
In Provenance: An Alternative History of Art, Gail Feigenbaum, associate director of the Getty Research Institute, and Inge Reist, director of the Center for the History of Collecting at the Frick Collection and Art Reference Library, present a collection of papers from a 2008 College Art Association panel on provenance, as well as contributions from additional invited experts. The contributors are primarily art historians, and the work that is featured ranges from ancient archaeology to conceptual art.

Rare is a work like Sébastian Bourdon’s Portrait of Countess Ebba Sparre (1652-53) that has a near-complete documentation of ownership. Nonetheless, since the mid-1700s, even partial provenance has conferred pedigree while works with an unknown past have often been dismissed regardless of artistic merit. Today, provenance remains a powerful, if shifting, concept that continues to impact the commercial art market. The authors highlight the critical relationship of provenance to collecting by examining promotional materials like museum catalogs, press releases, and labels as well as sellers’ strategies like providing clients with artists’ letters to authenticate work.

Although there is the occasional call for international standards in researching and recording provenance, the focus is on the narratives uncovered by these details. The book has no shortage of riveting stories, like Anne Boleyn throwing a Hans Holbein the Younger painting, commissioned by King Henry VIII, out the window; a Rembrandt portrait displayed in a window being mistaken for an actual person; and paintings being trimmed extensively in the Louvre no less, to match the dimensions of other paintings. So much more than “seemingly dry facts” (Elizabeth A. Pergam, p. 110), provenance emerges as “the social life of art” (Anne Higgonet, p. 201). Its volatile political life is also emphasized through numerous examples of works that were protected, purged, or misrepresented by rulers.

Of definite interest to art history departments, this collection is also applicable to museology and library science, particularly to the study of rare books. While the content is suited to graduate students, the clarity of writing is not beyond the reach of undergraduate students.

Anne Higgonet’s afterward synthesizes the book concisely, drawing connections within and between the different sections: Inscribing Provenance; The Time and Place of Provenance; Provenance and Commerce; and Provenance Research Instrumentalized.

The book contains notes, a thorough index, and high quality black and white illustrations.

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