

The Collecting Addiction: Who Needs Originals When a Forgery Will Do?

Is a skilled art forger a criminal or an entrepreneur?

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I blame my parents, first, and a great friend of nearly four decades, second, for my collecting addiction. Without a wife at home to tell me no, I always find room for another fine acquisition.

My interests are eclectic, including “turtle ship” models, commie tchotchke, chess sets, and military art. So I sometimes have to work extra hard to find room for a new acquisition. However, there’s usually space if I push items a little closer together, move a couple around, fill any empty spots nearby, and pretend that rearranging clutter is the latest decorating trend.

Alas, I’m not in the league of a Malcolm Forbes, Peggy Guggenheim, Frederick Koch, J. Paul Getty, or one of the many other wealthy art aficionados. I’ve long wondered what it would be like to bid in an auction, with price no object. Instead of looking for items with a couple zeroes, one could go to six, seven, eight, or even nine digits if pressed. A couple hundred million? Let me call my financial adviser to do the money transfer!

However, I read an interesting interview in the *Washington Post* and realized that there was another way. The *Post* ran a delightful conversation with the author of a new autobiography. His job? A forger. A very fine forger.

Tony Tetro, author of *Con/Artist: The Life and Crimes of the World’s Greatest Art Forger*, created works attributed to a number of celebrated artists. Some people might view him as a criminal. However, he also could be viewed as an entrepreneur, filling a gaping demand among collectors seeking names that happen to be on art rather than art that happen to be by said name.

Consider reviewer Kelsey Ables’ description of Tetro:

For nearly two decades, the artist Tony Tetro made a career out of pretending to be other people.

Salvador Dalí, for instance. He regularly faked the Spanish surrealist’s work so well that he likened it to “printing money.” One of his Caravaggio imitations was praised by an unknowing expert for its “extraordinary ‘archaeology.’” And an impressionistic canvas that Tetro signed “Claude Monet” even ended up in the collection of the then-Prince Charles. Although he never attended formal art school, on his own, Tetro studied the way Chagall rendered color, investigated the flesh of Caravaggios and challenged himself to get into the heads — and hands — of modernists and masters.

What is the difference between a Dalí and a fake Dalí? Not much, by appearance. His work was, er, unusual, and he was infamous for flooding the market. If you like a particular image with his name, why should it matter who actually drew it? Dalí or Tetro, so what?

That is close to my collecting style. I concentrate on a couple historical periods and like active scenes. There is a lot of military art out there, some original, some reproductions. Given the very different values of such work and the kind of masterworks Tetro was faking, there isn't much of a market for forgeries in my niche.

This is the final injustice of a system that emphasizes the names on art, rather than art itself.

Sometimes an artist will follow one of the greats, signing his name alongside "Après [famous artist's name]." That's a tribute to an older, more established figure, but the new one can be as pleasing as the old. Some artists are more expensive, but that mostly reflects the fact that they are better at their craft, so their paintings and drawings are nicer to display. My pleasure in buying one of them is less the name than the scene itself. The artist is like a corporate brand name. If I see something by a particular artist, I will look at it more closely since I expect that artist will do a better job.

Indeed, Tetro's success suggests that talent has very little to do with artistic success. After all, his skill is obvious. He described learning how to paint like past masters: "I would stay home and practice copying old masters. And not just old masters — everybody, Picasso to Rembrandt. I liked trying to understand what they were doing and why they did it. Like Renoir, often in his paintings, the face is in focus and he blurs out the rest. I got used to using Renoir's colors. I got to know what he wanted to do with his work. Learning about each artist, I enjoyed that."

Yet the market value was all about the name. Some of the artists whose work he forged commanded prices in the millions. He produced paintings of equal quality which fooled experts. Yet if he painted the same scene on his own, he would receive pennies on their dollars. Does that make any sense from an artistic standpoint?

One of the most striking aspects of Tetro's account was the complicity of dealers. There were plenty who were happy to make more than a few illicit dollars along the way. Described Tetro:

When I started doing forgery professionally, art dealers would ask me to do different artists. It was like a business. First, I went to a gallery owner to sell my work, but then word got out that I was doing well — doing these Dalís or Picassos or Chagalls, and different dealers contacted me. I'm not saying that every single dealer was selling fakes. I just had seven or eight. I didn't have 70 or 80. But it got to the point where it didn't seem illegal to me, it got past that point. I approached it like I was going to work, except I didn't punch a time clock. I would get up every morning to have coffee and start painting. It felt like it was going to last forever.

Tetro was prosecuted and imprisoned for fraud, and yet, his work made a lot of people happy. Buy a Tetro-produced Chagall and hang it on your wall. As long as you believed it really was by Chagall, you felt good, satisfied, and proud. You believed your money was well spent. You had status with your high-society friends. After all, what you really were collecting was the envy of your friends and compatriots, reflecting the presumption that you possessed equal reserves of taste and cash. Equally important was the hunt and competition, beating out your collecting rivals for a newly discovered masterwork. In this way, a Tetro Chagall provides as much benefit as an original Chagall.

Indeed, Tetro created a whole new historiography for some artists. In his interview with Ables, he emphasized provenance: “Forgery was really about coming up with evidence. Like with a Rembrandt work I made, I found an argument between two experts. One expert said a particular drawing existed. The other expert said it never existed. Well, I made it exist. That was enough to pass 34 years ago.” Imagine, two experts on the esoterica of Rembrandt paintings couldn’t resolve a historical dispute. But Tetro could!

Even now, he defends his art. Tetro allowed:

[I]f I came across one of my works in a museum, I’d be proud, I think. Right now, say somebody’s looking at a painting and they’re admiring it. If they like it because it says Picasso, and it’s actually mine, are they hurt by that?

Frankly, that would be me. I look at a Chagall or Picasso and recognize that skill was required in rendering the drawing or painting. But I still would have trouble understanding why the sophisticated set slobbers all over such artists, and especially why the financially abundant spend the equivalent of my lifetime earnings and much more on such items because of the name attached, almost irrespective of what the actual scene is.

Today Tetro makes original works in the style of the greats but attaches his own name to the paintings. For that his compensation is but a fraction of what would be paid for an original. Why is the latter worth so much more than the former? This is the final injustice of a system that emphasizes the names on art, rather than art itself.

In the end, it’s probably best that I collect stuff I like rather than based on who created it. Of course, if someone wanted to give me a Rembrandt or a Picasso, I’d be happy to hang it somewhere appropriate. I mean, the wall above the towel rack in the master bath is empty, ready for such a high-quality picture. But I will probably wait for Tony Tetro to paint one for me!

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