

Were the ancient Romans art forgers?

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A popularly held tenet in the historical record on art is that the practice of forgery began in the ancient world. Rome provides the key exhibit, where sculptures made by craftsmen of the day were passed off as classical Greek antiques and sold to naïve aristocrats who strived to demonstrate their sophistication and fashionability. This point is part of a larger narrative that says phony artworks were replaced by phony relics during medieval times and then re-emerged during the Renaissance after which they grew to larger proportions. However, revisionist scholars in recent decades, while following the rest of the time line, have challenged the traditional perspective on forgery among the Romans. The new perspective says the idea of forging art held by the modern mindset, and through which we are inclined to interpret history, has been too casually read into the ancient tableau. Advocates of the strong version of this view assert categorically that art forgery was not present in the Roman world: that a careful look at the evidence leading to the claim of forgery shows it to be weak and misunderstood. A softer line is represented by scholars who have addressed one part or another of the evidence without pronouncing on the larger issue, which suggests that the traditional view overstates the case while not denying that the culture of Rome harbored art forgery.

Given the range of views on the beginnings of the underworld of art, where does a proper answer lie? The revisionist warning about seeing history confusedly through a modern lens makes sense. Yet the claim that by switching lenses we can make something disappear, is problematic in its own right. An examination of the revisionist reaction to traditional thinking will show it is reasonable to accept that art forgery was present in Rome, although the evidence for it is not as strong as its claimants have assumed. At the least, as the revisionist position recognizes while preferring not to call it forgery, it is safe to say that in Roman society there was a significant trend of devious activity involving artworks.

The case for forgery

Browsing twentieth-century literature on art forgery shows a variety of sources that have spoken for the traditional view and told of problematic artworks (predominately sculptures) in ancient Rome. Among the commentators are leading figures in art criticism, art history, archaeology, and classical philology: Adrian Darmon, Sepp Schuller, Frank Arnau, Joseph Alsop, Otto Kurz, Ludwig

Friedlander, Hans Tietze, Licia Vlad Borrelli, Brunilde Ridgway, Jerome J. Pollitt.¹ More recently Michaela Fuchs and W.V. Harris have voiced their views.² Also carrying the message are the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, *Encyclopaedia Universalis*, *Columbia Encyclopedia*, and *Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics*,³ and it has reached a wide audience through Thomas Hoving's bestseller *False Impressions: The Hunt for Big-Time Art Fakes*.⁴ Some of these sources offer only a brief mention with perhaps an example or two of evidence, while others give more detail. With all of them, however, the pronouncement is confident about the presence of forgeries in ancient Rome.

There is no single comprehensive account of the traditional position, but it can be summarized in several points. First is recognition of Rome as an advanced society for its time: sophisticated in economic, legal, political, and cultural terms.⁵ This is a generally unstated assumption which is in keeping with the practices we learn about from Roman literature concerning the art industry. As happens in modern cultures, and as we find present today in our own, there was a considerable

¹ Adrian Darmon, 'Forgeries: A Long History', Museum Security Network, <http://www.museum-security.org/forgeries.htm> (last accessed 2 May 2016); Sepp Schuller, *Forgers, Dealers, Experts: Strange Chapters in the History of Art*, New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1959, xiii; Frank Arnau, *The Art of the Faker: 3000 Years of Deception*, Boston: Little Brown, 1961, 16; Joseph Alsop, *The Rare Art Traditions: The History of Art Collecting and Its Linked Phenomena*, New York: Harper and Row, 1982, 196-197; Otto Kurz, *Fakes: A Handbook for Collectors and Students*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948, 116; Ludwig Friedlander, *Roman Life and Manners Under the Early Empire*, London: Routledge and Sons, 1908, 330-332; Hans Tietze, 'The Psychology and Aesthetics of Forgery in Art', *Metropolitan Museum Studies*, 5, August 1934, 4; Licia Vlad Borrelli, 'Falsification and Forgery: History of Falsification', in *Encyclopedia of World Art*, 5, New York: McGraw Hill, 1961, 335; Brunilde Ridgway, *Roman Copies of Greek Sculpture: The Problem of The Originals*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984, 22-23; Jerome J. Pollitt, 'The Impact of Greek Art on Rome', *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 108, 1978, 162-164.

² Michaela Fuchs, *In hoc etiam genere Graeciae nihil cedamus. Studien zur Romanisierung der spathellenistischen Kunst im 1. Jh. V. Chr.*, Mainz: von Zabern, 1999, 44-52; W.V. Harris, 'Prolegomena to a Study of the Economics of Roman Art', *American Journal of Archaeology*, 119: 3, Jul 2015, 404-406.

³ 'Forgery', *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <http://www.britannica.com/topic/forgery-art> (last accessed 2 May 2016); Germain Bazin, 'Fux en art', *Encyclopaedia Universalis*, Paris, 2002, 247; Denis Dutton, 'Forgery and Plagiarism', *Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics*, San Diego: Academic Press, 1998; 'Forgery, Early History', *Columbia Encyclopedia*, <http://infoplease.com/encyclopedia/entertainment/forgery-art-early-history.ht> (last accessed 2 May 2016).

⁴ Thomas Hoving, *False Impressions: The Hunt for Big-Time Art Fakes*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996, 30-36.

⁵ Just how advanced Rome was relative to later societies can be debated, although it has been compared to post-Renaissance times. For a summary of the Roman economy, as allied with social conditions and the legal and political system, see Peter Temin, 'The Economy of the Early Roman Empire', *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 20, 2006, 133-151.

element of misrepresentation about the nature of the artworks available for sale and on display in public and private places. What people thought they were viewing and collectors thought they were purchasing as 'original' (genuine, authentic) items sometimes were not. Besides originals, and besides works designated as copies (direct reproduction of a specific image, or the more general copying of a style), there were others that were forgeries: by dictionary definition, meant 'to deceive, mislead, or defraud.'⁶ Commonly used synonyms are 'counterfeit' and 'fake', although specialists sometimes distinguish between a fake as an existing item that is altered for the purpose of deception and a forgery as being made as a phony from scratch.

False inscriptions

A key maxim in the traditionalist view says Roman made knockoffs bore phony signatures. Thomas Hoving, former director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, asserts in *False Impressions*, "The forgers of ancient Rome were ambitious and signed their creations with the names of the finest artists of the past – artists like Myron, Polyclitus, Phidias, Praxiteles, and Lycippus."⁷ Supporters of this contention have cited Roman writings. The famous British art forger Eric Hebborn notes in his do-it-yourself manual, *The Art Forger's Handbook*, that Cicero in a letter to his friend Atticus complains about false inscriptions affixed to sculptures. Cicero's actual words are, 'I detest deceitful inscriptions on other people's statues.'⁸ Hebborn playfully quips, 'True most collectors hate false signatures but, as Cicero said, only "on other people's statues".'⁹ The assumption here that 'inscriptions' means 'signatures' is a bold one that fails to include the context of the statement within the document where it is found, as well as the fact that descriptive material other than signatures appeared on Roman sculptures.

Other writers, too, bemoan false inscriptions, such as Livy, who presents a moral message about the damage that is done to the historical record.

I am inclined to think that history has been much corrupted by means of funeral panegyrics and false inscriptions on statues; each family striving by false representations to appropriate to itself the fame of warlike exploits

⁶ *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary of the English Language*, New York: World Publishing Company, 1975, 719.

⁷ Hoving, *False Impressions*, 31.

⁸ The translation is offered by Dale Kinney in 'Spolia, Damnatio and Renovatio Memoriae', *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome*, 42, 1997, 134. Kinney cites H. Blanck, *Wiederverwendung alter Statuen als Ehrendenkmal der Griechen und Romern*, Rome: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 1969, 14.

⁹ Eric Hebborn, *The Art Forger's Handbook*, Woodstock, New York: Overlook Press, 1997, 59.

and public honors. From this cause, certainly, both the actions of individuals and the public records of events have been confused.¹⁰

As with Cicero, the bothersome markings on sculptures indicate that genuineness has been compromised, but without identifying the exact nature of the markings. We shall see later how this is a main point of contention raised by revisionists.

Another take on false inscriptions is offered by Phaedrus in the prologue for Book five of his collection of fables.

If I shall insert the name Aesop, to whom I have already rendered every *honor* that was his due, know that it is for the sake of *his* authority, just as some statuaries do in our day, who obtain a much greater price for their productions, if they inscribe the name of Praxiteles on their marbles, and Myron on their polished silver. *Therefore* let these Fables obtain a hearing. Carping envy more readily favors the works of antiquity than those of the present day.¹¹

Here the inscriptions are clearly names, and there is a financial motive involved for artists when they record names other than their own: the names of noted artists (especially from centuries earlier) are worth far more than those of unknowns. The point about the value in a name is made also by Pliny when he recounts incidents from the lives of noted Greeks the Romans revered. Even as contemporary artists in their own day, their names drew greater respect and higher price tags on their works than lesser artists could command. Phidias, it is said, helped his talented but young protégé Agoracritus when he put his own name to many of the young man's works.¹² The revered painter Apelles contributed to Protogenes' reputation and earnings when, while visiting him at Rhodes and hearing of the modest prices his rival was charging, he chose a group of works from the inventory and

made him an offer of fifty talents, and then circulated a report that he was buying those works in order to sell them as his own. By this contrivance, he aroused the Rhodians to a better appreciation of the merits of their artist, and only consented to leave the pictures with them upon their offering a still larger price.¹³

While Pliny's examples are of Greeks rather than of Romans playing fast and loose with the authorship of artworks, we see that the misdeeds of their predecessors

¹⁰ Titus Livy, *History of Rome*, 8.40, D. Spillan trans., London: Henry G. Bohn, 1853.

¹¹ Phaedrus, *The Fables of Phaedrus*, 5 Prologue, in *The Comedies of Terrence and the Fables of Phaedrus*, Henry Thomas Riley trans., London: George Bell and Sons, 1887.

¹² Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History*, 36.4, John Bostock and H.T. Riley London: H. G. Bohn, 1855.

¹³ Pliny, *Natural History*, 35.36.

were known to the Romans. Concern over works bearing phony claims about who created them was within the Roman mindset.

Satirical writings

Suspicion about phony works is evident, too, in Roman satirical writings that mock the claims made by collectors about the genuineness of their holdings, as well as the assumptions made by art appreciators about what they are viewing. Martial jeers a collector's naivety,

You have bought up all sorts of silver plate; you alone have the productions of Phidias' graver, and the labors of Mentor. Nor are genuine Gratiuses wanting in your collection, nor vases inlaid with Callain gold, nor embossed ones from the tables of your ancestors. Yet, amidst all your silver, I wonder, Charinus, that you possess none pure.¹⁴

About the attitude of viewers of art, Encolpius, the narrator of Petronius' *Satyricon*, tells us,

I took a walk through all the public arcades and entered a picture-gallery, which contained a wonderful collection of pictures in various styles. I beheld works from the hand of Zeuxis, still undimmed by the passage of years, and contemplated, not without a certain awe, the crude drawings of Protogenes, which equaled the reality of nature herself; but when I stood before the work of Apelles...¹⁵

While readers today may sense a sarcastic tone in these passages, the specific digs the authors make are obscured through translation and by the nature of the satire involved. The key is that things are not what they seem to be. Martial's translator notes that the author is playing on the word 'pure' in a reversal of meaning,¹⁶ which reflects back on the rest of the passage. Petronius puns on the artists' names in ways that question their identification with the works Encolpius is viewing. Protogenes' 'crude drawings' (*rudimenta*) refer to his last name, which in a literal translation into Latin from Greek means a 'rivaling' of the truth. And the painting supposedly by Apelles plays on *appellant*, thus questioning who its creator was.¹⁷ Satirical literature, then, takes its place along with other writings in commenting on the mistaken attribution of artworks.

¹⁴ Martial, *Epigrams*, 4.39, Bohn's Classical Library, London: George Bell and Sons, 1897.

¹⁵ Petronius, *The Satyricon*, 83, W.C. Finebaugh trans., New York: Boni and Liveright, 1922.

¹⁶ Martial, *Epigrams*, 4.39, note 3.

¹⁷ John Elsner, 'Seductions of art: Encolpius and Eumolpus in a Neronian picture-gallery', *Cambridge Classical Journal*, 34, 1993, 32. See also Harris, 'Prolegomena to a Study of the Economics of Roman Art', 406.

Physical evidence

Beyond literary references, the case for Roman forgery includes physical evidence. An often cited example is the bronze Apollo of Piombino (named for the site where it was found) held in the collection of the Louvre. Originally thought to be archaic when discovered in the early nineteenth century, in the late twentieth century it was redesignated as a late Hellenistic pastiche. The discovery at Pompeii in 1977 of a statue of similar style and size confirmed suspicions, as the details of the archaeological setting ruled out the dating as archaic.¹⁸ Two more odd features about the Apollo led to the judgment, eventually accepted by many scholars, that the statue was meant to deceive.¹⁹ An inscription on the left leg anomalously dedicated the work to Athena, an unlikely mistake for an artist working in archaic times. And the artists who created the work, but did not inscribe their signatures, hid a lead tag inside that identified themselves by name, from which it was determined they were members of a family of sculptors active in the second and first centuries BC. Whether the sculpture was in fact made as a forgery rather than merely a copy remains a matter of conjecture. The unusual inscription and hidden tag are suspicious, but not conclusive of fraudulent intent. The Louvre's description of the work today says it is commonly considered to be from the first century B.C., and explains the confusing features without specifying forgery.²⁰

In simulating the archaic period, the Piombino Apollo is unusual amidst the physical evidence pointing to forgery in Rome. Many works are styled according to the classical period, and are inscribed with the names of famous Greek artists. Simply carrying such a prestigious label does not necessarily indicate forgery, but in various instances there are accompanying circumstances that create suspicion that fraud was the objective. The sheer volume of works identified with the greats of the past gives pause, but more specifically, certain names were used by more than one artist. There were at least five 'Myrons' who produced sculptures under that name during the imperial period of Rome.²¹ Phidias appears in the guise of several Roman sculptors.²² Praxiteles, too, seems to have been especially prolific. Beyond the matter of their quantity, other features expose certain works carrying famous names as being incompatible with those names. Among the Louvre's holdings is a 'Praxiteles' sculpture done in a style recognized as Roman imperial – the figure is

¹⁸ Ridgway, *Roman Copies*, 22-23.

¹⁹ This judgment, which came to be accepted by other scholars, was rendered by Brunilde Ridgway in 'The Bronze Apollo from Piombino in the Louvre', *Antike Plastik*, 7, 1967, 43-75.

²⁰ www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/apollo-piombino (last accessed 2 May 2016).

²¹ Alison Burford, *Craftsmen in Greek and Roman Society*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972, 210-211.

²² Peter Stewart, *The Social History of Roman Art*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 22.

fully clothed, among other giveaways.²³ Another work with stylistic inconsistencies is the 'Callimachus' relief at the Capitoline museum in Rome. It compares more with late Hellenistic works than with those of an earlier time, and its mannerist design appears to be exaggerated beyond acceptability for the latter.²⁴ Even more out of keeping with expectations of Greek treasures is a statue in Rome of the baboon-god Toth made in an Egyptian style and signed 'Phidias and Ammonios both sons of Phidias made'.²⁵ Further inconsistencies are found in other mediums. A number of Hellenistic and Roman gems bear the names of Greek masters never known to have worked in gems -- such names as Sostratos, Pheidias, Skopas, Polykleitos, and Pamphilo.²⁶ Other gems are designated as by noted gem cutters from the past, such as one by 'Apollonides' with the inscription in Latin so that it could not have been rendered by the fourth century B.C. artist.²⁷ Various gems inscribed 'Dioscurides' also have been deemed to be suspicious.²⁸ Silver works are another area of concern, such as four silver drinking bowls of Roman creation that bear the name 'Apelles'.²⁹ Examples like these raise red flags about authenticity: anomalous features in works bearing the names of famous artists reveal that those artists did not create them. Suspicion, then, leans toward forgery.

Corinthian bronze

Besides the identity of artists, the other telling feature in the traditional account of forged Roman sculptures is the material they are made from, specifically, the ones claimed to be of Corinthian bronze. A number of Roman writers offer comments on the aesthetic virtue and high value of works made of this substance, from cups and

²³ For an explanation of the exposure of this work as being of Roman origin, including the opinions of other scholars, see Fuchs, *In hoc etiam genere Graeciae nihil cedamus*, 49-50.

²⁴ Fuchs, *In hoc etiam genere Graeciae nihil cedamus*, 50-51; Eduard Schmidt, *Archaistische Kunst in Griechenland und Rom*, Munich: B. Heller, 1922, 62.

²⁵ Peter Stewart, *The Social History of Roman Art*, 22; Michael Squire, 'Ars in their I's: Authority and authorship in Graeco-Roman visual culture', in Anna Marmodoro and Jonathan Hill, eds, *The Author's Voice in Classical and Late Antiquity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, 379.

²⁶ Gisela Richter, *Engraved gems of the Greeks and Etruscans: a history of Greek art in miniature*, London: Phaidon, 1968, 139-140, 168; Gisela Richter, *Engraved gems of the Romans: a supplement to the history of Roman art*, London: Phaidon, 1971, 49-50, 146-147. See also Erika Zwierlein-Diehl, *Antike Gemmen und ihr Nachleben*, Berlin: Gruyter, 2007, 112-113, 123, 266, 110. A good summary of these signatures on gems is provided by Squire, "Ars in their I's", 379.

²⁷ Gisela Richter, 'Inscriptions on engraved gems of the Roman period and some modern or problematical representations', in *Archeologia Classica*, 25-26, 632-633.

²⁸ Richter, *Engraved gems of the Greeks and Etruscans*, 168.

²⁹ Ernst Kunzel, 'Quod sine te factum est hoc magis archetypum est? (Martialis 8.34)', *ArchKorrBl*, 8, 1978, 313-314; Kenneth Painter, *The Insula of the Menander at Pompeii. Vol. 4: The Silver Treasure*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001, 28.

plates to figures and figurines. The workmanship is described as refined, but it is the material that is unique. Pliny the Younger professes to be a novice about the arts who was overcome by the beauty of a statue of Corinthian bronze and purchased it;³⁰ Propertius praises the desirability of the substance as equivalent to that of gold, precious stones, and estates of land;³¹ Seutonius tells of Tiberius' complaint about three mullets fashioned of Corinthian bronze selling for 30,000 sesterces which led to his suggestion for the Senate to consider price controls;³² and Strabo recounts that graves in Corinth were raided in a search for items fashioned of bronze.³³

Scholars have speculated on the nature of the type of bronze known as 'Corinthian', but in general terms it seems to have been a mixture involving copper with silver and gold, perhaps with small amounts of tin and lead.³⁴ Varying formulas among these metals are possible. Pausanias posits that the water from a certain spring used in the tempering process is a key agent.³⁵ The exact composition, however, was a puzzlement in the Roman world, which contributed to Corinthian works being highly prized and expensive, and to elusiveness in their authentication. Pliny believed that few such objects actually existed in his day (limited to vessels made into dishes, lamps, and washing basins) and that,

There has been a wonderful mania with many for gaining possession of this metal...But most of these people seem to me to make a pretense of their discernment in reference to this metal, rather for the purpose of distinguishing themselves from the multitude, than from any real knowledge they possess..³⁶

Connoisseurial lore held that Corinthian bronze had a unique and demonstrative odor. Self-styled experts sometimes applied the sniff test, as told of by Martial about a pretentious esthete wandering the shops of Rome: 'He consulted his nose whether the bronzes had the true Corinthian aroma.'³⁷ In the *Satyricon*,

³⁰ Pliny the Younger, *Letters*, 3.6, William Melmoth trans., Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952.

³¹ Propertius, *Elegies*, 3:5, M.E. Butler trans., Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958.

³² Seutonius, 'The Life of Tiberius', 34, in *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, J.C. Rolfe trans., Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1913.

³³ Strabo, *The Geography*, 8.6.23, Horace Leonard Jones trans., New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1927.

³⁴ For the history and nature of Corinthian bronze, see D.M. Jacobson and M.P. Weitzman, 'What Was Corinthian Bronze?', *American Journal of Archaeology*, 96: 2, 1992, 237-247. See also Carol C. Mattusch, 'Corinthian Bronze: Famous But Elusive', *Corinth*, 20, 2003, 210-232; D. Emanuele, 'Aes Corinthium: Fact, Fiction, and Fake', *Phoenix*, 43: 4, 1989, 347-358.

³⁵ Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 2.3.3, W.H.S. Jones trans., New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1918.

³⁶ Pliny, *Natural History*, 34.3.

³⁷ Martial, *Epigrams*, 9.59.

Petronius mocks the sniff test along with the popular notion (repeated by Pliny) that Corinthian bronze came into existence when Corinth was sacked and burned, with many metal items melting into a mixture. At Trimalchio's dinner party, the bloviating host notices a guest admiring a Corinthian bronze platter, and spouts off:

'I'm the only one that can show the real Corinthian.' I thought that, in his usual purse-proud manner, he was going to boast that his bronzes were all imported from Corinth, but he did even better by saying, 'Wouldn't you like to know how it is that I'm the only one that can show the real Corinthian? Well, it's because the bronze worker I patronize is named Corinthus, and what's Corinthian unless it's what a Corinthus makes? And, so you won't think I'm a blockhead, I'm going to show you that I'm well acquainted with how Corinthian first came into the world. When Troy was taken, Hannibal, who was a very foxy fellow and a great rascal into the bargain, piled all the gold and silver and bronze statues in one pile and set 'em afire, melting these different metals into one: then the metal workers took their pick and made bowls and dessert dishes and statuettes as well. That's how Corinthian was born; neither one nor the other, but an amalgam of them all. But I prefer glass, if you don't mind my saying so; it don't stink and if it didn't break, I'd rather have it than gold, but it's cheap and common now.'³⁸

Fiction figures generously into Roman thinking about Corinthian bronze: the odor is a highly unlikely giveaway trait.³⁹ And the story about the creation of the material comes in other versions (as typical of myths) than Pliny's and Trimalchio's.⁴⁰ Plutarch tells his version of it, and then a tale of a bronze worker who found a hoard of gold and mixed it in small batches into his bronze material, after which the reader is told that both of these stories are fictitious.⁴¹ The creation stories enhance the factor of the unknown surrounding Corinthian bronze, reinforcing the satirists' mocking of claims about its genuineness. The point coming through from all of this is that there was a strong consciousness of whether items claimed to be made of the famed metal were genuine or counterfeit. This consciousness combines with a recognition of artworks bearing false names to reveal a concern about deceitfulness in art that was clearly a feature of the Roman mentality – deceitfulness labeled as forgery by traditionalist commentators.

³⁸ Petronius, *The Satyricon*, 50.

³⁹ Jacobson, 'What was Corinthian Bronze?', 238.

⁴⁰ Emanuele, 'Aes Corinthium', 351.

⁴¹ Plutarch, 'Wherefore the Pythian Priestess Now Ceases to Deliver Her Oracles in Verse', *Plutarch's Morals*, 3, William Goodwin trans., Boston: Little Brown, 1878.

The revisionist view

Recent commentators such as Sandor Radnoti, Alexander Nagel, Christopher Wood, Thierry Lenain, and Jonathan Keats have challenged the traditional view of the origin of art forgery. As stated by Nagel and Wood, 'The act of art forgery was a historical novelty of the Renaissance. Until the late fifteenth century, when the market for art began to link value to demonstrable authorship, no one had been accused of "forging" an artwork.'⁴² According to this account, while Rome had a thriving art industry, it did not include forgery. To think it did is a misunderstanding that interprets a distant people in terms of contemporary values and practices. Three lines of argument comprise the revisionist position.

- * Regarding art, Rome was a copy culture, lacking the intellectual perspective and economic conditions that would emerge many centuries later and lead to the presence of forgery.
- * Comments by Roman writers about false inscriptions on artworks can be interpreted in ways other than their being references to forgery. Likewise, the physical evidence of anomalous signatures can be explained through practices other than forgery.
- * Recorded instances of art forgery in the Roman world are lacking, either in legal proceedings or in literature. Examples that have been cited of odd and deceitful activities do not fit within the modern classification of forgery.

Copy culture

In a provocative article titled 'The Copy and Its Evil Twin',⁴³ Nagel explains the nature of a copy culture, including the features it lacks that if present would lead to forgery. And he emphasizes that ancient and medieval cultures such as Rome and Byzantium were fixed in a mentality of copyism. The limiting focus of pre-modern thinking is that images are copied rather than created. Artworks repeat existing prototypes such as the essential form of the Virgin Mary or works by Myron or Polycleitus. While the copies of a prototype admit of variations, there is a topological resemblance among them. There is no special something that makes an artwork an individual stand-alone piece. The modern notion of an 'original' is missing: a work in which the image is a uniquely conceived one-off rather than

⁴² Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood, 'Interventions: A New Model of Renaissance Anachronism', *Art Bulletin*, 87: 3, 2005, 413. For similar assertions that the practice of forgery appeared first in the Renaissance, see Sandor Radnoti, *The Fake: Forgery and Its Place in Art*, Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999, vi; Thierry Lenain, *Art Forgery: The History of a Modern Obsession*, London: Reaktion, 2011, 13.

⁴³ Alexander Nagel, 'The Copy and Its Evil Twin', *Cabinet*, 14, Summer 2004.

something borrowed, one that instead of being designed to be like what already exists, is consciously designed to be different.

When images inhabit a copy culture, there is no room for forgery. Without a cult of the originally produced work, appreciated as a singular and unrepeatabe performance – without a conception of the work as an event – forgery has no function. This is why it is so difficult to find documented cases of art forgery in antiquity, and why the few cases that have been brought forward are inconclusive: in each case what is alleged a forgery can reasonably be explained as a copy.⁴⁴

The invocation of Roman copyism to disavow the presence of forgery is problematic. To limit the Romans to being copyists is to follow a popular generalization that they were mere followers of the Greeks who made replicas of sculptures by the likes of Pheidias, Praxiteles, and Myron. Even if, for the sake of argument, we assume this notion to be correct, it does not demonstrate an absence of respect for originality. That respect was present among the Greeks, and Greek artworks were what the Romans especially prized. The fact that they copied those works does not mean they lacked respect for the originals. Copying and originality can coexist. Such coexistence is a feature of our culture today, which we see in reproductions of Leonardo's 'Mona Lisa', van Gogh's 'Starry Night', Rodin's 'The Thinker', and many other works that sell widely in bookstores and museum shops, and through online sites. Further, images are copied, perhaps with a bit of alteration, and presented as appropriation art a la Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst, who have followed in the footsteps of Andy Warhol and Sherrie Levine. Why should we think the Roman mindset did not similarly accommodate originals as well as copies, showing reverence for originals by making it possible for more people to enjoy them through exact reproductions or appropriations?

Art critic Blake Gopnik, writing for the *New York Times*, has echoed Nagel's claim that forgery is a Renaissance invention: before that time copies stood on equal footing with originals in conveying religious or commemorative ideas.⁴⁵ The message of an artwork, in its various renditions, was what counted, not the specific vehicle through which it was conveyed. About Rome in particular, we are told,

it was considered normal to copy Greek statues of Praxiteles or Polyclletius, even while altering them. Patrons wanted access to the larger aesthetic ideas and ideals of their artistic geniuses; they didn't think of works of art 'as singularities, as unrepeatabe performances by an author' as Mr. Nagel says.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Nagel, 'The Copy and Its Evil Twin', 7.

⁴⁵ Blake Gopnik, 'In Praise of Art Forgeries', *New York Times*, November 2, 2013.

⁴⁶ Gopnik, 'In Praise of Art Forgeries'.

What is overlooked in this point of view is that what are being called the 'larger aesthetic ideas and ideals' are in fact singularities. That is why they were copied vigorously, and why their authors were remembered for them and celebrated, and why the original renditions of those works carried special value.

Copying as presented by Nagel and Gopnik misses this connection. Instead they talk of the pre-Renaissance in general, with the repeating of prototypes absent a concern about the singularity of an original, and lacking or minimizing recognition of artists for their singular genius. This characterization is what anthropologists tell us fits for primitive societies (typically preliterate) past and present. Artists there are respected during their lifetime, but quickly forgotten afterward, while the artworks they create follow predetermined conventions.⁴⁷ This pattern may apply also to societies that are more advanced, but it is a mistake to include Rome among them, as it is for Greece as well. The nature of Roman copying was much more sophisticated than the copy-culture thesis gives credit for.

Scholarship in recent decades has offered considerable discussion of the extent and nature of copying in Roman art, emphasizing that it did not define the entirety of the artistic enterprise. An aggressive version of this point speaks of the 'copy myth', asserting that most Roman sculptures were in fact not direct copies,⁴⁸ and tracing the misunderstanding to general statements made by Roman authors such as Horace⁴⁹ and Virgil⁵⁰ about Roman indebtedness to Greek culture, and on through history via Giorgio Vasari and Johann Winckelmann to the nineteenth century where it reached full development.⁵¹ The forcefulness of the myth – the

⁴⁷ For an explanation of how primitive societies view the copying of artworks without concern for originality, as demonstrated through an extended example, see Ross Bowden, 'What is Wrong with an Art Forgery? An Anthropological Perspective', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 57: 3, Summer 1999.

⁴⁸ Miranda Marvin, *The Language of the Muses: The Dialogue between Roman and Greek Sculpture*, Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2008, 2, 10, 217.

⁴⁹ Horace's famous statement from the *Epistles* is that 'Greece, the captive, made her savage victor captive, and brought the arts into rustic Latium', *Horace: Satires, Epistles and Ars Poetica*, 2.1, H. R. Fairclough trans., Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1929.

⁵⁰ Virgil in the *Aeneid* tells us, referring to the Greeks,

Others, no doubt will better mould the bronze
To the semblance of soft breathing, draw, from marble,
The living countenance, and others plead
With greater eloquence, or to learn measure,
Better than we, the pathways of the heaven.

The Aeneid of Virgil, R. Humphries trans., New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951, 173.

⁵¹ An account of the 'copy myth' through art history is found in Marvin, *The Language of the Muses* (summarized 2-9, extended argument throughout the book). See also Elaine K. Gazda, 'Beyond Copying : Artistic Originality and Tradition', in Elaine K. Gazda ed., *The Ancient Art of Emulation: Studies in Artistic Originality and Tradition from the Present to Classical Antiquity*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002, 1-24.

reason for its perpetuation – is explained through its role in providing the grounding for learning about Greek sculptural art, of which very few originals exist. We come to know Greek images by seeing them recreated in Roman copies. To assert there is a Romanness in Roman art detracts from this enterprise: it generates confusion about where Greek originality leaves off and Roman ingenuity begins.

Discussion about Roman artistic originality sometimes points to landscape painting. Pliny credits his countrymen with inventing this genre,⁵² although it may be more accurate to say they played an important part in its development.⁵³ The main focus, however, has been on Roman sculpture, where it is pointed out that several basic categories of sculpture bear distinctively Roman subject matter. Portraiture, historical relief, funerary relics, and sarcophagi depict the people and events of their place and time, leaving copies of Greek works as a minority in the Roman sculptural corpus.⁵⁴ Some of the copies are assumed to be direct replicas of Greek predecessors, while others that were thought to be so have been challenged on a case by case basis that argues for reclassification as Roman in nature.⁵⁵ Based on German scholarship, in the 1970s the term ‘ideal’ was introduced to describe sculptures that borrow from Greek ways but are not direct copies.⁵⁶ Idealization points toward stylistic borrowing from a single artist, or pastiches combining some of this and some of that in the way a twenty-first century painting done in an impressionist manner would draw from its antecedents but not look like a Monet or a Renoir or a Seurat. In this sense, Roman artists have been said to be ‘emulators’ of Greek art, but not by copying in a way that adds nothing new. Rather, ‘emulation’ means striving to go beyond the Greeks: to innovate on their styles and images with the desire of creating something as good or better on its own terms.⁵⁷

Acceptance of the revised view of copying varies by degree among scholars on Roman art, and even strong proponents acknowledge that the Romans owe a large debt to Greece. Considerable borrowing went on, but to see it as merely duplicating venerated Greek statues is incorrect. To whatever degree one’s scholarly inclinations take it, there is recognition that the Romans made works that were not mere copies or even variations on Greek images, in contradistinction to the

⁵² Pliny, *Natural History*, 35.37.

⁵³ Roger Ling, ‘Studius and the Beginnings of Roman Landscape Painting’, *Journal of Roman Studies*, 67, 1997, 1-16.

⁵⁴ Elaine K. Gazda, ‘Roman Sculpture and the Ethos of Emulation: Reconsidering Repetition’, *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 97, 1995, 121, 130.

⁵⁵ For examples see chapters 9-12 (by Miranda Marvin, Jennifer Trimble, Elizabeth Bartman, and Linda Roccas) in Gazda, *The Ancient Art of Emulation*.

⁵⁶ See, for instance, Walter Reilmich, ‘Bemerkungen zur Enforschung der romischen Idealplastik’, *JdI*, 88, 1973, 247-282; Paul Zanker, *Klassizistische Statuen: Studien zur Veränderung des Kunstgeschmacks in der romischen Kaiserzeit*, Mainz: von Zabern, 1974.

⁵⁷ Ellen Perry, *The Aesthetics of Emulation in the Visual Arts of Ancient Rome*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. See especially the summary 189-191.

copy-culture thesis that relies on their doing nothing else. Roman art copies the Greeks, to be sure, but it also has notable features of its own.

Social and economic conditions

The problem of failure to understand the nature of copyism in Roman art signals a similar failure to recognize the complexity of the social and economic climate in which that art existed. The revisionist view of forging art as a Renaissance invention summarily denies that the necessary conditions for the practice were present in Rome. Nagel summarizes them as: 1) newly assertive artist authors; 2) a new breed of collector; 3) an emerging art market; 4) a new class of intermediaries later known as dealers.⁵⁸ These four points in themselves are a reasonable characterization of the level of development needed to foster forgery, but it is historically wrong by more than a millennium to claim their initial origin was around the fifteenth century. All four conditions were clearly present in Rome. Not only were there grounds for plentiful copying, such as was found in other cultures, but in Rome the basis was there also for the emergence of fraud.

An assertiveness by artists is detectable in the Greek world as early as the seventh century BC with the introduction of signatures on their works,⁵⁹ and the rest of the conditions appeared in the period of the late Roman Republic and early Empire when the citizenry developed an avid interest in art. After Roman military victories over the Greeks, especially at Syracuse (211 BC) and Corinth (146 BC), war booty flooded the city with artworks of various kinds and most notably sculptures. Many works were put on public display in tribute to Rome's conquests, and (through their specific images) to convey political and religious messages to the masses. Other works were held privately as collector's items, although sometimes in semi-public view, and meant to show their owners' wealth and prestige as well as erudition on aesthetics and art appreciation. Some Romans resisted the aesthetic appreciation that others showed of these foreign prizes, maligning it as evidence of softness and licentiousness that threatened the national spirit, but in time many embraced it as a welcome refinement.⁶⁰

The Greek practice of signing artworks applied only to some artists and some works, but it was widespread enough to indicate that personal pride and the desire for recognition of individuality through one's own creations was clearly an element of the artistic mindset. Phidias, Myron, Praxiteles, Lysippus, Polyclitus,

⁵⁸ Nagel, 'The Copy and Its Evil Twin', 10.

⁵⁹ Martin Robertson, *A History of Greek Art*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1976, 1, 43.

⁶⁰ Regarding Roman practices and attitudes about the display of Greek art, see Alessandra Bravi, *Ornamenta Urbis: Poere d'arte greche negli spazi romani*, Bari: Edipuglia, 2012, especially chapter 1 for an overview; Steven H. Rutledge, *Ancient Rome as a Museum: Power, Identity, and the Culture of Collecting*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, chapters 2-4; Jeremy Tanner, *The Invention of Art History in Ancient Greece: Religion, society and artistic rationalization*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 255-275.

and other names were familiar to the public. When works by such figures reached Rome centuries later, they were regarded as 'Old Masters' that served as models for copyists who turned out numerous likenesses. Myron's 'Discobolus', Phidias's 'Athena', and Praxiteles' 'Aphrodite', for instance, were admired by the Romans in the way people today think of famous works from the Renaissance. Many of the Roman copies, as we see in examining them today, are by anonymous artists. Some of the ones with signatures bear Roman names, but most of the names are Greek, which indicates their makers were Greek artisans whose productions were exported to Rome, or they were Greeks who lived and worked in Rome.⁶¹ A few of these artists such as Pasiteles, Stephanos, and Arkesilaos became the stars of their own day, but the greatest fame lay with the iconic masters of the past whose original works were now several hundred years old, and whose names appeared not only on those works but sometimes on other ones produced hundreds of years later in republican and imperial Rome.

The art-minded public of Rome knew the names of the masters old and new, and travelers to various cities sought out the art attractions to be found there. As Cicero tells us, works such as Tarentum's statue of Europa, Rhegium's Venus, and others were considered priceless by the locales that held them.⁶² The masses derived pleasure from viewing art, although their degree of sophistication in interpreting it may have been limited.⁶³ Many of the Roman elite developed connoisseurship to the extent that it became a part of their ideal of leisure and their formal discourse. Orators were expected to know about famous sculptors and painters.⁶⁴ Written commentary included art criticism and art history. A popular form of poetry done in epigrams gave interpretations of individual works and artistic styles in terms of psychological and philosophical insights.⁶⁵ A number of treatises were available that analyzed the works of many artists, although few survive today: by Polykleitos, Agatharkos, Euphranor, Xenocrates, Duris, Pasiteles, Antigonas, Apelles, and Parrhasius. Pasiteles wrote a notable book in the first century B.C.⁶⁶ Of existing writings, the most notable are by Pliny, who pays particular attention to which artists made which works. Even lesser lights get attention, and sometimes there are questions of attribution that cause lively debate. In describing the sculptures in Augustus' building, for example, Pliny designates

⁶¹ Stewart, *The Social History of Roman Art*, 15-16.

⁶² Cicero, *Against Verres*, 2.4.135, C.D. Yonge trans., London: George Bell and Sons, 1903.

⁶³ Rutledge, *Ancient Rome as a Museum*, 8.

⁶⁴ Tanner, *The Invention of Art History in Ancient Greece*, 209-210, 253.

⁶⁵ For a general account of the tradition of 'ekphrasis', see Ruth Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination, and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2009.

For a condensed discussion, with two specific examples, see, Carolyn MacDonald, 'Greek and Roman Eyes: The Cultural Politics of Ekphrastic Epigram in Imperial Rome', Chicago: American Philological Association, 2014.

⁶⁶ Tanner, *The Invention of Art History in Ancient Greece*, 212-219; Donald Strong, *Roman Art*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988, 60, 107.

works by Philiskos of Rhodes, Heliodorus, and Polymarchos,⁶⁷ and mentions three more works whose origin is uncertain but much discussed.⁶⁸ The penchant for examining the artistic environment is found in fictional writings as well, and sometimes satirized. Lucian presents a conversation in his Philopseudes:

‘Have you never noticed as you came in that beautiful one in the court, by Demitrious the portrait sculptor?’ ‘Is that the one with the quoit...?’
 ‘Ah, that is a fine piece of work, too, a Myron; but I don’t mean that, nor the beautiful Polyclitus next to it, the Youth tying on the Fillet.; the Tyrannicides of Critius and Nesiotes are on that side too: ...’⁶⁹

Another sketch, this one by Horace, has his slave speaking his mind and unbraiding him for being hypocritical about the enjoyment of paintings.

Or when you stand popeyed in front of a painting by Pausias,
 You madman, are you less at fault than I am who marveled
 At the posters of athletes straining their muscles in combat,
 Striking out, thrusting, and parrying, in red chalk and charcoal.
 As if they were really alive and handling those weapons?⁷⁰

Satirization like this, whether it means to mock the connoisseurial attitude or to respect it, highlights its presence in Roman culture. Romans were privy to numerous artworks in their surroundings, which they commented on in everyday discussion as well as in volumes dedicated to formal analysis.

While Roman interest in art developed at first around publicly displayed works, it also led to private collecting, and went hand-in-hand with the building of magnificent homes and the conspicuous consumption of luxury goods. Collectors often included contemporary artists among their holdings, as with Gaius Asinius Pollio, who featured Stephanos and Arkesileos along with Old Masters Praxiteles and Skopas.⁷¹ Perhaps the most prolific collector was Lucullus, who filled his villas with artworks.⁷² Caesar was an avid collector of statues and paintings.⁷³ Cicero collected on a lesser but significant scale, although he sometimes professed publicly

⁶⁷ Pliny, *Natural History*, 36.4.

⁶⁸ Pliny, *Natural History*, 36.4.

⁶⁹ Lucian, ‘The Liar’, 18, *The Works of Lucian of Samosata*, H. W. Fowler and F.G. Fowler trans., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905.

⁷⁰ Horace, *Satires* 2.7, in *The Satires and Epistles of Horace*, Smith Palmer Bovie trans., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959.

⁷¹ Pliny, *Natural History*, 36.4.

⁷² Plutarch, ‘Lucullus’, *Plutarch’s Lives*, John Dryden trans., New York: Modern Library, 621-622.

⁷³ Suetonius, ‘The Life of Julius Caesar’, 47, J.C. Rolfe trans., in *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, J.C. Rolfe trans., Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1913.

to being a connoisseurial novice in order to maintain good standing with conservatively minded Romans who stigmatized collecting as frivolous and pretentious. His letters reveal the extent of his interest in art and his involvement in purchasing it.⁷⁴

The acquisitiveness of collectors demands the presence of a market. As described by Jerome J. Pollitt,

What we would call an 'art market' appeared for the first time in Western history, and perhaps in world history in late Republican Rome...All the familiar features of today's art market were there: passionate collectors, dealers (some unscrupulous, some reliable), smugglers, forgers, restorers, appraisers, fads and fashions, and inflated prices. All of this emanated from the fact that upper class Romans who had once been free to seize Greek art were now content to buy it in order to adorn their townhouses and villas.⁷⁵

Art for purchase was available at shops and auctions, and through independent dealers and go-betweens. Prices for artworks were sometimes high. Pliny recounts that Lucius Crassus paid 100,000 sesterces for two cups,⁷⁶ and Hortensius paid 144,000 sesterces for a painting of the Argonauts by Cydias.⁷⁷ Lucullus offered 60,000 sesterces to commission a statue by Arkesilaos, a contemporary master, but both men died before it could be finished and the transaction completed.⁷⁸ Caesar outdid them all by paying eighty talents (2,000,000 sesterces) for two paintings by Timomachus.⁷⁹ Consider in comparison the price of a loaf of bread at half a sesterce, a mule at 520 sesterces, and 2 slaves for a total of 5,300 sesterces, with the wealthiest few hundred Romans having fortunes averaging 2.5 million sesterces although a few like Lucullus and Crassus held far more.⁸⁰

On the other hand was Gaius Verres, the former governor of Sicily who was famously prosecuted by Cicero for plundering the people there. He often paid (when he was not stealing outright) a mere pittance for the artworks he desired by

⁷⁴ Cicero, 'To Atticus', 1.1, 1.4, 1.6, 1.8, 1.9, 1.19, *The Letters of Cicero*, Evelyn S. Shuckburgh trans., London: George Bell and Sons, 1899. Also his letter to Fadius Gallus, 7.23.

⁷⁵ Pollitt, 'The Impact of Greek Art in Rome', 162.

⁷⁶ Pliny, *Natural History*, 33.53.

⁷⁷ Pliny, *Natural History*, 35.40.

⁷⁸ Pliny, *Natural History*, 35.45.

⁷⁹ Pliny, *Natural History*, 35.40.

⁸⁰ These figures are from the first century A.D. rather than a hundred years earlier, but the difference probably is not great. For the prices see Koenraad Verboven, 'Currency and credit in 1st c. AD Bay of Naples', Working paper 2.1, 2012, 10-12, http://www.academia.edu/1260770/2012_Currency_and_credit_in_1st_c._Bay_of_Naples (last accessed 2 May 2016). For the amounts of personal fortunes see William Scheidel and Steven J. Friesen, 'The Size of the economy and the distribution of Income in the Roman Empire', Princeton/Stanford Working Papers in Classics, 2009, 17, www.priceton.edu/~pswpc/pdfs/Schidel/010901.pdf (last accessed 2 May 2016).

applying extortionary tactics. In one instance cited in the trial proceedings, he acquired statues by Praxiteles, Myron, and Polykleitos for a total of 6,500 sesterces. In comparison, Cicero notes that a bronze 'of no great size' (presumably by a celebrated name) was sold recently at auction for 120,000 sesterces.⁸¹ Verres was a key player in the art market as a dealer as well as a collector, with a profit margin we can guess to be astounding. Other art dealers, too, had shady reputations, including two artists Verres hired as experts to scout and buy for him.⁸² Damisippus drew criticism from Cicero for failing to complete a deal to buy sculptures (from Cicero's holdings),⁸³ and he was parodied by Horace as a dealer who used his sharp eye and expertise at appraising to survey artworks and offer less than fair value.⁸⁴

In sum, the four conditions Nagel asserts as necessary for art forgery were present in ancient Rome, long before he claims they first appeared historically. (1) There were artists respected for their individuality and whose works were highly valued. Some were contemporary, but iconic status was afforded mostly to Greek Old Masters. Connoisseurship developed around the appeal of notable artists and artworks. (2) Avid collectors purchased works they displayed in their homes. Emperors collected art, as did many others with wealth. (3) There was a lively art market through which collectors made purchases and sometimes paid exorbitant sums. (4) The art market included dealers with a specialized focus on art, some of whom were notorious for their underhanded methods. These conditions were not insipient; they existed to a remarkable degree for the time, and as a notable fixture in art history. Along with an understanding of the nature and extent of Roman copying, they tell us that Rome was far from the mere copy culture that revisionism has portrayed.

Deconstructing signatures

While the first line of revisionist thought runs up against facts from the historical record, the second line shows more promise. Passages from Roman writings – by the likes of Cicero, Livy, and Phaedrus – that complain about false inscriptions on artworks can be explained in ways other than suggesting forgery. The same point holds for physical evidence in the form of inscriptions themselves: there are multiple interpretations of their significance. Just what the suspicious markings were meant to say is subject to confusion because there are practices involved that are foreign to us today. Identifying these practices speaks against forgery being present in Rome on as broad a scale as otherwise might be assumed, although it does not support the conclusion that it was absent.

Portraits of well known figures, along with those of revered family members abounded in Rome, and they were sometimes recycled by reconfiguring

⁸¹ Cicero, *Against Verres*, 2.4.12-14.

⁸² Cicero, *Against Verres*, 2.4.30.

⁸³ Cicero, 'To Fadius Gallus', 7.23.

⁸⁴ Horace, *Satires*, 2.3.

and renaming them (making them a variety of 'spolia' by definition), or simply by renaming without alteration. We can imagine the name of a nephew put on a bust to replace that of a great-uncle, even if the nephew's visage bore little resemblance to the work newly dedicated in his name. This practice was disparaged by some, but others, including preeminently powerful and wealthy figures, accepted and participated in it. Mark Antony had two large statues relabeled with his own name,⁸⁵ while the emperor Claudius had the face in two portrait paintings of Alexander repainted as Augustus.⁸⁶ It is this practice of rededication, and not phony artists' signatures, that both Thierry Lenain in *Art Forgery: The History of a Modern Obsession* and Jonathan Keats in *Forged: Why Fakes are the Great Art of Our Age* suggest Cicero is referring to in his quote about 'deceitful inscriptions on other people's statues' (see page 3). Lenain notes that earlier in the letter containing the quote, Cicero established what was on his mind by denouncing a particular statue of Scipio for having improperly (in this case by mistake rather than deceit) been given the name of one of the general's family members. Keats asserts that Cicero's anger, then, was about a fraud on history rather than on an artist.⁸⁷ Lenain also asserts that Livy's statement (see page 6) telling us 'history has been much corrupted by means of funeral panegyrics and false representations on statues' refers to spolia. The concern about the harm caused to the historical record is over distortion of the subject matter of a work of art rather than who made it.⁸⁸

The clarification about spolia makes sense, even if the custom it describes appears odd by today's standards. Cicero's statement, taken in the extended context of his whole letter, does not seem to refer to signatures. And Livy's words about corrupting history come in an immediate context that relates the concern about 'inscriptions on statues' to the fame of families rather than of artists. In fact, the quote cited here comes in other translations that make this meaning evident. One translator has it, 'I believe that the true history has been falsified by funeral orations and lying inscriptions on the family busts.'⁸⁹ Names featured on family busts were of the family members being portrayed; who the artists were would have been of little concern.

Spolia are only a minor issue in the matter of suspicious inscriptions as related to forgery. But they signal caution in thinking that the name appearing on an artwork is necessarily intended to identify its maker. The main concern is about works bearing the names of Greek Old Masters that were made several centuries later than their lifetime. Lenain asserts that when the name of a famous artist was affixed to a copy, the act was not fraudulent: the sculptor was simply noting the

⁸⁵ Plutarch, 'Antony', *Plutarch's Lives*, 1138.

⁸⁶ Pliny, *Natural History*, 35.36.

⁸⁷ Lenain, *Art Forgery*, 68-69; Jonathan Keats, *Forged: Why Fakes are the Great Art of Our Age*, New York: Oxford University Press, 8.

⁸⁸ Lenain, *Art Forgery*, 69.

⁸⁹ Titus Livy, *The History of Rome*, 8.40, Canon Roberts trans., London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1905.

style which was being followed. In reference to the quote from Phaedrus (see page 4) about artists getting higher prices if they inscribe names like Praxiteles and Myron on their works, we learn,

Phaedrus' idea was most probably not that artists used to put *false* signatures on *spurious* imitations, but that some of them enhanced the value of their works (copies or pastiches) by linking these to prestigious forerunners – especially since there is little reason to think that Phaedrus had *deceptive* practices in mind.⁹⁰

Lenain backs up this point by noting the Latin verb *adscribere* admits to more than one meaning, as do the nouns associated with it, and that how someone interprets what ancient writers meant by it when describing artworks is a matter of the person's predisposition.⁹¹ Without being predisposed to think of forgery, he says, we should locate Phaedrus' emphasis in his beginning words: 'If I shall insert the name Aesop, to whom I have already rendered every honor that was his due, know that it is for the sake of his authority, just as some statuaries do in our day.' Accordingly, Phaedrus is telling us he himself as an author follows an artistic practice that sculptors do of basking in the light of a celebrity, but this is done without claiming his work was created by that celebrity any more than the sculptors were claiming their works were done by Old Masters.

By this way of thinking, putting a famous name on an artwork would be a form of branding. The message would be that this is a reproduction of so-and-so's famous work such-and-such, or, more loosely, this is a work done in the style of so-and-so. The identification with celebrity would fetch a higher price. Regarding direct copies, such a practice could accord with what we know today through reproductions of famous paintings and sculptures on which the famous signature was affixed by someone at the copyshop where they were made rather than by the named artist. However, a famous signature on a stylistic copy would be unusual by present day standards, and create suspicion of fraudulent intent unless it was accompanied by the signature of the copyist. Stories are legion of newly 'discovered' works by important artists that turn out to be forgeries.

In the Roman art world, did a famous name inscribed on an artwork function simply as a label rather than an indication of original authorship, suggesting that any artist might deem to apply it? Reading Phaedrus at face value says not. And if the quotation in question needs interpretation to be fully understood, there is a rendering that reinforces the suspicion of fraudulent intent rather than denying it. The key insight is that in comparing works of art with works of literature, Phaedrus is pointing specifically to deceptive practices: literary fakes share common cause with fake sculptures and paintings. Counterfeit poems were a

⁹⁰ Lenain, *Art Forgery*, 67.

⁹¹ Lenain, *Art Forgery*, 67.

frequent occurrence in Roman culture, thus the message is that visual art, too, should be seen as subject to deception about its authorship.⁹² Inscribing with a famous name is not a tribute, not an innocuous act of branding, but a disdainful adulteration of art history for personal gain.

Interpretations of the Phaedrus quote provide a range of possibilities for how accepting the Romans were of artworks in their midst inscribed with the names of great masters. There were many such works. If it was not the case that artists felt free to attach famous names at will to their productions, then what custom or restraint was there that limited such an appropriation while still allowing for a copious output? Scholarship on artistic activity in Rome suggests the answer lies in a system of patronymics: there were family workshops of artists that account for many craftsmen inscribing their works with revered names. Praxiteles is the typically cited example, with descendants of the master seemingly carrying on his name for three centuries.⁹³ That such an extended family affair could apply for other names is possible, but could it account for the full spectrum of masters who were copied? Perhaps so, if use of the name was not restricted merely to descendants, but also extended to their proxies. Might a famous artist, or a family member of a later generation, have sold the right to use the name commercially? Could there have been, for instance, multiple 'Myron' workshops operating as franchises?

There are other speculations, too, about the dynamics of artistic patronyms carried on in a loose fashion. It has been suggested that slaves or freemen laboring in workshops were given names like 'Praxiteles' and 'Myron'.⁹⁴ Doing this may have legitimized their production in the name of the master, although it could have been simply a convenient way to make a general (and perhaps humorous) reference to the artisanal work they carried out. Then again, claiming a master's name may have been shorthand for saying 'I am as good as he was', hearkening to the perspective that says Roman copying was done in emulation. A precedent is found on a funerary relief signed by the artist himself and inscribed, 'as a sculptor I blossomed no less than Praxiteles'.⁹⁵ Might works that were signed with famous names, rather than the true names of their creators, have been done with the intent of emulation while not telling viewers about it? The artist's sense of competition and achievement would be a personal secret.

By mistaking Roman authors' remarks about spolia to be about signatures, and by mistaking patronymic signatures for false signatures, it is easy today to think

⁹² Irene Peirano, *The Rhetoric of the Roman Fake: Latin Pseudepigrapha in Context*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, 51.

⁹³ Peter Stewart, *The Social History of Roman Art*, 30; Andrew Stewart, *Attika: Studies in Athenian Sculpture of the Hellenistic Age*, London: Society for the Promotion of Hellenistic Studies, 1979, 102; Squire, 'Ars in their I's', 377-78.

⁹⁴ Squire, 'Ars in their I's', 379; Stewart, *The Social History of Roman Art*, 22,

⁹⁵ Michael Squire, 'Roman Art and the Artist', in *A Companion to Roman Art*, Barbara E. Borg, ed, Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons, 2015, 188.

that Rome was rife with art forgery. But when we understand that the artistic inscriptions of another culture derive from practices unlike our own, forgery seems less likely. Still, less likely does not mean non-existent. It is a mistake to conclude from what is known and surmised about inscriptions that forgery was not present in Rome. The criticism noting that spolia are separate from forgery is solid, but the possibilities enabled through patronymics lend themselves to trickery. If an artist legally acquired the name of Myron because it would increase the value of his signature, the invitation to fraud is evident. The concern is not about the right to sign with a particular name, but confusion resulting from what that name is represented to mean when capitalized on by someone who sells the artist's work. What was legally marked 'Myron', and understood to be a copy when it was produced, could have been misrepresented as an original Old Master when it passed through the art market. Then again, while producing many copies that were sold as such, talented artists may also have been producing other works of higher quality that they, or the dealers selling the works, marketed as originals.

Recognizing there was a market for signed copies in Rome, and assuming that purchasers generally understood they were buying only copies even when they were inscribed with famous names, does not preclude a separate market for originals that suffered the presence of forgeries. The latter market may have been much smaller in volume, but would have been much pricier per piece. When the supply of Old Master works that the Romans desired dried up due to their popularity, it is difficult to imagine that enterprising fraudsters did not fill the void with forgeries. We know that collectors paid high prices for certain items, and we know from comments by Roman writers (excluding the misunderstanding about spolia) that a concern about fraud versus genuineness concerning artworks was an element in the mindset of the day. Are we to believe that concern was unfounded?

Absence of records and questions of definition

Beyond disputing findings in the historical record said to point to art forgery, revisionist thinking also considers what is missing entirely from that record. Should we not expect that if forgery was present in Rome, the legal system would reveal it? In fact, while there were laws against forging documents and currency along with various cases reported of prosecution for those offenses, Roman courts made no provision for art forgery.⁹⁶ Roman law, although much was drawn from it by later cultures, is not a mirror of legal systems today. It was dispensed through a group of standing courts each of which handled a specific category of offense, with courts for treason, murder (specifically knifing and poisoning), adultery, and several other

⁹⁶ This circumstance has been pointed out by several commentators. Lenain, *Art Forgery*, 72-73, advances the point in support of his view that art forgery was absent in Rome. Others recognize the lack of legal sanctions but do not conclude against the presence of forgery. See, for instance, Harris, 'Prolegomena to a Study of the Economics of Roman Art', 406; Fritz Mendax, *Art Fakes and Forgeries*, London: Werner Laurie, 1955, 33.

crimes not being established until the middle of the second century B.C. and onward.⁹⁷ Prosecution under the law for the forgery of documents (transferring land to heirs) began in 80 B.C.⁹⁸ During the evolution of the legal system, actions were sometimes punished as transgressions against customs if not against specific legal conventions. Thus non-codified offenses did not necessarily go unanswered. Art forgery may have been looked at as an unfair practice akin to what today we declare broadly as 'fraud'.

It may be, too, that in situations where art forgery was suspected, proving it in court was thought difficult enough not to be worth the attempt. Determining with certainty that a particular work was a fake would have been burdensome. While there was connoisseurial interest in art, there do not seem to have been experts with anything like the degree of knowledge that came many centuries later. And such experts as there were would have been subject to (as often is the case today) contradictory opinions among them. Further, scientific means employed today in exposing forgeries were not available. Regarding the absence of prosecutions, then, we should not conclude that art forgery was not present in Roman culture and not thought to be a repugnant practice, especially by collectors paying large sums for artworks. If not legally punishable, either because of the nature of the law or the difficulty in prosecution, it still stood to have been considered morally wrong. And while thus censurable, if the greatest deterrent to art forgery was shame rather than conviction in court, the incentive to engage in it would have been greater than for transgressions that risked a legal response.

Besides legal sanctions, the other absence in the written record cited to deny the occurrence of art forgery in Rome is of stories telling about forgers plying their craft and about forgeries being discovered. Lenain follows this tack, arguing that the stories we have are not truly of forgery, but types of deceitful action that, by definition belong under other classifications. Concerning tales about Corinthian bronze, he tells us that the concern is not about whether it was actually faked. There is enough evidence to show that it was. Here Roman writers are taken at face value. Pliny makes it clear that fakes were on the market and that many people were fooled by them. But what was the nature of the imposture? The revisionist perspective emphasizes that 'if fake Corinthian bronzes have been produced, then the chief object of deceit must have been the material itself.'⁹⁹ It was not difficult to pass off something else as Corinthian since no one knew the exact nature of the famous and expensive substance. Materials forgery was common even with known substances. In a case recounted by Plutarch, Phidias was accused of substituting cheaper ingredients for some of the gold and ivory that was supposed to be used in

⁹⁷ Jill Harries, *Law and Crime in the Roman World*, London: Cambridge University Press, 2007, chapter one offers a good, while rather brief, overview of the Roman legal system.

⁹⁸ Katherine M. Koppenhaver, *Forensic Document Examination: Principles and Practice*, Totowa: Humana Press, 2007, 47.

⁹⁹ Lenain, *Art Forgery*, 62.

fashioning his statue of Athena for the Parthenon.¹⁰⁰ But trickery with materials, Lenain asserts, is not the notion someone conjures when hearing the word 'forgery'.

To sum up: even though these facts indisputably and interestingly pertain to a general history of lying, and even if they relate to the production of art objects, they cannot be considered as instances of art forgery. They do not correspond at all with the definition proposed in the first chapter: nothing in them concerns the simulation, mostly stylistic, by means of which a forger has an artwork usurp 'first-object' status of something from a different origin.¹⁰¹

What we are told counts as 'forgery', then, is the stealing of an artist's style (presumably stealing a specific image is included), and producing a work in its likeness that is claimed to be by the originator of that style. A scam with false materials does not count.

Appropriating another artist's work and calling it one's own also is said not to count. Lenain refers specifically to Pliny's stories of Phidias putting his name on his protégé's sculptures to raise their market value, and Apelles suggesting he would do likewise with a lesser priced artist's paintings that were of high quality (see page 4). Again the challenge is not to whether the events happened, but to the type of action they represent. Rather than 'forgery', we are reminded, the proper term in these cases is 'plagiarism'. The two are opposites in that the former pretends one's own work was done by someone else, while the latter pretends someone else's work is one's own.

This line of argumentation is problematic. Although a distinction can be made between forgery of a style and materials forgery, and between plagiarism and forgery per se, these differences are surmounted by implications and connections drawn from them that lead toward more than away from the likelihood of forgery in Rome. We are alerted to the multiplicity of art scams conceived by ancient minds: to the cunning with which they operated, and the likelihood that 'forgery' in Lenain's restricted sense of the word existed among those scams. Moreover, the strategy of separating forgery out as different by definition rebounds against itself through the very semantics it relies on. The difference between forging materials and forging a style is rooted in the common ground of dissimulation. The two types of forgery are both forgery, even if today one is more prevalent in people's thinking and is what they would conceive when hearing the word. A person with a bit of knowledge of art is likely to think of a phony Dali print or Rodin sculpture, two key targets of forgers in recent decades,¹⁰² or of a painting done in the style of Jackson Pollock and claimed to be by the famous abstract expressionist. But if someone purchased a 'genuine' gold figurine the value of which is in its material rather than

¹⁰⁰ Plutarch, 'Pericles', *Plutarch's Lives*, 193-194, 206.

¹⁰¹ Lenain, *Art Forgery*, 63.

¹⁰² Milton Estrow, 'The 10 Most Faked Artists', *ARTnews*, June, 2005.

its configuration, and it was subsequently proved to be made of a gold substitute, this would be no less a case of forgery and considered no more acceptable ethically or legally. Trimming down the definition to what is more common cannot banish the less common in forgery.

With plagiarism, the semantic distinction from forgery is accurate, but again there is a common ground to be recognized. Both plagiarism and forgery involve pretense, and both commit assault on originality: they make false claims about who created specific artworks. More than linguistic opposites, they are close cousins. And in the case of Phidias there is a significant revelation that false signatures were involved. Lenain acknowledges that the master's name was inscribed on the plagiarized works, and that the intention was about deceit. But instead of accepting that this evidence of false inscriptions in plagiarism is reason to think the same thing could occur in forgery, he dismisses it as excluded by definition.

Summary and conclusion

The traditional view that art forgery was a standard practice in ancient Rome has met with various critical reactions and alternative explanations. The meaning of Roman writings that refer to false inscriptions on statues has been reinterpreted. Physical evidence consisting of numerous artworks bearing Greek Old Master signatures has been depicted in ways other than forgery. Both Roman law and modern linguistic conventions have been examined to enhance our understanding of cultural practices from long ago. Beyond all of this, it has been asserted that Rome was a copy culture lacking the necessary level of sophistication for the presence of art forgery. These challenges to the traditional view yield answers that range from clear and reasonable refutation, to refinement with continuing puzzlement, to semantically strained and decidedly wrong.

The strongest challenge consists of reassessing Roman writings that make reference to false inscriptions. Rather than pointing to spurious signatures of famous artists, statements by Cicero and Livy describe *spolia*: statues that are rededicated by changing the name of the person being portrayed. Such a cavalier renaming of artworks does not occur today, so readers of ancient authors can easily be misled about what their cultural forebears were saying. Reading history through a modern lens has created confusion.

Spolia involve a form of deception, but it is not forgery. Phaedrus' well known quote (see page 4), however, is not about *spolia*. It refers to the names of Old Master Greek artists being inscribed on sculptures made several hundred years after they lived, and to the financial gain thereby derived. The revisionist portrayal of this practice as merely designating the style of a sculptor, rather than faking a signature, is a possible explanation. But it is also possible that what traditionally have been assumed to be phony signatures are just that. Further testament to fraudulent artworks comes through comments in imaginative literature which reveal a suspicion among art followers in Rome about the authenticity of the

masterpieces collectors put on display. Satire and sarcasm tell of a mindset fearful of fakes populating the proud possessions of aristocratic households.

Construing a famous Greek master's name on a Roman-made artwork as merely a designation of a particular style is tenable in theory if the work, in fact, follows the forbear's style. But this theory does not explain a whole segment of the physical evidence that has been examined: various works bearing famous names but having stylistic features anomalous to those names, and in some cases made in a medium foreign to those names. A prevalence of patronymics among artists, extended over generations, could account for the anomalies, i.e., Myron sculptures that do not look like Myron's work. But a practice of this sort also portends a looseness with names that is convenient for perpetrating fraud, hence support for claiming the presence of forgery rather than a refutation of it.

The argument that stories of deviousness by artists in Rome as well as Greece are not, by definition, descriptive of forgery, is weak. Plagiarism is not forgery *per se*, and materials forgery is not stylistic forgery, but those dishonest practices are close cousins to what is being denied, and focusing precise semantics on what they are not is misleading. Likewise with the observation that there was no provision in Roman law to deal with art forgery: what was not there technically is not truly telling. We can still recognize an element of concern among Roman authors about the genuineness of Old Master artworks, indicating that forgery was considered to be a censurable act even if it was not prosecuted.

Finally there is the copy-culture thesis that says the Romans lacked the necessary cultural advancement to be subject to art forgery. This notion is clearly wrong. Neither did the artists of the day merely copy existing works of Greek art nor did Rome lack the cultural and economic features conducive to producing and marketing fakes. There was an appreciation for fine art, including public exhibition, private collecting, and connoisseurial literature. A teeming art industry of dealers and skilled artists provided both antique works and newly made ones, although the number of antiques dwindled as demand rose. Conditions were ripe for forgery to answer the demand. All of this occurred amidst an environment replete with deceitful practices in misrepresenting artworks – materials forgery, spolia, and a mindset wary of art plagiarism – along with the forgery of currency and documents. Given the combination of motive, skill, and dissembling habits, to think that likenesses of Old Master works were not passed off as originals strains common sense. If forgery of this sort did not occur, we are left to accept that there was an uncharacteristic void in the Romans' disposition. Would they have been devious in so many other ways yet so naïve as to miss out on the potential of art forgery?

Revisionist thinking has thrown up cautionary flags about the claim that forgery was a feature of the Roman art world. Yet it has not nullified that claim. The traditionalist case for forgery has been challenged in ways that point out a lack of 'hard' evidence: revisionism carries this amount of strength. However, the circumstantial evidence is abundant and strong, and if not definitively, it at least leads reasonably to the conclusion that the Romans engaged in making and

purveying phony antique artworks. To lean on an old metaphor -- at our distant remove we can see the smoke, and where there is smoke...

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