



DAMAGE/LOSS/FRAUD APPRAISALS AND HOW THEY GREW

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A Bitter Beginning

It was enough years ago so that I don't want to even mention the date, but I was an intern in the office of the 80-year-old dean of fine art appraisers, James St. Lawrence O'Toole. He was at the stage of life in which he loved to visit with clients while his protégé went about examining, measuring and, in our case at least, photographing the objects of our appraisals.

I'd only been out on a few jobs with my mentor, but the first of them had been the appraisal of everything in a small city museum, so I had a bit more confidence than perhaps I should have had after successfully researching colonial portraits and Chippendale chairs. I saw no trouble when we were called in to prepare a report for an English couple just come to the States where they'd found several of their antiques had been severely damaged in the crossing.

After turning in the appraisal to my boss, who checked it favorably, we were certain the clients would be pleased with our report. They were not. Politely, but quite firmly we were informed that the report did them no good because it was based on insurance replacement value only, but no mention of the damage or what they were to do about it. We were embarrassed and bewildered. We had failed, but neither understood how and what we were to do to remedy it.

Next Go-Around

Because I was young and not willing to forgive my mistakes, I brooded about this mishap a great deal until finally a glimmer of a solution began to form in my mind. Shortly afterwards we were asked to take a look at a fire damaged apartment in a 5th Avenue luxury building. The fire had started when the stereo system, left on overnight, had ignited and pretty much destroyed the living room with all its artworks and stylish furniture.

As I walked through the lengthy apartment I noted that the damage lessened in each room until we reached the rear bedroom where nothing had been touched by fire, except that the odor lingered heavily over everything.

In my head I started the creation of a chart, one that graded the destruction unleashed by the fire. The living room was a total loss, the next room had some total and some partial damage, the following room had only partial damage, and so on until the final room where nothing was visibly wrong, but there was that awful smell of smoke.

Of course it was necessary to bring in various types of conservators – for the art, for the objects, for the furniture, and specialists who were capable of ridding the smoke smell completely. The only thing the apartment's occupant demanded was a complete overhaul of every piece of clothing, including the plastic wrapped unworn shirts that couldn't have been affected. However, since the overall report had gone down well with him and with all the people involved, primarily the insurers, it was little enough price to pay.

After that, and as the firm grew, we developed a highly refined format for damage/loss cases and set a standard in the field. Today we appraise thousands of items during the year in these cases – art, antiques, designer furniture, objects of all kinds, and any number of obscure collectibles. We've had to learn the latest techniques in conservation in order to appreciate the complexity of some restorations, and we've learned to differentiate between the kind of restoration that devalues a work and the superior restoration that returns the original value to the item.



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We haven't even touched on the stolen pieces that we had to value, and sometimes find, but that's for another time.

Art Fraud

It shouldn't surprise anyone that there is a good deal of art fraud, especially since a single painting can now be sold for over \$100 million, and any number of others reach prices more than half as much on a not so irregular basis.

Whenever a country undergoes revolution, and followers of the deposed dictator or president flee the country, fraudsters always find a way to arrive with a story about how they fled with precious goods from the mother country and must now (sobbingly) part with these previous artifacts in order to have a roof over their heads. We've been presented with dubious "15th century icons" that were manufactured in New Jersey, for all we know, and just about yesterday. We've seen good copies, bad copies, and art-historically crazy imitations of famous artworks, like a supposed Mary Cassatt rendering of a woman in

Depression Era clothing which would have been decades after the artist lost her sight and certainly after she had died. We've seen rugs that were gone years and years before a claim was made. The owners were just waiting for a flood to declare every worn and torn rug in their shop absolutely and totally ruined.

One couple brought a large group of paintings from a South American source that they intended to sell through a gallery they were to open on the East Coast. There was a famous name attached to each work, and not one of them was correct. Appraisers don't authenticate, but when a fake is so outrageously wrong, attributed to artists with false signatures, wrong periods, wrong subject matter – well then.... But when there is any doubt, or it's a close call, we must bring in the expert on that particular artist whose has the final say.

Our work has been fascinating. The kind of work that makes you want to get to the office and see what challenges will be facing you that day. Who says damage/loss/fraud appraisals can't be exciting? Well, actually nobody.