

HIGH NOON BECKONS IN THE ARTWORLD'S 'CRIME OF THE CENTURY'

GIULIANO RUFFINI has been in the headlines since 2016, when French authorities began investigating his onetime ownership of works by Cranach, Hals, Parmigianino and Gentileschi, among others.

That investigation was prompted by a Poison-Pen Letter accusing Ruffini of selling not *bona fide* Old Masters, but Fakes... and, almost unbelievably, fakes good enough to fool the world's top dealers, auctioneers, museum curators and private collectors – and sell for millions.

That anonymous missive is here made public for the first time – with Giuliano Ruffini pointing the finger at man he believes wrote it: his ex-associate JEAN-CHARLES METHIAZ.

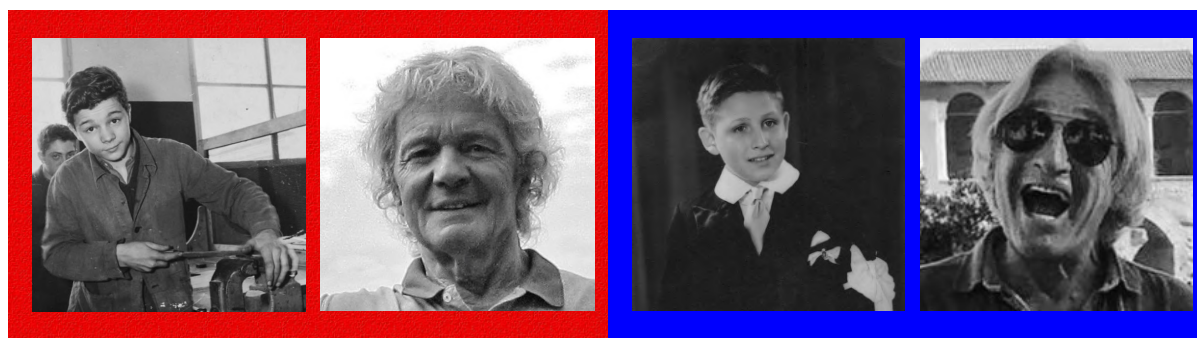
The two former lady-killers, now in their mid-seventies, have spent the coronavirus lockdown in isolation at opposite ends of Italy: Ruffini with his son Mathieu in the rugged Apennine Hills south of Parma; Méthiaz with his dogs Oscar and Gaston amidst the olive groves of Apulia.

Ruffini has been passing the time on home restoration, Méthiaz by posting lengthy diatribes on Facebook. His favourite targets: French President Emmanuel Macron ('a demented manipulator'); his predecessor François Hollande ('an incapable moron'); and 'Al Capone' – which is how Jean-Charles Méthiaz refers to Giuliano Ruffini.

'The Head of Old Masters at a prestigious auction house told me that, if they know a painting comes from Ruffini, they don't even want to look at it' wrote Méthiaz in March 2020. 'He even added that this man was the devil.'

When Ruffini and Méthiaz finally emerge blinking into the sunlight, it will be at High Noon – for a shoot-out in France's Civil Court on 20 May 2021 over what, in another post, Méthiaz has dubbed '*l'escroquerie du siècle*.'

The Crime Of The Century.



THE PERSUADERS! GIULIANO RUFFINI & JEAN-CHARLES METHIAZ

RUFFINI AND METHIAZ first met in 2000 at a Milan dinner-party hosted by Michelle Vasseur, a French entrepreneur who owned a beauty clinic in the city. She and Ruffini were introduced to one another by a mutual plastic surgeon friend from Cannes.

Ruffini and Méthiaz – born a year apart – hit it off. When, soon afterwards, Méthiaz and Vasseur came to visit him at his home near Parma, Ruffini cooked a huge salmon in the industrial oven he had installed to cater for parties thrown by his teenage son.

‘Méthiaz gutted the fish’ recalls Ruffini grimly.

Méthiaz’s artworld knowledge at the time swam around second-hand Art Deco – acquired while working for an earlier girlfriend, who had a stand at the *Puces de St-Ouen*, the principal Paris flea-market. ‘He was not very well-known’ declares Paris picture dealer Jean-Marie Le Fell, who first met Méthiaz in 1978. ‘He was not a member of any experts’ organization, and he never advertised.’

‘Méthiaz used to hang out at St-Tropez’ asserts Ruffini (quoting a friend who ran a beach café there). ‘Then he called himself a journalist – maybe he wrote three or four lines in some magazine or other. He found various women to maintain him – he was a good-looking guy. But his life was a failure... until he stumbled across a useful idiot like yours truly.’

THE YOUNG RUFFINI 1945-71



Giuliano Ruffini was born in a 17th century farmhouse (left) near the River Enza in the hamlet of Velago de Ceretolo, 30 miles south of Parma, on 4 April **1945**. He spent his early years with his maternal grandparents, whose home had been damaged in the Garfagnana Earthquake of September 1920.

‘I loved waking up with the cock crowing, fresh milk for breakfast and the smell of hay, the cowshed and newly baked bread’ he coos nostalgically. When he was three his father found work as a cobbler in Paris, and the family moved to Rue Letort, a grimy street close to the *Puces de St-Ouen*. It was a rough neighbourhood. Immigrants were not welcome. There was scant parental affection to compensate. Ruffini was raised a Catholic and, like Méthiaz, took First Communion. He looks back with horror on the roving fingers of boy-loving priests.

The only youthful moments Ruffini remembers with fondness was a year spent in Algiers when he was eight. His father had been sent to work for a new shoe-shop on the city’s main shopping street, Rue Michelet [now Rue Didouche-Mourad], and the family were lodged in a ‘superb apartment on the top floor overlooking the sea.’ Ruffini’s year in North Africa sparked a love of travel that would develop into almost pathological wanderlust. Hardly any twelve-month period of his adult life would be spent in the same place.



Ruffini's passion for art was sparked when his father's boss gave him a box of paints for Christmas. He began painting in earnest at thirteen, setting up his easel by the River Enza (seen from his grandparents' home, *above right*) while on holiday. He never took lessons.



In **1959** Ruffini obtained French nationality and scraped his school leaving certificate. 'I'd like to read and write properly' he shrugs 'but I can't concentrate, and I'm not much cop when it comes to spelling or grammar.' After a year as an apprentice in Rue Boinod, his father landed him a job on the assembly line at the huge Chauvin Arnoux electronics factory on Rue Championnet. Meanwhile his parents had saved up enough to buy a tiny two-room flat on Boulevard Ornano, close to Porte de Clignancourt, where Ruffini and his brother slept in a fold-up bed in the dining-room. Eighteen months later, aged 16, he fled to Cannes with his 19 year-old girlfriend Françoise Greffe (*above*). They stayed in a maid's attic that her parents rented above the Hôtel Miramar. Françoise 'played the flirt with guys who were loaded, saying I was her cousin' recalls Ruffini. In 1965 she would star as *Virginia de Solen* in the erotic movie *Sexus*.



Ruffini, meanwhile, began to paint full-time – using a palette-knife in a vigorous Figurative style he would ambitiously claim indebted to Vlaminck. His works were hung by Greffe's parents in their restaurant on Rue Pasteur, next to the Miramar, where they caught the eye of lesbian singing legend Damia (*left*, 1889-1978), a sort of inter-war Edith Piaf, who arranged for them to be exhibited in Paris – tasking her impresario Georges Rovère (who worked for the Philips record label) with presenting Ruffini to the capital's glitterati.



Ruffini was lodged in a flat near Place de Clichy formerly occupied by Jacques Brel – whom he met, being struck by his catch-phrase '*mon cul sur la commode*' (later immortalized by Charles Aznavour in the song *J'ai Vu Paris*). Jean Cocteau was lined up as Ruffini's artistic advisor, but died from a heart attack on 11 October 1963 two days before the pair were due to meet ('I knew Cocteau was gay' says Ruffini 'but that didn't bother me').

Ruffini appeared on the daily TV culture show *Paris-Club* alongside Maurice Escande, head of the Comédie-Française, and spent a fortnight preparing for his exhibition as the guest of *Lido* director Pierre Guérin and his Dutch boyfriend at *Le Moulin de Mistou* – their country-house in Mauperthuis, 30 miles east of Paris. On 27 February **1964** Ruffini was invited to Studio Harcourt to sit for a celebrity black-and-white photographic portrait. His show opened a few days later, hosted by the *Galerie du Colisée* at 40 rue du Colisée (500 yards from the Champs-Élysées). The all-star *vernissage* was filmed by British Pathé as *Young French Artist Ruffini On Show*.





The young artist appeared arm-in-arm with teenage singing star Michelle Torr (*bottom left*) who, sniffs Ruffini, ‘was cute but never washed – you could smell her coming a mile off.’ Torr (as a blonde) would represent Luxembourg at the 1966 Eurovision Song Contest (*bottom right*) – coming 10th with *Ce soir, je t’attendais* (released in the U.K. as ‘Only Tears Are Left For Me’).

The Paris exhibition virtually sold out, but Ruffini blew his new-found riches on a sports car and the Riviera high life. ‘I was a young fool!’ he admits. ‘Ended up without a kopeck!’ So he accepted an invitation to go and work for a dealer in Rome, decorating furniture with painted figures. Ruffini didn’t stay long. ‘It turned out he was queer and wanted to get his way with me. I nearly knocked his block off.’ He returned to Paris, where he was briefly involved in an unsuccessful attempt to launch an advertisement lay-out agency in Rue Bergère, then returned to Italy – renting a small house in Vetto, three miles south of his birthplace, where he earned a living by selling his paintings.

In **1967** he applied to emigrate to Australia, landing in Brisbane and spending the first two weeks in hospital being treated for syphilis. Then he was assigned to a state hostel in Torwood, just outside Brisbane – landing a job in a bar-restaurant run by a Swiss immigrant and his Australian wife, and learning to cook. A year later he moved to Sydney, running errands for a modern art gallery. Three months afterwards he headed to New Caledonia, living in ‘stunningly beautiful’ Nouméa in a small hotel run by an aged couple who, when his funds ran out, let him stay on for free. In return he painted them a large view of *Notre-Dame* in Paris. He found work as a cartoonist for a local newspaper.

Three months later he took a third-class ticket on the cargo boat *Le Calédonien* (which had transported Charles de Gaulle from Martinique to New Caledonia in 1956). The ship, laden with evil-smelling coprah (macerated coconuts), stopped off in the New Hebrides, Tahiti and the Marquesas on its 55-day voyage to Marseille via the Panama Canal. Ruffini returned briefly to Paris, then set off for three months in Brazil. Back in Paris, in **1969**, a fortuitous encounter in a bar on the Champs-Élysées, with a wealthy Italian-speaker who asked him for a light, would have far-reaching consequences.



The slick Italian invited Ruffini to a party next day, hosted by fashion designer Paco Rabanne – where Ruffini was introduced to Aldo de Silva, artistic director of the magazine *Jeune Afrique*. De Silva put him in touch with his editor Béchir Ben Yahmed, who gave Ruffini a job as a lay-out artist. A year later Béchir asked Ruffini if he'd like to go to Ivory Coast as Artistic Director for the publishing house Inter Afrique Presse.



Ruffini spent two years in Abidjan, painting portraits of friends (see left) and working for the weekly newspaper *Ivoire Dimanche* and quarterly magazine *L'Entente Africaine* – displaying a deft touch, gift for caricature and winning sense of humour (see below). As with his thickly daubed teenage landscapes, however, there was nothing about his work to suggest a budding world-class forger of Old Master paintings.

Shortly before leaving Ivory Coast, Ruffini caught up with his childhood friend Gérard Majax – who had grown up in the next street in north Paris, become a famous magician, and was performing in Abidjan. Majax told him that, next time he was in Paris, he would introduce him to a wealthy friend of his who had just split from her showbiz boyfriend Richard Chanfray – self-styled 'Comte de Saint-Germain' (and future partner of the singer Dalida; both would commit suicide in the 1980s).

Ruffini returned to Europe in 1972, again settling in Vetto. He opened an antiques shop in Castelnuovo ne' Monti, the nearest town, stocking it with pictures from Drouot bought on trips to visit his parents. 'I landed an *Ecce Homo* by Guido Reni for a handful of francs!' he remembers. 'No one was interested in religious paintings back then.' With most of his sales made to friends and acquaintances, Ruffini soon found the gallery unnecessary.



GIULIANO RUFFINI: BIG PROBLEMS ? WE CAN HELP YOU SLEEP EASY (1972)

– ADVERTISEMENT FOR INTER AFRIQUE PRESSE PUBLISHED IN THE QUARTERLY MAGAZINE ENTENTE AFRICAINE



Later that year, on one of his trips to Paris, Ruffini met up with Gérard Majax who, as promised, took him to meet his ‘wealthy friend.’ She was childless, twice-divorced, 50 years old and, since 1965, had run an antiques shop at 2 rue du Pas-de-la-Mule (shown left in 2020), just off Place des Vosges.

It was called *La Brocanterie du Marais*. She was called Andrée Borie.

THE ILLUSTRIOUS ANDRÉ BORIE 1971-73

Andrée was the younger daughter of **André Borie** (1889-1971), one of France’s leading 20th century civil engineers. He hailed from the Allier *département* of Auvergne, and began work for François Mercier’s regional construction company at age 14. By the time he was twenty he had been promoted to Foreman and was living in Moulins (capital of the Allier), where the company was based.



Two years later he was sent to Portugal to oversee construction of the Vale de Vouga rail line between Espinho and Vouzela south of Oporto. It was in Vouzela – where a majestic stone viaduct was built under Borie’s direction – that his first daughter, Georgette, was born in December 1912.



After serving voluntarily during World War One (despite being exempt from military service) Borie was appointed Chairman of François Mercier’s company in 1920 following his sudden death. His first task: to complete the daunting 32-bridge, 48-tunnel, 70-mile Nice–Cuneo railway through the Alps (now known as the *Train des Merveilles*).

Borie also founded his own company, the *Société des Entreprises de Travaux Publics André Borie*, headquartered at 92 Avenue de Wagram in Paris – soon with branches in Nice, Marseille, Lyon, Strasbourg, Portugal, Ivory Coast and Algeria. Andrée, his second daughter, was born in 1921. Four years later, aged 35, Borie was awarded the Légion d’Honneur after being elected to the *Commission Syndicale du Syndicat Professionnel des Entrepreneurs de Travaux Publics* (France’s civil engineering union).

During the 1930s Borie moved into a Belle Epoque town-house at 125 Avenue de Wagram – across the road from his company offices – and embarked on various large-scale projects: constructing Nice Airport; widening the city’s fabled *Promenade des Anglais*; expanding the main train stations in Nice, Toulon and Marseille; and building the 100-mile Fianorantsoa-Manakara rail line (65 bridges and 48 tunnels) in south-east Madagascar.

Borie served as President of the *Syndicat Professionnel* from 1936-39 before a government appointment as head of the *Commissariat Général à la Construction et au Bâtiment et aux Travaux Publics*. He also branched into real estate, creating the *Société*

Immobilière de la Rue du Maréchal-Joffre à Nice in 1934 which, despite its name, shared the Paris offices of his engineering company.

After the Liberation Borie became President of the *Fédération Nationale des Travaux Publics* and head of the *Comité Professionnel du Bâtiment et de la Construction*. His career reached its apogee in 1949 when he was made a *Grand Officier de la Légion d'Honneur* – a title bestowed on no more than 250 French citizens at any one time.



The year after, to mark his 30 years as a civil engineering boss, a medal was struck in his honour – designed by Abel La Fleur, author of soccer's original FIFA World Cup (*Jules Rimet Trophy*) in 1930. The medal shows a patriarchal Borie surrounded by the lettering *PRESIDENT DU SYNDICAT PROFESSIONNEL DES ENTREPRENEURS DE TRAVAUX PUBLICS DE FRANCE ET DE L'UNION FRANÇAISE*. The reverse features an aerial view of a hydroelectric dam and the words *ENERGIE-PROBITE-TRAVAIL*.

André Borie's subsequent projects included the construction of the mile-long Tunnel de la Croix-Rousse under central Lyon; two four-mile tunnels beneath the Vosges; and the first 30-mile section of the *Autoroute de la Côte d'Azur* (Riviera Motorway, now A8). His last, most ambitious undertaking was the Mont Blanc Tunnel – at 7¼ miles, the longest road tunnel in the world when it opened in 1965. The only thing André Borie didn't build was the Channel Tunnel quipped his 1971 *Le Monde* obituary, which dubbed him 'robust in every sense, often seen on worksites wielding his walking-stick like a Marshal's baton.'

Borie bequeathed 50% of his company's shares to members of its workforce, with the other 50% divided equally between his daughters Georgette and Andrée – who described her father to Ruffini as 'totally straight, with a passion for art and a library of 10,000 books.' Borie's *Le Monde* obituary dubbed him 'rustic yet refined.' He was a noted wine connoisseur and a 'tireless reader' whose 'level of culture took technocrats by surprise.'

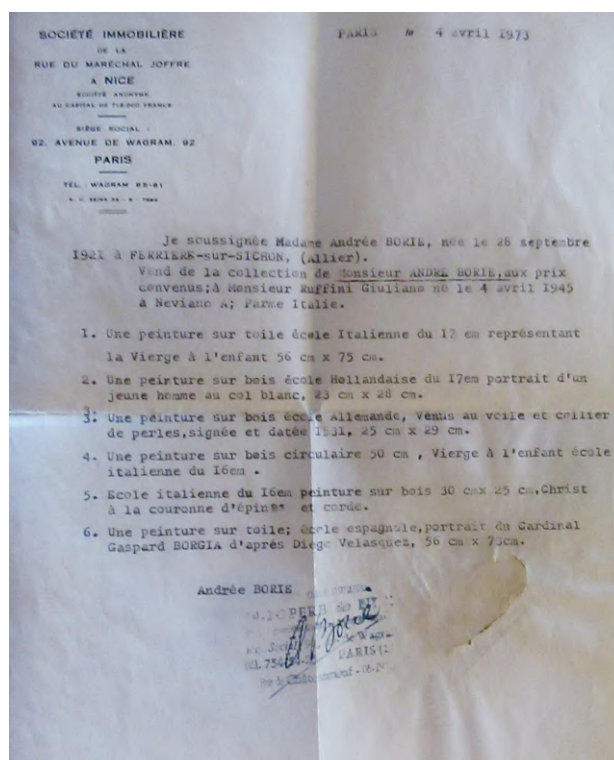
There should be nothing surprising about this cultivated denizen of High Society lining his Paris home with decent pictures – mostly, no doubt, acquired from prominent dealers. Ruffini remembers the building (since demolished) as 'spectacular, with stables in the courtyard, stained glass windows, tall ceilings and pictures all over the walls, many of them very high up.'

As Georgette was only interested in their father's modern works, it was Andrée who inherited his Old Masters. She put some in her shop in the Marais – creating a special gallery on the first floor, whose walls Ruffini lined with dark red velvet – and consigned others to Drouot auctioneer Raymond de Nicolaÿ, who had recently qualified as a *commissaire-priseur*. These, recalls Ruffini, included 'a large picture with nymphs and dolphins, a portrait attributed to Titian, and a splendid seascape by a Flemish artist.' Tracing these works today seems unlikely: Ruffini says they were spread among several auctions between 1973 and 1975, but cannot remember if these sales were catalogued (a rarity at Drouot in those days). With Andrée Borie also ceding some of her father's

paintings to Giuliano Ruffini as personal gifts, there were not enough to form the basis of what 21st century auction-speak would spin as a ‘single-owner sale.’

The absence of an officially designated ‘André Borie Collection’ has been claimed as evidence that Borie cannot have owned high-quality paintings. Such an interpretation neglects the likelihood of a millionaire businessman acquiring works of art as decoration rather than an investment – and preferring to pass them on to his daughters *en masse* rather than have the taxman sniffing through a detailed inventory.

The self-confident André Borie – company boss at 30, *Légion d’Honneur* at 35 – had no need to boast about his art collection. One of the two known surviving references to his love of art comes via a lengthy dedication to him in an illustrated edition of Maurice Toesca’s *La Nativité* (1952), complete with 15 etchings by Michel Ciry. The other takes the form of the typewritten list (right) recording Andrée Borie’s sale of six works from *la collection de Monsieur ANDRE BORIE* to Giuliano Ruffini on 4 April 1973 (his 28th birthday). Four are illustrated below.



The authenticity of this document has been questioned, but chemical analysis – undertaken in February 2016 by Prof. Giovanni Bottioli of Pavia University’s Biotechnology Department – has ‘not revealed any element anachronistic or incompatible with the date shown on the document’ (*non ha evidenziato alcun elemento anacronistico e incompatibile con la date riportata sul documento stesso*).

The list translates into English as follows:

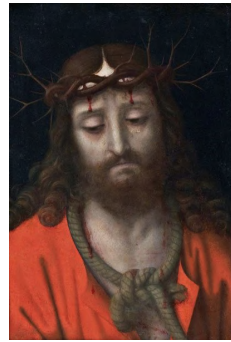
1. **Virgin & Child**, Italian School 17th century, painting on canvas 56 x 75cm
sold by Ruffini ‘to a friend’ for ‘around €25,000’ as ‘after Barocci’ in the 1980s
2. **Portrait of a Young Man in White Collar**, Dutch School 17th century, painting on wood 23 x 29cm
sold for €350,000 in 2015
3. **Venus with Veil & Pearl Necklace**, German, signed & dated 1531, painting on wood 25 x 29cm
sold as a Cranach to dealer Konrad Bernheimer for €3.2m in 2013 (now in the Liechtenstein Collection)
4. **Virgin & Child**, Italian School 16th century, circular painting on wood, 50cm
sold ‘for peanuts – it was rather ugly’ (Ruffini) to an Italian dealer in the 1980s
5. **Christ with Crown of Thorns & Rope**, Italian School 16th century, painting on wood 30 x 25cm
sold as a Solario to Eric Turquin for €62,000 in 2014
6. **Portrait of Cardinal Gaspard Borgia after Velasquez**, Spanish School, painting on canvas 56cm x 73cm
unsold



1.



3.



5.



6.

Five of the six paintings have been sold since 1973, for a total €3.65m – of which Ruffini himself has received just €440,000. The sale of the *Venus with Veil* behind his back would provoke a long-running civil case.

Ruffini concedes, however, that the Borie List is not altogether accurate. Although Andrée stated she was *selling* the pictures to him, they were actually gifts. ‘That’s why there are no prices’ he explains. And not all the paintings on the list had actually belonged to Andrée’s father. ‘We bought the oil-on-canvas *Virgin & Child in Nice*’ thinks Ruffini. ‘And the *Christ with Thorns* at Drouot.’

Two significant works once owned by André Borie, on the other hand, do not appear on the list: a *David & Goliath* on lapis lazuli, sold to Jean-Claude Bacchiana in 1972 as a ‘19th century copy after Gentileschi’; and a *St Jerome* of the ‘Flemish School’ (later attributed to Parmigianino), which Andrée gave Ruffini in 1975 for his 30th birthday.

At least six works with an André Borie provenance did, therefore, pass through the hands of Giuliano Ruffini. Apart from the *Venus*, he was swindled out of €1.76m over the *David & Goliath* by Jean-Charles Méthiaz who (on 20% commission) assured Ruffini he had been paid €1.4m for it. The *St Jerome* once owned by Ruffini was sold over a decade later at Sotheby’s New York for \$842,500 (the equivalent of €642,000 on the day of auction).

As the following table reveals, the ex-Borie paintings therefore yielded a total **€7.8m** – of which just **€1.48m**, or less than 20%, was pocketed by Ruffini himself: a risible return for a man accused of being a master crook.

SOLD	WORK	PRICE	TO RUFFINI	TO OTHERS	WHICH OTHERS?
1980s	16 th century <i>Virgin & Child</i>	8,000	8,000		–
2012	Gentileschi: <i>David & Goliath</i>	3,600,000	1,120,000	2,480,000	J.C. Méthiaz
2012	att. Parmigianino: <i>St Jerome</i>	642,000	–	642,000	L. Donat-Pourrières
2013	Cranach: <i>Venus with Veil</i>	3,200,000	–	3,200,000	M. Tordjman
2015	Hals: <i>Man in a White Collar</i>	350,000	350,000	–	
	after Velasquez: <i>Cardinal Borgia</i>	–	–	–	unsold
TOTAL		7,800,000	1,478,000	6,322,000	

ALL FIGURES IN EUROS

COLLECTOR BACCHIANA

A leading client of Andrée Borie's *Brocanterie* was **Jean-Claude Bacchiana** (1936-2012) who, reports Ruffini, purchased still lifes and Flemish works along with the *David & Goliath*. In 1974 Bacchiana also acquired an Italian *Ecce Homo* later attributed to Correggio.



Bacchiana and Ruffini had become pals in Cannes in the 1960s, after being introduced by their mutual paramour Virginia de Solen. Ruffini was ‘fascinated by this handsome guy – charming, intelligent, self-confident’ – and, at the time, one of Europe’s best-paid male models. At glamorous parties in Bacchiana’s vast Paris apartment on Boulevard Berthier, a star-struck Ruffini mingled with celebrities like cinema stuntman Yves Gabrielli and French ‘TV Vet’ Michel Klein, along with ‘a bevy of classy models... I’ve never slept with so many pretty birds in my life!’ Bacchiana gave Ruffini the keys to his apartment whenever he was out of the city.

Although his Italian mother – to whom he was devoted – had come to Paris to work as a cleaner, Bacchiana was a man of immense culture, ‘always reading and who loved writing.’ He was an accomplished wildlife photographer, and acquired a high-brow taste in art from jet-set journalist Madeleine Chapsal – whom he squired for two years after her 1960 divorce from Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber (founder of the news weekly *L’Express*). It was as an *habitué* of the Michelin-starred *Coconnas* restaurant on Place des Vosges that Bacchiana discovered Andrée Borie’s antiques shop around the corner.

When his youthful looks began to fade, Bacchiana quit modelling and moved to the Alpine ski resort of Megève to join the real-estate firm set up there by his friend Bobby Durant (1926-2005) – a retired wrestler and former *Mr Europe* (right). Bacchiana subsequently established his own estate agency in Geneva. When the real estate business collapsed in the early 1990s, Bacchiana sold out and returned to Megève, where he lived next to the casino on Route Edmond-de-Rothschild.



Over the next few years the former heart-throb (below) became a shadow of his former self. He and Ruffini, however, remained close – speaking on the phone ‘every other day.’



Ruffini invariably stopped off in Megève for two or three days on his trips to Paris, and helped Bacchiana out with occasional loans – as well as buying back the *Gentileschi* from him in 1995 and the *Correggio* a few years later.

Bacchiana died in solitude in 2012. ‘A fantastic guy – and totally honest!’ sighs Ruffini. ‘I miss him.’

THE AMOROUS ANDRÉE BORIE 1974-80

Ruffini and Andrée Borie (shown together right) travelled extensively to buy stock for *La Brocanterie du Marais*. Nice – then home to dozens of antique-dealers – was a fertile hunting-ground; Andrée owned a flat overlooking the harbour in neighbouring Villefranche-sur-Mer.



But Ruffini soon tired of working in an art gallery, and Andrée Borie closed *La Brocanterie*



du Marais in late 1974. She and Ruffini divided their time between the Côte d'Azur and the 150-acre farm (left) they had purchased the year before at Codena in the Apennines, a few miles from Ruffini's birthplace. Summer visitors included Virginie de Solen and her radio-presenter husband André Asséo; author Louis Nucéra and his model wife Suzanne; and film producer Pierre Lary with his wife Huguette Debaisieux, a top Paris journalist. The walls were

festooned with Old Master pictures (some of them unsold stock), which the couple locked up in a windowless laundry-room with an armoured metal door whenever they went away.



Andrée and Giuliano sold several paintings to Adelio Bertolazzi, whom Ruffini had met in Vetto in 1965 while Adelio was visiting his fiancée Francesca Morselli. Adelio recalls the youthful Ruffini as 'kind and sensitive... he loved art.' Adelio and Francesca were regular visitors to Codena in the 1970s. Speaking in August 2020, Adelio remembered the house as 'full of paintings' and Andrée Borie as a 'discreet, broad-minded lady of high intelligence – very much in love with Giuliano and always giving him presents.' Adelio would later be godfather to Ruffini's son Mathieu.



Adelio still owns three works acquired in Codena: a battle-scene attributed to Cavaliere d'Arpino; a woman with baby attributed to Carlo Francesco Nuvolone; and a grimy 120 x 72cm *Crucifixion* (left) which, when he bought it, was ascribed to 'the circle of Guido Reni' but has since been identified as the *modello* for the *Martyrdom of St Andrew* altarpiece (right) painted in 1668 by Guillaume Cortois for the Bernini church of Sant'Andrea al Quirinale in Rome.



The painting's original misattribution can hardly be equated with the forgerly cunning of which Ruffini has been accused: the re-attribution has raised its value ten-fold.

Not that Adelio cares. A deeply religious man, he bought the *Crucifixion* 'to look at, not as an investment.' It has hung in his lounge in Brescia for forty years, where it 'fits in perfectly with our antique furniture.' Ruffini believes the work must once have belonged to André Borie, as 'it's not the sort of subject Andrée or I ever bought.'

The couple frequently pursued their Old Master shopping sprees along the Mediterranean from Nice to Barcelona – especially when Spain eased restrictions on exporting artworks after the death of long-standing dictator Francisco Franco in 1975. They also gained insider access to the Madrid art scene after being introduced, in Monaco, to jet-set socialite Jaime MacVeigh – who was cavorting with Prince Rainier's niece Christine de Massy, and earned a living importing American jeeps. MacVeigh had grown up in Madrid (his father designed Spain's famous *Talgo* train in the 1940s) and was friends there with a chain-smoking, homosexual dealer/art historian called Rafael Perez-Menendez, who 'knew all the leading Spanish families and museum curators.'

Giuliano Ruffini, in fact, was among the first post-war foreigners to target Spanish Old Masters. Franco's iron dictatorship had placed the country off-limits to the European art trade for decades and 'Spain was full of big collections. Nothing had left the country under Franco.' One major collection that he and Andrée Borie stumbled across was squirrelled back to France for discreet safe-keeping at Jean-Claude Bacchiana's home in Megève. More than any other factor, it was Ruffini's interest in and access to the Spanish Old Master market that underpinned his rise into the artworld big league over the following decades.

In **1978** Andrée and Giuliano opened *Le Bistro*, a restaurant/piano-bar on Piazza Garibaldi, Parma's main square – 'the sort of place the city was lacking' says Ruffini. 'I was very dynamic in those days, always full of ideas.' While Andrée wintered in Villefranche, enjoying the sun and the sea, Ruffini ran the restaurant, shuttling to and fro from Parma.

On 12 March **1980** Andrée, a heavy smoker and drinker with long-standing health problems, died from a heart-attack in Villefranche; coincidentally or not, her father's firm Borie SA had been the subject of a hostile takeover (from *Société Auxiliaire d'Entreprises*) one week before. Her chauffeur Max rang Ruffini in Parma with the tragic news.

RUFFINI GOES SOLO 1980-2000

Andrée Borie left Ruffini handsomely provided for, having stuffed a bank safe in Parma full of cash and gold ingots. At 34 he was a millionaire. But he felt 'lost.' He did not get on with his younger brother Ivano (who was running the farm at Codena) and lived near his restaurant in Parma, where he met Nadine Ianelli – whose parents had, like his, fled post-war Italy for Paris. She was 'pretty, nice, 14 years younger than me and without a job.' Ruffini hired her as a cook. They married in August **1981**.

That same year Ruffini's favourite wine-producer Liginio Fontana – head of the *La Piccola* estate just outside Montecchio (25 miles north of Codena) – introduced him to his 23 year-old neighbour Lino Frongia – an artist from the Parma Academy who had just had his first solo show in Reggio Emilia.



Ruffini was impressed by Frongia's art historical knowledge and painterly savvy.

One of the first paintings Frongia (*left*) restored for him, in 1982, was a *St Sebastian* (*right*) attributed to Carlo Dolci (1616-86) that Ruffini had bought with Andrée Borie from a gallery in Nice. Frongia 'restored part of the face, but you could never tell' recalls Ruffini. He sold the painting to a friend from Parma in 1983.



Over the next years and decades Ruffini would seldom buy a painting without asking Frongia's opinion. 'I'd send Lino a photo and he'd tell me if it was a copy or an original. He taught me a lot.' Frongia's career as an artist soon took off. He made a name for himself with his quirky Figurative works, and moved to Rome in 1987.

Meanwhile Ruffini's son Mathieu – on whom he would come to lavish obsessive affection – was born on 13 September 1982. The family settled in Codena, although Ruffini was often in Parma where, apart from his restaurant, he was a partner in a thriving gay disco.

But the marriage proved short-lived, and his wife moved back to her parents in the Paris suburbs, taking Mathieu with her. Ruffini decided to finish with farming, trade in his animals and machinery, and resume his travels. He sold his Parma restaurant and headed to the Adriatic port of Trieste, planning to train as a yacht skipper and sail the world. He had a couple of offers to take the helm for rich businessmen, but couldn't agree terms and returned to Codena.



In 1985 he opened a gym in Castelnovo ne' Monti, where his high-flying karate skills were captured by photographer Benito Vanicelli for the regional newspaper (*left*). Ruffini's martial art mastery was the product of a youth that had been 'full of aggro.

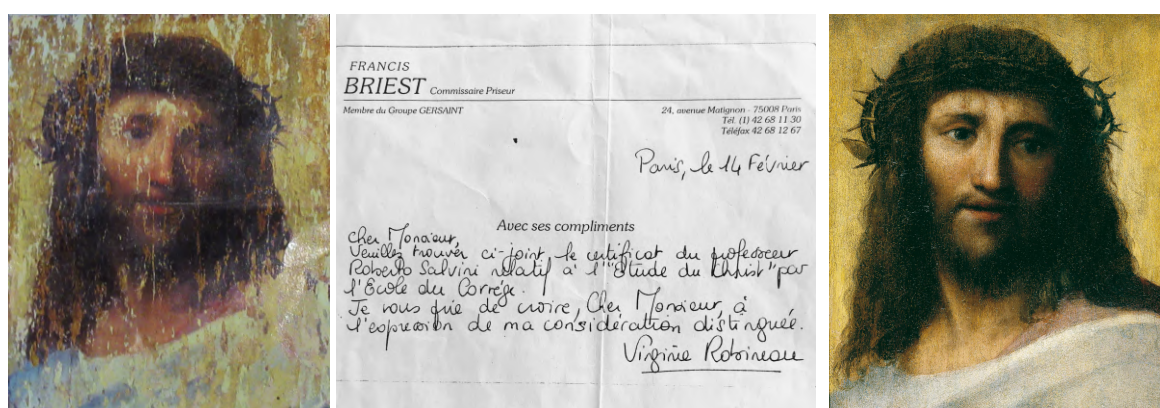
At school I was bullied as the dirty little Iti. My father beat me because I was a lousy pupil. I lived in a rough neighbourhood. I had to fight to defend myself. By the time I was 16 I could lamp a guy of forty.'

Ruffini's twice-weekly karate classes attracted pupils by the dozen. He also resumed his interest in art, visiting galleries and flea-markets, especially in Nice (notably Galerie D'Amato). As Frongia only busied himself up with touching up paintwork – he did not do re-lining or repair serious damage – Ruffini set about learning restoration techniques himself with a Bologna restorer called Barbara, who was five years his elder. Although the two became lovers, he has forgotten her surname ('without wishing to boast' he brags 'if I could remember the names of all the chicks I've bedded I'd deserve the Nobel

Prize For Memory’). Two years later Ruffini embarked on a five-year relationship with the teenage niece of another friend.

A couple of years after that he moved on to Lucile Abastado, a well-weathered Riviera socialite. She was ten years older than him and owned *Le Bistroquet* restaurant in Monte Carlo, across from the Casino. They talked of buying a boat and spending part of the year in the Caribbean, but Ruffini was unable to overcome his remorse at being split from his son. He dumped Abastado and persuaded his wife to return to Italy, renting her a separate flat and having his son to stay with him in Codena whenever possible.

He was often in Paris to see his parents and visit Drouot, staying in an hotel on nearby Rue de Provence and attending auctions and viewings on a daily basis. The first public manifestation of Ruffini’s phenomenal eye for art (Drouot Old Master expert René Millet has called him ‘a crack’) came in early **1992**, when he bought a much-damaged *Etude du Christ* (below left) that auctioneer Francis Briest had catalogued as ‘School of Correggio.’ On February 14 Briest employee Virginie Robineau lovingly forwarded Ruffini a ‘certificate’ by Roberto Salvini (onetime head of the Uffizi) from the early 1970s which, being written in Italian, the firm had not bothered (or been able) to read. It asserted that Salvini had ‘no doubt’ the painting was a youthful work (c.1512) by Antonio da Correggio himself, and had probably once been part of a larger painting.



Ruffini later showed the picture to Paris Old Master expert Eric Turquin who, he believes, was keen to include it in one of his uncatalogued sales at Drouot – ‘that way not many people would see it, and he could buy it via an accomplice as per usual, to sell himself later’ claims Ruffini. ‘I refused. A few days later I bumped into him at Drouot, and asked him if he’d care to value the picture for me as the museum in Correggio wanted to buy it. “Non Monsieur!” squeaked Turquin. “I don’t believe in it! Nothing to do with Correggio!”’ (Turquin denies the exchange, saying he considered ‘too restored – but I never suspected it was a fake.’) The two men have been at daggers drawn ever since.

‘To pretend that I could have deliberately included an important picture in a non-catalogued Drouot auction, in order to buy it personally for cheap and resell it at a high profit, is totally defamatory!’ thunders Turquin. He adds that, as a member of the *Syndicat Français des Experts Professionnels* (France’s Professional Art Expert association), he is prohibited from buying in his own sales ‘and I have certainly never done that.’

Ruffini had the battered Correggio restored by Maricetta Parlato in Bologna. She alerted Eugenio Riccomini, Director of the Galleria Nazionale di Parma, as to its quality, and in May/June **1994** it was exhibited at the Museum of Correggio (accompanied by a catalogue reproducing Salvini's laudatory appraisal). The Museum bought the work from Ruffini for 350m lire (€180,000) in 1997 and it has been on display there ever since.

Ruffini had his first run-in with Sotheby's later that year, over a 'wonderful painting Andrée and I bought from an important Madrid collection in the 1970s.' It was signed *Van Dael* but unrestored and needed a clean. Sotheby's entered it for sale in Monaco on 2 December **1994** as *Vase de Fleurs et Fruits sur un Entablement* with an estimate of FF400,000 (€60,000) – then withdrew it at the last minute. 'They told me it wasn't right!' fumes Ruffini. 'OK, they're the experts. But if it's not a Van Dael, I'd like to know just who did it! Not even Frongia could have produced a picture like that!'



In early **1996** Ruffini and a friend bought an oil-on-panel *Peasants Brawling Over Cards* as a 'Brueghel copy' at the Mercanteinfiera antiques fair in Parma. Sotheby's London entered it in their Old Master Paintings on 3 July 1996 as 'attributed to Pieter Brueghel III' (Lot 28, estimate £50,000-70,000). Just before the auction, however, they withdrew the painting, citing doubts about authenticity. 'If experts at Sotheby's, Christie's or Drouot say your picture's OK, then suddenly change their minds – you're the one to blame!' seethes Ruffini. 'You're a crook! A forger! They pin the blame on you to cover up their own incompetence!'

In **1999** Ruffini was the consignee of another disputed Brueghel at Drouot: *Peasants Attacked By Brigands* (below right), offered at Rieunier-Bailly-Pommery on November 22. As the auction expert was Ruffini's sworn enemy Eric Turquin, the work was entered for sale by Jules-François Ferrillon, a onetime philosophy teacher Ruffini had befriended a few years earlier after buying a vellum still life from him by 17th century Italian artist Octavianus Montfort. Ferrillon and Ruffini often met up at Drouot and scoured flea-markets together looking for bargains.

Ferrillon actually named the consignee as his Swedish wife Gunilla Lardell (who happened to have a Swiss bank account). Turquin attributed the work to Brueghel, and it sold to Galerie Saint-Honoré of Paris for FF 1.6m (€244,000), eight times estimate.



But the gallery were unable to substantiate a Brueghel origin and obtained the sale's cancellation. Ruffini recuperated the painting. In March 2009 – having been attributed by Brueghel authority Klaus Ertz to Pieter Brueghel the Younger, with supporting scientific analysis from Hamburg University and the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts – it would sell at the Vienna *Dorotheum* for €70,000.

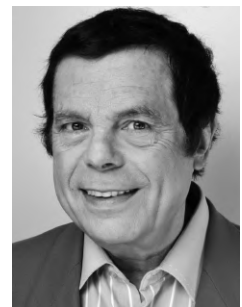


Another Ruffini work Turquin became involved with in 1999 was the 'Flemish' *St Jerome* (left) that Andrée Borie had gifted Ruffini in 1975. Turquin says he first saw the work in the Geneva Freeport; Ruffini says he was first shown it by Ferrillon in Paris. Turquin admits 'he kept the painting for a month... I must confess I did not know who it was by.'

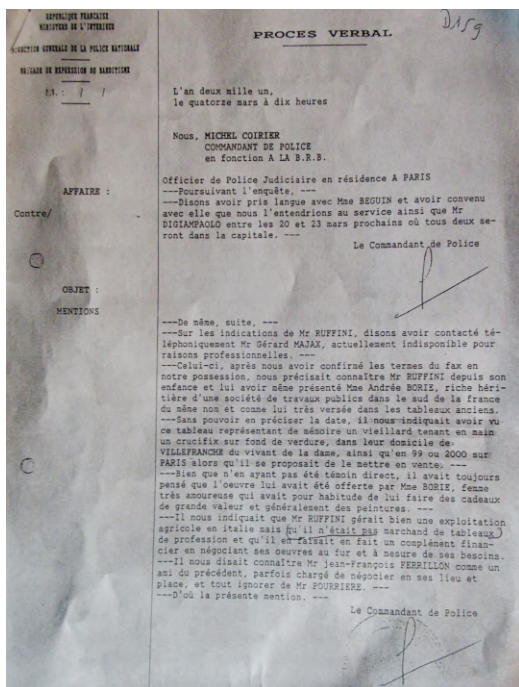
After Louvre curator Sylvie Béguin and Italian art historian Mario di Giampaolo had both attributed it to Parmigianino (1503-40), the work aroused interest from the Getty Museum in California. According to Ruffini, Ferrillon (without informing him) named his friend Lionel de Saint Donat-Pourrières, a dealer from Luxembourg, as a 'straw owner' (on 20% commission in the event of any sale) so that the work could be sent to the States without any hassle over an export permit. Its presence in the Grand Duchy was duly recorded by notarial deed in April 1999.

The Getty's Senior Curator of Paintings, Scott Schaefer, came to Paris in March 2000 to view the picture – appreciating its 'great beauty, superb landscape and striking image of St Jerome.' But he was not convinced it was a Parmigianino, and requested to have the work sent to Los Angeles for further examination. Ruffini – having got wind of Saint Donat-Pourrières's involvement – refused, recuperated the painting and deposited it in a safe at the BNP bank near Drouot. Ferrillon had a key to the safe and was empowered to show the picture to prospective clients.

Subsequently, reports Ruffini, Donat-Pourrières called Ferrillon saying he wanted to show the *St Jerome* to a potential American buyer. Ferrillon left him the picture at the Millon-Robert auction firm next to



Drouot. When he returned Donat-Pourrières and the *St Jerome* were nowhere to be seen. After being informed by Ferrillon, Ruffini – who was in Italy at the time – sped to Paris and filed a complaint for theft. Although Gérard Majax (above) told police he had seen the work at Andrée Borie's flat in Villefranche before her death in 1980, and again in Paris when Ruffini was preparing to sell it, Ruffini was unable to prove legal title.



Majax's statement (left), recorded by Commandant Michel Poirier of the Paris Police *Judiciaire* on 14 March 2001, casts light on the relationship between Ruffini and Andrée Borie. After confirming he had known Ruffini 'since

childhood’ and introduced him to Andrée Borie, Majax described her as ‘a rich heiress’ who was ‘very much in love’ with Ruffini and, ‘like him, very knowledgeable about Old Masters’ – and ‘in the habit of offering him presents of great value, usually paintings.’

It was only when Ruffini’s association with the picture emerged during the court case, says Eric Turquin, that he realized it was a fake – pleading in self-defence that *Je ne me suis pas trompé, j’ai été trompé* (‘I made no error, I was tricked into error’) as ‘the standard of faking was extremely high. We were all too naïve. We had not come across Old Master fakes like this before.’

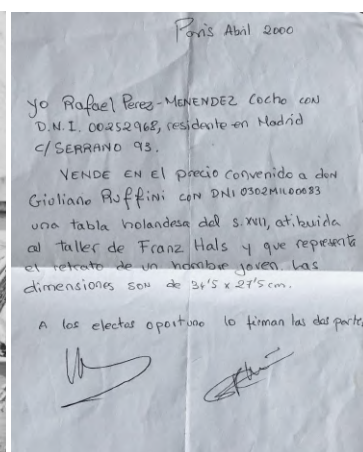
In 2008 the picture was illustrated in the catalogue of the Correggio exhibition in Parma – as a Parmigianino from a ‘German private collection.’ In January 2012 it sold for \$842,500 at Sotheby’s New York, as ‘circle of Parmigianino from a French private collection.’ The consignor was Lionel de Saint Donat-Pourrières. In *Autodafé*, his book about the painting published digitally in 2020, he does not discuss how the picture came into his possession.

DUTCH PUZZLE 2000

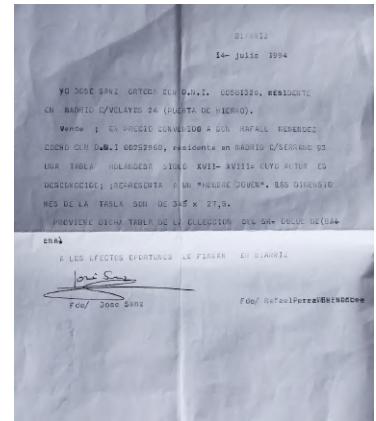
Meanwhile, in April 2000, Ruffini made two significant purchases. First, on April 1, in Rome, he paid €7,500 for a *Padre Eterno* (‘God the Father’) which, according to the *Babuino* auction house, had been attributed to El Greco’s Venetian period in 1962 by the Roman art historian Claudio Tiberi (1927-2009), then by Giovanni Mariacher (1912-94), Director of Venetian Museums, in 1987.

A few days later, in Paris, Ruffini paid Rafael Perez-Menendez €8,000 for a ‘17th century Dutch portrait’ (below left) of *Un Hombre Joven* (Young Man) ‘attributed to the workshop of Frans Hals.’

The deal was sealed in a ‘gigantic apartment full of pictures and *objets d’art*’ close to the Champs-Élysées, owned by a ‘lady who was a longstanding friend of Perez-Menendez’ – and who, Ruffini was given to understand, was a daughter of Charles de Gaulle (presumably his elder daughter Elisabeth, 1924-2013). The portrait was ‘pretty filthy’ beneath a layer of greying varnish.



Perez-Menendez had bought the portrait as a ‘17th-18th century Dutch painting, author unknown’ for FF 20,000 (around €3,000) in 1994 from another Spanish dealer, José Sanz Ortega (see receipt right) – who had acquired it from the former partner of the Duke de Baena, a Spanish diplomat. The Duke spent his retirement in Biarritz (*Biarritz* in Spanish), where he passed away in 1985 at the age of 92; the town renamed one its streets *Rue du Duc de Baena* in his honour. His sister Maria (in 1947) and father Mariano (in 1953) had also died in the upmarket French Basque resort, 20 miles from the Spanish border. ‘There’s no point inventing such a fancy provenance for an item worth a few thousand euros’ asserts Ruffini. ‘That’s why the provenance is definitely OK.’



The Duke de Baena – shown above with an expression and in a pose mirroring his Dutch painting – doubtless acquired the portrait during his diplomatic service in Holland: in 1920 as Under-Secretary to the Spanish Legation in the Hague; from 1945-48 (as *Duque de San Lucar*) as Spanish Envoy; and from 1956-63 (after becoming *Duque de Baena*) as Spanish Ambassador. In 1958 he founded the *Premio Duque de Baena* award for students at The Hague’s Royal Academy of Art, funding the award for a decade. In January 1963 Princess (later Queen) Beatrix of The Netherlands visited the award exhibition in the Duke’s company; he was made an Honorary Member of the Academy later that year.



The Duke was a serious art collector with, it would appear, a penchant for pictures of men: among his purchases (from London dealers Colnaghi) was the red/black chalk *Portrait of a Bearded Man* by Federico Zuccaro (left) sold for £16,800 at Christie’s London on 4 July 2006. In retirement the Duke wrote *The Dutch Puzzle*, an erudite survey of Dutch society and national character, remarking gratefully that in the Netherlands ‘sexual matters are treated with a liberty and understanding superior to any other country in Europe.’



One section of his book, on the Dutch obsession with tulips, reveals that the bulb-growers *Grullemans Brothers*, from the famous Keukenhof tulip fields, named new blooms in the Duke’s honour in 1946 (the *Hertog de San Lucar*) and 1958 (the *Hertog de Baena*). The Duke also refers to the speculative ‘tulip crash’ of 1637 that ruined Jan van Goyen – master of Jan Steen, whom he calls ‘one of the last of the great Dutch Roman Catholic painters’ from the period when Spain controlled the Netherlands, ending with the Peace of Münster in 1648 – a few years before his portrait of *Un Hombre Joven* was probably painted. ‘Many catalogues of tulips were published’ adds the Duke, ‘some of admirable quality, such as the one painted by Judith Leyster, one of the favourite pupils of Frans Hals.’ The Duke fondly evokes the ‘rows of small houses surrounded by enchanting little gardens’ in Haarlem, Hals’s home town.

RUFFINI ACCELERATES 2002-09

In 2001 Ruffini moved to Florence, where his son Mathieu enrolled in drama classes. Two years later they settled in Rome, with Mathieu continuing his theatrical studies. Two years after that they relocated to Paris, renting a flat near Les Halles.

Early in **2002** Ruffini showed Sotheby's Milan a worn, oil-on-panel *Tower of Babel* – another work he had spotted at the *Parma Mercanteinfiera*. Sotheby's offered it in London on July 11 with an estimate of £20,000-30,000 and an attribution to Abel Grimmer (c.1570-1620) that seemed amply justified by a price of £193,650. Sotheby's, however, returned the work to Ruffini a fortnight later, refusing to pay him and claiming the picture was a later copy. 'No doubt their client bought it over the phone and, when he saw its condition, didn't fancy it – so they found some friendly lab to say it wasn't right' accuses Ruffini. The painting's subsequent history appears to back him up.



Ruffini had it confirmed as 'of the period' by the Pitti Palace's laboratory, then sold it via Jaime MacVeigh



to a dealer in Madrid for around €30,000. The dealer had it restored, then authenticated as a Grimmer by Reine de Bertier de Savigny, author of the artist's *catalogue raisonné*. In 2011 it fetched €279,400 at Neumeister in Munich. 'Sotheby's cost me €200,000!' fumes Ruffini.

At a Milan flea-market in early **2003** he paid €150 for a small, dirty picture of a butterfly and strawberries with the then-barely legible signature/date *Coorte 1704*. Ruffini 'didn't think it was right, but the price was so low I bought it.' He had the picture assessed by Christie's Milan – who entered it in their Old Master sale in London on 9 July 2003 as *Strawberries in a Pot on a Stone Ledge with a Butterfly* by Adriaen Coorte (estimate £60,000-80,000). It sold for £206,850 to a London dealer and was later shown at TEFAF Maastricht.

In **2006** James MacVeigh acquired a handsome *Portrait of a Man* to which he had been alerted by his friend Rico Zermeño (1925-2014), a Nice-based American actor with a passing resemblance to Liberace. MacVeigh showed the portrait to Ruffini and Frongia who, after consulting Sylvie Béguin (who attributed it to Girolamo Bedoli) and Mario di Giampaolo (who attributed it to another Parma Mannerist, Michelangelo Anselmi), paid MacVeigh €160,000 for it and sent it to London for restoration – where it was seen by a Mayfair dealer who was keen to sell it himself, and offered to go quits.

The portrait was subsequently attributed to Parmigianino by David Ekserdjian. Ruffini's share of the hefty proceeds enabled him to buy his own Paris apartment in Rue du

Faubourg-St-Honoré (just 100 yards from the scene of his youthful art exhibition triumph in adjacent Rue du Colisée). In July **2007** he paid Lino Frongia \$739,200 for his share of the profits – a sum French justice would later suspect of remunerating Frongia for work as a forger.

Also in 2007, Ruffini embarked on one of his more quixotic ventures: opening an ice-cream parlour in Madrid (at Calle del Arenal 25 next to the Opera House). Ruffini says he wanted to help an ‘out-of-work friend who made superb ice-cream’ and thought he’d spied a market niche, having been assured there was nowhere for Madrilenians to buy decent ice-cream. But, laments Ruffini, ‘it turned out that the Spanish don’t eat ice-cream – they’re too busy stuffing themselves with *tapas*.’ The parlour (cutely called *Cupido*) proved a costly failure, closing after three years at a loss of over €300,000.

‘As one may imagine,’ remarks Ruffini acidly, ‘I would hardly have bothered messing around with ice-cream in Madrid if I was busy producing lucrative fakes.’

In June **2008** the *Ecce Homo* that Jean-Claude Bacchiana had bought from *La Brocanterie du Marais* in 1974, then sold back to Ruffini in 1999, was included in *The Grand Gallery* exhibition staged jointly by London dealers Clovis Whitfield and Partridge Fine Art at the latter’s gallery in New Bond Street.



Three months later it featured in the giant *Correggio* exhibition in Parma – having been declared a *Correggio* by Mario di Giampaolo, Sylvie Béguin and Nicholas Turner (former Deputy Keeper of Drawings at the British Museum and Curator of Drawings at the Getty Museum in Los Angeles). However, at the September 19 opening, Vittorio Sgarbi – maverick TV personality and Secretary of State for Culture under Sylvio Berlusconi – declared the *Ecce Homo* ‘a beautiful picture, like a *Correggio*, but not by him.’ He claimed to have seen it being painted in 1994 by an artist he described as *Padano* (i.e. from northern Italy).

The press identified Lino Frongia and another highly skilled Figurativist, Agostino Arrivabene from Lombardy, as potential suspects. Both ridiculed the suggestion. Arrivabene thanked Sgarbi for the free publicity. ‘Just Vittorio shooting his mouth off’ shrugged Frongia, while admitting he had once made a copy of a *Correggio Head of Christ* as a ‘stylistic exercise.’ Ruffini substantiates Frongia’s assertion, explaining: ‘When I sold my small *Head of Christ* to the Museum of *Correggio*, I asked Frongia to do me a copy. His girlfriend saw him working on it. She later told Sgarbi she’d seen Frongia painting a *Head of Christ* on a wooden panel.’ Frongia’s copy was destroyed by fire in 2005, when Ruffini’s Codena farmhouse was hit by lightning while he was on holiday in Ibiza. Furniture, carpets and other pictures went up in smoke – though Ruffini’s most valuable paintings remained unscathed in his armoured laundry-room.

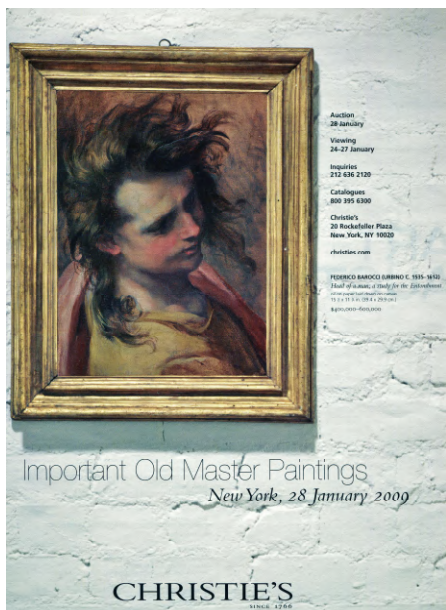
Ruffini, and others, believe Sgarbi spouted the tale of the ‘fake’ *Correggio* to embarrass exhibition curator Lucia Fornari – Director of Parma’s National Gallery and a longstanding

Sgarbi adversary. Fornari had refused to include a work owned by Sgarbi in the exhibition, prompting Sgarbi (a man of Trumpian self-restraint) to demand her resignation at the opening press conference. Fornari responded by sending the *Ecce Homo* for analysis at the MIDA Laboratory in Rome.

The Christ Is Authentic ('Quel Cristi è autentico') thundered the *Gazzetta di Parma* on 30 November 2008 – reporting that 'no material or technical elements contradicting a 16th century dating for the painting' had been found in Rome. The *Gazzetta* also quoted Nicholas Turner as telling the Correggio Conference (held in Parma November 28-30) he had seen the picture 'in France in 1972, at the home of a collector who left the work to sisters [alla sorelle] after his death' – which sounds mighty like a reference to André Borie and his daughters Georgette and Andrée. Turner would later deny the report, and vow to 'keep absolutely stumm when Ruffini's name comes up.'



The picture would be offered unsuccessfully, with a price-tag of €5m, at Maison d'Art gallery in Monaco in September 2009. It remains unsold – even though microchemical, stereo-microscope and histochemical analysis, conducted in 2018 by Artelab in Rome using pigment samples removed in London under the direction of restorer Cinzia Pasquali (see above), have confirmed a 16th century dating.



Ruffini soon moved on from the Correggio controversy. On 28 January 2009 he enjoyed a 25% commission on a *Head of St John the Evangelist* sold for \$1.76m at Christie's New York to London dealer Jean-Luc Baroni. This altarpiece oil study, on paper mounted on canvas, had been bought from a Spanish lawyer by Jaime MacVeigh – who sent Ruffini a photograph to show Sylvie Béguin and Mario di Giampaolo (a few months before his death in July 2008). Both attributed the work to Barocci. Christie's were so enthusiastic about the work that they flagged

it up in a full-page ad (*above left*) in prestige monthly *Art + Auction*. They did not, however, pay their vendor his full due – withholding \$230,500 on the grounds that the Coorte still life consigned by Ruffini back in 2003 was no longer considered authentic. Christie’s behaviour was cavalier on two counts: MacVeigh, not Ruffini, was the official vendor of the Barocci; and it was Christie’s, not Ruffini, who had presented the still life as a *bona fide* Coorte.

Ruffini bade Christie’s pay MacVeigh what he was owed for the Barocci, while offering to pay them half of what they were claiming over the Coorte – providing Christie’s agreed for it to be tested in a Vienna laboratory. If it were then declared a forgery, Ruffini would reimburse Christie’s entirely. Christie’s refused – claiming their own analysis had revealed the ‘probable’ presence of titanium white (first produced in the 1920s).

‘Dishonest bastards’ was Ruffini’s reaction. He believed Christie’s had succumbed to pressure from the work’s owner after the painting’s failure to be accepted in the *Ode aan Coorte* exhibition held at the Mauritshuis in The Hague from February-June 2008. ‘As the owner was a big client of theirs, Christie’s had some dodgy tests done by a friendly lab – simple as that’ surmises Ruffini.

DUKE’S TRAVAILS : THE LOUVRE’S HALS 2008-10

Meanwhile, eight years after had Ruffini acquired it in April 2000, the Duke de Baena’s dirty Dutch portrait found a potential buyer. The Louvre.

Perez-Menendez had shown the work to Matías Díaz Padrón, former Curator of Dutch Paintings at the Prado, who didn’t believe in it. On the basis of a black-and-white photograph of the portrait before cleaning, Claus Grimm (author of the *Frans Hal catalogue raisonné*) also excluded Hals, although he thought it might have been painted by one of his sons. Ruffini ‘found it interesting, so I proposed it as *School of Frans Hals*.’

Ruffini offered the portrait to his dealer-friend Jean-Marie Le Fell for €30,000. When Le Fell dithered, Ruffini took it to Christie’s Paris, where it was viewed by Old Master expert Elvire de Maintenant. Some days afterwards she informed Ruffini that Christie’s thought Grimm had been too cautious: they wanted to offer the portrait in New York as ‘attributed to Frans Hals’ with an estimate of \$300,000. Ruffini agreed. Ten days later, Christie’s informed him that Quentin Buvelot of the Mauritshuis believed the work was by Hals himself – and increased their valuation to €5 million.



When Blaise Ducos, the Louvre’s Head of Dutch & Flemish Paintings, was shown the work by Christie’s he declined to issue an export permit and commissioned a condition report from the Louvre’s Research & Restoration Centre. This noted ‘several vertical cracks’ to the panel but deemed the condition of the paint surface ‘particularly good’ and found an *FH* monogram bottom-

right beneath a ‘fairly thin coat of varnish’ that ‘seemed fairly old.’

On 22 October 2008 the Louvre launched a public subscription to raise the €5m needed to buy the painting within the legal time-limit of 30 months (i.e. by 22 April 2011). On October 28 Ruffini signed a contract with Christie’s, agreeing to their demand for 17.5% commission if the transaction went through. The Louvre’s PR drive termed the work a ‘masterpiece,’ extolling its ‘economy of means, psychological sobriety and richness of palette.’ France had ‘no painting comparable to this national treasure.’ Blaise Ducos termed the portrait ‘the quintessence of Golden Age Holland.... In the history of painting only one country, one town, one artist could have produced such a work: the Netherlands, Haarlem, Frans Hals!’

The Louvre were seeking funding for two other paintings at the time: a *Portrait du Comte Molé* by Ingres, classified in April 2006 (price €18m); and *St Peter’s Denial* by Antoine/Louis Le Nain, classified in August 2008 (price €11.5m). Both appeals would succeed, thanks largely to corporate sponsorship. A small foreign portrait would struggle to arouse comparable backing to these Gallic blockbusters.

As the Louvre campaign rumbled on, Ruffini found himself in urgent need of funds to keep pace with the runaway costs of the luxurious villa he was building in Codena for his beloved son Mathieu. Without awaiting the outcome of the Louvre’s appeal, Ruffini resolved to cancel his contract with Christie’s (which concerned solely the portrait’s potential acquisition by the Louvre) and sell the picture privately for €3m.

Zurich art consultant Bruno Meissner and Italian courtier Alberto Antonioli inspected the portrait at Ruffini’s flat, accompanied by heavyweight New York dealer Otto Naumann. But when Claus Grimm (right) – having been sent a new, high-resolution image – attributed the work to Hals’s son, Frans II (1618-69), their interest faded.



At the invitation of Giammarco Cappuzzo, London dealer Mark Weiss came to view the painting (by now in storage at *Art Transit* in central Paris) in May 2010. He was smitten, but could not stump up €3m by himself – so brought in Fairlight Art Ventures (founded by hedge-fund manager David Kowitz in 2009) to co-finance the purchase on a 50-50 basis. The deal looked a win-win: if the Louvre bought the work for €5m, the two men would earn a swift profit; if the work were returned, there was every chance its value on the international market would comfortably exceed €5m (Weiss thought a market-fresh Hals worth nearer \$15 million).

In December 2010 the Louvre acquired Cranach’s *Three Graces* for €4m, having raised €1m by public subscription inside five weeks. But in April 2011 the museum called off the hunt for €5m to buy the Hals and returned the portrait to Ruffini, complete with export permit. Unknown to the Louvre, Ruffini was no longer the owner. He had the work shipped by Gander & White to Mark Weiss, who lost no time in promoting it as a *bona fide* Hals, pointing out similarities with four other Hals portraits of the 1650s and calling it a ‘perfect illustration of why Van Gogh and Manet looked to Frans Hals as a model.’

The portrait was sold soon afterwards to Seattle billionaire Richard Hedreen for \$11,287,500 in a deal brokered by Sotheby's (who ceded \$10.75m to Weiss/Fairlight and kept 5% commission). Hedreen was known as a collector of Contemporary Art but, according to trade sources, also invested in Old Master paintings – often advised by Sotheby's American Chairman and Old Master specialist George Wachter.

THE RETURN OF MR MÉTHIAZ 2009-11

In 2009 Mathieu Ruffini played the role of a 19th century violinist in a short film shot by Jules-François Ferrillon, Giuliano Ruffini's onetime associate who had returned to Paris after taking a course in cinema production. Giuliano bankrolled the film to the tune of €30,000 – with Lino Frongia contributing a '19th century style' portrait of Mathieu's character as a prop (in 2015 Jean-Charles Méthiaz would hand the *Police Judiciaire* a photograph of this portrait as evidence of Frongia's supposed forgery capabilities). Ruffini then hit on the idea of a fictitious film exposé of crooked dealers, auctioneers, experts and laboratories – with his son again in the starring rôle, this time as an Italian forger in Paris. Some of Ruffini's own paintings were to be used as props ('to me, at the time, they were just copies' he says). Ferrillon was to write the screenplay.

Meanwhile **Jean-Charles Méthiaz** had moved back to Paris after the end of his liaison with Michelle Vasseur (who had taken charge of the arts café *Le Trottoir*, near Milan's Naviglio Grande). Being unable to afford a place of his own, Méthiaz had talked Jean-Marie Le Fell into putting him up until he found a new girlfriend. The lucky lady turned out to be Catherine Pillet-Moreels, an opera-lover from Dieppe who lived in the 14th Arrondissement. 'She supported him' recalls Raphaël Wertheimer, an audiovisual producer who got to know Méthiaz in 2009 while filming documentaries for the *Centre Hospitalier* in suburban St-Cloud, where Pillet-Moreels was Assistant Director.

'He exploited the generosity of friends' adds Le Fell, who was present at the dinner hosted by Pillet-Moreels in **2010** when Ruffini re-encountered Méthiaz after a lapse of several years. 'I felt pity on him at his age' says Ruffini. 'He never had a dime.'



To generate funds for the 'Italian forger' film, Ruffini decided to sell an unsigned *Still Life* attributed to the 17th century German artist Georg Flegel (left). He asked Méthiaz to sell it for him 'as he was without a job. He got a good price for it. I could have sold it myself, but I was pleased to help him' (the still life would re-emerge at TEFAF Maastricht, with Flegel's signature).

Ruffini invited Méthiaz and Pillet-Moreels to stay at his Italian farm, and lent Méthiaz €3,500 to buy a car (a second-hand Mercedes convertible). 'Méthiaz never reimbursed him' snorts Wernheimer – who dubs Méthiaz 'a gigolo who could be charming and seemed erudite' yet was 'two-faced and egocentric with no notion of friendship.'

The forgery film was put on hold when Ferrillon disappeared with an American girlfriend.



(1)



(2)



(4)



(5)

Meanwhile – partly out of friendship, and partly because he could speak English – Ruffini (who speaks only French and Italian) offered Méthiaz the chance to sell paintings regularly on his behalf, for a generous 20% commission – even though, as Le Fell puts it, Méthiaz had ‘no competence or qualification in the field.’

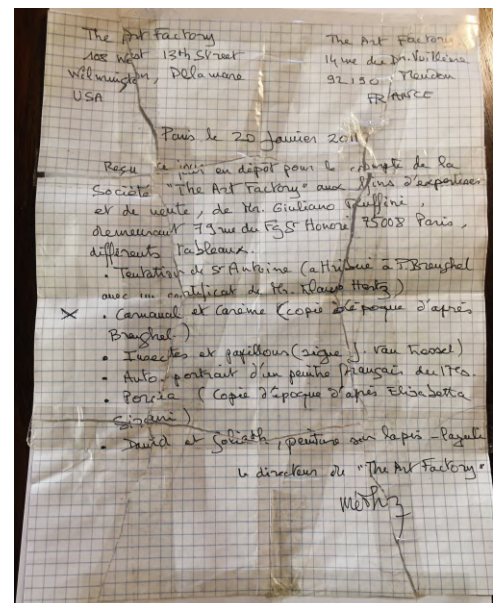
On 5 January 2011 Méthiaz founded *The Art Factory*, a limited liability company in Delaware (giving his address as 14 rue du Dr-Vuillème, Meudon, 92190 France). He would ‘officially accept the position of Manager’ on January 18; the company was, in fact, a one-man show, set up with the aid of 26 year-old Michael Tordjman, whom Méthiaz would introduce to Ruffini as ‘my Jewish friend.’

On 8 July 2010 Tordjman had co-founded the *Association Française des Avocats et Professionnels du Droit* (‘French Association of Lawyers & Legal Professionals’). Curiously, the statutes specified his profession as *Directeur Financier* (‘Financial Director’) and declared him ‘domiciled in Paris’ – even though the accompanying Declaration Of Association listed his address as *Route Royale* in *Les Essarts-le-Roi*, 25 miles south-west of the capital. This Association was a family affair, with three Tordjmans on the six-person board: Michael (President); Paris lawyer Eva Tordjman; and Michael’s cousin Thierry (Secretary General), who had been sworn in as a lawyer in 2004. In September 2010 Thierry would open a Paris office at 25 avenue Malesherbes, moving in 2013 to 59 rue La Boétie (next door to the former Wildenstein Gallery, where André Borie may well have acquired some of his paintings).

A scruffy list on squared paper in Méthiaz’s writing (right), dated 20 January 2011 but of no legal validity, cites six works that Ruffini handed Méthiaz for ‘analysis and sale’ (*expertise et vente*):

- (1) *Temptation of St Anthony* (attributed to P. Brueghel with certificate from Klaus Hertz)
- (2) *Carnival & Lent* (contemporary copy after Brueghel)
- (3) *Insects & Butterflies* (signed J. van Kessel)
- (4) *Self-Portrait of a 17th century French Artist*
- (5) *Porcia* (contemporary copy after Elizabetta Sirani)
- (6) *David & Goliath*, painting on lapis lazuli

Four of the six works are shown above, the *David & Goliath* below. Méthiaz sold one of them. He had ‘em on his list, but almost none of ‘em were missed:



(1) The Brueghel *Temptation* – bought by Ruffini and Andrée Borie in the 1970s – had garnered a Klaus Ertz authenticity certificate in 2010, and would be exhibited in Krems (Austria) in 2011 and Wrocław (Poland) in 2013 but only sold in July 2015, for €260,000 at Hampel in Munich. (2) The *Carnival* after Brueghel – which Ruffini had brought from Monaco businessman Raymond Cohen in the 1990s – was auctioned at Drouot for €30,000 on 27 May 2014. (3) Ruffini does not recollect the fate of Van Kessel’s *Insects*. (4) The anonymous *Self-Portrait* remains unsold. (5) Ruffini finally offloaded the *Porcia* for €6,000 in early 2020.

That leaves (6) the *David & Goliath* Ruffini had bought from Jean-Claude Bacchiana in 1995 as a ‘19th century copy after Orazio Gentileschi.’

TELL IT NOT IN GATH 2012

Ruffini declares himself bewildered to find the *David & Goliath* on Méthiaz’s ‘Little List’ of January 2011. He is adamant that he did not entrust Méthiaz with the work until November 17 – ten months later.

Ruffini initially sent a photo of the work to Giammarco Cappuzzo, an art broker he had met in Florence (where his father ran an Old Master gallery). When Cappuzzo failed to respond, Ruffini assigned the picture to Méthiaz – telling Cappuzzo that Méthiaz was actually the owner, ‘so that he wouldn’t get angry with me if the painting went and fetched a decent price’.



The *David & Goliath* (left) had far more commercial potential than the five works entrusted to Méthiaz earlier in 2011. Larger versions of the same subject, by Orazio Gentileschi, exist on canvas (in Rome’s Galleria Spada) and on copper (in Berlin’s Gemaldegalerie).

Méthiaz was out of his depth in the Old Master world. He therefore enlisted the help of Axel Rondouin (below), a 25 year-old Parisian who, after studying wealth management and working as an auction-house clerk, had co-founded the art consultancy *De Pictura* in April 2010.



Rondouin checked if the Gentileschi appeared on the database of the Art Loss Register. On 14 December 2011 the Register certified that the work was not recorded as ‘stolen or missing, or reported as lost between 1933 and 1945.’ On 3 January 2012 a similar all-clear was issued to Rondouin by the Cultural Heritage Section of the Carabinieri in Rome.

On 5 January 2012 The Art Factory billed Galerie de Rive in Geneva (founded 2004) the sum of €1.15m for the *David & Goliath*, ‘attributed to Orazio Gentileschi’ and hailing ‘from the former André Borie Collection’ – stipulating that the work would remain in the Tordjman safe in Paris (at Banque CIC, 77 rue St-Lazare) until payment had been transferred in full to The Art Factory’s account in Cyprus. Méthiaz lyingly told Ruffini he

had been offered €400,000. Ruffini was happy enough: ‘I said OK! I’d have been happy with €100,000! To me, the *David* was a 19th century copy.’

But the mysterious Geneva deal was called off before payment was received from Galerie de Rive (directed since February 2009 by Charles Bailly, a dealer known for his flair in rediscovering important Old Master paintings).

At around the same time Michael Tordjman showed the work to Francesco Solinas, co-curator of the exhibition *Artemisia 1593-1654: Pouvoir, Gloire et Passion d’une Femme Peintre* (devoted to the daughter of Orazio Gentileschi) due to open at the Musée Maillol in Paris on March 14. Solinas had agreed to examine the painting in his Paris flat after being solicited by Rondouin via e-mail. He was assured by Tordjman and Rondouin, without supporting evidence, that the *David & Goliath* had been acquired by André Borie from Jules Benzrihem in Paris on 23 September 1937.

Solinas was so enthusiastic that, on **January 29**, he wrote to his co-curator Roberto Contini (of the Berlin Gemaldegalerie) about this ‘extraordinary’ picture whose ‘assured, lengthy, vigorous brushstrokes’ had all the elegance and precision of Orazio Gentileschi. Solinas added that, if Contini agreed to include the picture in their Maillol show, the owner (whom Solinas referred to as a ‘Belgian collector’) would ‘send it to Cinzia Pasquali next week for cleaning.’



Pasquali (*left*) – famed for her work in the Louvre’s *Gallery of Apollo* and *Hall of Mirrors* at Versailles – noted that the painting was on three plaques of lapis lazuli mounted on a single piece of slate, with parts of the precious blue stone left blank to represent the lake and sky. The paint-surface was covered with a layer of oxidized varnish that was ‘certainly not original’; there were brownish traces around the edges, probably caused by an earlier frame. Pasquali cleaned the surface with triammonium citrate before applying a fresh coat of varnish.

Her report recorded the picture as belonging to a ‘Paris private collector’ – not a Belgian one. The cleaning was paid for by *Adama Investment Fund LLC* – a hedge fund founded by Michael Tordjman in Delaware in March 2011.

The Gentileschi went on show at the Musée Maillol on **14 March 2012**. ‘*De Pictura exhibit an unknown work by Orazio Gentileschi*’ screamed Axel Rondouin’s website – claiming that *De Pictura* had been asked to sell the work by ‘a Belgian private collector.’



A newly discovered Gentileschi was sensational news, and the work drew appreciative comment from such aficionados as veteran Italian expert Nicola Spinosa, Keith Christiansen of the New York Metropolitan Museum, and Elizabeth Cropper of Washington’s National Gallery – with the Getty Museum reportedly interested in buying the work. Mark Weiss (*left*) was so impressed he asked



Giammarco Cappuzzo (*above right*) to engineer a meeting with the work's owner. Cappuzzo promptly contacted Jean-Charles Méthiaz. The rendez-vous – the first time Cappuzzo and Méthiaz had met – took place at the offices of Thierry Tordjman, in the presence of Michael Tordjman and Axel Rondouin, on an ill-omened **Friday April 13th**. Although the painting had been on French soil for decades, it was accompanied by a Belgian export permit, granted to Rondouin on April 4.

After Weiss and The Art Factory had signed off on a price of **€3.6m** – which Weiss funded 50-50 with Fairlight Art Ventures (which later acquired full ownership of the painting after Sotheby's – reports Weiss – 'had had it to sell privately for \$10m') – Méthiaz took Cappuzzo to one side and enjoined him 'not to say anything about this to Giuliano Ruffini.' Cappuzzo agreed, but found the request 'bizarre' (and was less than impressed that Méthiaz offered him no commission – even though he had set up his deal with Weiss). Cappuzzo had no inkling that Méthiaz (who refuses to comment on Cappuzzo's allegation) was planning to tell Ruffini he had sold the Gentileschi for just **€1.4m**.

Ruffini should have received €2.88m (once Méthiaz had deducted his 20% commission). Instead he received €1.12m (80% of €1.4m), a shortfall of **€1.76m**. The €1.12m was transferred by The Art Factory (in dollars) to Ruffini's Monaco account on May 2. This bank transfer referenced a *Lettre de Mission du 17 novembre 2011* – apparent confirmation of the bogus nature of the 20 Janvier 2011 dating assigned by Méthiaz to his little list. The remaining **€2.48m** – apart from €100,000 reportedly ceded to Michael Tordjman and Axel Rondouin – was pocketed by Jean-Charles Méthiaz. Tordjman (who struck up an instant rapport with Weiss, based on their common Jewish heritage) had just been hired by Ruffini as Financial Advisor and, on 5 March 2012, opened yet another company in Delaware: ID24 Production, in the name of Ruffini's son Mathieu.

In early March 2012 Tordjman (who also worked with the Antwerp diamond trade) persuaded Giuliano Ruffini to move to Brussels. His lawyer associate Daphné Bajkowski helped with his administrative formalities – including the opening of a new bank account. Ruffini had a girlfriend, and several pals, in the Belgian capital but – although he liked the people, and the lively gallery scene – he soon came to hate the city due to its 'cold, grey, rainy climate.'

VENUS IN AN OPAQUE VEIL 2012-13



On **19 November 2012** in Paris, encouraged by the sale of the Gentileschi, Ruffini signed a *Mandat Pour Expertise et Vente* with The Art Factory for a *Femme Nue* in oil on panel, which he handed over to Méthiaz. The contract made no mention of the names Cranach or Venus. Ruffini thought the picture 'worth between €50,000 and €80,000.' Back in the 1970s he and Andrée Borie had shown it to an expert near Drouot who considered it a 'fine contemporary copy' produced in Cranach's workshop.

Méthiaz promptly betook himself to Christie's Paris, boasting to Elvire de Maintenant (*above*) that he had found a Cranach in a Belgian collection.

Christie's France SNC
9, avenue Matignon
75008 Paris
Tel: +33 (0)1 40 76 55 55
Fax: +33 (0)1 40 76 55 56
www.christies.com

ANNEXE-
Christie's

CHRISTIE'S

The Art Factory
c/o Jean Charles Méthiaz
100 West 13th Street
New York, NY 10001
U.S.A.

Client: 252552
Tél: République F.R.A.

Scemi Client: PROPRIETAIRE
No de Stock: PARCH328
Contenu: Particulier
L'œuvre: Euvre de Mainteneur Garantie en cas de dommage ou perte Christie's

REF. No	DETAIL DES OBJETS	RECEVE	RECOMMANDATIONS POUR LA VENTE	Estimation (Franchise)	Estimation (Franchise) du propriétaire	Reçu	Frais de Marketing & Garantie en cas de dommage ou perte durant le transit
Ligne	Titre	Description	Debut	Fin	Estimation	Date Proposée	
1	1	Lucas Cranach, Venus, HSP 30x24cm, sans cadre	HSP OH		3.000.000/ 5.000.000 GB pounds sterling Provisionnel		29NOV12

Frais de Marketing: l'indice de l'Etat 2012 à l'Etat 2012 pour le plan de l'Etat 2012 à l'Etat 2012. Les lots sont illustrés à la discrétion de Christie's. L'illustration peut varier. Toutes les estimations ne sont que des estimations. Christie's n'est pas responsable des erreurs de calculs de l'Etat 2012 à l'Etat 2012. Les lots sont illustrés à la discrétion de Christie's. L'illustration peut varier. Toutes les estimations ne sont que des estimations. Christie's n'est pas responsable des erreurs de calculs de l'Etat 2012 à l'Etat 2012. Les lots sont illustrés à la discrétion de Christie's. L'illustration peut varier. Toutes les estimations ne sont que des estimations. Christie's n'est pas responsable des erreurs de calculs de l'Etat 2012 à l'Etat 2012.

Instructions Spéciales:
Reçu par Roland de Lathuy
à Bruxelles le 29/11/12

Instructions Spéciales:
Confirmation of estimate
subject to authentication
and provenance research

Signature: Les objets énumérés ci-dessus ont été remis à Christie's

Vendeur: Jean Charles MÉTHIAZ Date: 29/11/2012
Nom en toutes lettres: (pour The Art Factory) ROLAND DE LATHUY
PARCH328001 Date d'impression: 29NOV12 10:59 par PAR.DPP.SAR

pour recherches et authentification sans engagement

De Maintenant took Méthiaz ‘very seriously’ as ‘he told me it was he who discovered the Gentileschi exhibited at the Musée Maillol.’ She arranged a viewing of the Venus in Christie’s Brussels office for November 29 – with the company’s Deputy Chairman, Paul Raison, zooming in from London to join her and Roland de Lathuy, Head of Christie’s Belgium. ‘All three of us thought the Cranach a potential masterpiece’ De Maintenant later declared.

At the end of the viewing Jean-Charles Méthiaz – named unequivocally as the ‘vendor (on behalf The Art Factory)’ – signed an agreement with Christie’s France SNC ‘for research and authentication’ pertaining to an unframed ‘HSP’ (huile sur panneau, i.e. oil on panel) designated as ‘Lucas Cranach, Venus’ with a ‘provisional estimate’ of 3.000.000/ 5.000.000 GB pounds sterling. Although the agreement (above) was made in the name of Christie’s France – with Elvire de Maintenant as ‘contact’ – it was signed by Roland de Lathuy, below the mention *Reçu par Roland de Lathuy à Bruxelles le 29/11/12*.

Christie’s sent the painting to London for examination. Over the next fortnight they received encouraging but inconclusive opinions (produced, let it be said, with remarkable alacrity) from various experts about a potential Cranach attribution.

Technical analyst Libby Sheldon found ‘many aspects of the painting consistent with the period of the artist.’ Dendrochronology consultant Ian Tyers thought it painted on a ‘most peculiar piece of wood, with a most peculiar surface,’ surmising it might have been ‘pulled rather vigorously out of an engaged frame.’ Tom Caley, Director of the Conservationist Studio R.M.S. Shepherd Associates, found the picture ‘very impressive and extremely well-preserved, of very high quality and great sophistication’ – but added that ‘the poor condition of the panel does not square well with the superb state of preservation of the paint.’ Caley e-mailed his findings to Paul Raison and Christie’s Old Master specialist Assunta von Moy on December 12.

Axel Rondouin would later claim he and Méthiaz appraised Ruffini of Christie's findings. Ruffini scoffs at the idea. 'If I'd known the plan was to take it to Christie's, I'd have taken it to them myself – they're only 100 yards from my Paris flat!' (Ruffini could not have imagined that Méthiaz would show Christie's the painting in Brussels, given that it had been in Paris for over forty years). Ruffini says he rang Méthiaz 'at least once a fortnight' to ask about the painting's whereabouts, but was fobbed off each time.

Méthiaz claims he kept Ruffini informed of his actions, and that 'Ruffini was furious that I gave it to Christie's, because he thought it would be sold to a private collector confidentially.'

On **28 December 2012** an entity called the *Skyline Capital Corporation* (address: Suite 903, 1120 Broadway, New York) made The Art Factory an 'irrevocable purchase offer' of \$700,000 for the painting 'Venus with a Veil' attributed to Lucas Cranach the Elder.' The offer was 'valid for a period of 30 days' and signed by one *Robert Jenkins* as Skyline's *Financial Director* – but actually made on behalf of Michael Tordjman.



On **16 January 2013** Méthiaz visited Ruffini in Paris and offered to buy the *God the Father* (*left*) on a battered panel (*right*) that Ruffini had bought at auction in Rome for €7,500 in 2000. Frongia had touched up the paintwork, after cleaning (by a restorer in Parma) had revealed two angel-heads in the top corners, confirming Ruffini in his belief that the picture was a youthful El Greco. He began by asking Méthiaz €700,000 for it, but happily accepted **€560,000** 'as it would have been difficult to get everyone to recognize it as an El Greco.' The sale



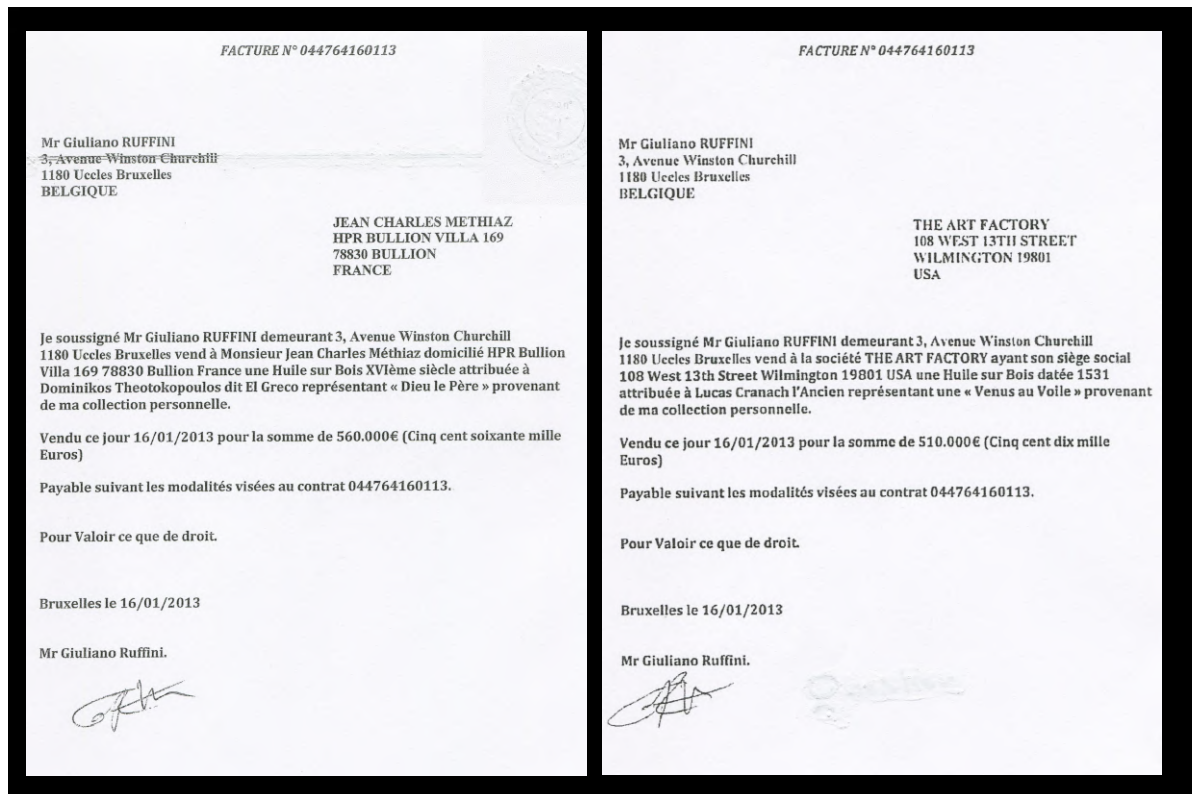
agreement (*below left*) was addressed to Méthiaz personally, at his French domicile (different from the home address he gave when founding The Art Factory in 2011).



Méthiaz, recalls Ruffini, was keen to buy the work 'because a painting of an old man had just appeared at auction with a modest estimate, yet sold for a huge sum because people thought it was an El Greco.'

The old man in question (*left*), identified as *St Peter*, had appeared six weeks earlier (5 December 2012) at Bonhams in London as 'attributed to El Greco,' with an estimate of £40,000-60,000. Its dimensions (68 x 56cm) were virtually the same as Ruffini's work (74 x 54cm). It soared to £792,000 (then worth €980,000).

Bizarrely, a second sale agreement (*below right*) was purportedly produced in Ruffini's name the very same day – this time addressed to The Art Factory in the USA, and concerning the **€510,000** sale of an 'oil on panel dated 1531 attributed to Lucas Cranach the Elder, representing a *Venus with Veil*.'



This second invoice, says Ruffini, was bogus, with the El Greco invoice serving as its template. Apart from the changes to the billing address and work description, this second invoice was the spitting image of the first.

Twelve lines, in fact, are exactly the same, and the invoice number is identical: **044764160113**. We appear to be looking at some hurried copy-pasting. The second six digits of this invoice (160113) indicate the date – but it is inconceivable that the first six digits (044764) should be the same for both invoices.

‘The contracts having been written the same day and drawn up by my secretariat, it’s certain that this is a careless error by whoever drafted them’ explains Méthiaz. ‘Any conclusions about hurried copy-pasting are biased and tendentious.’

Another key difference is the signature: in the second document this is placed higher up and much further to the left, and looks different: as attested in May 2014 by the graphologists Giuseppe Ziveri (expert for the Court of Parma) and Evelyne Marganne (expert for the Paris Appeal Court), Ruffini’s signature in the ‘Cranach’ invoice was forged (Ziveri believed by using the ‘tracing-paper method’). Christine Jouishomme, another handwriting expert for the Paris Appeal Court, would reach the same conclusion in January 2015. A four-page contract numbered 044764 was also produced pertaining to the supposed Cranach sale, again with a forged signature.

The typeface and lay-out of both documents appear identical to various contracts produced by Michael’s cousin, Thierry Tordjman; perhaps Méthiaz’s ‘secretariat’ was located in in his office. On **26 April 2013** Méthiaz transferred the sum of €560,00 to

Ruffini, as payment for the El Greco. Ruffini never received any €510,000 payment from The Art Factory.

Just before or after the disputed Cranach invoice, Méthiaz and Tordjman travelled to London and recuperated the painting from Christie's in Mayfair, then took it to the Weiss Gallery nearby (where they smirk together *right*). Méthiaz told Mark Weiss he was the owner of the painting, 'Tordjman adding that it had been owned for the past 100 years by a well-established family in Paris' (according to Dr Catherine Weiss, the Gallery Manager). Mark Weiss – 'rather rashly' as he later admitted, in one of the understatement of the century – signed a €9.5m sale contract on the spot. This contract, drawn up in French, was signed by Weiss, Méthiaz and Tordjman (as 'witness') and disconcertingly dated 17.01.2013 at the top and *jeudi 13 Janvier 2013* at the bottom. Méthiaz and Tordjman had good reason for the date January 17 to supplant January 13, given the creation of an invoice suggesting Ruffini had sold the work to Méthiaz on January 16.



The painting was 'attributed by The Art Factory to Lucas Cranach the Elder' and its title given (in French) as *Venus au voile* (with *Vénus* misspelt). A non-refundable 10% was due from Weiss by 28 January 2013, the rest by February 25. The contract – 'generated by Tordjman' according to Weiss – stated that the work had been the subject of 'in-depth research' by Christie's.

Although Tordjman would have an increasingly hands-on rôle with regard to the *Venus* over the weeks ahead, it was Méthiaz who did most of the talking – assuring Weiss that 'Christie's were desperate to sell' the work and 'convinced it would make a world-record price.' Weiss says he 'completely believed in the painting,' adding: 'I trusted Méthiaz. He put me under pressure to make an instant decision. I did not realize he was a supreme con man – an outrageous and arrogant liar, and a formidable and brazen bluffer.'

When Weiss called a high-placed friend at Christie's to talk about his purchase, and heard that Christie's had doubts about Cranach's authorship, he 'immediately contacted Tordjman [not Méthiaz] and informed him I could not, and would not, honour the contract since they [Méthiaz and Tordjman] had misrepresented the painting.'

On **21 January 2013** Méthiaz finally appended his signature to Skyline Capital Corporation's 'irrevocable purchase offer' of December 28 – its \$700,000 a far cry from the €9.5m Mark Weiss had briefly been prepared to stump up. A handwritten addendum by Méthiaz to the Skyline contract stated (in painful English) *I hereby inform Skyline Capital Corporation that the painting has been sold to mister Mark Weiss, who informed me verbally that he will not to honour his engagement. Legally he has until January 2013, 28th, to honour this contact, should this be the case, my acceptance to his offer will be nil and void.*

On **January 29** Thierry Tordjman issued a *Lettre valant constatation de résiliation* by Weiss for not paying the 10% deposit by January 28, stating that Weiss owed The Art Factory €950,000 and was liable for ‘all costs, interests and penalties resulting from the non-respect of his contractual obligations.’

On **January 31**, from Berlin, Werner Schade issued a statement referring to the picture’s ‘astonishing unconstrainedness’ (*Ungebundenheit*) and likening it to Cranach’s 1528 *Eve* in the Uffizi and his two 1531 versions of *Venus with Cupid* – in Rome’s Galleria Borghese and the Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts in Brussels. On February 8, from Berlin, Dieter Koeplin penned a handwritten letter to Michael Tordjman calling the painting ‘extraordinarily attractive.’



On **February 10**, London-based *Conservator-Restorer* Katherine Ara (left) informed Mark Weiss by e-mail that the painting was ‘in good condition with no passages of repainting save for obvious scattered minor retouchings.’ She had not, however, examined the painting ‘in the flesh.’ On **February 13** Bodo Brinkmann, Curator of Old Masters at Kunstmuseum Basel, e-mailed Weiss saying he thought the right hand and left knee had been overpainted by someone other than Cranach, and calling for a ‘high-resolution IR [infrared] image.’ He also suggested Weiss contact Gunnar Heydenreich in Cologne (head of the

Cranach Digital Archive).

Armed with the positive opinions of Schade and Koeplin, Tordjman and Méthiaz waived their 10% claim and went back to Weiss, whom Tordjman e-mailed on **March 7** – saying Méthiaz had been offered €3.1m for the Cranach, and would he be interested in paying a bit more? Weiss declined. A week or so later Méthiaz and Tordjman visited Mark Weiss on his stand at TEFAF Maastricht (**March 14-24**), and again offered him the Cranach – this time for €5m. Weiss again said no. When the pair were asked to leave, recalls Catherine Weiss, ‘Méthiaz grabbed and squeezed my upper arm and told me to “stay away from men’s business.”’ The Cranach was also (through the offices of Axel Rondouin) offered to rival London dealers Colnaghi, who checked with the *Art Loss Register* as to whether the work was recorded as stolen or missing. On March 20 the *Art Loss Register* wrote back to Colnaghi saying no.

On **March 21** an *Agreement of Purchase & Sale* for the painting – presented as merely ‘attributed to Lucas Cranach the Elder’ – was concluded between Jean-Charles Méthiaz (for The Art Factory) and Robert Jenkins for Skyline Capital (now in Suite 327 at 1220 Broadway), with payment due by May 2; the provenance was given as *Belgium, Private Collection*. Skyline’s ‘irrevocable purchase offer’ of \$700,000 had been made back on December 28 – before expert assurances as to Cranach’s authorship had vastly enhanced the work’s value. No evidence that The Art Factory actually received €700,000 from Skyline Capital has been forthcoming.

In a contradictory *Amendment to the Agreement of Purchase and Sell of Painting* (sic), also dated March 21, the Seller (Méthiaz/The Art Factory) informed the Buyer (Robert Jenkins/Skyline) that *due to the European Economic Banking Crisis (Cyprus), the payment*

to *The Art Factory* cannot be done today as contractually planned.... As a result, all right, title, interest and risk in and to the Work possessed by Seller shall pass to Buyer at signature of this Agreement. This nonsensical ‘amendment,’ flying in the face of commercial practice, was designed to ensure that Méthiaz/The Art Factory ceded legal title to the work before being paid for it.

That same day, March 21, another contract was drawn up in Brussels. There was no mention of Skyline Capital, who had purportedly purchased the works hours (if not minutes) before; instead the work’s owner was named as Michael Tordjman, ‘mandated’ to sell the *Venus au Voile* (Vénus again misspelt) for €3.2m to Colnaghi’s owner Konrad Bernheimer. The painting was no longer ‘attributed’ to Lucas Cranach the Elder, but unequivocally ascribed to him. Tordjman was described as ‘of German nationality.’ The statutes of the Lawyers’ Association he founded in 2010 had declared him French, but Tordjman does not appear to have wished the words *France* or *French* appearing in this contract: he assured Konrad Bernheimer the picture was a family heirloom that had spent the last 150 years in Belgium. Bernheimer was happy to believe him.

No mention of Méthiaz or The Art Factory was made in this sale contract, which asserted that the Cranach had been deposited on March 20 with Tordjman’s Brussels lawyer Daphné Bajkowski (*right*) at her office at 49-A Rue St-Bernard (where, ironically, Ruffini was soon to rent a first-floor flat from Bajkowski’s associate Alan Hitter). The €3.2m was to be paid into Tordjman’s HSBC account in Singapore.



On **April 4** Tordjman wrote to the UK Arts Council, from Brussels (albeit on Paris letter-headed paper), saying that ‘from my best knowledge the *Venus with a Veil* by Lucas Cranach the Elder coming from Brussels to London does not require a Belgian Export License and is not on any of the three Cultural lists.’ He declared the value of the work to be ‘over €50,000.’ His letter appears designed to enable the work to be shipped to Colnaghi without and fiscal or administrative interference.

RUFFINI IN IGNORANCE 2013



Giuliano Ruffini was left in ignorance about the fate of his Cranach. Two months later, on **June 5**, Méthiaz splashed out inflated prices to buy two works from him in the name of The Art Factory (now domiciled at 26 York Street, London): an Abel Grimmer *Tower of Babel* for €64,500, and an *Architectural Setting with Figures* by Bartholomeus van Bassen (*left*) for €72,000; the sums were transferred from The Art Factory’s account with the Bank of Cyprus (the island having recovered from its ‘banking crisis’). Ruffini had acquired the Van Bassen in Bologna for just €16,000 on May 9, from the heirs of the celebrated conductor and noted art collector Francesco Molinari-Pradelli (1911-96). It was shipped by Arteria of Florence to Thierry Tordjman in Paris ‘following Jean-Charles Méthiaz’s instructions.’

Ruffini was ‘surprised’ by the price he obtained for the Van Bassen, but found nothing suspicious in Méthiaz paying over the odds as ‘he knew nothing about Old Masters’ and was ‘completely ignorant about their value.’

Three weeks later, on **June 25**, Ruffini issued The Art Factory with a *Mandat Pour Expertise et Vente* for his potential Velazquez, designated as a *Portrait d’un Cardinal* with no mentioning of an artist’s name or the cardinal’s identity. In 2005 the portrait had been subjected to stratigraphic analysis by the Spampinato Laboratory in Lucca, which found the pigments compatible with a 17th century dating. In 2007 Perez-Menendez had it analysed by the Prado’s laboratory and shown to the museum’s Honorary Director, Alfonso Pérez Sánchez – who deemed it the ‘best of all’ copies of Velazquez’s lost *Portrait of Cardinal Borgia*.

Colnaghi, meanwhile, had produced a six-page essay on their new *Venus* – an ‘exquisitely painted and highly important addition to Cranach’s œuvre.’ On June 21 Dieter Koeplin sent them a written appraisal ‘following first-hand inspection of the painting post-cleaning and restoration.’

On **July 1**, at the *Masterpiece* fair held in the grounds of the Royal Hospital in Chelsea, Colnaghi announced in a press release that they had sold the Cranach – ‘one of the most iconic images by the artist’ – to the Prince of Lichtenstein. It was flagged on the Colnaghi website, with thanks to ‘Dr Werner Schade, Dr Bodo Brinkmann and Dr Dieter Koeplin for confirming the attribution in full to Lucas Cranach the Elder.’ The picture, affirmed Colnaghi blandly, had been in a private Belgian collection since the mid-19th century.

For Méthiaz and Tordjman, the publicity generated by Colnaghi’s bragging was a nightmare scenario: they had expected the Cranach to be sold discreetly, as is usually for the case with transactions of such importance.

Méthiaz made himself scarce – heading to the villa in southern Italy he had purchased a few weeks earlier with the funds generated by his association with Giuliano Ruffini. ‘His lifestyle changed overnight’ remembers Raphaël Wernheimer. ‘He boasted to me about buying a boat and a house in Apulia, saying he’d moved abroad for fiscal reasons.’

On **14 July 2013** Méthiaz announced on Facebook that he would not be returning to France ‘until we’re shod of this tinpot president... it’s high time for a revolution to get rid of this incapable cretin [François] Hollande!’ (whose term of office ran until May 2017).

Méthiaz assured his Facebook followers that ‘here in the south of Italy it’s very hot, but I’m up in the hills so there’s a nice little breeze. No garden as such, but a large terrace with centuries-old olive-trees and flowers wherever you look, the air fragrant with jasmine. A slice of paradise...’



On **July 24** Méthiaz e-mailed Ruffini (copying in Tordjman) about a ‘probable client’ for the *Cardinal* who was ‘convinced of the work’s authenticity’ as a Velasquez. The ‘head curator at the Prado’ [Carmen Garrido] was also ‘more than 90% sure’ but, before pronouncing, wanted to examine the painting after its varnish had been removed. It would subsequently emerge that Méthiaz’s ‘probable client’ was Colnaghi, and that – while Méthiaz sniffed jasmine and lounged on a sun-bed in his circular swimming-pool – Axel Rondouin was acting as his London go-between.



On **November 28** Ruffini acknowledged the return of five pictures by The Art Factory: the anonymous 17th century *Artist’s Self-Portrait* from the Méthiaz list of January 2011; a 17th century *Female Portrait* after Cagnacci; a *Grande Scène Champêtre* by a follower of Abel Grimmer; an 1844 Frederick Catherwood view of the Maya site of *Kabah* in Mexico (left), bought for €25,000 from Carmine Fiore in Turin on May 13 (Fiore having acquired it from the Turin lawyer Lucio Donatiello in 2006); and El Greco’s *God the Father*, for which Méthiaz had paid Ruffini €560,000 on April 26. ‘He wanted to exchange the El Greco for another painting of the same value’ recalls Ruffini. ‘I refused.’ Méthiaz would never be reimbursed.

The following afternoon, **November 29**, Méthiaz was questioned by the OCBC (*Office Central de Lutte contre le Trafic des Biens Culturels*), France’s Art Crime Squad, as part of an inquiry into a fake Josef Albers that he had wanted to buy – only for the Josef & Anni Albers Foundation in Connecticut to declare it a fake. Méthiaz was interviewed at the Commissariat of the 6th Arrondissement by Franck Le Noan, *Gardien de la Paix*, assisted by Mathilde Gaugy, *Lieutenant de Gendarmerie*.

Lieutenant Gaugy, promoted to Captain in January 2014, would play a central rôle in the subsequent pursuit of Giuliano Ruffini.

On **9 December 2013** Méthiaz/The Art Factory (now domiciled back in Delaware) paid Ruffini €500,000 for a tiny, 16.5 x 22.5cm still life of *Two Walnuts on a Table* (right) in oil and paper mounted on wood – dated 1701 and ‘attributed to Adriaen Coorte *sans garantie*’ – that Ruffini had acquired with Andrée Borie in Spain in the 1970s. It would be the two men’s last civilized exchange.



Giuliano Ruffini still remained blissfully unaware of his Cranach’s fate. He was disabused a couple of days later, by Giammarco Cappuzzo over dinner in a Chinese restaurant near the Champs-Élysées.

‘How’s business?’ asked Ruffini.

‘Not bad!’ breezed Cappuzzo. ‘I sold a Cranach not so long ago!’

He was referring to the *Nymph in Spring* (c.1540) by Lucas Cranach the Younger (*below*), shown by Mark Weiss a few months earlier at TEFAF Maastricht. It had previously been owned by Philippe Cognacq (1914-2012), whose grandparents had founded the famous *Samaritaine* department store and Cognacq-Jay Museum in Paris. Cappuzzo had secured the painting after it failed to sell at Drouot (Audap-Mirabaud) on 7 November 2011, hampered by an inflated estimate of €3-4 million (Eric Turquin had ascribed it to Lucas Cranach the *Elder*). Weiss would sell the work to the San Diego Museum of Art in 2018.



‘May have a Cranach myself!’ replied Ruffini, bringing up a photo on his mobile phone. ‘It’s with a friend. We’re having it studied. I’ve had it over thirty years – it’s never been on the market.’

‘I know that!’ exclaimed Cappuzzo. ‘Colnaghi sold it for £7m at *Masterpiece!*’

‘Are you sure?’ spluttered Ruffini. His face, recalls Cappuzzo, ‘turned all the colours of the rainbow.’

They checked Colnaghi’s website. Up came a photo of Ruffini’s *Venus* on the home page.

‘It’s not possible!’ gasped Ruffini, breaking out in a cold sweat.

Cappuzzo called his friend Tim Warner-Johnson, a Colnaghi Director. He confirmed the gallery had bought the work from a certain Michael Tordjman.

‘Ruffini was in tears – not just about losing €3.2m, but also about losing a friend [Méthiaz] he’d known for years.’

Cappuzzo took Ruffini to see Paris lawyer Jean-Jacques Neuer – a specialist in art market disputes – who advised that, as the painting had been sold in England, Ruffini should get himself a lawyer in London and initiate criminal proceedings there. Ruffini did not know any criminal lawyers in London, was afraid of the cost, and spoke scant English. He also, declares Cappuzzo, had no wish to repeat the experience of his case in France over the stolen Parmigianino, ‘when he had the police and tax people everywhere.’

To Ruffini, launching criminal proceedings was simply ‘too much of a challenge. In his naïve way he trusted that, after his years of friendship with Méthiaz and Tordjman, he would recuperate the money with a civil case.’

‘I have a big problem’ states Ruffini. ‘I like to help people! I’m too kind! I’ve always been extremely sensitive to the kindness I never encountered when I was growing up. But kindness is a sign of weakness. I want to think that others are like me. If I was a crook I

wouldn't get screwed. If I was used to screwing others I'd be a lot less trusting. I get screwed by people I think are kind.'

On **December 15** Ruffini e-mailed Méthiaz asking 'for the seventh time' where his Velazquez was. He had been left without news of it since July 24. Ruffini followed up three days later by ordering Méthiaz to 'stop messing me around' (*te foutre de ma gueule*, as he put it in earthier French). 'Tell me what's going on, or I'll take it back!'

RUFFINI'S RIPOSTE 2014

On **8 January 2014** Ruffini withdrew The Art Factory's mandate for the *Cardinal* and transferred it to Axel Rondouin. That same day Ruffini and Cappuzzo travelled to snowy Munich – staying overnight at the *Le Méridien* Hotel opposite the Hauptbahnhof, then visiting Bernheimer's Georgenstrasse office near the Englisches Garten next morning. Tim Warner-Johnson had arranged the meeting.

'I sat opposite Bernheimer (*right*), with his secretary taking notes' recalls Cappuzzo. 'We spoke in English. Giuliano didn't say much. I translated his few words from French. The appointment was very gentlemanly.'



Ruffini remembers it differently. 'Bernheimer refused to show me the invoice unless I signed a document promising him not to sue. It was blackmail – but I signed.' The invoice confirmed that Bernheimer had bought the Cranach from Michael Tordjman.

Back from Munich, Ruffini e-mailed Tordjman on **January 10** to announce he was 'cancelling all my contracts with The Art Factory and your friend Méthiaz, given that you are his financial advisor as well as acolyte. I advise you to make him think twice, as I have all the evidence I need to recuperate my Cranach or the money he owes me...'

Ruffini e-mailed Méthiaz five days later, at 08:23 on **January 15**:

'At the start of 2013 you told me you'd sold my Cranach for €2.5m. In fact, you and Michael sold it to Galerie Weiss for €10m, and were photographed with the painting in your hands at the gallery. But after hearing from Christie's that their opinion was not very positive, Weiss broke off the contract. Later Michael e-mailed Weiss to inform him you had an offer of €3.1m and that, if he offered a bit more, the picture would be his. But Weiss didn't buy it. Then Michael presented himself to Colnaghi, a few yards away, as sole owner of my picture, declaring the Cranach had been in his family in Belgium for 150 years, and sold it to Bernheimer for €3.2m, to be paid in Singapore. That's the fraud committed by you and Michael... If you don't pay me what you owe for the sale of my painting, the police will be on to you. Apart from breach of trust, there's also the matter of exporting an artwork from France without a permit – the work's value far exceeds €150,000 – so you risk a €450,000 fine and two years in jail. If you pay me what you owe, all well and good, I'll tell my lawyer not to contact the police. If not, too bad for you.'

It was Tordjman who replied, at 11:50:

‘Before our respective lawyers get involved, I suggest we meet up today so I can let you have my version of the facts, which has nothing to do with what you describe.’

‘You have nothing to explain’ snapped back Ruffini. ‘My lawyer will be in touch today.’

At 12:42 Ruffini e-mailed Méthiaz as follows:

‘When I think that for 15 years I believed you were a friend, and gave you a helping hand to get you out of all the mess you were in – and, to thank me, you screw me like this... You’re the worst piece of shit I’ve ever come across.’ After referring to Michael Tordjman as ‘your little Jewish friend,’ he added: ‘if you two don’t see sense soon, you’ll find yourselves in very hot water.’

Six hours later Ruffini e-mailed Méthiaz again, more calmly:

‘Think about it – if everything goes to court, with the two paintings [the Gentileschi and the Cranach] exported without permits... just imagine the disaster. You’ll have to reimburse Weiss for the Gentileschi and Bernheimer for the Cranach, plus the fines. As for that Skyline company you invented overnight.... We’re talking about false statements, breach of trust, complicity in organized fraud, etc., plus the fact you’re fiscally resident in France. As for the law on works of art, an agent needs to inform the owner, in writing, about any offer received – and the work can only be sold with the owner’s written approval. I never authorized you to sell my Cranach to anyone.’

Three weeks later, over lunch with Tim Warner-Johnson in New York, Giammarco Cappuzzo learnt that the *Cardinal* was with Colnaghi in London, who had been paying for its insurance, transport and restoration (not Rondouin). On **February 4** Bernheimer wrote to Ruffini confirming that the *Cardinal* had been ‘brought to us in London last Summer for research purposes and is still safely with us in the gallery.’ Colnaghi had contacted Carmen Garrido from the Prado, ‘with whom we have a very close working relationship.’ Colnaghi had not been informed that Ruffini was the work’s owner.

Next day, **February 5**, Ruffini e-mailed Axel Rondouin to cancel his Velasquez mandate for ‘important personal reasons.’ On **February 7** Colnaghi’s Warner-Johnson advised Cappuzzo that ‘Rondouin has been in touch with us concerning the collection of the Velasquez.’ Cappuzzo urged him ‘absolutely not to give the painting to Axel Rondouin. Mr Ruffini does not want Rondouin to touch the painting again.’

Rondouin was furious: brokering the sale of a Velasquez could have set him up for life. On **March 3** Carine Catherine Perrier, his Paris lawyer, wrote to Ruffini accusing him of unilaterally breaking off the January 8 mandate without justification, just when Rondouin’s efforts were leading to the painting’s ‘highly probable sale’ for an anticipated \$30-40 million.

Perrier demanded \$2m damages plus \$300,000 in professional compensation. Ruffini ignored her. Cappuzzo recuperated the Velazquez from Colnaghi and had it analysed by Cinzia Pasquali. It was further assessed by Artelab in Rome in January 2017. No anachronistic elements were found.

In mid-March 2014 Ruffini's lawyer Philippe Scarzella wrote to Méthiaz and Tordjman summoning them to pay up the €3.2m they had raked in for the Cranach. But the *huissiers* commissioned to deliver these letters in person were unable to do so – reporting that there was no trace of Méthiaz (14 rue Vuillème, 92190 Meudon) or Tordjman (5 rue Albaric-Magnard, 75016 Paris) at their declared addresses.

An attempt to deliver the letter to Méthiaz at another supposed address – HPR Bullion, Villa 169, 78830 Bullion – proved equally fruitless. It was the address of a clinic (HPR standing for *Hôpital de Pédiatrie et de Rééducation*) which, according to its website, caters for 'children and adolescents from birth to 17.' Tordjman's 'address' contained a bizarre error: the Rue Albaric-Magnard postcode is **75116 Paris**, not **75016 Paris**. Any self-respecting *Seizard* knows and (if they live in the 'right' half of the city's largest *arrondissement*) boasts about the difference.



On **March 27** Scarzella (left) lodged a *requête aux fins de saisie conservatoire* (request for a preventive seizure) in Ruffini's name against Michael Tordjman, to the value of the €3.2m paid for the Cranach. Enforcement Judge Myriam Zylberman granted a preventive seizure of €2.56m (i.e. 80% of €3.2m, given that Ruffini had been offering 20% commission).

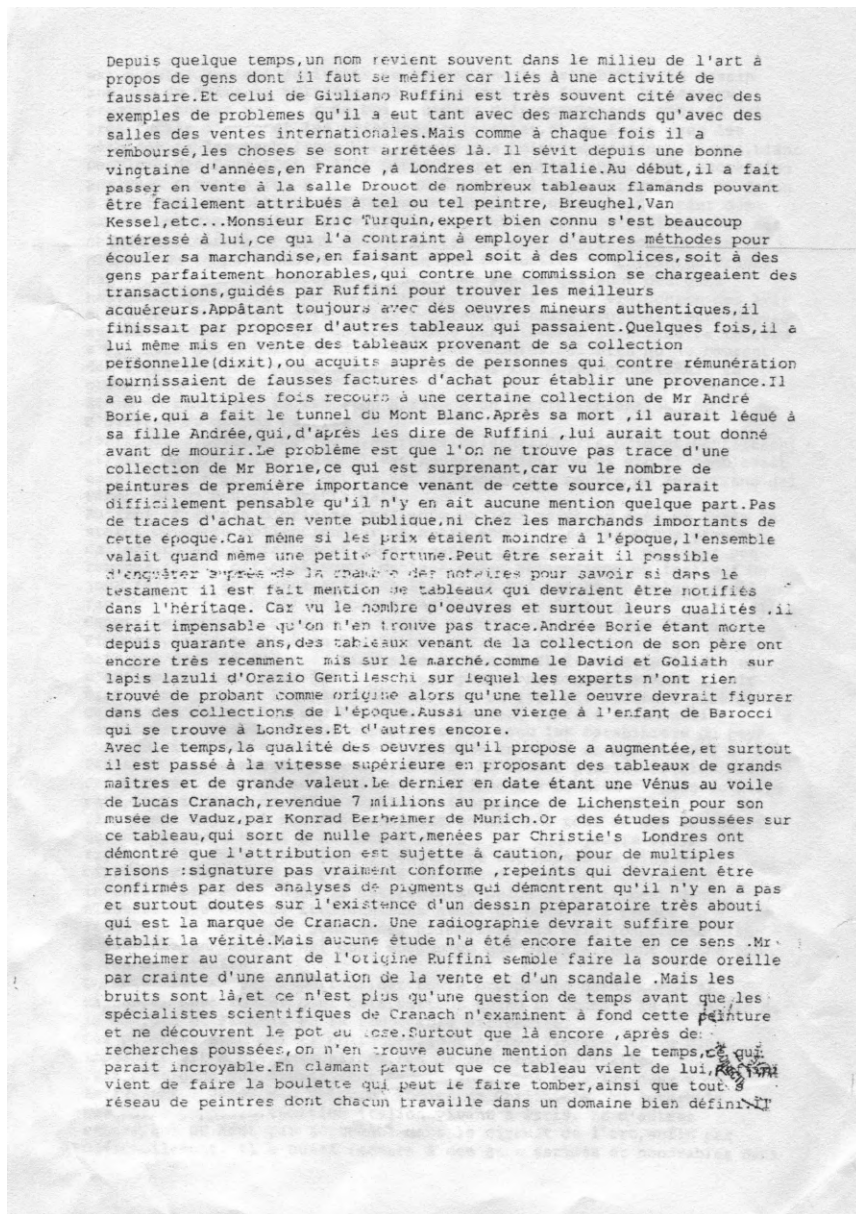
On **May 2** Ruffini launched a Civil Case against Tordjman and Méthiaz over the fraudulent sale of the Cranach. The first hearing took place on **May 16**. Shortly afterwards Axel Rondouin rang Ruffini in Brussels – urging him, says Ruffini, to drop the case as Tordjman and Méthiaz were 'dangerous' and had 'high-level contacts.' Rondouin refused to say more but, recalls Ruffini, 'insisted on seeing me in person. I was in Belgium and told him to say what he had to over the phone – I had nothing to hide. But he hung up.' Rondouin subsequently moved to Hong Kong.

THE POISON-PEN LETTER 2014

Ten days later, on **May 26**, the *Office Central de Lutte Contre le Trafic des Biens Culturels* received an anonymous, 3,000-word Poison-Pen Letter that accused Ruffini of selling Old Master fakes – and would set in motion a chain of events that would rock the Art World.

Ruffini's legal team were only apprised of the letter's existence in 2015 – and only allowed to read it in 2017. The letter (*first page reproduced below*) has been fleetingly evoked in some press reports on the Ruffini case, but its contents have never been analysed in detail. Nor has the anonymous author (known as a **Corbeau** in French) been conclusively identified – until now.

The letter, written in French, is in two parts, running to 1,680 and 1,300 words respectively. The first part appears to have been typed – a couple of words have been blacked out, which would not have been necessary had the missive been produced by word-processor. It runs to 2½ pages, with no spacing between paragraphs, and majors on two accusations against Ruffini: peddling forgeries and tax evasion.



For some time, announces the Corbeau ('bird of ill omen' – literally crow or raven), Giuliano Ruffini had been 'very often cited' in the artworld as someone linked to forgery. 'He has been active for a good twenty years in France, London and Italy,' his activity concerning 'only paintings and drawings from the 15th-18th centuries.' He has supplied suitably old materials to various artists, 'the most important of them living a few miles from his Italian home' [a transparent reference to Lino Frongia]. The paintings were 'then baked in an oven so as to create the *crackelure* one would expect.'

The Corbeau seems to doubt there is enough evidence of forgery to nail Ruffini, admitting 'it might be hard to prove forgery from a technical point of view' – while urging 'an investigation into the origins of works that appear from nowhere' and drawing

attention to their 'number and frequency.' The Corbeau ridicules the Borie provenance: 'No trace of a Borie Collection has been found, which is surprising given the number of very important paintings from this source; it seems hard to think there is no mention of it anywhere.' The Corbeau recommends 'consulting the Chamber of Notaries to see if the will mentions paintings in the inheritance.'

Tax evasion, feels The Corbeau, should be easier to prove. 'The fiscal aspect is important as, relatively speaking, this may cause his downfall like Al Capone, especially when one knows the pugnacity of the Guardia di Finanza and their redoubtable efficiency.' For many years Ruffini had had 'one account in Monte Carlo, three or more in Italy, one in

France and one in Belgium.’ He was a ‘dealer in all but name’ and ‘perfectly organized to avoid declaring his income.’ Although he was officially resident in Belgium ‘it should be easy to establish that he only spends a few days there each year. He spends practically the whole year at a place called Codena, one hour from Parma’ which ‘ought to be fairly easy to prove by inquiring locally, though not via the *carabinieri*, where he has friends. He also owns a flat in Paris – a visit could reveal plenty of evidence about his activities and all the works that have appeared from nowhere.’

As well as investigating Ruffini, The Corbeau tells police who else to talk to. ‘Among those who have worked for him for a long time, two names keep cropping up: James MacVeigh, formerly with Christie’s or Sotheby’s; and Gianmarco Cappuzzo, an Italian broker living in Paris.’ Although The Corbeau misspells Cappuzzo’s first name (*Giammarco*), he accurately records his mobile phone number (as well as home and mobile numbers for Ruffini). ‘Méthiaz had it in for Cappuzzo because he was the guy who told me everything and took me to see Bernheimer’ comments Ruffini.

The Corbeau omits to mention three middlemen whose dealings with Ruffini were more extensive than Cappuzzo’s: Jean-Charles Méthiaz, Michael Tordjman and Jules-François Ferrillon (then in the process of writing a book called *Faussaire* – ‘Forger’ in its English version). At the same time, The Corbeau takes pains to specify – in a self-serving passage curiously irrelevant to his overriding anti-Ruffini purpose – that the latter ‘also has recourse to honourable people who are more victims than accomplices and who buy or sell his pictures on commission, without suspecting for an instant that they are fakes.’ Ruffini believes this is clearly evidence of ‘Méthiaz talking about himself.’

The police should also, advises The Corbeau, interview ‘Monsieur Eric Turquin, the well-known expert’ – as someone who ‘used to take a keen interest’ in Ruffini and ‘could, if he so wished, tell you a lot about him.’ As Turquin, in The Corbeau’s opinion, was a ‘glory-seeker’ (*avide de gloire*), the prospect of helping render Ruffini ‘harmless’ could be a ‘powerful incentive.’

The first part of this poison-pen letter ends in melodrama:

Latest News. It would seem that there is a well-hidden oven at his Codena property. Everything can be found if you look hard enough. All this information is real and verifiable, and with the investigative means at your disposal you should be able to obtain worthwhile results.

The letter’s second part, although in a different typeface, is clearly by the same author, and appears to have been written on computer. It is two pages long (with the IBAN numbers of three Ruffini bank accounts appended afterwards) and deals with individual paintings. Two-thirds of the text concerns the *Venus* – with the technical report by Shepherd Associates (Shepherd misspelt *Sheperd*), written in English in December 2012, extensively summarized in French.

One of the eight principal findings that The Corbeau attributes to Shepherd is of great significance:

Les craquelures de la peinture semblent être apparues récemment et soudainement (ce qui suggère une cuisson du tableau pour provoquer artificiellement un vieillissement qui vient d'habitude avec les siècles).

'The painting's *craquelure* seems to have appeared recently and suddenly (which suggests the painting was baked to artificially provoke ageing which usually takes centuries).'

No such sentence appears in the Shepherd report – which makes no mention whatsoever of *craquelure* (the network of tiny cracks found on the surface of old paintings). Quite the opposite: the report states that 'no cracking is visible, even under magnification.' The Corbeau's fabrication is clearly designed to insinuate that the *Venus* was baked in Ruffini's secret oven.

The Corbeau also refers to Lilly Sheldon's pigment analysis, which 'shows no retouching. She also found traces of titanium white which only appeared in the 20th century. She suggests doing more detailed analysis.'

The Corbeau suggests by whom:

'It is therefore important that this painting be studied by Gunnar Heydenreich.'

Konrad Bernheimer, cited six times by The Corbeau (more than anyone else except Ruffini, with his name routinely misspelt *Berheimer*), is accused of 'not doing a proper job of research to establish irrefutable proof of the Cranach attribution... desire for profit prevailed over the professionalism of a dealer with a worldwide reputation.'

The Corbeau also reveals that 'another painting proposed by Ruffini, *Portrait of Cardinal Borgia* attributed to Velasquez, is in the hands of the Colnaghi Gallery in London owned by Mr Berheimer [and] currently the subject of a new study by the curator of the Prado. Mr Berheimer is close friends with this lady...'

Other works cited by The Corbeau include the *David & Goliath* attributed to Gentileschi, 'from the phantomatic André Borie Collection... there was indeed a Borie Collection, that of Jacques, sold by Tajan in 1973 (?).'

The Corbeau's disingenuous question-mark masks the fact that this auction did not take place in 1973 – the year of the Andrée Borie list of works ceded to Giuliano Ruffini – but on 21 March 1977 (under the firm *Ader-Picard-Tajan*).

The Frans Hals (routinely misspelt *Frantz Hals*) had been 'turned down by auction experts, who are highly qualified people, yet recognized by the Louvre despite unfavourable opinions' then 'acquired by Mark Weiss from London who, although aware of the suspicions, ignored them, especially as he knew about the Ruffini provenance.'

Then there was 'a painting by Barocci, a *Virgin with Child*, from the same Borie Collection with a certificate from Mr Turner, but whose attribution is contested by the main auction

houses.’ The picture was now, disclosed The Corbeau, ‘in the hands of London restorer David Chesterman, a friend of Ruffini’s.’

Going back in time, according to The Corbeau, ‘we arrive at an impressive number of works by leading masters: Parmigianino, Solario, Correggio, Barocci, Melendez, Coorte, Grimmer, Gentileschi, Frantz Hals, Cranach, Breughel, Van Kessel, Titian, Guardi etc. It would also appear that he [Ruffini] is preparing to put a work by Sebastiano del Piombo and another Frantz Hals on the market.’

Giuliano Ruffini originally believed the poison-pen letter to have emanated from Michael Tordjman but later, after learning of its contents, changed his mind – asserting that only one person could have written it. Méthiaz, when asked to comment, stated: ‘Ruffini has already said and declared in interviews that the author of the anonymous letter was Michael Tordjman. Given all his rantings about me, what else can I say?’

But Michael Tordjman was ‘not so stupid as to write that the Cranach was a fake, having said it had been in his family for 150 years’ counters Ruffini. ‘Then he’d have had to reimburse the €3.2m he banked.’ And ‘Tordjman had never been to Codena, so he couldn’t have known about the oven.’

Méthiaz, on the other hand, was ‘the only person,’ says Ruffini, ‘who knew all my bank account details’ – and the only person who knew of Ruffini’s connexion with a work by Sebastiano del Piombo. ‘A friend e-mailed me a photo of a Del Piombo that I sent on to Méthiaz to see if there was any interest. I never sent it to anyone else.’



There is no shortage of evidence to support Ruffini’s accusation. For starters, both The Corbeau and Jean-Charles Méthiaz (on Facebook) evoke the Devil when describing Ruffini’s activity:

CORBEAU: *Le mot ‘diabolique’ revient souvent ces temps ci pour qualifier l’activité de Ruffini, au vu de la très grande qualités de ses faux.*

METHIAZ (Facebook 04.03.2020): *Comme me le confiait le directeur des Old Masters d’une prestigieuse salle de ventes, quand on sait qu’un tableau provient de Ruffini nous ne voulons même pas le voir ! Il a même ajouté, mais ceci n’engage que lui, que cet homme était le **diable**.*

Then, both The Corbeau and Jean-Charles Méthiaz imagine Ruffini suffering the fate of Al Capone at the hands of Italy’s pugnacious/vigilant Guardia di Finanza (Financial Crime Unit).

CORBEAU: *Le volet fiscal est important, car toute proportion gardée, comme **Al capone**, il peut tomber pour cela, surtout quand on connaît la pugnacité de la **Guardia di Finanza** et sa redoutable efficacité.*

METHIAZ (Facebook 06.03.2020):

Al Capone (toute proportions gardées car je le cite comme cas de figure) s'est fait alpaguer pour des histoires avec le fisc . Je doute que les 740 000 euros échangés depuis un compte suisse entre Mathieu Ruffini et le peintre Frongia aient échappés à la vigilance de la Guardia di Finanza !

Jean-Charles Méthiaz Ben non ! Al Capone (toute proportions gardées car je le cite comme cas de figure) s'est fait alpaguer pour des histoires avec le fisc . Et je doute que le seul Ruffini ait maille à partir avec ce dernier Je doute que les 740 000 euros échangés depuis un compte suisse entre Mathieu Ruffini et le peintre Frongia aient échappés à la vigilance de la Guardia di Finanza ! Et il vaut mieux affronter un lion à mains nues que les militaires de ce corps d'élite . En Italie le coronavirus fait moins peur qu'eux !

Like Reply 1w Edited

The repeated use of the phrase *toutes proportions gardées* ('relatively speaking') by both The Corbeau and Méthiaz is suggestive. So is the fact that neither of them are able to spell it properly. Another term misspelt by both The Corbeau and Méthiaz is *Quant à* ('As for'). Both write *Quand à*. Both also write *Breughel* rather than the more usual *Brueghel*.

Both writers suffer from verbal diarrhoea. The Corbeau's poison-pen letter begins with a 42-line opening paragraph. Méthiaz, on 4 March 2020, spewed out a Facebook entry of 68 lines – one of the longest Facebook entries ever posted. Both The Corbeau and Méthiaz have a slapdash grasp of punctuation – routinely placing spaces *before* commas and full-stops, rather than *after* them. Both The Corbeau and Méthiaz routinely misspell *connaît* (knows) and *paraît* (appears) – omitting the circumflex. Neither of them like hyphens, either: The Corbeau writes *lui même* not *lui-même* (himself); Méthiaz (in an e-mail to Christie's Tudor Davies dated 31.10.2013) wrote *elle même* not *elle-même* (herself).

In fact, the outpourings of both The Corbeau and Méthiaz are riddled with enough spelling and grammatical errors to embarrass a ten year-old – even though Méthiaz brags on his Facebook page of being an alumnus of the Sorbonne's *Faculté des Lettres*. Heaven help the French education system.

Amongst the 21 artists cited by The Corbeau and Méthiaz in connexion with Ruffini, one name stands out – that of *Guardi...* for the simple reason that Ruffini had never handled a work by the artist. Yet *Guardi* would also be cited – alongside Cranach, Gentileschi, Hals *et al* – by Jules-François Ferrillon in his book *Faussaire*, published in June 2015, suggesting he and The Corbeau were in cahoots.

The Corbeau's allusion to Frongia as Ruffini's likely forger-in-chief would be substantiated by Méthiaz in a Facebook post on 17 October 2019, dubbing Frongia a 'painter of genius, suspected of also being the author of the Frans Hals, the Cranach *Venus*, the Gentileschi *David & Goliath* and the Parmigianino *St Jerome*.' (Frongia, let it be said, was a mere teenager when Andréé Borie gifted her sweetheart Ruffini the Cranach and Parmigianino, and sold the Gentileschi to Jean-Claude Bacchiana.)

The moral turpitude of a legal system that encourages anonymous denunciations is hard to square with France's claim to be a bastion of human rights. Yet, after ascertaining that the works cited in the poison-pen letter had indeed been on the market in recent years, the OCBC launched a Preliminary Inquiry into forgery and fraud – while making no attempt to identify the poison-pen writer.

RUFFINI v. MÉTHIAZ: THE CIVIL CASE 2014-15

Meanwhile, the Civil Case – launched by Ruffini against Méthiaz & Tordjman on 2 May 2014 – continued. On **June 6** Enforcement Judge Myriam Zylberman rejected The Art Factory's May 7 appeal and ordered Méthiaz to pay Ruffini €2,500. On **June 13**, in an apparent delaying tactic, The Art Factory appealed against the June 6 ruling. On **June 26** an exasperated Judge Zylberman authorized Michael Tordjman's home at 1 Square Rocamadour, near the Bois de Boulogne, to be placed under sequester.



The defendants in the civil case submitted their Initial Conclusions six months later, on **18 December 2014**. At what must have been considerable cost, and in apparent confirmation of Axel Rondouin's talk about their 'high-level contacts,' Méthiaz and Tordjman each hired a superstar barrister. Méthiaz lined up Emmanuel Marsigny (*left*), famed for his court rôle following the *Concorde* crash of 2000, and a former partner of the late Olivier Metzner (named



France's most powerful lawyer by *GQ* magazine in 2012). Tordjman took on Olivier Schnerb (*right*), who had recently nailed Marine Le Pen, leader of the far-right *Front National*, in a defamation case.

Marsigny's *Conclusions* inadvertently confirmed Méthiaz's incompetence as a picture salesman, suggesting he had sold a grand total of just three works for Ruffini. (Even then, his contribution was minimal – the *Gentileschi* was bought by Giammarco Cappuzzo's client Mark Weiss, while Méthiaz merely consigned the other two pictures – Pieter Brueghel's *Carnival & Lent* and a still life after Jacques Linard – for auction at Chatou, a minor saleroom in the Paris suburbs.)

Marsigny's defence of Méthiaz revolved around the disputed contract of 16 January 2013, whereby Ruffini supposedly ceded the *Cranach* to The Art Factory for €510,000. Marsigny also claimed, without evidence, that Ruffini had handed the *Cranach* to Méthiaz in... Brussels, not Paris, some days *before* the sale-mandate was signed – in Paris – on 19 November 2012. After contending without proof that Ruffini told Méthiaz to sell the *Venus* 'as quickly as possible, as if to rid himself of something awkward,' Marsigny speculated that Ruffini 'hid himself behind The Art Factory' so as 'to avoid having to confront auction-house experts' himself. He concluded by demanding €500,000 damages for both Méthiaz and The Art Factory.

Olivier Schnerb contented himself with a demand for €50,000 damages on Tordjman's behalf. He insisted that, while Tordjman had no legal connection with The Art Factory, both Méthiaz and Ruffini had asked his advice about selling the *Venus* – Ruffini insisting it be sold as *attributed* to *Cranach* even though the '1531 dating was indisputable.' Auction-house reticence over the *Cranach*, surmised Schnerb, derived from the artist's popularity with Hitler and a fear that the painting was Nazi loot.

This groundless hypothesis was accompanied by lachrymose talk of the Tordjmans' 'horrific' family history during World War II. But there was no justification for casting doubt on the moral integrity of the Cranach's former owner, André Borie – who, in the Hoover Institute's survey of *France during the German Occupation 1940-44*, was described by Georges Servoingt (Editor of the pro-Pétain weekly *L'Espoir Français*) as 'owner of the only major French civil engineering company not to have worked for the Nazis.' Servoingt also revealed that Borie used his company lorries to supply the Resistance in Auvergne, and that his son-in-law Marcel Hohberg (husband of Andrée's elder sister Georgette) was wanted by the Gestapo for liaising with the British.

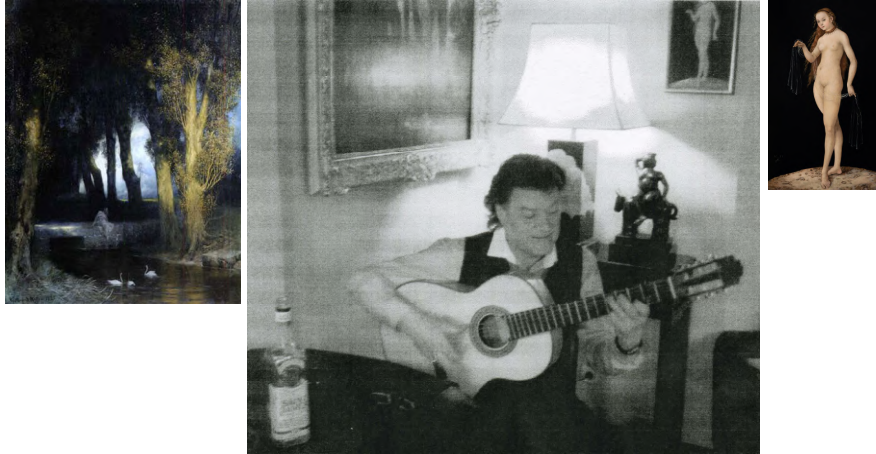
André Borie was also a close friend (and financial backer) of France's pre-war Radical-Socialist Prime Minister, Edouard Daladier – who, on 6 September 1940, was arrested by order of Pétain at La Vernue, the Bories' country house 15 miles west of Vichy. Daladier, as he recorded in his *Wartime Diaries*, had been enjoying the Bories' 'affectionate hospitality' for several days. He had been warned he might be arrested, and 'was afraid of compromising Borie by my presence – but he categorically refused to let me depart.' When Vichy agents arrived to arrest him, he 'took leave of Madame Borie and her daughters, who had welcomed me so graciously. I reproached myself for not departing sooner. They protested, and embraced me.'

The reason why Giuliano Ruffini was happy for his paintings to be sold as merely 'attributed to' had supposedly occurred to Tordjman in November 2013, when he read about the discovery of a stash of pictures looted from Jewish owners under the Nazis (the 'Gurlitt Affair'). 'Ruffini, it should be noted, has never possessed any work painted after 1944' wrote Schnerb, with heavy innuendo. He even appended, as evidence, a French *Wikipedia* article about Gurlitt.

It was not Schnerb's finest hour. His talk of auction-house 'reticence' over the Cranach hardly squared with Christie's alacrity in dispatching experts from London and Paris to view it in Brussels – and he effectively torpedoed his own client by categorically asserting that Tordjman 'had bought the work from The Art Factory through the intermediary of the Skyline Capital Corporation.' Tordjman had subsequently assured Konrad Bernheimer that the *Venus* had been in his family for 150 years.

On **10 February 2015** Méthiaz's Italian villa was placed under sequester by the Court of Bari, which dismissed his appeal in an 11-page ruling on May 26 – fining him €7,425 to boot. On **February 13** Mark Weiss issued a statement accusing Tordjman and Méthiaz of twice conspiring to 'misrepresent themselves' to him, with Méthiaz 'claiming to be the owner of paintings that were actually on consignment.' On both occasions 'it would appear Méthiaz and Tordjman also conspired not to tell the truth about the true selling-price of the works, that were being sold on behalf of Mr Ruffini.'

Three witnesses swore to having seen the Cranach in Ruffini's Paris flat: his Italian friend Marco Nebuloni; his Spanish guitar teacher, Andrés Francisco; and Egide Gougia, *Chargé d'Affaires* at the Embassy of the Central African Republic in Paris, who confirmed seeing 'a high-quality painting of a naked Venus hanging on the wall of his lounge' during regular visits to Ruffini between 2009 and 2012.



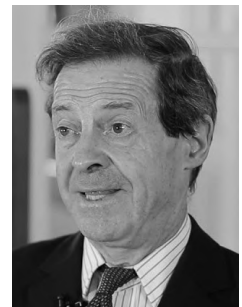
Andrés Francisco certified that, on visits to Ruffini's from 2008 onwards, he had seen 'a small Renaissance-style painting of a nude with a veil' – and even produced a photograph (above) with the work visible on the wall behind him. The other picture in this photograph, *Pond with Swans at Dusk* by German symbolist Ferdinand Keller (1899), is still in Ruffini's possession.

'I like pictures that convey emotion' explains Ruffini. 'I'm a romantic at heart'.

THE GAUGY INTERVIEWS 2015

Meanwhile the Paris *Police Judiciaire* had been gathering evidence for their Preliminary Inquiry. Much of that evidence came from interviews conducted by Captain Mathilde Gaugy.

Gaugy's first interviewee on **27 February 2015**, just as The Corbeau had suggested, was Old Master expert **Eric Turquin** (right) – the only witness afforded the dignity of being interviewed at his place of work rather than hauled into the OCBC offices in suburban Nanterre. He asserted that Giuliano Ruffini had 'had a bad reputation for some time.' There were 'complex attributions to resolve' about his works, 'and I realized later they were probably fakes.' Of the Cranach Venus: 'I have heard negative talk about it in the trade.' On the Hals portrait the Louvre sought to buy: 'I don't like it. The picture lacks expression. I wouldn't have bought it.'



Turquin's opinions were allowed to pass without comment by Mathilde Gaugy who, admittedly, could not have known that the Duke de Baena had found his Hals portrait so inexpressive that he had himself photographed mimicking its exact expression. Turquin is not a recognized Hals specialist; the *Quelques Belles Enchères* ('Impressive Auction Prices'), for which he claims responsibility on his website, extend from a late 13th century Italian Primitive to a 19th century Indonesian Bull Hunt.

One interesting revelation in Turquin's testimony concerned the *St Jerome* attributed to Parmigianino, whose ownership dispute occurred before Ruffini and Méthiaz first met.

Turquin revealed that, when Ruffini launched civil proceedings against Méthiaz, the latter contacted him asking for details about the Parmigianino affair. ‘He wanted me to help him’ stated Turquin. ‘I told him I needed a letter from his lawyer, to which I would reply.’ There would be no mention of the *St Jerome* in the *Conclusions* presented by Méthiaz’s lawyer (Emmanuel Marsigny) on 18 December 2014. Parmigianino was, however, cited in The Corbeau’s poison-pen letter.

Another person Méthiaz contacted ahead of his lawyer’s *Conclusions* was Christie’s Old Master expert **Elvire de Maintenant**. Méthiaz wanted her to send him Tom Caley’s two-page report on the Cranach for Shepherd Associates, which she did on December 12. Marsigny appended the report to his *Conclusions*. The Shepherd report was also cited extensively by The Corbeau.

De Maintenant and Méthiaz enjoyed a cordial relationship: it was she, not one of her colleagues from the Modern Art Department, who liaised with him over a painting ascribed to Mary Cassatt that The Art Factory wished to sell at Christie’s New York (but turned out to be a fake).

Méthiaz requested Caley’s report from De Maintenant after taking her out to lunch (one wonders who picked up the bill). When Méthiaz confided over the coffee that the Cranach belonged to him and Ruffini, not Tordjman, De Maintenant was ‘flabbergasted’ as she told Gaugy in Nanterre on **14 March 2015**. ‘I was naïve enough to imagine the picture’s Belgian provenance was correct!’

De Maintenant also told Gaugy how she first came across the Cranach – when Méthiaz came to see her at Christie’s offices in Paris and ‘told me he had found a work by Cranach in a Belgian private collection. I went to see this work in our Brussels office, in the presence of the director of the office and an English colleague. The work was presented by Jean-Charles Méthiaz.’

Gaugy did not press De Maintenant about Méthiaz or the Cranach’s history, but responded with a leading question: ‘Do you know of other problematic works with a Ruffini provenance?’ De Maintenant tied herself in knots trying to give Gaugy the sort of anti-Ruffini reply she was angling for. Yes, she replied, there was the Barocci that Christie’s sold for \$1.5m in New York in 2009. There was absolutely ‘no problem’ about the work ‘except the name of the consignor.’

De Maintenant also talked about the Hals, claiming Ruffini had told Christie’s he bought the portrait from the boyfriend of a former Consul in Holland. ‘This could not be verified’ asserted De Maintenant. ‘Ruffini did not have the name of the Consul or of the person who had sold it to him.’ (‘Rubbish!’ retorts Ruffini. ‘I gave Christie’s all that information!’)

Axel Rondouin was questioned by Mathilde Gaugy on March 5. He confirmed being shown the typewritten ‘Borie List’ in Ruffini’s Paris flat on 8 January 2014, when he signed his mandate for the Velasquez.

When **Jean-Charles Méthiaz** saw Gaugy on **19 March 2015** it was less for an interview than a monologue. Méthiaz was allowed to speak for 15 minutes without interruption, unleashing (according to the official transcript) a torrent of 1,500 words (the average length of the two sections of The Corbeau's poison-pen letter).

Méthiaz told Gaugy that 'in November 2012 I was given a mandate for a work attributed to Cranach, portraying Venus with a veil. I went to Christie's in Paris. I was received by Elvire de Maintenant. Her initial impression was to say it was a masterpiece. I went to Brussels with Elvire de Maintenant as the painting was consigned to me in Belgium.'

Gaugy knew full well from De Maintenant that she had not seen the Cranach in Paris – yet here was Méthiaz artfully implying that she had. Gaugy did not seek clarification.

Méthiaz also told Gaugy that Ruffini had obtained the Cranach 'from a Belgian collector who had had it in her family for 150 years.' Yet just five days earlier, when speaking to Gaugy, De Maintenant had bewailed her own 'naïveté' in believing the story about 'the picture's Belgian provenance' – after being told by Méthiaz that the Cranach belonged to him and Ruffini. Gaugy again failed to challenge Méthiaz about the contradiction.

Méthiaz now says that, when he told Christie's the work had been 'bought from a Belgian family,' he was 'just repeating what Ruffini had told me about where he'd got it from, without mentioning him by name, in line with his wishes not to appear in the transaction.... It was only some years later that I learnt that in fact it came from a certain Borie Collection. Although it was clearly signed Cranach, the work was not recognized as such by experts at the time, so it could be perfectly legally and transparently transported to London by Christie's.'

This account, however, does not square with the contract drawn up between Méthiaz and Christie's on 29 November 2012 (see p.29), which clearly identifies the author of the painting as *Lucas Cranach* (with no mention of any date).



During his 2015 hearing with Captain Gaugy, Méthiaz handed over a small *Lion* drawing attributed to Martin Schongauer (left) that Ruffini had commissioned him to sell. The drawing was Ruffini's property and, eight weeks earlier (on January 13), Judge Zylberman had ordered The Art Factory to return it to him. It did not belong to Méthiaz and he had no business in handing it over to anyone; his gesture could have been construed as theft. Captain Gaugy accepted the drawing without demur.

After Méthiaz had reeled off the names of fifteen Ruffini works he had been involved with, Gaugy lobbed up a routine 'Do you know of any other works that Ruffini has sold or offered for sale?' Méthiaz seized the hearsay bait, immediately bringing up the Hals portrait the Louvre tried to buy between 2008-10 (before he had begun working for Ruffini). Nor could he resist mentioning 'a portrait of a seated man attributed to Frans Hals' and a 'photograph of a painting attributed to Sebastiano del Piombo' that Ruffini had shown him, 'portraying a *Young Man with Falcon*.' His words again echoed those of

The Corbeau: 'It would also appear that he [Ruffini] is preparing to put a work by Sebastiano del Piombo and another Frantz Hals on the market.' Ruffini had shown a photograph of the Del Piombo to Méthiaz – but to no one else.

Méthiaz assured Gaugy he 'never really had doubts about the authenticity' of Ruffini's pictures but 'wondered how one person managed to come up with so many masterpieces' – a phrase that echoed The Corbeau's talk of 'so many masterpieces being put on the market by Ruffini... we can always believe in coincidences, but that's taking things a bit far.' Méthiaz also aped The Corbeau by furnishing Ruffini's bank details.

Ruffini, claimed Méthiaz, was just 'one of my clients.' Gaugy did not ask him who the others were. 'I wasn't the only person selling for him' stated Méthiaz – before fingering Jules-François Ferrillon and Marco Nebuloni (though not Michael Tordjman), alongside Giammarco Cappuzzo and Jaime MacVeigh (the latter two already cited by The Corbeau). Méthiaz had even brought 'documents where some of these names appear' to hand over to Gaugy. In other words – and with Gaugy's consent, if not encouragement – Méthiaz appeared before her not as an impartial witness but as an agent for the prosecution. Six days later, on **25 March 2015**, Captain Gaugy declared herself to be acting on 'e-mails received from monsieur Jean-Charles Méthiaz' – again bringing to mind Rondouin's warning to Ruffini that Méthiaz had 'high-level contacts,' and the fact that Gaugy was present when Méthiaz was questioned by the OCBC in November 2013.

Méthiaz's e-mails advised Gaugy to engage in some on-line research to suss out information on Lino Frongia. 'Typing the key-words *Frongia Lino* in the Google search-engine brings up web-pages devoted to *Frongia Lino, artist*' reported Gaugy stolidly. She tracked down articles in the *Gazzetta di Sicilia* (31 March 2014), indicating that Frongia had recently 're-painted the nave of Noto Cathedral' (right); and in *La Repubblica* (28 September 2008), 'referring to Lino Frongia as a forger... suspected of being the author of the *Christ by Allegri* exhibited in Parma.'



Gaugy made no attempt to contextualize her findings. The *Repubblica* article was headlined *Lino Frongia: 'I am not a forger.'* The idea that someone roughly corresponding to Frongia's description (he was not accused by name) might have painted Ruffini's Correggio was floated by Vittorio Sgarbi: the very man who, as one of the two consultants for the post-earthquake reconstruction of Noto Cathedral, commissioned Lino Frongia to fresco the nave. Sgarbi was ex-Secretary of State for Culture; his fellow-consultant, Francesco Buranelli, Head of the Vatican Museums. Gallic insinuations that two of Italy's top cultural figures had knowingly hired a crook for a major ecclesiastical commission would not be forgotten when, four years later, Aude Buresi issued a European Arrest Warrant in Frongia's name and vainly sought his extradition to France.

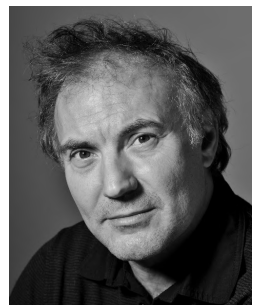
The *Gazzetta di Sicilia* article consisted solely of an interview with Lino Frongia. As Frongia is notoriously reticent about speaking in public, and as Buresi would continue to suspect him of forgery on an epic scale, it is worth quoting from:

‘I absolutely deny that I am the author of the *Christ* exhibited in Parma’ declared Frongia. ‘At first this rumour made me laugh, but now I’m fed up with it. I share a passion for copies with Vittorio [Sgarbi] – but for me they’re just a stylistic exercise, that’s all. I’m passionate about painting technique. When I make copies of Old Master paintings, my own style disappears and I completely depersonalize myself. I’ve copied Guercino, Van Dyck, Ingres... some of these works are in my flat in Rome, others are owned by Vittorio. I have a *Head of Christ* after Correggio in my home in Montecchio – but it’s different from the one in the exhibition, and not even finished.’

Gaugy does not seem to have found it incongruous that a supposed forger should talk so openly about his love of making copies. Frongia also referred to his copy of a *San Giuseppe con il Bambino* by the Venetian artist Giovanni Battista Piazzetta (1683-1754), which he had shown in 2004 in Guastalla (on the Po 20 miles north-east of Parma) alongside the original – owned by Sgarbi.

‘If Frongia really were this Leonardo-cum-Michelangelo capable of producing all these fake masterpieces, why on earth would he need me, tucked away in the countryside, to sell them for him?’ wondered Giuliano Ruffini. ‘Frongia’s been living in Rome for years – he’s a mate of Sgarbi’s, he was friends with Versace and Zefirelli, he knows all the top galleries....’

On 11 June 2015 Jules-François Ferrillon (*right*) published a vaguely autobiographical novel called *Faussaire*, blending lurid sex scenes with talk of artistic forgery. It went largely unheralded, except for an interview with a since-defunct French webzine called *Roads*, in which Ferrillon claimed his book adopted a ‘Surrealist’ approach designed to ‘confuse’ the reader, and featured a faker called Giordano – ‘whose real name I’m keeping quiet.’ The book was linked to Ferrillon’s earlier pretensions as a film producer and dramatist.



Meanwhile the Civil Case dragged on. On **7 October 2014** Ruffini’s lawyer Philippe Scarzella submitted his own *Conclusions* to the *Tribunal de Grande Instance* (Paris High Court), recapitulating the case against Méthiaz, Tordjman and The Art Factory. He called Tordjman’s talk of the Cranach being Nazi loot ‘particularly grave, without foundation and defamatory’ – noting that Tordjman and Méthiaz had not been troubled by any such eventuality when selling the *Venus...* of which, Scarzella pointed out, there was no trace in the Art Loss Register or France’s *Musées Nationaux Récupération* (a list of 2,000 artworks recovered from Germany after World War II). Associating the André Borie Collection with Nazi loot, sniffed Scarzella, showed Tordjman in abject light (*‘ne reculant devant aucune bassesse’*).



Scarzella contended that, by removing from France a work Christie's had provisionally valued at £3-5million without soliciting an export permit, The Art Factory had committed a crime under French law – and was guilty of 'exceptional misconduct' as regards the mandate it had received from Giuliano Ruffini. Scarzella recalled how, in 2009, France had refused an export permit for Cranach's *Three Graces* (far left), considering the painting a 'national treasure.'

The comparison was all the more pertinent in that both the *Three Graces*, like Ruffini's *Venus with Veil*, was dated 1531 and emerged from a previously unrecorded French private collection. The Louvre acquired the *Three Graces* for €4m in December 2010.

On 9 December 2015 a date was set for the final hearing of the Civil Case: 22 September 2016.

ENTER AUDE BURESI: THE CRIMINAL CASE 2015

The Preliminary Inquiry was completed in May 2015. On **24 July 2015** France's Public Prosecutor launched a Criminal Investigation into *Forgery, Fraud & Money-Laundering in Paris, France, England & Italy*.

On **August 10** the Investigation was placed in the hands of *Juge Aude Buresi* – *Juge*, in this context, corresponding not to 'judge' but to Examining Magistrate. Buresi, on the face of it, seemed an odd choice: she was a finance specialist with little knowledge of the artworld, and she was already up to her ears in cases of a politically sensitive nature.

After qualifying as a Magistrate in 2003 (classed 70th out of the 223 candidates in her year) Buresi was based in Metz before moving to Paris in 2006. In July 2008 she became a Juvenile Court magistrate, then in August 2010 an Examining Magistrate. In January 2011 she was assigned to the *Cour des Comptes* (Court of Auditors) and would thereafter specialize in financial cases. In August 2013 she was named a *Vice-Présidente Chargée de l'Instruction* at the *Paris Tribunal de Grande Instance*.

In December 2013, when Examining Magistrate Dominique Bibal-Sery was transferred from Paris to Amiens, Buresi took over her *cabinet* – which was responsible for investigations to do with the art market.

In 2010 Buresi had been elected to the *Conseil* (council) of the *Syndicat de la Magistrature* (Magistrates' Union), whose quarterly review *J'essAime* had railed against the 'retreat of civilization engendered by Sarkozysm' in the run-up to the 2012 French presidential election (which Sarkozy lost). Coincidentally or not, Nicholas Sarkozy (not Giuliano Ruffini) would become Buresi's over-riding professional focus from 2015 onwards.

In April 2014 Buresi had been handed the inquiry into the financing of the Front National's 2012 presidential campaign. In December 2014 she was named as one of three examining magistrates tasked with investigating an alleged misuse of corporate assets connected to three flights taken by Nicolas Sarkozy in 2012/13. In March 2015 she began assessing Sarkozy's former Intelligence Chief, Bernard Squarcini – suspected of insider influence and violating judicial confidentiality.

In September 2015 – just weeks after taking charge of the Corbeau-inspired *forgery, fraud and money-laundering* case – Buresi was assigned to the investigation of alleged Libyan funding – to the tune of €50m – of Nicolas Sarkozy's 2007 presidential campaign.

Although Aude Buresi's politics do not appear close to those espoused by Jean-Charles Méthiaz – going on his Facebook rants against Sarkozy's presidential successors François Hollande and Emmanuel Macron – Méthiaz is one of her biggest fans, drooling about her on Facebook with obsessive regularity.

He praises her as 'extremely discreet' (no known photograph of her has ever been published) and 'redoubtably efficient,' and for 'casting light on a vast system of trafficking that has been going on for years.' He has defended her against the jibes of Italian culture pundit Vittorio Sgarbi.

Méthiaz even claims to know Buresi's methods (*connaissant les méthodes de Madame Buresi*, he would write on 4 March 2020) – although, given her 'extreme discretion,' one wonders how.

On **26 November 2015** Lino Frongia, Giuliano Ruffini and his son Mathieu were named as suspects. Perhaps mindful of The Corbeau's suggestion that fiscal evidence might ('like Al Capone') expedite Ruffini's downfall, Buresi authorized Mathilde Gaugy to rifle through Giuliano's French bank account (held jointly with his son Mathieu).

On **December 1**, after spotting a cheque for €59,000 received from Paris dealer Mathieu Néouze, Gaugy descended on Néouze's gallery near Drouot and demanded to see his business register. The sum corresponded to the sale on 13 February 2014 of an Andrea Solario *Head of Christ*, owned by Ruffini, for €62,000 – with Néouze retaining €3,000 commission. The buyer, said Néouze, was Eric Turquin.

Néouze told Gaugy he had been put in touch with Ruffini by their mutual Brussels friend Allan Chinn – who, in November 2014, had also offered Néouze two small, circular paintings ascribed to Pieter Brueghel the Younger (Ruffini had bought the pair for €120,000 in 2011). Néouze again contacted Turquin but, having learnt of Néouze's connection with Ruffini, Turquin wasn't interested – even though the paintings had been authenticated by Klaus Ertz, author of Pieter Brueghel's *catalogue raisonné*.



The Solario was small beer. Mindful, perhaps, of The Corbeau's assertion that Ruffini's financial dealings would fail to withstand the 'pugnacity' and 'redoubtable efficiency' of the *Guardia di Finanza*, Buresi's next move was

to request the co-operation of Angela Baraldi (*above left*), Procurator of Reggio Emilia, citing information received from a ‘qualified, confidential source’ (i.e. The Corbeau).

Baraldi tasked the regional *Guardia di Finanza* to ascertain the ‘whereabouts, known addresses, frequentations and property’ of the Ruffinis and Frongia. It transpired that Frongia ‘was not known to the police’ and had a ‘reputation for morality and good conduct.’

Giuliano Ruffini, however, had been fined 40,000 *lire* (about €20) in 1973 for illegal possession of a firearm and 300,000 *lire* (the equivalent of €155) for affray in 1984 – after forcefully expelling a couple of rowdy clients from his restaurant/piano-bar. ‘They claimed I hit them’ say Ruffini. ‘Rubbish! Parma was run by Communists, and they made the most of it – *Le Bistro* was considered a *bourgeois* sort of place.’

His fiscal status had been investigated in 2002/3, but no tax audit instigated as result. He owned a tractor; his son Mathieu a Range Rover, a truck, three tractors and two motorbikes.

POLICE RAIDS 2016

At dawn on **28 January 2016** the *Guardia* swooped on Giuliano Ruffini’s house in Codena, Frongia’s house in Montecchio, and Mathieu Ruffini’s flats in Parma and Castelnovo ne’ Monti. They impounded computers, phones, pictures and paperwork. The search at Frongia’s ‘confirmed that painting is his main activity – his dwelling had a very large studio’ noted the *Guardia* cheerfully, as if this somehow proved his guilt as a forger.

Down at Codena, boasted the *Guardia de Finanza* in bold capitals, the search also yielded ‘**POSITIVE** results both in the entrance hall and living room, where there were four paintings: a woman in blue, a peasant grape harvest, a naked woman in bed and a *scène galante*’; and in the laundry, where Giuliano Ruffini ‘spontaneously declared that an armoured door was concealed behind a wheeled shelving-unit, giving access to a room with an industrial oven and a kitchen oven. He specified that this hidden room was used to store paintings in the event of prolonged absence. A box containing tins of paint and sponges was confiscated from the laundry.’

The discovery of this concealed industrial oven – asserted Lieutenant-Colonel Giuseppe Tondi (*right*), regional head of the *Guardia di Finanza* – ‘supports the hypothesis of criminal activity.’



He had his discovery videoed, transferred to DVD, and dispatched to Judge Baraldi. ‘The possible existence of this oven, and above all its purpose, had already been hypothesized by my Unit’ gloated Tondi.

A concealed oven was just what Aude Buresi was hoping the raid would throw up, as per The Corbeau’s indications. The *Guardia* also discovered pots of varnish, plus several manuals about art restoration. Buresi must have thought she’d hit the jackpot.

Giuliano Ruffini was perfectly sanguine about the matter. 'It was me who showed the *Guardia di Finanza* the laundry-room – they'd never have found it otherwise' he states. 'I had the room made in 1975, to store pictures and valuables when Andrée [Borie] and I spent Winter away. The house was isolated and an easy target for burglars.'

Being unaware of The Corbeau's writings at the time of the *Guardia* raid, Ruffini failed to realize the supposed importance of his big oven. 'I had the industrial oven installed in the laundry because there was nowhere else to put it. The oven was used for bread, pizzas, fish – I'm a good cook, I've owned two restaurants. There's nothing unusual about a cook having a large oven!' He sold the oven a year later, after completing his son's new villa across the valley on his Codena estate.

Buresi's belief that this industrial oven was used to 'bake' paintings and generate artificial *craquelure* struck Ruffini as too silly for words. 'Paintings could not be dried in this oven!' he cries. 'It was an old artisanal oven with large electrical resistors. It's obvious that if you dry paintings inside, with all the oil and turpentine they contain, the vapours would catch fire at the merest spark!'

The *Guardia* found 15 paintings on Ruffini's premises which, along with paperwork, affording ample evidence of his frequent artwork purchases. The *Guardia* also latched on to a €1.2m cheque to Ruffini from his friend Marco Nebuloni, dated 13 January 2016 – for a *Madonna Reading with Christ on Her Lap*, for which Nebuloni had found a Russian buyer in Malta. Although Nicholas Turner had authenticated the painting as 'an important new addition to the canon of Barocci's authentic works' in May 2011, the deal was called off at the last minute – and the cheque found by the *Guardia* never cashed – after the prospective buyer received a competing opinion from Andrea Emiliani (1931-2019), head of Bologna's *Pinacoteca Nazionale*. To Turner the work was 'quintessentially the master.' To Emiliani, just 'a very fine contemporary copy.'

Ruffini's friendship with ceramics dealer Nebuloni, who lived half-an-hour from Codena, stemmed from their common love of good cuisine, rum and cigars. Many of Nebuloni's clients were art collectors, from whom he and Ruffini were able to make 'some decent purchases, often jointly.' Nebuloni also had a pad in Malta; the two would fly out together from Bologna Airport. Ruffini decided to go and live in Malta 'for the climate, as winters in Codena can be harsh' – but stayed less than a year after finding the island 'bloody boring' and the weather unbearable ('there's often a biting wind, and in summer it's hot as hell').

A handwritten sheet found by the *Guardia* suggested that Ruffini's current assets (including the ephemeral €1.2m) totalled €4.74m. The *Guardia* also picked up on a notarial deed dated 7 October 2011, whereby Giuliano Ruffini transferred the sum of €2.3m to his son Mathieu.

On **February 15** the Reggio Emilia Criminal Court ordered Ruffini's pictures to be returned, and gave Buresi an ear-bashing. 'Nothing in the dossier suggests these paintings are fakes' bristled the Court incredulously. 'The supposed faking appears to

have been evoked by a *confidential source* which, as such, can in no circumstances be taken into consideration.’

The ‘confidential source’ to which the Court referred was the Anonymous Letter sent to the OCBC in May 2015. Article 240 of Italy’s *Codici di Procedura Penale* (Criminal Procedure Code) outlaws recourse to such letters in a judicial context – stating that *i documenti che contengono dichiarazioni anonimo non possono essere acquisiti né in alcun modo utilizzati* (‘documents containing anonymous declarations cannot be acquired or used in any way’).

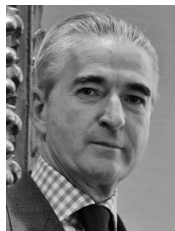
Also on **15 February 2016**, undaunted by the admonitions of her Italian colleagues, Aude Buresi issued a *commission rogatoire* to Monaco requesting that the Ruffinis’ accounts with the CMB bank be blocked, and full details of their financial activity submitted to her.

BURESI v. THE PRINCE 2016

Keen to bask in the glory of her Codena/Montecchio findings, Buresi moved on to her first big publicity stunt. At 1pm on **1 March 2016**, by her command, the Cranach Venus – sold to Prince Hans-Adam of Lichtenstein (*right*) by Colnaghi in 2013 – was impounded from an exhibition in the south of France and taken to Paris for analysis.

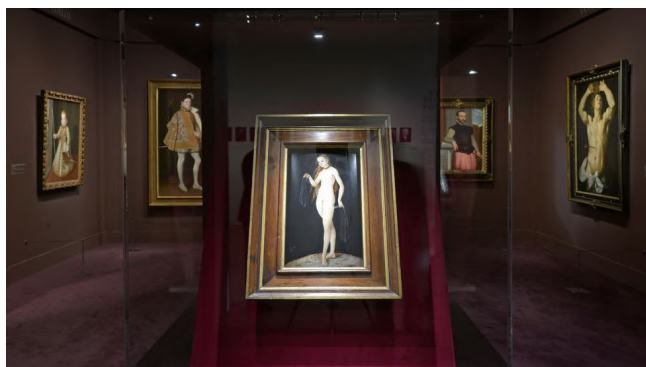


It was an unheard-of humiliation for the Prince who, down the years, had lent hundreds of works to French institutions from his 1,700-work collection – reputedly the largest private art collection in Europe. He was outraged by Buresi’s behaviour and immediately filed a civil suit, letting it be known via his lawyer that he was appalled not to have been forewarned.



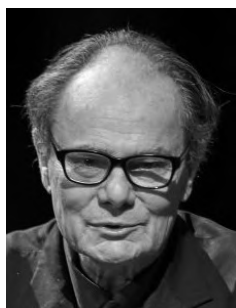
Buresi’s brazen move stunned the artworld. Roman Herzig (*left*), boss of Vienna’s *Galerie Sanct Lucas* and a longtime advisor to the Prince, accused the bulldozer magistrate of ‘behaving horribly,’ adding: ‘You can’t just seize the property of a sovereign Head of

State. Who will ever lend to the French again?’



Les Collections du Prince de Liechtenstein ran at the Hôtel de Caumont in Aix-en-Provence from 7 November 2015 to 20 March 2016 – only the second exhibition at the Caumont since its re-opening after a multi-million-euro transformation from a music academy into an arts centre. The selection of fifty

paintings and watercolours, including works by Raphael, Rubens and Rembrandt, had previously been displayed in Japan, Singapore, Moscow, Peking and Shanghai. The Cranach took centre-stage in the '16th Century Gallery', headlined the show's PR campaign and fronted its catalogue.



News of the Cranach's confiscation was first revealed on the radio, by *France Info* on **3 March 2016**. After a report in *The Art Newspaper* by Vincent Noce (*left*) on **March 4**, the story raced around the world.

As former art correspondent for Left-leaning daily *Libération*, Noce had established insider access to France's Art Crime Squad and built up a redoubtable reputation as an investigative journalist. Having been fed Christie's technical reports on the Cranach, he informed *Art Newspaper* readers there were six 'areas of concern' and that Paris *Juge Aude Buresi* was 'overseeing a closer examination of the work.'

On **March 11**, the day TEFAF Maastricht opened to the public, *Le Quotidien de l'Art* reported that Gentileschi's *David & Goliath* had been removed from London's National Gallery the day before – and 'faced the same accusations' as the Cranach. 'Serious unanswered questions remain!' gasped journalist Carole Blumenfeld (*right*), claiming darkly that the Gentileschi had been 'offered for sale to various museums and collectors by Russian agents.' She omitted to mention that the Gentileschi had also been part of the National Gallery exhibition *Making Colour* in 2014 (*see below*).



Visitors were invited to 'journey from *lapis lazuli* to cadmium red, through yellow, orange, purple and verdigris to deep green viridian – in a series of colour-themed rooms.' The Gentileschi was singled out for illustration in *The Burlington Magazine's* review.

In fact, the Gentileschi had been on show in the National Gallery for the past 2½ years – lent by David Kowitz on behalf of Fairlight Art Ventures at the request of curator Letizia Treves (*left*).



In a Gallery podcast in November 2013 Treves declared that, after joining the Gallery in April, 'one of the first things I did was get this picture on loan' as it was 'astonishing... such a small painting, yet it has such incredible wall-power. The bright blue really intensifies the drama of the scene.'

Despite the 'extraordinary expense' of the lapis lazuli – mined since antiquity, she noted, in north-east Afghanistan – Gentileschi had 'chosen to paint over three-quarters of the picture surface,' letting the 'coolness' of the blue show through 'in the deathly pallor of Goliath's decapitated head... he's hidden the blood, but indicated the onset of *rigor mortis* by letting the blue show through.'



Treves also spoke about the picture's 'old slate backing, with a 17th century inscription of a name and a number – probably relating to a 17th century inventory.'

Joséphine Bindé (right) added perspective to the Gentileschi story in French weekly *Télérama* on **March 15**, quoting the National Gallery as saying the picture had been 'temporarily lent' for 'a small presentation of Gentileschi works that ended last week' before being returned to its owner as planned.



Bindé was also the first journalist to reveal the existence of The Corbeau. 'An anonymous whistleblower has been casting doubt on the authenticity of several Old Master paintings' she wrote, adding that the Hals, Cranach and Gentileschi all had the same previous owner, whom she identified as 'X, represented by lawyer Philippe Scarzella.'

After tracking Scarzella down at TEFAF – she had obtained his phone number from Mark Weiss – the resourceful Bindé revealed the Borie provenance and the nefarious rôle of a 'Paris intermediary [i.e. Méthiaz] acting in concert with a certain M. Tordjman.' The Cranach's illegal export from France, and €3.2m sale via 'an offshore account in Singapore,' were chronicled in detail.

Scarzella unwound a bit too far with the velvet-voiced Bindé – impetuously declaring himself '200% sure' Tordjman was The Corbeau (even though he had yet to read the text of the anonymous letter). Tordjman's lawyer Olivier Schnerb was on to the allegation like a flash – suing Scarzella and Bindé for defamation (they were found guilty in July 2020, but appealed). Schnerb also insisted on a *Right Of Reply*, published by *Télérama* on **4 April 2016**. 'No way is Monsieur Tordjman the Corbeau!' he pounded, before explaining that Tordjman – unlike The Corbeau – was convinced that 'this magnificent work is by Cranach's hand' and stood to lose a huge amount of money if it were declared a fake.

NOCE LINES UP RUFFINI 2016



Meanwhile Giuliano Ruffini continued to wheel-and-deal in the Old Master market. On 21 March 2016, in association with Marco Nebuloni, he had bought an oil-on-panel *Susanna & The Elders* (c.1540) by Flemish artist Vincent Sellaer for €80,000 from Bologna plastic surgeon Roberto Lauro (left).



The work is shown *in situ* at Lauro's home *above left*, with Nebuloni and Lauro signing the sale agreement (*centre*).

The 300-work collection that Lauro had assembled with his concert pianist wife Wilma Bignami was handsomely catalogued in 1994 (*see below right*). The *Susanna* was the only painting they sold privately. When the couple died within a fortnight of each other in Autumn 2016, their collection became the source of a protracted inheritance dispute.

Ruffini calls the Sellaer *Susanna* the favourite work he has (co-)owned, but he didn't enjoy it for long. It was sold at auction by Hampel in Munich for €310,000 on December 7. A €230,000 profit inside nine months is good business in anyone's language.

On **April 11** Ruffini and Nebuloni bumped into Ferrillon on the Champs-Élysées. Ferrillon asked Ruffini for €50,000 to fund his work on the screenplay for the film that had inspired his book *Faussaire*. Ruffini told him to get stuffed – whereupon Ferrillon 'got very angry and threatened to bad-mouth me in the press.' Five weeks later, in another interview with *Roads*, Ferrillon confirmed that his book had started out as a screenplay for a film to be financed by Giuliano Ruffini, with his son in the lead role. Ferrillon purported to be 'troubled' that his book was used by Ruffini's detractors.

Schnerb having disclosed the identity of Miss Bindé's 'Mr X,' Vincent Noce lost no time in securing an 'exclusive interview' with Ruffini, published in *Le Journal des Arts* (the French sister publication of *The Art Newspaper*) on **April 14**. Noce presented Ruffini as a 'Maltese resident in his seventies.' Ruffini described himself as 'a collector, not dealer. Sometimes, after a few years, I tire of paintings and sell them to buy others.' He had not considered the *David & Goliath* to be a Gentileschi: a work on lapis lazuli was harder to date than one on canvas. He'd 'always thought it dated from the 18th or 19th century, but it has been recognized as a Gentileschi by Francesco Solinas, Roberto Contini and Mina Gregori.' He had owned the *Venus* since 1973, believing it a contemporary Flemish copy, as it was painted on oak rather than Cranach's usual lime.

Noce put Ruffini through the mincer.

'*The Borie List has no prices on it!*' he threw out accusingly.

'Back then you didn't put prices' retorted Ruffini. 'It was private matter. Your word was your bond.'

'But no one has ever heard of this collection!'

'Some private collections are just not known. I know one in Italy with 400 paintings, but no one knows about it.'

'Do you have any photographs of the paintings at your home?'

'I used to have a suitcaseful of photos, but my ex-wife threw them all out.'

'Why do you call on intermediaries to sell such masterpieces?'

'I'm into art, not commerce. I guarantee the ownership and origin, not the attribution or authenticity – that's the job of dealers and experts.'

Noce's interview was recycled for an English-speaking audience in the June 14 issue of *The Art Newspaper*. This wrongly stated Ruffini was born in France, and reported that the Cranach's supposed presence in 'a Belgian family since the middle of the 19th century – the provenance given to Bernheimer when he purchased it in Brussels' – was now 'contradicted by Ruffini, who says he acquired it in Paris in 1973.' Ruffini was made to sound like a liar, with no indication that Bernheimer had been fed the 'Belgian provenance' story by Michael Tordjman.

Noce *did* report that Ruffini had sued Tordjman and Methiaz for breach of contract over the Cranach – but added that both men asserted the transaction to be 'perfectly legitimate' as Ruffini had previously sold the work to The Art Factory for €510,000. Noce made no attempt to ascertain the truth of the matter.

A second, longer Ruffini interview appeared on the culture website *VieilleCarne* on **April 19** – and saw him expound, perhaps naïvely, about *craquelure*. 'I've done some restoration, and handled fakes that could be recognized by their *craquelure*' he explained. 'A genuine painting has different types of *craquelure*; forgers, or people making copies, use glue as a preparation then paint on top of it. If they put the painting in the oven, it cracks as it dries – but the *craquelure* is the same throughout. But the colours in Old Master paintings do not share the same consistency, and develop *craquelure* differently – black, for instance, is rarely subject to *craquelure* at all.'

VieilleCarne presented Ruffini as the Cranach's 'true owner,' and detailed how he had been 'swindled' by Méthiaz and Tordjman – whom Ruffini, like Scarzella before him, identified as The Corbeau. This time there was no reaction from Tordjman or his lawyer. It was Méthiaz who demanded a *Right Of Reply*, 'formally contesting' Ruffini's 'presentation of the facts.' Méthiaz claimed to have been 'perfectly transparent' in his dealings with Ruffini, whose 'lying accusations' were designed 'solely to deflect attention from his trouble in justifying the origin of his works.'

Ruffini had been introduced to *VieilleCarne* by Ferrillon, who had recently been back in the media himself – talking to High Society weekly *Point de Vue* about his newly-relevant book *Faussaire*. Although this was now promoted by a YouTube video featuring the Cranach Venus drowning in a sea of dollars, Ferrillon continued to peddle ambiguity – opining that the Cranach 'could just as easily be fake as authentic' before asking:

'Why would its former owner lodge a complaint if he knew the painting were a fake?'

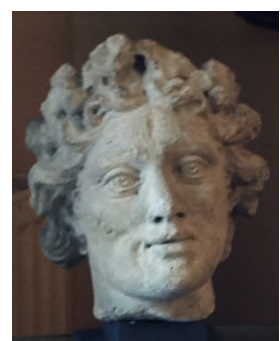


SECOND SEARCHES 2016

On **18 April 2016** Ruffini's Paris flat was raided by police. Among the artworks impounded (see below) were a French portrait of a *Marshal in a Wig*, a panelled Flemish dining scene, a German *Deposition* and – incongruously – a marble *Head of a Faun*. The paintings had been bought privately and at auction, in Madrid and Paris, for prices in the €10,000-20,000 range. All were accompanied by invoices but, five years later, Ruffini had still to obtain their restitution – with judicial sources citing supposed doubts about their ownership.

On **April 21** fresh searches were carried out in Italy – this time in the presence of French *gendarmes* – at Ruffini's Codena home and Lino Frongia's house in Montecchio, where 26 photographs were taken of paintings lining the walls. Several appeared to be copies of famous Old Masters, three by Velazquez (the *Infanta* from *Las Meninas*; his portrait of *Felipe IV*; and a head-and-shoulders close-up of his *Pope Innocent X*). Mindful that, without a forger, she didn't have a case, Aude Buresi attended the Frongia raid *in person*.

The *Guardia di Finanza* also impounded a stash of invoices. One concerned two boxes of paints that Frongia had ordered from Bologna, another a €250 bill from a restorer. Alongside a note addressed to Peter Glidewell (a Rome-born art dealer) concerning two portraits priced €15,000 and €13,636.36, there was a sheaf of carbon-copies of modest invoices addressed to Giuliano Ruffini (for advice about purchasing artworks) and to the Parma interior-decorating firm Barj Buzzoni – which, reported the *Guardia* zealously (after consulting *Dun & Bradstreet*), had a 2014 income of \$674,725 (and expenditure of \$343,260) under the shrewd stewardship of its 86 year-old boss Maria Barigazi. *Guardia* sleuths even unearthed twenty blank invoice-slips destined for Barj Buzzoni, complete with carbon-paper doubles.



Frongia's Air 2 iPad (a model launched in late 2014) was also scrutinized. Its earliest messages dated from 20 May 2015 – when Ruffini e-mailed Frongia about a work that *non has expertise, mi dicono che e un Van Dick originale e lo si puo facilmente epertizzare aumentzandoci di molto il valore* (has no expertise, said to be an original Van Dyck and can easily be assessed, greatly increasing its value). Most of the other iPad messages concerned paintings, prices and opinions. On 9 July 2015 Ruffini forwarded an e-mail he had received from Clovis Whitfield, listing half a dozen paintings and their prices; then, on July 24, a message from Jean-Marie Le Fell about some minor Old Master he did not think worth trying to sell. On July 27 Ruffini messaged Frongia about a work attributed to Abel Grimmer.

Some of the pictures Ruffini and Frongia exchanged e-mails about in October 2015 must have struck even Aude Buresi as inconsequential, like a *Descent from the Cross* from the workshop of Rubens to be offered by Doyle in New York on October 14 (when it sold for \$10,625), or a 17th century Italian *Portrait of a Maiden* to be sold at the modest John Nicholson auction firm in Surrey on October 28 with an estimate of £4,000-6,000.

Buresi's eagle eye honed in on two other e-mails, though: one dated October 23 from Marco Nebuloni, about El Greco; and one dated December 25 about an *Ecce Homo* sold at Sotheby's London back on 6 December 2006, measuring 71.8 x 55.5cm and described as 'the same, but ours is bigger.'

STIGMATIZING EL GRECO 2016

On **1 May 2016** it was El Greco's turn. Ten days after stumbling across Ruffini, Frongia and Neubolini discussing a work of his (and exactly two months after grabbing her Cranach), Buresi ordered the seizure of an oil-on-copper *St Francis Receiving the Stigmata* (1576/7) from the exhibition *El Greco In Italia* at the Casa dei Carraresi in Treviso.



The painting – bought by Lino Frongia at a Parma antiques fair for €1,800 in 2005 – had been attributed to El Greco by Vittori Sgarbi. It was Giuliano Ruffini's idea to have it shown in Treviso, as his pal Marco Nebuloni was friends with event organizer Serena Baccaglini (left).



In July 2015 Ruffini had taken Nebuloni to meet Frongia at his home in Montecchio, with a view to persuading him to show the *St Francis* in Treviso to enhance its value. Although Frongia (as Nebuloni would later tell the *Guardia di Finanza*) 'was not very keen on the idea,' he agreed for Nebuloni to show a photo of the work to Baccaglini. She alerted Lionello Puppi, the exhibition's Curator, who immediately recognized it as an El Greco and insisted on its presence in his show, which opened on October 24.

Nebuloni obtained an export permit for the painting (valued at €500,000), as the exhibition was initially slated to travel to St Petersburg. He also had the *St Francis*

analysed by the Palladio painting research centre in Vicenza, whose 20-page report, based on X-ray fluorescence and microstratigraphy, found no trace of modern binders or pigments while noting the presence of an ‘oily, orange-brown second layer – a technique learnt while El Greco was in Venice.’

On **26 May 2016** the Treviso Regional Court declared Buresi’s *May Day (May Day)* seizure null and void – ruling that there was no evidence that the El Greco was a fake. It was the second time in four months that Buresi had fallen foul of Italian Law (the seizure of Ruffini’s paintings having been ruled invalid by the Court of Reggio Emilia in February). In blatant defiance of the Italian Court ruling, however, Buresi – who on May 11 had commissioned an expert analysis of the work – refused to return the painting from Paris.



On **13 June 2016**, 84 year-old Lionello Puppi (*left*) was summoned by Treviso’s *Guardia di Finanza*. ‘When did you learn that Signor Frongia was the owner of the El Greco?’ chuntered Lieutenant Sandro Scaboro.

‘Never heard of Frongia’ growled Puppi (*left*).

‘Do you know Signor Ruffini?’ frowned Scaboro.

‘No!’ barked Puppi.

Puppi’s ‘attentive and in-depth study of the painting’s style and technique’ had convinced him it was a work by El Greco – an artist he had been studying since 1964. No visitor to the exhibition had cast any doubt on the attribution, he asserted – and that included Leticia Ruiz Gómez, the chief El Greco specialist at the Prado Museum in Madrid.

Next day, **June 14**, Palladio boss Paolo Cornale (*right*) was quizzed by Scaboro about who had asked him to analyse the *St Francis*.



‘Marco Nebuloni,’ retorted Cornale – ‘an antiques dealer and existing Palladio client.’ Cornale handed Scaboro the €790 price-quote he had submitted to Nebuloni on March 21. Nebuloni, he asserted, had accepted the quote on March 22, and paid via bank transfer. Palladio’s report was completed on April 6.

Marco Nebuloni, in turn, was interrogated by Scaboro on **June 27** – revealing that he had commissioned the Palladio analysis at Frongia’s request (but had yet to be reimbursed).

SCIENTISTS v. CONNOISSEURS 2016

Meanwhile, the Cranach seizure set alarm bells ringing from London to Seattle.

A nervous Mark Weiss asked Giammarco Cappuzzo for proof of how and where Ruffini had acquired the Hals portrait. The Menendez invoice did little to allay his concerns – so Cappuzzo asked Ruffini for Menendez’s phone number. ‘I rang it straightaway’ says Cappuzzo. ‘Menendez answered.’



Cappuzzo, however, remained ‘very suspicious’ – so on **8 May 2016** he jumped in his 4 x 4 and drove to Madrid, where Rafael Perez-Menendez lived alone in an apartment on Calle de Hortaleza in the old town, a ten-minute walk from the Prado. ‘The guy was alive – not an invention!’ recalls Cappuzzo. ‘I took a photo of his ID card with my mobile phone and called Mark Weiss. I even passed him on to Weiss so they could talk.’ When Menendez learnt that Weiss had sold the painting for 11 million dollars, relates Cappuzzo, ‘the poor guy nearly fainted! He told me he’d shown the painting to Díaz Padrón at the Prado, who didn’t believe in it – that’s why he sold it to Ruffini for €8,000.’

Matías Díaz Padrón was Head of Dutch & Flemish Painting at the Prado from 1982-2005. On 27 March 2017 Carlos Herrero Starkie, founder of the Institute of Old Masters Research, would e-mail Mark Weiss to say Díaz Padrón had told him that he had indeed been shown the Hals portrait at the Prado many years ago, but ‘did not attach much importance to the painting, and has no record of correspondence about it. He only gave an oral opinion – as was usual at the Prado at the time.’

Sotheby’s claim they learned of Ruffini’s link to the Hals ‘through French press reports.’ The truth is slightly different. They were alerted by Vincent Noce, as he brazenly admitted in an *Art Newspaper* podcast on 5 March 2021: ‘When I understood that Giuliano Ruffini was a really problematic dealer, I went and contacted Sotheby’s in Paris and told them “I know that you have sold several paintings coming from him... the guy is a problem”.’ Whereupon Sotheby’s – who had merely brokered the sale of the Hals to Richard Hedreen – contacted Mark Weiss about having the portrait tested. ‘I had no objection at the time’ acknowledges Weiss. ‘I did not believe then, nor has my opinion changed at any point since, that the painting was a fake.’ With Hedreen’s blessing Sotheby’s packed the Hals off to Orion Analytical, a forensic laboratory in the Massachusetts village of Williamstown run by James Martin (right).



The choice of Martin, who was better known for analysing contemporary art than Old Masters, may have been linked to his involvement in the scandal that had engulfed New York’s venerable Knoedler Gallery a few years earlier, over the sale of million-dollar Abstract Expressionist fakes. Martin’s pigment analysis helped the case be resolved in July 2013 – when Glafira Rosales, a small-time Mexican dealer from Long Island, pleaded guilty to supplying fakes to Knoedler. Her forger was identified as Pei-Shen Qian, a Chinese painter from Queens (whose errors included signing a ‘Jackson Pollock’ *Pollok*).

One of Qian’s creations – signed *Mark Rothko* and dated 1956 – was bought for \$8.3m by Gucci boss Domenico de Sole. In July 2013 De Sole joined the Board of Sotheby’s. In March 2015 he became Sotheby’s Chairman. In February 2016 De Sole reached a lucrative out-of-court settlement with Knoedler, thanks in part to Martin’s evidence.

When, on **19 April 2016**, De Sole's company contracted James Martin to examine the Hals portrait, they were fully aware of his ability to identify anachronistic pigments. Martin discovered miniscule particles of titanium white and phthalocyanine blue in the Hals portrait – pigments first produced in the 20th century. The particles were 'too small to see without magnification.'

Orion's *Hals Report* was released on **24 May 2016**, and included a 250-word account of Martin's qualifications that read like a paean to a career of stellar achievement.

The 19-page, 2,900-word report, accompanied by 181 pages of appendixes, concluded that the portrait must have been painted 'after the mid-20th century' – a judgment that effectively made the Louvre (which had spent 2½ years trying to buy the thing, as mid-17th century Dutch) look like a Mickey Mouse outfit.

Weiss says that fresh testing he arranged by the company Art Analysis & Research was unable to be completed before the July 11 deadline Sotheby's had set for accepting new information addressing the work's authenticity. Sotheby's rescinded the sale and reimbursed Hedreen, asserting that Mark Weiss and Fairlight Art Ventures were, as vendors, legally obliged to pay back what they had received for the work.

The authenticity of the Hals had been unequivocally addressed in the February 2014 issue of the *Burlington Magazine* by Louvre curator Blaise Ducros and Quentin Buvelot of the Mauritshuis in The Hague, who extolled it as 'intensely observed' with a 'snapshot-like character.' Their article *A Rediscovered Portrait by Frans Hals* dated this 'very important addition to Hals' oeuvre' to 1655-60, as it 'unmistakably belongs to Hals' late period' – showing Hals to have 'lost none of his skills' and having 'superbly captured the man's facial expression and the engaging look in his eyes.'



The work was also included in the monumental monograph on *Frans Hals* by Claus Grimm's American rival Seymour Slive (*left*), also published in 2014.

EXIT INSPECTOR CLOUSEAU 2016

Mathilde Gaugy's final contribution to the investigation took the form of a *procès-verbal* (official report) submitted on **2 June 2016**, entitled *Article: Who was André Borie?*

'This day, while pursuing research on the internet,' began Captain Gaugy in her usual portentous style, 'we have observed the presence of an article making reference to the present procedure.'

The article had been posted on the English-language blog *Art History News* back on March 24 by the Scottish-based art dealer and broadcaster Bendor Grosvenor who, thought Gaugy, displayed 'a good knowledge of the case.'

But Grosvenor's 'knowledge of the case' was gleaned from the internet – and hampered by the fact that (as he admitted) 'my French googling isn't up to much.'



Gaugy's report on Grosvenor's writings was woefully tendentious. Grosvenor had 'found no trace' of the André Borie Collection which, claimed Gaugy, struck him as 'suspicious' (quite the opposite – 'not that this means anything' is what Grosvenor actually wrote).

Then, Grosvenor (*left*) had mentioned the Correggio *Head of Christ* 'also thought to come from the Borie Collection' that had been shown in Parma in 2008, when it was the 'subject of controversy' after 'Vittorio Sgarbi declared it a fake' and 'named various people who could have been behind it, including an Italian artist called Lino Frongia.'

Gaugy artfully omitted both Grosvenor's next comment ('*all of which is most intriguing, but doesn't get us very far*') and his own opinion of the Correggio ('*the picture looks to be really quite convincing*').

There is something of the Inspector Clouseau about French police trawling the Net and relying on foreign punditry to flesh out their own investigations. The importance of primary sources seemed lost on Gaugy: when discussing the Correggio, she cited Grosvenor citing a catalogue produced by the Monaco gallery Maison d'Art, whereby the Correggio 'after Borie's death was passed by inheritance to an heir who apparently sold the picture at Christie's in Geneva.'

But the Correggio was not sold by Christie's – in Geneva or anywhere else. Christie's sold mainly Jewellery and Watches in Geneva, not Old Master Paintings, as Bendor Grosvenor ought to have known. The Correggio had been bought from Andrée Borie's Paris shop by Jean-Claude Bacchiana, who sold it to Ruffini after his estate agency went bust in the early 1990s. Bacchiana lived in Megève. Before agreeing to the deal, Ruffini had the painting inspected by Christie's in Geneva, 40 miles away. 'They confirmed the painting was from the right period, and pretty interesting, so I bought it' states Ruffini.

Bendor Grosvenor also proffered 'some immediate thoughts and conclusions' which Gaugy chose to ignore, doubtless because they ran counter to the Buresi case narrative:

* '*The addition of the Borie Correggio makes it less likely that were dealing with a cache of fakes here. Isn't it still hard to believe that someone could make such convincing fakes in the style of so many artists and over so many periods?*'

* '*The apparent Belgian provenance that has been attached to the Cranach is presumably incorrect. Someone has a case to answer here.*'

* '*It would be odd for anyone who knowingly handled fakes to bring a lawsuit about the painting: one would imagine they would want to lie low, and be happy with what they'd made so far*' (a reference to Ruffini's civil case against Méthiaz and Tordjman)

* '*We still have very little strong evidence to allow us to say that these pictures are fake*'

CIVIL CASE SUSPENDED 2016

The closing arguments in the Civil Case opposing Giuliano Ruffini and Jean-Charles Méthiaz/ Michael Tordjman were scheduled for 22 September 2016. But on **30 June 2016** – at the request of Méthiaz and Tordjman – the case was suspended by Pre-Trial Judge Edmée Bongrand due to ‘doubts about the Cranach’s authenticity’ pending the analysis ordered by a ‘magistrate of this jurisdiction [i.e. Aude Buresi] as part of an investigation concerning an international network of forgers.’

The Corbeau’s poison-pen letter had done the trick. The civil case would remain suspended until 2020, affording Méthiaz and Tordjman four years’ respite. Buresi would resolutely decline to investigate the pair even though they had hived off nearly €5.7m from paintings owned by Ruffini – allegedly defrauding Ruffini of over €4.5m in the process. It is hard to credit that a man of such supposedly mephistophelian cunning, accused of making his fortune by peddling forgeries, could be such a lousy businessman – and so naïve and trusting in his attitude to others.

Five weeks later, on August 3, under the headline *Prince of Lichtenstein Duped by Forger*, French satirical weekly *Le Canard Enchaîné* reported that a ‘college of three experts’ had declared the *Venus* a fake ‘done deliberately in the manner of Cranach the Elder’ – claiming that the pigments were not compatible with the 16th century, that the oak panel dated from the late 18th century at the earliest, and that the paintwork had been artificially aged with manufactured *craquelure*. In words echoing The Corbeau’s accusation, the article evoked a ‘a network of fakers based in Rome and Florence commissioned by the Franco-Italian businessman Giuliano Ruffini’ and revealed that ‘magistrates’ (presumably a reference to the singular Aude Buresi) were also ‘questioning paintings sold for a fortune attributed to Solario, Gentileschi, Pieter Brueghel and Frans Hals.’

On August 31 *Le Canard* was compelled to publish Ruffini’s *Right Of Reply* rubbishing the allegations. Shortly afterwards, the Buresi investigation was transferred from the **OCBC** (dependent on the Interior Ministry) to the **Service National de Douane Judiciaire** (dependent on the Finance Ministry, and reputedly more ‘docile’ about taking orders from examining magistrates).

Involving French Customs did not, on the face of it, sound surprising with the case’s two main suspects in Italy but was, in fact, a most unusual move: since 2009 the OCBC had boasted a section specifically devoted to *la répression de la contrefaçon artistique* (‘repression of art fraud’) – commonly known as France’s Art Crime Squad – and one would have expected an examining magistrate with scant artworld experience to seek to avail herself of this section’s specialist expertise. The move was all the more surprising in that Aude Buresi had refused from the outset to look into the illegal export of the Cranach (with its bogus Belgian provenance).

The OCBC was renowned for a softly-softly approach, and balked at the publicity surrounding the Cranach seizure and the leaking of Buresi’s expert report to *Le Canard*

Enchaîné. Nor were the OCBC overly convinced about the existence of an Italian forgery ring churning out Old Masters.

THE PRINCE v. BURESI ²⁰¹⁶

On **19 October 2016**, Johann Kräftner (Director of the Liechtenstein Collection) and Robert Wald (Head of Conservation) had travelled to Paris to meet two members of Team Buresi: forensic scientist Violaine de Villemereuil and Christine Jouishomme, the graphologist who, in January 2015, had concluded that Giuliano Ruffini's signature on The Art Factory's €510,000 Cranach sale contract had been faked. The third team member – Guido Messling, a curator at Vienna's Kunsthistorisches Museum – failed to show up.

The meeting got off to a tense start when Kräftner (*left*) and Wald were appraised that



Gunnar Heydenreich (*right*), head of the Cranach Digital Archive, had told French police on September 6 that the *Venus* was a fake; and that 80 year-old expert Dieter Koepplin (*below right*), a retired curator from Kunstmuseum Basel, had sent Heydenreich a message back on May 12 reversing his previous (positive) opinion about the painting.



It is interesting, in this context, to recall The Corbeau's statement that Koepplin 'strongly advised having the painting examined by the very famous Gunnar Heydenreich.'



On **28 October 2016** Kräftner issued a press release lamenting the 'unfounded' interpretation Buresi's experts had made of their own analysis. While politely terming the Paris meeting 'useful,' he stressed that, 'given the number and complexity of the issues at hand, there was not enough time to reach common conclusions' – adding that the report of the meeting, drafted by Villemereuil and Jouishomme, did 'not cover every aspect of our discussion.' As a result, 'to avoid the anonymous release of certain results in a tendentious manner so as to influence the course of justice,' Kräftner and Wald fired back with their own account of the meeting 'in order to communicate to the public the detailed information on which our point of view is based.' Their report, in places highly technical, ran to 4,200 words. It tore Buresi's forgery theory to shreds.



The most scathing criticism was reserved for Buresi's 'misguided' resort to graphology 'to prove the authorship' of Cranach's signature emblem of a winged serpent with crown and ring (*left*) – deemed to 'have almost certainly been added by different hands.'

(No doubt the bizarre presence of Graphologist Jouishomme in Buresi's 'college of experts' was down to The Corbeau's indication that 'Koepplin did not like the signature.')

To Kräftner and Wald, this 'signature' was 'an integral part of the painting as a whole' and its appearance 'certainly comparable to the brushwork of the signatures, or rather the mark, of the Cranach workshop.' Kräftner and Wald also blasted Libby Sheldon's

claim that the yellow pigment in Venus's necklace was a lead monoxide rather than lead-tin yellow – a pigment only used until 1750. The painting also, they claimed, contained red cinnabar (not used after 1687); natural azurite (only used until 1800, but rarely after 1675); and both *refined* titanium white – in the paint surface and the *craquelure* (caused by recent restoration and cleaning) – and *unrefined* or *unpurified* titanium white derived from iron oxide, commonly used in the 16th century. Kräftner and Wald found it 'startling' that Buresi's team had ignored 'the fundamental research on *craquelure*' carried out by Spike Bucklow, Research Director at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, in his seminal *Description & Classification of Craquelure and Description of Craquelure Patterns*.



Although Buresi's team emphasized the presence of *craquelure* within the figure of Venus and its absence from the black background, Kräftner and Wald found this 'not surprising' given that carbon-based black pigment forms 'significantly less *craquelure*' because of its 'extremely long drying rate.' They cited Hans Holbein's *Lady with a Squirrel and Starling* (c.1527) in London's National Gallery, and the *Portrait of a Woman* by Monogrammist HW (1538) in the Lichtenstein Collection, as other 'clear examples.'

Kräftner and Wald took issue with the claim by Buresi's team that 'the general tendency for the cracking network within the paint-film is perpendicular to the grain of the panel' – countering that there were 'also areas where the direction of the cracking is parallel to the wood grain.' They felt the painting's restoration, involving consolidation of the surface, would have required moisture and heat, aggravating the existing *craquelure* and producing further cracking throughout the flesh tones. The use of heat in the consolidation process would, they felt, have 'helped produce the slightly convex (blister-like) surface quality of the upper paint surface.' Heat would have been applied by a tacking-iron; the notion of the painting being aged in an oven struck Kräftner and Wald as preposterous (or 'very difficult to carry out on a wooden support covered with oil-bound pigments,' as they put it diplomatically).

In response to the claim that the painting, atypically for Cranach, lacked an under-drawing (in the opinion of Dieter Koeplin as relayed by The Corbeau), Kräftner and Wald detected a 'carbon-based underdrawing' that differed from the final design of Venus's right cheek, right arm and right foot.

Countering claims that Cranach eschewed the use of oak, Kräftner and Wald pointed to over 20 Cranach paintings on oak in the Cranach Digital Archive – noting that Cranach sometimes painted on walnut, birch, maple, poplar, pear, pine, alder and spruce as well as his usual limewood. Indentations at the top and bottom of the panel, contended Kräftner and Wald, resulted from attempts to reduce the warp of the panel using a clamp. They noted that, based on its 167 growth rings, dendrochronologist Dr Peter Klein had dated the panel to the 1520s. The absence of known provenance 'cannot be regarded as sufficient cause for questioning age or authenticity – the greatest collections have extensive holdings whose history is incomplete or non-existing.'

The Lichtenstein Collection ‘had arrived at the clear conclusion that the *Venus* can by no means be considered a recent forgery’ and ‘remained fully convinced of the painting’s authenticity.’

Aude Buresi ignored the Kräftner/Wald report and clung on to her *Venus*. The situation was ubuesque: a painting considered *bona fide* by its lawful owners remained confiscated as a fake by the representative of a foreign state.

HALS CASE CONTINUED 2016

On **13 October 2016** the Monaco Appeal Court unblocked the Ruffinis’ accounts at the CMB (*Compagnie Monégasque de Banque*) to which, since April 14, they had been denied access at the demand of Aude Buresi. The Court ruled that Buresi had violated the European Convention Of Human Rights by refusing to communicate the evidence underpinning her demand – a staggering rebuke.

Ruffini cheerfully informed Noce about his unblocked accounts when they met on **October 25** at the *Grand Hotel Del Mare* in the Italian seaside resort of Bordighera, 9 miles from the French border. Ruffini was accompanied by Marco Nebuloni and his French lawyer Philippe Scarzella, Noce by Jules-François Ferrillon. Noce’s article in *Le Journal des Arts*, published on November 25, would quote Ruffini’s description of himself as ‘an art-lover who had sold dozens of paintings over the last forty years, enjoying some success’ but had ‘never ventured to attribute them to great masters’ – something he ‘left to experts, curators and dealers.’

Implying that various forgeries had passed through Ruffini’s hands, Noce opined that ‘the fakers’ ingeniousness evokes the unbelievable skill of Van Meegeren with his Vermeers truer than life’ – a curious assertion given that, although they managed to fool Hermann Göring, Van Meegeren’s paintings looked nothing like Vermeer. On the other hand, Noce also quoted restorer Cinzia Pasquali as ‘having no doubt as to the authenticity’ of Gentileschi’s *David & Goliath*.

Sotheby’s claim that the Hals portrait was a forgery was relayed on the front-page of the *New York Times* on **October 26** in an article by Nina Siegal that regurgitated Sotheby’s talk of ‘in-depth technical analysis’ and linked the Hals to the impounded Cranach. ‘Are there other forgeries out there from the same source?’ wondered Siegal, before citing the Gentileschi *David* and the Parmigianino *St Jerome*.

Siegal, as the authoress of a novel called *A Little Trouble with the Facts*, seemed well equipped to discuss the Ruffini Affair. She quoted a warning from Martin Bijl who, as chief restorer at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, had ‘worked on about 30 Hals paintings’ – to the effect that Orion Analytical were ‘not familiar with the handwriting of Frans Hals, so to speak, so that’s an extra reason to be careful’ (James Martin, however, claims he has ‘studied Hals’ works for thirty years’).

Siegal also addressed the issue of provenance. ‘Sometimes you find the provenance much later than a painting is found’ added Bijl. We don’t know everything!’ Quentin

Buvelot of the Mauritshuis told Siegal that ‘it’s not uncommon that Old Master paintings are not listed in existing literature. One should not forget that serious catalogues only date from the 19th century.’

In Autumn 2016 Sotheby’s asked Orion Analytical to test the *St Jerome* from the ‘Circle of Parmigianino’ they had sold for \$842,500 in January 2012. This time James Martin found a slightly different modern synthetic pigment: phthalocyanine green.

The *St Jerome* had been shown as a Parmigianino in the *Parmigianino & European Mannerism* exhibition held in Parma and Vienna in 2003. Sotheby’s catalogue had called the painting ‘a striking and powerful image of *St Jerome*’ and ‘an exceptionally fine example of 16th century northern Italian Mannerism’ of ‘extremely high quality, technical virtuosity and intense emotion.’ After selling at Sotheby’s, the *St Jerome* went on display – from April 2014 to February 2015 – at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Sotheby’s must have been delighted with Martin’s work. In **December 2016** they bought up his company *Orion Analytical* and made him their Director of Scientific Research – and a Senior Vice-President. They refunded the unnamed *St Jerome* buyer and, on **17 January 2017**, took Lionel de Saint Donat-Pourrières (*right*) to court, demanding he reimburse what he had obtained as consignee. Two days later France’s *Douane Judiciaire* contacted Sotheby’s with a view to obtaining the *St Jerome* for Buresi’s investigation (it would be sent to Paris on June 26).



On **February 7** it was announced that Sotheby’s had launched proceedings against Mark Weiss and Fairlight Art Ventures over the *Hals*. The case would drag on for over two years and would not, ultimately, revolve around authenticity but legal liability.

*

In February 2017 Aude Buresi, along with two other magistrates, was appointed to investigate former French Prime Minister François Fillon for fraud and embezzlement. The news sent shockwaves through the country: Fillon was a candidate in the upcoming presidential election, and front-runner in the polls. His ratings collapsed, and the sensational legal case would dominate Buresi’s work schedule until April 2019, when Fillon was committed for trial (he would receive a five-year jail sentence in June 2020).

FERRILLON’S FICTION 2017

After consulting a British blog in search of evidence of Franco-Italian crime, Buresi’s investigation now turned its attention to a Gallic novel.

According to a *Bordereau de Transmission de Procédure* – for what the *Douane Judiciaire* were now officially calling ‘*L’Affaire Ruffini*’ – a *procès verbal* was drafted on 23 January 2017, ‘*Date de Publication du Livre Faussaire*.’ Then a second on **18 April 2017**, recording the ‘*Exploitation du Roman Faussaire*.’ In other words, investigators had been appraised

of – and, apparently, eagerly awaiting – the publication of Ferrillon’s 500-page doorstop, so they could exploit it for Aude Buresi’s criminal case.

Even more bizarre: Ferrillon’s novel was not published on 23 January 2017 – but on 11 June 2015. It was the *Second Edition* that was published in January 2017. What was so different about it?

Along with a new Preface by Vincent Noce, a whole raft of changes to the text, that’s what – all designed to help readers identify Ferrillon’s ‘fictional’ forger *Giordano R.* as Giuliano Ruffini.

In the list of artists imitated by ‘Lino’ – described by Ferrillon as a ‘master of deception’ and ‘uncontested virtuoso of mystification’ – were ‘Frans Hals, Brueghel, Cranach, Parmigianino and Gentileschi... Solario, Correggio, Titian, Melendez, Francken, Anselmi, Van Dyck, El Greco and Velázquez.’

Ferrillon evoked the Cranach’s sale to Colnaghi and subsequent purchase by the Prince of Lichtenstein:

The painting in his collection that Giordano was proudest of was a Venus by Lucas Cranach the Elder.

‘Is it authentic?’

‘What do I know?’ Giordano retorted. ‘That’s up to the experts and the labs.’

Giordano goes on to warn about intermediaries:

They wouldn’t think twice about screwing you and pocketing all the proceeds of a sale by claiming that the painting really belongs to them. It happened to me once with two Belgian clowns who made out that my paintings had been in their families for centuries.

The Cranach, wrote Ferrillon, was one of Giordano’s forgeries... sold to an English dealer, who in turn had sold it to a prince of some obscure European country.

Ferrillon also mentioned the Hals portrait and Parmigianino’s *St Jerome* – implying that both were fakes:

... a portrait of a young man apparently painted by Franz Hals. He was clearly mischievous. Giordano pointed out that the man probably wanted to warn his beholders that he was not all that authentic.

... a bluish landscape, some trees and rocks could be seen in the distance. In the foreground was a lone figure in a cave. He was dressed in a simple red sheet, keenly scanning the sky....

‘Is this another picture from your collection?’

‘Yes, it’s a Parmigianino....’

Giordano subsequently had that painting stolen, having entrusted it to a broker. Although it reappeared at an auction in New York, Giordano had already come to terms with his loss.

When he was encouraged to try and get it back, he gave a succinct response: ‘Nah, that Parma guy’s painting was some ham-handed business.’

The Ferrillon extracts quoted here come from *Forger*, the English translation of the French second edition – which also adds a reference to Ruffini’s painting *Peasants Attacked By Brigands*, sold at Drouot in 1999:

‘Mind you, genuine paintings can suddenly be declared fakes, too. I saw that happen to a Brueghel. The dealer had paid too much for it at auction. When he struggled to sell it, he persuaded an obliging lab to dab on a little cadmium red and pretend to have found some modern pigment to disprove how old it was. The painting immediately became a fake. The dealer sued, claiming the expert had made a mistake. He got his money back – plus damages, by claiming the affair had harmed his reputation.’

The ‘dealer’ implicated here is Galerie Saint-Honoré in Paris; the expert, Eric Turquin.

Ferrillon also evoked Ruffini’s ‘superb Gentileschi, palmed off on a London dealer’ (Weiss) – who ‘made such a killing that he named his yacht after the artist’ – as well as Ruffini’s relationship with Andrée Borie, in connexion with ‘old invoices faked by Giordano when he was playing the gigolo with some old biddy who sold antiques, and snuffed it ages ago.’

The Corbeau’s ‘secret oven’ was referenced in a passage about Giordano’s supposed recipe for faking Old Masters:

‘It’s got to go in the oven for it to be the right period and give it a nice network of cracks... well cooked in the oven, at about 120°C for a fortnight.’

Ferrillon stopped short of having Lino’s fakes loaded into Giordano’s kiln after travelling from Montecchio to Codena in a sealed truck like a *plague bacillus*.

Ruffini scoffed at Ferrillon’s technical knowledge, believing much of it gleaned from a slipshod perusal of Cennino Cennini’s *Il Libro dell’Arte* (written in 1437):

*‘Red made from crushed ladybirds, rabbit skins dissolved in quicklime to make glue, vine-shoots heated in aluminium to make black...! Sure, and why not crush blue butterflies to make blue, crush ants to make umber, and crush maze to make yellow? The red that Ferrillon talks about isn’t made from *coccinelles* (ladybirds) but *cochenilles* (cochineals)... Restorers don’t breed and skin rabbits – you can buy rabbit-skin glue anywhere!’*

Ferrillon’s pseudo-erudition is reflected in the following passage:

A Russian woman once suggested that they analyse the pigments more closely. She said the earth used had changed from being exposed to radiation since the Industrial Revolution.

The woman in question is Elena Basner (born 1956), onetime curator of the Russian Museum in St Petersburg. Her suggestion had nothing to do with industrialization, but concerned radioactive isotopes provoked by nuclear explosions after 1945.

Despite its title and artworld references, Ferrillon's novel revolves around a sado-maso affair between its narrator and a neo-Nazi dominatrix with a Japanese sugar-daddy who lives in New York and collects Oriental Carpets and Tribal Masks. The grotesque depths from which the book struggles to emerge can be deduced from the following lines:

I went to the woods to breathe their invigorating air that multiplies my thirst for life. I wanted to feel the hum of the rain on my shivering skin, to mate with the foliage and peat, and roll around in the soft mud, grunting crudely.

For Vincent Noce to preface such self-indulgent clap-trap was a surprising lapse in aesthetic judgment, and did not sit easily with his reputation for objectivity as an investigative journalist. Noce appeared to endorse Ferrillon's version of events, writing of the 'real characters the author has clearly been inspired by.... Many of these details are credible, authentic and disturbing. How could so many specialists, curators and museum directors have been so misled?'

MULTIPLE SUMMONS 2017

On **21 April 2017**, three days after receiving the report on Ferrillon's book, Aude Buresi summoned Giuliano and Mathieu Ruffini, Lino Frongia and Jules-François Ferrillon to present themselves for questioning at the *Douane Judiciaire* on May 17.

On **April 28**, ten days after the *Douane Judiciaire* had read about it in Ferrillon's novel *Faussaire*, a *procès-verbal* was drawn up headed *Gentileschi – Yacht Mark Weiss*. A 75-second video (complete with Pink Floyd soundtrack) filmed by fellow-yachtsman had appeared on *You-Tube*, showing Weiss (interrogated in Paris on April 4) at the helm of his new vessel, arms triumphantly aloft.



On **May 16** Ruffini's Italian lawyer Federico de Belvis (*left*) wrote back to Buresi questioning French jurisdiction over the case; his client, he assured her, was fully prepared to be heard in Italy. He received no reply.

Lino Frongia informed Buresi, via his own lawyer, that he did 'not understand why it appears opportune to hear him in France' as the seizure of the *El Greco* had 'taken place on Italian soil' – having been 'ordered, then annulled, by an Italian magistrate.' As Frongia was 'Italian, speaks Italian and lives in Italy' he was 'legitimately surprised to have to present himself to a French judicial authority for reasons of which he is unaware.' Buresi's same-day reply tartly referred Frongia's lawyer to Article 52 of the *Convention Implementing the Schengen Agreement* (which states that 'each Contracting Party may send procedural documents directly by post to persons who are in the territory of another Contracting Party').

Ferrillon sent a copy of *his* summons to Giuliano Ruffini 'to make me understand that if I didn't cough up his €50,000 he'd spout a load of bullshit about me' reports Ruffini. In the event, as Ferrillon later informed a journalist, he 'declared what Ruffini told me about the Parmigianino that was sold at Sotheby's: "It's doubtless a fake, anyway!"'

Ruffini is adamant he never said any such thing: 'I told him I thought it could be 18th century – as the expert [David] Ekserdjian thought it could be a work *after* Gentileschi.' Ruffini dismisses Ferrillon's book as 'fiction, pure and simple.'

Ferrillon was questioned on May 16, Giammarco Cappuzzo on **May 17**. Cappuzzo was holed up at the *Douane Judiciaire* for over 10 hours and, to his shock and disbelief, forced to spend 1½ hours locked in a cell 'as a suspect! Just because Méthiaz wrote my name in an anonymous letter!'

Cappuzzo may have irked his interrogators by flippanantly suggesting that 'if someone can produce all these fakes capable of fooling the world's top museums, you shouldn't arrest the guy – you should give him a medal!'

On **21 July 2017** Buresi received a note from Bologna Public Prosecutor Alberto Canid, informing her that the Ruffinis refused to travel to France for questioning. Buresi sent out fresh summons to Frongia and the Ruffinis on **September 19**, requiring them to appear on November 2.

Ruffini's estranged brother Ivano – resident in the village of Carpineti, 10 miles from Codena – was convoked for October 27 but, instead, spoke to investigators by telephone on **October 9**.

Giuliano Ruffini's French and Italian lawyers paid Buresi's office a visit on **October 13**, to reiterate Ruffini's readiness to 'explain himself as regards the facts reproached him' – in Italy, 'as stipulated by international dispositions, and as is routinely the case in affairs of a transnational nature.' They again questioned French jurisdiction over the case. Buresi refused to alter her position.

Paris dealer Monique Kruch, of the *Galerie St-Honoré*, was quizzed on **October 20**. One week later Inspector Valentin Payraud, of the *Douane Judiciaire*, ploughed through the Ruffinis' Swiss bank accounts for the years 2007-09. This followed the police's perusal of the Ruffinis' accounts in France, Monaco and Italy.

Buresi's professional instincts being to follow the money-trail (and The Corbeau having made no mention of any Ruffini bank account across the Pyrenees), she paid no attention to Ruffini's dealings in Spain.

Ruffini's lawyers sent Buresi yet another letter on **October 30**, again insisting that Ruffini was happy to talk. They were ignored. Buresi had other things on her plate.

In September 2017, on top of the Fillon case, she had been assigned to the 'Kazakhgate' corruption and money-laundering scandal (involving the sale of *Airbus* satellites and helicopters to Kazakhstan), while in October she had begun an investigation into high-level corruption among French customs officers in Le Havre (who would be brought to trial in June 2020).

EXPERT ANALYSES 2017-18



After her disputed work on the Cranach, court expert Violaine de Villemereuil (*left*) turned her attention to the Hals portrait, which Sotheby's had forwarded to the French police. Villemereuil's report was produced in conjunction with Anna Tummers (*right*), a curator at the Frans Hals Museum in Haarlem, and delivered on 13 October 2017. It compared the portrait with two other works by Hals – concluding it was fake with different brushwork,



anachronistic pigments and *craquelure* that looked as if it had been artificially created by means of heat.

On **December 21** Violaine de Villemereuil handed in the El Greco report Buresi had commissioned from her in May 2016. Buresi's wide-ranging brief to the 35 year-old Villemereuil – a graduate of the Lyon Chemistry & Chemical Engineering College – did not confine itself to science. In addition to analysing the work's pigments and restoration, Villemereuil was tasked with 'retracing the painting's history, comparing the signature to that on other works by El Greco, and identifying any element enabling the courts to rule on its authenticity.'

Expecting Villemereuil to be a forensic scientist, graphologist and art historian rolled into one revealed staggering *naïveté* and artworld ignorance. Expecting intellectual dishonesty was even worse. Villemereuil was instructed not to keep an open mind: she was to 'define the factual and historical technical criteria enabling it to be established that the picture is a fake.'

'No physico-chemical analysis of an El Greco work on copper has ever been carried out' began Villemereuil, before referencing the analysis carried out by the Palladio laboratory in Vicenza in April 2016, which had found the work's pigments 'compatible with the late 16th century.' All the pigments identified by Villemereuil were 'known to have been used by El Greco' – except, she added darkly, Naples Yellow. However, as the pigments' *granulometry* was 'not habitual,' she felt able to affirm that they did 'not form a coherent ensemble.'

She had also detected 'translucent grey and white fibres partly trapped in the paintwork.' One white fibre, magnified x 200 under a microscope, appeared 'slightly twisted' and did 'not present the characteristics of animal fibre' – prompting Villemereuil to speculate that 'it might be cotton fibre' and, as such, 'anachronistic' to the work's supposed period.

Villemereuil found several zones of restoration, mainly on the figure of St Francis. Although restoring a modern fake might, to most people, sound an incongruous idea, she felt the damage to the paintwork 'could be of natural or *artificial* origin.'

The work's subject-matter, pose and background displayed similarities with other El Grecos – but, as these works dated from different periods in his career, Villemereuil also deemed these similarities 'anachronistic.'

Infrared reflectography had revealed *pentimenti*: alterations to the composition carried out during its execution, and invariably considered proof that a work is not a fake. Villemereuil countered this by disparaging the painting's brushwork as 'messy' (*brouillonne*), and asserting that 'the painting does not seem to come from El Greco's studio or any artist trained by him.' She went further: when examined 'under strong magnification and various types of light,' the brushwork was 'not coherent' with authentic El Grecos of similar period and format.

Her purely personal opinion was diametrically opposed to that of Lionello Puppi, who had been looking at El Grecos with and without magnification for over half a century.

As for the painting's support, 'few works painted on copper by the artist are known.' Yet Villemereuil declined to study the two other El Grecos on copper shown in Treviso (a *Christ on the Cross* and an *Adoration of the Magi*), ostensibly because they were from private collections and 'not found in previous publications.' And she made no reference to El Greco's oil-on-copper *Adoration of the Shepherds* (1572-74) in the San Diego Museum of Art.

Although the copper of Frongia's painting was indeed 'compatible with copper earlier than the 20th century,' admitted the bookish Villemereuil, it contained 'a smaller proportion of lead than that indicated by bibliographical sources for copper in the 16th century.' The 'heterogeneous and artificial' nature of the copper's 'traces of corrosion and ageing' reflected, in her opinion, 'a wish to age the appearance of the support' artificially.

Villemereuil's grasp of graphology was not, luckily, put to the test, given the work's absence of signature. Citing Harold Wethey's outdated *El Greco and his School* (published in 1962), she asserted that 70% of El Greco's twenty paintings of St Francis were signed. There was, then, a three-in-ten chance of Frongia's picture being *unsigned*. Villemereuil deemed this lack of signature 'occasional' – implying it to be suspect.

She was not able to compare the brushwork (or 'treatment and application of the pictorial matter' as Villemereuil put it) with other El Grecos – other than 'from bibliographical data and high-resolution images.' These enabled her to declare that the 'parallel, juxtaposed touches' of white on the right shoulder differed from a 'work of reference' portraying St Francis in oil on canvas.

Her 'historical analysis' of the work's provenance revealed 'no document attesting to the existence of the painting before 2015' – which chimed in with her 'most likely hypothesis' that it was 'deliberately fabricated so as to produce a work in the manner of El Greco.' There were, she added, 'strong presumptions' (as opposed, perhaps, to the hard and fast evidence required by most courts of law) not to consider El Greco the author of the work, or the late 16th century as the period when it was produced.

‘Its authenticity’ concluded Villemereuil grandly ‘is therefore excluded.’

After her assessment of Frongia’s El Greco, Mademoiselle de Villemereuil churned out a second report riddled with even more spelling mistakes. Commissioned by Aude Buresi on 31 January 2017, this report was a synthesis of lab results and general observations generated by Frongia’s El Greco and five works once owned by Giuliano Ruffini: the Prince of Lichtenstein’s impounded Cranach; the Hals and the Parmigianino declared by Sotheby’s James Martin to be fakes; the Solario *Ecce Homo* that Eric Turquin had bought for €62,000; and a Brueghel *Carnival* sold at Drouot for €37,500.

The latter two, relatively minor works were presumably included because they were easily accessible. Turquin, it should be noted, is a co-plaintiff in the criminal case; his disputed Solario had the added *cachet* of appearing on the Borie Liste of 1973. They were analysed by Paris Appeal Court expert Géraldine Albers (right), a murals specialist. Villemereuil’s report also incorporated input from the Musées de France Research & Restoration Centre’s Eros database.



Buresi instructed Villemereuil to compare the works’ provenance and ‘establish the coherence’ of signatures, subject-matter, materials and method of execution (an unorthodox request, given the works’ variety of styles and subject-matter). A section devoted to the *History* of the Hals portrait began with the unequivocal heading (in bold) **Fausse Origine** – with the work’s provenance from the Borie and De Baena Collections summarily dismissed as fake. Villemereuil misspelt both names – Borie as *Bories* and Baena as both *Buan* and *Baeen* (perhaps a Spanish ancestor of Mr Bean) – and also misspelt *Methias*, *Cappuzzo* and *Ferillon*. She couldn’t even date her report properly – writing 21 Janvier 2019 above the title at the top and 20 janvier 2018 alongside her signature at the bottom. Villemereuil couldn’t help remarking in her report on the ‘wounds’ (*stigmates*) the Parmigianino had suffered during previous expert analysis ‘in the context of a judicial procedure outside France.’

Surprisingly, given how keen she was to interview people whose only connexion to the case was an axe to grind with Giuliano Ruffini (like his brother Ivano or Andrée Borie’s nephew Jacques Hohberg), Aude Buresi did not bother to talk to the man who had recorded the Mr Baeen provenance and 1994 sale of the Hals: Rafael Perez-Menendez (too late now: this Man of La Mancha succumbed to coronavirus in Autumn 2020).

On the basis of what can only have been information provided by Buresi, Villemereuil regurgitated a Corbeau-friendly account of the Cranach’s recent history.

After noting a *mandate in the name of M. Jean-Charles Méthiaz* in November 2012, Villemereuil recorded (under ‘1st Trimester 2013’) the work as sold first to *The Art Factory M. Tordjman*, then to *the company Skyline*, before being bought by *Gallerie [sic] Colnaghi*. In other words, Ruffini’s claim to have been swindled by Méthiaz and Tordjman – the subject of an ongoing civil court case – had been unilaterally rejected by Buresi before that case had even come to trial.

Villemereuil's history of the Parmigianino contained one piece of intriguing information: Paris dealer Gabriel Terrades had offered to buy it for FRF 500,000 (the equivalent of around €80,000) in 1993 (before its attribution to Parmigianino).

Villemereuil obediently took Buresi's interest in coherence to repetitive extremes. The Cranach was 'not coherent in terms of size, nature or preparation.' The Hals was 'not coherent in terms of size or preparation.' The Brueghel was 'not coherent in terms of preparation.' The El Greco was 'not coherent in terms of nature or preparation.' The Solario was 'not coherent in terms of size.' Villemereuil contended that 'artists from a common period (1550-1650) and region (Western Europe) share a common base of pictorial matter at their disposal' while cautioning that 'each has their own specificity. In the context of being confronted with these specificities, the ensemble of works to be compared present incoherencies.'

Three works, she declared, contained titanium white: the Cranach, the Hals and the El Greco. As their isotopic ratios did not – despite being 'close' to one another – 'correspond to any existing database geo-localisation,' it was 'highly probable that they had the same source of production.' A source of production which, needless to say, was 'incompatible with the years 1500-1650.'

FERRILLON SUED 2018

On **19 May 2018** Jules-François Ferrillon was interviewed by French weekly *Marianne*. The magazine termed his book a *roman à clef* – i.e. with characters based on real life.

Ferrillon concurred. Whereas the first edition had cited the names of various artists, the second contained 'more detailed descriptions of the paintings so as to leave no doubt: these are indeed the pictures incriminated since 2016, having passed through the hands of Giuliano Ruffini.'

The new edition, explained Ferrillon, 'raised the lid on a veritable system: there really are forgers in Italy whose technique is so highly developed they can produce fakes. I say exactly how these paintings were fabricated. I do not say exactly by whom; I just give a name, *Lino* – an artist whose house just happens to have been raided by the police.' This Lino was 'one of the greatest forgers of all time, a master of every style and capable of producing a Caravaggio just as good as a Cranach or a Titian.'

Three months later, on **August 16**, Ruffini sued for libel – accusing Ferrillon of mendacity, malice and seeking to destroy his reputation through 'baseless pseudo-revelations.' Ferrillon – along with *Marianne's* editor Yves de Chaisemartin and journalist Marc Eldewald – was indicted on October 3.

The case would drag on. On 20 February 2020 Ferrillon submitted six pieces of 'evidence' as part of his defence: four press articles (two of them by Vincent Noce); a Sotheby's memo from their 2017 court case against Mark Weiss; and (aping the precedent set by Michael Tordjman's barrister Olivier Schnerb in 2014) a *Wikipedia* article.

HALS: THE MUZZLED REPORT 2018

On 16 November 2018 German forensic scientist Erhard Jägers (right) addressed a 147-page, 30,000-word *Expert Report* on the Hals portrait to the London High Court. The Report had been commissioned by Mark Weiss's legal team, but was shelved. 'The court case was ultimately entirely about contractual law' explains Weiss, 'and for that reason my lawyers insisted that I had to settle – since all Sotheby's had to do to win was to convince the court that their decision to rescind the sale was based on the best available evidence they had at that given time. The fact that we believed we could prove the Orion Report was deeply flawed did not matter. Since I had settled just prior to the trial [in March 2019], there was never the opportunity for the scientific evidence to be presented or debated in court – even though my steadfast conviction of the painting's authenticity was supported by Jägers' compelling report.'



Jägers, a Chemistry graduate from the University of Bonn, claimed to have examined some 150 Old Master paintings since becoming co-director of the *Mikroanalytisches Labor* in Bornheim in 1992. He analysed the Hals in conjunction with his wife and co-director Elisabeth Jägers; art historian Regina Urbanek (both women are professors at the Technische Hochschule in nearby Cologne); and wood biologist Peter Klein of Hamburg University.

The contents of Jägers' Report have never been made public – until now. It accuses Martin's findings of being 'fundamentally flawed.'

Martin 'did not properly examine or understand' the structure and layers of the painting, declares Jägers. Nor did he 'conduct a proper testing process.' Martin's photographs were 'poor and over-magnified' and 'did not prove what he says they prove.' (Martin counters that Jägers 'lacked the equipment required to peer-review our findings.')

The locations where Martin had found particles of phthalocyanine blue were, asserted Jägers, not made clear. These locations were 'either on the sides of the panel (which is not relevant) or in areas of loss or damage or restoration (also not relevant)... it appears he [Martin] sought out areas of loss and damage which would corroborate his views.' (Martin denies the charge, claiming that 'Jägers' microscope did not permit him to observe at up to 60x what Orion observed at up to 90x.')

Jägers described the particles of phthalocyanine blue – crucial to Martin's contention that the picture was a fake – as 'hard, transparent and plasticky... agglomerations of a form of silicate or yellowed resin.' They were 'not paint pigments' and had 'not been used to paint any part of the work. No paint surrounds them. These particles do not form part of the original paint layer structure.' Jägers dismissed them as 'pollution.'

Martin denies talking of 'paint pigments' – terming the particles 'modern air abrasive coloured with phthalocyanine blue. I found the particles in, and in most cases

surrounded by, the white ground layer – under the paint layer.’ He agreed that the particles were a ‘pollution’ – one that ‘became part of the painting when it was created.’

Jägers found ‘nothing that tends against an attribution to the 17th century’ and thought it impossible for a modern forger to have created such a ‘complex, multi-layered structure’ consisting of: a ‘pre-glue’ layer with a transparent binding medium containing animal glue; a first ground-layer of calcium carbonate; a second ground-layer of calcium carbonate and lead white, ‘with saponifications (lead soaps) caused by the interaction of the lead in the painting materials with the oily binding medium that have caused protrusions in the paint surface’; the paint layer; a protein varnish; at least two resin varnishes; and a top varnish of ‘thickly applied’ artificial resin... ‘in many places foreign pollution has adhered to or been caught within it.’ There was ‘every indication that considerable time elapsed between the application of one varnish layer and its being cleaned off and the next varnish layer being applied’ added Jägers.

The portrait’s pigments – lead white, yellow ochre, red/brown ochre and carbon black – were commonly used in the 17th century; their particles were ‘large and irregular, consistent with hand-ground pigments.’ Dendrochronology suggested the oak panel dated from 1588 or thereafter. The picture had also, observed Jägers, been subjected to ‘at least two campaigns of restoration’ – the first ‘between twenty and fifty years ago,’ the second ‘since 2008.’ This most recent retouching was on top of the last layer of varnish, and contained titanium white.

Jägers’ stinging criticism would attract Sotheby’s understandable ire. James Martin had ‘conducted an in-depth analysis of the work’ they retorted. ‘His analysis and report were peer-reviewed and endorsed by another leading independent scientist in the field.’

CRACKING CONCLUSIONS, TARNISHED VARNISH 2018

Jägers also addressed the technical findings of the Tummers/Villemereuil report commissioned by Aude Buresi – dismissing its analytical conclusions as the authors ‘did not properly identify the composition of the ground’ and, ‘in considering the presence of titanium white, operated on a flawed premise that no restoration took place before 2008.’ Their comments on the painting’s *craquelure* and lead soaps, he spluttered, ‘appear to be based on speculation.’

Jägers disputed the Tummers/Villemereuil claim that ‘lead soaps and their protrusions can be accelerated artificially by means of heat.’ On the contrary, affirmed Jägers, ‘such protrusions are a well-known feature of old works... a normal reaction between oil and lead.’ Heating ‘would have created crackles everywhere, not just in the places we see here – the fact that impasto areas of white lead pigment have cracked, and the thin areas of ochre and carbon black in the background have not, is normal.’

The paintwork’s *craquelure* was ‘normal for a panel of this age. If the panel had been artificially heated, I would have expected to see more damage.’

So much for Ruffini’s secret oven, then.

Jägers was not the only expert to question James Martin's phthalocyanine findings. In a statement about the *St Jerome* attributed to Parmigianino dated 26 February 2018 (reproduced by Lionel de Saint Donat-Pourrières in his book *Autodafé*), art scientist Maurizio Seracini declared that the Micro-Raman Spectroscopy analysis used by Orion was 'hardly able to identify pigments underneath the painting's layer of varnish' – and that this varnish had 'a phthalate component which closely resembles the spectrum of phthalocyanine when examined by Raman Spectroscopy.' James Martin disputes Seracini's words – saying that he 'used confocal Raman microscopy, which permits depth-sensitive analysis of materials, including particles under varnish.'

In November 2018 the *St Jerome* would be declared a modern fake and Saint-Donat Pourrières ordered to reimburse Sotheby's and pay costs. And foot the bill for James Martin's analysis.

UNWARRANTED 2019

A French arrest warrant for Lino Frongia was issued on **30 January 2019**. It accused him of forgery and laundering the proceeds of commercial fraud. Frongia ignored it.

A *European Arrest Warrant* was issued for **Giuliano Ruffini** on **March 13** – for forgery, fraud and money-laundering in France and elsewhere since 1995. He was arrested on **May 20** by the *Polizia Giudizaria*, but released after a court hearing two days later. When his arrest warrant was overturned by the Milan Court of Appeal on **July 2**, Buresi issued a new *European Arrest Warrant* dated **July 14** – Bastille Day, as if to remind Italian authorities that Ruffini was French. It limited the charges against Ruffini to acts committed since 8 August 2002.

A *European Arrest Warrant* was issued for **Lino Frongia** on **August 23**. Among the charges levelled against him was deceiving Italian authorities and the public by presenting a painting of *St Francis* attributed to El Greco at an exhibition in Treviso. He was arrested on **September 10** by the *Carabinieri* of Reggio Emilia, but released after a court hearing next day, with Italian judicial authorities requesting supplementary evidence from Buresi. This she sent on **September 26**.

Buresi's attempts to arrest Frongia and Ruffini stirred Tordjman & Méthiaz into action. On **October 15** Michael Tordjman lodged a request for the Civil Case to be definitively postponed until the conclusion of the Criminal Case, while Jean-Charles Méthiaz asked Judge Bongrand to supply Buresi's expert report on the *Cranach Venus*, given that the arrest warrants issued for the Ruffinis and Frongia suggested that the report had now been completed.

Two days later, on Facebook, Méthiaz gleefully announced 'the end of an investigation confirming the suspicions about the existence of a highly discreet and efficient network going back at least thirty years!'

Under the headline *Fake Saga – Here Comes the Sheriff!* [i.e. Aude Buresi], and an image of the St Francis seized in Treviso, Méthiaz wrote the following:

This San Francesco lost in mystical ecstasy is not an El Greco but a modern fake, probably by Lino Frongia, a painter of genius suspected of also being the author of the Frans Hals, the Cranach Venus, Gentileschi's David & Goliath, the Parmigianino St Jerome.... He was already suspected a few years ago of producing a Correggio Head of Christ sold to a museum by Giuliano Ruffini, Frongia's partner, in what is already being called the crime of the century for the scale of the fraud and an estimated prejudice of nearly 300 million!

It all started in 2016 with the sensational impounding of Cranach's Venus with a Veil, exhibited in Aix-en-Provence and recently acquired by the Prince of Liechtenstein. The Examining Magistrate, Aude Buresi, had just launched a rollercoaster investigation, unearthing a vast system of trafficking that had been going on for years, orchestrated by Ruffini and, it seems, his son in association with Frongia and probably other painters. Starting with suspected fakes of Ruffini provenance came a spate of other works, all with the same owner and all scientifically shown to be modern fakes, with Coorte, Velazquez, Breughel, Barocci, Pontormo, Solaro, Van Kessel and others added to the list of discoveries from Ruffini's supposed collection. He defends himself by saying he's been lucky and never sold any painting as authentic, leaving that to the experts.

Three years of discreet inquiries, conducted jointly with police in other countries, mainly Italy, with analysis showing the Cranach at the heart of the case is a fake.... The ultra-discreet Buresi has never spoken about the matter or released any details, even though evidence of Ruffini's involvement in trafficking fakes emerged following Sotheby's discoveries re the Hals and Parmigianino. The Cranach dossier must now be now pretty solid, as not long ago the magistrate issued international arrest warrants for Giuliano Ruffini, his son Mathieu and the painter Lino Frongia for fraud, money-laundering and faking works of art. They were arrested and placed at the disposal of Italian police, pending a judge's decision about the French demand for their extradition.

Thus ends an investigation confirming suspicions about the existence of a highly discreet and efficient network going back at least thirty years! But it's above all the start of another story – a tidal wave in the artworld if everything is proven, undermining traditional expertise and with tales of big money... revelations, confrontations, accusations, refutations, quarrels among experts and defence lawyers, and of a probable trial if the accusation has the evidence.... the next chapter in a veritable novel.

Twelve days later, on **October 29**, Frongia's extradition case came up in Bologna. Vincent Noce reported on it in *La Gazette Drouot* under the headline *Fake Old Masters: Crossing the Alps*.

Noce revealed how a '61 year-old local artist, Lino Frongia,' had 'slipped into' a hearing at the Bologna Appeal Court to be told (though proceedings were 'almost inaudible') that 'in four months' time' he would learn if he were to be 'transferred to Paris to explain his involvement in one of the biggest scandals ever to rock the artworld.'

The case had ‘been launched by Aude Buresi’ against Frongia’s ‘friend and neighbour Giuliano Ruffini’ who, claimed Noce, had ‘boasted about distributing dozens of Old Masters to all corners of the globe.’ Noce mocked Ruffini as a ‘plucky, lucky art collector’ who had ‘retired into the mountains near Reggio Emilia while selecting the welcoming island of Malta for his fiscal residence.’



Frongia, wrote Noce, conformed to ‘all the clichés... balding, with a moustache and sideburns’ – and a gift for pastiche, exemplified by ‘two decent copies of David for Gianni Versace.’ The paintings in question – versions of Jacques-Louis David’s *Mars & Venus* and *Helen & Paris* – were jointly sold for £133,250 at Sotheby’s London in 2009.



Their slick brushwork reflected Frongia’s skilled technique, but no one was likely to mistake his paintings for originals – as a comparison of the *Mars & Venus* by David (*above left*) and Frongia (*left*) makes clear. Also, at a whopping 149 x 170cm, their format was far removed from the small-scale works scrutinized by Aude Buresi – which, with the exception of the Gentileschi, were not based on pre-existing works but appeared to be original compositions in their own right. Frongia’s works for Versace offered zero indication that he was the purported forger at the heart of the *Affaire Ruffini*.

FATE OF A FINE PAINTING 2019

On **7 April 2019**, ten days after Weiss had paid Sotheby’s \$4.2m to settle out of court over the Hals, his former associate David Kowitz was *in court* facing Sotheby’s on behalf of Fairlight Art Ventures. The hearing saw Fairlight’s legal counsel accuse James Martin (recently named Sotheby’s *Chief Science Officer*) of acting for Sotheby’s as a ‘partisan consultant’ rather than an ‘independent expert’ when preparing his report (the Judge, however, would declared himself ‘satisfied that Mr Martin worked with professional integrity’).

Sotheby’s claimed that the Hals sale contract contained an offer to rescind the sale and return the purchase price if The Buyer (i.e. Richard Hedreen) provided written evidence raising doubts as to the painting’s authenticity or attribution and Sotheby’s decided the painting were counterfeit. Kowitz maintained that only Mark Weiss, not Fairlight, was contractually concerned by this offer.

The High Court’s ruling, postponed until **11 December 2019**, found in favour of Sotheby’s – who had ‘acted according to the contractual framework’ under which Fairlight were ‘liable to Sotheby’s for failing to return the purchase price of the painting.’ Mr Justice Knowles found ‘nothing in Fairlight’s suggestion that Sotheby’s conduct should cause the court to deny this remedy.’ Fairlight were left facing a bill of around \$6.5m.

Sotheby's declared themselves 'glad to see our position completely vindicated by the court.' That was an artful way of putting it: Mr Justice Knowles did not vindicate their stance on the work's authenticity – emphasizing that 'this judgment does not determine whether the painting is by Frans Hals.... It is to be hoped that its intrinsic qualities will not be ignored, and that it might be enjoyed for what it is, which is a fine painting.'

It was refreshing to hear someone (perhaps significantly, someone not connected with the artworld) talk about a work of art in terms of intrinsic quality, rather than obsessing over its authorship and commercial value.

20-20 VISION JANUARY-MARCH 2020

Vincent Noce had concluded his October 2019 report on the Frongia extradition case by referring to a 'painting recognized as a Bronzino' hanging in the Musée Jacquemart-André in Paris – even though 'neither the museum nor its owners can explain its provenance.' Noce knew better, confiding that Giuliano Ruffini had 'given me to understand he was behind its discovery.'



Noce's remark about the Bronzino's absence of provenance sounded like a call for action – along the lines of the suggestions coursing through the The Corbeau's poison-pen letter.

Sure enough, Buresi had the Bronzino impounded. Her move came on Monday **20 January 2020** – last day of the exhibition *Masterpieces of Italian Painting from the Alana Collection* that had opened at the Musée Jacquemart-André the previous September.

Ruffini insists his involvement in the work's history was limited to showing it to his friend Philippe Costamagna in his Paris flat. Ruffini had received a photo of the work from Rafael Perez-Menendez – who claimed a Spanish dealer had bought it at a charity auction in Madrid.



After offering Ruffini 10% commission if he could have the work analysed and arrange its sale, Perez-Menendez – accompanied by Ruffini's old friend Jaime MacVeigh – brought the work to Paris to be inspected by Costamagna (*left*), a specialist in the Florentine Cinquecento. Costamagna would write that he felt 'enormously excited' when he first handled the picture, as there was 'no room for doubt: I was looking at an unknown work by Bronzino.' He promptly arranged for its inclusion in the exhibition *Bronzino – Artist and Poet at the Court of the Medici* (for which he was a member of the Advisory Board) due to open in Florence's Palazzo Strozzi on 24 September 2010.

Costamagna catalogued the work as 'Bronzino: St Cosmas, 1543-5.' Far from its provenance remaining obscure, as Noce had claimed, Costamagna identified it as the top

half of a painting installed in 1545 in the Cappella di Eleonora in Florence's Palazzo Vecchio, as the pendant to Bronzino's *John the Baptist* (now in the Getty Museum). The catalogue even published a reconstitution of the chapel (*below*) as it would originally have appeared with the two panels in place. They had been removed by 1553, when an inventory recorded them as *in guardaroba* ('in storage').



Perhaps because it scuppered Buresi's belief that the *St Cosmas* was a Ruffini fake, Noce failed to mention its onetime presence in the Cappella di Eleonora when he broke the news of its Paris seizure to readers of *The Art Newspaper* on **21 January 2020**. The *St Cosmas* – one of over seventy works from the New Jersey-based *Alana Collection* on show at Jacquemart-André – had been bought in 2011 by the collection's owners (Chilean billionaire Alvaro Saieh and his wife Ana) from London dealer Derek Johns, who claimed to have purchased it from a Zurich collector. Ruffini says he never received his commission.

Meanwhile debate over resumption of the Civil Case was in full swing. On 4 December 2019, in response to Tordjman's attempt to have the case definitively postponed, Giuliano Ruffini petitioned Pre-Trial Judge Edmée Bongrand to allow the Civil Case to proceed without further ado – pointing out that the criminal investigation had been going on since 2015 for no tangible result.

Judge Bongrand delivered her ruling on Thursday **30 January 2020**. Noting that Ruffini had initiated civil proceedings back in May 2014, and citing Article 6 of the *European Convention of Human Rights* ('everyone is entitled to a fair and public hearing within a reasonable time'), she ordered the Civil Case to be resumed.

Referring to the Cranach, she declared: 'Establishing the authenticity of the work in question is no obstacle to a ruling on Monsieur Ruffini's demands concerning the offences allegedly committed by the defendants in their capacity as mandated intermediaries.' She rebuked Tordjman for requesting access to evidence in the Criminal Case: such evidence was confidential and entirely separate from the Civil Case. Bongrand ordered the next civil court hearing take place on March 25.

On Friday **February 28** the Bologna Court of Appeal refused to deliver up Lino Frongia to French Judicial Authorities. The Court did not believe the evidence supplied by Buresi portended Frongia's likely conviction, or approve of her 'unqualified or imprecise sources' (a reference to The Corbeau's anonymous letter). Nor did Italian magistrates feel that any of the events supposedly justifying Frongia's removal had anything to do with France.

The Court went further – explaining its position as regards the nine points Buresi had outlined to justify Frongia's extradition:

- 1) a declaration by Jean-Charles Méthiaz about Giuliano Ruffini commissioning Lino Frongia to paint a '19th century-style' portrait of his son Mathieu
- 2) a newspaper article in which Vittorio Sgarbi alleged Ruffini's Correggio, exhibited in Parma in 2008, was a fake – possibly by Frongia
- 3) a statement by Jules-François Ferrillon that his fictional fake-trafficker 'Giordano' (i.e. Ruffini) had suggested Frongia was his faker by typing his first name on a computer
- 4) an exchange between Frongia and Ruffini in 2015, about an *Ecce Homo* sold at auction in London in 2006, involving the phrase 'it's the same but ours is a bit bigger'
- 5) the discovery at Ruffini's home of an export certificate issued by the Italian Culture Ministry for Frongia's *El Greco*
- 6) declarations by Lionello Puppi & Marco Nebuloni confirming Frongia as the owner of this *El Greco*
- 7) stylistic similarities between this *El Greco* and other works sold by Ruffini
- 8) large sums of money exchanged between the Ruffinis and Frongia
- 9) Frongia's €1.1m investment in metal-trading company Silgocom

The nine points appeared to represent the sum total of Buresi's four-year criminal investigation. In a stinging rebuke to the French Examining Magistrate, the Court declared only Point 4 worthy of attention – but not much: the difference in dimensions between Ruffini's *Ecce Homo* (20.2 x 29cm) and the one under discussion (70 x 90cm) were so considerable that he and Frongia could not possibly have been talking about the same painting.

The Court was particularly scathing about Buresi's Point 7, given that Treviso Appeal Court had ruled that Frongia's *El Greco* was authentic.

Frongia was equally scathing about the way he had been treated – declaring his arrest warrant 'totally abusive, given that I have always made myself available to be heard by French investigators – albeit on Italian territory, as the law allows.'

Frongia was astonished at the turn of the events. 'During the first phase of the investigation I thought things would blow over in a few weeks – just long enough for the senselessness of such hypothetical accusations to be understood. Instead there was a fantasy-driven reconstruction of the facts in line with popular cliché – i.e. that an artist can paint works in the manner of very different artists merely because he so wishes... to the point of fooling the leading experts for each individual artist. To perfectly imitate any one of these artists would take a lifetime!'

MÉTHIAZ MOUTHS OFF MARCH 2020

Five days later, on Wednesday **March 4**, an irate Méthiaz unleashed a 820-word diatribe on Facebook under the title *The Ruffini Affair: Scam of the Century??* Beneath an image of the impounded Bronzino, he wrote:

In January the examining magistrate Aude Buresi, in charge of the investigation into the widespread international trafficking of fake Old Masters, had this St Cosmas, hitherto considered to be by Bronzino, removed from the exhibition of a renowned collection at the Musée Jacquemart-André in Paris. The reason: the painting is thought to have passed through the hands of Giuliano Ruffini – the initial owner of of the Frans Hals, the Parmigianino and Cranach's Venus in a Veil, all recognized as fakes. Other far from minor

works are also concerned and undergoing analysis. So it seems the Magistrate's inquiry is sufficiently well-advanced, and that her conviction about the involvement of Ruffini and his son Mathieu is strong enough for her to consider everything to do with them as suspicious. She has issued international arrest warrants for the father and the son, who live on a sumptuous domain near Parma, and another for their neighbour, the painter Lino Frongia, suspected of being the genius forger responsible for the most important works. A link between Frongia and the Ruffinis was established when the investigation revealed that Mathieu, the son, had transferred the tidy sum of €740,000 from a Swiss bank account. One wonders what this transaction concerned, and what services were being rewarded! If it was for restoration work, the sum appears excessive. Frongia has been cited by the art critic Vittorio Sgarbi, former minister of culture under Berlusconi, as the author of a fake Correggio, with pretty damning evidence provided in support of this theory. The self-same Sgarbi (still someone who matters in Italy) is now giving his pal Lino unconditional support and violently attacking magistrate Buresi. Italians are very chauvinistic, and magistrates here still remember the poor relations with France over extradition demands for the terrorists granted asylum under Mitterrand. The attitude of France's current president towards the country hasn't improved things.

It's against this background of tension – and the difficult relationship between the two country's police forces, with Italians loath to accept a French magistrate being in charge of an affair originating in Italy – that a judge in Bologna has rejected Buresi's extradition demand on the ground that the mandate did not provide enough evidence. Despite the suspicion surrounding him, at least when it comes to the El Greco, Frongia won't be going to France to explain himself. Will the Magistrate be able to hear him in Italy? **It is, of course, an unexpected blow (C'est bien sûr un coup dur, inattendu).**

But things aren't over yet: by the end of the week, a judge in Milan is to decide whether or not to send Giuliano Ruffini and his son Mathieu to France. Giuliano is French, having resided successively in France, Italy, then supposedly Belgium before ending up in Malta while actually living in Italy. You get people like that... Matters here are far more serious than for Frongia, and the evidence stronger. It's clear that Ruffini is doing all he can to avoid facing the Magistrate, claiming he is innocent of everything and declaring through his lawyers that he is keen to be heard by the authorities and fully co-operate. He has the opportunity, and he shirks it! He's also suing his ex-buddy Ferrillon for defamation. Ferrillon's book *Faussaire* (pretty awful except for the bits that lift the lid on the activities of a forger directly inspired by Ruffini) cited the incriminated works long before the investigation was launched. It's a bit schizophrenic to attack a guy for lying while refusing to attend a summons anyone sure of his case would rush to attend! But okay – everyone has the right to be presumed innocent. Knowing the methods and redoubtable efficacy of Madame Buresi (as shown in the *Fillon Affair*), she won't be hunting for scalps unless she's well-armed. She doesn't need obstacles put in her way. Hopefully the Milan judges will allow this palpitating investigation (which some journalists are calling the *Crime of the Century*) to run its course. Finally, if you like art and detective stories – a book by my friend Vincent Noce, an internationally renowned investigator in the field of art, will be out in April, containing a detailed, documented and verified account of his six-year investigation! [publication of the book by the friendly Noce would be delayed]

In reply to Parisian artist Fanni Chambas, who thanked him for ‘revealing what the artworld is all about,’ Méthiaz unleashed another 400-word tirade:

The prejudice in this affair is almost 300 million euros! Apart from the painters I cited above, there are works by Gentileschi, Pontormo, Velazquez, Greco, Coorte, Barrochi, Salviati, Corregio, Van Kessel, Breughel and Grimmer, and drawings by Schongauer, Hoffman, Khnopff.... For over 30 years the market has been inundated with paintings from Ruffini with no history and obscure provenance. For some, notably the Venus, he claims the provenance is a mysterious Borie Collection of which there is no trace, something that seems utterly improbable given the personality of André Borie! Rien, niente, nada! As the head of Old Masters at a prestigious auction house told me: ‘If we know a painting has a Ruffini provenance, we won’t even look at it!’ He even opined that the man was the devil. The Prince of Liechtenstein, who owns the Cranach, has noisily demanded its return, even releasing the results of his own analysis. But now he’s keeping mum. As for Frongia, he’s renowned as a stupefying copyist of Old Masters. Some dealers are reluctant to admit they’ve been taken for a ride due to negligence; others are scared of having to reimburse huge sums, like the London dealer Mark Weiss and his associate, who were ordered to reimburse Sotheby’s 10,000,000 dollars for the Frans Hals! Weiss also bought Gentileschi’s David & Goliath from Ruffini, another suspected fake. When he sold it, Weiss bought himself a yacht! He doesn’t seem to envisage this painting could also be a fake, preferring to stay in the dark. Everyone’s keeping a low profile. Buresi’s investigation is disturbing – they’re all looking after number one rather than thinking collectively. Traditional expertise is under challenge, now science is needed to back up the eye. Mountains of dosh, reputations in tatters, a tidal wave rocking the market to its foundations.... As a leading dealer friend put it to me: ‘the artworld is secretive, and must remain so.’

In announcing that ‘by the end of the week, a judge in Milan is to decide whether or not to send Ruffini to France’ Méthiaz was behind the times. The Milan Appeal Court had ruled on the validity of Ruffini’s European Arrest Warrant that very afternoon – finding it justified (not least because Ruffini, unlike Frongia, was a French citizen), but delaying extradition until Ruffini’s run-in with Italian tax authorities had been resolved.

Méthiaz was back on Facebook on Friday **March 6**. ‘Against all expectations, and defying the opinion of the public prosecutor, a Milan judge has refused Ruffini’s extradition to France!’ he frothed at 8:28pm, beneath the headline *Slapped In The Face – The Ruffini Affair Continued!*

French judicial authorities, began Méthiaz, wanted to hear Ruffini reply to accusations of forgery, money-laundering, etc. with, I suppose, good reasons behind their demand. But Ruffini’s lawyer pointed out that Ruffini is under investigation from Italian tax authorities, i.e. probably involved in tax evasion and liable for a huge fine. Until that matter’s been resolved, he cannot be tried for something else in another country. Which could take years.

What a joke: one acknowledged offence being used to avoid answering other supposed offences! Instead of addressing the tenor of the arrest warrant, the lawyer hit on this means to temporarily get his client off the hook. He may still be interrogated by Italian police and, perhaps, the French Magistrate – but the long-awaited trial in France, to bring

this affair to a close, will not be happening anytime soon. Ruffini has won a ‘victory’ but, far from exonerating him, it merely reinforces the idea that he’s a shady character who cannot be as innocent as he claims, otherwise he wouldn’t be seeking to avoid a confrontation with Buresi by every possible means.

Héloïse Danjou commented that she had thought the affair over and done with. Méthiaz snorted ‘No way!’ before continuing (in a passage that has since been removed):

Al Capone (relatively speaking – I cite him as an example) was done for tax evasion. And I doubt that Ruffini’s the only guy facing problems with the taxman. I doubt the €740,000 transferred from Mathieu Ruffini’s Swiss bank account to the painter Frongia has escaped the vigilance of the Guardia di Finanza! Better to face a lion with your bare hands than an officer of the Guardia di Finanza! Italians are less scared of coronavirus.

BIASED AND BELEAGUERED MARCH-OCTOBER 2020

The **March 19/25** issue of *Paris Match* devoted a lengthy, 2,500-word article to *Giuliano Ruffini – The Virtuoso*. Journalist François de Labarre reported that Aude Buresi was ‘struggling to wind up her investigation’ and termed the Milan Court’s decision not to extradite Ruffini a ‘slap in the face’ for her – curiously resorting to the same term (*camouflet*, in French) as Jean-Charles Méthiaz. Labarre also echoed Méthiaz’s ‘devil’ jibe in wondering if Ruffini were an ‘Angel or Demon’ – either responsible for ‘the finest collection of fakes in the history of art’ or the victim of ‘an unprecedented legal blunder.’

Ahead of the Civil Case hearing, slated for March 25, Ruffini’s lawyer Philippe Scarzella drafted his *Summary Conclusions* – calling for Méthiaz and Tordjman to pay Ruffini the €3.2m they had fraudulently obtained for the Cranach, plus costs and €50,000 in compensation. Coronavirus delayed the hearing until July 16 – when 18 November 2020 was set as the date for the next Ruffini v. Méthiaz showdown.

On Thursday **July 2** Ruffini’s criminal lawyer Paul Le Fèvre (right) addressed a blistering *Note à l’attention du Ministère Public* to France’s Public Prosecutor, detailing shortcomings in Buresi’s handling of the Ruffini case – ‘characterized by dysfunction and anomalies’ that raised ‘questions about the impartiality with which the case has been treated from the outset.’ Le Fèvre’s allegations majored on five areas:



* The ‘**boundless and inexplicable credit**’ given to an anonymous denunciation without any attempt being made to identify its author and his or her motives – and ignoring the ‘disturbing timescale’ between its receipt less than a month after Ruffini had launched civil proceedings. Although clearly an ‘act of vengeance,’ the denunciation had been ‘the cornerstone of the accusations against Ruffini from the outset.’

* **Bias:** Buresi’s investigation lacked objectivity and impartiality, exemplified by her request to Monaco authorities for information on a painting (Correggio’s *Head of Christ*) offered for sale by a local gallery with a provenance that Buresi cited as ‘André Borie (i.e. the usual provenance fraudulently used by M. Ruffini)’ – thereby treating Ruffini not as a

suspect but as someone whose guilt was already established. ‘Who can believe in an impartial justice, respectful of the right to be presumed innocent, when reading this peremptory assertion?’ wondered Le Fèvre. It was, he exploded, ‘a display of opinion all the more shocking in that it dates from early in the investigation, a whole year before the Examining Magistrate first contacted Ruffini.’

* Buresi’s **conduct of the investigation had been disavowed by four Italian courts: Reggio Emilia** (February 2016) when annulling the seizure of paintings from Ruffini’s home because ‘the only thing suggesting they are fakes’ was a ‘confidential source’ [i.e. an anonymous letter] ‘which, as such, cannot possibly be taken into consideration’; **Treviso** (May 2016) when annulling the seizure of Frongia’s El Greco, due to ‘lack of evidence’ and the ‘existence of expert analysis confirming its authenticity’; **Milan** (Summer 2019) when declaring Ruffini’s *European Arrest Warrant* invalid due to lack of evidence; and **Bologna** (February 2020), when ruling that the accusations against Frongia did not come under French jurisdiction. Furthermore, Monaco authorities (October 2016) had spurned Buresi’s demand that the Ruffinis’ bank accounts be blocked as unjustified; and it was ‘astonishing’ that Buresi should have ignored the Prince of Lichtenstein’s insistence that his painting was an authentic Cranach.

* **Ruffini had been treated like a fugitive from justice** by the issue of a *European Arrest Warrant* – ignoring his stated readiness to be heard in Italy (as was ‘ordinarily the case in transnational legal cases’), and even though Italian authorities had ‘never had any problem in contacting him, and considered there was no risk of his absconding.’ (Ruffini feared he would either be detained by Buresi for an unspecified period, as French law permits, or placed under *contrôle judiciaire* and forbidden from leaving France.)

* The **failure to investigate Jean-Charles Méthiaz & Michael Tordjman** who had sold Cranach’s *Venus with a Veil* – the supposedly ‘fake’ painting at the heart of the case – for €3.2m without the knowledge of its owner Giuliano Ruffini. ‘Why wasn’t impounding this sum one of the first acts undertaken by the Examining Magistrate?’ asked Le Fèvre. ‘If the Cranach were indeed a fake, Tordjman and Méthiaz were accomplices to the criminal activity of which Ruffini stands accused. If it were authentic, they were swindlers. Why have they not been asked to explain themselves?’

When appraised of Le Fèvre’s remarks, Méthiaz retorted that he was ‘neither an accomplice nor a swindler’ (Michael Tordjman, according to his lawyer, ‘does not reply to interviews’).

Ruffini calls it ‘incredible and scandalous that Méthiaz asserts on Facebook that all my pictures for the last thirty years have been fakes – which means he himself sold fakes worth around €7m! Yet he continues to publish photos of himself sunning himself in his swimming-pool in Apulia, untroubled by the Law. No one knows where his money is. None of his accounts have been blocked. He has never been investigated. Just who the hell is protecting him?’

Paul Le Fèvre is not the only Paris lawyer to have been incensed by Buresi’s approach. In 2019 barrister Vincent Nioré railed against the ‘disgusting’ (*dégueulasse*) search of the offices of a female colleague ordered by Buresi, saying he was ‘sick of the filthy methods

of examining magistrates.’ The touchy Buresi felt personally insulted and lodged a complaint. As a result, Noiré faced a disciplinary hearing on 25 June 2020 (postponed from March due to coronavirus) chaired by Pierre-Olivier Sur – who, coincidentally, had replaced the late Oliver Schnerb as Michael Tordjman’s defence lawyer in 2017. Noiré was exonerated.

*

Ruffini’s case against Ferrillon for libel, initiated in August 2018, shuddered to a halt on **14 October 2020** – when Ferrillon wrote a grovelling letter to Ruffini regretting that ‘my words may have been felt to impugn your honour and reputation’ and claiming ‘I did not mean to imply you were responsible for selling fakes’ – but had merely been ‘exploiting the ambiguity between fiction and reality.’

The real culprit, Ferrillon courageously insinuated, was a pushy journalist ‘seeking to establish a link between my fictional character and yourself.’

SUR ET CERTAIN NOVEMBER 2020

After dealing with Noiré, Pierre-Olivier Sur (*right*) presented his *Conclusions* on Michael Tordjman’s behalf in the Civil Case at a hearing in Paris on **18 November 2020**. There was no longer any talk of the Cranach Venus having a possible Nazi past, and Sur reduced the late Schnerb’s demand that Giuliano Ruffini stump up €50,000 damages to a symbolic one euro.



But Sur seemed to copy-paste other elements of Schnerb’s original *Conclusions* unthinkingly into his own – continuing to ascribe Giuliano Ruffini a domicile in Brussels (where he had not lived since 2015) and giving Méthiaz’s address as the HPR children’s clinic in Bullion (where bailiffs had not surprisingly found no trace of a Mr Méthiaz in March 2014). Sur also noted that Méthiaz’s company The Art Factory was based in America and had an office in London – an unusually cosmopolitan one-man show – and described his client Michael Tordjman as an ‘enlightened connoisseur with a passion for art’ and an ‘exceptional eye’ – in contrast to Giuliano Ruffini, whom *Paris Match* had dubbed a ‘virtuoso who fools the experts’ and ‘an excellent illusionist, forger or not.’

Sur noted that Ruffini’s civil lawyer Philippe Scarzella had been found guilty of slandering Tordjman on 8 July 2020. Scarzella, wrote Sur, had ‘insulted’ Tordjman by claiming he had ‘pretended to be the owner of the painting [i.e. the Cranach] and exported it illegally from France.’ As Tordjman’s ‘ownership’ of the Cranach was at the heart of the Civil Case, it was odd for Sur to cite this section of the Scarzella’s defamatory interview with *Télérama* rather than his misguided assertion that he was ‘200% certain’ Tordjman was The Corbeau.

Sur maintained that Tordjman’s Skyline Capital Corporation had acquired the picture from The Art Factory for €700,000 on 21 March 2013, then sold it to Bernheimer the very same day – having obtained expert opinions that it was actually by Cranach, not just

attributed to him. ‘Michael Tordjman,’ as Sur put it prettily and, given the Cranach’s subsequent reputation, wholly inappropriately, ‘bought a doubt and sold a certainty.’ Sur made light of the *conte de fée* about the Cranach being in a Belgian family ‘for over 150 years’ – whose paternity he attributed to Méthiaz, not Tordjman – and joked that the only person likely to be bothered by such a fairy-tale was the Prince of Lichtenstein.

Sur gleefully pointed out that Michael Tordjman had never been questioned by the examining magistrate [Aude Buresi], and expressed surprise that Ruffini had not initiated criminal (as opposed to civil) proceedings. He challenged the January decision of Pre-Trial Judge Edmée Bongrand by again calling for the Civil Case to be postponed pending the conclusion of the Criminal Case. In contradiction of Judge Bongrand’s ruling, Sur maintained that the Cranach’s authenticity, and therefore its price, were indeed relevant to the Civil Case.

At the heart of the submissions made by both Sur and by Méthiaz’s lawyer, Emmanuel Marsigny, was an insistence that The Art Factory’s €510,000 invoice for the Cranach, dated 16 January 2013, was *bona fide* rather than bogus. Marsigny also maintained his unsubstantiated claim that Ruffini had handed over the Cranach to Méthiaz in Brussels. To circumnavigate the awkward fact that no trace of a Ruffini payment of €510,000 had ever surfaced, Marsigny claimed that the El Greco returned to Ruffini by Méthiaz on 28 November 2013 had been accepted as compensation.

Marsigny also claimed that ‘elements had come to light since March 2016’ [when the Cranach was impounded] that meant the Cranach was ‘now considered a modern fake.’ It was ‘quasi-certain’ Ruffini knew this when he commissioned Méthiaz to sell the painting – only launching civil proceedings when he saw that this ‘fake’ had fooled the artworld to the tune of €3.2m. Marsigny accused Ruffini of being ‘implicated in the large-scale trafficking of fake paintings.’

A GOOD YARN NOVEMBER 2020

Marsigny also complained of the preventive seizure of ‘a work by Mary Cassatt belonging to the Art Factory, *Little Girl with Ball of Yarn*, from the premises of Cadogan Tate’ (in the Paris suburb of St-Ouen). The painting was waiting to be shipped to the United States for auction. Its seizure had caused the Art Factory ‘serious economic prejudice.’

Perhaps Marsigny was unaware of the Cassatt’s full story. On 4 April 2014, when granting Ruffini a preventive seizure against Michael Tordjman, *Juge de l’Exécution* (Enforcement Judge) Myriam Zylberman had allowed the painting – stored in Tordjman’s name at the Cadogan Tate warehouse in the Paris suburbs – to be placed under sequester. At 13:46 on April 7 Méthiaz’s associate Axel Rondouin e-mailed Cadogan Tate asking them to dispatch the painting to Elvire de Maintenant at Christie’s *post-haste*. At 16:04 Cadogan Tate’s Jerome Aita e-mailed back informing him the *Little Girl* had been impounded at 11 o’clock that morning.



Méthiaz was insistent that the picture belonged to The Art Factory and demanded its return.

When Judge Zylberman rejected his claim he took the matter to the Paris Appeal Court which, on 2 July 2015, declared that The Art Factory had provided no evidence that it had paid for the work. The Court also noted that the painting had been exported from Italy without a permit.

Rondouin – purportedly on behalf of The Art Factory – had acquired the work from Didier Buhler de Montescourt, an art broker from Eguilles (near Aix-en-Provence), on 17 October 2012. The price was given as €115,000, with €45,000 due to Buhler and €70,000 to Leonardo del Re in Rome.

The painting had been shown in 2006 in the itinerant *Venus Venus* exhibition co-organized by Leonardo's mother, American dealer Marisa del Re, whose gallery label was stuck on the back. On 23 May 1979 it had featured (as Lot 114) in Christie's sale of 19th & 20th Century American Art in New York – and had since, claimed Buhler de Montescourt, belonged to the Sorza Collection and to Mario Battistini, in Rome; to a private collection in Chicago; then to another private collection in Rome.

The picture was doubtless a fake – as Ruffini's lawyer Philippe Scarzella discovered when trying to establish its value. On 10 June 2014 Thomas Morin-Williams, a Paris-based auction expert in 19th and 20th century paintings, informed him that he and his team had 'strong doubts as to its authenticity.'

On 4 December 2014 Elizabeth Oustinoff, Director of Adelson Galleries in New York, declared that the painting 'does not suggest characteristics of the known work of Mary Cassatt.' Gallery founder Warren Adelson had compiled Cassatt's *catalogue raisonné*.

Scarzella finds it 'amazing' that Examining Magistrate Aude Buresi has shown no interest in the Civil Case in general – or in the Mary Cassatt affair in particular. 'She has a potential fake linked to Méthiaz on her doorstep, with an Italian provenance to boot – and what does Buresi do about it? Nothing!'

BLAST FROM THE PAST FEBRUARY 2021

Evidence in the case took a new twist on 20 February 2021. In a sworn affidavit citing a telephone conversation that took place in 2014, Raphaël Wertheimer – a onetime mutual friend of both Méthiaz and Ruffini – wrote as follows:

I used to frequent Giulano Ruffini, his son Mathieu and Jean-Charles Méthiaz. I witnessed numerous discussions during which they evoked transactions concerning works from M. Ruffini's collection. After their dispute over the sale of the 'Cranach' I can attest that M. Méthiaz declared: 'It's true I wasn't straight with him... I really screwed that Iti!' (Je l'ai bien baisé, ce Rital!). I was struck by the violent nature of his words, especially as M. Méthiaz had no money when I first knew him, and owes his fortune solely to M. Ruffini, who accorded him his total confidence.

NOT SO SURE OR CERTAIN FEBRUARY 2021

Vincent Noce's long-awaited book on *L'Affaire Ruffini*, originally slated for publication in April 2020, finally appeared in February 2021. Hopes it would contain blockbuster last-minute revelations were disappointed ('*le lecteur reste sur sa faim*' as *Le Figaro* confraternally put it): Noce struggled as much as Aude Buresi to nail down substantive accusations with regard to Giuliano Ruffini and Lino Frongia, though it seemed clear enough where his sympathies lay.

The book contains no mention of *Le Corbeau* – merely stating *en passant* that 'the OCBC were put on the trail by an anonymous letter.' Noce fails to identify Jean-Charles Méthiaz as the 'former business contact of Giuliano Ruffini' who, when questioned by the OCBC in March 2015, 'denounced as fakes a score of paintings and drawings offered for sale' by Ruffini (sales in some of which this unnamed contact was complicit). Instead of investigating Ruffini's claim that Méthiaz's supposed purchase of the Cranach was based on a forged signature, Noce blithely reports that this accusation – along with Ruffini's allegation of breach of contract – has been 'categorically denied' by Méthiaz and Tordjman. Noce goes further, complaisantly quoting the pair's opinion that 'in reality, Ruffini couldn't bear to see the work's value soaring after he'd got rid of it.'

While full of detailed research about individual paintings, Noce's text contains a number of errors. Some are relatively innocuous: the Correggio *Head of Christ* was shown by Maison d'Art in Monaco in 2009, not 2014 as Noce states; when talking about the Hals portrait, Noce confuses Claus Grimm with Richard Green (Grimm being pronounced *Greem* by a French tongue).

Noce quotes 'local magazine *Val di Noto*' as likening Noto Cathedral to a 'little Sixtine Chapel' after Lino Frongia had painted its vaults. The comparison is laughable (see image p.51), but serves to imply that Frongia has a *michelangelesque* gift for imitating Old Masters. (Noto's 'local magazine,' by the way, is an on-line blog produced by Biagio Iacono, a retired Literature Professor.)

Noce's account of the *Guardia di Finanza's* raid on Ruffini's farmhouse is woefully ill-informed. He says the *Guardia* were 'too busy seizing financial paperwork and computers for the presence of a small oven in a laundry room to strike them as incongruous.' As we have seen (p.55), the *Guardia* gleefully reported the oven's discovery in block capitals.

Noce's genealogy is suspect, too. With respect to the Duke de Baena, he cites his 'great-niece' Cristina Ruiz de Arana as refuting the Duke's ownership of the Hals portrait. Cristina is, in fact, a very distant relative of the much-travelled Duke (he and her grandfather were cousins), and was still in her teens when the Duke snuffed it in 1985. She is hardly qualified to pontificate about his art holdings.

Noce wrongly asserts that Méthiaz paid Ruffini \$2.4m for the Gentileschi. As we have seen (p.28), the true amount was €1.12m (€1.4m minus Méthiaz's 20% commission), paid in its dollar equivalent on 2 May 2012. Noce's head for figures also spins when he evokes the supposed sale of the Gentileschi to André Borie in 1937 for 4,250 francs – a sum Noce

describes as equivalent of €260,000 today, ‘which hardly seems logical for an anonymous painting at a time when the art world was severely depressed.’ No indeed, but Noce appears to have forgotten that the French Franc was re-valued in 1960, with 1 *nouveau franc* worth 100 *anciens francs*. So he is about €257,000 wide of the mark. **4,250 francs** in 1937 is worth **2,465 euros** today (see http://leparticulier.lefigaro.fr/jcms/c_57169/valeur-en-euros-des-francs-erosion-monetaire).

There is something of a Wild West, *Goodies versus Baddies* scenario about Noce’s cast of characters. Konrad Bernheimer (who bought and sold Ruffini’s Cranach) ‘does not have a very assured eye, whatever he thinks.’ The Louvre’s Blaise Ducos (who tried to buy Ruffini’s Hals) is ‘soft-spoken and neat as a pin, with an ironic little smile playing on his lips... prone to coming out with highly subjective opinions based on a penchant for intellectual speculation.’

Presumed forger Lino Frongia ‘enjoys life in the fast lane’ – arriving from Rome ‘in one of his sports cars’ to visit his mother in his native village, ‘where he has turned his house into a palace’ after a building campaign ‘that must have lasted seven or eight years.’

Noce gives short shrift to anyone speaking positively about works connected to Ruffini. Of Mina Gregori, *doyenne* of Italian art historians, Noce declares peremptorily that ‘for some years her signature has not enjoyed the same authority as in the past.’ Francesco Solinas, who co-curated the Gentileschi show in Paris, is ‘not, strictly speaking, an art historian or even a specialist of the period’ and, as a curator, ‘rather indulgent, accepting some very weak paintings.’

Old Master expert Mario di Giampaolo was a ‘very nice’ man – i.e. too nice for the artworld, as he ‘could never refuse anything to anyone.’ Louvre curator Sylvie Béguin had an ‘almost maternal relationship’ with Di Giampaolo – and, ‘like him, was sensitive to male charm.’ Giuliano Ruffini used to ‘offer her chocolates and sometimes small paintings... you couldn’t say he bought her, but she found him attractive.’

Ruffini and Giammarco Cappuzzo ‘share an aversion to Socialists and Communists, and a peculiar sense of humour when it comes to women and minorities.’ American museums that have shown works once owned by Ruffini have never been ‘renowned for their vigilance when it comes to provenance.’

Art historian David Ekserdjian – who disputed the Gentileschi attribution of Ruffini’s *St Jerome* – is, on the other hand, ‘particularly respected.’ London dealer Johnny Van Haeften – who bought an ex-Ruffini still life as an Adriaen Coorte, then decided it wasn’t – ‘earns the plaudits of his colleagues for his seriousness and honesty.’ Orion founder ‘Jamie’ Martin (‘as everybody calls him’) has ‘an extremely organized mind’ and is fêted as the ‘Rock Star of Art Science.’

The three amigos are portrayed as if butter wouldn’t melt in their mouths. Axel Rondouin is ‘elegant and somewhat discreet.’ Michael Tordjman is ‘elegant, charming, a little shy’ (and ‘seems sincerely astonished’ by all the fuss about the Cranach). Jean-Charles Méthiaz is ‘a tall, affable fellow’ who ‘likes fishing and making his own olive oil.’

The ‘tenacious’ Aude Buresi, meanwhile, is likened to a ‘steamroller.’

After flattening careers in the corridors of power, the steamroller seems to have struggled with the rollercoaster terrain of Reggio Emilia, and conked out before reaching the olive groves of Apulia... perhaps one reason why Jean-Charles Méthiaz declares himself ‘perfectly serene and confident as to the outcome of this affair.’



2020 was a busy year for the beleaguered Buresi. On June 16 she was tasked with conducting a judicial inquiry into fiscal aspects of the Kerviel Affair (which had cost French bank *Société Générale* €5 billion in 2008). In early September she was among the lawyers and magistrates affected by a giant computer hack at the Tribunal de Paris. In early October she oversaw a four-day grilling of Nicolas Sarkozy about the Libyan funding of his 2007 presidential campaign. As 2020 segued into **2021**, Giuliano Ruffini was probably the least of her concerns.

Was he ever anything else?

Buresi’s fruitless investigation seems to have run on auto-pilot, beholden to the directives of Le Corbeau’s poison-pen letter.

‘In or out, there is never a doubt just who’s pulling the strings’ as Sandie Shaw famously put it when winning the 1967 Eurovision Song Contest with *Puppet On A String*.

‘I’m all tied up to you. Where’s it leading me to?’

Nothing more to say.

No more ace to play.

The Winner Takes It All.



THE JUDGES WILL DECIDE ... THE LIKES OF ME ABIDE