

“Provenance”

French, noun *f*, origin, source; *en ~ de*, from || ~ *de*, come from;

Figurative - originate/result/stem from; be due to

1 : ORIGIN, SOURCE

2 : the history of ownership of a valued object or work of art or literature

You will frequently encounter references to the “provenance” of a work of art. The literal meaning of the word is the origin or source of the work. Provenance is often defined narrowly as the history of ownership. To me, it means that, and more. Provenance encompasses the origin and history of a work of art - who made it, who has owned it, and where it has been. “Good provenance” implies a record that supports the “bona fides” of the piece, both as to authenticity and value. A “lack of provenance” implies suspicions as to the origin or authenticity of a work, even that it may have been stolen or illegally exported. What constitutes good provenance varies. A nineteenth century Hudson River School painting can be sold with some gaps in its history due to owners who wanted to remain anonymous. A Gustav Klimt which disappears from records in Austria in 1940 and reappears in 1955 is highly suspect. Pre-Columbian pottery from Mexico originally sold in 1965 without any excavation record may be a safe purchase. If the same pottery first appears on the market in 1973 with no excavation record or export license, a buyer today could receive unwanted attention from U.S. and Mexican authorities.

You should seek as much documentation as possible, not only to protect yourself as a buyer or seller, but to preserve information about the object. The cultural meaning and value of a work of art is enhanced by knowledge of its creation, ownership and “use” over time. It is a bonus that the monetary value of a piece of art is normally increased by the same information.

The “sources” of provenance are varied. They include:

- **Sales documents** such as invoices, purchase agreements, advertisements, condition reports, appraisals, shipping records, auction records, and correspondence.
- **Records of attempted sales** such as auction records, and correspondence with potential buyers. (Attempted sales can be missed if you request only records of completed sales.)
- **Owners documents** such as appraisals, insurance valuations, photographs which include the object, exhibition records, and letters referring to the object.
- **Artist’s records**, whether directly from the artist or from the artist’s estate or heirs, such as production records, sale records, correspondence, and exhibition records.
- **Independent authentication documents** such as certificates from the artist’s estate or heirs, or from a trust, foundation or board established by the heirs to authenticate the artist’s works. You can purchase reports from organizations tracking stolen art or from organizations keeping records of art sales. A scholar who has published the only study of an artist or made a single artist the focus of her career may be the sole authority whose opinion on authenticity is definitive.
- **Public documents** such as newspaper stories, museum catalogs and records, exhibition records, scholarly articles, export permits, law suits, archaeological excavation permits and records, and registries such as the National Stolen Art File maintained by the FBI. Admittedly, some of these “public” documents are easier to obtain than others. Searches of the FBI registry must be made through a law enforcement agency. Interpol, however, offers a public subscription database of stolen art plus a CD listing about 28,000 stolen works of art and cultural property.

