



The Underbelly Of Art Forgery On Display At Springfield Museums

Forgeries in fine art have existed about as long as art itself. They're notorious, convincing, and lucrative – and they're an unseemly little secret kept under wraps by museums and art dealers.

By JARED BOWEN
March 31, 2014

A new show at the Springfield Museums, *Intent to Deceive: Fakes and Forgeries in the Art World*, looks at counterfeiting in the 20th century and how art forgers have nearly successfully taken on some of the most vaunted artists.

The lines are more than blurred—they are inspired, mimicked, and forged in this new exhibit. On these walls, you'll find some of the world's greatest artists alongside the frauds who've successfully taken them on. This is a show that's created rumbling in the art and museum worlds—an exhibition that dares to pull back the curtain on the grim and often embarrassing reality that for as long as there have been great artists, there have been equally great forgers making a fortune on their heels.

Springfield Museums art director Heather Haskell said 30 to 40 percent the art market is forgeries.

"One of the interesting things about them is that technically they're very good and when you walk around this show you would think that some of this work is authentic," Haskell said.



Is this the real *Girl With A Pearl Earring* painted by Johannes Vermeer? Or a fake one, painted by convicted forger John Myatt? Read this article to find out.

Credit via Michele & Donald D'Amour Museum of Fine Arts

Haskell is the director of the Michele & Donald D'Amour Museum of Fine Arts which, like most museums around the world, has identified forgeries in its own collections over the years. When interviewed, forgers have said that their work is hanging in museums, Haskell said, though they will not acknowledge which ones.

"Intent to Deceive" examines art fraud by way of some of the 20th century's greatest forgers. Men who were good artists, but not good enough.

"For these artists, at least a number of them, they were very disappointed at the art world, the traditional art world did not recognize their talent; and so this was a way to short of get back at those established experts," Haskell said.



Elmyr de Hory painted roughly a thousand fakes before his 1976 suicide. Purchased by an unsuspecting collector, his “Modigliani” was eventually donated to a Miami Museum where it hung unquestioned for 12 years, Springfield Museums curator Julia Courtney said..

“Modigliani, because of his style, how he approached painting was pretty easy to forge; so, that’s another thing that forgers look for, is masters that they can replicate fairly easily without having to do too much homework,” she said. “Modigliani, because the shapes are pretty large, the lines and everything were easy for forgers to replicate, and this one is quite good. When we actually unpacked it, we were all like- Is that one of the fakes or the real one?- so it even fooled us momentarily.”

A premiere Vermeer forger in the 1930s and 40s, Han van Meegeren was both masterful and audacious.

“Because Vermeer didn’t create that many works, van Meegeren actually took advantage of that element and fabricated paintings rather than copied them, in the style of Vermeer and he actually created a whole time period in Vermeer’s career that didn’t exist, which came to be know as the religious period,” Courtney said.

Today science is van Meegeren’s undoing. The Bakelite plastic he mixed in with his paint to give his canvases an aged look now causes them to bend.

“He also went an extra step and he would actually paint on canvases that had paintings on them before, they were older, so the surface was cracked; so he would paint on the surface of the canvas that was already old and he would roll them up and that would create this very modeled surface that you associate with an older painting.”

There is one story of redemption here and that’s in the guise of John Myatt, convicted in 1999 for fraud, he served a one year sentence and is now an acclaimed, legitimate artist—painting *The Girl With the Pearl Earring* just because he can (see an image of Myatt’s fake above).

“I think if you hadn’t seen it and you’d seen in just on books covers and what not, it would be very convincing,” Courtney said of the painting. “She’s a bit larger than the original and she’s a bit more off-center and a lot more blue tones are used in this painting than are used in the original.”

Myatt now lectures on forgery and paints so-called “genuine fakes”, but his legacy looms darkly. Some 200 of his forgeries entered the art market, and 120 of those are still out there.