

The Telegraph

Warning of 'industrial' trade in fake paintings

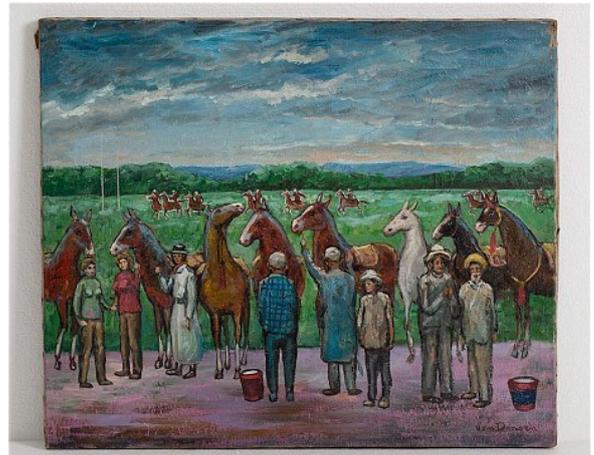
By Claire Duffin, and Robert Mendick
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Bill Harbord, 82, is thought to have earned hundreds of thousands of pounds from the sale of fakes at some of London's busiest antiques markets

A renowned German museum is warning tourists to Britain's busiest art and antiques markets to avoid an 82-year-old dealer accused of selling fake paintings on an "industrial scale".

Bill Harbord, who has been trading art for half a century, is thought to have earned hundreds of thousands of pounds from the sale of fakes. The scale of Mr Harbord's enterprise has alarmed experts. The pictures he stocks — he has hundreds at his home — are purportedly by highly collectible modern artists. They are signed and often come with official-looking stamps and in distressed frames.

Mr Harbord lets customers believe the works are genuine and sells them for anywhere between £45 and £250 apiece, a tempting gamble for the thousands of visitors to the Portobello Road and Covent Garden markets in London, where he operates.



A work for sale on Mr Harbord's stall which claims to be a van Dongen

Experts say the sheer number of fakes being sold is damaging confidence in the market. A museum in Hannover recently issued an alert over more than 100 collages sold as genuine works by Kurt Schwitters, one of Germany's best-known modern artists.

Dr Isabel Schulz, the head of the Kurt Schwitters archive at the Sprengel Museum, told The Sunday Telegraph that at least seven could be traced to Mr Harbord's stall. "It is very worrying," she said. "I am really angry because they are using Schwitters's name to make money and in doing so they are damaging his reputation."

Prompted by the museum's concerns, undercover reporters from The Sunday Telegraph bought a number of works from Mr Harbord last week, including a collage purported to be by Schwitters and a watercolour claimed to be by the French Fauvist painter Raoul Dufy which was stamped with the details of his agent.

Reporters were told the works were genuine, only for experts to dismiss them as forgeries.

Trading standards officers announced an investigation after being shown footage of the transactions. "This looks and sounds like it could potentially be a breach of fair trading legislation," said Sue Jones, Westminster City Council trading standards manager, "If people are being falsely led to believe they are buying a genuine article when it is anything but genuine, that is a con. We will be looking into this." The disclosure will add to the concern about the growing problem of art fraud, with many amateur buyers now being caught out by a practice known as 'trapping' where fake works are sold at supposedly bargain prices on the basis they might be genuine.



Experts say the sheer number of fakes now available undermines the art market and creates confusion over what works and artists can be trusted. Last week, a French institution ordered that a fake Marc Chagall painting be burnt. The owner, a Leeds businessman, had bought it for £100,000 in 1992, in the hope it was genuine and worth a lot more.

Philip Mould, an art dealer and presenter of BBC One's *Fake or Fortune*, said: "The industrial-scale production of these fakes has a wearing effect on people's perception of the art world. It damages confidence."

Mr Harbord sells his paintings for just a few hundred pounds, making them affordable to ordinary buyers, further enticed by the prospect that the painting might just be genuine.

Scientific testing of the 'Schwitters' collage bought last week by *The Sunday Telegraph* showed it to be a forgery. A genuine collage is worth at least £50,000.

Another of the paintings sold by Mr Harbord and his wife Enid, 80, was a watercolour, which they claimed was by Raoul Dufy, a French fauvist painter, who died in 1953. The painting was stamped on the back with "Durand-Ruel, 87 Avenue de Friedland Paris (8th)", the name of Dufy's agent.

Mr Harbord told the undercover reporter: "It's stamped on the back of the picture". Mrs Harbord added: "That is the gallery it was purchased from." Asked if it was a real Dufy, Mr Harbord replied: "Yeah, of course."

Last week at his home in south east London, Mr Harbord vehemently denied any wrongdoing. "You are climbing up the wrong tree. I never, never [said they were real]," said Mr Harbord, "No I am sorry, we did not. I never said they were genuine, never, ever."

He added: "Do they [customers] realistically think they can get a genuine article for that kind of price? "If you have someone who has lost £10,000 because of me, then you have something to write about."