

COUNTRY LIFE®

JANUARY 16, 2019

EVERY WEEK

Garden splendours

Tips from the top: head gardeners' secrets

The family that saved Britain's orchids
Tom Parker Bowles's guide to sausages
Dazzling dahlias and the magpie's kind side

Fake it till you make it

A fascinating exhibition of works by fraudulent artists prompts Huon Mallalieu to reflect on the clues for detecting forged manuscripts and paintings

IT'S surprising how obvious forgeries become once the forger has been exposed. I'm entitled to be a little smug about this, because, when at Christie's, I rejected a Tom Keating 'Samuel Palmer' long before he was unmasked by Geraldine Norman in *The Times*.

On closer inspection, Gainsborough beauties turn out to be flappers

The most convincing element of that fraud was the care that Frank and his lady friend had taken to ensure the labels and scribbles on the backs of their frames were in period. Another major giveaway in many forged paintings is the way faces, particularly of pretty women, tend to be of the faker's own period rather than that of the original artist—on closer inspection, Gainsborough beauties turn out to be flappers.

Les Enluminures

Anachronistic females are a hallmark of a prolific faker

known as the Spanish Forger, who produced medieval paintings and illuminations in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He worked in Paris and was almost certainly not Spanish, the name coming from the first of his paintings to be exposed. It is not so much the faces of his women, but the fact that almost all—saints and sinners alike—have out-of-period cleavages.

Opening tomorrow at Les Enluminures in New York, the

exhibition 'Holy Hoaxes: a Beautiful Deception' celebrates the collection formed by William Voelkle during his 50 years as a curator at the Morgan Library. Les Enluminures is a highly respected commercial gallery with branches in Paris and Chicago; nothing is for sale on this occasion, but visitors will enjoy an invaluable educational experience.

It was Mr Voelkle who brought the Spanish Forger into the light in 1978 with a major exhibition

at the Morgan, having bought his own first example six years earlier. Today he has a dozen 'Spanish' forgeries, along with about 50 other fakes and copies, including Ethiopian codices by the Synkessar Miniature Forger, 'Coptic' musical manuscripts, miniatures by the 19th-century copyist Caleb Wing and an illumination by nuns of Mederet in Belgium, who are working today.

To set the context, genuine works are included. The Spanish



St Martha Taming the Tarasque, by the Spanish Forger, bears all the hallmarks of his fakes: the expressions look whimsical, in contrast to the pious and pensive faces associated with the period



Detail of an illuminated choirbook, thought to be a Victorian fake, but in fact attributable to the 15th-century 'Master of the Cypresses'

Forger was already known at the Morgan when Mr Voelkle arrived in 1967; indeed, the name had been coined in 1930 by Belle da Costa Greene, the first Director.

Mr Voelkle's running list now numbers more than 400 'Spanish' fakes, including 117 panels and triptychs, 11 manuscripts and 283 leaves. The highlight of his own group is a 28¼in by 17½in

'I rejected a Tom Keating "Samuel Palmer" long before he was unmasked ,

panel of St Martha taming the Tarasque—the local dragon of Tarascon. This includes most of the Forger's hallmarks: sugary-sentimental female faces, décolletages, the pageboy costumes of the men with limited colours and superficial treatment of the folds, theatrical postures and hand gestures, tapestry-like foliage, stage-set architecture and swirling water.

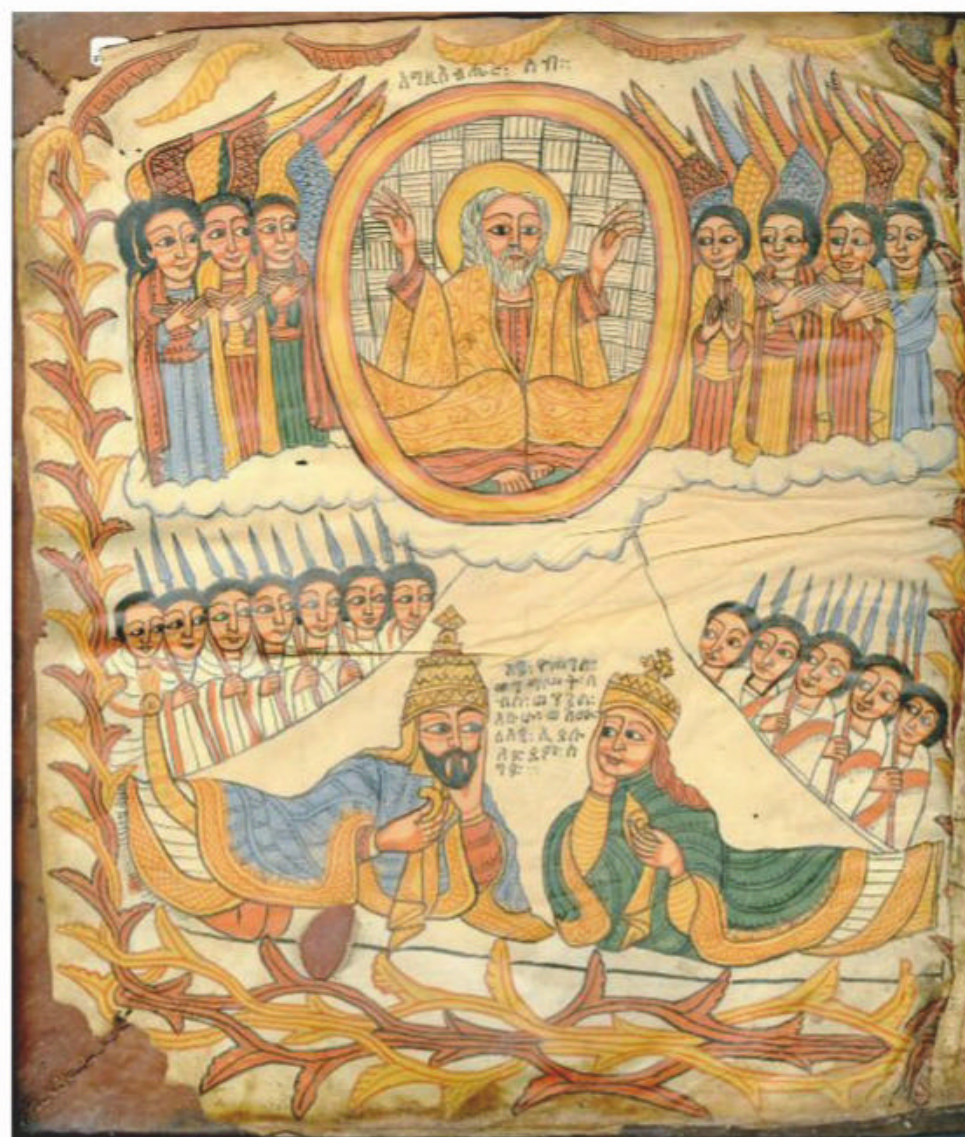
The 'Synkessar' forger takes his name from the 17th- and 18th-

century Ethiopian hagiographies that he purported to illustrate. They began to appear on the Western market in about 1987, after the demise of Haile Selassie, who had banned the export of manuscripts. They were painted over original texts in an ancient liturgical language and, despite the presence of 24 in the British Library, it was some time before buyers realised that Synkessars had never been illustrated.

Again, there were out-of-period touches, such as the 17th-century King Atse Yohannes gazing lovingly into the eyes of Queen Sebl Wengel like Burton and Taylor in *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Carbon dating did for a group of '8th to 10th century' Mayan codices by showing that, although the underlying materials were of the dates claimed, the painting on all was by the same hand.

This is a field in which knowledge benefits, as well as protects, a collector. When Mr Voelkle found an illuminated choir book in a New York auction catalogued as 'by Victorian ladies', he knew it was much older. In time he identified the hand as the 'Master of the Cypresses', the anonymous but



Above: King Atse Yohannes, as depicted by the 'Synkessar' forger. Below: An homage to the 'Cypresses' choirbook, painted as a gift for William Voelkle by the psychiatrist Scott Schwartz



genuine 15th-century Spanish artist responsible for a series of choir books in Seville Cathedral. This is now a gem of his collection, as is a charming 3½in by 3¼in tribute painted as a gift to him by Scott Schwartz of New York in 2000.

'Holy Hoaxes: a Beautiful Deception' is at Les Enluminures, 23 East 73rd Street, 7th floor, New York, NY 10021, USA, January 17–February 2 (www.lesenluminures.com)

Next week: Pierre Bonnard