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A Real Pollock? On This, Art and Science Collide

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For nearly 60 years, a small painting with swirls and splotches of red, black and silver has stood as a symbol of enmity between two women: Lee Krasner, Jackson Pollock's widow, and Ruth Kligman, his lover. Until her death, in 2010, Ms. Kligman, herself an artist, insisted the painting was a love letter to her created by Pollock in the summer of 1956, just weeks before he died in a car crash. But the painting was rejected by an expert panel set up to authenticate and catalog all of Pollock's works by a foundation established by Ms. Krasner. This month, it seemed the dispute that outlived both women might finally be settled. Ms. Kligman's estate announced that forensic tests — comparing samples from the loafers Pollock died in, his rugs and his backyard — had linked the painting with Pollock and his home.



Pollock, center, with his wife, Lee Krasner and a neighbor, Sam Duboff, in the Pollock studio in August 1953.

But instead of resolving one dispute, the findings only reignited another, one that pits traditional ways of determining whether a work is genuine against newer technologies.

On one side stands Francis V. O'Connor, a stately Old World-style connoisseur with a Vandyke beard and curled mustache, who believes erudition and a practiced eye are essential to judging authenticity. Mr. O'Connor, a co-editor of the definitive Pollock catalog and a member of the now-disbanded Pollock-Krasner Foundation authentication committee, said "Red, Black and Silver" does not look like a Pollock.

"I don't think there's a Pollock expert in world that would look at that painting and agree it was a Pollock," Mr. O'Connor said at a symposium this month.

On the other side is Nicholas D. K. Petraco, a retired New York City detective and forensics specialist who examined the painting at the request of the Kligman estate. Approaching the canvas board as if it were a body at a crime scene, Mr. Petraco said he had no doubt the painting was made at the Pollock house and is linked to Pollock.

"I've had cases with less materials than this where people are spending 25 to 30 years in jail," he said.

As technology advances, the art world has turned to microscopic analysis and pigment testing to buttress — or challenge — the judgments of a tiny club of experts whose opinions have long been treated as law. This pursuit of scientific validation has only deepened as art historians and institutions like the Pollock-Krasner Foundation, which shut down its authentication board in 1996, retreat from certifying art for fear of being sued.



But science has its limits. Paint or paper may help establish the date of a work, while hair and fibers can help pinpoint where it was made. A work's provenance must also be verified. Still, connoisseurs — as well as most auction houses who rely on them — maintain that true authorship cannot be established without an expert evaluation of the composition and individual strokes that reveal an artist's "signature."

In this case, the difference of opinion could be worth millions. Unauthenticated, "Red, Black and Silver" would be listed as "attributed to Pollock" and carry an estimate of no more than \$50,000, said Patricia G. Hambrecht, chief business development officer at Phillips auction house, where the painting is consigned. If judged a Pollock, the painting's estimated value would soar to seven figures, she said.

Ms. Kligman's account of the painting dates to the summer of 1956 when she was 26 and living in Pollock's house in East Hampton, N.Y., after Krasner, having caught the lovers together, sailed for Europe. Pollock was in an alcoholic tailspin and hadn't painted in two years. As Ms. Kligman detailed in a new introduction to the 1999 edition of her memoir, "Love Affair: A Memoir of Jackson Pollock," the artist was on the lawn when she brought him his paint and the sticks he used. After he finished, he said, "Here's your painting, your very own Pollock."

A friend of Ms. Kligman's, Bette Waldo Benedict, has said Ms. Kligman told her the same story at the time.

Art forensics have primarily concentrated on what a painting is made of. But Mr. Petraco, who has decades of experience with the New York Police Department crime lab and is now a professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, looked at what the painting contained: the dust, hairs, fibers or other detritus that might have fallen on the surface and under the paint.

Because Mr. Petraco, who holds a Ph.D. in theoretical chemistry, has more experience analyzing red blood than red paint, he decided to perfect his technique for removing materials without damaging the painting by making some Pollock-like drip paintings in his backyard in Massapequa Park, on Long Island. (It's tougher than it looks, he confessed.)

Despite what one sees on television crime shows, hairs and threads cannot be traced to a specific individual or sweater, Mr. Petraco said. What builds a forensic case is not any single piece of evidence but a combination of consistent factors. In this case, Mr. Petraco said the clincher was discovering a polar bear hair, a rare find in a country that has banned the import of polar bear products for more than 40 years.

"Is there a polar bear in this story?" Mr. Petraco wondered.

There was. A polar bear rug that had adorned the living room floor in 1956 was still in the East Hampton attic.

Colette Loll, a private fraud investigator who worked on the case, said she had no preset agenda. "I was looking to poke holes," she said but "fraud just wasn't supported." Both she and Mr. Petraco said they had donated their services to the estate.

Ms. Loll said the case presented "a real opportunity to shift the paradigm away from the dictatorship of the connoisseur, where only one or two people who sit on their thrones can decide what is and what is not an authentic painting."

Mr. O'Connor, who is widely viewed as one of the top authorities on Pollock, said art forensics are valuable, but in this case he found the results "redundant and essentially irrelevant."



The painting may have been made in Pollock's yard but that doesn't mean it was made by Pollock's hand. He did not speculate by whose hand it might have been.

To Mr. O'Connor, connoisseurship is just as rigorous as forensics. Its methods, he acknowledged, "can seem mysterious, if not laughable, to the lay person." But the connoisseur, he said, has "absorbed into visual memory the artist's characteristic form — his shapes, compositional devices, linear rhythms, typical colors" and handling of paint well enough to detect a fake.

In "Red, Black and Silver," a silver wash covers the canvas and a black ovoid shape near the center serves as a focal point. No other Pollock has either of those characteristics, he said.

In 1995, the authentication board offered to designate Ms. Kligman's painting as a problematic work, which meant that if other scholars, with further study, labeled the work as authentic, the board would not object. But Ms. Kligman rejected that qualification.

In Mr. O'Connor's view, "the Kligman work is in limbo with respect to authenticity."

Whether it remains that way is an open question: After all, precisely what happened between two people, now dead, who were alone on a summer afternoon in an East Hampton yard 57 years ago may ultimately be beyond the ken of science or connoisseurship.