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Sotheby's Drags Christie's Into Fight Over Fake Old Master

By

Jonathan Browning

• Auction house wants help proving \$11 million painting is fake



Frans Hals fake Source: Sotheby's

Sotheby's has dragged rival auction house Christie's into a fight over the sale of an \$11 million Old Master painting it says is a fake.

Ahead of a London trial next year, Sotheby's wants to prove that art specialists at Christie's had prior doubts about a work attributed to Dutch Golden Age artist Frans Hals, which the firm itself later concluded was a forgery.

After the discovery, Sotheby's had to reimburse the buyer, U.S. real estate investor Richard Hedreen, and is now suing the art gallery that owned the work to recover its loss. The auction house hopes its biggest competitor could bolster its case, helping to show that "the generally accepted view of scholars and experts" was that the picture is unlikely to be genuine.

Christie's didn't immediately respond to an email seeking comment.

The painting, "Portrait of a Gentleman," was caught up in a scandal that rocked the art world after technicians hired by Sotheby's discovered pigments in paint that could only have been used four centuries after the artist's death.

It was once owned by French collector Giuliano Ruffini, according to court filings. A 16th century painting of Venus, attributed to German master Lucas Cranach the Elder, which had also belonged to Ruffini, was seized by French police in March 2016 on suspicion that it was fake.

"It is a question of reputation that has a much broader impact than the value of this one painting," Emily Wood, a lawyer for Sotheby's, said in court Wednesday.

A judge allowed Sotheby's to question Christie's specialists, including one who told French police that the auction house "had too many doubts" about this work. A trial in London's High Court is slated for April.

Lawyers for Mark Weiss, the art dealer who bought the painting from Ruffini, said in court filings that he still believes the work to be by Hals. At the time of the Sotheby's sale in 2011, the work was generally considered by scholars to be by the Dutch artist, they said. The dealer consequently had no obligation to return the \$10.8 million purchase price, they said.