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#### NEWS

## Tale behind Schiele watercolours is a tragedy—but is it a theft?

The heirs of the Viennese entertainer Fritz Grünbaum, who died in Dachau, go to court in New York to recover his art

by DAVID D'ARCY | 21 November 2015



Richard Nagy showed *Woman Hiding Her Face* with an asking price of \$2.5 million at the Salon of Art + Design fair in New York

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The heirs to Fritz Grünbaum, a Jewish entertainer from Vienna who died in Dachau during the Second World War, are suing the London dealer Richard Nagy to recover two watercolours by Egon Schiele that were exhibited last week at the Salon of Art + Design fair in New York.

A judge has issued a temporary restraining order to keep the pictures in the US. Yet three legal panels have already ruled that there is no evidence that the collection from which these pictures are meant to have originated was ever taken by the Nazis.

Nagy and the heirs of Fritz Grünbaum (1880-1941) are due back in court in New York on 1 December. Raymond Dowd, the lawyer for the heirs, promises “overwhelming evidence that the pictures were looted”. Dowd stresses that this evidence is new to the disputes over Grünbaum’s property.

Nagy says that both watercolours have been sold in the past at Sotheby’s, where their provenance was vetted. The works are *Woman Hiding Her Face*, offered at the asking price of \$2.5 million, and *Woman In Black Pinafore*, offered at \$500,000.

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Grünbaum, a popular cabaret performer and satirist in Vienna, was interned in Dachau in 1938 and died three years later. His wife also died in a Nazi camp in 1942. Mathilde Lukacs, Grünbaum's sister-in-law, sold 71 works on paper by Egon Schiele in 1956, at what is now Galerie Kornfeld in Bern, Switzerland. The heirs maintain that those works came from Fritz Grünbaum's collection, and their lawyers contest her right to sell them. Nagy and other experts stress that Lukacs was a collector in her own right and the works may have never belonged to Grünbaum.

In 2010, a US court ruled against a claim brought by Dowd and Grünbaum's heirs to recover a drawing by Schiele, *Seated Woman With Bent Left Leg (Torso)*, 1917, that was purchased by the collector David Bakalar in 1964. (The decision was later upheld by a US appeals court.) That same year, an Austrian panel studying the provenance of three works by Schiele in the Leopold Foundation believed to have belonged to Grünbaum found no evidence of theft to justify their restitution.

This summer, Herbert Gruber, a Viennese genealogist working for Grünbaum's heirs, threatened to sue the Albertina Museum in a US court while the estate awaited an Austrian panel's decision on another claim involving two drawings by Schiele held by the Albertina. In October, the legal panel found no grounds for returning the works.

Evidence may be a problem for Grünbaum's heirs, as records from the Second World War are sparse. Works belonging to Grünbaum were exhibited at Viennese galleries in 1925 and 1928, without images. His property was inventoried by a Nazi official in 1938, but works on paper were not listed separately and no images were provided.

In 1956, a catalogue published by Galerie Kornfeld of works sold by Mathilde Lukacs included pictures. Neither of the works named in the lawsuit against Nagy were in the 1925 or 1928 gallery shows; both are on the Lukacs list from Kornfeld.

[For an earlier story on Grünbaum's collection, click here.](#)



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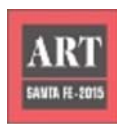
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