

AUTHENTICATION IN ART

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Global market for forged and stolen artworks is thriving and underpoliced

- Clive Williams

I recently attended a seminar on art fraud where a notorious British art forger was among the presenters. Forgery and fraud are particularly prevalent in the international art and antiquities markets. To a large extent, dealers, galleries and auction houses are self-regulating and, given the high prices fetched by some items, subject to far less oversight than they should be. It is very much a case of buyer beware.

The notorious forger was John Myatt, said to be the perpetrator of the biggest art fraud of the 20th century. When Myatt was at art school, he developed a talent for painting in the style of various masters, which he did for his own amusement and to entertain fellow students. Later in life, his wife left him with two young children, the youngest aged 18 months. Myatt gave up work as an art teacher and worked from home to keep the family intact until his children reached school age.





Artworks stored in one of Bonhams & Goodman's auction houses. Photo: Jacky Ghossein

The only way he could make money at home was by painting. However, he found it difficult to make a living selling his art. One day, he had the bright idea of capitalising on his copying ability, and advertised in *Private Eye* magazine: "Genuine fakes. Nineteenth and twentieth century paintings from £150."

Soon, one of his regular customers was art dealer John Drewe, who realised he could sell Myatt's paintings as genuine works after Christie's accepted Myatt's "Albert Gleizes" painting as genuine, and paid £25,000 for it. Myatt, who needed the money, became a willing accomplice to Drewe's fraud but says he never made any serious attempt to disguise his work, using only modern emulsion paints and K-Y Jelly for his paintings.



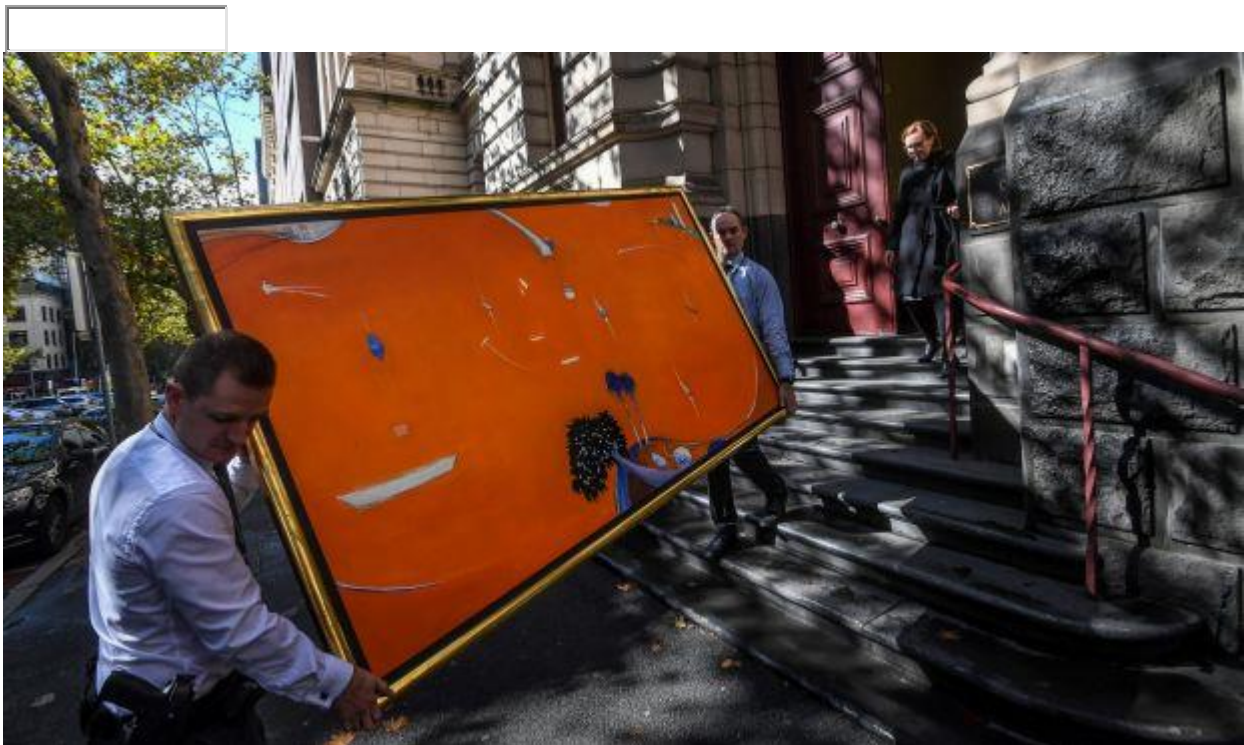
Art dealer Peter Gant and conservator Mohamed Aman Siddique were convicted of fraud last year but acquitted earlier this year. Photo: Jason McManus

In April 1996, police raided Drewe's gallery in Reigate, Surrey, and found materials he had used to forge certificates of authenticity. Drewe had also altered the provenances of genuine paintings to link them to Myatt's forgeries, and added bogus documents to archives of various institutions to establish the authenticity of Myatt's forgeries.

Police from the art and antiquities squad estimated that 200 paintings had been sold, of which 60 were later recovered. The balance are believed to be still circulating in the international art market as genuine works by Marc Chagall, Le Corbusier, Jean Dubuffet, Alberto Giacometti, Henri Matisse, Roger Bissiere, Ben Nicholson, Nicolas de Staël and Graham Sutherland.

In February 1999, Myatt, who had cooperated with police, was sentenced to a year in prison for conspiracy to defraud. He was released after four months. Drewe was sentenced to six years for conspiracy, and served two years. Myatt still produces "genuine fakes" but clearly labels them as such, and they are much in demand. He now describes himself as a "tribute painter".

Another area of art fraud is art substitution, where a copy is made of a genuine painting and then substituted for the real thing. It is possible today to photograph a painting and have a very good copy painted in Thailand or Vietnam. The switch might not be discovered until years later.



Brett Whiteley's 'Orange Lavender Bay' is carried from the court after Gant and Aman's appeal was heard. Photo: Justin McMacus

The Australian art market also has its share of alleged forgeries.

In May 2016, art restorer Mohamed Siddique and art dealer Peter Gant stood trial in Victoria on charges of obtaining and attempting to obtain financial advantage by deception, by selling paintings that resembled the late Brett Whiteley's *Lavender Bay* series. They were found guilty at a jury trial but, in April this year, the verdict was overturned. A key prosecution witness, Wendy Whiteley, the former wife of Brett Whiteley and a foremost expert on his work, said she could not comprehend how the decision to quash the conviction happened.

There is also a grey international market of genuine artworks that are obtained through underground channels, often after conflicts. Many artworks disappeared during World War II and are now in private collections. Some collectors are happy to own stolen objects without showing them to anyone else, or are prepared to keep stolen items hidden until a statute of limitations expires.

There are many illicit sales in the international antiquities market. Major galleries like the Australian National Gallery are assessing their collections and returning looted antiquities to the countries they were stolen from. The items were originally bought in good faith from supposedly reputable dealers.

Conflict still brings many looting opportunities. In February 2015, the United Nations Security Council banned trade in artefacts illegally removed from Syria since 2011, and from Iraq since 1990, hoping to choke off a funding source for Islamic State. But relics from the ruins of Palmyra and Nimrud are now openly for sale in London and elsewhere.

Policing art and antiquities is usually a low priority for law enforcement. London has the world's largest market, but the remaining two specialist officers in the art and antiquities squad have been seconded full-time to the Grenfell Tower Inquiry. This means the squad has effectively ceased to exist, with the two officers likely to move on to higher-priority areas when the inquiry concludes.

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