

Fraud in the Art Market

In the past, churches in Europe were filled with “relics” and churches competed on how many they held. Folks would go on pilgrimages to visit these churches. Have you ever wondered how these were acquired? When the Europeans showed up in the Middle East with money looking for “relics”, they ran into the problem that not many actually existed. But there were hundreds of craftsmen willing to make fake relics for them. Today is not much different. Art fraud exists throughout the industry. Where there is a market, there are fakes. Over time, fakes drive out real.

Recently a biblical museum had to admit that a number of its prized possessions were fakes. They also had to admit that they purchased thousands of stolen items.

For a while, some financial advisors have recommended putting money into fine art. The result has been predictable: prices for known fine art have skyrocketed, and fakes have proliferated. Some experts suggest that nearly every major museum has purchased a fake. There are almost more fake Roman bronzes on the market than real ones. Some fakes are so good that experts are fooled.

The same has happened with other forms of art. Drive west and you can find highway side stores advertising “Real Indian Jewelry” which isn’t made in this country, nor even in India (instead often in less expensive places such as Pakistan). Similarly, t-shirt art that is supposed to be a regional style is

now nearly all made overseas by people copying the style. There are antique Chinese fakes of even earlier pieces.

The problem with fakes and illegally dug up items is so huge in Israel that some estimates are that over 90% of artifacts on the Israeli market are either fake or illegally dug up. It is so bad that even “reputable dealers” don’t actually have much that is legitimate. Any “certificate of authenticity” that a shop owner offers is worthless.

The Bad Drives out The Good

Why does this problem exist? One reason is that most people are not able to determine whether a piece is legitimate. But the problem is increased in Israel as so many people go there on a religious pilgrimage.

When people go like that, they often suspend disbelief while there. That makes them very vulnerable to fraud. Secondly, people who make fakes are getting very good at making them. Often, they are accomplished artists and study their craft. However, the price difference between what people will pay for a recently created masterpiece and an ancient broken piece is enough to drive anyone to make a fake or similar.

Once someone has purchased a fake, the fake can gain provenance by being shared with museums for shows. After a while, it becomes very difficult to tell people that something is a fake.

Anytime people are paying more for something about a work: the artist’s name, the bragging rights, the story, etc., than for the actual piece, someone else will create a fake with those items.

Solve Wicked Problems

There are many “Wicked Problems” out there. A “Wicked Problem” is one where we can’t know all the parameters, all the ramifications, or even all the ways to solve it, but are problems that real people have.

There are formal definitions of “wicked problems”, but the best way to describe them are that they are the result of other problems. Thus, there are no clear solutions, no way to tell if we have properly solved them, we may have conflicting information about the problem, and no way to do a test case first.

Often, people try to address wicked problems using their beliefs. Cultures build a “folk lore” about wicked problems and write “wisdom” books about them. Occasionally, nations go to war to try to solve a wicked problem.

Our world has many such wicked problems. Every culture has them. Different people see the same problem differently and will argue their viewpoint most strongly. The longer a culture has been in power, the harder it is for the culture to see a different view of a problem. Today’s cities full of people from different places means that they bring with them very different ways of seeing the world.

Politics is part of the difficulty in solving such problems. Political forces want a “quick” solution and a solution that fits into the current political structure. However, a real solution might require a major restructuring of society.

Sometimes, we have to look outside the power structure to find a solution. When a problem is very strong, it is often those who lack a vested interest in the current social structure who can solve the problem.

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Risky World

Google Maps could be hacked. An artist pulled a wagon filled with 99 cell phones around some empty streets in Berlin. The result was that to Maps the streets appeared to be filled with traffic moving very slowly. Maps then routed live traffic away from those streets.

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