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An American Couple Returned a Looted Painting to Poland. In the Process, They Became Unlikely Figures in the Country's Fight for Gay Rights

The couple used the media attention to advocate for the LGBTQ+ community in Poland.

Kate Brown, May 13, 2019



Craig Gilmore and David Crocker with *Portrait of a Lady*. Photo: Christopher Lapp

When I first meet a well-dressed, tan American man named Craig Gilmore at a party in Warsaw last month, I ask the same question any two foreigners ask one another: What brings you to Poland?

His answer: “How much time do you have?”

I have time. And so he proceeds to tell me a fairly remarkable tale—one that traces how one California couple became tied up in both Poland’s quest to reclaim its looted art and the fight for LGBTQ+ rights in the country.

The story began in 2016, when Gilmore and his partner David Crocker opened the door at their home in Los Angeles to find Homeland Security agents on their stoop. In 2006, the collectors—who specialize in English and European portraiture from the 15th to 18th centuries, with a special interest in “misfits” or unknown subjects—acquired a 17th-century Flemish painting, Melchior Geldorp’s *Portrait of a Lady* (1628), for around \$5,000 at Doyle auction house. For nearly a decade, it hung proudly in their rustic kitchen. (The auction house denies any wrongdoing.)

It soon became clear, however, that their beloved painting had a dark past. The work, it turned out, had been looted from Poland’s National Museum in Warsaw during the Nazi occupation in World War II. It is one small part of Poland’s ongoing fight to retrieve a staggering 70 percent of its cultural heritage that remains missing or abroad since the war.

The couple swiftly agreed to return the painting. But they had no idea that their decision would be the beginning of a lengthy relationship with the country—and make them unlikely figures in Poland’s struggle against the rising tide of intolerance and homophobia.



Homeland Security removing the painting. Photo: Christopher Lapp

Repatriation Meets Gay Rights

The couple sent off the painting with a goodbye party, complete with Polish delicacies and champagne for the Homeland Security agents who came to pick it up.

The celebration continued with a ceremony at the National Museum in Warsaw in September 2018, where the painting was welcomed home more than 80 years after it left. Crocker, Gilmore, the Polish deputy prime minister, and the American ambassador were all in attendance.

The couple sported triangular rainbow Pride pins on their lapels, beaming with pride to be able to return one of 500,000 missing objects to Poland as a gay couple. “During all parts of the ceremony, I very consciously always had a gentle hand on David: on his shoulder, on his back,” Gilmore tells artnet News. “I didn’t want any doubt of our relationship status, and of the support we shared together.”

They were dismayed, however, when culture minister Piotr Gliński only acknowledged Gilmore in the televised press conference.



Crocker, Gilmore, with US Ambassador and Piotr Glinski, the Deputy Prime Minister of Poland. They found out later that Crocker was unacknowledged so that the Polish government could broadcast the news on TV and the radio without mentioning a gay couple was responsible for the painting's return. As Gilmore puts it, Crocker, who "had been 50 percent of the decision to help get the painting back to its homeland encased in that frame, sits unacknowledged by my side. Bam! The framework of international diplomacy shatters."

Indeed, the strongly Catholic nation of Poland is one of the few EU countries that does not recognize same-sex partnerships. The ruling right-wing Law and Justice party has turned anti-gay sentiment into a rallying point ahead of the European Union's parliamentary elections on May 23 and the country's federal elections this fall. Party leadership has called homosexuality a foreign import and a "threat to civilization."

"When we arrived [in Poland]," Gilmore recalls, "the government had recently distributed pamphlets showing rainbow hands reaching out to grasp children, as if to say the LGBTQ community is coming to molest your sons and daughters. It gave me chills to see such haltered and fear-mongering."



Jaroslaw Kaczynski, leader of the Law and Justice party. Photo: Artur Widak/NurPhoto via Getty Images.

The Proposal

The experience has motivated Gilmore and Crocker to become increasingly involved with the promotion of LGBTQ+ rights in Poland. Over the past few years, they have made t-shirts, posters, and began talking to members of the community. They also initiated a series of donations to local organization.

Last month, Gilmore, an opera singer, and Crocker, an artist, returned to Warsaw's National Museum, where *Portrait of a Lady* is now hanging, for another event to mark the latest round of donations. They chose three entities—KPH, an organization that campaigns against homophobia, the POLIN Museum on the site of the former Warsaw Jewish Ghetto, and the education department of the National Museum—in order to connect the gay rights movement, the local Jewish community, and Polish culture in general.

Conservative politics have also been nipping on the heels of Polish museums and Jewish institutions. Last month, an erotic work by artist Natalia LL was censored by the government at the National Museum. And just last Saturday, nationalists took to the streets in Warsaw to protest the US's pressure on Poland to compensate Jews whose families lost property during the Holocaust.

“As a couple, David and I have been very historically conscious that homosexuals were rounded up and thrown into concentration camps by the Nazis, and we have been concerned that people do not forget this,” Gilmore says. “In addition, I feel that the LGBTQ and the Jewish people have a shared sense of what it is like to be ‘the other’ in society.”



The couple's engagement in Warsaw. Photo: William Clift

On that same trip to Poland, Gilmore proposed to Crocker at a public park in the Polish capital. The development was quickly picked up by local liberal media.

Of course, homophobia in Poland cannot be resolved with a public proposal. But it offered a welcome dose of uplift. "It was a nice and brave gesture to do it in Warsaw, the capital of one of the few remaining EU countries not to recognize any form of partnership between people of the same sex, but the problems are too massive and profound to be changed symbolically," Vyacheslav Melnyk, the director of Campaign Against Homophobia, told *Associated Press*.

"We had dreamed of a moment when our repatriation might create bridges between communities," Gilmore tells artnet News. "For us, *Our Lady* is a symbol of hope for human rights, and a message that sometimes doing more than just the right thing is the only option."