

AUTHENTICATION
IN ART

AiA Art News-service

artnet®

Forgers Are Targeting Weak Spots in the Growing African American Art Market

Charles White and Alma Thomas are among the targets of enterprising forgers today, according to a new report.

Sarah Cascone, January 7, 2019



Charles White, *Sound of Silence* (1978). The Art Institute of Chicago, ©1978 The Charles White Archives.

The downside of African American artists' long-overdue rise in the art market is starting to appear: forgeries. Dealers say they're seeing a growing number of forged or fake works by 20th-century African American artists due to a potent cocktail of increasing prices and a lack of institutional expertise in previously overlooked figures, according to the [*Art Newspaper*](#).

Because collectors are just beginning to catch on to the appeal of artists such as Alma Thomas and Charles White, there isn't necessarily the same documentation and scholarship available to help identify authenticate works of art, creating an opportunity for enterprising fraudsters.

"When people were asking for provenance records, these are things that a lot of the artists didn't even prepare," Miami art dealer Jumaane N'Namdi told artnet News, pointing out that many painters historically didn't think it necessary to sign their work. "The artists who are blue-chip artist today all had the same issues, but it got cleaned up over the years by whoever was representing them, and now it seems like they had all these awesome files."

In markets like the current one, which is seeing collectors buy works by African American artists amid efforts to reevaluate the canon of art history, there is an additional emphasis on a work's provenance and exhibition history. But at the same time, auction houses are "seeing more questionable works," Nigel Freeman, director of African-American art at New York's Swann Auction Galleries, told artnet News in an email. "Fortunately, our department has extensive experience: we have handled more than 4,000 artworks over 11 years."

N'Namdi has encountered fakes attributed to artists including Henry Tanner and William H. Johnson, though they may well have been made during the artist's lifetime, by less successful artists looking to emulate a peer with a proven collector base.

Other problematic works include not outright fakes, but overly optimistic attributions from collectors hoping to have gotten lucky with, say, an eBay purchase.

So buyer beware: Thomas, White, Beauford Delaney, [Romare Bearden](#), and [Bob Thompson](#) are all among the forged artists that dealer Michael Rosenfeld told *TAN* he had encountered in recent weeks. "It's a whole generation: you could go from A to Z through the list, from Charles Alston to Charles White. I am seeing fakes attributed to all of them," he said.

On the other hand, the need for an air-tight attribution can sometimes go too far. "You hate to say there's too much caution, but you can miss out on some great pieces," N'Namdi said. "There are always fakes, but I guess with this big boom now people are even more concerned."



Salvador Dalí (Figueras 11.05.1904 – 23.01.1989 Figueras) *Les Atavismes du crépuscule (phénomène obsessif)* (1933). Kunstmuseum Bern. Bequest Georges F. Keller 1981.

Keller worked with Bignou in Paris at the Galerie Georges Petit until it closed in 1932. The two then set up a gallery as partners under Bignou's name in the French capital. In 1935, Keller became the director of its New York branch.

"Keller and Bignou were business partners for decades and collaborated on the Aryanization of a Jewish gallery in Paris," Kunstmuseum Bern provenance researcher Nikola Doll told the Swiss broadcaster SRF. Their gallery closed after Bignou's death in 1950, according to archives at New York's Frick Collection.

It is unclear what the business connection means, if anything, for the works at Kunstmuseum Bern. But potential problems "can't be ruled out," according to Amelie Ebbinghaus, a provenance researcher at the firm Art Loss Register. The museum is planning to study 80 works in the collection.

This is not an unfamiliar position for the Kunstmuseum Bern. In a surprise move, Cornelius Gurlitt bequeathed his collection to the institution in 2014. The son of a Nazi-era art dealer, Gurlitt hoarded more than 1,500 works in secret until authorities uncovered the trove in Munich and Salzburg in 2012. Bern concluded that it would only accept works after their provenance had been cleared.

Museums' responsibilities toward WWII-era gifts have changed "before and after the Gurlitt case," Zimmer told *Agence-France Presse*. "The climate has changed, the tone has changed, the questions have changed, and I think we all agree that it is part of the museum's task to look at where the collections come from and to deliver answers."

Zimmer tells artnet News that the museum's provenance research department is currently entirely funded by foundations and private donations. "In order to

permanently fund the department, we will need a wider net of support, also from the state,” she says.

Both institutions and auction houses in the country have been changing the way they handle works of problematic provenance, and the Swiss government has made new grants for provenance research available.

But Zimmer maintains there are significant challenges to deal with along the way to improving Switzerland’s track record on handling Nazi-looted art. There is a lack of qualified provenance researchers and funding is limited—a fact that is surprising given the country’s affluence. Zimmer says that limited access to private archives is another hindrance in the search for truth from a dark moment in European history.

Meanwhile, in Berlin tomorrow, January 8, Germany is due to return a painting from the Gurlitt hoard, Thomas Couture’s *Portrait de jeune femme assise* (1850–55), to the heirs of its Jewish former owner, the politician Georges Mandel.