

Why the Brooklyn Museum Can't Get Rid of All This Fake Art

DAVID WAGNER January 15, 2013

In 1932, a New York retail magnate bequeathed a trove of artwork to the Brooklyn Museum, but after a series of recent high-tech inspections, many of the donations turned out to be fake. And because of the benefactor's will, the museum can't even throw them out.

Col. Michael Friedsam earned his wealth as the president of a lavish Manhattan department store and prided himself on his collection of Renaissance paintings, canvasses by Dutch masters, porcelain from China, and other precious artifacts. But, after putting his 926 donations to the Brooklyn Museum through modern verification tests, curators now know that about a quarter of the items he gave the museum upon his death are fakes, including that portrait of Louis XI to the right.



Art authentication techniques have become a highly precise, forensic science since Friedsam's days. Writing about a small portrait that had been confirmed as the handiwork of Leonardo da Vinci a few years ago, Time's Dan Fletcher reported that art verification process hinged on "a high-resolution multispectral camera," "a faint fingerprint left on the canvas," "carbon dating," and analysis that revealed the canvas was painted by a left-handed person.

Many pieces from the Friedsam collection apparently didn't pass such tests. And storing all that bogus art while keeping in line with the strict Association of American Museums standards is running up the bills. DNAinfo's James Fanelli reports that the museum's tab comes to \$403,000 to set up offsite storage for the works, plus \$286,000 in rent each year. The New York Times' Patricia Cohen, following up on Fanelli's story, explains why they can't just junk the fakes:

The obvious solution — to deaccession the relatively worthless items — has been blocked, however, by clauses in Colonel Friedsam's will that require the museum to obtain permission from the estate's executors. The holdup? The last executor died in 1962, said Francesca Lisk, the Brooklyn Museum's general counsel.

Friedsam also specified in his will that if the collection were broken up, the art should be given to his broth-in-law and two of his friends. Manhattan Surrogate Court judge Nora Anderson has told the Brooklyn Museum and the New York State attorney general's office that they must reach out to the descendants of these parties if they want someone to take the art off their hands. The Brooklyn Museum has decided not to part with one of the fakes, though: this "Elderly Gentleman" which had been long mis-attributed to El Greco:

