Museum Director Detained at Airport With Lost Icon Worth $1M
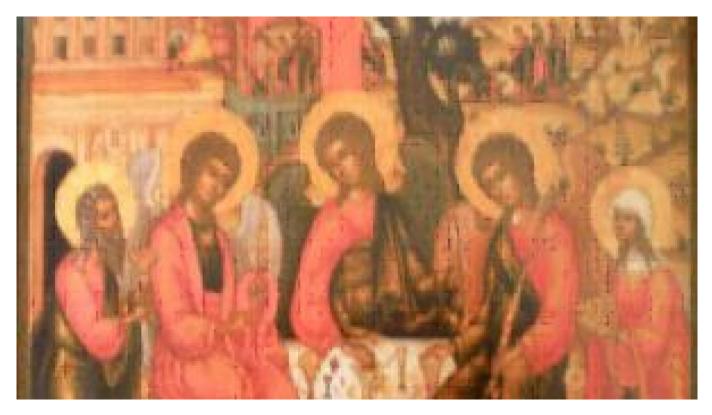
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An image of the 1690 icon by Kirill Ulanov that a museum director attempted to smuggle into Russia.

The director of a Moscow museum was detained at Domodedovo airport with a 17th-century icon worth $1 million, police said Thursday.

But there was confusion over whether the museum director had been authorized to bring the icon into Russia.

Police said in a statement that they learned that the 62-year-old museum head would be traveling from Dusseldorf, Germany, to Russia carrying the "Old Testament Holy Trinity" icon painted in 1690 by Kirill Ulanov. The man was detained upon his arrival to Domodedovo and the painting was seized.

Experts estimate the value of the icon on the illegal art market at $1 million, according to the police statement. The statement said the museum director faces smuggling charges and has faced such charges in the past.

The museum director, who RIA–Novosti identified as Nikolai Zadorozhny of the Russian Icon Museum, told the news agency that he had been authorized to purchase the icon by the culture department of the Vologda region, where the painting had been stolen almost two decades ago.

Zadorozhny claimed he had with him upon arrival to Domodedovo a raft of legal documents, including a sale contract, a certificate of transfer and acceptance, and a tax declaration that he filled out at the airport. He said he had signed a contract with the Vologda region culture department to allow his museum to exhibit the icon for six months.

The Ulanov icon was stolen in 1994 from a local history museum in the Vologda region town of Ustyuzhina. It depicts the appearance of God in the form of three angels to Abraham, with the figures of Abraham and Sarah on either side of them, serving a meal.

In March, the icon was discovered at an auction in Germany, where the owner was demanding compensation for it, threatening otherwise to put it up for sale, according to a statement on the website of the Vytegorsk municipal district in Vologda.

RIA–Novosti identified the former owner as Mikhail Abramov, who Zadorozhny said sold him the icon for 25,000 euros, a small fraction of its estimated value, under the condition that it return to the Vologda museum.