



Interview Milko den Leeuw of Authentication in Art with Prof Dr Maurizio Seracini

Can you please give a short introduction of yourself?

*In 1973 I graduated from UCSD in Bioengineering with a minor in Art. As a born Florentine, I always felt the need to have a balance education between art and science. It became more obvious to me when I found myself in California, which was light years from the culture I was familiar with and fully embedded in a highly scientific discipline.*

*When in 1975, back in Florence, I met Prof. Carlo Pedretti, who was my former art history professor in College and already one of the world leading scholar on Leonardo, and he asked me to try to unveil the mystery of the lost Leonardo's mural "The Battle of Anghiari" in the Hall of the 500 in Florence, I immediately embraced the idea to merge engineering science and Cultural Heritage. Ever since, I tried to introduce into the world of art concepts familiar to the medical world such as clinical chart, multispectral imaging, the work of art seen as a patient and the need to assess its state of conservation according to an objective methodology based on a scientific approach and not, as too often happens even today, by a subjective evaluation of a curator and or a conservator.*

*I also felt the need to introduce science into the process for authenticating a work of art and I must say that this was and still is a very steep and bumpy road. There is so much that science can do to conserve, preserve, protect, discover, authenticate and disseminate the knowledge and appreciation of Cultural Heritage worldwide. Unfortunately, the idea of the educated eye supremacy by art historians on one side and of restorers know best with or without science, is preventing a major paradigm shift in the management of Cultural Heritage that could be brought by scientists in the effort to make conservation become a true science.*

*I may sound pessimistic, but I am only being realistic after over 4 decades of professional activity in this field.*

At the AiA 2018 Congress you made the distinction between authentication and attribution. You described authentication as the objective verification of fact, based on scientific methodology, whereas you saw attribution as the posing of subjective personal opinion. In this distinction do you see a way where (art) historical 'evidence' could somehow be objectified and be disconnected from the personal position of the art historian and transcend into fact, or as close to fact as can be?

*In Italy and not only in Italy, there is not a clear distinction between authentication and attribution. The two terms are considered the same by Italian law and, even worse than that, to make an expertise you do not even have to be an art historian. It goes without saying that to sell an artwork the main requirement (in addition to provenance and proof of ownership) is to have it attributed by a leading expert. Why bother authenticating an artwork? It can be expensive, time consuming and, after all, if the expert recognizes the hand of the artist, obviously it is also authentic! How to change this nonsense? Well, a comprehensive knowledge of a work of art should require a teamwork done by historians, art historian, conservators, scientists, lawyers, appraisers, insurers and often also bankers and investigators, since ownership and legitimate provenance of funds for the purchase should also be checked very carefully. It may look cumbersome and hardly feasible, but this is how a real asset class investment in any other field is normally subjected to. Art historical evidence could and should become objective provided that the art historian would accept first to be one of the several specialists involved in the study of the artwork without any role supremacy and most important willing to base his work on the findings of the historian, the conservator and the scientist. I see some hope in the rather new professional figure of the technical art historian. Unfortunately, they are very few, their scientific background is often not adequate, and they operate mostly in museum environments, where it is easier to work in a group, and not in the art market for lack of integrated teams of specialists.*

Over the years you have been subjected to backlash and misconceptions from parties ranging from government institutions to the press. What made you stay in the world of art analytics?

*As I mentioned before, I got involved in the Cultural Heritage world due to a combination of events: bumping into Prof. Carlo Pedretti in Florence by chance at a time when I was evaluating the possibility to go back and work in the States since in Italy there was no understanding of the role of a biomedical engineer in a hospital. I found the idea of transferring my knowhow to 'special patients' fascinating but soon enough I realized how crazy, or, I should rather say almost impossible, it was. Through the years I came to regret this choice many times but the inborn curiosity to be involved in such fascinating field and the passion I had in developing and testing new technological solutions to study incredible masterpieces were the main drives to keep me going. Last but not least was the challenge in trying to unveil the genesis of a masterpiece, to understand how an artist with just a piece of wood or canvas and some colours was able to express creativity and genius. I still find it insane how much antagonism and criticism government institutions and media alike had against my work through the years. Uncovering an incredible underdrawing in Leonardo's Adoration never seen for more than five centuries and proving that the brownish colour covering the painting was not the work of Leonardo but rather of a minor painter, raised*

*arms in the community of art historians. Searching for Leonardo's mural in the Hall of the Five Hundred also created so much animosity. I was accused to be obsessed by the search to the point of drilling holes in Vasari's frescoes to check if the Battle of Anghiari was hidden behind it. It was fake news, since the decision for the drilling and its execution were made by the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, but I am still seen as an unwanted alien by the international community of art historians and not only. That is the price you pay if you stand out the chorus line.*

You have talked on AiA 2018 about the ever-growing crime rate involving works of art. Art can be forged, looted, stolen, used for money laundering, tax evasion and other criminal purposes. Some are arguing for the self-regulation of the art world, on the other hand people are asking for the government to step in. What form of regulations do you propose?

*If the U.S. State Department has ranked art crime as the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest criminal enterprise in the world, it is evident that such an alarming increase in this type of crime is proof alone that the art world, or more specifically, the art market, is not capable of self-regulation—or worse still, it has no interest in self-regulation.*

*It is well documented that organized crime exchanges looted artworks for drugs and weapons. Free ports have become the “safe harbor” for artworks that are either of dubious provenance or smuggled from war zones. Well-known and established antique fairs are often the center for scandals involving the sale of fake artworks. The price of artworks continues to grow, yet there is no check of their real cultural value, thus encouraging illicit speculations and money laundering. As the request to invest in artworks grows, so has the production of fakes—now making up 50% of the market—yet there is sadly little interest in introducing the concept of scientific authentication as a main deterrent to the proliferation of fakes.*

In your AiA 2018 lecture you called for three new types of art world professionals. An interdisciplinary art scientist, schooled in both art history and scientific examination. An art crime investigator that specializes in the identification and tracking of artworks involved with criminal enterprises. And most revolutionary an art advisor that stands above all other fields of expertise in the art world and guides the full research process of an artwork, or otherwise put the professional that will run the art advisory service. Could you elaborate a bit more on these new professionals?

*In order to make the global art market transparent, there is also a great need to create a new breed of professional figures;*

*An interdisciplinary scientist specialized in material science, chemistry and diagnostic imaging and with a strong background in Art History, who will be able to develop and apply specific methodologies and technologies to Art Authentication as well as to help fighting Art Crimes worldwide.*

*An Art Crime Investigator with an in-depth knowledge on a wide array of technologies that he could implement to search, monitor, identify and verify stolen, looted, lost, forged or smuggled Cultural Heritage artifacts and verify the authenticity of due diligence documents. A new figure of Art Advisor for all types of investors, ranging from private collectors, investment fund companies, family banks, insurance companies, etc. Such Art Advisors should be acting as an Art Manager on guiding the client through the entire process of art acquisition, as I have outlined before when I talked about the need for an audit trail for art investors. The Art Advisor could offer potential investors a complete art advisory service, one*

*that is comprised of well-coordinated expertise that can guarantee clients protections and verifications as exist in all other asset classes. The integrated art advisory service provided to investors by the Art Advisor could dramatically change the way art will be bought and sold in the future.*

Thank you Maurizio for your time, ideas and answers, most appreciated, Milko

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