

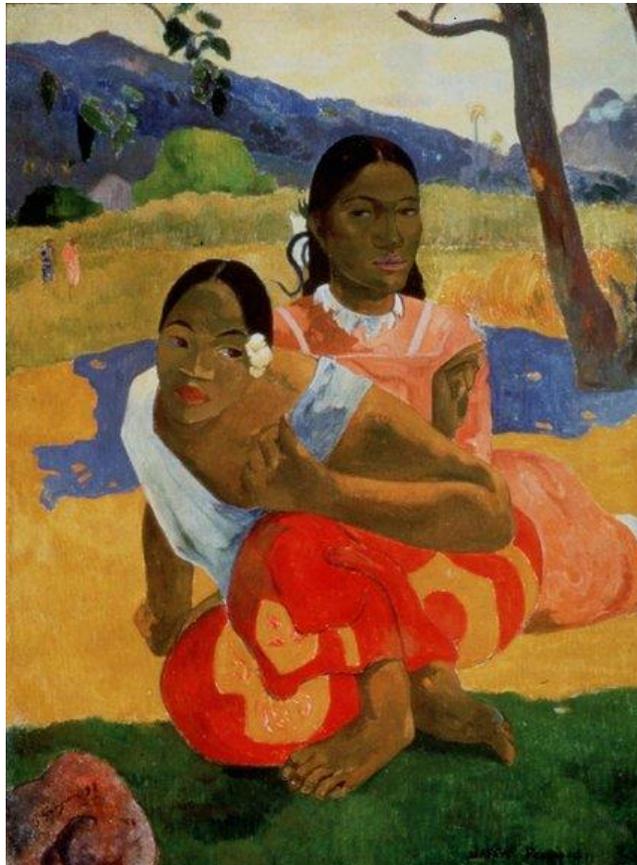
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Lawsuit Reveals Gauguin Painting Was Not World's Most Expensive

By SOPHIE HAIGNEY JULY 3, 2017



Paul Gauguin's "Nafea Faa Ipoipo (When Will You Marry?)," from 1892. Credit Artothek/Associated Press

A legal dispute has revealed that a painting thought to be the world's most expensive artwork is not the most expensive one after all. Paul Gauguin's 1892 oil painting "Nafea Faa Ipoipo (When Will You Marry)?" sold for \$210 million in 2014, \$90 million less than originally reported.

The New York Times and other news outlets [reported in 2015](#) that the painting had been sold by Rudolf Staechelin, a retired Sotheby's executive, to a Qatari buyer for close to \$300 million. If true, that would have been the highest known price for a painting.

Prices in private sales of artwork are often closely guarded secrets, particularly when they reach astronomical levels. On Wednesday, however, a trial began in the High Court in London that revealed the ins and outs of this particular high-stakes art deal, which took nearly two years of negotiations to complete.

In September 2014, Mr. Staechelin sold the painting to a limited liability company run by the British art dealer Guy Bennett on behalf of the emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, according to documents submitted to the court by lawyers for the Swiss auctioneer Simon de Pury, who was involved in the dealings. Mr. de Pury's lawyer wrote that he originally put the buyer and seller in touch. Mr. de Pury, along with his wife, Michaela de Pury, and their limited partnership, have sued Mr. Staechelin and his trust, claiming that Mr. de Pury is owed a \$10 million commission on the sale.

The two sides had no written contract regarding the commission. The de Purys' lawyer, Jonathan Cohen, wrote in an argument submitted to the High Court last week, "It would be unusual to find some types of contract made orally, but that is not true of the art market, which continues to operate in a 'gentlemanly manner, based on mutual trust.'"

Mr. Staechelin contests the claim that he owes commission. He contends that Mr. de Pury deceived him about possible higher offers for the painting, voiding any possible agreement, gentlemanly or otherwise.

Jeremy Scott, the lawyer for Mr. Staechelin and his trustees, said in a phone interview: "The trustees say that had it not been for the deception, they wouldn't have accepted the \$210 million price. They say that the de Purys forfeited any right to commission as a result of the deception."

The trial is ongoing, but Mr. Scott said that a decision in the case by the end of July was possible. At the very least, however, the suit has rearranged the top rankings for high art prices: Willem de Kooning's 1955 painting "Interchanged" stands alone with a [reported sale price of \\$300 million](#) in 2016. Cézanne's "Card Players" [brought \\$250 million](#) in a sale to the Qatari government in 2011.