

ART FAKES AND FRAUDS: HAVE YOU EVER BOUGHT ONE?

Suddenly Fake Art is in the news again. An expert declares one of the National Gallery's prize exhibits, "Samson and Delilah," is not a Rubens after all, but a poor 20-Century copy. In Italy a studio set up solely to manufacture fakes is raided by a Special Police Unit - Art Crime (SPUAC).

Our own Holiday Season seems likely to be shaken up by fortune seekers scouring cliffs and beaches around the country after rumours spread that Banksy has hidden a 1000 Portable Epic Banksy Beach Limited Edition Stonework (PEBBLES). These are in secret locations along Britain's nearly 8,000 miles of coastline. So there's a 1 in 8 chance you might find one and make a fortune. But will it be signed...?

SPUAC DI ROMA sounded like a TV series begging to be made. Cwg applied to join the unit but they said they are over-subscribed with applicants. However they did refer us to Art Expert Mlle Ginette Emanlaerrehton. "That's a bit of a mouthful," we said. "Depends how you look at it, M. Earwig," she replied. Then she pushed her glasses up and proceeded to lecture us:

"The Fake Art Trade is as old as Art itself. There are Caves in Lascaux with huge gaps in the rock where large paintings must have been chipped off for reasons we can only guess at. But we do know that Art enhances life. It amplifies positive emotions. Beauty, Honour, Love, Spirit. But with the invention of money the Serpent enters the Garden with his servants Deceit and Treachery. Now people value Art as income. Easily done since not everyone can distinguish fake from real..."

We could listen to Ginette for hours. But we ask her for an example.

"As a mere *expert* I haven't been allowed to see it myself, of course, but it is rumoured that the Boardroom at Thames Water HQ is graced by the original **Botticelli 'Birth of Venus'** bought at enormous expense, presumably as an investment. Though one has to doubt its provenance given that Venus is depicted floating on a surfboard in a black wetsuit, with flippers, scuba-diving gear, and an octopus on her head. Poor Venus is also rising from a very, very, very brown sea. Or perhaps that just reflects the Company's sense of humour.

"Similarly there is rumoured to be a piece by your own **JMW Turner** in a locked cellar under Tate Britain. It is dubbed the '**Yellow Temeraire**' since that gallant warship is depicted skedaddling away from battle under full sail rather than staying to face the foe.

"Of course, **Leonardo's Mona Lisa** is so famous that you'd be stupid to think of buying it. But many have bought copies. Yet many more have bought what they proudly believe is the very rare 'original' Mona Lisa. Full length. Naked, Winking and Simpering. There are thousands owned world-wide, according to SPUAC. Did the Buyers get the joke? And if it gave pleasure, why not?

As the Structuralist Bruno Obscuro, observed 'apres tout qu'est ce que c'est la verité?' And she's right. Consider these examples:

"The '**Green Chinese Lady**' is much-derided as kitsch but tests have shown it is in fact a genuine **Caravaggio** original: mysterious, elemental, great colour-crashing Art. And the poor chap probably never made a penny out of it."

So what doesn't sell? We ask.

"Well, there is **Van Eyck's 'Betrothal of the Arnolfini'**. Where you can just see the barrel of the Bride's Father's shotgun resting on her shoulder to point at the Groom. More recently there is the sad case of '**Brexit Bonus**' by the mysterious **Clacton Cabal**. Which depicts a Tsunami of Cash, Coin and Love crashing over the Cliffs of Dover to be harvested by desperate locals. No one's bought that for a while. Except at boot sales in the run-up to Bonfire Night.

"Which brings us on to political parody. In the 1970's the British activists **SUR-REALLY?** reproduced **Constable's 'Haywain'** as **Mushroom Cloud hanging over Flatford Mill** to protest Cruise Missiles. This made a point in its day but has since been replaced by '**Haywain 99%**' where the entire East Anglian landscape is depicted as under water with the odd tip of a church spire poking up desperately through the waves.

"I have to give it you Brits," says Ginette. "You really nurture your pain like Cleopatra did her bitey Asp. Bu the good news is **Vermeer's 'Girl with a Pearl Boot'** is selling well in a package with Women's football kit. Your choice of lucky number on the shirt!"

We tell Ginette this sounds like exploitation.

“Would you call **this** exploitation?”

She tells me about the self-described elite group of American businessmen – *Yes, they are all Men* – who are secretly promoting Art products in a highly-controlled range called *Know Your Martians*. Presented as art, the collections feature 'genuine' Martian real and fictional citizens, past, present and fictional as portraits in the style of 1950s US Science Fiction Magazine covers.

“The idea,” says Ginette, her eyes glinting, “is to select and prepare suitable human employees for corporate life on the Red Planet when life all here on Earth is destroyed. They need people capable of learning new ways, new words, new worlds. But are also obedient. It is thought that there are 7 major Martian dialects with important variations. So linguistic skills are vital. Would you like to take the Test, Earwig? You get paid a guaranteed million dollar fee just for trying.”

Hard to refuse that! So Ginette locked me in a soundproof booth with a computer that asked me questions until I fell asleep. An alarm woke me 5 hours later. There was no sign of Ginette. Just a plump envelope with a hand-written note: *I was hoping to meet you again on Mars, Earwig. But I'm afraid you didn't slice the condiment. Hope you have time to spend your fee.*

It takes a long time to count a million's worth of \$1000 dollar bills.

I was half way through before I realised they were Bank of Mars \$1000 bills.

So perhaps I was never really suited for the job and she was just being nice.

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