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Are Forgers the "Foremost Artists of Our Age"? Author Jonathon Keats Argues Yes

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There are a number of surprising statements in Jonathon Keats's new book "Forged: Why Fakes Are the Great Art of Our Day" (Oxford). "No authentic modern masterpiece is as provocative as a great forgery." "Forgers are the foremost artists of our age." "Fakes are arguably the most authentic of artifacts." I don't think Keats proves any of these ideas, and I'm not sure he even believes them. He's written a terrific narrative about six master forgers, and enclosed it in a rather flimsy theoretical envelope.



Keats wants us to believe that a) modern art is about anxiety, and b) art forgery does a much better job at inducing anxiety, so therefore c) forgery attains a higher level of artistic achievement. As he puts it, "legitimate art can only simulate the violations that forgeries perpetrate. In that sense, forgeries are more real than the real art they fake." He's taking several short-cuts here, above all by not making any distinction between the kinds of anxiety that are provoked by authentic artworks and forged ones. Forgeries create anxiety only when discovered — at their most successful, they're incognito. And it's primarily economic anxiety: a forger's dishonesty can make museums and collectors wonder about the value of their acquisitions and cast serious doubt onto the self-regulating abilities of the art market. But Keats is certainly right that these forgeries have a claim to greatness. Forgers can re-create bygone styles and channel the talent of great artists of the past, but, in order for their talent to be known, the fraud has to be revealed. And it's remarkable how often the forgers that Keats has profiled spilled the beans about their trickery because they craved credit and recognition (even penning autobiographies with clever titles like "Drawn to Trouble" and "The Fake's Progress"). In addition to their artistic skill, they are also amateur scientists, employing various techniques to make forged artworks look old, such as sandblasting marble, dipping it in acid, and searing it with a torch to make cracks, or adding Bakelite (an ancestor of modern plastic) to hand-ground pigments to imitate Old Master oil paint.

There is no single motive behind art forgery, and the forgers described here have different ambitions. At one extreme, Elmyr de Hory (1906-1976) lived an extravagant lifestyle with a made-up aristocratic pedigree, at one point selling dozens of fake modern masterpieces to a gullible American oil tycoon. In a very different vein, British everyman Tom Keating (1917-1984) claimed his motivation was to take revenge on the art market for the sufferings of his "artist brothers" and didn't attempt to get rich — he even gave away his fakes to neighbors and acquaintances in the local pub.

The most recent forger profiled in the book, Eric Hebborn, died in 1996, bludgeoned to death by an unknown assailant (perhaps a duped buyer or an implicated dealer?). It's curious that Keats doesn't mention the spectacular forgery of Wolfgang Beltracchi, who, along with his wife, is currently serving a six-year sentence in a Cologne prison for selling forged artworks with an estimated total of \$22 million. Like Elmyr de Hory, Beltracchi used his fraud to finance a luxurious lifestyle, buying mansions in Germany and the south of France. His case is still sending ripples through the art world, with the indictment of a museum director in Germany earlier this month for allegedly arranging the sale of a suspected Beltracchi forgery.



It takes time to ferret out the works of art forgers. Some are remarkably tenacious. Keats tells the story of the Marienkirche in the northern German town of Lübeck, where traces of 14th-century frescoes were revealed when the British carpet-bombed the church during World War II and centuries of whitewash were literally burned off the walls. Unfortunately the murals were turning to dust and had to be “restored” (i.e. painted anew) by Lothar Malskat (1913-1988) after the war. Malskat even created a new fresco entirely from scratch. Angry at the unscrupulous restorer who paid him a pittance for his achievement, and eager for recognition, Malskat exposed the fraud. But today, a German guidebook describes the Marienkirche as the site of authentic Gothic frescoes that were miraculously recovered. It’s such a good story — it’s just too bad it isn’t true.