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French masterpieces stolen by Nazis during Second World War set to fetch millions at auction

Nazis looted the paintings after Jewish businessman Gaston Lévy and his family were forced to flee to Tunisia

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Paul Signac's La Corne d'Or (Sothebys)

Three “exceptional” masterpieces by **Camille Pissarro** and **Paul Signac** are to be auctioned in London, after being returned to the heirs of a Jewish collector whose home was looted by the **Nazis**. The works previously belonged to Gaston Lévy, a businessman, property developer and collector who lived in Paris during the Thirties, *The Guardian* reports.

Lévy was forced to flee to Tunisia with his English-born wife, Liliane, and their daughter, after France was occupied by Germany during the **Second World War**. The family survived, but Lévy's extensive collection of art, books and paintings was dispersed under the occupation.

After the war, two of the works were returned to France and later hung in the Musée d'Orsay in Paris. The third, which was stolen from Lévy's country home in the Loire Valley, was later discovered in the collection of German art dealer Hildebrand Gurlitt.

Thomas Boyd-Bowman, a director at Sotheby's impressionist and modern art department, told *The Guardian* that this is the first time the Pissarro and Signac works have appeared at auction

Pissarro's "Gelée blanche, jeune paysanne faisant du feu" (White frost, young peasant building a fire), is considered the star of the three works and is expected to fetch up to £12m on 4 February.

"It's a pity for the Musée d'Orsay to lose these paintings, but it's a good example of a country acting in an honourable fashion. It's the right thing to do," said Boyd-Bowman. "Looting and vandalism should not profit others."

It is estimated that the Nazis stole around 100,000 artworks during their occupation of France; approximately 61,000 of those were returned after the war. France launched a new office last year dedicated to researching and returning Nazi-looted art.