

Why are you so sure it's a fake?

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by Alan Walker

In his self-termed “pirate days”, Thomas Hoving was the Director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art where, among other things, he authorized both the purchase of the Euphronios Krater and the then notorious deaccession of the Museum’s coin collection, long stored at the American Numismatic Society. Later, after leaving the Met and not being made head of the Getty, he changed direction. As editor-in-chief of the now defunct *Connoisseur* magazine, he and his protégés fulminated against the art and antiquity trade, specifically for those very shenanigans which he had previously so happily supported. Hoving has written a number of autobiographical books recounting what went on behind the scenes at the Met. Filled with insider gossip and mud slinging, they’re terribly amusing to read, but the way Hoving reveals his own character may turn some readers off: a pity because much of what he has to say is really worthwhile.

In *False Impressions: The Hunt for Big-Time Art Fakes* (Simon & Schuster, New York, 1996) Hoving discusses the history of faked art objects (no coins), with a special emphasis on his own knack at finding them out (especially if they are in the Met or the Getty—though his hilarious 11th Chapter, “Fakes by the Ton”, pp. 150-162 concerns a museum in Zagreb which, so he claims, contains *only* fakes!). I think his chapter on forgeries or copies made in ancient times is severely misleading, but as a whole the book is great fun and often frighteningly informative, and I’d recommend that anyone interested in the subject get a copy (it’s \$26, but most book store chains have it on discount—The Strand in New York even had it at 50% off).

The best parts of the book are those in which he discusses how “fakebusters” (the awkward term he uses for people who are natural fake detectors) only have to look at an object to get a gut feeling of whether it’s real or not. For example, on page 20 he quotes Bernard Berenson, who said “it is very largely a question of accumulated experience upon which your spirit sets unconsciously . . .”, but then the problem is “. . . how to fish out the evidence that will make the conviction as plain to others as it is to me.” At the Met, before any new acquisition, there was a vetting process which included a checklist of safeguards designed to ensure the object’s authenticity.

Some of the items on that list would also make good sense if used by numismatists:

First: Within seconds of first catching sight of a new work, write down the first words or phrases that come to mind. This should be the quintessential, kinetic, first impression. Seasoned fakebusters know first impressions are almost always right . . .

Second: Make a deliberately detailed and pedantic description of what you see. This is intended to help you look at every millimeter of the object . . .

Sixth: Describe the style of the work. Is there a single homogeneous style or many?

Seventh: Establish if the supposed date and style agree.

Tenth: Subject the piece to a scientific examination using a wide number of methods . . . and above all, the common magnifying glass. Then discount everything you find.

If all the information recorded in each category supports the first flashing impression, no doubt the work is okay and worth acquiring . . . if doubts begin to crop up, make a “Doubts List” and track down every hesitation and uneasiness until each has been furnished with a full explanation (pp. 21-22).

To these points I would add a few others:

A: Does the object require an unusual set of circumstances for it to exist (or for it to be on whatever weight standard it is on)? This relates to Hoving’s sixth and seventh points.

B: Does the object look “stupid” when compared with other pieces of ostensibly the same period? Ancient objects can be beautiful or ugly (sometimes very ugly), perfectly made or very crude, but they are never stupid or laughable looking; those last are qualities often found in forgeries made by artisans working in an artistic tradition completely foreign to their own times.

C: Is the only expert who says the object is real someone no one has ever heard of?

D: Is the sale/purchase process actively bizarre?

Coin forgeries fall into two major groups. The first is made up of **contemporary copies** of two types: counterfeits designed to defraud the unwary (such as plated or illegally debased issues, or all those Roman mint forgeries we call hybrids) and copies, often of perfectly good weight and metal, made to facilitate trade (such as the Syrian and Egyptian owl tetradrachms, Celtic coins of many types, the Gallic and British copies of Julio-Claudian bronzes, the so-called barbarous radiates, etc.).

The other group, divided into **three families**, is more insidious since it consists of **modern counterfeits** designed solely to deceive collectors.

The first family is composed of those counterfeits taken directly from genuine coins: by casting or by using either a genuine coin or an electrotype as a positive to make new dies. The products of these methods range from obvious rubbish to extremely dangerous forgeries, especially those struck from new dies. These forgeries are stylistically identical with real coins, but can differ from them by fabric; by metal; by technique of manufacture; by the presence of defects from the original coin, such as flan cracks, dings, double strikes, and the like as integral parts of the forgery’s design; by inept corrections made to the new die to cover up

defects on the model (like holes or deep gashes); and by the highly subjective criterion of “feel”.

The second family is the easiest to spot, and consists of genuine coins which have been recut into something else. For example, we have a sestertius of Aelius which seems to have a ghost-like laurel wreath in his hair: it’s actually a recut Commodus!

The third family includes all those forgeries struck from dies made freehand by a modern forger, either as copies of ancient originals or as inventions. These are the Paduans, the Beckers, the Capraras, the Christodoulos’, the Cigois, the Orphanides’, the Kostakimous, etc., and have a history stretching right back to the Renaissance. Some of these forgers were spectacularly good artists, and really were able to capture the feeling of the ancient coins they copied, while others were such hacks that we often wonder how anyone could ever have been fooled by their products.

The older fakes (i.e. pre-late 19th century) can be remarkably long lasting (as the Paduan Colosseum sestertius I described in the March 1995 *Celator*), but they often display gross errors of style and metrology, subjects then not clearly understood. Caprara and other early forgers consistently got weights wrong, or capriciously combined dies of totally different series, or used the wrong metal, like Becker’s silver Visigothic forgeries or the whole series of gold multiples of Lysimachus struck in Munich during the 2nd quarter of the 17th century from dies by Cavino (see K. Pink, “Gold Medallions of Lysimachus and Kindred Forgeries”, *Numismatic Chronicle* 1937, pp. 73-90). These forgers used real coins, casts, or engravings as their models.

By the late 19th century forgers were given a far greater repertoire of models thanks to the widespread use of photographic plates in numismatic publications: a perfect example being a fragmentary coin from the Zagazig Hoard, which was illustrated in 1927 and almost immediately used as the model for a unique forgery by Orphanides. Increasingly careful publications, as the British Museum Greek catalogues begun in 1873, made getting the weights right far easier too. New hoards also gave forgers the impetus to make a few more of the coins they contained, as the 1937 Taranto Hoard which provided models for Festa’s splendid fake distaters of Thurium.

These virtuoso forgers also invented coins which could well have existed, such as hitherto unknown denominations, like gold staters for rulers who only struck bronze or silver, or pure fantasies such as coins of numismatically unknown rulers like Queens Artemisia and Ada. One rather astute European collector told me that he once was chatting with someone he knew was behind a whole series of forgeries, and just for fun and to see what would happen, casually mentioned a coin, last on the market in the 1920s, which was very much on his wish list. Surprise, surprise, a year or so later one turned up!

While there may well be some super fakes out there which have never been suspected, it is my opinion that there is **always something** about their style or fabric which will reveal these modern fakes for what they are. Many of the best fakes, which have a general appearance that really looks ancient, collapse when they are examined closely since most of the details

turn out to be wrong (as with Christodoulos' stater of Stymphalus where Herakles' lion skin appears as a fringed shawl). Another give-away is when conceptual, moral, or artistic conventions of one period turn up in an object purporting to be centuries earlier. Thus, it pays to follow Hoving's checklist and see where first impressions lead. Let me illustrate this process with a coin which recently came out of eastern Europe: most observers thought it false, but it did have its champions.

The coin (Fig. 1) purports to be a gold stater of the ancient Crimean city of Panticapaeum, and weighs 9.02 grams. Panticapaeum's is surely the most spectacularly flamboyant and artistically ambitious of all Greek gold coinages, and specimens have always been extremely popular for those collectors and museums with the financial wherewithall to acquire them (Gulbenkian couldn't resist them and had 11 [Gulbenkian II, 580-590]). The coins date to ca. 350-320 B.C. and are mostly on a local weight standard of ca. 9.10 grams, believed to be the equivalent in value of the heavier Cyzicene electrum stater.

The Panticapaeum staters all have the same types, a head of Pan on the obverse, and a horned griffin standing left with a spear in its mouth on the reverse. They can, however, be divided into three chronologically successive groups from the way Pan's head is portrayed. The first has a small and neat profile head of Pan in Greek style (Fig. 2, see also SNG BM 855, Jenkins, *Greek Coins* 242, Kraay *ACGC* 911, Gulbenkian 580-581). The second bears a spectacular, Greek style, three-quarter facing head (Fig. 3, see also SNG BM 859, Jenkins 241, Kraay *ACGC* 912, Kraay & Hirmer 442, Gulbenkian 982-984). The third and latest group has a large, Scythian style, profile head of Pan wearing an ivy wreath, and can in turn be divided into an earlier series of small module coins and a later of large module ones (Figs. 4 and 5; for the small module series see SNG BM 864, Kraay & Hirmer 441, Gulbenkian 585-587 and *Kunstfreund* 188; for the large module series see SNG BM 867, Kraay & Hirmer 440, Gulbenkian 588-590 and Hunt I, 95 = *Wealth of the Ancient World* 98). The last group of large module staters ends with a subgroup of identical style but of Attic weight (ca. 8.50 instead of 9.10 grams, as SNG BM 878).

Most people dismissed the new coin as an obvious, badly made fake reminiscent of the dreadful travesties coming out of Bulgaria. In fact, they went so far as to laugh at the people who had it; a *big mistake* since that elevated the simple question of whether the coin was real or not into the kind of personality conflict which puts everyone's backs up, and makes rational, calm discussion nearly impossible. The people who thought this coin false were quite right, but by relying on the feelings generated by their first impressions of the coin, and not taking the time to analyze those feelings, ideally by way of one of Hoving's "Doubt Lists", they laid themselves open to charges of arrogance and envy.

This new coin can best be compared with the Type I staters. Looking at the genuine example in Fig. 2, we see a rather compact and restrained head of Pan in excellent Greek style. The hair is in long locks which curve along, following the outline of the skull, though the ends of some locks stick out along the head's profile like little spikes (rather like a somewhat conservative "punk" haircut). There is a distinct knob at the bridge of the snub nose; an outthrust, somewhat pointed beard; and a sharp pointed



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

neck truncation. Pan's ear is that of a goat.

On the reverse the griffin stands solidly to left on three of his legs, directly on top of an ear of grain. His head faces the viewer; his right forefoot is raised; and he holds a spear in his mouth. He has two curved horns on his head (as here the curve often goes off the edge of the coin: for clearer examples see Gulbenkian 580-583; for a curve merging with the coin's edge see Fig. 3). The griffin's wing curves up from his shoulders toward the rear, then curves forward, ending in a somewhat rounded way just behind his head (this is a rather stylized form of wing, rather like that of Pegasus on earlier Corinthian staters, as compared to the more realistic pointed wings on later issues [Compare Kraay & Hirmer 478-480 with 485-487]).

Returning to Fig. 1 we see a rather large head on the obverse, not at all compact (in size it is rather comparable to the earlier Type III staters, as Fig. 4). The hair is in rather coarse locks; the eye is remarkably large; the ear has been turned into a large circular structure with a pointed leaf coming out of it; the knob on the bridge of the nose looks like a large pimple rather than an organic part of his head; the features are in general terribly coarse and ill made; the neck truncation is very long; and the hair of the beard is remarkably regular.

The reverse shows a griffin whose horns are perfectly parallel, and go straight up without a curve into the edge of the die; the wing ends in individual feathers which do not curve over, and which look like a feather duster; his tail is forked at the end; instead of standing firmly on the ear of grain his left hind leg is up in the air; his right foreleg seems to be composed entirely of connected dots; and his neck and head are very awkwardly attached to his body. The **Pi** in the inscription is **strongly** inclined to the right: on all other examples it is either vertical or **slightly** inclined, either to the left, or to the right (especially on the Type III issues).

The stylistic faults of the new coin, like the griffin's raised leg, straight horns, wing and neck, and forked tail, and the totally coarse style of the obverse (an unfortunate blend of the earlier Greek style of Figs. 2-3 and the later, more florrid "Scythian" style with ivy wreath of Figs. 4-5) are too unconvincing to be true. The mixture of a Type I style head and an early Type III head size is also cause for alarm.

An even more drastic mistake is the complete misunderstanding of Pan's ear on the new coin. Pan had the ears of a goat, symbolic of his animal nature, and this was a standard and universally known feature of his iconography in ancient times. Even though Pan is a mythological figure, like the centaurs, silens, and maenads, everyone knew what he looked like; just as in Byzantine times every icon painter knew precisely what John the Baptist looked like. In both cases their images followed a carefully worked out canon. But this Pan's ear seems to be formed of a *Perisphere* and a *Trylon*, as if he were a refugee from the 1939 World's Fair in New York!

Finally, another very good reason why this coin is clearly false is its stupidly ugly look: ancient coins are often ugly and crude, but they are never stupid looking. In short, the stylistic errors on this coin could never have been made by an ancient artist working within his contemporary tradition, but would have been made by a modern die cutter attempting a

free-hand copy of something he didn't really understand.

It was suggested that the coin's stylistic anomalies could be explained if it was the last issue, hitherto unknown, and that its die cutter used a number of earlier staters as prototypes. Aside from the fact that the stylistic mistakes on this coin are, as we have seen, not the kind which would have been made by an *ancient* engraver, the "expert" involved (for whom, see my point "C") seems not to have been aware that Panticapaeum had already switched to the Attic standard for its gold staters (no doubt due to the influence of the staters of Philip II and Alexander III). So if this is meant to be a final issue, struck ca. 310/300 or later I suppose, why were they using an obsolete weight standard? For these arguments see my point "A".

"But," someone is bound to say, "wouldn't it be a good idea to do a metal analysis? Wouldn't that prove whether the coin is genuine or not?" **NO.** Scientific tests can provide tremendous amounts of vital information on *how* objects were made, and *what* they were made from, but despite many optimistic claims, they can't always tell us *when* those objects were made. A case in point being the well-known affair of the Getty Kouros: based on what they thought were serious stylistic and technical faults a considerable number of scholars condemned it as a modern forgery (for the whole story see Hoving, pp. 279-310).

Early in the debate the Getty commissioned a very careful petrographic analysis, which revealed that the marble's surface had undergone a chemical change known as dedolomitization. According to the scientists involved, this could only have occurred naturally over many hundreds of years; and was, thus, seen as conclusive evidence for the supremacy of objective scientific evidence over more subjective criteria like style. Nevertheless, the artis stuck to their guns.

A few years later, not only did a second fragmentary, clearly fake, and very similar kouros show up (both are reputed to have been made in Rome), but other scientists managed to recreate similar surface weathering on similar marble in about three months using potato mold! That's right, a *potato patina*. In this case the lesson is that the results of the scientific tests were accurate (the marble surface had undergone a chemical change), but that the interpretations were mistaken (that the chemical changes had to have taken place over a very long time and that those changes could not be duplicated by forgers).

Scientific tests can tell us whether a gold coin is struck or cast (this can also be done by eye). These tests may well be able to tell if a coin was struck using modern or ancient methods, but if the latter, not when. Scientists can also tell us whether the alloy used is modern or ancient, since trace elements and proportions differ between the two. The modern origin of their product is obvious when forgers use sovereigns or 20 rouble pieces as bullion for their flans; but when they use Byzantine solidi the situation is less clear (and perfectionist forgers are perfectly capable of reading scientific analyses and tailoring an alloy to fit). It is well known that common, ratty, late 4th century Athenian tetradrachms were used as flans for modern forgeries of Greek tetradrachms ("It must be good—the silver's right."). Scientific tests can be tremendously important in determining authenticity (as with paintings, pottery, wood, etc.), but they

are simply one of several tools for doing so. Read Hoving to see how many forgers have attempted (succeeded?) to fool scientific inquiry, only to be tripped up by stylistic analysis: thus his tenth point.

Returning to the Panticapaeum stater, when carefully studied it condemns itself by its own stylistic inconsistencies. But the instinctive reaction so many people had to this coin illustrates a lesson every numismatist has to learn: **if you have handled thousands upon thousands of coins, and suddenly one appears which looks funny to you, find out why.**