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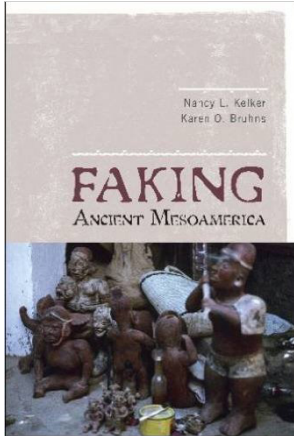
Online Journal in Public Archaeology

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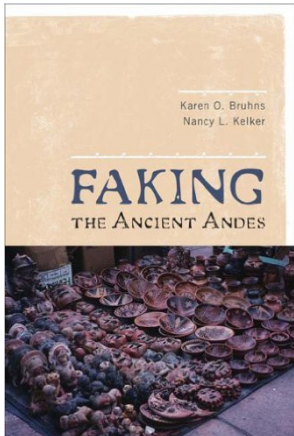
REVIEWS



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Faking Ancient Mesoamerica
[Nancy L. Kelker and Karen O. Bruhns]

Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press
ISBN: 978-1-59874-149-0
256 pages, 2010



Faking Ancient Andes
[Nancy L. Kelker and Karen O. Bruhns]

Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press
ISBN:978-1-59874-395-1
224 pages, 2010

With their twin volumes, *Faking Ancient Mesoamerica* and *Faking the Ancient Andes*, Nancy L. Kelker and Karen O. Bruhns have created a true rarity in academic scholarship, an enthralling page-turner. The authors combine their extensive academic backgrounds studying the ancient cultures of Latin America with revealing research on the modern industry that both produces and distributes faked artifacts, resulting in a startling portrait of unprovenanced

pre-Columbian artifacts. In so doing, Kelker and Bruhns remind us that restrictions against working with unprovenanced artifacts are not obscure or outdated ethical standards but instead are a vital necessity to the study of the ancient world.

One of the most eye-opening tales of forgery presented in these two books is the tale of a faked Olmec Colossal Head. For those who are unaware of the extent, or perhaps the gall, of the antiquities forging industry, it is only natural to presume that the majority of fakes are of artifacts that would attract less attention. For example, given the sheer quantity of pre-Columbian ceramic figurines that have been recovered by archaeologists, it is not hard to conceive that a clever forger could slip a few fakes in with the real examples while no one was the wiser. Olmec Colossal Heads, however, are rare (with only 17 known), large (hence the moniker "Colossal"), and have tremendous cultural cachet as symbols of both the Mexican nation and the history of archaeological research in the region. Nevertheless, Kelker and Bruhns recount the story of a forged Colossal Head that was sold to a German collector for \$20 million. There was little doubt that the piece was a forgery as the man who sculpted the head took several photos of the work in progress, including some showing him in the act of carving the piece. These photos were recovered in a raid by German police in the offices of the antiquities dealer who had sold the object. The existence of such photos is an interesting example of how forgery rings operate. Kelker and Bruhns provide several examples of forgers taking photos of their work in progress so that if they are later caught by authorities and accused of selling genuine antiquities they can provide evidence that they are in fact only making replicas. The buyers of these 'replicas', however, can be kept in the dark and distracted by the lure of owning a piece of the ancient past.

A common theme throughout both *Faking Ancient Mesoamerica* and *Faking the Ancient Andes* is the way in which the products of the forgery market reflect contemporary imaginings of the ancient past, thus setting them apart from authentic expressions of pre-Columbian cultures. For example, modern notions of "primitivism" often creep into forged pieces, representing natives as other or wild, rather than as sophisticated agents of an active cultural system. The most notorious example of this tendency can be found in the corpus of sexually-themed or fetish pottery produced by modern forgers of Andean wares. The existence of authentic Moche sex pots, along with related examples from neighboring Andean cultures, has been known for many decades; however, as Bruhns and Kelker note, these pots display a limited range of sexual activities. Modern reproductions of such pots, both in the form of tourist wares and forged antiquities, greatly expand on the range of sexual activities depicted and notably embrace the depiction of homosexual acts. As gay rights movements rose in prominence during the 1980s and 1990s, Andean pottery depicting homosexual acts gained greater prominence in the art market matching the rising demand. Despite the fact that none of these pieces came from excavated contexts, they were further endorsed by Queer Theory advocates within the academy who argued that ancient homosexuality had been oppressed by contemporary heteronormativity. Through this example Bruhns and Kelker clearly demonstrate that forgers were meeting the demands of their contemporary market, in this case both the art market and the academic market of ideas.

Kelker and Bruhns also do not shy away from more nuanced and debatable objects in their books. Most notably they devote a lengthy section of *Faking Ancient Mesoamerica* to discussing the Grolier Codex, considered by many to be an authentic pre-Columbian Mayan book. Kelker and Bruhns consider not only the artistic conventions found in the manuscript but also the raw materials, and the astronomical information conveyed by the manuscript to make

their judgment that the Grolier was painted in the present, albeit on authentically ancient paper. Not all scholars will be convinced by the arguments made by Kelker and Bruhns; for example, they dismiss the accuracy of the astronomical information found in the Grolier as being copied from the Dresden Codex (an undisputed pre-Columbian Mayan codex) without commenting on the fact that codified tables of astronomical data should be notably similar from one document to the next. Their discussion of the Grolier Codex, however, is even-handed and should be of great value to all scholars who value a critical approach to the ancient world.

This work, however, is not without its problems. On numerous occasions throughout both books, Kelker and Bruhns criticize the museum world for an unwillingness to admit to the existence of fakes within their collections. While this is clearly the case at many institutions, the nature of the comments made against museums often sinks to the level of casting aspersions on the entirety of the museum world, rather than focusing on particular known cases. Given the frequency of these aspersions, the author of this review was not surprised when Kelker and Bruhns admitted that at least one of them had been fired from a museum position for suggesting that an artifact was in fact a forgery. The museum profession's complicity in the face of at the very least looted, if not forged, antiquities is an important issue that should be dealt with head on rather than surreptitiously. Unfortunately, the manner in which this issue is presented in *Faking Ancient Mesoamerica* and *Faking the Ancient Andes* may leave an uninitiated reader with the impression that the problem is only a personal vendetta on the part of the authors rather than a systemic and institutional issue.

Another problematic topic found in both books is the discussion of how fakes are manufactured and traded on the black market. Kelker and Bruhns provide specific details on how different materials are manufactured and artificially aged to fool the collector. For

example, they provide specific instructions as to how cracking can be induced in wooden objects and how suitable surface erosion of stone objects can be created through the application of a variety of substances. They also interview individual forgers regarding how they got their start in this illicit world and discuss the business practices employed by forgers to both better sell their wares and protect themselves from prosecution. Through this discussion Kelker and Bruhns shine a bright light onto a shady business, and hopefully the result of this exposure will be that more people in the world of art collecting become aware of the basic tricks of the trade and thus are not so easily hoodwinked by forgeries. At the same time, it is impossible to read these sections of Kelker and Bruhns' books and not see how they could be used as a practical 'how to' manual for an aspiring forger. This problem was perhaps unavoidable as some discussion of the business of forgery was a necessity for these books, but greater care could have been taken in many instances to avoid such explicit descriptions of the methods of forgery.

Overall, Kelker and Bruhns have presented us with a much-needed discussion of the widespread and prominent nature of forgeries within pre-Columbian artifacts. All too frequently, their examples of forged artifacts include prominent pieces that have played central roles in museum collections, art monographs, and scholarly discussions of pre-Columbian Latin America. The reader will inevitably find a classic piece, whether it be the Olmec Wrestler or the Gothenberg 'Paracas' Trophy Head, in these pages, and subsequently find their faith in our interpretations of pre-Columbian Latin America shaken. Both *Faking Ancient Mesoamerica* and *Faking the Ancient Andes* read like page-turning tabloids where the reader cannot wait to see what scandal will appear on the next page, yet these books are supported by strong scholarship and they further serve as excellent reminders of the importance of context and integrity when dealing with ancient artifacts. While one might

wish to quibble over the authenticity of particular pieces discussed on these pages, the central point rings true; if you do not know the archaeological provenience of a piece you must entertain the question of its authenticity, no matter how genuine it might appear at first glance.

AP: Online Journal in Public Archaeology

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Cover Image: *Makonde women* (Festo Gabriel)

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ISSN: 2171-6315

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