

Appendix 1.

ORIGINALS, REPLICAS, & QUESTION MARKS

What is an "authentic" work of art? As a rule, a work is considered authentic if it is known to have been, or is widely thought to have been, made by an artist at a particular place and time, or at least authorized by him or her. In modern times, the practice of signing works has become common, but that was quite rare in the past. If the signature is genuine, that is a mark of authenticity. But one needs to be sure the signature is genuine.

Most of the works studied in Art History classes are part of the "canon" of Art History, that is, the widely accepted master works usually published in textbooks for all periods. If they are in the "canon," that means these works have been generally accepted as both genuine and important. Few question their authenticity.

However, outside the "canon," there are many questions about authorship, dating, etc., and scholars can often disagree. Connoisseurship is a special branch of Art History which deals with questions of attribution and authenticity. For example, which Rembrandt paintings are really by Rembrandt? Which were painted by an associate or a follower? Scholarly opinion can change from generation to generation, and often does.

Science can help to settle such questions, but such evidence can only determine possibilities. Final decisions in this field are made by human beings. Art History is one of the Humanities not one of the Physical Sciences. When you read a phrase such as "accepted as authentic" that usually means a large percentage of respected specialists have agreed. "Attributed to" means some scholars think yes, but some think no. World-class experts can be fooled, of course; but not very often.

As a rule, works in our exhibition program are original works of art. But a number of replicas and reproductions sometimes are included in exhibitions in order to make a point and/or in order to stimulate student discussion in specific areas of study. That is the case in "The Spirit of the Renaissance" which is mostly replicas.

Every time a curator writes a catalogue entry or a wall label he or she needs to consider the best available scholarship, compare that information with what he or she knows about the work itself, then make an informed decision about the authenticity of the work and the attribution of authorship. If that curator has extensive knowledge in one field or another he or she can make those determinations more easily. What do experts look for? Here are some examples. Tribal scholars attempt to determine if a mask was made to be used in rituals, or for tourists. Two objects might even be made by the same artist, but one is considered more authentic than the other if it was created with greater sincerity for a deeper purpose of being used in sacred rituals.

Most of the Rodin sculpture in museums today was made after he died. But he gave permission for posthumous editions of his sculpture to be made, trusting it would be done well. Are those posthumous pieces "authentic"? Some say yes; some say no. How does one decide?

Many of Gauguin's most important prints were never editioned by him. Nevertheless, museums compete passionately to collect some of his posthumous printings? Are these later editions "authentic"? Who decides? On what basis?

Print scholars often focus on various states and editions, and still debate the meaning of "original print." In the old days, the only accepted techniques for "fine prints" were etching, lithography, etc. Contemporary techniques, from photo-offset to Giclee, techniques often used by major artists today, have confounded the old-timers and widened the debate.

A print engraved and pulled by Durer himself 500 years ago is certainly more authentic than one pulled from the same plate last year. But if the original plate is still in good shape and the printer is good, it probably would take an expert to tell the difference, so a certain degree of authenticity is present.

Some of the replicas in this exhibition are very close to the form and spirit of the original work made centuries ago. A similar closeness to an original work is often present when a print or a sculpture has been replicated with the authorization of an estate or a museum. Such objects are made with much more care than ordinary commercial editions. If it is very close to the form and spirit of the original, an object often is called a "replica" rather than a mere "reproduction." Only if the intention is to deceive is a replicated object called a "fake."

Replicas can be very useful for educational purposes. Many replicas are so good that they are on display in museums around the world, alongside original works, because the visual experience is so faithful. Some teaching museums at universities and art schools contain only replicas.

To work on your connoisseurship skills, it is useful to look at an object closely and let your eyes decide first, before you read the wall label. It is by doing this kind of looking thousands of times that an ordinary "eye" becomes an "expert" eye.