



So You Think You Wouldn't Be Bamboozled By Lothar Malskat's Art Forgeries?

Jonathon Keats, Contributor - commentary on art exhibitions around the world
10/19/2012

Lothar Malskat was one of the foremost fakers of the 20th century, convincing the Nazi elite that his ersatz Medieval church murals were “the last, deepest, final word in German art” – and that the Vikings imported turkeys from the New World to Schleswig-Holstein two centuries before Columbus discovered America – as related in this column yesterday. Here is the remainder of the story...



Marienkirche Lübeck
(Photo credit: eriwst)

Half a decade after Lothar Malskat gave the Nazis reason to rejoice in their Viking roots, the German Fatherland was kaputt. Captured by Allied forces, Himmler committed suicide. Rosenberg was convicted and hanged at Nuremberg. Stange was dismissed from his university post, the Vikings retired to the fjords.

Malskat emerged from the war unemployed and broke. Discharged from the Wehrmacht, he attempted to survive as an artist, painting erotic pin-ups that he peddled on the streets of Hamburg. By the summer of 1945, his circumstances were dire. He sought out his old employer.

Fey seems to have been the only man in Germany unaffected by the war. Though his father had not survived, and the restoration trade was moribund, he still lived in much the same style as when Malskat first encountered him in 1936, wearing fine suits and smoking fancy cigarettes. He gave Malskat a room in his servants' quarters, and put him back to work.

The new business was different, but familiar enough. Instead of faking restorations, Malskat forged old-master and modern paintings. Fey supplied him with yards of canvas, and a list of desirable names. Rembrandt. Watteau. Munch. Corot. Chagall. Picasso. To keep up with orders from collectors in Frankfurt and Munich, Malskat had to work fast. “Sometimes I copied an old painting in a day,” he later recalled. “It took me an hour to do a Picasso. But what I liked best was to do new paintings in the style of the French Impressionists.” Amongst the seventy-odd artists he imitated over the next several years in some six hundred oils and watercolors were Renoir, Degas, van Gogh, Gauguin and Utrillo.

As might be expected given the scale and speed of production, the quality was uneven. One Frankfurt dealer made the mistake of showing a Malskat to Chagall, who was notoriously unable to detect counterfeits of his own work. For once Chagall had no trouble perceiving the fraud, and destroyed the forgery with his own hands. The dealer just shrugged off the loss, and never again sought Chagall's opinion.

There were plenty of buyers, enticed by economic conditions. With the fall of the Third Reich, the German economy was ruined, shifting most transactions to a black market. Wary of hyperinflation, people used cigarettes as currency, and sought to protect their savings by purchasing commodities such as art. The majority of new collectors were inexperienced, and since many of the most valuable paintings had been looted from foreign museums, or seized from Jewish collectors during the Holocaust, asking questions about provenance was verboten. Leading people to believe they were beneficiaries of others' misfortune, Fey transferred attention from the artifact to the transaction. He



made people complicit in his transgression. Because the purchase was illicit, they trusted that the artwork was authentic.

And for a brief period, it made no difference. Since most everyone accepted the paintings based on their attribution, they traded freely, a colorful surrogate for money. Those who were artistically savvy cynically suspended disbelief. The pious fraud was no longer political, but had become economic. The West German Currency Reform of 1948 effectively ended the black market. Supported by the Marshall Plan, the new Deutschmark superseded dubious old paintings, and even American cigarettes, as the medium of exchange. The Deutschmark was introduced in June. One month later, quick-witted Fey came to Malskat with a new proposition. In the heat of war, an old church had been engulfed in flames, and the fire had revealed an unknown medieval mural. People deemed it a miracle, and were calling for a conservator. On the strength of his success in Schleswig, Fey secured the contract to restore Marienkirche in Lübeck.

The selection was controversial. In a sealed report filed with the provincial Culture Ministry, the Schleswig-Holstein state curator Peter Hirschfeld wrote that “the restoration of defective medieval mural paintings is, in the last analysis, a question of trust. Dietrich Fey will not guarantee that he has never done any overpainting in an unguarded moment. I therefore declare that I disassociate myself from the working methods of the restorer Dietrich Fey. I decline all further responsibility.”

However the church authorities were determined to hire Fey, and to have his restoration bring the attention to Marienkirche that it had to St. Petri-Dom eighty miles away. “Paint out the church beautifully,” advised the Lübeck bishop Dr. Johannes Pautke. Further encouragement to enhance the murals was given by the church superintendent, and most emphatically the chief architect, Dr. Bruno Fendrich, who exhorted the restorers to “preserve the religious impression,” reminding them that “we want no museum.” According to Malskat, Fendrich’s favorite refrain was “Immer Farbe druff!” *Lay on more paint!*

Malskat laid on more paint than even Fendrich could have hoped. Scaffolding was erected to bar entry into the nave, and signs were posted warning of danger overhead. Fey instructed the masons to start hammering whenever anyone approached, warning Malskat and his assistant, Theo Dietrich-Dirschau, to conceal work-in-progress behind wooden panels. With those precautions in place, the two men scrubbed the walls and reprimed the brick. On the fresh surface, Malskat repainted apostles and saints that had previously been only faint and incomplete. He worked quickly with bold lines and bright colors, covering in days the square footage that would have taken a more conventional conservator months.

The speed with which he painted put the project ahead of schedule. By the summer of 1950, he’d recreated all the 14th century murals in the nave. A year remained before the 700th anniversary festivities, so Fey had scaffolding erected in the choir and proposed that Malskat discover an additional cycle of murals.

Since the walls were blank, Malskat had no visual constraints. Within the limitations of the era he was faking, he was free to create. To an extent, he worked from books, in particular Morton H. Bernath’s classic 1916 survey of painting in the middle ages, *Die Malerei des Mittelalters*. His murals also borrowed liberally from earlier periods, for instance a 9th century depiction of a Coptic saint in Berlin’s Kaiser Friedrich Museum. Nor did he forget his father, or Hansi Knoteck, both of whom once again were models-in-absentia, as was Grigori Rasputin, who he cast as a bearded king. He painted in local laborers as monks. He portrayed himself as a patriarch. Within months the walls of the choir were resplendent with art. Twenty-one Gothic figures stood ten feet in height, embellished with friezes of animals and flowers: The Marienkirche miracle had a surprise post-War sequel.

Amidst all this secret activity, only one expert seems to have managed to ascend the seventy-foot scaffold uninvited, a doctoral student by the name of Johanna Kolbe. Though she didn’t witness Malskat at work, she had a unique opportunity to scrutinize the paintings with a magnifying glass rather than binoculars. What she saw appalled her. She informed municipal authorities that the paint was applied “much too thickly” and also noted a few oddities in the nave, such as the disappearance of



Mary Magdalene's sandals. Fey accused her of defamation. She decided that her memory must have been faulty.

That left only acclaim. "Ideas hitherto current as to the original aspect of Gothic brick interiors will have to be revised in light of the merits of the works here recovered," wrote the Lübeck Museum director Hans Arnold Gräbke in a monograph on the murals, *Die Wandmalereien der Marienkirche zu Lübeck*. Noting stylistic similarities to the frescoes in Schleswig, he dated the choir murals to the 13th century, an assessment echoed by the art historian Hans Jürgen Hansen in a second treatise. "They exhibit a severe style, Byzantine-influenced and still almost Romanesque," Hansen observed, contrasting them with the 14th century paintings in the nave, which he found "more animated, softer, entirely Gothic." Even the dour Peter Hirschfeld came around, calling the murals "the most important and extensive ever disclosed in Germany, in fact one of the finest intact frescoes of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries extant throughout western Europe."

The 700th anniversary of Marienkirche was celebrated in that spirit. Chancellor Adenauer declared the murals "a valuable treasure and a fabulous discovery of lost masterpieces". Louis Ferdinand, Prince of Prussia (and grandson of the late Kaiser) offered his royal congratulations. Reproductions of the murals were printed on two million postage stamps, issued in ten and twenty pfennig denominations. Articles were published in periodicals around the world, including *Time Magazine*, which pronounced the paintings "a major artistic find," informing readers that "the interior of the Marienkirche looks more as its original decorators intended than it has for 500 years."

Das ist erhehend! Over the following months, one hundred thousand people visited the church, buffeting Lübeck's faltering economy with revenue from tourism. The murals of Marienkirche were miraculous indeed, seemingly able to provide for the city's every need.

* *

The only person who didn't find the miracle of Marienkirche uplifting was Lothar Malskat. While restoring the church, he often quarreled with Fey, who paid him a mere 110 marks a week out of the 88,000 Deutschmark budget. When Malskat protested that he was doing all the work, Fey reminded him that he was just an anonymous assistant; the Hanseatic City of Lübeck had hired Dietrich Fey, the acclaimed conservator of St. Petri-Dom, to restore Marienkirche.

More than he begrudged the low pay, Malskat resented the anonymity. As he worked in the nave, and especially in the choir, he grew increasingly attached to the paintings, convinced that he was not their restorer – nor even their forger – but their full-fledged creator. He inconspicuously marked some of the figures with his initials. At one point he wrote "All Paintings in this Church are by Lothar Malskat". Fey promptly had his words whitewashed.

The 700th anniversary celebrations left no doubt as to Malskat's position. He watched Fey take full credit for the murals, and receive all the accolades. Fey was publicly honored by Adenauer, granted an additional 150,000 marks in restoration money, and nominated for a prestigious university professorship in Bonn, while Malskat was left to drink bottled beer with the masons.

Malskat's resentment festered for eight full months, while he worked for Fey on smaller restoration projects in the Lübeck Rathaus. Repeatedly he confided to Dietrich-Dirschau his intention to get even with his imperious boss and gain the recognition he craved. Each time he lost courage. Then on May 9, 1952, he abruptly entered the police station and announced that the Marienkirche murals were counterfeit. He'd faked the medieval paintings on Fey's orders, he said, and he was confessing because "that crook Fey" had treated him unfairly.

Nobody believed him. The cops labeled him a crackpot, a local newspaper proclaimed that "this is the lamentable case of a painter gone crazy", and the good people of Lübeck proposed to have him committed. They refused to examine the murals, to scrutinize their miracle, even after Malskat



submitted photographs taken with his Leica documenting his creative progress from whitewashed walls to finished frescoes.

Malskat appealed to the national media. The unknown painter's sensational claims garnered him interviews on radio and television. He pointed out the figures based on Rasputin and Hansi Knoteck, and Die Welt printed photos of murals next to their purported sources, including the Coptic saint in the Kaiser Friedrich. To any unprejudiced observer, the resemblance was unmistakable. Lest open-mindedness prevail, the city of Lübeck issued an official statement. "Rumors and accusations against the renowned art expert Doctor Fey are of no consequence and purely malicious gossip." The walls of Marienkirche had been reclaimed from oblivion; now they needed to be protected against defamation.

Unable to get himself and Fey arrested for their fraudulent restoration of Marienkirche, Malskat returned to the Lübeck police station in August, confessing to their pre-war forgery in the Schleswig schwahl. If anything, that admission only further damaged his credibility: The crackpot artist was now also deemed a megalomaniac. Fendrich and his fellow Marienkirche officials went on record with a signed decree. "Any charges at present being leveled at the restorer Dietrich Fey are as yet insufficient to rouse our misgivings. The work of preservation will therefore continue under the restorer Dietrich Fey."

Malskat hired an attorney by the name of Willi Flottrong. He told the lawyer not only about the bogus restoration work, but also about the phony Picassos and Rembrandts. Handing over a folder of evidence, he instructed Flottrong to file charges against Fey and himself, legally compelling the police to act. Flottrong submitted the portfolio to the prosecutor on October 7th. Two days later, Fey was detained while police searched his house.

They found seven paintings and twenty-one drawings counterfeited by Malskat, including forgeries of Matisse, Degas, Chagall, and Beckmann. No longer could the conservator or his restorations be protected. A commission of experts was dispatched to examine the murals of Marienkirche. On October 20th they published a report. "The twenty-one figures in the choir are not Gothic, but painted freehand by Malskat," the committee wrote. "The painting described as old by the restorer, Fey, does not lie on the medieval layer [of mortar] but on a post-medieval layer, and cannot, if for this reason alone, be considered original." The report also confirmed that the murals in the nave had been repainted.

This time, the Lübeck bishop himself spoke up. Conceding that the murals were fake, Pautke asserted that "if the restorer Dietrich Fey has fraudulently succeeded in getting his work recognized as faithful restoration, this was possible only because of an extremely cunning deception which misled not only the church administration, as proprietor, but also curators and art experts."

However nothing rankles quite like the fraudulently pious. In the face of such monumental betrayal of the public trust, the courts were unwilling to accept as a foregone conclusion the innocence of anyone. Over the following ten months, the prosecutor amassed hundreds of hours of testimony. Embarrassing questions led the church superintendent to request early retirement, and another high official to depart for East Germany. In the several hundred page indictment, Bruno Fendrich was named co-defendant.

Thus the trial of Malskat and Fey also became a trial of the institutions that had supported them. "The real defendants are not the forgers, but the experts and officials who failed to exercise proper care," editorialized a local newspaper. "They didn't mind being deceived. Had Malskat not photographed the empty church walls before he started painting his murals, the evidence would have been suppressed by the very people who employed him. They are as much to blame as the forgers themselves."

* *

The case was too big for the Lübeck courthouse. In order to accommodate all the people clamoring to watch the trial, proceedings were held in the Saal des Atlantiks, a dancehall popular for its swinging music, fashionably known as Stimmung und Schwung. The bar was draped to lend sobriety to the



hearing, and the number of spectators seated on the dance floor was limited to four hundred, though several hundred more paid the Atlantiks janitor twenty pfennigs an hour for a chair in the garden, where they could hear the testimony on loudspeakers.

The trial began on August 10, 1954. Asked why he had confessed, Malskat told the tribunal and the people of Lübeck – as well as the nearly fifty reporters in the press box – that “everybody raved about my beautiful murals, yet Fey got all the credit. Nobody even knew my name.” From that moment on, he was the center of attention.

He presented himself as the unacknowledged master he considered himself to be, speaking of the consummate ease with which he’d decorated Marienkirche. (“I love to do thirteenth century painting,” he quipped “Nothing to it.”) At the same time (and somewhat inconsistently), he disparaged the connoisseurs who’d praised his forgeries. “One art critic raved about the ‘prophet with the magic eyes’,” he said. “It was modeled on my father. Another gushed about the ‘spiritual beauty of the splendid figure of Mary, so far removed from our present day image of womanhood.’ For that painting I used a photograph of Hansi Knoteck.”

Of course with this new knowledge, people could no longer see these figures as the critics had in 1951, believing them to be ancient. From the vantage of the trial, the forgery of Marienkirche was unfathomable. “At a time when X-ray apparatus, quartz lamps and the most modern technical equipment seem to exclude the possibility of large-scale art forgeries,” asked the prosecutor, “how could a second-rate painter have fooled the nation’s leading experts?”

“People like to be fooled today,” responded Malskat. “We just gave them what they wanted.”

What people did not enjoy was knowing that they’d been tricked. On January 26, 1955, after more than five months of testimony, the court reached a verdict. “Although the ascertainable material damage done may not have been excessive, it seriously endangered the restoration of Marienkirche as a whole,” asserted the presiding judge. “The dishonest behavior of those engaged upon it undermined confidence in the proper execution of all the reinstatement work.” In other words, the offense was not fundamentally a crime of property damage. The infringement was psychological: Robbery of faith, theft of a miracle. After Fendrich and Dietrich-Dirschau had been sternly chastised, Fey was sentenced to twenty months in prison and Malskat to eighteen.

His reputation ruined, Fey never restored his career in conservation. Malskat fled to Sweden, where he attempted to capitalize on his celebrity, and to prove his artistic genius, by soliciting commissions. He decorated Stockholm’s Tre Kronor Restaurant in the 14th century Gothic style, and recycled his Schleswig turkeys in ersatz murals for the Royal Tennis Court. Extradited to Germany in late 1956, he served his jail term, and then faded into obscurity, eking out a living as a self-styled expressionist for his remaining thirty-two years.

However the most punishing treatment was reserved for Marienkirche itself. With the verdict, Peter Hirschfeld turned with a vengeance on the murals he’d been led to admire several years before, stating that “the forgeries should first be plastered over so as to obtain a clear surface free from all theoretical preconception and thus enable careful plans to be laid for an ideal solution of the problem by substituting true works of art for forgery, honesty for insincerity, with consequent obliteration of the stain upon morality. It should be considered the duty of any truly Christian community to carry out this task.”

In the choir, Hirschfeld had his way. Malskat’s transgression was covered up by workers, and by-and-large forgotten. In the nave, the opposite viewpoint prevailed. “The nave forgeries were deliberately left as they were,” noted the restorer Sepp Schüller, conservator of the Suermondt-Museum in Aachen, writing about the scandal in his 1959 book *Forgers, Dealers, Experts*. “They constituted a sort of warning to all concerned with art, either as amateurs or professionals.”



The contradictory responses reflect our emotional ambivalence toward a betrayal of trust: whether to obliterate or to commemorate the offense. Yet whichever decision is made, the sting of injury will pass, and people will recover their belief. According to the Lübeck entry in *Rough Guide: Germany – a Baedeker for the 21st century* – “Gothic frescoes of Christ and saints add colour to otherwise plain walls [of Marienkirche]; the pastel images only resurfaced when a fire caused by the 1942 air raid licked away the coat of whitewash.” Malskat is not mentioned, nor is his moral stain apparent in the church. For a new generation of tourists, the murals are again miraculous.

[Excerpted from *Forged: “Why Fakes Are The Great Art Of Our Age”*, by Jonathon Keats, forthcoming from Oxford University Press in January.]