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Kokoschka Painting a Forgery? Experts Say Yes, Artist Said No

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The hallmark lot in Berlin based online auction platform Auctionata's first sale, dubbed "the first live auction in the history of the internet," a 1925 painting by Oskar Kokoschka was called into question days before the sale, leading to a disappointing €7500 result, half of its €15,000 estimate, the FAZ reported Saturday.



A detail of the disputed painting, "Rosen II" (1925) and its abnormal signature, Courtesy Auctionata

In an email dated November 24, 2012, Régine Bonnefoit wrote to Auctionata which reads in part, „Nach eingehender Untersuchung der Sachlage und Anhörung der beiden international anerkannten Kokoschka-Spezialisten Prof. Dr. Heinz Spielmann und Frau Dr. Katharina Erling erklärt die Fondation Oskar Kokoschka das von Auctionata in Berlin angebotene Stillleben ‚RosenII‘ zu einer Fälschung.“ The website posted the Foundation's full and detailed account of why "Rosen II" could not possibly be Kokoschka's work in a discreet "Weiterlesen" section of the lot's page, less prominently displayed than a recommendation of the work by art historian Victor Wiener.

In that section of detailed information, Auctionata explains that because the work was verified in a *raisonné* published by J. Winkler and Katharina Erling in 1995, they would continue to include it in the December 7 sale. However, they warned bidders that purchase was at their own risk, quite ironic due to the prominently displayed 25 year promise of authenticity on their homepage. Erling refers to documents connected with a 1966 auction of the work at Lempertz in which Kokoschka himself verified the work as his own. At the time, his friend and collector Willy Hahn was the seller.

Bonnefoit postulates in the foundation's verdict that Kokoschka likely would have verified the work regardless of it being his hand due to his only having seen the current image in a photograph, or more emotionally, because he did not want to have Hahn lose money on the picture. That came by way of a letter Kokoschka sent to Hahn, which all but implicates the artist himself as having essentially taken credit for fan art.

Considering the further evidence provided: the brush strokes do not resemble those found in any other Kokoschka work and the signature is entirely different than that which he typically used to mark his oils. Moreover, it seems Bonnefoit and her colleagues would have very little to gain by discrediting the painting, with Erling potentially even losing reputation due to her previous verification of the work, while Auctionata would have lost the high point of its auction.