

The Case of the Newly Reattributed Van Goghs

Archives and foundations often use definitive language when they talk about “complete” catalogues of works. But that is not necessarily how art history works. This is demonstrated by the case of the 9 Van Goghs that have recently been reattributed.

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There are artworks that are certainly authentic, there are artworks that are certainly forgeries, and then there is a large gray area of artworks about which we do not have enough information to decide. This so-called “gray area” is exciting food for thought for art historians but may be less so for collectors, the art market, and many artist’s foundations and estates. Archives and estates tend to use definitive and bulletproof language regarding authenticity and attributions, and catalogue raisonnés like to place the reassuring word “complete works” on their covers. But this is not necessarily the way art history works. In the case of Vincent van Gogh, expert Martin Bailey recently reported in *The Art Newspaper* that numerous paintings had undergone a five-year scholarly and technical research project, which has now concluded that some of them are attributable to van Gogh. This is not a mere shifting of a single expert’s opinion by their eyes alone, but rather the result of a rigorous evidence-based approach that includes deep comparative connoisseurship, further provenance research, and new forensic tools of scientific analysis.

One example is an 1889 *Self Portrait* at the Oslo National Museum, thought for many years to be a forgery. As the museum’s website reports, the painting was purchased by the museum in 1910 but in 1970 its authenticity became questioned by scholars: connoisseurship questioned the work’s style and use of color, which did not seem typical of van Gogh, and the work had an incomplete provenance. Its date of execution was also uncertain, as was its place of creation (Arles, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence or Auvers-sur-Oise). However, in 2006, further provenance research revealed that the portrait had originally belonged to van Gogh’s friends Joseph and Marie Ginoux in Arles, although when the work was given to the Ginoux and when it was created remained open questions. In 2014, the Oslo Museum invited the Van Gogh Museum to reassess the style, technique, material, provenance, and iconography of the work. By comparing it to other paintings of that period, which all also are made on similar types of canvases, analogous pigments, a similar somber palette and unusual brushstrokes, the date of the work’s creation was now established as August 1889, a fact supported by a letter to the artist’s brother Theo dated 20 September 1889, in which Vincent describes the painting as “an attempt from when I was ill.” The self-portrait was painted during a severe psychotic episode that lasted for a month and a half: on 22 August, the artist wrote that he was still “disturbed” but felt able to paint again. The Oslo portrait shows van Gogh as mentally ill, head bowed and turned away from the viewer, with a sideways glance and a lifeless expression typical of depressed and psychotic patients, confirming that he painted his self-portrait at the end of his first major psychotic episode at the Saint-Rémy asylum. The painting will now go back on display after half a century.

Also returning on display after 30 years in storage will be the *Vase of Poppies* (1886) at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum in Connecticut, re-accepted for study by the Van Gogh Museum. The style and colors were considered atypical, and the work had therefore been

taken off display. But during this study, the ground layer, pigments, and style were all re-assessed and determined to be compatible with the artist's work in that period, and an x-ray image and infrared reflectography of the painting shows the outline of the portrait of a man underneath the flower painting—it was noticed when the researchers turned the canvas 180 degrees. New provenance research supported the reattribution. In the early autumn of that year, van Gogh had written in English to his British artist friend Horace Livens, explaining that he “lacked money for paying models.” He had therefore spent the summer making “a series of colour studies in painting simply flowers, red poppies, blue corn flowers and myosotis... trying to render intense COLOUR and not a grey harmony.” Additionally, the Parisian dealer Ambroise Vollard referred to a canvas of “coquelicots.” The work has now been dated to early summer 1886, also because the flowers depicted—poppies—usually flower in Paris in June and July.

A similar situation occurred with the Kröller-Müller Museum, which acquired a flower still life by Vincent van Gogh in 1974, but its size and style were thought to be inconsistent with the artist's typical work. Additionally, the flowers were considered too excessive, leading the painting to be re-labelled “formerly attributed to Van Gogh.” But X-ray studies at the Van Gogh Museum revealed two wrestlers painted under the still life of flowers, which matched a letter that Vincent wrote to his brother in January 1886: “This week I painted a large thing with two nude torsos – two wrestlers [...] And I really like doing that.” A 2012 study team of multiple experts from different countries determined that the underlying painting was indeed by the artist and that he had also painted the still life over it later, probably to save money by re-using canvases.

Catalogues raisonnés, often considered the “bibles” on artists, also should be cautious about finiteness. The *Still life with Fruits and Chestnuts* (1886) at the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, was excluded from one of the van Gogh catalogue raisonnés and was taken off display, dismissed as a fake. Recently, a reference to “pears and chestnuts” was found in an 1890 inventory that was compiled shortly after van Gogh's death, with the word “Bernard” added. This led scholars to the artist's friend Emile Bernard, and it was found that his mother sold a work with that title and the dimensions of the San Francisco painting to Vollard in 1899. Infrared reflectography at the Van Gogh Museum revealed that yet again, the artist reused the canvas: underneath the layer of paint was found a female wearing a scarf, probably painted some months earlier when Van Gogh was in Antwerp.

This and the other reattributed paintings demonstrate the fluidity of some attributions and of catalogues raisonnés. These works demonstrate the importance for collectors and museums of having the option of resubmitting a work of art to a foundation or archive, and of leaving open the possibility of appealing decisions when definitive evidence has not yet emerged. Of course, we must also remember that not all works live in the gray area of uncertainty. Many artworks have solid, well-documented and unchanging attributions.

Originally published in Italian in *We Wealth*, 2022.

English translation provided by the author © Sharon Hecker

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