

## CASE REPORT

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# Examination of a “Velasco” Signature on an Oil Painting

**ABSTRACT:** In September 2003, an investor bought an oil painting at auction in Denmark. The painting was signed “José Maria Velasco.” The investor attempted to sell the painting in the United States, but found that he needed confirmation that this was an authentic Velasco painting. The provenance of the painting was questionable because it came to Europe from Cuba without appropriate documentation including the date of its entry into the European market. If the signature was determined to be authentic, the painting would have an approximate value of 1 million dollars. Initial research on the life and works of the artist and a literature review resulted in the preparation of an “Art Worksheet.” Known signature specimens were obtained from reputable sources. A comparison of the known signatures with the questioned signature concluded the questioned signature was very probably not executed by José Maria Velasco.

**KEYWORDS:** forensic science, questioned documents, oil painting signature, art worksheet

In September 2003, an investor bought an oil painting at auction in Denmark. The painting was signed “José Maria Velasco.” The investor attempted to sell the painting in the United States, but found that he needed confirmation that this was an authentic Velasco painting. The provenance of the painting was questionable because it came to Europe from Cuba without appropriate documentation including the date of its entry into the European market.

The author was consulted and asked to examine the signature on the painting and compare it with a copy of a signature from a Velasco painting offered for sale at a reputable art gallery. It was stated that the questioned painting at the time of sale was titled “The Valley of Mexico” and was believed to have been painted in 1890. Further, if the painting could be shown to be a Velasco it would be worth more than a million dollars.

Although the painting (Fig. 1) was partially damaged by wear and tear, it should be noted that various art dealers in Europe and the United States believed the painting to be in the style of Velasco. However, the elderly granddaughter of Velasco, Maria Elena Altamirano Piolle, who authenticates Velasco’s works, questioned the painting’s authenticity.

The investor was advised to consult the McCrone Research Institute in Chicago, IL, and obtain a report from them concerning the age of the paint before a search for additional known signatures commenced. In December 2003, the investor obtained a report that stated oil paint similar to that on the questioned painting was used as early as 1820.

## Methods and Materials

### *Research of the Artist*

Research was conducted on the artist José Maria Velasco. It was learned that Velasco was considered to be the most important Mexican artist of the 19th century and one of the “greatest landscape painters in the history of modern art” (1). He was known primarily as the painter of the Valley of Mexico, which is the area surrounding Mexico City. Velasco traveled to Paris (via Havana, Cuba) and exhibited 68 paintings at the 1889 World’s Fair—an indication the questioned painting may have entered the European market at that time. Velasco painted constantly and in his lifetime produced more than 400 landscapes in oil, many drawings, watercolors, in addition to six murals on canvas located in the Institute of Geology in Mexico City. Also, Velasco was the teacher of Diego Rivera, another important Mexican artist.

In 1943, the Mexican government declared Velasco’s paintings a “National Monument” making him the first Mexican artist to be



FIG. 1—Painting containing questioned signature of “José Maria Velasco.”

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accorded that honor. This honor meant that it would be illegal for Velasco's paintings to leave Mexico. As a result, it was supposed, the only paintings by Velasco outside of Mexico were those that left before 1943 (2). An Internet search revealed that several of Velasco's oils are housed at the Museo Nacional de Arte (National Museum of Art) in Mexico City. Measures were taken to obtain photographs of the signatures on these paintings.

#### *Literature Review of Art Signatures*

While waiting to obtain additional known Velasco signatures, a literature review was conducted for articles pertaining to signatures on works of art. Goetschel (3) wrote that in France "the expertise of a reputed expert is hereditary. In some cases it is the heirs who are experts, even posthum [sic] born children. All other artistical or technical facts are of no value in court and on the art market, compared to their opinion. These experts decide alone on the authenticity of the work of art. Therefore, a certificate signed by that particular expert is of great value and has been the object of forgeries." Goetschel's statements provide an explanation for Velasco's granddaughter authenticating his work.

In 1988, Clement (4) reported that signatures "were generally forged very carefully, so carefully in fact that they deceived several experts."

Professors Kissame and Burns (5) described "the five-layer principle in scientific testing of oil paintings: the canvas, the Gesso (undercoat), the pigments in the medium, the varnish, and the frame must all be appropriate to the time and place of the painting's supposed manufacture." Regarding the artist's signature, Kissame and Burns reported that ultraviolet light would show tampering with the varnish in and around the signature area; i.e., on oil paintings the signature should be beneath the varnish not over it. Further, these professors claimed that "oil paintings are the least likely to be targeted for faking. The problem is far worse in prints, etchings, engravings, and lithographs."

Hanna (6) described very effectively what the forensic document examiner (FDE) should know when examining signatures on drawings, watercolors, lithographs, silkscreen, intaglio, and woodcut works of art. Hanna did not address oil paintings; however, she did explain that, "Obtaining and establishing known standards is the single most difficult factor in the examination of art." Hanna cautioned that although museum pieces may not be authentic, the signatures on these pieces are the most valuable knowns to work with. In her paper, Hanna indicates the questioned art may be too cumbersome to take to the location(s) of the specimens. For this reason she suggests the best approach is to photograph the questioned signature(s) and take it to the location of the standards where a comparison can be conducted.

In 1996, van der Reyden (7), who was in charge of the paper conservation at the Smithsonian Center for Materials Research and Education, identified three important ways to examine objects for authenticity: stylistic analysis, historical analysis, and scientific analysis. She stated that the scientific analysis of artwork always required nondestructive testing. Analytical techniques fell into several broad categories: illumination, radiography, magnification, elemental analysis, and property measurements. It was most interesting to note, that van der Reyden cited in the bibliography of her paper FDE's Hanna, Harrison (8), and Osborn (9).

The International Center for Art Intelligence Inc. (10) listed a number of examination techniques that included the examination of signatures. Caution was suggested when using art signature directories because "a forger can use the same signature directory to learn how to fake a signature that you're using to identify it." This



FIG. 2—Signature obtained from an art signature directory that was at variance with the known Velasco signatures obtained from oil paintings. It is unknown with what artwork this signature originated.

statement was particularly noteworthy as Van Wilder's (11) directory contains a purported signature of Velasco (Fig. 2) later found to be incongruent with the known signatures obtained from reputable sources.

#### *Preparation of a Worksheet*

Initially, the entire painting was photographed using a Canon EOS RebelX S camera (Canon USA, Inc., Lake Success, NY) with Kodak 400 color film (Eastman Kodak Company, Rochester, NY). In addition, several macro-images were taken with an Olympus Camedia digital camera (Olympus America, Inc., Mellville, NY). The dimensions of the canvas were measured and found to be  $33\frac{1}{8}$  in. wide by  $20\frac{1}{8}$  in. in length (84.12 cm  $\times$  51.10 cm). It was observed that the edges of the canvas were frayed and unpainted. The reverse side of the canvas was discolored and contained what appeared to be mold along the lower left corner. The notation "Mexico. José MARIA VELASCO 1840–1912" written in pencil appeared on the reverse side of the painting in the upper left corner. At this time, based upon initial research and literature review, an Art Worksheet was prepared and notes taken under each heading (Fig. 3). An initial examination of the signature area of the painting using ultraviolet light and side lighting failed to disclose any evidence that suggested the signature was applied to the varnish coating.

#### **Results and Discussion**

In early 2004, four known Velasco paintings were photographed and macro-photos were taken of the signatures on these paintings. Three of the paintings were housed in the National Museum in Mexico City and one was obtained from a private art gallery in the United States. The four known signatures and the questioned signature were written "José M. Velasco" and were produced during a 20-year period. Each of the known specimens contained additional writing below the signature identifying the place and date: (K1) Mexico 1877, (K2) Bahia de la Habana 1889, (K3) Mexico 1892, and (K4) Mexico 1897. It was noted that the known signatures consisted of brown paint. To the naked eye, the questioned signature also appeared to be produced in brown paint; however, closer inspection revealed it was composed of a combination of green paint with a tinge of brown. The green paint was evident under magnification and in the digital camera prints. Research revealed that Velasco was in the habit of using brown oil paint when signing his oil paintings. Further, there was no record that apprentices signed his work (1).

The known signature on the 1877 photograph was difficult to decipher but the letter forms were discerned using the computer enhancement software Adobe Photoshop 5.0. A comparison between the known signatures revealed enough similarities and no significant differences to determine that they were suitable standards for comparison with the questioned signature. However, when comparing the four known signatures with the undated questioned signature, significant differences were observed (Fig. 4). For example, the questioned letter "J" does not contain the

**Art Worksheet****Date:****Client:****Type of Art:****Name of Artwork and purported Date of Execution:****Purported Artist:****Subject:****Materials Used (substrate, pen, ink, brush, pencil, oils, etc.)****Composition/Framing:****Provenance/Documentation to Support Provenance:****Independent Research (research articles, internet, books, telephone calls, etc.)****Measurements:****Fluorescence (alterations may appear darker):****Infrared (can enable nonvisible layers or signs to be visible):****Side light (to see what stands out in relief and/or scratches):****Filters (to aid contrast):****Concomitance (continuity of cracks throughout paint, particularly around the signature):****Magnification (evidence of fingerprints, mixture of paint):**

- a. ***If signature applied to fresh paint, the brush carves its structure into the coat.***
- b. ***If the paint is dry, the paint layers of the support and the signature are separated and the borders are sharp.***

**Signature (draw – note dynamics, inclination, proportion, pressure variation, placement, date, etc.)****Photographs taken:****List of known standards:****Additional notes:**

FIG. 3—Worksheet to use in the examination of art signatures.

more elongated approach stroke or ending stroke that appears in the known signatures. The accent mark above the “e” in “José” is longer and closer to the “e” than observed on the known signatures. The form of the initial “M” on the questioned signature has a flatter and shorter appearance than found in the known signatures. The capital “V” in the questioned signature consists of one-stroke with a rounded bottom, unlike the more pointed two-stroke variety that appears in the known signatures. The wide loop

in the letter “l” in the questioned signature does not appear in the known signatures. Letterforms “a,” “c,” and “o” of the name “Velasco” in the questioned signature are narrow compared with the more rounded versions of these letters in the known signatures.

The differences outlined above, the use of green oil paint in the questioned signature, a lack of additional writing under the questioned signature support the finding that José Maria Velasco very probably did not sign this painting. In addition, the limited amount



FIG. 4—Comparison chart showing the known signatures and questioned “Velasco” signature with arrows pointing to differences noted.

of known signatures prevented a more conclusive finding. The report clearly stated that the examination did not cover the authenticity of the painting itself and that the report only offered an opinion as to the signature on the questioned painting.

### Conclusion

It is not often that a FDE has the opportunity of examining an art signature and such examinations pose difficulties not encountered in regular casework. Initially, certain elements suggested the questioned painting could be genuine. However, a more careful analysis of the questioned signature and a comparison with known signatures suggests the signature on the questioned painting was not produced by Velasco. Along with a thorough literature review, a comprehensive worksheet was used to record important information considered during the examination process. During the

course of this examination, it was learned that some art dealers are unaware FDEs can provide information concerning the genuine or spurious nature of an art signature. This case does have a relatively “happy ending” as a report from the FDE author allowed the investor to get his money back from the auction house in Europe.

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