

Matins de la philosophie
Octobre-décembre 2019

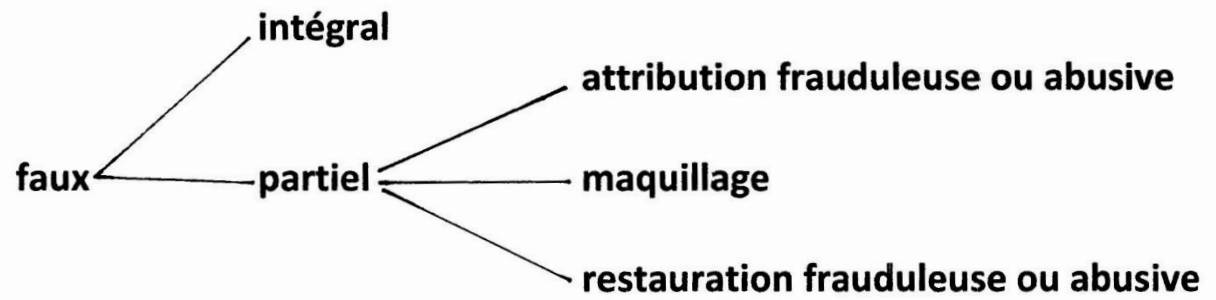
Art et authenticité

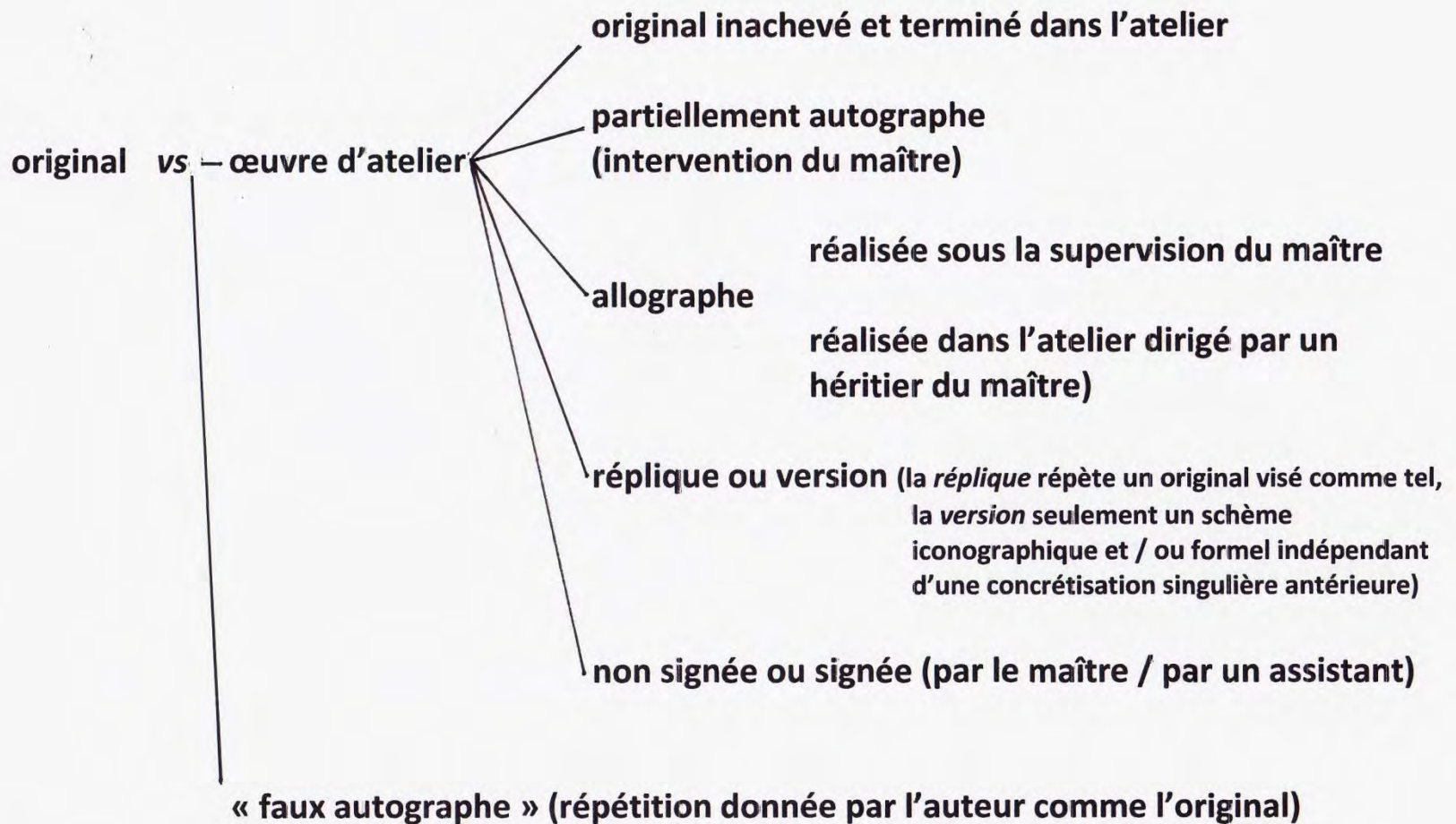
Authenticity is contrasted with “falsity” or “fakery” in ordinary discourse, but, as noted, falsity need not imply fraud at every stage of the production of a fake. Blatant forgery and the intentional misrepresentation of art objects has probably been around as long as there has been an art market — it was rife even in ancient Rome.

However, many works of art that are called “inauthentic” are merely misidentified. There is nothing fraudulent about wrongly guessing the origins of an apparently old New Guinea mask or an apparently eighteenth-century Italian painting. Fraudulence is approached only when what is merely an optimistic guess is presented as well-established knowledge, or when the person making the guess uses position or authority to give it a weight exceeding what it deserves. The line, however, that divides unwarranted optimism from fraudulence is hazy at best. (Any worldly person who has ever heard from an antique dealer the phrase “It’s probably a hundred and fifty years old” will understand this point: it’s probably not that old, and perhaps not even the dealer himself could be sure if he’s merely being hopeful or playing fast and loose with the truth.)

Authenticity, therefore, is a much broader issue than one of simply spotting and rooting out fakery in the arts. The will to establish the nominal authenticity of a work of art, identifying its maker and provenance — in a phrase, determining how the work came to be — comes from a general desire to understand a work of art according to its original canon of criticism: what did it mean to its creator? How was it related to the cultural context of its creation? To what established genre did it belong? What could its original audience have been expected to make of it? What would they have found engaging or important about it? These questions are often framed in terms of artists' intentions, which will in part determine and constitute the identity of a work; and intentions can arise and be understood only in a social context and at a historical time. External context and artistic intention are thus intrinsically related. We should resist, however, the temptation to imagine that ascertaining nominal authenticity will inevitably favour some “old” or “original” object over a later artefact. There may be Roman sculptures, copies of older Greek originals, which are in some respects aesthetically better than their older prototypes, as there may be copies by Rembrandt of other Dutch artists that are aesthetically more pleasing than the originals. But in all such cases, value and meaning can be rightly assessed only against a background of correctly determined nominal authenticity.

authentique vs

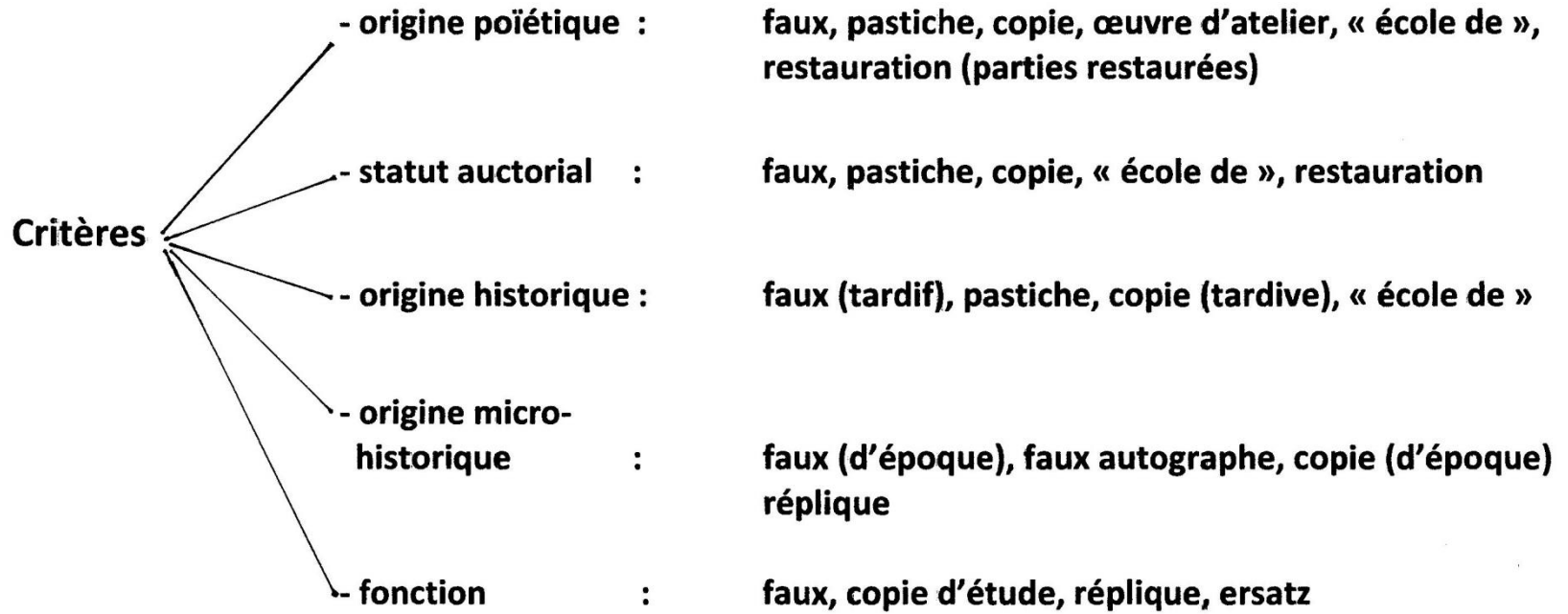




original vs

- « école de » (même style + continuité historique : élève, atelier, héritiers)
- « dans le style de » (même style mais pas de continuité historique)
- pastiche (même style et / ou collage d'emprunts, sans continuité historique)
 - d'étude
- copie
 - d'atelier (ne pas confondre avec *réplique*)
 - de maître
- ersatz (autre classe d'objet que l'original imité mais destiné à un usage similaire)
- reproduction (autre classe d'objet que l'original imité, non destiné à un usage similaire)
- faux (imitation avec intention de tromper sur l'origine), partiel ou intégral

N.B. toute œuvre qui n'est pas un original peut être produite et / ou utilisée en tant que faux.



NB. : « critères stylistiques » = seulement indices formels

Despite the widely different contexts in which the authentic / inauthentic is applied in aesthetics, the distinction nevertheless tends to form around two broad categories of sense. First, works of art can possess what we may call *nominal authenticity*, defined simply as the correct identification of the origins, authorship, or provenance of an object, ensuring, as the term implies, that an object of aesthetic experience is properly named. However, the concept of authenticity often connotes something else, having to do with an object's character as a true expression of an individual's or a society's values and beliefs. This second sense of authenticity can be called *expressive authenticity*.

Forgery episodes such as van Meegeren's Vermeers are unproblematic in terms of nominal authenticity: there is a perfectly clear divide between the authentic Vermeers and the van Meegeren fakes. But there are areas where determining nominal authenticity can be extremely fraught. Consider the complexities of the following example. The Igorot of northern Luzon traditionally carved a rice granary guardian figure, a *bulul*, which is ceremonially treated with blood, producing over years a deep red patina which is partially covered with a black deposit of grease from food offerings. These objects were already being made for tourists and for sale at international exhibitions in the 1920s, and one famous virtuoso Igorot carver, Tagiling, was by then producing figures on commission by local families and at the same time for the tourist trade. *Bululs* are still in traditional use, but specialized production of them ceased after the Second World War. Today, if a local wants a *bulul*, it is purchased from a souvenir stand and then rendered sacred by subjecting it to the appropriate ceremony. "The result," Alain Schoffel has explained, "is that in the rice granaries one now finds shoddy sculptures slowly becoming covered with a coating of sacrificial blood. They are authentic because they are used in the traditional fashion, but this renders them no less devoid of aesthetic value."

We do not necessarily have to agree with Schoffel's aesthetic verdict on "shoddy" souvenirs to recognize that he is legitimately invoking one of the many possible senses of "authenticity": the authentically traditional. The contrast to the authentically traditional carving in this context is a tourist piece, or one not made to take part in or express any recognizable tradition. On the other hand, a tourist piece that is bought by a local person and employed for a traditional purpose is just as authentic, but in a different sense: it has been given an authentically traditional use in an indigenous spiritual context. The fraudulent converse to authenticity in this sense would be a piece that is intentionally misrepresented as fulfilling a traditional function, but which does not, for example a piece that has been carefully given a fake patina and signs of use or wear by a dealer or later owner of a carving.



Arguments over the use and presentation of art are nowhere more prominent than in music performance. This is owing to the general structure of Western, notated music, in which the creation of the work of art is a two-stage process, unlike painting and other plastic arts. Stand in front of Leonardo's *Ginevra de' Benci* in the National Gallery in Washington, and you have before you Leonardo's own handiwork. However much the paint may have been altered by time and the degenerative chemistry of pigments, however different the surroundings of the museum are from the painting's originally intended place of presentation, at least, beneath the shatterproof non-reflective glass you gaze at the very artefact itself, in its faded, singular glory. No such direct encounter is available with a performance of an old musical work. The original work is specified by a score, essentially a set of instructions, which are realized aurally by performers, normally for the pleasure of audiences. Because a score underdetermines the exact sound of any particular realization, correct performances may differ markedly.

With a painting, therefore, there normally exists an original, nominally authentic object that can be identified as “the” original; nothing corresponds to this in music. Even a composer’s own performance of an instrumental score — say, Rachmaninoff playing his piano concertos, or Stravinsky conducting *The Rite of Spring* — cannot fully constrain the interpretive choices of other performers or define for ever “the” authentic performance. (In any event, composer/performers interpret their music differently on different occasions.) Stephen Davies argues that a striving towards authenticity in musical performance does not entail that there is one authentic ideal of performance, still less that this would be a work’s first performance or whatever a composer might have heard in his head while composing the piece. The very idea of a performance art permits performers a degree of interpretive freedom consistent with conventions that govern what counts as properly following the score.

Nevertheless, the twentieth-century witnessed the development of an active movement to try to understand better the original sounds especially of seventeenth-and eighteenth-century European music. This has encouraged attempts to perform such music on instruments characteristic of the time, in line with reconstructions of the past conventions that governed musical notation and performance. This concern with authenticity can be justified by the general, though not inviolable, principle which holds that “a commitment to authenticity is integral to the enterprise that takes delivery of the composer’s work as its goal. If we are interested in performances as of the works they are of, then authenticity must be valued for its own sake”. This interest can take many forms — playing Scarlatti sonatas on harpsichords of a kind Scarlatti would have played, instead of the modern piano; (...) performing Haydn symphonies with orchestras cut down from the late Romantic, 100-player ensembles used by Brahms or Mahler. These practices are justified by taking us back in time to an earlier performing tradition and, in theory, closer to the work itself.

In this way of thinking, the purpose of reconstructing an historically authentic performance is to create an occasion in which it sounds roughly as it would have sounded to the composer, had the composer had expert, well equipped musicians at his disposal. Enthusiasm for this idea has led some exponents of the early music movement to imagine that they have a kind of moral or intellectual monopoly on the correct way to play music of the past. In one famous put-down, the harpsichordist Wanda Landowska is said to have told a pianist, “You play Bach your way, I’ll play him his way.” The question for aesthetic theory remains: *What is Bach’s way?* If the question is framed as purely about instrumentation, then the answer is trivially easy: the Bach keyboard *Partitas* are authentically played in public only on a harpsichord of a kind Bach might have used. But there are other ways in which the music of Bach can be authentically rendered. For instance, Bach’s keyboard writing includes interweaved musical voices which, under the hands of a skilled pianist such as Glenn Gould, can often be revealed more clearly on a modern concert grand than on a harpsichord. In general, the dynamic range and gradation of the piano are an advantage for all music performed on it, in contrast with the harpsichord, though the older instrument displays some exquisite qualities in which Bach too can sound glorious. (Its lack of sustaining power, for example, required harpsichord composers to introduce trills and ornamentation which became part of the Baroque style.)

However, if an authentic performance of a piece of music is understood as one in which the aesthetic potential of the score is most fully realized, historic authenticity may not be the best way to achieve it. We would not go back to productions of Shakespeare plays with boys taking the female roles simply because that was the way it was done in Shakespeare's time. We regard the dramatic potential of those roles as ideally requiring the mature talents of actresses, and write off the Elizabethan practice of boy actors as an historic accident of the moral climate of Shakespeare's age. We assume, in other words, that Shakespeare would have chosen women to play these parts had he had the option.

Similarly, the Beethoven piano sonatas were written for the biggest, loudest pianos Beethoven could find; there is little doubt that he would have favored the modern concert grand, if he had had a choice. (Davies points out, however, that the appeal and point of some of Beethoven's piano writing, for instance with the *Appassionata Sonata*, is that it pushes to the limit, and beyond, the capabilities of Beethoven's instruments: on a modern grand, the sense of instrumental challenge in the power *Appassionata* is lost, or in any event reduced.) The best attitude towards authenticity in music performance is that in which careful attention is paid to the historic conventions and limitations of a composer's age, but where one also tries to determine the larger artistic potential of a musical work, including implicit meanings that go beyond the understanding that the composer's age might have derived from it. In this respect, understanding music historically is not in principle different from an historically informed critical understanding of other arts, such as literature or painting.