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Smears, counterclaims and lawsuits—the tangled web surrounding Prince of Liechtenstein's Cranach

Old Master works by Orazio Gentileschi, Frans Hals and Diego Velázquez drawn into dispute



Venus (1531), attributed to Lucas Cranach the Elder. Photo: © LIECHTENSTEIN. The Princely Collections, Vaduz–Vienna

There has been a bizarre new twist in the case of the Prince of Liechtenstein's painting of Venus, attributed to Cranach, which was seized on 1 March by a French judge. The Art Newspaper has learned that the painting is the subject of a lawsuit that has been ongoing since May 2014. The case was launched in Paris by an art dealer against two middlemen. The French dealer, who cannot currently be named, says he was the owner of the painting and was cheated of the true value of the work after agreeing to a contract of sale in November 2012.

The middlemen in turn claim the French dealer sold the panel to them in January 2013, for €510,000, as a work by an anonymous artist, which was only later authenticated as a Cranach by two scholars. The middlemen claim that disputes arose when they wanted to check the work's provenance, in case it had been looted during the Second World War, but also after the French dealer learned of the huge sale prices obtained in a matter of months. The French dealer is suing for breach of trust.

In March 2013, the work was bought in Brussels by Konrad Bernheimer for €3.2m, from a German financier based in Paris. In July, Bernheimer's London gallery, Colnaghi, sold it to the Prince of Liechtenstein for €7m.

The work was seized by judge Aude Buresi from an exhibition at the Caumont Centre d'Art in Aix-en-Provence, in the South of France. According to the French dealer's attorney, Philippe Scarzella, the investigation also includes half-a-dozen other works, including a portrait of a man attributed to Frans Hals, a David with the head of Goliath, painted on lapis lazuli and attributed to Orazio Gentileschi, and a portrait of cardinal Borgia attributed to Velázquez. All three works, he says, were sold to the London dealer Mark Weiss.

The French dealer says he was the source for all these works, claiming he got them from the collection of a French businessman, André Borie. His lawyer insists that, even if there is any doubt about their provenance, it does not mean the works are forgeries (and indeed, French law allows for the seizure of works that are suspected forgeries for investigation without a court judgement). He considers the allegations — which led to this criminal investigation — a result of the feud and an attempt to smear his client.

The German financier, who sold the disputed Cranach to Konrad Bernheimer, told The Art Newspaper that he had "nothing to do with the criminal investigation". He believes "the Cranach is authentic" and denies any wrongdoing in his business relations.

The idea that the works could be forgeries is dismissed by the dealers involved. "The painting is correct and we have no other comment," Konrad Bernheimer told us at the opening of Tefaf in Maastricht, explaining he was "not aware" that an analysis commissioned by Christie's, at the end of 2012, raised doubts about the panel.

Mark Weiss says the whole affair is “insane”, noting that the painting on lapis “was shown at the Maillol museum in Paris before being recently exhibited by the National Gallery in London”. (The National Gallery returned it to its owner a couple of days after the Venus was seized because “the display just went to its end”, according to the press office.)

Meanwhile the Louvre had tried to buy the portrait attributed to Hals, launching a fundraising campaign (it failed to make the €5m price tag). Presented as a “major discovery, masterly executed, in excellent state of conservation”, it was classified as a “national treasure” in 2008, after a study by the National French Museums’ laboratory. This is the same lab where the Venus has now been sent for a complete set of examinations at the request of the judge.