

Fakes and Frauds

Ed Dittus

If you collect anything you will eventually be faced with a fake. By fake, I mean an object intended to deceive. There are many good reproductions of arms and armor and art and other objects but they are marked in such a way that their origin is clear.

I am talking about fakes, lying pieces of **** that separate you from your money. And I will shortly talk about one faker in particular, a conniving bastard named Joe Walter of Missouri (deceased).

To be very, very clear, by "fake" I mean specifically objects that are not what they are represented to be, or what they appear to be. This is totally independent of the specific words that a seller might use. As Johnathan Turley says:

res ipsa loquitur: The thing speaks for itself.

A Luger with Adolph's name engraved in a Comic Sans type face, heavily adorned in golden swastikas is a fake no matter if the seller says "I don't know if it's real". The object itself deceives.

A fantasy piece, on the other hand, is something that does not imitate a real object: it is made up, a figment, a fantasy. The problem arises when such an object is *represented* as being authentic. The piece itself assuredly speaks honestly, it is the human agent that lies. In that context, the fantasy piece becomes a fake.

This little missive will, as is the wont of it's author, flit from topic to topic,

using examples as they emerge in the writers consciousness. But the theme is fakery and how it manifests itself in objects of interest to collectors.

Some years ago, in the early 80's I believe, I was interested in American swords and pole arms. Thru a friend I was exposed to an outfit called "The House of Swords and Militaria".



I got my hands on a catalog and immediately felt a buzzing on the edges of my consciousness. That's a lie. I KNEW something was really wrong. The catalog was full of rarities, real rarities. Stuff that just does not come on the market. And one of a kind things. All represented as real and authentic.

Things like this:

This is an example of the aforementioned "fantasy piece", something that is not a fake because the original never existed. It is made up, hokum, bullshit.



"But ... but ... but", you think as you push down the rational part of your brain (and my carefully worded warning), "maybe there were just a FEW and THAT is why no one knows about them".

Ah! The wishful thinking of the true collector!! No, I did not get suckered in by this piece of shit, I was far too clever for that.

An aside: Years before, I vacationed in that vast desolation that is called Maine. There was a little antique store there and they had a knife that looked like this:



The one they had (and that I bought for \$60) was a bit different, there was

no swastika on the blade, just the makers name "Eickhorn", all correct I might add. Now I don't collect Nazi stuff, it is pretty distasteful IMHO but this was just damn odd and was not terribly expensive and, as all collectors know, there is always the chance of finding "something" that is rare, unknown, valuable, ONE OF A KIND etc etc. This was my first exposure to "fantasy" pieces. Pure bullshit, made up. Doubtless made by Eickhorn (a big supplier to the Nazis) but post WW2 and for the GI trade. Do not forget that US (and other) troops occupied Germany and many of these soldiers never saw combat. Yet they needed some sort of souvenir with martial overtones. And the presence of Swastikas on such an object was a definite plus. Somehow, inexplicably, the market met this demand. Keep this in mind the next time you see one of Hermann Goring's many Lugers.

In fact, a good reason for not collecting Nazi stuff, aside from the ethical, is that it is faked left and right. It started right after the war when factories assembled left over pieces. Were they "authentic"? Welllllllllllll ... yeah, but "not of the period".

I recall buying an Officer's Saber of Civil War vintage in the little town of Lambertville, across the river from New Hope Pa. Nice sword but there was something ... wrong ... the blade (nicely engraved) was worn, very worn. The hilt, pristine. All authentic but slapped together. A Frankensword.

A truth that is oftentimes lost on the collector is that legitimate manufacturers of the real deal, collectible whatever, are there primarily to make money. If the war ends and they have a ton of parts, worn, unworn, damaged, etc. etc. their guiding principle is to turn inventory into cash. If a collector or two gets bamboozled well, tough.

I digress ...

So Mr. Walter was a faker. His catalogs were wondrous collections of stuff that, if real, would have commanded tens of thousands of dollars.

And the prices!!! You could buy decorations: Pour le Merite for peanuts!! Crusader armor!!! And concentration camp garb and badges and whatnot: all fake. I should take the catalog that I have and scan it in it's entirety. Absolutely amazing stuff. And for virtually free.

That is actually not entirely true. There were real pieces, enough to provide an out to the seller as we shall see.

Anyway, I was hooked. I bought two or three swords, a Naval Cutlass, a Dragoon Saber and something else, I think. All of them might have cost \$600.

The alarm bells, which were going off full time but muffled, became a bit louder when the stuff arrived.

I was not an expert at the time, and I'm probably not much better now, but even then the things looked *WRONG*. The cutlass grip was almost suede like in appearance, the wire wrap on the grip of the Dragoon saber was not like examples I had seen.

"Then again", I told myself hopefully, "these things were made by the tens of thousands and by many, many suppliers and therefore variations were not

only possible, they were probable. Why, given that, a perfect example would be suspect!!!"

<I am willing to bet real money that the above strikes a familiar chord, even if you won't admit it>

n.b. the grips of real in-service US Naval Cutlass' did not have the brass wire wrapping (it would corrode in seconds) and were generally varnished to protect the leather.

Evidentially they were in service up to the time of WW2. This is what a real one looks like:



Anyway, the Gods were chortling at this point as they looked down.

So, in order to examine the pieces better, I started cleaning them. I was cleaning the Dragoon Saber when I noticed something on the blade. Was it writing? Maybe, but it was damn small. I cleaned it and looked closely. The

letters swam from the mists of disbelief and stood out clearly:

hecho en España

hecho en España

hecho en España

hecho en bloody España

I checked my Spanish English dictionary to be sure but, yes.



Then I got mad.

SOB cheated ME!!!!

CHEATED ED!!!!!! ME!!!!!!!



I did what any aggrieved 'Merican would do, I called the FBI. Really. I WAS pissed!! Interstate commerce and all.

To not put too fine a point on it, the patient and bemused agent explained

that Mr. Walter was really sorta small time. He pointed out that if I confronted him he would doubtless give me my money back, no questions asked. He'd say that he was a legit guy but bad things can slip thru.

That's exactly what happened. Got back every penny.

I understand that Mr. Walter was shot to death in a parking lot some years ago. Something about bags of nickels or something.

American sword collectors who are "in the know" still watch out for Mr. Walters' fakes at shows.

There is a lesson here, damned if I know what it is though.

A word on Armor. I collected in this area for a while. The difficulty (aside from the insufferable nature of my fellow collectors ... "Well that piece of yours has some problems. Take a look at my example, it is flawless" etc.) was fakes and fakery. Back in the Gilded Age, any self respecting, affluent white guy with a library needed, desired, required a suit of armor or two. Problem is that real ones, nice ones were a bit hard to come by.

Enter Guy Laking (I use him as an exemplar, there were others). Sir Guy was Master of the London Museum and the Wallace and the collection at Osborne House. An aristocrat. A scholar. If he passed judgment on an object you could take it to the bank. Back then, academics in the employ of institutions could ethically <ahem> "consult" <ahem> with auction houses and other outlets on the authenticity of their wares.

What could possibly go wrong? Hint: it did. Thing is that the fakes from back then are 100+ years old. They have some real age. Tough to tell.

I had an associate who, back in my armor collecting days, said that "you can always tell a fake". He made the case that materials and style and manufacturing skill would always inform the connoisseur of trickery. The connoisseur, the conceit ran, through years of examining examples would simply be *able to tell*.

It *is* a reassuring conceit to believe that if you are spending thousands of dollars on a piece that you actually know what you are talking about. It is, of course, bullshit from top to bottom. The best fakers (of armor and arms and everything else) are every bit as skilled as their forbears of 500 years ago. With armor, the steel used can be obtained from old, damaged pieces whose value is paltry. So if neutron bombardment is used to ascertain the composition of the steel, it will test out as old. Note that until the development of the Bessemer Process, certain elements (Molybdenum for example) could not be combined with iron, the furnaces were not hot enough. If you find Molybdenum in the object it is new, relatively.

Here are the lames of a gauntlet. The metal was sourced from a 17th century breastplate, the gauntlets were "repaired" in 1995. In 50 more years, these gauntlets will be "correct".

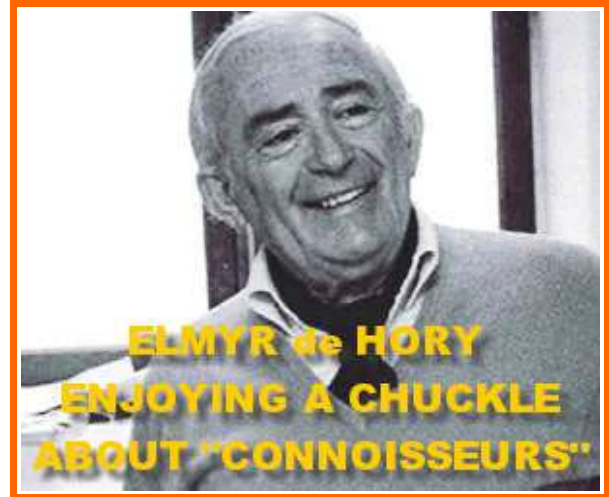
And, of course, there is no guarantee that the pieces so carefully examined in order to support one's connoisseurship were good in the first place. The cynic simply smiles at the



assertion.

All of the foregoing eloquently explains my lack of interest in pursuing Arms and Armor collecting.

Another slight digression ... Elmyr de Hory was a faker par excellence. His stuff still, doubtless, hangs in august museum halls:



"To get a glimpse of the scale of de Hory's scam, during his time in the United States, de Hory's works were bought by reputable art galleries such as Niveau Gallery and the now disgraced and defunct Knoedler & Co in New York, who acquired fake Modiglianis. At the same time, art museums also purchased the fakes. For example, he sold a forged Matisse to the Atkins Museum of Fine Arts, and a fake Picasso to the William Rockhill Nelson Gallery of Art, both in Kansas City. Unfortunately, there is no such thing as an inventory of de Hory's fakes, which makes it impossible to know the whereabouts of his forgeries and how many exist."¹

So it is with firearms. Sure, there are tells that signal something fishy but for the best fakes there are, by definition, no signs.

It is like asserting that a perfect murder is possible. "Oh yeah? Show me one!". You can't. Obviously, by definition.

How does the collector protect him or herself? Unless one is going to buy "a Luger" to have a "type" and that is the end of collecting, one needs to focus a bit. And to focus one needs to buy books, frequent collector web sites and ask many, many questions.

That said what are the things that one ought to look for, from a 10,000 foot level as it were?

n.b. Recognize that there are ~~probably~~ definitely exceptions to everything that I am about to say.

T.E. Lawrence, in his book "Crusader Castles" wrote, in describing them, that they present a

"series of exceptions to some undiscoverable rule"

and so it is with firearms and, particularly, Lugers.

Remember, also, that collectors suffer from a yea-saying mental illness. Even though they know damn right well that something is bad, they will all too often look for excuses to overlook obvious flaws. There are some things, though, that are simply beyond the pale.

Often the faker will assemble parts of different ages and degrees of wear. If you see a pistol with a pristine finish take a look at the bore. Is it worn or is it's condition commensurate with the rest of the piece? I have seen very nice, almost pristine pistols with bores that were shot out.

Which brings us to a question of definition. When does a "refinished" anything become a fake? My definition is "when it is decidedly not what it purports to be". A pristine Luger with shot out bore is a fake. Period.

Take a look at this ... Mauser m. 1914
Kriegsmarine!!!! Pristine!!!! Look at the
mark!!!

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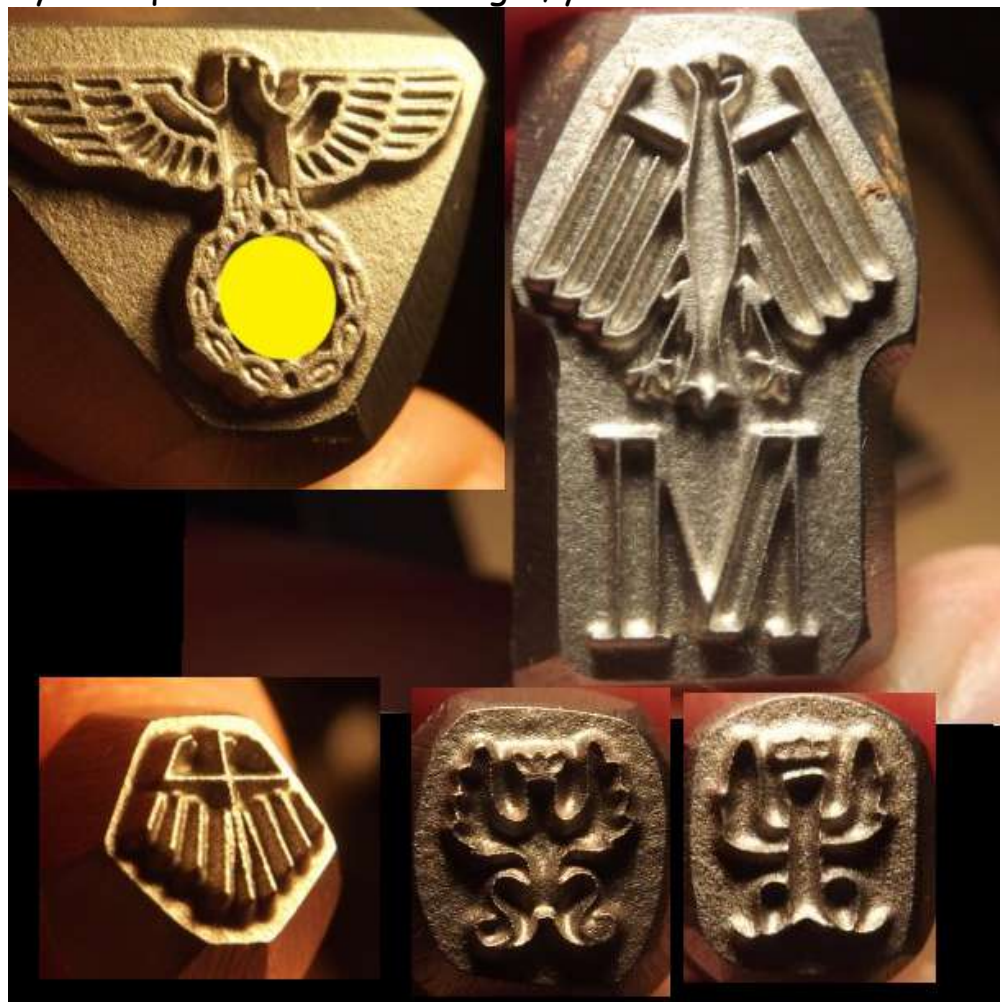


Really? Look at this:



Two day delivery, direct from Poland.

In fact, if you require a different Eagle, you need but ask:



The amusing thing is that they blank out the Swastika (so no one is offended) on an object whose only purpose is to enable lying and theft.

Anyway, the point is that a "mark", per se. is not terribly meaningful without a context. And the context is the gun in it's entirety as well as the provenance.

Tom Hoving was the Director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

"... (He, Hoving) would later declare that 40% of MET works are fake, before adding that it is a very widespread phenomenon. The Museum of Elne (Pyrénées-Orientales) indeed holds the rope, with 60%. As for the Mimara Museum in Zagreb, almost all of the 3,754 works are allegedly counterfeit."²

I quote this because museum curators (and their staff) have as job #1 assuring that fakes do not enter their hallowed halls. They studied their pursuit in college and their only job is to view, handle, analyze, examine and evaluate the objects which constitute their lifelong focus. They see and assess thousands of pieces.

And they are fooled.

Regularly. Repeatedly.

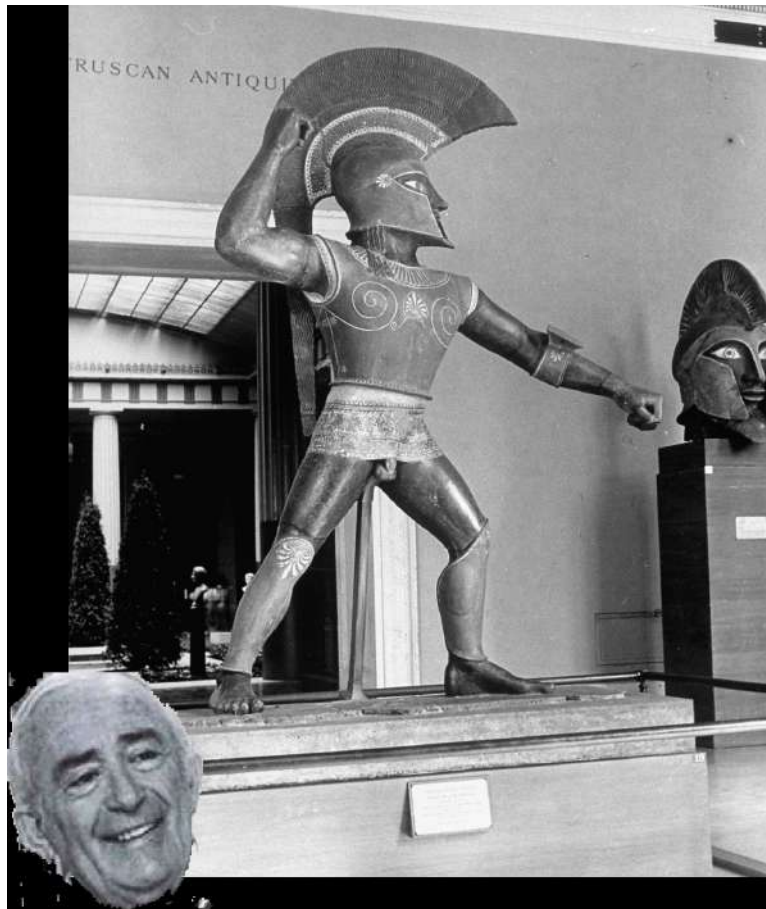
At the risk of overstaying my welcome, note the picture, below.

IN 1933 AT THE METROPOLITAN Museum of Art in New York, three Etruscan warrior sculptures of black terracotta clay towered over their audience in an all-new exhibit. The ancient art, believed to be from the fifth century B.C., had never been displayed

before: two warriors stood eight and six feet high, and a four-foot tall head stared into the audience from under its war helmet and big, curly beard.

The curator who acquired them, John Marshal, wrote "I can find nothing approaching it in importance," in a report for the museum; these pieces challenged known history of ancient Italian art. They were in amazing condition.³

<https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/etruscan-forgeries-met-museum-art>



But wait, there's more:

There was just one problem: they were fakes. And for the 28 years they were on proud display, even skeptical experts couldn't help the Met evade one of the most embarrassing scandals of the art world.

Dear, dear Elmyr is certainly enjoying himself.

But sometimes there is a happy ending (I think).

So I knew (vaguely) a dealer guy, saw him at shows next to another old pal.

Went to the Sarasota show a while back and didn't see the person in question and asked after him. "He's dead" was the response. :shock:

Hate that. Anyway, I looked down with a suitably sad expression on my face.



When decency permitted, as most collectors will, I asked after the guys possessions. A rolling stone, as we all know, gathers no moss. Turns out they

were being auctioned off by a small place near me. Online I might add.

This is getting long but stay with it, there is a point.

My other pal, the one that was still alive, said "his stuff was bad. He monkeyed with it". Now, as we all know, that is thinly veiled code for "he creates fakes". I had heard this about the departed before so was not surprised. I entered the lists with eyes wide open.

I bid on a bunch of things, some tools, old ammunition (ca. 1940's) a few books and a Luger. As you know, I do not collect them.

I figured I would not go over \$800-900 and if I prevailed I would get a shooter that I could sell at any point for \$1000 or more. No brainer.

As it transpired, I got the attached for \$800. I picked it up, took a look and said "refinished, faked".

I took it apart. Then I realized that while I know a bit about WW1 Lugers, I know nothing about those made after WW1.

The serial appeared in 15 places, correct as it turns out. The initially worrisome lack of metal in the white in the guts of the thing was proper.

And so it went.

Looked at it again. Dunno. Something is wrong. The finish is almost too good.

But then again, when a gun is refinished there are a couple of tells ... often (I won't say "usually") there is some evidence of corrosion. One or two places where the rust ate into the metal. Tiny. When the thing is refinished the new finish is OVER the corrosion. That is a 100% give away that the thing was refinished.

Also ... another tell is when the parts don't have the same wear. Remember my officer's saber. With a gun, if two parts have the same SN they ought to be the same age, not necessarily the same wear but they have to have the same "feel" of age.

Then there are the stamps. The Germans liked to stamp stuff. Serial numbers, proofs, inspection marks etc etc. Some were put on after the bluing, some before. Either way they tend to be sharp. When a gun is refinished it is buffed as part of the metal prep. There is no way of "lightly buffing" a tiny inspection stamp. And if the area is not treated the same as surrounding areas it stands out. No way around it.

My purchase is perfect. Too good. See what I mean?

I am coming around to the position that it is good. Thing is that it is like the paranormal: we really WANT it to be true so we have to be doubly cautious about accepting evidence. As Carl Sagan said "extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence".

I was just looking at the high points and muzzle. That is where you expect some holster wear and it is worn in those areas, not a lot but it shows wear. That is good.

The thing that is convincing to me is the serial on the firing pin (yes, Virginia, the Germans serialized the firing pin). It is unworn like the rest of the serial stamps. If the thing had been fired, it wouldn't look that way.

So, provisionally, I have a 95%+ 1939 Luger that might be worth \$2500???

More? Less?

Now ... how could this have been faked?

Well, you might start with a pristine receiver or one or more parts in great

shape with or without serial numbers. You would then obtain after market parts or authentic parts maybe. Then administer the stamps and refinish all of them at the same time. Different finishing batches look different. Then assemble.

For \$800? Also ... why hang onto it? Dump it at the first show.

Then again, the sainted Harold Peterson in his book "Is It Fake?"⁴ pointed out that there are people that fake things for shit and giggles and the cost is simply the cost of their hobby.

Read about Mark Landis. Hilarious stuff, Lulz aplenty. In a nutshell, Mark created fake works of art and donated them, sometimes while wearing Priest's garb, to smaller museums. Never took a penny. Did something "wrong" but not illegal.

As an aside, I contacted Mark on the occasion of my Wife's birthday. He kindly (for a small fee) produced this

Is there a Luger Mark Landis? I would be shocked if there weren't

As Peterson observed, some people do it for lulz. I saw a Luger once that was faked. The dealer knew the story. The faker bought a modern barrel, invested in the stamps, lovingly refinished the thing and then sold it for pennies (relatively) on the dollar.

On this example the issue is lack of wear, everything is pretty good.

I have pistols from 110 years ago that are pristine in the truest sense of the word. If you saw a gun of modern manufacture in that condition you would not hesitate to buy it as new. It happens. People buy a "thing" and stick it in a drawer for 30 years then die then their kid finds it and tucks it away and so it goes for a few generations. Then a snowflake finds it and shrieks and I

charge \$12.35 to come take it off their hands.

I think I mentioned this story but one time I brought a helmet to the Met for their opinion. The curator observed that they never see really untouched stuff so that if they ever did (unknowingly) they would probably call it fake since they would rather miss a real one then accept a phony one.

Happy collecting.

References

- 1: <https://artcollection.io/blog/elmyr-de-hory-fiction-and-facts-surrounding-the-famous-art-forgery#:~:text=To%20get%20a%20glimpse%20of,York%2C%20who%20acquired%20fake%20Modiglianis.>
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- 3: <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/etruscan-forgeries-met-museum-art>
- 4: Peterson Harold. How to tell if it's a fake: Trade secrets revealed for antique collectors and dealers. Charles Scribner's Sons; 0 edition (January 1, 1975)