



AUTHENTICATING SALVADOR DALÍ —

WHOM CAN YOU TRUST?

by David Phillips

AUTHENTICATION – WHAT IT IS AND WHO DOES IT

It may be too obvious but it's worth stating: a genuine painting by Picasso, by Jackson Pollock, by Rembrandt, by any famous artist, can fetch tens or hundreds of thousands or even many millions of dollars; a fake or a forgery, which can often look very much like the real thing, is usually worth nothing or very little.

With so much money at stake, it is essential to be able to tell what is real and genuine, and what is a fake or a forgery.

Someone, not necessarily a knowledgeable collector or expert, may have a piece of art and want to know what it is worth. They were sold a signed and numbered limited edition Salvador Dalí print ten years ago on board a cruise ship as an investment, for example, and want to know what it is worth now. Or they are looking at purchasing a piece of art and want to find out if the price is right. All too often they turn to an appraiser. An appraiser is someone who can establish the value of a piece of art *as long as he or she knows what it is*. In other words, assuming a limited edition print by Salvador Dalí is genuine, they can establish the market value. However, an appraiser is not an authenticator.

An appraiser will take the documentation about the piece and render his appraisal based on that, assuming that the piece is what it is stated to be.

So here is the first rule: AUTHENTICATION PRECEDES APPRAISAL.

For definitions and a greater understanding of authentication, read [Getting to the Truth of Authentication](#) by Theresa Franks.



There is no point taking a questionable piece of art to an appraiser to find out what it is worth. First you must establish the truth of what it is, and this is done by an expert, not by an appraiser. There are experts in Picasso – in fact there are experts in Picasso original work and also in Picasso graphic works such as lithographs and etchings. There are experts in Salvador Dalí original works. And there are experts in Salvador Dalí graphic works. Same with Chagall, Miro, Rembrandt, and so on.

There are different types of experts, each competent and trusted in his or her own field. There are scholars who have studied the works of an artist and know all about that artist, her medium, her style, her life. In some cases they were close to the artist by family or other relationship and knew the artist and the work personally. They have become, through their knowledge, recognized experts within the art industry. They are used by Sotheby's and Christie's and Bonham's and the other major, reputable art auction houses, and by museums to authenticate pieces which are presented as being by a particular artist.

There are also scientists who use their science to determine whether a painting or other piece of art is by a particular artist or from a specific period. A statuette represented as being made by an ancient Greek sculptor can easily be proved to be a fake if a chemical analysis shows that it is made from modern, man made materials which did not exist at the time it was supposed to have been made. There are many other scientific tests. In the field of art crime detection there are scientists in police laboratories who are able to prove, for example, that a certain document purporting to be evidence of provenance of a piece was typed on a machine that did not even exist at the time the document was supposed to be authored, or a print was made on a type of paper that did not come into existence until well after the date the print was supposed to have been made, and so on. These scientists are experts in forensic examination of works of art and related materials.

Another reliable means of authentication is through the provenance of a piece. This means its history from the moment it was created forward to the present. If this is complete and verifiable, then the piece could be genuine. If it is not, then the piece is suspect. If it is false, then the piece is likely a fake. But the documents used to show the provenance of the piece can be and often are forged. It is easier to forge a document than a painting or a print. So one must be

very wary of accepting at face value documents which “prove” authenticity. There is no substitute for in-depth knowledge and expertise.

Recognized or accredited experts use their knowledge and expertise to establish the authenticity of a piece of art.

And again, authentication precedes appraisal, if there is any question about the genuineness of a piece of art.

RELY ONLY ON INDEPENDENT, DISINTERESTED EXPERTS

There are also dealers, galleries, auction houses, collectors, owners and other people and entities who stand to gain financially from the sale or purchase of a piece of art. All of these people and entities have a vested interest in the authentication and appraisal of the art. Mary Smith owns a painting which may be by Monet. If it is by Monet, it is probably worth a lot of money. If it is not by Monet, then it is worth far less. She would have a personal interest in stating that the piece was painted by Monet. If she was not strictly honest, this financial incentive could influence her conduct with regard to the art.

The owner of the piece, the buyer of the piece, the seller of the piece, do not qualify as independent or unbiased sources of authentication or appraisal.

Similarly an expert who was offered \$10,000 to “authenticate” a piece of art (i.e. find it to be authentic and say so) but only \$200 if she finds the work to be inauthentic, is not an unbiased, disinterested party. This could also be the case with an appraiser. The expert and the appraiser are both entitled to their fee. But the fee needs to be for the examination and expert opinion, not compensation for returning a predetermined finding which is favorable to the compensator.

A scientist called upon to determine the authenticity of a proposed valuable piece of art, who is offered a percentage of the sale price of that piece, is not an unbiased observer. If he can just prove that those pigments were used by Jackson Pollock and that the fingerprint in the paint is that of the Abstract Expressionist himself, or that the DNA corresponds, he will become rich overnight. Those dollar signs can easily color his vision when he looks in the test tube. The scientist must stand to gain nothing by demonstrating that something is genuine or that it is fake. He gets the same fee.

This is also true of an appraiser. If she is retained by an

art gallery to appraise the pieces they are selling she can easily be influenced to provide falsely high values. Why? Because her job depends on it. The gallery, if at all unethical, will want the pieces appraised high so that they can sell them for a greater profit. If the appraiser is not inflating the prices, she can lose her retainer and be replaced by someone who is prepared to be swayed by the all-powerful dollar signs.

It's all a matter of greed versus integrity. Unfortunately, rumor has it that there are individuals, even in the world of art, who are willing to cast aside their integrity in favor of the tempting dollar.

One way for an individual owner to get an idea of the value of a piece of art is to approach some art dealers or galleries and ask them how much they will pay you for your precious painting or sculpture. If they are reputable, they will insist on provenance and authentication. They will try to buy the piece for as low a price as they can so that they can then sell it at a greater profit. But if you go to several you can get a rough idea of the market value of your art. One can also check into sales prices of the same or similar pieces in auction records which can be obtained online. But do not confuse what people are asking for the piece with what it will actually sell for.

The law protects the buyer if the piece turns out to be false. In many states, where the law is enforced, the knowing seller of a fake piece of art is liable to pay three times the sale price in damages. However, this is not easy to prove or enforce. Better to find out before buying.

Art experts answer to the art industry in general. Appraisers belong to professional associations. Some of these issue accreditation to their members. Some monitor the practices of their accredited members and others do not.

CATALOGS AND EXPERTS – SAYS WHO?

How does this all work out in the real world? Well, let's say you think you have an original Salvador Dalí painting. You want to sell it. You take it to Sotheby's and ask them to auction it for you. Their reputation depends on selling only genuine items. They will verify its authenticity before offering it for sale. In the case of a Dalí original, this means sending it to Robert and Nicolas Descharnes in Paris. If it was a Picasso, a Warhol, a Pollock, etc. they would send it to the acknowledged and trusted expert for that artist or use in-house experts if they have them on staff.



Robert and Nicolas Descharnes with Frank Hunter

On one point, Sotheby's and Christie's are in full agreement: the world experts on the original works of Salvador Dalí are Robert and Nicolas Descharnes.

To quote a 3 September 2008 letter from a Senior Vice President at Sotheby's to a well-known Dalí dealer:

"This letter is to confirm that the only internationally-recognized experts who can authenticate the paintings, drawings and sculpture of Salvador Dalí are Robert and Nicolas Descharnes. Sotheby's will only accept expertise certificates from these experts before being able to proceed with the sale of art by that artist."

And from a Director at Christie's came the following on September 23rd, 2008:

"This is to confirm that, for the purposes of authenticating paintings, sculptures and works on paper by Salvador Dalí, Christie's uses Robert and Nicolas Descharnes."

Since these two auction houses are the key *commercial* entities in the world when it comes to art, one can

safely assume that they have done their homework and chosen the only reliable sources in the world for authentication of original Dalí works.

For most famous artists there is a catalogue raisonné – a carefully prepared catalog of all their works – which is consulted. Sometimes there is additional information and expertise available to supplement the catalog.

In the case of Salvador Dalí, two catalogues raisonnés exist for his graphic works, his prints, etchings, engravings and all the work which can be considered a multiple (a piece of art of which a number of copies were created).

One of these catalogs, *The Official Catalog of the Graphic Work of Salvador Dalí* was prepared by New York educator, collector and scholar, Albert Field, who was officially sanctioned by Salvador Dalí to produce the catalog and who worked very closely with Salvador Dalí, meeting with him often for verification and questions about his research and findings. This was a labor of love carefully compiled over a period of more than 40 years and finally published in 1996.

The other is the *Dalí: Catalogue Raisonné of Prints* in two volumes, compiled by two Germans, Ralf Michler and Lutz Löpsinger. This was published in 1995.

Both catalogs are useful. For example Chief Detective Ernst Schölller, second in command of the Art Crime Squad of the Baden-Württemberg State Criminal Investigation Department in Stuttgart, Germany, uses both catalogs when establishing the authenticity or otherwise of suspected fakes.

According to a spokesperson at Sotheby's, one of the world's two leading art auction houses, the complete portfolios of Dalí prints and the early black and white etchings which they sell, must conform to the Michler/Löpsinger catalogue raisonné.

But the acknowledged experts on Salvador Dalí original works, Robert and Nicolas Descharnes, favor the Albert Field catalog, as Robert Descharnes explains when asked which of the two existing catalogs he prefers (the following quote is translated from the French):

(Extract from videoed interview with Mr. Robert Descharnes in May 2008.)

FAR: Who in the world would you say is the expert on Dalí graphic works?

RD: There was Michler and Löpsinger. Löpsinger is dead and Michler had problems. But they knew Dalí's graphic works quite well. They published a catalogue. They are the only ones I see in fact apart from us. We know them fairly well. And Frank Hunter. If you are referring to any expert in the whole world, there is also Frank Hunter.

FAR: What is your opinion of the work of Albert Field?

RD: Dalí liked Field very much because he was faithful. And his work is very useful in the Dalí world. His catalog is an excellent work.

FAR: Of the two catalogues, which is the best?

RD: The one that hasn't yet been done which we are going to do (laugh).

FAR: Of the two that exist?

RD: Of the two that exist, Albert. In my opinion it's Albert's. Because the Germans never met Dalí. They never spoke with him. On the other hand Albert was with him just about every Saturday in New York. His work was extremely valuable. I would have thought that the Dalí



Chief Detective Schölller with FAR® CEO Theresa Franks.

Museum in St. Petersburg would have named a room in his honor or something like that. It would be appropriate.

(Excerpts from the May 2008 videoed interview with the Descharnes and Frank Hunter in Paris can be seen [here](#).)

The catalogs and the experts are not perfect. But be very wary of an art gallery or dealer or a private collector attempting to discredit the catalogs and stating that they have pieces for sale which are not included in the catalogs but are worth tens of thousands of dollars and so on. The people who compiled the catalogue raisonné spent a great deal of time and care checking into very large numbers of works. They did so based on scholarship and research. In the case of Albert Field, he worked continually with Salvador Dalí to make sure that the catalog was complete and that it did not include as legitimate pieces, any that were fakes or forgeries or unauthorized editions. He was not swayed in his work by any vested interest but was driven to compile a complete and accurate catalog.

Albert Field established the Salvador Dalí Archives, Ltd., in New York. When he died, the running of the Archives was taken over by Frank Hunter, an architect and photographer who had worked extensively with Field in the compilation of the Official Catalog and was fully conversant with the research and the materials gathered by Field. Today Frank Hunter is the Director of the Salvador Dalí Archives and, in addition to working on updating the catalog, offers expertise on the subject of Salvador Dalí's graphic works. Frank Hunter is acknowledged by Robert Descharnes as being one of the very few reliable experts in the world on the subject of Salvador Dalí graphic works.

There are, in the case of Salvador Dalí, two organizations which are also respected in terms of preserving the authenticity of the artistic legacy. The Gala-Salvador Dalí Foundation in Figueres, in Spain, founded and presided over by Dalí himself until his death, is a private cultural institution with the stated mission of promoting, boosting, and protecting Dalí's oeuvre and intellectual property. In addition to managing Dalí museums and collections, it offers expertise regarding Dalí's work and manages his copyrights.

The Salvador Dalí Museum in St. Petersburg, Florida, owns the largest and most comprehensive collection of Dalí works in the world, collected by Industrialist A.

Reynolds Morse and his wife Eleanor, and established in St. Petersburg in 1980.

On the forensic side, Chief Detective Ernst Schöller, second in command of the Art Crime Unit of the Landeskriminalamt (the LKA or State Criminal Investigation Department) of the Baden-Württemberg region of Germany, has devoted his life to investigating and eradicating art related crime. In pursuing this aim he has become an expert in detecting fake prints and has worked diligently to clear the German market of, among others, fake Dalí works. He is an expert from the forensic angle.

(Articles and videos on the subject of Dalí experts can be found at www.salvadoralifakes.com.)

Here then are the experts on one artist: Salvador Dalí.

You could take another artist, Picasso, Miro, Pollock, etc. and similarly trace the real experts in their art. These are the people and organizations that the art world relies on to accurately determine the real works and weed out the fakes and forgeries.

UNRELIABLE, UNACCEPTABLE, UNQUALIFIED, SELF-STYLED "EXPERTS"

Of course the above-listed experts are not the only people or organizations with knowledge of Salvador Dalí and his works. There are many collectors, dealers, galleries, art historians and so on with varying degrees of genuine expertise which should not be discounted.

Unfortunately in the completely unregulated field of art, anyone can come along and hang out a shingle and set him- or herself up as "the world's leading authority on Salvador Dalí" or some other artist.

An excellent case in point is the self-proclaimed "fingerprint expert", Peter Paul Biro of Montreal, Canada. An art restorer by trade and without a single recognized qualification in the field of fingerprint analysis, Biro set himself up as an expert in the authentication of works of art through fingerprint analysis, announcing to the world that he had proved that a certain painting was by Turner as he had found Turner's fingerprints on it and then proving that the painting "Teri's Find" was by Jackson Pollock since it carried an unmistakable Jackson Pollock fingerprint on the back. His bluff was called, however, when two qualified latent fingerprint examiners checked his work on another supposed Pollock and found it to be flawed.

The climax came when one of the world's leading fingerprint forgery and fabrication experts demonstrated that the fingerprint used by Biro to support his claim that a large Pollock-style painting was indeed by Jackson Pollock was a forgery, planted by means of a small rubber stamp which was cast from a fingerprint on a paint can in the Pollock Krasner House on Long Island. Biro asserted that the fingerprint on the can of paint was made by Pollock, but no recorded prints of the abstract expressionist painter can be found on record. Documents exist showing that Biro was part of a scheme, masterminded by ex-convict Tod Volpe who fleeced conned stars and celebrities out of millions by setting himself up as an expert and using their confidence in him to dupe them. The scheme entailed setting up a large gallery in New York to exhibit and sell works of art that had been "authenticated" by Biro through his pseudo-scientific methods. The discovery that the fingerprints on the supposed Pollock painting had been forged, effectively put an end to Biro's credibility.

(For those interested, further information on the above scam can be found [here](#).)

Tod Volpe is another example. In his autobiographical book he explains in great detail the tricks and deceptions he practiced as an art dealer to separate the unwary from their hard-earned dollars, selling them phony or overpriced art.

Yet another case of someone proclaiming themselves an expert and hanging out a shingle is Bernard Ewell of Santa Fe, New Mexico. Ewell is an appraiser, apparently accredited as such by the American Society of Appraisers. He was used, many years ago, to appraise part of the collection of the Salvador Dalí Museum in St. Petersburg, Florida (the appraisals all had to be redone recently, by another appraiser).

Ewell appears to have been paid a lot of money by Park West Gallery to state that a large number of Dalí prints they had obtained from the Albaretto family in Torino, Italy, were genuine – the same prints which Albert Field and the Salvador Dalí Archives in New York, also offered a large sum of money to declare genuine, were unable to authenticate (for more information, read [Where do the Park West Gallery Dalí Prints Come From?](#)). Anyone exposed to the exaggerated and false claims on his own website and in his mailings, and the propaganda generated by Park West Gallery stating that he is "the world's leading expert on Salvador Dalí", and by the Albaretto family, Italian collectors and publishers of Dalí works widely suspected of exhibiting

and selling fakes, might be excused for mistaking Ewell for a Dalí expert. The facts are that he is an appraiser. An appraiser is not qualified to authenticate. Ewell is recognized by no one of any importance in the art world as being an expert on Salvador Dalí nor as someone qualified to make pronouncements on the authenticity or otherwise of original works by Dalí (the Descharnes are the experts) or the graphic works of Dalí (the experts are the Descharnes, Albert Field's catalog, the Salvador Dalí Archives Director Frank Hunter, the German catalog by Michler and Löpsinger, and the Gala Salvador Dalí Foundation). And while no one in the art world takes Ewell's claims seriously, the general public might be fooled by his self-propaganda and that published by Park West and the Albaretto's.

Park West Gallery itself claims to have Dalí experts on its staff, from Albert Scaglione the owner, himself, who waxes nostalgic on video about his days with Salvador Dalí, to Morris Shapiro, the gallery director who sends out specious letters and reams of irrelevant documentation to "prove" the provenance of pieces questioned by Park West customers. Again, these individuals are not recognized by anyone of any credibility in the art industry as being the experts they portray themselves to be.

The Albaretto's, private collectors who also published a number of Dalí print series through Les Heures Claires, a Paris-based publisher, also set themselves up as experts on Salvador Dalí's works, going so far as to persuade an Italian judge to issue a statement proclaiming that Mara Albaretto was a qualified expert on Dalí's works. How would an Italian judge know? Fortunately the judicial statement was invalidated by Dalí himself who issued a notarized declaration denying any validity to the Albaretto's claim of expertise concerning his works.

There is a middleman in the whole Albaretto, Park West Dalí enterprise. A man by the name of Philippe du Noyer, who was the go-between negotiating sales of the Albaretto's claimed Dalí originals and graphics to Park West and others. He is much featured in Ewell's self-promotional video, along with the Albaretto's and others. The fact is that none of these people, not the Albaretto's, not the du Noyers, not Ewell and not Park West Gallery nor its executives can be classified in any way as experts on Salvador Dalí, any more than Peter Paul Biro can be classified as a qualified fingerprint examiner.

Mr. Robert Descharnes did not even know who Park West Gallery was. He stated that Park West Gallery

has never approached him or his son Nicolas for any authentication of the claimed Albaretto collection originals or prints that they sell, despite the fact that they are the recognized experts. One can only wonder why not.

CONCLUSION

It is a sad commentary on the totally unregulated world of art, that unscrupulous and self-serving, profit-seeking individuals and organizations with vested interests can subject the uninformed art buying public to so much false propaganda with impunity. Especially when so much money is at stake. On any given day, through the cruise line art auctions alone, millions of dollars are being taken from unsuspecting passengers for art which is either fake, or bearing fake signatures and edition numbers, or is genuine but fraudulently misrepresented as being worth many times its true value – a bargain and an investment.

The solution for people so abused is to refuse to remain uninformed. Don't buy art without the necessary research – certainly not if you are buying it as an investment.

There are experts, genuinely disinterested experts, who are capable of establishing the authenticity and value of works of art with some accuracy. They charge a reasonable fee for their expertise, regardless of the outcome, and are independent of the financial transactions which their expertise supports.

If you are considering buying art, you need to be aware of the situation that exists in a totally unregulated market and do your due diligence before you buy.

On the positive side, there is much wonderful, genuine art on the market which will increase in value through the years. There are reputable dealers and galleries, true experts who do their work with passion, integrity and expertise. Thank goodness!

For the buyer, the trick is to establish authenticity and pay a fair price.

Then there are no regrets, recriminations, demands for refunds and law suits, class action or otherwise. 🚫

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