

European Painters Worth US\$ 50 Million Stolen During Brazil's Carnival

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A spectacular robbery of art works by Picasso, Matisse, Monet and Dali marred the start of the Rio Carnival on Friday, which saw a slimmer than usual King Momo kick off festivities to feverish samba rhythms.

The assailants caught the museum's guards by surprise, disarmed them and forced them to shut down the building's security cameras. The gunmen also briefly took as hostages several tourists visiting the facility.

No one was injured in the robbery, which took place Friday afternoon at the Chácara do Céu (Heaven's Ranch) museum shortly before it was scheduled to close.

Two tourists from Australia and a couple from New Zealand were among those held by the gunmen, the Globo Online Web site reported. They said the robbers knew exactly what they were taking.

"Dali's picture, for example, is the only one by him in public exhibition in Latin America."

According to authorities, the stolen works - taken from two of the museum's exhibition halls - were Dali's "Two Balconies," Picasso's "The Dance," Monet's "Marine" and Matisse's "Garden of Luxembourg." During the heist, the gunmen also made off with a book of etchings by Picasso titled "Toros" (Bulls).

The robbery occurred at a time when nearby streets were filled by some 10,000 people enjoying the sights and sounds of the first day of the Rio Carnival, police said.

Federal police said they feared the works, the value of which has not been estimated, would be taken out of the country by way of an airport or overland into Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay.

The local media estimated the paintings' worth at around US\$ 50 million. The museum's director, Vera Alencar, told reporters that no robberies had occurred at Chácara do Céu since the 1980s.

For his part, the head of the Culture Ministry's Museum Department, José do Nascimento Jr., said the robbery was not caused by a lack of adequate security, adding that part of the close to 95 million reais (US\$ 44.4 million) earmarked in 2005 for the cultural sector was spent on bolstering security at museums

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