

Frenchwoman gives up legal fight for return of Nazi-looted Pissarro

Léone-Noëlle Meyer, 81, drops legal action against University of Oklahoma after being threatened with fines



La Bergère Rentrant des Moutons (Shepherdess Bringing in Sheep), completed by Camille Pissarro in 1886

Kim Willsher
2 Jun 2021

A French heiress has been forced to give up her battle to recover a Pissarro painting the Nazis looted from her adoptive parents.

Léone-Noëlle Meyer, 81, announced on Tuesday she had been left with “no choice” but to drop legal action to retrieve *La Bergère Rentrant des Moutons* (Shepherdess Bringing in Sheep) after she was threatened with large fines if she continued.

Last month a Paris court ruled that a contested contract Meyer signed five years ago, sharing the Pissarro with a US university to whom it had been donated, overrode a 1945 French law requiring the restitution of Nazi looted artworks to their rightful owners.

“This work of art, which belonged to my adoptive parents, Yvonne and Raoul Meyer, was stolen from them by the Nazis during the occupation of France in 1941. For almost 10 years, I have battled in order to obtain the recognition of the principle that the restitution of a pillaged work of art should occur independently of any other consideration related to its provenance, its history or its successive ‘owners’,” Meyer said in a statement on Tuesday.

“But after all these years, I have to admit it has proven impossible to convince the different parties to whose attention I have brought this matter. I was heard but not listened to.”

Meyer had described her battle as a “quest” on behalf of the family she lost during the Holocaust and her late adoptive parents: she lost her mother, grandmother and older brother at Auschwitz. After the war she was adopted as a seven-year-old by Yvonne and Raoul Meyer from a Paris orphanage.

During the Nazi occupation, the Meyers had fled Paris, placing their art collection, which also included a Picasso, a Renoir and a Bonnard, in a bank vault where it was discovered by the Germans. Meyer’s father had tried to retrieve the Pissarro from a Swiss dealer in 1953, but was informed that his claim was too late.

The painting then disappeared until 1990, when Madame Meyer discovered it was hanging in the University of Oklahoma’s Fred Jones Jr Museum of Art, having been donated by a local family who had bought it from a New York dealer.

In 2016, Meyer, listed as the ninth-richest woman in France, worth an estimated €600m, agreed to share the painting with the university on the basis of a three-year rotation between France and the US. However, Meyer said afterwards that she had signed the deal under duress. “I was called at 2am and my American lawyer put me under strong pressure to accept this deal. I didn’t have the choice,” she told Le Monde.

The painting, completed by Camille Pissarro in 1886 and worth an estimated €1.5m (£1.3m), is now hanging in the Musée d’Orsay in Paris but will return to Oklahoma this summer.

In her statement, Meyer, who had wanted to donate the painting to the Musée d’Orsay, said she was now handing ownership of it to the University of Oklahoma. It was now up to the university to ensure the three-year rotation outlined in the 2016 agreement was maintained, she added.

Her French lawyer, Ron Soffer, said: “Mrs Meyer has decided to put an end to her struggle to obtain restitution of this painting. The University of Oklahoma has now obtained full title to the painting. As far as Mrs Meyer is concerned they are free to do with it as they please.”

Soffer had argued that the 2016 agreement should not take precedence over a 1945 French law establishing that “no possessor can prevail against the legitimate owner of a work stolen by the Nazis”.

“Under this law, the American museum is presumed to have been a possessor in bad faith,” he said. He also said that no French public museum would be prepared to take on the cost and logistics of sending the painting to Oklahoma every three years in perpetuity.

After last month’s hearing, Soffer said: “It is regrettable that the struggle for justice by an 81-year-old Holocaust survivor whose entire family was murdered in Auschwitz seems to have been rebuffed. My client has fought for the memory of her parents and

for the principle that France should not be deprived of an artwork that provides historical testimony to the years of war and occupation in France.”

In a joint statement, the University of Oklahoma said it did not intend to retain the title to the painting in the long term and was “committed to identifying and transferring ownership to a French public institution or the US [Art in Embassies](#) programme”.

Christophe Marinello, the founder of Art Recovery International, and an expert in recovering stolen, looted and missing works of art, said it was regrettable the case had been fought in the courts. “I’m a lawyer, but I wish they had never resorted to litigation. I’m sure a solution could have been found amicably and discreetly outside the court system,” Marinello said.

He added there should have been provision in the 2016 agreement for the eventuality that it would not be possible to find a museum in France to accept the terms of the rotation.

“She (Mme Meyer) signed an agreement and sadly she has to live by the agreement. It’s unfortunate she is not going to be able to get exactly what she wanted but I think her dropping the case is a wise decision,” he said.

“We need to focus on the many, many Nazi looted works of art still being held by collectors, dealers, museums who are actively hiding these works from the heirs.”