Fabulous Fakes

Fakes for sale! Certainly not an enterprise a museum would support? But just three years ago the Metropolitan not only supported but expanded its activities in this market by establishing its sculpture reproduction workshop. Quality control was the keystone in producing objects so nearly identical to the Museum’s original that either “MMA” must be etched on or a copyright plaque affixed to distinguish the copies.

Until several years ago some reproduction work was carried out in the Conservation Department by the mold maker and caster, but the severe demand for their conservation skills finally diverted them from this work. Outside manufacturers commissioned to reproduce Museum objects had the disadvantage of working at a distance from the original. These manufacturers still mold the glass or found the metal for the majority of the reproductions (and completely produce many objects), but under the new workshop’s aegis, the Museum has special control of the critical stages: the shop makes the original mold and applies the finish to the facsimile. The shop also has facilities to produce some pieces entirely, and its access to the original and to the expertise of the Museum’s curatorial and Conservation departments aids it in developing novel techniques and experimenting with new material.

For years the workshop was only a dream of Bradford Kelleher, sales manager of the Museum’s Book Shop and Reproductions. He hired Annette Needle, a sculptor, now the workshop’s supervisor, as his typist, enticing her with his proposed enterprise. Nothing happened with the venture for about a year, when two incidents occurred that were instrumental in launching it. Kelleher’s department rented space on West End Avenue to store its books and reproductions, and Walter E. Rowe, master restorer in the Conservation Department, admiring the jewelry Mrs. Needle had made and was displaying in the annual employees’ art exhibition, reminded Kelleher of what a talented artist he had in his employ. Kelleher immediately envisioned setting up a workshop for Mrs. Needle in part of the newly acquired space. He took her
Expert knowledge is needed to determine the best way to duplicate every object. Here Annette Needle and Shirley Vorspan compare bronze angels produced by three different methods—electroforming (galvanizing) on a plaster mold, bronze casting, and spray bronzing. Which method will most precisely recreate the original in weight, size, and texture?

Special innovations in material and methods are sometimes required. The usual mold-making material, silicone rubber, would have discolored the limestone of an ancient Egyptian relief, so Mrs. Needle, through controlled experiments on similar limestone, developed a sizing that enabled the silicone rubber to be used without harm.

Quality sculpture reproduction begins with a perfect mold taken from the original. Plaster casts (below) of the mold being made here are sent to a glass manufacturer, who blows the molten glass into iron molds and returns finished copies.

into one of the large, empty rooms and announced, “It’s all yours.” Starting with a potted plant from the five-and-ten on the window sill, she literally created her workshop—hired a staff, commandeered furniture and flooring, painted the walls, selected equipment, and won a major political battle with the landlord in acquiring the sink vital to her work.

The demand for the Museum’s superb fakes is so great that the supply barely stays ahead of it. Curators continually suggest new pieces to be reproduced. Today the sculpture workshop keeps three women besides Mrs. Needle—Shirley Vorspan, Jane Dickerman, and Wendy Hutton—busy making molds, casting pieces, and patinating the finished objects. The shop has recently expanded, employing Bill Knight, a trained jeweler, to produce on an experimental basis small replicas of champlevé and cloisonné enamels in the Museum’s collection of medieval art. The shop is outgrowing its premises; to accommodate Knight’s jewelry workroom, it has spilled over into an adjacent men’s lounge.
Bill Knight is imitating ancient Byzantine enameling techniques. He gouges out a pattern from a Byzantine design on a gold disk and fills the hollows with enamel—ground, colored glass. The piece is then fired in a kiln to solidify the enamel.

Objects of stone are hand cast in the studio in composition stone, a powder mixed with water that preserves the maximum detail and duplicates the surface without shrinkage. While in a liquid state, it is carefully spooned into a mold, to avert the formation of air bubbles. When the stone is set, Wendy Hutton removes it from the mold and retouches, patinates, and polishes it to match the marble of the original—in this case, a Greek relief of a horseman.

**OPPOSITE**

Bronze replicas of a thirteenth-century Italian bird are cast at a foundry by the lost-wax process: after a solid wax copy of the mold is surrounded by an adhesive ceramic material, the wax is melted out of the encasement and replaced by molten bronze. With the original close at hand for reference, the workshop casts the wax copies—the most critical step in obtaining an accurate bronze reproduction—and patinates the finished bird.

Jane Dickerman brushes the first layer of hot wax into the open mold, covering all surfaces. Then she fills the closed mold with wax and empties it, building another layer. Three subsequent layers are poured. She removes the hardened wax copy and retouches it, melting off the mold’s seam lines and bringing out the detail. There is a wax replica for each bronze copy. The wax is sent to the foundry and a shiny bronze bird returns, ready for hand finishing. Chemical baths and heat (as shown here on some bronze lions) cause a natural patination of each piece. The copy is gilded, polished, and mounted, and is hardly distinguishable from the original.

“Hardly distinguishable from the original” is the goal in creating a reproduction. Achieving it demands creative craftsmanship and elevates these five people above competent technicians. To capture the essence of an object requires imagination in the finishing: instead of adding an eighth of an inch of gold leaf here and a sixteenth there or a measured amount of color to each crack in the stone, the Museum craftsmen, like their ancient counterparts, decide what looks best in a given instance, thus capturing the spirit of the piece.