

# TIMES ONLINE

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## Thief in a headscarf runs rings round top jewellers



CCTV footage of the woman police want to question over a series of raids

Adam Sage in Paris

With her headscarf, long black coat and gold-rimmed glasses, she looks like a wealthy Middle Eastern woman with a taste for diamonds.

Jewellers across Europe are discovering that the mysterious middle-aged “Qatari” is, in fact, a cool-headed, quick-fingered thief who can steal valuables worth hundreds of thousands of euros without guards realising that anything is wrong.

A jewellery industry source told *The Times* that the woman had exposed holes in the security of some of Europe’s most prestigious boutiques.

After she stole a €635,000 (£574,000) ring from Cartier, the luxury jeweller, in Paris, police are trying to establish her identity and whereabouts before she strikes again. Internationaler Juwelier Warndienst, a crime prevention network for the German jewellery trade, has placed her on a list of its most wanted suspects.

German police believe the woman in the headscarf, as she has become known, has been stealing rings from top hotels in Germany and Switzerland for at least a decade. It is her recent exploits, however, that have propelled her into the select group of what *Le Figaro* called “highflying magicians” of crime.

On September 8 last year she entered Tiffany’s in Frankfurt, claiming to be from Qatar and travelling in the company of a woman aged about 30, who she said was her daughter.

She looked at the display cases, barked orders at employees and asked to see their most valuable items. She examined a couple of pieces but left without buying anything.

It was only after she had disappeared with her accomplice that the boutique realised she had taken a €210,000 five-carat ring and replaced it with a cheap copy. Sales staff, guards and security cameras had all failed to notice the exchange.

She repeated the performance last November, this time in the Cartier boutique in Paris in the company of a man aged about 30 claiming to be her son. The scam ended with the loss of a 5.5carat diamond ring.

Details of the theft emerged this week despite attempts by the notoriously secretive jewellery industry to keep it out of the public eye. Detectives believe that behind the Middle Eastern disguise lies a French woman from a community of travellers based in Provence.

They say that she almost certainly operates with members of her family, who check out jewellers, identify the rings they want to steal and provide her with replicas. French police believe that they know her name but do not know where she is hiding.

“The point about luxury jewellers is that they have to get out their valuables for customers to see,” an industry source said. “Everyone in the trade knows they are vulnerable to thieves who are cunning and quick. There are other examples, besides this woman.”

The most famous in France was Jean Herrina, nicknamed the Sultan, who is reported to have stolen jewellery worth a total of €15 million by posing as a Saudi prince. He committed suicide in prison in 2007 after he was arrested in Paris.

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