

AUTHENTICATION IN ART

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In the Thorny Questions of Authenticity, Who Decides?

BY NINA SIEGAL | MARCH 27, 2018



Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519), "Salvator Mundi," circa 1500, oil on walnut, 65.6 x 45.4 cm (25.8 × 17.9 in). The painting was sold at Christie's New York, November 15, 2017, for \$450.3 million, making it the most expensive painting ever sold.

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- ARTISTS

- Leonardo da Vinci

Before “Salvator Mundi” sold for \$450 million to a Saudi prince in November, the painting was unequivocally promoted by Christie’s auction house as a work by [Leonardo da Vinci](#), with a long list of scholars and technical experts who supported the attribution. Christie’s Old Masters specialist Alan Winterminute went so far as to describe it not only as “absolutely a work by Leonardo da Vinci,” but also asserted that it was “entirely a Leonardo da Vinci.” But at least two other leading scholars had already expressed concerns about the attribution: Carmen Bambach of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Frank Zollner, the author of the most recent Leonardo catalog raisonné.

Since the sale, more skeptics have come out questioning how much of the master can be found in the painting, doubting not so much whether it can be defined as authentic, but how much of the original remains visible. Among them are the Met’s former director, Thomas Campbell, who commented in an Instagram post that the work had undergone an “extensive amount of restoration,” raising doubts about how much of Leonardo’s’s hand could be found in the work.

There’s been a joke going around the Old Masters community that Salvator Mundi was sold in a contemporary sale because it’s mostly the work of a living artist: the restorer. The astounding price paid for the painting certainly contributes to the volume of the debate about it and scrutiny over its authenticity. But it also raises questions about how “rediscovered masterpieces” are marketed to the public, when there is gray area about attribution and restoration. With such vast sums of money at stake, are market forces having an impact on clarity when it comes to attributions? How much about the history of restoration and the role of assistants does the public need to know? And if some scholars disagree, who ultimately decides how an attribution is communicated to the public?

Milko de Leeuw, founder of Authentication in Art, a nonprofit organization in The Hague that is trying to establish standardized guidelines for attributing art (which it hopes to publish in June 2018), says there is a central conflict between two different art world cultures reflected in the case of the “Salvator Mundi”:

“You see here an example of the different approach of the art market and the academic world,” he said. “So all the academics will say, ‘we think it might be,’ ‘maybe,’ ‘most likely...’ While the market has to sell something, and selling always goes with 100 percent confidence.”

Brian Allen, chairman of Hazlitt, Gooden & Fox, some of the top international dealers of Old Masters based in Britain, said, “We’re talking about a very imperfect science. Two people don’t see things in the same way. You can do a lot of scientific testing and you can find out if the materials, and the support and so forth are technically right, but in the end there is still going to be that gray area. It comes down to a hunch and letting the market speak.”

Downplaying the Naysayers

“Sometimes, when there’s a level of ambiguity about an artwork’s attribution, the market will downplay the perspectives of those who doubt the work to make the potential sale stronger,” said the New York Old Masters art dealer Otto Naumann. “The auction world has to ignore some of the naysayers and they do, they just do,” said Naumann. “They just steam over it, snowball it. I think that’s definitively increasing, whereas before it was a product of mistakes or not really knowing what the truth was. Now there’s so much information out there, that in their eyes there’s truth to be avoided.”

Establishing the authenticity of an Old Master painting has always required a combination of art historical connoisseurship and technical analysis of the materials used in the work, and these days, restoration science is often a key factor in determining a work’s origins. In recent years, a new work by an Old Master is presented as a new “discovery,” when in fact it may be a case where the painting has been kicking around for a while, but the attribution has recently been upgraded, boosting market prices by orders of magnitude.

In January of 2017, for example, Sotheby’s in New York sold a “recently discovered” painting of a gentleman on horseback by Peter Paul Rubens, and it was the top lot of the evening’s Old Master sales, selling for five times its \$1

million pre-sale estimate, for \$5.1 million. Although it had been described frequently in the press as a “long-lost Rubens,” it was actually a painting whose attribution had been changed. A year-and-a-half earlier, it had been sold as an Anthony Van Dijk for \$14,000 at Christie’s in Amsterdam. What changed was that it had undergone a restoration and technical analysis, and then two leading Rubens scholars, Ben van Beneden, director of the Rubenshuis Museum in Antwerp, Belgium; and Arnout Balis, chairman of the Rubenianum in Antwerp, decided it was a work of the master.

Similarly, Sotheby’s in December sold “Dedham Vale with the River Stour in Flood,” as an original painting by the popular British landscape artist John Constable for 1.8 million pounds (\$2.4 million) only after Sarah Cove, founder and director of the independent Constable Research Project, used new physical and stylistic analysis to demonstrate that the work was by Constable. It had been previously attributed to the painters TC Hofland and Richard Reinagle. As a work by either of those lesser known British artists, the painting would’ve been worth perhaps a fraction of its sale price, but as a “rediscovered Constable” it was much more marketable. A painting that was once thought to be a copy or the work of a follower or only partially completed by a particular master painter is now “authentic” because more evidence supports a stronger attribution, and it’s ready to go up for sale in a totally different price category.

That’s the case with “Salvator Mundi,” which in the 1500s was attributed to Leonardo, and then lost its link and became attributed to a follower, Giovanni Antonio Boltraffio, one of his pupils. It was only re-attributed in 2011, after six years of intensive restoration work and technical examination. In this case, the attribution will stick unless it’s challenged — which is unlikely to happen in the short term because it is now going on display in the Louvre Abu Dhabi and it’s unlikely it will be made available for any new scientific analysis. But who knows? The tricky aspect of any attribution for a painting that’s hundreds of years old is that there’s rarely universal agreement on any given artwork, and there are almost always scholarly dissenters even to a widely held position, especially when it comes to very well known artists.

A Figure of Authority

“With certain artists, there’s sometimes not one figure of authority who everybody goes with,” said Allen. “With lesser artists you often have one scholar who has spent their time writing a catalogue raisonné and they’re the only person who’s seriously done any work on the artist, so that person’s word tends to be taken very seriously because they’re unchallenged. When it gets into the pantheon of great artists it becomes more complicated when a picture isn’t fully documented because you then get into real shades of disagreement.” The notable exception to this rule is Rembrandt, who has been studied for the last 60 years by the Amsterdam-based Rembrandt Research Project led by the scholar Ernst van de Wetering. The project has examined every known and suspected Rembrandt painting in the world, come to conclusions about authenticity, and published the determinations in a multi-volume “Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings,” which is used as a kind of Rembrandt bible. Even with the Research Project, however, decisions have been changed over the years — some paintings once considered Rembrandts have been downgraded to studio works, and works once thought to be copies or pupil’s works have later been designated as original masters.

The trouble is that there isn’t an equivalent of the Rembrandt Research Project for every artist, nor an expert of the caliber of van de Wetering, who retired earlier this year and is no longer accepting requests to examine potential Rembrandts. Van de Wetering started at the RRP as an intern decades ago, when it was a group of art historians who based their decisions primarily on connoisseurship.

But as he became the leader of the project, he increasingly relied on the new technologies. “What I’ve done over the years is to build a solid foundation of interdisciplinary knowledge about the paintings that includes a stylistic and material analysis,” van de Wetering said in a telephone interview. “I’m a scholar but I’m also involved in the science as well.” Increasingly, though, the specialized connoisseurs like van de Wetering who were relied upon to make these determinations have been retiring. In their place have emerged entire

teams of experts, who include not only art historians but also restorers and scientists specialized in technical analysis of art. An example is the Bosch Research and Conservation Project, a team of research conservators, art historians, technical art historians and a photographer who worked together to standardize research into every known painting by Hieronymus Bosch. De Leeuw sees this as a wholly positive development. “For a long time it was all in the hands of the high priests,” he said. “The market and the public wants that but now they see that the high priests working totally on themselves and that they make mistakes. If you look at the news and you see all these scams, all these forgery cases, it mostly has to do with the fact that a certain high priest feels that he holds the truth.” He said that Authentication in Art takes the position that the most unassailable attributions come from a holistic team of specialists.

Studio Practice

For attribution issues with Old Master paintings, one complicating factor is always the role of the studio. Technical analysis can help us identify whether the materials — wood panels or canvas supports, pigments and minerals — can be dated to the time when a particular artist was working. But what if the painting came out of a master’s studio, but was not painted by his hand? Old Masters from the 15th century through the 18th century were called such because they usually presided over studios where they worked with assistants and pupils, who often painted parts of their canvasses. Sometimes, masters would also call in other specialists, such as a landscape painter, who would be asked to fill in the background on a portrait. These pupils, assistants and supporting masters were rarely credited, even at the time.

“People expect the new technology and the equipment to give an answer but it doesn’t, not by a long shot,” said Anna Tummers, curator at the Frans Hals Museum in Haarlem, the Netherlands, and author of “The Eye of the Connoisseur: Authenticating Paintings by Rembrandt and his Contemporaries.” “It can only tell you if it’s really wrong. If you try to differentiate between a Rembrandt, a studio work and a contemporaneous copy that’s hard. There are certain telling details that can be relevant but it’s very hard to let a machine do

your work.” In those cases, you need the opinion of an art historian or a connoisseur who can really understand the artist’s signature style, or manner of working, she said. And even then, she adds, you’ll often have disagreements between art historians who feel that they intimately know the artist’s work.

In his Leonardo catalogue raisonné, Zöllner listed “Salvator Mundi” under the heading “Leonardo da Vinci and Workshop (?),” and suggested that “we might sooner see the Salvator Mundi as a high-quality product of Leonardo’s workshop, painted only after 1507, on whose execution Leonardo was substantially involved.” Bambach concluded that “much of the original painting surface may be by Boltraffio, but with passages done by Leonardo himself,” all of which seems plausible. During her extensive, well-documented restoration of the painting, the renowned conservator Dianne Dwyer Modestini found plenty of technical evidence to support an attribution, including, she said, “the kind of pentimenti that were typical of Leonardo.” This was confirmed by expert connoisseurship of art historians such as Robert Simon and Martin Kemp. But no technical evidence can entirely rule out the presence of other hands in the work. “Attributions keep evolving,” said Tummers. “It’s never completely black and white. Even back in Leonardo’s day there was a debate.” So what if the attribution “entirely to Leonardo” evolves to a place where it turns out to be only “mostly Leonardo,” or perhaps by Leonardo and his studio, or if scholars can affirm that the hands are Leonardo’s but the rest is part assistant and part restorer? “That’s entirely their responsibility,” said Mr. De Leeuw, referring to Christie’s. “If, suppose, something is found that later that indicates the contrary, then they have a \$450 million problem.”