

Differentia: Review of Italian Thought

Number 3 *Combined Issue 3-4 Spring/Autumn*

Article 13

1989

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Recommended Citation

Piccolomini, Manfredi (1989) "Of Forgery, Ancient and Modern," *Differentia: Review of Italian Thought*. Vol. 3 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://commons.library.stonybrook.edu/differentia/vol3/iss1/13>

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Of Forgery, Ancient and Modern

Manfredi Piccolomini

What is the difference between an essentially exact duplicate—more commonly called *forgery*—made in recent years of a fifteenth-century Italian painting representing a Madonna with Child, and a replica of a twentieth-century “readymade”—say, for example, Marcel Duchamp’s *Bottle Rack*—also reproduced in present times? There is no simple answer to this question. The issue of *forgery* lies in the individual perception of the beholder.

Let us start our analysis by imagining one of the many nineteenth-century English or American art connoisseurs who went to Italy for the purpose of acquiring old-master paintings to be sold at a substantial profit to museums or private collectors at home. The connoisseur would visit country churches in Tuscany or Umbria in search of valuable Italian works and, upon finding, for example, the altarpiece of a small Romanesque church, would try to meet and befriend the parish priest. The priest, most likely a naive country priest, deferential to the art-loving and sophisticated foreigner and certainly not aware of the developing international interest in early Italian art, would probably give away the painting in exchange for some money presented to him as a philanthropic donation to the church. The connoisseur would also offer to replace the work of art with another one, *exactly alike*, made by a contemporary “artist.” He would clearly not mention the fact

that the "artist" in question went under the more common name of *forger*.

The priest would accept the offer happily, considering it highly advantageous to the parish. Nothing would be lost, and finally an improvement in the dilapidated church would be possible. As for the painting, the priest would not think of it as having an *artistic* value, only a *religious* one, as the object of daily worship. An exact reproduction would therefore make no difference. The congregation would not even notice it. The connoisseur, for his part, would perceive the matter quite differently. He would be able to acquire what he considers an artistic masterpiece in exchange for a little cash and a cheap imitation. One of those imitations that have by now become famous, concocted by one of the many art forgers who found a vast and growing market for their productions beginning during the mid-nineteenth century.

Let us now bring our nineteenth-century connoisseur to a major Italian city like Florence, placing him in contact with a member of a fading aristocracy who nevertheless still owns one or two portraits of his ancestors by Bronzino. Here too the connoisseur would offer some money and an *exact*, newly made replacement for the painting. Finding some use for the money, the owner would also greedily accept it. This situation is, however, radically different from the preceding one. In this case the seller knew well that the portrait was made by a leading artist and that his ancestors had paid a substantial sum for the commission. He knew well that the replacement accepted in exchange, regardless of the exactitude of execution, was not the *original* work by Bronzino. In accepting the deal he accepted the *forgery*, and was bound to pass on the fraud to members of his family and to his friends.

From the two completely imagined but nevertheless representative examples of the way in which Italy lost so much of its art during the past century to foreign collections, one thing should be clear: *the idea of fake depends, in the first place, on cultural and historical conditions*. The priest, while understanding that his replacement painting was an imitation, did not associate with it the fraudulent and deceptive aspects that make up the quintessential nature of the *fake*. The awareness of having accepted a fraudulent deal instead would, or should, haunt the complying aristocrat for the rest of his life.

Let us now move to a more modern aspect of the *fake*, and see what happens to art forgery in modern times.

In 1914 Marcel Duchamp took a few objects from daily life

such as a bicycle which he promptly fastened for no logical reason to a kitchen stool, or a bottle rack of the type used in French wineries to dry wine bottles, signed them and claimed them as works of art. For many good reasons the art establishment did not call Duchamp's bluff, and in this way, almost as if by magic, an ordinary bottle rack became Marcel Duchamp's *Bottle Rack*. Today it enjoys the renown and the popularity of some of the greatest art works of all times. With the *Bottle Rack* was born one of the great artistic movements of our century, that of the "readymade."

In the 1960s, when Duchamp was enjoying the height of his celebrity as the guru of the twentieth-century avant-garde, the Milanese art dealer Arturo Schwarz finally called his bluff. Schwarz had several sets of the "readymades" forged (but is it possible to forge an industrial object?), asked Duchamp to sign them, and put each set up for sale at \$25,000! Duchamp was amused by the game, complied with the signing, and enjoyed the hefty revenues, saying he had done nothing to earn them! He had, however, become the forger of himself.

Let us finally suppose that I, the author of this article, traveling through France during the summer long after Duchamp's death, find a bottle rack just like his, buy it for a few dollars, and then try to sell it as a work of art. Would I be selling a fake? Would the object be more of a fake if I said that I was selling Duchamp's *Bottle Rack* rather than just a bottle rack? What if I forged Duchamp's signature on it? After all, Duchamp did not "make" the original *Bottle Rack*. He bought it in a store just as I do.

There seems to be a substantial difference between the fake of an old-master painting such as a Renaissance Madonna with Child and that of a modern work such as Duchamp's readymade. In the case of the readymade, Schwarz' "fake" or my "fake" are not anymore "fakes" than Duchamp's piece. In terms of an industrial object there is no real *original*. As in Plato's theory of the arts, the *original* never lies in the object but in the idea, and there can never be a perfect rendition of the idea. Duchamp's *Bottle Rack* is just as good as mine, whether it is signed or not, and my bottle rack is just as good as Schwarz'. What Duchamp has over Schwarz and me is that he had the *original idea* of transforming an ordinary bottle rack into a piece of art. But insofar as the object in itself is concerned, any bottle rack would do just fine. The originality is in the mental process that leads to the nemesis of the ordinary piece and transforms it into a work of art.

I must add that this definition is only true in theory. In the

real world of art made up of art dealers and museum curators, collectors and huge tax breaks for art donations, there is obviously an interest in preserving the originality of any object considered to be a work of art, be it a Renaissance painting or an industrial object. The law of supply and demand teaches that prices rise in inverse proportion to the availability of the object. There cannot be too many bottle racks each worth several hundred thousands of dollars. The marketplace's invisible hand protects itself by championing hairsplitting discussions and Sherlock Holmes-like investigations to distinguish the "good" bottle rack from the "bad" one, the one worth a fortune from the one worth only a few dollars. But such discussions do not take into consideration that the only difference between the two objects lies in the reality of Duchamp's eye and hand!

It is an ironic and paradoxical close to this discussion on Duchamp that the first, and, as it were, "original," *Bottle Rack* signed by the artist in 1914 has been lost. The only existing bottle racks are "replicas"!

In the case of our old-master painting, be it a Madonna with Child or a Bronzino, originality rests in the artifact and not in the idea. Both the Madonna and Child and the portrait are ancient and traditional tropes painted by many artists through the centuries. One artist rather than another receives a commission to paint a work in one of these generic areas because his style, his special hand is in demand. To forge the work of an old master is always a long and often imperfect process during which the forger immerses himself in the old master's times and carefully studies all of his stylistic details. In composition, anatomy, color and other features, each great master exercises his individual style, and a successful forger has to imitate all of these particulars to the best of his ability. Modern connoisseurship of old masters, starting with Bernard Berenson and Roberto Longhi, consists in the careful study of these details, and it is often said that a successful forger always works according to the advice of a good connoisseur. Connoisseurs are also those who, by pointing out some "mistake" in the painting, are able to uncover the forgery.

And what about the personality of the forger? Who is he? How and why does he come to do what he does? Very little is known about forgers. They are surrounded by an almost sacred aura of mystery. We know for a fact that there were, and probably still are, many of them. We know that starting with the second half of the nineteenth century a substantial market developed for their

talents, especially in Florence and Siena, the birthplaces of Italian art. But it is extremely difficult to do research on them. Even art historians who have a special eye for detecting fakes and who often write and discuss the theory and history of forgery—Federico Zeri is the first one to come to mind—are very careful never to mention names. They glide over the subject by saying that the proper name is irrelevant to the issue of forgery or, more simply, that they cannot remember it. There are legal entanglements in naming forgers and even I, who am not an art historian, prefer to avoid mentioning the names of the one or two I know. One always fears that naming names may open a can of worms. . . .

The forger's personality is therefore by-and-large only matter for speculation. Obviously money is the most important motivation for a forger since fame, the other great stimulator of human activity, is forbidden to him by the very nature of his work. The opportunity to compete in disguise with the greatest artists of all times is probably another great side benefit since the ability to make one's own work pass, say, for a Raphael or a Michelangelo, must provide some satisfaction. On the other hand, the faker is protected by anonymity in the case of failure. But there is surely another very interesting dimension to the forger's work which needs to be analyzed from the psychological point of view. Obviously a very talented artist in his own right, at least from the technical point of view, the forger freely chooses to annihilate his own artistic persona in order to duplicate that of others. Insecurity about his material well-being and low self-esteem involving the real worth of his talents compel him to imitate others' talents rather than promote his own. By doing so he is protected from official failure while still having the opportunity to enjoy fame vicariously, although in solitude, whenever his artifact succeeds in passing as the artifact of someone else. Like Woody Allen's *Zelig*, the art forger is the quintessential chameleon, the one who prefers to excel through others rather than to make his own personal individualized statement. If one were to accept classical paradigm of art as mimesis, then it would be easy to define the forgery as the imitation, albeit the fraudulent imitation, of the imitation.

In more recent times, as things seem to have become much more complicated, the definition of forgery is a good deal more elusive. During the twentieth century, both artists like Duchamp and critics have shown a great interest in the theory and the practice of forgery, probably because through an understanding of the phenomenon one can reach interesting conclusions about

some of the artistic developments of our times. In a well-known and much quoted article written in the mid-1930s, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin tries to come to terms with the fact that because of the development of new artistic media, such as photography and cinema, as well as improvements in lithography, a work of art can be reproduced almost infinitely. Seemingly unable to explain what has happened to the *original* under these new conditions and incapable of retrieving from the sea of unlimited reproducibility the baffling *real thing*, Benjamin states that in our time "the distinction between author and public is about to lose its basic character."¹ Confronting the same subject more directly from the point of authorship in a well-known short story, "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*," Jorge Luis Borges imagines a twentieth-century author who set out to re-write Cervantes. In describing Menard's intentions, Borges writes:

He did not want to compose another *Quixote*—which is easy—but *the Quixote itself*. Needless to say, he never contemplated a mechanical transcription of the original: he did not propose to copy it. His admirable intention was to produce a few pages which would coincide—word for word and line for line—with those of Miguel de Cervantes.²

As the story progresses, Menard succeeds in his initial goal, producing without copying a few chapters which coincide word for word with the text of Cervantes. "Cervantes' text and Menard's are verbally identical," says Borges, "but the second is almost infinitely richer."³

What is this added richness of the copy-which-is-not-a-copy? Obviously, the production of a Golden Age style and of Golden Age narrative structures in our time has quite a different meaning in terms of irony and parody than if the same work had been composed in its original century. The added richness of the contemporary version lies in the fact that while preserving all the characteristics of the Renaissance one, it also adds elements such as parody which are the result of literary and historical anachronism. The main focus of Borges's story is not to point out the differences between two supposedly identical works of literature composed in different centuries, but, again, to take up his own personal war against the battered concepts of *authorship* and *originality*. Because Menard did not copy Cervantes' work, his *Quixote* is as much an *original* as Cervantes' *Quixote*, the one everyone generally accepts as the only possible *original*.

The crucial innovations which have occurred in all the arts

during the twentieth century have all carried with them attacks on notions of authorship and originality. In his first Futurist Manifesto of 1909, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti maintained that “a roaring automobile, which seems to run on shrapnel, is more beautiful than the *Nike of Samothrace*.”⁴ Thus, anticipating Duchamp, and Andy Warhol’s Pop Art, he proposed an artistic role for industrial products or “readymades.” While Marinetti permitted the followers of his movement to deposit a bunch of flowers before Leonardo’s *Gioconda* only once every year, he claimed that “to admire an old master painting is equivalent to pouring our sensibility into a funerary urn rather than projecting it far away, through violent creative sparkles of invention and action.”⁵ Innovation was to take the place of tradition. Marinetti wrote that “the great Parisian tailors who by the fast invention of new fashions create a passion for the new and hatred for what has already been seen” were among those “possessed by divine forces.”⁶

Most important though, Marinetti proposed the abolition of the artist’s “I,” of his individuality, in the work of art. He contended that the role of the artist was to bring reality into the work of art rather than infusing it with his own subjective point of view.⁷ Tristan Tzara picked up on this point in 1922 while theorizing the artistic principles of the Dada movement:

Art has not the celestial and universal value that people like to attribute to it. Life is far more interesting. Dada knows the correct measure that should be given to art: with subtle, perfidious methods, Dada introduces it into daily life. And vice versa.⁸

It is interesting to note that exactly one year earlier (1921), in one of the greatest plays of the century, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, Luigi Pirandello represented his characters as they rebel against their author-director because he tries to make them act and do things according to his personal artistic vision. The six characters claim to know their drama better than the director and they want the freedom to act it out as they know it.

Reality triumphs over art. The *original* is no longer in the artist—whether we speak of plot, painting or musical score—but it belongs to the world itself.

This paradox was brought to its furthest limit by a contemporary musician who in 1952 composed a “silent piece.” In a performance of John Cage’s *4’33”* (the title indicates the length of the piece), the audience is exposed to a performer who walks on stage and sits in front of his piano without playing. For four minutes and thirty-three

seconds the audience witnesses a totally silent musical composition! But as complete silence is obviously an impossibility, the audience in fact hears noises that inevitably occur in any circumstance. More particularly, if the performance takes place outdoors there will be foreign noises and sounds intruding, such as birds singing or the wind blowing through the branches of trees. These foreign and unexpected noises were Cage's goals in 4'33". Rather than imposing his own musical sounds, his own individual musical preferences on the audience, Cage wanted the audience to become aware of sounds that are created naturally and by chance in the environment. Commenting on this work, the composer said:

I wanted my work to be free of my own likes and dislikes, because I think music should be free of the feelings and ideas of the composer. I have felt and hoped to have led other people to feel that the sounds of their environment constitute a music which is more interesting than the music which they would hear if they went into a concert hall.⁹

Thus in Cage's radical musical statement, the *originality* of the work is transferred from the work itself and the personality of its composer to the surrounding world and to chance. The best condition for the artist in our time, Cage seems to say, is to disappear *as* an artist!

Pop artists have been especially attentive to the theme of forgery in the past thirty or so years. By "forging" boxes of Brillo Soap Pads, Andy Warhol set the art world afire in the 1960s. And painting symbols such as the American flag, dart targets and numbers, Jasper Johns based his art on the reproduction of things which are nothing in themselves. What is the difference between painting a symbol, imitating it, or simply *forging* it? In his recent *Four Seasons* series exhibited at the 1988 Venice Biennale, Johns carries his symbolist theory to the point of infusing the work with an image that refers to Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy of the multiple and undefinable meanings of images. The image of the head of a duck which can also be seen as the head of a rabbit, a problem that takes up many pages in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*,¹⁰ makes its emblematic appearance in the *Spring* painting of the *Four Seasons* opposite a trick vase, the sides of which form profiles of Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip. Everything becomes something else; everything is a decoy. And once a decoy is painted and reduced to a flat surface, how does it differ from the "real thing" it fraudulently claims to represent?

Probably the most compelling artistic exercise in forgery of our times is that of J. S. G. Boggs, a fairly unknown artist until two

years ago when his arrest and trial on charges of counterfeiting currency bills made him a celebrity almost overnight. By forging money Boggs strikes at the heart of one of the most inviolable and sacred symbols of our times. This is his scheme: Boggs draws a perfect reproduction—his forgeries are said to be unrecognizable from a slight distance—of a Treasury note, say a \$100 bill, on only one side of an accurately dimensioned piece of paper. He reserves the reverse side for his signature and other relevant information. Then Boggs tries to buy something with the note. He tells the seller that the bill is his own drawing, but that to accept the paper is to accept the value arbitrarily assigned to it. The forged bill must be accepted for \$100 and if the products Boggs buys are worth \$95, he must receive \$5 in change. Boggs also demands a written receipt for his purchase. Following this transaction, Boggs sells the *real* \$5 bill obtained in change and the receipt to one of his collectors for several hundred dollars. He also gives the collector some clues as to who owns the forged \$100 bill. It is up to the collector to contact the merchant and to acquire the forged bill, which at this point usually sells for a lot more than the value drawn on its face. This act completes the artistic process: a work of art is made of the forged bill, the receipt and the real bill obtained in change. These three items are then hung in galleries and sold for several thousand dollars.

Some of these counterfeited bills hanging in a London gallery were confiscated by Scotland Yard in 1986 and led to Boggs' trial for counterfeiting without the prior consent of the Bank of England. Although Boggs risked a severe sentence, he was found not guilty by the jury. Some of the jurors admired the work and became fascinated by the idea behind it. In an interview, his lawyer said:

A banknote represents value, and a Boggs does not, though it *has* value. Boggs does nothing to resolve the category confusion, because it is the very process of his art to mystify, to obscure the distinction. But surely it is the function of the law to recognize and proclaim such obvious category distinctions.¹¹

It is again interesting to emphasize that Boggs' troubles were caused by concerns arising from the marketplace and from the authorities' implicit responsibility to curb any scheme, however innocuous, that could threaten accepted social values regarding material entities. A fake is a fake especially if it constitutes a hazard, real or imagined, to the established value system.

In a similar literary experiment, several years ago the English

novelist Doris Lessing seemed to confirm that originality and authorship are a primary marketplace need. Lessing wrote a novel, *The Diary of a Good Neighbour*, under an assumed name and asked her agent to submit it to publishers as the work of a beginning writer. Lessing's two long-standing British publishers turned down the work of the supposedly unknown beginner, demonstrating the revenue valve of the *author* over the work.¹²

We have come a long way from our nineteenth-century forger of old-master paintings who works in hiding and fears any publicity, to Boggs who, aside from being proud of his forgeries, assumes that they will be sold at a price much higher than their original value as monetary units. What happened in between? Is modern art different from classical art? Has art changed?

It is very difficult to give one definite answer to this question because diverse theories of the arts abound, and especially because art, at its best, always eludes and transcends theory. The difficulty is even greater with modern art because it has made ambiguity, as Boggs' attorney properly pointed out, one of its primary concerns. However, if indeed as Arthur Danto claims,¹³ modern art tends to blur the distinction between art and life by centering on the ordinary rather than the exceptional, then we must conclude that the issue of originality is no longer relevant to an understanding of art as it might be in the case of an old-master painting. The visual and tactile aspects impressed on the work by the artist's individuality are no longer in question. Modern art is conceptual rather than ocular, it speaks to the mind rather than to the eye, it is to be thought and not seen; it is, in one word, philosophical rather than perceptual.¹⁴ The "hand" of the artist, his "patte" (paw), as the French avant-garde artists of the beginning of the century sarcastically called it, has practically disappeared. It is not the image in itself and its "beauty" that count, but the intellectual process that the image sets in motion. The lack of originality characteristic of the readymades which shamelessly flaunt a total absence of the "hand" is mentally much more stimulating because it challenges the boundaries of art with impending non-art, thus questioning the very nature and legitimacy of art!

Finally the "real world," art's worst enemy! The "real world," the world of money and banks, the marketplace of art and of all other things as well, does not seem to accept the total reproducibility of art or, for that purpose, of anything else. Not yet, at least. If everything were totally reproducible—from works of art to \$100 bills—the world would probably be total chaos. The marketplace

tells the common man, if not Duchamp, that it is not enough to imprint one's signature on an ordinary object to make it worth a fortune. It tells us that we have to toil for our well-being, it reminds us of our human condition. With the message it encodes in its abolition of originality, modern art paradoxically does what all great art has always done: It expands our horizons, it replaces our daily concerns with spiritual inspiration. Maybe it describes for us the Garden of Eden, that place of total availability which rests well hidden in the subconscious.

1. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, H. Zohn trans. (New York: Schocken, 1969), p. 232.
2. Jorge Luis Borges, "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*," in *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, B. Wallis ed. (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), p. 5.
3. Borges, p. 9.
4. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, "Fondazione e Manifesto del Futurismo," in *Teoria e Invenzione Futurista*, L. De Maria ed. (Milano: Mondadori, 1983), p. 10.
5. Marinetti, p. 12.
6. Marinetti, "La nuova religione-morale della velocità," in op. cit., p. 133.
7. Marinetti, "Manifesto tecnico della letteratura futurista (1912)," in op. cit., p. 50.
8. Tristan Tzara, *Lecture on Dada*, quoted in Calvin Tomkins: *The Work of Marcel Duchamp, 1887-1968* (Amsterdam: Time-Life Books, 1985), p. 65.
9. Richard Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage* (New York: Limelight, 1988), p. 65.
10. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, G. E. M. Ascombe trans. (New York: Macmillan, 1960), IIxi.
11. A complete profile of Boggs by Lawrence Weschler appeared in *The New Yorker* of January 18, 1988, pp. 33-56, and of January 25, 1988, pp. 88-98. The quote is on page 88 of the January 25 issue.
12. Doris Lessing, "Under Another Name," in *Granta* 13 (London: Penguin Books, 1984), pp. 176-80.
13. *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1981).
14. A rather exhaustive discussion of the visual nature of classical art and the conceptual one of modern art is found in William Rubin, "Modernist Primitivism: An Introduction," in *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art*, William Rubin ed. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984), Vol. 1, pp. 1-81.