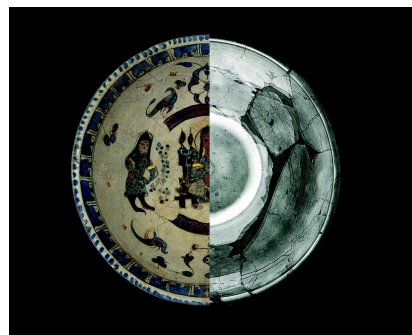


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**FAKES, COPIES, AND QUESTION MARKS:
FORENSIC INVESTIGATIONS OF ASIAN ART**
September 25, 2004 – March 27, 2005

Asian Art Museum examines the nature of authenticity through an engaging exhibition which reveals the sometimes inexact science of classifying art

SAN FRANCISCO, CA, AUGUST 3, 2004: “Is it fake or is it the real thing?” Almost everyone faces a version of this question from time to time in everyday life. Whether it is a Rolex watch, a Louis Vuitton handbag or a piece of antique furniture, the question of authenticity confronts consumers on a daily basis. Professionals in the art world are no exception. Beginning September 25, 2004, the Asian Art Museum will present *Fakes, Copies and Question Marks: Forensic Investigations of Asian Art*, an exhibition that is part science lesson, part crime scene investigation, revealing how the museum’s experts determine the authenticity of artworks. The exhibition includes more than forty objects – primarily from the museum’s collection – that are or were: once thought to be authentic but, through subsequent analysis, have been found to be forgeries; authentic objects once considered fake; works that are pastiches made up of pieces from more than one original object; and works of art that imitate earlier or more valuable originals. Examples of objects which have cannot be categorized using the methods available today are also included. On view in the museum’s Tateuchi Thematic Gallery (Gallery 24, second floor) through March 27, 2005, *Fakes, Copies and Question Marks: Forensic Investigations of Asian Art* is curated by Donna Strahan, Head of Conservation at the Asian Art Museum.



A museum’s responsibility is to present an accurate record of the past for all who value authenticity, including art historians, archaeologists, collectors, dealers, and the public. Museums employ specialists in the field of art (curators) and those who are trained in the scientific conservation of objects (conservators) to fulfill these responsibilities. *Fakes, Copies, and Question Marks* reveals the tricks of the trade of these highly trained individuals responsible for determining an artwork’s authenticity.

(Above) Split view with X-ray of bowl with enthroned figure, approx. 1100–1300.
Iran. Mina’i ware, fritware with overglaze polychrome decoration.
The Avery Brundage Collection, B60P1869.

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Fakes, Copies, and Question Marks opens with an explanation of the difference between fakes, imitations and copies. Stated simply, “fakes” are made with the intention to deceive, often for profit and sometimes to falsify the past in order to legitimize the present. “Imitations” are copies of originals made of less expensive materials or by less costly methods. “Copies” are made to represent originals that are not available due to loss, distance, etc. After explaining the differences between these categories, the exhibition details the methods used to determine the category in which an art object belongs.

Much of the research for the exhibition was accomplished during the years prior to the installation of the museum’s new permanent collection galleries in 2003, when many objects in the collection underwent examination by conservators. This period of analysis and treatment provided new insights into the museum’s collection. Some objects previously suspected to be fakes were determined to be authentic, and vice versa. Some objects, while authentic, were determined to have been heavily restored in the past, sometimes in the long-distant past. Throughout the exhibition, visitors are invited to play detective and try to determine for themselves the difference between a fake, a copy and a genuine work of art. Similar objects are often grouped together without distinguishing which is authentic and which is not. Upon lifting a flap underneath the label description, the legitimate work of art is identified along with an explanation of how its authenticity was determined.

“Visitors coming to the museum often do not know how objects are chosen to be on view in the galleries. This exhibition gives a behind-the-scenes look at how museums determine which objects are worthy of display. It is a wonderful mix of art and science,” says Strahan.

Even before visitors enter the gallery housing the exhibition, two large, bronze seated Buddha sculptures purportedly more than five hundred years old are on view in the museum’s South Court, serving as a test to visitors before they learn more in the exhibition. One sculpture is authentic; the other was actually made within the last 150 years. Visitors are invited to the 2nd floor Tateuchi Thematic Gallery to view the rest of the exhibition and to discover which seated Buddha is genuine.

The most important tools used to determine authenticity are the human eye and the informed mind. Curators thoroughly familiar with the type of object carefully examine and compare it to others of known age, looking for stylistic similarities and differences. Vital to this task is the curator’s understanding of the context in which the object was made, and their extensive training on how to carefully examine objects. Careful visual examination by conservators also helps in determining authenticity. They study the materials and methods used to make a work of art. Conservators can often detect authentic dirt accumulation patterns and wear

patterns of natural aging, as well as fake “evidence” such as added dirt, join lines, cracks, and paint splatter and other efforts to simulate aging. Many fakes are detected at this point.

Time and research also can provide new insights into objects. The fake can be determined authentic and the authentic can be determined fake. Fakes can accumulate histories that make them seem credible. For example, a Khmer style standing stone Avlokitesvara on view in the exhibition has a documented letter dated from the 1930s from a respected dealer attesting to its authenticity. Despite this “proof,” modern stylistic studies have exposed it as fake.

If the results of visual examination are inconclusive, objects may then be examined by other means. Some questions can only be answered through the use of technical examination and scientific analysis. Using a wide variety of approaches, conservators can unmask fakes and restorations in much the same way that experts use forensic methods in criminal investigations. Two scientific techniques are primarily used in the detection of fakes: (1) studying the materials and methods of construction to determine if these are in keeping with the apparent age and historical period of the object and (2) looking at the object for wear, corrosion, and other evidence of age. A gold standing Buddha with body halo from Korea – purportedly from the Goryeo dynasty (918-1392) – provides an example of the first technique described. The tool marks on the body halo were clearly made by a jeweler’s saw. This type of tool was not available during the Goryeo dynasty, thus revealing that this object was classified as a fake.

The museum’s conservation department carries out authenticity studies and analyses of materials and techniques. Different analytical methods are appropriate for different materials. Fluorescent and polarized light microscopy, chemical spot tests, and X-radiography can all be done in the Asian Art Museum’s own conservation laboratory. Highly specialized methods of instrumental analysis—including carbon-14 dating (C-14), thermoluminescence authentication (TL), X-ray fluorescence (XRF), X-ray diffraction (XRD), inductively coupled plasma-atomic emission spectrometry (ICP-AES), Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy (FTIR), scanning electron microscopy (SEM), electron probe microanalysis (EPMA), gas chromatography mass spectrometry (GCMS), and optical interferometry (OI)—are available outside the museum’s lab. On view in the exhibition is a ceramic bowl from Iran dating 1100-1300 that—at first glance—appears to be an intact authentic piece. However, an X-ray of the bowl shows that the object was actually constructed from fragments of several bowls. Gaps between the fragments were filled in with plaster, and are evident upon irradiation. An ultraviolet light has been installed in the bowl’s display case so visitors can click it on to see the deception for themselves.

Some analytical techniques require that a small sample be taken from the object. Two vessels in the shape of stags on view in the exhibition, purportedly from the second millennium

BCE, provide an example how a special process is used to determine their authenticity. It is extremely rare to find one stag vessel, let alone two, that are really from this period. Small core samples were drilled from both stag vessels and sent for thermoluminescence testing (TL). The principle behind TL is that some of the minerals that comprise ceramic materials such as the terra-cotta clay of the stag vessels absorb natural background radiation at a predictable rate. When the clay is fired during manufacture, these minerals release this radiation. This sets the “TL clock” back to zero, and the minerals again begin to absorb radiation. As the samples taken from the stags were heated to over 400 degrees for TL, the absorbed radiation was released and measured. This test determined approximately how long it had been since each stag last fired. The TL test is not precise enough to give an exact date of manufacture, but it provides a range of dates. If the apparent age of the object falls within this range, the TL result is said to be consistent with the suggested period to manufacture. The TL data show that one of the stags is 3,000 years old and the other one is less than 100 years old.

Also on view in the exhibition is a rare large pitcher from western Iran purportedly dating to 1200-1300. To the naked eye, the pitcher looks too good to be true. Pieces this large and this old are almost always damaged. This one is nearly perfect. Sampling and analysis by thermoluminescence testing, however, proved it to be authentic.

Many cultures have a great regard for the past, one result of which is the revival of classical styles. Sometimes this includes the copying of popular or special objects from previous eras. While the intention of the maker may have been to honor the past, the work may be misconstrued by later generations as being older than it actually is. For example, beginning in China’s Song dynasty (960-1279 AD) ancient ritual vessels were deliberately used as models for new bronzes to be collected by scholars. Chinese artisans created vessels that imitate those from the ancient Shang dynasty (approx. 1600-1050 BCE). Two ritual objects are on view, one from the Shang dynasty with a natural surface patina achieved through slow corrosion while the vessel was buried in the ground for over three thousand years. The adjacent object is a copy from the Song dynasty. The artificially aged surface patina on this vessel was created with paints and lacquer to resemble the original Shang dynasty vessels.

Some objects are indisputably determined to be fakes or copies, but in more problematic cases neither the art-historical connoisseurship nor the scientific data is conclusive. Stone sculptures present one case in which science alone cannot determine the date of an object. While science can determine the age of the stone –formed millions of years ago – it is not possible to determine the date it was carved into sculpture. The exhibition provides two busts of deities from Southeast Asia. One head was made in the 12th century; the other is questionable based on

stylistic grounds. At present there are no scientific tests available that are useful for dating carving. Weathering (erosion, root marks, deposits) can be useful indications of age. Unfortunately, the appearance of age be induced by chemicals or faked with paint. The experts are always racing to keep one step ahead of the forgers, who are constantly developing more sophisticated ways to avoid detection. Accurate aging studies on stone may aid in the future, but for now the questionable object will remain a mystery.

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About the Asian Art Museum

The Asian Art Museum is a public institution whose mission is to lead a diverse global audience in discovering the unique material, aesthetic, and intellectual achievements of Asian art and culture. Holding nearly 15,000 Asian art treasures spanning 6,000 years of history, the museum is one of the largest museums in the Western world devoted exclusively to Asian art. Once located in Golden Gate Park, the museum now resides at its new, expanded facility at Civic Center Plaza. An architectural gem featuring a dynamic blend of beaux arts and modern design elements, the museum's new home is the result of a dramatic transformation of San Francisco's former main library by acclaimed architect Gae Aulenti (designer of the Paris's Musée d'Orsay, Paris) into a showcase for the museum's renowned collection and exhibitions.

Visiting the Museum:

Overlooking Civic Center Plaza, the new Asian Art Museum is located at 200 Larkin Street, between Fulton and McAllister streets. The new location offers greater access to Bay Area residents and visitors via BART, MUNI, Sam Trans, Golden Gate Transit, and the Bay Bridge. Parking is available in the nearby Civic Center Garage and other paid parking facilities in the neighborhood.

- **Information:** (415) 581-3500, or www.asianart.org.
- **Location:** 200 Larkin Street, San Francisco, CA 94102.
- **Hours:** The museum is open Tuesday through Sunday from 10:00 am to 5:00 pm, with extended evening hours until 9:00 pm every Thursday.
- **Admission:** \$10 for adults, \$7 for seniors, \$6 for youth 12–17, and free for children under 12. Thursday evenings after 5 pm admission is just \$5 for all visitors except those under 12 and members, who are always free. **Target Tuesdays:** The museum offers FREE admission to all on the **first Tuesday** of every month, courtesy of Target Stores.
- **Access:** The Asian Art Museum is wheelchair accessible. For more information regarding access, please call (415) 581-3598; TDD: (415) 861-2035.

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