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Detail of the pink quartzite cult statue of Amenophis III found in Luxor Temple in 1989 and now on display for the first time in Luxor Museum



The Aesthetics of the Forger

Stylistic Criteria in Ancient Art Forgery

Jerome M. Eisenberg, Ph.D.

Following preconceived notions of the rules of aesthetics, specialists have too often been ready to accept an object as ancient and then to place it in a particular niche in its supposed area. If the object departs too far from the norm it may be classified as unique or 'provincial' work. If it reveals the existence of two different cultures, it is 'under strong (foreign) influence', or incorporates (foreign) elements, or it is 'made by an (Ionian) artist for a (Scythian) customer or by a (Scythian) artisan trained by an (Ionian)'. If none of these approaches satisfies the specialist he will use a catch-all category, which squarely places part of the responsibility on the shoulders of another specialist, such as 'Graeco-Scythian' or 'Assyro-Phoenician'.

The art historian should not be so ready *first* to accept and *then* to categorise a work of art. This tendency of *wanting* to believe, also common among art collectors, has led to the acceptance, not only of many individual forgeries, but also of entire series of art objects over a period of more than two hundred years. These objects, which were pleasing and acceptable to specialists in the past, still are to the current generation of scholars which was weaned on them and their particular aesthetics. Many of the forgeries are works of art in their own right and should be enjoyed as such, but they should not be included in the otherwise relatively orderly evolution of art styles.

The author had already been involved with ancient art for several years before he realised that many of

his observations on the authenticity of ancient objects based upon their aesthetics began to form a pattern. These observations were subsequently formulated into a series of principles of the 'aesthetics of the forger', or stylistic criteria in art forgery.

These aesthetics of the forger should aid in recognising many forgeries and in eliminating several controversial and non-conforming groups and series of objects in nearly every field of art, especially in such problematical areas as Iranian, Anatolian, Scythian and Early Christian art. They should expose several famous works of art and 'excavated treasures' as frauds. A very few of the principles listed have been noted before by various authors, but only as unconnected observations.

It is very easy for a forger to make at least a few aesthetic errors in the creation of a forgery which the ancient artist would not ordinarily commit. Perhaps some may have

been committed by the unskilled ancient artist or apprentice, but normally this lack of skill would be reflected in the overall quality of the work. The ancient artist would not deliberately commit any of these errors because of his intuitive dislike of stylistic principles which were foreign to his own culture. The appreciation and imitation of the 'exotic' arts were very limited in ancient times. Most probably, the locally imitated wares of foreign style found in the Mediterranean region were made for the use of the foreign colonies – for example, the glazed green faience bowls with Egyptian designs of Cypriot origin in the thirteenth century BC. If a foreign style was accepted, the result was an aesthetically pleasing amalgam of the local and foreign styles, such as the Hellenistic art of Egypt.

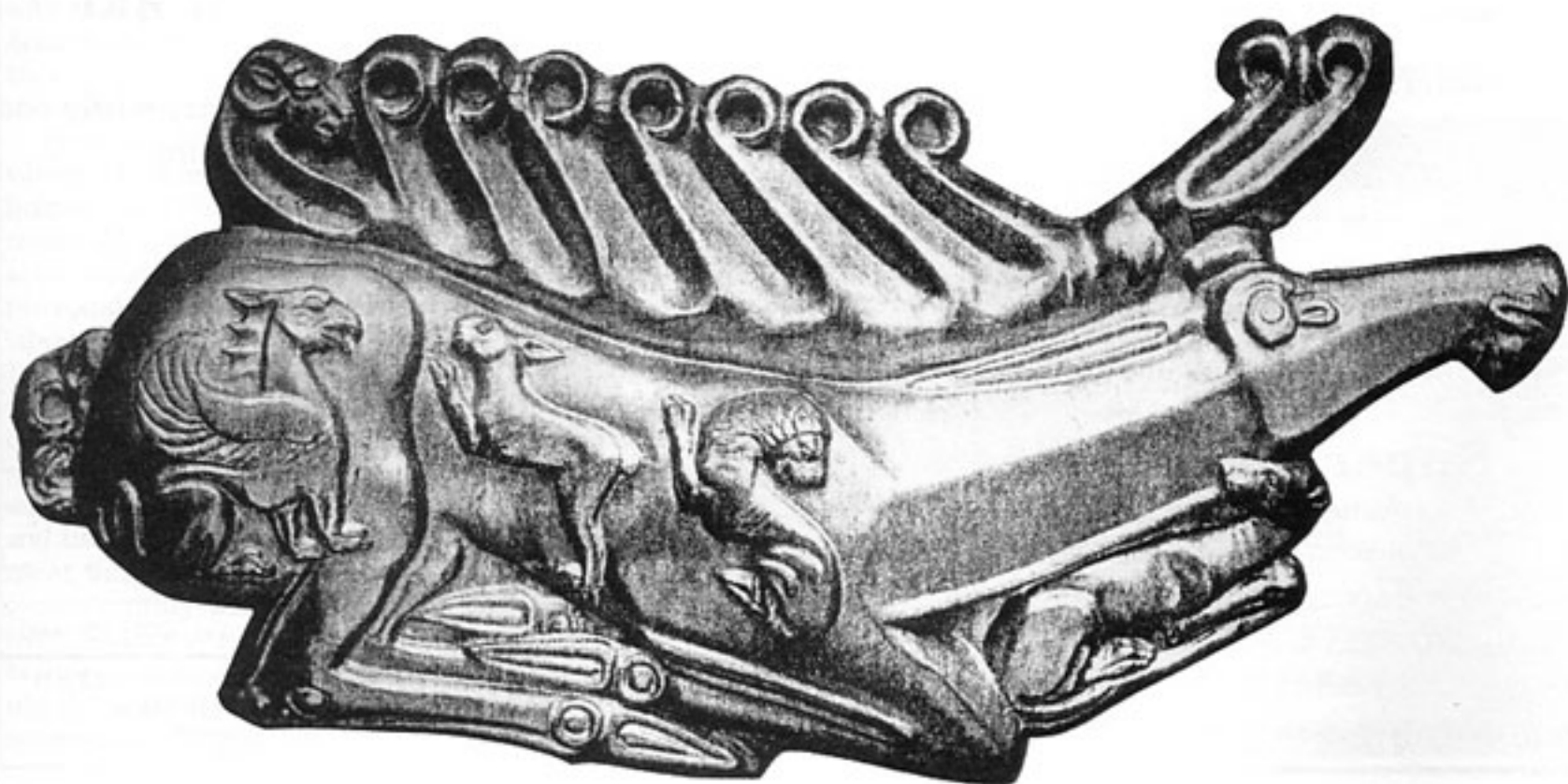
The author has selected some well-known and universally accepted art objects from two different areas and cultures in order to demonstrate the validity of his theory and its application in linking different forgeries and proving their connections and some of their common origins; he believes that all five examples are nineteenth-century forgeries.

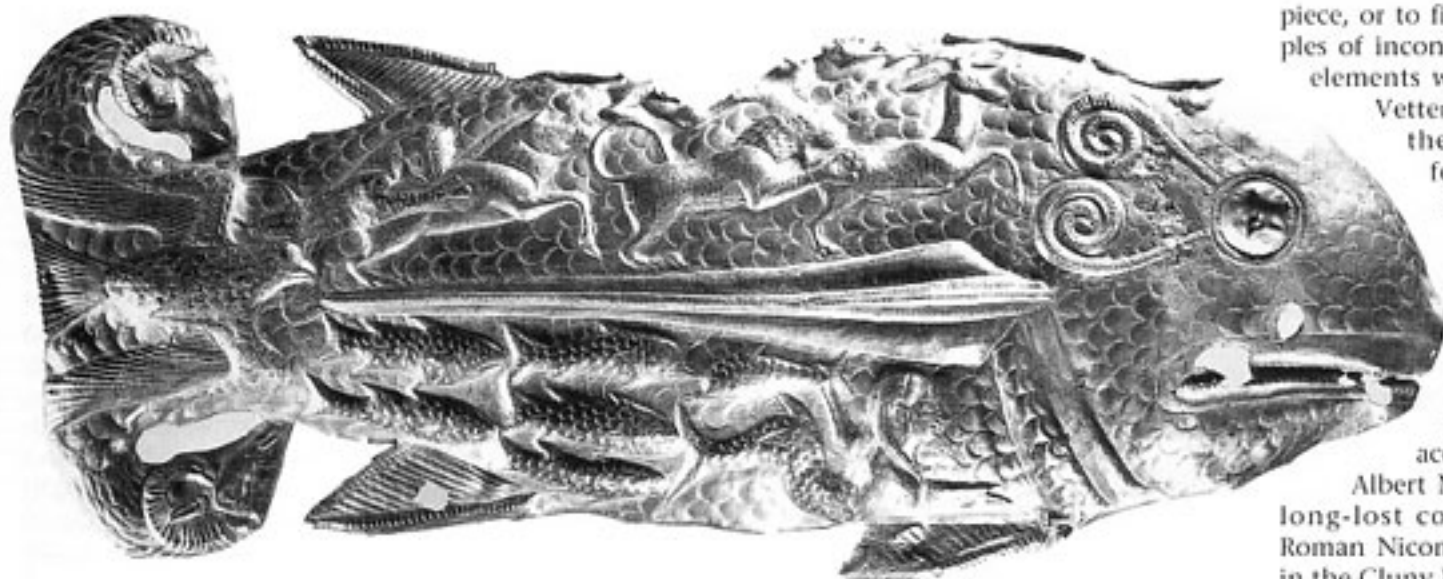
Creation of the Forgery

Misunderstanding of the harmony in design by the forger

1. *Lack of harmony in the design of the total object* – the different elements not relating to one another and thus not forming a coherent whole.

Fig 1. The Kul Oba gold stag, 31.1 cm. The Hermitage. After E.H. Minns, 'Scythians and Greeks' (1913).





The Kul Oba gold stag (Fig 1), considered to be a Scythian shield centre-piece of Greek workmanship of the fifth-fourth century BC, supposedly recovered in 1830 from a plundered tomb near Kerch in the Crimea, is now in the Hermitage. It is an excellent example of disharmony:

- a. The monotonous repetition of the antlers and its own two elements, then the sudden translation of the rear antler into a zoomorphic form, the curved-necked ram's head.
- b. The confused and disorganised group of animals on the body, then the two clean, undisturbed planes on the neck.
- c. The attempt of the artist to balance these two sections by placing an animal beneath the neck of the stag, thus destroying the silhouette of the animal.

The Vettersfelde electrum (an alloy of gold and silver) fish (Fig 2), also considered to be a Scythian shield centre-piece of Greek workmanship of the sixth century BC by most authorities (and Etruscan by at least one other), was found in 1882 near Berlin and is now in the Antikenabteilung of the Staatliche Museen, Berlin. It is another example of disharmony in the overall design:

- a. The entire silhouette is realistically portrayed except for the tail fins, which are unexpectedly transformed into curved-necked ram's heads (again!).
- b. The body of the fish is carefully covered with scales, then two totally unrelated registers, one portraying two animal scenes on land, are added; finally, an eagle flies behind both registers. Nothing is left out – we have pursuit on land, in the sea, and in the air! None of the scenes relate to the fish itself or add to the design of the object; they merely fill a void for the artist.
- c. The highly stylised eye has no relation to the realistic scales, the zoomorphic tail fins or the animal scenes.

2. *Lack of or improper use of symmetry* – an improper balance of elements which should be symmetrical.

The large ornamental electrum plaque or 'breastplate', composed of four discs around a fifth smaller disc (Fig 3), supposedly found with the Vettersfelde fish, provides us with a perfect example of a variety of symmetrical patterns found on one object but with no relationship to one another, thus destroying the symmetry of the total object:

Top left disc: above, a boar opposite a panther; below, a bull opposing a lion (A:B, C:D).

Top right disc: left side, a jackal opposing a goat; right side, two rams opposing (E:F, G:G).

Bottom left disc: above, a jackal chasing a hare; below, a lion chasing a stag; all running clockwise (E to H, D to I).

Bottom right disc: above, two panthers opposing; below, two panthers opposing (B:B, B:B).

It is obvious that none of the discs were executed with the others in mind to form a symmetrical composition. In fact, none of the groups of animals on any one of the discs align themselves in the same direction as any of the groups on the other discs.

3. *Monotonous repetition of elements* – without a direct bearing on the theme or general overall design.

The monotonous repetition of elements or of similar objects, especially in a non-rhythmical sequence, can be illustrated by the animals on the electrum sheath from Vettersfelde (Fig 4). Often the elements have no bearing on one another, such as the introduction of the fish behind both the leopard chasing the boar and the lion chasing the stag.

4. *Incongruous and extraneous elements.* Often an incongruous or extraneous element is introduced to alter the original design or theme of a genuine

piece, or to fill a void. Among examples of incongruous or inappropriate elements we have the fish on the Vettersfelde electrum sheath, the eagle on the Vettersfelde electrum fish and all of the animals on the Kul Oba stag.

As a typical extraneous element we have the small attendant on the 'Late Roman' Symmachi ivory panel (Fig 6), acquired by the Victoria & Albert Museum in 1865 as the long-lost companion to the Late Roman Nicomachi ivory diptych leaf in the Cluny Museum (Fig 5).

Fig 2. The electrum Vettersfelde fish. 41 cm. Staatliche Museen, Berlin. Photo by Jutta Tietz-Glagow.

5. *Disparity in style of execution of elements.* On the Vettersfelde fish one notes the beautifully executed rams' heads and the sensitive head of the triton or merman, but a very crude school of fish. It appears to have been done by two different artists. The forger probably copied the rams' heads, the head of the merman, and most of the other elements from specific sources. The fish appear to be the creation of the nineteenth-century forger rather than a copy of an ancient hand.

The Symmachi panel also shows a disparity in style between the beautifully executed border and inscription, taken directly from the genuine Late Roman Nicomachi panel (Fig 5), and the tree, derived from other sources; and, finally, on the lowest level, the completely misunderstood priestess' garment and altar. One might note the observation made by Joseph Natanson in *Early Christian Ivories* (1953): 'The London leaf, in contrast, appears clumsy, being an academic imitation of a style already beyond the artistic powers of the carver'. Yet he still accepted it as an ancient work of art!

In later periods, when art schools and apprentices were common, several hands will often be evident in the execution of a work of art, but rarely in ancient times.

6. *Disparity in degree of abstraction of elements* – such as the whole object being highly stylised whilst minor elements are naturalistic.

The Kul Oba stag is the perfect example of a highly stylised and partially abstract object with minor elements, such as the animals on the body, executed in a classical and naturalistic manner. This disparity in the degree of abstraction of individual elements in a composition should not exist except when executed by a post-classical individualistic artist, such as Michelangelo's 'unfinished' statues.



Misunderstanding of elements by the forger

7. *Misunderstanding of the style.* Stylistic elements should have a significant relationship with the total object. This is especially true of a zoomorphic part or juncture in the animal-style arts of the Steppes and Migration periods. It should represent a specific part of the body – feet, tails, horns, shoulders – and replace or cover over that area and other similar areas on the same object. The zoomorphic juncture should evolve gracefully from the body.

On the Kul Oba stag, the only true zoomorphic element is the rear antler, which has been transformed into a very obvious ram's head on a serpent-like neck. It has no relationship whatsoever to the other antlers, which are mechanically stylised and have no anthropomorphic tendencies whatsoever. The artist, now more decisive and confident, has elaborated on the zoomorphic juncture and added the hound below the neck of the stag, creating his own organic structure – a 'stag pouch'. Finally, he added three more animals, which have no conceivable relationship with one another, onto the flank and

Fig 3. The electrum Vetersfelde plaque, 18.5 cm. Staatliche Museen, Berlin. Photo by Jutta Tietz-Glagow.

hindquarter of the beast. These are not zoomorphic elements but are completely separate objects which have no reason to be on the stag. They certainly do not add to its aesthetics and have no relationship in composition to any other Scythian works of art – except the Vetersfelde fish!

On the Vetersfelde fish we again find the serpent-necked ram's head, this time serving as both caudal fins, yet the other fins are represented naturally. This relationship of the zoomorphic rear fins to the realistic forward fins is the same one as that of the zoomorphic rear or crown antler to the realistic front antlers of the Kul Oba stag and, in the opinion of the author, a trait of the forger – the tendency to copy or to adapt from other forgeries (see no. 21 below).

8. *A misinterpreted or unique element in the composition.* On the Symmachi panel (Fig 6) one can find a number of misinterpreted elements:

a. The sleeves of the priestess's garment are misrepresented as bracelets.
 b. The falling-away of the garment from the back of her neck and the pull of the garment's folds towards the middle of the left side of her body

do not occur in depictions of ancient garments.

c. The nature of the garment itself is utterly confusing: a mantle or scarf appears to be draped above her breast, falling over her shoulder and down to her back, at which point it swings up to join the converging folds of the main garment.

d. The cut-off stump of a branch of the tree in the Nicomachi panel is badly translated into a 'grafted' stump on the Symmachi tree.

e. The principal altar design is executed as if on a flat surface, while in fact it is on two planes joining at right angles. The altar itself is a confused mixture of rectangular and round altars.

f. The radiating bundle of twigs aflame on the altar is certainly a unique element. The writer knows of no other representation in ancient art of this type of fire, which is perhaps more familiar to the American Indians or the Boy Scouts!

Another type of unique representation formed from unrelated elements is that of mythological figures holding attributes that are not associated with them – Zeus holding a caduceus or Hermes holding a thunderbolt. In some post-classical objects the usual attributes are lacking, for example Poseidon without his trident.

9. *Unrelated elements in the composition.* This division consists of elements that have no relationship whatsoever with the other objects in the composition of which they form a part, for example, the two fish swimming after the two chasing animal groups on the Vetersfelde sheath.

10. *Detached, awkward components* – every component should gracefully and naturally join the rest. On the Kul Oba stag, the brow-antlers are completely detached from the other antlers, and the rear or crown-antler does not gracefully align itself with its companions.

The priestess on the Symmachi panel has acquired an unusually low breastline due to the large number of drapery lines above it, which apparently distracted the artist from his bodily placements.

The awkward stance of the priestess was due to the misadaptation of the stance of the priestess of the Nicomachi panel, who is turning away from the altar and towards the spectator. The Symmachi priestess stands with a nearly full left profile to the viewer, yet her right foot is shown impinging on the frame and appears closer to the viewer than the left.

11. *Disproportionate elements* – enlargement or miniaturisation. The lack of

proportion or proper relationship in size is another common error of the forger.

The hare and lion on the flank of the Kul Oba stag are completely without proper relationship in size. They are the same in volume in order to fill uniformly the space they occupy. This hare apparently served as the inspiration for the hare on the Vetersfelde plaque, which also matches the size of its larger companions in order to form a symmetrical composition.

In contrast, one may observe a lack of proportion proceeding in the opposite direction on the Symmachi panel. Rather than an enlargement or reduction to equal another object in size, here there is an over-reduction as a result of an attempt to put objects into a proper size relationship – the attendant is far too small in proportion to the priestess, even if standing immediately beyond her.

Personal Style of the Forger

12. *The influence of current style on the forger.* Practically all forgeries will reflect the style of the period in which they were created. No matter how skilled the forger, he is influenced by current style and by the tastes and fashions of his period. His contemporary, even a specialist in the particular field of the object, will tend to accept it, perhaps as a variation in style from a newly discovered workshop, because his eye reacts comfortably to it. He unwittingly accepts the subtle nuances of his own time as variations in the products of another time and place.

As our knowledge of aesthetics and styles in ancient art increases, each generation will find it easier to differentiate between original works of art and forgeries of past generations. How awkward some of the productions of Alceo Dosseno in the 1920s appear to us today!

The forger responds most readily to those elements or objects which were created during his time or in the recent past, thus he very often will use as his inspiration another forgery, since it contains elements of current style. Often an element will reappear in forgeries over a period of many generations because it was comfortably assimilated by a forger in each succeeding generation.

13. *'Unique style'* – appearance of a fully developed style or type hitherto unknown.

When an ancient art style bursts into full bloom without a gradual link with earlier styles, or at least some stylistic precedents from that or neighbouring cultures, it should be viewed with suspicion. While this view would not have carried much weight half a century ago, our knowledge of ancient civilisations has advanced to the stage where perhaps only minor cultures remain to be found.

'Treasures' or 'burials' for foreign sources are often 'salted', or even completely invented to allow for the occurrence of an unusual style which might be accepted by a specialist in another field not intimately acquainted with the relevant aesthetics. If some of the elements of the Vetersfelde fish found in a 'Scythian' grave in Germany are compared to other Scythian pieces – the body of the fish, the bearded merman, the serpent-necked ram's head – all are completely non-Scythian elements and its acceptance by Scythian specialists is hard to comprehend. Similarly, the Etruscan specialist cannot be condoned for labelling it 'a southern Etruscan work, probably from Cerveteri', if one studies the zoomorphic tail and the body of the fish. Finally, we have the Greek specialists who classify the style of figure and the animal decoration as 'wholly Ionian, but the form of the objects is quite un-Greek'. The form of the fish and the eye were probably the invention of the forger,

and the serpent-necked ram's head zoomorphic element was inspired by the Kul Oba gold stag.

Most of the confusion was obviously due to the immediate acceptance and classification of the Vetersfelde 'treasures' by the specialists, in spite of their unique appearance.

14. *Repeated favourite ancient motifs and devices of the forger* – in periods or regions where they do not ordinarily occur, or invented types.

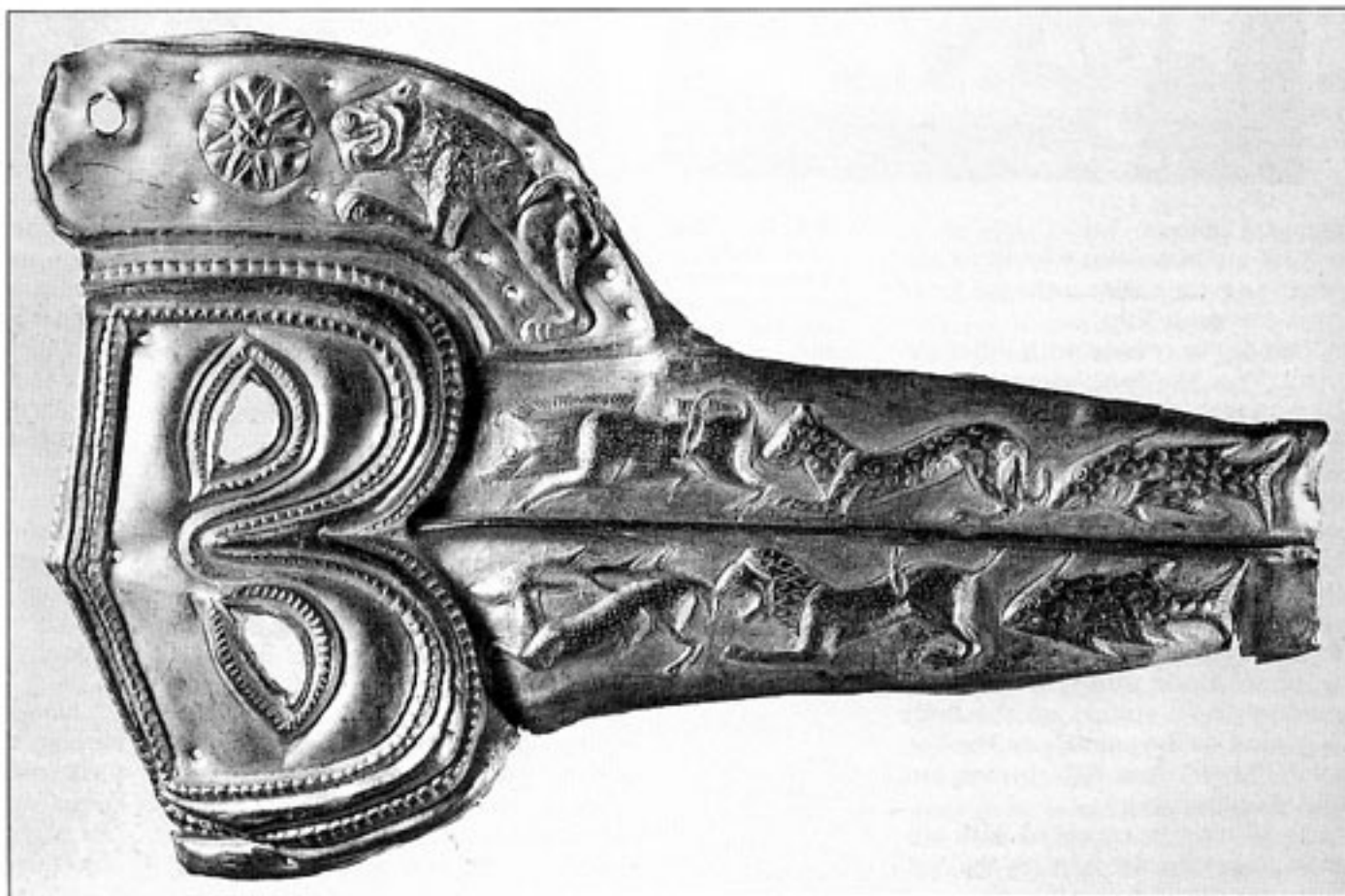
The fish appears to be a favourite motif of the forger. It is an animal form very easy to execute and very difficult to compare stylistically, by comparison with the ruminant and feline families. It does not commonly appear in ancient art beyond its use in water-based landscapes, such as those depicted on Egyptian wall-paintings, Egyptian and Assyrian reliefs, Greek vase paintings, and Roman paintings and mosaics. It is relatively rare as an individual art object before the Early Christian period and its eventually widespread use in Indian and Oriental art.

The Vetersfelde treasure is a perfect example of the 'fish syndrome' – both the total form of the electrum fish and the representation of six fish on the lower register.

Typical devices and motifs of the forger noted on Near Eastern, Iranian and Scythian forgeries are:

- a. Animal or combat scenes repeated in horizontal bands or in checker-board patterns.
- b. Vertical or horizontal bands of

Fig 4. The electrum Vetersfelde dagger sheath, 22 cm. Staatliche Museen, Berlin. Photo by Jutta Tietz-Glagow.





(left) Fig 5. The Late Roman Nichomachi ivory diptych panel. 29.5 cm. The Cluny Museum, Paris. After Giraudon.



(right) Fig 6. The Symmachi ivory diptych panel. 29.5 cm. Victoria and Albert Museum.

- identical animals.
- c. Birds out of context with other elements (e.g. the eagle on the tail fin of the Vetersfelde fish).
- d. Fish out of context with other elements (e.g. the fish swimming after land animals on both registers of the Vetersfelde electrum dagger sheath).
- e. Spiny-crested winged dragons (e.g. on the rump of the Kul Oba gold stag).
- f. Serpent-necked ram's heads (e.g. the rear antler of the Kul Oba gold stag and the tail fins of the Vetersfelde electrum fish).
- g. Fur or hair on animals indicated by random short streaks on the body (e.g. most of the animals on the Vetersfelde electrum fish, breastplate and sheath).
- h. Large rosettes associated with animals (e.g. with the lion on the Vet-

tersfelde electrum sheath), except for Corinthian pottery.

i. Granulated triangles or 'wolf's teeth'.

15. 'Horror vacui' or dislike of the void in an art style that does not ordinarily use the concept.

The forger tends to fill in empty areas, often with extraneous, incongruous, or meaningless elements. This 'horror vacui' is often accepted without question when associated with cultures using space-filling patterns on their objects, such as the Scythian, Celtic and Migration arts.

The dislike of the void is especially noticeable on the Kul Oba stag and Vetersfelde fish, even to the projections leading from their eyes.

The altar attendant on the Symmachi panel was probably a space-

filling addition. While certainly not necessary for the scene, the artist would otherwise have a large space above the altar. In order to accommodate the attendant, it was necessary to shift the flame to the right of the top of the altar!

16. *Excessive emotion.* Too much sentimentality or pathos may be introduced, especially in Hellenistic objects such as terracotta Tanagra figures or groups. Often it occurs where it is not warranted or accepted, as portrayed on archaic groups.

17. *Lack of emotion.* Conversely, there may be a lack of sensitivity or a lifelessness where it should exist, due to the lack of 'spirituality' in the artist.

Sources of the Forgery

Individual sources

18. *Identical objects not ordinarily occurring as such* – one copied from the other, or both forgeries.

Identical objects are uncommon in ancient art, except for such things as mould-made terracottas, small cast votive bronzes and cast gold jewellery elements. The larger the object, the less the chance of its matching another, for one must now allow for a number

of factors: piece-moulds, improvements and details added after casting or moulding, and the high odds against the probability of survival from ancient times.

Objects struck from a die are limited in scope to ancient coins, medallions and plaquettes. Small identical gold and silver hammered objects are nearly always jewellery elements. For identically cast, struck and hammered objects one must often rely on a critical visual or microscopic examination to determine if there are signs of antiquity on the surface.

19. *Miniaturisation or enlargement of an element.* Often an element or a complete scene is taken from an object or composition and used as the subject of a new work. Sometimes a complete object, reduced in size, becomes only

part of another object; or part of an object is enlarged, becoming a complete work of art by itself.

20. *Reversal of image.* A mirror copy of another object is much more difficult to associate with the original. Both identification and comparison are hindered by the reversal of the image. An eighteenth-century sculptor made a careful stone relief copy of a rhinoceros from a 1515 woodcut of Albrecht Durer. This was a reversal of the image of Durer's work, and was accepted by the Borgias and then by the Naples Museum as a Roman original.

21. *Other forgeries,* not necessarily in the same field, are often used as sources for motifs by the forger, due to the subconscious acceptance of contemporary style. The serpent-necked ram's head on the Kul Oba stag was adapted by the forger of the Vetersfelde fish, both creations of the nineteenth century.

22. *A synthesis of geographically disparate styles.* Pure styles of different areas may occur on the same object with little or no change in each style. Recent Iranian gold objects from a 'new site' contain elements of Assyrian, Iranian, Phoenician, Syrian, Scythian and Urartian styles.

When foreign influences appear on a work of ancient art, they should be precisely *that* – foreign influences, not the pure art style of another region.

The Vetersfelde fish, a supposedly Scythian work, contains pure Greek elements in the animals and the merman. Thus, we have confusion among the critics:

Furtwangler, A. (1883): property of a Scythian chieftain, but an 'Ionic' work.

Minns, E. H. (1913): an early Scythian work.

Rice, T. Talbot. (1957): 'Both objects [the Kul Oba stag!] must come from the same workshop, and it is tempting to assign them to a Greek from Olbia...'

Poulsen, V. (1962): 'Judging by stylistic parallels, such as the little frieze on the Monteleone chariot, rather a southern Etruscan work, probably from Cerveteri.'

Boardman, J. (1964): the style is 'wholly Ionian, but the form of the objects is quite un-Greek.'

Jettmar, K. (1964): '...plainly the work of a Greek artist commissioned by a barbarian ruler'. 'Greek workmanship with oriental motifs'

23. *Disparity of period-indicative elements* – such as an archaic design on a Classical object.

When elements of different time periods are incorporated into the same work, it is often evident by an inability of the critics to agree on its dating. If these elements appear earlier in dating stylistically, the scholar contends that the forged object indicates a 'nostalgia revival', an 'archaisitic' trend, a 'spirit of Hellenism', etc. If some of the elements appear later in dating than they should be, it indicates to the scholar only an 'earliest known' occurrence of this phenomenon, even though it may be hundreds of years too early.

The Kul Oba gold stag is of a type ordinarily dated to the seventh to sixth centuries BC. The animals depicted on its body, however, are of a much later Greek style, therefore it has been dated to from fifth to fourth centuries BC.

Often forgeries are found 'in situ' with other objects of fixed dates, thus establishing a *terminus post quem* or *ante quem* and giving the art historians a convenient range of dating for the find.

24. *Synthesis of elements* from different objects to form a new element or composition.

The Vetersfelde fish affords us a good example of both a new element and an entire composition. The top-half of the bearded sea-god is taken from the figure of the hunter as depicted in Greek and Etruscan art. The forger has replaced the usual rabbit on a pole with a dolphin in the hand of the merman. This was probably adapted from the type appearing in Attic red-figure vase paintings of Poseidon holding a dolphin horizontally by its tail.

The curved-necked ram's head tail fins of the upper register of the Vetersfelde fish are based on the curved-neck ram's head rear antler of the Kul Oba gold stag. The 'sea-eagle' is taken from yet another source. Thus, four or five different objects were used as sources for the Vetersfelde fish.

Execution of the Forgery

Technique in Execution

25. *Lack of change in technique* in spite of the change of material and tools, or in the size of the object.

The gem engraver uses great economy of detail due to the restrictions of size and the hardness of the material. The sculptor has considerably more latitude as the size of the object increases and the hardness of the material decreases. Obviously, an ivory carving would be finer and more delicate in detail than a granite relief. The

worker in metal relies more on engraving and incising techniques that the sculptor in stone. Very often the forger will translate an object from one medium to another – perhaps the subject of a carnelian intaglio will be used to create a gold plaque. He will, however, usually overlook the change in technique.

26. *Indecisive, irregular or misinterpreted lines or elements* due to uncertainty caused by a lack of familiarity with the subject.

The execution of the altar on the Symmachi ivory panel was obviously done by an artist completely unfamiliar with the representation of ancient altars or, for that matter, any object in the perspective indicated. Note, particularly, the flat rear outline, the misrepresentation of the rear right side of the volute on top, and the lack of indication of two planes at right angles on the wreath design, which was adapted from a round altar.

27. *Mechanical modelling.* A stiffness in line or flatness in plane is often an indication of direct copying from another source.

28. *Correction by an addition.* The correction of an apparent irreparable error in execution is often accomplished by the placing of an appliqué, sometimes of a different, occasionally more precious, material, over the error.

29. *Correction by elimination.* An irreparable error in execution may be eliminated by its removal, in the damaging of the surface or by breaking off that area.

30. *Completion by elimination.* Finally, we have the completion of an object by eliminating certain areas that were missing on the source of the forgery.

It must be emphasised that forgeries are not just created for financial gain, but often to boost the reputation of an excavator or a scholar. It is therefore essential that one should *first* expertise, *then* categorise.

'The Aesthetics of the Forger' was developed by the author over many years and was originally read as a paper at an annual meeting of the Archaeological Institute of America. The author examined all the objects illustrated in London, Paris, Berlin, and St Petersburg from 1968 to 1970. He would welcome any suggestions or additions to this list of stylistic criteria. Hopefully its publication will encourage scholars to re-examine their traditional ancient art aesthetics and to re-evaluate some of the many works of the recent past that have been placed in a false context by art historians. 