

# **ALL THAT GLITTERS ...**

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## Introduction

Eric Hebborn, the (in)famous forger once noted:

'No drawing can lie of itself, it is only the opinion of the expert which can deceive.' [1] and I take this comment as the point of departure for this paper.

'Artfraud' is a delicious term, conjuring up images of master fakers, moustached, bereted, ferreted away in dim alleyways producing glittering masterpieces that disturb the market, befuddle the expert and besmirch reputations, not to mention dislodge substantial sums from the rich. Of course, and I hate to disappoint you, artfraud is, as is most fraud, more often an act of opportunity than of planning, and has more to do with blindness (of the purchaser) than with cleverness (of the perpetrator). Further, not all trade that involves works that are not authentic is fraudulent, even if it is problematic and inconvenient. The 'trade chain' often ensures that the originator of the deceptive work is not the person who owns the work when questions are raised about it. Many works begin life innocently yet manage to 'slip' their destinies. These works were never manufactured in order to mislead, but the stories around them become 'strengthened' with time. Most conservators have encountered the family 'treasure' which, with passing generations, has achieved a status far beyond its humble beginnings; cases where the small amateur landscape has become the small 'Streeton' panel - family history recording Streeton's friendship with great grandfather.

Other examples of strengthened works include the badly damaged work which is heavily restored to the point where very little of the original is extant, the work which was never signed by the artist but which bears the artist's 'signature', or which has had its date altered to a more highly sought after earlier date. Noon scenes that become moonrises, unfinished works that are completed, unattributed works which gain attribution - all are examples of deceptive, but not necessarily fraudulent practices.

In these cases the issue is not the authorship but the claim that the work represents a certain value (cultural or financial).

What these cases have in common is that there is an attempt to provide a context which supports a particular hypothesis about the work that will add value to the picture. The added signature does not in itself provide evidence that the work is a Streeton, but it may strengthen this assertion, and it may tip the belief of the buyer.

Hebborn describes how this practice operated in the studio of the apocryphal restorer Mr Aczel.

'[p]ictures that are unsaleable are bad business; and by some warped kind of logic become bad art. Nobody want bad art, so dealers have it 'improved'. Should a painting be unsaleable because it represented an ugly woman, the ugly woman would become a pretty young girl. If it represented a saleable young man contemplating an unsaleable skull, the offending skull was changed into a brimming glass or wine. Dogs and horses enlivened otherwise unsaleable pastures. Balloons floated into commercially deficient skies at once became immensely important (that is, expensive) documents in the history of aviation. Popular signature came and unpopular signature went. Sullen-faced individuals left our easels wreathed in smiles.' [2]

When we are identifying fraud then, we are not identifying a type of object, but rather a type of behaviour. Conservators, who deal with the materials and techniques that constitute the meaning of the work as an object, have no expertise in determining behaviour and intention. We are not in a position to identify 'fraud'. However conservators can provide an understanding of the relationship of the work to the proposition that accompanies it, such as 'this is a work by Arthur Streeton.' By examining the work in the light of such a proposition it is possible to indicate those points where the proposition is supported by the evidence, and those areas where it is not. This provides for 'points of identification' as the police call them, which enable a theory of best fit to be devised. After extensive examination the theory of best fit may be that the work is a Streeton, or it may be that the work is not. If the work is not then the issue of how it is being presented, and to what purpose, may link the enquiry to artfraud. It must be strongly emphasised however that the presentation of a wrongly attributed work is not, ipso facto, artfraud. Neither is the painting of a work in the style of a particular artist, even when that painting is signed with the name of the artist in the style of the artist's signature.

## **Context**

A central issue is context. A work that is authentic in one context, may not be authentic in another. The work may be authentic if attributed to Jones, but not authentic if attributed to Roberts. Further a forgery may not be problematic if it is on display in an exhibition of 'Fakes and Forgeries', but will be if it is on display in an auction house sale.

When we consider the data present in the work or in the material accompanying the work, we are attempting to collect a body of evidence that can be used to determine a working hypothesis. Once this hypothesis has been developed it is then tested against the data, or more data is sought. This is a process of developing a theory of 'best fit', and it is generally not a straightforward process. In determining the theory that best fits the work we will generally work through several theories, in classic Popperian logic, until we establish a theory which is most secure given the evidence.

Suppose for example we are presented with a work that bears the signature 'Arthur Streeton' and purported to be from 1888, however the work does not look like a Streeton from this period. We will start with the theory that the work is genuine and test this theory by asking a number of questions about the work.

Does the work look like a Streeton at all? Are the materials of the kind known to be used by Streeton? Have the materials been used in the way Streeton is known to have used these materials? Is the work prepared in a way that fits other securely provenanced works by Streeton? Has the signature been applied to wet paint or does it sit over cracks in the paint layer? Is there a varnish layer between the signature and the paint layer? Is the paint of the signature indicated in other areas of the work?

As various answers present themselves we will modify the theory. It may be that the work resembles a later Streeton, in which case it may have been produced by someone less familiar with Streeton's oeuvre or it may indeed be a later Streeton. If we find that the signature has been added later, sitting over varnish and cracks and in a different paint, does this mean the work is not authentic? Not necessarily. We know that Streeton added signatures to works decades after they were originally painted. And so it goes, until we have developed a theory which best fits what we know about the artist. Of course our conclusion may be that this

particular work and the artist whose name it bears have no relationship to each other bar the wish, whim and say so of an eager vendor. Even then the best hypothesis may not include any issues relating to fraud, after all the vendor may be an innocent. At this point the conservator must bow out, however the objective facts which have been defined by the conservator may be used to develop a fuller context relating to the trade of the work. The conservator may interface with fraud issues, but will not determine nor define them.

## **Verification**

There is another issue here which is critical in ensuring that the facts, as determined during the analysis of the work, can be meaningfully used in law, and this is the issue of verifiability. In order to produce evidence that is meaningful it is necessary to indicate how such evidence is objective and verifiable. The history of artfraud is scattered with stories of experts who 'got it wrong' and not just wrong, but terribly wrong. This subjective nature of connoisseurship has led to an interest in scientific enquiry as a possible benchmark in authentication. However scientific validation can also be subjective.

As Fleming notes:

'Even the simpler scientific tools are not more than a means of investigation. They do not provide 'instant interpretation' of an object's history: That is a subjective response that lies within the mind of the observer, a feature of analysis with adequate scope for error.' [3]

The fact is that we can never absolutely know that a work has been produced by a particular artist. It is always possible that an exact replica will be produced along with manufactured documentation. (Consider for example the recent case of John Drew in London who infiltrated the archives of the Tate Gallery and the Victoria and Albert altering documentation to develop false provenance.) The issue is not what we know, but rather how we know and whether our assertions are verifiable. Authentication involves finding connections between theories and facts, and verifying these connections. In order to do this however it is necessary to have access to enough body of factual information so that the contextual reference points are as complete as possible. It is also necessary to identify those areas where, if additional evidence was produced, the theory about the attribution of the work may change.

## **Databases**

Since the inception of the Ian Potter Art Conservation Centre in 1990 staff have been working closely with colleagues in the Schools of Fine Arts, Physics, Inorganic Chemistry and Earth Sciences to analyse and record the materials and techniques of the works of a range of Australian artists. The aim is to build up as complete information as possible about an artist's working method and the materials used. This information is placed on databases which in many ways approximate the connoisseurs' experience. However unlike the connoisseurs' knowledge this information is available to, and added to, by a range of researchers over an extended period, and does not rely on the existence, memory or sanity of one person. A body of data such as this provides verifiable points of identification, where facts about a work can be checked against documented facts about other works by the same artist.

Although not originally developed in order to provide benchmarks for authentication processes, these databases have been useful in such cases because they can be an important contributing factor in determining the hypothesis of 'best fit'. When a dubiously provenanced

or attributed work is brought into the laboratory it is examined in order to determine 'points of identification', that is points where the work intersects known information about the artist in question and points where it diverges. In this process diminishment of the strength or rate of best fit at a number of points of identification can diminish the result to the point where we can no longer say with any degree of certainty that we have 'best fit'. Another hypothesis must then be provided (for example that the work is an anomalous work by the artist or that the work is not by the artist) and the facts checked against this revised hypothesis.

While the existence of databases that record the materials and techniques of a particular artist are useful in examining points of identification, the formulation of hypotheses are generally based on three aspects relating to the work; the art historical, the provenance and the materials and techniques. In a well-authenticated work there should be little dysfunction between these three. In problematic works the interrelationship may be less clear and more able to be dissolved.

The proposition that a particular work is by Arthur Streeton is not best tested by noting all points where the work is the same as one by Streeton, but rather, by finding that one anomaly which indicates beyond reasonable doubt that the work could not be by Streeton. The aim of authentication, should not be to prove that a work is by a particular artist, but to attempt to disprove that it is.

As A J Ayer noted:

‘The aim of the sceptic is to demonstrate the existence of an unbridgeable gap between the conclusions which we desire to reach and the premises from which we set out.’ [4]

To do this however it is necessary to have a well-defined context for the enquiry, and such a context must include art historical, provenance and materials and techniques information. In the case of the connoisseur the context is provided by years of study however the assimilation and distillation of such study resides in the experience of one person and is therefore not verifiable in a completely objective sense. Scientific analysis on the other hand may provide verifiable results but may lack the art historical experience that enables a proper contextualising of these results.

The process of authenticating a work of art involves a broad knowledge of the philosophical and practical issues, and an ability to draw on a range of information and expertise including art historical expertise and scientific analysis. While a full analysis can generally only take place in a laboratory the process of examining artwork to determine if it is likely to be problematic can be undertaken by anyone providing they are capable of working through the following issues.

1. What is it that would lead anyone to question the provenance or attribution of the work? For example, does the work look problematic, or why is it claimed to be problematic?
2. What kind of condition is it in and does its condition relate to its purported age and history?
3. Is the work of a style consistent with the artist at that period?
4. Are the materials and techniques consistent with other known works by the artist at that period?
5. What information is available to support the supposed provenance of the as it is to manufacture a painting.)

This procedure provides a context from which a theory can be developed about the work. At this point there may not be one theory but rather a number which require testing.

For example such theories may include:

- That the work is not by the artist it is purported to be by.
- That the work is an anomalous work by that artist painted perhaps when the artist was ill or under stress to produce an artwork quickly.
- That the work is representative of work by that artist, but that you have not seen enough works from this period or on this scale to know that.

Further research may then be necessary to find evidence that will strengthen one of these theories.

In the past year the Ian Potter Art Conservation Centre has also been developing a database of works which have insecure or false provenance, or which are anomalous in relation attribution or materials. (For example works inscribed '1899' which contain titanium dioxide - a post 1920 pigment). A number of these are indicating central points of manufacture. This information has provided a new range of points of identification and is proving a useful adjunct in determinations of authenticity in Australian art. I will talk more about this in the next session on the industry's response to issues of artfraud.

## References

1. Hebborn, Eric. *The Art Forger's Handbook*. Cassell. London. 1997. Quoted on back cover.
2. Hebborn, Eric. 1997. p.133
3. Stuart.Fleming. *Authenticity in Art: The Scientific Detection of Forgery*. Institute of Physics. London 1997. p.22
4. A.J. Ayer. *The Central Questions of Philosophy*. Penguin edition. 1976. p.63.