



AiA Art News-service



Keeping it real in the art world

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Far beyond the monetary value, forgery attacks something inside us that we know to be precious

“French police seize naked woman aged 485.”

It would make an arresting headline. And the facts are almost as odd as they sound. In an unusual move last week, the French authorities seized a picture of a beautiful nude believed by experts and certainly by its owner, the Prince of Liechtenstein, to be a [Venus painted by Lucas Cranach the Elder](#) in 1531. The work is now suspected of being a fake, one of a large number involved in a fraud investigation. We'll see what happens.

It's only the latest in a flood of cases about forgery plaguing the art world at the moment. Until recently New Yorkers were intrigued by the long-running Knoedler trial, which involved selling for many tens of millions pictures supposedly by Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock and other modern American greats — but actually created in a garage in Queens by a Mr Pei-Shen Qian (whereabouts unknown). The case was settled, to the disappointment of many: these things rarely come to open court and it was an irresistible insight into the dark underbelly of the art world.

More widely, the sheer weight of lawsuits has forced the closure of several authentication boards, including the one looking after [Andy Warhol](#). Some artists — Giacometti is one — are persistently the focus of faking scandals. It goes on and on. But when we're not revelling in the soap-opera side of these stories (and the slight naughty

frisson of schadenfreude), most of us feel art forgery to be a strangely upsetting crime. Why so? There are conmen in every field. Surely with art, above all, it's the emperor who has to caveat?

Except that art — our feelings about it, and therefore our valuing of it — depends on a complicated nexus of things, of which the immediate perception of a work is only one. The art market — worth \$63.8bn in 2015, according to the latest European Fine Art Fair report by Clare McAndrew — depends almost entirely on the concept of authorship. Value is accorded to a work only partly because of its aesthetic impact, but largely because of the identity of its creator. Or, in the case of older art and objects that are anonymous, because of proven age, and a recognised place in one tradition or another. The work is what it is, yes, but it comes wrapped round with an invisible but mightily thick coating of history, allusion, back-story, association. There's a good deal of belief involved, and it does actually change the way we see things.

Let's say we're looking at a rather bad work by Van Gogh (there are some). Why do we still value it so highly? Because we are simultaneously feeling the impact of everything we know about the artist — the struggles, the pain, the dark glamour, the brilliance of his other works. The canvas before us becomes much more than itself, imbued with our knowledge of his mastery and the traces of a genius.

In this way beauty, emotion, excitement, spirituality, skill, craftsmanship — the whole bundle that makes up the aesthetic impact — has little effect on value compared to the legitimacy, the "rightness", of a work.

But wait a moment, I can hear you say. Surely this is ridiculous? What you've just described is nothing but the emperor's new clothes from the old story. How can the aesthetic experience of a certain work be worth millions if we think it was made by a certain hand, but only a tiny fraction of that if it's not?

These are strangely fragile supports on which to base a multibillion-dollar industry. The ghost of fakery can blow them away with a single puff. But that's only one reason why we feel art forgery to be so horrible a crime. Forgery is art that's pretending to be something it's not. Far beyond the monetary value, it attacks something inside us that we know to be precious. If our feelings about art rest on beliefs we can't quite explain, then it's the desire to believe itself that's being traduced. Art both creates and satisfies our longing to feel things beyond the rational. But it has to be real.