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Massive Old Masters Forgery Ring Busted in Spain

Alexander Forbes, Friday, January 30, 2015

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Officials announcing the forgery ring bust with the purported Goya at the center.
Via: El Pais

Police in Spain have uncovered a ring of art forgers specialized in the creation of counterfeit Old Masters, *El Pais* reports. Announcing the bust earlier this week, police said that they recovered 27 artworks from several locations.

The group allegedly sold fake works by Flemish masters and the likes of Goya and José Benlliure through the internet and at various art galleries. The 27 pieces recovered in their raids, based out of Castellón, had a combined price of €1.2 million. Both regional and national police collaborated on the takedown. The investigation began when a detective was offered a painting depicting the Adoration of the Magi for €180,000 on an unnamed internet platform.

Officials say that the works varied widely in quality. The forgers allegedly attributed most expensive artwork in the haul to Goya. It had a price tag of €900,000. Police claim the work was middling at best in its approximation of the Spanish romantic master's style. However, they presume that the high price tag was meant to convince would-be collectors that the piece was the real deal.

Better fakes included a purported Melchior de Hondecoeter still life and a portrait of San Jerónimo. The forgers reportedly used the ash of orange trees in order to give the paintings a suitable patina. More skilled forgers typically use existing canvases from the period from which the work they are attempting to create would have originated rather than artificial methods of aging, which are much easier to detect (see Master Forger Wolfgang Beltracchi Gets a Gallery Show).

But that's not the most egregious (and hilarious) alleged act of forgery that the ring undertook. Reports suggest that a group of "etchings" also purported to be by Goya and being sold for €2,500 a piece, were nothing other than photocopies.

This is the second major forgery ring broken up in Spain in recent weeks. Earlier in January, police arrested three people in the cities of Zaragoza and Tarragona for trying to sell fake Joan Miró, Pablo Picasso, and Henri Matisse drawings (see Picasso, Miró, and Matisse Forgery Ring Busted). The bust marked the end of a six-month-long operation to dismantle the ring. It is unclear whether the two groups were related in any way.