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Who Will Preserve Jackson Pollock's Legacy?

Will the concerns of long-time guardians of Pollock's oeuvre be proven in the marketplace?

By [Jennifer Landes](#) | March 7, 2019 - 9:43am



Francis V. O'Connor and Richard Taylor, center, worked together for many years on issues of connoisseurship and science in determining authenticity in paintings attributed to Jackson Pollock.

Just a year ago at the memorial symposium for Francis V. O'Connor, Kerrie Buitrago reminded those gathered of a joke Eugene V. Thaw said to Dr. O'Connor, his co-author for the 1978 Jackson Pollock catalogue raisonné: "When we both are gone, all the fake Pollocks out there will become Pollocks."

The two men died last year, as did Charles Bergman, who was a founding organizer of the Pollock-Krasner Foundation in New York after the death of Lee Krasner in 1984. All three were considered essential in protecting Pollock's artistic legacy, but Mr. Thaw and Dr. O'Connor — who was responsible for a 1995 supplement to the Pollock catalog as well — were intimately involved in authentication issues for most of the past three decades.

Ms. Buitrago, the executive vice president of the Pollock-Krasner Foundation, said Dr. O'Connor took that joke seriously. During some of his last years, he worked on what to do about some 350 known Pollock fakes and potentially scores of other unknown works waiting for the right moment to present themselves. He had hoped to devise a curriculum for connoisseurship that could become part of New York University's Institute of Fine Arts graduate program. He even began a search for a successor to "develop the necessary skills and practiced eye to carry on his work," according to Ms. Buitrago. Neither effort came to fruition, however.

There is an institution that authenticates Pollock's work, along with those of many other artists. The International Foundation for Art Research has been the de facto Pollock authentication service for years. Sharon Flescher, IFAR's executive director, said recently that "ever since the Pollock-Krasner Authentication Board disbanded in the 1990s, and the Pollock-Krasner Foundation and others (museums, auction houses, insurance companies) began referring Pollock-related inquiries to our Authentication Research Service, IFAR has researched, examined, and written reports on well over 150 purported Pollocks and has preliminarily reviewed many dozens of others."

IFAR is a nonprofit educational and research organization and has "no vested interest in the outcome of this research," she added. The foundation was involved in the uncovering of two recent scams, including the 2016 guilty plea of John Re, an East Hampton man who sold forged Pollock paintings, claiming he had found them in a local basement. Ms. Flescher also testified at the Knoedler gallery trial in 2016 about a Pollock sold by the gallery that "we had refused to accept as a Pollock as early as 2003."

Having worked with Pollock experts for many years, she said there were and continue to be others who serve this purpose for them. She agreed, however, that “Gene Thaw had a truly fabulous ‘eye’ and his passing is a great loss, for many reasons.”

Recently, Richard Polsky has also put out his Pollock-authentication shingle. An art dealer based on the West Coast, he said he has been in the business for 41 years. Having already established himself as an authenticator of works by Andy Warhol, Keith Haring, and Jean-Michel Basquiat — other popular artists for faking — he said he turned to Pollock because he is one of his favorite artists.

He developed his eye by immersing himself in the artist’s work and his world, he said. “In the 1980s I went to his studio, and I was mesmerized. It was like being in a religious shrine. And I’ve seen virtually every painting he did in that sweet spot of 1947 to 1950.”

He said he read the Steven Naifeh and Gregory Smith biography several times, and understands the artist’s psychology and where he was coming from, who influenced him, what he was trying to do and say. He also has learned his working methods and the context in which he was painting, in addition to studying the catalogue raisonné.

“When you do this, eventually you develop a level of expertise. . . . No one is born a connoisseur.”

In his Warhol authentications, Mr. Polsky has challenged some exclusions in that artist’s catalogue raisonné, posting his own addendum on his website, and also states there that he is willing to “re-examine paintings that were stamped ‘Denied’ by the Warhol [Authentication] Board,” which dissolved in 2012. “Just because you have an authentication board and they’re assembling a catalogue raisonné, doesn’t mean they’re going to get it right all of the time. They’re human beings and they have agendas, like we all do.”

In one notable case, Warhol’s board members authenticated a trove of “Brillo Boxes” that were asserted by a Swedish museum director to be real, when almost all but a dozen had been executed after the artist’s death.

Mr. Polsky said he is working on one Pollock authentication already and has another waiting. “We work one at a time,” he said. His process “comes down to two things: What does it look like, which is most important, and what is its back story,” known in the art world as provenance.

He charges \$3,500 for his Pollock authentications. If he determines there is a decent chance it could be real, he will then recommend that a forensic scientist he has worked with for many years examine it. That study will analyze the pigments and canvas to confirm that they came from the time of the artist and were materials he was known to use.

With so many of the artist estates and foundations having left the authentication business, citing litigation issues, why isn't Mr. Polsky fearful of being sued? "If you hire me, you have to sign a disclaimer in layman's language agreeing not to sue if you don't care for my opinion." But, he said, "it's really all about transparency."

If it's not real, "I'm very clear in my report why it isn't. . . . If I substantiate it, they're not going to sue me over \$3,500. They can take my document and tear it up when we're done," he said. "It's like attorney-client privilege. I treat it as a private matter; it's not like I will post the results on the internet."

He acknowledged that even if a client signs a disclaimer, if someone "really wants to sue you, they will find a way to sue you." He noted that the Warhol board was sued by one applicant for conspiring to inflate the prices of the works by keeping the number of authenticated works artificially low. That applicant eventually dropped the case, but the foundation paid millions in legal fees.

Mr. Polsky thinks that even works not in the catalogue raisonné have a real chance in the marketplace if enough experts think they are real. He said smaller auction houses are willing to sell works that they cannot guarantee as real, as long as they clearly disclose it. He said this approach might even be accepted by the largest auction houses.

He said that if an unknown Pollock were uncovered and the scientific analysis backed it up, "it wouldn't shock me if one of the big houses took it," particularly if it was a painting that could fetch \$20 million to \$30 million or more.

If they presented his letter of authenticity along with the forensics report, "I checked with a lawyer, it becomes up to the client to bid. If you believe we're credible, bid on it. . . . No one is putting a gun to anyone's head, just be honest and up front with documentation."



Richard Polsky, an art dealer from California, recently announced that he would provide authentication services for works by Jackson Pollock.



A painting sold by the Knoedler Gallery represented to be by Jackson Pollock, but found to be fraudulent by the International Foundation for Art Research, a non-profit organization. IFAR has been the de facto Pollock authentication service after the Pollock-Krasner Authentication Board disbanded after the publication of the supplement to Pollock's catalogue raisonne in the 1990s.