

Bona fide or bogus?

Forgery | Biennale Paris's ramped-up vetting process aims to calm art world nerves after last year's faking scandal. By *Gareth Harris*

The Biennale des Antiquaires, the grandest decorative arts fair, has made radical changes to adapt to challenging times. The 61-year-old fair, which is run by the Syndicat National des Antiquaires (SNA), has a new name, Biennale Paris, and a new management structure (the SNA voted to end the tenure of Dominique Chevaller last year, replacing him with the Paris-based dealer Mathias Ary Jan as director). This year also marks the first time the fair is held annually.

But the 94 galleries this year gathered under the dome of the Grand Palais will see the most far-reaching change yet: a ramped-up vetting process designed to calm art-world nerves after a forgery scandal last year, which centred on fake 18th-century furniture, rattled the French antiques field.

Bill Pallot, a leading specialist in 18th-century royal furniture, was charged with commissioning two fake chairs that were subsequently sold, through an intermediary, to the Kraemer Gallery in Paris (the two chairs were listed by the state-run National Treasures committee). Laurent Kraemer of the Kraemer Gallery says: "My position is still the same. I am a victim in this affair."

Neither Kraemer nor the gallery owner, Didier Aaron, for whom Pallot worked, were present at last year's fair, nor

will they be at this year's (neither gallery is accused of wrongdoing). The case is still due to come to court.

Gallerists at Biennale Paris will face a much tougher set of vetting conditions this year. Vetting remains an under-the-radar activity, little understood by outsiders. Put simply, the vetters make sure each work on a stand is what it says it is. "They also ensure that condition and quality match the standards set by the fair," says Jane Morris, former editor of The Art Newspaper. "It can be a tense process; the vetting at some fairs strikes dread into the hearts of dealers."

Since the scandal, the SNA has taken a belt-and-braces approach, setting up an overarching vetting committee overseen by two independent professional bodies, the Compagnie Nationale des Experts (CNE) and the Syndicat Français des Experts Professionnels en Oeuvres d'Art et Objets de Collection (SFEOP).

Divesting the SNA of vetting duties at Biennale Paris is a canny move. The system by which its exhibitors, who all belong to the SNA, had sat across various sub-vetting committees at the Biennale had come in for some criticism.

The French online publication *Le Quotidien de l'Art* reported, for instance, on an abuse of power at the heart of the previous vetting body.

Under the new system, 100 experts are split into groups of three to five



according to specialty. "Under the new rules, exhibitors will not sit on the committees, thereby avoiding any conflicts of interest," says Michel Maket, president of the SFEOP.

Auction house employees are also excluded from the vetting panels. The screw-tightens in other ways, too: under the new regime, dealers can only appeal against three disputed items, and any

objects brought on to their stands to replace sold items must have been cleared with vetting officials at the start of the fair.

These developments have generally been welcomed by participating dealers. "Independent vetters are obviously a guarantee of integrity. The fact that those vetters are chosen from among the experienced experts of the CNE and

SFEOP is certainly a good move," says Damien Boquet of the eponymous Paris gallery, which specialises in 19th- and 20th-century paintings and drawings.

"Having no exhibitors on the vetting committees is an interesting decision," he adds, "but I think there should be some exhibitors from the SNA board assisting the vetters, though they should not have a final say in any disputes. SNA members could observe and liaise between the exhibitors and the vetting staff regarding disputed items."

The new audits at Biennale Paris bring into focus the delicate issue of screening works at fairs. Earlier this year at PAD, the Paris art and design fair, the CNE officials entrusted with the task of vetting works dropped out, citing "disrespect" for their mission and a lack of professionalism.

At the European Fine Art Fair (Tefaf) in Maastricht, which is often cited as the gold standard event for vetting, 194 experts work across 29 categories; significantly, participating exhibitors have sat on the vetting panels. Bringing the Art Loss Register (ALR) on board in 2000 to help check the provenance of objects for sale further reassured collectors (the world's largest database of stolen art will carry out the same checks at Tefaf's autumn and spring fairs in New York). Fourteen other fairs, including Masterpiece in London, use the ALR's services, which include the mammoth task of verifying dealer inventory lists before the fairs open.

But is vetting still necessary? Guy Peppiatt, the early British watercolours dealer who vets at the Works on Paper fair in London, believes so. "It gives confidence to visitors that what they are buying is genuine. It also gives dealers confidence in their stock and can tell them things they didn't know. Vetting committees are extremely knowledgeable and can sometimes identify an artist or subject the dealer hasn't."

Vetting may reassure buyers, but the Edinburgh-based art historian Bender Grosvenor advises: "Carveat emptor [buyer beware] is always the best approach. Do your own homework rather than relying on someone else."