

## AUTHENTICATION IN ART



**Milko den Leeuw of Authentication in Art interviewing Martin Kemp, Emeritus Research Professor in the History of Art at Oxford University and speaker at the AiA Congress May 2014 and 2016, The Hague.**

**Could you please give us an introduction of yourself and your work?**

I'm Emeritus Research Professor in the History of Art at Oxford University. I was trained in Natural Sciences and Art History at Cambridge University and the Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London. I was British Academy Wolfson Research Professor (1993-98). For more than 25 years I was based in Scotland (University of Glasgow and University of St Andrews). I have held visiting posts in Princeton, New York, North Carolina, Los Angeles and Montreal. I've written and broadcast extensively on imagery in art and science from the Renaissance to the present day. Leonardo da Vinci has been the subject of a number of books, including *Leonardo* (Oxford University Press 2004).

I curated a series of exhibitions on Da Vinci and other themes, including *Spectacular Bodies* at the Hayward Gallery in London, *Leonardo da Vinci: Experience, Experiment, Design* at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2006.

**Five years ago, when Authentication in Art was started, you were one of the first partners to join the foundation. Over these past five years, have you noticed any changes in the authentication process?**

Outside the immediate business of the kind of paintings and drawings that I am sent on a regular basis - most often aspiring "Leonardos" - I am not well placed to judge what is happening in the authentication business on a wider basis. I have certainly found it useful to refer people to the Authentication in Art website, both for guidance and for the essays etc. that are accumulating impressively. The aspects of the art world that deal with authentication - academics, museum and gallery personnel, dealers, auctioneers, specialists in scientific examination and the many maverick "experts" that claim credibility on the internet - tend to be sealed off from one another. The internet has made things worse, since the rival parties can now shout abuse at each other with impunity. I don't see the boundaries ever breaking down comprehensively - there are too many institutional and financial imperatives involved - but if Authentication in Art in the long term can make the boundaries more permeable, it will have done a very good job.

**If we want to use past results and present findings to create a future perspective, an accepted protocol or clearly defined discourse seems to be the logical step. What do you think we might be overlooking thinking this is, in fact, logical?**

It is self-evident that there should be common protocols, not least for "innocent" owners who step into the morass of the art world. But it is not a world in which logic prevails. Each of the professional cadres prioritise the expertise regarded as standard in their own area of operation, without any clear sense how the status of their criteria relates to the status of other modes of making judgements.

Let's take the example of scientific examination. Auctioneers and dealers have increasingly embraced scientific examination as a tool in proving what they are selling actually is what they say it is. Such evidence is very handy when it shows that a meagre "copy" is actually the pricey "original". However, when the scientific results are less than favourable, they can be suppressed. Private companies offering scientific tests may be subject to confidentiality agreements that prevent unfavourable results emerging. In the commercial world, connoisseurship is accorded a high priority, and the percentage of paintings examined scientifically is far smaller than in museums and galleries. The style of operation for auctioneers and dealers has been founded upon the glamour of the connoisseur's sensibility – a glamour ideally shared by the prospective purchasers. Science may help sellers and purchasers in advance of a sale but it is seldom central. There is still a strong tendency to rely on *ex cathedra* statements like, "this does not look like" artist X, or that "this is an obvious forgery", setting aside all other aspects of the processes of authentication. I will be discussing this in my book *Living with Leonardo*, now in draft.

I should say that I am not mounting an attack on "connoisseurship" (or "judgment by eye", my preferred term) but making a plea for its strengths, competences and shortcomings to be recognised, both in itself and in relation to the full spectrum of techniques that we can bring to bear on authentication.

I hope that recent high-profile cases where items sold by Sotheby's did not stand up to later scientific examination will mean that the auction houses and dealers will undertake scientific analysis and analysis of other kinds of evidence more seriously in advance of the sale. I see that Sotheby's have purchased a company that specialises in scientific examination.

**Recently we saw the 10-million-dollar-blooper with the alleged Frans Hals painting. Reading the publication on its authentication, we saw that it was based on findings covering only three quarters of an A4 paper. Isn't it time that editors of professional magazines take their responsibility serious? We suggest peer review reading, with a specialized authentication board. How do you see this?**

The *Burlington Magazine* publication of the Hals was more-or-less satisfactory in itself, using a set of familiar art-historical arguments, but it shows every sign of haste and included no scientific examination. Were I editor of that August publication, I would have asked that such an examination be undertaken.

The subsequent technical report "proving" that the Hals is a forgery does not seem to have been published. (*At the time of this publication not all findings were made public* - MdL)

It is an unsatisfactory business in all respects.

Ideally when an object makes its public debut, it should do so in a comprehensive, peer-reviewed publication in advance of or at the same time as its emergence in the more popular media. In most cases, however, this is not practical. The processes of peer-reviewed publications tend to be ponderous and slow. Most owners, dealers, auctioneers and authors are impatient to push things forward, particularly when large sums of money are involved. The handling of the *Salvator* was exceptional in this respect. It has set a standard that is unlikely to be followed.

I'm not sure a single "authentication board" would work unless it could select from a wide range of relevant expertise in each case. What is needed for a potential Leonardo is very different from a potential Malevich. In general I am not enthusiastic about self-appointed judges and juries of the kind that operate at vetting committees of art fairs. I'm not much in favour of attribution by committee.

**Is this notification based on your study *Human cortical activity evoked by the assignment of authenticity when viewing works of art*, published in *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* in 2011? (See the link to the pdf below)**

That study was not concerned with authenticity as such. We were not trying to discover if anyone could tell a Rembrandt from a non-Rembrandt. We showed that when a viewer was told that a painting was not by the master (regardless of whether it was authentic or not), the mental processes became far more complicated and involved with decision-making, memory etc. The act of seeing is radically affected by the expectations that are set up. As I have said, seeing is a malleable business.

**When it concerns great masters like Leonardo, it seems rather legitimate for experts in the field to use the press or online media as their platform. Avoiding academic assessment, this way details get lost and may result into fake news. Do you share this concern, and what do you think can be done about it?**

For even the most sober academic, it is easy to get carried away with the discovery of a "new Leonardo", and bask in immediate media exposure - enjoying Warhol's fifteen minutes of fame. But we should remember that the press are looking for "stories" not for a careful exposure of evidence. They will also seek negative opinions without evaluating the credibility of those opinions. To be telephoned or emailed about the discovery with inadequate information and a low grade image might well stimulate an adverse reaction. The divergent fates of the two Leonardo discoveries with which I have been most closely involved illustrate how extraneous factors radically coloured how they were viewed. Looking back over the different fortunes of the attribution of the *Salvator Mundi* and the portrait of *Bianca Sforza* ("La Bella Principessa"), there are some clear lessons to be drawn. The first concerns how the work of art enters the scholarly and public domains. The *Salvator* and the body of historical evidence was carefully presented to a judicious election of experts, who – remarkably for the leaky art world - kept their counsel for three years. By the time the painting emerged in public at the National Gallery in London, there was a critical mass of influential voices who would speak in the painting's favour. With the *Bianca* a series of incontinent leaks in the press, and exchanges of insults between the owner and experts who had not seen it prejudiced it in the eyes of important specialist commentators. Where the work makes its debut is crucial. Being shown in the National Gallery in London or debuting a flashy commercial show radically affects how it is regarded. Once a painting enters a circuit of commercial or semi-commercial exhibitions, typically in secondary venues, it is increasingly unlikely to be welcomed by major public museums. It will be seen as "in the trade".

Ownership also plays its role. The owners of the *Salvator* played their hand cleverly, fostering the idea that they

wanted to do right by Leonardo's masterpiece. The handling of the portrait was far less prudent and it became seen as an overtly commercial speculation.

**In your work on the Leonardo projects you have always combined different areas of expertise. How did you combine the outcomes from these different specialities? In other words: what gave you the most conclusive answers?**

It is rare for any one piece or kind of evidence to be decisive in a positive manner. The truly decisive things tend to be negative, such as the identification of later media in a work. The positive evidence tends to come in the form of pointers, and the greater the accumulation of positive pointers the better. The positive evidence is always vulnerable to claims that the evidence can be forged or circumvented. The carbon dating of the vellum of the portrait can be dismissed by saying that it's easy for a forger to get hold of old vellum. It is more difficult to get around the dating of the white pigment to over 225 years old. The evidence that the portrait came from the vellum book of the *Sforziada* in Warsaw is, say, 80% positive, but someone hostile to the attribution can always play on the 20%. Even provenance is rarely decisive. Of Leonardo's paintings, only the *Last Supper* has a truly continuous history. We have excellent records of the presence of the *Salvator* in the collection of the Stuart kings, but we are still filling in the provenance on either side of that. And, of course, provenances can be falsified.

At least with Leonardo we have the advantage of his very idiosyncratic creative personality, both technically and conceptually. I could cite many examples. His keenness to use the edge of his hand to soften contours is a good but not unique pointer. His strong tendency to keep adjusting his compositions, when most artists would have settled on a solution, is also a strong pointer. His underdrawings are very distinctive.

He handled content in a distinctive manner. His notable innovation in the *Salvator* of characterising Christ's orb as a rock crystal sphere with "inclusions" provides a good deal of encouragement about the attribution. And so on. The accumulation of positive pointers can act very powerfully as a set of strong probabilities. In the cases of the portrait and the *Salvator*, the accumulation is impressive, and the negative sniping has been on indecisive fringes of the evidence. Only the statement that "it does not look like Leonardo" is a potentially decisive negative, but in itself that statement is virtually meaningless. I will say "it looks like Leonardo". This gets us precisely nowhere and brings the business of attribution into disrepute.

**Did your work on the Leonardo project provide you with important lessons that are valuable to other authenticity research projects and/or catalogue raisonné committees?**

The key lesson is that seeing is very malleable and that we can all too readily see what we want to see. At each stage, there has to be the corrective of asking rigorously what is *wrong* with the work. Cultivated disbelief is essential if we are not to be carried away with enthusiastic bias. Joining a club of "believers" who reinforce each other's opinions is not a good idea. Such clubs tend to arise spontaneously in geographical and professional niches. Another lesson is not to invest too much emotion in being right - as a kind of personal ownership of an attribution. Arguments too easily become personalised, particularly in the context of internet polemics. Being wrong is uncomfortable, but it does not invalidate everything one has done and will do. Stay cool.

**Last AiA congress showed that education is of fundamental importance to the future of authentication issues. Do you have suggestions on how to improve the educational system for authentication research?**

I am rather pessimistic about this. We can all agree that education is the key - as it is to combat racism, for example - but I find it difficult to identify organisations that can undertake the education on a wide enough basis to have a real effect. The universities are not the obvious vehicle. The centre of academic art history has moved decisively away from authentication and connoisseurship. Museums and galleries are obviously competent to do so, but it's difficult to see them wanting to entangle themselves in the attribution jungle. I hope that other people see the kinds of opportunities I can't presently recognise.

**Do you think it is still plausible in 2017 that an authentication process based on only one field of expertise can validate a work, or has an interdisciplinary approach become essential to all authentication research?**

A multi-faceted approach is essential, and we can now deploy a much wider range of methods than in the past. But simply throwing all the available methods at an item will not work. We need to know what each of the methods can tell us within the parameters of its competence and, at least as important, what each method *cannot* legitimately do. There tends to be a confusion between evidence that says "nothing here excludes the attribution" and evidence that more positively points in a more precise way to the origins of the work. We are still a long way from having adequate professional procedures.

As Robert Burns said in his Scots poem "To a Louse",  
*O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us  
To see oursels as ithers see us!  
It wad frae mony a blunder free us.*

Or, more prosaically,  
*Would that some power gave us the gift  
To see our attributions as others see them,  
It would from many a blunder free us.*

Martin, thank you so much for your time and patience in answering these questions for AiA.  
Oliver, thank you for your assistance.

Link: <http://authenticationinart.org/pdf/literature/Frontiers-Manuscript-1.pdf>

Milko den Leeuw for Authentication in Art Newsletter March 2017©