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An artful robbery

Claire Berlinski

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Officials at the State Painting and Sculpture Museum in Ankara aren't sure when the theft of paintings by the late-Ottoman era landscapist Hoca Ali Riza happened.

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Recently, a Turkish museum's staff discovered that a large number of famous Ottoman-era drawings from their collection were forgeries, the originals probably stolen years ago. Claire Berlinski finds that the theft of valuable artworks across the world is more common than many think. During a recent inventory of Turkey's State Painting and Sculpture Museum in Ankara, museum personnel noticed that some of the frames looked wrong. On further inspection, they discovered to their horror that a significant number of the collection's famous drawings by the late-Ottoman era landscape artist Hoca Ali Rza, as well as numerous other important works, were forgeries. Not only that, they were photocopies - forgeries so crude that in principle, a child should have seen the difference.

The ensuing investigation suggested the originals might have been stolen as much as a generation ago. It had to have been an inside job, investigators concluded, and could only have been done with the co-operation of the museum's staff. Every organ of government close to the museum has come under suspicion of incompetence or corruption. Fatih Ozgul of the Turkish National Police notes that the investigation has unique procedural aspects: "This is an exceptional case," he says, "because the Ministry of Culture and Tourism might also be subject to negligence claims. So there are two investigations, one is administrative, the other is judicial."

The story has generated scandalised newspaper headlines in Turkey and given rise to a great many conspiracy theories. The con, according to local rumours, involved officials at the highest levels of government. Quite a few

column inches have been devoted to the shamefully haphazard curation of Istanbul's state museums. What is most interesting about this case, however, is the public reaction to it, and what it suggests both about the neuroses of Turkish society and the philosophical problems raised by the crime of forgery itself.



In truth, most museums around the world suffer from inadequate security. Crimes like this are hardly a unique inculcation of Turkish society: according to the international think tank Association for Research into Crimes against Art (Arca), art crime is the third-highest grossing criminal enterprise worldwide, behind only drugs and arms trafficking. What is unique here is the seeming belief among the Turkish press that everything in Turkey is tainted by official malfeasance, that conspiracies are omnipresent, and that even the most beautiful things are apt, on closer inspection, to prove a sham. The state of Turkey's museums is a particularly sore point, because nothing says "European" more than a museum staffed by people who seem to know a lot about art.

To be sure, the Europeans aren't impressed by this scandal or what it suggests about local museum standards. Mark Durney of Arca notes that charcoal drawings such as Riza's are extremely fragile. "Smudging and light exposure are the two main agents of deterioration to worry about," he says. The theft, he says, "raises questions about the cleaning, conservation, curating, documenting, storage and site security, and general museum practices employed by the institution".

In principle, these drawings should have been displayed behind a clear plastic frame. They were not. As some officials here have suggested, they might well be better off wherever they are now. "This has been the situation for more than four decades," agrees the corporate art consultant Karoly Allioti, a specialist in the Turkish art market who now works in Paris. "And it's not a surprise to anyone. The Ottomans had fantastic book-keeping habits, yet the Republic is strongly failing at this."

Local art critics are savaging the museum's security system and the common practice of lending works of art to government officials to decorate their homes. Much of the collection in Ankara was neither photographed nor properly registered, which makes it much less likely it will ever be found. Art dealers here may have been appalled by the revelations, but they weren't remotely shocked. "This doesn't come as a surprise to anyone in our sector," says the art director Kerimcan Guleryuz of Istanbul's Gallery x-ist.

Nor is this the first major museum security scandal in Turkey to make headlines. In 2006, the theft of rare artefacts - part of the so-called Lydian Hoard - from a rural museum in Western Turkey generated particularly rueful attention, given that Turkey had lobbied intensely for years to see those very artefacts returned from New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. The museum's director, who had been one of the key players in the campaign to see the artefacts returned, was arrested and convicted of the theft.

In 2007, the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism announced a campaign to tighten museum security.

Technology would be upgraded, it said, the staff educated, and hi-tech security systems, including CCTV, eye and fingerprint scanning systems would be installed. However, so far little has changed. But nor is Turkey the worst nation in the world where art theft is concerned - not by a long shot. In fact, according to Interpol, the countries most affected are France and Italy. This makes sense: bank robbers rob banks because that's where the money is.

But it also begs the question as to why the Turkish press are being so critical. If the French and the Italians can't keep their museums secure, it is not because their society is unusually corrupt, and it's certainly not because they're not European enough. Russia, rocked several years ago by the discovery that a curator at the Hermitage had made off with hundreds of priceless items, recently ordered a massive national audit of its museums, the first undertaken in the post-Soviet era. The audit's findings suggest that at least 160,000 pieces are missing.

It's usually an inside job - Turkey isn't special in this regard, either. Forgery in particular, notes Haldun Dostoglu of Istanbul's Galeri Nev, thrives in countries where institutions aren't well-equipped to distinguish between the real and the fake. "Speculative art market actors prepare a nice atmosphere for such attempts," he adds. According to industry estimates, forgeries may account for 10 per cent to 50 per cent of art for sale on the international market.

Another key point has also been lost in the hand-wringing: the forgeries were discovered, suggesting that attention to inventory is actually improving. "Personally," says Durney, "I applaud the fact that the museum has commissioned periodic reviews of its inventory despite the obvious risks that it can pose to its reputation and public support if objects are unaccounted for." So why, then, have the Turkish people been so hard on themselves about these revelations?

The question suggests not only the corrosive levels of social distrust in Turkey, but some of the rich problems in the philosophy of aesthetics raised by the notion of forgery. If no one noticed for years that these were photocopies - and no one minded - why were they any less valuable than the originals? "To answer requires a review and investigation into concepts of authenticity, aesthetics, and how we perceive, or experience, art," says Durney. "Authenticity is a cultural construct of the modern western world. It stems from the enlightenment thinkers' search for truth via philosophical inquiry, rational thinking, etc. More simply put, when one discovers a work thought to be original is a fake, he or she feels wronged."

"The forger betrays our trust. The self-giving on which all human relationship depends," writes the philosopher of aesthetics Francis Sparshott, arguing that the danger of forgery is cynicism and disillusionment. "Essentially," says Durney, "a fake or forgery undermines one's search for truth through art, and thus chaos ensues."

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