

Sindelfingen

City wants to return looted art

- July 22, 2014 -

Sindelfingen – even before Sindelfingen’s mayor Bernd Vöhringer appointed the new town council ceremonially, he had to inform the councils about a “for us relatively unusual story.” The issue concerned the “Restitution claims regarding the Lütze collection,” how Otto Pannewitz director of the Sindelfingen gallery explains. In plain language: It is about looted art. A painting, which belongs to the gallery’s art collection, is on the Lost Art list of the nationwide Coordinating Centre for Lost Cultural Assets founded in 1994. It takes care of lost and looted cultural assets. Also the “Bildnis des Appellationsrates Stengelein” (“Portrait of the “Council of Appeal” Stengelein”) by Wilhelm Leibl, painted in 1871, is part of it (we reported previously).

On the occasion of the city’s 725-year-anniversary in 1987, Sindelfingen bought the painting from a Swiss private collection for DM 540. 000 for its own significant Lütze collection. Half of the price was paid by the city, the other half by the Daimler AG. Upon our request, this was confirmed by the spokesperson of the automobile manufacturer yesterday. Daimler AG did not wish to give any further comments. According to Pannewitz it is not possible to tell offhand how much the painting is worth today. “In any case, since then prices on the art market went up,” says mayor Vöhringer

Heirs miss 411 objects

In 1934, the painting was auctioned together with the entire collection of the Jewish Mosse publisher-family. Before, the Nazis had expropriated the family. Hans Lachmann-Mosse, the former owner of the Mosse-collection, had already fled to Switzerland at the beginning of 1933. Now, the heirs demand the return of the art works. The list is long: they listed 411 objects, some of which have been found in various German museums. A few weeks ago, the city of Sindelfingen received a letter from the San Francisco law firm Bartko, Zankel, Bunzel & Miller, reported Pannewitz to the city councils. In this letter they demand the return of the painting.

“If it should turn out that the heirs are entitled to the claims, the city of Sindelfingen will seek a dialogue with them and follow the applicable law as defined by the Washington Principles in 1998 and its related declaration in 1999,” clarifies gallery director Otto Pannewitz.

The parliamentary group leaders of the municipal council joined this position, which had only learned of this story through our request shortly before the council meeting of yesterday’s Tuesday evening. “If it turns out that the claims are correct we will return the painting. This is our moral obligation,” said the spokespersons of the parliamentary parties of the CDU, Freie Wähler, SPD, Grüne, FDP and Linke unanimously.

Perhaps compensation instead of return

Most recently, the “Bildnis des Appellationsrates Stengelein” was exhibited in the gallery two years ago, says Pannewitz. This next spring – so the plan – it shall be exhibited again. If it still remains in the city’s ownership. It is also possible the heirs will renounce the return of the object, which belongs to one of the most important pieces of the Sindelfingen gallery. Instead, city and heirs could agree to a monetary compensation. The amount of compensation is currently a matter of speculation.

“A compensation must be sustainable for the city’s budget,” says Hans Grau head of the party “Grünen”. If the amount of compensation is too high, we will return the painting. This is legally sound, says Richard Pitterle lawyer and spokesperson of the party “Linken.”

Is there more looted art in the gallery’s collection? “That is possible,” says Pannewitz. But to determine this, all art objects would have to be compared to the Lost-Art-Database. Meanwhile, big museum hire so-called provenance researchers who investigate the origin of art objects. “Our little establishment cannot afford this.”