

Hungary not returning artworks seized by the Nazis

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January 16, 2008 | The Municipal Court of Budapest has rejected a lawsuit from US-based Holocaust emigree and Herzog-heiress Martha Nierenberg concerning the return of artworks originally stolen from her family by the Nazis when Germany invaded Hungary in 1944.

This fifth and legally binding decision in the case is the first that has gone in favor of the state. The decision rules that the Hungarian state acquired the works of art through "prescription," meaning that by possessing a property for long enough the state had gained ownership of it. Although the masterpieces were originally seized by the Nazis, they have belonged to the Hungarian National Gallery for several decades.

Although Baron Lipot Herzog, assembled one of the greatest art collections of the time in pre-war Budapest, consisting of some 2,500 pieces at its peak, Nierenberg's quest has focussed on 11 artworks (including paintings by El Greco, Van Dyck, Courbet and others) with an estimated worth of between \$15m and \$20m.

The last ruling in the case was back in 2000, when an appellate court said the works of art had to be returned to the family, but this was appealed by the state.

"I guess they're hoping they can wait me out," Nierenberg told the New York Times. "Part of me is frustrated. Part of me is angry at the government. It's been a long time, but you keep on," she added.