

## ART OR AUTHENTICITY

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Nelson Goodman's essay *Art and Authenticity* purports to answer what Aline B. Saarinen called "the most tantalizing question of all: If a fake is so expert that even after the most thorough and trustworthy examination, its authenticity is still open to doubt, is it or is it not as satisfactory a work of art as if it were unequivocally genuine?"<sup>1</sup> The manner of asking the question suggests a positive answer, i.e., the inauthentic work of art is as satisfactory as the genuine work. There is even a hint that snobbery is involved in the kudos given to the original. Critics and even the public at large may be uncomfortable with these suggestions. Curators, art merchants, and artists must be appalled. And as Goodman acknowledges, "a philosopher of art caught without an answer to this question is at least as badly off as a curator of a painting caught taking a Van Meegeren for a Vermeer." Van Meegeren, it should be known, was a famous forger.

Goodman wrote his essay to provide an answer, to defend the common intuition and conviction, namely, that there is a fundamental difference between an authentic work of art and a copy, which is put in doubt by Saarinen's question. I wish to show that most of Goodman's essay does not even address the real question, let alone answer it. His purported answer merely establishes that it is impossible to prove that there is not *some* aesthetic difference between *any* two artifacts.

Saarinen's question amounts to this: If two objects provide the same aesthetic experience, then what justifies our regarding one as a masterpiece and the other a fake? Goodman's "answer" is that if we know that the two objects are different it is always possible and hence cannot be excluded that there is some aesthetic difference. But what we want answered is why the two are *fundamentally* different *aesthetically*.

Goodman asks us to imagine we have a Rembrandt original on the right (*Lucretia*) and a superlative imitation of it on the left. We know from a "fully documented history" that the painting on the right is the original, and we have chemical analyses and so forth establishing without doubt that the one on the left is a recent "fake" (sic).<sup>2</sup> The two pictures are so similar that "we cannot see any difference between them; and if they are moved while we sleep, we cannot then tell which is which by merely looking at them" (Goodman, p. 191).

The phrase "merely looking" requires very careful analysis, and Goodman provides it. Under "normal" conditions, without instruments and so forth and so on at length and in depth. Then, too, who is to do the looking? The most skilled experts and not, for example, "one-eyed wrestlers" and

so forth and so on. Finally, even assuming that no one could ever detect any aesthetic differences between the two pictures only by looking at them, there might be some aesthetic difference. The principle reasons he gives for this is that even the unperceived differences between the two works are pertinent to any visual experience for (a) knowledge of the difference affects one's present looking, (b) such knowledge constitutes evidence that there may be differences, and (c) that knowledge may eventually train one to see differences that one cannot initially make out.

Mr. Goodman takes the case further. Ultra-hypothetically, suppose that no one shall ever be able to see any difference. Even then one could not claim that there were no aesthetic differences by looking at them, for then "the existence of a difference between them will rest entirely upon what is or is not proved by means other than merely looking at them" (Goodman, p. 189).

All this is thought-provoking and brings into high relief the difficulty of specifying a hard meaning for "looking at" and its relationship to "knowing that" and related matters. It is a veritable epistemological *tour de force* and even quite relevant to what Goodman *calls* the critical question, namely, "is there *any* aesthetic difference between two pictures for  $x$  at  $t$ , where  $t$  is a suitable period of time, if  $x$  cannot tell them apart by merely looking at them at  $t$ ?"<sup>3</sup> Goodman's reasons for claiming that there might be some aesthetic differences are compelling.

But the critical question is *not* whether there are *any* aesthetic differences between the two pictures, but whether there are differences sufficient to justify regarding one with awe as a masterpiece and the other with relative indifference as a "mere" copy if even after the most thorough examination it cannot be determined which is which. This tends to suggest very strongly that the two works are equally excellent aesthetically. And that is the rub.

Imagine that a painter has painted a painting of one of his previous paintings. It has been done so well that even an expert could not tell which was the first and which the second. Goodman's compelling epistemological arguments would apply with equal validity to this case as they do the Rembrandt-fake case. There might be some aesthetic differences even if no one could ever tell by merely looking. Goodman's "answer" does nothing more than establish that there is no way to be certain that aesthetic differences do not exist between any two works, regardless of aesthetic considerations, and regardless of how thorough anyone's examination of these works might be.

This is trivial. And it is trivial across the board for all perceptual objects and not merely for discriminating between masterpieces and "fakes." It is always possible that presently undetected differences of any kind, aesthetic or other, in any two items will turn out later to have detectable differences. The real question is not whether there can be any detectable or even unde-

tectable differences, but whether these differences are sufficient to warrant the attitudinal differences that almost everyone is prone to give to the two works once it is known that one is a "work of art" and the other a "copy." Even this way of putting the issue tends to prejudge what is at stake, for if both are equally aesthetically satisfying why should one be considered a "work of art" and the other a "copy," *i.e.*, not a "work of art" at all? There is something fishy about the colossal difference in our attitude toward the two pictures, since aesthetic response to them could be almost or even wholly indistinguishable. Have we misconstrued the basis of our attitude? Are we guilty of an attitudinal "category mistake"? We may think that we are responding to the aesthetic merits of the original, but if the two pictures were moved while we slept and we could not then tell the difference between the one and the other by looking at them, we have *prima facie* evidence that we are not responding to the aesthetic properties.

Mr. Goodman acknowledges that all he has attempted to show is "that the two pictures can differ aesthetically, not that the original is better than the forgery" (Goodman, p. 192). This is tantamount to an admission that he is not concerned with Saarinen's question. There is, however, one short, paragraph in which Mr. Goodman does address Saarinen's real question.

Returning from the . . . ultra hypothetical we may be faced with the protest that the vast aesthetic differences thought to obtain between the Rembrandt and the forgery cannot be accounted for in terms of the search for, or even the discovery of, perceptual differences so slight that they can be made out if at all only with much experience and long practice. This objection can be dismissed at once; for minute differences can bear enormous weight . . . differences in sound that distinguish a fine from a mediocre performance can be picked out only by the well trained ear. . . . Extremely subtle changes can alter the whole design, feeling, or expression of a painting (p. 192).

The perfectionist in any art gives great importance to the finest details. Part of having an artistic temperament is the extraordinary sensitivity to even the slightest imperfection. One may respect this and still insist that the two works, even if not exactly equally satisfying, are still not sufficiently different to entitle one to glory and the other to indifference. Saarinen's question was clearly concerned with what Goodman cavalierly dismisses here by saying that "minute difference can bear enormous weight." They sometimes can and do. The question remains. Under what conditions and with what justification do such differences support the common prejudice in favor of the original? I will not gainsay that these venturesome remarks could aid and abet a philistine mentality. There is that danger. Suffice it to say that the philosophy of art is not advanced by evading the issue. Perhaps

that almost universal concern with and interest in originals is just that—a concern with and interest in originals. We still need an answer to the question of how that concern and interest are related to aesthetic experience and judgement. In any case it appears that the philosopher of art is as badly off as a curator taking a Van Meegern for a Vermeer if she has to rely on Goodman's attempt to answer Saarinen's question. In *Art and Authenticity*, like the curator, Goodman seems concerned less with art than with authenticity.

#### NOTES

1. Quoted as an introductory remark by Nelson Goodman in his essay "Art and Authenticity", anthologized in *Aesthetics Today* (rev. ed.). Morris Philipson and Paul J. Gudel, (New York and Ontario: 1980). Meridian Book, New American Library.

2. Goodman persistently employs the moral terms "fake" and "forgery" for the inauthentic work. Since the issue is purportedly purely aesthetic, clarity is not served by this terminology. I am convinced that this use of moral epithets to characterize aesthetic differences tends to give Goodman's claims a degree of unwarranted plausibility.

3. Goodman's use of "merely looking" is at first intended to exclude documentation, chemical analysis, and so on, but it tends later to mean looking without knowledge, without preparation, and finally seems to mean without respectable elitist sensitivity.