



AiA Art News-service



Belgian police examine claims Russian art show was full of fakes

Homes raided after Museum of Fine Arts in Ghent cancels exhibition of avant garde works

***Daniel Boffey** in Brussels*

Tue 20 Mar 2018 11.17 GMT Last modified on Tue 20 Mar 2018 22.00 GMT



A piece by Kazimir Malevich. The Russian artist's work is among those claimed to have been forged.
Photograph: Picasa 2.7/Handout

Homes across [Belgium](#) have been raided by police investigating allegations that counterfeit Russian avant garde works were exhibited at the Museum of Fine Arts in Ghent.

The display of 26 pieces, loaned by the Russian businessman Igor Toporovski, was terminated by the gallery in January after experts claimed it was full of fakes. The museum's director, Catherine de Zegher, was suspended from her post earlier this month.

Experts claim Europe has become [awash with counterfeit Russian works](#) in recent years.

On Friday, Wiesbaden regional court in the western German state of Hesse sentenced two men to three years and 32 months in prison respectively for having knowingly sold forged pictures that had been presented as works by artists including El Lissitzky, Kazimir Malevich and Alexander Rodchenko.

The pair were ordered to pay back about €1m (£875,000) they had made through the sale of the pictures.

Ghent's public prosecutor's office and federal police in east Flanders carried out their searches on Monday after a formal civil complaint from a collective of four art dealers from London and New York, and a descendant of an artist whose work is said to have been counterfeited.

The prosecutor's office declined to comment on the targets of its investigation.

Geert Lenssens, a lawyer representing the complainants, said: "They are suffering damage now that the art market, of which they are a part, and the museum world, with whom they work closely, are being damaged."

Detectives sealed computers, requested documents and interviewed De Zegher, according to the Belgian newspaper De Standaard.

It is believed forgers have focused on Russian avant garde works due to a lack of experts in the genre.

The wave of modern art flourished in the early 20th century, after which socialist realism was decreed the sole sanctioned mode in the Soviet Union, and archives were often destroyed.

The collection under investigation, entitled Russian Modernism 1910–30, was on display for more than three months before being removed on 29 January.

An [open letter signed by 10 experts](#) also questioned the validity of the works purportedly by artists including Malevich, Rodchenko, Wassily Kandinsky and Vladimir Tatlin.

De Zegher told the city's cultural committee on 5 March that her 35 years of curatorial experience qualified her to recognise fakes.

She claimed to have consulted two foreign experts, Noemi Smolik and Magdalena Dabrowski, on the authenticity of the collection. However, Smolik and Dabrowski refuted the claim in the Flemish press days later.

Eline Tritsmans, a lawyer acting for De Zegher, declined to comment "in the interests of the judicial investigation".

Annelies Storms, the alderman for culture in Ghent, said: "We are always confronted with new issues. It is easy to say afterwards what someone has to do."

