CLASSIFIED: DECLASSIFIED / CASE FILE 1939-1946

The Kulmbach Dossier: A Chronicle of Plunder and Restitution

Tracing the 1939–1946 theft, evacuation, and hunt for the Krakow masterpieces of Hans von Kulmbach.



MFA&A RECOVERED ASSET

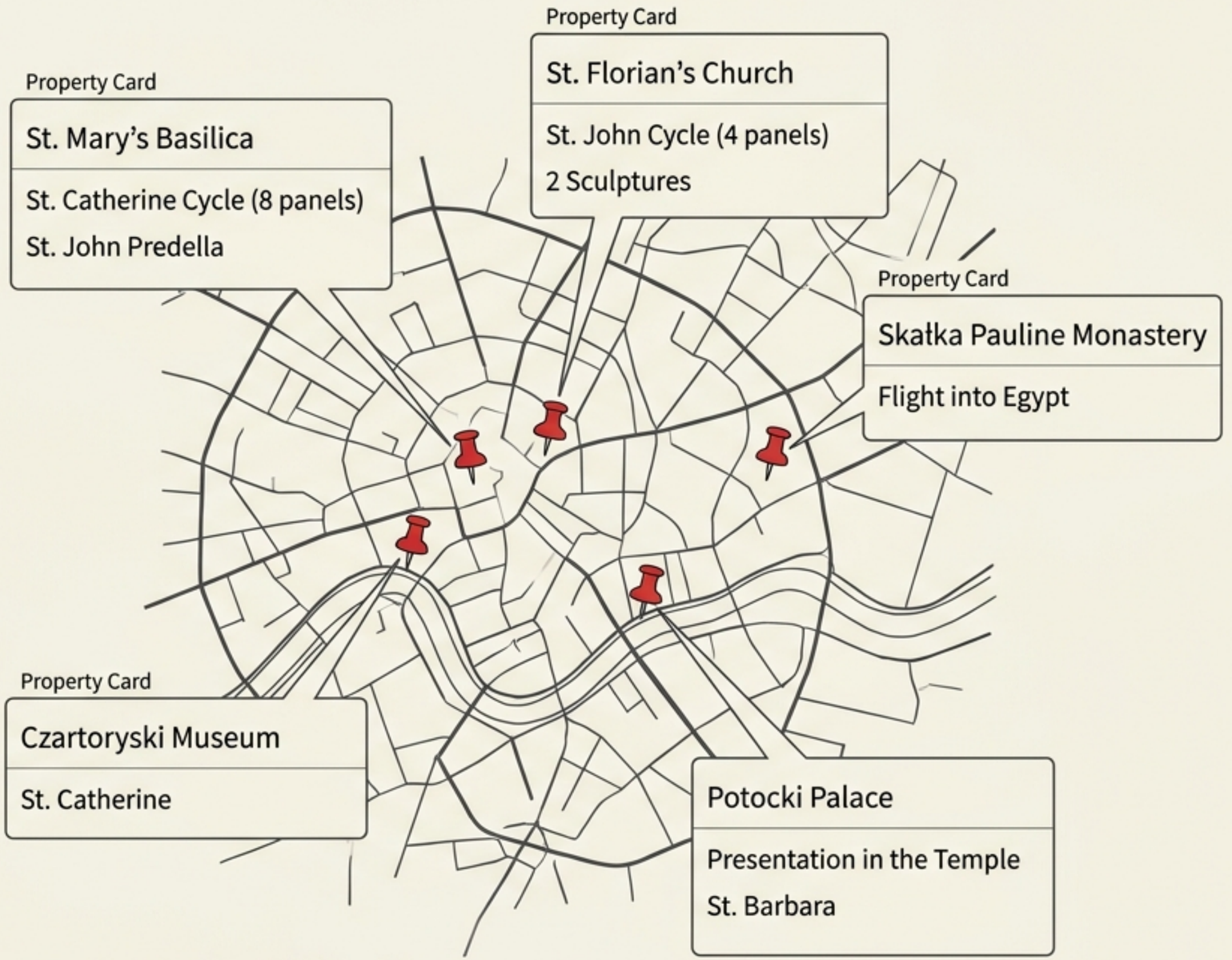
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Eighteen Masterpieces Scattered Across Pre-War Krakow

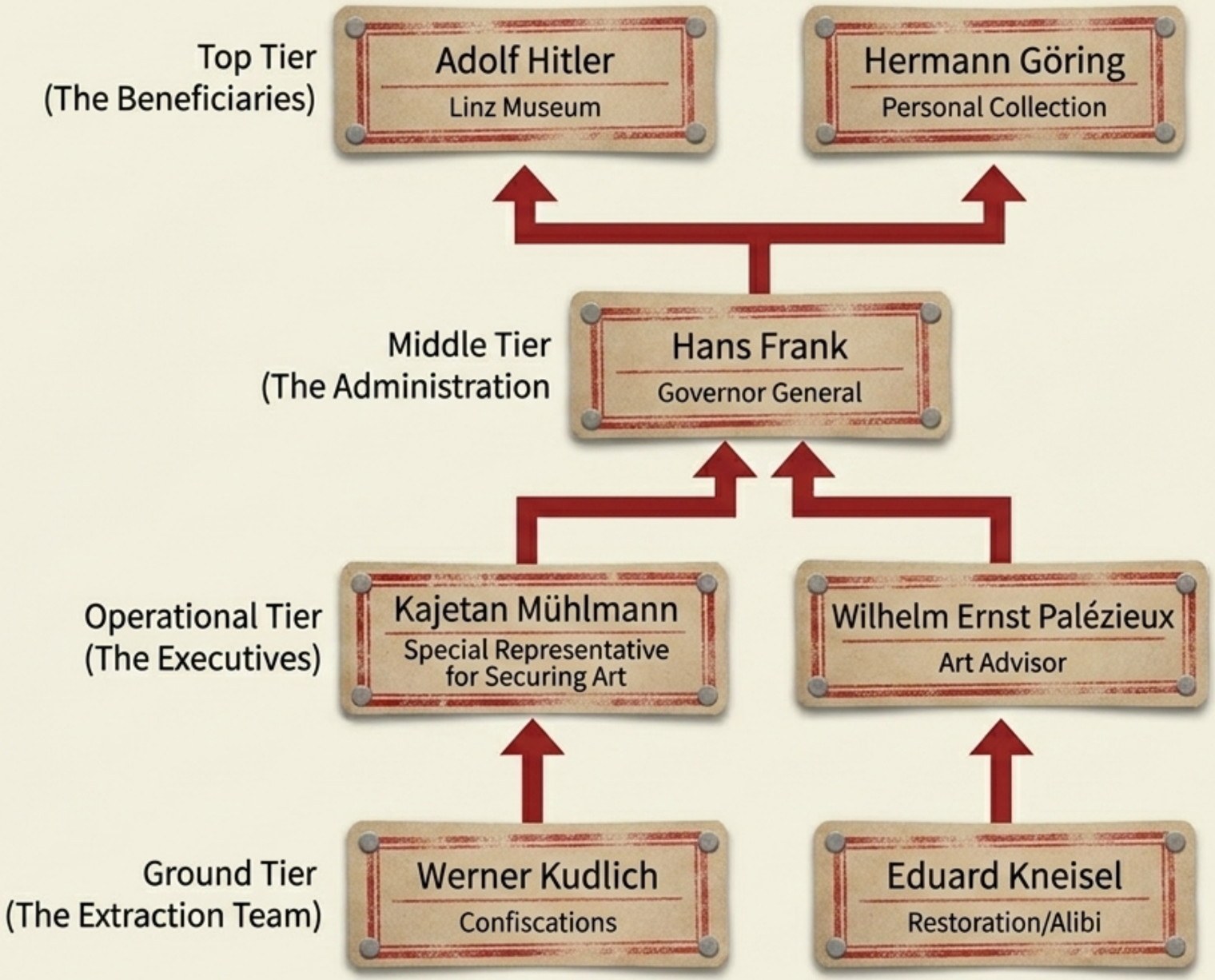
Before 1939, the works of Nuremberg master Hans von Kulmbach were dispersed across Krakow's most prestigious ecclesiastical and private collections. To the incoming Nazi regime, they were not just art—they were propagandistic proof of German cultural dominance in the East.



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The Architecture of Legalized Plunder

The theft was not random looting, but a systematic, legalized extraction governed by Hans Frank's 1939 decrees. The bureaucratic machinery funneled Poland's heritage directly toward the upper echelons of the Third Reich.

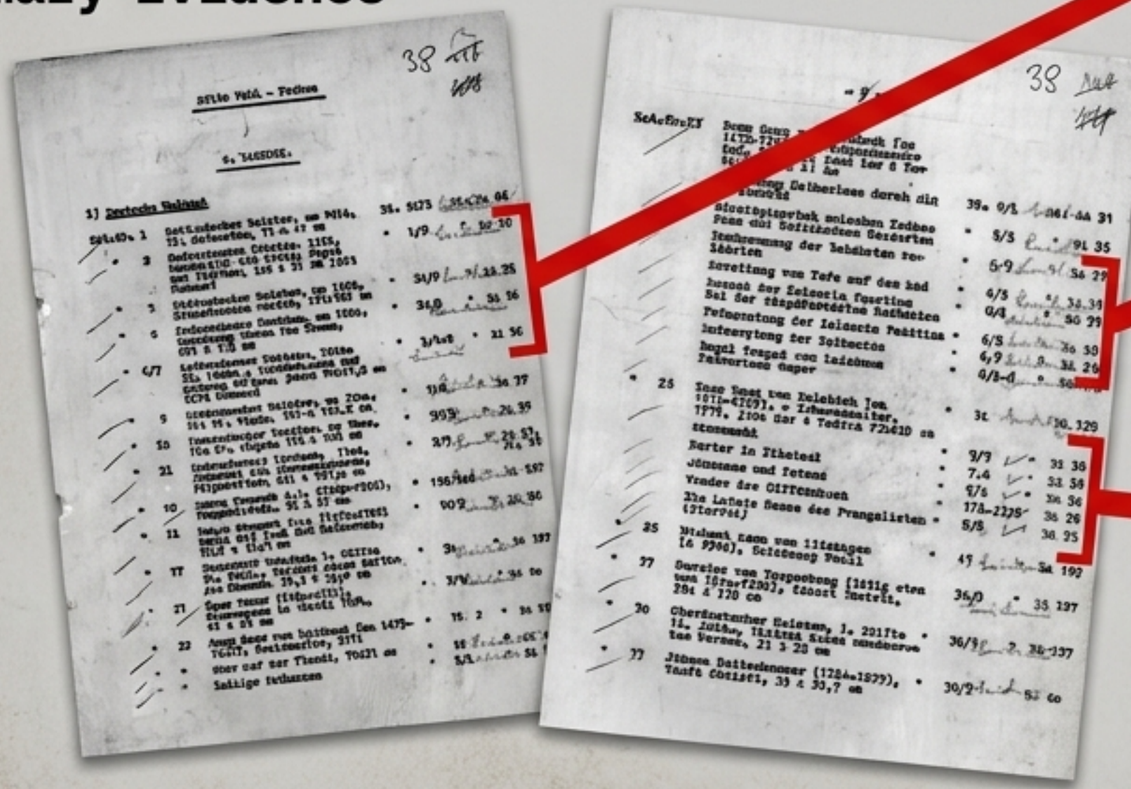


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Reduced to Inventory: The ‘First Choice’ Ledger

Kulmbach’s works were immediately classified as I. Wahl (First Choice)—the highest tier of looted art, reserved exclusively for Adolf Hitler’s personal disposal. They were logged into a luxurious 1940 catalog, *Sichergestellte Kunstwerke im Generalgouvernement*, effectively stripping their cultural context to replace it with inventory numbers.

Primary Evidence



Forensic Breakdown

Cat. No. 22

Flight into Egypt
(Skałka Monastery)

Cat. No. 23

8 St. Catherine panels
(St. Mary’s Basilica)

Cat. No. 24

St. John cycle
(St. Florian’s Church)

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The Propaganda of Preservation

The Mühlmann team didn't just steal; they curated a narrative of salvation. By spring 1940, conservator Eduard Kneisel was actively cleaning and over-varnishing the Kulmbach panels in the Jagiellonian Library basements. The Nazis claimed they were rescuing neglected masterpieces from Polish incompetence.



1. Surface cleaning of centuries of grime
2. Heavy over-varnishing applied by Kneisel
3. Photographic documentation by Stanisław Kolowca for publication

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The I940 Sweep: Eight Months to Erase a Legacy

Aug I939

St. Mary’s works hidden in a Carmelite convent by Adam Bochnak, but returned under threat of reprisal against the clergy.

Feb 5, I940

Kudlich confiscates St. Mary’s panels.

Feb 8, I940

Kudlich confiscates St. Florian’s panels (locating one hidden at the Academy of Fine Arts since I925).

May 3I, I940

Czartoryski St. Catherine confiscated.

Aug 27, I940

Flight into Egypt confiscated. The Pauline monks had smuggled it to Jasna Góra, but the Gestapo tracked it down.

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The Phantom Targets of the Potocki Palace

The Nazi bureaucratic machine was not flawless. Two Kulmbach paintings from the Potocki collection were proudly listed in the Sichergestellte Kunstwerke catalog (Items 22c and 22e). Yet, they were never actually found.





Diagnostic Note

Entered into the ledger “in advance” with the assumption they would be found. The palace was occupied by District Governor Otto von Wächter—were they stolen privately, or lost in the chaos?

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The Evacuation Route: Outrunning the Eastern Front

By summer I944, the Red Army's advance forced a panicked evacuation of the Wawel Castle basements. What followed was a chaotic, multi-stage retreat masterminded by Wilhelm Ernst Palézieux and provincial conservator Günther Grundmann.



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The Silesian Fracture: Left Behind in the Snow

The Kulmbach collection did not survive the retreat intact. On February I3, I945, facing rapid Soviet advances, Günther Grundmann had only one truck available. He was forced to choose what to save and what to abandon at the Schaffgotsch Palace in Warmbrunn.

Loaded for Bavaria (The Survivors)

- 6 St. Catherine panels
- Flight into Egypt
- Czartoryski St. Catherine



Warmbrunn
(Feb I3, I945)

Abandoned in Silesia (The Lost)

- 2 St. Catherine panels
- 4 St. John panels



FATE UNKNOWN:
Looted by locals, seized by Soviets, or destroyed in combat?

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The Monuments Men: Engineering the Return

Coburg fell to the US 3rd Army on April II, I945. Under the MFA&A (Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives) section, the recovery transitioned from chaotic discovery to meticulous, bureaucratic restitution at the Munich Central Collecting Point (MCCP).

0I / Identification
May I945

Major Harry Lockland spots Polish property at Tambach Castle.

02 / Verification
Nov I945

Polish delegate Dr. Karol Estreicher arrives to formally identify the Kulmbach works.

03 / Documentation
April I946

'Property Cards' generated; legal transfer to the Polish government signed.

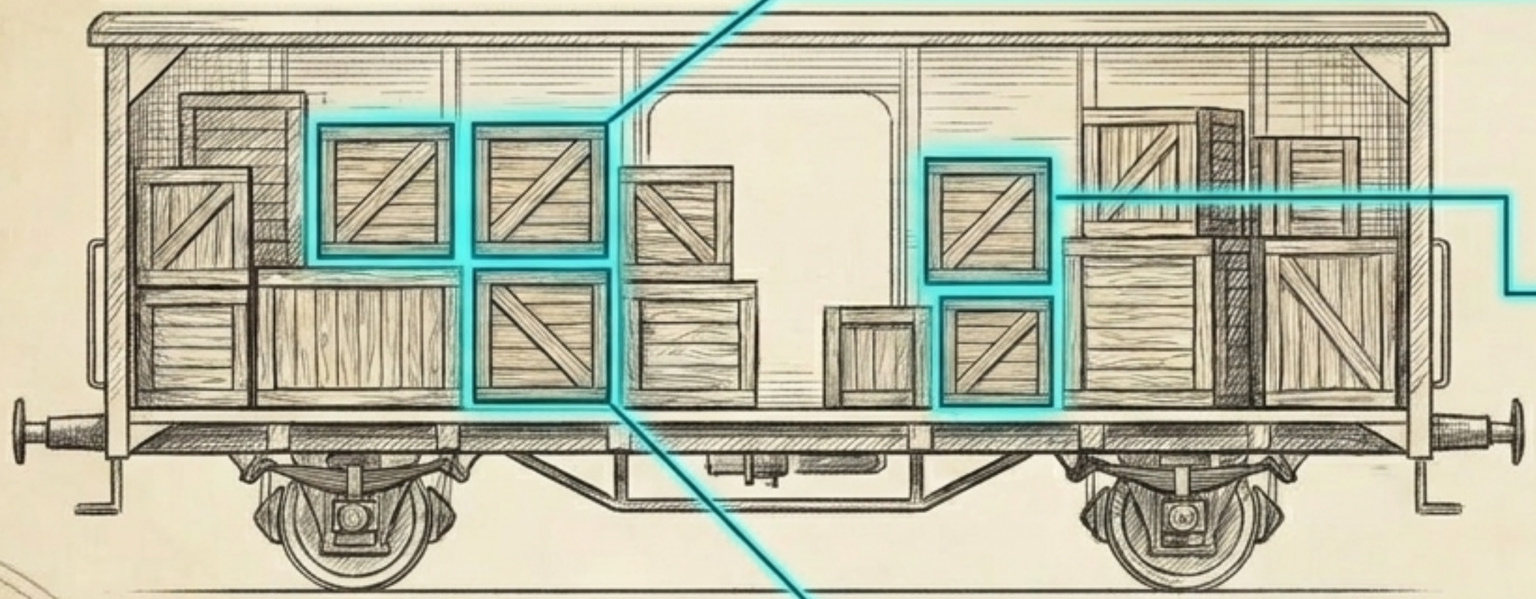
04 / Preparation

Condition checks and packing under the supervision of national experts.

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Train DR Pi 23 888: The Homecoming

On April 28, I946, a massive 28-car train, escorted by American guards, departed Nuremberg. Two days later, at 2:45 AM on May 2, it arrived in Krakow, returning the stolen heritage to the Wawel central depot.



Crates No. 542 & 543
Contents: Six St. Catherine panels.

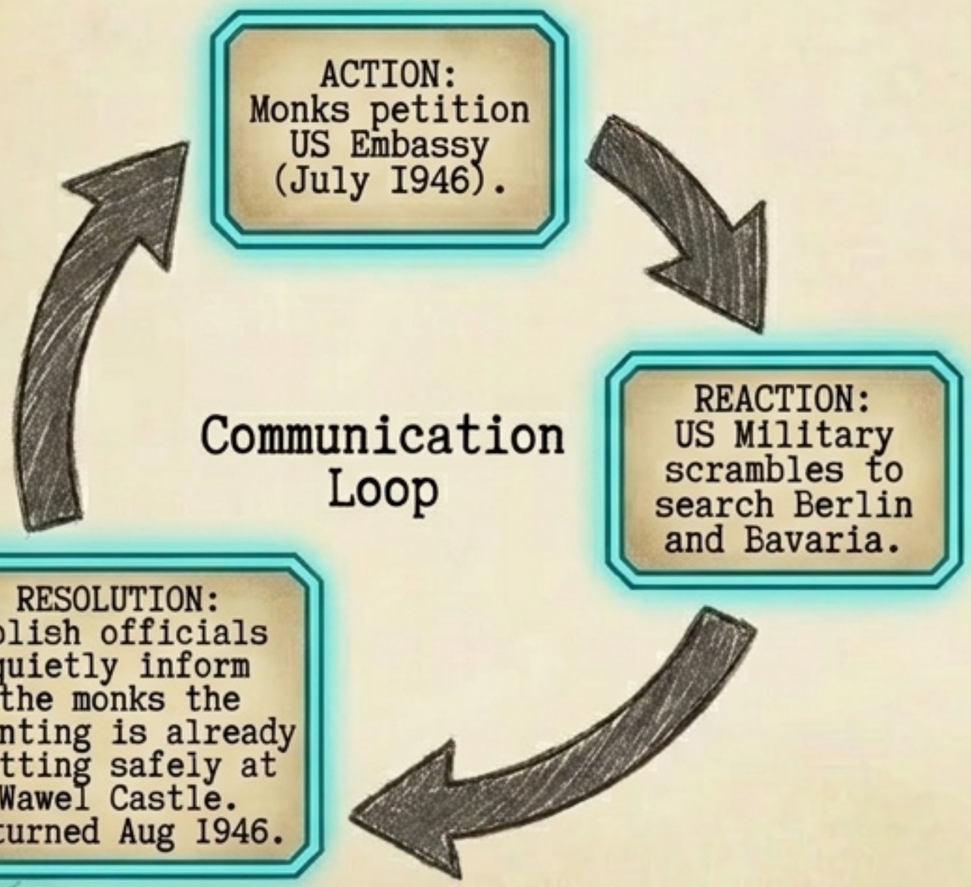
Crate No. 548
Contents: Skałka's Flight into Egypt.

Crate No. 552
Contents: Czartoryski St. Catherine (temporarily misidentified on manifests as the Potocki St. Barbara).

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Diplomatic Leverage for a Monastery

Unaware that Flight into Egypt had already arrived in Krakow, the Pauline monks of Skałka sought leverage. In July 1946, they formally petitioned US Ambassador Arthur Bliss Lane, demanding the interrogation of Kajetan Mühlmann's brother to find their painting.





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The Fate Matrix: Kulmbach's Krakow Legacy

Collection	Confiscation Date	Ledger Cat. No.	Final Status
St. Catherine Cycle (St. Mary's)	Feb 1940	Cat No. 23	6 Recovered / 2 Lost
St. John Cycle (St. Florian's)	Feb 1940	Cat No. 24	4 Lost
St. John Predella (St. Mary's)	Feb 1940	Cat No. 24	Held in State Museum
Flight into Egypt (Skałka)	Aug 1940	Cat No. 22	Recovered
St. Catherine (Czartoryski)	May 1940	Cat No. N/A	Recovered
Presentation & St. Barbara (Potocki)	Ledgered in advance	Cat No. 22c/e	Lost

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The Purgatory of Survival

Surviving the Nazi looting apparatus and the frantic retreat did not guarantee a homecoming. In the post-war era, Kulmbach's art faced a new barrier: the shifting political landscape of Communist Poland. Rescue by the Allies did not equate to restitution to the owners.



St. John Predella

Survives WWII

Nationalization of Church Property



St. Mary's Basilica (Rightful Owner)

Trapped in the National Museum, Warsaw (Despite pleas in 1956 & 1967)

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