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Dark Arts

‘Intent to Deceive’ takes a close look at famous forgers



Recorder illustration/Adam Orth

Master forger Elmyr de Hory is the subject of several books, including Orson Welles' last film, "F is for Fake." His own originals are in such demand that fraudulent artists now create forgeries of them. (Art used to create this illustration is by Elmyr de Hory (Hungary, 1906-1976), *Odalisque*, 1974, oil on canvas, in the style of Henri Matisse (French, 1869-1954). Collection of Mark Forgy, original photo by Robert Fogt)

Story by Don Stewart

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With TV crews from Russia, Spain and CBS News, as well as correspondents arriving from Germany, China, France, Denmark and other points of the compass, Springfield's D'Amour Museum exhibit of art forgery and fakes has struck a resounding global chord. Perhaps no one is more surprised at this wellspring of interest than the show's guest curator, Colette Loll.

"I'm a little shocked," Loll said, speaking from the museum galleries recently. "I have to say, in little Springfield? I did not imagine this, when we decided that this would be our first venue in opening the exhibition. I'm absolutely shocked, but I think we've definitely struck a nerve."

The Washingtonian is the sole employee of Art Fraud Insights, a business that takes her to the museums and universities of America and Europe to both lecture about and sleuth bogus art objects.

Loll's exhibit profiles five men with artistic talent who fooled the critics and experts, in some cases, for decades. A novelist, in his wildest fever dreams, couldn't conjure up their eccentric lives. There's a suicide, an unsolved murder and a particular form of madness among the quintet and their contrary endings are the stuff of Agatha Christie and O. Henry stories. Whether it's a fake, a replication of an existing valuable artwork, a forgery or a painting created "in the style of" a well-known artist, the fraudulent dark arts business seems to carry serious health risks.

With a display of dozens of artworks taking up several galleries, it's a comprehensive exhibit, gleaned from two years of research by Loll. On a recent Sunday afternoon, prior to a packed auditorium lecture by Loll, the exhibit was overrun. She suggested what has ignited the profound interest in the subject.

"I think it's because there's been so much in the news recently about art fraud and art forgery, specifically with the Beltracchi case and the Knoedler scandal ... It reaches a far and broad audience ... It seems to be the Trifecta," Loll said.

The German Wolfgang Beltracchi was arrested and imprisoned in 2010 and admitted to the forgery of hundreds of paintings, many of which are still in circulation. M. Knoedler & Co., a 165-year-old art dealership, closed in 2011, in part due to a \$17 million sale of a forged Jackson Pollock.

"We should expect to see art crime as a growth industry in the coming years," Mark Forgy, an author who spoke in tandem with Loll, told the audience.

The forging Dutchman

Among the stories was the 1945 discovery of some 6,500 artworks stashed in an Austrian salt mine by German Reichsmarschall Hermann Goring. One of the treasures was a large canvas, "Christ and the Adulteress," considered a rare work by the 17th century Dutch master Johannes Vermeer.

The sale was traced to Han van Meegeren, a wealthy artist who had, in 1938, sold Rotterdam's Museum Boijman a Vermeer for some \$300,000. Having sold a national treasure to Hitler's right-hand-man, the Dutchman was facing a death sentence for collaborating with the enemy. As Lord John Kilbracken, a van Meegeren biographer, notes in the film "Scams, Schemes and Scoundrels," the artist broke down after several days of police grilling.

"You are fools!" he quoted van Meegeren as saying. "I didn't sell a great national treasure to the Nazis! I painted it myself and I also painted the Vermeer in (Rotterdam's) Boijmans museum and the Vermeer in (Amsterdam's) Rijksmuseum."

The police were amused by this fantastic story while the public viewed him as a villainous traitor. In the two years that elapsed before his trial, however, popular sentiment toward him flip-flopped. A poll found him second in popularity only to Holland's Prime Minister.

"There's nothing more amusing than a painter who cuts through all the 'hoo-ha' and fools them all," a Museum Boijmans curator quips in the film "Van Meegeren's Fake Vermeers."

To prove to the court that he was an expert forger, the artist was placed in a guarded room with a canvas and paints.

"But first he asked for some alcohol and morphine because he claimed that that was the only way that he could work," Loll said during her lecture.

In several days a brand new Vermeer was produced and van Meegeren faced just two years in jail for art forgery. Prior to serving the time, however, he suffered two major heart attacks, dying at the age of 58. It was estimated that, in today's dollars, he had made between \$25 million and \$30 million in his lifetime.

Aging centuries in hours

Loll's detective work in determining forgeries is generations above earlier forensic techniques wherein paint was first swabbed with alcohol and then poked with a needle. If the paint was soft, or the needle exited with a residue, the artwork was considered bogus. Hardly reliable. In the 1970s it was noted, for example, that the oils of 19th-century artist J.M.W. Turner had never dried properly. Among her arsenal of space-age equipment, Loll uses a \$50,000 XRF (X-Ray Fluorescence) Bruker

Tracer SD III system. The device, which does no harm, scrambles the paint's electrons to determine its chemical composition.

Van Meegeren would use pumice stone to remove existing paint from antique canvases. He duplicated Vermeer's reliance upon badger hair brushes and colors made from organic matter. The paints were mixed with a homemade form of plastic for hardening and the artwork was then rolled on a drum to create cracks. To indicate the passage of centuries in just a few hours, the hundreds of fractures in the image were dabbed with dark ink. The Dutchman then baked the canvas at 212 degrees Fahrenheit to harden the paint.

"Brilliant!" Loll said.

In the dark arts, business charm is important and perhaps was never found in such abundance as in Elmyr de Hory. Forgy told the audience that he was the artist's companion for seven years, long after the European was revealed as a fraud. Following this discovery, the writer said that de Hory became "a bad-boy media darling."

"Elmyr became a mentor before I knew what a mentor was," Forgy said. "He was charismatic with an impresario's flair."

The artist is the subject of Forgy's book, "The Forger's Apprentice" (CreateSpace; 346 pages, \$15). Life on the island of Ibiza with the bon vivant was heady stuff. Dinner guests included the German actress Marlene Dietrich and the actor and director Orson Welles. De Hory was the subject of Welles' last film "F is for Fake."

"When I was 20, it was all very clear," Forgy said. "He was Robin Hood. He stole from the rich and gave to himself."

His criminal life began simply enough. When a wealthy friend mistook one of his drawings for a Picasso, he sold it for 50 pounds. He was then off to the races and once boasted that he could draw a Modigliani portrait better than the Italian himself. De Hory, who had assumed a name and an invented life, was adept at forging various artists and became so popular that thieves now profit by faking his own signed originals.

Despite his wealth, he once said that "what I sold, I sold very miserably. The dealers make more money."

Facing extradition to France for fraud, de Hory committed suicide.

Eric Hebborn's life also ended violently. The English artist was intrigued by how easily art experts could be fooled. When he found reams of pre-industrial art paper in a London shop, felonious dreams took flight. His forgeries, attributed to early Renaissance artists, commanded astronomical sums. The deception crashed, however, when a National Gallery curator noted that two artists, from different countries, working in different centuries, were using the same paper. The forger was bludgeoned on a Roman street, his murder never solved.

An unusual madness

For some 30 years, Mark Landis has forged paintings without fear of arrest. Disguising himself as a priest, or wealthy eccentric, he's gifted some 40 museums and universities with fraudulent and often compelling images by 19th-century masters. Referring to his unusual bequeathments as "a hobby," the frail bachelor has been diagnosed twice as a schizophrenic and more fashionably has been considered bipolar.

Of the quintet, the British artist and forger John Myatt has had, following a prison sentence, a sideways success. The Scotland Yard detective who arrested him suggested that he go into business creating "Legitimate Fakes." Myatt's 2011 painting "Landscape near Auvers," in the style of van Gogh and indicated as bogus, sold for \$30,000 recently.

Loll told the audience that forgers are driven, not so much by greed as to seek reprisals upon an art community that has dismissed them.

Van Meegeren once said, "I decided ... to revenge myself on the art critics and experts by doing something the likes of which the world has never seen before."

Loll was asked what she hoped people would take away from the exhibit.

"By inserting works of art into the art historical record that don't belong there, not only from the perspective of economic or even legal implications, forgery is a crime against cultural heritage," she said.

For more information visit: intanttodeceive.com

Exhibit details

"Intent to Deceive" continues at the D'Amour Museum of Fine Arts through April 27. Closed Monday. Open Tuesday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sunday, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Admission: adults, \$15; college, with ID, \$10; ages 3 to 17, \$8.

Directions: take Interstate 91 south to exit 7. Take the second left onto State Street, take the first left past the library onto Elliot Street and the next left to Edwards Street.

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