

2006

# The Value of Forgeries in Museums: An Arguement for their Appreciation and Recognition as Objects Worthy of Display

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**The Value of Forgeries in Museums:  
An Argument for Their Appreciation and Recognition as Objects Worthy of Display**

by

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**Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of**

**Master of Arts in Museum Professions  
Seton Hall University**

**August 2006**

## Abstract

It is the purpose of this paper to first establish the values ascribed to art objects that classify them as valid and worthy of appreciation in an art institution while simultaneously attempting to ascertain the characteristics of a forgery that distinguish it from art that we accept as legitimate and worthy of residing in museums and cultural institutions. The four individual values that determine a work of art's overall value are identified as aesthetic value, originality, historical value, and educational value. After examining these values and their presence or absence in works of art that are accepted by the art world as legitimate and also forgeries, there are indications that both may possess or lack any number of these values to some degree. Furthermore, that museums purportedly collect objects because they possess any combination of these values seems to suggest that forgeries, too, should be given consideration for collection and exhibition.

## Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Dr. Charlotte Nichols for her ceaseless encouragement, valuable insight, and continued patience that made this work possible.

Although several scholars and institutions were contacted to discuss the issue of forgeries in the art world, few were willing to respond and even fewer willing to go on record to discuss the topic. Therefore, I would also like to extend my gratitude to Diane Bilbey of the Victoria and Albert Museum for openly discussing the Museum's collection of Fakes and Forgeries and to those of you at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco who generously offered literature and exhibition material from "Fakes, Copies, and Question Marks: Forensic Investigations of Asian Art." It is my hope that forgeries will eventually be a topic that can be discussed openly in the art world and that perhaps this paper may make a meaningful contribution to the topic of forgeries.

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## INTRODUCTION

Rare is the object that has a clear and unquestionable provenance, for more often than not it is necessary for an expert to examine and analyze the work to make a determination of authenticity. Connoisseurship, an expert's deep familiarity with an artist's oeuvre, style and process, is the most widely accepted method of ascertaining authenticity, however, even with the assistance of scientific analysis, attributions are impervious to human fallibility.<sup>1</sup> Determining the authenticity of a work of art does not always involve differentiating between the authentic from the inauthentic; rather, it may simply involve analyzing and reconsidering previous attributions. But why does a work's attribution matter? Most would agree that determining authenticity provides a better understanding of an artist, particularly in terms of their contributions to the world of art and their techniques and methods of production. Formulating a decisive attribution also determines the work's market value, which in today's art world, where auction salesrooms are increasingly realizing hammer prices in excess of the high estimates, appears to account for a substantial portion of the work's total value.

Denis Dutton, in his essay "Art Hoaxes," states that "as much as any other human enterprises, the art world today is fueled by pride, greed, and ambition. Artists and art dealers hope for recognition and wealth, while collectors often acquire works less for their intrinsic aesthetic merit than for their investment potential."<sup>2</sup> It has also been noted

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<sup>1</sup> In France, authenticity can be determined by the holder of *droit moral*, or moral right, over the artist's work, regardless of any actual qualifications or reputability. Additionally, scientific testing that is utilized to accompany an expert's analysis can only determine that a work is inauthentic; it can not definitively determine an attribution.

<sup>2</sup> Denis Dutton, "Art Hoaxes," in *The Encyclopedia of Hoaxes*, Gordon Stein (ed.), Detroit: Gale Research, 1993, 1.

that the current art market reflects the collecting of curiosities or rarities, “an activity that has nothing directly to do with art.”<sup>3</sup> These may sound like cynical views of the current art world, however, the reality is that while Picasso’s *Garçon à la pipe* (1905, Private Collection) has sold for \$104 million at auction and Klimt’s portrait of Adele Bloch Bauer for \$135 million at private sale, we must be asking ourselves just what is meant by “value” and “worth.”

It is the monetary value of a work of art that we think of when we ask, “What is this object worth?” To a certain extent however, we assume that the art market reflects artistic quality and thus works of consummate quality are understood to have a higher monetary value than less proficient works.<sup>4</sup> However, Mark Jones, in his introduction to “Why Fakes Matter,” indicates that an object’s value need not be monetary.<sup>5</sup> Jones’ assertion suggests that works of art may possess several values that ultimately determine its overall value as an art object.

While there is no clearly defined value set that comprises an object’s value as a work of art, there appear to be certain prevailing characteristics among art objects. These values assume different names and there is a lack of consensus in the art world regarding their composition, however, for the purpose of this discussion, these values are identified as aesthetic value, originality, historic value (or historicity), and educational value. That these values are not individually identified when discussing the overall value of a work of art does not negate the existence of individual values, but rather it suggests the individual

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<sup>3</sup> Antoinette LaFarge, “The Memetic Museum,” Paper presented at the 1999 College Art Association Conference as part of the panel “The World Wide Web and the New Art Marketplace.” 12 Oct. 2004. <http://yin.arts.uci.edu/~mof/LibraryF/meme.html>.

<sup>4</sup> This assumption combined with the dominance of authorship invariably leads to the overestimation of poor quality works by so-called first-rate artists and the underestimation of superior quality works by so-called lesser artists.

<sup>5</sup> Mark Jones (ed.). *Why Fakes Matter: Essays on Problems of Authenticity*, London: British Museum Press, 1992.

significance of each particular value may be secondary to their sum total. That is, the value of an art object is established given the total set of characteristics an object possesses rather than an overt breakdown of individual values.

There is no formula or method of quantifying these values to produce an equation that determines an object's overall value. They are not individually requisite characteristics in determining monetary value, however, the extent to which a work of art or object possesses monetary value is contingent upon the presence of at least one additional value. That is, no object innately possesses monetary value without the presence of some other value that provides a reason to assess monetary value to that object. This is precisely the reason why making decisive attributions about a work of art is of the utmost importance in the art world; it identifies to some extent, often implicitly, the individual values a work of art possesses which ultimately determines the overall value of the object and, consequently, its monetary value.

If it appears that an emphasis is being placed on monetary value, it is misleading, for the primary concern is quite the contrary. By establishing an object's overall value we can more clearly identify that which is worthy of residing in museums and cultural institutions. Museums collect and preserve objects for several reasons, without regard for market value.<sup>6</sup> This is partially because works are maintained in perpetuity, and thus market value is inconsequential, and partially because we know there to be objects that merit appreciation (for whatever reason) that possess little or no monetary value. It would be a grievous error to ignore the interrelatedness of an object's overall value as an

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<sup>6</sup> The extent to which museums are concerned about an object's monetary value is limited to purposes of insurance valuations and some instances where the object is considered for deaccession.



art object and its subsequent monetary value, however, we should be concerned with monetary value only insofar as it contributes to our understanding of its overall value.

The first individual value to be considered is aesthetic value. Philosophers and art historians alike have for centuries contemplated the arts in order to clarify our understanding of aesthetic values. Aesthetic theories are continually emerging with the particular objective of determining what it means to have, or lack, aesthetic qualities and whether all works of art have an aesthetic purpose. Most theorists seem to agree that the function of art is not solely to have aesthetic properties or that aesthetic properties are necessarily possessed by all works of art. As this subject will be examined in further detail later, it should suffice to say that aesthetic value is generally the most often cited property ascribed to an object in order to justify its monetary value, particularly among the fine arts. Exactly what properties qualify as aesthetic properties is unclear, however, most aestheticians and art historians will agree that aesthetic value includes non-visual as well as visual properties. The basis for this argument is that non-visual properties will determine how one understands and perceives an object in order to accurately establish the parameters by which we may judge its aesthetic merit. This is compounded by the fact that there is an evident lack of consensus as to what non-visual properties constitute an object's aesthetic value.

Some theorists have made distinctions between aesthetic value and artistic value. This differentiation emerges from theories that posit the natural existence of aesthetics among all objects, natural or man-made, artistic or otherwise. The position is that everything can be evaluated by some criteria with the understanding that there are objects

that possess aesthetic properties that are not necessarily art. For example, a sunset can have aesthetic properties, however, it is understood that a sunset is not art.

It is important to note that a determination of aesthetic properties is very much dependent upon cultural and temporal factors as well. That is, judgments of aesthetic quality will vary over time and across different cultures. When judging the aesthetic value of works today, we do so with a different set of criteria than those used when the works were first created and exhibited.<sup>7</sup> One need only look back some one hundred years to consider the response to artists who exhibited at the Salon des Refusés.

Considered today to be some of the most important and innovative artists in the history of art, including Paul Cezanne, Edouard Manet, Claude Monet and Camille Pissarro, their art, a direct and unapologetic response to the Salon establishment, was condemned by a hostile public. Similarly, works of art from one culture will be viewed with a different perspective and aesthetic appreciation than when viewed by those of another culture.

The second value, originality, generally refers to the uniqueness or individuality of a work of art. The extent to which originality constitutes a value separate from aesthetics is a disputed point as some aesthetic theorists argue that it is a non-visual property on which our perception of an object's aesthetic value is partially judged. Given the equivocal nature of the term and its various possible applications, it will be treated as a separate entity and discussed as a value apart from aesthetics. This is particularly necessary when we consider alternate uses of the term originality, namely that refer to

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Baxandall coined the term "period eye" to denote the shared experiences and beliefs of people within a culture that ultimately establishes their common interpretation of a perceived image. According to Baxandall, it is precisely these shared perceptions that generate uniform qualities that are appreciated in works of art and provide standards of taste in any given period of time in history. See Michael Baxandall, *Painting & Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988, 29-108 for full discussion.

individuality of an artist or artwork and the idea of creative uniqueness, and the singular author paradigm which involves exclusivity of creative production. It will be demonstrated that both types of originality ultimately break down, particularly when contemplating contemporary art, and that both serve to promote financial interests rather than our understanding of art objects.

The third value to be examined is historical value and like originality, it possesses a temporal component. It involves everything that has happened to the work or as a result of the work being produced, beginning with its creation through its current status and is commensurate with age. This includes factual evidence such as previous ownerships and the position of the work in relation to other works by the same artist or maker. Historic value also encompasses the work's socio-cultural significance, that is, the work's importance in terms of its relevance and significance as a social or cultural specimen. The object itself may possess no innate characteristic or meaning that constitutes its relegated status as an art object beyond the object's value as a social or cultural object. For example, an apparently ordinary bowl on display at a museum would be a curious exhibition piece, however, upon gaining information about the object we learn that the bowl was found at an excavation site near Pompeii. The object takes on a meaning and value far greater than initially perceived.

An object's historicity is often valued as a direct link between the artist and the object. Forgeries are criticized for disrupting this relationship by presenting a false history and undermining the integrity of the history we hold to be accurate and true. Consequently, the art world vilifies the forgery and ceases to acknowledge its existence, effectively denying *its* history within the general history of art while simultaneously

ignoring the possibility that it possesses a history of its own either within the history of forgeries or as an object in its own right.

Finally, educational value can be defined as the extent to which an object offers an informative experience by providing new knowledge. This is arguably the only value inherent in an object, for there are few, if any objects in the world that can not be displayed and explained to an individual in order to provide some bit of knowledge or information.

Objects of questionable authenticity present a serious problem to the art world because they undermine the very method by which an object's value is determined. The term "forgery," however, is a term that tends to include or is associated with other terms used to describe objects of dubious origins, such as "fake," "copy," or "replica." It is generally thought that what distinguishes forgeries from the latter terms is the intent to deceive.<sup>8</sup> Hans Tietze was the first to distinguish between two types of forgeries: reproductive and creative forgeries.<sup>9</sup> Most literature is concerned with reproductive forgeries (for convenience and clarity these can generally be thought of as exact copies), particularly since aestheticians and academicians have been largely preoccupied with the issue of whether a genuine work and its reproductive forgery share the same aesthetic properties. Creative forgeries have received much less attention and yet are much more problematic, for they threaten our concept of originality and ultimately confound our historical understanding of art. As there is a total lack of uniformity with which the term

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<sup>8</sup> There is an undeniable moral dilemma to forgeries, however, it will not be heavily scrutinized as it does not negate the possibility that a forgery, or any other object for that matter, could possess value of some kind. Intent to deceive is certainly a non-visual property (as it has nothing to do with the physical characteristics of an object) worthy of consideration, however, it all too often becomes the focal point and used to categorically reject the object without further consideration.

<sup>9</sup> Sándor Radnóti, *The fake: Forgery and its place in art*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 1999, 41. Originally from Hans Tietze, "Zur Psychologie und Ästhetik der Kunstfälschung," *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* 27, 1933, 231f.

forgery is used and given the manner in which forgeries are discussed in the available literature, unless otherwise noted the term forgery will primarily refer to the copy. While creative forgeries will be discussed, namely as works created in the style of other artists and misattributed works, they are rarely the topic of scholarly discourse.

“Fake” is typically a more general term that includes any work of art with an erroneous attribution, regardless of the intent of production. This lack of differentiation between various types of objects, including forgeries, authentic works and copies, is clearly problematic for they are in fact all very different things with meaningful distinctions. Copies and replicas are much closer in meaning, as they usually designate works of art that are derivative of already extant works of art, the difference being the extent to which the successor imitates the predecessor. In each of the previous cases, the works of art are not created with the purpose of passing for the work of another artist. Whether this occurs sometime later is wholly separate from the artist’s initial intention. The difficulty, however, is that for many works, particularly those produced by an artist who is no longer living, intent can be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain.

Antoinette LaFarge, states that “the idea of forgery presupposes the idea of the original. Indeed the art world’s debasement of forgery follows on its exaltation of the original.”<sup>10</sup> This is clearly evidenced by the reactive position collectors and art institutions typically take when a work of art is discovered to be something other than what it was initially thought to be. In such instances, forgeries are typically condemned to the darkness of a storage room or disposed of altogether, symbolically and physically degrading the object.

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<sup>10</sup> Antoinette LaFarge, “New Lexicon of Forgery.” 2001.  
<http://yin.arts.uci.edu/~mof/LibraryF/lexicon.html>, accessed 12 Oct. 2004.

The imprudent logic behind such actions fails to elucidate any possible value the forgery appears to lack or that the genuine article possesses. It also does little in furthering our understanding of what exactly constitutes a forgery and the differences between forgeries and the genuine article, if in fact they exist. LaFarge's assertion points out that the genuine is clearly thought to possess certain qualities that the forgery lacks. These differences define the forgery in terms of the original as an inherent counterpart that acts as a reference point from which we are to understand the forgery. It does not follow that forgeries therefore have no value.

It is the purpose of this paper to first establish the values ascribed to art objects that classify them as valid and worthy of appreciation in an art institution while simultaneously attempting to ascertain the characteristics of a forgery and the fundamental attributes that distinguish it from art that we accept as legitimate. Naturally, once this is accomplished, it is necessary to determine what, if any, value the forgery retains. By analyzing and clarifying the individual values that determine a work of art's overall value (i.e. aesthetic value, originality, historical value and educational value) it will be argued that forgeries do possess value and that that value merits appreciation and recognition by museums. It has been recognized that forgeries can benefit a museum rather than harm them, particularly in the form of permanent collection displays and temporary exhibitions that have addressed issues of authenticity and attributions. Since museums ostensibly collect objects irrespective of their monetary value, that is, because they possess some other value, it will be argued that museums should consider the deliberate incorporation of forgeries into their permanent collections.

## PART I: AESTHETIC VALUE

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to offer a comprehensive review of aesthetic theories of art, it is necessary to highlight a few of the prevailing theories, particularly those that have sought to embrace or reject forgeries among those objects to which aesthetic theories apply. There are two traditional sides to this debate; there are those concerned solely with the aesthetic object, that is, whether an object is of consummate quality exclusively determines the extent to which it has aesthetic value; this is in contrast with the position that the qualities of a forgery are dependent upon the genuine, in part because it attempts to imitate its aesthetic properties and thus, by default, lacks those very properties. Those who hold the former position will argue that a forgery of exceptional quality possesses aesthetic value.<sup>11</sup>

It should be noted at the onset that the moving of art from its functionally appropriate environment into institutionalized collections encourages a shift from contextual significance to individual significance as aesthetic objects in their own right. This contextual change will be addressed more fully under the topics of originality and historicity, however, its relation to aesthetic value requires that we concern ourselves with the object proper and not the contextual significance it might have had. In short, if we are looking at a fifteenth century altarpiece in a museum we are experiencing it quite differently in context, time, and meaning than it was initially intended. We can neither

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<sup>11</sup> Spencer, Ronald (ed.). *The Expert Versus the Object: Judging Fakes and False Attributions in the Visual Arts*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, 107. Samuel Sachs II, former director of the Frick Collection, provided the following insight, “[u]ltimately, aesthetic quality holds sway over matters of attribution or authenticity. Museums can hang a picture that is absolutely, certifiably by artist X, but if it is a weak picture, why do it?”

suppose what that experience must have been like nor attempt to recreate it. Although we must accept that the object has changed, it can nevertheless be judged on aesthetic value.

If we accept as our starting place Alfred Lessing's seminal paper "What is Wrong with a Forgery?" we confront the undetected forgery that can not be perceptually distinguished from the original. Of this forgery, Lessing believes there can be no aesthetic difference between them, for if our visual experience is the same, our aesthetic judgment must be also.<sup>12</sup> Nelson Goodman's response to whether there can be any aesthetic difference between the two, if even the most knowledgeable expert can not tell the difference between them, rests on his emphasis of non-perceptual knowledge. Goodman believes that if such knowledge allows us to accurately determine that there is a difference between the two works, that this difference will ultimately determine whether we are experiencing and appreciating the works properly. "This knowledge," according to Sándor Radnóti, "instigates us to change our present aesthetic experience. The aesthetic qualities of an artwork not only constitute what we see, but also determine how we see it."<sup>13</sup>

Mark Sagoff takes this position even further, suggesting that the aesthetic experience that leads to a comparison between an original work and its exact forgery is entirely inappropriate. According to Sagoff, "a forgery will not have relational aesthetic qualities, then, in common with the original no matter how closely it resembles it or how difficult it is to tell the two paintings apart."<sup>14</sup> That is, it does not belong in the same

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<sup>12</sup> Alfred Lessing, "What is Wrong with a Forgery?" in *The Forger's Art*, ed. Denis Dutton, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983.

<sup>13</sup> Sándor Radnóti, *The Fake: Forgery and its Place in Art*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 1999, 115.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 120.



referential class.<sup>15</sup> If we are convinced that both works before us are genuine Goyas, that we are fooled by the forgery does not mean that the inauthentic Goya is a real Goya or that it possesses the same aesthetic qualities as an authentic Goya simply because we are mistaken. Rather, we understand the work to be something that it is not and thus it can not have the same properties we assume it to have.

Taken to the opposite extreme, the same can be said for genuine works believed to be a forgery. Levinson takes a different approach, claiming that “works of art that differ structurally, differ aesthetically.”<sup>16</sup> That there are inevitable differences of structural attributes (i.e. line, color, texture, etc.), eliminates the possibility that the forgery and the genuine work are aesthetically similar. Supposing that one argues that the forgery and the original represent the same subject, Sagoff argues that while the original represents, for example, a landscape, the forgery attempts to represent the original and thus, a different subject. Following this logic we must conclude that the forgery can only be in the same referential class as another forgery.<sup>17</sup>

Hume’s *Of the Standard of Taste* addresses perhaps the most common objection to art theory, that taste can be subjective. Hume’s main purpose is to settle disputes over

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<sup>15</sup> This argument is consistent even if we are confronted with a misattributed work. Whether the correct attribution is known or not, the work of art has neither the attributes and qualities we assumed it to have nor the same associations we ascribed to it when it was misattributed.

<sup>16</sup> Jerrold Levinson, “Aesthetic Uniqueness,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 38.4., 1980, 435.

<sup>17</sup> This logic, however, leads to two hackneyed and interrelated assumptions. First, it incorrectly assumes that the forgery can not be understood in relation to genuine works of art and second, it forces any given work of art to categorically fall into a single referential class. To address the first assumption, let us suppose that we have before us a known Picasso forgery of a lesser artist’s work. Naturally, the forgery created by Picasso of a lesser artist’s work will be more valuable (and least monetarily and art historically), than the “original” and, obviously, a forgery of a Picasso by the same minor artist. The forgery by Picasso will also be understood within the artist’s oeuvre and the work by the lesser artist that has been imitated. The idea of the singular referential class is highly problematic as it requires one to define the class into which we place works of art by identifying some common denominator while ignoring other, potentially more significant, similarities or differences. In short, the referential class to which something belongs quite simply depends on which referential class you are referring to. Referential classes are determined by media, dimensionality, and subject matter among numerous others including time, geography, and inspiration.

the judgment of beauty and artistic quality in works of art by discrediting the individuality of taste. Hume writes, “beauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty.”<sup>18</sup> This certainly reads as a concession of aesthetics as subjective, however, he concludes, that there is one correct judgment and that this assessment is a joint verdict by ideal critics who are most suited to make determinations of beauty. Jerrold Levinson questions Hume’s reliance on the ideal critic; after all, why should the judgments of an *ideal* critic necessarily be what we pursue aesthetically?<sup>19</sup> Succinctly put, ideal critics possess heightened senses and an essential connection to great works which enables them to afford others, who lack an appreciative profile, a direction leading to the positive aesthetic experiences that people, particularly art-interested people, are naturally inclined to seek out.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, if the ideal critic is able to see aesthetic differences between the forgery and the original, which we ourselves, the undiscerning average person, can not detect, we should be inclined to side with the ideal critic.

Aesthetic theories exist that give plausibility to the position that forgeries possess aesthetic properties. Nick Zangwill presents the “second-order” counter-example to traditional aesthetic theories, which holds that while certain works of art may appear to have no immediate aesthetic function, such as Duchamp’s *Fountain* (original 1917) or *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919, Private Collection), “their point lies in the fact that they are meant to be seen in the context of, and by contrast with, traditional works of art” and thus evoke

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<sup>18</sup> David Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste,” in *Essays*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1963, 244.

<sup>19</sup> Jerrold Levinson, “Hume’s Standard of Taste: The Real Problem.” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 60.3, 2002, 229.

<sup>20</sup> This does not explain why people seek out experiences that may not produce positive aesthetic experiences or in fact produce negative experiences. See Kendall L. Walton’s “How Marvelous!: Toward a Theory of Aesthetic Value,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 51:3 (Summer 1993), 499–510.

the aesthetic qualities of those works.<sup>21</sup> He argues that a viewer without knowledge of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* (1503-1506, Musée du Louvre), could not understand the point of *L.H.O.O.Q.* That is, second-order works are entirely dependent upon first-order works. "In this respect," Zangwill offers, "they are like forgeries."<sup>22</sup> The forgery, as we have established, is dependant upon the original.

This problem of whether forgeries possess aesthetic value can be altogether circumvented by distinguishing between that which is *aesthetically* valuable and that which is *artistically* valuable.<sup>23</sup> While neither grants individual subjectivity, it more narrowly defines objects we consider works of art while broadening the realm of objects we hold to have aesthetic value. Indeed, along a continuum most people would agree that every object can be judged according to an aesthetic principle whereby each possesses some level of aesthetic value, whether positive, negative or neutral. For example, a bouquet of flowers has positive aesthetic value, as does a de Heem still life painting. We might also say that a sheep has positive aesthetic value, however, one of Damien Hirst's dissected sheep submerged in formaldehyde may have negative aesthetic value. A work of neutral aesthetic value might be a painting such as Goya's *Third of May* (1914, Museo del Prado), where the work, positive in its production (i.e. skillful use of light and dark, fine brushwork, etc.) is countered with the negative subject matter. One could argue that a rubber band or shoelace also has neutral aesthetic value. These examples vary

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<sup>21</sup> Nick Zangwill, "Are There Counterexamples to Aesthetic Theories of Art?," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 60.2, 2002, 113.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Fenner, David E. "Production Theories and Artistic Value." from *Contemporary Aesthetics*, 1995, <http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=265>

tremendously as the de Heem, the Hirst and the Goya are indisputably works of art, while the others are not.

It follows that if all objects can have aesthetic value, all objects that possess artistic value also possess aesthetic value, but not all objects that possess aesthetic value possess artistic value. The extent to which there can be a crossover from something possessing aesthetic value and artistic value is contentious; Duchamp's nominations of what can be art severely blurred this boundary. George Dickie defines a work of art as "1) An artifact, 2) a set of the aspects of which has had conferred upon it the status of the candidate for appreciation by some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the art world)."<sup>24</sup> Arthur Danto has argued that a work of art "is about something," that "it has a subject; it conveys a viewpoint; it requires interpretation; its interpretation appears in the context of historical art theory; it is rhetorical; it is metaphorical."<sup>25</sup> Levinson's position of aesthetic uniqueness verges on originality while Danto's on historicity, both of which have been principal qualities that appear to exclude forgeries from being able to possess artistic value. If the work-of-art-status is predicated on the presence of originality and historicity (in addition to aesthetics) it is no coincidence that both of are said to be consistently lacking in forgeries.

## **PART II: ORIGINALITY**

At the center of any discourse on forgeries is the concept of the "original." If

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<sup>24</sup> George Dickie, *Art and Aesthetics: An Institutional Analysis*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974, 34.

<sup>25</sup> Sándor Radnóti, *The Fake: Forgery and its Place in Art*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1999, 127.

originality is an essential property of artistic value, and thus necessary to achieve the status of “work-of-art,” it must be demonstrated that forgeries possess originality if a forgery is to be included among art objects. This seems like quite an undertaking given that we have previously established that in many ways the forgery succeeds the genuine and is by default secondary to the genuine and therefore, appears to lack originality, at least in the traditional sense. The term “originality,” however, has different meanings and in order to adequately determine whether a forgery possesses originality, we are obligated to examine the multiple associations of the term. This will also reveal the overvaluation of originality as a quality of art as its presence in some works of art is, at best, minimal.

Three different variations of the term will be addressed: originality as numerical uniqueness of a work of art, originality as creative uniqueness, and originality as the work of an individual creator (in this sense, originality is necessarily entwined with authorship). As each is rarely explicitly identified as an independent version of originality, it shall be understood that to qualify as an art object, only one type will need to be recognized for it to be said that it possesses originality. This supposition will become more stable as it is demonstrated that there is hardly a shortage of examples where one or more types is absent but another extant. If any one type can be demonstrably absent, then we must be able to identify another. If we can not identify any, we can agree that the object lacks originality.

### Originality as Numerical Uniqueness

Originality of numerical uniqueness takes on two forms, literally the oneness or singularity of an object and also the primacy of the object.

The idea that a work of art can exist in only one, actualized representation is, however, an antiquated assumption that has nonetheless endured over time. We need only consider photographs and prints to find that exceptions to this assumption exist. While printmaking had been around for centuries prior to the advent of photography, it was largely considered a craft, partly because the print could be reproduced *ad infinitum*, and partly because the production of the object relied on a technological mechanism, making the final product, presumably, more akin to a manufactured object than a work of art. During the early stages of photography, it was viewed very much the same as printmaking, where the ease of reproducing the product contributed to its status as craft, not art. Both photography and printmaking began to be considered legitimate art forms around the beginning of the twentieth century as people began to utilize them in artistic ways. Artists realized the artistic potential these types of media offered and that the economic rewards could be substantial; after all, one could produce more than one version of the work. Naturally, creating an endless supply would lower the value of each individual work so artist's limited the production to a predetermined number. This is not unlike the bronzing of sculptures where there are typically a set number of casts for each sculpture. Of all of the examples, we understand a singular version of the work to be one version in a set total number of the edition or casting of that work.

Although there is unquestionably technical skill necessary to create these types of artworks, the originality that these works possess is in the creativity that is bonded with

the medium from which the final product is produced (that is, in its *creative uniqueness*). For the printmaker, it is the carved wood from which the woodblock print is made, the scratched plate of an etching, the cut out paper of a screenprint, and so on. For the photographer, it is the captured image as well as the developed negative and darkroom manipulation that gives the photograph its creative uniqueness. For the sculptor, naturally, it is the chiseled and carved block of clay or other material that ultimately contains the artist's genius. To a certain extent then, we accept that artworks of *certain media* can exist in multiples; paintings, however, have never been privy to this classification.

When discussing the primacy of an object, it is understood that the original is first and that any other object that might resemble the original, no matter how closely, is different from it in some way. The term forgery is considered antonymous with the original; the original is the authentic work to which the forgery is claimed to be referencing. James Elkins refers to primacy as a way "to differentiate between the primary object, which refers to itself, and the secondary object, which refers mostly to what is primary."<sup>26</sup>

Vincent van Gogh's copies of Jean-François Millet's *The Sower* (1850, The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) are just that, copies. They lack originality in the sense that they are secondary objects that refer to the original Millet painting, yet they possess originality because the recognizable image of *The Sower* has been translated into van Gogh's personal style. A dilemma arises, however, when we consider appropriation art. As it is the topic of a later discussion, it should be satisfactory to simply point out that

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<sup>26</sup> James Elkins. "From Copy to Forgery and Back Again," *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 33.2, 1993. 114.

such art can clearly lack primacy since it is dependent upon the primary, appropriated image. Yet, consider whether a new work of art that appropriates all or part of Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.*, which in all likelihood has a considerably firmer connection with Duchamp than it does Leonardo da Vinci, then grant primacy to Duchamp's work? At some point we must ask exactly how far removed or to what degree of derivation can one work's dependency on another determine primacy? It could be argued that primacy can be realized in practically all works of art except exact copies.

### Originality as Creative Uniqueness

In this sense, an original object presupposes a certain amount of creative uniqueness and irreproducible qualities that differentiate it from other works already produced or objects of a similar nature. When we say that a work of art is original in this sense, we are referring to the innovation or novelty of the object. This can generally be thought of as the unique combination of formal elements that produces a new and unprecedented work of art. It must also include the creative or novel *idea* of the work itself. It is this meaning that we use to describe an object when we can not imagine a similar work or precursor. Starting with the latter component of creative uniqueness, Dennis Dutton refers to the "inner passion and vision" that makes a work of art distinctive and unlike others. "Successful forgers often exhibit impressive technical skill," he says, "and yet as artists they seem to have nothing to express themselves."<sup>27</sup> What lacks in the forgery, according

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<sup>27</sup> Denis Dutton. "Art Hoaxes," in *The Encyclopedia of Hoaxes*, Gordon Stein (ed.), Detroit: Gale Research, 1993. Available at [http://denisdutton.com/art\\_hoaxes.htm](http://denisdutton.com/art_hoaxes.htm).



to David Phillips, is the artist's true voice, or "individual authenticity," that distinguishes that artist from others.<sup>28</sup>

This position is persuasive when applied to artists such as Jackson Pollock, whose art, in addition to being in a style that was distinctly his own, was physical and impulsive, or the deeply psychological and emotional works of Edvard Munch. The paradigm breaks down, however, when we confront examples of contemporary art where authenticity is paradoxically true-to-oneself while explicitly consumerist. In such works, the art directly replicates, represents, or integrates pop culture or commercial references that are clearly aimed at marketability or comment on art as a commodity. David Lowenthal writes, "it is a common delusion that works of art are generated by an exclusively creative urge. Like other artifacts, art is mainly fashioned to be appreciated and acquired by others. Prospective viewers and buyers influence the design and production of art objects through artists' needs for subsistence and prestige."<sup>29</sup> Jennifer Dalton's recent work, *The Collector-ibles* (2006) demonstrates Lowenthal's observation quite clearly. It combines mass produced objects with an art world reality by reworking DC and Marvel comic action figures to represent the collectors on the 2005 ARTnews Top 200 list. Moreover, Dalton comments on the influence these people have over modern art, saying, "You look at these people; you read about them in magazines. Their taste has such a huge effect on what art is popular or praised."<sup>30</sup> To say there is an often inseparable link between market demand and artistic production would be an understatement. Andy Warhol directly addressed the notion of art as commodity with his

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<sup>28</sup> David Phillips. *Exhibiting Authenticity*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997, 94

<sup>29</sup> David Lowenthal. "Forging the Past." *Fake? The Art of Deception*, Jones, Mark (ed.). London: exh. cat., British Museum Publ., 1990, 17.

<sup>30</sup> Rachel Somerstein. "Honey, I Shrunk the Collectors," *ARTnews*, Summer 2006, 40.

images of Campbell soup cans and iconic celebrities such as Elvis Presley and Marilyn Monroe. Jeff Koons, with works such as *Pink Panther* (1988, The Museum of Modern Art, New York) and *Michael Jackson and soap bubbles* (1988, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art), keeps Warhol's tradition alive today.

The originality of such works is not in the subject matter, nor is it necessarily in the creative interpretation of the subject; it is undoubtedly argued, in the idea that these objects or images, not hitherto included in the realm of art, *could* be art. The suggestion that such things could be art is rooted in Duchamp's works like *Fountain* and *In Advance of the Broken Arm* (1915, Yale Center for British Art), where a urinal and snow shovel, respectively, are nominated as works of art. Duchamp's ready-mades experiment with the artwork's indistinguishability from everyday objects. Radnoti points out that, "The ready-mades' relationship to the 'original' objects is characterized by negation (that is, to destroy the notion of art)."<sup>31</sup> In so doing, Duchamp simultaneously extends the artistic vocabulary infinitely among all ordinary and everyday objects while eliminating the idea of numerical uniqueness of works of art. Taken further, LaFarge suggests that such works of art present the indistinguishability of *value* where Duchamp's works are "a kind of up-front forgery, an attempt to pass off something worthless as something valuable."<sup>32</sup> That a work by Warhol or Koons could easily be mistaken for a cheap, kitschy souvenir or a Duchamp for something you could purchase at a hardware store, punctuates this argument. Whether it follows that forgeries could be considered art is arguable, but it certainly suggests the possibility.

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<sup>31</sup> Sándor Radnóti. *The Fake: Forgery and its Place in Art*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1999, 109.

<sup>32</sup> Antoinette LaFarge, "New Lexicon of Forgery." 2001. <http://yin.arts.uci.edu/~mof/LibraryF/lexicon.html>

When discussing originality as creative uniqueness, a brief mention of commissioned art seems appropriate. Artisans and craftsmen prior to the Italian Renaissance, rarely, if ever, thought about personal expression and certainly not originality in the sense that we think of the term today. According to Michael Baxandall, “the fifteenth century painting was still too important to be left to the painters.”<sup>33</sup> Indeed, the creation of a painting intimately involved the customer/financier who instructed the artist on everything from subject matter to the materials used. Commissions required a substantial amount of control to be relinquished by the painter, albeit without much choice, which unquestionably limited the creative process.

#### Originality as the Work of an Individual Creator

The concepts of originality and authorship are inseparable. The expectation is that we can assign, with some level of confidence, an author to most works of art. While this allows us to better understand the object in a larger art historical context, it conveniently also allows us to put a monetary value on the object. We understand a signature on a work of art as the defining characteristic of authorship and consequently, assume the validity of an artwork because it has been attributed to a particular artist. This, in short, protects our sense of individuality and reaffirms our notions of the authenticity and legitimacy of works of art. It is, however, an insufficient method of ascertaining authorship and ultimately serves to limit our understanding of art by discrediting works without a clear author and inflating the significance and value of those we have already assigned authorship to.

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<sup>33</sup> Michael Baxandall. *Painting & Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988, 3.

For example, Arthur Danto presents a scenario where a painter, a forger, and a child each produce three completely identical objects: three ties painted in a single shade of blue.<sup>34</sup> It is assumed that the child's rendition is a simple daub, the forger's an imitation or version of the artist's, and the artist's the work of a genius. The work-of-art status is assigned to the painter's version despite the fact it can not visually be distinguished between another like version. In order to rationalize this, we would have to say that we accept the validity of the artist's version simply because of the signature attached to it, which becomes the purpose of the object rather than the object itself. Now suppose that we have confused the paintings and in fact the child's and artist's are switched; the value follows the artist, while the object has not changed.

Works of art conceived by a singular artist but produced by entire workshops compromise the idea of exclusivity of creative production. Although works by Rembrandt and Rodin are often attributed to the Master, they were also routinely worked on by pupils. These assistants would fill in areas or attend to the sections considered less important to the overall work. For example, in an early Italian religious painting we can be sure that the Virgin Mary and the Christ child were painted by the hand of the Master while the angels, architecture, or other scenery might be attended to by the assistants. The separation between the hand of the Master and the pupil is not always easily discernible, and in some cases it may be altogether impossible to distinguish between the two; there is no shortage of stories where artists have signed their name to an exceptional work made completely by a pupil.

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<sup>34</sup> Sándor Radnóti. *The Fake: Forgery and its Place in Art*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1999, 59.

Today, artists such Damien Hirst and Sol LeWitt simply create an idea and a template while the assistants will frequently complete the work without the artist's further involvement except to accept or reject the final product. The counter-argument to this is that the concept, which possesses the artist's creativity, is theirs and the execution has been delegated. This explanation only serves to complicate the issue, for an idea can not be a work of art. A work of art must have a physical manifestation of the idea or concept, no matter how impermanent and ephemeral, in order to be declared a work of art. How then are we to understand the products of these workshops? The art world tacitly accepts these objects without question while, on a larger scale, they undermine most of the conventions we accept as rules for artistic production. It is important to note that the art world does not attribute the work to each assistant or the group of assistants as a whole who had a hand in the creation of the work, rather the work is attributed to the "Master," whose name alone will validate the object and, consequently, command respect, legitimacy, and financial value for the work of art.

Appropriation art also undermines the idea that originality derives from an individual creator. As the term suggests, such art utilizes, to some degree, elements from other objects or art works in order to create a new work of art. In this sense, the appropriator takes creative inspiration from the appropriated artist or maker. The degree of theft varies from clippings from miscellaneous newspapers or magazines (as seen in Cubist and Dadaist collages), to recognizable images (like Jasper Johns' appropriation of the American flag), ordinary objects (as in Rauschenberg's combines or Hirst's preserved animals), or to other works of art in their entirety (as in Duchamp's appropriation of the *Mona Lisa* for *L.H.O.O.Q.*, and Sherrie Levine's re-photographing of Walker Evans

photographs). LaFarge points out that the line between forgery and Appropriation art is not a very clear one, stating “[c]entral to any definition of forgery are the ideas of unacknowledged theft and exactness of the copy. When both are present in the extreme, you have a forgery; when present in modified form, you may have any number of modern works of art.”<sup>35</sup> The distinction between what is appropriation and what is a forgery is clearly one of convenience.

Following the rationale behind the apparent acceptability of Appropriation art, it appears that Zangwill’s proposed “second-order” strategy is not limited to aesthetic properties of works of art. Taken one step further, it can easily be applied to originality. For example, Jake and Dinos Chapman’s *Insult to Injury* (2003), a “rectified” version of Goya’s *Disasters of War* (c. 1820, published 1863) involved the direct alteration of Goya’s original etchings (which the brothers owned) by adding clown and puppy faces where once human faces existed. The Chapman brothers appropriated Goya’s *Disasters of War* and the considerable art historical significance the work possesses, in order to produce *Insult to Injury*. Without Goya’s etchings there would be no *Insult to Injury*; in this case, the originality of one work is wholly dependent upon the originality of the first work.

This certainly gives credibility to the argument that a creative forgery, such as a work painted in the style of another artist, can be considered an original work of art. As W.E. Kennick points out, van Meegeren’s *The Supper at Emmaus* (1940 - 1941) is not based on a previously painted Vermeer, but rather is seen to “imitate certain stylistic

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<sup>35</sup> Antoinette LaFarge, “New Lexicon of Forgery.” 2001. <http://yin.arts.uci.edu/~mof/LibraryF/lexicon.html>

features of Vermeer.”<sup>36</sup> The difference is that the van Meegeren is not a “forged” Vermeer, but rather an original van Meegeren in the style of Vermeer.

That works are considered forgeries simply because they are misattributed confounds our attempt to appropriately understand the objects while negating any possible merit the object might possess. Critics will argue that it is the deception of the forgery that demotes its status from art object to worthless imitation; however, this requires one to fully understand the intention of the artist which, in many instances, can never be known. If we can consider Appropriation art as a second-order type of originality, then proposing the idea of the forgery as original would seem to be a logical progression. It seems reasonable that we could consider forgeries as objects of second order originality, whether they imitate a pre-existing object or whether they imitate the style of a specific artist. Original forgeries are particularly intriguing since they appear to possess creative uniqueness in the idea of the subject (while admittedly lacking in innovation and novelty of style), and primacy (as there is no specific work on which the forgery is based).

A more contentious position held by the notorious art forger Eric Hebborn, suggests that any work of art, forgery or otherwise, can never be false; only the attribution or labeling can be false.<sup>37</sup> The proper labeling of a forgery might read “Eric Hebborn in the style of Corot,” or “Eric Hebborn in the manner of Poussin,” in much the same way van Gogh’s *The Sower* (1881, Rijksmuseum) is labeled, which typically reads,

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<sup>36</sup> W.E. Kennick. “Art and Inauthenticity,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 44.1,1985.

<sup>37</sup> Eric Hebborn. *Drawn to Trouble: Confessions of a Master Forger*, New York: Random House, 1991, 356-357. This position is unfavorable primarily because it defaults to the expert entirely and effectively side-steps the ethical dilemma the forger creates. His point is well taken insofar as it aims to protect the artist whose work has been misattributed and, as a result, condemned. To the extent that it justifies or endorses the forger’s intentional deception can not be condoned.

“*The Sower* (after Millet).” This certainly is a more accurate description and, in conjunction with already established degrees of originality, we can begin to establish a more meaningful framework for the understanding of forgeries or objects without definitive attributions. An apposite summation of the idea of forgery as original is provided by Radnoti, who believes that “the naïve dictum of ‘original in place of forgery’ corresponds to the ideal that the original intention can be fully reconstructed; the problem of ‘forgery or original’ offers the possibility of understanding more thoroughly or ‘better’ than the original intention; and the acceptance of ‘forgery and original at the same time’ broadens the interpreter’s horizon, allowing him to embark on a thoughtful course of understanding.”<sup>38</sup>

### **PART III: HISTORICAL VALUE**

Our knowledge of history is dependent upon the remaining evidence that we have assembled that allows us to reconstruct the past. By far, the most compelling argument against forgeries is that they destroy our understanding of history by their anachronistic insertion into the history of art. What is more, their improper inclusion within an artist’s oeuvre will continue to falsify the history of that artist as future determinations of authenticity will invariably be made, in part, from those forgeries. The importance of an historical link between an object and its creator is evident by the emphasis we place on drawings as a developmentally significant component to the artist’s creative process. In this sense, forgers of drawings are not merely imitating an artistic or period style, they are

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<sup>38</sup> Sándor Radnóti. *The Fake: Forgery and its Place in Art*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1999, 139.



forging the process of invention and creativity. Some objects are wholly dependent upon their historicity for value, such as ethnographic material, remnants or incomplete artifacts. These objects tell a story, or at least part of one; their importance does not rely on the object itself, but rather the history associated with it. Forgeries that imitate such objects are highly problematic.

To the extent that forgeries alter our understanding of history is reprehensible, and the feelings associated with being cheated or misguided are understandable, however, the subjugation of the objects themselves is not. Lessing argues that Vermeer's significance (or for that matter the significance of any artist) in the history of art was that "he painted certain pictures in a certain manner *at a certain time in the history and development in art.*"<sup>39</sup> Lessing points out how we traditionally determine the individual significance of an artist within the larger progression of art (e.g. the extent to which they contribute to the development of specific styles, test the boundaries of art, resolve certain questions of the time), however, it does not move the issue of historicity in a direction that justifiably eliminates forgeries from the history of art, nor the possibility of forgeries possessing a historical value of their own.

By considering forgeries as the inherent antithesis of, or at the very least incompatible with, objects with a definitive attribution, we destroy the history of forgeries simply by their perpetual comparison to such works. Jones believes that once a forgery is exposed, "it loses its value as a relic."<sup>40</sup> He is correct insofar as he suggests that it loses its historical value that it was once assigned, however, to suggest that because

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<sup>39</sup> Alfred Lessing. "What is Wrong with a Forgery?" in *The Forgers Art*, ed. Denis Dutton, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983.

<sup>40</sup> Mark Jones. "Why Fakes?" *Fake? The Art of Deception*, London: exh. cat., British Museum Publ., 1990, 15.

it happens to be a forgery it has no history whatsoever would be categorically false; the history it was once assigned is no longer applicable, however, it is part of the general history of forgeries and it continues to possess its own individual history which does not end upon its discovery to be a forgery.

There is no lack of evidence that forgeries have prospered throughout the history of art and The British Museum's 1990 exhibition "Fake? The Art of Deception" clearly recognizes this. Sir John Pope-Hennessy's thesis of *The Study and Criticism of Italian Sculpture* is summed up by Radnóti quite neatly as: "The history of forgeries is part of the history of Italian sculpture," and indeed the same could be said for many periods in the history of art.<sup>41</sup> By eliminating forgeries from the history of art, historians have essentially eliminated the history of forgeries altogether. Mark Jones concedes that "[a]s keys to understanding the changing nature of our vision of the past, as motors for the development of aesthetic certainties, they deserve our closer attention, while as the most entertaining of monuments to the wayward talents of generations of gifted rogues they claim our reluctant admiration."<sup>42</sup>

Aside from the issue of strict historical record, a possible fourth type of originality emerges which is intimately related to historicity; it is the idea of originality of context. Naturally, an object's original context is an important part of its history, one that is irrevocably lost by its institutional status as art object or artifact. Returning to the example of the fifteenth century altarpiece in a museum, the object is no longer in its intended context and one would imagine that by being experienced outside that context

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<sup>41</sup> Sándor Radnóti. *The Fake: Forgery and its Place in Art*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1999, 138.

<sup>42</sup> Mark Jones. "Why Fakes?" *Fake? The Art of Deception*, London: exh. cat., British Museum Publ., 1990, 16.

and transplanted into an entirely different space, it has lost an important part of its history. Inexplicably, it appears that this can be a minimally significant component to an object's overall value as indicated by the Metropolitan Museum of Art's purchase of Duccio's *Madonna and Child* (c. 1300) for \$50 million.<sup>43</sup> Although the work is not an altarpiece, it shows clear indications, namely in the damage caused by candles placed in front of the piece, that its function was not intended solely for visual satisfaction.

In general, the art world is obsessively concerned about authenticity, yet there is no apparent rationale or obvious method of how we assess what is or is not authentic. That an object's historicity can be manipulated to the point of making something "original" is a prime example of this lack of clarity. The restoration of a work of art is, first and foremost, an attempt to renew an object back to its *original* form as intended by the artist or maker. That we can presume to know what this intention was or even how to go about replicating it is, at best, a narcissistic and self-indulgent exercise; at worst, it is to alter the appearance, meaning, and historical significance of the object.

Works on display in galleries of ancient Greek and Roman sculpture may be only partially what they purport to be. According to Jones, "Since classical antiquities were almost always found damaged, restorers were much in demand and their skill lay in the creation of an allusion of completeness, in modifying the old and adding the new in such a way as to create a single unified whole."<sup>44</sup> This single and unified whole is put forth and accepted as the real object. The idea is that it is viewed now as it would have been viewed when it was created and yet, in actuality the *real* object is a fragmented sculpture

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<sup>43</sup> Coincidentally, the authenticity of this work has recently been called into question by art historian James Beck.

<sup>44</sup> Mark Jones. "Why Fakes?" *Fake? The Art of Deception*, London: exh. cat. British Museum Publ., 1990,14.

that has lost part of its history by the attempt to make it whole. Jones goes on to say that “[a] damaged painting by Rubens that has been *deceptively* restored so as to lead the buyer to believe that it all by Rubens’s own hand is ... a fake, even though in some areas or beneath the restoration Rubens’s own brushwork is still extent.”<sup>45</sup> Note that Jones insists that the restoration be deceptive in order to be considered “fake;” whether or not the restoration is intentionally or unintentionally deceitful and deceptive, or authorized and fully disclosed, it is almost certainly well beyond the average viewer’s knowledge. That the restoration has occurred at all is deceptive and manipulates our understanding of the object’s history. Jones falls well short of stating as much, however, when a museum leads its visitor to believe that a complete version of a work of art or artifact is the real thing when it has in fact been restored, the institution creates a forgery by deceiving the viewer.

Similarly, Elaine Heumann Gurian discusses the reconstructed skeletons of dinosaurs that “are a combination of the bones from the same species owned by the museum plus the casting of the missing bones from the same species,” concluding that “‘real’ therefore takes on a new meaning.”<sup>46</sup> According to Heumann Gurian, “Curators recognize that the experience of seeing the whole skeleton is more ‘real,’ and certainly more informative, than seeing only the authentic, unattached bones that do not add up to a complete or understandable image.”<sup>47</sup> The real object gives way to a supposedly more

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<sup>45</sup> Reed, Christopher. “Wrong! But a nice fake is a valued object in a university art museum,” *Harvard Magazine*, September-October, 107.1, 2004, 41-51. Reed quotes Senior conservation scientist at the Straus Center for Conservation and Technical Studies, who aptly refers to a work that has sustained a substantial amount of restoration as a “restorgery.”

<sup>46</sup> Elaine Heumann Gurian. “What Is the Object of This Exercise? A Meandering Exploration of the Many Meanings of Objects in Museums” *Daedalus*, 128, 1999, 170.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

real experience. The value of the object no longer lay in its true form, but rather in what it can offer the viewer *visually*. To return to our example of the marble sculpture, we must wonder, would the work of art not be more real were the composite material removed and the object *restored* to its fragmented form?

#### **PART IV: EDUCATIONAL VALUE**

In addition to the enormous task that art museums have of maintaining and preserving the history of art, they must also interpret the objects they collect and define their significance for this generation and generations to come. Forgeries have largely been omitted from the historical record of art and rare is the occasion that a cultural institution realizes, at a minimum, the educational potential of forgeries. Every object, artistic or otherwise, can in some way convey some bit of information in order to provide an educational learning experience. As a result, we need not attempt to establish or justify the educational value of forgeries, but rather we should examine the ways forgeries have been or can be utilized as educational tools. Fortunately, there are a few examples which demonstrate this potential and suggest the further examination and appreciation of forgeries.

First, however, it should be noted that the general public's exposure to forgeries is almost entirely, if not completely, dependent upon the journalistic sensationalism that comes with a story of "unmasking" or possible questioning of a work of art's authenticity. Such stories invariably position the forgery in contrast to what it might have been rather than attempt to demonstrate that the object may still have value. There is, one

assumes, no story if there is no loss or humiliation, for the media fuels the public's interest in watching the expert shamefully admit to being deceived by the forgery while marveling at the forgery's ability to fool the establishment. This perpetuates the negative stigma attached to forgeries by reinforcing the idea of forgery as antithetical to genuine. Only museums are in the unique position of being able to change this prevailing perception of forgeries and thus, we must look to them to educate the public accordingly.

The British Museum's 1990 exhibition "Fake? The Art of Deception" was truly an unprecedented look at the history of forgeries and, indeed, there has not been an exhibition since that has examined forgeries in quite the same way. What made the exhibition unique was that it was exclusively an exhibition comprised of works with dubious attributions or that were categorically spurious, almost all of which were culled from the museum's permanent collection. The goal was multifaceted, at once to illuminate the unworthy omission of forgeries from the history of art by exhibiting their aesthetic and technical achievement (which simultaneously acknowledged their deceptiveness and the gullibility of those who accepted them) while also demonstrating the values and perceptions of those who created them and for whom they were created. That art historians and donors were willing to concede their acceptance of such works is a feat unto itself, however, to extend the debate further and reconsider the objects' value is an altogether rare accomplishment.

The fact that the objects were mostly from the British Museum's permanent collection is significant. It showed the museum's willingness to reveal the breadth and scope of the inclusion of forgeries into its collection, ranging from ancient Babylonian inscriptions to Italian Renaissance sculptures to eighteenth century English ceramics and

beyond; no period or culture seemed exempt. Indeed, it was as revealing of the history of the production of forgeries in general as it was of the collecting methods and tastes of Great Britain during the nineteenth century.<sup>48</sup> That the British Museum continues to exhibit a selection of spurious works in its Fakes and Forgeries gallery is a testament to the Museum's broadminded approach to the history of forgeries and their greater art historical significance. The gallery was opened in 1982 as a result of increased awareness of forgeries during the 1970s. It was aimed at educating the public of the thriving forgery industry of the nineteenth century and its impact on the museum, as most objects were acquired during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with the belief that they were genuine.<sup>49</sup> Prior to the gallery's opening, the objects were held in storage, however, today they are exhibited because of their merit as objects in their own right.

In 1995, the Metropolitan Museum of Art held "Rembrandt/Not Rembrandt," a presentation of works definitively and dubiously attributed to the Old Master. The exhibition accentuated the often minimal differences between Rembrandt and the work of his pupils. At the time, Michael Kimmelman asked, "Now genius is supposed to be inimitable. So how to explain the works mistaken for Rembrandts? How can the inimitable be imitated?"<sup>50</sup> His answer is that quite simply, Rembrandt inspired artists to imitate his style. Being forced to compare the works side by side we were at once witness to Rembrandt's influence on his followers while also accepting of their works as independently exceptional works of art, regardless of their authorship. Although the

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<sup>48</sup> Diane Bilbey, <d.bilbey@vam.ac.uk>. "General Inquiries Regarding Fakes & Forgeries Gallery" Private e-mail message to Corey Wyckoff. 29 September, 2003.

<sup>49</sup> Diane Bilbey, <d.bilbey@vam.ac.uk>. "General Inquiries Regarding Fakes & Forgeries Gallery" Private e-mail message to Corey Wyckoff. 16 October, 2003.

<sup>50</sup> Michael Kimmelman. "Art Review; Sincerest Flattery: Imitations and Rembrandt," *The New York Times*, 13 Oct. 1995.

exhibition primarily dealt with the issue of attribution, it certainly suggests that a similar display could compare forgeries and genuine works.

Throughout the exhibition there was evidence from scientific test results, such as images of x-rays and electron microscopy scans, which helped substantiate the curators' claims of authorship. However, these strange, occasionally biomorphic, usually abstract patterns were implicated as being more real than the objects they represented, for we were led to believe that underneath the painted surface, which could not differentiate between Rembrandt and his workshop, the problem of attribution could be resolved. The resulting impression was that we could not trust the paintings. While the scientific analyses certainly added an educational component by illuminating the artist's methodologies or painting techniques, such as brushstroke styles or reworked areas, they detracted from our ability to appreciate the works for what they were: objects of consummate quality.

That scientific analysis can assist with the determination of attribution and that we, the average museum visitor, might better understand this process, is an educational opportunity that museums seem eager to share. To the extent that it might be used to help demystify and inform people about forgeries is promising but it can easily be taken to the opposite extreme. A prime example is the recent exhibition at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco titled, "Fakes, Copies, and Question Marks: Forensic Investigations of Asian Art." The museum exhibited "fakes" and genuine objects that were authenticated by the use of scientific testing. According to the museum's public relations material, "visitors were invited to play detective and try to determine for themselves the difference



between a fake, a copy and a genuine work of art.”<sup>51</sup> This seems like a futile chore given that the museum professionals themselves required the use of scientific analyses; nonetheless, the concept is interesting and demonstrates one possible application of forgeries as an educational tool. By explaining how the forgery was identified, it would educate the visitor on how such works were made and why they may be so difficult (or easy) to distinguish between the genuine objects. Unfortunately, the exhibition was much narrower in focus and indeed the forgeries, and the scientific results that identified them as such, were merely used to reinforce the museum’s adulation of the genuine works, for a wall text reminds us that “Authentic objects are valued for their rarity, beauty, and age, or for their associations with past places, peoples, and ideals.” We can easily conclude that forgeries are therefore devalued for their supposed lack of these very qualities. Donna Strahan, curator of the exhibition, declares that “visitors coming to the museum often do not know how objects are chosen to be on view in the galleries. This exhibition gives a behind-the-scenes look at how museums determine which objects are worthy of display.”<sup>52</sup> The subtext is that scientific testing allows the museum to determine what is *genuine* and, thus, worthy of display; ironically, they are exhibiting forgeries to help make their point.

That the museum does not acknowledge this makes it clear that forgeries, even when exhibited, are still considered adversarial rather than beneficial, despite their ability to educate visitors. A more impartial exhibition would have further developed the ideas and design of “Rembrandt/Not Rembrandt,” whereby works with dubious attributions were displayed *with* genuine objects rather than *against* them, which allowed for

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<sup>51</sup> Tim Hallman. <pr@asianart.org> Public relations materials for exhibition “Fakes, Copies, and Question Marks: Forensic Investigations of Asian Art.” 3 Aug. 2004.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

meaningful comparisons while still being able to appreciate each independent of the other. The British Museum's re-evaluation of their forgeries was a remarkable recognition of the value such objects continue to offer and can be regarded as a type of topical exhibition. In this sense, the forgeries are displayed in order to tell a chronological history or lend support to a theme or argument which encourages a meaningful debate and furthers our understanding and appreciation of the objects exhibited. The Asian Art Museum's exhibition was debatably a comparative exhibition as the relationship between forgery and genuine was clearly one of contrast, ultimately limiting our understanding by narrowly defining the objects on display and restricting the possibility of expanding our perception.

As mentioned with regard to the British Museum's permanent gallery of forgeries, forgeries naturally tell part of the collecting history of the museum. Similarly, the Cuming Museum in London, which houses the collection of archaeologist Henry Syer Cuming, also displays forgeries. The museum was established in 1906 and among the many natural history and ethnographic specimens exhibited are known forgeries which, according to the museum, were intentionally collected by Cuming. For reasons unknown to us now, Cuming knowingly invested in these objects and without speculating, it is reasonable to suggest that he felt they possessed some quality worth appreciating, otherwise he would not have amassed a collection of them in the first place.

Forgeries clearly have the potential to educate the public by demonstrating the trends of taste during the time the object was collected, the process of creating an object using antiquated materials, scientific testing methodologies that are used to authenticate objects as well as to demonstrate and accentuate the manner in which the imitated artist

worked in order to reveal the similarities or differences with the forger's work. Museums have been, for the most part, reluctant to utilize forgeries for such outright purposes and the extent to which they have been willing to exhibit forgeries at all is almost entirely limited to a less stimulating display that serves to remind the viewer of the forgery's inferiority to unquestionably genuine objects.

## **CONCLUSION**

After examining the individual values that determine the overall value of a work of art, it seems that the question posited by Lessing, "What is wrong with a forgery?" can not be answered by directly examining the objects themselves. If we are determining the value of an object in terms of aesthetic value, originality, historicity and educational value, there are indications that both forgeries and objects accepted as legitimate works of art may possess or lack any number of these values to some degree. Furthermore, that museums purportedly collect objects because they possess any of these values seems to suggest that forgeries, too, should be given consideration for collection and exhibition. There is no question about whether forgeries exist in museum collections, for it is doubtful that a museum exists that has not intentionally or unintentionally allowed a forgery to be accessioned. How then do we account for the glaring absence of forgeries from museum galleries and exhibition walls?

The answer must reside beyond the consideration of the objects themselves and there are indeed a number of peripheral issues to address. The obvious criticisms of forgeries are that they negatively impact the art market, they distort the accuracy of the art historical record, and that they are simply of inferior quality to those objects or styles

they attempt to imitate. These are not arguments but rather convenient excuses used to shroud the actual objection to forgeries; that the discovery of a forgery in a museum's collection is inevitably associated with misjudgment, guilt, and humiliation among the experts that have been taken in by the forgery. That forgeries should be unconditionally condemned is not simply an attitude, it is the zeitgeist and, consequently, the absolute rejection of such objects is not simply expected, it is ordinary practice and standard protocol.

The negative reaction and associated feelings with having been deceived by a forgery can easily be quelled by first, having those involved acknowledge their error and their fallibility, then redirecting their attention to the merits and value of the object, for there were clearly admirable qualities that led experts to praise it in the first place. To the extent that donors might be impacted or implicated in a museum's accessioning of a forgery is, again, secondary to the primary goal of a museum, which in all likelihood has something to do with the collection, preservation and interpretation of works of art or objects in some meaningful way.

One might argue that if forgeries are displayed in museums, the art world will be encouraging the production of new forgeries. This may appear to be a reasonable argument, grounded on the assumption that the acceptance of forgeries will create a new demand for their creation, however, it is speculative and unsubstantiated. If we can begin to deracinate the ingrained notion that the forgery must be a detriment, we can progress beyond the initial impact of its discovery and establish a norm of acceptability of forgeries.

Museums are quite possibly the most dominant force in determining the culture of the art world. By displaying forgeries museums would effectively eliminate the “deception imperative” of forgeries by qualifying them as valuable and worthy of attention. While it is unlikely that this will eliminate forgeries altogether, it seems reasonable to suggest that forgers might be less deceitful about their work if forgeries were recognized as legitimate objects in their own right. While challenging the assumptions we have of forgeries, this new position would also allow the art world to contemplate the objects and the qualities they possess, ultimately attenuating the stigma attached to them. Such objects collected by museums would aptly be labeled as paintings “in the style of” or “after” the imitated artist.

First and foremost, museums preserve and record the history of art in the interest of the public it serves. The history of forgeries is as rich as the history of objects we are currently willing to acknowledge as legitimate art and is indeed directly entwined with the general history of art. Yet, forgeries continue to be a clandestine issue in the art world, an inexplicably overlooked and untapped resource of museums. As evidenced by the British Museum’s permanent exhibition of forgeries and several temporary exhibitions that have addressed forgeries in some capacity, it is clear that they not only attract an interested visitor population, but also provide a more accurate history of art by recognizing the value of forgeries as worthy of appreciation and recognition by the art world. Indeed, we should be looking to museums to broaden our understanding of art and our cultural history, not limit it. Museums should offer debate, raise issues, ask questions and expand our notion of what is and can be appreciated and, as public custodians of art and interpreters of culture, never should we expect or receive less from

them. If museums accept forgeries as an undeniable part of the history of art, they will inevitably provide an even richer, balanced, and more thoughtful museum-going experience.

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