

# Swiss Museum Settles Claim Over Art Trove Acquired in Nazi Era

Catherine Hickley

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The Kunstmuseum in Basel agreed to pay the heirs of a Berlin collector for 200 works he sold as he fled German persecution of Jews.



Credit...Julian Salinas

Twelve years after the city of Basel, Switzerland, rejected a claim for restitution of 200 prints and drawings in its [Kunstmuseum](#), officials there have reversed their position and reached a settlement with the heirs of a renowned Jewish museum director and critic who sold his collection before fleeing Nazi Germany.

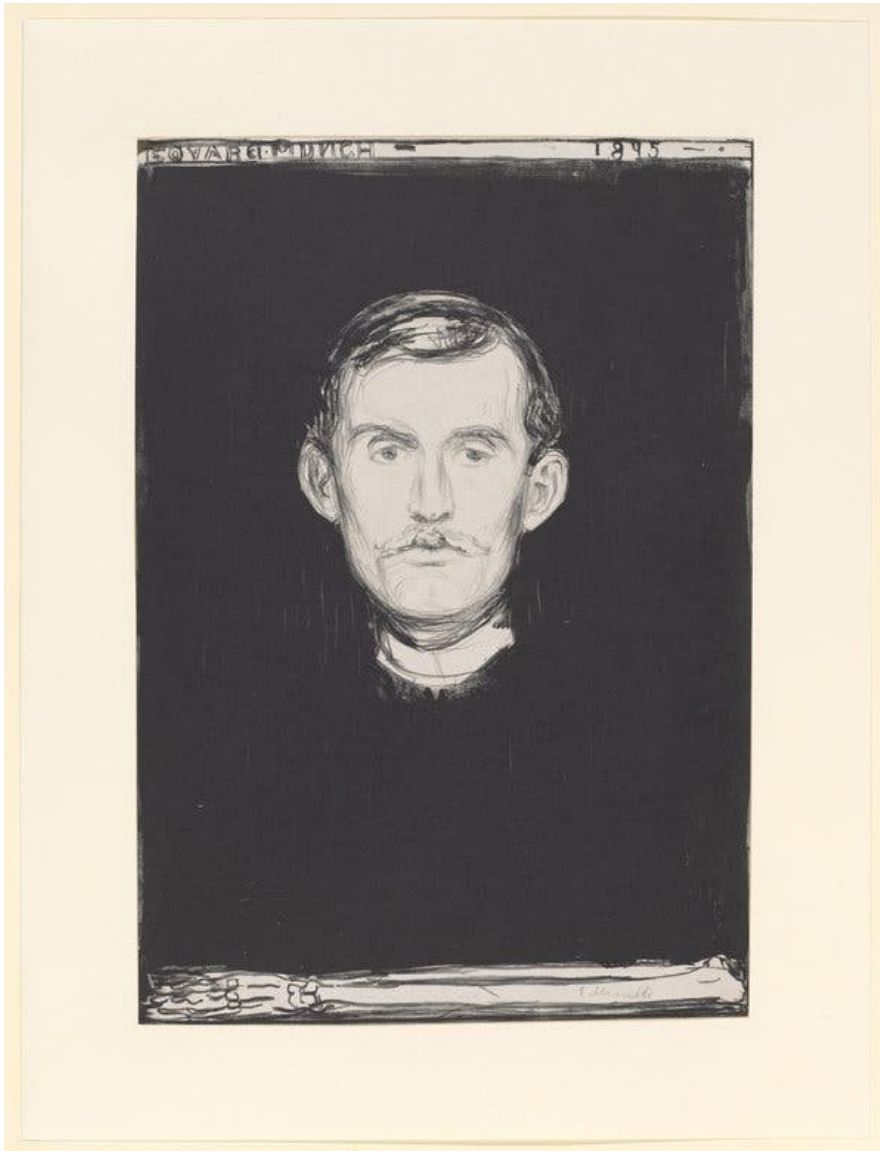
In 2008, the museum argued that the original owner, [Curt Glaser](#), a leading figure in the Berlin art world and close friend of Edvard Munch, sold the art at market prices. The museum's purchase of the works at a 1933 auction in Berlin was made in good faith, it said, so there was no basis for restitution.

But after the Swiss news media unearthed documents that shed doubt on that version of events, the museum reviewed its earlier decision and today announced it would pay an undisclosed sum to Glaser's heirs. In return, it will keep works on paper estimated to be worth more than \$2 million by artists including Henri Matisse, Max Beckmann, Auguste Rodin, Marc Chagall, Oskar Kokoschka, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Erich Heckel. Among the most valuable pieces are two Munch lithographs, "Self Portrait" and "Madonna."

The turnaround is a major victory for the heirs but also a sign, experts said, of a new willingness on the part of Swiss museums to engage seriously with restitution claims and apply international

standards on handling Nazi-looted art in public collections. “Switzerland was neutral during the war, but it was a marketplace for art,” David Rowland, the New York lawyer representing Glaser’s heirs, said. “It is now making great progress in coming to grips with these cases. This is a big step forward.”

The Kunstmuseum said it also plans to mount a comprehensive exhibition in 2022, in consultation with the heirs, about Glaser’s role as “a collector, art historian, critic and museum director.”



Credit...via Basel Kunstmuseum

“It has taken a long time, but this is good news,” said Valerie Sattler, Glaser’s great-niece and one of his heirs. “We were initially all very skeptical that anything would change with this review.”

Born in Leipzig, Glaser began work as an art critic in 1902. From 1909, he was a purchaser for the Royal Gallery of Prints in Berlin. He began to build his own collection and was appointed director of the city’s Kunstbibliothek, or art library, in 1924. At regular art salons, Glaser and his wife entertained artists and intellectuals over tea and liqueurs in their Berlin apartment in the 1920s.

Soon after the Nazis seized power in 1933, Glaser was ousted from his post and the accompanying apartment. He decided to leave Germany and sold most of his collection in two auctions in Berlin.

Among the bidders at the Max Perl auction house in May 1933 was Otto Fischer, a curator for Basel's public collections, who had been given permission to "make cheap acquisitions."

The Kunstmuseum says its research suggests Glaser received the proceeds for the sales. He left for Paris in 1933 and eventually made his way to the United States in 1941. He died there in 1943.

Glaser's heirs first approached the Kunstmuseum in 2004. Four years later, the government of Canton Basel, which oversees the museum, rebuffed their claim. It argued the prices that had been paid for the works were typical of the time. It said the auction catalog had given no indication that the works belonged to Glaser and the Kunstmuseum had "exercised all requisite care" in its acquisition.

The heirs, most of whom live in the United States, accused the canton and the museum of "failing on a human level" and "minimizing the Holocaust in all of its aspects."

But in 2017 the Basel Art Commission, a committee that supports and advises the museum, agreed to review the case. There were several triggers for this reassessment.

In 2014, another Swiss museum, the Bern Kunstmuseum, inherited the tainted collection of Cornelius Gurlitt, a recluse who had hidden away in his Munich and Salzburg homes about 1,500 works inherited from his father, an art dealer for Adolf Hitler. His bequest, and the burden of responsibility it placed on the Bern museum, trained a spotlight on Switzerland's patchy record in restituting Nazi-looted art and raised public awareness of the plunder and of works sold under duress that had made their way into some museum collections.

Then in 2017, the Swiss public television channel SRF reported that Basel had not been entirely open in its assessment of the Glaser claim. Minutes from 1933 meetings revealed that the art commission at the time was aware the works belonged to Glaser. They also described the purchases as "cheap," if not "fire-sale prices."

Meanwhile, other museums and private collectors, particularly in Germany, had agreed to retribute Glaser works sold at the two 1933 auctions. Among those that returned art to the heirs were the Museum Ludwig in Cologne in 2014, the Hamburg Kunsthalle in 2015 and 2018, and Berlin's State Museums, which also installed a plaque honoring Glaser at the Kunstbibliothek in 2016.

When the Gurlitt case drew wide attention to the Kunstmuseum in Bern, Felix Uhlmann, the president of Basel's Art Commission, said the committee took up "informal contact" with officials there to discuss best practices when it came to international restitution standards.

"The Gurlitt case opened up lots of questions and prompted us to look more closely at the legal basis for restitution decisions," he said by telephone. "We also looked at how other institutions had responded to Glaser claims, and saw that some had reached different conclusions to the Basel decision in 2008. So we thought we must at the very least revisit this case."

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