

Artful Fakes

In the 19th century, when museums were still a new idea, the competition for masterpieces was fierce—among museums and private collectors alike. Important archaeological excavations in Greece, Rome, Egypt, and Mesopotamia yielded fantastic treasures that were quickly acquired by or on behalf of the great museums of Europe. Such a climate invited dishonest dealers and expert counterfeiters eager to meet the demand. Photographs were not yet widely available, so collectors and curators had to rely on their memories, notes, and sketches when analyzing a work of art.

The best forgers typically don't copy readily identifiable art objects. Instead, they work in the style of existing masterpieces. By using authentic materials and the original artist's techniques, they create unique objects that appear genuine—at least initially. It is easy to understand how the thrill of discovering something hitherto unknown could cloud otherwise sound judgment, and even renowned collectors and curators have occasionally been fooled. However, it is said that every fake has about it something of its own time which eventually comes to light. Several works in this gallery were once lauded as masterpieces by experts but later revealed as artful forgeries.