

THE CANVAS

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A Conversation with Marianne Rosenberg

Marianne Rosenberg is part of a bona fide art world dynasty. The Rosenberg family has a long and storied history dating back to 1878, when Marianne's great-grandfather, Paris antiques dealer, Alexandre Rosenberg, began selling impressionist works by Cézanne, Manet, Van Gogh, and others. His sons continued in the industry, each becoming art dealers in Paris. In 1946, Marianne's father joined the family business.

During World War II, the Nazis stole hundreds of important works by world-renowned artists from Rosenberg galleries. As a result, the Rosenberg family has been at the forefront of the global fight to track down Nazi-looted works of art so they can be returned to their rightful owners. To date, they have successfully recovered several hundred pieces, but are currently embroiled in a battle with a German collector to retrieve Edgar Degas' 'Portrait of Mlle. Gabrielle Diot'.

Marianne always assumed she'd be in the art world, but after pushback from her father, she pursued a career in International Finance Law. Delayed, but undeterred, she finally realized her dream of following in her family's footsteps when she opened her own gallery space on the Upper East Side. Now, just three years later, the gallery is significantly expanding its space as it cements its footing in New York art world firmament.

Speaking via email on the eve of the gallery's opening for its newest show, the first U.S. solo exhibition of Ann Christopher, the youngest woman ever elected to the Royal Academy, we had a fascinating conversation discussing the the motivation for the gallery's expansion, how the role of dealers (and the nature of collectors) has changed over the years, and how her family determines when to offer a work from the collection at auction.

Interview begins ▼

The Canvas: Three and a half years ago, in March of 2015, you decided to open up a gallery space on New York's Upper East Side after a career in international finance law. Can you walk me through how and why you decided to open up the gallery?

Marianne Rosenberg: The opening of Rosenberg & Co. was the culmination of years of thought. I grew up with a grandfather and father who were art dealers, and I listened to discussions about art every day at every meal. Each summer, we traveled around from museum to museum, and met artists represented by my father's gallery. It never occurred to me that I would become anything other than an art dealer until, for reasons that remain obscure but probably have to do with the fact that I am a woman, my father said no. At the time, a woman art dealer was something difficult to envision. During my career, I had postponed opening the gallery for various unpersuasive reasons, but gradually two things happened. First, as collegiality within large corporate law firms diminished, the world of international finance law became less attractive, and second, my children were getting nearer to university. I took the opportunity to begin Rosenberg & Co. because ultimately, I always knew this was what I was going to do.

The Canvas: The market's very different from when your father and grandfather were dealers. How has it been entering the New York art market these past few years?

Marianne Rosenberg: The roles of the art dealer and, more importantly, the nature of clients and collectors, have changed dramatically over the years. There were, in fact, very few dealers when Paul Rosenberg started out, and my grandfather defined what an art dealer could – and should – be, both in his representation and promotion of artists, and in his advisory role with many museums and important collectors. The environment had already shifted when my father became a dealer, but there was certainly still an enormous connoisseurial role. This has changed now that contemporary art has taken over the market's attention, and dealers are needed who are both devoted to their artists and clients, and knowledgeable about art through all the eras and movements.

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The Canvas: You are opening up an expanded space, so the gallery has obviously been at least somewhat successful. At a time when many dealers, across all genres of art, are exploring digital and other alternatives for showcasing art in the face of declining foot traffic, why did you feel that now was the right time to expand in terms of the gallery's physical footprint?

Marianne Rosenberg: The decision to expand was partially serendipitous. An amazing space became available in the perfect location. It is also true, however, that prior to expansion we felt constrained in our desire to provide more important and complete solo exhibitions, and even mixed exhibitions of different time periods and media. So, while we, like most dealers, devote substantial time to fairs and online options, we still firmly believe that the physical space of an art gallery is critical to the art world.

Online options will never convey the emotion of being face to face with the vibrancy and the texture of a painting or sculpture. In our mind, a gallery should not just be a place to show beautiful art, but should also be a living, breathing thing where people come to learn and to linger, where there are symposia, discussions, and where one can meet artists, professionals, and collectors. The gallery is the central part of this work. It is also completely in line with, and a way of honoring, my grandfather's career and vision. The art fair is an instantaneous, ephemeral event, whereas the gallery has a longevity and continuous presence. It is a center for learning as well as commerce.

The Canvas: Over the years, the family has been able to reclaim all but approximately 60 artworks (out of nearly 400) that the Nazis stole from your grandfather. Even within the past few years, the family has been able to track down lost works and have them returned. For instance, in 2014, Matisse's 'Profil bleu devant la cheminée' was returned to the family. And in 2015, Matisse's 'Woman with a Fan' was also found and returned. A number of prominent secondary market dealers and auction house specialists and heads of departments read *The Canvas*. Can you walk me through the process of what happens after the family has a painting returned? Is there some sort of joint discussion about whether to offer it for sale? *What factors go into that decision-making process? And are there any works that might come up for auction in the near future?*

Marianne Rosenberg: My family still has approximately 67 artworks to recover from those looted by the Nazis. We do not know the location of any of these works, or even if all of them survived. It is possible that some of them were destroyed, willfully or not, in the course of the war. However, when a painting is finally returned to us – after what usually proves to be a very long and extraordinarily frustrating process – any decisions regarding the painting are reached through joint discussions among my sister, my first cousin, and me. At this point, we are not aware of any works that might come up for auction in the near future, although the Rosenberg family, our advisors, and the auction houses are always on the lookout for looted works that might surface.

The Canvas: At the end of October of this year, that big New York Times article was published about the family's efforts to win back the looted, 'Portrait of Mlle. Gabrielle Diot' by Degas. For readers who may not be informed about the intricacies of this particular case, do you mind giving a brief summary of the salient details and where things currently stand?

Marianne Rosenberg: The portrait of Mlle. Diot is an exquisite Degas pastel drawing of which my grandfather, Paul, was very fond. It was stolen by the Nazis, and no trace of it was found until the late 1980s, when a full-page ad appeared in *Apollo* magazine – which, on very glossy paper, showed a large image of Mlle. Diot. The ad gave information for the Gallerie Hans in Hamburg.

When the Rosenberg heirs contacted the gallery, they were met with fierce resistance and a refusal to reveal the name of the consignor or to acknowledge the claim. Shortly after that, the work was allegedly withdrawn from consignment and no further information was available. Mr. Hans, at that point, was entirely aware that he was handling a piece of looted art, yet he continued, through various channels, to try to sell the painting. We received no further news until Mr. Hans recently contacted the family again, informing us that the holder of Mlle. Diot wished to "sell" the painting back to us.

The Rosenberg family's position is that one cannot sell something one does not own. The current holders of the Degas drawing are attempting to sell, with full knowledge, a piece of stolen art, and the concept of asking the Rosenberg family to repurchase what we in fact own is anathema and offensive to us. We have refused to comply and have tried to engage the German government to assist us, and to determine the identity of the possessor. We have also stated our willingness to talk indirectly, through a representative, with the party in possession of the work, and after the spate of news articles on the case, the German government has told us that they recommend that Mr. Hans advise the holder to contact us through an intermediary. At this point, however, things have again come to a halt.

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The Canvas: Stuart E. Eizenstat, an advisor to the US State Department, released a report late last year that cast blame on five countries in particular – Hungary, Italy, Russia, Poland, and Spain – for failing to fulfill their commitments to restitution of Nazi-looted art. What did you make of his report and what do you think can be done, both within the fine art community and the general public, to apply pressure on those countries to live up to their commitments?

Marianne Rosenberg: My family's loss of artwork occurred in France, and we are well-versed in what happened there. About Nazi looting in countries other than France, though, Mr. Eizenstat is certainly more knowledgeable. He is likely correct in stating that much more could be done in the five countries that he named. But it is also true that much more could be done in other countries as well, such as France, Austria, and Germany.

As to what can be done in the fine arts community, and by art dealers in particular, there must be a willingness to accept the Washington Principles. The Washington Principles were drafted primarily to apply to museums and public institutions, but galleries should adhere to their tenets as well. It should be mandatory for all art dealers to conduct provenance research before showing or selling any artwork, particularly if provenance is questionable or there are gray areas – for example, in Austria and Germany starting in 1933, and in France starting in 1940. There are scholars who are remarkably adept at digging up and tracking down provenance information, and both German authorities and shippers often kept fastidious records of transactions. Given these resources, it is incumbent upon everyone to make that effort, and not simply expect that the heirs of stolen work will come forth.