

CONNOISSEURSHIP

Connoisseurship (from the French *connaître*: to know), being an expert in matters of taste, is particularly associated with the fine arts but is also connected to wine and food. It indicates an individual with a comprehensive knowledge and critical understanding of a subject. The theory is that repeated study of an art work will enable the viewer to get to know certain idiosyncratic traits particular to the artist and that ultimately this approach will assist in determining authorship and in distinguishing true from false – in other words to determine authenticity. In the twenty-first century, the role of the connoisseur is generally to establish who made the work, when and where. Since the 1960s the reputation of connoisseurship has declined in academe owing to the rise and pre-eminence of theoretical and sociological approaches to art history and to the decline in formalist approaches. In addition connoisseurship, with its implied interior and subjective understanding – particularly in relation to matters of taste – has been negatively associated with dilettantism. There has been a perception that connoisseurship lacked intellectual rigour and could not be taught as an academic subject. In addition, there continues to be the view linked to the history of connoisseurship that it is practised by a narrow elite. The connoisseur as a figure who passed judgement on quality in art and, also on occasion, on authenticity was valued increasingly in Europe from the eighteenth century. An examination of the history of connoisseurship over the last 200 years also reveals its prejudices, divisions and dichotomies. In the eighteenth century artist and collector Jonathan Richardson (1667–1745) held that connoisseurship made one a better gentleman. In 1816 the painter and writer Benjamin Robert Haydon (1786–1846) published an attack on the classical scholar and connoisseur Richard Payne Knight (1750–1824) after the latter had cast doubt on the authenticity of the Elgin Marbles. Haydon's attack

focused on Payne Knight's position as a professionally untrained gentleman and connoisseur.

In the nineteenth century connoisseurship emerged as a major epistemological model for the study of art. A leading figure in the literature on connoisseurship was Giovanni Morelli (1816–91). Morelli is considered the inventor of scientific connoisseurship because of his emphasis on the close examination of anatomical detail. In *Italian Painters* (first published in 1890), Morelli articulated the view that each artist has their own idiosyncratic manner of creating (generally painting and drawing) which is most evident in areas such as the hand or ear or in the execution of drapery. In particular, he asserted that it was possible to see an artist's stylistic essence in the smallest physical details such as the fingernail, toenail or ear lobe. The art historian must operate like a detective since each artist leaves unconscious traces that are not necessarily followed by a pupil, thus enabling the connoisseur to distinguish the original from a copy. This approach was also thought to enable the expert to distinguish an original from a forgery. Morelli's method of discovering meaning in slight or unconscious detail was also of interest to Arthur Conan Doyle (1859–1930) and Sigmund Freud (1856–1939). Morelli stressed that the connoisseur focused on the work of art and regarded the art historian as a bookish pedant. For Morelli, the connoisseur engaged in long and careful study of the individual object in order to determine authorship and to ascertain quality. Morelli also appeared to associate connoisseurship with an elite who 'know' a great work of art when they see it. Morelli believed in two kinds of sight – physical and spiritual, with the spiritual expressed as belonging to artists and students of art who are both privileged and endowed with a natural gift and according to Morelli, after long and careful study are able to discern the deeper meanings in outward forms. This more subjective approach involving a spiritual and emotional response to art (most particularly paintings) has become increasingly discredited. That said, the Morellian method continues to be employed into the twenty-first century.

Morelli's connoisseurship was admired by a number of followers including Bernard Berenson (1865–1959), Adolfo Venturi (1856–1941) and Constance Jocelyn Ffoulkes (1858–1950). Bernard Berenson was the most influential and well-known disciple of the Morellian approach, which he

articulated in his 1894 essay 'The Rudiments of Connoisseurship,' published in 1902. An American by upbringing, Berenson emerged as the pre-eminent expert in Renaissance art in the late nineteenth century. His expertise proved particularly useful to collectors and dealers. He cultivated strong relationships with major US collectors such as Isabella Stewart Gardner (1840–1924). Berenson used his skill in attribution both to buy art and to advise his collectors. More controversially, he struck up a relationship with the art dealer Joseph Duveen (1869–1939) in 1906, later introducing Duveen to Mrs Gardner. Berenson continued to act as her adviser and apparently received a 25 per cent commission on resulting total sales from Duveen until 1928. From 1928 Berenson became less reliant on Duveen's commission from both purchases and sales and instead received a retainer. Duveen relied on Berenson's expert opinion to persuade collectors of the authenticity and quality of the works of art. Berenson's expertise thus had an enormous impact on the art market particularly with respect to prices for Old Masters and served to accelerate and enhance the market for this field since his assessment of an object's authenticity greatly increased its value. Berenson's numerous optimistic evaluations and his relationship with Duveen have led to doubt being cast on a number of his attributions. He appears to have conflated his role as a connoisseur with that of high social status, thus reminding us that today the status of connoisseurship may be compromised when this approach is used in the service of the market or for social advancement. It may not be coincidental that the decline in this aspect of connoisseurship's reputation dates from after Berenson's death.

Another significant development in the history of modern connoisseurship occurred as a result of a forgery case and associated lawsuit in 1945–7 when it emerged that a 'famous' painting by Johannes Vermeer (1632–75), thought to have been recently rediscovered, was in fact a forgery by Han van Meegeren (1889–1947). Van Meegeren was able to mislead a number of experts including connoisseurs and scientists, since he painted with pigments consistent with those used by the Old Masters. In addition, he painted on top of the surface of seventeenth-century paintings. His downfall was that he used a modern binding agent. One of the challenges for connoisseurship and a further reason that this approach fell into disrepute was that experts at the Van Meegeren trial had discussed the style of the painting in generic

terms and made value judgements, referring to the work as demonstrating pure expression and a deep religious emotion. Such sentiments were difficult to prove and subject to widespread disagreement and debate.

The issue of the evaluation of expert knowledge is an ongoing one. The Van Meegeren case is significant as an instance of intuitive connoisseurship being downgraded, marking the beginning of a more 'scientific' approach to connoisseurship. The Rembrandt Research Project by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research illustrates this transition. The project credited Morelli with having invented their techniques of connoisseurship – particularly in his focus on certain seemingly insignificant details. The approach of the project since the 1970s has also been to employ science to determine the authorship of works. The twenty-first-century connoisseur increasingly also needs to be familiar with scientific and technical processes including X-rays, infrared photography, Raman microscopy, pigment sampling, canvas research, multi-spectral imaging and dendrochronology. In addition, the expert needs to be able to analyse scientific data and use it in the service of connoisseurship. Scientific data may act as an aid to determine the age of the panel, canvas or pigment but it cannot be used to verify authorship. More recently the Rembrandt Research Project has confirmed that connoisseurship ultimately played a larger role in its conclusions than science, making the point that absolute certainty can seldom be proven in the making of attribution – particularly if unsupported by documentary evidence.

Connoisseurship is much debated in the twenty-first century, particularly in academe. As an approach it continues to be used by dealers, collectors and auctioneers, but there is a persistent view in the academic community that the status of connoisseurship continues to be low both in universities and in museums and galleries, although there has recently been a shift here owing to the rise in technical art history as a field of study in the US and Europe. Some commentators have asked whether there is a crisis of connoisseurship, noting that art history graduates seldom demonstrate connoisseurial skills. This view is largely owing to continuing negative associations of connoisseurship with both elitism and the art market and the prevailing perceived belief that connoisseurship, without a clear methodology, cannot be taught. More recently art professionals have asked whether object knowledge

should be separated from technical elements of attribution and seemingly intuitive aesthetic judgement.

Connoisseurship may also be confused with visual acuity, which is more widely taught in universities. Here students are taught to be visually literate and to look closely at works of art to see what can be learnt from the object as part of a contextual analysis. This approach does not necessarily involve object handling or an engagement with questions of style, quality, authorship or date. Few, if any, university-level courses train students in connoisseurship and in the interpretation of scientific tests. There continues to be no methodology for attributions or handbooks to train aspiring connoisseurs – both necessary if the discipline is in fact more than a flash of intuition. That said, object-based art history continues to be taught at tertiary level in Europe and North America and the study of technical art history is increasing in universities. In the UK increasing numbers of universities are partnering with museums in joint PhD projects some of which engage in technical art-historical projects.

More recently, David Freedberg has written one of the strongest arguments outlining the reasons for connoisseurship continuing to matter and also being worthy of disciplinary esteem. Freedberg suggests that connoisseurship's interdisciplinary nature lies in its engagement with the sciences and social sciences. For example, the ability to determine quality and authorship of a group of drawings may involve working with experts in anatomy and natural history as well as archivists and paleographers. This both enlarges the field and also opens up the possibility of engaging with a much wider world. Connoisseurship occupies a role at the centre of the arts, humanities, sciences and social sciences – not just for the discipline of art history. This is because connoisseurship employs a myriad of different tools and also because it may offer an exemplary crossover between the new neurosciences and traditional historical ones, unpacking the science of how we apprehend, read and classify a work of art. In addition, Freedberg argues that rather than dismissing intuition, it is important to unpack the cognitive processes at work that include the role of intuition. Freedberg's analysis offers a multi-valent and interesting way forward for connoisseurship and one that provides a conceptual, multidisciplinary and methodological underpinning to this approach.

Connoisseurship is more difficult to categorise with respect to contemporary art given that it has become increasingly context-based, with for example site-specific performance art. With respect to questions of authorship, this is less relevant for contemporary art since the artist is usually still alive and able to assist. Recent and contemporary artists may also actively resist connoisseurship and question associated issues such as quality, authorship and authenticity – Andy Warhol (1928–87) and Elaine Sturtevant (1924–2014) being cases in point. The rise of technical art history as a field of study in universities and the increasing number of PhD collaborations in Europe between museums and universities jointly committed to technical art history, together with David Freedberg's timely intervention, may signal a new direction for connoisseurship. (See also 'Authenticity').

Jos Hackforth-Jones

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AUTHENTICITY

The authentic refers to the real or genuine – particularly with respect to an author or painter. To authenticate means to give authority or legal validity to and to establish something as genuine or real, thus also certifying its origin or authorship. In relation to the visual arts, authenticity can be divided into two kinds of approach: physical or material authenticity and conceptual or contextual authenticity. Establishing physical/material authenticity involves an understanding of connoisseurship, provenance and technical art history together with an ability to read and interpret scientific data, plus a knowledge of appropriate scientific developments and approaches. Determining physical/material authenticity, then, is a complex and multidisciplinary process which also intersects with due diligence. (See 'Due Diligence'.)

In order to establish physical/material authenticity the expert begins by acquiring a thorough knowledge of the physical condition of the work of art via an empirical observation of its materials, techniques, condition and configuration in order to establish the date and to attribute authorship. This technical examination includes an analysis of any restoration carried out, since this has a bearing on both the quality of the work and its value. Some understanding of scientific process is vital in order to ascertain the degree to which a work may have been altered since its production. Typically an expert in a museum or commercial gallery will also need to research the work in order to find supporting documentary evidence which will attest to its provenance (the history of its ownership and location) and to the history of the work as well as to its authorship. Establishing physical/material authenticity is important both for the museum world and for the commercial sector. This process is integrally associated with three key modern institutions: the museum, the auction house and the art fair. Museums in particular perform a major role in validating authenticity and in promoting the acceptance