

PROVENANCE and CONNOISSEURSHIP

by Joan Altabe



The story of art forgery is as old as the Seven Hills of Rome. Michelangelo sculpted a Cupid, buried it in a Roman garden for that dug-up antiquity look and sold it for an inflated price. Why? He needed the money – the usual rationale for fraud.

But fakers aren't the only villains. There are unscrupulous ways that dealers collude in forgeries. In his book *Unmasking the Forger*, David Sox, a researcher on the Shroud of Turin, says the bad guy (besides the forger) is the dealer who is never slow to fudge provenance or change attribution.

You won't hear very many museum curators telling you that, however. Michael Merling, former curator at the Ringling Museum, told me before he went on to a similar post at the Virginia Museum of Art, that museums are not victims in the art forgery story: "Frauds are less likely to be acquired because no respectable dealer would knowingly sell an imitation with intent to deceive an institution. Their careers would be over – and nobody would ever go to them again."

Yet the Virginia Museum, where Merling now works, holds an art object with a provenance from a shady dealer, convicted felon Tod Volpe. The art object is a Mission-

style desk designed by Charles Rohlf's at the turn of the 19th century, gifted to the museum by collectors Sydney and Frances Lewis. The provenance states that Volpe's gallery sold the work to the Lewis couple. Omitted is how Volpe obtained the desk.

Volpe tells how in his autobiography *Framed*. He hoodwinked an elderly couple out of the desk by telling them that it wasn't authentic, even though he knew it was. Then, to make the sale to the Lewis couple, he made up a story about the desk being discovered in an old mansion where it stood for many generations. And to give the desk still further importance, Volpe put it in a book he co-authored, called *Treasures*. As he revealed in his autobiography, "Telling a client that something they are thinking of buying will appear in a book will often clinch a sale."

The Virginia Museum records *Treasures* as the desk's "Known Publication History." Given that Volpe's account of the desk's history doesn't match the provenance, it's clear that no one at the museum read the book.

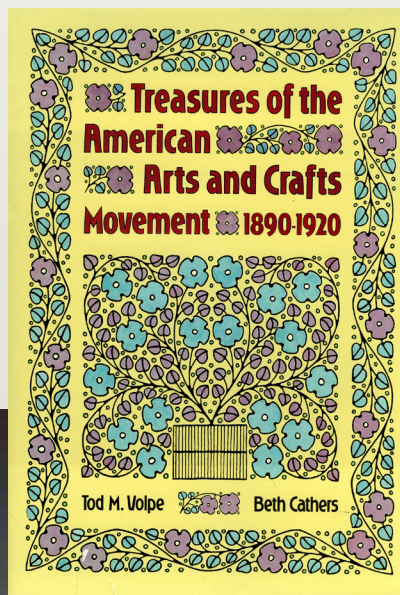
Unlike Merling, who believes that deceptive dealer practices don't happen at museums, Thomas Hoving, former director of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, reports in his book, *Making the Mummies Dance*, that in considering 100,000 works for purchase in his 16-year tenure, fully 60 percent were not what

they were said to be. Art dealers figure in these misrepresentations somewhere.

In a public seminar on art forgery in 1967, Hoving said it was time for museums to illuminate the public about fakes. That was 40 years ago and the wait goes on. One reason for the delay can be found in Karl Meyer's book *The Art Museum*. He speaks of long-term museum policies of "silence and

secrecy" on purchasing art. "There's also little information shared among museums and dealers who have been stung," he said.

John Ringling got stung with a purchase of a so-called Rembrandt, titled *Lamentation*, now attributed to a student of the Old Master. It was an unnecessary mistake. Rembrandt's brushwork was more than half the thickness of a finger. He was known for painting a portrait with color so heavily applied that you could lift it from the floor by the nose. *Lamentation* shows no such texture. Enter connoisseurship.



Connoisseurship – knowing an artist's ways and means and knowing art history – could have saved Ringling from the bad purchase. In fact, it may be said that connoisseurship bests provenance because it can't be faked. Consider the provenance for the Georgia O'Keeffe set of 28 watercolors called "The Canyon Suite," which surfaced in 1990, two years after O'Keeffe died. According to the provenance, Terry Reid Caballero of Amarillo, Texas, got the paintings as a gift from her father-in-law, Emilio Caballero, who said

The Mission-style desk which Tod Volpe obtained by fraud and sold with false provenance appears in a book he co-authored called Treasures of the American Arts and Crafts Movement.

he had received them from Tim Reid, Terry's grandfather, who was believed to have been one of O'Keeffe's lovers.

But there's a problem with the Emilio Caballero story, particularly the part about O'Keeffe having an affair with Reid. By all accounts, O'Keeffe didn't have much to do with Reid, who was a student when she was teaching in Canyon, Texas. "She made friends with her students which stretched the boundaries of acceptable behavior for teachers in Canyon," says Jeffrey Hogrefe, O'Keeffe biographer and former arts columnist for the *Washington Post*. One night, she invited Ted Reid, a striking football star and local hero who wanted to become a pilot, to her room to see some photographs Steiglitz (Alfred, O'Keeffe's husband) had sent her. When her landlady told her she couldn't entertain male students in her room, she was perplexed. Reid was told he was jeopardizing his own position in the community by seeing the schoolteacher. He dropped her, O'Keeffe said, "like a hot cake."

Hogrefe goes on to say that O'Keeffe had no interest in Reid as a sexual partner and was surprised that others felt she had. Reid, himself, has since said that he never had any of her work.

At first, the experts hailed the "Canyon Suite" as a great find and the collection sold for \$5 million. Then they changed their minds, saying that O'Keeffe couldn't have painted it because the watercolor paper on which they're painted didn't exist in 1916-1918 when O'Keeffe lived in Canyon, Texas – the subject of the "Canyon Series." O'Keeffe, the reasoning goes, usually painted landscapes when she

lived in them. The paper used for "Canyon Suite" didn't come into use until 1930.

But a cynical inner voice asks, "What if O'Keeffe painted "Canyon Suite" after she left Texas, when the paper came into use?" After all, when O'Keeffe lived in Manhattan, she returned to themes she had begun in Texas – the flat landscape of the plains, the essence of canyon sunrises.

Hogrefe points out that when O'Keeffe lived in South Carolina, she used the wide, flat Texas landscape as a point of reference for her art making. He notes in the 1992 memoir, *O'Keeffe, The Life of an American Legend*, that when the artist painted in South Carolina, she closed her eyes and imagined how it felt to be standing on the Texas plains.

O'Keeffe, herself, spoke of this. Asked if she were sure it was the canyons that her abstractions depicted, she said her work was more about how she felt in canyons rather than how they actually look.

Hogrefe further reports that O'Keeffe's landscape paintings were more about her sexual experiences than about her on-site experiences: "O'Keeffe visually experienced landscapes when she considered her sexual feelings." He got that from ongoing interviews with the man O'Keeffe loved in her final 14 years, Juan Hamilton, who gave Hogrefe access to the painter's friends and insight into her private world.

All of which means O'Keeffe could have painted the canyon while away from it: any time, any place.

This is not an argument for or against the authenticity of "The Canyon Suite." This is only to say that picking on the paper is not

conclusive. You need connoisseurship. For example, Kansas City museum conservator Mark Stevenson, who helped decide that “Canyon Suite” was not O’Keeffe’s, says, “The materials and physical aspects are often more telling than the aesthetics.” Also telling is an artist’s history. If art scholars read O’Keeffe’s, they might not have changed their minds.



Thomas Hoving said he knew all along that the O’Keeffe’s were not hers. Driving his opinion is connoisseurship: “O’Keeffe was a rough gal and the work looked too sweet. That always bothers me when something in an artist’s work looks nice. That means they’re for sale. This makes me very nervous because it’s all about money. The art world has become an increasingly unprincipled one of art fakery, big-time chicanery that brings in huge bucks.”

Of course, Hoving himself has not been above making money with art. Take the famed Metropolitan King Tut exhibit. King Tut’s tomb was intended to protect the remains of the Pharaoh Tutankhamen. It was supposed to safeguard the Egyptian ruler for the hereafter. Belief in an afterlife was so strong among the Old Nile people that food and wine were buried with them when they died. Which suggests that English Egyptologist Howard

Carter, who dug up Tut’s grave in 1922, not only stole its contents – casket and all – he also stole Tut’s eternal life.

Yet, when the Metropolitan Museum of Art was negotiating the loan of the tomb’s contents, Hoving talked about it in his memoirs as if there were no other point to the tomb but mining it for profit: “I had spent

the night calculating what revenues might be gained from the sales of a wide variety of books, calendars, jewelry, reproductions, posters, slides and cassettes ...” Hoving’s 1993 memoir’s callous title, *Making the Mummies Dance*, nails the point. Unaccountably, this museum director, who earned a doctoral degree in medieval objects, wrote that the big business aspect of the Tut show was the zenith of his tenure.

“Negotiating the ‘King Tut’ – so full of adventures, challenges, and plain fun – was the high point of my Metropolitan career. Afterwards, slowly and almost imperceptibly, I became more and more bored with the museum.”

Not that Hoving’s connoisseurship is infallible. He makes mistakes, such as referring to frescoes by Verrocchio when none exist. But unlike faulty provenances that can go undetected, errors in connoisseurship can be easily found out and corrected. ✍️