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Art Forgers and the Deconstruction of Genius

ABSTRACT

Since the art market's inception, art forgery has been a constant presence. The phenomenon derives from the market's prioritization of canonical masters. The art forger's work often represents a resentment by latter-day contemporary artists who often believe that their work deserves equal praise and equal valuation to that of earlier master. A key role in the process of distinguishing fake from the authentic would be played by the role of the expert. One of the first public events to literally place the reigning connoisseurship system on trial would be the Hahn v. Duveen lawsuit over two versions of a purported Leonardo da Vinci. The trial captured the general public's attention, resulting in a mock play and a novel on the subject. The novel articulated both the public's bemuse-

ment at modern art and their incredulity at the system of attribution which sustained its market. The mid-century would contain no shortage of important forgery cases, but the topic did not become such significant fodder for popular culture again until the explosion of Elmyr de Hory's revelations in the late 1960s. In doing so, he launched the single greatest institutional critique of the genius artist and the system of expertise that controlled their market. No one had yet achieved quite so profound an attack on the art market's prioritization of geniuses and the opinion of experts. Duchamp, Warhol, and Hirst all mocked the art world, but Elmyr shook it to its very foundations. His life represents a *Gesamtkunstwerk* of artifice, and one that influenced multiple followers.

On 23 February 2014, *60 Minutes* aired an exposé on the German art forger Wolfgang Beltracchi,¹ and it spurred a national conversation as to why his paintings were any less worthy than the autograph works he imitated. In fact, viewers of the thirteen-minute piece overwhelmingly expressed their admiration at his achievement:

“Got to love this guy! Brilliant!”

“I love the fact that he was able to fool the ‘experts’”

“He’s brilliant. And he’s shown the art world how ridiculous it is.”²

After all, his fakes had been exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art³ and sold at Christie’s,⁴ and elite collectors happily enjoyed them as if they were authentic. Since the art market’s inception, art forgery has been a constant presence.⁵ The phenomenon derives from the market’s prioritization of canonical masters. A trade in art works began to appear in the later Hellenistic period, and the guiding principle to valuations, driven by what is most prized by collectors, were those works and artists among the mentioned in proto forms of art history.⁶ The Piombino Apollo represents one of these Classical era fakes or pastiches. It was made in a style of a fifth century BC kouros, but by two first century BC sculptors who acknowledged as much on a now-lost lead plate inside the bronze.⁷ Pausanias, in his *Description of Greece*, comments on the star artifact of Chaeronea, which purports to be the scepter of Agamemnon, made by Hephaestus and referenced in Homer, and he deems it authentic but goes on to dismiss other claimed creations by the god as fakes.⁸ The art forger’s work often represents a resentment by latter-day contemporary artists who often believe that their work deserves equal praise

1 The Con Artist: A Multimillion Dollar Scam, in *60 Minutes* (CBS News), 23 February 2014. (<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/art-forger-wolfgang-beltracchis-multimillion-dollar-scam/>).

2 The comments are taken from a YouTube version (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1si3JYWZxNg>) of the *60 Minutes* exposé.

3 The work was a fake Max Ernst that was shown at *Max Ernst: A Retrospective*. Exhibition dates: 7 April – 10 July 2005.

4 Max Ernst, *La Horde* (1927). Christie’s London, 20 June 2006, lot 158, Impressionist and Modern Art (Evening Sale).

5 Joseph Alsop, *The Rare Art Traditions: The History of Art Collecting and Its Linked Phenomena Wherever These Have Appeared* New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1987), 16-18.

6 Xenokrates of Sikyon in particular. His works only survive through Pliny the Elder’s writings on art in *Naturalis Historia*. See: *The Elder Pliny’s Chapters on the History of Art*, tr. K. Jex Blake, with commentary and historical introduction by E. Sellers (London: MacMillan and Co., LTD., 1896).

7 B. S. Ridgway, The Bronze Apollo from Piombino in the Louvre, in *Antike Plastik*, 7, 1967, 43-75 Also see: <https://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/apollo-piombino>.

8 Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, tr. W.H.S. Jones (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), 9.40.11, 9.40.11, 9.41.1. Pausanias’s justification for distinguishing the authentic from the fake is that the scepter is gold which was as it was referenced in Homer, but the works he dismisses are of bronze, and he notes that alloy of bronze was only invented by the Samians Theodorus and Rhoecus, which was after the age of Agamemnon. It may be our first reference of inauthenticity being determined through the presence of anachronistic materials.

and equal valuation to that of earlier master, and their work directly undermines that valuation hierarchy. For example, when Michelangelo created his *Sleeping Cupid*, he may have done so to prove he was as worthy as a classical sculptor, though it may have been Baldassare del Milanese, the dealer, who tried to pass it off as a classical piece.⁹ In this narrative, we see two of the possible roles and intentions displayed: an artist who creates an innocent fake, and a dealer who turns it in to a forgery with an intention to deceive. Ultimately, the forger represents a rearguard, underdog counter-attack by the masses of underappreciated contemporary artists upon a market that pays super-prices for works by the canonical few. They justify their actions because they remain unappreciated and blame the victims: dealers, collectors, art market, for their crimes.

A key role in the process of distinguishing fake from the authentic would be played by the role of the expert. Their authority, however, may not necessarily be universally acknowledged. Karl Mannheim describes a sociology of knowledge validated in four possible scenarios: one, consensus; two, monopoly position; three, atomistic competition; and four, polar competition.¹⁰ The market prefers the first two: either artworks whose attribution is consensual, or at least the relevant expert is consensual acknowledged. It is the power of that appearance of consensus that supports the market's financial power.¹¹ Art forgers understood when each of the variations of these knowledge scenarios occur and how to manipulate it.¹² The literary and motion picture sectors have repeatedly employed narratives around attribution that reinforce the general public's skepticism as to the unique genius of the few anointed masters and present the forger as a picaresque hero who debunks those myths.

One of the first public events to literally place the reigning connoisseurship system on trial would be the Hahn v. Duveen lawsuit over two versions of the purported Leonardo da Vinci *La Belle Ferronnière*, the one in the Louvre and the one that appeared in Kansas in 1920.¹³ Hahn had sued the dominant Old Master dealer Joseph Duveen for \$500,000 USD for slander of title.¹⁴ The trial would lead to a crucial dichotomy between Morellian connoisseurship represented by the experts Duveen brought forward, especially the Italian old master specialist of the era, Bernard Berenson, and new art forensics tech-

9 For a full narrative of the *Sleeping Cupid* and its source material, see: Paul F. Norton, The Lost Sleeping Cupid of Michelangelo, in *The Art Bulletin*, Dec., 1957, Vol. 39, No. 4, 251-257.

10 The forgers understood when each of the variations of these scenarios occurred and how to manipulate it. Karl Mannheim, *Competition as Cultural Phenomenon*, Essays Sociology Knowledge, Volume 5 (London: Routledge, (1929) 2013) 198.

11 Umberto Eco. Falsification and Consensus, in *Faith in fakes: essays* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1986), 173-179.

12 Jeffrey Taylor, The Secret to All Great Art Forgeries, in *The New Republic*, 6 January 2016

13 John Brewer, *The American Leonardo: A Tale of Obsession, Art and Money* (New York: Oxford UP, 2009) provides the full narrative up until its recent sale.

14 \$500,000 Suit Hangs on da Vinci Fingers: Impressions on Canvas Said to Prove Master Painted Picture Denounced by Duveen, in *The New York Times*, 5 November 1921.

niques such as microscopic study of pigment samples and x-rays.¹⁵ The trial went on for six years and captured the general public's attention,¹⁶ and even resulted in a mock play on the subject, *The Trial of Joseph Duveen*.¹⁷ The drama of the proceedings so much entered the zeitgeist that it was satirized by Hilaire Belloc's novel *The Missing Masterpiece* in 1929,¹⁸ which comically reworked this first great attribution trial, but refocused it on modernism and the emerging modern art market. Transposing the courtroom drama from an Old Master to the avant-garde would be entirely appropriate because Thierry Lenain believes the obsession with fakes and forgery to have emerged with the market in modern art.¹⁹ A term closely associated and sometimes even interchanged with authenticity is originality, the capacity for a work to be original, even though this concept can embody a wide gamut of finer meaning, whether: particularity, uniqueness, novelty, genius, or a supreme achievement.²⁰ Furthermore, this concept can be increasingly muddled with more easily reproducible media such as bronze sculpture, photography, and prints.²¹ This strong correlation between preoccupations with "authenticity" and "originality" indeed both emerged in the early twentieth century with its overwhelming focus on the geniuses of canonical modernists.²²

The protagonist of *The Missing Masterpiece*, Sir Henry Bensington, matches Joseph Duveen in almost every way except for Duveen's reputed lack of interest in modern art.²³ The character had become the pinnacle of the trade on both sides of the Atlantic. He had been born in Germany (Duveen in the Netherlands)²⁴ only to rise to be the most English of noblemen. Bensington also earned a reputation for smuggling Italian fifteenth

15 John Brewer, Art and Science: A Da Vinci Detective Story, in *Engineering & Science* No. 1/2, 2005, 37-40.

16 Oracle Sued, in *New York Journal*, 5 February 1929.

17 Sylvia Lyon, The Trial of Joseph Duveen, in *The Boulevardier*, circa 1931. See: Emmabeth Nanol, The Man of La Belle Ferronière: A fake Leonardo? The scandalous court case of art dealer Joseph Duveen, 23 May 2013 (<http://blogs.getty.edu/iris/treasures-from-the-vault-the-man-of-la-belle-ferroniere/>).

18 Walter Kaiser, Not So Grand Illusion, a review of *The American Leonardo: A Tale of Obsession, Art and Money* by John Brewer, in *New York Review of Books*, 25 February 2010.

19 Thierry Lenain, *Art Forgery: The History of a Modern Obsession* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), 13.

20 Alfred Lessing. What Is Wrong with a Forgery? in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Summer, 1965, Vol. 23, No. 4 (Summer, 1965), 461-471.

21 Bruno Latour and Adam Lowe, The migration of the aura or how to explore the original through its facsimiles in *Switching Codes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 13-16.

22 Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-garde and Other Modernist Myths* (United Kingdom: MIT Press, 2012).

23 Duveen generally only dealt in eighteenth century and earlier artists, as well as antiques (his father's original trade). Among notable exceptions was his willingness to sell James McNeill Whistler. See: Whistler Painting bought for \$200,000; "Lady Meux" Purchased by Duveen Brothers from English Family and Brought Here. Wife of London Brewer "Harmony in Pink and Gray" Is Artist's Second Portrait of Once Pretty Barmaid at the Gaiety, in *The New York Times*, 31 January 1919, 9. Duveen also donated a Cézanne *Bathers* and Gauguin's *Faa Iheihe* to the National Gallery, London. See: Andrea Geddes Poole, *Stewards of the Nation's Art: Contested Cultural Authority, 1890-1939* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010) 207.

24 Cynthia Saltzman, *Old Masters, New World: America's Raid on Europe's Great Pictures, 1880-World War I* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 200.

and sixteenth century paintings out of the country in violation of its cultural protection laws,²⁵ and this was one of the most nefarious claims laid against Duveen.²⁶ The novel also references a notorious US Customs incident which made Bensington famous, where he imported as one thing only to reattribute it later for a higher value.²⁷ Duveen similarly earned fame for a US Customs case, though it was as much against his uncle Henry,²⁸ who acted as an appraiser for the customs service.²⁹ Henry had been low-balling Duveen Brothers imports and over-valuing competitors' goods.³⁰ Joseph would consider the record fine of \$1.2 million to be a point of pride indicative of the firm's prominence.³¹ Bensington could drive tastes in the market and that is exactly what he did with the oeuvre of a tragically young-dying French Symbolist painter, Bourrot.

A few years after World War I, Bourrot received an impromptu visit from English gentleman Henry Delgarin at his threadbare Latin Quarter studio. He had instead expected his landlord demanding overdue rent. Delgarin paid the back rent, and Bourrot would gift him what he would consider his masterpiece. The painting featured a disembodied eye floating above bands of vermilion and yellow over a field of mauve, "very sinister; below all, upon the outer edge, was something which might have been a tropical fruit or a balloon but half inflated, and this was of a tender grey."³² In disgust at his landlord, Bourrot had titled the work, *Ame Bourgoise*, [*Bourgeois Soul*]. The disembodied eye could be identified as a clear reference to Odilon Redon, who became known for that symbolist motif.³³ Redon had shown thirty-nine oils, pastels, and drawings, as well lithographs at the 1913 New York Armory show,³⁴ and he had been the show's overwhelming success.³⁵

25 Hilaire Belloc, *The Missing Masterpiece*. Illustrations by G. K. Chesterton (London: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1929), 34.

26 Meryle Secrest, *Duveen: A Life in Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) 183.

27 Belloc, *The Missing Masterpiece*, 34-36.

28 *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology: Official Organ of the American Institute of Criminal Law and Criminology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1912) Volume 2. 624. This is a transcription of: Three Miscarriages of Justice, in *The Boston Transcript*. 624.

29 Wallace Ludel, The Enduring Legacy of Joseph Duveen, America's First Mega-Dealer, in *Artsy*, 9 April 2019 (<https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-enduring-legacy-joseph-duveen-americas-first-mega-dealer>).

30 Henry J. Duveen, Art Dealer, dies. Senior Member of Duveen Brothers Expires at 64 In Fifth Avenue Home. Gathered Morgan Works. Later Paid Millions for Famous Collections--Indicted In 1910 for Customs Violations and Heavily Fined, in *The New York Times*, 16 January 1919, 13.

31 Philip Hook, *Rogues' Gallery: The Rise (and Occasional Fall) of Art Dealers, the Hidden Players in the History of Art* (London: The Experiment, 2017) 96.

32 Belloc, *The Missing Masterpiece*, 21.

33 See: Odilon Redon, *Eye-Balloon* (œil-ballon), 1878 (<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/33013>).

34 Megan Fort, The overwhelming appeal of Odilon Redon, in *The Armory Show at 100*, blog: 10 September 2013, New York Historical Society (<http://armory.nyhistory.org/the-overwhelming-appeal-of-odilon-redon/>).

35 Milton W. Brown, *The Story of the Armory Show* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1986) 134.

Bourrot would continue to struggle until he met with unprecedented success with another painting, *Le Néant* [Nothingness] which was “an unrelieved black surface: nothing more: and framed in one of those narrow white frames.”³⁶ The work had been rejected by “the *Salon*, but also by the *Independent*, the *Nouvel Independent*, the *Décadant*, and even the *Eccentrique*. At last, with difficulty, Bourrot managed to get it shown at the *Absolu*.”³⁷ The string of seceding exhibition societies clearly mocked Paris’s bewildering succession of break-away salons,³⁸ and his difficulty in being shown at all would clearly cast him in the role of the modernist art market’s new hero, the maverick.³⁹ The square black picture in a white frame draws an unmistakable association to Kazimir Malevich’s *Black Square*, and his Suprematist works would have recently become known in the West because of his show at the 1927 *Große Berliner Kunstausstellung*.⁴⁰ While in Berlin, Malevich paid a visit to the Bauhaus⁴¹ where they published his tract on Suprematism,⁴² and he also discussed film ideas with Hans Richter.⁴³

The next work captured Bensington’s attention and truly catapulted the fictional Bourrot to elite status: “...he surpassed the glories of ‘Le Néant’ in the still greater triumph of his ‘Amour Perdu,’ the profound meaning of which struck straight to the modern soul.” The painting became known by its English title *Love Destroyed by the Years*, and the illustration by G.K. Chesterton⁴⁴ resembles a series of cubist forms descending and creates an obvious comparison to the Armory Show’s most notorious work, Marcel Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*, which Gutzon Borglum had labelled *A Staircase Descending a Nude*.⁴⁵ A prescient joke throughout the novel was the question of which way the *Bourgeois Soul* was to be hung, and that question would indeed plague modern and particu-

36 Belloc, *The Missing Masterpiece*, 39.

37 Ibid, 41.

38 See: Fae Brauer, *Rivals and Conspirators: the Paris Salons and the Modern Art Centre* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013) for a full history of Paris’s subdivision into competing salons.

39 Iain Robertson, *Understanding International Art Markets and Management* (London: Routledge, 2005), 18.

40 Troels Andersen, *Malevich: Catalogue Raisonné of the Berlin Exhibition 1927, Including the Collection in the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam; with a General Introduction to His Work* (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1970).

41 Anja Schlossberger-Oberhammer, Kazimir Malevich’s Visit to the Staatliches Bauhaus (Dessau), in Monica Cioli, Maurizio Ricciardi, Pierangelo Schiera, eds., *Traces of Modernism: Art and Politics from the First World War to Totalitarianism* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2019). 199. There he met Gropius and Kandinsky and asked to work at the Bauhaus, but there was no budget to hire him.

42 Kasimir Malewitsch, *Die Gegenstandslose Welt*. Bauhaus Bücher, vol. 11 (Munich: Albert Langen Verlag, 1927).

43 Timothy O. Benson and Aleksandra Shatskikh, Malevich and Richter: An Indeterminate Encounter, in *OCTOBER* 143, Winter 2013, 52–68.

44 Belloc, *The Missing Masterpiece*, 43. The forty-one illustrations by Chesterton are Daumier-esque in their caricatures of the 1920s art world and English high society.

45 Brown, *The Story of the Armory Show*, 137.

larly abstract art. Malevich rotated his paintings between exhibitions,⁴⁶ and the Tate famously hung a Rothko wrong,⁴⁷ while the fake one at the Knoedler trial was nonetheless debated as to which way was up.⁴⁸ The novel articulated both the public's bemusement at modern art and their incredulity at the system of attribution which sustained its market.

Like the Hahn's painting, the copies of Bourrot's masterpiece had been made innocently by Delgarin's son, who was good at nothing in life but making exact replications, and after having made two identical versions, he died. The hilarity between the painting having not one but two fakes, mirrors a wider masterful technique of Belloc's to set up contrasting pairs who are different, but really alike: two fakes, two parvenu collectors, two blowhard barristers, two continental dealers competing with Bensington to snare the masterpiece. The recurring dualities reference the essential problematic with attribution, which is that it necessitates binary solutions of *yeses* and *nos*—authentic or inauthentic.⁴⁹ The reality of attribution, however, can be far less simple, as was the situation with Duveen's breakup with Berenson over the *Allendale Nativity*.⁵⁰ The Hahn trial had, in fact, marked the beginning of the end of Berenson's undisputed dominance over the field of Italian Renaissance.⁵¹ When giving testimony in Paris in 1923, he showed lack of concern whether a purported Leonardo at the Prado was on wood or canvas: "It is not interesting on what paper Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*."⁵² At the trial over the two versions of the missing masterpiece (neither of which are the authentic one) the celebrity witness (a parody of Berenson) was the Curator of the Oil Paintings Department in the Imperial Museum, Dr. Edward Mowlem, who possesses "a reputation and a bundle of facts so considerable that he was already in the first rank of the profession." But Mowlem's assertions are undermined when under cross-examination he admits to not having seen the original.⁵³ In fact, the comparison staged by Duveen at the Louvre⁵⁴ was

46 Rainer Crone, David Moos, *Kazimir Malevich: The Climax of Disclosure* (London: Reaktion Books, 1991) 156.

47 Alastair Jamieson. Rothko art hung wrong way round in exhibition, in *The Telegraph*, 9 November 2008.

48 Pat Mullen, 'Made You Look' and the Art of the Con Barry Avrich's latest doc is a wild but true caper, in *Point of View*, 17 April 2020.

49 Ernst van der Wetering of the Rembrandt Research Project summarized the problem: "Most people want an authority who says, this is a Rembrandt, and this is not a Rembrandt. But our work has little to do with money and with writing museum labels. It's doing the best we can to reconstruct a segment of art history." Sylvia Hochfield, What is a Real Rembrandt?, in *Art News*, February 2004, 82-93.

50 Hans Tietze and E. Tietze-Conrat, The Allendale Nativity in the National Gallery, in *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 31, No. 1, March 1949, 11-20.

51 His decline had much to do with his admission under cross-examination that he had been in the pay of Duveen. Rachel Cohen, *Bernard Berenson: A Life in the Picture Trade* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 218.

52 Brewer, *The American Leonardo*, 141.

53 Belloc, *The Missing Masterpiece*, 255-260.

54 The Leonardo da Vinci Dispute: A "Slander of Title" Action, in *The Illustrated London News*, 2 March 1929, 339.

lampooned through the masterful caricatures by Chesterton of jury member comparing the two competing copies of *Bourgeois Soul*.⁵⁵

The novel's comic usage of two fake versions may have been referring to the fact that the *London Illustrated News* mistakenly published a photograph as the Hahn's painting, but which was, in fact, a third version of *La Belle Ferronnière*.⁵⁶ The Hahn-Duveen trial would, more than anything else, expose the weakness of the connoisseur-based system of attribution, especially when the ultimate decision would rest with a jury of peers and the expert-connoisseur's "indisputable authority" held little sway with them. Belloc made the same critique and at the same time presaged future cases that would emerge from modernism, and particularly abstract art, since connoisseurship proved even less useful when the subject was no longer a figure with hands and ears.⁵⁷

The mid-century would contain no shortage of important forgery cases: Han van Meegeren's Vermeers,⁵⁸ Otto Wacker's Van Goghs,⁵⁹ but the topic did not become such significant fodder for popular culture again until the explosion of Elmyr de Hory's revelations in the late 1960s. In doing so, he launched the single greatest institutional critique of the genius artist and the system of expertise that controlled their market. De Hory faked the key figures of the *École de Paris*, Picasso, Matisse, and especially Modigliani, and his works entered the collections of museums⁶⁰ and were sold by Knoedler.⁶¹ They only became known, however, when Clifford Irving published his biography, *Fake! The Story of Elmyr De Hory, the Greatest Art Forger of Our Time* in 1969,⁶² which exposed the epistemological flaws of the modern art market. The life of Elmyr de Hory should be regarded as one of the most deconstructive conceptual artworks of the twentieth century. No one had yet achieved quite so profound an attack on the art market's prioritization of genius and the opinion of experts. Duchamp, Warhol, and Hirst all mocked the art world, but de Hory shook it to its very foundations. His life represents a *Gesamtkunstwerk* of artifice, and one that influenced multiple followers.

55 Belloc, *The Missing Masterpiece*, 268, 272.

56 "La Belle Ferronnière": Three Pictures for Comparison, in *The Illustrated London News*, 18 July 1931, 115.

57 Ivan Lermolieff, *Die Werke italienischer Meister in den Galerien von München, Dresden und Berlin /ein kritischer Versuch von Ivan Lermolief; aus dem Russischen übersetzt von Dr. Johannes Schwarze* (Leipzig: E.A. Seemann, 1880).

58 Jonathan Lopez, *The Man Who Made Vermeers: Unvarnishing the Legend of Master Forger Han van Meegeren* (Boston: Mariner, 2009).

59 Stefan Koldehoff, The Wacker forgeries: A Catalogue, in *Van Gogh Museum Journal*, 2002, 138-149.

60 Christopher Reed, Wrong! But a nice fake is a valued object in a university art museum, in *Harvard Magazine*, Sept. Oct. 2004).

61 *Art News Annual* for 1958 contains a Knoedler advertisement that features an De Hory fake Matisse on page 22.

62 Clifford Irving, *Fake! The Story of Elmyr De Hory, the Greatest Art Forger of Our Time* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969).

The source most familiar to people would be Irving's book and although the author did claim to have made efforts to validate his subject's statements, he largely transmits the story wholesale as it was dictated to him. Even in the first two pages devoted to de Hory's origins in Budapest, nine false claims have been discovered by subsequent research.⁶³ de Hory's name was not Elmyr de Hory, but rather Elemér Hoffmann.⁶⁴ His family had no aristocratic title and did not have significant landholdings, except that his maternal grandfather owned a brick factory in Transylvania.⁶⁵ His father was not an ambassador, but a wholesale merchant of hand-made goods.⁶⁶ His family did not live in a palace among the elite in the Buda Hills, but rather in an apartment in rapidly urbanizing Pest.⁶⁷ de Hory did, however, possess a double portrait of himself and his brother painted by the world-famous Hungarian Philip de László.⁶⁸ In 2010 de Hory's heir, Mark Forgy, exhibited the work, together with his collection of de Hory's surviving oeuvre, only to be informed by the de László Trust that it had certainly not been painted by the esteemed portraitist.⁶⁹ The fact that de Hory would forge a childhood double portrait of himself and his brother in sailor suits (a brother he claimed was no longer alive, though, in fact, he was), signed in the name of an artist who at that time would have only painted the most elite members of the European plutocracy should give some indication of the importance he placed on his claim of aristocratic heritage. As he was seeking to avoid deportation from Spain to France in the 1970s, he wrote to his brother in Hungary to send images of the Hory (the aristocratic name he had adopted) family crest, so that he might validate his lineage and foil the authorities' attempt to extradite him.⁷⁰ De Hory even tells lies in death: his tombstone in Ibiza contains two falsehoods: his made-up name, Elmyr, and a year of birth that made him five years younger.⁷¹

63 Irving, *Fake*, 15-16.

64 Birth Record for Elemér Hoffmann, Folyó-szám [Registration Number]: 1034. "Kivonat: A Budapest Zsidó Hitközség születési anyakönyvéből." It reports 14 April 1906 as his date of birth.

65 An interview with Edith Tenner, the widow of de Hory's maternal cousin, Edith Tenner, explains that Irén Tenner was de Hory's mother, and her father owned a brick factory in Billéd, which would have been the Transylvania region of the Hungarian Kingdom. The town is now Biled, part of Romania. The grave of Ignacz Tenner, his grandfather, is in his own Jewish cemetery outside of Biled's Christian cemetery.

66 Birth Certificate. de Hory's father, Adolf Hoffmann, is described as a "Kéziműarúnagykereskedő." This could mean he sold products like brooms or brushes.

67 Birth Certificate. The address was Sétatér 2 in District V. This would have been on the edge of a massive building project going on around today's Szabadság tér, and so the address was probably constantly cacophonous and dusty.

68 De László (1869-1937) was the most sought-after portraitist in the world after John Singer Sargent renounced portraiture. De László painted portraits of popes, royalty, and U.S. presidents.

69 Mark Forgy, *The Forger's Apprentice: Life with the World's Most Notorious Artist* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2012).

70 István Hont, de Hory's brother, to the Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County Archives, 12 February 1972. Mark Forgy collection.

71 His gravestone on the Spanish island of Ibiza is engraved: "14 de Abril 1911-11 de Diciembre de 1976 ELMYR."

His significance can be compared to Marcel Duchamp's role as founder of conceptual art in that Elmyr created his own genre of forgery as deconstruction of the modern art market. His influence can be appreciated in the series of copycat cultural productions he inspired. After the success of *Fake!*, Clifford Irving convinced McGraw-Hill of the idea that he had made contact with one of the 1960s great enigmas, the recluse Howard Hughes.⁷² His contract and advance had been secured from the publisher⁷³ on the basis of forged handwritten letters from Hughes supporting the project.⁷⁴ While Elmyr never served jail time,⁷⁵ Irving would do seventeen months and emerge from prison bankrupt,⁷⁶ and end up selling the rights to *Fake!* to an English bookmaker named Ken Talbot.⁷⁷ Irving's text would be reprinted word-for-word, with the primary difference being a thirty-page epilogue written by Talbot. In the epilogue, Talbot claims to have bought over four hundred works from Elmyr in the 1970s, and, furthermore, transcribes a lost journal in which Elmyr gave instructions for how he faked Renoir, Monet, Pissarro, and Toulouse-Lautrec.⁷⁸ The ten new plates in Talbot's publication were drawn from the works claimed to have been purchased from Elmyr. Eventually, over 100 of those were sold to a former Texas governor and a Santa Fe Gallerist for \$225,000.⁷⁹ Other suspect works from Talbot's collection would emerge on the secondary market only to be denounced as fake fakes because these Impressionists were never the ones Elmyr had targeted.⁸⁰ In the 1990s, another Hungarian followed the same pattern of his compatriot, perhaps having read *Fake!*, which was widely known in his Hungarian 1956 émigré circles in the US.⁸¹ Gabor Nemeth marketed a group of purported Jackson Pollocks⁸² that he professed to have acquired second-hand from Pollock's girlfriend, Ruth Kligman.⁸³ To support the claims, he

72 Paul Maliszewski, If He Did It, Review of Clifford Irving, in *Hoax*, Book Forum, Apr/May 2007.

73 Clifford Irving, *Autobiography of Howard Hughes: Confessions of an Unhappy Billionaire* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1971).

74 The Fabulous Hoax of Clifford Irving, in *Time*, 21 February 1972. Welles speculated that Elmyr might have even assisted in the production of the forged letters.

75 Elmyr de Hory Is Dead at 65, in *The New York Times*, 12 December 1976, 51.

76 Christopher Reed, Clifford Irving obituary: Author who forged Howard Hughes's autobiography, in *The Guardian*, 12 December 2017.

77 Johannes Rød, Fake Fakes in the Forger's Oeuvre: One more story about Elmyr de Hory. IIC Nordic Group 16th conference on art forgeries. Reykjavik, 2003, 53-57.

78 Ken Talbot, *Enigma: New Story of Elmyr De Hory – The Greatest Art Forger of Our Time* (London: ONT, 1991) 238-268.

79 Patricia Degener, Five-Figure Prices for the Work of a Master Faker, in *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 28 August 1983, 5C.

80 Kurt Bayer, Auction house pulls paintings when told forgeries faked, in *NZ Herald*, 7 October 2014.

81 Gabor Nemeth, Obituary, in *Park Rapids Enterprise*, July 3, 2014. Welles mentions that all the Hungarians he has known had a propensity towards being con artists. F for Fake, Janus Films, (DVD The Criterion Collection, 1975) 40:58.

82 *Revisiting Pollock: A Collection of Paintings Attributed to Jackson Pollock* (Azusa: Azusa Pacific University, 2008).

83 Suzanne Muchnic, Paintings could be by Jackson Pollock, or not, in *Los Angeles Times* 30 September 2008. The reporter interviewed Ruth Kligman (who was still alive then) for the story, and she denied ever

provided fractal analysis to prove their authenticity.⁸⁴ Like Elmyr, he found the persona he created about himself to be the ultimate goal of his forgery schemes. His business associates used the proceeds from the sales of his fakes to make a documentary about his life that claims that: one, he was a German aristocrat, two, flew with the Luftwaffe but also rescued his Jewish girlfriend from Auschwitz, three, became a spy for the British MI6 working inside the Soviet Union, and four, served as Kennedy's translator to Khrushchev during the Cuban Missile Crisis.⁸⁵ What each of the fakers Elmyr, Irving, Talbot, and Nemeth acquired from his predecessor was the tactic of manipulating the epistemological foundations of how the art world knows what it knows. In each case they presented not just forgeries but also assembled the authoritative statements to validate them. They all understood how fragile art's knowledge structure was, and how it could be corrupted.

This mentor-protégé transmission found its most profound embodiment in the last completed film by the master of cinematic illusion, Orson Welles. He had launched his career with a fake invasion from outer space,⁸⁶ whose most famous movie was a mock documentary of a fake tycoon,⁸⁷ and whose greatest acting role was playing someone who fakes his own death.⁸⁸ Welles would create a pseudo-documentary essay on the topic of "fakery, art forgery, charlatanism, magicianship, the idea of authorship, and experts,"⁸⁹ and produced such an essentially new form of manic fast-paced editing that it could be seen as a founding example of the MTV aesthetic. "*F for Fake* is a fake documentary about a fake artist being described by a fake writer and framed by a self-admitted superstar genius person."⁹⁰ During the filming, life began to imitate art, and Howard Hughes emerged and claimed to have never met Irving.⁹¹ Although credited to Welles, the movie belongs as much to his new partner Oja Kodar, and derives from re-editing an earlier film shot by a dealer who had been the victim of Elmyr's forgeries.⁹² Its key conversa-

knowing Nemeth.

- 84 Letter from Prof. Richard Taylor, University of Oregon, on the fractal analysis of four works in Nemeth's collection: "have been shown to be composed of the specific form of fractals found in Pollock's poured paintings." A facsimile of the letter appears in the *Revisiting Pollock* catalogue, 9.
- 85 *Cuban Missile Crisis: A Spy Talks Inside Oval Office*, Turner and Associates, Candlelight Entertainment Inc., Magic Lantern Productions; Howard Kazanian, Russell Turner, Ellen Turner producers; Russell Turner director. DVD released 25 September 2007. Most of the claims can be shown to be false, including that Nemeth could not speak Russian.
- 86 *The War of the Worlds (Invasion from Mars)*, The Mercury Theatre on the Air, CBS Radio, broadcast on 30 October 30, 1938.
- 87 In *F for Fake*, Welles expands on the coincidence by noting that originally *Citizen Kane* was to mirror the life of Howard Hughes, not William Randolph Hearst.
- 88 Harry Lime (played by Welles), the villain of *The Third Man*.
- 89 Peter Bogdanovich on *F for Fake*, DVD, The Criterion Collection.
- 90 *F for Fake* and the Death of the Author, in *Brows Held High*, 24 February 2015, 6:01 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3O6OTVyybZU>).
- 91 Gladwin Hill, Howard Hughes Tells of His Life In a 3,000-Mile Phone Interview, in *The New York Times*, 10 January 1972, 1.
- 92 Much of *F for Fake's* footage was actually shot for an earlier documentary by François Reichenbach, *Elmyr: The True Picture*, which aired on the BBC on 16 July 1971.

tions never took place but were concocted in the editing room,⁹³ and after promising to tell the truth for sixty minutes, he and Kodar narrate how she modelled for Picasso in exchange for ownership of the canvases. When her grandfather exhibited his own works as those Picassos, the forger explained to the master that the works are enjoyed by viewers and praised by critics. Welles then admits that “for that last 17 minutes I’ve been lying my head off.”⁹⁴ Elmyr summarized the contempt for authorship when asked if he feels bad for faking Modigliani: “I don’t feel bad for Modigliani, I feel good for me.” In his epic soliloquy on the unsigned Chartres cathedral, Welles reminded us: “Our songs will all be silenced, but what of it? Go on singing. Maybe a man’s name doesn’t matter all that much?”⁹⁵

More sophisticated cartoons have always channeled cinematic touchstones and in that way familiarized younger generations on the source motifs by allowing them to encounter it first by way of its reverberation through mass media.⁹⁶ The Simpsons episode *The War of Art* transmitted *F for Fake* to FOX/SKY television audiences, and raised again the core question: why do we only care about a painting because we thought it was by someone famous?⁹⁷ When the omnipresent sailboat painting over their couch was destroyed by Lisa’s new guinea pig, the family found a post-impressionist painting at the Van Houten’s yard sale that had an unnoticed signature of Johan Oldenveldt, an artist worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. The auction, however, was halted because of an ownership dispute with Mr. Van Houten’s former lover and would send Homer and Lisa to Isla Verde to research its provenance.⁹⁸ The former art colony has now become a hedonistic techno party scene, an obvious reference to Elmyr’s home on Ibiza.⁹⁹ When Homer validated his title to the painting, he expressed the market’s primary concerns: “That proves the painting is mine, and nothing can stop me from selling it and keeping all the money! I love art!”¹⁰⁰ At that moment, he is interrupted by the forger of the work, Klaus Ziegler, who asked him, “Art? What do you know about art? You don’t even know who painted that picture.” After being taken to his studio and shown his imitations of Chagall, Picasso, Wyeth, Monet, Klimt, and Garry Trudeau, Lisa castigated him: “What you do is horrible... ripping off geniuses who spent years perfecting their styles.”¹⁰¹ Ziegler responded: “Beauty is beauty. My forgeries give pleasure to people all over the world.

93 This is particularly true of the invented conversation between Elmyr and Irving, as to whether Elmyr forged signatures. Welles, *F for Fake*, 1:03:48-1:05:15.

94 Welles, *F for Fake*, 1:26:34.

95 Welles, *F for Fake*, 1:07:50.

96 In addition to the Simpsons, most of the more successful adult-oriented cartoons: South Park, Family Guy rely on cinema references for an important degree of nearly every episode’s structuring.

97 *The War of Art*, The Simpsons, FOX, S25 E15, Release date: 23 March 2014, 19:01.

98 *The War of Art*, 14:41.

99 *The War of Art*, 17:09.

100 *The War of Art*, 17:50.

101 *The War of Art*, 18:48.

The only question to ask is... Did it move you?"¹⁰² In this short question, the character, clearly intended to resemble Elmyr at his La Falaise secret studio, expressed the forger's (and the public's) lack of concern for genius and authorship.

Elmyr, with his chain-reaction of imitators, embodies the postmodern art hero who, like Warhol and Oldenberg, make an assault on the structures of the modernist art market a core component of their practice. Postmodernism relishes in dismantling hierarchies established by modernism, like experts and geniuses, and celebrates cultural flattening. It comes as no accident that the phenomenon that Elmyr set in motion emerges simultaneous with the publication of a foundational tract of postmodernism, "Death of the Author."¹⁰³ When converted to the medium of visual arts, the text becomes the painting, the author—the artist, the critic—the expert. Elmyr and his followers liberate the text while murdering the author. Elmyr does this to the modernist hero Modigliani, Irving to Hughes, but they also do it to each other. Talbot takes Elmyr's voice from him, Welles's editing concocts imaginary conversations between his protagonists. *F for Fake* in that way is a tour-de-force *la mort d'auteur*, where no one really created it: it relied on borrowed footage from other films (Welles's, Kodar's, and Reichenbach's), and the primary narrative was driven by the actions of its protagonists which occurred during production. Barthes urges that: "the reign of the Author should also have been that of the Critic, but that criticism ... should be overthrown along with the Author."¹⁰⁴ Popular culture: novels, cinema, and cartoons, reinforce the premise that art need not be concerned with authorship: what matters is how the audience has read it.

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102 *The War of Art*, 19:13.

103 Roland Barthes, The Death of the Author, in *Aspen*, 5+6, Item 3, 1967.

104 Roland Barthes, The Death of the Author.