

PROVENANCE RESEARCH AND THE ART TRADE

Ed. Peter Wehrle

KETTERER  KUNST

CONTENT

- 07 **Introductory note**
Gudrun und Robert Ketterer
- 09 **Preface**
Peter Wehrle
- Essays
- 15 **The gap between the academic art world and the art trade –
on the status quo and the future of an uneasy relationship**
Christian Fuhrmeister and Stephan Klingen
- 27 **Case study The Mengers family – collectors and traders**
Agnes Thum
- 41 **Art trade documentary sources and their benefits for scholars and the trade**
Theresa Sepp
- 51 **Case study The Kühns art dealership – an approximation**
Sarah von der Lieth
- 63 **Auction catalogs and provenance research**
Susanne Meyer-Abich
- 71 **Case study The art collection of Kommerzienrat Isidor Bach –
a reconstruction approach**
Sabine Disterheft

- 83 **The Paul Cassirer & Walter Feilchenfeldt Archive, Zurich**
Christina Feilchenfeldt
- 93 **Case study The Jewish art dealer Arthur Dahlheim**
Carolin Faude-Nagel
- 105 **Dr. No or: How I learned to love the reverse sides of paintings –
Looking back on 28 years with a Berlin auction house**
Stefan Pucks
- 115 **Case study The Paul Metz Collection and the ‘Ettle Case’**
Katharina Thurmair
- 127 **The Holocaust Claims Processing Office and the art trade: an unlikely partnership**
Anna B. Rubin
- 135 **Case study The unknown brother: Fritz Benjamin and his art collection**
Agnes Thum
- 147 **The archival sources of Galerie Fischer, Lucerne**
Sandra Sykora
- 157 **Case study ‘Degenerate Art’ in the art trade**
Mario-Andreas von Lüttichau
- 169 **Authors**
- 176 **Imprint**

678

Ernst Arndt Kunsthandlung, Dresden

28

Faun
die Krüge
München
Arndtstr. 57/100

1210

34

DR. NO OR: HOW I LEARNED TO LOVE THE REVERSE SIDES OF PAINTINGS – LOOKING BACK ON 28 YEARS WITH A BERLIN AUCTION HOUSE

In winter 1984/85, during a seminar on ‘Dutch 17th Century Painting’, students were passing the restoration workshop of the Hamburger Kunsthalle. “Let’s use this opportunity to see something really rare”, said Professor Martin Warnke, “and take a look at the reverse sides of the paintings. Sometimes they tell us more than the front.” At the time, I had no idea that I would get to look at well over 10,000 reverse sides of paintings from the late 18th to the 20th century in the course of my life. In February 1995, I joined the cataloging department of a Berlin auction house.

Starting to work there, the first thing I had to do was determine the type of paint and the support (oil on canvas, tempera on burlap, etc.) or the printing technique (etching on laid paper, drypoint on vellum, etc.), measure the artwork and describe its state of preservation for the catalog. Over the years, I learned to distinguish a Dresden stretcher from a Danish one, and to estimate the age of the paper with the help of UV light. In addition, the works’ authenticity also had to be verified. Back then the whole expert scene was not as advanced as it is today, so I looked for evidence of authenticity based on what I could find on the reverse sides. Artists’ inscriptions on the reverse, their signatures, picture titles and dates, or estate stamps were the first things to be included in the catalog description. Everything that spoke for the authenticity of the artwork and increased its value was mentioned, including the labels the paintings feature from exhibitions in museums or at art dealers (*fig. 1*).

When I think back to these beginnings today, it feels like listening to grandpa talking about the war. Until the introduction of a database in the fall of 1995, we wrote our catalog entries in a MS Word file in specific order. We didn’t take any photos of the verso sides; expensive transparencies served for printing the catalog and for occasional inquiries we

Fig. previous page: Findings on the reverse: Otto Strützel, *Faun*, 1906, oil on panel, 27 x 21.5 cm.

© Ketterer Kunst GmbH & Co. KG, Munich

made to the respective experts. We obtained information from books and magazines in our well-stocked library and the Berlin Art Library. But the eyes of the Warnke student increasingly wandered to the other, seemingly unimportant inscriptions, stamps and labels on the stretchers and frames. I began to take notes of what I saw, initially in no strict order and always aware that my actions might seem completely redundant from the employer's point of view, and that I might be wasting my valuable time. But that was about to change.

After the turn of the millennium, digitization became part of everyday work life and with it came a vast increase of research potential and obligations (!) for determining provenances: requirements stipulated in the Washington Declaration of 1998, initially only mandatory for public art collections in Germany, they were soon also applied to the art trade. With the triumph of digital photography, the financial aspect began to play a minor role in the documentation of the reverse sides, but it would have required additional archive staff to manage the photos. In any case, we created files, occasionally with printed photos and photocopies of labels and estate or collector stamps, later also in digital form.

Here are a few thoughts on the broad field of reverse side features.



Fig. 1: Findings on the reverse: Franz von Lenbach, *Landschaft mit schlafendem Hirtenknaben*, c. 1858–1860, oil on cardboard, 26.5 x 36.8 cm.



Fig. 2: Auction house Leo Spik, Berlin: Lot 58, in white chalk.

© Ketterer Kunst GmbH & Co. KG, Munich



Fig. 3: Auction house Rudolf Bangel, Frankfurt a. M.: Auction 654, lot 30, in blue crayon.

© Ketterer Kunst GmbH & Co. KG, Munich

Inscriptions

At the auction house for which this author works, this term is used to denote everything that does not come from the artist, whose own inscriptions are referred to as designations. For example, the first owners of a painting might have written their name on the back, or noted the artist's name in case the painting was unsigned. It was not until the end of the 19th century that inscriptions from art dealers and auction houses followed. It took me years to decipher them – today many things are available online by just a few clicks. I learned that in the 20th century many auction houses discreetly labeled the works with the lot number in white chalk; Leo Spik in Berlin, for example, always labeled two, sometimes even three bars of the stretcher or frame (*fig. 2*). If you find a number in blue crayon at the top right of the stretcher or on the backing board, a three- or four-digit number separated from another shorter number by a slash, then you have an indication of an auction at Rudolf Bangel in Frankfurt am Main (*fig. 3*). The auction number is followed by the lot number. A similar number in pencil in bottom left is a reference to auctions at Galerie Wolfgang Ketterer in Munich, where the Arabic numerals indicate the lot number, with or without a separating slash, followed by the auction number in Roman numerals (*fig. 4*). After 1945, colleagues from English and American auction houses were less squeamish, using stencils to apply their numbers to the stretcher in black paint (*fig. 5*). The writing utensils that were employed also help to identify the date, a ballpoint pen for the years after 1945 and a felt-tip pen for the 1960s and 1970s. Since then – albeit very rarely – art dealers have also applied their – usually indecipherable – gallery abbreviations with transparent, fluorescent liquid that can only be seen in UV light.

Stamps

Alongside the inscriptions, stamps of the manufacturers and dealers of art supplies (canvases, boards, etc.) in London and Paris, and later also in Munich, were also applied. The addresses on these stamps can help to confirm the authenticity and (earliest) chronological classification of a painting, while watermarks and embossing stamps can do the same for works on paper. Max Liebermann, for example, bought his stretchers and canvases from Leopold Hess on Genthiner Straße 29, Lovis Corinth from L. A. Schröter & Co. in Charlottenburg, as his apartment on Klopstockstraße was nearby. In the case of Walter Leistikow's paintings, the stamp of the Berlin art supplies shop Doris Ranfft can contribute more to determine the authenticity than the front, especially if an employee or the shop owner Hermann Mordaß himself added 'Herr Professor Leistikow' and the dimensions of the stretcher in fine pencil. As Leistikow was appointed professor shortly before his death, such a painting could be dated to the years 1907/08 – if we can act on the assumption that not every well-known artist in the store was addressed with this title.

The first customs stamps also originate in the 19th century, followed by the owners' address stamps as of 1900, and export permit stamps for paintings from Eastern European or Latin American countries after 1945.

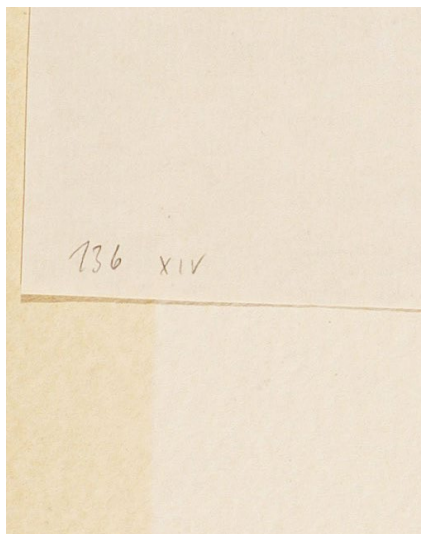


Fig. 4: Galerie Wolfgang Ketterer, Munich: Auction 14, lot 136, in pencil.

© Ketterer Kunst GmbH & Co. KG, Munich



Fig. 5: Christie's auctioneers: stock number, black ink, stenciled.

© Ketterer Kunst GmbH & Co. KG, Munich



Fig. 6: Stuttgarter Kunstkabinett: 36th auction, May 3, 1961, lot 158, label.

© Ketterer Kunst GmbH & Co. KG, Munich

Labels

Labels with names and sometimes addresses printed on them emerged in the late 19th century, probably as a result of the expanding art market. Ever more distant regions could be reached by railroad, and it was a good idea to label one's possessions when traveling. Taking pride in documenting where the painting had been may also have played a role – just like hikers adorn their walking sticks with medallions. As the frame of a picture could be replaced, the labels were usually placed in prominent positions on the stretcher, at the top, preferably on the left or in the middle.

Understatement was the trademark of the art salon founded by the cousins Bruno and Paul Cassirer in Berlin in 1898. The gallery was located in the middle of a quiet residential area away from the bustling Potsdamer Platz and did not even have a store sign. Understatement also characterizes the Cassirer labels, which featured nothing but a printed 'No.' and inscription of inventory number, an artist's name and the title of the painting. On the subject of 'inventory number': As the acquisition of an artwork was in some cases financially burdening for some art dealers, or they were unwilling to take on the risk alone, gallery owners often (or even mostly?) acted on behalf of the artists or other dealers. This was reflected on the labels by the additions 'C', 'Com' or 'K' for 'Kommission' ('consignment'). The addresses on the labels can be used to trace the period during which the painting was

there, although this is not always reliable, as art dealers used their stock of labels over longer periods of time.

The stickers of well-known galleries such as Paul Cassirer or unknown ones such as Alfred Heller in Berlin-Charlottenburg aroused my curiosity: Where exactly were they located and what did they specialize in? Wolfgang Wittrock shared my interest and published my historical art city map *Die Kunststadt Berlin 1871–1914* with 100 art business addresses for the Ferdinand Möller Foundation in 2007.

Auction house labels from the period between 1945 and 1985 are particularly noteworthy today, as they cannot be researched online. Above all, I have in mind the squares, in most cases pastel-colored labels of Roman N. Ketterer's Stuttgarter Kunstkabinett (*fig. 6*), actually mostly placed bottom left, just like the later inscriptions on the reverse sides of his brother Wolfgang Ketterer's auction house in Munich. However, the former only indicate the lot number, which is why one needs to consult every single catalog for the 37 auctions of the Stuttgarter Kunstkabinett – or rather has the privilege of doing so, because the range of works of Modern art on offer in post-war Germany was spectacular! It is generally a good idea to memorize the typography of auction catalogs, as some buyers of works of art simply cut out the catalog description and stick it on the back of their new acquisition. Speaking of which: Around 1900, exhibition institutions, artist associations, art societies and museums also introduced labels, with fellow artists in particular not hesitating to stick their labels directly onto the back of the canvas. Over the years, the canvas shrank and the label bulged out in front.

As a result of the increasing number of exhibitions, shipping companies such as Gustav Knauer in Berlin also attached their labels to artworks in the early 20th century, followed by Schlien in Berlin and Hasenkamp in Cologne around 50 years later, in many cases inscribed with the lender's name by hand! Naturally, owners of the paintings also provided their own address labels after 1945.

Frame makers' labels should not be forgotten, not only because they probably came somewhat earlier than the stickers of art dealers, but also because frame makers often turned art dealers, as was the case with Weber in Berlin or Abels in Cologne. The addresses and the nature of the stickers, usually applied in top or bottom center of the frame or the backing board, allow for an approximate determination of place and time of framing. In the case of Conzen from Düsseldorf, the order number even tells us the year the picture was framed. The frame maker labels also bear witness to the pride taken in the craftsmanship, a reputation not always justified after 1945.

One more word on the manipulation of reverse features: In early years I still saw labels with the names scratched out, but this seems to happen no more. As a result of today's provenance research, which experienced a boom with the Schwabing Art Trove in 2012, labels or problematic names of previous owners are now probably removed or sanded off or 'disposed of' together with the stretcher, and the painting is mounted on a new one (I will mention one exception that confirms the rule below). If the canvas has been relined, even though this does not appear necessary from a conservation angle, extreme caution is required. Unless the painting comes from the US, as Americans seem to love preserving their paintings for eternity. The story of the forger Wolfgang Beltracchi is almost touching. He didn't fail because of his work on the front sides – his pictures by Heinrich Campendonk



Fig. 7: Fake Flechtheim label on a forged Campendonk painting.

Image credits: © Landeskriminalamt Berlin



Fig. 8: Fragment of a label of Galerie Goldschmidt-Wallerstein, Berlin.

Photo: © Agnes Thum



Fig. 9: Label of Galerie Goldschmidt-Wallerstein, Berlin.

© Ketterer Kunst GmbH & Co. KG

or Max Ernst were confirmed by experts – no, he failed on the reverse sides! The portrait of Alfred Flechtheim on a fictitious gallery label helped to uncover the forgery scandal (*fig. 7*).

It has always been my goal to give each of the artwork I tend to in cataloging its own story. The specialist knowledge went to my head, and I was even considering to showcase my knowledge on the TV game show *Wetten dass?*, claiming I could identify paintings from behind. I once shouted “Yeaaaaah!!!!” so loud that it could be heard throughout the house when I was able to identify a small painting inscribed ‘Königsplatz 3’ as former property of the Akademie der Künste in Berlin. Unfortunately, this also prevented its sale! Same case, different aspect: A painting by a German artist from around 1930 featured the deed of gift for some esteemed ‘Pg.’ (NSDAP party comrade) with the signature of Robert Ley, the head of the German Labor Front, on its reverse. But that’s not all: the deed covered half of the name of the previous Jewish owner. When we informed the prospect consignor that we could not offer the painting the way it was, she simply asked: “Can’t you remove it?” We could not, and the painting went back. Even though I only wanted the best for the company, my popularity with my colleagues went down. When Florian Illies, one of the auction house’s partners until 2018, jubilantly showed me a drawing by Adolph Menzel as a potential consignment for the upcoming auction, I inspected its reverse side and concluded: “We can’t sell that!” That finally earned me the nickname ‘Dr. No’. But it was not because of a fragmentarily preserved label that I identified it as problematic, but because it was inscribed with the name of a Jewish art collector.

No one can know all the reverse features by heart. Fortunately, there are usually other sources for a work of art, unprinted and printed or passed on by word of mouth, from which the provenance can be reconstructed. It is simply a matter of establishing the right connections. When I was asked whether I could identify the upper edge of a label on a painting by Erich Heckel (*fig. 8*), the first place I looked was Galerie Goldschmidt-Wallerstein in Berlin, the artist’s number one dealer in the 1920s, and, lo and behold: it matched! (*fig. 9*)

Long before due diligence was mandated for the art trade by the German Cultural Property Protection Act of 2016, auction houses had already established regular scrutiny of the verso sides, colleagues were interviewed, databases such as Lost Art in Magdeburg and the Art Loss Register in London were scanned and the archives of art dealers like Paul Cassirer or Ferdinand Möller were consulted. The firm that employs the author has a team of two provenance researchers who carry out in-depth research and establish contact with the heirs of the previous owners in cases where a painting is suspect of being Nazi plunder.

A look into the future: Although no single person can know everything, the many hundreds of young, well-connected art historians today could compile their knowledge and create a computer program that can recognize all the features on the reverse sides and thus determine the provenance of every work of art. But wouldn’t that be the end of provenance research? For me, at any rate, the realization is that to stand still is to fall behind. So, I’m learning to love the front sides of paintings again.

PROVENANCE RESEARCH AND THE ART TRADE

Legal notice / bibliographic information

© 2024 Ernest Rathenau Verlag, Karlsruhe, and the authors
The image rights are indicated with the image.

Editor	Peter Wehrle, Managing Director Ketterer Kunst GmbH & Co. KG
Concept and editorial Essays	Agnes Thum, Sabine Disterheft, Sarah von der Lieth Sabine Disterheft, Carolin Faude-Nagel, Christina Feilchenfeldt, Christian Fuhrmeister, Robert und Gudrun Ketterer, Stephan Klingen, Sarah von der Lieth, Mario-Andreas von Lüttichau, Susanne Meyer-Abich, Stefan Pucks, Anna B. Rubin, Theresa Sepp, Sandra Sykora, Agnes Thum, Katharina Thurmair, Peter Wehrle.
Translation	André Liebhold, Hamburg
Copyediting	Elke Thode, Text & Kunst Kontor, Stockach, and Susanne Meyer-Abich, Berlin
Layout	Friedrich Art, Hamburg
Cover	Ilona Singer, <i>Bildnis Robert von Mendelssohn</i> , 1928, oil on canvas, 55 x 46 cm (detail) / © Ketterer Kunst GmbH & Co. KG
Produced by	Ernest Rathenau Verlag, Karlsruhe
Printed by	Offizin Scheufele, Stuttgart Printed in Europe
Published by	Ernest Rathenau Verlag Lorenzstr. 2 76135 Karlsruhe info@ernest-rathenau-verlag.com ISBN 978-3-946476-14-6 (softcover English edition)



Essays contained herein published under
the Creative Commons Licence CC BY-SA 4.0

The copyright of the essays lies with the respective authors.
The illustrations are subject to the respective terms of use.

This publication is available permanently and for free (Open Access) online
at <https://www.kettererkunst.de>, <https://ernest-rathenau-verlag.com>,
<https://books.google.de> and <https://archive.org>.

ISBN 978-3-946476-16-0 (PDF German edition)
ISBN 978-3-946476-17-7 (PDF English edition)

Bibliographic information of the German National Library: The German National Library lists this publication in the German National Bibliography; detailed bibliographic data can be found online at <http://dnb.dnb.de>.