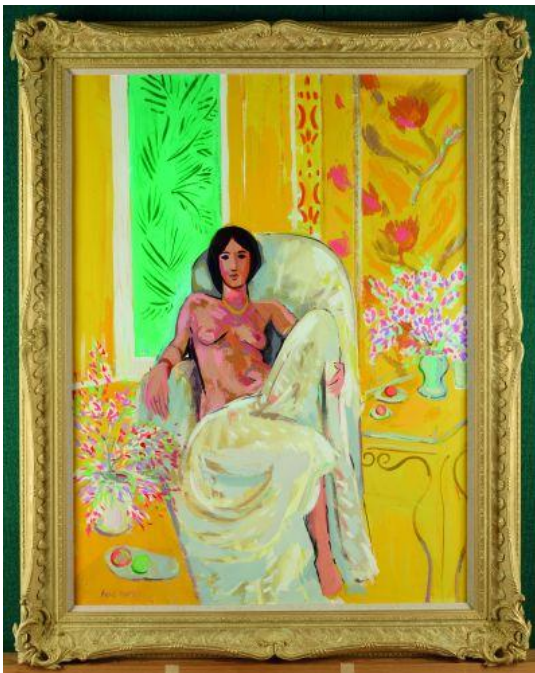


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Review: Ringling show about art forgers is authentically fascinating

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“Intent to Deceive: Fakes and Forgeries in the Art World” at the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art is an intriguing exhibition. It shines a light on the process of authentication through the careers of five artists who gained fame (infamy, actually) through their talent at copying other artists and lying about it. The show illustrates what they did along with interesting psychological sidebars exploring possible reasons for their dishonesty. ¶ Most artists are underappreciated, even if they're talented. That seems to be the motivation for at least four of the five (all men, by the way) who basically gave the middle finger to the art world. If the experts didn't like them, they would make fools of those scholars and critics. And make lots of money, too.

Han van Meegeren (1889-1947) was probably the most talented of the group. He made a fortune passing off his work as that of the Old Masters. Several of his fake Vermeers are on view, including *Head of Christ*, which he claimed was part of a group of undiscovered works by the great 17th century Dutch painter. Because oil paint can take years to dry, he had to hasten the process. He discovered that mixing pigment with the chemical now known as Bakelite, then baking the painting at a low temperature, yielded a perfectly hardened surface. He bought 17th century canvases, painted and dried them, then rolled them around metal cylinders to create the crackled surface of old paintings. He might never have been caught but for the discovery of one of his "Vermeers" in the collection of Nazi leader Hermann Goering that was presumed to be looted. The Allies tracked it back to the original seller, van Meegeren, who was arrested for collaborating with the Nazis and participating in the



potential loss of a national treasure a crime that could have meant a death sentence. He came clean. No one believed him. So in the courtroom during the trial, he painted his last forgery and proved his point. Van Meegeren died of a heart attack before he could serve a lesser sentence for fraud.

Elmyr de Hory (1906-1976) drew or painted in the style of the post-impressionists at a time when everyone wanted abstract expressionism. He was so derivative that people mistook his work for the real thing and offered to buy it. He liked the good life and began forging in earnest. Unlike van Meegeren, de Hory didn't have to use an elaborate technical process because he forged much newer art. After World War II ended, de Hory, who was born in Hungary and lived in Paris, immigrated to the

United States, where he invented an elaborate history as a dispossessed Hungarian aristocrat who had to sell his art collection. One of his paintings, mimicking Philip de László, also Hungarian and famous for his portraits of nobles and the rich, depicted him and his (probably fictitious) brother Stephan as children dressed in jaunty sailor outfits. He hung it in his house so potential clients could see proof of his resplendent past, being from a family able to afford de László.

De Hory was especially good at emulating Modigliani and Matisse, as we see in the exhibition, and sold an estimated 1,000 works into the art market with the assistance of a con man. He would sometimes try to paint his own work but couldn't find a market for it and always returned to forgery. But he became sloppy. Dealers and collectors became suspicious and he was under investigation. He moved to the Spanish island of Ibiza where he befriended author Clifford Irving. He told his story, including his fake past, to Irving, who wrote his biography followed by a documentary by Orson Welles. Irving later wrote a bogus autobiography of Howard Hughes and, in an ironic twist, de Hory did a cover portrait of Irving for *Time* magazine when the book con was revealed. That cover is also on view. De Hory killed himself before he could be extradited.

Eric Hebborn (1934-1996) seems to be the most cynical of the group. He was a gifted painter, draftsman and professional conservator with an expertise in historic paper. He used that skill and knowledge to create works that are so good they elude forensic detection, and many in museum collections can't be determined authentic or not. This exhibition focuses on forged drawings. Hebborn was caught when a museum curator noticed that drawings from different periods by different artists were on the same type of paper, the torn edges matching perfectly, and that one used

a medium not consistent with its period. He shared concerns with curators at other museums and the search for the art's origin ended with Hebborn.

Hebborn wreaked such havoc on museum print collections, many who worked there wouldn't comment because it would compromise the institution's reputation. But Hebborn thought of himself as heroic and wrote two books bragging about his ability to fool the best experts in the world. Shortly after the second one was published, he was found on a street in Rome, his head bashed in. The murder is unsolved.

John Myatt (1945-) stumbled into forgery. He needed to support his two children and began advertising modernist-style works as "genuine fakes" for several hundred dollars. A con artist sold one for about \$100,000 as a legitimate work through an auction and the two became partners. They were able to keep up the act by creating false documentation — a history of ownership that plays a big part in authentication. They were caught because they were unloading so much art that dealers became suspicious. Myatt served some prison time and is now painting fakes marked as such. Some sell for tens of thousands of dollars.



Mark Landis (1955-) is in a different category. He never sold his forgeries and fakes; he gave them away. Sometimes posing as a priest, he would contact or cold-call a museum offering one of his drawings or paintings in honor of his late parents. He also provided fake authentication. Some museums would be suspicious and test the works, immediately identifying them as inauthentic. In one example, he painted over an image he made on his color printer, and when museum staff put the work under blacklight, the pixels were revealed beneath the paint. Because Landis didn't profit from his work, he wasn't charged. He has been diagnosed with mental illness, probably bipolar, and liked the attention that came with his philanthropy.

At this point, you have read a lot about the artists and little about the art. That's because this isn't really a show meant to celebrate and bring to our attention fine art. It's a cultural and historical document, full of information and props. We see the fakes and forgeries along with the real things, old and new methods to identify a fraudulent work, materials the artists used, historical context, documentary videos, even the black suit and white collar Landis wore when he pretended to be a priest. There are also several "tests" for viewers asking them to pick the real from the

forgeries. (Full disclosure: I only got one out of three correct!) "Intent to Deceive" doesn't sensationalize or glorify these people, and it indirectly scolds the art world for perpetuating a problem with fraud despite advanced instruments to detect it.

"The simple answer is they don't want to know," says Colette Loll, the show's curator, who works as an authenticator. Auction houses and galleries are in business to make money and aren't always thorough in checking out a work's history. Some art is so obviously inauthentic, a good museum professional can see it on casual perusal. But sophisticated authentication can be expensive, and smaller museums can't always afford it.

Still, do these people deserve representation in a museum even if they're not glorified? (Incidentally, Loll says that the museums from whom many of these forgeries are on loan say they are among the most popular works in their collections.) What sticks in my craw is the remorseless subversion they visited on other artists' legacies. For example, a catalogue raisonne, or complete and verifiable list of works by an artist, has yet to be written for Modigliani, a modern master who died in 1920, because artists such as de Hory hacked his style so well and thoroughly that experts are scrambling to establish what Modigliani did and didn't do. Thanks to John Myatt and his partner and Eric Hebborn, museums are still sorting through their collections. They may never know for sure about some of the works.

I'm glad I saw the exhibition, but I'm also sad and angry that it has a good reason to exist.

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Intent to Deceive: Fakes and Forgeries in the Art World

The exhibition is at the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, 5401 Bay Shore Road, Sarasota, through Aug. 3. Hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily with extended hours to 8 p.m. Thursday. Admission is \$25 for adults, \$20 for seniors and \$5 for seniors. It includes admission to the art museum, Ca d'Zan (not open during extended hours) and the circus museum. Admission to the art museum only is free on Mondays. ringling.org or (941) 359-5700.