



**U.S. Immigration  
and Customs  
Enforcement**

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# Fact Sheet

## **World War II Cultural Artifact Cases**

Stolen art, looted antiquities, fraudulently acquired artifacts – these are the little known casualties of war. While the Nazi regime made a practice of looting art and other cultural property during the Holocaust, the loss of other works during World War II has been attributed to Soviet troops and even U.S. servicemen. In the years since, technology has made it easier for thieves and traffickers to move these priceless items around the globe. As such, investigating the loss or looting of cultural properties and returning them to their countries of origin are an important part of ICE's diverse mission.

ICE, the largest investigative agency of the Department of Homeland Security, has a special unit known as the Cultural Property, Art and Antiquities Investigative Program, which coordinates investigations from the National Intellectual Property Rights Coordination Center in Virginia. The unit works closely the Department of State's Holocaust Art Recovery Working Group and Cultural Heritage Unit.

Our specially trained investigators and attachés in more than 40 countries not only partner with governments, agencies, and experts who share our mission to protect these items, but they train the investigators from other nations and agencies on how to find, authenticate and enforce the law to recover these items when they emerge in the marketplace. Customs laws allow ICE to seize national treasures, especially if they have been reported lost or stolen. ICE works with experts to authenticate the items, determine their true ownership and return them to their countries of origin.

Enclosed are but a few examples of efforts done by ICE and our predecessor, the U.S. Customs Service, to return valuable works of art and cultural property to their rightful owners.



## Repatriated items:

### Portrait of Wally



In 1999, U.S. Customs (a legacy agency of ICE) seized “Portrait of Wally” from the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan as suspected stolen art. The portrait is a work by Austrian artist Egon Schiele, and it was brought to the United States for an exhibit. The oil painting was stolen by Nazis from Viennese art gallery owner Lea Bondi during World War II. After the war, the painting was acquired by the Leopold Museum. This case, in collaboration with the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the Southern District of New York was settled in July 20, 2010, when the Leopold Museum agreed to pay the Bondi estate \$19 million.

### Paintings to Pirmasens Museum

Eleven oil paintings that were taken from the City of Pirmasens during World War II by a U.S. serviceman were turned over during a “sending off” ceremony to representatives of Pirmasens in July. The city museum had stored the paintings, which included works by local painter Heinrich Buerkel (1802-1869), in an air raid shelter under a schoolhouse. About 50 paintings were missing when the museum went to recover them. After the death of the serviceman, relatives contacted ICE agents, who seized the paintings in March 2010. The paintings will be repatriated at the Pirmasens Museum in Germany this fall.



### “Portrait of a Musician Playing a Bagpipe”



This painting, formerly owned by German art dealer Max Stern, was discovered by undercover ICE investigators at an art gallery in Manhattan. The portrait, valued at \$60,000, was created in 1932 by an artist in the Netherlands. Stern was forced by the Nazis to sell this painting, along with 200 of his other artworks and forfeit the proceeds of the sales. Stern fled from Germany and eventually settled in Canada. ICE seized the painting and returned it to Stern’s estate in a repatriation ceremony on April 21, 2009. This portrait also led to the recovery of the 16<sup>th</sup> century oil painting, “St. Jerome,” another one of Stern’s masterpieces stolen by the Nazis.

## **16<sup>th</sup> century Hebrew Bible**

On November 9, 2009, ICE returned the Bible to the Jewish Community of Vienna on the 71-year anniversary of Kristallnacht (Crystal Night), or Night of Broken Glass, when the Gestapo coordinated an attack on the Jewish people and their property. The Bible, lost to its Jewish owners that night, consists of two volumes and includes works of scholars dating back to the 11<sup>th</sup> century.



## **“Jeune Fille a la Robe Bleue” painting**



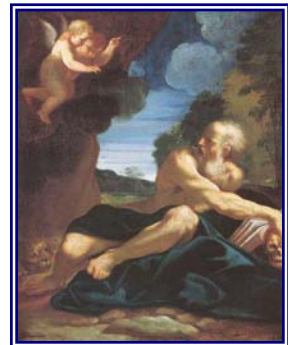
A portrait of a little girl wearing a blue dress alongside her pet rabbit at her family’s winter home in Ohain, Belgium, was painted by Antoine “Anto” Carte, a Belgian artist, in 1932. When Nazi forces invaded Belgium, the family was forced to flee, abandoning their home and all their belongings. An ICE agent was alerted that it was being offered over the internet by a Long Island, N.Y. art gallery in 2009. An undercover operation ensued to locate the painting and it was seized from a Queens N.Y. art storage facility. On Dec. 1, 2009, ICE returned the painting in a ceremony held at the Brussels Jewish Museum in Belgium to the subject’s surviving son.

## **14<sup>th</sup> century Hebrew manuscript**

In November 2003 ICE returned a 14<sup>th</sup> century Hebrew manuscript, stolen by the Nazis during World War II, to the Jewish Community Organization of Vienna, Austria. The manuscript is one of the oldest versions of the Kabalistic text known as “Sepher Yetzirah” and is valued at approximately \$68,000. The investigation began in March 2002, when a newspaper article reported that the manuscript was to be sold at a New York auction house. The probe revealed that Aaron Stefansky, a U.S. citizen, had smuggled the manuscript into the United States after purchasing it from an antiquities dealer in Israel. In 2003, the manuscript was seized, and Stefansky was arrested for customs smuggling charges and pleaded guilty.

## **“St. Jerome” by Ludovico Carracci**

“St. Jerome” painted by famed Italian artist Ludovico Carracci in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, was in the private collection of prominent Manhattan art dealer Richard L. Feigen. An ICE investigation revealed that the oil painting had belonged to art dealer Max Stern who was forced by the Nazis to sell it through Lempertz Auction House in 1937. Feigen unwittingly bought the painting – valued at \$55,324 – when it was reoffered by Lempertz in 2000.



## **Drawings to the Bremen Museum**

On July 19, 2001, the U.S. Customs Service returned historic paintings that were taken from the Bremen Museum in Germany more than 50 years before. Among the works were drawings by Rembrandt and Jacob van Ruisdael. According to experts the real star of the collection was the late 15<sup>th</sup> century drawing of “Women’s Bath” by the seminal German artist Albrecht Dürer, which has been valued at \$10 million. During World War II, the drawings were stored for safekeeping in a castle, which was occupied in 1943 by Russian troops, who took the drawings home with them. The drawings didn’t surface again until 1993, when a fine arts museum in Azerbaijan announced plans to exhibit them. The Bremen Museum tried to assert ownership, but the artwork was stolen again from the Azerbaijan museum before Bremen was able to assert its claim. In 1997, mention of the drawings surfaced again in Tokyo in the offices of the German Embassy. U.S. Customs agents, acting in an undercover capacity, set up a meeting with the Japanese businessman in N.Y. and ultimately arrested several targets and seized the pieces from a hotel room in midtown and an apartment in Brooklyn.

## **16<sup>th</sup> century de’ Barbari painting**

In December 2000, the U.S. Customs Service returned a 16<sup>th</sup> century painting by Venetian artist Jacopo de’ Barbari to the Weimar Museum in Germany. The painting is valued at as much as \$400,000. It was reported missing from the Schwartzburg Castle – used during World War II to safely store artwork – in 1945. American soldiers later occupied the castle during the war, and after the fighting ceased, museum officials concluded that the artwork had been stolen by American troops. Decades later, the museum was contacted anonymously by an individual in New York offering to return the painting in return for a \$100,000 finder’s fee. The museum refused to pay such a high fee, and suspecting extortion, contacted law enforcement. In an undercover operation, U.S. Customs Service agents posing as museum employees, taped conversations with furniture restorer Frank J. Vaccaro of New York. Later they arrested Vaccaro and searched his business for violations of Customs laws involving smuggling and transportation of stolen property. The painting was found hidden in the ceiling of Vaccaro’s office. Sotheby’s valued the painting at \$5 million.