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Revealed: the art experts who pass fakes as authentic

Dubious data and selective use of evidence lead to forgeries being attributed to masters

A fake Marc Chagall painting, owned by a Leeds businessman who had bought it for £100,000 in 1992, was ordered to be burned last month and an Istanbul art gallery closed down its Joan Miró exhibition last year after directors of the Spanish surrealist painter's estate said some of the works were forgeries.

The uncovering of fakes by committees comprising descendants of the artist is increasingly common and has prompted one of Britain's foremost art historians to condemn the methods used by scholars to authenticate works as a "professional disgrace".



Art historian Martin Kemp examines Leonardo drawings in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. Photograph: John Baxter

Martin Kemp, emeritus professor of art history at Oxford University and a Leonardo expert, said many rely on "dubious data" and that a "chaotic" approach is used to attribute paintings. He said he was alarmed at the ease with which historical, visual and scientific evidence is manipulated to suit the overriding objective – enhancing academic reputations or boosting financial rewards in attributing paintings to particular masters.

"There's lots going on, from academic incompetence to really dirty stuff," he said. The manipulation is possible because the collective profession's approach is "chaotic", he said. "Documentation, scientific analysis and judgment by eye are used – and ignored – opportunistically in ways that suit each advocate, who too frequently has undeclared interests."

Kemp added: "It tends to be very selective and, even if other evidence is mentioned, then generally there's a core of what seems to be most secure, which is seized on. The more wobbly things are shoved to the side. The various kinds of evidence, their status and what job they do in proving the case are never really inspected."

Having trained as a scientist and art historian at Cambridge University and the Courtauld Institute, London, he has an acute sense of using evidence "in a reasonably systematic way". That makes him all the more aware of how scientific evidence is being abused, with a reliance on "very dubious" data.

Scientific examination is carried out by museums and galleries or private operators. Acknowledging that some of the latter are excellent, Kemp said: "Nonetheless they're being paid as pipers to a degree, regarding a work owned, say, by a group of speculators. They accumulate big fat files, data of technical evidence which – if you know how to analyse it – mean almost nothing." He mentioned "lots of graphs and fancy data, including carbon dating", which reveal little of use.



He is alarmed by owners and syndicates of investors, with much to gain from a painting's attribution to a master, who commission tests on pictures with a "visual plausibility" and censor data that fails to back their case. If, for example, a report casts doubt on a Rembrandt attribution because tests reveal a pigment only developed after the artist's death, contracts prevent the report's author from speaking out if that information is suppressed. Kemp said: "There has certainly been some legal silencing." He observed that few art experts can stand up to "fancy lawyers" employed by owners, "bullying of the worst kind".

Money is the motivation, he said. As pictures change hands, he is sometimes sent the same picture – at about five-year intervals – by each new owner. He said: "The syndicate get a few opinions from some more easily manipulated art historians. They assemble a body of scientific data, sell the picture for a profit to the next syndicate, upping the ante each time."

The situation is not helped by the reluctance of scholars to express opinions for fear of legal action. The Andy Warhol Foundation no longer authenticates works for that reason. In 2011 it revealed that it spent \$7m defending itself against a lawsuit brought by a collector, Joe Simon-Whelan, over his "Warhol" silk-screen self-portrait whose authenticity it had rejected.

The problem is partly the professional training, Kemp says. "In any profession you must be aware of the status of different kinds of evidence. In art history, that isn't taught in any way and I've never seen it discussed."

Nicholas Eastaugh, scientist and technical art historian of Art Access & Research, whose clients include leading auction houses, said: "There are no standards. It's totally unregulated. It's a Wild West ... We're trying very hard to establish standards, but there is no professional control. You can shop around for a scientific report that probably says essentially what you want. It's shocking."