

AUTHENTICATION IN ART

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THE TIMES

Artists turn to vellum to beat the forgers copying their work

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Artist Brigid Edwards uses vellum for her artwork to beat forgers. CREDIT: EDDIE MULHOLLAND

- [Patrick Sawyer](#), SENIOR REPORTER

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With millions of pounds at stake the art world has long wrestled with how to detect forgeries, from using chemical paint analysis to X-rays, infra-red examination and putting canvases under the microscope.

But one solution has been staring us in the face all this time, and it dates back hundreds of years.

Contemporary artists are increasingly turning to vellum - the prepared animal skin sometimes known as parchment on which Britain's Acts of Parliament have traditionally been printed - to insure against the risk of copies of their work being passed off as originals.

But while the use of vellum goes back to the classical age, its use to foil bogus copies of valuable paintings is the result of a very modern technique - DNA analysis.

Because, as an animal product, each piece of vellum used to paint on carries its own unique DNA fingerprint.

This can be matched to a small segment of the vellum from the painting retained by the artist, should there ever be a question over its authenticity.



Artist Brigid Edwards with her current work. CREDIT: EDDIE MULHOLLAND

It's a deceptively simple but effective technique for establishing the provenance of a painting, says Britain's only manufacturer of vellum.

Paul Wright, who runs William Cowley parchment makers in Newport Pagnell, Buckinghamshire, said: "To authenticate art people have tried all sorts of methods, such as water stamps and other man made techniques.

"But whatever is man made can be replicated by man to fool someone. Vellum is foolproof because each piece has its own unique DNA 'fingerprint' which can be used to establish its authenticity when compared with a piece of the original retained by the artist."

Mr Wright sells vellum to some of the world's leading contemporary artists, not just as a protection against forgery but also "the beauty" of working with the material.

"I'm told it's second to none as a material on which to paint," he said.

"The result looks almost three dimensional."

Mr Wright added: "There's also something up lifting about using vellum. You're creating something of permanent beauty from a creature who might have been killed to make burgers for our short-term gratification."

Among those currently working on vellum is Brigid Edwards, the acclaimed botanical artist, whose paintings of plants and insects are admired for their painstaking detail and life-like appearance.



Brigid Edwards uses vellum for her artwork - the DNA from which can be matched to a piece of the material retained by the artist in order to authenticate a painting as genuine. CREDIT: EDDIE MULHOLLAND

Edwards, who works from a studio in Camden, north London, said: "It produces a result I've not found on paper. It can deliver an intensity of colour with a luminous quality. But I'd never thought of the authentication aspect of it. What an incredible idea."

Although founded in 1850, the techniques of washing, scraping and drying used at William Cowley's workshops to produce vellum have changed little since the medieval era, when the material was used by monks for their illuminated paintings.

Indeed the continuity of the material led Mr Wright to joke with Prince William last week that should his brother marry Meghan Markle, their marriage certificate would by tradition be produced by his firm on vellum.

Mr Wright was referring to the Royal Marriages Act of 1772, which requires all descendants of King George II to obtain the sovereign's agreement before they wed.

This is known as the Instrument of Consent and is a document made from vellum - usually calfskin - proclaiming the monarch's approval of a marriage and bearing a large red wax Great Seal of the Realm.

Mr Wright, told the Prince, who was visiting Milton Keynes: "If Prince Harry marries Meghan then his certificate will be in our vellum."

He later said: "He just laughed - a nice laugh."

Not laughing are the forgers who dream of passing off their copies as an original masterpiece.

"With most fraudsters the moment they know a painting is on vellum they don't bother trying to copy it," said Mr Wright.

"They know it's a fruitless exercise. You might be able to skilfully copy the painting, but you can't replicate the DNA of the material on which its painted. It's unique."