

The following is a translation of an article which appeared on 4. December 2013 in the Augsburg Allgemeine newspaper. The original article may be viewed at <http://www.augsburger-allgemeine.de/bayern/Interview-Kunstexpertin-fordert-Rueckgabe-aller-Bilder-an-Gurlitt-id27983722.html>

ART FIND

Interview: Art expert calls for the return of all pictures to Gurlitt

Berlin art historian Sibylle Ehringhaus viewed the pictures from the Schwabing art find one and a half years ago. She is calling for the rapid return of the works.

Sibylle Ehringhaus was one of the first art historians to inspect the Gurlitt collection after its seizure by the Augsburg prosecutor. The Berlin resident is an expert on 19th Century German art. She made a name for herself as an author and provenance researcher, and researches the origin of artworks for the public sector, auction houses, art dealers and private clients, "starting ideally from the artist up to the current owner." Our newspaper spoke with Sibylle Ehringhaus about the Schwabing art find.

When and where you could view the collection of Cornelius Gurlitt?

Ehringhaus: That was one and a half years ago. The collection had just been secured by the prosecution. They invited me because I am a specialist for the 19th Century. In fact, even older works were there. It had to happen pretty quickly. We only had two days to sift through the collection, which is, of course, not much time. As to the background of the case, I knew hardly anything at this time.

What was the condition of the artworks?

Ehringhaus: The condition was very good for a collection in private hands. Because Cornelius Gurlitt had stored the images in the dark, the colors were exceptionally fresh. There were very diverse, very different types of artworks, from studies to drawings to paintings.

What kind of a feeling did you have, seeing, as an expert, such an unknown collection?

Ehringhaus: This was, of course, not routine. The quality and scope of the collection are, in the end, exceptional. All this was highly interesting for me, it makes your heart beat faster.

What did you think when there was talk in the media of the value of the collection being a billion euros?

Ehringhaus: This is all not only completely hypothetical but frivolous. Apart from the fact that the majority of people were brought into play who were not familiar with the collection at this time — to estimate a value is impossible. These values are not predictable. Media excitement arises precisely when it is about a lot of money. But I am confident that after having gone astray, the whole debate will now follow the right path.

The collection is no longer in the possession of Mr. Gurlitt. Do you think that is right?

Ehringhaus: No. The government has seized of the collection of a private person for an alleged tax offense. Even this is highly questionable. It is basically lacking, in my opinion, the legal basis to take Gurlitt's art away from him. The same applies to the publication of the

pictures. What his father Hildebrand Gurlitt did or did not do, is one thing. But fortunately guilt by association has been abolished. If I, as a provenance researcher, get a work contract from a private citizen, I will act. But Cornelius Gurlitt commissioned neither myself nor anyone else, nor was he required to. I could not, in good conscience, research the provenance of these pictures today.

What now needs to happen?

Ehringhaus: The pictures belong to Gurlitt. The collection must be returned to him as soon as possible — completely. How and where this can happen, is difficult to say now. The government has committed a mistake here, which they initially admitted, so then - if it's even possible - they should make up for it. At the same time, the government must provide for the protection of the man whose life they have completely unraveled.

What about the moral dimensions of the debate? Do not all state museums at least have to check whether they have looted art in their collections, and return the works, if necessary, to the rightful owner?

Ehringhaus: That is precisely what I see as the most urgent issue to be dealt with. If it is politically desirable, the conditions for a review of public collections must to be created within a reasonable timeframe. This will only be possible, however, with the creation of permanent positions at museums for experts, that is to say: qualified provenance researchers.