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Authorship and Attribution: Forgery and the Power of Names

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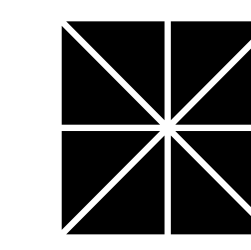
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Authorship and Attribution: Forgery and the Power of Names

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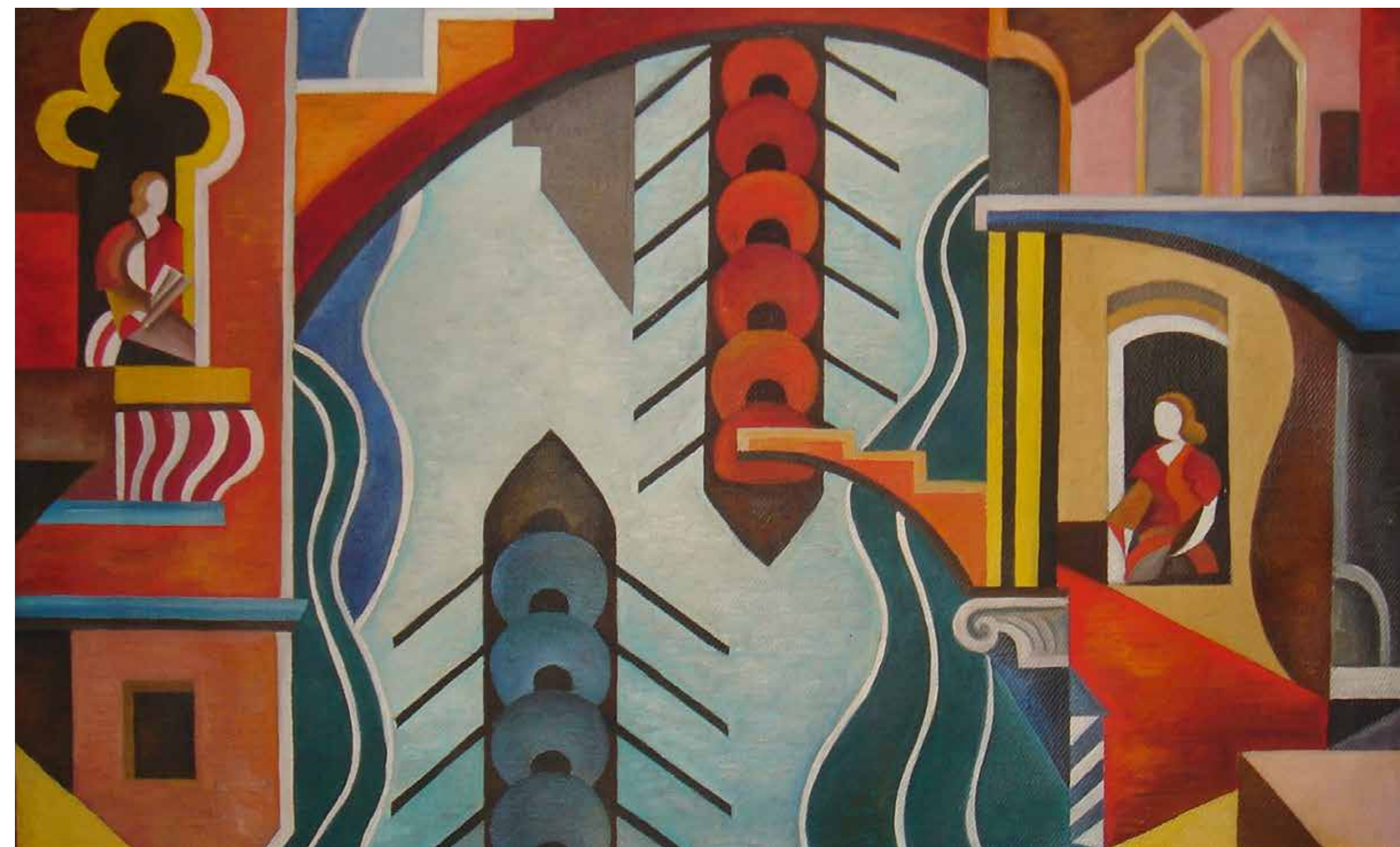
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Introduction

The individualistic culture of the Western art world creates a unique environment for forgery to occur, even flourish. There are a number of things that separate a “fake” from simply a “copy.” It must be produced and sold under deliberate false pretenses. Anyone can create a work “in the style of” a famous artist, or recreate some specific work, but the crime lies in pretending it is an original of the artist.

One key component in certifying art is provenance, or physical documentation. By tracing its path through history, one is better able to prove a work’s origins. Historically, experts, or connoisseurs, who have studied specific artists, have spoken with authority on the authenticity of work based on a visual analysis. In recent years, scientific tests, which examine the layers underneath the surface, and which analyze small samples of paint are becoming more common. With this additional information, experts are able to see if all layers are coherent with the original artist, and if the pigments used are consistent.



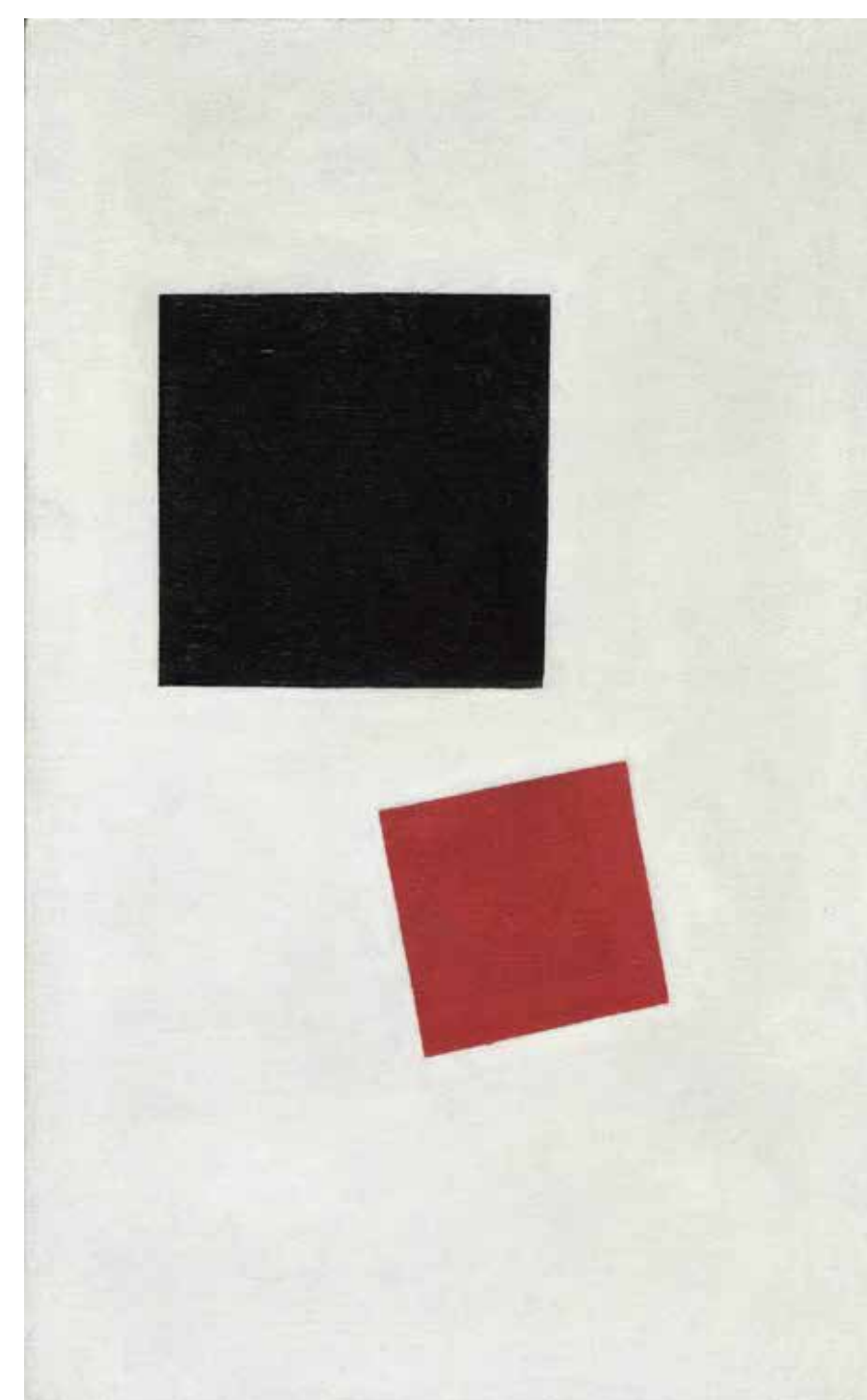
Wolfgang Beltracchi

Heinrich Campendonk’s *Red Picture with Horses* sold for almost 4 million dollars and was said to be the defining Campendonk work. Only it wasn’t by Campendonk at all, but the work of a man named Wolfgang Beltracchi. Beltracchi worked as a forger for nearly 40 years, emulating dozens of artists. He was finally caught by a test revealing a pigment he used in *Red Picture with Horses* was inconsistent with the time period. Beltracchi was sentenced to six years in prison, convicted for 14 forged works, though that is only a fraction of his projected profit of over 100 million dollars. Since his conviction, he has been interviewed and profiled by dozens of media outlets, and now creates paintings in the style of various artists under his own name, which sell for thousands of dollars. His deception rocked the art world, stunning auction houses, galleries, and private collectors, but most especially experts who had certified the authenticity of his works. Beltracchi himself seems to carry no guilt at all for his deception, feeling that his works really are masterpieces. It raises powerful questions on the role of authorship, and the weight that a well known name gives a painting, regardless of the visual experience. For all intents and purposes, these paintings are as beautiful and powerful as authentic works, even fooling Ernst’s widow. The only difference is the authenticity of the signature.



“It’s a business
of illusion.”

– Wolfgang Beltracchi



Operation Malefiz

In 2013, German and Israeli police broke up an alleged international art forgery ring, arresting two men after finding hundreds of suspect works. The investigation went on for five years, at the conclusion of which only four paintings were proven to be fakes. The rest, according to a collaboration of ten international experts, could not be decisively spoken on. Andrei Nakov and Patricia Railing were two connoisseurs consulted, and had sharp differences of opinion on which works were authentic. While both were confident in their assessments, it is impossible not to wonder what things might have consciously or subconsciously influenced their verdicts, including their messy divorce.

Further, the history of Russian avant-garde art is obscured by the Soviet Union’s suppression of modernist art, making tracing a clear provenance difficult. Without being able to rely on connoisseurship or provenance, the only method left is scientific testing, but even this has limits. Tests can effectively date paintings, but they are expensive, and can be tricked by using materials from the period, and if a forger is aware of the possibility of x-ray examination, they can forge multiple layers. This convergence of ambiguity, along with its recent rise to popularity, makes Russian avant-garde art an attractive target for forgers.

Conclusion

Steve Saverwyns, in an article on scientific analysis of art noted that “the interest, and moreover the value of a painting, is often determined by its authenticity rather than by its artistic qualities or upon the skill of the master who painted it.” Is this because we place a premium on originality and artistic genius? Or is it simply a factor of the increasingly commercial nature of the art world? Regardless, authenticity remains a question that everyone is fascinated by, whether they are in it for the art or the money. Everyone likes to think they are on the side of the truth.