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Introduction

FICTIONS OF CAPITAL

Time is the most precious capital, and with it every happiness is acquired, but little by little it dissipates.

—AL-QAZWINI, *The Wonders of Creation and Marvels of Existence*, thirteenth century

Capitalism's fictitious objects have left strange traces in the archives of modern history. In the courts of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Syria, moneylenders circumvented Islamic law's formal proscription on earning interest by inserting imaginary commodities into loan agreements. In contracts for *bay' wafa'* (a type of loan secured against immovable property), fictitious goods enabled creditors to charge and receive interest. In the eighteenth century, these financial fictions were measured in quantities of soap; in the nineteenth, clocks.¹ James Reilly has shown that the "price" of the imaginary clock or watch (*sa'a*) in those nineteenth-century contracts amounted to interest or profit for the creditor, paid to them in monthly installments, with the arrangement openly acknowledged in some documents as an artifice.² Timepieces were presumably chosen for this role because they represented small, eminently exchangeable high-value assets—a neater fiction to conjure into existence than piles of nonexistent soap. It is hard to imagine a better symbol of capitalism's chimeric powers of generation than all those imaginary clocks lying forgotten in court archives, quietly ticking out the accelerating time of money.

This is a book about faking, forging, and fictionalizing medieval ceramics from the Islamic world. It is also a book about extracting, buying, selling, and investing in antiquities, and the curious physical transformations that money can effect upon objects. In the collected corpus of Islamic ceramics, two kinds of history—the long art histories of material objects, and the economic history of the colonial-era Middle East—fuse into each other. Together they tell the story of an entire body of craft skills that has been disavowed, concealed, and forgotten; crafts that have the power to create glamour and enchant onlookers, make the broken become whole, cast the shadows of time where they have not yet fallen, and launch a thousand imagined pasts. Some of the smallest exemplars of these skills, like the little aquamanile explored in depth in chapter 3, have the most to reveal when we attend to them closely (fig. 1.1). But I have opened this book among the imaginary clocks of finance

because they represent the strange structures that beat the heart of the antiquities market. The dizzying instabilities of the modern financial industry and its capacity to create money out of nothing—money that can then disappear again when markets collapse—are important to this story. Even more important than imaginary money, though, is the nature of assets, and what happens when the physical matter of history—here mostly potsherds, but elsewhere manuscripts, architectural decoration, and all the other residues of the physical past—gets translated into numbers and entered onto a balance sheet.

This introduction sets the stage by asking when and how and why people have fabricated and then circulated physical history, especially that which purports to represent the past of the region known conventionally as the Middle East, as well as what we should call it and why it matters. First, it briefly explores the words we use to describe inauthentic artworks, before turning to the political and cultural economies in which they have been created and circulated, and the material challenges faced by those craftspeople who turned their skills to the creation of fictive antiquities. It then explores the reprographic technologies and visual remediation that helped bring both the modern antiquities market and its attendant spectrum of forged, doctored, and fabricated material culture into being. Finally, the introduction returns to the financial industry's extraordinary powers of transubstantiation that turn artifacts into assets, showing how these have underpinned the workings of the antiquities market from the past to the present, underwriting all the subjects of this book in the process.

Fake, Forgery, Fabrication

Every collection of historic ceramics from the Islamic world will contain composite objects, pastiches, and perhaps some whole-cloth forgeries, but not every custodian of those pieces is in a position to tell the stories that hide behind the glamorous surfaces.³ Research in collections and archives requires time and money for travel to far-flung institutions, while technical analysis can be prohibitively expensive and difficult to arrange if you don't have laboratory facilities on your doorstep. More insidious are the barriers to transparency about condition that come from private interests and impact even public museums via donors, dealers, trustees, and the collectors who might one day be persuaded to donate or sell their artworks to the institution. Put bluntly, the collectors' market for Islamic ceramics has a tremendous interest in maintaining the fiction of the intact object, and it is very difficult for scholarship to operate completely outside of that ecology.

A vast range of deceptive modifications have been practiced on the ceramics of the premodern Middle East as they made their way to market, and huge amounts of skilled labor have been expended on making these objects of desire. That labor has rarely been recognized for what it is: a major form of embodied craft skill. The commercial narratives of the antiquities market usually prefer to gloss over modifications, while scholarship has, with a few specialized exceptions, expended most of its energy on parsing out original material from modern interventions and trying to clean the present off the past. Both have tended to ignore the unknown artisans who did this work, frequently treating their art as a distasteful or distracting interruption in the life

of the object. Only a few art historians, Oliver Watson chief among them, have sought transparency about physical condition within the corpus of Islamic ceramics as a means of telling a larger art history of collected objects.⁴ This book, then, is not only about ceramics but also about acknowledging skills that have not yet received their due. It is also about the unstable natures of history and authenticity, and what it means to try to extract those intangible things from physical artifacts that have journeyed through a modern global marketplace. Therefore, the first point of order is to clarify terminology. I attempt to set the terms as simply as possible before turning to the vexed question of how we write about inauthentic artworks.

Almost every study of inauthenticity in art acknowledges the slippery nature of the available terminology, and many authors have laid out their working parameters for words like “fake” and “forgery” at some length. Dictionary definitions are not as helpful as one might hope, but in standard English-language contexts there is an overall difference in tenor between the words “fake” and “forgery.” A fake is something that is not what it purports or is purported to be, and the word can be used for a bewildering variety of things from handbags to body parts to social self-presentation. A forgery is something made in fraudulent imitation of something else with the specific and deliberate intention to deceive. Thus, “fake” is a status that an object could acquire through lots of different routes, including postproduction sleight of hand on the market. The status of forgery, on the other hand, is definitively dependent on the initial intent of the maker(s) at the point of production. For something to be a forgery, it must have been intended from the moment of its inception and creation to be perceived by a human audience as something it is not.⁵

Throughout this book I have reserved the relatively narrow term “forgery” for clear-cut cases where objects have demonstrably been made from scratch with an express intention to deceive. Several such cases are discussed in this introduction. I have veered away from the word “fake,” with its confusingly broad applications, except when referring to general phenomena. “Fake” tends to subsume all nuance and particularity into negative judgment, eliding the very activities that this book seeks to excavate: that is, the physical alteration and invention of historical ceramics for sale on the antiquities market. An extraordinary number of degrees and types of remaking are possible with old ceramics, as this book shows, and determining intention to deceive is often contingent on both material and transactional evidence. To this end, I have favored “fabrication” as a word that brings the material skill and improvisational ingenuity of all such interventions back into view.

There is, of course, a substantial literature on the forgery of art and antiquities, with varied aims and intentions. Much of the writing from the early twentieth century is premised on educating the buying public so they can learn to spot the inauthentic.⁶ Such primers frequently incorporate an element of the “gotcha” narrative, taking pleasure in exposing the tricks that might catch out the unwary. Often, this type of writing lingers over the ingenuity of the forger and the credulity of those who were taken in—especially when the latter were supposed to be experts. The gotcha element in these texts is ostensibly part of a didactic and educational mission to aid potential buyers, but much of the time it seems geared toward entertaining a readership fostered on detective



1.2. T. G. Wakeling, *Forged Egyptian Antiquities* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1912), plate VIII.

fiction and the “indiciary paradigm” of physical clues.⁷ One such example of early forgery literature, T. G. Wakeling’s color-illustrated *Forged Egyptian Antiquities* of 1912, states its mission to be educational—in large part so that experts such as him will be spared the social discomfort of being asked to give opinions on forgeries unwittingly purchased by travelers in Egypt, like the endless new-made “Ancient Egyptian” scarabs being produced by local and European craftsmen (fig. 1.2).⁸ But in reality, most of the audience for this book must have been the library-going public of Great Britain, unlikely to travel to Cairo to buy antiquities but able to enjoy Wakeling’s anecdotes of detective work and exotic roguery from the comfort of their own homes. The twin threads of buyer’s guide and gotcha narrative are intertwined throughout the history of forgery literature as a genre, and have also found expression in a number of exhibitions calling attention to fakes and forgeries in art.⁹

Within the literature of collecting and connoisseurship that surrounds the so-called decorative arts—ceramics, woodwork, metalwork, glass, stone-carving—much of the writing on fakes and forgeries has concerned itself with policing the evidence base and cleansing it of inauthenticities. Less often stated is the rude economic truth underpinning some of those anxieties: exposure of faking and forgery can decimate the financial value of investments. Across the entire globe, the nineteenth- and twentieth-century antiquities markets turned historical artifacts into financial assets. The “decorative arts”



I.3. Leopoldo Batres, *Antigüedades mejicanas falsificadas: Falsificación y falsificadores* (Mexico City: Fidencio S. Soria, 1910), plate 5.

were extracted from every corner of the earth, creating new industries of faking and forgery, and with them, new genres of writing about inauthenticity.¹⁰ The 1910 publication of Leopoldo Batres's book *Antigüedades mejicanas falsificadas*, with over two hundred objects from the Museo Nacional de México illustrated in photographic plates, exemplifies one of the didactic strains in forgery study. Through its text and illustrations the book makes itself a specimen cabinet of paradigmatic falsifications, as the author parses the inventory of the museum's archaeological collections, sifting new antiquities from old and establishing his own authority as the adjudicator of authenticity.¹¹ It even includes photographs of the Barrios brothers of San Juan Teotihuacan with the molds they used for manufacturing new-made "antiquities" from earthenware, giving a rare glimpse of individual craftsmen and their modes of working within a frenetic antiquities market (fig. I.3).

Finally, there is another distinct strand in art forgery studies that has tended to focus on the philosophical implications of forgery, riffing on the borderlines between truth and falsehood.¹² A small group of celebrity painting forgers come up over and over again within this subgenre, especially Hans Van Meegeren and Elmyr de Hory, the latter being the focus of Orson Welles's film *F for Fake*. More recent figures, including Wolfgang Beltracchi and Pei-Shen Qian, are surely already being incorporated into this canon as well.¹³ This branch of forgery literature delights in staging the forger as a master trickster, a twisted genius making collectors and institutions dance to his tune and leading us all into an existential hinterland of unstable realities. Within this celebratory discourse the forger is always a man, and most often a white European. This particular branch of writing about art forgery may offer a certain kind of entertainment, but it does not generate a lot of insights among the so-called decorative arts. These usually come to us unauthored and therefore,

forged or not, cannot be turned so easily into fodder for narratives of individual genius.

The question of creators looms large in this book, although they remain elusive. The invisible hands of colonial-era ceramics fabrication are usually not filled out with names, identities, families, or written records of what those craftspeople thought about the world they lived in and the work they did. We can catch stray glimpses of them, however, in the background of certain episodes from the history of antiquities forgery, and it is to such concrete episodes that this introduction now turns. The motivations for creating and circulating new “antiquities” that supposedly originated in the ancient and medieval Middle East have been many and various. For the Europeans and North Americans who constituted the primary market for most such ventures from the second half of the nineteenth century onward, the Middle East was a region of the mind that mixed together the Holy Land of Biblical origins, Europe’s exotic “Other,” and a vast quarry for the extraction of history. When those projective desires met local craft knowledge, the result was a market in fabricated history.

Writing New Histories in Stone and Clay

The modern science of archaeology developed in part out of quests by European Christians to confirm the veracity of the Bible. This created a special platform for forgeries that purported to confirm or invoke Biblical history, especially those that bore “ancient” writing. By the era of the European Enlightenment, when texts and material objects were becoming formalized as evidentiary categories and collecting cultures were starting to solidify into structured markets, quests for Biblical proof were already giving rise to forgeries. Sometimes these were made far from the Holy Land itself. One of the great hoaxes of the eighteenth century was the Lügensteine (“lying stones”) created in 1725 to dupe Johann Bartholomew Beringer (1667–1740). These falsified fossils were manufactured by Beringer’s colleagues at Würzburg University and distributed around Mount Eibelstadt for his specimen seekers to find, with the express intention of discrediting and humiliating Beringer. (Academics can be so cruel.) The prank became a career-damaging scandal when Beringer decided to publish his remarkable collection as a book, complete with printed plates. In addition to highly fanciful carvings of insects, plants, animals, and even heavenly bodies petrified in stone, one group of the Lügensteine comprised, in Beringer’s words, “magnificent tablets engraved in Latin, Arabic, and Hebrew characters with the ineffable name of Jehova” (fig. 1.4).¹⁴ The nature of fossil formation being as yet undetermined, Beringer speculated that these characters could have been formed through the action of light carrying impressions of words and imprinting them onto matter—an idea that must have seemed no more or less incredible than other theories of immanent geological trace emerging in the fevered academic environment of eighteenth-century Europe.¹⁵ The state of flux around fundamental questions of matter, belief, and the legibility of stones made the Lügensteine hoax possible in the same instant that it also made Beringer’s acceptance of it risible among his peers.



I.4. Johan Bartholomäus Adam Beringer, *Lithographiae Wirceburgensis, Ducentis Lapidum Figuratorum* (Würzburg: Mark Anton Engmann for Philipp Wilhelm Fuggart, 1726), plate 7.

One hundred and thirty-five years after the Lügensteine were carved, two stones inscribed with Hebrew script (both modern and archaic) were supposedly found in earthworks in Ohio in 1860. The most famous of these is the so-called Decalogue Stone (fig. 1.5), an arch-shaped piece of black limestone carved with an inscription in archaicizing Hebrew characters and a vaguely Near Eastern-ish image of a standing man (the latter quite possibly cribbed from *Discoveries Among the Ruins of Nineveh and Babylon*, published in 1853 by Sir Austen Henry Layard, English excavator and founding chairman of the board of the first Ottoman Bank).¹⁶ Although the Ohio stones were quickly recognized as forgeries in some quarters, in others they were heralded as proof of a theory that the earthworks and mound structures of pre-Columbian North America were built not by indigenous peoples but by the Lost Tribes of Israel.¹⁷ The Ohio stones were created at a time when archaeology was in its infancy in the United States and arguments about the origins of humanity—and especially the nature of “the races”—were violently animated by the immediate political issue of slavery.¹⁸ Risible as the Lost Tribes theory may sound to some, it is a foundational tenet of that remarkable document of nineteenth-century American religious fervor, *The Book of Mormon*. The



1.5. Decalogue Stone, carved limestone. United States, ca. 1860. Johnson-Humrickhouse Museum, Coshocton, Ohio.

Decalogue Stone might originally have been a prank, like Beringer's Lügensteine, but it has come to be an object of belief that represents a deeply held version of history.

As the creators of the Lügensteine and the Ohio Decalogue Stone well knew, carved stone inscriptions carry their own authority within Judeo-Christian environments, where the archetype of the stone tablets of Moses is reliably present in the collective consciousness. Stonecarving is, however, very difficult to do skillfully—see the clumsy letters on the Decalogue Stone—and it is easy to see why antiquities forgers might favor more plastic media.¹⁹ After encountering these two early forgeries crafted in stone to serve as “evidence” in intellectual and theological debates, it is striking that large-scale market-driven forgeries of the later nineteenth century were often conducted through clay. In theory, unglazed earthenware presents the least technically demanding medium of pottery forgery, but its deceptive simplicity has lured some craftspeople and dealers into overestimating their own ability to turn a convincing modern forgery out onto the market—especially in the perennially appealing realm of the figurine.²⁰

In the 1870s and '80s, hundreds of so-called Asiatic Terracotta forgeries of Greek earthenware sculptural figurines were offered for sale to European

and Ottoman collectors (fig. 1.6).²¹ The scale of production and success of the deception was such that some 20 percent of the figurines of this type in the Berlin Antikensammlung have been shown by thermoluminescence testing (see chapter 5) to be modern creations.²² Certain private collectors fared even worse: all fifteen of the figure groups of this type bought by the Havemeyer family of New York are now thought to be modern.²³ The identities of the craftspeople responsible for the forged Asiatic Terracottas were never settled, but Athens has been suggested as the likely point of origin. Hypotheses of the time included an Italian with high-level training in sculpture who established a forgery workshop in the city that then undid itself through its own overproduction. One wonders, however, if this projection of Italian artistic supremacy over Greek is based on evidence, prejudice, or a mixture of the two.²⁴

The late nineteenth-century Asiatic Terracottas illustrate an important material truism of ceramics forgery, one that appears again in this book. They sometimes incorporate deliberate fractures and repairs, which can be an integral part of the forger's process.²⁵ In the twentieth century, forged antiquities were sometimes even given to professional restorers in a damaged state so their reconstruction from fragments would be documented, making the restorer into a witting or unwitting "launderer" of authenticity.²⁶ In the case of the Asiatic Terracotta forgeries, one identifiable characteristic is a tendency—against all logic—for the breaks in the earthenware body to lie on the backs and bases of the figurines and not on projecting parts, or for heads and arms to be delicately broken off and reattached without any disfiguring



1.6. So-called Asiatic Terracotta forgery, fired earthenware with pigment. Probably Greece, late 19th century. Height 25.5 cm. Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Museum, 1920.44.98, Gift of the Misses Norton.

loss of material. As a contemporary commentator noted, “[the modern craftsmen] had not the heart to damage the more dignified portions of their works, the freely-modelled parts that had cost them so much trouble. We see, therefore, in spurious figures and groups fractures which confine themselves, in a manner contrary to all reason, to the base or the back of the figures or groups, while they dexterously avoid the heads, hands, wings, fans and other projecting portions.”²⁷

Salim al-Kari, Islam Akhun, and the Value of the Past

Around the same time that the unknown creators of the Asiatic Terracottas were laboring over their figurines, the lure of unglazed earthenware led a Jerusalem artist named Salim al-Kari and his collaborator, the antiquities dealer and sometime missionary Moses Wilhelm Shapira (1830–1884), to invent an entire material history in clay. Like the creators of the Asiatic Terracottas, they might possibly have escaped detection for longer if they had not produced such large quantities of material. Al-Kari, whose name identifies him as a craftsman (from the Arabic *kar*, meaning work or workmanship), was an Arab Christian with a business making icon paintings to sell to the Orthodox Christian pilgrims who streamed to the city of Jerusalem.²⁸ His partner-in-production Shapira is now remembered mainly for his role in a Biblical papyrus forgery of 1883. Shapira was born to a Jewish family in what is now Ukraine before migrating to Jerusalem and converting to Protestant Christianity in the mid nineteenth century.²⁹ As is shown in chapter 1, these points of religious and ethnic identity have potential significance in the turn-of-the-century antiquities market.

Al-Kari and Shapira’s intervention into the rising antiquities market of the 1870s was sparked by the excitement surrounding a genuine ancient artifact, the Moabite stele. This black stone slab, found in Dhiban (in modern-day Jordan), first came to antiquarian attention in 1868. It was inscribed in an ancient Semitic language in the ninth century BCE; its content, which parallels the Biblical account of the Moabite king Mesha, was immediately seized upon as confirmation of the veracity of the Bible. Recognizing the frenzied desire among European collectors for more of the same, al-Kari and Shapira began in 1872 to manufacture thousands of modern Moabite artifacts, a large tranche of them being bought by the Royal Museum in Berlin in 1873. Charles-Simon Clermont-Ganneau, a French dragoman (translator for merchants and government agents) living in Jerusalem, unmasked the affair and exposed al-Kari and Shapira’s fraud in a series of publications. He tracked al-Kari’s activities through conversations with the potters of Jerusalem, who told him that al-Kari and his father used local clay to create figurines and tablets to which al-Kari added pseudo-Canaanite characters. Many of these characters were copied from the genuine inscription on the Moabite stele but applied to the pottery in mostly nonsensical order. By Clermont-Ganneau’s report, al-Kari also worked with local potters who made wheel-thrown vessels for him, which he then adorned with “inscriptions” before firing the pieces in their kilns. The pottery was artificially aged after firing by soaking it in a nitrate solution to mimic deposits found in the soil at the area of its purported discovery.³⁰ Shapira and al-Kari even went as far as staging excavations in the 1870s,



I.7. *Moabite Pottery in Mr. Shapira's Shop*. Photograph by H. H. Kitchener, 1874. Palestine Exploration Fund, PEF-P-5111.

with their new-made antiquities carefully buried beforehand, to demonstrate the authenticity of their goods to excited buyers.³¹

Records of the “Moabite” pottery made by al-Kari and sold by Shapira survive in a remarkable group of drawings and watercolor paintings made by a British lieutenant named Claude R. Conder. To judge from the paintings by Conder, Shapira’s stock included not only the public-facing figurines recorded in two surviving photographs (fig. I.7), but also a backroom supply of sexual subject matter (fig. I.8). Five extant sheets of Conder’s paintings are labeled “Phallic”—some of them also annotated “not to be published”—and depict animate phalluses, figures with exaggerated genitalia, and a startlingly graphic earthenware pudendum.³² Conder’s paintings and the surviving photographs of Shapira’s Moabite stock reveal inventive hands at work in clay, trying to create things that looked convincingly “primitive.” And yet the pieces now immediately betray nineteenth-century sensibilities, especially when viewed *en groupe*. This is evident not only in the prurient subjects and the oddly modern-looking hooded eyes of some of the figures, but also in the exaggerated presence of outsize, undamaged letters on the front and back of the objects, applied in barbotine or incised into the clay body. Tellingly, it is as if the inscriptions had been intended from the outset for mediation through print or photographic reproduction, for the delectation of philologists and armchair travelers.³³ The creators of these modern “Moabite” materials likely drew upon the hodgepodge of available reproductions of ancient artifacts coming to light in the arms race of nineteenth-century archaeology



in the Holy Land and Mesopotamia, in addition to firsthand viewings of the Moabite stone itself.³⁴

Perhaps inevitably, Shapira's name has come to have its own luster on the market. As Michael Press has shown, objects that may have nothing to do with him are now promoted and sold as "Shapira forgeries."³⁵ The trope of the lone male forger-genius is so appealing, and so powerfully lodged in the modern imagination, that it tends to bend the evidence around it to fit itself. It also carries some distinctly racialized baggage. When Clermont-Ganneau wrote up his investigation of the Moabite pottery in tones of high indignation in the late nineteenth century, he was confident the main craftsman and real mastermind of the episode was al-Kari—in spite of the somewhat predictable protestations from some European commentators that "it is impossible to conceive that an Arab created these quantities of statuettes and vases covered with Moabite inscriptions."³⁶ But when the affair has been presented in more recent writings as an enjoyable trickster romp, the portion of genius has accrued to Shapira. In recent accounts al-Kari has become Shapira's mute factotum, the unthinking hands to Shapira's brain.³⁷ It is a striking truth of antiquities forgeries that the indigenous craftsman may be permitted center stage when blame is being apportioned, but once the balance has settled in favor of genius, he will usually be eclipsed by the nearest white or white-approximating man, often an extraterritorial dealer or equivalent figure.

That said, one of few subaltern figures of the colonial era who is now recognized in the annals of forgery in his own right is Islam Akhun (active ca. 1894–1901). At the eastern end of the Islamic world, the oasis town of Khotan in modern-day Xinjiang became a locus for foreign collectors at the end of the nineteenth century as the British and Russian empires played out the territorial maneuvers of the Great Game.³⁸ Observing the prices foreigners would pay for the historical manuscripts that had started to come to light in the Taklamakan desert—and that none of those foreign buyers could read the pages they were so keen to acquire—Islam Akhun and his collaborators manufactured a series of manuscripts written in made-up scripts. At first these were handwritten, before someone realized blockprinting on artificially aged paper was a more efficient means of production (fig. 1.9). One report from the time tells that the woodblocks were prepared by a cotton-printer, giving a tantalizing glimpse of local craft knowledge, tools, and materials being repurposed to the new commodity system of the global antiquities market.³⁹

For a few years Islam Akhun and company were able to sell a substantial number of these forged manuscripts and woodblock books to foreign diplomats and travelers, before suspicions became too great. In 1901 the Hungarian British traveler Aurel Stein confronted Islam Akhun with the deception and induced him to tell the whole story, which Stein then published.⁴⁰ More recent research shows that Islam Akhun's workshop did not limit itself to the now well-known manuscript and blockprint forgeries, but also produced and sold fired earthenware objects.⁴¹ Forgeries of antique earthenware figurines and vessels were being made concurrently in Russian Turkestan, and it is hardly surprising that Islam Akhun and his workshop would have tried their hand at earthenware figurines as well.⁴² The most arresting to come to light so far is the wonderful and absurd figurine of the evil king Zahhak of Persian myth, held in the Hermitage Museum since its acquisition in the early

I.S. Claude R. Conder, *Ashtaroth? Mr. Shapira's Collection, Jerusalem*. Watercolor painting. Jerusalem, 1872. Palestine Exploration Fund, PEF-PI-233.



1.9. Islam Akhun and workshop, manuscript forgery, woodblock print on paper. Sold to George Macartney in Kashgar, 1896. Length 21 cm. British Library, Or.13873/2.

twentieth century from Nikolai Fyodorovich Petrovsky (1837–1908), Russian consul to Kashgar (fig. 1.10). The large scale and unwieldy form of this figure must have presented serious challenges for firing, and its successful execution certainly attests to the involvement of knowledgeable potters. Painstaking research by Pavel Lurje and his colleagues has revealed the path traveled by this and related earthenware objects now in St. Petersburg and Berlin, a path that leads back directly to the Khotan workshops of Islam Akhun and his collaborators.⁴³ Thermoluminescence testing in 2013 confirmed what stylistic analysis and archival research already announced: the Zahhak figurine was last fired between 100 and 150 years ago, and is not an antiquity but a modern forgery. Most interesting is a point raised by the Russian scholars: the Khotan Zahhak forgery is neither a direct imitation of any genuine historical material nor one aligned along the edges of any identifiable categories of local antiquity. Rather, it is a creation of the imagination built from ideas about the pre-Muslim past of the region that were held by its late nineteenth-century Muslim inhabitants.⁴⁴ Unglazed, fired earthenware proved to be the perfect plastic medium for confecting a highly imaginative piece of physical history that could be sold to eager agents of empire.

In economic environments where the artifacts of the past had some monetary value in immediate society but enormous value to foreigners, Salim al-Kari, Islam Akhun, and others correctly estimated that successful forgeries could be made from base materials with some local exchange value but no international worth, like clay, wood, and paper. The abstract financial value of antiquity was thus successfully embodied, via the labor of colonial-era craftspeople, into new commodities. Sometimes those workshops amalgamated different historical epochs into their products. An undated glass negative shows a particularly curious example of historical blending in Islamic ceramics forgery (fig. 1.11). The plate comes from the archives of Antoin Sevruguin (1851–1933), a Russian of Armenian-Georgian descent who ran a successful photography business in Tehran in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is one of a set that show historic ceramics photographed in studio settings, including vessels and dishes that were in the possession of well-known dealers by 1910 and 1912.⁴⁵ The photographs were presumably com-



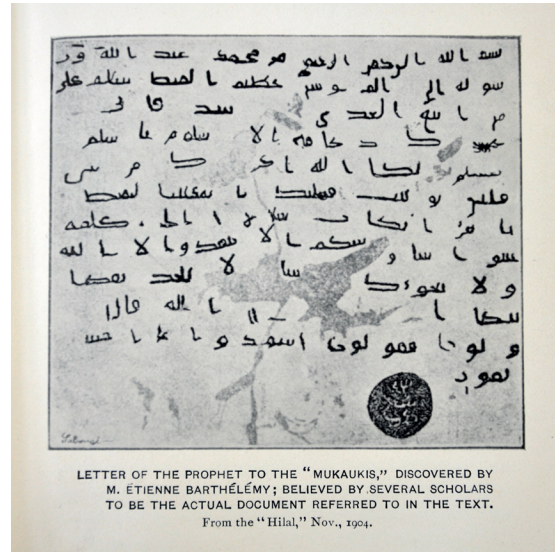
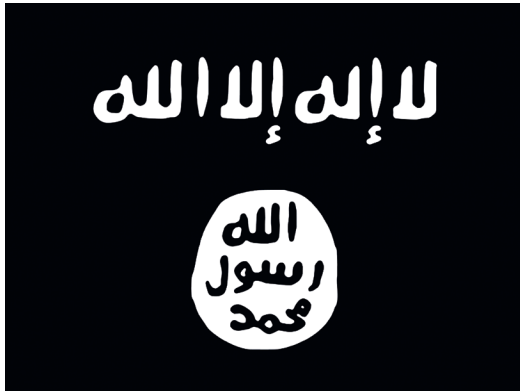
I.10. Islam Akhun and workshop, Zohhak figurine, fired earthenware. Khotan, late 19th century. Height 61 cm. State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, ГA-3053.

missioned before 1910 for circulation on the market to potential buyers and they were probably taken in Sevruguin's Tehran studio.

The appearance of the large monochrome glazed jar in the center of the negative plate clearly indicates that it was created in the modern era and intended to look archaic. The processes of making (and identifying) fabrications and forgeries are treated at length in chapter 3; here it is enough to say that questions are immediately raised by the very crudely rendered turbaned figures, birds, and animals that have been pastily applied to the body of the jar. These do not fit with any known ceramics tradition from the premodern Islamic world and look more like pastrywork than a potter's art.⁴⁶ The problems do not stop with the figural imagery. Like some of the Asiatic Terracottas, the jar has been deliberately broken into large pieces before being ostentatiously stuck back together, making a show of its fragmentation without causing it to sustain any actual loss. Finally, and most startlingly, a curious addition sutures a much older historical period into an otherwise vaguely medievalizing invention. The characters around the neck of the jar are obviously intended to mimic the cuneiform script of ancient Near Eastern clay tablets, a script used from around 3000 BCE to the first century CE. They have, however, been made at an enlarged scale and in positive by applying strips of clay onto the surface of the jar, in contrast to real cuneiform which is inscribed



I.11. Studio photograph of ceramics. Positive image from glass plate negative, probably taken before 1910 in Tehran. Antoin Sevruguin/National Museum of Asian Art Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Myron Bement Smith Collection, Gift of Katharine Dennis Smith, 1973–85, FSA_A.04.2.12.GN.26.05.



by pressing into a clay surface with a wedge-shaped stick. The out-of-scale pseudocuneiform characters around the neck surely derive from print reproductions of ancient inscriptions and, like the Moabite forgeries, they seem to anticipate the jar's own remediation and circulation through photography and print media. They may well have been drawn from the images of cuneiform inscriptions found in the publications of the Iranian scholar Fursat al-Dawla (1854–1920), such as his 1896 *Asar-i 'ajam*.⁴⁷

The mawkish cuneiform jar seems to have sunk without trace sometime after its photographic portrait was made in Tehran, or at least, I have not been able to trace it. Latter-day fundamentalists have, however, ensured that the nineteenth-century heyday of market forgeries in Middle Eastern antiquities will continue to resound in the present. The scandalous mess of looted artifacts, new-made “antiquities,” and forged documentation at the Museum of the Bible looks set to continue unfolding—and generating new forgeries—for years to come.⁴⁸ But the acquisitive greed of collectors is not the only route by which religious forgeries continue to have traction. Around the same time that the Museum of the Bible's founder, Steve Green, was asking no questions about his newly acquired antiquities, the neocaliphal terrorist group ISIS adopted a nineteenth-century forgery as the central device of their official flag (fig. I.12).

The so-called seal of Muhammad was imprinted on a letter that purported to be an original document sent from the Prophet Muhammad to the governor of Egypt in the seventh century. The subject of huge excitement when it was “discovered” in Egypt in 1854 and subsequently sold to the Ottoman sultan in 1858, the letter enjoyed only a few years of celebrity before the consensus started to turn against its authenticity. It is now recognized by most experts as a forgery, quite possibly manufactured by its “discoverer,” a Frenchman called Etienne Barthélémy. The emblem on the ISIS flag is in fact a remediation at several removes from Barthélémy's fraud, being copied not from the document itself but from early twentieth-century drawings of it that subsequently gave rise to further copies in physical and digital media (fig. I.13).

I.12. Flag of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and other terrorist organizations.

I.13. So-called Letter from the Prophet to the Muqawqis of Egypt, after a drawing published in *Hilal*, 1904. D. S. Margoliouth, *Mohammed and the Rise of Islam* (New York/London: Putnam/Knickerbocker Press, 1905).

As Ahmed El Shamsy observed in his study of the flag, “Countless postcolonial states were built on colonial mythologies created and developed by Orientalist scholars. Yet the fact that the Islamic State—a group obsessed with its own authenticity and freedom from outside influences—fell for a 150-year-old European fraud is not without irony.”⁴⁹

Perhaps, though, it is not so much ironic as inevitable. The modern fetishization of authenticity and evidentiary proof and the conversion of that impulse into tangible material is, after all, what brought the Lügensteine and the seal of Muhammad alike into existence.⁵⁰ And when the “evidentiary impulse” of modernity meets the commodity systems of late imperial capitalism—the same systems that shaped the colonial states of the Middle East and their economies—the outcome is inescapable. The market will produce tangible objects that meet the desires of consumers, titillating them with artifacts that support their preferred version of history and offering them the chance to hold that desired past in their hands and wield it. The “seal of Muhammad” proved attractive to nineteenth-century collectors and twenty-first-century fundamentalists alike because it looks so satisfyingly archaic—the result of its having been created for a modern world that equates the appearance of antiquity with the latter-day virtue of authenticity.

F for Photography

Already in this introduction, the technologies of print and photography have surfaced several times as vital components in the translation of artifacts to commodities. The inbuilt relationship between photography, print publication, and the collectors’ market in fine ceramics is visible from the very start of the new technology. The first fascicle of the first photographically illustrated book, William Henry Fox Talbot’s *The Pencil of Nature* (1844–46), gives two of its five plates over to the carefully arranged contents of collection cabinets. One of these is devoted entirely to glazed fine ceramics (fig. 1.14). The objects have been arranged on dark shelves, carefully prepared to provide a strong contrast with the pale forms of the pieces. Although they mimic the appearance of an opened cabinet in a stately drawing room, the photographs were in fact taken outdoors—quite possibly in the courtyard at Lacock Abbey, Talbot’s ancestral home.⁵¹ The resulting plates are, simultaneously, luminous records of the new technology’s capacity to render reflective surfaces and precise details of design, and documentary inventories of commodities.

Talbot himself recognized documentation of property as one of the great potentials of the new medium, specifically citing it as a potential application of photography in his comments accompanying the image of the china cabinet. He writes that “The more strange and fantastic the forms of [the collector’s] old teapots, the more advantage in having their pictures given instead of their descriptions. And should a thief afterwards purloin the treasures—if the mute testimony of the picture were to be produced against him in court—it would certainly be evidence of a novel kind.”⁵² Photography was thus immediately and presciently identified by Talbot as having an evidentiary function in both a particular legal sense—the hypothetical trial of a thief—and the more generalized aspect of documenting property and validating ownership. Thus, in the first book to be published with photographic illustrations, owner-



I.14. "Articles of China."
Photograph by William
Henry Fox Talbot, 1844.
The Pencil of Nature (1844),
plate III, fascicle 1. Getty
Museum Collection,
84.XZ.572.

ship of fine ceramics acts as the premier means for demonstrating photography's potential documentary value to those who collect and own art and antiquities.⁵³

Talbot's image is directly analogous to country-house practices of visible storage for collected objects of "decorative art," whereby a china cabinet becomes a kind of visual inventory for an owner who will notice if something goes missing from his "stock." In the photograph, the absence of any indication of the surrounding supports for the shelves—which may well have been rather makeshift and unattractive—advances the ceramics themselves into a realm of pure commodification, abstracted from much real sense of physical setting or potential use.⁵⁴ The image of the china cabinet received favorable comment from audiences of the time. Reviewers noted the precision with which the photographic process had been able to render individual objects entirely legible in form and pattern in spite of their tiny dimensions on the page, the author of the *Athenaeum* review even observing that they "improve under examination with a powerful lens."⁵⁵ The connoisseur's eye had found a new training ground.

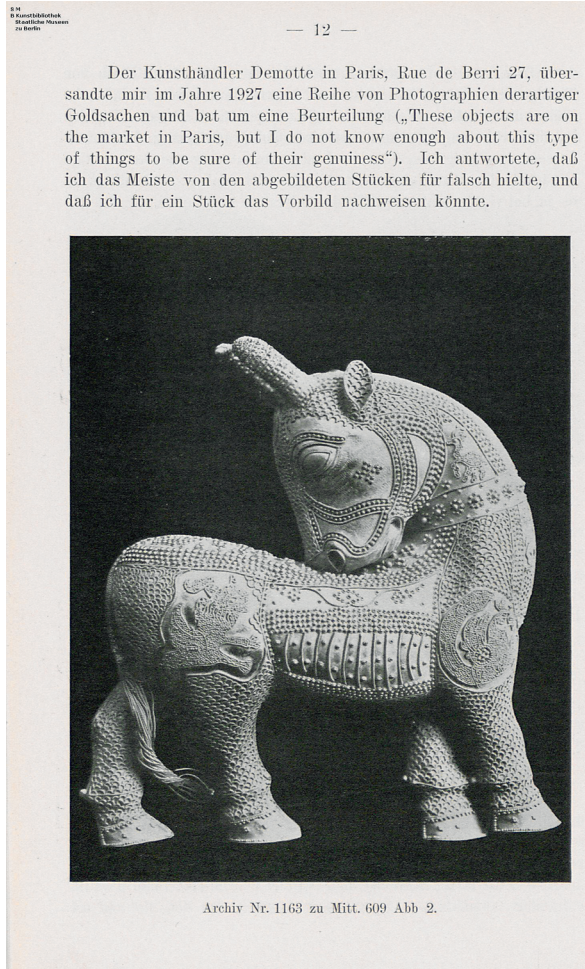
Prescient though he was about the usefulness of photography for documenting art ownership, Talbot perhaps did not foresee another, closely related paradigm shift that photography would enable—that is, the massive acceleration of the forger's art. The business of faking and forging art and antiquities is, as seen in chapter 1, quite old; however, the expansion of print and above all photography accelerated such practices exponentially.⁵⁶ To trace the colossal impact of photography on practices of forgery and fabrication, we must turn to the pages of a most unusual early twentieth-century publication. The *Mitteilungen des Museen-Verbandes als Manuskript für die Mitglieder* (Communications of the Museum Association in Manuscript for Members,

hereafter the *Mitteilungen*) was privately printed in Hamburg from 1899 to 1939 for the Association of Museum Officials for Defence against Fakes and Improper Business Practices.⁵⁷ The journal circulated to a membership of museum directors and curators in Germany and elsewhere in Europe who met annually; the society also maintained in Hamburg, and subsequently in Berlin, a physical archive of photographs and documentation of suspected or proven art forgeries, cross-referenced in the reports circulated in the *Mitteilungen*. The archive disappeared in World War II, probably destroyed in Allied bombing, but copies of the publications survive. Oliver Watson, as curator at the Victoria and Albert Museum, had access to the secret journal through the museum's library holdings and was the first to make use of it in the study of Islamic ceramics forgery.⁵⁸ Today the entire run of the journal has been digitized by Heidelberg University and provides an extraordinary record of the prewar antiquities market's shadow side.

Created as a private route for sharing information about forgeries being offered for sale and the means of their detection, the entries in the *Mitteilungen* range from brief warnings about specific objects to full transcriptions of lectures. In the earliest years of its publication, the expected code of confidentiality among the journal's subscribers seems to have been taken as read. From 1903 onward, however, all issues include a stern masthead notice reminding readers that "the association expects its members not to deposit [copies of the journal] in libraries and to take precautions to prevent the association's printed matter falling into unauthorized hands or even into the trade."⁵⁹ The game of cat and mouse between museums and forgers was on, and each side was trying to stay one step ahead of the other by keeping secret what it knew.

Information was prime currency in this scramble. The *Mitteilungen* made it possible for museum directors and curators to share not just the names, locations, and sales pitches of those trying to sell goods that weren't what they claimed them to be, but also the techniques being used in manufacture and the means by which those could be detected. At first the journal was not illustrated, but as reprographic capabilities expanded through the first decades of the twentieth century, photographic illustrations appeared more frequently. In word and image, the four-decade print run of the journal exposes an extraordinary range of suspect material swirling in the eddies of the market: prehistoric tools, Japanese woodcuts, Swiss furniture, Roman bronzes, Bohemian glass, Italian relief carving, and every kind of ceramic from Spain to China. Virtually everything that collectors desired would turn up faked, sooner or later. Reading through the entries, it becomes clear that print publication and especially photographic reproduction were the engines that drove it all. Time and again the expert reports note that models used by forgers can be identified with reproductions in books, from the designs on new-made Attic vases to "prehistoric" engravings on fragments of bone.⁶⁰ Print and photography were important means by which information could be shared among those seeking to detect forgeries, but they were also the fabricator's best friends.

A particularly neat illustration of the fabricator's reliance on published photographs can be seen in a rather Disneyesque bull figurine published in the journal in 1929 by the scholar of Islamic art and curator of the Islamic department in the Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum in Berlin, Friedrich Sarre (fig. I.15).



I.15. Forged figurine in gold, offered on the market in 1927. After Friedrich Sarre, “609. Persian Style Forged Precious Metal Work,” *Mitteilungen des Museen-Verbandes als Manuskript für die Mitglieder* (May 1929), p. 12.

Made from gold and supposedly found at Rayy in northern Iran, it was offered for sale by the Paris dealer Demotte in 1927—right around the same time that other gold figurines and large-scale figural sculptures in stucco, all of purported medieval Iranian origin, were circulating through European and North American dealer networks.⁶¹ Medieval Iran was having a “sculpture moment” on the market. The curious proportions of the bull figurine, with stumpy legs and a huge head turned backward, make sense only when one reads Sarre’s note in the 1929 volume of the *Mitteilungen*. He points out that the modern maker of this object was probably working from a photograph of a relief-carved bull at Persepolis that had been published in Sarre’s own book, *Arts of Ancient Persia*, in 1922 (fig. I.16). In the book, Sarre’s published photograph of the Persepolis relief had cropped out the lion that attacks the bull from behind, leaving much of the composition obscure and forcing the forger to make up a body for the creature while adapting the head from that of the contorted bull in the frieze.⁶²

Modern reprographics and the ever-increasing circulation of photographic images in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries generated more and more models for copyists to work from.⁶³ But photography was more than

schatz stammender Zylinder ist wegen seiner zwiefachen Darstellung, die den König zweimal im Kampf wiedergibt, von Interesse. Der symmetrische Aufbau der figurenreichen Szene ist besonders bemerkenswert, wird aber bei einem Zylinder des Berliner Kabinetts noch übertroffen, wo der König auf zwei bärtigen gekrönten Flügelsphinxen steht und in gestreckten Armen Löwen an ihren Hinterbeinen hinaushält, die in ohnmächtiger Wut mit aufgerissenen Rachen den Kopf nach oben wenden. Die Dattelpalme daneben erinnert an den Dareioszylinder. Diese drei Zylinder dürften wegen ihres etwas nüchternen, den persepolitischen Reliefs ganz entsprechenden Stiles als persische Arbeiten anzusprechen sein. Daneben gibt es eine große Anzahl von Stücken, deren Motive gleichfalls persisch sind, deren freiere und mehr individuelle Behandlung aber die Hand von ionischen, in persischen Diensten arbeitenden Künstlern verrät, die sich ganz der höfisch persischen Auffassung anzupassen verstanden.



Abb. 4. Stier von einem Relief in Persepolis
Vergrößerung, vgl. Tafel 21

I.16. Relief carving at
Persepolis in Friedrich
Sarre, *Die Kunst des alten
Persien* (Berlin: Bruno
Cassirer Verlag, 1922).

just a sump of raw material for the forger. Increasingly, it was also the instrument of passage from physical object to virtual commodity. The identification of artifacts with their photographic images—images that tended to monumentalize their subjects through certain conventions of lighting, angle, and scale⁶⁴—meant that the photograph became the premier document of commodity ownership, just as Talbot had foreseen. Moreover, it also meant that ownership was no longer mediated solely or even primarily through the physical object; rather, it was mediated through the image of the object. Within the commodity system of the antiquities circuit, representation through print and photographic imaging increasingly substituted for—and ultimately eclipsed—the physical presence of the object.⁶⁵ As one recent scholar of Iranian art has succinctly put it, “Exhibitions come and go and what remains is a catalogue.”⁶⁶ This commodification of physical artifacts—the process that turns them into assets of virtual value, mediated by their own images—brings us back full circle to the curious fictions of capitalism with which this introduction began.

Transubstantiation: Artifacts to Assets

One of the oddest truths underpinning modern life is that most money in the world exists only as numbers. It comes closest to having any reality only at the point of transaction. A famous quote—often misattributed to a director of the Bank of England—states this truth in bald terms: “The modern bank-

ing system manufactures ‘money’ out of nothing; and the process is perhaps the most astounding piece of sleight of hand that was ever invented. . . . Some 80 percent of what a modern community uses as money is not, strictly speaking, ‘money’ at all, but merely a transferable entry scribbled in a bank’s ledger.”⁶⁷ Mark Carney, former governor of the Bank of England, recently confirmed this when he observed that 85 percent of what we think of as “money” in the banking system is numbers created by the banks themselves through lending against illiquid assets, like company shares, real estate, and even antiquities.⁶⁸

This is the alchemy that turns physical artifacts into antiquities and thereby virtual commodities—that is, objects of desire, accumulation, and investment. The concept of the asset is key to this. When a physical object like a thirteenth-century Iranian luster bowl enters the antiquities market, it becomes an exchangeable asset with a ledger value that exists increasingly independently of its physical self. Simultaneously, to become an asset in this way it must be shorn of its originary context, just as money acquired through criminal activity must be if it is to be successfully laundered. For example, if the bowl gets mired in debates about the legality of its extraction from Iran, it will become difficult or impossible for its current owner to exchange it, at least within the public and legal levels of the antiquities market. In short, its commodity status will falter and its value as an asset will therefore be placed in jeopardy. I say more throughout this book about provenience (the precise location of archaeological recovery) and provenance (the chain of ownership that establishes a historical artifact as a legally exchangeable commodity, rather than a recently looted object). Here, the important point is that turning historical artifacts into exchangeable assets depends overwhelmingly on severing them, physically and intellectually, from their original contexts. Architectural monuments must be fragmented and ripped apart, manuscripts taken from libraries and often dismembered, ceramic sherds disassociated from archaeological stratification and often reconfigured into an artificial whole, like our hypothetical luster bowl.⁶⁹

The market requisite for severance from context lays bare a fundamental point of tension between the scholarly disciplines of archaeology and art history today. Modern academic archaeology varies in its practices but most, if not all, current methodologies are premised on the accurate documentation of extraction context wherever possible. Maps, findspots, stratigraphy, and assemblage data are now part of archaeology’s stock-in-trade (although, as chapter 2 shows, this was certainly not always the case). In some contemporary iterations of archaeology, the archaeological context could even be considered the primary subject of study, ahead of the individual artifact. The discipline of art history, on the other hand, has historically placed the interpretation of images at the center of its models of meaning, and has not always paid close attention to the physical histories of its subjects. In recent years there has been a distinct “material turn” in art history as well as an accelerating awareness of collecting histories—especially for works harvested from colonial contexts—and the contours of the field are changing rapidly. But while the highly destructive nature of early archaeological extraction makes the damage done in the past exceedingly visible, art history’s paradigmatic subjects of study—easel paintings and other forms of transportable image—

circulated above ground from the moment of their creation onward. This has perhaps conditioned art historians to think of their subjects as inherently and unproblematically mobile, meaning that the distorting and even destructive effects of the discipline have not been as immediately evident nor as widely discussed as they are in archaeology. One outcome is that while both disciplines were born out of collecting cultures, much of art history remains imbricated with the market in ways that academic archaeology does not, or at least not to the same degree, and it is within art history that the fictions of capital still circulate most freely. Our thirteenth-century luster bowl, transformed from archaeological subject matter (sherds with a context, even if unrecorded) into an art historical object (a bricolaged vessel with an attractive design and no context), is now free to enter the market.

As with other kinds of asset, once the monetary value of an antiquity has been established, it can be altered by subsequent transactions without the physical reality of the object changing at all. Those value-changing transactions are not limited solely to buying and selling. The most dramatic example of this in recent times is the much-contested *Salvator Mundi* painting, which increased enormously in financial value once it was included in the National Gallery's 2011 Leonardo da Vinci exhibition and thereby publicly validated as an autograph original by Leonardo himself.⁷⁰ This is an extreme example of what I will call a "scholarly transaction," a category that includes cataloguing, publication, and display. These can affect the value of any antiquity, including our hypothetical thirteenth-century luster bowl, by adding information, authority, and pedigree to it, augmenting its status as an asset and ultimately its financial value.⁷¹ Scholarly transactions—especially successful exhibitions and their catalogues—can even create new asset classes by demarcating a particular type of object as interesting or important and therefore valuable.⁷²

Because scholarly transactions can be used to "launder" the market profiles of unprovenanced antiquities once they have entered circulation, exhibitions, publications, and entrance into a "good" collection are classic routes for generating an asset-worthy pedigree. This pedigree can eventually serve to displace or obscure awkward questions about provenience and provenance. This is especially true for objects originating in areas like the Middle East or Southeast Asia, where modern geopolitics and historical instabilities have created low market expectations for documentation and a laissez-faire attitude among many buyers.⁷³

The same routes that launder the provenance of looted objects can also be used to get inauthentic objects into circulation. When a reputable scholar publishes the first study of a collected object and implicitly or explicitly represents authenticity, condition, and/or provenance as unproblematic, the piece is then usually considered free to continue onward, passed as "safe" for scholarship and exhibition. A completely untroubled passage might be rare in reality for ultrahigh-value assets—again, witness the *Salvator Mundi* painting, which has garnered plenty of comments about its (in)authenticity—but it is possible for low-to-mid-value assets like our medieval luster bowl.⁷⁴ This means that scholarly publication can have significant implications for the financial value of antiquities. It is hardly surprising that private collectors have long paid to have their collections published in beautifully produced catalogues, written by eminent scholars. In this way, the transubstantiation of artifact to asset can be completed.⁷⁵

There is also a deeper level to this interplay between the curious alchemistries of finance and those of the antiquities market. At every turn in the modern antiquities trade, from the nineteenth century to today, the instruments of finance do not just provide parallels to the market; rather, they are its actual substrate. It is no coincidence that the heyday of fabricating Islamic ceramics—and antiquities forgery in the region more generally—coincided with the rapidest expansion of modern European-style banking into the Middle East, from about 1870 to 1914. It was this financial system that created the full-blown antiquity-as-asset, making it possible for fragments of physical history to become an internationally tradable, value-bearing asset class, and rendering historical time itself an exchangeable form of capital. Critical to the expansion of modern banking and the antiquities trade alike in this new frontier was the establishment of what are essentially fictive forms of money: bills of exchange, for example, were introduced to the Ottoman Empire by European bankers who sought to stabilize a fiduciary currency system by regulating the exchange market.⁷⁶ Stocks, bonds, mortgages, formalized credit facilities, and exchange systems of asset valuation all play their part in the histories told within this book, as the economic landscape of the Middle East underwent irrevocable changes with the introduction of new financial practices.⁷⁷ Relevant histories of banking in the region are developed more fully in chapter 1, as the ground is laid for the large-scale translation of artifacts to assets within the tilling fields of the Middle Eastern antiquities race.

Invisible Hands

This book presents a history of Islamic ceramics as modern subjects of extraction, fabrication, collection, and imagination. It seeks to illuminate the previously disdained craft enterprises of fabrication and forgery, and to reinstate those enterprises into the history of art as crucial forms of artistic skill that demand closer study. To do so, the book travels across several different registers, from materially focused art histories (albeit applied to unorthodox subjects) to political and social economies. The conventional narrative would tell us that craft skills and artisanship were swept away in the Middle East in the second half of the nineteenth century, drowned by the wave of manufactured goods that arrived via industrialization and the asymmetric trade treaties of colonialism. There is much truth in this, but it is only part of the story. As this introduction has already shown, some craft skills were in fact redirected toward a new market generated by the colonial project and its fanatical harvesting of artifacts: the faking, forging, and fictionalizing of antiquities, especially ceramics. To probe the challenges that colonial modernity presents to the discipline of art history, we must look more closely at the thousands of brittle objects that moved through it and were remade in its image. Islamic ceramics came to be canonized as an art form through processes of extraction and fabulation that made the new old and the old whole again; these processes were enacted by invisible hands that created an entire asset class for circulation in a globalizing antiquities market.

A foundational premise of this book is that the global antiquities market is rooted in colonial models of resource extraction, nourished by the instruments of the modern finance industry. Chapter 1, “Middle Eastern Antiquities: The Making of a Modern Marketplace,” lays out the long prehistory of

collecting that produced a marketplace so receptive to the fabricator's craft. It presents the history of Islamic art collecting as a history of commodification, viewed through three distinct temporal episodes. First, the chapter traces the convergence of colonial ventures, resource extraction, finance, and forgery in the early modern scramble for antiquities in the Middle East and considers the types of objects that were most desired by those early collectors. This is followed by a study of the confessional groups that moved from early modern mercantile success to prominence in both the antiquities trade and the modern banking industry, within the late nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire and Iran. It asks who achieved success in that environment, and why those two trades were frequently conjoined. The chapter finishes with a case study on the rise and fall of one incredible, emblematic object in the early twentieth-century art market: the so-called chalice of Antioch, a late antique Syrian silver vessel that was at one point marketed as the most sacred and storied object in Christianity. Through these three aperçus, a multilayered, *longue durée* view of social networks, political structures, and economic institutions comes to light, exposing the deep foundations of a quintessentially modern marketplace and the fabricated antiquities that moved through it.

Between the 1880s and 1914 the market for Islamic antiquities from the Middle East exploded, fueled by the increasing interest of European and North American collectors and the development of ever more efficient technologies of transportation and communication. Chapter 2, "Objects of Desire, In and Out of Time," focuses on this critical era of market acceleration to produce an extractivist history of Islamic ceramics. In this chapter, vessels and tiles are presented not in the tidy evolutionary sequence of the sales catalogue but as a resource that was violently harvested and processed in largely undocumented circumstances, all within the space of a few decades. The absence of scientific archaeological information dogs the field of Islamic art history, and we have not always been keen to acknowledge the *sans-papiers* nature of most of our materials. Chapter 2 addresses this by piecing together the scattered evidence to tell the story of above-ground ceramics harvesting from collections and shrines and below-ground commercial extraction from historical sites, defying tidy chronologies and keeping one eye on the places where inauthentic objects appear in that record. Along the way, the chapter interweaves close studies of superlative individual objects to show what drove this frenzied harvest, as collectors clamored for more.

Chapter 3, "Making Gold from Base Matter: Potsherds, Paint, and Patience," is the fulcrum of the book. To make the case that ceramics fabrication was an important site of craft skill, it is essential that the reader should appreciate how that work was done. A quite astonishing range of craft practices, representing untold hours of work and experimentation, were dedicated to the creation of seemingly whole ceramic objects for the antiquities market. To make these visible, this chapter coordinates several different kinds of detective work: close looking, laboratory analysis, scientific imaging, and archival research are used in concert to dive deeply into the self-effacing methods by which ceramics were made anew. Deliberately framing a new vocabulary for the phenomena it describes, the chapter sets out three main modalities of fabrication in historic ceramics from the Islamic world: bricolage, skin-swaps, and the *coup de théâtre* of true forgery, complete with the artificial shadows of time.

After economies, extraction, and fabrication, chapter 4 turns to the human networks that created and floated these objects and secured their status as assets. “The New Babylon: Dealing in an American Century” follows the shifting financial focus of the global art market from Paris and London to New York and, eventually, the mid-twentieth-century American Midwest. Built on archival research conducted in collections across the United States and Europe, the chapter begins in the Middle East by examining the changes that antiquities collecting brought to local economies, querying what we can know about the craftspeople involved and mapping the locations of Islamic ceramics fabrication. Switching next to the dealer network, correspondence archives bring to light the means and methods by which a host of individuals pitched their wares and made their fortunes in a transnational network that mobilized social as well as financial capital. The last part of the chapter homes in on the emblematic ceramics collection of one of the most celebrated Middle Eastern antiquities dealers of all time, Dikran Kelekian (1867–1951). The changing fortunes of Kelekian’s collection, traced through multiple museum archives, serve as a mirror of the twentieth century’s global economic transformations, as his pieces travel from the Middle East to Paris, London, and eventually New York, finally coming to rest in the civic museums of the Midwestern United States.

Finally, in chapter 5, “The Riddle of Raqqa” returns to an object class that has recurred at points throughout the book—so-called Raqqa ceramics—and a dealer who made his first appearance in chapter 1. This chapter challenges the art historical consensus about the highly coveted ceramics of Raqqa, now represented in several major US museums. The study is centered upon an unpublished collection of Raqqa ceramics on the Indiana University campus that traveled through the same routes as much better-known examples in more famous institutions. It traces the story of the Indiana pieces back to Raqqa through three anachronistic episodes: the arrival of the pieces in Indiana in the 1970s; analysis conducted on campus between 2016 and 2021; and the extraction and circulation of the famous ceramics of Raqqa between the end of the nineteenth century and the interwar years. Using laboratory analysis and provenance research, it questions the stories that dealers and art historians have relied upon to explain the miraculously intact and perfect condition of some of these medieval survivals, and mounts an alternative explanation for their immaculate appearance.

Within all this there remain the material poetics of the objects themselves. When done well, the craft of ceramics fabrication creates works of compelling virtuosity that defy easy comprehension and suture multiple temporalities into a single whole. The extraordinary material durability of fired clay lures us into thinking that we can somehow reconstruct the past from it completely; that if we had but world enough and time, we could perfectly recreate both the object and its life story from the shattered and degraded pieces, the imperfect archaeological record, the lopsided archive, and the doctored display object. We couldn’t, of course, but there is a great deal to be gained in trying. In truth, the histories of premodern ceramics are as fractured as the objects themselves; and like ceramics, histories can become distorted when we try to piece them back together from fragments.

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