Multimillion-pound international art forgery ring busted, say German police

Two arrested from gang of six that allegedly produced 400 fakes attributed to Russian avant-garde artists such as Kandinsky

Louise Osborne in Berlin
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Kazimir Malevich - Supremus Photograph: Fredrik Von Erichsen/AP

German authorities have smashed a multimillion-pound ring of art forgers who specialised in paintings by avant-garde Russian artists including Wassily Kandinsky, Kazimir Malevich and Natalia Goncharova.

Around 100 officers from the federal police (BKA) raided a string of houses, businesses, warehouses and art galleries across the country on Wednesday and Thursday. Two suspects, aged 67 and 41, who are believed to head a group of six involved in the ring, were arrested in raids in Wiesbaden, where more than 1,000 objects were seized.

Searches were also conducted in Switzerland and Israel, with the results still pending, according to the BKA.

The forgers are believed to have sold more than 400 pieces of counterfeit art painted in the style of artists such as Kandinsky and Malevich. The suspects are alleged to also have forged authenticity certificates to give the impression the paintings were previously unknown works.

The paintings were sold for four-to-seven figure euro sums, according to police. Two forged paintings were allegedly sold between 2011 and 2013 for €2m (£1.7m) in total to buyers in Germany and Spain.

In July last year Spanish police arrested four people as they tried to sell a forged version of Pablo Picasso's Buste de Jeune Garçon (Bust of Young Man) for £1m.

The high prices garnered at auction have made Russia's avant-garde art works a prime target for forgers,

said Rainer Grübel, who specialises in Russian art at the Carl von Ossietzky University in Oldenburg. "For some artists it's very attractive to forge," he said.

Kandinsky is particularly popular in Germany, where he spent time in the 1920s. Born in Moscow in 1866, Kandinsky moved several times between Russia and Germany where he taught at the Bauhaus school of art and architecture until it was shut down by the Nazis in 1933.

Grübel said both he and Malevich were well-known for having "broken with the tradition of European art of the time", the style of which was "reproducing reality in the picture".

"Malevich did it with art without an object – object-free art and in the case of Kandinsky it was through abstractionism, reducing all the features from reality into mere contours and shapes," he said.

Aside from its popularity and high auction price tags, avant-garde art is also easier to reproduce than other works, says William MacDougall, director of MacDougall's auction house.

"It's well known that avant-garde works are particularly subject to forgery purely on stylistic grounds," he said. "It's not that difficult to paint a convincing black square. It's much more difficult to forge a Rembrandt, for instance."

MacDougall said the majority of works the auction house received were rejected on the basis that it is difficult to tell whether they are real or not.

"Of course, you are much safer buying from an auction house because it is a public event and the artwork is publicised a couple of months in advance so people tend to notice forgeries," he added.

There are other ways of finding out whether paintings are real, such as provenance – tracing the painting's roots, regarding where it was bought and sold, although that is not always possible, said Grübel.

The BKA said it had struck an "important blow" against the internationally active art forgery scene. "I see this as yet another example of the significance of intergovernmental cooperation of law enforcement authorities in the fight against organised crime," said BKA's president Jörg Ziercke.