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THE SILENT PARTNERS IN AN ART FORGER'S LIFE

Forgery takes the active participation of others as responsible for the duplicity as the artist



The Mona Lisa by Da Vinci (Wikipedia)

Convicted art forger Shaun Greenhalgh penned a recent [memoir](#) recounting how he duped the art world when he copied Leonardo da Vinci's drawing "La Bella Principessa" valued at \$100 million -- using a supermarket clerk as his [model](#), no less.

The way art forgery stories like this are commonly written, you'd think counterfeiters solitary figures rifling through art history books full with four-color reproductions. But there's more to them than skills and smarts. Forgery takes the active participation of others as responsible for the duplicity as the artist. Who? Think about it.

Consider the case of the most famous forger, Elmyr de Hory, who faked the paintings of Amedeo Modigliani so perfectly that any definitive list of his actual work is impossible. How did so many art experts get the attribution wrong? Answer: They didn't. They're in on the fakery. They had to be.

Granted art and money have been going together since the Medici's bankrolled art in the Renaissance, and granted sloppy art scholarship has a hand in art forgeries. But so does avarice.

One of the most famous forgers was Dutch painter Hans van Meegeren, who faked Vermeer for a living. And he was good at it, paying attention not only to technique, but also to materials. He even went to the expense of buying rare lapis lazuli paint -- a natural ultra-marine blue that Vermeer used -- even though it cost more than gold by weight. And he bought a lot of it, seven years' worth, according to a Scotland Yard report.

Obviously, Van Meegeren's diligence about the choice of pigments made his fakes tough to call out. Even so, it's hard to believe that so many in the art world were taken in, unless they saw the same chance to haul in big bucks that Van Meegeren did and looked the other way. In fact, Van Meegeren's "Vermeers" would never have been identified if he hadn't confessed after his work ended up in Hermann Goring's collection to mark him a Nazi collaborator. To avoid the death penalty for treason, Van Meegeren owned up to the lesser charge of forgery.

Given all the years that Van Meegeren's "Vermeers" changed hands, the art world is not innocent. Let's not forget that Dali sold his signature on blank picture planes, giving rise to a flood of fakes and a \$1 billion counterfeit-print industry. His

indifference to truth-in advertising created a market for his work as slithery as his melting watches. But it was the complicity of art dealers that made the scam work.

Likely that's why movies began portraying the art world in terms of money. The 1988 flick "The Moderns," set in Paris during the '20's comes to mind. When a collector in the film discovers he bought forgeries, he said, "Maybe I should have framed the money I spent for them. That's what makes art important anyway."