

**THE NEXT HORIZON OF MUSEUM PRACTICE:  
VOLUNTARY REPATRIATION, RESTITUTION, AND REPARATIONS**

# Descent

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of Museums**

## ABOUT THIS PAPER

A work of speculative fiction exploring a future in which the provenance of an object can be exhibited with a power equal to or exceeding the actual object.

## ABOUT THE NEXT HORIZON PROJECT

This paper is one of a series published by the American Alliance of Museums exploring the future of voluntary repatriation, restitution, and reparations in museums. For this collection, AAM's Center for the Future of Museums invited a diverse group of authors from the museum sector, academia, and descendant communities to share their visions of preferable futures in opinion pieces, academic research, fictional stories, or hybrids between these formats. For a full overview of the project, and a selected timeline of museums' evolving ethics regarding collections and community relationships, see the AAM report [\*The First Horizon: Understanding the State of Voluntary Repatriation, Restitution, and Reparations Today\*](#).

“That can’t be right,” Marianne said. “An entire museum for just one painting?”

“I’m just looking at the guidebook,” said Joe. “Here, I’ll read you the whole entry.”

**Topping the list of must-see Weimar art venues is undoubtedly Descent, the only museum in the world dedicated to a single work of art. The museum is located on the site of the sixteenth-century Herderkirche, itself a UNESCO World Heritage Site. In 2027, workers performing a restoration of the church’s famous three-part altarpiece (also known as a triptych) discovered a small painting secreted behind the central panel. This was quickly identified as Francesco Guardi’s long-lost *Descent from the Cross*, which had been missing since its theft by the Nazis from a private French-Jewish art collection in 1943. Upon discovery, the collection’s heirs agreed to donate the painting back to the church on the condition that a special facility be built to house it on the premises. Though Guardi’s painting is regarded as only a minor work of the Venetian School, its namesake is now widely regarded as one of Europe’s best small museums.**

“How could we miss the best museum in Weimar?” said Marianne sarcastically.


“Oh, and there’s one more line,” said Joe.

**Because of the museum’s unique nature, we strongly recommend that visitors not seek out additional information about the museum prior to arrival.**

Ninety minutes later (tickets were timed), they were standing in the plaza across from the Herderkirche. White stone walls rose three stories high, studded with small windows and broken up by modest buttresses and two sets of dark green doors. The grey slate roof added another three stories, with only a few small windows, a thin chimney, and a small spire breaking its steep slope. A larger spire stood at one end of the church. The building was impressive, though it would have been a stretch to call it beautiful.

The only evidence that this was not just a church but also one of Europe’s pre-eminent museums was a section of building next to the spire, which was also white stone but appeared to be newly constructed. That and a sign that said “Descent” with an arrow pointing towards the entrance. An attendant checked their tickets outside the entrance and reminded them of the No Photography policy. They went inside.

The church was brightly lit but quiet. Rows of pews dominated the room and the balcony. Without any obvious signage to guide them the couple gravitated towards the far wall, which was entirely taken up by a large triptych altarpiece. On the altar in front



of the triptych stood a small but lavish golden frame, partially obscuring the painting. It was empty.

“Willkommen meine Freunde!” said a voice. Joe and Marianne whirled around. An old man sat in one of the pews to the right of the altar. He was smartly dressed and wore a red bowtie.

“Uh, danke,” said Marianne. “Ich spreche—”

“Ach, I am so sorry, I forgot that this is the English tour,” said the man. “Welcome, my good friends, to Descent. My name is Karl.”

“Hi, Karl,” said Joe. “Are you the docent?”

“I can be,” Karl smiled. “But this is an active church, *ja*? I have been attending services here for the last forty years. Come, will you sit with me for a minute?”

He motioned them to a bench directly in front of the altar and they sat. From this angle, the golden frame encompassed the entire triptych. The central panel depicted a crucified Jesus. Below him stood three men standing still, as well as a fourth who was wrestling a demon. Karl continued to sit in the pews. Together, the three of them stared at the frame and the triptych in silence. A minute passed. Then another.

“Uh, Karl?” asked Marianne. “Were you going to tell us about this painting, or...?”

“Yes, I can,” said Karl. “What would you like to know?”

“I don’t know,” said Marianne. “It’s your museum, isn’t it?”

“Well, it is not mine actually, ha ha, but I understand your meaning,” said Karl. “Tell me, do you know what is the purpose of this painting?”


“I’d guess that it’s Jesus,” said Joe. Marianne rolled her eyes.

“Yes, you are correct!” said Karl enthusiastically. “Actually, it is two depictions of Jesus Christ—he is being crucified but he is also the one battling a demon monster. But, I was not asking what is depicted. For these things you can look at placards or Wikipedia. I asked if you know its *purpose*.”

“I’m Jewish,” said Joe, to indicate that he did not.

“I was baptized Episcopalian,” said Marianne, “but I never really learned much about it.”





Karl looked at the painting and sighed. “It is not the sort of thing that requires initiation into deep mysteries. My friends, you are looking at a man who is being tortured to death. He is bleeding out of his hands and feet and side. Do not overthink this depiction of agony. When you witness it, you are supposed to feel the same.”

“Is that what you feel, Karl?” asked Joe.

Karl gave a wry smile. “Well, that is the idea when a painter paints such things. But, if I am honest, this particular painting does not make me feel anything. It is too confused, yes? The panels on the left and right depict patrons, even the painters themselves, but their faces are so blank, as though they are not really sharing in the agony of Christ. They are more interested in giving you coded Protestant messages, which most visitors do not find very interesting. So, no, I do not like it very much. But this is okay. I am only here for the frame.”

“The *frame*?” said Marianne.

“Yes,” said Karl. “This is the very frame of *Descent from the Cross*, the Guardi painting that was found behind the triptych. The painting depicts the moment when Jesus was taken down from the cross, when Mary was finally able to hold her son’s corpse. A very sad image, designed to make you sad. People have painted it so many times because it is part of the story of Jesus’s torture, death, and resurrection. One of the ‘stations of the cross,’ if that term is meaningful to you. It is quite small, hmm?”

“You don’t have the painting?” asked Marianne.


“Well, we did have it,” said Karl. “And it was briefly displayed in its frame on the altar, like you see here. But it did not belong to us, so we gave it back to its owners. They wanted us to keep the frame.”

“Why the frame? It looks like a thousand other frames.”

“Yes,” said Karl. “And Guardi’s painting looks like a thousand other paintings, and Jesus looked like a thousand other men. It is very popular to depict the descent from the cross, even today. The truth is that I do not really remember anymore what Guardi’s painting looked like, it has been so long since it was returned. It is not about the quality of the painting. For me, it is something else.”

“What do you mean?” asked Joe.

Karl hesitated. “If I were Catholic, I might say that I like the frame because it is a sort of relic, like a piece of the True Cross or the bone of some saint. I like it because it allows



me to imagine the painting as larger than life and yet not so ethereal that it is simply mythological. For me, the frame makes the painting something between real and unreal. Tell me, have you ever been to Jerusalem?”

“Once,” said Joe. “Not recently.”

“I only ask this because long ago another Jewish visitor told me it reminded him of the Western Wall, the remnant of the Jewish temple that now surrounds the Dome of the Rock, the only thing that was left standing after the Romans destroyed the temple and looted its sacred artifacts. Because the wall is not the temple, you see, but there is something powerful about that remnant all the same. Interesting how a single artifact could resonate with both Christians and Jews, yes? Although perhaps it is appropriate when you are standing in a museum dedicated to a piece of Christian art owned by a Jewish family.”

“Where is the actual painting?” asked Marianne.


“Perhaps you will laugh, but I do not know,” said Karl. “Well, that is not true. I know it is in the museum, but one of the conditions of my employment is that I am not allowed to visit the rest of the museum, and nobody from the rest of the museum is allowed to visit me. It is a strange job, yes? As soon as you proceed to the rest of the exhibit, you will know more than I have learned in all my time here! As for me, I am more than happy to spend my days inside this beautiful church.

It may sound like religious nonsense to you, but even though I am often here by myself I never feel lonely; I always feel like I am in the presence of my Lord and Savior, that He is watching over me in this place. But, come—you are on your way to see the painting. Follow me.”

Karl stood up slowly and made his way towards the back of the church. On the left, next to the main entrance, were the unmistakable double brass doors of a grand elevator. They slid open as Joe and Marianne approached.

“The people who built Descent wanted to preserve the church as much as possible,” explained Karl, as he directed them into the elevator. “So it was built entirely underground, except for this elevator shaft. It was lovely to meet you. Please enjoy it, yes?” And with that, the elevator doors closed. A small display above the doors read CHURCH.

Joe and Marianne stood in the center of the large elevator, which had a slightly musty smell. Apart from “door open” and emergency call buttons, the car had no visible controls. Through its glass walls they were able to see that they were going down, but



they could not see anything beyond the undifferentiated grey limestone that hugged the elevator shaft tightly, passing them by as they descended story after story into the earth.

The elevator's lethargy, combined with the uninterrupted monotony of the surrounding rock, had a disorienting effect on Joe and Marianne; they knew they were descending, but could not tell how far down they were going. When it finally stopped, the couple didn't know if they were a dozen or a hundred meters below the street.

Above the doors, the display read MUSEUM. The doors opened; a young, dark-haired woman with large, round glasses stood in front of them, apparently waiting for them. "Welcome!" she said with a warm smile. "My name is Julia. Please, come inside."

Joe and Marianne stepped out of the elevator and into a large and extremely well-appointed room. The floor was covered in a variety of elaborate Persian rugs, upon which sat half a dozen mahogany chairs and stools upholstered in rich brown leather. Along the walls stood bookcases filled with countless hand-bound volumes, with more stacks piled on top of the bookshelves, along with an assortment of what could only be described as the doodads of the rich: an hourglass, a globe, several clocks, three small porcelain statues, a brass telescope.

Above these objects, ascending all the way to a very tall ceiling and its large false skylight, were hundreds of paintings, hung so that barely an inch separated one from the next, none with visible labels of any kind. Many bore golden frames like the one they had seen upstairs.


"Welcome to Salon Adolphe Schloss," said Julia. "You are standing in a perfectly faithful recreation of the room in Paris where the Schloss family displayed its impressive collection of artwork, including Francesco Guardi's *Christ déposé de la croix*."

"I'm confused," said Marianne. "I thought this museum was dedicated to a single work of art."

"You're remembering correctly," said Julia. "All of the paintings that you see on these walls are replicas."

"Replicas?" said Marianne. "You mean forgeries."

"They would be forgeries if we were attempting to fool people into believing that they are genuine," said Julia, who had clearly answered this question many times. "But we are not. In fact, if you look closely, you will see that every painting contains a small inscription indicating that it is a facsimile and the location of the genuine article."





“How are the original museums okay with this?” asked Marianne.

“You must remember that much of the Schloss collection is still owned by the heirs,” said Julia. “So they made their long-term loans conditional on the right to house a replica of their works in Descent. More museums consented once we agreed not to use any of the replicas in our promotional materials. But—we are going out of order. Shall I explain the collection?”

The two nodded in agreement.

“What you are looking at is the personal gallery of Adolphe Schloss, an Austrian Jewish financier who moved to France in the 1870s. The collection, which ultimately grew to more than three hundred works, is particularly strong for its Dutch and Flemish artists—although Guardi, of course, was Viennese. Here,”—she walked to a small painting on the bottom of the far wall, a depiction of animals in a gathering storm—“we have a work of Peter Paul Rubens.”

Joe and Marianne leaned in to see it better. A small golden inscription in the corner read: *Authorized facsimile. Permission of National Gallery of Canada. Schloss #271.*

“And where’s the main attraction?” asked Joe.

Julia gave a half smile. “I will tell you, but I find that guests appreciate it more when they first search for it themselves.”


“We don’t know what it looks like,” Marianne pointed out. “Although we know that it has Jesus and a cross.”

“If I may be enigmatic, that should not make a difference.”

Joe and Marianne began to examine the paintings, row by row. The subject matter varied, but not dramatically. A man with long white hair, a goatee, and a cross on a golden chain. A woman in a richly embroidered dress with puffy sleeves and a high lace collar. A spotted horse. Small ships under a big sky. Two travelers on the road under a tall tree. Mary with the baby Jesus. Another with Mary and another baby Jesus, along with Joseph and a handful of angels. A man sharpening a quill.

“Here!” shouted Marianne in excitement. “Sorry,” she said, instantly lowering her tone. “Is this the one?”

She pointed at a painting midway up a wall. One edge of the painting was flush against a corner of the room, making it awkward to examine. A lifeless Jesus occupied the





painting's center. Surrounding him were Mary and three other people whom neither Joe nor Marianne could identify. The figure on the immediate right was standing on a stool; the crooked mast of a knocked-down cross stood behind him.

"Ah!" said Julia, peering up with them. "Not everyone finds this painting. It is indeed a depiction of Christ's deposition from the cross. But it is by Rubens again, not Guardi. I should not say this, but I personally think it is stronger than Guardi's work. There is a sense of movement in it that Guardi's rendition lacks, and its composition is less haphazard."

"Oh," said Marianne, disappointed. "So we should look for something that looks like this, only worse?"

"I can show you," said Julia. "Look where I am pointing."

Julia pointed at a spot on the wall two paintings down and to the left of the Rubens. Surrounded on all sides by other paintings, a grey plaque read: *Francesco Guardi (1699–1760). Christ déposé de la croix. Schloss #277.*

"This was one of the last paintings Schloss acquired before his death in 1911. Based on our conversations with the family, we know that it was hung in precisely this spot."

"Don't tell me you don't have the actual painting," said Joe.

"We do have the painting," said Julia. "But it is not in this room. Just the plaque."


Joe shook his head. "I feel like I'm stuck in some video game where the princess is always in another castle. Is the whole deal here that this place is just a big bait-and-switch? Is that what counts for edgy in modern art?"

"No bait and switch," said Julia. "Don't worry, you will see it by the end of your time here. And I am not like the docents upstairs, who are not allowed in the rest of the museum; in fact, I examined the work just last week for an article I am writing."

"But why isn't it *here*?" asked Marianne.

Julia blinked. "In a room full of replicas? Surely that would be inappropriate."

"Put in a replica, then."



“We do not have the permission of the family. But also—I think it is clear that I am not here just to tell you about the painting. I am here to tell you about the room in which the painting once existed.”

“It’s just a gallery,” said Joe. “We’ve seen half a dozen galleries this week already.”

“Yes, it is just a gallery,” Julia agreed unexpectedly. “And it is from private galleries like this that modern museums emerged. But a gallery is a complicated thing, no? Tell me: Why do you think a secular Jew like Adolphe Schloss cared for depictions of the crucifixion, of the virgin mother? Do you think he worshipped such things?”

“He probably just thought they were beautiful,” said Marianne, annoyed at having to say something so obvious.

“Yes! But I think you are saying more than you realize. This entire room—it is dedicated to beauty, yes? It is not a church, and the depictions of Jesus are meant to be admired, not worshipped. When a rich man or a museum buys a religious work, he knows he is changing how people will look at it; by putting it next to nice pictures of people and horses he is telling you how to view it, what he thinks it means. It is a kind of—what is the word in English? An ‘abduction?’”

“But Schloss didn’t abduct the painting,” said Joe. “The Nazis did that. Later.”


“Of course,” said Julia. “All of these paintings were acquired by Schloss legally, as far as we know. I do not mean an illegal abduction. I mean that the gallery defines the painting, just as the paintings define the gallery. A beautiful room like this adds to the value of a work, but so does a church, and the painting cannot live in both at the same time. Schloss took the painting out of the world of worship and put it in the world of aesthetic beauty. I do not say this is good or bad. I simply say that it is true.”


“So let me guess,” said Joe. “You’re trying to be above all that by not displaying it anywhere. You say that the painting is above context by not actually showing it to anyone.”

“I believe the museum did consider this during planning,” said Julia. “But they were worried that people would feel tricked.”

“You promise that we’ll see it by the end?” asked Joe.

“Yes, I promise,” said Julia. “But if you would not mind me asking: why does it matter? I have already said that Guardi’s work is not some incredible specimen, and you can see by where it sits on the wall that it was not given a place of prestige. Would you really





have come just to see such a middling work? Or even this beautiful gallery, full of authentic paintings like in the 1920s? Why is this room different from the intact original?”

“Because this room is fake,” said Joe. “And galleries are supposed to be real.”

“But why?” asked Julia.

“Aren’t you the docent?” asked Joe. “Why are you asking me?”


Julia leaned forward, hands clasped behind her back, as though she were sharing a secret. “Look. Some people come to a gallery because they like the idea of looking at a painting and imagining that Rubens or Rembrandt or whoever stood where they once stood, painting brushstrokes that you can still see today. They like real things because real things connect them to history. It makes the past come alive for them.”

“Yes,” said Joe. “Exac—”

“But,” she continued, “I personally don’t think such people really get what they want. If you want to see the *Mona Lisa* because you want to feel some connection to da Vinci, why not display it on an easel, inside a replica of the studio where it was made? Why not put Michelangelo’s *David* in some Italian workshop among huge unfinished blocks of marble, so that visitors can appreciate how astounding it is that any person could coax such beauty out of a stone? People can come to galleries and museums to see the past, and you can certainly feel a connection with the past when you are there, but if we are being honest you cannot do so without fighting against the very museum that is showing you the work in the first place, because if the thing was in its home context you would have never seen it. Museums are bad storytellers and unreliable narrators; they are full of perfect rooms designed to make you feel that they are inevitable, that every painting inside *had* to be where it has been placed, even though nothing could be farther from the truth. Perfection is the opposite of storytelling. You can have a thing or you can have its story, but not both. Schloss didn’t paint; he collected. So you cannot tell the story of Guardi’s painting without seeing it as both a *collected* thing and a *stolen* thing. Like every other painting in this room.”

“So you’ve solved the puzzle? You’ve figured out how to have it both ways?”

Julia shrugged. “I don’t know if we’ve entirely succeeded, but I have worked in enough rooms like this to tell you that you would have moved on five minutes ago if not for the missing painting. Think about it this way: Guardi’s painting is absent from billions of rooms, but it is only in this museum that its absence has meaning. Nobody will care



about a wall painted blue, but they will notice immediately if you have forgotten to paint even the tiniest corner. People seem to gravitate towards loose threads.”

Marianne and Joe spent another minute perusing the room on autopilot, but it quickly became clear that their interest in this part of the museum had been exhausted. Julia escorted them back to the elevator and wished them farewell. The doors shut and again the elevator began to slowly descend.

“A bit pretentious, don’t you think?” asked Joe.

“Mmm,” said Marianne. “I don’t know. I kinda like it.”

Both felt a sudden lurch in their stomachs as the elevator began dropping faster. The lights flickered; a metal panel rattled above their heads, and the limestone surrounding the car became rougher. Joe and Marianne fell silent, unsure if this was a real safety issue or just another part of the exhibit. The musty smell in the elevator became stronger and slightly sour.

Thirty long seconds later, the elevator stopped. CONSTRUCTION, read the sign above the doors, which presently opened onto a short unfinished tunnel that appeared to be blasted directly out of the rock. The rotten smell of sulfuric acid was now unmistakable. A loud hissing sound was coming from somewhere up ahead. The only illumination came from a string of work lights attached to the wall.

“Are we supposed to be here?” asked Marianne, peering out. “It looks like they’re still building this part.”


“It’s a heavy-handed gimmick,” said Joe. They stepped out of the elevator.

The end of the tunnel was framed by a large sliding metal door. Marianne pulled on the handle; the door shifted but did not open. “I think this might not be part of the exhibit,” she said. She tried again; this time, the door moved a little more, enough to see that there was more light coming from the other side.

“I think it’s just rusted,” said Joe. Marianne jerked the handle hard and heard a sickening *crack* as the door flew along its track to the other side of room.

“Shit,” she muttered through her breath. Then she looked into the room beyond. “Oh, shit shit *shit!*”

“Wait,” said Joe. “Did you—”



Just beyond the door, on the ground in front of them, lay a small unframed painting. Though it was torn through the middle, and though they had never seen it before, its identity was unmistakable. There, near the torn edge, a crucified Jesus was being cradled by his mother. A young man stood beside him, holding Jesus's arm; above him sat an older man, his hands folded in prayer and his eyes raised to the heavens.

"What the *fuck* is going on?" said Marianne, her heart pounding. She picked the fragment of Guardi's *Descent from the Cross* off the ground. "Why would someone wedge a painting behind a door?"

"Check to see if it's a facsimile," said Joe. "This place is all tricks."

"It's not a facsimile," said a deep voice. "It's worse than that."

Joe and Marianne looked up. Beyond the door was a gigantic rock cavern. Yellow working lights lit a portion of the room but most of the cave remained in darkness, making it impossible to determine the cavern's full size or even see its ceiling. Inside stood a tall thin man in a black hoodie. "Here," he said, and they understood it as a command. "Close the door behind you."

Marianne picked up the other half of the painting and they walked inside. They obeyed, slightly scared despite understanding that this was probably all a show.

The man didn't look like he could be older than thirty. Surrounding him on all sides were row upon row of freestanding metal shelves, some reaching three times his height. The shelves were filled with paintings and sketches. It was an archive.


"My name is Jack," said the man. He had an American accent. "Do you know where we are?"


"Is this still part of the museum?" asked Marianne. Her heart was still pounding.

"It is now," said Jack. "But it is also a place. A real place—no facsimiles." He smiled. "You are standing in a salt mine that was once used by the Nazis to house stolen works of art. When the Schloss collection was stolen, it ended up in a place like this, waiting to be delivered to Hitler's planned personal museum."

"So, I didn't destroy a priceless work of art?"

Jack snorted. "No," he said. "You can't destroy it because Guardi's painting was never found. The version they located was a forgery, and the version you demolished—quicker





than most, by the way—is just a copy of that forgery. I like to stick them in the door when I come down here. It’s fun to see how visitors react.”

“The travel guide said that it was found in the church. Is that not correct?” asked Joe.

“A long-lost treasure located behind a famous triptych? Just quasi-religious nonsense. They learned the truth a little more than a year after the original discovery, but too much had been invested in the project and nobody wanted the embarrassment.”

“But the docent told us—” started Marianne.

“Which one, Tobias or Julia? Never mind; neither has been down here,” said Jack. “They think it’s the height of post-postmodernism or whatever to have a museum where the central painting is missing, and they are so pleased with their own enlightened thinking about art that they cannot see the bigger truth. The docents think that the painting is stored in a small humidity-controlled room just below the salon. They’re right, except the only thing there is the original forgery. The whole thing was even leaked online recently—you could look it up right now if we had cell service down here—but people like them are too confident to search for it. Why do you think this place isn’t busier? Why do you think you were able to get tickets? Why do you think nobody else is *here*?”


Joe and Marianne looked at each other. “If that’s all true,” said Marianne, feeling slightly calmer, “then why are *you* here?”

Jack smiled. “I work here. I’m the museum’s forger-in-residence,” he said, as he pantomimed a curtsy. “And this is my workshop. I’m responsible for around a third of the paintings you just saw in the salon. I’m particularly fast at making Guardis because I make so many, although I must say that I’ve become sloppy with them, not that you’d notice.”

“And these shelves are all your forgeries?” asked Joe.

“Well, not *just* mine,” said Jack. “There are five of us taking shifts down here. I’m the youngest of the group; I just graduated from Universität der Künste in Berlin last June. These are works stolen by the Nazis and never recovered. I mostly work from photographs. As long as all of the paintings are watermarked and don’t leave the premises I’m allowed to make as many as I want. Our aim is to create a forgery of every single lost work. We destroy any forgeries if someone recovers the real deal, but these days that rarely happens.”

“For what purpose?” asked Marianne. “What does this have to do with the painting that you say doesn’t exist?”



“Look, you have to shift your paradigm,” said Jack. “Descent isn’t a museum. Museums have things to exhibit. This place literally has nothing; the whole thing is built around the fantasy that the past can be recovered, that if you remember hard enough or care deeply enough you’ll be able to restore some beloved past. But, man, there just isn’t anything *here*. It’s all just old photographs and early films and people remembering their grandparents. Just echoes. The only thing real is the church. The rest is just a graveyard.”

“Sounds nihilistic,” said Marianne.

“It’s anything but. Lost art is invisible; I can say that the Nazis stole ten thousand paintings, but there’s no weight to it. My job is to make loss visible. We’re surrounded by an acre of lost paintings. You can *see* them, you can *touch* them—and yes, you can even break them, mutilate them. Really, have at it! Chew on a canvas until your mouth tastes like linseed oil. These aren’t even close to archival conditions; the sulfur deposits in these mines will make everything down here discolor and crack all by itself. There are no rules down here because nothing that’s down here is real anymore, even though it takes up all this space.”

“Even though nobody outside this room will ever see them?” asked Joe.

“*Because* no one will ever see them,” said Jack. “Call it experimental art if you want. I call it realism. My great-grandmother was a survivor. Everyone else in her family was murdered. I never met her. I’ve never met *any* survivors. I wish I had. When I work here, I feel like I’m communing with the dead. I am saving loss from loss.”

“And the fact that you’re working in an actual Nazi salt mine?”

Jack laughed. “Just a bit of luck. Or divine providence! The salt mine was under the church already. If you want a quasi-religious story, that’s the one I’d pick.”

“And what if I hadn’t been able to get that big metal door open?” asked Marianne. Jack grinned. “Not everyone does. It’s stuck on purpose. Some people are so sure that this place is supposed to be clean rooms with bright lights that they don’t even get out of the elevator. They just want a nice building that can pass before their eyes and then go home, so we take them back up to see the room with the forgery and then they go home. We can’t force people to be curious.”

Joe and Marianne watched Jack paint and examined the shelves of forged artwork. Some of the material was similar to the works in the salon, but the variety was much greater: there were pencil sketches, pastels, landscapes, even a few small sculptures.



Every item was labelled with the name of the work, the name of the creator, and its last verified sighting. They said goodbye to Jack and headed back to the elevator.

“So?” prompted Joe as the doors closed. The car began its slow ascent. The lights were steady and the rattling was gone, confirming that they had inadvertently been forced to participate in some ham-fisted immersive theatre.

“I don’t even know where to start,” said Marianne. “It’s definitely trying to do something different, but I’m not sure whether it succeeds. And also, does everything really need to be a mystery these days? What’s wrong with going to a museum and seeing something you like?”

The elevator stopped; the display again read “CHURCH.” When the doors opened, however, Joe and Marianne did not find themselves back in the sanctuary. Instead, they were face to face with an old wooden wall. Light shone between the wall and the floor of the elevator; bending down, Marianne could see the sanctuary, though its floor was now far below them. Above the wall, extending three feet to the ceiling of the car, there was complete darkness.

“We’re stuck between floors,” said Marianne.

“Probably just another trick,” said Joe. “Let’s see what happens.”

But nothing happened. Five minutes passed. Marianne pressed the emergency call button. It lit up, but after ten more minutes it was clear that no help was coming.

“Hello?” said a voice from below. “Is someone there?”

“Karl!” shouted Marianne. “Is that you?”

“Yes!” said Karl. “Are you alright? Are you stuck? I am so sorry; we have been having problems with this elevator recently and this is not the first time someone has gotten stuck in the ceiling.”


“We’re fine. Can you get us out?”

“Yes, of course. You are lucky you were not the last group of the day or I would not have noticed that there was anything wrong with the elevator until tomorrow morning! Hold on, I need to turn the power off and on; that usually solves the problem.”

They heard footsteps, and then all lights in the elevator went out and the fan that had been circulating air stopping whirring, leaving them in complete darkness and








total silence. As their eyes adjusted, Joe and Marianne could see that the black space above the sanctuary was in fact a small and dimly lit attic. Its walls sloped sharply upward, meeting at a point high above them. Rays of dusty light pierced the darkness, emanating from six small, high windows.

Lying on the floor of the attic, which currently stood at about chest height, was a large dark mass. On top of the mass lay a small rectangular object. A ray of sunlight touched a corner, revealing a golden gleam.

“Is that—” started Joe.

Marianne jumped and muffled a scream. As they watched, the pile began to stir and change shape. Huge arms and legs extended from its center as it silently rose, transforming the mass into a massive figure. The figure began to sway—first slowly, then in wider and wider sweeps, rotating in erratic ellipses around the center of the room, softly humming a sad and wordless melody, its arms holding the painting to its chest so tightly that the two appeared to merge. If it noticed them, it did not show it.

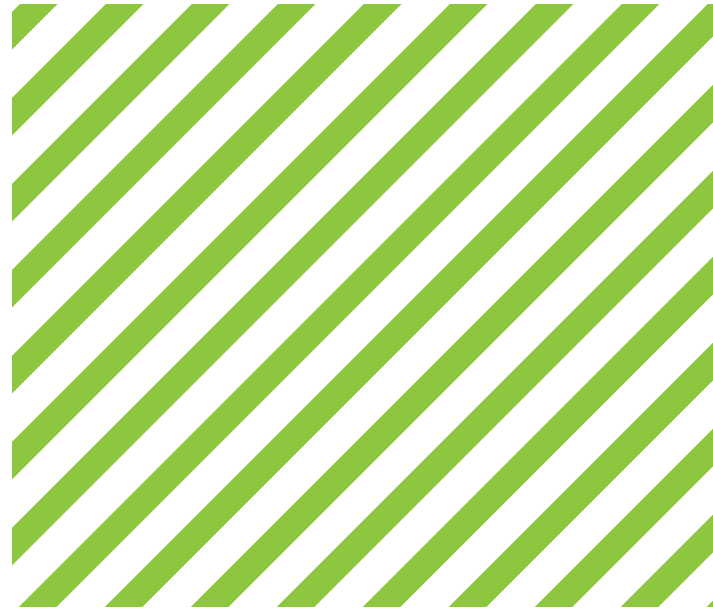
The elevator lights came up and the fan resumed its whirring. The attic and its figure receded into darkness, the doors closed, and the car began its return to the sanctuary.





## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Dr. David Zvi Kalman** is a writer working at the intersection of technology, religion, and art. He is the owner of Print-O-Craft Press, an independent publishing house that focuses on Jewish art books and LGBTQ subjects. David Zvi holds a PhD from the University of Pennsylvania and a BA from the University of Toronto. He is the inventor of the twenty-sided dreidel, his short fiction has appeared in multiple locations, and he blogs at the website Jello Menorah.





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