

Forgery and the science of the “authentic”

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Vast storerooms sprawl in the basement of the Museo Nacional de Antropología (MNA). Out of sight of the public, in the museum’s inner sanctuary, tightly packed on movable compact shelving, sit crates full of bones and mummified bodies and man-made artifacts, corresponding to the cultural periods and regions that organize the display rooms of the museum. Other objects, smaller and more fragile – clay seals, silex arrowheads, obsidian tools, jadeite jewelry, and small ceramic fragments -- are stored in drawers, gingerly encased in protective material. Each object comes with its own inventory label, in some cases with two or more time-weathered labels – speaking to the history of the object in the museum, as it underwent various inventories --, sometimes with numbers and place of origin recorded directly onto it, as was common practice until the mid-twentieth century. In May of 2019, after completing the entrance protocol with the police guard, we made our way into the archaeology storeroom. This time we were not here to admire those exemplars of national patrimony that spill over from the exhibit space above; we had come to look at things that most of the museum’s curators have lost interest in: fakes.¹ Unlike the Museum’s “authentic” objects, its fakes sit crammed together on ten shelves in the back of the archeology storeroom, in no apparent order, certainly not organized by culture or type – for, what culture or type or provenance can be assigned to an object made in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries? Most of them lack inventory labels, although some do have them, which means that, at some point, they were part of the museum’s collection and only later deemed to be forgeries and segregated to form part of this gathering of outcasts. To make matters more confusing, it is also possible that there are “authentic” objects among them, temporarily awaiting a curator’s verdict.

We walk towards the corner with a mixture of fascination, horror, and condescension, with a sense, that comes only in retrospect, that one would have never been duped by a fake, that one knows better. In some cases one does: there is the representation of a rather misshapen dog-like creature sitting on its hind legs; “deities” with incongruous medieval crown-like gear on their

¹We use a broad definition of “fake,” as an object which is made to pass as “authentic,” for the purpose of economic or intellectual gain.

heads; an amorously embracing couple made of porous volcanic stone; carved details which immediately betray the use of metal tools; and many, many paperweight-like heads of stone, eyes squinting, toothless mouths gaping in horror (Figures 1, 2, and 3). Many of these objects form a class of their own, incomparable, unique, different from any other artefact both among fakes and among authentic artifacts. “Why didn’t forgers at least make them agreeable or beautiful?,” wonders Bertina, the archaeologist and curator of the Sala Mexica in our team of two. “Maybe because, for a large part of the nineteenth century, prehispanic objects were considered ugly, deformed or bizarre, so making them ‘ugly’ might have been a way of imbuing them with the air of an ancient preconquest past,” ventures Miruna, the historian. We stop to wonder how the criteria for telling not the fake, but the authentic, came about, what made something plausibly authentic at different moments.

[insert figures 1, 2, and 3 near here]

In many cases, discovering why or if an object on these shelves is a fake is taxing. To our eyes, many look “authentic.” In other cases, “something simply doesn’t feel right.” Ultimately, a thin line separates the “authentic” from the “fake” – so thin and porous, in fact, that we keep placing certain objects back and forth, now on one side of the divide, now on the other. Make the criteria for differentiation too rigid, and there is no room for regional variation or for human agency – that is, for the ancient artisan with a personal signature style or for the artisan in the periphery, striving to reproduce objects made for the elites. And, of course, there is no room for the unique, for that one artefact which is different from all others, which could be a fake but could also be a masterpiece. But then, too many objects of the same kind can also be a reason for alarm. As Eliseo Padilla, the curator of the Sala de Occidente, succinctly puts it, “How many ceramic dogs from Colima are too many? Did people in Western Mexico do nothing for hundreds of years but these cute and chubby dogs, to inter them in shaft tombs, where they would be discovered in the late nineteenth century, starting a collection craze that endures to our days?”² When the criteria for authenticity are too broad, many fakes pass as “authentic.” Besides these more subjective stylistic calls, chemical and physical analyses, involving increasingly sophisticated technologies, have contributed to developing a science of authenticity. But, like style, “scientific” methods have revealed that the line between the fake and the authentic is far from rigid. In some cases, certificates of authenticity based on new techniques of analyses are

² Personal interview, May 2019.

not enough to persuade researchers in a field that an object is “authentic.”³ The bottom line, as restorer Sergio González at the MNA suggests, all objects of unknown provenance or lacking strict excavation protocols and records are suspect.⁴ Of course, not all of them are fakes.

How, then, is one to proceed in telling the authentic from the fake? This is a question asked since the nineteenth century by museums, collectors, dealers, and often, by the forgers themselves. It is a question whose answers are intimately entangled with ideas about aesthetic and commercial value, proof-making, scientific authority, expertise, and institutional credibility. The problem with fakes was not a problem until fakes were perceived as a threat economically to the antiquities market; intellectually, to the scientific disciplines that were becoming consolidated in the second half of the nineteenth century; and institutionally, to national museums that staked their authority on their capacity to collect and display the “authentic” as “synonyms for cultures congealed in historical time.”⁵ Fakes have always been part of museums, yet, most museums treat their fakes with little care, proportionally inverse to the care and attention they enjoyed when they were thought to be authentic. A fake is an embarrassment, it speaks to gullibility or ignorance. Once something is exposed to be a fake, its inventory number is discontinued and the object is banished out of sight, into a basement. Until recently, alleging limited space, most museums have gotten rid of their fakes altogether, forgetting, with that gesture, how fakes entered their collection in the first place, how they were studied, classified, and displayed, as well as the individual and collective decisions that banished them.⁶ Specific fakes have sometimes fared better, to find a place in scholarly literature, as early as the nineteenth century, because they make for fascinating detective stories and for enlightening case studies with provocative theoretical implications.⁷ But in general, fakes are simply forgotten. In

³ For the controversy surrounding the fourth Mayan Codex, see Coe et al 2017.

⁴ Personal interview, June 2019.

⁵ Irina Podgorny, “Sobre la constitución de los objetos etnológicos en los inicios del siglo XX: museos, falsificaciones y ciencia,” *Museología & Interdisciplinaridad* II.5 (May-June 2014), 23

⁶ For an insightful book-length study of its collection of fakes by a museum, see Justin Jennings and Adam T. Sellen, *Real Fake. The Story of a Zapotec Urn*, (Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum, 2018). See also Mark Jones, *Fake? The Art of Deception* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990) for the catalogue of an early exhibit on fakes organized by the British Museum.

⁷ For specific works on prehispanic Mexican fakes, see W.H. Holmes, “The Trade in Spurious Mexican Antiquities,” *Science* 7.159 (1886): 170-172; Leopoldo Batres, *Antigüedades mexicanas falsificadas. Falsificaciones y Falsificadores* (Mexico City: Imprenta de Fidencio S. Soria, 1909); and Gordon Ekholm, “The Problem of Fakes in Pre-Columbian Art,” *Curator* VII. 1 (1964): 19-31. For more recent literature, see Jane Maclaren Walsh, “The Dumbarton Oaks Tlazolteotl: Looking Beneath the Surface,” *Journal de la Société des Américanistes* 94.1 (2008): 7-43; Jane Maclaren Walsh and Brett Topping, *The Man who Invented Crystal Aztec Skulls. The Adventures of Eugène Boban* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2019); Esther Pasztory, “Three Aztec Masks of the God Xipe,” in

the case of the MNA, there is no history of its fakes.⁸ In fact, there is little awareness among the museum's employees about when and why fakes began accumulating at the back of the archaeology storeroom, and, more importantly, about what happened to the rest of the fakes held by the museum at different moments.

This essay is a first approach to the collections of archaeological fakes accrued and lost at Mexico's national museums over the course of almost two centuries, as the museum peregrinated from place to place, probably taking each move as a pretext to rid itself of what it took to be fakes. We are interested in thinking through how to tell the story of the museum not only through its personnel, its publications, and its choice specimens, but through its relationship with forgery. It was, in the first place, a mundane and practical kind of relation which tied the museum with the world of forgers and traffickers in fakes, not only because the museum sought to separate itself from this underworld, but because it was implicated at different times in the production and acquisition of forgeries, both knowingly and unknowingly. Second, there is an epistemological connection between fakes and "authentic" objects at the museum. The "authentic" is that which is not "fake." So, while the burden of proof has mostly consisted in determining whether something is fake (and not whether it is authentic), the methods and protocols for exposing a forgery -- many of which come from the natural sciences -- have contributed to shaping and reinforcing the methods for studying authenticity, for instance, by generating stylistic taxonomies and by examining marks of fabrication and processes of ageing by different materials. Finally, the criteria for telling a fake apart have changed over the course of two hundred years, and those changes are not just a matter of better and more objective methods, but have to do with aesthetic, political, and cultural projections and expectations about the preconquest past. As art historian Esther Pasztory has suggestively put it, "fakes tell us what we want to see in the authentic [...]. If we want to understand how collectors saw Aztec art, we have to interrogate the forgery that was made to fit their tastes and interests."⁹ What did the museum, but, more widely, dealers, private collectors, and scholars want to see in Mexico's ancient past at

Thinking with Things. Towards a New Vision of Art (Austin: University of Texas, 2005, 209-224); and Jennings and Sellen, *Real Fake*.

⁸ For an early twentieth century account of the collection of fakes at the National Museum of Mexico, see Batres, *Antigüedades mejicanas falsificadas*. See also Nancy L. Kelker and Karen O. Bruhns, *Faking Ancient Mesoamerica* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2010), which addresses specific fakes at the MNA in the context of a broader study of fakes in Mesoamerica.

⁹ Esther Pasztory, "Truth in Forgery," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 42 (Autumn 2002), 159.

any specific moment? What were their expectations with regards to the technical expertise, manufacturing practices, aesthetic ideals, and cultural provenance of Mexico's ancient peoples?

The grotesque, the ugly, and the beautiful

Fakes at the MNA are not a new phenomenon, not even a twentieth century one. Leopoldo Batres, at the head of the Inspectorate for Archeological Monuments between the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century, traced falsification to the sixteenth century and located it in the Mexico City *barrio* of Tlatelolco, which had specialized in ceramic production since preconquest times. In the years following the conquest, Tlatelolco's kilns began turning out ceramic ware for the Spanish conquistadors and it was at that moment, according to Batres, that Tlatelolco became an "emporium for fantastic and imitative ceramics."¹⁰ Responding to Spanish taste, local artisans made all sorts of "fantastic" objects: pots "decorated with gods, their lip replete with as many whistles as notes on the chromatic scale," jars with snakes-shaped handles, human figurines imitating gods, coiling serpents, flutes shaped like clarinets, lizards, and other monsters.¹¹ Sometimes ancient molds or molds made from original ancient pieces were used. This industry persisted into the 1860s, when, Batres writes, Tlatelolco became increasingly mestizo and European.¹² It is difficult to know why Batres thought of these locally-produced ceramics as falsifications and not simply as the persistence of an artisanal tradition, which struggled to keep up with and to adapt to new demands for everyday ware. Batres's concern, clearly, has to do with the ensuing confusion and distortion of evidence once these artefacts began to pass for original pre-hispanic ceramics. These same concerns led Batres to reject all objects produced in the post-conquest years as fakes, including colonial codices.

It is unlikely that sixteenth-century ceramics were made to pass for prehispanic ware in the colonial period. Instead, for the origins of mass falsifications we need to look at the turn of the nineteenth century, which saw, on the one hand, a new intellectual involvement with the vestiges of long-gone worlds, leading to the formation of cabinets and collections of antiquities, such as the one at the MNM. On the other hand, Mexico's aperture, as an independent nation, to foreign investment, commerce, diplomacy, and travel, saw an influx of foreign merchants, speculators, diplomats, and tourists, some of whom took a scholarly or commercial interest in

¹⁰ Batres, *Antigüedades*, 8-9.

¹¹ Batres, *Antigüedades*, 7.

¹² Batres, *Antigüedades*, 24

antiquities. As early as the 1820s, Jean Frederick Waldeck, a French artist and collector of Mexican antiquities – who would make a name for himself as draftsman for the NMN and as one of the earlier and more systematic explorers of Palenque – expresses doubts that Carl Nebel, a fellow artist, might be peddling him fakes, to test his acumen. Nebel had presented him with fragments of codices and with a small ceramic version of the Piedra del Sol, the famous so-called Mexican Calendar. “Is it a fake?” Waldeck asks himself. Under a magnifying glass, he discerns traces of color – blue, red, yellow and brown –, but he suspects that, though the pigments seem old, they could have been polished down to give them patina. “What if the relief is of Nebel’s making, to take me by surprise and mock me afterwards? If this is the case, he was successful in achieving a perfect imitation, but not in deceiving me.”¹³ Unlike Waldeck, most foreigners did not come to Mexico to collect antiquities; they took up collecting on the side, which brought them into competition with each other and with the MNM. Forgers stepped in to satisfy demand.

By the mid-century, the museum owned a collection of fakes. In a rare gesture, rather than hiding them away, and despite lacking exhibit and storage space, the museum, under the direction of José Fernando Ramírez, one of its most competent directors, decided to put its fakes on display sometime in the mid-fifties. There is no record of the museum’s fakes in institutional archives at that moment; the only description of this early display survives in the writings of Englishman Edward Burnett Tylor (1832-1917), who would later become associated with the foundations of cultural anthropology. His impressions of the museum – which Tylor visited in 1856, in the context of his year-long travels through Mexico -- were mostly unfavorable, with extended comments on the chaos that reigned within, even as he had words of praise and admiration about specific objects. He found himself especially intrigued by the presence of a “particularly instructive shelf” there, which contained “numbers of sham antiquities.” Their manufacture was “a regular thing in Mexico, as it [was] in Italy”-- he felt compelled to add, in response to those who insisted there was no manufacturing of prehispanic fakes in Mexico.¹⁴

For Tylor, the telltale sign of fakes was their departure from preconquest representations of Amerindian physiognomies. By careful examination, Tylor came up with a list of the more common errors committed by forgers:

¹³ Waldeck, January 15, 1831, “Journal, in French, of Baron Jean Frederic Maximilien de Waldeck, 14 oct., 1829 - 21 aug. 1837”, The British Library Add MS 41684.

¹⁴ Edward Tylor, *Anáhuac: or, Mexico and the Mexicans, Ancient and Modern* (London: Longman, Green, and Roberts, 1861), 230.

The foreheads of Mexican races are all very low and their painters and sculptors even exaggerated this particularity, to make the faces they depicted more beautiful, so producing an effect which to us Europeans seems hideously ugly, but which is not more natural than the ideal type of beauty we see in the Greek statues. After the era of the Spaniards, we see no more such foreheads; and the eyes, which were drawn in profiles as one sees them in the full face, are put in their natural position [...]. Short, squat figures become slim and tall. It is very seldom that the modern counterfeiter can keep clear of these and get back to the old standard. Among the things on the condemned shelf were faces too correctly drawn to be genuine, grotesque animals that no *artista* would [...] have designed who had not seen a horse, headdresses and drapery that were European and not Mexican.¹⁵

At stake in Tylor's – and the museum's -- characterization of fakes is the recognition of different ideals of beauty, as centered on the representation of the human figure. What Amerindians considered beautiful – low foreheads and short, squat figures – is simply hideous and ugly to the eyes of Europeans, who take the nude Greek male body as their ideal. So, any human figurine that conforms to what a Westerner would consider beautiful or correct or “natural” is a potential fake. In his short description, Tylor does not side with one set of conventions over the other, suggesting they are both equally arbitrary. But he does identify one of the more important aesthetic criteria that has shaped approaches to the prehispanic since the late eighteenth century and continues to do so today: the divide between the beautiful and the ugly.

In the 1810s, Alexander von Humboldt published *Vues de cordillères et monuments des peuples indigènes de l'Amérique*, an album of sixty-nine illustrations and descriptions of American “monuments,” both natural and man-made. On the whole, Humboldt qualified the vestiges of America's ancient past as bizarre, hideous, and singular, and saw them as embodiments of larger forces: the sublime and agitated topography of the Americas (for emphasis and comparison, Humboldt places preconquest antiquities side-by-side volcanoes and other grand geological formations) and the political and religious structures that limited individual freedom. Even if they seemingly lacked aesthetic worth, Humboldt did not consider

¹⁵ Tylor, *Anáhuac*, 230.

American antiquities “unworthy of attention”;¹⁶ their worth was as objects of the science of humanity’s past:

The grossest of works, the most bizarre of forms, those masses of sculpted stone, which impose themselves only through sheer bigness and by the high antiquity one attributes to them, those enormous pyramids that show the coming together of a multitude of workers, all this can be connected to the philosophical study of history [...] They offer to our eyes a picture of the uniform and progressive march of the human spirit.¹⁷

The vestiges left behind by its ancient peoples made manifest America’s place in universal histories of progress – where Western European civilization occupied the highest rung -- that were the hallmark of Enlightenment historiography. Humboldt was not the first European to identify the productions of the American other with the grotesque, but his *Vues* became an obligatory reference for the study of American antiquities and certainly reinforced that stereotype, especially at a time when the study of American antiquities lacked a set of conventions – a language and a visual syntax – for their description and interpretation. Although not everyone agreed with Humboldt’s aesthetic dictum (see Deans-Smith in this volume), many collectors and museum curators, well into the nineteenth century, continued to see the vestiges of America’s ancient past as grotesque. In due time, forgers did their best to cast this vision of the authentic onto their creations.

One of the more notorious episodes in the history of Mexican fakes is the mass production of black ceramic ware, epitomized by a type of vase, of “notable form [...], modelled in dark clay, and bristling with a superabundance of figures in relief, which gave a castellated effect,”¹⁸ a possible take on the black ceramic ware made at Tlatelolco over centuries (Figure 4). The vase enjoyed lavish popularity among collectors in the second half of the nineteenth century, to become the object of scholarly vituperation by the late century. In 1886, WH Holmes, a geologist and archaeologist specializing in North American antiquities, who later became head of the Bureau of American Ethnology at the Smithsonian, wrote a short essay “The Trade in Spurious Mexican Antiquities,” where he presents one of the earliest descriptions of the vase:

¹⁶ Alexander von Humboldt, *Vues des cordillères et monuments des peuples indigènes de l’Amérique* (Paris: Schoell, 1810-1813), 2.

¹⁷ Humboldt, *Vues*, 2.

¹⁸ Holmes, “The Trade,” 170.

The body of these vases is usually a short, upright cylinder, mounted on three feet, and is profusely decorated with incised patterns and with a variety of ornaments, including human and animal figures in the round. A row of figures surrounds the rim, giving a battlemented effect; and a high conical lid, surmounted by a human figure, is usually added. The body of the vessel is modelled by hand. The attached figures are formed separately in molds, and afterwards set in their places. Certain parts are further elaborated by means of figured stamps.¹⁹

[Insert figure 4 near here]

Holmes was among the first to document the bustling traffic in black ceramic ware. In the 1880s, he was working as a geologist for the Central Mexican Railway and his travels around Mexico convinced him that there was a tight connection between fakes and trains, which brought ruins, especially those in the vicinity of Mexico City, even closer to it. Trains made the ruins at Teotihuacan, some 45 km from Mexico City, into a center for the production and distribution of black ceramic ware, even though, unlike Tlatelolco, Teotihuacan, did not boast of a ceramicist tradition in preconquest times.²⁰ Holmes paints the following scene of the “antiquities” market at Teotihuacan:

In passing back and forth by the railway, I found that each train was met by one or more of the vendors, who were careful to expose but a limited number of the pieces, and that this method of sale was systematically practiced. Wishing to secure a piece, I waited until the train was about to move off, when I held out a silver dollar, and the vase [...] was quickly in my possession. The price asked was five dollars, and in the city of Mexico would have been three times that amount. At the rate of purchase indicated by my experience at San Juan [Teotihuacan] at least one piece per day was carried away by tourists, making hundreds each year.²¹

Hundreds of these objects most likely ended up on a mantelpiece as family heirlooms, but some passed as “authentic” and made their way into museum collections, as donations or acquisitions, as was the case with the “miniature stone fort” or the “Chinese pagoda in clay” -- as Holmes derisively calls the two black ceramic vases that ended up at the Smithsonian.

¹⁹ Holmes, “The Trade,” 172.

²⁰ Holmes, “The Trade,” 171.

²¹ Holmes, “The Trade,” 171.

By the end of the nineteenth century, many museums – in Mexico City, Vienna, London, and Washington D.C. -- owned too many vases of this kind: “It is not wonderful that museums in all parts of the world are becoming well stocked with this class of Mexican antiquities,”²² wrote Holmes. His concern above all intellectual: fakes distorted the understanding of the past. Though he did not doubt that “they will be detected in time and thrown out,” he was worried that “in the meantime, they will have made an impression upon literature.”²³ Holmes’s article is meant as an antidote of sorts against forgers’ ruses to make these vases pass for genuine prehispanic antiquities. He urged collectors not to fall for an aged look, which forgers achieved by burying the piece in moist earth to prepare it for the market or by washing it with a thin solution of clay. Ancient ceramics, by contrast, “are thoroughly discolored, and every crack and cavity [...] will be completely filled with sediment.”²⁴ But, for Holmes, the most important feature for telling apart fakes was their “incongruousness”: in the case of black ceramic ware, their pastiche were “not even imitations of genuine [ancient] work [but] compositions made up of unrelated parts, derived, maybe, from ancient art, and thrown together without rhyme or reason.”²⁵ As Holmes concludes, “fraud is stamped upon every contour and written in every line.”²⁶ By contrast, “true native art is consistent: each part bears an intelligible relation to all other parts.”²⁷

Three quarters of a century had passed since Humboldt qualified American antiquities as grotesque. By the time Holmes studied them in the late nineteenth century, American antiquities had become more familiar to scholars and collectors. It was clear, Holmes suggested, that the ancients were masterful artisans, who made their objects with “rhyme and reason,” in accordance with coherent iconographic, stylistic, and technical conventions. Black ceramic vases of the sort purchased by Holmes on the train to Teotihuacan would no longer do, or would raise an eyebrow among high-end collectors. The deformed and incongruous might still appeal to those whose vision of the exotic indulged in fantasies of the tasteless look of primitive crudity. But authenticity had a different look. As scholars like Holmes sought to teach their contemporaries in the science of the authentic, forgers took note as well. Fakes were becoming increasingly “beautiful,” well-made, and increasingly hard to tell apart.

²² Holmes, “The Trade,” 171.

²³ Holmes, “The Trade,” 170.

²⁴ Holmes, “The Trade,” 171.

²⁵ Holmes, “The Trade,” 172.

²⁶ Holmes, “The Trade,” 172.

²⁷ Holmes, “The Trade,” 172.

A taxonomy of fakes and the science of authenticity

In 1910, Leopoldo Batres (1852-1926) published the most extensive and apparently the only attempt, to date, to create a record of fakes at the MNM: *Antigüedades mejicanas falsificadas*(sic), a thirty-page booklet, followed by an annex with photographs of over 200 objects at the museum. Batres begins with an anecdote from Paul Eudel's *Trucs et truqueurs: altérations, fraudes et contrefaçons dévoilées* (1907), about a certain Prof. Berg from Christiania (Oslo), who "discovered" a twelfth-dynasty Egyptian sarcophagus under the floor of a peasant's hut. A hefty sum secured the object, which arrived at the university museum two months later. Scholars gather excitedly around it, but doubts and suspicions arise immediately: the solid "sycamore wood" of the coffin makes a hollow sound; the prayer to Ossyris lacks style; the paint is recent; the fabric wrapping the mummy, rough muslin; the mask's eyes are made of glass. Despondent Prof Berg "starts doubting himself and [...] no longer answers his colleagues' questions; he has no energy left to argue, and like a man condemned to death, his eyes sunk in his orbits, awaits his condemnation."²⁸ This comes in the form of X-rays, a new technology which makes the contents of the wrapped bulk visible without destroying them – contact with air would pulverize the mummy. Only, there is no mummy, but a "horrible simulacrum, the most vulgar of shadows, a straw mannequin."²⁹

With Eudel's story – which has all the ingredients of a great crime mystery, from the scene in the hut in Egypt to the gathering of experts in Oslo; from the construction of incriminating evidence to ruined reputations --, Batres disposes the reader towards his own booklet. Fakes, Batres affirms, plagued the study of prehistory, ancient Egypt, Babylonia, and medieval France; but the presence of fakes among archaeological artefacts at the MNM was especially detrimental to the study of Mexico's ancient past because "it was hard enough to know it," even when dealing with authentic artefacts. Fakes made that study so much harder. At stake, as Irina Podgorny has succinctly put it in a study on fakes and the consolidation of archaeology as a scientific discipline, is whether it was the archaeologist or the forger who got to create new types.³⁰ The fabrication, by a forger in Oaxaca, of "idols" made of clay and lead, with

²⁸ Batres, *Antigüedades*, 4.

²⁹ Batres, *Antigüedades*, 5.

³⁰ Podgorny, "Sobre la constitución de los objetos," 24.

a singular resemblance to Hindu divinities³¹ – at a moment when archeologists were looking for the Oriental origins of New World civilizations -, shows fakes were of crucial concern for Mexican archeology. In his *Antigüedades mejicanas falsificadas*, Batres sets out to address it by doing for Mexican antiquities what Eudel had done for the antiquities of the Old World. He was especially suited for the task.

Since 1885, Batres had served as General Inspector of Archaeological Monuments, a post created ex-professo for him by President Porfirio Díaz; his broadly-defined duties included collecting archaeological artefacts on behalf of the museum and the inspection, conservation, and reconstruction of archaeological sites. By 1908, his assignments were expanded to subsume the “[examination of] each acquisition [by the museum] in order to determine its authenticity, its culture of origin, and whether it had been severed from the ruins.”³² Acting, as he did, as broker between the museum, collectors, dealers, Mexican and foreign archaeologists, and people working at archaeological sites, Batres had profound practical knowledge of Mexican archaeology and would have inevitably had his run-ins with fakes and their makers -- his photographs of forgers standing proudly by their kilns at Teotihuacan is telling in this regard (figure 5). Furthermore, since 1907, he had been working on a new inventory for the archaeological collection at the NMN.³³ It is possible that his small book of fakes was a byproduct of this much larger task and that the separate collection of fakes was part of his effort to record the museum’s authentic artifacts.

[insert figure 5 near here]

Antigüedades mejicanas falsificadas is not a complete inventory of the museum’s fakes. Batres shows only the more notorious ones. Still, the book gives a sense of the diversity of things that were being faked --vases, jewelry, masks, statuettes, and codices --, as well as of the surprising range of materials used to make them: black clay, bone and human skulls, shell, obsidian, gold, silver, paper, coconut, and alabaster – the latter was imported from Italy, as vases and columns to furnish bourgeois homes; when an alabaster object broke, forgers purchased the material and modelled it on objects in the museum. Batres also includes tools used by forgers,

³¹ Batres, *Antigüedades*, 9.

³² Bueno, *The Pursuit of Ruins. Archaeology, History, and the Making of Modern Mexico* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2016), 76-77.

³³ He was charged with the task by museum director Genaro García, who was dissatisfied with the inventory produced by German archaeologist Eduard Seler in 1907. See Miruna Achim and Bertina Olmedo in Seler, *Inventario de las colecciones arqueológicas del Museo Nacional, 1907* (Mexico City: INAH, 2018).

such as a remarkable collection of eighty electroplated molds of hieroglyphs copied from codices, which were used to produce the “famous Chiapas bricks” in the museum’s collection of fakes (Fig. 6).³⁴ Batres has intimate knowledge and appreciation for the fabrication of these molds, which combine precision, delicacy, and sturdiness: the reliefs, which imitate glyphs in ancient codices, are made of fine white wax; the wax is then subjected to galvanoplasty with copper, to ensure the molds would be robust enough to be pressed on wet clay and produce the “bricks.”

[insert figure 6 near here]

But the book is more than a catalogue of selected fakes. It is also a who’s who of sorts in the world of forgery; an instruction manual, for the unsuspecting buyer or collector, on how to tell a fake by examining aspects as diverse as style and manufacturing techniques; and a scathing reckoning with scholars and high-ranking museum officials -- many of whom Batres considered his bitter enemies -- who fell for fakes. Alfredo Chavero, the by-then-deceased director of the MNM, is the object of Batres’s deepest scorn, for having published studies of fakes – which Chavero took for authentic metalwork – in the museum’s journal *Anales del Museo Nacional*. Others, Batres does not name, although, how hard could it have been for a contemporary of Batres’s to guess the identity of the professor at the Museum of Natural History in New York and at Columbia University, who purchased fake Zapotecan antiquities? (Marshall Saville) Or that of the Mexican scholar who published studies of fake codices (José Fernando Ramírez), only to have his work immediately criticized by a colleague, which resulted in the end of their friendship?

Forgery, as Batres describes it, is a wide, systemic phenomenon, which is not limited to the artisan working a kiln or chipping away at an obsidian block, to sell the product to the unsuspected buyer on a train to Teotihuacan. Rather, Batres describes forgery as collaborative work which brings together many people, of diverse social standing, each person bringing specific skills to the making of a fake, from its conception and its fabrication to passing it off as “authentic.” This dense network includes, obviously, the artisan, but also the dealer, a “cynical individual, insinuating and suggestive, who employs all his art to convince his victims that white is black,”³⁵ and reaches as far up as “the directors of local museums, who, profiting from their

³⁴ Batres, *Antigüedades*. We have not been able to identify what “bricks” Batres refers to.

³⁵ Batres, *Antigüedades*, 14.

situation, reproduce with astonishing fidelity the objects in their custody, to launch them on the market as genuine prehispanic artefacts.”³⁶ Thus, in many cases, forgery starts with the museum itself, which is, to the eyes of its personnel and of forgers, a valuable archive of models and molds.

Artisans form the most diverse group in this flowchart of forgers. There are, among artisans, those who enjoy high social standing, as is the case of the “dangerous forger,” whom Batres does not name, who produced copies of Fray Bernardino de Sahagún’s work held at European libraries; having fine knowledge of the originals and “an extraordinary ability” [to reproduce them], his offensives are error-free and unflinching, warns Batres. There is also another unnamed artist, from Oaxaca, a “true genius for forgeries of Zapotec and Mixtec antiquities.”³⁷ On the other hand, Batres names Don Elías Amador, a prestigious lapidary --and a patriot in the republican army at the time of the French intervention, who took seven bullets and was left for dead³⁸ --, who took up obsidian carving after the war, as an experimental project, seeking to understand and reproduce ancient manufacturing processes. Most forgers, however, were lowlifes, “uncouth peons” and “counterfeiters whose ability [did] not go beyond confection,”³⁹ and whose connections with the crime world went beyond the forgery business. Thus, Batres warns his readers, “there just returned to Mexico City one of the most capable forgers of obsidian antiquities, who had been deported to the penitentiary islands of Tres Mariás for being a recalcitrant thief. Almost all the men who dedicate themselves to this ignoble industry are alcoholics and waste their time in taverns.”⁴⁰

If Batres’s text, with its cast of “dangerous” draftsmen, “cynical” traffickers, “recalcitrant thieves,” and unscrupulous museum directors, sounds like a criminology manual -- titles such as *Los criminales en México* (1904) and *Crímenes sexuales y pasionales* (1906) by Carlos Rougmanac, Batres’s contemporary, come to mind --, the resemblance is not at all casual. Like the criminologist, the archaeologist is called to the scene of a crime, to reconstruct and determine what happened. In a classical essay, Carlo Ginzburg identifies the configuration, towards the end of the nineteenth century, of an “indiciary paradigm,” that is, the turn, by art connoisseurs,

³⁶ Batres, *Antigüedades*, 14.

³⁷ Batres, *Antigüedades*, 14.

³⁸ Batres, *Antigüedades*, 30.

³⁹ Batres, *Antigüedades*, 14.

⁴⁰ Batres, *Antigüedades*, 15.

detectives, and psychoanalysts, to physical, chemical, biological, or morphological traces and clues, as an epistemological strategy for detecting the mark of a criminal or the brush of a famous artist.⁴¹ Batres's methods for telling the fake from the authentic -- as he strives to find the "something off" that separates the copy from the original-- are based on the assumption that there is no such thing as a "perfect copy," just as there is no "perfect crime." Procedures that were becoming increasingly routine in the study of crimes, such as the careful reading of traces with a trained eye and with the help of sophisticated instruments, were being adopted by archaeologists, who also worked with fragments and clues to build credible narratives about the past. Of course, Batres insists, it was indispensable for the critic to have thorough knowledge of the style, composition, form, symbolism, and dress used by prehispanic peoples in their productions. He applies this kind of formal knowledge, for instance, to contrast preconquest and colonial codices: the use of perspective and arches in the case of the latter were telltale signs. But knowledge alone is not enough; something more is needed for a critic to tell a fake: acumen ("penetración para juzgar").⁴² He certainly believed he had it: "In front of my eyes have passed as imitations, or as the product of fantasy, fakes of incontrovertible merit; some of them were so perfect that only an eye with a lot of experience in this kind of defects can recognize the falsehood of an object."⁴³

Metalwork and obsidian at the museum offered Batres good opportunities to test and show off his acumen. Batres published photographs of a fair number of gold fakes in the collections, from small figurines to beading and low reliefs. He also snidely included engravings of fakes that Chavero had taken to be authentic (figure 7). Some decades earlier, Batres thought, it would have been easy to distinguish between authentic and fake metalwork because forgers used soldering to bind parts of an object with metal alloys. Prehispanic metalworkers did not use alloys; they cast the objects, sometimes achieving admirable thinness. But later forgers began to imitate the techniques of the ancients, so it was becoming increasingly difficult to tell a fake apart. Batres recommends experts observe the trace left by tools on the object. Steel burnishers created a highly-polished surface; by contrast, ancient polishing techniques, with agate, rendered a muted sheen.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Carlo Ginzburg, "Clues: Roots of a Scientific Paradigm." *Theory and Society* 7.3 (1979): 273-288.

⁴² Batres, *Antigüedades*, 27.

⁴³ Batres, *Antigüedades*, 6.

⁴⁴ Batres, *Antigüedades*, 25-26

[Insert Figure 7 near here]

In the last section of his booklet, Batres turns to obsidian fakes. When Tylor described the market of fakes in Mexico City half a century earlier, he suggested that obsidian was a good investment because it was likely to be “authentic,” for “the art of working obsidian [was] lost and there [could] be no trickery about that.”⁴⁵ By the time Batres published his *Antigüedades mejicanas falsificadas*, the MNM owned the world’s largest collection of obsidian fakes, consisting of masks, small amulet-type objects, vessels, faces, and animals. Batres finds them technically admirable -- “I have seen fake obsidian idols that are marvelous both in their carving and in their polish”⁴⁶ – and especially difficult to tell apart as fakes. As with metalwork, tool marks and manufacturing techniques are helpful. Contemporary artisans, Batres writes, grind obsidian blocks with emery, carve them with steel punches and chisels, and give them form with a mallet, before polishing the object with petroleum and an emery board. These instruments leave behind a noticeable trace. Prehispanic artisans used stone tools to carve and grind obsidian, producing different kinds of marks. Would nineteenth-century obsidian carvers learn to work the material using the same techniques as ancient carvers, like metalworkers did? This was a common fear among connoisseurs and collectors. As Gordon Ekholm, the curator of Mexican archaeology at the American Museum of Natural History, wrote some time later, curators were reticent to describe their experiences with fakes because they feared revealing their “secrets” to forgers, resulting in improved forgeries.⁴⁷ By the 1960s, communication between museums, collectors, connoisseurs, dealers, and forgers had become less fluid than in Batres’s days, although it has never come to a halt .

There emerges, in the writings of Holmes, Batres, and Ekholm, the sense of a constant and intimate interplay between the museum curator and the forger, between the authentic and the fake, each shaping the understanding of the other. By the beginning of the twentieth century, to produce proof of forgery, collectors and connoisseurs looked for telltale traces and incriminating details: the use of clay washes to simulate ageing, the mark of a steel burin or a mallet, the presence of alloys, a stain of petroleum, a style that was “somewhat off.” Taxonomies of mistakes made no sense, however, without a more thorough and systematic knowledge of what

⁴⁵ Tylor, *Anáhuac*, 229.

⁴⁶ Batres, *Antigüedades*, 30.

⁴⁷ Ekholm, “The Problem of Fakes,” 21.

the authentic looked like: how pots and bones aged over hundreds of years; how and what materials and tools were used by ancient potters, carvers, sculptors, and jewelry makers to fashion their artefacts; what styles and iconographic programs gave meaning to different objects at different moments. Is it possible, then, that the necessity to tell the authentic from the fake shaped the way authenticity was studied? Did archaeology receive a boost from the kinds of protocols and technologies -- from magnifying glasses to microscopes and X-rays, which someone like Batres might have borrowed, both in a literal and in a conceptual sense, from the natural history laboratory at the MNA – that were being used to discard fakes? Can we trace the genealogies of methods and techniques for the production of evidence in Mexican archaeology to the study of fakes and further back, to the natural sciences? This is only a hypothesis and a lot more research would be needed to confirm it. In any case, even if the extensive use of technologies in archaeology did not originate first with the study of fakes, it is difficult to disentangle questions about manufacturing techniques and styles, provenance, and chronology, which are the hallmark of contemporary archaeology, from early attempts to tell the fake from the authentic.

The little obsidian monkey

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the turn to the methods of more established scientific disciplines, such as criminology, botany, and anatomy, as well as the reliance on scientific instruments, were key for the consolidation of archaeology as a scientific discipline and of the museum as a guardian of Mexico's authentic past. Still, a century later, excavation in controlled circumstances remains the consummate guarantee for authenticity. Suspicions still linger about the source of some of the more beloved and representative objects of the MNA. Neither stylistic nor technical analyses suffice to produce consensus about their provenance or chronology among archaeologists.

Such is the case with the obsidian vase lovingly-called the “little obsidian monkey” (*monito de obsidiana*), which has become one of the metonyms for the Sala Mexico, and, more broadly, for the preciousity and the superb carving skills of the prehispanic dwellers of Mexico's central valleys. Made of golden obsidian from the Sierra de las Navajas,⁴⁸ in the present-day

⁴⁸ Obsidian can be traced to its source by identifying its chemical composition and characteristics such as color. Every volcano produces a different obsidian.

state of Hidalgo, the vase, 15 cm tall x 16.5 cm wide x 17.3 cm deep, has a globular shape and extremely thin walls. As one of its first admirers, antiquities collector Eugène Boban, described it in 1884, “it is carved in the image of a kneeling monkey, which folds its tail, which surrounds the lip of the vessel, with both its hands.”⁴⁹ The monkey, apparently blowing or whistling through its mouth, could be a personification of Ehécatl Quetzalcóatl, the Mexica deity associated with the wind and the underworld. (Figure 8).

[insert figure 8 near here]

References to the little monkey first appear in the documentation of the MNM on January 31, 1876, when, together with a gold “idol,” it was sold to the museum for 600 pesos, by Dr. Rafael Lucio.⁵⁰ In 1882, the vase is included in the catalogue of the archaeological and historical collections at the MNM, which specifies that “the precious obsidian vessel, found in an ancient tomb in an hacienda close to Texcoco,” was being exhibited in a room on the top floor of the museum, together with obsidian mirrors, ritual vessels, and domestic utensils.⁵¹ Two years later, Boban published a more detailed description of the vase, associating it, for the first time, with the god Quetzalcóatl and praising the “admirable regularity” of its carving, especially of its walls, “so thin that at first it resembles a glass bottle.”⁵² Boban also gave an elaborate account of its provenance: Dr. Lucio had obtained the vase from a sick patient, who in turn had bought it for the price of a donkey (estimated at 12 reales or 7.5 francs) from a peasant who had found it in a tomb on his land, close to Texcoco. Stories like these, which had little chance of being confirmed, are common in the history of collecting. In any case, the little monkey has no excavation record associated with it. This has been one reason why its authenticity has been considered doubtful.

Boban’s controversial place in the history of antiquities collecting does little to put those doubts to ease; indeed, his association with the piece raises red flags. Boban, who moved with certain ease between Mexico and France, was an antiquities dealer who accrued and sold numerous collections in the course of his life. He was, by necessity, a student of fakes, who rendered service to his contemporaries by displaying his forgeries, for illustrative purposes, at

⁴⁹ Eugène Boban, “La vase en obsidienne de Tezcoco au Musée National de Mexico.” *Revue d’ethnographie*, 1882, 71.

⁵⁰ [Name], Archivo Histórico del Museo Nacional, Vol. 1, expediente 47, fol. 164.

⁵¹ Gumesindo Mendoza and Jesús Sánchez, “Catálogo de las colecciones histórica y arqueológica del Museo Nacional de México,” in *Anales del Museo Nacional de Antropología*, II: 476.

⁵² Boban, “La vase en osidienne,” 71.

international exhibits.⁵³ Above all, though, he was a master forger, the mind behind the creation of the Aztec crystal skulls, some of the greatest forgeries in Mexican archaeology.⁵⁴ It comes as no surprise, then, that Boban moved with ease and familiarity among forgers, especially among lapidaries. In his correspondence with WH Holmes, for instance, Boban makes reference to a certain Juan Bobadilla, an expert carver of obsidian and jadeite. Though Bobadilla's skill might have been matchless, he and other master carvers incriminated themselves by producing obsidian figures and idols, writes Boban, when the "ancient Mexicans never made figures or idols of obsidian, but [used it] only for masks, adornments for lips and ears, eyes for stone idols, and pendants in the shape of animal heads." Boban categorically adds: "all obsidian objects with bodies, arms, and legs can be considered fakes."⁵⁵ If he had incriminating evidence about the obsidian monkey, he kept it to himself, although obsidian artefacts have remained suspicious, even as they continue to be sought after; as Ekholm has suggested, they are beautiful, and have a "fatal" appeal to collectors.⁵⁶ Lately, a series of studies revealing the presence of obsidian fakes at topnotch collections have confirmed these misgivings.⁵⁷

If these reasons were not sufficient to raise doubts about the provenance of the obsidian monkey, its theft from the MNA, together with that of other emblematic objects, on December 25, 1985 – a theft which shocked Mexico and was the topic of the recent commercial film, *Museo*, starring Gael García Bernal –, have cast its authenticity into question. The monkey was eventually returned to the museum, but the fact that such a delicate object survived the incident unharmed made many wonder if the object that was returned was the same as the one that was stolen. As recently as 2011, archaeologist Leonard López Lujan called for an "analysis of the monkey in order to confirm its authenticity," in the context of a catalogue that includes it among the hundred most representative objects in the museum.⁵⁸

The analysis was carried out in 2015 as part of the ongoing project "Estilo y tecnología de los objetos lapidaries en el México Antiguo" ("Style and Technology in Lapidary Objects in

⁵³ Exposition Universelle Internationale, *Catalogue spécial de l'Exposition des Sciences Anthropologiques*. Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1878, 27.

⁵⁴ Walsh and Topping, *The Man who Invented Aztec Crystal Skulls*. See also, Riviale, Eugène Boban.

⁵⁵ Boban to Holmes, cited by Walsh, "La vasija de obsidiana de Texcoco," 67.

⁵⁶ Ekholm, "The Problem with Fakes," 29.

⁵⁷ Walsh, "The Dumbarton Oaks Tlazoltéotl." As Walsh has shown, the Tlazoltéotl statuette is also associated with Boban.

⁵⁸ Leonardo López Luján, "Monito de obsidiana," in *100obras. Catálogo esencial. Museo Nacional de Antropología*. (Mexico City: Conaculta, INAH, 2011), 186.

Ancient Mexico”). Led by archaeologist Emiliano Melgar Tísoc, the project seeks to advance knowledge about the provenance and chronology of prehispanic artefacts by studying the technologies used to produce them. Based on the premise that “every culture has particular ways of making objects” and is reticent to changing those ways, the project looks for tool marks and manufacturing techniques – the way Batres had a century before.⁵⁹ In the case of the obsidian monkey, Melgar Tísoc used magnifying glasses, a stereoscopic microscope, and a scanning electron microscope, to study the topology, roughness and porosity of the piece – that is, the superficial characteristics that compose manufacturing marks. The analysis concluded, first, that there are no traces of metallic or electrical instruments in the manufacturing of the vase; second, that the traces found correspond to the use of prehispanic tools, such as flint chippings (for incisions), reeds and animal skin (for smooth surfaces), flint burins (for ear perforations); and, third, that the carving techniques coincide with those used by ancient artisans from Texcoco. In other words, the technical analysis of the piece corroborates nineteenth-century accounts of its provenance.⁶⁰

This last assertion has proved controversial. Various archaeologists we have interviewed have misgivings about rigidly associating a particular manufacturing technique with a specific place; this allows no room for an artisan’s personal agency, that is, for his taste and training, or for the possibility that he could have travelled freely between Texcoco and other places. At the same time, there remains the possibility that nineteenth-century artisans could have used ancient manufacturing techniques to carve the vase, just as experimental archaeologists do nowadays; in fact, to analyze the tool traces obtained from the vase, Melgar Tízoc compared them with those produced by experimental archaeologists, who study ancient manufacturing techniques by reproducing them. Of course, none of these objections prove that the vase is not from Texcoco or that it is a fake. But they do show that authenticity is not an easy thing to prove. Despite possible misgivings, the little obsidian monkey remains in the Sala Mexica. After all, the object has beauty to its advantage and serves to remind visitors of the sophistication reached by Mexico’s ancient civilizations.

⁵⁹ Emiliano Melgar Tísoc, Reyna Beatriz Solís Ciriaco, and Bertina Olmedo Vera, “Análisis tecnológico del mono de obsidiana de la Sala Mexica,” in *Actas del Workshop de Arqueometría de la Universidad Tecnológica de Valencia*. Oxford: Archaeopress, forthcoming.

⁶⁰ Melgar Tízoc et al., “Análisis tecnológico.”

Conclusions

Over the course of their history, Mexico's national museums have lost most of their fakes, although there are no records of how this happened. Nor has there been much scholarly interest or curiosity to find out. There are some references left of the fakes themselves, such as those gathered at the MNM by Ramírez in the 1850s or those documented by Batres in 1910.

Archaeological fakes are not the only objects to have been periodically expelled from or made invisible by Mexico's national museums; it is a fate they share with things – such as natural history specimens or ethnographic photographs (see Gorbach and López Hernández in this volume) – that are no longer considered to embody the present's vision of Mexico's past or of its patrimony. Yet, even as the MNA has chosen to forget its fakes, these have been integral to the construction of the authenticity of the objects that the museum chooses to display. Some decades ago, Ekholm advised compiling historical catalogues of prehispanic fakes, classified by styles and tastes, of the kind Batres also produced, to help curators distinguish forgeries in their collections.⁶¹ We follow up on Ekholm's proposal to suggest that a catalogue of fakes at the MNA today, or – may we hope for it? --, an exhibit of its fakes could be valuable in different ways as well. Such an exhibit could help forge new narratives of Mexican collecting and of the broader premises that have shaped expectations about the aesthetics of Mexico's past and of its value and uses as national patrimony.

⁶¹ Ekholm, "The Problem of Fakes," 25.