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Forged: Why Fakes Are the Great Art of Our Age by Jonathon Keats – review

Great art? Fakes and forgeries are, by their nature, reactionary.

In his wonderful collection, *Pricksongs & Descants*, Robert Coover wrote: "What is life, after all, but a caravan of lifelike forgeries?" This neatly encapsulates the postmodern fascination with the ersatz and the phony, suggesting there is no authentic reality, but merely a succession of imitations designed to gull us into believing in them. The figure of the forger occurs with curious persistence in avant-garde fictions: it is central to Wyndham Lewis's scathing *The Revenge for Love*, is part of the warp and weft of aesthetic legerdemain in *The Cornish Trilogy* by Robertson Davies, and is perhaps most thoroughly and dynamically explored in William Gaddis's masterpiece, *The Recognitions*.



Scandalous brilliance ... Han van Meegeren sold his painting *Christ and the Adulteress* as a Vermeer

In the characters of Victor Stamp, Francis Cornish and Wyatt Gwyon there is a similarity that extends to the real life art-forgers described in Jonathon Keats's entertaining volume: they have talent, but it is shy of genius, and they are sceptical about dominant trends in modern art. The mixture of an inferiority complex and remarkable technical skill can lead to some rather dark places.

The best part of *Forged: Why Fakes Are the Great Art of Our Age* is not what comes after the colon. Keats discusses six notorious forgers or forgeries: Lothar Malskat, who did not restore but invented the murals in the Lübeck Marienkirche under the direction of the art historian Dietrich Fey; Alceo Dossena's Roman and Renaissance sculptures; Han van Meegeren's Vermeers; Eric Hebborn's flood of fakes – and his fake confessions to fakes; Elmyr de Hory, whose career as a forger may be a fake, and whose collaboration on a confession with Clifford Irving can be seen as a trial run for Irving's better-known fake, *The Autobiography of Howard Hughes*; and finally, the winning Tom Keating, who turned from forgery to documentaries on painting.

It seems to me that a distinction ought to have been drawn between forgeries and fakes. Forgery implies a copy of a pre-existing work, such as Andrea del Sarto's version of Raphael's portrait of Pope Leo X, or indeed Scaroth the Jagaroth's multiple Mona Lisas in the Doctor Who story "City of Death". Fakes are original works in the style of another artist, and allow much more of the "getting one over on the experts" attitude that seems to motivate so many fakers. Partly, this involves knowing the preferences and predilections of the target. One example is the dislikable hoax perpetrated by Raphael Mengs (and possibly Giacomo Casanova) on the German art critic and classicist Johann Winckelmann. Winckelmann authenticated a supposedly Roman fresco concocted by Mengs. The subject – Jupiter kissing Ganymede – was selected to play on Winckelmann's repressed homosexuality. Malskat confessed that, in creating the fake murals in St Petri-Dom cathedral in Schleswig, he deliberately made the apostles look Viking to appease the Nazi authorities (as well as using the Austrian film star Hansi Knoteck as the Virgin Mary). When he erroneously put some turkeys into a purportedly medieval painting, it sent the Nazis into ecstasies: surely this was proof that America was discovered by Teutonic explorers. Van Meegeren profited under the Nazi occupation of Holland,



leading to the wonderfully paradoxical court case where he had to prove he was a forger to avoid a postwar charge of selling national treasures to the Nazis: he had hoodwinked Hermann Göring with a fake Vermeer of Christ and the Adulteress. Dossena's classicism was a neat fit to Mussolini's co-opting of the Roman past, and he was apparently working on a bust of Il Duce when the scandal about his activities broke (precipitated, as is often the case, when he realised his dealers were making more from his endeavours than he was).

More appealing figures are De Hory, Keating and Hebborn, although Hebborn's murder in 1996 remains unsolved. Given the self-satisfaction of connoisseurs and the venality of auction houses, it is difficult not to side with the forger; a sentiment echoed in the lovely story "Rumpole and the Genuine Article" by John Mortimer. Rumpole gets his client off by quoting another Keats, "a thing of beauty is a joy forever". Either the victim genuinely liked the painting, in which case it was worth the money, or bought it as an investment, in which case, as the saying goes, value may go down as well as up.

The contention that fakes are the supreme modern art form rests on a false syllogism: modern art, Keats argues, intends to unsettle; fakes unsettle us; therefore fakes are great art. There is, I would argue, a difference between the psychologically disturbing impact of the Rothko chapel or Ken Currie's Three Oncologists and the anxiety of uncertainty over a forgery. In some ways, the forgery is more akin to a social faux pas, an intellectual gaffe.

But that is not to say that fakes and forgeries cannot inform modern art; the fake work is not purposeless, but has palpable designs on us. In discussing Duchamp, Keats does not mention that the original Fountain was lost, and that Duchamp made several versions of it in secret, thus preventing his original provocation becoming fetishised. The numerous blank canvases Salvador Dalí signed at the end of his life can be seen as a final act of disdainful rebellion.

Milan Kundera has a thought experiment in *The Curtain* where he imagines a composer who could create works in exactly the style of Beethoven. To do so now would not, Kundera argues, be just kitsch, but abominable. It would be a betrayal of art's function in looking forward, developing new aesthetic strategies, breaking fresh ground in expression. The fake, the forgery, the hoax is by its very nature reactionary, however intriguing the stories of the forgers are.