

AUTHENTICATION IN ART

AiA Art News-service



THE ART NEWSPAPER

Spare us the so-called experts and call for the connoisseurs

Inherited moral rights, over-ambitious academics and discredited catalogues raisonnés have led to a crisis in attribution

By Bendor Grosvenor. Focus, [Issue 266, March 2015](#)

Published online: 10 March 2015



Like Agatha Christie's Poirot. Photo: RetroAtelier

It was often like the arrival of the Man from Del Monte from those popular 1980s television adverts. An expert would be welcomed with hushed reverence into the London gallery where I used to work, and presented with a painting for inspection. After a few minutes of silent examination, the expert would, if we were lucky, say “yes”. Much rejoicing would follow—our new discovery had been declared authentic. Occasionally, however, the verdict would be “no”. A painting bought as the work of a “follower of so-and-so” would have to remain just that, no matter how much we believed in the attribution ourselves. Months of research and conservation, not to mention a considerable financial commitment, would be dismissed on the basis of a quick judgement by “the expert” who, by some quirk of art-historical fate, held the exclusive right to decide what an artist did or did not paint.

Although such negative verdicts had to be accepted as an occupational hazard, I came to the view that some “experts”, including some who said “yes”, did not know how to assess a painting properly, whether it was understanding its condition or identifying key areas of creative invention. Certainly, they knew many obscure facts about an artist’s life, and what his paintings meant (or what they thought his paintings meant). But when it came to being able to identify the artist’s hand, they could not do it.

Of course, most of the experts I have consulted are extremely knowledgeable and reliable. They freely give opinions based on years of devotion to a particular artist. And sometimes, I happily admit, they were right and I was wrong.

But the duff experts highlight flaws in how we go about authenticating paintings. The late Erik Larsen was a hopeless “expert” on Van Dyck, and (it is said) took cash for attributions. The sheer range of paintings he attributed to Van Dyck, from weak copies to works demonstrably by other artists, defies belief. And yet Larsen’s view was seen as definitive for many years. He was cited widely in auction catalogues and exhibitions, and left a trail of attributional disaster in his wake.

Why was Larsen’s view so trusted? Because in 1988 he wrote a catalogue raisonné—a handsome, two-volume edition published by Freren. It didn’t matter that it was so bad that even the self-portrait of Van Dyck on the cover was a copy of an original in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York; as far as the art world was concerned, the catalogue made Larsen the expert. Van Dyck’s body of work remained in disarray until the Paul Mellon Centre published another, infinitely better catalogue raisonné on Van Dyck in 2004, listing 744 works by the artist as opposed to the 1,047 paintings in Larsen’s publication.

No substitute for experience

Not every artist is as lucky as Van Dyck in getting a second chance. Normally, the time and expense involved in putting together a catalogue means that they are attempted once in a generation at most. Many artists, including Godfrey Kneller and Giovanni Bellini, are still waiting for theirs. And a bad catalogue can set back the study of an artist for decades; I know

of two under preparation that will, when finished, present a sadly inaccurate view of their artists' body of work.

Larsen's example demonstrates two things. First, that it is dangerously easy to become "an expert": all you need is a publishing contract. And second, that the art world—especially the art market—believes that if a painting is published in the latest book, it must be authentic, no matter how good or bad that book is. The key thing is "independence"; the belief that if an attribution comes from an academic with no obvious conflict of interest, then it must be right.

In the quest for academic impartiality, however, we often ignore actual ability. True attributional expertise (in fact, let us be grown up and call it connoisseurship) can only be gained through years of experience. It requires intense scrutiny of paintings by all manner of artists, of all levels of quality, and of pictures in varying conditions. Although there is a certain element of natural talent in connoisseurship (an acute visual memory is essential), there is no substitute for training your "eye" over time.

Short-sighted approach

And yet the manner in which many academics now become "experts" is entirely wrong, from a connoisseurial point of view. First, they will focus on just one artist, rather than a wider, contextualising circle of artists of the period. Then they may publish, as is the way in "new art history", a work on a general or theoretical aspect of that artist's work. And finally, they will base their formative visual assessment on small illustrations of well-known pictures in museums. Connoisseurship cannot be learned like that.

In truth, however, the more pressing issue is the dearth of art historians now willing to make attributions or to write anything resembling a catalogue raisonné. Since the 1980s, connoisseurship has been sneered at in many university courses, and writing a monograph is considered retrograde. There are other pressures, too. The threat of lawsuits deters many from discussing authorship (the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts shut its authentication board in 2011 over lawsuits, and even the Wildenstein Institute in Paris was sued recently over a putative Monet of a scene near the artist's home in Argenteuil). Although such cases are rare, many museums, such as the Tate, do not offer formal attributions of works outside their collections. As a result, there are now large gaps in expertise: in British 18th-century art alone, there is no accepted authority on George Stubbs or Thomas Lawrence.

New model of authentication

To whom, then, should we turn for the authentications of the future? Some want to create self-appointed authentication panels, to pronounce on attributions across the centuries, using pre-ordained criteria and a reliance on scientific analysis. But these would be a disaster, creating closed hierarchies that would lead to less debate, while divining attributions by science is a practice still in its infancy.

Instead, I believe art history can benefit from a new model of authentication. Unfortunately, the realities of academic fashion, not to mention funding, mean that catalogues raisonnés are likely to be things of the past. But must we continue to rely on the old model of a specific person for a specific artist, with that individual holding a monopoly of expertise? Must we risk hampering the study of an artist for a generation by deferring to “an expert” who may write fine essays but who, like Larsen, cannot tell the difference between a Van Dyck and a hole in the wall?

Surely we should recognise that if we really want to know who painted what, we must trust people who are good at establishing just that: those who are good connoisseurs, not those who merely have a publication history. Moreover, the skills of a connoisseur—someone with a good “eye” and a clear understanding of scientific analysis—are transferable from artist to artist. The connoisseur of Joshua Reynolds is likely to be good on his contemporaries Henry Raeburn and Allan Ramsay too.

A wider pool of trusted connoisseurs would also enable us to proceed more by way of consensus, rather than relying on a single individual. Research centres such as the RKD (the Netherlands Institute for Art History) in the Hague show what can be achieved by a small, dedicated team of art historians willing to make attributions on Dutch artists across the centuries. They regularly give advice on attributions to museums, collectors and even the art trade. I know of no similar centres in other countries that are as happy to engage in making attributions. And yes, we must accept that many in the art trade, those who seek to establish authenticity professionally and who may have proven track records as connoisseurs, have views worth listening to.

There will always be conflicts of interest somewhere, just as there will always be those who say that authorship is irrelevant. No system for establishing authenticity can be perfect. But new discoveries are the engine of art history, and if we continue to rely on a diminishing pool of inexpert experts, our subject will soon grind to a halt.