Nazi Trove Reveals Dresden Holocaust Survivor’s Lost Art

By Catherine Hickley - Nov 12, 2013

Fritz Salo Glaser was due to be among the last Jews deported out of Dresden on Feb. 16, 1945. Three days before, Allied fire bombs reduced the city to rubble and saved Glaser from Theresienstadt concentration camp.

For years, Glaser’s family wondered whether the inferno that spared his life had claimed his prize possessions: the hundreds of artworks he amassed as a well-to-do lawyer and sold during the Nazi era to stay alive. Now they have proof at least some survived -- in the Munich apartment of Cornelius Gurlitt, son of a Nazi art dealer. Gurlitt’s cache of 1,406 artworks worth about $1 billion was seized in 2012 in a tax inquiry.

The German government this week began publishing details of the artworks in the hoard that may have been seized by the Nazis or lost by Jewish collectors in forced sales. Of the first 25 to be registered on the database www.lostart.de, 13 were listed as belonging to Glaser.

They are drawings, graphics and watercolors by the Dresden artists he socialized with -- Otto Griebel, Ludwig Godenschweg Erich Fraass, Christoph Voll, Conrad Felixmueller and Wilhelm Lachnit. Glaser also owned works by Paul Klee, Emil Nolde, Wassily Kandinsky, Oskar Kokoschka, and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff.

“This is very exciting,” said Sabine Rudolph at CSC Rechtsanwaelte in Dresden. Rudolph is helping Glaser’s elderly daughter-in-law to recover the lost art. “We think there may be many more Glaser works in the hoard. This seems to be confirmed by the quantity of works already on the database.”

Lost Treasures

The discovery of Gurlitt’s art trove has raised many questions in Germany, as Jewish groups demand full transparency and restitution, art historians ask what else might be hidden in private collections, and families of those who lost treasures wonder why it has taken so long for the authorities to announce their find.

A lawyer who sympathized with communist ideology, Glaser loved the art of his time and acquired it with enthusiasm.

“I have always known your art has eternal value,” Glaser wrote in a 1924 letter to Otto Dix, whom he counted as a friend.
An accomplished accordion and violin player, Glaser entertained regularly with his wife Erna at their Dresden home during the inflationary 1920s, offering their bohemian friends music and dancing as well as lavish supplies of food and drink.

“He looked for direct contact to ‘his’ artists whom he supported both financially and creatively with his many purchases,” according to a report by Heike Biedermann, an art historian at the Dresden State Collections. “The prices for works on paper were low, so he managed to buy a large amount of art without having extraordinary wealth.”

‘Degenerate’ Art

His collection was 90 percent comprised of works on paper, though he owned about 40 paintings. When the Nazis swept to power, the art Glaser loved was scorned as “degenerate.” He was banned from practicing as an attorney in 1933, and could no longer work as a tax adviser from 1937.

The house parties stopped, and he began to peddle works from his collection to support his family as his financial situation deteriorated. After December 1938, Jews were banned from selling art.

Rudolph, the lawyer representing his heir, learned from a family acquaintance that Glaser sold two Schmidt-Rottluff paintings, a Klee, a Kandinsky, a Kokoschka and a Nolde to pay the “Judenbusse,” a tax that Hermann Goering extorted from Jews after the pogroms of 1938 as “atonement for the hostile stance taken by Jews toward Germans.”

Gestapo, Inferno

With his house subject to frequent searches by the Gestapo, Glaser destroyed all documentary evidence of the forbidden art sales and kept what was left of his collection hidden.

During the Dresden inferno, he hid in his Dresden home. In the mayhem that followed, he slipped out of the city to join his wife and daughter, sheltered and concealed in a farmhouse about 10 miles (16 kilometers) to the south.

Rudolph said she is in suspense about the dealer Hildebrand Gurlitt’s accounts, which Focus magazine said were found with the cache of art in the Munich apartment. Focus, which first reported the find, also said a file of 181 unframed artworks in his son’s apartment is believed to have belonged to Glaser.

Hildebrand Gurlitt, like Glaser a lover of “degenerate art,” was born in Dresden 20 years later and died in the same year, 1956. Gurlitt went on to buy art for Adolf Hitler’s planned Fuehrermuseum in Linz, and sold the modern works the Nazis hated on their behalf.

“We had no leads to Gurlitt, but we had a suspicion,” Rudolph said. “Gurlitt has to be at the back of your mind, because he was from Dresden.”

Art Question
The question now for Glaser’s daughter-in-law, who declined to be interviewed or identified by name, is whether she will get the artworks back. Under German law, Cornelius Gurlitt is the legal owner and civil court cases to recover art lost due to forced sales in the Nazi era rarely succeed.

Yet Rudolph is optimistic.

“The pressure from outside has led to success -- now the works will be published and provenance research will gain pace,” Rudolph said. “The German government is getting very involved in the case. Things have gone too far for it to withdraw and leave claimants on their own.”

After the war, Glaser had to continue working well past retirement age to feed his family. At 68, he took a post at the Justice Ministry in the state of Saxony, helping determine which of Hitler’s laws should be retained and which annulled.

He then resumed his work as a lawyer and died at about 80. His family sold some of the art he had saved from the fire to pay for their food and accommodation after his death.

Thanks to those sales, his legacy lives on in some of the most prestigious museums of the world. A 1921 portrait of Glaser by Otto Dix now hangs in the Neue Galerie in New York. A 1925 Dix portrait of Glaser with his family is one of the crown jewels of Dresden’s public art collection.

Muse highlights include Philip Boroff on U.S. art auctions, Amanda Gordon’s Scene Last Night, Ryan Sutton on New York dining and Jeremy Gerard on U.S. theater.

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