

# AUTHENTICATION IN ART

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## TOWN&COUNTRY

### **The Surprising Truth About Fake Art and How to Avoid Being Scammed**

\$200 billion is spent worldwide on art every year, and \$6 billion of that is tainted by illegal and illicit activity.



PARAMOUNT

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Here's a little test of your social anxiety. You're on Main Street in East Hampton (You failed already! Just kidding), window-shopping, and you see an art gallery. You're not an art connoisseur, but you know what you like and you've been known to spend on it. This gallery is no gewgaw emporium for hapless tourists but a handsomely shabby place with oriental rugs and a radio playing the Trout Quintet. The owner, a charmingly ruffled bohemian type, offers you a mug of lapsang souchong. When one of the objets piques your interest—an earthy Jackson Pollock sketch for the surprisingly affordable price of \$2,000—you decide to go for it.

*Getting duped by a forgery is in some ways the rich person's ultimate humiliation.*

Suddenly the charmingly ruffled dealer starts speaking a language you barely understand, using terms like “catalogue raisonné” and “provenance,” which you haven't heard since Intro to Modernism. Does art have the same rules as purchasing a car or a house, you wonder? Would it be tacky to ask about the sketch's history? Have you already exposed your inexperience by buying a Pollock in the first place? And, really, could you get ripped off at a store playing Schubert, with oriental rugs, offering tea?

Often, after getting duped in precisely this manner and finding themselves in ownership of what turns out to be a stunningly obvious fake, buyers prefer to hide their loss. That's because getting duped by a forgery—to the extent that it represents a failed effort to signify wealth, taste, and mastery of an insider code—is in some ways the rich person's ultimate humiliation.



## CANALETTO'S VIEWS OF VENICE (1723-1724) AT THE QUEEN'S GALLERY AT BUCKINGHAM PALACE

GETTY

“It’s like food poisoning,” says Alexandra Porter, a Manhattan art dealer. “The chances of getting it at a restaurant are not high, especially if you know where you’re going. But can it happen? Of course. And when it does it’s terrible.”

Auto parts tycoon Nicholas Taubman is one of the rare victims who chose to go public after being snookered. In 2005, Taubman, a Roanoke, Virginia, native, bought a painting by Clyfford Still—an abstract expressionist whose work rarely comes to market—at an art fair for \$4.3 million. For the next several years it adorned the American embassy in Bucharest, to which [Taubman, a heavy-hitting Republican donor, had been appointed ambassador by George W. Bush.](#)

However, after returning to the U.S., Taubman heard a distressing rumor: The dealer who sold him the crown jewel of his collection was suspected of selling fakes. Upon examination, the Still turned out to have been created by a struggling painter in his garage in Queens, who had sold it for a few thousand dollars.

Taubman is hardly alone. So polluted by fakes is the art world that every serious collector is likely to have been burned at least once. Alec Baldwin [admitted](#) last year that a beloved Ross Bleckner painting he bought from dealer Mary Boone was not the work he thought it was but rather a different image from the same series by the artist.

Now in litigation with Boone, the actor did not want to talk about the dispute. Nor did other well-known victims of art fraud, including John McEnroe and Wall Street titan Andrew Hall, whose private museum in Vermont includes a large number of works said to be counterfeit.



A REPRODUCTION OF RENOIR'S LA LOGE SITS INSIDE THE PRESIDENT'S 66TH-FLOOR PENTHOUSE IN TRUMP TOWER; THE ORIGINAL HANGS AT THE COURTAULD IN LONDON.  
GETTY

“Art is not what it used to be,” says Christopher McKeogh, an agent with the FBI’s art crime unit. “It’s not just something you hang on a wall. It’s collateral, it’s an investment, it’s a commodity. More and more, we see it turn up in money laundering cases because its value is so high.”

As a result, an unending series of forgery-related outrages seems to have afflicted the art world, from last year’s “scandal of the century” involving counterfeit Old Masters (one of which had at one time been declared a “national treasure” by the government of France), to the investigation and subsequent closing in 2011 of the Knoedler & Co. gallery, to the 2011 trial of German-born Wolfgang Beltracchi, the “greatest art forger of all time,” who was said to have seeded bogus paintings at major museums throughout the world.

Yet aside from a stumble now and then, the price of artworks continues to climb. “The art world is more robust than it was last year,” says Evan Beard, an art specialist with U.S. Trust/Bank of

America. “Brexit is not as big a catastrophe as anticipated, and China’s back in the game. We’re having a good year.” Sales at Christie’s, the world’s largest auction house, are up 14 percent in 2017 compared to last year.

Nevertheless, of the \$200 billion spent worldwide on art every year, \$6 billion is tainted by illicit activity, "and we’re not talking about people stealing paintings," says Robert Wittman, a private art investigator who founded the FBI’s art crime unit. "We’re mainly talking about fraud.”

That concerns Cyrus R. Vance Jr., the district attorney of New York. Forgery, he says, “is not good for New York City business. You don’t want to be known as a place where you go to buy art and half the time it’s fake.”



IN 2012 ART CRITIC JERRY SALTZ COMMISSIONED SOME “RICHTERS” FROM JERSEY CITY ARTIST STANLEY CASSELMAN. HE CAUGHT THE FAUX BUG AND HAS SINCE COMMISSIONED “GUYTONS,” “HIRSTS,” AND MORE.

GETTY

Both Vance and the FBI have beefed up their art crime units over the last decade while pursuing highly visible cases of fraud, such as the investigation of Knoedler & Co., which led to the closure of one of the most distinguished art galleries in the country.

But con artists like Eric Ian Spoutz have adapted. Spoutz, a 34-year-old dealer with an established gallery near Detroit, made a small fortune selling “previously unknown” minor works by artists such as Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline to victims who came from places ranging from Michigan to California. The key to his scam was pursuing modest rather than huge payoffs and dispersing his targets.

“Spoutz tried to stay under the radar,” says McKeogh. “If someone in Arizona loses \$3,000, the police aren’t going to do anything.” Spoutz also forged elaborately researched letters of authentication by real art critics and gallery owners, using a vintage typewriter that ultimately proved his undoing. “Because it has federal jurisdiction, the FBI was able to go to all those victims and examine the evidence,” says McKeogh. “All the letters were written with the same typewriter.” (Spoutz went to jail this year for wire fraud.)

All of which raises the question: Who can you trust? Dealers? So-called authenticators? “Sometimes it’s difficult even for experts to identify forged art,” says Vance, who in his early years as an assistant district attorney prosecuted a celebrated case of art fraud involving Persian antiquities. “It was a skillful set of pieces, quite beautiful and impressive.” However, “nobody would help me examine them because the defendant was a well-known art dealer.”

Finding the technology for proving authenticity less than foolproof, Vance ended up taking urns and chalices said to be priceless relics to the bomb squad to be X-rayed. Most “experts” would say that forensic techniques haven’t improved much in the 30 years since the case was prosecuted.



## ANALYZING A MICHAELANGELO SKETCH GETTY

“How do you prove it’s fake?” Wittman asks. “If there’s nothing wrong with it, nothing anomalous with the materials, how do you know? A lot of galleries and auction houses fall back on that and say, ‘Okay, you prove it to me.’ It’s subjective.”

“The art market is the only part of the economy where opinions matter more than facts,” says Beard. “What two or three experts believe is somehow more important than the underlying truth. And every generation has its own experts.” So why take the risk? Perhaps because, as the Dutch Master—counterfeiting protagonist of *The Recognitions*, William Gaddis’s classic 1955 novel, says, “a work of art redeems time.” Or because, as his Mephistophelian dealer says, “buying it redeems money.” Either way, art has the power to make people make some very bad decisions.

“As fun as it is to fall in love at first sight, it’s never a good idea with art,” Manhattan art consultant Jay Grimm says. (Grimm advises clients to get everything in writing and to do business via the U.S. post office, to take advantage of mail fraud protections.)

“People pay for uniqueness,” says Wittman. “Why is a piece of canvas somebody painted 300 years ago worth \$30 million? Because I can have it and other people can’t.”

“Con men are the same everywhere,” says McKeogh, who before joining the FBI art crime team investigated fraud involving Wall Street

and Hollywood. “They’re good talkers and use an insider language.” Eric Ian Spoutz was born into a family fluent in that idiom (his uncle Ian Hornak was an accomplished painter whose work resides in museums), and he “purposely sought people out of their wheelhouse,” says McKeogh, so that he could use that fluency against them.

Not everyone thinks buying fakes is a tragedy. Ken Perenyi, a reformed counterfeiter in St. Petersburg, Florida, can be hired to paint you a Modigliani, Picasso, or Monet (“Why Spend Millions at Sotheby’s and Christie’s?” his website asks) for between \$5 and \$50,000. He dares you to spot the difference between his creations and the ones in auction catalogs (some of which continue to circulate even though he says he painted them).



ARISTOTLE ONASSIS ENJOYED LETTING THE GUESTS ON HIS YACHT, THE CHRISTINA, THINK THAT THE TWO FAKE GOYAS HANGING ON THE WALL NEAR THE RENOIR WERE REAL.

GETTY

“I consider my work equal to or exceeding that of the master,” says Perenyi, who went straight in the 1990s and claims to be doing better now than he did as a forger. Are his clients, who he says come from “the private jet class” and “places like Palm Beach,” embarrassed to own fakes? He says he doesn’t ask whether the paintings are presented as real, but he assumes most of them are. (Occasionally he’ll “open up a magazine and see one of my paintings above a fireplace.”)

There are also artists who specialize in borrowing, if not stealing, the vibe of blue chip artists. Such imitators may create “Warholesque imagery,” says art adviser Kipton Cronkite, “but if people walk into a room and say, ‘Oh, that looks like a Warhol,’ then it’s up to the collector to correct them, right?”

Still other people may be less prone to fake art anxiety because for them art is less a status game than a cold-blooded investment. “I don’t think rich people are afraid of buying fake art,” Kunitz says. “I think fake art involves one of rich people’s favorite pastimes: suing each other. But if you’re not equipped to engage in that sort of warfare, you should probably stay out.”

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