

Dr. Léone Noëlle Meyer
39 quai d'Orsay
75007 PARIS
France

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An Open Letter to the People of Oklahoma

RE: « THE SHEPHERDESS » BY CAMILLE PISSARRO

This open letter is about the painting called "*Shepherdess Bringing In Sheep*" ("*Bergère rentrant des moutons*") (1886), an oil on canvas by Camille Pissarro, bequeathed by Clara Weitzenhoffer in 2000 to the University of Oklahoma.

With regard to the provenance of the painting, the documentation filed by my father, Raoul Meyer, with the French Government after the liberation of France establishes this provenance conclusively. Hence, there is no question as to whom this painting originates with.

The painting is currently on display at the University of Oklahoma's Museum, the Fred Jones Museum of Art, as the result of a 2000 bequest by Clara Weitzenhoffer. She had acquired the painting in 1956 from a New York gallery, which had not verified its history although, at that time, that might have been a wise thing to do.

The Raoul Meyer family is my family by adoption and I am its sole heiress.

Since the death of my adoptive parents, in June 1970 and January 1971 respectively, I have never given up hope that I would one day find all the paintings missing from their collection which had been plundered by the Nazis between 1940 and 1944 during the German occupation of France.

And yet, few details of those events were within my grasp. Nevertheless, I continued my own quest for the painting until 2012, when one of my sons and his wife uncovered on the Internet a concrete lead concerning the whereabouts of the painting.

That news overwhelmed me.

Please understand that my quest carries within it a tremendous emotional burden. My entire biological family was murdered at Auschwitz between 1942 (the Vel d'Hiv pogrom) and 1944: first, my mother in 1942, then the rest of my family in 1944, while I, somehow, miraculously, survived this slaughter.

Right after liberation, a Jewish relief organization took me in its care near Paris. Then, when I was seven years old, I was adopted by Yvonne and Raoul Meyer in December 1946.

During the Second World War, the Meyers lost not only paintings, but all of their belongings. They were forced to hide, first in the South of France, then somewhere in the center of France, but that did not prevent my father from providing the Resistance with information on German troop movements at great personal risk to himself.

After the war, the Meyers, my adoptive parents, recovered most of their assets including some of their paintings. But there were still a number of works that went missing. They rarely

spoke of them, out of concern for me because they knew that my entire family had been annihilated. There were moments, though, when I knew that they had not forgotten anything. And I knew as well that I should never forget anything.

I view this quest as a two-pronged duty to remember: a duty to my biological family and a duty to my adoptive family. Do not think for a moment that any of this is easy. It forces me to question my whole existence. I am not in the habit of forgetting my roots, nor the debt that I owe to those who raised me.

I find all of this very difficult. But I simply cannot surrender and say: "oh well..." That is out of the question.

Because this is also about a duty to seek justice.

The Jewish victims of those barbaric acts have every right to see justice done to their surviving murderers. That has been the mission of the Klarsfeld family at great cost to their own peace of mind.

The victims' heirs also have an obligation to find what was stolen from them. In this respect, there cannot be any statute of limitations.

I cannot conceive that the University of Oklahoma could aid and abet those crimes in any form. The family that donated the paintings, including "*The Shepherdess*", did so without realizing the dubious history of some of them. Had they known, there is no doubt in my mind that they would have restituted our painting to us out of a deep sense of justice and dignity. I was told that a member of the family declared that there was nothing in this bequest that would preclude restitution of the painting.

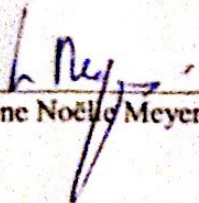
I am full of admiration for America and am deeply grateful for the sacrifices made by Americans in helping to restore freedom to Europe.

Today, I simply ask that you do the right thing. This has nothing to do with money. It is about justice and a duty to remember.

Restitution is a posthumous victory for the victims over barbaric behavior. And please remember that those events occurred barely 70 years ago.

I understand that this letter is an English translation of my words expressed in French.

Sincerely,


Dr. Léone Noëlle Meyer