

Police uncover eBay art scam

A man selling Picasso and Chagall paintings as originals is arrested.

BY CASEY CORA
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TAMPA — Posing as a customer, Tampa police Detective Bob Baxter placed a bid for paintings by Pablo Picasso and Marc Chagall on eBay. He won.

More than \$3,000 later, Baxter supposedly owned original works by two of history's most famous painters and a certificate verifying they were the real deal.

Now the seller of those two paintings faces three felony charges after police said he shipped the detective two phony pieces of fine art.

Ethem Ulge, 44, of Wesley Chapel made about 40 transactions in 2007, sending packages from a pack mail business on Bruce B. Downs Boulevard to locations across the globe, police



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A Wesley Chapel man is accused of selling artwork such as this fake on eBay last year using a pack mail business in Tampa.

said. From those, Ulge netted about \$200,000, police said.

"His job, as we could determine, is selling art work on eBay," Baxter said.



Police say Ethem Ulge, 44, netted about \$200,000 in bogus art sales in 2007.

Working on a tip from police in New Jersey, where police are investigating the native of Turkey for similar art fraud complaints, police set up the sting in November. Here's how it worked:

Ulge, under the eBay username "pakmailseller24," offered the paintings on eBay — a Chagall from the 1930s supposedly obtained by a Canadian surgeon and a knockoff Picasso dated in the 1960s. He wrote
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Police uncover scam in sale of art on eBay

a cleverly crafted description of the paintings authenticity, Baxter said.

Baxter sent \$3,500 to a holding account; Ulge sent the two paintings, which arrived with smudges of wet paint and the smell of oil. Tape held the artwork to their matting.

Also included was a certificate of authenticity by an appraiser. Police said that person didn't exist.

After a local appraiser confirmed everything was fake, investigators secured a warrant, and Ulge turned himself in to a

Hillsborough County jail on felony charges, including grand theft in the third degree, organized fraud less than \$20,000 and fraudulent use of personal information.

Police and art experts say purchasing art on the Internet is a "buyer beware" scenario better left to experts with discerning eyes.

"It's like stepping into the ring with a professional boxer and you know nothing," San Francisco-based art appraiser and consultant Alan Bamberger said of online art purchases. "You're

out in one punch."

So what's the amateur purveyor to do?

Do your homework and ensure the authenticity with a reputable appraiser, said Elaine Gustafson, director of exhibitions and collections at the Tampa Museum of Art.

"If you do buy online, that's the caveat," she said. "Take it to somebody who can authenticate it and not just rely on the seller's word."

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