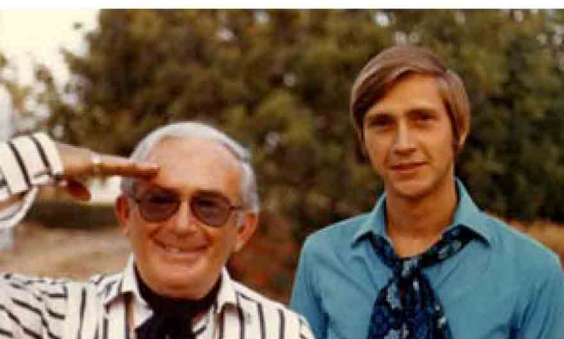


# A Forger's Fears

A LONGTIME COMPANION SHARES MEMORIES OF ART FAKER ELMYR DE HORY. BY JONATHAN LOPEZ



From top: Elmyr de Hory, *Orchestral Scene*, in the style of Raoul Dufy, circa 1971, watercolor on paper; De Hory and Mark Forgy, photographed around 1971, on the Spanish island of Ibiza.



**HUNGARIAN-BORN** Elmyr de Hory (1906–76) was among the most prodigious and successful art forgers of all time, imitating Picasso, Matisse, Modigliani and other modern masters in hundreds of paintings, drawings and prints sold on the international market during the postwar period. Mark Forgy, who was De Hory's companion on the Spanish island of Ibiza during the 1970s, has put together an exhibition of the forger's work, opening at the Durst Organization in New York in the fall. In conversation with *Art & Antiques*, he explains that De Hory's final years were lived under the looming threat represented by Fernand Legros, a French dealer who had grown rich selling De Hory's fakes but eventually wanted to see the man dead.

#### WHEN DID THE PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN DE HORY AND LEGROS TURN SOUR?

**FORGY:** Elmyr stopped providing Legros with fakes in 1967. A Vlaminck Fauve-period painting was up for sale in Pontoise,

and the auctioneers discovered that it was only partially dry. Everything fell apart on account of that incident. There was a scandal. Legros ended up doing some jail time. But Elmyr was living in Ibiza, so he was relatively safe.

**IN FACT, HE BECAME A CELEBRITY, FEATURED IN CLIFFORD IRVING'S BOOK *FAKE* IN 1969 AND THE ORSON WELLES FILM *F FOR FAKE* IN 1974.**

**FORGY:** The fact that Elmyr was basking in all this attention was what pushed Legros over the edge. He was a terrifying man. I remember Elmyr had a couple leather chairs upstairs at the villa, and one night he said, "Imagine your mother were sitting here in this chair and Legros in that chair. If you left the two of them alone for 10 minutes, by the time you got back Legros would have convinced your mother that the best thing she could possibly do would be to murder you."

#### SO ELMYR WAS AWARE THAT LEGROS MEANT HIM HARM?

**FORGY:** Constantly aware. We made a trip to Geneva in the early '70s. The morning after we got there, we went down to the lobby of the hotel, and we were immediately surrounded by police. Legros had told them that Elmyr was making death threats against him and demanding \$100,000 in small bills as part of some kind of extortion plot.

#### HOW DID LEGROS EVEN KNOW YOU WERE IN GENEVA?

**FORGY:** He had private detectives following us, so he pretty much always knew where we were.

**ACCORDING TO THE HEARING TRANSCRIPT, THE JUDGE IN GENEVA DETERMINED THAT LEGROS' EVIDENCE AGAINST ELMYR WAS FABRICATED—FORGED LETTERS, BOGUS PHONE RECORDS, ETC.—AND DISMISSED THE CHARGES. WAS THAT THE END OF IT?**

**FORGY:** No. Legros kept orchestrating



*Portrait of a Woman, in the style of Amedeo Modigliani, circa 1975, oil on canvas.*

attempts to get Elmyr extradited to France to stand trial. He told the French authorities that Elmyr had supplied him with fake customs stamps to transport forgeries around Europe.

**LEGROS INCRIMINATED HIMSELF JUST TO SPITE ELMYR?**

**FORGY:** He was obsessed. One day a French fellow came to the house with a woman who knew Elmyr. This fellow said that he had connections, and he warned Elmyr, “If you end up going to jail in France, Legros has taken out a contract on you, and you will be killed.”

**WAS THIS ON ELMYR’S MIND DURING THE EXTRADITION PROCEEDINGS?**

**FORGY:** There were three separate extradition attempts.

The first two failed. But in 1976, around the time that Elmyr was having the most prestigious exhibition of his life at a gallery in Madrid, a third demand made its way through the courts, and this time they got the wording right. The decision came down about a month after the show closed.

**YOU WERE THE ONE WHO GOT THE PHONE CALL, IS THAT RIGHT?**

**FORGY:** I broke down in tears when I gave Elmyr the news. By this time he had already written out letters to friends explaining what he planned to do. The maid was there at the house that morning. Elmyr told her to go home, and then he went upstairs and took an overdose of sleeping pills with cognac.

**SUICIDE?**

**FORGY:** Yes. I had urged him to flee. But he said, “The good thing about life is that we can choose when to exit.”

**HOW DID YOU FEEL ABOUT HIS DECISION?**

**FORGY:** For the longest time, I had a horrible sense of guilt about Elmyr’s death, wondering if there was some way I could have changed things. I still don’t have an answer to that question.

**I TAKE IT THAT ELMYR WAS A BIG PART OF YOUR LIFE.**

**FORGY:** I was just a naive kid from the Midwest backpacking through Europe when I met him in 1969. Elmyr said to me, “First of all, Mark, if you want to live here, you have to speak at least two or three languages.” So he enrolled me in the Alliance Française for private lessons. And then suddenly I was hobnobbing with all of his society friends, drinking fine wines and wearing ascots. Elmyr took me under his wing. He was relentlessly, innately generous.

**DO YOU HAVE A FAVORITE MEMORY OF HIM?**

**FORGY:** We were in London. Elmyr ran into an old friend named Norma Clark. She had been married, briefly, to one of the Clarks of Cooperstown, the Singer sewing machine heirs. By this point Norma was a fading beauty, reduced to selling off some of her personal possessions. She invited us to her flat in Eton Square and made it clear that she would accept any help that Elmyr might offer. So he went over to a bookshelf and took down this old leather-bound tome. He said, “Can I have a razor blade?” Norma gave him one, and he carefully removed a blank page from the front of the book. Then he said, “Can I have a pencil?” About 10 minutes later, he came up with this Modigliani woman’s head—a beautiful piece—and he gave it to Norma unsigned.

**DO YOU KNOW WHAT SHE DID WITH IT?**

**FORGY:** We saw Norma a couple months later in Capri. Elmyr asked her what had become of the drawing. She said, “I took it to a curator at the Tate who thought it was most likely authentic because it wasn’t signed. I told him it was just a little something left over from my husband’s collection.” She wound up selling it at Christie’s or Sotheby’s. If I recall correctly, it fetched a pretty penny. 📖