



Replicas & Fakes

in the Chinese Art Market



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In recent years, as the Chinese painting and fine art market has continued to heat up and become more of an investment potential, the risk of fakes and forgeries has become a major concern.

In March 2005, a story appeared in the media in the city of Zhuhai which is a good example. An exhibition of the works of two Chinese masters, Li Xiongcai and Guan Shanyue, was presented by the National Treasures Art Network at the Guangdong Museum. Guan Shanyue's daughter, Guan Yi, and Li Xiongcai's son, Li Jie, revealed that four of the Guan Shanyue pieces and thirty-four of Li Xiongcai's were counterfeits. The exhibits organizer for the National Treasures, however, denied the claims and brought witnesses who could "confirm the authenticity of the work at the exhibition." These witnesses included the Art Publishing House that published Li Xiongcai Masterpieces to commemorate the first anniversary of Li Xiongcai's death.

In December 1999 the Foundation in Taipei held an exhibition of Fu Baoshi's works called "King Kong Verve," organized by the Shanghai Museum. Fu Baoshi's son, Fu Ershi, himself a well known painter, told the media that all the pieces exhibited were counterfeits. He said in a letter to the Nanjing Daily Newspaper that the works on show in the Shanghai Museum were provided by Mr. Xu Zuoli,

of the Taiwan Lantian Gallery and that the original source of these fakes was a gang of swindlers from the mainland who concocted a whole story to lure buyers into acquiring the fakes. The works had been brought to the attention of Mr. Xu Zuoli by a so-called art "expert" who was simply acting as middleman for the counterfeiters. This "expert" invented a whole story



FROM THE DAFUN WEBSITE

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about Fu Baoshi painting a large number of works at his (the “expert’s”) house. Mr. Xu Zuoli bought the story and a large number of the paintings and took them to the exhibition.

This authenticity dispute caused an uproar in the art world and amongst collectors.

Another incident occurred in the spring of 2002 when the Jingguang Center in Beijing organized a show of several dozen works by Shi Lu which had not previously been seen in public. The authenticity of these pieces was seriously questioned by experts. The Henan Shangqu police, after three years of investigation, uncovered a scheme by crooked dealers to sell off forged paintings attributed to the renowned master.

These major swindles have shocked the art market and collectors are understandably anxious to get to the bottom of the proliferation of forgery which has amounted to tens of millions of dollars of fakes sold to unsuspecting victims, many of them foreign.

At present, collectors in major cities throughout the country, especially in the painting and calligraphy trading centers, such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Nanjing, XI’an, Chengdu, Tian Jin and other places, are tending to buy several or even several dozen counterfeit works of famous local artists. These counterfeits are obviously cheaper and easier to get hold of than the really high quality, original pieces.

It is easy to find, in the Beijing collectibles market, forgeries of the works of famous Chinese painters such as Qin Gong, Fu Jie, Wu Zuoren, Fan Zeng, Liu Bingsen and others in galleries, museums and even state-owned auction houses. The forgeries are of artists who have died not all that long ago, such as Zhu Qizhan, Song Wenzhi, Tang Yun, Guan Shanuye, Li Xioncai, Ceng Shifa, Chen Dayu, Fu Boshi, Wu Zuoren and Liu Bingsen, but also of contemporary, living artists, such as Qing Gong, Fu Jie and Fan Zeng and Ya Ming. The extent of counterfeiting and forgery varies, depending on the artist.


The forgers try to sell the work in other areas than where the contemporary artists lived so that

the collectors they are approaching, who may be very familiar with contemporary artists in their own region, don’t know their work and can’t tell they are fakes. They also suppose that the lower prices are due to the difference in price in other geographical areas. They use the lower price and the collector’s ignorance of the artists from other regions as part of the trap.

As in most other countries, the field of art, authenticity and auctions is completely unregulated. Because of the lack of laws and regulations, a number of disputes arise concerning auctions and artwork in general:

1. The artist himself or herself acting directly or through lawyers or brokers, announces before the auction that the pieces for sale under his or her signature are forgeries and asks for the auction to be stopped.
2. In the case of artists who are dead, their relatives may claim ownership for the work or claim that the rights to the work were conferred upon them.
3. In the case of living artists or the family of artists who are no longer living, family disputes impact on the activities of the auctions (in the case of divorce, for example).
4. Individual artists may have agreements with specific auction houses and their associates; therefore, when other auction houses try to sell that artist’s work they may face a negative reaction from the artist.

TESTING AUTHENTICITY



There are a number of ways to test authenticity. The first is by microscope in the laboratory. The most basic scientific investigation allows scientists to see the true age of a painting. The next method is using light. For example, varnish of the 19th century, when subjected to ultraviolet light, will appear fluorescent blue and green. Infrared light can also help reveal the age of the paint and ink. A third method is an examination of color and compounds. Some colors, for example, were not available in the 15th century. A fourth method applies to metal and ceramic products.



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These are more difficult to detect and require more advanced equipment and technology. Ceramics products are more difficult to reproduce. To make them match the originals, you need to use the same clay.

DAFEN VILLAGE – CHINA'S FIRST OIL PAINTING VILLAGE

Reproductions and replication of old masters and other art is a related but entirely different subject than counterfeits, forgeries and fakes. One is legal; the other is not.

Dafen Village in Guanwai of Shenzhen (website www.cndafen.com) is the largest source of copied oil paintings in the world. Ten years ago there were some 300 villagers in Dafen. Now there are over 2,000 Academy of Art painters from 20 provinces and cities, along with the sales staff, increasing the population of the village by over 10,000 who have come from elsewhere.

The village, which accounts for 60% of the world's oil painting market, offers a start-to-finish service in reproductions. Once completed they are exported by sea. Here 4,000 CNY (\$516) buys you the best reproduction of Van Gogh's Sunflowers, the original of which would sell for tens of millions of dollars.

Dafen village is not producing forgeries. They are honest copies. And there is a market for them. The customer knows that the painting is a reproduction

Left, artists compete to show their skill in a timed copying test in Dafen, China. Below, the sculpture at the entrance to Dafen village.



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and they try to satisfy art lovers' passion for world famous artwork when they can't afford the originals and would rather have reproductions than prints.

By reproducing paintings popular in the European and the United States markets, Dafen has become an out-and-out oil painting commodity production base. If you stay in the village for a few days, you can see Americans coming to purchase art every day. Their

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purpose is the same: the purchase of marketable oil paintings for resale abroad. In many people's eyes, however, making money by imitating original works, is seen as a shameful activity.

From the simple production and marketing of oil paintings, Dafen has expanded into also producing traditional Chinese paintings and industrial arts. It's annual production exceeds 100 million pieces produced and exported, a total of over US\$387 million, of which 70% is exports and the remainder domestic market. The village is a great base of Chinese cultural industry.

As China's economy develops and the standard of living increases, the general public can approach the artistic requirements of a more affluent lifestyle. There has been a growing tendency not only to want to view original artwork in galleries and museums, but to be able to buy original art for their homes, where the appreciation can last.

The scarcity of original art results in very high prices. This in turn has opened the door to art reproduction. As collectors point out, it is not illegal to reproduce works of art, as long as it is not fraudulently being represented as the original.

These market forces helped promote counterfeiting and also replication. The replication of art has worked well. Not only is it a legal and honest way for the public to acquire the works of art they want at a price they can afford, it has also promoted the development of the arts and thus made new, original work available to the general buying public.

— Currently in China, a large number of professional art reproduction companies and individual operators have emerged. More and more Chinese people have begun to accept reproduced or counterfeit works of art which have artistic merit and these find their way into private collections or home decoration. Investment advisors suggest that price and collection value mainly depend on the quantity and the quality of the reproductions. Really high quality reproductions, in fact, promote knowledge

and understanding of art and tend to have high investment value.

If an unlimited number of pieces are reproduced, the sheer abundance lowers the importance and value of the work. But where a limited number of reproductions are authorized by the original artist and signed and numbered, the value can be expected to increase and they are therefore a good investment.

According to one financial advisor, “Many people who want to invest in art but have a limited amount to spend, might be better off looking for reproductions which they can get for a more reasonable amount of money and which will still increase in value.”

In China the commercial art market is still developing and there are some excellent deals to be had. The price of reproductions varies. At the Bai Yaxuan gallery, for example, the average price of a reproduction piece is 1000 CNY (US\$130) whereas at Er Xuanshe they sell for 3-5000 CNY or more.

The recommendation of Tang Jianjun, an expert with the Chinese Collectors Association Advisory Committee recommends that the reproductions are limited to a small number of a given work, and that the artist doing the reproduction obtain the authorization and signature of the original artist (or authentication from the National Museum of Art in the case of artists who are no longer living). These reproductions would then be collectible and a good investment.

Strictly speaking there are two types of reproductions. One is a mere copy of the image where no attention is paid to materials and techniques but merely a copy of the original image. Then there are much higher quality reproductions where media, materials and technique are all faithfully reproduced. This latter type is rarer and worth much more than a mere copy, where only the image is reproduced, often with different techniques and materials.

In China it is quite common for a painter to reproduce the original artist's work, with the sanction of the original artist who authorizes a limited number



*Left, the entrance to
Dafen's "Louvre".*

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of signed reproductions. These are verified by the original artist or a representative as to accuracy and technical accuracy and quality before they can be sold and a certificate is issued which accompanies the painting when it is sold. The reproducing artist signs a contract and sells these works under license. A percentage of the sale usually goes to the original artist.

So the Chinese have found a way to satisfy their desire for art in a manner which they can afford. And the work is spreading beyond China's borders. 