

BREMEN

"Never Look a Gift Horse in the Mouth"



Vincent van Gogh's *White House at Night*, 1890, was looted from Germany by the Russians and hidden in the Hermitage. Is it still there—or has it turned up on the black market?

The gold treasure of Troy, looted from a Berlin bunker in the last days of the Second World War and stored for almost 50 years in a secret Russian museum depository, will finally come to light next year. Irina Antonova, director of the Pushkin Museum in Moscow, where the gold has been hidden, said that museum personnel were preparing the objects for exhibition, but she refused to allow television newscasters permission to film them. The presence of the gold in the Pushkin Museum was revealed in *ARTnews* in April 1991.

Antonova's statement had German museum officials up in arms. Wolf Dieter Dube, director general of the Berlin State Museums, fired off a letter of protest. "It is a good practice that no one touches objects from other museums without asking for permission," Dube told *ARTnews*. "Up to now,

nobody has had the possibility to see the objects, and then to learn that our colleagues are going to restore these things without talking to us—we can't accept that."

Klaus Goldmann, chief curator of the Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte in Berlin, where the gold was housed before World War II, was concerned about the possibility that the Russian restorers would "shoeshine" the treasure, perhaps because political leaders might "want to see shining gold." If the objects lost their original patina, Goldmann said, it would be impossible to answer certain questions about them: Did Heinrich Schliemann really find them at the site of what he believed to be ancient Troy, or did he buy them elsewhere? And did he make copies of them, as has been rumored? "If they polish the gold," Goldmann said, "its documentary quality will be lost."

Another development that worries Ger-

man museum directors is the growing amount of war loot turning up on the market. Rudolf Blaum, acting director of the Bremen Kunsthalle, said, "We have an agreement with our Russian partners not to purchase any works on the black market, and we are abiding by that agreement." The official position is that museum directors may decide for themselves to compensate the Russians—in the form of restoration or library equipment, computers, or books—but this is humanitarian aid, not payment for booty. The Germans also destroyed or stole vast amounts of art in Russia.

Dieter Opper, assistant to the Bremen state culture minister and coordinator of activities between the states and the Interior Ministry, said he thought the artworks appearing on the "gray" market came from private hands, not the official depositories in Russian museums.

That has been true of the many drawings from the Bremen Kunsthalle that have recently resurfaced in Europe and America. Three—an engraving of the Virgin and Child by Dürer, a landscape etching by Claude Lorrain, and a school of Anthonis Waterloo drawing—were returned to the museum by television journalists who had bought them from Russians in Hamburg. Blaum said the museum had not been involved in the return. When the journalists told him the works were for sale, he said he didn't want to know anything about it. But he agreed to accept them as a gift. "I would never look a gift horse in the mouth," he explained. Now that the works are back in the museum, Blaum says, "I don't know how they got them—and I don't want to know."

Three other works from Bremen became the subject of a New York court case when the dealer to whom they were offered by a Russian immigrant called the FBI. The Russian, Yuly Saet, told the dealer, who asked not to be identified, that he had lived on an island in the Baltic Sea, where he had taught rural children. In gratitude, a farmer had given him three drawings, which Saet claimed "had been taken off the body of a dead Russian army officer." All bore the Bremen Kunsthalle stamp. Saet's lawyer, William Weber, later told *ARTnews* that Saet had acquired the drawings from a farmer, but in his version the farmer lived in Siberia and the drawings came from a grounded Russian submarine. Sealed in a crate, they had washed up on a beach.

The FBI seized the drawings in a sting operation, and the Bremen Kunsthalle filed an ownership claim. Saet's attorney was preparing a similar claim. Unless a settlement can be reached, a judge will decide who the rightful owner is.

But a strange case involving a painting by Vincent van Gogh suggests that not all the

looted artworks turning up on the market are private trophies of war. The picture, *White House at Night*, comes from the important prewar collection of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist works belonging to Otto Krebs, a Heidelberg industrialist who died in 1941, leaving his collection and his country estate in Holzdorf, near Weimar, to a foundation he set up. After his death, foundation personnel took the pictures to the Holzdorf house and hid them in its well-secured cellar. The house was commandeered by the Red Army and became the headquarters of General Vassily Chuikov, head of the Soviet military administration in Thuringia. In 1949, after the Soviets left, the paintings—98 works by Manet, Monet, Cézanne, Degas, Renoir, van Gogh, and Signac, among others—disappeared. *ARTnews*, in September 1991, published a top-secret Russian document that proved that 78 paintings from the collection had been deposited in the Hermitage. What happened to the other 20 is not known.

Last November, a group of German museum officials were shown the Krebs collection in the Hermitage. Rolf Bothe, director of the Weimar Kunstsammlungen, told *ARTnews* that they saw three van Goghs (there were four in the collection). One of them was *White House at Night*, and something about it puzzled the Germans. Bothe said the picture looked very “fresh,” and the Germans joked about it and wondered if Krebs might have bought a fake in the 1920s. The other pictures looked fine. “In general,” he said, “we had the impression that the collection was excellently preserved and that the pictures were original.”

A few weeks later Bothe (and other German museum directors) received a letter from the Art Loss Register in London, a nonprofit organization that keeps track of stolen art. The letter said that a certain Mr. Novak had inquired about *White House at Night*. Bothe located Gerhard Novak in Offenbach, near Frankfurt. Novak told him that he had been offered the picture by someone of Yugoslavian origin. Novak confirmed to *ARTnews* that he had inquired about the picture in London but refused to discuss the matter further.

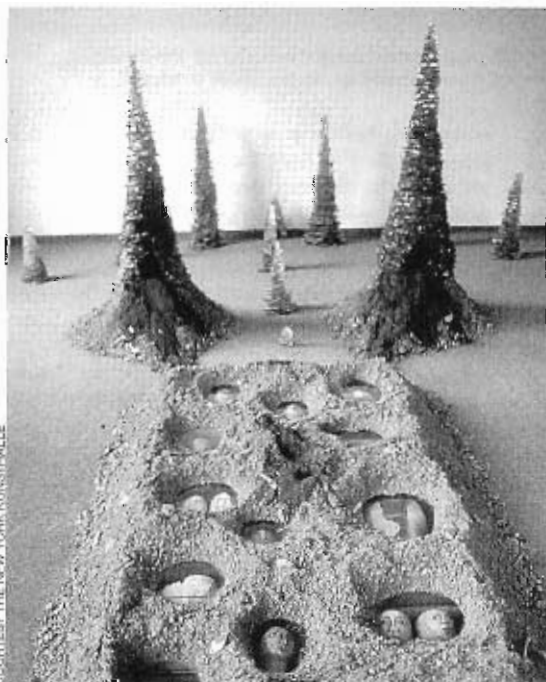
The suspicion, of course, is that the picture in the Hermitage may have been stolen and replaced by a copy. Asked if a substitution might have taken place in Germany between 1945, when the war ended, and 1949, when the collection was removed from the country, Bothe answered that the materials for such an operation wouldn't have been available in postwar Weimar. Georgy Velenbakhov, deputy director of the Hermitage, refused to comment.

The matter is under investigation by the Ministry of the Interior, the Bundeskriminalamt (the German equivalent of the FBI), and the district attorney for Offenbach.

As the situation became more complicated, the members of the war loot restitution commission prepared to meet with their Russian counterparts in Moscow in March. Sources who asked not to be identified said that the Trojan gold, the Bremen drawings, and the Krebs collection would all be on the agenda. But Russian Minister of Culture Evgeny Sidorov expressed doubt about the fate of the Koenigs Collection, which was in the Museum Boymans-van Beuningen in Rotterdam before the war. It was sold to the Germans in an illegal sale, according to Dutch law, taken to Germany, and then to Russia. Dutch officials have been negotiating for its return since 1991.

In the meantime, the Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte decided to take the initiative and return a cache of objects looted by the Nazis from Russia. In March, Goldmann said, the museum was returning a hoard of art taken from the Kherson museum in Ukraine—80 bronze and copper objects and pottery dating from neolithic to medieval times—to a representative of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences. The objects were stolen in 1943 or '44 and ended up in a castle near Osnabrück that was used as an SS “university” and housed a large collection of looted art put together for Gestapo chief Heinrich Himmler. The museum bought them in 1985. “A colleague from Moscow identified one piece,” Goldmann said, “and then we researched them and discovered they came from Kherson.”

—Ginger Henry-Künzel and Andrew Decker. Additional reporting by Ekaterina Dyogot in Moscow.



SARAJEVO

Taking the Place of Armies

Almost in defiance of the Serbian army encamped on the mountains surrounding the city, Sarajevo's arts are alive. Musicians play in public, shows go on at the Kameri theater, exhibitions happen in bombed-out galleries. “I'm not saying that art can eliminate the war,” says poet, painter, and impresario Enver Hadziomerspahic, a 47-year-old Bosnian Muslim. “But it can provide the force for the people of Sarajevo to want to continue to live.”

Hadziomerspahic directed the opening and closing ceremonies of the 1984 Sarajevo Winter Olympics. He also founded the Sarajevo Art Biennale, curating the only two editions of that event in 1987 and '89. Last winter, he traveled to Italy with a double mandate from Bosnia's Ministry of Culture. One objective was to find a European venue for a third Sarajevo Art Biennale in 1995.

His second mission was to publicize war-torn Sarajevo's most ambitious cultural endeavor: the realization of a major contemporary art museum by the year 2000. The plan, called International Cultural Project “Sarajevo 2000,” has met with both enthusiasm and skepticism—a skepticism Hadziomerspahic has encountered and overcome before. “Fifteen years ago,” he recalls, “a small group of people in Sarajevo was working on an equally improbable project: the Winter Olympic Games. But in the end Sarajevo was selected, and the games were a glorious success. We hope the creation of this museum can signal the return of civilization to our city, and the return of our city to the peace and culture of Europe.”

At present, “Sarajevo 2000” has little more than a rough blueprint, a founding committee, and six short years in which to realize its museum. Hadziomerspahic and his colleagues would like their museum to feature the work of 100 of the world's most important contemporary artists. For a site they have chosen a 15th-century fortress currently occupied by the United Nations command.

As a metaphor, the transformation of the fortress into an art museum would signal the end of the reign of force in Sarajevo. From the time of its construction, the fortress has always been occupied by an army. It served as the Turkish military garrison.

Mustafa Skopljak's *Sarajevo '91, '92, '94, 1992-93*, never got to the Venice Biennale—but is now on view at the New York Kunsthalle.