

Can you spot the fake?

Springfield Museums exhibit examines widespread problem of forged paintings

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'Struggling artist' might be a cliché, but it also describes a common predicament: It's not easy to make a living out of art.

Unless, perhaps, you want to try your hand at forgery.

"Intent to Deceive: Fakes and Forgeries in the Art World," a new exhibit at the D'Amour Museum of Fine Arts in Springfield, examines the widespread problem of phony artwork, from remakes of genuine paintings and drawings to forged work created in the style of particular artists.



Concentrating on the work of five famous forgers of the 20th century, the exhibit presents a story of intrigue, deception and courtroom drama — even homicide — while also exploring the motivation of the five forgers, who collectively imitated the work of Matisse, Vermeer, Modigliani, Picasso, Rubens and many other artists.

Springfield museum officials say they've been pleasantly surprised by the widespread interest so far in the show, both among visitors and the media; reporters from Russia, Denmark and Great Britain have visited the museum.

"We like to put different kinds of shows out there to inform people, and in this case, unfortunately, forgery is a huge part of the art world," said Julia Courtney, curator of the D'Amour museum. "It's estimated that up to 40 percent of the artwork [in museums and private collections] consists of forgeries."

The exhibit features more than 60 paintings and drawings — including some genuine ones as a point of comparison to the fakes — and biographical information on the forgers, including short videos and newsreels. In addition, there's information on the means art experts use to authenticate paintings as well as fascinating details on how the forgers, some of whom operated with crooked dealers to sell their work, managed to fool so many people — and, in some cases, make themselves wealthy in the process.

"The tools for detecting forgeries have gotten more sophisticated, but it seems like some [forgers] always figure out how to stay one step ahead," Courtney said.

She stressed that the exhibit, which was organized through the Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit group International Arts & Artists, is not an attempt to glorify the forgers, although she acknowledged that there's likely heightened interest in the subject because forgery has become a popular story line in movies, books and newspapers, particularly given the insane prices fetched for some art today.



A story last year in *The New York Times*, for instance, revealed that an artist working out of a garage in Queens had produced 63 phony works by famous modernist painters like Jackson Pollock and, with a now indicted art dealer, had sold them over a 15-year period, many through a venerable but now-shuttered Manhattan gallery. The estimated price tag for all that fraud? About \$80 million.

“Fakes and forgeries were once the dirty little secret of the art world,” writes exhibit creator Collete Loll in an introductory statement about the show, which will travel to other parts of the country later this year. “In today’s art world, the bungling of authentication makes big news and can no longer be swept under the rug. ... [But] duped museum and art experts, though by no means vindicated, may now find comfort in a growing public interest in deciphering these costly mistakes.”

Trump the critics

Perhaps the most famous forger profiled in the Springfield exhibit is Han van Meegeren, a Dutch painter of the early 20th century who enjoyed initial praise for his original work — his most well-known piece was a drawing of a beloved pet deer from the Dutch Royal Family’s menagerie — but grew embittered when critics later dismissed his art as out of step with modern times and imitative of past artists.

To support his expensive lifestyle and trump his critics, Van Meegeren in the 1930s painted forgeries in the style of 17th-century Dutch master Johannes Vermeer, creating a phony body of work ostensibly from a little-known part of Vermeer’s life; it was subsequently dubbed the artist’s “early religious period.” Van Meegeren also mixed Bakelite, an early form of plastic, in his pigments to duplicate the hard, cracked texture of old oil paintings.

But after World War II, one of his forged Vermeers, “Christ and the Adulteress,” was discovered in the opulent home of Nazi kingpin Hermann Göring, head of the German air force. Sale of the painting was traced back to Van Meegeren, who faced a possible death sentence for selling a Dutch natural treasure to the Nazis.

In his closely watched 1947 trial in Amsterdam, however, Van Meegeren confessed to creating forged Vermeer paintings, including “Christ and the Adulteress” — and, under supervision by court officials, he painted a new one to prove his story. He was sentenced to a year in jail for fraud and forgery but died before he could serve his term.

Courtney says Van Meegeren shared some common traits with other master forgers — bitterness at critics for their dismissal of his original work, but also excellent technical ability and knowledge of art history that enabled him to create forgeries convincing enough to fool the very critics he despised.

But in retrospect, she said, “What’s really interesting today is that his Vermeers don’t look at all like the originals.” The faces of the women in Van Meegeren’s paintings, she notes, remind one more of flappers than 17th-century women, likely because he had to paint in secrecy and drew his visual clues from contemporary society.

Pointing to another forged painting in the exhibit — one done in the style of Henri Matisse, by the Hungarian-born forger Elmyr de Hory — she says the work does a good job duplicating Matisse’s colorful palette but lacks something else: “To me, it’s almost too good. It’s too stiff, too controlled. The expressive element is missing.”

Yet de Hory may have been the most prolific forger of modern times. It’s estimated he produced 1,000 forgeries in his career, most of which are still believed to be in museums and private collections and likely will never be identified. His whole life “was a grand gesture of artifice,” as the exhibit notes put it:



After coming to the United States following World War II, he passed himself off as a dispossessed Hungarian aristocrat who was selling his extensive private art collection to maintain his rich lifestyle.

'F is for Fake'

De Hory's tale highlights another interesting aspect of the exhibit: He and other forgers became celebrities of sorts on account of their fraud. De Hory was the subject of a highly embellished but bestselling 1969 biography, "Fake!" His story was also featured in the 1972 Orson Welles film "F for Fake."

Another forger profiled in the Springfield show, Eric Hebborn of Great Britain, wrote two autobiographies about his career, in which he used his skills as a painting restorer to create perhaps over 500 fake drawings and reworked paintings. He also became the subject of a 1991 BBC documentary, "Portrait of a Master Forger," in which he defended his work by saying, "Ever since art was invented, people have made imitations of it."

Hebborn, who opened his own art dealership in England, also relished getting the better of the critics who had rejected his original work. He made a point of never selling his forgeries to amateur art collectors. As he put it, "Only the experts are worth fooling. The greater the expert, the greater the satisfaction in deceiving him."

Neither de Hory nor Hebborn were ever charged for their forgeries, though both were investigated, and Hebborn was mysteriously bludgeoned to death in Rome in 1996 in a crime that remains unsolved. Another British forger, John Myatt, was jailed for several months in 1999 after he and his dealer, John Drewe, were convicted of selling 200 forged modernist paintings, including some in the style of Monet and Van Gogh.

But Myatt has since earned a handsome income by openly creating copies of masterworks, giving guest lectures at universities and appearing on TV. A 2010 book, "Provenance: How a Con Man and a Forger Rewrote the History of Modern Art," tells the story of how Drewe sold Myatt's paintings as genuine masterpieces and Myatt, in serious need of money, got caught up in the scam, though Drewe made off with the lion's share of the profits.

The last forger in the show, Mark Landis, is the oddest of the quintet — an American with a history of mental health problems who gave away dozens of his forgeries to museums and universities in memory of his parents, apparently because he craved attention and validation of his artistic skills. Landis has never been charged with a crime, though, because he received no money for his work, nor claimed any tax deductions for the donated art.

Courtney notes, however, that even a museum that has suffered no loss of money by accepting a gifted painting still loses credibility if the work is revealed to be a fake. Meanwhile, the financial losses that museums, galleries and private collectors suffer from buying forgeries remains a grave problem, she adds.

Loll, the exhibit creator, has an extensive background in art fraud investigations and research. As such, she says it's high time for the art world to put security ahead of potential profit when examining questionable work.

As she writes, "The inability of the art market to self-police or lobby for enforceable civil and criminal laws creates the opportunity for robust criminal enterprise. In an industry that suffers from a lack of transparency, the problem is one everyone recognizes but few have the incentive to fix in the face of indomitable self-interest."