

Forgeries? Perhaps Faux Masterpieces



Edward Linsmier for The New York Times

Ken Perenyi lived an extravagant lifestyle off his faked works of the finest masters.

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MADEIRA BEACH, Fla. — For nearly three decades [Ken Perenyi](#) made a small fortune forging works by popular 18th- and 19th-century artists like [Martin Johnson Heade](#), Gilbert Stuart and Charles Bird King.

Examples of Mr. Perenyi's reproductions. He has written a book called “Caveat Emptor: the Secret Life of an American Art Forger,” said that he misses “the addictive thrill of fooling the experts” and that he sees himself as a spiritual heir to the artists he copies. “I’m convinced that if these artists were alive today, they would thank me,” he said.

Then in 1998, Mr. Perenyi says, two F.B.I. agents showed up on his doorstep, curious about a couple of paintings sold at Christie’s and Sotheby’s, ostensibly by the maritime artist [James E. Buttersworth](#) but actually his own meticulous creations.

Over the next few years, he says, the F.B.I. continued to keep a close watch on him at his bayside bungalow here, tracking his work and where it sold, and talking to his friends and associates. Though the authorities never charged him, the scrutiny pushed Mr. Perenyi to develop what he calls “a new business model”: openly selling his faked oils as the reproductions of the finest masters.

Now they are bought by Palm Beach decorators, antiques dealers, professionals, business executives and others who want the look of cultured gentility without the price tag.

“I realized the life I knew and loved was over,” he said of his career as a con man. Whereas one Perenyi forgery fetched more than \$700,000 at auction, now he sells a nearly identical work for as little as \$5,000. They are the art-world equivalent of a three-carat cubic zirconia that can be flaunted as a Tiffany diamond.

Are they sold as authentic by the people who buy them?

“During the first few years of trying to market and sell my paintings legitimately, I couldn’t say where they went or what people did with them,” Mr. Perenyi, 63, said in an interview at his home. Behind him hung three fake Buttersworths, similar to the yachts that first attracted the F.B.I.’s notice. “Today I have an established clientele, and I only sell to people I know.”

Though many businesses sell fine-art reproductions, few can match Mr. Perenyi’s craftsmanship — or his checkered past.

His forgeries, he says, financed an extravagant lifestyle that included European trips, exclusive restaurants, Versace couture and “total freedom.” He says they brought him into contact with mob enforcers, the lawyer Roy Cohn and [Andy Warhol](#), who, he says, bought one of his forgeries, a [John F. Peto](#).

He gives details of his exploits in a forthcoming memoir, [“Caveat Emptor: the Secret Life of an American Art Forger”](#) (Pegasus Books), which has been optioned by RKO Pictures. It is being marketed as a confession, and Mr. Perenyi, who is open in discussing his life as a swindler, is safe in the knowledge that the statute of limitations for his forgeries has passed.

An F.B.I. spokesman said that officials could not comment on the accuracy of his account because the case file, while inactive, had not been closed.

As for Pegasus, Claiborne Hancock, the publisher, said a lawyer had vetted the manuscript. Mr. Perenyi also has receipts for some works he had consigned for auction as a dealer but, in reality, had created.

Mr. Perenyi estimates that hundreds of his fakes remain in circulation. Occasionally he glimpses one (“It’s like bumping into an old friend”) in an auction catalog or in a magazine. “I miss the addictive thrill of fooling the experts,” he said. “It was great sport for me.”

A spokesman for Sotheby’s declined to comment. A spokesman for Christie’s said that the names of consigners are confidential but noted that a work Mr. Perenyi refers to as his own, a rendering attributed to Heade of two hummingbirds that was sold in 1993, is in the artist’s catalogue raisonné, the definitive compendium of his work. The author of the Heade catalogue, Theodore E. Stebbins Jr., a curator of American art at the Harvard Art Museums, said that if Mr. Perenyi’s account is persuasive, he would need to re-examine the work.

The difference between Mr. Perenyi’s legal business and his criminal one is that now he makes clear his paintings are reproductions, even though they have the artist’s signature. Fraud applies only when someone actively misrepresents a copy as an original.

But he continues to take immense pride in his skill. “There’s no one who does what I do,” he said.

Actually, in Europe, there is [John Myatt](#), a British forger who spent four months in prison in 1999, also sells “genuine fakes” for a chain of galleries owned by a British publishing company. Top-notch artists like Mr. Myatt and Mr. Perenyi can command relatively high prices for fakes. Mr. Perenyi prices his reproductions, with their carefully aged frames, canvases and backings, from \$2,500 for a small hummingbird that he signs with Heade’s name to \$30,000 for a large Roman vista after Pannini.

Authentic paintings attract collectors for a variety of reasons: an artist’s vision, a venerable reputation, investment potential or the ineffable mystique of the genuine. High-end fakes satiate a different sort of desire: aesthetic cachet at a fraction of the price.

“I have some of his paintings mixed in with real art,” said Nancy Telese, a Palm Beach socialite and a longtime friend of Mr. Perenyi’s. She owns his versions of Heade, Picasso, Modigliani, Miró and others.

“Of course they’re much less expensive than a real painting,” Ms. Telese said. “But I thought his work was their equal. They were just so beautiful, with such detail. This is like what I see in the museums around the world.”

The “Picassos” will elicit a gasp from viewers, she said. Most people won’t ask if the works are real, but if they do, “I say they’re reproductions,” she said.

Mr. Perenyi said other clients did not want to speak with a reporter because they present his works as the real thing.

At Trinity Gallery in St. Petersburg, Fla., where Mr. Perenyi’s work is sold, the owner, Allan Abrams, said his buyers are usually “a professional older couple who all their lives wanted to own a painting by a certain artist, and this is the closest they’ll ever get.” Impressionist paintings and male nudes are the biggest sellers, said Mr. Abrams, who requires all buyers to sign a receipt attesting that they know they’re buying a reproduction.

Mr. Perenyi’s own home, a replica of a Nantucket saltbox cottage, is filled with some of his favorite creations, including William A. Walker’s cabin scenes, a Stuart portrait of George Washington and John F. Herring Sr.’s horses.

During the interview he hauled out a few large, blue plastic tubs and took off their lids. Inside one were stacks of tiny framed canvases in the style of the 18th-century view painter Francesco Guardi, a rival of Canaletto and Pannini who painted scenic postcards of Venice to sell to British nobility on their Grand Tour. Hundreds of other paintings Mr. Perenyi has produced are stockpiled in secure storage units nearby, he said.

Spreading half a dozen of his Guardi replicas across the living room floor, Mr. Perenyi said he developed his artistic technique on his own and learned the forensics by working for a restorer and a frame maker when he was in his 20s. Through extensive research and trial and error, he figured out how to simulate the telltale signs of age: the distinctive spider-web cracking in the paint, the tiny dots of fly droppings, and the slimy green look of old varnish when viewed

under ultraviolet light. One of his best, he says, was a Heade-style passion flower that Sothebys sold as a new discovery in 1994 for \$717,500. A copy now hangs over his fireplace.

Today Mr. Perenyi sees himself as a spiritual heir to the artists he copies. "These men were businessmen," he said; they made multiple variations of a painting and employed other artists in their studio to replicate their work.

"I'm convinced that if these artists were alive today, they would thank me," he said. "I'm somebody that understands and appreciates their work."

Standing over one of his Herrings he pointed out the sheen of the horse's coat and the crystal-clear detail of the jockey's face. "I don't wish to flatter myself," he said, "but I'm sure Herring himself would be proud to put his name on this painting."