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A Forger's Impressions of Impressionism

Guy Ribes's Paintings Lend Realistic Touches to 'Renoir'

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On a sunny weekday morning in a cafe in Brooklyn the French director Gilles Bourdos is flipping through his laptop's gallery of international art. There's a charcoal study of Cézanne card players; Picasso's inkblot Don Quixote, tilting his lance at the Spanish sun; and a blue-hued, Old World fantasy, bearing the kaleidoscopic hallmarks of Marc Chagall. Many would consider the images art. The authorities considered them evidence. All are from the case file of Guy Ribes, the convicted French art forger whose hands have copied some of the world's great masterpieces and are currently starring in Mr. Bourdos's new movie.



Michel Bouquet plays the Impressionist Pierre-Auguste Renoir in "Renoir." The film features paintings by the forger Guy Ribes.

"Renoir," which opens in New York and Los Angeles on Friday, is a highbrow domestic drama, set in 1915. It focuses on Pierre-Auguste Renoir (Michel Bouquet), the giant of Impressionism; his son Jean, the future giant of cinema; and the woman who would become the father's last model and the son's first wife. Writing in *The New York Times*, the critic Stephen Holden described it as a "gorgeous film" that "visualizes the world as observed by an enfeebled artist who is kept alive by his obsession with how the skin of a beautiful woman absorbs light." In doing so Mr. Bourdos's film tackles one of the more slippery subjects in cinema, the making of art.

Creative genius can be a car wreck, but it's a lot harder to capture on film. Mr. Bourdos was well aware of this and for his own inspiration looked at how two different directors approached another titan of modern art, Vincent van Gogh.

"Vincente Minnelli recreated the work of van Gogh in the look of his film, and its composition," Mr. Bourdos said, referring to "Lust for Life," the Kirk Douglas vehicle of 1956. Moving onto the movie "Van Gogh," he continued, "Maurice Pialat eliminated completely the representations of the paintings in his 1991 film. So what I tried to do was find a third way. I didn't want to use any computer re-creations of the paintings. And I wanted them to be shown being created in the moment."

Enter Mr. Ribes, whom Mr. Bourdos had heard about through art world experts. "He was very well known among the gallery owners," Mr. Bourdos said. "And for good reason. They'd bought his paintings."

To call Mr. Ribes a colorful character is putting it mildly. Born in a brothel to a prostitute mother and a gangster father, he's a former member of the French Foreign Legion and a lifelong devotee of the great painters. Although he created and sold his own work early on, he also provided paintings "inspired" by the masters to a criminal art ring that sold the paintings as genuine.

Rather than copy known work Mr. Ribes would create work that simulated style, paintings that might have been done by Picasso or Chagall or Renoir and, say, languished in a private collection before



being made available to gullible buyers. For this Mr. Ribes, at the age of 61, was sentenced to three years in prison, getting out in December 2010.

“I was in a rather precarious situation when this project was proposed to me,” Mr. Ribes said by phone from Paris, referring to his post-prison finances. Mr. Bourdos hired him in May 2011 and put him in a studio next to his office, and Mr. Ribes worked for six months on the paintings that appear in the film — not just re-creations of existing Renoirs but also paintings he might have done.

“It was very important for us to do that very intense period of preparation,” said Mr. Ribes, who was granted, with Mr. Bourdos, a privileged visit to the Musée d’Orsay’s store of Renoirs, many of which are not on regular display in the museum’s Paris galleries. He was able to study, more closely than ever, the techniques that make Renoirs Renoirs.

In the film Mr. Bouquet is shown outdoors, a brush in Renoir’s bandaged, arthritic hands, putting color to canvas; when the camera cuts to the painting, it is Mr. Ribes’s hand applying the paint.

“I found his hand could be directed the same way you direct an actor,” Mr. Bourdos said. “When he had to paint a Renoir, he had a very specific way of moving his hand. He had to fall into that rhythm of the painting, so it would be correct.” The actions of Mr. Bouquet and Mr. Ribes, of course, had to be coordinated.

“I became his coach,” Mr. Ribes said of Mr. Bouquet. “A different coach than Gilles, because he was focusing on the text, and I was making sure the hand gestures reflected mine.”

Although many faux Renoirs, 73 in all, appear in “Renoir,” the film did not face the copyright issues that have bedeviled other art-oriented movies, like “Basquiat,” when an estate won’t allow the use of the artist’s images and they have to be omitted, or recreated (in the case of Jean-Michel Basquiat’s work, by the director, Julian Schnabel). To Mr. Bourdos, Mr. Ribes’s paintings give “Renoir” a vitality it could never have achieved otherwise and helped avoid the problems faced by a production like “Surviving Picasso,” the Merchant-Ivory film of 1996.

“I wish he’d been around when we were making our film,” the director James Ivory said of Mr. Ribes. “We were absolutely forbidden to use anything that Picasso had created, including anything he wrote. I thought it was a sad thing. It would have, visually, been a different film.”

Mr. Ivory said he avoided talking to the press about his film’s nonuse of real Picassos, thinking at the time it might damage public perception of the movie. Mr. Bourdos, conversely, seems to take joy in Mr. Ribes’s contributions.

“He could look at a painting and see the artist’s soul, and that’s what made him such a good forger,” Mr. Bourdos said. “He would have been very much at home as a classical painter, or a Renaissance painter, or in a tradition of painting Madonnas in a church. Renoir saw himself as an artisan. That’s Guy’s approach as well.”

In France Mr. Ribes’s profile was enhanced by an interview, after he left prison, with the writer Jean-Baptiste Périétié. They are now collaborating on a book.

“One of the things we’ll put at the end is his work on the film,” Mr. Périétié said, “and that he’ll probably work on other films in the future.

“It’s funny, isn’t it,” Mr. Périétié added, “that the same thing that led to his conviction is what he’s being paid legally to do?”