

ART & DESIGN

German Foundation to Help Jewish Heirs in Search for Nazi Looted Art

By COLIN MOYNIHAN MARCH 7, 2017

Shortly after the Nazis rose to power in Germany in 1933 the family of a prominent newspaper publisher there fled to France, leaving behind an eclectic art collection that included Benin bronzes, Egyptian antiquities and 20th-century realist paintings. The works were confiscated, many were auctioned and most have been presumed lost.

Now a partnership including German museums, university researchers and the descendants of the publisher, Rudolf Mosse, will search for the plundered works as part of a two-year contract that the Mosse heirs have signed with the Freie Universität Berlin.

The project, called the Mosse Art Research Initiative, will be partly funded by the German Lost Art Foundation, which was formed in 2015 by the federal and state governments in Germany to find and identify cultural artifacts seized by the Nazi regime. Officials at the Lost Art Foundation said that this was the first time they had financed an initiative to track down a set of works that had belonged to a particular family. The application for help from the initiative stood out, the foundation officials, said, because it included heirs and public institutions that were willing to work together on researching and supporting the project financially.

A spokeswoman for the foundation, Freya Paschen, said, “We do hope that more projects of this variety will apply for funding in the future.”

The Mosse Art Restitution Project, which was created by the Mosse heirs several years ago to search for the art, will share in financing the new partnership, and 11 museums and archives in Germany have agreed to cooperate.

“This is something that serves the interest of all parties,” said J. Eric Bartko, who manages the Mosse Art Restitution Project. “We have common interests, common ethical beliefs and common principles.”

Dr. Meike Hoffmann, the coordinator of the project at the Freie Universität, said that five researchers there would use material including correspondence between Mr. Mosse and artists and art dealers; collection catalogs from the 1920s; auction catalogs from the 1930s; and the archives of a Nazi-era art dealer named Karl Haberstock, to identify works that had been part of the collection.

Mr. Bartko said that several institutions where Mosse works have been located, including the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin — Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Staatliche Kunsthalle in Karlsruhe and the Museum Wiesbaden, will make documents and archives available to the researchers.

He said research indicates that the Nazis may have seized more than 4,000 works from the Mosse collection and that the restitution project had identified just over 1,000 by name. The heirs began a formal effort to recover the lost works in 2012.

Since then, Mr. Bartko said, the restitution project has recovered about 20 works from institutions in Germany and Switzerland and sold some of them back to museums that had agreed to surrender them. The recovered works include a pastel drawing by Adolph Menzel called “Dame mit roter Bluse,” a sculpture of a lion by August Gaul and a marble Egyptian sarcophagus from 200 A.D.