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INSIDE ART

By CAROL VOGEL APRIL 20, 2001



The Morgan Makes Amends

Issues of provenance, ownership and restitution resulting from World War II looting continue to face museums in the United States and abroad. Now the Pierpont Morgan Library has its first such case.

In 1997 the library purchased a 1599 German manuscript containing liturgical music compiled by Johann Schirmer, a cantor at the church school of St. Sebald in Nuremberg. The Morgan, which does not disclose the cost of its acquisitions, bought the manuscript from Maggs Brothers, a London dealer, which had purchased it at an auction at Swann Galleries in Manhattan for \$3,910.

When William Voelkle, the Morgan's curator of medieval and Renaissance manuscripts, learned that a German scholar, Dr. Volker Schier, was planning to visit the Morgan to look at another manuscript, he told him of the acquisition. Dr. Schier requested a microfilm copy of the manuscript because it documented church music in Nuremberg after the Reformation.

"Once he saw the microfilm," Mr. Voelkle said, "he wrote to me saying that the manuscript was actually property of the Stadtbibliothek in Nuremberg" and had been there until World War II. Documents from the Stadtbibliothek show that on Oct. 20, 1944, the collection was taken to the ballroom of a restaurant in Hohenburg that served as a mess hall for occupying American soldiers. A 1952 inventory by the Stadtbibliothek reported that the manuscript was missing and was thought to have been taken by a G.I.

Mr. Voelkle said he then discovered that the Morgan had also bought a book containing two works written by Joannes Cochlaeus, a theologian connected with the St. Lawrence Church in Nuremberg. "We bought it because of its binding," he said. It was decorated with a coat of arms designed by Albrecht Dürer for his friend Willibald Pirckheimer, a Nuremberg humanist.

The Morgan bought that book from the Manhattan dealer Fred Schreiber, who had purchased it at the same Swann auction for \$5,750. The manuscript and the book had identical bookplates, those of Georg Andreas Will, who sold his library to the City of Nuremberg in 1792.

When Dr. Schier notified Stadtbibliothek officials that the Morgan had the book and manuscript, they told the Morgan that both belonged to their library. "We bought them in good faith, thinking the provenance was clear," said Charles E. Pierce Jr., director of the Morgan. "But when we found out their provenance, there was no question that we had to return them. Clearly they were stolen, and now they're going back where they belong."

Simian Star Power

For yet another auction season, a work by the 1980's art star Jeff Koons is likely to eclipse much of the contemporary art coming up for sale. "Michael Jackson and Bubbles," a 1988 porcelain sculpture of that pop star with his chimpanzee, decorated with gold metallic paint, is on view behind glass at Sotheby's York Avenue headquarters.

Like Mr. Koons's monumental "Puppy," a 43-foot-tall terrier made of 75,000 live flowers, and his famous stainless-steel rabbit, "Michael Jackson and Bubbles" uses beautiful materials. But in this case Mr. Koons has transformed them into a kind of three-dimensional clichéd celebrity photograph. "It's the best of Jeff: celebrity, seduction, scale and fragility," said Laura Paulson, director of Sotheby's contemporary art department in New York. "Like celebrities, you can't get too close to it."

Mr. Koons produced four editions of the 70-inch-long piece, including an artist's proof. One is in a foundation in Athens, another at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. The artist's proof is owned by the Broad Art Foundation in Santa Monica, Calif.

The work, to be offered at Sotheby's auction of contemporary art on May 15, is expected to sell for \$3 million to \$4 million. While Sotheby's isn't identifying the seller, contemporary-art experts say it is Lew Manilow, the Chicago collector. Last May a 1988 Koons porcelain sculpture, "Woman in Tub," a large figure of a woman grabbing her breasts, caused a stir when it was sold at Christie's for \$1.7 million.

An Upgrade in London

The Tate Gallery's library and archives in London, specializing in British fine art since the Renaissance and known as the pre-eminent collection of contemporary art material in Britain, has been restricted in both its space and its availability to scholars. Now, with a \$3.1 million donation from the Kreitman Foundation of London, its resources will be increased at Tate Britain.

Designed by John Miller & Partners, London architects, the new library, archive and reading rooms will have better and larger accommodations. "The library was originally designed for curatorial use and for a small number of scholars," said Sir Nicholas Serota, director of the Tate. "Scholarship is the bedrock of any institution, but it frequently takes a back seat to other things." The new quarters are to open by June 2002.

Gleaming in the Sun

Like Alexander Liberman, the Condé Nast editorial director who died two years ago and had a second career as a sculptor, Arthur Carter, owner of The New York Observer, has been quietly making art in his studio in Connecticut for more than nine years. Last year Mr. Carter had a one-man show at the Salander-O'Reilly Galleries in Manhattan. Now six sculptures from that show can be seen for three months on the newly renovated plaza in front of the General Motors building, on Fifth Avenue between 58th and 59th Streets.

The works, of gleaming metal in a variety of styles, all seem indebted to David Smith, although Liberman's work may also have been an inspiration. "It was always graphic design that was the area of publishing that interested me most," Mr. Carter said. "And that's what these sculptures are about."