Psychometry and the affective artifact

Author: Jeremy Dronfield
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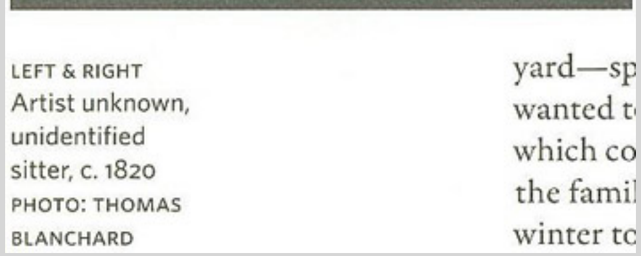
Abstract

Art history and crime investigation share a forensic perceptual epistemology. Both seek to uncover knowledge in order to evaluate past events through current evidence. Whereas art historians describe and interpret artifacts, forensic scientists use the methods of natural science to establish the facts of a crime. Psychometry, a pseudo-science of the early twentieth century, sought to do both. Such claims as that the Shroud of Turin was made by a man who had suffered crucifixion were supported by psychometric readings of the cloth. Although psychometry was discredited, it has been revived in recent years in a form that has been adopted within a broad psychoanalytic perspective. Typically, Bion's notion of the analyst's therapeutic control over the psychoanalytic setting is used to justify the use of psychometric readings of artifacts. Psychometry is also used in forensic psychiatry and forensic archaeology. This article argues that psychometry is not a valid method of investigation. It is not a forensic science, and it is not a form of psychoanalysis. Psychometry is a pseudo-science that uses the psychoanalytic setting to validate its claims. In addition, it exploits the psychoanalytic setting to generate the material upon which its claims are based. The use of psychometry in the past, enabling misunderstanding of the historical contingencies of artifacts, demonstrates the dangers of psychometry in forensic archaeology and forensic psychiatry.

Both the science of archaeology and psychoanalysis, in contrast to psychometry, are concerned with the affective context of archaeological artifacts. Psychometry, in contrast, is a pseudo-science that uses the psychoanalytic setting to generate and validate its claims. The use of psychometry in forensic archaeology and forensic psychiatry is discussed in relation to Bion's notion of the analyst's therapeutic control over the psychoanalytic setting. The use of psychometry in the past, enabling misunderstanding of the historical contingencies of artifacts, demonstrates the dangers of psychometry in forensic archaeology and forensic psychiatry. Psychometry was discredited in London, Paris, Lyon and Vienna in the early twentieth century. It was revived in the mid-twentieth century in a form that has been adopted within a broad psychoanalytic perspective. Typically, Bion's notion of the analyst's therapeutic control over the psychoanalytic setting is used to justify the use of psychometric readings of artifacts. Psychometry is also used in forensic psychiatry and forensic archaeology. This article argues that psychometry is not a valid method of investigation. It is not a forensic science, and it is not a form of psychoanalysis. Psychometry is a pseudo-science that uses the psychoanalytic setting to validate its claims. In addition, it exploits the psychoanalytic setting to generate the material upon which its claims are based. The use of psychometry in the past, enabling misunderstanding of the historical contingencies of artifacts, demonstrates the dangers of psychometry in forensic archaeology and forensic psychiatry.

Cedarbrook Sanatorium and Lower "Lorelei Bowman" Sanitarium from right lower clockwise: Nurse Ratched, Dr. Jekyll, Dr. Frankenstein, Dr. Caligari, Dr. Mengele, Dr. Dolittle, Dr. Zhivago, Dr. Strangelove, Dr. Zeuss, Dr. Seuss, Dr. Doom, Dr. Who, Dr. Zhivago, Dr. Zeuss, Dr. Seuss



LEFT & RIGHT
Artist unknown, unidentified sitter, c. 1820
PHOTO: THOMAS BLANCHARD

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winter to

(54) Psychometric reading with Diana Wiseman, March 8, 2010.

(55) The paintings were conserved by Arthur Lanecki in Montreal in 2006.

(56) I am greatful to the curators who so generously shared their expertise: Rene Villeneuve, Associate Curator of Early Canadian Art at the National Gallery of Canada (quoted in an email from Charles Hill, Curator of Canadian Art at the National Gallery of Canada, February 24, 2010) and Dennis Reid, Curator of Canadian an Art at the Art Gallery of Ontario (telephone conversation with the author, March 2010).

(57) Cynthia Cooper, Curator, Costumes and Textiles at the McCord Museum in Montreal, dated the clothing and chair depicted in the portraits as from no earlier than 1815, which would put my brother's attribution into question (email from Cynthia Cooper, February 25, 2010).

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