

In search of artworks stolen from Belgium by the Nazis

Art for the Reich

GEERT SELS

During the Second World War an immense art heist took place. The Nazis took artworks from all of their occupied territories to Germany, in order to set up their own sizeable collections. When it comes to Belgium, that story is only just beginning to be told. How could paintings by Memling, Van der Weyden, Brueghel, Jordaens, and Cranach simply leave the country? The Nazis stripped homes, stole artworks, forced owners to sell their paintings, and spent millions of Reichsmarks on the art market.

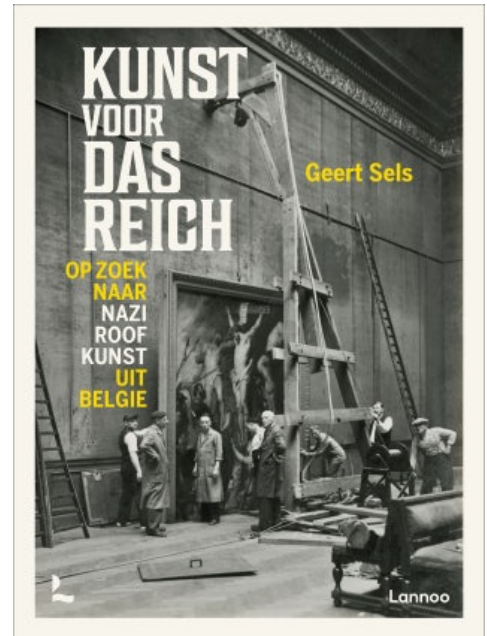
After eight years of research, Geert Sels has put together the puzzle pieces that he found in archives in Paris, The Hague, Koblenz, and the major Belgian cities. Through persistent detective work, he has discovered how the art was taken. He concludes that collectors, dealers, and auction houses showed little restraint in going along with the Nazis' plan to acquire the art.

A wonderful example of art history research of the highest order.

KUNSTTIJDSCHRIFT VLAANDEREN

After the war, paintings from Belgium made their way to the Louvre, Tate Britain, the Getty Museum, and the Yale Art Gallery. The Netherlands, France, Germany, and even Russia have, to this day, artworks that should have been returned to Belgium. This makes a Belgian story into an international one. Some works did come back and now hang in Belgian museums, their rightful owners, however, were never traced.

Why were they never contacted? In contrast to other countries, Belgium remained embarrassingly passive when it came to the Nazis' art heist. 'Art for the Reich' tells the uncomfortable truth and tests the limits of government policy. Forgotten records are laid bare and the dark side of the paintings in our museums is revealed.



AUTHOR



Geert Sels (b. 1965) is a Belgian journalist and writer, and an expert on Germany and the theatre. He has worked for various media in Flanders and is currently a journalist specializing in culture for the daily De Standaard. Sels writes mainly about theatre, architecture, cultural policy, art forgery and looted art. He is also a researcher for the Study and Documentation Centre for War and Contemporary Society (CegeSoma). In 2014 his series of articles about Nazi art won him the Flemish-Dutch prize for investigative journalism De Loep.

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