



## Introduction of Noah Charney by Pieter van Os

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Noah Charney knows a lot about art forgers, as becomes evident in his wonderful book *The Art of Forgery*. So you would think: he secretly admires them, at least a little bit. They provide him with wonderful stories, he talks to them, he invests energy and time in researching their methods. He even wrote a novel based on his knowledge of art forgers.

But he says he doesn't. Quite the contrary, he thinks that we, the public, and especially journalists like me, are way too friendly to forgers. We romanticize their lives and doings, and in this way reward them for their criminal behavior.

Somehow this is a brave attitude of Charney, since his book hopes to find an audience which admires art forgers, or which is at least interested or intrigued by them. People like you and me. If we weren't intrigued by art forgers, we wouldn't be here tonight.

His attitude is also interesting. Charney gives valuable reasons for his disdain of romanticizing forgery. One of them: fame provides forgers the opportunity to ask high prices for their work after they have been exposed. In his book Charney names several of them, like Geert Jan Jansen, Lothar Malskat, and John Myatt. The latter became a star in his own television show, as did Tom Keating, another forger featured in Charney's book.

We won't even mention the enormous royalties forgers like Joni and Beltracchi got for the memoirs they wrote after being exposed.

I don't want to put the question on the table whether art forgery is a crime. It is. It's fraudulent to sell a work of art saying it was made by a famous artist, or a not so famous artist, while you know it's a lie. But I do hope that a conversation with Noah Charney will complicate the question of the gravity of the crime.

By complicating the question, and in some way diminishing the gravity of the crime committed by art forgers, I will keep up a family tradition. Maybe some of you saw a quote of my father, Henk van Os on the back of the Dutch translation of Charney's book:

"Remember: high quality art forgeries are ideal indicators of the history of taste."

The quote is from an article on the forger Icilio Joni, who specialized in medieval Sieneese altarpieces (with fantasy knights). In the article, from February 1971, my father advocates studying art forgeries, since they tell a whole lot about the taste of buyers in the period the forgery was sold, or brought onto the market.

I think that is correct. But I would like to add some compliments for forgers. First of all: art forgers make art. This sounds obvious, but is rarely treated as such. The provenance could be false, or the signature; but that does not mean the work is rubbish. There are too many examples of forgeries being celebrated as masterpieces. (See: story of Van Meegeren.) And there are too many examples of copies being treated as the real ones (See: story of National Museum of Venezuela.) I was a little bit shocked when in the best movie on art forgery ever, *The F for Fake*, by Orson Welles, the main character, the Hungarian born art forger Elmyr de Hory walks to the fireplace to burn what he has just drawn. Once he burned a beautiful drawing of a nude lady in the style of Modigliani. I was even more shocked when I learned that, legally speaking, De Hory did the right thing, at least in France, where authorities always burn every piece of art that is exposed as a forgery.

Isn't that odd? The art works were already exposed, weren't they? So these works stopped being false. They became genuine works by, for example, Geert Jan Jansen, to name just one art forger whose work ended up in the hands of French law enforcement.

In the epilogue of his wonderful book, Charney states that prosecution of crimes against art are important in the name of “the preservation of pure and true art history”. One of my questions, tonight is: what is that: pure and true art history? Aren’t the boundaries between true and false too fuzzy to make such an assertion? If even Michelangelo earned his first money at the art market with forgeries (as Charney explains in his book), how pure are the works he started to make under his own name? And what do we think of ruins, of castles and of paintings which are restored (almost renewed) by unknown artists? How pure is the history there? And as Orson Welles reminds us in his *F for Fakes*: some of the greatest works of art of mankind, such as cathedrals, sphinxes, and the Borobudur, were made by anonymous artists. Not to mention revered relics.

In other words: isn’t the harsh judgment of forgers a result of the egomania that has surrounded artists since the Romantic Age – an exaggerated attention to the individual genius of the artistic mind?

Another question: how to judge the man, Mark Landis, who made forgeries to donate to museums? Should he be punished because he lied? Or should he be cherished, for producing ‘new’ art, as a non-profit forger?

Charney advises potential buyers of high end art – a small global group of billionaires - to spend more money on authentication research. I find all research into art interesting, so I don’t mind Charney’s advice. But to be honest, I also find the exponential rise of prices on the art market a bit obscene. And ridiculous, to say the least. I am not a Marxist, but I can see what is going on: the world economy creates a small group of super rich that love to show that they can come up with eighty million dollars for one single painting of Rothko, or a triptych of Francis Bacon. So be it.

However, it seems to me that only art forgers can derail this mechanism. And because of the ever improving quality of research in authentication, they have to get smarter and better every day. Don’t they deserve some credit? Or at least some smiles?

Art forgers have another welcoming function: they give us something to talk about. And it is my experience that most conversations about art bring us closer the mystery of it. These conversations at least give us the experience, or illusion (depends how you look at it), that we come close to the elusive essence of the artistic accomplishment. I hope you will enjoy the great cases that Noah Charney will present tonight.