

British galleries work to recover art stolen by Nazis

■ Legal hangups may prevent art's being returned to Jewish owners.

LONDON (AP) — British museum directors have published on the Internet a list of 350 art treasures in 10 major museums that might have been stolen by the Nazis during World War II — but it's unclear whether any of the paintings will ever be returned.

The National Museum Directors' Conference hopes to discover whether the works — which include paintings by Pablo Picasso, Claude Monet and Auguste Renoir — once may have belonged to Jews and other victims of

Adolf Hitler's German regime.

"I cannot believe for one moment that any of the national galleries would wish to display an item which was stolen from someone who was murdered or once forced to sell the piece to survive. We are talking about human tragedies," said Lord Janner, chairman of the London-based Holocaust Educational Trust.

The items, estimated to be worth tens of millions of dollars, have "gaps or question marks" over their history between 1933 and 1945, when the Nazis oversaw the looting of hundreds of thousands of paintings and sculptures.

The list features 109 works in the National Gallery in London, including

Picasso's "Fruit Dish, Bottle and Violin," Renoir's "A Nymph by a Stream" and Eugene Delacroix's "Christ on the Cross."

The Tate Gallery list of 80 works includes Paul Cezanne's "The Avenue of the Jas de Bouffan" and Picasso's "Head of a Woman."

But a British tribunal set up to mediate ownership disputes won't be legally binding, and court claims may be thrown out if the art was acquired in good faith at least six years ago.

Arts minister Alan Howarth said the problem is further complicated because current law bars museums from disposing of art held in trust for the nation.

"Just as it was wrong to take paint-

ings off Jewish people in the circumstances of the Nazi era, so it would be wrong without a proper basis of evidence to take paintings off the national collections, which are held for the public benefit," Howarth said in a British Broadcasting Corp. interview.

Museum directors stressed that nothing on the list has been identified positively as stolen. Other explanations for gaps in the records may be unregistered sales or hurried moves of artwork during the war years.

So far, only one unresolved claim has been received asserting ownership of the Tate Gallery's "View of Hampton Court Palace" by Jan Griffier.

Tate Gallery chief Sir Nicholas

Serota, who is leading the British inquiry, said further research is needed to establish which works were stolen by Hitler's troops.

"We are publishing this information so others can help us close the gaps," he said.

But groups representing Holocaust survivors said there was a moral obligation to return the works to legitimate owners.

"I can think of no lesson better to give the British nation than the return of looted property to its rightful owners," said Bobby Brown, spokesman for the World Jewish Restitution Organization in Jerusalem. "If culture is not based on morality, than it is not culture."

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