

# NewStatesman

## In Praise of the Fake

*If the best art excites our emotions, makes us question the world around us, and exhibits astonishing skill... what better than forgeries?*

BY JONATHON KEATS PUBLISHED 03 MAY 2013

When the New Orleans Museum of Art received a donation from Mark A. Landis in 1987, the curators had no idea how lucky they were. While the watercolor bore the signature of Marie Laurencin, a minor French Cubist, Landis himself was the painter. Over the next several decades, often disguised as a priest, Landis gifted at least a hundred more fakes to some fifty American museums, boosting their holdings in names ranging from Paul Signac to Charles Courtney Curran to Pablo Picasso.



The New Orleans Museum was fortunate – though the curators may beg to differ – because Landis is now more noteworthy than Laurencin.

To be sure, his watercolor isn't much to look at, faithful as it is to Laurencin's sentimentalism, but the con job he perpetrated is astonishing. As one of the foremost forgers of our time, Landis is one of the greatest artists.

To appreciate Landis as an important artist, and to recognize forgery as a vital art form, you have to set aside the antiquated notion of art as a precious bauble. Since the advent of Modernism in the mid-nineteenth century, serious artists have been battling that perception, struggling to make art subversive. Impressionism and Cubism presented radical challenges to how we visualize the world. Dada and Surrealism undermined our confidence in logic. Expressionism – both figurative and abstract – bombarded us with visions of existential crisis. Pop Art made a show trial of consumerism. These are oversimplifications of course, but they suggest a common cause shared by all modern art worthy of attention. The most significant artists provoke us to examine ourselves and our civilization.

Yet the provocation is seldom sufficient for most people to take notice, let alone to question their worldview. That's because even the fiercest work is tamed when it's presented as art. Edvard Munch's paintings won't actually pain you, nor will Marina Abramovic's performances (unless you happen to be one of her volunteers). Well-lit and air-conditioned, museums are safe havens. Expert wall texts provide comforting explanations. Any anxiety you feel is just a passing thrill, like the fear you experience watching a horror film.

And anyway, only a small minority of people visit museums and galleries in the first place. Generally patrons are well-educated, liberal, urban and affluent. Those may be good demographics for cultivating donors or clients, but art can hardly change the world if it reaches only an elite.

Forgeries have none of the limitations of legitimate art. They're anything but safe, and encountering them is anything but voluntary. When a forger perpetrates a fraud, he or she plays to our blind spots. And if the forger is caught, the ensuing scandal broadly exposes the false assumptions and flaws in



our system that permitted the deception. In the aftermath of a great forgery, we see ourselves and our world more clearly.

Take the case of the Dutch painter Han van Meegeren, the most famous art forger of the 20th century. In the late 1930s, van Meegeren faked a painting by Johannes Vermeer that looked nothing like Vermeer's known pictures. It was a Biblical scene, showing Christ breaking bread at Emmaus, and it seemed to validate the longstanding claim of a leading Dutch scholar, Abraham Bredius, who believed that Vermeer had gone through a lost religious phase. Bredius eagerly authenticated the painting. (In *The Burlington Magazine*, the toniest art journal of the day, he even declared it to be "the masterpiece of Johannes Vermeer of Delft".) His endorsement was a license for van Meegeren to produce more in the same style, and World War II made the paintings ridiculously easy to sell since patriotic Dutchmen were desperate to keep their patrimony out of Hitler's collections.

Van Meegeren painted one too many. His version of Christ and the adulteress was acquired by Nazi Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring, the Luftwaffe commander who'd recently leveled Rotterdam. After the war, van Meegeren was discovered to have been the seller, and charged with criminal disloyalty to Holland. He confessed to the far lesser crime of art forgery. His court case garnered worldwide media attention, featured in newsreels and magazine articles. "The knowledge and integrity of many experts... stood on trial," wrote Irving Wallace in *The Saturday Evening Post*. More broadly, the van Meegeren scandal encouraged people to question the mechanisms of authority – buttressed by the war – that protected his ghastly paintings from public scrutiny.

Maybe van Meegeren couldn't have done it today, but there are myriad other ways in which forgers manipulate everything we take for granted. Tweaking those beliefs, more than any technical skill, is the forger's *métier*. One of the last big cases of the 20th century played out on eBay in 1998, when a seller named Kenneth Walton brushed the initials RD52 on a colorful abstract painting he found in a junkshop, leading bidders to believe they were outsmarting him – and getting the deal of a lifetime – by buying a 1952 canvas by Richard Diebenkorn. With the help of a little shill bidding, the painting topped \$135,000 before the FBI closed in. The scandal reverberated far beyond the art world, engaging audiences that had never even been online, let alone heard of Diebenkorn. Just three years after eBay was founded, Walton's con job revealed how ill-adapted human instincts are for negotiating the virtual marketplace.

While Walton had scarcely touched a paintbrush, he was a great artist because his scam made us examine our nascent relationship with the world wide web. Sure it was a crime – for which Walton was punished with a jail term – but art can't be judged by legal standards, let alone by an artist's character. (After all, Caravaggio was a murderer.) We can appreciate the con without condoning it.

And forgery is not necessarily a crime. Mark Landis has never been charged because he's always given away his fakes. He donates them to minor museums, often in memory of his parents. He declines to take a tax deduction. Sometimes he offers to pay for framing.

Most of his forgeries are mediocre. Many are painted directly atop printed photos of the original paintings, downloaded from the internet. Some have gaps where you can see pixelation, as curators have noticed long after he's gone. They've spread word about him, so he's taken up aliases. For a while, one of his favorites was Jesuit Father Arthur Scott.

Several newspapers have interviewed Landis, trying to ascertain why he'd selflessly pass off fakes. His responses are inconsistent and hardly convincing. (He told the *Financial Times* that he wanted to commemorate his parents but couldn't afford a suitable memorial, a touching story until you consider how many paintings he's donated under fictitious names.) What makes Landis's work so provocative is that it defies conventional thinking. Curators are duped over and over again because the conman's munificence disarms them. Evidently our materialist culture has a blind spot for generosity. His fakes are more subversive, and thus more artistically compelling, than the Signacs and Picassos he copies.



The great irony is that forgeries are more real than the real artworks they fake. They genuinely manipulate society rather than merely illustrating alternate points of view. There are no boundaries, no frames or explanatory texts. We are at once the forger's materials, subject, and audience.

Artists need not be taken aback by the fact that forgers are outperforming them. On the contrary, artists should take the subversiveness of forgery as inspiration. Artists have a natural advantage, since forgers are inclined to hide their ruses. (Their forgeries can only become great art if they're exposed.) Most forgers don't want to get caught. In contrast, artists can flaunt their subversions.

In 2011 the new media artists Julian Oliver and Danja Vasiliev built a simple device that allowed them to hijack the wi-fi signal in a library, and to remotely edit the content of news sites such as nytimes.com so that everyone in the room reading the New York Times on a wireless device would see modified headlines. Then they posted the blueprints online so that anybody with a soldering iron could manufacture the appliance.

Countless artworks comment on the unreliability of information in the digital age. Oliver and Vasiliev make the precariousness palpable. Any time you use public wi-fi, you have to wonder whether someone has installed their device in your vicinity. Your anxiety is real, and leads to honest questioning of everything you believe. All art should be so engaging.

Jonathon Keats is most recently the author of *Forged: Why Fakes Are The Great Art Of Our Age* (Oxford University Press).