

# Fakes

The human mind creates pictures, tells stories, and invents explanations. Sometimes these activities are closely linked to a real world, sometimes they rise freely from the imagination. Nevertheless they are usually attuned in some way to truth. Science creates testable hypotheses for what might happen. Art is much less closely tied to the real world but still helps us to understand it.

For various reasons human beings also create false things. The intention is to deceive. The motives are various. Sometimes the fraudster is looking for personal gain. Sometimes she wishes to make others look like fools. Sometimes he just does it because it is possible. This post considers three famous fakes.

## **Piltdown Man**

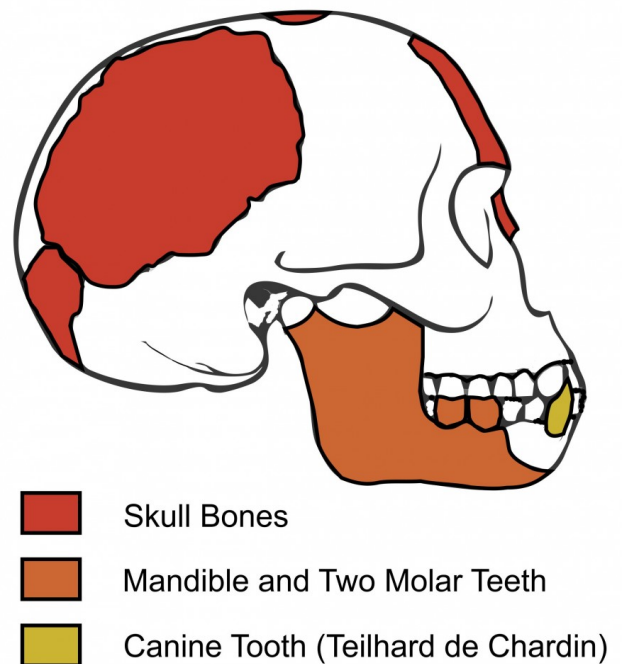
In 1912 Charles Dawson, a lawyer and amateur archeologist, brought some fragments of a humanoid skull that had been unearthed from the Piltdown gravel pit in Sussex to Arthur Woodward, a geologist at the British Museum. He wondered whether the skull might have come from an early human ancestor, like the fossil remains of *Homo heidelbergensis* that had been found in Germany in 1907. During the summer Dawson, Woodward and a young Jesuit priest, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, sifted through the Piltdown gravel. In due course a jawbone with two molar teeth and a separate canine tooth were also discovered.

At the end of the year, Dawson and Woodward announced the reconstruction of the skull, proposed that it came from an ape-like ancestor of modern man and named this species *Eoanthropus dawsoni* (Dawson's dawn-man). A second similar

skull was unearthed a few years later, although the details concerning where and when this was found were never made clear.

The skulls were hard to reconcile with what was known about human evolution. The brain was much larger than expected since the jaw indicated a species much closer to ape than to man. Furthermore, the canine tooth was too large to allow the observed side-to-side wear on the molars. Yet it was not until 1953 that the whole affair was demonstrated to be a hoax (Weiner et al., 1953).

The original skull bones were from a medieval human being, the jaw from an orangutan and the teeth from chimpanzees.



Who instigated this colossal fraud? Various theories have been proposed (documented on the [The Piltdown Plot](#) webpage of Blinderman & Joyce). Most authors have attributed the fraud to Dawson, but suspicion have also fallen on Woodward, who had reconstructed the skull, and on Teilhard de Chardin, who had found the canine tooth while working with Dawson (e.g. Gould, 1980). Recent evidence has indicated that Dawson was almost certainly the sole source of all the false fossils. He had a long history of faking archeological finds, the Piltdown skull being but the culmination of his career (Walsh, 1996; Russell, 2012). His associates were probably innocent dupes.

Dawson appears to have conducted the hoax for fame. No longer just a small-town lawyer, he became able to hobnob with important and intelligent people. In addition, he probably enjoyed a sense of superiority over the colleagues that he duped. And some frustration when it took them so long to find

what had been seeded in the gravel pit. Indeed, Teilhard de Chardin was the only one to find anything that had been planted.

It is difficult to know how much the Piltdown fossils impeded our understanding of human evolution. The fossils did not fit with the findings from other regions of the world, but since these were only sporadic, the field was left more confused than incorrect. Some of impetus for re-examining the fossils in 1953 stemmed from the fact that Piltdown man could only make sense as a strange evolutionary dead-end.

Piltdown's continuing notoriety stems from the way it is used to support the creationist point of view. If evolutionary scientists have so clearly faked this evidence of a missing link between human and ape, all the other scientific findings are also suspect.

### **Christ and the Adulteress**

In late 1943, [Han van Meegeren](#), a Dutch painter and art-dealer, acting through various intermediaries, offered to Hermann Göring, the German Reichsmarschall and art connoisseur, a newly found painting by Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675) entitled *Christ and the Adulteress* (Lopez, 2008; also webpage Han van Meegeren).



The painting depicts the story of the woman taken in adultery who was brought before Jesus by the scribes and Pharisees (John 8: 1-11). The legal penalty for adultery was death by stoning. Jesus was silent for a while, wrote something on the ground and then said "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her." The accusers silently left, and Jesus told the woman to "go, and sin no

more."

Göring had the painting assessed by art experts, who confirmed that it was certainly by Vermeer. The head of Christ was very similar to that in another recently discovered Vermeer, *Christ at Emmaus*, which had been bought by the Rotterdam's Museum Boymans van Beuningen in 1937. Göring assumed that the painting had probably been looted from a private Jewish collection, and insisted on having some documentation of its provenance. Van Meegeren provided a letter promising to reveal the name of the owner within two years of the painting's purchase. In early 1944, Göring bought the painting for 1.65 million Dutch gulden (equivalent to 6.75 million USD in [current prices](#)) and displayed it as the centerpiece of his personal art collection.

On May 8, 1945, Germany capitulated to the Allies. On May 29, Van Meegeren was arrested for collaborating with the enemy. Faced with a possible death sentence, van Meegeren decided to confess that he had painted Göring's Vermeer, incidentally fulfilling his 1944 promise to reveal its provenance. Indeed, it soon came to light that he had also painted several other pictures attributed to Vermeer, including the *Christ at*

*Emmaus.*

At his trial in 1946, van Meegeren claimed that his main motive was to show that, despite the lack of critical enthusiasm for his own paintings, he was as great an artist as Vermeer. In response to the judge's question that he had nevertheless received high prices for the paintings, van Meegeren replied "I could hardly have done otherwise. Had I sold them for low prices, it would have been obvious that they were fake." (Lopez , 2008, p. 215). The public considered him a hero, someone who had duped the experts and swindled Hermann Göring. He was convicted of forgery rather than treason, and let off with a lenient sentence. Prior to serving his term in prison, however, van Meegeren died of a heart attack in 1947.

Later investigations have shown that van Meegeren was not just a brilliant painter who had cocked a snook at the critics and made a fool of Göring. He had a long history of forging old-master paintings, with the proceeds from their sale financing a very decadent life-style. While his countrymen had starved, van Meegeren had lived in luxury. Furthermore, he had been obsequious in his regard for the Nazis, sending Hitler a copy of his book of drawings with the inscription "to my beloved Führer, in grateful tribute" (Lopez , 2008, p. 20). The story of how he bravely duped the Nazis was as much a forgery as his Vermeers.

Nowadays, it is difficult to see how van Meegeren's biblical paintings could have been attributed to Vermeer (Blankert et al., 2007; also [Complete Interactive Vermeer Catalogue](#)). Vermeer was a painter of interiors both physical and psychological. He painted real people in domestic rooms lit by sunlight coming from the upper left. The faces of his subjects conveyed clearly what was in their minds: concentration, wonder, charm, elegance, thoughtfulness or foolishness. The pictures were incredibly detailed and perfectly colored: the drapery, clothes, objects, gestures were almost photographic in their realism. The paintings are famous for the way they

represent light. In van Meegeren's forgeries, the faces are either lifeless or caricatured, the colors dull and opaque, the drapery limp, the gestures robotic, the lighting stark.

However, the appreciation of a painting depends on both what the artist creates and what the viewer perceives. Lopez (2008, p 6) points out that

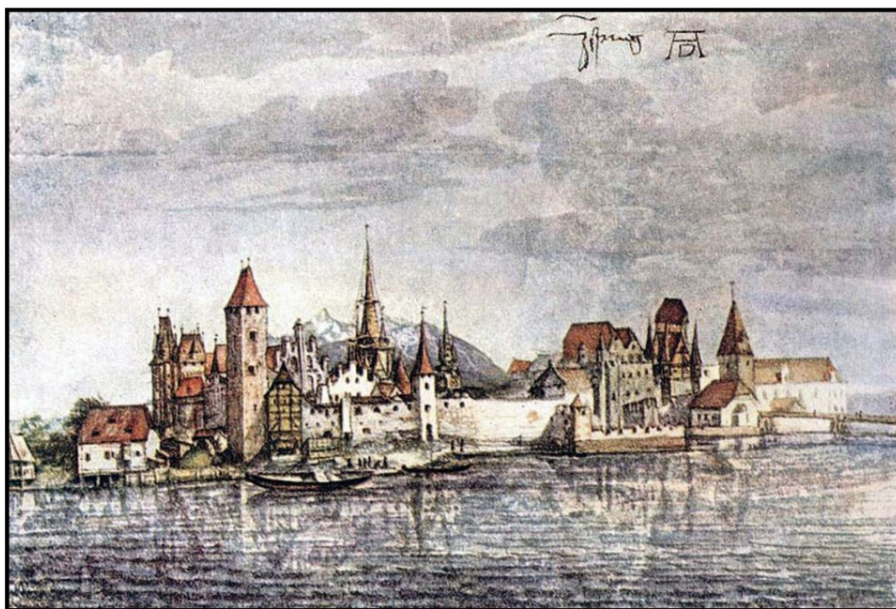
a fake doesn't necessarily succeed or fail according to the fidelity with which it represents the distant past but on the basis of its power to sway the contemporary mind. Although the best forgeries may mimic the style of a long-dead artist, they tend to reflect the tastes and attitudes of their own period. Most people can't perceive this: they respond intuitively to that which seems familiar and comprehensible in an artwork, even one presumed to be centuries old. It's part of what makes forgeries so seductive.

Lopez suggests that the imagery of the fake biblical Vermeers is very similar to the art of fascist propaganda with its stolid, lifeless representatives of the Aryan ideal (2008, pp. 122-142). Göring would be easily moved by this simple pictorial style and readily attuned to the image of a benevolent lord granting mercy to an undeserving but beautiful woman.

Though a charlatan and a fascist, Han van Meegeren is not utterly condemned. We often harbor some guilty affection for the rogues of our world, the jesters who puncture our pretensions and point out our foolishness. In the play *The Bakelite Masterpiece* (Cayley, 2014), van Meegeren is portrayed as one who was tempted by curiosity – “pure perverse curiosity that must know not *should* I do it but *can* I do it. Before the act, simply the question: can I pull it off?”

## **The Darkening Ecliptic**

In October 1943, Max Harris, the editor of *Angry Penguins*, a literary magazine in Adelaide, Australia, received a letter from Ethel Malley, enclosing some poems of her brother Ern who had just died of Graves' Disease. The first poem was based on a watercolor painting of Innsbruck by Albrecht Dürer:



Dürer: Innsbruck, 1495

I had often, cowed in the slumberous heavy air,  
Closed my inanimate lids to find it real,  
As I knew it would be, the colourful spires  
And painted roofs, the high snows glimpsed at the  
back,  
All reversed in the quiet reflecting waters –  
Not knowing then that Dürer perceived it too.  
Now I find that once more I have shrunk  
To an interloper, robber of dead men's dream,  
I had read in books that art is not easy  
But no one warned that the mind repeats  
In its ignorance the vision of others. I am still  
The black swan of trespass on alien waters.

The poem fascinated Harris. He immediately asked Ethel to send him the other poems, promising to arrange their publication.

The poems – nineteen in all – came out in special issue of *Angry Penguins* in the summer of 1944 under the title [The Darkening Ecliptic](#). The painter Sidney Nolan provided the cover art, *The Sole Arabian Tree*, based on a line in one of the poems.

It soon became known that there was no such person as Ern Malley (Heyward, 1993). The poems had been written by two poets, James McAuley (1917-1976) and Harold Stewart (1916-1995). Dismayed by the current trends in literary modernism, they had composed the poems as a hoax to demonstrate that the poetry promoted by pretentious magazines such as *Angry Penguins* was indistinguishable from nonsense. While working in the army's Directorate of Research and Civic Affairs (probably an intelligence agency, but the directorate's mission has never been determined), they had spent one afternoon concocting the poems using free associations, a pastiche of lines from each other's poems, distorted quotations from other modernist poets, and a rhyming dictionary.

*Dürer: Innsbruck, 1495* was actually one of McAuley's unpublished poems. It suggests the difficulty of distinguishing the real from the reflection, the original from the copy. The claim that "art is not easy" forms its center and "the black swan of trespass" is the final phrase that hooks the poem into the reader's memory. The other 18 poems are far less coherent and often come close to gibberish. Nevertheless, some lines have an uneasy resonance, such as those that begin the poem *Colloquy with John Keats*:

I have been bitter with you, my brother,  
Remembering that saying of Lenin when the shadow  
Was already on his face: "The emotions are not skilled  
workers."

The first line recalls Pound's poem on Walt Whitman: "I make truce with you Walt Whitman – I have detested you long



enough." The next two lines are fascinating. Lenin may have never said it but he should have.

The final poem *Petit Testament* ends with a soaring apologia:

Set this down too:  
I have pursued rhyme, image, and metre,  
Known all the clefts in which the foot may stick,  
Stumbled often, stammered,  
But in time the fading voice grows wise  
And seizing the co-ordinates of all existence  
Traces the inevitable graph  
And in conclusion:  
There is a moment when the pelvis  
Explodes like a grenade. I  
Who have lived in the shadow that each act  
Casts on the next act now emerge  
As loyal as the thistle that in session  
Puffs its full seed upon the indicative air.  
I have split the infinite. Beyond is anything.

"Set this down too" derives from Eliot's [\*Journey of the Magi\*](#). The subsequent lines also sound like Eliot, until the sonorous quotidian is suddenly interrupted by an exploding pelvis. The ending comes from Keats' poem about his friend Charles Brown, "the seeded thistle" that "sendeth fair its light balloons into the summer air."

The final line marvelously encapsulates the empty essence of Ern Malley. Later printings changed it to "I have split the infinitive" (Heyward, 1993, p 239). Since the original manuscript of the poems is lost, we cannot know whether "infinite" was a misreading or whether "infinitive" was an inspired later revision by the hoaxers.

*The Darkening Ecliptic* can be approached in several different ways. The poetry can be seen as a biting parody of modernism, where depth of obscurity masks a lack of meaning. In another

view, the hoaxers may have inadvertently put together images and allusions that made sense. They could have unconsciously succeeded in writing poetry, even though they believed they were creating nonsense. A third approach is to consider the story of Ern Malley and his sister together with the poems as a complete creation: a multi-layered parody about writing poetry in an unpoetic world. This would perhaps prefigure post-modernism, where the work of art interacts with its creator. In 2002, [Jacket Magazine](#) published an issue dealing with the Ern Malley affair and its enduring effect. Peter Carey's novel *My Life as a Fake* (2003) derives in large part from the story of Ern Malley and his creators

As well as being held up to public ridicule, Max Harris was subsequently prosecuted and convicted of publishing obscenity (Heyward, 1993, pp. 182-212). The sexual connotations of Ern Malley's verse were too much for the staid people of Adelaide. The trial became an essential part of the Ern Malley affair, a final act that left the realm of parody and entered the absurd.

### **What is fake?**

Piltdown man was a scientific fraud without redeeming virtue. Once we move from science to art, however, the idea of a fake changes. Every work of art is a representation of something else: art is not the real thing. Van Meegeren's Vermeer paintings were fraudulent but they were also actual works of art. The fraud was in attributing them to Vermeer. *The Darkening Ecliptic* was a fake version of modernist poetry, but the Ern Malley affair soon became its own post-modern creation. At whatever level they are read, the poems bring into question the nature of poetry: how much of their meaning is inherent in the lines and how much invested by the reader's mind?

True art is always modern. Sidney Cavell has pointed out that the sequence of artistic styles is necessarily irreversible (1969, pp 210-211). New art that can be completely explained by traditional principles cannot transport us beyond what we already know. A modern composer should not now create music like Mozart. It would have too little meaning for contemporary listeners. Similarly a modern painter should not create pictures like Vermeer. Such paintings are copies; if passed off as the master's, they become forgeries. Van Meegeren was able to paint pictures that passed for Vermeer, but unable to make his own art relevant to his times. The poets who wrote the Ern Malley poems were reacting against the new; they preferred the neoclassical poetry of early modernism to the new style of the *Angry Penguins*.

Orson Welles grappled with the ideas of art and forgery in his last movie *F is for Fake* (1974/2005). The film partly documents the story of Elmyr de Hory, a prolific forger of modernist paintings and drawings. De Hory is shown in Ibiza making beautiful drawings in the style of Matisse and Modigliani, drawings that could easily be sold for thousands of dollars. The film also considers Clifford Irving, who had published a biography of de Hory in 1969. As the film was being made, it became apparent that Irving had just passed off his fictional biography of Howard Hughes as fact. Everyone was conning everyone. In addition, Welles spliced and edited the movie so that nothing ever happened exactly as it appears. The film is real but the story largely fake.

The other main character in the film is Welles' mistress Oja Kodar. The film begins with her walking through the streets of Rome and being ogled by every male she passes. It ends with her seduction of Picasso in the south of France, his painting of a series of nudes



with her as a model, her demanding the paintings in return for her love, her destruction of the paintings and the forging of a substitute set of Picassos to take their place by Oja's grandfather, whose dream was to create an entirely new Picasso period. The end of this story is told with Orson Welles and Oja Kodar, both wearing Welles' trademark black fedoras, acting out the grandfather's death-bed conversation with Picasso. This delightfully convoluted tale is complete fiction. Our enjoyment requires a temporary suspension of disbelief – we must take the fake for real. This is not a traditional documentary (Rosenbaum, 2005).

Yet art that goes beyond the traditional is always suspect. Jackson Pollock's drip-paintings could easily have been a joke, a jester's way of making fools of those who found them beautiful. Why would anyone pay good money for something that a five-year old child could paint? Modern art depends as much upon its perception as on its creation. If the Pollak paintings are meaningful, they are not fake. If the reader can find meaning in Ern Malley's poems, then either the reader is a dupe or the poems are not fake.

Art is always an exercise in trust (Lanchester, 1993). The artist must convince us of its meaning and we must be willing to invest some effort in finding it. Every experience of new art involves the "possibility of fraudulence." The aesthetic experience, depends then "upon a willingness to trust the object, knowing that the time spent with its difficulties may be betrayed." (Cavell, 1969, p 188). The betrayal of this trust between writer and reader is the cruel edge of the Ern Malley hoax.

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