

## *Thieves Hit TEFAF Art Fair in Daylight Heist*

A gang used a sledgehammer to smash open a display case and make off with jewelry at the renowned Dutch art fair, as dealers looked on, aghast.



By Alex Marshall

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On Tuesday morning, Marian Bies-de Wolf was working at TEFAF, the world's pre-eminent fine art and antiquities fairs, when she saw a group of men running through its corridors.

It was a strange sight, she said in a telephone interview, since “nobody runs at TEFAF,” which is held annually in Maastricht, the Netherlands.

Then things got stranger, Ms. Bies-de Wolf said, as the men pulled out a heavy object and “started bashing up” a glass case in the next booth, which belonged to the London jewelry dealer Symbolic & Chase. Ms. Bies-de Wolf could not see if the men took anything, she said; after someone shouted that the thieves had a gun, she ran away.

Several hours after the robbery, it was still unclear what the thieves had stolen. The Dutch police said in a news release that four men had taken jewelry, but gave no further information. Two men from Belgium had been arrested and their potential involvement was being investigated, it added, while a search for other people connected to the theft was ongoing.

Wim Coenen, a spokesman for the Dutch police in Limburg, the region that covers Maastricht, said in a telephone interview that he could not comment further or state whether any jewelry had been recovered.

A spokesman for Symbolic & Chase declined to comment on the incident.

TEFAF, also known as the European Fine Art Fair, is one of the world's longest-running art fairs specializing in fine art and antiquities. The current edition, its 35th, opened on Saturday and runs through Thursday.

This year's event features 242 dealers, among them Symbolic & Chase. According to its Instagram feed, Symbolic & Chase had a multitude of items on display at the fair, including diamond rings, and an intricate, Japanese-inspired gold bracelet.

TEFAF's organizers did not mention the fair had experienced a robbery on social media. In a post on Twitter they said that the fair was "temporarily evacuated due to an incident," and was "still open to visitors and exhibitors."

Yet events seemed more dramatic to witnesses. James Butterwick, a British dealer, said by phone that he was just yards from the robbery when it happened. Mr. Butterwick said he walked out of another booth to see a man trying to smash a glass case.

A Dutch fair visitor picked up a vase of flowers and tried to confront the robbers, Mr. Butterwick added, only for one of the thieves to pull out what appeared to be a gun, which he waved at onlookers. "Things took a bit of a turn for the worse," Mr. Butterwick said.

Mr. Butterwick, whose account was corroborated by video of the robbery posted on social media, said the event lasted about 30 seconds. He did not see what the robbers stole, he added, but they seemed to be "after specific items."

When he entered the fair, Mr. Butterwick said, security personnel at the entrance "took a close look at you," and checked bags, though no one had to walk through metal detectors or was patted down.

He added that he did not see any security guards confront the robbers. TEFAF said in an email statement on Tuesday afternoon that the Dutch police were on site within minutes. "Nobody was injured during the incident," the TEFAF statement added.

This is not the first time TEFAF has been hit by a robbery. In 2008, thieves stole a diamond necklace worth about \$1.8 million from the fair; in 2010, a ring and necklace worth about \$1.3 million were stolen from a booth run by Hancocks, another London jewelry dealer.

Hancocks did not respond to a request for an interview on Tuesday.