


REPORT

A QUESTION OF PROVENANCE

 Generally speaking, the art investor thinks that provenance makes the painting. The true collector, on the other hand, is more circumspect, knowing that provenance is only of relative worth.

Historically, provenance had a prestige value. For as in all things royal, acquisition of noble property implied transfer of “nobleness” and sometimes power. It was an appeal to authority.

Provenance has also become a means for tracing property lost in the mayhem of the 2nd World War, a mayhem that resulted in the spoliation, appropriation, requisitioning, theft of works of art. The Wildenstein case in Paris is among the most recent to have been brought to the public eye.

In both these circumstances provenance – when it can be established unequivocally – is a means of identifying ownership of the work of art.

More recently, provenance has been given another task: that of contributing to authenticating a work of art, and this harks back to the appeal to authority.

This task is applied most often where connoisseurship is lacking, a phenomenon of the auction houses in particular. To link a work to the artist’s studio is the aim of such provenances, as is possible in rare instances such as the Malevich paintings in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam or in Russia when the avant-garde artists were selling their works between 1918 and 1922 directly to the Museum of Artistic Culture. (See, S. Dzharfarova, “The Museums of Artistic Culture – A Policy of Disseminating Modern Art”, in this issue.)

Outside of these special circumstances there are few if any records of the change of hands of works of art and so there are invariably gaps in a chain, often due to the war-culture of the 20th century across Europe and Russia. The result is that if the provenance is called into question, this in turn tends to call the work into question, something that reveals the logical inconsistency between these two categories. Just as who owned a work of art in no way guarantees its authenticity, so also do gaps in provenance in no way invalidate a work’s authenticity.

Provenance, then, is clearly not a suitable tool for authenticating a work of art and it can be considered no more than supporting evidence at best. Provenance is indifferent to that which makes a work of art what it is.

What makes a work of art what it is lies within the work itself. This includes the handling of brushwork and the choice of colours and pigments, the subject matter, and what is intrinsic and unique to an artist’s creative process and style. All this can be discovered by the highly sophisticated scientific instruments that are being increasingly, refined which are used by reputable and experienced scientists. Of utmost importance is that with these instruments there are a number of methods to determine whether a work of art is at least sixty years old, the shortest period during which the binding media of the pigments will have aged evenly (polymerised). This is also how false ageing can be detected.

Prior to the developments of the recent technologies, provenance may have been a factor in the authenticating process of a work of art. Since then, those who had needed to place their confidence in the vagaries of provenance can confidently shift their allegiance to the more reliable scientific analysis. For in it are found real tools that are trustworthy. They also show provenance to be what it is: links to the work of art that are merely circumstantial.

Scientific analysis has been used extensively in the investigation into Russian Avant-Garde works of art precisely because of the general lack of documented provenance or of partial provenances.

This lack of documentation has been due in part to the movement of people as a result of the October 1917 Revolution and two World Wars. Equally important was the impact of government policy. For Joseph Stalin decreed in 1932 that art was now an instrument of the State in order to serve the propaganda needs of the new Soviet regime. Russian Avant-Garde art could not fulfil this task because it was abstract and non-objective. So it was ordered to disappear from view. Museums removed their collections from the walls to be stored in reserves, while artists and collectors hid works behind cupboards or rolled them up as “sausages” to prevent drafts under doors and windows. Many, many works were collected in the Moscow Central Depository of Contemporary Painting and this began with those of Natalia Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov who had left for Europe in 1915, then those of Olga Rozanova’s studio following her death in 1918, to be added to by the artists themselves as a result of Stalin’s decree when they feared that their studios would be searched (which they were). There were also reserves

in Leningrad and other major cities where hundreds of works of art were stored, and they were not opened until after the fall of the Soviet regime in 1991. Throughout the Soviet era no one was ready to admit to owning Russian Avant-Garde art unless they were fearless of being deported to Siberia, George Costakis being the exception due to his official status.

There were, nevertheless, a few private collectors in Moscow and Leningrad who were attracted to the Avant-Garde but they were cautious and, hence, secretive about what they owned or who they received, given the political climate. When they met in order to trade works, no paperwork would ever be exchanged, no paper trail existed. (See Christina Burrus, “The Valeri Dudakov Collection”, *Journal of InCoRM*, Vol. 2, 2010. See also, P. Railing, “The Purge of Modern Trends”, in this issue.)

Documented provenance for Russian Avant-Garde art, then, is a rarity. When it does exist it may be a partial provenance in that, due to the historical vicissitudes of troubled Soviet times, it is unable to reach back to the artist’s studio on the basis of document. Even where artists’ inventories exist, as in the case of Aleksandr Rodchenko, they are hopelessly incomplete and works difficult to trace, while Kazimir Malevich stored much of his work with his brother, Miecheslav, in Moscow, for which no lists are known and nor are the paintings.

Thus the task of authenticating works of art falls to the scientists in the first instance, and this has been reported on in the *Journal of InCoRM* in Erhard Jägers, “Scientists Under Fire?”, *Journal of InCoRM*, Vol. 1, 2009, P. Railing, L. Thomas and I. Cassan, “The Interaction of Scientific and Art Historical Investigations into Works of Art”, *Journal of InCoRM*, Vol. 2, 2010; S. Ruiz-Moreno and A. Lopez-Gill Serra, “Contributions Towards the Palette of Liubov Popova”, *Journal of InCoRM*, Vol. 2, 2010.

So when art investors insist on provenance “in case they will want to sell the work in future” they are revealing first of all their ignorance about the historical circumstances in Russia throughout most of the 20th century. They are also revealing their real attitude to the work of art: it is a commodity like any other trader’s item. How can an object of human creativity be nothing more than a bag of gold? and one that is at the artist’s expense when it finds itself in a bank vault rather than on a wall to be experienced. Art demands respect and that is the difference in the attitudes of the art investor and the art collector.

Rarely do true collectors ask for provenance and, even if they do, their decision to purchase is not determined on the grounds of provenance because they know that it is not valid as a proof of authenticity; indeed, for them provenance will have little power to authenticate a work of art. Rather, they place their confidence in the work itself based on the scientific and art

historical expertises that accompany it. True collectors, in fact, place their confidence in true value, the kind that can be had by reliable evidence only. Provenance has the undeniable value of reputation but is no more than a complement – and not even a necessary one – to scientific and art historical methods whose professional responsibilities include assessing the genuineness of works of art.

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