So Valuable, It Could Almost Be Real

By PATRICIA COHEN

A personal escort — flying first class to be well rested and alert — will accompany the painting "The Head of Christ" from the moment it leaves the Boijmans Van Beuningen museum in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, until it is safely locked in the vault at Springfield Museums in Massachusetts this month, when it will be exhibited in the United States for the first time.

A 24-hour escort is not an unusual requirement for valuable international museum loans. What makes the security arrangements — estimated to cost more than $31,000 — notable in this case is that the painting is a fake.

And it is not just any fake, but an imitation: Han van Meegeren’s "The Head of Christ" (circa 1939), which imitates Vermeer, is more artifact than art.

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Head of Christ is a Boijmans storage room.

So, in addition to a personal escort, van Meegeren’s "Christ," for example, will have an outside conservator scrutinize every inch of the canvas and frame when it leaves a museum and after it arrives, to report on its condition.

"The Head of Christ" is part of the exhibition "Intent to Deceive: Fakes and Forgeries in the Art World," which includes two other van Meegeren, "The Girl With the Blue Bow," once credited to Vermeer, from the Hyde Collection in Glens Falls, N.Y., and "The Procuress," from the Courtauld Gallery in London.

The show will travel to the Ringling Museum of Art in Sarasota, Fla.; the Canton Museum of Art in Ohio; and the Oklahoma City Museum of Art. Other forgeries in the show are by celebrated con men like Elmyr de Hory, a Hungarian who said he sold a thousand fakes; John Myatt, whose collaborator infiltrated art.

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Forgeries and fakes have their own mystique and now their own show.

Vermeer by the most notorious forger of all: Han van Meegeren, the World War II-era painter whose counterfeits were so convincing that, after the war, he had to create one for witnesses to avoid harsh punishment for selling a national treasure to the Nazi leader Hermann Göring.

Clearly, some forgeries are more equal than others. In New York, buyers of some of the dozens of multimillion-dollar fakes sold through the knobler & Company gallery, now shuttered, have filed lawsuits, complaining that their vaunted Modern masterpieces are now "worthless."

But the Boijmans loan, "The Head of Christ," and other famous fakes with which it is being exhibited in a traveling show retain a valuable mystique.

"They’re not original artworks, but they’re so prestigious that they require the same security measures as an authentic work," said Julia Courtenay, Springfield Museums’ curator of art.

Citing security concerns, the leading and borrowing museums all declined to reveal the works’ estimated worth or insurance information. But the paintings are being treated like the real thing: "The requirements for security are not different from other works we give on loan," said Friso Lammers, the curator of old master paintings at the Boijmans. "Never mind that the accessioned home of "The

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Motivated by stifled ambitions and contempt for experts.

Elmyr de Hory’s 1971 "Odalisque" rather misfits Maritime.

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