

# A Provenance Primer

## *The Importance Of An Artwork's Documented History*

By ALAN BAMBERGER



A SIGNIFICANT TERM that all new collectors must know is “provenance” — documented proof of a work of art’s authenticity. Recounting the work’s ownership, exhibition, and/or publication history, provenance may also provide incidental information that deepens our understanding of the work, which enhances that artwork’s value and desirability.

Legitimate, verifiable provenance takes many forms:

- A signed certificate, statement of authenticity, appraisal, or letter from an established and respected national or international authority on the artist. The appraiser’s or expert’s contact information must be included in the document.

- Original gallery or museum exhibit or other identification labels attached to the art.

- An original sales receipt from the artist, a gallery known for dealing in the artist, or a similarly established agent of the artist.

- A film, photograph, or recording showing the artist talking about, making, or in the presence of the artwork.

- Names and verifiable contact information for previous owners of the artwork.

- Books, exhibition catalogs, newspaper or magazine articles discussing, mentioning, or illustrating the artwork.

- Verifiable verbal information related by an individual who knows or knew the artist, or who is familiar with the artwork, such as a family member, dealer, agent, or representative.

Unscrupulous sellers know the value of provenance, and may present questionable, vague, meaningless, or even

fraudulent provenance in an effort to create or inflate value for the pieces they are selling. For example, a seller might present a picture of a work of art that looks like the one in question, a signature example that looks like the signature on the art in question, or an illustration of the art purportedly taken from an old auction catalogue. These are not valid types of provenance documentation.

Fortunately, questionable provenance is relatively easy to detect. The following guidelines will help you identify and avoid questionable provenance:

- Insist on original provenance documents. Photocopies of documents are not valid forms of provenance (unless the originals can be located, verified, and inspected firsthand).

- Demand facts. Statements or opinions that a work of art “looks similar to other works by the artist” or “is attributed to the artist” are not provenance, unless they come from respected authorities on the artist and can be documented.

- Look for provenance documents that specifically mention the work of art in question. Documents generally discussing artists or other works of art are not provenance.

- Beware of sellers who provide provenance only if you buy the art,

citing, for example, that they’re protecting the privacy of previous owners. The real reason is that their “provenance” is problematic.

- Names of previous owners are not valid provenance unless they contribute concrete proof that the art is by the artist whose signature it bears. Request the full names and contact information for all such owners to confirm that they actually exist (or existed) and once owned the art.

- Similarly, names of galleries or auction houses that once sold the art do not constitute valid provenance unless they confirm its authenticity. Again, request complete contact information for all such galleries or auction houses, including sale dates, so that claims may be verified.

- Do not accept verbal statements that sellers make about ownership history as provenance. Conditional or third-party statements like “this art is believed to have been owned by...” or “the person I got it from told me...” or “the estate that this came from had lots of important art...” are not valid provenance unless verifiable.

Before you invest in a work of art, make sure the dealer can provide real provenance. Even when buying works by living artists, start with the proper documentation of the sale. You never know which of your works may gain in value, so it’s best to create a reliable paper trail for every piece in your collection. ■

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