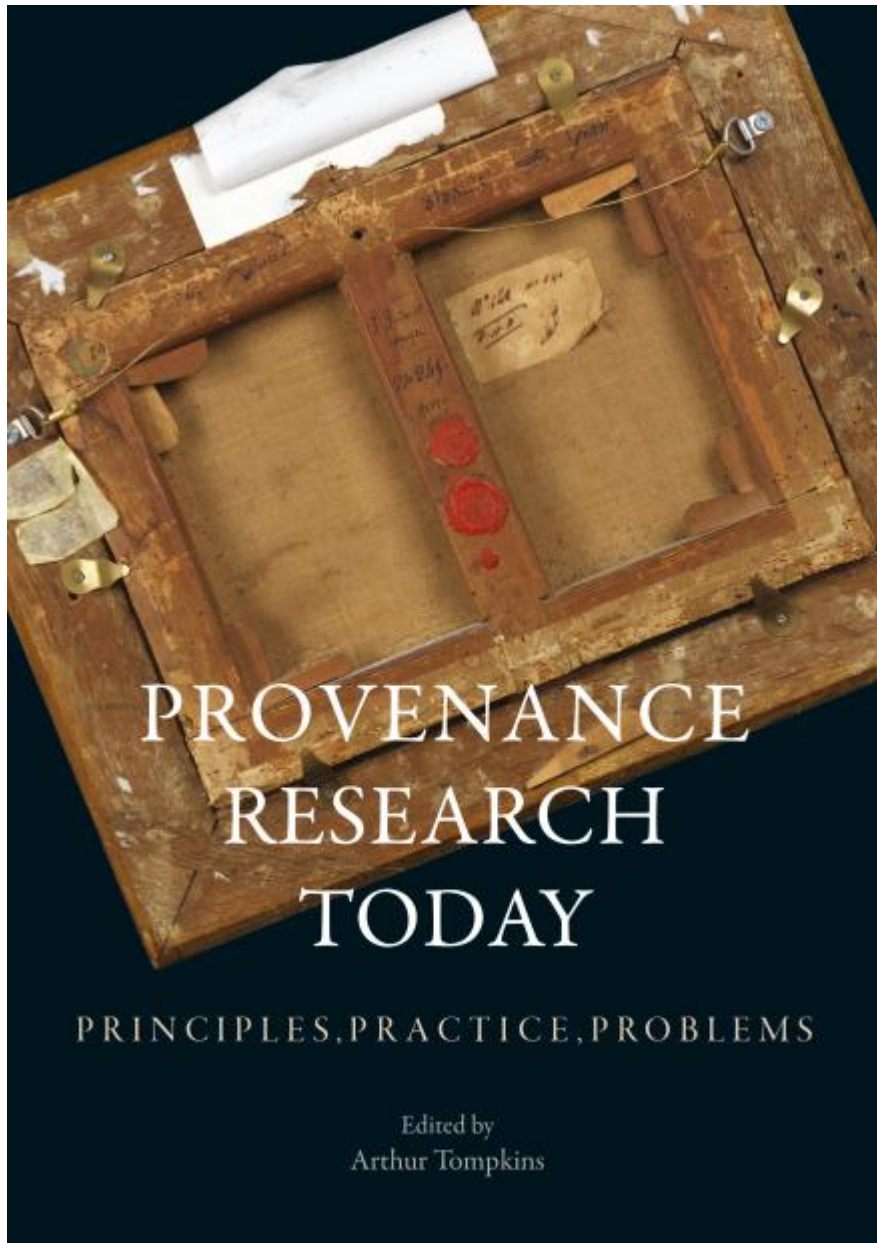


Research Today



Reviewed by Riza Hussaini

Provenance Research Today: Principles, Practice, Problems

Edited by Arthur Tompkins

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This publication could not have come at a better time. A few weeks into reviewing this volume, several news articles, documentaries and tools emerged regarding forgeries, illicit sales, non-fungible tokens (NFTs) and repatriation of looted antiquities and art works.

For those working in heritage or the arts, the term provenance is perhaps no stranger. But how much of provenance do we truly understand? Is it merely the who, what and where of an object? What about everything else in between or even before any obvious documentation? In an increasingly ethics-led and equity-aware world, provenance research and due diligence ought to play a greater part in our work as heritage professionals, from considering acquisitions and conservation treatments to display and interpretation.

Drawing together experts and practitioners of provenance research, this volume takes the reader from the beginnings and aims of provenance research and current practices, right through to the future mitigation of potentially serious legal disputes.

Provenance Research Today is a wide ranging primer for those new to, or interested in, the subject. Though that said, anyone already carrying out such research would benefit from the extensive case studies, examples of legal implications and technical scholarship presented. What I appreciate and enjoy about this volume is the openness in sharing and explaining case studies where the disputes reached court and the extent to which people will go to falsify provenance.

This review includes my thoughts on a few of the essays that resonate with my interests and introduced me to provenance practices. This volume is organised into five parts, each carefully chaptered allowing the reader to easily navigate to specific topics. While each of the included papers can stand alone, some authors reference other essays within the volume, allowing the reader to further explore certain ideas. Generously, the book also provides a wide selection of additional resources as well as suggested readings which include online archives, databases and auction catalogues.

We start off with editor Arthur Tompkins illuminating us with “The history and purposes of provenance research”. His chosen case study of Gustav Klimt’s Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer and two other paintings—also by Klimt—beautifully illustrated the complexities and importance of provenance research; that is, for “a just and fair” conclusion as to whom what rightfully belongs. The history of the painting’s journey was, at one point in its life, concealed, and efforts by the heirs to see its return were impeded even by the government. Thus is the thorny situation of Nazi-looted art. While unravelling the seizure of artworks during the Nazi era has been (and still is) overwhelming, it has played a pivotal role in the expansion of provenance research in the 20th century; a large portion of the case studies in this volume are reflective of this.

It was emphasised that securing a robust and well-rounded provenance requires time and persistence, building on previous information, evaluation and then more investigation.

In several essays, notably in Part V, notions of morality as motivation are referenced as part of the just and fair solution to the reconciliation of cultural property. Moral obligations being of a

fluid nature, it was reasoned that to assess and deliver a just and fair solution, a new framework and guidance would be needed. From here on, the traditional tasks of provenance research (that is of authenticating artworks) are already inculcated; these tasks include connoisseurship, scholarship through authentication agencies and examination through catalogue raisonnés, a term recurrently mentioned. Once a matter exclusive to art historians and curators, provenance research has expanded greatly. The depth and breadth of research undertaken now encompasses all the nuances to reflect the multi-disciplinary venture in gaining a full comprehension of the origin and journey of an artwork to establish “whether such transfers are ethically, morally and legally valid and defensible” (p. 23).

In our age of technology, it is widely accepted that any research done is a hybrid between digital and analogue resources. As technology advances, provenance research of heritage objects has shifted more to the digital sphere. The topic of digital scholarship and data-driven research being an interest of mine, I was anticipating more from chapter 6 (by Jason Sousa and Ariane Moser) which seemed rather basic in the first part. It did eventually get up to speed touching briefly on blockchain technologies and utilising machine learning and AI to enhance provenance research. The essay does provide a good grounding in the collection, validation and use of data and databases which are now commonplace and addresses the gamut of misinformation, limitations and outdated databases that are also available. The authors make a timely argument for decentralising institutional data, emphasising the need for cost-effective access to, and the connection of, related databases to share knowledge which would provide greater data access for all. However, it left me wanting more.

There was a shared indication (in chapters 6 & 7) that the art market and art history research are rarely in sync. And as Louisa Wood Ruby pointed out in chapter 7, early art historians seemed quite hesitant in adopting the digital environment as a legitimate resource, perhaps due to conservatism and the complexities of navigating digital databases. This initial disinterest has meant that the move to incorporating and using digital resources has been slow and appears to still be lagging. Wood Ruby evaluates, in some detail, initiatives and tools that digital advancements contribute to ongoing provenance and art research, particularly the use of specialised imaging technology, investigating web-archives and the increased reception of open data.

This volume does not indulge the reader in the thrilling world of art auctions and sales; rather it unpacks the rigorous (or not) back-of-house operations involved in running auction houses and galleries. To be sure, the book never downplays the impact and influence these organisations and collectors have on the popularity and market value of an artwork or artist.

Susan J. Cooke’s essay in chapter 9 is an instructive investigation into how catalogue raisonnés are used in the modern art market ecosphere. The author summed it up deftly saying that the regular audience of the modern catalogue raisonné “are more often users than readers, more likely to scan than pore over its content” (p. 117). As I have little experience evaluating these catalogues, this essay was particularly helpful in my understanding of these catalogues and their place within provenance research; this essay was a welcome read despite it being so far into the volume.

Although the catalogue raisonné purports itself as a complete listing, it can differ between publishers, organisers, and time periods. For example, a previously listed owner may decide to exclude their name from a catalogue raisonné in order to remain anonymous in future editions and are then disguised through punctuation—brackets, back slashes and semicolons—which are also used to imply doubt or gaps in provenance. A limited provenance history may suggest a history that is flawed, perhaps less interesting, or just a very private owner. Yet a highly decorated provenance can also arouse suspicion, and “[a] work’s provenience is not a guarantor of artistic authorship any more than its provenance” (p.120). What now seems obvious is that provenance is an interpretive process, and most catalogue raisonnés involve collective input from multiple experts; it is cyclical—to compile a catalogue raisonné involves undertaking provenance research.

Provenance Research Today is an informative read with some events discussed resembling that of a blockbuster movie. It is a fascinating and often moving insight into the sometimes dubious activities in the art and antiquities market exposing the unscrupulous practices of buyers and sellers. That the modern approach to provenance research should include computer scientists, imaging specialists, conservators and more to achieve a holistic outcome appears tacit.

There is an underlying sentiment that real change in the system must come from participants in the art market, and this volume highlights the conflict between commercial and national interests and the truth of provenance. Given how recent a more thorough approach to provenance research is in many major institutions, it is likely to take time for the necessary changes to manifest. With an increased interest in transparency in all aspects of life, and the rising profile of restitution of cultural property, increased pressure from outside the art world may well be the impetus needed.

Author Byline

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(Read the review in the August-September 2021 "News in Conservation" Issue 85, p. 36-38)