

Exposing the fakes and the forgers

A new website now protects art lovers from buying counterfeit paintings

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By Eva Munk

Have you ever been tempted to buy a painting? Has the friendly owner of one of Prague's Old Town galleries offered you - and "only you" - a great deal on a work by a big-name artist, with a signed and stamped certificate of authenticity by a certified court assessor?

Hopefully you resisted the impulse to buy. According to experts at the Czech National Gallery, 50 percent of the paintings brought to them for assessment are fakes. So, if you could not resist and fell for the sales pitch and the smile, the chances are one out of two that you now have a fake hanging on your wall.



Zdeněk Novák says the grant from the Giacometti Foundation will help him translate his site and also protect foreign art buyers.

The next time you wish to buy art in Prague, consider having a look at Falzum.cz, a website aimed at exposing the activities of forgers in the Czech Republic. Its founder, a former policeman named Zdeněk Novák, says foreigners are the favorite victims of shady art dealers.

"As people here get savvier, the sale of forgeries has been spilling over abroad," Novák says. "Artists are always best known in the place where they lived and painted. Abroad, it will be years, if ever, before an expert sees [the forgeries], and if they do, the statute of limitations will have run out."

Novák's website fights forgers on three fronts: by keeping readers up to date on their activities, by publishing photographs of known forgeries in order to block their resale and by reporting court decisions in forgery cases so that victims can be informed of their options.

There's just one catch: It's in Czech, because Novák has not had the funds to have it translated. But now, thanks to a 10,000 euro grant from the Giacometti Foundation, awarded in Paris May 25, that will soon change.

The Fondation Alberto et Annette Giacometti is a French public interest institution, created by government decree in December 2003. Although its main aim is to protect the work of sculptor Alberto Giacometti (1901-66), it also awards the Annette Giacometti Prize for the rights of authors and artists, and the ART©OPYRIGHT grant, which supports innovative projects promoting author rights and helping raise awareness of the problem of art counterfeiting. Novák's proposal won the latter grant for 2013.

"Now we will be able to expand our activities abroad, use more foreign sources and, of course, translate the site into English, German and French," he tells The Prague Post.



By "we," Novák means Falzum Stop, a civic association of lawyers, art historians, scientists and collectors that is dedicated to fighting the growing number of forgeries flooding the Czech art market. The group includes such academic heavyweights as the rector of the Fine Arts Academy, Jiří Kotalík. Novák is the association's spokesman and editor of its website. For a fee, Falzum Stop also performs stylistic and technical analyses of paintings.

Novák founded the association after seven years with the Czech National Police, where he was in charge of "protecting the national cultural heritage." He doesn't talk about what made him leave the force. He only says: "There's nothing worse for a policeman than a boss who won't support him. That's like a soldier going into battle with a commander who's afraid."

In 2008, after an equally frustrating nine-month stint at the Culture Ministry, he realized suppression wasn't working, so he decided to try prevention instead - and came up hard against the courts.

In 2011, the Brno District Court condemned the perpetrators in one of the biggest fake-art scams in Czech history. Known as the "Trojský kůň" (Trojan Horse), it involved the sale of 160 forgeries. When Novák, citing Czech open information laws, asked for photographs of the paintings for the website, the judge refused. Novák appealed the decision to the Constitutional Court, which sided with him. The Brno court finally agreed to release the photos - for 765 Kč (about 30 euros). Novák appealed. More than a year and a half later, the Justice Ministry ordered the court to release the photos free of charge and sent the uncooperative judge before a disciplinary commission.

Such small victories notwithstanding, Novák says there is no way of stamping out forgeries, because the victims themselves don't want to come forward.

"Imagine you buy a painting for a million crowns, and a few years later you find out it's a fake. You go to the dealer who tells you the statute of limitations has run out. So, rather than stare at the painting sourly for the rest of your life, you resell it. Of course, now you yourself are committing a crime," he says, adding that the chances that a perpetrator will be punished are slim.

"Look at the Trojan Horse case. That took from 2004 to 2011. Meanwhile, one perpetrator dies, another one was in a mental institution - he wasn't even convicted - one perpetrator went to jail for a few months. It took seven years to resolve; [a large] number of people were harmed, and there was no rapid resolution. A criminal has got to be punished fast."

But that is a job for the courts.

"I have no need to arrest anybody," Novák says. "We just inform and give people the chance to decide if they want to be cheated or not, if they want to think twice about the goods being offered to them. Everybody has the right to make a bad deal."