

# AUTHENTICATION IN ART

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## True or 'Valse'? Eccentric art museum features genuine fakes.



CLAUDIA CAPOS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

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VLEDDER, Netherlands — All is not quite what it appears to be at the [Valse Kunst Museum](#) in Vledder, a Dutch farming town with neat brick houses and coiffured peony gardens nestled among griddle-flat cornfields and dairy farms in north-central Netherlands.

The museum, ensconced in Vledder's former town hall, showcases nearly 100 paintings bearing the names of many Dutch Masters, including Rembrandt and Vincent van Gogh, as well as other world-renown artists, such as Picasso, Matisse, and Salvador Dali. Rare carved-wood and stone sculptures, exotic blown-glass art, old coins, vintage Rolex watches, and foreign stamps fill the museum's shelves and display cases.

As Doug and I stroll through the galleries, we spot one of our favorite paintings, Georges Seurat's "Port-en-Bessin, un dimanche." The Impressionistic oil-on-canvas work captures the soft pastel image of sailboats bobbing in a cozy harbor on France's Normandy coast on a Sunday morning. The problem is, we saw the nearly identical Seurat painting hanging in the Kröller-Müller Museum last week. The one we're now admiring is a forgery.

But then, so are all the other paintings and works of art on display in the Valse Kunst, or Fake Art Museum.

Museum founders Henk and Erna Plenter hatched the idea of collecting and exhibiting fraudulent art after they were fleeced by an art dealer in Amsterdam's Spiegelkwartier who sold them a bogus Matisse lithograph depicting a stylized blue figure of a woman. The couple wanted their eccentric museum to educate serious art collectors about forgeries and to entertain curiosity seekers.

Since 1998 when the museum opened, the Plenters' collection has attracted enough spurious art donated by other duped buyers to fill three large exhibition rooms in the former town hall. Today, the museum has the somewhat dubious distinction of being the Netherlands only institution dedicated to fake art.

“People are curious and don’t know what to expect,” says our guide, Sandra Goos. “They take our tour to gain an understanding of fakes and forgeries — and to learn how the world of fraudulent art works.”

For decades, fake art has been a multimillion-dollar business worldwide. It still is today. Two of art history’s most notorious forgers, Han van Meegeren and Geert Jan Jansen, gained widespread notoriety while amassing incredible fortunes. Their brazen exploits and prolific works have been featured in art books and magazines and on television. Many of these mountebanks’ masterpieces fooled even the most experienced curators and ended up in prestigious galleries, auction houses, and private collections.

“These fakes were sold as ‘original’ artwork to buyers who paid high prices for them,” Goos says. “Today, they have no monetary value. But all of them have fascinating stories.” She leads us past an M.C. Escher print, a Paul Klee pen-and-ink drawing and a Fernando Botero painting of two rotund dancers. We also spot several colorful works by Joan Miro, Marc Chagall, and Karel Appel. They actually look as though they could pass for the real thing. But they’re all as bogus as a \$3 bill.

Detecting fake art is not easy. The devil is in the details, according to Goos. In one knockoff of Leonardo da Vinci’s “Mona Lisa,” the woman’s pursed lips are too red, her eyes are too narrow and her fingers are overly plump. In a copycat version of Johannes Vermeer’s “Girl With a Pearl Earring,” the forgers darkened the young lady’s complexion, giving her an exotic look. A religious statue from Asia, acquired by an antiquities collector, has lost chunks of its veneer, which was created by smoke from a fire rather than the passage of time.

Van Meegeren was so adept at forging paintings and using techniques to mimic centuries-old masterpieces that he fooled Nazi party leader Hermann Goering into paying a hefty sum for a falsified Vermeer. At the end of World War II, the Allies found the forgery in Goering’s possession and arrested van Meegeren for being a Nazi collaborator. To prove his work was a fake and thereby escape the death penalty for treason, the wily art dealer re-created another painting during his trial. Van Meegeren was convicted of

falsification and fraud, but died before serving out his prison sentence. During his dubious career, it is estimated he swindled buyers, including the Netherlands government, out of \$30 million. This strange tale of artistic deception was featured on the Travel Channel's "Mysteries at the Museum" in 2014.

These days, many reproductions of famous works of art are being churned out by low-paid laborers in sweatshops in China and other parts of Asia, according to Goos. High-tech forgery techniques have made these replicas increasingly difficult to distinguish from the originals.

"We continue to get donations of false art from people who have found paintings and other valuables in their parents' attics," Goos says. "Forgers will try just about anything. Often you never really know which art pieces are genuine and which are not."

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