

# COROT AND REYNOLDS

## on *Fake or Fortune*



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*First published December 1, 2024*

I was catching up yesterday on *Fake or Fortune*, the very popular British TV show on sleeper art. Sleeper art is art found by the public at Ebay or other private sale which is hugely undervalued. Usually it is unsigned or misattributed, but the buyer has a hunch it may be a genuine work from a real master. I have actually had some experience with that. I found what I thought was an unsigned Thomas Lawrence being sold at Ebay from a seller in South America. Of course I couldn't afford it, even as a mis-attributed work, but I forwarded a photo to Sothebys, and they agreed with me. Unfortunately, they took so long to respond that by the time I heard from them the painting was gone.

*Fake or Fortune*, now in its 12<sup>th</sup> year and hosted by BBC presenter Fiona Bruce and top dealer Philip Mould (in the direct line of Charles II, not admitted in his bio), researches and analyzes a select number of these sleepers, to find out if they are indeed genuine. [As I have shown you before](#)—and is admitted by mainstream critics of the show—these mysteries often go nowhere, since the research is judged at the end by a “top expert” on that particular artist. But since these experts are not artists, being “scholars” with no real credentials or eye, their appraisals are often or usually wrong. The most obvious example of that is the Wildenstein Institute, which has pronounced final judgment in several of these shows, doing its reputation much damage in the process. But none of these experts has shone. They all come across as self-satisfied and self-appointed experts, aka charlatans, and that is not just my opinion. On a search I find that appears to be the public consensus of the show.

We see that again in the episode this October on Corot, where the artwork is judged a forgery at the end by Clare Dieterle, her credentials being that she was married to a guy who was the 2great-grandson of an artist who knew Corot. OK. I snap-judged the painting as genuine, based not on the signature in the

corner, but on the signature in every brushstroke. Nothing in the show reversed that; rather it confirmed it. I have studied hundreds of Corots in museums all over the world, since he is a favorite of mine. I recognize his style as I could recognize the face of my ex-girlfriends. And no, it is not a style you could completely copy. I say that as someone who has done a lot of copying of old masters. You could copy the subject matter and the treatment and the paints, but you could not fully copy the way the hand moves across the canvas. That is as distinctive as a signature, or actually much moreso, because much more complex. Yes, some copyists got close, but you can almost always spot a fake because the leaves in the trees don't have that quick horizontal motion Corot always has. Most people paint trees in the vertical, for obvious reasons: that's how they grow. We think of them moving up and down. But Corot painted them in the horizontal, with the leaves always done with the same brushes moving right to left and usually slightly up, as if the wind is always coming from the east. The speed of the hand is also worth mentioning, since this is late Corot, where the hand no longer has the least hesitation. Almost impossible to copy, since it is always easier to copy tight work than loose, free, highly idiosyncratic work like this. There are a hundred other telltales but I don't wish to bore you. I also don't wish to give away all my secrets.

If you don't see what I mean, look at one of Corot's figures instead of his trees.



A very pleasing naivete that it would be very difficult to copy, and almost impossible to forge with a new figure. You wouldn't know how to be wrong in just the cute way he is wrong.

But I can tell you of another way I knew this was not a fake immediately. Anyone imitating Corot

would be doing it for money, so they would want to produce the most salable fake possible. Since the big tree takes up almost 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of this canvas, the forger would make sure it was as pleasing as possible. He wouldn't paint it as a brown smudge, or as Mould says, "sponged-in". He would paint it a lovely silver-green, as in Corot's most agreeable paintings. So we know this isn't just a Corot, it is very late Corot, at his most abstract, messy, and daring—and therefore also his most difficult to copy. Not just most difficult, but most pointless for a forger, since this style was not his most popular. As you see with the tree, not painted to please. Forgers copied his middle style, which had a pleasing looseness without diving off into this abbreviated sketchiness that would have been a modern turn-off for buyers of the time.

To say it another way, this is one of Corot's rare autumn works. He almost always painted spring or summer scenes, for obvious reasons: color sells. Corot knew that and so would any forger. In fact, the forger would key on it more than Corot, because by that time (1870s) Corot was rich and famous. He could paint whatever he wanted. But a forger would be painting strictly for money, and so he would avoid an autumn scene like this at all costs.

This could be why Robaut was fooled into thinking this was not a Corot. Being a very late autumn scene painted by a very old Corot, of course it would look different than a standard or typical or archetypical Corot.

Due to the fact we are looking at a signature under original varnish (proved during the show), we know that IF this was forged, it was forged in the 1870s while Corot was still alive by a master forger—which is unlikely enough—and no master forger of Corot would have been forging in this late style, sponging in brown trees. A forger would also be toning down all other oddities, like too much canvas showing through, blobby flecks standing in for foreground flowers (which even Mould has trouble making sense of) and things of that nature.

Clare Dieterle and previous Dieterles dismissed the signature as dubious, but they may be missing something there as well. Mould proved this painting was done near the end of Corot's life (due to the colourman's mark on the back of the canvas), so that should have been taken into consideration. . . and probably wasn't. I assume the biggest problem they see is the leg of the "R" falling way too low. But an old person's hand is unsteady, and the first place you would see that is in a signature. The rest of the canvas is very loose, as we have already established, so any new unsteadiness would be masked. But a signature requires a control beyond anything else in the painting. I checked the signature myself, and the "O's" do match Corot's distinctive o's, made with two strokes, one on each side with a gap at the top and often at the bottom as well. Someone poorly forging an "R" would not likely perfectly forge those difficult "O's".

There is also this: judging heavily from a signature is always a mistake, because we artists don't understand that our signatures should always be the same. If we drop the leg of an R down too far because the cat rubbed our leg and startled us a bit, we don't immediately re-do it for the benefit of future experts. Genuine signatures can vary a lot and usually do, especially across many decades. My signature has changed a lot, partly on purpose and partly by accident. I would never think I needed to match it to previous signatures just to suit the suits. Artists are generally the least anal people on Earth while self-appointed experts are generally the most. So there's that.

All that said, I do wish to hedge a bit, because the footage we get of the painting isn't that good. I went back to double-check everything before hitting print and realized I was sticking my neck out further than I usually do here. All the shots in the episode are blurry and in bad light. Strangely, I couldn't

find the work published on the internet, either. I would need to see the work in person, of course, to make a final judgment. But I think I will let my commentary stand, since it is accurate commentary even if I turn out to have been fooled by some master forger. These things I pointed out should have been taken into consideration and I saw no indication they had been, either by Mould and Bruce or by Dieterle and Robaut.

Dieterle also doesn't seem to have taken any account of the new information Mould and Bruce *did* find, which no one else had: they came very close to creating a full provenance of the work, since they find documentation back to Staats Forbes, who owned 160 Corots and knew and bought directly from Corot for many decades. That isn't rock solid, since there is the possibility Forbes bought this later after Corot died, and therefore couldn't confirm it with Corot himself. However, if you combine that with what they found about the date of the canvas and signature, the probability this is a forgery becomes very remote. Corot would have still been alive when it was forged and would have known when it came on the market, unless the forger stored it for many years. Short of that unlikely possibility, Corot should have been able to knock it back himself. The buyer would certainly have contacted him for confirmation, especially since the buyer was his rich old English friend Staat Forbes.

But the final pronouncement wasn't the only strangeness going on in this episode. Early on Mould is asked by Fiona Bruce to give his usual quick estimate of value, high and low, and he says that if genuine, this painting could go for £60-70,000. If fake, it would be in the hundreds of pounds. What? The frame alone is worth at least £5,000. And Mould admits there is a third category for Corot of "not proven": Corots that have no real provenance but are so good they have been bought by major museums as likely "studio of Corot" or something. Since only Corot's best students could possibly have painted this, either as a study or forgery. So this work would obviously fall into that category at worst. And what would its value be then? Well, I think Mould's valuation for the genuine category is way too low here, and that the "not proven" value would be in that range. The real value at auction of a proven Corot of that size and quality would be way over £100,000, and perhaps several hundred thousand. Which leads me to ask if some sort of con is being run on the owner here. At the end she is led to believe the painting is almost worthless, being far below the price of the frame, which of course encourages her to sell it for a pittance. To whom? Philip Mould? What happened to the third category he told us about in the beginning? Suddenly that is all out the window and Sally is told the painting is worth almost nothing. Don't believe it, Sally! If I were her I wouldn't part with that painting for under £100,000, but if she is in desperate need of money she could put it up at Sothebys with a reserve of £50,000. My guess is it would sell in a heartbeat, perhaps to a museum. At that point the opinion of any expert or scholar is moot.

*continued*



The other show I watched was last year's show on Joshua Reynolds. It is a heartbreaker because they end up destroying the painting while trying to identify it, proving again what a bunch of bumblers these people are, scholars and conservateurs alike. I literally screamed “don't do it!” at the screen the first time they suggested removing later paint layers. Why? Because—as they admit—they have no way to date any of the paint layers, and Reynolds was known to repaint over varnish in his own paintings. He was also known to have kept many of these subject pieces (fancy pictures) in his studio until his death, so he could have been repainting them as an old man, explaining the clumsiness of some of the retouches. If this is by him, it isn't one of his best, but it doesn't have to be. The eyes ARE painted in his style, which no one bothers to notice, and the eyes are ruined with the rest by the end—a tragedy regardless of who painted them, since they were quite good.

They only bring in the “expert” after they have ruined the painting, so he sees only the tragedy. He doesn't get to judge the painting for what it was, so the whole thing is a joke. But this painting didn't come out of nowhere. It had spent the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century in a hillside villa in Monte Carlo, owned by very rich people, and it had made a *catalogue raisonné* of Reynolds, accepted as probably genuine by previous experts (like Ellis Waterhouse) almost a century ago. So these people working for *Fake or Fortune* should have treated it with more respect. Given the amount of repainting, they should have known removing it would destroy the effect. Due to the UV, X-rays and other data, they knew the face itself had major repainting, including the eyes, so they should never have dared to touch anything but the final varnish. I still can't believe Simon Gillespie agreed to do it.



That's the ruined painting, which the owner immediately sold through Bonhams auction house in February 2024 for £1,664. Since the frame alone is worth about that, the painting was just thrown in for free. A total loss.

You will say there was a date of 1830 found on the painting under overpaint, proving it couldn't have been a Reynolds, but that does not compute. 1830 could have been the date of a first revarnish, or it could have been the date of a restoration/retouch, indicating not all retouches were by Reynolds. If 1830 had indicated the original date of creation, it would accompany a signature. No artist dates without a signature or initial. And no forger dates a Reynolds forgery 1830 regardless. Gillespie assumes the first repaint is 1830, but that is based on nothing. Or, it is based on the date found, but as I say that proves nothing about the layers of paint. A date near an edge cannot be used to date layers on a face in the center of the canvas. The skill of the repaint on the face tells me it was probably done by Reynolds himself, and the same goes for the hands, which also look period. They could have been done by an aged Reynolds, and without proof they weren't, Gillespie should never have started removing paint on the face or hands. He assumes only the oldest layer is Reynolds, but that is a terrible assumption, one that led to the ruination of this charming painting.

The only good news is that they got high-res jpegs of this painting in its first condition, so it could be repainted to match that pretty well. The only problem is that part of the charm of it was in its patina, and that can't be recreated. New paint will never match the complexity of old paint. Dirty varnish also sometimes helps, as you see in this case, where it toned down the background while adding a cohesion to the whole painting.

Something else occurred to me while watching this episode. We learn a lot about Reynolds' method,

and some of it even I didn't know. I have books on Reynolds and his technique, but if I knew these things I have since forgotten some of them. I knew he used wax and resin, but I didn't know he sometimes threw watercolor paint into an oil painting. Fantastically lazy and ill-advised, if true. We see many of Reynolds' paintings that have darkened and can't be restored, due to degradation of improper materials. Same thing we have seen more recently with Odd Nerdrum and all those using mastic (resin) and Maroger, but moreso. Many of Reynolds' portraits were ruined in the lifetime of his sitters, often within a decade or two. Which brings up this question: how is it that so many Reynolds in museums now look pristine, like they were painted yesterday?



That's some amazing conservation work, eh, on a painter who didn't know how to use his materials. Or is that all that is going on there?

Honestly this isn't the first time I have had this thought. To be clear, I am not suggesting that is a fake. I don't know anyone living that could have painted that. What I am suggesting is that there may be a lot more repainting in the big museums than they are willing to admit. The first time this occurred to me was in the late 1990s, when I went to the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh. Every painting was absolutely perfect, and I thought at the time "they must have the best conservation department in the world!" But I have since seen similar miracles at many other top museums, arousing my suspicions. And a lot has changed in the last two decades, during a time of ever-accelerating corruption. If it was just due to advances in varnish replacement, I might believe it, but it seems to go far beyond that. And once I had done my research on Raphael and Vermeer and I realized that these museums were showing many very high profile fakes, I finally understood that nothing was beyond

them, or beneath them. They would do anything to win public funding and lure more clueless tourists. In some cases this repainting may be defensible, but in a majority of cases I have to imagine it is not. And even in the cases it is, it should be acknowledged, so that it can be rightly judged. How will we know if we approve of it or want more of it if we don't even know it is happening?