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To Reel In Crowds, a Museum Is Showing a Fake Painting

By WILLIAM GRIMES OCT. 31, 2014



CreditThe Mariners' Museum

The 19th-century artist [James E. Buttersworth](#), although a titan in the field of marine art, cannot be described as famous. Prized for his exquisitely detailed portraits of racing yachts and clipper ships, he remains unknown to the general public and therefore has limited drawing power.

To overcome this obstacle, the [Mariners' Museum](#) in Newport News, Va., hit on a novel solution for its new exhibition of his work: Toss in a forgery and challenge museum visitors to sniff it out from among the 34 genuine Buttersworth works.

About that ringer: Museums and forgeries are natural enemies, and officials at the Mariners' Museum tiptoed warily around their idea for quite some time before committing to it.

“The museum couldn't be seen spending money on this and putting it in the collection,” said Lyles Forbes, the museum's chief curator and the organizer of [“B Is for Buttersworth, F Is for Forgery: Solve a Maritime Mystery.”](#) which opened on Saturday.

When it came down to it, he added, he was not even sure how to acquire a forgery.

At this point, help arrived from a man who has agreed to identify himself only as “a friend of the museum.” (Because his name appears as a lender on the wall text of the forged painting, providing it here might give away the secret to visitors).

The friend took on the assignment of securing a forged Buttersworth, which proved to be relatively easy, since, when it comes to bogus Buttersworths, nearly all roads lead to one man: [Ken Perenyi](#).

For years, Mr. Perenyi studied and imitated the work of Buttersworth, turning a tidy profit by selling his paintings to unsuspecting dealers and collectors. He is not shy about this. Visitors who click on his [website](#) are greeted with the words “Welcome to America's No. 1 Art Forger Website.” He has chronicled his buccaneering days of turning out bogus Buttersworths and Martin Johnson Heades, his mainstays, in “Caveat Emptor: The Secret Life of an American Art Forger,” [published two years ago](#).

Mr. Perenyi now plies his trade openly and legally (though he is still on the F.B.I.'s radar). The friend of the museum acquired, through an intermediary, a genuine ersatz Buttersworth, from Mr. Perenyi's stock on hand, for about 5 to 10 percent of the price that the painting might fetch if it were authentic.

A small Buttersworth in good condition might sell for \$30,000, said Alan Granby, who, with Janice Hyland, runs [Hyland Granby Antiques](#) in Hyannis Port, Mass, which usually has several

Buttersworths for sale. The much rarer large paintings, especially those depicting America's Cup races, can go for more than \$1 million. Mr. Perenyi said that his prices range from \$5,000 to \$150,000.

The museum has made a point of not mentioning Mr. Perenyi, who said he did not know until a reporter approached him that his work was in its current show. "We did not want to lend any legitimacy to the forger or be seen as promoting him in any way," Mr. Forbes said.

On entering the exhibition, visitors approach a high-resolution digital image of "Magic and Gracie off Castle Garden," an 1871 Butterworth that shows two yachts, sails taut in the wind, racing neck and neck in New York Harbor. On a nearby television screen, a photo of Buttersworth pops up, and "hot spots," activated with the touch of a finger, explain the fine points: the signature, size, background features, sky and weather, seas and sea gulls, composition and meticulous detailing of the ships.

Visitors, prompted by clues in the wall texts, then try to identify the lone forgery. At two voting booths, they can test their suspicions by entering the number of the suspected forgery on touch screens that tell them whether they are right or wrong and offer to give them the correct answer. Then the honor system applies. Those in the know are asked not to give away the secret.

Mr. Forbes invited Colette Loll, the founder and director of the consulting firm [Art Fraud Insights](#), to write wall texts explaining the difference between fakes and forgeries: Fakes replicate an existing work, while forgeries masquerade as new or unknown work.

Mr. Perenyi has been a burr under her saddle for quite some time. "He seems to have no remorse for diluting the body of work of an artist he professes to admire with all the forgeries he has inserted into the market," she said. "If you fess up, but do not provide the specifics, the forgeries are still out there in circulation."

Mr. Perenyi is more than happy to explain the techniques required to fake a Buttersworth, which he does crisply and authoritatively. If the circumstances were different, you could imagine him delivering a splendid lecture at the museum.

Over the telephone, he held forth enthusiastically on Butterworth's hallmarks: the favored New York settings; the play of light on clouds and water, reflecting the influence of the Luminist painters; the love of dramatic contrasts in the sky; and the painstaking attention to detail, with the stitching on canvas sails depicted in lines as fine as a human hair.

“Hardest of all is the unique way he painted water, ” Mr. Perenyi said. “He did not follow the tried and true technique that British artists developed for waves and water. He rolls or twists his brush in his fingers as he pulls it along, to get ribbons of highlights.”

Close study and constant practice, Mr. Perenyi said, have made him the equal of his master. “If he could come back to life, he would shake my hand,” he said. “After all, I devoted 30 years to understanding him. He would say, ‘I would be proud to put my name on it myself.’”

The forgery aside, the exhibition draws heavily on its own substantial collection of Buttersworths, augmented by loans from other museums and by a collection of 16 paintings recently donated by Janet Schaefer, a collector in Stonington, Conn.

All eyes will be searching for the non-Buttersworth, however. The painting returns to the friend of the museum when the exhibition closes on April 26, at which point, the friend said, “I’ll probably put it in my office as a conversation piece.”

As for Mr. Perenyi, he declared himself well pleased to be included in the Mariners’ Museum exhibition. “ I take it as a great compliment,” he said, “and a testament to the museum’s good taste.”