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Old Master market faces the “biggest art scandal in a century”

A series of Old Master paintings has come under the spotlight as further details emerge about a potentially major fakes scandal.



‘An Unknown Man’ by Frans Hals which was sold in a private deal brokered by Sotheby’s in 2011. With its authenticity having been brought into question, Sotheby’s reimbursed the buyer and are believed to have threatened the seller with legal action to recover their losses.

Sotheby's have now confirmed to ATG that they have reimbursed a buyer who acquired a Frans Hals (1582-1666) portrait in a private deal they brokered in 2011. This followed the [seizure of a painting](#) attributed to Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472-1553) in March as part of an ongoing investigation by French authorities into suspected forgeries believed to have been created using highly sophisticated techniques.

The picture in the Sotheby's deal was sold by London dealer Mark Weiss and the buyer is understood to be a US client. There is no suggestion that the dealer or Sotheby's knowingly handled a fake.

ATG attempted to contact Weiss for comment but had not received a response as this story was published.

Technical Analysis

In a statement sent to ATG, Sotheby's confirmed that, following the seizure of the Cranach, they "informed the buyer of the Hals of potential concerns regarding the authenticity of the work". They added: "We then worked collaboratively with the buyer to commission a high-quality, technical analysis which demonstrated the work was a forgery."

ATG understands that, while dendrochronological tests took place in 2011, it was the recently-conducted "materials analysis", which included close examination of the pigment, that led to a belief that the painting was a forgery.

Sotheby's reimbursed their client "several months ago".

The questions surrounding the Hals and the latest developments in the possible fakes scandal came out in the most recent edition of the French publication *Le Journal des Arts*, released at the end of September. The story was subsequently followed up in a piece in this week's *Mail on Sunday* which reported that Sotheby's were believed to be threatening Weiss with legal action to recover their losses.

While the company told ATG that "no proceedings have been commenced as of now", they added, "Sotheby's will enforce its contractual rights as necessary".

The stories in *Le Journal des Arts* and *Mail on Sunday* story also mention a painting attributed to Orazio Gentileschi (1563-1639), *David with the Head of Goliath*, that is also thought to be "linked" to the Cranach. It was previously sold by Weiss but had also been accepted for display at the National Gallery in London. The National Gallery said: "The gallery always undertakes due diligence research on a work coming on loan as well as a technical examination."

"Buyers will insist on more guarantees"

Paris and New York dealer Bob Habeldt was quoted in the *Mail on Sunday* saying that rumours in the trade suggest as many as 25 works may be listed as fakes when the results of the French investigation become public.

"This is the biggest art scandal in a century," he said. "The careful marketing of these highly sophisticated forgeries using primarily older materials has caught the market by surprise. The implications will be that buyers will insist on more guarantees, scientific and financial."

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