

Tummers, Anna, *The Eye of the Connoisseur: Authenticating Paintings by Rembrandt and His Contemporaries*, Getty Publications, 2011  
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## AUTHENTICITY

The authentic refers to the real or genuine – particularly with respect to an author or painter. To authenticate means to give authority or legal validity to and to establish something as genuine or real, thus also certifying its origin or authorship. In relation to the visual arts, authenticity can be divided into two kinds of approach: physical or material authenticity and conceptual or contextual authenticity. Establishing physical/material authenticity involves an understanding of connoisseurship, provenance and technical art history together with an ability to read and interpret scientific data, plus a knowledge of appropriate scientific developments and approaches. Determining physical/material authenticity, then, is a complex and multidisciplinary process which also intersects with due diligence. (See 'Due Diligence'.)

In order to establish physical/material authenticity the expert begins by acquiring a thorough knowledge of the physical condition of the work of art via an empirical observation of its materials, techniques, condition and configuration in order to establish the date and to attribute authorship. This technical examination includes an analysis of any restoration carried out, since this has a bearing on both the quality of the work and its value. Some understanding of scientific process is vital in order to ascertain the degree to which a work may have been altered since its production. Typically an expert in a museum or commercial gallery will also need to research the work in order to find supporting documentary evidence which will attest to its provenance (the history of its ownership and location) and to the history of the work as well as to its authorship. Establishing physical/material authenticity is important both for the museum world and for the commercial sector. This process is integrally associated with three key modern institutions: the museum, the auction house and the art fair. Museums in particular perform a major role in validating authenticity and in promoting the acceptance

of a work of art as authentic. Museums are thus equally the bastions and the gatekeepers of authenticity: in economic terms they play a vital role in securing the symbolic value of a work of art. This may increasingly lead to the enhancement of the economic value of that object.

As a starting point, dealers and gallerists are generally keen to identify the characteristics of a work and locate it in its particular cultural and artistic milieu as either an original work or a copy – be it in the school, circle or studio of a particular artist. (See also ‘The Auction Process.’) Works of art are usually validated as either autographic, where they can be securely attributed to an artist, or prototypical, where they are determined to be typical and primary examples of the artist’s oeuvre. Establishing material authenticity is particularly useful in relation to conventional media and to both modern and Old Masters.

In recent years there has been an increasing interest in technical art history in the Academy. In both Europe and the US there has been an acceleration in the technical and scientific research of art objects and an increasing number of courses of study in this field. The last decade has seen numerous exhibitions (mainly in the West) that invoke technical art history and the sciences alongside connoisseurship to address issues around authenticity in order to test attributions. The exhibition *Rembrandt: The Master and his Workshop* (1991) at the National Gallery, London, included recent re-attributions and the outcomes of the work of the Rembrandt Research Project. In 2010 the National Gallery’s *Close Examination: Fakes, Mistakes and Discoveries*, with funding from the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council, was able to re-attribute a number of paintings where formerly attributions had been thought to be secure. The aim of this exhibition was to determine authenticity in as disinterested a manner as possible and to determine whether the exhibited works were indeed by the hand of the Master, or a workshop collaboration, period copy or a more recent forgery. This was a courageous exhibition in which connoisseurship and archival, technical and scientific expertise were jointly employed to re-attribute a painting to Raphael (1483–1520) formerly thought to be a copy and similarly to ‘downgrade’ a painting by Hans Holbein the Younger (c.1497–1543) to Michiel Coxcié (1499–1592). In considering authenticity in relation to Old Masters, it is important to remember that during and

after the Renaissance, workshop practice meant that as part of their training artists would copy from their master. In addition to this practice, apprentices in a workshop would assist in the execution of a work and frequently made copies of the finished object as a record. Copies, then, were regularly made with no intention to deceive. (See ‘Ethics.’)

Exhibitions that focus on artists’ technique and involve scientific analysis alongside connoisseurship are becoming increasingly common on both sides of the Atlantic not only in relation to Old Masters but also in relation to twentieth-century art. In 2015 London’s Estorick Collection’s exhibition, *More than Meets the Eye: New Research on the Estorick Collection*, combined connoisseurship with science in order to enhance knowledge and understanding. In one case, the outcome meant that the gallery was able to refute the attribution of the artist himself, in this case *The Engineer’s Mistress* (1929) by Carlo Carrà (1881–1966), where it emerged that Carrà had changed the date in order to please his patron’s desire for an earlier and thus more valuable autographic work.

A number of exhibitions have also been devoted to the issue of fakes and forgeries. While an artist may make a fake in good faith, the production of a forgery implies deliberate deception in the making of a fraudulent imitation and is illegal. (See also ‘Fakes, Forgeries and Thefts.’) There are numerous infamous cases over the last hundred years – most notably Han van Meegeren’s forging of Vermeer’s paintings that misled respected and high-profile experts. While it is becoming increasingly easier to detect later ground and materials, some more recent forgers have been able to successfully forge documentation and provenance – the so-called Bolton forger being a case in point. Shaun Greenhalgh made an alabaster forgery, *The Amarna Princess*, in the style of an Egyptian princess of 1350 BC. This was purchased in 2003 for \$695,200 by Bolton Council who were convinced by the beauty of the work and by the added weight of forged documentation. The most infamous instance of document forging to support attributions is by John Drewe (b.1948). In the 1990s he was able to penetrate the archives of Tate, the Institute of Contemporary Arts and the Victoria and Albert Museum. He then changed the records of numerous artists so that they matched the forgeries painted by his associate John Myatt (b.1945). There continues to be uncertainty regarding the extent of Drewe’s document

forgery and tampering with archives. There is a great public appetite for the role of fakes and forgery in art crime. Exhibitions on this topic tend to attract large crowds, such as *The Metropolitan Police Service's Investigation of Fakes and Forgeries* exhibition held at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2010, which had to be extended owing to the scale of public interest. The Art Loss Register, a comprehensive international database, continues to report that art forgery costs the UK art market alone at least \$310 million a year.

Attempts to successfully authenticate art are ongoing and will continue – especially given the large sums at stake in the art market. One of the most compelling stories in recent years concerns the so-called *La Bella Principessa* – an unsigned drawing on vellum with no substantial provenance, which first came onto the market at a Christie's auction in 1998. It sold for \$21,850, before being exhibited at Kate Ganz's gallery in 2007 where it was catalogued as nineteenth-century German School. It was purchased by Peter Silverman, who enlisted the support of numerous experts to employ technical and scientific analysis in order to endorse the work as an authentic drawing by Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519). Much has been written about this drawing and expert opinions are divided – with the majority coming out against the attribution to Leonardo. Revealingly the drawing was not included in London's National Gallery exhibition of *Leonardo da Vinci: Painter at the Court of Milan* in 2011. It may be that the current owners' sensationalist marketing of this drawing and the fact that any judgement is perceived to lend weight to a process of sale has also deterred some experts from passing a judgement in its favour. The role of museums in the process of authentication is significant. Experts tend to avoid liability by confirming whether a work will or will not be included in a forthcoming exhibition or major catalogue. Conversely, *Christ as Salvator Mundi* (1490), also attributed to Leonardo da Vinci, was included in the National Gallery's exhibition in spite of some bad overpainting and some unconvincing sections in the work. There is, however, an etching of 1650 after this painting made by Wenceslaus Hollar (1607–77) which adds to the veracity of the attribution, and unlike *La Bella Principessa*, *Christ as Salvator Mundi* has an impressive provenance since it was once owned by Charles I and was recorded in his art collection prior to being auctioned in 1763. The painting was accepted by

the National Gallery for its 2011–12 exhibition reportedly on the condition that it would not appear on the market for some time. It was sold to the Russian oligarch Dmitry Rybolovlev for \$127.5 million in 2013.

With respect to contemporary art, increasingly in academia there has been greater focus on the processes of replication so that art historians and their scientific counterparts consider casting techniques, stamping and striking images, printmaking techniques, photographic processes and replication. The issues of both physical and conceptual authenticity apply to contemporary art. With regard to physical authenticity, there is the added advantage of a living artist being able to assist in documenting the work. A number of museums such as the Guggenheim have focused on establishing new practices which will assist both in conserving contemporary art via the Variable Media Initiative (in particular performance and sound works and those of a more ephemeral nature) and in establishing and maintaining authenticity. When a work is acquired Guggenheim conservation staff contact the artist in order to confirm details about the material and production of the work of art, its exhibition history and any additional information regarding conditions of installation and the work's variability. In order to understand and preserve the art work, the museum considers that it is vital for the conservator to consider not only the artist's intention and the work's technical make-up but also the relationship between the two.

Conceptual or contextual authenticity is most consistently invoked in connection to contemporary art. In the late 1960s and 1970s many artists challenged definitions of authorship and originality. Art and Language, a conceptual artists' group founded in the late 1960s adopted a conceptual approach making works identical to the original. This practice would come to embody postmodernism and appropriationism in the 1980s. Conceptual or contextual authenticity occurs when an artist adopts a more conceptual approach and may separate the notion of authenticity from originality. Thus artists might appropriate, remake or reproduce the work of a (generally earlier) artist. The twenty-first-century remake may act in a subversive manner to undermine the authenticity of the original work and also to comment on the mistaken conflation between its price and value. Elaine Sturtevant is a case in point, deconstructing for the viewer the notion that a copy is necessarily a paler imitation, in her remakes of work by well-known

artists such as Claes Oldenburg (b.1929), Andy Warhol or Jasper Johns (b.1930). Here Sturtevant reminds us that a work may be authentic but may not be an original.

Since the eighteenth century collectors have frequently tended to buy 'names'. In recent years a number of commentators have noted that mis-attributed works in museums, most notably those originally attributed to Rembrandt, have not only suffered in terms of the staggering drop in market value but also in the resulting decline in museum audiences for these works, following their reattribution. Cases in point are the Gemäldgalerie's *Man in a Golden Helmet* (c.1650) and the Frick Collection's *The Polish Rider* (c.1655). As well as the dramatic fall in both economic and symbolic value, neuro-aesthetics, the study of the effects of art objects on the brain, has established that parts of the brain, most particularly the orbitofrontal cortex, are more responsive to the 'art status' or authenticity of a work than to its sensory and aesthetic content, reminding us of what may be obvious to anyone who regularly visits museums, that knowledge of a work's authorship determines the reaction from the viewer.

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