

Greek man charged with stealing Dali painting from New York gallery

A Greek man proved inept at the art of thievery by swiping a Salvador Dali painting from a New York City gallery as security cameras rolled and, in a panic, later trying to send it back anonymously, authorities said Tuesday.

Phivos Istavrioglou also left fingerprints that helped detectives track him down — another misstep in a botched fine art caper that even he found foolish, according to an account of a confession contained in court papers.

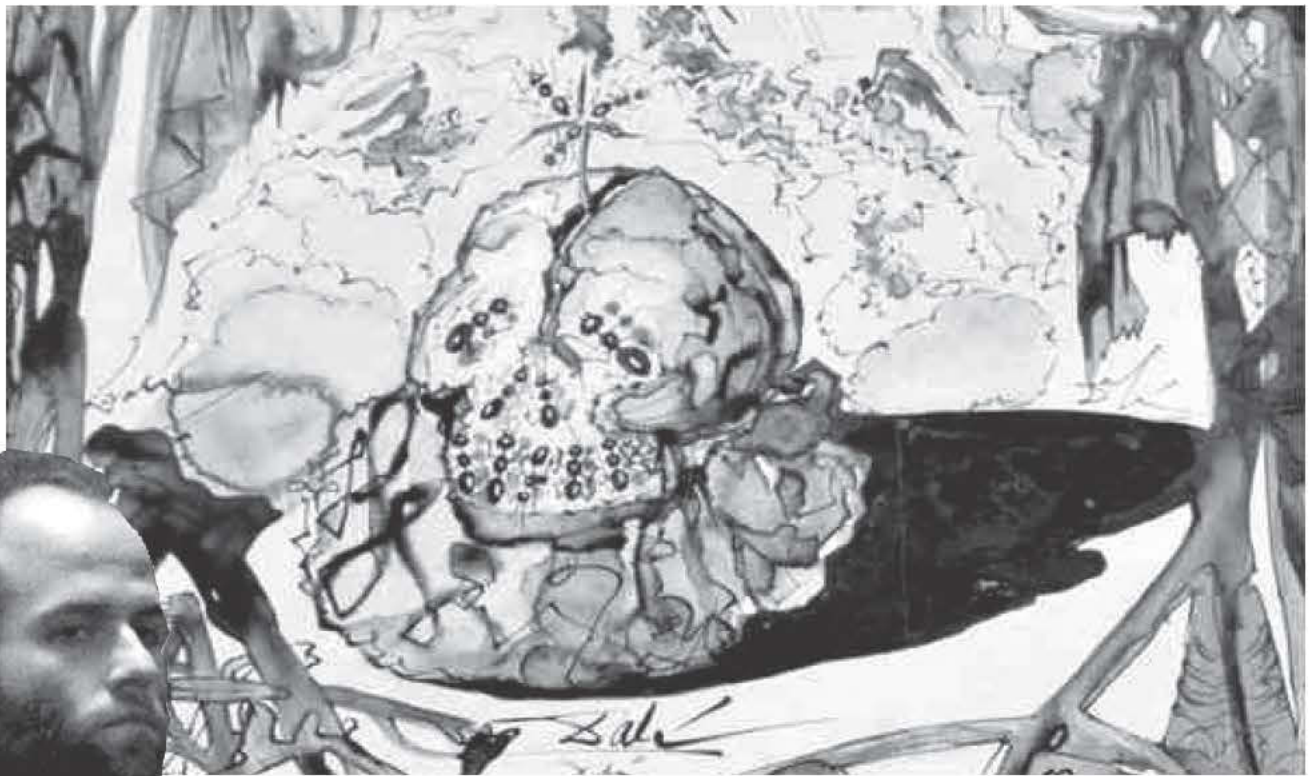
The second Istavrioglou walked out of the Manhattan gallery last summer with the Dali watercolor and onto Fifth Avenue, he “was scared and couldn’t believe what a stupid thing he did,” the papers say.

Istavrioglou, 29, of Athens, pleaded not guilty Tuesday to grand larceny during a brief court appearance in Manhattan at which a judge set bail at \$100,000. His attorney had no immediate comment.

Prosecutors accused Istavrioglou of stealing “Cartel de Don Juan Tenorio” in broad daylight while visiting New York in June. After pulling it off the wall at the Upper East Side gallery, he stashed it in a shopping bag and flew with it back to Athens, authorities said.

“It was almost surreal how this theft was committed — a thief is accused of putting a valuable Salvador Dali drawing into a shopping bag in the middle of the afternoon, in full view of surveillance cameras,” District Attorney Cyrus R. Vance Jr. said.

Shortly after learning authorities had distributed security photos of him that were seen around the world, Istavrioglou took the



\$150,000 work out of its frame. He then rolled it up in a cardboard tube — “in a manner befitting a college dorm poster” — and mailed it back to New York without a return address, prosecutor Jordan Arnold said.

New York Police Department detectives lifted fingerprints

from the shipment that matched one from a juice bottle that they say Istavrioglou shoplifted last year from a Whole Foods market, giving them a name, police Commissioner Raymond Kelly said. An investigator posing as an art gallery owner later tricked Istavrioglou into returning to New York by offering him a possible position as a consultant.

Federal agents intercepted Istavrioglou at John F. Kennedy International Airport on Saturday. While speaking to detectives that afternoon, court papers say, he “indicated he knew the theft would catch up to him and wants to make (the) situation right.”

Four MPs return to PASOK but party still beset by turmoil

Four MPs rejoined PASOK on Wednesday, a few weeks after being ejected from the Socialists’ parliamentary group for opposing the latest austerity package, but their return did not disguise the deepening tension in the party.

It was announced that former ministers Costas Skandalidis and Angela Gerekou, along with Michalis Kassis and Yiannis Koutsoukos would cease to be independent MPs. Their return took the number of PASOK lawmakers back up to 28, which is still lower than the 33 the party had after the national elections in June. It also increased the number of deputies in the tripartite coalition to 168, a comfortable majority in the 300-seat House.

Their return came as PASOK heads toward its party congress at the end of the month. Preparations have led to tension within the party. A group of 75 members, including some MPs, issued a statement expressing concern about the way the congress is being planned. Their intervention is seen as

casting doubts on Evangelos Venizelos’s leadership.

The tense atmosphere in the party was evident when members faithful to former Prime Minister George Papandreou almost came to blows with Venizelos supporters at PASOK’s headquarters in central Athens on Wednesday over complaints that the congress participants had not been announced yet.

The party could also suffer further damage from the parliamentary inquiry into the Lagarde list.

Police experts informed MPs yesterday that files containing the names of some 2,000 Greek depositors had been opened on September 30, 2010, hours after the CD with the list was given to then Finance Minister Giorgos Papaconstantinou and that the person opening them had used 28 keywords to search the data, including “George Papandreou,” “Papakonstantinou” and names of other politicians and businessmen.

The inquiry is likely to be extended until the end of March.



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