

ANTIQUES

Gleaning the True Identity of an Enigmatic Forger

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Published: April 7, 2011

Elmyr de Hory, a Hungarian-born painter known for forging works by Picasso, Modigliani and Matisse, was the subject of biographies and documentaries full of his own lies about his background. In 1976, while under investigation for art fraud, he committed suicide by overdosing on sleeping pills, leaving behind boxes of paperwork that are now yielding some truths.



Elmyr de Hory's self-portrait, from about 1970, was discovered recently in France.

Mark Forgy (pronounced FOR-ghee), a writer in suburban Minneapolis who was Mr. de Hory's assistant and housemate on Ibiza in the 1970s, inherited the archive. He has been poring over it with Colette Loll Marvin, an art historian in Paris. They are conducting interviews and tracking down government records to update a [Web site](#) and to produce a documentary and exhibition, both titled "Elmyr de Hory: The Art and Science of Deception."

"I'm so far down the rabbit hole," Ms. Marvin said in a recent phone interview, "I'm just not going to rest until I find out who this man is."

A few weeks ago, she and Mr. Forgy traveled to western France and unrolled a dozen de Hory paintings that had been discovered in a farmhouse's attic. In Budapest, they found birth records, dated 1906, for

Elemer Albert Hoffmann, son of Adolf and Iren. No one knows when Elemer upgraded his name, or how he financed art studies in Munich and Paris before moving to New York in 1947.

He claimed that his father was a Roman Catholic and a diplomat, but the Budapest ledgers list Adolf as a Jewish merchant. The Nazis killed his entire family, Mr. de Hory said. But a cousin named Istvan Hont visited the artist's villa on Ibiza, where Mr. Forgy was working at various times as a chauffeur, secretary and gardener. Mr. Hont, it turns out, was the forger's brother.

Mr. Forgy knew that his boss copied masterpieces but did not much question their life on Ibiza, in which they kept company with celebrities like Marlene Dietrich and Ursula Andress. "I accepted the amazing with a nonchalance," Mr. Forgy said in a recent phone interview. Mr. de Hory was the focus of Orson Welles's 1974 documentary "F for Fake," and Clifford Irving breathlessly titled his book "Fake! The Story of Elmyr de Hory the Greatest Art Forger of Our Time."

After Mr. de Hory's suicide, Mr. Forgy returned to Minnesota. "I went into deep seclusion" working as a night watchman and house restorer, he said. He held onto the papers and paintings. "I have schlepped them around endlessly," he said. "The walls here in the house look like the Pitti Palace in Florence."

His wife, Alice Doll, encouraged him in recent years to examine the stacks of false passports, Hungarian correspondence and Swiss arrest reports. Ms. Marvin contacted him last year. She had helped organize [a show about faked and stolen art](#) at the National Museum of Crime & Punishment in Washington, including a portrait of a pensive brunette by Mr. de Hory imitating Modigliani.

The researchers are now raising money for the documentary, developing an exhibition for the [Budapest Art Fair](#) in November and preparing to interview a nonagenarian de Hory cousin in Germany. They also plan to send paintings for lab analysis. "We're trying to create [aforensics](#) footprint of his work," Ms. Marvin said.

They already know that Mr. de Hory tore blank pages out of old books for sketching paper and bought paintings at flea markets to scrape and recycle the canvases. His fakes have become collectibles. Last fall, at a Bonhams auction in England, a buyer paid more than \$700 for a seascape of crowded sailboats, with a forged Raoul Dufy signature on the front and "Elmyr" on the back.