

Rebecca Welkens, Heidelberg / Demival Vasques Filho, Luxemburg: “...an excessively opulent style of the German Gothic”: Forgeries and Networks of Forged Medieval Art

Art forgeries rank among the most persistent challenges in art history. The *Internationale Museenverband zur Abwehr von Fälschungen und unlauterem Geschäftsgebaren* (1898–c.1945) sought to protect museums, collections, and the art market from the growing circulation of forgeries. Its central platform was the internally circulated journal *Mittheilungen*, which documented forgeries and reported suspected cases. At annual conferences, contested objects were debated, attributions reassessed, and technical examinations initiated. Within the DFG-funded project *ForNet – Forgeries and Networks*, we use the *Mittheilungen* to investigate the association’s actor networks, decision-making processes, and the objects under discussion. By combining archival research, art historical analysis, and historical network analysis, we examine how attributions of authenticity were produced, circulated, and acquired long-term authority.

The first part of the paper offers an overview of the project and its digital component. It will show how to track and trace the forgeries of medieval art in our dataset and how digital approaches can help us to make sense of the debates that were waged about the authenticity of these artworks by members of the Verband. We will address the challenge of finding and modelling the correct terminology to describe the ‘status’ of the artworks (i.e. original, copy, forgery) for both the Verbands’ members and for ourselves.

To understand the conditions under which the status of objects changed from ‘medieval authentic’ to ‘forged’, our project also traces the contemporary whereabouts of items discussed by the Verband. The second part of the paper will therefore focus on a museum object, first believed to be medieval but then considered a fake by a Verband member. Unaware of this verdict, the item is today again regarded as an original, but our reference to the former assessment has led to a new scientific examination. This case study demonstrates how expert networks, and institutional decisions shaped an object’s status, entered the scholarly literature, continue to influence its reception, and whether, and to what extent, the Verband proved effective by its own standards. The paper thus explores the long-term impact of historical forgery discourses and their significance for the production of historical knowledge.