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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

**VMFA TRUSTEES VOTE TO RETURN FRENCH PAINTING
BELIEVED TO HAVE BEEN STOLEN BY NAZIS IN 1944**

**“Portrait of Jean d’Albon” to Be Released
To Heirs of Austrian Collector Julius Priester**

The board of trustees of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts has voted to deaccession a 16th-century French painting, “Portrait of Jean d’Albon,” and return it to the heirs of the late Austrian collector Julius Priester, from whom it is believed to have been stolen by the Gestapo in 1944.



“Portrait of Jean d’Albon,” 16th century;
Corneille de Lyon (Manner of), Dutch, ca.
1500/10-1575; oil on wood panel. (Photo by
Katherine Wetzel, © 2004 Virginia Museum
of Fine Arts)

“Newly provided information has enabled the museum’s staff to identify the painting as the one Priester owned,” says Kathleen Morris, associate director, exhibitions and collections management, at VMFA.

The painting, one of eight known versions, is credited to artist Corneille de Lyon (Manner of), who lived from circa 1500 to 1575. It is an oil painting on wood panel and measures 6⁵/₈ by 5³/₄ inches. It entered the VMFA collection in 1950 as an anonymous gift. Following the death of the donor, the painting was credited publicly as “Gift of Mrs. A. D. Williams.”

Mrs. Williams purchased the portrait from Newhouse Galleries in New York in 1950. The gallery acquired it from Frederick Mont, a dealer alleged to have had ties to other paintings confiscated during the Nazi regime during World War II and who is also alleged to have had ties to other paintings that traded hands in Vienna during and after the war, according to Morris.

“We have conducted detailed and careful research, and we have concluded that

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evidence convincingly points to the identification of our painting with the Priester painting,” says Dr. Michael Brand, VMFA’s director.

“The issue is complicated by the existence of seven other known versions of the same portrait. Until a few months ago, we were not aware that one of the versions had been confiscated by Nazis, nor did we have the evidence that links our painting to Priester. After receiving and studying the documents related to the Priester painting, we are convinced that our painting and the Priester painting are one and the same.

“Our board has concluded that deaccessioning it and returning it to its rightful owners is simply the correct thing to do,” he says.

The portrait was most recently on view at the museum in 1985. It has never been lent to another institution, but it was published in a 1966 catalog of the museum’s collection and in later publications.

Corneille was born in the Netherlands but was active mainly at Lyon in France in the 16th century. In 1541 he became court painter to the Dauphin, later Henry II. Contemporary references indicate that he had a considerable reputation as a portrait painter and that his style was widely imitated.

The subject of the portrait, Jean D’Albon, held a number of political offices in France and, in 1539, he became the governor of Lyon. He became a knight of the order of Saint Michael in 1530. In the Corneille de Lyon (Manner of) portrait, he is wearing the insignia of the order of Saint Michael suspended by a gold chain.

The request for restitution of the painting came from Kurt H. Schindler of Hampshire, England, who first contacted the museum on Feb. 17. Schindler is sole executor, heir and beneficiary of the estate of Priester.

Schindler’s claim is being handled by the New York State Banking Department’s Holocaust Claims Processing Office (HCPO), which, since 1997, has represented claimants seeking restitution of Holocaust-era assets, including art. In such cases, through legal and research expertise offered at no cost to claimants, HCPO attempts to explore all means of restitution other than litigation. Working primarily with Monica Dugot, deputy director of HCPO, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts staff members regard the experience with Dugot and HCPO as one of mutual cooperation and respect, Morris says.

Priester, who was Jewish, lived in Vienna until 1938 when he emigrated to Mexico in the face of increasing Nazi aggression against Jews. His art collection was secured and stored

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in Vienna until it was seized by the Gestapo in 1944.

In 1954, a reproduction of the stolen portrait was published in a Vienna police report along with reproductions of other paintings from the Priester collection that had been stolen in 1944. “The Viennese police report did not find its way to VMFA, which at that point had owned the painting for four years,” Morris says. “The museum first learned of the 1954 police report from Schindler.”

In telephone calls and letters to VMFA, Schindler expressed his belief, based on his own research, that the museum’s version of “Portrait of Jean d’Albon” is the one that was taken by the Gestapo. He based his belief, in part, on the portrait’s connection to Newhouse Galleries, which was known to have worked closely with Mont, the dealer who had offered the painting to Newhouse Galleries. Mont immigrated to the United States in the 1930s, but had operated previously in Vienna, where he was known as Frederick Mondschein.

Mont has been linked to Bernhard Witke, a Gestapo officer and appraiser who was arrested following the war for high treason and sentenced to three and a half years in prison, according to evidence compiled by Karen Daly, VMFA’s assistant registrar and Nazi-era provenance administrator.

Working closely with Schindler, Dugot and an attorney from the Virginia Attorney General’s Office, Morris says “all evidence points to the identification of the VMFA painting with the Priester painting.” Among arguments for that identification, she says, are these:

- It is certain that Priester owned a version of the painting.
- The VMFA version is the only one of the known versions with a significant provenance gap during the Nazi era (the gap extends from 1902 to 1949).
- The VMFA version corresponds exactly to a photograph supplied by Schindler.
- The VMFA version was purchased in 1950 from Newhouse Galleries, which acquired it from Mont, who is now alleged to have been involved in another transaction related to a painting from the Priester collection.
- There is no other known version that could be argued to be the Priester painting.

“The museum’s board has moved as expeditiously as possible on this matter because of the age of the claimant, the highly sensitive nature of Nazi-era restitution issues, the

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strength of the evidence compiled to date, and our responsibility to act prudently,” Brand says.

“We plan to return the painting to Schindler as quickly as possible. We are glad to be able to restore one item from the Priester collection to its rightful owner. The fact that it has taken 60 years to determine the location of this painting is an indication of how complex and frustrating the search can be.”

VMFA plans to display the painting publicly for two weeks beginning Wednesday, May 26, while it undertakes final preparations for returning the painting to Schindler.

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