

# ARTISTIC CRIMES : THE PROBLEM OF FORGERY IN THE ARTS

Denis Dutton

THE CONCEPT of forgery is a touchstone of criticism. If the existence of forgeries—and their occasional acceptance as authentic works of art—has been too often dismissed or ignored in the theory of criticism, it may be because of the forger's special power to make the critic look ridiculous. Awkward as it is, critics have heaped the most lavish praise on art objects which have turned out to be forged. The suspicion this arouses is, of course, that the critics were led to praise the forgery for the wrong reasons in the first place. Since the aesthetic object as perceived is no different after the revelation that it is forged, the inference to be drawn is that it had previously been critically valued not for its intrinsic aesthetic properties, but because it was believed to be the work of an esteemed artist.

Natural as this suspicion is, it represents a point of view I shall seek to discredit in the following discussion. Everyone recognizes that the proper identification of an art object as genuine or forged is crucial as regards monetary value, that forgery has moral implications, that there are important historical reasons for wanting to distinguish the genuine from the faked art object. But there are many who also believe that when we come down to assessing the *aesthetic* merits of an art object the question of authenticity is irrelevant. Take, for example, the celebrated case of Han van Meegeren.<sup>1</sup> The facts are familiar enough: van Meegeren tried to make for himself a career as a painter in Holland in the years after the First World War. Critics refused to recognize what he took to be his genius, and he decided to get even. His plan was to forge a Vermeer, and after the painting had been discovered and lauded by critics, he would reveal to the world that Han van Meegeren had painted it. The critics would have either to admit that they were fallible (and perhaps fallible in their previous estimate of his talents) or, if they were to uphold their claims to authority, they would have to allow that he stood with Vermeer among the supreme masters of art. Van Meegeren went about his business with the greatest care, using only badger hair brushes lest a modern bristle imbedded in the paint should give him away, crushing his own lapis lazuli for pigment, studying seventeenth-century formulae for varnishes, collecting old canvases, and perfecting a method for producing a very convincing *craquelure* in the painted surface.

He might have started out with the notion of humiliating the critics, but, as it turned out, his first forgery was too profitable for that. He decided to make another, and then another. Before the end of his career as a forger, he had painted over a dozen Vermeers, Terborchs, and de Hoochs. How was he found out? Interestingly, not on account of suspicions about the authenticity of his paintings, some of which might even have been accepted to this day were it not for the fact that one had found its way into the collection of Hermann Göring. Since van Meegeren was known to have dealt with these paintings, he was arrested soon after the end of the war and tried for having sold a Dutch national treasure to the enemy. It was only at his trial that he confessed to having created this famous 'masterpiece' and others himself. Some critics refused to believe it then and even continued to disbelieve it in later years (though new dating techniques dealing with the relative quantities of lead and certain radium isotopes in the pigment have now confirmed that van Meegeren was telling the truth).

But, of course, why should anybody have believed him then? Here was an accused criminal claiming that he had painted acknowledged masterpieces by Vermeer, including *Christ and the Disciples at Emmaus*. This was the painting which, at the time of its unveiling in 1937 at the Boymans Museum in Rotterdam, was called by one esteemed authority on Dutch painting of the seventeenth century 'the masterpiece of Johannes Vermeer of Delft . . . every inch a Vermeer . . . the colours are magnificent—and characteristic. . . . In no other painting by the great Master of Delft do we find such sentiment, such a profound understanding of the Bible story—a sentiment so nobly human expressed through the medium of the highest art . . .'.<sup>2</sup> And so on.

The van Meegeren story is just one good example of the general problem of forgery in the arts. I say 'arts' in the plural because I believe that in one form or another the problem can arise in all of them. The problem may be stated quite simply thus: **if an aesthetic object has been widely admired and is discovered to be a forgery, a copy, or a misattribution, why reject it? A painting has hung for years on a museum wall, giving delight to generations of art lovers. One day it is revealed to be a forgery, and is immediately removed from view. But why? The discovery that a work of art is forged, as say, a van Meegeren Vermeer, does not alter the perceived qualities of the work. Hence it can make no aesthetic difference whether a work is forged or not.** At least this is how one approach to this question goes, an approach which has had the support of such able defenders as Alfred Lessing and Arthur Koestler.<sup>3</sup> Koestler, for instance, insists that an object's status as original or forged is extraneous information, **incidental to its intrinsic aesthetic properties.** Thus the person who pays an enormous sum for an original but who would have no interest in a reproduction which he could not tell from the original (perhaps a Picasso pen and ink drawing), or worse,

who chooses an aesthetically inferior original in preference to an excellent and superior forgery (or reproduction), is said to be at best confused and at worst a snob.

In a discussion which is largely in agreement with this, Lessing mentions that the possibility of forgery exists only in the 'creative' but not in the 'performing' arts. While I will argue that in certain respects this distinction itself is dubious, regarding the possibility of forgery it is surely misleading. Consider for a moment Smith and Jones, who have just finished listening to a new recording of Liszt's Transcendental Études. Smith is transfixed. He says, 'What beautiful artistry! The pianist's tone is superb, his control absolute, his speed and accuracy dazzling. Truly an electric performance!' Jones responds with a sigh. 'Yeah, it was electric all right. Or to be more precise, it was electronic. He recorded the music at practice tempo and the engineers speeded it up on a rotating head recorder.' Poor Smith—his enthusiasm evaporates.

But, really, ought it to? If Smith cannot with his ears discriminate between the pianist's technical accomplishments and an engineer's turning a knob, why should it make any difference to him? In fact, looking at the situation from Koestler's perspective, we will have to consider that Smith is a snob, or at least somehow confused. But surely there is something legitimate in Smith's response; surely there is more to this than can be accounted for by saying that Smith is simply letting extra-aesthetic considerations influence his aesthetic response to the piano performance.

I raise this example in connection with Lessing's claim that 'the concept of forgery applies only to the creative and not the performing arts' (p. 247). The distinction between so-called creative and performing arts has certain obvious uses: we would not wish to confuse the actor and the playwright, the conductor and the composer, the dancer and the choreographer. And yet this distinction (often employed invidiously against the performer) can cause us to lose sight of the fact that in certain respects all arts are creative, and correlatively, all arts are performing. It is this latter fact which is of particular relevance in understanding what is wrong with forgeries. For it can be argued that every work of art—every painting, statue, novel, symphony, ballet, as well as every interpretation or rendition of a piece of music, every reading of a poem or production of a play—involves the element of performance.

When we speak of a performance we usually have in mind a human activity which stands in some sense complete in itself: we talk of the President's performance at a press conference, or a student's performance in an examination, with the intention of marking off these particular activities from the whole of a presidential administration or the quality of the student's work done throughout a course. Moreover, as these examples also indicate, performances are said to involve some sense of accomplishment, of achieve-

ment. As objects of contemplation, art works stand in differing relations to the performances of artists, depending on the art form in question. On the one hand, we have such arts as the dance, where the human activity involved in creating the object of contemplation and the object itself are one and the same thing. In such a case it would be odd to say that the object somehow represents the performance of the artist, because to perceive the object is to perceive the performance. On the other hand, we have painting, where we normally perceive the work of art without perceiving those actions which have brought it into being. Nevertheless, in cases such as the latter what we see is the end-product of human activity; the object of our perception can be understood as representative of a human performance. That arts differ with respect to how or whether we actually perceive at the moment of creation the artist's performance makes no difference to the relevance of the concept to understanding all of the arts. In fact, the concept of performance is internal to our whole notion of art.<sup>4</sup>

Every work of art is an artifact, the product of human skills and techniques. If we see an actor or a dancer or a violinist at work, we are constantly conscious of human agency. Less immediately apparent is the element of performance in a painting which has hung perhaps for generations in a museum, or a long-familiar musical composition. Yet we are in such cases no less confronted with the results of human agency. As performances, works of art represent the ways in which artists solve problems, overcome obstacles, make do with available materials. The ultimate product is designed for our contemplation, as an object of particular interest in its own right, perhaps in isolation from other art objects or from the activity of the artist. But this isolation which frequently characterizes our mode of attention to aesthetic objects ought not to blind us to a fact that we may take for granted: that the work of art has a human origin, and must be understood as such.

We begin to see this more clearly when we consider our aesthetic response to natural beauty. In a passage in *Art as Experience*, John Dewey asks us to imagine that some object we had come to enjoy, believing it to be a primitive artifact, is revealed to us to be an 'accidental natural product'.<sup>5</sup> In Dewey's view, this revelation changes our 'appreciative perception' of the object. His point is that aesthetic appreciation is 'inherently connected with the experience of making'. This is well taken; imagine, for instance, the sorts of things we might say of the object before and after its natural origin is revealed. We could continue to appreciate those features from among the object's purely physical qualities which please us, such as shape and texture. But aspects of the object which we had previously assumed to be expressive will no longer be understood as such: it could still be called 'angular' or 'jagged', but not 'energetic' or 'restless'; it could still be 'fragile', perhaps even 'graceful', but no longer 'economical' or 'witty'. It could in general still be described in terms of predicates which indicate that it is agreeably shaped, but not in

terms of predicates implying that it is well wrought. We could continue to enjoy the object, but we would no longer find ourselves admiring it in the same way: 'to admire' usually means in part 'to enjoy', but it also carries with it implications of *esteem* (one can even admire a work of art without particularly enjoying it).<sup>6</sup>

Contrast this with another object of aesthetic appreciation. Let us take as an example one which we do not usually think of in terms of performance: Schubert's setting of Goethe's 'Erlkönig'. Like a pleasantly shaped piece of driftwood, this song is an object of aesthetic enjoyment. But it is surely more than merely a pretty piece of music sprung from the mind of someone on an autumn afternoon in 1815. As a work of art, it is seen, for example, as a way of overcoming various problems, musical and dramatic, posed by Goethe's text. The poem presents a composer with certain possibilities and limitations; in listening to Schubert's 'Erlkönig' we are listening not simply to an attractive sonic surface, but to how one man has worked within those limitations developing those possibilities. We listen as the music modulates to extraordinarily remote keys; we note how Schubert's stresses differ from Goethe's and are yet in no way inferior; we admire how the composer has handled the problems posed by the three voices in the poem; we consider, against the backdrop of prevailing tonal conventions in Schubert's time, the shrill minor ninths with which he has the child cry 'Mein Vater'; we notice how Schubert (typically) can allow the music to modulate into major keys without destroying the dark atmosphere of the song—in fact, the song is all the more sinister with these harmonic diversions.

In all of these considerations, we treat the composition of the music itself as a performance, as activity involving human intention. There are theorists who would of course insist on our distinguishing the song as an object of aesthetic attention from the circumstances of its origin. That such a distinction is possible is self-evident. That we do not, and ought not to, completely divorce these elements of appreciation is also clear. What is Schubert's 'Erlkönig'? It is this pretty sonic experience, certain words strung together and sung in certain tones to piano accompaniment, and we can talk endlessly about the beauties of that aural surface just as we could talk of the appealing properties of the piece of driftwood. It is also a profound human achievement, something done by someone. It is precisely a *setting* of Goethe's poem, one of perhaps fifty other such settings produced in the nineteenth century. What is understood and appreciated about Schubert's 'Erlkönig' is neither of these to the exclusion of the other: both are part of our understanding of the song as a work of art.

And so it is whenever we observe the work of an artist, be that artist a composer developing a theme, or inventing one (compare the usual performances of Beethoven with Tchaikovsky in these regards); be that artist a poet writing an elegy for his deceased parrot; be that artist a painter trying

to figure out how to give some unity to the family portrait now that the duke insists on having his favourite hunting dogs included too; be that artist a playwright who must resolve a complex and tangled plot—in all of these cases it is appropriate to speak of the performance of a task, and of the success or failure of the task at hand.

Again, in order to grasp what it is that is before us, we must have some notion of what the maker of the object in question has done, including some idea of the limitations, technical and conventional, within which he has worked. It may be perfectly true (and not necessarily obviously so) to remark that in a painting of the Madonna the pale pink of the Virgin's robe contrasts pleasantly with the light blue-grey of her cloak. But it is far from irrelevant to know that the artist may be working within a canon (as, for example, fifteenth-century Italian artists did) according to which the robe must be some shade of red, and the cloak must be blue. The demand (to juxtapose fundamentally warm and cool colours) poses difficulties for creating harmony between robe and cloak, in the face of which Ghirlandajo may reduce the size of the cloak and tone it down with grey, Perugino may depict the cloak thrown over the Virgin's knees and allow a green shawl with red and yellow stripes to dominate the composition, while Filippino Lippi may simply cover the robe completely with the cloak. To say that the resulting assemblage of colours is pleasant may, again, be true enough; a fuller appreciation and understanding, however, would involve recognizing how that pleasing harmony is a response to a problematic demand put upon the artist.

Artistic performances in general, like musical or dramatic performances in particular, are assessed according to how they succeed or fail—the notions of success or failure are as much internal to our idea of performance as the idea of performance is to our concept of art. In this respect, there is an important truth in a view such as Goethe's which insists that criticism must begin by finding out what the artist intended to do and then ask whether he succeeded in doing it. Before we can determine whether or not a particular artistic performance can be said to succeed or fail, we must have some notion of what counts as success or failure in connection with the kind of artistic performance in question.<sup>7</sup> Let us consider once again Smith's difficulties with the piano performance of the Liszt Études. The attitude we properly take towards any artistic performance varies enormously, depending on the nature of what confronts us. There are many elements that go into a performance of a Liszt study according to which we assess it. We consider tone, phrasing, tempo, accuracy, the pianist's ability to sustain a line, to build to a climax, and so forth. Speed and brilliance may be important considerations (which is not to say that the fastest or most brilliant performance will be the best). Now part of what will count as achievement in the performance of a Liszt study is that the music be produced by the pianist's ten fingers; in piano criticism

this is usually taken for granted. Given how we understand pianistry, this forms one of the expectations we bring with us to our perception of the piano performance; it indicates, moreover, part of what counts as achievement in playing the piano.

Of course, I am not saying that the assessment of success or failure in piano performance need necessarily be the way I describe it. We can well imagine different ways of going about producing the aural experience to which we attend. There might come a time, for instance, when electronically produced accelerandos will become accepted procedure in piano recording. But note that this will alter our conception of what will count as achievement in a recorded piano performance. We will no longer say things like 'Didn't she play that run beautifully', but rather 'Don't they do marvellous tempo-engineering at Columbia'. We may expect that engineers will be given credit on record albums, not for having (presumably) faithfully reproduced the sounds the artist has produced, but for having altered those sounds in ways previously left to the performer. I for one would not oppose this, any more than I oppose recording *Götterdämmerung* in separate sessions on various days. But just as I know, and in fact ought to know, that the resultant recording of *Götterdämmerung* will feature voices which sustain their power throughout the whole opera in a way that would be impossible in any live performance, so I ought to know that the piano recording I am listening to is a collaboration of pianist and engineer, one which, perhaps, features runs at speeds human nerve and muscle could never alone produce. Until I know this, I cannot understand the nature of the achievement before me.

Here then is where the electronic accelerandos or the van Meegeren fakes have the ability to betray us, and where forgery in general misleads. In the most obvious sense, a forgery is an artifact of one person which is intentionally attributed to another, usually with the purpose of turning a profit. But forgeries, and forgeries of painting would stand only as the most famous examples, are artistic crimes not merely because of misattribution of origin but because of *misrepresentation of achievement*. It is essential that forgeries should be understood as a sub-set of a wider class of misrepresented artistic performances. Since all art can be seen under the aspect of performance, whether or not the art in question is conventionally called 'performing', there always exists the possibility that the nature of the achievement involved in the performance may be misunderstood or misrepresented. In my example of the piano recording, Smith brings to his experience certain expectations regarding what is to count as achievement in the art in question, and these expectations are not met. The point is that Smith's experience cannot be understood as an experience of sound, such that the faster and more brilliant the sounds the better; Smith's experience of sound implies the experience of a performance, of something done in a certain way by a human being.

The fundamental question then is, what has the artist done, what has he achieved? The question is fundamental, moreover, not because of any contingent facts about the psychology of aesthetic perception, but because of the nature of the concept of art itself. As I have noted, Smith's initial disappointment in the piano recording may later be replaced by admiration for the skill and sensitivity with which the engineer has varied the tempi of the recording. This does not indicate that Smith's response can be understood as merely conditioned by his beliefs about what he perceives. On the contrary, Smith's beliefs are about what he takes to be a work of art, and hence are centred on what he understands to be the achievement implicit in what he perceives. Technological advances in the arts in general, the inventions of airbrushes, electric stage lighting, sound synthesizers, and so forth, have tended progressively to alter what counts as achievement in the arts; these advances have in no way altered the relevance of the concept of achievement in art or criticism and hence have not changed to that extent the concept of art *überhaupt*. Smith's mistake about the nature of the achievement before him, or the experts' mistakes about the van Meegeren Vermeers, simply requires that the question of what the achievement is should be recast: indeed, the achievement of the engineer may be worthy of admiration, just as the achievement of van Meegeren was far from negligible. Under its (corrected) description, van Meegeren's performance was one of producing in the twentieth century paintings in effective imitations of the seventeenth-century Dutch style. Some of his canvases, e.g. *Emmaus* and at least one of the Terborch forgeries, had they their origins in the seventeenth century, might well have been worth placing in museums, at least as examples of an antique genre. Still, just as the achievement of an engineer, however notable, is different in kind from (though not necessarily inferior to) the achievement of a pianist, so the achievement of van Meegeren could never be of the same sort of that of Vermeer.

I can believe that the painting before me is a Vermeer instead of a van Meegeren, and adjust my perception accordingly. But I cannot similarly believe that it makes *no difference* whether it is a Vermeer or a van Meegeren, not at any rate if I am to continue to employ the concept of art in terms of which we think about Vermeers, van Meegerens, piano virtuosi, and the rest. This is not a contingent matter of belief or taste; reference to origins is a necessary constituent of the concept of a work of art. Nor is it merely a cultural question. Cultural considerations can influence how we talk about art, can alter in various ways our attitude towards it. It is frequently pointed out, for instance, that criticism as customarily practised in the European tradition places great emphasis on the individual artist in a way that art and criticism in the Orient traditionally do not. Modern critics in the Occident tend to care deeply, perhaps sometimes excessively, about who created a work of art. But this does not mean that, say, Chinese critics have been un-

concerned with the origins of art works: it does not entail that they would be uninterested in ever distinguishing a copy from a newly invented composition, or a marvellously carved stone *from one smoothed by the waters of a brook*. To be sure, culture shapes and changes what various peoples believe about art, their attitudes towards it. This may be strikingly different from ours, as in the case of the elaborately carved *Malagan* of New Ireland which is unceremoniously discarded after its one-time use. Anyone who concluded from this that the people of New Ireland had no concept of art would be open to ridicule; they may have different views about how art is to be treated—to that extent we could even say loosely that theirs is a ‘different conception of art from ours’. But, limiting ourselves only to that consideration germane to the present discussion, *it is a conception of art* so long as according to it art is treated among other things as human performance, the work of art having implicit in it the possibility of achievement of some kind. Thus the concept of art is constituted *a priori* of certain essential properties. I do not propose to enumerate those features (the question of the contents of any such list lies at the heart of the philosophy of art); but I do insist that reference to origins and achievement must be included among these properties.<sup>8</sup> This whole issue is what gives the problem of forgery such central philosophical importance: theorists who claim that it ought to make no difference to appreciation whether a work is forged or not do not merely challenge a few dearly held cultural beliefs about what is important in art. They attack rather the very idea of art itself.

Let us take stock of what I have so far argued. I have claimed that in certain respects, differing according to the type of art in question, the concept of performance is intrinsic to our understanding of art; that works of art of whatever sort can be seen under the aspect of performance. In emphasizing the importance of the notion of performance in understanding art, I have centred attention on the extent to which works of art are the end-products of human activities, on the degree to which they represent things done by human agents. In this way, part of what constitutes our understanding of works of art involves grasping what sort of achievement the work itself represents. This takes us, then, to the question of the origins of the work: we cannot understand the work of art without some notion of its origins, who created it, the context in which the creator worked, and so forth. But now it must be stressed that our interest in origins, in the possibility or actuality of human achievement, always goes hand-in-hand with our interest in the work of art as visual, verbal, or aural surface. In its extreme forms, contextualism in critical theory has tended to emphasize the origins of the work, its status as human achievement, at the expense of attention to the purely formal properties; in its exclusive concentration on formal properties, isolationism, or formalism, has (by definition) tended to slight the importance of the human context, the human origins, of art. Both positions in their more

extreme and dogmatic forms constitute a kind of philistinism. The more familiar sort (against which Koestler and Lessing react) has it that if a work of art is a forgery, then it must somehow be without value: once we are told that these are van Meegerens before us, and not Vermeers, we reject them, though their formal properties remain unchanged. The opposed sort of philistinism, which could well be called *aestheticist philistinism*, claims that formal properties are the only significant properties of works of art; that since questions of origins are not important, it ought to make no difference at all to us whether we are confronted with Vermeers or van Meegerens. Both positions are properly called philistine because both fail to acknowledge a fundamental element of artistic value.

In developing a view which finds the aesthetic significance of forgery in the extent to which it misrepresents artistic achievement, I have hitherto avoided discussion of a concept often contrasted with forgery: originality. It is of course easy to say that originality is a legitimate source of value in art, that forgeries lack it, and that therefore they are to be discredited on that account. This seems true enough so far as it goes, but the difficulty is that it does not go far enough. One problem centres on deciding what 'original' means, or ought to mean, in contrast to 'forged'. Originality is often associated with novelty in art, but this sense alone will not do, since there are many fine works of art whose outstanding features have little to do with novelty. Stravinsky's musical ideas, or Wagner's, were more novel in their respective epochs than Mozart's or Bach's; yet it would be odd on that account to call the latter composers relatively unoriginal in their contribution to music. Furthermore, even forgeries—those putative paradigm cases of unoriginal effort—can have strikingly original aspects. Not, perhaps, with those forgeries which are mere copies; but indeed, the most interesting cases of forgery involve works which are precisely not slavish copies, but pastiches, or works in the style of another artist. Here there is room for originality. Consider the heavy-lidded, sunken eyes of van Meegeren's faces: they may be insipid, but they are certainly original, and not to be found in Vermeer. In fact, we must remind ourselves that stripped of its pretensions, each of the van Meegeren Vermeers is an original van Meegeren. For what it is worth, each of these canvases is in that sense an original work of art: my point is precisely that it may not be worth much.

A crux here is that an artistic performance can be quite perfectly original and yet at the same time share with forgery the essential element of being misrepresented in terms of its actual achievement. The concept of originality is important in this context: part of what disturbs us about such cases as the van Meegeren episode is that aesthetically significant aspects of the paintings at issue did not have their origins with Vermeer but with an artist who lived several hundred years later. In that sense, we can call the van Meegeren fakes 'unoriginal'; though they are original van Meegerens, elements which

we especially value in them did not originate with Vermeer—and part of what would make those elements valuable is that they should be the product of seventeenth-century Vermeer performances rather than twentieth-century van Meegeren performances.<sup>9</sup> But even where all aspects of the performance in question did in fact originate with the single individual who is credited with it, even where the performance is in that sense pluperfectly original, it is possible for it to share with forgery the essential feature of misrepresentation of achievement. Consider an instrumental performer who announces he will play an improvisation and then proceeds to play a carefully premeditated composition of his own creation. What is performed originates entirely with the performer; it is in no sense a copy of the work of another, and one would not want to call it ‘unoriginal’. But it is surely a performance which shares with forgery the fact that its true nature is misrepresented. (Still, even though its status as composition or improvisation is indifferent to the fact that the same person is performing, origins remain important: an improvisation is distinguished from a composition in that it is originated spontaneously, on the spur of the moment—it is heard as it is created.)

And just as there can be cases of misrepresentation of achievement which do not, strictly speaking, involve any misunderstanding of the identity of the individual with whom the art object originates, so there can be misattributions of origin which do not entail significant misrepresentation of achievement. There are stanzas counting as decent Keats which would not have to be radically reappraised in terms of the artistic achievement they represent if they were discovered to have actually been written by Shelley. The same might be said of certain canvases by Derain and Cézanne, or sonatas by Kuhlau and Telemann. (This is not to deny that there are crucial differences between these artists and many of their works: but to mistake Mozart for Haydn is not *always* a foolish or naïve blunder.) In other cases, subtle and interesting shifts in our understanding of particular works might result: a piece of music perceived as run-of-the-mill Beethoven might be seen as outstanding Spohr. In such a case, however, our reassessment of the achievement involved is relative only to the career of the individual artist, and not to the historical achievement the work represents.

The significant opposition I find then is not between ‘forged’ and ‘original’, but between correctly represented artistic performance and misrepresented artistic performance. Originality remains a highly relevant concept here, however, insofar as it shows us that some notion of the origins of a work is always germane to appreciation. Without such concern, we cannot understand the full nature of the achievement a work represents, and such understanding is intrinsic to a proper grasp of the work of art. The predictable challenge to this involves the insistence that while I have been directing attention to human performances, what is really in question in appreciating

works of art is *aesthetic experience*. On this account, aesthetic experience is said to refer to the visual or auditory experience of the sensuous surface of the work of art. Yet who is it who ever has these curious 'aesthetic experiences'? In fact, I would suppose they are never had, except by infants perhaps—surely never by informed lovers of painting, music, or literature (the latter always a difficult case for aestheticians who like talking about 'sensuous surface'). The encounter with a work of art does not consist in merely hearing a succession of pretty sounds or seeing an assemblage of pleasing shapes and colours. It is as much a matter of hearing a virtuoso perform a dazzling and original interpretation of a difficult piece of music or of experiencing a new vision of a familiar subject provided by a painter. Admittedly, there is an attraction in wanting to look past these thorny complexities to concentrate on the sensuous surface, and it is the same attraction that formalism in all its various guises has always had. It is a marvellously simple view, but (alas!) art itself is even more marvellously complex. Against those who insist that an object's status as forged is irrelevant to its artistic merit, I would hold that when we learn that the kind of achievement an art object involves has been radically misrepresented to us, it is not as though we have learned a new fact about some familiar object of aesthetic attention. On the contrary, insofar as its position as a work of art is concerned, it is no longer the same object.<sup>10</sup>

## REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> For a full account of the van Meegeren episode, see Frank Arnau, *The Art of the Faker: Three Thousand Years of Deception* (Boston, U.S.A.: Little, Brown, 1961).
- <sup>2</sup> Abraham Bredius, 'A New Vermeer: Christ and the Disciples at Emmaus', *The Burlington Magazine* 71 (1937): pp. 210–11.
- <sup>3</sup> Arthur Koestler, 'The Aesthetics of Snobbery', *Horizon* 8 (1965): pp. 50–3.
- Alfred Lessing, 'What is Wrong with a Forgery?' in Monroe C. Beardsley and Herbert M. Schueller, eds., *Aesthetic Inquiry: Essays on Art Criticism and the Philosophy of Art* (Belmont, California: Dickenson, 1967).
- <sup>4</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the notion of performance in art and criticism, see F. E. Sparshott, *The Concept of Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967).
- <sup>5</sup> John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Capricorn, 1958), pp. 48–9.
- <sup>6</sup> In response to an early draft of this article presented at a meeting of the American Philosophical Association in Chicago on 30 April 1977 Kendall Walton commented on the difference between our reactions to natural and man-made beauty: 'A theist may see the hand of God in a sunset or in the Grand Canyon. But if God is as powerful as he is supposed to be, his making the Grand Canyon or a sunset is hardly an achievement; in this way, one might regard the Grand Canyon as one regards Dutton's electronically accelerated performance . . . the result is too easy to be impressive.' In considering the difficulties of criticizing the work of an omnipotent artist, we see the extent to which our admiration of the greatest artistic achievements of humankind involves some sense of the frailty and limitations of ordinary human intellect and imagination.
- <sup>7</sup> For a more extended discussion of this issue, see Denis Dutton, 'To Understand It on Its Own Terms,' *Philosophy and*

*Phenomenological Research* 35 (1974): pp. 246–56.

<sup>9</sup> See also Leonard B. Meyer, 'Forgery and the Anthropology of Art', in *Music, the Arts, and Ideas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967). Meyer quotes Eliot's remark, 'certain things have been done once and for all and cannot be achieved again'. He then adds, 'The crucial word here is "achieved". They can perhaps be done again, but they cannot be achieved again. Beethoven's late style is a discovery and an achievement. Someone coming later can only imitate it' (pp. 58–9). A similar argument is adduced by Colin Radford, 'Fakes', *Mind* 87 (1978): pp. 66–76.

<sup>9</sup> The critical dynamics of the whole van Meegeren episode have never been adequately chronicled. As I am able to piece the evidence together, Nelson Goodman's suggestions appear to be apposite: the first van Meegeren Vermeer,

*Christ and the Disciples at Emmaus*, may not have been a fine Vermeer (Bredius's opinion notwithstanding), but it was a plausible one. It also contained, most obviously in the rendering of faces, stylistic elements which were clearly van Meegeren's and not Vermeer's. Subsequent forgeries tended increasingly to contain van Meegerenisms—but the shift was gradual enough so that previous canvases tended to validate the authenticity of each new 'discovery'. Still, if one looks at some of the later forgeries, such as *Isaac Blessing Jacob*, one wonders how anybody could have been taken in: they were poor van Meegerens and execrable Vermeers.

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