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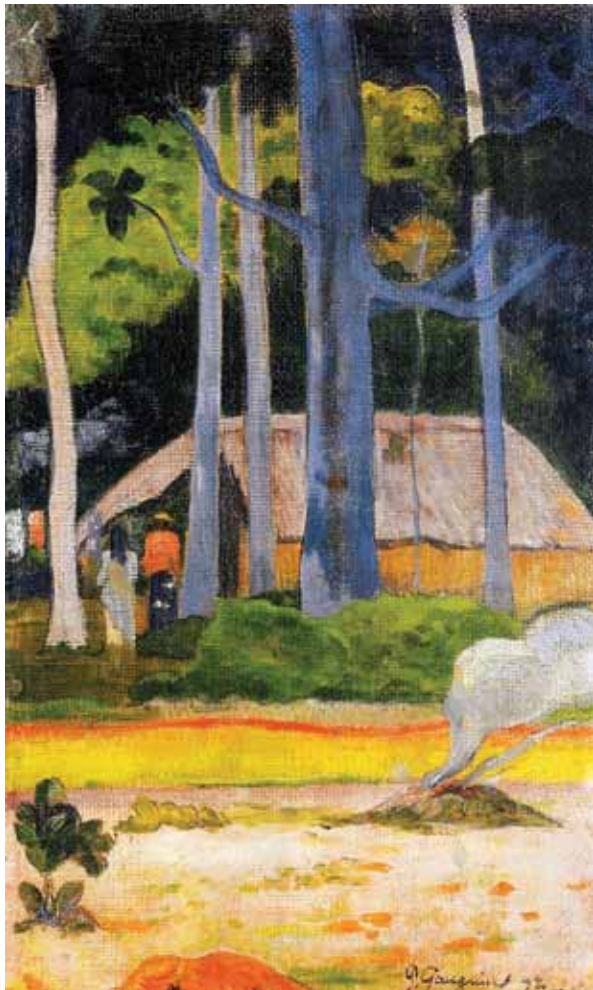
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Art on Ice



Sorry, Third Reich looters. The priceless **Albert Otten Collection** is the one that got away.

BY COLIN W. SARGENT



Dear Nazi war criminals and your very quiet descendants: While you were heartlessly confiscating priceless works of art across Germany, at least this stunning collection of paintings and sculptures escaped your grasp. Disappearing overnight in Cologne, Germany, in 1937, it vanished to a wisp in Switzerland, spent decades on ice in Canada, and when the coast was clear, resurfaced in Scarsdale, New York and Teaneck, New Jersey.

Where is this collection today, comparatively unknown and unshown since 1987, dancing with Kandinskys, Munchs, Gauguins, Klees, Dufys, Miros, and Signacs?

Last year, the world stepped into the darkness of movie theaters to watch Helen Mirren star in *Lady in Gold*, the real-life story of Maria Altmann and her quest to restore Gustav's Klimt's shimmering *Portrait of*

Adele Bloch-Bauer to her family. The movie throbbed with chase scenes, exotic settings in Vienna, and leering Nazis. The director's genius was to make the past sizzle to meet the present. But it has nothing on the Albert Otten collection, which lives among us now in Portland, Maine.

Many residents of our state recognize Les Otten as the man behind Sunday River, the man who saved Fenway Park in Boston, and the dreamer who is turning The Balsams into a blue-chip world resort. But this story begins a generation earlier, with his father, ironmonger and steel industrialist **Albert Otten**, who himself couldn't resist big dreams and objects of beauty.

Albert Otten was born Albert Ottenheimer to a German-Jewish family in 1886. Soon, his hometown of Bonfeld in southern Germany was too small to keep him down. He surfaced in Cologne as the head of Albert Ottenheimer ironmongery, where his keen sense of timing guided him to create branch plants and offices across Germany and

Treasures in the Otten Collection include, from top: *Fourth Position on Left Leg* by Edgar Degas; *The Eagles* by Carl-Gustav Carus; *Cabin Under the Trees, Tahiti*, by Paul Gauguin; and *Wild Goose* by Francois Pompon.



FROM TOP: EDGAR DEGAS, "FOURTH POSITION ON LEFT LEG"; CARL GUSTAV CARUS, "THE EAGLES"; PAUL GAUGUIN, "CABIN UNDER THE TREES"; FRANCIS POMPON, "WILD GOOSE"



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DISCOVERIES

Holland after World War I. His fame and fortune grew to the point where he was making significant charitable donations in 1929 to the poor of his home town. His love for art—traditional at first—was kindled around this time, and soon he was a member of the Cologne Museum Association, according to a translation of his Wikipedia entry under his original last name, Ottenheimer. Not that you can be a bigshot in steel without irony: “Until 1937 he was also the major shareholder in the iron and steel works AG (EHW) in Thale am Harz, a company that since 1934 had a monopoly in the production of steel helmets for the German Wehrmacht.” As the horror of Hitler’s agenda rose in the 1930s, Albert “was forced to sell [his share of his many business interests] under pressure from government agencies, the proceeds of which were [then seized by the German Reich], with the Reich Flight Tax charged.” As the Holocaust closed in on him in a myriad of forms, there was no time for art collecting as he faced life-and-death danger and with crystal-ball prescience dis-

BELOW: WASSILY KANDINSKY (RUSSIA, 1866-1944). STRAMM (STRONG), 1929. OIL ON BOARD, 26 X 15.5 INCHES. PORTLAND MUSEUM OF ART, MAINE. LENT BY LESLIE B. OTTEN, '10.2002.Z.1. IMAGE COURTESY OF PILLAR DIGITAL IMAGING.





Clockwise from above: *Early Morning* by Max Pechstein; *Head of Auguste Renoir* by Aristide Maillol; *Street In Kragero* by Edvard Munch; and *Stramm (Strong)* by Wassily Kandinsky.

appeared from Germany in 1937, the year before Krystallnacht.

ALL OR NOTHING AT ALL

Gambling everything, he fled to Switzerland and shipped his growing art collection to Canada, a stunning act of forethought.

Here's where the movie of his life would follow lavishly across a landscape of fright in which he is threatened and pursued through harrowing border crossings and safehouses: "Ottenheimer emigrated via Switzerland, from where he dissolved his last German assets, and Canada into the United States. There he worked as an entrepreneur in the iron and steel trade until the 1950s with the Albot Industries in New Jersey."

THAWING OUT

The family home was in Scarsdale, New York.

For years and years, the Impressionist paintings and sculptures were on ice in Canada, kept in hiding in storage, waiting until the world was safe. Finally, when Albert Ottenheimer had built up a fortune a *second* time, they were uncovered, shipped to New York, and then, as the family grew to love our state, to Maine.

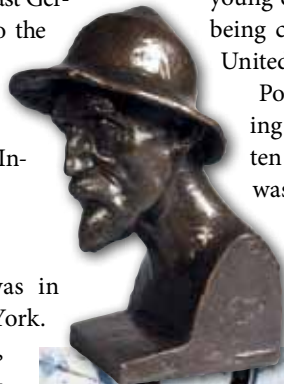
"I inherited, and was able to add to, my father's Impressionist art collection," Les Otten says. "My dad was

born in 1886. He was 63 when I was born. He immigrated from Germany, lost his fortune, but he was able to save his art; the Nazis cared very little for art early on. He shipped his collection to Canada early on. The Degas *Dancer* statue was bought in the 1960s by my father. I was able to add to it as well. That collection is on loan to Portland Museum of Art, but it is only semipermanent."

Among priceless objects thirsty for an audience is *Street in Kragero*, by Edvard Munch. "One recurring motif in many of his compositions, the stark and divisive tree in the left corner, serves to pull the composition forward. This is in direct conflict with the exaggerated perspective of the road leading to the houses. In turn, the faceless group of figures in the lower right recall many of Munch's works and, through association with these, one can almost hear a muffled scream," writes William H. Gerdtz in the catalog of the 1987 PMA show, the last time these objects came to light.

Did Les ever dream of becoming an artist himself? "I certainly have a passion for it, but as a profession it's skipped me to a new generation. I'm proud to say my son owns an art gallery in Palm Desert. He still lists me as consiglieri. His gallery features young emerging American artists who are being collected by many museums in the United States."

Portland Museum of Art's not having a major show of the Albert Otten collection while *The Lady in Gold* was lighting up the movie screens just deepens the mystery. "We do expect several pieces to be on display in 2016," says Erin Damon, Assistant Registrar at the Museum. ■



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