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Art libraries as a source of false provenance

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***Abstract:** In the mid-1990s an art forgery case was uncovered in which art libraries had been used as unwitting tools in an elaborate scam to construct false provenances for forged works of art. Working with an accomplice who produced forgeries purporting to be by well-known 20th century artists, the main instigator of the scheme painstakingly produced paper documentation (including small exhibitions catalogues) which was used to convince dealers and potential buyers of the authenticity of the forged works. Some of these forgeries were placed in London art libraries and archives in place of the originals. It is alleged that works were sold on this basis and high market prices reached. The case raises issues of the authority of documentation, the practices of provenance checking, the security of library and archive collections and the ease with which their material may be corrupted. Those involved in this case were caught, tried, found guilty and have served their sentences. They are now once more at liberty.*

This case was the subject of an article by Jennifer Booth, former Archivist at Tate, in the current issue of the Art Libraries Journal. The paper will much of the same ground, but will not be a repetition of that article. The idea will be to stimulate discussion of the issues raised by the case in the workshop.

Art libraries as a source of false provenance

Beth Houghton, Head of Tate Library & Archive, London, UK

In 1999 John Cockett (aka Dr. John Drewe) was sentenced to 6 years in prison for masterminding an ingenious art fraud. With an accomplice, who produced forged works of art purporting to be by a number of 20th century artists (*inter alia* Giacometti, Ben Nicholson, Dufy, Sutherland), he had fooled several experts, possibly flooded the market with a large number of forged works and potentially contaminated the collections of a number of art libraries and archives in London.

It worked like this: whereas many art forgers have relied on their skill as artists, in this case, John Drewe set out to provide the documentation which would prove the provenance of the works of art which John Myatt, his accomplice, had produced. In order to illustrate the provenance he would create documents such as letters and bills of sale, and ensure that the work of art featured in this dealer's stock-book or that gallery's exhibition.

To create an individual document - for example a bill of sale, he might acquire a copy of the letter-headed paper or form used by a particular dealer at around the appropriate date, obtaining an example perfectly legitimately by using an archive with relevant holdings and requesting a photocopy. This he could then cut and paste into a document, using an old typewriter of suitable vintage, to complete the details of the sale of the painting John Myatt had made earlier. If he wanted to make it look still more authentic, he could also include in his paste-up the image of the ownership or photocopy-authorisation stamp of the archive from which he had obtained the photocopy. Then all he had to do was produce a further photocopy of the paste-up and he had a document which he could present to a potential buyer of the work. Alternatively, he could have a facsimile rubber stamp made - easy enough to do - so that the photocopied forged bill could carry a fresh and original stamp. 'Look! This bill of sale comes from the Gallery X archive which is held in the prestigious Y archival collection in a national institution.'

Becoming more ambitious, he could photograph the forged painting and insert it, with fictitious sale details into a Gallery stock book; and/or he could create or alter exhibition catalogues to include the works for which he was creating a history. However, in such cases, rather than producing a document which he could use independently, he needed to place them in the context of a library or archive to give them authority.

As librarians and archivists we devote considerable attention to security, our aim usually to prevent material being removed from our collections. We are not, in general, on the look out for someone who might insert items into our collections, or substitute material. However this insertion and substitution is exactly what John Drewe did in the Tate Library and Archive and in the National Art Library in London.

Over a period of roughly ten years from the mid-1980s John Drewe established his 'business'. A con-man of apparently considerable plausibility he made himself known to collectors and dealers and went to impressive lengths to establish himself as a serious researcher and benefactor of the arts. He offered to donate two Bissiere paintings (forged of course) to the Tate. Fortunately (or unfortunately for us, as it later turned out) the quality of the works was insufficient to interest the Tate, which politely declined and therefore didn't get as far as smelling a rat at this early stage. He then donated £20,000 to the Tate Archive to assist the cataloguing programme. This was presumably done with a double advantage in view: both to gain special status for himself in relation to the collection, and also to hasten the cataloguing of

relevant collections of documents and therefore ensure they would be accessible to him for his nefarious uses.

He became a registered user of the Tate Archive and the National Art Library and, in addition employed others to carry out research for him. As a result of his labours we know that the Tate Archive has a photograph of a forged Giacometti inserted into an album of works handled by the Hanover Gallery in the 1950s, and the National Art Library has lost at least one, and the Tate Library at least two, exhibition catalogues which were replaced on the shelves by forged catalogues containing details of forged works of art.

The story of how John Drewe was finally unmasked is a long, somewhat labyrinthine (and occasionally comic) tale. It is told by the former Archivist of the Tate in a recent issue of the *Art Libraries Journal*¹ and I don't wish to repeat that tale here. In brief, the Giacometti Foundation had done much to establish that not only was there a new surge of dubious works by the much-forged Giacometti on the market, but that they appeared to be accompanied by dubious documentation. The Tate Archivist had also begun to suspect that forged provenance documents were in circulation. On being asked to confirm that certain documents which had been presented to dealers, as proof of provenance, were in fact copies of originals in the Tate Archive, and on not being able to trace them, the first and most likely explanations of mis-filing and theft began to give way to a nasty suspicion that they weren't there because, in fact, they never had been... i.e. the copies were original forgeries. She had also begun to be less than comfortable about our Dr. Drewe. However, there was nothing concrete to connect the forgeries with his odd and suspicious behaviour and therefore her reports were not, to her great frustration, acted upon.

So - a cautionary tale. But what can we learn from it?

The power of documents and the vital role they play in the art market.

The works of art themselves were not even good forgeries. John Myatt had been happily producing 'genuine fakes' for £250 a throw in modern household paint when he was picked up by Drewe, and continued to make these works to the same sloppy technical standards. However, when supported by a sheaf of papers, backed up by the location of some of this material in prestigious research libraries and archives, dealers and buyers looked no further. In fact, one Nicholson expert who expressed doubt about the work of art, said he must be mistaken when faced with the paperwork.

The importance of 'originals'

Most of this would have been impossible without the photocopying machine. You could say that dealers and buyers who accept photocopies as authoritative documentation deserve to be fooled. Those who came to the source to check some of these documents had their suspicions confirmed. However, when the 'original' in the library is itself a cleverly created forgery the situation becomes more complex, and the deception much more difficult to detect.

No-one is above suspicion - even donors.

This means that, in security terms, all users must be treated the same. Donors must not be given special access, although this may sometimes be extremely difficult to sustain diplomatically.

But this case raises as many questions without easy answers:

Security. Of course we should maintain the best levels of security we can. In the case of archives, it is normal for reading rooms to be invigilated. How a photograph and sale details could be inserted into a bound album in the Tate Archive where a member of staff sat only a few

feet away from a maximum of five researchers sitting close to one another remains baffling. However, libraries and archives are for use. Any access carries risk. **What practical measures could we take to stop substitution and insertion into our collections and how far could we go without seriously compromising service and access?**

Authenticity. There is an assumption that publications and documents in libraries and archives are authentic and 'original', and maintaining this confidence is important to scholarship and the art trade. This case has shown that this cannot be assumed. It is conceivable that some of this material was tampered with before acquisition. **What could librarians and archivists do to check the authenticity of original or rare items on adding them to their collections? Is it possible and practical to do this, and do the risks justify the effort ?**

Users, donors and other special relationships. To what extent can we protect ourselves by tightening up our procedures for vetting those who have access to our collections? **How far is it practical to go in checking the references and identities of those who use our collections? And how easy is it to withstand the pressures to permit privileged access to donors (of material or of money)?**

References

1. Booth, Jennifer. Dr.Drewe – a cautionary tale. *Art Libraries Journal*, vol.28, no.2, 2003, pp. 14 –17.

Biographical Details:

Studied Fine Art followed by post-graduate librarianship diploma.

In the 1970s held academic art library posts as Faculty Librarian for Art & Design (Newcastle Polytechnic), Academic Librarian for Art & Design (Leicester Polytechnic). Joined the Tate Gallery Library in 1976 as a cataloguer, moving to acquisitions in 1978 and becoming Librarian in 1984. Became Head of merged Library and Archive department in 1990.

Active member of ARLIS/UK & Ireland from its foundation in 1969. Member of Council and of various committees. Former Chair of ARLIS, former Editor of Art Libraries Journal and 8 years on Standing Committee of IFLA Section of Art Libraries.