

# Rita Reif, Antiques and Auctions Columnist, Dies at 94

szabozs



Rita Reif, who after starting out in some of journalism's lowest-rung jobs spent decades covering the worlds of antiques and auctions for The New York Times, and made news herself in the late 1990s when she challenged the ownership of an [Egon Schiele](#) painting thought to have been stolen from a relative of her late husband by the Nazis, died on June 16 in Washington. She was 94.

Her son Timothy M. Reif said she died at his home, where she had been in hospice care since last year for congestive heart failure and dementia.

Ms. Reif accumulated thousands of bylines in her half a century at The Times. She started working at the newspaper part time in 1947, pasting stock tables onto layout boards for the financial section. In 1950 she was hired full time as a clerk in the newspaper's archive, and then three years later she moved to the women's news department as a clerk.

Soon she was writing bylined articles. [One of her earliest](#), from April 1954, was a look at how engineers kept the Wollman Memorial Skating Rink in Central Park frozen when the temperature was in the mid-60s. Among the tidbits she noted in that article: Flared skirts tended to drive heat down into the ice, causing melting.

In 1956 Ms. Reif was made a reporter in the women's news department, the usual place for women at the newspaper in that male-dominated era. Timothy Reif said that his mother, who by then had earned a master's degree in English literature from Columbia University, had asked to cover religion but had been told that was a man's beat.

She covered home décor and related matters, writing countless articles on trends in decorating children's rooms, developments in home lighting, how to shop for mattresses, hi-fi systems and bathroom fixtures.

In 1962, when the White House curator suggested that the famed Lincoln bed might actually have been installed by President Abraham Lincoln's predecessor, James Buchanan, she [got to the bottom of the matter](#), determining that the curator was apparently mistaken; a bill of sale from 1861 provided by the office of the first lady, Jacqueline Kennedy, sealed the deal.

In 1963 [Ms. Reif reported](#) that a new appliance that had been in development for 10 years under such secrecy that the project was known by a code name, "P-7," had finally reached the market: It was General Electric's first self-cleaning oven.

Later she moved to the Real Estate section. Many of the articles Ms. Reif wrote in her first decade and a half touched on antiques, and in 1972 the knowledge she displayed earned her a new assignment. She was given the newspaper's regular column on antiques, taking over for Marvin D. Schwartz, who had written it since the mid-1960s. She also covered the often overlapping beat of auctions.

For the next 25 years she chronicled sales, exhibitions and trends of all sorts, whether involving [paperweights](#) or [Picassos](#). Staggering sums were being paid for artwork in that period, and Ms. Reif had a formidable reputation, Constance Rosenblum, editor of The Times's Arts & Leisure section during much of the 1990s, recalled.

"When I first arrived at the section," Ms. Rosenblum said by email, "I remember being told that the heads of the city's major auction houses used to quake at the sound of her name because she was such a powerful figure in their world, being such a force at The Times, and whatever she wanted in the way of access or information they would instantly provide."

Ms. Reif stopped writing the Antiques column in 1997 and retired from her full-time job, though she continued to write for The Times on art and architecture for several more years.

That same year, 1997, she made news herself when she contested the ownership of "Dead City III," a 1911 Schiele painting that she said had been stolen by the Nazis from [Fritz Grünbaum](#), an uncle of her late husband, Paul Reif.

At the time, the painting was on loan to the Museum of Modern Art in New York from the collection of Dr. Rudolf Leopold, an Austrian ophthalmologist who had acquired hundreds of artworks, for the [MoMA exhibition "Egon Schiele: The Leopold Collection."](#) Another family had already questioned the ownership of a different work in that exhibition, "Portrait of Wally," and when she read about that challenge in late 1997, Ms. Reif [told People magazine](#) a few months later, she talked it over with other family members and "everybody agreed we had to do something."

She wrote to MoMA asking that the museum not return "Dead City III" to the Leopold Collection, and when the museum turned down the request, Robert M. Morgenthau, the Manhattan district

attorney, stepped in early in 1998 and seized both that work and “Portrait of Wally.” The action caused an uproar, with some officials in the museum world saying that it would put a damper on the longstanding practice of loaning works for exhibitions.

The family claiming “Portrait of Wally” reached a financial settlement with what is now the Leopold Museum in 2010. “Dead City III” was [eventually returned](#) to the Leopold, but Timothy Reif, who is a judge on the United States Court of International Trade, said he and others were continuing to challenge the ownership of that work [and other art](#) believed to have been looted by the Nazis. Mr. Grünbaum was a well-known cabaret performer and librettist who died in the Dachau concentration camp in 1941. Judge Reif said his mother knew that “Dead City III” had been particularly meaningful to her husband, Paul Reif, a composer who emigrated from Vienna in 1940 and [died in 1978](#), because before the war he and Mr. Grünbaum had written operettas together.

“My mother was incredibly careful about her journalistic integrity and independence and took this step only because she knew how much Grünbaum meant to my father,” Judge Reif said by email, adding, “She did this for him and because she knew it was right.”

Rita Anne Murphy was born on June 12, 1929, in Manhattan. Her father, Harry, was a mechanical engineer, and her mother, Louise (Becker) Murphy, was a homemaker who later worked at several retail stores.

Rita graduated from Cathedral High School in Manhattan and worked briefly as a copy girl at The New York Journal-American before starting at The Times. She put herself through Fordham University, receiving a bachelor’s degree in 1950, and then earned her master’s degree the next year.

In addition to her son, she is survived by five grandchildren. Another son, Leslie, [died in 2004](#).