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are helping people out
of Buenos Aires' slums

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Un petit faux pas

The little French town of Elne hit the headlines this year when a local gallery discovered more than half of its collection was fake. We went to find out how they got swindled – and what happened next

Words / Nancy Heslin → Photography / Javier Luengo





The cobblestoned pavements along Elne's *route nationale* are overrun with dozens of stalls, selling everything from traditional olives to Laurel and Hardy slippers. But art enthusiasts who visit the Friday market hoping to scoop up a replica of work by the town's famous painter, Étienne Terrus, will be disappointed. There's not so much as a postcard.

Despite the fact he studied at age 16 at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris and was friends with Henri Matisse and Aristide Maillol, Terrus is little known outside south-western France's Roussillon region, near the borders with Spain and Andorra. Even in the town where he was born in 1857 it can be hard to find any sign of the painter.

If you're really looking hard, you might spot a bronze bust near the 12th-century cloister, one of only two males ever sculpted by Maillol. Or the obscure plaque in the city centre that marks 1 Place Terrus, where the artist and his sister lived. With guidance you might even find the unremarkable family plot at the cemetery, where he was buried in 1922.

And yet, this April, Terrus was everywhere. His face was plastered on newspapers and websites across the world, as his art – or, rather, *not* his art – drew the eye of global media to this tiny commune (population 8,960), tucked away between the Med and the Pyrénées. In the six months since, a decades-old mystery surrounding the artist has been uncovered, triggering a *gendarmerie* investigation into art trafficking that could extend far beyond Terrus. »



“This April, Étienne Terrus’ art – or, rather, *not* his art – drew the eye of global media to this tiny French town”



Previous page ✓
 Elne lies in the shadow
 of the Pyrénées; Aristide
 Maillol's bust of Terrus
 From top ✓
 The real thing: Terrus'
 Marine, in the museum's
 collection; detail of the
 artist's signature on his
 painting of Espirà de
 Conflent

“I would never have believed that Elne would become the talk of the art world,” says Mayor Yves Barniol of the circumstances that led to the town’s unlikely 15 minutes of fame. It was he who made the astonishing announcement, on 27 April this year, at the reopening of Musée Terrus, that 82 of its 140 Terrus works were fakes.

The museum had been closed since October 2017 for a renovation when the new curator discovered that something wasn’t right. He told Barniol, and by March the municipality had filed a complaint for “forgery, use of forgery, counterfeits and fraud”, at an estimated loss of €160,000 (US\$185,500).

From his office at the *mairie* (town hall), the 64-year-old mayor remembers he felt duty-bound to report the wrongdoing. “I was horrified that anyone had paid €5 to visit the museum and saw copies. These aren’t the values I grew up with,” he says.

The story hit headlines around the world within hours. Art historian Eric Forcada, 42, who coordinated with the mayor and the press, received a barrage of calls from international media – CNN, BBC, Al Jazeera, and even Yucatan.com in Mexico. When his phone battery eventually died, he left it off.

“I didn’t sleep the night of the inauguration,” discloses Forcada, who specialises in Post-Impressionism as well as in regional artists from the 1939 Spanish exodus. “The mayor was very clear about shedding light on this story for the integrity of the body of works and for the museum. He didn’t want to fool people, and for that I think he is very honest and courageous.” »



Forcada attributes the worldwide attention to the fact that more than 60% of the museum's collection is fake – “There's still a certain reputation of French art,” he says – and because of the implication of scandal. “We're tackling three things: art, politics and money. And these three powers are gathered in one very strong symbolic case.”

The first clue that something wasn't right was discovered on 28 August last year, when Forcada, who studied art history and visual art at the University of Montpellier III, began to look at newly purchased Terrus works he was curating for the new exhibition. “After a while, I noticed something wrong with the freshness of the paper: it was very white,” he remembers. “It was watercolour paper, which did not exist in the 1910s and 1920s, and I knew there was a problem.”

Sitting at Le Casot *bar à vin* in Elne's medieval ramparts, he scrolls his iPhone to find examples of what he discovered. With more Terrus forgeries than legitimate paintings, there are plenty to choose from. “Here you see cranes have transformed the sloping roof [of this building] into a turret in 1958. Terrus died in 1922. So, how could he paint a tower that didn't exist? The forger doesn't realise this.”

After Forcada put together his technical findings in a PowerPoint presentation for the town council, the mayor set up a commission of five other experts, who validated 90% of his findings. A specialist from the Louvre came to authenticate paint layers with infrared reflectography, and came to the same sad conclusion that the museum had been swindled. »

“We're tackling three things: art, politics and money – gathered in one very strong symbolic case”

Clockwise from above left ✓
This fake painting, *Belltowers of Elné Cathedral*, was copied from a postcard sent by Terrus and reproduced in a 2002 exhibition catalogue; Elne's mayor, Yves Barniol, who decided to go public with the frauds; another fake, *Collioure nocturne*, features a Gothic tower built in 1958, 36 years after Terrus' death



The preliminary results of the investigation are expected this month, but it's now believed that the Terrus forger (or forgers) worked with catalogues and palmed off maybe five to 10 copies to the newly acquired lot. "You don't need to make 50 forgeries," Forcada explains. "You buy some paintings at a flea market, sign them Terrus and mix them in with works that resemble the artist's. It can be deceitful because if there are genuine works in the lot of 50, it should mean that everything is genuine."

One weak link may well have been the late deputy mayor of culture and heritage, Odile Traby, who served under the Communist administration from 1965 to 1995, and again between 2001 and 2014. A private collector of Terrus who bequeathed part of 60 pieces donated to the museum on her death in 2016, a few years earlier she bought 16 works with state money for the museum, despite her failing eyesight. A good proportion of these items were among those that have been found to be dubious.

The reason the discovery took so many checks to uncover was the relative obscurity of the artist. As an anarchist, Étienne Terrus rejected systems and fame. He refused to have dealers and rejected what he saw as pressure from institutions to mould an artist into mass production. In 1883, he turned his back on Paris and the promise of a successful career and returned to Elne, where he was often seen wandering with easel and paints in tow. He spent a great deal of time in the Albera Massif in the south of Pyrénées-Orientales near Collioure, 15km south-east of Elne. He worked in what became known as a "pure light" technique.

"When we look at Terrus' landscapes there are seldom any shadows," explains Forcada, as he points out details on the 20 works still on display at the museum. "He works when the sun



"Today art forgery isn't about the Picassos worth millions... it's found where it's least expected"



Forgery: as old as paint

Fake paintings date back at least to the Romans, who made copies of Ancient Greek sculptures.



Forgery has become so widespread in art, architecture and even wine that Sotheby's set up its own forensics department in 2016, bringing analyst James Martin - AKA "the rock star of forensics" - in house full-time.



A court this month will hear how one of the world's "most prolific art collectors", Andrew Hall, was allegedly duped into spending €583,000 (\$676,250) on work "believed to be" by US artist Leon Golub.



British art critic Michael Love estimates "at least 20% of paintings held by major museums will no longer be attributed to the same painter 100 years from now" while former head of the Fine Arts Expert Institute, Yan Walther claims "50% of art on the market is being forged or misattributed".

From above left ✓
Art historian Eric Forcada;
Espirà de Conflent, from
the collection of the
Musée Terrus Elne

reaches its zenith. He is not, like an Impressionist, working in semi-tones." This quality is said to have inspired the "pure colour" of painters Henri Matisse and André Derain, whose summer in Collioure marked the birth of Fauvism, yet he is less known than them and his works are less able to be policed.

"The problem we have," insists Forcada, "is he's an accessible painter and few experts know his work. Even me, I'm an art historian not an art expert." Today art fraud is found where it's least expected - "with lesser-known regional masters".

That's why the OCBC - a division of the French National Police set up to fight trafficking of cultural property - declared three years ago that art forgery is no longer about the Picassos worth millions of dollars, where there are many specialists to determine the *vrai* from the *faux*. And, for smaller artists, detection can be a fine art, with fewer tools available. For example, as well as architectural references and paper surfaces, another fraud giveaway can be »



While you're in... Elne



Stay Cara Sol

Elne's only hotel, with splendid Pyrénées views, has delightful new owners who speak English and serve a mean breakfast on the ramparts terrace. Doubles from €97.

hotelcarasol.com



Eat Le Casot

This natural wine bar in the town centre is a friendly spot to enjoy small plates and a glass of the local Grenache or Carignan. The bar works closely with growers for authenticity.

casotelne.blogspot.com



Do La Maternité Suisse d'Elne

This historic maternity hospital in Château d'en Bardou was created by a nurse in the early 1900s for Spanish and Jewish refugees, and restored in 1997 thanks to a man who was born here. ville-elne.fr

pigmentation: titanium dioxide replaced zinc in white paint only post-1920. There are tests for this, but they're not cheap.

"For art worth €30 million, you'll spend €800 to €1,000 at a lab to detect titanium to see that it was painted after 1930," says Forcada. "But for a piece of art worth €3,000, a smaller collector is not going to spend €800. And they're not going to sue."

At least, that's the theory, but in this case it seems the fraudsters reckoned without Yves Barniol. Despite reportedly being advised that he should keep quiet or risk bringing shame on the town, the mayor made the decision to speak up. This was at some considerable risk, considering that Elne, once a wealthy agricultural centre, now relies heavily on tourism, and on the 65,000 sightseers who visit each year.

But it seems his honesty has paid off. "We should always look for the silver lining," he says today. "The museum has had 30% more visitors since this story broke." Once the paintings have been released by the gendarmerie, he plans to exhibit both the originals and the copies side by side with an explanation – sure to bring even more of a crowd.

Although it seems there may always be a question mark over exactly what happened here, it's heartening to hear Elne's story. The impact of this case continues to ripple across France, as other small museums now look to verify their collections.

"It's more about money than art appreciation," concludes Barniol. "There's a financial market behind all of this, which, I believe, many people were aware of, but no one dared say anything. We are the first."

Elne is a two-hour drive from Barcelona; Norwegian flies to Barcelona from more than 20 destinations. Book flights, a hotel and a rental car at Norwegian.com

"We should always look for the silver lining – the museum has had 30% more visitors"

Above
Étienne Terrus' home at 1 Place Terrus, one of Elne's few public tributes to its homegrown artist