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A multidisciplinary operational protocol for the study of manuscripts and metals: proposals by Ahmed Hosni

“Forgeries and the Authenticity of Archaeology” by Ahmed Hosni, recently published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2022), aims at shining a light into the darkness of cultural heritage crime. As the result of ten years of research in archaeological heritage conservation, Hosni’s book has been revised by Prof. Wafika Noshi (Cairo University), Prof. Tarik Nazel, and Dr Al-Quds (Minya University). It is a primer about forgeries in the Egyptian context and focuses on two classes of materials, manuscripts and metals. Hosni sets off from a concept very much in tune with this Journal: our duty to investigate forgeries because they can lead to a mystification of history and an incorrect perception of culture by civil society. The first chapter, “Types of Forgery and Faking”, introduces the basic vocabulary and phenomenon, leading the reader into the Arab world and its material productions. The nuances that words and notions like “fake” or “forgery” can acquire in different contexts are fascinating (and it is a problem that the scientific community should try to solve to come to shared solutions for combating criminal phenomena). The second chapter, “Methods of Detecting Forgery and the Faking of Archaeology”, deals first with manuscripts and then with metals. In both cases, Hosni reiterates how advantageous and essential it is to carry out a multidisciplinary and transversal work that embraces the historical analysis of the material evidence and technological and scientific investigation. The methods, techniques, and tools necessary to access the authenticity of the objects in question are briefly described, focusing on the possibilities each instrument can provide for the study of manuscripts or metals. The third chapter, “Applied Samples”, deals with three cases. The Thirty Parts of the Holy Qur’an, a manuscript initially deemed to date back to the Islamic era but made by an unknown copyist, instead;

a copper vase kept at the Agricultural Museum in Cairo; and an Iron Helmet at the Museum of Applied Arts in Cairo. Applying the methodologies discussed in the first two chapters to concrete case studies, Hosni shows us the operational protocol he has developed over the years. This operational protocol is the most valuable hinge of the entire volume (the stylistic and graphic rendering eases a technical-operational approach rather than a theoretical study) and reflects an extremely pressing, relevant need for the world scientific community. Recently, the conference “Lo scienziato e il falsificatore. Metodologie scientifiche per identificare i falsi nell’arte” (Lucca, 2-3 December 2021), organized by the University of Pisa in collaboration with the Italian detachment of the International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, gathered experts in scientific diagnostics, restoration, and conservation of cultural heritage, as well as jurists, law enforcement agencies, archaeologists, and art historians to try to lay the foundations for shared operational protocols for the authentication of cultural goods. These operational protocols will be fundamental to spot and study forgeries in the most precise way possible. Therefore, they will provide the best tools for preventing and combating the criminal phenomena that threaten the world’s cultural heritage. While waiting for the proceedings of this important conference to be published, Ahmed Hosni’s “Forgeries and the Authenticity of Archaeology” might spark further reflections and investigations on the authentication of manuscript and metals especially, reflections and investigations that are essential to preserving the memory of authentic cultural heritage.

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