



ANDREW J. SHORTLAND

PATRICK DEGRYSE

WHEN ART ISN'T REAL

THE WORLD'S MOST

CONTROVERSIAL OBJECTS

UNDER INVESTIGATION

LEUVEN UNIVERSITY PRESS

When Art isn't Real
The World's Most Controversial Objects under Investigation

When Art isn't Real

**The World's Most
Controversial Objects
under Investigation**

**Andrew Shortland
Patrick Degryse**

Leuven University Press

© 2022 by Leuven University Press / Presses Universitaires de Louvain /
Universitaire Pers Leuven. Minderbroedersstraat 4, B-3000 Leuven
(Belgium).

All rights reserved. Except in those cases expressly determined by law,
no part of this publication may be multiplied, saved in an automated
datafile or made public in any way whatsoever without the express prior
written consent of the publishers.

ISBN 978 94 6270 312 4
eISBN 978 94 6166 461 7 (epdf)
eISBN 978 94 6166 462 4 (epub)
<https://doi.org/10.11116/9789461664617>
D / 2022/ 1869 / 16
NUR: 682

Typesetting: Friedemann Vervoort
Cover design: Daniel Benneworth-Gray
Cover illustration: The Getty Kouros. Digital image courtesy of the
Getty's Open Content Program.

Every effort has been made to contact all holders of the copyright to
the visual material contained in this publication. Any copyright-hold-
ers who believe that illustrations have been reproduced without their
knowledge are asked to contact the publisher.

Contents

Chapter 1		
	Introduction	7
Chapter 2		
	Pittdown Man	15
Chapter 3		
	The Getty Kouros	51
Chapter 4		
	Turin Shroud	77
Chapter 5		
	The Vinland Map	101
Chapter 6		
	The “Amarna Princess”	117
Chapter 7		
	Leonardo and the Eye	141

Chapter 8

The Reconstruction of Knossos 157

Chapter 9

Conclusions 175

A Guided Bibliography 181

Glossary 191

Chapter 1

Introduction

In 2019, trade in the global art market was estimated to have been worth in excess of £50 billion. Around two thirds of that huge sum was traded in only two countries, the USA and the UK. China comes in third with an 18% share and, as with many China-related statistics, this share will only grow over the next few years. At the very top end of the market, the last decade has seen a huge rise in the prices paid for art. Of the top twenty most expensive paintings ever sold fifteen have been sold since 2010 and, remarkably, all ten of the top ten prices paid for paintings were paid in the last decade. This includes *Salvator Mundi*, attributed to Leonardo da Vinci, the world's most expensive painting and the subject of Chapter 7. It is interesting to note, therefore, that although the art market has such value, it is one of the least regulated markets in the world. The high values paid are often in cash, buyers and sellers largely relying on the “traditional ... hand-shake culture of the art trade”. This leads to the art market being called “famously opaque” with a threat of criminal activity that is ever present. The FBI has estimated that thieves steal art objects worth between \$4-6 billion worldwide every year, raiding and damaging cultural assets. It identified art as the third biggest criminal market after drugs and weapons. Looted antiquities have been acknowledged by law enforcement bodies as a significant source of insurgent and terrorist funding.

The situation means a significant human institution, a basis of human culture and cultural identity made up of international networks of institutions such as museums, galleries, public exhib-

itions and auction houses, is blighted by crime. A survey of industry professionals conducted by Deloitte in 2016 reported that “around 75% of all stakeholders surveyed agree that ‘authenticity, lack of provenance, forgery, and attribution’ are the biggest threats to credibility and trust in the art market”.

Despite this well-known prevalence of problems with forgeries, fakes and smuggled art objects, only limited resources have been committed by policing operations to dealing with art crime. This has led to greater pressure on business and cultural institutions to ensure that they are dealing in works with established provenance. It is this world that this book describes – the drive to protect a market from those who would want to profit from it illegally.

We both work in universities and are both career academics. We have approached the art world from the study of objects from the ancient world. We were both trained initially as geologists, but then fell under the spell of archaeology and the analysis of objects from Egypt and Rome. This is essentially curiosity-driven research, and we have the great luxury to be able to work with problems and objects as they tickle our fancy. Working on these materials and objects provides an opportunity to gather a database of workable scientific techniques and accurate chemical compositions, a body of knowledge on art and science that on the one hand can be used to comment on cultures of the past and human behaviour, but on the other can help to identify those objects that are more of the present than the past – fakes and forgeries. Working in university departments on historical objects, we both started initially by analysing excavated archaeological material. This was partly a matter of chance, but also reflected the way analysis was carried out twenty years ago. Then, to do any really accurate work, the necessity was to take samples from objects. This is much easier with excavated material which is usually already broken and/or fragmentary. However, the work quickly spread to analysing comparable collections in museums. It is in this way that we both were introduced for the first time to the buying and selling of objects on the art market. Museums, especially American museums, have always bought extensively from the mar-

ket. There are a number of such examples in this book. They act as a caution as to what can go wrong when enthusiastic curators believe that they have discovered a “sleeper” – an important lost artefact, misidentified as something trivial in the past but actually of much greater historical (and, of course, financial) value. This book is a series of stories of objects where science has attempted to validate or repudiate the opinions of other experts. As we will see, some of the cases described here have been proved “beyond reasonable doubt”, but others are still argued over, sometimes much to the chagrin of the scientists involved, for whom it is “case closed”. In particular, with these stories we want to give the reader some feel for the people involved. A feel for those period or material experts who give their opinion on an object’s validity from its looks, feel, even smell. A feel for the analysts, who employ their scientific equipment to the object and give their opinion from the numbers and pictures that are derived from them. A feel for the experts working with, in parallel with, and occasionally against each other.

Of course, it is also about the other side in this game, the forgers. We will show that some forgers have given a bit of insight into their motives. Surely, financial gain is one, perhaps very powerful reason to go about this work. However, it has been described by some as the motive to continue on the crooked path, not necessarily to start on it. Almost all *forgers* have more complex motives than just *financial* gain. Often there is an element of revenge in what they are doing. Sometimes they regard themselves as artistic geniuses who have cruelly and inexplicably been shunned by the art community. Therefore, there is an element of fooling and trying to embarrass those same critics and experts that have been dismissive of their own works. Once in the game, the forger can become addicted to the power he has. It becomes difficult to stop, and after all – when you’re caught, you’ll be famous and respected, or at least recognised, finally. There is also a great modern interest in newspapers and the public as a whole on the “little man” getting one over on the stuffy, élitist, upper classes of the art market – a forger can be a hero in the newspapers, despite what they are doing being essentially fraud.

Interestingly, most forgers claim to see many more of their works in museums and galleries, indistinguishable from the real thing, still unrecognised for the forgeries they really are – is this true, or are they just not able to get rid of that monkey on their shoulder, craving further attention, and recognition?

So there is a whole gamut of smoke and mirrors in this field – forgers routinely and, in some cases, pathologically lie. Some have lived so long with their untruths that they appear unable to distinguish fact from self-generated fiction. Not only that, but they are also responsive in their works – they tend to improve with time. Indeed, the arms race between those who forge and those who detect is rather exciting. It is also rather important – history is subtly changed by the insertion of fakes into an artist's or culture's oeuvre. Sometimes this is minor, sometimes (see Chapter 2, Piltdown Man) it can have major ramifications. However, always it is slowly changing, slowly subverting, history. Historians rightly strive for accuracy, even though all would accept that a lot is a matter of opinion. However, that opinion is more difficult if some of the evidence used to create it is unreliable, corrupted by forgers' intent on personal gain or fame, the effect of which is that they are, bit by bit, poisoning history.

Throughout the book we describe scientific approaches and briefly some methods, our area of expertise after all. However, individual chapters deal with personal stories related to the objects, and how they make or break careers and people. In the end, this book is also about how we interact with the objects and the people. Each chapter discusses a particular case, usually with one object or related group of objects taking centre stage. Often, we try to contrast this object with other similar cases. We also draw out themes present in most if not all of the cases we discuss, each theme brought out more strongly in one of the particular stories.

Our first case study in chapter 2 carries the title Piltdown Man and deals with our earliest case and one of the most famous. Piltdown is the location where a hominid skull was found, and it must be one of the oldest objects ever to be deliberately faked, dating as it does to before modern *Homo sapiens* walked the earth. In this story a

very senior, world renowned scientist appears to have been fooled by an extremely prolific amateur forger. The themes that come out of this chapter are twofold. Firstly, the forgery here had a massive and long-term impact on our interpretation of the ancient past. It threw history off track for decades and caused our interpretation of real hominid remains to be distorted and reassessed. However, this is also the story of a senior scientist whose name will forever be tarnished by association with the case. Whatever wonderful work he did in other areas, it is with this case that his name is most known. He never lived to know that his prize discovery was an outrageous, deliberate lie perpetrated by a man whom he regarded as a friend.

Chapter 3, the Getty Kouros, also discusses an ancient object, in this case a Greek stone statue. Here the story is, if anything, more complex than in Chapter 2. The case becomes not only a question whether the object is a modern forgery, but also a discussion of how such an object, if real, could end up in an American museum. It shows that in some cases the work of the forger and the work of the looter and trafficker are closely related, each using the other as cover for their activities. The chapter discusses the murky world of trafficking in looted antiquities and how, in the past, some august institutions adopted a light-handed attitude towards the investigation of the history of objects that they wished to acquire.

After the controversy about the potential for recently smuggled or forged objects that is the heart of Chapter 3, the next chapter deals with the Turin Shroud, an object which all concerned agree has existed in pretty much its current state since at least the fourteenth century AD. If forged, it is therefore the earliest forgery in this volume. These are perhaps only facts that all agree on in this, perhaps most argued over of all the cases we present. For this is a religious object, intimately connected (or not) with the person of Jesus Christ. In chapter 4 we discuss how difficult it can be to approach objects, especially religious objects, objectively. How difficult it is for some to accept that scientists working on such objects are driven not by a desire to corrupt or deceive believers, but simply by an interest in the right answer. Of all the cases covered, this provokes the strongest

opinions (on both sides) and the most vituperative arguments. There will almost certainly never be a consensus on this, one of the most emotive, interesting and charismatic objects ever made, regardless of whether it is real or a medieval forgery.

In contrast, chapter 5 on the Vinland Map presents an object that has much more of an academic discussion behind it. Potentially an early map mentioning North America, this has far less of the emotional impact of the previous chapter. However, the theme developed here is the ability of scientists to argue amongst themselves over the same observation or series of data. It shows how a clever forgery (if that is what it is), even if relatively simply made, can have generations of scientists scratching their heads and changing their minds. And, once again, there is a significant impact on our understanding of history if the object is real.

The modern case of the “Amarna Princess”, a small stone statue presumed of ancient Egyptian origin, is presented in chapter 6. It is the first case where the forger is still very much alive. So alive in fact that he has published his memoirs, showing a wide range of different object types that he forged. Here the theme is that of the forger’s mindset and motivation. It concerns an individual who extorted millions from victims and yet does not seem at all interested in the money. That individual also was relatively untrained – not a graduate of an art school or famous university (indeed, of any university – he left school at 16) – and yet with great artistic skill and even more operational cunning. He and his family worked a complex series of forgeries and deceptions for over a decade; indeed the extent of his forgeries is still debated and he has made incredible claims to having forged some very important and expensive pieces, also connecting him to the next chapter.

Chapter 7, Leonardo and the Eye, talks about the work of Leonardo da Vinci in general, and one or two of his paintings in particular. How much contact does an artist like Leonardo have to have with a painting for it to be a “Leonardo”? A lot of artists worked in studios with their students – is it enough for Leonardo to paint just part of the image? This is also a story of the huge amounts

of money that can be made on the art market by the right person at the right time. It is the story of how the opinion of one or two individuals, combined with some very astute marketing, can make \$100 million in only a few years. This is broadened into the theme of connoisseurs – who are these strange people who can just look at an object and know that it is real? What is “the eye”, that mystical ability to just know that an object is right? It also explores what happens when this whole edifice comes crashing down and a famous connoisseur makes a howling and very public mistake.

Chapter 8 the Reconstruction of Knossos continues on from the previous chapter in its investigation of how much of an object has to be created by an artist for it to be his or hers. Here the emphasis changes to how much of an object has to be preserved to make the object still the object it was? The art of conservation and restoration is described and different ideas of the ethically permissible extent of reconstruction is considered. Finally, this is taken to an extreme when an archaeological site is discussed where a very high percentage of the visible remains are extensively, and sometimes imaginatively, reconstructed. How much of this can go on before the site has all the historically damaging effects of a forgery?

The final chapters bring us to a conclusion, but also provide a useful bibliography and glossary. Rather than providing exhaustive references through the chapters, we hope that the guided bibliography is a more user friendly way of exploring further the cases and themes raised in this book. The bibliography details some of the best sources that we have used in the drawing together of the chapters. A short commentary is provided on each of the sources, the aim here being to help readers pick a reference that is useful for them, whether they want a technical report or more general work, an “accepted” version of events or a more controversial one. In this way, readers will know whether the text they are reading is widely praised or “fake news”. Finally, a short glossary is added for the specialist terms, techniques and individuals named in the text, once again to free the main text of explanations that might interfere with the narrative.

The research, writing and travel for this book have taken the two of us over a decade and we have worked on many of the areas in collaboration. However, some of the experiences, impressions and descriptions are more personal to each of us – this is especially true of meetings where we have not both been present. We have tried to give a flavour of this through asides which we have written as individuals. To delineate this, they are set in a different font.

The authors would like to acknowledge the help that they have received from the following academic colleagues and others in the research for this book: Heather Bonney, Mark Carnall, Ian Trumble, Pierrette Squires, Stephen Donovan, Ray Swan and Sophie Hayes. Several others would prefer to remain nameless, but are thanked here. A special note should be made of Katherine Eremin and Marc Walton for many years of travel, hospitality and debate. Parts of this book were devised and written during PdG's visiting fellowship at All Souls College, Oxford.