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Is 'The Art of Forgery' an Art at All?

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NOAH CHARNEY'S INTRIGUING SURVEY OF ART CRIME GRAPPLES WITH A QUESTION THAT HE HIMSELF NEVER FULLY ANSWERS: ARE THE GREAT FORGERS ARTISTS IN THEIR OWN RIGHT?

THE GIRL WITH THE PEARL EARRING, JOHANNES VERMEER, C. 1665

The equivocation in the usage of the word “art” in the title of *The Art of Forgery* is more provocative than one might initially believe. The phrase “The Art of ____” is a common one, used as a more appealing substitute for locutions like “How to ____” or “A Guide to ____”. The word “Art” classes up such sayings, in the process heightening the proceedings they describe. In the case of *The Art of Forgery*, however, “art” very much means *art*, in all of its elevated aesthetic practices and assumptions. By the time Noah Charney’s thorough survey of art crimes comes to its close, one cannot help but ask: can what forgers do, however wrong it is, be considered art—perhaps even great art?

This question is one Charney himself never gives a clear answer to. He closes out the book by claiming, “There is, without doubt, an art to forgery, just as there is an art of a different sort to the confidence tricks and deceptions that so often pass off art as greater than it actually is” (252-3). He then qualifies this, adding, “But forgers are largely failed artists who are missing one component of greatness” (253). This passage is repeated verbatim earlier in the book in the chapter “Revenge”, after a passage on the forger Eric Hebborn (108). In that section of “Revenge”, Charney elaborates:

We should also remember that, no matter how convincing the forgery, a forger’s work is inherently derivative. Renaissance artists looked to Aristotle for a definition of what makes a work of art great. Aristotle suggests three criteria. A work of art must be ‘good’, as in exhibiting skill and successfully accomplishing what the artist set out to do; it must be ‘beautiful’, meaning aesthetically pleasing or morally elevating; and it must be ‘interesting’, which concerns the idea behind the work’s content and what thoughts and emotions it provokes. (108)

The problem here is that nowhere does Charney clearly delineate which of the three Aristotelian attributes a forger lacks. Indeed, at various points throughout the many narratives within *The Art of Forgery*, forgers express each of the three criteria in some capacity. Hebborn himself arguably expresses all three, as Charney’s somewhat glowing profile of him makes more than clear. When he poses the question of whether or not Hebborn can be considered a great artist, he can only really muster, “While Eric Hebborn could stand strong among the Renaissance greats he forged, most forgers are not of his calibre” (107). In sum: if there are forgers that are true artists, they are few and far

between. But this means that, if Charney is right, there is at least one forger who is also a great artist; as he told NPR, “[Hebborn is] the only forger... in this book who I would argue was at the same artistic skill level as the people he imitated.”

The only other criterion that might categorically exclude any forgers from being considered “artists” in the full sense is that of “derivation”: the forger’s necessarily subordinate position in relation to the oeuvre of the artist whose work he forges. (The male pronoun here is of note, as Charney begins this volume by claiming that he knows “of no notable female forgers in the history of forgery”.) Reasonably, one might claim that because, for example, Han van Meegeren tried to forge in the style of Vermeer, whatever skill he exhibited is merely an impression of an already established style. Thus, whatever van Meegeren exhibited in his paintings, such as his famous forgery *The Disciples of Emmaus*, can merely be found in the already existing catalogue of Vermeer originals, and thereby “done better”. For original art, one ought go to Vermeer; for impressive copy work, one should study van Meegeren’s forgeries.

Distinctions such as that one are helpful to an extent, but they are also undermined by several facts about the art world that Charney quite helpfully outlines in *The Art of Forgery*. First, the category of “originality” is often presumed, without much substantial warranting, to be an inviolable feature of great art. This assumption, as Charney points out, is often culturally relative; much of the history of Chinese art is defined by the repetition of the styles and structures of China’s great masters. Though a Western audience might think such technique to be the equivalent of copy-and-pasting, for Chinese artists this reverence for the great masters of their country comes out of a respect for the art itself, not out of a lazy desire to merely replicate an already popular style. (Charney points out, however, that as Western tastes have come to China, originality has become a more desired feature.)

Second, the question of originality’s source is often unclear. From the Renaissance masters to contemporary artists like Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons, artists have relied on the use of studios, wherein multiple different artists work together to produce the vision of the lead artists. As a result, many works of art that are attributed to one person are the

result of many people working together, a point that Charney hammers home multiple times throughout *The Art of Forgery*. Even though in many of these “master studio” cases the vision and design is entirely in the hands of the master artist—Charney uses the example of Paul Rubens in his [NPR interview](#)—the resultant work of art is still the result of many different hands.

When this happens, has the work lost its originality? Must the artwork have been entirely created by the visionary himself? The history of art curation suggests a “no” answer to the latter question, as scores of paintings from the great masters of art still bear the sole attribution of the master in art galleries around the world. But obsession with originality is often paired with the idyllic vision of a lone artist toiling over a painting in his studio for hours on end. Charney wisely challenges this notion with the artistically and morally ambiguous narratives in *The Art of Forgery*, but by the book’s end, it’s still not clear what “original” means.

Third and finally, the best forgeries are challenges to the traditional notion of “originality”. If one views any of the many full-color juxtapositions of a forgery with its source of inspiration that are included in the glossy pages of *The Art of Forgery*, it will become clear that while forgeries imitate, they also create anew. In the case of the forger Wolfgang Beltracchi, who worked in tandem with a league of confidence artists, his Campendonk forgeries not only display knowledge of Campendonk’s technique, but also create striking new images. The many full-color illustrations provided in *The Art of Forgery* invite the viewer to challenge her faith in the unassailability of the great masters’ techniques. Ingenious types like Hebborn prove that much of the brilliance that artists, critics, and experts identify in paintings has a lot more to do with the artificial construction of an artist’s career rather than an objective fact found in the oils and watercolors themselves. The fact that art experts and curators have been (and continue to be) fooled by forgers is evidence enough that there is skill—indeed, *artistic* skill—in the work of forgery.

In Denis Dutton’s excellent anthology *Arguing About Art’s* chapter on forgery, Alfred Lessing argues, “The offense felt to be involved in forgery is not so much against the

spirit of beauty (aesthetics) or the spirit of the law (morality) as it is against the spirit of art” (eds. Neill and Ridley, Routledge, 2002, 92). While misleading buyers into believing that the painting they are buying comes from a particular source is easy to chalk up as fraud, pulling “wool over eyes”, if you will, isn’t the art that Charney is truly interested in—though there is undoubtedly an art to such a con. Rather, Charney’s fascination with people like Hebborn comes from the fact that the products such artists produce appear to be great art. “Somehow,” Lessing continues, “a work such as [van Meegeren’s] *The Disciples [of Emmaus]* lacks artistic integrity. Even if it is beautiful and even if van Meegeren had not forged Vermeer’s signature, there would still be something wrong... *What?* is still our question” (92).

The sphere in which forgers operate might help explain why that “something wrong” is so hard to identify. The “crimes” of forgery manifest most distinctly in that nebulous “art world”, in all of its caprice and high-minded taste. Sure, some of the best forgeries are aesthetically beautiful, but if they violate implicitly adopted standards like originality, they’ll never pass the test of art culture—even if, as Charney boldly claims about Hebborn, the forgeries are as genuinely arresting as the work of the grand masters that they draw from. Because forgers practice their craft—or art—in the wealth-drenched, elite circles of the art community, a world largely inaccessible to the general public, the crimes forgers commit aren’t typically seen as all that bad. Only the disgruntled buyer or the disgraced museum curator will end up truly rankled. As Charney rather starkly puts it, “In the field of art forgery, the benefits outweigh the risks, and by a mile” (159), partially because forgery “affects only wealthy individuals and faceless institutions” (249).

The art world is a murky one indeed, and sussing out the various biases of buyers, collectors, and experts, all of which form the baseline of judgment from which claims about artworks are made, is not easy. To a layperson, it’s not clear what makes an original artwork and an exceptional forgery different in the realm of the aesthetic front. The whole reason forgery has been a successful enterprise for so many, enough to fill a whole book, is because forgers often pull off dazzling art, enough to fool even the most wizened of scholars.

There is, however, a distinction that helps elucidate a great forgery from a great artwork. In the aforementioned *Arguing About Art*, Dutton writes, “The significant opposition I find then is not between ‘forged’ and ‘original,’ but between correctly represented performance and misrepresented artistic performance” (109). Even if one can see that a forgery is aesthetically impressive, the moral and artistic wrong comes in the misattribution of the artist, not in the composition of the painting itself. (In fact, many forgeries explained in *The Art of Forgery* became quite valuable later on precisely because of the story of their being forged, in addition to their often excellent technique.) One might genuinely prefer, say, one of Geert Jan Jansen’s forgeries in the style of Karel Appel to an original Appel itself, but the head of an art gallery is well within reason to be peeved if she finds a Jan Jansen rather than an Appel in her collection, when she was under the presumption that the latter was the true provenance of the painting.

Yet as relatively straightforward as Dutton’s distinction is, there’s still a feeling that’s difficult to shake off, one that goes back to Charney’s notion that forgers lack “one element of greatness”. What that element is remains unclear by the end of *The Art of Forgery*. But if Charney is right in claiming that “the benefits outweigh the risks, and by a mile” in the art forgery game, then it’s likely that forgers will continue to pose challenging dilemmas to the originality-obsessed art world.

Art forgery does function as crime, but it also operates as a means of interrogation over what makes an artwork great (and also valuable): is it the composition of the painting? The name attached to it? The story of its creation? Such questions can never be answered definitively, and ultimately they’re limited to a painting-by-painting basis. However, one thing is certain: so long as excellence in art remains an ambiguous identification, forgery will always exist as its complementary counter-practice.