

AUTHENTICATION IN ART

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Serious doubts grow over Old Masters sold by Giulano Ruffini

US collector refunded by Sotheby's after tests reveal modern materials in
"Frans Hals" painting



An Unknown Man was believed to have been by Frans Hals and was sold by Sotheby's in 2011—the auction house has now cast serious doubt over its authenticity

In the latest development in a growing scandal over several Old Master paintings, the authenticity of which are in serious doubt, Sotheby's New York provided new details on the rescinding of a 2011 sale to a US collector of a portrait sold in good faith as a Frans Hals. The auction house confirmed it reimbursed the buyer "in full" after discovering the painting was a forgery, which was first reported by our sister paper, the Journal des Arts, on 30 September.

The painting was sold in 2011 by Sotheby's and the London dealer Mark Weiss to Seattle-based collector Richard Hedreen for \$10m. It was purchased for €3m by Mark Weiss from Giulano Ruffini, whose estate near Parma was raided by French and Italian police last April. Before that, the Louvre had tried to buy the portrait, which was declared a "national treasure" in France.

Now, Sotheby's indicates that "after receiving consent" from Weiss, it informed Hedreen of "a possible issue with the authenticity of the painting" and that a subsequent "in-depth technical analysis established that the work was a forgery." Sotheby's confirms it then "rescinded the sale and reimbursed the client in full", adding that the company means to "keep its promises when problems arise". Weiss, who has not paid back his 50% share of the sale by Sotheby's, says further technical analysis is needed.

Sotheby's acted "after the seizure by French police last March of a work attributed to Cranach", which had been sold to the Prince of Liechtenstein by Colnaghi Gallery. As we revealed at the time, this painting also belonged to Ruffini.

Sotheby's indicates that the study of the painting it believed was by Frans Hals was undertaken by "one of the leading experts on the field", Orion Analytical, before being "peer reviewed by another leading conservation scientist". The analyses "showed the presence of modern materials used in the painting". Sotheby's says in the statement that a cross-section of the painting revealed "trace evidence in ground and paint layers" containing "synthetic materials first produced in the 20th century".

Ruffini told us he had sold dozens of paintings over the past few decades. But he never claimed any of them were by Old Masters. "I am not an expert, only a private collector," he insisted. "If these paintings were later attributed to Correggio, Gentileschi or the Bruegels, or any other great artist, the experts, the dealers and the curators are responsible." The dealers in question respond that these works have impressed the best experts, including the Louvre's curators and laboratory.

"[Mark] Weiss, strongly believes, as do others in the museum and scientific world, that more forensic analysis needs to be done before making a final judgement on this painting," says a spokeswoman for Weiss Gallery, referring to the painting attributed to Frans Hals.

