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Degas Painting, Stolen in 2009, Is Found on Bus Near Paris

By AURELIEN BREEDEN FEB. 23, 2018



The Degas painting, “The Chorus Singers,” was taken in 2009 from a museum in Marseille. Credit French Customs, via Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

PARIS — A little over eight years ago, French investigators were stumped after a small painting by the Impressionist master Edgar Degas was [stolen](#) from a museum in the Mediterranean port city of Marseille.

The painting, a colorful pastel from 1877 depicting singers on a theater stage, appeared to have been unscrewed from a wall, but there was no sign of a break-in. The police briefly [detained](#) a night watchman, but then released him.

Years went by. The painting, titled “The Chorus Singers” and thought to be worth nearly \$1 million, was nowhere to be found.

Until now.

In a surprising twist, the French authorities confirmed on Friday that the painting had been recovered on Feb. 16 by customs officers randomly searching the luggage compartment of a bus at a highway stop in Ferrières-en-Brie, about 18 miles east of Paris.

The officers found the signed painting in a suitcase, but none of the passengers on the bus claimed it as their own. A customs spokesman said on Friday that the search had not resulted from a tip, and that authorities did not initially know if the work was authentic.

Long-distance bus lines are often checked because they are used by criminal networks to convey drugs. The spokesman said the customs officers did not further question the passengers on the bus, but the investigation would continue.

Françoise Nyssen, the culture minister, said in a [statement](#) that “this fortunate rediscovery of a precious work of art” had reversed what had been a “heavy loss for French Impressionist heritage.”

According to the Culture Ministry, Degas said the painting depicted chorists from the final act of the opera “Don Giovanni.”

The painting was taken in December 2009 from an exhibition at the Musée Cantini in Marseille, where it was on loan from the Musée d’Orsay in Paris. At the time, it was estimated to be worth 800,000 euros.

After the painting was recovered, the Musée d’Orsay confirmed its authenticity. The museum [said](#) on its official Twitter account on Friday that it was “delighted.”

Laurence des Cars, the head of the Musée d’Orsay, told Agence France-Presse on Friday that the recovery was a “relief.”

“We had not heard about it since 2009 and we had all the reasons to be worried about its fate,” she said, adding that the painting did not appear to have been damaged.

The discovery was timely, coming shortly after the 100th anniversary of Degas’s death and coinciding with an [exhibit](#) at the Musée d’Orsay, which ends this weekend, on the friendship between the painter and Paul Valéry, the French poet and thinker.

French customs officials seized more than 10,000 works of art in 2016, mostly ancient pieces of currency and archaeological artifacts, according to official statistics. [In another high-profile case](#) from 2015, customs agents seized a portrait by Picasso from a yacht in the Mediterranean.

Tanguy Garrel-Jaffrelot contributed reporting.