

## **Forgery and the Corruption of Aesthetic Understanding** **Sherri Irvin**

### Abstract:

Prominent philosophical accounts of artistic forgery have neglected a central aspect of the aesthetic harm it perpetrates. To be properly understood, forgery must be seen in the context of our ongoing attempts to augment our aesthetic understanding in conditions of uncertainty. The bootstrapping necessary under these conditions requires a highly refined comprehension of historical context. By creating artificial associations among aesthetically relevant qualities and misrepresenting historical relationships, undetected forgeries stunt or distort aesthetic understanding. The effect of this may be quite pervasive, and removing known forgeries from museum walls will be insufficient to eradicate it. Continued attention to forgeries, once exposed, can in fact serve us by increasing our understanding of how aesthetic understanding is formed and by helping us to repair the damage they have inflicted.

In 1968, Nelson Goodman made an observation about artistic forgery that has never been fully appreciated, though his discussion of forgery has received plenty of philosophical attention. Goodman describes the case in which you, the viewer, are confronted with an original work and a forgery that is, for you, perceptually indistinguishable from it. On the basis of lab tests, you know which of the works is forged, but you can see no difference between them. Nonetheless, Goodman says, the knowledge that one of them is forged makes for an aesthetic difference between the works, for you, now. One reason is that this knowledge changes the way you look at the works, and the way you should look at them; it alters the sorts of scrutiny it is appropriate to apply. In fact, knowledge that one of the works is forged "assigns the present looking a role as training toward ... perceptual discrimination" (Goodman, 1976, 105).

Goodman might easily be misconstrued as offering an argument for the aesthetic inferiority of forgeries.<sup>1</sup> It might be assumed that what we are looking for when we scrutinize an illegitimate copy is evidence that it is worse than the original. Therefore, the aesthetic difference that exists even before we are able to see a difference between the two is a difference in value, of course favoring the original. But Goodman explicitly denies that he is arguing for the aesthetic inferiority of forgeries (Goodman, 1976, 109). Moreover, his view implies that known forgeries may provide an important benefit. Knowledge that a work is forged leads us to employ our perceptual faculties more rigorously, to seek for distinctions not presently available to us. A known forgery can help to hone our aesthetic sensibilities, whether it is better or worse than the relevant class of originals.

In this discussion, I will embed Goodman's observation about the benefits of forgery in a theory of aesthetic understanding. Aesthetic understanding, I will suggest, is a matter of bootstrapping that involves reliance on experts and, especially, artists whom we suspect of superior aesthetic understanding, though we don't know precisely in what that understanding consists. Some commentators have suggested that our aesthetic rejection of forgeries, once discovered, is a variety of snobbishness, of relying on the prestige of great names rather than on pure aesthetic qualities to determine which works we will favor.<sup>2</sup> On my view, some of this so-called snobbishness, or *prima facie* reliance on acknowledged aesthetic experts, which clearly does constitute a substantial part of our aesthetic practice, is both appropriate and necessary for the enhancement of aesthetic understanding. For this reason, as I will show, the harm associated with undetected forgery is potentially much more severe than has previously been recognized.

The aesthetic harm perpetrated by forgery has typically been located quite narrowly, centering on the forged artwork itself. A work's being a forgery is thought to invalidate it as

an artwork (e.g., Danto, 1973) or, more commonly, to invalidate any aesthetic judgments we might make about it while assuming it to be genuine (e.g., Sagoff, 1976; Dutton, 1983). This characterization of the aesthetic problem with forgery is inadequate for two reasons. First, as Goodman's example suggests, the fact that a work is a forgery need not disqualify it from aesthetic consideration; nor, as I will argue, need it invalidate every aesthetic judgment made about the work when taken to be genuine. Second, and more importantly, this characterization seriously underestimates the scope of the harm potentially perpetrated by an undetected forgery. As Goodman pointed out, a known forgery may promote the development of aesthetic capacities that can then be applied quite broadly. In a similar way, as I will show, an undetected forgery may compromise our aesthetic understanding across a wide range of cases, extending far beyond the forgery itself and the class of works to which it is misattributed.

Now for a few remarks about the notion of artistic forgery under discussion: I will consider only forgeries within the visual arts, though most of what is said will apply to forgeries in other arts as well. Some forgeries, as in Goodman's example, are copied from existing originals, though rarely so as to be perceptually indistinguishable from them for an ordinary viewer. Copying has long been a favorite exercise for artists, and duplicates produced for study have sometimes later been misrepresented as originals. A more interesting sort of case, though, is that of creation of works in the style of an artist, adopting some of that artist's techniques and motifs without producing a replica of any existing work. An example is the much-discussed case of Han van Meegeren, who in the 1930s produced forgeries that were spectacularly successful at being accepted as genuine—and superior—Vermeers.<sup>3</sup> Some forgers have passed off works in the style of a period or region without misattributing them to any particular artist; others have created a fictional personage to whom a collection of works is attributed, giving art historians the satisfaction (albeit temporary) of "discovering" a great artist from the past. Some types of forgery of contemporary artworks are, of course, possible as well. Though discussion of forgery tends to focus on the making of the work, forgery can occur equally through the manipulation of provenance of a work innocently produced; or it may, as in a remarkable recent case,<sup>4</sup> involve the conspiracy of a maker and an agent who supplies false documentation and history for the works. The common element in cases of artistic forgery is that some aspect of the work's origin has been intentionally misrepresented, leading to a false attribution of it to some person, period or location. For the present purposes, Michael Wreen's recent definition is useful: "a forged *XY* isn't a genuine *XY*, but is represented as a genuine *XY*, and is so represented with the intention to deceive," where *X* is a variable ranging over sources of issue (such as Vermeer or 17<sup>th</sup>-century Holland) and *Y* ranges over the kind of thing forged (such as paintings) (Wreen, 2002, 152).<sup>5</sup>

I will now consider three influential accounts of forgery and highlight the difficulties with them. Each of these accounts discusses the problem with forgeries as largely confined to the forged work itself. As I will show, however, prior to their detection forgeries may undermine aesthetic understanding quite broadly. But once they have been exposed, they have a valuable role to play in repairing the damage.

### **Philosophical Accounts of Forgery**

The aesthetic condemnation of forgeries has been given a number of justifications, of which I will survey three representative examples offered by Alfred Lessing, Mark Sagoff and Denis Dutton.<sup>6</sup> But first, I should briefly situate the debate which serves as the focus of my inquiry. The three philosophers whose views I will criticize, particularly Sagoff and Dutton, were working in part to overthrow a once-powerful set of formalist assumptions according to which the aesthetic significance of an artwork is a function exclusively of its visual properties.<sup>7</sup> On the formalist view, questions about when, where, under what circumstances and by whom an artwork was made, while sometimes of historical interest, are never relevant to the aesthetic value of the work. Some philosophers (e.g., Kulka, 1981; 2005), wishing to acknowledge that the value of an artwork may depend in part on such things as the contribution it makes to art history, adopted a distinction between

aesthetic value and artistic value. According to this distinction, aesthetic value "is assessed on the basis of visual perception alone" (Kulka, 1981, 338), whereas artistic value is equivalent to the value a work has by virtue of its position in art history, and will thus depend in part on factors other than its visible properties.

However, this distinction between the aesthetic and the artistic has proved difficult to sustain, particularly in the face of Kendall Walton's (1970) arguments to the effect that the attribution of an aesthetic property to an artwork inevitably depends on the prior assignment of that work to some relevant art-historical category. Moreover, it is now widely acknowledged, in part due to developments in modern and contemporary art, that the value of an artwork may be a function of the ideas it expresses as well as of how it looks. The value a work may have by virtue of the ideas it expresses seems to be a variety of non-visual aesthetic value, such as can be found in works of literature.<sup>8</sup> This sort of aesthetic value cannot be divorced from the work's art-historical situation, since the ideas a visual artwork expresses are in part a function of associations between the artwork's visible features and aspects of the socio-historical context in which it was produced. For these reasons, I will use the term 'aesthetic' to refer to properties that fall into both the traditional category of the aesthetic and the more recently minted category of the artistic.

The arguments I will criticize have made an important contribution to the now-widespread recognition that the value of an artwork must be a function of more than its visual appearance. I will criticize them from within a sympathetic perspective and will draw a conclusion which, while quite different from theirs, is in the broad spirit of their projects. At the same time, it is important to note the (sometimes serious) shortcomings of these earlier arguments, which have perhaps served as an obstacle to the development of a more adequate view about the aesthetic problem with forgery.

Alfred Lessing, writing at a time when formalist assumptions still held sway, denies that a work's being a forgery makes any difference to its aesthetic value. However, he does see an artistic problem with forgeries: they lack originality and, thus, artistic integrity. After distinguishing several senses of originality, Lessing highlights the relevant one: originality, in this sense, is "the artistic novelty and achievement not of one particular work of art but of the totality of artistic productions of one [artist] or even one school" (Lessing, 1965, 71). Originality, then, must be judged in relation to the historical period in which the work was created. A recent forgery of a Vermeer work, "in *its* historical context, i.e., the twentieth century, is not original, since it presents nothing new or creative to the history of art..." (Lessing, 1965, 72). The forgery lacks artistic integrity, in turn, due to "the disparity or gap between its stylistically appropriate features and its actual date of production" (Lessing, 1965, 73). Van Meegeren's fakes lack integrity because their stylistic elements, typical of Vermeer, are inappropriate to works produced three centuries later.

The view that the problem with forgeries is a lack of artistic integrity is untenable for at least two reasons. First, it cannot account for cases where the forger is a contemporary and perhaps an associate of the original artist, since in such cases the stylistic characteristics may be wholly consistent with the circumstances of production. Such cases show that the stylistic "gap" Lessing mentions is not a necessary condition for forgery: if Braque had misattributed his Cubist works to Picasso, perhaps to increase their prices, we could hardly accuse him of forging in a style inconsistent with his circumstances.<sup>9</sup> Second, the stylistic "gap" is not sufficient for forgery, since incorporating elements of the style of artworks from other periods or locations is a time-honored tradition within all arts; indeed, as Rudolf Arnheim (1983) has pointed out, some degree of stylistic reliance on past works is unavoidable. Some contemporary artists, including Art & Language and Komar & Melamid, have created works in the style of past artists or movements in order to make statements about art and its history and institutions. While Lessing clearly did not have such self-referential artistic practices in mind, his conception of the forgery's lack of artistic integrity must be rejected on their account.

A second view about the aesthetic wrongness of forgeries, defended by Mark Sagoff (1976; 1978a), holds that a forgery is altogether the wrong sort of thing to be compared aesthetically to original artworks, and is thus not susceptible to aesthetic evaluation.

Aesthetic predicates, on Sagoff's view, are (at least) two-term: they relate their object implicitly to some aesthetically relevant class, such as 'Vermeers' or 'fourteenth-century Florentine paintings.'<sup>10</sup> Moreover, a description involving such a predicate implies that the object belongs to the class in question. Aesthetically relevant classes are those employed by art historians and critics, who have created them as a framework to account for and facilitate aesthetic judgment; Sagoff suggests that they can be viewed as the artistic analogy of natural kinds (Sagoff, 1976, 142). 'Vermeers and Vermeer forgeries' is not such an aesthetically relevant class; nor do an original artwork and forgeries of it jointly belong to any aesthetically relevant class. The most we can do, then, is predicate of an original Vermeer that it is skillful for a Vermeer and of a Vermeer forgery that it is skillful for a forgery (Sagoff, 1976, 134).<sup>11</sup> But this does not allow us to compare the Vermeer and the forgery to each other, any more than we can compare the degree of skillfulness of a fourteenth-century Florentine portrait to that of a jailbreak (Sagoff, 1976, 132): it simply doesn't mean the same thing to say of a painting that it is skillful as it does to say of a jailbreak that it is skillful. Therefore, original Vermeers can never genuinely be compared to forgeries with regard to their aesthetic qualities.

The place to press Sagoff's view, I think, is at his insistence that there can be no legitimate reference class to which both a Vermeer and a Vermeer forgery created in a distant time and place can belong.<sup>12</sup> What are the grounds for this claim? The nature of criticism, Sagoff thinks, requires that works be considered in relation to established reference classes that are productive, in the sense that they allow for "interesting aesthetic discriminations" among their members, and that "provide a framework in which hypotheses may be constructed, extended, confirmed, and refined" (Sagoff, 1976, 139). These are the reference classes that have emerged from art-critical and -historical practice, and they "are primarily of an historical and geographical nature" (Sagoff, 1976, 142).

But this won't do, for a number of reasons. First, the insistence that aesthetic comparisons must occur within art-historical classes conflicts with a venerable tradition of cross-historical comparison. Though there may be no significant art-historical category which includes any two of these artists, surely we can propose that Matisse is a better colorist than Rembrandt or that de Kooning and Matisse are both great colorists. These comparative judgments may be wrong or unfounded, but they are not incoherent or meaningless. This suggests that if aesthetic properties are relational, as Sagoff plausibly claims, the second term of the relation need not always be a specific art-historical category; it might instead be a class as general as 'artist' or 'painting,' and then there is no non-question-begging way of excluding forgers and their works from the domain of aesthetic comparison. A second and related point is that in some cases, criticism satisfies its function best when it operates outside established reference classes. Sagoff himself gives examples of this, as when he notes that *King Lear*, when considered in relation to the plays of Samuel Beckett, "has many qualities of the drama of the absurd" (Sagoff, 1978a, 88). In making this comparison, Sagoff says, "we are going well away from conventional associations. In such cases, however, it is possible to find surprising and enlightening qualities in these and other works in so far as they belong to the invented class" (Sagoff, 1978a, 89). Sagoff admits, then, that such unlikely pairings can give rise to productive reference classes. Goodman, in a reply to Sagoff, agrees: though we should avoid deviant and ad hoc categories, he says, "we must recognize that the ability to relate things in a novel way, to discern neglected affinities and contrarities, to transcend the bounds of the commonplace, is fundamental to comprehension and creation in the arts" (Goodman, 1978, 167).

Given that this is so, Sagoff's argument is left to rest on the assumption that an original work and a forgery can never fall into the same (legitimate) reference class because, considered together, they will never shed light on each other in an interesting or mutually informative way. But what is the warrant for assuming this? Surely viewing an artwork alongside a close copy of it can be quite revealing: if we find that the original work prompts a kind or intensity of response not evoked by the forgery, we can study the slight but perceptible differences between them to come to a greater understanding of the precise

features in virtue of which the original work evokes the response.<sup>13</sup> Considering the reference class that includes both an original artwork and one or more forgeries of it, then, may help us to achieve new insight about the original work in much the same way that a control group helps us to understand the phenomenon under study in a scientific experiment.

The prima facie plausibility of Sagoff's suggestion that originals and forgeries do not sustain aesthetic comparison appears, ultimately, to depend on the positive case of comparison, in which an aesthetic predicate is attributed to both an original and a forgery. There may be resistance, after a forgery has been uncovered, to saying that both it and an original work are "radiant" or "skillful," and in the same way. There seems to be no resistance, however, to noticing that the forgery is *less* innovative, *less* subtle, *less* harmonious than the original. Now that we know the van Meegerens are not Vermeers, it is routine to observe that they are less skillful than the genuine works. The hands are flaccid, indicating a weak comprehension of anatomy; the light comes from inconsistent or unidentifiable sources (Werness, 1983, 54-56). A forger might equally be accused, in direct comparison with the original artist, of an inferior color sense or rigid, choppy technique. Sagoff's claim that forgeries are not susceptible to aesthetic comparison with originals flies in the face of our actual, apparently legitimate practices.

Unlike Sagoff, Denis Dutton (1983) does not deny that forgeries and original artworks can be compared with respect to their aesthetic qualities. However, Dutton suggests that aesthetic judgments made about a forgery when it is taken to be genuine will typically be invalid. This is because forgeries harm by misrepresenting artistic achievement, which is the key to aesthetic evaluation. Art, on this view, may be construed in part as the performance of a feat of solving problems or overcoming obstacles. To know how impressive the artist's performance has been, we must be aware of the context within which she worked and the limitations she faced.<sup>14</sup> This information is critical to assessing achievement, which in turn bears upon aesthetic value. Thus, by misrepresenting the nature of the artist's performance, a forgery thwarts our evaluation of its own aesthetic merit. Usually, of course, the forgery prompts an overly positive assessment of its own value; it cheats, like an athlete who secretly takes performance-enhancing drugs. Even if the achievement actually manifested by the forgery is not inferior to that of the original work, it is invariably quite different, and this means that the forgery must be understood and appreciated differently.

This account of forgery has considerable appeal. The artistic achievement manifested by an artwork is something we care about, and the context of its production is undoubtedly relevant to comprehending this achievement.<sup>15</sup> But Dutton's account might be thought to give achievement an undeserved degree of primacy in our evaluation of the work. First, it is not clear, pace Dutton, that the artist's having overcome more substantial obstacles necessarily makes the artist's *work* better, or changes in any way how we ought, aesthetically, to assess it. Suppose we were to learn that the artist of a much-admired painting had, at the time of creating it, been suffering gradual deterioration of her vision, and had used a magnifying glass to view the canvas as she painted. Because the glass was relatively small, she was forced to hold the finer details of other areas of the canvas in memory while painting, whereas a perfectly sighted artist would have been able to see these details directly. Thus the visually impaired artist would have overcome an obstacle that a normally-sighted artist making a similar painting would not have had to overcome. This is certainly an interesting and poignant fact about the process by which she created the work, and it might well shed light on certain decisions she made in creating it. It might also legitimately prompt us to take a special interest in the work, just as we often take an interest in the accomplishments of people who have surmounted great obstacles. But does it make the work itself better, or even aesthetically different, than it would have been otherwise? Imagine that critics had been puzzling over a stylistic discrepancy between two passages of the work, suggesting that this was a flaw in an otherwise outstanding piece. Knowledge of the obstacle the artist overcame to make the work suggests an explanation: namely, that she was not able to see the fine details of the entire work in a single viewing.

I see no reason to think this explanation reduces or eliminates the degree to which the stylistic discrepancy is a flaw in the work. We may blame the artist less for it than we would blame an artist with normal vision; but this need not translate into a revised assessment of the work itself. Nor need it lead us to interpret the work differently; indeed, it appears that the artist, by using the available means to compensate for her disability, endeavored to produce a work that would be understood in the same way as if a normally sighted artist had produced it.<sup>16</sup>

Dutton might respond by excluding such local difficulties as an individual artist's visual impairment from the class of obstacles that bear upon the aesthetically relevant notion of achievement. But it is not clear that he can legitimately make such a move without giving up central elements of his view. "As performances," Dutton says, "works of art represent the ways in which artists solve problems, overcome obstacles, make do with available materials" (Dutton, 1983, 176). As Dutton is acutely aware, the problem an artist sets for herself may be highly individual, with the result that the obstacles she must confront may be completely irrelevant to the achievements of her contemporaries. In addition, Dutton sometimes makes reference to the aesthetic relevance of contingent, local difficulties that have sprung up for individual artists, as when the artist must "give some unity to the family portrait now that the duke insists on having his favorite hunting dogs included too" (Dutton, 1983, 178). Finally, as Dutton indicates, "[t]he fundamental question ... is, What has the artist done, what has he achieved?" (Dutton, 1983, 181). It is hard to see how any theory of aesthetic value which accords such a central position to the artist's achievement could avoid acknowledging the relevance of Beethoven's deafness or Chuck Close's paralysis to the aesthetic assessment of their work.

Of course, Dutton might respond by insisting that these particular obstacles are aesthetically relevant to the work: that the later works of Close and of Beethoven are, in fact, aesthetically enhanced by their artists' disabilities. As I have suggested, this strikes me as a revisionist account of aesthetic value; however, even if Dutton is right on this point, and thus correct about one aesthetic problem with forgery, there is another very important aesthetic problem that he and others writing about forgery have not addressed.

### **Aesthetic Understanding**

While Dutton's view that forgeries harm because they misrepresent the artist's achievement contains elements that a correct account of forgery must maintain, it, like the views of Sagoff and Lessing, underestimates the damage to our aesthetic understanding that is inflicted by undetected forgeries. All three views locate the aesthetic problem with forgery within the particular forged artwork: it lacks integrity, it is not an appropriate object for aesthetic judgment at all, or we cannot evaluate it effectively. These views tend to suggest, then, that once we have identified the forged work and removed it from museum walls (or hung it in a more appropriate location), the problem has been eradicated. As I argue, this is incorrect: eradication of the mistaken views engendered by a forgery may require sustained examination of the forgery itself and the circumstances of its acceptance, as well as of its relations to other works.

On my view, the nature of aesthetic understanding and of the strategies available for its development entails that the damage forgeries may inflict is much more severe and pervasive than these views recognize. Just what is aesthetic understanding? Aesthetic understanding comprises, at least, the abilities of recognizing the aesthetically relevant qualities of an artwork, comparing artworks with respect to these qualities, judging the aesthetic merit of artworks, and situating these comparisons and judgments within a context of aesthetic considerations. To lack one of these abilities, in some or all domains, is of course not to be devoid of aesthetic understanding, but only to be in a plight that afflicts all of us to varying degrees. Aesthetic understanding is, in many respects, historical in nature: both the contextual situation of artworks and the judgment of their merit depend heavily upon knowledge of the roles they have played in the progression of aesthetic developments.<sup>17</sup> Evaluation of an artwork's significance depends upon what has preceded it as well as what follows it; the contribution the work makes to later developments, the

things it makes possible, may be more important than its formal properties when its merit is to be judged. As is widely accepted, and as the present account requires, both perceptual and cognitive capabilities are implicated in the tasks of recognizing aesthetic relationships and making aesthetic judgments (hence my use of the term 'understanding,' which suggests a cognitive component). Aesthetic judgment clearly does and should rely on pre-existing structures of knowledge and belief, including information about the relevant artistic and historical context.

I suggest that the appropriate strategies for development of aesthetic understanding, given the uncertainty with which we are confronted, fall within a bootstrapping framework. This is due to the complexity and uncertainty of the aesthetic terrain. Aesthetic understanding is, for each of us and at every moment, constrained according to (at least) our background knowledge and perceptual abilities. Some distinctions we can detect and describe; others we may sense without being able to specify them; to still others we are blind. Our evaluative responses are similarly subject to limitations: while we are able to appreciate some works on first encounter, others prompt a strong reaction that is not immediately identifiable as positive or negative. Such reactions are susceptible even to complete reversal: a work initially admired may come to seem trite, while an initial aversion may yield to tolerance or even to admiration. And, of course, we can appreciate some works that we cannot enjoy. We can appreciate a Vermeer without knowing why, or while being deceived as to why; we can prefer one to another without being able to account for the judgment, or we can fail to form a preference at all. We can make comparisons on the basis of spurious considerations, ranking Rothkos according to their sizes and Pollocks according to the density of paint application: aesthetically relevant distinctions gone awry.

How are we to advance, given the complexity of the aesthetic terrain? We can, of course, collect knowledge about art history and work to hone our perceptual skills. Aesthetic evaluation and the sensory perception that underlies it are highly dependent on the knowledge and belief we have already amassed. As Arnheim (1983) points out, to perceive is to detect structure, not merely to receive a retinal imprint.<sup>18</sup> And the structure one detects, whether effortfully or automatically, will depend on a storehouse of previous information and structural precedents.

However much knowledge and perceptual acuity we are able to muster, though, it will never deliver us to some objective standpoint from which aesthetic judgments are to be made or redeemed. Experts, in trying to make judgments of aesthetic value in novel cases, are in the same situation of aesthetic struggle as the rest of us, just with mastery in a broader domain. This helps to explain the perplexity we feel, and many other generations have felt, when confronted with the new art of our time.<sup>19</sup> Our aesthetic "truths" (which, over time, come to have the status of accepted facts about the superiority of certain artists and works over others) are not fully determined by pre-existing aesthetic principles or heuristics. Instead, they must be constructed in stages by those whose tools for doing so are best refined. When confronted with new works, we (or our best critics) do not simply *detect* their aesthetic value; insofar as these works are truly novel, we must confer their value, based on the context and perceptual structures we succeed in building for them and on the way in which they appear to extend trajectories of aesthetic development we have observed in earlier works. This conferral, in turn, influences how, how widely, and by whom the work is seen, thereby shaping the influence the work will have on later artistic developments. For example, the characteristics for which a work is praised are likely to be developed further by other artists; and this, in turn, will reflect back favorably on the initial work, causing it to appear (and, indeed, to be) prescient in a particular respect. Thus, a work may end up being aesthetically significant, given other developments that are completely independent of (and even subsequent to) it, though under different circumstances it might have been dismissed as, and actually ended up being, worthless or banal.<sup>20</sup>

The most significant new artworks often pose puzzles for the sort of aesthetic judgment I have been describing. Their relationships to past works and past aesthetic trends may be unclear; a completely new trajectory may be needed to account for them.

The difficulty of making judgments about contemporary developments is one reason why it is so important to continue probing into the past. It is readily acknowledged that past artistic developments shed light on and help us to understand the present. At the same time, though, as we look into the past with new eyes, different perceptual abilities and contemporary puzzlement, we may discover new aesthetic relationships in past artworks.<sup>21</sup> These discoveries can then be used as precedents and frameworks for the making of new judgments about past aesthetic development.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the interconnections among aesthetically significant trends and developments are more extensive than is typically acknowledged. T. S. Eliot explains the situation thus:

[W]hat happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted.... (Eliot, 1948, 49-50)

One implication is that historians who work on art from the past should be well versed in contemporary developments, not just the converse.

The search for considerations to guide aesthetic judgment in novel cases must, then, take us in many directions. Clearly, the more knowledge we possess about past artistic developments and the accounts that have been given of them, the greater will be our capacity for situating new works in a relevant context. For this reason we rely, and rightly so, on art historians and critics with advanced knowledge and perceptual skills. But what do they, in turn, rely on, given that their superior resources cannot rescue them from the situation of aesthetic uncertainty?

My answer is that there is a crucial element of trust, or faith, in the development of aesthetic understanding. To make effective aesthetic judgments in uncharted terrain, we must rely, at least temporarily and defeasibly, on acknowledged sources of aesthetic superiority to lead us incrementally further in aesthetic comprehension.<sup>23</sup> Often these sources will be artists themselves. Once we have discovered an artist whose work is aesthetically superior according to existing understandings, we may need to follow that artist, to construct the extension of our aesthetic account around her new work, even if we have difficulty at first situating its aesthetic significance within a context of understanding. The accounts we construct on this basis may, of course, turn out to be flawed; a new development may turn out to be a dead end, giving rise to nothing. It is for this reason that I say our trust is defeasible: we may, at times, have reason to revoke it. At other times, our judgments may be self-fulfilling: by championing a particular group of works as a fount of aesthetic significance, we promote future developments that will, retrospectively and, perhaps, retroactively, further augment the works' value. Art production is responsive to aesthetic understanding, not independent of it.

The sort of trust I have in mind is not blind trust of indefinite duration. Aesthetic trust can be seen as an aid to the formation of hypotheses which are eventually supported or undermined by subsequent observations, though these observations do not have the sort of objectivity and universal replicability claimed for observations in science. When confronted with new artistic developments, I may initially be in a state of utter perplexity, surrounded by a collection of artworks whose value I am completely unable to determine. Hypothesis formation is necessary for me to progress, to begin to make sense of what I see so that I can begin to perceive what is before me, to recognize its significance, and in consequence to assess the works' value. My progress will be hastened if I form hypotheses that are likely to be supported in my subsequent experience; but since my own aesthetic capacities are not sufficiently refined to generate such hypotheses spontaneously, trust in the aesthetic capacities of others is an invaluable resource. Once I place this provisional trust, it provides me with directions to pursue in my continued looking and perhaps helps

me to see features and relationships that I was unable to detect before. Ultimately, whether or not my trust was warranted will be determined largely by the nature of my own aesthetic experience (which has perceptual, cognitive and affective components): features which I initially esteemed out of trust may eventually come to appear outstanding to me independent of trust. If, after a period of continued looking guided by trust, I remain unable to see the value a critic insists is present, I will ultimately have reason to revoke my trust.

In some cases, we may place our trust not in the judgments of a critic but in the characteristics of artworks. Having recognized the superior value of an artist's earlier work, I (or a critic) may place my trust in his new work despite finding it discomfiting. This trust need not always be consciously accorded; in some cases, I may simply be attracted to an artwork or aesthetic feature without knowing why, and without explicitly recognizing that I am placing my trust in it. The hypotheses I form on the basis of such trust may relate to the nature and value of future artistic developments: I may hypothesize that the artist will produce future works in which some new feature will crystallize and be revealed as aesthetically superior, or that the present work will generate a new trajectory of outstanding developments by other artists. If my predictions go unsatisfied, I will have reason to conclude that I have placed my trust in an aesthetic dead end; and if they are borne out, as measured by my own satisfying aesthetic experiences in viewing future works, my trust will have been vindicated.

A trust-based approach may be necessary for the extension of aesthetic understanding of past artworks as well. As I suggested above, our experience with newer art perpetually informs our lookings at past work, leading us, among other things, to search for aesthetic relationships that might help us to account for new artistic developments. In this process, we may need to use those qualities that we acknowledge as aesthetically superior to warrant those which are correlated with them, but which we are unable directly to appreciate. To offer a crude example, we may revel in the faceted luminosity of Cézanne's landscapes, yet be perplexed or jarred by the frequent divergence in treatment between foliage and architecture. To advance in our aesthetic understanding, we may need to place our trust in Cézanne's aesthetic judgment and/or in the correlation between the two characteristics of the work, using aesthetic authority as a supplement where other relevant considerations are absent or, as yet, invisible to us.

### **Forgery and the Undermining of Aesthetic Understanding**

How does artistic forgery threaten aesthetic understanding? Forgeries call into question the soundness of the knowledge assumed to ground aesthetic judgments, and this might seem to be their chief disturbance. It is disconcerting to learn that the experts whose aesthetic acuity we esteem most highly are unable to distinguish an original from (what may later come to appear) a blatant fake—and therefore to suspect that artistic knowledge and aesthetic sensibility are on much shakier grounds than we had thought. The harm caused by forgeries, indeed, stems precisely from the fact that aesthetic understanding lacks foundational axioms and clear test criteria. But the success of forgeries does not suggest that there are no legitimate modes of gaining aesthetic understanding. Artistic forgeries bring about harm not by *revealing* our plight of aesthetic uncertainty—when they do this, they actually perform a service. They harm, instead, by undermining our strategies in the face of this uncertainty, leaving us with aesthetic “understanding” that is stunted or spurious.

As I have argued, aesthetic understanding develops, and should develop, according to a bootstrapping procedure—and as a necessary component of this procedure, trust is placed, at least defeasibly, in acknowledged aesthetic “experts” (critics, historians and artists) and in the correlates of aesthetic qualities we already regard as valuable. This view implies that the problem with forgery is not isolated in the forged work: a forgery can have wide-ranging impact on aesthetic understanding, potentially influencing even our judgments about works remote from the forgery or the relevant class of originals. A forgery, when it adopts the prestige of a great artist or the aesthetically admired qualities of an esteemed

style and artificially combines them with other aesthetically relevant features, undermines our ability to bootstrap effectively to a better developed comprehension of aesthetic values and relationships. As long as a forgery remains undetected, it has the potential to contaminate aesthetic understanding quite deeply by misdirecting our trust, creating artificial associations between the aesthetically superior and other features which lack comparable aesthetic warrant. Our trust in works and artists we know to display a superior aesthetic understanding, while fully appropriate, can lead to serious error here, as the skewing of correlates of aesthetic value leads to mistaken inferences and, ultimately, foils our attempts at understanding or extends them in inappropriate directions.

The problem is not merely with judgments of aesthetic merit. Even when a forgery technically or artistically rivals the relevant class of originals, it prevents us from apprehending the actual historical relationships that are central to aesthetic context. Its incorrect attribution distorts our understanding of what was possible when, under what conditions and for whom. This, as Dutton points out, makes it difficult for us to assess the achievement exemplified in the individual work. But it also, and more seriously, prevents us from apprehending the historical progression of aesthetic developments. Without a correct understanding of historical context, we cannot make sense of new (or old) aesthetic developments or understand their role in building on prior developments, challenging present ones and contributing to those to come.<sup>24</sup> And, of course, our inability to understand these things about a forged work prevents us from apprehending the genuine aesthetic context of many other works as well. The ripples of a single misunderstanding may travel far. Aesthetic understanding, in such a case, is broadly undermined.

Interestingly, Michael Wreen and Monroe Beardsley, both of whom deny that a work's being a forgery detracts from its aesthetic value, seem to acknowledge that forgeries may do this sort of aesthetic harm: Wreen approvingly attributes to Beardsley the view that "forgeries prevent the effective aesthetic training of art-receivers" and elaborates that they do so by "distort[ing] aesthetic discrimination or ... retard[ing] its development" (Wreen, 1983b, 204).<sup>25</sup>

The van Meegeren case helps to illustrate this point. Prior to their detection, the van Meegeren forgeries clearly undermined aesthetic understanding. As Werness (1983) notes, now that we are aware of the existence of the forger van Meegeren, it is not difficult to notice stylistic characteristics in his forgeries that refer us back to van Meegeren as their creator. This means that prior to the forgeries' detection, certain stylistic elements that were in fact van Meegeren's would have appeared to be stylistic elements of Vermeer. And since van Meegeren also forged Hals, de Hoogh and others, some of their works would appear, spuriously, to have stylistic features in common with each other and with certain works by Vermeer. Clearly, this would lead to quite distorted understandings of the relationships among these artists. Moreover, some of the stylistic features imported by van Meegeren were completely anachronistic, obviously appropriate to the 1930s rather than the seventeenth century. For example, the deep-set, hollowed eyes of the subjects in van Meegeren's *Supper at Emmaus* are much more characteristic of photographs of 1930s celebrities than of Vermeer's portraiture. Examination of the case suggests that such anachronistic stylistic elements contributed to the acceptance of the works as superlative Vermeers: because these elements were highly valued in the 1930s, when the works were passed off, they actually increased critics' and historians' esteem for the works. And the association of these stylistic features with Vermeer would, in turn, lend them a spurious pedigree, prompting further mistaken aesthetic judgments.

Once the forgeries were detected, on the other hand, they were subjected to just the sort of revised scrutiny Goodman alludes to. Art historians and others have gradually been able, by looking carefully at the forgeries in relation to the original works, to recognize the ways in which aesthetic understanding was distorted before the forgery was discovered, and to refine their understanding of the true characteristics of the various periods of Vermeer's production (Werness, 1983). It remains instructive to consider the reasons for the dramatic downward revision in assessment of the forgeries' value over a period of just a few decades. The detection and continued study of the forgeries has taught us something about aesthetic

understanding, namely that the stylistic characteristics of our own time may influence us heavily while remaining "invisible" to us. By studying the forgeries over time, then, we can rectify the damage they once did to aesthetic understanding; and, indeed, we can make new discoveries about the nature of that understanding that might otherwise have been impossible.

It should now be clear that views such as Lessing's, Sagoff's and Dutton's, insofar as they imply that the aesthetic problem with forgery inheres primarily in individual forged works, need modification. The interconnection of aesthetic developments across regions and historical periods can allow forgeries a deep and wide-ranging impact on our aesthetic understanding. Simply finding them and expelling them, then, is not an adequate remedy. Extracting the misconceptions created by a forgery may take many years, as we gradually correct mistaken assumptions that may have remained tacit all along. When, confronted with uncertainty, we place our aesthetic trust, it may not be entirely clear just what we are placing it in. Is it some formal property or formal relationship? Is it a connection between stylistic aspects of the work and features of the world? Is it an attitude, an atmosphere? Even on learning that our trust has been misdirected, locating the conclusions to which it has led us can be difficult. Examination of the forgery and the circumstances of its acceptance, though, can facilitate this process while, as Goodman pointed out, improving our capacities for aesthetic perception. Once we have learned the true origins of the forged work, we can begin to disentangle the aesthetic features it has appropriated from those its maker was simply unable to shed. And this enterprise may yield revelations about the forger's own time and circumstances that would otherwise have been unattainable.

My view implies that not all forgeries are equally harmful. A forgery which hangs in obscurity in the home of a collector may have no impact beyond corrupting the aesthetic understanding of the few people who view it. In general, the more attention an undiscovered forgery attracts from people who take a serious interest in art and its history, the more widespread the damage it has the potential to cause. However, it would be wrong to conclude that only forgeries of the most historically significant works are such as to perpetrate aesthetic harm. Even a forgery which is taken to be a minor work of a particular period may harm by misleading us about the genesis of certain stylistic features or the availability of particular aesthetic insights.

In an interesting way, a highly competent forgery has great potential to cause harm, yet at the limit its very competence may mitigate the harm's severity. The better a forger is at avoiding detection, the longer the forger's products are likely to remain in place and to subtly corrupt our aesthetic understanding. But if a forgery is successful largely because it has been purged of anachronistic elements and imbued with the style of the forged artist, then for the same reason the magnitude of damage may be relatively slight. Gregory Currie suggests that a forgery which is impossible to distinguish from the original work may simply be another instance of it: if the forgery affords precisely the same perceptual experience as the original, then it gives the same sort of access to all the properties relevant to our understanding of the work and judgment of its merit. For instance, it gives us precisely the same basis as the original for assessing the original artist's achievement (Currie, 1989, 43). However, we should note, with Goodman, that our current inability to detect a difference between an original and a copy does not guarantee that we are dealing with a Currie-type case, such that there are no such differences to be detected; as our perceptual abilities become more and more refined, perhaps as a result of viewing newly created artworks, we may begin to detect features of the forgery that were not evident to us, or to prior generations, on earlier viewings. As our view becomes sharper, these elements that we are newly able to detect (all the while believing the work to be genuine) may contribute to the distortion of our aesthetic understanding in unpredictable ways. Even a forgery which eludes detection due to the forger's mastery of the relevant style and technique, then, may compromise aesthetic understanding to a considerable degree.

If we value aesthetic understanding that correctly captures art historical relationships, and thus provides the best possible basis for forming new aesthetic judgments, we will be vigilant in detecting forgeries and expunging them from the canon.

But, contrary to what many philosophical views of forgery would suggest, we should not expect that this will immediately eradicate the problems they have caused. Once a forgery has been uncovered we must, through continued looking at both it and the relevant class of originals, come to discover the precise ways in which we were misled, the relationships we misunderstood, the trust we misplaced. In so doing, we may achieve a degree of aesthetic understanding superior to that we would have attained if the forgeries had never been created.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Wreen (1983b) shows that Goodman's argument fails as an argument for the aesthetic inferiority of forgeries, but without claiming that Goodman meant to argue for this conclusion. Wreen elsewhere suggests that "Goodman's argument ... either proves absolutely nothing or is implicitly question-begging and leads to strongly counter-intuitive results" (Wreen, 1983a, 342).

<sup>2</sup> See discussion in Lessing (1965).

<sup>3</sup> For an account, see Werness (1983).

<sup>4</sup> In this case, the forger's accomplice bound spurious pages into old exhibition catalogues in a prominent art library to provide provenance documentation for the forgeries. See Landesman (1999).

<sup>5</sup> As Wreen notes (2002, 155), something may be represented as a genuine XY (e.g., a genuine Jones painting) even if there are no genuine XYs (say, if Jones is a fabrication of the forger, and hence never made any paintings).

<sup>6</sup> I will not here discuss the views of philosophers such as Michael Wreen and Monroe Beardsley to the effect that a work's being a forgery can make no difference to its intrinsic aesthetic value. These views presuppose a broadly formalist perspective which I reject for reasons to be sketched in this section. For example, Beardsley says, "I cannot see how there can be two objects of very different aesthetic value" such that "they are indistinguishable to the naked eye," clearly implying that non-perceptual information about the object must be irrelevant to its aesthetic value on his view (Beardsley, 1983, 229). I also will not discuss the moral problem with forgeries, since it is the aesthetic problem that is of interest in the present discussion.

<sup>7</sup> Two of the chief advocates of formalism were Clive Bell and Roger Fry. See Bell (1914) and Fry (1926).

<sup>8</sup> Kulka's (2005) renewal of the distinction between aesthetic and artistic value improves, in some respects, on the earlier version. However, his claim that a copy that looks just like the original necessarily has the same aesthetic properties as the original suggests that his view cannot take account of the possibility that artworks may have non-visual aesthetic value: it would rule out, for example, the possibility that an extremely close copy of a Warhol by Elaine Sturtevant could express different aesthetically relevant ideas than the Warhol itself does.

<sup>9</sup> Wreen (1983b) discusses the case in which Picasso creates a forgery by attributing one of his works to Juan Gris.

<sup>10</sup> Sagoff (1976) holds that stylistic predicates (a subset of aesthetic predicates) are three-term, relating the object, a reference class and a foil class made up of works with some historical or geographic relation to the reference class.

<sup>11</sup> Of course, we could apply the predicate 'skillful' to the Vermeer in relation to a broader reference class: we could say, for instance, that it is skillful for a seventeenth-century Dutch genre painting. But on Sagoff's view, such broadening of the reference class has its limits; no legitimate broadening will eventuate in a class that includes both the original and the forgery.

<sup>12</sup> Some might doubt that aesthetic judgments genuinely require reference classes at all, in which case Sagoff's view would seem to lack even *prima facie* plausibility. I will assume that Sagoff's general point about reference classes is correct and challenge his conclusion about forgery on other grounds.

<sup>13</sup> Note that this example does not beg the question against Sagoff by comparing the original and the forgery with respect to some aesthetic property, since the propensity to

evoke a response is not an aesthetic property on Sagoff's view. See discussions in Sagoff (1976; 1978a; 1978b; 1981).

<sup>14</sup> Gregory Currie (1989, esp. ch. 2) defends a similar view. However, Currie denies that a forgery necessarily prevents us from assessing the artist's achievement: a forgery which is a perfect copy, on his view, is an instance of the original work and gives us the same basis for assessing the artist's achievement that the original would (ch. 4).

<sup>15</sup> Kulka (1981; 2005) advances a similar view.

<sup>16</sup> An intentionalist theory of interpretation, which suggests that the correct interpretation of the work is determined by the artist's actual intentions, might be forced to say that the artist's disability is interpretatively relevant, since many of the artist's intentions may have related to ways of compensating for her disability. However, as I argue in Irvin (2005), there are good reasons to reject the intentionalist view.

<sup>17</sup> For argument that the understanding of an artwork must take its historical position into account, see Baxandall (1985). For argument that a work's ability to continue attracting favorable attention over time is relevant to its merit, see Savile (1982). Levinson (1990) holds that the influence a work has on subsequent works is part of the work's "art-content," which presumably makes it relevant to both understanding and evaluation of the work.

<sup>18</sup> Obviously, Arnheim's observation is the distillation of a great deal of work in the psychology of perception.

<sup>19</sup> Leo Steinberg (1972) writes eloquently of this.

<sup>20</sup> Levinson (1990) suggests that the degree to which an artwork is influential does not change over time, since, at the time of its making, it is already a fact of the matter that it will influence subsequent developments in certain ways; only our knowledge about its influence changes. While I disagree with Levinson's account of influence properties—I find it more plausible to say that a work becomes more influential as the works it influences come into existence—nothing I say here is inconsistent with it.

<sup>21</sup> Confronted with the works of Jasper Johns, Steinberg says, "what really depressed me was what I felt these works were able to do to all other art. The pictures of de Kooning and Kline, it seemed to me, were suddenly tossed into one pot with Rembrandt and Giotto. All alike suddenly became painters of illusion" (Steinberg, 1972, 12-13).

<sup>22</sup> The mode of aesthetic judgment under discussion may be distinguished from the pernicious "forward retroactivism" described by Levinson (1990). Whereas forward retroactivism involves judging past artworks in terms better suited to subsequent developments, the sort of aesthetic judgment in question here need not involve the application of anachronistic predicates to past artworks. Instead, it involves applying perceptual skills and aesthetic faculties we have sharpened, in part, by viewing recent works so as to detect features that are in fact present in past works (and have been there all along, even if no one has noticed them).

<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, a germ of this idea can be found in Hume, who notes that the delicacy of taste which allows for legitimate aesthetic judgments must be developed by looking at great works. Thus we must already have a store of great works for new experts to hone their sensibilities on, so as to be able to make adequate judgments about further works. Works newly selected as great might then be thought to provide occasion for further refinement of delicacy.

<sup>24</sup> See Baxandall (1985) for extensive discussion of the relevance of historical context to the understanding of artworks.

<sup>25</sup> Wreen cites an unpublished paper, "The Ethics of Art," delivered by Beardsley at Bowling Green State University's Conference on Ethics and Art in 1980.

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