

Authentication Problem: Stevens and Cooper

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[Adapted from a problem by Sally Yard, Professor of Art History, University of San Diego]

Your client, collector D.H. Stevens, wants to return Fernand Léger's *Still life with vase*, 1922, which he bought at Christie's in 2023, because he thinks it was not done by Léger.

Science:

Experts believe that the paint and other materials were commonly used from 1900.

X-rays reveal a drawing beneath the painting that diverges somewhat from the painting.

Documented Provenance:

1963 Léger died childless in 1955. His second wife née Nadia Khodasevich (1904-1982), who held Léger's *droit moral*, certified the work in writing.

1964 Private sale to British collector-dealer Douglas Cooper (1911-1984) through Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler (1884-1979), whose gallery represented cubists before WW2. After the war, he is an independent art consultant and dealer.

1970 *The Cubist Epoch*, curated by Douglas Cooper at the Whitney Museum, includes a work titled *Still life with vase*. The black-and-white photo in the catalogue appears to be the same painting.

2023 Sold at Christie's to D.H. Stevens on behalf of a "private collector in France"

Anecdotal Provenance:

1920s Douglas Cooper noted that Kahnweiler told him that *Still life with vase* was given to A.M. Baudy by his friend Fernand Léger, and that Kahnweiler was selling the work for Baudy.

2023 Céline Cooper, Douglas Cooper's granddaughter, told Stevens that she had consigned the painting to Christie's.

Connoisseurship and other facts:

1984 No paintings are listed in the inventory of Douglas Cooper's estate.

1992 *Still Life with vase* does not appear in Fernand Léger's *Catalogue Raisonné* by Georges Bauquier.

1999 John Richardson publishes *The Sorcerer's Apprentice: Picasso, Provence, and Douglas Cooper*, an account of his living with Douglas Cooper 1949-1960 in close contact with Picasso, Léger, and other cubists. Richardson recounts an incident when Richardson convinced Cooper that a Léger that Cooper had opined authentic was a forgery. Cooper was accused of plagiarism, inaccuracies and "flexible ethics", but none was proven.

2003 Léger's great grandnephew Hervé Léger, then holder of Léger's *droit moral*, announced that he would no longer act on requests for authentication.

2013 *The Guardian* reports that more than 30 paintings, including Légers, are fakes. Wolfgang Beltracchi, 59, an artist from Freiburg, his wife and her sister were convicted of fraud. One of the canvases contains underpainting.

2021 Several Léger scholars accept as genuine a work not included in the *catalogue raisonné*.

2022 Skate's *Art Market Research* issued a report for a 1939 Léger stating the Authenticity Risk as "moderate-high", the Artist Liquidity Risk and Price Volatility Risk "low".

2023 Curators at the Guggenheim Museum informed Stevens that they would not include his painting in their show on Cubism because of "stylistics anomalies".

