

AUTHENTICATION IN ART

AiA Art News-service

SULLIVAN &
WORCESTER

Disputed Bauhaus artist Kurt Waldmann and concerns of another forgery enterprise in Germany



Germany September 9 2015

A few weeks ago some interesting speculation started circulating about [the possibility of a new forgery operation in Germany](#), which was home to the [now-infamous Wolfgang Beltracchi](#). Beltracchi successfully fooled buyers for years with forged Expressionist and Modernist paintings, going so far as to invent a fictional “Jäger Collection” (including a staged photograph of Beltracchi’s wife purporting to show a painting on the wall of an ancestors home). The most interesting thing about the current story is that it is impossible to tell yet whether there is really a problem; the most detailed efforts to date have been unable to confirm [whether Kurt Waldmann, the artist in question, even existed](#). Many of the indicia of concern are there, but they are hardly conclusive.

Here is what is known so far from press reports: a supposedly Dada or Bauhaus artist named Kurt Waldmann was discovered by a French journalist at a flea market in Berlin shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall (at this point, [flea markets are almost a disqualifying condition](#)). These works were included in German auctions, and in exhibitions including one at the Kunsthaus in Dresden

“Künstliche Tatsachen / Boundary Objects”. Two weeks ago, however, [the Sueddeutsche Zeitung posed the question in its article \(in German\) title: “Did Kurt Waldmann Really Exist?”](#)

The SZ pointed to the absence of any reference to Waldmann in art historical literature (not news), and that criminal authorities in Saxony and Berlin were investigating (major news), particularly after the [Deutsches Hygiene-Museum](#) in Dresden supposedly rejected the exhibition now at the Kunsthaus.

In reaction to the SZ report, the *Berliner Kurier* located an art dealer in Brussels who was the lender of a number of Waldmann works around Europe. He is not named in the article, but the paper says (my translation):

He is—as he insisted on the telephone—rock-solidly convinced of the existence of Waldmann. “I don’t understand, why the German police are investigating.”

The dealer did not offer any speculation as to why the police are suddenly investigating.

For its part, the Kunsthaus [issued a press release](#) that clearly reflected concern enough to expend significant effort. It read, in relevant part (my translation, underlined/bold emphasis added):

Through research of the team of the Kunsthaus in coordination with the curator, a whole series of new findings have already been brought to light, and referred for further examination. Among other things, it has been clarified in the context of this investigation that all previous findings that are associated with this signature can be traced back to a Strasbourg journalist named Jean Milossis. This information coincides with the statements of other gallery owners who were concerned with the work before Pascal Polar was. There are some Antiquarian sales in Strasbourg, most likely from this same source. The Kunsthaus Dresden has had conversations with a variety of interested parties previously mentioned in connection with this work to confirm the provenance.

Moreover, the team of the Kunsthaus Dresden has conducted research in the address historical address books in the region. This research confirmed investigations already conducted by Mr. Polar and public investigations that no person of this name is listed here. Other people were found, however, who found the signature of K. Waldmann to be correct; nonetheless, no artist could be found who confirms this result and expanded on previous results. The Kunsthaus Dresden has also commissioned a spectrometric analysis.

... We cannot confirm or refute a historical person named Kurt Waldmann as the author.

This lack of resolution creates any number of legal and market-based issues. First, of course, if the paintings were a forgery and Waldmann never existed, then of course that would be a colossal fraud (but by whom is not known). If the paintings are genuine, however, and Waldmann simply

escaped historical notice, then the mere fact of the police investigation would be disastrous to the value of the paintings currently in private hands. Any number of better-known, indisputably real artists have seen the market for their work all but destroyed even by the perception that their work is commonly forged. And, conversely, if there is some sort of intentional disparagement of the authenticity of the paintings, that too could be actionable.

As always, the safest course remains to be meticulous—and skeptical—when it comes to provenance. If you are buying, or trying to sell, a work of art with a prior owner that does not make sense to you, ask questions first. If you sell it, you are likely making a warranty for which you could be held liable. If you are buying it, you may be getting something quite other than what you expected.

In the meantime, we'll be watching for developments in Dresden.