

The Biggest Art Scam in History

- Chaim Rivkin

How One Man Fooled the Entire Art World, Selling Dozens of Forgeries to the World's Most Prestigious Art Museums

The world of modern art was shaken up in the late 1990s by the revelation that a swindler had flooded the market with hundreds of clever forgeries. Numerous paintings on display in some of the most reputable museums and archives were discovered to be fakes.

A huge controversy exploded. People demanded to know how such a hoax had been allowed to occur. Had art dealers known that they were dealing in fraudulent works, but intentionally kept the matter quiet? If so, were they motivated by embarrassment or did they seek to profit from the sales? Were other accepted historic artworks also forgeries?

Read the incredible story of one man who carried out one of the most damaging swindles of all times. He was aided, knowingly or unknowingly, by dozens of art dealers around the world.

John Myatt lived in a small cottage in a quiet town near London. To his neighbors he was an artist of exceptional talent whose abilities had never been translated into a proper income. If his business acumen had been better developed, he could easily have cut out for himself a much better lifestyle.

Myatt's career began in 1986, when he revealed that he was capable of imitating the brushstrokes of recognized masters. He spent the next nine years leading a quiet, though successful, life as an artist. He produced amazingly realistic reproductions of such modern art prodigies as Braque, Matisse and Giacometti. His prints were so close to the originals that they could easily be mistaken for them.

Everything was going fine until one morning in September 1995. Myatt opened his front door to take his young son to the school bus. He was surprised to find a police car parked in front of his home. A plainclothes officer walked up the path right to Myatt and introduced himself as Jonathan Searle, a former artist and art historian. He now worked as a sergeant for London's metropolitan detective service, Scotland Yard.

The 50-year-old Myatt responded in a congenial tone, inviting the detective in to talk over a glass of tea. After all, it wasn't every day that he met an expert with a genuine appreciation for art. He apologized to Searle and asked him to wait inside while Myatt waited outside for his son's bus. Searle took the opportunity to begin a thorough search of Myatt's home. When Myatt returned he found that the house had been turned upside-down by the visitor.

Myatt pointed to one of his son's doodles. "Do you like that drawing?" Searle nodded absentmindedly. It was clear that he was completely astounded by what he had found. Incredible reproductions of works from great masters such as Braque, Chagall, Giacometti and Dubuffet hung matter-of-factly on the walls. Strewn around the rooms were books and sheets with

sketches of works from such famous names as Le Corbusier and Ben Nicholson.

In all, Myatt was later found to have produced nearly 200 drawings and sketches, according to an official count made by the police. They represented nine world-famous masters of modern art. Myatt readily admitted that he himself had produced all the works Searle had found in his home. He reported that he delivered them to a man in London at a rate of one approximately every six weeks. They were being sold to the public as genuine originals.

Officials in Scotland Yard already had their suspicions about the art dealer whom Myatt dealt with in London. Detectives believed that this man, John Drewe, was the mastermind behind Myatt's forgeries, and possibly behind others as well. Drewe sold these reproductions as original works of art through various prominent auction houses around the world. He also dealt directly with some of the top art dealers in London, Paris and New York.

When Searle revealed that he was investigating Drewe's fraudulent business, Myatt agreed to cooperate fully. He shocked Searle by openly sharing the technique he used to produce such authentic-looking reproductions. It was nothing more than a mix of cheap paints covered by a layer of a specific type of veneer!

Myatt had no idea how many millions in profit Drewe had made from selling his works. He estimated that his own revenues amounted to \$165,000 over the years. Some of this was deposited in a Swiss bank account under Myatt's name. Myatt offered to return the \$30,000 that was left and agreed to help the authorities capture Drewe. In fact, Myatt seemed genuinely eager to be helpful. The police were left with the impression that it was a burden off of his shoulders for the truth about his activities to come out.

After recording a conversation between Myatt and Drewe, the police stormed Drewe's home in a London suburb seven months later, on April 9, 1996. There they found hundreds of documents belonging to such prominent art collections as the

Victoria and Albert Museum, Tate Gallery and the Institute of Contemporary Art.

On the kitchen table were two catalogs that Drewe had stolen from Victoria and Albert's National Art Library, still in the original museum sack in which Drewe had smuggled them out. Detectives also found rubbers stamps bearing the seal of the Tate Gallery and other respected art authorities, as well as receipts for sales of numerous artworks to various foreign countries going back many years. There were certificates from Dubuffet's and Giacometti's heirs, attesting to the authenticity of the works that Drewe sold. Finally, there were all of the tools of the counterfeiting trade.

To their surprise, the detectives and art experts discovered that the greatest effort had not gone into producing the forgeries. Drewe's true genius lay in the extensive false framework he created as a background for Myatt's work. He had created an entire history of how the works had reached him: when they were produced, when and from whom he purchased them, as well as the present owner.

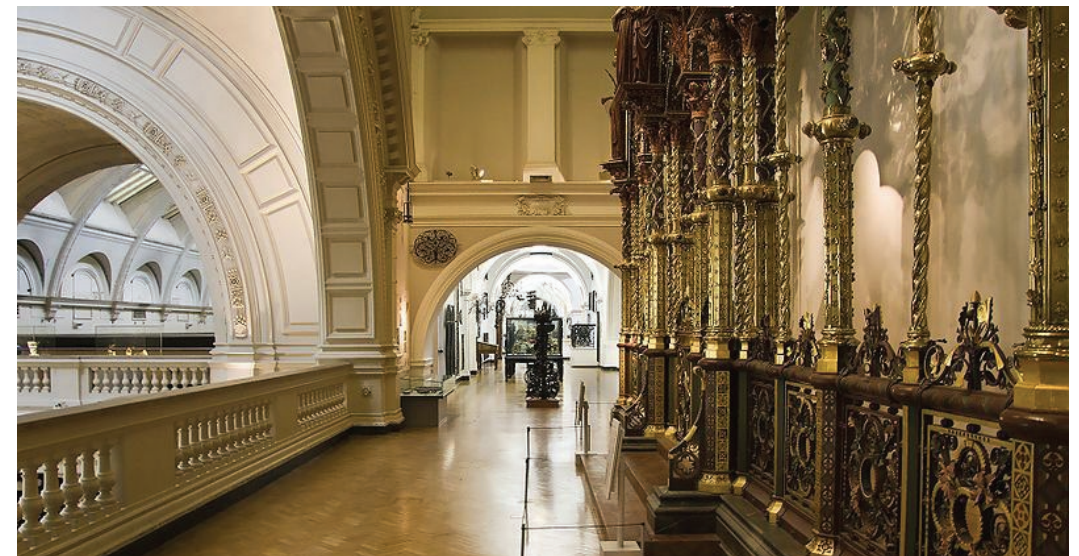
To further authenticate the works he sold, Drewe had spent the previous 10 years systematically infiltrating some of the most closely guarded art archives in the world. He had substituted fake documents for



John Myatt, the accomplice, cooperated fully with the investigation.



Forged seals found by police in John Drewe's home.



Victoria and Albert Museum.