

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB LUNCHEON WITH
PHILIPPE DE MONTEBELLO, DIRECTOR,
METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

TOPIC: ART PLUNDERED DURING THE HOLOCAUST

MODERATOR: DOUG HARBRECHT

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THIS IS A RUSH TRANSCRIPT.

MR. HARBRECHT: Good afternoon and welcome to the National Press Club. This is our 90th anniversary year. My name is Doug Harbrecht. I'm president of the National Press Club and Washington news editor of Business Week magazine, a McGraw-Hill Companies publication.

I'd like to welcome Club members and their guests in the audience today, as well as those of you watching on C-SPAN or listening to this program on National Public Radio.

Before introducing our head table, I would like to remind our members of some upcoming speakers. Tomorrow we will hear Senator Robert Bennett of Utah speak. His speech is about the anticipated computer problems in the year 2000. He's calling his speech, "Paul Revere, Not Chicken Little, Sounding the Call on the Year 2000." That will make you watch.

And on Thursday we'll hear Oakland, California Mayor-elect Jerry Brown, the former governor of California. He will be speaking on the unfinished urban agenda.

Next week we'll hear Senator Fred Thompson of Tennessee speak on July 22nd. His speech is entitled "Is the Administration Serious About Nuclear Arms Proliferation?"

And our last speaker in July will be Nick Brooks, CEO of Brown & Williamson Tobacco Corporation. He will discuss tobacco's solution to curbing youth smoking on July 28th.

Transcripts and audiophiles of National Press Club luncheons will be posted this afternoon at our website at npc.press.org. To purchase audio and videotapes, please call 1-888-343-1940.

If you have any questions for our speaker today, please write them on the cards provided at your table and pass them up to me. I will ask as many as time permits.

I'd now like to introduce our head table guests and ask them to stand briefly when their names are called. Please hold your applause until all head table guests have been introduced.

From your right, Joanne Lewis, art critic, Washington Post; Irvin Molotsky, reporter, New York Times; Anita Defanis, director of government affairs, Association of Art Museum Directors; J. Carter Brown, former director of the National Gallery of Art; Debra Oren (sp), Washington bureau chief, New York Post; Sharon Cott, legal counsel, New York Metropolitan Museum of Art and guest of our speaker; to my right, Ken Eskey, chairman of the Speakers Committee; skipping over our speaker for just a moment, Gordon Smith, president of Gordon Smith Company and member of the Speakers Committee who graciously arranged today's lunch; Harold Holzer, director of communications for the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art; Larry Lipman, vice president of the National Press Club and Washington correspondent for the Palm Beach Post; and Maria Recio, Fort Worth Star-Telegram. (Applause.)

It has been said that the works of art looted by the Nazis during the holocaust of World War II are the latest prisoners of war. Mr. Philippe De Montebello, director of Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, strongly agrees with that assessment. Our speaker today chairs a task force established in January of this year by the Association of Art Museum Directors, a group of 175 museum directors in the United States, Canada and Mexico. The report of the task force, issued in June, establishes a broad set of principles and guidelines dealing with the identification and restitution of art confiscated by the Nazi regime and never returned to its rightful owners.

Mr. DeMontbello and the task force is dealing with a very complex problem, one that will require museums to research their own collections, respond to claims of persons for whom the art was confiscated, and set up an elaborate system of identification and return of such art. Jewish organizations such as the World Jewish Congress will be closely involved, as will scholars, donors, auction houses and dealers.

The anniversary of the storming of Bastille seems to be an appropriate time for Mr. DeMontbello to talk about freeing confiscated art here at the Press Club. Born and educated in France and later a graduate from Harvard University, Mr. DeMontbello has headed one of the premier art museums of the world for some 20 years. It is matched by no other museum in the Western hemisphere, and is approached in size only by the Louvre and the Hermitage. Attracting close to 5 million visitors a year, the Metropolitan under Mr. DeMontbello has vastly increased its permanent collection, pursuing an active acquisitions program, as well as expanding its galleries.

The search for the rightful owners of art plundered during the holocaust and the establishment of a system to deal with its return presents very complicated issues. And although only a few cases have come to light so far, the extent of the problem is still unknown. There may be cases of art innocently displayed in galleries today whose origin must

be determined.

So to hear about this topic, ladies and gentlemen, please extend a warm National Press Club welcome to Mr. Philippe De Montebello. (Applause.)

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: Thank you very much, Doug. And thank you, Gordon Smith, for asking me to be here today.

It's a great pleasure to be before the National Press Club, although I shan't hide that it's rather daunting to address so many members of the fourth estate. I trust that my lack of experience in doing so will be treated by all of you with indulgence -- (laughter) -- in a sense more indulgence than I saw at the Met, as Harold Holzer, head of communications, I think probably did some maneuvering to have me here in the line of fire, retaliating, I guess, for my complaint about too little national press attention devoted to the Metropolitan. (Laughter.) And, in addition to putting me in the line of fire, doing it on the 14th of July. I tend to prefer to spend the quatorze de juillet with my family quietly mourning the passing of the -- (inaudible) -- regime. (Laughter.) But I'm consoled by the French results on Sunday in the World Cup. (Laughter.)

This said, I do want you to know that I appreciate this opportunity.

I'm here today, as you've just heard, not just as the director of the Metropolitan but as the chairman of a task force of the Association of Art Museum Directors that was charged with the drafting of guidelines -- they were issued on the 3rd of June -- guidelines intended to help fellow directors deal with the critical issue of the day, that of potential claims against works of art that may have been spoliated during the Nazi World War II era, which one defines really as 1933 to '45.

Let me dispel first a couple of misconceptions. The first is that our task force somehow was formed in response to the Manhattan district attorney barring the return to Austria of two Egon Schiele paintings from a loan exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. This is not correct. The AAMD task force was created as a reaction to the heightened level of consciousness about this spoliation of goods from Jewish families well before Mr. Morgenthau's action, back to such highly publicized issues as congressional action on the recovery of Jewish assets in Swiss banks, as well as information yielded by the declassification of documents in a number of countries.

The second misconception arises from the unfortunate and completely unjustified linkage, frankly, in too many press reports, of American art museums with Swiss banks. This demonization of museums may make good copy, but it really has no basis in fact. It puts museums unfairly on the defensive, whereas in fact we are eager to solve the problem.

First of all, I think we should remember that American museums are bona fide third-party owners. They were not acquiring works of art in Europe during the Nazi era. The works of art, if they had been looted, would have entered our institutions indirectly long afterwards, occasionally through purchase, generally from well-established dealers or at auction, but most often as gifts or bequests from collector philanthropies who are often the last in a long chain of innocent good-faith purchasers, many themselves Jewish.

Moreover, museums are to be further distinguished from Swiss banks or Italian insurance companies in that museums do not conceal their assets, their works of art. Nor do they benefit from them other than to reach a broad audience to ensure that tens of millions of visitors in the US learn from them and enjoy them.

Also, as you know, museums announce their acquisitions -- proudly, I might add -- and they encourage press reports. They display these works to the public in their galleries. They

publish them in scholarly journals and in widely read illustrated catalogues, and they loan them to special exhibitions all over the world. And they can be seen everywhere on postcards and posters.

Now, to potential claimants looking for, say, an important painting, museums, frankly, are an open book. As public, quasi-academic institutions, museums welcome comments and inquiries about their collections. And we never stop conducting research, a process that embraces not only art historical issues but -- (inaudible) -- inquiries as well. Frankly, we like and we need to know works of art previous ownership. The history of collecting illuminates the history of art.

I think it would be fairer to say, therefore, that museums often turn out to be secondary victims rather than part of the problem, and certainly they expect to play a very active role in a just solution -- just as they did at the end of the war when American museum personnel, including the Met, played a vital role in the massive restitution projects organized by the US military.

Now, there is -- and there's no question about it -- in later years the fact that -- and this is really until recently -- questions of provenance touching on the World War II era were only addressed casually by museums, collectors and the art market as a whole, just as dormant assets in banks remained dormant. Works of art were offered for sale or gift by distinguished collectors and reputable dealers, and their recent sources were usually perfectly legitimate. Where the works of art were decades earlier, tended to be the subject of academic inquiry, not so much in the nature of a title search. Those were different times.

This has changed drastically, the whole psychology has changed. And the reason is the same confluence of circumstances that finally shed long-needed light on the financial crimes. And it has refocused attention on the deeply repugnant plundering of art that unquestionably occurred during the Nazi World War II era.

That light, shone only after the fall of the Iron Curtain, has opened many long-suppressed documents to scholars. After the declassification of a host of national archives occurred, we see a 50-year time level after the war, and scholars responded quickly. As you know, Lynn Nicholas (sp) published a ground-breaking exclusive, "The Rape of Europa," Hector Feliziano (sp) produced the important work, "The Lost Museum" -- both offering evidence of the wide-scale systematic art looting that plagued Europe during the holocaust era.

Unquestionably, the press helped as well. Your focus on the quest for the recovery of assets of all kinds has properly emboldened the victims of spoliation and their heirs to come forward to make inquiries, indeed in some instances to make claims.

I might add, since fanciful figures have been put forward as to the number of "looted or stolen works" hanging in our museums, it is rather unfortunate phraseology, it sounds somehow as if museums were the thieves. Perhaps you and your colleagues could adopt a fairer phrase, "works once looted or stolen" ?. (Laughter.)

In any event, there have been only at the Met two World War II-related claims in the last 50 years, both are recent, and fewer than a dozen in the entire United States where tens of thousands of works of art acquired since World War II are displayed.

Incidentally, I should correct one thing that Doug said earlier: The AAMD's guidelines are meant for Canada and US, not south of the border.

One claim against the Metropolitan came from the Belgium government and it's for a minor Flemish primitive that we purchased at a public auction in London in the '70s. And the other is from a non-Jewish German family which believes its painting was taken at some point by the Russians.

Now, we are studying these claims. They're not simple claims, not any of them are, and very few will be. However foul and vividly recalled World War II-era thefts may have been, the trail of works of art since their illegal seizures or false sales can be very murky and vexingly difficult to sort out.

I offer as a case in point the Met's great Van Gogh -- (French pronunciation) -- masterpiece, or Van Gogh -- (using American pronunciation) -- if you prefer, "Wheat Fields with Cypresses," which we acquired in 1993. We were very much satisfied at the time of its purchase that its provenance -- it had come from the Mendelson (sp) family -- was impeccable. But earlier this year the New York Times challenged us to prove the case.

The story had a happy ending for the museum going public. The Times reporter found a Mendelson descendant who recalled that the family left the picture behind with a farmer when they fled Germany, they returned after the war, miraculously found the paintings in the farmhouse, reclaimed them, and this particular painting was sold by the Mendelson family after the war.

Now, other stories may prove more different to sort out. And frankly, curators are not investigative reporters, they are art historians. There simply would not be a right question and answer at the right time solution to every puzzle that comes up.

Museums intend, however, to resolve claims, and where appropriate to provide restitution. No museum wants to hold a stolen work of art. And we particularly do not want to hold works stolen during a period so recent whose wounds are still so deeply central to so many survivors and their children. At the same time, we are deeply mindful of another obligation, that to the public to keep works of art on view for the enjoyment and education of as many people as possible. Museums are not private collections. Surely it will be in everyone's interest whenever possible to marry simple justice and public service. That is what my colleagues affirmed in February in testimony before the House Banking Committee, chaired by Congressman Jim Leach. Mr. Leach's determination to weigh all the complexities of this difficult issue is much appreciated by museums, and I am grateful as well to New York Senator Alfonse D'Amato, for raising consciousness on the whole issue of World War II-era looting, and to our own New York members of Congress -- Chuck Schumer, Nita Lowey, Gary Ackerman -- to name a few -- who have also addressed this issue constructively.

On the third of June, as I mentioned earlier, the AMD adopted the report at the -- the report of the task force at its annual meeting in Rochester. As many of you know, the guidelines call on American art museums to begin to conduct a comprehensive review of their collections to determine if any works were unlawfully confiscated during the Nazi World War II era, and not restituted. And the report suggests that museums make maximum use not only of traditional research -- and this is important -- but also what will be the most useful tool in the end, the electronic databases and computer linkages scheduled to be established by various third parties in the months and years to come, and they include the Commission for Art Recovery, established by the World Jewish Congress; and the Holocaust Art Restitution Project from the National Jewish Museum. Both plan to establish and assemble computerized databanks that promise wider access to previously dispersed or hidden information. These databases suggest the possibility of a future in which claimants, as well as museums, can use the Internet to gather and cross reference all the available information about the Pauvonso (sp) work of art and the existence of any known past or present challenges to ownership. Therein lies real hope for the dovetailing of information and access to hitherto unknown postwar restitution and entirely proper subsequent sales.

I must caution that it will take time to build the databank necessary to make the system work. An army of skilled researchers will need to do a lot of digging. Ultimately no Web site is more valuable than the information it can offer, and that includes an (at-loss ?)

registry. I might add that the cooperation of European art museums will be vital to the success of future databases, and I am pleased to report that initial contacts with my colleagues at British, Dutch and French museums has been most encouraging. Indeed, they support in principle the AMD task force guidelines.

Last month I directed the heads of the Metropolitan's 18 curatorial departments to begin immediately to implement the guidelines we helped to create, and we have begun the process of review, often into small three-by-five cards bearing ink or pencil inscriptions written often decades ago. There is a reality check here which should imply no diminution of commitment to the task. The truth is the process will take time and money. We have a finite number of researchers, all of whom work concurrently on the preservation and display of works of art under their care, and thrown in the bargain organize a few exhibitions as well. Our mission is vast. Our holdings are deep. But we recognize that our responsibilities are broad, and the research effort is certainly a priority.

In the event our research or that of independent groups generates a claim for allegedly confiscated art, we will respond promptly to resolve the matter in an equitable and mutually agreeable manner, with the claimant, utilizing where appropriate the avenue of mediation.

This coming November, the State Department and the U.S. Holocaust Museum will jointly host here in Washington an international conference on Holocaust-era assets. We look forward to working with Undersecretary of State Stuart Eizenstat to make this effort productive, and we thank him for his very positive reference to the AMD's guidelines adopted in June.

Now, before I take your questions, let me reiterate what I said in both my House testimony in Washington and at the announcement of the AMD guidelines last month, and that is that the unlawful and immoral spoliation of art during the Nazi regime remains a bitter part of the unspeakable memory of the Holocaust which all museums deplore and condemn. Likewise, we remain proud of the work museums did after the war to help preserve and restitute literally hundreds of thousands of plundered works. We are determined to maintain these standards in the future. Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen. (Applause.)

MR. HARBRECHT: Thank you. Mr. de Montebello, for our first question: Is the Metropolitan Museum prepared to open its archives to outside researchers in order to elicit the truth about the postwar art market and to make this data available to the public?

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: The Metropolitan has always made its archives and the information about its works of art available to researchers. So in keeping them open nothing will change.

MR. HARBRECHT: How specifically have your procedures at the Met changed since the task force was dissolved? Could you give us some examples please?

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: Since what was dissolved?

MR. HARBRECHT: The task force.

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: The task force of the AMD issued the guidelines. They are guidelines -- it's not a subpoena to all of its members, about 170 of the largest museums in the country. But all of the museums signed onto them, and with the mandate that they begin to review their collections in a serious manner. And I know quite a number of museums, in addition to the Met, have begun to do so.

More important in a sense than the guidelines is the higher level of consciousness all of us now have, the fact that immediate questions are now triggered into our minds, since the minds of museums and their staffs about the Povnasin (sp) works of art was this painting, this book, this manuscript, perhaps spoliated during the war. This did not happen in previous years, just as it didn't in a lot of other arenas. But it does now. And I think that in many

ways is the most important part -- is the psychological change.

MR. HARBRECHT: Again, specifically, how does the Metropolitan Museum ensure that works of art acquired or donated to the museum have not been looted or misappropriated by the Nazis?

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: For the moment our due diligence is limited to what is available to art museums. As I've indicated, short of having all the various national archives around the world sort it out in an intelligent and useful manner, translated -- because many of them are not in English -- brought together through these databases, the best that we can do -- and it's pretty good -- is the traditional areas of research about Povnas (sp) -- from looking at genealogy to all of the published books, to the consultation of scholars, experts in the area, listening to gossip -- a very important element in the art world -- (laughter) -- looking at the archives of dealers, auction houses -- a great deal has been published -- and but frankly claimants also have to come forward -- too few have in the past -- that psychology is changing. But we are eagerly awaiting these databases, and we have indicated to both groups that I've mentioned today that art museums will be as helpful as they can, for example if they wish to establish advisory committees -- people of the museum will be happy to be on those committees.

MR. HARBRECHT: Museums have an obligation to respond to a claim by carefully investigating the history of the piece in question. But do museums have any obligation to initiate such investigations for pieces not subject to such claims?

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: Well, when I indicate that we will -- that I have asked our 18 curatorial departments to look at the Povnas (sp) -- of all of the works acquired since the war -- that is not a response to claims; it is a proactive free choice action to really comb the archives. There are thousands of such works of art. They are not all Van Gogh paintings. You are dealing with thousands of drawings and prints, and those would have been most difficult to sort out, if at all possible in the future.

The excellent records kept by the French, and especially by the Germans in France at the Jourdoem (sp) and others are quite rudimentary. And when you find the notation that a nude bather by Bonnard drawing was taken from Family X, where Bonnard did 250 drawings of nude bathers. So short of having the dimension of the work, or short of the drawing having some marking on the back, a lot of things will never be found, because it's simply impossible. So we do our best.

MR. HARBRECHT: Do you feel all museums are equally willing to return once-looted art? What do you think of the attitude of the museum in Vienna, which seems very reluctant for example?

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: Well, first of all, I am speaking here on behalf of American art museums, not my colleagues in Europe. I am not altogether sure that the question is accurate. But I have read about Vienna and the Rothschild collection -- indicates a considerable leap in good faith on the part of the Austrian authorities -- I mean, of -- yes. So I am not sure that that is the case, but I am not here to speak on behalf of foreign museums.

MR. HARBRECHT: Why should museums give up paintings they bought in good faith?

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: That's a very important and delicate question. Should museums necessarily give up paintings bought in good faith? And this is why we will call for mediation. Every instance is going to turn out to be very different. One will also come into a situation as you have already seen of dispute among heirs. A lot of things have to be verified. There's the whole question of an intervening half century, a great many good-faith purchasers, public interest -- Is restitution necessarily to be 100 percent of what was spoliated? Is there a middle ground where you recognize that you do not wish to create a secondary victim and find a middle ground?

I'll tell you an interesting anecdote. I dare to tell it. And it's one that occurred only a couple of days ago -- I think it was late last week. It was an article in the New York Times about the Herzog collection and the claim of heirs from that Jewish-Hungarian family against the museum in Budapest I believe. And I was riding in a taxi in New York with a Jewish gentleman of modest background, and with my acquaintance, and I had the paper opened at that article, and he said, "Oh, this makes me so angry." And I said, "Oh, you know, maybe the Hungarian government --" He said, "Not at the Hungarian government, at the Herzogs and at the heirs." And I was puzzled. And I said, "Well, this is a different take on it." What this gentleman said is, "Yes, you, the museums, the press, the Congress, are focusing on the belongings of the 50 richest families in Europe during the war. Six million of us didn't have paintings to exchange for the lives of" -- and his family was lost in the camps -- "didn't have paintings, and they shouldn't have them back. They were able to buy the freedom of their family."

So the complexities. The highly emotional nature of this is interesting. And so I don't think that museums should -- let's say frivolously or too quickly -- despoil necessarily the audience on the basis of what seems to be merely on the surface legitimate claims. A lot has to be taken into account. But if a claim is legitimate, and the work was not restituted. Remember, more than 80 percent of the works of art taken during the war were given back through these commissions after the war. So we are talking about that 20 percent. One has to do a lot of verification.

MR. HARBRECHT: Has there been, or are there any plans to make an assessment of the value of the artwork estimated to have been misappropriated during the Holocaust and still out there? Is there an estimated value you could give us?

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: I can't give you an estimated value, just as I can't give you an estimated number of works of art. I mean, I -- we simply don't know. And again it depends on what mediation and what is recommended as fair value, and fair compensation, and fair restitution.

MR. HARBRECHT: Mr. de Montebello, do you believe there should be a date certain when provenance questions should no longer be raised?

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: An interesting question. The tenor of all of the various commissions, trials from Nuremberg on, tend to consider -- quite rightly, I think -- the Holocaust is sui generis, and as being exempt, really, from moral issues, from statute of limitations. And so frankly, I would not see using the technicality of an abstractly found date as a reason to deny a completely legitimate claim from the process.

MR. HARBRECHT: You just told a very interesting anecdote about your cab ride. Here's a question. Is there a mechanism -- given the fact that so many Jews were killed during the Holocaust, and have no heirs to claim looted art -- is there a mechanism, or is there a mechanism in the works to restore its value to the Jewish community?

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: No, there is no mechanism certainly in the museum community. What most members of the Jewish community have recommended, and I think it seems like a very valid point, is that museums should recognize and acknowledge, through their labeling systems and their catalogues, that a work of art has been looted from a Jewish family.

And in fact, a painting Chardin (ph) Boy Blowing Bubbles, was acquired in the 1960s by the Met, and had been taken from a Jewish family in Europe. And the day in the 60s when it was put on the walls of the Metropolitan, it indicated on the label that such was the case, just as it did in the Museum Bulletin published and written by Ted Russo (ph) about the painting.

MR. HARBRECHT: You mentioned restitution with the help of the military. Is this still an area of possible cooperation?

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: I'm not sure I understand the question.

MR. HARBRECHT: I'm not sure I understand it either. (Scattered laughter.) But --

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: "With the help of the military." We're talking about the years immediately following the war in the late 1940s. And the commissions were disbanded, I don't remember in what year, 1951, or something like that.

MR. HARBRECHT: Is there any possibility of --

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: No, it's far too long after the fact. And no, it would be completely impractical.

MR. HARBRECHT: Your group wears the white hats of art restoration. Are there any black hats, or persons engaged in illegal trade you'd like to talk about here? (Laughter.)

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: No.

MR. HARBRECHT: Do the moral or legal rationale for the return of art stolen during the Holocaust, support the return of other art plundered during human history, such as the return of manuscripts stolen from Armenian churches by the Ottoman Turks during the genocide of Armenians in 1959 (sic)? And how far should museums go, in returning stolen art? Should art works taken 100 years ago, or 500 years ago be returned?

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: When Venice takes the Four Horses of San Marco and returns them to Constantinople, then we will study the matter of -- (laughter) -- such restitution.

MR. HARBRECHT: Well, more recently, stolen or looted art from the Angkor Wat from Cambodia, and Africa, is a serious problem. To your knowledge, these pieces of art -- have any of them found their way to American museums? Is this a possible problem?

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: The answer is yes to both sides of the question. Khmer art from Cambodia and surrounding countries has been avidly collected, certainly ever since Andre Malraux launched and made that movement known, in the *Voix de Silence* (ph), and elsewhere. Such works are proudly shown in museums. The National Gallery of Art, in fact, had a loan exhibition a couple of years ago on Khmer art. The Metropolitan has a distinguished collection, not as good, of course, as that of the Musee Gimay (ph) in Paris. Theirs is strong, because of their colonial past.

And in fact, a great many of these works, were repertoried, photographed, while in the storerooms in Phnom Penh. And about a year ago, we discovered that one Khmer head in the Metropolitan's collection, was one of the ones reproduced in a book by a French Commission in Phnom Penh as having been taken from that storeroom.

Our curator was dispatched instantly, with the head in a crate, and returned to the government in Phnom Penh. So, if an uncontrovertible theft is brought to the attention of an art museum in this country, that museum clearly recognizes that it has no title to the work, and it will return it.

MR. HARBRECHT: Did looters show taste in art? If so, what sort? (Laughter.)

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: Looters showed not only taste, but a great deal of knowledge. And it goes back, in a sense, if you wish, to Napoleon's days in the campaigns in Egypt and in Italy, where he took one of the great museum curators and directors of the world, the Baron Vivandenoif (ph), with him, to advise him as to which specific works to take from Milan, from Naples, from Florence, and Rome -- and in Egypt as well.

And Hitler, Goering and others, and Rosenberg, were extremely well-advised. And, while their taste did not extend to what the Germans called "degenerate art" -- in fact, they used it to barter the Old Masters they preferred -- they were well-informed. So, that's I guess the smart answer.

MR. HARBRECHT: This is a two-part question about technology. What do you foresee in using technology, both to find and return the art looted by the Nazis, and also to increase knowledge and appreciation of great art?

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: Well, the first part of the question is pertinent to our discussion today. Technology is a tool. It is a medium, it is not the message. And whatever the databases are that are brought together, they will only be as good as the information that is plugged into them.

The technology, through cyberspace, the Web, and so forth, makes it possible for any potential claimant to get on-line and find as much information as possible. Likewise for people who -- collectors, dealers, auction houses, museums -- may be considering or owning works of art, find that there may be claims about them. The second part of the question is a very broad one, which I really don't think it's appropriate to get into now.

MR. HARBRECHT: You talked a little bit about this in your speech. But to what extent will foreign museums be bound by the guidelines laid down by the A.A.M.D.? And what promise do you see there, and what problems do you see?

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: Well, they're not bound by the guidelines of the A.A.M.D. The "A" -- the first one -- refers to America. So, we don't speak for French, Dutch, English museums, to cite the three countries which have put together similar groups and are drafting similar guidelines.

Our guidelines have been distributed and given to those member museums in Europe, and as I indicated in my remarks, were welcomed, in principle, without necessarily adopting every word. They really felt that whatever guidelines -- and I think some of them will come out with them -- will closely resemble these. So, I'd like to think that our document is one that has the value of replicability, and will be indeed used at least as a model by European museums.

Very, very different, outside of England. Very different -- they're in a very different situation from American museums, for obvious reasons.

MR. HARBRECHT: A point of clarification on a point you were making before. Are you saying looted art from the Holocaust should remain in museums? Does restitution mean money, or does it mean return?

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: There's no clear-cut answer to this. As I said, every single case is going to be dealt on its own merits, and will be very different, one from the other.

What I was saying about remaining in museums, was in response to a question: if there are no claims, if there are no heirs. As Tom Freudenheim (ph) has expressed -- and he speaks for a major Jewish group, and used to be, as you know, the museum director, and the secretary of the Smithsonian -- his feeling is, and I simply quote him, that "no Jewish group has a better right to stolen art than any other group."

And so the notion of transferring heirless art to some repository somewhere, where the guiding principle for showing masterpieces, the creativity of the mankind, is the fact that they were looted during the war, not only trivializes and just gives a bad taste, where I think that none of the owners would approve. So, we're talking now about heirless art, and that's I think very different.

MR. HARBRECHT: Is there a difference of opinion in the Jewish community about the return of Jewish art?

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: The answer is yes. I don't speak for the Jewish community. I'm not an expert. I have followed and been in many discussions, and I've heard many different points of views from those who would go all the way to restitute absolutely everything and remove it, to those who would wish a middle ground, as I've described it before.

I think all human beings have differences of opinion. And being Jewish, does not exempt you from disagreements with fellow Jews.

MR. HARBRECHT: Here's a question. You sounded very bitter in your address. Do you feel that museums have been battered by the mainstream press? Do you think the subject of looted art is too sophisticated for the mainstream press, a.k.a. the New York Times? (Laughter.)

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: Well, in fact, I wasn't referring to the New York Times. The New York Times has been rather fair on the issue. I was referring to other papers and other media. I don't think that I was bitter. I didn't mean to come off as bitter. But there's no question that this is an issue of great complexity, that has been reduced to slogans and easy sell by simplistically-minded members of your profession. (Scattered laughter.)

And it isn't that simple. And, as I said before, museums are not primary actors on the theater of 1933-1945. And, that is merely what I was trying to clarify, is the too-easy linkage that has been made, because it's good copy, between the Swiss banks, and so forth, and museums. And I think that linkage really does not exist, and is unfair. MR. HARBRECHT: Can you tell us more, please, about the Van Gogh provenance story? How did you or the New York Times discover its origins in February?

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: Well, the origins were known. We had always known that it belonged to the Mendelssohn family. Our curators had assured themselves, before the purchase in 1993 (I don't remember when it was exactly now), that indeed, through the regular sources we consult, from various archives to the dealers who were involved all the way back to 1952 -- Natone (ph) in Zurich, for example -- that the picture was legitimately sold and taken out after the war. We didn't have the kind of proof that holds up in court, but we have the kind of proof that has traditionally held up in academic circles. What the New York Times did -- and we're very grateful to Judy Dubrinsky (ph) for that legwork -- is to give us, in addition, proof that would hold up in a court of law. So, we can now put a little checkmark next to that picture. And we would encourage anybody who wishes to do due diligence on any other work of art in the Met, since we're interested in knowledge and in the truth, to by all means, call heirs, and call people. That's that fewer number of phone calls I'll have to make.

MR. HARBRECHT: Now, off the subject for a moment. Art museums in general, and the Metropolitan in particular, are frequently considered to be "elitist." What are you doing to reach out to people of modest means and minorities?

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: I'm asked that question frequently. I have to tell you I don't understand the question. Of course museums are elitist. Every one of you is elitist. Anybody interested in excellence, and better, best vs. mediocre, is elitist by definition.

What we are not, is elitist in an exclusionary sense. We are elitist in a Jeffersonian-Adamsian sense, of bringing up the level of the people. It is the demagogue who would keep people ignorant. So the best of elitism is folding in as many people into the elite, of the educated, and enriched as possible. That is the very fundament of democratic life. (Applause.)

MR. HARBRECHT: Good answer.

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: Obviously. (Laughter.)

MR. HARBRECHT: Please discuss the conceptualization of the museum visitor seeking an experience.

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: Cathartic. (A date?) through music on the balcony and looking at works of art. These are all wonderful experiences that can be found in the great art museums of this world. The greatest mistake and the trap that the museums could fall into is promising too many cathartic experiences for every visitor in front of every work of art.

I think we all know that there are individual moments and individual works that will transfix us at certain times, and others we'll walk by 20 times without feeling anything. But there is always the promise that that bolt out of the blue is going to strike. And when it does, it's a great feeling. And going to an art museum is at least giving yourself the chance to have that bolt come out of the blue.

MR. HARBRECHT: What is known about the whereabouts of the so-called degenerate art exhibited by the Nazis?

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: A great deal, since an excellent exhibition mounted by the Los Angeles County Museum that's traveled in Europe, I think even in Germany, has been published. All of these works are known. They were sold by the Nazi regime from German museums, who, for the moment, at least, have declared they would not claim them back, because the Nazi regime was the legitimate regime of the time.

MR. HARBRECHT: Okay, here is the question, ladies and gentlemen. What is your opinion of a Press Club which has banished a Paris salon painting of the 19th century -- a nude, I might add, "Phrennie" -- because it was deemed offensive by some members of the Press Club? It says women members, but some members of the Press Club. (Applause.)

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: I believe in your inalienable right to exercise bad taste. (Laughter.)

MR. HARBRECHT: That's all? (Laughter/applause.) It's a pretty good painting. Maybe you might like to hang it in the Metropolitan. (Laughter.) Some of us would really -- no, never mind.

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: Consider it -- (inaudible) -- a gift. We'd have to check into its haute -- (inaudible). (Laughter.)

MR. HARBRECHT: Were you surprised when Ambassador Annenberg gave many more paintings than the National Gallery of Art? (Laughter.)

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: Jay Carter Brown is to my left a few paces. If he wished to answer the question on my behalf -- no, I don't think that I was surprised. We worked far too hard in nurturing this relationship to be surprised at its conclusion. (Laughter.) We were delighted, I must add.

MR. HARBRECHT: Where do you personally and professionally stand on the issue of the Elgin marbles? I have no idea what the Elgin marbles are. I'm just asking these questions. Or, for that matter, the works Napoleon took for France. I beg your pardon. I'm from Long Island. I don't know these things. (Laughter.)

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: First, Elgin is a shoe company. Elgin (changes the pronunciation)

is the lord. Second, Napoleon had nothing to do with that one, really. They are at the British Museum and, in my opinion, should remain at the British Museum. I don't believe in rewriting history.

We alluded a moment ago -- I alluded a moment ago; I don't want to make you accomplices to anything that I say -- I alluded a moment ago to the fact that the Nazi regime was the legitimate regime of the time, heinous as it may have been. The regime that sold to Lord Elgin the marbles was Turkish and was for a brief moment the legitimate regime governing Turkey. But legitimate or not legitimate, what is lost sight of in the debate about the Elgin marbles -- they're the great marbles from the Parthenon in Athens -- is what the British Museum and their being in a major western capital has given in terms of repayment in scholarship and knowledge, because there they could be studied.

They could be, to a large extent, preserved; we now know perhaps a little less than had been thought. But it is absolutely clear that had they remained on the Parthenon, there would be nothing left today. Just look at the rest of the stones there. And so it's a complicated case. But as you asked earlier about what about other wars and other instances, I think when you're dealing with the fact that it's 200 years old, you're dealing with history. And rewriting it, to me, makes absolutely no sense. (Scattered applause.)

I would like to add, if those stones were to be returned to be placed, which would be foolish, on the facade of the Parthenon, you'd have at least some argument for their return. But to go in a glass-case museum nearby, my goodness, it would look pretty good at the British Museum.

MR. HARBRECHT: Are there any plans for a joint exhibition between the Metropolitan Museum and the Hermitage?

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: Yes, we are always in conversation with our colleagues at the Hermitage. And we expect many more exhibitions to come forward. I'm not in a position now to make an announcement about future shows, but there are definitely exhibitions that we are studying at the moment.

MR. HARBRECHT: Would you talk, please, about the plan for the conference of numerous countries for November of this year, with the help of the State Department? Will the result be a comprehensive and detailed program of art restitution?

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: I am not the progenitor of this initiative, and it's not my place to speak about it. I know too little about it. There are people from the State Department in this room who might, but I don't think it's part of your *modus operandi* to come to the podium. But I really am not the person to answer that question.

MR. HARBRECHT: In this modern day of knock-offs and questions of authenticity, how does one sort out art forms and objects without constant second-guessing?

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: Well, as in every profession, there are innumerable ways of checking for authenticity. The ones that come to the mind of most people outside the profession are the technical, chemical and physical means that are used from X-rays to -- (inaudible)-- luminescence.

Ultimately, the eye of the curator, the informed eye, the saturated eye, saturated by looking at a multitude of like images, is going to make the right judgment. And most good curators can tell instantly, at a glance, without calling a chemist, if a picture is right or if a picture is wrong; a little bit the way the dermatologist, seeing someone with acne and someone with bubonic plague, knows the difference without consulting books. (Laughter.)

MR. HARBRECHT: Well, Mr. Montebello, I would like to thank you very much for coming

today. I have a few items here for you. One is a certificate of appreciation for speaking here today at the National Press Club.

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: Thank you very much.

MR. HARBRECHT: Second is our 90th anniversary history of the National Press Club, "Reliable Sources," of which you became one today. And we thank you.

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: Appreciate that.

MR. HARBRECHT: And the Elgin marbles of the National Press Club -- (laughter) -- the National Press Club mug. (Laughter.)

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: Thank you very much. (Applause.)

MR. HARBRECHT: For our final question today, now that France has won the World Cup, should we look for a revival of French impressionism, or will the French simply be -- it says insufferably smug, but will the French be insufferably smug about their soccer team? (Laughter.)

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: The French are insufferably smug about almost everything, so why shouldn't they be about their soccer team? (Laughter.) We're very pleased. I watched the game, and I jumped up and down in joy when we won, just like Chirac. (Laughter/applause.)

MR. HARBRECHT: Thank you very much. I'd like to thank you for coming today, Mr. Montebello. And I would also like to thank National Press Club staff members Kate Goggin, Joanne Booz, Pat Nelson, Melanie Abdow-Dermott and Howard Rothman for organizing today's lunch. Thank you all very much for coming. (Applause.)

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