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// **Collecting the Ukrainian way**

Ukrainian museums: How to steal a million

In 2010, in Ukraine the amount of robbed museums doubled compared to 1998. If then, in all Ukraine 23 museums were robbed, by March of this year, the number is already 55. One of the biggest and most expensive thefts was of the Caravaggio painting “The Taking of Christ or Kiss of the Judas” from the Odesa Museum of Western and Oriental Art in 2008. Recently, the painting was found in Germany.



// “Kiss of Judas” Caravaggio

The Ukrayinska Pravda Zhyttya reporter, when addressing the Security Service of Ukraine, was reassured that “the robberies of museums are not of an organized character and are singular cases that make up only 5% of all cultural valuables that are stolen.”

On the website of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, one can find a [catalog](#) of cultural valuables that have been stolen from Ukrainian museums and other collections from 1999-2009. It has about 1,000 items. To compare, the previous catalog (1984-1998) had only about 106 stolen art pieces. This means that in the last 10 years, in Ukraine there was a 9.5-fold increase in stolen valuables over previous years.

Yuriy Savchuk, head of the State Service on the Control and Transportation of Cultural Valuables through the Ukrainian Border, explains the increase by the inclusion of more informational sources list. The 2010 catalog includes thefts from private collections, whereas before such information was never publicized.

Sad geography

Savchuk pays attention to geographical trends. “The leading national museums do not register any robberies, but less protected are small provincial museums. They are the regional and city museums in Vinnitsya, Zakarpattya, Odesa, Lviv and Cherkasy regions.”

In the last 10 years, 40 regional museums were robbed. At the same time, Kyiv museums were almost never targeted.

Yuriy Bakulenko, director of the Kyiv Museum of Russian Art, is confident of the safety of his museum. “Our museum has the best protection. We have a very complex security system.”

The vulnerability of regional museums is enhanced by the work of the press, thinks Bakulenko. “The press publicly states that museums in the regions are badly guarded. Everything is almost hinted at for robbers to come and steal something.”

Yuliya Lytvynets, head curator of the National Art Museum of Ukraine, speaks less confidently about the security of the museum’s collection. “Our museum can afford to install a really good alarm system; video surveillance is done all the time; we have guards – so external enemies are of no threat to us. However, there is always an internal enemy – let me remind you of what happened in the Hermitage. In these cases, it is very hard to find out who is guilty, and what is worse – it is even harder to notice right away which paintings disappeared.”

The general state of Ukrainian museum security was characterized to the reporters of *Ukrayinska Pravda Zhyttya* by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, “The increase in prices for antique items and art on the world market stimulates robberies of museums and natural preserves.”

“Providing guards to museums and collections is a painful topic to the workers in the museum sphere. The laying off of guards because of debts and the increase in the criminal situation in the country can lead to the loss of rare valuable museum exhibits and museum collections.”

Elegant crime

One of the biggest museum robberies in Ukraine took place at the Uman Ethnographical Museum (Cherkasy region) and the Yampil Regional Museum of Fine Art (Vinnitsya region).

Twenty-one paintings were stolen from these museums in the last two years. In 2006-2008, the works of Soviet painters were substituted for new replicas. The museums gradually lost the works of Tetyana Yablonska, Serhiy Shyshko, Mykola Hlushchenko and Serhiy Hryhoryev.

The works of those painters cost quite a lot on the black market. “A prominent name cannot cost less than USD 5-10 ths. A good complete work of a famous Soviet painter would cost more than USD 10 ths,” reassured gallery worker Lyudmila Berezhnytsya.

One of the Kyiv art dealers raised the price range. “Hlushchenko could easily cost over USD 20 ths.”

Mykailo Shevchenko, director of the Museum of Modern Art, states that Shyshko paintings are even more expensive. They can cost USD 60-80 ths.

In order to steal such expensive masterpieces from Uman and Yampil, the organizers developed a very simple, but very well organized scheme.

Ukrainian museums have the right to conduct temporary field exhibits, meaning that for some time, they can share their paintings with other state institutions. In 2006-2008, paintings from both museums traveled to exhibitions at the regional department of the Security Service of Ukraine, the military department of Yampil and the city water service.

After some of those exhibits, instead of originals, only copies were returned to the museums. The museum workers did not notice the switch right away.

In April 2008, on the defendant's bench was Mykola Vykhrystyuk, director of the Uman Ethnographical Museum; Valeriy Viyazlovskiy, head of the Yampil interregional department of the Security Service of Ukraine; Vitaliy Melnyk, deputy head of the Uman regional police department, and Oleksandr Prylypko, director of the Vinnitsya Vodokanal department.

The defendants could have gotten 7-12 years in prison, with the confiscation of all personal property. However, none of them have been sentenced yet. That means that in two years, the Kryzhopilskiy district court has not given a final ruling on the case.

Here is a comment from Serhiy Kiz, senior investigator on extremely important cases of the military prosecutor of the central district, "The case is at the sentencing stage. It is too soon to say that the issue is closed. The case is multi-faceted and very big. A lot of witnesses were involved, which is why the court needs time. I think that the case will be resolved in the nearest future."

In total, they found half of the paintings stolen from the Yampil and Uman museums; the second half is gone without a trace.

Using muscle

The robberies from the Kmytiv Museum of Fine Art named after Y.Bukhanchuk look much less elegant.

On February 1, 2009, robbers broke the window grates, glass and the door in order to take out 17 paintings by top Soviet painters – Yablonska, Hlushchenko and Shyshko.

Kmytiv is a small settlement. Everybody knows everyone. Plus, the museum is surrounded by other houses – so it is very strange that the robbery was not noticed at night.

Viktor Boyko, director of the Kmytiv museum, tried to explain, "There is a club not far from the museum. That night, music was playing very loud and young people were having fun – so the guard thought the noise was coming from the club."

"Everything happened because of the lack of financing. Money for real guards was found only after the robbery. Now there are guards 24/7 and they take responsibility for it. They have weapons, know self-defense techniques and have an alarm button."

Boyko thinks the robbers could have had help from some Kmytiv residents, "The paintings had to be carried out through the forest, which is why I think the robbers had somebody local leading them."

Such thefts are not spontaneous, says the director of the Kmytiv museum. "They must have specifically come and studied their options. All of the stolen paintings were part of the permanent exhibit. It was apparent that an appraisal specialist was in the museum, checked out everything and estimated which paintings were worth a lot on the black market. When the suspects were arrested, our workers recognized them as visitors that used to come to the museum."

On April 8, at a private apartment in Kyiv, 11 paintings from Kmytiv were found. The rest of the originals disappeared.

Ivan, an art dealer that works with the biggest Kyiv art galleries, suggested that paintings from the museums rarely disappear into thin air, "Paintings are stolen either by amateurs or at somebody's order. Usually they take out a specific picture for a specific collector."

The founders of the auction house Zolotoye Sechenie, Oleksiy and Mykhailo Vasylenko, in unison, said, "A stolen masterpiece is very hard to resell. It is almost like suicide."

Stolen paintings: Reincarnated

Inexperienced criminals returned part of the masterpieces to the museums themselves – usually by throwing them in the garbage. Part of the thefts are hidden for a while, for example, while being sold to inexperienced collectors or starting dealers.

Gayane Atayan, daughter of painter Tetyana Yablonska, whose paintings were stolen from the Uman and Yampil museums, described one of the possible schemes of stolen art on the black market. "When the Uman museum was robbed and I saw which paintings were substituted with fakes, I remembered that one of them was brought to me for an expert examination. That landscape was bought by some dealer who was definitely very new to this business. I had the telephone number of that dealer and gave it to the Security Service of Ukraine right away."

It happens quite often that stolen works appear in public in a few years. In September 2008, at a big antique exhibition in Ukrayinsky Dim, the painting "Winter Sun" by Mykola Hlyshchenko, stolen from the Uman museum, appeared. It turned out that the owner of the painting was young businessman Oleksandr Krasovskiy from Berdychiv.

Art dealer Ivan described the story of how the painting got into such a prominent exhibition. "It was bought by a young beginning collector in a Kyiv gallery. Now he learned his lesson and will better check what he is buying."

According to Ivan, this is not the last case of doubtful masterpieces being exhibited in Ukrayinsky Dim. "In the last exhibit in Ukrayinsky Dim, nobody bought any paintings by Vasyl Nepiypyvo. This was all because a year ago a few of his paintings were stolen from the Kmytiv museum."

Restorer and co-owner of the gallery Estamp Maksym Sahaydak also has experience working with stolen paintings. I have experience with being offered stolen paintings. One time it was a painting stolen from the Uzhorod museum. When we found that out, the gallery returned the painting to the museum. But one can protect oneself, since now there are websites and catalogs available."

Besides the aforementioned famous cases that were widely publicized, less prominent robberies also take place. According to experts, the biggest amount of them happened at the beginning of the 90s under the rule of President Leonid Kuchma.

Yevhen Solonin, curator and manager of an exposition at the PinchukArtCentre, shared inside information from the past. "During Soviet times, the Ministry of Culture and the Union of Painters would purchase works from a painter and then distribute them between museums and other institutions."

"Everything was recorded – which institution received which painting. There were lots of swindlers that took advantage of such situations. In 1991, they would come to a community and say that they

came from the Union of Painters and wanted to take back the paintings. During that transition period, nobody knew what belonged to whom... nobody knows where those paintings are now.”

Painter and former art dealer Ivan Hryhoryev, grandson of painter Serhiy Hryhoryev, shared another story from his life. “A few really good works my grandfather gave as a present to Andriy Malyshko. Right now these masterpieces should have been in the Malyshko Museum in Obykhiv. Recently, that museum sort of suffered two fires. After the fires, the paintings by Hryhoryev disappeared. However, I think that the paintings really disappeared before the fires.”

“I am also curious where the famous landscape by Hryhoryev that used to be in the parliament library in Kyiv during Soviet times disappeared to. Now it is not there.”

Art dealer Ivan said that after 1994, the paintings were in a fire. “During Kuchma’s time, all paintings connected to Soviet propaganda were taken out of storage. They were intended to be destroyed. I myself saw how 5-6 really high-level paintings were taken out and burned.”

“Some paintings were used to cover windows in villages. Some of the paintings I managed to take away – I asked that they be used in exhibits. At first, most people refused, but then I offered money and nobody refused after that.”

Self-defense: Theory...

Part of the stolen paintings, most likely, ended up in private collections. But the paintings can also end up in galleries, collections and auction houses that will try to sell them.

Nataliya Romanova, art critic and author of the class “History of Collecting” at the Kyiv National University of Theater, Cinema and TV named after Karpenko-Karyy, shared her comments. “Even if the fact of robbery is resolved, this does not mean that the masterpiece will come out of the cultural whirlpool. This especially concerns unknown landscapes by Shovkunenko, Shyshko, Hlushchenko, Hryhoryev, etc. – those are easy to copy and sell. However, it is much harder to steal and sell very famous paintings.”

Gallery owners, dealers and collectors completely contradict such statements. They say that it is impossible to sell a stolen painting.

Oleksiy and Mykhailo Vasylenko, founders of the auction house “Zolotoye Sechenie”, have their own self-defense credo: “We work only with verified people. They will never go for a crime. A person that cheated once will never find clients again.”

Gallery worker Lyudmila Bereznytska, on the contrary, does not recommend working with dealers. Instead she recommends checking on the background of the painting. “One can buy a painting from a dealer at an auction or they can do it in a gallery where they will receive a certificate for the painting and its history. We cannot sell a painting without a biography.

...and practice

In practice, a painting’s history is very unreliable. Simple proof – an antique sale that takes place every Saturday at the International Exhibition Center. It is a place famous for Viktor Yushchenko’s visits; he buys old things there.

Twenty minutes of walking between the stalls was enough to get plenty of reassurances from sellers that we can get certificates for just about anything for an extra sum of money.

However, one cannot always believe such certificates – some sellers warn about possible copies of histories. “There are experts who write the histories by hand so their certificates cannot be copied. Dmytro Horbachov is one of them.”

The seller at the next stand promises, “If you pay just 20% more for the painting, by evening you will get a painting’s history and certificate of authenticity for any painting.”

It is just as easy to take out any of the paintings from Ukraine. Theoretically it is possible only after an expert examination and permission from the State Service on the Control of Transit of Cultural Valuables through the Ukrainian Border.

But in practice one does not need permission nor an expert examination. Sellers of antiques at the International Exhibition Center, every Saturday are ready to connect their sellers to the necessary people.

For just 600 hryvnyas, one of the sellers promises to provide a document with an expert resolution and permission from the State Service on the Control and Transportation of Cultural Valuables to carry out the masterpiece from Ukraine. However, he does warn that even with such documents a painting can be stopped at customs.

With the help of customs officers, one can easily pass any point on the Ukrainian border. The services of “verified couriers” cost 18% of the masterpiece’s price. However, there is another lottery in this: the painting can sometimes get to its destination or not. But if the painting does not reach its destination, they promise guaranteed compensation – the couriers pay the price of the lost item.

Coda

The problem of theft exists and it is recognized officially. However, there are no answers to the rhetorical question, “So what should be done?”

Nowadays, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, together with the Ministry of Internal Affairs, is seeking alternative models of protection. “We are working on the matter of developing a state program of a step-by-step development of technical security systems that would economize on state expenses.”

“One more respective direction for protecting museum collections is the project by the International Atomic Energy Agency. The project foresees marking all cultural valuables and museum items by the weak radioactive isotopes, which would simplify the identification process and would help effectively stop their illegal flow.”

The sale of stolen works, with all of their scale, is only one shady aspect of the Ukrainian art market. Copies of masterpieces are of no less danger. There is a big debate about the found Caravaggio painting – some say about its authenticity and others – consider the Judas Kiss a copy.

As of right now, no Ukrainian or foreign consumer can be completely sure they are completely protected from buying stolen or copied masterpieces. The Ukrainian market is not clean and is not transparent. It is a very hermetic art field with a circular cover-up working in it.

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