

Faking it

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*The recent revelation that Bolton Museum's Amarna Princess statue (above left) is a fake manufactured in 2003 rather than an ancient Egyptian piece has focused attention on the perennial problem of forgeries. **Tom Flynn** investigates the world of dodgy deals and counterfeit creations.*

Fakes have been described as "the venereal disease of the illicit art market" and it is an apt metaphor. As prices in the art market rise exponentially, so the risk of contamination by counterfeit objects increases accordingly. Reputations are at stake, but so are significant amounts of money as fakers and forgers become more sophisticated in their methods.

The Amarna Princess, which was acquired with Art Fund help in 2003 as an ancient Egyptian representation of a daughter of Pharaoh Akhenaten (reigned 1379-1362 BC) has left a trail of red faces from Bolton to Bloomsbury and so it is hardly surprising that on making a few gentle enquiries for this article lips remained as tightly sealed as a pharaoh's tomb. Then, in late April this year, 84-year-old George Greenhalgh of Bromley Cross, Bolton, and four members of his family, were charged with conspiracy defraud in relation to the statue. They are due to appear in court on 24 July. Suspicions about the Amarna Princess first arose in early 2006 when a relief, purporting to be Assyrian, was submitted to the British Museum for expert opinion. When it emerged that the relief had come from the Greenhalgh family — the same source as the Amarna Princess — Scotland Yard was called in.

Now it seems the alabaster torso could be one of any number of fake objects allegedly produced by the same highly skilled team of fakers and forgers between 1989 and 2003. Dick Ellis, director of the specialist art consultancy The Art Management Group, is a former Head of Scotland Yard's Art & Antiques Unit and a world-renowned expert on art crime, fakes and forgeries. In the early 1990s, Ellis recalls that paintings purporting to be by the Scottish Colourist S.J. Peploe began circulating in the art trade. Alarm bells rang when the paint fell off. The pictures were traced to a family in Bolton. According to Ellis, Scotland Yard could have made an arrest at the time but failed to do so due to organisational constraints. The consequences of that inaction are now becoming clear.



Some years after the Peploe incident, Ellis was invited to the office of Dr Robert Anderson, director of the British Museum. Dr Anderson and his colleagues had begun nurturing some doubts about a large Romano-British silver tray — the so-called Risley Park Lanx — which had appeared at Sotheby's in 1991 and was acquired by the museum shortly after for around £100,000.

The Risley Park Lanx was discovered at Risley Park, Derbyshire in 1729 and published by William Stukeley in 1736 (above left), but subsequently vanished. When it reappeared in the 1990s it was supported by a provenance document purporting to be a will, bequeathing the lanx to — you guessed it — a member of the same Bolton-based family responsible for the peeling Peploes. What complicated matters, however, was the fact that the lanx had tested positive as Roman silver. Had the family recast the object from genuine Roman coins?

The Risley Park Lanx continues to be something of a mystery, not to say a source of slight embarrassment to the British Museum, where it is no longer on display. Deputy Director of The British Museum Andrew Burnett says the lanx remains problematic. "There have been different views of it and it's something we're looking at again in the light of the Amarna Princess case. We haven't formed a final view on it yet."

The Risley Lanx case illustrates that there are good fakes and bad fakes and good fakes often turn out to be as interesting as genuine pieces. This was made clear in a 1990 exhibition at the British Museum — *Fake? The Art of Deception* — which featured objects from the entire museum spectrum. Andrew Burnett says, "People tend to have a very polarised view of the world of fakes and the world of genuine things and see a sharp and easy distinction between the two. We need to get over to people that it is very difficult to tell in a very considerable number of cases and opinions do change."

One member of the London Egyptology trade told Art Quarterly that he had seen a number of pieces allegedly from the Lancashire source and that the Amarna Princess was better than most of the things they'd done. "It was very convincing, and not at all surprising that it fooled everyone." Clearly a combination of thorough research and genuine craftsmanship went into the making of the Amarna Princess, suggesting that a network of knowledgeable individuals was responsible.

Another expert familiar with the Amarna Princess affair, who asked to remain anonymous, says the alabaster carving is an example of "a good fake". "We shouldn't be thinking of these people as Egyptological forgers, but as people who make things," said the source. "Every curator sees lots of fairly poor stuff every year and one can easily spot the workshops turning out fake terracotta lamps. But the Amarna Princess falls into an altogether different category and is a reminder that that the really good fakes in public and private collections haven't been spotted yet."

Andrew Burnett concedes that, "It may be the case that there are more things around," but adds, "There is no need for panic to set in. Fakes have been around ever since people started collecting in the Renaissance and that will always go on."

The house raided by police in Bolton last year contained "ancillary equipment" for fabricating an eclectic range of objects, making the investigation all the more difficult.

Versatility has been a mark of some of the most successful fakers and forgers. The notorious Italian sculptor Alceo Dossena (1878-1937) created everything from Greek marble Athenas to 'Simone Martini' Annunciations before he was discovered, while John Myatt, in league with his accomplice John Drewe (left), created works in the style of everyone from Chagall to Giacometti until arrested in 1995.

Like the Drewe case, the Amarna Princess reveals how today's forgers are increasingly aware that it is not enough to fake the object; supporting documentary provenance must also be fabricated. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century auction catalogues were not always illustrated and often relied on scant descriptions alone, thus making it easier for fakers to ascribe false histories to their counterfeit creations.

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James Ede, director of leading London antiquities dealer Charles Ede Ltd., says the trend towards ever more convincing provenance-faking is the most irritating aspect of the Amarna Princess case and others like it. "I hate fakers and forgers with a passion because they're trying to undermine one of the most valuable tools of the honest trade — our approach to authentication through diligent provenance research." Mr Ede believes, however, that the Amarna case will not have any negative impact on the legitimate trade, but everyone will learn from it. "My 'Black Museum' is enormous," says Mr Ede. "I always say that one's ignorance is encyclopedic and any dealer who doesn't occasionally inadvertently buy fakes isn't trying hard enough. We're all human and we all make mistakes."

The main ammunition against fakes and forgeries is a combination of provenance research, scientific analysis and old-fashioned connoisseurial expertise, none of which is infallible. The Amarna Princess could not be scientifically authenticated as stone is not amenable to testing, while the provenance connecting the object to a late 19th century auction at Silverton Park, Devon appeared to be convincing. As for connoisseurship, this too has its limits as the quality of workmanship can often be entirely convincing.

But is connoisseurship a dying art? Andrew Burnett believes not. "I think there are fewer people around who know the material well personally, but it's not a dying art. Connoisseurship will always remain very important. My sense of scientific tests is that sometimes they can help you rule something out, but they can very rarely prove that something is genuine. Hence the connoisseur's knowledge of the object, of the materials and of who produced it, will always remain very important."

As for the influence of the market, some commentators believe the combination of rising prices and the easier routes to market via the internet are encouraging illegal activity. In May 2000, Kenneth Walton, a former lawyer, fabricated and sold a forged Richard Diebenkorn abstract oil painting for \$135,858. He recently wrote a best-selling book about his exploits, perhaps proving that crime does pay. Meanwhile, last year, a number of fake spot prints by Damien Hirst appeared on the open market in an attempt to cash in on the rapidly escalating prices for authentic examples. "This is one of the trends you can expect to see," says Dick Ellis. "The last boom in the art market in the late '80s and early '90s was followed by a boom in fakes and forgeries. Now the market is booming again. Over the next five years you'll see a commensurate growth in the incidence of art crime."

In the event that the Greenhalghs are found guilty and their assets are handed to Bolton Museum, The Art Fund will ask Bolton to repay a portion of its grant for the Amarna Princess.

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