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It Might Have Been a Masterpiece, but Now It's a Cautionary Tale

By NINA SIEGAL SEPT. 19, 2017



Piet Mondrian and Nelly van Moorsel in 1923, the year in which Mondrian painted an untitled work that was displayed in the Nazis' "Degenerate Art" exhibition. Credit via the Netherlands Institute for Art History

AMSTERDAM — When the cultural historian and Piet Mondrian biographer Léon Hanssen visited the Bozar Center for the Arts in Brussels in the spring of 2016, a painting stopped him dead in his tracks.

It looked remarkably similar to an untitled 1923 Mondrian that the Nazis had displayed as an example of “degenerate art” in a famous 1937 Munich exhibition. It was thought to have been destroyed in the Berlin air raids at the end of World War II. But could this be it?

Without any information about its history, the painting, which is owned by a Swiss collector, had been included in a show devoted to Mondrian’s contemporary, the Dutch artist [Theo van Doesburg](#). Mr. Hanssen asked to have a closer look.

“The painting had not been restored and it was really very fragile, nearly a ruin,” he explained in a phone interview. “It really made an impression of a painting from 1923 that was as original as you can imagine. It was as if you could shake hands with Mondrian.”

Mr. Hanssen, a professor at the Tilburg School of Humanities in the Netherlands, asked permission to research the provenance of the painting from the [Stedelijk Museum](#) in Amsterdam, which was scheduled to receive it next. The Stedelijk and the anonymous private collector granted him the opportunity. Based on this research, Mr. Hanssen has revealed in a book released last week that the work he thought was a significant find is not — and in fact appears not to be a Mondrian at all.

Photo



The Stedelijk said in a statement that it was unaware of any doubts about the painting’s authenticity when it arrived at the museum in 2016. Credit [Ivvy Njiokiktjien](#) for The New York Times

What started out as a potentially major cultural discovery now turns out instead to be a cautionary tale about the dangers of presenting works of art owned by private collectors that have not been systematically vetted. In this case, art experts seem to have passed the buck on conducting basic

due diligence on the artwork before displaying it as a Mondrian — putting their own reputations on the line because they gave such credence to a private collector.

When Mr. Hanssen, inquired with the Bozar about the provenance of the Mondrian on display, they could not provide him with a detailed history, he said. The arts center explained only that the loan from the Swiss collector had been suggested by the Stedelijk, which was considering exhibiting the work as well.

But information provided to The New York Times from the Netherlands Institute for Art History, known as the RKD, indicates that the Swiss owner of the work who has lent the painting to three art institutions — the Bozar, the Stedelijk and the Zentrum Paul Klee in Bern, Switzerland — has known since 2006 that the attribution to Mondrian has been questioned.

The records show that Mondrian expert Joop Joosten, who co-wrote a definitive 1998 catalog of Mondrian's abstract works, inspected the painting himself in 1994 and again in 2004. Both times he rejected it. In 2006, according to the RKD, Mr. Joosten informed the painting's owner that it was most likely a copy. Mr. Joosten, who is over 90 years old and in poor health, could not be reached for comment, according to the RKD.

None of the art institutions or individuals involved would disclose the name of the collector, but Beatrix Ruf, director of the Stedelijk Museum, said in an interview that he was an established figure whose works have never been questioned before.

Ms. Ruf said that she first saw the work at the home of its Swiss owner in 2015, and discussed the possibility of exhibiting it. In 2016, the work was sent to at the Stedelijk for research. At the time, according to a statement issued by the museum, the Stedelijk was unaware of any doubts about the painting's authenticity.

Sophie Lauwers, head of exhibitions at Bozar, explained in a phone interview that her institution isn't a museum, but rather a center for the arts, and that it doesn't have capacity to do authentication research, but they always partner with established curators and museums. "We labeled it according to the information we got from the Stedelijk," she said, adding, "I think both of us were really handling it in good faith."

Hans Janssen, Mondrian expert and curator of modern art at the [Gemeentemuseum](#) in The Hague, which owns more works by the artist than any other museum in the world, said he found it odd that he had not been consulted, because the Gemeentemuseum has studied hundreds of Mondrians. "It makes the acting and policy of the Stedelijk Museum a bit amateurish," he wrote in an email.

John T. Spike, chief curator at the [Muscarelle Museum of Art](#) in Williamsburg, Va. and specialist on issues of authentication, said that the Stedelijk seems to have followed a fairly typical protocol for handling a potential loan. It did not exhibit the painting without research, and allowed Mr. Hanssen to carry it out when he asked.

But he added, the Stedelijk did recommend the painting to the Bozar. “This thing does boil down to: why did they recommend it when it didn’t come with any authoritative backing, to our knowledge?” he said. “Considering that there’s an expertise center on Mondrian no more than an hour away, why didn’t they rely on that expertise? That’s a definite lapse there.”

The Stedelijk’s statement says it believes the task of a museum is “to promote art, try to show works that are not yet known to the public and in order to do so, build connections with private collectors. It is not the role of a museum to determine authenticity of a work.”

In response to this statement, France Desmarais, director of programs and partnerships for the [International Council of Museums](#) in Paris, which has established codes of ethics for art institutions, said, “It’s more complicated than that.”

“If museums are trusted it’s because we have a track record of honest and ethical conduct that is based on scientific and academic research,” she said. “Research, due diligence, are part of the museum’s prime responsibility.”

“We need to be wary of our interaction with the private market, which includes private collectors and dealers,” Ms. Desmaris said. “They’re an important source of collection from museums and there’s a really important relationship that needs to be cared for and preserved, but we cannot take for granted that what a reputable collector collects is all authentic or has all good provenance.”

Fewer art institutions these days have in-house authentication experts who can do the kind of vetting that used to be a more common part of museum practice, said Mr. Spike. “We have a scarcity of experts in the world and for years art graduate schools have taught that connoisseurship is a kind of mumbo jumbo magic,” he said. “When I started in the 1970s there were generations of people who were connoisseurs and they were very, very good.”

Ultimately, he added, when trying to make sure that a painting is properly attributed, “it’s like going to the doctor, you always need more than a second opinion. Sometimes even a third.”

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