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Inside the Underground World of Legal Art Forgery

Even among the wealthiest collectors, forged paintings are a closely guarded secret—but more common than you'd think

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Edouard Manet, French (1832-1883). *The Croquet Party*, 1871. Oil on canvas, 18 x 28 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches. Gift of Henry W. and Marion H. Bloch.

Photo: Courtesy of the Bloch Collection

Despite having the means to own the original, one American multimillionaire has opted to hang a forged Renoir in his home while the real thing hangs prominently at a major museum. The man in question is not President Donald Trump, who recently made headlines with his claim of owning Renoir's 1881 *Two Sisters (On the Terrace)*, despite the painting being part of the Art Institute of *Chicago*'s permanent collection, but Henry Bloch, the Kansas City-based cofounder of tax preparation firm H&R Block.

We'll likely never know the provenance of the president's purported Renoir, but Bloch's is an example of the seldom-spoken yet widespread practice among institutions to forge famous pieces for collectors who've either donated or loaned the original works. In 2010, Henry and late wife Marion Bloch promised the Nelson-Atkins Museum their two-decade-old collection of Impressionist and post-Impressionist art. In 2015, two years before the Bloch Collection was slated to debut, the museum began duplicating the works, some in-house, some with external help.

“For the Degas sculpture, they had a few on hand at the *Metropolitan Museum of Art* bookstore,” says museum director of design and experience, Steve Waterman. “It wasn't exactly the same sculpture, but we were not really worried about that so much.”



Pierre-Auguste Renoir, French (1841-1919). *Woman Leaning on Her Elbows*, ca. 1875-1885. Oil on canvas, 5 ½ x 9 inches. Gift of Henry W. and Marion H. Bloch.

Photo: Courtesy of the Marion and Henry Bloch Collection

Bloch calls the results “wonderful.”

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“I have asked, are you sure you gave me the copies?” he says. “That’s how much they resemble the originals.”

Reproductions ease the separation anxiety between collector and artwork, filling a space on the wall (or in the heart) that would otherwise go empty.

“It’s a useful resource for museums, auction houses, and dealers primarily that need to ply a particular artwork out of a collection,” says Brad Shar, whose New York–based firm Lowy works with both institutions and individual collectors to create reproductions. “The possibility of having an exact copy to fill a wall space is a powerful incentive a lot of the time.”



The Bloch Galleries at the Nelson-Atkins Museum.

Photo: Joshua Ferdinand

Despite being perfectly legal and of exceptionally high quality, art reproductions do carry a stigma. The owner of one faux *Picasso* recounted the story of how his grandparents, after selling their entire collection, commissioned a major auction house to duplicate each piece as gifts for their grandchildren. He declined to be named. Two sources from Christie's, who spoke on background, have confirmed that reproduction is a common practice there. And as of press time, the Metropolitan Museum of Art has not returned our request for comment.

“There are museums in the past who have wanted to take something of high value down and replace it with a replica, but that’s a behind-the-curtain thing,” says Timothy Carpenter, a supervisor and special agent in the FBI’s art theft program who frequently lectures collectors to do the same. “If you’ve got this \$10 million painting that you’re concerned about, you can probably afford to make a \$5,000 copy made and hang it. It’s the only guarantee to keep their painting safe if they don’t have security on their residence.”



An employee at Lowy stretches a canvas digital print.

Photo: Tracy Shar

At Lowy, collectors interested in hiding their originals in the vault, whether for security purposes, to protect delicate works, or to lower the cost to insure them, can reproduce works without the help of a museum. The company employs both specially trained restoration artists and independent artists in need of a day job to conserve and replicate artworks. The process starts with an extremely high-quality print of a digital image, and then the painstaking application of clear conservators' gel to simulate brushstrokes. Prices start at about \$2,000, while frames tend to quadruple the amount.

The innocuous nature of these copies gets overshadowed by the explosive scandals that do rock the art world from time to time. Recent headlines include the Modigliani exhibition in Genoa, which was shut down this summer after 30 percent of the paintings were alleged to be forgeries, and the Sotheby's \$10.6 million sale of a fake Frans Hals a year ago. Legally, Lowy clients are formally required to acknowledge that the piece it is a copy and will not be used unlawfully, but just in case, the firm's contract indemnifies the company against any potential wrongdoing. "There is certainly fraudulent behavior out there," says co-owner Brad Shar. "We wanted to make sure that we were legally protected."