Groundings Undergraduate Academic Journal

University of Glasgow | Glasgow University Union

The Cultural Status of Art Forgeries

Author(s): Vedika Khandelwal

Source: Groundings Undergraduate, April 2015, Vol. 8, pp. 32-41

Published by: Glasgow University Dialectic Society, University of Glasgow

ISSNs: 1754-7474 (Print) | 1755-2702 (Online)

The Cultural Status of Art Forgeries

Vedika Khandelwal

This article explores the cultural status and significance of forgeries in the world of art, as well as tracing an evolution of the changes in their perception. Forgeries are generally thought to be culturally perverse, falsifying our experience and understanding of art. However, this very devaluation of forgeries presupposes notions of authenticity and originality which, upon examination, turn out to be arbitrary or inconsistent. Thus, the value of forgeries is twofold: firstly, they highlight and help criticise the presuppositions behind our cultural and aesthetic practices and attitudes; and secondly, they can also be valuable as works in their own right. Forgeries cannot be left out from the study of art history, as they have contributed in the shaping of art historical study as it is today.

INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS ART FORGERY?

A forgery can be defined as an intentional action with the intent to deceive. It imitates the appearance of an artwork with a different origin and intends to steal its identity, place, and status.[1] A successful forgery relies on appearing to be authentic and thus displays characteristics that are in common with the original it emulates.[2] Moreover, the forger intends to remain anonymous in his quest to deceive the Art World. Consequently, the unknown forgery enjoys the cultural status reserved for the object or artist it simulates, and is deemed successful. However, on its detection, the perception of forged art changes and the status of the work is altered in in terms of its intrinsic value. The newly discovered forgery is deemed un-artistic and authorless — marking it as culturally perverse and thus creating a 'black-hole' in the art historical paradigm.[3] This essay highlights the evolution of attitudes towards forgery, whilst elaborating on their significance, based on instances from the journey of modern

VEDIKA KHANDELWAL is a final year History of Art student, and previously read Art History and Art-World Practice at Christie's Education, London. She is interested in South Asian art and the influence of international politics on postmodern art. This article emerged from her 'Art Forgeries, Misattributions and the Art Market' Senior Honours course. The guidance offered by Dr Christa Roodt was instrumental in researching the topic.

[1] T. Lenain, *Art Forgery: The History of a Modern Obsession* (London, 2011), 30.

[2] M.C. Beardsley, 'Notes on Forgery' in D. Dutton (ed.), *The Forger's Art: Forgery and the Philosophy of Art* (Berkeley, 1983), 225.

[3] Lenain, *Art Forgery*, 20.

forgers including Han Van Meegeren and Tom Keating.

EVOLUTION OF FORGERIES: FROM GENIUS TO FRAUD

The first notion of forgeries as they are perceived today appeared in Vasari's account on Michelangelo. During the Renaissance, the act of successful deception was hailed as artistic genius — Michelangelo even began his career as a forger.[4] Vasari also recalls that the young artist was able to pass off his version of the classic age statue of *Sleeping Cupid* (among others) as ancient artefacts.[5] Moreover, he could replicate antique drawings and then give them an authentic appearance by smoking and staining them.[6] Michelangelo's infamous deception and success as a forger was imperative towards the establishing of his reputation as a 'great' and 'original' artist.[7] However, with the evolution of culture there was a change in the basis of artistic interpretation and a consequent shift in the perception of forgeries. The view that is nowadays standard in the art world regarding forgeries has best been summarized by Lenain:

> from the status of dazzling mimetic prowess, forgery has moved downwards in the culture of art, and then to its darkest margin, to become the weird epitome of the unartistic...once celebrated by the best-established observers of art.[8]

A reason for this change in perception of forgeries is the modern art world's obsession with the idea of 'originality,' which has now become an integral characteristic of 'great art.' This idea of the 'aura' dominates artistic understanding and original art is considered to be aesthetically valuable and exciting because it facilitates a 'feeling of intimate contact with the magical power of the creative artist; it heightens awareness, sensitivity and deposition to response: when a work is a known fake, the magic is gone.'[9] In order to succeed, Western artists do not merely seek to produce works of

[4] Ibid., 13.
[5] Ibid., 13.
[6] P.F. Norton, 'The Lost Sleeping Cupid of Michelangelo' (1957) 39 *The Art Bulletin* 251.
[7] A. Briefel 'Sacred Objects/Illusionary Idols: The Fake in Freud's 'The Moses of Michelangelo"' in P. Knight & J Long (eds.), *Fakes and Forgeries* (Newcastle upon Thames, 2005), 29.
[8] A. Briefel, 'Sacred Objects', 30.
[9] Lenain, *Art Forgery*, 311.

beauty, but original works of beauty.[10]

It is on these grounds that, for instance, Vermeer, the infamous Dutch Golden Age Painter, is considered to be an Old Master. He is viewed not only as a painter of beautiful pictures, but also as someone who achieved the ideal of original creation through his art. This reiterates the modern idea of viewing the artist as a creative genius.[11] It is the forger's lack of this very imaginative novelty and spontaneity in their art that has prompted the view that forgeries should occupy an inferior position in the cultural hierarchy and be distinguished from works of 'great' art.[12] For instance, the forgers of inauthentic Vermeer paintings faked not his technique, but rather his originality, by imitating his unique usage of light and shade, to his intricate compositions and the innovative use of the rich blue colour characteristic to his work.[13]

This interpretation of modern forgery, as seen in the works of forgers such as Van Meegeren and Elmyr de Hory, is what distinguishes them from the of the earliest known Renaissance examples — modern forgers tend to rely on their ability to mimic styles and creativity rather than technical skills. For instance, even though the forgeries by Van Meegeren were widely accepted as works of the Dutch master Vermeer, they were technically inept. In this case, Meegeren was able to exploit a gap in the rediscovered Dutch master's oeuvre. Since Vermeer only had a small body of known paintings, Meegeren was able to create 'early religious period' paintings in the 'style' of Vermeer. His interpretation of Vermeer's Caravaggio phase led to the creation of *Supper at Emmaus.* His forgery was celebrated as a newly discovered Vermeer masterpiece and deceived everyone including the seventeenth-century Dutch art expert, Abraham Bredius.[14] After his initial success, Meegeren continued to inject Vermeer forgeries into the Art World. On the detection of this deceit, Meegeren exposed the vulnerability of the highest art authorities. Prior to their detection, the acceptance of these forgeries into the canon of Vermeer's oeuvre influenced all subsequent judgments of related works, both originals as well as unknown forgeries.

[10] L.B. Meyer, 'Forgery and the Anthropology of Art' in D. Dutton (ed.), *The Forger's Art: Forgery and the Philosophy of Art* (Berkeley, London, 1983), 85.

[11] A. Lessing, 'What is Wrong with a Forgery?' in D. Dutton (ed.), *The Forger's Art: Forgery and the Philosophy of Art* (Los Angeles, 1885), 70.

[12]Lessing, 'What is Wrong with a Forgery?', 67.

[13]Ibid., 70.

[14]Ibid., 74.

Perceptions were built around the forged works and Meegeren in a way that loosened the hold on reality and managed to deform and falsify the understanding of Vermeer's art.[15] Moreover, as seen in this case, Meegeren's deception also led to misinterpretation of Vermeer's artistic achievements.

DOES TRUE ORIGINALITY REALLY EXIST?

Western society today places cultural value on what is 'original.' Originality in art is expected to lead to the revelation of new and valued information 'about the world, revealing new forms of beauty', which 'explores the emotions, nature of social relationships and what it is to be human, explores what is new in the world and how the world might best be represented and so on.'[16] Even though forgeries have, as discussed above, led to certain revelations — including the vulnerability of the art authorities, and gaps in art historical knowledge — they are considered to lack artistic integrity because they involve deception. Moreover, it is believed that they do not contribute towards the discovery of *new* ideas.[17] This lack of creativity leads to a devaluation of their cultural status.[18]

Despite this devaluation, placing forgeries within an art historical study also reveals that the very notion of forgery is a concept that is made meaningful only when referenced with regard to the modern concept of originality and authenticity.[19] This can reveal to us, and help criticize, the various presuppositions upon which the notion of aesthetic value depends, as it perceived today. The significance placed on the artistic genius and the superiority of the 'authentic' marks the primary basis of the cultural distinction between the original and the forged. The pleasure derived from a work of art often depends on its perception as a scarce, authentic, and therefore collectible object. Moreover, the very evolution of the perception of art forgeries is intertwined with the changing perception of 'authentic' art: both reflect the same societal interests, and every forger pays attention to the trends behind 'original' art, and the psychology

---

[15] E. Dolnick, *The Forger's Spell: a True Story of Vermeer, Nazis, and the Greatest Art Hoax of the Twentieth Century* (New York; London, 2008).

[16] M. Jones, 'Why Fakes?' in M. Jones (ed.), *Fakes: The Art of Deception* (London, 1990), 13.

[17] R. Bowden, 'What Is Wrong with an Art Forgery?: An Anthropological Perspective' (1999) 57 *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 336.

[18] Ibid., 337.

[19] Ibid., 334.

of their appreciation.[20]

Today's art world 'demands the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake.'[21] This cult of authenticity pervades modern life and the essence of authenticity takes priority over authenticity itself. For instance, a majority of the Renaissance forgeries that stemmed from the demand for relics were successfully deceptive despite reflecting contemporary characteristics: they were more reflective of the contemporary vision of the past than authentic antiquities.[22] Also, the discussion of this cult of authenticity is incomplete without the mention of the modern idea of restoration: a process that often misinterprets the original artistic intention, yet is culturally acceptable and deemed authentic. Tom Keating's painting in the style of Goya was a protest against the museum restorers who, according to him, destroyed this old Master's work with their over restoration. To Keating, his painting was a replacement that the museums were not fit to own.[23] He considered his own forgery, in a way, more true to original that the actual authentic piece. This highlights another important issue: that even though the contrast between originality and artistic genius, on the one hand, and everything that falls short of this ideal, on the other hand, is one of the central tenets that influence artistic perception and value judgments, this very distinction is rather arbitrary. Restoration can do as much violence to the ideal and the cult of originality as forgeries, and yet the former is acceptable, while the latter is not.

It can be argued that the art world places significance on authenticity and originality in order to strengthen the alienation of the public from it. Art connoisseurship has traditionally been elitist, and this issue of authenticity further empowers 'experts'.[24] This culture of looking at art 'experts' as the final authority and judge of authenticity and 'great' art often encourages forgery: forgers like Tom Keating, and Van Meegeren among others faked artworks to demonstrate the crass incompetence of the so called 'experts'.[25] Keating resorted to art forgery as a means of avenging those artists who had deserved respect from the art establishment, which had left them impoverished during their lifetime and continued to exploits their work even after their death:

---

[20] Lessing, 'What is Wrong with a Forgery?', 68.

[21] J. Keats, *Forged: Why Fakes are the Great Art of Our Age* (New York, 2013.), 4.

[22] D. Lowenthal, 'Forging the Past' in M. Jones (ed.), *Fakes: The Art of Deception* (London, 1990), 22.

[23] D. Lowenthal, 'Authenticity? The Dogma of Self Destruction' in M. Jones (ed.), *Why Fakes Matter: Essays on Problems of Authenticity* (London, 1992), 189.

[24] Keats, *Forged*, 144.

[25] Lenain, *Art Forgery*, 25.

> ...the time had come for the commercial art establishment to learn a lesson — I was determined to do what I could to avenge my brothers and it was to do this that I decided to turn my hand to Sexton Blaking. Money was not the motive and a vast majority of fakes were just given away – including the sketches imitating the style of Rembrandt, watercolours in the hand of J.M.W. Turner and Thomas Girtin.[26]

Fakery, according to him, was regarded as a means of helping people in need and simultaneously creating chaos in the art market. Van Meegeren, too, started his career as a forger in an attempt to prove his merit after being rejected by the connoisseurs.

FORGERIES AS SIGNIFICANT HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

These forgers have in their own ways succeeded in revealing the weaknesses of the art paradigm. As highlighted earlier, the knowledge that a work is a forgery alters its cultural value for experts and connoisseurs and reveals a form of cultural anarchism on an ethical and political level.[27] However, whether or not the knowledge of a forgery affects the general aesthetic perception, state or cultural value of an artwork depends almost wholly upon the aesthetic theory we bring into inquiry.[28] From a purist perspective, this kind of knowledge does not cloud the aesthetic judgement, and theoretically the discovery of a forgery should not influence the visual experience of a work of art.[29] To a man who has never heard of either Vermeer or van Meegeren and who stands in front of *The Disciples at Emmaus* it should make no difference whether he is told that is a seventeenth-century Vermeer or a twentieth-century Meegeren in the style of Vermeer[30]. The fact that it is a forgery would be, for this viewer, merely a piece of knowledge that stands independent from the work as an object of aesthetic value.

However, in reality, the very distinction between the 'original' and 'forged' art

---

[26] Ibid., 33.

[27] Keats, *Forged*, 149.

[28] Lenain, *Art Forgery*, 25.

[29] L. B. Cebik, 'On the Suspicion of an Art Forgery' (1989) 47 *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 148.

[30] Lessing, What is Wrong with a Forgery?, 63.

highlights that the criteria of judgment of art are not intrinsic or purely visual.[31] The perception of a work of art, including that of forgeries, is inherently relative: cultural beliefs influence the way in which we perceive, think, act, and also condition and modify our physiological responses.[32] The same cultural beliefs are revealed on the detection of a forgery – despite remaining visually unaltered, the cultural and market value of a forged work changes in accordance to its attribution, thus proving that perception of art does not rely merely on the visual. Lessing writes in his essay that it is

> indeed serious or regrettable that the realm of art should be so infested with non-aesthetic standards of judgement that it is often impossible to distinguish artistic from economic value, taste or fashion from true artistic excellence, and good artists from clever businessmen.[33]

Lenain also brings to light that the very concept of originality itself is arbitrary and ill-defined: all artists borrow, copy, simulate and plagiarize to some extent the styles and inventions of others, if not their own and 'originality' always derives from the more or less dissimulation of simulation.[34] We may value originality, but true originality, if it exists at all, is rare.[35]

On the other hand, the very nature of art ensures that the production of a perfect fake is nearly impossible: every forger inevitably leaves traces of his own style, even when imitating (as closely as possible) the style of others.[36] Therefore, forgeries arguably possess, in their own way, characteristics similar to original art as they have their own 'aura.' The moment the forger becomes an author, the fake ceases to be a fake. That is, to define a work as a forgery is to only make a point regarding authorship misattribution; it should not entail that we ought not to treat it as an individual work in its own right, applying to it the same standards we would apply when dealing with a non-forgery. In this context, there would be no distinction between the 'original' and 'forged' art, as forgeries would be treated as authentic works of a certain kind and

[31] Nelson Goodman, 'Art and Authenticity,' in Denis Dutton (ed.), *The Forger's Art: Forgery and the Philosophy of Art* (Berkeley, 1983), 82.
[32] Meyer, Forgery and the Anthropology of Art, 82 .
[33] Lessing, 'What is Wrong with a Forgery?', 63.
[34] Lenain, *Art Forgery*, 26.
[35] Meyer, 'Forgery and the Anthropology of Art', 86.
[36] Keats, *Forged*, 15.

therefore, should belong within the same authorial structure reserved for what is perceived as 'original.'

CONCLUSION

On the basis of this historiographical study, it can be argued that forgeries occupy a changeable artistic and cultural status. Placing them within the realm of art historical study requires the questioning of critical theory, and puts the nature of art in jeopardy. However, even though forgeries may be deemed culturally perverse, they are a part of the modern history of art and their significance cannot be ignored. The development of a critical tradition is connected with the exposure and even production of fakes: works of art cannot exist in isolated splendour and are always a part of a cultural and artistic history.[37] Forgeries form a valuable source of historical evidence, and are therefore worthy of preserving and studying. Not only do they provide a unique perspective on how the past was perceived by the past but are also integral to the understanding of artistic creativity. Detection of forgeries highlight the components of modern artistic experience: there is an intertwining of aesthetic and symbolic value, and art is judged not purely based on the external but also internal factors such as authenticity and attribution which drive perception. They reveal that the attitude towards works of art is also sentimental: what we know literally changes our responses to a work of art.[38] Thus, once we know that a work is a forgery our whole set of attitudes and resulting responses is profoundly altered.[39] Forgeries question non-aesthetic standards of judgement, and bring to light the elitist nature of the art world. They also formulate an integral aspect of modern artistic culture, and are thus imperative to the understanding of the history of art.[40] The late modern forger is a part and parcel of the cultural fabric of our world and the epitome of the new artistic culture based on the application of this artistic paradigm.[41]

Forgers like Van Meegeren cannot be left out from the study of art history as they have contributed in the shaping of art historical study as it is today. Moreover, their

---

[37] Meyer, 'Forgery and the Anthropology of Art', 89.

[38] D. Lowenthal, 'Authenticity? The Dogma of Self Destruction' in M. Jones (ed.), *Why Fakes Matter: Essays on Problems of Authenticity* (London, 1992), 189; A. Koestler, 'The Anatomy of Snobbery,' in *The Trail of the Dinosaur and other Essays* (New York, 1995), 73.

[39] Meyer, 'Forgery and the Anthropology of Art', 81.

[40] Lenain, *Art Forgery*, 324.

[41] Lenain, *Art Forgery*, 234; 324.

journey is often romanticized and often draws more public attention than most 'original' artworks. Therefore, it can be said in conclusion that today's culture places forgers as foremost artists of our age. There are but few authentic modern masterpieces as provocative as a great forgery.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

M. C. Beardsley, 'Notes on Forgery' in D. Dutton (ed.), *The Forger's Art: Forgery and the Philosophy of Art (*Berkeley, 1983), 225-231.

R. Bowden, 'What Is Wrong with an Art Forgery?: An Anthropological Perspective' (1999) 57:3 *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 333-343.

A. Briefel, 'Sacred Objects/Illusionary Idols: The Fake in Freud's "The Moses of Michelangelo"' in P. Knight & J. Long (eds.), *Fakes and Forgeries* (Newcastle upon Thames, 2005), 29-40.

L. B. Cebik, 'On the Suspicion of an Art Forgery' (1989) 47:2 *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 147-156.

E. Dolnick, *The Forger's Spell: a True Story of Vermeer, Nazis, and the Greatest Art Hoax of the Twentieth Century* (New York; London, 2008).

N. Goodman, 'Art and Authenticity' in D. Dutton (ed.), *The Forger's Art: Forgery and the Philosophy of Art* (Berkeley, 1983), 78-93.

M. Jones, 'Why Fakes?' in M. Jones (ed.), *Fakes: The Art of Deception* (London, 1990), 11- 16.

J. Keats, *Forged: Why Fakes are the Great Art of Our Age* (New York, 2013).

A. Koestler, 'The Anatomy of Snobbery' in *The Trail of the Dinosaur and other Essays*, (New York, 1995), 69-94.

T. Lenain, *Art Forgery*: *The History of a Modern Obsession* (London, 2011).

A. Lessing, 'What is Wrong with a Forgery?' in in D. Dutton (ed.), *The Forger's Art: Forgery and the Philosophy of Art* (Berkeley, 1983), 58-76.

D. Lowenthal, 'Forging the Past' in M. Jones (ed.), *Fakes: The Art of Deception* (London, 1990), 16-22.

D. Lowenthal, 'Authenticity? The Dogma of Self Destruction' in M. Jones (ed.), *Why Fakes Matter: Essays on Problems of Authenticity* (London, 1992), 184-192.

D. Lowenthal, 'Counterfeit Art: Authentic Fakes?' (1992) 1:1 *International Journal of Cultural Property* 79-104.

L. B. Meyer, 'Forgery and the Anthropology of Art' in D. Dutton (ed.), *The Forger's Art: Forgery and the Philosophy of Art* (Berkeley, 1983), 77-93.

P.F. Norton, 'The Lost *Sleeping Cupid* of Michelangelo' (1957) 39:4 *The Art Bulletin* 251-257.