

AUTHENTICATION IN ART

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Matisse: can you spot the fake?

A Venezuelan museum took two years to notice that their original Matisse had been swapped for a fake. Are forgeries now so good they could ruin the art market?



Odalisque in Red Trousers ... Henri Matisse's original, left, and the fake, right. Photograph: AP Photo/Sofia Imber Contemporary Art Museum

What makes a real Matisse better than a fake? What makes any original work or art more valuable and special than a copy?

In 2002, *Odalisque in Red Trousers*, a sensual and lovely painting by Matisse hanging in the Caracas Museum of Contemporary Art, was discovered to be a fake. The real painting had been stolen. It seems that no visitor, guard or curator noticed it had been replaced with a copy for quite some time. When the anomaly was finally discovered, 14 other works supposedly in the museum's collection were also reported unaccounted for.

Venezuelan authorities say the theft and replacement by a copy took place around 2000, so it seems everyone was duped by the fake for two years. Now, finally, the original 1925 painting by Matisse has been returned to Venezuela with great fanfare after it was recovered by the FBI.

The fact that a fake could pass itself off so well as the real thing – and not just any real thing, but a sumptuous artistic delicacy by a master – is perturbing. In 1936, the theoretician Walter Benjamin claimed that in the "age of mechanical reproduction", the quasi-sacred quality of original works of art – what he called their "aura" – must inevitably fade. Instead of precious cultural treasures, he believed that from now on works of art would be mere images circulating freely.

He was wrong. Reproductions of art in books and on TV have, since his time, vastly enhanced its "aura". By increasing art's fame, reproduction has helped to drive the prices of original artworks ever higher. The unique work of art has never been more valuable: that's why Venezuelais so pleased to get its real Matisse back. Yet fakes and copies get better all the time. Clearly the fake that held court for a couple of years in Venezuela's leading art museum had to be very skilled. In this sense, Benjamin was right. As photographic reproductions and scientific documentation of works of art make them easier to study, it is simpler than ever for forgers to use this information to make an accurate copy.

Can we, any longer, be confident that originals always trump their forgeries? The mystery in Caracas came at the start of a century that is seeing artistic reproduction rapidly reach new levels of perfection. Digital scanning can now enable copiers to create microscopically exact reproductions of works of art. Pioneering examples include Veronese's *Wedding at Cana* and the tomb of Tutankhamun.

These are bona fide copies made for legitimate reasons, but what's to stop a forger in the near future from engineering the perfect fake? Up to now, the real failure of all fakes is textural. A copyist might be able to reproduce the image in a Van Gogh or Rembrandt well enough, but what about their rich idiosyncratic brushwork?

3D printing may soon be able to reproduce the thickly ridged surfaces of oil paintings. The massive amounts of close-up scientific information provided by institutions like the Van Gogh Museum may then allow a forger to make a three-dimensional rather than two-dimensional fake of Van Gogh's impassioned oils.

So maybe we are at last about to enter the revolutionary age Benjamin predicted, when reproductions become so good that originals no longer have any value. At that moment the art market will collapse, and – to paraphrase Karl Marx – human art history can finally begin.

