



Antique Jewelry Authentication and the Appraiser

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Authentication of antique and period jewelry has always been an important issue for jewelry appraisers. And with the ever-increasing quantity of high quality reproductions, and repaired and altered pieces, authentication is becoming increasingly difficult for the average appraiser.

The process of authentication is to prove or verify that an item is from a specific era; a specific manufacturer, maker or designer; a specific country; or has been owned by a specific person. There has always been a popular perception that an appraiser doing a valuation, offering expert testimony, or acting as a consultant is all knowing about the item of jewelry. Included in this is the expectation that the appraiser will be able to completely identify and authenticate the item.

In reality, the role of the authenticator is one the appraiser does not always play. An appraiser must always identify and describe the item but does not always possess the knowledge or equipment to perform the authentication. To become an expert in authentication one must study and develop an extraordinary knowledge and familiarity with the item and all the possible reproductions and fakes. An appraiser is legally expected to demonstrate due diligence in all aspects of the appraisal process. This responsibility means the appraiser must always determine if authentication is required--and if they are qualified to authenticate the item or need to tap outside expertise. Often the appraiser will need to rely on recognized experts to ascertain if the item is authentic and then value the item based on the results of the report. An example of this would be a report from the GIA Gem Trade Laboratory on the colour origin of a blue diamond. The appraiser will rely on the report to substantiate the value placed on the item. With antique and period jewelry, the qualified person the appraiser has relied on has been an experienced dealer, respected author, or an auction house.

The appraiser now has a new option, the Estate Jewelers Association of America (E.J.A.A.) Authentication Laboratory. The appraiser can now rely on the lab report as they have in the past with other reports such as the GIA Diamond Grading Report. As with reliance on any report, the appraiser relying on the E.J.A.A. report needs to state in the appraisal that "This appraiser did not personally perform the authentication but relied on the authentication report provided by the E.J.A.A., and the value conclusion is based on the results of the report."

As appraisers and dealers we must all realize we are not experts in all areas of jewelry. A lack of understanding of antique and period jewelry and the market may lead appraisers to incorrectly value an antique item based on the cost to manufacture a similar item today, or to miss subtle repairs, alterations, or condition problems that can have a significant affect on value. Certain value characteristics that make a piece of jewelry representational of a certain era can greatly enhance the value. If the appraiser misses these it could result in an inaccurate value conclusion. An awareness of the value characteristics of antique and period jewelry is not only important for the item you are appraising but also for the items you are using as comparables to base your value conclusion on.

For example, if you are valuing a Victorian micromosaic in good condition in its original frame depicting a historical landmark, you can hardly compare it to a micromosaic with a floral scene in an original frame but having a replaced catch. The fact that a floral scene is not as desirable and that the replaced catch is a condition problem will make the floral motif micromosaic considerably less valuable. In this situation the appraiser not only has to understand why the market considers one scene more valuable than another but must also understand what catch is appropriate for the time period.

Another important area for the appraiser to understand is the availability of certain gemstones throughout history and the evolution of gemstone treatments. If you have an Art Deco ring with a Monghsu ruby, a diffusion-treated sapphire, or a glass-filled ruby, the gemstone is not original to the piece, as these were not available during the Art Deco period. This can have considerable effect on the value of the ring.

Appraisal clients must be made aware of the fact that authentication may enhance the value of the item they have. The appraiser needs to explain the additional costs associated with the authentication process and the possible benefits so they can make an informed decision as to whether or not to proceed with the authentication. If a client decides not to pursue the authentication, the appraiser does not always need to decline the appraisal assignment. As one solution the appraiser can state that "the client decided not to pursue authentication due to the costs involved and therefore we have supplied two values-one if authentic and one if not."

Authentication is a critical step in the appraisal process and the appraiser needs to understand when and how to pursue authentication, and how to incorporate an authentication report and its results in the appraisal document. Appraisal organizations such as the International Society of Appraisers (1-888-472-4732) offer educational programs that train appraisers in appraisal theory and principles, including issues such as authentication and report writing.

Always remember: a good rule is, if you need to ask yourself if you need help with authentication, chances are you do.

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