

Before Selling a Work of Art

Condition examination and technical studies for an informed decision

By Juan Sarracino

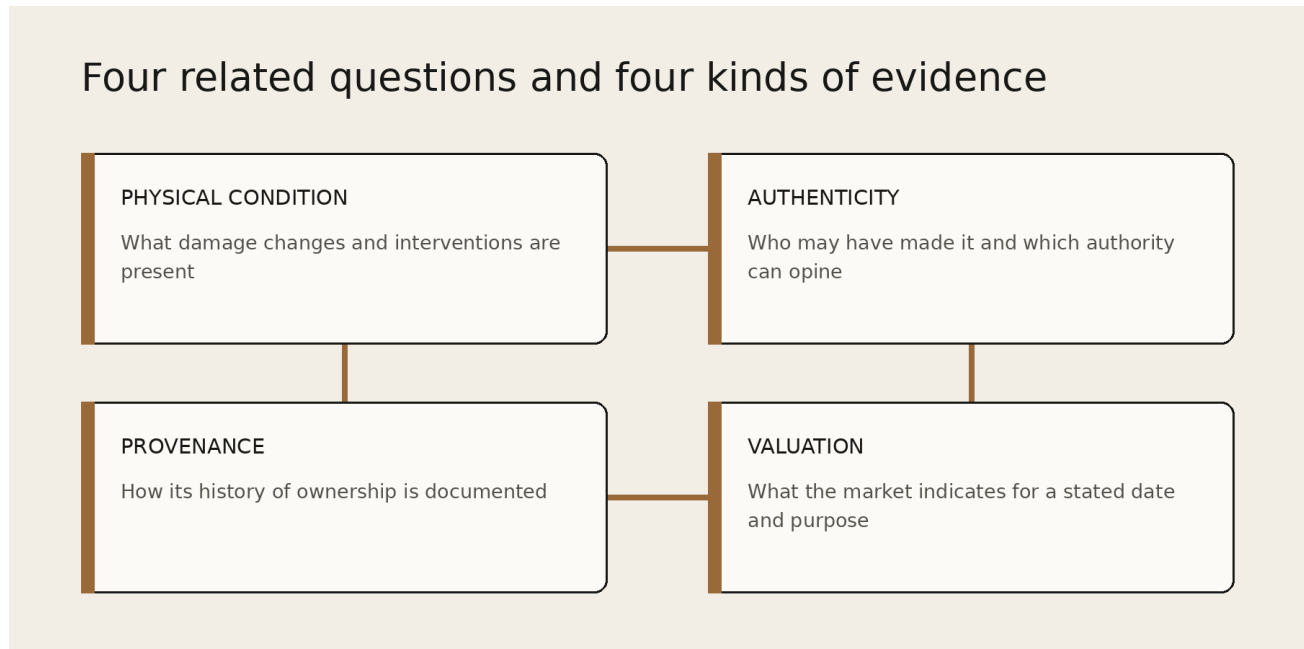


A painting examined under raking light. Illustrative image created for this article; it does not depict a specific artwork or studio.

A painting may look immaculate on a wall and tell a different story under raking light, ultraviolet illumination or examination of the reverse. A repaired tear, lining, lifting paint, altered varnish or extensive retouching can be almost invisible in an ordinary photograph.

This information does not automatically make a work good or bad. Nor does it determine authenticity or price on its own. It reduces uncertainty, supports a clearer negotiation and helps establish whether the work is stable, whether treatment may be required and whether its physical condition is consistent with the proposed transaction.

The central instrument is the condition report: a professional, dated and normally illustrated record of the physical state of the work and its frame at the time of examination. Properly prepared, it establishes a baseline for a sale, acquisition, loan, shipment, insurance matter or claim. [1]



Physical condition authenticity provenance and value

These four questions are related, but they are not interchangeable. A condition report describes material state and stability. Authentication addresses authorship through competent authority and historical, stylistic or scientific evidence. Provenance reconstructs ownership and circulation. Valuation estimates value for a defined date, market and purpose.

A conservator may find materials, repairs or characteristics that are compatible or incompatible with a historical hypothesis. Technical studies can contribute relevant evidence to attribution. Even so, a conservator does not automatically become an authenticator or appraiser. The National Gallery of Art uses visible and ultraviolet light, microscopy, X-radiography and infrared reflectography to understand materials, creative process, condition and possible attribution questions; conclusions require those results to be integrated with other evidence. [3]

Separating these functions protects buyer and seller. An independent material report gains credibility when it does not promise to certify authorship or set a price. A sound transaction brings together condition, authentication authority, provenance and market evidence as the circumstances require.

What it contributes to a sale

For a seller, examination before marketing identifies issues before they appear in negotiation. It may reveal whether a canvas retains its original support, has been lined, contains patches, losses, distortion, active cracking, abrasion, retouching or a varnish that changes the appearance of colour.

For a buyer, the report makes it possible to compare price with actual condition and consider future risks involving stability, transport, insurance and possible treatment. For an auction house or insurer, it provides organized documentation and a dated point of reference.

A condition report does not guarantee a higher price. It may reveal problems that require the estimate to be reconsidered. Its principal contribution is to reduce what the parties do not know and to lower the risk of later disagreement.

What an organoleptic examination is

The term is more complicated than the practice it describes. In conservation, organoleptic examination is the first systematic reading of an artwork's perceptible properties before laboratory testing. It is primarily visual, supported by magnification, controlled illumination and examination of the face, reverse, edges, stretcher and frame. Physical contact is limited to what is necessary and is undertaken by a trained professional.

The conservator observes support, ground, paint layer and surface. Cracking, distortion, loss, lifting, abrasion, staining, deposits, varnish changes, repairs, patches, seams, lining, inscriptions, labels and mounting elements are recorded. The examination also distinguishes among damage, natural ageing and the artist's original choices.

Professional looking is a procedure, not a quick impression. The Canadian Conservation Institute recommends consulting earlier reports, first assessing safe handling and documenting each component systematically. [1][2]

Light as an examination tool

Normal light supports an overall assessment of dirt, varnish, losses and lifting paint. Raking light is placed at a low angle and reveals planar distortion, dents, relief and irregularities that disappear in frontal illumination. Transmitted light, placed behind some canvases, helps locate perforations, cracks and variations in thickness. [2]

Ultraviolet radiation can produce different responses in varnishes, retouching and other materials. It helps identify patterns, but a dark area under UV is not by itself proof of restoration or forgery. Results depend on materials, age, layers and previous treatment.

Infrared imaging may reveal underdrawing, inscriptions or changes, depending on pigments and materials. X-radiography offers another structural depth. No single modality answers every question; value comes from combining observation, imaging and context.

From the eye to the laboratory

Scientific tests should be selected after a question has been formulated. Ordering many techniques without a defined purpose increases cost without assuring a useful answer. XRF can detect chemical elements associated with pigments; it does not automatically identify a brand, recipe or exact date. Cross-

sectional microscopy studies the sequence of layers. FTIR and Raman can characterize binding media, pigments and other compounds. Some configurations are non-invasive; others require micro-samples and explicit authorization. [3][9][12]

Method	What it may contribute	Main limitation	Scope
Direct observation and magnification	Cracks, losses, lifting paint, abrasion, dirt, repairs, labels and visible structure.	It depends on expertise and does not by itself identify chemical composition.	Non-invasive and basic
Raking and transmitted light	Deformations, planar distortion, surface relief, perforations, cracks and thickness variations.	Transmitted light is not useful for every support or paint system.	Non-invasive and basic
Ultraviolet light	Fluorescence patterns in varnishes and possible retouching or fills.	A dark area alone does not prove restoration or forgery; interpretation is essential.	Non-invasive add-on
Infrared imaging	Underdrawing, inscriptions and some compositional changes.	Not every pigment or material permits lower layers to be seen.	Non-invasive and specialized
X-radiography	Structure, fasteners, damage, compositional changes and differences associated with some pigments.	It requires equipment, safety procedures and specialist interpretation.	Specialized
XRF	Chemical elements that can guide the identification of pigments and materials.	It detects elements; it does not automatically provide a pigment name, maker or exact date.	Usually non-invasive
Microscopy FTIR and Raman	Layer structure, fibres, pigments, binding media and organic or inorganic materials.	Micro-sampling may be required, and the test should answer a defined question.	Advanced and separately quoted

What a professional report should contain

A useful report identifies the work and the purpose of the examination. It should record artist or attribution, title, medium, support, dimensions, signature, date and inscriptions when present; describe the face, reverse, stretcher and frame; and document ground, paint layer, varnish, distortion, loss, cracking, repairs and visible interventions.

It should also state stability, risks, recommendations for handling, display, storage or treatment, the examiner's name and credentials, date, scope and limitations. Overall photographs of the face and reverse, together with details of relevant areas, establish a baseline for future comparison. [1]

For an important sale, request a signed report and ask whether it may be supplied to a buyer, auction house, insurer or lawyer. Clarify which techniques are included, whether the work will be unframed, whether UV or raking light will be used and whether the photographs form part of the final document.

What happens at an auction house

When a work is accepted on consignment by a major international auction house or specialist firm, a process of examination, research, cataloguing and presentation begins. Its scope varies with the house, category and importance of the lot. Specialists review medium, dimensions, support, signatures, inscriptions, labels, provenance, literature, exhibitions and condition; this information influences the catalogue entry, estimate and presentation.

Christie's, Sotheby's, Phillips, Bonhams and LAMA provide condition information in different ways. An auction-house report, however, is not necessarily equivalent to a comprehensive study by an independent conservator. Phillips is especially clear: its specialists are not professional restorers or trained conservators, and it recommends independent advice for property of significant value. [14][17]

House	Practice and caution
Christie's	It considers condition, provenance, rarity and market evidence; after consignment, property is catalogued and professionally photographed. Its condition reports are free and advisory, and in-person inspection is recommended. [14][15]
Sotheby's	It states that every work going to auction is professionally photographed for documentary and promotional purposes. Condition information and pre-sale exhibition help buyers inspect the lot. [16]
Phillips	Its specialists may prepare condition reports, but its own guide states that they are not professional restorers or trained conservators and recommends independent advice for significant property. [17]
Bonhams	It permits condition reports to be requested for many lots and presents catalogue photography. Availability and scope should be confirmed on the individual lot page. [18]
LAMA	LA Modern Auctions, within the Rago/Wright/LAMA structure, makes condition information available before sale and supports lots with photographic documentation. Scope depends on the sale and object. [19]

Photography, cleaning, and limits

Professional photography is part of market due diligence. Christie's describes professional cataloguing and photography after consignment; Sotheby's states that every work going to auction is photographed for documentary and promotional purposes. Images may show the face, reverse, signature, labels and details, which is essential when a buyer is far from the work. [15][16]

Cleaning or restoration before auction is not automatic. In some cases a house may coordinate consultation or treatment authorized by the owner when it improves stability or responsible presentation. A work should not be cleaned simply to make it look more attractive. Overcleaning can remove glazes, patina, historical retouching or original material.

Property is generally offered in its existing state, and house reports are advisory. More information improves decision-making but does not create an absolute guarantee. The auction house provides market

due diligence; the conservator provides material due diligence; the competent authority provides authenticity evidence; and comparable sales analysis addresses value.

Before and after transport

Documenting a work before it passes through a shipper, warehouse, gallery, auction house, exhibition or buyer allows its arrival condition to be compared. Incoming and outgoing reports can help locate when damage occurred and support a claim.

The record should include date, location, examiner, overall photographs and details of pre-existing issues. For fragile works, recommendations about packing, orientation, handling, temperature and humidity are as important as the visual description. [1]

What it costs

There is no universal rate. Size, complexity, framing, disassembly, travel, urgency, photographic documentation and additional tests all affect the fee.

In South Florida, a prudent planning figure, not an official fee from a specific provider, is approximately \$250 to \$500 for a basic examination and signed report; \$400 to \$900 when extensive photography, raking light and UV are required; and \$900 to \$1,500 or more for insurance, dispute, high-complexity or demanding documentary work. Scientific analyses are quoted separately and may add several hundred dollars or more depending on equipment, sampling and interpretation.

Only two local references publish figures that require careful reading. D&D lists \$150 per hour and about \$250 per object for certain written treatment estimates, not necessarily a full condition report. WCCFA publishes \$135 for an immediate estimate, while its normal estimate after examination is generally prepared without charge. A restoration estimate, a condition report and a scientific study are different products. [6][11]

Before delivering the work, request a written proposal defining scope, responsible professional, methods, number of photographs, schedule, permitted use of the report, insurance and travel or transport charges.

Services in Miami and South Florida

The following information was checked against official sites on September 20, 2026. Fees and conditions can change; confirm them directly before taking or sending an artwork.

Provider	Contact	Services costs and requirements
D&D Art Inc.	1465 SW 8th St., Suite 104, Miami, FL 33135 305-742-4270 / 786-326-6265 ddartinc@gmail.com	Canvas paintings, examination, condition reports and treatment. A work may need to be opened or unframed for a complete inspection. The studio publishes \$150 per hour and about \$250 per object for certain written treatment estimates; off-site visits are billed separately. Confirm the fee for a signed condition report, because it is not the same as a restoration estimate. [5][6]

Provider	Contact	Services costs and requirements
Art Conservators Lab	2001 Biscayne Blvd., Miami, FL 33137 786-973-8138 art.conservation.services@gmail.com	Oil, acrylic and tempera on canvas, panel and glass; chemical analysis; condition surveys and reports. No fixed fee is published. Send images, dimensions, medium, support and the purpose of the assignment to request a quote. [7]
ArtCare Conservation	Miami / Palm Beach 305-661-3707 javier@artcareconservation.com	Condition reports, pre-purchase consultations, sale and insurance reports, and analysis using XRF, microscopy, digital X-radiography and infrared imaging. The official Miami page does not publish a studio address; coordinate directly with Javier Hernandez. Individually quoted. [8][9]
WCCFA	4602 SW 74th Ave., Miami, FL 33155 786-734-6334 wccfa@wccfa.com	Examination, condition assessment, treatment proposals and technical analysis. Appointment only and billed hourly. High-resolution images, dimensions and medium can support a ballpark figure, but a contractual estimate requires a studio examination. It publishes a \$135 fee for an immediate estimate; the normal estimate is generally prepared without charge. This is not the price of a full condition report. [10][11]
Longevity Art Preservation	Miami 305-677-8217 info@artlongevity.com / emilymk@artlongevity.com	Appropriate when condition is accompanied by a scientific question: UV, IR, multispectral imaging, XRF, microscopy, FTIR or Raman. Laboratory and mobile services. Define the research question first; the project is quoted individually. [12]
Stella Art Conservation	5194 Georgia Avenue, West Palm Beach, FL 33405 561-346-3402 info@stellaartconservation.com	Condition reports, photographic documentation, laboratory examination and, in some cases, on-site examination. Materials analysis is available upon request. Ask separately for the fee for the written report and for any additional testing. [13]

What to send when requesting a quote

A well-prepared inquiry saves time and makes proposals easier to compare.

Send high-resolution photographs of the face and reverse; details of signatures, labels and damage; dimensions with and without frame; medium and support if known; artist, title and attributed date; information about earlier treatment; purpose of examination; current location; deadline; and whether a signed report is needed for a buyer, insurer, loan, auction or legal matter.

Ask who will perform the examination, what training that person has, which techniques are included, whether the work will be unframed, how many photographs will be delivered, whether insurance applies while the work is in the studio and what happens if further analysis is recommended.

The American Institute for Conservation recommends considering training, experience and professional review. Its Professional Members have had their work reviewed by peers. [4]

When it is worth the cost

Not every painting needs X-radiography, XRF or sampling. A staged strategy is usually sensible: begin with physical examination and a condition report, then add technical analysis only when a defined question arises.

A report deserves particular consideration for important sales or acquisitions, uncertainty about earlier restoration, fire or water damage, long-distance transport, loans, insurance, claims and works whose condition could materially change the financial decision.

Sometimes the most useful conclusion will be that the work is stable, has minor interventions and requires no treatment. In other cases, a small observation under magnification or UV will open a different inquiry. The quality of the process depends on separating what was observed, what was demonstrated and what remains a hypothesis.

Conclusion

In the art market, an informed decision begins by knowing exactly which question each professional is answering. The best report does not promise certainty it cannot provide. It documents precisely, explains its limitations and gives buyer and seller a clearer basis for negotiation.

Juan Sarracino

Sarracino Art Research & Advisory

Sources and verification

Contact details and references checked on September 20, 2026. Planning estimates are not official quotations. Confirm scope, price and requirements directly with each provider.

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