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Fine Arts > Issues in Authentication: Provenance, Catalogues Raisonné and Definitive Experts

Danielle T. Rahm

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As a collector, one of the most important things to be aware of is that works of art cannot be properly insured or conveyed without evidence of authenticity. To establish or verify authenticity, professional appraisers, auction houses, and dealers rely on provenance, catalogues raisonné, and definitive experts. While these sources of information are highly regarded and accepted throughout the art world, constantly changing scholarship often challenges works that have long been considered “authentic,” creating a time consuming and frustrating procedure for collectors. When dealing with the works of many important and widely collected artists, this process is fraught with complexities and limitations that are imperative for a collector to understand and navigate.

Purchasing works of art at a respected gallery or inheriting a collection from a relative is often a collector’s first exposure to issues of authenticity and the relative importance of provenance. Provenance, the historical record of ownership of a valued object or work of art, is a vital part of establishing authenticity and should be evaluated seriously when acquiring fine art. In a perfect world, a complete record of provenance would include all previous owners’ names, dates of ownership, locations kept and means of acquisition (i.e. commission, inheritance, sale through a dealer or auction house, etc.), progressing in order from the studio of the artist forward. This includes physical evidence, such as photo-certificates of authenticity, invoices, correspondence, inventory records, gallery and exhibition labels, sale catalogues, collector’s stamps, marks and inscriptions.

Of course, such extensive documentation of provenance is rare, often with breaks in the succession of ownership, or basis in hearsay, especially in the instance of artwork dating from before the 20th century. The possibility of forged documents must also be considered. Provenance research, while sometimes fruitful, is an arduous endeavor, often involving the examination of public records, published ledgers and inventories, sale and exhibition catalogues, and searchable online databases of sale records.

Due to these limitations, the exclusive use of provenance as evidence of authenticity is rarely acceptable, and is best relied upon in conjunction with an entry in the artist’s catalogue raisonné or an opinion rendered by a current definitive expert.

When acquiring a work of art, a collector should exercise due diligence by requesting from the seller all known information regarding provenance, exhibition history and literary citations, as well as any original documentation that may accompany the piece. If provenance is lacking, this must be taken into consideration when deciding to purchase the work. After acquisition, it is imperative to preserve known provenance, including keeping all documentation in a safe place, and taking precautions during any conservation or framing work to ensure that all hand-written notations, stickers, seals, or labels that may be affixed to the frame or backing are carefully removed, protected and re-attached by a qualified professional.

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Catalogues raisonné, comprehensive compilations of a single artist's body of work, usually arranged chronologically, by medium or subject, are considered a prime resource for verifying authenticity. Depending on the relative importance of a particular artist, as well as the availability of information to cataloguers, the quality and completeness of these compilations vary widely. Recent, well-funded projects often contain color images, medium, dimensions, state/editions (for prints), condition reports, related works, reference numbers, provenance, exhibition history and literary citations for each work.

Supplemental information may include examples of the artist's signatures, lists of disputed or questionable works, and biographical information.

These catalogues are sometimes compiled by the artist, if living, or as is most often the case, the current definitive expert on a deceased artist. This expert is frequently a scholar with an intimate knowledge of the biographical and technical details of an artist's life and body of work, whose opinion of merit and authenticity is highly regarded by the professional art community. Commonly, the expert is the artist's descendant, spouse or companion, publisher, dealer or representative, an archivist, researcher, or person with direct lineage of knowledge. The definitive expert, along with authoring the catalogue raisonné will authenticate works that have not been included in previous catalogues. The procedure and fee for this varies, depending on the expert's requirements, which may include submission of professional images, transparencies, and all known information or examination of the art in person.

Although finding a reference to a particular work in the artist's catalogue raisonné is a strong, and in some instances, sole indicator of authenticity, there are complexities that mitigate the decisiveness of these resources. Catalogues raisonné, especially for the most well known artists, are extensive, comprising many volumes, and are expensive to produce. Therefore, very few copies are printed, with some volumes held only at limited libraries and major art institutions making access for the collector difficult. The expense of production also restricts the frequency of revised editions, meaning that the resource can only be considered current at the date of publication.

Older catalogues raisonné, in addition to presenting concerns about accuracy, can be difficult to utilize, often with black and white, small, and/or limited images. Positively identifying a work to be the exact one detailed in the catalogue can also be challenging, and even if the piece is identified, it may have been subsequently altered to the point where it can no longer be considered authentic. These are issues that require the professionally trained eye of a qualified appraiser and in some cases, confirmation by the current definitive expert or authenticating entity.

The accuracy of catalogues raisonné is one of the most challenging aspects of authentication. As with all fields of knowledge, scholarship is constantly progressing. New biographical details about an artist's life are discovered and previously unknown works surface, sometimes changing a definitive expert's opinion of which examples can or cannot be attributed to the hand of the artist. Therefore, a previously "authenticated" work may require re-authentication before it can be properly insured or sold as such. As the authorship of a catalogue is frequently a scholar's lifetime project, the compilation can be left unfinished or unrevised at the time of the author's death, making re-authentication difficult or impossible. Although in many instances there is an alternative scholar or colleague who is able to comment as a definitive expert, this is not always the case and it can take years to establish a new scholarly voice for the artist.

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Further compounding the issue are instances where there is no catalogue raisonné for a particular artist, or at least none pertaining to a specific medium of that artist's work. For example, there may be catalogues of paintings but not works on paper. When this situation arises, authentication is dependant on comment from a current definitive expert, who may have a catalogue in preparation. If no such expert exists, the work cannot be authenticated, and will not be accepted for sale by any prominent auction house or dealer. Exceptions are works having an extremely reliable provenance tracing back to the studio of the artist, which as discussed previously, is a rarity.

The challenges of authentication can be extremely frustrating for the collector, especially Chubb Collectors without guidance from a professional appraiser or consultant who is familiar with navigating these complexities and working within the framework of authenticity issues. Although the process of authentication is not perfect and can be limited by human error, deception and slow moving scholarship, there is much reason for optimism. As art becomes more valuable, the importance of establishing authenticity is increasingly recognized amongst insurers, collectors and the art community. This awareness, in conjunction with new technologies, encourages a more in-depth, accurate, and streamlined authentication process. It is a certainty that moving forward, many more lost treasures will be discovered and long standing authentication mysteries solved. and working within the framework of authenticity issues. Although the process of authentication is not perfect and can be limited by human error, deception and slow moving scholarship, there is much reason for optimism. As art becomes more valuable, the importance of establishing authenticity is increasingly recognized amongst insurers, collectors and the art community. This awareness, in conjunction with new technologies, encourages a more in-depth, accurate, and streamlined authentication process. It is a certainty that moving forward, many more lost treasures will be discovered and long standing authentication mysteries solved.

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