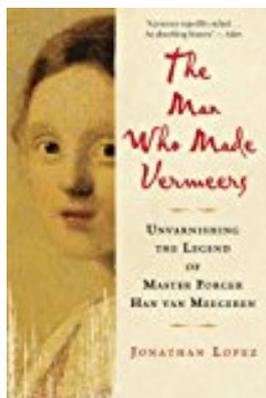


[PDF] The Man Who Made Vermeers: Unvarnishing The Legend Of Master Forger Han Van Meegeren

Jonathan Lopez - pdf download free book



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Product Description

It's a story that made Dutch painter Han van Meegeren famous worldwide when it broke at the end of World War II: A lifetime of disappointment drove him to forge Vermeers, one of which he sold to

Hermann Goering in mockery of the Nazis. And it's a story that's been believed ever since. Too bad it isn't true.

Jonathan Lopez has drawn on never-before-seen documents from dozens of archives to write a revelatory new biography of the world's most famous forger. Neither unappreciated artist nor antifascist hero, van Meegeren emerges as an ingenious, dyed-in-the-wool crook--a talented Mr. Ripley armed with a paintbrush. Lopez explores a network of illicit commerce that operated across Europe: Not only was van Meegeren a key player in that high-stakes game in the 1920s and '30s, landing fakes with famous collectors such as Andrew Mellon, but he and his associates later cashed in on the Nazi occupation. *The Man Who Made Vermeers* is a long-overdue unvarnishing of van Meegeren's legend and a deliciously detailed story of deceit in the art world.

A Look Inside *The Man Who Made Vermeers* (Click on Images to Enlarge)

A Q&A with Jonathan Lopez, Author of *The Man Who Made Vermeers*

Q: It seems incredible that Van Meegeren was able to forge a whole Vermeer oeuvre. How did he get away with it?

A: Supply and demand played an important role. Vermeers are extremely rare--only thirty-six are known to exist--and a lot of wealthy collectors wanted to get hold of one.

Q: Did real Vermeers turn up on the market in addition to the fakes in those days?

A: Sure. The appearance of the occasional gem is what kept everyone searching for more. One of Vermeer's best pictures, *The Girl with the Red Hat*, for instance, was discovered in 1925 in a private collection in Paris. It was the last genuine Vermeer ever found. Andrew Mellon bought it and later donated it to the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., where it remains on view to this day. Mellon was a very generous man.

Q: Didn't Mellon also buy a fake Vermeer?

A: Actually, he bought two: the first in 1926; the second, in 1927. He never realized they were phonies. He displayed them in his home, right next to the *The Girl with the Red Hat*, and gave them to the National Gallery along with the rest of his collection. Mellon's two fakes hung at the National Gallery as genuine Vermeers until the late 1950s, when chemical tests showed them to be made from modern paint. They're kept in storage now. Both of them were made by Han van Meegeren--as is revealed in *The Man Who Made Vermeers*.

Q: Who was the "brains" of the operation?

A: The man at the center of the plot was an English art collector named Theodore Ward, who was a close friend of Van Meegeren's. Ward considered himself a true connoisseur of painting and resented wealthier collectors who could afford whatever they wanted but lacked a deep knowledge of art. He got his revenge with the Mellon fakes. It would appear, though, that Ward was slightly

mad. He decorated the parlor of his London home to look exactly like a Vermeer interior. There's a photo of it in the book, along with a very nice portrait of Ward by Van Meegeren, in which Ward is depicted wearing a red velvet smoking jacket, cigar in hand. He looks immensely pleased with himself.

Q: Van Meegeren never confessed to painting the Mellon Vermeers, but he did admit to painting other fakes, including a phony Vermeer that he sold to Hermann Goering. Why would he hide one part of his career, but flaunt another?

A: It has to do with the circumstances of Van Meegeren's confession. The Dutch government arrested Van Meegeren as a Nazi collaborator at the end of World War II, charging that he had sold a priceless Vermeer to Goering, the number two man in the Nazi hierarchy after Hitler. When Van Meegeren admitted that he himself had painted Goering's masterpiece, it naturally made him quite popular with the general public--and he played it for all it was worth. He claimed to be a misunderstood genius who had turned to forgery only late in life to revenge himself on the critics who had scorned him early in his artistic career. He only admitted forging the few works that the authorities already knew to be connected to him through the straw men who had brought the pictures to market. There were rumors--even then--that Van Meegeren was really a lifelong crook, but those leads were never investigated. I think no one wanted to spoil such an appealing story--the little Dutchman who outwitted Goering.

Q: Was there anything else Van Meegeren was hiding?

A: Yes. Van Meegeren really was a Nazi collaborator. During the occupation, Van Meegeren painted propagandistic artworks (under his own name) for the German-installed puppet government of the Netherlands, gave large sums of money to Nazi causes, and even sent a polite note to the Führer in Berlin, as a token of his admiration. Remarkably, Van Meegeren's interest in Nazism actually dated back to a period long before the occupation. As early as 1928, five years before Hitler assumed power as chancellor of Germany, Van Meegeren could be found parroting selections from Mein Kampf. The reality is that fleecing Hermann Goering was just an ordinary business transaction, not a political statement. Van Meegeren truly believed in the fascist dream. After the war, that was a big problem.

Q: How did Van Meegeren's fascist sympathies play into the types of "Vermeers" he painted?

A: Well, forgeries often reflect the tastes and attitudes of their own time just as much as those of the period they attempt to imitate. Mellon's fake Vermeers, for instance, strongly resemble the society portraits that Van Meegeren painted under his own name during the 1920s. Back in Mellon's day, nobody noticed this anachronism because people, in general, respond almost instinctively to the elements that seem familiar and comprehensible in an artwork, even one presumed to be centuries old. It's part of what makes fakes so seductive. But, by the mid-1930s, Van Meegeren was no longer painting pictures of pretty Dutch society girls. He had become deeply interested in Nazi visual culture, in particular, so-called Volkgeist imagery, a kind of propaganda art which attempted to represent the pure spirit of the Aryan race. Van Meegeren's later Vermeers are essentially Volkgeist images presented in the guise of 17th century paintings, an art-historical hoax that changed the past to suit Van Meegeren's twisted view of the present. Today, people look at Van Meegeren's later Vermeer forgeries and wonder how one on earth anyone could ever have mistaken them for the real thing. But they are "Vermeers" born of the Nazi era, and we should be thankful that they seem incoherent to us today, because it shows how far we have travelled from the mood and preoccupations of that moment. It's no coincidence that Hitler's personal photographer, Heinrich Hoffmann was a big fan of the "Vermeers" that Van Meegeren pumped out during the late 1930s and early 40s. They gave him the illusion of seeing his own aesthetics projected back into

history. It was a kind of sinister narcissism, really.

Q: Do you think an art hoax of such proportions could happen today?

A: In the annals of forgery, Van Meegeren is unique for the way he bent history to his will. He had an idea about the past, about the essential spirit of the Dutch people, and, with his fake Vermeers, he created the visual evidence needed to “prove” his point. There's never been anything else quite like it, and hopefully there never will be again. The entire idea behind Van Meegeren's project was a product of his era, the fascist era of European history. That said, though, ordinary forgery--the kind done for pure profit--continues unabated. There's a family in England that was arrested recently. They had been making and marketing fake Gauguin sculptures for decades. They were quite clever about it--studied Gauguin's style and life history, created phony documents to fake the ownership history of the individual pieces. It's really not an uncommon story. Forgery is a big business. Always has been; always will be.

Q: Do you think Van Meegeren would have been pleased by the appearance of not one but two biographies of him this year? How are the two books different?

A: Oh, he would have been thrilled! He loved attention more than just about anything in the world, and I'm sure, wherever he is right now, he's smiling. My guess, though, is that Van Meegeren would probably find the other fellow's book a bit more flattering, because it's closer to the storyline that Van Meegeren himself created for his life and career back in 1945. Personally, I don't believe that Van Meegeren cast any kind of “spell” on people, nor do I think that the collectors and dealers that Van Meegeren duped were necessarily foolish--Andrew Mellon, for instance, was by no means a foolish man. The other book repeats a lot of Van Meegeren's self-serving mythology. My book doesn't do that. It is about the specific historical circumstances that allowed the Vermeer swindles to occur. It's steeped in the intimate details of the history of the art market, the history of the Netherlands, and the history of Van Meegeren's career as it really happened. And I think that kind of depth of involvement with my subject matter shows through in my conclusions. I don't present Van Meegeren as a man in isolation, but as a product of his times and of the sordid milieu in which he operated. The central issue the other book misses is that Van Meegeren was not a lone gunman. It takes a loosely coordinated web of self-interested, morally compromised individuals to push a second-rate product into the marketplace as though it were a masterpiece. That sort of thing still goes on today, and not just in the art world, but in every conceivable field of endeavor.

From Publishers Weekly Starred Review. In this engaging study, art historian Lopez examines—as did Edward Dolnick's *Forger's Spell*, published in June—the fascinating case of Han van Meegeren, a notorious Dutch art forger. Van Meegeren, who sold Hermann Goering a fake Vermeer, was convicted of collaboration; he became a folk hero for duping the Nazi leader. But according to Lopez, van Meegeren was a successful forger long before WWII, and contrary to van Meegeren's claim that he was avenging himself on the art critics who had scorned his own work, Lopez says he was motivated by financial gain and Nazi sympathies: What is a forger if not a closeted Übermensch, an artist who secretly takes history itself for his canvas? Lopez asks provocatively. The author gives a vivid portrait of the 1920s Hague, a stylish place of mischief and artifice where van Meegeren learned his trade, and brilliantly examines the influence of Nazi Volksgeist imagery on van Meegeren's *The Supper at Emmaus*, part of his forged biblical Vermeer series. Lopez's writing is witty, crisp and vigorous, his research scrupulous and his pacing dynamic. 88 b&w photos. (Sept.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

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