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Avoiding fakes and forgeries: how to find the real deal

By Bridget Galton
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Fake artworks have been around since the first sculptures were imitated thousands of years ago. Now lab analysis and online information can help buyers avoid the forgeries

The businessman on the BBC's *Fake or Fortune* who paid £100,000 for a bogus Chagall had good reason to curse forgers.

But with stakes in the multi-million pound art market high, and con artists deploying increasingly sophisticated technology, fakes and forgeries are on the rise.

Richard Kay, head of pictures for Somerset-based auctioneers Lawrences, says: "Fakes and forgeries have been around for as long as people have been producing works of art.

"In 1AD they made imitations of sculptures from 1BC where the originals were damaged, lost, or rare."



A signed work of art does not necessarily guarantee authenticity

Forging signatures, flogging framed facsimiles, sun-ageing drawings, and putting fakes into old frames stamped with reliable auction house names are a few of the forger's tricks. One conman even gained access to The Tate library to create provenances for his fakes.

"I've been shown things from all periods, often bought and sold in good faith, such as a picture of Florence Nightingale that was just a Victorian lady in a mob cap," says Kay.

"Forgers are getting cleverer and there are more opportunities to imitate great works of art. There are big rewards but very expensive blunders too."

Experts have harnessed technology to combat fraud. The internet has made it easier to research a piece's history, and lab analysis can date artworks.

"Every part of a picture, wood, canvas, paper, pigments, can be chemically analysed," explains Kay.

"A 19th-century copy of an early 17th-century work by Reubens isn't going to fool the forensics."

Aided by high-resolution digital photographs, expert and academic opinion can be sought worldwide. But Kay says problems can arise with certain artists.

"There's no authoritative record of everything Picasso produced. He was prolific, his style varied and he didn't always sign his work – plus it's easy to find a sheet of 1950s paper for your forgery.

"Lowry used soft pencil or Biro, and the signature LSL is among the easiest to fake."

Because the burden of proof increases with the value of the painting, forgers target less renowned artists who will attract less scrutiny. And since older work requires more skill to fake, criminals tend to favour 20th-century art. So, as Kay says, "a John Bratby or even a Lowry has a greater chance of slipping through."



Fakes are sometimes accompanied by a plausible story built around a personal connection. A forger might, for example, posit their fake as a drawing given to Lowry's cleaner.

"There's a ring of truth about it and no-one to dispute the story," says Kay. "There can be this feeling that it's better to tell your friends you were fooled by a fake Lowry than that you let a cut-price one slip through your fingers.

"We are all naturally gullible and inclined to believe something is genuine, provided it's offered with sufficient conviction and authority."

For anyone browsing auction sites, Kay offers the following advice for avoiding forgeries:

- The greater temptation to believe something is a bargain, the more cautious you should be;
- Provenance can be checked with galleries. Some catalogues and sales are online, or you can ring to check sales records;
- Don't set too much store by signatures; not all artists signed their work and they are easy to fake;
- Only buy from reputable auction houses, and email or ring to quiz their experts.

"There are a lot of huxters and charlatans out there and we welcome difficult questions," says Kay. "It's all part of the service."

Pontus Silfverstolpe, founder and director of Barnebys, agrees that serious auction houses offers significant protection for buyers.

"They have good experts who know the market well and you should trust them. If you are unsure, call and ask them to take another look."

An expert in Scandinavian 20th-century furniture, he has seen iconic Arne Jacobsen chairs faked using the legs of old broken chairs with newly made seats.

"They rebuild the furniture to make very good copies, but the originals have brown leather that has aged with a certain patina. They were made by skilled craftsmen with quality materials and that can be a giveaway."

He says unique pieces – early prototypes made with materials no longer available or with a special stamp – are highly prized and provenance such as an original sales bill can further establish legitimacy.

Lotta Lindquist-Brosjo, managing director UK at Barnebys, adds: "We aggregate content from more than 160 respected auction houses around the world on Barnebys. They sit on fantastic knowledge and would all, I am sure, be happy if you questioned the authenticity of a lot – so keep searching and asking."