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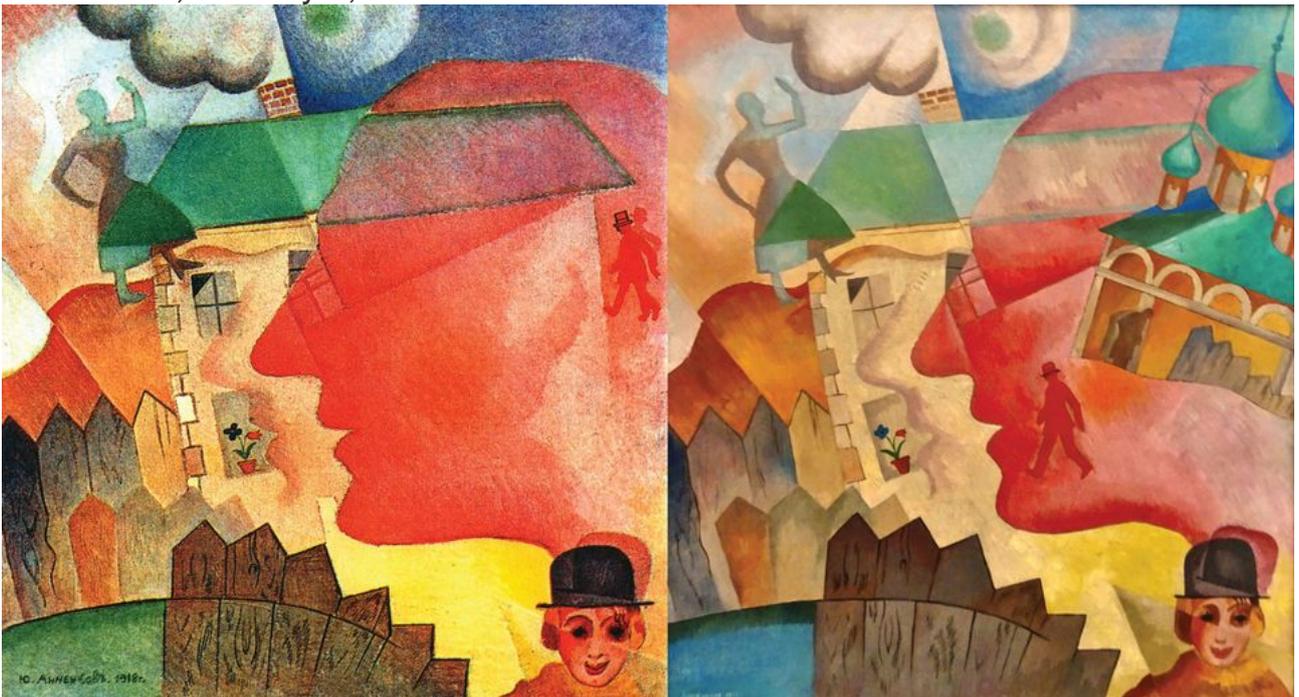
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Art and Law

The Collectors Who Lent Two Dozen Allegedly Fake Artworks to a Major Belgian Museum Have Been Arrested

Igor and Olga Toporovsky were taken into custody late last month.

Javier Pes, January 3, 2020



A known painting by Yury Annenkov (left) and a work that was on view at the contested exhibition in Ghent. Courtesy of Dieleghem Foundation.

The fallout from an exhibition of Russian avant-garde art that was overshadowed by allegations that it included numerous fakes continues, following the arrest of the two collectors at the center of the scandal. Igor and Olga Toporovsky, who lent works to the Museum of Fine Arts in Ghent for a 2017 exhibition titled “Russian Modernism, 1910–30,” were taken into custody late last month by Belgian police. The husband-and-wife duo, who gave artworks supposedly by Kandinsky, Malevich, and Goncharova, face allegations of fraud, money laundering, and forgery, although no official charges have been made.

The collectors were detained after complaints were filed by an international group of art dealers and collectors. The group’s lawyer, Geert Lenssens, told the *Art Newspaper*: “The Toporovskys were arrested early last month by the Belgian federal police after a criminal complaint deposited 18 months ago by our clients.” It is unclear if the pair are still in custody.

The Toporovskys’ lawyer, Sébastien Watelet, did not immediately respond to questions from Artnet News. He told the *Art Newspaper* that his clients would comment soon.

In 2018, Belgian police carried out raids in a hunt for fake Russian art, although it is unclear if the couple’s arrest stems from the same investigation. The market for Russian avant-garde art has long been plagued by fakes, but the Belgian case stands out because of the international stature of the borrowing institution.

The Brussels-based Dieleghem Foundation, founded by Igor Toporovsky, lent 24 works to the Museum of Fine Arts exhibition, immediately setting off alarm bells among experts. A group of scholars and dealers expressed their doubts about the authenticity of many of the works on show, writing an open letter pointing out that key works lacked exhibition histories and had never appeared in scholarly publications. The exhibition thereafter closed early.

The furor over the show led to the indefinite suspension of the museum’s director, Catherine de Zegher. A respected curator of contemporary art, she has not returned to her post. Her treatment has been criticized by CIMAM, a committee of leading museum directors and curators. In a statement issued last year, the group said that accusations against De Zegher had “caused considerable damage to her reputation as a museum professional and curator of the highest standing internationally.”

The scandal threatens to cast a shadow over the museum's unprecedented exhibition of works by Jan van Eyck, titled "An Optical Revolution," which brings together more than half of his known works. The show will be open from February 1 through April 30.