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News Releases

FEBRUARY 23, 2011 TOLEDO, OH

Transfer ceremony marks return of antique porcelain to heirs of former German prime minister Investigation results in repatriation of the "Nereid Sweetmeat Stand" to Dresden State Art Collections

TOLEDO, Ohio - A valuable piece of porcelain will be returned to a German art collection following the successful conclusion of an investigation conducted by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) Homeland Security Investigations (HSI). The return was marked Feb. 23, 2011 in a ceremony at the Toledo Museum of Art. The centerpiece, manufactured in Meissen, Germany, from the famed Swan Service will be returned to the Dresden State Art Collection.

Before World War II, several pieces of this dinner service were on loan to what was then called the Museum of Applied Art in Dresden from the family of Count Heinrich von Bruehl, a former prime minister of Saxony.

During World War II, the Nereid Sweetmeat Stand was stolen. After a forensic investigation by ICE, the Nereid Sweetmeat Stand, which has been in the Toledo Museum of Art's collection since 1956, was determined to be the same piece taken from Dresden. Custody will transfer to the Dresden State Art Collections on behalf of the von Bruehl heirs, who have agreed to lend the work to the Dresden museum upon its return to Germany.

"Today's ceremony rights a decades-old wrong and reconnects this valuable artifact to its rightful cultural origin and history," said ICE Director John Morton. "This artifact represents an important part of the German national heritage and identity and we are grateful to be involved in its return."

"While we are certainly sad to see the Nereid leave us, we take pride in the fact that the Toledo Museum of Art upholds the highest standards of museum practice by fully cooperating with the investigation and then returning a beloved piece that has been definitively proven not to be ours," said Carol Bintz, chief operating officer of the Toledo Museum.

In 1737, Count Heinrich von Bruehl, the founding patron of the Meissen porcelain factory, ordered the factory's chief modeler to create a dinner service. The result, four years in the making, was the Swan Service - a dinner service for 100 comprising 2,200 pieces. The Nereid Sweetmeat Stand, part of the centerpiece arrangement, is considered one of the masterpieces of the collection.

The Swan Service remains one of the most celebrated achievements in European porcelain because of its unprecedented size and beauty. Only about 200 pieces survive, scattered in collections around the world. Of the four Nereids, the whereabouts of only two are currently known. One is a heavily damaged piece on display in a museum in Berlin. The Nereid that has been in the Toledo Museum of Art's collection, and prior to that in Dresden, is the only known complete Nereid, making it one of the most valuable pieces remaining of the Swan Service.

In August 1920, the Dresden Museum of Applied Art received 25 pieces of the Swan Service, including the stand, on permanent loan from the von Bruehl family. These pieces, along with others in the collection, were hidden at the Reichstaedt castle in Germany toward the end World War II. After the war, the boxes were found opened, with the Nereid stand and several other pieces missing.

In 1955, the stand was purchased by a New York firm from a European art dealer, and subsequently imported into the United States. The Toledo Museum of Art acquired the Nereid in good faith from a reputable New York dealer in 1956, and has had the Nereid on public display since that time.

In November 2010, the stand was determined to be the stolen Nereid Sweetmeat Stand after a forensic examination conducted by staff from the Toledo Museum of Art, the Dresden State Art Collection, the Cleveland Museum of Art, and special agents from ICE HSI. This determination followed months of diligent investigation by agents from HSI offices in Cleveland, New York and Frankfurt, as well as the cooperation of the Toledo Museum of Art and the Dresden State Art Collection.

The piece is scheduled to go on display in Dresden later this year.

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