

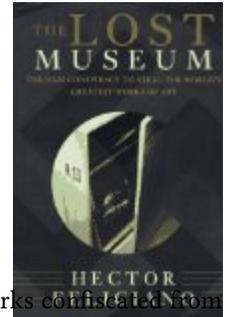
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Hector Feliciano. *The Lost Museum: The Nazi Conspiracy to Steal the World's Greatest Works of Art*. New York: Basic Books, 1997. ix + 278 pp. \$27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-465-04194-7.

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Although there is a burgeoning literature on the looting of art works by the Nazi leaders during World War II, much of the history has yet to be written because of the secretive nature of the art world and the sheer number of works that were displaced. In this trade book intended for a broad audience (a revised version of a 1995 French book *Le Musée Disparu*), Paris-based journalist Hector Feliciano has published the results of seven years of investigation. Although this work tells us little that is new about the Germans' behavior, it offers a vivid portrait of the art world in occupied France and gives insight into the often problematic treatment of looted art works by museum officials and collectors in the postwar period. This latter topic in particular has made news in both Europe and North America.

Feliciano's scope of study is intentionally delimited: in the first of the three sections which follow the introduction, he examines five private collections in France, which he notes was the "most looted country in Western Europe," with "one-third of all the art in private hands ... [having been] pillaged by the Nazis" (p. 4). More narrowly, he looks at the fate of the art works belonging to the Rothschilds, the dealer Paul Rosenberg, the Bernheim-Jeune gallery, the David-Weills, and the Schloss family. Feliciano even narrows the focus at times to specific works of art, such as the chapter devoted to Jan Vermeer's *The Astronomer*, which was seized from Baron Alphonse de Rothschild by the Nazi looting agency the *Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg* (ERR) and passed on to Hitler. Such detailed study is often very illuminating, as he cites, for example, the letter Alfred Rosenberg sent to Martin Bormann in November 1940 just before transporting the painting to Germany. Rosenberg noted, "I am pleased moreover to inform the Fuehrer that the painting by Jan Ver Meer of Delft [sic], to which he made men-

tion, has been found among the works confiscated from the Rothschilds" (p. 15). This correspondence, then, suggests Hitler's active participation in the looting program and offers further evidence of Rosenberg's circumscribed intellectual horizons.

Feliciano's decision to focus on a limited number of collections enables him to include details which make this history not only specific but vivid. He provides the precise addresses of the three branches of the Rothschild family in Paris; and by including photos of the interiors of certain of the homes—for example, that of Edouard, who directed the bank and lived in Talleyrand's residence near the Place de la Concorde—one gains a sense of the ambience that prevailed until 1939. These art works, which were used instrumentally by the Nazi leaders to help overcome insecurities about their social status, usually stemmed from opulent, quasi-regal milieux. The history of these residences alone speaks volumes. Feliciano tells of the head butler of Robert de Rothschild who created a secret room near the laundry, filled it with valuable art works and antiques, and then had it sealed off and the wall whitewashed. Despite the fact that Goering's chief of staff General von Hanesse commandeered the palace, the treasures were never discovered. Feliciano's extensive knowledge of Paris serves him well in bringing this history to light.

The second section of the volume concerns the art market in Paris and Switzerland during the war. The Paris market, as Feliciano rightly notes, flourished after the German invasion, when people sought out inflation-proof assets and had limited opportunities to spend their money. He quotes Alfred Daber, who recalled "People had plenty of cash, but there were no pretty clothes, no new cars, no vacations, and no restaurants and cabarets

in which to spend money. All you could do was buy butter on the black market” (p. 123). But of course, there was always art. Feliciano describes this “frenzied” atmosphere, and also explains how the Swiss market evolved into “a kind of satellite to the French market” (p. 154). He rightly observes that “this neutral nation enabled buyers of art to transport and dispose of it, becoming a sort of plundered art gallery” (p. 154). He explains not only how the Swiss political culture, but also how the legal system proved conducive to the laundering of looted art: an acquisition was (and still is) deemed legal and permanent if the person purchasing the work did so in “good faith” and possessed it for five years. The secrecy clauses of the banking laws and the prevalent use of the diplomatic pouch also contributed to the trafficking in stolen art works. Feliciano confirms what other scholars had previously argued: a large number of dealers in occupied Western Europe and neutral Switzerland colluded with the Nazi elite as the latter amassed sizeable collections.

The final section of the book concerns the search for displaced and missing art works. This information is where Feliciano has made a name for himself as he revealed that the Musée National d’Art Moderne in Paris was among the institutions in France and Switzerland that held works that had been seized from Jewish victims during the war by the Germans (these works are now referred to as *Musees Nationaux Recuperation* or MNRs). Feliciano exposed the code utilized by the museum to keep track of the provenance of the works in the collection: “R” referred for “recuperation” and the number following it signified the order in which the work arrived at the museum. Feliciano charged the museum’s curators with having “made no huge effort” to find the rightful owners for “thousands of unclaimed works” (p. 215). According to the Ministry of Culture, 61,000 works were returned to France after the war and 45,000, or approximately 80 percent, were returned to the proper owners (p. 216). Of those which went unclaimed, some two thousand of the most important works went into the national museums, while the remainder were auctioned off. Feliciano worked assiduously for four years attempting to locate the archival records pertaining to two thousand works, and although he was denied access to the papers kept by French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, he was able to piece together some of the history through the general catalogs of the major institutions like the Louvre and the Musée d’Orsay. Oftentimes, Feliciano is able only to raise questions, as in the case of a Boucher’s painting now in the Louvre which was sold at auction in 1941 to an unknown buyer. It was not possible to discern the rightful

owner and the crucial file in the French public archives was suspiciously missing (p. 227).

Hector Feliciano’s research, however, has also yielded tangible results. The Administration of the French National Museums admitted to having come up short in the search for rightful owners and took steps to remedy this, including a web page and an exhibition of many MNRs in spring 1997. Around this time, then French Prime Minister Alain Juppe promised to create a commission to investigate Jewish assets held by the government since the war (p. 236). The investigation that was largely prompted by Feliciano’s book led to somewhat greater openness on the part of French authorities: the heirs to collector Alphonse Kann, for example, were given a dossier by the Foreign Ministry which helped them in their attempt to recover certain works (some now in the hands of private parties in the United States). But one should not be too sanguine about this story: Feliciano was denied access to crucial documents by the French government, was attacked by French officials in the press and in scholarly colloquia, and has more generally “touched a raw nerve in French society” (p. 236). This book shows what most have long known: for the French, the occupation years are still a troubling chapter of their history that they have yet to master.

Hector Feliciano’s readable and noteworthy book is not without flaws. There are a number of minor factual errors, including the date of the Degenerate Art Exhibition in 1937 (p. 106), the names and titles of various individuals (e.g., Otto Kuemmel headed the Berlin State Museum, not the “Reich’s museums”), and the claim that the Gestapo confiscated the Rothschilds’ property in Vienna prior to 1938 (p. 139). There are also occasional mistakes that one presumes stemmed from the translation (e.g., on page 106 he writes that the plundering agency the *Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg* “extended its operations into the Occupied Zone,” when he must mean the un-occupied Zone). Feliciano is also not immune to some larger conceptual problems. For example, he treats Hitler’s collection as a private one (p. 15); while one may make this argument, Hitler considered it an official or public collection and one should allude to the complexities of the situation. The book is also not systematic in terms of geographic scope (Poland, for example is scarcely mentioned), or the range of plundering organizations (e.g., there is no mention of the very important *Sonderkommando Kuensberg* which ravaged the Eastern Front). Feliciano’s tone is also occasionally self-aggrandizing. He uses formulations such as “the second official exchange of which I am aware” (p. 158), when in

fact, he is summarizing British intelligence officer Douglas Cooper's 1945 report that carefully documents the twenty-eight exchanges. He asserts in the introduction that "no one...had tried putting side by side and meticulously analyzing these long-compartmentalized and heterogeneous elements: wartime books and memoirs; classified and declassified documents and interrogation reports coming from France, Germany, Switzerland, the U.K., the former Soviet Union, and the United States; period photographs; art history and museum documents..." (p. 6). This claim is not only immodest and wrong (other scholars have undertaken similar research), but also undermined by his failure to consult or cite much of the relevant literature (notably works by Kenneth Roxan, David Wanstall, Matila Simon, Karl Meyer, Charles de Jaeger, Alan Steinweis, Kenneth Alford, Konstantin Akinsha, Gregori Kozlov, Sylvia Hochfield, and by this reviewer). One must also note that he does not utilize German archival or secondary sources. The Nazis' looting of art works and the postwar legacy of these actions makes for a story that is so long, complex, and elusive that it re-

quires a certain humility on the part of the author.

Hector Feliciano has nonetheless made a significant contribution to the writing of this history. He broke new ground by way of his research in public institutions in France and in private archives in both Europe and the United States. His many interviews also yielded valuable information. Feliciano should also be commended for including the victims in this study: the case study approach enables him to show how families were victimized as a result of the Nazis' cultural policies. In this respect, his work differs from other studies which focus on the perpetrators or on those who safeguarded the works that they imperiled. In short, Hector Feliciano should be lauded for some fine investigative work and for the contribution he has made in illuminating specific aspects of an important and vast subject.

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