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THE MORNING CALL

The story of art forgers is one of fame, money and talent

Forgery and fine art are almost inseparable, having coexisted for as long as there has been a high demand for a limited supply of original artwork. Curiously, not all forgeries are done for profit — sometimes there is a psychological motive behind these grand deceptions that is far more complex than a scheme for financial gain.

"Intent to Deceive: Fakes and Forgeries in the Art World" at the Reading Public Museum is a fascinating exhibit that profiles five prolific forgers from the 20th century to the present. With 55 paintings on display — forgeries as well as original artwork by Daumier, Matisse, Picasso, Modigliani and more — the show explores how these forgers beguiled the art world.



CAPTION **Intent to Deceive**

ROBERT FOGT / CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Elmyr de Hory (Hungary, 1906-1976), *Odalisque*, 1974, oil on canvas, in the style of Henri Matisse (French, 1869-1954). Part of *Intent to Deceive* at the Reading Public Museum, through Sept. 7.

conjunction with "Secrets of the Mona Lisa," which showcases the investigative work of French optical engineer Pascal Cotte on the world's most famous painting. The two shows play quite well together, since many of Cotte's techniques have since been used for authentication and forgery detection.

Fakes and forgeries once were the dirty little secret of the art world, and no gallery, museum or auction house has ever been entirely free from the embarrassment of a costly misattribution or faulty provenance. Some forgers, once discovered, have become so notorious that their works command nearly as much as those by the artists they were copying.

"I would venture to say that there are probably forgeries and fakes in virtually every art institution out there," says Reading Public Museum curator Scott Schweigert. "But there has been a new era of transparency and

honesty about it. In the old days it was just brushed under the rug — no one wanted to be embarrassed by such a thing. Today, people recognize there is something to be learned by such a discovery. It's a good lesson if it leads to saving another museum from making a mistake."

The five forgers profiled in "Intent to Deceive" — Han van Meegeren, Elmyr de Hory, Eric Hebborn, John Myatt and Mark Landis — were responsible for some of the most infamous scandals of the last century. Unable to make a career based on their own artistic style, they found fakery, the exact duplication of an original work of art, and forgery, the creation and selling of a work of art which is falsely credited to another, to be their avenue to recognition and commercial success.

It takes chutzpah as well as substantial artistic skill to forge a Vermeer — yet Dutchman Han van Meegeren had both. His "Girl with a Blue Bow," painted in 1924, was sold to a reputable dealer as a "certified Vermeer," and later found its way to an American private collection. It's no surprise van Meegeren was able to fool so many experts. The detail of the lace collar and luminosity of the pearls around the neck of the subject in "Portrait of a Lady," also from the 1920s, faithfully capture Vermeer's style.

A dark, melancholy self-portrait of Hungarian forger Elmyr de Hory gazes at the viewer with unmitigated defiance. One can fully believe his claim that he could draw a simple Matisse far better than Matisse himself, and in less than 20 seconds, to boot. He even proved it, as his ink-on-paper "Woman in Three-Quarter Profile," from 1975, demonstrates. His 1956 "Portrait of a Woman" hung in a museum in Miami for years as a genuine Modigliani until it was discovered to be a forgery.

De Hory, who committed suicide in 1976, became one of the most celebrated forgers of the 20th century. A video interview shows him in his home, proudly demonstrating his talent by creating a Picasso-style drawing and a painting like Matisse.

In another video, British artist John Myatt recalls a phone call he received the day after he got out of prison after serving a brief term for fraud. The

call was from his arresting officer, offering him £5,000 to paint a portrait of his family. "You should put your talent to work," the officer told him.

Myatt never actually intended to deceive — his plan was to sell "genuine fakes" through an advertisement in a local paper. Unfortunately he got mixed up with a professional con man who schemed to sell the paintings as genuine, and both ended up in jail.

Myatt does not specialize in any one artist. His "Girl with a Pearl Earring," based on Vermeer, hangs next to "Landscape near Auvers," a van Gogh knockoff. Each are a remarkable likeness of the real thing. Myatt has turned his downfall into commercial success. He is represented by a gallery in London where his works command prices of \$30,000 and more.

Fakery by itself is not a crime, a fact behind one of the most intriguing of the artists represented in the show. American artist Mark Landis might be the most famous art counterfeiter who never committed a crime. Over a 30-year period, Landis approached museums, universities and art galleries claiming to be a wealthy philanthropist with a collection he wanted to donate in honor of his deceased parents.

Diagnosed as a schizophrenic at age 17, Landis, 65, lives in declining health in his home in Laurel, Miss. He has never been prosecuted for any criminal action. He talks about his craft and life in an endearing video interview.

On display is a lovely watercolor by Landis of boats on a river, in the style of French painter Paul Signac. In 2008 Landis came to the Oklahoma Museum of Art with the painting, intending to donate it along with a briefcase full of other works. It was later discovered he gave identical copies of the work to four other museums. There is no question Landis was supremely talented. His charcoal-on-paper sketch of a nude done in the French Academic style is exquisite.

A graduate of Britain's Royal Academy of Arts, Eric Hebborn could have had an illustrious artistic and academic career. Instead, put off by critics and

contemptuous of art dealers, Hebborn found his talents better suited to creating works in the style of Renaissance and Baroque period artists.

Hebborn's training as a painting restorer taught him to repair damaged works, enhance them and ultimately forge them. He devoted his skills to forgeries of Old Master etchings, especially in the style of Watteau, Mantegna and Falcone. On display is a sketch of an old man, purchased by a dealer who became suspicious when he noticed the paper's torn edges perfectly matched several other sketches he had bought from Hebborn. A lovely miniature sketch of a Roman warrior's head was exhibited for years as the work of the 15th century Italian artist Aniello Falcone until it was revealed as a forgery.

Also on display are some of the materials used by the forgers to create their ersatz works. Many are common household items. Myatt used common house paints, often rubbing his canvases with coffee grounds and vacuum cleaner dust to "age" the works. To achieve the consistency of oil paint without its expense, he mixed KY lubricating jelly with his acrylic or vinyl-based paints.

Landis approached museums and galleries using a number of aliases, including Father Arthur Scott, a Jesuit priest. His priest's cloak and collar, both which he bought on the Internet, are on display. Proving there is indeed fame — or at least infamy — in forgery, a framed copy of the Feb. 21, 1972 issue of Time magazine hangs next to de Hory's paint-mixing palette. On the cover is de Hory himself, with the caption "Con Man of the Year."

A clever interactive feature of the exhibit is a "Find the Forgery" challenge, in which viewers are presented with original works by Picasso, Curran, Walden and Vlaminck alongside forged works by some of the most famous art forgers in history. Also included is a pair of drawings in the style of Henri Matisse, a highly copied artist because of his style and the value of his work.

The contest officially ended July 4, but you'll still have to do some investigation on your own, since the fakes are not labeled. Hint: no coffee grounds were used in any of these works, whether original or bogus.