

Thief in headscarf cons jewellers

A jewel thief dressed as a wealthy Muslim woman has stolen rings worth hundreds of thousands of euros from dealers across Europe, police say.

The woman, wearing a headscarf, coat and gold-framed glasses, is suspected of swapping gems for replicas.

In one incident in Paris, the woman allegedly stole a 5.5 carat diamond ring worth 635,000 euros (£574,000).

Detectives say the thief has targeted dealers in Germany, Switzerland and France over a 10-year period.

German police are linking her to thefts from hotels in Germany and Switzerland during that time.

'Magician of crime'

French newspaper Le Figaro has dubbed her one of Europe's "high magicians" of crime.

The Internationaler Juwelier-Warndienst - a crime prevention network for the European jewellery businesses - has put the woman on its list of most wanted suspects.

Martin Winckel, who runs the service, described her as "the best shoplifter today".

"She does several kinds of shoplifting. She distracts the employees or she swaps high-end jewellery with counterfeit jewellery," he told the BBC.

"It is important to get her. The losses to the jewellers are not always insured so it is a real loss for them."

The crime which brought the woman to international attention happened last September when a 210,000 euro (£189,000) ring was stolen from Tiffany jewellers in Frankfurt, Germany.

She had entered the store with a younger woman and asked to see the ring.

When the couple left without buying anything, staff investigated and discovered that the ring had been switched for a fake.

The same woman allegedly visited the Cartier store in Paris in November, but this time with a man.

Staff later realised the pair had allegedly stolen a 5.5 carat diamond ring worth 635,000 euros.

The same woman was allegedly shown on CCTV footage.

One of the leads being followed up by police is that the woman allegedly belongs to a family

of criminals based in Provence, southern France.

Mr Winckel describes her as a "follower of Jean Herrina" referring to France's most notorious jewellery thief, nicknamed the Sultan.

Jean Herrina reportedly stole jewellery worth 15m euros by posing as a Saudi prince but was eventually caught in Paris and committed suicide in prison in 2007.

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