

EAST HAMPTON CON MAN KNOWN TO IFAR PLEADS GUILTY

JOHN RE ADMITS SCHULTE PROVENANCE WAS CONCOCTED

On December 1, as this *Journal* issue was in production, IFAR learned that John Re, a resident of East Hampton, Long Island, pleaded guilty in federal court in New York to one count of wire fraud in conjunction with a decade-long scheme that defrauded art collectors out of \$2.5 million. The plea followed an intensive FBI investigation that led to Re's arrest in June and subsequent release on bail.

Although the court documents describe Re's crimes as dating back to "at least 2005," in fact, as early as 2001 IFAR became aware of Re and the so-called "George Schulte Collection" of purported Pollocks and de Koonings he was selling, when a "Pollock" with Schulte's name in the provenance was submitted to IFAR's Art Authentication Research Service. Other works with that provenance were later spotted on the Web. Years later, IFAR was presented with other Schulte "Pollocks," all of which were said to have been discovered in the basement of Schulte's house in East Hampton (the works and research will be discussed in detail in a forthcoming *IFAR Journal* article). None of the works submitted to IFAR

turned out to be by Pollock. The June Criminal Complaint quotes extensively from IFAR's reports.¹

In his recent Plea Agreement, Re admitted to having fabricated the Schulte provenance and authorship of the works. It is not clear at this point, who actually created the paintings, although the Criminal Complaint made note of the fact that Re himself is a painter; nor has the FBI said whether it is investigating others in connection with this fraud. Re faces up to 20 years in prison. Sentencing is scheduled for April 2015.

George Schulte (1922-1996), a woodworker and furniture restorer, was the owner of an antiques and appraisal shop in the Springs section of East Hampton, not far from where Pollock and Lee Krasner lived after 1945. In 1999, John Re, a former employee at the shop, claimed to have discovered a large group of paintings and drawings by Pollock and de Kooning while cleaning out the basement of the Schulte house.

The first Schulte "Pollock" submitted to IFAR in 2001, a small dripped painting on paper signed 'Jackson Pollock,' was accompa-

¹ *United States v. John Re*, no.14-cr-550 (PKC) (E.D.N.Y., filed June 20, 2014).

"The June Criminal Complaint quotes extensively from IFAR's reports."

nied by a notarized document bearing the signature of Schulte's widow, Barbara, stating that her late husband acquired the painting directly from Pollock sometime during the late 1940s or early 1950s presumably in lieu of payment for work performed at Pollock's house. Curiously, Re himself was a "witness" and signatory to the notarized statement.

IFAR was unable to substantiate the provenance, or find any evidence that Pollock knew Schulte, or had business dealings with him, let alone a relationship that would account for an exchange or a gift of paintings. More importantly, the work itself did not bear scrutiny as a Pollock, lacking the vitality and compositional integrity of Pollock's 1948 black and red dripped paintings on paper, which it superficially resembled. Just as troubling, the paper was anomalous for Pollock; the paint materials were wrong; and the work appeared to be intentionally "aged," executed as it was on a discolored, grimy, and creased piece of paper. IFAR rejected the attribution to Pollock.

THE GROUP OF 45

In 2011, IFAR agreed to review a large collection of 45 purported Pollocks from the Schulte collection that had been acquired by a single collector, named in the government’s Complaint as Collector 2. Most of the works were signed and some were dated (FIGS. 1A and B). We learned from the Complaint that John Re had tried to discredit IFAR in an unsuccessful attempt to dissuade Collector 2 from submitting the works to IFAR for review.

Each of the paintings in *this* group was submitted with a statement signed by Re identifying it as part of the Schulte



FIGURES 1A and B. Fake Jackson Pollock works sold by John Re and later submitted to IFAR. 1A (upper) is a work on paper; 1B (lower) is a painting on canvas. Photos: IFAR.



collection. Unlike the 2001 document submitted to IFAR, Barbara Schulte did not sign these documents. By that time, she had been institutionalized with dementia; she has since died. IFAR’s provenance research into this group included interviews with George Schulte’s family and friends, all of whom denied that Schulte ever knew Pollock or had owned paintings by him.

Upon examination, the specialists found the paintings to be stylistically unconvincing and “remarkably, and disturbingly analogous in palette, composition, and overall execution, much more similar, in fact, than any of Pollock’s authentic works are to each other.” Forensic examination that IFAR undertook revealed serious anachronisms in the paint media used in virtually every work tested. There was nothing to substantiate a Pollock attribution, and IFAR rejected all 45 works.

RE CHANGES HIS STORY

In January 2014, three years after IFAR issued its reports on the 45 works, John Re contacted IFAR. Apparently forgetting that he himself had signed the provenance statements, each of which also contained an embedded image of the work, Re claimed that the paintings examined by IFAR were actually

from the “Taylor Robinson Collection,” and that the Pollocks had “already passed forensics & Top world expertise [sic].” He demanded that IFAR re-examine all of the paintings and amend its reports in light of this new information, hinting at legal action if IFAR did not comply. Needless to say, IFAR did not comply.

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In June, assisted by IFAR’s research, Re was arrested for fraud. He was later indicted in August. The Complaint also accused him of making threatening statements – including boasting of his alleged mob connections — when he was confronted by one of his victims.

This was not Re’s first encounter with the criminal justice system; in 1995, he, along with his wife, Rhonda, and two others, was charged with criminal possession of devices for printing counterfeit \$20 bills. He served two years

in prison.² Upon his release, Re turned from counterfeiting money to dealing in fake art. Posing as an art expert who “exposed” fakes for sale on the Internet, Re posted glowing reviews of himself on his blog. One happy client gushed that Re had steered him away from buying a fake Picasso and a fake Pollock online, and claimed that Re had assisted “the FBI in New York in the prosecution of a major art forgery ring in 2000.” Re himself sold dubious artworks from a variety of web sites including eBay, using shill

² John T. McQuiston, “4 are Held in Forgery of \$20 Bills on L.I.,” *The New York Times* (Oct. 19, 1995).

bidder to drive up prices, and threatening those who challenged him or complained. In 2003, he was ordered to pay \$43,500 in damages for breach of contract for selling fake Picasso and van Gogh paintings on eBay and for making defamatory statements against the plaintiffs.³

In the current case, in addition to facing imprisonment, Re has been ordered to forfeit \$2.5 million and, until the forfeiture debt is paid, he is barred from selling his personal submarine, “USS Deep Quest,” which he is said to

³ *Masterworks Fine Arts, Inc. v. Re*, no. 02-cv-3664 (E.D.N.Y., filed June 24, 2002).

have purchased from Universal Studios for \$70,000 and restored for over \$1 million. Perhaps not surprisingly, the authenticity of the submarine itself is in dispute. While Re claims it is a decommissioned US Naval vessel, naval experts say it is only a movie prop.⁴

— **LISA DUFFY-ZEBALLOS**

Art Research Director, IFAR

and **SHARON FLESCHER**

Executive Director, IFAR

⁴ T.E. McMorrow, “A Tale Forged in Paint and Steel,” *East Hampton Star*, Aug. 14, 2014. The real USS Deep Quest is an exhibit at the Naval Undersea Museum in Keyport, WA.

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IFAR ART AUTHENTICATION RESEARCH SERVICE

For more than forty-five years, IFAR has offered a unique Art Authentication Research Service, which works to resolve questions concerning the attribution of works of art. As a not-for-profit organization with a distinguished Art Advisory Council and a worldwide network of scholars, IFAR is free to render objective opinions unaffected by the marketplace.

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3D PRINTING AND THE ART WORLD

IS THERE A "DUTY" TO AUTHENTICATE ART?

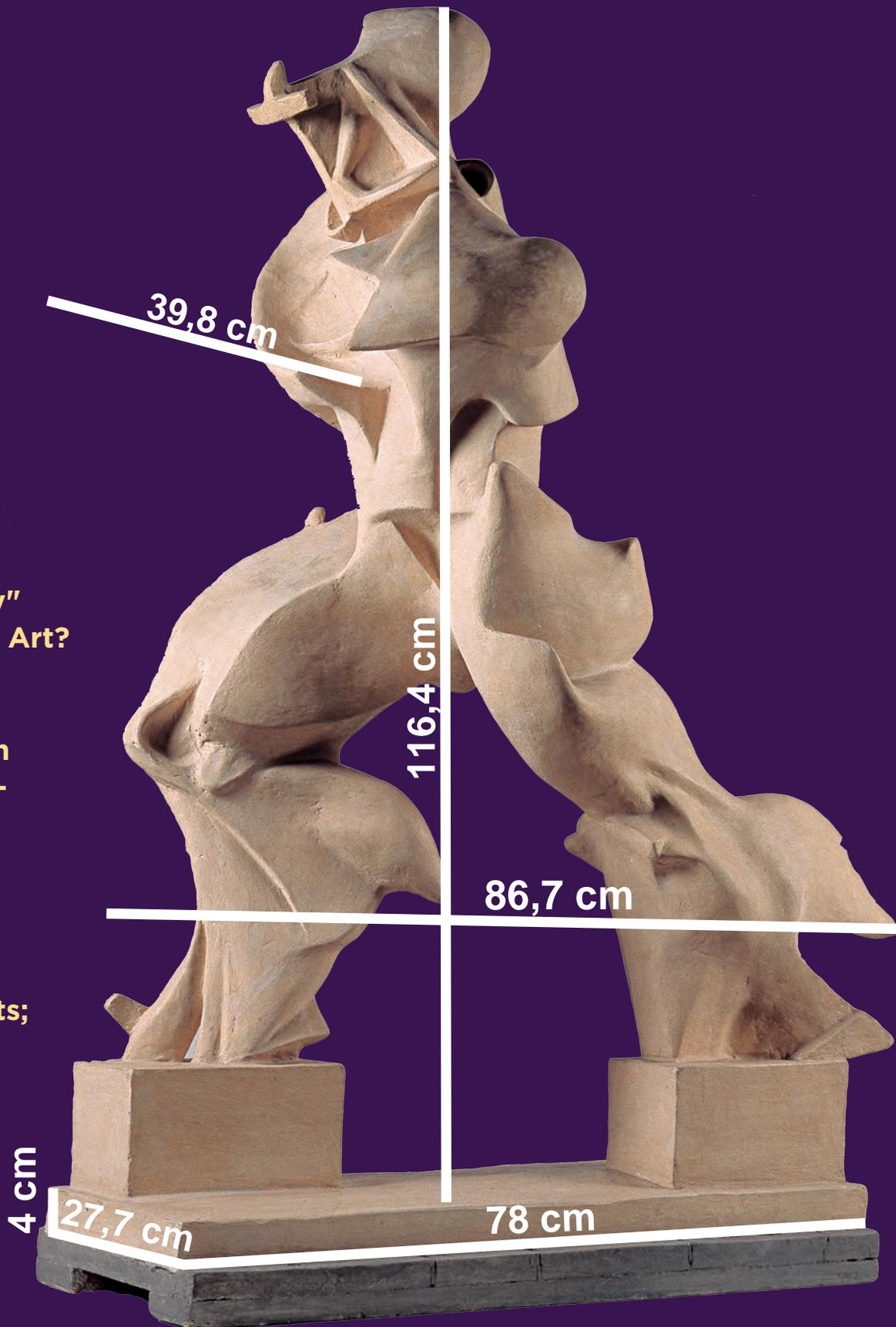
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COVER: UMBERTO BOCCIONI (Italian, 1882-1916). *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*, 1913. Plaster. Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo, Brazil.
Photo: Courtesy of MAC USP. See story on page 43.