

## AUTHENTICATION IN ART



Milko den Leeuw of Authentication in Art interviewing Prof Dr Robyn Slogett, Director of the Grimwade Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation, and member of the AiA Workgroup on Technical Art History.

### **Can you please give a short introduction of yourself?**

As Director of the Grimwade Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation (<http://arts.unimelb.edu.au/grimwadecentre>) and the Cripps Foundation Chair in Cultural Materials Conservation at the University of Melbourne, I oversee the industry-focused teaching, research and consultancy programs of the Centre. I first studied art history and philosophy for a Bachelor of Arts Honours, and then obtained qualifications in cultural materials conservation (applied science), before undertaking doctoral study on the ethnographic and art collection developed by German jurist Dr Leonhard Adam. My current research interests include attribution and authentication of Australian paintings, the development of the Australian art market, collection development and history, the materials and techniques of artists, and the preservation of cultural materials held in Australian Indigenous communities. The teaching programs at the Grimwade Centre are Masters level, and we have a strong PhD cohort. I love the interdisciplinary nature of conservation and it is always interesting working with art historians, physicists, chemists, forensic scientists, artists, artists' families, collectors, dealers, Indigenous communities, and many others. One of the most interesting things about

conservation is the ability and opportunity to interrogate an artwork from the macro to the nanometre level.

**Education is the key answer and true fundament of any society - ancient or modern. Can you tell us the specific trigger of your successful academic approach in relation to authentication research at the University of Melbourne?**

The basis for the authentication research that the Grimwade Centre undertakes is two-fold. Attribution studies emerged as a specific interest from a series of research projects with partners in art history, chemistry, earth sciences and physics, undertaking analysis of securely provenance works in the University of Melbourne art collection. Our work in this area attracted interest from owners and dealers who wanted to understand whether a work under question could be ascribed to the artist's oeuvre. This led to the development of processes and protocols to support this work and ensure it was rigorous and robust. The second reason that we engage in the study of attribution is that, as a public university, preserving and protecting the authentic cultural record is not only a professional requirement within the ICOM-CC Definition of the Conservator-Restorer but a duty if we are to ensure that students are not studying false documents, including artwork. Therefore, if we are asked about the validity of a particular work, we need to be able to provide a studied response.

**In Vanessa's and your lecture at AiA 2014 ([see AiA website](#)) you underlined that the work of many important Aboriginal artists is forged in a mind blowing tempo. How do you and your team keep pace and what is your advice to our colleagues?**

It's true that there are often surges in art fraud, or at least in the entry of highly problematic works into the art market. This is generally when an artist's oeuvre is vulnerable and this is particularly the case with Australian Aboriginal artists who live in remote areas where communication and access may be difficult, who are elderly and for whom English may be a second, third or fourth language. For this reason having data bases of securely provenance works is critical. Aligned to this is the establishment of points of identification that are relevant to the artist and that include relevant materials and techniques analysis.

**When the oral history of Aboriginals is taken in consideration provenance research seems not to contribute any value. The development of data sets, you referred to in the 2014 lecture, on artists materials are most likely increased by now. Do you consider meta-data and cross reference linking of material data as an increasingly important tool against fakes?**

Absolutely, and for two reasons. First, the more verifiable data to which we have access the better able we are to contextualise a work that has questions raised about it and to decide whether it may or may not fit within the profile of securely

provenance works. Second, the ability to sort and access this information in ways that are searchable, secure and have been subject to verification is critical as without the relevant meta-data the masses of information, and in their various formats, becomes unmanageable and inaccessible.

**The research on the materials of the works by Aboriginals are mostly carbons, irons and other materials already used for a long time. How do you discriminate the materials for dating?**

There are a number of techniques that can assist here. For example, Particle Induced X ray Emission (PIXE) can provide analysis across a large spread of the periodic table, so rather than look for age we look for anomalies, for the one element that indicates a different source. When you can test for parts per million, as with PIXE, then even the smallest amount of idiosyncratic material becomes evident. However, contemporary Aboriginal artists use a range of materials and techniques that include the same materials that are used globally so the important thing is to have a battery of techniques that can be employed for the question at hand. Again context is all-important in understanding what might be relevant information to the question you are asking about the work, and what might just be more information.

**Is there sincere interest in Australia by important collectors to financially support your work?**

We have had, and continue to have support for research from a number of collectors and dealers, as well as institutions. We tend to focus this towards PhD students to support their studies. The Australian Research Council also provides grant funds.

**Would a TAHDA system be of any help for your work?**

The TAHDA system looks very interesting in that it is interdisciplinary, searchable, and brings together a wide range of contextual and contextualised information. The controlled access and time-marked data entry requirements give increased confidence that the system is robust in terms of limiting any potential corruption of the information held there. I look forward to learning more about it in the coming months. (see [www.tahda.org](http://www.tahda.org))

Robyn, thank you so much for your time and patience in answering questions for AiA.

Oliver Spapens, thank you for your assistance.

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For more information please visit:  
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Please submit your proposal to: [info@authenticationinart.org](mailto:info@authenticationinart.org)

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