

History of art forgery

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University of Central Missouri The Art of Forgery History of Art Forgery 4/15/2012| Abstract The purpose of this paper is to examine the history of Art Forgery and the history of one of the greatest art forgers of our time, Tom Keating. The paper will go into the basic history of art forgery from the first recorded art forgery all the way up to the ways forgeries are made today. It will also go into the changes of how forgeries were detected and how forgers are prosecuted. The history of art forgery is not as sinister as some people may believe.

In the past, and in some art schools today, students were/are made to copy the works of the master artists, such as Leonardo, Michelangelo, Van Gogh, Monet, and countless others, to hone their skills and practice. In years long past the masters would create their originals and then many copies would be made to make it visible to many people all over the world and to enhance the likelihood that the art would survive the ages. (Dutton, 1983) This went on for years without any thought but as time went on more and more of the masters art started to surface the need for experts were needed to make sure the art in question was the real thing.

In the past a person would have to spend years if not a lifetime researching and studying the way an artist would paint by looking at brush strokes, type of paint and canvas used, and other distinctive characteristics of the artist. As time progressed those same experts became some of the most accomplished art forgers. One such forger was French artist Jean-Pierre Schecroun. Before he was arrested and found guilty of forgery in 1962, Schecroun is said to had produced somewhere around eighty forgeries of artists' works like Picasso and other modern masters. The pictures were said

to have brought in ? 5, 000 in two years (Dolice, 2003). Forgeries have become such a common practice that any work that surfaces that is allegedly a work done by a modern master such as Van Gogh, Picasso, Dali, Miro, and Chagall is put under great scrutiny. Along with art experts, art restorers make good forgers. In 1970 at an auction house in Europe auctioneers noticed that of all the paintings they were getting ready to auction off that there were thirteen paintings of the famous British painter Samuel Palmer but all of them had the same theme, the town of Shoreham, England.

After an article was released revealing their suspicions an art restorer named Thomas Patrick Keating claimed that all thirteen were of his making. Keating was born in 1918 Lewisham, a borough of London to poor un-noteworthy parents. From a young age Keating was a gifted painter and have of love art. After World War II he became an art restorer. (Keating, Norman, & Norman, 1977) After not being able to support himself and his family he became a house painter to make extra money to make ends meet. He did all he could to break into the art market by exhibiting his paintings at numerous galleries but he never got much recognition.

In his own eyes Keating believed that the whole gallery system was “ rotten. ” He stated that the system was “ dominated by American ” avant-garde fashion, with critics and dealers often conniving to line their own pockets at the expense both of naive collectors and impoverished artists. ” (Keating, Norman, & Norman, 1977) Keating had have enough and decided to get revenge on the broken system. He formed a plan to destabilize the gallery and auction system by flooding the market with forgeries. By the time he

was caught he allegedly produced over 2, 000 forgeries and copied over 100 different artists.

In an article to the Guardian, a British news network a friend of Keating's, John Brandler said that " He thought, 'I'm as good as Rembrandt, Palmer, Renoir and all the rest of the classic painters, and I'm going to prove it'," and many think that he did. Known as a forger with a cause he would leave tell-tale markings that would one day reveal that the work was a fake. Known to sometimes write on the canvas with lead before he painted, Keating knew that an x-ray would reveal the message underneath. It was also not unknown of him to purposefully add miniscule flaws or to use materials not available in the time of the original painter.

One of the more devious things that were done to ensure the fallacy of his works was done to a few of his oil painting forgeries. Keating knowing that one day all oil paintings will need to be cleaned put a layer of glycerol under his painting. When the restorer would go to clean the painting the chemical reaction would cause the glycerol to dissolve and then the layer of paint would disintegrate leaving the whole work a ruin and revealing that it was a forgery (Keating, Norman, & Norman, 1977). He also had specific techniques he would use on forgeries of certain artists.

When it came to Rembrandt's works he would boil nuts for hours to make the paint fade in the future where true paints from the era of Rembrandt would not. In 1977 after an extensive investigation Tom Keating was finally arrested, not for forgery per-say but for conspiracy to defraud. That same year his autobiography, *The Fake's Progress: The Tom Keating Story* was published. The years had not been kind to Keating. Years of smoking and
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inhaling the chemicals that are used in art restoration; turpentine, ammonia and methyl alcohol had taken a toll on his life. The case was dropped due to his poor health.

The case was just what was needed to launch him to the fame that has eluded him when he first started to break into the art market. In 1982 through 1983 he had a television program where he talked about the old masters of painting and the techniques that they and he had used to become famous. The following year in 1984, Thomas Keating passed away from a heart attack. After his passing his works have become even more collectable and many find that his forgeries are worth just as much, if no more, than his originals (Keating, Norman, & Norman, 1977). Tom Keating was in no fashion one of the first art forgers.

As stated above forgery has been around as long as art has. People will always want to replicate something that they find pleasing or today that they can make some money. The concept of forgery has not really changed that much over the years. If you want to forge a famous painting or sculpture you study the original artist, try to copy the style that they use, and use materials as close to those used by the artist as possible. Unlike the process, the methods of detection have made great strides. In the beginning the only way to spot a fake was through examination.

Some of the few things beside style that are looked at when determining the authenticity of a piece are frames, signatures on the art, stretch bars, and nail holes. (Fleming, 1975) All of these have possibilities of being originals because all of the following, minus the signatures can be changed when an art restorer works on a painting but a true expert can tell.

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As technology advanced so did the ways of detecting forgeries. The development of the use of x-rays has brought about the use of x-ray diffraction and fluorescence. Both are used to determine the composition of the materials used. In x-ray diffraction, used in the authentication of paintings, not only analyzes the components but also to detect pentimento, the alteration of a painting. Carbon and "White lead" dating are used to measure the age of a painting, Dendrochronology used to date wooden objects and Thermoluminescence is used to date pottery. (Fleming, 1975) One of the newest forms of authentication is digital authentication. Wavelet decomposition is when the picture is broken down into smaller pictures and then the texture is analyzed by the stroke of the paint.

The United States has many laws against counterfeiting and fraud but when it comes to prosecuting forgers they have a hard time proving the burden of proof. Just like the forgers changing with the times, prosecutors have adapted. It has become standard practice for prosecutors to go after forgers under Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act (RICO). This has worked because it is very seldom that a forger works alone. They usually have someone they trust that helps them find a buyer or get the forgeries into an auction.

In going after all of the people prosecutors have been successful against art forgers such as the case United States v. Amiel. (Dolice, 2003) Forgers and the sellers of counterfeit art can also be held accountable through civil actions. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) protects against unfair trade practices in the art market. In 1993 the FTC brought a case against Magui Publishers, Inc. In *FTC v. Magui Publishers, Inc.*, the court found Magui guilty

of and made them pay \$1.96 million in restitution. (Federal Trade Commission, 1993) Art Forgery has been around since art was first made.

Though it started as nothing but a simple exercise to better one's skill, it has become a crime that is hard to fight. With the discovery that one can make money just by copying an artist's style art forgers started selling their own paintings as the work of the masters and they haven't stopped. This brought about such forgers as Thomas Keating, the forger with a cause. As the forgers themselves changed, the ways they were caught have changed too. The introduction of using x-rays was a great advance in the detection of pentimento, the alteration of the original painting.

When going after the forgers prosecutors must rely on other means than just federal statutes against forgery. RICO has made it easier for federal prosecutions to go farther. As art continues to flourish, so will the ways that people try to copy that art. In the years to come, forgers will become more and more skilled at the art of copying. That being the case, all who work against forgers must be vigilant and work as hard as the forgers themselves to stay one step ahead of them. If not, one day forgers may be making forgeries of the master forgers of today. Works Cited Dolice, J. (2003). *Fabulous Fakes and a History of Art Forgery*. Dutton, D. (1983). *The Forger's Art*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Federal Trade Commission. (1993). 9 F. 3d 1551: Federal Trade Commission, Plaintiff-appellee, v. Magui Publishers, Inc.; Pierre Marcand, Defendants-appellants. Retrieved April 2012, from FTC.gov. Fleming, S. J. (1975). *Authenticity in Art: The scientific Detection of Forgery*. New York: Crane, Russak & Co Inc. Keating, T.,

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