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CURRENT BOOKS

REVIEWS OF NEW AND NOTEWORTHY NONFICTION

Old Master, New Mimic

Reviewed by Paul Maliszewski

IN AUGUST 1937, ABRAHAM BREDIUS produced a masterpiece. Bredius, the foremost expert on Dutch painting, examined a picture for a lawyer who said he represented a young woman from a wealthy Dutch family that had fallen on hard times. Two days later, Bredius declared that he'd discovered a painting by Jan Vermeer (1632–75): "This magnificent piece . . . has come to light—may the Lord be thanked—from the darkness where it has lain for many years, unsullied, exactly as it left the artist's studio." With a brief letter of authentication and, later, a scholarly article, Bredius transformed some paint and a roughly mounted rectangle of canvas into a national treasure.

But Bredius was wrong. *The Supper at Emmaus*, as the painting came to be known, was a forgery, and not a crafty one. It depicts Jesus after his resurrection breaking bread with two disciples while a serving woman holding a pitcher stands to the side. The figures are lumpy and ill formed, their clothes concealing what the forger couldn't render. The space behind Jesus is unadorned, whereas in Vermeer's finest work, maps, tapestries, and paintings hang from the walls, and individually rendered tiles—usually Delftware, a product of the painter's hometown—decorate the baseboards. Ver-

meer's windows are often ornate and thrown open to the day, with figures mirrored in the glass.

Light reflects off a bowl's lip or the beads of a pearl necklace, and glows from within his human subjects. In the forgery, just the corner of a window is visible, and the only light is drab.

The *Emmaus* wasn't a knockoff by a lesser-known 17th-century artist or a student of the master. Not more than a few weeks old when Bredius inspected it, the painting was the handiwork of Dutch artist Han van Meegeren (1889–1947). While still a student, van Meegeren won a prestigious national art prize, but the rewards for being the year's best young Dutch painter were modest. He turned to forgery for fast profits and out of frustration with his contemporaries, whose abstractions and experiments he thought pointless, decadent, and dull. By painting in the guise of more famous artists, he became a shameless success.

The story of van Meegeren has been told before, in several out-of-print biographies and scholarly works of art history. Frank

I WAS VERMEER:
The Rise and Fall of
the Twentieth
Century's
Greatest Forger.

By Frank Wynne.
Bloomsbury USA.
276 pp. \$24.95



Han van Meegeren, jailed in Holland after World War II as a traitor for selling masterpieces by Dutch artist Jan Vermeer to the Nazis, tried to prove that he had forged the paintings by creating another “Vermeer” for his captors: *The Young Christ Teaching in the Temple*.

Wynne, a London-based journalist and the English translator of Michel Houellebecq’s novel *The Elementary Particles*, adds little to those accounts of the forger’s fizzy rise and ignominious fall, and he only cursorily considers the uncomfortable questions about the art world raised by a forger’s achievements. What makes one painting—or one painter—more valuable than another? Are such determinations rational, or arbitrary and faddish? Wynne treats such questions as brief pauses in a brisk page-turner. He has his story to tell.

Reading this easily digested, only occasionally thoughtful historical reenactment is rather like watching the actors at Colonial Williamsburg, or the weekend warriors who band together to replay the Battle of Gettysburg. In a typical passage, Wynne describes a domestic argument between the painter and his wife when they were

alone, in which her “sensuous lip” quivers. Van Meegeren and others speak in so many unsourced passages of dialogue that one wonders whether Wynne has purchased liveliness of plot and character at the expense of solid history. His eagerness to embellish what is already dramatic leads him to overreach, not unlike Bredius and his expert colleagues.

The *Supper at Emmaus* is larger than most works by Vermeer, about whom so little is known that one writer called him “the sphinx of Delft.” Its subject matter bears only a glancing resemblance to his better-known, achingly detailed domestic scenes—the milkmaid with a pitcher, the noblewoman writing a letter, the woman standing before a window as daylight shines in upon her. Vermeer’s oeuvre includes few religious subjects, but Bredius and other

prominent critics had long supposed that the artist, who converted to Catholicism so that he and his wife-to-be could marry, painted other religious works now unknown to us.

Those critics further speculated that there must have been a transitional period between Vermeer's early canvases, which tend to be larger, more romantic, and clearly influenced by Caravaggio, and his smaller, more placid later works. With so few paintings credited to Vermeer—in Bredius's day there were roughly 50; today there are only 35, and even that number is thought to be padded with forgeries—the critics believed that the paintings of his middle period were lost, casualties of time and the neglect into which Vermeer's work fell for nearly two centuries after his death.

Van Meegeren's success in passing off his *Emmaus*, for which he received 520,000 guilders, the equivalent today of about \$4.7 million, encouraged him to continue forging. During the next few years he rushed off six more Vermeers, including *The Last Supper*, which fetched 1.6 million guilders, and three other religious canvases, which sold for a combined 4.2 million guilders—extraordinary sums of money for any artist, in any age, but all the more jaw dropping when set against the widespread deprivation in Europe during World War II.

Van Meegeren's later forgeries piggybacked on his earlier work. He copied himself, creating paintings that resembled his own fakes more than original Vermeers. Critics dutifully called attention to the striking way in which each latest discovery was so much like *The Supper at Emmaus*. In all, van Meegeren is believed to have painted 11 Vermeers, three canvases in the style of Frans Hals, and a couple mimicking Pieter de Hooch.

Through a web of intermediaries, van Meegeren sold *Christ with the Woman Taken in Adultery*, his sloppiest Vermeer by far, to Hermann Göring for the price of 1.65 million guilders and the return of hundreds of Dutch old masters looted by the Nazis. After the war, van Meegeren was arrested and imprisoned

for treason—for selling a national treasure to the enemy. Six weeks in custody sufficed to extract his confession: He was Vermeer. Few people believed him—nobody, after all, likes being fooled—until he forged one last Vermeer for the authorities. Convicted of lesser fraud charges and sentenced to a year in prison, he died in 1947, before serving a day.

Van Meegeren's patrons were not rich, uninformed collectors, people with all the money in the world and no taste. Rather, they represented major museums, galleries, and private collections. Wynne speculates, correctly, that nationalism and wartime anxiety fueled the intense bidding for the fakes. As the world came undone, the least the Dutch could do was preserve their cultural heritage. To seal the deals, the forger relied on the art world's overly cozy network of buyers, critics, and museum curators. That world, like all small worlds, protects its own. After van Meegeren's deceptions were made plain, few people sought to press charges. Most didn't want to acknowledge publicly that they'd been duped. Others simply refused to accept the truth. One critic insisted that van Meegeren was a boastful liar, and prided himself on having rescued the fakes from being destroyed, as Dutch law dictates.

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Van Meegeren understood, as other forgers do, that the stamp of authenticity can trump art. The proof, however spurious and cobbled together, that a painting is by Vermeer (or any other name-brand artist) is at least as important as the quality of the work. It was enough for the forger to create a plausible resemblance to Vermeer. Van Meegeren's early forgeries crassly combined elements of authentic paintings, cut-and-paste style, into pastiches. While he eventually became an accomplished mimic, he was never a great painter. But he didn't need to be, for a painting's market value derives not just from the

quality of the individual canvas but largely from the reputation of its putative creator. Today the art world is not appreciably different. Wynne concludes with an object lesson: In 2004, casino developer Steve Wynn paid \$30 million at auction for a Vermeer that is far from the artist's best—and one not all experts agree is authentic.

Everyone wanted van Meegeren's forgeries to be masterpieces. The buyers and curators wanted desperately to acquire a Vermeer for their collections. The critics wanted, no less desperately, to claim responsibility for adding one more work to Vermeer's all-too-slim catalogue raisonné. And experts such as Bredius wanted to confirm their pet theories. Pride and self-regard colored judgment, and no one truly saw what he was looking

at, because no one dared look closely.

The forger's story may be read as an enduring fable about the art world. A modern-day Aesop might cast the tale with a wily crow and selfish foxes: One day, the crow set the foxes fighting for control of an apple. The apple, the crow swore, was unlike any other in the world, and the foxes chose to believe him. But the apple was really nothing special, and the crow, in the end, was found out and driven from the forest for its lies. But what of the foxes that desired blindly and wildly, and so were fooled? Should not they too learn a moral from such a story?

PAUL MALISZEWSKI's writing has appeared in *Granta*, *Harper's*, and *The Paris Review*. He is currently completing a collection of essays about the varieties of faking.

Strung Out

Reviewed by David Lindley

UNTIL JUST OVER TWO DECADES AGO, STRING theory was an esoteric branch of mathematical physics that held the attention of only a handful of maverick researchers. For their efforts, these pioneers endured a mixture of puzzlement and derision from their colleagues, and had trouble finding positions at academic institutions where they could pursue their quirky endeavors. But nowadays, it's hard to land a job in a high-powered department of theoretical physics if you don't do string theory.

Aficionados claim that string theory provides the foundation for a "theory of everything"—a harmonious unification of all of fundamental physics. To the contrary, declare Lee Smolin, a physicist at Canada's Perimeter Institute, and Peter Woit, a mathematician at Columbia University, string theory has thus far explained exactly nothing. But Smolin and Woit offer conflicting recommendations on how to restore sanity to theoretical physics, suggesting that string theory's dominance does not yet face a wholly persuasive challenge.

The essence of string theory is a literal asser-

tion: Elementary particles—electrons, photons, quarks, and their numerous cousins—are not pointlike objects but "strings" of energy forming tiny, wiggly loops. If a stringy loop vibrates one way, it manifests itself as an electron. If it shimmies some other way, it looks like a quark. Wacky as this idea may sound, there are good reasons why physicists so fervently embraced it. Smolin, the more elegant writer, is far better at conveying the conceptual import of physical theorizing with a minimum of technical detail. Neither book, though, is easy reading for the uninitiated.

To put it very briefly, what turned interest in string theory from an oddball enthusiasm to a mainstream occupation was a twofold realization that came in 1984. That's when two of the early string pioneers, John Schwarz of Caltech

THE TROUBLE WITH PHYSICS:

The Rise of String Theory, the Fall of a Science, and What Comes Next.

By Lee Smolin.
Houghton Mifflin.
392 pp. \$26

NOT EVEN WRONG:

The Failure of String Theory and the Search for Unity in Physical Law.

By Peter Woit. Basic.
291 pp. \$26.95