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One Queens Painter Created Forgeries That Sold for Millions, U.S. Says

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For 15 years, some of the art world's most established dealers and experts rhapsodized about dozens of newly discovered masterworks by titans of Modernism. Elite buyers paid up to \$17 million to own just one of these canvases, said to have been created by the hands of artists like Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko, Franz Kline and Robert Motherwell. But federal prosecutors say that most, if not all, of the 63 ballyhooed works — which fetched more than \$80 million in sales — were painted in a home and garage in Queens by one unusually talented but unknown artist who was paid only a few thousand dollars apiece for his handiworks.



"Untitled" by Jackson Pollock was one of the forged works. How imitations of the most heralded Abstract Expressionists by a complete unknown could have fooled connoisseurs and clients remains a mystery.

Authorities did not name or charge the painter and provided few identifying details except to say he had trained at a Manhattan art school in a variety of disciplines including painting, drawing and lithography. He was selling his work on the streets of New York in the early 1990s, they said, when he was spotted by a Chelsea art dealer who helped convert his work into one of the most audacious art frauds in recent memory.

The new details about the man said to have created the fakes were contained in a superseding indictment, handed up Wednesday against one of the co-conspirators, Glafira Rosales, an obscure dealer from Long Island who was arrested after a lengthy Federal Bureau of Investigation inquiry. She has been charged with wire fraud and money laundering in connection to what authorities have called a scam, but her boyfriend, alleged to be the other co-conspirator who discovered the painter, has not been charged.

Investigators say Ms. Rosales sold 40 of the counterfeit works through Knoedler & Company, a venerable Upper East Side gallery that took in about \$63 million from their sale. The gallery, which abruptly closed in November 2011, kept \$43 million of that sum, and paid Ms. Rosales \$20 million. Fakes sold through a second Manhattan dealer, Julian Weissman, brought in another \$17 million, according to the indictment.

Meanwhile, the painter earned \$5,400 for a painting in December 2005 and \$7,000 for another in February 2008, the indictment said.

Ms. Rosales has pleaded not guilty and was released on bail earlier this week. Knoedler, its former president Ann Freedman, and Mr. Weissman have repeatedly said they believed the works they sold had been authentic.

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“It’s impressive,” said Jack Flam, president of the Dedalus Foundation, the nonprofit organization that authenticates Motherwell’s work. “Whoever did these paintings was very well-informed of the practices of the artists.”

One of the first experts to publicly identify some of these paintings as forgeries, Mr. Flam noted that not only the works themselves, but also the backs of the paintings and the way the canvases were treated and the frames constructed aped the styles of the artists.

But he said “the way we look at reality is highly influenced by the context it’s presented to us.” The fact that they were sold by Knoedler, a respected gallery, influenced people’s opinions, he said.

Ms. Rosales’s boyfriend and business partner, who was not named in the indictment but has previously been identified in court papers as Jose Carlos Bergantiños-Diaz, processed the freshly painted fakes, “heating them, cooling them, and exposing them to the elements outdoors, in an attempt to make the fake works seem older than, in fact, they were,” the indictment said.

Ms. Rosales concocted various stories about the sudden appearance of so many never-seen-before works, telling Knoedler and Mr. Weissman that a majority came from a family friend who had inherited them from his father and insisted on remaining anonymous. The works, she said, were acquired in the 1950s and kept stashed in a sealed container.

Eight lawsuits have been brought by customers who say they were duped into buying forgeries. Many of the works were subjected to forensic testing that concluded they were forgeries.

Two of those suits were settled, including one involving a Pollock bought by a London hedge fund director for \$17 million.

Ms. Freedman’s lawyer, Nicholas Gravante Jr., said: “Rosales’s confession confirms that Ann Freedman was the central victim of this criminal scheme.” Knoedler’s lawyer, Charles D. Schmerler, said in a statement: “If proven true, the new allegations against Rosales are a sad development for the entire art world.” But he said claims that Knoedler knowingly sold inauthentic paintings were baseless.

A lawyer for Ms. Rosales, Steven R. Kartagener, declined to comment on the new charges.

John Howard, a Wall Street executive who has sued Knoedler, Ms. Freedman and Ms. Rosales after paying \$4 million for a painting attributed to Willem de Kooning, said that after he purchased the work in 2007, he asked Ms. Freedman to be on the lookout for a rare item — a small Motherwell from the artist’s acclaimed “Spanish Elegy” series.

“I doubt you’ll ever see one,” he remembered her saying.

Then six months later, he said, he got a call from the gallery saying one had surprisingly turned up. He decided not to buy it, he said. He noted that the work remained in an inventory of works unsold when the gallery shut its doors.