

## Top Stories

### 5-Year Jail Term for Hermitage Thief

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A 55-year-old local part-time history teacher was sentenced on Thursday to five years in prison for his involvement in thefts at the State Hermitage Museum.

Nikolai Zavadsky, who had admitted to taking part in a criminal scheme involving his late wife, Hermitage Museum curator Larisa Zavadskaya, was also ordered to pay 7,388,000 rubles (\$283,000) in damages to the Hermitage.

The massive theft of 221 artifacts, including jewelry, enamels, and other artifacts worth an estimated \$5 million was reported last summer during an inventory that had begun in October 2005. The court proved Zavadsky guilty of having stolen 77 of the artworks.

The stolen items included a selection of medieval and 19th-century Russian jewelry, silverware and enameled objects.

During the trial, Zavadsky confessed to having taken the 77 artworks to antique shops to sell while being aware that they came from the Hermitage. He also blamed his late wife, stating that she was the mastermind behind the thefts.

Larisa Zavadskaya died of a heart attack at her desk in October just as an inspection of her department got underway that eventually exposed the absence of the works.

During the court case, Zavadsky maintained he was selling the stolen goods under pressure from his wife who had "a forceful personality."

Zavadsky remains the only person convicted in the case. The investigators detained several suspects, including local antiques dealer Maxim Shepel, but released them without charge. It was not established whether Larisa Zavadskaya had had any protectors at a higher level in the museum.

Thirty-one items recovered by the police have been returned to the museum. The most valuable of the stolen artworks, a 19th-century icon named "The Assembly of All Saints," worth about \$200,000, was recovered on Aug. 3, in a garbage can outside 21 Ulitsa Ryleyeva following an anonymous call to police.

Most of the stolen items that were recovered all surfaced in a similar manner, mainly in August and September, 2006. The Hermitage's management have repeatedly appealed to collectors and antique shop owners, but the recovery process has since stalled. The fate of the other stolen artifacts remains unknown.

Despite the value of the goods stolen, the Zavadskys shared two rooms in a communal apartment in a dilapidating building on Kamennostrovsky Prospekt in central St. Petersburg.

Zavadsky's lawyer Lyudmila Mikhailova said all the money earned from selling the artifacts was spent on basic needs, like food and utilities.

Zavadsky taught part-time at the Lesgaft Physical Culture Academy and the St. Petersburg Academy for Business and Law.

During his testimony, Zavadsky asked for a suspended sentence in order to be able to be given the opportunity to compensate for the Hermitage's losses.

Zavadsky's only son, Nikolai Zavadsky Jr., worked at the Hermitage from 1998 to 2004 as a forwarding agent. He pleaded not guilty and the investigation failed to prove his involvement in the thefts. The high-profile theft highlighted both the vulnerability of Russian art collections — even at the highest level of security available in the country — and the lack of transparency in the national antiques market.

Anatoly Vilkov, deputy head of the Russian Culture Preservation Board, said in August that while the percentage of solved art thefts has doubled in recent years, the numbers of undetected thefts committed by museum staff has been steadily growing.

The director of the Hermitage Museum, Mikhail Piotrovsky, called the theft "a stab in the back," following its discovery.

Piotrovsky also said the avalanche of critical stories in the media that followed the discovery was part of an orchestrated campaign aimed at handing Russia's premier museums into private hands, its goal being to create the impression that museums cannot provide adequate security.

Piotrovsky began his job as Hermitage Director in 1992 following in the footsteps of his father, Boris Piotrovsky,

who occupied the prestigious post at one of the world's richest museums for 26 years from 1964 to 1990.

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 recently begun to build an electronic catalog of its vast holdings and does not have photographs or electronic images of all of them.

The Hermitage spends about 20 million rubles (\$746,000) on security each year.

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