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Dutton: The Forger's Art: Forgery and the Philosophy of Art

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idea and then refer to it to solve particular problems as they arise. He defines the graphic problem as how to choose between the available possibilities for conveying information visually in such a way as to be monosemic, that is, capable of being understood in only one way the maker of the graphic intended. He catalogs the possible ways the two "planar" variables of length and width plus the six retinal variables of size, shape, color, texture, orientation, and value can be combined to express the relations between variables, depending on whether the variables are "reorderable," ordered, quantitative, or geographic and on whether you want to produce a diagram (correspondences on the plane between all the divisions of two components), a network (correspondences on the plane between all the divisions of one component), or a map (correspondence on the plane among divisions of one component arranged according to a geographic order). Those definitions give you an idea of the level of abstraction in the analytic prose.

Fortunately, Bertin uses his mastery of visual materials to give telling examples of what he is talking about (the way the retinal variables can represent variation in a component, for instance, or the one hundred different representations of the same information he uses to pose the problem of which graphic to choose on pp. 100–137) and to develop a visual language to summarize his theory. He represents the two components of the data (we could probably call them variables) by orthogonal arrows and the third variable by a diagonal arrow rising above the plane:

The combinations can be used to express combinations succinctly, but you must learn the language to know that the above arrows stand for the number of people in the cells defined by cross-classifying an unordered qualitative variable with five categories (e.g., five reasons for going to a café) and an ordered quantitative variable (e.g., age classes).

Most importantly, Bertin emphasizes how to know when we have solved the graphic problem: when we have created an image that allows a reader to grasp at one look (or some minimum number of looks) the answer to the question he has posed of the data displayed. All this is at a level of theoretical generality that lets you reason out the answers to questions as yet unposed. His book is hard work but worth it; it gives you a systematic way to think about these problems.


Reviewed by Gary Alan Fine
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A forgery can be distinguished from an original because it looks more genuine.

Ernst Bloch

A forgery is one of those paradoxes of existence that brings the rest of the world into question. Should forgery be a crime? Or should we be grateful to the unappreciated forger for increasing our stock of Old Masters? If we can't tell the difference between a forgery and an original, aren't the two of equal value? Questions of the nature of art, these among them, make forgery into the Rubik's Cube of aestheticians—except that the Cube can, eventually, be solved.

Denis Dutton, editor of The Forger's Art, has done those of us who love a good puzzle an invaluable service by bringing together a dozen articles, some written exclusively for this volume, others previously published, on the philosophy of forgery. One emerges from the reading dazed by the contortions into which logic can be shaped and by the power of one's definition over the question one asks. Forgery is no easy topic, but it is further complicated when each theorist, like the blind men describing an elephant, "sees" the issue differently. To help the reader recognize this pachyderm, Dutton wisely opens the book with a biographical chapter on the greatest of modern forgers, Han Van Meegeren, the Dutch forger of Vermeer.

Hope Werness ("Han Van Meegeren fecit") presents the historical and personal events of Van Meegeren's life in a lively, readable fashion. Although the chapter does not contribute directly to the philosophy of forgery, it does provide a grounding for other chapters. Since Van Meegeren is the primary example used throughout the volume, this base of knowledge is essential to understand the rest. From here the plot thickens.
A number of fundamental questions cut through the remaining chapters. Most obvious is the question of whether a forgery can ever be aesthetically equal to the original on which it is based. This question was classically stated by Aline B. Saarinen:

... the most tantalizing question of all: If a fake is so expert that even after the most thorough and trustworthy examination its authenticity is still open to doubt, is it or is it not as satisfactory a work of art as if it were unequivocally genuine? (p. 92)

The question, particularly as posed by Nelson Goodman ("Art and Authenticity"), focusses on exact copies. That is, if one has two "versions" of a picture cheek-to-jowl and one cannot tell them apart, can we ascribe two different values to them? Goodman's answer to the question is that the two works of art can and should be differentiated. Even if we are not able to see the difference now, at some later time such a differentiation may be possible. Anyone who has spent time with "identical" twins should see the relevance of this belief. The heart of this approach is that aesthetics is not based simply on the paint molecules on canvas but on the interpretation of those molecules.

Such a solution, as proposed by Goodman, does not solve the problem as cleanly as one might like. First, it does not address the problem of what differentiates the pictures until we can see a difference (unless it is to goad others to see that difference—creating expectations of them). Second, it does not answer whether the difference is truly an aesthetic difference or some other kind of difference. This latter view is proposed by Alfred Lessing ("What Is Wrong with a Forgery?"), who sees the problems with "perfect" forgeries as historical, economic, and legal, but not aesthetic.

This question focuses on the artwork, but there is another approach to forgery (typically leading to its derogation) which focuses on the original creator. Every work of art has a history of production (see Goodman; and Wreen, "Is Madam? Nay, It Seems!"). The forgery is dishonest in misrepresenting this history. It was produced using "real" paints, canvases, and the like, but its "meaning" as an art is not honest. One of the aesthetic meanings of any work is that it was done in a particular period, by a particular hand. Vermeer's works are fascinating in part because they were painted in Holland during the seventeenth century, and were significantly different from any painting that had been done previously—although, of course, they were influenced by others. Judgments of aesthetics can, from this perspective, be grounded on the historical situation of the creator. Someone who creates a treatise on psychoanalysis would receive much less attention if it were written in the 1900s than if it had been created at the turn of the century; Freud has come before. This might explain why France produced so many notable impressionists in the nineteenth century but so few in the twentieth. If one viewed aesthetic qualities as absolutes, opera rated from the historical circumstances of their creation, one might imagine that a great, new impressionist working in the tradition of Monet is a possibility, instead of being immediately classified as a quaintly naive Sunday painter. As one who occasionally dabs and daubs in that style, I await, though do not expect, such a revival. My works of paint might have had some credibility a century previous but now are firmly unnotable.

The reason for this passage of style has much to do with the devaluation of forgery. Forgery deliberately misrepresents its history. However, even if fraud were not involved, the history of production of a duplication is of less aesthetic significance than that of the original. Sociologists of art, notably Howard S. Becker (1982), argue that artists are deeply affected by the aesthetic conventions of their age. Major artists are those who transcend these unstated limits of what constitutes "great art" and can convince enough of their contemporaries or those who follow that their innovations are worthy of the label "art." The forger has a much easier job; after all, the conventions which he uses have been accepted through the pioneering of others. His creativity has become mimicry. As Dutton ("Artistic Crimes") notes, the history of occidental art is based on who created a work: when, where, why, and how. The canons of good journalism apply to art history. For the same reason that we care less about the second heart transplant, we care less about a "new" Vermeer, so forgers feel they must convince their audiences that they are presenting "the real thing."

This approach takes us behind the problem of identity (that is, whether two art works can be distinguished). The problem with the great art forgeries is not that they mimic a particular painting but that they do not. If we are deceived when we find two works that appear the same, the deception has little social impact, although it dramatically affects those who now have works judged "genuine" or "fake." This situation can be contrasted to that which is involved in works that are termed "original forgeries." (Harris 1961). Han Van Meegeren's Christ and the Disciples at Emmaus is such a work. It is not similar to anything Vermeer painted; therefore, by accepting it into Vermeer's oeuvre, we have substantially altered our understanding of Vermeer. Thus, some art critics con-
sider forgery an example of “cheating history” (Fine 1983). Besides making critics look ridiculous, which forgeries surely do, they also change our relation to the past in some small way.

Original forgeries raise Van Meegeren’s question about his own work: if he can fool the critics with his Vermeer, doesn’t that make him as good an artist as Vermeer? It is a question that haunts critics. Although few of our esteemed critics would grant him this exalted status, the question is not easy to answer. From the view that appearance is the key value in art (Jack W. Meiland, “Originals, Copies and Aesthetic Value”) it would seem that one would have to give the Dutch devil his due. Yet most people (including most contributors to this volume) accept the relational, interac-
tional qualities of art. As Leonard Meyer (“Forgery and the Anthropology of Art”) notes, in practice we never judge objects on their intrinsic attributes alone. Meyer’s claim is that it is foolish to attempt to make a watertight separation between aesthetic and other criteria. Meyer suggests that to pretend to admire a forgery or to think it is no different from an original is reverse snobbery, which ignores our feelings. This perspective is congruent with those interpretive sociologies, such as symbolic interactionism, which suggests that the meaning of an object can be understood only in the light of its context and not through any intrinsic qualities. Such an approach can accept the changed meaning and value of a forgery after its unmasking because of the change in its social context. Indeed, such a perspective might go further in asserting that there may be occasions in which a forgery may have more aesthetic interest than the original on which it was based, such as a Rembrandt copy of a Lastman (Mark Sagoff, “The Aesthetic Status of Forgery”).

As we venture into the heady world of new art movements, the entire question of forgeries becomes more delicate. How, after all, can one forge Duchamp’s Fountain—a real ceramic urinal? The display of found objects presents the same problem to those who wish to draw a firm line between creator and deceiver. Where are the boundaries of art? As long as we object to forgery because of its “fraud,” we have little real difficulty, but if we choose to consider work done by the hand of one person which happens to be passed off as that of another as forgery, how can we protect the art restorer? The argument that most sociologists of art make is that we know as participants in the “art world” what really constitutes original art and what constitutes forgery, and from this institutional view we are unlikely to confuse the two.

One final question is raised in several of the chapters: what kind of works can be forged? Nelson Goodman makes an influential distinction between autographic works, in which performance and individual style are crucial, and so can be forged, and allographic works, in which the style of creating the work is not important. Paintings can be forged, but can the score of a symphony be forged in the same way? Goodman, Joseph Margolis (“Art, Forgery, and Authenticity”), and Monroe Beardsley (“Notes on Forgery”) attempt to deal with this dichotomy, but to loss effect than with some of the other issues in the volume. To divide works of art into two classes seems naive to begin with, and although there are some differences worth exploring here in terms of the social uses of “copying,” this approach does not sufficiently consider the nature of the economic market and the options of “discovering” aesthetics in all parts of the art world.

With all these philosophical gremlins lurking around corners, The Forger’s Art provides endless fascination. Understanding forgery involves the skill of asking absurd questions and answering them only slightly less absurdly and with considerable bravado. One feature lacking from this admirable collection is that we learn about forgery only from the standpoint of the artist, the critic, and the general public, but where is the voice of the forger? Forgers have been quite capable as self-publicists, and several (David Stein, Elmyr de Hory, Tom Keating) have written or contributed to their own autobiographies. Each has a justification for his actions, which generally can be described as “blaming the victim.” Each artist sees himself as having been betrayed by the art establishment, and each makes a forceful case for the “appearance theory of aesthetics,” demonstrating how their self-esteem can be insulated from the implications of their crimes. They did make many people happy until they were discovered: a perverse use of the phrase “doing well by doing good.” Unfortunately, Dutton’s collection presents a world in which there is forgery without forgers. As a collection of writings by philosophers it sometimes appears that there are only hypothetical crimes: “imagine a forgery, . . . .” If for no other reason, we should be grateful for Han Van Meegeren; he would surely have had to be invented had he never lived.

Some readers will miss any discussion of the history and extent of forgery beyond the confines of Van Meegeren. Is forgery a major social problem? How is it dealt with? Although this book does not pretend to be anything other than a collection of papers on the philosophy of art, those who wish entree to the subject could legitimately ask for a longer and more empirical introduction that would place the problem of forgery in social, historical, and legal perspectives.
These qualms aside, Denis Dutton's volume is admirably suited for any scholar interested in issues of what makes art "art." The issues that forgery raises are significant precisely because they are potentially subversive of all art and artistic theories. Criminals sometimes make the best teachers—and the most troubling ones. We should never forget the words of Theodore Rousseau, Jr., Curator of Paintings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York:

We should all realize that we can only talk about the bad forgeries, the ones that have been detected; the good ones are still hanging on the walls. [Goodrich 1970:224]

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Reviewed by Miles Orvell
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Only in the last ten or fifteen years, picking up where Robert Taft left off in the thirties, have we begun to connect photography with the larger cultural and social history of which it is necessarily a part. One such connection—between photography and the city—seems now, in the light of Peter Hales’s Silver Cities, to have been long overdue for detailed consideration. (It has been equally neglected by urban specialists: in his otherwise inclusive and multidisciplinary Images of the American City [1976], Anselm Strauss has remarkably little to say about photography.) Yet the connection is a natural one, for the noisy growth of the American city in the nineteenth century coincided with the advent of photography, and the camera was inevitably an adjunct to the process of urbanization, directing the eye, and the mind’s eye, according to the interests of the image-maker. Hales is interested in the whole spectrum of urban photography from its beginnings to World War I, encompassing the early daguerreotypists, commercial studios, amateurs, and reformers; and he articulates a range of types and purposes that gives order to the inchoate and boundless mass of city scenes. Though not without certain problems, Silver Cities is a brilliant synthesis of social, cultural, and technological history, a handsomely produced, lavishly illustrated survey—over two hundred images—of a previously neglected, richly fertile field of research.

Hales discerns several distinct phases in the history of urban photography, reflecting changes in the way people saw cities and in the nature of photographic technology. Chapter one, which covers the period from 1839 to 1870, outlines the development of a standardized style that pictured the city as a place of civic order, architectural monuments, and growing prosperity—whatever the reality of depressions and disorder might have been. When the wet-plate collodion process, with its easy multiple copies, replaced the more limited daguerreotype, the market for urban views increased dramatically, and both single plates and complete books became available, based on the precedent of the daguerreotype's quiet celebration of the city. The San Franciscan G. R. Fardon, for example, produced an album in 1856 that taught both "what to see [and] how to see it," featuring categories of "history, culture, fire protection, trade, business, and geography," and feeding the city's ambition to promote itself commercially, despite its economic depression, and feast the eyes of the armchair traveler. Fardon had invented, as Hales says, "the photographic booster book" (p. 50). These early scenes were devoid of human presence, but in 1859 Edward Anthony of New York significantly advanced the art in a set of stereo card views that took advantage of the instantaneous capabilities of the developing technology, showing a populous city that delighted Oliver Wendell Holmes with its "multitudinous complexity of movement" (p. 59).

The decades following the Civil War were marked by a continuation of the earlier booster tendencies, with photographers capitalizing on the increasing speed of film and on the growing reproductive technologies of the medium to reach an even wider audience of book and magazine readers. Hales calls this movement the "Grand Style," and in his second chapter, covering the years from 1870 to 1893, he surveys the depiction of the city as a "place of monumental scale and inexorable progress, where laissez-faire capitalism was successfully converting urban entropy into a new civilization—an environment of order, grandeur, and permanence" (p. 119). Hales demon-