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The unreal thing



Two recent exhibitions and a couple of books address the matter of fakes and forgeries, but they leave unaddressed several matters of art

By James Gardner

Money has become so central to our response to visual art that to lament this fact, aside from being a lost cause, has itself attained to the status of a platitude. It has not always been this way. Surely the potentates of the Renaissance competed to secure the best commissions among living artists and the worthiest relics of the dead, especially ancient statuary. And from the seventeenth century on there has been a brisk secondary market for more recent masters. But sometime after World War II, this marriage of art and money began to take on a life of its own, and in the past generation the acquisitiveness of the collecting class has reached fever pitch. Today the wealth of nations, to say nothing of Detroit, is apt to be measured as much by their impressionists and Damien Hirsts as by their oil fields, nickel deposits, and arable land.

The cause of this transformation is rarely appreciated, but it is not especially difficult to understand. The driving force behind it is fame; the vector of that fame is photography; and the context of that fame is an ever expanding leisure that enables millions of tourists to get themselves physically into the Louvre and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Behind this new pursuit of visual stimulation is one of modernity's most remarkable achievements, a greatly expanded access to culture: though literature has enjoyed the benefits of mass dissemination since the early nineteenth century, visual art (along with music and the other performing arts) began to reap such rewards only in the twentieth. At the same time, photography has made art works famous in ways that would have been unimaginable a century ago. And when one takes into account that art alone among cultural artifacts exists as a unique and salable object, then the frenzy of its acquisition becomes a foregone conclusion.

Fig. 1. *Portrait of a Lady* by Han van Meegeren (1889–1947), twentieth century, in the style of Gerard Ter Borch (1617–1681). Oil on canvas, 27 by 21 inches. Yale University Art Gallery, Mabel Brady Garvan Fund.

Fig. 2. *A Naked Warrior with One Foot on a Helmet* by Eric Hebborn (1934–1996), twentieth century, in the style of Andrea Mantegna (c.1430/31–1506). Pen and black ink on paper, 11 3/4 by 4 1/4 inches.

National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C., Joseph E. McCrindle Collection.





And yet, behind this frenzy is an issue upon which our collective response to visual art, and with it the entire survival of the art world itself, stands or falls: the question of authenticity. Consider the *Mona Lisa*, that most emblematic of all art objects. Surely it has been a focus of intense interest since its creation. But that interest has grown into a cult only in the past century, largely as a result of the painting's propagation through millions upon millions of postcards. Until a generation ago, you could still come within a few inches of its surface and even admire it without the distorting mediation of bullet-proof glass. Today you are lucky to get within half a block, and if a new installment of the *Da Vinci Code* franchise hits the Cineplex, you can forget about even that degree of proximity. But suppose that the Louvre decided that a work of such value and fragility would henceforth be exhibited only in reproduction, but a reproduction—such as is now possible—that flawlessly rendered every detail and allowed the viewer to inspect it as long and as closely as he wished. (In some museums the use of such reproductions is already common with regard

The Secret Life of an American Art Forger, by Ken Perenyi, the shameless imitator of Martin Johnson Heade and other American and British masters of the nineteenth century. In a sign of how mainstream Perenyi's activities have become, *Kirkus Reviews* breezily blurbs that "Readers will be captivated as they follow the development of this remarkable talent over a 40-year career."

Hoping to dismantle this somewhat romanticized reading of what it considers to be a criminal act, the art world has struck back with two new exhibitions, *Faked, Forgotten, Found: Five Renaissance Paintings Investigated*, at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, and *Intent to Deceive: Fakes and Forgeries in the Art World*, at the Ringling Museum of Art in Sarasota, Florida, and elsewhere through May 2015.

The Carnegie show involves the scientific analysis of several of its own paintings whose authenticity has been challenged. One of these is *Madonna and Child with Angel* by Francesco Francia, a lesser-known Bolognese master

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to Upper Paleolithic art and early photographs.) Well, you may be certain that all the tourists, like phantoms fleeing an enchanter, would vanish in an instant. And the economy of France itself, relying as it does on tourism, would, by that one act, suffer a modest and yet measurable loss.

Clearly, too much is riding on the authenticity of the object for such a switch ever to occur. The art world, that global industry that employs hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of well-trained professionals to keep it running, stands or falls on the sacral authenticity of the object itself. And so, even though the expert forger is too rare a creature to represent more than a nuisance to this art world Leviathan, the menace that he represents is taken very seriously indeed. At the same time, and for much the same reason, the forger has acquired of late a countercultural chic among certain members of the public who resent the presumptive arrogance of the art establishment. This attitude is largely enshrined in such recent books as *Forged: Why Fakes are the Great Art of Our Age*, by the critic Jonathon Keats and *Caveat Emptor*:

of the early sixteenth century (Fig. 3). Another version exists in London's National Gallery and this exhibition seeks to determine which is the real one. After extensive research, the Carnegie triumphantly concludes that "There seems no reason for doubt [that Leonard Koester's authenticating the Pittsburgh painting] was entirely justified, as indeed was his belief that the National Gallery painting was, and is, a fake."

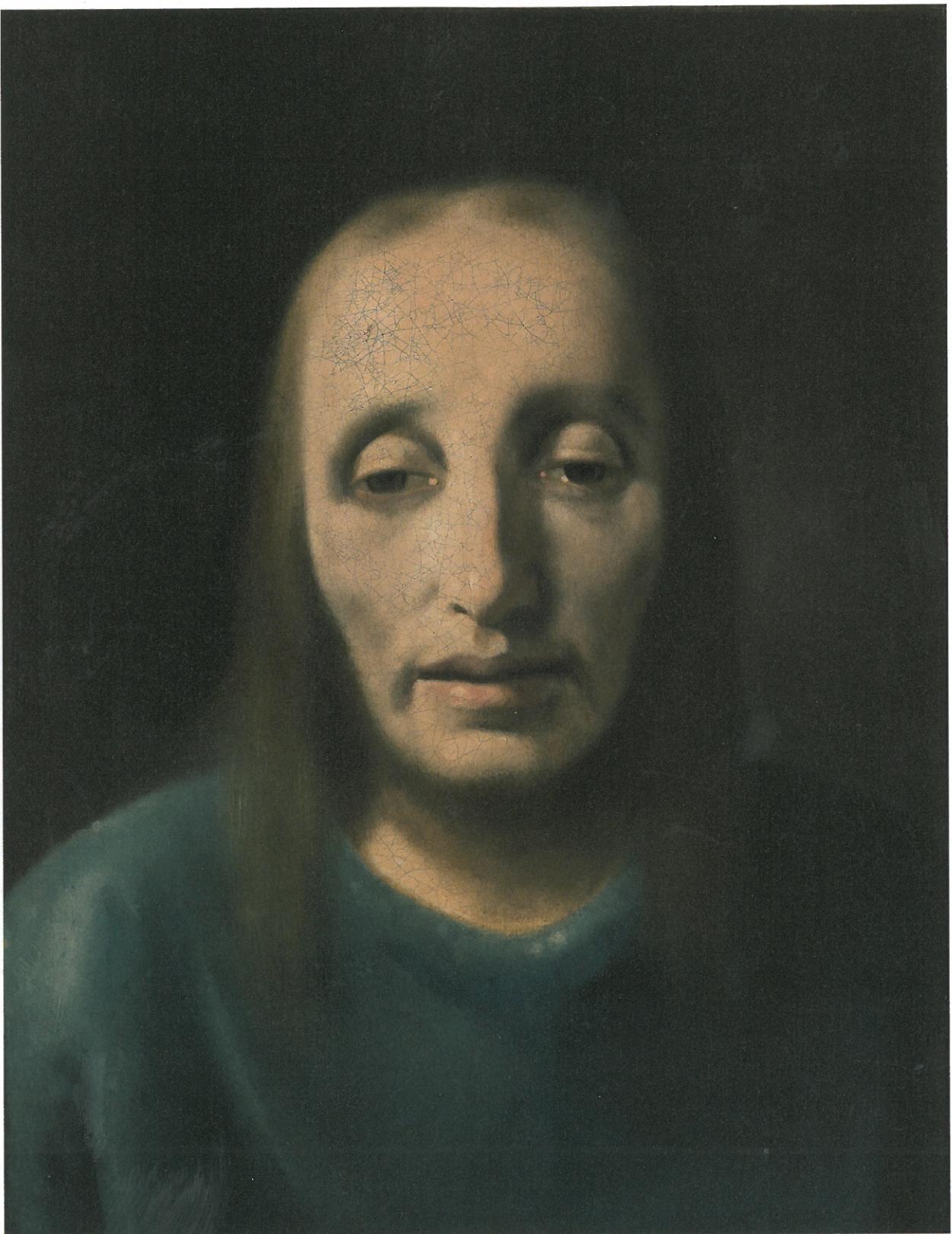
The Ringling show includes, in addition to authenticated art, the work of five forgers—Han van Meegeren, Elmyr de Hory, Eric Hebborn, John Myatt, and Mark Landis—and it examines their modus operandi and how they were ultimately caught.

Because one often hears of forgeries but rarely sees them, or at least is not aware that one is seeing them, the show promises an almost ghoulish fascination. Its pleasures are, in one sense, antithetical to those of most mainstream exhibitions: in a typical museum show, we are encouraged to admire the beauty or at least the



Fig. 3. *Madonna and Child with Angel* by Francesco Ribalini, known as Francesco Francia (1450–1517), 1495–1500. Oil on wood panel, 22 7/8 by 17 3/8 inches. Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, Howard A. Noble Fund.

Fig. 4. *The Procuress* by van Meegeren, 1940, in the style of Dirck van Baburen (c. 1595–1624). Oil on canvas, 40 by 42 1/2 inches. Courtauld Gallery, London, courtesy of the Samuel Courtauld Trust.



cultural consequence of the work on view. Here quite the contrary is expected: we are strenuously exhorted, even required, to reprove the work. In this respect, *Fakes and Forgeries* more closely resembles something at Ripley's Believe It or Not in Times Square than it does the usual museum fare.

But perhaps it would be more profitable and more interesting—almost as a kind of thought experiment—to do the opposite of what is expected of us and to examine these works as we would any others of the most impeccable pedigree and provenance. How good, ultimately, are they as art? To the extent to which these paintings and drawings are not mere copies, after all, they are works of art in their own right, striving to match every standard of draftsmanship, composition, and chromatic skill that we seek in the “real”

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art on which they are modeled. They aspire to compete in every respect except that of originality. In its place stands a different category of achievement, that of impersonation, of subsuming one's own artistic essence in that of another artist. Surely this is a far less sublime ambition than the quest for true originality: and yet, in terms of pure artistic talent and intelligence, it cannot be entirely dismissed.

So as regards Eric Hebborn's study *A Naked Warrior with One Foot on a Helmet*, in the manner of Andrea Mantegna (Fig. 2), it could be seen—assuming that it was understood to be from the quattrocento—as either a genuine work by that master or a work by someone in his studio or by some remoter follower. If I were to come upon this drawing in complete ignorance of its real status, I could probably believe that it was by a contemporary of Mantegna (for which the forger deserves considerable

praise), but I do not believe that I should have mistaken it for a work by the master himself. In this, as in most of the drawings by Hebborn, indeed in most works that turn out to be forgeries, we seem to see a revered master at something less than his full powers. He has taken up the pen or the brush at an hour that has not proved entirely propitious to his art. In the case of the “Mantegna,” the face is wrong and the musculature—which is the real point of this sort of drawing—is substandard and pedantic.

A more famous forger, and the subject of a scandalous trial in 1947, is Han van Meegeren, who engaged in a far riskier enterprise than Hebborn: he forged

Fig. 5. *Head of Christ* by van Meegeren, c. 1940–1941, in the style of Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675). Oil on canvas, 20 by 15 1/2 inches. *Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam.*

Fig. 6. *Regatta* by Elmyr de Hory (1906–1976), c. 1974, in the style of Raoul Dufy (1877–1953). Signed “Elmyr” at lower left. Oil on canvas, 20 by 26 inches. *Collection of Mark Forgy.*



Old Master paintings, in which, because they tend to be more finished and less process-oriented than drawings, modern intrusion is always easier to detect. Van Meegeren's *Head of Christ* (Fig. 5), like all of the other “early Vermeers” he painted, hardly resembles what most people associate with the Delft master. It does not even look much like Vermeer's earliest style, which is more expansive and less refined than the later work for which he is famous. In fact, these van Meegerens are all bad, even execrably bad, paintings. And yet, his *Portrait of a Lady* (Fig. 1), which invokes



Gerard Ter Borch, another Dutch master, is quite lovely, even though it would seem—at best—to be by one of this artist's disciples. At the same time, van Meegeren's *Procureess* (Fig. 4), supposedly by Dirck van Baburen, a follower of Caravaggio from Utrecht, seems especially accomplished and, on the basis of the photograph, at least, it could well pass muster.

Elmyr de Hory and John Myatt based their careers on forging early twentieth-century modernism rather than the Old Masters, and here other difficulties ensue. By their very nature, impressionism and especially expressionism embrace the chance and spontaneity involved in the very process of painting,

as opposed to the more finished and polished Old Masters that van Meegeren forged. In the context of modernism, by its very nature, missteps and inadvertences are less apparent.

Consider two works that are intended to evoke Raoul Dufy. One, *Regatta*, is by de Hory and, having been produced after he was exposed, is signed "Elmyr" (Fig. 6). It is a weak piece of

work: the predominantly pink tonalities are feeble and the lines, pudgy and lifeless, exhibit little of the joy and exuberance that were Dufy's hallmark. (That de Hory was capable of better can be seen in *Fauve Landscape*, which is in the style of Maurice de Vlaminck [Fig. 7].) In *The Paddock* by John Myatt, however, Dufy fares somewhat better (Fig. 8). Here two diminutive horses and their riders stand beneath the towering, parti-colored foliage of an immense tree. This really is a lovely and accomplished painting, even though, once again, it can lay no claim to originality. But it is undeniably alive with that joy that was so central to Dufy's art.

The aesthetic assessments I have just offered, of course, are not what the Ringling exhibition had in mind. Mounted by the Washington D.C.-based International Arts and Artists, it exhibits little patience for the miscreants who threaten "our cultural heritage," in the words of David Furchtgott, the organization's president and CEO. In an online essay that accompanies the show, art historian Tom Flynn inveighs against the "self-satisfied smirk of the art forger [who presumes to] triumph over snobbish art professionals."

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Implicitly, Flynn has in mind books like Keats's *Forged: Why Fakes are the Great Art of Our Age*. Generally lucid and well-written, this book unfortunately promises more than it delivers. From the title itself, one might have expected a nuanced assessment of the artifacts it considers, irrespective of their pedigree. Instead, Keats seems more interested in making a Warholian point about the ultimate meaning of art, and he sees the act of forgery as an example of conceptual art, a questioning of concepts like authenticity and originality, more than he sees the object itself—as the forger intended—as a thing of beauty and value.

But, properly understood, the forged work is entitled to a certain existential status that has never been accorded to it in the past. Certainly every effort must be taken to detect the forgery, lest its inclusion in an artist's oeuvre falsify, in

some measure, our understanding of his entire career. And certainly the owner of a work of art is fully justified in hoping that the "Dufy" in his possession is indeed by that master, exactly as an autograph collector would wish a letter signed by Abraham Lincoln to have been penned by our sixteenth president. There is, after all, nothing trivial or base in that sense of sacred nearness that we feel before the relics of the great. But none of that has, or should have, anything to do with the proper assessment of a painting or drawing or sculpture, whatever its claimed pedigree might be. At their best, several of the forgeries included in the Ringling exhibition are quite beautiful. And even though, yet again, they can lay no claim to the virtues of originality, they are deserving of the attention and the praise of any viewer who is less interested in the art world than he is in art.

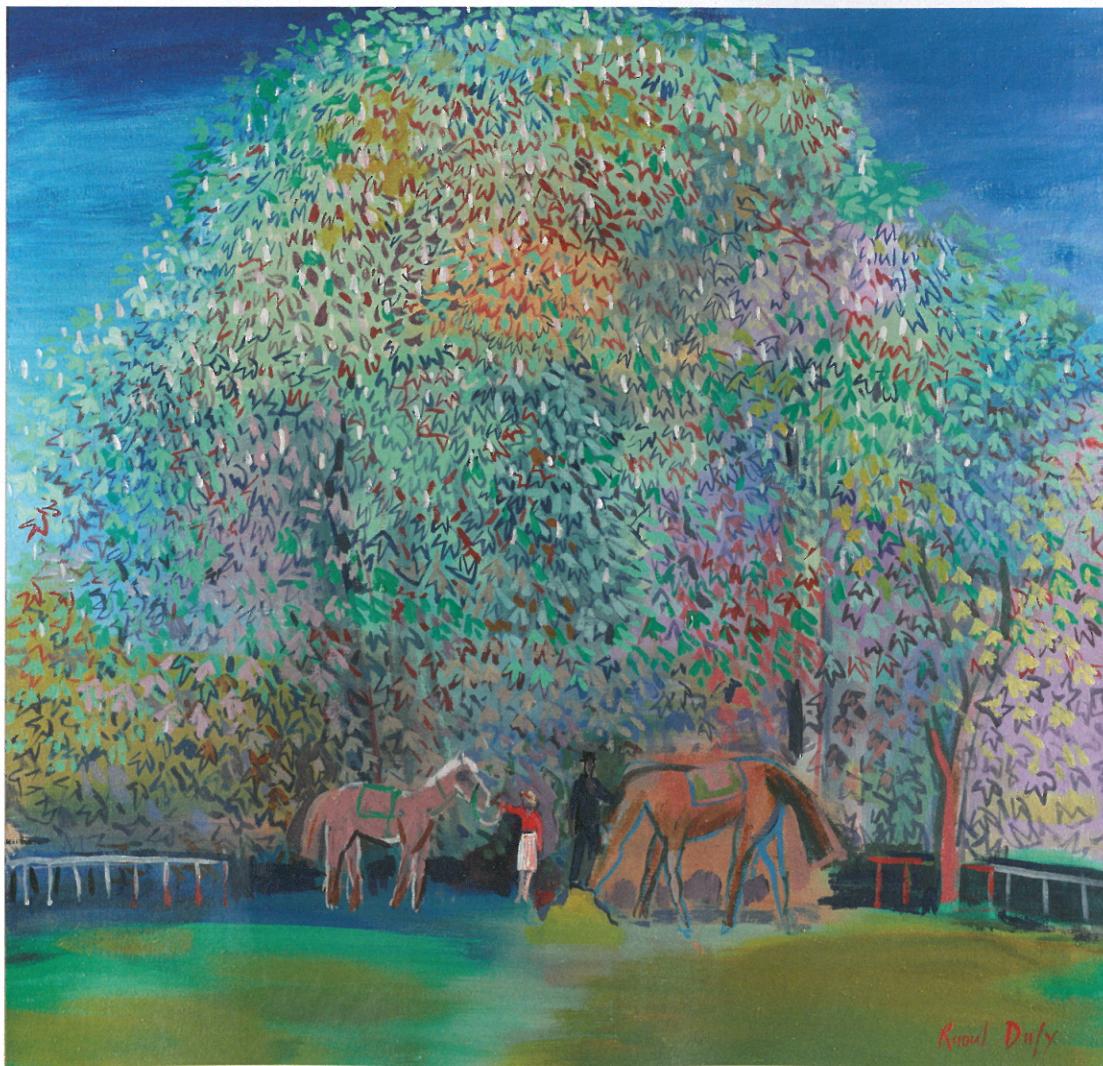


Fig. 7. *Fauve Landscape* by de Hory, c. 1968, in the style of Maurice de Vlaminck (1876–1958). Signed "Elmyr" at lower left. Oil on canvas, 25 by 31 1/2 inches. *Forgery collection; photograph by Robert Fogt.*

Fig. 8. *The Paddock* by John Myatt (1945–), in the style of Dufy. Inscribed "Raoul Dufy" at lower right. Oil on canvas, 32 inches square (framed). *Collection of T. West and K. West; photograph courtesy Washington Green Fine Art.*