

Museums Call for System To Address Nazi Booty

By JUDITH H. DOBRZYNSKI

Facing growing claims that they are displaying wartime plunder, the directors of the nation's top art museums are calling for the creation of a system to resolve potential ownership disputes.

"None of us wants to have demonstrably stigmatized works of art hanging on our walls," said Philippe de Montebello, the director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, who is leading a 13-member task force formed by the Association of Art Museum Directors, which includes the heads of the 170 largest art museums in North America. The group will develop guidelines to resolve individual ownership claims arising from the seizure of artworks before, during and immediately after World War II.

In Washington, some members of Congress are also growing concerned about the difficulties posed by potential claims. The House Banking Committee has scheduled a hearing on looted art for Feb. 12.

The museum association's position, described in a statement yesterday, promises no solution to the thicket of potential claims, but it was welcomed as a step forward.

"They are admitting that there may be problems and that they want to try to solve them," said Hector Feliciano, the author of "The Lost Museum: The Nazi Conspiracy to Steal the World's Greatest Works of Art." "It's extremely positive."

Mr. Feliciano, a Paris-based journalist, contrasted the museum association's statement with the reaction of European museums to claims of looting made by former art owners or their heirs, and to publication of books like his. In Europe, such charges were seen as an insult, he said, "and museums — in France, in Holland, in Spain — have not admitted publicly that they have looted art, even though they've given some back."

Yet the problem is complex, not simply a

Congress shares concerns about the ownership of art.

matter of restitution for Nazi looting, Mr. de Montebello said. Museums also have legal obligations and responsibilities to the public as well as to individuals who unwittingly donated the artworks.

In recent months, claims have been made for paintings in the Seattle Art Museum and the Metropolitan and for a monotype borrowed for study by the Art Institute of Chicago from a trustee. Questions also sur-

Continued on Page 6

Museums Address Ownership of Booty

Continued From First Arts Page

faced recently about an artwork in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. And two paintings by Egon Schiele that were on loan at the Museum of Modern Art from the Leopold Museum in Vienna have been kept in New York by a grand jury subpoena, pending the outcome of a criminal investigation of their ownership.

The Modern, citing contractual obligations to return the paintings, has moved to quash the subpoena, and the Manhattan District Attorney's office is scheduled to respond to the Modern's motion on Monday.

Some experts believe that hundreds, if not thousands, of looted works hang in American museums or in the homes of collectors. But Mr. de Montebello said, "we simply don't know how big the problem is," adding that he did not think it was huge.

Claims are expected to increase, however, partly because of two new organizations. Last fall, the World Jewish Congress established the Commission for Art Recovery, overseen by Ronald S. Lauder, the cosmetics heir and chairman of the Modern, to help people recover art seized in wartime. The B'nai B'rith Klutznick National Jewish Museum in Washington, meanwhile, set up the Holocaust Art Restitution Project to create a database of Jewish cultural losses.

The museum directors' proposed solution would likely involve a mediation or arbitration panel or some other forum for resolving disputes. "There is a need for an independent panel," said Ned Rifkin, the director of the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, who as chairman of the association's art issues committee appoint-



Don Perdue/Metropolitan Museum of Art

Philippe de Montebello.

ed the task force. "We can't do this ourselves. It has to come from a larger context than museum directors. We're doing what we can to initiate something."

Neither Mr. Rifkin nor Mr. de Montebello would speculate on an appropriate sponsor of the panel. Mr. Rifkin said the issue would be taken up by the task force, whose members include the directors of the largest museums in New York, Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, Philadelphia and Seattle. It expects to have initial recommendations in June.

"We will discuss and arrive at a set of guidelines to let members deal with this in the same way, within a range," Mr. de Montebello said.

Looking ahead, Mr. Feliciano said, "I hope the task force will help create an international independent ar-

bitration commission to help solve these problems. It should be composed of international experts, both European and American. This could avoid astronomical legal fees and a witch hunt."

While the specter of looted art has loomed over museums for a few years, at least, the dimensions of the problem are just sinking in. "This has ramifications potentially for all museums, not only those that may have stolen art," Mr. Rifkin said. "Because of the loan situation, the case at the Modern has ramifications for all of us."

The House Banking Committee is also sizing up the problem but not considering legislation, for now. "The hearing is informational, to give a sense of what the problem looks like from the museum directors' standpoint," said one committee staff member who insisted on anonymity. "We want to know how much art is out there, what precautions do museums take, does the incident at the Museum of Modern Art place a chill on art exchanges, the difficulties in establishing provenance and the moral-versus-the-legal responsibilities."

"And," he added, "we'll ask them to tell us if they see a role for government in this."

In addition to Mr. de Montebello and Mr. Lauder, others testifying at the hearing include Glenn D. Lowry, the director of the Modern; Earl A. Powell 3d, the director of the National Gallery of Art; James N. Wood, the director of the Art Institute of Chicago; Gilbert S. Edelson, the administrative vice president of the Art Dealers Association of America, and Stephen E. Weil, an emeritus senior scholar at the Smithsonian Institution's Center for Museum Studies.