

Master Swindler

The man who took it upon himself to fill the Vermeer shortage.

THE FORGER'S SPELL

A True Story of Vermeer, Nazis, and the Greatest Art Hoax of the Twentieth Century

By Edward Dolnick

Harper. 349 pp. \$26.95

Reviewed by Daniel Stashower

In Amsterdam just after World War II, a dapper little man named Han van Meegeren, a noted art dealer, faced a charge of collaboration with the Nazis. At issue was a painting by Johannes Vermeer that had found its way, with Van Meegeren's help, into the hands of Reich Marshall Hermann Goering, Hitler's second in command. If the court found him guilty, Van Meegeren faced a death sentence. "Idiots!" Van Meegeren yelled. "You think I sold a Vermeer to that fat Goering. But it's not a Vermeer. I painted it myself!"



Han van Meegeren, 1945

"This is the true story of a colossal hoax," writes Edward Dolnick at the start of this gripping historical narrative. "The time was World War II. The place, occupied Holland." It must be said that the broad strokes of Van Meegeren's story sound like a vintage Hollywood movie. "The Painter Who Fooled the Nazis!"

"Everything about the case was 23," Dolnick tells us. "The sums that changed hands soared into the millions; the artist who inspired that frenzy of buying was one of the best-loved painters who ever lived: Johannes Vermeer; the collectors competing for masterpieces included both Adolf Hitler and Hermann Goering." Van Meegeren, the man at the center of the drama, was a "middling painter of old-fashioned taste" who found a higher calling as the most successful and opportunistic art forger of the 20th century. While his fellow Dutchmen suffered and starved during the Nazi occupation, Van Meegeren lived in 24 through the sale of "newly discovered" Vermeer masterpieces.

Dolnick, a veteran science writer, knows his way around a canvas. His previous book was *The Rescue Artist: A True Story of Art, Thieves, and the Hunt for a Missing Masterpiece*. He is careful to place Van Meegeren's deception in a suitable frame, detailing circumstances that allowed the forger to 25 a "Vermeer gap" – created not only by the scarcity of the artist's work but also by the values it represented. During the war years, Dolnick explains, "admiration of Vermeer took on a new dimension. Art historians and ordinary art lovers alike saw embodied in the great painter the very qualities that Goering and his kind had put most at risk."

This cultish devotion to Vermeer sparked a thriving market, first among Dutch collectors who wanted to keep their national treasures out of Nazi hands, and later, after the outbreak of war, among German art scouts, who coveted paintings by Vermeer as they were so 26. "In all the world there are only three dozen Vermeers," Dolnick explains. "Even a conqueror with Europe at his feet could do nothing to alter that brute fact."

But Van Meegeren could. For years critics had scorned him as a minor talent who could do little but ape his betters. He responded by turning his energies to 27, an arena in which he proved supreme. Over a long period of rigorous trial and error, he developed a process that made him, according to one expert, "the Edison of art forgers." It was not enough simply to mimic Vermeer's technique; Van Meegeren diligently recreated the artist's original materials, down to the lead-based paints and marten-hair brushes. Once the canvas was complete, he subjected it to various stresses to harden and crack the paint, in order to simulate the passage of three centuries and convey the necessary patina of age. It is strangely mesmerizing to witness Van Meegeren bend to his labors, though in effect we are simply watching paint dry.

By the time Hermann Goering enters the picture, *The Forger's Spell* has raised provocative questions about the nature of 28 and the psychology of deception. The man who understood these issues best may well have been Van Meegeren himself. "Yesterday this picture was worth millions of guilders, and experts and art lovers would come from all over the world and pay money to see it," he declared after his exposure. "Today, it is worth nothing, and nobody would cross the street to see it for free. But the picture has not changed. What has?"

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Kies bij iedere open plek in de tekst het juiste antwoord uit de gegeven mogelijkheden.

1p 23

- A highly questionable
- B larger than life
- C quite simple
- D rather obscure
- E thoroughly researched

1p 24

- A fear
- B Germany
- C luxury
- D poverty

1p 25

- A cause
- B explain
- C exploit
- D study
- E widen

1p 26

- A beautiful
- B foreign
- C pure
- D rare
- E sophisticated

1p 27

- A crafts
- B fakery
- C science
- D trade

1p 28

- A art
- B capitalism
- C jealousy
- D war

Bronvermelding

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