

The Parkville Frame Gallery

Newsletter

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Subject: Provenance

Let's assume that you are about to purchase an expensive original painting. Is it a genuine original, or is it a fake—a clever copy of the original work? Considering that fake art has been (and is being) sold to unsuspecting buyers, how can you protect yourself? There are many things to consider. One of those things is **Provenance**.

Provenance is defined by the International Foundation for Art Research (IFAR), a nonprofit educational and research organization dedicated to integrity in the arts:

“... provenance provides a documentary record of owners' names; dates of ownership; methods of transference, i.e. inheritance, or sale through a dealer or auction; and locations where the work was kept, from the time of its creation by the artist until the present day. Unfortunately, such complete, unbroken records of ownership are rare, and most works of art contain gaps in provenance; indeed, it is more common for an object to have an incomplete ownership history than a complete one.

Essentially a kind of detective work, provenance research must be approached with creativity, persistence, attention to detail, and the ability to think outside of the box. And like detective work, provenance research can be difficult and time-consuming. Often, the difficulties researchers encounter involve the state of extant records. Many archives have suffered damage, destruction, or dispersal due to wars or natural disasters, and the records of smaller or short-lived galleries have not always been preserved. Moreover, private owners may not have saved purchase records, particularly for works of lesser monetary value, and sometimes no records of transfer were created in the first place. Even those records that do exist may not be reliable: they may provide unclear, inadequate, conflicting, or incorrect information.”

To better understand provenance, let's conduct a case study. Our case study will look at the history of a well-known former New York company known as M. Knoedler & Co. Our case study will then introduce us to individuals such as: Ann Freedman, Knoedler's former President and Director; self-described art dealers Glafir Rosales and José Carlos Bergantiños Díaz; and Chinese national and alleged art forger Pei-Shen Qian. While viewing videos we will learn about the sale of counterfeit paintings by abstract artists such as Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell, Mark Rothko, and others. We will see how very sophisticated, but unsuspecting buyers were subjected to millions of dollars in losses.



Stereoscopic photograph of the Knoedler gallery interior, ca. 1860–1880

Source: Wikipedia

“M. Knoedler & Co. was an art dealership in New York City founded in 1846. When it closed in 2011, amid lawsuits for fraud, it was one of the oldest commercial art galleries in the US, having been in operation for 165 years.

Knoedler dated its origin to 1846, when French dealers Goupil & Cie opened a branch in New York City. Goupil & Cie was an extremely dynamic print-publishing house founded in Paris in 1827. Michel (later Michael) Knoedler (1823–1878), started to work for Goupil & Cie in Paris in 1844. He moved to New York in 1852 to take charge of the New York branch. He purchased the U.S. arm of the business in 1857, and was later joined by his sons Roland (1856–1932), Edmond, and Charles, with Roland taking the lead after his father's death in 1878.

With dealer Charles Carstairs, Knoedler opened branches in Paris (1895), Pittsburgh (1897), and London (1908), and, under Carstairs' influence developed a reputation as a leading dealer of Old Master paintings, with customers including collectors such as Cornelius Vanderbilt, William Rockefeller, John Jacob Astor, and J. P. Morgan.”

Knoedler closed its doors in 2011, after selling more than 60 counterfeit paintings over the course of several years to unsuspecting buyers for approximately \$80 million dollars.

The 2020 Barry Avrich Netflix film: ***Made You Look, a True Story about Fake Art 2020*** provides us with background information about the fascinating Knoedler fraud case. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AGDVW7V6OLA>

The video: ***20/20 Hindsight: Lessons from the Knoedler/Rosales Affair*** is a panel discussion about the case. https://www.ifar.org/past_event.php?docid=1465583041
(Note: This is a long video, but very interesting.)

The video: The ***FBI's Art Crime Team*** discusses the FBI's Art Crime Team in detail. https://www.ifar.org/past_event.php?docid=1633456949
(Note: Be patient, this video may take a minute to open.)

The bottom line is this: Fake art is out there, sometimes where you least expect it to be. Be an informed buyer. When purchasing expensive works of art, buy from a reputable source. Be cautious, and always do your “due diligence” prior to buying. Research the provenance of the piece you are buying. You may even want to consult with an art expert(s). Consider a carefully written contract between you and the seller.