



Boundary-Pushing Women And The Men Who Stole Their Inventions: The Art Fraud

BY TREVOR HUGHES

13 SEPTEMBER 2020

SHARE THIS    

It is a fact that the incorrect attribution of the achievements of female scientists to their male colleagues is so extensive that it has a name: the Matilda effect. Throughout history, the inspiring work of many women – not only scientists – has been wrongly, intentionally, and unfairly stolen by their male colleagues or even, in some cases, their husbands. This is the first in our series on women whose ideas or inventions were unjustly stolen by greedy men.

The scene in the courtroom was tense. The bitter battle had raged for over three weeks with claims and counterclaims, accusations of threats, lies, bad faith and theft. Eventually, the judge decided that only one thing would settle the matter. He ordered two easels and two sets of brushes and paints to be brought into the courtroom.

"Right," he said. "Ready, Steady, Paint!"

It was the world's first, and as far as I know, only, paint-off.

Precisely 53 minutes later, we had a winner. But what led to this bizarre stand-off?

It started in 1946 when young American, Walter Keane was in Germany just after the end of the Second World War. In an interview with *Life* magazine, he said, "My psyche was scarred in my art student days in Europe, just after World War II, by an ineradicable memory of war-racked innocents. In their eyes lurk all of mankind's questions and answers."

Whether it was the war-racked innocents or not, the half-Danish, half-Irish Walter Keane's paintings of huge-eyed children and animals became immensely popular. The paintings appeared on postcards, greeting cards, coffee mugs. Originals were bought by celebrities such as Natalie Wood, Joan Crawford and Dean Martin.

Keane's artwork did not meet with great critical approval. *The New York Times* art critic described it as 'tasteless hack work'. When Keane had an idea to create a masterwork, a painting called *Tomorrow Forever* showing a long line of doe-eyed waifs standing on an everlasting staircase, *The Times* commented: 'It contains about 100 children and hence is about 100 times as bad as the average Keane.'

Still, Walter didn't care what the critics said. He was making a fortune. He moved to a big, gated mansion with a pool and several servants. There he lived the high life of a celebrity artist. Visitors included the Beach Boys and Maurice Chevalier. He recounted in his memoirs that, 'There were always three or four people swimming naked in the pool. Sometimes I'd go to bed and there'd be three girls in the bed.'

In 1955, Keane had met and married Margaret (born Peggy Doris Hawkins), a 28-year-old from Nashville. So what was she, his wife, doing while Walter carried on as if he was in the Playboy mansion? The answer was that she was locked in her room where she spent 16 hours a day, working.

In 1964, Keane and his wife separated. Then, in 1970, in a radio interview, the truth came out: Walter Keane was an utterly talentless painter. The 'Big Eye' paintings had all been executed by his wife. Walter had begged her to teach him to paint but, she said he was hopeless.

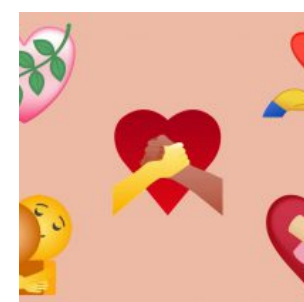
Shortly after their marriage, she had accompanied Walter to a San Francisco night club called the Hungry I, where Walter had been selling her paintings.

During a conversation with one of the club's patrons, he asked her, "Do you paint as well?" She was shocked to realise, in that moment, that Walter had been passing off her paintings as his own.

TRENDING



ENVIRONMENT
Can Lobsters Be The Answer To The World's Plastic Problem?



ARTS & CULTURE
So Sorry, There Are No Emojis For Forgiveness ... Until Now



NEWS
These Wearable Sensors Can Bond With Human Skin



GENIE
World Radio Channels At Your Fingertips With This Interactive Map



According to Margaret Keane, she went along with the ruse because Walter had connections with the mafia and he threatened her: 'If you ever tell anyone, I'll have you knocked off.'

The couple separated in 1964 but still, Margaret carried on painting and still, Walter sold the paintings as his own.

After the 1970 disclosure of the fraud, Walter insisted that it was he who produced the paintings and that Margaret had only lied in public because she thought he was dead. And in any case, he claimed, she was, 'a boozing, sex-starved psychopath who he had once discovered having sex with several parking lot attendants.'

So the battle lines were drawn and after weeks of competing testimony, the judge ordered them both to produce a 'Big Eye' girl painting. Unfortunately for poor Walter, he was supposedly suffering from a sore shoulder and was thus unable to compete.

Margaret, on the other hand, produced a perfect painting in precisely 53 minutes.

The judge found Walter guilty and awarded Margaret damages of \$4 million – which works out at \$75,471 per minute. Not bad even for a top artist.

Unfortunately, Margaret never saw a penny. Walter had blown his entire fortune on women and drink.

Nonetheless, Margaret finally received the credit due to her, which is all she says she ever wanted. Her story has been immortalised in Hollywood, in the Tim Burton film *Big Eyes* (2014).



Leave a Comment

Your email address will not be published. Required fields are marked *

Type here..

Name*

Email*

Website

Save my name, email, and website in this browser for the next time I comment.

[Post Comment »](#)

RELATED ARTICLES

