

Studies of handwriting belong to the oldest crime-related fields of study. Documents such as testaments or letters containing threats are most frequently dealt with in specialists' opinions. Painting signatures are an interesting example of handmade signs which permit to identify their authors. Although evaluating the authenticity of art requires computer analyses of style and material, the efficacy of the process can be further enhanced by using various graphologic methods to study graphisms featured on the given work.

Hans van Meegeren was one of the most famous forgers of paintings from the 20th century. Works created by him, mainly sold as paintings by Jan Vermeer, were so brilliantly painted that experts could not recognize them as falsifications. One of the works found its way (illegally) into the collection of Hermann Göring. When it was spotted by the allies, the inquiry brought them to Hans van Meegeren. The latter, being accused of collaboration with the Nazis, admitted that he was responsible for the forgery. In order to determine whether he was telling the truth, a special committee was appointed, led by Paul Coremans, the director of the chemical laboratory at the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Brussels. Among others, the two following chemists were invited to participate in the project: Wiebo Froentjes, employed at the Danish Ministry of Justice, and Martin de Wild, a scientist specializing in microscopic analyses of paintings and in the use of X-rays for creating expert opinions.

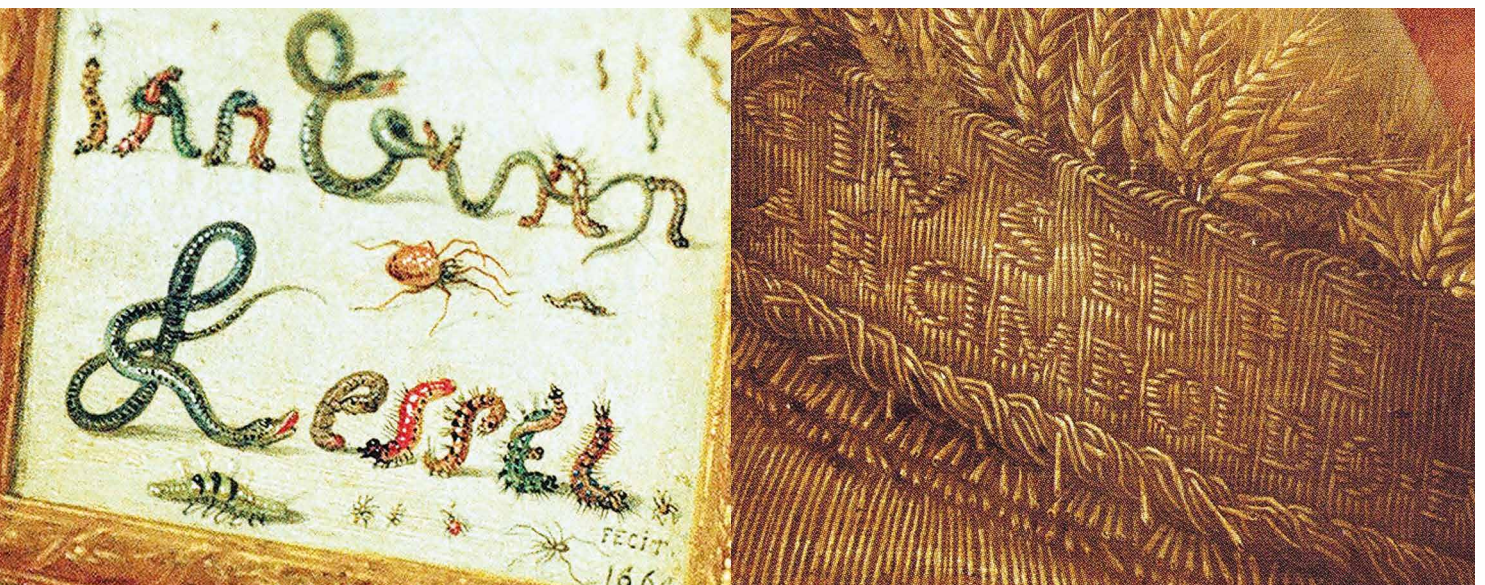
Hans van Meegeren's career as a forger brought him fame, and his later paintings, bearing the authors actual signature, were popular and expensive. Unsurprisingly, some brave people attempted to create forgeries of Meegeren's works, who presumably was the best-known forgers of the 20th century. This is illustrated, among others, by the collection of Hans van Meegeren's genuine and counterfeit painting signatures compiled by his biographer Frederik H. Kreuger.

The authenticity of works of art can thus be studied in a calm expert's office, where historians of art perform their stylistic analyses, as well as in laboratories in which specialist opinions are drawn up on the basis of physical and chemical analyses of the object. The study of graphisms, e.g. notes on drawings or painting signatures, is an interesting aspect of assessing the authenticity of a work of art. Due to the fact that a methodology for compiling specialist opinions regarding signatures has not yet been devised, current studies are based on a modified graphological approach known from criminalistics. These studies are performed by Prof. Tadeusz Widła, criminologist at the University of Silesia.

A *signature*, a word of Latin origin, indicates a sign left by the author on a given

TRACKING THE FORGERS OF PAINTING SIGNATURES

Illusory signatures evoke the impression of being an element of the painting / Photo. Tadeusz Widła archive





Not all painters consistently use slanted handwriting. As an example, Claude Monet can be named, whose handwriting was interchangeably tilted to the left and to the right / Photo. Tadeusz Widła archive

work of art. It can take the form of a monogram, a geometrical figure, or even an animal or plant form. Most generally speaking, a signature is a sign which permits to identify the work's author.

When artists decide to sign their work, they most frequently use their first name and surname, written in full, initials, an abbreviation of their name, only the name or surname, or a pseudonym. Monograms, that is one or more letters somehow connected with each other, are also resorted to. Moreover, it is common that some artists sign their works in more than one way, and this circumstance has also to be taken into account when an expert's opinion on signatures is compiled. Another important element are dates, which might refer to the depicted event or to the completion of the work of art. They are also legally protected and cannot be modified. Other used graphisms are the work's title, data concerning the depicted persons, or dedications. Sometimes, descriptions of the circumstances associated with the painting process can also be encountered.

The richness and diversity of painting signatures provides interesting material for graphological studies which be-

long to the oldest disciplines regarded as a part of criminalistics.

– In order to determine the authenticity of a work of art, extensive analyses are required. If we want to obtain a result backed by the authority of science, we additionally have to perform material testing. For the purpose of analyses performed in our laboratory, we resort to methods developed by graphologists, says Prof. Widła. The expert opinions are predominantly compiled for judiciary authorities, antique dealers, or museums, but sometimes we are contacted by private collectors who have doubts concerning the authenticity of the works of art in their possession.

– Among others, we studied works allegedly painted by three famous artists of the Kossak family e.g. grandfather Juliusz, father Wojciech, and son Jerzy. It was discovered that all three signatures had been forged by the same person, the expert adds.

A painting which is to be analyzed should be regarded as a document whose authenticity is questioned. A graphical-comparative approach has turned out to be the most effective in this context. The description of characteristics used to determine the author's writing habits is one aspect to be taken into ac-

count. Among others, experts pay attention to the position of letters, spaces between them, proportions of signs, or the tilt of the handwriting axis. However, the writing habit itself is a key factor. When a person's signature is being forged, the forger is struggling with own habits, and this becomes apparent on the paper or on the canvas. A study's success also depends on the quality of the material which is at the experts' disposal. In 40 years of research, Prof. Widła has collected photographs of more than 10,000 painting signatures, a fact which provides an excellent basis for empirical research.

In this ample collection, there are, among others, photographs of Titian's genuine and forged signatures, who belongs to the favorite artists of Prof. Widła.

– Once it happened that somebody bought a genuine work of art but decided to put an additional signature on it to prove its authenticity beyond doubt, says the scientist.

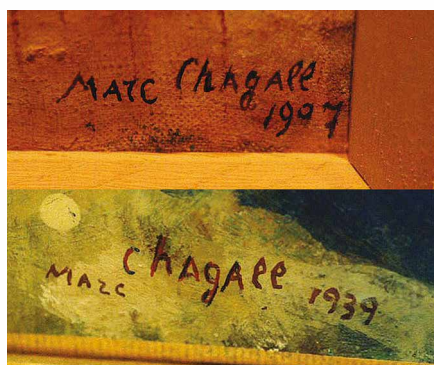
As this situation illustrates, studies of the authenticity of painting signatures are not only a passionate search for the true origin of the respective work, but can also reveal very strange stories pertaining to it.



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Marc Chagall, signatures on painting / Photo. Tadeusz Widła archive