

# NOT in it FOR the MONEY

Mark Landis, the Gift Forger

NOAH CHARNEY AND MATTHEW LEININGER



WHITNEY CURTIS PHOTOGRAPH

Most known art forgers have turned to forgery for financial, rather than psychological reasons. But money wasn't a factor in the scheme of Mark Landis – aka Steven Gardiner, aka Father Arthur Scott, aka Father James Brantley and now aka Mark Lanois – when he showed up at Loyola University in New Orleans in February of this year. The interesting thing about his fourth alias that he used at Loyola, is that Landis had presented himself under his given name – Landis – at Loyola 10 years earlier, and had gifted the institution 10 forgeries: all paintings that he had created and passed off as valuable originals. But he accepted no money for these gifts, not even a tax break. His only prize was personal enjoyment in being catered to by the art world while knowing that he had fooled them, that his own works were being accepted into established collections and lauded as Impressionist originals, gifted in his parents' memories.

Mark Landis may be the most famous art forger who has never committed a crime.

Landis is a painter and former gallery owner, and a most unusual type of criminal – one who has yet to break a law. When he arrived at the Hilliard University Art Museum at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, driving a large red Cadillac that had belonged to his mother, Jonita Joyce Brantley, formerly of Laurel, Miss., he introduced himself as Father Arthur Scott. He was dressed all in black, with a Jesuit pin on his lapel.<sup>1</sup> He was carrying a painting that he intended to gift to the museum in memory of his mother, whom he told the staff was Helen Mitchell Scott, whom he said was a Louisiana native. The painting was by American Impressionist Charles Courtney Curran. Under his first alias, Steve Gardiner, he had gifted a drawing supposedly by Jean-Antoine Watteau in 2009, as well as offering the same Curran forgery to the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art in '09.

The Curran painting looked authentic right off the bat. It bore the weathered label of a defunct New York City art gallery on its back. Since it was unframed, Father Scott offered to pay for the frame, and also suggested that he might consider donating more paintings from his family's collection.

The only flicker of suspicion came when a museum employee began to chat with Father Scott about possible mutual acquaintances in the nearby Catholic community, at which point the priest seemed to grow nervous and claimed "I travel a lot," to cover for his inability to recognize local names.

Mark Landis, in the guise of Father Scott, among others, has spent decades creating forgeries and gifting them to museums. He crafted meticulous back-stories for his own alter egos, and for the works that supposedly came from his collection. He never accepted any money for his paintings, even turning down the chance to swap the donated paintings for tax write-offs, and so for some time it was unclear as to whether Landis was actually breaking the law. He was never caught, since he gave only fake addresses and names. As far as anyone knows, he last tried to donate a painting in November 2010, when he presented himself, and a forged drawing, to the Ackland Art Museum in North Carolina, again in the guise of Father Scott.

That same month The Art Newspaper broke the story about Landis and his scheme, running a photograph of him.<sup>2</sup> It seemed the jig was up.

Matthew Leininger, formerly with the Cincinnati Art Museum, has been tracking Landis ever since 2008, when Landis (using his own name) offered to give several artworks to the Oklahoma City Museum of Art, where Leininger worked at the time. Leininger cultivates a dossier of Landis' contacts, sightings and forged works. The earliest donation of a fake by Landis in Leininger's dossier dates to 1985, when one of his forgeries was given to the DeGrummond Libraries at the University of Southern Mississippi. The next is from '87, when a work of his was given to the New Orleans Museum of Art. Leininger has tracked Landis' travels through 20 states and links him with close to 50 museums, including major museums such as the Art Institute of Chicago.

Landis went quiet after the publication of The Art Newspaper article in 2010. It appeared that the publicity might have scared him straight. But on July 25, '11, Leininger received an email from the principal of Cabrini High School in New Orleans. It seemed that a Father James Brantley, who looked remarkably like Landis, had donated an oil-on-copper painting, "Holy Family with Saint Anne," ostensibly by 16th-century painter Hans van Aachen. The principal had become suspicious and contacted Leininger, who has become the go-to researcher for all things Landis. Leininger quickly found that James Brantley was the name of Mark Landis' stepfather, and all signs suggested that the painting was a forgery. It seemed that Landis was still operating, now under yet another pseudonym.

Leininger received a second call shortly thereafter from Brenau University in Georgia. A Father James Brantley donated several pictures to the university, including a drawing attributed to Edith Head, and had also promised a \$100,000 donation. Leininger emailed Landis anonymously and said, in brief, that he was aware of Landis' continued activities and his new name. Landis didn't respond, but the sightings of Father James Brantley abruptly ceased until February of 2012, when he came out under his fourth alias: Mark Lanois. Leininger was contacted by a curator in Muncie, Ind., where she told him that the forger was now operating as Mark Lanois and had gifted another forgery to Loyola University in New Orleans. What is strange is that Landis had been at Loyola 10 years earlier, and gifted them 10 works. Then, 10 years later, he returned to the scene, having exhausted three aliases in five years, and managed to dupe the university once again under the same name with which he duped them a decade ago.

The works Landis created were good enough stylistically to fool a first glance, and had some detail elements, like the worn label on the back of the fake Curran, to pass initial examination but not close scrutiny. The Hilliard discovered that they had been given a fake within hours, as soon as the painting was examined under a microscope and ultraviolet light; but long after Landis had gone – a similar revelation also took place when Leininger alerted his colleagues to his discovery in August 2008. The first work examined by Leininger in August '08 was a watercolor by Paul Signac, in which the same piece was released to the press as a gift of Mark Landis, to the Savannah College of Art and Design. Later, Leininger found this same watercolor in other museums. This was the case as well with the other forgeries that the Oklahoma City Museum of Art had been gifted. Leininger found the same forgeries in other institutions across the country.

Landis didn't try to fool technological investigations with his forgeries. According to John Gapper, who investigated Landis for a Financial Times article, Landis explained his preferred method as follows: he would go to Home Depot, spend about \$6 on supplies, buy three boards cut to the desired size and paste digital reproductions of the works he planned to copy onto the boards. He would then paint directly onto the digital reproductions. The most he would do to give the works the appearance of age would be to scuff the surfaces slightly, as well as distress the paper and boards he used for his forgeries. His goal was only to trick museums into accepting the work into their collections, usually as a gift in honor of a deceased member of Landis' family. Once the work was part of the collection and Landis had left the scene, he didn't seem to mind if the work was found to be fake. His lack of concern with details, creating forgeries that even a non-expert could tell weren't right, shows his disinterest in the lasting effect of his fraud. Landis himself stated that his rationale for perpetrating this unusual scheme was that "Everyone likes to be treated nice."

The financial gains aside, forgers often seek to fool the art community as revenge for having dismissed their own original creations. The art community, its scholars, collectors, curators and salesmen, have proven themselves a forger's best ally, or maybe in this case their worst enemy.

Before money enters into it, the only beneficiary in disproving the "discovery" of a new, potentially valuable work that comes on the market (and may ultimately turn out to be a forgery) is an abstract sense of truth. This holds little sway when thousands, and occasionally millions, of dollars are at stake should the new work be deemed authentic. What if it's deemed an original? Everyone benefits. The owner of the object now possesses a great treasure, to keep or sell for huge profit. The seller, be it an auction house, gallery owner or other middleman, gains his commission. The new buyer, be it a museum or private collector, gains a rare trophy. Scholars are privy to a new object to study, adding to their body of extant works and the knowledge amassed from them. The media can report on a great story, that there are hidden treasures among us, there for anyone to find. The collective wishful thinking of the art world unconsciously conspires to affirm the authenticity of newly discovered works.

This is particularly the case when a museum is handed a gift. Museums rely on gifts to fill their walls – most of the Baroque art at London's National Gallery, for instance, is owned by Sir Dennis Mahon and the works are displayed on loan thanks to his beneficence. The phrase "don't look a gift horse in the mouth" takes on a new meaning. It would shatter the delicate reliance museums have on donors and supporters if they were to look too closely and, heaven forbid, discover something wrong with the gift offered to you.

By creating a work of your own which exhibits your artistic skill to such an extent that it's mistaken for the work of an acknowledged master, the revenge is two-fold. First, it demonstrates that the forger's ability level is comparable to that of the famous master whose work has been forged.

Second, it undermines the so-called "experts" who dismissed the forger's original work in the first place. Of course it undermines the experts privately – until the forgery is revealed, in which case even the capture of the forger can underscore the forger's point and make him feel a victor. For when the forger is caught and his forgeries come to light, the experts he was out to dupe are shown publically to have been fooled. With so many museums and collecting institutions in the United States and abroad, all potential victims of Landis and his breed, Leininger is certain that there are others who have yet to come forward.

In Landis' case, we still don't know the origin of his unusual habit of donating forgeries. He was a diffident, artistic child who was diagnosed with schizophrenia at age 17 and institutionalized for 18 months.<sup>3</sup> He studied photography in Chicago, then became an art dealer in San Francisco. He resided at 16 different addresses between 1985 and 2000.

John Gapper, writing for Financial Times, located Landis shortly after The New York Times reported that Landis "seems to have disappeared altogether." Gapper simply drove to the gated community where Landis' mother had lived and asked the estate manager where Landis was.

According to his story, the manager said that he was in his old apartment where he lived with his mother. His red Cadillac was parked outside and Gapper heard music coming from inside the apartment. He knocked, but Landis didn't answer. A week later, Landis phoned Gapper and invited him to visit. Gapper returned to Louisiana and spent a day with Landis in his apartment. As an apology for not having opened the door when Gapper first knocked, Landis gave him a painting he had done of Joan of Arc, signed with his own name. He ended the meeting with a request: "See if you can smooth things over for me. Tell them I'm not a bad guy. I'm awful sorry if I caused them any trouble."

Landis' fakes would likely fail to stand up to scrutiny in an open-market situation. It is the confidence trick, donating a work and truly gaining no financial advantage, playing on the reliance of museums on donations, that makes the trick so successful. Leininger thinks that Landis might eventually be found guilty of money fraud, as Leininger continues to research a pastel that sold in South Carolina, consigned by a private collector from Mississippi. The pastel forgery that was sold was supposedly by the artist Everett Shinn, entitled "Nymph on the Rocks." This pastel, which sold in March of 2008, was consigned by a private collector who allegedly may have been Landis himself. This same pastel (or an exact copy of it) was gifted by Landis in '02 to a museum in Laurel, Miss.; the pastel is still in their possession. If the private collector from Mississippi was indeed Landis, as some have conjectured, then this would be the first time that Landis may have committed a crime – money and art fraud, since the consignor earned money through the sale of the pastel – something Landis has never before done, as far as authorities are aware.

To be charged with fraud a victim has to suffer a loss. With the possible exception of this 2008 pastel, in which the buyer of the "Shinn" may have been tricked into purchasing a forgery, no financial loss is known to have occurred. So

Mark Landis is out there, having officially harmed no one, but having successfully perpetrated a very bizarre forgery scheme over many years that continues to this day.



*Landis forged this painting by American Impressionist Charles Courtney Curran and offered it to Hilliard University Art Museum at the University of Louisiana.*