



Russian avant-garde forgery case spreads

Alter hundreds of works are seized in Germany, police swoop in Tel Aviv

LEGAL CASE

Wiesbaden, Tel Aviv. A forgery ring specialising in Russian avant-garde art, which was broken up in June by German federal police, appears to be bigger than previously thought. In addition to the two arrests and four warrants issued in Germany, police in Israel, where the forgeries are believed to have been made, have detained further suspects in connection with the ring.

Alter a "long-running undercover investigation", Tel Aviv District Police arrested 18 people, including art experts and financiers, in June on suspicion of producing "high-quality art forgeries", says a spokesman for the police. In addition to fraud and forgery, the suspects are being investigated for money-laundering offences and tax avoidance. The suspects, who appeared before a judge in the magistrates' court in Rishon LeZion, close to Tel Aviv, have been released on conditional bail, with a number being put under house arrests. According to the Haredi news website *Kikar Shabbat*,

the suspects include some ultra-Orthodox residents of Bnei Brak, a city just east of Tel Aviv.

The operation took place with the help of police in Germany, where many of the forgeries are believed to have been sold. In June, around 100 German police officers searched 28 apartments, offices, storage spaces and galleries in 14 German cities, seizing around 1,000 works. Two men were arrested: Itzhak Z. (67), the owner of the Wiesbaden-based Galerie SNZ (which closed in 2010) and Moez H. (41), who also had ties to the gallery. Four suspects are still being sought by the police.

The gang allegedly faked and sold around 400 works by Russian avant-garde artists on the international art market. The works were purportedly by artists including Natalia Goncharova, Kazimir Malevich, Wassily Kandinsky and Alexei Jawlensky.

"Between 2011 and 2013 alone, the two people under arrest [in Germany] sold the alleged forgeries for around €2m to clients in Germany and Spain," says a press statement issued by the German police.

The Stuttgart-based auction home Nagel appears to have been affected by the activities of the ring. Rudolf Pressler, the head of acquisitions at Nagel, says that its client list "overlaps" with the list of suspects supplied by the police.

The offices in Bornheim of the conservation scientist Erhard Jägers, who says he analysed "a few hundred" of the works linked to the ring, were also investigated by German police. Jägers says he provides "scientific context", looking only at the materials used in the works, not the stylistic elements. "[The alleged forgeries] were very good," he says. "The materials were all used at the time when the paintings were supposedly created."

The market for Russian avant-garde art is notoriously problematic. The chaos of the Second World War and the legacy of the Cold War means that works by the highly sought-after Modern Russian masters often have incomplete provenances. Experts believe that Russian avant-garde fakes outnumber the authentic works on the market.

Julia Michalska