EVERYONE HAS them, but no one wants to talk about them,” conceded Linda Eaton, the John L. and Marjorie P. McGraw Director of Collections at Winterthur Museum, Garden & Library. She spoke about showpieces that are not what they seem, most often antiques that aren’t really antique, and all too often objects specifically made to fool collectors.

Such impostors take a variety of names—fakes, forgeries, and frauds. A fake is any object that pretends to be what it is not. A forgery is a fake made with deception in mind. The motive might be fraud—its maker wants someone to think it is real to raise its perceived value—or it could be simply a matter of pride, such as an artist wanting to prove he is as skilled as the master.

The invention of the maker is the telling difference. Part of any artist’s training is copying great masterpieces, so the results are innocent copies unless someone adds the signature of the original artist.

In painted artworks, scientific analysis is particularly valuable because many modern pigments appeared only within the past 100 years. The case of Robert Lawrence Trotter illustrates this. Initially he painted in the folk art style but signed his own name, but when prices for antiques climbed in the 1980s, he began distressing his work and passing it off as original. Chemical analysis showed he used modern pigments that post-date those artists used in the 1830s. Eventually Trotter admitted selling fraudulent paintings and was sentenced to 10 months in prison. Respected dealers Brian and Arlene Palmer donated this 1980 unainted portrait of a woman and child to the Fenimore Art Museum so others would not be fooled. You can see brush marks in the blanching on the surface of the painting, probably caused by a substance that created cracking and a false impression of age. Some areas of paint are lifting; where it has lifted, you can see that there was another painting underneath. Trotter probably damaged the frame intentionally to enhance his deception.
In 1786, George Washington purchased a set of 302 pieces of Chinese export porcelain decorated with a figure of Fame holding the badge of the Society of the Cincinnati, formed three years earlier to perpetuate the friendships made by officers during the American Revolution. Today many curators and collectors consider this to be the most significant group of antique porcelain in existence. Genuine examples from the service occasionally appear on the market and fetch high prices, but experts have questioned the authenticity of some. This hard-paste porcelain plate, made in Jingdezhen, China, in 1784, is among the 74 pieces of the Washington set owned by Winterthur.

which taints both the signature and painting as forgeries.

Fakes abound but curators, experts, and collectors don’t like to talk about them. No one wants to admit he’s been swindled or acknowledge he has gaps in his expertise. Identifying that you have been swindled and compiling the evidence to prove it also makes it difficult to bring such cases to court.

In discussions of forgeries, museums are often singled when the forger’s intention is to “fool the experts” rather than make a profit. At one time museums authenticated the value of many collectibles—although modern ethics codes prevent that practice.

As with most museums, Winterthur owns its share of fakes and forgeries. The museum occasionally accepts known fakes as gifts to use for teaching. Once identified, fakes help develop skills in

When experts tested this similarly decorated porcelain plate, it proved to be of the proper vintage, but they were suspicious because the artwork didn’t look exactly right. Research showed a set of the bordered-but-blank china had been sold at auction in London in 1975. Gray staining on the back suggests that the 18th-Century plate was re-fired to fix new decoration to the front. Further analysis revealed components of the green enamel were inconsistent with 18th-Century Chinese technology. A counterfeiter added the central motif in about 1975 to increase the plate’s value.
Comparing the style of painting on these blanket chests reveals that the Sibila Himmelbergerin chest (left), from Berks County, Pennsylvania, probably dates to the late 1800s rather than the “1792” on the lid. Deliberate fraud seems unlikely—in the late 1800s, such chests had little value. Two similar chests, each with the name of a Himmelberger sibling, are known, suggesting this example was made to please three heirs who each wanted one. It’s a younger and less valuable antique but not likely a forgery.

A close examination of the paint on the genuine Kernen chest (below), made c. 1788 in Pennsylvania, shows long, smooth brushstrokes in contrast to short, thick versions on the Himmelbergerin chest. The green pigment of this chest also lacks the 19th-Century additives found in the green paint used on the newer chest.

connoisseurship and scientific analysis. By carefully examining and evaluating these imposters, curators and collectors alike can learn to identify discrepancies between the fakes and the genuine examples and avoid being deceived in the future.

Recently Winterthur mounted the exhibition Treasures on Trial, which not only shows how curators discovered many museum fakes and forgeries but allows you to participate in the process.

EVIDENCE TO WEIGH
Fakes are as old as art itself. Artists copy their own works, students copy masterworks, and skilled artisans duplicate centuries-old antiques in homage to their ancestors. Such copies aren’t

The maker of the Himmelbergerin chest built it with far more nails than one would expect, and X-rays show them to be steel wire nails. “Later on,” Eaton noted, “someone else distressed the nails to make the chest look older. Each article has a complicated life, so it’s not a binary thing.” Shown from left to right are a wrought-iron nail made in the 1700s, taken from the Kernen chest; a nail drawn from steel wire, available from the 1870s onward; and a wire nail from the Himmelbergerin chest, with its head hammered to look like a wrought nail, suggesting an intent to deceive some time after it was made.
necessarily bad. Some are masterworks in their own right. Moreover, much of what we know of ancient Greek art, for example, is through fakes—copies made for Rome.

Forgers seek quick profits. When antiques come into fashion, creating demand and higher prices, forgers go to work, and the number of counterfeit pieces rises. When prices are low, forgers have little incentive to take risks (or make the effort). For example, baseball memorabilia is currently in high demand, and some prices are astronomical. Some experts believe that fully half of the objects on the market are fakes.

Even the most well-intentioned collector might think he has something older or different in origin than it really is, particularly if the object comes from an estate where the initial owner left records. Erroneous assumptions can be made and provenance accidentally—or perhaps intentionally—created.

"Is it or isn’t it real? We have moved from mythology to the evidence, and that is what the exhibition is showing," Eaton explained.

Museum experts rely not on a single test but evaluate evidence they obtain three ways. And, Eaton noted, "It’s just as important to prove that something is real as to catch a fake. Is this really a Frederic Church you found at the thrift store?"

Experts study the provenance of an object, researching its history of ownership, from creation if possible. They use connoisseurship to attempt to identify the maker by evaluating the artist’s style and techniques, and they apply scientific analysis to identify the materials used to create an object, which can often help in dating it.

INDIVIDUAL SHORTCOMINGS
As valuable as each method is, each has weaknesses.

Most experts use connoisseurship as their primary tool, evaluating aspects of an artist’s work such as color choices, brush strokes,
Comparing copies to an original fraktur illustrates how connoisseurship identifies fakes. Johann Conrad Trevits of Dauphin (now Lebanon) County, Pennsylvania, made this certificate to record the birth of Magdalena Mosser on January 29, 1802. The National Gallery of Art displayed it in a 1954 exhibition, and 20 years later it graced the cover of a Sotheby’s November auction catalogue for the collection of Edgar William and Bernice Chrysler Garbisch. A second auction catalogue in 1977 also showed the fraktur. Given the notoriety of these sales and the prominence of this image, the appearance of copies on the market came as no surprise to museum experts.

drawer. (See the photo on page 2.) Interested but cautious, du Pont sent his “expert,” noted antiques dealer Albert J. Collings, to examine the chest. Collings proclaimed it to be genuine, while the owner’s “expert” suggested it had been made in Newport, Rhode Island, “probably the work of one of the Townsends,” whose furniture was competitively collected and highly priced.

Displayed for a time at Winterthur before being re-examined, museum experts eventually determined that someone had reworked old materials—crafting the top from drawer fronts or table leaves and the sides from reused drawer fronts—a fake.

Provenance can also be problematic. If an object has been passed down in a single family since new—if your six-time great-grandfather had the taste, cash, and foresight to hire John Singleton Copley to paint his portrait—and you can trace the work through estate inventories,

In about 1976, an unknown counterfeiter copied the Trevits fraktur from the Garbisch collection, but his looser handwriting and obvious lack of knowledge of German characters (and even the language), showed it to be a fake. Other factors illustrating the deception include paint that is less transparent than early watercolors, the absence of flaking or cracking that comes with age, and the lack of haloing or sinking of the ink into the paper, a characteristic of period iron-gall ink.
As an example of misleading provenance, Winterthur shows a violin with a label identifying it as the work of Antonio Stradivari from 1721. Imitators began manufacturing violins in Europe in the 19th Century, not to deceive but to pay homage to the master luthier. This example appears to date from the 19th Century, a judgment reinforced by scientific analysis of the label, below, printed on wove paper, which was not available in Europe until the late 1700s.

But few antiques have such perfect provenance. Sales records through galleries add credibility, as do such documents as estate inventories, bankruptcies, court cases, even newspaper accounts. Old photographs also give evidence of age, at least back to the middle of the 19th Century. Occasionally an object can be documented as an incidental in a painting—the ring that great uncle George wore when he posed.

Provenance cannot be taken at face value but must be judged for its own authenticity. According to the Chicago Appraisers Association, "Often it is easier to fake the authentication papers than the actual work itself. Today 46 percent of fake Picassos we examine have fake letters of authentication."

Although scientific analysis through such technologies as gas chromatography, X-rays, and chemical assay would seem definitive, it isn't when it can be performed on only a small sample. For instance, an entire painting cannot be sampled without destroying it, so conservators and scientists must be careful to identify areas of restoration to ensure they are analyzing original material.

Perhaps the biggest problem with scientific analysis is that the cost of the investigation often exceeds the object's value, especially for an individual collector. As a result few antiques are thoroughly scientifically tested—and probably not the $50 export porcelain plate in your local antiques shop.

Even if every object underwent scientific analysis, testing might not confirm its identification. Eaton said, referencing a seaside painting in the exhibition signed "HOMER," for 19th-Century painter Winslow Homer. Scientific analysis shows the pigments and glue used to attach a canvas to the...
back are appropriate for his time, but experts still disagree over the painting's authenticity.

Judging authenticity is like a trial, the Winterthur exhibition points out. You gather all the evidence you can using provenance, connoisseurship, and scientific analysis and draw a conclusion. Often there is no definitive answer—experts vary in weighing the evidence. In some cases, the verdict must be drawn by consensus.

The exhibition lets you participate, showing in the final section 3 objects with “the prosecution and the defense” and asking you to vote whether each object is genuine or fake.

PROTECTING YOURSELF

It's not against the law to copy an antique. American copyright law, which protects an artist's work, does not apply to objects made before about 1920, considering them “in the public domain”—that is, fair game for copying. It is not against the law to sell a copy of an antique. We call them “reproductions,” and without them, few could enjoy objects of beauty appropriate to their period homes.

A forger breaks American law only if he touts a reproduction as an original and sells it based on it being an original. The crime is in the misrepresentation not the making. Similarly, the owner of a fake who honestly believes it is real and sells it to you as such is not committing fraud.

Winterthur illustrates the point with a colonial-style Windsor chair made in the early 20th Century by Wallace Nutting. A skillful woodworker, Nutting proudly burned his name into each chair he made and sold them as his own work—reproductions. But at a later date someone planed away Nutting's name and fraudulently offered it as an antique. The seat of the chair, shaved thin, is the giveaway. Both the seller and the picker who allegedly found the chair were charged with fraud but acquitted.
The best way to protect yourself is to buy from a trusted dealer who guarantees the authenticity of what he sells. Absent that, you're stuck with the fake. Even that might not be enough—dealers are only as reliable as their sources, and they can acquire items they don't recognize as questionable just as collectors and museums can.

"The primary take-away is that it is not simple to prove authenticity. Don't be overruled by your passion," Eaton cautioned.

She advises young collectors, "Learn as much as you can by visiting museums and noting details. Attend special events where you can look up close at undersides and joinery and even hold items. Something that looks right can feel nothing like the real antique. Know that a hot market makes you vulnerable, but most of all don't be afraid to collect. That is how you learn. The more you know, the more you realize you don't know. And you will make mistakes. Everyone can be fooled."*

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