STYLISTIC CANON, Imitation and Faking
Comments on Schefold (AT 18,2)

I am confounded by the article ‘Stylistic canon, imitation and faking’ in your April issue. Despite the promise of the title, the stylistic canon of Mentawai art is nowhere properly addressed. As Evelyn Payne Hatcher explains in Art as culture (1985, pp. 16-17), ‘The problem of defining “a style”… presents difficulties… because there are so many elements and factors in any art style, words describing one or some of them, if taken too seriously, can lead to errors of identification and of interpretation.’ Without a theoretical framework for his interpretations, Schefold’s observations appear overly simplistic.

There is an issue of methodology and procedure here. After working for over 30 years in the art world, 15 as a museum curator, I do not believe it is possible to determine definitively whether an object is ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ from a photograph. No one should publish his/her suspicions of an object without first examining it extensively, with the assistance of a professional to do the appropriate lab work. It is a rather straightforward procedure to ascertain whether a wooden object has been artificially aged or altered. It would have been helpful if Schefold had acknowledged this.

Using photographs as one’s primary source of information is a treacherous activity. Comparison of the jaraiks in Figures 3 and 4 reveals a striking resemblance in the configuration of the two pieces. Are they one and the same? Different people took the photographs at different times and in different places. Incidental differences abound. Figure 4 is a third-generation image. As critical empirical data on this piece is missing, it is impossible to determine whether the jaraik in Figure 3 was altered in the ways that Schefold so confidently asserts. It’s equally plausible that the jaraik in Figure 4 is a copy of that in Figure 3. Schefold’s proposal that the jaraik illustrated on pages 50-51 of the Chicago catalogue was once a door is another figment of his imagination. He hasn’t seen any of the pieces in the Chicago catalogue.

Where are the measured, circumspect remarks? The fragments of conversations with Mentawai natives and a Batak informant quoted in the article are unreliable. Instances of a lack of correspondence between verbal information and actual behaviour are well documented in the literature. In the instances noted above the questions are leading, and the possibility great that the informant’s response was intended to please or impress.

The text on the wooden house carving in Figure 1 doesn’t note that this object is from the author’s own collection. Given the possible conflicts in terms of Schefold’s personal interests in Mentawai art, I’m puzzled as to what was to be gained by publishing this tabloidesque self-serving article. The reputation of the field of cultural anthropology is at stake. Many academics view cultural anthropology as too speculative and not rigorous enough, more social than science. Such claims are nowhere better confirmed than in this article.

In their reply to Reimar Schefold’s article ‘Stylistic canon, imitation and faking’, Bruce Carpenter and Frank Wiggers (AT 18,2) question aspects of Schefold’s underlying research. As the field researcher responsible for at least some of this, I feel compelled to respond.

Carpenter and Wiggers wonder why a Batak migrant (one of my informants) would busily himself carving traditional Mentawai objects unrelated to Batak traditions. In fact this was a side product of his long involvement in the tourism business. His family owned an internationally known tourism company in Padang, on Sumatra, and he personally assisted international film crews shooting documentaries on Mentawai culture in the second half of the 1990s. His guests were keen to see hard-to-find ‘pristine’ traditional Mentawai culture and, to satisfy their desires, he urged Mentawai friends in various parts of the island to give their houses a more traditional appearance. While helping with this work he discovered that he himself enjoyed carving. He then made extensive studies of Mentawai style and tradition and became well known among various Mentawai uma longhouses for the quality of his carvings, which now can be seen in different parts of Siberut. This Batak carver did not mislead me, as Carpenter and Wiggers seem to think. He himself stated that he had carved the particular jaraik illustrated by Schefold in Figures 3 and 4. Furthermore, on the basis of these photos, his own assertions to this effect were independently confirmed by several Mentawai islanders living in the area where this particular object was purchased.

Carpenter and Wiggers infer from Schefold’s description that my Batak informant started to carve after the appearance of the Indonesian translation of Schefold’s Spielzeug catalogue in 1991. Indeed my informant does own a copy of this book and also admits to having copied some objects from it, several of which can be seen in the Taman Nasional building in the village of Maileppet, and elsewhere. However, his carvings made to meet tourist demand predates this catalogue by at least five years. It was therefore quite possible for Olivier Lelievre to photograph this jaraik in 1992.

It may be true, as Carpenter and Wiggers suggest, that the contemporary production of Mentawai-style art destined for the market has been stimulated by their own Chicago catalogue published in 1999. However, the art industry on Siberut was established as long ago as the late 1980s, well over a decade before the publication of the catalogue. Prompted by the demands of tourists, traders and art scouts, individuals began to produce traditional-style or more original carvings. Over the years their number augmented and carvers on Sumatra joined in. I have described this development in a separate article (to appear in Indonesia and the Malay World, 30(88), December 2002). The assertion that the objects included in the Chicago catalogue predated this development, since they were collected between 1991 and 1996, is therefore incorrect.

I am not particularly concerned with the finer points of art trade definitions of authenticity and tradition. I am interested, however, in how such definitions relate to the opinions of the people credited with their production. The free-standing three-dimensional ape figure illustrated on the front cover and on pp. 40-41 of the Chicago catalogue is a fascinating example. In his article, Schefold writes that he knows of no such figures ‘belonging to the long established art of the island’ and considers them ‘probable… a modern creation’. As Carpenter and Wiggers correctly argue in reply, apes have an important role in Mentawai myth, ritual and legend, and are certainly part of the material tradition as uniquely stylized figures carved on the surfaces of various wooden objects. However, these figures are two-dimensional depictions and it does not follow that carvings of free-standing three-dimensional ape figures must therefore be a Mentawai artistic tradition as well. During my fieldwork I did not meet a single Mentawai (including Sakuddei, designated as the area from which the figure originates) – on Siberut or elsewhere – who recognized the monkey figure in the Chicago catalogue as a Mentawai carving. I took the Chicago catalogue to Siberut in 2000, not with the intention of discrediting it but because it was the only publication at the time containing pictures of some objects new to me, including this ape-figure. I showed its front cover picture to Mentawai in many different areas; they all greatly admired its style and grace, but showed surprise when I told them the figure was supposed to have come from Siberut.

At one point during this fieldwork I discovered a more crudely carved ape-like statue with a different head in the Chicago catalogue, in the background of the photograph on page 101. My Mentawai informants happened to know personally the particular shaman shown in the foreground of this photo, and we swiftly set off for his house. He directed us to the house where the picture was taken, but when we arrived there the monkey figure had disappeared: it had been sold to an art scout working for a Sumatran dealer. We were told that it had been carved to make the house more attractive to the tourist groups who frequently visited it. One of the villagers knew of a Chinese carver in one of the harbour settlements who carved ape figures and
sold them to dealers. I would certainly be able to find a nice figure there, he reasoned. Despite my investigations, it appeared that neither the Mentawai I followed up nor the Chinese carved the monkey statue depicted in the Chicago catalogue; and therefore we still do not know its origins.

The emergence of new objects and concepts is proof of the resilience of living cultures, and this is just as exciting as established art forms. However, the two should not be confused. The case of the monkey statue serves as an illustration of how non-traditional objects may become part of a tradition in the eyes of outsiders. It should be seen as a warning to art traders, collectors and academics alike not to accept objects as ‘traditional’, ‘old’ or ‘authentic’ without studying their biography in some detail, and exploring their place in the style and aesthetics of the ethnographic region.

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Reimar Schefold’s article is both fascinating, in its profound understanding of Mentawai culture, and stimulating, prompting a desire to compare his experience with other similar experiences encountered in other parts of the world. There is more at stake than just the corpus of ‘unspoiled’ Sakudeii/Mentawai sculpture. Fakes clouding the view of what the indigenous masters once produced for their own community are splendid examples of something that disturbs many of us today: our perception of virtually all forms of art in the world is being increasingly distorted by fakes. I therefore concur absolutely with Schefold in concluding that when fakes enter into the relevant stylistic heritage of a group of people, they not only change the perception that we connoisseurs, collectors and art historians have of that particular tradition, but will sooner or later affect the cherished cultural image future generations will hold of art ‘of their ancestors’. And the fact that fakes produced to fool Western connoisseurs now unfortunately deceive them, the holders of the tradition, is very disturbing – not only for Professor Schefold.

In the following examples I draw attention to the distorted perception of art traditions that fakes produce and make three different points. The illustrated ‘decorative puddles’ with the provenance ‘Siberut’, displaying exuberant handles but completely unfit for rowing (there is no record of a tradition of their ceremonial use as far as I know), reminded me of the ‘Guro spoons’ from Côte d’Ivoire that began to appear on the art market a few years ago, sometimes exhibiting an authentic-looking patina (a coating of copper or bronze formed after long exposure to a humid atmosphere or burial). These are often enlarged versions of wooden spoons that, generations ago, were used by elders for eating. The handles of the modern artefacts are decorated with fine antelope heads with long and delicate horns. These modern objects are made not for members of Guro society (three ethnographers including myself tried in vain to document a single wooden spoon in use by a Guro elder between 1960 and 1975) but rather for the international art and tourist market. What Guro carvers traditionally carved were small spoons with ornaments or small, rounded buffaloe-heads. In these forms the short horns are bent, forming a rough circle. The modern ‘Guro spoons’ are produced by commercial sculptors of various ethnic groups for antiquaries who add the patination, but a few have also been carved by the most famous (eastern) Guro master, Sabu bi Boti. It seems that he was inspired by antelope masks of the dye-ensemble (of the western Guro), which he might have seen illustrated in books. The size of the large modern Guro spoons is reminiscent of the traditionally large ceremonial spoons of the Dan, on the border with Liberia, but a tradition of ‘hospitable women’ performing with such ladies never existed amongst the Guro people. Here, as with the Mentawai case, the ‘canon’ of a regional style has been changed to meet foreign demand, with the introduction of new forms and sizes.

My second example, from India, concerns market surges, whereby works of art from newly discovered regional canons appear on the market, in a process which generally follows a specific pattern. First a few ‘originals’ from an hitherto unknown style start to appear, as the area is explored and then ruled by (local) dealers. At this point the quality of the discovered objects is variable, but they often include some of the ‘best’ pieces. When the plunder has been going on for some time, high-quality objects appear less frequently. Now newly made and hardly used pieces are included in the assortment, and when they prove difficult to sell they are altered by the dealers’ workshops, often being re-cut and receiving a fake patination. They are then distributed amongst the ‘authentic’ unaltered objects. If this stimulates the market, in the next surge true fakes begin to appear and then become dominant. These are often still made mainly by local traditional craftspersons, but are increasingly being crafted in workshops owned by dealers in various parts of the country. A good example of this surgery-like pattern is the way ‘art from Nagaland’ first appeared a decade ago. When the artefacts surfaced early buyers were lucky enough to acquire originals (as in Jean-Paul Barbier’s case), but those who arrived in Delhi or Calcutta later to purchase Naga sculptures and jewellery were soon confronted with faked objects, which insiders labeled ‘instant antiques’. The pattern was less clear-cut in the case of ‘Khond’ (E. India) bronze art: here the local Oriya brass founders (who had been selling their products to Khond communities) were the main agents buying out the local shrines for internationally active dealers, and from the very beginning they sold these purchases alongside new copies they produced and gave a fake surface. They soon found out what sold well and on this basis began to produce more elaborate and elegant versions of traditional patterns. These were again typical expansions of the traditional models made to cater to international taste.

My third and last example shows that forgers can also develop the possibilities of an emerging art period or region where the canon is not yet recognized and they can therefore remain undisturbed by the trusted eyes of connoisseurs and art historians. Recently, an Indian art dealer with a high reputation in New York began to offer large paintings on cloth representing Hindu gods and goddesses. These ‘tantric’ images were splendidly crafted, and their short inscriptions in the Takri script of the hills were difficult to decipher but made some sense. The mostly female deities had some of the charming realistic features which we associate with late Mughal painting, but were otherwise based on the ‘Basohli’ style of late 17th-century Pahari painting. Art dealers labelled them ‘Mandi paintings of the early 17th century’. The work was presented as that of a very early Pahari workshop of which we know very little, but which Dr. V.C. Ohri, in his recent book The origins of Pahari painting, rightly postulated as one of the earliest workshops in the hills situated in the former principality of Mandi. (Another academic paper by Catherine Glynn and art historians. Recently, an Indian Mandi style with similarities to Mughal painting, appeared in the journal Artibus Asiae.) Ohri’s book is widely distributed in India and easily available to local art dealers and their studios. We know that there are highly gifted painters working on paper and cloth, especially with the dealer Vijayavargia in Jaipur, and in the small town of Bihlwa, and there are also some shrewd art dealers in the neighbourhood. And with Ohri and the painters exchanging news frequently in Jaipur, it was not long before these ‘new samples’ of the earliest Pahari painting turned up, very enticing, quite plausible because this was precisely the kind of material that scholars and collectors were hoping to find – but unfortunately faked. *

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