

Rare Manuscripts Returned in Historic Ceremony at St. Nicholas Ground Zero



On Friday, April 28, 2023 at St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church and National Shrine, the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America hosted a Repatriation Ceremony to commemorate the official return of three historic manuscripts by Swann Galleries. Dating back to the 16th and 17th centuries, they are among nearly 900 religious objects and manuscripts looted from the Monastery in 1917 by Bulgarian combatants.

General Counsel George Tsougarakis, who has represented the Monastery in seeking the return of manuscripts that were stolen in 1917, offered an introduction, while Devon Eastland, Senior Specialist of Early Printed Books, spoke to the institution's decision to return the manuscripts.

Distinguished Speaker, Colonel Matthew Bogdanos, who serves as Assistant District Attorney for New York City and leads its groundbreaking Antiquities Trafficking Unit, contextualized the Monastery's manuscripts within the broader history and importance of recovering antiquities and heritage object trafficking.

"Swann Auction Galleries has set an example for others to follow, including academic institutions," His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros said in his remarks, "The fact that, the oldest continually operating specialist auction house in New York has demonstrated such leadership in this regard, speaks volumes of its integrity, and we thank them."

His Eminence also honored Colonel Bogdanos and Ms. Eastland for their work.

Community members, including Philoptochos and Leadership 100, attended. A number of dignitaries and religious and civic leaders attended, among them Her Excellency Ambassador of Greece Alexandra Papadopoulou, His Grace Bishop Irinej of the Serbian Orthodox Patriarchate, Honorable Consul General of Greece Mr. Konstantinos Konstantinou, Mayor of Corfu Meropi Spyridoula Ydraiou, New York State Senator Brian Kavanagh, Mr. Ryan Koch of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, the Tanenbaum Center's Rev. Mark Fowler, and Ionian University

Rector Andreas Floros.

You can read more about GOARCH's efforts to secure the return of the three historic manuscripts in the New York Times (April 28, 2023): www.nytimes.com/2023/04/28/arts/greek-monastery-kosinitza-manuscripts-looted.html or read an excerpt below:

"Looted Monastery Manuscripts Rediscovered During Office Renovation," by Colin Moynihan

"In 2008, Swann Auction Galleries in Manhattan sold three Greek-language manuscripts from the 16th and 17th centuries to an antiquities dealer who returned them two years later after concluding they might have been looted.

"The dealer was reimbursed but the auction house, its officials said, was unable to reach the person who had consigned the items. So they sat on a shelf for more than a decade, all but lost in the shuffle of daily operations.

"Three months ago, though, the manuscripts resurfaced when Swann's chief financial officer went through his office before a renovation. There on a shelf in a long-forgotten plastic bag were the manuscripts, which are believed to have been stolen from a Greek monastery in the midst of World War I.

"They are thought to have been lost in 1917 when Bulgarian combatants are said to have plundered nearly 900 items from the Theotokos Eikosiphoinissa Patriarchal and Stavropegial Monastery, often called Kosinitza, in northern Greece.

"The manuscripts will be sent back to the monastery, and their return is to be commemorated on Friday in a repatriation ceremony in Lower Manhattan. After the ceremony, arranged by the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, @archbishopelpidophoros of America is planning to travel to Constantinople to deliver the manuscripts to Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, the leader of the Eastern Orthodox Church. From there, the items will go back to Kosinitza.

"It is a blessing for the monastic sisterhood at the monastery of Theotokos Eikosiphoinissa to see the contents of their former library slowly being returned to them," Archbishop Elpidophoros said in a statement. He said the church hopes that other organizations with manuscripts stolen from the monastery would also return them."







Looted Monastery Manuscripts Rediscovered During Office Renovation

A Manhattan auction house found and returned the 16th- and 17th-century texts, which are thought to have been looted from a Greek monastery during the turmoil of World War I.



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