

“Die Schattengalerie”: a research project for lost art at the Suermondt-Ludwig-Museum

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After the end of World War II, the collection of the Aachen Suermondt-Ludwig-Museum suffered many losses. In 1945/46, Red army troops took many works of art with them (as war booty) from the Albrechtsburg in Meißen (near Dresden), where a large number of paintings from Aachen had been brought for safety during the war. Although a group of paintings returned to Aachen in 1961, about 275 paintings are still missing today.

The largest group of these paintings (mostly Dutch and Flemish painting of the 16th and 17th century, including works by Balthasar Van der Ast, Jan Asselijn, Abraham Bloemaert, Pieter de Bloot, Jan van Goyen, Peter Paul Rubens, Frans Snijders and Nicolaes Van Verendael) has been missing without a trace ever since. They may be in former Soviet territory. Not all the paintings, however, have remained in Soviet possession. For example: nine (possibly ten) paintings were transported before 1951 from Meißen to Canada by a certain Alice Siano who had been working for the Soviets. A *Still life with flowers* by Balthasar Van der Ast, probably the best known lost painting from Aachen, is currently in a private collection in New York. A few other examples of works that occurred on the art market after 1945 also indicate that some paintings might have found their way back to the West.

The “Verlustkatalog” (missing paintings catalogue) that will be published by the Suermondt-Ludwig-Museum in December 2007, will make clear that the museum still claims ownership of the majority of these paintings. Secondly, it will try to document the paintings as extensively as possible to enable their identification, and to localize (and eventually regain) them. Therefore it is necessary to publish basic data, relevant facts concerning provenance and, most importantly, to reproduce good quality images. For these reproductions it is in many cases possible to use photographs taken before the war (glass negatives are available at the museum’s archive). In addition, we will expand provenance research on these works (provenances before, during and especially after 1945), thereby using the internet (Artnet) and The Art Loss Register. Furthermore, art historical research (incorporating the current state of art historical literature, like changed attributions) will take up the mass of the work. This catalogue will be the second in the series of collection catalogues of the Aachen museum since the first one, the catalogue of Dutch and Flemish paintings (1550-1800) by Thomas Fusenig, was published by Hirmer Verlag in March 2006.

The research project will not only result in a scholarly catalogue. The Suermondt-Ludwig-Museum will take the opportunity to bring the theme to a broader audience by staging an exhibition which will open at the museum when the catalogue is presented. Through the exhibition of photographs

of the works on a 1:1 scale, visitors will be able to experience this “Schattengalerie” (“shadow collection”) of paintings no longer in Aachen. The third part of this project will be to organise a symposium to further this problem for all of Germany’s “Beutekunst” (looted art) with participants and speakers from different disciplines; (art) historians, but also art dealers, private collectors, journalists, lawyers and politicians.

Several partners have agreed to participate in this project. Importantly, the Kulturstiftung der Länder, the main central institution in Germany, has given its full support. One of their tasks is to try and regain lost works of art, including wartime losses. To this matter, recently the Kulturstiftung - in close cooperation with several museums among those the Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz - has founded the workgroup “Deutsch-Russischer Museumsdialog,” which aims to clarify the situation concerning properties of German museums in Russia and to establish better contacts between the two countries. A private partner who will participate in the project is Van Ham Kunstauktionen in Cologne. The Art Loss Register (Deutschland) too, has agreed to cooperate by providing their services. We also hope for the support of large networks, such as CODART. By making images of all the paintings available on the CODART website, we could reach a worldwide network of colleagues.