

Trickery and Trumpery

“Hello, Mary,” said her husband as she came in. “And how was the Moles' open afternoon?”

“Very nice, Ted,” she replied. “Interesting and enjoyable readings. You should have been there. One of the Moles had a poem about a Roman brick with a fake inscription on it; you would have liked that.”

“Ah,” said Ted, “not the infamous Epioi inscription?”

“Yes,” Mary replied thoughtfully. “I seem to remember some such name. Here,” she continued as she pulled a slip of paper from her pocket, “this is the chorus – it was a sort of ballad – and there's a sketch of the brick.”

“Ah, yes,” laughed Ted, “the Epioi inscription, also known by some as the Psychro inscription from one of the places it was supposed to have been found.”

“*One* of the places, Ted?” queried Mary. “You mean there are others?”

“Exactly so, Mary,” answered Ted. “It was once in the private collection of Dr Stylianós Giamalákis who, according to Spyridon Marinátos, one time director of the Iraklion Museum, said it was found near the sacred cave at Psychro on the Lasíthi plateau. But when the Museum acquired the collection, the collection's handwritten catalogue gave a different location, namely the village of Íni in the province of Monofátsi, while the German scholar, Ernst Grumach, claimed Dr Giamalákis had told him it had been found at Amnisós on the north coast of Crete.”

“Weird,” said Mary. “It sounds a bit fishy to me.”

“Quite so,” said Ted, “as well as having writing apparently in the Ionic alphabet of the 3rd century BC with signs like those found in the Linear A and Linear B scripts of the *15th* century BC. What surprises me is that it took so long to show conclusively that it was a fake.”

“I wonder,” mused Mary, “what other fake antiques there are.”

“Plenty of those, Mary,” laughed Ted. “Take the Brewster Chair that the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Michigan, bought for nine thousand dollars in 1970.”

“The Brewster Chair?” queried Mary. “What was it and why Brewster?”

“It was chair,” said Ted, “made with wooden pins in the 17th century style and reputed to have belonged to William Brewster, one of the men who established the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1620.”

“But it didn't belong to him, I'm guessing,” said Mary.

“No, it didn't,” agreed Ted, “nor could it have done because it was made in 1969 by the American artist and sculptor, Armand LaMontagne.”

“Ha, ha,” laughed Mary, “but why did he do that?”

“Well,” Ted replied, “the story is that he made it out of spite after an argument with an antiques dealer who had questioned his background; he then seems to have forgotten all about it until he heard that the Henry Ford Museum had bought it.”

“What happened then?” asked Mary.

“Oh, the museum had it tested to see if LaMontagne's claim was correct. X-rays confirmed it had been made with modern tools. But the chair is still on display in the museum – as an educational tool, but not as an antique!”

“I doesn't seem,” said Mary, “that either the Epioi faker or LaMontagne made their fakes for profit. Has anybody deliberately made fake antiques for profit?”

“Oh yes, Mary,” replied Ted, “many people over the ages. But one of the more notable instances was the Greenhalgh family of Bolton, known as the 'garden shed gang'.”

“Oh, yes,” said Mary, “I had forgotten about them. A shed in someone's garden, I seem to

remember, and wasn't it run as a sort of family business?"

"Yes, Mary" replied Ted, "a shed in the garden of George and Olive Greenhalgh, whose son, Shaun, was the faker. It was used it to store the fakes and, later, also as a workshop for producing them. Shaun produced the fakes, George and Olive did the marketing and Shaun's brother, George Jnr, looked after the finances."

"They got away with it for sometime, I seem to remember," said Mary.

"For seventeen years," said her husband. "Shaun was a very skilled craftsman and had picked up some knowledge from his work as an antiques dealer. He researched his stuff well in order to authenticate his items with histories and provenance by, for example, faking letters from the supposed artists, in order to demonstrate his ownership of the item."

"I vaguely recall them," said Mary. "Didn't Shaun fake quite a lot of different things?"

"Oh yes," said her husband, "all sorts: from painting in pastels and watercolours, to sketches, and sculpture, both modern and ancient, busts and statues, as well as bas-relief and metalwork. One of his most ambitious projects was the so-called Amarna Princess."

"Amarna Princess?" mused Mary. "That would be a daughter of Akhenaten and Nefertiti."

"It would indeed," replied Ted. "Shaun made a twenty inch statue, apparently of a stunning translucent alabaster, done in the Amarna period style and passed it off as representing one of the princesses; only two other similar statues were known. He also produced fake letters to show that his statue was found among his great-grandfather's 'forgotten collection' bought at the 1892 auction at Silverton Park, Devon, the home of the 4th Earl of Egremont. Among the items listed in the auction catalogue were 'eight Egyptian figures.'"

"Now what happened to it?" asked Mary.

"Shaun's dad," said Ted, "pretending not to know what the statue might be worth, approached Bolton Museum with it and the fake letters. After consulting experts at the British Museum and Christie's, the Museum bought the statue for more than four thousand pounds in 2003."

"They got caught in the end" said Mary. "Did someone realize the Amarna Princess was a fake or was there some other reason?"

"Oh no," said Ted, "no one questioned the fake princess. But buoyed up with this success, the family tried to use great-grandfather's 'forgotten collection' provenance again; Shaun produced what they claimed were three Assyrian reliefs of soldier and horses from the palace of Sennacherib in 600 BC. At first the British Museum expressed an interest in buying one of them, which seemed to match a drawing by A. H. Layardin in the Museum's collection. But, when two of the reliefs were submitted to Bonhams auction house, its antiquities consultant spotted what he considered to be an obvious fake. Bonhams consulted with the British Museum about various suspicious aspects, and the Museum then spotted several unlikely anomalies and contacted the Arts and Antiquities Unit of Scotland Yard. A year and a half later the family was arrested."

"I notice," observed Mary, "that all these fakes are fairly recent: 20th or early 21st century. Is this a modern phenomenon or has it gone on before?"

"Oh no, Mary," replied Ted, "it's not new. I guess it's been going on whenever people have shown an interest in items from the past. Think of the trade in fake religious relics of the later Middle Ages; and in the 18th century there was a hoax a bit like the Epioi fake in that it consisted of fake engravings on stones."

"Oh, where was that?" asked Mary, "And what were the engravings?"

"At the University of Wurzburg in Germany," answered Ted, "and the engravings were on fragments of limestone and showed apparently fossilized impressions of animals such as lizards, frogs, and spiders on their webs. To some of them were added Hebrew letters, including the ineffable name of God."

“Who did that and why?” asked Mary.

“Ignatz Roderick, Professor of Geography and Mathematics,” replied Ted, “and the University Librarian, Georg von Eckhart; they knew that Dr Johann Bartholomeus Adam Beringer, Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, was interested in fossils and they wanted to discredit him because, in their view, he was arrogant and despised his colleagues.”

“So,” asked Mary, “what did they do with these engravings? How did Dr Beringer get hold of them?”

“They planted the stones on Mount Eibelstadt,” said Ted, “where Dr Beringer frequently went to search for fossils. He took the engravings seriously and took the name of God as showing that they were of divine origin. Indeed, in 1726, he published a work entitled 'Lithographia Wirceburgensis', detailing 204 of the stones in his collection and giving a number of theories about their origin.”

“What!” exclaimed Mary, “I don't know about arrogant – but he sounds very gullible.”

“Yes, indeed,” said Ted, “though you should remember that in the 18th century it wasn't understood how fossils were produced. Anyway, Roderick and Eckart eventually decided that the hoax was getting out of hand and tried to convince Dr Beringer that the stones were a fraud, without admitting they were the hoaxers. Dr Beringer brought Roderick and Eckart to court to, as he put it, 'save his honour.' In the trial the whole truth emerged and it not only discredited Dr Beringer, it also ruined the reputations of Roderick and Eckart.”

“Well, the hoax was a bit childish, wasn't it?” said Mary. “But it shows the chorus of that Mole's ballad is true:

*For trickery and trumpery
Persist the whole world through.”*

“Indeed, they do,” agreed Ted. “But, Mary, enough of trickery and trumpery. Time for a cuppa, I think. I'll go and put the kettle on.”

“A good idea, Ted,” said his wife.