

ARTICLE

THE SUBTERFUGE OF ART

Art can convey more than just the beauty of an enchanted grove or the captivating smile of its subject. Find out some of the more devious uses that art pieces might have in the Forgotten Realms.

Wealthy folk across Faerûn have enjoyed art for centuries, but rumors have spread from the later 1300s DR onward of some widespread illicit uses of art. These shady doings were made possible because of two common aboveboard customs in Amn, Tethyr, Calimshan, the Vilhon Reach, and Chessenta. The first is the custom of nobles and the wealthy of sending very true-to-life head-and-shoulders portraits of possible spouses to would-be suitors. The second involves the habit of painting grand houses, castles, or owned buildings when newly built or renovated as a commemoration and later to send copies of the results to possible purchasers or to those holding such property as collateral.

So art was traveling often, and that's where the darker ideas came in. No one knows whose clever mind was the first to think of smuggling documents, treaties, receipts, debt-bonds (what we might call IOUs), and dangerous messages by means of paintings—but it's been going on for years upon years now, among many.

SHIPPING DETAILS

Sketches, inferior copies, and bulk unfinished paintings may be rolled like oversized scrolls and protected in lengths of clay drainpipes that are fitted into padded wooden cradles made to wedge snugly inside

protective crates. Finished paintings are more often shipped framed and mounted, or pressed (clamped in a press—a protective sandwich of wooden slabs, one of which is larger than the painting and fashioned with a raised lip or frame, so as to create a shallow tray the painting sits in, between protective padding layers of oiled cloth, and is then covered by the other slab of wood, the slabs strapped tightly together).

A pressed or framed and mounted painting may have a mounting front sheet that frames it within the (usually wooden) outer frame, behind which is the painting itself (on board or tile, or canvas stretched over a board or tile). Behind the painting is a protective hardboard (thick parchment or thin wooden veneer panel), then one or more sheets that can be taken out to act as protective coverings for the painting, and then a thin wooden or slate backboard. Those “one or more sheets” can, of course, be anything—and the smuggling happens when they are treaties, contracts, or even spell scrolls, hidden between painting and backboard so as to enter a city or country unseen by customs inspectors or border guards.



INCREASINGLY UNSAVORY USES

At least one criminal gang (the Archondar of Zazesspur) sent kill orders (directions as to who should be assassinated, how, and when) and detailed instructions to members (usually coded, but sometimes not) in messages slipped into the layers of paintings, to their agents up and down the Sword Coast. Such killings were often orchestrated with particular timing or planted clues to send pointed messages or falsely cast blame for the slayings.

The formulae for making blended wines or perfumes are known to have been sent via paintings from business owners (in Tethyr, for example) to their employees elsewhere (such as the cities of Waterdeep, Selgaunt, and Silverymoon). So have maps, including stolen ones being sent out of the city they were purloined in to safer hands in distant places.

In a recent incident of espionage, several counterfeited messages, purporting to be from a ruler to his envoy, were sent to a spy in a rival city where they could be planted

in a manner that would allow them to be found easily so as to cause trouble for the ruler and, at the same time, to lead astray the authorities of that city.

Nobles who hosted revels often in Waterdeep hit upon the idea of using portraits hanging in their homes as static message drops: the paintings stayed in one place, but various guests coming into the home would know to place or retrieve messages from the backs of particular paintings, when unobserved.

As Alustriel once commented, while ruling Silverymoon, "I marvel at the utter and tireless endlessness of the deviousness of folk everywhere. Inspiring, in a way, but the vigilance it demands is exhausting!"

MANY MISHAPS

On some occasions, paintings have reached the wrong recipients or been so delayed in arriving that their hidden contents caused confusion or tragic misunderstandings.

A competent posted-to-Waterdeep trade factor who'd succeeded a hated-to-be-eliminated predecessor was murdered instead of her forerunner. Orders to burn down a warehouse and its contents reached the wrong hands, who mistakenly committed arson on the wrong property. Covert agents of a gang tried repeatedly to ally and work with unsuitable guild contacts who hated their organization and had no intention of loyally working with them, because they'd received orders meant for another organization entirely, and tried to act on them.

ANOTHER WAY

Certain users of the traveling painting subterfuge began to fear it would be detected, so they stopped hiding items inside the layers of shipped paintings and turned to conveying meanings by elements included in the painted scenes themselves. This became known as "showing secrets."

Sometimes hidden maps or diagrams are sent by drawing them into complicated floor plans and builders' drawings (for buildings to be built, or supplies to be assembled to specific lengths, sizes, and shapes for construction). Cryptic notations aid someone in the know to disentangle what's part of the hidden map or diagram from the floor plan it's been made part of.



Others hit upon the idea of hiding messages in the relatively voluminous texts of cheap chapbooks; recipients in the know followed a pattern of selecting particular words (for example, the word at the right-hand end of the topmost line on every fourth page) to learn the message meant for them.

In the case of the static message drops used by certain Waterdhavian nobles, one energetic noble had two versions of the same painting made: one with a pennant flying from a background turret, and one with no pennant. If a guest saw the pennant, that meant one predetermined message; if there was no pennant visible, they knew the other meaning intended for them.

SHOWING SECRETS

Conveying messages by means of what's shown in a painting can be unsubtle, but specific ways of sending messages are as numerous as the artists attempting them. One frequently used means is to paint a group portrait of several real, recognizable persons—with just one of them depicted as dressed in blood-red, or an unusual hue of clothing (sky blue, for instance), indicating that they are the one to be targeted. Putting just one weapon in the scene (a dagger held by someone else, for instance, or a hangman's noose) can convey additional information; the dagger could mean assassinate the identified person, whereas the noose could mean "make it look like suicide." Or a burning building in the background of the painting, in a scene where no weapons are visible, could tell the recipient this: The person identified (by the sky-blue clothing) is to die in a fire; clubbed senseless and left to look like an accident.

FACING IT

A relatively recent innovation in hiding messages in paintings is to paint a very good likeness of an intended target's face on the body of the supposed subject of the painting. For example, in a painting of an elderly gowned noblewoman, the noble lady is given the face of a younger man who is the target. This has on occasion been carried to ridiculous extremes (young maidens painted with heavy masculine beards, for example).

In other instances, other identifiers have been painted rather than the too-obvious face. For example, a beautiful maiden or known personage (high priest, famous dead hero) is depicted as normal, but with a tattoo or brand or specific injury (missing fingers or a deformity) added that the subject did not possess or never had, but which a target individual does have and can readily be identified by.

Certain Harpers in the past used this in combination with temporary, cosmetically applied tattoos on cheeks, shoulders, necks, hands, and other readily visible body areas so agents could identify each other or contacts. This practice passed out of use when certain foes learned of it and realized how easy it was to make the intended agent or contact "disappear" and replace them with an impostor to which the right temporary cosmetic mark had been applied. Some Harpers still use a modification of this: false scars and wounds applied by someone very skilled in applying cosmetics, so the

distinctive “permanent” disfigurement looks very real.

0 Shares

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FEATURED ARTICLE



PAX 2014 LIVE GAME

ARCHIVED FOOTAGE/PHOTOS - 09/09/2014

Watch in awe and amusement as Jerry Holkins, Mike Krahulik, Scott Kurtz, and Morgan Webb of Acquisitions Inc. wade once more into almost certain doom, courtesy of Dungeon Master extraordinaire, Chris Perkins.

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