

# Scientific Documentation of Modern and Contemporary Indian Art – A Need in Present Perspective

Aditya Prakash Kanth

## *Abstract*

*India is a growing market of modern and contemporary art and these are being housed in many modern art galleries, museums as well as in private collections. With the exponential growth in the prices of contemporary artworks, fake market is also flourishing at a tremendous rate thereby creating more and more demand for authentication of high value works. Connoisseurship has been undergoing a substantial decline everywhere; still this practice is prevalent and rising in India due to the lack of any kind of documentation which can support scientific method of authentication.*

*There is no compendium of any sort of the modern masters or contemporary artists' materials and techniques available. There is a distinct lack of any technical study done on contemporary paintings such as material analysis, pigment analysis, etc. Thus in the given situation, connoisseurship becomes the only method of authentication but there is no technical facility to validate the connoisseur's statement. Developing the understanding of technical history of contemporary paintings is very difficult due to the lack of resources.*

*Lack of proper documentation, less information about artists' progression, concocted provenance, etc. all demand even great competence in connoisseur to identify the genuine, courage and confidence in collectors to verify the authorship before making any investment.*

*This paper highlights the urgent need to document the Indian modern and contemporary artworks especially the masterpieces in a more scientific way. It will not only benefit the collectors but also curators and conservators in their decision making processes.*

## **1. Introduction**

India is a growing market of modern and contemporary art and contemporary paintings are playing a very prominent role in its financial growth. Indian art market saw boom in the early years of last decade and post recession again it is experiencing a steady growth gaining collectors and investors confidence back in the art market. With the everyday increasing number of potential buyers, many players have entered into the art market such as auction houses, art galleries, private sellers, etc. and some international auction houses are also relishing the prospect of trading in the contemporary paintings in India and trying to tap a growing yet to mature art market. With this growth the value of contemporary paintings is increasing day by day thus creating more and more demand for authentication of high value works. Buyers today not only want authentication certificates from the sellers but also want to verify the authorship of

paintings by hiring independent art connoisseurs, trying to get examined by conservators, and other professionals with specific knowledge on modern and contemporary Indian art.

## **2. Issues in perspective**

### **Fakes**

Progressing Indian art market is more or less like an opaque market. There is no regulatory system which can oversee the art business, control and regulate the prices; put a check to the nefarious activities of selling counterfeits which are by-products of hyped-up market. As a result of this, the market is flooded with fakes. Many new ambitious galleries deal with these kind works and thus bring these into the mainstream market, which becomes very difficult to identify from genuine.

### **Less information about artists' progression**

Information about artists' life progression is very important to know where he was trained, when he started painting, which places he worked, with whom he worked, etc. But in many cases there is inadequate information about the artists' progression, as a result of which verifying provenance of their artworks becomes very difficult.

### **Lack of provenance and concocted provenance**

In many cases, the provenance of modern and contemporary art is highly questionable. Though some art galleries provide authentication certificates, yet veracity of these documents are questionable. Many galleries provide concocted provenance. Problem becomes much more critical when artists themselves and their families resort to unethical practices in providing wrong provenance in order to earn more and more money. Many cases have also come to light that artists keep assistants who paint in bulk for them. They hide this information from the public and bring many paintings on their name to cater the need of the art market.<sup>1</sup>

## **3. Current practices and disagreement with standards**

### **Improper documentation**

Many a times the persons involved in documentation of modern and contemporary artworks don't have the requisite knowledge and skill to do the correct captioning. Improper information once obtained carries forward to various places and thus improper documentation is accepted into the system as the correct information due to lack of knowledge and awareness.

### **Damage to the inscriptions and labels due to improper packing and unpacking**

Due to the lack of awareness, many a times it has been noticed that the inscriptions, gallery labels are damaged due to packing tape applied on them which take away the inscriptions when the adhesive tapes are removed. Packing and unpacking are often done in casual manner. Many a times the packers are not even trained to pack the artworks, still they do as a part of the job which only adds woe to the worries.

## **Scribbling on verso**

This has been in practice since long and almost every gallery likes to scribe something on the back of the object. Various kinds of scribbles can be found on the back on canvas, on the stretcher, on the back of paper, on back of frame. Cases have been observed where the scribbling on verso caused charring of the canvas along the scribbling. Further to that framers are also most often found in the habit of writing sizes of mount and frame, colour of mount and frame, etc, on verso of the artworks due to negligence on their part, thus creating unnecessary information on verso of the objects.

## **Photography for sale purposes**

Correct photography is the basic part of the documentation. But in order to publish pictures in catalogues with intention to sale the artworks, most of the times images are highly touched-up in photoshop and other softwares which hide the imperfections present in the object. These images can be misleading in order to establish the genuine. Though this is acceptable to certain extent in order to attract potential buyer, but for documentation purposes these images are far from the desired. Therefore, for documentation purpose, objects should be photographed as the object is with all imperfections visible in order to obtain true visual representation of the artworks and also to establish authenticity at any later stage.

### **4. Demand for connoisseurship and challenges**

As the contemporary paintings becoming highly expensive day by day, fake market is also thriving and expanding like never before. It is not surprising to know that the size of fake market has grown much bigger of the genuine market. So today, the role and responsibility of the connoisseurs are on the rise as they establish the confidence in buyer to buy only genuine works by issuing a qualified opinion on the painting and also alerting them from any work of questionable nature.

Connoisseurship as the term suggests is an essential tool in attributing authorship and determining the authenticity and the ability to distinguish genuine from fakes, but it is highly subjective and unscientific. It is all about educating an eye. It is a sixth sense which becomes more important than any classical studies and converts the subjective judgement into scholarly interpretation. Using this skill connoisseurs sometimes dictate the art market as it is only their expertise available which can help buyers to invest in quality and genuine artworks.<sup>2</sup>

Connoisseurship is declining everywhere due to the advancement of technology and its usage in documentation of artworks, yet this practice is prevalent and rising in India due to the lack of any scientific facility for documentation. Without any technical database of artists' materials, pigments, signatures and inscriptions, etc., authentication becomes very difficult and left for the expertise of connoisseur for some qualified opinion. But the connoisseur's statement is subjective and requires some technical facility to support that statement with concrete scientific and systematic evidence.

But many a times reputation of the connoisseurs are also at stake as the market is filled with many fakes and reproductions and beyond a certain point of analysis of style and ability to make judgement by intuition sometimes a connoisseur fails to distinguish fake from genuine. If the connoisseur misreads the painting, it turns into a big blunder. Authentication of contemporary paintings at times becomes very challenging as artists progression is less known, in many cases there are no provenance, concocted provenance produced by galleries to dupe inexperienced buyer, concocted provenance provided even by the artist family and friends, collusion between galleries and fake providers all demanding great competence in connoisseur to identify the genuine.

## **5. Need for the systematic and scientific documentation**

Everyday information about the modern and contemporary art is generated in terms of publications, shows, art magazines, exhibitions, and discussions by curators, criticisms by critics at art trades, universities, museums, galleries, etc. Most of those publications and discussions are based on art historical researches which are very essential for the appreciation of contemporary art. But when it comes to documentation of artists' materials, techniques, and deconstruction, there is a significant lack of information on this matter.<sup>3</sup>

In order to ensure to obtain the correct and substantial information which can be helpful in authentication, following are the systematic ways being suggested for the documentation of modern and contemporary art:

### **Accurate documentation**

Many a times it has been noticed that basic captioning are not done correctly. Many significant information are not captured which can be vital in authentication of artworks. It is imperative to do the accurate captioning, with knowledge of the documentation process, materials they are documenting without spelling errors and other typing mistakes.

### **Condition photography**

For documentation purpose, visible photography should be done of the front and back of the painting or photography from all angles should be done in the case of sculpture documentation. Signatures, inscriptions, seals, labels, stretchers, etc. should be photographed distinctly. Raking light photography allows documenting the losses, cracks, undulation, painting techniques, etc. Transmitted light photography allows to document paint losses, holes, and other similar imperfections in the painting. All photography done for documentation purpose must show all imperfections present in the painting.

### **Medium identification**

It has been observed in many cases where acrylic medium has been mentioned as oil, gouache has been mentioned as watercolour or oil, tempera as gouache or oil, etc. At times, they really pose challenges in identifying the medium with naked eye without any aid. Yet with good theoretical knowledge of mediums and materials and some experience of observing the paintings, one can draw a conclusion in identifying the mediums and materials.

Mix media adds more problems. In many cases where there seems to be any confusion in identifying the individual components of mixed media, it is common practice to write mixed media. Though in some cases, details of the mixed media can be found on the labels and inscriptions or the invoices supplied by the seller. Wherever any such details are present, they must be reported rather than just writing mixed media.

### **Signature Analysis**

One can plot all signatures decade-wise and notice the difference between actual and the fake ones. Signatures should be analyzed by usage of changing inks, changing signatures over the period of time, signatures in different languages, etc. Signature details also give the year of execution. Signatures are very important in modern and contemporary art world. And about this particular aspect of the painting most reputed gallery owners and seasoned collectors who are in this business for longer period can judge between genuine and the fake. They first look for the signatures. Therefore signature analysis is very important. Many a times signatures are written in regional languages, all those signatures should be read and also get the year of execution by reading them.

### **Analysis of verso**

Documentation of verso of the objects, especially paintings is as important as documenting the painted side. Many a times, verso is hidden behind the frame and the mount. There should be a thumb rule to open the frame in all cases and document the verso. Many a times artists' signature also present on verso, sometimes on stretcher too.

### **Analysis of labels, and other stickers**

There are different kinds of labels that are found on the object:

1. Exhibition labels
2. Labels pasted by the artists themselves
3. Labels pasted by the gallery owners / inventory managers
4. Labels pasted by the auction houses
5. Labels pasted by conservators and restorers
6. Labels placed by documenters/archivists

Many a times it is observed that documenters and other persons involved in packing and unpacking remove the labels knowingly or unknowingly. Sometimes, labels themselves fall off the object due to lack of adhesive bond or old adhesive. Many a times labels are placed on the tapes which have been used to seal the verso gaps between mount and frame. This creates a problem in opening of the paintings. If someone wants to see the verso of the painting, then the mount from verso has to be removed and this may damage the labels as the labels are pasted on very peculiar places.

Labels add historicity and authenticity to the objects. They also inform about their previous transportation history, previous owners, provenance, etc. There is lots of information available on the labels. Barcode labels are also placed on the back of the object. Labels give various

details about the object such as name of the artist, medium, year of execution, place of exhibition, etc. Therefore labels and other stickers should be carefully documented.

### **Recording of inscriptions**

Inscriptions present on the verso of the artworks give a good amount of information about the artwork. Many a times artists write details of the work such as name of the artist (which is very important in cases where there is no signature), title of the object, year of execution, medium, sizes, orientation of the object (in some cases orientation of the paintings are not clearly discernible, in those cases, orientation in form of arrows given on the verso provides valuable information about the orientation). In addition to the inscriptions written by the artists, gallery owners or collectors also sometimes write some code or title on verso of the painting, or the framer writes the size of the mount, etc. The practice of writing on verso by galleries and framers should be discouraged so that the importance of verso of the objects is maintained. Collectors or gallery owners should try to devise some other ways of putting gallery records such as temporary labels, etc.

### **Preparation of condition reports**

Condition reports give a good account of the status of preservation and damage present in the artworks. This can serve as a very useful data for authentication of the artworks as condition report would tell all the imperfections, inherent or induced present in the artwork.

### **Pigment Analysis**

Since artists use different pigments in different times, a chronological table can be prepared to identify the pigment. But this is not a good source of authentication of modern and contemporary art because artists may buy the pigments in bulk and use those later even years after buying the paint. It cannot even tell when the pigments were produced. It cannot tell when after the inventions of the pigment have been used. Only it can be estimated that the painting is not executed before that certain date or year as the pigment was not synthesised before that year.<sup>4</sup>

### **Thread count Analysis**

Thread count can be done in case of paintings on canvas. Thread count analysis is the procedure in which the number of thread is counted in warp and weft in square inch or square cm area. Preparing a data bank of this of artists is very important. Whenever any painting comes for authenticity, conservator can match the thread count to the similar works of that period of the same artist. Also there are possibilities to know that same canvas role, or canvas from same manufacturer might have been used to execute two paintings. This can provide good information to support the authenticity of works as painted depictions can be copied but copying thread count would be very difficult. In some cases where the painting canvas is lined, it becomes very difficult to count the thread. If the paint layer is thin, then there are possibilities of thread count from the painted side using magnifier, but if the paint layer is thick, it becomes very difficult.<sup>5</sup>

### **Watermarks**

Watermarks can be easily identified by looking the object against the light. This is a good source of information on paper used by the artist. Many artists have penchant to use papers from specific manufacturers, in all those cases, watermarks and seals embossed in paper can give a significant tool in identifying the genuine.

### **Building of vocabulary of modern and contemporary art materials**

Since the materials and mediums of the modern and contemporary art are different from the antiquarian materials, so the documenters write the captioning whatever they find suitable. Here there is a requirement to develop a vocabulary of terminologies related with modern and contemporary art based upon the different media, different kind of signatures such as monogram, initials, or artist's seal, different kind of supports, etc.

### **Video interview of artists by a team of a conservator and a curator**

Video interview is a very good means of recording authentic information directly from the artists. In practice interviews are taken but usually done by critics or curator. In this case the focus remains on the style and iconography, not on the material and techniques. A team of one conservator and one curator or critic should form the team for the interview, so that maximum information can be taken in a single interview and all aspects are covered such as artistic process, materials and technique used, when and where he/she painted, the motivation behind creating the work, historical and aesthetical perspective using a set questionnaire. Photos of artists with their works can also serve as important information in establishing the authenticity of the artworks.

## **6. Scientific Instrumentation**

Following instruments are very helpful in the examination of artworks:

### **UV photography**

Ultraviolet radiations have shorter wavelength than the visible radiation. These UV radiations cause materials to fluoresce. UV examination can be done to determine the surface characteristics of the paintings. Different compositions of varnishes fluoresce differently. Varnishes also fluoresce differently as per the difference in age. Old and new varnishes can be easily be distinguished using this method.<sup>6</sup>

### **IR reflectography**

IR photography can be employed to look through the paintings. It can be used to see the under drawings which is not visible to the naked eyes. IR radiations have longer wavelength. When the longer wavelength of IR radiation penetrates the paint layers become transparent and underneath layers become visible to the camera. The camera sends the pictures to monitor which can be seen by the examiner. Many pigments appear transparent whereas some pigments are opaque and appear dark. The image appears in black and white on the computer monitor. The contrast of absorption of various materials reveal layer of the painting not visible to the naked eye such as under drawing and the changes in the paint layer.

## **USB microscopy**

Hand held microscope can also be employed for thread count as it gives accurate picture and details of the thread count. Certain pigments can also be determined as pigment crystals can be seen using this instrument. Synthetic pigments vs. natural pigments are easily determined with this instrument. Retouching can be easily noticed. It comes in various magnifications. Usually it comes in 200x magnification, but certain usb microscopy also comes in 600x magnification. Polarised light microscopy can also be done by using some specific filters attached to the USB microscope which can be used for documentation of pigment size, observation of preparation of grounds through cracks, etc.<sup>7</sup>

## **Multispectral Imaging**

When the aim is better understanding of work with aim of authentication, it is useful in knowing the materials as they differ period to period and artist to artist. The trustworthy method to identify the materials is the analysis of micro samples. Only the drawback of this method is that it requires the paint samples to be detached from the painted surfaces which cannot be placed back. This can be employed to view not only on the surface but each layer of painting in great detail. It can also give pictures of very high resolution.<sup>8</sup>

Analysis with scientific instruments such as **Polarised Light Microscopy (PLM)**, **Fourier Transform Infrared Spectroscopy (FTIR)**, **X-ray Fluorescence (XRF)**, **Scanning Electron Microscope (SEM)**, **Raman spectroscopy** are some of the advanced instruments which can be employed for analyzing structural and chemical information of the object, pigments and binders, elemental compositions, etc. This will give precise information about the medium and materials, thus reducing any ambiguity cropped up by different modes of visual documentation.

## **7. Conclusion**

Many of the renowned modern masters are in their eighties and nineties. They are available for consultation about their works, whenever the authenticity of any of their paintings is questioned. But when the fakes are prevalent in case of living artists, what will happen when these artists are no more to be referred to. Therefore there is an urgent need of documentation of contemporary artworks before many significant information are lost.

Scientific instrumentation can provide many essential details helpful in authentication. Using a set of these instruments, much information can be gathered, such as painting techniques, preparation processes, and materials of composition such as pigments, varnishes, ground, supports, condition, and any previous conservation intervention. This will be very helpful in guiding conservators in their decision making process in undertaking restoration of modern and contemporary artworks.

## **Creating a data bank**

There is an urgent need to develop a comprehensive data bank of all information collected directly from visual documentation as well as scientific investigations which can be put in public domain for researchers, collectors, museum personnel for their reference and whenever

authenticity of any object is questioned. The data bank can be used for research purposes, publication, teaching and other academic scholarly interpretation and dissemination of knowledge and awareness.

### **Taking special care of masterpieces**

There are many paintings and other contemporary works of art that are famous and worth all these scientific examinations. But, to initiate the process, first masterpieces should be targeted. All information should be gathered about those masterpieces which are lying with museums, art galleries and art collectors. Then select masterpieces should be given priority in documentation. Priority should be given to the masterpieces of those artists who are in their eighties and nineties, as they can provide much vital information about their works.

### **Training**

Museum personnel and other professionals engaged in documentation of modern and contemporary artworks should be given appropriate training in identifying the mediums, materials, can read the digital imaging, etc. This will give the desired tools and skill set to the conservators and curators in dealing with these kinds of works with confidence which help in capacity building in India by creating a pool of subject experts with in-depth knowledge on modern and contemporary artworks.

Finally, it will boost confidence in collectors while making any investment decision; will go a long way in appreciating contemporary art and also establishing the respect for the artists and eventually Indian art market.

Government institutions have to take the initiative with the support of private stakeholders for the concerted, holistic and coordinated action. This can create a world of systematic and scientific knowledge in the benefit of Indian modern and contemporary art.

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### **Author**

ADITYA PRAKASH KANTH is a senior conservator at Conservation Laboratory, National Museum, New Delhi. He is also a PhD research scholar at National Museum Institute, New Delhi. Address: c/o Conservation Laboratory, National Museum, Janpath, New Delhi, 110011, India. Email: [adityakanth@gmail.com](mailto:adityakanth@gmail.com); Tel: +91-98109 45259.