



Nazis seized hundreds of artworks from anti-Hitler comic. Many ended up in US museums

EDUARDO CUEVAS, USA TODAY

New York prosecutors this week returned two modernist drawings Nazis seized over 80 years ago to relatives of a Jewish cabaret performer killed at Dachau.

Fritz Grünbaum, a Viennese singer and comedian who was outspoken against Hitler in his act, is believed to have owned at least 450 works of art before the Nazis annexed Austria. His relatives have retrieved about a dozen.

In some cases when Nazis arrested Jews and sent them to concentration camps, the officers carted off the family's belongings, including priceless works of art. Nazi officials placed stolen artwork in galleries and their homes and stashed it in caves and salt mines. The Allied "Monuments Men" [worked to retrieve many pieces in the aftermath of World War II](#). When art resurfaced across Europe, the original owners of the work were often not disclosed during sales, which made it hard for descendants of people killed in the Holocaust to recover their family's stolen property.



fritz grünbaum
ullstein bild Dtl., ullstein bild via Getty Images

Many families like Grünbaum's have spent decades tracking down and trying to prove they own valuables stolen by Nazis.

After years of searching, relatives finally regained ownership Friday of two Egon Schiele drawings Grünbaum owned. Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg announced the pieces held by two American art museums had been returned to Grünbaum's descendants. Prosecutors valued Schiele's 1911 drawing, "Girl with Black Hair," which was the property of Oberlin

College's Allen Museum of Art in Ohio, at \$1.5 million. The second piece, "Portrait of a Man" from 1917, belonged to the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh and was valued at \$1 million. Seven additional works the New York DA retrieved this past fall were worth \$9.5 million.

Detailed records from Nazi officials and art dealers offer Grünbaum's family members and prosecutors clues for tracking down the long-ago-stolen pieces. They show that hundreds of paintings and drawings seized from Grünbaum's wife after he was sent to Dachau are scattered in collections across the U.S. and Europe.

After years of searching, each recovery matters.

"This is a victory for justice, and the memory of a brave artist, art collector, and opponent of fascism," a relative of the collector, U.S. Judge Timothy Reif, said in a statement. "As the heirs of Fritz Grünbaum, we are gratified that this man who fought for what was right in his own time continues to make the world fairer decades after his tragic death."



Egon Schiele's 1911 drawing "Girl with Black Hair" was held at the Allen Museum of Art at Oberlin College, in Ohio. The Jewish cabaret performer Fritz Grünbaum owned the piece before Nazis looted the art during the Holocaust.

PROVIDED: Manhattan District Attorney's Office

Grünbaum's family members auctioned pieces they have recovered at Christie's and used proceeds toward a trust that provides scholarships for high school musicians from underrepresented communities, Raymond Dowd, an attorney for Grünbaum's family, told USA TODAY. The two Schiele pieces recovered Friday are set to be auctioned in May.

The family has also active litigation to recover a dozen pieces that belonged to Grünbaum that are in Austrian museums, Dowd said.

They have clues about where other pieces are, but Dowd said, "There's a lot more detective work that we need to engage in."

Dowd said the family is grateful for prosecutors like Bragg and Morgenthau who are unwilling “to turn a blind eye to this horrible crime.”



Egon Schiele's 1917 drawing "Portrait of a Man" was held at the Carnegie Museum of Art, in Pittsburgh. The Jewish cabaret performer Fritz Grünbaum owned the piece before Nazis looted the art during the Holocaust. [Show less](#)
PROVIDED: Manhattan District Attorney's Office

Seizure of art, murder by Nazis

Grünbaum, who was born in 1880, collected hundreds of works during his decades as a performer in Austria and Germany. He became a vocal critic of the Nazis, performing what [one site](#) describes as "political cabaret" in Vienna.

"He insisted on staging pieces that openly mocked Hitler, the lack of freedom under Nazism, and the impossibility of dissent in Austria," according to a history on [Music and the Holocaust](#) by ORT, a UK-based charity.

Upon walking onto a dark stage for his last public performance in March 1938, he told the crowd he saw nothing.

Ice rinks and Kit Kats: [After Tree of Life shooting, Pittsburgh forging interfaith bonds](#)

"I must have wandered into the National Socialist culture," he quipped, using another name for the Nazis.

Austrian officials banned him from performing after that and days later, the Gestapo arrested him, according to court filings.

He was imprisoned at Dachau and performed for other Jews imprisoned there. He remained at the camp until his death on Jan. 14, 1941.

In July 1938, while he was at Dachau, Nazis forced him to give his wife Elisabeth power of attorney,

forcing her to hand over his entire art collection to the government. Jews were not allowed to own property, and by 1939, a Jewish property declaration showed Nazis had taken all of his wife's property.

On October 5, 1942, Elisabeth was deported to the Maly Trostenets death camp in Minsk where she was killed.

Stolen art resurfaces in Switzerland, Manhattan

Elisabeth's property declaration detailed Grünbaum's possessions. However, the bulk of the artwork the family had owned vanished from records after World War II. Allied officials warned that looted Nazi art was turning up in American and European galleries and museums.

Documents from 1930 detailed that Jewish Austrian art dealer Otto Kallir knew Grünbaum had owned Schiele pieces. After the war, Kallir purchased 20 works.



In this file photo, Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg discuss charges filed against former President Donald Trump on April 4, 2023, in New York City. USA TODAY

The pieces ended up at New York's Galerie St. Etienne, a modernist gallery in Midtown that Kallir founded. The works were later sold to museums and collectors, according to court filings. Heirs would search for these pieces for years.

It wasn't until 1998 that the family got their first breakthrough. Robert Morgenthau, Manhattan's DA at the time, seized Schiele's "Dead City III" from New York's Museum of Modern Art, about four blocks from Kallir's gallery.

It was the first of the 20 works returned to Grünbaum's heirs.

The heirs brought lawsuits against several institutions to retrieve the other art Kallir purchased after the war. They were stymied by questions about the provenance of the art and documents that showed the works had been properly acquired by other institutions because Grünbaum's sister-in-law had possession of the pieces and sold them off. Grünbaum's family and art historians dispute this evidence. In a 2018 case for two of Grünbaum's Schiele pieces, a New York judge ruled Grünbaum couldn't have transferred artworks voluntarily. "A signature at gunpoint cannot lead to a valid conveyance," he wrote.

In September 2023, the family had another breakthrough when the Manhattan DA's office and investigators from U.S. Homeland Security seized seven pieces from galleries in California and New York collections. In October, an art collector surrendered another piece directly to the family.

Monuments Man purchases stolen art

On Friday, Bragg, the New York DA, announced Oberlin's Allen Museum had returned Schiele's "Girl with Black Hair" to Grünbaum's heirs. In 1958, Charles Parkhurst, who directed the Oberlin's museum and was part of the "Monuments Men" effort purchased the piece, Andrea Simakis, a spokesperson for Oberlin College, wrote in an email. It was "inconceivable" he would have knowingly purchased artwork that might have been stolen, she added.

The college voluntarily returned the drawing, she said. "We hope this will provide some measure of closure to the family of Fritz Grünbaum."

The Carnegie Museum of Art returned "Portrait of a Man" to the family. The Carnegie Institute accepted the drawing as a gift in 1960, according to [expert art historians](#) cited in court records.

In a statement, officials from the museum said the institution had relied on a finding confirmed and upheld in federal court that the collection the drawing came from wasn't stolen by Nazis. When the Manhattan DA took on the case, the Carnegie Museums decided not to contest the claims and gave the piece to prosecutors in October, according to the statement.

"If at any time we believed that the Egon Schiele drawing 'Portrait of a Man' had been stolen by the Nazis, Carnegie Museums would have returned it before now to those we believed to be its rightful owners," the statement said.

Bragg's office has now helped return 10 works of art to the family. In a statement, Bragg said this accomplishment speaks to the "dogged advocacy" of Grünbaum's relatives.



Egon Schiele's 1916 drawing "Russian War Prisoner" is held at the Art Institute of Chicago. The Jewish cabaret performer Fritz Grünbaum owned the piece before ... [Show more](#)

PROVIDED: Manhattan District Attorney's Office

“Let us use this moment as an opportunity to honor and preserve the extraordinary legacy of Mr. Grünbaum – a life that we should never forget,” Bragg said.

Grünbaum owned 81 Schiele pieces, an art historian stated in court documents. Other works that belonged to him are in dispute in court.

Schiele’s 1916 piece, “[Russian War Prisoner](#),” remains at the Art Institute of Chicago. Megan Michienzi, a spokesperson for the museum, maintained the work wasn't looted but rather legally obtained from Grünbaum’s sister-in-law. Michienzi cited a 2010 federal court ruling on a separate piece of Schiele art Grünbaum had owned.

"If we had this work unlawfully, we would return it, but that is not the case here," she said in a statement.

In November, a federal judge dismissed the Grünbaum family's case against the Art Institute of Chicago because the time to file a lawsuit under the 2016 [Holocaust Expropriated Art Recovery Act](#) expired.

Bragg has also taken on the case against the Art Institute of Chicago. Douglas Cohen, a Manhattan DA spokesperson, said oral arguments are set to begin April 3.