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Old Master scandal: Italy rejects European arrest warrant for painter connected to forgery case

Lino Frongia was arrested in September as part of a major investigation involving works purportedly by Lucas Cranach, Frans Hals, Parmigianino, Gentileschi and Bronzino

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A painting purportedly by Frans Hals was sold by Sotheby's in 2011

The court of appeal in Bologna has rejected a European arrest warrant issued for Lino Frongia, a local painter, in connection with a series of alleged Old Master forgeries that has rocked the US and European art markets, [The Art Newspaper France](#) reports. This is a major setback for the Parisian judge Aude Burési who has led the criminal investigation in to the scandal over the past five years.

In the coming days, the court of appeal in Milan is expected to hear the cases of two other people under investigation, Giuliano Ruffini and his son Mathieu Ruffini. They are both also fighting European arrest warrants. Their Parisian lawyer, Philippe Scarzella, says he feels “quite optimistic” after the decision in Bologna.

The case involves paintings purported to be works by Lucas Cranach, Frans Hals, Parmigianino, Gentileschi and Bronzino, which have sold for millions of pounds. Over the past three decades, these works, along with many others, were sold by Giuliano Ruffini, usually through intermediaries, via major international galleries and auction houses.

Some of the pictures were exhibited by the Metropolitan Museum in New York, the National Gallery in London and the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. The Louvre almost acquired the alleged Frans Hals, which is now the subject of a [civil lawsuit in London](#).

Frongia's lawyer, Tatiana Minchiarelli, argued in court that the evidence in the warrant did not sufficiently justify her client's transfer to Paris. She pointed out that Frongia was only connected to one of the paintings in the investigation: a work deemed as an El Greco by several experts and leading figures including former Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi's under-secretary for culture Vittorio Sgarbi.

The criminal investigation has been severely hampered by tensions between France and Italy, which started in May 2016 when a French court opposed the judgment of a local court in Treviso ordering the restitution of an alleged Goya to Frongia.

Frongia and the Ruffini's arrest warrants were issued in May 2018 after they declined to be interviewed in Paris by French

investigators. Frongia was arrested in northern Italy in September and was released after a day.

A rejection by the Milan court of the other warrants issued for Ruffini and his son would be a further blow to the French investigators. All three men maintain their innocence.