

What's In A Name?

Tracking A Painting's Original Title

By HOWARD REHS



LAST MONTH, Alan Bamberger explained the concept of provenance, which refers to the documented authenticity and history of a particular work of art. One useful key to researching any piece is its original title. While galleries such as ours are always happy to help people research that information, the cold, hard fact is that the actual title of a particular work of art is, at times, almost impossible to determine. This is especially true for works created by artists who never “made it,” as well as many well-known but not well-documented artists.

In the best of circumstances, the paperwork showing the original sale from the artist is still in existence. Provided the artist listed the title of the work, you know exactly what the original title is. However, original paperwork from an artist rarely exists, and this is where the problem arises.

Typically an artist will sell a work to, or through, a dealer who, in turn, may decide to re-title the work. Why do dealers do that? Well, artists often give generic titles to works — *Floral*, *Landscape*, *Sunset*, *Three Children On A Beach*, etc. These titles can become repetitive, making it very difficult to track the works. In order to distinguish one from another, dealers often create more descriptive, unique, or romantic titles.

In the case of works by Julien Dupré, even his personal documentation has proved fruitless. In Dupré's original account book, he listed all the paintings he sold, along with their titles and to whom they were sold. You

might think that solves all the problems. Not so fast! Dupré, like many other artists, had a habit of repeating a title, or using a very similar title, numerous times.

For example: In 1904, Dupré sold four works, all titled *Une Faneuse*, to one dealer. In 1905, he sold another seven titled *Une Faneuse* to that same dealer, and another work titled *La Faneuse* (a slight variation) at an exhibition. In fact, Dupré used this same title dozens of times over the course of 30 years! Because the artist rarely dated his paintings, and never numbered them to match the numbers in his account book, it is virtually impossible to determine which work is which.

Your next question may be: What about a work that the artist titled with a unique name? Even if the original dealer sold it with that title, it does not mean the title still remains with the work. Paintings are bought and sold many times during their lives, and often when they are resold, the original title is lost (unless copies of the original documents accompany the work). In the course of researching the provenance of various works, I have seen many instances in which a

painting was given a new title each time it reappeared on the market, not necessarily because someone deliberately wanted to change it, but because the seller simply didn't know the original title.

Another problem exists when works have been reproduced in books or as prints. Here, minor variations in a work's title abound, especially when they are being translated from a foreign language. The basic reason for this is that translations of specific words can vary. For example, Daniel Ridgway Knight's *L'Appel Au Passeur* (which literally translates to *The Call To The Ferryman*) has been reproduced as *Hailing The Ferryman*, *Hailing The Ferryman*, *Calling The Ferryman* and *The Ferryman*.

So what does this all mean? Is it really important to have the original title? Does the original title enhance a work's value or affect its provenance? While it is nice to have the original title (though you may be somewhat disappointed by its less than descriptive nature), it is not imperative. What's really important, especially with regard to value, is that the work be authentic, in nice condition, of superior quality, and from one of the artist's best periods. ■

HOWARD L. REHS, *president of the Fine Art Dealers Association*, is currently writing the *catalogue raisonnés on Julien Dupré and Daniel Ridgway Knight*. For more information, contact: Rehs Galleries, Inc., 5 East 57th Street, 8th Floor, New York, NY 10022; 212.355.5710; www.rehsgalleries.com.