

How to Get an Artwork Appraised during a Pandemic

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With a smartphone, a woman photographs Adolph Menzel's *Fräulein von Below und Baroness von Schuckmann*, 1864, in the Kupferstichkabinett. Photo by Andreas Gora/picture alliance. Image via Getty Images

Art appraisals may not be essential business, but the art world needs them to stay active. Appraisals allow collectors to make consignments for auction. They offer crucial information about artworks' conditions, and offer the industry's most reliable sense of value. While appraisals traditionally require in-person assessments, professionals have gotten creative during lockdown, finding safe and reliable ways to inspect artworks.

Sotheby's, in fact, noted "increased interest" in its appraisals business during the COVID-19 pandemic. "Many collectors are eager to understand the value of their collections, and as such we have been providing a lot of insurance and fair market valuations for their individual needs," said Charlotte Van Dercook, head of Sotheby's Contemporary Curated department in New York. Economic

uncertainties and shifting fortunes, in other words, can inspire people to reappraise their assets and consider potential sales.

Haven Art Group CEO and founder Claire Marmion said she's been surprised by how much of the business has seamlessly moved online. Her team can conduct site visits virtually, via Zoom, to explore a home and "map out all the exposures around a collection."

Van Dercook's team has also embraced digital appraising strategies, using Zoom calls, photos, and video to glean information about artworks. "While there may not be a substitute for in-person interaction, the appraisals process itself has transitioned quite smoothly for us," she said.

Yet some types of appraisals specifically require on-site visits. In-person examinations are often a must if you want to secure a bank loan based on an artwork's value, for example. According to Marmion, "in theory," the Internal Revenue Service itself often requires on-site visits.



Amanda McConaha of Jackie Silverman Associates appraising an artwork for a collector insured by Pure Insurance. Courtesy of the Haven Art Group.

“In a claims scenario, it’s very difficult to respond and appraise without site verification,” she added. “You’re trying to figure out what artwork looked like before and after an event.” For insurance to pay out after a fire or other disaster, specialists must examine objects in person. In the case of estate appraisals, which can determine tax filing data, Marmion noted that assessments may be done virtually, with the assumption that qualified appraisers will follow up with an on-site visit at a later date.

Danielle T. Rahm, managing director at New York Fine Art Appraisers, confirmed that some in-person visits are still critical. For example, she spoke of a collector who had been in the hospital and recently passed away. His art had some previous condition issues that would affect both the value and the way the work would be moved out of the apartment: It had to be transported quickly, and Rahm and a counterpart needed to inspect it beforehand. They visited the site together, taking special precautions—“common sense,” she said. They wore gloves, masks, and booties, and kept the windows open for ventilation. They asked that no one touch the artworks 48 hours before they came to examine them. Sotheby’s takes similar precautions and, according to Van Dercook, uses “rotating specialist schedules to limit the number of staff on-site.”

On-site, in-person viewings are the only way to confirm a few key details about art. Rahm noted that it’s particularly difficult to assess an artwork’s medium and condition on a screen. She must rely on clients to be honest when they fill out forms with details about artworks they want appraised. Such information includes title; date; medium; artist; signatures, numbers, and markings on the piece; framing information; dimensions; provenance; literary references; exhibition history; condition as far as the client is aware; any conservation assessment or conservation work completed; and any opinions of authenticity or other documentation.

“It’s very high stakes,” said Rahm. “I can never guarantee a client isn’t being dishonest and proclaiming to have something that either doesn’t exist if it’s for insurance purposes, or has a condition issue that isn’t visible from pictures.” As an appraiser, she protects herself by disclosing the variables she’s relying on and the uncertainties that persist without an on-site visit.

Rahm and her team adhere to the standards established by Uniform Standards of Professional Appraisal Practice (USPAP), which do not, in fact, require inspection visits. They do, however, require what Rahm called “a reasonable basis for a credible result.” She and her team have admittedly had to make “extraordinary assumptions” over the past few months.

Disclosure is key to appraisal work right now—professionals must be aware of their limitations as they work remotely, and be able to communicate those to all parties affected by an artwork’s value.

Library closures are another, perhaps more unexpected, pitfall for appraisers in the age of COVID-19. Rahm’s team often relies on catalogues raisonnés and exhibition histories that haven’t yet been digitized.

Like any art lover, Rahm is eager to see art in person again. “Seeing the color, seeing the vitality of it and the movement of the brushstrokes that you just can’t replicate in pictures,” she said. “While that may not always directly quantify the value, the visual impact of a work, when you see it in person, is something the appraiser needs to understand.”

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