

... IS NOT GOLD

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In the previous session I talked about the issues of context and intention as two determinators in the framing of our response to artworks of problematic provenance or dubious attribution. In this paper I will concentrate on the issues and responses that surround how we deal with a work that is obviously problematic, and I will focus on the development of the data base of problematic works which we have been working on at the University of Melbourne Conservation Service.

In 1990 the University of Melbourne Conservation Service began developing databases on the materials and techniques of Australian artists. This project took advantage of the unique collaborative research opportunities that are presented on a university campus. The development of these data bases relies heavily on the interrelated expertise available in the Conservation Service, the Ian Potter Museum of Art, the School of Fine Arts, Classics and Archaeology, and the Schools of Physics, Chemistry, and Earth Sciences with occasional input from other disciplines on campus. These databases contain works that have secure provenance, and research has centred around artists represented in the University of Melbourne Art Collection. As a result of this there is now a substantial body of information in place which provides a context for understanding how these artists worked and what materials they used. As the Conservation Service developed expertise in the analysis of artwork a number of clients presented works which were problematic in an attempt to locate the point where the authentication or attribution of these works could be determined. Over a period of time it became obvious that with some of these works there were 'points of identification' that placed them more securely in one category than another. So for example while we could indicate those points where the works did not fit with what we know about Streeton for example, we could also indicate those points where the work fitted with what we knew about a range of wrongly attributed 'Streetons' which had come to the laboratory previously. This meant that apart from being able to locate points of identification for works that fit within the oeuvre of a particular artist, works that have a different 'workshop' origin can also be identified.

As a result we have established a data base of works which have been shown to fall into this problematic category, and which have corroborating evidence that they are not the work of the artists they are purported to be. Both databases assist in determinations relating to other works by providing a context that enables the testing of parameters of best fit. In terms of the authentication or attribution process this has enabled a much better context for the examination of dubious works. Many of these dubious works come from one or two sources. By comparing the attributes of these works (supports, pigments, paint application, varnishes, supporting documentation) with the works of artists on the Australian artists data base it is possible to find and quantify those points of identification which provide good evidence in support of hypotheses relating to 'best fit'. In fact the 'problematic works' database has suggested sources for some works which were in fact later shown to be correct.

The aim of the conservator should be to use specific professional skills to close the gap between the premises and conclusion until they are closely bound by verifiable supporting evidence. These databases assist in this process.

In 1998 Lauraine Diggins Fine Art provided funds to enable the Conservation Service to dedicate some staff time to the development of the database dedicated to expanding the information available about problematic attributions.

Of course it would be naive to assume that setting up a database with this kind of information is a simple affair. There are number of issues that relate to the establishment of such a database, including the philosophical and legal issues, as well as those which involve ethical and business considerations. One of the central issues relates to the use and availability of such information.

As I discussed in my previous paper much of the meaning of a work depends on the context in which it is being presented, and once information is in the public arena the context in which it is presented is not easily controlled. For this reason information on the database is not freely available. In addition client confidentiality is a key requirement in dealing with issues of attribution and authentication, and this is the same with information that relates to the artwork. For this reason the database is only available to staff at the Conservation Centre, to be used on a client by client basis. This means that we do not provide information about a particular work to anyone other than the client. However material on the database does form part of our knowledge of what points of identification exist and what they relate to, and this has some bearing on considerations of additional works. In practical terms this means that we do not tell new clients that we have a particular work on file unless we get approval from the original client, but we will give them an assessment, which obviously is based on what we have already discovered about the work, as well as on anything new that may have come to light.

It may come as some surprise to you to learn that the trade of art pivots on three securing factors, expertise, reputation and money. We are probably all aware of stories of reputable experts who have mistakenly attributed works, or clients who have purchased wrongly attributed works. In such cases there is no intent to pass on a wrongly attributed work, quite simply an honest mistake was made. While due diligence is important the issue is not whether a mistake was made, but rather how the mistake was dealt with. This is an issue for the owner and the expert, and if not resolved it may be an issue for the law. It is not an issue for a third party who has no jurisdiction of such issues, and no ability to resolve the problem of the purchase. This is another reason why issues relating to the examination of artwork are contained between the client and the Conservation Centre and are absolutely confidential.

One of the key tenets in any determinations of authentication is verifiability, and the database is also used to rate the verifiability of information relating to the work. The provenance of a work is only good if it provides the ability to verify indicators that link the work to the artist. It is not the existence of provenance-like documentation that is the issue, it is the verifiability of this 'evidence'. In fact a large number of the problematic works we see, that have other indications that they are not by the artist they are purported to be by, are often weighed down with provenance. They protest too much. In this respect the response of a reputable dealer or a thoughtful purchaser is the same as the police or the conservator, they check the provenance trail to see what is verifiable. Is there really an Ethel Schwindler, whose grandmother, so family history recounts was Arthur Streeton's laundress and who, as a mark of thanks for her beautifully presented collars, was the recipient of a small, but beautifully composed 1888 panel? And if Ethel Schwindler exists does this grandmother, and is the link to Streeton. Even this is not conclusive proof that the work is by Streeton, but it strengthens the 'theory of best fit' which I spoke about earlier.

As noted previously we can never be one hundred percent certain that a work is by a particular artist, that is to say we can never 'prove' that it has been painted by the artist - unless we see them do it. This however begs the question of how a conservator can best, and safely, contribute to issues of authentication and attribution. At a recent symposium in Sydney

Michael Reid spoke of the tripartite factors of 'need, speed and greed' [1] that lead people to suspend critical faculty in order to pass over vast sums of money for a work of dubious background when normally they could not be prevailed upon to pass sixpence to their dying mother.

When people come to conservation laboratories for advice regarding issues of authenticity there is generally some other baggage which accompanies the request. In a practical sense it is important for conservators to be aware of this and to frame their response in a way that can take account of legal and professional issues if needs be.

From work to date there are five main points which must be taken into account when framing a response to a request for authentication work.

1. Who will see that response and how will it be used? Will you find yourself in a court of law and your response being used, properly or improperly, to establish a particular case? What steps can you take to ensure that your response is only used in accordance with your wishes?
2. What kinds of liabilities can arise from your response? Will your response impact on either you, someone known to you or a totally unknown third party and what will their response be to that impact?
3. What can you safely say you know? Or of even more relevance - what are you prepared to claim you safely say you know? How do you frame your response to take account of this?
4. What other ethical responsibilities should you exercise? For example if you know a work that you determined to be dubious is being sold as authentic what position do you take, and what implications are there either way?
5. Finally the considerations discussed above relating to the establishment of probability rather than fact and the need to provide verifiable evidence rather than opinion should be considered the most important intellectual tools for framing responses to issues of authentication.

There is also the danger that in becoming obsessed with issues of authentication that we too narrowly define the field. Certainly over the past twelve months in Australia there has been a frenzy in relation to matters of authentication and attribution. In particular this has resulted in questions being raised about works, which while certainly not the best works by a particular artist, nevertheless have no reason to be brought into question.

I'll leave you with this dictum about the subject of art fakery voiced in the 1930s by the scholar Max Friedlander who said: "It is indeed an error to collect a forgery, but it is a sin to stamp a genuine piece with the seal of falsehood." [2]

References

[1] Michael Reid speaking at *FAKES! - a seminar* held at the Australian Academy of Decorative Arts on 22 June 1999.

[2] Hoving, Thomas: *False Impressions: The Hunt for Big Time Art Fakes*. New York. 1996. 209