The Stylistic Detection of Forgeries

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This seminar, devoted to the detection of forgeries by stylistic analysis, and the next one, on scientific methods of detection, should be thought of together, for they are complementary and one can't stand independently of the other. Modern science has brought us new techniques of analyzing works of art that reinforce and are a considerable help to the stylistic methods that have existed for a long time, which we will discuss here this evening.

I'll begin by trying to give you an idea of what we mean by style. This is a very subtle and complex matter, and therefore an extremely difficult one to present to a large audience, but I thought the best way to do it would be to discuss a well-known forgery. First, a word of warning: we should all realize that we can only talk about the bad forgeries, the ones that have been detected; the good ones are still hanging on the walls. A sense of humor is important in this subject, and so is common sense and the realization that there aren't so many forgeries, discovered or undiscovered, as the newspapers would like to make us believe. Forgeries are exceptional at any time. They're created by a market: if the market's good there are more than when the market is quiet.

To get back to my subject, the forgery that I'm going to talk about is an exceptional one, because it was considered a beautiful thing—and forgeries rarely are. One of the characteristics of average forgeries, the kind we've heard about recently, is that they're mediocre. That is why they pass: they escape notice. But this one was thought to be very fine: it is the picture of Christ and the Pilgrims at Emmaus (Figure I), attributed to Vermeer but actually painted by Han van Meegeren, the Dutch forger who flourished just before and during the Second World War.

I'll start by pointing out the reasons for this picture's success, the things in it that were done well. Then I'm going to show you a painting by Vermeer. By comparing the stylistic qualities of the two, we can draw our conclusions.

The key to the whole question of van Meegeren's success is that he did not try to imitate the classical Vermeer—the Vermeer we all think of, in the pictures upstairs and in the Rijksmuseum and other great galleries. Van Meegeren chose Vermeer because he was a Dutchman, because he was famous, and because his works are very rare and very expensive. At the time van Meegeren began, there were rumors all over Europe that Andrew Mellon had offered more than one million dollars—an enormous sum in those days, much greater than it is today—for the famous Artist in His Studio, now in the Vienna museum, which was then still in private hands. Van Meegeren, who had studied and knew art history, took advantage of the fact that Vermeer's a man we know little about. We have a group of works done when Vermeer was mature, some of which are dated. The work of his youth is missing. We have three or four pictures that we believe were painted when he was young. They are quite different; so different that the one in Figure 2, Christ in the House of Mary and Martha, in the Edinburgh museum, would not, I believe, have been attributed to him if it were not for the fact that it bears his signature. (Even with the signature, it has taken people a long time to accept it as his.) In other words, part of Vermeer's oeuvre is missing. Well, van Meegeren saw this gap and decided that he would fill it. He wouldn't copy Vermeer; he would create the missing part of Vermeer's oeuvre.

Every forger, when he paints, has to begin by getting a feeling for the period and the place in which the picture is supposed to have been painted. Van Meegeren has captured this feeling to some extent in the Pilgrims at Emmaus. The simplicity of the background and the architecture, the solemn, Protestant atmosphere, fit our idea of seventeenth-century Holland. The way the bulk of the figures fills the picture is a seventeenth-century characteristic, as is the composition. Here, in fact, is an instance of van Meegeren's cleverness. He knew that art historians were looking for an Italian origin for Vermeer's style, for Italian influence in his works, and so he took the composition from the Caravaggio painting in Figure...
3, confirming the hypothesis of twentieth-century art historians about Vermeer's sources.

Van Meegeren took certain elements from pictures by Vermeer. But he did not make an exact copy; rather, he evoked the artist’s style. The head of Christ is probably inspired by the head of Christ in the Edinburgh painting. For the head and hand of the disciple at the right, van Meegeren took his inspiration from The Astronomer (Figure 7). And for the head of the woman in the background, he seems to have used the head of the girl in The Procuress (Figure 4) as a model. Certain details, such as the still life, were taken directly out of pictures by Vermeer: the jugs in The Procuress and the Museum’s Girl Asleep (Figure 5) are very close to the one in van Meegeren’s Pilgrims at Emmaus.

Van Meegeren studied Vermeer’s harmony of color, its predominant blue tone, and imitated it. He imitated, too, some of his characteristic “pointillist” brushwork, particularly in the still life. Finally he put in the signature, which is, of course, always the easiest thing to add.


Now let's look at a painting that we are certain is by Vermeer, and see if we can isolate the qualities that are outstandingly his. The Girl Reading a Letter (Figure 8) in the Rijksmuseum is recognized by everyone as Vermeer's work. It is a true expression of the spirit of seventeenth-century Holland: the feeling of peace, security, and prosperity, the people's satisfaction with themselves, the delight in material riches natural after a long period of disaster and war, and the Protestant reserve and reticence. These are all characteristic of Dutch painting in the seventeenth century. The things that are personal to Vermeer are surely the picture's cool serenity, the feeling of completely arrested movement and of silence—the silence that Claudel describes so well in his book L'Oeil Ecoute. There is also the fact that there is nothing personal about the human being; the girl is rather like the still life. She doesn't make you want to put your arm around her waist. The delight you take in the picture is entirely a visual, aesthetic delight, not sensuous or emotional in any way.

Other important characteristics of Vermeer's style are the incredibly lovely nuances of light and color that run all through the picture, and the way each form is surrounded by crystal clarity. Vermeer doesn't model his form: he creates it by a series of colored facets, evoking rather than representing it. These are things that occur in all pictures of Vermeer's mature period.

Compare this painting to Christ and the Pilgrims at Emmaus. Once we've looked at a true Vermeer, the faults of the other come out, the weaknesses, the failure of the forger. None of the fundamental qualities of Vermeer's style, which reflect his special habits of feeling and working, really exist in this other picture. The clarity is gone: you don't feel the space around each figure. There is a sentimentality to the head of Christ that is quite foreign to anything of the real Vermeer. It's actually much closer to our time. This is a major weakness of any forger: he can't help interpreting past art in terms of present predilections. The modeling is not done in a series of facets, and the touch is greasy, without that wonderful cool and measured quality that you get in Vermeer. The overall harmony and balance of Vermeer's pictures is also missing: look at van Meegeren's exaggerations, his insistence on the seams on the sleeves and the highlights on the bread—impossible for Vermeer.

In spite of these faults, van Meegeren was almost successful. But he was almost successful not because of the painting—I think that is plain, although stylistic discussions cannot be fully convincing when they're
based on illustrations rather than on actual works of art—but because of the tricks he played. He was a remarkable confidence man, an extremely intelligent crook. He created a provenance for the picture; he had an intermediary who sold it for him; he got one of the most prominent art historians—Abraham Bredius—to write an article on it, which was published in *The Burlington Magazine*; it was then exhibited publicly. Finally it was sold to the Boymans museum. The museum hesitated about taking it, although they were urged by D. G. van Beuningen, an important collector who later bought others of van Meegeren's works. In the end, the museum was pushed into buying it because van Meegeren floated the rumor that the Rijksmuseum wanted to get it.

At the end of the war I interrogated one of Göring's agents, a man who represented him in Holland. It was he who bought, or was the intermediary for Göring's purchase of, a picture by van Meegeren after war was declared. This man, Alois Miedel, told me the story of how this happened, an instance of van Meegeren's astute sense of timing and his exploitation of circumstance. Miedel ran a small bank in Amsterdam. His wife was Jewish, and they finally fled from Holland to Spain, where I found and interrogated Miedel himself. He told me he aided the Resistance under cover all through the war, helping people to escape, out of loyalty to his Jewish wife. One night a man, who, he knew, was in the Resistance, came to him and said, "Mr. Miedel, I know you buy paintings for the Reichsmarschall and I have a picture for you. But I will sell it to you only on one condition, and that is that you don't inquire where it came from, because it belongs to an old Dutch family who want to give the money to the Resistance." At that time Miedel had staying with him an old friend, Heinrich Hoffmann, Hitler's photographer and advisor on artistic matters. Van Meegeren knew Hoffmann was there. Miedel took the painting up to Hoffmann, who said, "Why, it's a Vermeer! I want it for the Führer." Miedel went to the telephone and called Göring, who said he'd send a plane for it the next day. Van Meegeren was a real opportunist, and a very clever one.

He was finally arrested for financial collaboration, since it was discovered that he had amassed an apparently inexplicable fortune during the Occupation. Hoping to get out of this collaboration charge, he admitted to painting fake Vermeers. As a result he was sentenced to only one year in jail. During his confession, and after later studies, his tricks were revealed. He painted with colors used in the seventeenth century, making only one mistake, which came out in scientific analysis: he used cobalt blue, not invented until the nineteenth century. The medium he used was a substance similar to Bakelite. When heated, this medium hardened, and the picture seemed to have aged centuries in a few hours. As a consequence, the x-ray of a picture painted in this medium looks like the x-ray of an old picture. It also resists solvents the way an old picture does. Van Meegeren's paintings were done on top of old ones that already had a craquelure, and by heating and rolling them he transferred this craquelure to his own work.

What made it possible for him to get away with all this was, of course, that soon after the first picture was well publicized and bought by the Boymans museum, war was declared. All paintings by Vermeer were hidden away and the experts were in hiding, so it was impossible to compare genuine Vermeers with van Meegeren's. Van Meegeren's later pictures were much worse in quality. I think there's no doubt that with time the forgeries would have come out because of their stylistic weaknesses. That's a very important aspect of forgeries, particularly of old masters: a forger not only has to put himself into the skin of the artist and understand his times, but he also has to realize what in the artist's work is attractive to us today. Of course tastes change as time passes. It's all very well to say that we can detect the forgeries easily now, stylistically, but every time I think of it I feel, "There but for the grace of God go I." There's no doubt that twenty years ago van Meegeren's paintings were much more appealing. Time is essential in a case of this kind.

A curious consequence of today's sudden burst of scientific knowledge is that we now tend to look too closely at the physical components of a work of art. The other day one of our most prominent scholars in Dutch painting told me that when he saw the article in *The Burlington Magazine* and the photographs of the Emmaus he said to his pupils, "That's a forgery." But then he went to Holland, and when he saw the picture in front of him, with its convincing craquelure, convincing colors, convincing aging, he began to doubt his own first impression. There, close to it, he saw all the convincing details and not what was wrong with the style.

For any of you who intend to buy works of art, all I can say is, don't go into it unless you're willing to give it a tremendous amount of time, to train your eye, to look and look and look. And, even then, probably the best lesson you can have is to buy a forgery.