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Interview with Ken Perenyi, American Art Forger

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Published: February 21, 2013

The Secret History of Art interviewed Ken Perenyi, a successful career American art forger and author of a recent memoir, *Caveat Emptor*, about his escapades. He was interviewed for *The Journal of Art Crime* and *The Secret History of Art's* next book, *The Book of Forgery*, an illustrated history of fakes and forgeries, which will be published by Phaidon in 2014. What follows is an excerpt of the interview.



Could you begin by telling me about the very first work that you forged, the process of making it, and what made you turn to creating a work that would be passed off as something it was not?

The first one was a matter of circumstance that led me to it. I found myself in great need of money when I was 18, and I had already started painting. I was befriended by a well-known commercial artist from New York called Tom Daly. Under Tom's direction I discovered that I had a real natural talent for oil painting. It impressed my mentor, Tom, and I learned to paint simply by looking at Old Masters in museums. I never had lessons or formal training, it was just looking at paintings, studying them, and figuring out how the artists achieved their effects.

I started painting in 1967, with no intention of creating fakes. I wanted to paint surrealistic pictures to impress my friends at the time. The hippy era was big, and my friends from New York City were all avant-garde and were all older than me. They leased a crumbling old mansion on the Palisade cliffs overlooking the Hudson River, and so I began hanging out there with them. I wanted to fit in and impress them, so I started painting a number of surrealistic pictures. But everyone who looked at them said that they seem to be influenced by the Old Masters—that wasn't a criticism, just an observation. And that's the way I understood how to paint, to layer and make things appear like the Old Masters.

I spent a lot of time in museums, studying painting. When I found myself in desperate need of cash, Tom Daly joked that I should try forging a painting. He gave me a book about the forger [Han] van Meegeren, that he had just finished reading. I was impressed, and in the brashness of youth, I figured, maybe I can do this?

On my next trip to the museum, I visited the Flemish section. The 16th century panel portraits struck me as pieces that would be easy to emulate. So why not try something like this? I painted one on a small wooden panel that I scavenged from the bottom a drawer of an early piece of furniture. I managed to make a fine little portrait on the panel, and was able to sell it to a gallery on 57th Street [in New York]. I got \$800 for it—that was my first fake. From that point on, it wasn't a matter of if I would paint another fake, but when. But I didn't look upon it as a career at that point, I saw it as something I could always fall back on, to raise some quick cash, until a turning point came later in life.

For that first piece did you create any accompanying provenance, or was the painting itself enough to convince the gallery?



The painting itself was enough. I think I was believable because I was young, and my story was that I'd simply inherited a few things from a deceased uncle. I think the dealer probably looked me over and thought that this guy's not sophisticated enough to even know what a provenance is, so I'll accept the story. But the painting was convincing. I have a technique of engraving cracks [craquelure] that I can still do to this day—I can engrave a line as fine as a human hair, control it in any pattern that I want. It's a very convincing technique, although I don't engrave cracks anymore—I've since developed more sophisticated ways of persuading cracks to appear on paintings.

Did you try van Meegeren's Bakelite method at any point?

No, I thought it was really too complicated. For awhile I bought some of the lavender oil that he used, and I tried assembling some of his materials, but gave up on it as too complicated. But when I read in a book about him that some artists engraved cracks, I thought that this sounded like the path of least resistance.

For future forgeries did you find that your technique evolved, either in how you created the forgery or in how you passed works off as original?

I never really tried to develop an elaborate story or provenance. What worked for me the first time set the pattern. I'd simply walk into a gallery and say that I had a painting I wanted to sell. I'd always have a vague story: I got it from a deceased relative, I found it in a flea market, I found it in my attic. A simple story and that was it. I figured that if they didn't buy it, I'd just go to the next place. Around the city there were an abundance of galleries that advertised "We buy antique paintings," practically begging people to come in. So it really was not a problem to sell the things.

About how many pieces in total do you think you made, and successfully passed off, over your career?

I have, in my photo archive, photos of at least a thousand paintings, many of which I've passed off as originals. Now, there's another portion of that collection of photos that I have sold to various people through the years—so-called "dealers" of dubious repute. Folks who have bought them knowing they were fakes, but who probably sold them as originals. So I'd hesitate to give any more specific numbers, but I'm working on my archives, trying to sort it all out for future publication, a catalogue raisonné. I sold a lot of works as originals, but I also sold a lot of works as fakes that were probably sold as original.

How long would one painting, for instance the first that you made, take you to paint, and how long would it take you to artificially age?

I was always a fast painter, and I think a lot of people were impressed with how quickly I turn out even a complicated painting. The small Flemish and Dutch-style paintings that I turned out in the early days, they never took more than a few days, a week at most, to paint. I could do them faster later on, maybe two days. Early on, though, they took me maybe a few days to paint, but then I would go through the drying process, which meant exposing them to the sun for long periods of time, also to heat lamps. You have to dry the paint. And remember, for this type of painting, whether Dutch or early American, there's very little build-up of paint, impasto, they're thinly painted, so to get that paint at least superficially hardened doesn't really take that much. Now, it won't stand up to an attack of acetone, but it's going to look hard and feel hard, and that's all I was after, that was enough. I always stressed having things look forensically correct, rather than being technically correct. I would say a lot of my paintings, if subjected to real testing, well, they would never have passed, but that's never done. Experts look at something and believe in their eyes, in their expertise, and that's what sells the painting.



Did you ever in your career come across another art forger, and compare techniques?

No. People often ask if there is a fraternity of art forgers who swap stories. No, I have never met another forger—nor did I have any real desire to. Throughout the years I would occasionally read about forgers, but I noted that the forgers that had become public had always dealt with modern works: Picassos, Matisses that did not really require extensive technical work such as creating cracks and finding period supports. The only artists I read about who went to the trouble of making Old Masters were Han van Meegeren—and Tom Keating to a certain degree. But maybe I'm in something of a class of my own, in that I've chosen to create period paintings that require a great deal of planning, technical planning, as opposed to people who make modern works. I probably would've made a lot more money if I had been painting Post-Impressionists.

It would have certainly been easier.

My love has always been in period art.

The other book, besides those on van Meegeren, that is popular and tends to be found in the libraries of forgers is Eric Hebborn's memoir, *Drawn to Trouble*, and his manual on forgery, *The Art Forger's Handbook*. Did you ever use his books?

He mostly dealt with drawings, so I skimmed through his books, but it didn't capture my attention, it seemed too far from my area of expertise.

Later in your career, did the police ever ask you for help on other forgery cases?

No, they have never communicated with me, and frankly I would not offer my services as a consultant, on principle. I look upon them as the other side, and I'm not interested in working with them.

Could you give some suggestions for contemporary art collectors, as to what collectors might look for in order not to be fooled, themselves, by a forger?

That could cover a lot of areas. I still see my paintings turning up here and there in catalogues, as originals. I kind of feel that if a forger is as dedicated as I was, you can make paintings that could fool anyone and go on forever as being considered period. It's all about how talented the forger is. Time is the test, and eventually a fake will reveal itself, that deficiencies will reveal themselves. If so, I've done pretty well, as I see my own pieces still considered originals.

When you deal with big-name painters, those works should have a provenance. A Picasso, a Modigliani. They should have a history. In the area I chose to target, it was perfectly plausible for a painting not to have a provenance. Even to this day, a Martin Johnson Heade could turn up in a flea market with no further known history. If you are collecting and spending money on art, the only protection you really have is to buy from a big auction house or big dealer, so that if you discover later on that the picture is not correct, you have recourse to go back and request a refund. But if you bought a work through some private person, based on someone's word, and you find out you've been taken, well, you'll have a real hard time. From my own experience, a forger can make a truly great painting, almost impossible to detect, so you want to know that, in the event you buy a fake, that you have recourse. Understand that at a gallery you're getting some protection, but you're also overpaying in most cases. The best deal of all is usually through an auction house, which offers some protection but also allows the market to determine the price of the object.

I would say, you know, buyer beware. There's risk in everything.