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## Fake or Fortune: on the Issue of Forgery of Russian Avant-Garde Art

Posted on [19. December 2015](#) by [admin](#)

# REPORT

## Fake or Fortune: on the Issue of Forgery of Russian Avant-Garde Art

Wednesday, 2 December 2015. Gallery of Russian Art and Design, GRAD, London.

GRAD, a relatively new London gallery which is backed by the long arm of Peter Aven of the Alfa Group (on him see Putin's Russia. The dangerous illusion of independent and western oligarchs, 19 June 2015, Delfi. The Lithuania Tribune: [en.delfi.lit/](http://en.delfi.lit/)) is to be congratulated for taking this initiative to organise a talk on the complementary work of scientific analysis and art historical research into works of art. For while collectors and museums are in support of the contribution of science to art history, auction houses are generally diffident if not dismissive since they are candid that research is not their concern, while the ability of science to detect fakes or establish historicity is slow in coming into their realm of consciousness.

The speakers were the Russian cultural journalist and historian of Soviet photomontage 1935-1980s, Konstantin Akinsha, and the English conservator, Nicholas Eastaugh. The gallery's announcement paired the two components stating that "scientific and historical analysis of works of art is becoming an increasingly necessary part of the due diligence process." The assumption would be that the two aspects would be integrated in the presentations and responses to audience questions. In fact, Akinsha's talk presented a list of asserted or implied cases of "fakes", "pastiche" and "questionable work" reported on in the press, while Eastaugh set out how his science is used in the authentication process and in support of art history.

Akinsha was the first to speak. He began by showing slides of works that he compared with officially accepted works from museums in order to demonstrate the case for fakes. Using stylistic analysis, he pointed to spelling mistakes, misappropriations from sources (such as an early 20<sup>th</sup> century typewriter), or inept "twins" of a known work in order to assert that the comparative works were fakes, or forgeries. He did not take into account that they could be student works, for example, and he did not make reference to any of his own research into a particular artist, nor did he ever consider scientific reports that may have been carried out on the works he challenged. He mentioned the names of major and smaller London and German auction houses who have sold "fakes", he said, as well as museums in Russia and the West who have exhibited and reproduced them in their catalogues. Nor did he hesitate to cite the names of published art historians whom he considers to have been "sloppy" and perhaps even guilty of "criminal work" – on what grounds? – in certifying art. He went on to make the audience cluck with disapproval about a current court case involving works accused of being fakes by the German police. About a Swiss collection, which he said was "under police investigation", he did not reveal that all the some 400 works have been subjected to in-depth scientific analysis by highly esteemed and reputable and experienced scientists who have found NO FAKES.

How dangerous is a little or but superficial if not unreliable information taken from second-hand sources when such hearsay is used as if it represents the truth. How disturbing his proposal that some of his colleagues should be subjected to "criminal investigation".

Nicholas Eastaugh was the second to speak. He touched lightly on the purpose of scientific investigation into works of art and its forensic role to establish authenticity through knowledge of techniques and material structures. Eastaugh mentioned the tools used to analyse pigments, supports – canvas, wood, etc. – as well as the practice of the laying in of paint in various layers by different artists and in different historical periods. All of this

contributes to attribution and authenticity, he said, the “correlation of science and views of art history integrated and inclusive”. Being a new field since the 1990s, he noted, the scientific means of investigating the material aspects of works of art are continually evolving, and he discussed more recent methods involving carbon 14 dating for example. However under-proved this particular technique may be, scientific analysis of works of art is “here to stay”, Eastaugh asserted, because of the extensive information it provides in order to identify authentic works and detect modern copies. Eastaugh gave examples from the recent case in which a German painter, Beltracchi, analysed old materials and pigments and imitated techniques, but whose mistakes were detected by scientists.

The interaction of science and art history are “here to stay”, then, but there was little evidence that this interaction was appreciated in the responses from the speakers and the moderator, dealer James Butterwick, to questions put by the audience. The scholarly work on Russian Avant-Garde painters by known and responsible art historians was glibly trashed despite the contributions of scientists into the historicity of materials and methods in their books. But there was no acknowledgement of this or enquiry into it.

Are there Russian Avant-Garde fakes?

There is the case of the nearly 200 works on paper attributed to Mikhail Larionov which, following collaborative scientific analyses and art historical research, were declared by the Geneva Penal Court in April 2001 to be fakes. There is/was also the case of a Tel Aviv gallery called “Authentic Fakes” whose painters may produce a blue Kandinsky or a pink Picasso to match their clients’ sofas. In the first case, the intent was to deceive, to make modern works be taken for historical ones. In the second case, the works were clearly labelled and there was no intent to deceive. The first are fakes, or forgeries, the second are modern copies.

So before declaring a work of art to be fake or genuine, it must be proven by the combined contributions of experienced and reputable scientific and art historical methods. Since this collaboration has been being practiced over the last 20 years or so, it is therefore not possible to say, as Akinsha declared in his opening words, that there has been an “avalanche of questionable works on the market”, a “pollution”, even, a claim reiterated by dealer Butterwick. Rather, modern works have been detected by scientists and an impressive number of authentic historical works have been identified, complemented by the research of serious scholars.

It is a great pity, even a tragedy, then, that such an excellent initiative at GRAD – and one that was the foundation of InCoRM in 2007 and the exploration and application of which is found in all the articles published in the JOURNAL OF INCORM since 2009 – appears to have been largely a cosmetic affair.


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10 December 2015

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