

## EXHIBITING THE INAUTHENTIC: THE INTENT TO DECEIVE

Art fraud is one of the most serious challenges facing museums today in their stewardship of cultural heritage. It is therefore crucial to examine the interaction of the inauthentic with the art institution and its development in the modern era. The first exhibition on the topic was held at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and in the decades since, inauthentic art has become an increasingly popular subject for exhibition in the institution that has been traditionally dedicated to the authentic. Reflecting the shift in the scholarship, the contemporary exhibition of fakes and forgeries has transferred its focus from the inauthentic object to the creators, the so-called art forgers. This paper explores the early history of exhibiting art forgery within the museum and the implications for the institution, before examining a recent example of such an exhibition.

A survey of exhibitions on the topic of art forgery and authenticity from 1900 to 2015 revealed over 70 examples<sup>1</sup>. The early exhibitions in the period between 1908 and 1924 reflect the scholarly approaches of the time and establish the common curatorial approaches evident in later exhibitions. The early exhibitions had a strong focus on education, beginning with the use of copies as art historical tools and graduating to exhibiting copies and fakes as a way to educate the collector in the detection of problematic works of art.

An early exhibition held in 1908 at the Whitechapel Gallery in London was titled »Copies of Great Pictures« (fig. 1) and featured a collection of »copies by distinguished artists of masterpieces, chiefly in foreign or private collections, the originals of which many visitors are unlikely to see [...] designed specially for students of the history of art«<sup>2</sup>. This exhibition demonstrates comfort with the production of copies as historical tools, rather than approaching the act of copying as a suspicious practice, a reflection of attitudes in the 19<sup>th</sup> century before the development of the modern obsession with authenticity<sup>3</sup>.

The first exhibition of inauthentic art in North America was held in 1916 at the Pennsylvania Museum with the title »Fakes« and Reproductions« (fig. 2). It was the first exhibition to use a comparative curatorial model, bringing examples of forgeries and copies together with original objects on loan in cooperation with the Bureau of Identification. This feature makes it the earliest example of an exhibition in collaboration with law enforcement, a trend that occurs in later exhibitions – exhibitions have since been held by and in conjunction with police services in the United Kingdom, the United States, Italy and France. The exhibition featured »modern counterfeits and copies of old china, glass, metalwork, enamels [and] ivories« and used authentic examples so the audience could compare the real with the fake, with black cards with gold lettering to indicate the genuine pieces<sup>4</sup>. The exhibition also included a 63-page catalogue, including an introductory essay by Edwin Atlee Barber, the Director of the Pennsylvania Museum. According to E. A. Barber, the purpose of the exhibition was »the education and protection of collectors and the general public, so far as may be, against the wiles of the forgers«<sup>5</sup>.

In 1924 the Burlington Arts Club held an exhibition titled »Counterfeits, imitations and copies of works of art«, which followed the same comparative curation model as the 1916 exhibition. Although not a public institution, the Burlington Arts Club was a significant influence on the arts scene in London in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, with members such as American artist James Whistler, during his time in London, and art critic John Ruskin<sup>6</sup>. The exhibition catalogue stated: »The object of the present exhibition is to help

**UNDER REVISION.**

WHITECHAPEL ART GALLERY,  
HIGH STREET, WHITECHAPEL.

SPRING PICTURE EXHIBITION,  
1908.

INTRODUCTION.

The present exhibition is the second of a new series of picture exhibitions initiated in 1907. The aim of these exhibitions is three-fold, and the pictures exhibited in the several sections are intentionally of different characters.

In the Upper Gallery are hung groups of pictures from the chief bodies of artists working in association in the British Isles, and the object of the collection hung there is to afford artists and students of art a survey of contemporary methods and technique. This year, in the place of the paintings by Chardin and eighteenth century French artists, which occupied a portion of the Lower Gallery last year, a collection of copies, by distinguished artists, of masterpieces, chiefly in foreign or private collections, the originals of which many visitors are unlikely to see, is hung in the Small Gallery and the End Bay of the Lower Gallery. This section is designed specially for students of the history of art.

The main part of the Lower Gallery contains paintings in which subject interest—literary, poetic, or anecdotal—is combined with more purely artistic merit.

“Subject” interest is lacking in some of the art of the present day, which is most interesting on the side of technique, but this divorce of subject and fine technique is not essential, and possibly is a sign of the unnatural antagonism reigning at the present day between beauty and commercial utility.

The feeling for artistic beauty, and the sense of technique in painting is only vouchsafed to some eyes, just as a full appreciation of musical harmonies is only appreciated by comparatively few ears; but art and music have functions for the general world outside the realisation of their own peculiar technical perfection, which concerns, primarily, the born artist or musician, whether these are active producers or mere lay appreciators, and many, through the power of association of ideas or the mere vividness of illustration, enter unconsciously into a certain portion of the riches of the kingdom of art.

**Fig. 1** A page from the catalogue for the »Spring Exhibition« at the Whitechapel Gallery, London, 1908. – (After Whitechapel 1908, 1).

students, collectors, and critics, indeed all who in their several ways are interested in art in the study of problems of quality and originality, as also of period, school, and the like<sup>7</sup>.

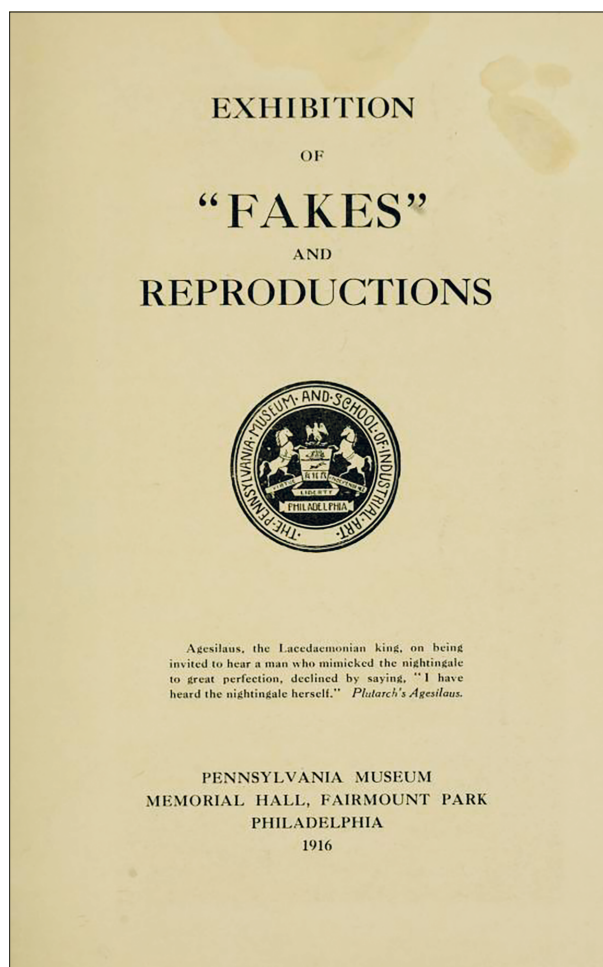
It also contained a number of statements affirming the club's opinion that the exhibition of art forgery was an important part of the teaching of art in universities. It suggested that »every museum should not only organise but show a section of such objects bearing on the collection of originals which forms its ex-

hibition«<sup>8</sup>. In the introduction to the catalogue, it is argued that experienced collectors would be wise enough to use such an exhibition to develop their skills in detecting copies and imitations, as »It is only the inexperienced collector who is insulted by a request for a loan of such examples, and who affects horror and incredulity at the idea that he too may have fallen by the way«<sup>9</sup>.

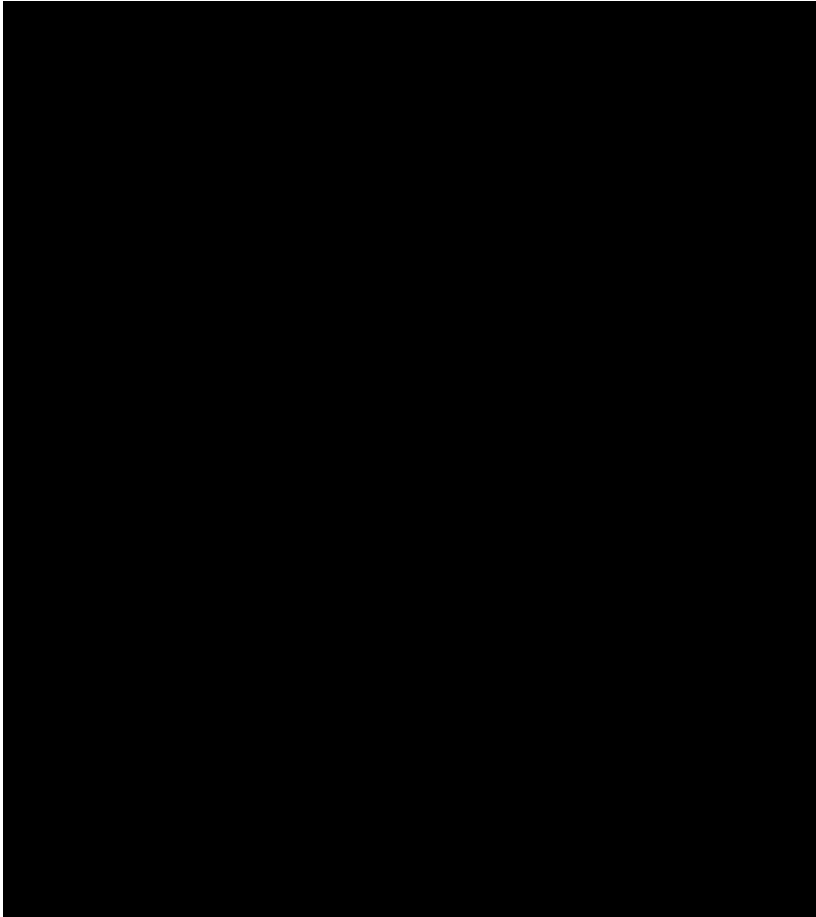
The themes that can be drawn out from these early exhibitions indicate that they were designed for pedagogical reasons, to teach students of art history, and for the protection of collectors and the general public. The approach of comparative curation, matching original works with forgeries and copies, has been popular throughout the 70 or so exhibitions since 1908. It also significant that there has been a rapid increase in exhibitions on the topic in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with the number of exhibitions increasing by over 50 % in the decade and a half since the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>10</sup>. This increase demonstrates a keen interest in exhibiting and discussing art forgery, and also an increase in awareness of the art of the forger.

The fascination with art forger and their output is a distinctly modern phenomenon. Early literature in the area focused on the objects rather than the creator; however, recent scholars such as Jonathan Keats and Thierry Lenain have critiqued this approach and sought to update research on the topic by attempting to seek truths about art forgery, rather than to simply spot fakes<sup>11</sup>. This trend is also evident in the development of the exhibitions on the topic; however, there are a few exceptions, mostly within the art market.

In fact the earliest exhibition to focus on the art of a single forger was in 1933, with the exhibition and subsequent auction at the National Art Galleries Inc. in New York of sculpture by Alceo Dossena. In the foreword to the sale catalogue, art historian Dr. Alfred A. Frankfurter argues that Dossena's work is »valuable to the collector and the museum for artistic achievement [as much as it is] for scientific documentation«<sup>12</sup>. The focus on the art forger in an exhibition does not appear again until a series of solo exhibitions at the Wright-Hepburn-Webster gallery in London and New York of works by American forger David Stein (1969-1970) and Hungarian forger Elmyr de Hory (1971; **fig. 3**). Similarly, the Patrick and Beatrice Haggerty Museum of Art at Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, presented an exhibition of works by the so-called »Spanish Forger« in 1988. Since then there has been an increase in exhibitions that focus on works by forgers, including well-known names such as Han van Meegeren, Eric Hebborn, Elymr de Hory, John Myatt and Mark Landis.



**Fig. 2** Title page from the catalogue for the »Fakes« and Reproductions« exhibition at the Pennsylvania Museum, Philadelphia, 1916. – (After Barber 1916, 1).



**Fig. 3** Elmyr de Hory (1906-1976), Self Portrait (Elmyr de Hory), c. 1974, oil on canvas. Collection of Mark Forgy, on display in the »Intent to Deceive« exhibition at the Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, Florida, May 2013. – (Photo F. Strong).

It is these five forgers who featured in the exhibition »Intent to Deceive: Fakes and Forgeries in the Art World«, which toured five North American cities in 2014 and 2015. The exhibition combined the two different types of curatorial styles: the pedagogical comparative curation, and a focus on the art of the forger. The exhibition, curated by American art fraud expert Colette Loll, displayed the work of the five prolific forgers, showcasing their personal effects and the materials and techniques each used to create their fraudulent works. The exhibition illuminated how each forger deceived the experts, until they were ultimately exposed. The exhibition also brought to light the forgers' frustrated artistic ambitions, chaotic personal lives, and contempt for the art world. It also attempted to show how advances in technology can aid art professionals in ascertaining authenticity.

Media focus prior to the »Intent to Deceive« exhibition fixated on the more sensationalist elements of the topic, including an article in the *New York Times* on 31 December 2013 by Patricia Cohen titled »So Valuable, It Could Almost Be Real«. The article outlined the large cost of flying Han van Meegeren's »The Head of Christ« from the Netherlands to the US, including the presence of a personal escort in first class costing a total of \$ 31,000<sup>13</sup>.

Considering the fact that most exhibitions of loaned objects involve significant costs associated with the insurance and safe transportation of works of art, this type of incredulous editorialising points to a larger issue of how art forgery objects are perceived as less worthy of care and attention than authentic art. The issue of loans also raises the issue of the participation of art museums in exhibitions that seemingly criticise their expertise. While there is a perception that museums and curators do not want to be associated with forgeries, the experience of this exhibition suggests the situation is more complex.

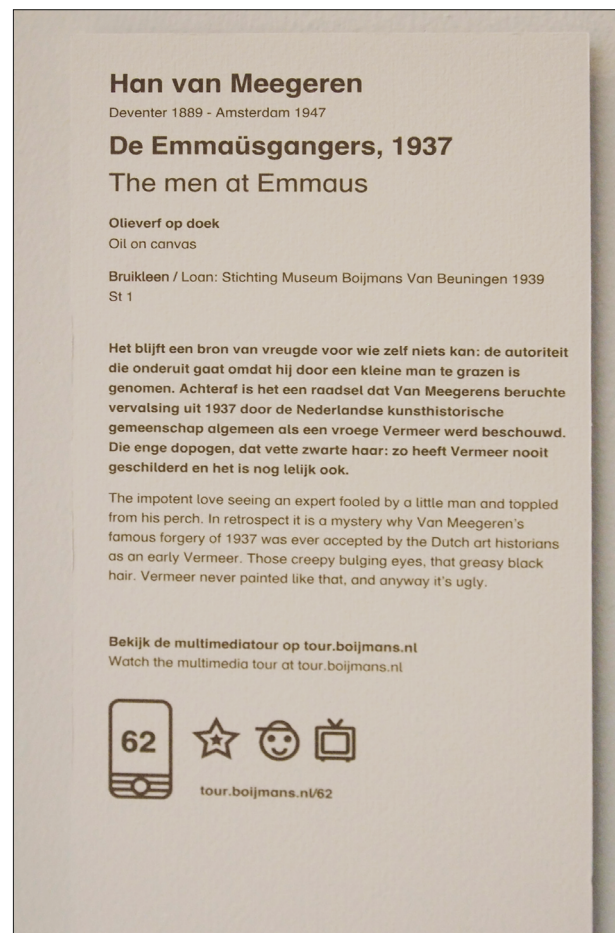
Works by forgers were borrowed from private collections as well as from two established institutions, the Courtauld Institute in London and the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen in Rotterdam, which both have a history of publicly discussing the authenticity of the two works by Han van Meegeren in their collections, »The Procuress« and »Head of Christ«. The Courtauld acquired »The Procuress« as a work by Van Meegeren in the 1960s and had its attribution as by the Dutch forger confirmed in an episode of the BBC television show »Fake or Fortune« in 2012. Prior to »Intent to Deceive«, »The Procuress« had previously been loaned to the Minneapolis Institute of Arts for the »Fakes and Forgeries« exhibition in 1973<sup>14</sup>.

Likewise, the Museum Boijman van Beuningen in Rotterdam has been forthright about the museum's history of acquiring works thought to have been by Vermeer which turned out to be by the forger van Meegeren. In 2010 they held an exhibition titled »Van Meegeren's Vermeers«, which displayed paintings by the forger alongside scholarly and scientific research undertaken into their authenticity.

Yet despite hosting this exhibition of works by the famous forger, the museum's treatment of his painting »Supper at Emmaus« demonstrates the museum's unease with its past errors (fig. 4). In 2013 the »Supper at Emmaus« was observed on display in the permanent collection at the museum, hung in a dark corridor, isolated between the main entranceway and the rest of the permanent collection, which was hung chronologically. Jonathan Lopez describes it as »intentionally hung in a hall between the modern and old-master galleries, as if there might still be some doubt about where it really belonged«<sup>15</sup>. Similarly, the explanatory label next to the work is quite unusual for a cultural institution, and for an uninitiated observer would possibly be confusing. It could be argued that the language used, particularly in the description of the painting as »ugly«, demonstrates the museum's discomfort with its continued display.

Similarly, the »Intent to Deceive« exhibition demonstrated a range of different attitudes of the institutions involved. Some well-established and renowned American museums loaned original works to the exhibition, including the Museum of Modern Art, New York, the National Portrait Gallery and the National Gallery of Art in Washington. The loans of original works suggest tacit support for the exhibition, although C. Loll admits she did have some problems arranging loans, as did the University of Cincinnati when they attempted to borrow other works by Mark Landis for the exhibition »Faux Real« in 2012<sup>16</sup>. It was noted in the New Yorker that »[s]ome museums refused to lend paintings, believing that showing Landis's work would only encourage him. Some didn't want to be identified as having fallen for his ploy«<sup>17</sup>.

Another remarkable aspect of the North American exhibition was the participation of an institution that had admitted its own fallibility. The uncovering of the activities of American art forger Mark Landis is linked to



**Fig. 4** Explanatory wall text accompanying »Supper at Emmaus« in the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, June 2013. – (Photo F. Strong).

one of the exhibiting galleries of »Intent to Deceive«, the Oklahoma City Museum of Art. Registrar Matthew Leininger became suspicious of works donated by the forger and investigated Landis, tracking his activities for over five years. Leininger found up to 50 institutions where the forger had donated works in various disguises, including dressed as a priest.

In publicity for the exhibition, the museum's curator Alison Amick was up front about the deception that occurred. She is said: »Mark Landis first deceived the museum with a watercolour by Louis Valtat, the French artist, back in 2007. In 2008, he brought five additional works to the museum; all six of these works are on view in the exhibition »Intent to Deceive«. Basically, the museum was initially deceived by Mark Landis because we were trusting – but not for long. Based on the efforts of museum staff and our (then) registrar [...] and board leadership, we quickly realised what was going on«<sup>18</sup>.

In the documentary film »Art and Craft« (2014), which depicts the cat-and-mouse investigations of Leininger chasing Landis, the registrar reveals that back in 2008, the Oklahoma City Museum of Art was not impressed by the deception and immediately removed Landis' works from the wall. Afterwards, Leininger moved to the Cincinnati Art Museum, but he infers in the film that he was sacked by the Cincinnati museum for his obsession with taking down Landis. The film leaves this fact unconfirmed, urging the viewer to draw the conclusion that it did not want the embarrassment of admitting professional fallibility.

Yet despite this depiction in the film, the Oklahoma City Museum of Art not only clearly saw value in exhibiting »Intent to Deceive« but also hosted a free screening of »Art and Craft« during the exhibition, and even held the world premiere of an opera based on the forger's life in May 2015.

The exhibition of art forgery within the context of the art museum is part of a wider need for art historians and curators to consider these objects within the same framework as authentic art. If we desire to identify inauthentic objects in the art market and circumvent some of the damage that can be done by deception, then art historians and curators must utilise the tools available to them. If the hand of the forger is studied, collected and exhibited in the same way as authentic art, then it is more likely to be able to be identified before reaching the point at which deception takes place. Although challenging to traditional notions of authenticity in art, objects of art forgery can be of value for exhibition in the art museum.

## Notes

1) Strong 2016.

2) Whitechapel 1908, 1.

3) Radnoti 1999. – Lenain 2011.

4) Barber 1916, 6.

5) Barber 1916, 6.

6) Burlington 1952, 97.

7) Witt 1924, 19.

8) Witt 1924, 20.

9) Witt 1924, 20.

10) Strong 2016.

11) Lenain 2011, 7. – Keats 2012.

12) Frankfurter 1933, 7.

13) Cohen 2013.

14) Minneapolis 1973, cat. no. 88.

15) Lopez 2009, 235.

16) Strong 2016.

17) Wilkinson 2013, n. p.

18) McDonnell 2013, n. p.

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## Zusammenfassung / Summary

### Das Inauthentische ausstellen: Die Absicht zu täuschen

Kunstbetrug ist eine der drängendsten Herausforderungen, denen sich Museen heute gegenübersehen, und wird in Kunstinstitutionen zunehmend zum Ausstellungsgegenstand. Das erste Beispiel einer Ausstellung zum Thema Authentizität – im Sinne von Echtheit – und Kunst reicht zurück bis an den Anfang des 20. Jahrhunderts. Seither sind Fälschungen in der Kunst ein beliebtes Ausstellungsthema in Europa und den Vereinigten Staaten geworden. In ähnlicher Weise wie sich der Fokus in der Literatur zu diesem Thema vom Objekt zum Schöpfer, den sogenannten Kunstfälschern, verlagert hat, so hat sich auch der Schwerpunkt zeitgenössischer Ausstellungen zu diesem Thema verschoben. Der Beitrag hinterfragt den Wert dieser Entwicklung in Ausstellungen und die Auswirkungen auf die Kunstinstitution anhand historischer Beispiele und erörtert eine aktuelle Wanderausstellung aus den USA.

### Exhibiting the Inauthentic: The Intent to Deceive

As one of the most pressing challenges facing museums today, art fraud has increasingly become a subject for exhibition within the art institution. The first example of an exhibition on the subject of authenticity and art can be traced back to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and since then inauthentic art has become a popular topic for exhibition across Europe and the United States. Just as the literature on the subject has shifted from a focus on the object to a focus on the creator, the so-called art forger, so too has the emphasis of contemporary exhibitions on this subject. This paper queries the value of this trend in exhibitions and the implications for the art institution, using historical examples and discussing one recent touring exhibition from the US.