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ART HISTORY

# Mystery woman



U.S. soldiers recover the bust and other art treasures from storage in Altaussee, an Austrian salt mine, in 1945. The works had been collected by Hans Posse, a former museum director whom Hitler had tapped to head the future Führer museum. The Image Works

The Kimbell helps determine the history of a Renaissance bust that passed through Nazi hands on its way to Fort Worth

By Galle Robinson  
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For a museum director, receiving a call from Robert Edsel is like getting a call from the Internal Revenue Service for the rest of us. It stimulates the gastric juices as the mind whirls, "OMG, what now?"

Edsel is the author of *Rescuing Da Vinci* and *The Monuments Men: Allied Heroes, Nazi Thieves, and the Greatest Treasure Hunt in History*, chronicles of Nazi art thefts and their ultimate recovery during World War II. In the course of his ongoing research, Edsel finds evidence that great works of art thought to have provenances unblemished by Nazi ownership are not as clean as their current owners believe them to be. So a call from Edsel could spell problems that range from merely troublesome to financially disastrous.

Eric Lee, director of the Kimbell Art Museum, received one of Edsel's calls in December 2009, and he remembers it clearly: "He invited me to lunch. He said he wanted to show me something."

A few months earlier, Edsel had been in Germany doing research for his current writing project, *Saving Italy*. He was flipping through photographic archives when he came across what he calls "a smoking-gun photo." It showed the Kimbell's terra cotta bust of Renaissance art patron Isabelle d'Este being removed from the Altaussee salt mine, where Adolf Hitler stored the looted art he planned to use in the Führer museum.

Edsel recognized the sculpture immediately and knew it had to be the Kimbell's and not a copy because of the vertical firing-line cracks on the sculpture's front. He also knew that the Kimbell was not aware that the piece had spent time in Hitler's art hideout.

There was a problem with the Kimbell's provenance on the sculpture — one that could leave it liable for restitution.

It would take the Kimbell nearly two years and thousands of miles of travel to find out why this artwork, in its collection since 2004, had been stowed in the Nazi salt mine, and what it might have to do about it.

**A familiar issue**

It wouldn't be the first time the Kimbell had to return a piece of Nazi-looted artwork. In 2006, the museum relinquished Joseph Mallord William Turner's painting *Glaucois and Scylla* (1841) to one of John and Anna Jaffe's heirs, who provided the Kimbell with incontrovertible proof

More on KIMBELL, 4E



Kimbell historian and curator Nancy Edwards and author Robert Edsel unraveled the history of a Renaissance bust, believed to be of art patron Isabelle d'Este, that the museum purchased in 2004. Star-Telegram.com/E. Edsel

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ART HISTORY

So who is this mysterious 'Isabella'?

Prior to 1910, when she appears in the inventory of an art dealer in Florence, nothing is known about the terra cotta bust — not whose likeness she captures, who created her or when. She is known simply as *Bust of a Woman*.

The dealer, Luigi Grassi, labels her from the Lombard School, a northern Italian art style from the eighth to 16th centuries. She was bought from Grassi sometime over the next two decades by Dr. Otto Lanz, a Swiss surgeon who lived in Amsterdam, and the bust was in his collection by 1931.

For a few years, art historians thought she might be by Leonardo da Vinci, as there is a profile sketch by da Vinci of Isabella d'Este, the Marchioness of Mantua and avid art patron, in the Musée du Louvre in Paris that resembles the bust. But there is no record of da Vinci making a terra cotta of d'Este. That attribution was short-lived, but the resemblance to known artworks of Isabella kept that portion of her identification alive.

There is a record from 1491 of d'Este commissioning Gian Cristoforo Romano, a multi-talented artist, courtier, singer, poet and antiquarian, to create a marble portrait bust of her, although there is no record of that having been made. At best it is assumed that this is a terra cotta by Romano of d'Este from around 1500, and the only sure thing in that equation is the date — give or take about 100 years — as a thermoluminescence test performed in 1973 ascertained that the piece was made c. 1408-1538.

It is a Renaissance-era terra cotta. Where it came from before 1910 is still a cold trail, and the attributions to Romano aren't solid.

Isabella's journey

**1910-12:** The portrait bust of a woman shows up in the inventory of Florence art dealer Luigi Grassi.

**1931:** Dr. Otto Lanz (1865-1935), a Swiss surgeon living in Amsterdam, purchases the bust and it is in his collection by 1931.

**1941:** Lanz's widow, Anni Theresia Will Lanz, sells her husband's collection to Hans Posse, Adolf Hitler's middleman, for 2 million Swiss francs and 350,000 Dutch guilders, "a big price but not a great price," says Kimbell curator and historian Nancy Edwards. The bust is transferred to the Kremsminster, a collection spot where bought and stolen artworks are vetted for Hitler's planned Führer museum. The bust is deemed suitable and is sent to the Altausse salt mine in Austria (one of several mines used for storing artworks), where it joins more than 6,000 priceless objects, including works by da Vinci, Vermeer and Michelangelo.

**1945:** Allied forces find the mine in Austria and hastily move everything to Munich, where they begin the arduous task of identifying the works and returning them to their countries of origin.

**1946:** Isabella is repatriated to the Netherlands Art Property Foundation in Amsterdam.

**1953:** The foundation decides that the Lanz collection was sold willingly to Hitler, and therefore will not be returned to the family. The Lanz works are sold at auction. The bust is purchased for 35 guilders (then about \$10) by Lanz's daughter, Anna Gertrud Lanz Kijzer, who gives it to her brother Dr. Adrian Berchtold Lanz.

**1973:** Purchased by the Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection, Lugano, Switzerland, from Dr. Adrian Lanz through dealer Marco Grassi.

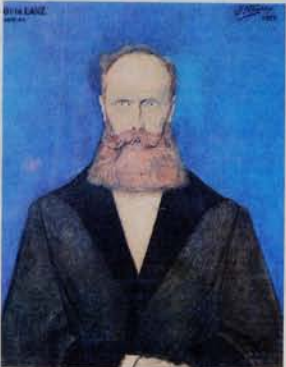
**2002:** Purchased by London art dealer Daniel Katz.

**2004:** Purchased by the Kimbell Art Foundation, for a reported \$7 million.

— Gale Robinson



The bust, believed to be of Isabella d'Este, was once thought to have been made by Leonardo da Vinci. Star-Telegram/Barry T. Ewin



Otto Lanz was a Swiss doctor who practiced in Amsterdam. Zedberg Foundation



A mine worker and a GI sit atop rubble in the Altausse salt mine in Austria after creating enough space to pass through the tunnels and retrieve the stored art. The cache of more than 6,000 priceless works included 'Isabella,' as well as works by Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo. Robert Proby Collection

Isabella's path to the Kimbell



- 1. Florence, Italy
- 2. Amsterdam, Netherlands
- 3. Lugano, Switzerland
- 4. Munich, Germany
- 5. Amsterdam, Netherlands
- 6. Lugano, Switzerland
- 7. London, England

Locations of the 'Isabella' bust before the Kimbell bought it and brought it to Fort Worth.



The panels of the Ghent Altarpiece, because of their size and weight, proved particularly challenging to move through the salt mine's narrow passageways. National Archives and Records Administration

Kimbell

Continued from 1E

that the painting had been seized in 1943 by the pro-Nazi Vichy regime in France. The Kimbell returned the painting, and when the heirs put it up for auction the following year, the Kimbell repurchased it for \$5.7 million and put it back on the gallery wall. It was a pricey correction, but it brought them untold amounts of good will.

"It was the right thing to do," Lee says.

Neither was this Edsel's first time delivering dreaded news to a local institution. In 2006, he found photographic proof that the portraits of *Saint Justa* and *Saint Rufina* (valued at more than \$10 million) by Bartolomé Esteban Murillo in the permanent collection at the Meadows Museum in Dallas had been confiscated from the Rothschild family by the Nazis. The Meadows was slow to respond to the information, Edsel says, but it now has acknowledged its ongoing attempts to reconcile the two paintings' provenance on its website, stating: "In collaboration with consultants in London and Paris, SMU and the Meadows Museum are confident that we will find the last piece of the puzzle with regard to the provenance of these paintings."

Restitution cases have become more commonplace in the past two decades as permanent collections go online and heirs of wartime owners scramble to stake their claims. So many cases have surfaced that 10 years ago, the American Association of Museums established guidelines that state: "If a museum determines that an object in its collection was unlawfully appropriated during the Nazi era without subsequent restitution, the museum should seek to resolve the matter with the claimant in an equitable, appropriate and mutually agreeable manner."

"Many tools have been developed to help museums with these works," Lee says. "It's all about an issue of transparency." When the Turner went back on the Kimbell's walls, the gallery label included the story of the return and repurchase.

From mine to museum

When, under the direction of Timothy Potts, the Kimbell bought the bust, believed to be of Isabella d'Este, an Italian noblewoman, from a London art dealer in 2004, it was believed that she had been in the holdings of the Lanz family in Amsterdam for the duration of the war. The provenance, provided with the sale showed that it was bought by Dr. Otto Lanz between 1910 and 1931 and sold by Otto's son and heir, Dr. Adrian Berchtold Lanz, to the Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection in 1973. How could she have ended up with the Nazis?

Edsel knew he couldn't arrive on the Kimbell's doorstep with only "the photo to cause a heart-palpitating moment," he says.

There were two things he needed to find: the property index cards created by the Monuments Men that showed that (1) this "Isabella" was the Lanz "Isabella" found in the salt mine, and (2) that she had been restituted to the Netherlands.

When the Monuments Men discovered the cache of more than 6,000 artworks in the Altausse salt mine in 1945, they had to remove them quickly. The world map was being redrawn by the Allied victors and Austria might end up on the Soviet side of the spoils.

"Depending on where the lines were drawn, the area might end up as Austrian-controlled, and therefore, Soviet-controlled, and if it is in Soviet hands, who knew what would happen to it. So there was urgency," Edsel says.

The Monuments Men packed up the priceless artworks as best they could, using the same materials the Nazis had used to protect them: table linens, draperies and winter coats. The *Bruges Madonna* by Michelangelo was carted out wrapped in what looks like chaise longue cushions and lace draperies. The *Ghent Altarpiece*, one of the most famous altarpieces in the world, was found disassembled and stacked on milk crates. Paintings had been ripped from their frames to save space and were stacked by the dozens on crude shelves.

The journey out of the narrow mine shaft was perilous, as was the truck

ride to Munich, where the artworks were taken to the former Nazi party headquarters, as it was one of the largest buildings left standing after the war. Here, the Monuments Men sorted the artworks into piles by country and began their cataloging.

They used reference books to find what they could and recorded the information on library index cards, Edsel says. The Monuments Men would send the pieces back to the country from which the Nazis had taken them, and it was the country of origin's responsibility to get them back to the rightful owners.

The index cards would show when a piece arrived in Munich and anything that was known about the artwork — such as the title or the name of the artist — and whether it had been bought or stolen from an individual, church or museum. Then there would be a second card, a release card showing that it was received by the country of origin.

Edsel was looking for those two cards. He found them online in the archives of the Deutsches Historisches Museum (German Historical Museum).

"Isabella" had arrived in Munich on June 28, 1945, in shipment No. 1447 from Altausse. The information on her card indicated that she was a northern Italian sculpture of Isabella d'Este, possibly attributed to Leonardo da Vinci. She had belonged to the Lanz family of Holland but had been purchased by Hans Posse for Adolf Hitler for 25,000 Reich marks. Some of this information came from Nazi notebooks. It helped tremendously that the Germans were meticulous record-keepers.

Some items were confiscated, others bought legitimately, and still others were forced sales. It would be left to the government of the Netherlands to determine how Hitler came to own "Isabella."

She was packed up in Munich on June 3, 1946, and sent back to the Netherlands.

With these two cards as evidence of the return of "Isabella," Edsel was fairly confident that the Kimbell would be able to piece together the history of what happened after the bust returned to Holland.

He took his findings and the photograph to Lee.

"While his heart probably wasn't racing, I'm sure his blood pressure was elevated. But I said I was 99 percent sure he didn't have a problem," Edsel says.

"There was concern and apprehension, as there may still be problems here," admits Lee. He deployed Nancy Edwards, the museum's curator of European art and head of academic services, to research what had happened during and shortly after the war years.

The Monuments Men constructed a pulley to lift Michelangelo's *Bruges Madonna* out of the salt mine and onto a cart. They had to pack this work and others the same way the Nazis had, in cushions, draperies and the like. National Gallery

The sales history Edwards had been collecting information on Otto More on ART. SE



A soldier and an Austrian miner inspect Dutch painter Jan Vermeer's *The Artist's Studio*. Hitler planned to display the works in a future museum in his hometown after the war.

National Archives and Records Administration

## Art

Continued from 4E

Lanz since the Kimbell purchased the bust in 2004, and knew much of that portion of the sculpture's history.

Dr. Lanz was from Switzerland but had moved his surgical practice to Amsterdam, and as his business flourished, he began collecting Italian Renaissance art. He was one of the few art collectors in Holland at the time who did so, eventually filling his home with more than 400 pieces. He loaned many objects to the Rijksmuseum for exhibitions, and in a very important 1934 show of Italian art at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, where 234 objects from the Lanz collection were displayed, the bust was not included. It was probably around this time that the da Vinci attribution was in serious doubt, and "Isabella" was deemed too iffy to be included.

Edwards' research took her to Amsterdam and the Rijksmuseum, and with the assistance of curator Duncan Bull, she found that after Lanz's death in 1935, his widow and children tried to sell his collection. They hoped to sell it as a whole, but there was little interest. As tensions in Europe mounted, many of the Lanz works were sent to the Rijksmuseum for safekeeping.

In 1941, the family was approached by Hans Posse, the former director of Dresden Gallery and Hitler's handpicked director of his future Führer museum (Gemaldegalerie Linz). Posse was shopping for works to put in the museum that Hitler planned to build in his hometown of Linz after the war. In April 1941, Posse bought the Lanz collection and paid the family 2 million Swiss

francs and 350,000 Dutch guilders — "a big price but not a great price," Edwards says.

The collection was sent to Kremsmünster, where pieces were vetted. "Isabella" was deemed significant and sent to Altaussee, where it was found four years later by the Monuments Men.

When the collection was returned to the Netherlands after the war, the country found the Lanz-Posse sales record and decided that it had been a legitimate — not forced — sale, and that the works would not be returned to the Lanz family. The collection would be sold at auction.

The auction took place in March 1951. The Rijksmuseum has a copy of the sale catalog in its archives. Among the scores of Lanz pieces headed for the block was the bust. It was bought by Anna Gertrud Lanz Kijzer, Otto's daughter, for 35 guilders (then about \$10, Edwards says) and she gave it to her brother Dr. Adrian Berchtold Lanz, who had always liked it.

This filled the holes in "Isabella's" war history for Edwards and explained how the Lanz family had it both before and after the war. Because the work had belonged to Otto Lanz before the war and to his son after, the Kimbell had assumed that it had been in the family for the war's duration.

Adrian Lanz held on to the bust until 1973, when a thermoluminescence scan showed that it was indeed a work from around 1500.

"Since the bust was not on public display, it was not really known by scholars in the intervening years until it was again considered for sale," Edwards says.

Art dealer Marco Grassi — grandson of Florence art dealer Luigi Grassi, in whose inventory the work first appeared, in 1910 —

handled the 1973 sale. He told Edwards there had been a letter written by British expert John Pope-Hennessy in 1973 to a Dr. A.B. Lanz, attributing the work to Gian Cristoforo Romano, and expressing interest in purchasing the work for the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. But the bust was sold to the Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection, then located in Lugano, Switzerland.

Upon Baron Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza's death in 2002, the bust was sold to London art dealer Daniel Katz, who sold it two years later to the Kimbell Art Museum for what art experts suggest was about \$7 million.

### Rightful owners

It took Edwards almost two years to fill in gaps and uncertainties after Edsel found the photograph.

"As do most curators, I balance a number of responsibilities, and had this been a case of looted art, the wheels would have turned more quickly," Edwards said. "Last month I was able to get records documenting its transfer from Amsterdam to Kremsmünster, prior to its removal to the salt mines."

This was the last piece of the wartime history that Edwards needed.

"Nancy continued her research until every 'i' was dotted," Lee says.

But this is only the most recent past of "Isabella." Her first 400 years are still a mystery (see accompanying story). The bust is on display in the Kimbell's galleries with the permanent collection. Lee says the photograph of "Isabella" being transported out of the salt mine may be included on the label with the information that at one time she was intended for the Führer museum.

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