

Works of Art Stolen by the Nazis in Belgian Museums ? A More Detailed Investigation Is Necessary

The Flemish newspaper *De Standaard* reported last weekend the presence in Belgium museums of works of art taken by the Nazis. The article and the subsequent reactions make it clear that there are still a lot of unanswered questions. A more thorough archival research is essential.

A few important Belgian museums allegedly display works of art that do not belong there. Concerned are works of art and paintings confiscated by the Nazis during the German occupation and taken to Germany, for so-called research purposes, or, in colloquial terms, to supply works for Hitler's dream museum or for Goering's private art collection. Jewish collectors were probably also the victim of these practices. Questions are raised with regard to the restitution of works of art in the post-war years.

Partial view of Hermann Goering's art collection, in his residence in Karinhaal. (Photo Cegesoma, n° 198.386)

Art historians and lawyers point to the passive attitude of the Belgian authorities and of the museums who keep suspect works of art in their collections. Not enough was done to find the legitimate owners. The particular example referred to is the donation in 1988 of the collection Frans Heulens to the Museum of Fine Arts of Brussels. Heulens is said to have been a key figure in the art trade with the Nazis during the occupation.

In the meantime, a few politicians and museum directors have reacted to this news item. Secretary of State Philippe Courard, in charge of the Federal Museums, is looking into the matter. Michel Draguet, Director of the Museum of Fine Arts, is considering the best way of taking distance of the Heulens collection which takes up two museum rooms. However, to go to the bottom of the issue, an interdisciplinary archival research by historians, art historians and lawyers is called for. Not only in Belgium, but also (and particularly) in Germany, the Netherlands and France.

Articles of De Standaard :

- 25 janvier 2014
- 27 janvier 2014
- 28 janvier 2014

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31 / 1 / 2014