

### The shifting values of authenticity and fakes

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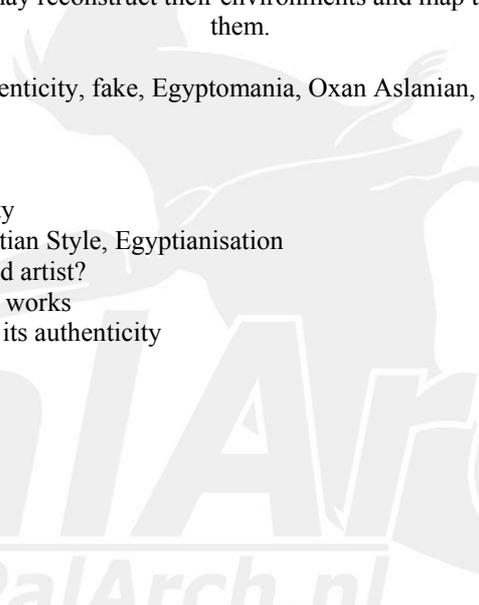
#### **Abstract**

The present article discusses the shifting values of authenticity and fakes. Using a biographical approach and the notion of things' social life it examines an Egyptianised relief which according to the author is probably the work of the 'Master of Berlin', Oxan Aslanian, and investigates the wider context in which the object was conceived. The period under consideration is from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The article goes on to explicate that fakes of ancient Egyptian art were circulated through multiplex social networks involving antiquities dealers, fakers and academics from different cultural backgrounds. By following the trajectories of these objects we may reconstruct their environments and map the web of social networks tied to them.

Key-words: Authenticity, fake, Egyptomania, Oxan Aslanian, antiquities market

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## **1. Many-faceted authenticity**

Authenticity has been and continues to be the subject of violent controversies; not only in determining whether or not artefacts and objects of art are genuine, but also in issues tied to nationalism, ethnicity, property and identity. That is in questions of frontiers and thresholds. The Venice Charter of 1964 introduced authenticity as one of the key concepts in discourses about the preservation of cultural heritage. The concept was further debated during the preparatory workshop of Bergen in January 1994 and later during the conference of Nara in November 1994 (Larsen & Marstein, 1994, 1995). The Nara Document stressed the need for a broad understanding of authenticity in order to protect cultural heritage and diversity. It argued that the respect of other cultures and the recognition of the legitimacy of different cultural values is an essential perspective in treating questions of authenticity. Conventionally, in the classification of tangible heritage by the UNESCO the test of authenticity is based on four main factors which are: site and its environment, conception, material and execution. These factors vary from culture to culture and are set up in different hierarchies according to the context. For example, in Japan, the Ise Shrine is entirely reconstructed every twenty years. All the materials, equipment and furniture are changed, but the site remains the same and the original design of the building is kept intact.

On a national and international level matters concerning the authenticity of tangible and intangible heritage entail complex processes where culture, politics and economics are interlinked. It involves addressing issues tied to various interpretations of the past as well as taking decisions about what and how to convey the many-faceted authenticity of heritage. These measures demand careful procedures. As a number of studies have shown, heritage, whether tangible, intangible or natural, is polysemous and the focus of conflicting interpretations (Meskell, 1998; Lowenthal, 1998). Authenticity remains an element of power and authority in the hands of those who decide what and whose pasts are more representative of a nation's history and, thereby, more 'valuable' than other pasts. This is especially true in plural societies and in countries with a colonial past where, what Arjun Appadurai (1981) calls the 'shared past', is polyphonic and the perception of authenticity often becomes a source of discord. Moreover, determining the authenticity of heritage has become even more complex during the last three decades as we observe an inflation of the notion of heritage. So much so that it encompasses all sorts of material and immaterial legacies (Lowenthal, 1998).

As mentioned above, site and its environment are central criteria in evaluating the authenticity of heritage and material culture. But monuments, archaeological finds, artefacts of all sorts, manuscripts and books from different civilisations have been travelling for centuries. Big as they may be, they still are movable. Several have become integral items of museum collections or, like Egyptian obelisks, landmarks in various capitals around the world. Others are disseminated through the antiquities market. The multiple connections of transplanted heritage and material culture do in no way impinge on what we perceive as their authenticity. They have not become clones, copies or fakes. Nevertheless, in their new environments their meaning has changed. This, however, is also true for monuments, buildings and artefacts that have not been displaced. According to Tilley (2006: 71) "Things change their meanings through their life cycles and according to the way they are used and appropriated and in the manner in which individuals and groups identify themselves with them."

But what about copies and fakes? Do their meaning and the perception of their value as copies or fakes change in similar ways?

## **2. Egyptomania, Neo-Egyptian Style, Egyptianisation**

This article is about the shifting values of authenticity and the ambiguity of fakes. It posits that authenticity is processual, and thus, continuously in the making. To give an exhaustive analysis of the notions of fake and copy would largely exceed the scope of the present article. Suffice to say that in the framework of this paper, copy does not designate an exact duplicate or replica, but the imitation of an original model, and the reproduction of a certain style. Furthermore, the fundamental distinction between fakes and copies is that fakes are made with the intention to mislead, while this is usually not the case for copies (Fiechter, 2005: 7; Jones, 1990: 12–14). It does not mean, however, that fakes and copies do not have a certain aesthetic and cultural historical value or that fakers and copyists are not talented. The example of 'The Egyptian' and other works by Owan Aslanian discloses some aspects of this ambivalence.

In the case of ancient Egyptian art, assessing whether an artefact is genuine or counterfeit entails, in my opinion, to reflect on whether the object under consideration should not be classified under the category known as Egyptomania. According to Jean-Marcel Humbert (1989: 10), Egyptomania is first and foremost a western phenomenon which encompasses all sorts of re-uses of ornamental elements and literary themes borrowed from ancient Egypt without, however, relating them to their original function. The determinant factor that sets them under the label Egyptomania is the antique décor. The web pages [Egyptomania.org](http://www.egyptomania.org/) (<http://www.egyptomania.org/>; last consulted 14 January 2007) state that: "Egyptomania" refers to post-

pharaonic fascination with ancient Egypt and its myriad manifestations. This includes obvious visual expressions of Egyptian themes, for example in operas and architecture, as well as the employment of Egyptian motifs by philosophers, occultists, and groups with political or social aims. Egyptomania began with the Greeks and Romans and persists today among modern Western (and Eastern) civilisations. In some of its specific forms, it is referred to as the Egyptian Revival, the Neo-Egyptian, Egyptianate, and Egyptiana.”

Among the topics included in the web site which are relevant to the present paper we find ‘the antiquity trade, past and present, legal and illegal, authentic and fake’ and ‘the social and political contexts of Egyptology and Egyptomania’. The term ‘Egyptomania’ has, in my opinion, slightly derogative connotations because the component ‘mania’ suggests that some pathological disturbances are attached to this trend. Neo-Egyptian and Egyptianised are more appropriate terms to describe material culture and architecture which have taken their inspiration from ancient Egyptian sources. As the studies gathered by Sally MacDonald & Michael Rice (2003), and Naguib (1993, 2002a, forthcoming) show, the use of ancient Egyptian motifs and themes is not uniquely a western phenomenon. It is an integral part of Egyptian local knowledge and traditions and is tied to politics, consumption, tourism and nostalgia.

The Napoleonic expedition to Egypt in 1798 with its body of accompanying scientists led to the first systematic survey of the country’s monuments. Later, the decipherment of hieroglyphs in 1822 opened the way to new insights about the ancient Egyptian civilisation. These events did much to not only prompt scientific research, but also tourism and different kinds of ventures. Egypt became a popular destination for Europeans. Artists, architects and writers travelled there to find new sources of inspiration. The quest for rare and exotic experiences and picturesque sites were not the only reasons. Politics, economy and the establishment of new markets and job opportunities were other important factors to this fascination. This coincided with the policy of modernisation introduced during the reigns of Mohammed Aly (1769–1849) and of his successors. Egyptian rulers welcomed foreign capital and recruited European urban planners, engineers, architects and skilled workers for their various projects. Cairo and especially Alexandria were transformed into cosmopolitan cities (Naguib, 2001, 2002b). Thus, at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, academic, artistic, literary, political, industrial and commercial interests converged and several arenas where people from different cultural and religious backgrounds interacted were elaborated. Mary Louise Pratt (1992) uses the term ‘contact zone’ to describe such intermediate spaces of cultural encounters, exchange and circulation in the colonial context. For her a contact zone is (p. 6): “the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict.” The contact perspective underlines the interactive and often improvised dimensions of these cultural encounters. Contact zones are by no means peaceful spaces but rather ramified fields of tension where homogeneity and heterogeneity, tradition and innovation, the local and the global converge. Most of all, contact zones are, in my view, spaces of accumulated transcultural knowledge and overlapping social networks (Naguib, 2003: 121–122). They are loci of dialogue, hence, of communication, negotiation and exchange. The antiquities market is such a space.

### **3. Oxan Aslanian: forger and artist?**

One of the consequences of the renewed interest in pharaonic Egypt was that neo-Egyptian buildings and monuments and Egyptianised artefacts became popular and were sought after. The antiquities market flourished and with it the fakers’ business. According to the German Egyptologist, Ludwig Borchardt (1930) there existed in the early 1900s in Egypt two main ‘schools’ of fakers. One was Egyptian with its centre in Luxor. The trade was kept within families and was passed on from father to son. The products seldom reached high artistic standards. They were mostly made in series from moulds, some of which had been kept for generations in the same family. The artefacts were usually sold as souvenirs to tourists through local, close-knit intergenerational networks composed of family members and relatives. The other ‘school’ of ancient Egyptian antiquity fakers consisted of Europeans, mostly Italians, Greeks, Armenians and Maltese, who had settled in Cairo and Alexandria where they had established sophisticated multiplex networks involving quarrymen, stonemasons, antiquities dealers and academics from different cultural origins. In Egypt, their activities were centred in Cairo, Alexandria and Luxor. In Europe, most of their products were sold through antiquarians in Berlin and Paris. They were artists and highly skilled craftsmen for whom forging Egyptian antiquities was a secondary, albeit profitable, activity. Most of them worked either at the construction of new palaces, villas and apartment buildings, or at the newly opened restoration department of the Egyptian museum or, like the enigmatic ‘Berliner Meister’, Oxan Aslanian, were engaged in the antiquities business, and supplied the market with what Borchardt called ‘recent Egyptian antiquities’ (Borchardt, 1930; Fiechter, 2005: 11–52.). Borchardt who had had direct dealings with Oxan Aslanian was the first to publish works by him without, however, naming him. Others like the antiquarian Heinz Herzer who had bought some of Aslanian’s documents from his widow and was the first to name him in an article (1971), and scholars like Schoske & Wildung (1983), Krauss (1985), and more recently

Fiechter (2005), took up the lead after Aslanian's death in 1968 and pursued the detection of other artefacts produced by this mysterious character and prolific forger.

Oxan Aslanian was an Armenian born in Salonique in 1887. His family immigrated to Syria when he was a child and he probably learned sculpture and engraving there. From Syria Oxan moved to Egypt where he had relatives who were well established in the antiquity business. In 1900 he began to work in the antiquity shop of one of his Kalebajian uncles in Cairo and it was around that time that he began to make his own 'ancient Egyptian' sculptures and reliefs. According to the available sources consulted by Fiechter (2005: 29–31) it seems that Oxan Aslanian moved to Europe around 1914. He established himself in Berlin in 1920 and lived there until 1939. He then left for Hamburg and later for Munich where he died in 1968. Although little is known about Aslanian's character and life, it is clear from various documents and letters that he was an active agent and purveyor of goods in the transnational antiquities trade and that he had an extended social network among the curators of various museums, antiquarians, Egyptologists, robbers and other fakers both in Egypt and Europe (Fiechter, 2005: 31–44).

As for most artists, we can recognise different periods in Aslanian's production. His first works were sculptures imitating models of the Old Kingdom. After he moved to Europe and settled down in Berlin he focussed on the New Kingdom and made some reliefs 'in the way of' Deir el Bahari. Our 'The Egyptian' is an example of that period. In a letter to a colleague at the Metropolitan Museum of Art the American Egyptologist, Herbert Winlock describes a similarly Deir el Bahari styled stele being sold by an antiquarian in Paris after World War One (Fiechter, 2005: 31–32). In the 1920s Aslanian's style changed again. From then on his works were inspired by the Amarna period.

#### **4. 'The Egyptian' and other works**

'The Egyptian', as its owners have baptised it, is a relief in limestone representing a man walking (figures 1 & 2). It is in a private Norwegian collection and was bought in Paris in 1920. Its measurements are: height: 61 cm, maximum width: 31 cm, depth: 4.5 cm. The back of the relief shows marks of chiselling as if the block had been cut out of a rock. The left bottom part has been broken and glued. The man is represented according to the aspective principles of ancient Egyptian art: his body is painted in red ochre, both shoulders are shown, his head is in profile, the eye almond shaped and the nose slightly aquiline. A deep furrow goes down from the nose to the chin. The man is wearing a rounded curly wig reaching down to his shoulders and a thin head-band is tied at the back of the head. His beard is rounded upwards and he is dressed in a white loincloth with fringes. His right arm is lifted and bend backwards, and he is carrying a jar in his hand. The left arm is raised but the hand has been destroyed. The left foot is broken off.

The relief was provided with a four pages long article written by the well known French Egyptologist, Émile Chassinat (1920). The article entitled 'Bas-Relief ethnographique égyptien de la XVIIIe dynastie' is more an explanatory paper than a certificate of authenticity, and I have not been able to trace another copy of it. In the article Chassinat gives an overview of what was then known about the land of Punt and its inhabitants. He goes on to discuss the position of Egypt during the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty and the extend of its empire and he cautiously observes that (p. 5): "L'oeuvre égale au moins, par la beauté de son execution, les sculptures cependant réputées du temple d'Hatshoutsoutou [sic]. Elle est certainement contemporaine, où [sic] à peu près, de celle-ci; et on peut lui imputer, sans aucune chance d'erreur, une origine thébaine. Elle provient, autant qu'il est permis de se prononcer en pareille matière et sans autres indices que ceux que fournit l'examen archéologique d'un objet, d'un tombeau encore inconnu de la nécropole de Sheikh abd el-Gournah ou de l'Assassif."

Close examination of 'The Egyptian', both technical and iconographic, revealed that it is what euphemically could be described as a 'recent Egyptian antiquity'. The pigments used were unknown in ancient Egypt and the tool marks are those of modern metal instruments. This came as no surprise to the present owner who confirmed that the family always suspected that the relief was a fake. However, as noted by Chassinat the workmanship is of high quality. Moreover, Chassinat is quite explicit in asserting that the source of inspiration was the famous expedition to the land of Punt depicted on the walls of the temple of Hatshepsut at Deir el Bahari, and whose original is now in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. This is shown by the man's features which are reminiscent of those of Punt's sovereigns and their people, and other details like the beard, the deep furrow around the mouth, the wig and the loincloth with frontal strips although here they are fringed and not plain as in the original. The comparison with photographs of other reliefs in coloured limestone which have been published by Borchardt (1930, pl. I, figs. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8; pl. II, figs. 10, 11), Schoske & Wildung (1983: 1–3), and most recently by Fiechter (2005: 80, fig. 5; 189–197, pl. 26, fig. 103, 104; pl. 27, fig. 105, 106, 107, 108; pl. 28, fig. 109, 111, 112, pl. 29, fig. 113) show several similarities with 'The Egyptian'. These similarities include the type of stone used, craftsmanship and composition. For instance, the persons depicted are placed centrally and the breaks are made in such a way that they do not disfigure them. Other details such as the rendering of the head, in particular of the eyes in the above listed reliefs are much comparable to those of 'The Egyptian'



Figure 1. *The Egyptian*. Photograph by the owner.

(Schoske & Wildung, 1983: 2). Thus, to me the style of 'The Egyptian' with its soft pearly background, the red ochre that seems to peel off naturally, the strategic breaks so that the figure does not lose its centrality, the treatment of the head and wig, the eye with its introspective and downcast look and the posture of the hands points to Oxan Aslanian. Dietrich Wildung corroborated my assessment in a personal communication (November 1991).



Figure 2. *The Egyptian, detail. Photograph by the owner.*

### **5. Conclusion: the fake and its authenticity**

As a rule, experienced fakers avoid making exact copies of known works of art. Instead, they tend to fabricate new pieces in ‘the spirit of’ a certain style and period by putting together elements from different genuine pieces. Moreover, most fakers remain anonymous which in no way means that they are unknown to their surroundings. Some have even reached great notoriety. With the passing of time their works are considered real objects of art and, ironically, acquire a value of authenticity. Oxan Aslanian was one of the most gifted creators of Egyptian ‘antiquities’ during the period under consideration here. Many specialists have been taken in by his skills and have considered him a great artist, so much so that in the world of Egyptology he is known today as ‘The Master of Berlin’. His works have found their way in private collections as well as among some of the most prestigious museum collections of Egyptian antiquities as those of Charlottenburg in Berlin, the Louvre in Paris and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Fakes are situated in time. They reflect contemporary trends and respond to demands from the market. Although the workshop of the ancient Egyptian sculptor Thutmes in Tell el Amarna had been discovered by Borchardt in 1914, the finds – with the bust of Nefertiti as their masterpiece and icon – were not published before 1923–1924. This coincided with the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun in November 1922 and all the subsequent events and publicity surrounding it. From that time on, Egypt was seen as the home of wisdom and primal monotheism. Art from the Amarna period was no longer considered crude and offensive by the general public who steered the fluctuations of the antiquities market at the time, but as the expression of a profound religious experience. The Amarna period with its ‘visionary’ pharaoh and ‘beautiful’ queen was mystified and romanticised. It inspired academics as well as travellers, writers, artists and ... fakers. It is noteworthy that no fake piece of Amarna inspired art was produced before 1924 (Fiechter, 2005: 29). Interestingly, also the famous Mansoor collection was created during that period ([www.mansooramarnacollection.com/](http://www.mansooramarnacollection.com/)).

In time, a fake may turn into a unique piece created by a master and inform us on the intricacies of social agency and networks, and the tastes and trends of a certain period. If the present writer's evaluation of the relief is correct, the ambivalence of the piece lies in its conflicting values. It embodies both forgery and authenticity, because although it is a fake 'The Egyptian' still remains a genuine piece by the 'Master of Berlin', Olan Aslanian.

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