

The New York Times

Egon Schiele Watercolor, Said to Be Nazi-Looted, Set for Auction

Christie's, which values the work at more than \$1 million, said the proceeds from any sale would be shared with the heirs of an art collector killed in a concentration camp.



"Boy in a Sailor Suit," by Egon Schiele, from 1914, is scheduled to be sold at auction in March. Credit... Egon Schiele; via Christie's

By Catherine Hickley

Feb. 21, 2025 Updated 1:50 p.m. ET

A watercolor by Egon Schiele, "Boy in a Sailor Suit," is scheduled to be sold next month [in London](#) at Christie's after the auction house brokered a settlement between the consignor and the heirs of a Viennese cabaret performer who owned the work before he was killed in a Nazi concentration camp.

The 1914 portrait, with a low estimate of \$1.3 million, is one of about 80 works by the Austrian Expressionist artist that the cabaret performer, Fritz Grünbaum, possessed. An outspoken critic of the Nazis, Grünbaum was arrested by the Gestapo in 1938 and was imprisoned in two concentration camps, including Dachau, where he died in 1941.

After decades of working to trace and reclaim his collection, his heirs, Timothy Reif and David Fraenkel, have recovered or reached settlements on a number of Schiele works on paper in recent years. Christie's has auctioned 12 of the recovered works.

The heirs, with support from investigators from the Manhattan district attorney's office, have said that Grünbaum's wife, Elisabeth, was forced to hand over the art collection to Nazi officials. Elisabeth was deported to a concentration camp in 1942 and murdered.

But the Art Institute of Chicago, which has a Schiele watercolor once owned by Grünbaum, has cited evidence that it says disputes that the collection was ever taken by the Nazis and has gone to court to fight the seizure of the work, called "Russian War Prisoner," by investigators. The

The New York Times

institute argues that the work was not looted, but remained in Grünbaum's family until it was sold to the art dealer Eberhard Kornfeld by Grünbaum's sister-in-law, Mathilde Lukacs, in 1956. A New York Supreme Court judge, who held [several days of hearings](#) on the dispute last fall, is scheduled to issue a ruling in the case in coming weeks.

In its materials associated with the sale of the watercolor, Christie's, which has its own provenance department that researches restitution issues, has embraced the position held by the heirs, who are seeking the restitution of hundreds of works once held by Grünbaum.

"Fritz Grünbaum's art collection was confiscated by the Nazis in post-Anschluss Austria,"

Richard Aronowitz, head of restitution at the auction house, said in a statement.

The efforts to settle the provenance and ownership of the Grünbaum works have led to multiple court cases.

In 2018, the New York Supreme Court ruled that Grünbaum never sold or voluntarily relinquished any works before his death and that the heirs were the rightful owners of two Schiele drawings in the collection of the art dealer Richard Nagy. In 2019, that ruling was upheld by a New York appeals court.

Manhattan investigators have cited those rulings in the seizure of a number of Schiele works in U.S. museums and private collections. In 2023 and 2024, for example, five museums restituted works to the heirs, including the Museum of Modern Art and the Carnegie Museum of Art.

But in two other civil cases — one directly involving the Art Institute's "Russian War Prisoner" — federal courts have ruled on procedural grounds that the Grünbaum heirs came forward too late to lay claim to the works. One of the federal judges also described Kornfeld's account that he purchased the works from Lukacs as credible.

Separately, two museums in Vienna — the Albertina and the Leopold Museum — are also fighting the heirs' claims for Schiele works in their collections on the grounds that Austria's sovereign immunity protects them from U.S. lawsuits.

The consignor of "Boy in a Sailor Suit" is a German woman who had purchased the watercolor at Sotheby's in 1992, according to Dirk Boll, the managing director of Christie's in Germany.

Michelle McMullan, who is running the Christie's evening sale of 20th- and 21st-century art in March, at which the Schiele will be featured, described it as "one of the best watercolors I have handled" and said it shows the artist — whose art the Nazis deemed "degenerate" — "at the very height of his powers." Unfinished elements, such as the missing left hand, "evoke movement and spontaneity," she said.

The consignor, apprised of the Grünbaum provenance, asked Christie's to help mediate an agreement with Grünbaum's heirs, according to Boll. He said she plans to donate her proceeds from the sale to a kindergarten in Munich. The sale will also raise funds for the heirs' Grünbaum Fischer Foundation for performing artists, according to Christie's.

"This is another moment to celebrate the memory of our family member, who was a brave artist, art collector and opponent of Fascism," Reif said in a press statement.