

A Problem Like Schuffenecker: An Artist on Trial

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Fig. 1. Vincent van Gogh or Claude-Émile Schuffenecker, *Sunflowers*, 1889. Oil on canvas. Tokyo: Sompo Museum of Art. [Sompo Museum of Art]

Google a list of famous art forgers. Nestled between forgers like Mark Landis and Tony Tetro you will find the name Claude-Émile Schuffenecker, French Post-Impressionist artist, painter, collector, and teacher. It is jarring to see one of the founders of Post-Impressionism, Paul Gauguin's friend and mentor, on a list of famous art forgers. What did Schuffenecker do to deserve this odious designation? What evidence exists that proves Schuffenecker was a forger? One thing is for certain: Schuffenecker's reputation was already tainted by the time of his death in 1934.

On August 26, 1934, nearly one month after the artist's passing, a German newspaper published the following:

No one in Germany would have known him [Schuffenecker] had his name not been mentioned again and again in different stories related to false Van Goghs [but] any lay person can easily distinguish Schuffenecker's paintings from those of Van Gogh. The copies which came onto the art market, and were based on Van Gogh's style of painting, originated presumably with his brother Amédée. To what extent there were grounds for the brothers to have been drawn into doing forgeries has never been established" (Grossvogel, *Catalogue Raisonné* 51).

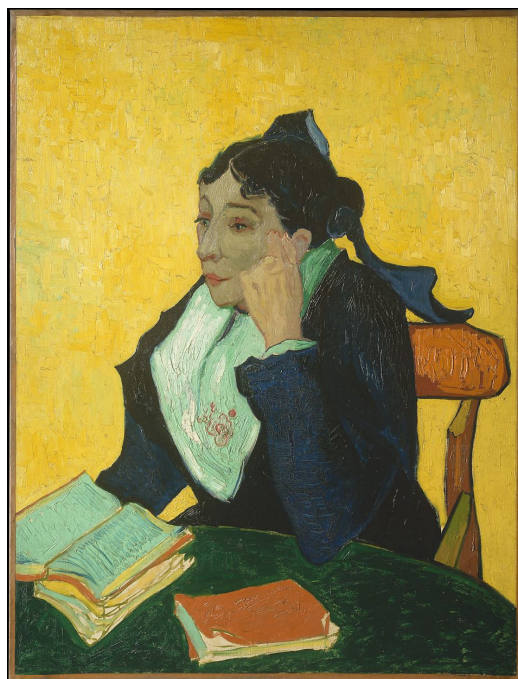


Fig. 2. Vincent van Gogh or Claude-Émile Schuffenecker, *L'Arlésienne: Madame Joseph-Michel Ginoux*, 1888–89. Oil on Canvas. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art. [The MET]

To this day, rumors about Schuffenecker's alleged forgeries swirl about the art world. Hanspeter Born and Benoît Landais dedicated an entire book to the subject. In their 2014 book, *Schuffenecker's Sunflowers and Other van Gogh Forgeries*, Born and Landais claim that Schuffenecker was responsible for many van Goghs now hanging in distinguished private and museum collections. Among the van Goghs they believe to be Schuffenecker forgeries the so-called *Yasuda Sunflowers* (Seiji Togo Yasuda Memorial Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo; fig. 1), *L'Arlésienne: Madame Joseph-Michel Ginoux* (Metropolitan Museum of Art; fig. 2, and *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear and Pipe* (private collection; fig. 3). Theories about Schuffenecker's

forgeries are so widespread that the leading scholar on the artist, Jill-Elyse Grossvogel, felt obligated to include a section on the topic in her artist's catalogue raisonné published in 2000 (Grossvogel, *Catalogue Raisonné* 50–51). What merit do these theories have? Is there substantial evidence that proves Schuffenecker forged paintings? What should we call Schuffenecker? Was he an artist, copyist, or forger?



Fig. 3. Vincent van Gogh or Claude-Émile Schuffenecker, *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear and Pipe*, 1889. Oil on Canvas. Private Collection. [Born and Landais 139]

Claude-Émile Schuffenecker was born 8 December 1851 at Fresnes-Saint-Mames (Grossvogel, *Claude-Émile Schuffenecker* 20). In the 1870s, while employed at a Parisian brokerage firm, Schuffenecker began studying art in the studios of Georges Grellet, Paul-Jacques-Aimé Baudry, and Carolus-Duran. While working in finance, Schuffenecker met Paul Gauguin. Schuffenecker stimulated Gauguin's interest in art (Philips 7). He gave Gauguin painting lessons and introduced him to artists like Camille Pissarro. Alongside Paul Gauguin, Edgar Degas, Georges Seurat, Armand Guillaumin, and Camille Pissarro, Schuffenecker participated in the final Impressionist exhibition in 1886. A few years later, in 1889, when Paris

was celebrating the completion of the Eiffel Tower and hosting the World's Fair, Schuffenecker helped organize the Volpini Exhibition, which featured Synthetist and Impressionist works by Schuffenecker, Paul Gauguin, Louis Roy, Émile Bernard, and Charles Laval (Grossvogel, *Claude-Émile Schuffenecker* 25).

For most of his artistic career, Schuffenecker was an instructor. He spent twenty long years in the Paris public school system teaching drawing (Grossvogel, *Catalogue Raisonné* 41). This provided him with a steady, dependable source of income. Schuffenecker's students fondly referred to him as "le père Schuff" or "Bouddha" (Grossvogel, *Catalogue Raisonné* 41). His artist friends, including Bernard, Gauguin, Roy, and others, called him "le bon Schuff" for his unyielding support. Despite wanting to be known as an artist first and foremost, Schuffenecker came to be known for his impressive collection of avant-garde art. With his meager teacher's salary, Schuffenecker consistently bought the "finest works available to him from his contemporaries" (Grossvogel, *Claude-Émile Schuffenecker* 29). He owned numerous works by van Gogh, Paul Cézanne, and Odilon Redon.

Despite Grossvogel stating "[w]e can now confirm the fact, based on the most recent research, that Schuffenecker did no forgeries of Van Gogh's paintings prior to 1900" (Grossvogel, *Catalogue Raisonné* 52), he did make copies of van Gogh prior to that date. There exist at least two known examples of Schuffenecker carefully copying van Gogh paintings. The first copy is a small, undated sketch after van Gogh's *L'Arlésienne: Madame Ginoux with Gloves and Umbrella* (figs. 4 and 5). The original painting by van Gogh is housed in the Musée d'Orsay in Paris. According to Grossvogel's catalogue raisonné, Schuffenecker owned this van Gogh prior to May 17, 1893 (Grossvogel, *Catalogue Raisonné* 8). The second copy, dated to 1890, is a pastel after van Gogh's 1889 *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear and Pipe* (Grossvogel, *Catalogue*

Raisonné 92; fig. 6). Both Schuffenecker copies are signed or marked with the studio stamp or both.



Fig. 4. Claude-Émile Schuffenecker, *The Arlésienne* (after van Gogh), Pencil on paper. Private Collection. [Grossvogel, *Catalogue Raisonné* 9]



Fig. 5. Vincent van Gogh, *L'Arlésienne: Madame Ginoux with Gloves and Umbrella*, 1888. Oil on canvas. Paris: Musée d'Orsay. [Musée d'Orsay]



Fig. 6. Claude-Émile Schuffenecker, *Man with a Pipe* (after Vincent van Gogh's *Self-Portrait*), c. 1890. Pastel on paper. Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum. [Grossvogel, *Catalogue Raisonné* 92]

It was common at the time for artists to make copies of famous art works. It was a way to study and improve. Copying was part of the training of a 19th-century artist (Plesch 2). Van Gogh himself often copied black and white reproductions of Jean-François Millet and Honoré Daumier (Rathbone 18–19). He also made compositions based on the work of his contemporaries. There once existed a “positive ‘culture of the copy’” (Lenain 215, borrowing Schwartz’s title) and Véronique Plesch reminds of “the vital role copying played for centuries in the teaching of art, with academies stocking plaster casts of famous works. Besides allowing budding artists to hone their craft, the practice reveals their tastes and aspirations, as it was aimed at achieving ‘a profound spiritual concordance’ with the master” (Plesch 2). Naturally, Schuffenecker copied artists other than van Gogh. In 1879, he copied Pierre-Paul Prud’hon’s

Christ on the Cross (Grossvogel, *Catalogue Raisonné* 42). Schuffenecker hung his copy, approximately a third the size of the original, over his bed at his home on the rue Olivier de Serres. Schuffenecker also made precise copies of his own work. While problems arise when an innocent copy comes to be regarded as an original, there is no evidence that suggests this is the case with any of Schuffenecker's copies.

Born and Landais make the case that two van Goghs, *L'Arlésienne: Madame Joseph-Michel Ginoux* (fig. 2) and the *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear and Pipe* (fig. 2), are in fact the handiwork of Schuffenecker and were made before 1900. What is the validity of this claim? About *L'Arlésienne* in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Born and Landais declare that "Vincent did not paint the *L'Arlésienne with Books*. It is a copy, an adaptation, a pastiche made by Schuffenecker, probably soon after he had acquired the original" (Born and Landais 93). The "original" in this case is van Gogh's 1888 *L'Arlésienne: Madame Ginoux with Gloves and Umbrella* in the Musée d'Orsay (fig. 6). Born and Landais posit that "a number of anomalies in the New York painting betray the copyist who misread the original." Comparing the two *Arlésiennes*, they explain that

[i]n the copy, the model's elbow does not rest properly on the table. Unlike in the Paris picture, the outer side of the armrest was forgotten. The armrest becomes a flat board, and in its place one sees the continuation of the chair-leg. In the copy, Mme Ginoux's face has a flat and lifeless expression. Her eyelids are reddened, her lips strangely pursed and she seems to suffer from nose-bleed (Born and Landais 97–98).

However, this impressively descriptive observations do not constitute irrefutable evidence. As for the self-portrait, Born and Landais consider that "*The Man with a Pipe*, a weak imitation of Vincent's *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear*, was painted by Émile Schuffenecker" (Born and Landais 137; figs. 6 and 7). Their claim, again, is based on stylistic analysis and unsubstantiated documentary evidence. Furthermore, what did Schuffenecker have to gain in forging the work of

van Gogh before 1900? There was little money to be made as van Gogh was still largely unknown.



Fig. 7. Vincent van Gogh, *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear*, 1889. Oil on Canvas. London: Courtauld Gallery. [The Courtauld]

Immediately before Schuffenecker divorced his wife in 1904, he sold his extensive collection of art to his brother, Amédée, for 100,000 francs. Born and Landais assert that after this event, the two Schuffenecker brothers began buying, selling, and forging artwork for profit. On this period in Schuffenecker's life, Grossvogel writes, "A number of discrepancies and contradictions, however, uncovered by that research seemed to indicate, contrary to what we expected, circumstances in Schuffenecker's life between 1896 and 1906 that might have indeed supported the accusations. Closer examination of those circumstances links probable forgeries with what had begun the trajectory as a series of innocent study copies" (Grossvogel, *Catalogue*

Raisonné 50). There exists no irrefutable evidence that proves the Schuffenecker brothers collaborated in selling forgeries. More likely, some works sold by Amédée originated as innocent copies by his brother, which, as they changed hands on the market, came to be mistakenly considered as original.

In 1927, the critic Maximilien Gauthier published an interview with Schuffenecker, although he didn't name him, only describing him as the companion of Gauguin. During the course of the interview, Schuffenecker openly admits to "finishing" works in his private collection. For instance, concerning a Cézanne he had recently sold, he explained:

When I bought it, it was clearly not finished. I finished it myself . . . and don't take me for a tinkerer with masterpieces! A large part of the canvas was blank. This blights the painted surface. For a moment, my intention was to put it on a smaller stretcher, but one would have to change the frame. This consideration alone made me do what I did. If I had known that twenty years later my calm brushstrokes would be valued as such a high price, I would simply have restrained myself. This affair, I swear to you, never brought me a penny (Born and Landais 304–305).

When asked to "show the limits" of his intervention, Schuffenecker, "with a sure hand and without hesitating one instant," drew a clean line of demarcation:

On this small spot I also put some malachite green. I repeat that I did this without any malign intention, and absolutely not with the purpose of making money. In the same fashion, I painted over a part of L'Estaque. Cézanne had painted his famous landscape over a study for a portrait. In the blue of the sea first an eye, then a nose appeared—"grew back" as one says in painter's language. Some well applied touches, and the nuisance disappeared. I did the same in the no less famous Portrait of his wife. Cézanne had left the hands in white; I put a light touch of pink on them that one admires discerningly. In another landscape, representing the Basin of the Jas de Bouffan, Cézanne was content to indicate the sky with a light smear of solvent and cobalt. I finished that sky (Born and Landais 304–305).

Furthermore, in this interview, Schuffenecker explains that at the time he "tinkered" with Cézanne's works, "Cézanne was not yet the giant who he has now become even in the eyes of the blind. Among comrades you allow yourself to take certain liberties" (Born and Landais 305).

Schuffenecker owned all three Cézannes he “finished” at some time before 1904. *Estaque Bay* was painted between 1879 and 1883 (fig. 8), *Grand pin et terres rouges (Bellevue)* in 1885 (fig. 9), and *Madame Cézanne en robe rayée* between 1883–85 (fig. 10). About *Grand pin et terres rouges (Bellevue)*, Walter Feilchenfeldt and Jayne Warman, the authors of Cézanne’s catalogue raisonné, remain puzzled: “[w]e still have not elucidated the question of the signature in the lower right corner of the painting. Since the painting was unfinished and, moreover, Schuffenecker had suggested that he himself had filled in the right side, one is therefore entitled to wonder if Cézanne would have really signed in the empty corner of an unfinished canvas. Rather, we believe that Schuffenecker signed off to complete what he had started” (“Cézanne et Schuffenecker”).



Fig. 8. Paul Cézanne and Claude-Émile Schuffenecker, *Estaque Bay*, 1879–83. Oil on canvas. Philadelphia Museum of Art. [Philadelphia Museum of Art]



Fig. 9. Paul Cézanne and Claude-Émile Schuffenecker, *Grand pin et terres rouges (Bellevue)*, 1885. Oil on canvas. Private Collection Japan. [Feilchenfeldt, et al.]

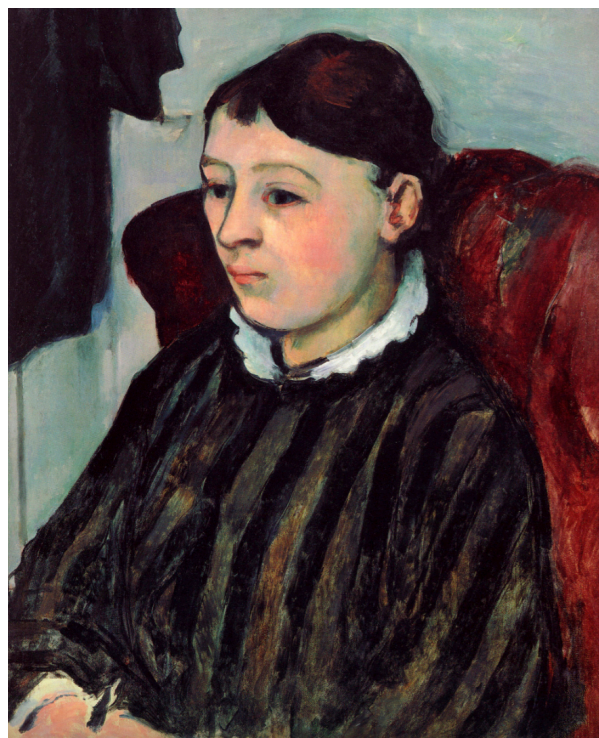


Fig. 10. Cézanne and Claude-Émile Schuffenecker, *Madame Cézanne en robe rayée*, 1883–85. Oil on canvas. Yokohama Museum of Art. [Feilchenfeldt, et al.]

At this time, given all the evidence available, it is irresponsible to label Schuffenecker a forger. However, more research is definitely needed. As of now, this is what we can safely claim. Firstly, Schuffenecker made copies of van Goghs before 1900. There is a possibility that some of these copies have made their way into the art world as authentic van Goghs. Secondly, there is no hard evidence that indicates Schuffenecker is the author of either *L'Arlésienne: Madame Joseph-Michel Ginoux* in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (fig. 2) or the *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear and Pipe* in a private collection (fig. 3). Thirdly, it is a fact that Schuffenecker admitted to “finishing” Cézannes in his collection.

Schuffenecker lived and worked at a watershed moment in the history of copying art. He worked within the “positive culture of the copy.” Infamous art forgers, as they exist today, had not yet become a feature of the art world. Schuffenecker lived and died before Han van Meegeren duped the Nazis, before Elmyr de Hory made a business out of forgery. In fact, Schuffenecker died the same year Eric Hebborn was born. Today, the art world might find Schuffenecker’s artistic practices abhorrent. How dare he copy van Gogh? How dare he “tinker” with Cézannes? But one must not judge Schuffenecker with modern standards. Instead, we must accept Schuffenecker for what he was, a French Post-Impressionist artist, painter, collector, and teacher operating under the artistic norms of his day. This, however, does not mean we should stop investigating his work. For the time being, with research ongoing, he ought to at least be removed from lists of confirmed forgers.

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