

# AUTHENTICATION IN ART

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## THE ART NEWSPAPER

### Russian art historian on trial over forgery

**Andrei Vasilyev claims avant-garde expert Elena Basner and the State Historical Museum both knew the work he bought was a fake**

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The St Petersburg art historian Elena Basner, controversially accused of selling a forgery of *In the Restaurant*, 1913, by Boris Grigoriev—the original of which is in St Petersburg's State Russian Museum under the title *Paris Cafe*—is now on trial.

The case has gripped and divided the art world ever since Basner's arrest in January. Andrei Vasilyev, a prominent St Petersburg art collector, claims Basner plotted to sell him the work knowing it was a fake.

Basner, who worked at the State Russian Museum for years but left to work on contract for the Bukowskis auction house, denies any wrongdoing and says the painting was offered to her by a man named Mikhail Aronson, and that she got a \$20,000 cut from the buyer, Leonid Shumakov, who bought it for \$200,000 in cash. Shumakov is said to have then sold the work to Vasilyev, the plaintiff, for \$250,000. The painting was recognised as a forgery by Yulia Rybakova, a restorer who saw the work in an exhibition.

Basner, who has previously spoken out about the extent to which the Russian art market is riddled with fakes, says she did not realise the painting was a forgery. In her only interview about the case, with the St Petersburg publication *Gorod 812*, she accused Vasilyev of trying to salvage his own reputation after he sold the painting to "a high-placed Moscow financier" for \$950,000.

Vasilyev has claimed in court hearings that Basner told him the fake was in the museum's vaults and that his painting was real. He also claims the Russian Museum subsequently offered to authenticate his fake, leading to suggestions that it had participated in the forgery.

Mikhail Piotrovsky, general director of St Petersburg's State Hermitage Museum, called Basner's arrest "an insult to the entire Russian intelligentsia".