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Do Museums Love Themselves More Than They Love Art?

Edward Goldman · Wednesday, August 31st, 2011

One of the most despicable things that can happen to a great work of art — beyond destruction caused by some terrible calamity — is to be willfully cut in pieces for the greedy purpose of making more money through multiple sales. An example of such a disgraceful, greedy action happened to the remarkable group portrait by Frans Hals, famous 17th century Dutch painter. Two-hundred years ago this painting was cut in two pieces: the smaller one eventually ended up at the Royal Museum in Brussels, while the larger one, owned by a private European collector, was recently sold to an as yet unidentified US museum.

There is good chance that these two divided parts will be reunited for temporary display either in the Belgian or American museum. In a similar situation a few years ago, the Getty Museum temporarily unified a great painting by Vittore Carpaccio, famous 15th century Venetian artist. The Getty owns only half of this painting; the other one belongs to a museum in Venice. It was a sheer delight to see this masterpiece the way the artist meant it to be. And it was simply painful to know that, after only a couple of months on view, the painting would be once again torn apart.

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