

ART SY

## How to Make Sure You're Not Buying a Forgery

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Restorers in the studio of the Doerner Institut prepare for a conservation. Photo by Matthias Balk/picture alliance via Getty Images.

Elizabeth von Habsburg, the managing director at the appraisal and advisory firm Winston Art Group, has seen her fair share of forgeries over her 30 years in the business. She remembers a collection of 100 Fabergé pieces, only two of which turned out to be authentic. In other cases, she's uncovered a fake Cézanne and a whole warehouse full of forged works in Las Vegas. She didn't need to look at any of these pieces to know they were fake. The red flags were all in their paperwork.

When art forgeries make headlines, the stories behind their unmasking often involve meticulous examination of previously overlooked details and forensic

labs testing materials. And while these techniques certainly help identify fakes, they're not always necessary. In fact, according to appraisers, lawyers, and other experts, there are a number of much simpler (and cheaper) strategies that collectors can use to help identify a potential fake before it's too late.

### Know your dealer

Before even getting to the artwork, the first thing to consider is the dealer. In the case of the fake Fabergés, von Habsburg discovered that not only were most of the pieces missing crucial paperwork, but the same person who sold them to the unwitting collector over the course of several years also did the collector's annual appraisals. When buying anything for thousands of dollars (or more), don't make your decision solely based on the seller's word. "You should always have independent advice," von Habsburg said.

"Purchasing art is such an emotional decision," said Jennifer Mass, materials chemist and president of Scientific Analysis of Fine Art, "and the art world is a fascinating old-fashioned world of handshake deals and no due diligence." Collectors may feel they're being rude when asking too many questions of a dealer, especially one who claims to have called them first for the chance at owning a newly acquired work. It's this mixture of excitement, fear of missing out, and misplaced trust that can lead collectors to unwittingly buy a forgery.

### Do some sleuthing

The best way to avoid being duped is to stop yourself from buying on impulse and do a little bit of research—on both the dealer and the work. Simply looking up names online is a start, specifically making sure the dealer is reputable. Any negative press is certainly a warning sign, as is a suspicious lack of information; you could also look people up on How's My Dealing, a website of artist reviews of dealers (how a dealer treats their artists can be indicative of how they'll treat their clients).

Once the dealer passes the test, start asking them questions about the work: Who owned it before? Where did they get it from? Has it been conserved? You can simply ask to see its paperwork. If the dealer is hesitant or evasive in answering your questions, that's a bad sign. You wouldn't buy a car or a house without finding out how it was built or when; why would you be any less scrupulous about buying an artwork?

The next step is examining the all-important paperwork. This includes documentation of the ownership history of the work (the object's "provenance," pronounced the French way), as well as signed authentications and records of exhibition and conservation. Every artwork that's not brand new comes with documentation of provenance. If it doesn't, that's a sure sign something's wrong. For new artworks, you can always contact the artist or their studio to ask about the work.

### Become a provenance pro

A good forger will know the importance of provenance, so the veracity of the documents themselves also needs to be checked against the artist's catalogue raisonné: the official and comprehensive record of all the works of a single artist, often compiled by the artist's estate. As for the authentication documents, those could also be forged—which turned out to be the case with the Las Vegas warehouse trove von Habsburg examined, with the names of actual experts appearing in documents that the experts themselves said they'd never signed. In examining a work's documentation, there's some sleuthing you can do on your own. The Wildenstein Plattner Institute, for example, is a great resource for digital catalogues raisonnés. But an experienced researcher or appraiser could also be very helpful. However, an appraiser won't be able to authenticate a work; only an authenticator—someone very closely associated with the artist in question, like the estate or a dealer the artist worked with for an extended period—can do that.

While experts can help track down the provenance and take a very close look at the work for signs of the artist's hand, they might not be willing to say anything definitive about an object for fear of being sued should they turn out to be wrong. Such concerns were the reason the Warhol Authentication Association Board disbanded in 2012—it was spending too much money on lawsuits over authenticity disputes. However, an appraiser will know what gaps to look for, like a lack of recent certification, exhibition history, or literature citations; a highly inflated value; or a discrepancy in the work's title. (Don't forget to vet your appraiser as well; affiliation with or certification from a professional association is always a good sign.) Keep in mind, though, that documentation of genuine works also often has gaps; the key is in figuring out which are plausible and which are not.

As appraiser Louky Keijsers Koning pointed out, there are cases where the catalogue raisonné is incorrect, or the artist changed the work's title at some

point. A lot of paperwork also gets lost over the years. In the most obvious forgeries, there are multiple suspicious or missing documents. “Finding a lost work is very rare,” Keijsers Koning said. “That’s why provenance is very, very important.”

A good forger is not only a good artist, but also a cunning researcher and savvy businessperson. They look for reasonable gaps to dive into, copying works by artists that lack or have incomplete catalogues raisonnés (like Jean-Michel Basquiat, Willem de Kooning, or Amedeo Modigliani), no authenticating body (as with Andy Warhol), or rising market prices combined with little comprehensive scholarship (such as Banksy or Natalia Goncharova).

### Contractual obligations

Once you’ve done all your research (including analyzing the signature, the style of the work, and any gallery labels on the back) and feel confident in your purchase, it’s important to keep the paperwork trail going by creating a good contract with your dealer. Keijsers Koning said she often reminds collectors to keep their invoices and appraisal reports, but a lot of people don’t even have invoices. Attorney John R. Cahill, who co-represented a plaintiff in the infamous Knoedler Gallery forgery case, added that a contract is key to protecting the buyer should a forgery be discovered.

“In most states, it’s up to the judge or jury to decide if authenticity was part of the deal,” Cahill said, and dealers have been known to create loopholes for themselves, citing works as “authentic to the best of my knowledge” to avoid liability. (The state of New York, however, has a law that protects the buyer with a kind of four-year warranty, so they have the right to a refund if the work is found to be a forgery in that time.)

“A good contract will say the work is authentic and everything you know has been disclosed,” Cahill noted, adding that Knoedler Gallery was sued for fraud because it didn’t disclose the fact that the International Foundation for Art Research failed to definitively identify one of the “Jackson Pollock” paintings as genuine, which would have been a clear signal to the buyer that something was amiss.

Dealers are not always at fault, though—they’ve often been fooled by forgeries themselves. Even major auction houses like Christie’s and Sotheby’s have inadvertently sold forged works. And with master forgeries—the ones that make national headlines—forensics really are necessary to bring them to light.

## Good science outs bad art

“Good forgers are careful enough to get materials to match” the ones the real artist used, Cahill said, adding that people who copy ancient Chinese ceramics often take shards from real period pottery and grind them into the fakes in an effort to trick scientists. Some of the most notoriously successful forgers, like Wolfgang Beltracchi, went out of their way to buy old canvases and create period paints for their works.

“Beltracchi made sophisticated forgeries, and he did a good job science-proofing them,” Mass, the materials chemist, said. But he was caught when a purported Heinrich Campendonk painting supposedly made in 1914 was found to contain traces of titanium white—a pigment that didn’t exist at the time.

Mass’s lab at Scientific Analysis of Fine Art specializes in material analysis of artworks, from molecular analysis to spectroscopy. She said all the processes she uses are either noninvasive or minimally so; she can get all the information she needs from a sample the size of the period at the end of this sentence. In 2014, Mass was part of a team that worked with the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C., to uncover a composition beneath Picasso’s *The Blue Room* (1901) using multispectral infrared light. A fascinating revelation in itself, if there was ever any doubt as to the authenticity of the painting, this clinched it once and for all. “With infrared imaging, if there’s nothing underneath, no change in the composition or sketch, that’s a red flag,” Mass explained. Thanks in part to this method, she’s identified a number of apparent 17th-century Dutch paintings that were actually copies from the 19th century. If two paintings are the same, the one with moving sketches and changed composition is always the original, marking where the artist changed their mind or made adjustments. When analyzing the paint (both the pigment and the filler), she often discovers attempts to disguise the condition of the work; in one case, she found that 80 percent of a painting was overpainted, something that was hidden from the client who bought the work.

But even on the forensic side of things, it’s often more telling to analyze the canvas and even the accompanying documents than the paint itself. Mass said she sees a lot of fake labels on paintings, identified as such because the paper they’re printed on has optical brighteners that have only been available since the mid-1940s. These same issues come up with faked documents, which is one of the reasons Mass has a paper conservator on her team.

## The nuclear option

As for the canvas, radiocarbon dating has proven the best method for determining its age. Irka Hajdas, a researcher at the university ETH Zürich's Laboratory of Ion Beam Physics in Switzerland, specializes in radiocarbon dating of cultural heritage objects, including paintings, ivory carvings, textiles, and manuscripts. It's a very complex process, as the levels of radiocarbon in the atmosphere have risen and fallen over time, influenced by such factors as changes in the Earth's magnetic field, solar activity, and, most drastically, the nuclear weapons testing of the 1950s. She said it's impossible to date Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* (1503–19), for example, because the levels of radiocarbon remained unchanged for nearly two centuries (from 1450 to 1650), largely coinciding with the Renaissance. On the other side of the spectrum, it's easier to date canvas used for paintings after the 1950s, when nuclear weapons testing caused a massive increase of radiocarbon levels in the air.

With all of these methods at hand (including new developments in artificial intelligence), new forgeries are uncovered every day. "Forgers never can predict what sort of analytical methods are invented to tackle their product of falsehood. They can't adjust their forgeries to future applications. At a certain moment, they fall out," said Milko den Leeuw, painting conservator, pictology specialist and founder of Authentication in Art, a Netherlands-based nonprofit that researches and promotes best practices in the field. "It is our job to speed up inventions, check and double check their possibilities and limitations. So that we can integrate those into the toolbox."

While AI, radiocarbon dating, and molecular analysis are all important tools in identifying forgeries, they aren't always necessary. The most important tool is meticulous research, and in the internet age, it's easier than ever to do it yourself. As von Habsburg put it, "as more information becomes available online, more forgeries come out of the woodwork." And remember to never let a dealer rush you into a sale. "There are many more fakes than you would expect," said Keijzers Koning. "If you have any doubt, you shouldn't buy it."

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