



Authentication and Due Diligence in Cuban Art

Provenance, certificates, expert authority, and risk indicators

A practical method for turning dispersed clues into a documented, risk-proportionate conclusion while respecting confidentiality.

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Executive summary

Authenticating an artwork is not a matter of finding a persuasive signature or receiving a certificate with an official appearance. It is a cumulative investigation. The strongest conclusion emerges when five bodies of evidence converge: examination of the object, its documented ownership history, art-historical comparison, the demonstrable authority of the person giving the opinion, and legal and commercial checks on the transaction. No single element substitutes for the others.

This discipline is especially important in Cuban art. Migration, dispersed archives, private sales, lost documentation, and variations in titles, measurements, or transliteration can produce incomplete files even for legitimate works. Those gaps do not prove forgery, but they must not be filled with assumptions. They should be identified, investigated, and stated precisely in the final report.

Governing principles

- A certificate is evidence to be verified, not a self-validating guarantee.
- Provenance should be treated as a chain of verifiable facts, not as a decorative narrative.
- An opinion based only on photographs is generally preliminary.
- Expert authority is specific to the artist, period, and type of work.
- Due diligence ends in a documented risk decision, not necessarily in absolute certainty.

1 Authentication, attribution, and due diligence

Three concepts that are often conflated should be kept distinct. Authentication asks whether an artwork was made by the named artist. Attribution expresses a degree of confidence — for example, “by,” “attributed to,” “workshop of,” or “circle of” — and should use controlled language. Due diligence is broader: it examines the identity and authority of the parties, legal title, provenance, lost or stolen-art records, documentation, physical condition, and the terms of the transaction.

Responsible Art Market recommends a risk-based approach that calibrates the depth of inquiry to the object, the parties, and the transaction’s complexity.[1]

Authentication and valuation are also separate tasks. An authorship opinion does not determine value by itself; even a well-supported appraisal does not authenticate. Value also depends on date, quality, rarity, scale, medium, condition, provenance, exhibition history, and demand. Combining the two functions can create conflicts of interest, particularly when the expert’s compensation depends on a positive conclusion or a particular price.

2 Provenance as a chain of evidence

Provenance is the history of an artwork’s ownership, custody, and location from creation to the present. An ideal chain identifies owners, dates, methods of transfer, locations, exhibitions, publications, and sales. Complete chains are uncommon. The quality of a provenance therefore depends not only on continuity but also on the quality, independence, and consistency of its supporting records. The Smithsonian’s Archives of American Art notes that provenance research can help establish both an artwork’s pedigree and the identity and authenticity of a specific object.[2]

Each link should answer four questions: who owned or held the work; when; how it was acquired or transferred; and what contemporary record proves the event. Invoices, receipts, letters, estate inventories, dated interior photographs, exhibition labels, gallery records, customs documents,

insurance files, and catalogues may corroborate one another. A later statement made expressly for a sale carries less weight than an independent record created when the event occurred.

Level	Examples	Professional reading
Strong	Contemporary invoice or inventory; datable photograph; documented exhibition; authoritative publication	Independent evidence close to the event and unmistakably tied to the object
Intermediate	Family statement; retrospective gallery record; partial copy; label without a related archive	Potentially useful, but requires corroboration and consistency checks
Weak	Unverifiable oral history; 'private collection' without dates; document created when the work was offered	Should not be converted into fact without additional evidence

Provenance must match the specific object. Title, dimensions, support, image, inscriptions, and known repairs should remain coherent over time. Changes in title or measurement can be innocent, but they require explanation. If the same photograph or certificate appears attached to different objects, the investigation should stop immediately.

3 What a certificate can prove

A certificate of authenticity records an opinion and, when properly prepared, fixes the identity of the object that was evaluated. It should include a high-resolution photograph, title or designation, proposed date, medium, support, dimensions, inscriptions, date of issue, the issuer's name and signature, the scope of examination, and a clear statement as to whether the work was physically inspected or reviewed only through images. Responsible Art Market's guidelines also recommend retaining the research file and avoiding the indiscriminate issue of duplicate certificates.[3]

The certificate is not self-sufficient. One must establish that the issuer exists, has artist-specific competence, actually issued the document, and can match its registration number, image, and data to an archive. It should also be confirmed that the authority continues to stand by the opinion. Documents can be altered, reused, or forged; even a respected name may appear on a paper that person never produced.

Minimum certificate checks

- Contact the issuer or archive custodian through an independently obtained channel, not solely through a telephone number provided by the seller.
- Match the registration number, photograph, measurements, medium, date, and every inscription to the present object.
- Request written confirmation that the opinion remains current and ask about earlier versions, reservations, or revised conclusions.
- Examine the original document, signatures, stamps, paper, metadata, and chain of custody when the risk profile warrants it.
- Keep the authenticity certificate separate from the appraisal, commercial invoice, and condition report.

4 Recognizing genuine expert authority

Kinship, an institutional title, or many years in the trade are not sufficient by themselves. Authority should be demonstrated through specific research: publications, exhibitions, sustained access to primary archives and undisputed works, technical knowledge of materials, a consistent history of opinions, and a willingness to explain method and limitations. Guidelines issued by the Catalogue Raisonné Scholars Association and the College Art Association treat authenticity opinions as a scholarly practice governed by standards, not as an honorary prerogative.[4]

In Cuban art, authority varies by artist. For some artists, the appropriate starting point may be a foundation or estate with an active archive; for others, it may be the scholar who has systematically catalogued the work or a curator with sustained access to patrimonial collections. Roberto Cobas Amate, for example, has worked for more than three decades in the study and curatorship of Cuban modern art at Havana's Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, and his opinions appear in the public market in connection with works by specific artists such as Sandú Darié and Loló Soldevilla.[5] That relevance does not remove the duty to confirm each document directly. Precisely because a respected signature adds value, it may be imitated or reused.

With José María Mijares, as with other artists whose production is extensive and stylistically varied, the work should be checked with the archive, estate, or specialist who can demonstrate access to undisputed comparisons from the precise period. Family connection may facilitate documentary access, but it does not replace method. Likewise, a specialist's refusal to issue a definitive opinion from photographs is not a weakness; it may be evidence of responsible practice.

Question	Favorable indicator	Reason for caution
Competence	Publications and research on the specific artist or period	Generic experience or authority based only on a title
Method	Explains comparisons, archives, examination, and limits	Instant conclusion without verifiable reasoning
Independence	Fixed fee and disclosed conflicts	Payment tied to value, sale, or a positive result
Records	Archive of opinions and control numbers	Cannot confirm earlier documents
Examination	Physical inspection when necessary	Definitive certainty based only on photographs

5 The object, comparison, and science

Investigation begins with the object, not with the seller's story. The front, back, edges, frame, support, fastenings, labels, numbers, stamps, signatures, and evidence of restoration should be documented. The work is then compared with accepted examples from the same period, considering composition, drawing, gesture, palette, construction, preparation, materials, format, and the evolution of the signature. A superficial resemblance to the artist's "general style" is insufficient.

Physical inspection allows the examiner to study surface, stratigraphy, aging, support tension, layer sequence, and the relationship between signature and paint. Raking light, ultraviolet radiation, infrared reflectography, X-radiography, microscopy, and pigment or binder analysis can answer defined questions. There is no automatic battery of tests: the strategy should respond to the

particular doubt, the material, and the available comparisons. Connoisseurship, art-historical research, and technical analysis complement one another.[3]

Science is often more effective at exclusion than attribution. A pigment introduced after the claimed date may demonstrate an anachronism; materials compatible with the period do not prove authorship on their own. Results should be interpreted with a conservator or scientist familiar with the artist's practice and with possible restoration campaigns.

6 Due diligence on the transaction

An authentic work may still carry defects in title, authority to sell, export status, sanctions exposure, litigation, or theft history. The review should identify the seller and, where appropriate, the beneficial owner; confirm the capacity to transfer title; understand the role of intermediaries; review contractual restrictions; and document price, payment method, and jurisdiction. Written warranties should at minimum address ownership, the truthfulness of supplied information, the absence of known liens, and cooperation if a claim emerges.

Lost and stolen-art records should also be checked when value or risk profile warrants it. INTERPOL maintains an international database of reported stolen artworks, while the Art Loss Register operates a private due-diligence database.[6] A negative result means only that no match was found in those records; it does not establish clean title or authenticity.

Import, export, cultural-property, privacy, sanctions, and anti-money-laundering obligations vary by jurisdiction and date. Independent legal advice should be obtained whenever any may apply. This article provides a research method, not a legal opinion.

7 Particular features of Cuban art

The archive of twentieth-century Cuban art is dispersed across the island, the United States, Latin America, and Europe. Revolution, exile, relocation, informal inheritance, gallery closures, climate damage, and domestic losses fragmented many files. Legitimate transactions were often private and minimally documented. The professional response is not to lower the standard, but to reconstruct the history through lateral sources: datable family photographs, catalogues, correspondence, migration records, critics' and galleries' archives, exhibition lists, period publications, and inventories.

Name variants, accents, translated titles, measurements taken with or without a frame, imprecise descriptions of media, and reused supports all require control. For artists whose careers span pre- and post-exile periods, comparison must be chronological. It is unsound to compare a late-1950s Concrete work with a figurative or lyrical painting produced decades later merely because both bear the same signature.

Digital photography supports initial screening, but it can also alter color, suppress texture, crop damage, and separate a document from the object to which it originally belonged. Investigators should therefore request original high-resolution files, overall and detail views, front and back, scale, raking light, and — where appropriate — a continuous video call or in-person inspection before reaching conclusions.

8 Risk indicators and proportionate response

Indicator	Why it matters	Recommended response
Anomalous price or urgency	May prevent normal review or exploit fear of losing the opportunity	Pause; require adequate time and a complete file
Unknown or unreachable certifier	Competence and issuance cannot be established	Research the record and obtain a second independent opinion
Unconfirmable certificate	May be a copy, alteration, or reuse	Verify with the issuer or archive; match image and registration
Prestigious but vague provenance	A collection name can be invoked without a proved connection	Request dates, records, and an object-specific link
Only seller-controlled photographs	May conceal reverse, surface, scale, or restoration	Obtain original images and independent examination
Data changes between documents	May indicate error, mixed files, or substitution	Build a chronology and resolve each contradiction
Opinion and sale handled by the same person	Creates a conflict of interest	Separate authentication, brokerage, and valuation
Refusal to identify owner or authority to sell	Raises title, sanctions, and unauthorized-agency risk	Apply enhanced checks or withdraw
Persuasive signature, weak work	A signature is among the easiest features to imitate	Evaluate the whole object before the signature
A recently created, overly perfect paper trail	Provenance can also be fabricated	Verify documents in outside archives and locate contemporary traces

9 A recommended ten-step protocol

1. Define the question and intended use of the report — acquisition, sale, loan, insurance, estate, or publication — and agree on the review standard.
2. Identify the owner, seller, intermediaries, and each party's authority to act.
3. Create a stable object record with photographs, dimensions, medium, support, inscriptions, and condition.
4. Gather all documentation rather than selecting only favorable material; preserve originals and metadata.
5. Build a provenance chronology and label each fact as confirmed, probable, stated, or unresolved.
6. Review scholarship, archives, catalogues, exhibitions, and accepted comparisons from the specific period.
7. Verify certificates and opinions directly with their issuers or archives through independent channels.
8. Examine the work physically and commission technical tests only for questions they can answer.
9. Review title, lost or stolen-art records, condition, legal restrictions, and contractual terms.
10. Issue a graded conclusion that states evidence, limits, contradictions, residual risk, and next steps.

The file should preserve evidence that weakens the attribution as well as evidence that supports it. When information is insufficient, “opinion reserved” or “inconclusive” may be the correct professional result. Forcing a binary answer where the evidence does not support one increases risk for every party.

10 Confidentiality and reporting

Confidentiality protects the owner and the integrity of the investigation, but it should not conceal conflicts, replace verification, or prevent an expert from keeping records of known forgeries. A public report may omit names, addresses, prices, and security information; the internal file should retain sources, permissions, communications, and enough reasoning to audit the conclusion.

A professional opinion should state

- The precise object examined and the date of examination.
- Whether inspection was in person or exclusively photographic.
- What documentation was received and which elements could be independently verified.
- The comparisons, archives, and methods used.
- Conflicts of interest and the compensation arrangement.
- The conclusion, degree of confidence, limitations, and any outstanding conditions.

Conclusion

The best defense against error is not an impressive-looking paper but a reproducible process. In Cuban art, where documentary history may be fragmented and authority distributed, professional judgment lies in bringing object, archive, expert, science, and transaction into convergence. Sound due diligence does not promise infallibility: it states what is known, how it is known, what could not be confirmed, and how much risk remains.

Notes and selected sources

- [1] Responsible Art Market, Art Transaction Due Diligence Toolkit, risk-based approach and checklists. <https://www.responsibleartmarket.org/guidelines/art-transaction-due-diligence-toolkit/toolkit/>
- [2] Smithsonian Archives of American Art, A Guide to Provenance Research at the Archives of American Art. <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collection-features/a-guide-to-provenance-research-at-the-archives-of-american-art>
- [3] Responsible Art Market, Guidelines for Experts Authenticating Works of Fine Art, sections on in-person examination, documentation, technical analysis, reporting, and records. <https://www.responsibleartmarket.org/guidelines/guidelines-for-experts-authenticating-works-of-fine-art/guidelines/>
- [4] Catalogue Raisonné Scholars Association, Guidelines for Issuing Scholarly Opinions about Authenticity; College Art Association, Authentication and Attributions Guidelines. <https://www.catalogueraisonne.org/guidelines>
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- Denver Art Museum, Provenance Research, definition and role of provenance inquiry. <https://www.denverartmuseum.org/en/provenance-research>

Methodological note

This article provides general criteria for research and risk management. It does not authenticate a specific work, constitute an appraisal, or replace legal, tax, customs, or conservation advice. Web sources were accessed September 18, 2026. Every opinion on an artwork must rest on its individual file and, where appropriate, physical examination.