Like Jacob with Esau: The 3D Printed Replica and the Future of the Museum

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Abstract
The importance of the aura, the metaphysical element that gives art, artifacts, and other objects of cultural heritage their authenticity, has been heavily contemplated ever since the publication of Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." This thesis strives to add to this conversation and expand upon it by delving into the emergence of additive manufacturing, or what is more commonly known as 3D printing, and its relation to museums and other institutions that comprise the public humanities. This technology challenges the auratic properties of an exhibit by first digitizing it onto a computer by scanning it and then uploading this data to a 3D printer, which then proceeds to replicate the scanned exhibit down to incredibly fine details. For museums the possibility that 3D printed replicas, increasingly able to be indistinguishable from the original and capable of being produced in great numbers at ease, replacing their auratic exhibits is a very real possibility to consider. This thesis argues that some museums are responding by despatializing their exhibitions in order to uphold their auratic exhibits, while others are offsetting the potential loss by turning their exhibitions into tactile, multisensory experiences. Either option, which are not mutually exclusive, transforms the traditional museum. This thesis ultimately concludes that it's possible to reconcile the auratic exhibit with the 3D printed replica should these institutions properly adapt. Doing so will allow them to continue fulfilling their mission statements to preserve and promote the auratic exhibits well into the future.

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(Replicas cast from the originals are now in place.) "I carried out this work with the greatest diligence and the greatest love." (Click image for more photos / Chris Parker / Axiom). A conservator uses a laser to clean a relief embedded in the door frame. The third panel, "Jacob and Esau," is Ghiberti's most masterful. "It best demonstrates his genius," says Syracuse University professor Gary Radke, the curator of the exhibition, because "it shows so many aspects of Renaissance art." The receding tiles of the floor illustrate the recent innovation of scientific perspective, and the arches and pilasters are inspired by Roman architecture as interpreted in Filippo Brunelleschi's spare, monumental churches.