



V A N W E Y E N B E R G H

What is the provenance of an artwork?

Research on the history of ownership, or provenance, of works of art has always been an important part of a curator's work. Museum curators conduct this research to shed light on the historical, social, and economic context in which a work of art was created and collected, as well as on the history of taste.

Art historians have always sought to know the identity of previous owners, but such information is often difficult to establish. When a painting has been owned by a family for several generations there may be no records of sale. Frequently, private collectors prefer to buy and sell works anonymously through dealers or auction houses, whose records may therefore not disclose the true owner. Moreover, many dealers and auction houses that were active in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are no longer in business and their records may have been lost or destroyed. Thus it is rare to find works of art having a complete history of ownership. It is, therefore, important to bear in mind that gaps in provenance do not necessarily indicate that a work was looted or stolen.

Reconstruction of a complete history of ownership for a given work can be difficult and sometimes impossible. Many records of ownership have been destroyed as a result of natural disasters, man-made disasters such as war, and neglect. Information is sometimes withheld by dealers and auction houses at the request of previous owners who wish to maintain their anonymity. Much archival information remains undiscovered or difficult of access.

Without this provenance, often sole recognized authenticators refuse a certificate of authenticity.

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