

Christie's auctions Egon Schiele watercolor "Boy in a Sailor Suit" (1914) from the Fritz Grünbaum collection

Heirs demand the consensual return of twelve Schiele works by the Republic of Austria

London/Vienna



At an auction held by the renowned auction house Christie's in London yesterday, March 5, 2025, Egon Schiele's watercolor "Boy in a Sailor Suit" (1914) fetched € 3,240 000,-. The work comes from the collection of the Viennese cabaret artist Fritz Grünbaum (1880-1941), who openly opposed the Nazi regime and was murdered in a concentration camp in 1941. As an author, composer and sought-after entertainer, Grünbaum had a lasting influence on Viennese cultural life in the 1920s and 1930s.

The European owner, aware of the problematic provenance of the Schiele painting, asked Christie's to help negotiate a settlement with the Grünbaum heirs. Part of the auction proceeds will go to a Munich kindergarten and to the Grünbaum-Fischer Foundation for Performing Artists. The auction thus represents a further important step in the process of coming to terms with the looting of Fritz Grünbaum's collection during the Nazi era.

Call to the Republic of Austria

The auction of this important work by Schiele also serves as an opportunity to call for action by the Republic of Austria. Grünbaum's heirs – David Fraenkel, Timothy Reif and Milos Vavra – have been committed to recovering unlawfully seized art for decades. In a court case that has already been concluded in New York, it was determined that Fritz Grünbaum did not voluntarily sell any of his artworks. In recent years, museums such as the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York have returned works by Schiele from Grünbaum's collection to his heirs.

The heirs have initiated legal proceedings in New York against the Republic of Austria and two Austrian museums. The focus is on twelve Schiele works – two from the Albertina and ten from the Leopold Museum, including the central painting "Dead City III" (1911).

Michael Pilz, legal expert in the proceedings against the Republic of Austria, sums up the lack of understanding for the behavior of the Republic of Austria: *“Austria constantly refers to the provisions of its Art Restitution Act, even in the proceedings in New York. This law, however, does not provide for any possibility of review or judicial control of the decisions of the Austrian Federal Government on an application for restitution. Therefore, the restitution of looted art is always a mere act of grace by the Republic, not a reparation of Nazi injustice!”* Pilz calls on the Republic to adapt the Art Restitution Act and to enable Austrian courts to decide on rejected applications for restitution. In the case of the Fritz Grünbaum collection, this could be implemented immediately by a court of arbitration made up of international experts, according to the Viennese lawyer.

In view of their historical responsibility and the current budget situation, the heirs are also appealing to the Republic of Austria to dispense with the costly services of a US lawyer and to find an amicable solution for the restitution.

“I am convinced that in view of the current budget crisis and its historical responsibility, Austria must choose the path of dialogue – instead of entering into a costly legal dispute with a US attorney. Our goal is to fulfill the heirs' justified restitution claims in a fair and amicable process while preserving our cultural heritage,” explains Herbert Gruber (Bureau for Genealogy) as the heirs' spokesperson.

Now the Republic of Austria is called upon to reform the Art Restitution Act without delay and to enable a judicial review of rejected restitution applications. At the same time, the heirs appeal to all parties involved to avoid horrendous legal costs by reaching an out-of-court settlement, so that this longstanding grievance can be quickly and amicably ended.

For photos and further details on the auctioned painting and its provenance, please visit the Christie's auction house website: <https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-6523666?COSID=40810194&cid=DM527504&bid=470592452#details>

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