



# Forgeries: as seen on TV!

Art crimes are on the rise, and Canada is implicated

**Ben Kaplan, National Post**

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Thievery in the art world seems to be running as rampant as the prices artists like Damien Hirst are receiving for their work. After stolen masterpieces were uncovered in both Montreal and Toronto recently, a pair of California grifters were sentenced to seven years in prison in a separate case yesterday after being caught for forgery, another popular art crime. The couple was charged with auctioning off forged Picassos and Dalis on television.

Between 2002 and 2006, Kristine Eubanks, 52, and her husband, Gerald Sullivan, conducted art auctions that were televised on DirecTV and The Dish Network. The couple claimed they were selling art from "estate liquidations all over the world."

But U.S. attorneys charged that their company, Fine Art Treasures Gallery, sold counterfeit pieces and even forged signatures on some. The prosecution also claimed the couple would rig their auctions by having "phones ringing in the background to drive up the price" and showing fake bids onscreen.

"It's like they were attempting a 007-type crime, but didn't have the 00," says Doug Freeman of Freemanart Fine Art Consultants, a Londonbased company specializing in art forgery. "On the other hand, greed breeds money, and that's brought about ingenuity with these criminals. After all, they're selling artwork on the open market while that open market is being policed."

The police involved in yesterday's sentencing in California nabbed the couple after they'd already sold US\$20-million in forged goods.

The convictions on counts of conspiracy to commit mail fraud, wire fraud and tax evasion sent reverberations across Canada, which has recently been dubbed a "hotbed for stolen art" by the Art Loss Register. But the art world is given to hyperbole, argues Mark Durney, the founder of Art Theft Central, a database tabulating information of worldwide art crimes.

Responding to a much-publicized FBI report that claimed art world theft is a US\$6-billion industry and the fourth largest criminal enterprise after drugs, money laundering and guns, Durney says: "There's a lot of exaggeration in the world of art crimes, like the number \$6-billion that gets tossed around. In reality, most art crimes are part of an interrelated ecosystem of illicit industries, and illicit art is used as collateral for money or drug laundering."

The two Canadian cases were both uncovered by savvy gallery owners. In Montreal, Robert Landau had purchased a US\$100,000 painting by the Swiss artist Paul Klee. It was only after he tried verifying the piece that he learned the work had actually been stolen from a New York museum. The case of the Toronto gallery owner Miriam Shiell

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