



AiA Art News-service



How to Tell if your Artwork is Fake

MutualArt

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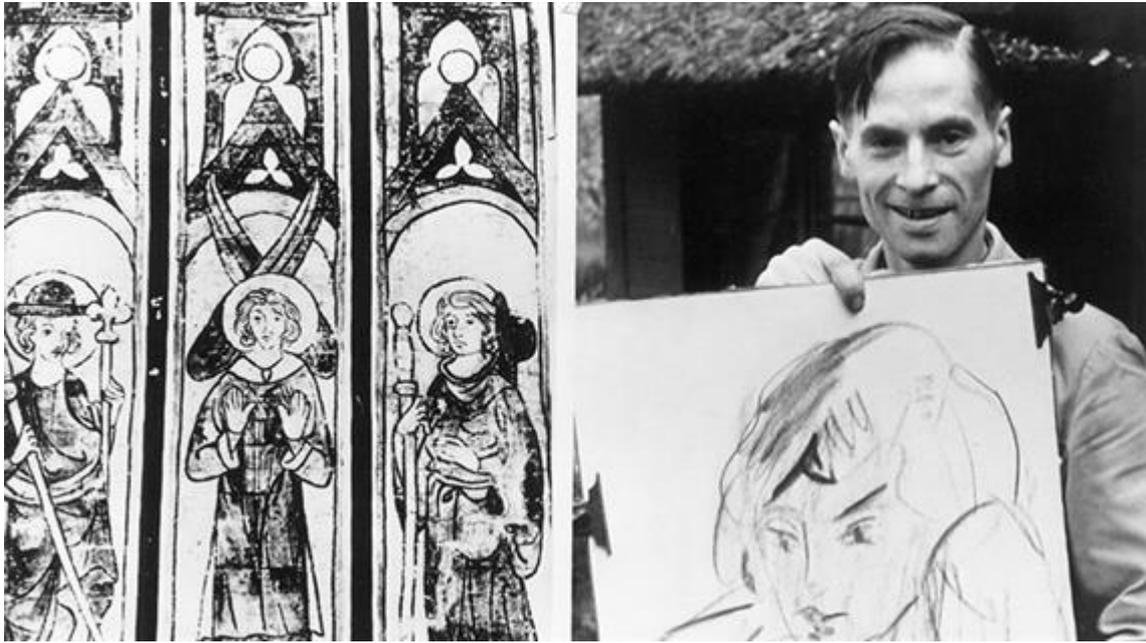
Confirming the authenticity of an artwork crucial before buying. We give 5 key factors to consider and uncover some of the most shocking forgery cases in art history

The notion of a forger conjures up a the image of a cartoonish criminal painting a knock-off da Vinci in some kind of darkened attic. But many forgers are frustrated artists in their own right, struggling to make a living by imitating others.

In fact, before he became an acclaimed Renaissance artist, [Michelangelo](#) made his money forging ancient Roman sculptures. He created a sculpture out of marble, intentionally broke it and then buried it in a garden. He later dug up the sculpture, claiming he had discovered a lost Roman antique, and sold it to an unsuspecting Cardinal. Years later, the Cardinal discovered the sculpture was fake, but rather than chastise [Michelangelo](#) or revoke his payment, the Cardinal recognized the genius talent the young artist possessed, and invited him to Rome, where his career soon blossomed.

Indeed, not all forgers work for money; some are seeking glory, while others hope to undermine conventional art world structures. German artist [Lothar Malskat](#) is a prime

example: tasked with restoring the frescoes of a bombed medieval cathedral, he instead forged new versions which, when completed, were so admired that the German government featured them on four million postage stamps.



Lothar Malskat and the forged frescoes that made his name. After being released from jail, Malskat became a 'real' painter who received successful commissions.

But Malskat couldn't keep the secret. He wanted credit for the paintings, so he decided to sue himself, in order to prove that he had forged them. Malskat was widely disbelieved until he pointed out two "time bombs": anachronisms he had intentionally inserted into his work to prove they were fakes. These included a painting of a turkey (which were indigenous to North America, therefore non-existent in medieval Germany), and a portrait of the actress Marlene Dietrich. Malskat won (and lost) the trial, and was imprisoned for 18 months — but achieved his desire for eternal recognition.

The reality today is that most art forgers are simply out to trick collectors and institutions into paying top dollar for worthless fakes. Buyers beware — the [Fine Arts Experts Institute](#) (FAEI) estimates that well over 50% of all art in the market is fake. Some artists are faked more than others, and some forgers are more sophisticated than their rivals. With so many counterfeits out there, how can you tell if your artwork is fake?

1. Check if the painting you are buying is already part of an important collection

It may seem unbelievably simple, but many forgers will try their luck selling copies of artworks that are actually kept in a famous permanent collection. As MutualArt's resident expert, Mattia Pozzoni, elucidates, "On a daily basis, we receive [appraisal requests](#) from people offering [Rothko's](#), [da Vinci's](#), [O'Keeffe's](#), that are part of an important collection. All it requires is a quick google search. Nowadays the internet is a very easy way to achieve basic due diligence". Checking the records of a foundation or an archive is always the first port of call — but as we will see, even the archives can be wrong. If you do find that the real work is held elsewhere, contact the owner and give them the details of the fraudulent seller.

2. Ask for as much paperwork as you can — and then check it's authenticity

The most important thing in establishing authenticity is provenance. If the seller has an invoice, or proof of purchase, this makes it far more likely that the artwork is real. Always go the extra mile. If the seller bought the work from a dealer that's still in business, get in contact with the dealer and check that the work really did come through them. The more documentation you have, the more likely your artwork is genuine. That said, it is possible that the fraudsters have forged the documentation as well as the artwork...

John Myatt was a famous British forger who painted over 200 fakes of well known artists including Marc Chagall, Le Corbusier, Jean Dubuffet, Alberto Giacometti and Matisse. Sales of his forgeries generated over €25 million, in what has been described by the *Guardian* as “the biggest art fraud of the 20th century.” Myatt's success lies in the abundance of false documentation that accompanied each artwork: his forgeries might have amounted to nothing, were it not for the efforts of John Drewe, his dealer. Drewe convinced reputable auction houses including Sotheby's and Christie's to purchase works by forging certificates of authenticity, and altering the provenances of real paintings to make Myatt's forgeries appear legitimate.

Drewe's forgery went further than auction houses: he gained access to the archives of various institutions by donating money and fake paintings, introducing false records that made Myatt's forgeries appear authentic. So tread with caution — even official archives can be dubious.

3. Buy from a reputable source and don't be tempted by bargains

It's always preferable to buy from a reputable vendor — even if this makes the work more expensive — it heavily reduces the risk of buying a fake. With that in mind, when you're investing in art, it's generally safer to pay more. If you find a valuable artwork at a low price, it could be a bargain, but the more likely scenario is it's a fake. Look for premium pricing, and seek out longstanding and revered dealers. But be aware that even the most respectable galleries aren't always 100% trustworthy...



Collectors bought this fake [Jackson Pollock](#) painting from the Knoedler gallery for \$17 million.

The Knoedler Art gallery was one of New York's oldest and most trusted art dealerships, having been in business for 165 years. In 2009, however, it was discovered that the gallery had sold hundreds of fake paintings between 1994, including reproductions of works by [Robert Motherwell](#), [Jackson Pollock](#) and [Mark Rothko](#). Knoedler had purchased the paintings from the art dealer [Glafira Rosales](#), who in turn had commissioned the fakes from the art forger Pei-Shen Quian. Rosales made millions of dollars from every sale, while Quian was paid just \$9,000 per piece. The full extent of the gallery's knowledge regarding the arrangement is still unclear. Director Ann Freedman claims she had no idea — that she was duped, along with the unlucky buyers. But others in the art world are less sure, and many suspect there was collusion afoot. In any case, it goes to show, even the most reputable galleries aren't impervious to the dangers of forgery.

4. Check the back of the painting

As Pozzoni suggests, "Look at the back of the painting. If you see labels from auction houses and galleries, that is a good sign." This indicates previous sales. You can then contact the institutions in question, and confirm that the work did come through them. You can also check the back of your work against the photo kept in the official archives. The more amateur forgers only focus on the front and/or don't have access to the archives, therefore have no idea how the back looks.



A painting displaying the single-word signature used by artist Giacomo Balla, whose later works are signed Futur Balla.

Another sign of a fake is the signature. If the signature is wrong, that is a huge warning flag. That said, the signature is the easiest thing to forge, so an accurate signature isn't always the sign of a real artwork. It's also important to remember that some artists paint in very different ways throughout their career, and may use different signatures at different times. For example, the Italian artist [Giacomo Balla](#) signed all his paintings *Balla*, until he began

working with the Futurists, at which point he adopted a new signature, *Futur Balla*. So if a signature seems different, don't go calling the cops just yet; there may be a reason for it.



Giacomo Balla, *Forme Rumore*, 1928. Gouache on thick paper, 7.75 x 12.625 in. (19.69 x 32.07 cm.). This later work by the artist shows his later signature, Futur Balla.

5. Consider having paintings chemically tested

Chemical testing is 100% reliable, but it's not something you can do at home. If after preliminary analysis you think the work might be authentic, take it to an expert. Test the pigment, test the canvas. At MutualArt we were offered a [Modigliani](#), but chemical testing revealed that the painting contained Titanium pigments, which were invented several years after the original painting was produced. If you're buying an expensive work, it's always worth running the tests.