

The Looting of Life



The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York is having a blockbuster exhibition of 19th-century European painting. Everyone thinks this exhibition is wonderful. Now, however, a journalist has published an article that accuses the Museum of exhibiting a masterpiece of French painting that had passed through Nazi hands during the second world war. The journalist says the painting was in a private collection of art that belonged to a Jewish art patron; the Nazis sent the collector to a death camp and stole his art collection for themselves. In the aftermath of the war, the stolen art disappeared from view. It has now surfaced in New York. The journalist has convincing proof for all his assertions. Scholars in the field examine his evidence and agree that the painting has a tainted past.

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Reader's Response

Amber Kumar: Designer, Artist, Activist

As an artist existing in our trying times, I find it hard to believe that the museum is unaware of the message it's giving to the denizens of the art world, especially as it certainly challenges the aspect of ownership. Art is a living representation of a moment, one that is immortalized in public spaces like museums, put on display for all to see. That being said, while museums can make political statements, they do not represent ownership, but censorship to a degree, especially since our art leaves the artist's ownership once it is sold to another, yet, the caveat stands that while it does not represent us any longer, it still puts our values on display, putting our thought processes out in the public for all to see. Thus, it is up to these public spaces to show the ownership of these pieces properly, representing the artists and the respective owners of a work of art. A work of art is more indicative of the person owning it than of the artist, especially in the regard of ownership.

In regards to my personal stance on the fact that the Metropolitan Museum of Art has stolen Jewish artifacts in its possession, I will be evaluating it on its legal, moral, and emotional grounds, and as far as I'm concerned, all three stances can have the same result. In regards to the legality of the situation, I believe

that if the museum unknowingly came into contact with the goods, then the museum should be free of judgment, especially if they compensated the buyers accordingly. If the latter is in fact the actuality of the matter, the sellers should be tracked down and the the money should then go to the remaining estate of the specified Jewish art collector. This result then works in tandem with the moral and emotional grounds of this case, as those affected negatively by the trafficking of stolen goods should be paid appropriate reparations in order to right the wrongs that have occurred in the Holocaust.

Moreover, I also believe that due to the severity of the crimes committed in during the Third Reich, the statute of limitations should be ongoing, allowing more cases like this one to see the light of day and finally receive the legal action it deserves.

As an artist, it would be an honor for any of my pieces to be placed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, but I would hate to be associated with so horrific a war crime and do nothing to attempt to right the wrongs of the past. As far as I am concerned with the matter, the importance of the art's content pales in comparison to the aspect of ownership, and because the journalist seems to have substantiative proof, it would be foolish for the museum to make such a

drastic faux pas. Museums have a past of attempting to frame their art in a postmodern view, by depoliticizing the pieces featured (1). However, as much as one could try, depoliticizing art is as much of an insult to the piece as taking acetone to oil paint- it removes the meaning and ultimately will hurt the work. We should instead accept the political associations that some of these pieces have, and simply pay credit where credit is due, and in the Met's case, this would involve paying reparations or some sort of restitution fee benefiting the victims of the holocaust.

As the Metropolitan Museum of Art has a lot of power as an established historical gallery of humanity, it should also accept the fact that humanity is indeed capable of atrocity, and use its social capital wisely, and lead by example. Additionally, unless asked by the estate of the Jewish art collector, I do not believe that it is necessary for the museum to give back the works of art to the owners, but instead pay any restitution fee or reparation that the family has asked for. Art is meant to be displayed, and this reminder is as good as any in order to blatantly accept the fact that hatred and genocide are hard truths of humanity and we should not even pretend that we are far better than we were then, as we continue to commit crimes against our fel-

low human daily. The Metropolitan Museum of Art should instead work on effectively showing the complex nature of this painting, and frame it in a way that is real and emotionally evocative- by telling the truth of the matter (1).

Overall, my stance on the painting featured at the Metropolitan Museum of Art are legally and morally aligned- that the Metropolitan Museum of Art should take back the money spent on purchasing the painting and give it to the family of the Jewish art collector, and the painting should remain at the Met if the estate of those affected believe it should be. Marginalized groups have had a long and arduous history of being silenced in the art world, and if the Metropolitan Museum of Art chooses to lead by example, this hopefully will pave the way for other reparations to be made towards other victims of war crimes and past injustices. Whether the public agrees or not with the Metropolitan Museum of Art's decision in this matter, this will result in this case becoming a model for resolving other injustices of the past, and I hope that the Met, being one of the more significant of American museums, will make a decision that benefits the victims of this case. Thank you for allowing discourse on this important topic. 