Lenain begins his history in the Middle Ages, when the issue of false relics and miracles often arose. But during this time, if a relic was not genuine, it was not considered a fraud, as it was not the intent of the creator to deceive. As a result, the concept of forgery was not as developed as it is today. During this period, art was generally created for spiritual reasons or to honor revered artists of the time, often involving the copying of drawings by other masters, many of which were lent to him by unsuspecting collectors.

Art forgery dates back more than two thousand years. Roman sculptors produced copies of Greek sculptures. Presumably, the intention was not to deceive, but rather to create a work of art that would serve as a representation of the original. The concept of forgery must be distinguished from copies produced with no intent to deceive. In this unique history, Thierry Lenain examines the genealogy of faking and interrogates the anxious, often neurotic, quest for authenticity that has driven the creation of fake art throughout history. The range of forgery extends from the replication of precious works of art to the outright counterfeiting of works of art at the behest of a particular individual or group. Forgery can be defined as an intentional attempt to create a work of art that is not genuine.

The Art of Forgery: The History of a Modern Obsession, Lenain

Forgery is typically seen as a blight on the art historical landscape—a disease, Lenain suggests, that threatens the very identity of art. Her work rests upon what he calls the trace paradigm, the view that any artwork displays traces of its historical origin.