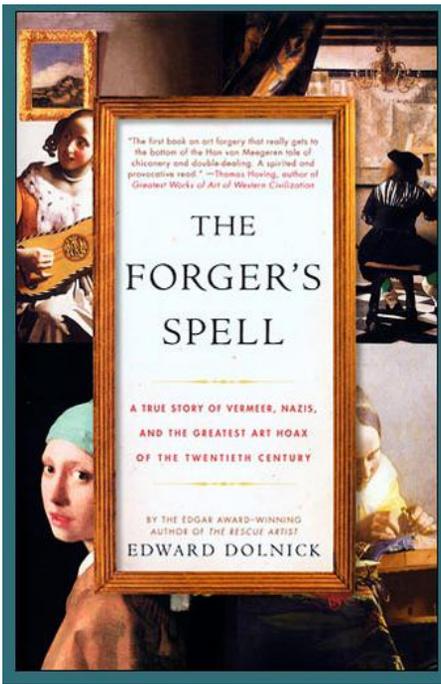


# *A Charming Deception*

Review by Tanya Roland



*The Forger's Spell*, by Edward Dolnick (2008) is a jaunt into a world of forgery, Hitler's sacking of Europe's art, and the vulnerability of humans when it comes to desire. This true story played out in and around WWII Holland. Han Van Meegeren was an average painter and art dealer who just couldn't seem to get the kind of respect he felt he deserved - an artist's Rodney Dangerfield. Not to be bested by his contemporaries, he simply decided to become a forger.

His hutzpah served him well. Van Meegeren chose hugely esteemed artists to copy, primarily Jan Vermeer and Franz Hals. He methodically searched for period canvases on original stretchers, learned how to remove original paint, cook and crack his new paintings to make them appear old, and dirty the surfaces to enhance the illusion. This exceptional diligence paid off handsomely, up to a point. In the years that he was selling these paintings, he was living large. He made the equivalent to \$30 million of today's dollars. The dealers and critics, says Dolnick, were so hungry for Vermeers particularly, they disregarded what should have been the the obvious - that as a painter, this guy was no master.

Van Meegeren's skill, however, was in playing the emotions of the collectors. In this he was brilliant. When you look at examples of his work, it's laughable that they passed for Vermeers. But they did, in spades. The power of the human mind to delude itself is unfathomable. The story even has a redeeming end. The personable Van Meegeren was caught and heavily suspected of collaboration. One of his biggest customers had been Hermann Goering.



Hans van Meegeren painted his last "Vermeer" in police custody.

By ANTHONY JULIUS  
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It took at the very least Van Meegeren's actually making another painting while he was in custody (between coffee, crumpets and long strolls) to persuade his jailers that he was telling the truth....that he had sold Goering (and others) paintings by his own hand. Once the true story came out, the Dutch loved it. Van Meegeren became a hero for sticking it to the nazis. He still was sentenced a year in prison for fraud and quietly died before he spent one day of that sentence.