

Art World

'It's the First Domino': After the Museum of the Bible Discovered Its Dead Sea Scrolls Are Fake, the Field Braces for More Revelations

The discovery heightens suspicions over the authenticity of some 70 Dead Sea Scroll fragments around the world.

Sarah Cascone, March 16, 2020



One of the fake Dead Sea Scrolls from the Museum of the Bible at high magnification. Photo courtesy of Art Fraud Insights.

There's more bad news for the [Museum of the Bible](#) in Washington, DC. Every single one of its 16 fragments of the famed Dead Sea Scrolls have been found to be modern-day forgeries—not just the five [previously identified fakes](#). And since the Museum of the Bible's trove was a small part of a much larger group of scroll fragments that have since spread around the globe, the finding could have big implications for the field.

The museum announced the news at an academic symposium on Friday, presenting the results of a battery of tests conducted by outside experts between May and October of 2019. In a 200-page report, the five-person team judged the artifacts to be 20th-century forgeries meant to mimic the famed Dead Sea Scrolls first discovered in 1946 in Israel's Qumran caves. The findings were first announced by [National Geographic](#), and have already launched a contentious debate on [Twitter](#).

"We came to an unanimous conclusion that they were all forgeries," Colette Loll, founder of [Art Fraud Insights](#), which conducted the tests, told Artnet News. "There were a lot of anomalies that we identified through microscopy."

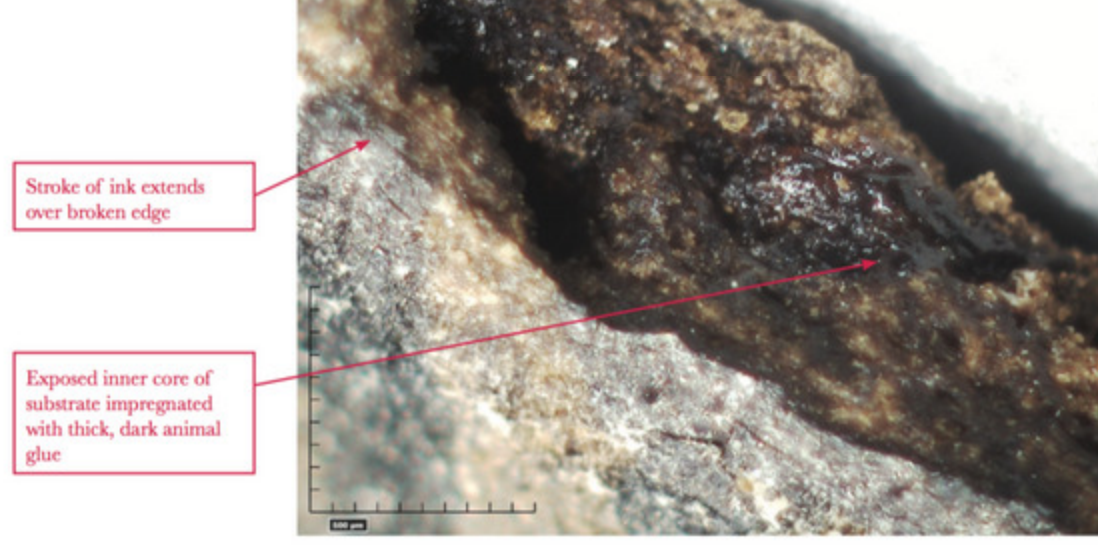
How the Fakes Were Caught

Loll cited several pieces of evidence that led her team to its conclusion. Instead of being made from tanned or lightly tanned parchment, like the real Dead Sea Scrolls, the Museum of the Bible's fragments were made of leather—likely ancient, perhaps from the soles of old shoes.

"After 2,000 years, leather and parchment look very similar," said Loll. "Until you do a high magnification analysis, as well as a chemical and elemental analysis, you really can't tell the difference."

But under a microscope, there were several dead giveaways—first of all, the leather was very bumpy and rough. "It was obvious to us that the scribe had a very difficult time writing on the surface, unlike the clean smooth parchment that would have been used 2,000 years ago," Loll explained.

More damningly, a close examination showed that the writing had been applied to a surface that was already fragmented—the ink dripped over the sides and fell into cracks that wouldn't have existed when the leather was new.



One of the fake Dead Sea Scrolls from the Museum of the Bible at high magnification, revealing anomalies. Photo courtesy of Art Fraud Insights.

"This confirmed our conclusion that ancient materials were repurposed for the creation of these fragments," said Loll.

Another clue was that parts of the real Dead Sea Scrolls look a bit like they've been coated in glue, because the collagen in parchment breaks down over the millennia, turning into gelatin. The fragments from the Museum of the Bible were "heavily impregnated with an amber-colored animal skin glue," Loll said. "Not only did the coating facilitate the writing on these uneven and bumpy surfaces, but it also served to mimic the degradation you would see in the authentic scrolls."

"It's the First Domino"

The Dead Sea Scrolls are the oldest-known Biblical texts, and most of them belong to the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. There are some 100,000 authenticated fragments, but the Museum of the Bible's holdings—reportedly acquired for millions of dollars—were all among a group of some 70 previously unknown Dead Sea Scroll fragments that came to market after 2002.

An antiquities dealer named Khalil Iskandar Shahin, also known as Kando, acquired many of the original Dead Sea Scrolls in the 1950s. The post-2002 fragments reportedly were first sold by his son William Kando.



One of the fake Dead Sea Scrolls from the Museum of the Bible at high magnification. Photo courtesy of Art Fraud Insights.

Since the new artifacts appeared on the market, institutions and private collectors have spent somewhere between \$35 million and \$45 million to purchase them, Dead Sea Scroll expert Rabbi Lawrence Schiffman told those assembled at Friday's symposium. All those fragments, considered suspect for years, are now definitively called into question—and it seems all but certain other forgeries will be identified.

"This is the first domino," said Loll.

A Debate Over the Findings

Between 2009 and 2014, [Hobby Lobby](#) tycoon Steve Green snapped up 16 of the post-2002 fragments for his planned Museum of the Bible—seven directly from Kando, the rest from bookseller Craig Lampe, collector Andrew Stimer, and book collector Michael Sharpe. Before the institution even opened, it put together a 2016 book, [Dead Sea Scrolls Fragments in the Museum Collection](#), published by Brill. It offered a scholarly analysis of the artifacts, but no scientific testing had been conducted.

Despite Loll's damning findings, one of the lead editors of the 2016 book, biblical scholar Emanuel Tov, contests the new report because similar tests were not conducted on authentic Dead Sea Scrolls as a baseline of comparison. "The report expects us to conclude that abnormalities abound without demonstrating what is normal," he told *Nat Geo*.

But other experts have been suspicious for quite some time. As the 430,000-square-foot museum's [November 2017 opening date](#) approached, concerns over the fragments' authenticity began to mount—one of the book's other authors, Kipp Davis, even published an [article](#) raising the possibility of forgery. At the same time, the institution itself became the subject of controversy.



Visitors tour the "History of the Bible" exhibit at the Museum of the Bible in Washington, DC. Photo by Saul Loeb, courtesy of AFP Photo/Getty Images.

A Trouble-Plagued Museum

Investigators [questioned the provenance of the \\$30 million collection](#) that Green began amassing in 2009, and found that the company had imported [looted artifacts](#). Hobby Lobby ultimately [reached a settlement](#), returning 5,500 smuggled Iraqi artifacts and paying a \$3 million fine. They were forced to [return 13 Egyptian Biblical artifacts](#) in 2019.

By that point, an initial analysis of five of the Dead Sea Scroll fragments had already been carried out, showing them to be inauthentic. That's when they called Loll to amp up the search.

"The Museum of the Bible really wanted to put this question to rest, and they committed significant resources. I recruited an incredible team of scientists, conservators, and imaging scientists," said Loll, who agreed to carry out the necessary scientific analysis because the institution promised total transparency.

"The Museum of the Bible has had some pretty significant criticism, justifiably so, given these missteps in their collecting practices," she added. "It was clear to all involved that this project had to be completely independent."

The museum is currently closed to the public due to the current global health crisis. Before it reopens, the remaining scroll fragment forgeries will be removed from view. What remains to be seen is who, exactly, created these modern-day forgeries and how they found their way to the marketplace.



One of the fake Dead Sea Scrolls from the Museum of the Bible at high magnification. Photo courtesy of Art Fraud Insights.

What's Next

"As for who was responsible," said Loll, "the scope of my research was confirm or refute authenticity. The next phase of the research will likely look into where and when and who. But there are a limited number of dealers whose hands have touched these post-2002 Dead Sea Scroll fragments."

The museum will be making Loll's report available to the public in the hopes of identifying other forgeries. "The sophisticated and costly methods employed to discover the truth about our collection could be used to shed light on other suspicious fragments and perhaps even be effective in uncovering who is responsible for these forgeries," said Jeffrey Kloha, the institution's chief curatorial officer, in a [statement](#).

The uncovering of such high-profile forgeries stands as a reminder that antiquities collectors are perhaps particularly vulnerable to fraud. "Doing extensive due diligence is always really important, especially when you're looking at biblical text," said Loll. "Often times, the collectors are ideologically motivated—and the market takes advantage of that."

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Sarah Cascone
Senior Writer



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