About Errol Morris

Errol Morris is a filmmaker whose movie "The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons From the Life of Robert S. McNamara" won the Academy Award for best documentary feature in 2004. He has also directed "Gates of Heaven," "The Thin Blue Line," "Fast, Cheap, and Out of Control," "A Brief History of Time" and "Standard Operating Procedure." A book of his essays (many of which have appeared here) will be published later this year. He is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and lives with his wife and French bulldog in Cambridge, Mass.

Bamboozling Ourselves (Part 1)

By Errol Morris

This is the first of seven installments of "Bamboozling Ourselves." Read part two and part three.

> Oh World — the Devil's Orb —
> Your vanity shall lead you to hell.
> — Martien Berversluis, *Teekeningen 1*

1.
A GRUDGE

Museum Boijmans-Van Beuningen, Rotterdam “Supper at Emmaus” by Han van Meegeren.

Why do people believe in imaginary returns, frauds and fakes?

Bernard Madoff, A.I.G. , W.M.D.’s … How did this happen? Do we believe things because it is in our self-interest? Or is it because we can be manipulated by others? And, if so, under what circumstances?

Last year, two different books on that subject appeared within months of each other. Not only did both tackle the question of fakery, they were both about the same man: Han van Meegeren, arguably the most successful art forger of all time. Edward Dolnick’s “The Forger’s Spell” was released first (Edward Dolnick’s wife is on the board of The New York Times Company), followed by Jonathan Lopez’s “The Man Who Made Vermeers.” The titles provide a clue to the different goals of the authors — Dolnick’s interest in the nature of the trickery, the *spell* that Van Meegeren cast; Lopez’s interest in the nature of the man who did the tricking, the *man* who cast the spell.

Left, courtesy of Harper Collins; right, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt

There is something compelling about two people writing about the same man at the same time, as if the authors themselves might be doppelgangers, or at least mirrored two aspects of Van Meegeren's biography.

Both books begin on May 29, 1945. Shortly after the liberation of Holland, Han van Meegeren, a painter and art dealer living in Amsterdam was arrested for collaboration with the Third Reich. He was accused among other things of having sold a Vermeer to Reichsmarshal Hermann Göring — essentially of having plundered the patrimony of his homeland for his own benefit and the benefit of the Nazis. To save his skin — the penalty for collaborating was imprisonment or hanging — Van Meegeren revealed that the painting sold to Göring and many other paintings that he had sold as works of the Dutch masters were forgeries. He had painted all of them.

On July 21, 1945, The Times weighed in on the story: "Authenticity of Several Paintings Sold as Vermeers Is Questioned" (pdf).

> The authenticity of several paintings introduced to the public as newly discovered works of Jan Vermeer, seventeenth century Dutch master, is in question and the case has become a national sensation in England. Originally many of these paintings were introduced to the public by Hans van Meegeren (sic), modern Dutch painter. Soon after the liberation of the Netherlands Van Meegeren was arrested for collaboration with the Germans and is now in prison awaiting trial. The press agency Anepaneta, which operates as a government mouthpiece, asserted a few days ago that

> Van Meegeren had made a statement that he himself painted the supposed Vermeers… Art experts say they are not convinced that the statements attributed to Van Meegeren are true. The director of the Rotterdam Museum said the prisoner was a fantasist who had a grudge against museums and similar institutions. A painting restorer in The Hague said that if one of the disputed works which he transferred to new canvas recently, "Pilgrims to Emmaus" ["Supper at Emmaus"] was indeed a forgery, then the painter must be considered a genius in that particular line.

"A genius in that particular line." But *what* "particular line" is this? If the painting was indeed a forgery, then must the painter be considered a genius? Incredulity followed by skepticism. The Times article continued:

> "If the rumors prove to be true," the newspaper ["Volkskrant"] said, "then the best experts and completely reputable persons have been the dupes of a deception which was fashioned with unparalleled skill and in which, besides the forger himself, many middlemen must have taken part…" Van Meegeren and other major figures in the Netherlands charged with collaboration have yet to be brought to trial.

Van Meegeren was one of the "major figures in the Netherlands charged with collaboration."

Time magazine was more forthright in their appraisal. In an account dated just 10 days after the Times article (Time, July 30, 1945), Van Meegeren is unambiguously described as a "Dutch Nazi."

> When the exquisite *Christ at Emmaus* was found in the linen closet of a Paris house (TIME, Sept. 19, 1938) it was one of the big art stories of the decade… Last week, a Dutch Nazi confessed that he had painted the "Vermeer" himself — and, what's more, had knocked off six others, plus two Pieter de Hooches for good measure… The master picture-forger was one Hans van Meegeren, a little-known Dutch artist. Although he worshiped Adolf Hitler, he felt no compunction about unloading a fake on fellow Nazi Hermann Göring. Göring got *Christ and the Adulteress* in a trade for 173 paintings… Some Dutch art experts, who stand to lose considerable prestige over the affair, just plain don't believe a word of Van Meegeren's story.

But just what was it that they didn't believe? Presumably, that he had really painted these "masterpieces" himself. They wanted him to prove it. And so, Van Meegeren was asked to paint yet one more forgery, "Christ in the Temple." But of course, it really wasn't a forgery. This time the authorities knew that Van Meegeren was the painter.

Getty Images Van Meegeren paints “Christ in the Temple.”

Over two years after Van Meegeren’s arrest, he was put on trial in Amsterdam. On Oct. 29, 1947, The Times reported the following:

> Hans van Meegeren (sic), the Dutch painter who shocked the art world by foisting a series of false Vermeers, Pieter de Hoghs and other old masters on experts, finally was placed on trial in District Court here today. He pleaded guilty and the state demanded a sentence of two years’ imprisonment. The charge on which Van Meegeren was arraigned specified that he sold works bearing the spurious signatures of famous artists. It was not a simple case of forgery, inasmuch as the defendant created the works after the style of the seventeenth century masters, without actually copying any of their canvases…

And then on Nov. 12, The Times reported that Van Meegeren had been sentenced to a year in prison. Asked outside the courtroom for his reaction to the sentence, Van Meegeren simply said, “I think I must take it as a good sport.”

Getty Images Van Meegeren on trial.

How did he do it? Why did he do it? Newspapers reveal the thinking and confusions of their time, but they don't necessarily provide answers. Was Van Meegeren a collaborator or an artist? Or both? And if he was a genius, what was his genius? His ability to trick people? Or was he able to trick people because he was an *artist* of genius? Who was Van Meegeren? A con man or Nazi? Did he forge paintings solely for monetary reward or was something more sinister involved?

To be sure, the Van Meegeren story raises many, many questions. Among them: what makes a work of art great? Is it the signature of (or attribution to) an acknowledged master? Is it just a name? Or is it a name implying a provenance? With a photograph we may be interested in the photographer but also in what the photograph is of. With a painting this is often turned around, we may be interested in what the painting is of, but we are primarily interested in the question: who made it? Who held a brush to canvas and painted it? Whether it is the work of an acclaimed master like Vermeer or a duplicitous forger like Van Meegeren — we want to know more.

I started my further investigations into Van Meegeren by calling Edward Dolnick, the author of "The Forger's Spell." Our conversation started with the question of why people reject certain types of forgeries. According to Dolnick, it has to do with something called "The Uncanny Valley."

2.
The Uncanny Valley

ERROL MORRIS: I'm fascinated by your use of "The Uncanny Valley."

EDWARD DOLNICK: That's one of my favorite parts of the book. But I wasn't sure whether it should be included in the book. I was on the fence about it. I thought it might be too indulgent.

ERROL MORRIS: Indulgent?

EDWARD DOLNICK: Well, it's a digression. You're talking about paintings and forgery and what oil paintings look like, and then you say: let me tell you a cool thing about robots! Before this new spate of Van Meegeren books, they always squeezed him into a frame that I don't think fits, that he was like other forgers, that he did these close copies, that he tried to make his forged Vermeers look like real Vermeers. If you really looked at Van Meegeren's Vermeers, you would see that Van Meegeren's story couldn't be that story, even though people told it that way. [1]

ERROL MORRIS: Could you explain to me the concept of "The Uncanny Valley," as you use it in your book?

[The Uncanny Valley is a concept developed by the Japanese robot scientist Masahiro Mori.[2] It concerns the design of humanoid robots. Mori's theory is relatively simple. We tend to reject robots that look too much like people. Slight discrepancies and incongruities between what we look like and what they look like disturb us. The closer a robot resembles a human, the more critical we become, the more sensitive to slight discrepancies, variations, imperfections. However, if we go far enough away from the humanoid, then we much more readily accept the robot as being like us. This accounts for the success of so many movie robots — from R2-D2 to WALL-E. They act like humans but they don't look like humans. There is a region of acceptability — the peaks around The Uncanny Valley, the zone of acceptability that includes completely human and sort of human but not too human. The existence of The Uncanny Valley also suggests that we are programmed by natural selection to scrutinize the behavior and appearance of others. Survival no doubt depends on such an innate ability. — E.M.]

EDWARD DOLNICK: You would think a close copy would be the goal of a forger, but it might not be a smart way to go. If you were a brilliant technician it might be an acceptable strategy, but my forger, Van Meegeren, is not as good as that. So if he's going to try to pass himself off as Vermeer, he isn't going to do it by painting "The Girl With Two Pearl Earrings." [3] He's going to get in trouble, because that's asking for a side-by-side comparison, and he's not good enough to get away with that.

Dan Mooney for Errol Morris “The Girl With Two Pearl Earrings.”

ERROL MORRIS: In fact, he most likely wants to avoid that at all costs.

EDWARD DOLNICK: He wants to avoid it. So his big challenge is he wants to paint a picture that other people are going to take as Vermeer, because Vermeer is a brand name, because Vermeer is going to bring him lots of money, if he can get away with it, but he can't paint a Vermeer. He doesn't have that skill. So how is he going to paint a picture that doesn't look like a Vermeer, but that people are going to say, "Oh! It's a Vermeer?" How's he going to pull it off? It's a tough challenge. Now here's the point of The Uncanny Valley: as your imitation gets closer and closer to the real thing, people think, "Good, good, good!" — but then when it's very close, when it's within 1 percent or something, instead of focusing on the 99 percent that is done well, they focus on the 1 percent that you're missing, and you're in trouble. Big trouble. I wonder if it's true in general: if one group, one music group, does a cover of a famous song, that if they do a pretty good job you think it's pretty good, and if they get close, instead of thinking, "Boy, that's really good," you focus on what's missing and think, "Gee, they shouldn't have bothered, why don't they do their own stuff?"

ERROL MORRIS: Right.

EDWARD DOLNICK: Van Meegeren is trapped in the valley. If he tries for the close copy, an almost exact copy, he's going to fall short. He's going to look silly. So what he does instead is rely on the blanks in Vermeer's career, because hardly anything is known about him; he's like Shakespeare in that regard. He'll take advantage of those blanks by inventing a whole new era in Vermeer's career. No one knows what he was up to all this time. He'll throw in some Vermeer touches, including a signature, so that people who look at it will be led to think, "Yes, this is a Vermeer." [4]

ERROL MORRIS: It's not like telling one identical twin from another. The fascination here is that the pictures do not look like other Vermeers, and yet he got away with it.

EDWARD DOLNICK: It was going to be a different kind of story. It wasn't going to be about how "you can't tell the difference," because you could. It would be, "How could people look at these things which are manifestly so different and not see what's going on?" It became a story about how experts can get it wrong, and in fact, how expert knowledge, instead of helping, can be a hindrance. On the surface it seemed to be a story about art and history, but really, it's a story about psychology.

Getty Images Trial of Han van Meegeren.

[Here, Van Meegeren in an Amsterdam courtroom gazes at a slide projection of the most famous of the real Vermeers. Van Meegeren's forgeries hang all around it. – E.M.]

ERROL MORRIS: Just psychology?

EDWARD DOLNICK: Well, it's a tangle of reasons. The opinion of Bredius, the one who proclaims to the world that he's found this new Vermeer, carries a lot of weight. But he's far past his prime. He wants to cap his career with one last triumph. World War II plays into it because people had to take their authentic paintings and hide them away so they won't get stolen or bombed, so you can't put side-by-side a Vermeer and this new, would-be Vermeer and study them and look back and forth. The timing is great. The Dutch are desperate to keep their masterpieces out of German hands. The buying and selling is going on at hyper-speed, with no originals available for comparison. A whole host of factors like that — some of them happenstance, some of them cleverness on the forger's part, some of them dopiness or willful blindness on the victim's part. Bredius wants it too much. Rotterdam, the city that buys the first forgery, the one that sets all this in motion, has a kind of second-city complex. They want to put themselves on the map, there's a new museum that wants to make a big splash; it's got a new director, a pal of Bredius, the one who's too invested, who has too much faith in his own eye and his own talent, and there is no spectrogram or something to put to these pictures and say, "Is this the real thing?" You have to depend on an expert eye, and every

expert is supremely confident that his eye is the right one! And so, if you're good, that's fine. If you're so-so, that's big trouble.

ERROL MORRIS: And at this particular time, the various kinds of tests for the ages, paints, etc., etc., etc., had not advanced to the point where it was possible to just simply prove this is a contemporary painting rather than something that came from the period of Vermeer.

EDWARD DOLNICK: Yes and no. Van Meegeren was sometimes careful, other times astonishingly reckless. He could have passed certain tests. What was peculiar, and what was quite startling to me, is that it turned out that nobody ever did any scientific test on Van Meegeren, even the stuff that was available in his day, until after he confessed. And to this day, people hardly ever test pictures, even multi-million dollar ones. And I was so surprised by that that I kept asking, over and over again: why? Why would that be? Before you buy a house, you have someone go through it for termites and the rest. How could it be that when you're going to lay out $10 million for a painting, you don't test it beforehand? And the answer is that you don't test it because, at the point of being about to buy it, you're in love! You've found something. It's going to be the high mark of your collection; it's going to be the making of you as a collector. You finally found this great thing. It's available, and you want it. You want it to be real. You don't want to have someone let you down by telling you that the painting isn't what you think it is. It's like being newly in love. Everything is candlelight and wine. Nobody hires a private detective at that point. It's only years down the road when things have gone wrong that you say, "What was I thinking? What's going on here?" The collector and the forger are in cahoots. The forger wants the collector to snap it up, and the collector wants it to be real. You are on the same side. You think that it would be a game of chess or something, you against him. "Has he got the paint right?" "Has he got the canvas?" You're going to make this checkmark and that checkmark to see if the painting measures up. But instead, both sides are rooting for this thing to be real. If it is real, then you've got a masterpiece. If it's not real, then today is just like yesterday. You're back where you started, still on the prowl.

ERROL MORRIS: Was Van Meegeren's decision to paint something unlike other Vermeers something that he just fell into, or something that was motivated by a previous and unsuccessful attempt to pawn off a forgery?

EDWARD DOLNICK: His early forging career was like other forgers. You paint the identical twin and hope no one can tell it from "Girl With a Pearl Earring. Especially with a painter as obsessive as Vermeer. The same items turn up in picture after picture, the same room, the same light through the same kind of window, the same clothing. It'd be easy to say, maybe to get away with it, that here is Vermeer, obsessively working the same theme yet again. And so there might not be suspicion, that "why is he painting so many pictures that are so near one another?" So Van Meegeren had tried to pass off a close copy, which had fooled one collector who paid a lot of money for it.

ERROL MORRIS: Which painting was that?

EDWARD DOLNICK: It was called "Lady and Gentleman at the Harpsichord." [5] So Bredius, the same fellow who's going to proclaim that "The Supper at Emmaus" is the greatest Vermeer of all, precedes that fiasco by proclaiming this "Lady and Gentleman at the Harpsichord," a newfound Vermeer, is a great Vermeer, but no one else takes up that cry. No other connoisseur. In fact, they're all snickering at him. The old man has lost it. That snickering among the art crowd insiders doesn't work its way down to the collector. As I said, you paid a lot of money for it. So in that sense, Van Meegeren had succeeded in this near-copy strategy. But he hadn't succeeded in the way he wanted. He hadn't been proclaimed, or had a work that is proclaimed, except by this one man, Bredius, whose opinion nobody else took up. He hadn't had his work proclaimed a masterpiece, which was part of his goal — along with the money.

ERROL MORRIS: Ah.

EDWARD DOLNICK: The way Van Meegeren looked at this was that, if Vermeer was universally hailed as a genius, and if people took a picture that Van Meegeren had painted to be a Vermeer, that meant, by some kind of transitive property, that he was a genius. So that's what he's after. It's not enough just to make money. He wants his work proclaimed a masterpiece.

ERROL MORRIS: Do you think it was a calculation that Van Meegeren consciously made, or not, when he created "The Supper at Emmaus": "I will make something that really is different from other Vermeers, from what's gone before"?

EDWARD DOLNICK: Well, I don't think he had understood The Uncanny Valley, this business of, if you get very, very close, people think better, better, better, and then there's a point where, all of a sudden, the near-imitation gives them the creeps. I don't think he had anticipated that. I think that he had found to ask for a close comparison was trouble. I don't think he had the notion that to barely miss was more trouble than to miss by a lot.

ERROL MORRIS: Well, didn't his previous attempts alert him to the possibility that this was trouble?

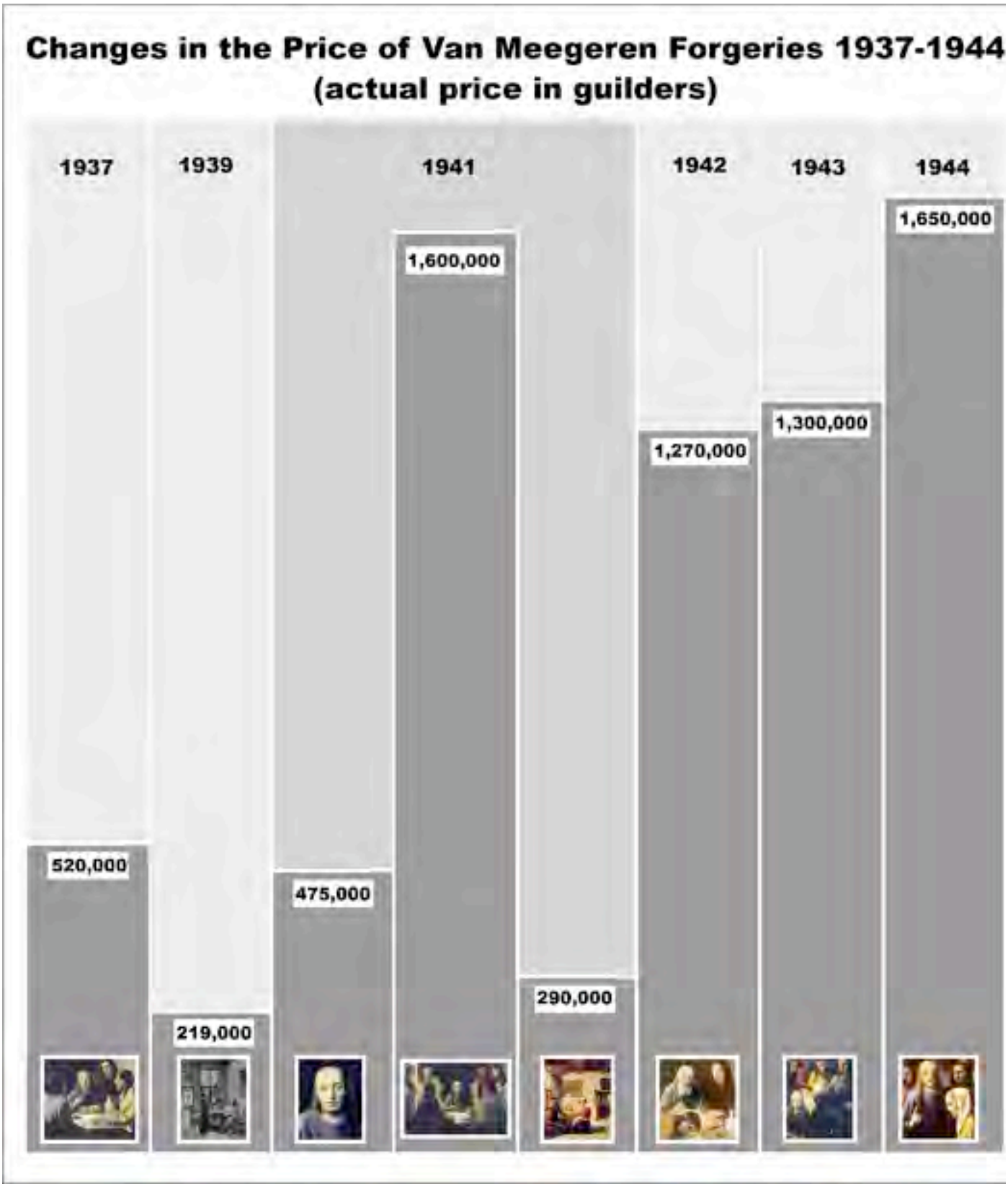
EDWARD DOLNICK: Well, they hadn't done well enough, so it had alerted him in that sense. It had fooled only one critic and not the art world in general, which was his goal. It had been condemned by all but one critic as a transparent fraud.

ERROL MORRIS: Right.

EDWARD DOLNICK: So he didn't want to go that way again. He wants to stick with Vermeer, because it's where the money is and where the prestige is, but this "Lady and Gentleman at the Harpsichord" showed that to paint a Vermeerish Vermeer wouldn't work. So how far can you back away from that and still have people say Vermeer? So he's going to throw in the Vermeer touches, the blues, the yellows, the light from the left-hand window. He's got to put his signature. He's got to put in enough hints that people will understand that this is meant to be Vermeer, but he's decided after the Lady and Gentleman at the Harpsichord, I think consciously, that it can't be just like the other Vermeers. It's got to be Vermeerish enough to make people think Vermeer, but not so Vermeerish that people say, "Gee, what's wrong with that?"

ERROL MORRIS: Of course, after "The Supper at Emmaus," every time the forger, in this case Van Meegeren, produces yet another picture in that style, "The Supper at Emmaus" can be used to validate, authenticate, the subsequent works of art!

[As Van Meegeren produced more and more Vermeers, there were more and more Van Meegeren Vermeers to "authenticate" the new ones that came on the market. It is like the forging of the Hitler Diaries. The forger was so prolific that documents produced by the forger were used to "authenticate" the handwriting in the forged Diaries. Forgeries used to authenticate other forgeries by the same forger, and in the case of Van Meegeren, forgeries that helped increase the sale price of later forgeries in the same style. [6] — E.M.]


Changes in the Price of Van Meegeren Forgeries 1937-1944
(actual price in guilders)
1937
1939
1941
1942
1943
1944
520,000
219,000
475,000
1,600,000
290,000
1,270,000
1,300,000
1,650,000
[7]

EDWARD DOLNICK: It's a brilliant strategy, because there's room in Vermeer's career for a new era, because he does so few pictures. And then, more important, as you say, each new forgery lowers the bar for what counts as a Vermeer. And now, no one would say, after the first one, "Why is he painting these strange Biblical things, he didn't go in for that," because we know he did go in for that! We have "The Supper at Emmaus"! So Van Meegeren's not much of a painter. He's an excellent businessman, he's a terrific psychologist, and so he makes not being much of a painter not such a crucial thing, which is really a remarkable coup.

ERROL MORRIS: But is he really truly mediocre?

EDWARD DOLNICK: Well, mediocre when we're asking if you can pass for Vermeer. This is a man who could earn a living as a painter, but was he any better than a thousand other people of the day? It's a terribly audacious goal he set himself. If his goal were to make a living as an artist, he could do that. But to be in the pantheon of artists? To be considered in the same league with Vermeer. That's quite a goal. But he wasn't close to that. He was going to have to find some other way to be accepted into that tiny group.

ERROL MORRIS: You select a number of features that can be ascribed to Vermeer, and you exploit some of them. But don't you also have to create some kind of provenance to the painting as well, so that there is a reason to believe that this painting was produced during the 17th century?

EDWARD DOLNICK: Well, it seems that there's two approaches to that. One is the approach that Van Meegeren used. Rather than lavish care on forging sales records and this kind of thing, he provided only the vaguest of stories: "Once upon a time, this painting belonged to a wealthy family who had it for years and years, then they fell on hard times, they didn't want anybody to know. I was a family friend. They asked me if I would help out. I said I would. I can't reveal their name, it would be too embarrassing to them." And around that barely plausible story, people were willing to take that and essentially to embellish it in their own minds. That would be enough. The picture had this kind of vague glamour about it. It belonged to a wealthy family; they'd had it a long time.

ERROL MORRIS: Glamour, perhaps, even mystery?

EDWARD DOLNICK: Right. It's a bit of a romance, like the mysterious woman across the room. She might be more alluring than if someone whispered in your ear that she's 26 and she graduated from the University of Paris and her father is this and her brother is that, better not quite to know who this woman is, who somehow appeared at the other side of the room, radiating mystery. That's one strategy. That's the one Van Meegeren used, and it worked nicely for him. His buyers didn't get hung up on the nuts and bolts. You give only the bare bones of a fairy tale and you let the collector enhance it in his own mind.

ERROL MORRIS: There are many, many things that fascinate me about this story. One of them is this ultimate question: who was Van Meegeren? Who was this man? Was he just an opportunist? Was he a dyed-in-the-wool Nazi?

EDWARD DOLNICK: No, no! He was a bad guy. He was an opportunist. At the very least, he was perfectly willing to take money from anybody who had it, first of all. And second, to live a quite high life in occupied Holland at a time when to lead a high life meant to pal around with really quite vile characters, which he was happy to do. The story goes wrong for him when Göring buys his painting, because at the end, when the Allies have found Göring's stolen art, you don't want to be mixed up with him. So how is Van Meegeren going to get out of that? There couldn't be a worse association to have as part of your resume. And so he spins that. It's a brilliant pirouette. So he becomes "the man who fooled the Nazis." If they had triumphed, he would have happily enjoyed that money. Now they haven't, so he's the great puncturer of the biggest stuffed shirt of them all?

ERROL MORRIS: He's a hero instead of a villain.

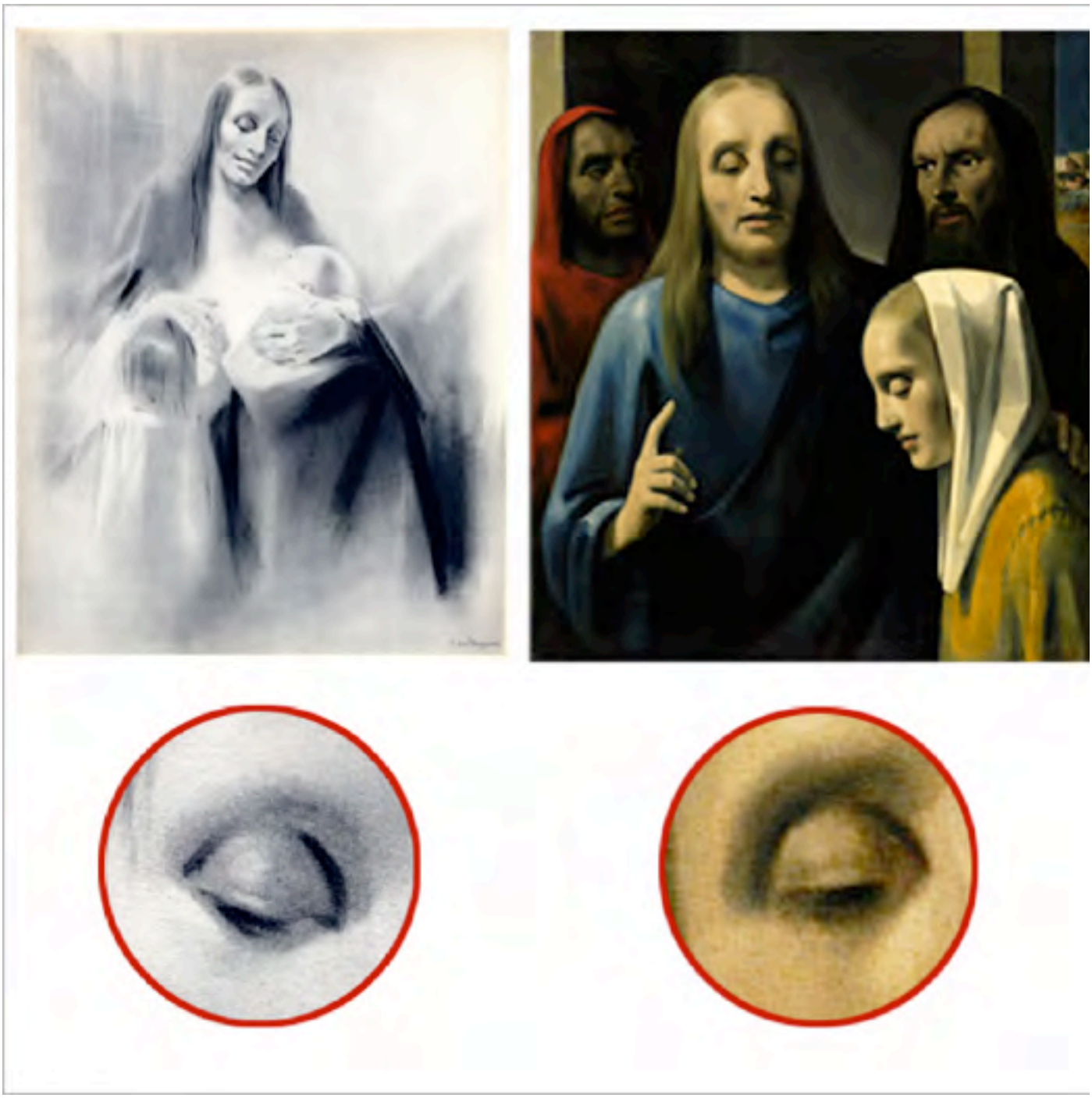
EDWARD DOLNICK: It's a nervy move. Most forgers go wrong because one person catches on to them. They fool one person too few. Somebody looks at the thing and says, "Wait a minute! That's not right." Van Meegeren goes wrong because he fools one person too many. He fools Göring. And that's trouble, because where Göring is, there's going to be lots of investigations.

ERROL MORRIS: The Göring sale must have been irresistible. There was just so much money in it. And who was to know that the Third Reich was going to just simply crumble?

EDWARD DOLNICK: Yeah. You couldn't have foreseen that. That's probably, financially, a smart move. But Van Meegeren was no hero.

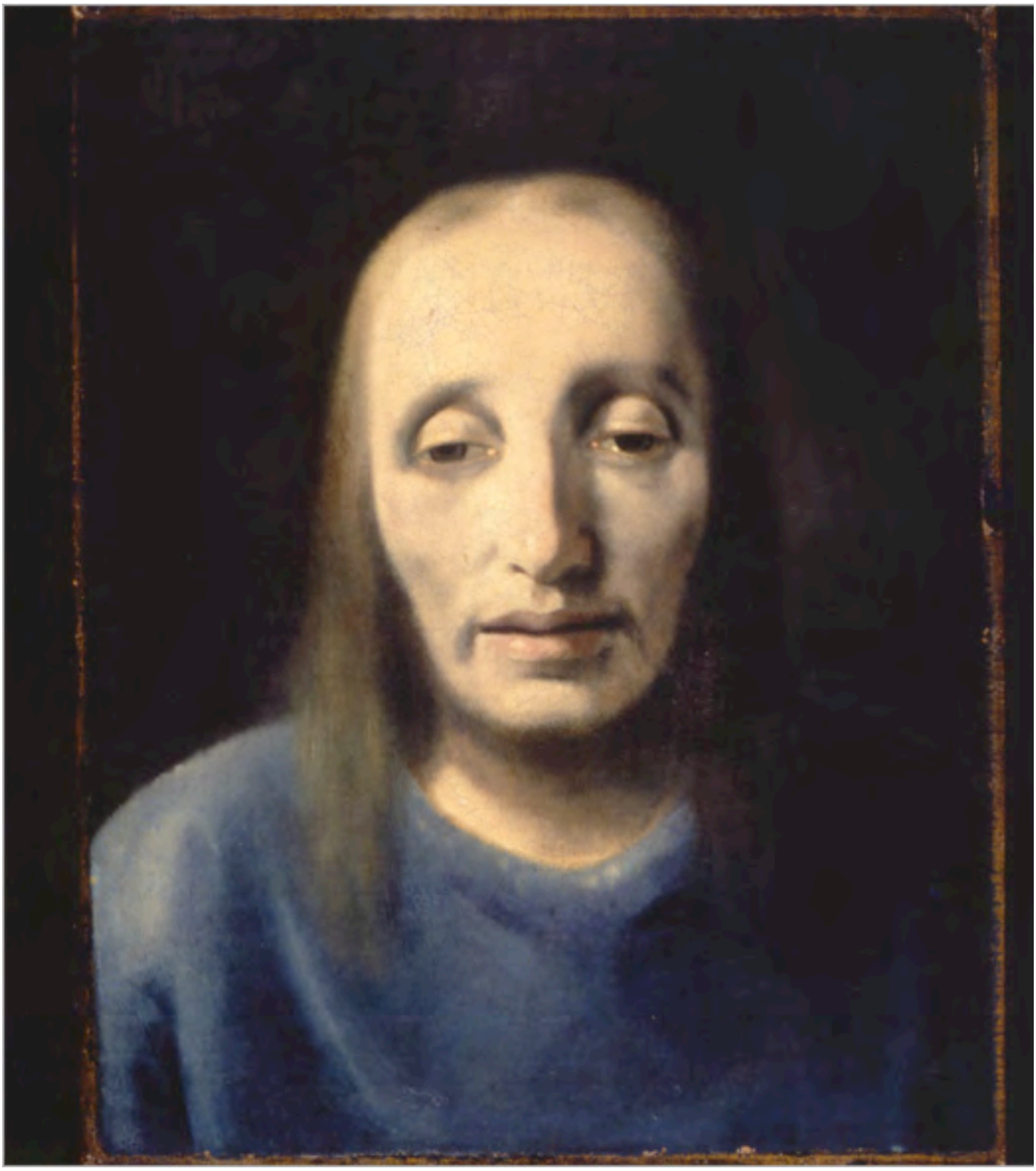
ERROL MORRIS: The question of this book of his watercolors and drawings that was found in Hitler's library. What is your feeling about that whole deal?

EDWARD DOLNICK: Well, there are a lot of elements to that. One is that that book of drawings could have given the game away; the forgery, I mean, if anybody said, "Look, be-cause there's a remarkably similarity between the crazy, heavy eye-lidded figures that he drew and the figures in his biblical Vermeers." To look at those, you think right away, "Boy, these Van Meegerens and these newfound million-dollar Vermeers look awfully similar!"



Left, Teekeningen 1; right, Tim Koster/Instituut Collectie, Nederland/Rijswijk-Amsterdam.

So that was a big gamble. And then, just as a testimony to who Van Meegeren is, he's turning out this lush coffee table book during World War II, the time when his fellow Dutch are in desperate circumstances. The Jews are carted off to concentration camps and killed; the Dutch are starving; they're chopping down trees in the park for firewood, for heat. There's not wood to make coffins to bury the dead, and he's publishing this lovely, thick book of drawings, in a lavish production cover and Nazi colors. Something's up, if anybody had to time to pay attention.



Museum Boijmans-Van Beuningen, Rotterdam

ERROL MORRIS: He pays for the publication, correct?

EDWARD DOLNICK: I think that's correct. I'm not certain, though.

ERROL MORRIS: And so was the inscription in the book, signed by Van Meegeren, and with an inscription to Hitler, authentic?

EDWARD DOLNICK: Yeah. There can hardly be more damning circumstantial evidence. Again, he tries to talk his way out of it. He claims that he signs the book, and then, someone who's purchased it, someone else, writes an inscription above the authentic Van Meegeren signature: "To my beloved Führer."

ERROL MORRIS: But isn't the inscription in Van Meegeren's handwriting? Is Van Meegeren trying to claim that someone forged his handwriting?

EDWARD DOLNICK: Van Meegeren's trying to say that he had nothing to do with this! All he did was sign his book.

[Was one of the greatest forgers in history trying to claim that he was the victim of a forgery? Dolnick is impressed by Van Meegeren's savoir-faire — the mark of a true confidence man, his ability to lie his way out of anything. But yet, this excuse seems unusually pathetic — on par with "The dog wrote my inscription to Hitler." It is surprising that anybody took it seriously. – E.M.]

ERROL MORRIS: Have you seen "The Supper at Emmaus"?

EDWARD DOLNICK: Yeah. It's still on display at the museum that bought it, at the Boijmans in Rotterdam. Now it's hard to see. It's way, way up on the wall. The museum director who bought the painting, a fellow named Hannema, lived to a ripe old age and out of deference to him, they kept the painting on display throughout his lifetime. He was booted out as director shortly after the war, but when he finally died they immediately whisked it away. It turned out that people were so interested in the painting, to the museum's chagrin, that they took it out of storage and put it back on display.

ERROL MORRIS: So what were your feelings on seeing this painting for the first time?

EDWARD DOLNICK: Well, it's an astonishing thing to see, first of all. "So this is the little lady who started the Great War," that kind of thing. You want to see the object that started all this. It's hard, having thought about it and seen so many reproductions of it, to see it for itself, in the same way that it was hard for the Dutch in the 1930s who were told that this is the greatest painting ever, it was hard for them to see it simply as a painting. For Bredius, who believed that this was the triumph that capped his career, it was hard for him to see it, and for me, knowing it had touched off this whole story, it was hard to look at it and say, "Is it really dreadful? Could, in fact, it actually be beautiful?" It was surrounded with too much story to be able to look at it and make an open-minded judgment.

ERROL MORRIS: Have you seen the other Van Meegeren Vermeers?

EDWARD DOLNICK: That's the only Van Meegeren Vermeer I've seen in person. At least based on the reproductions, they get worse and worse, and become quite dreadful, in fact. But for the reasons you say about the lowering of standards, that didn't matter.

ERROL MORRIS: …the lowering of standards or the changing of standards? We assume that it is a lowering of standards in retrospect.

EDWARD DOLNICK: People always say, when they hear this story, "Ah, it's the emperor's new clothes!" But it's much trickier than that. Because in the emperor's new clothes, people see the truth, but it's only the little boy who has the courage to say it. [8] This is more fun. People don't see this painting as dreadful. Everyone is saying it's great. They see it as breathtaking! Everyone is in on it.

"The Emperors New Clothes" by Arthur Rackham.

ERROL MORRIS: Yes, it's a different story. The experts really think that The Supper at Emmaus" is a great painting. Van Meegeren actually underlines that with his question — it was one of the greatest paintings in the world yesterday; today it's nothing. But what is the difference? There is no physical difference between "The Supper at Emmaus" before and after. But there is certainly a big difference in how the painting is seen, how it is perceived.

[If you could duplicate a masterpiece atom by atom would it still be a masterpiece? Van Meegeren provides an even more interesting question. We know that "The Supper at Emmaus" is the same painting before and after Van Meegeren's confession, only our ideas about it and its provenance have changed. There is no need to duplicate the painting, the painting remains the same. In 1937 Bredius wrote, "It is a wonderful moment in the life of a lover of art when he finds himself suddenly confronted with a hitherto unknown painting by a great master. Untouched. On the

original canvas and without any restoration. Just as it left the painter's studio!" For Bredius in 1937 "The Supper at Emmaus" is the greatest Vermeer. By 1947 it was no longer even a Vermeer, and it was an embarrassment. -– E.M.]

EDWARD DOLNICK: We have a fascination with the paintbrush that made this painting, that it was in the hand of Vermeer. We're that close.

ERROL MORRIS: Yes, that too. That desire to be physically connected, in some sense, to Vermeer. But you are absolutely right. It's not that the experts are afraid or are too vain to speak up; they actually see the painting as a masterpiece. But then who is "the little boy" in this fairy-tale? Who sees it as a fake when it's in their self-interest to see it as a masterpiece? Van Meegeren tells the authorities that they have been duped only after it becomes clear to him that it is in his self-interest to reveal himself as a forger rather than as a collaborator. But I have my own quibble with Hans Christian Andersen and his story.

EDWARD DOLNICK: What's that?

ERROL MORRIS: I have always wanted to tell him: "The story is very, very, very good Mr. Anderson, but there is no little boy." [9]That's it. That's my quibble. There is no little boy.

A week after my interview with Edward Dolnick, I interviewed Jonathan Lopez, the author of "The Man Who Made Vermeers," the second of the two books to come out in 2008 about the forgeries of Han van Meegeren.

Van Meegeren maintained two careers — as both an artist and forger, and it was my hope in talking to Jonathan Lopez to learn more about both.

3.
The Nazi Aesthetic

I was interested in the controversy surrounding a book of watercolors and drawings that is given only cursory attention in Dolnick's book. Jonathan Lopez [10] puts the book, "Teekeningen 1," front and center. It is in fact a framing device for his argument. References to "Teekeningen 1″ occur at the very beginning and near the very end.

JONATHAN LOPEZ: The book was found in Hitler's library at the central offices of the Nazi government, the Reichschancellery in Berlin.

ERROL MORRIS: Tell me about this.

JONATHAN LOPEZ: I actually own a copy of this book. It's an enormous tome with gold lettering and a big red insignia right in the center. So it's got the red, black and gold colors of the Nazi party across the front of it. Some of the art in it is just kitsch; some of it has very strong Nazi-istic overtones.

Cover design, Teekeningen 1; Private Collection.

And it is paired up with poetry, most of it written by Martien Beversluis, a really hardcore Nazi friend of Van Meegeren's. The whole project seems to have been conceived as a collaborationist gesture. And at some point in 1942, Van Meegeren signed a copy using artist's charcoal. And he inscribed it: "To my beloved Führer in grateful

tribute – Han van Meegeren." [Dem geliebten Führer in dankbarer Anerkennung gewidmet von Han van Meegeren.] Some friend of his who was able to actually get this book to Hitler, or some friend of a friend, delivered it because it was found in Hitler's library just days after the end of the war.

ERROL MORRIS: How did the inscription come to light?

JONATHAN LOPEZ: Even before anyone knew anything at all about Van Meegeren as the forger of Vermeer, there were people in and around Amsterdam who knew about him because of his pro-Nazi reputation. So when a young Dutch reporter, Jan Spierdijk, found the book in Berlin, it was news. One of the Resistance newspapers, De Waarheid, published Spierdijk's account of what the inscription said. It was not a huge piece of news because Van Meegeren was not a famous person at that point, but it was such an outrageous thing that it made it into the newspaper. The newspaper did not print a facsimile of the inscription until months later. The original July 11, 1945, article had the content of the inscription noted only in the text of a sidebar to Spierdijk's article about visiting the Reichschancellery.

[The front page that is reproduced here is from Nov. 6th, when Spierdijk wrote a second article to defend himself, because nobody seemed to take the matter as seriously as he would have liked. – E.M.]

DE WAARHEID
VOLKSDAGBLAD VOOR NEDERLAND

STADSEDITIE

Het gesprek voortgezet

Onmiddellijke bijeenroeping van Ronde Tafel-Conferentie

Moskou in feesttooi

Britse havenarbeiders weer aan het werk

Oorlogsmisdadigers worden voor hun rechter

Voorlopige uitslag der Hongaarse verkiezingen

Geen valse Van Meegeren!

Hier is dan de opdracht aan den „Führer"

Mes goed, meneer?

Nederlanders in de Russische bezettingszone van Duitsland

HET WEER

Collection of Jonathan Lopez

ERROL MORRIS: Did this happen before or after Van Meegeren confessed to painting Göring's Vermeer?

JONATHAN LOPEZ: What fascinates me is this happened after Van Meegeren had confessed to the authorities about forging Göring's Vermeer, but before it was known publicly that he had done so. The whole matter was still a closely guarded secret at that point, and the appearance of this article in De Waarheid became a real moment of crisis in Van Meegeren's story. When Van Meegeren had first confessed, he had captured the imagination of his arresting officer, a very courageous lieutenant in the Dutch army named Joseph Piller, a Jew who had survived the war in hiding and had acted as a Resistance operative. Van Meegeren presented Piller with this great story about how he had been a misunderstood artist, about how he had turned to forgery late in life to get revenge on the critics who had scorned him, about how he had fooled Hermann Göring and so on, and Piller found this very seductive. In dealing with his superiors, he supported Van Meegeren's version of events. Then the business about Van Meegeren writing this love letter to Hitler comes out, and suddenly Joseph Piller, who has very –

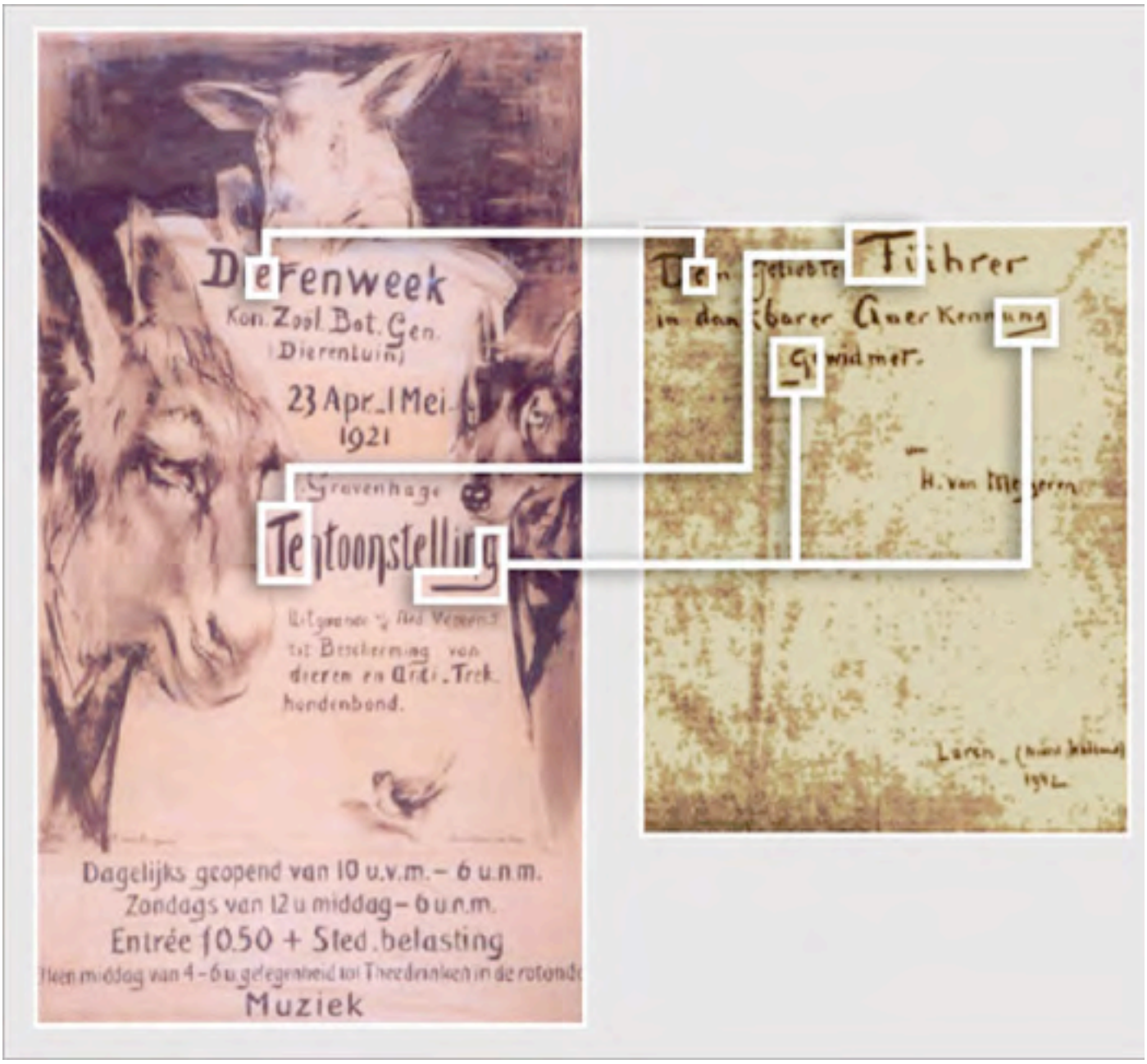
ERROL MORRIS: The love letter being the inscription…

JONATHAN LOPEZ: Yes. That's what I meant. I was exaggerating. But yes, the inscription to Hitler. Joseph Piller has some practical concerns in the world. He wants a job in the Dutch government after the war was over. He does not want to come off looking like a fool. So suddenly, of necessity, he became Van Meegeren's ally. But it's quite similar to the incident with the Frans Hals forgery, "The Laughing Cavalier," in the 1920s where the painting had fooled a very great expert in Dutch art, Cornelius Hofstede de Groot. And it had fooled him so completely that when technical evidence came out suggesting that the picture was a fake – I mean, really proving beyond any kind of reasonable doubt that the picture was a fake – he just simply refused to believe it. And fought against the judgment tooth and nail, saying that science has no place in the examination of paintings. He could not admit that he was wrong. And that just had to do with the attribution of painting. Joseph Piller had his whole career on the line at the end of the war. So he ended up taking Van Meegeren's part. And so the image of Han van Meegeren that you get in most of the popular literature is the image that Joseph Piller gave to the world. Van Meegeren could make it up, but he was not in a position to broadcast it. He got Joseph Piller to do that for him, because Piller had no choice.

ERROL MORRIS: And Van Meegeren claimed that the inscription was not in his handwriting.

JONATHAN LOPEZ: Yes, he claimed that he had signed a lot of books. But someone else, probably a German officer, had written the inscription and given the book to Hitler. And in fairness to Joseph Piller, when the newspaper article came out, it was plausible, just barely plausible, that this might really have been the case because there was no photograph of the inscription printed with the first newspaper article. [11] There was just Jan Spierdijk's report and Van Meegeren's claim that the inscription wasn't genuine. That lie worked for a few months while the story of the Vermeer forgeries grew into a beloved national joke in the Netherlands. And Van Meegeren became a folk hero, the little Dutchman who fooled the big German. By the time Jan Spierdijk was able to lay his hands on a photograph of the actual inscription to Hitler, Van Meegeren's false story had been accepted as fact.

[Lopez has paired a facsimile of the charcoal inscription and signature (from 1942) with another example of Van Meegeren's handwriting (from 1921) [12]. Note: the upper case 'T' and 'F' and the lower case 'g' with the tail trailing off to the left. They match remarkably well. Of course, this doesn't incontrovertibly prove that Van Meegeren wrote the inscription to the Führer, but does provide strong prima facie evidence. – E.M.]



Left, collection of the Municipal Archives of the Hague; right, De Groene Amsterdammer

JONATHAN LOPEZ: It's his handwriting, and it's all written in one fell swoop, and it's written in charcoal. Yeah, it's his writing. The Dutch government had a professional handwriting expert look at it, and he determined: yes, it was all written in one hand. It's Han van Meegeren's handwriting. By the time Jan Spierdijk printed the photograph on the front page of De Waarheid, no one cared. The image of Van Meegeren as the clever trickster was so well established at that particular moment that strangely no one cared. No one cared. And in time, everyone forgot that this photograph actually existed. It was essentially lost to history [13].

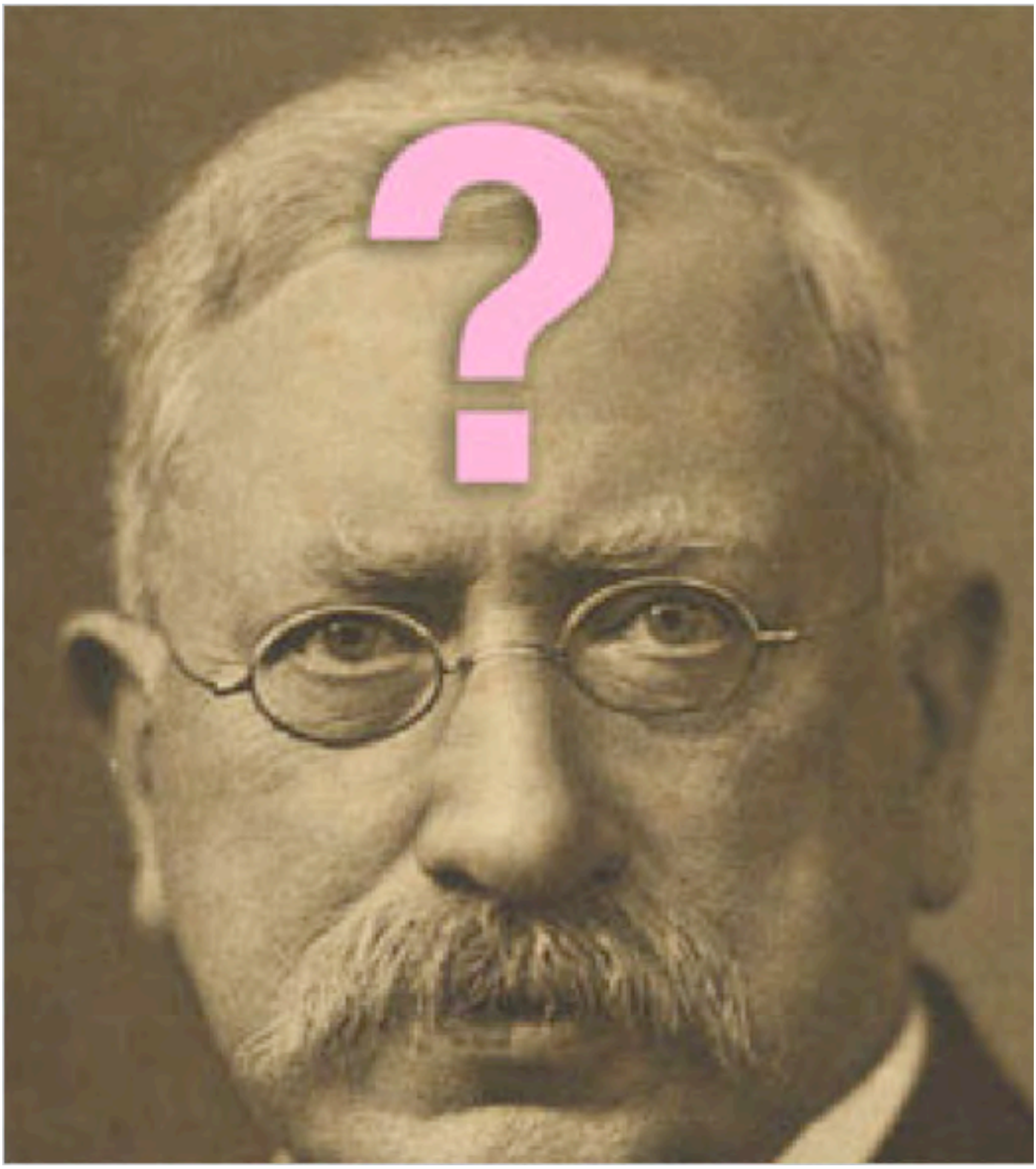
ERROL MORRIS: Everyone forgot that there was an inscription or forgot that the inscription was written by Van Meegeren?

JONATHAN LOPEZ: In the books that were written about Van Meegeren in the 1960s, like Lord Kilbracken's book, Van Meegeren's version of the events is presented as completely true.[14] It states that it was definitively proved that the inscription was not his. But it was never mentioned at his trial, which concerned only the issue of art forgery, not collaboration. A separate shadow proceeding was looking into his actual acts of collaboration, and the people conducting that investigation came to the opposite conclusion. [15] [16]

ERROL MORRIS: That he, himself, had written the inscription to the Führer.

JONATHAN LOPEZ: Yes. Van Meegeren's talent was creating an image of himself that was a forgery.[17] There is this sense of schadenfreude, this snickering at the people who were dumb enough to get fooled by Van Meegeren. And that's always been part of what made the Van Meegeren story so seductive. Everyone likes that little moment where the high and mighty make some incredibly stupid blunder. I think that's part of human nature. You see someone from a very sophisticated background make a stupid error in his own area of expertise. It's kind of amusing if you're inclined to think of such people as being stupid or pompous. The problem is: the people that Van Meegeren fooled weren't stupid. These were very, very important people. Wilhelm von Bode, the director of the Kaiser Friedrich Museum, he was an incredibly important historian and critic. There is no history of Dutch painting without these people. They created Dutch art history as a discipline. Abraham Bredius become a laughing stock in the popular literature on Van Meegeren. But Rembrandt's paintings are still referred to by their Bredius numbers, the numbers that were as-signed to them by Bredius in his catalogue raisonée of Rembrandt's work published just a year or so before he authenticated "The Supper at Emmaus." He was not a dumb or unimportant person, but he did make a very substantial error.

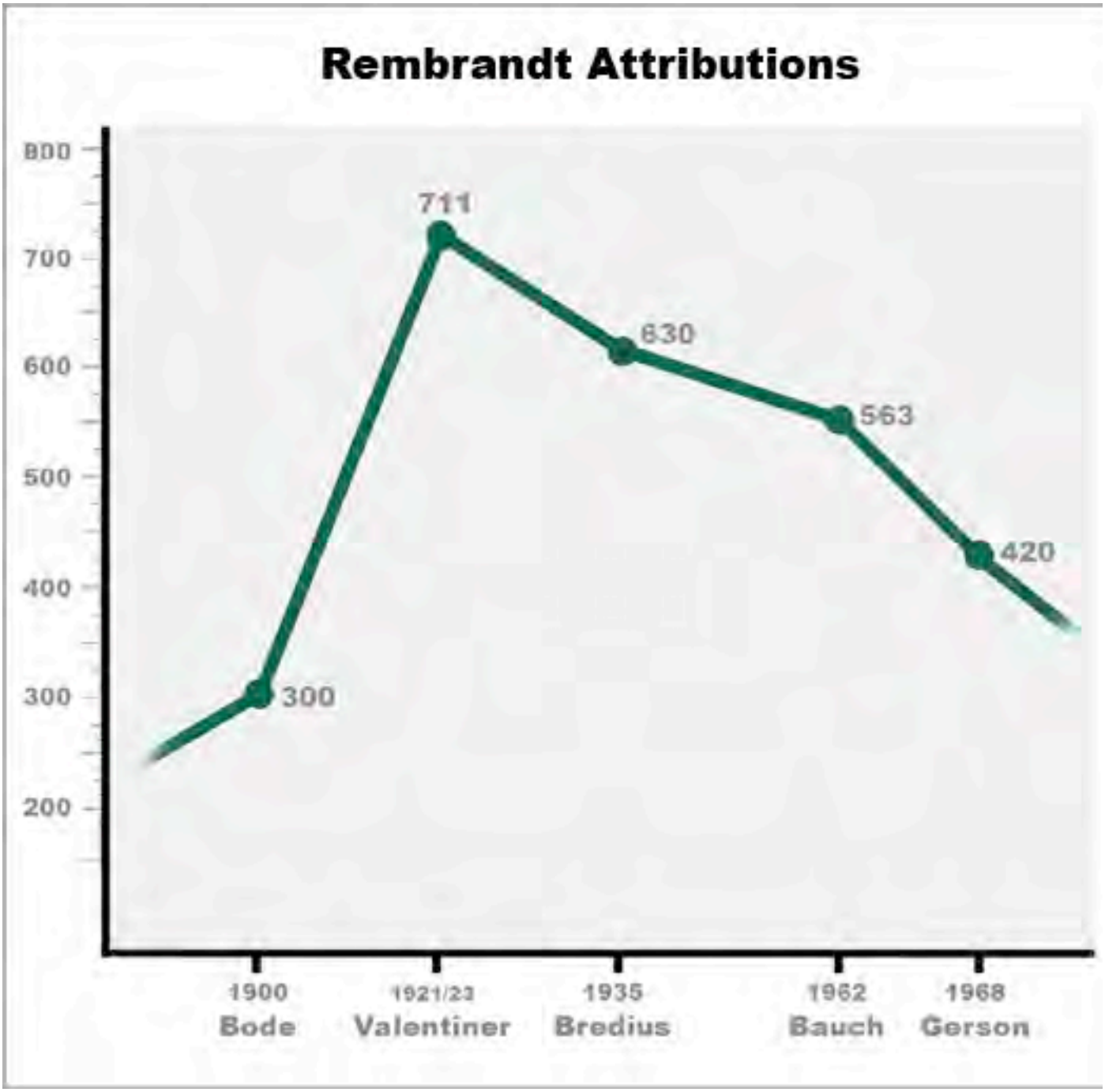
ERROL MORRIS: A question remains: what was Bredius thinking? [18] [19]



Haags Gemeentarchief

[Not only did Bredius make an error, he was never able to admit to it. This, of course, is not surprising. The principle of cognitive dissonance assures us that we will continue to defend our decisions no matter what evidence is

adduced against them. Bredius might not be “dumb or unimportant,” but he was also partially responsible for attribution-inflation. When Rembrandt’s works were first cataloged in the 1830s, some 200 works were attributed to him. Wilhelm von Bode raised this to 300, but Bode, Hofstede de Groot and Wilhelm Valentiner continued adding to that figure after the catalogue’s publication. By the time Valentiner’s "Rembrandt Wiedergefundene Gemälde" was published in 1921, the count was up to 711 and still climbing. [20] Bredius reduced the number to 630 in 1935. After Bredius, Kurt Bauch further reduced the total number to 563 in 1962; and Horst Gerson, who had been Bredius’s assistant on the 1935 catalog, updated it in 1968, trimming back the list of authentic Rembrandts to 420, but still retaining Bredius’s numbering system. Note: the period of Rembrandt attribution-inflation more or less coincided with the period of monetary hyperinflation in Germany. Coincidence?]



ERROL MORRIS: If these people are some of the most important figures in the history of the history of art – or, if you prefer, the history of major historians of art – how is it that they made these mistakes? Now, everybody can make mistakes, but why these mistakes?

JONATHAN LOPEZ: A variety of reasons. In the 1920s when Wilhelm von Bode was attributing the early Van Meegeren fakes that came to him, he was in desperate financial need. He was absolutely dead flat broke, just like everyone else in Berlin.

ERROL MORRIS: Because of hyperinflation? [21]

JONATHAN LOPEZ: Because of the hyperinflation he lost every cent he had. There was this kind of shady ambience in Berlin at the time that this occurred. I'm not saying that Wilhelm von Bode ever did anything that was knowingly dishonest, but there was a fair amount of chicanery going on in Berlin at that time. And these fake Vermeers fit in very well with the whole feeling of Weimar Berlin. So in Bode's case there may have been some financial motivation. In Bredius's case, there was an entirely different issue. He was an elderly man. [22] He wanted to reassert his place in the art world, because his two greatest colleagues, Hofstede de Groot and Wilhelm von Bode, had died, and he was the last one left standing. And they had always been a little bit more influential than he had been in the art market. Not in the museum world, but in the art market – as attributors of paintings for galleries. Bredius wanted to fill their shoes, and making great discoveries was one way to do that. So there was a measure of vanity involved with his decision to authenticate "The Supper at Emmaus." But he didn't just look at the painting and suddenly decide that it was the greatest thing he'd ever seen. He was skeptical about the whole setup to begin with. He didn't know the person who was bringing him this mysterious picture – a straw man acting for Van Meegeren. So Bredius contacted an attorney in The Hague to find out, "Who is this guy who's bringing me this picture. I've never heard of him. What can you tell me about his character?" Bredius was not dumb, and he wasn't naïve. But as it happens, Van Meegeren managed to find himself the ideal person, Gerard Boon, to act as his go-between with Bredius, an incredibly respectable person, and an incredibly decent person. And that certainly helped cement Bredius's confidence in the picture.

ERROL MORRIS: Surrounding himself with the imprimatur of respectability.

JONATHAN LOPEZ: Being fooled by these fakes doesn't necessarily define you as an idiot. It just means that a well-concocted lie did what it was supposed to do. Part of the problem that we have today is we look at these pictures, and they don't look anything like Vermeer. They also don't look anything like any art that we have around us today. The fakes that Van Meegeren did in the 1920s, we can look at those and say, "Yeah, they look kind of like 1920s society paintings, and they're very sweet, and they're pleasant enough artworks." But the ones from the late 1930s and 1940s belong to a world, to a strain of visual culture that no longer exists – that nobody wants to look at, that nobody wants to pay any attention to because it was stamped out. It was erased for very good reasons. Because it was fundamentally pernicious.

A NEW VERMEER BY ABRAHAM BREDIUS

IT is a wonderful moment in the life of a lover of art when he finds himself suddenly confronted with a hitherto unknown painting by a great master, untouched, on the original canvas, and without any restoration, just as it left the painter's studio! And what a picture! Neither the beautiful signature "I. V. Meer" (I.V.M. in monogram) nor the *pointillé* on the bread which Christ is blessing, is necessary to convince us that we have here a—I am inclined to say—*the* masterpiece of Johannes Vermeer of Delft, and, moreover, one of his largest works (1.29 m. by 1.17 m.), quite different from all his other paintings and yet every inch a Vermeer. The subject is *Christ and the Disciples at Emmaus* and the colours are magnificent—and characteristic: Christ in a splendid blue; the disciple on the left, whose face is barely visible, in a fine grey; the other disciple on the left in yellow—the yellow of the famous Vermeer at Dresden, but subdued so that it remains in perfect harmony with the other colours. The servant is clad in dark brown and dark grey; her expression is wonderful. Expression, indeed, is the most marvellous quality of this unique picture. Outstanding is the head of Christ, serene and sad, as He thinks of all the suffering which He, the Son of God, had to pass through in His life on earth, yet full of goodness. There is something in this head which reminds me of the well-known study in the Brera Gallery at Milan, formerly held to be a sketch by Leonardo for the Christ of the *Last Supper*. Jesus is just about to break the bread at that moment when, as related in the New Testament, the eyes of the Disciples were opened and they recognized Christ risen from the dead and seated before them. The Disciple on the left seen in profile shows his silent adoration, mingled with astonishment, as he stares at Christ.

In no other picture by the great Master of Delft do we find such sentiment, such a profound understanding of the Bible story—a sentiment so nobly human expressed through the medium of the highest art.

As to the period in which Vermeer painted this masterpiece, I believe it belongs to his earlier phase—about the same time (perhaps a little later) as the well-known *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* at Edinburgh (formerly in the Coats collection). He had given up painting large compositions because they were difficult to sell, and painters like Dou and Mieris were already getting big prices for their smaller works.

The reproduction [PLATE] can only give a very inadequate idea of the splendid luminous effect of the rare combination of colours of this magnificent painting by one of the greatest artists of the Dutch school.

"The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs," Vol. 71 No. 416 (Nov. 1937)

ERROL MORRIS: But this still doesn't tell me why people bought off on these paintings. It makes it sound like happenstance.

JONATHAN LOPEZ: In what way?

ERROL MORRIS: O.K. Expert "A" was desperate for money because of the hyperinflation in Weimar Germany. Another expert, "B," was left alone after the death of important colleagues and needed to assert his own importance. But is it just something that Van Meegeren did? Or is it something that the buyer cooperated in? Was it a kind of weird folie à deux?

JONATHAN LOPEZ: Well, it involved more than deux. Forgery is about the way the present looks at the past. The best forgeries may imitate the style of a long dead artist, but to appeal to people at the moment that they're being tricked, forgeries must also incorporate some of the aesthetic prejudices of the moment. When fakes work well, they give us a vision of the past that seems hauntingly up to date. And that's one of the things that makes forgery so seductive. [23]

[In other words, successful forgery must include a contemporary element. Indeed, I would make the claim even stronger. They can't help including a contemporary element. It didn't have to be a conscious calculation on Van Meegeren's part. Maybe we can't see it at the time, but it is there. My wife, Julia Sheehan, a textile historian, points out, "Clothing can seem timeless and classic when you buy it, but then ten years later you look at it, and it seems of

a period." Things that are "timeless and classic," never are. We and the objects that we produce are hapless prisoners of time. – E.M.]

JONATHAN LOPEZ: There's one picture I reproduce in the book that's sometimes called "The Greta Garbo Vermeer."

ERROL MORRIS: It is a horrible picture.

JONATHAN LOPEZ: Yes, it's horrible.

ERROL MORRIS: It just doesn't look like—

Print room, Archive box 200, Museum Boijmans-Van Beuningen, Rotterdam; Photo by Jonathan Lopez

JONATHAN LOPEZ: It doesn't look like a Vermeer. It looks like a bad 20th century poster for a Garbo movie. But Max Friedländer – an incredibly important art historian – authenticated that picture. It was sold to Baron Heinrich Thyssen. These were not dumb people. It's just one of the hardest things to accept – that this actually worked, that intelligent people were taken in by this. But if you can get to the point where you can accept that this actually did happen, then you can start grappling with the story and why it happened. But, so long as you're sort of stuck in this mode of laughing at people who get taken in by cleverly constructed lies, you'll never understand that these particular lies work for a good reason. These pictures were, in some ways, more seductive than real old masters, because they incorporated the taste of their own times. "The Supper at Emmaus" pushed that principle to an extreme totally unprecedented in the prior annals of forgery. It was basically — it was a contentious argument about history itself. It was an attempt by Van Meegeren to project the Nazi aesthetic into the past, to create a historical precedent for it. And that's why "The Supper at Emmaus" is such a difficult work to understand today, because the argument that it makes was decided in 1945. And the side of the argument that "The Supper at Emmaus" was on lost.

ERROL MORRIS: Because Nazi aesthetics died with the Third Reich in 1945?

JONATHAN LOPEZ: Yes. "The Supper at Emmaus" was making a specific argument about Dutch culture in the Golden Age – that in its essence, at its core, Dutch culture had this medieval, Teutonic basis to it. In Berlin, of course, Hitler and the Nazis were advancing similar arguments about the "true spirit" of German culture. These arguments had considerable appeal for Van Meegeren. They fit in perfectly with his anti-modernist biases. He even used some of the money from his early forgeries to bankroll a reactionary art magazine called De Kemphaan in which he reworked many of Hitler's aesthetic arguments from "Mein Kampf." He really got into Nazi aesthetics deeply.

But is there a difference between being deeply into Nazi aesthetics, and being a Nazi? Is it even possible to discern — to find out what was in Van Meegeren's head — just by looking at what remains on the canvas? Lopez sees the connection between Van Meegeren's Nazi-Vermeers and Van Meegeren's own art as one important step toward finding out.

4.
Mealtime at the Farm

ERROL MORRIS: The picture "Mealtime at the Farm."

Getty Images"Mealtime at the Farm," Han van Meegeren.

JONATHAN LOPEZ: Take a look at some of the books from the German Reich art exhibitions every year during the 1930s and flip through them. You'll see a lot of paintings in there that may, in fact, remind you of "The Supper at Emmaus," these scenes of people in humble Bavarian dwellings gathering around a table to have a simple meal. "The Supper at Emmaus" was not just a picture, it was a type of picture. And you could find modern equivalents of it if you went to the great Nazi art exhibitions. And during the war, when Van Meegeren revitalized his career under his own name, he openly painted pictures like these, so-called Volksgeist paintings, and exhibited them in occupied Holland and also in Germany. One of them, he even dedicated publicly to Hitler. A lot of this art looks like kitsch to us today. Some of it looked like kitsch to people then, too. But it was a living style of art. And it was vital in a way that it isn't today. And I think unless you understand some of the visual culture of the time, you're never going to get to the point of understanding why any of these really strange looking pictures could ever have been accepted as Vermeers.

ERROL MORRIS: The idea that all successful forgeries contain both the past and the present.

[Van Meegeren maintained two separate careers. A career as an original artist and a career as a forger. Compare the timelines of his two careers. Did his original work inform his forgeries or vice versa? Regardless, it is clear that the two developed in relation to each other, particularly the late Van Meegerens — the pictures from 1940 on. This raises a whole series of questions. Is Van Meegeren imitating Vermeer or imitating himself? Or perhaps imitating himself imitating Vermeer? — E.M.]

JONATHAN LOPEZ: Yes. The way we see the world changes with time. To take examples from much better art than "The Supper at Emmaus," if you're walking through a museum and you get to a room filled with big baroque allegories, you may — unless you have a really special taste for it — you may just keep on going until you get to the Vermeers. There aren't that many people who are interested in baroque allegories. But you have to kind of accept that there was a whole century when people were awfully interested in baroque allegories. We're just not quite there now. It doesn't mean the art is necessarily bad in any way. By the same token, the world that it belonged to is very hard for us to relate to. But a fake like "The Supper at Emmaus" was appealing to a current in visual culture that's totally, absolutely dead in today's world. So dead, that it's virtually impossible for anyone to see it for what it actually was. We just don't understand coded Nazi imagery. "Emmaus" is geared to a whole way of looking at the world that was plausible in 1937, but completely implausible today — completely incomprehensible today.

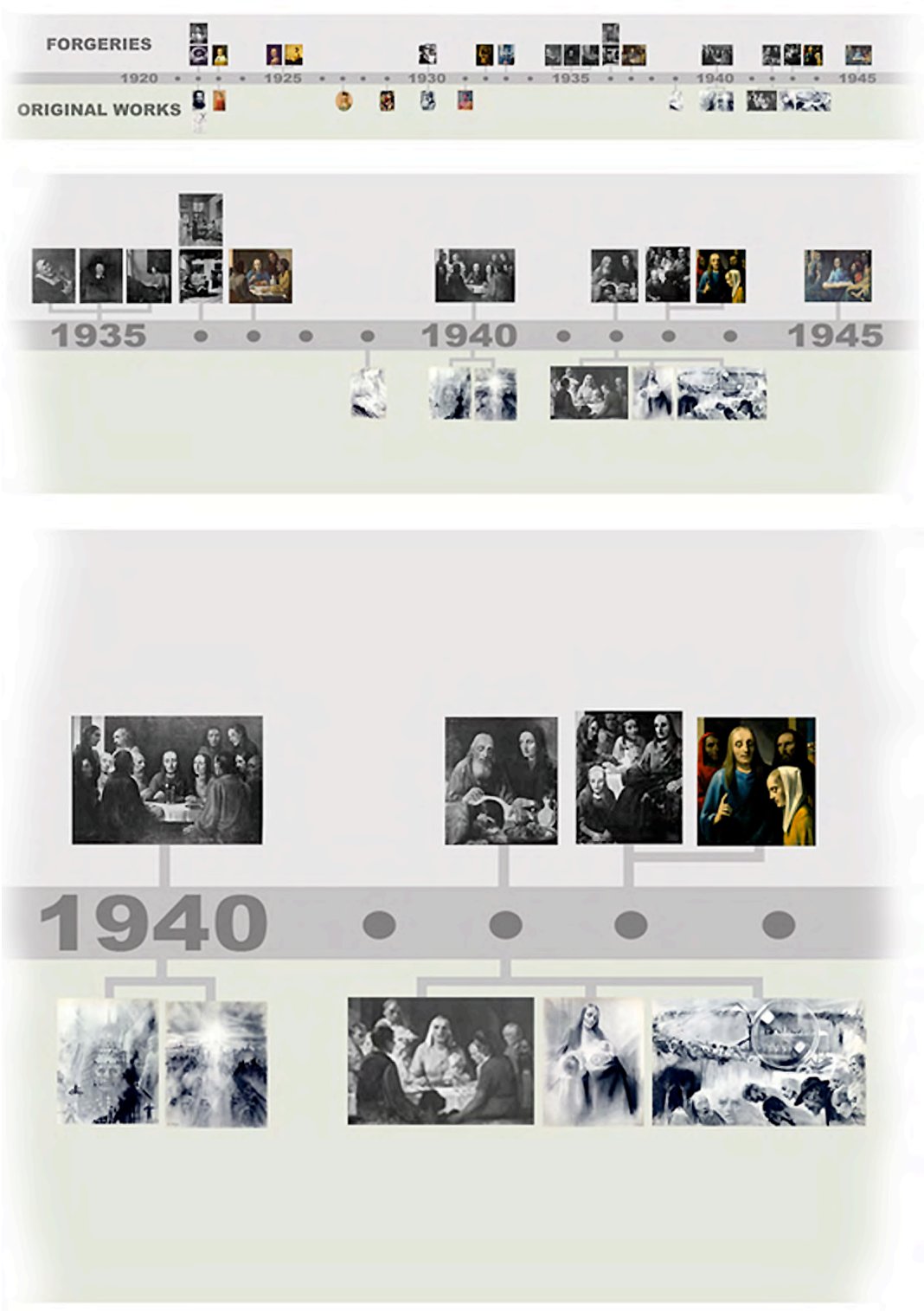


Image credits: Getty Images; Jonathan Lopez; Museum Boijmans-Van Beuningen, Rotterdam; Teekeningen 1

ERROL MORRIS: Well, if Hitler and Göring had seen one of these paintings, which of course they did, they bought them so that they could imagine Vermeer was one of them?

JONATHAN LOPEZ: Precisely. That's absolutely true. That's kind of what Van Meegeren was doing. He was imagining that Vermeer was one of him. That was what "The Supper at Emmaus" was about. It was about projecting Van Meegeren's prejudices backwards into the past. And for a brief, very brief time, just a couple of years it worked.

Imagine these two explanatory models. One model tells you: Hitler, Göring, pick any highly-placed Nazi, liked these paintings because they saw themselves in it. The other model tells you that they wanted to enhance their stature by owning a work of one of the greatest Dutch masters, by owning a Vermeer.

Of course, it could be both. When Göring says, "I want that," what exactly is it that he wants? Does he want "Christ and the Adulteress," the Vermeer? Or "Christ and the Adulteress," the Nazi Vermeer? The Vermeer that is designed to appeal to him. If Lopez's theory is right, then the Van Meegeren Vermeers are possibly more attractive to Göring than a real Vermeer because he sees himself in them. Christ pardoning the adulteress. A German volks-romance. The dark-skinned, sinister-looking Jews hovering in the background. There are several parts to Lopez's theory. Part One: Van Meegeren was a Nazi — even if he wasn't a declared follower of Hitler. Part Two: Van Meegeren incorporated Nazi ideology into his paintings, including his Vermeers. Part Three: The Nazis liked Van Meegeren's Vermeers because they were Nazi art. Part One of Lopez's theory is clearly right. His research is impressive. And the examples he provides are convincing. Part Two is also right for similar reasons. It is only Part Three that I am unsure about. Alas, we have no control experiment. We can't offer Göring the choice between a real Vermeer and a Van Meegeren Vermeer and see which one he picks. But we can imagine that Göring was less suspicious of the possibility of forgery because the painting appealed to him on a fundamental level.

Tim Koster/Instituut Collectie, Nederland/Rijswijk-Amsterdam “Christ and the Adulteress”

JONATHAN LOPEZ: We don’t really know what Göring thought about “Christ and the Adulteress” beyond the fact that he was willing to pay a lot of money for it. And I don’t think Hitler ever saw the picture in person. We do know that other Nazis found the biblical Vermeers extremely appealing. For instance, Heinrich Hoffmann, Hitler’s

personal photographer, considered himself a great connoisseur of the biblical Vermeers. He actually squabbled with Göring over the right to buy "Christ and the Adulteress." Hoffmann wanted it for Hitler. You could say that Hoffmann, on an unconscious level, probably felt that he was seeing his own aesthetic — the Nazi aesthetic, which he helped to create — reflected back at him from across the centuries. He was like Narcissus gazing into the water.

ERROL MORRIS: A competition among the Nazis for Nazi-Vermeers?

JONATHAN LOPEZ: Göring's fake Vermeer is certainly not the worst of them. It's also kept in relatively good condition, which is not true of many of them. These paintings, because they're not made with oil paint, deteriorate in weird ways. There are tremendous conservation problems involved with keeping them looking presentable.

ERROL MORRIS: There's something very funny about the conservation problem of forgeries, that these forgeries cannot literally pass the test of time.

JONATHAN LOPEZ: Forgeries self-destruct because they're made for a specific purpose, which is to create the illusion of authenticity at the moment that they're being sold. But they're not made to last. And I guess you could take that sort of as a metaphor for what I'm talking about in terms of the visual culture as well. Fakes are meant to work at the moment when some collector is signing the check. But 60 years later the forger isn't likely to care whether his work holds up, or even whether the paint still adheres to the canvas. The two Van Meegeren Vermeers, the Mellon fakes, "The Smiling Girl" and "The Lacemaker," at the National Gallery, have developed these horrendous fissures and cracks. You would never be able to transport them anywhere because big pieces of paint would come flying off the surface.

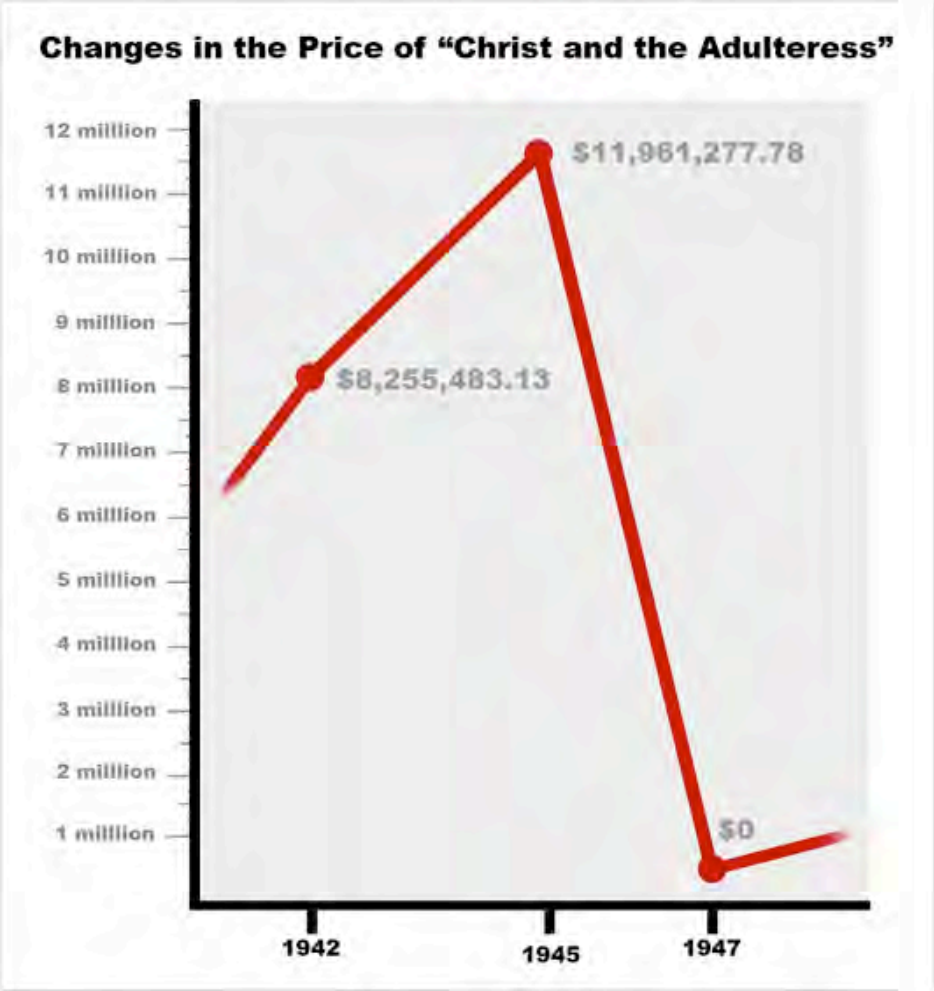
Andrew W. Mellon Collection, The National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Imitator of Johannes Vermeer, "The Lacemaker."

ERROL MORRIS: It's the sad story of a fake after it has been exposed as a fake. An ironic version of the idea that a fake cannot withstand the test of time.

JONATHAN LOPEZ: But Göring's fake is well maintained. "Christ and the Adulteress" looks probably very much like it did when Göring bought it. I've gone to see it. It's held in storage in Rijswijk as part of the collection of paintings that was repatriated to the Netherlands from Germany at the end of the war. And these paintings are generally divided up around various museums, or lesser works are put in offices of government officials. But with Göring's fake, nobody wants it. Nobody wants to have it in his office. So it remains in storage in Rijswijk. I made a pilgrimage to go see all of these fakes at various storage facilities in the Netherlands and in the U.S. It's kind of strange because this picture that Göring paid an incredible sum of money for is hanging in a wired cage in Rijswijk and not in Göring's great gallery at Carinhall, his baronial home north of Berlin. If the Nazis had won, maybe it would be different.


National Archives Carinhall.

On his 52nd birthday — that is on Jan. 12, 1945 — Hermann Göring unveiled to guests plans for a gigantic, 1000-foot-long Hermann Göring Museum at Carinhall. By then, the Soviets had already begun a final offensive on Berlin. Göring issued an order to destroy Carinhall to prevent it from falling into the hands of the Red Army. It was dynamited on April 28, 1945, after the art was removed. [24] On May 21, 1945, the Associated Press sent out an article, “Göring Gave Nurse a $1,000,000 Vermeer.” According to the relative value of one dollar in 1945 vs. 2008, the painting would be worth in 2008 roughly $12,000,000.



BERCHTESGADEN, Germany, May 21 (AP) – A prize painting from Hermann Göring's art collection – an item valued by United States Army art experts at $1,000,000 – was recovered tonight. Jan Vermeer's seventeenth century "Christ and the Adultress" was found in the possession of Christa Gormans, Mrs. Göring's nurse.

Capt. Harry Anderson of Ossining, N.Y., fine art expert of the United States 101st Air-borne Division, made the discovery in Schloss Fischhorn, near the Zellam See, where Göring's wife has been staying.

The castle, under guard of the 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment, became a likely spot to look after Captain Anderson found evidence in Göring's luxurious railroad cars that the Dutch artist's painting was somewhere in the vicinity.

Captain Anderson questioned Göring's wife, but she denied any knowledge of the Vermeer masterpiece, although he "did pick up six small paintings from her," he said.

As Captain Anderson was leaving the nurse spoke to him, then went to her room and got a four-foot length of stovepipe wrapped in a blanket. She said Göring had told her "to keep this and I'd never have to worry for money again the rest of my life."
Captain Anderson unwrapped the blanket and found the Vermeer painting wrapped around the stovepipe. It was placed in the 101st Division's "Göring Art Exhibition" tonight.

National Archives Recovered painting of “Christ and the Adultress” with soldiers.

5.
The Devil’s Orb

Jonathan Lopez and I resumed our discussion of Van Meegeren. I was still in search of an answer to the question of whether Van Meegeren was an apolitical huckster or a Nazi. Perhaps there were some additional clues in Teekeningen 1.

ERROL MORRIS: So is Van Meegeren’s success, success in pandering? Finding out what Nazi collectors want, and then giving it to them?

JONATHAN LOPEZ: To some extent, yes. Although, that’s only part of it. He really was an artist, and he did have to become involved in the aesthetics of what he was doing and making things that he himself found appealing.

ERROL MORRIS: He had to incorporate something of himself in his painting — even the forgeries. By the way, many of the images in your book are just amazing, the Van Meegeren drawings. They’re so strange. “Creepy” is the right word.

JONATHAN LOPEZ: Oh, the Nazi drawings?

ERROL MORRIS: Yeah.

JONATHAN LOPEZ: Yeah, the one with the snake and the deer. That's pretty horrendous. And the one with the soap bubble, "The Devil's Orb" ["Grain, Petroleum, Cotton"]—

ERROL MORRIS: The soap bubble is utterly amazing.

Teekeningen 1 "Grain, Petroleum, Cotton" by Han Van Meegeren.

JONATHAN LOPEZ: That horrendous scary-looking book. My wife makes me keep it behind a door in my office so that nobody knows that we own the thing. Because you look at it — Jesus Christ what is this? It's this sinister-looking book. It's just creepy-looking. It's enormous; it's black. It's got this gold Gothic script on it. It looks like an evil book.

ERROL MORRIS: Evil?

JONATHAN LOPEZ: Well, pretty bad. It was a very difficult kind of research to do. You have to do primary source research to get anywhere, because most of the secondary literature is not very good. It tends to repeat the same misinformation over and over again. So you have to go into –

ERROL MORRIS: You have to dig.

JONATHAN LOPEZ: You have to dig around, and you have to look in places you wouldn't initially think of looking. And you have to learn everything you can about this man and who he was, and about who he knew, and

who they were. And you have to recreate the culture in which he functioned. It was quite difficult. I had to learn Dutch. It involved a lot of hard work. I looked up the relatives and descendants of lots of people. I found these people in the Netherlands and wrote them letters in halting Dutch begging them to let me come talk to them. Eventually they agreed. A lot of the paintings that are reproduced in the book are from photographs that I took. It's not like you're going to find Van Meegeren's works hanging in a museum. They're family portraits that he did for wealthy Dutch families and are still in the possession of the families for which they were made. I had to track down those pictures and ask people: "Could I come see the picture of your mother at your house in the middle of nowhere in Holland. And by the way, you don't know me: I'm a weirdo from America who's interested in this obscure artist."

I asked Lopez to translate the Beversluis poem that accompanies the drawing "Grain, Petroleum, Cotton." He wrote to me, "It is called 'The Devil's Orb' and is written in rhyming couplets. I can't get it to rhyme in English, but here is a fairly poetic translation." [26]

THE DEVIL'S ORB

Oh World — the Devil's Orb —
Your vanity shall lead you to hell.
Frothing money-lust calls out its imprecations
As the devil reclines naked and shameless on that dread book
Blowing from his pipe your eternal torment
Out of the Old Testament's hate…

We lie prostrate before three mighty powers:
Petroleum, grain, and cotton!
We are their victims, beaten with cudgels
And by their hand and their cloak is the grand Design spoiled.

Oh they stand and lift the glass
And we dance with glee when given leave.
Their monocles and coins sparkle
While their insatiable maws get filled—but life itself is emptied.

Onward! Onward!
Through hunger and death
With the lash at your back and your back to the Word.
The people pass through this triumphant-seeming world
Led to perdition.

An unholy spirit lurks behind
The shimmer of illusion and festivity.
He grows swollen with our tears and sweat.
But still we pull him forward.
With our noses to the grindstone and our hearts sunken
We labor for their fiendish demon Baal, whose meaningless orb
Rolls us onward to the great chasm.

Oh spiral of decadence!
Parade of spiritual slaves
Caught in the storm winds like flightless birds
Made weak with panic and bloodied with shot
Oh dream of transcendence endured in suffering!

The orb is filled to bursting!
Glory alights and avarice must lose out!
For the mortal curtain is too thin and the emptiness too profound!
People! People!
Blinded by the clouds
Of stupidity and fear of the gaping abyss,
All sins shall be redeemed in a fiery day of reckoning
By Love…the Light.

Teekeningen 1 Detail of “The Devil’s Orb.”

Van Meegeren’s images can be interpreted in many different ways. Beversluis’ poem, how-ever, leaves little to the imagination. The opening lines reek of anti-Semitism. Although Lopez spends many pages in his book arguing his brief for why Van Meegeren must be considered a Nazi-sympathizer, the poem and the drawing, alone, powerfully underline his thesis.

And so, Han van Meegeren forged 11 Vermeers, a Frans Hals, a couple of de Hoochs and a Terborch. But for Lopez, Van Meegeren’s greatest forgery was not any of his paintings. It was his biography. It was his success in

convincing Joseph Piller, the Jewish agent of the Dutch Resistance who arrested him, and eventually the rest of the world that he was a folk-hero — a gifted artist who conned Göring — not a Nazi-sympathizer or collaborator. As such, forgery is similar to sleight of hand. You misdirect attention, emphasize certain details and suppress others. [27]

We live with a glut of information. More information than ever before. And yet, we see so very little. The same human mechanisms that operated thousands of years ago still operate today. If we don't wish to know something, if we prefer to believe something that's false is true, there is little that prevents us from doing so. Invariably, we prefer fantasy to the truth.

Early in his career (1922), Van Meegeren had drawn Princess Juliana's pet deer from the royal menagerie in The Hague. It became one of his best-known works.

Teekeningen 1

Twenty years later, he returned to the fawn — in a drawing from Teekeningen 1 — but this time it is wrapped in the coils of a viper. It's an endlessly suggestive image, but who can say what it really means? Drawings and paintings — like photographs — can be endlessly interpreted and reinterpreted. We can believe what we want to believe about them. Is the deer, the people of Holland, ensnared by a Nazi viper? Is Van Meegeren the viper, and the deer, the gullible people of the world? Is it a simple allegory of the weak being inevitably destroyed by the strong? And if we can ultimately decide these questions, can we determine Van Meegeren's intentions, that is, what he was trying to say to Hitler, the ultimate recipient of this work?

Teekeningen 1

For both Dolnick and Lopez, Van Meegeren is a chameleon who can change his colors to suit his audience. But if for Dolnick Van Meegeren is a trickster, a cad, an opportunist, for Lopez there is something far more insidious, far more sinister lurking in the shadows. If the Nazis could be seen as a bunch of fanatical losers who criminally seized power through duplicity and cunning, Van Meegeren is their poster boy.

Van Meegeren asked: what was the difference between "The Supper at Emmaus" before and after it was revealed to be a fake. Van Meegeren's question is thought provoking. Van Meegeren's "The Supper at Emmaus" is the same painting as Vermeer's "The Supper at Emmaus," but it is a painting that is perceived differently. [28] It is seen to have a different provenance, a different history — and that of course is of crucial importance to art collectors and

connoisseurs around the world. Changing the proper name involves changing the perceived provenance. “The Supper at Emmaus” was painted by Van Meegeren; in that respect, it doesn’t matter what we call it. Notwithstanding, the mere act of calling it “a Vermeer” — or signing it with a signature that looks like Vermeer’s signature — makes us see it as a Vermeer. [29] And this tells us in part: what’s in a name. A name is about a history, a provenance, and a trail that leads us back into the past, but the use of a name (appropriately or inappropriately) can short-circuit our need to verify that “it” is what we think it is. The name prevents us from looking into the possibility of a different and distinct history. The name overwhelms the thing itself. Even Bredius remarks on “the beautiful signature, I.V. Meer…” Compare for yourselves a compilation of signature samples: six different forgeries by Van Meegeren (at the bottom) and 16 different signatures by Vermeer (at the top.)

A.B. de Vries, “Jan Vermeer van Delft”

It is also possible that the name "Vermeer" inspired Van Meegeren to do some of his best work. Yes, he did it as a forger, but as Lopez suggests, "The Supper at Emmaus" may be Van Meegeren's greatest work and also the greatest Nazi work of art. Did *imagining* himself as Vermeer, *pretending* to be Vermeer allow him to do better work than he could have done otherwise? Did he need to see himself as an amalgam of Van Meegeren and Vermeer?

Two people in one. Like the two books on different aspects on the nature of the fraud that he committed. Dolnick and Lopez are writing about the *same* man, but they have different sets of *beliefs* about him. It is almost as if they are writing about Van Meegeren and his doppelganger. Or perhaps they are merely discussing different *aspects* of the same man. Are we talking about the mystery of personality or its inherent complexity? Could personality be analogous to a deck of cards that is constantly shuffled, different cards at different times appearing at the top of the deck? Teekeningen 1 is a case in point. On one hand, Van Meegeren is sending to the Fürher *evidence* that the Vermeers that he is selling are really Van Meegerens. (Did he also send a copy to Göring?) It is as if he is saying: "Look at these drawings. Don't they remind you of something?" Is it like a dare? A deliberate flirtation with danger? An artist who wants his collectors to appreciate his paintings — even if they are forgeries? Or on the other hand, is it a sincere offering from an admiring and loyal servant? [30]

If the two books are reflections on two aspects of one man, I wondered again if we should make anything out of their time of publication. Why these two books now? I wrote to Jonathan Lopez, and he wrote back:

We now live at a time when a lot of smart people have fallen prey to expertly packaged lies … I think that the Van Meegeren story has unusual resonance at this particular moment for that reason. I think, actually, that this is why we have two books coming out on this subject at the same time. There's something false in the air.

Ultimately, I believe that it's extremely important to understand how reasonable people can be led into misjudgments — even truly awful ones … That's why I ended "The Man Who Made Vermeers" with Göring's quote to Gustave Gilbert at Nuremberg.

Here is the quote from Göring:

Why, of course, people don't want war. Why would some poor slob on a farm want to risk his life in a war when the best that he can get out of it is to come back to his farm in one piece? Naturally, the common people don't want war… That is understood. But it is the leaders of the country who determine policy and it is always a simple matter to drag the people along… The people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same way in any country.

There are endless debates about whether leaders "drag the people along" or whether they are puppets of forces which exist outside of themselves. This is the substance of Tolstoy's theory of history outlined in "War and Peace" — the general's delusion (it could be Göring's or Napoleon's) that he is in control of history when he is but a pawn. [31] History, when all is said and done, is enacted by all of us, not by a select few, and it is to the story of the collective to which I now turn.

6.
The Illegal Camera

Verzetsmuseum, Amsterdam.

On May 10, 1940, the Nazis marched into Holland. Shortly afterwards, they asked the Dutch authorities to survey the Jewish population of Amsterdam. "This map (100 x 100 cm) was made by Amsterdam officials in January 1941 on the instructions of the occupiers. Each dot represents ten Jewish inhabitants. Of the 140,000 Dutch Jews, about 80,000 lived in Amsterdam." [32]

The sequence of events leading to the destruction of the Jews of Holland follows what is now a well-known pattern. In October 1940 Jewish enterprises were required to register with the German occupiers; a month later Jewish public servants, including teachers and professors were dismissed from their jobs; in July 1941 special identity cards for Jews were issued. And on and on and on. The rounding up of Jews, their imprisonment at various transit camps, principally Westerbork, and ultimately, their deportation by train to the extermination camps in the east. But there is a larger point to be made about Dutch complicity in the Holocaust and their collaboration with the Nazis. The Dutch were among the worst.

Both Dolnick and Lopez cite the Erasmus lectures given by Louis de Jong, a Jewish-Dutch historian, who spent the war years in England and was one of the first historians to provide an account of what had happened to the Dutch Jews. There is something of an "Alice in Wonderland" quality about De Jong's account, as if the reality of what had happened hadn't quite set in. De Jong writes, "There is, at first sight, a strange contradiction between two facts: that proportionally more Jews were deported from the Netherlands than from any other country of Western Europe, but there was not a country in Europe, and perhaps in the whole Christian world, were there was less anti-Semitism than in the Netherlands." Really? De Jong (a couple of sentences later) elaborates, "It was not that life in the Netherlands was easy for Jews, most of whom were rather poor, but it was certainly less difficult than elsewhere. They felt at home. They felt more or less safe and, from a desire to ensure their safety, they were, generally speaking more law abiding than Jews elsewhere, more obedient, less suspicious, less aggressive." From "a desire to ensure their safety…they were more obedient…?" But if the Jews felt safe, yet had to make that extra effort to be "more law abiding than Jews elsewhere," doesn't that tell us that the Jews of Holland did not feel safe, that they felt unsafe?

[33] Maybe there was less anti-Semitism in Holland, or maybe, just maybe, their anti-Semitism expressed itself differently. But anti-Semites or not, the Dutch were part of the Nazi apparatus that sent over 100,000 Dutch Jews to their deaths in Auschwitz and Sobibor, approximately 3/4 of their Jewish population.

De Jong provides yet one more unsettling story, the story of the postcards — postmarked from an address in Berlin and sent in many instances after the writer was already dead.

Upon arrival at Auschwitz-Birkenau, those Jews who were not selected for the gas chambers, but who were inscribed in the concentration-camp part of the complex, often were ordered to write postcards or letters to their families, informing them that they had arrived safely and that living and working conditions were tolerable. Many of these letters were not passed on, but several batches of them did arrive in Amsterdam; the first batch, 52 postcards, arrived four weeks after the first deportees had left Westerbork. I will quote one letter, taken from a batch that arrived in the middle of December 1942. This particular letter was dispatched from the notorious camp of Auschwitz III, the I.G. Farben works at Monowitz, where a total of 35,000 perished. "I have now been here four weeks," the letter said, "and I am well. I am in good health. Work is not particularly heavy. We start at seven in the morning and we work till four in the afternoon. Food is good: at noon we have a warm meal and in the evening we get bread with butter, sausages, cheese, or marmalade. We have central heating here and we sleep under two covers. We have magnificent showers with warm and cold water."

In De Jong's account, the elements of German deception are enumerated, but the Dutch are almost absent. There are only the Germans (the villains) and the Jews (the victims). After all, it is De Jong who says, "there was not a country in Europe, and perhaps in the whole Christian world, were there was less anti-Semitism than in the Netherlands."

De Jong represents the post war Dutch view of its own role in the war. More recent scholarship accepts and documents Dutch collaboration. In her recent book, "Beyond Anne Frank," Diane Wolf, a professor of sociology at University of California, Davis, writes:

> The Nazis found little resistance to their occupation in the Netherlands; rather, they enjoyed acquiescence and cooperation from the Dutch state and its institutions, including the civil service and, for the most part, the police. Indeed, Holland did quite well on the Nazi report card for good behavior: even Eichmann is reported to have said, "it was a pleasure to work with them." The history of acquiescence during the Nazi occupation, in the Netherlands, especially regarding the fate of Dutch Jews, challenges popular assumptions… Despite images to the contrary, historians confirm that those who helped save Jews consisted of a small minority… [The] number of Dutch collaborators with the Nazis exceeded the number of those in the Resistance. Relative to the population, the Netherlands had the highest number of Waffen-SS volunteers in Western Europe. [34]

More Jews died (per capita) in Holland, than anywhere else in Europe, except for Poland — three times (per capita) the number in France. The odds of being a Jew deported and murdered from Holland compared with France were about 3-to-1. Wolf cites the statistics, which appeared in Raul Hilberg's "The Destruction of the European Jews" as early as 1961. But who wants to revisit the horrors of World War II?

Table 1 Jewish Populations and Death Rates in Selected European Countries

Country	*Prewar Jewish population*	*Number of deaths during World War II*	*Percentage of Jewish population killed*
Italy	43,118[a]	9,000	20
France	310,000	75,000	24
Belgium	90,000	24,000	26
Luxembourg	3,000	<1,000	<33
The Netherlands	140,000	>100,000	>70
Poland	3,300,000	3,000,000	90

SOURCE: Hilberg 1985: 64.

[a]In 1941 there were 39,444 Italian citizens of Jewish descent and 3,674 Jews from other countries.

From "Beyond Ann Frank," reproduced by the permission of University of California Press.

The facts are undeniable. I was curious about the Dutch perspective on collaboration.

I took out a book from the library: "The Illegal Camera (1940-45): Dutch Photography During the German Occupation" ["De Illegale Camera (1940-1945): Nederlandse fotografie tijdens de Duitse Besetting"] — but couldn't read it because it is written entirely in Dutch. I found myself staring at one particular photograph. From the pictures around it, it seemed to be a photograph of Jews being rounded up by the Nazis. Dutch gentiles are walking along the sidewalk. It all looks so neat and orderly. Do they know what's happening? Do we know what's happening? Am I imagining things? Am I looking at the picture with the hindsight of 60-plus years of historical knowledge? [35]

Jack Dudok van Heel / ImagebankWW2, NIOD

I asked a friend, the Dutch Holocaust historian Robert-Jan van Pelt, to look at the book and translate the text referring back to the photograph. [36] Here is his translation: “A photo of a roundup (razzia) of Jews was made by Jack Dudok van Heel. Dudok van Heel was in contact with Fritz Kahlenberg in the group ‘The Hidden Camera.’ On a sunny spring day he photographed a calm roundup, as calm as silent churchgoers strolling to Mass on a sunny Sunday morning. The photograph was taken from the window of his in-laws’ house on the corner of the Albrecht Durerstraat and the Euterpestraat.”

The text ends with: “Dudok van Heel recalls with absolute certainty that the scene was a razzia of Jews.” Van Pelt was also fascinated by the photograph. We sat looking at it. Van Pelt in Toronto, myself in Cambridge, Mass.

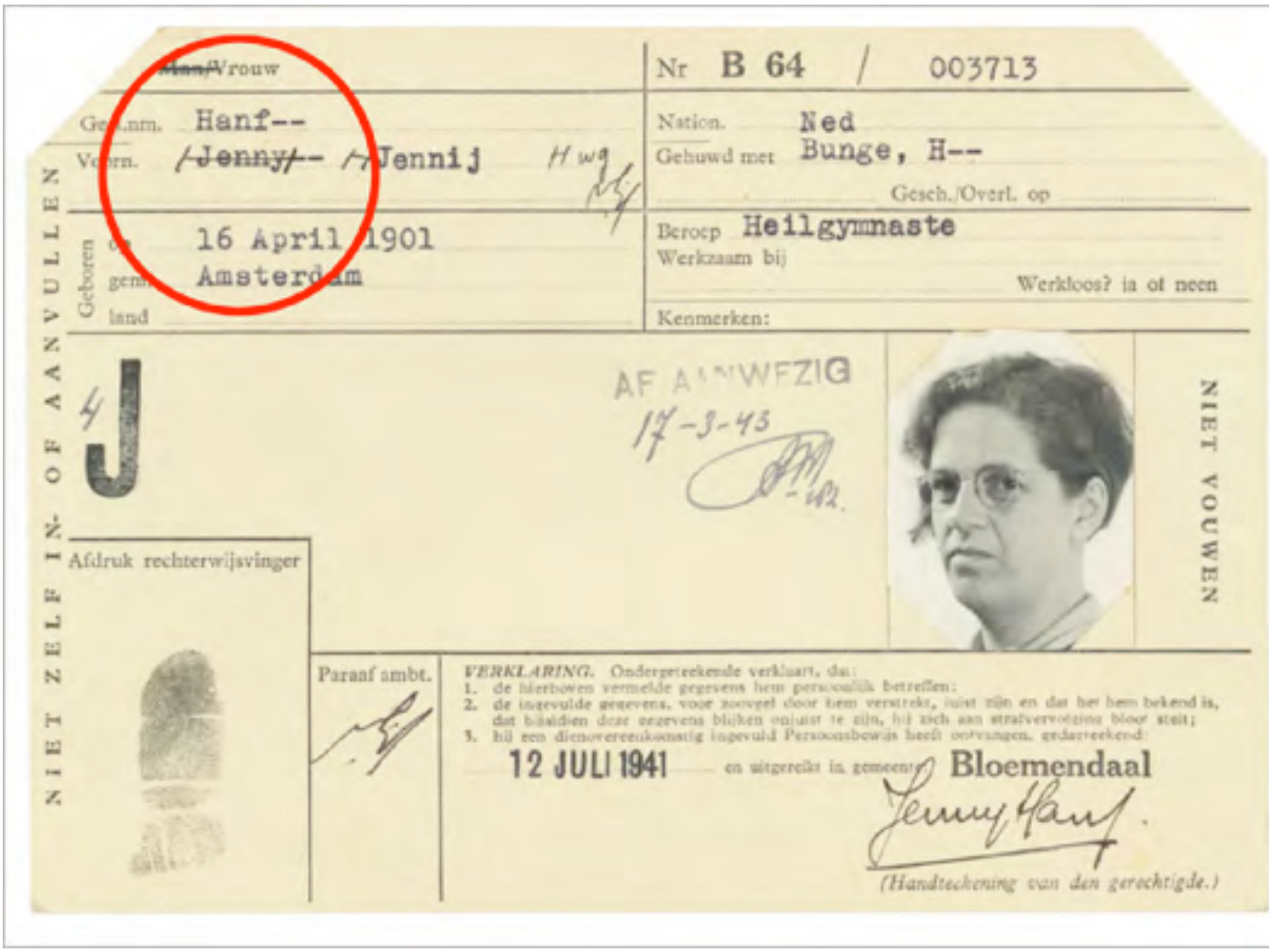
ROBERT-JAN VAN PELT: The photo was taken on the corner of the Albrecht Durerstraat, which is in Amsterdam Zuid, an area populated mostly by German Jewish refugees. The group is walking on the Euterpestraat, in the direction of the headquarters of the SD [the Nazi Security Police] which was located on the same street. You can see an armed German soldier on the left at the front of the group — the figure next to the tree.

Detail of Jack Dudok van Heel / ImagebankWW2, NIOD

Later, Van Pelt sent me an e-mail providing additional detail:

> During the Second World War, ‘going to the Euterpestraat’ meant that great harm would befall you. Immediately after the liberation, the Dutch tried to wipe out the memory of the Euterpestraat by renaming it after Gerrit (Jan) van der Veen, an artist who, unlike van Meegeren, had chosen to resist the Germans. In 1940, after the German occupation, van der Veen was one of the few who re-fused to sign the so-called “Arierverklaring,” the Declaration of Aryan Ancestry. In the years that followed, he tried to help Jews both in practical and symbolic ways. Together with the

musician Jan van Gilse and the (openly homosexual) artist, art historian, and critic Willem Arondeus, van der Veen established the underground organization De Vrije Kunstenaar (The Free Artist). Van der Veen and the other artists published a newsletter calling for resistance against the occupation. When the Germans introduced identity documents (Persoonsbewi-jzen) that distinguished between Jews and non-Jews, van der Veen, Arondeus and the printer Frans Duwaer produced some 80,000 false identity papers. Incidentally my grandmother Jenny Hanf, who had an official identity card #B64/003713 marked with a fat "J," received one of those 80,000 forgeries. She became Fenna Anna Deekens, identity card number #B64/002210. This was an identity card that had been "lost" and then doctored by the resistance. It held up in two razzias, and thus saved her from being murdered in Sobibor or Auschwitz. [37]



Collection of Robert-Jan van Pelt

Collection of Robert Jan van Pelt

["The Illegal Camera (1940-45): Dutch Photography During the German Occupation" includes several pictures of Van der Veen. In one photograph, we can see his hands just sneaking into the frame. He is holding an identity card. Another photograph shows the team at work. Van der Veen is a perfect example of a forger working not for his own good but for the good of others. There are many varieties of forgery, and it is surprising to see how easily they are accepted as the real thing and how the mere change of a name can imply a change of provenance and of identity. – E.M.]

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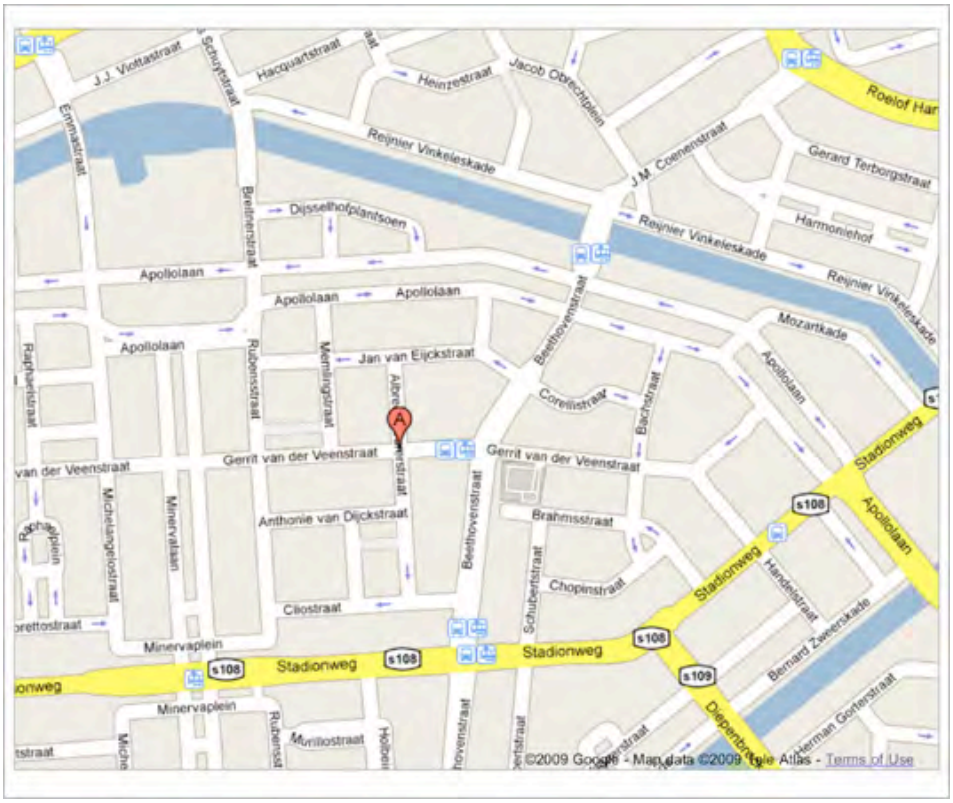
The deportations to the east started in the summer of 1942, and Van der Veen published a manifesto in De Vrije Kunstenaar and in many underground newspapers. The manifesto described the deportations to the East as a "mass murder decided on in sober and cool-blooded deliberation" and called them "the greatest national catastrophe which ever has touched our land…" It continued as follows:

> But we, the true voice of the Dutch nation… as you, compatriots: WHAT WILL YOU DO? Will you again limit yourself by crying a little… Will your reaction to this mass murder be characterized by the word "pity"? Or will we speak later about the eruption of a national anger that will be capable to bring the machinery of daily life to a halt? … COMPATRIOTS, THE MEASURE IS FULL!!!!!!" Defend the Jews where you can. Hide them, give them shelter and food, no matter how difficult it may prove to be. DUTCH POLICEMEN, think of your human and true professional duty: don't arrest Jews. Help them to escape and hide themselves. Know that you will be the murderer of every man, woman and child you arrest! PERSONNEL OF THE RAILWAYS: ENGINEERS, KNOW THAT EVERY TRAIN THAT YOU RUN FILLED WITH SLAVES WILL GO TO THE SLAUGHTER-HOUSE!!!! Citizens from all walks of life, convince

everyone you know that one must resist. Every one can act in their own way and in their own circle, by word, in writing, and above all through deeds!!! Rescue your persecuted compatriots from death. Know that we have no higher human duty!!!

On March 27, 1943, Van der Veen, Arondeus and a few friends raided the (Bevolkingsregister) Municipal Registry of Amsterdam, setting the building and its files on fire. The fire partially destroyed census records. Arondeus was arrested, sentenced to death and on July 1, 1943, executed. On the evening of his execution he asked a visitor to tell the world that "homosexuals are no less courageous than other people." On May 1, 1944, Van der Veen tried to liberate prisoners from the Amsterdam jail. He was hit by a bullet and brought, partly paralyzed, to a hideout. There, he was betrayed and arrested on May 12. A month later he and his comrades were executed in the dunes near Bloemendaal.



Google Maps

Our discussion continued: Dudok van Heel's photograph, Van der Veen and the manifesto, and the limitations of the first generation of post-War Dutch historians (like Louis de Jong).

ERROL MORRIS: Why do 40 or 50 years have to go by before a country can even look at its past?

ROBERT-JAN VAN PELT: Only the third generation can do it. Children can't look at their parents' generation because they're too angry. They're too much involved. That's why I believe that grandparents are essential in the raising of children. It's the closing of accounts. And then when you get to 75 years, it becomes extremely confusing because memory becomes hopelessly intertwined with history. It is no longer possible to separate the two. [38]

Van Pelt directed me to an essay he had written with Deborah Dwork. It appears in a compilation of essays edited by David Wyman, "The World Reacts to the Holocaust." [39] Van Pelt and Dwork write eloquently about the changing conceptions of the Holocaust in post-War Holland, in particular, about the period after the war where Dutch

complicity in the Holocaust was all but ignored. (De Jong was part of this tradition.) And they write about Westerbork, the transit camp from where Eichmann's trains departed.

> More than 100,000 Jews had been deported to the east from Westerbork, and there had not been a single attempt to blow up the railroad tracks. But gentiles often stood along the crossings and waved to the passing trains. It was a gesture, Louis de Jong wrote, that touched the deportees deeply. By 1970 Westerbork had become the site of a row of enormous radio-telescopes, for the same reason that it had been a convenient spot for a transit camp: it is the more remote spot in the Netherlands, far away from radio interference and removed from society. The monument is the last bit of track. On one side is the buffer stop, and on the other the ends of the track are turned to the heavens, imitating the gesture of the telescopes. [40]

"The Diary of Anne Frank" is the most famous of all Holocaust stories; it has been published in dozens of languages, turned into a play and into a movie. Anne Frank and Han van Meegeren lived only a short distance from each other. A half-kilometer or so. The proximity of Van Meegeren's mansion and Frank's hidden attic room is not so surprising. Amsterdam is a small, densely populated city. But their stories have something to tell us – particularly how their stories were received and popularized. Both stories are about our deep need to believe lies rather than the truth — all of us. We are all fantasists. For the Dutch there was the need to believe that they had not been collaborators – not even passive collaborators. That they had been tricked, conned, fooled. But the disturbing image remains — the hands waving at the trains leaving for the east.

Bamboozling Ourselves (Part 7)

By Errol Morris

This is the final installment of "Bamboozling Ourselves." Read the rest of the series.

7.
A Tale of Three Locations

Amsterdam City Archives Goudstikker business card.

Herengracht 458.

A sumptuous urban palace, Herengracht 458 was built at the time Vermeer was painting real Vermeers. The building was acquired by Jacques Goudstikker in 1927 and outfitted with period rooms – furniture, decorative arts, textiles, sculptures and, most significantly, paintings – Gothic, Italian Renaissance and Old Dutch. It became an amazing museum-like showcase for art. The Goudstikker family had been shaping the art world of Amsterdam for three generations. Goudstikker's grandfather, Jacob, his father, Eduard, and then Jacques, who joined the firm as a young man in 1919.

He was one of the first dealers to have a thorough education in art history. From the moment he entered the family business, Jacques Goudstikker combined serious scholarship with a keen sense of how to market and promote art. This was reflected in his elaborate catalogues – his were some of the first to use photography extensively. They became the authoritative sources for art historical knowledge in Holland. He provided an entire discourse on why people living in modern homes should include at least one Dutch master: "It's craziness to believe that a modern human being should live between bicycle tubes and dental instruments."

At his country estate, Nyenrode, he created tableaux vivants with his wife and other guests, a living version of the paintings in his collections. For Jacques Goudstikker, his art collections were very much alive.

Left, Amsterdam City Archives; right, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

There is a photograph of Goudstikker and Queen Wilhelmina in 1929 at an exhibition at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. In the next few years, he would mount shows in major cities throughout Europe and America. Despite the decline of the Dutch economy, Goudstikker's business continued to thrive.

Amsterdam City Archives Goudstikker and Queen Wilhelmina.

And then, in 1940, at the age of 43, Jacques Goudstikker was dead. In many ways, the story is very simple. He was a victim of the Nazis, though he was not killed in a Nazi concentration camp.

When I first read the details of Goudstikker's death, I suspected some sort of foul play. But the story seems even worse. Bad luck, an absurd sequence of events that no single individual could ever hope to control – his desperate attempts to flee Amsterdam; the bombing of the cargo ship that was taking him, his wife and infant son across the English Channel to safety; the refusal of the authorities to allow them (or any of the other Jewish émigrés) to disembark at Dover; and his accidental death in the middle of the night en route to Liverpool. The family was crowded together with many refugees in the hold of the ship. The baby was crying, and Goudstikker went up on deck. The rest is conjecture. The deck listing in heavy seas, the black night, the open hatch . . . .

Amsterdam City Archives SS Bodegraven

According to the death certificate, the cause was: *"Fracture of Skull due to accidentally falling into the Hold of the s/s Bodegraven on the High Seas whilst a Refugee Passenger thereon."* A black notebook was found on his body with an alphabetical list of many of the 1,400 artworks he had left in Holland. It was May 16, 1940, less than a week after the Nazi invasion of Holland.

Amsterdam City Archives Goudstikker notebook.

The black book and many of the paintings from the Goudstikker collection are currently on display at The Jewish Museum in New York. [41] In the catalogue for the show, there is a more detailed account of his death. As Desirée, his wife, described the night: “We found your husband. Where? How? Is he alright? … They took me to a cabin. He was lying there … with his sardonic smile on his face … Jacques was dead.” The captain made an unscheduled stop at the military port of Falmouth. Desirée was not given permission to go to the funeral or even to go ashore. She asked that the grave be covered with flowers, that he be buried with the cufflinks she had given him as a wedding present, and that they play his favorite song, Cole Porter’s “Night and Day.”

The catalogue continues, “Jacques Goudstikker, the distinguished scion of a Dutch dynasty who had been knighted by the queen of Holland and was esteemed as an eminent figure in the Dutch cultural world, was laid to rest in a foreign land. The man forced to flee his homeland because he was a Jew, whose records appear in the records of the Jewish community from the eighteenth century, and whose fate was sealed by the German occupation…” In some sense, he was lucky; 16 of his relatives died in Auschwitz, Sobibor and Buchenwald.

But it is what happened to Goudstikker’s galleries immediately following his death that is also appalling. Goudstikker’s attorney had died on the day of the invasion from a massive heart attack, and he declined to appoint a successor to prevent anyone negotiating with the Nazis in his name. Nonetheless, the vultures descended immediately. Goudstikker left behind a gallery manager, A.A. ten Broeck and a restorer, Jan Dik. On June 3, 1940 A.A. ten Broek was appointed director of the Goudstikker galleries. And on July 13 Ten Broek and Jan Dik were

paid 180,000 guilders *each* to sell the property of the firm to Hermann Göring and Alois Miedl – a banker and Göring's close associate. This despite the fact neither Goudstikker nor his heirs had authorized anyone to act in their name.

Göring bought all the paintings and art objects for 2,000,000 guilders and Alois Miedl bought the remaining assets of the company for 550,000 guilders. These included the right to the trade name J. Goudstikker and the real estate – the Nyenrode castle in Breukelen, Herengracht 458 (the gallery in Amsterdam) and the country estate Oostermeer. Although these transactions were dignified with several contracts, they were for all intents and purposes looting and theft. Miedl acquired no pictures in the initial deal, although he did acquire many Goudstikker pictures back from Göring in subsequent deals.

Nationaal Archief, Amsterdam Göring at Goudstikker's.

Using Goudstikker's name, Miedl went on to make a fortune selling art, particularly to the Nazis. (Jews were to be slaughtered, but their brands and brand-names preserved.) Jan Dik, the restorer and Goudstikker employee who had profited from Göring's take-over of the gallery, stayed on as well. Eventually, he authenticated a painting that would become a prize piece in Göring's personal collection: "Christ and the Adulteress."[42]

Keizersgracht 321.

In the atmosphere of crooked dealings and deception of Amsterdam after the invasion, Han van Meegeren's forgery business was booming. He wanted a new home that would showcase his wealth and he found it at Keizersgracht 321, an opulent mansion in a prime location along a central city canal. He purchased the building, in 1943, from Petrus Jan Rienstra van Stuyvesande, a pro-Nazi banker. Rienstra led the Buitenlandse Bankvereniging, the Amsterdam branch of the bank owned by Alois Miedl. It turned out that the real estate transaction would be the least of Van Meegeren and Rienstra's business dealings.

When Alois Miedl took control of the famed Goudstikker Gallery, Van Meegeren took notice, and urged Riesntra to make an introduction. Though the meeting was brief, Van Meegren smelled an opportunity. Through Rienstra – in addition to being Miedl's employee at the bank, he had occasionally assisted Miedl with his art dealing endeavors by

feeding him clients – Van Meegeren funneled “Christ and the Adulteress” to Miedl in the Goudstikker Gallery. A new Vermeer for the collection of the eminent art dealership.

Fast forward to the end of the war. On May 29, 1945, there was a knock on the door of Keizersgracht 321. Joseph Piller, a Jewish lieutenant in the Militair Gezag, the provisional military government, and a former Dutch resistance fighter, had come to arrest Van Meegeren. The strangeness of Van Meegeren’s life-style must have been striking. Holland had just suffered through the “Hunger-Winter” of 1944-5. More than 20,000 people died of starvation. There was incredible privation – the electricity and gas in Amsterdam had been off for months – but Van Meegeren was living in absurd luxury. He held wild, extravagant parties, overflowing with liquor, and jewels – women were encouraged to grab a handful of jewelry from a pile on their way out the door. Van Meegeren had even installed an ice rink in the basement of his mansion to entertain his guests.

© Marius Meijboom/Nederlands Fotomuseum, Rotterdam A boy during the “Hunger-Winter” of 1944-5.

As a headquarters for his investigations into Dutch collaboration, Lieutenant Piller had set up shop at (of all places) Herengracht 458 – the Goudstikker galleries. The mansion that had housed some of the most sophisticated collections in pre-war Holland, and which was plundered by Göring, became the scene for investigating and prosecuting collaborators involved in looted and stolen art.

The interrogations in the aftermath of the war are surreal, almost comical. Everybody, of course, describes themselves as good guys, despite what they had done. Jan Dik and Ten Broeck claimed that they had held the Goudstikker business together in difficult times; Miedl presented himself as an ethical businessman who had protected many Jews (including Goudstikker’s mother) from the Nazis; Rienstra represented himself as a patriotic Dutchman trapped in Van Meegeren’s Nazi machinations, and Van Meegeren aped Rienstra’s story, of being an anti-Nazi Dutchman who would never have sold his forgeries to Göring. Of course, they were all collaborators of one stripe or another. (And some were not just collaborators, but actual members of the Nazi party.) But doesn’t everybody see himself as the hero of his own biography? Don’t we all live in a self-contrived narrative bubble, where we describe ourselves to our best advantage? Who knows what fabrications the Nazis constructed for themselves to allow them to see their actions as heroic rather than criminal?

The spirit of the times is admirably captured in the first transcribed interrogation of Rienstra and Van Meegeren. Van Meegeren insists that he never knew that the painting would be sold to the Germans, most certainly not to Göring; Rienstra that he had never met Miedl and didn’t know that Germans were involved in the transaction. (This despite a deposition from Rienstra’s chauffeur reporting that he routinely delivered paintings for Miedl, including deliveries to Hofer, the manager of Göring’s art collections, and Hoffman, Hitler’s photographer and confidant.) Lies compounded by further lies, compounded by finger-pointing, pathetic attempts to deflect blame, totally unconvincing protestations of innocence, and convoluted narratives of self-absolution.

This interrogation was conducted by Joseph Piller on June 22, 1945, less than a month after Van Meegeren’s arrest and exactly ten days after his confession. The interrogation starts with Rienstra alone, and then Van Meegeren is invited to join the party. [43]

RIENSTRA van STUYVESANDE: Van Meegeren is a crook. There’s no doctor in the world that could cure everything that’s wrong with him. He suffers from syphilis and delirium. He got the 75,000 guilders from me and gave me back 25,000 for the trouble that I went to getting the money out of Miedl. Van Meegeren wrote a letter to Göring. Miedl wanted to pay the money, but only if Van Meegeren wrote a letter in which he promised to make the identity of the picture’s owner known within two years’ time.

JOSEPH PILLER: Have Mr. Van Meegeren come in. *(Van Meegeren enters offering an outstretched hand.)*

RIENSTRA van STUYVESANDE: No, I’d prefer not to shake hands.

HAN van MEEGEREN: On second thought, me neither.

JOSEPH PILLER: Van Meegeren, Rienstra claims that you got 50,000 guilders back from him.

RIENSTRA van STUYVESANDE: I gave you 75,000 and got 25,000 back. And then later you wanted to blackmail my wife about illegal earnings. We have no illegal earnings.

HAN van MEEGEREN: 25,000? Maybe it was 45,000. And what do you mean by “blackmail”? You never returned any 75,000 guilders to Miedl! Hah, hah, hah!

RIENSTRA van STUYVESANDE: I have other money than that dirty money of yours.

The interrogation goes on and on and on. But for me, there is only one central issue – did Van Meegeren *knowingly* set up the deal with Göring? (Lopez has trouble believing that Van Meegeren would do something *that* risky, *that* potentially suicidal. I, on the other hand, have less trouble believing it. He's a crazy risk-taker, after all. But what is surprising to me is that Van Meegeren – the forger of so many paintings – is such a *bad* liar. But maybe that's what happens when you get caught with your hand in the cookie jar.) The interrogation continues:

P. J. RIENSTRA van STUYVESANDE: …you know damn well that you wrote a letter to Reichsmarschall Göring, saying that you were selling a Vermeer of Delft for 1,650,000 on behalf of the owner, whose identity you would reveal within two years' time.

JOSEPH PILLER: Hold on. You wrote the letter and gave it to Van Meegeren to sign?

P. J. RIENSTRA van STUYVESANDE: Van Meegeren negotiated directly with Miedl [Göring's friend and business associate] over the picture. There was a lot of argument over the provenance. Miedl agreed to go ahead, on the condition that the name of the owner be revealed within two years.

HAN van MEEGEREN: That was under duress. The picture had already been sent to Germany. You said you had Dutch relations who would buy it.

P. J. RIENSTRA van STUYVESANDE: That's a lie!

JOSEPH PILLER: So, Mr. Rienstra, you went to Van Meegeren with an unsigned letter addressed to Göring?

P. J. RIENSTRA van STUYVESANDE: No, with my typewriter and a sheaf of paper. I typed the letter, but we composed the text together.

HAN van MEEGEREN: Totally untrue!

P. J. RIENSTRA van STUYVESANDE: We composed it together. I typed it. Van Meegeren signed it… The deal was that Miedl would pay out if Van Meegeren gave him the letter.

And so Göring received a letter, typed by Rienstra and co-written by Rienstra and Van Meegeren, promising to reveal the name of the previous owner of "Christ and the Adulteress" – and Van Meegeren was paid in full. Van Meegeren subsequently tried to downplay his connection with the Nazis. But his claim that he had no knowledge that Göring was buying the "Vermeer" is laughable – as laughable as his claim that the inscription to the Führer in Teekeningen 1 was not his signature but was forged.

Nazis were everywhere – most certainly, in Van Meegeren's circle of associates. And in yet one more irony, the deal for "Christ and the Adulteress" involved the transfer back of paintings that had been plundered by Göring and Miedl from Jacques Goudstikker's galleries in 1940.

Jozef Schneller, Miedl's gallery manager gave a deposition on Nov. 22, 1945.[44] At least, Schneller was willing to admit that he was a Nazi.

JOZEF SCHNELLER: My name is Jozef Schneller, and I joined the Nazi party in 1933 because I believed in its objectives. I have known Herr Miedl when I worked for him as an accountant in Munich at the bank of Johan Witzig. In the summer of 1940, Herr Miedl invited me to work for him managing his business at the Goudstikker gallery in Amsterdam. I thought that this would be a good job, and so I came… Towards the latter half of 1943, Rienstra came around the office with a man that I then did not know. I later learned that this man was named Van Meegeren. I recall that the wives of the two men were also present for this visit. This visit had only to do with taking a look at the pictures in the Goudstikker collection. One evening, sometime soon thereafter, Rienstra came again to the Goudstikker offices. Herr Miedl then called me into his office, saying that I would now have the opportunity to see a real Vermeer. In the room where Miedl and Rienstra were standing, I saw a crate in which there was a painting

showing Christ and the Adulteress Woman. The painting was signed in the upper left, MEER… Miedl paid, for the aforementioned picture 1,650,000 guilders in total, of which Rienstra, as commission, received via Handelstrust West 75,000 guilders and from the office safe another 75,000 guilders. I got the impression that half of the sum was to be given to Mr. Van Meegeren, who took receipt directly of the main amount of 1,500,000 guilders.

And so, Van Meegeren went to Handelstrust West and was paid 1.5 million guilders – in 15,000 100-guilder notes. The 150,000 guilder commission was split between Rienstra and Van Meegeren, although the depositions are filled with their unending squabbling about who got what. The exact split of the 10 percent commission may never be known but what is known is that all of these negotiations – the commission, the fees, the swapping of the Goudstikker inventory – took place against a grim backdrop of plunder, bribery, extortion, razzias and genocide.

Jonathan Lopez suggested I contact Nancy Yeide, the head of the Department of Curatorial Records at The National Gallery of Art and the author of a forthcoming book, "Beyond the Dreams of Avarice: The Hermann Göring Collection." I kept wondering, what was the *real* nature of these transactions? Why were Dutch Old Masters being sent back and forth between Amsterdam and Berlin, between Meidl, Göring and Hitler?

NANCY YEIDE: In the post-war report it specifically says that Göring was involved in selecting the ones that were to be traded for the Vermeer. But I just find it hard to imagine that Göring was looking at his collection and deciding "yes or no" to come up with the list of those to trade back to Miedl. But, then the ones that he traded back to Miedl for the Vermeer do have a future life.

ERROL MORRIS: A future life?

NANCY YEIDE: Yes. Miedl sold some of them to representatives for the Linz Project for the Führermuseum – essentially he sold them to Hitler.

[The Linz Project was Hitler's dream, a massive museum to be built in his hometown to house his art collections.]

ERROL MORRIS: Van Meegeren sells his Vermeer for 1,650,000 guilders, 150 thousand of which is his commission with Rienstra. Where does the 1.5 million come from? Wouldn't Miedl have to actually pony up that money himself if he was not being paid in cash by Göring? I'm interested in the nuts and bolts of these transactions – to make them come alive in some way. It makes me wonder whether Miedl accepted these paintings in partial payment for the Vermeer because he knew that he was going to turn around and sell some of them to Hitler. How many paintings were originally transmitted to Göring? Then how many pictures did Göring give back to Miedl for the purposes of making the transaction on "Christ and the Adulteress"? And then I guess my question following that would be of those paintings, how many of them were earmarked for Hitler, for the Linz Museum? And how much did Miedl get for them? And what exactly do these transactions mean?

NANCY YEIDE: There's one key list that was assembled by Hofer, who was Göring's curator. Hofer was apprehended more or less with the collection that had been evacuated to Berchtesgaden, and he made himself useful in attempting to ingratiate himself, no doubt to the allies who were doing the investigations into the collection. There is a post-war art looting investigation report on Göring. And Hofer is, of course, a key source of the information. According to Hofer, there were 150 paintings traded for the Vermeer. He lists 125; he couldn't remember the others.

C O N F I D E N T I A L

Attachment 63

A list of the pictures given by GOERING to MIEDL in exchange for the Vermeer, Christ and the Woman taken in Adultery, and the pictures from the GOUDSTIKKER Collection listed below. The list has been made up from memory by MIEDL who has attempted to indicate the provenance in every case. When pictures acquired by GOERING in the original GOUDSTIKKER deal are mentioned, the catalogue number has been taken from the original GOUDSTIKKER catalogue. (See Reference [illegible].)

1. Roger van der Weyden — Madonna with Child
2. Hans Memling — Small Madonna with Child
3. Hans Memling — Altarpiece, Maria from an Annunciation
4. Hans Memling — Altarpiece, Angel from an Annunciation
5. Master Wilhelm of Cologne — Christ, the Saviour with the Madonna and Child
6. Quentin Massys — Madonna and Child
7. Master of the Bern[illegible]colli Portraits — Annunciation

- -

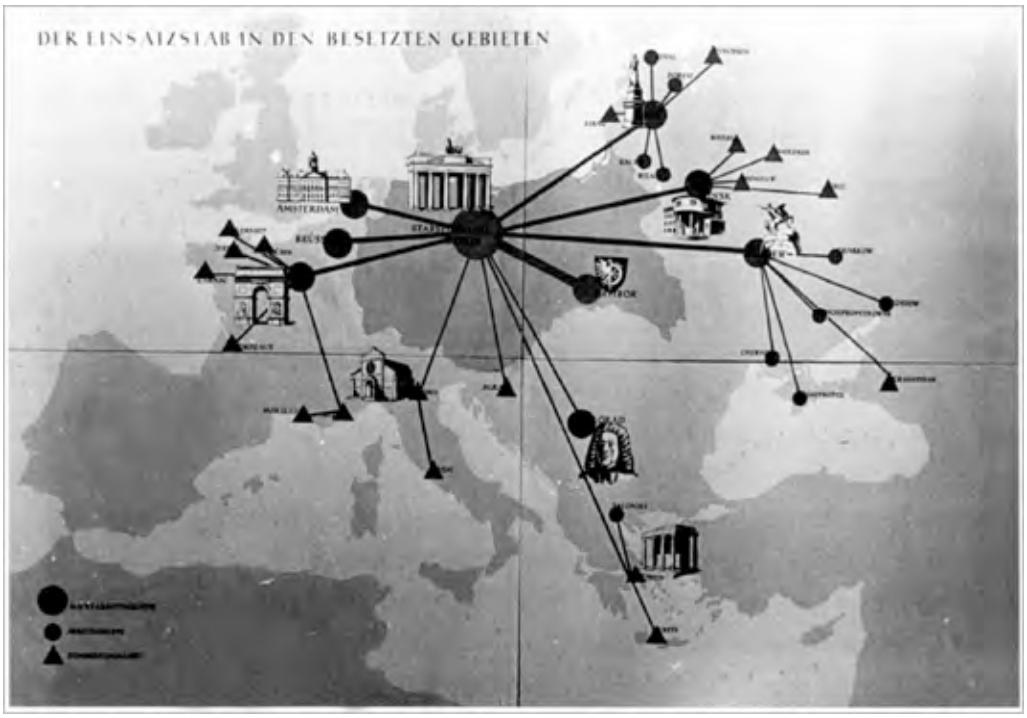
No. 1 - 54 from GOUDSTIKKER Catalogue, May 1940

1. 1513 Pieter Aerts, Kitchen scene (Kitchen in the open air ?)
2. 3190 Pieter Aerts, Mother and Child
3. 1449 Beerstraaten, Winter Scenery
4. 2539 Barth. Bruyn, the Elder, Small Portrait of a Man with book
5. 752 A. van Beyeren, Sea piece
6. 1006 Bloemart, Landscape
7. 2659 Adam van Breen, Ice Landscape with Skaters
8. 1717 Jan de Cock, Temptation of St. Antony
9. 3067 Jan de Cock, Biblical Subject) Pendants
10. 3068 Jan de Cock, Biblical Subject)
11. 378 Pieter Codde, Interior
12. 664 Coffermans, Resurrection
13. 2341 Griffier, Small Landscape) Pendants
14. 2342 Griffier, Small Landscape)
15. Hamilton, Bird (not in the GOUDST. Inventory) Pre-war property, Picture with white falcon, GOERING)
16. 1214 Henri met de Bles, The Calling of Peter.
17. 646 Pieter Lastman, Urias Letter
1199
18. 902 Jan Looten, Landscape
19. 927 Ludtichuys, Portrait of J. H. Lestevenon
20. 723 Mancadan, Landscape with mountain goats
21. 1714 Mancadan, Landscape with two figures
22. 2082 Mancadan, Landscape with Man on a rock
23. 1932 Claes Molenaer, Winter Scene
24. 2015 P. Molijn, Landscape with Shepherds
25. 1430 Joos de Momper, Mountain scenery
26. 2012 A. van der Neer, Moonlight Landscape
27. 1031 A. van der Neer, Moonlight Landscape
28. 1082 W. van Nieland, Italian Landscape
29. 2592 Jan Olis, The Lovers
30. 100 Anth. Palamedes, Interior
31. 362 Anth. Palamedes, Guard House
32. 2442 Bonaventura Peeters, Marine
33. 2475 Jan Provost, Burial of Christ
34. 2593 Van Beerstraaten, Small Still Life
35. 2020 Jac. van Ruysdael, Wood landscape with lake
36. 1464 Sal. van Ruysdael, The Valkhof
37. 1790 Schaeuffelein, Portrait of a Man
38. 2778 Hans Schwab von Wertingen, Portrait of a Man
39. 2485 Daniel Seghers, Flower piece
40. 717 G. Terborch, Small Portrait of a Woman

ATTACHMENT 63 C O N F I D E N T I A L

National Archives

What seems so extraordinary about these lists is the casual way that literally thousands of paintings were stolen, sold and bartered so that even more could be stolen. The Nazis even had their own organization dedicated to the task at hand – the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg, the ERR. A vast criminal network dedicated to plundering art – a network in which Van Meegeren operated with consummate skill.



Yad Vashem Photo Archives

When Joseph Piller asked Van Meegeren to paint *one more* Vermeer, he was trying to answer the question: What was the *provenance* of these paintings? Did Van Meegeren really paint them? With a *real* Vermeer, we imagine the hand holding the brush. Likewise, with Van Meegeren's forgeries, we want to *see* the hands that painted the pictures. The answer for Piller was readily available; it was in Van Meegeren's hands, in his capacity to make art. And so he moved Van Meegeren from de Weteringschans Prison (the same prison that Van Der Veen, the good forger, had raided in an attempt to liberate his comrades) to the Goudstikker Galleries and supplied him with all the materials he needed to create another Vermeer. The creation of this new painting, "Christ in the Temple", took place in the same gallery whose pillaged art was traded for the previous Van Meegeren forgery "Christ and the Adulteress"; the gallery that had also helped "authenticate" that same forgery. Except that this time, everybody knew that Van Meegeren had painted it. In that sense, it was an authentic forgery.

Nationaal Archief, Amsterdam A closeup of Van Meegeren at work.

Some 40 years after the war Piller was interviewed by Adriaan Venema ("Kunsthandel in Nederland 1940-1945." Amsterdam: Arbeiders, 1986. The translation was provided by Jonathan Lopez.)

ARIAAN VENEMA: You were the first to hear that Van Meegeren was a forger.

JOSEPH PILLER: I had questioned him for 24 hours straight. He kept on with his evasions. But 24 hours, he turned to me and he said: 'I did it; I painted it.' And I was sure of it too: Van Meegeren had done it.

ARIAAN VENEMA: He told you that he had painted it and you believed him right away? Was that on account of the way that he said it?

JOSEPH PILLER: It was completely in keeping with human nature. He was someone who felt misunderstood by everyone involved with the art world. Always that Hertje (his drawing of Princess Juliana's pet fawn). He was always compared with that. He wanted to show the world what he could really do. That was how it all began. It didn't start with a desire for financial gain. He wanted to prove that he was a great man. He didn't copy Vermeer. He worked as if he really were Vermeer. Once you got to know his psychology during those 24 hours, it was completely credible. Afterwards, of course, things changed. Once he saw that there was money to be made so easily, he went on with it, and it became something else. Then it was financial gain…

ARIAAN VENEMA: How did the matter become world famous?

JOSEPH PILLER: In my office, the Goudstikker building on the Herengracht — I had my office there. It was there that he made that picture to show that he was really the forger. I think he must have gotten some journalists over there himself somehow. He was like a master of ceremonies at his trial. He said to me then, 'Joe, I've saved the best seat for you.' He held nothing against me. I had helped him to make a big name for himself. He wanted everybody to know about it. He just didn't want to give back the dough. That was schizophrenic, but I didn't care. I was supposed to be dealing with getting back what had been stolen from the Netherlands. I wasn't really there to take a forger — who, in my heart, I rather liked — to prison. I guess I feel some regrets about it. But that wasn't my job. On the other hand, I also continued to protect him. He forged so much. There are all sorts of Jan Steens and every other possible thing too that people in the business will say "it's so beautiful," but I know that it's a fake. He had a factory going. But it wasn't my job to bring that out into the open….

ARIAAN VENEMA: In conversations I've had with art dealers you tend not to come out too well.

JOSEPH PILLER: They hated me.

ARIAAN VENEMA: But your duties consisted of getting back pictures, not investigating the art dealers.

JOSEPH PILLER: It was fear — fear that it would all come out, that they had been on the wrong side. Also, it was clear that I did not like collaborators. Too much had happened in my life to be kind to people like that. I was more extreme then. I was young, and I had witnessed many deaths, and I hated anyone who had worked with the Germans.

ARIAAN VENEMA: Did you come across any art dealers who felt shame for what they had done?

JOSEPH PILLER: Oh, no. Not shame — fear. They all said they had sold only their worst things and kept the good ones.

ARIAAN VENEMA: May I gather that you were rather disappointed after the war?

JOSEPH PILLER: People are people, and our hopes for a better world were very righteous. We saw a kind of ideal image before us. In the years 1940-1945, two things were extremely important. The first: to get the enemy out of the country. And the second — and this for us was just as important — to build a better world… Everything went wrong, and that was a disappointment. But that is a disappointment for the whole Resistance, not just for me.

Both Dolnick and Lopez wrestle with the question of why Joseph Piller helped Van Meegeren to redefine himself as just a trickster rather than as a Nazi collaborator. For me, it is not so difficult to understand. His case reflected a national desire – on the part of both gentiles and Jews – to put the war behind them, and to deny the reality of what had just happened. To move on.

Prinsengracht 263.

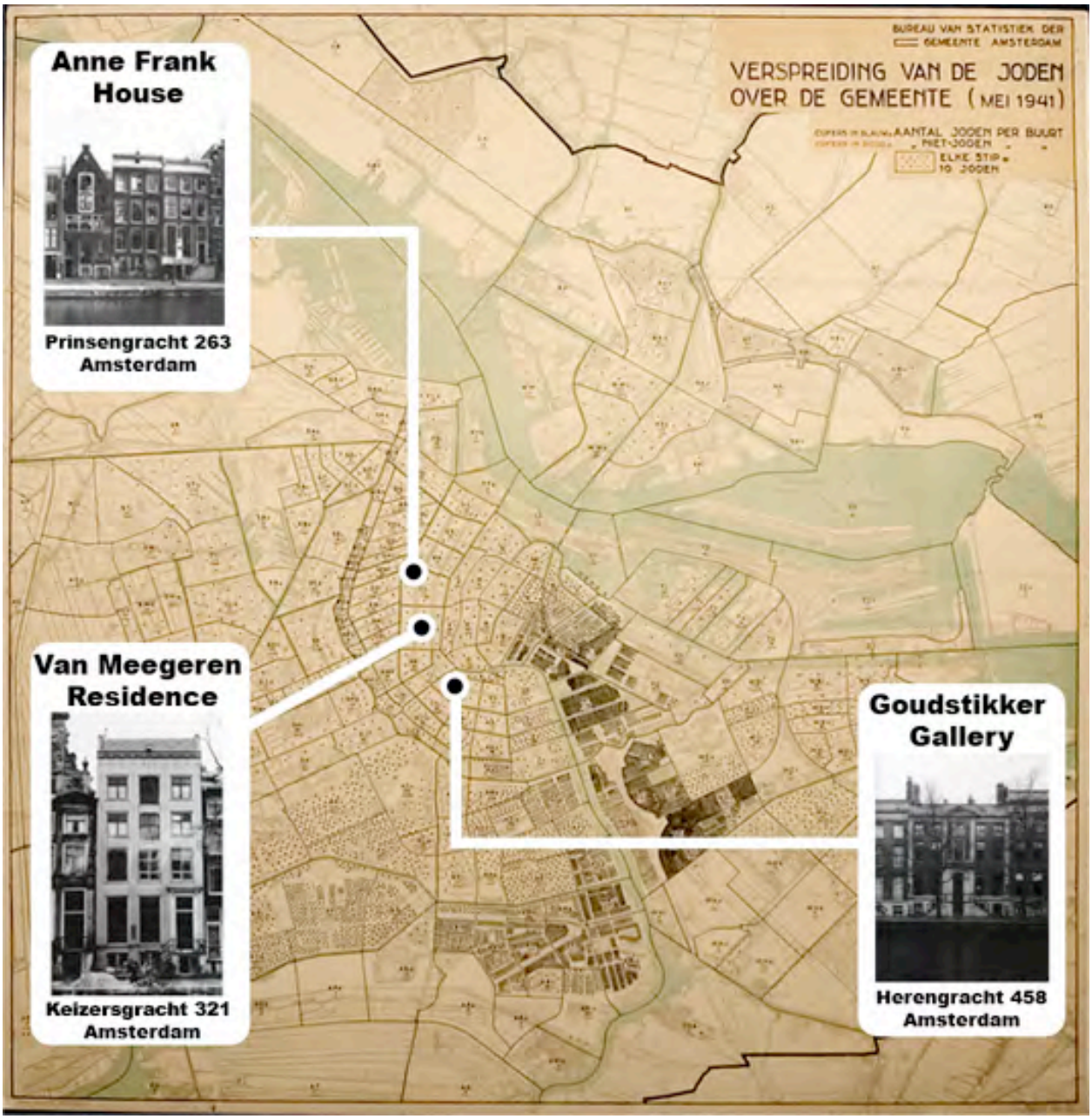
On Aug. 4, 1944, at Prinsengracht 263, Anne Frank, her father and mother, her sister and the others in hiding were betrayed – not *discovered* by the Germans – but betrayed by a Dutch informant. On Sept. 3rd they were put on the very last transport to leave Westerbork for Auschwitz. Of the eight people in hiding, seven died. Three members of the Frank family were *killed* by the Germans, but they were betrayed by the Dutch. Only Otto Frank, Anne's father, survived the war. This is not to say that all the Dutch were bad, but it is to say that the simplified view expressed by Louis de Jong (and other first generation post-war Dutch historians), a picture that leaves the Dutch out of the Holocaust, is incomplete. There were Van der Veens and there were Rienstras, there were heroes and collaborators, and many, many people in that gray area in between.

Prinsengracht 263, Keizersgracht 321 and Herengracht 458. These three locations are not far from each other. Each, in its own way, speaks to the insanity and criminality of the Nazi era.

The Goudstikker galleries were closed after the war. Many of the paintings taken by Göring and Hitler were "repatriated" to the Dutch government, which claimed ownership. It has taken over 60 years to have a small fraction of the paintings returned [to Goudstikker's heirs]. Van Meegeren died in 1947. He had divorced his wife, Johanna, before the end of the war. He was able to settle on her somewhere between 800,000 and one million guilders that the law could not touch – as long as she maintained the fiction that she played no role in Van Meegeren's crimes. By most accounts, it was a way of hiding his assets. She lived in luxury until her death at the age of 91.

The Anne Frank House at Prinsengracht, which has become a tourist attraction and a symbol of Dutch resistance, should also serve as a reminder of Dutch complicity. It's just that we prefer to remember the past as human triumph rather than human failure.

And so, after the war, the Dutch wrapped themselves in the cloak of Anne Frank and pretended that they, too, were innocent. As such, Van Meegeren becomes not just the story of the self-deception and duplicity of *one* man, but of an entire nation.



Map: Verzetsmuseum, Amsterdam; insets: Amsterdam City Archive

There may be yet one more principle at work – something very simple. The bigger the lie, the more willing we are to believe it.

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Acknowledgments

I am particularly indebted to my researchers Julie Fischer and Ann Petrone. This essay could not have been written without their ideas, advice and support. I would also like to thank Charles Silver and Julia Sheehan, who commented

on numerous drafts. Leon
Neyfakh read a late draft and made a number of helpful suggestions. I have benefited enormously from ongoing discussions with my two main interview subjects, Edward Dolnick and Jonathan Lopez. I have found both of their books of enormous interest, and their work and writing has made this essay possible. Jonathan Lopez kindly provided many images – including images of the many Van Meegeren forgeries. He also translated a number of important texts, including the interviews from Venema and the depositions of Rienstra, Van Meegeren, etc. Nancy Yeide from the National Gallery of Art was helpful in discussing Goering's art acquisitions. Michael Lynton first brought to my attention the grim statistics concerning the deportation of Dutch Jews, and Robert-Jan Van Pelt helped me with my many questions concerning Holland, the Holocaust and the years following the war. It was only after we discussed the photograph of the razzia and Robert-Jan showed me his grandmother's identity cards that I started looking further into that odd nexus of connections between the Nazis, the Dutch and the Jews. Dan Mooney created the many excellent illustrations, including "The Girl With Two Pearl Earrings." I am not going to say whether it is a real Vermeer or not, but it is for sale, and I am willing to accept any offer over $100,000,000.

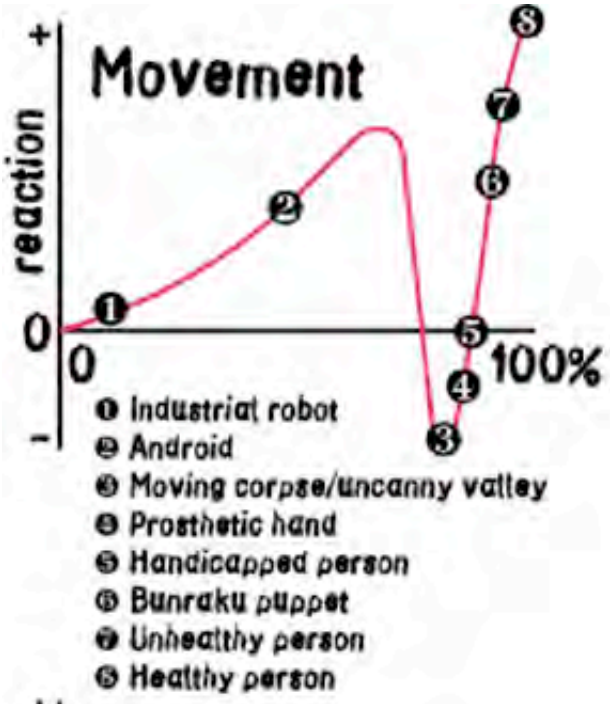
FOOTNOTES:

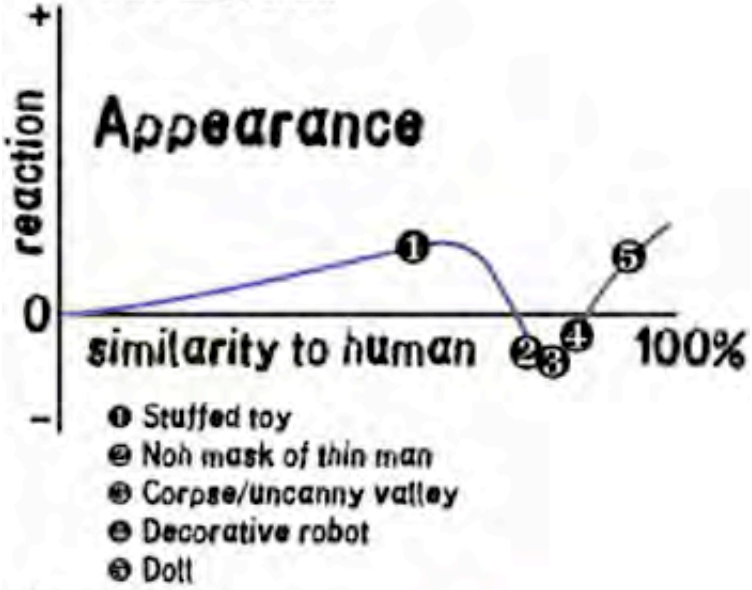
[1] In the first article in The Times, the writer is aware of the fact that Van Meegeren is not trying to imitate any known paintings by Vermeer.

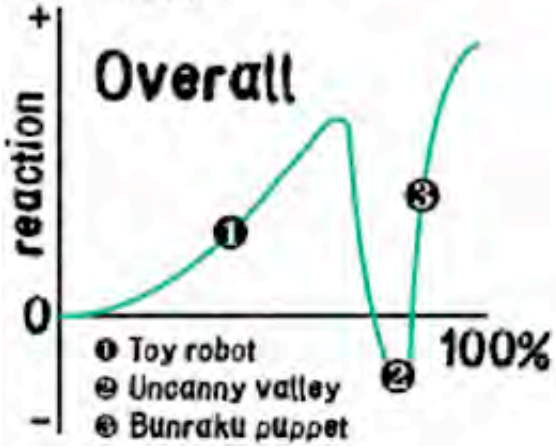
[2] The illustration comes from an article on the web by David Bryant, "The Uncanny Valley: Why are movie zombies so horrifying and talking animals so fascinating?" "Though originally intended to provide an insight into human psychological reaction to robotic design, the concept expressed by this phrase is equally applicable to interactions with nearly any non-human entity. Stated simply, the idea is that if one were to plot emotional response against similarity to human appearance and movement, the curve is not a sure, steady upward trend. Instead, there is a peak shortly before one reaches a completely human 'look' … but then a deep chasm plunges below neutrality into a strongly negative response before rebounding to a second peak where resemblance to humanity is complete. This chasm — The Uncanny Valley of Dr. Mori's thesis — represents the point at which a person observing the creature or object in question sees something that is nearly human, but just enough off-kilter to seem eerie or disquieting. The first peak, moreover, is where that same individual would see something that is human enough to arouse some empathy, yet at the same time is clearly enough not human to avoid the sense of wrongness. The slope leading up to this first peak is a province of relative emotional detachment — affection, perhaps, but rarely more than that… The conclusion drawn by the good doctor is that designers of robots or prosthetics should not strive overly hard to duplicate human appearance, lest some seemingly minor flaw drop the hapless android or cyborg into the uncanny valley — a fate to be dreaded by all concerned." Dave Bryant has provided three graphs showing The Uncanny Valley with respect to movement, appearance, and some vague combination of factors, called "Overall." The x-axis is "degree of similarity" to human, where a human 100 percent resembles another human, and where an inert boulder 0 percent resembles another human. I will not entertain the perhaps familiar example of people who closely resemble inert boulders. Let's just say they are different in principle. The y-axis is an acceptance/rejection index.

Courtesy of Dave Bryant

In a further e-mail, Mr. Bryant pointed out: "Be aware also that while mine is one of the oldest Web articles on the subject, there now are several others, some of them with very different views of the topic and very different explorations of it. Some works even deal with refutation of the hypothesis,
pointing out quite correctly that there is (or was – the situation may have changed) no hard research backing up the idea! In particular, the electronic game and computer-animation industries have generated some discussion, and even Roger Ebert referred to it in at least one of his critiques."


Movement
+
reaction
0
-
0
100%
1 Industrial robot
2 Android
3 Moving corpse/uncanny valley
4 Prosthetic hand
5 Handicapped person
6 Bunraku puppet
7 Unhealthy person
8 Healthy person


Appearance
+
reaction
0
-
similarity to human
100%
1 Stuffed toy
2 Noh mask of thin man
3 Corpse/uncanny valley
4 Decorative robot
5 Doll


Overall
+
reaction
0
-
100%
1 Toy robot
2 Uncanny valley
3 Bunraku puppet

[3] Notwithstanding, I started to wonder about "The Girl With Two Pearl Earrings." Would it be possible to sell such a painting? Could I convince someone to buy it? Is this an example of Mori's Uncanny Valley or just a bad joke?

[4] Vermeer had painted one religious allegory — "The Allegory of Faith," now in the Met — and one biblical history painting — "Christ in the House of Martha and Mary," now in the National Gallery of Scotland. Then there is a gap in his creative output. Is it possible that there was no real gap — that Vermeer was working away producing many biblical scenes? Well, many dealers and collectors thought that it was. Van Meegeren's method could be called: Find a biographical gap and fill it.

[5] Dolnick writes, "Vermeer did not name his pictures, as far as anyone knows. The names in common use are largely a matter of tradition and vary slightly from writer to writer. Here and throughout the book I have followed the names in Albert Blankert's Vermeer of Delft." (Dolnick, "The Forger's Spell," p. 33) The name of a painting is not unlike the caption of a photograph.

[6] In his book "Selling Hitler," Robert Harris recounts the discovery, authentication, and debunking of a set of diaries purported to be Hitler's, published by the German magazine Stern in 1983. Two forensic handwriting analysts – Dr. Max Frei-Sulzer, former head of forensics for the Zurich police, and Ordway Hilton, a forensic expert and 30-year veteran of the New York Police Department – compared the diaries in question to other Hitler documents. Some of them were real, others were forgeries that had not yet been brought to light: "[Dr. Frei-Sulzer] agreed to conduct a handwriting analysis. Walde, swearing him to secrecy, provided him with two photocopies of documents from the Stern hoard: Unfortunately for Frei-Sulzer, these supposedly genuine examples of the Führer's writings were also the work of Konrad Kujau, a confusion which meant that the scientist in some instances would be comparing Kujau's hand with Kujau's, rather than with Hitler's." And then, "[Ordway Hilton] was handed the originals of the two documents cop-ied for Frei-Sulzer: the page from the Hess volume and the telegram to Horthy, together with an accompanying folder of 'authentic' Hitler writing for comparison, part of which was genuine and part from Heidemann's collection of forgeries. … Hilton's report, couched in five pages of professional gobbledegook, was conclusive. But, based as it was on the assumption that all the documents he had been given for comparison were authentic, it was also completely wrong. It was scarcely surprising that the signatures in the Kleist document, the Horthy telegram and the photographs proved 'consistent': they were all forged by Kujau."

[7] From left to right, images courtesy of: Jonathan Lopez; Jonathan Lopez; Museum Boijmans-Van Beuningen, Rotterdam; Museum Boijmans-Van Beuningen, Rotterdam;
Museum Boijmans-Van Beuningen, Rotterdam; Museum Boijmans-Van Beuningen, Rotterdam; Museum Boijmans-Van Beuningen, Rotterdam; Jonathan Lopez.

[8] Yes, the Hans Christian Andersen story is about how people see the truth but are afraid to speak it. Vanity and fear. The crucial lines: "One day two swindlers came to this city; they made people believe that they were weavers, and declared they could manufacture the finest cloth to be imagined. Their colors and patterns, they said, were not only exceptionally beautiful, but the clothes made of their material possessed the wonderful quality of being invisible to any man who was unfit for his office or unpardonably stupid." But, as Ed Dolnick points out, this is a variant where the citizens in the story simply fail to even see the truth. They fail to notice that the Emperor is naked because they are told he is wearing clothes by an expert, and who are they to doubt an expert? One way the fable is enormously relevant, though, is that each time the scoundrels succeeded in convincing someone in the Emperor's court that they were working with real fabric, the easier it became to fool the next person. Each act of forgery reinforced the campaign, because the more people were on the record as seeing the fabric, the more sure everyone else is going to be that the problem lies with them and not everyone else.

[9] I was surprised to learn that Hans Christian Andersen added the little boy as a character in a very late draft. It was because of a complaint by a reader. Ah, the pressures that exist for redemptive endings.

[10]. Jonathan Lopez is a Harvard educated art historian who writes regularly for a number of different arts publications, including Art and Antiques.

[11] There are two different articles in De Waarheid, one with no photo in July, and one with a photo in November.

[12] The poster is for the Royal Menagerie and is in Van Meegeren's handwriting, from Haags Gemeentearchief. The use of the boxes for comparison derives (at least for me) from Charles Johnson of Little Green Footballs.

[13] Until Lopez published the photograph in De Groene Amsterdammer in 2006.

[14] Kilbracken does claim that the inscription was not by Van Meegeren. "It was conclusively proved that only the signature was in his handwriting – as is his common practice he had autographed 50 or 100 copies, one of which had been bought by an ardent Nazi, whose identity has not been established, and dedicated by him – but the rumor did not die." Kilbracken's wording is peculiar. He does not say that it was conclusive proved that the inscription was not in Van Meegeren's handwriting, only that the signature was. Kilbracken, "Han Van Meegeren, Master Forger" (Thomas Nelson, 1967). Kilbracken definitely belongs to the school of Van Meegeren scholarship that sees him as an opportunist, not as a Nazi.

[15]. Jonathan Lopez wrote to me, "With regard to the handwriting on the inscribed copy of Teekeningen 1, the Centrale Raad van de Eereraad voor de Kunst (Central Committee of the Purge Board for Artists) had a special meeting on January 27, 1946 to consider the evidence regarding the book. The reason for the special session was that the committee had requisitioned the book from its owner, an Amsterdam collector named Jammert, who had acquired it from two Belgian journalists. (I'm pretty sure these were friends of Jan Spierdijk, who went with him to the Reichschancellery in Berlin.) Jammert demanded the book be returned to him because he had a buyer who wanted to acquire it immediately. The minutes of the meeting reference the report of a 'grafoloog' — handwriting expert — from the Hague crime laboratory. The report is said to be appended to the minutes, but was not in the file folder when I examined it in 2006. However, the minutes of the meeting summarize the findings of the report as follows:
a. The handwriting expert determined that the entire inscription, including signature, was written in vine charcoal.
b. The handwriting expert determined that the entire inscription, including signature, was written by a single hand.
c. By comparing the inscription and signature in the copy of Teekeningen 1 to an inscription and signature on a charcoal portrait drawing by Han van Meegeren of someone named L. Weber, the handwriting expert concluded that the same hand had produced both."

[16] I asked Jonathan Lopez about the specifics of the "shadow proceeding." He wrote back, "It was part of the postwar 'zuivering,' or purification process that dealt with people whose collaboration did not rise to the level of high crimes. Such people were punished through 'purge boards' linked to various professions. Van Meegeren's case fell under the aegis of the Eereraad voor de kunst, or the purge board for artists. They did not make their findings known publicly at the time because to do so could have prejudiced Van Meegeren's trial for forgery, which, as a matter before the criminal courts, took precedence. According to the recollections of the head of the Eereraad (I think his name was Van der Goes van Natters), they were prepared to hand down a lengthy professional ban against Van Meegeren after the forgery trial ended, but Van Meegeren – with characteristically perfect timing – dropped dead before the decision was announced, so it didn't become publicly known until a brief newspaper piece in the mid 1970s." (Lopez, "The Man Who Made Vermeers," pp. 220ff.)

[17] It could be argued that Dolnick's use of Mori's Uncanny Valley is an example of this: an example of Van Meegeren's cleverness, but, of course, Van Meegeren was clever. And, indeed, his faux Vermeers did outsmart the art critics and art historians. Bredius did roll over for Van Meegeren. As Lopez points out, Bredius not only accepted "The Supper at Emmaus" as a Vermeer, he called it the greatest of all the Vermeers. The question, of course, is: what was Bredius thinking? Why did he not only authenticate "The Supper at Emmaus" but embrace it as a masterpiece?

[18] In the 1990s the Dutch government assembled their own team of experts – the Rembrandt Research Project (RRP) – to reevaluate these attributions and reduced the number to 280. Additional details can be found on the Rembrandt Research Project website. The preface to the RRP: The Rembrandt Re-search Project; past, present, future, makes explicit reference to the Van Megeeren affair. "Having traumatized both the art-historical and museum worlds, this affair engendered veritable paranoia regarding possible forgeries. Yet this scandal, and the role of the

laboratory in resolving it, also generated great optimism regarding the potential of scientific research methods in art-historical investigation. Without the need for a full-fledged Vermeer investigation, research conducted at the Institut Royal du Patrimoine Artistique in Brussels (one of the few laboratories specializing in this area at the time) demonstrated that the painter Han van Meegeren's claim to be the author of the most admired of the Vermeer forgeries, the "The Supper at Emmaus" in the Boymans Museum in Rotterdam (the present Boijmans van Beuningen Museum) was in fact true." I very much like how this is phrased. The problem became the problem of attributing "The Supper at Emmaus" to Van Meegeren rather than proving that it could not be attributed to Vermeer. It also speaks of "veritable paranoia," at the same time it asks us to consider veritable forgeries. The RRP found it necessary to make another distinction, which importantly, mirrors the distinction that I have made about reenactments – the distinction between copies and forgeries. For example, a student of Rembrandt could have been asked to make a copy of Aristotle contemplating the bust of Homer. It is an exercise with no intention to deceive. Hundreds of years later there could be attribution difficulties because there is no longer a clear record of provenance. The student copy could be taken as an actual Rembrandt. The copy doesn't have to be made during Rembrandt's lifetime. It could have been two hundred years later. It still isn't a forgery. It is just a copy. A forgery must have behind it the intention to deceive. In reenactments we do not have the vocabulary to distinguish between a reenactment that is intended to deceive and one that is created for other purposes entirely. In their efforts to discriminate real Rembrandts from the school of Rembrandt, the RRP decided, "Paintings in the style of Rembrandt and with the aspect of a seventeenth-century painting, which on the basis of style and quality can scarcely be considered as works by Rembrandt himself, in virtually all instances originated in Rembrandt's workshop. Their relation to the work of the master can vary from a literal copy to variants which in invention are ever further removed from a given (or lost) prototype. Production in the workshop of free inventions in the manner of Rembrandt must also be taken into account. Works in which more hands are involved are encountered only rarely in Rembrandt's hypothetical oeuvre."

[19] Bredius's enthusiastic endorsement of "The Supper at Emmaus" calls into question the very idea of expert opinion, at least expert opinion that is not based on scientific evidence. There are two separate questions here – about the painting's aesthetic value and about its provenance. It is easy for critics and experts to say, after Van Meegeren's confession, that the painting is mediocre. But does this suggest that aesthetic value depends on provenance?

[20] Lopez later wrote to me, "It turns out there were two editions: one in '21, the other in '23. Bizarrely, this does in fact coincide with the hyperinflation, which began when the German reparations payments couldn't be met in 1921 and ended only with the return to currency controls at the end of '23." Reference for the two editions of Wiedergefundene Gemälde can be found here.

[21] The hyperinflation in Weimar Germany in the 1920s was bad – very, very bad. In 1922, the highest denomination German banknote was 50,000 Mark. By 1923, the highest denomination was 100,000,000,000,000 Mark. In December 1923 the exchange rate was 4,200,000,000,000 Marks to 1 US dollar. If the Rembrandt attribution-inflation had occurred on a similar scale, by 1923, instead of just 711 Rembrandts, there would have been over 100,000,000. A prodigious output.

[22] Abraham Bredius (1855 – 1946) was 80 in 1935.

[23] One way to understand the fundamental difference between Dolnick's and Lopez's account is to see that for Dolnick, the sleight of hand involves a psychological transaction – one person fooling another person or group of people. For Lopez, however, Van Meegeren's forgeries must be seen against the background of an entire culture and history.

[24] Image credits: Getty Images; Jonathan Lopez; Museum Boijmans-Van Beuningen, Rotterdam; Teekeningen 1.

[25] "Göring ordered the total destruction of Carinhall after he had left it forever. The thought that others may live in the chateau-like building, that to him was the symbol of his power and his personality, was beyond all bearing for him. When the last trucks and railroad trains carrying objects of art had departed, leaving Carinhall like an empty

hull, Göring's soldiers blew up the structure; it totally collapsed. Only debris remained." From Heinrich Fraenkel and Roger Manvell: Hermann Göring. Pawlak, 1962.

[26] In addition to the translation Jonathan Lopez (in an e-mail to me) provided the following analysis: "In Dutch, it's much clearer that the shimmering orb (or "bubble" — same word in Dutch, and maybe the better translation in this instance) is being blown by the Devil out of his pipe and that this bubble is literally made out of "money lust" which is the spirit of "hate" emanating from the Old Testament, the book upon which the Devil reclines. In English, it's a little hard to make all of these connections perfectly clear without using a lot of dependent clauses, mostly because our sentence structure is so different, and we don't have nouns with gender. Anyway, the Devil, and the world's prostration before the powers of finance and commodities — wheat, petroleum, cotton — are explicitly identified by Beversluis with the values of the Old Testament, which spoil the divine "Design." In contrast, the "Light" and spirit of "Love" embodied in the true "Word"— i.e. the New Testament — are hidden from us as we toil unwittingly in the Devil's service. Hence, "a fiery day of reckoning" is needed to break the devilish avarice of Old Testament values that are beating the world to a bloody pulp. Of course, in the final analysis, this is all basically just a lot of angry nonsense—but it does help to explain Van Meegeren's weird drawing with the businessmen and dancing girls inside the bubble, and the devil with a pipe lying on an open book, which otherwise is rather obscure. And there is definitely an issue of context here too. When Karl Marx denounces international capitalism, he's calling for a workers' revolution. When a member of the Nazi party, like Beversluis, denounces international capitalism, he's probably calling for some-thing a bit different, such as, perhaps, getting all the Jews out of the business world — which is just what the Nazis were up to in Holland and elsewhere at the time Beversluis and Van Meegeren collaborated on this weird book with its weird Naziistic cover. Jewish-owned businesses — department stores, movie studios, art galleries — were being Ary-anized, that is to say, placed in the hands of Nazi overseers while the Jewish owners were deported to concentration camps in Germany and eastern Europe. "Fiery day of reckoning" = the Holocaust? Or perhaps just the Axis cause in general? Tricky question. Tricky book. But, for Van Meegeren, wartime collaboration, like everything else, meant never completely showing his hand. That's what makes him so fascinatingly devious."

[27] And to underline this claim, Lopez cites John Ford's masterpiece "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance": "When the legend came to be accepted as fact, the papers preferred to print the legend," from "The Man Who Made Vermeers," p. 210.

[28] We could look at a Sherrie Levine copy of a Walker Evans photograph and believe that it is an original Walker Evans. But if we are then told that it is a Sherrie Levine, we perceive it differently. It has a different provenance. It is often supposed that the idea of copying a photograph is different from copying a painting, but what is clear is that every copy (no matter how exact) has a different provenance, and hence is different. Of course, we can be mistaken about the provenance of something, and then see it differently when our mistake has been corrected. Van Meegeren provides the parallel example for painting. We attribute a (faux) Vermeer to Van Meegeren, and we see it differently.

[29] Here, I have to take issue with Shakespeare. I don't believe a rose by any another name would smell as sweet. But I can agree wholeheartedly with Gertrude Stein. A rose is a rose is a rose.

[30] Lopez clearly believes it is the latter, and clearly does not like me either suggesting otherwise or that it may be more complicated. In one of his e-mails to me he wrote, "I think [the idea of Van Meegeren flirting with danger] gets us back to the merry trickster idea of Van Meegeren, and it's something of an apologist argument, i.e., that Van Meegeren was putting one over on Hitler. Yes, it was daring of Van Meegeren to ape his own forgeries, but people at the time actually assumed that he was paying homage to Vermeer. This homage is noted explicitly in both the biographical essay by E.A. van Genderen Stort at the beginning of Teekeningen 1 and in the interpretive essay that follows it by the Nazi journalist Pieter Koomen. Koomen also goes on, characteristically, to contrast Van Meegeren's reverence for history to the cosmopolitan degeneracy of Kathi Kollwitz. Both authors also note that there are works in Teekeningen 1 that strongly resemble Rembrandt — the sepia drawing — and Frans Hals — 'The Vagabond.' So it was not particularly surprising that Van Meegeren would also imitate Vermeer. It's not that people didn't notice the resemblance: they did. But they had no reason to suspect that there was more to the re-semblance than met the eye. In hindsight, now that we know that Emmaus was a fake, it seems like Van Meegeren was deliberately flirting with danger. But take away that hind-sight, and how dangerous was it really? People wrote

poetry in honor of Emmaus — why shouldn't a traditionalist artist like Van Meegeren imitate its form and style. With the drawing 'Mother Love,' Van Meegeren was actually continuing, by new and different means, the quarrel with art history that he had begun with 'The Supper at Emmaus.' Having already inserted a Nazi Vermeer into the canon, he proceeded to pull Vermeer explicitly into the orbit of contemporary Volkgeist painting. Put the photo of the German mother wearing her Mutterkreuz in the middle of your comparison of 'Mother Love' and 'Christ and the Adulteress' and you'll see what I mean. It's as though Van Meegeren were taking a victory lap. When Van Meegeren sent the signed copy of Teekeningen 1 to Hitler with 'dankbarer Annerkennung,' I think he was sincerely thanking Hitler for changing the world in a way that made Emmaus possible. Hitler, with his will to power, changed the present; Van Meegeren the past — but both in the service of the same ideology. In a way, they were partners in crime."

[31] The standard reference (aside from the second epilogue to Tolstoy's War and Peace) is Isaiah Berlin's essay on Tolstoy's philosophy of history, The Hedgehog and the Fox. Berlin paraphrasing Tolstoy writes, "There is a particularly vivid simile where the great man is likened to the ram whom the shepherd is fattening for slaughter. Because duly grows fatter, and perhaps is used as a bellwether for the rest of the flock, he may easily imagine hat he is the leader of the flock, and that the other sheep go where they go solely in obedience to his will. He thinks this and the flock may think it too. Nevertheless, the purpose of his selection is not the role he believes himself to play, but slaughter — a purpose conceived by beings whose aims neither he nor the rest of the sheep can fathom." I would humbly offer a somewhat different theory: The Self-Important Theory of History, where any individual sees himself as the progenitor of everything, unless things go badly, and then it's someone else's fault.

[32] verzetsmuseum.org/museum/en/alwayspresent,topstukken/stippenkaart

[33] Louis de Jong. "The Netherlands and Nazi Germany." Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990. This is an issue that I wrestled with in my movie, "Mr. Death." Is Leuchter an anti-Semite? If it looks like a duck, talks like a duck, and acts like a duck, is it a duck?

[34] Diane Wolf. "Beyond Anne Frank: Hidden Children and Postwar Families in Holland." Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007 (pg. 56). The citation is to Raul Hilberg, "The Destruction of the European Jews," first published in 1961 and still the standard reference work on the Holocaust.

[35] The photograph is from an exhibition at the Jewish Museum in New York. Sarah Boxer of The New York Times reviewed it. She describes the photographs from 1944 when "Anne Frank and the rest of the inhabitants of the 'secret annex' in Amsterdam were shuttled off to death camps. Yet, at least in this exhibition, the deportation of Jews looks chillingly quiet. In 1944, Jack Dudok van Heel took a picture of a roundup of Jews at the corner of Euterpe and Albrecht Durer Streets in Amsterdam. As Mr. Bool points out in the Dutch catalogue 'De Illegale Camera 1940-1945,' with a rather ill chosen simile, this roundup looks "calm, as calm as silent churchgoers strolling to [church] on a sunny Sunday morning." The people do look calm, and they are dressed in their best, but they are not going to church, or to synagogue, for that matter. They are strolling to their deaths. How was it possible for them to appear so composed at that late point? Even Anne Frank, with her sunny outlook, knew that death was a real possibility."
http://www.nytimes.com/1996/08/23/arts/just-beyond-the-placid-images-brutal-death-waits.html

[36] Robert-Jan van Pelt is featured in my movie "Mr. Death." He wrote with Deborah Dwork what has become the standard history of Auschwitz, and as an expert witness defended the historical record in the Irving-Lipstadt trial held in 2000 in London. His account of this trial, "The Case for Auschwitz: Evidence from the Irving Trial," is a powerful summary of the evidence for what happened at Auschwitz-Birkenau during the war. His newest book (also with Dwork) is "Flight From the Reich: Refugee Jews 1933-1946," the story of the 1 million Jews who escaped the fate of the 6 million by getting out in time.

[37] Robert-Jan supplied me with some additional details, "A registry card number B 64 / 003713 sent from the Mayor of Bloemendaal to Jenny Hanf "inviting" her to collect her identity card on July 12, 1941 between 11.45 am and noon. She was instructed to bring two identical photos, and received eleven more instructions as to what should be shown and what not. She brought the registry card to the town hall at the time stipulated, and she was asked to

provide a fingerprint on the registry card and on the identity card. One of the photos was attached to the registry card, and one to the identity card. Both were stamped with a fat 'J' which stands for 'Jood.' Jenny Hanf then signed both the registry card and the identity card, and left with the identity card. The registry card remained in the town hall. As the photo shows, Jenny was not happy about the procedure."

[38] "When you get to the time 65-85 years ago, the past becomes extremely confusing because our knowledge of the past as second-hand memories inherited from our grand-parents, becomes hopelessly intertwined with our knowledge of the past as an objective history written up in books. The great British historian Eric Hobsbawn called this time a twilight zone between history and memory, a no-man's land of time — a time that is simultaneously part of us and very important to us, but that has also slipped from our reach. He suggested that it is almost impossible to acquire a fair representation of what happened in this twilight zone. The story of van Meegeren is located in our own twilight zone. Hence I think our fascination, and hence also our frustration."

[39] David Wyman, "The World Reacts to the Holocaust." The chapter on Holland is written by Deborah Dwork and Robert-Jan Van Pelt.

[40] Dwork and Van Pelt also mention the poet Wim Ramaker who visited Westerbork and wrote about the experience. [Robert-Jan Van Pelt translated the poem.]

Who dares to raise his voice here?
Departure point of a whole people:
with known destination left for Auschwitz,
Sobibor, Theresienstadt, Bergen-Belsen, Kosel…

And nobody saved them
To be sure there was much waving when they passed by
A gesture that always touched the deported deeply
but nobody shifted the point to life,
or changed the track

Scores of trains have left from here,
according to the schedule
often Tuesdays,
exactly on time,
because no one was allowed to die too late

Stand for a moment…
now the point of departure and arrival have almost caught up with each other
Here left a whole people:
more than one hundred and two thousand Jewish fellow citizens,
children, mothers, fathers,
fathers, mothers, children
and also babies and those old of days
were gassed, shot, burned alive,
beaten to death, hanged
while we waved

At last the rails are shifted
of sadness twisted
and at the place where they were readied for their journey
stand telescopes
to amplify their silent whispering in the universe
and to wave again
when they wave.

[41] The catalogue, “Reclaimed: Paintings From the Collection of Jacques Goudstikker” (Yale University Press, 2008).

[42] In a deposition after the war, Jan Dik said of the “Christ and the Adulteress” authentication: “Miedl showed me a picture depicting the adulteress woman who stood next to Christ with two Jews looking on. I checked that picture for its authenticity. I was not able to perceive that it was fake, so, in that event, I considered it to be genuine.” Not only is Jan Dik able to emphasize his supine position with respect to the Nazis, he unwittingly confirms that *he* saw the painting as anti-Semitic, that it was a “Nazi Vermeer,” what Jonathan Lopez aptly describes as “projecting one’s prejudices back into the past.” But I wondered whether my feelings about Jan Dik and Ten Braught were an exaggeration. They were working at Goudstikker’s, but were they working *for* Göring? Was I overstating the case? Then I stumbled on to this report from the end of the war. The document states, unequivocally, that they were collaborators:

“Looted Art in Occupied Territories, Neutral Countries and Latin America,” May 5, 1945:The most notorious case of loot reported in Holland so far is that of the large and valuable Goudstiker Collection in Amsterdam. It was ostensibly ‘purchased’ in the summer of 1940 by Alois Miedl, Goering’s personal representative. Miedl was assisted by a Dutch national, J. Dik, Heerengracht 257, Amsterdam. Dik, who had been appointed manager of the Goudstikker Gallery by the owner, turned collaborator and helped with the liquidation of Goudstikker interests. His son worked with another Dutch Quisling, a Miss Denijs, and together they sold some of the paintings which were part of the collection. It is not clear how this Dik came to introduce himself as the representative of Mr. Goudstikker who, before his death, had formed a corporation to take over all his assets, which included several houses and a large collection of paintings and art objects. He gave one man power of attorney but this man died before Goudstikker, himself, was drowned [sic]. Approximately 200 paintings from this collection may still be located in Spain, where they were taken by Miedl, and some in Switzerland.” (Preliminary Report prepared by Foreign Economic Administration, Enemy Branch, External Economic Security Branch.)

[43] Interrogation of P.J. RIENSTRA van STUYVESANDE
conducted by Lt. Van Amstel [i.e.: JOSEPH PILLER] and Lt. Goedemans, at Apollolaan 7, 22 June 1945; transcribed by: M. van der Linden and C.A.H. van der Linde; identity information as per card: Rienstra, Petrus Jan, born Amsterdam, 18 July 1905. Married to J. Went. Profession: Bank director. Address: Vening Meineszkade 12 (private house). It has been translated by Jonathan Lopez.

[44] Deposition of J. Schneller, November 27, 1945. ARA, rch. 2.09.09/24716 II. Again, it has been translated by Jonathan Lopez.