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The New York Times

Austrian Authorities Thwart Group Trying to Sell Fake Picassos

By CHRISTOPHER D. SHEANOV. 8, 2016



A fake Picasso, titled “El Greco” (1950). Credit Bundeskriminalamt

LONDON — Austria’s [criminal intelligence service](#) announced this week that it had uncovered a group selling forgeries of high-profile art, including fakes that had been attributed to Chagall and Picasso.

The service said in a statement on Monday that intelligence officers had posed as art buyers and arrested six suspects at a Vienna airport hotel in an undercover operation in July. Details on the operation were kept private until this week.

The suspects were said to have been trying to sell the undercover authorities five artworks that they said were Picasso originals for about 10 million euros, or about \$11 million, each.

The authorities in the Vienna suburb of Schwechat, site of the city's international airport, received a tip in the middle of the year that a small criminal group was planning to sell fake artworks there and alerted the intelligence service, which then organized the undercover purchase.

Further investigations into the suspects, who include five Austrians and one Slovenian citizen, revealed that members of the group had over a dozen forgeries of works by artists including Picasso and Emil Nolde in their possession in Austria, and that there was a trove of more than 60 others by artists like Klimt, Monet and Picasso at one of the suspects' properties in Slovenia.

The Slovenian member of the group tried to sell some of these fakes in 2014 but was unable to find buyers, said Vincenz Kriegs-Au, a spokesman for the criminal intelligence service. After the first failed attempt, the suspect teamed up with those who were arrested in July. He told investigators that he bought the works from an art collector. It is not clear who painted the forgeries.

The suspects, whose names have not been released, told investigators that they believed the works were real. The suspects have been released pending trial, Mr. Kriegs-Au said. All of the works are in police possession, and representatives of the artists' estates are in the process of evaluating some of them for authenticity.