



ART DUE DILIGENCE GROUP

Interview with Art Authenticator Curtis Dowling on Art Fraud



Curtis Dowling is an art authenticator who specialises in art fraud detection and works with his due diligence team. Curtis has over 25 years' experience of the art market, as an art dealer and art adviser. He now authenticates art and investigates provenance, having started his career with the Royal Military Police.

Curtis has successfully investigated many blue-chip artists' works, such as paintings by L.S. Lowry, Turner, Titian and Pablo Picasso.

He also presents a popular T.V. show called The Treasure Detectives on CNBC in the U.S., where Curtis and his team take art owners on a journey to discover whether their artworks are the genuine article or fake.

Q: How did you get into art fraud investigations?

It all began when I started working for an art dealer on the Portobello Road in the early 1980's. I was fascinated by antique art and my first day was a baptism with fire. The art dealer I was working for ran out of silver candlestick holders and so he sent me to an address in Islington to collect some. When I arrived at the address, the seller opened the door and asked me what period of silver I wanted. I did not know and so he said "if you're not sure I will stamp you two from each century". He put the hallmarks on right in front of my eyes.

That day opened my eyes to the criminality in the art world and awoke my investigative mind. After a stint in the Royal Military Police, I then spent the rest of my career in the art and antiques world, from advising on art and antiques, including for the TV series Lovejoy, to running my own art galleries over a ten year period to working as an art authenticator and specialising in the detection of fakes.

Q: What type of companies hire you and what types of artworks have you been asked to authenticate?

A: I am hired by private collectors, sellers, insurance companies, banks and museums. My clients tend to seek the truth about their art; they want to know whether the artwork is genuine or not, whether they are buying, selling, insuring or inheriting the art. We have worked on a wide range of cases involving purported works by Constable, Manet, Monet, De Kooning, Da Vinci and Canaletto amongst others.

In over 25 years, we have seen a great variety of works. When there are very large sums of money at stake, sometimes even millions of pounds, the stories we have uncovered and the fakes we have seen are often fantastical. Forgery is thousands of years old, so sometimes where a three hundred old painting is a fake, it could have been faked two hundred and ninety-nine years ago and for different reasons.

Q: How problematic in your view is the issue of fakes and forgeries in the antique sector and the contemporary art sector? Many people assume it is just a problem for antiques; is this correct?

A: If there is money involved and the criminal intent, anything can be faked and this is not going to change. It is easier to fake a suit of armour, or a

Meissen bowl than it is to smuggle 100 kilos of heroin and so it is not just a cottage industry, it is seriously well-funded organised crime which goes to fund, child labour, prostitution, drugs and guns. The contemporary art market particularly is fraught with danger as is the Russian market, but these markets have always had this problem.

Q: How high is the risk of purchasing a fake artwork?

A: Each visit I make to a new client usually starts with the same smug comment, that “there are no fakes in my collection.” From our experience of client cases, the statistic is worrying, for the last 100 clients I have had meetings with (galleries, banks, collectors), 61% have had at least one high value fake. My response to my shocked clients is usually the same: I tell them only the bad forgers get caught.

Q: How do people get duped?

A: I am aware of 62 different art scams; however the criminals are susceptible to getting caught too. The types of scams range from a great provenance story, such as the hard up peer in East Anglia that sold his astrolabe for a fortune that had been in the family for centuries. He then kept having copies of it made and kept on selling these copies.

Provenance usually falls down first, if it is a perfect provenance then it is probably fake. The art work somehow will give itself away too through proper examination.

No one is immune to getting caught out by fakes, even the experts and dealers get duped. The fraudsters play on human failings such as greed, arrogance or naïveté, and so one can be easily dazzled by the mystique or value of important artworks and then fail to stop and question the artworks and the stories attached to them.

Q: How sophisticated is art forgery today?

A: Art forgery has always been impossible to detect or test for if the forger is very skilled at it. Some forgers use old canvases, can source, create and emulate the artists’ materials and use ageing techniques that are designed to fool the viewer as to the age of the artwork. The technical testing that is available today is excellent but there are forgers who have worked out how to get around technical analysis.

Our team created a painting only this year that passed all the tests and it took only two weeks to achieve this. If the forger is excellent then no technical test or expert will discover it unless examining an artwork holistically.

Q: How do you conduct your investigations?

A: Every investigation is different and depends very much on the specific artwork, however we always start with a full examination of the item. Sometimes the item gives itself away and we do look for things experts do not tend to look for, as our focus is on who made the artwork.

Sometimes we even recognise who created the artwork straight away from the style of the artwork and being familiar with the hand of certain forgers.

Often the physical examination throws up a great many questions that we need to go away and answer. Our approach at the outset will always be to attempt to break the provenance as this is the easiest thing to discredit. We never use the internet as this is true beat cop work.

Recently a client asked us if we knew most of the forgers still working. “Yes” I said. In fact, we think we know most of the forgers working today.

We often use information to solve these mysteries from who we think are the true experts on the subject, the forgers themselves; they have created these fakes and profit considerably from this activity.

Q: What things have you discovered about the actions of forgers in your experience of encountering their work and meeting with them in person?

A: In 25 years of working in this area we have realised forgery is a business. To the forgers, it is no different to art dealing, museum curating or restoration. Sometimes it is a cottage industry, for example we know a little old lady in Suffolk, who is an ex-art teacher, who paints one fake a year so she can go off golfing in Spain, to workshops of forgers employed by large criminal gangs.

One case of ours involved tracking down a gang of Romanian gypsies who made near perfect Lalique glass artworks, that were being shipped from Sofia in Bulgaria to the UK.

The art world seems to not want to acknowledge the size of the problem. This may be down the fact that it is a pervasive problem and also one where people know they have probably bought, sold, or valued a fake and that this happened because they could not tell the difference.

Q: How do art market professionals get ahead of the forgers and employ due diligence steps to better discover whether an artwork is genuine or fake before a transaction takes place?

A: The art market has established many new processes in recent years to help protect consumers against forgery. It has helped a little, but it simply means the fakers have become more sophisticated themselves in not only the making of the items but also through ingenious provenance paperwork and various stories that accompany the artworks.

Technical testing has helped but the very good forgers, can get around those tests and so it is many different facets that need examination and very close inspection.

In my view if you cannot get information from the artworld's "dark side"- the world of the forgers - you are going to struggle to get to the truth quickly or in a cost-effective manner.

Q: How can consumers be more vigilant and alive to the risks? What are the red flags or alarm bells that should lead one to seek more information and hire a private detective?

In our experience, it is very difficult to open some people's eyes to the risks of fakes and forgeries. Sometimes people crave blissful ignorance. For that reason, we see consumers buying fake art from obviously suspicious places for that type of artwork, for example a blue-chip artist being sold at a low end market stall or from an unknown gallery website or in an obscure online auction.

It gets far more complicated when fake art is hanging in reputable galleries, being sold at well known auction houses and even hangs on the wall of museums.

Whatever the reputation of the seller, you would not buy a new car, regardless of value, if you were not getting guarantees, VIM numbers, log books and service histories. So why on earth would you part with many thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, with no more than a few cheap sheets

of legal paper? In my opinion, you either have a great deal of faith or you genuinely want to bury your head in the sand.

So far as you are aware, how often do the forgers get caught?

I will end as I began. There are thousands of forgers in the U.K..

The bad ones either stop working or get caught and occasionally a prolific, but bad one, will make the headlines. 90% of them will retire from it as old people after many successful years knowing they have fooled everyone and content that their work hangs on walls and graces homes and museums around the world.

Interview by Jessica Franses, Director of the Art Due Diligence Group Ltd, MD of Vitruvian Arts Consultancy Ltd and art lawyer. (July 2018).