



## How To Love A Fake

*Art has been in the news a lot lately.*

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This past week a painting by Francis Bacon sold at Christie's for more than \$142 million. This is the most money ever paid for a single artwork at auction. Last summer we learned that the venerable and now defunct New York art dealer Knoedler and Company had sold 40 paintings purporting to be by Rothko, Pollack, de Kooning and others that were actually counterfeits made by a man in a Queens garage studio. Last week a trove of art looted by the Nazis — hundreds of paintings — was found in an apartment in Munich.



We sometimes think of paintings as like autographs. It's only Mick Jagger's autograph if he signed it, with his very hand. And it's only a Vermeer, say, or a Rothko, if Vermeer or Rothko themselves actually made the pictures.

This makes good sense when it comes to autographs. A signature is a person's mark. By affixing our mark, we sign the deal; we make the commitment; we write the check. An autograph matters because it certifies.

But none of this is true of paintings.

We value paintings for their own qualities. If we also admire the painter, this is only because he or she managed to make objects whose value is otherwise manifest.

Perhaps, then, we should think of painting, not on the autograph model, but on what I'll call the architecture model.

Le Corbusier doesn't have to have built the structure for it to be an expression of his artistic accomplishment. And so with painters. It isn't the dubious magic of the artist's touch that is significant. What matters, rather, is the distinct achievement of the artist's conception, a conception that can be realized in different ways.

This idea shouldn't be too strange. It is widely known that Titian, Rembrandt, Rubens and other Great Masters ran workshops (factories) where assistants did significant portions of the actual labor. And no one seriously expects that Jeff Koons actually made the stainless steel "Balloon Dog Orange," which this week sold at auction for close to \$60 million.

But there are borderline cases. Several months ago I discussed art historian Benjamin Binstock's remarkable proposal that a number of Vermeer's paintings were probably made by his daughter, who had labored, for a time, as his apprentice. Let us suppose that Binstock is right. Does this mean that these Vermeers are not Vermeers, that they are fakes? Well, it means that they were not painted by him; he did not apply the paint to the canvass. On the autograph conception, they aren't Vermeers. But



on the architectural conception, quite possibly (not necessarily), they are. Maybe Vermeer found a new way to make paintings, a new method? He used his daughter!

This proposal has been advanced by the art critic Blake Gopnik. From Gopnik's standpoint, Vermeer's daughter's paintings are his paintings — making a host of assumptions about the facts of the case — because they are the realization and working out of the father's project.

It is an overly narrow and parochial conception of authorship — something like the autograph conception — that gets in the way of our appreciating that artists can do things, and make things, without actually doing them and making them.

Gopnik pushes this argument to its extreme in his recent NYT essay "In Praise of Art Forgeries." Forgers, Gopnik proposes, can be an art lover's friend.

Sometimes, they give us works that great artists simply didn't get around to making. If a fake is good enough to fool experts, then it's good enough to give the rest of us pleasure, even insight.

Why suppose that a work is a fake or a copy just because the artist himself didn't actually make it? What makes a fake a good one is that it realizes, or investigates, or approximates, an artist's contribution. It makes a move in a space of possibilities opened up by him or her. It is the very fact of the forgery's success that ensures that what the forger is doing is relevant and, potentially, a contribution to the original artist's work.

Gopnik invites us to think of the faker as a kind of faithful assistant who just happened to arrive after the artist's death, or who set himself to work without the artist's explicit permission.

This idea is an important one. It applies pressure to the idea that we know what it is for a painting to be a Vermeer or a Koons. Authorship, like the wider notion of agency itself, is fraught and delicate. And it is one of art's jobs to explore this.

Nevertheless, it is important to remember that, in the real world, we do not ever come up against forgeries that duplicate the qualities of their originals; we only ever come up against forgeries that seem to do this.

Yes, they may fool the experts, as Gopnik says. But only for now.

I don't mean to suggest that the experts will always get it right eventually, thanks to a kind of infallibility of expertise. Although there is actually something to this. Not because experts are so smart, but rather because forgers usually deploy devices that are only designed to pull the wool over the contemporary crowd; in the passage of time, significant stylistic difference emerges. (This familiar point was noted by Peter Schjeldahl, in his somewhat unfriendly response to Gopnik in *The New Yorker*).

No, the deeper point is that we need to guard against misunderstanding what it means for an expert, or anyone else, to get it right.

Judgments in matters of art are themselves only ever works in progress, revising themselves in light not only of an ongoing engagement with the work, but also a continuing dialogue with other artists and thinkers, past and present. What the art historian Meyer Schapiro called "critical seeing" is something we cultivate, spread out in time. From that standpoint, getting fooled about what you are seeing, needn't be a failure at all; it is, rather, a moment in an ongoing process.

Which takes us back to Gopnik's insight. He's right that our engagement with a forgery can enable us to achieve insight into the work and conceptions of the artist who has been copied. But not because it fools the experts. But precisely because, in time, it can't.