

## ART AND COGNITION WORKSHOPS

- *Authenticity in Art*

**Denis Dutton** (University of Canterbury, New Zealand)

- *The ontology of forgery*

- *L'Ontologie du Faux*

**Roger Pouivet** (Université de Nancy)

- *Forgery and Reproduction*

**Gregory Currie** (University of Nottingham)

- *Replicative forgery*

**John Zeimbekis** (Université de Grenoble)

- *From Original to Copy and Back Again*

**James Elkins** (School of the Art Institute of Chicago)

- *Drawing in the Social Sciences: Lithic Illustration.*

**Dominic Lopes** (University of British Columbia)

- *Dual Recognition of Depth and Dependent Seeing*

**John Dilworth** (Western Michigan University)

- *Scientific Reasoning, Mental Models, and Depiction*

**Laura Perini** (Assistant Professor at Virginia Tech.)

- *Any Way You Slice It: The Viewpoint Independence of Pictorial Content*

**John Kulvicki** (Dartmouth College)

- *Film as Dynamic Event Perception*

**Heiko Hecht** (Psychologisches Institut der Johannes Gutenberg-Universität)

- *Cross-Modal Effects in Motion Picture Perception: Toward an Interactive Theory of Film*

**Mark Rollins** (Washington University in St. Louis)

- *On the Nature and Perception of Depictions*

**Thomas Stoffregen** (University of Minnesota)

- *Art and Neuroscience*

**John Hyman** (Oxford University)

### ***Authenticity in Art***

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Abstract:

Works of art possess what we may call *nominal authenticity*, defined simply as the correct identification of the origins, authorship, or provenance of an object, ensuring that an object of aesthetic experience is properly named. However, the concept of authenticity often connotes something else, having to do with an object's character as a true expression of an individual's or a society's values and beliefs. This second sense of authenticity can be called *expressive authenticity*. The following discussion will summarize some of the problems surrounding nominal authenticity and will conclude with a general examination of expressive authenticity. This paper is excerpted from a longer version published in the [Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics](#).

## Introduction

“Authentic,” like its near-relations, “real,” “genuine,” and “true,” is what J.L. Austin called a “dimension word,” a term whose meaning remains uncertain until we know what dimension of its referent is being talked about. A forged painting, for example, will not be inauthentic in every respect: a Han van Meegeren forgery of a Vermeer is at one and the same time both a fake Vermeer and an authentic van Meegeren, just as a counterfeit bill may be both a fraudulent token of legal tender but at the same time a genuine piece of paper. The way the authentic/inauthentic distinction sorts out is thus context dependent to a high degree. Mozart played on a modern grand piano might be termed inauthentic, as opposed to being played on an eighteenth-century forte-piano, even though the notes played are authentically Mozart’s. A performance of Shakespeare that is at pains to recreate Elizabethan production practices, values, and accents would be to that extent authentic, but may still be inauthentic with respect to the fact that it uses actresses for the female parts instead of boys, as would have been the case on Shakespeare’s stage. Authenticity of presentation is relevant not only to performing arts. Modern museums, for example, have been criticized for presenting old master paintings in strong lighting conditions which reveal detail, but at the same time give an overall effect that is at odds with how works would have been enjoyed in domestic spaces by their original audiences; cleaning, revarnishing, and strong illumination arguably amount to inauthentic presentation. Religious sculptures created for altars have been said to be inauthentically displayed when presented in a bare space of a modern art gallery (see Feagin 1995).

Whenever the term “authentic” is used in aesthetics, a good first question to ask is, *Authentic as opposed to what?* Despite the widely different contexts in which the authentic/inauthentic is applied in aesthetics, the distinction nevertheless tends to form around two broad categories of sense. First, works of art can possess what we may call *nominal authenticity*, defined simply as the correct identification of the origins, authorship, or provenance of an object, ensuring, as the term implies, that an object of aesthetic experience is properly named. However, the concept of authenticity often connotes something else, having to do with an object’s character as a true expression of an individual’s or a society’s values and beliefs. This second sense of authenticity can be called *expressive authenticity*. The following discussion will summarize some of the problems surrounding nominal authenticity and will conclude with a general examination of expressive authenticity.

## 2. Nominal Authenticity

### 2.1 Forgery and Plagiarism

Many of the most often-discussed issues of authenticity have centred around art forgery and plagiarism. A forgery is defined as a work of art whose history of production is misrepresented by someone (not necessarily the artist) to an audience (possibly to a potential buyer of the work), normally for financial gain. A forging artist paints or sculpts a work in the style of a famous artist in order to market the result as having been created by the famous artist. Exact copies of existing works are seldom forged, as they will be difficult to sell to knowledgeable buyers. The concept of forgery necessarily involves *deceptive intentions* on the part of the forger or the seller of the work: this distinguishes forgeries from innocent copies or merely erroneous attributions. Common parlance also allows that an honest copy can later be used as a forgery, even though it was not originally intended as such, and can come to be called a “forgery.” In such cases a defrauding seller acts on an unknowing buyer by misrepresenting the provenance of a work, perhaps even with the additions of a false signature or certificate of authenticity. The line between innocent copy and overt forgery can be, as we shall see, difficult to discern.

Plagiarism is a related but logically distinct kind of fraud. It involves the passing off as one’s own of the words or ideas of another. The most obvious cases of plagiarism have an author publishing in his own name a text that was written by someone else. If the original has already been published, the plagiarist is at risk of being discovered, although plagiarism may be impossible to prove if the original work, or all

copies of it, is hidden or destroyed. Since publication of plagiarized work invites wide scrutiny, plagiarism is, unlike forgery, a difficult fraud to accomplish as a public act without detection. In fact, the most common acts of plagiarism occur not in public, but in the private sphere of work that students submit to their teachers.

## 2.2 *Honest Misidentification*

Authenticity is contrasted with “falsity” or “fakery” in ordinary discourse, but, as noted, falsity need not imply fraud at every stage of the production of a fake. Blatant forgery and the intentional misrepresentation of art objects has probably been around as long as there has been an art market — it was rife even in ancient Rome. However, many works of art that are called “inauthentic” are merely misidentified. There is nothing fraudulent about wrongly guessing the origins of an apparently old New Guineamask or an apparently eighteenth-century Italian painting. Fraudulence is approached only when what is merely an optimistic guess is presented as well-established knowledge, or when the person making the guess uses position or authority to give it a weight exceeding what it deserves. The line, however, that divides unwarranted optimism from fraudulence is hazy at best. (Any worldly person who has ever heard from an antique dealer the phrase “It’s probably a hundred and fifty years old” will understand this point: it’s probably not that old, and perhaps not even the dealer himself could be sure if he’s merely being hopeful or playing fast and loose with the truth.)

Authenticity, therefore, is a much broader issue than one of simply spotting and rooting out fakery in the arts. The will to establish the nominal authenticity of a work of art, identifying its maker and provenance — in a phrase, determining how the work came to be — comes from a general desire to understand a work of art according to its original canon of criticism: what did it mean to its creator? How was it related to the cultural context of its creation? To what established genre did it belong? What could its original audience have been expected to make of it? What would they have found engaging or important about it? These questions are often framed in terms of artists’ intentions, which will in part determine and constitute the identity of a work; and intentions can arise and be understood only in a social context and at a historical time. External context and artistic intention are thus intrinsically related. We should resist, however, the temptation to imagine that ascertaining nominal authenticity will inevitably favour some “old” or “original” object over a later artefact. There may be Roman sculptures, copies of older Greek originals, which are in some respects aesthetically better than their older prototypes, as there may be copies by Rembrandt of other Dutch artists that are aesthetically more pleasing than the originals. But in all such cases, value and meaning can be rightly assessed only against a background of correctly determined nominal authenticity (for further discussion see Dutton 1983; Goodman 1976; Currie 1989; Levinson 1990).

## 2.3 *The Igorot of Luzon*

Forgery episodes such as van Meegeren’s Vermeers are unproblematic in terms of nominal authenticity: there is a perfectly clear divide between the authentic Vermeers and the van Meegeren fakes. But there are areas where determining nominal authenticity can be extremely fraught. Consider the complexities of the following example. The Igorot of northern Luzon traditionally carved a rice granary guardian figure, a *bulul*, which is ceremonially treated with blood, producing over years a deep red patina which is partially covered with a black deposit of grease from food offerings. These objects were already being made for tourists and for sale at international exhibitions in the 1920s, and one famous virtuoso Igorot carver, Tagiling, was by then producing figures on commission by local families and at the same time for the tourist trade. *Bululs* are still in traditional use, but specialized production of them ceased after the Second World War. Today, if a local wants a *bulul*, it is purchased from a souvenir stand and then rendered sacred by subjecting it to the appropriate ceremony. “The result,” Alaine Schoffel has explained, “is that in the rice granaries one now finds shoddy sculptures slowly becoming covered with a coating of sacrificial blood. They are authentic because they are used in the traditional fashion, but this renders them no less devoid of aesthetic value.” We do not necessarily have to agree with Schoffel’s aesthetic verdict on “shoddy” souvenirs to recognize that he is legitimately invoking one of the many possible senses of “authenticity”: the authentically traditional.



#### 2. 4 Authenticity in Music

Arguments over the use and presentation of art are nowhere more prominent than in music performance. This is owing to the general structure of Western, notated music, in which the creation of the work of art is a two-stage process, unlike painting and other plastic arts. Stand in front of Leonardo's *Ginevra de' Benci* in the National Gallery in Washington, and you have before you Leonardo's own handiwork. However much the paint may have been altered by time and the degenerative chemistry of pigments, however different the surroundings of the museum are from the painting's originally intended place of presentation, at least, beneath the shatterproof non-reflective glass you gaze at the very artefact itself, in its faded, singular glory. No such direct encounter is available with a performance of an old musical work. The original work is specified by a score, essentially a set of instructions, which are realized aurally by performers, normally for the pleasure of audiences. Because a score underdetermines the exact sound of any particular realization, correct performances may differ markedly (Davies 1987).

With a painting, therefore, there normally exists an original, nominally authentic object that can be identified as "the" original; nothing corresponds to this in music. Even a composer's own performance of an instrumental score — say, Rachmaninoff playing his piano concertos — cannot fully constrain the interpretive choices of other performers or define for ever "the" authentic performance. Stephen Davies argues that a striving towards authenticity in musical performance does not entail that there is one authentic ideal of performance, still less that this would be a work's first performance or whatever a composer might have heard in his head while composing the piece. The very idea of a performance art permits performers a degree of interpretive freedom consistent with conventions that govern what counts as properly following the score (Davies 2001; see also Godlovitch 1998; Thom 1993).

Nevertheless, the twentieth-century witnessed the development of an active movement to try to understand better the original sounds especially of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European music. This has encouraged attempts to perform such music on instruments characteristic of the time, in line with reconstructions of the past conventions that governed musical notation and performance (Taruskin 1995). This concern with authenticity can be justified by the general, though not inviolable, principle which holds that "a commitment to authenticity is integral to the enterprise that takes delivery of the composer's work as its goal. If we are interested in performances as of the works they are of, then authenticity must be valued for its own sake" (Davies 2001). This interest can take many forms — playing Scarlatti sonatas on harpsichords of a kind Scarlatti would have played, instead of the modern piano; using a Baroque bow over the flatter bridge of a Baroque violin to achieve more easily the double-stopping required of the Bach solo violin works; performing Haydn symphonies with orchestras cut down from the late Romantic, 100-player ensembles used by Brahms or Mahler. These practices

are justified by taking us back in time to an earlier performing tradition and, in theory, closer to the work itself.

In this way of thinking, the purpose of reconstructing a historically authentic performance is to create an occasion in which it sounds roughly as it would have sounded to the composer, had the composer had expert, well equipped musicians at his disposal. Enthusiasm for this idea has led some exponents of the early music movement to imagine that they have a kind of moral or intellectual monopoly on the correct way to play music of the past. In one famous put-down, the harpsichordist Wanda Landowska is said to have told a pianist, "You play Bach your way, I'll play him his way." The question for aesthetic theory remains: *What is Bach's way?* If the question is framed as purely about instrumentation, then the answer is trivially easy: the Bach keyboard *Partitas* are authentically played in public only on a harpsichord of a kind Bach might have used. But there are other ways in which the music of Bach can be authentically rendered. For instance, Bach's keyboard writing includes interweaved musical voices which, under the hands of a skilled pianist such as Glenn Gould, can often be revealed more clearly on a modern concert grand than on a harpsichord (Payzant 1978; Bazzana 1997).

However, if an authentic performance of a piece of music is understood as one in which the aesthetic potential of the score is most fully realized, historic authenticity may not be the best way to achieve it. We would not go back to productions of Shakespeare plays with boys taking the female roles simply because that was the way it was done in Shakespeare's time. We regard the dramatic potential of those roles as ideally requiring the mature talents of actresses, and write off the Elizabethan practice of boy actors as an historic accident of the moral climate of Shakespeare's age. We assume, in other words, that Shakespeare would have chosen women to play these parts had he had the option. Similarly, the Beethoven piano sonatas were written for the biggest, loudest pianos Beethoven could find; there is little doubt that he would have favored the modern concert grand, if he had had a choice. The best attitude towards authenticity in music performance is that in which careful attention is paid to the historic conventions and limitations of a composer's age, but where one also tries to determine the larger artistic potential of a musical work, including implicit meanings that go beyond the understanding that the composer's age might have derived from it. In this respect, understanding music historically is not in principle different from an historically informed critical understanding of other arts, such as literature or painting.

### 3. Expressive Authenticity

In contrast to nominal authenticity, there is another fundamental sense of the concept indicated by two definitions of "authenticity" mentioned in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: "possessing original or inherent authority," and, connected to this, "acting of itself, self-originated." This is the meaning of "authenticity" as the word shows up in existential philosophy, where an authentic life is one lived with critical and independent sovereignty over one's choices and values; the word is often used in a similar sense in aesthetic and critical discourse. In his discussion of authenticity of musical performance, Peter Kivy points out that, while the term usually refers to historical authenticity, there is another current sense of the term: performance authenticity as "faithfulness to the performer's own self, original, not derivative or aping of someone else's way of playing" (Kivy 1995). Here authenticity is seen as committed, personal expression, being true musically to one's artistic self, rather than true to an historical tradition. From nominal authenticity, which refers to the empirical facts concerning the origins of an art object — what is usually referred to as provenance — we come now to another sense of the concept, which refers less to cut-and-dried fact and more to an emergent value possessed by works of art. I refer to this second, problematic sense of authenticity as *expressive authenticity*.

#### 3.1 Authenticity and Audiences

Too often discussions of authenticity ignore the role of the audience in establishing a context for creative or performing art. To throw light on the importance of an audience in contributing to meaning in art, consider the following thought-experiment. Imagine the complicated and interlocking talents, abilities, stores of knowledge, techniques, experience, habits, and traditions that make up the art of opera — for example as it is presented, or embodied, by a great opera company, such as La Scala.

There is the music and its history, the dramatic stories, the staging traditions, the singers, from the chorus to the international stars, along with the distribution channels for productions — broadcasts, videos, and CDs. In addition, surrounding opera there is a whole universe of criticism and scholarship: historical books are written, academic departments study the music and the art and technique of singing, reviews for new casts and productions appear in magazines and daily newspapers. When the lights go down for a La Scala performance, the curtain rises not on an isolated artistic spectacle, but on an occasion that brings together the accrued work of countless lifetimes of talent, knowledge, tradition, and creative genius.

Now imagine the following: one day La Scala entirely loses its natural, indigenous audience. Local Italians and other Europeans stop attending, and local newspapers cease to run reviews of performances. Nevertheless, La Scala remains a famous attraction for visitors, and manages to fill the hall every night with busloads of tourists. Further, imagine that, although these nightly capacity crowds — consisting of people from as far away as Seoul, Durban, Yokohama, Perth, Quito, and Des Moines— are polite and seem to enjoy themselves, nevertheless, for nearly all of them their La Scala experience is the first and last opera they will ever see. They are not sure when to applaud, and although they are impressed by the opulent costumes, dazzling stage-settings, massed chorus scenes, and sopranos who can sing very high, they cannot make the sophisticated artistic discriminations that we would associate with traditional La Scala audiences of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

How would we expect the demise of the traditional audience to affect the art of opera as practised at this imaginary La Scala? The problem here is not necessarily the loss of good singers or orchestral pit musicians: it is rather the loss of a *living critical tradition* that an indigenous audience supplies for any vital artform. It is impossible to engage in this thought-experiment without concluding that in the long term operatic art as practised at such a La Scala would steeply decline. A Pacific Island dancer was once asked about his native culture. “Culture?” he responded. “That’s what we do for the tourists.” But if it is only for the tourists, who have neither the knowledge nor the time to learn and apply a probing canon of criticism to an artform, there can be no reason to expect that the artform will develop the complex expressive possibilities we observe in the great established art traditions of the world (Dutton 1993).

Why, then do critics and historians of art, music, and literature, private collectors, curators, and enthusiasts of every stripe invest so much time and effort in trying to establish the provenance, origins, and proper identity — the nominal authenticity — of artistic objects? It is sometimes cynically suggested that the reason is nothing more than money, collectors’ investment values — forms of fetishizing, commodification — that drives these interests. Such cynicism is not justified by facts. The nominal authenticity of a purported Rembrandt or a supposedly old Easter Island carving may be keenly defended by its owners (collectors, museum directors), but the vast majority of articles and books that investigate the provenance of art works are written by people with no personal stake in the genuineness of individual objects. Moreover, when this comes into question, issues of nominal authenticity are as hotly debated for novels and musical works in the public domain as they are for physical art objects with a specific commodity value.

Establishing nominal authenticity serves purposes more important than maintaining the market value of an art object: it enables us to understand the practice and history of art as an intelligible history of the expression of values, beliefs, and ideas, both for artists and their audiences — and herein lies its link to expressive authenticity. Works of art, besides often being formally attractive to us, are manifestations of both individual and collective values, in virtually every conceivable relative weighting and combination. Clifford Geertz remarks that “to study an art-form is to explore a sensibility,” and that “such a sensibility is essentially a collective formation” whose foundations “are as wide as social existence and as deep” (Geertz 1983). Geertz is only partially right to claim that the sensibility expressed in an art object is in every case *essentially* social: even close-knit tribal cultures produce idiosyncratic artists who pursue unexpectedly personal visions within a socially determined aesthetic language. Still, his broader description of works of art, tribal or European, is generally apt, along with its corollary is that the study of art is largely a matter of marking and tracing relationships and influences.

This explains why aesthetic theories that hold that works of art are just aesthetically appealing objects — to be enjoyed without regard to any notion of their origins — are unsatisfactory. If works of art appealed only to our formal or decorative aesthetic sense, there would indeed be little point in establishing their human contexts by tracing their development, or even in distinguishing them from similarly appealing natural objects — flowers or seashells. But works of art of all societies express and embody both cultural beliefs general to a people and personal character and feeling specific to an individual. Moreover, this fact accounts for a large part, though not all, of our interest in works of art. To deny this would be implicitly to endorse precisely the concept of the eighteenth-century curiosity cabinet, in which Assyrian shards, tropical seashells, a piece of Olmec jade, geodes, netsuke, an Attic oil lamp, bird of paradise feathers, and a Maori patu might lay side by side in indifferent splendour. The propriety of the curiosity cabinet approach to art has been rejected in contemporary thought in favour of a desire to establish provenance and cultural meaning precisely because intra- and inter cultural relationships among artworks help to constitute their meaning and identity.

#### 4. Conclusions

Leo Tolstoy's *What Is Art?*, which was published near the end of his life in 1896, is the work of a genius nearly gone off the rails. It is famous for its fulminations not only against Beethoven, Shakespeare, and Wagner, but also even against Tolstoy's own great early novels (Tolstoy 1960). It continues, however, to be read for its vivid elaboration of a thesis that has a permanent place in the history of aesthetics: artistic value is achieved only when an artwork expresses the authentic values of its maker, especially when those values are shared by the artist's immediate community.

Tolstoy claimed that cosmopolitan European art of his time had given up trying to communicate anything meaningful to its audience in favour of amusement and careerist manipulation. Where and how Tolstoy drew the line between art that is falsely sentimental and manipulative on the one hand, and sincerely expressive on the other, has been hotly disputed (Diffey 1985). But it is impossible that these categories could be entirely dispensed with, at least in the critical and conceptual vocabulary we apply to Western art. It is more than just formal quality that distinguishes the latest multimillion-dollar Hollywoodsex-and-violence blockbuster or manipulative tearjerker from the dark depths of the Beethoven Opus 131 String Quartet or the passionate intensity of *The Brothers Karamazov*. These latter are *meant* in a way that many examples of the former cannot possibly be: they embody an element of personal commitment normally missing from much popular entertainment art and virtually all commercial advertising. Expressive authenticity is a permanent part of the conceptual topography of our understanding of art.

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