

The Risks of Collecting: The Provenance of an Artwork

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Provenance is a term used to indicate the origin and chain of ownership of a work of art. Today, it has often come to be used as proof of authenticity or attribution, considered a guarantee upon which “certification” is based, whether it be on paper or via new digital methods such as blockchain. In the case of living artists, the provenance is verifiable: there is usually some kind of proof of sale or the artist can guarantee that the work is theirs. In the case of non-living artists, however, the older the work the more complicated it is to establish its provenance. Some works are accompanied by reliable documents, such as sales receipts or presence in registers of the time the work was made, but other artworks arrive with no documents at all, or else the provenance is incomplete or suspect. Collectors should be aware of these risks.

In some cases, the original provenance of an artwork has been forgotten, lost, modified or falsified over time. In other cases, it is not possible to establish a chain of ownership due to a lack of reliable documents, as in the case of a painting that belonged to the same family for generations, about whose origin only hazy memories remain. At other times, works of art appear in unexpected places without any history, such as the painting attributed to Cimabue recently discovered in the kitchen in an anonymous house in the French countryside (<https://www.we-wealth.com/it/news/pleasure-assets/opere-darte/capolavoro-dimenticato-cucina-tarli-autenticatori/>).

It is crucial never to take a declared provenance for granted. A work could have been stolen or looted and this information is not reported, as in the case of the Pissarro purchased by Baron Thyssen-Bornemisza (<https://www.we-wealth.com/it/news/pleasure-assets/opere-darte/pissarro-cassirer-barone-bornemisza/>) without checking its origins. Years later, a bitter lawsuit revealed that the work had been confiscated from the gallery owner Paul Cassirer during World War II. Collectors are often told to check the Art Loss Register, a database of looted works, which, however, is still in-progress and incomplete. To understand the difficulty with tracing the original owners of looted works, one need only think of the 8-year search conducted by a specialized task force of the German government on 1590 works from Cornelius Gurlitt's collection: to date only 14 have been returned.

Doubts often arise due to the incompatibility between an artwork and the accompanying documentation. It is not enough to say that the work belonged to a friend, relative or acquaintance of the artist; the presumed relationship with the artist can be reassuring, but it must be confirmed by evidence from the time that the person existed, whether the work was a gift or a purchase. A name without supporting documentation should be a wake-up call for the collector, as happened in the famous scandal of forgeries sold by the Knoedler Gallery. In that case, the original owner was a certain “Mr. X, Jr.” who was later discovered never to have existed. A collector must insist that the seller, the expert or the authenticating institution provide further documentation.

What if a provenance is doubtful or incomplete? In such cases, a material scientist who specializes in the artist or artistic period in question can help. Through their research, these scientists can identify materials or techniques that did not exist at the time the artwork was made. If, for example, a pigment from a later period is found in the original layers of a painting, the work may be a forgery, regardless of the validity of the provenance.

Can we therefore conclude that all works with materials incompatible for their time are fakes? The answer is no. There are legitimate copies made in later periods to which an older provenance was added by mistake, in order to deceive buyers or increase the work's value.

To reveal discrepancies, a team of art historians and material scientists specializing in the study of artworks is ideal. The former can raise doubts which the latter can investigate. Thanks to sophisticated techniques available today, material scientists can unmask skilfully falsified documentation. Fake period photos can be made with Photoshop to justify the presence of a work in a collection or to insert the works into original exhibition catalogues.

Finally, collectors must remain critically alert to how a provenance is woven together between material and historical information. When a group of sculptures was found in the Fosso Reale in Livorno, many experts initially believed they were by Modigliani. The misunderstanding arose from the fact that the objects were found to be made of Livorno Stone, a material that Modigliani was said to have used according to an anecdote that was never proven. Thus, a perfect storm of information was created in an effort to prove the attribution of the work. However, the works turned out to be a prank staged by a group of college students using an electric drill. Even if Modigliani had used that type of stone (and there is no proof of this), the material out of which an artwork was made is not sufficient evidence alone to prove that *those* objects were carved by *his* hand. In fact, Livorno Stone is still available and used today—its availability does not prove that Modigliani used it.

In conclusion, it is only human to want to eliminate risks or doubts and look for certainties. Often, however, the reality is different. As more information emerges, the provenance of an artwork can change. One must be ready to change one's conclusions accordingly. A rigorous art historical investigation cannot be based on an opinion or wishful thinking. Rather, it develops from a logical process based on the collection and interpretation of available factual evidence. An intelligent collector who approaches art with a critical eye towards provenance and the associated risks involved can avoid many of the pitfalls of false certainties.

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