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EST. 1817

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Han van Meegeren (Deventer 1889-1947
Amsterdam)

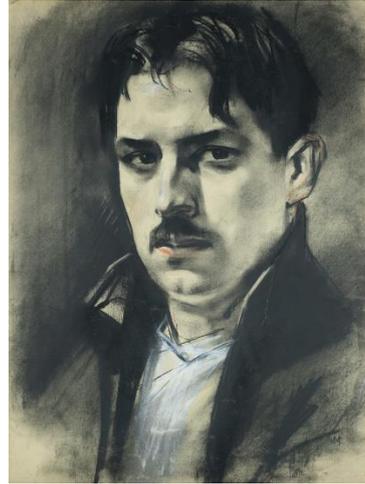
Self-Portrait

Signed with initials (lower right): 'VM', titled
on reverse

Pastel with white and red highlights

23 ¼ x 17 ½ in. (59 x 44.5 cm.)

Executed c.1912-15.



Provenance

Deaccessioned by the Gemeentemuseum, Arnhem;
André van der Vossen.

Henricus Antonius "Han" van Meegeren was a Dutch painter and portraitist, considered one of the most ingenious art forgers of the 20th century. Van Meegeren became a national hero after World War II when it was revealed that he had sold a forged painting to Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands.

As a child, Van Meegeren developed an enthusiasm for the paintings of the Dutch Golden Age, and he set out to become an artist. Art critics, however, decried his work as tired and derivative. Van Meegeren felt that his genius had been misjudged, and he set out to prove to the art critics that he could more than copy the Dutch Masters; he would produce a work so magnificent that it would rival theirs.

In 1932 he moved with his wife, the actress Johanna Theresia Oerlemans to the South of France and began preparations for this ultimate forgery, which took him from 1932 to 1937. Van Meegeren delved into the biographies of the Old Masters, studying their lives, occupations, trademark techniques, and catalogues. He set out to define the chemical and technical procedures that would be necessary to create his perfect forgeries. He bought authentic 17th century canvases and mixed his own paints from raw materials (such as lapis lazuli, white lead, indigo, and cinnabar) using old formulas to ensure that they could pass as authentic. In addition, he created his own badger-hair paintbrushes similar to those that Vermeer was known to have used. He came up with a scheme of using phenol formaldehyde (Bakelite) to cause the

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paints to harden after application, making the paintings appear as if they were 300 years old. Van Meegeren would first mix his paints with lilac oil, to stop the colours from fading or yellowing in heat. This caused his studio to smell so strongly of lilacs that he kept a vase of fresh lilacs nearby so that visitors wouldn't be suspicious. Then, after completing a painting, he would bake it at 100 °C (212 °F) to 120 °C (248 °F) to harden the paint, and then roll it over a cylinder to increase the cracks. Later, he would wash the painting in black India ink to fill in the cracks.



Han van Meegeren painting *Jesus Among the Doctors* in 1945

It took Van Meegeren six years to work out his techniques, but ultimately he was pleased with his work on both artistic and deceptive levels. Two of these trial paintings were painted as if by Vermeer: *Lady Reading Music*, after the genuine paintings *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter* at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam; and *Lady Playing Music*, after Vermeer's *Woman With a Lute Near a Window* hanging in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. Van Meegeren did not sell these paintings; both are now at the Rijksmuseum.

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Following a journey to the 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin, Van Meegeren painted *The Supper at Emmaus* using the lapis lazuli (ultramarine blues) and yellows used by Johannes Vermeer and other Dutch Golden Age painters (fig.1). In 1934 Van Meegeren had bought a seventeenth century mediocre Dutch painting, *The Awakening of Lazarus*, and on this foundation he created his masterpiece à la Vermeer. The experts assumed that Vermeer had studied in Italy, so Van Meegeren used the version of Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio's *Supper at Emmaus* located at Italy's Pinacoteca di Brera as a model. He gave it to his friend, attorney C. A. Boon, telling him that it was a genuine Vermeer, and asked him to show it to Dr. Abraham Bredius, the art historian, in Monaco. Bredius examined the forgery in September 1937 and, writing in *The Burlington Magazine*, he accepted it as a genuine Vermeer and praised it very highly as "the masterpiece of Johannes Vermeer of Delft". The usually required evidences, such as resilience of colours against chemical solutions, white lead analysis, x-rays images, micro-spectroscopy of the colouring substances, confirmed it to be an authentic Vermeer.



Fig.1: Han van Meegeren, *The Supper at Emmaus*, 1937, Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam

The painting was purchased by The Rembrandt Society for fl.520,000 (€235,000 or about €4,640,000 today), with the aid of wealthy shipowner Willem van der Vorm, and donated to the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam. In 1938, the piece was highlighted in a special exhibition in occasion of Queen Wilhelmina's Jubilee at a Rotterdam museum, along with 450 Dutch old masters dating from 1400 to 1800.

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Despite the presence of masterpieces of Rembrandt and Grünewald, A. Feulner wrote in the "Magazine for the History of Art" that it was "the spiritual centre" of the whole exhibition.



Fig.2: Han Van Meegeren, *Christ and the Adulteress*, 1942, oil on canvas, 39.4 x 35.4 in., from the collection of the Fundatie Museum, via the Netherlands Cultural Heritage Agency, Zwolle, Netherlands.

The artist returned to the Netherlands in September 1939 as the Second World War threatened. During this time he created several forgeries, including *The Head of Christ*, *The Last Supper II*, *The Blessing of Jacob*, *The Adulteress*, and *The Washing of the Feet*, all in the manner of Vermeer. In 1942, during the German occupation of the Netherlands, one of Van Meegeren's agents sold the Vermeer forgery *Christ with the Adulteress* to Nazi banker and art dealer Alois Miedl (fig.2). Nazi *Reichsmarschall* Hermann Göring traded 137 looted paintings for *Christ with the Adulteress*, and showcased it at his residence in Carinhall. It became one of his most prized possessions.

On 25 August 1943, Göring hid his collection of looted artwork, including *Christ with the Adulteress*, in an Austrian salt mine, along with 6,750 other pieces of artwork looted by the Nazis. On 17 May 1945, Allied forces entered the salt mine and Captain Harry Anderson discovered the painting. In May 1945, the Allied forces questioned Miedl regarding the newly discovered Vermeer. Based on Miedl's confession, the painting

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was traced back to Van Meegeren. On 29 May 1945, he was arrested and charged with fraud and aiding and abetting the enemy. He was remanded to the Weteringschans prison as an alleged Nazi collaborator and plunderer of Dutch cultural property, threatened by the authorities with the death penalty. He labored over his predicament, but eventually confessed to forging paintings attributed to Vermeer and Pieter de Hooch. He exclaimed, "The painting in Göring's hands is not, as you assume, a Vermeer of Delft, but a Van Meegeren! I painted the picture!"



Van Meegeren at his trial in 1947.

He was convicted on falsification and fraud charges on 12 November 1947, after a brief but highly publicised trial, and was sentenced to one year in prison. He did not serve out his sentence, however; he died 30 December 1947 in the Valerius Clinic in Amsterdam, after two heart attacks. It is estimated that Van Meegeren duped buyers out of the equivalent of more than US\$30 million in 1967's money, including the government of the Netherlands.