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Wealthy Russians Return $36M in Artwork From Europe via Uzbek Firm – Systema

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A logistics company from Uzbekistan helped ship $36.6 million worth of artwork from Europe to Russia, bypassing EU sanctions on luxury goods, according to a new report by the investigative outlet Systema.

The company, Bek Broker, which mainly transported goods from Russia to Uzbekistan before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, has reportedly moved $41.6 million in cargo since February 2022. Most of this cargo consisted of paintings, sculptures and other artwork.

According to Systema, an affiliate of the U.S.-funded news organization RFE/RL, 44 pieces of art valued at $4.6 million, including works by Salvador Dali, Pierre-Auguste Renoir and Henri Matisse, were removed from a yacht in Amsterdam and shipped to Tashkent, Uzbekistan in early 2023.

Three days later, these works were delivered to the Moscow home of billionaire Alexei Repik, whose construction firm holds contracts in the Russian-occupied Ukrainian city of Mariupol. Repik has since been sanctioned by the U.K., Australia and Canada.

His wife, Polina Repik, told Systema that the artworks had been "returned to Russia" and transferred to an unspecified museum. The Dutch carrier involved in moving the art objects from Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam said it did not know about the cargo's final destination.

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Another prominent Russian sanctioned by the West, weapons manufacturer and art collector Mkrtich Okroyan, reportedly used Bek Broker to return his art to Russia via Uzbekistan. After a February 2023 investigation by allies of the late Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny revealed Okroyan's properties in the U.K., his wife moved $286,000 worth of artwork from the country to Moscow through Tashkent.

Okroyan, who leads the Soyuz plant that produces engines for Russian cruise missiles, was later sanctioned by the U.S., EU and British governments.

While EU sanctions prohibit the export of luxury goods valued over 300 euros to Russia, there are exemptions for artwork on loan as part of cultural cooperation agreements.

According to British lawyer and co-founder of the non-profit State Capture, Alex Prezanti, any individual or entity in the United Kingdom or the European Union involved in the shipment of artwork to Russia could be violating sanctions on luxury goods.

"The criminal liability of those involved depends largely on what they knew or should have known about the ultimate owner and destination of the works of art," Prezanti was quoted as saying by Systema.

Liability also applies to cases where an individual or entity was involved in the transfer of artwork to a third country, such as Uzbekistan, if the sender knows that the final destination is Russia, the lawyer added.

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