



Press Release

Oetker art collection returns Spitzweg painting to heir of Jewish collector Leo Bendel

<Bielefeld, November 20, 2019> The private art collection Kunstsammlung Rudolf-August Oetker GmbH has returned a painting by Carl Spitzweg to the heir of the Jewish collector Leo Bendel. The return of the painting follows international efforts over a number of years to identify the rightful heirs to the estate of the original owner of the work who was murdered by the Nazis.

Since 2016, the Kunstsammlung has pursued a pioneering project to audit what is a private collection, including commissioning experts to research the provenance of artworks that form part of the collection. The purpose of the audit is to assess whether any audited artwork belonged to a person persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, ideology or political opposition to National Socialism who was wrongfully deprived of such an artwork.

The painting entitled “Der Hexenmeister“ (also known as “Sorcerer and Dragon“) by Carl Spitzweg is an example of late romanticism and is seen as typical of the “subtle humour“ of the artist. Between 1875 and 1880, Spitzweg who is one of the best known German



proponents of Biedermeier and Romanticism, created two almost identical paintings with the same subject-matter.

One of those paintings formed part of the collection owned by the Polish tobacco dealer Leo Bendel. Leo and his wife, Else Bendel (née Golze), lived together in Berlin and Vienna. In 1935, Leo was unable to continue on his path due to his Jewish faith and shortly thereafter he gave up his residence in Berlin. In 1937, he sold the painting to Galerie Heinemann in Munich. In 1938, Leo Bendel gave up his Polish citizenship and, together with his wife, converted to Catholicism. Nonetheless, in September 1939 he was arrested by the Nazis in Vienna and deported to Buchenwald concentration camp, where he was murdered in March 1940. His non-Jewish widow survived the war.

In 1937, Caroline Oetker purchased the Spitzweg painting “Der Hexenmeister“ from Galerie Heinemann, Munich. She bequeathed the painting to her grandson Rudolf-August Oetker. In 1998, the painting then became part of the recently established Kunstsammlung Rudolf-August Oetker GmbH. In 2006, representatives of the estate of Leo Bendel informed the Kunstsammlung that the painting was once in the collection of Leo Bendel. The Kunstsammlung and the Bendel estate’s legal representatives have been in agreement since 2016 that the Kunstsammlung would return the painting to the rightful heir(s). However, it has taken time to identify them and obtain Court documents evidencing their right to the painting. Now that the relevant Court has identified the party entitled to the painting by law, it can be returned.



Dr. Jörg Schillinger, spokesperson for Dr. August Oetker KG and member of the board of the Kunstsammlung, is delighted that the painting is finally being reunited with the family of its original owner. “This case demonstrates that even in scenarios where the parties involved are in agreement with each other as to how to resolve such a matter amicably and in an equitable way, identifying the rightful heirs can take time and delay the actual return of the artwork to the heir(s) entitled to it.”

The lawyer representing Leo Bendel’s heir, Gunnar Schnabel, made the following statement on behalf of his client: “The heirs to Leo Bendel are delighted that the Kunstsammlung Rudolf-August Oetker GmbH is now returning this painting which was lost as a direct result of persecution by the Nazis. The settlement with a private collection on the basis of a solution that is both amicable and equitable is exemplary. Unfortunately – internationally – such solutions are still the exception to the rule.”

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