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Christie's Teams Up With the FBI to Help Return Vases Looted by the Nazis to the Heirs of Their Jewish Owner

A pair of gilded French vases were returned to the family of Lucie Mayer Fuld after the auction house spotted them on the German lost art database.

Naomi Rea, August 2, 2019



Façade of Christie's auction house in New York. Photo by Smith Collection/Gado/Getty Images.

Christie's auction house teamed up with the FBI's art crime team in New York to return a pair of Nazi-looted vases to their rightful owners.

The bronze, fire-gilded, Louis XVI vases, which are estimated to be worth around \$120,000, were returned yesterday, August 1, to the descendants of their original Jewish owner in a ceremony held at the US embassy in Berlin.

"These are often complex and highly sensitive matters for all parties involved, and Christie's devotes considerable resources to investigating the provenance and authenticity of all objects we offer for sale," Monica Dugot, Christie's international director of restitution, tells artnet News. "We are proud of our track record in this important area, and pleased that we were able to identify these vases as Nazi-era looted property and start the process that allowed for the official return of these objects on Thursday to the Fuld heirs."

Christie's researched the history of the vases after they were consigned to the auction house for sale by an unnamed collector or dealer. During the course of due diligence procedures, which includes a routine check of the German Database of Lost Art among other historical records, Christie's specialists discovered the vases were confiscated by the Nazis from a Jewish widow, Lucie Mayer Fuld. (The auction house did not comment on the consignor's reaction to the discovery.)

More than 500 items in the lost-art database are listed as belonging to Mayer Fuld. These include 13 paintings, 18 sculptures, and more than 482 craft and folk artworks, as well as two library objects, and two graphic objects.

The vases were among the hundreds of items stolen from Mayer Fuld's home after she fled Germany in 1939. The Nazis confiscated her art and other property, ostensibly to collect an "exit tax." After the Nazis came to power, they seized Jewish people's bank accounts, and levied hefty exit tax on anyone who managed to leave the country.

Several hundred items from the Mayer Fuld estate, including the vases, were listed in a forced sale at Knapp auction house in Berlin on June 10, 1940. The stolen vases resurfaced first at an auction at Sotheby's London in 1997, and then another UK auction house in 2000. Christie's believes the purchaser at the time then gifted them to the unnamed consignor who hoped to sell them at Christie's New York in June 2013.

A representative for Christie's tells artnet News that the auction house withdrew the two late 18th century Ormolu vases from the pre-sale process when its provenance researched turned up the name Harry Fuld, the husband of Lucie Mayer Fuld, as a previous owner. Harry Fuld died in 1933. The name, which is well-known in the field of restitution research, raised a red flag for the auctioneers, who then triggered further research by Christie's internal restitution department.

After Christie's was able to confirm the vases were looted property, the auction house informed the consignor that they were not suitable for sale, and notified representatives of the Fuld family. They were then secured and held by Christie's until the FBI art crime team took over the case. The FBI organized the restitution. Members of Mayer Fuld's family met with FBI agents and a representative of Christie's at the repatriation ceremony.