



# AUTHENTICATING & ARCHIVING YOUR ARTWORK

BY PETER OUYANG

Most artists know the pitfalls of using fugitive materials that cause their artwork to deteriorate, but they are often less cognizant of other threats to the future quality and value of their art. Chief among those is the lack of documentation about what they created, how they executed their work, and how they pursued their

**Artists who treasure their work need to consider the quality of the materials they use and the completeness of the records they maintain.**

careers. Those considerations can affect the validity, future marketability, and potential value of an artist's creation. Notable cases exist of artists with large bodies of work that have been scrutinized, exhibited, and studied extensively but are still in dispute because of inaccurate record keeping and questions

of authenticity associated with their output. For example, the ongoing dispute over paintings purported to have been created by Jackson Pollock may never be resolved because the artist didn't sign or document much of his work.

### Authenticating Your Artwork

Artists can avoid authenticity issues that may arise by considering the importance documentation has on the validity of their work. There is always a personal aspect to art, and those who collect it value their associations with living artists and appreciate evidence left behind by those who are no longer alive. For that reason, it is beneficial for artists to establish archival records to protect their future prospects and their patron's interests. "When an artist takes the time to develop an archive of their work, they demonstrate that they are serious about their art, treat it with respect, and act responsibly," believes Peter M. Fairbanks, the president and co-owner of Montgomery Gallery, in

San Francisco. "Picasso was a good businessman who kept meticulous records and marketed himself well. Robert Motherwell was also scrupulous about tracking his paintings."

Fairbanks' experience directing a gallery that specializes in 19th- and 20th-century work, as well as Old Master paintings, makes him keenly aware of the importance of diligent record keeping. "There are American artists who kept careful logs of their work, but who didn't document their locations," he explains. "For example, John George Brown (1831-1913) didn't keep track of his paintings, and today we don't know where his paintings are located. American artists in the 21st century should organize their paintings in a sequential order. The Smithsonian's Archives of American Art ([www.aaa.si.edu](http://www.aaa.si.edu)) shows the logs of American artists, which are great for art historians who want to track a painting's existence, or for contemporary artists who want to see how





**BOTTOM**  
**Senlis Cathedral,  
 Midnight**

by Susan Pecora,  
 1996, watercolor,  
 22 x 30. Collection  
 the artist.

**ABOVE AND RIGHT**

These preliminary sketches and accompanying journal entries of finished work done by Massachusetts artist Susan Pecora show the process some artists use to document their artwork from conception to final creation.

Words are totally inadequate to describe my world tonight. <sup>May 19th</sup>  
 It is past midnight and I am sitting on a bed looking perhaps  
 one block away towards a gothic cathedral built 7 centuries ago.  
 The french doors of my room open out onto a two story terrace  
 with nothing but a cobblestone street between us. The night  
 is warm and clear. There is a mist softly drifting in front  
 of the right turret and the whole cathedral is lit from  
 below. In the daytime you can hear the clack, clack, clack  
 of the carriage horses hooves as they trot on the cobblestones  
 below. This is truly one of the most spectacular  
 views I have ever seen.

*Ron Hart*





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**BUSINESS OF ART**



*u. for  
Claude Monet*

This set of signatures by master artist Monet shows how handwriting analysts will sometimes cross reference an artist's signature from past paintings and personal documents to verify the provenance of a piece.

the work of past artists has been documented."

A key factor in artists authenticating their work is making sure the materials they use to sign their paintings or write accompanying commentary are of archival quality. Handwritten annotations are not only prized by collectors but are also essential to art scholars who research an artist's life and work, so ensuring that the signature endures is imperative to this process. Artists should sign a work while the paint is still wet, writing the signature on the back with a date. By using fade-resistant, nonfeathering, water- and chemical-proof ink, as well as acid-free paper or stationery, artists can ensure their signatures and commentary will last for generations.

Beyond a long-lasting signature, some artists like to further establish the link between generations of creators and collectors by keeping handwritten journals chronicling motivations for creating a work, significant life experiences, relationships involving the work, and living

locations. It's also a good idea to track the dates and location of exhibitions, any accompanying press coverage from those events, and perhaps photographs of the artist and artwork at the exhibition. Creating a list of patrons that purchased an art piece—complete with their name, date, gallery/exhibition location, and where the artwork resides—is also a good step toward providing the chronology of a particular piece.

Many contemporary artists are using more modern methods to organize and preserve their work, including photographing their paintings and arranging them in a portfolio with appropriate captions; or storing digital files on their computer in folders marked with specific subject matter, medium, and the year created. Longevity issues should be considered for these instances as well: regarding photographs, silver halide black-and-white photos last longer than color; and if digital files are going to be stored, it is best to save them on gold-metal-backed CD-ROMs. Some artists will even have a





Des vings pour la 2<sup>e</sup> infanterie  
 et un aviateur  
 Picasso  
 Arles le 20.6.54.



Picasso was known as a diligent businessman and marketer when it came to his artwork, always signing and documenting every painting he created.

microchip embedded into an art piece, and if this is being considered, it is important to determine the lifespan of the chip and how long it will last in the embedded environment.

#### The Verification Process: Scholars, Signatures, & Science

*Provenance* and *catalogue raisonné* are two key terms used by art scholars or appraisers that are associated with the authentication process of artwork. *Provenance* refers to the history of ownership of artwork and the details of when an art piece was created, its size and dimensions, and dates of acquisition and sale. Art scholars compile photographs, documentation, and the provenances of an artist's work (even if the piece is lost or destroyed) to create a *catalogue raisonné*. *Catalogue raisonnés* become the ultimate reference of an artist's lifetime body of work.

If an artwork is unsigned or if the authenticity is in question, extensive research will be conducted to determine the creator of the work. Although appraisers can point out inconsistencies in an art

piece, they are generally not considered authorities in determining the authenticity of a work. In fact, no single authority can be used to decide a painting's creator, but it is rather a collaboration among many researchers and experts in the field. This group effort can involve the expertise and research of art scholars, scientists, and signature analysts, among others.

During the verification process, an art scholar will first visually inspect a painting to establish the artistic style and method used, determining when the piece was likely created and whether the signature reflects the same time period. "Historical elements of the piece corroborate the time period," explains Fairbanks. "I look at the clothing fashion, furniture design, the landscapes, and building architecture, all of which can indicate time periods and geographic locations of where the painting took place." If an art piece is not signed or the signature is in question, a handwriting analyst will research signatures from various time periods of the artist's life.

Initially, the handwriting

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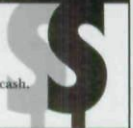
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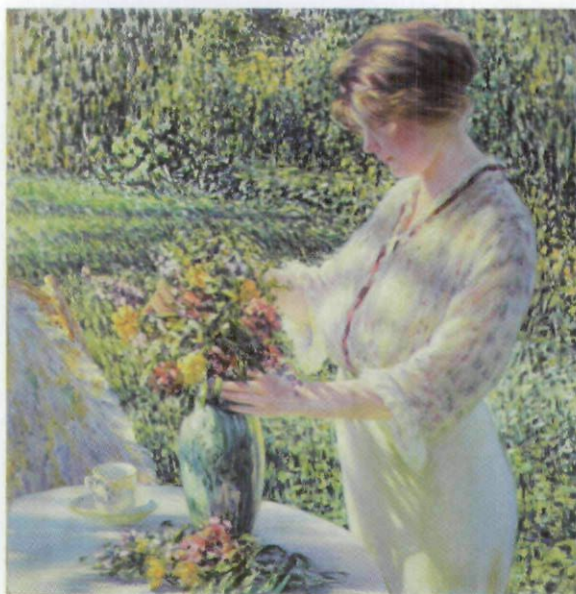
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## BUSINESS OF ART



### Dejeuner (Breakfast)

by Louis Ritman,  
ca. 1914, oil,  
36½ x 36¼.  
Private collection.

This painting was  
never signed by the  
artist and is one of  
many that Peter M.  
Fairbanks, the  
president and co-  
owner of  
Montgomery Gallery,  
in San Francisco,  
researched to  
determine the origin  
and author.

analyst scrutinizes the placement  
and fluency of the signature, as  
well as the congruity of the hand-  
writing within the painting itself.  
This visual check includes look-  
ing for dates that may be recorded  
or handwriting that is integrated  
into the art. "I look at signatures  
within the context of the artist's  
style," remarks Heidi Harralson,  
the certified document examiner  
for Spectrum Consultants. "An  
artist's signature can be as expres-  
sive and stylized as their art-  
work—if their artwork is detailed,  
their signature may have a lot of  
detail as well." In an examination  
of Frida Kahlo's works, Harralson  
researched and compared journal  
entries, personal letters, and  
phrases found in paintings, as  
well as writing on ceramics.

The documents reviewed dur-  
ing the signature-verification  
process can include business  
transactions—such as checks,  
wills, or contracts—and personal  
correspondence, including letters,  
journals, or notes. Ten to 15 signa-  
tures are the minimum require-  
ment for comparison, and these

usually fall within two years of the  
creation of the artwork. The  
attributes of the signatures are  
compared within the time period,  
the medium, and other signatures  
in the artist's business and per-  
sonal life. An artist's signature  
confirms the originality and can  
point to the actual time period  
when the artwork was created.

Scientific examinations of the  
materials used to create the art-  
work help determine the time  
period in which a painting was  
created, whether it is real or a  
reproduction, and if it can be con-  
nected to the artist. "Identification  
of the paints, based on the crys-  
talline properties of the color sam-  
ples, reveals the pigments used to  
create the work and when the  
piece could first have been creat-  
ed," states Joseph Barabe, the  
senior research microscopist  
and director of scientific imag-  
ing at McCrone Associates and  
the leader of scientists who ana-  
lyzed the ink on the *Gospel of  
Judas* codex. "If we find that the  
materials were not available at  
the time the artist painted, then



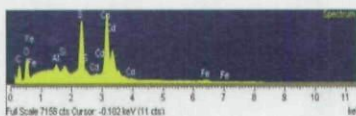
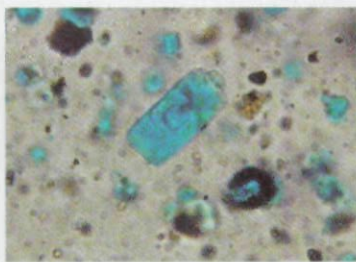
the authenticity is questioned. Material science can only point to authenticity; historical style and provenance are also essential components, and signature analysis is of growing importance."

Simple to complex scientific measures used to examine art pieces include regular bright room light, a low raking light to show texture, and ultraviolet light to stimulate fluorescence. Infrared reflectography may show underdrawings, and X-rays can show underpaintings. The paint can also be sampled and analyzed using a polarized light microscope (PLM) or a Scanning Electron Microscope (SEM) with spectrometers for elemental analysis. Other analytical instrumentation commonly used includes infrared and Raman spectroscopy and X-ray diffraction.

### Suitable Archival Procedures

"Although the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art does not take an official position or have any guidelines on the types of information artists might gather about themselves and their work," states Richard Manoogian, the chief of reference services for the company, "we certainly encourage them to preserve careful, complete documentation of their work and career so they may be of benefit to scholars."

The authentication process can take a long time, and it can take just as long to reach an agreement among art scholars regarding the results of the research, all of which is conducted well after the lifetime of the artist. Planning for and keeping archival records can avoid this process, solidify an artist's reputation, and maintain the genuine connection to artwork that was created to last for generations. "Artists aren't librarians or accountants; they may not pay attention to tracking details, and it



#### TOP

This pigment is manganese blue, seen at 1,000X magnification. Manganese blue is very easy for researchers to identify because of its unique anomalous rust-brown color when magnified.

#### ABOVE

This elemental profile of cadmium-yellow pigment found in a watercolor by Degas is an example of the kind of analysis researchers conduct to determine if the pigment is characteristic of the artist in question.

could be difficult to get them into the habit of record keeping," says Fairbanks. "For this reason, artists should select a tracking method that is as simple as possible."

Provenance handwritten by the artist confirming the details of an art piece is one of the most valuable sources of documentation in the authentication process. An artist's records validate that his or her artwork is genuine and reinforce the connection of artist to audience, which in turn helps patrons feel the artwork value is equitable. Journal memories and insights can be shared with generations to come, and archival-quality ink pens and stationery allow the artist to provide permanent documentation. By initiating suitable archival procedures in the present, an artist creates assets for future artwork transactions, and long-lasting family heirlooms. ■

*Peter Ouyang is the vice president of marketing and product development at Sakura of America, a manufacturer of writing instruments and artistic media, in Hayward, California.*

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