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Owner of purported Monet loses case in French court

Work featured on BBC's Fake or Fortune programme in 2011

by GEORGINA ADAM | 7 January 2016



Les Bords de Seine à Argenteuil (dated 1875 on frame), purportedly by Monet, was the subject of an attribution battle

While Guy Wildenstein faces charges of tax fraud and money laundering in Paris, another French court has handed down its final ruling on a Monet that was the subject of a bitter attribution battle between the owner and the Wildenstein Institute. And it is a clear “non!”

The work, Les Bords de Seine à Argenteuil (dated 1875 on frame), featured in the BBC programme Fake or Fortune in June 2011, in which its owner David Joel enlisted the help of the programme presenters, Fiona Bruce and Philip Mould, to prove it was a genuine Monet.

Joel, now in his late 80s, had bought the painting privately for €50,000 in 1993, and is convinced it is “right”. However, Daniel Wildenstein, Guy’s father, had rejected it in 1982 when he was approached by Christie’s. It was excluded from the catalogue raisonné of Monet’s works, prepared by the Wildenstein Institute, the non-profit arm of the art-dealing Wildenstein dynasty. Prior to being bought by Joel, the painting had been offered at auction but was bought in at £500,000.

The BBC programme produced considerable evidence to show the work was painted by Monet, digging up an illustration of the painting in Monet’s obituary, published in *Le Figaro*. It also found provenance going back to the artist’s dealer Georges Petit. Its belief in the picture was backed up by a number of eminent specialists including the late Professor John House of the Courtauld and Professor Paul Hayes Tucker.

The programme makers presented their findings to the Wildenstein Institute, asking it to change its mind and include the painting in the catalogue raisonné. When the Institute refused, Joel took it to court, attempting to force inclusion. He lost in 2014 and last month an appeal court confirmed that decision.

The judge pointed out that it was not the court’s role to establish the authenticity of the work, but rather decide whether it should make the authors of the catalogue include a painting they did not believe in.

While Guy Wildenstein and the Institute had asked for damages of €120,000, the court only awarded them €10,000; Joel was also ordered to pay his (undefined) legal costs.

Opinions still vary about the work. The court cited Joachim Pissarro, Charles Stuckey and Richard Brettell as not believing in its authenticity. In *The Guardian*, Waldemar Januszczak wrote: “What no one seems prepared to countenance is that the Wildenstein Institute is right...I completely agree with their view that the picture featured in the programme was not painted by Monet. Plenty of fake Monets were already in circulation while Monet was alive. And, unfortunately, his unscrupulous dealer, Georges Petit, was perfectly capable of selling pretend Monets.” Others, including inevitably, Bendor Grosvenor, who worked on the programme, are still convinced it is “right”.