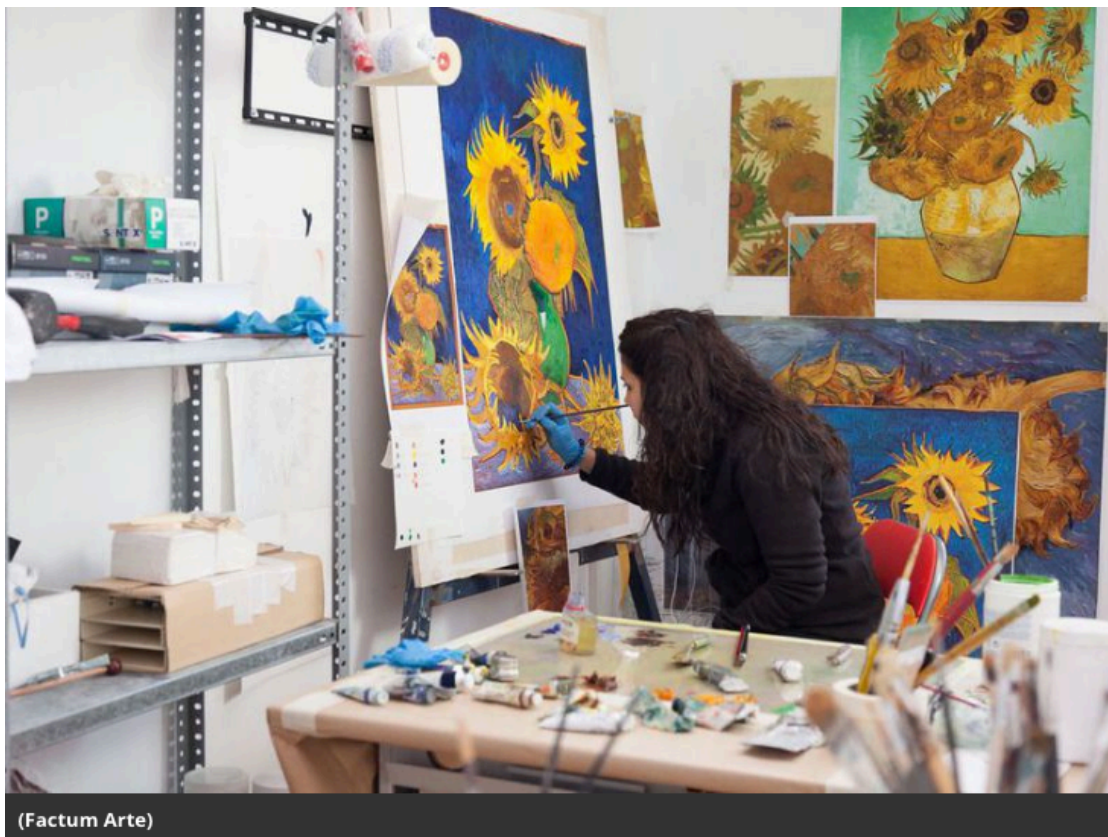


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Digital Forensics Reconstructs Seven Lost Masterpieces

Artwork by Van Gogh, Klimt, Monet and more have been painstakingly remade by Factum Arte for a new television series



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Art is not invincible. Despite the best efforts of museums and conservators, pieces in collections can be [eaten by bugs](#), misplaced in [storage](#), looted by invading armies or, say, [burned](#) according to the wishes of an angry prime minister's spouse. For these reasons and more, there are masterworks that

we know of or have images of that no longer exist. That's what makes a recent project by the digital production company [Factum Arte](#) so fascinating.

As [Emily Sharpe at *The Art Newspaper*](#) reports, in a seven-part series now airing on Sky Arts called "[Mystery of the Lost Paintings](#)," Factum artists and technicians use digital forensics to recreate seven masterpieces lost during the 20th century.

The works include Vincent van Gogh's "Six Sunflowers," destroyed in a collector's home during a 1945 U.S. air raid near Osaka, Japan; Johannes Vermeer's "The Concert," stolen from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in 1990; and one of Monet's water lilies, destroyed by a fire at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1958.

Each piece took its own investigation to recreate. To construct the colorful van Gogh, for instance, the team was allowed to scan an existing sunflower painting in order to understand the brush strokes and speed with which the artist created the masterpieces. "We had a very poor color photograph and some other reference material, but we were able to identify the position of the brush-strokes and distort the individual strokes from the National Gallery painting to fit the lost painting," Adam Lowe, founder and director of Factum tells [Dalya Alberge at *The Guardian*](#). "We relied on knowledge of van Gogh's palette and the paints he was using at the time to reconstruct the color."

[The Vermeer](#), in turn, leaned on scans from high-quality art books, which were enlarged and printed on canvas. Three Factum artists painted over the copies to recreate the works as closely as possible. Then, using digital technology, those three versions were fused together to create the best amalgamation.

Other works the team tackled include Gustav Klimt's "Medicine," a government-commissioned allegorical painting intended to decorate the University of Vienna. After it provoked a scandal upon its debut, Klimt took back the painting, which was later acquired by a Jewish collector, whose collection was "[Aryanised](#)" in 1938. The work ended up at a castle north of Vienna, where it was destroyed when Nazi troops set fire to the building in 1945 to prevent it from falling into enemy hands.

The sensual 1928 Tamara de Lempicka painting "Myrto," which depicts two naked women, and is believed to have been looted by a Nazi soldier invasion of France in 1940, is another selection. The piece has not been seen since the war, and the restoration process was particularly tricky because there are few surviving reference materials to it. "Factum's re-creation of this painting was directed by the fact that only one low-quality black-and-white image exists and complicated further because so few of Lempicka's paintings from

the period are in museums – most are in private collections,” [Factum explains](#) on its blog.

Franz Marc’s “The Tower of Blue Horses,” which was exhibited in the [Nazi Degenerate Art exhibition](#), was another painting lost in the war that the team worked on. While it has yet to surface, curators do have reason to believe this work survives to this day because of “several reports of sightings,” as [Martin Bailey](#) of the *Art Newspaper* explained in a piece about the ongoing search for the German expressionist painting published last year.

The final piece Factum tackled is the infamous 1954 portrait of Winston Churchill by Graham Sutherland. The Prime Minister and his wife, Clementine believed the painting made Churchill look “half-witted.” Rather than let it live on forever in mockery, [an archival tape](#) revealed that Clementine’s private secretary burned the work herself following “Lady C’s” wishes (a moment you might remember being referenced on “The Crown”). To recreate [the Churchill portrait](#), Factum used the few surviving photos of the painting as well as preparatory sketches kept at the National Gallery in London. They even visited Churchill’s former tailor on Savile Row to view samples of the material the suit in the portrait was made of.

Philip Edgar-Jones, UK director of Sky Arts, tells Sharpe that he believes the series provokes major philosophical questions around the art of recreations: “[C]an we—and should we—reproduce a great work of art?” he asks.

Lowe is less philosophical in his answer. For him, this kind of work is not forgery or fakery, which is a [huge problem in the art world](#). Instead, he says, the effort is about promoting a greater understanding of these works which, in most cases, were unjustly taken from the world.

Whatever the case, it’s nice to have these artworks back in some form, no matter what Winston Churchill or the Nazis thought of them.