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By Anayat Durrani

The Certificate of Authenticity

Rely on it at Your Own Risk

Between 1986 and 1994, British master art forger John Myatt painted 200 new works and passed them off as originals by nine modern masters. Myatt succeeded with the help of accomplice John Drewe, a skilled “artist” of false provenances who created countless bogus certificates of authenticity. Their fake artwork sold through auction houses including Christie’s and Sotheby’s for tens of thousands. The men were eventually arrested in 1995. Their criminal escapade is considered the biggest art con of the 20th century. To this day, up to 120 Myatt fakes are still believed to be in existence and circulating, false certificates of authenticity and all.

Certificates of Authenticity (COA) provide information about the artwork and the artist. But the “authenticity” factor is misleading.

Over the years the art world has seen COAs printed, faked, forged, duplicated and copied. Anyone from a seasoned art criminal to an amateur can create and pass off a false COA and barely raise an eyebrow.

Origin of COAs

Certificates of authenticity have been around for some time. Dr. Peter C. Sutton, Executive Director of the Bruce Museum in Greenwich, Conn., said COAs began “at least by the late 19th century when ‘authorities’ and ‘experts’, often authors of standard monographs, or museum directors, would write ‘Gutachten’ (German expression meaning “appraisals”) for a fee or sometimes as a favor to a collector.”

Dr. Sutton is overseeing the current exhibit at [The Bruce](#)

[Museum](#), called “Fakes and Forgeries: The Art of Deception” (May 12-Sept 9) that presents 60



examples of Western paintings, works on paper, sculpture and decorative arts that have been recognized as imposters, including examples of the rarest and most famous deceptive works. Themes of connoisseurship, authentication, and conservation, as well as the evolving scholarship of stylistic development are addressed.

“Many of these experts’ COAs weren’t worth the paper on which they were written; a Gutachten, for example, by Vogelsang

virtually assures that the painting's attribution is wrong," says Dr. Sutton. "Even great connoisseurs, like (Bernard) Berenson, are now known to have been compromised when they had some self-interest in the picture. So generally it's a discredited practice at least in the Old Master field."

Dr. Sutton said that

London dealer Joseph Duveen. Duveen would regularly send photographs of works to Berenson, "who noted his attribution on the photos and signed them." Duveen would retain these "attestation" photographs, and then show them to clients as certificates of authenticity. If Duveen sold the artwork, Berenson would get 25%

dealers and collectors, however, "certificates handwritten on the back of a photograph are treated with a certain contempt since they were written for money."

Dr. Sutton said the practice of writing COAs for a fee has been discredited in the art world. However, he adds, "A letter written by an acknowledged expert on an artist supporting its attribution is as valuable as the credibility and impartiality of the expert."

In Spencer's book, collector, dealer, scholar and philanthropist Eugene Victor Thaw incorrectly stated that art historian Julius Held, when he fled Germany, "carried with him to America the idea of written certificates." Held's daughter, art historian Anna Held Audette, said that her father "did not write them, and felt that as anyone could, they were generally worthless. He saw too many spurious ones."

“Fake COAs are unfortunately commonplace in the art market. Just as art can be faked, so can COAs, but with even more ease.”

impressionist, modern and contemporary markets are less stringent and sometimes still acknowledge COAs, depending on the artist and the expert.

Art historian Berenson lived a life of luxury and became rich by selling his expertise to art collectors, as well as by selling signed certificates of authenticity. According to a publication by the Getty, called *The Business of Art*, Berenson helped create a market for early Italian Renaissance art through his business ties with

of the sale price. (see an example of the photo "attestation" [here](#).)

According to the *Expert Versus the Object*, by Robert Spencer, in the pre-WWII era, when salaries of academics in Europe were not very significant, "it became common practice for even well known and very distinguished professors of art history to give 'certificates' of authenticity for paintings and other works of art, which were usually used to help promote a sale." The book goes on to note that among modern

Forged COAs

Fake COAs are unfortunately commonplace in the art market. John E. Conklin, author of *Art Crime*, also believes COAs are worthless because, he says, just as art can be faked, so can COAs, but with even more ease.

While not much seems to be known on where COAs precisely originated, there are speculations on their historical purpose.

"My guess would be that COAs originated as a way to make

concrete the provenance of a work of art, or to convince buyers that works without documentable provenances were legitimate,” says Conklin.

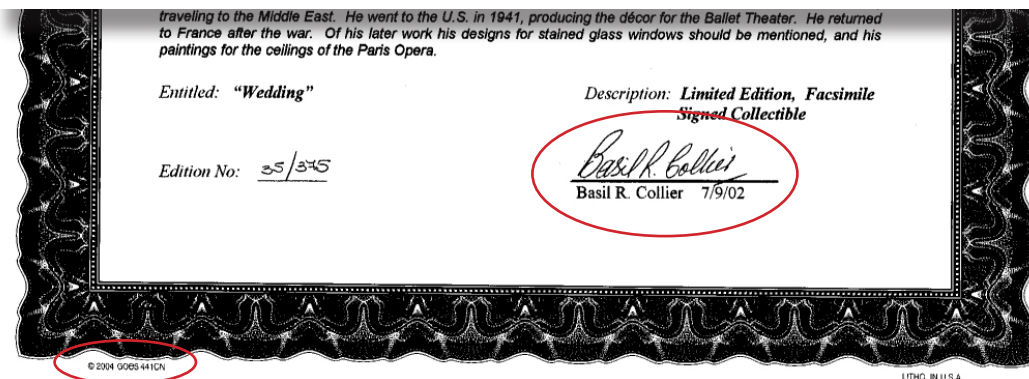
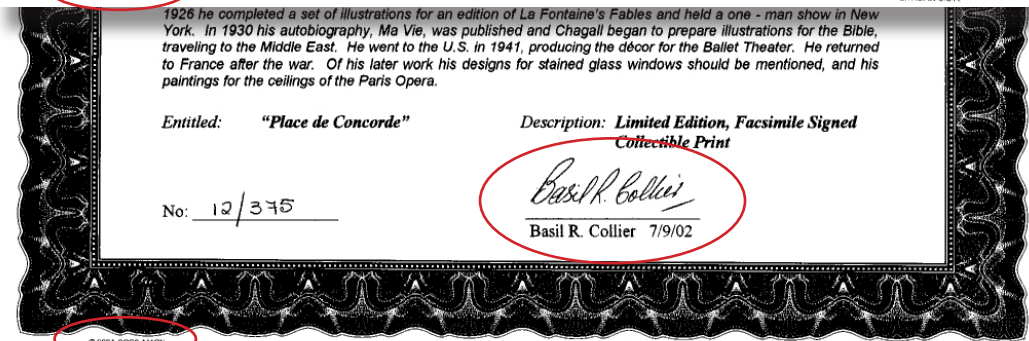
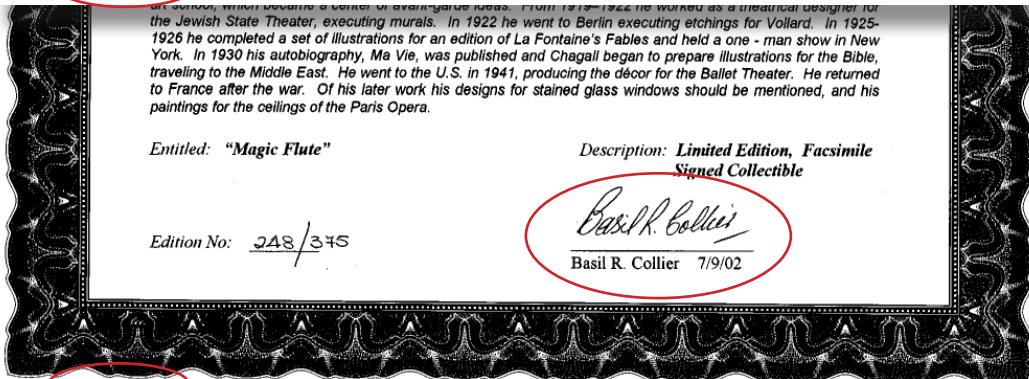
COAs may have originated as signed photographs or letters written by various individuals, often motivated by money or self-interest, to “authenticate” a work. Throughout the years, however, the value of COAs has diminished.

“We have found that art fraud suspects selling fakes also include COAs to help sell the product. They go hand-in-hand,” says Detective Don Hrycyk, LAPD Art Theft Detail, who has come across countless fake COAs.

Det. Hrycyk said that those who sell fake art usually target gullible buyers who do not have a strong art background. The COA, he says, “is meant to reassure and mislead the buyer as to the genuineness of the artwork and are of little or no value.”

Det. Hrycyk provided Fine Art Registry™ with samples of COAs from one of his cases, a series of COAs for Chagall prints, *right*.

“The signature of the authenticator on each COA does not deviate and has obviously been duplicated. Each is dated in 2002,” says Det. Hrycyk. “However, in the lower left corner of each certificate is the date the form was created which was two years later in 2004. So the date was obviously postdated.”



COAs and the Artist or Collector

Still, when purchasing artwork, a COA is often the art buyer's only assurance that a piece of artwork is the real thing. And, for many artists, the COA may seem a necessary addition in the documentation of their artwork.

"For most artists COAs are unnecessary," says Charles Sherman, FAR® member artist

and fine art appraiser of 20th century paintings, and sculpture as well as old masters. Sherman has over 20 years experience in the Los Angeles art community and has uncovered art frauds and recovered stolen art. "They are only needed if there are known fakes of artists works such as Picasso, Chagall, Dali and Miró, who are the most popular artists that are faked."

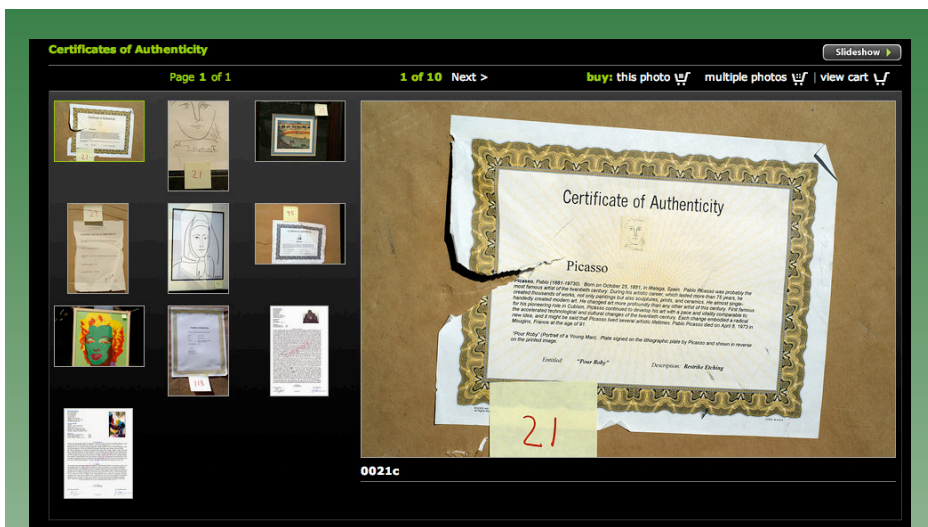
Sherman said that since anyone could make up a COA, authenticating works of art could be a science. He said it would require knowing the individual or individuals, dealers or foundations in the world that have the credibility to authenticate artwork.

"It is very important to know that an appraiser is not an authenticator," says Sherman. "An appraiser assumes that the information given to him is accurate. Most appraisers including myself have a disclaimer to that effect."

Sherman cautions that "an appraisal means nothing if the artwork is a fake."

Theresa Franks, CEO of Fine Art Registry, said that certificates should never be taken at face value. She said they should always be viewed as highly suspect no matter what.

"If a dealer or anyone for that matter promotes an art object using the Certificate of Authenticity as the object's main attraction, run like the wind or run the risk of being duped. One should always question the validity of a certificate as they are often issued by unreliable, unknown, and many times unscrupulous individuals and dealers," says Franks. "And the problems with COAs don't stop with art on the secondary market. There are scores of artists living and selling today who have had their own COAs and artwork faked and



You can view other COA samples that Detective Hrycyk provided [here](#)

Says Detective Hrycyk about the items at the above site: "As you can see, most have scant information about the print. Some simply say 'Certificate'; A Warhol COA (#113) gives a meaningless declaration stating, 'We hereby certify this artwork to be a fine art work' with no name for the authenticator and an undecipherable signature. One COA for a Picasso (#95) appears to have been faxed. A Picasso etching printed backwards (#21) with the signature in reverse, has a COA that makes mention of the reversal as if the etching was supposed to be printed backwards. The COA of the \$48 million 'Buddha' statue & the \$15 million 'de Kooning' illustrate another tactic by fakers - to include verbose gibberish that dances around the main issue of authenticity. Instead, the narrative gives the impression that the artwork is genuine without actually stating this. On most of these certificates, the essential information related to genuineness is absent or nebulous, providing the suspect with a degree of deniability if he or she is caught."

forged. In fact, an artist from the UK recently sued a number of cruise ship lines for doing just that – forging his signature on a number of prints and certificates of authenticity. It goes on all the time, many times without the artist ever finding out about it. Once an artist’s work begins to increase in value or the artist gains in popularity, the risk for faked documents rises and so fraud is perpetuated.

“One also has to consider that over time certificates are almost always separated from the artwork and more often than not lost or destroyed, especially when unexpected disasters strike,” says Franks.

Fine Art Registry Tags With COAs

While COAs are highly questionable when presented with a piece of artwork, they are not entirely functionless.

“For artists living and creating today, I would recommend using a Certificate of Authenticity only as an accoutrement to the permanent tagging and registration of a work of art [with the patented FAR tag, registered in the FAR secure database],” said Franks. “We provide the FAR COA to originating artist members as a marketing tool only. FAR does not promote nor advocate the exclusive use of Certificates of Authenticity simply because a

COA cannot stand on its own merit and has never stood the test of time (witness Dali, Chagall, Miró, Picasso). The COA will never be considered a reliable instrument within which to prove authenticity at any point in the future.”

Fine Art Registry offers a free customizable and downloadable Certificate of Authenticity to all member artists, providing they have first purchased Fine Art Registry tags and have formally completed the registration process of permanently recording the object’s details into the FAR database. Unlike traditional paper COAs that are easily tampered with, the FAR seal or tag cannot be counterfeited and is also tamper-evident. For additional ease of reference, the FAR ID number is printed directly onto the COA at the time of creation.

“The FAR tag applied to the artwork or object itself is the only effective means of recording and conclusively establishing authenticity and provenance of the originating artist’s work,” says Franks.

She adds, “The bottom line is that the Certificate of Authenticity may have been recognized as a legitimate means of proving authenticity decades upon decades ago, but that was then and this is now. The sooner the art industry stops recognizing and/or promoting the continued use of

Certificates of Authenticity, the healthier the industry will become and the less likely it will be that the unwary or unsophisticated will be duped. The art crime rate will be diminished and perhaps billions of dollars saved. It’s time that the COA goes the way of the transistor radio and the 8-track player.” ✍

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authenticity and
provenance – Join
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