

**LEONE-NOËLLE  
BADER  
MEYER  
1939-**



**BATTLE FOR  
NAZI-LOOTED  
PISSARRO  
PAINTING**

An 1886 Impressionist painting by Camille Pissarro entitled “Shepherdess Bringing in Sheep” became a tug-of-war between the University of Oklahoma and a French Holocaust survivor who claimed it was stolen by Nazis in occupied France. The university claimed the painting was a gift from a benefactor’s \$50-million art collection, the largest group of French impressionist artwork ever given to a public American university.

French supermarket mogul Gaston Lèvy sold the Pissarro artwork to department store Galeries Lafayette co-founder Thèophile Bader in 1940, who gave it to his daughter Yvonne and her husband Raoul Meyer. While fleeing the country, the Meyers hid it in the Credit Commercial de France safe. In February 1941, while raiding the bank’s safe deposit box in the sleepy southwest French town, Nazis found their collection. When they plundered art collections, the Nazis also destroyed family archival records, and created fake bills of sale. The painting was sold to Swiss art dealer – and art-looting collaborator – Christoph Bernoulli that same year.

After the Meyers returned to Europe in 1945, they reclaimed most of their art collection but the Pissarro’s whereabouts was difficult to track. In 1951, they traced the painting to Bernoulli, but the statute of limitations had run out the year before. In 1953, a Swiss court noted the Meyers’ pre-war ownership, but ruled that Bernoulli had done due diligence. Bernoulli offered to sell the Meyers the painting, but they refused.

In 1956, Amsterdam art dealer E. J. van Wisselingh sold the painting to New York’s David Findlay Galleries, who sold it to wealthy Oklahoma art collectors Aaron and Clara Weitzenhoffer the next year. After the Meyers’ death in the early 1970s, their daughter, French pediatrician and renowned philanthropist Léone Meyer, continued the search. Upon Clara’s 2000 death, it was donated to the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art in Norman. When Meyer discovered a 2011 article by historian Marc Masurovsky detailing the painting’s dubious history in a Plundered Art blog, she contacted the university, demanding the Pissarro’s return.

University president David Boren refused, hiring a lawyer famous for defending museums who refuse to return stolen Nazi works. Meyer sued in May 2013, arguing the lack of provenance documentation indicated the museum failed to perform any meaningful investigation. The District Court for the Southern District of New York, dismissed the suit for lack of personal jurisdiction, since the case involved people living in Oklahoma.

The case was restarted in Oklahoma’s Western District Court in April 2015. Oklahoma lawmaker Paul Wesselhoft believed it was a morality issue, and restitution of lost art was one of the last remaining avenues of justice for Holocaust survivors. A writer at the campus newspaper found forty other museum artworks with Nazi connections at the Fred Jones Museum, including paintings by Pissarro, van Gogh and Monet. Despite a 2015 State Resolution to resolve the controversy, the university refused and the backlash grew. Newsweek magazine called it a public relations nightmare.

In 2016, New York billionaire art collector Ronald Lauder mediated negotiations making Meyer the painting’s sole owner, and setting up a five-year rotation between the Musée d’Orsay in Paris, known for its Impressionist collection, and OU. Even though Meyer wanted to donate it to the Musée d’Orsay, the museum got cold feet citing insurance nightmares and potential physical risk to moving the \$2-million painting, and refused the gift, placing it back in legal limbo. Citing the unworkable agreement, Meyer filed a 2020 lawsuit to stop the painting’s rotations. OU sued 81-year-old Meyer for \$3.5 million and \$100,000-a-day penalties.

In June 2021, Meyer abandoned the Pissarro’s ownership, and gave it to OU under an agreement of the continual exhibition in both countries. She didn’t feel relinquishing the painting’s ownership was a victory, “I had no other choice. I was heard but not listened to.” The question still remains as to why OU’s behavior changed only after the story garnered national attention negative to the university.