

The Bizarre Story of the Forger Who Forged to Prove His Innocence!

The Genuine Forgery

• Dov Levy



In May 1945, Allied liberators uncovered a valuable painting by the 17th century Dutch master Jan Vermeer in the private collection of German Field Marshal Hermann Goering. The Dutch artist and art dealer who provided it to him was promptly imprisoned as a traitor for selling a national cultural treasure.

No one believed Han van Meegeren when he pleaded not guilty on the grounds that the painting was not a genuine Vermeer but a forgery. To prove that he had not sold a national treasure, van Meegeren was forced to forge another Vermeer while in confinement—this time in the presence of court officials and reporters.



June, 1945. Han van Meegeren sat in his dismal prison cell in Wateringskant, North Holland, pondering his bleak situation. A man who was used to enjoying the high life, by now he had endured the ravages of the Nazi occupation of his homeland with all of the accompanying privations. To make matters worse, with the Netherlands only just liberated, he had been incarcerated on charges of treason against his country for collaborating with the enemy by selling a national cultural treasure. Even if he escaped the death penalty, the charges would probably result in a lifetime in prison.

When the victorious Allies had marched through Austria the previous month, they uncovered the collection of stolen art belonging to German Field Marshal Hermann Goering, carefully hidden in a salt mine. Found within the vast collection of assorted pieces of valuable art—looted from across occupied Europe—was one previously unknown painting by the Dutch master Jan Vermeer. Interrogation of Goering's agent, German art dealer Alois Miedl, had revealed that the painting had been purchased from van Meegeren.

But van Meegeren was hiding a dark truth: that painting was no Vermeer. He had actually deceived Goering by selling him a clever forgery, one of a series he had created over the last eight years with his own hands. If he admitted that the painting was forged, he could escape a possible death sentence, he thought. He would exonerate himself from the charges of being a traitor. But in doing so, the various other forgeries of which he was guilty over the course of his career would also come to light. He would expose himself as a con artist who had cheated his customers out of millions.

After mulling over his predicament for two weeks, van Meegeren realized he had no choice. On June 12, he conveyed his dramatic confession to the authorities: "The painting in Goering's hands is not, as you assume, a Vermeer... but a van Meegeren!"

Van Meegeren admitted that he had produced several other forgeries that were attributed to

Vermeer, as well as forgeries attributed to the Dutch painters Frans Hals, Gerard ter Borch and Pieter de Hooch. These included one painting that had been declared authentic by the world's leading expert on Vermeer and had been on public display at the Boijmans Museum in Rotterdam for the past seven years. If van Meegeren's claims were accepted, it would shake up the art world.

It is the fate of the liar not to be believed even when he tells the truth. When they heard van Meegeren's confession, officials just laughed at what they considered a very unique but totally improbable excuse. What won't a criminal declare in order to get out of paying for his crimes? Any fool could tell that the Nazi's painting had the hallmark of a genuine Vermeer, the work of a grandmaster's hand! Did van Meegeren think he would convince them that he was capable of matching the genius of one of the country's greatest painters ever, and of fooling leading experts to boot?

Han van Meegeren was stymied. How could he prove his innocence to the skeptical public? With no other options, he embarked on the most pivotal forgery of his career. Still confined, and in the presence of court witnesses and reporters, he lifted the palette and brush and began painting yet another "Vermeer." This one would have to be convincing enough to prove to his detractors that he truly was great enough to mimic the works of the grandmaster.

Han van Meegeren

Henricus Antonius van Meegeren was born on October 10, 1889, in the Dutch city of Deventer to a middle-class family. He suffered through an unpleasant childhood with a father who was domineering and sometimes downright abusive. Young Han was often forced by his father to write 100 times "I know nothing, I am nothing, I am capable of nothing."

The boy developed an early interest in art, but his father disapproved of the field. He ridiculed Han for pursuing drawing and forced Han to invest his talents elsewhere.

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