

May 21, 2019

The National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo

The Return of a Donated Artwork Discovered to Be Stolen Property

The NMWA received a single donation of approximately 150 Western illuminated manuscript pages in fiscal 2015. Scientific studies of the works have advanced since their donation thanks to the cooperation of Japanese and overseas scholars. During the course of these investigations one work was identified as an item that had been stolen from its Italian owner. This information led the NMWA to return the artwork to a representative of the Italian Carabinieri at the Embassy of Italy in Japan on April 26, 2019.

The artwork was a leaf cut from the breviary of Ludovico da Romagnano, a bishop of Turin in the 15th century. Until 1990, this leaf was in the Archivio Arcivescovile di Torino. According to media reports, the theft was discovered in August 1990 and the thief captured. The thief and his wife had entered the archives in the guise of volunteers, cut a total of 32 leaves from manuscripts in the collection and then sold them in Italy and other countries.

After the theft, this work appeared in a June 1993 auction in London. A venerable antiquarian bookseller in London was the successful bidder at that auction and eventually the work ended up in the hands of the owner who donated it to the NMWA.

Upon the receipt of the donation of manuscript pages that included this work, a Japanese university professor who specializes in medieval manuscripts was named an NMWA guest researcher in order to carry out the scholarly investigation of the donated works. The professor noted that the work in question might have been in fact stolen from Turin, and asked Associate Professor Pier Luigi Mulas of the Università di Pavia to investigate further. Mulas' research determined that this work is the 455th folio of the breviary of Ludovico, based on codicological studies examination and the textual context within the breviary.

Mulas reported the results of his investigation to the NMWA, the Archivio Arcivescovile di Torino and the Italian Carabinieri. This led the Carabinieri to initiate their own investigation.

Upon confirmation of these facts the NMWA took steps to return this artwork to its rightful owner, and has now successfully handed the work over to the Carabinieri representative at the Italian Embassy in Tokyo.