

AUTHENTICATION IN ART

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THE HINDU



Piramal Museum of Art 12

Spot the difference: Juxtaposing original with fake artworks, the show sheds light on the differences, both visual and monetary, and the difficulties in authentication.

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Bombay Showcase

An ongoing exhibition at the Piramal Museum of Art helps distinguish a fake from the original

Collecting art can be a thrilling and deeply fulfilling process, fuelled by passion, aesthetics and emotions. Governed by arbitrary values, the art market is getting increasingly susceptible to forgeries. People producing bogus art works who operate under secrecy are technologically qualified. On the other hand, buyers are driven by emotions and investment, and often have a limited knowledge of the expansive field of art. To help understand art forgery, the Piramal Museum of Art is running an exhibition, Likeness without reference – the cultures of forgery. Juxtaposing original with fake artworks, the show sheds light on the differences — both visual and monetary — and the difficulties in authentication. On display are works by renowned Indian artists whose works are commonly forged such as M.F. Husain, S.H. Raza, Jamini Roy and Raja Ravi Varma. Additionally, there's a showcase of traditional Tanjore and miniature paintings. With an emphasis on due diligence, the exhibition aims to educate buyers and traders with quick tips like checking for the artist's signature, inspecting the back of the painting and verifying the cultural relevance of an art piece.

Art and the law

While the exhibition cautions art enthusiasts and buyers, understanding of the legal frame work is also essential. “The beauty of art law is that it is multidisciplinary in India,” says Tejshree Savara Mathur, advisor on art, antiquities and cultural heritage law at Anand and Anand. In order to spread awareness, Mathur gave a talk on the Indian legal system and its role in art-related transactions. “There’s no one law governing the art market but a combination of laws, statutes and torts,” she says.

While the laws maybe in place, there’s a paucity of awareness among buyers and artists. “They function on trust instead of contracts,” observes Mathur. According to the lawyer, as it stands today, the art market in India is worth ₹1,000 crore, out of which, fakes account for ₹80 to ₹100 crore.

So what are the various ways to spot the fake? “It begins with adequate research,” says Ashvin Rajagopalan, director, Piramal Art Foundation. The level of skill seen in a forged piece differs from the original. In case of replicas, the imitator often simply recreates the form and techniques, without being able to establish elements of spontaneity. Therefore, it is imperative to compare the artwork in question with the artist’s known body of work. As demonstrated in the exhibition, the forger may go the extra mile and use technical skills which result in a product that’s too good to be true.

To keep track of the artists' creations, Mathur emphasises on the need for a catalogue raisonné: a scholarly compilation of their repertoire. An art work that is atypical of an artist has a higher chance of being a fake. The artist's work may evolve stylistically over time and even within a certain time period, but it's uncharacteristic of their style, one must be cautious.

Pricing can also be indicative of authenticity. The agenda of a forger is to make a sale, so a buyer must be careful if a piece is flexibly priced. Furthermore, if the artwork is sold at a non-standard source, like an antique dealer, it has a higher chance of being fake.

Establishing authenticity

Both Mathur and Rajagopalan stress on the importance of due diligence on the part of the buyer during a purchase. A buyer must screen the transaction through various filters; provenance being the first checkpoint. Linking the artist to the first buyer and then consecutively all other owners helps seal its authenticity. Ascertaining the reputation of the previous owner, especially if it's a gallery or a dealer, is also essential. Another way to establish provenance is to look at a visual document such as a photographs of the artwork with the artist. "The photo may establish that the artist produced a work like that but not necessarily if the artwork being sold to you is the one in the photograph," clarifies Rajagopalan.

Therefore, physical inspection is imperative and Likeness without reference has a few tips. The verso of several paintings, for instance, includes gallery labels that help with origin information. Inscriptions and signatures of an artist could tell of its history and context. The verso also shows the ageing of the canvas which could determine its time of creation. In a favourable scenario, a buyer could find published material written by art writers and critics to verify the authenticity of the artwork.

Ultimately, as Mathur points out, understanding of art is the most essential. Immersing yourself in art by visiting museums and galleries, and reading catalogues is a good place to start.

Likeness without reference – the cultures of forgery is on till March 31 at Piramal Museum of Art, Lower Parel.