

## Top Stories

### Hermitage Recovers Stolen Icon

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One of the most valuable works of art from the haul the the State Hermitage Museum announced Tuesday had been stolen has turned up in a garbage can following what the local police named "an anonymous call."

It has been less than a week since Mikhail Piotrovsky, director of museum called a news conference to acknowledge the theft of 221 precious items from the collection's Russian Art Department.

The police received the call around midday on Thursday, and the item, an icon worth \$200,000, was found in a garbage can outside 21, Ulitsa Ryleyeva, the police press service reported.

Piotrovsky said Tuesday that the recently discovered theft of items, worth up to \$5 million from the museum, was "a stab in the back."

"I would describe this situation as a stab in the back of the entire museum community and the Hermitage in particular, as we try to protect our autonomy and independence," Piotrovsky said.

Piotrovsky said the theft was discovered during an inventory of the museum's Russian art department.

The items were not insured, Piotrovsky said. Only exhibited art works are insured, he explained. The stolen items were housed in a storage facility.

The stolen items include a selection of medieval and 19th-century Russian jewelry, silverware and enameled objects. A detailed list of the items was not available Tuesday, but museum officials promised to release the list in the near future.

Piotrovsky also confirmed that members of the museum's staff were suspected of involvement in the theft. "Regrettably, it is already clear to me that the criminals apparently used museum staff to steal the precious objects. We cannot yet determine the extent of the employees' involvement, however," Piotrovsky said.

"The presumption of innocence and the atmosphere of absolute trust in curators that has reigned in the museum in the past will have to change," Piotrovsky said. "The new economic reality has affected how people think, and money has begun to play a greater role."

Anatoly Vilkov, deputy head of the Russian Culture Preservation Board, told Moskovsky Komsomolets newspaper that while the percentage of solved art thefts has doubled over the past years, the numbers of latent thefts, committed by the museum staff has been steadily growing, too.

Only three curators had official access to the storage facility where the stolen items were kept, Piotrovsky said.

The curator who oversaw most of the missing items died of a heart attack on the job shortly after the inspection began last October, said Irina Antonova, director of Moscow's Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts. Antonova described the theft as a "tragedy for the country," and cautioned against accusing Hermitage employees of complicity until all of the evidence was in.

The Hermitage has released no information about the three curators who had official access to the storage facility.

Police have opened a criminal investigation into the theft and are working to establish a time frame for the theft and a list of potential suspects. "At the moment, we are looking at a time frame that covers the last 30 years," a police spokeswoman said.

A list of the missing items with descriptions and photographs, where available, will be sent to Interpol as soon as possible, said Alexander Khozhainov, head of security at the Hermitage.

Piotrovsky said most of the items were likely to have been stolen during the past few years. "A number of the items have been inspected, exhibited or photographed for albums in recent years," he said. "Only a few of them have not been heard of for a long time.

"Usually, if an item is missing, we eventually find it in another department," Piotrovsky said. "That is why the inspection was extended. But unfortunately, it became clear that the artworks in question were no longer in the museum." The inspection was completed on July 23.

The Hermitage houses more than 3 million works of art. The collection is regularly inventoried, but because of its enormous size, many years can pass between inspections of any given department.

The museum has only begun to build an electronic catalog of its holdings, and isotope identifiers, used by many Western museums, have only recently been introduced in the Hermitage.

Not all of the missing items have photographs or electronic images of them available.

The Hermitage spends 20 million rubles (\$746,000) on security each year. No additional security measures for personnel will be introduced at the museum, but the system of records and controls will be overhauled, museum officials said.

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