



# HUFFPOST ARTS & CULTURE

## The Complicated Business of Spotting an Art Forgery

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When people who are shopping for original art ask me "How can I tell if a piece of art is a forgery or not?", my answers are simple and complex. The simple answer is: If you collect art for the love of art, buy directly from the artist. Unless you are in the room with the artist as she or he creates your work of art, there is no way to guarantee that they did the work. The complex answer is: Why does it matter if the artwork was actually done by the person to whom it is attributed? Does the value of a work of art lay in the price a buyer is willing to pay, or in the emotional impact the work has on the owner? Art galleries and auction houses have been known to sell forgeries, just as artists have been known to sign forgeries of their own works -- Picasso for example. Value is relative, and whether a work of art is a forgery should not matter if the work of art gives you fulfilment.

Consider that while my mother and I ran Forgery of the Month Club in the 90s, 99 percent of our customers were middle class. Virtually all of them believed they could never afford to own a work of two-dimensional art that was actually done by a well-known or famous artist. In response to that market demand, Forgery of the Month Club produced signed Rembrandt drawings, Picasso drawings and prints, Toulouse Lautrec and Whistler sketches, and works in the style of other well-known artists. Because all our customers knew mom actually did these works, we sold them at affordable prices while breaking no laws. The legal violation would have occurred if we had attempted to sell them as works produced by the attributed artists. Customer satisfaction was 100 percent.

Consider one of Vincent Van Gogh's "Portrait of Dr. Gachet" which sold for \$147 million in 1990. Certainly supply and visual seductiveness played a role in creating demand for this painting, but \$147 million worth? "Portrait of Dr. Gachet" sold for that inflated price not because there was immutable proof that he actually painted it, but for several other reasons: there was agreement that 100 years ago Vincent Van Gogh painted it; he is one of the most loved Western painters ever; it was considered a relatively safe investment and because it was sold at auction. People who attended that auction, and similar other auctions are, aside from being wealthy, competitive. That is a characteristic that is crucial to auction houses fattening their bottom lines. It is the unwillingness between bidders to lose which drives up the price and creates the emotional cachet of the authenticity of the artwork up for auction. The \$147 million paid for "Portrait of Dr. Gachet" reflects an individual's ability to pay, and their desire to dominate, or to win. Additionally the exorbitant price paid for the piece adds a compelling and emotional bettina to the work, whether or not the painting was done by Van Gogh.

Anything man can invent, man can circumvent. Let us say for example, that you are interested in purchasing a small sketch by the Flemish Baroque painter Peter Paul Reubens, who lived in the 16th century. You shy away from competing, you don't have millions to spend, and you are passionate about Reubens work. You commission Forgery of the Month Club to draw one for you. To circumvent living in the 21st century rather than in the 16th century, mom needs paper and ink from the 16th century, knowledge of Reubens body of work, and the ability to draw in his style. For the paper to be authentic, mom finds a book from that era, and carefully tears out the cover sheets. For the correct ink, she finds a recipe for the type ink Reubens used, and after two or three days practicing, mom draws in the style of Reubens, paying careful attention to line quality, proportion and the eyes of the subject. Because no catalogue of an artist's work is ever exhaustive, this sketch is attributed to Reubens. There are enough points of comparison on the sketch to pass microscopic inspection.



Forgery, however, is not limited to works of art. Provenance, which is essential for most if not all transactions in today's art world, can be forged as well. Yet the means of declaring an art work genuine however, are just as available to today's forger as they are to contemporary art specialists, investigators or auction houses.

If you wanted provenance mom might write a complaint letter to the president of Sotheby's, Christies or an insurance company. When their response letter arrived on letterhead, mom would slice it off and paste it to the provenance letter she had typed on her 1942 Olivetti typewriter. She would sign the name of a deceased employee, or a favorite pet then Xeroxes the letter eight or nine times for weathering. If that was too cumbersome, she might create a letterhead for a fictitious, but defunct insurance company, or ask me to research museum marks, and create one with which to stamp the back of the sketch.

When mom presents you with the sketch, your heart races. You are thrilled, and pay her \$750. It hangs elegantly on your wall, and you feel great looking at your Reubens. Friends and family croon over it. Does it matter if mom did the sketch? Will it matter in one hundred years? Was it worth \$750?