Art or Forgery?
The Strange Case of Han Van Meegeren
A Videodisc for Aesthetics and Art History

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ABSTRACT

Presenting an internationally notorious and intriguing case study in art forgery, the videodisc program *Art or Forgery? The Strange Case of Han Van Meegeren* is an educational tool designed to facilitate three crucial tasks in the critical study of visual art: • Access to data (a wealth of art works and information about them) • Attention to relevant detail and • Analysis of both the evidence and evidentiary issues relevant to our inter-related judgments of aesthetic value and attribution. The program provides easy access to a wealth and variety of evidence: albums of masterworks and forgeries, critical commentary, and an historic documentary film on the intensive investigations into the case and the motives and ingenuity of the alleged master forger. Besides a Bookshelf of generic research material for free exploration or review, the program includes two structured Investigations that lead the user systematically through an assessment of the ‘Internal’ and ‘External’ evidence in the case. The videodisc won the Best Humanities Software Award in the 1990 EDUCOM/NCRIPtal Higher Education Software Awards Program. I describe the design, uses and educational goals of the videodisc.
EDUCATIONAL GOALS

THE APPRECIATION OR HISTORICAL STUDY of visual art depends crucially on assumptions or claims that given art works can be attributed to given artists in given periods; both the appreciation and history of art presuppose a methodology of attribution and a theory of evidence; and these are open to philosophic question and analysis. Apparently straightforward, deceptively prosaic empirical questions of attribution (By whom was a given work created and when?) are themselves often influenced by judgments of aesthetic value (as when features reflecting the artistry or artfulness of a work are themselves taken as evidence for attributing the work to a given master). Philosophy begins in wonder, and our wonder about What is art? or why we value it, wonder about what makes any artifact a work of art, wonder about the source and nature of aesthetic value is best catalyzed when our assumptions about the attribution of a presumed art work are cast in doubt or violated. For this reason, the study of forgery and issues of artistic attribution is a powerful motivation to philosophic wonder and aesthetic inquiry. Of all the realms of arguable human values, aesthetics perhaps purports the most mystifying questions. Aesthetic inquiry can therefore provide paradigmatic insights into very generic issues of human valuing and inquiry. But the student requires special means, motive, and opportunity for the study.

A primary concern of aesthetics or the philosophic study of art is the critical understanding of the criteria and methods by which we attribute aesthetic properties or value — which in turn requires the critical analysis of evidence and evidentiary issues, which in turn requires close attention to data and detail, which in turn requires access to the relevant data and detail. The Art or Forgery? videodisc is an educational tool and resource that provides for these three requirements of the philosophic and historical study of art, for we might call the “Triple A” tour of visual art and aesthetic values:

- Convenient access both to information about the art works in question (“external” evidence) as well as to the relevant works themselves (“internal” evidence).
- Close attention to the primary data, the details and features of visual art works themselves (the “internal” evidence for aesthetic