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And Now It's the Real Deal

The premise of *Antiques Roadshow* is simple. Debuting in 1977, the television programme had expert appraisers travel throughout Britain and assess the value of antiques that locals brought in. The appraisers authenticated any collectibles and offered a brief history of the craft and context of each piece. *Antiques Roadshow* was an exciting way of sorting out genuine treasures from hoarded bits and bobs gathering dust in British attics.

Currently in its fortieth season, with spin-offs in Canada and the United States, the show is a raging success. Most of the objects dragged into *Antiques Roadshow* are just what they appear to be – kitschy heirlooms with quirky family stories or antiques picked up as a bit of a lark. But part of the show's appeal, aside from its discussions about craft history, lies in the possibility that there could be something valuable and authentic. People watch to see if any sort of treasure might come to light, and the narrative of the show builds on that anticipation.

And over the years, audiences haven't been disappointed. Unearthing objects from a Shakespearean notebook to a Fabergé drinking vessel, from silver coins minted during the reign of Charles II to eighteenth-century Chinese carved rhinoceros horn cups, the *Antiques Roadshow* has given new life to some truly impressive antiques. (There was even a genuine Spanish Forger painting, discovered in 2016.) *Antiques Roadshow* runs counter to the stories of most fakes, frauds and forgeries – and that's part of its success. Instead of objects being debunked, these are stories that see items valued and authenticated, rare though these spectacular finds are.

What all fakes have in common is that they're usually too good to be true. Artefacts like the Spanish Forger's paintings, William Henry Ireland's Shakespeares or Johann Beringer's faux fossils seem to justify experts' scepticism – spectacular, earth-shattering, paradigm-shifting, unprecedented new discoveries in the art, artefact and antiquities worlds are assumed to be fake because, well, they generally are. But sometimes that default assumption is wrong. Sometimes new discoveries like those unearthed through *Antiques Roadshow* are just that – new discoveries. Such finds defy the odds, proving to be the Real Thing after all.

The ancient Maya Grolier Codex is an artefact with an odds-defying story. (Although the Codex has nothing to do with *Antiques Roadshow*.) For more than 40 years, many experts derided this ancient Maya artefact as a fake – the sort of thing that would fool an enthusiastic but undiscerning art collector – only to find after extensive scientific testing and decades of research that the codex is most likely the real thing. Although not universally accepted within the scholarly community, the Grolier Codex shows that the authenticity of objects is constantly under negotiation. It also shows that authentication and acceptance of something, after it has been declared fake, is an uphill battle.

To understand the Grolier Codex, it's necessary to unpack its history – the history of the codex's discovery, of course, but also the history of the ancient Maya scribes who wrote it, the Spanish who tried to destroy it and the decades of archaeological debate about its authenticity. Contemporary archaeologists put the creation and writing of the codex in the thirteenth century AD, and Maya history reaches back thousands of years before that.

Ancient Maya civilisation occupied much of southern and eastern Mesoamerica – from modern-day Chiapas in

southeastern Mexico, through Belize and Guatemala, and into western Honduras and El Salvador – from several thousand years ago until the Spanish conquest of Mexico in the sixteenth century. In the millennia before the Spanish conquistadors ever set foot in Central America, many prominent Maya cities like Tikal, Palenque, Copán, El Mirador, Chichén Itzá and Calakmul enjoyed periods of political expansion, economic prosperity and ultimate decline as new cities emerged and others rose to power.

This history included a massive reorganisation of the Maya political landscape sometime around 900 AD, when centres of power shifted to the northern reaches of the Yucatán in Mexico and eventually to the volcanic highlands of Guatemala. With Spanish contact, the then-flourishing Maya city centres were ‘crushed in a protracted, traumatic subjugation that consumed thousands of lives’, prominent Mayanist Robert Sharer states in *The Ancient Maya*. The Spanish arrival ‘was a scourge marked by brutality, catastrophic epidemic diseases introduced by Europeans, and the determined intervention of the Catholic Church’. Historians call this the Conquest and the Conversion.

When the Spanish arrived in the New World, they weren’t prepared to encounter peoples with a history as long and complex as their own. Only their own cultural traditions with deep roots in the classical worlds of Greece and Rome, their Eurocentric logic went, were the legitimate route for a ‘civilised’ society to historically unfold. Mesoamerican cultures (particularly the Mexica, widely known as the Aztec) challenged their assumptions. Throughout their history, the Maya had demonstrated, in Sharer’s words, ‘astonishing achievements’ in mathematics, calendrics, astronomy and, of course, writing, with complex technologies and complicated political organisations, and in the arts, with traditions in sculpture, painting and architecture.

In other words, ‘to sixteenth-century Europeans, secure in the knowledge that they alone represented civilized life on earth, the discovery of the Mexica, the Inka, and the Maya came as a rude surprise,’ Sharer explains in *The Ancient Maya*. ‘The peoples of the Americas, though capable of brutal practices, were not as efficient in the practice of warfare as the Europeans, and although offering brave and determined resistance, were ultimately crushed by the conquistadors.’ In the subsequent centuries, the idea that there was a ‘lost civilisation of the Maya’ resonated with Western audiences, which did not realise that there are millions of ethnic Maya peoples speaking dozens of Maya languages who, today, live in what we call Mesoamerica.

Consequently, the ancient Americas became something for mid- to late-nineteenth-century Europeans to encounter, explore and try to explain, and these Western outsiders categorically denied the living descendants of the ancient Maya any connection to this rich, intellectually and artistically sophisticated ancestry. But this historical aura was full of myths, legends and guesswork trying to make sense of Maya pyramids, architecture, ball courts (where sporting endeavours took place) and artefacts.

Nineteenth-century writers and travellers capitalised on this mystique. For example, between 1839 and 1842, American lawyer and travel writer John Lloyd Stephens and English artist Frederick Catherwood explored Mesoamerica and introduced their readers to ‘lost cities’ of the Maya, firmly establishing the Maya as exotic, extinct and curious to their American and European readers. Stephens and Catherwood took note of the Maya hieroglyphic writing throughout their travelogue, and ‘believe[d] that [Maya] history is graven on its monuments’, since they saw Maya writing on so many different buildings. But Maya writing was unreadable to Western audiences, as there was no

Rosetta Stone equivalent to translate the glyphs, leaving Stephens and Catherwood to ponder, 'Who shall read them?' As many Mayanist scholars point out and have for decades, deciphering the ancient Maya written language has been one of the most perplexing and enduring mysteries of the Maya.

Ancient Maya languages are written with a mixture of hieroglyphs that express whole words and others that connote distinct syllables. (To eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scholars, the script looked similar enough to ancient Egyptian to warrant referring to the writing as hieroglyphics.) Contemporary Maya languages, however, are most often written using the Latin alphabet, not glyphs, although there is a widespread push among indigenous groups to readopt the ancient Maya hieroglyphic system for ceremonial inscriptions written in various modern Maya languages. Very rough estimates suggest that something like 5,000 individual ancient Maya texts can be found in museums and private collections – most of which were written on ceramic vessels and stone monuments during the Classic Period (AD 200–900), although Maya glyphs also show up on cave walls, animal bones, shells and obsidian. (The earliest example of Maya hieroglyphic writing is a column of 10 hieroglyphs painted in a thick black line on white plaster, found on a 2,300-year-old limestone block in a temple in Guatemala.) These texts were written on incredibly durable materials, able to withstand centuries of weathering, thus offering modern Mayanists a written record to read and interpret.

Historically, the knowledge of how to read Maya hieroglyphic writing died out in the sixteenth century. Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars took up the question of translating Maya texts, and for the next hundred years linguists and archaeologists have worked to wring every possible bit of understanding from ancient

Maya glyphs. In their *Introduction to Maya Hieroglyphs*, Mayanists Harri Kettunen and Christophe Helmke describe the process of deciphering Maya texts as ‘advancing ... steadily in stages’ over decades, punctuated by the occasional and spectacular breakthrough.

Maya glyphs are found on a plethora of durable artefacts such as ceramics and pottery, and architectural structures like temples and stelae, but codices were the primary form of written records. Made of sturdy paper from the inner bark of fig trees – called *huun* in Maya and *amate* in Spanish – the codices were folding books with continuous accordion-like pages, written by elite artist-scribes in hieroglyphic script in what experts consider to be the now-extinct Maya language, *Ch’olti’*. Maya script was used continuously from the third century BC until the Spanish Conquest, although some contemporary archaeologists contend that Maya hieroglyphic writing survived until the seventeenth century in areas that were unaffected by Spanish control.

Although parts of the various codices had been published throughout the 1800s, it wasn’t until the latter half of the nineteenth century that linguists, epigraphers, archaeologists and anthropologists doubled down in their efforts to decipher the Maya script. While some experts were successful in decrypting the astronomical tables and the number system, full translations of the codices didn’t happen until the late 1970s to the early ’80s. As of 2017, scholars consider themselves able to translate roughly 90 per cent of Maya texts.

Maya book technology has always been codex-based. Broadly speaking, codices were handwritten books with pages that are bound together; Maya codices had folded, accordion-like page are a unique type of book and occupy an important place in the history of book technology. Globally, codices replaced scrolls – an earlier form of written records – almost completely by the sixth century AD, as a

codex offered scribes a sturdy and compact set of writing surfaces and easily accessible information. Since both sides of a page could be used, and many pages could be bound together, scribes had more space to write than they did on just a scroll; additionally, to find something in a codex didn't involve having to, well, scroll through an entire book to find what one was looking for – bound pages could simply be flipped through. A codex, moreover, improved the durability and storability of a record. 'The painted leaves of codices were likewise read from left to right to the end of the front of the bark-paper strip,' archaeologists Nancy Kelker and Karen Bruhns say of Maya codices, 'then, if both sides were painted, the manuscript was turned and read from left to right so that the last page of the *verso* was the backside of the first page of the *recto*.'

Based on the existing Maya codices, scholars suggest that they are not records of historical events but are 'more esoteric and astronomical', as Mayanists Kettunen and Helmke write, full of 'information presented in the form of almanacs and prophecies'. According to codex translations, the Maya were particularly interested in Venus, as astronomer-priests had identified the Morning Star and Evening Star – that is, Venus – as the same planet. This Maya astronomical observation, contemporary archaeologist and Maya scholar Michael Coe was quick to point out, had not been appreciated by Homer's Greeks.

When Spanish conquistadors marched through Mesoamerica in the sixteenth century, the accompanying Catholic priests judged the Maya codices to be heretical, devil-inspired books and they burned them – nominally to demonstrate the 'superiority' of their Christianity over the polytheistic, nature-infused indigenous Maya religion. In July 1562, the infamous Spanish Bishop Diego de Landa congratulated himself on having incinerated the contents of an entire Maya library in the Yucatán. 'We found a large

number of books in these characters [Maya script] and, as they contained nothing in which were not to be seen as superstition and lies of the devil, we burned them all, which they [the Maya peoples] regretted to an amazing degree, and which caused them much affliction,' he wrote in his *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán*, his catalogue of the eradication of Maya history and literature.

Although some Catholic priests, like Bartolomé de las Casas, decried the destruction of the codices and had for decades, the extermination of Maya libraries was thorough – books were destroyed en masse. 'These books were seen by our clergy, and even I saw part of those which were burned by the monks,' de las Casas lamented in his *Apologética Historia de las Indias*, 'apparently because they thought [they] might harm the Indians in matters concerning religion since at that time they were at the beginning of their conversion.' The last of the then-known Maya codices was burned in 1697, when the Guatemalan city of Nojpetén fell to the Spanish. In a bit of historical irony, *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán* also contained notes by de Landa about Maya script that would prove to be useful to scholars working to decipher and translate Maya hieroglyphs centuries later.

For decades, twentieth- and twenty-first-century Mayanists believed that only three Maya codices survived into the twenty-first century. The three of them – known as the Dresden, Paris and Madrid Codices – are named after the European libraries where they were rediscovered in the nineteenth century, when scholars began using the texts to study the natural history and ethnography of Mesoamerica. In 1811, for example, the famous naturalist-explorer Alexander von Humboldt published several pages of the Dresden Codex in his atlas detailing the indigenous populations of the Americas. These codices survived the destruction of the other Maya books only because Spanish

conquistadors took them back to Europe as curiosities and souvenirs of their time in the Americas. Furthermore, these three codices all date to the later centuries of Maya book-making practices. Not a single codex from the Classic Maya Period survives today.

Ergo – and this is key to the story of the Grolier Codex – Maya codices are extremely rare, due to history, geography and chance. This scarcity impacts academic scholarship as well as the artefacts' financial valuation. Archaeologists can't just go out and discover more codices simply because they want to. Any *huun*-made book that survived the Spanish annihilation centuries before faces the threat of decomposition from Mesoamerica's wet, acidic soils, which easily eat through the delicate fig-bark paper. (Contemporary excavations of Maya burials have yielded some lumpy organic blocks with paint flakes that archaeologists suggest are the decomposing, unreadable remains of codices.) If codices were buried in dry caves, they could, archaeologists argue, survive for centuries. But no such codex has been recovered under any such circumstance, and the historical odds are that it never will be. Until the discovery of the Grolier Codex in the mid-twentieth century, the Dresden, Madrid and Paris Codices were it.

The rarity of Maya codices, however, piqued a very particular niche market in the early twentieth century, as their scarcity ensured a built-in demand in the world of high-end art collecting. This demand opened the collecting markets to artefacts that were looted from Maya archaeology sites and smuggled into auctions, and with this demand came a plethora of fake codices, crafted by forgers ready to foist their art into this burgeoning market. (The wealthy early twentieth-century American newspaper businessman William Randolph Hearst, for example, was said to have purchased not one, but two, fake Maya codices in the early twentieth century.) Although forged codices rarely fooled

expert scholars who had seen the three authenticated codices for themselves, the fake Maya texts provided an extremely lucrative market for the less-than-discerning collector.

Faking Mesoamerican art – especially Maya art – is nothing new. Archaeological and historical estimates highlight this point, suggesting that Aztec forgeries were most likely sold to Hernán Cortés's unsuspecting, gullible soldiers as they conquistador-ed their way across Mesoamerica. These 'souvenirs' were essentially engineered artefacts for the Spanish, as enterprising Aztec artisans pivoted the Toltec statues and Teotihuacán masks that they had been forging in the past to include their new Hispano-Aztec market. (Some Mesoamericanist scholars think that it's possible that a pre-Conquest 'cottage industry' of forgers popped up around the ruins of Teotihuacán, to sell Teotihuacán fakes to the hunters of antiquity.)

The Spanish brought New World antiquities back with them, and many of the artefacts – some authentic, many not – were gifted across Europe from one noble to another, filling cabinets of curiosities with curios from new, exotic locations. The market for ancient Mesoamerican antiquities really took off, however, after the colonies gained independence from Spain in the nineteenth century. As the former colonies opened up for a plethora of businesses in the decades following their independence, demand for art, antiquities and artefacts from the 'lost civilisations' (which the Spanish had decimated during the Conquest) increased to the point where forgeries became incredibly productive. Travelogues like those of John Lloyd Stephens and Frederick Catherwood were powerful tools in the creation of interest in the mystique of the ancient Americas.

Moreover, earlier explorers and travellers like Alexander von Humbolt introduced European readers and the intelligentsia to the peoples and arts of the Americas. The developing European art market paired neatly with a rise in newly formed countries' interests in their indigenous pasts – in Mexico, for example, the War of Independence sparked political rhetoric that promoted politicians as restorers of the Aztec past. Other former Spanish colonies in Latin America began to look for ways to reclaim or promote their non-Spanish pasts, one of these ways being the construction of national museums that needed to be filled with artefacts.

From its earliest history, the faking of Mesoamerican art and antiquities affected both high- and low-end markets. Skilled craftspeople and artists ensured that whatever sort of piece a collector wanted – or expected – could be procured. And once fakes were 'authenticated' with the weight and authority of belonging to a collection, they were translated into 'real' artefacts, regardless of whether they were, technically, from the context they were purported to be associated with. 'By mid-[nineteenth] century there was an incredibly prolific and flourishing antiquity-fabricating industry,' Nancy Kelker and Karen Bruhns explain, 'at least in those countries that had significant numbers of foreign visitors/travelers/businessmen and had had complex societies producing "goodies" in the Precolumbian past.'

The situation with fakes, frauds and forgeries in museum collections reached a crisis point in the late nineteenth century. Alarming many museum professionals, like William Henry Holmes, the famous explorer-archaeologist and American museum curator. When Holmes took a curatorial position at the Smithsonian Institution's Bureau of American Ethnology in 1889, he was faced with the task of having to 'do something with' the large Latin American collection of arts and artefacts that the Smithsonian had acquired.

Holmes himself was an expert in the prehistoric Ancestral Puebloan culture (historically referred to as ‘Anasazi culture’), and had worked with the US Geological Survey and, in 1883, had travelled to Mexico City to examine the archaeological collections at the National Museum. In his publications, Holmes noted that he found many forgeries in the National Museum, a situation he found perplexing. He was rather shocked, however, when he found copies of those same forgeries in the Smithsonian’s collections! ‘It is not surprising that the archaeologists in the United States or Europe should make mistakes in interpreting this work, as they have to take the word of unscientific collectors who rely upon the statements of native dealers,’ Holmes clinically observed in his notes, ‘but it is strange that Mexican scholars should so long have passed the work by without comment.’

It’s worth noting that for many nineteenth- and twentieth-century collectors, the ‘crudeness’ of an early Americas artefact was considered virtual proof of its authenticity, regardless of its provenance or history. Cocooned in a rhetoric of cultural superiority and unencumbered by detail, many collectors simply assume that old-looking, stylistically ‘crude’ artefacts must be the real thing. Moreover, tastes in the then-contemporary art scene also drove demand, with artists like Diego Rivera collecting West Mexican figurines (and many fakes) because of their apparent ‘modern art’ flavour. It’s also worth noting that ‘Fakes are made for us. Fakers can appeal to the tastes of the modern era,’ as art crime historian Erin Thompson reminded me when I asked her about the enduring appeal of fakes. ‘The ancients didn’t make things with our preferences in mind. Fakes are often bigger, more spectacular, more interesting, and more sexy than genuine antiquities.’

While all sorts of Mesoamerican artefacts were faked, and faked extensively, faux Maya codices have long been a class unto themselves. The first fake codices appeared on the

market in the nineteenth century, overlapping with the burgeoning industry of other Mesoamerican fakes. In 1909, Mexican anthropologist and archaeologist Leopoldo Batres published *Antigüidades Mejicanas Falsificadas*, an extensive catalogue of Maya fakes, complete with photographs and descriptions of how the forgery industries operated. (He included pictures of brass stamps used by some forgers to easily crank out cheap, fast Maya-codex-looking artefacts.) Batres noted that forgers could acquire authentic-looking paper through shady archaeological site-looting connections.

For decades Mayanist and Mesoamerican scholars collected catalogues of codices that were understood to be phony – in 1935, Danish archaeologist Frans Blom published *A Checklist of Falsified Maya Codices*, listing the top 10 fake Maya codices. One of the codices that made it on to his list offered readers images of Maya warriors driving Roman-like chariots being pulled by plumed serpents. These forged codices were part of far-ranging museums and collections – one was in the Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde in Munich and four were housed in Guatemala City. In 1958, prominent Mayanist César Lizardi Ramos denounced the then-prominent Codex Porrúa as a fake, bringing the number of fakes circulating within the museum and scholarly world to 33.

In their book *Faking Ancient Mesoamerica*, Nancy Kelker and Karen Bruhns argue that since Lizardi Ramos's work with the Codex Porrúa, the number of fake Maya codices has more than tripled, as of 2010. (And, of course, this estimate does not reflect the number of manuscript fragments and touristy souvenir-type codex forgeries.) 'The earliest published forgeries were unsophisticated works by modern standards but still sufficiently adept to pass the scrutiny of collectors,' Kelker and Bruhns point out. 'The more modern faux codices range from the unbelievably bad to those good enough to fool Ivy League Maya specialists.'

With the comfortable distance of decades, many of these debunked Maya codices appear ridiculous, even to the amateur eye. (The Roman-like chariots, for example.) Again, much like the work of the Spanish Forger and his nineteenth-century medievalism, once you know what to look for, the signs become easy to spot. Or, at least, they ought to become obvious enough to raise questions from buyers as well as connoisseurs. Many forgers worked off images from the authenticated Maya codices – the Dresden, Paris and Madrid – selecting motifs at will, but with no awareness or understanding of how and why some things ought to go together. They were essentially trying to imitate the Maya language without understanding syntax or context – and what they produced was simply a pictorial jumble.

One of the pages of the Codex Porrúa, for example, has ‘whimsical pseudo-narrative scenes’ that show a ‘wedding-cake-like three-tiered pyramid’ and a hiker who ‘is in immediate need of a good podiatrist’, as experts note in disgust. After wading through pages of mixed Maya and Mixtec motifs, also problematic for genuine Maya codices, the reader comes face to face with a dragon. ‘The dragon,’ Nancy Kelker and Karen Bruhns fairly smirk, ‘came off of a Chinese import!’

Taken together, it’s easy to see how – and why – authentication plays such an important role in Maya art, antiquities and archaeology. Which leaves us with the question: how do we know what’s genuine and what’s not?

First and foremost, if an artefact comes from a well-documented archaeological dig, the act of discovering it and recording that discovery – its provenience – helps to establish its legitimacy. When codices simply appear on the

art market as 'recently discovered' but without proper provenience or provenance, it's impossible to tell if they're looted, smuggled, faked or in any other way unsavoury. (Across a plethora of disciplines, from art to archaeology to palaeontology, more and more experts are refusing to authenticate or even study objects for which the provenance cannot be verified. Private collectors' markets, however, are a different story.) Photographs, journals, site reports, monographs and academic journal articles – all of these things help provide a body of proof as to the genuineness and legitimacy of a discovery.

Aside from the context of an archaeological discovery – which may or may not be helpful in sorting through older collections – connoisseurship offers a qualitative expertise to vet pieces. Otherwise known as 'a good eye', connoisseurship is a go-with-the-gut sort of sense about judging whether paintings and other art are real or not, based on the experience of having seen and worked with art for decades. Nancy Kelker and Karen Bruhns remain a bit sceptical as to the efficacy of relying purely on connoisseurship as the best means to sift real art from fakes. 'Because of their appreciation of great art and their knowledge of all the juicy details about the lives of artists and collectors, connoisseurs make entertaining dinner guests,' they dryly note, 'but as a group, their track record detecting Precolumbian fakes is somewhat spotty.'

The mid-twentieth century, however, brought a plethora of new authentication methods to the worlds of art, antiquities and archaeology, as different scientific disciplines formalised specific types of chemical and physical analyses. These analyses offered means and methods for testing various characteristics of artefacts – information that could, in turn, be used as evidence for an object's authentication or not.

The first analysis available in 1949 was a systematic way to test the age of once-living materials – radiocarbon

dating. This type of dating test only works on materials that were once organic; it destroys the sample being tested, and it takes a bit of skill to interpret the date range that the test gives. In other words, radiocarbon dating only works on things that were once alive, destroys part of the thing and doesn't just spit out a note saying, 'This codex was made in the year 1325.' But it was – and is – an important step in providing scientific analyses as part of the authentication process.

Since the mid-twentieth century, a plethora of scientific tests and methods has been developed. Thermoluminescence dating, for example, can be used on ceramics that have become divorced from their original archaeological context, offering a date for when a ceramic piece was fired. Computer-tomography (CT) scans allow researchers to 'see inside' an object. Scanning electron microscopes offer incredibly powerful magnification, leaving little room for forgers to hide any flaws in their craft. And these are but a few of the tools that science has to offer.

It's important to keep in mind that these tests cannot detect a 'real' object, and that there are many objects that defy any sort of scientific analysis. Sculptures, for example, are notoriously difficult to test. Tests can only tell us the age of an object, what it's made of and how it looks under magnification. The results of such tests have to be put together and read like a detective story. Consequently, analyses are generally used to debunk artefacts, by revealing results that show something was made centuries after it was 'supposed' to have been made, or something to that effect. Forgers have become more sophisticated over the years as well, adapting to the advent of these new technologies by trying to use looted ancient materials as a base for their modern creations.

'Tests can only detect fakes when we run the tests. And there are so many reasons why we don't run the tests.

They're expensive and it can be hard to find experts to run them. Often, we just don't want to run the tests. People or institutions who bought or sold an antiquity don't want to prove that it's worthless,' Erin Thompson told me in an interview. 'People who study antiquities don't want to prove that they wasted their scholarly career. The general public doesn't want to think that experts don't really know anything.'

Which brings us back to the story of the Grolier Codex. Although Mesoamerican archaeologist and Maya expert Michael Coe has championed the Grolier Codex as a genuinely authentic artefact from the beginning of the codex's story, it took more than 40 years of systematic study for other scholars to accept the accumulating evidence that it wasn't just some sort of fake, like so many other codices have been. And even today, acceptance of the Grolier Codex isn't universal.

There are few 'found' codices in recent Mayanist history that have been as contested as the Grolier Codex. It acquired its name from its first public showing in the Grolier Club in New York City, in 1971, organised by Michael Coe, then professor of Maya archaeology at Yale University. (The Grolier Club is a private society of bibliophiles with dedicated interests in the history of bookbinding, book printing and books in general.) The exhibition – 'Ancient Maya Calligraphy' – focused on intrinsically aesthetic objects that were either painted or inscribed with the Maya script, and Grolier Club members saw funerary vases, ceramic flasks, boxes and even a human bone that was incised with Maya writing. The codex, however, was the exhibition's centrepiece. Here, the exhibition claimed, was an artefact that defied historical odds.

The Grolier Codex features a Venusian calendar with Mayan glyphs and figures that are painted in red, black and blue over its white lime-coated stuccoed surface. The pages of the book are approximately 18cm (7in) tall and measure 125cm (50in) in length when they are folded out accordion-like – that’s roughly the size of a contemporary paperback and, when stretched out, the length of a workbench desk. The codex comprises 11 surviving pages, but archaeological estimates suggest that it had as many as 20 pages. (The codex has five additional associated pieces of *huun* paper that have not been stuccoed or painted.) The bottom part of the codex is damaged as moisture has eroded and stained the remaining pages.

Although the codex has several rich colours – haematite red, deep black, and brown and red washes, as well as the famous ‘Maya blue’ hue – the inks have been used sparingly in the codex. One small part of the five associated pages was submitted to the Teledyne Isotopes laboratory for radiocarbon dating and returned a date of AD 1230 $\pm$ 130. If we assume that the five unpainted pages are of the same age as the painted ones, this puts the Grolier Codex as having been painted sometime in the thirteenth century, which Michael Coe argues is consistent with its style and content. The date would also, provocatively, make the Grolier Codex the oldest extant Maya book in existence. Not only was it unprovenienced, with odd calendrical information and strange blended iconography, but also Coe was claiming that it was *older* than the Dresden, Paris and Madrid Codices? Inconceivable!

Coe suggested that only one side of the Grolier Codex had been painted because the book was removed from circulation among the thirteenth-century Maya priests by either burial or ceremonially depositing the codex. When Coe and his colleagues described the codex’s motifs and glyphs in the 1970s, they noted that there were some things,

like the way that days are connoted in the codex, clearly comparable to the three other codices; however, Coe also suggested that there were some things about the style of the Grolier Codex that looked distinctly un-Maya and were reminiscent of other Mesoamerican styles from further west, like those of the Toltec and Mixtec. Scholarly reactions to Coe's claims were mixed, to say the least.

The Grolier Club published a catalogue with photos and descriptions of the exhibition's artefacts two years later, in 1973. In the entry for the codex, Coe described it as being from a private collection with unknown provenance. ('Said to have been found together with a mosaic mask in a late Maya-Mexican style ... it must owe its preservation to the dry conditions of a cave somewhere in the Maya area,' Coe clinically notes. 'Its coming to light is thus an exceptionally rare event.') And this is where the story of the Grolier Codex gets complicated and its authenticity is challenged.

To begin with, the story of the codex's discovery didn't really make sense. Why would an artefact that rare have an unknown provenance, as Coe claimed? Why would a discovery this important – a fourth Maya codex – not provide audiences with the details of how it came to be exhibited? Journalist Karl E. Meyer pressed Coe for details about the codex's owner in Meyer's 1973 book about illicit art trafficking, *The Plundered Past*. Coe simply deferred the question and would only comment that, 'the codex was a "real hot potato" lent to the Grolier Club by an anonymous owner'. Just who found the codex, where, and under what circumstances was never very clear.

The story of the Grolier Codex's discovery as collected, pieced together and told by Karl Meyer, goes something like this: in 1966, a prominent antiquities collector in Mexico City named Dr Josué Sáenz received a phone call from a person who said, 'Hello. I will have good news for you in

two weeks,' and promptly hung up. A few weeks later, the phone rang again and Sáenz recognised the voice of the man, who in this call identified himself only as 'Gonzáles' and promised to provide Sáenz with a cache of incredibly lucrative ancient treasures – Mesoamerican artefacts that would sell quickly and well within the antiquities market. Gonzáles called a third time and urged Sáenz to come and see the amazing treasures. Sáenz promptly booked a flight to Villahermosa in Tabasco, southern Mexico, no questions asked.

When Sáenz arrived in the foothills of the Sierra de Chiapas, he was met by Señor Gonzáles and other villagers, who showed Sáenz a spectacularly decorated Maya mask and the book with Maya hieroglyphics that would become known as the Grolier Codex, according to Meyer. Sáenz claims that the villagers told him that they had collected the two treasures from a dry cave at a nearby – but undisclosed – location.

A bit of background, here, about Dr Josué Sáenz. He was an imposing figure in the world of antiquities and art collecting. He attended Swarthmore College and the London School of Economics, and wrote a thesis about monetary theory while at Cambridge University, studying under prominent economic theorist John Maynard Keynes. Coming from an influential family in Mexico City, Sáenz had money, social position and connections. He was a banker, sportsman, public servant and even a university lecturer. (He was even on the National Olympic Committee during the Mexican Olympics in 1968.)

In the 1950s, however, Sáenz turned his attention and efforts to the world of collecting, quickly becoming a serious player in the world of Mesoamerican artefacts and antiquities. In *The Plundered Past*, one of Sáenz's colleagues described him entering the collecting world with confidence and money. 'Josué went about it the way he does everything,

with intelligence and energy. He let it be known that he would pay the highest price on the market for anything he wanted, and as a result he got first refusal on everything of importance for sale in Mexico.'

This brings us back to Sáenz looking at the Maya mask and codex, standing on a rough airstrip in the Sierra Madre de Chiapas, surrounded by villagers. Because of Sáenz's reputation, Señor Gonzáles and his *colegas* would have known exactly who they were calling – the guy who could move their artefacts into an international art market and pay them for their troubles.

Sáenz is said to have offered the villagers \$2,000 cash, then and there, for the two artefacts, but he coughed up more money after the villagers produced a catalogue from the Parke-Bernet Gallery in New York, and demanded that he pay them what would have been in keeping with such artefacts going up for auction on the art market. Locals – 'looters' in some archaeological literature, 'intermediaries' in other records – claimed to have removed the codex from a dry cave in Chiapas, and it was purported to have been found in a wooden box with three other pieces of *huun* paper and a turquoise mosaic mask. Sáenz asked to take the mask and codex to be authenticated before he bought them, but claims that the villagers refused to allow the artefacts out of their sight without payment.

Sáenz wrote a post-dated cheque, collected the mask and codex from the villagers, and flew back to Mexico City to have the artefacts authenticated by other experts. He hoped that post-dating the cheque would allow him to stop the payment if he found the artefacts to be fake. The villagers, however, quickly cashed the cheque and Sáenz was out of his money.

Authenticating the mask was an uphill battle for years, with some experts saying that it was real and others claiming that it was fake. (Sáenz himself had actually come to believe

that the mask was a fake.) Eventually, the intricate mosaic mask made its way to Dr Gordon Ekholm, curator of Mexican archaeology at the American Museum of Natural History, who authenticated it by looking carefully at its construction, noting that it looked as though a piece of the mosaic had fallen off in such a way that it would have been a detail impossible to fake. The art world accepted it as the real thing and the mask was sold to American art collector Mildred Barnes Bliss in 1966; it remains in the family's private collection held by the Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington, DC.

The codex, on the other hand, was much more complicated, and consequently its authenticity has been under debate for decades. Once Sáenz had purchased it, he tucked it away until he decided to show it to archaeologist Michael Coe in 1970–1971. It was at Coe's insistence that the Sáenz-owned artefact went on display at the Grolier Club with other examples of Maya writing.

In the business of separating real artefacts from fakes, first impressions are everything. A provenance is an integral part of any artefact's cultural history, as explanatory power and cultural cachet are largely predicated on the circumstances that surround its discovery. How an artefact is discovered – and how that discovery is documented – is just as important to the process of authentication as the physical properties of the thing itself. The story of an artefact's discovery is its introduction to the world, and those initial impressions are hard to shake off; if there is anything suspicious, the whispers of fakery or forgery will follow an artefact for the rest of its life, directly affecting its social, ethical and financial valuations.

If the original context is legal and legitimate, artefacts are more readily accepted – they quickly move to being material objects to be studied by academics, accessioned into museums by experts and bought by private collectors,

depending on an artefact's legal ramifications. On the flip side, looted or forged artefacts are often backstopped with fabrications so vague that they are impossible for anyone to falsify. If the documentation of a discovery cannot be proved one way or the other, the default assumption is that an artefact is simply not the real thing. In the decades since Sáenz acquired the artefacts, his story has rankled many an expert.

Just about everyone who was anyone thought the codex was a fake. From the start, the unverifiable provenience (and the story that smacked of looting at best and forgery at worst) meant that authenticating the artefact would be incredibly difficult. Furthermore, for over a century, Maya experts had become comfortable with the idea that only three Maya codices had survived the Spanish Conquest, so the possibility that a fourth would so conveniently turn up, when all other discovered codices had proven to be fakes, strained credibility. Assuming that the Grolier Codex was a fake was an easy – and justifiable – assumption. It made it difficult for audiences to take it seriously as a legitimate new discovery. Even decades later, the story of its discovery is vague at best, sketchy at most, and quite frankly comes across as Hollywood-inspired fiction. What, everyone asked themselves, were the odds?

In the decades after its initial exhibit, experts debated, scientifically tested and questioned the Grolier Codex, finding a plethora of things to seize upon that indicated the artefact wasn't the genuine thing.

In his seminal study of the codex in 1976, archaeologist J. Eric Thompson built a powerful case to dismiss the artefact as a fake. In addition to the swarmy story of its discovery, archaeologists pointed out that that the Grolier Codex had several, significant differences from the Dresden, Paris and Madrid Codices – everything from the number of blank pages, to the style and literary scope of the text,

and the fact that it was purportedly older than the other three. And just because one piece of paper associated with the codex was radiocarbon dated to the thirteenth century, his argument went, it didn't mean that the rest of the codex was that old.

Moreover, Thompson pointed to the longstanding tradition of forgers using bits of genuinely old paper and decorating them with Maya symbols to fetch a better price for an object. There was the question of the uncharacteristic motifs and glyphs that Coe had noted in his original catalogue in 1973; they weren't in keeping with how archaeologists thought about the Maya in the mid-1970s. Some scientists claimed that the sharp edges along some of the pages could be explained by a modern blade cutting the paper, and that the water damage was a convenient cover-up to offer the purported Grolier Codex forger enough wiggle room to get away with Maya script that wasn't textbook correct. Other experts focus on the 'freshness' of the paint (compared with the three authenticated codices), and suggest that it would only be that good if it was a much more recent fake.

The three authentic codices are all books that show divination or prophecy – the Grolier Codex does not. Other experts do not believe that the motifs and glyphs actually illustrate Venus, thus undercutting the Grolier's potential authenticity. The Dresden Codex, for example, displays several calendrical cycles of Venus as well as depicting five different gods of the morning star, each positioned in the centre of a separate page displaying the dates associated with the four phases comprising each Venus cycle. Where the Dresden Codex shows one Venus god representing the morning star in each of the five cycles of Venus, according to the Maya calendar, the Grolier Codex shows four Venus gods in each cycle – a noticeable departure in motif.

Over the decades, experts have been torn as to whether or not the variations in the calendar notations meant that the author of the Grolier Codex was familiar with the notation and ring numbers found in the Dresden Codex. 'I sincerely doubt that any modern faker would have thought of putting hybrid ring numbers into a Venus calendar,' Coe dryly suggests in his original 1973 report, when whispers of doubt about the artefact's authenticity swirled around the artefact and its sketchy provenance. 'Fakers, whose knowledge of the Maya calendar and iconography is fairly abysmal, are usually reduced to copying, but no trace of copying [from the Dresden Codex] can be detected here.'

And so some archaeologists, like Michael Coe, said that yes, the Grolier Codex was authentic; others, like Nancy Kelker and Karen Bruhns, said that it wasn't. However, it feels telling that in Kelker and Bruhns's *Faking Ancient Mesoamerica*, the Grolier Codex gets six pages of discussion about just how it is fake, while other fakes are debunked succinctly in the space of a page or so. (They let that aforementioned imported Chinese dragon motif, for example, basically speak for itself.) But their nuanced treatment of the Grolier Codex highlights its ambiguity, suggesting that the artefact is complicated enough to warrant much more discussion than has been generated for any other purported Maya codex. In short, for decades it was simply easier to find legitimate ways to discount the Grolier Codex than it was to accept it as authentic.

Michael Coe and a few other archaeologists, however, were willing to bet their expertise that what they had seen defied the historical probabilities and was the real deal. Building a convincing case against fakers – imagined or not – would take time, and teams of archaeologists and Mayanist scholars spent that time gathering evidence. In the two decades since its discovery and initial exhibit,

archaeologists, art historians and epigraphers had not been idle. Today, 40-plus years of studying the Maya networks and influences have helped to explain the odd Toltec and Mixtec motifs that Coe noted in his original description. (It turns out that there was a lot of variation in how glyphs were written – differences that depended on where in the Maya empire the script was found, as well as, more significantly, *when* it was written.) Motifs that had perplexed experts now had solid explanations.

In 2007, scientists published a detailed analysis of the so-called Maya blue pigment typical in painted Maya script and found in the Grolier Codex. The idea was to see if the blue found in the Grolier Codex matched the materials of other, validated Maya blue sources. The chemical make-up of the blue pigment is particularly important, furthermore, because at the time of the suggested illicit fabrication of the Grolier Codex, no one knew how ‘Maya blue’ was made – it would have been virtually impossible for a forgery to have the correct chemical make-up of true Maya blue, because it had not been revealed itself.

Maya blue is a vibrant, sky-coloured azure colour found on ceramics, architecture and written records across the ancient landscape of Mesoamerica. First created around AD 300, Maya blue melts together indigo from the local *añil* plant and the clay mineral palygorskite to form an ink that has endured in the archaeological record for centuries. According to archaeologists, Maya blue was ritually made by heating together the palygorskite and indigo in incense burners. More than just something to write with, however, Maya blue was a critically important part of ancient Maya religion and ritual as it symbolised the rain god, Chaak, as well as being associated with other deities.

If the Maya blues in the other, authenticated sources of blue match those in the Grolier Codex, the logic went, this would help to shore up the argument about the codex’s

authenticity. Using non-destructive methods like PIXE (Proton-Induced X-ray Emission) and RBS (Rutherford Backscattering Spectrometry) analyses, scientists examined the elemental make-up of the Grolier Codex's Maya blue pigments to see if any modern stuff had made its way into the paint's make-up; results from the study indicated that there wasn't anything modern in the pigments (meaning that the paint would, in fact, be very old), and that the array of minerals and elements found in the Maya blue was consistent with other archaeological discoveries. 'We are however a bit closer to determination of its authenticity,' the study authors noted, 'but other factors must be considered, such as deterioration patterns, content and context. Materials analysis is just one of the facts.'

The scales tipped in favour of accepting the Grolier Codex's authenticity in 2016, when Stephen Houston of Brown University and Michael Coe (now professor emeritus of archaeology and anthropology at Yale), along with Mary Miller of Yale and Karl Taube of the University of California-Riverside, published a peer-reviewed synopsis of the decades of study of the Grolier Codex. Each brought their own expertise and academic specialisation to the project, and the goal was to put to rest the question of the codex's authenticity.

They noted that the sharp cuts on the codex's pages are not the result of modern tools (as earlier experts had argued), but of a natural pattern of breaks in the gypsum-based stucco plaster used to coat the pages; they also argued that the sketch and grid lines in the glyph writing are in keeping with how glyphs in Maya murals were painted. And, finally, additional radiocarbon dating of the paper gives a date range of AD 1212 $\pm$ 40, corroborating the original dates of AD 1257 $\pm$ 110. 'Our goal was to see if there was something that was modern that [may] have been put into the paint on the Codex ... to confirm that it was a 20th century fraud,' Yale

art historian Mary Miller explained in a 2016 interview with *PRI.org*. ‘Having started in the corner of the doubters, I have moved to the opposite side of the ring and I have no doubt of its authenticity.’

‘It became a kind of dogma that this was a fake,’ archaeologist and Mayanist scholar Stephen Houston declared upon the publication of what has been seen to be the Grolier Codex’s authentication. ‘We decided to return and look at it very carefully, to check criticisms one at a time. Now we are issuing a definitive facsimile of the [Grolier Codex]. There can’t be the slightest doubt that the Grolier is genuine.’

Taken together, the conclusion is well reasoned and consistent: the Grolier Codex is the oldest known codex created in the Americas – a record of astronomy and calendar keeping from the late Maya civilisation. For all intents and purposes, it’s the Real Thing.

This is an unusual direction for a story about authentication to take. Instead of experts debunking artefacts as forgeries or fakes – like the Spanish Forger’s panels, William Henry Ireland’s Shakespeare signatures or Beringer’s faux fossils – a small group of Mesoamerican scholars had to work for decades to provide a convincing argument to their colleagues and to the world that the Grolier Codex was genuine.

But debate still surrounds the Grolier Codex is far from over. In the August 2017 issue of the scholarly publication *Mexicon*, Mayanist Bruce Love argues that the scientific analyses associated with the codex aren’t definitive enough to justify the interpretation made around them. He argues that the Maya blue isn’t a positive result, but rather simply isn’t inconsistent with other

negative results. The water stains on the pages, Love maintains, don't penetrate below the gypsum overcoat of paint the way they ought to in an artefact that had been exposed to moisture. And then there's the issue of the calendric cycles, iconography and glyphs that have never matched expectations. 'In my opinion,' Love argues, 'the authenticity of the Grolier will never be decided by iconography, which can be argued *ad infinitum* ... we can only hope that the Grolier Codex will undergo another round of scientific testing.'

Much of the problem of the Grolier Codex's authenticity comes back to the question of its origin – because its provenance is so problematic, some experts think that it's impossible to judge it as authentic or not. Because it wasn't recovered in an archaeological context – it wasn't excavated or mapped – there have always been questions about just how much of Dr Josué Sáenz's story is legitimate and how much is simply an embellished and sanitised way to talk around the possibility that he bought looted artefacts and then helped traffic them to the United States.

'Sáenz was a controversial figure,' Mary Miller said in a 2017 interview with *Yale News*. 'People disliked his involvement with the 1968 Olympics. People resented the fact that he was a private collector who didn't donate his collection to the nation. They disliked the man and his collection, and they wanted to treat everything in it as fake.'

Donna Yates describes that process of creating a false provenance as a common way to make illegitimate artefacts saleable in the art and antiquities markets. 'Sellers make up plausible but totally fake stories that explain why the objects are in their possession, and which render the pieces sellable on the market,' Yates explains. 'No one actually believes these stories, but the better ones are just tight enough that they are hard to prove false. The lowest level

is saying that a recently-looted piece comes from an 'old family collection' or an 'Anonymous Swiss Collector'. Even in the most unlikely of situations, these 'false provenances' can win out.'

Consequently, the context of an artefact's discovery sets the null expectation for its authenticity. With a good origin story of a properly papered and provenanced discovery, the expectation is that the artefact is genuine; but a story that smacks of ill-repute immediately sets expectations that the article in question is forged or a fake. Even now, after the Grolier Codex's authentication, there are experts who don't embrace the codex wholeheartedly, pointing to its probably looted and possibly trafficked provenance. It's a morally and ethically inconvenient genuine artefact, significant though it may be.

'An archaeological find of major significance was made at the site to which Dr Sáenz was summoned in Chiapas,' Mayanist Clemency Coggins lamented back in 1973, lambasting colleagues who were willing to study artefacts without clear provenances. 'Whatever was in the cache has been dispersed, and the item of most importance [the Grolier Codex] has ... whereabouts uncertain. Such is the high price we pay for the high price of art.'

After its display at the Grolier Club in New York City, the codex was repatriated to Mexico City and has been housed in the Museo Nacional de Antropología for decades, with a replica of it on display for museum visitors. The story of the Grolier Codex is a reminder that objects live on a continuum of authenticity, and that they can move up and down that continuum, depending on their history and context. 'Authenticity is cultural. What we consider to be "real" depends on our social and cultural circumstances, our world view, and the context that we are in,' Donna Yates described to me in an email. 'Stories create authenticity and, indeed, authenticity is a story.'

As for Michael Coe and his lifetime's work with the Grolier Codex: 'It's nice to be vindicated,' Michael Coe said in a recent press release about the codex's authenticity, adding, 'I never once changed my mind in these 43 years. I knew it was good.'