

A Rembrandt that is not a Rembrandt

If you want to authenticate a painting, turn to a catalogue raisonné. Long used almost exclusively by dealers and scholars, some are now available at popular prices.

By Lisa Sanders

NEW YORK'S Metropolitan Museum of Art once boasted 42 Rembrandts. It is down to 20. The other 22 turned out to be bogus.

A "Rembrandt/Not Rembrandt" exhibit will be staged at the Met,

beginning Oct. 10, and the real and misattributed oils will be displayed. The purpose of the show is to illustrate the authentication process that curators and historians use to determine authorship.

Art scholars, you see, will out. They are relentless. Since one of the earliest catalogues of 558 works attributed to Rembrandt van Rijn was published in 1906, art sleuths have whittled the number of "authentic" pieces down to about 300.

Catalogues raisonnés are annotated, illustrated books of artists' works, usually compiled by art historians and scholars. "They require painstaking research. They're very time-intensive and they're expensive to produce," explains Gail Levin, president of the Catalogue Raisonné Scholars Association. Levin ought to know. She spent eight years compiling a catalogue of works by American painter Edward Hopper. "It's an absolute labor of love. I don't make a penny off it," she says proudly. "We're a long-suffering breed," comments Maurice Tuchman, who, along with fellow art historians Esti Dunow and Klaus Perle, spent 30 years on a two-volume catalogue on painter Chaim Soutine.

Traditionally, the audience for these catalogues has been small—a few thousand scholars, art dealers, collectors and reference librarians willing to pay the several hundred dollars most of these catalogues cost.

In recent years, however, some publishers of catalogues raisonnés, such as Benedikt Taschen, based in Cologne, Germany, have discovered market economics: Lowering unit prices boosts sales. Says Tuchman, whose Soutine catalogues cost \$80 a



The Metropolitan Museum of Art

The only thing wrong with this Rembrandt is that it's bogus. **So are 21 others at the Met.**



"Clamdigger," a work now known to be by Edward Hopper
The painstaking research by scholars is a labor of love.



"Antigone," by Mark Rothko
A catalogue of his work is currently being prepared.

set, "The first edition of 12,000 copies sold out in seven weeks. Two months later it went into a second edition. That's astonishing. Most catalogues raisonnés are printed in editions under 1,000." Taschen publishes catalogues and collections of works by such artists as Salvador Dali, Pablo Picasso and Vincent van Gogh. They are available in most art and museum bookstores.

"If a client calls me up and says he's interested in, say, a certain Picasso, the first thing I do is turn to the catalogue by Christian Zervos and see whether it's in there. If not, then the buyer has to endure the whole litany of getting the work authenticated by other sources," says New York art dealer and collector Richard Feigen.

David Anfam, who has been working since 1989 on a catalogue of painter Mark Rothko's work, explains how a scholar gets to know an artist's work. "It's the same with Rothko as it is with Rembrandt," he says. "There are ways of applying paint, ways of treating a figure, and ways of creating pictorial texture. You can only get a good sense of those when you see the original paintings. It's

much like the difference between talking to someone on the phone and seeing them in person." Anfam has traveled widely to view more than 700 of Rothko's roughly 800 works on canvas.

Catalogues raisonnés have been prepared on hundreds of artists, but not all catalogues raisonnés are created equal. Sometimes authentic pieces are not

included—by accident, or by caprice. But subsequent scholarship usually unearths such oversights. For example, Vivian Endicott Barnett, whose first catalogue raisonné on the watercolors of Wassily Kandinsky was published in 1992, found a previously unknown landscape by the artist that was brought to her by a collector. The authenticity was determined by Kandinsky's handwriting on the back of the piece and also through tracing its provenance.

If you own pieces by name artists, there's a chance you could be contacted by a scholar who is putting together a catalogue. If you get such a call, cooperate. Your painting could be worth more if it gets included. What if the scholar rejects it as inauthentic? You might as well find out now rather than later. Currently in the works, for example, are catalogues of Alexander Calder, Andy Warhol, Georgia O'Keeffe and Marsden Hartley.

Unfortunately, there is no single directory in the U.S. on catalogues, but experts at the auction houses and dealers should be able to tell you if a catalogue exists or if one is being put together.



Catalogue of works by Chaim Soutine
Thirty years of research for \$80.