



## A flood of fakes

Ivor Waldeck, Cape Town | 01 augustus 2013

I personally purchased an "original Pierneef" woodcut that turned out to be a copy. The auctioneer returned the purchase price when confronted. At the same auction, there was an obvious Irma Stern forgery on display - the signature was right but not much else (the artwork was not for sale).

There was also a Gabriel de Jongh painting on offer - the signature was right but when questioned about the authenticity, the auctioneer said that De Jongh was very ill at the time he painted the artwork!

These events occurred at only two auctions I attended in Cape Town.

In John Pollock's 1982 booklet *Antique Fakes in South Africa*, he says: "It was reported back in 1972 that the SA art market was rife with counterfeits and forgeries and that many pictures were brought from overseas and altered to suit the market."

He goes on to say that an artist whose work is expensive will inevitably attract the attention of forgers.

"An art expert of the 1970s once said in the homes of hundreds of wealthy South Africans pride of place is given to paintings by famous local artists which were complete with signatures but in fact are not worth the canvas they are painted on."

Pollock mentions that the work of Frans Oerder was particularly suspect. Apparently a gallery owner in Johannesburg was shown six of these paintings and all of them bore his forged signature. Not one of them had been painted in SA.

A local artist of 30 years' standing claims that the SA art scene is rife with forgeries. He mentions that in particular, expensive art of simplistic style such as that of Stern and others attracts the interest of forgers. In the case of the artist Father Frans Claerhout, he is of the opinion that there are probably as many forgeries out there as genuine articles.

In March 2012, the New York Times revealed that Wolfgang Beltracchi had forged the works of 50 different artists. Beltracchi and three others were convicted of forgery and corruption relating to 14 works that sold for US\$45m. The article quotes an expert saying "almost the entire art world was caught out".

With millions of rand (and sterling) now being paid for the works of famous SA artists, and taking heed of the situation in 1972, it seems fair to say that perhaps thousands of counterfeits and forgeries now grace the homes of South Africans and elsewhere - the art works not being worth the canvas they are painted on!