

Art Forgeries and Attributed Aesthetic Value

This paper is written in an attempt to answer the question, "Is there a difference in the aesthetic value of an art "forgery" and an "authentic" work of art?" In doing so, a broader question concerning the nature of aesthetics must be confronted, namely, "Is there any determining factor of aesthetic value other than the observer's visual (auditory, etc.) perception of an artwork?" Does the historical background, expression of emotion, novelty of concept, or any other intangible element effect a work's aesthetic value? I will put forth evidence to support the conclusion that autograph does not alter aesthetic value, and that labeling a work a "forgery" should not diminish its value as art.

In this paper, I will not argue for the aesthetic value of reproductions, nor for that of the "perfect forgery" (Goodman 1997), but rather for artworks done in the style of other artists (such as the famous Vermeer/Van Meegeren case). I believe that these are separate issues, and that establishing the value of one does not establish the value of all three. There are four objections to the aesthetic value of a forgery that I will address here.¹

- 1) Art forgeries are lacking in creativity.
- 2) Art forgeries lack the element of emotional expression.
- 3) Art forgeries are deceptive and therefore morally reprehensible.
- 4) Art forgeries "lack the right sort of relation to the ongoing tradition within which they arise" (Batin et al. 1993, 113).

In addressing the subject of art forgeries and the viewer's response to them, L. B. Cebik (1989) writes,

Whether or not knowledge of a forgery effects the aesthetic perception, state, or value of an artwork depends almost wholly upon the particular aesthetic theory we bring to the inquiry. Purists for whom no knowledge infects the experience of a work cannot allow knowledge of a forgery to dull their senses. All others must specify how the knowledge of a forgery—or its lack— influences judgment. The work now belongs to A in year Y rather than to B in year Z, and we view it accordingly. The work has a history—or more correctly—a biography, which we have now corrected. The work smells of crime; a fraud that enriched some and embarrassed others. What kinds of facts we allow into aesthetic perception and judgment determine what we see or what we may sensibly say. (147.)

According to Cebik's account of the types of aesthetic theory, I would be arguing for a purist's view. I hold that I am arguing for the only logically consistent view available: Objections to forgeries (though I will only address a few), based on any aesthetic theory, hold inconsistencies, whether in the theory itself or in its treatment of forgeries alone.

To address many of the objections different theories of aesthetics have to

forgeries, I will use a case created by Stephen M. Cahn and L. Michael Griffel (1989): Brahms's Fifth Symphony. The subject is an imaginary Fifth Symphony attributed to Brahms, which is found centuries later in his Vienna home. The piece was printed and performed, highly praised as a recovered Brahms masterpiece. The Berlin Philharmonic is scheduled to record and release the work by the end of the year.

But now a startling confession comes forth: The symphony was not composed by Brahms but by a young American composer, John Shmarb. When asked why he had concocted such an elaborate hoax, young Shmarb replied: "For the last ten years publishers and critics and musicologists have been dismissing my work as inconsequential: because they claimed all I did was copy nineteenth-century music. Now that the world has judged my work as it would a judge the work of any nineteenth-century composer, my genius has been acknowledged. I am not imitating Brahms. I am simply composing as a contemporary of Brahms might have. I find it natural to write in the Romantic vein and want to continue to do so. A great work is a great work, whether composed by Brahms or by Shmarb.

I will deal with cases such as this within the four categories that I laid down above, Creativity or Novelty, Expression of Emotion, Morality, and Connections to Ongoing Traditions in Art.

1. ART FORGERIES LACK CREATIVITY

An element shared by all works of art is artistic creativity. This seems to be missing in the case of John Shmarb, as well as Van Meegeren and others who 'copy' the style of famous artists. Original, authentic works of art are creative; their concepts and styles are new and unique. Tolstoy (1997) claimed that novelty, (artistic creativity) was one of the three elements of good art. However, the element of creativity may be assumed to exist in art in greater quantity than is actually present. It is questionable if any concept is truly novel, that is, totally and completely new, without traces of known or experienced elements.

In more spiritual aesthetic theories, such as discussed by A. K. Coomaraswamy (1997), art is considered a discovery of something already in existence, rather than a novel creation.

Every artist *discovers* beauty, and every critic finds it again when he tastes of the same experience through the medium of the external signs. But where is this beauty?... (T)he external signs- poems, pictures, dances, and so forth- are effective reminders. We may say that they possess significant form. But this can only mean that they possess that kind of form that reminds us of beauty, and awakens in us aesthetic emotion.

Coomaraswamy calls works of art *reminders*; they do not show the audience something completely new, rather they remind them of something they have already

seen or already know. In the same vein, Elkins (1993) comments on the novelty of artistic concept, putting forth that no idea is truly creative; all can be traced back to some inspiration.

Art historical texts tend to assign the concept of originality to works that possess one or more of three further properties: originality, ... primacy, and uniqueness.

Original works are those that appear to be without antecedent. The smile in Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* (1503-05) inaugurates a tradition of enigmatic smiles from Leonardo's pupil Bernardino Luini onwards (as in the in the Brera in Milan), but *Mona Lisa's* smile can be understood as part of a tradition that goes back to Leonardo's teacher Verrocchio and ultimately to archaic Greek sphinxes (6th c. BC). Note that originality is constrained by the contextual uses of tradition, and not by a fixed definition. (114-15.)

In the light of these objections (that works of art are *reminders*, and that what we consider original is so only within certain contexts), it seems that to justify using the concept of creativity in art as a determining factor of aesthetic value, one must alter the definition. An artist is not creating 'something out of nothing,' rather, all works of art have conceptual origins (in part) elsewhere, outside the mind of the artist. The change in definition will have to accommodate this point. It will not even suffice to say that artists translate idea into form, because so many great works of art are directly representational. Consider the landscapes of the late nineteenth-century, or Van Gogh's *Peasant Shoes*. These could be considered 'copies' of nature or objects, just as forgeries are 'copies' of an artist's style. Both take their formal properties directly from objects that already exist, and are praised according to the degree of similarity they have with the original object. The creativity that artist's use, rather than novel creation, is to choose what is worthy of representation in their art and how to treat that subject.

This change of definition, that artistic creativity consists of choosing what to represent and how to treat that subject, may seem drastic, but it is exactly what we do when we accept "Ready-Mades" as works of art. Duchamp, in creating *Fountain*, is not translating abstract idea into form, but rather carefully choosing what to display as art. This is the type of creativity found in forged works. Artists who create forgeries choose what existing styles to use or display in their art. And there are several works of art that could easily be considered forgeries, but are accepted as art just in this sense. Adrian Kovacs self-portraits are recreations, exact copies, of Cezanne's self-portraits, and are respected as actual works of art (ibid., 115-16). If these works are thought to possess sufficient artistic creativity to be considered art and therefore have aesthetic value, then so ought forgeries similar to the Vermeer/Van Meegeren and Shmarb cases.

2. ART FORGERIES LACK EXPRESSION OF EMOTION

Even if art forgeries do possess sufficient artistic creativity, it may be argued that they do not express emotion as do authentic works of art. Other than Clive Bell, the majority of the art world follows expressionist theories of art. Tolstoy's concept (1997) of the artist's creative process is an extreme example of expressionist theory.

The process of 'creation' occurs as follows: a man surmises or dimly feels something that is perfectly new to him, which he has never heard of from anybody. This something new impresses him, and in ordinary conversation he points out to others what he perceives. . . . They do not see or do not feel what he tells them of. . . . (H)e directs his whole strength to the task of making his discovery so clear that there cannot be the smallest doubt, either for himself or for other people, as to the existence of that which he perceives: . . . and it is this effort to make clear and indubitable to himself and to others . . . what . . . had been dim and obscure, that is the source from which flows the production of man's spiritual activity in general, or what we call works of art. . . .

Tolstoy's idea has carried over to a large number of non-formalist theories of art, at least to some extent. Art is thought to be the artist's attempt to convey some emotion, either that the artist himself feels, or that he has felt at one time and believes is worth expressing through an artwork. Forgeries, however, do not seem to convey emotion, or be caused by the desire to express emotion, but merely copy the style of another artist whose art did express such emotion. If the expression of emotion is a defining element of art, then forgeries must be excluded. I will take the position that forgeries are not intended to express emotion, though I am sure that this is not true in all cases. Those that do, such as Kovac's self-portraits, are already accepted in the art world and have eluded the derogatory categorization of 'forgery'.

To the defense of art forgeries, an artist's intent to express an emotion he actually feels may not be a necessary component of art at all. There is at least one case in which a major recognized artist held that he was not expressing his emotions in creating art. Composer Richard Strauss claimed to have composed without feeling of any sort. "I work very coldly, without agitation, without emotion even; one must be completely master of oneself to organize that changing, moving, flowing chessboard, orchestration" (Hospers 1997). Here, it is clear that the artist's own experience of emotion (or lack thereof) is inconsequential to the work's classification as art.

There are other reasons to exclude "intent to express emotion" from the standards by which art is judged. David Hume's theory of art supports this exclusion. His theory treats aesthetic judgment as a scientific inquiry. He holds that aesthetics are an objective matter; some judgments are correct and others are not. If this is the case, then the elements that effect the validity of aesthetic claims ought to be knowable by observation. Even if aesthetics is not an empirical study, if it is a study at all, only such factors that are *actually knowable* ought to contribute to aesthetic judgments.

Accordingly, a second reason to exclude "intent to express emotion" from the criteria by which art is judged, is that this intent is not realistically knowable. Unlike creativity, which can be seen in the physical elements of a work, and separates the types of forgeries in question from reproductions, intent to express emotion cannot be known by viewing a work. One may interview the artist, read his memoirs, research his life history, but still never *know* his intentions (one may be misled, etc.), and among these intentions is the intent to express emotion. Because the artist's intentions cannot be known, and because we already recognize the works of artists who are self-admittedly not expressing their own emotion, the artist's intent to express his own emotion *cannot* be a necessary factor in judging whether or not a work has aesthetic value.

Rather, if emotion is still to be a necessary element of art, it is the audience's emotion that would more likely be of significance. The viewer, in making an aesthetic judgment, could know if emotions were evoked in himself, but not if the artist intended to convey these emotions. But even this interpretation of the expression theory, though perhaps more plausible, is suspect. Does viewing a 'happy' painting or hearing 'happy' music actually make the viewer happy?² Is that why we identify certain emotions with certain works of art? What we are actually doing, when we label a work of art 'happy' or 'sad,' is recognizing something in the object that reminds us of the behavior of happy or sad individuals: long, soft tones in sad music, short, bright, high tones in happy music, etc. The work does not make us happy, it contains elements which we relate with happiness in its formal properties. We can make these judgments about a piece without being happy or sad ourselves. John Hospers (1997) comes to a similar conclusion in his article, "Art as Expression." In trying to explain how emotion is present in works of art, the expressionist theory collapses into a type of formalism. Hospers claims that rather than expressing an artist's emotion, the work contains emotion itself:

In conclusion, we may note that in presenting and defending its claim, the expression theory has in a sense made itself unnecessary. It is no longer necessary to say that the work of art is expressive of feeling qualities; it is only necessary to say that it *has* them—that it is sad or *embodies* sadness as a property.

I claim that for these reasons the theory of expressionism collapses, and can be dismissed as a nonviable theory of art. It is still possible that the embodiment of emotion is a vital element of art, even if the artist's mental states or intentions cannot be known.

However, not some great works of art do not seem to contain any emotion (other than the "aesthetic emotion" [Bell 1997]). Directly representational works of art do not embody emotion in any obvious manner. Michelangelo's *David* is one of the great works of art, and it does not seem to hold any emotional content. One could attribute emotion to the work, but this could be the case for any work, and the scope

of what is considered to embody emotion then extends to any conceivable object. It seems for these reasons, a) the inability to know an artist's intentions and b) the absence of emotional content in major recognized works of art, that expression of emotion can be excluded from the factors by which the judgment of aesthetic value is made, regarding forgeries or any works of art.

3. ART FORGERIES ARE DECEPTIVE AND MORALLY REPREHENSIBLE

Art forgeries, any other problems aside, are created for the purpose of deceiving their audience, the experts, or the general public. It could be argued that this factor alone should lessen their value; the creation of forgeries is a dishonest process. The forger is deceptive, preying on the limited knowledge of humanity.

Deception for deception's sake could easily be viewed as morally reprehensible, and that which is morally reprehensible has no value in society. However, depending on the theory of ethics one follows, whether or not something is immoral is defined in a variety of ways; the intentions of the agent, the consequences of the action, if the action is in one's best interest, if it is in accordance with God's will, among others. If one considers only the intentions of the agent, then the forger may very well be committing an immoral act. Kant's moral theory in particular could immediately condemn art forgeries based on the artist's intent to deceive. His theory of morality is concerned primarily with the intentions of the moral agent. The forger intends to deceive, and under the Categorical Imperative, deception is necessarily wrong. Viewed through this theory, it seems art forgeries could not possibly be morally acceptable.

But to give a more comprehensive assessment of the moral standing of a particular action, let us consider both the intentions of the agent and the consequences of the action (to cover all the bases, so to speak). So what are the consequences of a forgery? Those who have believed that the work was created by another artist discover they were duped. Museums have bought a painting that has suddenly decreased in value. Historians must rewrite their art histories. But is anyone done serious harm? I must think that, no, no one is significantly harmed by the actions of an art forger or by the forgery itself. And because no one is done harm by the existence of an art forgery, even by Kant's moral view art forgeries may now be morally acceptable. Though the forger does deceive the audience, no harm can really come from that deception, and if this is obvious to the forger, then the intent could not have been to cause harm. (If the forger does intend to do harm by the creation of his work, then his actions are immoral for other reasons, not because he created an art forgery. Under these circumstances, the artist would be morally culpable, not the work itself.) If the interests of the art world are to consist of exploring the facets of art, then their interests are not actually violated.³

The art world is constantly changing, mostly by new innovations. This

changing is not viewed in a negative light, but is what keeps art interesting over time. I posit that forgeries, along with new innovations, are the art world's source of continuing interest for us. Forgeries frustrate the project of the art critic, whose project is to "build up an overall picture of art" (Wollheim 1997), but they also add depth to that project. Museums take risks with every new acquisition, and no individual or institution is significantly 'set back' economically or otherwise by the discovery.

At least under certain ethical theories, forgeries are morally acceptable. But do aesthetics fall under the scope of morality? I believe that deeming art either moral or immoral is considering art in the wrong context. In what ways do aesthetics fall within morality's realm? Is it that people pay large sums of money for authentic works of art? Is it the economic value of art that makes forgeries seem immoral?

If it is economics that make us consider forgeries immoral, and this 'immoral' categorization diminishes a forgery's aesthetic value, then the diminishing is completely ungrounded. The economic value of an artwork should have no bearing on its aesthetic value. If there were no economics to art, if artworks could not be acquired monetarily, works of art should still have the same aesthetic value. Economics should in no way effect aesthetics, and if this is what one focuses on when lowering a forgery's aesthetic value, then loss resulting from this cause should be ignored. Monetary value is determined by art criticism, not by aesthetics. Consider the great artists of history who have died poor. One would not want to say that their works lacked monetary value at that time because they lacked aesthetic value; their aesthetic value remains constant, no matter their monetary value. I am not arguing that forgeries should be valued as if they were the work of the artist they are intended to emulate, I am arguing that they should not be stripped of their value because they were not done by a certain artist, or because they no longer have monetary worth.

4. AN ART FORGERY "LACKS THE RIGHT SORT OF RELATION TO THE ONGOING TRADITION WITHIN WHICH IT ARISES" (BATTIN ET AL. 1989)

It has also been said that an art forgery, such as the Shmarb case mentioned earlier, is not properly connected to the time period in which it is created. This argument could proceed as follows: Brahms had significance within his time period, Rembrandt and Michelangelo within theirs, but to create art in their styles now is outdated. Art is created in response to the current traditions and discoveries in the art world, and if a work does not do this it has less aesthetic worth than those that do. Therefore works that emulate or copy the styles of past artists do not have a place in their current historical context, and by this lose aesthetic value (*ibid.*, 113ff.)

My contention with this argument against art forgeries begins with its first premise. Rembrandt, Brahms, and the great artists of any period, not only had significance in the past, but have significance now as well. Their artworks, created

in their specific styles, not only had aesthetic value in the age of those artists, but hold this value through time. If these works, in these styles, have aesthetic value, do the styles maintain their value as well? If the styles do maintain value, then works created in these styles *now* should also have aesthetic value. I hold that, since the works of past masters still have aesthetic value, their styles must, (How could a work have value and its style not?) and works of today created in those styles should thereby be attributed aesthetic value.

Instead of closing off these styles into historical periods, they should be respected as communicating with the modern traditions. Art created in these styles is a response to the traditions of art, and when in time these traditions were prevalent should not limit when it is appropriate to create in such traditions. Great styles transcend the span of time, and by this transcendence have no less aesthetic value in the current era as they did when they were discovered. The Shmarb Symphony should have as much aesthetic value today as it would have in the Romantic period, or as a piece from that period would today.

There are other legitimate reasons to reconsider the treatment of art forgeries, beyond arguments against existing criticisms. Possible scenarios in the art world make determining whether or not a work is forgery seem a non-issue. Consider another imaginary case: *Starry Night*, throughout its entire existence thus far as a work of art, is believed to be created by a lesser artist attempting to emulate or forge the style of Van Gogh. Though an attractive painting, it is considered to hold little aesthetic value because it was done in emulation of a great artist, and is not an original work. Later, new research is done through the memoirs of Van Gogh that reveals his plans for *Starry Night*, and now it is believed that he in fact did create the piece. Now a work, whose aesthetic value was previously negligible because of its status as 'forgery,' is praised as one of the finest works produced by Van Gogh, and a masterpiece among art.

This situation is similar to the Shmarb and Vermeer/Van Meegeren cases, except here a work increases in aesthetic value instead of decreasing. But it seems unjustified that a piece could hold two different aesthetic values in the art world while remaining the same work. What has changed is the autograph, not the work itself. Formally, physically, this is the exact same work as it was before. The change in status relies on notes attributed to Van Gogh, and from this we assume he is the actual artist. Again, as with any claim to knowledge that depends upon another's mental states, we could be mistaken. He still may not be the actual artist; someone may have used his notes to create the work. We may have attributed aesthetic value to a piece which is still a forgery. With the margin of error in evaluating intentions as large as it is, and having already shown that forgeries *are* creative works, *Starry Night* should hold the same aesthetic value, whether it be painted by Van Gogh or by any artist.

There are other possibilities for confusion as to what is a forgery and what is not. There could be a simple mistake by art critics: An unknown artist creates in a

style of a past master, without being familiar with that master. The work is labeled a forgery of the master, but in reality is a completely original concept; the work is intended to stand on its own. Critics have disregarded what could be considered a great work, if it was possible to know the intentions of an artist. Since it is not, the work is unjustly stripped of its value. These sorts of mistakes may be only hypothetical, but their existence hypothetically should be enough to reconsider the treatment of known or suspected forgeries. They should be conferred aesthetic value on the merits of the works that can be known, namely, their physicality.

In the aesthetics of other non-western cultures, we find that what we label 'forgeries' are valued just as forgeries. The Six Canons of Painting, Chinese rules of art governing painters, hold that one of the six elements of an excellent work is "Transmission by Copying, that is to say the copying of models" (Xie-He 1997). For the Chinese, the ability to copy past masters is praised as one of the greatest talents, and as true art. The Kwoma of Papua, New Guinea, "place no special cultural or aesthetic value on what in the West would be called "original" works of art" (Bowden 1999, 334-43). Rather, artists are praised for their ability to recreate deteriorated works of art exactly as they were before. It is not the case that here the art is valued and the artist is not; artists are well respected among the Kwoma. But they are respected for just this talent, the ability to recreate honored works of art.

A forgery need be neither an aesthetic or cultural problem. What is necessary in the West is a respect for the type of creativity involved in forgery, and a relaxing of the seriousness with which we consider art. As I have suggested, to deem forgeries morally reprehensible is to look at art in the wrong light. There exists in art an interplay, a communication between the artist and audience, whether or not it is the artist's intention to dupe the audience. To say that forgeries are morally reprehensible because they intend to trick or deceive is analogous to saying jokes are immoral because they have the same function. Both entertain, and some do so to a certain extent by fooling the audience. In this light, forgeries are not a disgrace, but another intriguing part of the art world, and should be respected as such.

I am arguing not for a descriptive theory of aesthetics, but for a normative one. The art world *does* attribute less aesthetic value to forgeries, but it *should not*. The conclusion is counter intuitive. But if forgeries contain sufficient artistic creativity; if we cannot rely on our ability to determine the intentions of the artist to express emotion; if forgeries are not actually morally reprehensible, and do have a relation with the artistic traditions, then forgeries should not be viewed as a problem for cultures or for the art world. They should be respected and valued as one of the many interesting facets of a complex and intriguing community of art.

Notes

1. There are undoubtedly countless more objections to conferring value upon an art forgery, but I believe that most likely all could fit under these four categories.

2. If a work of art does indeed evoke an emotion from the viewer, i.e., a sad piece of music makes the viewer sad, it is more likely that the work is reminding the viewer of a sad experience or memory, and not that the music itself is the cause of his actual sadness.

3. There is a question as to whether this moral justification of art forgeries extends to literary plagiarism. The types of forgery I am defending, and plagiarism, seem to me to be in greatly different categories. Where as art requires creative work every time it is recopied by hand or altered even in the slightest, to plagiarize another's work does not. To make an analogy between the two, art forgery is comparable to creating a new Mona Lisa in exact detail by hand, and plagiarism would be running up to the original Mona Lisa in the Louvre and exclaiming, "I painted this!" On the one hand, the forger is creating *something*, and giving someone else credit for the work he did, and on the other hand, the plagiarist is creating nothing, and taking credit for the work someone else did. I do not believe that my defense of one entails a defense of the other.

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