

Certificates of Authenticity

Are They Worth the Paper They Are Printed on?

by Theresa Franks



It sounds strange to question the validity of such a time honored, dyed-in-the-wool institution as certificates of authenticity for artwork, doesn't it?

However, if you stop to think about it for just a moment, you will notice that these pieces of paper have been around for a very long time and so has art crime, fraud, forgery and fakery. So there might be something not quite right with the system.

Let's make one thing clear though. There is absolutely nothing wrong with certificates of authenticity accompanying works of art. They are a good thing. They can be a great marketing and packaging tool. They are attractive and they can provide some very useful information about the work of art, the artist and so on which is all very valuable to have when you purchase or own a work of art.

The problem arises when the certificate of authenticity is used to establish authenticity. This touching faith in a piece of paper is naïve. The problem with certificates of authenticity is that they don't certify authenticity at all. They are misnamed.

If you called it an "Artwork Bill of Sale" or "Artwork Accompanying Notes" or something like that then you would be home and dry. You can print off beautiful certificates with lots of valuable information and the person purchasing the piece would be pleased and it would genuinely add value to the artwork. But it should not be treated as something that demonstrates that the piece of art in hand was really the real McCoy.

Why? Forgery.

If you think that someone who was determined to go to the trouble of forging or faking a painting or sculpture or an ancient artifact would be deterred from doing so by the fact that there would be no original certificate of authenticity accompanying the piece, you are not facing reality. To forge the piece of paper is so much easier than to produce the actual item that it's almost incidental.

False provenance is just a way of life for art criminals. They will develop the most amazing stories about how they came to be in possession of

this great painting by Rembrandt or Van Gogh and provide extensive documentation to back up their story with letters from rich Arab sheiks and papers from non-existent, obscure art galleries.

Here's an example (it's a famous one but the problem is just as relevant with relatively unknown works). A painting allegedly by the Catalán painter Joan Miró was up for sale for \$50,000 at one of the world's major art auction houses. It had all the expected accompanying papers proving its "authenticity." The auction house had "authenticated" the painting. It was detected as a fake by Jacques Dupin, an expert in the subject, due to several clues left behind by the forger. The accompanying certificates of authenticity and the whole provenance of the piece were also forged. There are thousands of fake Miró paintings and prints still around passing for the real thing, all no doubt accompanied by the very best certificates of "authenticity," carefully filed by their owners as "proof" that these fakes are genuine.

Here's another. A notorious French counterfeiter, Henri Haddad, who committed his crimes under the nom de plume of David Stein, painted hundreds of faked Chagalls, Picassos and others. He often put together documentation to make his work look like the real thing, including stamping them with a rubber stamp which looked like that of a gallery in France. He actually got caught not because his paintings were found to be forgeries, but because he slipped up on the provenance issue. A US dealer who was going to buy some of the paintings asked for certificates of authentication. The forger said he would have to write to Paris to obtain these. He then quickly constructed the papers and brought them to the dealer a couple of days later. The dealer realized that he could not possibly have received papers from Paris through the mail in such a short time, reported him and that was the end of his life as a forger and the beginning of his new life behind bars.

As we mentioned above, the fabrication of authentication papers is almost incidental to the crime of forgery.

Separation and Loss

There is another problem with certificates of authenticity. They get separated from the artwork

they are supposed to authenticate and they get lost and destroyed — easily.

Here is what one veteran art collector had to say on the subject. "Certificates get lost, stolen, destroyed, faked, forged and just plain disappear. I sit here right now surrounded by paintings and other artwork that I own, that I have hanging on walls, valuable original pieces by famous living artists that I know issued certificates of authenticity and yet today I couldn't tell you for the life of me where those certificates are located or whether I have them at all, especially with the way my husband tosses boxes of old paper out. I know I put them in a file or did I? At the time I know I was probably sure that I would remember where I put them. But here we are years later, and I can't tell you where they might be. We have boxes stored everywhere. Here, at our vacation home, in the barn, in the shop, in the garage and in my office. What if I had a fire or a flood? Gone. Fast forward 35 years from now. I'm dead and gone. The pieces are sent to auction by family members. How will the pieces be valued? No certificates, no paperwork, no pedigree, no provenance. As the years go by the chances that an original certificate of authenticity will survive with the artwork is less than 10%."

So What's the Solution?

It was partly due to the pathetic reliance on these pieces of paper that we came up with the idea of a non-counterfeitable, tamper-evident tag that you attach to the piece of art itself (so it can't be separated) accompanied by a full description and record of the item in a secure, remote database. The tag itself is virtually impossible to duplicate (for the full information on this read the article *Not Just a Pretty Sticker*). It's also impossible to remove it without either leaving identifiable traces or damaging the piece it is removed from.

Now that is a certificate of AUTHENTICITY (assuming that the artwork it was placed on was an authentic one when the tag was placed on it). You can look at the back of the painting by a contemporary artist, see the Fine Art Registry™ tag on it, read the number off it, go to the Fine Art Registry online database and find the original record of the artwork and compare it. If it all matches up, you've got the real thing in your hands. If it doesn't

match up or if there is no tag then you start to get suspicious. But there's no way around it. And the tag cannot be lost because it is (very firmly) attached to the artwork. And the record and description cannot be lost or tampered with because they are in a very secure and well protected database.

Now you're talking certificate of authenticity. The only proviso is that the work that was tagged and registered was authentic—actually by the hand of the artist who created it. You could be sold a fake Miró and tag it and register it and that's what you would have: a fake Miró, tagged and registered. All that tag would prove is that the piece you are looking at now is the same fake Miró that you bought originally. But assuming that you bought a painting from a contemporary artist who personally tagged and registered the piece when it was created (which more and more artists are doing these days), then the tag and its corresponding database record proves without doubt that you have the original in your hands. Period.

The Fine Art Registry also offers to member artists free downloadable "Certificates of Authenticity" which you can definitely use and which do add some value to the piece of art when it is sold. They look nice and they provide some useful information which you might not otherwise have. But not for a moment does the Fine Art Registry claim that this certificate is useful in establishing authenticity. It's not.

Conclusion

So are "Certificates of Authenticity" worth the paper they're printed on?

Sure. They are. They are a nice way to provide a client with some additional information about the piece of art that has been created. They're pretty to look at and nice to have.

But let's call a spade a spade and not a marvelous machine for building houses – let's not use "authenticity" in the title or at least, if we do, let's know that we are just playing make believe. Certificates, yes. Authenticity, definitely not.

And certainly let's not go paying for a "Certificate of Authenticity" from someone who claims that the

purchase for \$5 or \$10 or \$100 from him or her is going to do anything for the authenticity of your artwork. It's not.

Besides, originating artists will soon be able to create, download and print a very pretty

"Certificate of Authenticity" (we only use the term because that's what people are used to calling them) here on the FAR® website for FREE and print it off themselves. Coming Soon!

Having said all this, I will let you in on a secret. Fine Art Registry is working on some interesting technology that will result in Certificates of Authenticity that really do live up to the name. You will be the first to know about this development when it's ready.

But for now, stick with the tags and the tags will stick with your artwork (literally). 📌

