

AUTHENTICATION IN ART

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Bizarre Pollock forgery scam targets unwary collectors in the US

IFAR has uncovered a cache of poorly executed fakes supposedly once owned by a wealthy German immigrant who went mad and left the art to his servants—but no trace in official records

by [LAURA GILBERT](#), [BILL GLASS](#) | 23 August 2017



One of the suspected fakes submitted to IFAR in 2013, painted in acrylic on cardboard and signed "Jackson Pollock" (Photo courtesy IFAR)

A forgery scam that poses a “significant threat” to unsuspecting art buyers has been uncovered by the International Foundation for Art Research (IFAR), which has identified four fakes purportedly by Jackson Pollock that were brought to it for authentication by three different owners. All the works surfaced starting in 2013, and are said to have come from the collection of James Brennerman, who, as far as IFAR can determine, is a fictitious identity.

The organisation, which has helped authenticate works by the artist since the Pollock-Krasner Authentication Board was disbanded in 1995, outlined its investigation into the forgeries in [the most recent issue of its IFAR Journal](#). It has seen photographs of ten other fake Pollocks and spotted another one online, all apparently from the same cache. To date IFAR is aware of less than two dozen possible fakes, but it fears there may be many more, since the paintings submitted to it were accompanied by a hefty dossier of documents referring to Brennerman’s collection of more than 700 works by Pollock. Those documents also refer to paintings by artists including Kline, De Kooning, Renoir, Monet, Hassam, Rothko, Manet, Hopper, Motherwell and Gorky, which Brennerman envisioned would “eventually form the core of his own art museum”, the IFAR Journal reports.

Unlike the high-profile Old Master fakes scandal in Europe and the forgeries sold by Knoedler, this scam is not aimed at the super-rich in major art centers. It targets modest collectors and so far is unfolding in the Mountain States and along the East Coast, among “a whole network of people who are not professional dealers, a different world from what we’re used to”, says Dr Sharon Flescher, IFAR’s executive director. While millions were spent on a single forgery sold through Knoedler, many more fakes are offered to this less sophisticated community at far lower prices, with sales in the five-figure range. As a result, “they circulate more easily”, Flescher says, adding that those figures can add up because of the potentially large number of victims.

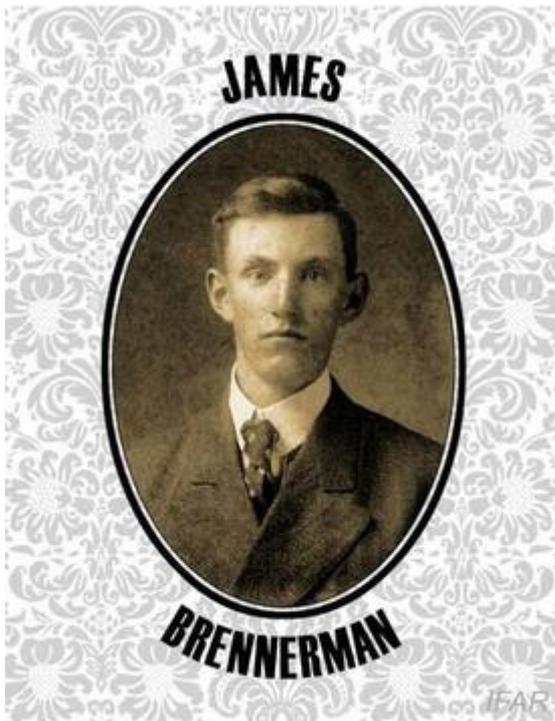
The details laid out in the dossier about the collection are sometimes bizarre. The buyers were told Brennerman was a German immigrant who settled in Chicago in the 1940s. Around 1968, he and an art collector friend named Charles Farmer paid cash for 748 Pollocks, “two truckloads” of art. The seller was said to be Pollock’s widow, Lee Krasner. In 1970, Brennerman purchased Farmer’s share. As described through decades of correspondence—all oddly written by Brennerman, “often in poorly-written German” the IFAR Journal notes, but none written to him—the collector eventually went mad, saying he would be “transported to another planet over which I will rule. I am destined to become a god.”



A photo from the Brennerman dossier, said to show the collector's Chicago mansion, Buffalo Park (Photo courtesy International Foundation for Art Research (IFAR))



The Wallfahrtskirche Mariä Heimsuchung, known as Das Käppele, in Würzburg, Germany



A photo from the Brennerman dossier said to depict the collector as a young man (Photo courtesy International Foundation for Art Research (IFAR))

IFAR suggests that Brennerman was characterised as an insane recluse to explain why the works were never exhibited and why he left all his art to his servants, Bert and Ethel Ramsey, when he died in 1974. The collection's provenance most recently includes a strip club owner in Roanoke, Virginia, who claims to have bought the works from the Ramseys.

As was the case with Brennerman, IFAR was unable to find any reliable official record of Farmer or the Ramseys. The dossier also included photographs that are meant to show Brennerman's estate but are actually of the Sforza Castle in Milan, the Neptune statue in Madrid, and an 18th-century Bavarian church.

During its research, IFAR found the paintings unconvincing and the provenance sometimes laughable but had them tested anyway "to hammer the nail into the coffin", Flescher says. The results showed anomalous materials

used to make the works, including acrylic paint, which Pollock never used in any of his accepted works and which was not widely available until the 1980s.



enforcement, Flescher said: "I am not at liberty to comment".

Another of the suspected fakes submitted to IFAR in 2013, painted in acrylic on foam board and signed "Jackson Pollock" (Photo courtesy International Foundation for Art Research (IFAR))

If taken to established galleries in major art centers, the fakes likely would have been immediately spotted as unsophisticated pastiches, Flescher says, particularly because dealers would have raised an eyebrow at the absurdly low prices. That these works are being offered outside the established system to less experienced buyers only adds to Flescher's concerns. At least one painting IFAR rejected was resold, and its new owner contacted the organisation for authentication. And the person behind the scam seems to be learning from his or her mistakes. When IFAR received the fourth Brennerman fake in 2015, the dossier no longer included photos and documents that had been called out as suspicious in previous reports.

"We do not know at this stage who created the works or is the mastermind behind the apparent scam. Perhaps a government investigation is in order," the IFAR Journal reports. Asked whether the organisation has informed law