

## AUTHENTICATION IN ART



**Milko den Leeuw and Oliver Spapens of Authentication in Art interviewing Dr Maxwell Anderson, President of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation**  
**Website Foundation:** <http://www.soulsgrowndeep.org/>

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

I'm an art historian and arts administrator, having earned a PhD from the Department of History of Art and Architecture at Harvard University in 1981. After serving for seven years as a curator in the Department of Greek and Roman Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (1981-87), I spent almost thirty years as the director of five museums, including the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Dallas Museum of Art. A former president of the Association of Art Museum Directors, I've written dozens of articles and two books on topics ranging from the moral rights of artists to adjudicating artistic quality to ongoing battles over ownership of antiquities.

**In 2016 you became President of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, which is dedicated to the documentation, preservation and promotion of African American artists from the South-Eastern U.S. What motivated your decision to join this Foundation?**

I grew up in a family that abhorred racial discrimination. My playwright grandfather's many years of collaboration with composer Kurt Weill yielded the 1949 Broadway production *Lost in the Stars*, an early and moving critique of apartheid in South

Africa. It was described by historian Roni Mikel-Arieli as “a metaphor for the racial injustice of African American segregation in the U.S.”

My experience as a museum director began in Atlanta in 1987, where I came to learn about the largely unknown achievements of African American artists living in poverty in the South, far from the art world’s glare. In the course of my career I acquired and exhibited works by artists including Lonnie Holley, Thornton Dial and the Quiltmakers of Gee’s Bend, Alabama at three museums. It was a natural transition after three decades of directing museums to seek broader acceptance of these artists within dozens of museum collections instead of at one institution at a time.

**We all know that most acquisitions of artworks resonate with the taste of its benefactors, whilst recognition of lesser known artists or unknown cultural developments depend on the interests of curators. How can we be ensured that these important but less mainstream artists are also shown in museums?**

Fortunately, the Souls Grown Deep Foundation’s goals have been embraced by museum directors and curators throughout the U.S. The pursuit of greater cultural diversity among audiences, boards, and staff is an ascendant concern among American arts leaders, and there is an increasing commitment to diversifying museum collections as well. Our Collections Transfer Program, which is steadily placing hundreds of artworks in the permanent collections of dozens of museums, continues to meet with wide acceptance. Through a new internship program we are seeking to broaden curatorial awareness of the significance of these artworks in the coming years.

**Authenticity of artworks stands at the core of the art world. For lesser famous (or lesser valuable) artists there is not the same focus and protection. How can we ensure that for these artists the authenticity and study of their work is properly researched and documented for the future?**

Notwithstanding a halting awareness of the 160 artists represented within our Foundation’s art collection, there have already been forgeries of works by the artist Thornton Dial. We consider it our obligation to monitor the market and call out malfeasance when we see it. In addition, the donation of our archives to the University of North Carolina is helping insure that scholars, dealers, and collectors can join in helping to insure the integrity of these artists’ legacies.

**The Internet has provided artists with new platforms to share their artworks. As such we are not as reliant as we used to be on institutions and critics to discover new art. How do you see the development of these new digital channels in creating more awareness for the lesser known artists? Are these opportunities something that you actively use at the Souls Grown Deep Foundation?**

We are very active in social media to promote awareness of the contributions of artists we advocate. And it's clear that the mainstream art world, including journalists and critics, is following our activities online, and supports our mission. But digital coverage notwithstanding, I still believe that the imprimatur of museum collections, exhibitions, and publications are essential in spawning acceptance of our artists' contributions. The Guggenheim Museum's exhibition *1900: Art at the Crossroads (May-December 2000)*, presented about 250 works by more than 170 artists from 26 countries, few of whom are celebrated today. It was a powerful rebuke to the notion that what we consider important today will stand the test of time, and I am wary of assuming that online enthusiasms reflect more than a temporary fever.

**At the Souls Grown Deep Foundation you have become increasingly active in the promotion of the artists in your collection. Works of these artists are now present in some of the most important museums in the U.S. after donations by the Souls Grown Deep Foundation. We can however imagine that you want to go a step further. How does the future look for the Foundation?**

We still have a long road ahead, with dozens of other U.S. museums having expressed interest in acquiring artworks from us. While continuing to pursue that outcome, we have simultaneously turned our sights abroad. The recent hire of Paris-based curator Raina Lampkins-Fielder signals our intention to place artworks in European collections, and foster an international awareness of African American art from the South. The works of our artists are in some ways the visual equivalent of jazz, rich with themes, variations and unconventional materials. We aspire to make their contributions known to audiences across the EU, and to alter the canon of art history to include artists who do not dominate the art market today.

Like many artist-endowed foundations, our mission does not end with the recognition of artists. Our parallel goal is to use funds obtained from donations and from discounted sales of art to museums to pursue racial and social justice, by making grants and building awareness of the adverse circumstances in communities that gave rise to the art in our care. Over the long haul these twin objectives, expanding the canon of art history and improving living conditions in the so-called Black Belt of the American South, are intertwined.

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

AiA Foundation board;  
Prof dr Nico Schrijver – Willem O. Russell – drs Ingeborg de Jongh

AiA Advisory Board;  
Dr Friederike Gräfin von Brühl – William Charron – Nanne Dekking – Pieter Hoogendijk – Prof em Dr Martin Kemp  
– Dr Jennifer Mass – James Roundell – Prof Dr Maurizio Seracini – Lawrence M. Shindell

AiA organizers;  
Milko den Leeuw – Oliver Spapens