

## NEW STRAITS TIMES

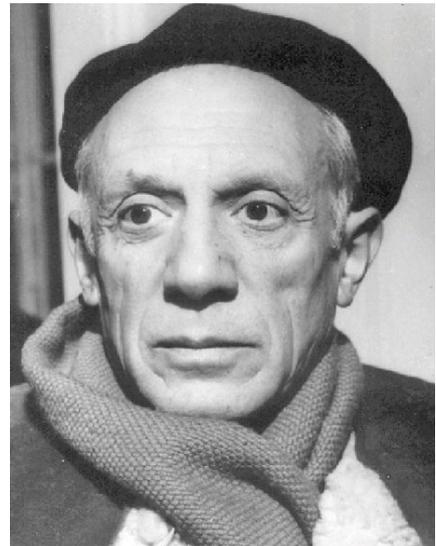
### ART: Forged and famous

*James McConnachie offers a compelling look at six forgers and their cunning techniques*

21 July 2013

IN 1938, a German historian noticed something odd about the newly restored 13th-century wall paintings inside Schleswig's cathedral. It wasn't the anachronistic presence of Vikings, nor that the Virgin Mary looked strangely like the Austrian cinema starlet Hansi Knoteck. It was the turkeys. In the Nazi context of the times, however, even turkeys were not a problem: It was triumphantly concluded that, two centuries before Columbus, Viking Aryans must have visited the Americas. History might be faked; German art could not be.

In truth, the turkeys were the restorer's enthusiastic attempt to fill uncomfortably empty space. He was a German housepainter turned art restorer, Lothar Malskat (1913-88), and Schleswig was only his apprenticeship in fakery. His real opportunity came in Easter 1942, when Allied carpet-bombing stripped the whitewash off the walls of Lubeck's Marienkirche.



The great Pablo Picasso

Drawing on art books (and the faces of himself, his father, local labourers and Rasputin), Malskat scrubbed away the originals and repainted afresh. He even added 21 new, 3m-tall "gothic" figures, where none had stood before. Despite turkeys and 3m Aryans, German art experts once again accepted that the paintings were not just authentic, but medieval masterpieces. Time magazine ran a whole piece about them.

The ability of fake art to humble the experts is irresistible. It's why fakes have spawned so many exhibitions and TV programmes, and why the critic and artist Jonathon Keats's collection of six tales of great 20th-century forgers is so enjoyable. His forgers seem motivated less by greed than by a common desire to take revenge on an exclusive art elite. It's hard not to cheer them on — not least, as Keats cleverly points out, because doing so puts us on the right side of the "credibility gap".

The two British forgers included certainly presented themselves as anti-establishment figures.

Tom Keating (1917-84), who became a star with his televised forgeries of oil paintings in 1982, protested against "the merchants who make capital out of those I am proud to call my brother artists".

The other is Eric Hebborn (1934-96), who executed up to 1,000 drawings in the style of a staggering range of Old Masters.

In truth, both Keating and Hebborn must have made small fortunes from their work, though Keats is oddly vague on the details. He's less forgiving about the Dutch pro-Nazi forger Han van Meegeren (1889-1947). The quintessential embittered virtuoso, the young van Meegeren could find no critical admirers for his technically superb yet hackneyed tableaux.



## VAN MEEGEREN'S REVENGE

His revenge began with his earliest counterfeits, copies of Frans Hals, but his “masterpieces” were seven brand-new, unknown Vermeers — notably the shockingly Caravaggesque Supper at Emmaus, whose “discovery” in 1937 the experts lauded as “the most important art historical event of this century”. The painting sold to the Museum Boijmans in Rotterdam for 520,000 guilders (RM988,476) — a sum equivalent to STG2.6m (RM12.5m) today. That was nothing, however, to the 1.6m guilders the Nazi leader Hermann Goring paid for his Christ and the Adulteress.

Keats himself is a conceptual artist, not a painter, so it's perhaps not surprising that he focuses on telling good yarns rather than discussing technique. This is disappointing, as the one time he gets into detail, it's fascinating. The problem with faking Old Masters, he reveals, is that paint based on linseed oil only dries after 100 years or so. Any younger, and it can be dissolved in alcohol — and dealers used this as a quick test.

Van Meegeren at first got around this problem by using a gelatin-based glue, but when a collector found his Laughing Cavalier unexpectedly dissolved in water, and demanded a refund, a new solution had to be found. Van Meegeren's answer was the early plastic Bakelite, which dissolved in neither alcohol nor water — and could survive the oven-baking of an accelerated ageing process.

The elusive Elmyr de Hory (1906-76) found a simpler answer: He forged more recent works by Picasso, Matisse, Modigliani and the like. A bit of dirt in the linseed oil did the job, and his dealers even took his fakes to the “original” artists for authentication. On being shown a de Hory forgery ascribed to him, the ageing Dutch fauvist Kees van Dongen allegedly reminisced fondly about how often he had made love to the model.

For Keats, de Hory emerges as the apotheosis of the forger. His very identity seems to have been faked, and his story became the subject of Orson Welles' last film, F For Fake. Even as his own (original) paintings became collectors' items, art experts became so accustomed to his fakes that genuine works — by the fauvist Raoul Dufy, for instance — were rejected as not having the right “hand”.

De Hory was even accused by his erstwhile dealer and partner in crime of being a “false forger”: Of claiming to have forged real works so as to be credited with forgery skills he did not really possess.

Keats's six stories are bookended by two disjointed and mildly pretentious essays on fake art that try to give it a conceptual spin. His headline claim is that “fakes are the great art of our age”. His reasoning seems to run that great modern art is anxious; fakes also make us anxious (about art); fakes are therefore great art. This is clearly a fallacy, and Keats's attempt at an intellectual gloss, as so often with writing about contemporary art, is all too easily dissolved. He should have stuck to the stories. They're good ones.

## FAME WITH NO NAME

Such was the urge of German forger Lothar Malskat to be recognised as an artistic genius, Jonathon Keats reveals, that in May 1952 Malskat himself walked into a police station to confess.

“Everybody raved about my beautiful murals,” he complained. “Nobody even knew my name.”