

Reattribution in art and viewing pleasure

By Ellen Mitchell

Does pleasure or aesthetic appreciation change when the viewer is no longer looking at an autograph painting previously believed to be by the hand of a 'master' but a work assigned to someone else of the same period or later? A brief sketch of terms used in galleries will precede my stance. Whereas 'attribution' denotes a minimum degree of doubt of authorship, 'studio of' refers to the work of assistants close to a master, whereas 'after...' and 'style of' as well as works re-identified by nationality and date, attest to inauthentic works and even fakes. The most accepted term for reassigning an art work to a lower or occasionally higher level is reattribution and is generally regarded as 'the price of scholarship'. Its association with downgrading also referred to as de-attribution, is my interest here. Works referred to can be accessed online.

Rembrandt to '*Studio of*'

For years our National Gallery of Victoria displayed an impressive self-portrait under the label of the great 17th century master, Rembrandt van Rijn, worth millions today. Then the latest publications by the Rembrandt Research Project combining scientific and documentary research with stylistic analysis, reduced the world-wide number of autograph Rembrandts from an oeuvre of over 600 to less than 300. Among de-attributions was our painting now shown as 'Studio of' Rembrandt, c.1660. Has this reduced the viewing pleasure of the general gallery visitor or that of the connoisseur?

The answer might be very little for both, if you are drawn to a portrait of an older man wearing a cap releasing short locks with slightly rough features, painted in sombre tones and impressive skills of facial expression. That it is exhibited and dated as studio work of the late period of the master, most likely executed by one of his apprentices under the guidance of Rembrandt, might not change the appreciation of the general viewer, possibly modify that of the connoisseur if not that of the gallery. The de-attributed portrait is shown in the Cabinet of Rembrandt on the second floor of the NGV in the vicinity of two autograph paintings, 'Portrait of a white-haired man' (1667) and 'Two old Men disputing' (1628).

Van Gogh to '*Style of*'

For another priced painting, 'Head of a Man' displayed to the public since its purchase in 1933, as a Van Gogh, the gallery made a 'downwards adjustment' in 2007 as the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam declared it as inauthentic. The director of the NGV at that time, Dr Gerard Vaughan, explained that reattribution 'is part of the normal work at a gallery' and that the work remains a 'fine and interesting painting', though its high market value was lost. Probably with doubts remaining, the work was assigned to an anonymous contemporary of Van Gogh dated c.1886. Involved in a restitution case in 2014, the gallery intimated its willingness to return the painting to its claimants in South Africa.

Van Eyck to '*Mid to late 15th century Flanders*'

A beautiful Netherlandish painting 'The Virgin and the Child' entered the gallery as a van Eyck in 1922 subsequently catalogued as van Eyck by himself. It was subjected to years of fluctuating scholarly opinion, including that of being an early pre 18th century forgery, then reattributed to 'follower of' in 1959, and no longer considered as copy. In 2014 it was finally assessed and exhibited as 'Virgin and Child' (mid to late 15th century Flanders) after an analysis of its oak panel "which was not able to 'match the tree growth rings with dated

chronologies". As van Eyck died in 1441 the result appeared as adequate evidence that he was not the originator. This is a jewel in the NGV's collection of Northern Renaissance paintings and will hold its audience enthralled irrespective of 'whodunnit'.

Ricci to Tiepolo: 'The finding of Moses' c.1755 (Upgraded)

It has been stated by scholars that the authorship of up to 20% of paintings in galleries is open to debate. This high estimation may not apply to the NGV but scholarly research can also reattribute in upgrading paintings that had been aligned with different artists and admired by gallery goers for a long time. One prominent example is 'The Finding of Moses' recently assigned to Tiepolo, the 18th century Rococo master. His autograph magnitude is overwhelmingly revealed in his 'Banquet of Cleopatra' of 1743, a premier work in the NGV, probably its stellar attraction and Australia's most invaluable with Pollock's 'Blue Poles' in the National Gallery of Australia trailing? 'The Finding of Moses' an unsigned and undated work was displayed for 60 years as a Sebastiano Ricci before its controversial reattribution to Tiepolo in 2015. Both Ricci and Tiepolo were influenced by and re-interpreted Veronese, and many paintings of 'The Finding of Moses' as well as prints are known. Tiepolo received most votes from art historians and researchers for veracity, aided by the work's restoration and over 2000 hours of meticulous cleaning. This is another example of a breathtaking change of authorship, but gallery visitors probably hardly noticed the change ...

300 Old Masters de-attributed in The Met. including Rembrandt and Goya

In 1973 the mighty Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, now 150 years old, almost secretly reassigned 300 Old Masters, or 15% of its holdings, to lesser artists by qualifying the labels of masters such as Rembrandt, Goya, Raphael, Vermeer and van Eyck, to 'studio of', or linking them to a later date denoting imitation or fake. And in 1996 further changes were made by downgrading Rembrandt's 'Old woman cutting her nails' and Goya's 'A city on a rock' to 'style of' with approximate date entries. If these demoted attributions of works which had fascinated museum goers for many years caused any diminution of appreciation is questionable, as the challenge for authenticity goes on.

Methods of art-historic and scientific research

When a student of art history, our professor took his connoisseurship class to the NGV with the particular task of suggesting the most likely original artist of challenged works. There were quite a few, and our research was almost entirely based on stylistic analysis including influence, comparison, characteristic iconographic attributes but no documentary reading. We effected no changes in authorship, but attribution research today employs scientific tools like infra-red reflectography and x-ray analysis which both reveal what is underneath the surface of paintings. For instance, it can show changes in composition, hidden paintings and over-painted areas. Pigmentation analysis from paint samples provides information of historical colour chemistry and dendro-chronological investigation can show the age and felling date of a tree from which a panel derives. Exhaustive archival and documentary research is employed to ascertain previous ownership referred to as provenance. This looks arduously at old inventories, sales receipts, auction records, catalogues, any reference testifying to previous ownership, etc. But science and provenance alone do not succeed in verifying the master's hand but still lean on stylistic appraisal by experts on different eras and artists.

'Fake or Fortune'

This is often manifest in the fascinating investigations undertaken by the English popular TV series of 'Fake or Fortune' where the final verdict of acceptance or rejection is ultimately pronounced by a panel of experts. Only if the legitimacy of the work in question is established does it have a chance of entering a relevant catalogue raisonné, an uncontested publication of all known works by an artist. Neither in 'Fake or Fortune' nor in galleries, does 'fake' carry the usual sinister connotations of deliberate deception, rather both endeavour to ascertain whether the attribution of a painting can be proven with the least degree of doubt or not. This year, the TV show's research came close to prove a supposed work by Gainsborough as autograph work. But the intriguing painting showing a group of gypsies in a wooded scene emerged as an imposter after all, lacking the final approval of the Gainsborough expert.

Exhibition of faked masterpieces in New York and London

In 1996 the Metropolitan Museum in New York exhibited faked masterpieces and in 2010 the National Gallery of London invited the public to peruse its exhibition "Close Examination: Fakes, Mistakes and Discoveries" and openly disclosed some genuine imposters including a fake Italian Renaissance portrait of the 15th century created 400 years later, discovered after scientific analysis. A painting entering the gallery as a Botticelli in 1874, showing a reclining Venus attended to by three putti amid columns in an attenuating landscape was also downgraded after age-appropriate pigment and material analysis combined with stylistic examination. It is now identified as Italian, Florentine, 'An Allegory' about 1500, and with its subject and age affinity to Botticelli well worth contemplating! – I find it encouraging that galleries have brought some of these erroneously attributed works to the forefront for scrutinizing and comparison, irrespective of their reduced status of affiliation to a master-hand.

The Master Forger, Han van Meegeren

Of course, there are plenty of forgers in the art world. The most prominent was Han van Meegeren, who attained a kind of hero status with a number of ingenious Vermeer inventions in the mid 1930's. He did not only succeed in selling counterfeits, as his stunning 'The Supper at Emmaus', to museums and art collectors but confessed that he had flogged one off to Goering. Denying the accusation of collaboration with the enemy and prove to the shocked experts that he was the author of up to seven forged works by Vermeer, he recreated a Vermeer in front of a disbelieving audience of adjudicators to save his life and his self-esteem. What was his approach? A long preparation period of imitating Vermeer's style, composition of groups, patterns, colour preferences, etc. He used historic canvasses and carefully mixed his pigments with synthetic resin, bakelite, instead of oil, for subsequent hardening and a 17th century surface appearance. Books, exhibitions, films, an excellent BBC documentary and even an exhibition in 1996 in the 'Kunsthall' in Rotterdam of his own works both real and fake, attest to the ongoing fascination with this master forger. And there are faked copies and 'originals' for sale but I can't afford one at \$88,000.

Today it is easier to detect forgeries and attribute paintings with state of the art scientific research, conservation and stylistic means but disputes about reattribution are ongoing. Does that really impact a great deal on the enjoyment of the gallery goer? Not a lot in my opinion.

Summary of de-attributed works referred to (excepting no.4)

1. Rembrandt, Van Rijn (1606 - 1669) 'Self-Portrait' - *Studio of, c.1660*
(NGV)
 2. Van Gogh, Vincent (1853 -1890) 'Head of a Man' - *After van Gogh, c.1886*
(NGV)
 3. Van Eyck, Jan (c.1395- 1441) 'The Virgin and the Child' - *Mid to late 15th cent. Flanders*
(NGV)
 4. Ricci, Sebastiano (1659 - 1734) 'The Finding of Moses' - *Tiepolo, Giovanni B. (1696-1770)*
c.1755 (Upgraded reattribution)
(NGV)
 5. Rembrandt, Van Rijn 'Old Woman cutting her Nails' - *Dutch, Style of Rembrandt, second to third quarter of 17th century*
(Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)
 6. Goya, Francisco (1746 - 1828) 'A City on a Rock' - *Spanish, Style of Goya, c.1850-75*
(The Metropolitan Museum of Art)
 7. Botticelli, Sandro (1445 - 1510) 'Venus and three Putti' - *Italian, Florentine, 'An Allegory', c.1500*
(The National Gallery Art, London).
 8. Van Meegeren, Han, (1889 - 1947), invented forgeries after Vermeer such as 'The Supper at Emmaus', 1937.
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