

A few thoughts about antique oil paintings

It is a fact that the public doesn't know the difference between old paintings from new and a good painting from a bad one. I have seen several times when people had a painting under glass and they assumed it was just a print. Or they have a print and think it is an original painting.

Whenever someone calls me on the phone and tells me that have a painting, I first ask what the **subject** is. Is it a landscape (outdoor scene), a still life, a seascape, or a portrait? I ask them to look at the back of it and tell me what they see? Traditionally, artists would tack a cotton or linen canvas over a wooden stretcher and tighten it with wooden triangular "keys." Then they would **prepare** the surface (**size it**) with glue and white lead. This keeps the acid from the canvas or board bleeding through the paint and smoothes the surface fibers. In the past early trained artists prepared the surface well and smooth. In the early 19th Century **prepared canvases** and stretchers were available for sale. Artists also frequently painted on various commercially prepared artist boards. However, **folk artists** painted on just about anything including, glass, tin, wood panels, bed ticking, cardboard, etc.

The best way to get a **quick sense** of the age of a piece of furniture is to learn about the materials, oxidation, tools marks, and construction rather than the nuances of style. That approach is also true for judging the age of paintings.

Looking at the back of a painting, one can learn many things. Is the wooden stretcher old and oxidized? Is the canvas darkened with age? If it was covered it could be old and not very dark. If one knows wood tool marks one can tell if the stretcher is hand sawed or machine planed. It is possible to determine if the wood is American or Continental. Continental stretchers often had an extra brace down the middle. Sometimes the stretchers have metal brackets with patent dates on them. Most importantly, if a painting was exhibited at a gallery, an exhibition, or a museum it may have a label on the back. The **information on it** may include the title of the work, the artist's name, his address, the location of the scene,

or the identity of the sitter, the date, the price, provenance, and more. This could add greatly to the desirability of the work. Collectors wish to know everything they can about individual works.

Fakes and reproductions exist and are being created today, especially in Asia. I have been told that Brighton, England is full of them. There are websites (Across the Sea) that produce and sell reproductions of famous paintings. Fortunately, these artists copy these famous paintings from a picture on a computer screen. They lose authenticity of an old painting in the process. They charge by the size of the oil. Apparently, artist copyrights last 70 years so anything short of that shouldn't be reproduced. I have heard that there are businesses that have bought up many **old canvasses** and boards to repaint. One can look at a painting under a UV or black light and learn about its restoration history and condition. Repainting will fluoresce bright purple usually. There is a foil for this masking varnish but it isn't widely used.

There are **trends** in collecting art as in every market. If at the Turn of the Century, grandma would have bought a landscape oil with cows, it may not have appreciated as much as if she had bought an impressionistic beach or park scene. As a general rule dark paintings or portraits of old scowling people are not very desirable. However, there are notable exceptions to every rule some of Peck's paintings.

Some **investor** groups have bought art as a commodity as the Japanese did with impressionist paintings in the 80's. In the today's market the signature of a piece is often overly important. Collectors aren't always looking for a fine example of an artist's work as much as they are buying **signatures**. A small study by Albert Bierstadt sells for \$5000. For that price, I prefer buying nicely painted paintings by regional or lesser known artists.

All paintings by an artist aren't created equal and are one of a kind items. If an artist was a famous landscape painter and he painted a portrait, it may not be particularly desirable. If an artist painted the same scene several times there are always differences. Often when a painter would paint in the outdoors, (**plein air**) he

would paint a study of the scene and later back in his studio he would paint a more elaborate version or several. This is especially true of the artists in the 19th Century who went to the American West to paint our **natural treasures**. It was very difficult to get to those remote places. They often just brought sketch books on horseback. There was a great interest in the **natural wonders** of America, so artists would paint grand paintings of Yosemite, Niagara Falls, etc. so that the public could experience them. Travel and communications was much more difficult then so this filled an entertainment need. Back in New York and other large cities, artists would have **exhibitions of these oils** and charge admission. Sometimes their compositions were imaginary scenes.

It has always been a struggle for artists to support their families, thus the expression “**starving artist.**” Many artists were alcoholics, so this affected the quality and consistency of their work. Like everyone artists had good days and bad ones. **Elkins died in the Elgin Asylum.**

Ideally paintings should be **stored in** controlled temperature and humidity out of direct sunlight. If a painting was stored in a hot attic or wet basement it could be ruined in a short time. If a painting got wet, this can separate the paint from the canvas. If a thoughtless person wiped it with a solvent or they could easily ruin the painting. Often the skies in landscapes are painted very thin and is easily damaged when amateurs trying to clean them. If a painting is rubbed with linseed oil it is generally ruined beyond repair. Paintings are not static, **they are constantly changing.** Oil paintings are very slow drying and are supposed to receive a varnish coat 6 months after completion however, many never receive it. As a painting dries the oils come to the surface and dirt may get incorporated into the paint resin or the varnish coat. In the last 20 years the science of conservation has changed dramatically. Thanks to Richard Wolber of the University of Delaware, conservators now have the technology with enzymes, solvent gels, and other “tools” that can safely remove the dirt and varnish without removing or affecting the painted surface. For hundreds of

years conservators have surface cleaned paintings with saliva now they have artificial saliva.

It is important to keep stretched canvasses tight so wrinkles won't develop. That is where the painted surface can crack. Some oils have **craquelure** which is a network of cracks in the painted surface. There is usually little to be done to fix this. Often stretchers were nailed into frames with the nails going through the edges of the canvas. One can make **museum brackets** to hold the painting in the frame. This keeps from weakening the foundation of the painting, the canvas. Years ago it was standard procedure to **reline paintings** and to patch the back of holes in canvasses. Nowadays the ethic is to preserve the old by sewing in holes and tears and **strip lining** of the edges. In the past, when they relined paintings often they didn't use reversible adhesive so if it came loose in one spot, it was difficult to fix. One should also cover that back of paintings with foam core to protect from puncture and to keep air off of the canvas back. If you can keep the foundation of the painting fresh you have a better chance to preserve the painted surface.

The **condition** of a painting is an important factor in determining its value. If it has much inpainting, especially to the face of a portrait it drastically reduces the value. If it is minor touch up in the background it generally doesn't affect the value very much.

After the Columbian Exposition in 1893, artists from the Art Institute of Chicago used to go south of Lake Michigan to paint for the summer. It was too buggy down there so they began coming to a farm in Oregon, Ill. Famous artists and sculptors such as Lorado Taft, William Wendt, Oliver Dennett Grover, and Francis Browne spent summers there. This group of artists was called the Eagle's Nest Art colony. They held art shows in the second story of the Oregon public library. They were active until 1942 and there remains a permanent exhibit open to the public.

To classify some of the works one could divide them into several groupings. Folk Paintings: Some of these artists may have had training and talent and most generally didn't. People didn't have the recreational pastimes that they do today with TV and travel etc.

Many ladies got together and painted on Sundays. Often they would copy prints or famous paintings of their time. There are many amateur paintings on the market that generally aren't very good.

Before the 1950's not much was known about important American folk artists such as Sheldon Peck and Ammi Phillips. I believe there is still much we don't know about Sheldon Peck. I have an interest in Peck because he was a **local artist**. There were few painters in Illinois prior to 1840. John Bereman of Aurora and Geneva identified who the folk portrait painter was that had painted the families in the Fox Valley including Aurora, Glen Ellyn, St. Charles, and Elgin. Peck rarely signed his work like many other itinerant artists of the early to mid 19th Century. Peck started painting in Vermont in the 1820's and later moved to New York state and in the 1830's to Chicago then to (Babcock's Grove), now Lombard, Illinois. When he first came to Illinois he tried to make a living painting portraits in Chicago and failed then moved to farm. His house is the oldest standing in Lombard. One of his paintings, the Wagner family of Aurora is an icon of American folk painting; it belongs to the Aurora Historical Society. His "signature" was often a folded curtain or "rabbit footprints" in the lace or fabric of the sitter. However, there are paintings of his that have neither. Why he painted some of them with these signatures and others is a mystery. Around **60 paintings** of Peck's paintings are known but it is difficult to attribute the atypical ones because they weren't signed. I have seen a pair of large portraits from Ohio that Peck signed but don't look anything like his other work. I am sure he was under great pressure to please the patrons, so he could get paid. One portrait he painted in exchange for a cow. So I imagine he would paint anything that was asked of him. There is a mystery to me. I have recently looked at the copy of **Peck's self portrait** and compared it with photographs of him and found that it wasn't very flattering. Why people liked his stylized portraits is a mystery to me. They often are very austere and not flattering to the sitter. There are about 6 paintings that have more than 1 sitter. Peck was born 1797 died 1868 so he painted for over 40 years and

like Ammi Phillips he had different periods. Most of his Vermont paintings on poplar board are very stylized but so are the Wagner's and Vaughns. From the 1840's when he would begin competing with photography.

Just as in handwriting analysis one looks for similarities trying to identify unsigned art. Often painters would handle objects the same over and over. The reasons that I believe my painting is possibly a Peck are the following similarities that it shares with other known Pecks are the following: the size, composition, background, lips, piercing eyes, reflection on tip of nose, the shadow from nose extending to the eyebrow, the ear, and the treatment of the perspective of the far side of the face, which was one of his weaknesses as a **self taught** artist.

Photography pretty much put folk portrait painters out of business. Photography was much cheaper and more accurate. Peck was an industrious sort he did decorative painting and sold photos, as his son Charles was a photographer.

Ammi Phillips was a very prolific portrait painter in New York State at the same time. Until the research was done, he was known originally as the Kent border limner. Phillips painted for many years so his paintings tended toward more realism as he got older. Some of his early ones tend to be very stylized and **strange** and they are the ones **collectors seek** today.

Today there is a **lot more known** about art and more resources available for researching American art. Today there are websites that have extensive data about many artists. Some of these sites are AskArt, Art Fact, Artcyclopedia, and the Illinois Historical Art project. There are also books and magazines such as American Art Review that contain much useful info.

American settlers generally came from Europe so the artists brought along those artistic traditions. In late 18th Century Europe, Romanticism was popular and was brought to America but with some changes. Romanticism showed God's hand in the natural splendor of nature. The American luminist painters developed a tradition of similar landscapes but with dramatic lighting. Some of these famous artists were Thomas Cole, Frederich Church, and

Albert Bierstadt. Of this luminist grouping some of these oils are also allegorical in nature, as they convey a story. One generally has to understand the literature of the time to understand the allegory.

Impressionism became popular in late 19th Century Europe and was initially resisted by artists here. However, it eventually caught hold and by the turn of the century the great luminists could barely sell their paintings. They were out of style. Finally, illustrations are the last group of which include many different types of subjects depending on the publication they were painted for.

I collect and study 19th Century American painting and 20th Century impressionism, realism, and illustrations. I know little of abstract art, expressionism, and modernism. I like American paintings and am always interested in acquiring nice examples. I enjoy living with the good ones and never tire of seeing them daily.