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Authenticity in Art Congress 2014: Retired FBI Agent Virginia Curry reports from The Hague

by Virginia M. Curry

THE HAGUE -- The [Authenticity in Art Congress](#) opened Wednesday here at the [Louwman \[Automobile\] Museum](#) in The Hague to discuss how the seemingly opposed spheres of science and art history connoisseurship might be aligned to synthesize a protocol for establishing authenticity of art, specifically paintings.

Jugen W. Wittmann, the Senior Manager of the Mercedes Benz archives and Collection Brand Communications, presented the protocols utilized by Mercedes Benz to preserve the integrity of their vehicles against forgery. Documents in their archives record each car manufactured and the “as delivered” condition of the vehicle to the original owner, with the serial numbers recorded on the vehicle. Wittman noted that such transparency is important since although there were only 33 of the Mercedes SSK ever built, there are more than 100 hundred registered as SSKs with the international Vintage Collectors Group.

Keynote Speaker Javier Lumbreras, the CEO of Artemundi Global Fund, discussed the collection of art and the frustrations of the purchaser who is burdened with the proof of due diligence. He concluded by saying that inasmuch as science cannot provide a “bulletproof” decision which can stand up as evidence in court, litigation, in his experience, is not worth the effort. Lumbreras drew an analogy similar to that of Jugen Wittmann of Mercedes Benz by noting that of the fourteen Rembrandt works in the collection of [The Metropolitan Museum of Art](#) only seven of them have an agreed authenticity.

Professor Martin Kemp, FBA, Emeritus Professor in the History of Art, Trinity College Oxford, (and an acknowledged Leonardo scholar) initiated the section on the Historical Developments in Painting Authentication and spoke about professional opinion in his paper, “It Doesn’t Look Like Leonardo”. Professor Kemp argued the construction of evidence of authenticity as “The judgment by eye in science and art and the tendency for the eye to see what it expects to see.” He

illustrated his point by comparing the points of view of a traffic accident, such as the point of view of the insurance adjuster, driver, weatherman, etc. noting that each one's interpretation of what they see is relative to their interest. Professor Kemp concluded that the observable consequences of the visual techniques of historical and scientific that are the most specific in identification are the most malleable. Above all, he cautioned, "We should be more cautious and prudent in our personal investments in our malleable acts and seeing."

Dr. Margaret Dalivalle presented a paper, "Picturarum vere Originalium: Inventing originality in early Modern London", which explored the question of originality of paintings and the invention of the idea of artistic originality in the eighteenth century.

Professor Frank James, Professor of the History of Science, Head of Collections and Heritage of the Royal Institution, London, spoke about the work of Humphrey Davy and Michael Faraday who developed chemical techniques in the late 18th, early 19th century to understand, conserve and record archeological and artistic objects, such as the wall painting and vase painting from Pompeii; the Lewis chess pieces; the unfurling and attempts to read the Herculaneum Papyri; and their comparisons with the pigments found on the Elgin marbles.

Dr. Lynn Catterson, an Art Historian from Columbia University, presented an extraordinary paper and cautionary tale about Stefano Bardini and his Art of Crafting Authenticity. Dr. Catterson's research led into the archives of Stefano Bardini whose expertise involved the forgery of "originals" and falsification of context and provenance. Dr. Catterson's research in the Bardini archive challenges the accepted *comparanda* and consequently, perceived authenticity and attributions in major museums.

Dr. John Brewer, Professor of Humanities and Social Sciences, CalTech, discussed the Duveen Trial of 1929, the hazards of presenting scientific evidence of authenticity in court, and the subsequent rejection of conflicting connoisseurship in court.

Evan Hepler-Smith, a Historian of modern science and doctoral candidate at Princeton University, discussed the early utilization of x-ray to fit the material, intellectual and social contours of authentication and connoisseurship.

Ms. Curry is a retired FBI agent, a licensed private investigator, and an art historian.

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