



Getting to the TRUTH of Authentication

BY THERESA FRANKS

“AUTHENTICATION” AND “PROVENANCE” DEFINED

Before I launch into the meat of this article, I think it is appropriate to begin with defining two important terms used frequently in the visual art market. It is important to know their meaning because these terms are what the art market turns on.

Authentication is the act of establishing or confirming something (or someone) as authentic: that the claims being made by or about the thing or object are true. Authenticating an object may mean confirming its provenance or history, whereas authenticating a person often consists of verifying identity.

Provenance is the origin or source from which something comes, and the history of subsequent owners (also known as Chain of Custody in some fields). Provenance is a sense of place, a time of manufacture, production or discovery. Comparative



techniques, expert opinion, written and verbal records as well as the results of tests are often used to help establish or verify provenance.

THE ACT OF AUTHENTICATION

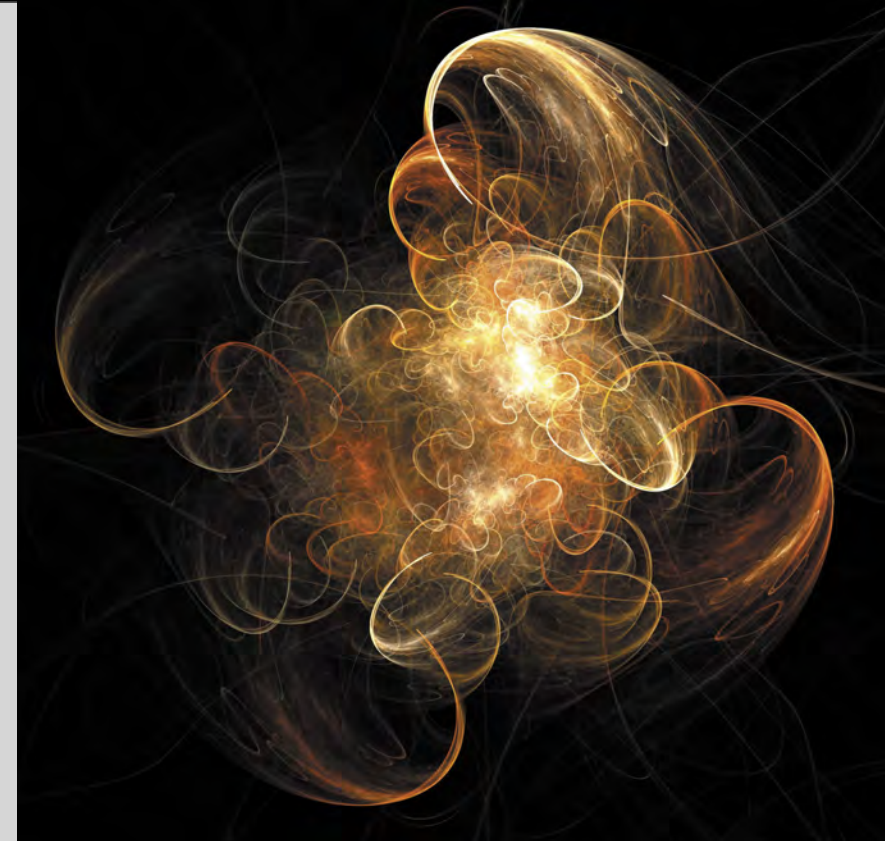
The act of authentication is at the heart of controversy in all cases surrounding recently discovered works of art claimed to be by the hand of superstar artists like Jackson Pollock, for example. In nearly every case the art object in question lacks the necessary iron-clad, verifiable provenance, with the added complication that the artist has long since departed the land of the living. This leaves the court of public opinion, art historians, scholars, family members, students of the artist, and perhaps even science, to solve the mystery.

Technology continues to progress rapidly, ushering in a variety of techniques that may assist in authenticating works of art. So why is there so much controversy surrounding authentication? The answer may seem a bit simplistic, and

I'm sure many would disagree, but I believe the answer is money and greed. When millions are at stake, people are inclined to do desperate things they would not otherwise do.

Two excellent examples of the debate surrounding authentication are playing out in the global media. In both cases technological advancements in science, mathematics, geometry, and forensics are being tested. In the first example, Teri Horton of Costa Mesa, California, claims she bought a painting from a thrift store for \$5 as a gag gift for a friend. As the story goes, she was later told by a friend that it looked like a Jackson Pollock, and that it could be worth millions. Horton, who admittedly couldn't care less about the art itself or the artist who painted it, relies squarely on the findings of a Canadian art restorer, Peter Paul Biro, turned self-proclaimed forensic scientist, who was recently interviewed with Horton and stated that he [Biro] is ready to go to court with his fingerprint evidence to prove that the painting owned by Teri Horton is an authentic Jackson Pollock. Despite all the hype and PR, it's abundantly clear to me that the motivation here is money. There's more to this story, of course, and you can read about it [here](#).

The second example in the news relates to a cache of claimed Jackson Pollock paintings discovered in a Long Island storage facility by Alex Matter, son of the late photographer Herbert Matter. Oregon physicist Richard Taylor was



invited by the Pollock-Krasner Foundation to determine the authenticity of Matter's paintings. Taylor and his collaborators claim that Jackson Pollock's poured paintings are comprised

of fractals, or complex geometric shapes that have been studied by mathematicians since the 1970s. Taylor claims that fractal analysis can be used to distinguish authentic Pollock paintings from fakes or imitations. Taylor's application of fractal analysis did not turn out favorably for Alex Matter; his paintings were found by Richard Taylor to be inauthentic. End of story, right? Not by a long shot.

Enter Richard Taylor's arch nemesis, Case Western Reserve University physics doctoral student Katherine Jones-Smith. When preparing and researching for a weekly astrophysics seminar in 2004, she came across Taylor's published articles on fractals in Nature, Physics World and Scientific American. After some analysis, Jones-Smith discovered that Taylor's work was seriously flawed. Jones-Smith demonstrated the doodles that she could make in minutes using Adobe Photoshop were as fractal as any Pollock drip painting, vividly refuting Taylor's claim that Pollock was able to generate fractals by hand only because he had attained a mastery of chaotic motion. Katherine Jones-Smith developed her critique of Taylor's work into an article titled, "Revisiting Pollock's Drip Paintings," co-authored with Harsh Mathur, Case professor of physics.

Adding to the drama of this story is the fact that at the same time Jones-Smith was researching Richard Taylor's data in 2004, Ellen Landau, Case Professor of Art History, and one of the world's foremost experts on Pollock, was studying the paintings discovered by Alex Matter. Jones-Smith and Mathur learned about Landau's work only this February by reading about it in a newspaper article. They contacted Landau to tell her about their research.

Landau responded: "I am pleased they have successfully refuted Richard Taylor's thesis and that it will be published in Nature. Irrespective of whatever determination is ultimately made on the authenticity of the recently found Matter paintings, fractal analysis should not be considered a foolproof technique for authenticating works by Pollock. The fact that Taylor has refused to fully share his testing criteria casts further doubt on the credibility of his claims."

So much for the fractal theory as a sole method of authenticating works by Jackson Pollock—at least for now. Maybe Richard Taylor will elect to share his testing criteria with Case and provide an apt rebuttal to Ms. Jones-Smith's fascinating findings in the near future. So the jury is still out on the Alex Matter paintings. Obviously, if the pieces Matters discovered were officially authenticated, they would be worth a tidy fortune—multi millions for certain.

In referencing Alex Matter's discovery, Ellen Landau said that if Pollock didn't paint them, they are "the most amazing fakes in modern art history." Landau has authored books on Jackson Pollock and his wife, Lee Krasner and believes that Pollock was reflecting on Matter's style of photography in the experimental works.

While there are considerable sums of money at stake in both cases, there is a significant contrast between the Teri Horton and Alex Matter stories. Teri Horton's case is a PR/media driven three-ring circus, flamboyant and gaudy, while Alex Matter

remains resolute, passively persisting in his quest for authentication—taking the high road.

VISUAL ART AND SCIENCE AREN'T STRANGERS

It wasn't long ago that another art meets science story played out publicly. Perhaps you might recall when the Getty acquired the infamous "kouros" marble sculpture—a figure of a young boy, perfectly preserved, standing close to seven feet tall with a hefty \$10 million dollar price tag? The statue was offered for sale by an art dealer named Gianfranco Becchina. Intrigued, the Getty took the kouros on loan and started an investigation into the statue's provenance. No one really knew when and where the Getty kouros was found, but Becchina handily turned over to the Getty's legal department a slew of documentation that purportedly supported its recent history, that it had been in the private collection of a Swiss physician since the 1930s and that he had purchased it from a Greek art dealer by the name of Roussos. The Getty's legal team was satisfied that the documents representing the sculpture's provenance were legitimate.

With the provenance issue resolved, the Getty moved on to scientific analysis for definitive answers. The Getty called in Stanley Margolis, a University of California geologist, to examine the surface of the Getty's kouros with a stereomicroscope. Margolis collected a core sample from the marble statue so that he could test and analyze the material with various scientific tools that included electron microprobe, mass spectrometry, electron microscope, X-ray fluorescence and X-ray diffraction. The testing by Margolis revealed that the Getty kouros was made of dolomite marble from the ancient Cape Vathy quarry on the island of Thasos and that the surface of the statue was covered with a thin film of calcite. According to Margolis the calcite film was a critical factor in determining the age of the kouros because dolomite can only turn into calcite over

the course of hundreds, if not thousands of years. Margolis' test results were conclusive—the Getty's kouros was old and was not a contemporary fake. Eureka!

A little over a year later, satisfied with its exhaustive investigation and relying on the scientific test results produced, the Getty purchased the kouros for around \$7 million. The beautiful sculpture made its debut exhibition in the fall of 1986. It was a big deal. The media gave the event plenty of coverage and a few months later Getty curator, Marion True wrote and published an article about the acquisition, singing its praises.

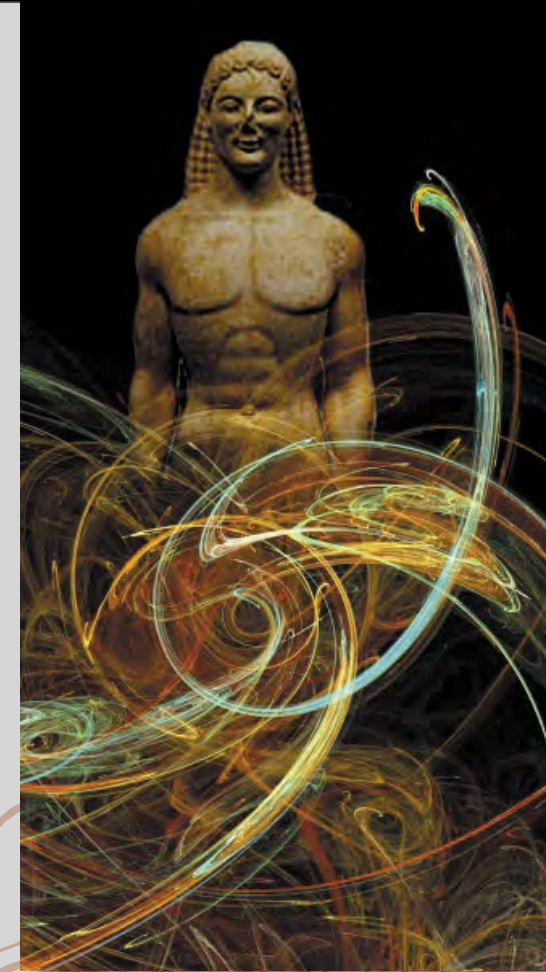
But then something remarkable happened...

THE UNDENIABLE FACTOR – CONNOISSEURSHIP

It wasn't long before the spotlight quickly dimmed on the Getty's glorious acquisition of the kouros. There was something about the sculpture that just wasn't right, despite the certainty of the scientific tests performed.

An Italian art historian and Getty board trustee, Federico Zeri was among a number of people who pointed out that there was something inexplicably strange about the Getty's kouros—to Zeri, the fingernails of the statue looked wrong.

Evelyn Harris, a world renowned expert on Greek sculpture, was visiting the Getty just before it finalized the purchase with the art dealer, Becchina. When Harris viewed the statute for the first time, an instinctive gut feeling told her that something was terribly wrong and she expressed her concerns. But it wasn't enough.



It wasn't until Thomas Hoving, former Director of MoMA, viewed the Getty kouros that things really started to look bad for the Getty. Hoving made a note of the first word that popped into his head when he first laid eyes on the kouros. "Fresh. It was fresh." Hoving suggested to the Getty curator that they attempt to have the purchase rescinded and the purchase price refunded.

The Getty's growing concerns over these experts' gut instincts forced its officials to call a meeting of the top Greek sculpture experts to

evaluate the kouros, so the Getty shipped the statute off to Athens for expert consideration. One of the panel of experts, George Despinis, Director of the Acropolis museum immediately opined, "Anyone who has seen a sculpture come out of the ground could tell that thing [the kouros] has never been in the ground."

When Georgios Dontas, head of Archeological Society in Athens first laid eyes on the kouros he said, "I felt as though there was a glass between me and the work."

Angelos Delivorrias, Director of the Benaki Museum in Athens talked to the other experts about the contradiction in the style of the sculpture and the fact that the marble verified by the geologist hired by the Getty was to have come from a quarry in Thasos which didn't add up. Delivorrias said he believed it was a fake because when he first laid eyes on the statue he felt a wave of "intuitive repulsion".

The kouros was spectacular, but it certainly wasn't what the Getty originally believed it

was. With all of the scientific tests and analysis performed in its initial investigation, the Getty had come to one conclusion, while the panel of world experts in Greek sculpture only had to lay eyes on the sculpture came to another conclusion all together—that the Getty kouros was a pastiche—a fake.

Not long after the meeting of the experts in Athens, as if things weren't bad enough, on closer inspection, the Getty's supporting documentation regarding the statue's provenance started to unravel, too. The correspondence relied upon by the Getty's lawyers to firmly establish provenance turned out to be fakes—at least one letter is reported to have referenced a postal code that wasn't even in existence until two decades later. Additionally, the scientific evidence relied upon by the Getty was found to be seriously flawed. Another geologist reported to the Getty that the dolomite surface could be aged in a few months with potato mold.

The \$7 million dollar purchase by the Getty was not an ancient sculpture after all, but rather a 1980 forged copy made in a workshop in Rome. For those of you who are compelled to visit the Getty kouros in person, it is currently on view at the Getty Villa in Malibu, California. You can also view the sculpture at the Getty's web site, [here](#). It's interesting to note the Getty's catalogue reference for the kouros:

**Greek, about 530 B.C., or modern forgery
Marble 81 1/8 x 21 1/2 in**

What this fascinating story teaches us is that there is a great deal to be said about the importance of connoisseurship in the act of authentication. The only question that remains unanswered for me in the case of the kouros is: if the Getty had the benefit of the opinions of Thomas Hoving, Evelyn Harrison, Georgios Dontas, and Angelos Delivorrias, before the purchase of the kouros, would the Getty still have chosen to make the acquisition anyway? I doubt it.

TRUE AUTHENTICATION

Sensationalized stories of art discovered that \$ may be worth millions are largely taken at face value. Most people never give pause—never stop to think that they are being seduced. Many of these stories are driven by PR, meaning that someone out there is paying big bucks to get your attention and it's easy to do. We are a society dependent upon the media and we are also a society that has a voracious appetite for collecting.

Visual art is seductive. Its role in society is to give meaning and pleasure or for that matter, shock or pain. Whatever your preference, visual art is at its basest form, an appeal to our emotions—it is how we connect to the artist, the art object, or even the perceived value of the art object. Whatever the case, visual art moves us, causes us to feel something and nothing, yet everything. Visual art is an enigma with no intrinsic value, but tucked within the layers of the mystery that visual art presents is "true authentication," stripped of all manufacture and pretentiousness, where connoisseurship factors in heavily. It is appreciation, discernment, perceptiveness, taste, and the pure love of fine art objects that the tools of science and forensics, though useful, can never substitute or replicate.

Connoisseurship will never be, can never be, omitted from the process of "true authentication." 