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Reviews



Algonquin Books, hardcover,  
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## THE ART FORGER

by *B. A. Shapiro*

Reviewed by *Kathleen Ambrogi*

I am sometimes masochistic in my reading choices. I chain myself to complex literary tomes through which I may trudge dutifully but not always joyfully. Those books pay a great dividend, so I don't regret my efforts, but there are times when a girl just wants to have fun (while reading). Don't get me wrong: I still want my reading to be smart. I still want to learn and grow. But there are days when a stroll looks better than a hike.

For me, *The Art Forger* really filled that bill. It's a fast-moving, art-driven mystery with a bit of romance thrown in for seasoning. For an art lover, this is a sure-fire hit. But unlike so many other novels based on specialized areas of learning, no prior knowledge is required for full enjoyment.

B. A. Shapiro's fresh plot ideas are captivating. We begin with a bite from history: an art theft at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston. Thirteen works of art—including several priceless masterpieces—were stolen on March 18, 1990, and they have never been recovered.


Fast-forward to a fictional present. Protagonist Claire Roth is a thirty-one year old artist with extraordinary skill but a sketchy past: a love affair with an older professor/artist that had dire consequences for them both. Now blackballed by the art community, her exceptional work is ignored and her career is going nowhere. While waiting for a break, she barely makes ends meet by copying paintings for a website called Reproductions.com. They pay her to create convincing, legal copies of actual masterpieces. As a result, our Claire is a highly skilled copyist, especially when it comes to the work of Edgar Degas. In addition, her ability to paint in the long, slow Great Masters style (think layer upon layer of translucent paint) influences her own highly realistic original oil paintings. But she is poor and desperate to break into the legitimate art world.

Enter Aiden Markel, owner of the most prestigious art gallery in town. He admires Claire's original work, and wants to offer her a solo exhibit at his gallery, but she must do something for him first. And here Claire meets the first of many puzzling questions. Will she make a deal with the devil and have her heart's desire, or is Markel actually an angel in wolf's clothing? From the beginning, the puzzles come fast and thick, and we soon realize that there may be more than one art forger in this tale of images and their many reflections.

Shapiro cleverly layers her plot details while keeping the action busy. She uses flashback to fill in the particulars of Claire's disastrous love affair three years earlier. She also creates imaginary 19th century letters from Isabella Stewart Gardner—the creator of the museum where the theft occurred—to help clarify some mysteries concerning one of the stolen masterpieces. The story picks up speed as the uncertainties mount, until it becomes quite the page-turner.

Along the way, Shapiro shares a great deal of fascinating information about the art and history of forgery, the intricacies of museums, and the world and work of art and artists. But she never loses track of what she's set out to do: tell a damn good story that's fun to read. That's one picture that's sharp and clear.

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