



NATIONAL CENTER FOR JEWISH FILM

Lili Gutmann from 'Making a Killing.'

A stolen art world

Film explores WWII art thieves

By Daniel M. Kimmel

"Making a Killing" is a 1998 British documentary about Nazi art thieves and, more particularly, a case involving one such theft affecting the survivors of the Gutmann family of Holland. They

Movie Maven

were't Jewish – except under the Reich's classification, in which a parent who had converted to Christianity was imprisoned and murdered as a Jew – and since they were wealthy with an exquisite art collection, they came to the personal attention of the art thieves in the German high command.

The film focuses on a landscape by Degas. It disappeared during the war but turned up in a private American collection in the 1990s and became the object of a lawsuit. Filmmaker Anne Webber shows us that the crimes didn't end with the war. Art dealers, auction houses, museums and private collectors all suffered convenient amnesia and did little or nothing to restore the art to its rightful owners.

In the course of the story, it's explained that an Impressionist painting like the Degas was of little interest to the Nazis, who called it "degenerate art." They preferred the "Old Masters." However, they were not so ignorant that they didn't realize that such paintings were of great financial worth. They could be sold – or traded – in order to acquire the works they held in high regard.

Those who know something of the art world will be familiar with the concept of "provenance," the history of an artwork's ownership. In the case of the Degas painting, one of the owners listed was one of the chief art "collectors" for the Germans. It was as much as saying,

"This was stolen!" Yet, on camera, we see a dealer claim not only no knowledge of the name, but also, in calling around to other dealers, that no one else knew it either. Such willful ignorance seems to be part of the problem.

Another issue is that the survivors often lack the financial means to pursue the international searches and legal maneuvers it takes to prevail in such disputes and can end up spending more than the work itself is worth on the open market. The callousness in the art world is demonstrated when the fact that one owner allowed the Degas to appear at some New England art exhibits is taken as a sign that the survivors in Europe should have known the painting had turned up. One person wonders how many generations will be permitted to reclaim works stolen by the Nazis, as if the most important value is not interfering with future sales.

The film ends abruptly, before the case is resolved. You have to read the postscript following the closing credits to learn the fate of the Degas. Meanwhile, other looted works continue to be exhibited and sold around the world.

(Daniel M. Kimmel, a Boston-based film critic and author, reviews Jewish films for the Advocate. He lectures widely on a variety of film-related topics and can be reached at daniel.kimmel@rcn.com.)

"Making a Killing" is available through the National Center for Jewish Film for \$36. Public performance rights separately available. Call (781) 736-8600 or go to www.jewishfilm.org.