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Police Accuse Italy's Former Culture Minister of Authenticating Fake Works by Late Avant Garde Artist Gino De Dominicis

Art historian and politician Vittorio Sgarbi is one of dozens accused of operating a forgery ring involving the late artist. **Henri Neuendorf**, February 6, 2019



Italian art historian and politician Vittorio Sgarbi. Photo by Roberto Serra - Iguana Press/Getty Images.

Former Italian culture minister and parliamentarian Vittorio Sgarbi is under investigation for his alleged involvement in a forgery ring that may have sold fake art by the late Italian avant-garde artist Gino De Dominicis.

In November, the Carabinieri's art crime unit announced the arrest of two people and impounded 250 allegedly forged works from the artist's foundation, some of which had already been sold to "unwitting

collectors,” according to the *Art Newspaper*. The art historian and politician is one of 23 people the Carabinieri is accusing of peddling forgeries and manufacturing fraudulent certificates of authenticity. Sgarbi has a history with De Dominicis. He was previously a member of the Gino De Dominicis Association, which was established shortly after the artist’s death in 1998, but after a falling out, he and several other members left to start a rival authentication board, the Gino De Dominicis Foundation and Archive. Since the split both organizations have continued to authenticate works independent of one another. Now, the newer organization has become ensnared in the Carabinieri’s probe.

Sgarbi denied the allegations in the Italian daily newspaper *Il Giornale*. “There is no [evidence] proving that I knew that works by De Dominicis which I authenticated were fakes... I am convinced that there are no fakes,” he wrote, adding that he has no incentive to put forgeries on the market because the artist only appeals to “an extremely limited number of collectors.”

“It is very rare for his works to appear on the market. In the last five years we have only seen about 30,” Mariolina Bassetti, head of modern and contemporary art at Christie’s Italy, told the *Art Newspaper*. De Dominicis’s auction record stands at €270,000 (\$335,779) for a work sold at the Italian auction house *Farsettiarte* in 2014, according to artnet’s Price Database.

So far, authorities have taken into custody the alleged forger, who has not been named, the vice president of the Gino De Dominicis Foundation and Archive, and the artist’s former assistant Marta Massaioli. Authorities say Massaioli’s “profound knowledge of De Dominicis’s painting techniques and conceptual language” helped the forger pass off the fakes as the real thing.

Massaioli inherited 167 works from De Dominicis and has a handwritten will proving the bequest, her lawyer says.

While demand for De Dominicis’ market is small, it is fertile ground for exploitation because he refused to document his work as act of rebellion against the market. As a result, there are no available images or catalogues to use for research.

Meanwhile, the ongoing forgery scandal has damaged the artist’s already small market. Dealer Claudio Poleschi told the *Art Newspaper* that his work is “nearly impossible to sell” right now.