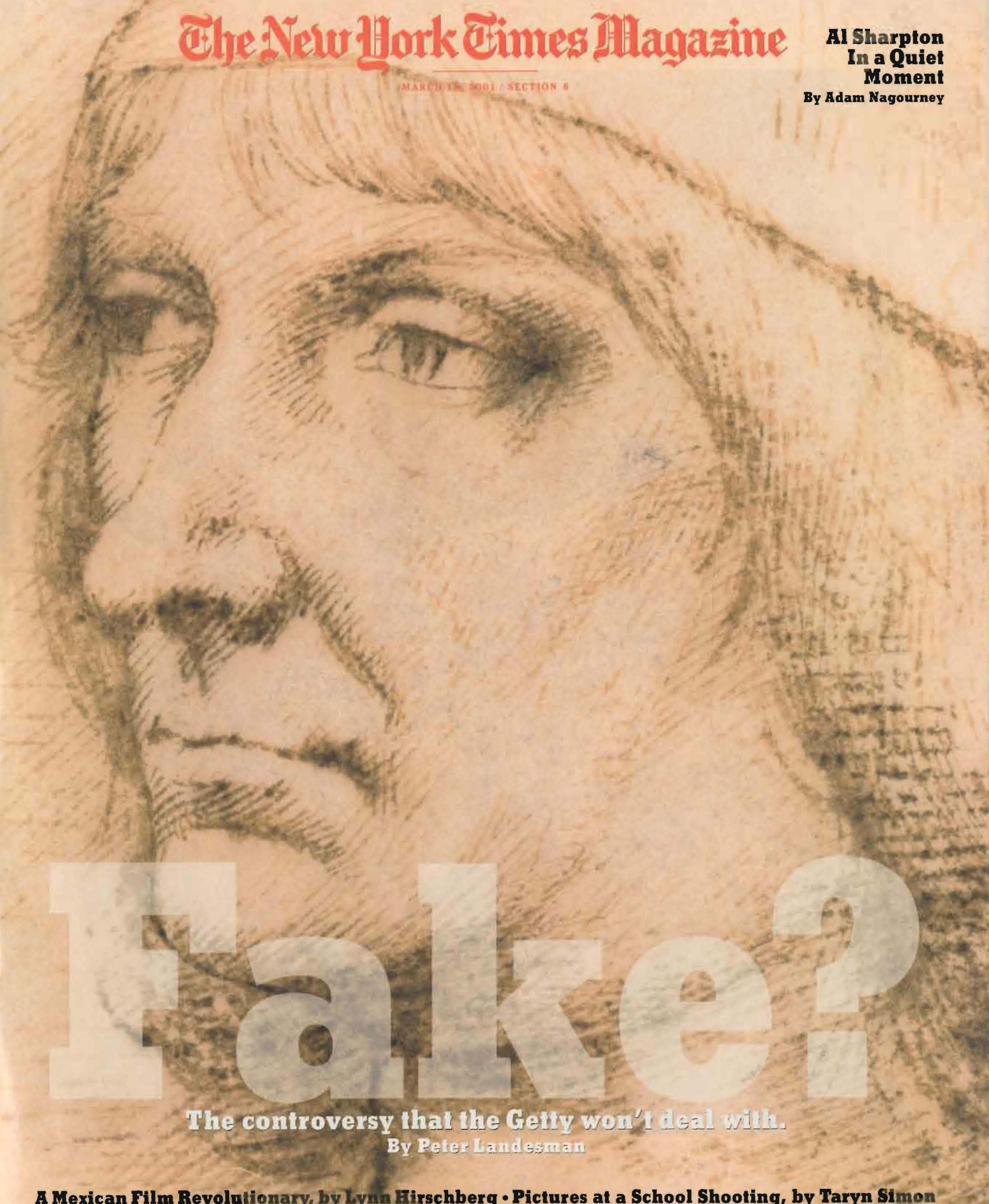
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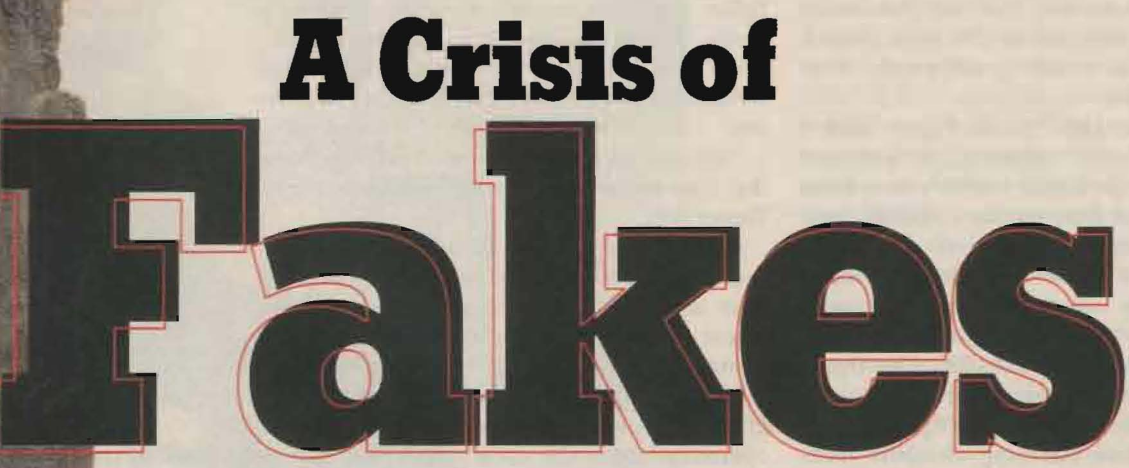

When a former curator accused the Getty of owning forgeries, it did what many museums do — not enough. **By Peter Landesman**

Even before Nicholas Turner was installed as curator of the J. Paul Getty Museum's celebrated European drawings collection, his intuition told him something was wrong. In 1993, a year before his appointment, he was examining some of the museum's prized old masters when he told George Goldner, then curator of the collection, that he was sure one of the drawings — a pen-and-ink study of a female figure attributed to Raphael — was a forgery. What's more, he suspected that he knew who had made it.

Over time, Turner identified five more drawings in the museum he was certain were forgeries, all of them attributed to other Renaissance masters. One was a portrait of an infant attributed to Fra Bartolommeo, whose most important work is the great altarpiece at San Marco in Florence; another was the only surviving drawing by the Italian sculptor Desiderio da Settignano. These works, mostly studies for later paintings, were valuable historical relics. More important, drawings — as the nexus between a masterwork's initial conception and its finished state — are one of the only road maps we have to a great artist's creative process. Accordingly, these works were expensive. Between 1988 and 1992, the Getty paid various dealers more than $1 million for the six drawings.

What first tipped off Turner were the myriad details that stir the suspicions of connoisseurs. For example, the paper seemed to him to be overwashed and unnaturally aged. Also, he felt the ink in those works appeared too tired, as though the fading had been accelerated: the iron-gall ink the masters used tends to darken, not lighten, with age.

"A drawing, like a person, takes a long time to get to know," Turner says. "If the work is authentic, it all hangs together as a statement — there are no oddities about it, and it is organic and coherent. If something on closer inspection lets you down, it will continue to let you down. The more you go back to it, the more it reveals its weaknesses."

Turner also noticed resemblances among the six drawings. The old masters worked ink with great

Attributed to, clockwise from top: The circle of Martin Schongauer (around 1490); Fra Bartolommeo (around 1510); Georges Lallemant (around 1625); Raphael (around 1500).

Drawings from the J. Paul Getty Museum.

Fake?

speed and fluidity to capture the grace and gestures of their subjects. Forgers mimic an artist's style but never fully capture the nuances that define an artist's "handwriting." And the lines on these drawings seemed, in Turner's opinion, spidery and haltingly drawn. Four of them, all supposedly by different artists, had been punctuated by what Turner identified as the same clumsy hatching — that is, evenly spaced parallel lines that suggest shadow.

The Raphael sketch, "Female Figure With a Tibia," was, in Turner's opinion, so awkward that he was sure the figure couldn't have been drawn from life, at least not by a skilled artist. (Renaissance artists almost always drew from life. Forgers tend to draw from other drawings.) Turner was equally unimpressed by the drawing attributed to Desiderio da Settignano, which the Getty had just bought for $349,000. One figure on the bottom of the Desiderio turned out to be identical to the figure on the left edge — but in reverse. Mixing and matching elements from different compositions by the same artist is one typical forger's ploy, but flipping an existing picture and hoping no one notices is even more common. Indeed, the supposed Fra Bartolommeo drawing, a black-chalk study of an infant's head, had caught Turner's eye as being the near replica-in-reverse of a study in a German museum — same child, same artist. The baby used to face right; now it faced left.

One way to test a picture's integrity is to turn it upside down — a technique used not only by connoisseurs but also by artists trying to see their work with a fresh eye. When a fake is right side up, we anticipate the whole, and our brains automatically correct subtle gaps in logic. But upside down, the work becomes an abstract jumble of line and shape, and the mistakes pour off the page, from poorly proportioned heads to exaggerated shading. Turned on its head, the Raphael appeared even worse to Turner: the flesh in the figure's armpit wasn't folded but lazily fudged, and the foot looked stumpy — unlikely lapses for such a gifted artist.

Running parallel to the right edge of the paper of the "Fra Bartolommeo" infant, Turner says, are three or four fuzzy, discolored bars, or patches of white, that he attributes to the presence of some greasy substance that prevented the ink wash from being absorbed by the paper. (Fra Bartolommeo prepared his paper meticulously, Turner says.) Still another of the Getty drawings, a standing female saint in black ink, supposedly by an artist in the circle of the 15th-century German master Martin Schongauer, was in Turner's view a feeble hoax. As he saw it, the figure had lifeless hair, arms that grew out of the ribs and hands like flippers. Nonetheless, the Getty had bought this one for about $170,000.

Then there was "Portrait of a Man," attributed only to a 15th-century "North Italian" artist. The drawing eerily echoed a portrait by Gentile Bellini at the Kupferstich-Kabinett Museum in Berlin. Turner detected only one major difference — the image was reversed. Turner also deemed the crosshatching to be rushed and chaotic.

"Some of the drawings were so patently bogus that they began to annoy me to look at them," Turner says.

As the clues piled up, Turner thought he had begun to decode the handwriting of the notorious and prolific British forger Eric Hebborn, whose drawings over the last 40 years had penetrated the world's most prestigious museums.

Nicholas Turner, 54 and heavyset, wears a look of continuous concentration. He is widely recognized as one of the world's most distinguished drawings curators. He was in charge of Italian and French drawings at the British Museum for more than 20 years; during the same period, he cataloged more than 800 drawings from Queen Elizabeth's private collection. In 1990, he was part of the team of curators that assembled an acclaimed exhibit at the British Museum, "Fake? The Art of Deception." Among his contributions was the dissection of a bogus drawing attributed to the 18th-century Italian artist Francesco Guardi.

The Getty lured Turner from London in 1994 with the promise of unfettered research latitude, unparalleled purchasing power and, of course, the glamour of its name. The Getty is, by far, the wealthiest art museum in the world, with an endowment of roughly $5 billion. As a private foundation, the Getty must spend 4.25 percent of that amount — or $200 million — a year. Accordingly, it buys whatever obtainable art and antiquities it wants to buy. At the time, it was planning to move out of its villa in Malibu, Calif., to the lavish 110-acre Getty Center perched high above western Los Angeles with a view of the Pacific. Although the Getty's overall collections could not match those of the Louvre and the Metropolitan, it dominated the current art market. Turner believed he had just moved into the job of his life. It would turn out to be a disaster.

After Turner came to his own conclusions about the drawings, Ari Wallert, an associate scientist at the Getty Conservation Institute, examined the supposed Raphael with X-ray fluorescence spectroscopy. Wallert discovered "a considerable amount of titanium" on the paper's surface, he told me recently; titanium oxides were not manufactured until after World War II, more than 400 years after the drawings were supposedly made. Conceivably, titanium traces could have rubbed off modern paper glued to the backs of the drawings for protection, but none of the pictures had these backing sheets, and there were no signs — like glue marks or residue of flour paste — that they ever did have them. "There is just no sign that these drawings lived for 300 or 400 years," Turner says.

'Some of the drawings were so patently bogus that they began to annoy me to look at them,' says Nicholas Turner, the Getty's former curator of European drawings.

He also researched the drawings' provenances — their written histories, including everything from creation to transfers of ownership to exhibitions — but none had any prior to the 20th century, and only one, the "Raphael," had any art-market reference at all, an appearance in an auction in Paris in 1986. Although authentic drawings often lack detailed provenances, Turner's findings further solidified his suspicions.

On Feb. 27, 1996, John Walsh, then the Getty's director, and his deputy, Deborah Gribbon, the museum's current director, visited Turner in the prints room, and Turner laid the drawings before them. Turner describes Walsh and Gribbon as having been embarrassed and despairing at his news. (The Getty says that this is "categorically untrue.") Turner remembers Walsh gesturing toward the "Standing Female Saint," attributed to the Schongauer circle, and saying, "Yes, I always thought the drawing ugly and never understood why we bought it." (Walsh and Gribbon declined, through the Getty, to reply to questions.)

Convinced now that his judgment was correct, Turner pursued his case. He asked for and received permission to inform the Getty's trustees in writing about the drawings' dubious authenticity.

But a week later, Turner says, he received word from Walsh that he was to say nothing.

Turner was furious. "It was beginning to look," he says bitterly, "as if I had the wrong attitude toward the museum's collection of drawings."

THE FIGHT OVER THE DRAWINGS WASN'T Turner's only problem. He was respected by his peers but roundly disliked. Colleagues at the Getty considered him mean, condescending and

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Peter Landesman is the author, most recently, of the novel "Blood Acre." He last wrote for the magazine about the rehabilitation of a woman with memory loss.

"PORTRAIT OF A MAN" FROM THE J. PAUL GETTY MUSEUM

Although "Turner's reputation is as the best person in the field in the world," according to one curator, when it comes to forgeries, "best" doesn't necessarily mean right.

unpleasant. "He has always had a very high opinion of his own expertise and a low opinion of that of other people," says Mark Jones, the head curator of the British Museum's "Fake?" exhibition. Turner's churlishness contrasted with the suave manner of Goldner, his predecessor, who over the years had earned the loyalty of many people who buy and sell old master art.

"Turner has a very good reputation as a scholar, but he has a lot of enemies," says Eduardo Testori, a Milanese dealer. "When he was at the Getty, some dealers were not dealing with him. They stopped offering things to the Getty." Although the Getty's enormous wealth allowed him to acquire some quality work, Turner struggled to match Goldner's achievements.

To make matters worse, in January 1996, Turner, who was married, began an affair with his assistant, Kathleen Kibler. Six months later, he tried to end it. She then filed a formal complaint of sexual harassment with the Getty, which the museum investigated but did not uphold, though it did caution Turner. According to Turner, her behavior then turned "aggressive." She erased his computer files, he says, and called him repeatedly at home. Turner complained to the Getty, which, he claims, did nothing. (The Getty denies this, but will not say what it did.) Kibler, who still works at the Getty, says she can't discuss her conflict with Turner. "I'd lose my job if I did," she says.

The relationship between the Getty and its drawings curator worsened. Turner protested that his budget had been unduly constricted and that he wasn't able to bid properly for new work. He also complained that the drawings department was being denied sufficient gallery space. In Turner's opinion, the Getty was punishing him and subverting his credibility in order to cast doubt on his forgery claims. (Of course, his reckless behavior regarding Kibler may have contributed to his difficulties.)

On Dec. 5, 1997, Turner sued the museum for defamation, as well as for its failure to react to his harassment complaints. In January 1998, the case was settled out of court. In the end, the dispute was less about sexual harassment than it was about the possible corruption of the Getty collection with fake works of art, what that meant to the reputations of the Getty and Turner's predecessor and what was going to be done about it.

The Getty had refused to let Turner voice his belief that the six drawings were forgeries. But his lawyer in Los Angeles, Peggy Garrity, attached a rider to his lawsuit demanding that a volume of an exhaustive catalog he had written on the museum's drawings, part of which was devoted to the forgery allegations, be published by the museum. In the settlement, Turner received a mid-six-figure payment from the Getty, plus a promise to publish his book. Turner also signed a confidentiality agreement that prohibited either party from disclosing the terms and conditions of the settlement. He also consented to resign, giving up his powerful post.

On Jan. 22, 1998, two days after the settlement was signed, the Getty messengered a letter to Turner's home informing him that it had moved his office and revoked his unrestricted access to the drawings collection. Getty officials did agree to solicit opinions on the suspected fakes from two other experts. One, Paul Joannides, an art historian from Cambridge University, agreed with Turner about some of the drawings and disagreed about others but agreed that allegations of forgery should be publicly addressed and that Turner's catalog and analysis was a "magnificent piece of work by an expert of worldwide reputation."

The other scholar who was consulted, William W. Robinson, curator of drawings at Harvard University's Fogg Art Museum, declined to offer a professional opinion. He has seen photocopies of the drawings, however. Robinson now says: "Obviously there is something questionable about them. I agreed with Turner that he was onto something." He adds, "Turner's reputation is as the best person in the field in the world."

As for Turner's catalog, it never saw the light of day. Indeed, it looks as though the Getty's intention all along was to bury it. Last May, Turner received a letter from the Getty's lawyer in Britain saying that if the museum published Turner's manuscript, George Goldner would probably sue for defamation.

For if Turner was right, it meant that Goldner, his predecessor, had been duped. Goldner, 54, is now curator of prints and drawings at the Metropolitan — and is also widely considered to be a great connoisseur. He was at the Getty for more than 14 years, starting in 1979, buying everything, including masterworks by Michelangelo, Rembrandt and Watteau. There "is no factual proof that Turner's opinion is right," he says, speaking of the disputed drawings. "There is nothing that connects Hebborn directly to these drawings. There is no statement from anyone saying that 'I know Hebborn made this drawing, owned this drawing, sold this drawing.'"

Goldner says it's natural for experts to disagree

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sometimes. Speaking of the supposed 15th-century drawing "Portrait of a Man," he says, "It is true that the figure is wearing the same costume as the Bellini, but you'll find in Venetian portraits of that time that three out of every four men are wearing costumes of that sort." Of the Fra Bartolommeo infant, he explains that the artist was composing an altarpiece that was to include a horde of baby angels facing in all directions. He adds that other experts think the drawing Turner calls a Hebborn might be by Pontormo, while still others say it is by Andrea del Sarto. No one, Goldner suggests, can know for sure who made it.

Other drawings in the group do trouble him, though. Speaking of the Raphael, Goldner says: "The drawing is rubbed and abraded, so that different parts of it look suspicious. This might be a copy by Raphael of another artist." He also now backs off his assessment of the Desiderio. "Today, I would be less ambitious and say it's by the workshop of Desiderio," he says. "It's not easy to prove it's by him." He pauses. "Not every drawing I bought was wonderful, but there is a difference between unexceptional drawings and fakes by Eric Hebborn."

To be sure, Goldner says he feels that his reputation is at stake: in the art world, buying a forgery is seen as an embarrassing lapse in judgment. He denies that he threatened to sue, though he admits that he "did push" the Getty. "If in the course of that they then decided it was in their interests to back off their earlier agreement with Turner," he says, "perhaps they used a hypothetical lawsuit to not publish the work." A month later, Turner's lawyer received a second letter, this time from the Getty's lawyer in the States, reminding Turner that the Getty "paid him a significant sum of money" to waive forever any dispute he had against the museum, including his claim that "his predecessor acquired drawings which were not authentic."

Last June, Turner sued again, this time for fraud. The points of contention were Turner's right to reveal the alleged forgeries and the Getty's failure to publish his catalog. "The motivation is truth and scholarly ethics," Turner says. "If you can see that such and such is fake, you've got to say it. It's disastrous to the field otherwise." The case is currently in arbitration.

Not everyone sees Turner's battle in such heroic terms. Eduard Testori, the Milanese dealer, says: "Turner failed at his job, so he is trying to make a lot of publicity. He is poisoned in the world of drawings."

Sara Hyde, former curator of drawings at the Courtauld Institute in London, puts it this way: "Experts see what they want to see. They have tunnel vision. They want to see fakes when they want to discredit their predecessor, and they want to see real when they want to believe."

Just before Christmas, upon learning of this article, Getty lawyers filed a motion with the court-appointed arbitrator in Los Angeles to keep Turner from discussing anything discovered during the case. The Getty argued that arbitration is an inherently confidential proceeding and so Turner should not be permitted to say anything to the media, especially anything about the forgeries. To which the presiding arbitrator replied, "Erin Brockovich was an arbitration," and rejected the Getty's attempt to gag Turner.

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The response of William M. Griswold, director of the department of drawings and prints at the Pierpont Morgan Library, was more typical. He refuses to say anything about the Getty drawings. "I'm not going to go into it," he says. Similarly, Anthony Griffiths, prints and drawings curator at the British Museum, says: "I can't talk about this. I won't say a word about it."

The implications of this controversy are far from trivial. Each year, tens of millions of museumgoers walk through the entrance of the Getty, or the Metropolitan or the Prado or the Hermitage, and never consider the possibility of having to arbitrate for themselves the authenticity of what they have come to see. A museum's meticulous presentation — exhaustive captions, hushed lighting, state-of-the-art armature — creates an institutional authority that is constructed to seem impregnable.

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Turner himself professes bafflement at the Getty's refusal to discuss the matter openly. "So many people have been taken in by Hebborn fakes that it is naïve of the Getty to believe that it is unique in being spared this embarrassment," he says. "During the last 20 years, they've been more active on the drawings market than any other institution. It's inevitable that they'd end up with some fakes."

IN THE OLD MASTER MARKET, 16TH-century drawings are rare. But 14th- and 15th-century drawings are almost unheard-of — and as a result, they generate jealous desire among dealers and curators. Museums in particular value rarity and pedigree more than attractiveness.

This may help explain why the supposed Hebborn fakes inspired interest from Goldner. "There is a snob value attached to having splendid 14th- or 15th-century drawings," Turner explains. "The supposition of a lot of people was that you wouldn't be able to get those drawings. Suddenly, because of Hebborn, you were."

Eric Hebborn was a confidence man with enormous artistic talent and a point to make. Born in 1934, he was a garrulous rogue. Early in his painting career, when he was still making "Hebborns" and signing his name to them, he dealt a little on the side. Brian Sewell, who was an acquaintance of Hebborn's, says that Hebborn began faking art out of anger toward Colnaghi's, among the world's most respected dealers of old master work. Sewell tells the story that one day Hebborn bought a number of drawings in a junk shop for £12, then went immediately to Colnaghi's and sold them for £25. Sometime later, "Hebborn went to an old master drawings exhibition at Colnaghi's, where he saw the same drawings on sale for thousands of pounds," he says. "He was so angry about it that he said he'd have the buggers. And he did. Then he said if he could take Colnaghi's, he could take Christie's and Sotheby's. And he did."

Between the late 1950's and 1996, Hebborn made more than 1,000 drawings and paintings, in a broader range of styles and time periods than any faker in history. He counterfeited the work of many of the most important European artists from the 15th to the 20th centuries. He made ink from authentic ingredients and bought Renaissance-era books and manuscripts to harvest blank pages. In fact, Hebborn targeted artists to fit the paper he found, not the other way around — a brilliant stroke. He meticulously replicated the tiny abrasions and incidental nicks that infect paper and canvas over the centuries. He drank while he worked to relax into the fluidity and grace of the artists he was aping. Some of his forgeries were so good that when he was alive, it was said that they would never be detected unless he chose them to be.

He had help. Many of his creations had been sanctified by the unimpeachable opinion of his onetime intimate and mentor Sir Anthony Blunt, the art historian, director of the Courtauld Institute and surveyor of the queen's picture collection. In 1964, Blunt was unmasked as a Soviet spy, the elusive "fourth man" in the Cambridge espionage ring. (He died in 1983.) Hebborn was coy about Blunt's collusion, saying only that many dealers, including Colnaghi's, bought his fakes on Blunt's advice.

While Blunt tutored Hebborn in the market's unquenchable thirst for Rembrandt, Michelangelo and Poussin, Hebborn made pilgrimages to the print room of the Uffizi in Florence and the British Museum in London. He studied paintings and retroactively faked their conception by concocting backward sequences of studies, from the most careful renderings to the barest sketches. In one case, he studied the painting "The Crowning With Thorns," by the Flemish master Anthony van Dyck, in a museum in Berlin, then made a series of "preparatory studies" by studying and visually collating actual van Dyck sketches, mixing and matching fragments of different works like puzzle pieces until he came up with believable compositions.

"He was unoriginal in a way," Turner says of Hebborn. "He couldn't invent a completely new Raphael figure, for instance — otherwise the public wouldn't know what to latch onto. He modified an existing motif so that he fooled a spectator into thinking that there had been creative thoughts."

Andrew Stewart, a professor of art history at the University of California at Berkeley, says: "The problem with any forged work of art is, if it looks like something we have already, then it's easy to condemn as a fake, as a simple knockoff. If it looks like a whole bunch of things, then you know that the guy drew on a whole bunch of sources. Any innovation is likely to be anachronistic. So the forger's dilemma is, Do you make it like stuff that we have already, and how much?"

Unlike the folk-hero forger Hans van Meegeren, whose "Vermeers" caused a sensation in the 1930's and 40's, Hebborn didn't make "finished masterpieces." Instead, he painstakingly invented sketches, drafts and preparatory studies. The result is a vast body of false knowledge,

Forgeries by Hebborn (shown in 1991) have infiltrated the world's most prestigious institutions.

PHOTOGRAPH BY RAIMONDO LUCIANI/GRANATA PRESS/PHOTO MEDIA

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But by gagging the forgery claim of its own expert, the Getty reveals a museum culture defined as much by commerce, politics and academic provincialism as by a commitment to accurate art history. No one suggests that there is a conspiracy to purchase known forgeries. But once substantive challenges to authenticity are made, for a museum like the Getty to revert to a code of silence seems ill advised.

Turner himself professes bafflement at the Getty's refusal to discuss the matter openly. "So many people have been taken in by Hebborn fakes that it is naïve of the Getty to believe that it is unique in being spared this embarrassment," he says. "During the last 20 years, they've been more active on the drawings market than any other institution. It's inevitable that they'd end up with some fakes."

IN THE OLD MASTER MARKET, 16TH-century drawings are rare. But 14th- and 15th-century drawings are almost unheard-of — and as a result, they generate jealous desire among dealers and curators. Museums in particular value rarity and pedigree more than attractiveness.

This may help explain why the supposed Hebborn fakes inspired interest from Goldner. "There is a snob value attached to having splendid 14th- or 15th-century drawings," Turner explains. "The supposition of a lot of people was that you wouldn't be able to get those drawings. Suddenly, because of Hebborn, you were."

Eric Hebborn was a confidence man with enormous artistic talent and a point to make. Born in 1934, he was a garrulous rogue. Early in his painting career, when he was still making "Hebborns" and signing his name to them, he dealt a little on the side. Brian Sewell, who was an acquaintance of Hebborn's, says that Hebborn began faking art out of anger toward Colnaghi's, among the world's most respected dealers of old master work. Sewell tells the story that one day Hebborn bought a number of drawings in a junk shop for £12, then went immediately to Colnaghi's and sold them for £25. Sometime later, "Hebborn went to an old master drawings exhibition at Colnaghi's, where he saw the same drawings on sale for thousands of pounds," he says. "He was so angry about it that he said he'd have the buggers. And he did. Then he said if he could take Colnaghi's, he could take Christie's and Sotheby's. And he did."

Forgeries by Hebborn (shown in 1991) have infiltrated the world's most prestigious institutions.

Between the late 1950's and 1996, Hebborn made more than 1,000 drawings and paintings, in a broader range of styles and time periods than any faker in history. He counterfeited the work of many of the most important European artists from the 15th to the 20th centuries. He made ink from authentic ingredients and bought Renaissance-era books and manuscripts to harvest blank pages. In fact, Hebborn targeted artists to fit the paper he found, not the other way around — a brilliant stroke. He meticulously replicated the tiny abrasions and incidental nicks that infect paper and canvas over the centuries. He drank while he worked to relax into the fluidity and grace of the artists he was aping. Some of his forgeries were so good that when he was alive, it was said that they would never be detected unless he chose them to be.

He had help. Many of his creations had been sanctified by the unimpeachable opinion of his onetime intimate and mentor Sir Anthony Blunt, the art historian, director of the Courtauld Institute and surveyor of the queen's picture collection. In 1964, Blunt was unmasked as a Soviet spy, the elusive "fourth man" in the Cambridge espionage ring. (He died in 1983.) Hebborn was coy about Blunt's collusion, saying only that many dealers, including Colnaghi's, bought his fakes on Blunt's advice.

While Blunt tutored Hebborn in the market's unquenchable thirst for Rembrandt, Michelangelo and Poussin, Hebborn made pilgrimages to the print room of the Uffizi in Florence and the British Museum in London. He studied paintings and retroactively faked their conception by concocting backward sequences of studies, from the most careful renderings to the barest sketches. In one case, he studied the painting "The Crowning With Thorns," by the Flemish master Anthony van Dyck, in a museum in Berlin, then made a series of "preparatory studies" by studying and visually collating actual van Dyck sketches, mixing and matching fragments of different works like puzzle pieces until he came up with believable compositions.

"He was unoriginal in a way," Turner says of Hebborn. "He couldn't invent a completely new Raphael figure, for instance — otherwise the public wouldn't know what to latch onto. He modified an existing motif so that he fooled a spectator into thinking that there had been creative thoughts."

Andrew Stewart, a professor of art history at the University of California at Berkeley, says: "The problem with any forged work of art is, if it looks like something we have already, then it's easy to condemn as a fake, as a simple knockoff. If it looks like a whole bunch of things, then you know that the guy drew on a whole bunch of sources. Any innovation is likely to be anachronistic. So the forger's dilemma is, Do you make it like stuff that we have already, and how much?"

Unlike the folk-hero forger Hans van Meegeren, whose "Vermeers" caused a sensation in the 1930's and 40's, Hebborn didn't make "finished masterpieces." Instead, he painstakingly invented sketches, drafts and preparatory studies. The result is a vast body of false knowledge, evidence of creative processes that never took place, all in preparation for finished masterworks that in some cases never existed.

Turner first became fascinated with Hebborn in 1990, just after he worked on "Fake?" at the British Museum. Hebborn wrote an angry letter from his studio in Rome to the museum, complaining that none of his fakes had been included in the exhibition. He added, "The British Museum need not have looked far, since there are a few of my works in its drawings collection already — notably the van Dyck 'Crowning With Thorns.'" He then listed some of the world's top dealers of old master drawings and many major museums — including the British Museum and the Metropolitan — among his victims. In his autobiography, published the following year, Hebborn described his targets as "those vulgar, avaricious creatures with good background, smart accents, fine educations and infinite pretensions, who control the art trade from the top and for whom a work of art is as good or bad as the amount it fetches."

"He was seen by some as a hero, but he wasn't a hero," says Eduardo Testori, the Milanese dealer. "Hebborn was a killer of art."

If so, Hebborn met a fitting end. He was killed, his skull crushed, in Rome in January 1996, a few weeks after he published "The Art Forger's Handbook," in which he revealed his techniques in manual form. His killer has not been found.

ONE WAY TO FERRET OUT A FAKE IS THROUGH the technical diagnosis of paintings and drawings — using X-rays or spectroanalysis, for example. With the tools of science, researchers try to determine what truth lies beneath the surface of a work of art. X-rays penetrate solid materials that are opaque to light, so that you can see details of a painting's construction, like an underdrawing or a false start. Spectroanalysis determines the chemical composition of pigments; if a work contains materials not available during the artist's lifetime, it has either been touched up by restorers — or it's a forgery.

But science and connoisseurship often clash. In the face of empirical evidence, a drawing or painting can seem almost fraudulent no matter whose name is on it. We are obsessed with authenticity but still uncertain about how to assess it. Most curators and collectors are unconvinced that empirical evidence is more valuable than a trained eye. Turner's suspicion about the Getty drawings, for example, began with an intuitive alarm about false style and mimicked grace; only then did the drawings wind up in the lab. In the end, proving the genuineness of a work of art is a twisty detective story: part hunch, part connoisseurship and only part forensics.

In 1999, while visiting the Cleveland Museum of Art, Turner identified *Continued on Page 52*

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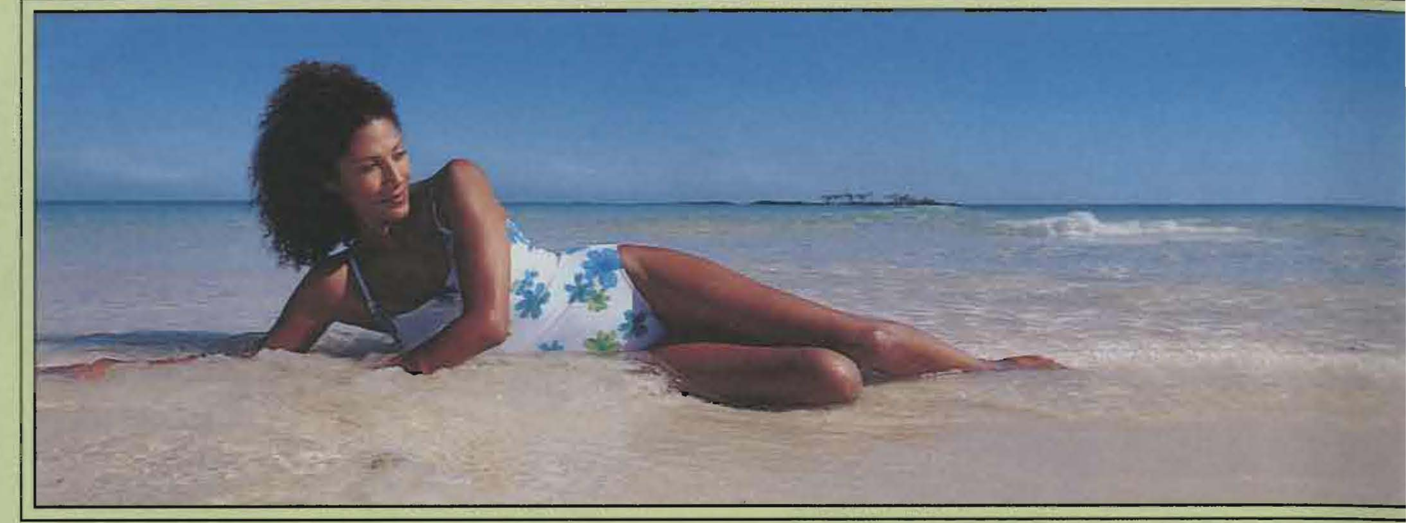

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GETTY

Continued from Page 52

figure of a harp player from the national museum in Athens, then submerged it in a river for six months until it became encrusted in limescale to "age" it.

Until now, the Metropolitan claimed that it had technical evidence of the statue's authenticity — while refusing to divulge it to keep the information from helping future fakers. But in February, it dispatched its curator of Greek and Roman art as well as two conservationists to scrutinize the statue before a witness.

It can take only a single obscure detail, they said, to acquit a work of art. Joan R. Mertens, the curator, pointed out a patch of lighter, smoother stone on the back of the statue's head. She called the patch a "paint ghost" and explained that paint once covering the entire figure had worn off everywhere but this one place, where the marble was brighter. Such an effect could conceivably be faked, Mertens said, *if* a forger in the 1940's, which is when the work was bought by the Metropolitan, had known that Cycladic sculptures had once been painted. (The Cyclades are a group of islands in the Aegean.) But this fact was unknown by scholars until the 1970's, Mertens explained.

"We devote an extraordinary amount of time and effort and concern to presenting our best knowledge," Mertens says. "It doesn't mean it can't be wrong. But it does mean every effort toward the truth has been made."

But if the "paint ghost" is the core of the Metropolitan's defense of the "Harp Player," the statue may well be in trouble. The fact is, paint on classical Greek statuary has been known about since the late 19th century. Thomas Hoving, who until 1977 was director of the Metropolitan, says, "Cycladic sculptures don't have a lot of paint, but some have traces, and this has been known since just before World War II" — which is when Craxton claims the "Harp Player" was made. "Forgers in Greece would have known," Hoving says.

"It's true — it was known that they were painted," says Elizabeth Hendrix, a conservation assistant at the Metropolitan with an expertise in early Cycladic art. She tells of a painted Cycladic head found in Greece in the 1890's. "The real point is that we're never going to know for sure. It's just who's got the evidence that he can argue the better point with."

Told of Hoving's and Hendrix's comments about paint and Cycladic art, Mertens says, "I made an unfortunately broad generalization." She still maintains that the "Harp Player" is authentic. The weathering and the delicate paint ghost on it, she says, would be too difficult to fabricate.

The Metropolitan's director, Philippe de Montebello, does not relish discussing accusations of forgery. In an interview, he lamented that he is never asked about the beauty of art, only about allegations of duplicity. "The public's fascination with forgery is just antiestablishment," he says bitterly, and then points out that the Metropolitan has actively promoted a dialogue with the public about it. Its 1995 "Rembrandt/Not Rembrandt" exhibit focused on the quest to verify Rembrandt's body of work and distinguish it from paintings done by his disciples and by outright fakers. "We are the ones with the competence and the staff," de Montebello says. "Most fakes around the world have been uncovered through the examination by the institutions themselves. Fakes are the lurid subset."

IN JANUARY, THE GETTY PERMITTED its supposed old master forgeries to be seen. The viewing took place under close supervision in a back room, a modern wood library with a view of the sea. All the drawings are figure studies of one sort or another, most of them brown-ink washes. They had been arranged side by side, like a lineup of accomplices to an unknown crime. Present in the room was John Cooke, the museum's spokesman, the affable courier of my questions and of the museum's clipped, unexpansive replies. There was also a "project specialist" named Peggy Fogelman, who handled the drawings with white gloves and moved around the room in grim silence.

My questions about the pictures — about their beauty in some cases, their ugliness in others — were ignored. A few of the drawings, like the one attributed to the circle of Schongauer, didn't seem particularly good. The similarity between the Getty's "Portrait of a Man" and the Bellini drawing in Berlin was striking. The poor proportions and stiff crosshatching common in most of Hebborn's fakes was, to my untrained eye, present in most of the drawings. But the drawings weren't willing to confess "forgery." In the end, there was just paper, chalk and ink.

"It is the misfortune of fakes that they are almost always defined by what they are not, instead of being valued for what they are," Mark Jones says. They are barometers not of genuineness but of surrounding human behavior, from the righteousness of Turner the whistle-blower to the stonewalling of the Getty itself, which offers little by way of a defense or counterclaim. In the end, a forgery's real value is in its role as a record of human frailty.

Nicholas Turner, meanwhile, is no longer a curator of anything. He lives in the tiny rural village of Tilbury-juxta-Clare, about 100 miles northeast of London, in the Stour River Valley, often painted by Constable and about 10 miles from the birthplace of Gainsborough. His eye is still in great demand, but now only as an independent contractor. He works alone in his home, the exiled whistle-blower, advising on private collections and museum exhibitions, writing a book on Renaissance art, out of the range of what he calls "a huge conspiracy among embarrassed people who've been duped."

"I see museums in a completely different light now," he says. "I find the employees caught up in institutional issues, like politics. They're not studying the material as museum professionals, as independent academics. They don't produce scholarship. Museum culture has become much more bureaucratic and caught up in entertainment issues and politics. Big exhibitions

Continued on Page 77

ANSWERS TO PUZZLES

OF MARCH 11, 2001

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GAIL COLLINS: SCORPION TONGUES — Politicians have been a favorite target [of gossip] ... at least since the time of the ancient Greeks, when Athenians speculated that Pericles always kept his helmet on because he was embarrassed about his pear-shaped head.

A. Gratis
B. Aesthete
C. In the act
D. Lutheran
E. Cabana
F. Opsimath
G. Low tide
H. Liberty
I. Impasse
J. New Haven
K. Snorkel
L. Sidestep
M. Cherubim
N. "Orestes"
O. Rap sheet
P. Patio
Q. Isaac
R. Odessa
S. Naphtha
T. The Clash
U. O'Keeffe
V. Naiveté
W. Gandalf
X. Upbeat
Y. Eschew
Z. Siege

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have become a public entertainment. Spectacle has overwhelmed serious study."

But museums have also been falsely accused in the past. The authenticity of a wondrous painting in the Metropolitan by Georges de La Tour, the 17th-century French painter of luminous candlelight and dark, was the source of controversy for years. After exhaustive studies by connoisseurs and conservators, the picture has been accepted as genuine, though it will remain forever marked by the stigma of accusation.

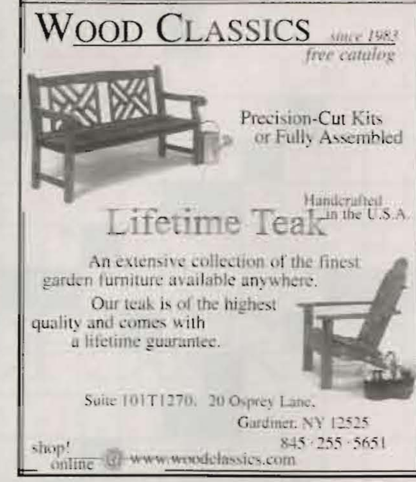
"There are two sins a curator or scholar can commit," says Professor Stewart of U.C. Berkeley. "One is to accuse a genuine work of art as fake, and the other is to authenticate a forgery. The first is much more heinous, to condemn something that someone made in antiquity. You have to consider the rush to judgment, and how quick someone is to impose his own ego on the material."

We want to walk into a museum and know that what we find there is real. "Museums act as a guarantee of the authenticity of what's on display, but the sources of authenticity are decreasing," Jones says. "People are more geographically mobile than their parents were. The past is some sort of fiction. The loss of certainty about what is and what is not real, and the increasing fictionalization of the past, means that museums have found themselves acting as psychic anchors."

And they are built to look the part. The gleaming Getty Center is the proverbial Ivory Tower, perched high above all of Los Angeles. The Metropolitan is an imposing fortress. What is on its walls and in its display cases, Jones says, "provides the reassurance that there is a direct, unarguable, authentic link between us and the past."

But the knowledge that we don't always know what is real — and neither, always, do museums — infects us with doubts that corrupt all of our other dealings with the culturally sacred. Experts are fallible. We have to take responsibility for what we look at.

"If a museum contains things which are inauthentic," Jones says, "then what it is saying becomes a lie." ■



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