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Four Tefaf art dealers in disrepute due to potential forgeries

Is the vetting procedure at Tefaf so watertight that forgeries are kept out of the fine art fair? And should the fair admit dealers who are linked to potential forgeries? Some participants say Tefaf's reputation is being damaged by a failure to take action

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8 maart 2017



Could a number of old masters, bought by French collector Giuliano Ruffini and recently exposed as modern forgeries, have slipped through the screening at Tefaf Maastricht, the most prestigious art fair in the world? Henk van Os, the chairman of the Tefaf vetting committee ponders for a few moments. “Yes, I think they could,” he says finally.

The former director of the Rijksmuseum is not the only one who thinks so. Long-time Tefaf dealers like Bob Haboltd and Niels de Boer agree. Haboltd: “Forgeries have got through in the past.” De Boer: “These are the best forgeries ever, shockingly good.”

2016 was the year of the art forgery and never before were so many good reputations damaged. Respected museums, dealers and art historians got caught up in various scandals. The common denominator? After advanced scientific research, the art they had thought to be old and authentic proved to be fake.



Auction house Sotheby's lost 11 million dollars on two forgeries last year. Sotheby's went on to buy the lab that had discovered 20th century traces on a painting sold as a Frans Hals. But what is Tefaf Maastricht doing to tackle the risks? The art fair opens tomorrow and claims to be the most reliable address in the world.

Disreputed dealers

The names of four regular Tefaf dealers - Colnaghi, the Mayor Gallery and the Weiss Gallery from London, and Didier Aaron from Paris – fell into disrepute last year after they were involved in dubious sales. Aaron had sold fake Louis XV chairs and was banned from French art fair Biennale des Antiquaires. But he is welcome at Tefaf Maastricht.

These four only make up 1.5 percent of Tefaf's market, says Tefaf CEO Patrick van Maris. The board of directors has discussed the matter extensively and decided not to take any steps. The dubious works were not sold at Tefaf and the courts have not yet given their verdict. Van Maris: "As long as there are uncertainties, we have to be very careful about making any comment." There is also the crucial issue of intent to take into account. Did the dealers know they were selling forgeries?

As chairman of the Tefaf vetting committee Henk van Os's role is limited: he is the referee but the board makes the rules. He has his doubts about the rule which states dealers can only be banned if they have sold forgeries at Tefaf itself. He will, he says, bring this up with the board.

Disaster

Insiders say the many court cases involving big Tefaf names are damaging the fair's reputation. Sotheby's has paid damages to the buyer of the fake Frans Hals but the Weiss Gallery that originally sold the painting is refusing to pay. Sotheby's is now suing Weiss. "Collectors are being given the impression that it's safer to buy art at an auction house than at a fair: at least an auction house will pay compensation if it's a forgery," says one insider. Forgeries are taboo in the art world, says Laszlo von Vertes, a Swiss dealer who has worked at Tefaf for years. "That is exactly why we need to start talking about this issue openly as soon as possible."

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Daniel Blau tried. The German photography dealer is a Tefaf regular. At the beginning of December last year he sent an email to all the dealers telling them why he would not be in Maastricht this year. It was, he said, a protest about the way the board of directors avoids all complex issues. The first concern he airs in the email is the absence of measures against "prominent dealers who were involved with forgeries and have damaged the reputation of the Tefaf screening process".

Tefaf director Van Maris doesn't want to talk about the letter. "If I talk to all 275 dealers, I will hear 275 opinions," he said. "As a director I cannot build a strategy on 275 individual opinions."

The works of art that got the four Tefaf dealers into trouble were not shown at Tefaf. But at least one forgery sold by Giuliano Ruffini did slip through the Tefaf net - a small still life by Adriaen Coorte that was shown in 2009 by Salomon Lilian. Only when one of the Mauritshuis' curators told the art dealer it was a forgery, did Lilian remove the painting. That was a few days after the opening.

Eight years on, Lilian is convinced that this Coorte came from Ruffini. Ruffini did in fact name Coorte in an interview as one of the many painters whose work he had sold.

Lilian himself doubted the authenticity of the Coorte, which he had bought for a relatively low price at an auction in Paris. It was "a gamble," he says. In fact, he says, that is why he took the painting to Tefaf : who better to decide whether it was authentic than the vetting committee there?

That is the danger of the great Tefaf reputation, says Henk van Os. "You sometimes see signs

at other art fairs saying ‘Accepted at Tefaf’. When I heard that, I realised it was all getting very complicated. Dealers are now having their painting checked just so it has Tefaf approval.”

Tefaf has included a disclaimer in the catalogue this year: ”The Scientific Research Team provides indicative analytical support,” it says. “The SRT’s work does not present the in-depth material investigation of a specialised art technological laboratory.” Van Maris says dealers can no longer put the responsibility onto Tefaf’s scientific research team. “The dealers themselves will have to hand in sound technical documentation,” he says, adding that Tefaf has the best scientific researchers of all art fairs.

Expert eye

For many years it was down to the expert opinion of the 175 members of the Tefaf vetting committee as to whether tens of thousands of works of art were authentic. It was not until 2012 that the scientific research team was established. Now if there is any doubt about authenticity or restoration, the judge calls in the research team to look at the painting in the mobile lab.

Robert van Langh heads this team of white-coated researchers. He is also head of the department of Conservation, Restoration and Research at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. He says the possibilities for research are limited in Maastricht: “Compare us to a hospital A&E department. We can do a quick scan to see if there is something wrong but we can’t do much more.”

During the fair itself, the team does not have time to put paintings through the X-ray fluorescence spectrometer or to take paint samples to verify authenticity. So they simply cannot say at short notice whether a work of art is authentic or not, says Joris Dik, a professor at Delft University of Technology and a member of the Tefaf team. “Sometimes we see nothing, sometimes we can express doubts and sometimes we can support those doubts,” he says.

Scientific research is not a standard procedure at Tefaf. It only happens if there is doubt about a work of art. That’s why the disclaimer is so important, says Dik. “The white coats at Tefaf can give the outside world the wrong impression.”

Independence

The independence of the members of the vetting committee is another issue. When Van Os began as chairman 10 years ago, he was irritated by the fact that many inspectors were also

dealers. On one occasion, the work was judged by the dealer running the booth because there were so few experts.

And when other experts were asked to double check, many of the items were disqualified.

Despite Van Os's efforts, there are still many dealers who also work as inspectors – at least 30 in the past five years. They are not allowed to say anything during the inspection of their own booth. But there are still conflicts of interest. Van Os has overruled inspectors' decisions on at least two occasions. "Once a complete stand was disqualified," he says. "When I looked into the problems, it turned out to be a matter of rivalry. One dealer in the vetting committee was being negative about a competitor. I could not allow that."

Willem Baars, a long-standing member of the committee which looks at 19th century paintings, says it is "highly irritating" that dealers are still involved in the inspection process. He ended his involvement with the PAN Amsterdam art fair nine years ago because he was angry about having to vet together with dealers.

Baars' vetting committee in Maastricht (one of 29 committees in total) is made up of art historians. This is as it should be, he says. "You cannot be honest about art if you have business interests at stake."

In an ideal world Tefaf wouldn't have any dealers in the vetting committee, says fair director Van Maris. However, some have knowledge that no-one else has. "Which is more important: avoiding conflict of interest or having enough knowledge?," he asks. "That is our dilemma."

Salon des Refusés

The vetting committee sends all dubious objects to the Salon des Refusés, a depot that remains under lock and key during the fair. They cannot punish the dealer. Only the board of directors can do that – but that too is made up of dealers.

Not so long ago the board of directors banned two British dealers because they were bringing in too many works of art of dubious origin. One of them was allowed back after two years, the other has been banned indefinitely because of the aggressive way he responded when questioned.

One of the Tefaf participants whose reputation was damaged last year is a member of the Tefaf board of directors - Konrad Bernheimer, the owner of Colnaghi, a dealership in London which celebrated its 250th anniversary in 2010. Bernheimer came into disrepute when the French authorities confiscated a painting he had sold by Lucas Cranach the Elder. The

painting came from the collector Giuliano Ruffini and although the court case is pending, many art historians think it is a forgery.

Prominent Tefaf dealers say they are unhappy about Bernheimer's position. One of them says he must step down if the French judges rule the Cranach is a forgery: "Then it will be crystal clear he cannot continue in this job."

Tefaf Maastricht runs from March 10 to 19 at the MECC exhibition centre. See also tefaf.com