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WHERE THE ART IS

Baldy Center addresses issues surrounding looted artworks

The cloak-and-dagger world of the secret market in artworks, and the legal and social issues that museums and libraries confront when handling items of cultural heritage, were the focus of a two-day conference at UB Law School.

The April 1-2 conference, sponsored by the Law School's Baldy Center on Law and Social Policy, featured a keynote address by Hector Feliciano, a well-known cultural analyst and author of *The Lost Museum: The Nazi Conspiracy to Steal the World's Greatest Works of Art*.

Among the topics of the discussions: "Cultural Material: Property or Heritage?"; "Guarding the Guardians of Culture"; "Holocaust Era Assets"; and "Native American and Indigenous Peoples Artifacts." The interdisciplinary panelists included curators, representatives of Native peoples, legal scholars and other academics, and education technologists.

Conference organizers noted that the topic is particularly timely given recent events in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as ongoing disputes over Native American remains and the return of artwork to Holocaust victims and their heirs.

Though the second day of the conference was held in the Center for the Arts, Feliciano's lecture was staged in the Buffalo & Erie County Historical Society auditorium to accommodate a wider public.

Feliciano began by noting that Adolf Hitler and Hermann Goering were art enthusiasts – indeed, Hitler applied twice for admission to the School of



Hector Feliciano gave the keynote address.

Fine Arts in Vienna. "He thought of himself as an artist all the time," the speaker said. "His taste was mixed, but he did know his art history."

The Nazis' conquest of France, and particularly Paris, fed that passion, because Paris was at that time the center of the art world. Picasso, Matisse and Braques were doing work there; art was being bought and sold, collected and written about.

The Nazis' looting of those treasures, Feliciano said, "started on the very first day of the occupation." By the end of the four-year occupation, he said, the Nazis had looted about 100,000 works of art and 1 million books and manuscripts – one-third of all the art in private hands in France, about 200 collections. Of those works, an estimated 20,000 to 40,000 are still missing: paintings, drawings, sculptures and objets d'art.

With a staff of 60 working to catalog their ill-gotten art, the Nazis took over a small museum near the Louvre for storage. They categorized anything post-impressionism as "degenerate" art, which could not be sent back to Germany but could be bartered worldwide for other works.

Feliciano then showed an evocative series of slides of artworks stolen by the Nazis, some of which remain missing. Vermeer's "The Astronomer," for instance, a beautifully lighted painting of a bearded man with a globe by a window, went directly to Hitler as a companion piece to "The Geographer," which the dictator already owned. Hitler intended that his personal collection would become the core of museum to be built in his hometown in Austria.

A simple, elegant Picasso nude drawing from the early 1920s was taken from Paul Rosenberg, an important Parisian art dealer who had secreted his collection in southwest France when the Germans arrived. The move couldn't safeguard the works from the invaders, and 60 to 70 paintings remain missing – including this one. "I am sure that it is somewhere, and it will surface someday," Feliciano said.

Another piece taken from Rosenberg was a Degas portrait of a young girl. "Among the Nazis," Feliciano said, "the only group who liked impressionism were the diplomats. They looted this painting and put it in the German embassy in Paris. Then the painting disappeared." In 1987, Rosenberg's daughter-in-law saw an ad in a British art magazine for an auction in Hamburg – featuring this very portrait. She called the dealer and was told the painting was there on consignment. When she called a few days later, consigner and painting had disappeared.

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The slides included some photographs of the Nazi looters at work, including one of Goering himself inspecting a stolen painting with a Nazi art historian. In the background, a man opens a bottle of champagne.



A crowd filled the Buffalo & Erie County Historical Society auditorium for the Baldy Center lecture.

tographs of the Nazi looters at work, including one of Goering himself inspecting a stolen painting with a Nazi art historian. In the background, a man opens a bottle of champagne. "Every time there was a big new acquisition, they would make an exhibition for Goering. He would pick pieces for himself, unless Hitler had chosen them first," Feliciano said. "Goering was closest to the looting itself. He really took it over. ... They never saw it as looting. They considered that they were taking what belonged to them."

In keeping with the theme of the conference, Feliciano noted that the re-discovery and repatriation of looted artworks often raises complex legal questions. A 1914 cubist painting by



Professor Shubha Ghosh and Dr. Sandra Olsen.

Braques, "Man With a Guitar," was taken by the Nazis from the collection of French dealer Alphonse Kann collection, sold during the war to a major French collector, resold in the 1960s,

then sold in 1981 to the Pompidou Center without that French museum knowing that it had been looted. The Kann family is now seeking to reclaim the painting.

In addition to the Baldy Center, the conference was co-sponsored by UB Law School, UB Libraries, UB Art Galleries and Museum Studies, the departments of anthropology and art history, and UB's Canadian-American Studies Committee. The keynote address also was sponsored by the Foundation for Jewish Philanthropies, the Institute for Jewish Thought and the Buffalo & Erie County Historical Society.