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Contentious paintings withdrawn from Zurich museum

The new extension to the Kunsthaus Zürich has been home to an impressive collection of French art since it opened in 2021. However, a shadow hangs over the illustrious works, which the private Bührle Foundation has loaned to the publicly funded museum on a permanent basis (see “Swiss Review” 2/2022). Industrialist Emil G. Bührle (1890–1956) made his fortune through arms sales to buyers that included Nazi Germany. A keen collector of art, Bührle acquired paint-

ings that Jews had previously been forced to sell for financial reasons as the Nazis closed in. Criticism of the Kunsthaus has been unrelenting ever since the permanent loan of Bührle’s paintings began. There was hardly any let-up even when the Kunsthaus began providing a more candid account of the exhibition’s historical context in 2023. Critics continue to lament what they believe is an inadequate appreciation of the perspective of the victims of National Socialism.



In June, the Bührle Foundation took the highly unusual step of removing five paintings from the rooms of the Kunsthaus Zürich. These were works (see captions on the right) that previous Jewish owners had originally sold under duress during the era of Nazi persecution. The Bührle Foundation now aims to find a “fair and just solution” with the legal heirs of the former owners. “The Dinner” by Claude Monet remains on the exhibition wall. Photo: Keystone

The saga took a surprising turn in June 2024, when the Bührle Foundation withdrew five paintings from the collection. Efforts are ongoing to reach a “fair and just solution” for these works with the legal heirs of the former owners, it said.

Two options include returning the paintings or paying monetary compensation. The masterpieces are currently in storage. Explanatory notes explain to visitors why there are gaps on the museum wall. A sixth painting

– “Young Woman in Oriental Garb” by Edouard Manet – remains in the exhibition, but the heirs of the painting’s previous Jewish owner are to receive a “symbolic settlement”.

This has done little to dampen the controversy. An independent report by historian Raphael Gross has found the Bührle Foundation’s provenance research to be inadequate, saying that the foundation’s published findings relating to a total of 205 works fall short of current stand-

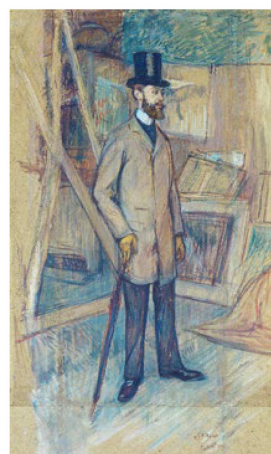
ards. Gross and his team discovered that significantly more works were in Jewish ownership than previously thought: 62 instead of the 41 noted by the foundation. Further inquiries still have to ascertain how many of these paintings belonged to Jews who were pressured to sell amid Nazi persecution.

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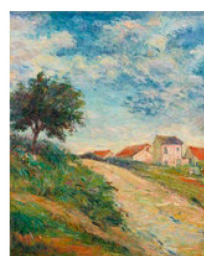
“The Sculptor Louis-Joseph Lebœuf” (1863) by Gustave Courbet was formerly owned by the Ullsteins, a German publishing family. In 1941, Elisabeth Malek-Ullstein parted with the painting – her last remaining financial asset – to start a new life in exile. She may have used the proceeds of the sale to fund the voyage to New York.



“Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec” (1891) by Georges-Henri Manuel and “The Old Tower” (1884) by Vincent van Gogh were formerly owned by the Jewish art dealer Walter Feilchenfeldt. Fleeing via Amsterdam, Feilchenfeldt eventually found himself in Switzerland, where he was able to settle but not permitted to work. He sold both works to keep his family financially above water.



“Monet’s Garden at Giverny” (1895) by Claude Monet also used to belong to the Ullsteins. Had the family not been affected by the Nazi boycott of Jewish businesses, they probably would not have had the painting moved to Switzerland or offered for sale.



“The Road” (1884) by Paul Gauguin belonged to German businessman Richard Semmel, who fled from the Nazis to New York via Switzerland. Emil Bührle bought the painting in 1937 at an auction in Geneva, where Semmel had submitted the work for sale.

Pictures: Kunsthaus Zürich, Emil Bührle Collection