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## **An A-Z of Nazi-looted art: German manual makes claims easier**

by Emsie Ferreira

BERLIN, April 22, 2007 (AFP) - In the wake of sensational sales of art that was seized by the Nazis, German authors have published the first handbook to help Jewish families win back masterpieces that are still in the wrong hands.

The 528-page tome "Nazi Looted Art - Art Restitution Worldwide" is sold as a do-it-yourself law manual for heirs of Holocaust victims hoping to confront museums and collectors in different corners of the world in a bid to recover lost canvasses.

Co-author Gunnar Schnabel makes an educated guess that "there are still thousands of masterpieces and tens of thousands of lesser paintings that should be returned to the rightful heirs.

"For example, some 30,000 art works were taken out of France, but 16,000 never resurfaced. It is the museums' policy to keep all of this top secret. There are works in basements and vaults," Schnabel, a lawyer who handles restitution claims, told AFP.

Even before it hit the shelves in March, the book he wrote with historian Monika Tatzkow was adding to pressure on the German government to return a painting from the Biedermeier era featured on its cover.

The work, "Fiat Justitia" by Carl Spitzweg, formed part of the German government's art collection for decades after World War II.

But it originally belonged to Jewish trader Leo Bendel who died in the Buchenwald concentration camp in 1940.

In February, as articles about the book appeared in most Austrian and German newspapers, the German finance ministry announced that it would return the painting to the Bendel heirs.

Schnabel and Tatzkow say they hope to force museums to investigate the provenance of their works and come clean on art they obtained thanks to the Nazis' systematic seizure of Jewish collections which peaked in the early 1940s.

German museums panicked last year when Berlin's Bruecke Museum had to part with Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's "Berlin Street Scene," a prized Expressionist painting looted from a Jewish shoemaker.

When the claimant let Christie's auction the work and it was bought by US cosmetics magnate Ronald Lauder for 38 million dollars (28 million euros), curators began bracing for a flood of claims from heirs hoping for a windfall from a buoyant art market.

Lauder is famous for collecting restituted art and an obvious target for criticism that a moral issue is being commercialised.

His first piece was a Van Gogh drawing discovered by Tatzkow which he bought for seven million euros, but in 2005 he paid a record 135 million dollars for "Adele Block Bauer I," an iconic portrait by Secessionist -- the Austrian name for Art Nouveau -- artist Gustav Klimt, after it was restituted to the sitter's niece.

"It's only about money and speculation," Martin Roth, the director of Dresden's State Art Collection, complained recently.

Museums like the Bruecke say they cannot afford to follow the example of Vienna's Leopold Museum which invited scrutiny of the origins of its unrivalled Egon Schiele collection.

It has also spent millions contesting a claim for the Austrian artist's "Portrait of Wally."

But ahead of an international conference on looted art taking place in Potsdam near Berlin next week, historian Julius Schoeps said: "I think the museums also lack the will."

He advised museums to loan out works to raise funds to pay out claimants as a way of keeping their collections intact.

Schnabel thinks there "is not enough money to buy back all the paintings the Nazis stole," but said in his experience museums are not prepared to pay even modest reparations.

"Initially, with the Kirchner painting, the granddaughter was happy to accept a sum below the market price but the museum refused."

Tatzkow accuses museums of playing for time in the knowledge that the generation of Jews whose parents perished in the Holocaust will not be around forever.

"They are trying to sit the problem out, to wait for time to pass," she said.

"The story of a missing artwork will eventually get lost in a family. The children will know something but once they are dead, restitution becomes more difficult."

Their book discusses 109 claims, successful and otherwise, filed from France to the United States to Australia, to illustrate the legal precedent in different countries.

It spares no reputations and hints that Jewish dealers joined in the lucrative business of trading looted art after the war.

"At that time it did not matter to them," Tatzkow said.

She insists that despite the fortune to be made on the re-sale of some restituted works, the art's main value for heirs remains sentimental.

"A restituted painting gives a family back a part of the past. Sometimes a work of art is all that survived the war and getting it back also helps to tell the story of what happened to the owner."

She disputes claims that the market value of looted paintings is enhanced by their tragic history.

"If a work was believed to have been lost for 50 years and it resurfaces, as happened with a Schiele, this adds to its value. But it is simply the prolonged absence from the market that pushes up prices."

Schnabel said heirs trying to find their way through the maze of restitution laws have said they found the book, which will be published in English in June, useful.

"A 78-year-old lady who is trying to reclaim an Impressionist masterpiece said it gave her the confidence to stand her ground in meetings with people who say they have the work."

But it has not always been welcomed by fellow lawyers.

"A number of my colleagues are not happy. They asked me why I give away expertise that they sell for a very high price," Schnabel smiled.

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