

A MUCH CONTESTED NEAR EASTERN OBJECT

AUTHENTIC OR FAKE?

It is the nightmare of every collector: the object you bought turns out to be a forgery. Small surprise, therefore, that establishing the authenticity of ancient artifacts has become an important field of research. Occasionally, there is good news.

By *Lucas Petit*

This tondo with unconnected juxtaposed scenes (...) is a poorly executed and modern attempt to replicate ancient scenes – but successfully sold and published.

The above quote is from *The Lie Became Great* (2000) by Oscar White Muscarella, a senior research fellow of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Muscarella claimed that museums are complicit in the illicit trade and destruction of sites by publishing unprovenanced objects. It is an entertaining and influential book, even though it is drenched with personal statements, like “how could this piece have been offered for sale with a straight face”. Based on his words, hundreds of objects in museums came to be considered forgeries.

One of those is a bronze tondo, acquired by the Dutch National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden in an antiquity shop in 1943. Its function is unclear: it is either a part of a wooden shield or a decorative

disk worn on the body. The tondo belongs to the group of so-called Luristan bronzes, which are artefacts of various individual forms that have appeared on European antiquities markets from the 1930s onwards.

The Leiden tondo measures 32.5 cm in diameter and is considered a unique masterpiece, since in contrast to similar objects it features decorative scenes. Around the central boss, decorated with a string of lotus flowers and pomegranates, two scenes are depicted: a court scene and a hunting scene. The first of these shows two men bringing ibexes and a bull up to the king. A servant is standing behind the throne. The other scene shows a lively and detailed lion hunt. An archer is taking aim and a man on a bull seems to be attacking a lion with a typical Luristan axe.

After the publication of Muscarella, the object changed from a masterpiece into a “poorly executed” forgery. According to him, there were several stylistic problems: the bull rider who slips off the beast’s back, a strange instrument next to the king’s seat, a left-handed bowman who was dressed in a 1940s designer skirt, and a representation of a Luristan axe that is

too large for the shaft and lies awkwardly parallel to the shaft. But especially the fact that it was unique and derived from the art market made it seem suspicious.

In 2012, the National Museum of Antiquities renewed its Near Eastern permanent gallery. One of the topics was the problems concerning the trade in antiquities and forgeries. If Muscarella was right about this tondo, it could play an important role in the exhibit on forgeries. But for the present author, unusual iconographical properties were not convincing enough. In February 2012, Robert van Langh and his team of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam studied the composition of the bronze, the method of fabrication, and the kind and extent of corrosion. Physical properties of the tondo were studied by microscopic examination and X-radiography. It became clear that the object was made from one single sheet of bronze by hammering, without evidence of joins, seams, or solder. This is consistent with the technique used for the production of other Luristan artefacts. Some corrosion may have been removed by previous cleaning operations. The forger could have used an ancient undecorated tondo and produce the lively decoration scenes, but it is extremely unlikely that the person was able, well before 1943, to reproduce this kind of corrosion artificially. All examinations and physical properties are consistent with the object being ancient.

The conclusion that this tondo seems authentic is surprising giving the firm conclusions of Muscarella. A similar case, however, already occurred in the 1970s at the Metropolitan, where a decorated bronze beaker was considered a fake, but proven authentic. Unique pieces can easily be described as forgeries because of the absence of parallels. Looking at the Leiden tondo in detail, many of the motifs have a parallel somewhere. Court- and hunting scenes occur regularly on objects from the ancient Near East and they fit well in the

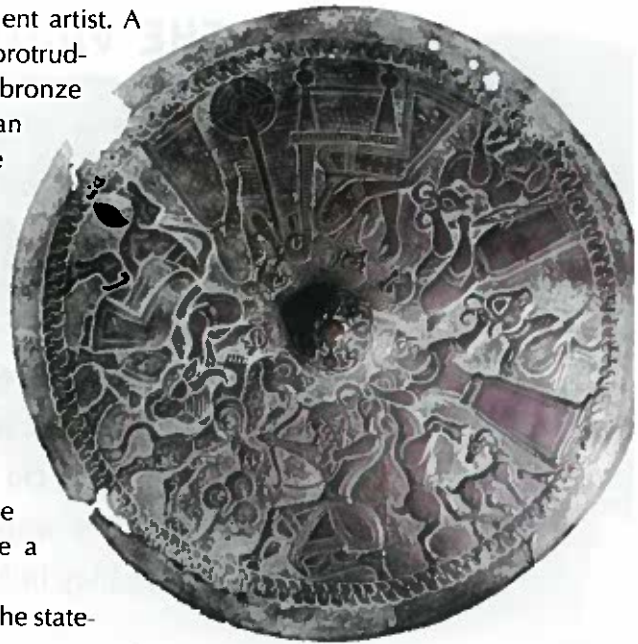
repertoire of any ancient artist. A standing lion with a protruding tongue is seen on a bronze strip in Berlin; a man riding a bull is visible on a silver plaque published by Belleli; left-handed bowmen are known from Assyria. The fact that the axe on the tondo was never intended to be a weapon but a grave good explain why the artist did not produce a realistic image.

Seen in this light, the statement of Muscarella appears somewhat odd. The Leiden specimen was not at all poorly executed and certainly does not have unconnected juxtaposed scenes. Technical examinations have proved it to be authentic and the iconography seems not to be so unusual at all. It is a wonderful and unique piece of art that deserves full rehabilitation. **AHM**

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FURTHER READING

Muscarella published his ideas for the first time in 1974 in "Decorated bronze Beakers from Iran" in *American Journal of Archaeology* 78/3 (pp. 239-252) and repeated them in 2000 in *The Lie Became Great: The Forgery of Ancient Near Eastern Cultures*. Robert van Langh's research has not yet been officially published, but as soon as there is a report, you'll be able to read it at: <http://tinyurl.com/o9llxhd>. You can already find information on other literature at this link.



The Leiden tondo. The court scene is to the right and above: people bringing ibexes to a king on throne. The lower and left-hand parts show the hunting scene.

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