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Forgers, Connoisseurs, and the Nazi Past

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Abstract

The authentication and accurate attribution of art can be a complex issue. Connoisseurship and ethics, politics and the media can get mixed in among the “active ingredients” that can obstruct efforts to correct scholarly misattribution in the sense of having mistaken the work for that of a master. The expertise of forgers Han van Meegeren and Wolfgang Beltracchi went way beyond artistic skill, technical skill, extensive knowledge of art history and the methods employed by the true masters. The connoisseurs who supplied the authentications were giving and receiving something in return, and this caused the ethical lines to blur. Political opportunism enabled van Meegeren to hide his sympathy for the *Volkgeist* conventions of Nazi art with a clever plot device by which he could demonstrate that he had conned a member of the Nazi elite. The Beltracchis concocted the history of production of a hitherto unknown number of modern art works by linking the fake provenances to pre-packaged narratives that invoked the most sordid elements of the cultural policy of the Third Reich. At their trials, the forgers assumed the role of “masters of ceremonies” who entertained the court staff and spectators. Unsurprisingly, the media conferred folk hero status on them. This article highlights the uncanny parallels and patterns in the art forgery careers of these two forgers, and specifically also in the misattribution of their forged works. Considering how intricate the interdependencies between evidence and beliefs can be, the ethical responsibility of the art trade when forgeries are sold comes into question. More scientific testing continues to expose some of the secrets of master forgers, but no forgery trial, law report or media report can completely de-contaminate art history. The relevance of information ethics relevant to the study of art history and material culture deserves to be highlighted more frequently.

Introduction

Forgers Han van Meegeren (1889-1947) and Wolfgang Beltracchi (b 1951 as Wolfgang Fischer) created new compositions which were taken to be unknown works by the artists they were forging. The two forgers had much in common: skills, artistic ability, technical competence and nerve. They identified the gaps that existed in the market. They knew what contemporary tastes dictated. Importantly, they were also able to anticipate the opinions of connoisseurs, and adapted their “work” to them. Van Meegeren painted religious works that would be lauded as newly discovered “Vermeers”. Vermeer’s work did not feature very prominently on collectors’ agendas between early 1700 and 1860, with the exception of works that were thought to be by artists such as Rembrandt who were more famous than him (Keats, 2013, 75). With the upsurge in interest in Vermeer’s work in the early 30s, van Meegeren saw an opportunity supply the market with the type of “Vermeers” it desired and anticipated (van den Brandhof, 1979, 170). No detailed catalogue raisonné of Vermeer’s oeuvre existed in the early part of the 20th century. The art market was presented with a single unfamiliar picture at a time. It stood amidst a rather small canon of works which was

all but readily accessible. Comparisons were not feasible (Goodman, 1983, 101-2). Van Meegeren also faked the provenance of his forgeries. Beltracchi's deception was similar in many ways. He is a high calibre trickster. He combined an advanced understanding of the failings and weaknesses of the art market with an extensive knowledge of the work and methods of a very large number of different modern artists. Beltracchi painted what would be regarded as works "missing" since World War II that had come to light, or works which the experts would expect an artist to have painted on account of having seen the work listed before. Since no visual record of these works existed he knew that checking would be difficult to do. Like van Meegeren, he created a fake history of production for an original of what he was forging. Not only was he willing to take the risk that the original could surface at any moment (Koldehoff and Timm, 2012, 127), but he also supplied "evidence" for the fake provenance in the form of falsified photo material and labels that conjured up pertinent aspects of the war-era narrative.

The authentication and accurate attribution of art can be a complex issue. Knowledge is constructed from data, but it is fallible and defeasible (Covey, 1990, 27). Authenticity is closely linked to a judgment and to the aims of those who pass judgment have in mind. The forgers' purposeful misrepresentations led connoisseurs to mistake their "work" for works by the masters. This close link between intent to deceive and error can make the boundary line dividing the forgers and the experts hard to locate (Briefel, 2006, 60). A good expert can be the forger's best ally if his or her competence manifests in predictable and stable expectations which the forger can fulfil (Lenain, 2014, 56). One antagonist provides support for the other: the-forger-as-expert and the-expert-as-forger. In both cases, a psychological strategy that relied among other things on active cultivation of endorsements by connoisseurs was devised for purposes of ensuring that buyers could be secured. The ethical lines became blurred, because these connoisseurs were giving and receiving something in return.

Van Meegeren claimed to have duped the Nazis by selling Reichsmarshal Hermann Göring a forgery he had painted himself, and insisted he could do much better than to copy a Vermeer to prove that this was true. He would make a completely novel work, "Christ and the Scribes in the Temple". This clever plot device helped to turn the spotlight away from himself and the deep Nazi ties he had cultivated since the late 1920s. More than 60 years after World War II ended, the Beltracchis concocted pre-packaged narratives that were cleverly interwoven with the persecution that followed from Nazi cultural policy. They linked an unknown number of modern art works to this fake history of production, and supplied hard evidence that bolstered the narrative. Their opportunism had credibility because of the way in which they objectified the travesties of the Nazi past. Their aim was downright deplorable: to bolster the uniqueness of the forgeries they were offering.

The connoisseurs implicated by the deception of van Meegeren and Beltracchi committed the type of error that results in misattribution of a work of art. Errors were precipitated by an incomplete or superficial evaluation of the work in question due to various types of pressure, not all exerted by the forgers themselves. Errors of misattribution can go unreported if victims are embarrassed about having been duped or about the financial loss suffered (Chappell and Hufnagel, 2012, 43). Stylistic connoisseurship is prone to error for two fundamental reasons. First, it is dependent

on superficial visual inspections. Secondly, it is also intricately dependent on the web of beliefs held by the observer who may be called upon to certify. Relying on the eyes more than on the conscience promotes the unhealthy demand for rare and unique pieces and renders buyers more vulnerable to misrepresentation (Koldehof and Timm, 2012, 167). Art-historical documentation, stylistic connoisseurship, and technical or scientific analysis represent different aspects of “best practices necessary for authentication and attribution” (Task Force on Authentication, authorized by the Board of Directors of the College Art Association, October 2008. Membership is not limited to the US). While these different courses of action complement each other, remarkably few contemporary codes of ethics contain guidelines in respect of art forgeries.

This article sets out the extent and scope of the forgers’ expertise, the lures that were deployed in respect of the connoisseurs they were targeting, why these connoisseurs took the bait laid out for them, and the factors that hinder the ventilation and the correction of scholarly error: more specifically the political climate of World War II and the Nazi narrative in art history. The confessions made at trial did not mean that the facts which impacted the art market were revealed. When their respective art fraud careers started and how many works they had forged were not established at trial. The pressures accompanying the extensive media coverage contributed to this situation to some extent. As memories fade and records fall into disuse, the full extent of the art fraud perpetrated is bound to remain unexposed.

The forger’s expertise

Van Meegeren got away with forging a whole Vermeer oeuvre. Several forged paintings were admitted into the corpus of Vermeer’s works as “early works”. By that point, this category was associated with atypical history paintings such as “Christ in the House of Martha and Mary”. Dividing Vermeer’s oeuvre into two groups helped to explain the striking differences in the quality and execution of many works. *Noord-en Zuid-Nederlandsche schilderkunst de XVII eeuw* (1936), the authoritative commentary of Hannema and van Schendel, did as much. Van Meegeren realized that a new painting with a biblical theme that displayed non-Dutch qualities in the composition could pass as a Vermeer. He made “Supper at Emmaus”, one of the “new discoveries”, to fit the description. The Italian influence of Caravaggio’s religious works provided a feasible explanation for this particular direction in Vermeer’s oeuvre (van den Brandhof, 1979, 95-7). The painting sold for 550,000 Dutch guilders (equivalent to \$4 million in 2014).

INSERT IMAGE: “Supper at Emmaus” by Han van Meegeren, Oil on canvas (115 x 127 cm), dated 1937

Aware of the chemical tests of the day, van Meegeren was always exceedingly careful with his materials and pigments (Kilbracken, 1967). He had knowledge of brushes, canvases and colours that were in use in the 17th century; the drying properties of oil; the methods of the old masters; the medium that was as hard as needed and that could pass all the common tests. He knew how to produce the disintegrated hues and cracking marks that gave the forgeries the appearance of 17th century works (Schüller tr, 1960, 98). His forgeries did not raise suspicions. Since no one suspected a problem, they were not subjected to scientific testing (Craddock, 2009, 308). While van Meegeren had used ultramarine that turned out to be contaminated by cobalt blue on

“Supper at Emmaus”, this fact would not have condemned the painting to the status of a forgery at the time of the trial because the isotopic analysis that would make it possible to indicate that the lead in the blue could not have been smelted in the 17th century, was unavailable at that point (Craddock, 2009, 311). His deceit was uncovered only once he was brought to trial because the court had to make a decision about his political proclivity. This was the point at which Van Meegeren declared “Supper at Emmaus” to be his own handiwork (Kilbracken, 1967, 152-3). Scientific proof of this only became possible in 1971.

The connoisseur and the lure of a Vermeer

Van Meegeren developed his methods and media in order for a great scholar of Dutch 17th-century painting to authenticate his work. Dr Abraham Bredius (1855-1946) was an important figure in the Dutch museum world. In the Netherlands he was the most highly acclaimed Vermeer authority of his day. Among his discoveries was “Allegory of Catholic Faith” by Vermeer, painted between 1671 and 1674. Certification by Bredius would carry more weight in the sale-room than anyone else’s (Kilbracken, 1967, 56). Together with van Schelder and Hoogendijk, Bredius was part of an exclusive and influential group of art historians. Having personified Vermeer as a history painter, the existence of this club may have prevented opportunities for raising critical questions. To the extent that it rewarded findings of authenticity of particular types of Vermeers with collegial and political support, Bredius would have been dependent on the paradigm which the group stood for.

Bredius was a well-off benefactor of the *Kunstkring* which van Meegeren joined in 1919. Nonetheless, van Meegeren regarded him not as a friend, but as someone who obstructed his development and progress as an artist in his own right (Lopez, 2009, 99, 111).

Throughout his career, Bredius was known for his active work in respect of the correction of misattributions. Towards the end of his career he published a catalogue of the complete works of Rembrandt in which he eliminated two hundred spurious works from the Rembrandt canon. When it came to Vermeer, however, he succumbed to the forger’s tricks. That Bredius was elderly and suffered from extreme myopia at that stage may have presented an opportune moment from van Meegeren’s perspective.

The connoisseur and the errors that were not corrected

The majority of art historians rejected Bredius’s attribution of van Meegeren’s first “Vermeer”, “Lady and Gentleman at a Spinet” (1932). Bredius was not suspicious. He had noted that the curtain in “Allegory” resembled that of “Lady and Gentleman”. Van Meegeren had included this deception for Bredius’s benefit, and it worked (Keats, 2013, 77). Bredius had observed that fake Vermeers were in circulation by 1932, but in this instance he remained blissfully unaware that the painting was a pastiche of elements that derived from a large variety of works by Vermeer (van den Brandhof, 1979, 93-4). An influential buyer was easily found in the person of Dr Fritz Mannheimer, a German banker in Amsterdam (Lopez, 2009, 110). The misattribution was corrected in due course. “Lady and Gentleman” was re-attributed to Van Meegeren in 1952. Just as Bredius is remembered for having denounced “Christ in the

House of Martha and Mary”, a painting that has enjoyed a secure attribution to this day, he is remembered for this famous error (Lopez, 2009, 135).

Some of Bredius’s errors were covered up by participants in the art market who did not wish to raise suspicions among their clientele. Bredius denounced works owned and sold by Joseph Duveen. When Bredius tried to sell “Allegory” on the American market, Duveen rebuffed him. Bredius attributed “Emmaus” when it appeared on the market in 1936-1937. Van Meegeren had told his reputable and unsuspecting go-between Gerard Boon that an antifascist client needed help to escape from Italy and wanted to sell “Emmaus”. He advised Boon to keep this information to himself. Given the risk she would face if the plan became known, no questions were asked. In turn, Boon told Bredius that the painting was of French-Dutch origin. Bredius took the painting at face value and did not delve any further into its provenance. When Duveen’s partner Edward Fowles went to see it, he immediately informed Duveen that it was a “rotten fake”. Duveen was tempted to discredit Bredius’s latest discovery, but Fowles thought there was little to gain from exposing Bredius’s mistake. A number of dealers were of similar conviction and preferred to keep quiet (Lopez, 2009, 111-2, 113-5, 137). Dealers who do not wish to raise suspicions among their clientele are wont to cover up misattribution or the failure to catch a forgery.

When considering new acquisitions of paintings, e.g. “Washing of the Feet” by van Meegeren, the Rijksmuseum did not consult the dissenting voices. The Museum acquired this painting in 1943 for 1,300,000 Dutch guilders (equivalent to \$5.3 million in 2014). When the experts were asked to advise on acquisitions by Dutch museums, they frequently controlled the method of the investigation, and this gave scope for controlling its outcome. Their interpretations won out over others.

Taking the bait

With “Emmaus”, van Meegeren had set out to offer an attractive and plausible theme, subject, and size. He knew that new discoveries that could shed light on the transition Vermeer achieved in his work would be particularly welcome. Bredius saw in this work a confirmation of his theory that Vermeer must have painted several biblical works. Bredius was not always closely involved with the sale of certificates of authenticity. His position changed when those who had supplied them passed away. He assumed this role willingly (Lopez, 2009, 111). The fees he earned contributed to his wealth and reputation as a collector in his own right (Keats, 2013, 72 note 3). He also received a fee for his certificate for “Emmaus”, and decided to use it to help Dirk Hannema (1896-1984), the director of the Boijmans Museum in Rotterdam, to acquire the painting for the Boijmans (Lammertse et al, 2011, note 17). The Rembrandt Society paid 520, 000 guilders for the work in 1938 on behalf of the Boijmans. No scientific testing was done beforehand.

Bredius did not live to see the start of the trial, but calling “Emmaus” “*the* masterpiece of Johannes Vermeer of Delft” in the *Burlington Magazine*, would never quite be forgotten (Lammertse et al, 2011, 105). Many considered it to be Vermeer’s finest work, including Eduard Plietzsch (Plietzsch, 1939), and yet, when the truth surfaced in 1945, it was the Bredius name that became shorthand for “foolish and opinionated art historians” (Lopez, 2009, 136). Among those who did not ridicule Bredius were van Beuningen and Hannema. They pursued the idea that the “Emmaus”

was authentic to their respective deaths (Buysen with Broersma, 2010, 65). Art fraud is frequently covered up by the intransigence of its victims (Hufnagel, 2015, 114).

Political climate conditioned by World War II

Being so rare, a genuine Vermeer was considered a Dutch national treasure that could not be exported. In the atmosphere of war, few people felt comfortable questioning the provenance of the “Vermeers” that were surfacing in such quick succession (Kilbracken, 1967, 180; Keats, 2013, 82-83). The pressure to save works for the Netherlands meant it was vital for Dutch buyers to commit, and Bredius was understandably keen to ensure that a great work such as the “Emmaus” would not be lost to Germany (van den Brandhof, 1979, 101). At the time, it was practice not to record sales and to pay cash (Lammertse et al, 2011, 104).

By the time “Christ and Woman taken in Adultery” came on the market, Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring had coveted a Vermeer for a very long time. He had lost his chance to acquire a Vermeer to Hitler more than once previously. In return for the “Adulteress” Göring offered 137 paintings from the confiscated collection of Jacques Goudstikker, whose art dealership in the Netherlands was arguably the most important dealership between the two world wars (equivalent to \$6,750,000 in 2014). Göring had looted a large number of paintings from the Goudstikker collection and several 17th century masters to boot (Advisory Committee on the Assessment of Restitution Applications for Items of Cultural Value and the Second World War, press release, 6 February 2006). Göring made no attempt to verify the authenticity of the “Adulteress” (Schüller, tr 1960, 90).

INSERT IMAGE: “Christ and the Woman taken in Adultery” by Han van Meegeren Oil on canvas (71.12 x 50.80 cm), dated 1942

German occupation of the Netherlands ended on 29 May 1945, and van Meegeren was arrested. Dutch police had established that he had sold the “Adulteress” to one of Hermann Göring’s buyers. A lieutenant in the Dutch Resistance by the name of Joseph Pillar gathered the evidence from Goudstikker’s accounts. Captain Harry Anderson discovered the painting in Göring’s art collection. Van Meegeren was unable to provide an adequate explanation. Pillar assumed the painting had been stolen from either a church or a museum (Keats, 2013, 87-8). He arrested van Meegeren for selling a cultural treasure to the enemy – conduct that was expressly forbidden by the Dutch government in exile. Having transacted business with National Socialist Germany, a hostile Occupying Power, van Meegeren could be charged with criminal disloyalty to Holland or high treason. A six-week interrogation followed his arrest.

Time to confess: Van Meegeren’s Nazi connections and opportunism

When he claimed that the sale of “Adulteress” to Göring was a swindle of his own making, van Meegeren became a folk hero. He confessed to having executed “Adulteress” himself. Whether done as a publicity stunt or to settle doubts about his confession, he gained the opportunity to convince the court that he had conned a Nazi criminal rather than the Dutch government (Schüller tr, 1960, 96).

Ample archival evidence attest to van Meegeren's fascist leanings and his long-standing interest in Nazism. Traces of Nazi collaboration start to appear from 1928 onwards, such as donations to the Nazi cause and commissions from the occupation government (Lopez, 2009, 244-5). Marijke van den Brandhof completed her doctoral dissertation titled *Een Vroege Vermeer uit 1937: Achtergronden van leven en werken van de schilder / vervalsers Han van Meegeren* in 1979. As far as van den Brandhof was concerned, van Meegeren gave visual expression to fascism in his work (van den Brandhof, 1979, 172). She analyses some of the elements comprising the body of evidence (van den Brandhof, 1979, 170-2) and makes reference to a dedication to the beloved Führer and inscriptions found in a copy of his book *Teekeningen I* (van den Brandhof, 1979, 129-33; Keats 2013, 84-5, 89). Her inference was van Meegeren was clearly very closely identified with the aesthetics espoused by the Nazis. She also mentions van Meegeren's prestigious commissions by Ed Gerdes, a Reich-appointed administrator in the Department of Art and Propaganda, to depict the National Socialist future. Gerdes offered him the opportunity to exhibit in Germany. She also notes that the Nazis were not unconditionally supportive of van Meegeren's work, but regarded him a mere beginner in respect of propaganda art (van den Brandhof, 1979, 133). There were other cues. A Dutch resistance newspaper (*De Waarheid*) published evidence of the collaborative relationship between van Meegeren and the Nazi elite (Keats 2013, 89). Several of van Meegeren's articles in *De Kempiaan* (1928-1931) demonstrated his antipathy towards modern art. He cultivated a friendship with the right-wing editor, Ubink. His writings mirrored passages from *Mein Kampf* that ranted against the evils of modern art (Lopez, 2009, 125). This attitude made short shrift of his candidacy for the position of chairman of the *Haagsche Kunstkring* (Lammertse et al, 2011, 51). Lopez deduces that contemporary *Volksgeist* conventions, which were favourable to biblical themes, directed van Meegeren's choice of what to forge (Lopez, 2009, 126).

Media coverage of the trial: farce and hype

Commentators are not consistent in their acknowledgement of the prominence of van den Brandhof's thesis in coming to a fuller understanding of van Meegeren's political identity, his identification with Nazi ideology and his close ties with the Nazi elite. Some recognise her thesis in their very first footnote (e.g. Werness, 1983, 1). Others only mention it when they wrap up (e.g. Lopez, 2009, 244; his book comprises 248 pages). However that may be, if one accepts van den Brandhof's hypothesis and findings, van Meegeren's "confession to having duped the Nazis" constitutes but a device designed to divert the focus and make the problem disappear. His plea is just one more deceit, perhaps his biggest. When the "confession" met with incredulity, van Meegeren proposed to prove he had painted the forgery himself, not by copying a Vermeer, but by making a "brand-new" Vermeer with a religious theme. "Young Christ and the Scribes in the Temple" was done in record time while in police custody.

INSERT IMAGE: Van Meegeren executes "Young Christ and the Scribes" Oil on canvas (157 x 202 cm), dated 1945

At the trial at the Fourth Chamber District Assize Court, Amsterdam, the media zeroed in on the farcical element in the legal process: that the innocence of the accused of criminal disloyalty could be proven only by establishing Van Meegeren's guilt to the lesser crime of forgery (Keats, 2013, 90-1). The forger's true identity as a

crypto-Nazi received no coverage during testimony and the official court record does not contain any reference to this telling fact. Lopez explains this situation by stating that the crown prosecutor “studiously avoided” the entire question of his Nazi collaboration (Lopez, 2009, 218). Whatever the cause may have been, the result was that van Meegeren saved face. Instead of being stigmatized he was taken for a misunderstood genius. Van Meegeren received a one year prison sentence (and forfeited his wealth) for making a frank confession and for poor health (Schüller tr, 1960, 101). He died of heart failure before his prison term could commence (Keats, 2013, 92).

A great deal of hype was generated by van Meegeren’s trial. Everyone liked the story of a forger whose clumsy reproductions of an Old Master outwitted the Nazi elite. The farcical element was played up in delightful media stories about the genial master. His likes, dislikes and quirks became a worldwide sensation (Lopez, 2009, 214-5). The media repeatedly pointed out that the case had world-wide importance and soon every journalist, both local and foreign, desired an interview with him. The media’s lightweight version of the tale became the version that defined events ever since the master forger became the man of the hour (Lopez, 2009, 218-9).

The perception that van Meegeren had hoodwinked the Nazis was also alive among critical scholars and commentators. For instance, Lord Kilbracken intimates that van Meegeren had given express instructions to keep “Emmaus” from falling into German hands and had successfully, albeit unintentionally, duped Göring (Kilbracken, 1967, 152). It also had some impact when van Meegeren’s works and effects were auctioned off in September 1950. The total bids received were low (Schüller tr, 1960, 102) but a few staunch admirers remained. Among them was the mining magnate, Sir Ernest Oppenheimer. Oppenheimer approved of the popular version of the story, and went on to acquire “Young Christ Teaching Scribes in the Temple” from van Meegeren’s estate in 1950 (van der Merwe, 2013). The price was a meagre \$7,000 then (<http://priceonomics.com/the-art-forger-who-became-a-national-hero/>) but it fetched \$39,507 at auction in 1996 (Catalogue entry for Lot 277/sale 2311 at a Christie’s sale in Amsterdam, 30 October 1996).

Van Meegeren admitted to forging fewer than ten works. All of these works were known to the authorities, because the go-betweens who introduced his works to experts and to the art market linked them to van Meegeren. He never admitted to having forged before 1937. However, research indicates that van Meegeren was active since 1923 as a member of a commercial art forgery ring in The Hague (van den Brandhof, 1979, 170). His primary link with organised art fraud is thought to be the forger and restorer Theo van Wijngaarden, who was his teacher. Whereas van Wijngaarden had technical knowledge of faking methods and a network of accomplices in other European countries, van Meegeren had raw image-making talent and could produce the forged artworks. A lucrative partnership between them is more than likely

(www.essentialvermeer.com/delft_school_fakes/erroneously_attributed_vermeers_on_e.html; <http://priceonomics.com/the-art-forger-who-became-a-national-hero/>). The detection and rectification of error require astuteness and transparency, qualities that can be hard to find in the art world.

The Beltracchi Ring

Considering the unique milieu in which van Meegeren's career as a forger developed, the economic harm done by his deceitful interactions with dealers and experts, the historical circumstances that distorted expert perception sufficiently to allow his swindles, and what this meant for the historical record, it was altogether hard to believe that any forger would be able to achieve the same success. Yet, when Beltracchi set his sights on works purportedly part of the oeuvre of each of 50-odd early 20th century French and German artists, one of the most lucrative art frauds in European history came to pass (Hammer, 2012, 1, 5). Some of the works purported to be by Max Ernst, Heinrich Campendonk and Emil-Othon Friesz fitted in with the theme of an existing series of paintings by a well-known painter. Others had been mentioned, but were not depicted in exhibition catalogues and could plausibly be claimed to have been lost during the Nazi era. For instance, "Red Picture with Horses" by Campendonk (1989-1957) was delivered to Kunsthaus Lempertz in Cologne in 2006. A painting by this name does exist in Campendonk's known oeuvre, but its dimensions and whereabouts remain unknown and no image is available.

The forgers' expertise

The meticulous approach that characterised the actions taken by the Beltracchis was responsible for helping this art fraud to succeed for so long, supporting the high life they were living in Freiburg prior to their arrest. Beltracchi employed age-appropriate materials. The pigments, canvases and frames he worked with were from the early 20th century, down to the very dust. He also adopted the technique of the artists in question, making it less likely that his deceit would become noticeable. Employing Max Ernst's technique, "The Forest (2)" was completed by using a spatula to scrape forms and textures from rough blocks of wood, seashells and other objects that had been placed underneath the canvas into the wet painted surface of the canvas. He worked fast but frequently took the time to imitate the environmental conditions that would have prevailed when the master was at work (Hammer, 2012, 5).

INSERT IMAGE: "La Forêt (2)" by Wolfgang Beltracchi (97.5 x 131.5 cm), executed ca. 2004

His expertise did not only extend to technique, materials and the surroundings at the time of production. Getting experts to confirm as authentic what he had contrived was vital. Unlike van Meegeren who seemed to operate on his own, Beltracchi had a network of fronts and supporters. Beltracchi's accomplice and front man, Otto Schulte-Kellinghaus, was responsible for sales and for supplying some of the details of the back-story of the "work". Otto would initiate contact with the connoisseurs and proceeded to build relationships with them (Koldehof and Timm, 2012, 142). In order to convince them that the forgeries were master works, some of the reprehensible aspects of the Nazi past had to be twisted to fit his objective of maximising his chances of making a profitable sale. Numerous forgeries found their way into the collections of prestigious museums and galleries. By early 2000, the forgeries were selling for six figures.

The pre-packaged narrative of the Nazi past: streamlined and effective

The Beltracchi Ring started to communicate false provenances to assert authenticity and legitimize the forgeries during the 1990s. Beltracchi's accomplices informed

leading auction houses about art collections of which one supposedly belonged to Otto's grandfather and another which was supposed to have been inherited by Helene and her sister, Jeanette Spurzem. Their deceased grandfather, Werner Jägers, was made out to have bought artworks from the persecuted Jewish-German art dealer and gallery owner Alfred Flechtheim (1878-1937). Flechtheim was bankrupt when he died in London after his entire inventory of modern masters had been Aryanised by the Nazis in 1934 (Petropoulos, 2011, 9, 31). The concocted storyline was that Jägers had hidden his collection away in a country home near Cologne prior to World War II. Beltracchi backed up the narrative by taking blurred black-and-white photographs of Helene posing as Josefina Jägers, her own grandmother, in front of several forged artworks. He used an old Brownie camera to reproduce a zig-zag edged reality that would resonate with the art market. The doctored images were geared to turn the circumstances that prevailed between 1933 and 1945 into "a sort of shortcut to legitimacy" (Hammer, 2012, 5).

INSERT IMAGE: Blurred black-and-white photo material depicting Helene posing as her grandmother

Beltracchi's "La Horde" featured on the cover of a Christie's sale catalogue in June 2006, and sold for \$4.3 million that same year. The expert opinion of Werner Spies is referenced in the provenance, naming Flechtheim as a previous owner (Koldehof and Timm, 2012, 47). The values of several works purported to be by artists such as Ernst, Campendonk and Valmier tripled within a short time span (*Spiegel* Interview with Wolfgang Beltracchi, 2012, 3).

The connoisseur and the lure of 20th-century artists

In order to quell any doubts about authenticity before they arose, the Beltracchis obtained statements and certificates ahead of offering the paintings to auction houses (Hammer, 2012, 3). Werner Spies, the museum director at Centre Pompidou in Paris between 1997 and 2000, had the profile that could make the plan work. After all, Spies was a decorated man who had a column in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* for many years. He was one of the top experts on Max Ernst and had been involved in organising a retrospective of Max Ernst at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2005. Spies did not inspect the supposed Jägers Collection closely. Striking similarities in style and quality of technique can mislead and compel, all at once, for these are the very qualities a good forger will successfully (re)produce (PK Covey, 1990, 27). The Nazi narrative was a streamlined ploy set up to unseal "reservoirs of German guilt and loss". He erred in the attributions of seven pieces (Hammer, 2012, 5). Like the obstinate refusal of a person in a powerful position to concede that a work has been forged, his declarations of authenticity transformed forgeries into originals and helped Beltracchi and his accomplices to place them (Röbel and Sontheimer, 2011).

Numerous Beltracchis infiltrated the art market and affected its integrity. The first forged Max Ernst painting to be authenticated was "La Forêt (2)". This forgery turned out to be the bait that triggered several more errors in attribution. Spies was eager for the Max Ernst Museum in Brühl to acquire it. He considered it a masterpiece (Hufnagel, 2015, 126). Schulte-Kellinghaus told Spies that this large canvas originated from the gallery of the legendary art dealer Flechtheim, who had sold it to Werner Jägers, a private collector in Cologne in 1930, and that he was the grandfather

of the owner, Helene Beltracchi (Röbel and Sontheimer, 2011). It sold for a scandalous amount in Paris in 2006, hitting the \$7 million mark.

“Tremblement de Terre” was painted in the style of Max Ernst and employed his famous frottage method. Spies had authenticated the work after having been told that it was from the Werner Jägers Collection and after having made an in loco inspection at the Beltracchis’ estate in France. The Sotheby’s catalogue entry reflected the authentication by Spies. The work sold in 2009 for a record \$1,142,500.

Doubts started up in 2006 concerning the time-worn Flechtheim Gallery labels that were affixed to the paintings that were put up for auction. In 2008 Ralph Jentsch indicated that Flechtheim never used labels depicting a caricature of himself. They did not match those of the Jewish art dealer (Koldehof and Timm, 2013, 38-9).

INSERT IMAGE: Time-worn fake Flechtheim Gallery labels

The type of glue used and the wood used for the frames were equally suspicious. Some of the frames attached to works that were supposedly by various modern masters were of the same wood or wood that originated from the same region (Chappell and Hufnagel, 2012, 41). The art market resisted open discussion and disclosure even after Ralph Jentsch had started to question the Flechtheim labels. While the questions he raised about the labels were also the beginning of Beltracchi’s undoing, this resistance also affected the speed with which corrections could be made.

The Beltracchis paid Spies an estimated €400 000 in respect of authentications for seven Max Ernst fakes (www.spiegel.de/kultur/gesellschaft/werner-spies-kunsthistoriker-gesteht-in-beltracchi-affaere-fehler-ein-a-852221.html). Spies received at least 7 percent of the sale price for his authentications just from Beltracchi alone (*Spiegel* Interview with Wolfgang Beltracchi, 2012, 4-5; *Frankfurter Allgemeine* of June 2011; Koldehof and Timm, 2012, 162). Art dealers also paid him commissions. The amounts remain undisclosed (Dusini, 2012). Lenain suggests that cases where the expert (the certifier) “passes to the side of the forger” should be investigated on suspicion that the expert acts as one of the forger’s means or as an intermediary (Lenain, 1914, 57). This trope features prominently in the narrative structure of forgery tales: the expert is supposedly interested in unmasking the forger, yet he contributes more or less knowingly to the success of the forgery (Lenain, 1914, 60). That Beltracchi took great care to avoid personal encounters with Spies, leaving Spies to deal with other members of his Ring, does not mean that the expert contributed any less. After Spies’s fall from grace, only works that appear in the 1975 catalogue raisonné that he had compiled while Max Ernst was still alive, can be trusted to be genuine (Koldehof and Timm, 2012, 171-2).

Having failed to pay due attention to technical history and condition, Spies’s reputation suffered a significant blow. He chose to say virtually nothing about his own part in the scandal in his autobiography published in 2012. Spies remains convinced of Beltracchi’s brilliance to this day. Jentsch, on the other hand, dismisses the forger as not having understood the modern in any deep sense (Koldehof and Timm, 2012, 109). Beltracchi employed a projector which enabled relatively exact duplication. Be that as it may, the forged paintings were sufficiently convincing to mislead several close family members of the modern masters whose works he forged. Campendonk’s

son assisted the art scholar who compiled a comprehensive catalogue of the artist's works, and a handful of "Campendonks" were included in it. Johannes Molzahn's widow bought a forged Molzahn (Hammer, 2012, 1-2). Max Ernst's widow, Dorothea Tanning, a surrealist artist in her own right, described "La Forêt (2)" as the most beautiful of all his paintings (*Spiegel* Interview with Wolfgang Beltracchi, 2012, 3).

Time to confess

Beltracchi had affixed stickers to the painting that purported to be Campendonk's "Red Picture with Horses" to create the impression that the provenance was secure, but he had used paint from a tube that did not list all the ingredients on the label. Once the police investigation got under way in 2010, scientific proof of the fraud started to pile up (Hammer, 2012, 1, 5). Trasteco Ltd, a company based in Malta, was the new owner. Trasteco insisted on a certificate of authenticity after the work was delivered, but found that no such document existed. It commissioned a scientific analysis which revealed a rogue pigment, titanium white. Campendonk could not have used this pigment, for it did not exist in 1914 when it was alleged to have been painted (*Spiegel* Interview with Wolfgang Beltracchi, 2012, 5). The manufacturer had failed to list titanium as a component of the white paint. When Trasteco demanded a refund from Lempertz for the full price paid, the court ruled in its favour (Hammer, 2012, 4). Lempertz was found to have contributed to the fraud by not undertaking scientific examination of the painting. Similarly, chemical tests indicated that "La Ciotat, 1907", signed and dated in the name of the artist Friesz, could not have been executed before 1938. In its pure form, titanium white was available only from 1910 onwards but the white pigment used in this work had been sourced from one of the crystalline forms of titanium dioxide, known as rutile, and production for painting developed only after 1921. Commercial production started after it was patented by Hixson and Plechner in 1938 (www.google.nl/patents/US2113946A, 12 April 1938). A law suit is under way between Aline Foriel-Destezet and Dickinson Roundel who sold the painting to her. Allegedly Simon Dickinson confirmed the authenticity of the artist's signature prior to the sale (Wright and Kay, 2014).

The Beltracchis' claim that the police ignored their telephonic offer to surrender. Police officers arrested them in August 2010 while they were on their way to dinner with their two children (Hammer, 2012, 4). They were accused of fourteen counts of fraud and document fraud (Hufnagel, 2015, 124). Their trial commenced in September 2011. It was brought to a swift and abrupt ending when a deal was reached with the prosecutors in the case. The District Court in Cologne never got to the stage where the facts could be probed and the fake back stories that manipulated painful aspects of history for financial gain could be investigated. Prosecutors were keen to avoid having to prove that Beltracchi had in fact made the forgeries. Among other things, it was considered difficult to prove that the perpetrators who brought the forged works to the art market were linked because of the name change which Beltracchi underwent (Hufnagel, 2015, 125). Part of the deal was a full confession, which would relieve the prosecution from having to discharge the burden of proof (Sontheimer, 2011). Hundred and sixty eight prosecution witnesses, of which some were expert witnesses, were lined up to testify, but were dismissed.

Beltracchi deployed all the charm of the artist hippie during his trial. The court was the setting for a drama, and while there was enough entertainment, few of the facts

were going to be revealed by his cheerful flamboyance. The “Master Forger” conducted himself as a master of ceremonies, insisted that his forgeries were pranks, and made light of the events in order to entertain (Sontheimer, 2011). For having capitalised on the worst features of the legacy of the Third Reich, namely the dehumanisation of Jewish dealers and collectors, the friendly court staff of the German civil justice system dispensed a light slap on the wrist. The confession was partial at best. Beltracchi admitted to having produced only fourteen forged paintings. German police have identified closer to sixty suspect paintings. Evidence exists to link Beltracchi’s activities as far back as the 1970s, and some estimates put the number of forged works at three hundred (Arts Media Agency, 2014). The trial could not supply anything specific (Chappell and Hufnagel, 2012, 39-40).

Sentences were decidedly lenient. Beltracchi received a 6-year prison sentence; Schulte-Kellinghaus 5 years and Helene Beltracchi 4 years. Jeanette received a suspended sentence of 21 months. Having been assigned to “open prisons”, the Beltracchis were incarcerated at night only, on condition that they were gainfully employed during the day. Time served before the trial was taken into consideration and as first-time offenders, they could expect to have their sentences reduced (Hammer, 2010, 5). Beltracchi was released on 9 January 2015.

Art forgery does not incur heavy criminal penalties. Forgers expose the warped values and pretensions of an art market geared to command high prices, and they entertain the public (Economist, 2013). When executed successfully their deception works to their financial advantage in the majority of cases. There may still be some truth in the idea that forgeries ultimately fail to corrupt the history of art because forgers cannot but leave their personal mark on their work, but a forgery also modifies our understanding of the truth for as long as it remains undiscovered. Defaming the truth carries a cost which someone, somewhere, must bear, and to that extent respect is counterproductive (Hauptman, 2011, 76). That the profits of many a forger increase after having been caught and being painted the hero, is a cultural perversion that poses a distinct hurdle in the quest to protect the integrity of the art market.

The controversy has forced authenticators and experts out of business. In May 2013, the Tribunal de Grande Instance of Nanterre in France ordered Spies and gallery owner Jacques de la Béraudière to pay Louis Reitenbagh €52,883. De la Béraudière’s gallery sold “Tremblement de Terre” by Beltracchi to Reitenbagh. In a bid to settle the civil suits against them, several of the Beltracchis’ bank accounts have been seized and their properties auctioned off (Hammer, 2012, 5). Meanwhile, the research continues. The Rathgen Research Laboratory recently published a report on the synthetic organic pigment called blue copper phthalocyanine that was found to be present in some of the fakes, but which was commercially available only as from 1935 (Röhrs et al, 2014).

Media prizes

Follow-up interviews, documentaries and book deals about the Beltracchi story and about Wolfgang's relationship with Helene have propelled him to celebrity status (Hufnagel, 2015, 124). The journalists who exposed the full story, Koldehoff and Timm, received the 2012 Annette Giacometti Prize for their work. The son of the Beltracchis’ legal counsel, Arne Birkenstock, directed the film “Beltracchi, The Art of Forgery”. It premiered in Cologne on 25 February 2014 and won Birkenstock the

2014 German Film Award for Best Documentary Film
(<http://www.arnebirkenstock.de/home-2/>).

Conclusion

Striking similarities in style and quality of technique can be as compelling as they can be misleading. These are the very qualities a good forger will successfully (re)produce. Being dependent on visual inspections, stylistic connoisseurship is prone to error. Superficial inspections are easily justified in the absence of a critical approach that insists on more than mere theorising about composition, line or brush stroke. The spectrum of possibilities between deceit and harmless imitations and replication permit of different forms of error. Misinterpretation or oversight is to be expected for to err is human, but when the critical analysis of the evidence is of such a poor standard that it adds to the chain of activities that insert a forgery into the art market, it amounts to misconduct.

An art forger's intent to deceive can steer the connoisseur towards misconduct. It frequently happens that expert and forger turn into close allies. As soon as the expert gives out clear and predictable indications of the expectations for a particular artist's work that the forger can follow and fulfil, the boundary line dividing the forgers and the experts fades. At some point, they may switch sides. If the predominant discourse reward findings of authenticity with collegial and political support, misattribution can be rather tempting. If powerful victims refuse to concede that they have been duped, misattribution will go unreported for a considerable time. From 1938 to 1945, it became steadily easier to sell the forged "Vermeers" to the Dutch establishment. Considerable faith was placed in the eye of the connoisseur; provenance research and technical examination were relatively exceptional. Additionally, Bredius was deeply concerned for Dutch cultural heritage during the war. He readily accepted submissions that fulfilled his own predictions about the characteristics he believed typified the work of Vermeer. As part of a network of experts that personified Vermeer as a history painter, Bredius would have depended on their views and would have been less than free to raise critical questions about the "Emmaus". The Rijksmuseum acquired works on advice of famous art historians who were ready to run with the period accents in vogue which van Meegeren had planted. Dutch Museums maintained their interest in the forged works even after the exposure of certain works by Vermeer as fake.

Keenly aware of the significance of provenance for sales, van Meegeren and Beltracchi manufactured convincing historical provenances to enhance the standing of the fakes in the art market. The falsified provenances helped to procure endorsements from reputable certifiers, and the endorsements established the uniqueness and authenticity of the pieces on offer, pushing prices up. Not only did these forgers insinuate fake information into the historical record, but they also insinuated an emotionally charged history into their elaborate fake provenances and twisted narratives. The last manipulation of provenance on the part of van Meegeren was to divert the attention away from his close Nazi ties. The media attention that was showered upon him at his trial helped to conceal that he had been nurturing *Volksgeist* sentiments for a long time indeed. Beltracchi deployed a fake provenance to unleash some of the powerful emotion in the reservoirs of the Nazi past. He went further than van Meegeren ever did: he backed up his cunning with physical evidence that meant connoisseurs were willing to forego technical analysis of paper, paint, canvas, frame, ever more eager to authenticate. The narratives were backed-up in such detail that

they discouraged Spies from performing technical checks on the materials, frames, labels and the physical condition of what was presented to him.

Evaluations can become shockingly incomplete when money stands to be made or when more titles and higher status are promised. Spies was concerned for the collection in the Max Ernst Museum but he also collected fees based on a percentage of the selling price of works that he himself authenticated. Permitting this practice, society all but invites experts to commit malpractice. It is little wonder that experts are less mindful of the assumptions they are making and are swayed to grant declarations of authenticity. When the expert is effectively acting as the forger's intermediary, the case can only invite suspicion. The German art crime unit may have drawn considerable mileage from the Beltracchi case, but can hardly claim to have brought the criminal element in the art world under control with the trial. The number of Beltracchi's forgeries that remain in circulation are estimated to be high but the number remains unknown. The evidence that links Beltracchi's activities back as far as the 1970s did not come to light at his trial. The harmful consequences of the fictionalised images and narratives of his forgery ring may gradually become clearer when more art historians and auction house experts find themselves exposed in civil claims, but the art history record is likely to remain contaminated for considerably longer.

Art historians are well-placed to deal with the problematic that is Art History. Arguably, their training ought to enable them to look out for problematic behaviours on the part of the participants in the art market and to assess competing explanations and claims to truth. Prominent Codes of Ethics remain silent on attribution and authentication, but fortunately there are welcome exceptions that relate information ethics to the history of art and the study of material culture.

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