

“The Lentz”  
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A small red fishing boat is tethered to a red-tipped post by the shore. In the background, a few birds float through the clouds. The name of the painting comes from the faint yellow signature: five capital letters that spell out my great-grandmother's surname. *The Lentz* hangs upon the walls of my uncle's home, above more recent pictures of my cousins and other relatives, descendants of those who escaped the fate of the Holocaust and made it to America. We know we had a few artists in the family, but even the family historian, Cousin Henie, isn't sure who painted *The Lentz*. From the signature, we know it was someone on my grandfather's mother's branch of the family. Other than that, the history eludes us.

As I have looked into the origins of this painting, I've wondered whether there are more paintings by this artist out there. Is it valuable? Who was the person, this "Lentz", who painted it, and did he or she produce more masterpieces? Alas, in the confusion and chaos that surrounded WWII and the Holocaust, my questions will likely remain unanswered.

For the Nazis, the accumulation of art was a top priority. Hitler, a failed artist, had an insatiable appetite for anything of value, particularly sculpture, jewels, pottery, tapestries, and paintings, and made looting artistic treasures a priority of the Nazis. The National Archives expert, Greg Bradsher estimates the SS looted 20% of Europe's art ("Documenting"). It has been estimated that more than

650,000 works of art were stolen during the greatest art heist in history. Many other works were coerced or sold for pennies on the dollar by Jews desperate to flee their homelands in search of safety. These stolen and collected works were transported across war zones, and hidden away in caves and abandoned mines, ultimately resulting in many pieces becoming damaged, destroyed, or lost to history.

Hitler aspired to create a “super museum,” a *Führermuseum*, in his hometown of Linz, Austria. He was obsessed with the project and regularly received annotated scrapbooks of plundered art destined for its halls and pored over the blueprints for the building (Charney). The massive museum was planned around Van Eyck’s masterpiece, the *Ghent Altarpiece*, a 15th century Flemish work spans eight elaborate panels and depicts biblical scenes. Hitler saw the *Ghent Altarpiece* as a way to right a perceived wrong against Germany: the work, which Germany had taken from a Belgian cathedral in World War I, was removed from Germany and restored to Ghent as part of the Treaty of Versailles (Charney).

Throughout the war, a cohort of 345 determined men and women from fourteen nations fought to save Europe’s treasures. The so-called “Monuments Men,” left careers as art historians, curators, architects, and professors to undertake the Herculean task of preserving Europe’s cultural history. Initially, the art experts were deployed to save statues, buildings and other cultural artifacts from the

ravages of combat (“Upcoming”). In addition, these men and women recovered seminal works including the *Ghent Altarpiece* and Leonardo da Vinci’s *Lady with an Ermine*. Most notably, the group discovered the Altaussee salt mine. They recovered 6,577 paintings, 2,300 drawings or watercolors, 954 prints, 137 pieces of sculpture, and thousands of other items (Morrison). Their efforts, while heroic, were not enough to return the vast majority of the *Raubkunst*, or looted art, to their rightful owners.

After the war, the Allied powers began the arduous process of restitution, an undertaking to catalogue and return artwork taken by the Nazis. Germany has stalled the process: it has no law preventing people or institutions from owning looted art or art sold under duress. In addition, the 1998 Washington Conference Principles on Nazi-Confiscated Art only provides for the voluntary return of works (Commission). Very few of the stolen pieces have been returned to their original owners and their heirs. Even when the art is located, the original owners are dead, their documentation destroyed or lost and their descendants have to convince commissions, art dealers and museums to willingly give up property worth thousands, if not millions, of dollars.

Looted art may still be hidden in far corners around the world. In 2012, recluse Cornelius Gurlitt, son of former museum curator Hildebrand Gurlitt, was found with 1,280 works of art hidden in his 1,076 square foot apartment in Munich

(Shoumatoff). The art was estimated to be worth at least a billion dollars. His father, Hildebrand, had been detained by the Monuments Men who returned 165 pieces to him but determined the rest were stolen (Shoumatoff). However, they didn't realize Hildebrand had lied about the rest of his collection being destroyed -- it had been hidden elsewhere. Cornelius died in May 2014 and left his collection to Switzerland's Museum of Fine Arts Bern which has promised to return any stolen art to its owners.

To date, most of this art continues to languish in storage while battles rage over its rightful ownership. One painting, *Seated Woman* by Matisse, which was stolen from Paul Rosenberg, was successfully returned to his granddaughter (Eddy). Another painting, Max Liebermann's *Two Riders on a Beach*, was returned and later sold at auction, fetching nearly \$3 million, three times its estimated price (Holmes). Ronald Lauder, a longtime advocate for the return of the stolen art has said, "The artworks stolen from the Jews are the last prisoners of W.W.II." (Shoumatoff).

Today, restitution has become a moral battle, and according to Holocaust survivor Leone Meyer, "a posthumous victory for the victims over barbaric behavior" (Hirschhorn). Although a small fraction of the items have great value, most of them have modest monetary worth. However, the teacups, candlesticks, photographs and other items pillaged from homes remind us of families destroyed.

The restitution of these items is a way to reconnect families and preserve their legacy, despite the atrocities of the Shoah.

As I ponder the Shoah's impact on art, I think about the indescribable amount of lost work and whether more of it might eventually be unearthed. Even more, I think about what could have been. Of the millions of Jews killed, how many more artists like my Lentz relative weren't given the chance to share their brilliance with the world? What other great minds were lost in the gas chambers? How could our society have been shaped by their contributions to art, to music, to science, to the world? I am grateful my family has a piece of history as a reminder of those who have sacrificed so that my family could be here today. While we may not know which Lentz created our Impressionist landscape, I feel like it was one of my female relatives, an aspiring artist like me, and I appreciate the joy her painting brings my family to this day.

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