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This Solemn Mockery

On Wednesday, 23 May 2012, the British auction house Bonhams began accepting bids for items from one of the most impressive collections of forgeries amassed during the twentieth century. There were phony letters attributed to the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley and the novelist George Eliot. A few faux medieval panels and paintings. Some fake Shakespearean ephemera. Ardent enthusiasts of all famous historical things fake, welcome to the sale of the celebrated Stuart B. Schimmel Forgery Collection!

During his life, Stuart B. Schimmel was a respected collector of rare books, manuscripts, engravings and historical printing technologies, following his successful career in business and accounting. ‘He brought verve and élan to the grand collection he amassed,’ John Neal Hoover lauded in his 2013 memorial, noting that Schimmel was ‘a true adventurer in the pursuit of books and the ways they can order one’s life’. In addition to building a traditional art portfolio with works by recognised masters, Schimmel spent half a century collecting superb forgeries, frauds and fakes.

Schimmel got his start collecting forgeries when he offered to buy a Lord Byron signature from his friend, Colonel Drake, who had unwittingly purchased a very good Byron forgery. (Schimmel graciously agreed to sell the signature back to Colonel Drake if, at some point in the future, it proved genuine.) From there, Schimmel went on to collect only the very best fakes, with items boasting amazing provenances and stories, rarities that commanded impressive prices. (‘Provenience’ to refer to the position of an artifact’s discovery, like at an archaeological site. ‘Provenance’ refers to the cultural and custodial history of

an artifact or object once it has entered a museum or collector's context.) He collected the ersatz with enthusiasm as well as a discerning eye. All of the fakes in his collection, you see, had been authenticated.

'The motivation for forgery is always complex, whether done for gain or fame, to prove a point or in the belief that something should exist even if neglected by its purported author,' renowned book collector Nicolas Barker suggested in the introduction to the 2012 Bonhams catalogue that listed the Schimmel lots. 'There is no such difficulty with Stuart's collection. All his are genuine forgeries. He has had a lot of pleasure out of collecting them, and the books about them. It is now the turn of others to enjoy the same pleasure in their dispersal.'

Among the many impressive authentic forgeries Bonhams listed in its sale, the masterpieces of two fakers stand out as intriguing genuine fakes – the works of the Spanish Forger and William Henry Ireland. The Spanish Forger painted and sold faux medieval images during the late nineteenth century and William Henry Ireland is famous for his eighteenth-century fraudulent William Shakespeare signatures and invented plays. The celebratas of these forgers and their forgeries explains why they were in the Schimmel collection to begin with, as both have become fashionably and lucratively collectable in their own right. These forgeries prove that fakes can be more than just the stories of them being debunked.

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'The Spanish Forger was one of the most skilful, and successful, and prolific forgers of all time,' William Voelkle, Curator of Medieval and Renaissance manuscripts at the Morgan Library, contends in his numerous publications about the Spanish Forger's work throughout the late twentieth century. Full of admiration

for the Forger's talent and audacity, Voelkle argues that 'Until recently his numerous panels, manuscripts, and single leaves were appreciated and admired as genuine fifteenth- and sixteenth-century works. Now they are increasingly sold, collected, and even exhibited as his forgeries.'

The story of the Spanish Forger begins in Paris. In the latter half of the twentieth century, Paris was not only the centre of influential arts movements, but also a headquarters for forgery production targeting tourist markets in the city as well as agents buying on behalf of high-end collectors and museums. The presence of less than genuine art was ubiquitous, whether that took the form of a copy, a replica or an outright forgery.

The issue of forgeries became so prevalent that in 1904, the French art historian and critic Count Paul Durrieu published a series of scathing articles warning his readers that the markets were rife with fakes. Whatever sort of art people wanted to buy, Durrieu argued, that art was being faked (and some of it was even being faked well). Although Durrieu did not mention any specific works that would later be attributed to the Spanish Forger, it is clear from the pieces that he did highlight that the Spanish Forger would have known how to work the Paris market of fake art. The Spanish Forger recognised just what sorts of fakes would be snapped up by enthusiastic, if somewhat gullible, buyers.

For decades, the Spanish Forger's work slid under the art world's radar, working their way into a plethora of collections, both private and institutional. The odd, newly discovered work still shows up, even today; as recently as 2016, a 'new' Spanish Forger piece was discovered and authenticated by the *Antiques Roadshow*. Although rumblings of fakery surrounded a couple of the Forger's manuscript pages early on in his story – in the mid-1910s – it wasn't until 16 years later that the faker

and his phony medieval art were formally recognised in the communities of art authentication.

In 1930, Ms Belle da Costa Greene, director of the Morgan Library, was asked to authenticate *The Betrothal of Saint Ursula*, a purported Jorge Inglés fifteenth-century painted panel. Maestro Jorge Inglés was a well-known painter and illuminator in the mid-fifteenth century, primarily painting out of Castille; one of Inglés's best-known panels is the *Altarpiece of the Gozos de Santa María* (known colloquially as the 'Altarpiece of the Angels'), a panel considered by many scholars to show the intersecting Hispano-Flemish painting traditions. Acquiring an Inglés would have been a coup for any museum, which is why the purchasing agent for the Metropolitan Museum of Art's board of trustees, Count Umberto Gnoli, was eager to add *The Betrothal* to the Met's collection. *The Betrothal of Saint Ursula* had already been authenticated by Sir Lionel Henry Cust, whose opinion Gnoli accepted. In order to shore up the board's confidence in the panel's authenticity, Gnoli hoped that Greene would endorse the panel and recommend that the board acquire it. The asking price was £30,000.

Bella da Costa Greene is an enigmatic character in the Spanish Forger story. Twenty-five years before coming across *The Betrothal of Saint Ursula*, she was hired by John Pierpont Morgan as a librarian to manage his then ever-growing collection of art, antiquities, manuscripts and rare books. Junius Spencer Morgan II – Assistant Librarian of rare books at Princeton University and John Pierpont's nephew – introduced Greene to his uncle and arranged for her initial job interview.

Belle da Costa Greene was born Belle Marion Greener, the daughter of Genevieve Ida Fleet and Richard Theodore Greener, who was (in 1870) the first black graduate of Harvard University. Greene grew up in Washington, DC, in what historian Heidi Ardizzone describes as a struggling

elite community of people of colour – well educated, well connected, but still very much situated in the racism of early twentieth-century America. Around 1900, after her father had separated from her mother and taken a post as a US diplomat in Siberia (where he subsequently had a second family), census records show that Belle's family began to vary their names. Before she arrived at Princeton, Belle dropped her middle name, 'Marion', and added da Costa.

When Greene began work at 'Mr Morgan's Library' in 1905, she brought with her the expertise in illuminated manuscripts that she had acquired at Princeton. She started as Morgan's personal librarian at a salary of \$75 a month, and over the next four decades would handle millions of dollars of business for J. Pierpont Morgan and, after his death in 1913, for his son Jack. She eventually became the Director of the Library when it was made a public institution in 1924, and steered the collection and the library to be one of the foremost of the twentieth century.

Perhaps most significant to Belle's own biography, however, is her decision to create her own origin myth – her own story of where she came from – and use it to leverage her considerable intellect to her advantage. In her initial interview with Morgan, she said that her mother was of southern nobility, fallen on hard times, and that her grandmother was of Portuguese descent, explaining the da Costa part of her name as well as what newspapers of the time called her 'exotic' appearance. According to Ardizzone, just how Belle's biracial heritage impacted her identity is an open question – Belle famously burned her personal correspondence before her death and carefully controlled her public persona over her 43-year career.

Although Belle was openly extolled as a leading scholar of illuminated manuscripts, she never worked in academia

or held a formal university profession, and never published scholarly research or books. She did, however, as one her admirers noted, ‘transform a rich man’s casually built collection into one which ranks with the greatest in the world’. Greene easily held her own among the intelligentsia and aristocracy in New York City and Europe, and in 1939 she was the second woman elected as a Fellow to the Medieval Academy of America. Greene embraced her reputation as a bohemian librarian, known for her acerbic wit. In one of her most-quoted quips, she resoundingly rejects the dowdy stereotyping of her profession. ‘Just because I *am* a librarian,’ Belle declared, ‘doesn’t mean I have to dress like one.’

When Count Gnoli sent a picture of *The Betrothal of Saint Ursula* to Belle da Costa Greene in 1930, he had no idea that the panel would kick off of a decades-long hunt for one of the most elusive forgers in art history.

The Betrothal of Saint Ursula is a downright idyllic painting. It’s also considerably hefty. After spending months looking at prints and scans of *The Betrothal* in art books or posted online, I had internalised the painting to simply be page sized, despite dutifully typing out its dimensions multiple times. When I put in a request to see *The Betrothal* at the Morgan Library, the librarians wheeled it out on a dolly, carefully propped up on foam blocks. The size of the panel caught me by surprise. It measures 60cm (24in) across and just about 76cm (30in) tall, not counting the massive frame and box the piece is stored in. The librarians told me that they were excited to see it in person, as it’s a rarely requested item from the Morgan collection.

In *The Betrothal of Saint Ursula*, lollipop-like trees dot the background and small ships bob around in a harbour.

A Lancelot-and-Guinevere styled couple wend their way from one castle to another. All of the figures have little bow mouths, pursed into syrupy smiles. Ursula demurely offers her hand to her green-sleeved fiancé, and her noble ladies-in-waiting mince down the lane in their bejewelled headdresses and low-cut dresses. White, puffy clouds fill the blue skies and you can't help but get the sense that it's always sunny in Saint Ursula's world. Belle da Costa Greene looked at the painting's medieval halcyonic utopia and concluded that there was something decidedly hinky about the whole thing.

There was something – or some things – that simply didn't sit well with her. It was cracked – with age? maybe? maybe not? – but the cracks conveniently stopped before they destroyed any of the figures in the painting. It was just too ... something. Too cutesy. Too perfect. Too many unflawed details that didn't quite add up. Ironically, the panel just looked too medieval.

After a thorough analysis, Greene concluded that *The Betrothal of Saint Ursula* wasn't a Jorge Inglés and that it certainly didn't date to any semblance of the Middle Ages. She jotted down her conclusions on the back of a colour illustration of *The Betrothal* that had been reproduced in *Art News* (1929), where Sir Lionel Henry Cust had originally attributed it to Inglés. 'Brought to me by Count Gnoli, who was then purchasing agent in Italy, for the Metropolitan Museum of Art,' Belle da Costa Greene recorded, 'who asked me to "back him up" in its importance for the Museum when it was to be passed on by the Trustees.' She christened *The Betrothal*'s artist the 'Spanish Forger' – because *The Betrothal* was purported to have been the work of a Spanish artist – put the panel as having been painted at the turn of the twentieth century, and over the next nine years, began to create an oeuvre that carefully documented this faker's faux medieval works. Incidentally, but unsurprisingly, the

Metropolitan Museum of Art declined to purchase the painting.

Although Greene began the systematic work of documenting known instances of the Spanish Forger's work, two of his specific pieces had already raised questions as early as 1914. Salomon Reinach, the famous French archaeologist and antiquities expert, exposed one painting, *The Portrait of a Young Lady of Sixteen*, as a forgery; later that same year, Reinach and Henri Omont found another fake medieval work in a copy of an illustrated Juvenal manuscript. In both cases, however, the work was simply categorised as 'fraudulent' and remained unattributed to a specific artist. That changed with Belle da Costa Greene's frank assessment of *The Betrothal of Saint Ursula*. Now, *The Portrait of a Young Lady of Sixteen* as well as the Juvenal were attributed to the Spanish Forger.

It turned out that Greene had seen the Forger's work before. The Morgan Library itself had one of the Spanish Forger's works that Greene had authenticated in 1909 – a medieval liturgy book – and the Forger had even finagled his way into the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Greene's list – which eventually totalled 14 items during her curatorial tenure – has continued to grow in the ensuing decades, as art experts ferreted out more examples of the Forger's work among public and private collections.

'As I have been interested in my artist friend, whom for want of a genuine name I call "the Spanish forger," I am delighted to learn from your letter of September 26 that you have uncovered several others,' Belle da Costa Greene wrote to Charles Cunningham, curator of paintings at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Cunningham in 1939, the like most of the curatorial art world, had learned that Greene was on the hunt for the Forger and was happy to help. 'I think that he (or the factory) started in the

manuscript field, although I have seen several paintings undoubtedly by the same hand ... I have no doubt that I shall be able to run them all down to manuscript originals. The last one I discovered was really fantastic.'

Curators sent Greene photographs of potential Spanish Forgers, both those in their own collections and ones that were up for auction. 'Thank you for the photographs which arrived this morning,' Greene wrote to Cunningham in a subsequent letter, in late September 1939. 'Yes – they are all examples of my dear old pal.' Two years later, however, the charm of this errant scamp's forgeries was wearing a bit thin. 'I am infinitely [sic] ashamed not to have thanked you before this for your letter of September 17th and the accompanying photographs,' Belle da Costa Greene groused to Charles Cunningham. 'The "guy" is becoming rather tiresome, do you not think? Two of these photographs are practically duplicates of two others I have.'

For decades, many have tried to put a name, or at least a definitive nationality, to the Forger. Scholars can trace the Spanish Forger's inspiration to a five-volume series published by Paul Lacroix in France in 1869–1882, which offered detailed illustrations of medieval and Renaissance life; they have even pinpointed which specific Lacroix motifs the Forger used in his various pieces. Using the publication dates of this series to culturally triangulate when the Spanish Forger was actively painting, scholars surmise that his earliest work was in the early 1900s, and decades later scholars would trace the provenances of various Spanish Forger pieces to Paris.

Today, the true identity of the artist remains unsolved – we don't know his nationality, his life story or even if the artist was a man. And that mystery is undoubtedly a key part of the Spanish Forger's continued fascination and appeal.

So just what makes a genuine work of art by the Spanish Forger? Several things, really. Some indications are obvious to even the most amateur of art enthusiasts (once they know what to look for), while others are much harder to uncover, relying on forensic tests and methods.

To begin with, there are the out-and-out saccharine scenes like those in *The Betrothal of Saint Ursula* that originally clued Greene in to the fakery. All the faces in the Spanish Forger's illustrations have a tilt, the mouths are rather bow-like and all of his subjects' feet turn out as if they are performing in a ballet corps. Moreover, the Forger opts to show a very specific sort of secular medieval life, full of chess and falconry, knights and women in pointy wimples – these are scenes with gardens, music, games, unicorns and revelry. Very few of the Spanish Forger's paintings focus on the religious aspect of medieval life as he gauged, quite accurately, that his turn-of-the-twentieth-century bourgeois collectors' interests would be piqued by scenes that featured castles, jousts, music and dragons, and not so much the religious side of the Middle Ages.

Another classic giveaway is the Spanish Forger's buxom noblewomen – ladies with décolletage so daring that they scarcely manage to avoid serious wardrobe malfunctions. ('All of the women have boobs,' a colleague deadpanned with a sigh and an eye roll, showing me some Spanish Forger manuscript pages. 'Any real medieval painting doesn't show cleavage like the Spanish Forger does.') If one puts all of these indications together, it really is as if the Spanish Forger was illustrating the nineteenth century's version of the Middle Ages. These could be scenes straight out of Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*, with all the trappings of medieval chivalry as could only be imagined hundreds of years later.

The Spanish Forger was careful to use materials that wouldn't draw a lot of scrutiny from collectors. He stuck to painting wooden panels, and illuminating loose leaves

and isolated manuscript pages. For pieces like *The Betrothal of Saint Ursula*, the Forger simply used old wooden panels painted on both sides – ostensibly to prevent them from warping. (Some of his contemporary forgers weren't as discerning in their materials and used any convenient source of wood for their medieval-esque paintings. One fake panel from the same turn-of-the-century Parisian market of fakes was discovered to have been fashioned from a desk drawer – the giveaway was a keyhole visible on the back of the panel.)

On close examination of *The Betrothal*, scholars have found that many of those convenient cracks were most likely actually created by the Spanish Forger using a sharp metal instrument. (Rather ironically, the cracks were almost repaired by an art-restoration department before the panel's unveiling as a fake.) Art scholars even traced the source material for *The Betrothal of Saint Ursula* to Lacroix's *Vie Militaire* and Louandre's 'Dames, Nobles et Suivantes', but emphasised that the images are composites inspired by classic texts published at the end of the nineteenth century.

However, it's important to look at *The Betrothal* as a whole object to understand its appeal and success. In the early twentieth century, without forensic testing, it would have been impossible to draw any conclusions from painted wood about the relative age of the material. It *looked* old, ergo it *was* old.

In addition to painting panels, the Spanish Forger forged illuminated loose leaves and manuscript pages by adding his own illuminations to actually genuine medieval manuscripts, thus making his fakes more believable, because they were painted on to something genuine. In a modern examination of the illumination of his painting the *Exorcism of Mary Magdalene*, one of the Forger's few religiously themed pieces, the border of the manuscript page is several centuries old, but the ermine-clad Mary Magdalene is

decidedly not. The Forger also scraped many medieval-age vellum pieces and simply added illustrations to them, in essence making these pieces into modern palimpsests where the drawings were often downright incongruous with their accompanying texts.

One such Spanish Forger manuscript leaf, held at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin, shows Saint Elizabeth greeting the expectant Virgin Mary with three onlookers. The other side of the page shows six sets of four-line red staves with square musical notations. As I sat in the reading room of the Harry Ransom Center and looked carefully at 'The Visitation', I could see the blade marks and bites along the edges of the page. The cuts were just slightly uneven, and it quickly became clear how the Spanish Forger had simply cropped part of an antiphonal leaf from an actual fourteenth- or fifteenth-century musical prayer book, and gone on to paint his nineteenth-century scene on the back.

The Spanish Forger had an idea about what fakes he could get away with, and an unwillingness to tempt himself to create something on a much larger scale. Entire books, for example, would be very difficult to fake well, since the possibility for error in the forgery compounds with the complexity of the object. 'The faking of whole manuscripts [is] attempted but rarely,' Otto Kurz explains in his extensive mid-twentieth-century handbook of European forgeries, geared to students and collectors. 'For every manuscript, however genuine, may contain spurious parts, ranging from whole pages to inserted initials. It is difficult to manufacture whole manuscripts, but it is comparatively easy to effect minor changes, which, if taken at face value, may increase not inconsiderably the interest of a manuscript.' Keeping it relatively simple meant that there was less possibility of the Forger giving away his game. The real genius in the style of the Spanish Forger is

his savviness in simply sticking to his own developed genre of medieval fakery.

This doesn't mean that the Spanish Forger never erred on details. When he attempted more complicated multi-panel projects – like the Cincinnati Triptych or the Tewksbury Polytych – it is obvious that both pieces were never meant to be viewed with the side panels closed. In an authentic triptych – a three-part panel painting with hinges on the two outer panels to enable them to open and close – the artwork can be viewed with the panels either open or closed. In the Spanish Forger's triptych project, if you were to close the outside doors on either panel, you would find that the painting doesn't, technically, wrap all the way around – an immediate indication that the triptych isn't genuine.

Over the course of the early twentieth century, art specialists built a profile of the Spanish Forger's style and methods. By the 1970s, authenticators began adding forensic techniques to their forgery-detecting arsenal as new scientific methodologies became available. Could we discern genuine Spanish Forger paintings scientifically, experts wondered?

The illuminated manuscript page *Hunt of the Unicorn Annunciation* offered just such an opportunity to blend art and science – what specialists saw as an opportunity to merge their areas of expertise, offering more insight into the Spanish Forger's art overall. The *Hunt* shows the archangel Gabriel with two leashed hounds facing a kneeling Virgin Mary, who is in turn holding a small unicorn. The entire scene is set amid a lush field of green grasses, a canopy of trees and a golden sky. Art experts argued that the piece was a ridiculously simplified take on a complex religious allegory – the Forger had simply opted to take the most 'interesting' elements of the illustration from the original medieval texts. Tellingly, art experts pointed

out, the Council of Trent strictly forbade the depiction of the *Hunt of the Unicorn Annunciation* in 1563; a sixteenth-century artist ought not to have been painting that piece, in that style, at that time. Again, to the discerning expert there is a sense that ‘something’s off’. But the *Hunt* begged the question, what could science add to the Spanish Forger story that would corroborate what art experts already knew?

This is where the forensic testing came in. Art experts subjected the *Hunt of the Unicorn Annunciation* to neutron irradiation at Brookhaven National Laboratory in conjunction with the State University of New York at Stony Brook, under the supervision of the Morgan Library and Museum, to better understand the choices in paint used by the Spanish Forger. The results were extraordinary.

The *Hunt of the Unicorn Annunciation* was bombarded with a beam of slow neutrons, exposing the manuscript leaf to low levels of radiation. (This sort of test doesn’t harm the original work of art.) The neutrons from the beam stuck to the different atomic nuclei in the paints, causing some of the atoms to become radioactive isotopes with different and distinctive half-lives, depending on the paint’s elemental composition. (Each paint colour contains different elements and these elements are necessary to give the colour its specific visual hue.) Scientists took several X-ray autoradiograph images over the course of 19 days to see how the different radioactive isotopes in the paint behaved, and whether there was a paint-based pattern to how the isotopes decayed. In the case of the *Hunt*, it was quickly obvious that the green paint in the illumination decayed faster than the gold, which decayed faster than the red – the images from the X-ray films left ghostly outlines of the gold paint, whereas the green paint had faded.

Physicists at Brookhaven took measurements of the radiation energies from the manuscript page and found

high concentrations of gold, mercury and arsenic. The green pigment, as it turns out, was made from a copper arsenate and was part of a common paint called Paris Green; this was a significant finding because Paris Green was not available before about 1814. Science concurred with curators' expertise that there was no way the *Hunt of the Unicorn Annunciation* could possibly be medieval, a conclusion that was in complete accord with the deductions based on the illumination's subject matter.

Paris Green pigment aside, once you know what to look for it's impossible – even for a non-art expert like myself – to fail to see the various signs that point to the Spanish Forger's work. Looking at *The Betrothal of Saint Ursula* at the Morgan Library, I found myself going through Belle da Costa Greene's original checklist of tells. Little bow-mouths, ballet-like feet, cutesy castles and daring décolletage. Check, check, check and check. Other illuminated vellum pages from the Spanish Forger that I saw offered beautiful miniature scenes, full of knights, battles and the nobility with pointy princess hats. (Reader, I could not help smirking at a noble lady's lips puckered into a trout pout.) But the detail! I was mesmerised by the details in the illustrated miniatures.

I had been prepared to arrogantly dismiss the Forger's work, well armed with all of the Spanish Forger tells, but the skilled detail in each and every page reminded me that the Spanish Forger – whoever the artist was – was a brilliant, regardless of the context of the paintings. When I was sat at a table in the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, Texas, and looked at how the Spanish Forger repurposed and repainted the page of medieval music into a faux-medieval miniature, I could see the hundreds of decisions that resulted in the page being what it was and how it was in front of me. These were decisions made about the original manufacture of the antiphonal prayer book in the

fourteenth–fifteenth centuries, and the choices that the Spanish Forger made in creating what I was actually looking at. I couldn't help but wonder if that green of Saint Elizabeth's robe in the painting would light up as Paris Green under neutron activation analysis.

Today, examples of the Spanish Forger's work can be found in many prominent art and manuscript collections, both public and private – Dartmouth, Harvard, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Walters Museum, the University of Pennsylvania and the University of Texas at Austin's Harry Ransom Center, to name a few. Even better, more pieces are likely to be discovered. Most estimates put the Spanish Forger's known catalogue raisonné at around 350 pieces and growing, as we don't know how many 'original' Spanish Forgers there are out there – and it leaves us with the possibility of discovering new ones. If the history of the Forger is any indication, art experts are certain to unearth and 'authenticate' more of his work in the decades to come.

It goes without saying that due to their fabulously curious, historically quirky provenience, the Spanish Forger's fakes sell, and sell well, with many pieces fetching astronomical prices at auction, and reserve prices often running in the tens of thousands of pounds. When four Spanish Forger pieces from the Stuart B. Schimmel Forgery Collection were auctioned in 2012, their reserve prices ranged from £4,000 to £8,000. It is apparent that what collectors want is the real forgery and the story of the Spanish Forger to go with it.

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The story of William Henry Ireland stretches even further back in history, predating the work of the Spanish Forger by more than a century. The immediate

nineteenth-century success of the Spanish Forger pivoted on establishing a unique style of giving audiences exactly what they wanted in the media that they desired. Similarly, Ireland's success hinged on his audience's obsession with all things William Shakespeare. The story of Ireland's forgeries speaks to the power and cachet that objects take on – even after they've been thoroughly debunked. Ireland's fraudulent Shakespeares are simply the story of fakes all the way down.

William Henry Ireland was born in 1775 to a rather unremarkable family in London. His father, Samuel Ireland, was an antiques collector, publisher of travelogues and ardent worshiper of the Bard's literary genius. As a rare book collector in his own right, Samuel Ireland desperately wanted to acquire something signed by Shakespeare himself to enhance his gravitas and reputation as a serious collector. In 1794, William Henry was working in an uninspiring job as a legal assistant, and his father dismissed him as too much of a 'dullard' to be interested in the world of collecting. William Henry desperately wanted to prove his father wrong.

Thus, at the age of 19, William Henry forged a simple business deed that bore Shakespeare's signature, using several old rolls of scrap paper that he considered authentic enough to pull off the feat. 'Having cut off a piece of parchment from the end of an old rent-roll at chambers, I placed a deed before me of the period of James the First, and then proceeded to imitate [sic] the style of the penmanship as well as possible,' Ireland wrote several years later. 'This gave me a deed that formed a lease between William Shakpeare [sic] and John Heminge with one Michael Fraser and Elizabeth his wife, whereto I affixed the signature of Shakspeare [sic], keeping the transcript of his original autographs before me.'

When presented with this 'discovered' Shakespearean deed, Samuel Ireland was ecstatic; it never crossed his mind

that it wasn't genuine. William Henry quickly forged some more items, which were also successful. And on it went. William Henry claimed to have found the Shakespearean documents through a colleague of his from school, and the story was just credible enough to pass his father's scrutiny as well as that of other, notable experts. Over the next year and a half, from December 1794 until 1 March 1796, Ireland faked William Shakespeare's signature on legal documents, drafted a new 'lost' Shakespearean play (one *Vortigern and Rowena*), 'found' another 'lost' play (*Henry II*) and even crafted entries in 'family Bibles'. Anywhere and everywhere that one might hope to see Shakespeare's name pop up, William Henry Ireland ensured that it did.

Samuel Ireland 'treated his new treasures with appropriate idolatry', as contemporary Ireland expert and bookseller Arthur Freeman describes in his overview of Ireland fakes, written for Harvard University. Samuel exhibited the forged discoveries – the public could buy a ticket sold by Samuel, with scheduled thrice-weekly visiting hours – and offered interested subscribers a selection of the better texts, and facsimiles in the form of a four-guinea folio.

The technique for crafting these forgeries wasn't easy, and William Henry used a mixture of methods to hoodwink his father and the public. As he described in his autobiography, *Confessions*, he would often use bits and scraps of seventeenth-century paper that could pass cursory scrutiny, as he had with that first deed. (This was similar to the method of material sourcing employed by the Spanish Forger.) Make your forgery with enough of the real thing, the logic goes, and it helps suspend disbelief in the fake bits.

William Henry varied the spelling of Shakespeare's name in his faked letters and deeds (Shaxpear, Shakespeare, Shaksper, Shakspeare and so on), which would have been in keeping with the different spellings that Shakespeare himself used – an authentic detail to make the forgeries all

the more believable. William Henry also tracked down seventeenth-century quartos, playbills and other pieces that were historically genuine, and then simply add his own signature, signing as William Shakespeare. The method of mixing in real parts to his forgeries was an effective way of keeping up his charade. He also used his forgeries to 'authenticate' previous forgeries, helping him avoid awkward questions about his discovered Shakespearean ephemera and documents.

But procuring the ink for the phony Shakespeares proved somewhat difficult. When he started forging papers, William Henry discovered that Thomas Laurie's bindery – within walking distance of New Inn, where Ireland was cranking out his forgeries – could produce an ink that looked downright Elizabethan by mixing in a little bit of acid to make the ink really froth. When he bought his original vial of old-fashioned ink, he apparently joked with Laurie and his apprentices that he wanted to see if he could use the ink to fool his father into thinking that a document was older than it really was. By the time William Henry needed to refill his inkwell, the fame of his Shakespearean 'discoveries' was well known; yet when he went to the bindery and asked the same assistant to brew him up another batch, no one said anything about anything. 'Although the fame of the manuscripts was perfectly well known to them,' William Henry mused, 'and I was the person supposed to have discovered them.' One can perhaps assume that Laurie and his assistants were so jaded that they simply didn't care what William Henry used the ink for, just as long as he bought it from them. Forsooth, William Henry Ireland paid his shilling for that second vial of ink and kept right on forging.

Samuel Ireland put William Henry's 'discovered' documents together, added his own attempt at a scholarly commentary and published the whole thing as *Miscellaneous*

Papers and Legal Instruments under the Hand and Seal of William Shakespeare on Christmas Eve 1795. Reactions to Samuel Ireland's magnum opus varied, to say the least.

The appeal of Shakespeare cut across all social classes, and offered cultural legitimacy and bourgeois *habitas* to Shakespeare collectors. (One particularly popular item was a love letter Ireland crafted from Shakespeare to his wife, Anne Hathaway, which purported to contain a lock of Shakespeare's own hair.) Everyone loved something about Shakespeare; everyone had something – a character, an experience, something – that they felt could connect them, personally, to the playwright. Ireland's fakes not only fooled members of the English nobility; they even passed the scrutiny of illustrious eighteenth-century scholars like Dr Samuel Parr and Dr Joseph Warton. Upon seeing Ireland's genuine fakes, the learned man of letters James Boswell (friend of renowned playwright Samuel Johnson), was rumoured to have sunk to his knees and kissed the precious relics. The Papers, as they came to be known, were adored by the public, right up until they weren't.

From the start, there were prominent Shakespearean scholars like Edmond Malone, who were dubious of the Papers' authenticity and incredulous that Ireland would have had the good fortune to find so many items that fitted so perfectly with the public's expectations. When Samuel Ireland published *Miscellaneous Papers*, it proved to be one fake thing too many for Malone to handle. In 1796, Malone published a truly blistering book, *An Inquiry into the Authenticity of Certain Miscellaneous Papers and Legal Instruments*, which soundly debunked the Papers as well as William Henry Ireland's stories of discovery. (Malone had scant tact or patience, even, for what he saw as Samuel Ireland's ludicrously amateur publication from the year before.) Malone pointed out inconsistencies in the materials, as well as arguing that their provenances and

details were too odd for them to be authentic Shakespearean documents.

For example, there was a set of handwritten marks on Ireland's *Lear* manuscript's final page that were actually doodles, which William Henry had forgotten to clean up. There was also the business of William Henry taking a few liberties with the original text. In the original *King Lear*, Shakespeare had the audacity to have Lear rant the lines: 'I woud divorce me from the mother's toombe/Sepulchring an adultrass.' These lines, in Ireland's version, became 'I could divorce thee fromme thye Motherres Wombe/And say the Motherre was an Adultrasse ...' Ireland's audiences felt that the second version – the forgery – was a vast improvement, as it helped clarify Shakespeare's pesky subtlety and made Lear's diatribe that much more understandable. *This* is what Shakespeare meant to have written, if only the Bard had had the good fortune to write with the clarity that Ireland imagined Shakespeare could have had. Edmond Malone, however, was having none of it.

Upon Malone's publication of *An Inquiry*, the younger Ireland quickly capitulated and acknowledged that he had set out to dupe his father and the public. In his autobiography, *Confessions*, he wrote that 'it occurred to me, that if some old writing could be produced, and passed for *Shakspear's*, it might occasion a little mirth, and shew how far *credulity* would go in the search for antiquities'.

Incidentally, the Irish playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan purchased the rights to produce the 'lost' Shakespearean play, *Vortigern and Rowena*, from Samuel Ireland. Sheridan even staged a production of it in the spring of 1796 at the Drury Lane Theatre. The actor-manager John Philip Kemble protested vehemently against putting on the play, as he and other actors simply didn't buy into *Vortigern and Rowena's* authenticity and never would. It was rumoured in the theatre world that Kemble purposefully repeated the

line ‘And when this solemn mockery is over’ to make sure that audiences knew very well just what, exactly, he thought about the play. *Vortigern and Rowena* opened on 2 April 1796 – three days after Malone published his *Inquiry* – despite Kemble’s suggestion that a more fitting opening night would be the day before, April Fools’ Day.

‘The final two acts went downhill and the audience, stacked with pro-Malone disbelievers, shouted the actors off the stage,’ as art historian Noah Charney wryly described the incident in his book, *Art Forgery*. ‘It was the one and only performance.’ Early on, Sheridan had noted that, compared with the Bard’s other plays, *Vortigern and Rowena* seemed awfully simplistic and downright inelegant. But if there was a chance that Shakespeare had written *Vortigern and Rowena*, then, by gosh, the Drury Lane Theatre would perform it.

Despite the overwhelming evidence, however, there were many, including Ireland’s own father, who refused to believe that the Papers were fake and that William Henry’s confession was real. Most biographers of William Henry Ireland agree that Samuel believed that his son was simply ‘too dim and shallow’ to create something so accomplished as these forgeries, and that he went to his grave disbelieving his son’s confession – choosing to believe in the veritable power of these forged Shakespearean Papers. Other public enthusiasts felt the same way. Shakespeare carried too much cachet, supporters argued, for these treasures to be dismissed as fake simply because William Henry Ireland had confessed to faking them. ‘The cult of Shakespeare, of Bardolatry, was well established, but the level of Shakespearean scholarship was not,’ author Patricia Pierce Card explained of Ireland’s appeal in *The Great Shakespeare Fraud*. ‘It had long been suspected [by Ireland’s contemporaries] that a cache of Shakespeariana would one day be found, such material having been annoyingly limited until then.

London's literati *wanted* to believe that the "Shakespeare Papers" were genuine.'

Even after William Henry confessed to the forgery, Samuel had the items bound in fashionable Russia leather in three folio volumes – with clasps – and commissioned wooden boxes trimmed in green for three special deeds, including the one that purportedly held the lock of hair attached to the letter to Anne Hathaway. Apparently not satisfied with the public mockery he endured when the forgeries were denounced as such, Samuel went for another round in 1799, when he committed to putting *Vortigern and Rowena* and *Henry II* (another 'lost' play William Henry 'found') to print.

Samuel died, as Arthur Freeman described, 'embattled and bitter', in July 1800, whereupon his heirs put his non-Shakespearean books and relics into auction at Sotheby's in May 1801, all of which sold for a measly £52. The rest of the immediate Ireland family – William Henry's mother and sisters – was anxious to rid itself of this entire affair and sold William Henry's original 170 Shakespearean forgeries to John 'Dog' Dent, MP, a banker, politician and bibliophile, who was rumoured to have paid £300 for them.

But William Henry Ireland's story, like so many stories of fakes, forgeries and frauds, doesn't simply span the 18 months when he was cranking out Shakespeare ephemera. Yes, between 1794 and 1796, he produced those original fake Shakespearean Papers. But it would appear that he wasn't quite ready to let the forgeries go – he was also perpetually broke, and with the ever-present threat of debtors' prison hanging over him, it's not hard to imagine why he opted to pick up his forger's quill again. Incidentally, William Henry found a rather spectacularly brilliant way to capitalise on his celebrity (notoriety?) by *beginning to forge his own forgeries* and selling them as his original genuine fakes.

As early as March 1797, William Henry Ireland sold a set of 10 forged forgeries to his neighbour and lawyer Albany Wallis. For the next four decades, William Henry had a long and, we might say, successful career manufacturing hundreds of artefacts that he often claimed were the famous 1794–1796 ‘originals’. (Recall that William Henry’s mother had sold all of those artefacts to Dent in 1801.) Nonetheless, as rare booksellers note, dozens of these ‘copies’ exist and surface in auctions – but the provenance and the original forgeries are safely authenticated. However, the forged forgeries sell, and sell well, especially to modern collectors.

‘He gave these people only what they were craving, and were eager to swallow,’ claimed art historian Richard Grant White, describing Ireland’s appeal and why so many bought the hoax for so long. But Grant White’s observations of Ireland’s appeal are also apropos to why people were as immediately keen to collect Ireland’s stuff, just as soon as it was revealed that the Papers were fake. He also describes Ireland’s appeal to modern collectors: ‘The real inspiration behind Ireland’s work lay in understanding the psychology of his audiences, and as they cried for more he fed them according to their appetite and capacity of belief.’ The 2012 auction of the Stuart B. Schimmel Forgery Collection boasted several Irelands – everything from letters signed as himself, ‘WH Ireland’, to what was actually authentic Shakespearean ephemera that happened to have Ireland’s signature as ‘William Shakespeare’. Incidentally, but unsurprisingly, Ireland signing as Shakespeare outsold anything signed as ‘WH Ireland’.

Today, William Henry Ireland is one of the most collectable and valuable of the dubious pantheon of Shakespearean forgers, with authentic Irelands fetching anywhere from a few hundred pounds to tens of thousands of pounds at auction. More than just financial cachet,

though, William Henry Ireland's forgeries continue to intrigue scholars. Institutions that have Ireland holdings – like Harvard University – consistently find their Ireland forgeries in use for any number of scholarly research projects.

When Belle da Costa Greene determined that *The Betrothal of Saint Ursula* wasn't a panel by Jorge Inglés and that it certainly wasn't medieval, the Metropolitan Museum of Art declined to buy it. The panel passed through the hands of private collectors for decades, and was eventually gifted to the Morgan Library in 1988 by Martin W. Cooper, in memory of his mother. Today, the panel is an important artefact of Spanish Forger history, and it is rather fitting that the Morgan Library has ended up as its eventual home.

One of the key parts of the Spanish Forger's story (as well as that of William Henry Ireland's shady Shakespeares) hinges on the moment when the art stops becoming something that is merely exposed as 'fake', and begins to become identifiable and collectable in its own right. In 1978, the Morgan Library put together an exhibition that focused specifically on the Spanish Forger's art in its own right – when American art critic Hilton Kramer reviewed the exhibition for *The New York Times*, he referred to the Forger as a 'nineteenth-century artist'. The Morgan Library had hoped that the exhibition would encourage collectors to re-evaluate their own collections and possibly bring more of the Forger's works to light.

The Morgan Library was not disappointed. When Lady Jeanne Campbell Cram – Norman Mailer's first wife – saw the exhibition, she took a second look at an elaborately framed painting of a *Noblewoman Embarking a Ship* in her family collection. She immediately realised that she had

an authentic Spanish Forger. ('Eureka,' she told William Voelkle over the phone, 'I've got one.') Lady Jeanne's grandfather had bought the painting in Paris in the 1920s, and when she brought the painting in its ivory frame to the Morgan for Voelkle's inspection, it quickly became clear how iconic and distinctive the Forger's style is – a non-expert could discover a piece in her collection based on just viewing one art exhibition.

When the catalogue for that Spanish Forger exhibition was going to print, a Californian dealer brought a book of hours, which had formerly belonged to the actor John Barrymore. (A book of hours is a devotional that contained prayers, psalms, and some scriptural text; books of hours were popular during the Middle Ages and often were lavishly illuminated.) Even though the dealer was disappointed that it wasn't a fifteenth-century artefact – although the paper and borders were genuine – Voelkle was thrilled to find that the famous French knight depicted in the book was painted by none other than the Spanish Forger. 'In 1984 John Barrymore, Jr., came up with the idea of a movie script on the Spanish Forger. Naturally he would play the lead, since his father had owned the manuscript, which is now in the Walter Art Museum,' Voelkle reminisced in his book, *The Spanish Forger*. 'The likes of James Coburn, Peter O'Toole, Richard Harris, and Alec Guinness were to be approached as possible participants. For years I had hoped that the film would become a reality.'

These are the sorts of stories that build up the authenticity of the Spanish Forger's art work and make it more real than any sort of validation within the art world. The object – the panel, the book of hours, whatever – had a complex material history that is all its own. Year after year, painting after painting, manuscript after manuscript, slowly the Spanish Forger had become legitimised, and we're more and more willing to move the Spanish Forger's art a

little closer to the ‘genuine’ or ‘real’ side of authenticity’s continuum. There’s little doubt that part of what makes stories like these so compelling is the audacity required to pull off such spectacular fakes, and the ingenuity and expertise essential to unmask them.

Originally, these art forgeries were intended to misguide – they tried to convince potential audiences of their legitimacy. In the world that they live in now, however, they’re more than just debunked art pieces – they’re material objects with complex histories that have lived longer as ‘Spanish Forgers’ than they ever did as pieces passing for authentic medieval works. Similarly, history has categorised Ireland’s Shakespeares – both the original forgeries and William Henry’s own genuine fakes – as forgeries much longer than they were ever considered real. (Ireland’s unique twist, was his forging of his own forgeries.)

The Spanish Forger and William Henry Ireland are just two characters in the long history of art forgery, but they neatly bookend how genuine fakes have become collectable in their own right by giving audiences exactly what they say they want. They become really ‘real’ at the point when they are no longer trying to fool anyone. ‘There is an illusionism to art – and to its authenticity,’ Noah Charney suggests in *Art Forgery*. ‘Sometimes the line between masterpiece and forgery is slender or even invisible. For a crime to be committed, someone or something must be victimized or damaged, whether that is someone specific – a buyer who was duped, for example – or a more abstract harm, such as to an artist’s reputation.’

For today’s audiences, with little risk of being deceived by either artist, the stories can either celebrate the fakers’ ingenuity and artistic prowess, or they can serve as cautionary tales to the over-enthusiastic art collector. But the stories also build the fake’s provenance, ensuring that collectors want the fake that is real – genuine – and not a

knock-off of a knock-off. Consequently, collectable fakes are about rarity and provenance, both of which depend on the logic of desire and economics, not necessarily reason.

‘What would the forger have thought about this ironic state of affairs?’ William Voelkle mused. ‘Would he have been pleased that his works were now collected as forgeries in their own right, and that they could even be sold for more as his own forgeries than as genuine medieval works of art?’

Thus, works by the likes of the Spanish Forger and William Henry Ireland are thus all the more genuine for having been fake in the first place. They are fakes that have become the Real Thing.