

PRESS RELEASE

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Project Gurlitt identifies painting by Thomas Couture as Nazi-looted art

A tiny repaired hole pointed the provenance researchers to Georges Mandel. This detail enabled the Gurlitt Provenance Research Project team to identify the painting *Portrait de jeune femme assise* (*Portrait of a Seated Young Woman*) by Thomas Couture as Nazi-looted art. The artwork belonged to one of the most famous French victims of the Nazi regime, the high-ranking Jewish politician and anti-Nazi Georges Mandel. Mandel was detained by the National Socialists as an *Ehrenhäftling*, or prisoner of honour, in the German camps, and murdered in July 1944 by the French militia in the forest of Fontainebleau. His Paris apartment was targeted by German art-looting organisations at an early stage.

Monika Grütters, Federal Commissioner for Culture and the Media, explained: “The fact that the researchers have been able, through their meticulous and unstinting work, to identify the painting by Thomas Couture as Nazi-looted art demonstrates once again how important it is not to let up in our efforts in the field of provenance research. I hope very much to see this work returned promptly to the descendants of the original owner. We owe it to the people who were persecuted by the National Socialists, deprived of their property and their rights, and in many cases murdered, to leave no stone unturned in investigating and clarifying the Nazi looting of art. It is and remains our moral obligation in cases of artworks seized by the Nazis to find fair and just solutions.”

A tiny technical detail pointed the **Gurlitt Provenance Research Project** team to Georges Mandel. Barely detectable at first sight with the naked eye, the *Portrait of a Seated Young Woman* by **Thomas Couture** from the Gurlitt art trove has a repaired hole at the level of the subject’s chest. And precisely this information was noted by someone, probably the legendary French art conservator Rose Valland, in the course of the official filing of claims directly after the war. But the lost Couture painting was described only in vague terms, which, given the numerous portraits of society women by the popular painter, represented a challenge for the provenance researchers. Nevertheless, the little handwritten note enabled them to trace it. With the assistance of the restorers at the Bundeskunsthalle (Art and Exhibition Hall of the Federal Republic of Germany), where the picture is currently being held as preparations continue for the exhibition “Gurlitt: Status Report”, the Gurlitt painting was again meticulously examined. This led to the discovery of a repaired hole at chest level. Another crucial document, signed by Eberhard Freiherr von Künsberg, turned up in the Political Archive of the Foreign Office in Berlin:

*“In the execution of the [...] order to secure art owned by Jews in France, the preparations were carried out without delay[...] (Künsberg) obtained] approval for the Secret Field Police to be deployed to secure Jewish art collections and place them in the safekeeping of the German embassy. **The new operation, in which several experts from my commission are likewise involved, began today with the searching of the apartment of the Jew Mandel.**”*

This presumably led to a series of artworks, most probably including the Couture painting, being taken to the German embassy in Paris.

A claim was filed for the return of the Couture painting from the estate of Cornelius Gurlitt. The Gurlitt Provenance Research Project has informed the claimant of its findings. This is the sixth case of looted art that the researchers have uncovered since the appointment of the Schwabinger Kunstfund task force.

The painting found in the estate of Cornelius Gurlitt in Schwabing has been published in the **Lost Art Database** since 2013 www.lostart.de/DE/Fund/478471 (with further information).

Attachement: Photo and photo credits

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Thomas Couture (1815–1879)
Portrait of a Seated Young Woman, 1850–1855
Photo: Mick Vincenz © Kunst- und
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Detail Thomas Couture (1815–1879)
Portrait of a Seated Young Woman, 1850–1855
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