



The Art Forger

Barbara A. Shapiro

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Almost twenty-five years after the infamous art heist at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum—still the largest unsolved art theft in history—one of the stolen Degas paintings is delivered to the Boston studio of a young artist. Claire Roth has entered into a Faustian bargain with a powerful gallery owner by agreeing to forge the Degas in exchange for a one-woman show in his renowned gallery. But as she begins her work, she starts to suspect that this long-missing masterpiece—the very one that had been hanging at the Gardner for one hundred years—may itself be a forgery. *The Art Forger* is a thrilling novel about seeing—and not seeing—the secrets that lie beneath the canvas.

The Art Forger Details

Date : Published May 21st 2013 by Algonquin Books (first published 2012)

ISBN : 9781616203160

Author : Barbara A. Shapiro

Format : Paperback 384 pages

Genre : Mystery, Fiction, Art, Historical, Historical Fiction, Contemporary

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From Reader Review The Art Forger for online ebook

Delee says

I will start by saying that my experience reading The ART FORGER was like I sat down to watch the movie Heat, and for some reason the movie Quick Change ended up in my DVD player by accident.

Okay maybe I am exaggerating a bit, but it was a much lighter read than I had expected...

I kept looking at THE ART FORGER on other people's "to read" list and was kind of on the fence about it. Then I was sitting down watching Anderson Cooper on CNN, and he had a segment on the Gardner Museum Heist. Even though I knew that Barbara Shapiro's book was a work of fiction based on a factual event, I decided to buy it, and start reading it that night -that is the nice thing about e-books when you decide to read something, it is right there at your finger tips -like candy bars near a cash register.

This is a really fun book. It has a little bit of everything -mystery, romance, suspense, art history, and everything you would ever want to know about art forgery but were afraid to ask.

~?~Autumn♥♥ says

I enjoyed this so much that I will have to read it again sometime. I also need to get more of her books.

Harry says

I'll make a confession right off the bat: I didn't give The Art Forger 4 stars because I was blown away by the prose, scene, setting, or characterization. Had those been up to snuff I'd have given it an easy 5. There are some flat characters, relies somewhat on stereo typical thinking about artists and their studios, it sports some letters written by someone else in stand alone chapters which jar a bit with the first person view point (one would assume our heroine would have no knowledge of these letters and so these chapters intrude, come across as the author stepping into the novel herself to ensure our understanding).

B.A. Shapiro's debut novel asks one simple question: "what would any of us be willing to do to secure our ambitions?" The setting for the novel is the modern day art world where artists, critics, curators, galleries, gallery owners, and yes, forgers collaborate to create one of the most lucrative enterprises in the world. I mean, really! Today most of us don't bat an eye when we think of sport franchises and multiple million dollar annual salaries being handed out for working six months out of a year. But when one single painting goes for millions of dollars just because it survived time and was painted by a certain individual a slight eye brow is raised and as we lean closer to what appears to be a group of nubile and plump (I won't say fat!)bathers hanging out together we do wonder what the big deal is with this artist (as opposed to the plethora of current day painters). We know something's different, something photographs can't capture, something in the glow of the skin, something about the essence of the thing. But, millions of dollars? Give me a break, right? And what if you're a painter yourself and say: "Hell, I can do that." You proceed to paint it and yet do not secure

your ambitions...or do you?

I am a painter myself. The very first time I knew I wanted to paint as a life's ambition was when, as a boy, I viewed the work of Maxfield Parrish, the 20th century american illustrator and fine artist. It rocked my world. The painting seemed to be lighted from the inside. Light didn't fall on it, it streamed from it. Have you ever viewed a kodachrome slide? Held it up to the light and felt the delicious wash of saturation, of color as you viewed it? That's what a Maxfield Parrish painting does. It was a view of the world, but a better one. In my twenties I spent years perfecting the Parrish technique (which harkens back to Bellini and later artist such as Degas) and to this day the paintings glow in my home, though, I don't paint in this manner anymore due to the incredible amount of time it takes in between glazings.

So, imagine picking up what you hope is a decent mystery surrounding the art world and discovering further clues on the very techniques I've attempted to master and discovering a solution to a gnarly problem that has long escaped me (Why isn't there a writer who exclusively authors mysteries taking place in the art world, as for example Francis does with horses and Dunning does with books?).

One of the things I love about this book is its verisimilitude. Shapiro is absolutely correct in communicating factual techniques, but also communicates very accurately the immense satisfaction that comes from painting in this style: techniques discovered in the 14th century, techniques for which most artists today do not have the patience. I know it, because I've done it myself. That she clued me in on a Dutch compatriot, on how to get around the drying time in between glazings will result in my picking up this style again, in my later years. So this book educates, displays a true compassion for the work while it entertains as is the case in the aforementioned works of Francis and Dunning.

The other thing that I love is Shapiro's plot: the whole concept of mysteries surrounding works of art. There are so many things we do not yet understand historically about the lives of various artists; so many paintings still missing after being plundered through war and outright theft. I mean, if a painting can be worth millions than it goes to follow that some would kill for it. Isn't that what drives most mystery/detectives? I mean: it's like walking into a second-hand bookstore with nothing but pristine, signed first editions, jacket flaps in impeccable order, on sale for \$1. Right? Though no one is murdered in this one, Shapiro has given us an excellent Who-Dun-It, one that will surely spark your interest in the art world, in art, in what makes a painting beautiful, in the ambition that drives artists to do what they do, as well as what destroys them.

As I said: this book is about ambition.

Pamela says

It was a love/hate relationship; a mixed bag reading experience.

"Without light nothing can be seen. And with it, still so much is unobserved."

I enjoyed the art techniques described succinctly - painting, curing, aging, framing. Quite fascinating! Time, talent, and eye-for-details. Art history, art appreciation, collector's obsessions, and the Gardner Art Museum heist were other founding plot-drivers that I found fascinating, along with literary elements.

The mystery, though thoroughly interesting and clever, wasn't anywhere close to "thrilling" as claimed on the dust jacket. In all fairness, most literary mystery novels typically aren't. They are slow burners, methodical and layered in pace and plot. And in this particular case, somewhat predictable and caricature stereotypical. I could visualize the characters and setting quite clearly, but there wasn't anything distinctive about the lot that set them apart from similar works of fiction.

As for the characters, there just wasn't anyone I connected with or found likeable. The one exception was Madame Gardner. I did enjoy her letters to her niece. I'm not sure why, but she reminded me of the Unsinkable Molly Brown - but with a bit more class.

Lastly, the off-color language and loose morals and sketchy ethics left a pungent scent in the air. A scent that bitters and detracts. And that, along with the above mentioned disconnects, was the deciding factor to round down - not up.

3.5

THREE *** Literary Mystery: Contemporary in Voice, Historical in Reach, Slow Burning *** STARS

Anmiryam says

The best parts were the tidbits about the process of forging an old master painting. While the writing is never bad, it's bland. Lackluster prose really inhibits the narrative voice of Claire, the forger of the title, who never comes to life on the page. Her naïveté after having been burned once by a man, only to let it happen again is astonishing, yet we never understand why she seems to be so easy to dupe. On top of the her unexciting narrative tone, Shapiro includes an ongoing correspondence between the collector Isabella Stewart Gardner and her niece which is both stylistically unconvincing and a cheap trick -- the letters themselves are available to the reader, but are presumed to have been destroyed in the fictional universe they are meant to illuminate.

Most readers will know the conclusion long before Claire and the obtuse museum officials (the 1990 Gardner museum robbery seems to have done little to increase the saavy of the members of the Boston and New York art scene on display here). I have a couple of books about Han van Meegeren waiting for me back in Pennsylvania, which I expect will prove to be far more thrilling than this dull 'thriller'.

Diane says

This is a novel that is based on a true crime: a \$500 million art heist at the Gardner Museum in Boston in 1990. The story centers around artist Claire Roth, who is good at making reproductions of famous paintings. Early in the book, a dealer asks Claire to make a forgery of one of the Edgar Degas paintings that was stolen from the Gardner. Claire recognizes that she's making a deal with the devil, and part of her payment is she

gets her own art show.

The novel includes chapters about Claire's background, which involve a doomed love affair with an older artist, and there are also letters from Isabella Stewart Gardner to her niece. Isabella was the person who originally bought the paintings in the museum and was friends with numerous artists in the late 1800s. The flashback chapters, the letters and the present-day action slowly build toward solving the mystery of the stolen painting.

I enjoyed the artistic aspects of the novel, especially the details of different forgers and the skills they used to make such believable reproductions. However, I found the romantic parts of the story to be tedious and too much like chick-lit. There was also a critical decision in Claire's back story that I don't believe any self-respecting artist would make.

Despite these minor irritants, I enjoyed the novel and would recommend it to friends who are interested in the art world.

Jodi says

Sorry, could not care if Claire was successful or not. I know we were supposed to be sympathetic toward her, why else for the youth prison volunteerism, but she was too untrustworthy. When I read it, it appeared as if she knew all along that she was making a forgery so that Aidan could sell it as the original but by the end of the book she had miraculously convinced herself that all she was doing was making a copy of a copy and that isn't a crime. Of course she had her penance of never knowing if her paintings are selling because of her talent or her notoriety. Really? Tough break for a felon.

Few too many loopholes in the story, and the devotion of her friends seemed unfounded (most I could glean - the men liked her because she was attractive—although Rik was thrown in as a gay man). Oh, and I almost giggled each time Aidan's finger was in jeopardy.

Did like the art background, the explanation of techniques and the premise. Just couldn't care if Claire was thrown in jail or not.

Jaylia3 says

Based on a real life, still unsolved art heist at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, The Art Forger manages to include more details about brush strokes and forgery techniques than I knew existed in a gripping story of artistic obsession. Claire Roth is a struggling young artist, blacklisted by the art establishment for a perceived crime against one of their darlings. She pays her bills by copying famous works of art for an above board online retailer. Then she makes a devil's bargain by agreeing to forge one of the stolen paintings, a Degas masterpiece, in exchange for having her own work shown in a prestigious gallery owned by Aiden Markel, a man she has feelings for.

Claire knows what she is doing is illegal, but like many characters in the book whose motivations complicate the plot, Claire for a time allows herself to be convinced that what she personally wants supports greater good. When Claire comes to suspect that something is not quite right about the painting Aiden has given her

to copy, her investigation leads her to research the museum where the painting was hung, the museum's colorful, world traveling founder Isabella Gardner, and the life and techniques of the artist Degas.

Interspersed between chapters told from Claire's point of view are lively nineteenth century letters about Degas and the European art scene of the time from Isabella Gardner to her beloved niece.

Vonia says

I loved that I recognized many of the locations mentioned here, like The Back Bay, The South End, Newbury Street, The Mandarin Oriental Hotel, The Museum Of Modern Art, of course the Isabella Stewart-Gardner Museum. I have actually long held a little-known fascination with the Gardner heist, primarily because of the idea that her will induces the museum board to leave empty frames in their place, even decades after the only unsolved large-scale art heist. It is unsettling, moving, eye-opening, and an entire mix of feelings to stand in front of these empty frames, something that could not have been created in any other situation. Something I am sure Isabella Gardner never could have foreseen when she wrote her will that way, but, somehow, based on what I have read about her character, I am sure it is exactly the way she would have loved it to be.

One might guess Shapiro's background is in the arts, but, no, she simply has done her research. The detailed painting techniques Claire Roth, the protagonist, uses for her side commissions for "Reproductions.com" (from the stripping to the layers to the baking), the methods of detection used by Claire herself as well as the authorities (Stretcher bars, frames, paint fissures, paint stroke directions, but mostly a lot of experience and/or intuition), the way characters interact in the fine art world, the real-life characters John Myatt, Ely Sakhai, Han Van Meegeren (These characters each have amazing stories in their own right, the latter having become so masterful at reproducing Dutch paintings that, in order to evade prosecution, he had to confess a painting he had sold to The Nazis was one he had painted. As it was so good that they still did not believe him, experts watched as he went through the entire process, reproducing the painting again.)

I do greatly appreciate Impressionism, even "Realism", as art historians and Degas himself has been quoted to categorize his work. I have always been a fan of Degas' Dancer Series in particular.

The suspense level was about right. Although I do feel there was a little too much DaVinci Code. By this I mean a little overwhelming, unnecessary side plots, information, etcetera.

In all, a great read.

Teresa says

This book is not my usual cup of tea, but the impending holidays have a way of getting me out of my usual zone (including sampling tea I wouldn't normally drink due to an Advent tea calendar) to indulge in a fast-paced, page-turning read.

What I liked most about the novel was learning of the fascinating, time-consuming (along with some shortcuts) techniques an artist of oil paintings (and a forger of them) uses: it's not just drawing on the canvas and then painting over the sketch, though I'm not sure this narrator was the right vehicle for so much knowledge and talent: I suppose she's some sort of artistic as well as detective genius. The Boston setting

was a plus, since I visited there just a few months ago, including a day at MFA (Museum of Fine Arts), which is described in evocative detail during one narratorial visit. Described in even more loving detail is the Gardner Museum, which I didn't have time to visit (and I so wish I had).

The ending felt anticlimactic. I realize I am perhaps being too critical, as well as contradictory, but I either wanted one more (fictional) letter or perhaps no letters at all, since I'm not sure the tone of them rang true from an aunt who has robbed her niece of happiness—and I don't think that was their point.

The novel is billed as a 'literary' thriller and while not of the same order as *What I Loved* or *The Goldfinch*, it's still an interesting glimpse into the art world, even appealing once to my childhood self who loved *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*. And those who found *The Goldfinch* overwritten (I didn't) may appreciate Shapiro's more matter-of-fact (that is, plot-over-character) style.

Carol says

Reader know thyself and most of the time I do. *The Art Forger* has been on my list probably since the day it hit the shelves. Am I glad I finally picked it up and read it? You bet!

Mystery, intrigue, romance, history, art, there's something for everyone here. The foundation of the story is based on the 1990 theft of thirteen paintings from The Isabella Gardner Museum. Barbara Shapiro paints a tale of the who, why, what to explore a plausible explanation regarding one of the most famous art pieces gone missing that day; a Degas. In the story the stolen painting is a fictional work by the famous artist named *After the Bath*. Claire Roth, an artist and reproductionist makes a deal to forge the stolen painting.

It's a very interesting story indeed. It left me craving more knowledge of the techniques described in the forgery, Isabella Gardner, the museum itself and the great artists.

The real heist has been in the news of late and seems to have ties to my own state Connecticut, making this the perfect time to explore the facts and fiction of the case.

There are many excellent reviews here and in the usual places. I won't bore you with more of my thoughts except to say I really enjoyed the book. Tense is places, enough mystery, characters that were vivid and that I liked, this was a fine read for me.

Carlos says

I loved this book, all the art references and the art processes explained here are catnip to me. I love museums and art, therefore any book mixing both its going to my criteria. The only reason I'm not giving it 5 stars is because I hated the main character personality, (so much so that I was rooting for her to get in trouble) but I guess all is well that ends well!!! :) I am completely satisfied with this book!

Jennifer says

Fact meets fiction meets art history lesson meets... Faustian deal? Who doesn't like the mystery of an unsolved heist, which to date is still the largest unsolved art heist in history? Throw in the world of struggling young artists, art collectors, art dealers, museum curators, art copyists, glitz and not so much glam and... Forgers. I was interested.

Claire, an art copyist by day, is a struggling artist working to clear a black mark against her name as a pariah in the Boston art scene. When she gets an offer she can't refuse in the form of her own show in a top-notch art gallery plus a healthy monetary payment in return for forging a well known Degas stolen from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in the famous 90s heist, morals be damned. Armed with the belief she's doing something wrong for all the right reasons, Claire bites. The twist has been well publicized, so there's no spoiler here, but Claire must decide what she's going to do when she discovers the "original" Degas she's presented with to copy from is a forgery.

There's a lot for me to like in the book: Shapiro does her "facts" very well. I know next to absolutely nothing about art. I found the parts about techniques, methods, and Degas' work one of the most intriguing aspects of the book. I can honestly say I learned something new. Perhaps I am a bit hesitant to believe that Claire could pull off a forgery (err, a copy of a copy) that fools the most trained eye just from reading on the internet. It's almost as unbelievable as me building a nuclear bomb from blueprints found on the world wide web. As Shapiro states in her afterword, the methods that she discusses are, in fact, acceptable methods of recreating period pieces. There is no mistake that Shapiro has done her homework – and probably not all on the internet.

Even when Shapiro shifts to "fiction," it's believable fiction. (view spoiler) I'm grateful for Shapiro telling me exactly what was real and what was fabricated in her afterword. I really wouldn't have known otherwise.

I enjoyed the descriptions of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum (and the Boston setting itself, for that matter) the best. Isabella and her museum reminded me of Houston's own Ima Hogg (really – try to say *that* without grinning). Ima was a philanthropist and lover of arts who converted her home, Bayou Bend, into her own personal museum showcasing American furnishings, silver, ceramics, and paintings – and acres and acres of beyooootiful gardens. Maybe Ima would have given Isabella a run for her money.

There were a few things for me not to like: Some characters fell flat like the crowd at Jake's, but I could see why Shapiro felt no need to develop them in too much greater detail. I just wanted to know more about them. Claire plays superwoman: A talented painter, certified copyist, Degas expert, prison volunteer, with an eye trained well enough to spot forgeries. And of course, she has to turn up her sleuthing skills to figure out where the original Degas painting was hidden and successfully find it. Then we all get our predictable romantic interest, plot twist, and happy ending.

"We see what we want to see." All in all, I was satisfied. This was a great, quick read about subject matter I knew little about and yet the story was accessible and not over my head.

Katie says

My predominant emotion while reading this book was irritation and I became much more interested in why it was irritating me so much than I was in the novel itself. I suppose principally because I thought it was going to be much more literary – a novel that creates the feeling that the characters are generating the plot rather

than a novel whose plot creates the characters.

I've just looked at other reviews of this book and nearly everyone praises the research. I think what they mean though is simply that she told the story of Han van Meegeren. I first came across his story on the excellent BBC series *Fake or Fortune* and it's a fabulous intriguing story. He was a master forger who had an almost foolproof technique of copying old masters. He might never have been discovered had it not been for the war. When the Dutch government found out he had sold a Vermeer, a national treasure, to the Nazis he was tried for treason. Therefore he had to prove to the court that he himself painted the picture.

What the author gives us is a kind of chick lit version of Van Meegeren.

There's a suggestion this novel asks the question, what are the moral implications of forgery in a world where everyone sees what they want to see? That's a fascinating question. Unfortunately the novel never really addresses it. It's too busy trying to sell its film rights. But if you want to read a serious, well-crafted novel about an art forger I'd recommend *The Last Painting of Sara de Vos*

Sara says

I confess to being wrapped up in the reading of this book and particularly the art of art forgery Shapiro unmasks. I have often wondered why a painting that has hung for hundreds of years on museum walls and been praised for its style and beauty is not just as valuable and just as precious when it is discovered that it was not painted by one of the greats but by his apprentice. Doesn't the art remain the same. Isn't it just as valuable as art even if it was painted by an unknown? We seem to carry our love of celebrity back into the ages before us and it is the name that sells.

Shapiro's main character, Claire, is a bit conflicted on the morality issues and a little heavy on excusing her own part in the disasters in which she becomes involved, but she is very human in wanting to be recognized for her talents. She is so susceptible to praise from what she considers the right sources and she is all too willing to compromise where she knows she should not in order to obtain the recognition that eludes her. In the process, she becomes entangled and must untangle a hell of a gordian knot. Even though it seemed obvious to me what the ultimate solution would be to the "mystery" of the painting, it was a fun ride to the end.

Shapiro gets high marks from me for her research and attention to detail. She is writing about a complicated subject in the art field and she obviously knows her stuff. The details of Belle Gardner's invented life fit seamlessly into what is known to be true about her, and the personality of Edgar Degas is also in keeping with his known traits. I was completely fascinated by the procedure Claire uses to produce her copies and found none of the explanations dry or over-written.

Some books are great, some are worthless, and some fall right in-between. This is one of the later. It isn't erudite, but it does have some points to make about human nature and Faustian deals. I will confess to being pretty upset when my Kindle battery expired and I had to wait overnight before reading the last four chapters and putting the story to bed. I have had some fairly heavy reading of late, and this was just plain, unadulterated fun.

