

Fakers, Fakes, & Fake Fakers

Well-known forgers reveal
the creative methods they
use to copy the masters

BY MILTON ESTEROW

Many years ago, I interviewed a forger named David Stein. He had been arrested for faking hundreds of drawings, gouaches, and watercolors by Matisse, Chagall, Picasso, Cézanne, Degas, Miró, and many others. One day, while he was out on bail, I asked him how an art forger creates works by well-known artists whose styles are so different.

“The first thing you have to do is know intimately the artist you are imitating, not only to know him but also to like him, to love his art,” Stein said. “You go into the soul and mind of the artist. It’s like a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde thing. You become someone else. When I painted a Matisse, I became Matisse. When I painted a Chagall, I was Chagall. When I painted a Picasso, I was Picasso.”

Art forgery has been a hot topic lately since the disclosure that Pei-Shen Qian, a 73-year-old immigrant from China, working out of his home in Queens, reportedly created at least 63 drawings and paintings by Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman, Franz Kline, and Richard Diebenkorn.

The works were sold or consigned by Glafira Rosales, a dealer of Sands Point, New York, to two Manhattan dealers, Knoedler & Company, which closed in 2011, and Julian Weissman. Over a period of 15 years, the works were sold to collectors for about \$80 million. Knoedler, its former president Ann Freedman, and Weissman have



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consistently stated that they were convinced that the works were authentic. Freedman says she showed the paintings to a number of experts, who confirmed the authenticity and quality of the works.

The case against Rosales is known as *United States of America v. Glafira Rosales, a/k/a "Glafira Gonzalez," a/k/a "Glafira Rosales Rojas," defendant*. She pleaded guilty in September to charges of wire fraud, money laundering, and tax evasion. As we went to press, no one else had been charged in the case, but Assistant United States Attorney Jason P. Hernandez indicated that additional arrests were contemplated.

Qian is said to be back in China, where he exhibited his own paintings in May at the Xiang Jiang Gallery in Shanghai. He has also had shows at the BB Gallery in Beijing. Qian came to the United States in the 1980s and studied at the Art Students League in New York. According to the website of the Shanghai gallery, one of his teachers was Richard Pousette-Dart.

Zhang Hongtu, a prominent Chinese artist who lives in Queens, told me, "I couldn't believe he would do this to fool the art market. I met him in 1982 and last saw him about 20 years ago. He was a very nice, honest person. He never painted in the abstract style. He did

Eric Hebborn poses with his copy of Jacques-Louis David's portrait of Mme Récamier (opposite). The original is in the Louvre. David Stein shows off his own work, which draws from his experience painting Chagalls and Matisses (below).

Impressionist-type paintings. He liked Bonnard very much.

"One day he went to the Museum of Modern Art with a friend of mine and saw Monet's *Water Lilies*. My friend told me that Qian loved it and knelt down on the floor. I saw some of his paintings from the May show on the gallery's website. They were figurative, with bold colors. In one of them he reinterpreted the Mona Lisa." The gallery's website states that Qian has "over twenty-seven" paintings that "spoof" the Mona Lisa.

David Stein, who served time in prison in

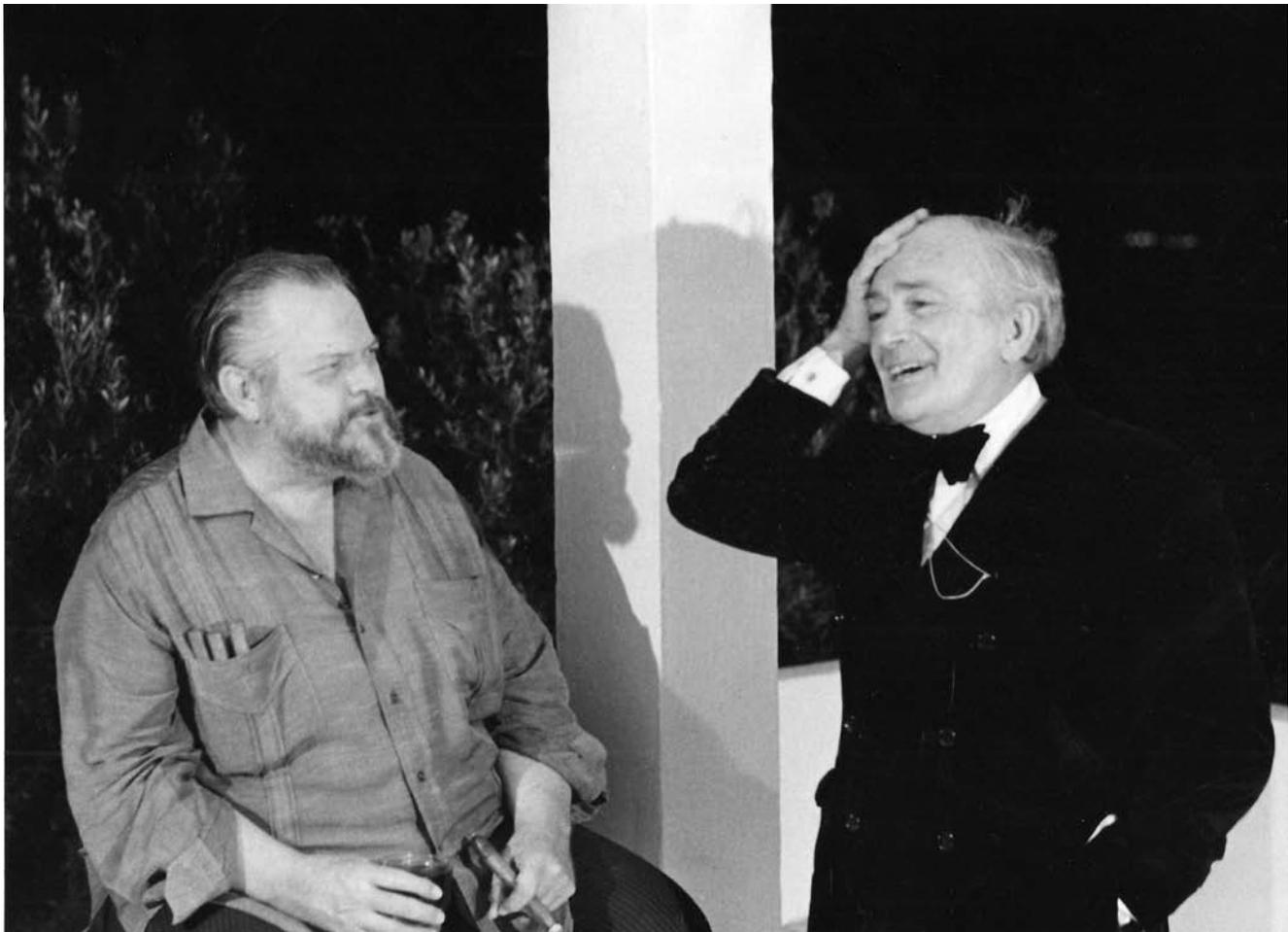
the United States and France and died in 1999, was not known to create spoofs, but he turned out Chagalls in a hurry.

"So many people wanted Chagalls," Stein told me. "I remember one day when I operated a gallery out of my apartment on Park Avenue I had an appointment there at one o'clock to deliver three Chagall watercolors that were not yet painted. I got up at six in the morning. The first thing I did was make some tea. I use Lipton tea; it's the best thing to use when

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you want to age drawing paper. It gives it a yellowish appearance when you dip cotton in the tea and spread it over the paper.

"Then, while the paper was drying, I made the sketches. I decided on circus scenes. I was working mostly from illustrations from books. One by one, I painted them. I was finished by eleven o'clock. When one was finished, I would put it in front of a sun lamp, which dries the material and cracks it slightly. It's like cooking.

"I rushed down to a framing place three blocks away. I told them it was urgent, and they framed the three watercolors while I waited. Everything was ready by noon. Then I ran six blocks to a place on Lexington Avenue to make photographs of the watercolors. I rushed back and made certificates of authentication. I know the writing of Chagall and I wrote: 'I Marc Chagall, certify that this watercolor is an original.' And I signed Chagall's name on the back of the photograph. I was finished a few minutes before the dealer arrived. He was satisfied and gave me a check for \$10,500."

Many forgers agree with Stein about the preparations needed to fake art. Eric Hebborn, a forger who was murdered under mysterious circumstances on a street in Rome in 1996, wrote two books and once urged his readers:

Elmyr de Hory (right) with Orson Welles, 1972. Welles directed a free-form documentary about de Hory called *F for Fake*.

"Imagine for a moment that you have, in fact, drawn in a manner of van Dyck (1599–1641) and inscribed it 'Rembrandt.' This is diabolical. Are there no limits to your skulduggery?"

Why? Well, maybe if the forgery is a good one, some expert will think that he spotted a wrong attribution but uncovered a marvelous but unrecorded van Dyck and announce "What an exciting discovery!"

Hebborn was a rogue whose skulduggery knew no limits. He boasted of having produced more than a thousand forgeries (drawings and paintings) of artists such as Bruegel, Pontormo, Corot, Poussin, and Piranesi, among others. (But his former lover announced in 1994 that Hebborn had not made as many works as he claimed to have made.)

Here's what Hebborn wrote about how to draw like Poussin: "Even Poussin did not learn how to draw like Poussin without years of practice. For just as no one could play the violin in imitation of [a master], unless they had first learned to play it rather well, so it is that no one can draw an imitation of a master draughtsman without being a pretty good draughtsman himself. Long years of practice added to arguably a solid art school background had given me proficiency in the art, and I



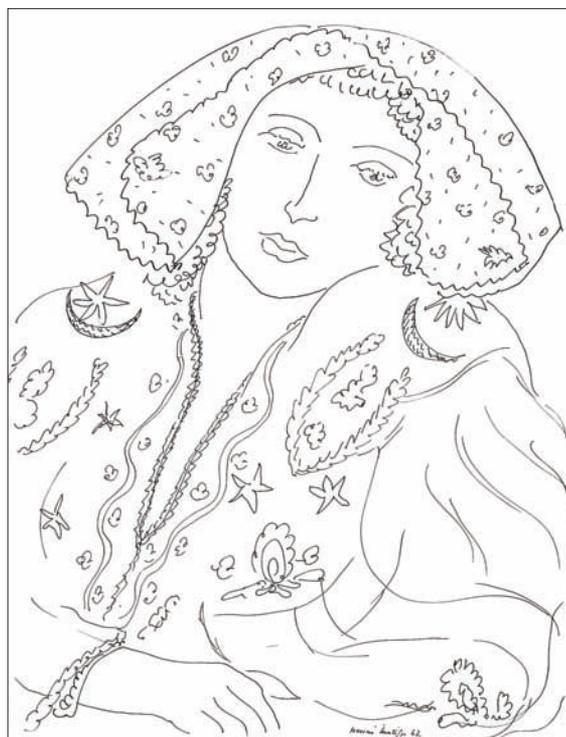
could at least claim to understand the visual language Poussin used. But now I had to learn his dialect, his accent, his pitch, his almost imperceptible inflections and mannerisms, subtleties that he himself may not have been aware of.”

Hebborn was a friend of Anthony Blunt, a Poussin scholar who served as Surveyor of the Queen’s Pictures until 1972, seven years before he was publicly unmasked as a spy for the Soviet Union.

Leo Stevenson, a well-known London copyist, told me that he had met Hebborn. “Some folks are still worried Hebborn drawings are still floating around,” he said.

“I don’t do copies anymore,” Stevenson said. “I am concentrating on my own paintings—mostly landscapes, seascapes, and aviation paintings. I do inventions in the style of everyone from Rembrandt and Hals to Monet. . . . The important thing with forgers is not to understand how artists painted but why they painted the way they did. I always think of it as an actor taking on a role. You have to get into the skin of the person you’re trying to imitate. It’s easier with more recent artists. If you’re going to imitate

De Hory in the style of Matisse: *Odalisque* (above) is an “original” Elmyr de Hory. *Portrait of a Girl* (right) was intended to deceive.



TOP: COLLECTION OF MARK FORGY; BOTTOM: SAINT LOUIS ART MUSEUM, GIFT OF THE MAIN STREET GALLERY



Rothko, there's lots of information on him, as well as a play and a film. The further back you go, technically and psychologically, it's more difficult. The psychological element is just as important as the technical side in creating a fake. Why? If you don't understand why he painted the way he did, you won't understand how he did it.

"I've done my own inventions of Monet for collectors. I've been to all the places he'd been to in France and Italy. I saw the atmosphere of the places and the light. I spent a lot of time in Giverny where he lived. He did a series of haystacks, I would add paintings in the series. They were not copies. They were extra paintings. I've probably done about 150 'Monets.'"

Stevenson added: "I always try to put a secret in my paintings. They will deliberately fail certain scientific tests. Sometimes I'll put a joke or a saying on the first layer of paint, and if you X-ray the painting you will see it. I did a Venice Canaletto several years ago. If you X-rayed it, you'd see a submarine coming out of the water."

Even the British Foreign & Commonwealth Office has commissioned Stevenson. "The British government owns a lot of art," he said. "Sometimes there might be a polite English fight between one government department and another to have possession of a work. Some years ago, the British Library wanted works in the Foreign Office—British artists of the 18th and 19th century. The Foreign Office fought tooth and nail to hang onto them and at

**London copyist
Leo Stevenson
with his fake
Pieter de Hooch.**

some point they asked me to do some copies."

Elmyr de Hory was never accused of making copies. He faked Matisse, Modigliani, Picasso, Derain, and Dufy, and he insisted that David Stein "uttered the worst sort of nonsense" when he claimed that he would go "into the mind and soul of the artist" and became Matisse when he painted Matisse.

"Could you write a story like Hemingway by trying to put yourself into Hemingway's mind and soul? Could you *become* Hemingway? No, it's a terribly vulgar and romantic explanation . . . though I'm sure the public eats it up. What *I* did was study—very, very carefully—the man's work. That's all there is to it.

"With Matisse, for example, I had to be

particularly careful. At the beginning . . . I used a very easy, flowing line for a Matisse drawing. Because he had, I thought, a very simple line. And then suddenly later on I realized that his hand was not as secure as mine. Obviously, when he stopped work to glance up at his model, his line stopped, too, with just that tiny little bit of uncertainty. Where I went very securely on, Matisse was hesitant, insecure. I had to correct that; I had to learn to hesitate also. Of course, I never have had much respect for Matisse anyway. . . . He was far and away the easiest artist to fake. (I don't like that word 'fake,' but I'll use it. I made paintings in the *style* of a certain artist. I never copied. The only fake thing in my paintings was the



signature.) . . . Modigliani, also, was someone I did with great success—not because he’s easy, but because there was such an affinity between us.”

De Hory made these remarks in a biography by Clifford Irving called *Fake!*. Irving claimed that he had helped Howard Hughes write his autobiography and later admitted that it was a hoax. He went to prison for 17 months.

Two of de Hory’s Modigliani drawings were exhibited many years ago in an exhibition of fakes at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts organized by Samuel Sachs II, then the museum’s chief curator and now president of the Pollock-Krasner Foundation. The drawings had been bought by a Chicago dealer from de Hory as original Modiglianis. One was sold to a Minneapolis collector and the other to a collector in Chicago. When de Hory was exposed as a forger, the dealer offered the collectors their money back. The Chicago man accepted, but the Minneapolis collector said, “That’s nice, but frankly, I bought the drawing because I liked it and it’s too bad it’s not a Modigliani but I’m going to keep it because we still love it.”

The drawings are now worth about \$6,000 each, according to Mark Forgy. “I’m Elmyr’s heir,” Forgy, who lives in New Prague, Minnesota, told me in a telephone interview. “I was his personal assistant for seven years and lived with him on the Spanish island of Ibiza until he died at the age of 70 in 1976.”

“Quite a technical show-piece,” Stevenson boasts of his fake Canaletto.

De Hory’s real name was Elemér Albert Hoffmann. He was born in Budapest in 1906 and studied art in Budapest, Munich, and Paris. “You might be surprised to know that some of the stories he told me about himself were not actually true,”

Forgy said. “He claimed that he came from an aristocratic background. None of that was true. He said his mother was shot by the Russians when they came to Budapest in 1945. His mother actually lived into the 1960s.”

Forgy said that he owns about 300 de Horys. “Many of the works are in the style of Modigliani and the other artists he imitated,” Forgy said. “The vast majority are in his own post-Impressionist style. All the works are signed “Elmyr” or not signed at all.” After de Hory was exposed as a forger in 1967, he signed his works simply “Elmyr” on the front or the back, Forgy said.

Forgy said he sells de Hory drawings at prices ranging from \$2,500 to \$8,000 and paintings from \$6,000 to \$8,000. He recently self-published a book about de Hory titled *The Forger’s Apprentice*. He and Kevin Bowen wrote a play with the same title that was performed in August at the Minnesota Fringe Festival in Minneapolis.

Are there any fake de Horys?

“I see them all the time on online auctions,” Forgy said. “Most often they have the fake signatures of Matisse, Modigliani, Picasso, or Dufy on the front and a fake Elmyr signature on the back. They sell in the \$2,000 to \$3,000 range but they’re fake fakes. I have the real Elmyrs.” ■