

# WHAT IS ART FORGERY

[1]<https://www.britannica.com/topic/forgery-art>

The most common type of fraudulence in art is forgery—making a work or offering one for sale with the intent to defraud, usually by falsely attributing it to an artist whose works command high prices. Other fraudulent practices include plagiarism, the false presentation of another’s work as one’s own, and piracy, the unauthorized use of someone else’s work, such as the publication of a book without permission of the author; both practices are generally in violation of copyright laws.

The fundamental consideration in determining forgery is “intent to deceive.” The act of copying a painting or other work of art is in itself not forgery, nor is the creation of a work “in the style” of a recognized painter, composer, or writer or of a particular historical period. Forgery may be the act not of the creator himself but of the dealer who adds a fraudulent signature or in some way alters the appearance of a painting or manuscript. Restoration of a damaged painting or manuscript, however, is not considered forgery even if the restorer in his work creates a significant part of the total work. Misattributions may result either from honest errors in scholarship—as in the attribution of a work to a well-known artist when the work was in fact done by a painter in his workshop, a pupil, or a later follower—or from a deliberate fraud.

Excluded from the category of literary forgeries is the copy made in good faith for purposes of study. In the matter of autographs, manuscripts in the handwriting of their authors, forgeries must be distinguished from facsimiles, copies made by lithography or other reproductive processes. Some early editions of Lord Byron’s work, for example, contained a facsimile of an autograph letter of the poet. If such facsimiles are detached from the volumes that they were intended to illustrate, they may deceive the unwary.

The history of the arts reveals instances of persons who have used forgery either to gain recognition of their own craftsmanship or to enjoy deceiving the critics who had rejected their genuine work. A legend told about Michelangelo illustrates this point. At the age of 21, he carved in marble a small sleeping Eros, or Cupid, based on ancient Roman works that he admired. Some time later this carving was sold as an antique to the well-known collector Cardinal Riario, who prized it highly. When Michelangelo stepped forward and claimed the work as his own he won immediate fame as a young man who could rival the work of the greatly venerated ancient sculptors.

There are basically three methods of producing a forgery: by an exact copy, by a composite of parts, and by a work done in the style of an artist or period and given a deliberately false attribution.

In the composite fraud, or *pastiche*, the forger combines copies of various parts of another artist’s work to form a new composition and adds a few connecting elements of his own to make it a convincing presentation. This type of forgery is more difficult to detect than the copy. Such a combining of various elements from different pieces can be very deceptive, because a creative artist often borrows from his own work. In fact, the similarity of a figure or an object in a forgery to that in a well-known work of art often adds to the believability of the new creation.

The Dutch forger Han van Meegeren employed a combined composite and stylistic procedure when he created seven paintings between 1936 and 1942 based on the work of Johannes Vermeer. In *The*

*Supper at Emmaus* he combined figures, heads, hands, plates, and a wine jar from various early genuine Vermeers; it was hailed as a masterpiece and the earliest known Vermeer. Ironically, van Meegeren never was detected as a forger. At the end of World War II he was arrested for having sold a painting attributed to Vermeer to one of the enemy and was accused of being a collaborator. He chose to reveal himself as a forger, which was a lesser offense, and proved his confession by painting another “Vermeer” under the eye of the authorities.

A notable forger of the late 20th century was Shaun Greenhalgh, who created several works of art in a variety of styles and, after carefully constructing a credible provenance for each, sold them over the course of roughly two decades with the help of his parents, George and Olive Greenhalgh. One of his notable forgeries was a stoneware sculpture, *The Faun*, thought to be a rare unglazed ceramic sculpture by Paul Gauguin, another was the *Amarna Princess* believed to date from 1350 bc.

## **Detection of forgeries in the visual arts**

The key to detecting forgery of unique objects lies in the fact that every object has within itself evidence of the time and the place in which it was made. The two main approaches, stylistic and technical analysis, are complementary and are best used together.

Stylistic analysis is subjective: it rests on the astute eye of the art historian. Each artist has a style, a flair, a verve unique to himself, and this can be recognized. His style will undergo change throughout his career, and this, too, can be stylistically analyzed and documented from his known works. When an unknown work purporting to be by a certain artist is discovered, the art historian attempts to fit it into the overall body of works by this artist. The subject matter, the brushwork, the choice of colours, and the type of composition are all consistent elements in a given artist’s production. Any variation immediately arouses suspicion. When the idiosyncrasies of an artist’s brushwork are studied, a fraud can sometimes be detected in much the same way a handwriting forgery is proven. In ancient works, particularly in antiquities, the scholar must examine the iconography of a piece. Forgers rarely have the scholarly background to combine iconographic elements correctly, and their errors often betray them.

An object must also be studied for its purpose. Ancient works were made for functional purposes. A forger usually makes an attractive piece often inconsistent with that purpose. As they were used most ancient pieces developed signs of wear. These rubbed and worn areas should appear in logical places on the object.

Documentation is also an important area of investigation. The apparent authenticity of many spurious pieces is bolstered by false documents to attest to the point of origin, former owners, and expert opinions concerning the pieces. A careful examination of these records often detects the forgery.

The hardest deception to detect is usually one that has been made recently. The forgery is a product of the time in which it was made, and the forger is closer to current understanding of the artist or period forged. The forgery, therefore, is often more appealing than a genuine work of art. As a forgery ages, viewpoints and tastes shift, and there is a new basis of understanding. Consequently, a forgery rarely survives more than a generation.

Technical analysis, an objective approach, rests on an arsenal of equipment and tests. The fundamental principle is the comparison of a suspected work with a genuine work of the same artist or period. The suspected piece must show the same pigments or materials used and comparable age deterioration. Inconsistencies automatically cause the piece to be suspect. Oil paintings dry out and develop a crackle, bronzes oxidize, and ancient glass buried in the ground develops iridescent layers. The microscope is the most useful basic tool: a close examination of the physical condition often will show if the aging is genuine or has been artificially induced. The type of tools used by the artist can be detected from an examination of their telltale traces.

Ultraviolet rays readily reveal additions or alterations to a painting, since the varnish layers and some of the paint layers fluoresce to different colors. Ultraviolet is also used in the examination of marble sculpture. Old marble develops a surface that will fluoresce to a yellow-greenish color, whereas a modern piece or an old surface recently recut will fluoresce to a bright violet. Infrared rays can penetrate thin paint layers in an oil painting to reveal underpainting that may disclose an earlier painting on the same canvas, or perhaps a signature that has been painted out and covered by a more profitable one. X rays are used to examine the internal structure of an object. A carved wooden Virgin supposedly of the 15th century but revealing modern machine-made nails deep inside is obviously a fraud. A forger usually works for the surface effect and is not concerned with the internal structures.

Sometimes it is necessary to remove small bits of materials from a work and subject them to various analyses. Chemical analysis is particularly valuable in determining the pigment used because many of the paints available to the modern forger were unknown in earlier times. Today titanium, a 20th-century product, is used to make the white pigment in most oil paints, whereas white lead was the element used in the time of Rembrandt. Many ancient colors were manufactured by grinding natural minerals such as lapis lazuli for blue and malachite for green. Today cheaper synthetic chemicals are used. Some chemical tests, however, require the removal of more ancient material than is desirable. In that event a speck as small as the head of a pin can be analyzed spectrographically. From the burning of a minute sample a photographic record of the spectrum of the light emitted is analyzed to reveal the elements present and their relative percentages.

The dating of an object by the study of radioactive decay of carbon-14 has had little application in the detection of art forgery because of the large quantities of material that must be destroyed. Thermoluminescent dating is based on the slight damage to all matter, including clays, by the faint nuclear radiation present in the earth. Magnetic dating of ceramic objects is based on the slow but perceptible shift of the earth's magnetic field over the centuries.

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[The Scientific Detection of Forgery in Paintings](#)

[Art Hoaxes From the Encyclopedia of Hoaxes, edited by Gordon Stein \(Detroit: Gale Research, 1993\).](#)

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