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Forgeries
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Forgery is fun for all: Exhibition at Nelson-Atkins Museum puts art of the ancient world put to the test

Visitors get to decide between fakes and the real thing

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Forgery plagues both the art historian and art merchant, but tickles the lay person no end.

What exhilarates the public more than the revelation that some expert has been hoodwinked by a con artist? We all relish details of the ambiguities beclouding would-be treasures, and that is just what an exhibition at the Nelson-Atkins Museum provides.

“Discovery and deceit: archaeology and the forger’s craft” considers the facets of fraud as they pertain to Egyptian, Near Eastern, Greek, Etruscan, and Roman statues, reliefs, vessels, and jewellery.

Robert Cohon, the museum’s curator of art of the ancient world, has assembled more than

eighty objects—about half of them inauthentic—from sixteen major American museums. “Every curator has at one time come across a forgery and been able to prove it”, says Mr Cohon, who considers the hunt “a highly intellectual adventure” that he hopes to bring alive for the public.

He juxtaposes genuine and less-than-genuine in a presentation both didactic and decidedly user-friendly.

Visitors are invited to pick up magnifying lenses, peer through electron-scanning microscopes, and press buttons exposing cosmetic retouches with a bath of ultraviolet light. They are shown how an arsenal of radiographic techniques detect modern repairs, how natural weathering and wear differ from artificial patinas, how thermoluminescence and traces of Carbon 14 pinpoint dates of manufacture, and how analyses of style and iconography can yield conclusions as persuasive as scientific testimony.

In many instances, lab data are supplied and the amateur put to the test: is the object fake or authentic? (The answer is always available on the far side of the display case). “This gets them really interested, and to think seriously and to look closely at art”, observes the curator, whose slender catalogue is a casual and entertaining medley of diaristic accounts of his encounters with objects.

About thirty items belong to the Nelson-Atkins, including two sixteen inch tall terracotta boxers in a third- or second-century BC style. Purchased by the museum in 1935 when they were said to have been recently excavated in Centuripe, Sicily, they soon were found to bear an uncanny resemblance to a pair of pugilists in the Vatican sculpted by Canova around the 1800s. Eventually they were declared modern. Searching the photo archive at the German Institute in Rome, Mr Cohon found a group of similarly pudgy statuettes, also on the market in the 1930s, and all by the hand of the same forger whom he and his colleagues have dubbed “The Pillsbury Dough Master”.

A gold bracelet with ram’s head terminals was thought to be Hellenistic until it was recognised as the handiwork of the twentieth-century forger known as Dimitriou, whose penchant for six-petalled rosettes is a dead giveaway. “We can identify him as the maker of pieces in museums throughout Europe, Scandinavia, Greece, and America”, says Mr Cohon, who juxtaposed the trinket with a genuine antiquity to allow visitors to compare ancient and modern granulation.

Visitor-activated ultraviolet reveals modern overpainting on a 3,000-year-old Egyptian relief, particularly the zinc-white eyes of the Nile boatmen which glow like cats’ irises in the night.

Another case study examines a third-century AD Roman marble bust of a girl long consigned to the storerooms owing to questions surrounding her perky Victorian nose. Obviously reworked, tests indicated that her marble nose and chin are additions, the ears are plaster, and the whole is coated with pigment roughened to simulate age. A gamma radiograph further shows a break through the neck repaired internally with metal supports. Interestingly, Mr Cohon found versions of the original in the Uffizi and the Vatican, suggesting an Imperial lineage for the young sitter.

The exhibition strikes an optimistic note with several erstwhile forgeries later considered to be genuine, and a concluding section assumes a humble posture, citing works which stubbornly remain puzzles. “Our knowledge is limited”, notes Mr Cohon “and the corpus of accepted knowledge is really mutable”.

The Metropolitan, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, and Dumbarton Oaks are among the lenders to “Discovery and deceit” which remains at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art until 5 January 1997, then travels to the Michael C. Carlos Museum at Emory University, Atlanta, 8 February to 18 May 1997.

Forgeries	Exhibitions	Ancient art	Kansas City	Nelson Atkins Museum of Art
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