BEYOND THE RELIC CULT OF ART

BY ALEXANDER NAGEL

I am nostalgic for a time before the modern concept of art forgery had gelled, when it was possible to imagine many ways for artworks to exist out of their time. I love the culture of Renaissance art because it was not settled in its categories, and produced art out of that unsettlement. It knew forgery, but it wrinkled time in other ways as well.

Between the 17th and 19th centuries, the temporal life of artworks settled down, or at least people began to insist that it had. Art historians got down to work, showing how artists belonged to their time and explaining why great paintings were original and unrepeatable. Sculpture was slower to come under the new regime, enabling the 18th-century classicist Winckelmann and his many followers, even to this day, to celebrate the glories of Greek statuary by looking at Roman copies. Artists continued looking backwards, but the divide between the present and the past seemed ever more unbridgeable. An ancient activity, arguably central to art-making—remaking works from another time, making works as if you are someone else—became criminalized, and now was condemned to go about its business in a skulking and fiendish manner. More than exacting study and technical skill were required to fool the cognoscenti; one had to resort to smoking paintings, patinating sculptures, and concocting paper trails, for example.

Here is a good assignment for an enterprising journalist. Go to China and find the absconded Pei Shen Qian, the painter who produced the Pollocks, Rothkos, Klines, De Koonings, Motherwells, Newmans, and Stills that were sold by the Knoedler gallery in the 1990s and 2000s for tens of millions of dollars before they were revealed as what they were—commissions from the dealer Glafira Rosales and her partner José Carlos Bergantinos Diaz, who sold the paintings to Knoedler for hundreds of thousands of dollars after having paid Pei Shen Qian a piddling amount for them. As Blake Gopnik has argued, there is much to be learned from forgeries. I would want to learn what it took to produce the works, and how Pei’s abilities improved over time. I’d like to know which of these artists was the hardest to get right, and which of them he thinks is the most over-rated. (I’d bet on Still.)

Unlike Gopnik and Jonathon Keats and several others, I am not here to celebrate forgeries. Art forgery is the perversion—there is no better word for it—of an ancient impulse inside art, as old, probably, as art itself. A look at the history reveals why it was inevitable that art forgery would develop once certain conditions came into being, but it also shows, and this is the main point, that things don’t have to be this way. We are in a historical cul-de-sac and we really should get out of it, especially as the conditions are quite good now for doing so—good, because the entire tenor of our technology points in this direction, and also because the expansion of the art market to China has generated an industrial production of forgeries that will soon make the current state of affairs unsustainable. Forgery is not simply an invention of the modern art market, though it is true, as I’ll explain in a moment, that art forgery in the West only began to be treated as a crime as the modern art market came into being in the late 15th and 16th centuries.

In China the discourse of art forgery begins very early, but in Europe it is rare to hear about forgeries of art before 1500. Art forgery goes unmentioned by ancient Roman law, which did lay down quite a number of strictures concerning document forgery and the counterfeiting of currency. In the Christian Middle Ages, talk of fakery buzzed with special intensity in the vicinity of holy relics. What matters in a relic is not its visual appearance so much as its provenance. An otherwise ordinary looking tunic is venerated because it belonged to Christ, or to a saint. If it had nothing to do with the worshipped person then it is a fraud. These rules apply in any relic cult, whether it is focused on Buddha or Elvis.
By contrast, what matters in images (icons, statues, etc.) is their visual aspect, which was generally consid-
ered transmissible from one image to another. In Christian art (and in parallel in Buddhist and Hindu art), the art of making images was inscribed in the transfer of visual information governed by precise protocols that are designed to allow any acculturated viewer to recognize what a given image represents, and to enable the image to deliver the effects that such a representation should deliver.

Michelangelo was testing the boundaries of an emerg-
cent culture of art appreciation, which was beginning to ask questions such as: Where does this work fit into the history of Florentine art? How is it typical of its time? Is it by Guotto or a follower? What fascinated Michelangelo, I think, was the opportunity to stand at the juncture of two ways of viewing past art. In contrast to copying for training purposes, which proceeds from the premise that the lessons of the model could and should be applied in the present, copying them as artifacts proceeds from exactly the opposite premise, that the model is foreign, that art has moved irreversibly in new directions. In reproducing the strokes made by the original artist, I relive them as a series of decisions, decisions that were natural for him and are not for me. It is not just that his individual style is different from mine, but that the entire epoch, the entire period style, the very premises on which he worked, are different. The strange quality of a sleeve, therefore, and my resistance to it, prompt questions about the otherness of those times generally.

I'm going to imagine that Pei Shen Qian had a similar experience. In a recent essay published in these pages, Jonathon Keats, “The Value of Forgery,” Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics 153/54 (2008), 5-19, pointed me to this passage.

As soon as they became an art market sensation, Michelangelo's designs were reproduced, often in other media such as ivory and silver. Of course Giulio wouldn't have been in the position of being fooled by a devilishly convincing copy if other people hadn't felt differently and desired the original even in the face of a perfect copy, because only the original is the relic of the great artist. With the reproductions, this view was to acquire a stranglehold over the culture of art, which it has maintained right down to the museums, exhibitions, and art fairs of today. Through the 16th century, however, the situation was not yet decided. The hand of the artist became increas-
antly visible in painting after Raphael's death in 1520, in the palpable brushwork of Titian, for example, turning the entire work into a certificate of authorship. And yet Titian extended his hand through a busy workshop, giving connoisseurs much discriminating work to do. Many of Michelangelo's designs were reproduced, often in other media such as ivory and silver. Of course Giulio Romano, whom Shakespeare called "that rare Italian master," was a representative of both the new art culture and the older understanding of the transmissibility of authorship: his hands worked to the "Raphael" that the Medici were determined to keep. He believed that artists were endowed with special gifts and that art had the power to do many things, including changing the way human beings lived. At the same time, he believed in the capacity of art to go "beyond nature," escaping the limits of an individual making of a given historical moment. This is a strong and sophisticated view, far richer than a relic cult of art. We might learn from it.

ENDNOTES

1. Blake Gopnik, "In Praise of Art Forgeries," The New York Times, November 3, 2013. See also the thorough theoreti-


3. nytimes.com/projects/2013/china-art-fraud/

4. In a previous his Held essay, Blake Gopnik correctly described the mutually reinforcing relationship of art-
historical inquiry and the modern art market: "Once the art history established a set of relatively stable notions about which creative acts had mattered in the past, a new market could piggyback on those notions to assign value to tradable objects uniquely linked to each of those acts." (italics added)

5. Harold Rosenberg, "American Action Painters," Art News (December, 1952), and he adds: “The man who started to remake himself has made himself into a commodity worth thousands of dollars, a tract of art, a 'market' for his ideas. I'm going to imagine all of this, since it is very hard to find reproductions of Pei Shen Qian's forgeries, let alone gain access to the actual works. Beyond having no monetary value (for the moment), they are considered so similar, as if they contained a virus that would destroy the whole system if allowed to spread.

6. For more on the preceding examples of Renaissance forgery, see Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood, Anachronic Renaissance (New York: Zone Books, 2010).

7. Karl Frey, Michelangelo: Quellen und Forschungen (Berlin: K. Curtius, 1907), 139. To this day scholars debate the attribution of several highly finished Michelangelo drawings that exist in copies. See Alexander Perrig, Michelangelo-Studien I: Michelangelo und die Zeichnungswissenschaft — Ein methodologischer Versuch (Bern and Stuttgart: H. Lang, 1976) and Michelangelo's Drawings: The Science of Forgery, trans. Michael Joyce (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991). I don't share Perrig's dogged belief in his capacity to break through the copy culture and assign these sheets to an array of individual masters on "scientific" grounds, but I appreciate his bringing this problem to the attention of art historians.

8. Vasari, Le vite de` più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architet-
tori nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568. For more on the preceding examples of Renaissance forgery, please see Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood, Anachronic Renaissance (New York: Zone Books, 2010).