

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 imi-

Han van Meegeren’s “The Head of Christ” (circa 1939), which imitates Vermeer, is more artifact than art.

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

tation 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 Knoedler & 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 Courtney, Springfield Museums’ curator of art.

Citing security concerns, the lending 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 than other works we give on loan,” said Friso Lammerse, the curator of old master paintings at the Boijmans. Never mind that the accustomed home of “The

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MUSEUM BOIJMANS VAN BEUNINGEN, ROTTERDAM

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“The 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’s, “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 ar-

chives at the Tate Gallery, the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, to plant fake provenance documents; and Mark A. Landis, a former gallery owner who dressed as a Jesuit priest during the quarter-century he spent trying to donate his forgeries to more than 40 American museums.

What links these men, said Collette Loll, the exhibition’s curator and an art investigator, are “frustrated artistic ambitions, chaotic personal lives and a contempt for the art market and its experts.”

Ms. Loll, who organized the exhibition with the nonprofit group International Arts & Artists, said she was shocked when she heard the \$31,000 estimate for the security arrangements demanded by just the Boijmans.

That sum is close to the \$39,500 that “Christ and the Scribes in the Temple” — the painting van Meegeren created in 1945 to prove he was a forger rather than a collaborator — fetched at Christie’s auction house in 1996.

Forgeries invariably raise knotty questions about the value of art and faith in the market, and fuel cynicism about art experts.

In November, a spirited debate about the value of forgeries played out on the website and

ONLINE: SLIDE SHOW

More images from the exhibition:
nytimes.com/design

pages of The New York Times after the art critic Blake Gopnik declared that forgers could be “an art lover’s friend.”

And last year, Jonathon Keats, who wrote “Forged: Why Fakes Are the Great Art of Our Age,” argued that “forgeries are more real than the real artworks they fake” because “they genuinely manipulate society rather than merely illustrating alternate points of view.”

Interest in counterfeits may have less lofty roots, however. Everybody loves a juicy scandal. The van Meegerens can also draw on the continuing fascination with World War II and the Nazis’ looting of Europe. Hailed as a kind of folk hero during his 1947 trial for having duped Göring, van Meegeren was later shown to be a Nazi sympathizer and inveterate rogue who swindled buyers out of the equivalent of \$106 million.

One of his facsimiles, “The Supper at Emmaus,” cited by the dean of Vermeer scholars as a, perhaps the, “masterpiece of Jo-

hannes Vermeer” was bought in 1938 by the Rembrandt Society of Rotterdam for the Boijmans for 520,000 guilders, the equivalent of about \$6.4 million today. “The Head of Christ,” sold for 475,000 guilders in 1941 (\$4.4 million today), was thought to be a study for “The Supper at Emmaus.”

Part of the enduring lure of the van Meegerens, undoubtedly, is the satisfaction of knowing that the most rarefied connoisseurs were duped by what now look to be ham-handed fakes.

As Jonathan Lopez wrote in his 2008 book about van Meegeren, “The Man Who Made Vermeers,” “Although the best forgeries may mimic the style of a long-dead artist, they tend to reflect the taste and attitudes of their own period.” Biblical scenes tapped into a sentimental and pastoral Germanic tradition, he notes, while the portraits of girls resembled 1920s flappers.

The works in “Intent to Deceive” are less art than artifacts; they have genuine historical significance. In that sense, these fakes underscore the persistent appeal of the real thing. Copies of a van Meegeren fake would not command such costly security precautions or draw visitors.

“The Head of Christ” and its traveling companions are being exhibited precisely because they are authentic — authentic forgeries.



Han van Meegeren’s “The Girl With the Blue Bow” (circa 1934), once credited to Vermeer, is in “Intent to Deceive.”

Artwork So Valuable, It Could Almost Be Real



Elmyr de Hory’s 1974 “Odalisque” mimics Matisse.

Motivated by stifled ambitions and contempt for experts.