The Game of Duplicity

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The Game of Duplicity, the fine—or unfine—art of forgery is something that involves everyone in the museum business almost daily. These seminars will discuss four aspects of forgery: this one will cover the general aspects of the forger’s game and the detection thereof. The second program will concern style and the eye: the intuitive investigation of a work of art that reveals it as a genuine piece or as nothing. In this museum the eye is king. The scientific apparatus that one brings to bear in discovering a forgery is first minister to the king, and the technical analysis of art objects will be dealt with in the third session. The last one will discuss the extremely complex legal aspects of investigating and revealing forgeries.

Why are we having this series of seminars? There are several reasons. First of all, the sudden rash of news stories was a very important factor in deciding to air some of these problems. And secondly, we think that such discussions—the types of fakes and their detection—are a vital part of the Museum’s educational obligation to the public: this is part of the daily life of people who work in museums; it’s something that we worry about, often after the fact. Another reason is a feeling that the public has many questions that it would like to pose; I hope this will become an arena where some of these questions find answers.

If you’re going to discuss forgery in the broadest possible sense, you must erect around this term two wide parentheses. The first is that there has not been a single collector in the entire history of collecting who has not made a mistake. And the other parenthesis is a quotation from the great art historian Max Friedlander: “It is indeed an error to collect a forgery, but it is a sin to stamp a genuine piece with the seal of falsehood.” That’s pretty rough stuff, but I’ve met many a young student who will
come and dismiss as a fake, offhandedly, something you’ve just purchased. The point is that collectors and museums have this tension of apprehension, and it takes a great deal of study, knowledge, expertise to be able to suspect and then prove that something is no good. At the same time you have to watch very carefully that you don’t commit the sin of branding something a falsehood when it is, in fact, a genuine piece that you simply don’t have the perceptivity to know about.

Forgery is not a modern phenomenon. Just after the first true artist began to do his first work of art, you can be sure that the first forger began to do his. During the Roman Empire, for instance, there was an extraordinary amount of copying: some of it straight forgery, I’m sure, although it’s not easy to prove; a great deal, however, was not forging, but an artistic harking back to earlier styles, sometimes for political reasons, sometimes for family or traditional reasons. It must have been hair-raising to live in Rome during the time of Hadrian. You can imagine the clank of chisel upon marble as people hurried to get “genuine Greek things, just brought over from Greece” to impress the emperor.

In my particular field of endeavor, the medieval period, artists and patrons were scandalously keen about forging things. In Venice, in the thirteenth century, a great workshop of mosaicists, of sculptors, of document writers spent years turning out work done in earlier styles, trying to prove that the Cathedral of St. Mark’s was at least as old and traditional as Rome itself.

Throughout the entire history of art, for many reasons—from the basic reason of a young artist urgently wanting to be discovered all the way up to sheer duplicity—you have forgeries: in the Renaissance, in the baroque and rococo periods, and then, of course, in the nineteenth century (although every day we’re learning that lots of the antiquities we thought were faked in the late nineteenth century actually are forgeries of earlier times).
Today forgers seem to be all around us, and indeed there's a cleverness now, an acuteness, that often defies description.

I want to categorize the types of forgeries that have occurred throughout the history of art. Before I start, though, there is one thing that I want to make very clear: you must distinguish between hard-core forgeries, works made to fool, and those pieces that are misattributions: the paintings, for example, that come from the workshop of one of the great painters, but that have been attributed to the master, have fallen off from that status, and too often have been dismissed as fakes. The two are totally different: one is an outright act of deceit, the other is a question of opinion and analysis.

What are the categories? The types, in ease of detection, are, first, the direct copy. Figure 1 shows two jewel-encrusted bookcovers. The one on the right is a neater, smoother, characterless copy—of the mid-thirteenth-century cover on the left. If you know your stuff, you're likely to spot a forgery like this as a copy of a famous type, and you'll dismiss it quickly.

The second category, which is a little more difficult, is something called a pastiche. The forger takes elements from many things and patches them together in such a clever manner that you don't put your eye on the single thing he has copied. The tapestry on the right in Figure 2 takes its inspiration from a variety of late fifteenth-century examples, and combines these authentic ideas into an extraordinarily lackluster whole. Contrast the vigor of the good one, on the left, with the sickness of the other. (Don't hesitate to use derogatory adjectives in describing forgeries. They should not be given any sort of adulation, despite the fact that at certain times in art history people have collected forgeries for their own sake. I'm not one of that school.)

The next category is the most difficult of all to detect. This is the evocation, when a forger does not go to a single model or several, but tries to pick up the spirit of the time, tries to evoke what an artist would have done. This category could not be better summed up than in the works of van Meegeren. In the next seminar Ted Rousseau will discuss van Meegeren's famous forgeries of Vermeer, which he was brilliant enough to paint in "what might have been" Vermeer's early style. On rare occasions van Meegeren attempted to do other things, and Figure 3 shows his attempt at capturing the style of Pieter de Hooch. Of course you can tell that the one on the left has a life and a light and a feeling to it, while the painting on the right is wooden, hesitant. These are the categories of forgeries. There are only three distinct ones, although naturally you can get combinations of them.
Now I’d like to take up those things that involve not forgery, but the problems of repair, of historical retrospective, and of our lack of knowledge. The head at the right of Figure 4 is a good example of a work of art that has been heavily repaired. In the picture on the left the additions have been taken off: it becomes a perfectly honest piece of the late twelfth to early thirteenth century—not, perhaps, of the highest quality, but a strong, living thing. You can see what the “restorations” did to it, how horrible they made it.

Then, in very rare cases throughout history, you find an artist going back to earlier styles in creating a work of art. In the lower part of Figure 5 you see an enamel plaque that probably dates from the middle or late fifteenth century, which is quite clearly based upon the Annunciation plaque (above) created in 1181 for the great altarpiece in Klosterneuberg by Nicholas of Verdun. The iconography, the manner in which the scene is depicted, is the same, but various changes have been made: there is an almost bourgeois monumentality in the lower one that is lacking in the pensive, delicate quality of the twelfth-century piece. The fifteenth-century plaque was discovered in the city of Mainz in the mid-nineteenth century; it was presented to Klosterneuburg and they kept it in the treasury there until The Cloisters managed to acquire it. In the middle to late fifteenth century, particularly in Austria, artists made a deliberate attempt to pick up significant styles from Romanesque and Gothic miniature painting and enamelswork, and inject them into their own works of art. In a case like this, you’ve got to be very careful, and not just say, “Oh, a nineteenth-century fake.” We tested our plaque not only by our eye and by technical analysis, but by the greatest grace of all in forgeries: how it stands the test of time. It seems to be perfectly...
genuine. It’s not the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen, but it is a significant fifteenth-century document. I’d rather have the one on top.

The last of my non-forgery categories is represented by the ivory cross in Figure 6, which comes from England and was probably made around the year 1181. Because of its inconsistencies with other medieval works of art—it had errors in iconography, it had a curious style, it had misreadings of the inscriptions—people sat back and said, “No good.” But is there an explanation for these inconsistencies? One, for example, is this: on the titulus, on the front of the cross, to which the little hand is pointing, you can see a curious mixture of Greek and Latin and pseudo-Hebrew that says not “Iesus Nazarenus, Rex Iudeorum” (Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews) but “Iesus Na\[z\]arenus Rex Confessorum”—King of the Confessors—which is about the only time in history that the plaque above Christ’s head has not said “King of the Jews.” There’s a very good reason for that: in the particular monastery in which this particular thing was made at this particular time in English history, it was very important that Christ was not King of the Jews, who at that time were considered total infidels, but that he was king of the confessors, because a confessor was a man of the faith. It turned out that its very inconsistencies made the cross very rare—and very fine.

I want to end by telling you how to look at a work of art. I have a very deliberate process that I automatically go through to help me overcome any urgency, any feeling of “grab it.” First of all, what is your immediate opinion? Do you feel strong about it? Do you feel cool? Do you feel doubtful? Write that word down; put it away someplace.

Then describe it. Not just pass your eyes over it, but really describe every bit of it. What is it? Did it have a purpose? Even a painting has to have had a use if it was of antique time.

What about its condition? Does it show wear? Get your microscope or your loupe and see whether the worn parts are really where human beings would have touched it.

What is the subject? Did the subject have a meaning and purpose in its own time? What is the iconography? Is it wild? And if it’s wild, for what reason? Does it have inconsistencies? If so, list them; put them aside.

What is the style? Its individual style, and the wider style of its period. Compare it with everything else of the epoch in which it was supposed to have been made.

Then go into its history. Investigate the documents concerning it, which are vitally important. We fool our-
selves sometimes by trusting documents that are just as phony as the piece; they should be examined on their own.

Another thing: stop, take stock. Make a list of the things that bother you and a list of things that make you feel great about the work of art. Take that list of things that bother you and peel them like an onion. Try to discover the weakness, because if you do, everything else will shatter. Once a forgery begins to be detected, it falls apart.

Then take a look at your mood at the time you want to buy the piece. Whether you’re a private person or a museum, your mood can be categorized in three words: speed, need, greed. Do you have to buy it quickly? Why? Take more time; living with something is the only way you will really be able to tell. Need: do you have to have it to show your friends, to show other institutions? The confidence game, which is part of the forger’s game, is based upon crawling greed. More forgeries have been perpetrated and collected because of greed than because of anything else.

Then, finally, go back to your initial reaction. If there are any doubts at all, drop it.

What are the responsibilities of a museum like ours concerning forgeries in its collections? I believe it’s important for the Metropolitan Museum to clean its own house occasionally; to discuss and reveal fakes. No collector, indeed no enormous collector like us, has ever gone through its history without ever making a mistake. But be sure, first, that they are fakes: remember that the worst thing you can do is to stamp a genuine piece with the mark of falsehood.

One final word. Some people say, “Well, if it’s fooled so many experts, why isn’t it so great on its own?” The obvious answer is something of a parable: a woman is fine and wonderful, but after she tells you her first lie, she may not be different, but she has changed—very deeply.

CAPTIONS

FIGURE 1

FIGURE 2
Left: Detail of a German (Franconian) tapestry, dated 1497. Sebahlsuskirche, Nuremberg. From Plate 310 of Die Deutschen Bildteppiche des Mittelalters (Vienna, 1926), III, by Betty Kurth.
Right: Forgery: tapestry. Metropolitan Museum, 32.100.388.

FIGURE 3
Right: Forgery: painting in the style of de Hooch, by Han van Meegeren (1889-1947), Dutch. Photograph: Copyright Laboratoire Central des Musées de Belgique.