

An excerpt from:

THE THEFT OF THE VIRGIN

by

John Scherber

“Replace that frame and you’ll make it a masterpiece.”

—Bernard Berenson

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PROLOGUE
PIET VERGRUEN AND HIS COLLECTION
LONDON, MAY, 1938

James Carruthers, the appraiser recommended by Sotheby's, made a final pass by the eight paintings, pausing for two or three minutes before each. His expression was unreadable. Piet Vergruen, the owner, waited without anxiety. He thought he already knew their value. Before this meeting, he had made a list with his best estimate, but he needed a written appraisal for new insurance coverage in England. Outside the Thames warehouse, the morning fog clung to the windows just below the roof.

"I am going to estimate them at £140,000 in total," Carruthers said at last. "You'll have it in writing by the end of the week."

Vergruen was expecting twice this amount.

"So the market in old masters is severely depressed here?"

"I wouldn't say that, but it's not enthusiastic either."

"But why so little?"

"You have a problem with three of them. The Rembrandt and the two Franz Hals. All three are forgeries."

Vergruen took a step away from the appraiser.

"But how can you say that? They've been in my family for years."

"Well, for one thing, this Rembrandt has also been in a private collection in France for more than 200 years. I've seen it. For another, both the Franz Hals paintings have the look of Han van Meegeren, one of the world's best forgers. Many think he's the equal of Hals. Don't take it too hard, he's deceived the best collectors in the world."

"Is the equal of Hals?"

"Yes, van Meegeren is still alive, but no one knows where he is."

Vergruen turned and stared at the brick wall of the bonded warehouse at the edge of the river. "These paintings were all purchased by my father," he said after a while, stroking his goatee.

"Then you have no reason to reproach yourself. Do you know what he paid for them?"

"He would never discuss that with me."

"Today, these three forgeries would bring perhaps £500 total at auction, correctly labeled, of course. My appraisal will properly identify them, so I don't think your insurer would even offer coverage. I'm sorry, but this happens. I'm just the messenger." He gave Vergruen an ironic smile.

They left together, the guards locking up behind them. As he got into the waiting taxi, Vergruen had already decided what he would do with the three forgeries.

Piet Vergruen was a third-generation Dutch chocolatier who had become increasingly uncomfortable with the political developments in Europe in the thirties. After the Nazi takeover of Czechoslovakia, and then soon after, of Austria, he sold his factory to a German whose family had lived in the Hague for many years, and moved with his wife, two daughters, and his recipes to England, where he made a new start. He had signed a non-compete agreement with the buyer that covered the Continent, but England was wide open to him.

In addition to numerous pictures of lesser value, he brought with him the collection of eight old masters from his father's estate that included the three fakes. It was good that Vergruen didn't need the money, but he didn't need the shock of the appraisal, either.

The shock proved to be short-lived, and when he retired in 1960 at the age of sixty-nine, he sold his English business to Cadbury, and with a portion of the proceeds, started a foundation to propagate information about forged artworks. He had also intentionally acquired numerous other forgeries over the years following the shocking appraisal, and exhibited them throughout Great Britain with seminars about forgery detection that proved popular with university faculty and students, and the general public. He loved to tour the shows anonymously himself, observing people's reactions. When he died in 1977, he left the bulk of his fortune to back the foundation and expand its work. His five genuine old masters and some minor works were divided between his two daughters, along with the remaining 25% of his substantial estate.

Called the Vergruen Reference Collection, the foundation now does two, or occasionally, three, traveling shows per year, and serves as a popular educational resource everywhere it's shown. Familiarly referred to in the art trade as the VRC, it draws the attention of scholars from all over the world. Novice collectors who see it often wish their own fakes were as good. A favorite pastime is trying to guess how each faked picture falls short of the original, which can be difficult, since only the best are included. Opinions can vary widely. Piet Vergruen would have been gratified.

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