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Framing the Past:
BETTINA LOORAM BURR '64



FRAMING *the* PAST

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This past spring a painting was on display just inside the entrance to Gallery 154 in Boston's Museum of Fine Arts called *A Dordrecht Nobleman on Horseback with Retainers and Grooms*. The painting shows a man sitting on a black horse, a white plume flowing from his hat, with other riders and helpers and a black-and-white dog nearby. *Dordrecht Nobleman* was painted by a 17th century Dutch artist named Nicolaes Maes, who once studied with Rembrandt. The painting was part of a gift to the museum by Bettina Loram Burr '64 and her two sons.

There was a time, however, when this painting seemed destined for the walls of a vastly different museum under vastly different circumstances. It had once been the plan that *Dordrecht Nobleman* would be displayed alongside other great works of art in what one man had envisioned would become one of the world's greatest art museums, a massive colonnaded structure in Linz, Austria, that would not just rival but possibly surpass France's Louvre in stature and reputation. But that vision, like others held by this man, an Austrian-born frustrated artist turned political leader, died with the man himself. He was Adolf Hitler.

"Every painting has a story," Bettina Burr says. The story of how *Dordrecht Nobleman* wound up in the Boston MFA begins in March 1938, a year and a half before the start of World War II, during what is known as the *Anschluss*, when Hitler threatened, bullied and bluffed his way to the bloodless annexation of Austria in one of the first stages of the expansion of Nazi power.

With the formal completion of the *Anschluss* agreement on March 13, Austria became a province of the German Reich, subject to German laws and practices, which were becoming increasingly brutal toward Jews. Jews living in Austria — there were 180,000 or so in Vienna alone — scrambled to find ways to leave. It was a sensible strategy — in the days following the *Anschluss* some 76,000 people were arrested. Within weeks the first convoy of

Nazi opponents was on its way to the concentration camp at Dachau.

One of the most prominent Jews living in Vienna at the time was Baron Alphonse de Rothschild, great-great-grandson of Mayer Amschel Rothschild, who founded the Rothschild banking dynasty and created what many believe to be the wealthiest family in history. The Rothschilds pioneered international finance, funded much of the Industrial Revolution and bankrolled the defeat of Napoleon. They held interests in mining, textiles, diamonds and other industries. The Rothschild name has come to be synonymous with wealth.

As the events of the *Anschluss* unfolded and German armored vehicles rolled across the Austrian border, Alphonse and his wife, the Baroness Clarice de Rothschild, were safely in London attending a celebration held to honor England's King George. The couple's 16-year-old son Albert was likewise safe, away at school in Switzerland. But their two young daughters — Bettina and Gwendoline, ages 13 and 11 — remained at the family home in Vienna.

The children's parents telegraphed the house with the command to get the girls out and evacuate them to Switzerland. Early the next morning Bettina and Gwendoline were on a train, but as it approached Innsbruck, the two sisters heard yelling on the platform, and Nazi soldiers shouting, "All Jews off the train!"

The girls were taken and held for hours in the municipal police station in Innsbruck. Then for reasons that became clear only later, they were released, and eventually were able to reunite with their parents in Switzerland. From there the family went to England, then to Canada, and finally to the U.S., settling in New York City in 1940. In 1943, Bettina de Rothschild married Matthew Loram, a Harvard graduate who was serving in the U.S. Army. Bettina Loram Burr is their daughter.

The Nazis had not released the two young girls out of

an act of kindness. “They had caught a bigger fish,” says Bettina Burr. That bigger fish was Alphonse’s brother, Louis, who was head of the family bank in Austria. The Nazis held him in prison for a year, during which time they negotiated for the turnover of the family bank and all assets. “All stocks, all bonds – you name it,” Bettina says. “And then he was let go. They would have killed him otherwise.”

Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi SS commander who was one of the chief architects of the Holocaust, later set up headquarters in Louis’s home. The Gestapo moved into Bettina’s grandfather’s house.

Rothschild banking and real estate assets weren’t the only things coveted by Hitler, who as a youth had wanted to be an artist, but who had twice been denied admission to a Vienna art academy. He wanted the Rothschild art. Within weeks of the *Anschluss* the Vienna homes of Alphonse and Louis de Rothschild had been plundered and stripped of paintings, prints, drawings, furniture and works of decorative art, thousands of pieces in all, including *Dordrecht Nobleman*. These were just a fraction of the tens of thousands of artworks the Nazis looted before and during World War II.

During the war these artworks were moved to locations where they could be hidden and protected. The Rothschild collection went to the salt mines at Altaussee, in the Austrian Alps, where the largest stockpile of looted art was stored. The mines’ temperature and humidity made them ideal storage sites, and the works were catalogued and stored on elaborate shelving built in tunnels more than a mile inside a mountain. Altaussee hid Hitler’s favorites, those he wanted for the *Führermuseum*, as his palatial museum in Linz was to be called.

Credit for the post-war recovery of the artworks goes to a special Allied corps called the Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives section – the Monuments Men, for short, though their numbers included several dozen women. They were historians, professors, curators and others who had paused their careers to protect works of art during and after the war. History tells us that they discovered the stash at Altaussee thanks in part to a tip from the son-in-law of a German dentist whom a member of the corps had gone to with a toothache.

At Altaussee the Monuments Men discovered thousands of stolen paintings, prints, tapestries, sculptures and pieces of furniture, including most of the Viennese Rothschild collection, though some pieces were never recovered. After the war ended in 1945, the artworks were once again catalogued, then loaded onto trucks and shipped to a central collecting point in Munich. From there the Rothschild art made its way back to Austria, its country of origin. Finally, in 1949, eight train cars full of Rothschild art headed toward Switzerland, the first

stop on a trip back to the family in New York. Matthew Looram, Bettina’s father, cabled his mother-in-law with the news. “Geronimo!” his message said.

An experience like no other

Bettina Looram Burr was raised Episcopalian, her father’s religion, and led a peripatetic childhood. Matthew Looram was a career diplomat, and when Bettina was young the family would follow him to wherever he was posted: Italy, France, Africa. She attended in-country schools, and struggled with the languages, with the result that her early education, she says, was “rather fractured.” When she was a teenager her father was appointed American consul to the African nation of Eritrea, and thinking that some school stability would be good for Bettina, her parents decided to send her to St. Timothy’s.

“St. Tim’s was an experience like no other,” she says. “It was probably the most formative experience of my life. I was desperately homesick. But the headmistress, Miss Watkins, really looked out for me, and in no time made me feel as if I belonged. My classmates did the same – they were kind and encouraging. There were wonderful teachers and wonderful courses. I was not crazy about algebra and geometry, but everything else was absolutely fabulous.”

The School gave Bettina her first real taste of independence, though she wasn’t much of a rule breaker. Rebellion for her meant turning the lights back on after lights-out, or sometimes breaking curfew. “St. Tim’s was a place of great stability for Bettina with her parents being abroad,” says her friend and former St. Timothy’s roommate Cynthia Shattuck ’64. “She imbibed the lessons of the School more deeply than the rest of us did. She always seemed to have a great center of gravity.”

If there are particular pressures that come with growing up into one of the world’s wealthiest families, Bettina says she didn’t feel them. She thinks those pressures weighed more heavily on the Rothschild men. At St. Timothy’s she didn’t feel that she got any special treatment, positive or negative, because of her family background. People either didn’t know, or didn’t notice, or didn’t care. “It’s who you are,” she says of being a Rothschild, “but it’s not part of your clothes.”

Bettina had grown up surrounded by the family’s art – “with beautiful things around day after day” – and this left an impression. She loved to draw and paint, and after St. Timothy’s she went to Smith College, choosing a major in art history, in large part because she could spend her junior year in Paris studying art.

After college, Bettina went to the African nation of Dahomey (now Benin), where her father was posted. She joined the Peace Corps, and her job was to teach English to the French-speaking Dahomeyans. She liked teaching,



Top: Looted by the Nazis, A Dordrecht Nobleman on Horseback with Retainers and Grooms, a 17th century painting by Dutch artist Nicolaes Maes, was one of thousands of pieces of Rothschild art stolen by the Nazis in the lead-up to WWII. Bottom left: Bettina Looram Burr '64; Bottom right: A 1937 family photo of (left to right) Albert de Rothschild, Baroness Clarice de Rothschild, Bettina de Rothschild (Bettina Burr's mother), Baron Alphonse de Rothschild and Gwendoline de Rothschild. (Top & bottom-right photographs © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.)





Top: The back of the painting *A Dordrecht Nobleman on Horseback with Retainers and Grooms* with a Nazi inventory number. Bottom: Treasures from the exhibition (clockwise from top left): Snuff Box, *Jean-Baptiste Bertin*, about 1770; Art Deco platinum, carved emerald and diamond brooch, about 1937; Carnet de bal, about 1765; Platinum and diamond necklace/tiara, c. 1920; Bonbonniere mounted with a timepiece, *John and George Hannett*, about 1765; Pearl and diamond necklace, c. 1880. (Gifts of the heirs of Bettina Looram de Rothschild. Bottom photographs © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.)



and when her Peace Corps term was over she applied for teaching jobs in the U.S., eventually getting hired to teach 6th grade at the Winsor School, a private school for girls in Boston.

In 1971 she married Craig Burr, a Boston-area venture capitalist. The couple's sons were born in 1979 and 1982, and Bettina stopped teaching to focus on raising them. When they were teenagers she joined what was then called the Ladies Committee of the Museum of Fine Arts, and worked at the museum as a volunteer tour guide. Today she's an MFA trustee, though she still gives tours. And, with her gift, she's a major benefactor.

Righting another wrong

It wasn't until Bettina was an adult that she became fully aware of another chapter in the story of her family's looted art. In the mid-1940s, as her parents and grandparents negotiated with the Austrian government for the release of their art, Austrian officials cited a law from 1918 that prevented art from being moved out of the country. An agreement was worked out. In exchange for the return of the bulk of their collection, the Rothschilds would give the Austrians some 250 artworks, including many of the family's most treasured pieces.

"This was an iron-clad deal worked out between the Austrians and my family," Bettina says. "It was not a subject that was brought up. There wasn't much hope of ever getting anything back."

Then in 1998, a half-century later, there was some hope. In January of that year, a New York City district attorney took the unprecedented step of ordering the city's Museum of Modern Art to hold two paintings by artist Egon Schiele, which MoMA had borrowed from an Austrian museum, and which two Jewish families – heirs of Jews killed in the Holocaust – claimed had been plundered by the Nazis. That action kicked in motion a sequence of events that led to the Washington Conference Principles on Nazi-Confiscated Art, which called for the identification and restitution of stolen art. The Washington Principles were signed by more than 40 nations. The Austrian government passed the Art Restitution Law, mandating investigation into the provenance of artworks in Austrian museums and the return of stolen art to its rightful owners.

"Museums were nervous," Bettina says. "They were not in favor of this. But there was a conviction that something had been done that was very wrong. Eventually right took hold."

Bettina's mother was in a hospital in Austria recovering from surgery when she read in a newspaper that the nation's museums had been directed to identify looted art. From her hospital bed she telephoned the Austrian minister of culture, and within 10 minutes she got a call

back. After months of negotiation, the country released the remaining 250 pieces of the family's art.

"She paved the way for others to recover art," says Victoria Reed, Curator of Provenance at the Boston MFA, of Bettina's mother. It's Reed's job to do the detective work on art in the museum's collection and on potential acquisitions. She is one of a handful of professionals doing this kind of work at museums, and her position is endowed, underscoring the MFA's commitment to it. It frustrates her that provenance work is not more widespread. "You can't extricate the provenance of a work of art from the work of art itself," she says.

An end to the wandering

The MFA exhibition was called *Restoring a Legacy: Rothschild Family Treasures*, and those treasures included an eclectic range of things: prints and paintings and drawings, 18th century snuff boxes in gold and mother-of-pearl, elegant notebooks and timepieces, brass-gilded commodes, rare illustrated books and Clarice's stunning jewelry, including an emerald-and-diamond brooch that Alphonse gave her for their 25th wedding anniversary. On one wall was a Philip de László portrait of Clarice, a serious-looking woman in a blue drape and pearls. On another was a George Romney painting of Emma Hart, a seductive beauty whose dark eyes seemed to hold the secrets to the adventurous life she led.

"Objects have the longest memories of all," wrote essayist Teju Cole in the *New York Times Magazine* last March, just a few weeks after the MFA's Rothschild exhibition opened in Boston. Cole wasn't writing about the Rothschild art, but about photographs taken in war zones and street riots and battlefields around the world: of a bloodstained kitchen curtain in Kiev, knives in a Rwandan refugee camp, the blue blouse of a Nigerian schoolgirl kidnapped by Boko Haram. "[B]eneath their stillness," he went on, "they are alive with the terrors they have witnessed."

An interpretive statement on one wall of the Rothschild gallery noted that except for the jewelry – which Clarice de Rothschild had with her in London in 1938 when the Nazis rolled into Austria – all of the works had been "looted and recovered." But for the most part the works themselves were doing a good job of keeping whatever terrors they had witnessed secret. With few exceptions, they felt sanitized, as if the mid-20th century part of their history had been scrubbed away. The starkest of those exceptions was *Dordrecht Nobleman*.

Curators displayed the painting just inside the entrance in a Plexiglas case that made it possible to see the front and back. On the back, around the wooden frame and on the canvas itself, were six numbers, and they traced a century's worth of the painting's movement, from the mid-

19th century, when the Rothschilds acquired it, to the mid-20th, when it reached the Munich collecting point after its recovery by the Monuments Men.

A catalogue number marked its sale in Vienna in 1859. An inventory number placed it in the Rothschild collection. In three places you could see the number AR 857, put there in red ink by the Nazis when they confiscated the painting in 1938. The “AR” indicated it had belonged to Alphonse de Rothschild. In the middle of the frame was the number K 972, another Nazi inventory number, marking the painting’s transport to Kremsmünster Abbey in Austria, its last stop before being shipped to the salt mines. The number 4071 signaled its post-war recovery and delivery in 1945 to the Munich collecting point. A white sticker with the number 135 looked like something you might find at a garage sale; it stumped the curators, who noted that they didn’t know what it meant.

It was a remarkable display, for in a little more than seven square feet of space it traced not just *Nobleman’s* movements, but the arc of the war itself. Coded in those numbers are Nazi aggression, displacement of Jews, looting and plundering, the Holocaust, the Allied victory and the events that came after.

Looted art has been a hot topic of late. 2014 brought us the George Clooney movie *The Monuments Men*, based on a book of the same name. Numerous media accounts and a documentary have focused on Cornelius Gurlitt, the reclusive son of a Nazi art dealer who was found to be in possession of tens of millions of dollars worth of art of questionable provenance. At least three documentaries have told the story of Jewish refugee Maria Altmann’s struggle to recover from Austria a famous Gustav Klimt painting of her aunt called *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer*, which the Nazis confiscated during the *Anschluss*. Last February her story became a major motion picture with the release of *Woman in Gold*, starring Helen Mirren as Altmann. It got mixed reviews, with one popular movie website calling it “a disappointingly dull treatment of a fascinating true story.”

Bettina Burr has quite a story of her own, though she is so modest it can take some effort to pull it from her. It’s best understood in contrast. *Forbes* has reported that together the Christie’s and Sotheby’s auction houses sold more than \$250 million worth of restituted art between 1996 and 2005. In 2006, Maria Altmann consigned *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer* to Christie’s, where it sold for \$135 million, then the highest sum ever paid for a painting. Browse the Internet and you’ll find dozens of stories of the sale of restituted paintings. What you don’t find are many stories of someone donating these artworks. Yet after inheriting all that remained of the Austrian Rothschild collection, Bettina Burr and her sons decided to give it away.

Gifts like this don’t happen very often, and in fact may never have happened before. Sharon Flescher, Executive Director of the International Foundation for Art Research, can recall a few smaller gifts of restituted art, but nothing on the scale of Bettina Burr’s gift, which she characterizes as “unusual and magnanimous.”

Kelly Hayes, the MFA’s Director of Gifts of Art, agrees. “The magnitude of this gift makes it most likely unique,” she says. “This is just extremely rare.”

On a cold and rainy day in Boston last spring, Bettina and I sat drinking tea and coffee in an MFA café. We talked about a number of things: the exhibition, her family, art, beauty, what it’s like to be a Rothschild, St. Timothy’s. She is proud of her work as secretary of her class, and was especially pleased that fully a third of the class showed up for last year’s 50th reunion.

I pointed out to Bettina her possible outlier status as the donor of what just may be the largest gift in history of art stolen by the Nazis and then returned to its owners. The MFA hasn’t said the value of the gift, but media reports put it in the millions of dollars.

This kind, gracious woman smiled, seemingly embarrassed by my observation. “You’re nice to say that,” she said. “But I never felt I owned these pieces. I felt I was the steward of these pieces.”

“They’re home at the Museum of Fine Arts,” she said later. “They’ve come to the end of their wandering.”

“There are always people in there,” Bettina said to me last March, referring to the gallery displaying her family’s art and sounding almost surprised by the interest the show had generated. “It’s really quite remarkable. I think it’s because of the story. That’s what makes it interesting. People seem very interested in this epic that took place.”

I decided to test her theory by asking random visitors what brought them there. A woman in her thirties said she was a fan of decorative art. A teenage boy on a school fieldtrip said he entered the Rothschild gallery because that’s where his friends went. A middle-aged man turned out to be chaperoning the fieldtrip. The “n” of my survey was small, but it didn’t lend a lot of support to Bettina’s notion that “this epic that took place” was the main attraction.

Later, as I was preparing to leave the museum, I was standing in the hallway outside the gallery. Two men came by, stopped and consulted their museum guide. “Oh!” one said to the other, excitement evident in his voice. “This is the one!” And then they rushed in. And although I don’t know what sparked their excitement, I do know that the first thing they came to was a painting of a man with a white plume in his hat, looking stately and dignified as he sat on his black horse. And that painting had a story to tell. ♦



Top: There is no better tour guide for an exhibition about Rothschild art than a Rothschild herself. Here Bettina Looram Burr talks to visitors about a portrait of her grandmother, Baroness Clarice de Rothschild, painted by Philip de Laszlo. Bottom: The MFA exhibit, *Restoring a Legacy: Rothschild Family Treasures*, showcased paintings, prints, drawings, furniture, jewelry and other works, including this 18th century portrait by George Romney: Emma Hart, later Lady Hamilton. The painting is one of Bettina Burr’s favorites.

