

Drawings from persecuted Jewish dealer draw scrutiny at National Gallery of Art

Findings about the provenance of three Old Master drawings in the Washington museum's collection may test the pro-restitution stance recently adopted at national institutions. By David D'Arcy

Three Old Master drawings once owned by the prominent Jewish dealer Siegfried Laemmle in Munich, which experts say were sold under duress during the Nazi era or seized by the Gestapo, are in the collection of the National Gallery of Art (NGA) in Washington, DC.

Works belonging to Laemmle (1863-1953) filled the Munich art market after the dealer, as a Jew, was ordered to close his business in 1935. Some objects reached Nazi leaders through Adolf Weinmüller, a party member whose auction house sold much of Laemmle's inventory. The Nazi official Martin Bormann acquired objects for Hitler's Eagle's Nest mountaintop retreat in Bavaria and other residences. Low prices attracted museums and private buyers.

Laemmle's younger brother Carl, a co-founder of Universal Pictures, welcomed Siegfried, his wife Betty and their son Walter in 1938 to Los Angeles, where they started a new gallery. Their heirs want to recover the art they lost in Germany.

The Laemmle family founded its art business in 1894, and Walter joined the firm in 1924. In 1935, they and other Jews were ousted from the Reich Chamber of Fine Arts. Besides selling many pieces, the family planned to flee Germany and sent works they hoped to bring with them to Weinmüller for appraisal. Once the Laemmles emigrated in 1938, the Gestapo seized those objects and sold them through Weinmüller.

Among the works at the NGA flagged by the highly respected Central Institute for Art History in Munich, in response to queries from *The Art Newspaper*, is a watercolour drawing by Johann Baptist Enderle, *Saint Ignatius Leaving Antioch* (1773), bought by the NGA in 2007. It

was consigned by the Gestapo in 1939 after Siegfried and Betty Laemmle left Germany, losing title to their property.

Madonna and Child Appearing to a Suppliant (around 1600) by Georg Neher was sold by Laemmle in 1936 after the Reich Chamber of Fine Arts ordered his gallery to be liquidated. The NGA received it as a donation in 2001.

Central Institute researchers also found the drawing *The Banquet of Archeloiis* (around 1545) by Luca Penni, bought by the NGA in 2007, to be "undoubtedly a sale under duress". They noted that "other items from this Weinmüller auction [where it sold] were restituted by several museums" in Germany.

Hiding in plain (web)site

The Laemmle pictures at the NGA are not hard to find. Provenance information for the drawings on the museum's website lists the names Laemmle and Weinmüller, along with dealers who later sold the drawings in the US market.

Weinmüller, a Nazi party member since 1931, worked closely with the Gestapo and other Nazi agencies in selling objects seized from Jews or consigned by Jewish dealers banned from the art trade. With businesses like Laemmle's closed, Weinmüller faced little competition in the marketplace. The surge in objects for sale drove prices down, and museums bought in quantity. Weinmüller also ran the "Aryanised" gallery *Kunsthhaus Kende* in Vienna.

Weinmüller and his business were investigated after the Second World War, but the auctioneer was never jailed or prosecuted. He insisted that his sales records were lost, destroyed in a fire. At Weinmüller's death in 1958, the gallery was taken over by Rudolf Neumeister. In 2013, Neumeister's daughter Katrin Stoll, who now runs the business, found

annotated catalogues detailing the firm's sales and customers from 1936 to 1943 in a basement air-conditioning compartment at the auction house, and made those archives available online.

In Germany, Weinmüller's Nazi ties were probed in a film and in a doctoral thesis published in 2012 as a book by Meike Hopp, then of the Central Institute (*Art Dealing under National Socialism: Adolf Weinmüller in Munich and Vienna*). The Munich City Museum contacted the Laemmles in the US and offered compensation for drawings of Munich church interiors dating from around 1600. Those drawings by Hans Krumper and others, unaffordable for the museum until Laemmle was banned from doing business, became known as the Krumper Bequest. The museum paid Siegfried Laemmle's great granddaughter, Nina McGehee, for the drawings, and organised the exhibition *Formerly Jewish-owned Property* (2018), displaying its acquisitions from Jewish collections.

Some institutions acted on the Laemmle seizures much earlier. In Austria, the Albertina Museum, under pressure from the Jewish Community of Vienna, restituted six works on paper to the Laemmles in 1999.

Last November, the Central Institute contacted the NGA, augmenting information already on the museum's website and alerting it to "red flags" associated with Nazi-mandated sales by Weinmüller and the Gestapo's involvement. When first contacted by *The Art Newspaper*, the NGA's head of provenance, Margaret Doyle, responded that she was looking into the works in question.

"They [the NGA] could have rather easily known," Christian Fuhrmeister, a professor at the Central Institute, wrote from Munich. "The more information is



Questions are being raised: Johann Baptist Enderle's *Saint Ignatius Leaving Antioch* (1773) was bought by Washington's National Gallery of Art in 2007. It was consigned by the Gestapo in 1939 after Siegfried Laemmle left Germany, losing title to his property

published (digitally), the more difficult it is to find excuses for not acknowledging it."

McGehee says: "Becoming involved in the family's efforts to recover stolen works of art has given me something that is both invaluable and fundamental – an understanding of who I am and where I came from." She adds: "The National Gallery has not yet contacted us. But we hope that it will be as responsive and proactive as the Austrian and German museums have been."

Washington's new restitution policy

An eventual claim from the Laemmles could test a recently announced commitment from national museums in Washington not to prolong disputes over cultural property with legal manoeuvring. So far that approach has been applied mostly to African objects and other colonial plunder in museum collections. In late 2021, the NGA announced the return of an 18th-century bronze cockerel to Nigeria that British troops took in a bloody attack on the city of Benin in 1897.

Before this policy shift, the NGA

in 2020 settled a claim for a 1903 Blue Period Picasso drawing, *Head of a Woman*, that lawyers for the heirs of its Jewish owner, Paul von Mendelssohn-Bartoldy, say was sold under duress during the Nazi era. The museum gave the picture to dealer Larry Gagosian, who sold it on behalf of the heirs for \$10m. An NGA statement said the drawing was returned "to avoid the heavy toll of litigation" and that forfeiting it "did not constitute an acknowledgment of the merit or validity of the asserted claims".

Works from Laemmle's gallery continue to surface on the market. In New York, the Jewish Community of Vienna reached a settlement with Sotheby's over the auction in January 2022 of a 15th-century sculpture Laemmle sold under duress in 1935 to two German dealers. In 1939, Nazi authorities seized that work from the industrialist Fritz Thyssen, a Nazi who, from Switzerland, criticised Hitler's invasion of Poland. The sculpture was stored with Thyssen's collection in the Museum Folkwang in Essen during the war. In 1949, British authorities restituted it – not to the Laemmles, but to the Thyssen family.

Art storage firms cash in on environmental crisis

By Torey Akers

MIAMI. Environmental scientists have forecasted that 2023 will see the return of El Niño, the ocean surface-warming phenomenon that is predicted to push global temperatures to unprecedented levels. This means continued flooding, hotter heatwaves and faster-moving storms – circumstances that bode badly for most industries but don't seem to phase the art storage sector, which charges collectors and institutions a premium to keep disasters at bay.

On a tour of fine art storage company UOVO's newest facility, in Miami's Wynwood neighbourhood, the general manager Vanessa Amor tells *The Art Newspaper* that the current boom in the art storage business owes some of its momentum to two early-21st century disasters – Hurricane Katrina in 2005



"People are going to need bunkers": fine art storage firm UOVO's new facility in Miami's Wynwood neighbourhood

and the 2008 recession. "Buzz started after Katrina; clients needed to know how to protect their collections," she says. "Once people got wind of the stock market crash, they had to start moving physical assets. We thought, 'This sounds like a business opportunity.'"

The number of art storage facilities

has grown fivefold over the past 15 years, according to Amor, increasing in tandem with the evolving needs of their client base. UOVO, for instance, has acquired five regional or specialised companies in as many years, including Florida-based Museo Vault in 2021 and Colorado-based Art Forward last year. Institutions and private collectors alike want to maintain the value and material integrity of their artefacts while keeping them out of sight, a task that requires a broad constellation of technology, security measures and specialised workers acting in concert.

Hurricane-proof?

Art storage facilities run by companies such as UOVO, Dietl, Crozier Fine Arts and Artex have traditionally clustered around cultural heritage hubs like New York, Los Angeles and Washington, DC.

Expansion into locations like Miami, a comparatively new art world destination that is notoriously flood-prone, has expedited the need for hurricane-safe locales, a prerequisite further emphasised by art insurers after Hurricane Sandy flooded the Christie's Fine Art Storage Services facility in Brooklyn in 2012.

After the Federal Emergency Management Agency (Fema) revised its surge zones for New York City in 2015, companies began to build as far outside of these zones as possible. Many new facilities, like UOVO's Wynwood complex, tout the elevation of their buildings as part of their allure.

"Hurricanes are number one on everybody's list, both in New York and in Florida," says John Jacobs, the chief executive and president of Artex Fine Art Services, which runs facilities in New York City, Washington, DC, Boston, Fort

Lauderdale and Los Angeles. "The awareness of the potential for flooding from hurricanes is much greater than it has been in both New York and Miami."

The industry standard for art storage facilities now includes not only museum-grade climate control and fire-deterrent technologies, but also power redundancy systems, cinder-block insulation, flood planning and fleets of specially trained art handlers.

"On numerous occasions, we've received calls from people's offices, homes and smaller-sized museums because someone saw a leak or a fire occurred, and they need a safe storage alternative immediately," says UOVO's vice president Clifford Davis. The company's new Miami facility also boasts perforated walls for optimal air flow, ultraviolet lights and generators powered by natural gas.

"This place is a bit of a bunker," Amor says on the floor of the Miami compound. "But people are going to need bunkers."