



## THE CAPITAL: WASHINGTON PORTRAIT, FREDERICK, MARYLAND.

Wes: We left Pennsylvania and traveled south for three hours for our next investigation, in Frederick County, Maryland. Maryland's history is entwined with that of its neighbor, the nation's capital, Washington, D.C. It's the birthplace of "The Star-Spangled Banner," so you wouldn't be surprised to come across pictures of George Washington here. Could this picture be a rare 1700s drawing of Washington by America's foremost portrait painter, Gilbert Stewart? He's the artist most famous for creating this iconic image of our first president. The drawing was discovered by a widow tidying up her late husband's possessions. Her son Jim, an engineer from Frederick County, Maryland, is now the proud caretaker of his father's portrait.

Jim: The drawing really means something to me because it was my father's. I look at it and I kind of see the things that he looked for. My Dad really had a passion for collecting. It really was kind of the thrill of the chase that he really liked to go after and find something that was unique.

Wes: I'm Wes Cowan, and I've come to investigate this unusual discovery. Is this where you found the drawing? It's actually where my mother found the drawing. This is a cabinet that belonged to my father. And when she was going through it and doing her sorting of his collection after he passed away, came across this as one of the items.

Wow. And you have no idea where he got it then.

Jim: No, not at all. What I really would like to know is whether this is an authentic Gilbert Stewart drawing.

Wes: Well, you know, Jim, looking at it, boy, there's just so much about this that says that this is potentially a genuine drawing. I'm going to slip it out of the jacket here very carefully. It's done on laid paper, which is very early paper. You can see the lines in there. That's the kind of paper that Gilbert Stewart would have been drawing on. It's potentially a really significant find. I would have to guess it would probably be in the range of value of \$30,000 to \$50,000.

Jim: Wow, that's great.

Wes: But of course, we've got to find out if it really is a genuine Gilbert Stewart.

Jim: Of course.

Wes: Before Jim banks that money, I need to find the best guy around to authenticate the portrait. I've arranged to meet Thomas Hoving, former director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Thomas Hoving: I used to have a technique where I'd have a friendly staff member in the office at the Metropolitan place the drawing in a totally unexpected place. When I came to work, I'd find it and I'd, you know, walk into the men's room, open up the thing and there the drawing would be. And you suddenly see it in a way you hadn't before because you study it, you begin to look at it in different ways and bang, you get that instant impression again. And the weaknesses begin to, loom out at you.

Wes: So this should be placed in, I don't know, someplace crazy, basketball court or sauna or I don't know what.

Thomas: Then you go through a whole list of things to examine it. That's to force your eyes over every millimeter so you won't miss something. This bothers me, the fact that this is so beautifully detailed, but the clothing, the epaulets and how they come is just kind of go under the – just start growing from here? Where does an epaulet start from? It seems to me a difference between the upper part and the lower part. This is kind of stronger than this.

Wes: Couldn't that be accounted for by saying that this is maybe a study for another oil painting that Stewart might have done, so he really wasn't paying any attention to the clothing, he was more interested in the face.

Thomas: The fact is, from the drawings that I've seen of Gilbert Stewart, he was obsessed by clothing.

Wes: Gee, I wasn't expecting this. I wonder what Tom will make of the condition of the drawing.

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Thomas: There's a tear here and there's a watermark that goes right to the edge of these lovely lips. It's unusual because any damage doesn't hurt the object, where the money is, right? It shows age, but it's in no way harmed.

Wes: Tom has a point. If the damage was more indiscriminate, the drawing is more likely to be genuine. So what's your gut instinct?

Thomas: My gut instinct, it's weak.

Wes: The drawing still looks pretty good to me. I better get another opinion. I'm at the Winterthur Museum in Delaware meeting David Mashut, an art historian and a Gilbert Stewart expert. But what was about Stewart that made him special?

David Mashut: He was quite simply the -- really the best portrait painter that had worked in America up to that time. He had a real ability to "nail the face to the canvas," as one of his contemporaries put it. He was very good at capturing a likeness.

Wes: David, I know that it's very difficult to do this, but comparing the oil painting with the drawing, what do you think about the drawing?

David: First of all, Stewart seldom made drawings. The only drawings that we know by Stewart date from at the beginning of his career when he was teaching himself how to draw. But there are no drawings by Stewart that are known after, say about 1780. Another thing that strikes me is that Washington is shown here in uniform, and he would not have been wearing a uniform in 1795 as President of the United States. So Stewart would have painted him in civilian clothes, not in uniform. The third thing is that the drawing bears the apparent signature, Gilbert Stewart, in the lower left. Stewart seldom signed his paintings, and when he did sign them, he used the form of his name, G. Stewart. He never used the full form of his first name, Gilbert Stewart when signing a painting.

Wes: So what are you saying?

David: I would say it is definitely not by Gilbert Stewart.

Wes: so I was wrong. So if Stewart didn't do this drawing, who did?

David: It looks to me like the work of a forger whose work I've seen on other occasions and he has a very distinctive style, almost like a fingerprint.

Wes: Well, what's his name?

David: Ferdinand Danton.

Wes: This guy Danton certainly had me fooled, and now I'm going after him. I've come to New York to meet convicted British art forger John Myatt. He painted 110 fakes over a 7-year period and made almost \$200,000. He was released from jail three years ago, and I'm hoping that he can give me his unique perspective on our forger.

John Myatt: Oh, it's lovely. Just lovely. It looks like an 18th-century work. Even though this is a forgery, it is nevertheless a very technically competent piece of work.

Wes: Ferdinand Danton is our forger. Ever heard of him?

John: Never heard of him. Mind you, the very best forgers, of course, are the ones nobody's ever heard of or, in fact, no one ever will hear of. Those are the successful forgers. Danton? No, rings no bells at all.

Wes: You know, that's an interesting observation and it's really one that I hadn't really thought about. That's the successful forger, the one who never gets caught.

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Wes: So did Danton ever get caught? Checking Public Records may unearth him. I'm trying to find some information on Ferdinand Danton. He was apparently a forger in the D.C. area. Destroyed? Yeah, Danton, D-a-n-t-o-n. Nothing? Never heard of him? Well, this isn't working. Let's try the obvious approach. Danton. Let's see, Ferdinand Danton. He died in New York in 1939. His last known wife was Henrietta Danton. He had four brothers and at least three sons, of which I am one. Holy cow! This guy is his son, George Grieve. Let's see, there's a link here. Should be to e-mail this guy. I'm going to fire him off one right now. George Grieve and I have arranged to meet in Washington, D.C.

Wes: George, what do you know about your dad?

George Grieve: What I was told by my adoptive parents, the Grieves, that I was found walking around Washington, D.C., when I was two years old.

Wes: You're kidding me.

George: Apparently with no one to look after me, so I was turned over to the Welfare Department. Apparently my mother, Henrietta, and my father, Ferdinand, abandoned me. And my father, Ferdinand, had spent two years in Lorton Reformatory for forging paintings.

Wes: I know your dad must have been a real character. Do you have any idea what he looked like?

George: In fact, I do. Would you care to see a picture?

Wes: You've got a picture of him?

George: I most certainly do. The one I call "Dapper Dan."

Wes: This is great. I mean, finally we see who our forger was. We see that he has a face. And what a character he was. He's got these spats on. He's got the straw boater. I think it would be acknowledged by most people that he was very talented in what he did. Unfortunately, he channeled that talent in the wrong direction.

Wes: I put out calls to Museums and Galleries, and the Historical Society of Delaware in Wilmington got right back to me. In the 1930s, they acquired seven portraits of local Delaware dignitaries, apparently painted by famous American artist Rembrandt Peale. Each of them turned out to be forgeries by our man, Ferdinand Danton. Historian Dr. Connie Cooper tells me the story. How much money did he take you guys for?

Dr Connie Cooper: All told, for about \$1500.

Wes: And that was a lot of money in 1934.

Connie: Yeah, it was quite a story to read about it now. Well, let's dig out the file.

Wes: Sure. I'm really anxious to see what you guys have got.

Connie: So here's the file of all the documentation that we have on this person. Oh, my gosh, look how thick that is.

Wes: Good grief! You generate a lot of paper. Boy, I'll say. This guy was something else, hoodwinking everybody right and left. Oh, here's telegram -- copies of telegrams. Let's see this. One of Danton's cons was to fabricate original sales receipts to make his forgeries look more believable. He also used shameless emotional blackmail to manipulate potential buyers. "I'm in very serious position, both my children ill with chicken pox and I must at once arrange for another home, I'm losing my home today, could I secure \$250 at once for all the portraits? There's nothing else I can do, my little boy has just passed away this afternoon. My loss is beyond my hopes of ever being happy. I am distressed beyond everything, please advance me \$100 by postal telegraph and I will ever be grateful."

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Wes: Now that I've met Danton's son George, I know that behind this facade of a caring father lies the reality of a man who abandoned his two-year-old son. Here's a letter from the Post Office Department. "December 26, 1935. "George Joseph Shepard, alias F.D. Vernon, M.D., John J. Hughes, M.D., and also known by many other aliases, was arrested February 18th, 1935, for alleged fraudulent use of the mails in the sale of spurious pictures by false representation was sentenced to serve from one to two years in the penitentiary." ah, let's see, what's this? "May 23rd, 1955" Oh, this is a copy of the FBI report on Danton. "Wife, Henrietta Danton." We've seen her before. "Son, George Danton." Our George. "David Danton." and look at this, here's another one. "Clifton Danton." that's a brother that we hadn't heard about.

Wes: So Ferdinand Danton was a self-centered con artist. For 20 years, he fooled the art world, until 1935, when the law finally caught up with him and he went to prison. Now I have to break the news to Jim that his Gilbert Stewart drawing is a fake. Jim, your question about the drawing, you know, the one thing you wanted to know was, is this an original drawing by Gilbert Stewart? I can tell you without hesitation that it's a forgery.

Jim: Wow. That's really interesting.

Wes: I'm surprised. I really am. It's a forgery done by a very clever guy named Ferdinand Danton. Fooled a lot of American Art experts. Some of his drawings were purchased by major institutions in the 1930s. He was really pretty doggone good at it. He fooled a lot of people. He fooled me.

Jim: Yeah. In a way, I'm kind of disappointed. You always think, well, maybe it's worth some money and that would be great. But to me, I think the answer to the question is, whether it's genuine or not, is really the more important thing. The guy obviously was a great forger, because I think it is a very striking image, but obviously, it's not worth as much as once believed, but that's okay. That's sometimes the roll of the dice. It's still an interesting piece and now it's a unique conversation piece.

Wes: To give Jim a better understanding of the story behind his picture, I wanted to introduce him to George Grieve.

George: Pleasure to meet you, Jim.

Jim: Nice to meet you.

Wes: Jim, George is the son of Ferdinand Danton, your forger.

Jim: Really?

George: That's right.

Jim: That's interesting.

Wes: Does it surprise you?

Jim: Yeah, it does. George, come on over here, I want to show you this.

Wes: It's the first time George has ever seen one of his father's forgeries.

George: Oh, wow. Do you have any idea how old this is?

Wes: Not really. It's certainly not from 1795. We think it's from around the 1930s. So Jim, tell me, what do you think about meeting your forger's son?

Jim: It's probably kind of the shock of my life. Number one, that finding out that it's a forgery. Number two, actually meeting a relative of his. It's pretty neat that you guys were able to find George and bring him here.

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Wes: George, I've got a surprise for you now, and you might want to put the drawing back in the drawer.

George: Oh? Oh? What are you up to?

Wes: I want to give you this file of information that we've put together on your father, Ferdinand Danton.

George: Well, I certainly thank you. You'll excuse me.

Wes: No, that's fine, that's fine. You know, I think that we were as shocked as you were to read the list of all his brothers, and not only your name and David, who we knew about, but also that there's another brother, Clifton.

George: Clifton.

Wes: 19 Palm Avenue, San Francisco.

George: Wow. I was unaware of Clifton. Wow. This is something. This is the biggest surprise of all, and I don't know what I can do to thank you. That's really an amazing story. It is.

Wes: By uncovering Jim's picture as a fake, we've managed to fill in a few of the blanks in Ferdinand Danton's life. He was an elusive figure to the people that he duped, but ultimately also a mystery to his own family.

Elyse: Danton may have died in 1939, but his forgeries keep appearing. In 2002, Washington College unmasked another portrait of the father of our country, long attributed to Rembrandt Peale, as a fake, and Danton as the prime suspect.

### MORE ON FORGERY

Forgers have been around for years, but where did it all start? Some say it started with the Romans. Merchants used to fake Greek sculptures to meet a rising demand for fine art. But the counterfeit game took off in the 20th century, when fine art started to command big money. Belgian Hans Von Magren is one of the best known forgers in the last 100 years. His fake Vermeers fooled many experts, who hailed them as some of the painter's greatest work. He was arrested in 1945 and confessed to his crimes. Detailed chemical and physical tests went on to prove that the materials Von Magren used for his paintings were modern. He ended his career in bankruptcy. In the '50s, Tom Keating took forgery to whole other level. He faked over 2,000 different paintings for more than 100 different artists. In 1976, he confessed, but confession had its rewards. He ended up hosting a television series about artistic techniques. Then there's our master forger, John Myatt. He and his partner pulled off the biggest contemporary art fraud ever in the UK. Then one morning, Scotland Yard came knocking. Game over. While the forgers may end up behind bars, their fakes are still out there. If you do end up with a masterpiece, watch out! It may not be what you think it is.

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