

# University Heirs Assemble Seven Nazi-looted Paintings

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MONTREAL CEREMONY MARKS MILESTONE OF MAX STERN ART RESTITUTION PROJECT

To mark the fifth anniversary of the Max Stern Art Restitution Project, the three university beneficiaries of the Estate of Max Stern



Franz Xaver Winterhalter (1805-1873): *Girl from the Sabine Mountains*.

(Concordia University, McGill University/Montreal, Hebrew University/Jerusalem) will host a return ceremony for the seven Old Master and Nineteenth Century paintings thus far recovered. The unveiling will take place on Wednesday, May 20th at 10:00am at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (Michal and Renata Hornstein Pavilion, 1379 Sherbrooke Street West).

The centrepiece of the event will be the unveiling of *Girl from the Sabine Mountains* by Franz-Xaver Winterhalter (1805-1873) – the most famous European court painter of his day. The canvas, illegally transported in 2005 from the United States to Germany during good faith negotiations with Baroness Von Morsey Pickard, finally returns to the universities after a precedent-setting battle for its ownership waged and won in the American federal courts. Following more than seventy years' possession by the family of a Nazi stormtrooper official, the courts affirmed that its forced sale was tantamount to theft and that a thief cannot pass good title.

This historic decision, by extension, applies to hundreds of other works that Max Stern lost from his Düsseldorf family gallery and collection. Indeed, the six month period since the rendering of the Winterhalter judgment has seen the return of three important Dutch and Italian Old Master paintings by European collectors as well as British and American dealers. The contributions of the American legal team led by Thomas Kline of Andrews Kurth LLP as well as the U.S Department of Justice and Department of Homeland Security cannot be understated.

Adding to the New York State Banking Department's Holocaust Claims Processing Office - the first organization to formally acknowledge the Estate's rights to pursue restitution - the Stern Project now boasts an international network of collaborators ranging from government agencies, law enforcement, database services, auction houses, dealers, collectors, private foundations, scholars, archivists, conservators and curators. Of particular note are the efforts of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts where some of the restituted paintings, notably *Girl*

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from the Sabine Mountains will be displayed as of May 21st. This further enhances the legacy of the already-significant European and Canadian art works left to the museum by Dr. Stern during his lifetime.

“When the restitution project was formally initiated in 2004, the estate executors and universities knew very well that this initiative would not be without its hurdles, but agreed that the cause was worth pursuing as long as necessary out of respect for our tremendous benefactor and for the justifiable imperatives”, said Clarence Epstein, Concordia’s Director of Special Projects and Cultural Affairs who leads the Stern Project. “Now, at the five-year mark of a global effort garnering unparalleled success, it’s time to take stock of what’s possible when committed professionals, institutions and governments work together.”

The moral and financial obligations that form the basis of the Stern Project took their cue from the 1998 Washington Conference Principles of Nazi-Confiscated Art to achieve just and fair solutions. This coming June, an international gathering in Prague will assess the progress made since the Washington Principles and there is little doubt that the initiatives by the Stern heirs will form the basis of pointed discussions about current practices regarding provenance research and restitution.

Benefitting universities in Canada and Israel it was always one of the mainstays of the Stern Project to educate the public and raise awareness of the heinous acts perpetrated on humankind by the Nazi government. To this end, the exhibition. Auktion 392: Reclaiming the Galerie Stern, Dusseldorf, continues its world tour with European venues slated for the coming year.

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