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## THE EAST HAMPTON STAR SHINES FOR ALL

# Jackson Pollock's Not-So-Fabulous Fakes

*In the past few years, several forgeries have emerged in the marketplace*

By [Jennifer Landes](#) | March 7, 2019 - 10:00am



A painting on fiberboard was one of the 45 works associated with John Re that were brought to the International Foundation for Art Research for authentication in 2011. *IFAR*

With a deceptively simple-looking technique and auction and private sale prices averaging in the tens of millions, Jackson Pollock's drip paintings are one of the most popular subjects for forgers, and several scams have emerged in recent years.

Francis O'Connor, a Pollock scholar and co-author of the artist's catalogue raisonné as well as a later supplement, once estimated that the known unauthenticated works by Pollock in the United States numbered around 350. Dr. O'Connor was known, along with Eugene Thaw, as one of the consummate experts in Pollock's painting style. Both men died last year.

It's not clear whether the count included single works and caches of paintings and drawings that were found to be imposters during the past decade or so. One of the most recent cases involved works sold by John Re, an East Hampton resident who said he had found paintings by Pollock and Willem de Kooning while cleaning out a basement for Barbara Schulte after the death of her husband, George Schulte. He later changed his story to having found them in a storage warehouse in New York City.

In 2011, the International Foundation for Art Research's authentication service was engaged by someone who had purchased 45 of the 65 Pollock-attributed paintings from Mr. Re. On canvas, fiberboard, and paper, the paintings were previously unknown. As Sharon Flescher, the director of IFAR, and Lisa Duffy-Zeballos, IFAR's art research director, noted in an article in IFAR Journal about their role in uncovering the fakes, if they had been authentic, "such a large group could have changed our understanding of Pollock's oeuvre." Instead, it was "an enormous fraud."

IFAR, a 50-year-old institution that also rejected a forged Pollock sold by the Knoedler gallery in the years before it closed in 2011, had actually encountered one of the Re works previously, in 2001, much earlier than even prosecutors thought Mr. Re had become active. It was a small drip painting on paper with a notarized letter from Ms. Schulte stating that the works in the collection, which included some attributed to de Kooning, had been received in exchange for projects her husband had done for both artists.

Pollock had a record of using paintings as payment, but the known instances are rare. IFAR researched documentation, biographical materials, and even Pollock's canceled checks to see if there was any connection between the two men, but found nothing and no mention of the painting.

Yet the real giveaway was the painting itself, "an unconvincing pastiche, lacking the vitality and compositional integrity of Pollock's 1948 to 1949 black and red works on paper," IFAR said. The work was signed and dated 1948. As for the rest of the group, even though some looked promising in photographs, "not one was remotely credible

when examined in person.” Their sameness in “palette, technique, and physical properties” was “uncharacteristic of Pollock.”

Although Ms. Schulte appeared to be involved, Mr. Re told IFAR that he had signed her name on the affidavits with her permission, and then signed his name on the later ones. He then said that she later sold the remaining paintings to him after she decided she didn’t want to be involved. By 2011, she had been put into an institution for dementia and could not be interviewed, but her family and friends had no memory of seeing paintings of that kind in her house and told IFAR they believed she had been exploited.

IFAR’s report on the paintings was included in the government’s complaint against Mr. Re and key to the findings that he had committed fraud. He pleaded guilty in 2014 and was fined more than \$2 million in restitution. In 2016 he was sentenced to five years in prison.

In an article in IFAR Journal in 2017, the foundation revealed that it had uncovered another group of small works on various supports represented to be by Pollock. Their claimed source was James Brennerman, supposedly a German-born collector who was said to have amassed a group of Pollocks that he kept in a mansion in Chicago. No such person appears to exist, and pictures used in the paintings’ supporting documents turned out to have been taken at a castle in Milan and an 18th-century Bavarian church.

Since 2013, the foundation has received related authentication inquiries from three people, one of whom said he owned 50 Brennerman Pollocks and hundreds more by other artists, all from the same source. The foundation has seen four paintings in total so far with this provenance. Through forensic analysis, all four were determined to have acrylic paint, a material Pollock was not known to have used.

According to a letter that is part of the documents given to the purchasers of the artworks, Brennerman’s collection has some 750 other works purported to be by Pollock, an artist known to have painted only about 1,100 works during his lifetime, according to his catalogue raisonné.

Dr. Flescher and Dr. Duffy-Zeballos noted the garishness of the palette in the paintings they saw, which were also not indicative of the style or materials in Pollock’s paintings of the period.

Yet there have been other fakes in history that have looked more attractive than the real thing. Dr. O'Connor said in a 2013 symposium on connoisseurship that "aesthetics have nothing to do with connoisseurship. You can have a great fake Pollock; it's not a Pollock though." He said a real Pollock has three factors that are impossible to replicate: roughness, reflectivity, and regularity.

The artist's regularity was so much a part of his practice that Richard Taylor, a physicist and the director of the Materials Science Institute at the University of Oregon, has applied the study of fractals — the repetition of patterns in nature — to Pollock's work. The swaying motion of the artist's drips and brushwork is fractal, he said at Dr. O'Connor's memorial symposium last year, and even "acts as a personal signature," given the artist's poor balance. "There's a myth that it's easy to paint a Pollock, but you have to have his physiology and then spend a decade learning to manipulate it."

Still, Dr. Taylor reiterated Dr. O'Connor's concern that without rigorous approach to connoisseurship in the marketplace, some of those 350 unauthenticated works would become "real" works in the marketplace, "seeking the blind to buy them."

At one point, Dr. O'Connor considered whether the Pollock-Krasner Foundation should assemble a database of questionable attributions. According to Kerrie Buitrago, the executive vice president of the Pollock-Krasner Foundation, he compiled a wealth of visual and verbal details about false attributions, but was "fearful it might be a lightning rod for litigation."

When the 2000 biopic "Pollock" was being made, 104 copies of existing works were made so that the actors playing Pollock and his wife, Lee Krasner, could be seen working on them. The Pollock-Krasner Foundation agreed to allow the film to make the copies, but Dr. O'Connor and Avis Berman, an independent curator and archivist, set about documenting the replicas to create their own catalog of copies.

"Although no expert would ever mistake the imitations for genuine artworks by Pollock and Krasner, some of the copies . . . stood a chance of fooling neophyte viewers and collectors in the future," when their link to the movie may have been forgotten, Ms. Berman said at the symposium. Such an exercise was required, she said, in order to "maintain the integrity of the work of Pollock and Krasner and to aid in clarifying potential questions" later. "No one grasped the implications of this project more astutely than Francis," Ms. Berman recalled. "He never assumed too much vigilance had been exercised."

According to Dr. Flescher in a recent email, “There are, indeed, many Pollock fakes in circulation, and the art community needs to remain vigilant. I am not comfortable with the term ‘gatekeeper’ to describe us (or anyone else), but we have done quite a bit to help ameliorate the situation.”

Helen Harrison, the director of the Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center in Springs, who has brought together many scholars to address the issues of Pollock authentication over the years, said of the current situation, “All I can say is, caveat emptor.”



An acrylic painting on foam board purported to be by Jackson Pollock from the "Brennerman Collection"