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French police seize painting attributed to Cranach, owned by the Prince of Liechtenstein

Judge orders investigation into the work's provenance and authenticity

by [VINCENT NOCE](#) | 4 March 2016



Venus (1531), attributed to Lucas Cranach the Elder. Photo: © LIECHTENSTEIN. The Princely Collections, Vaduz–Vienna

A Paris judge seized on Tuesday a painting attributed to the artist Lucas Cranach the Elder from an exhibition in Aix-en-Provence after doubts were raised about its authenticity. Part of the Prince of Liechtenstein's collection, the work is to be examined by experts.

Eric Morain, a lawyer for the Prince, told the French press he was “surprised” by the seizure, which was made without warning “despite the Prince’s long and close collaboration with France’s leading cultural institutions, including loans of major works”. The comment has raised fears among institutions that it might become difficult to secure loans from one of the world’s most important private collections, which holds more than 1,700 paintings.

The 40cm by 25cm panel showing a veiled Venus is similar to another painting by Cranach dated to 1532 that hangs in Frankfurt’s Städel Museum. The Prince of Lichtenstein’s painting appears on the cover of the catalogue for an exhibition of the collection at the Caumont Centre d'Art in Aix, which runs until 20 March.



Lucas Cranach the Elder, Venus, 1532 at the Städel Museum, Frankfurt



Venus (1531), attributed to Lucas Cranach the Elder. Photo: © LIECHTENSTEIN. The Princely Collections, Vaduz–Vienna



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The work came on to the market in 2012 and was sold in good faith to the Prince in 2013 by Colnaghi Gallery in London. According to information provided to The Art Newspaper, the gallery bought the painting from the manager of an American investment fund for €3.2m and sold it to the Prince for €7m.

The gallery says the painting was discovered “in a Belgian collection, where it had been held since the middle of the 19th century”. The gallery could not provide any further details about this collection and would not comment on the seizure. The authorities are now investigating this provenance, reviving doubts over the work’s authenticity that were raised when the panel first appeared on the market. According to documents, the work had been offered for sale to Christie’s, Sotheby’s and other galleries, and was declined.

Colnaghi says that three leading specialists—Werner Schade, Bodo Brinkmann and Dieter Koeplin—have attributed the painting to Cranach. However other experts have expressed reservations over the condition of the paint, the signature and the winged dragon from Cranach’s family seal next to it, as well as the state of the wooden panel.

A laboratory report, commissioned by Christie’s in advance of its 2012 Old Master auction found six “concerns” that required “further research”. The first of these is the “rather coarse nature” of azurite pigment in the pearls Venus wears in the painting, mixed with titanium white, which was not available until the 20th century. This anomaly could be explained by later restorations, however, the author of the report said. Other concerns include “the manner in which the surface paint is cracked and delaminating from

the panel, the nature of the panel itself and the blackish appearance within these cracks”.

The Paris judge Aude Buresi is now overseeing a closer examination of the work. The Prince of Liechtenstein and Culturespaces, the company that manages the exhibition space in Aix, will join the case as civil parties. The director of the Prince’s collection, Johann Kräftner, says: “We still believe in the authenticity of the painting and are not willing to respond to anonymous gossip.”