

THE ART NEWSPAPER

1,500 lost works of art worth perhaps €1bn found in Munich flat

Magazine claims the discovery was treated as a "highly political secret"

By Anna Somers Cocks
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The customs warehouse in Garching near Munich is holding around 1,500 works of art by some of the most famous artists of the early 20th century, worth in total perhaps €1bn. These include paintings, drawings and prints by Picasso, Matisse, Chagall, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Franz Marc, Max Liebermann, Paul Klee, Max Beckmann, Emil Nolde, Oskar Kokoschka, and a lost Dürer.

The current issue of the German magazine Focus carries the story of this extraordinary find, made in spring 2011 by tax authorities who went to a flat in the Schwabing neighbourhood of Munich. According to the magazine, the discovery was treated as a "highly political secret" by the Munich authorities, who knew that its announcement would provoke a flood of restitution claims.



The story as reported in Focus Magazine

Apparently claims were already on record for 200 of the works by people hopeful that they would one day turn up. These include TV journalist Anne Sinclair, granddaughter of the Jewish art dealer Paul Rosenberg and wife of the French banker and politician Dominique Strauss-Kahn. Three hundred of the works belonged to the list of "Degenerate Art" compiled by the Nazis. Meike Hoffmann of the Freie Universität, Berlin, is currently studying the provenance of all 1500 pieces and assessing their value.

The trail begins in September 2010 with a Customs inspection of a train from Switzerland to German, in which 80 year-old Cornelius Gurlitt was found to be carrying large quantities of cash. The authorities went to his darkened and musty flat a few months later expecting to find evidence of tax evasion and discovered the pictures behind shelves of decades-old foodstuffs. When the works were being taken away, Gurlitt commented that he did not know why they were going to such trouble now because he would be dead soon anyway. He is the son of Hildebrand Gurlitt, director of the museum in Zwickau until he the post in 1933 because he was half Jewish. He became an art dealer in Hamburg and was given the task by ministry of propaganda of selling the "Degenerate Art" from German museums for hard currency abroad. He also bought many works from private owners until the end of the war. Afterwards, he said that they had all been destroyed in the bombing of his Dresden flat and he was treated sympathetically by Allied investigators as a victim of Nazism. He died in a car crash in 1956. From some empty frames and documentation it seems that his son survived for the next 60 years by selling off pictures for cash. It is not clear how he managed to sell a painting by Max Beckmann, "The Lion Tamer", through Lempertz auction house for €864,000 months after his flat had been cleared by the authorities. Lempertz says it is not on the Art Loss Register's list of Nazi-looted works.