



Naming Names:

AN INTERVIEW WITH HECTOR FELICIANO

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Previously the Paris-based cultural writer for *The Washington Post*, Hector Feliciano is also the author of “The Lost Museum: The Nazi Conspiracy to Steal the World’s Greatest Works of Art,” (Basic Books, 1997) one of several recent studies which followed the trail of paintings looted by the Nazis during World War II. Many of these works were never returned to their rightful owners, and Feliciano’s book stirred up an international inquiry into the provenance of many works. It also opened larger questions about the art world’s surprising blind spots. Feliciano himself has been battling a lawsuit from the powerful Wildenstein Gallery, accusing him of slandering Georges Wildenstein, who is labeled a collaborationist in his book. In May 2000, a Paris appeals court rejected the Wildenstein family’s claim for damages.

Q. What are some of the major looted works that have been returned because of your book?

A. A Matisse in Seattle was returned to the Paul Rosenberg family. A Monet from the French State Museum in Normandy. A Picasso was returned to the

Kann family. Fifty paintings have been returned up to this point.

Q. How have the survivors' families reacted to your efforts?

A. Some people will always be elegant in their way of behaving. . . .

Q. How did you get involved with this subject initially?

A. I was a cultural writer at *The Washington Post* in Paris. One day, I was reporting on a regular Parisian art exhibit, when I happened to speak to an old French man. He said, "Did you know that there are still many missing paintings from the war, paintings originally looted by the Nazis?" That really struck me. In art history, paintings never really get lost. There is always a record. I went to see the French National Archives, and found that all the documents pertaining to this matter were classified—that's something you never tell a journalist. The more I knew, the more I wanted to know.

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Q. Finding the answers became an obsession?

A. You want to know everything. Every single story of every single painting stolen by every single Nazi. I spent ten years researching before writing the book.

Q. Why were the files classified?

A. France has very strict confidentiality laws that extend as much as 120 years after a person's death.

The whole matter of World War II is still considered very important and sensitive. Also, they know that many of the art dealers still operating today were collaborators during the war. Many people who donated works to museums were collaborators. Two thousand donated works in the State Museum had never been researched. Sometimes, I would find the original owner in a

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few hours. But many of the curators held art works for fifty years without doing any research on them. They would always tell me they were about to do an inventory. If I asked why they hadn't done one in fifty years, they would say, "Ah, an inventory is a very difficult thing to do."

Q. What was the most surprising discovery you made?

A. I was interviewing this very old man—92 at the time—a real Mr. Gossip of the art world. I was delighted that Mother Nature had given me such a gift. He was the first art dealer to open a gallery in Montparnasse in 1926. I had brought thousands of pages of documents from the National Archives in Washington. And while I was interviewing the old man, I was also checking these documents. Not only was he listed as a French collaborator—he was the main one! He told me, "I had nothing to do with the Germans. They invited me to lunch, and I refused to be head of the Art Dealer's Association." Later I realized that even to be invited to lunch meant he was already very close to the Nazis. I started asking him questions, getting closer to his collaboration. He would say he was getting tired and I had to leave.

Another surprise was that the unclaimed paintings included major works hanging at museums like the Pompidou. When I started, I thought only second-class paintings went unclaimed. There was a Léger at the Pompidou which had been in seven or eight exhibits all over the world. I found the painting in a photo of the back room of the Jeu de Paume during the war, where the Nazis had kept the "degenerate" art. I knew that if it was there it had to be on a list—the Nazis loved lists. I found out that the original owners were Paul and Leon Rosenberg. Now the family is claiming it.

Q. What about Jews who collaborated with the Nazis in the looted art trade?

A. That was the case with Georges Wildenstein. He had contacts with Nazis prior to the occupation. I found the actual letters. They couldn't sue me in

America, where you can say anything about a dead person. The law that the Wildensteins are using to sue me is not a libel law. It is a 19th century statute on the moral responsibility of a historian who does injury to someone's reputation. This law, interestingly, was used against French historians who tried to disprove the holocaust.

So far, I have spent \$80,000 in legal fees fighting this case. They are suing for \$1 million and future restraint—an interdiction against putting their name in any of my writing, which is censorship, so I have to fight. The money, of course, is no problem for them, as their wealth is estimated at \$3 to \$4 billion.

Q. Can you talk about the media frenzy surrounding the trial in France?

A. In France, people were fascinated because it was the first time that someone was being concrete about the facts surrounding the prevalence of collaboration in looted art during the war. I had evidence, and I named names.

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Q. Has “The Lost Museum” changed anything in the art world?

A. Even when the book was out, it took many newspaper articles before people began to realize what a big story it was. Because of the book and others like it, people are more concerned than in the past about provenance research. Many museums now have full-time staff investigating provenance. In Austria and France, all the state museums are conducting research—the Tate and the National Gallery in Britain. Even art history departments in universities are talking about it.

Q. One of the most surprising aspects of the book was the revelations about the Swiss complicity in the looted art trade. How have they reacted to the book?

A. I was threatened with a lawsuit by the Basel Kunsthalle because I said they

owned one of the looted paintings. The owners came out and stated it was true. Very few people knew that the Germans had regularly used the diplomatic pouch to Switzerland to smuggle looted art.

Q. What about New York?

A. After the war, New York took the place of Paris as the center of the art trade. Many works came through New York, and from New York they found their way to the rest of America. The Matisse in Seattle was sold by the Knoedler Gallery in the early 1950s to a timber family. Many pieces are being examined and claimed all over the country now.

Q. What is left as the biggest mystery?

A. Switzerland, probably. Where are all the hundreds of works that came to Switzerland? Are they in private collections? In museums? Are they distributed around the world? I would still like to know, but at a certain point, you have to move on. When I first started the research, I wanted to investigate all the looting of everything throughout Europe. But I realized that if I just covered the paintings in France, it would be enough to remove one brick from the façade, and the rest would come tumbling down. That seems to be what is happening.

Q. Some museums feel beleaguered by distorted media reports which suggest that huge numbers of works might be looted. How do you feel about the media frenzy your book created?

A. Once the story came out, it became a real frenzy. Journalists started calling me. Some barely knew a Monet from a Gauguin and did not know the meaning of the word “provenance.” They suddenly wanted to find looted paintings in ten days or ten minutes. Investigation is hard work. It can take years, money and sacrifice. Investigation is the opposite of frenzy.