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Princely buyer defends Cranach attribution over 'fakes' claim



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- Written by [Alex Capon](#)

The buyer of a major Old Master painting at the centre of a potential 'fakes' scandal has strongly defended its authenticity as a row threatens to erupt over its attribution.



'Venus', a painting attributed to Lucas Cranach the Elder which is part of the Prince of Liechtenstein's collection. French authorities seized the work earlier this year in connection with an investigation which brought into question the authenticity of the picture. Image © Liechtenstein. The Princely Collections, Vaduz–Vienna

With a probe into the work ongoing in France, the director of the Princely Collections of Liechtenstein Dr. Johann Kraeftner countered accusations over its authorship last week.

Kraeftner said in a statement that he “had no reason to doubt the authenticity” of *Venus* by Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472-1533) and added that they will refute divergent opinions “point by point”.

The oil on panel is among the works that have been under close examination after a judge in Paris ordered the seizure of the painting back in March.

French authorities are understood to be preparing a detailed report into the picture including an analysis of the pigments and the panel.

The picture was sold to the Prince of Lichtenstein for €7m in 2013 by dealers Colnaghi (run by dealer Conrad Bernheimer at the time). Kraeftner asserts that, before the acquisition, reports from two Cranach experts confirmed the attribution as did two restoration reports that were commissioned.

A dendrochronological analysis was also undertaken after the acquisition at the Zentrum Holzwirtschaft of the University of Hamburg, commissioned by the Princely Collections.

'No Reason to Doubt'

“Taking into account all the evidence, and all examinations to date, the Princely Collections have no reason to doubt the authenticity of the painting, its authorship to Lucas Cranach the Elder, and the origin of the panel to the 16th century,” said Kraeftner.

“Any divergent opinions resulting from recent analysis instructed by the French authorities can and will be refuted, point by point, as part of an ongoing investigation.”

Kraeftner also expressed frustration that “results of this ongoing investigation have been repeatedly passed on to members of the public, and before information has even been made available to us.”

Art Historians

According to a recent article in *Le Journal des Arts*, Dieter Koeplin, one of the art historians cited by the Princely Collections as having approved the Cranach attribution at the time of the acquisition, now is convinced that the work is “a counterfeit”.

The German conservation expert and Cranach scholar Gunnar Heydenreich also is reported to have provided testimony to the inquest which is being overseen by France cultural property body ‘l’Office central de lutte contre le trafic des biens culturels (OCBC)’.

ATG made enquiries to the OCBC about the current state of the investigation but was still awaiting comment.

The Cranach was one of number of works that were previously owned by the Frenchman [Giulano Ruffini](#) that have come under scrutiny. It emerged earlier this month that Sotheby’s have [reimbursed a buyer](#) who acquired one of the works in question, a Frans Hals portrait that was sold to a US collector in a \$10m private deal they brokered in 2011. It was previously owned by Ruffini but was supplied to Sotheby’s by London dealer Mark Weiss.

Sotheby’s commissioned a forensic analysis by US art conservators Orion Analytical which included chemical and cross-section examination. Sotheby’s have not released full details of the report but said that “the examination elucidated trace evidence in ground and paint layers used to create the work, which analyses revealed contained synthetic materials first produced in the 20th century”.

They also confirmed to ATG that they have “informed the buyer and initiated a procedure” over another work previously owned by Ruffini, the painting *Saint Jerome* catalogued as ‘Circle of Parmigianino’ which sold in a New York auction in 2012 for \$800,000. Sotheby’s said the painting is subject to a “technical analysis, similar to the procedure we undertook with the Hals”.

Additional reporting by Laura Chesters