

Media release

Basel, March 26, 2020

BLOCKING PERIOD: Friday, March 27, 2020, 12pm

Settlement between the Kunstmuseum Basel and the heirs of Curt Glaser

The Kunstmuseum Basel and the heirs of Curt Glaser have agreed on a fair and just solution. The Kunstmuseum Basel retains the works of art, while providing redress to the heirs with an extensive exhibition about Curt Glaser and monetary compensation.

Curt Glaser, who was of Jewish descent, emigrated to Switzerland in 1933. After the Nazis had seized power, he had lost his position as director of Berlin's Kunstbibliothek, one of Germany's leading art-historical libraries. In May 1933, he auctioned off most of his sizable art collection; the Kunstmuseum purchased two hundred drawings and prints. After a long illness, Curt Glaser died in the United States on November 23, 1943.

In late 2017, Curt Glaser's heirs approached the Kunstmuseum Basel and demanded a "fair and just solution." They invoked the so-called Washington Principles (Washington Conference on Nazi-Confiscated Art), which call for fair and just solutions in cases in which individuals had lost art during the Nazi era. The Kunstmuseum Basel, together with other Swiss art museums, adopted a resolution to implement the Washington Principles in 1998.

In its November 21, 2017, meeting, the museum's board of trustees resolved to investigate the matter in depth. Over the course of 2018, the trustees, assisted by a working group of the museum, studied the historical and legal ramifications of the case. They also heard Curt Glaser's heirs and their representatives. In late 2018, the board of trustees and the management unanimously adopted a decision based on an extensive report. The decision and report are publicly accessible on the Kunstmuseum Basel's website.

Curt Glaser was a victim of National Socialism

The board of trustees and the Kunstmuseum recognize that Curt Glaser was a victim of National Socialism and that his case must be adjudicated under the Washington Principles. However, in the opinion of the trustees and the Kunstmuseum, Curt Glaser enjoyed considerable latitude in his decisions on which works of art to sell and which to retain at the time of his emigration. The trustees and the Kunstmuseum also assume that he received the complete proceeds from the sales.

Based on this assessment, the board of trustees and the Kunstmuseum decided not to restitute the works. However, the Washington Principles also allow for another form of fair and just solution. The trustees and the Kunstmuseum regard the preparation of a detailed report on the case as part of a fair and just solution. In 2022, the Kunstmuseum will moreover mount an extensive historical exhibition about Curt Glaser. Its objective will be to shed light on Curt

Glaser's work as a collector, art historian, art critic, and museum director, with those works from his collection that have entered the Kunstmuseum Basel's holdings as central exhibits. Lastly, the board of trustees and the Kunstmuseum recommended negotiations with the heirs concerning a possible monetary compensation.

The report was shared with the Government of the canton of Basel-Stadt in late 2018. The Government approved the negotiations with the heirs and signaled its willingness to provide funding assistance for the exhibition about Curt Glaser. The board of trustees and the Kunstmuseum are most grateful to the Government for its support.

The negotiations with the heirs of Curt Glaser took place in 2019. The representatives of Curt Glaser's heirs traveled to Basel. The works formerly owned by Curt Glaser in the Kunstmuseum's collection were appraised. In early 2020, the parties arrived at a mutually agreeable settlement concerning the monetary compensation, which will be paid from the Kunstmuseum's acquisitions funds. The parties have agreed not to disclose the settlement figure. The board of trustees and the Kunstmuseum would like to use this opportunity to thank the representatives of the heirs again for the constructive cooperation.

The board of trustees and the Kunstmuseum believe that this decision and settlement reflect the museum's firm commitment to provenance research and the Washington Principles. Over the past decade, follow-up conferences and the work of scholars have refined those principles. That is why we have now been able to arrive at a different decision than in 2008, when the government of Basel declined to enter negotiations.

Elisabeth Ackermann, President of the Government:

"The Government welcomes the agreement achieved in the Kunstmuseum's negotiations with the heirs. The thorough investigation of the case and the exhibition honoring Curt Glaser's work, in combination with the monetary compensation, represent a fair and just solution based on the Washington Principles. The Government believes that the Kunstmuseum has handled the matter in exemplary fashion."

Contact us for further information:

Felix Uhlmann, president, board of trustees, Kunstmuseum Basel, felix.uhlmann@rwi.uzh.ch,
Tel. +41 61 279 70 00

Karen N. Gerig, head of communications, Kunstmuseum Basel, karen.gerig@bs.ch,
Tel. +41 61 206 62 80

Provenance research at the Kunstmuseum Basel

In conformance with the ICOM Code of Ethics, the Öffentliche Kunstsammlung, the public art collection of Basel, and its advisory board of trustees regard the commitment to an honest and transparent approach to the history of its holdings as a moral obligation and standard of scholarly excellence. It has also pledged to adhere to the Washington Principles. Since 2019, the Kunstmuseum Basel, with support from the Ernst Göhner Foundation, has been building a new division dedicated to provenance research that will undertake a multiyear scrutiny of the provenances of the works in the museum's possession. With funding support from the Federal Office of Culture (BAK), scholars at the museum began in 2016 to investigate the origins of each of the ca. 380 paintings and sculptures that entered the Öffentliche Kunstsammlung between 1933 and 1962. A second project is dedicated to reviewing the acquisitions between 1933 and 1945 of ca. 2,000 drawings now in the Kupferstichkabinett (Department of Prints and Drawings). The findings will be published on the Kunstmuseum Basel's website once these projects are completed.