

AUTHENTICATION IN ART

AiA Art News-service



THE ART MARKET
January 8, 2016 4:36 pm

Georgina Adam

Wildenstein trial and 'The Lute Player'; French art galleries association



©Wildenstein
Collection

Caravaggio's 'The Lute Player' (1596)

French authorities have spent five years investigating a case of alleged tax fraud against art dealer Guy Wildenstein. The trial opened this week only to be stopped three days later. Wildenstein, and other family members, were accused of bilking the French taxman to the tune of hundreds of millions of euros, by underdeclaring the stupendous value of his late father's estate. All the defendants deny wrongdoing. However the tribunal's president halted the trial because it involved both criminal and civil charges, and has sent the case to a higher court to rule on its constitutionality.

So don't hold your breath — the case is unlikely to come back before the tribunal for many months. Much of the Wildenstein's massive fortune comes from art dealing over four generations, as well as the family holdings of art, according to US investigators, and could be worth \$1bn.



Collection

©Wildenstein

Caravaggio's 'The Lute Player' (1596)

But an article published in 1999 in *Lute News*, the newsletter of the Lute Society, which went largely

unnoticed, questioned the attribution of one potentially highly valuable work belonging to the Wildensteins — Caravaggio’s “The Lute Player” (1596).

Reported to be worth some £69m, it is (supposedly) one of three versions, and had been on loan to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York until 2013, when it was taken back by the family. However, in the opinion of lute-maker David Van Edwards, a wealth of details in the painting including the number of pegs on the lute and its bridge mean that the work could not be from the 16th century and therefore, he concludes, is inauthentic.

Art dealer Clovis Whitfield concurs: “I know how obsessive Caravaggio was in his observation of detail, and so this picture is disqualified in a comparison with any of the originals.” The Wildenstein lawyer declined to comment.

...

Much has been written about the need for art galleries to improve their “brand image”, and certainly the number of lawsuits concerning fakes, disputes between collectors, dealers and even between artists and collectors, are painting what many feel is an unfair picture of the art trade. At the Art Business Conference held in London in September there were calls for the market to reinforce self-regulation. So it’s good news that next week the French Comité Professionnel des Galeries d’Art is launching an updated and revised code of practice.

Georges-Philippe Vallois, the Comité’s president, explains that the previous code was more than 20 years old and no longer applied to today’s world; the new one will lay down rules on the various

relationships in the art trade, between galleries, their artists and their clients. The Comité's 240 members will have to adhere to the code or be excluded.

"The Federation of European Art Galleries Association is interested in working with us," says Vallois. "And the code will be translated into English. I hope it will contribute to improving the image of art galleries."

Vallois is also going ahead with plans to create a fair for Comité members in Paris. It will be held in March next year in a central location "between the Grand Palais and the Louvre", and group about 50 dealers.

"We like the model of New York's Art Show, organised by the Art Dealers' Association of America," says Vallois. "All the stands would be the same size and would either be solo shows, or curated.

"Our selection committee would not include any dealers, but rather curators and critics; just one gallerist would be included to have a veto vote. We want this to be a 'first division' event, but not focused only on French artists — it will be international," he promises.

Georgina Adam is art market editor-at-large of The Art Newspaper

Photograph: Wildenstein Collection