

TALES OF CONTESTED AUTHORSHIP

A deftly written, jargon-free study of the highly scientific, but still murky, world of attribution.

John Adamson



The Scientist and the Forger: Probing a Turbulent Art World
Jehane Ragai
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How do historians spot a fake? Until recently, questions of attribution in art were mostly determined by a small band of sharp-eyed specialists in painterly style: those who had learned how to discern the tiny giveaways of individual authorship – habits of brush technique, idiosyncrasies of drawing – that disclosed whether a painting was the priceless work of a master or a near-worthless copy.

Even the sharpest of expert eyes were never infallible, though. Objective means of resolving disputed attributions were rare. In the contested no-man’s-land of disagreement, questionable or downright fraudulent attributions proliferated. Wilhelm von Bode’s quip about Rembrandt – that ‘he painted 700 pictures, of which 3,000 are still in existence’ – was one that could have been applied to almost any Old Master’s uncertainly catalogued oeuvre.

Over recent decades, all this has changed. Science now provides the historian – and the intending purchaser – with an ever-diversifying range of tests for the constituent elements of a work of art. Everything from the chemical composition of pigments to the thread-count of canvas complement the dependency on the expert eye.

As Jehane Ragai brilliantly argues in *The Scientist and the Forger*, these tests have never been more urgently needed. The massive expansion of the art market and the huge profits to be garnered in relatively easy-to-replicate contemporary art, have made the early 21st century the Golden Age of the Fake.

Ragai sheds focused light on this labyrinthine and habitually shady world. As a professor of chemistry, she is in command of the scientific detail and a wonderfully non-baffling guide through the bewildering array of new techniques on offer, from ‘Infrared Reflectography’ (useful in revealing details invisible to the naked eye) to ‘Laser Ablation Inductively Coupled Plasma Mass Spectrometry’ (which identifies pigments).

Not that science has all the answers. When it comes to questions of authentication and attribution (as opposed to simple falsification), science can usually only supplement, rather than supplant, the older tests provided by archival scholarship and the expert eye.

A case in point is the Leonardo *Salvator Mundi*, which recently became, at \$450 million, the most expensive painting ever sold at auction. For most of the 20th century, this picture had been dismissed as, at best, the work of one of the master’s pupils. However, analysis of the picture under infrared reflectography revealed distinctive characteristics of Leonardo’s technique, including the use of the palm of the hand, applied to the wet paint, to create an elusive softness of line. Yet it still needed a scholar-connoisseur, Professor Martin Kemp, with knowledge acquired over a lifetime that enabled him to recognise the tell-tale clues, to understand the full ramifications of the scientific tests. However, even his findings are questioned by other scholars in the field.

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Salvator Mundi, believed by some leading Renaissance art scholars to be the work of Leonardo da Vinci, c.1500.

Ragai’s book abounds with deftly drawn case studies, from Lucas Cranach to Lucian Freud. But she is equally interested in the philosophical and ethical dimensions of artistic creation and the art market and the responsibilities that attach severally to collectors, dealers and auction houses in checking for fraud. All, she argues, are negligent to various degrees and none more so than collectors, whose credulousness is an important mainstay of the fakery that is especially rife in the world of contemporary art.

Yet as reprehensible as the

forgery business is, it posits some constructively awkward questions. When it comes to conceptual art, some may wonder who is the more accomplished con-man (or the more culpable): the highly skilled forger with a painterly technique able to dupe the expert, or the skill-free ‘artist’ who persuades the collector that a urinal or an unmade bed was ever ‘art’ in the first place. In this world of conceptual crookery, who is really fooling whom is often a moot point.

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