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GRAND RAPIDS ART MUSEUM REPATRIATES SAINT EUSTACE PANELS
STOLEN FROM A CHURCH IN ABRUZZO, ITALY IN 1902

The Two Late 14th Century Panel Paintings will be on Public View at the Art Museum during April before Return to the National Museum of Abruzzo

GRAND RAPIDS, Mich., April 4, 2008 – The Grand Rapids Art Museum announced today that the Museum is returning two Italian panel paintings stolen from the Church of Saint Eustace in Campo di Giove, Abruzzo, Italy in 1902. The museum acquired the panels in 1947 without knowledge they had been stolen.

The two panels formed part of a sixteen-panel altarpiece that enclosed an effigy of the saint. They were painted by the Abruzzese Master of Castelvecchio Subequo, who was active in the region in the late 14th century. The panels composed a visual sixteen-part narrative of the life of Saint Eustace, a Roman general named Placidus, who converted to Christianity when he saw the apparition of Christ in the horns of a stag while he was hunting. Placidus died a Christian martyr by order of the Emperor Hadrian (76–138 AD).

Campo di Giove declared St. Eustace their patron saint because popular legend accounted that his apparition of the miraculous stag occurred in the mountains of Abruzzo and neighboring region of Lazio. Pope Clement III dedicated the church at Campo di Giove to Saint Eustace on April 7, 1188. The museum's panels, painted in tempera and each measuring 25 x 13 ³/₄ inches, depict the *Conversion of Saint Eustace* and the *Flight of Saint Eustace from a Plague Ridden City*.

In 1902, the altarpiece was stolen from the Church. A letter, dated December 18, 1902, in the State Central Archive in Rome from the Department of the Interior Police to the Department of Education related information about the theft. The altarpiece remained missing without a trace until the mid-1920s when two of the sixteen panels appeared in the Parisian art market.

The Grand Rapids Art Museum acquired their Saint Eustace panels from E.A. Silberman Galleries in New York in 1947. They were from the collection of Austrian Count Vetter Vander Lilie, who had immigrated to the United States before World War II. No cash payment was made in the transaction. The museum traded a tiny painting by Renoir measuring 1 ½ x 6 inches, titled *Tragic Jocasta*, for the Italian panels. The following year, in 1948, the panels were cleaned, and in 1955 the panels were treated at the Oberlin Conservation Laboratory for lifted areas of paint due to aging of the wood panels.

In 1978, New York University published a definitive study of the Saint Eustace altarpiece authored by University of Michigan Professor Marvin Eisenberg, a renowned scholar of Italian Renaissance painting. Eisenberg's article confirmed the original theft of the altarpiece and partially reconstructed the missing panels. His article established a scholarly assessment of the panels and their original provenance.

As the Art Museum prepared to move into its new building, Director Celeste Adams received an email inquiry about the panels from a graduate student in Italy. Luca Nicoletti was working with his professor on reconstruction of the Saint Eustace altarpiece and wanted pictures of the two panels. Adams comments, "This inquiry led us to several senior art scholars in Abruzzo, including Cristiana Pasqualetti from the University of Aquila, and to Anna Imponente, Superintendent of Culture. After several exchanges, we established the museum's willingness to return the panels as cultural patrimony in response to a request by the Italian government."

On the basis of the evidence of the theft recorded in the Regional and State Archives in Rome and the Italian request for their return, the Art Museum Board of Trustees voted to repatriate the panels. The legal department of the Metropolitan Museum of Art worked with the Art Museum's attorneys on the repatriation procedure.

Board President Michael Ellis stated, "Now that we have opened a new museum facility, matters related to the collection of art are becoming primary. This repatriation is not only the correct legal action, but it is also the right thing to do."

Professor Eisenberg, who retired seventeen years ago, was gratified by the news of repatriation. He stated, "I am aware of the work being done on this altarpiece in Italy and I am so pleased that the panels will be returned. I congratulate the Grand Rapids Art Museum on their noble action, which should be a model for many other museums."

Adams concluded, "Repatriation of documented stolen works is an enormously important issue for museums today. We cared for these works of art as good museum stewards for sixty years, and they can now become an important cultural asset for their home region. As a former University of Michigan student of Marvin Eisenberg, I am pleased to be the person handling the return of the panels."

Laurence Kanter, a leading scholar of Italian Renaissance Art in America, is the Lionel Goldfrank III Curator of Early European Art at Yale University and former Curator of the Robert Lehman Collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He commented on the repatriation, "The action of the Grand Rapids Art Museum is commendable. These panels will have far greater meaning and importance in the context of their home region than they would in any international museum setting. The Italian scholars dedicated to this worthy project can now take a significant step toward realizing their goal."

In Grand Rapids, former Ambassador to Italy Peter Secchia and his wife Joan support the museum for its repatriation. They stated, "We have a special love for Italy. We respect the Art Museum for restoring a work of art that is so important to the cultural heritage of Abruzzo."

Charlie Secchia has followed the Grand Rapids Art Museum dialogue with the cultural ministry while living in Italy. He stated, "My wife Natasha and I are pleased Grand Rapids will honor the repatriation process, which is such an important cultural issue world wide."

The Saint Eustace panels will be on view at the Grand Rapids Art Museum from April 8 through May 4 before their return to Italy to *Il Museo Nazionale d'Abruzzo* (The National Museum of Abruzzo).

About the Grand Rapids Art Museum

The mission of the Grand Rapids Art Museum (GRAM) is to provide a gathering place where people of all ages and backgrounds can enrich their lives through interaction with works of art in a thought-provoking and creative way. Established in the heart of downtown Grand Rapids, the new art museum is internationally known for its distinguished design and LEED Gold certified status.

Established in 1910 as the Grand Rapids Art Association, the Art Museum has grown to include more than 5,000 works of art, including American and European 19th and 20th century painting and sculpture and more than 3,000 works on paper. Embracing the city's legacy as a leading center of design and manufacturing, GRAM has a growing collection in the area of design and modern craft.

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