

## Top Stories

### New Twists in Hermitage Theft Drama

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Dramatic developments this week in the unfolding saga of the theft of millions of dollars worth of artifacts from the State Hermitage Museum included the arrest of three people earlier detained by police under suspicion of involvement in the heist.

More than 220 items were named as having been stolen from the museum on Aug. 1.

St. Petersburg police arrested the son and husband of Hermitage curator Larisa Zavadskaya, who died suddenly of a heart attack at her desk in October as an the start of inspection of her department, which eventually exposed the absence of the works.

President Vladimir Putin on Thursday called for the formation of a commission to revise and audit the collections of Russia's museums. The commission, to include representatives of the Interior Ministry, the Culture Ministry, the security services and other state organizations, is due to start its work on Sept. 1.

Zavadskaya's husband Nikolai Zavadsky, a 54-year-old history professor who teaches at the Lesgaft Academy for Physical Culture, has confessed to having taken about 50 artworks to antique shops to sell while being aware that they came from the Hermitage, the St. Petersburg police press-service reported.

Previously, Zavadsky maintained he had not known the items were stolen and that he took them to the dealers at the request of his wife who had told him she had received the works as gifts from friends, according to a report on Fontanka.ru. The investigation established that Zavadsky used his own passport to fill out forms needed to sell the artworks.

The Zavadsky family lives in a communal apartment in central St. Petersburg.

Zavadskaya's son, who worked as a courier at the Hermitage, has also been arrested.

The third suspect is local antiques dealer Maxim Shepel, who was found to have purchased one of the stolen items. On Wednesday, shortly after his arrest, Shepel was hospitalized for a nervous condition and a severe, allegedly self-inflicted, eye wound. Shepel's lawyer, Andrei Pavlov, told reporters that the dealer is currently undergoing treatment in a psychiatric ward in a city hospital.

Hermitage director Mikhail Piotrovsky said Thursday that the most valuable of the stolen artworks, a 19th-century icon named "The Assembly of All Saints," worth approximately \$200,000, has been recovered. The wooden icon turned up on Aug. 3, in a garbage can outside 21 Ulitsa Ryleyeva following an anonymous call to police.

Many of the stolen items have recovered in this manner in the last 10 days.

On Thursday, the police collected three items — two icons and a gilded silver cross — from lockers at Moskovsky Railway Station, after an anonymous call.

On Tuesday, two artifacts — a 19th century decorative silver ladle and a gilded silver pectoral four-sided Orthodox cross — were found next to the St. Petersburg branch of the Federal Security Bureau (FSB) at 4 Liteiny Prospekt.

It remains unclear who is behind the returns, and whether they lead to a particular group or present a chain of non-connected events.

The drama has Mikhail Piotrovsky's critics weighing the chances of the director's resignation or dismissal. But Piotrovsky's boss, head of the Federal Culture and Cinematography Agency Mikhail Shvydkoi told Ekho Moskv radio station this week that Piotrovsky's position is safe.

"Well, if you follow this logic, everyone should go. Including me," Shvydkoi said when asked who should be held accountable for the theft.

"He knows the museum and all its ailments better than anyone else we could possibly headhunt," Shvydkoi said. "Besides, Piotrovsky has already received his due: his name used to be normally mentioned in high tones, and over the past two weeks everyone speaks about him in very negative terms and most embarrassing context. This is a very tough thing to accept."