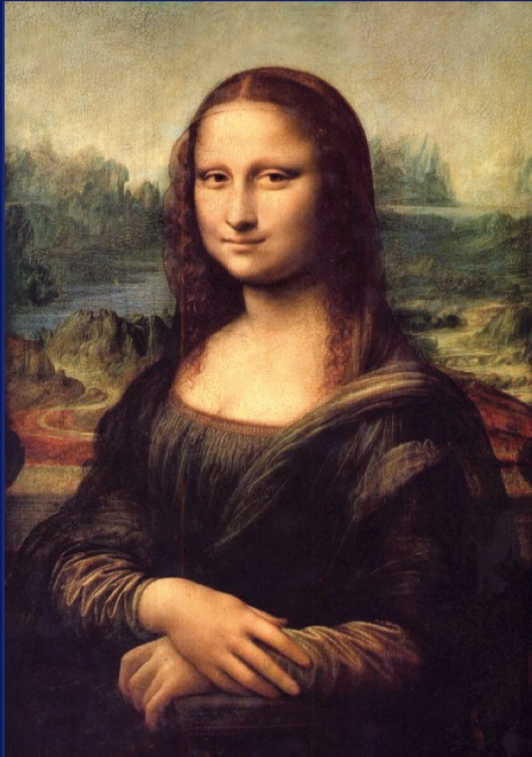


A second Mona Lisa?

Challenges of attribution and authentication and various possibilities for evaluating a work of art

Salvatore Lorusso

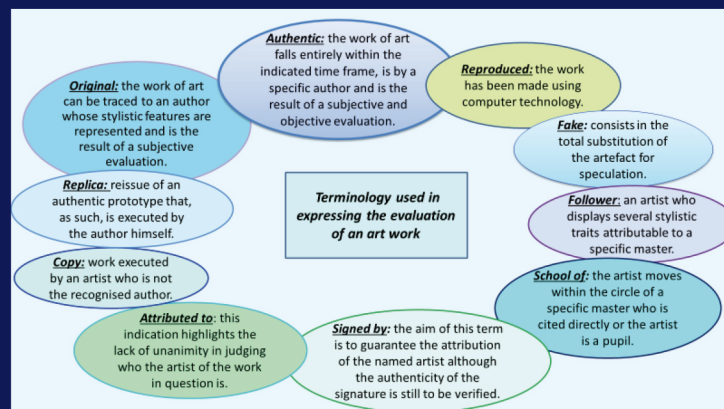
Andrea Natali



With papers by

Jean-Pierre Isbouts

John Asmus
Vadim Parfenov





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SALVATORE LORUSSO

ANDREA NATALI

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With papers by

JEAN-PIERRE ISBOUTS

JOHN ASMUS

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«L'ERMA» di BRETSCHNEIDER
Roma-Bristol

Salvatore Lorusso and Andrea Natali
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On front cover

Louvre *Mona Lisa* (on left)
Isleworth *Mona Lisa* (on right)
Expressing different degrees of certainty in art attribution (below)

Salvatore Lorusso and Andrea Natali
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1. *Mona Lisa*

*Stampato nel rispetto dell'ambiente su carta proveniente
da zone a deforestazione controllata.*

I would like to express my thanks to Angela Mari Braidà, who has accompanied me with great professionalism and preparedness on different occasions which, at times, have been arduous, and on others, propitious. Her figure and activity as Linguistic Advisor, appreciated by numerous authors, in relation not only to the Journal “*Conservation Science in Cultural Heritage*”, but also to other writings and volumes, are not limited to merely translating the various texts from Italian to English, but are also expressed by advising, proposing and indicating how to intervene and improve them. This has been her role in the volume, *A Second Mona Lisa? Challenges of attribution and authentication and various possibilities for evaluating works of art*, as well as in other works on the same subject.

With profound gratitude

Salvatore Lorusso

In expressing his point of view on the Socratic method, based on the thesis that everything we need is within us and that, ultimately, we have no need for others, the French philosopher, Emmanuel Lévinas, believes that other people are a problem and that discussion is always difficult.

Continuing along this line of observation, he added that the pressure of conformity often risks compromising our authenticity and freedom.

But one may ask: “What is the value of a life, and in the field of science, what is the value of research that is unable to open up to others, to communicate, by offering and acquiring what may constitute a conclusive common point of view that can be reached together?”.

A decision cannot be based on a single conviction or an individual judgment, thereby excluding the plurality of opinions which is required for fairness and thoroughness.

Each of us, as an individual is fully realized, only by being open with others; this allows me to affirm that the truth about the authentication of the second *Mona Lisa* must be the result of a combination of the potential of different scientific skills.

*I prefer to be grateful for what I have,
rather than be worried about what I don't yet have,
and what I will have with others.
And this holds true for study, for research, for life.*

Salvatore Lorusso

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PREFACE

René Descartes – considered as ‘the founder of modern philosophy’ and deeply influenced by science – in his work *Discourse on Method*, writes: “Intelligence is a characteristic of all men: some have plenty, others have less. However it is not the amount of intelligence that ensures the achievement of truth, but the way in which it is used, and, therefore, the method that is followed”. The method, therefore, is the starting point for appropriately conducting the search for truth, in philosophy, art and science.

This openness, compared with what one is habitually, repeatedly and currently ‘subjected to’ when reading journals, even specialized ones, refers to what is reported below.

Expressions such as “the very high quality, the finesse of the execution, the technique, the liveliness, the psychological intensity” and so on, have often characterized and supported the opinions given by important historians and art critics to validate the attribution of a work of art. The cases in question, in general, refer to the great masters of flourishing artistic periods from the past, but does not exclude contemporary authors.

Besides, attributions do not always reflect reality. The percentage of non-authentic artefacts on the market is very high according to data provided by the Italian Carabinieri Headquarters for the Protection of Cultural Heritage (CCTPC).

Art history is full of false or mistaken attributions. The world of art criticism, and correspondingly, of art attribution, is strongly influenced by several important personalities who Federico Zeri, an Italian art historian, has called “the well-known clique”. They work in an authoritarian manner and are not always willing to openly dialogue with other personalities from the academic and scientific world.

Nonetheless, pervaded by a decidedly unpleasant sentiment and involvement, one feels the need to point out how the lack of humility and/or more broadly speaking, gratitude, in the field of science – and possibly the excessive and unilateral accreditation of their own competences, however valid and unquestionable they may be – can determine incorrect results and invalidate the truth.

The term “humility” must be emphasised. Humility is a balanced way of being which derives from the full awareness that nothing has a truly objective value because it is connected to a personal evaluation. It is however true that humility, unlike modesty, which is a way of being that has its essence in not wanting to be superior to others and in not competing, does not lead to indifference, but leaves room for everything that is virtuous, provided it is not intrusive, pompous or arrogant.

Hence, a subjective evaluation of the work of art, expressed unilaterally as: “Let us present this attribution anew to scholars without fearing the outcome of their evaluation”, needs to be accompanied by an equally important objective evaluation, which should be carried out using “instrumental eyes”, i.e. diagnostic-analytical technologies to either confirm or confute the former.

The expression “objective findings” in the present context is to be understood as an attribution supported by a considerable amount of mutually independent evidence that is concordant with the final result.

It should be kept in mind that the above, seen from a broader and culturally synergistic perspective, converges into the uniqueness of science as the integration of the human and experimental sciences; it highlights the fundamental importance of the very different skills, backgrounds and experiences, from equally different areas and worlds, that are needed to address the multiple and complex problems in the field of cultural and environmental heritage. And it is the holistic value of the art work, characterized by a set of values involving different areas of research – historical, aesthetic, symbolic, spiritual, social, managerial, economic, financial, market, as well as technical-diagnostic-material-conservative ones – on which the meaning of interdisciplinarity is based [1].

The aim of this volume is to highlight the importance of several key aspects in the art world, considered to be essential in arriving at a correct judgment regarding the work of art to be evaluated [2-11].

They are:

- respect for the “life history” of the art object;
- use of the correct terminology, which implies concepts and meanings to be observed and followed;
- the methodological path to follow, aimed at providing the answer to the specific questions, and necessarily involving the various synergistic scientific skills needed to respect the holistic value of all heritage.

Bearing in mind these intents and, in reference to the currently much debated issue of attribution and authentication of art works, the volume addresses the following topics:

- the different possibilities of evaluating a work of art by distinguishing the different degrees of certainty in its attribution;
- the correct and complete methodological path for an accurate evaluation;
- a number of case studies relating to the attribution of artefacts of historical, artistic, sculptural and manuscript interest;
- a case study relating to one of the most well-known works by Leonardo da Vinci, the *Mona Lisa* – also known as *La Gioconda* in Italian - a unicum in the world of art;
- as an emblematic example of what was stated earlier, a discussion is presented of the historical and analytical-diagnostic investigation of the oil painting on canvas, *Mona Lisa with Columns* (St. Petersburg), conducted to establish the correct attribution;
- research into the numerous *Mona Lisas* through consultation of archival-bibliographic sources and discussion of the most significant ones, distinguishing between which are versions and which are copies of Leonardo’s famous painting.

Some of these topics are dealt with in the historical-technical Journal *Conservation Science in Cultural Heritage* in reference to the fundamental importance of interdisciplinarity [9,11-12].

Before tackling the problems relating to the various possibilities for evaluating works of art and the correct methodological path to follow, it is worth taking into consideration some aspects regarding forgery in the art market and the challenge of attribution.

PART ONE

ATTRIBUTION AND AUTHENTICATION OF ART WORKS





1. ART FORGERY

1.1. FORGERY IN THE ART MARKET

Art forgery manifests itself in three different cases characterized from the beginning by an intent to deceive:

- in the first case, an object is made which imitates the style of the creator of a specific artefact;
- in the second case, famous works are reproduced whose non-authenticity is declared by the “copyist”;
- finally, there is the forceful will to introduce into the art market circuit a work that leads one to believe it is authentic, because it is the work of a great artist.

The latter represents the quintessential case of “fake art”.

A fake, therefore, consists of a scam. There have always been forgeries: great writers such as Martial, Cicero and Pliny testify how, since the time of the ancient Romans, the exchange of forgeries was a widespread practice. At that time however, reproduction was nothing more than a tribute to the greatness of the artist. It was only during the Age of Enlightenment that reproduction began to take on a negative connotation and when, in the nineteenth century, art work began to take on an economic value, authenticity became a fundamental aspect and the improper use of signatures became rampant.

The counterfeit market is rife and corresponding economic returns can be significant: according to experts, a very large percentage of art works on the market are probably forgeries.

Below is a list, which is certainly not exhaustive, of some of the cases that have attracted the attention of the public and the media:

- A longing for classical antiquity led to the famous forgery of a fresco by the German painter Anton Raphael Mengs, depicting *Jupiter embracing Ganymede*, which was greatly admired by the German art historian and archaeologist Johann Joachim Winckelmann, who considered it a magnificent masterpiece. However, the numerous iconographic and stylistic details subsequently exposed it as a synthesis of ancient and Renaissance traditions realized through the typical language of eighteenth-century classicism: a forgery, moreover, can only be recognized when the point of view of the observer no longer coincides with that of the forger.
- A reproduction of the *Madonna* by Sandro Botticelli, purchased by Lord Lee in 1930, deceived experts and connoisseurs for years. Only later did restoration work allow a thorough investigation of the work. During its examination, photographs revealed that cracks and abrasions had been caused mechanically, and a study of the pigments highlighted it was a late eighteenth-century work.
- In 1932, the trial against the merchant Otto Wacker was held in Berlin. He had sold as many as 33 fake paintings by Van Gogh, after receiving written recognition from experts of the Dutch painter. In reality, the alleged experts, all in good faith, had been deceived by some false family correspondence which, during the trial, was rejected by the painter’s nephew, Vincent Willem Van Gogh. The merchant was sentenced to 19 months in prison and ordered to pay the sum of 30,000 marks in compensation.