



**Hubertus Butin**

**Art Forgery**

Deceptive Objects of Desire

With numerous images

(Original German title: Kunstfälschung

Das betrügerische Objekt der Begierde)

476 pages, Clothbound

Publication date: 08 March 2020

© Suhrkamp Verlag Berlin 2020

Sample translation by Laura Wagner

pp. 7 — 19

## **Content**

1. Preface
2. Forgeries, Copies and Falsifications
3. Originals and Grey Areas
4. The Problem of Forgeries
5. Forgers
6. Art Boom
7. Collectors
8. Speculators
9. Auctioneers, Art Dealers and Vendors on the Internet
10. Appraisers, Consultants and Experts
11. Public Media
12. Museum Directors
13. Artists
14. Postface

Annotations

Bibliography

Picture Credits

Acknowledgements

Index of Names

# 1. Introduction

## I.

These are not good prospects: Together with the alchemists, the forgers have ended up in hell. After the delinquents were first sentenced to death at the stake by the secular courts, they are now punished in the eighth circle of hell with leprosy, which causes them eternal agonising pain. At least this is how Sandro Botticelli depicted the fate of the forgers (Figure 1). At the end of the 15th century, the Italian artist drew the scene described in Canto 29 of the *Inferno*, which forms an essential part in his cycle of paintings on Dante's *Divine Comedy*.<sup>1</sup> While the forgers, according to the understanding at the time, ended up in hell as sinners, today they sit on TV talk shows with Stefan Raab or Markus Lanz, where they can be admired in public and celebrated for their deeds – an amazing transformation from criminals to media stars.

The extent to which the social status of forgers has changed can also be observed in other cultural spheres. Even some museums are now trying to inspire their visitors with their works. In 2015, the venerable Dulwich Picture Gallery, located in a suburb in south London, and the conceptual artist Douglas Fishbone playfully put the museum's visitors to the test. They replaced one of the paintings with a fake made by a Chinese painter for seventy pounds and asked the public to find the forgery and cast a vote (the copy was made of the 1769 *Portrait of a Young Woman* by the French painter Jean-Honoré Fragonard). The astonishing thing is not so much the fact that only ten per cent of the visitors recognised the deception, but rather the enormous appeal of the project: according to chief curator Xavier Bray, the number of visitors quadrupled during the time the forgery was on display.<sup>2</sup> The Dulwich Picture Gallery has one of the best and most valuable collections of old masters in Britain. But the public did not come to the museum to see originals by Rembrandt, Rubens, Canaletto, Poussin, Watteau or Gainsborough, but to discover a forgery. Apparently, art forgery has become a topic of interest not only to collectors, art historians, museum curators, restorers, art dealers, auctioneers and law enforcement agencies, but also to a wider public.

Even commercially, obvious forgeries or simple copies can be very popular. Konrad Kujau, who became famous for his spectacular forgery of Hitler's diaries, opened his own gallery in Stuttgart in 1989, which he ran until his death in 2000, after serving several years in

---

<sup>1</sup> Sandro Botticelli. *Der Bilderzyklus zu Dantes Göttlicher Komödie*, Hein-Thomas Schulze Altcapenberg (ed.), Exhibition Catalogue, Kupferstichkabinett Berlin, Ostfildern-Ruit 2000, p. 116 f.

<sup>2</sup> N. N., »Dulwich Picture Gallery's ›fake‹ painting revealed«, 28. April 2015, {<https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-32493860>} (All webpages last accessed September 2019).

prison. By calling his business the “Gallery of Forgeries,” he turned the scandalisation of his own crime into a recipe for success. For the disreputable and simultaneously dazzling concept of forgery attracted a public that willingly spent a lot of money on Kujau’s copies and imitations of works by well-known artists. Not only did he put the signatures of painters like Chagall, Dalí, Kokoschka, Macke, Picasso, Schiele or van Gogh on his paintings, he also added his own name, so that the works were by no means forgeries, since no one was deceived when purchasing them. Nevertheless, Kujau described his works as “forgeries” to promote sales. Since 2001, the brothers Eugen, Michael and Semjon Posin, who were educated in St Petersburg and live in Berlin-Neukölln, have also been offering relatively high-quality copies of paintings based on famous models from the Renaissance to classical modernism in their “Kunstsalon Posin”. Although they themselves describe their paintings as “re-creations” or more correctly as “copies,” they are repeatedly celebrated in the press as “master forgers.”<sup>3</sup>



Fig. 1: Sandro Botticelli, *La Divina Commedia. Inferno, Canto XXIX: Dante and Virgil visit the eighth circle of Hell, Punishment of forgers and alchemists* (excerpt), ca. 1481 / 1488, Coloured drawing on parchment, 32,1 × 47,0 cm, Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin State Museums.

But the works of actual forgers, even when advertised under their own name, sell like hot cakes at times. When, for instance, the London-based auction house Christie’s auctioned off paintings, watercolours and drawings by the forger Tom Keating in December 1983 and September 1984, the auction room could hardly hold the many interested bidders. Passionate bidding wars ensued, with the 340 paintings on offer often reaching many times their estimated prices.<sup>4</sup> In 2014, Christie’s result was surpassed: In October of that year, the auction house

<sup>3</sup> Numerous articles on this are available on the gallery’s website: {<http://www.kunstsalon-posin.de/indexalt.htm>}.

<sup>4</sup> *Paintings, Watercolours and Drawings by Tom Keating*, Christie’s (ed.), Auction Catalogue, London, 12. December 1983; *Paintings, Watercolours and Drawings removed from the Studio of the late Tom Keating*, Christie’s (ed.), Auction Catalogue, London, 10. September 1984.

Webbs of Wilton in southern England attracted crowds of collectors, speculators and the curious to a special auction offering over 230 works on paper and manuscripts by the legendary British forger Eric Hebborn. Hebborn had specialised in drawings by old masters such as Bruegel, Raphael, Michelangelo, Piranesi, Tiepolo, Rembrandt, Poussin and Watteau. In 1996, he died under mysterious circumstances in Rome. At the auction, some of his works were sold for up to twenty times the estimated price.<sup>5</sup> The very fact that these were works by a famous forger spurred the public's desire even more. The interest in forgeries by the Hungarian Elmyr de Hory, who died in 1976, is so great that his works in the style of classical modern artists were even themselves imitated in the 1990s. An exhibition of alleged forgeries by de Hory was held in Tokyo in 1994. The in-house gallery of the Japanese daily newspaper *Sankei Shimbun* presented seventy paintings as original forgeries by Elmyr de Hory, but they were merely poor copies by someone else's hand, i.e. fake forgeries.<sup>6</sup>

Some forgers are currently celebrating remarkable successes not just in the media, in museums and in commerce, but also on the book market: the Briton Shaun Greenhalgh wrote an autobiography<sup>7</sup> in prison that sold 5,000 copies in 2017 in the first two months after its publication<sup>8</sup> – a result that art historians, for example, can usually only dream of with their books. Greenhalgh was convicted of forgery in 2006 and was imprisoned for almost five years. His work ranged – which is quite unusual – from ancient Egyptian alabaster figures and medieval silver crosses to Baroque terracotta busts and ceramic figures by Paul Gauguin to the legendary drawing *La Bella Principessa* in the style of Leonardo da Vinci, the latter at least was claimed by Greenhalgh.<sup>9</sup> Among the buyers of his refined works were the British Museum in London and the Art Institute in Chicago.

## II.

The above-mentioned autobiography by Shaun Greenhalgh is part of an extensive and diverse body of literature on the topic of art forgery. The bibliography *Fakes and Forgeries in the Fine Arts* by Robert George Reisner, published in New York in 1950, comprises 859 entries of books and magazine articles, excluding newspaper articles. In 1987, James Koobatian published his book *Faking It. An International Bibliography of Art and Literature Forgeries, 1949-1986* in

---

<sup>5</sup> Georges Waser, »Aufgepasst bei ›Altmeistern!«, in: *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, Nr. 272, 22. November 2014, p. 57.

<sup>6</sup> Johannes Rød, »Fake fakes in the forger's oeuvre«, 4. December 2010, available online: {[www.elmyrstory.wordpress.com/2010/12/04/fake-fakes-in-the-forger%E2%80%99s-oeuvre/](http://www.elmyrstory.wordpress.com/2010/12/04/fake-fakes-in-the-forger%E2%80%99s-oeuvre/)}.

<sup>7</sup> Shaun Greenhalgh, *A Forger's Tale. Confessions of the Bolton Forger*, London 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Scott Reyburn, »A green light for criminals?«, in: *The New York Times*, 1. September 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Shaun Greenhalgh, see footnote 7, p. 185.

Washington; it contains 1,835 titles. The *Bibliografie zu Fälschung und Fälschungserkennung*, edited by Christian Müller-Straten and published on CD in Munich in 2015, lists 2,186 books and other texts. The excellent bibliographic database *Fake* created by the University Library Heidelberg cited 1,950 publications of interdisciplinary research literature as early as December 2019. This service provided by the university library, which can be accessed online, is continually updated.<sup>10</sup>

Basically, the academic publications<sup>11</sup> on the topic can be divided into seven different categories, although this is only a rough classification: Firstly, there are legal books and texts that shed light on the legal aspects of art forgery and the fight against it, with particular attention being paid to so-called art law.

Secondly, there are specialist books compiled by research laboratories, physicists and chemists who have specialised in the scientific, material-technical analysis of possible forgeries. These publications mainly present the various technological possibilities for examining questionable art objects.

Thirdly, there are (auto)biographies. Such publications retell the lives and deeds of well-known figures such as Wolfgang Beltracchi, Alceo Dossena, John Drewe and John Myatt, Shaun Greenhalgh, Eric Hebborn, Elmyr de Hory, Han van Meegeren, Tom Keating or Edgar Mrugalla.

A fourth category consists of exhibition catalogues published by museums that present forgeries – sometimes from their own collections – and the related research results. In the chapter on museum directors in this book, this specialist literature and the handling of forgeries is dealt with separately.

Fifth, there are academic books and journal articles, mostly written by museum curators or conservators, that communicate new findings on individual forgeries from their own institutional collection. University art historians also publish on forgeries in their field. These range from general treatises on the history of art forgery to texts that deal with a single medium – such as furniture, prints and antique sculpture – or that only address forgeries in the style of a single artist.

Sixth, there are publications of a journalistic or popular-scientific nature. Within the literature on forgery, such books occupy a very broad space. Just as from the 16th to the 18th

---

<sup>10</sup> Arthistoricum, »Bibliographie Fake«, available online: {[www.arthistoricum.net/themen/portale/fake/bibliographie/](http://www.arthistoricum.net/themen/portale/fake/bibliographie/)}.

<sup>11</sup> Selected examples for publications from these categories can be found in the Bibliography at the end of this book.

century art history was written mainly in the form of artists' stories (by authors such as Giorgio Vasari, Karel van Mander, Joachim von Sandrart, André Félibien and Antonio Palomino), in the 20th and 21st centuries the history of forgery has been presented by numerous authors in the form of forgers' stories.<sup>12</sup> Those books have a strong tendency towards the narrative, presenting the lives and deeds of counterfeiters as personalised criminal cases or as glamorous scandals, "with the familiar dramaturgy of motive, deed, suspicion, revelation."<sup>13</sup> It is striking that the same careers, like those of Han van Meegeren, Elmyr de Hory or Lothar Malskat, are constantly repeated as though they were mythological figures. The focus on the biographical dimension is often accompanied by a lack of references in the form of footnotes or endnotes, or even bibliographies, so that quotations and assertions are difficult or impossible to verify. These popular books may have a certain entertainment value, but this is usually higher than the information and knowledge gained. However, this does not detract from the success of this form of debate, as Diane Grobe, the director of the Fälschermuseum in Vienna, explained in an interview in 2015: for the public, "the stories behind the forgeries are the most important thing"<sup>14</sup>. Remarkably, this focus on the narrative was criticised as early as 1915. In his essay "Fälschungen und Kunstbetrug" ("Forgeries and Art Fraud"), Guenther Koch, for example, criticised the literature on the subject: "There was and still is too much gossip in the matter, one worked and still works with uncontrollable anecdotal stuff."<sup>15</sup> The Austro-British art historian Otto Kurz agreed with this view when he opined in 1948: "A great deal of the existing literature on forgeries is disappointing."<sup>16</sup> As an early example, he cites Paul Eudel's *Le Truquage. Les Contrefaçons dévoilées* of 1884: "Eudel's well-known book is a collection of very entertaining and humorously told stories, but for the most part they contain little or no reference to facts."<sup>17</sup>

The seventh and last category consists of those publications that can be described as advice literature. These books, which often have the term "handbook" in their title, give more

---

<sup>12</sup> See for example the publications by Frank Arnau, Alice Beckett, Clifford Irving, Lawrence Jeppson, Fritz Mendax, Manfred Reitz, Laney Salisbury & Ali Sujo and Sepp Schüller in this book's Bibliography.

<sup>13</sup> Anne-Kathrin Reulecke, *Täuschend, ähnlich. Fälschung und Plagiat als Figuren des Wissens in Literatur und Wissenschaften*, Paderborn 2016, p. 28.

<sup>14</sup> Diane Grobe, »Die Geschichten hinter den Fälschungen sind das Wichtigste für uns.« Museumsleiterin Diane Grobe im Interview«, in: *Fake. Fälschungen, wie sie im Buche stehen*, Maria Effinger and Henry Keazor (eds.), Exhibition Catalogue published by the Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg, Heidelberg 2016, p. 56. With her statement, Grobe refers to the visitors of Vienna's Fälschermuseum, but she indirectly also explains the specific interest in the publications described above.

<sup>15</sup> Guenther Koch, »Fälschungen und Kunstbetrug«, in: *ibid.*, *Kunstwerke und Bücher vom Markte. Auktion – Fälschungen – Preise und was sie lehren*, Esslingen 1915, p. 67.

<sup>16</sup> Otto Kurz, *Fakes. A Handbook for Collectors and Students*, London 1948, p. 17.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, p. 17.

or less detailed and knowledgeable advice on how to recognise forgeries in the various artistic media. Problem-oriented forgery literature began with such independent publications. Paul Eudel's *Le Truquage*, in the words of its author, also aims to "protect the still inexperienced collector",<sup>18</sup> even if the text is hardly useful in practical terms.

In 2011, the Brussels-based art theorist Thierry Lenain described Eudel's publication as "one of the very first books to deal exclusively with forged works of art and antiquities"<sup>19</sup>. Likewise, the Heidelberg-based art historian Henry Keazor wrote in 2016: "The phenomenon of art forgery is unequivocally negated for the first time in Paul Eudel's book."<sup>20</sup> However, the criticism of forgeries expressed at length in book form in the sense of explicit rejection and unequivocal condemnation begins even earlier. Adam von Bartsch, the Viennese curator of the imperial court library and graphic collection and the forefather of modern graphic research, published his two-volume *Anleitung zur Kupferstichkunde* in 1821. The first volume deals in detail with the different print techniques and the most important representatives of this artform. In our context, however, the second volume is significant as its first part examines "fraudulent copies". Bartsch doesn't use the word forgery, but he does address precisely those faked prints that are copies of originals created to deceive collectors. According to Bartsch, the more closely the copy follows the motif of the original, the greater the danger "that less experienced enthusiasts can be deceived by it, or at least be misled and put in doubt about it"<sup>21</sup>. In meticulous descriptions of various prints, the author explains how one can recognise forgeries. Over 130 prints at the end of the book illustrate in detail the aforementioned differences between the originals and the "fraudulent copies". Bartsch distinguishes between the categories "fraudulent", "very fraudulent", "quite", "highly" and "extremely fraudulent copy"<sup>22</sup>. The *German Legal Dictionary* translates the older term "*betrüglich*" as "*betrügerisch*"<sup>23</sup> ("fraudulent"). Already in the 15th and 16th centuries, the terms "*betrüglich*" and, in synonymously, "*betrieglich*" can be found in official legal literature, which was largely written

---

<sup>18</sup> Paul Eudel, *Le Truquage. Les Contrefaçons dévoilées*, Paris 1884, p. 11.

<sup>19</sup> Thierry Lenain, *Art Forgery. A History of a Modern Obsession*, London 2011, p. 14.

<sup>20</sup> Henry Keazor, »Katalog der ausgestellten Werke«, in: *Fake. Fälschungen, wie sie im Buche stehen*, Maria Effinger and Henry Keazor (eds.), Exhibition Catalogue published by the Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg, Heidelberg 2016, p. 110. Henry Keazor is also the author of the very worthwhile book *Täuschend echt! Eine Geschichte der Kunstfälschung*, Darmstadt 2015.

<sup>21</sup> Adam von Bartsch, *Anleitung zur Kupferstichkunde*, vol. 2, Vienna 1821, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, p. 5-60.

<sup>23</sup> *Deutsches Rechtswörterbuch*, Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften (ed.), available online: {<https://drw-www.adw.uni-heidelberg.de/drw-cgi/zeige?term=betr%FCglich&index=lemmata>}.

in so-called Early Modern High German.<sup>24</sup> As Bartsch shows, this terminology with its reference to the justiciable phenomenon of fraud was in use in the Modern High German of the 19th century as well.

However, already in the first half of the 18th century – i.e. even before Adam von Bartsch – two books were published that also explicitly warn against counterfeiting and which have so far remained largely or completely unconsidered by the scientific literature on counterfeiting: In 1740, the treatise *Traité des finances et de la fausse monnoie des Romains* (*A Treatise of the Revenue and False Money of the Romans*) by François de Chassepol was published in Paris. The second part of the book consists of the dissertation by the French numismatist Guillaume Beauvais entitled *La maniere de discerner les medailles antiques de celles qui sont contrefaites* (*An Essay on the Means of Distinguishing Antique From Counterfeit, Coins and Medals*). With his publication Beauvais explicitly addresses the inquisitive novices among collectors who are in the process of building up their own collection and should beware of counterfeiters. He claims and emphasises that no author before him has endeavoured to distinguish the authentic from the fake in this field of collecting.<sup>25</sup> The term “médailles” used by Beauvais refers to coins that actually served as a means of payment in antiquity. The objects he calls “médaillons”, on the other hand, are those by which we today understand elaborately designed medals in relief. At the time of their creation, they were used as gifts, to commemorate historical personalities and as collectors’ items.<sup>26</sup> At least since the Baroque period, they have been regarded as works of art. Beauvais explicitly emphasises his achievement as an author and his attitude towards forgeries: “Undoubtedly I shall lay open and expose one of the greatest mysteries of iniquity that any class of men ever conceived for deceiving others”<sup>27</sup>.

---

<sup>24</sup> Cf. e.g.: Sebastian Brant, *Der Richterlich Clagspiegel*, Straßburg 1516, p. IX; Graf Ferdinand I. von Tirol, *Lanndtßordnung der Fürstlichen Grafschafft Tirol*, Augsburg 1532, Sect. 8, p. XXX; Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor, *Constitutio Criminalis Carolina* (Halsgerichtsordnung), Mainz 1533, Art. 111 and 114.

<sup>25</sup> Guillaume Beauvais, »La Maniere de discerner les medailles antiques de celles qui sont contrefaites«, in: François de Chassepol, *Traité des finances et de la fausse monnoie des Romains, auquel on a joint une dissertation sur la maniere de descerner les médailles antiques d’avec les contrefaites*, Paris 1740, p. 240.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, p. 321f.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, p. 249. English translation from: M. Beauvais, *An Essay on the Means of Distinguishing Antique From Counterfeit, Coins and Medals*. Translated from the French by John Trotter Brockett, Newcastle 1819, p.21



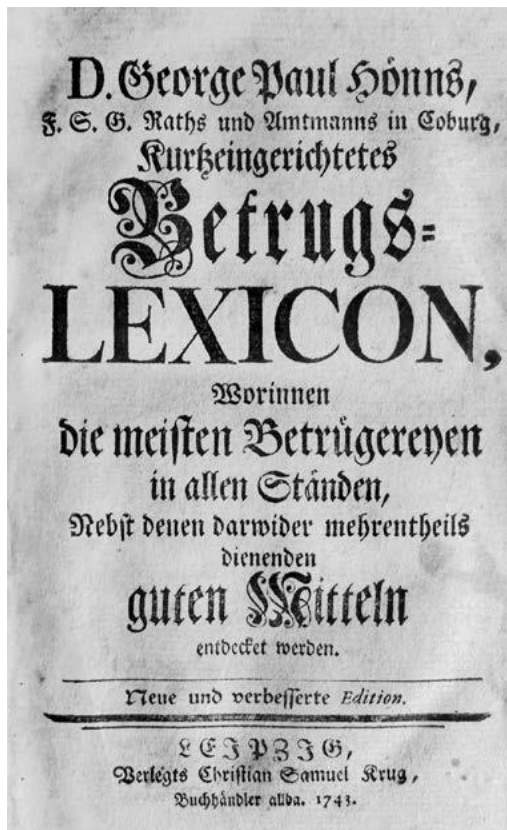


Fig. 2: George Paul Hönn's, *Betrugs-Lexicon*, worinnen die meisten Betrügereyen in allen Ständen, nebst denen darwider mehrentheils dienenden guten Mitteln entdeckt werden, Leipzig 1743, private collection, Berlin.

Beyond that, the *Betrugs-Lexicon*<sup>28</sup> was published in Leipzig as early as 1721, followed by the *Fortgesetzte Betrugs-Lexicon*<sup>29</sup> in 1730, written by the civil servant and councillor George Paul Hönn's of Coburg (Fig. 2).<sup>30</sup> These two extremely remarkable publications contain, in alphabetical order, more than four hundred entries covering just about every occupational and social group of the early 18th century. Each group mentioned is systematically examined for forms of fraud used in its field. Under the letter B alone, for example, we find bakers, barbers, farmers, miners, beggars, librarians, brewers, messengers, brides and booksellers as well as mayors. In order not to leave out any social class, clergymen, noblemen, court officials and judges were also included, which brought the author much animosity from the respective groups and even led to confiscations of his books. This, however, did not change the success of the *Betrugs-Lexicon*, which saw numerous editions and reprints. In our context, the entries on the engravers and painters are particularly worth mentioning. Hönn's points out that

<sup>28</sup> George Paul Hönn's, *Kurtzeingerichtetes Betrugs-Lexicon, worinnen die meisten Betrügereyen in allen Ständen, nebst denen darwider mehrentheils dienenden guten Mitteln entdeckt werden*, Leipzig 1743<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>29</sup> George Paul Hönn's, *Fortgesetztes Betrugs-Lexicon, worinnen die meisten Betrügereyen in allen Ständen, nebst denen darwider mehrentheils dienenden guten Mitteln entdeckt werden*, ed. unknown, Leipzig 1743.

<sup>30</sup> I am grateful to Michael Diers in Berlin for this suggestion.

engravers deceived by copying prints by famous artists, signing them with their respective names and passing them off as originals.<sup>31</sup> And painters also deceived by copying the work of a renowned colleague and putting his name on it so as to be able to sell it for a higher price. The author also mentions the artificial ageing of paintings, used to feign authorship from an older period for a profit.<sup>32</sup> In his preface written on 20 December 1720, Hönnns, with moral, legal and religious impetus, pits “sincerity, fidelity and honesty” against “deceit, guile and fraud”.<sup>33</sup> He condemns art forgeries explicitly, just as any other form of social fraud, and at the same time readers are admonished to exercise caution in order to “beware of such traps”.<sup>34</sup>

Books in the form of advice literature that deals explicitly critically with forgeries and frauds and denounce them forthright thus date back further than research has assumed so far. Since the more the original, and the expectation of a certain named authorship often associated with it, was valued, the more the forgers, who undermined this category of the original with their deceptions, came under criticism. The publications by Bartsch, Beauvais and Hönnns prove that this extensively expressed disapproval of art forgeries did not begin at the end of the 19th century, but in an impressive way already in the early 18th century, if even earlier examples cannot be found in book form.

[...]

---

<sup>31</sup> George Paul Hönnns, see footnote 28, p. 233f.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*, p. 248.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*, »Vorrede«, no pagination.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*, no pagination.