

# The New Criterion

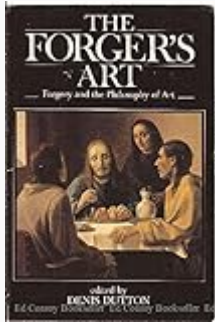
Books October 1983

## Pursuing the marginal

by E. V. Thaw

A review of *The Forger's Art: Forgery and the Philosophy of Art* by Denis Dutton

### BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE



*Denis Dutton*

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

University of California Press, 286 pages, \$15.00

*"I heard an imitation of Caruso and he's rotten."*

—old vaudeville joke

The essays collected in *The Forger's Art* address each other in the manner of an academic conference or symposium. Indeed, since most are written in academic jargon instead of English, they are more properly called "papers" instead of essays. The contributors are all professors, and, with one exception, they share the belief, treated throughout as an assumption, that there is a "problem of forgery" in the complex relationship we have with works of art; that, furthermore, the problem is central to our understanding of art itself. "The initial spark for 'The Forger's Art,'" writes Denis Dutton in his preface to the book, "came from students in my aesthetics classes persistently demanding to know why forged paintings must be considered inferior to originals, when 'nobody can tell the difference.'" It is comforting to know that intellectual curiosity is not absent from university aesthetics classes these days, but it is appalling

to see that a whole philosophical industry has sprung up around a non-issue like forgery. The foundation for much of the argument in the book is the essay by Nelson Goodman, a distinguished professor of philosophy at Harvard. In “Art and Authenticity” Goodman makes a distinction between autographic and allographic works of art—or between works that are made by the hand of the artist, like paintings, and those that can be transmitted by notation, like music, literature, and dance (to some extent). Goodman claims that, as long as the correct text is used, there can be no forgery in allographic arts. In autographic arts there *can* be forgery, he says, but our experience of even the “exact” copy will differ from our experience of the original. Goodman argues that if you cannot see the difference between an “exact” Rembrandt copy and the original and yet you know which the genuine Rembrandt is by provenance, then you will have a different aesthetic reaction to the paintings because you will expect to be able to see the difference between them in the future even if you cannot at the present. Goodman seems to be saying that our inability to see the difference between a real Rembrandt and a false one doesn’t mean that a difference doesn’t exist or that someone properly gifted or trained cannot see it. He implies, although not strongly enough, that the crucial difference between the real and the false is sometimes very subtle. That is why perfectly genuine paintings that have been cleaned or restored insensitively lose a measure of authenticity, although they remain genuine in the larger sense.

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## The symposiasts challenge Goodman but gain no ground in understanding along the way.

The symposiasts challenge Goodman but gain no ground in understanding along the way. His distinction between autographic and allographic works is attacked by various talmudic inventions of special cases: tampering with tapes, for example, or interposing an autograph with a printed score. Here is Mark Sagoff, a professor of philosophy at the University of Maryland, killing a flea with a cannon:

At the risk of being tedious, perhaps it is well to point out that there is a weak sense in which originals and forgeries can have some of the same aesthetic qualities even if these are relational. Let us say that an original painting, for example, Van Gogh’s “Night Café,” is very skillful for a painting by Van Gogh—it shows a full mastery of the various techniques, etc., which that artist developed. Thus this sentence is true:

Skillful (Night Café), y (paintings by Van Gogh) & Night Café e y (paintings by Van Gogh)

There may be a forgery of “Night Café” which is very skillful for a forgery; it shows a full mastery of the various techniques which go into forging. The following sentence, then, is also true:

Skillful (the forgery), y (forgeries) & the e y (forgeries).

Well, as you can see both the original and the forgery are correctly described as “skillful,” though not in relation to the same reference class. They will have the “same” aesthetic quality, then, in that very weak sense.

All the symposiasts take pains to show what aficionados they are of painting, poetry, music, and ballet, dropping names from Warhol to Cherubini and making long discursive comparisons of the different arts in relation to the “problem of forgery.”

The famous case of Han van Meegeren’s forgeries of Vermeer is cited repeatedly by the philosophers; it is thoroughly summarized by Hope B. Werness in the book’s first chapter. In spite of skepticism that was more widespread at the time than this book acknowledges, the forgeries were “discovered” only when van Meegeren himself, in order to avoid being prosecuted for collaboration with the Nazis after World War ii, confessed to having painted them. The case seems to raise the question of whether the forgeries were as “aesthetically valuable” as real Vermeers since some critics accepted their authenticity at the time. Incredibly, Jack W. Meiland, Alfred Lessing, and Monroe Beardsley all argue that there is no aesthetic difference between original paintings and clever forgeries like van Meegeren’s.

The last essay in the book is by Francis Sparshott, professor of philosophy at the University of Toronto and president of the American Society for Aesthetics. He compares forgery to the betrayal of true love and says that asking “‘What is wrong with forgery?’ is like asking ‘What is wrong with free sex?’” He tells us some dirty stories, advises us to buy only from artists we know well, in order to avoid fakes. (He himself collects Eskimo art.) In the last paragraph of the book he claims that an attitude that emphasizes the internal beauty of art increases our exposure to possible forgery and to disillusionment with art itself. Thus, we have Dadaism and anti-art, and “we are living out a dirty joke.”

What is behind this babble of aesthetics, this ferment on campus about forgery? The self-congratulatory tone in these essays is one clue. Many of the participants seem to feel they have scored a triumph over “empiricists” by merely identifying forgery as a central problem in aesthetics. The empirical approach is a sort of “art for art’s sake” or New Critical approach, in which the work of art is meant to contain in itself all that we need to know about it. Forgeries, it is claimed, can be identified only by our knowing things outside the visual data of the painting itself; ergo, “empiricism” in art criticism is defeated. Poor Clive Bell, whose efforts were directed at getting Englishmen to try to look carefully at the magnificent examples of modern art available to them, is cited here as the most extreme aesthetic empiricist: hence, a villain.

Of course, when it comes to looking at a work of visual art none of us is a perfect instrument. Some have a better “eye,” some better training and experience. Since art is so vast, no one is universally

competent. But it is simply not true that fakes and forgeries are the kind of problem that this book makes them out to be. Forgery certainly exists and it occasionally provokes some interesting problems, but it is decidedly marginal to the vast body of art itself. Making it central to our understanding of the creative act is merely playing a tricky intellectual game.

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but expertise is too, and very few  
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Fakes are prevalent, to be sure, but expertise is too, and very few fakes penetrate the defenses. Those that do are usually of two kinds. They are imitations of works of art so minor and marginal (scrappy Picasso ephemera, Dufy, Laurencin, or Chagall pastiches) that they sneak by the normal guardians of authenticity, or else they are major attempts at deception, like van Meegeren's Vermeers. Forgeries of this kind are carefully directed toward buyers whose defenses are down and whose desire for a coup clouds their judgment just long enough for the deception to succeed. The Boston Museum's Raphael and the Cleveland Museum's Grünewald were episodes of this sort. Neither lasted very long and neither distorted art history in any way. Both were identified as wrong by "eye" before other proofs were adduced.

Our philosophers have gone wrong in making forgery a central problem of art because they do not seem to understand the common-sense distinction between a thing and its imitation. There will always be imitations of a "hot number," whether it's by Judy Garland or by Picasso. In the case of a Judy Garland impersonation, most of us know the common language of performance and are able to distinguish the parody from the original. In the case of a Picasso impersonation, not everyone is so well equipped—certainly not most of the academics who have contributed to *The Forger's Art*. They seem to feel cheated by forgery of being able to understand art as a human endeavor. By their giving forgery a central position, their experience of art hovers around a mystery they cannot penetrate. Moreover, they pretend that no one else can.

One does not know whether to be upset or amused by the intellectual hijinks of some of the contributors. Jack Meiland, for example, discussing copies by Delacroix of earlier artists, writes:

It is instructive to vary this slightly by having Delacroix make, not an exact copy of, say, a Titian, but instead a copy that intentionally contains a small change, resulting in a better expression of Titian's vision. We do not have anything as serious and imposing as a new vision of the world as a result of Delacroix's change, only a small improvement in the old vision. Now, would you rather have Titian's original or Delacroix's almost-exact-but-slightly-improved copy? We might compare this situation with one in which you have your choice between one of Alexander Graham Bell's first telephones and a modern instrument. The improved version of the telephone is not original in the sense of being the first of its kind, and it is better than the original.

An anti-elitist political position combined with a fundamentally philistine sensibility often seems to lurk beneath the surface of these essays. The consequences of such a combination would be laughable were they not also dangerous. Only last year Edward Banfield, a professor of sociology at Harvard, argued at some length in *Harper's* magazine that America's regional museums should cease trying to buy original works of art. They should exhibit instead good reproductions of acknowledged masterpieces in order to provide the public with a superior "aesthetic" experience. The title of the piece was eloquently exact: "Let Them See Fakes: A Better Way to Bring Art to the People."

**T**he Forger's Art does include one essay that does not share the misconceptions at the core of the rest of the book. It is by Rudolph Arnheim, professor emeritus of the psychology of art at Harvard. His essay, "On Duplication," is a model of clarity and good sense. It begins like this:

We are afflicted not only with too many forgeries but also perhaps with too many disquisitions about forgery—too many because the same arguments keep turning up and the same examples are being cited again and again. The subject begins to look like one of those scenic spots of nature where too many vacationers have had a picnic. Is yet another attempt at interpretation really justified?

Arnheim goes on to give a lucid account of the complexity of the elements that constitute a work of art. He confirms that its "properties reside in all its various embodiments": the idea in the artist's head, the sketch, the finished painting or sculpture. Regarding our perception of art, however, he states: "It is always a search for structure because only structured form can be perceived." A nod to Clive Bell and the so-called empiricists, *pace* the philosophers.

Arnheim reminds us that forgeries must always reveal their own time. We look at art differently than we once did and in the future we will look at it differently than we do now. That alone is a built-in historical corrective to the problem of forgeries.

While most of the essayists in *The Forger's Art* are stuck at the "exact copy" paradox, a few properly point out that much connoisseurship of older art is concerned with attribution, which is a very different matter from forgery. Scholarship in the history of art is a continuous process: mistakes will be made by good authorities with the best of intentions. Once again, it is Arnheim who alone in this book states the reasonable case for a discipline always refining its search for the truth:

Practical indications can make it quite certain that a particular painting was done by Rembrandt; but such a proof, based on documentation, may not require any knowledge of Rembrandt's art whatever. It can be obtained by a detective or a lawyer. The art historian's true challenge consists in coming to know the characteristics of Rembrandt's art to such an extent that it can be distinguished with certainty from the works of others. This task, however, is necessarily endless; and by no means does the endlessness of the search imply that the final truth does not exist.

Arnheim is also alone in this book in frankly stating a fact the other contributors to *The Forger's Art* do so well to demonstrate: "In philosophical aesthetics, tedious pseudo-problems have been introduced by dichotomous thinking."

For those who have learned to read the language of art, the experience of original works is one of the greatest pleasures of civilized life. Of course, we should learn as much as we can—historically, biographically, technically, critically—about the art we wish to know well, the better to understand the nature of the experience. On rare occasion, a forgery, like those the newspaper supplements delight in—a van Meegeren, for example—will create a brief sensation and the cry will go up that experts are fools and art itself suspect. One is prepared for this in popular journalism, but one cannot but be annoyed to find such an attitude informing the deliberations of our contemporary philosophers.

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**E. V. Thaw** (1927–2018) was a preeminent art dealer, collector, and philanthropist.

This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 2 Number 2 , on page 74

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