



Al Held, "The Big A," 1962. Courtesy of the Al Held Foundation.

The Held Essays on Visual Art

Edited by Jonathan T.D. Neil

With the generous support of the Al Held Foundation, the *Rail* is pleased to present the following as one of the Held Essays on Visual Art, a series of texts that take on the state of our contemporary visual culture and take aim at the many received ideas that march under the banner of "art and politics."

BEYOND THE RELIC CULT OF ART

BY ALEXANDER NAGEL

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

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

Here is a good assignment for an enterprising journalist. Go to China and find the absconded Pei Shen Qian, the painter who produced the Pollocks, Rothkos, Klines, De Koonings, Motherwells, Newmans, and Stills that were sold by the Knoedler gallery in the 1990s and 2000s for tens of millions of dollars before they were revealed as what they were—commissions from the dealer Glafira Rosales and her partner José Carlos Bergantiños Diaz, who sold the paintings to Knoedler for hundreds of thousands of dollars after having paid Pei Shen Qian a piddling amount for them. As Blake Gopnik has argued, there is much to be learned from forgeries.¹ I would want to learn what it took to produce the works, and how Pei's abilities improved over time. I'd like to know which of these artists was the hardest to get right, and which of them he thinks is the most over-rated. (I'd bet on Still.)

Unlike Gopnik and Jonathon Keats and several others, I am not here to celebrate forgeries.² Art forgery is the perversion—there is no better word for it—of an ancient impulse inside art, as old, probably, as art itself. A look at the history reveals why it was inevitable that art forgery would develop once certain conditions came into being, but it also shows, and this is the main point, that things don't have to be this way. We are in a historical cul-de-sac and we really should get out of it, especially as the conditions are quite good now for doing so—good, because the entire tenor of our technology points in this direction, and also because the expansion of the art market to China has generated an industrial production of forgeries³ that will soon make the current state of affairs unsustainable. Forgery is not simply an invention of the modern art market, though it is true, as I'll explain in a moment, that art forgery in the West only began to be treated as a crime as the modern art market came into being in the late 15th and 16th centuries.

In China the discourse of art forgery begins very early, but in Europe it is rare to hear about forgeries of art before 1500. Art forgery goes unmentioned by ancient Roman law, which did lay down quite a number of strictures concerning document forgery and the counterfeiting of currency. In the Christian Middle Ages, talk of fakery buzzed with special intensity in the vicinity of holy relics. What matters in a relic is not its visual appearance so much as its provenance. An otherwise ordinary looking tunic is venerated because it belonged to Christ, or to a saint. If it had nothing to do with the worshipped person then it is a fraud. These rules apply in any relic cult, whether it is focused on Buddha or Elvis.

By contrast, what matters in images (icons, statues, etc.) is their visual aspect, which was generally considered transmissible from one image to another. In Christian art (and there are parallels in Buddhist and Hindu art and the art of many other traditions), the transfer of visual information is governed by precise protocols that are designed to allow any acculturated viewer to recognize what a given image represents, and to enable the image to deliver the effects that such a representation should deliver.

Art strayed into the territory of forgery when it got into the business of producing relics, art relics. Art becomes a relic when what matters is this physical object's provenance: who made it and at what time. The 16th-century biographer Giorgio Vasari noted that the young Michelangelo not only copied drawings by older masters, a common enough practice, but took the practice to a new level by copying not just the drawing's content (figures in certain poses, say) but everything about the older drawings, even the quality of the paper, which he smoked and stained to make it look old. The talk of smoking and tingeing suggests that Michelangelo also had to reproduce historically remote techniques and linear styles. He then returned his concoctions to the owners in place of the originals, presumably in order to see if they would pass and so gain him renown if and when the story got out, as seems to have happened.

Michelangelo was testing the boundaries of an emergent culture of art appreciation, which was beginning to ask questions such as: Where does this work fit into the history of Florentine art? How is it typical of its time? Is it by Giotto or a follower?⁴ What fascinated Michelangelo, I think, was the opportunity to stand at the juncture of two ways of viewing past art.

In contrast to copying for training purposes, which proceeds from the premise that the lessons of the model could and should be applied in the present, copying them as artifacts proceeds from exactly the opposite premise, that the model is foreign, that art has moved irreversibly in new directions. In reproducing the strokes made by the original artist, I relive them as a series of decisions, decisions that were natural for him and are not for me. It is not just that his individual style is different from mine. If it is old enough, the entire period style, the very premises on which he worked, are different. The strange quality of a sleeve, therefore, and my resistance to it, prompt questions about the otherness of those times generally.

I'm going to imagine that Pei Shen Qian had a similar experience, that he gained an insight into Pollock and De Kooning that few people have achieved, an insight arguably beyond that of the connoisseurs. In learning how to make Abstract Expressionist paintings that passed, even if all he ever learned was how to take shortcuts to making them, he found himself at grips with a problem that especially affected this school of painters. By making primal creativity, directness of expression, and authenticity of experience into the stuff of their art, the Abstract Expressionists worked on the razor's edge separating authentic expression from mere self-mimicry. If each work is an original act of creation, why do they look so much the same? On the one hand, it is the very signature of individual life, changing and yet consistent; on the other, it is a recipe made to order for the art market: this work is authentic because it is like other works in the series, yet it is irreducibly original, unlike any other work produced by the artist; it is Pollock at a particular, unrepeatable moment.

As soon as they became an art market sensation, the successful Abstract Expressionists had to grapple with the danger that they were working in an artificial environment, that recognizable consistency could at any moment fall into pandering self-imitation. One could shift direction, as many did, in order to reclaim authenticity and originality, but that was to court a different

kind of inauthenticity; there was Clement Greenberg, always ready to proclaim that a favorite artist had "lost his stuff." When the action painter loses touch with the "dialectical tension of a genuine act," Harold Rosenberg wrote in 1952, he will produce nothing but "apocalyptic wallpaper."⁵ Abstract Expressionism came packaged with warnings about sham or hollow work—warnings sounded by the artists no less than the critics and the public. To redo the action-based authenticity of Pollock and De Kooning, or to reproduce the aura of Rothko and Newman, to do it all so well that the new works enter into the existing series and thus sell for tens of millions, is to touch somewhere near the core problems of this art, not despite the fakery but because of it.

I can only imagine all of this, since it is very hard to find reproductions of Pei Shen Qian's forgeries, let alone gain access to the actual works. Beyond having no monetary value (for the moment), they are considered somehow poisonous, as if they contained a virus that would destroy the whole system if allowed to spread.

The fear aroused by the specter of forgery infects all of art, and has for some time. Yet this was not always the case. Even after art forgery became a cultural fact, there was a century or so during which art makers and lovers did not labor under this fear and inhibition. They combined discernment of quality and love of art with an acceptance of the validity of copies, an integration that is still hard for us to understand.

When Michelangelo's forgery of an ancient sleeping Cupid was exposed in the 1490s, it was quickly bought (as an exposed forgery) by the great collector Isabella d'Este, who then displayed it next to a Cupid she owned by the great Greek sculptor Praxiteles (in fact a Roman copy), thus offering a thoughtful exhibition on the theme of ancients and moderns, originals and copies. When Isabella d'Este was asked by the noblewoman (and, later, friend of Michelangelo) Vittoria Colonna for her painting of the Magdalen (we don't know by whom), she replied that she would be happy to send it and asked only for time to have a good copy made; the wording clearly indicates that Isabella herself will keep the copy.⁶ When Reginald Pole, a friend of Michelangelo, was asked for his drawing of a "Pietà" by the master, he replied that he would be happy to give it away since he could get another one from Vittoria Colonna.⁷ The most sophisticated collectors of art, close to the greatest artists, dealt quite naturally with the idea that even great works could exist in copies.

This is not to say that copies were not sometimes passed off as originals, in forgery mode. In 1523, Isabella d'Este's son Federico Gonzaga, then Marquis of Mantua, asked Pope Clement VII for Raphael's 1517 portrait of "Leo X with Two Cardinals" now in the Palazzo Pitti in Florence, and here as elsewhere it was only natural to offer the painting and have a copy made. But in Florence Ottaviano de' Medici, whom Vasari calls "extremely knowledgeable in matters of art," did not want to part with the painting, and so secretly contracted Andrea del Sarto to make a copy (now in Naples), which was offered as the original to Gonzaga. Andrea del Sarto's activity here is in many ways a traditional one, only now it became more intensive under the pressure of the deception; Vasari says Andrea went so far as to copy the smudges (*macchie*) on the original. The result was a copy so good that it deceived even Raphael's pupil Giulio Romano, who had lived in Mantua for decades with the copy.

At first Giulio would not believe the story, pointing out that he had actually assisted his master on the portrait and so should know it better than anyone. But once Vasari showed him a mark on the back that proved it was Sarto's copy, Giulio hunched his shoulders and said: "I don't esteem it less than if it were by the hand of Raphael, in fact I value it higher, because it is a thing beyond nature (*fuor di natura*) that an excellent man could imitate so well the style of another and make it so similar."⁸

Of course Giulio wouldn't have been in the position of being fooled by a devilishly convincing copy if other people hadn't felt differently and desired the original even in the face of a perfect copy, because only the original is the relic of the great artist. Within a few generations, this view was to acquire a stranglehold over the culture of art, which it has maintained right down to the museums, exhibitions, and art fairs of today. Through the 16th century, however, the situation was not yet decided. The hand of the artist became increasingly visible in painting after Raphael's death in 1520, in the palpable brushwork of Titian, for example, turning the entire work into a certificate of authorship. And yet Titian extended his hand through a busy workshop, giving connoisseurs much discriminating work to do. Many of Michelangelo's designs were reproduced, often in other media, as if they were a kind of new antiquity.

Giulio Romano, whom Shakespeare called "that rare Italian master," was a representative of both the new art culture and the older understanding of the transmissibility of authorship: his hands had worked on the "Raphael" that the Medici were determined to keep. He believed that artists were endowed with special gifts and that art had the power to do many things, including changing the way human beings lived. At the same time, he believed in the capacity of art to go "beyond nature," escaping the limits of an individual maker and of a given historical moment. This is a strong and sophisticated view, far richer than a relic cult of art. We might learn from it.

ENDNOTES

1. Blake Gopnik, "In Praise of Art Forgeries," *The New York Times*, November 3, 2013. See also the thorough theoretical discussion by Jonathan Hay, "The Value of Forgery," *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 53/54 (2008), 5–19.
2. See Gopnik's *New York Times* piece cited above and his Held essay published in these pages. Jonathon Keats, *Forged: Why Fakes are the Great Art of Our Age* (Oxford University Press, 2013).
3. nytimes.com/projects/2013/china-art-fraud/.
4. In a previous his Held essay, Blake Gopnik correctly described the mutually reinforcing relationship of art-historical inquiry and the modern art market: "Once art history established a set of relatively stable notions about which creative acts had mattered in the past, a new market could piggyback on those notions to assign value to tradable objects uniquely linked to each of those acts."
5. Harold Rosenberg, "American Action Painters," *Art News* (December, 1952), and he adds: "The man who started to remake himself has made himself into a commodity with a trademark." My thanks to Robert Slifkin for pointing me to this passage.
6. See Diane H. Bodart, *Tiziano e Federico II Gonzaga: Storia di un rapporto di committenza* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1998), 264.
7. Karl Frey, *Michelangelo: Quellen und Forschungen* (Berlin: K. Curtis, 1907), 139. To this day scholars debate the attribution of several highly finished Michelangelo drawings that exist in copies. See Alexander Perrig, *Michelangelo-Studien I: Michelangelo und die Zeichnungswissenschaft — Ein methodologischer Versuch* (Bern and Frankfurt: H. Lang, 1976) and *Michelangelo's Drawings: The Science of Attribution*, trans. Michael Joyce (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991). I don't share Perrig's dogged belief in his capacity to break through the copy culture and assign these sheets to an array of individual masters on "scientific" grounds, but I appreciate his bringing this problem to the attention of art historians.
8. Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architetti nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, eds. P. Barocchi-R. Bettarini (Florence: SPES 1966-84), vol. 4, pp. 378–80. See also Roger Jones and Nicholas Penny, *Raphael* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 159. For more on the preceding examples of Renaissance copying and forging, please see Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance* (New York: Zone Books, 2010).