

Picasso portrait returned by National Gallery to heirs of Jewish banker persecuted by Nazis

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The National Gallery of Art has agreed to transfer ownership of a small, Blue Period Picasso pastel portrait to the heirs of Paul von Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, a leading German Jewish banker whose life was upended by Adolf Hitler's rise to power.

10 Lawyers representing the heirs contend that Mendelssohn-Bartholdy was forced to begin liquidating his art collection by Nazi policies, which robbed him of income and jeopardized his life.

15 Anabeth Guthrie, a spokeswoman for the National Gallery, said in an email Tuesday that the gallery's research has found no evidence that Picasso's "Head of a Woman" was in the possession of the Nazis but that the gallery transferred ownership of the work to the family's heirs "to avoid the heavy toll of litigation and its diversion of resources from the Gallery's core mission."

20 However, the family never claimed the 1903 Picasso was in the possession of the Nazis. Rather, they argued that Nazi persecution forced the sale of the work and that this alone is grounds for it to be returned to Mendelssohn-Bartholdy's heirs. They argued that when the National Gallery accepted the Picasso as a gift from the Ian Woodner Family Collection in 2001, its own provenance research "should have caused them to do further investigation."

25 "It is clear that Paul von Mendelssohn-Bartholdy suffered from Nazi persecution and that it harmed him in every aspect of his life, including financially," said John J. Byrne Jr., a lawyer representing the heirs.

30 This is the third work that the National Gallery of Art has returned to the heirs of families that suffered under Nazi persecution. One of the works, a painting by Frans Snyders that was returned to its rightful heirs in 2000, probably was confiscated by Hermann Goering; the other, a drawing by Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld that was returned to heirs of a prior owner in 2016, was sold in 1939 under duress.

35 Paul von Mendelssohn-Bartholdy was a relative of the composer Felix Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment philosopher Moses Mendelssohn. Mendelssohn and Co., the bank his family established in 1795, was one of the five largest privately owned banks in Germany. Mendelssohn-Bartholdy's collection also included works by Vincent van Gogh, Claude Monet, Edouard Manet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir and Georges Braque.

"In examining all of the considerations the Gallery concluded that transferring the drawing was the right thing to do," Guthrie said.

40 One of the family's heirs, Julius Schoeps, director of the Moses Mendelssohn Center for European Jewish Studies in Potsdam, thanked the National Gallery for transferring the ownership of the Picasso in a statement emailed to The Washington Post on Tuesday. "This distinctive artwork is both a poignant reminder of the enormous impact that Nazi policies had upon the contents of many private and public art collections today, as well as the Mendelssohn family's tragic history in Nazi Germany," he said.

45 The heirs of Mendelssohn-Bartholdy have previously reached settlements with the current owners of three other Picassos they claim Paul von Mendelssohn-Bartholdy was forced to sell at the same time as "Head of a Woman." They include "Boy Leading a Horse," now in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art; "Le Moulin de la Galette," now in the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, and "Portrait of Angel Fernandez de Soto" (also known as "The Absinthe Drinker"). The latter was sold at a Christie's auction in London for \$51.8 million, 50 with commission, to a private collector by the Andrew Lloyd Webber Foundation after the foundation had reached a settlement with the heirs.

The Museum of Modern Art and Guggenheim settlements were reached in 2009, just before a trial was due to open. None of those settlements, all of them confidential, involved a transfer of ownership back to the heirs. As a portrait in pastel on paper, "Head of a Woman" is the least 55 valuable of the five. The National Gallery has only displayed it twice.

The family's restitution claim on a fifth work, Picasso's "Madame Soler," in the Bavarian State Paintings Collection in Germany, remains unsettled.

60 In 1920, Mendelssohn and Co. banded together with eight other German banks and founded BDO AG (known then as the Deutsche Waren-Treuhand-Aktiengesellschaft), which acted as a trust organization for foreign lenders. Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy was the co-chair of the supervisory board with Max Warburg. He was also a member of the board of the Berlin Stock Exchange and a well-known collector of modern art.

65 His prominence made him a special target for Nazi persecution of German Jews. The Nazis organized boycotts of Mendelssohn and Co. and excluded Mendelssohn-Bartholdy from important leadership positions. They forced him to forfeit land and the press branded him and his family enemies of the state. He fled his Berlin home under the threat of Nazi violence.

70 From 1932 to 1934, according to Byrne, his income plummeted by 86 percent as Hitler rose to power, and he made the decision to liquidate his art collection. He gave five Picassos on consignment to Justin K. Thannhauser, who sent them to a commercial exhibition in Buenos Aires. They failed to sell there and were sent back to Berlin, where Thannhauser purchased them from Mendelssohn-Bartholdy in 1934.

On May 10, 1935, Mendelssohn-Bartholdy died of a heart attack. The family bank was "Aryanized" — transferred to non-Jewish ownership — in 1938.