

Press release

Restitution by the Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen of four paintings from the collection of August Liebmann Mayer

The restitution by the Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen of a portrait of a lady by Wilhem Thöny, a Madonna by Cristoforo de' Moretti, an apostle by a Cologne Master and a 19th-century painting of Christ is to be made to the attorney Markus Stötzel, representing the daughter – who now lives in Los Angeles – of the Jewish art historian, August Liebmann Mayer (1885–1944).

The restitution is in line with measures passed by the federal states to implement the 'Declaration of the federal government of Germany and municipal bodies to find and restore cultural assets, seized by the National Socialists, to their rightful owners, especially those taken from Jewish citizens'. This case is another which has been brought to a successful conclusion by the Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen as part of the effort to compensate for crimes perpetrated by the National Socialists.

August Liebmann Mayer was curator at the Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen from 1909 until 1931. He began as a trainee under Hugo von Tschudi before becoming a curator, specialising in Spanish art in the Alte Pinakothek, when Friedrich Dornhöffer was director general. Even today, his profound knowledge of Spanish painting is still held in high esteem. Serious allegations that Mayer had made a fortune writing reports as an expert for an extra fee which he supposedly failed to declare for tax purposes, led to an unprecedented witch-hunt and his own request to be released from his duties in the civil service. In 1933, the Gestapo took Mayer into 'protective custody' from which he was only released after attempting to take his own life. His collection of art and other valuables were auctioned by Hugo Helbing, among others, to pay off allegedly high tax debts. Assisted by influential art dealers, Mayer emigrated to France in 1936, where he initially lived in Paris with his wife and child. When German troops invaded in 1940, Mayer had to flee to Nice. His flat in Paris was confiscated by the ERR and the contents of his library and modest art collection transferred to Germany. Mayer was arrested in Monte Carlo on 3 February, 1944; on 13 February he was taken to Drancy and deported to Auschwitz on 7 March, where he was murdered on 13 March, 1944.

The tax office in Munich imposed a fine on Mayer which was paid for using securities confiscated from him. In addition, the tax office stipulated the amount of payment due, which was partly covered by liquid assets, but which still left a six-figure sum outstanding. The tax office demanded that Mayer's property in Tutzing and all available assets, including his valuable art collection, be sold. All revenue generated went to the tax office in Munich North and that in Tutzing to meet outstanding tax debts. In 1944, the Gestapo submitted an application to the Regional Finance Office VII in Munich to assess the extent of the decline in assets and the overall value of 'the Jew August Israel Liebmann Mayer, b. 27.10.1885 in Darmstadt, last registered as living in Munich, at Martiusstrasse 8'.

In 1954, the Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen were given three paintings owned by August Liebmann Mayer by the regional authorities for property administration for safekeeping, which were then transferred to them officially in September 1956. A fourth picture followed in 1981.

In 1954, Mayer's only living daughter, as sole heir, submitted an application to the Bavarian Restitution Office for reimbursement for the loss of assets, the sale of furniture and works of art. This was forwarded to the appropriate government authority dealing with compensation claims, who turned it down as being unfounded. It was not until 1963 that the daughter came to an agreement with the compensation authority.

The work dated 1913 by Wilhelm Thöny of Graz (1888–1949), a contemporary of Egon Schiele and Oskar Kokoschka, now to be restituted, shows a middle-aged woman whose identity is unknown. Thöny studied at the Art Academy in Munich and, together with his Jewish wife, first emigrated to Paris in 1931 and then to New York. In 1948, thousands of his graphic works and paintings, which were to have been shown in a major group exhibition, were lost in a warehouse fire. In one fell swoop almost all his life's work was destroyed.

Two of the three works from August Liebmann Mayer's collection that were transferred from the State of Bavaria to the Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, were offered for auction in 1933 at Hugo Helbing's, but remained unsold. The work by Moretti is described in the sales catalogue as being by Besozzo. The small panel depicts the Madonna and Child, the saints Anne, Anthony (the Abbot) and Peter (Exorcista) against a richly chased gilded background. Between 1450 and 1475 traces of Christoforo Moretti's work as a painter can be found in Milan, especially for the House of Sforza, and in Piedmont. This panel from Mayer's estate documents Moretti's return to the specific characteristics of the international Gothic style in northern Italy. The only signed work of Moretti's is a triptych from S. Aquilino in Milan (now in the Museo Poldi Pezzoli), the style of which is very close to that found in Michelino da Besozzo's works.

The apostle picture on the other hand, was previously considered to be a work by the 'Master of the Life of the Virgin'. The fourth, small-sized work from the early 19th century is of Christ in front of Pontius Pilate.

"I am extremely pleased that, through the restitution of works of art, it has once again been possible to administer justice to victims of crimes committed under the arbitrary rule of the National Socialists, even many decades later," Prof. Dr. Klaus Schrenk, the Director General of the Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen reinforced.

Further information and pictorial material is available under tel. 089 23805-286 or by e-mail from pressebuero@pinakothek.de

Further information and pictorial material:

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Wilhelm Thöny: Portrait of a Lady, 1913



August Liebmann Mayer (1885-1944)