

AUTHENTICATION IN ART

AiA Art News-service

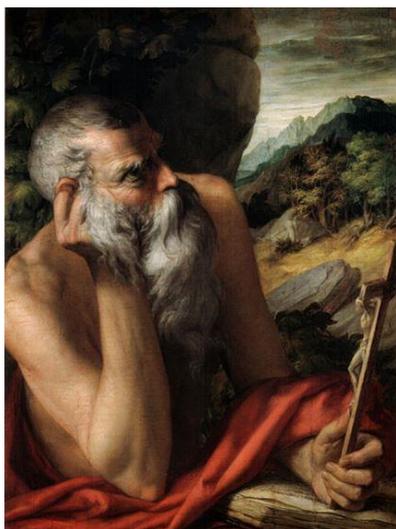


This is How Experts Spot Art Forgeries

/MutualArt

NOVEMBER 19, 2018

As forensic and material technology rapidly advances, art authentication keeps improving - but so do the forgers. We spoke to experts in the field to find out how a fake is spotted and how a genuine piece is authenticated.



The painting of St Jerome once thought to be a genuine [Parmigianino](#)

In the summer of 2017, at the Palazzo Ducale in Genoa, a major retrospective of [Amedeo Modigliani](#) opened to the public. The exhibition was hugely successful, welcoming thousands of visitors. Despite the popularity, the Palazzo closed the show three days early. The reason? Almost all of the paintings were fake.

Authorities seized 21 of the 30 paintings on display, all of which were exhibited as originals. In January this year, the results of the analysis were resounding. 20 of them were forgeries. “Even a child could tell these were crude fakes”, said revered Italian critic, Carlo Pepi, in an interview with [the Telegraph](#).

But beyond asking children to spot crude imitations, what tactics does the art world have at its disposal to tackle the threats of fraud and forgery? Oliver Spapens, an Associate at the non-profit foundation Authentication in Art, shared with us the details of the process. “We believe in something we call the three-legged-stool”, says Spapens, the legs of which are “Art History, Conservation Sciences, and Material Sciences”.

The AiA was set up in 2012 in The Hague to promote best practices in art authentication. Since then, they have been working diligently to promote rigorous standardization and proper practice at the intersection of material analysis and the art world.



The Disciples at Emmaus (1936), the most successful fake by infamous forger, Han van Meegeren. This painting was sold as an original Vermeer in 1937 for the equivalent of €4,650,000

According to Spapens, “very basic scientific principles are often lacking from material analysis in the art world because there are no regulations”. He recounts a recent instance in which conservation work was done on a section of a painting which was measured whilst still in its frame. The results were therefore useless when the painting was transferred for further analysis elsewhere without the frame.

It’s an extreme example of negligence, Spapens admits, but serves to highlight the lack of centralized and standardized procedure. “The art world is the least regulated market in the world I think”, he says.

Dr. Michelle Carlin is a researcher and lecturer in Forensic Chemistry at Northumbria University, and also consults with galleries and heritage organizations about artwork authentication. When asked how something on the scale of the [Modigliani](#) scandal can come about, she agrees it’s a matter of unregulated and inconsistent process. “Some galleries and historical buildings purchase artwork with paperwork that shows its provenance. However, this is taken on faith that the documents are original. There are also some very good forgeries that have been found over many years proving that even experts

on specific artists or experts in that period can also make mistakes. Chemical analysis is not always carried out.”

In modern times, there’s a lot of faith in chemical analysis, but Carlin highlights the importance of “other information from conservators, galleries and other art experts”, echoing Spapens' Three Legged Stool image. Unfortunately, there are still very high-profile cases of negligent or underinformed authentication practice in the art world.



Salvator Mundi (c.1500), attributed to [Leonardo da Vinci](#). The true provenance of the world's most expensive painting is under continual dispute

“For example the Parmigianino case”, says Spapens, referring to a 2012 instance in which a painting of St Jerome sold for \$842,500 at Sotheby’s and was later proven to be a high-class forgery. The painting was sold as being ‘from the school of Parmigianino’, and the auction notes cited at least two experts who were convinced it was by the master himself.

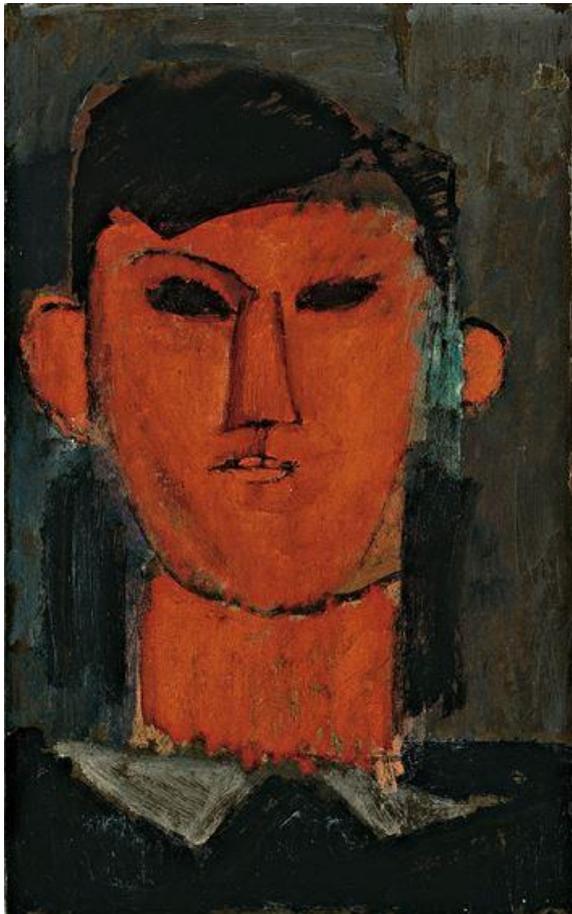
After tests done in 2015, celebrated forgery-spotter James Martin (now Sotheby's in-house authenticator) discovered the presence of a modern synthetic green pigment called phthalocyanine in more than 20 locations on the canvas.

At the time of the sale, “the material analysis wasn’t done”, says Spapens. “And then you see the weakness of not working with all three systems in tandem”. The auction house refunded the buyer once the evidence emerged, and began legal action against the seller, Lionel Saint Donnat de Pourrières. Last week, the US Court found in favor of Sotheby’s and ordered De Pourrières to repay \$1.2 million in damages.

One surefire way to spot a forgery, then, is to look for the physical presence of pigments and chemicals which could not possibly have come from the time period from which the painting supposedly dates. But what else should you look out for?

“One of the indicators of something being a copy or forgery is the lack of an underdrawing,” Spapens tells me. “It can’t be definitive, but an underdrawing suggests someone has changed their mind or has been thinking about it, whereas a copyist or a forger is already looking at an example, so they don’t change their mind that often”.

Similarly, in examples of modern or contemporary art (whose production wouldn’t ordinarily include processes such as underdrawing), evidence of the artist’s mental processes can be key. “Your frame of reference becomes different”, admits Spapens, “but let’s take, for example, a **Pollock**. The way he applied the lines was quite fluid. I know this sounds quite woolly, but what I mean is he had the picture in mind so he could do it in one fell swoop. As it is. Whereas if you’re trying to forge a Pollock, it won’t be that fluid because you’re trying to mimic his idea, not following your own idea. You won’t do it with the same ease as Pollock does it. You have to have an idea behind it”.



Amadeo Modigliani, *Portrait of Pablo Picasso* (1915)

Another fascinating piece of potential chemical evidence in authenticating modern art is “something called the Bomb Peak Effect”, Spapens explains. “Due to the Nagasaki and Hiroshima bombings, as well as nuclear testing, the C14 particles in the atmosphere got higher and then steadily declined. So that, of course, transfers into the plants of the time, which then again transfers into the canvases of the time”. This method can successfully date a painting's provenance to within a period of three years.

Spapens and the AiA foreground the importance of regulated, standardized practice, and the education of people within the art world, from collectors to lawyers (to which end they've produced a **handbook** of authentication practices, what they can achieve and what their limitations are).

Things are progressing, but in the meantime, Dr. Carlin suggests collectors ensure they have “documents, such as a certificate of authentication, which can aid provenance. As with all large purchase, doing your homework on the artist and speaking to experts on the artist would help you in keeping an eye out for forgeries”. Reports of a forgery ‘crisis’ in the market may be overstated, but buyer, still, beware.

