

From Original to Copy and Back Again

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WITHIN AESTHETICS, exchanges about the nature of forgery have been made largely in response to Nelson Goodman's *Languages of Art* (1968). In his original scenario we are invited to contemplate two paintings: one is authentic and the other is forged, but we cannot distinguish them by "merely looking," without the aid of X-Rays and chemical analyses. Our different aesthetic response to the two paintings is used to argue, in the words of Joseph Margolis, that "there are bound to be aesthetically relevant considerations in the appreciation of art that are not directly accessible to perception or to any other relevant mode of experience."¹ Historians have been largely silent during the debates on Goodman's claim: not, I think, because it is not an important problem, but rather because what matters to historians are the imperceptible considerations in any given case, rather than the simple existence of such considerations.

Here I would like to open the limited dialogue between art history and aesthetics on this subject by exploring the ways that forgeries, copies, and originals function within historical and critical discourse. I hope to show that the art historical way of ordering such concepts intersects the distinctions made by aestheticians in a mutually illuminating manner. A useful step in this direction has been taken by Crispin Sartwell, who has questioned the assumption that it is possible to distinguish authentic and inauthentic artworks.² In place of the dichotomy authentic / inauthentic he has proposed a twenty-one-step sequence of works from those that are most clearly inauthentic (and to which we would want to attach the label "forgery") to those that are most clearly authentic.³ The list, which need not be repeated here, begins with copies that are represented as originals, and ends with paintings that have been

cleaned. Enroute it passes through such problematic intermediaries as the “masterful copy of a particular painting to which a [forged] signature has been added by another hand.”

What I would like to do here is propose that Sartwell is not quite correct in historical terms when he says that “the authentic and the inauthentic are continuous with one another.” The fact that “cases can be adduced to any desired degree of intermediacy” (Sartwell’s next sentence) does not imply that there is a mathematical continuity between the poles of authenticity and inauthenticity. I agree that it does not make sense to speak of authenticity as a well defined term, but I think that the path from one to the other is made in discrete steps. Those “steps” are historically determined categories and habits of thought. Such criteria are relevant here since history has given us the terms “authentic” and “inauthentic” to begin with, and it is therefore plausible that it has given us other terms as well. To rephrase Sartwell’s claim: there are only a few “degrees” that we know how to “desire,” and historical practice has given us their names. Sartwell’s twenty-one steps, in other words, cannot be made infinite upon demand.

The particular sequence that I will propose has a second difference from Sartwell’s continuum and from Goodman’s dichotomy. Instead of comparing authentic and inauthentic, I will be comparing imperceptible difference with immediately obvious difference. The reason for this change also lies in the realm of historical response. In most cases, historians and critics do not find themselves wondering about nuances of forgery: the intention to deceive is far less common than the intention to emulate.⁴ Goodman’s problem, of seeing the difference between two apparently identical paintings, may never have taken place. Even when Van Meegeren’s paintings were thought to be Vermeers, there was no single painting that matched any of Vermeer’s authentic works. In saying this I do not mean that Goodman’s problem might not be a good test case: simply that to achieve it, he has to leave the realm of history. The history of art is marginally concerned with forgery, but centrally informed by the progression from the student working “in the manner” of the master to the independent artist working “in his own manner.” Questions of the aesthetic component of imperceptible

differences arise whenever one looks at a second- or third-rate picture, and wonders if it is sufficiently different from its models to be experienced as an original in its own right. Forgery, in this view, is a special case of all artistic work, a perversion or failure of the normal process of increasing distance between student and master.

So I wish to point out that forgery itself may be defined as a special case of a more general phenomenon, and that the sequence from original to copy is not continuous but proceeds in historically determined stages. My third contribution to this question is to point to the fact that the sequence forms a loop. Original and copy are not well-defined terms: not only because they are linked by intermediaries, as Sartwell says, but because they contaminate one another by forming a cycle that repeats through history. We can begin with the “given term,” the original work itself.

1. In art history, an *original* work may or may not be an authentic work. The *Virgin of Vladimir*, an early Russian icon, has been overpainted at least five times in the last seven centuries. Art historical texts tend to assign the concept of originality to works that possess one or more of three further properties: originality (which I will call *originary* to avoid confusion with the general term *original*), primacy, and uniqueness.

Originary works are those that appear to be without antecedent. The smile in Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* (1503-05) inaugurates a tradition of enigmatic smiles from Leonardo's pupil Bernardino Luini onward (as in the *Madonna of the Rose* in the Brera in Milan), but *Mona Lisa*'s smile can be understood as part of a tradition that goes back to Leonardo's teacher Verrocchio and ultimately to archaic Greek sphinxes (6th c. B.C.).⁵ Note that originality is constrained by the contextual uses of tradition, and not by a fixed definition. If we search for the history of polka-dots, we can trace them to a nineteenth-century dance, or all the way back to panthers.⁶ According to George Steiner, whatever is *primary* refers mostly to itself, and whatever is secondary refers mostly to what is primary. Hence Shakespeare is primary, and Shakespeare criticism is secondary.⁷ An originary work

might not be primary, and vice versa. *Uniqueness*, the third nonessential property of originality, distinguishes originals clearly from certain kinds of copies, but only blurrily from most terms we will be discussing. None of the three properties of originality taken individually is sufficient to distinguish originals from copies, and we will see traces of each idea in the categories that follow.

2. Next are *strict copies*, works made in exact emulation of originary works.⁸ In the strictest sense the strict copy is a modern invention. Baroque copies were seldom line-for-line, and Baroque academies had a well-developed aesthetic of copying that did not involve “photographic” copywork.⁹ A *reconstruction* is a particular kind of strict copy, in which the work is made again in the same way it was originally made, perhaps including layers of gesso, *imprimatura*, *grisaille*, body color, glaze, and varnish. It need not look any different from a strict copy that only mimics the surface layer of paint (as is done in contemporary conservation). The different aesthetic responses provoked by reconstructions and strict copies mirror the responses provoked by Goodman’s original and forgery, except that the successful reconstruction casts doubt on the original by making us wonder if all the layers were really necessary.

Given the large literature on forgeries¹⁰ and the extensive investigations of the Van Meegeren case,¹¹ I will make only two points here regarding forgery. First, though it is true that in this sequence most forgeries are strict copies and reconstructions, pictures called “forgeries” can also be found among the looser copies we will consider below.¹² Forgery, in effect, is dispersed through several categories and loses its primary value: as is appropriate for a category that is historically marginal in comparison with originality and copying. And second, the detailed historical study of forgeries might augment Sartwell’s twenty-one examples.¹³ Much of this literature has gone unnoticed in the philosophic debates, though some philosophers have stressed the historical aspect of our understanding of forgeries.¹⁴ The historical material demonstrates that the problem of forgery is seldom equivalent to the problem of achieving an indistinguishable strict copy. For example, a strict copy might refer

to a forgery, without being a forgery. Adrian Kovacs has made copies of Cézanne's self-portraits, which he calls self-portraits of himself.¹⁵ But the artist's advertisements show that he refers to forgery rather than exemplifying it. This is like the difference between the word forgery and the word "forgery," and it opens the possibility of reorganizing the topic of forgery in terms of quotation rather than intention or authenticity.

3. A *reproduction* is a copy that is readily distinguished from the original, but is meant to reduce or avoid an appearance of originality. Hence reproductions are works that are taken to have the same absence of originality that strict copies have, but with an appreciable formal and aesthetic distance from the originals. A reproduction is therefore one step further from an original than a successful strict copy. In art criticism there is a well-developed dialogue on originals and reproductions, and among its claims is the idea that the "age of mechanical reproduction" has served to bring out the concept of originality latent in previously "unreproducible" works.¹⁶ Reproductions can be mechanical or hand-made, and that difference can be used to modify the reference to originality. An example of the former is Sherrie Levine's photographs after Walker Evans photographs. By rephotographing from copies of Evans' negatives, Levine avoids the issue of skill and stresses the theme of copying: as she sees it, everything is a copy, and the world is "filled to suffocating" with copies of copies. The open, obvious, unskilled nature of her copies is meant to underscore the universal impossibility of originality.¹⁷ Handmade reproductions may be exemplified by Mike Bidlo's paintings of Picasso paintings. Since he actually paints them, his works are more complicated than Sherrie Levine's (and arguably also more aesthetically confused): he also refers to the skill and the genius that went into Picasso's works as well as to the difficulty, irrelevance, undesirability, or unimportance of originality. A work such as Bidlo's *Not Duchamp* (1984), which is an assemblage designed to mimic Duchamp's earliest ready-made, the *Bicycle Wheel* (1913), shows how complex these references can be.

Some reproductions approach or depart from originals in terms of quantity rather than skill or quality. *Multiples* and *limited editions* are sets of objects that preserve the idea of the

original's uniqueness. Joseph Beuys's multiples have this double reference: in part they are anonymous works of machine production, and in part they are originals. In paleography this is known as the difference between signatures and autographs. The latter are unique, and are by the signator's hand; the former can be reproduced or signed in absentia, by contracting a surrogate signator. Ottoman *tughras*, elaborate calligraphic Sultans' signatures, were drawn by calligraphers and sometimes also signed in autograph with the calligrapher's name, as one might sign a painting.

4. *Imitation* is a word introduced by the poet Robert Lowell; he used it to describe his poems "imitated" from originals rather than translated in the usual sense.¹⁸ Part of the concept of imitation is the construction of a new entity comprised of the imaginative fusion of the new and old works or artists. *Emulation* and *free copy* are synonyms, since such works are typically engaged in "conversations" with the original that paradoxically involve alteration in the name of greater fidelity. Imitations evoke the Italian distinction between imitation (*imitazione*) and imagination (*fantasia*).¹⁹ In historical terms, Lowell's position is that a work must be re-created by the *fantasia*, rather than slavishly imitated, in order to be "really" or "truly" true to the original. The opposite to this, and the privileging of *imitazione*, is provided by Vladimir Nabokov's translation of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*. Nabokov stresses absolute precision in transcribing individual words and his translation is frequently unreadable; in our terms his is an attempt at a strict copy.²⁰

5. *Variations, variants*, and works "after" or "in homage to" an original are allied to imitations but stress divergence from the original rather than the affinity. The catalogue of an exhibition held at Nuremberg in 1980 lists over one hundred variations on Dürer's work, many shown side by side with the originals.²¹ Though they span the full range of styles that were possible in Germany in the 1970's, most are primarily variations, as the catalogue suggests: they argue that style and relation to the past are independent. Picasso's works based on Old Masters are the best-known modern examples of variations. He made variations on Velasquez's *Maids of Honor* (1656), Jacques-Louis David's *Rape of the Sabine Women*

(1799), Eugene Delacroix's *Women of Algiers* (1849), and others. Caricature, parody, and persiflage (light-hearted parody) are variants because they do homage in an ironic or critical fashion. A pastiche, for example, is an uncomprehending or simplifying variation. Canaletto and other made *capricci* for tourists which are pastiches in this sense: if someone visited Italy and wanted mementos, but could not afford separate paintings of each city, he could buy Canaletto's paintings, which juxtaposed monuments from different places.²²

6. Moving farther along we come to *version*, which is almost an independent work: almost a second original. A famous example is Manet's *Dejeuner sur l'herbe* (1863), whose original may be said to be Marcantonio Raimondi's engraving of *The Judgment of Paris*. We do not always think of Marcantonio when looking at Manet, but we are invited to experience a divided consciousness: on the one hand, Manet's painting is an original, and on the other, it is not. *Le Dejeuner sur l'herbe* is poised between primary and secondary, imitation and original. It is this ambiguation that is partly the reason for Manet's fascination to art historians: his works occupy a particularly difficult position in the sequence we have been following.²³

Several of Sartwell's twenty-one entries belong here (especially numbers 10 through 21). His number 20 includes the states of a print, which are partly determined by earlier states but not necessarily dependent on them. When Rembrandt erased the figure of Tobit and the Angel from a landscape by Hercules Seghers, he made a pure landscape scene out of a Biblical scene. The ghostly outlines of the Angel and Tobit remained, but they are too faint to be noticed except by a close examination executed by someone who knows where to look. Again we meet Goodman's dichotomy in a setting that refigures its meaning: in this case, the aesthetic appreciation of both original and version is changed.

7. We now approach the place where we began, since works that edge the original entirely out of mind approach the status of original. But to be exact, this seventh category is not equivalent the first category, because the existence of a seventh category (of "originals" derived from originals, to use the quotation marks I employed in speaking about reproduction)

undermines the possibility that the first category might be pure and distinct from those that follow. In light of the seventh category, originals must be redefined as works related to and derived from copies, and copies must be also reconceived as originals *in statu nascendi*. This is historically appropriate and exemplary of the conceptual reduction that is required in order to contrast authentic and inauthentic works.

Though each of these stages suggests further problems, I think that the underlying, and most interesting, question is the conceptual rule of history itself, which appears from our vantage to have dictated the terms of the debate itself by providing us with these stages. For artists and aestheticians alike, these possibilities show the restricted meanings that obtain in the apparently trackless domain between original and copy. An artist is not free to work toward independence by achieving “any desired degree of intermediacy.” One does not make an original by sliding away from a great work, but by proceeding in stages from apparent slavery to apparent independence, and it is ultimately the interplay of stages in this sequence that provides the richness of meaning that painted traditions routinely achieve. That structure of our understanding, it seems to me, can enrich philosophic exchanges by fleshing out the harsh difference between original and forgery.

Notes

¹ J. Margolis, "Aesthetic Appreciation and the Imperceptible," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 16 (1976): 305.

² Another useful text is W. E. Kennick, "Art and Inauthenticity," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 44 (1985): 3 - 12. Kennick notes that Goodman writes "'forgery,' 'copy,' 'reproduction,' 'imitation,' and 'fake'... as if it made little or no difference which he used" (p. 3).

³ C. Sartwell, "Aesthetics of the Spurious," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 28 (1988): 360 - 362.

⁴ This point is also made by W. E. Kennick, *op. cit.*, 8.

⁵ This is crucial in the critique of Freud's *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood*. See Elkins, "Psychoanalysis and Art History," *Psychoanalysis and Contemporary Thought* 9 (1986): 261-98.

⁶ See also H. Hutter, "Original, Kopie, Replik, Paraphrase," in *Original—Kopie—Replik—Paraphrase*, Bildhefte der Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Wien, Doppelhet 12/13 (Vienna, 1980).

⁷ G. Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago, 1989).

⁸ See J.-P. Niemeier, *Kopien und Nachahmungen im Hellenismus: Ein Beitrag zum Klassizismus des 2. und frühen 1. Jhs. v. Chr.* (Bonn, 1985), and B. S. Ridgway, *Roman Copies of Greek Sculpture: The Problem of Originals* (Ann Arbor, 1984).

⁹ See D. G. Karel, *The Teaching of Drawing at the French Academy of Painting and Sculpture from 1760 to 1793*, PhD dissertation, University of Chicago, 1974, unpublished; L. Tavernier, *Das Problem der Naturnachahmung in den kunstkritischen Schriften Charles Nicolas Cochins d. J., Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der französischen Kunsttheorie* (Hildesheim, Zürich, New York, 1983), esp. 60 ff.; and P. L. Price, "Learning Through Imitation: Some Examples," in *Children of Mercury, The Education of Artists in the 16th and 17th Centuries*, exh. cat., Department of Art, Brown University (Providence, Rhode Island, 1984).

¹⁰ Among sources I have found useful are *The Forger's Art, Forgery and the Philosophy of Art*, edited by D. Dutton (University of California Press, 1983); H. Steele, "Fakes and Forgeries," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 17 (1977): 254-58; M. P. Battin, "Exact Replication in the Visual Arts," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 38 (1979): 153-58; D. F. Stalker, "Goodman on Authenticity," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 18 (1978): 195-98, M. Sagoff, "Historical Authenticity," *Erkenntnis* 12 (1978): 83-93; C. B. Cebik, "Forging Issues from Forged Art," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 27 (1989): 331-46; M. Wreen, "Counterfeit Icons and Forged Paintings: Caveat Emptor," *Analysis* 40 (1980): 156-51; and G. Bailey, "Forging Art," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 27 (1989): 319-29.

¹¹ For Van Meegeren's technique see H. Van de Waal *et al.*, editors, *Aspects of Art Forgery* (The Hague, 1962), 44 ff., with references to W. Froentjes and A. M. de Wild in *Chemisch Weekblad* (1949), 267, and P. Coremans, *Van Meegeren's Faked Vermeers en de Hooghs* (Amsterdam, 1948); *Imitationen: Nachahmung und Modell: Von der Lust am Falschen*, edited by J. Huber *et. al.*, exh. cat., Zürich, Museum für Gestaltung (Basel, c. 1989), 140 ff.; and H. B. Werness, "Han van Meegeren *fecit*," in *The Forger's Art, op. cit.*, 1 - 57.

¹² This is acknowledged in some philosophic work; see D. Dutton, "Artistic Crimes: The Problem of Forgery in the Arts," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 19 (1979): 302-14.

¹³ For historical information on forgery see first *Fake? The Art of Deception*, edited M. Jones *et al.*, exh. cat., British Museum (London, 1990), and then *Gefälschte Blankwaffen: galvanoplastische Kopien, Probleme der Authentizität*, ed. I. Baer *et al.* (Hannover, 1980); A. Andren, *Deeds and Misdeeds in Classical Art and Antiquities*, Studies in Mediterranean Archaeology, Pocket-Book, 36 (Partille, 1986); K. Turr, *Fälschungen antiker Plastik seit 1800* (Berlin, 1984); *Falsifications and Misreconstructions of Pre-Columbian Art: A Conference at Dumbarton Oaks, October 14th and 15th, 1978*, edited by E. H. Boone (Washington, D.C., 1982); and J. Hüber, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ See I. Mac Kenzie, "Gadamer's Hermeneutics and the Uses of Forgery," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 45 (1986): 41-48, and see also U. Eco, "Fakes and Forgeries," *Versus, Quaderni di studi semiotici* 46 (January-April 1987): 3 ff.

¹⁵ For Kovacs see J. Adamovic *et al.*, editors, *FRA-YU-KULT, Collection of Franciscan Monastery*, exh. cat., Mazej, Museum Siroki Brijeq (Yugoslavia, 1990), 90 ff.

¹⁶ For reproductions as the "repressed" condition for the existence of originals, see R. Krauss, "The Originality of the Avant-garde: A Postmodernist Repetition," *October* 18 (fall 1981): 47-66.

¹⁷ See P. Nagy, moderator, "From Criticism to Complicity: *Flash Art* Panel," *Flash Art* 129 (summer 1986): 49, and Yve-Alain Bois, "Painting," in *Endgame: Reference and Simulation in Recent Painting and Sculpture*, exh. cat., Boston, Institute of Contemporary Art (Boston, 1986), 29; and J. Siegel, "After Sherrie Levine," *Art Magazine* LIV / 10 (summer 1988): 141-44.

¹⁸ R. Lowell, *Imitations* (New York, 1961),

¹⁹ For imitations see also *The Counterpoint to Likeness: Essays on Imitation and Imagination in Western Painting*, edited by S. Howard (Davis, 1977), which is a selection of graduate students' papers from a seminar on imitation; and *Imitation and Inspiration: Japanese Influence on Dutch Art*, edited by S. van Raay (Amsterdam, 1989).

²⁰ Nabokov, *Eugene Onegin: A Novel in Verse* (Princeton, 1990).

²¹ M. Mende, *Dürer A-Z, Zeigenössische Dürer-Variationen von Anderle bis Zimmerman*, exh. cat., Stadtgeschichtlichen Museen Nürnberg and the Albrecht Dürerhaus Stiftung (Nürnberg, 1980).

²² For Canaletto's *capricci* see T. G. Links, *Canaletto* (Ithaca, 1982).

²³ See J. Huber, "Imitative Strategien in der bildenden Kunst," in *Imitationen: Nachahmung und Modell: Von der Lust am Falschen*, *op. cit.*, 144.