

U.K. 'monument woman': Nazi-looted past is Germany's Achilles' heel

Claims for plundered art must be dealt with efficiently, says Anne Webber, co-chairman of Commission for Looted Art in Europe

Hephzibah Anderson

When tickets went on sale for this year's Jewish Book Week in London, now on through March 2, one of the first events that sold out was a session titled "Nazi-Looted Art: A Time of Reckoning."

Interest in the conversation between Anne Webber, co-chairman of the Commission for Looted Art in Europe, and Lord Neuberger, president of the UK's Supreme Court, received a boost last November when it was revealed that some 1,200 Nazi-plundered artworks had been found in a Munich apartment. Now, it has received another.

The apartment belonged to Cornelius Gurlitt, the son of a notorious Nazi art dealer who died in a car crash in 1956. In recent weeks another 60 works, including paintings by Renoir, Manet and Monet, were found in Salzburg in another of Gurlitt's properties.

A few days after that second news story broke, I sat with Webber in her office, aptly art-filled and a block away from Baker Street, the legendary site associated with sleuthing, where a cinema just happened to be screening "The Monuments Men" (the new movie about a group of American soldiers in World War II, who tracked down artistic masterpieces stolen by the Nazis).

"It's almost as if the past has come back to life, isn't it?" Webber said of the Gurlitt discoveries. They've raised people's hopes, and already her commission has been inundated with enquiries from families from all over the world.

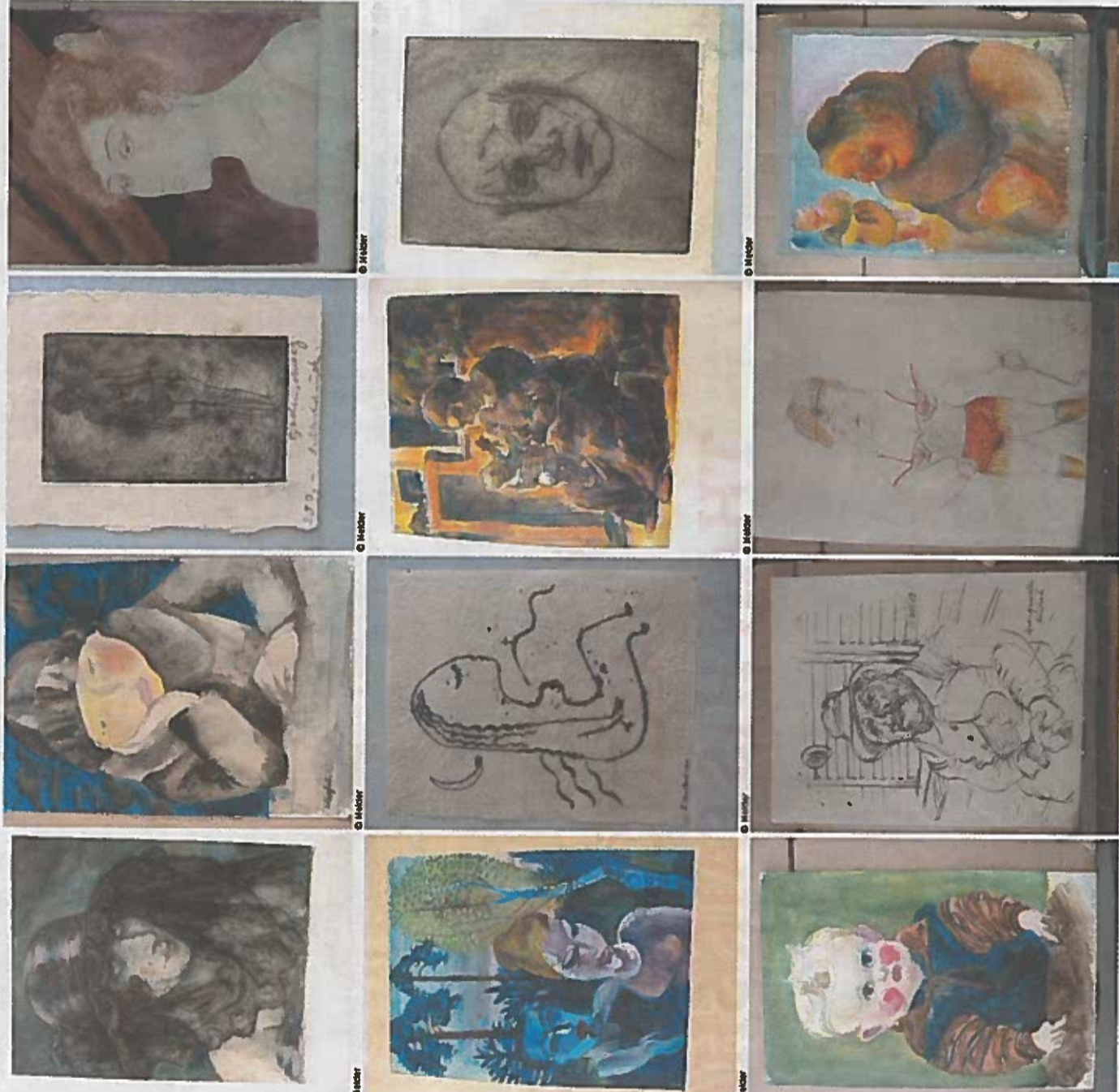
Culture of secrecy

Though Gurlitt is a private collector, and has set up a website to present his side of the story, the case has exposed Germany's culture of secrecy regarding looted art. As was leaked to a German magazine last year, the government had seized the Munich cache back in March 2012, but had just one researcher working on it.

"There's a massive loss of trust in relation to Germany," Webber explained.

Not that this is news to her organization, whose efforts on behalf of claimants

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ernment pledged to set up an independent research center. "They're basically saying the research is neither sufficient nor appropriate so far. That's certainly the experience of the claimants," said Webber.

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who negotiates with the German government on this issue on a regular basis.

"If the government acknowledges that the research isn't independent, then they must also acknowledge that the assessment of the claims can't have been independent either, and that there needs to be an independent claims process. We very much hope that this is the moment when they will accept that."

Arduous battle Webber herself is a documentary filmmaker. In 1996, she came across a reference to families searching for looted art in a newspaper report on work stolen from a German church by an American soldier. So little was known about the families' plight that when she pitched the idea of a documentary to the BBC, they asked: "Is it a story?"

She got the green light Britain's Channel 4, and her film, "Making a Killing," was also broadcast globally in 1998. It focuses on a Degas landscape belonging to a man who was beaten to death for the art in Theresienstadt. His daughter had traced it to the private collection of an American pharmaceutical billionaire, who'd bought it in good faith on the advice of the Art Institute of Chicago.

At the time, a costly and arduous legal battle was raging over the fate of the painting,

but when the collector saw Webber's film, he called her. "I've never really understood the facts before," he reportedly said, asking if she'd broker a deal.

She did, and it was held up as a model for resolution of such claims at the Washington conference. Six weeks later, the Commission for Looted Art in Europe was founded and Webber still hasn't had time to get back to filmmaking. This organization is the most expert of its kind in the world, and features a full-time staff that tracks down not only plundered art but also books, furniture, musical instruments - anything with sufficient identifying characteristics.

It's a painstaking process requiring forensic research, and even when a work has been located, the burden of proof is on the claimant. One case currently nearing resolution was opened 14 years ago. In the commission's 15-year existence, it has recovered over 3,500 artworks and other objects. Impressive though that figure is, in a staggering 90 per cent of their cases, the works they are seeking remain untraceable.

Israeli museums not immune to amnesia

The very first case solved by Webber's organization was that of a Parisian streetscape by Pissarro. The painting had been originally owned by Breslau industrialist Max Silberberg, who was forced by the Nazis to sell his entire collection. The commission's hunt led its staff to the Israel Museum.

"That's the irony," Webber said, adding that Israeli institutions are not immune to amnesia when it comes to dealing with problematic acquisitions. It also shows how complicated the journeys made by these paintings can be. By the time the so-called Monuments Men arrived on the scene, in 1945, many works had already been sold to dealers. The art world, Webber noted, has not been helpful.

After being returned to Silberberg's family in 2000, the Pissarro stayed on loan at the Israel Museum till the death of the last surviving family member last year. Two weeks ago that same Pissarro was sold at auction in London for over \$32 million.

"People are entitled to do what they want with their paintings," Webber said. "I think the museums use sales as a stick to beat the families with. If they'd been proactive it's more likely that the family might have been willing to come to an accommodation with them."

In one case, a museum repeatedly refused to even acknowledge in writing that a work's rightful owners had been murdered.

"Everybody always thinks it's just rich people's paintings the Nazis took, but they took everything - your tablecloths, your towels, your pots and pans," said Webber, who recalled a comment by renowned scholar and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel at a conference a few years back: "They stole not just the riches of the wealthy but the poverty of the poor."

I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine

Commissioner Hephzibah Anderson