



FORGERIES II. OF PRE-ISLAMIC ART OBJECTS

FORGERIES of art objects and manuscripts.

ii. OF PRE-ISLAMIC ARTIFACTS

There are essentially two kinds of forgeries that affect the study of ancient Iranian artifacts: the modern creation of an object that is falsely presented as an ancient artifact, and the assertion that an unexcavated object comes from a specifically named site, thereby effectively forging its provenience.

Forgeries of practically every kind of ancient Iranian artifact and iconography have been made, using a variety of techniques and materials. They have been manufactured in gold, silver, bronze, lapis lazuli, various hard and soft stones, terracotta, and ivory. The forger may produce close copies or imaginative variations, or create a generic “Iranian” style lacking a precise local reference; he may construct after-casts (*surmoulage*, *Nachguss*) either from a genuine original, thereby reflecting an authentic style, or from another forgery, thus compounding the fraud. To enhance the value of genuine plain sheet metal objects, motifs or scenes are added, either made up, or copied from other genuine or modern objects. Fragments of different authentic objects may be joined together, or ancient and modern units mixed, to create a pastiche. The forger may restore or embellish damaged genuine objects, compromising the original form and idea. Forgers also monitor archaeological discoveries and



publications, as well as collectors' desiderata for specific types of objects, hence the existence of large quantities of forgeries in styles with a ready market, such as Achaemenian, Sasanian, Marlik, and Lorestān.

Forgeries derive solely from the market place, the *bāzār*. They exist because of the insatiable desire of museums and private collectors to acquire ancient art, no matter how they are obtained; thus collector-purchasers are partners with antiquity dealers in the plunder of ancient tombs and mounds. The forgeries are introduced into the market mechanism in the initial transactions between plunderers, dealers and collectors, and subsequently are presented along with, and supposedly as, plundered genuine objects. Whether a dealer is selling forgeries knowingly or not is ultimately only of sociological interest.

Forgery is a lucrative trade. Iranian forgeries fetch very high prices. Sales are transacted by dealers operating primarily from various Swiss or U.S. cities, as well as from Paris, London, Munich, Beirut, Jerusalem, and Tokyo. Many forgeries were sold by dealers in Iran, primarily in Tehran and Hamadān, and sometimes by local villagers. Dealers talk of forgery workshops in Tehran, Isfahan, Hamadān, or in Paris and Italy, who sell only to their competitors. For a long time now, there has been a fashion for modern replicas of ancient objects and jewelry. Copies of Sasanian and Achaemenian style decorated plates or Achaemenian style bracelets are made in Persia to satisfy this demand. A Tehran bank has a modern metal wall frieze of a Sasanian king, and a stone Achaemenian style vessel is in front of the main Tehran post office. All these objects are of the same materials and forms as those used to create forgeries.

To display their knowledge, and enhance the value, dealers furnish most objects, ancient and modern, with a specific provenience. Often, the attribution is accepted at its face value. For example, in addition to forgeries, hundreds of unexcavated but genuine bronze artifacts in many collections are published as originating from Lorestān. These include Mesopotamian vessels, weapons, rein rings, etc. of the third through the first millennium B.C. ; a good number are inscribed in cuneiform. All these lack an archaeological provenience, and many could have been plundered in Mesopotamia.

The same false attribution of provenience for both ancient and forged works occurs with many hundreds of objects of all kinds of material attributed to the site of Ziwiye in Kurdistan; with the gold and silver Achaemenian-style material, vessels, tablets, jewelry, attributed to Hamadān; with Urartian



objects attributed to the Caspian region; with Lorestān material attributed to Urartian tombs in Turkey; with alleged Cypriot bowls or Indus seals from Lorestān; with alleged Early Dynastic lapis lazuli discs from Kermān; and with many other examples. Often the same object, genuine or modern, may be given a multiple provenience, e.g., published in one place as from Hamadān, in another as from Ziwiye; or in another as from Ziwiye or Lorestān; and so forth. When a forgery is accepted as both genuine and deriving from a specific site, the outcome is a double fabrication of history.

The distortions generated by forgeries of objects and of proveniences begin not in the marketplace, but rather with their presentation as ancient objects from ancient sites that is manifested by exhibitions in museums, and by publication in museum, exhibition, and collector catalogues, and in scholarly works. Scores of popular and scholarly publications have portrayed forgeries as genuine artifacts from the past. And probably not a single museum or private collection in the world, including Iran, that has acquired “Iranian art” is without forgeries—in some cases a large percentage of the collection. In 1998 many of these collections still display forgeries, as if excavated, and furnished with false proveniences..

Among all the ancient cultures of the Near East, those that developed within the borders of Iran have had the most modern forgeries manufactured, sold, exhibited, and published as genuine artifacts. It is not possible to determine the precise number because many exist hidden or unpublished in dealers’ shops, private collections, and museum basements, or because inadequate illustrations in publications and the lack of autopsy sometimes hinders a conclusion. What is certain is that there are many hundreds. While this phenomenon has existed for many decades in Iran, it accelerated when intensive plundering began in the early 1930s, and reached its peaks in the period from the 1950s to the 1970s. It goes on to this day while the discipline at large remains largely oblivious of the magnitude of the problem.

Through connoisseurship and historical and technological investigation, based on a study of genuine (excavated) artifacts and iconography, forgeries can be detected. Scientists claim to be able to determine through surface and cross-section analyses whether silver or bronze objects are ancient or recently made and corroded, but gold objects resist such tests. Terracotta objects can be tested by thermoluminescence (TL) techniques for age, and ivory may be tested for carbon presence. There have been, however, cases of disagreement between scientists and archaeologist-art historians regarding each other’s



conclusions; and some forgers have been known to have outwitted TL testing in the past.

Listings of the various forgeries of Iranian styles follow; the numbers given represent the totals recorded in one study completed in 1998. Many have been published as genuine ancient artifacts of ancient Iran.

Achaemenian forgeries: this category includes a variety of objects and materials representing both the known repertory and objects not known through excavations. There are forgeries of gold bracelets; gold and silver amphorae with animal handles, or isolated handles; gold, silver, bronze animal-headed vessels; gold, silver, bronze decorated plates and bowls; gold, silver, and bronze animal-headed protomes; gold finials; bronze mirrors; gold bracteates; gold, silver, bronze strips, belts, discs; stone royal human heads; lapis lazuli sculpture; gold, silver, bronze and stone animal sculptures and heads; exotic stone vessels; forgeries of Persepolis reliefs (total recorded: 215+).

Median: forgeries of Achaemenian art have sometimes been wrongly assumed to have been manufactured before the Achaemenian period, and therefore to be Median. These include two gold vessels with animal reliefs and handles; a genuine silver bowl with added symplegma scene; a stone “royal” head; gold strip with lion frieze; a lapis and gold lion head hilt; a stone relief.

Ziwiye: At least forty forgeries of gold, silver, bronze, and ivory objects are alleged to derive from this site. The objects include decorated plaques, strips, vessels, finials, discs/tandoi animal-headed vessels, bracelets, ivory plaques, mirrors.

Marlik/South Caspian (Amlash): Forgeries quickly followed the excavation of the Marlik cemetery in the early 1960s with its contents of sumptuous gold and silver decorated vessels. There are more than sixty forgeries of decorated vessels—sometimes copying excavated pieces—in gold (the majority), silver, bronze, and indeterminate materials. There are also gold strips; many bronze stag figurines; and a large number of terracotta and bronze human and animal statuettes, and terracotta vessels of strange forms—many manifestly forgeries, others uncertain.

Elamite: More than a dozen forgeries are known. Six or seven are modern or heavily re-worked decorated bitumen roundels covered with gold foil, which



were at one time accepted by scholars as deriving from Marlik. There are also stone plaques, several bronze female figurines, bronze helmets, a vessel.

Lorestān: Included are forgeries of canonical and non-canonical types attributed to the area. It is sometimes difficult to determine authenticity in this category as relatively few examples have been excavated, complex forms and aftercasts are involved, and some “strange” Lorestān-assigned objects may actually be genuine but derive from other, as yet unrecognized, cultures in Iran or elsewhere. Nevertheless, conservative analysis indicates that there are hundreds of forgeries attributed to Lorestān: finials, standards, horsebits, decorated disc pins, openwork pins, tondi, statuettes, vessels; also many pastiches, such as genuine vessels or strips with added decoration, or vessels with added animal handles.

Sasanian: A quantitative study of Sasanian forgeries has yet to be done, but there is evidence to date of scores of plates and vessels, most made of silver, others of gold and bronze, and decorated with royal heads, hunt and battle scenes, bucolic scenes, dancing ladies, fabulous creatures, etc.; a dozen or more gold, silver and bronze, lapis lazuli sculptures of royal heads; many animal-headed vessels and rhyta; gold medallions; bronze decorated beakers; and so forth.

Parthian: There is at least one prominent forgery, a silver head of a female that the forger surely intended to be of a Greek lady; it was published as having been found in Iran with Parthian coins.

Finally, there is yet another large number of objects attributed generically as “Iranian” or “Persian,” which includes a disparate group of amorphous human and animal statuettes, animal and hunt friezes, horse cheekpieces, weapons with strange additions, etc.

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