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Author(s): Gary Schwartz

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Connoisseurship: The Penalty of Ahistoricism

No one who has worked with a gifted connoisseur would be so foolish or ungrateful as to deny the existence of the gift or its usefulness.¹ One of my own close encounters with the phenomenon dates back to 1968, when I entered the employ of the Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie in The Hague. At the time, the RKD had 650,000 photographs of Dutch and Flemish paintings on file, and I was told in quiet awe that the director, Sturla Gudlaugsson, had recently visited the Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte in Munich to check their 100,000 Netherlandish photos for unknown examples and differing attributions. The ability of those such as Gudlaugsson to recognize and sort countless images saves the rest of us years of labor and speeds up the placing of particular works by decades or even centuries. They provide a framework for the formation of the mental images we use for our own attributions. Many of us, myself included, have experienced the satisfying flash of recognition that convinces us that we have found the hand of a known master in an unidentified or wrongly attributed work.

We do this as trained art historians, but there are non-academics — at auction houses, for example — who are able to make determinations of period, place and authorship of old master paintings, Oceanic artefacts or Coca-Cola bottles with no more than an elementary knowledge of art history to help them. The connoisseur's sensitivity to style, at its best, can be compared to the ear of the musician with absolute pitch, the feeling for numbers of the mathematical genius, the intuition of the first-class detective or the practiced diagnostician.

Without being able to tell us how they know certain things, they are sure that they do, and we believe them.

But we only believe them up to a point. In general, knowledge of this kind is not considered a definitive source of authority. One goes through two stages in judging such performances. Hearing the expert opinion, our sense of wonder is tinged by bemused skepticism. It is only when the judgment is corroborated by outside evidence — a tuning fork, a computer calculation, a smoking gun, a lab report, a signature — that we truly are impressed, and we relinquish disbelief.

The problem begins when the connoisseur's judgment cannot be confirmed by outside evidence. In that situation, we no longer see expert opinion as a welcome shortcut to a more dependable source of knowledge, but as a value unto itself. Even then we are apt to accept the judgment of a recognized authority as long as we have no reason to doubt it. It is only when another authority challenges an attribution that belief becomes insufficient. At that point we have no choice but to challenge the connoisseur, demanding to know the foundations of his judgments.

Many connoisseurs have met the challenge. Despite the proverbial laconism of the connoisseur, the literature is rich in manifestos, such as Bernard Berenson's *Rudiments of Connoisseurship*,² Max Friedländer's *On Art and Connoisseurship*,³ and Jakob Rosenberg's *On Quality in Art*.⁴ Attempting to account for their convictions, these connoisseurs insist that their judgments proceed from the perception, whether or not instantaneous, of specific

properties — composition, drawing, brushwork, modelling, expression, technical or anatomical features and so forth — which manifest the hand of the maker. Each writer agrees that, in Friedländer's words, "the artist [...] at bottom remains the same, and [...] something which cannot be lost reveals itself in his every expression."⁵ That something which cannot be lost is also, they concur, something which cannot be imitated. The task of the connoisseur is to attune himself to these unique and inimitable features.

All connoisseurs share this assumption, whether they search for the master's fingerprint in his technical habits, the minutiae of his style or the particulars of his quality. All operate on the belief that the object itself contains all the information needed to establish its authorship, and that this information can be interpreted properly by the observer who knows what to look for.

The most recent systematic description of connoisseurship known to me — a chapter by Willibald Sauerländer in an excellent introduction to art history for German students⁶ — dilutes its claims to some degree. Determinations of time and place, he writes, can be made on a firm scholarly basis, but attributions to individual masters cannot escape the "stigma of subjectivity and time-boundedness."⁷ It is his sanguine opinion that the field has taken account of this, and that "attribution to individual hands [...] no longer fills the central place it occupied a few brief decades ago."⁸ In my field this is certainly not the case. The major efforts in Rembrandt studies for the past thirty years have been the attempts of Otto Benesch, Horst Gerson, Werner Sumowski and the Rembrandt Research Project to establish corpora of the paintings and drawings of Rembrandt and his school. In fact, Sauerländer cites the Rembrandt Research Project as a model of how connoisseurship can "constantly sharpen and refine its instruments."⁹

If it were true, as Sauerländer claims, that art-historical common sense has rendered connoisseurship unproblematical and that steady progress is being made in applying it, I do not think there would be any need to discuss it further. My own discomfort with Rembrandt connoisseurship has certainly not been laid to rest by the publications of the Rembrandt Research Project, as thorough and well documented as they are. At the same time, I know from experience how difficult it is to determine the source of that discomfort and, more importantly, to deal, as an art historian, with the ultimate defense of connoisseurship: that while you cannot live with it, you cannot live without it, either. Academic purists may squirm, but they too practice connoisseurship or accept its findings. Connoisseurship is still the id of the art-historical ego.

In the following essay, I would like to take on these two oversized problems: namely to put my finger on what I feel is

most wrong with connoisseurship, and to sketch an art history which, freed from its flaws, can withstand close intellectual scrutiny.

Essentially, what the connoisseur does is to define a relation between an existing work and a historical category. Dealing with works of uncertain status, the connoisseur treats the other two elements in the equation as givens: the categories are formed by works whose authorship is firmly documented, and defining the relation is an analytic technique whose intricacies can be explained, although they mysteriously continue to resist codification. A closer look reveals that the two "givens" — the categories and the techniques by which unknown works are matched to them — are actually quite dubious.

The connoisseur's comparative material consists, in theory, of existing works whose authorship is documented. This sample, historically precious as it is, is, however, insufficient for the stated purposes of connoisseurship. The disappearance from sight of the entire oeuvres of many documented masters distorts the record, so that the connoisseur's categories do not correspond to historical reality.¹⁰ It is as if the sorted contents of a number of containers were dumped on a heap, half the containers were broken, and one then tried to sort the same material into the remaining containers. It may be a valuable, perhaps necessary exercise, but one should not entertain any illusions concerning its truth to historical fact.

Even more questionable is the process by which the relation between the work and the category is defined. In 1929, Berenson said, under oath, "[...] when I see a picture, in most cases I recognize it at once as being or not being by the master it is ascribed to; the rest is merely a question of how to try to fish out the evidence that will make the conviction as plain to others as it is to me,"¹¹ and, while the academic connoisseur of today may bend over backwards insisting that his attributions are analytical rather than intuitive, to my mind connoisseurship has never laid the ghost of Berenson and his acts of recognition.¹²

The methodological consequences of this go far to undermine whatever theoretical foundations connoisseurship may be said to possess. Allow me to illustrate this with some examples from the connoisseurship of Rembrandt paintings.

There is an unsigned, undated, undocumented painting of Christ in the Hyde Collection which has been praised most generously as a Rembrandt by Otto Benesch, Seymour Slive and Horst Gerson, and is unusual in its never having been doubted by anyone, to my knowledge. It serves as one of the benchmark works against which the authorship of other paintings of Christ is judged. In 1956, Benesch called it "the most monumental painting" of its kind,¹³ and Valentiner considered it the "center figure" of a supposed series of

four three-quarter-length evangelists, including the Louvre *St. Matthew*.¹⁴ In 1965, Seymour Slive wrote of it, comparing it with a smaller *Christ*, formerly in the De Boer Collection: "Perhaps Rembrandt actually began the painting now at the Hyde Collection with the thought of making a larger version of the small panel, but his incredible power of invention led him to depict quite another aspect of Christ's character."¹⁵ In 1969, Horst Gerson called it "a fine interpretation of an ideal image of Christ."¹⁶ In the 1960's, Slive, Gerson and Bauch illustrated the work after a fine-looking black-and-white photograph.¹⁷ In the color illustration in my book on Rembrandt of 1985, one notices that there may be something seriously wrong with the condition of the painting. Recently, the Photo Archive of the Getty Center yielded some photographs, taken for the restorer William Suhr during his work on the canvas in 1958, which reveal that the middle of the canvas was cut out at some point and later reattached, so that the composition of the painting as we know it is not the work of Rembrandt at all, but of a restorer. The condition of the surface, moreover, is so poor that it tells us little about the original quality of the painting.

Despite this, one continues to "recognize" the hand of Rembrandt in the work. Even the absence of the most essential qualities the connoisseur says he needs to analyze in order to arrive at an attribution or recognize the hand of a master — composition, drawing, paint surface — does not diminish one's certainty that this is a work by the master. This painting is fortunately untypical. But how many of the works we study would not be disavowed by their makers, on account of their condition, as caricatures of their style and technique?

On the other hand, no amount of positive evidence, however solid, is capable of forcing a recognition. An unprepossessing painting of a man's head, monogrammed and dated "RHL 1629," is rejected by the Rembrandt Research Project,¹⁸ although it displays dendrochronological and technical characteristics virtually identical to those of an accepted painting also dated 1629.¹⁹ The rejected Rembrandt in the Corcoran Art Gallery in Washington,²⁰ signed "Rembrandt f 1632" and traceable in documents as a Rembrandt from the eighteenth century on, is painted in a technique indistinguishable from the accepted portrait of Johannes Uytenbogaert of 1633.²¹

My argument is not with the attributions themselves, with which I happen to agree, whatever that information and the opinions behind it are worth. The point I wish to make concerns the priorities of connoisseurship. Once the hand of Rembrandt has been recognized or rejected, the Rembrandt Research Project is sometimes obliged to dismiss as irrelevant technical evidence of the kind which it otherwise considers corroboratory. The same unfortunate methodology is applied

to the signatures. Those on the rejected works I mentioned correspond in type to the signatures on unquestioned works of the period. The authors of the *Corpus*, however, applying the standards of quality connoisseurship to the signatures, conclude: "The shaping of the letters does not seem spontaneous, and does not carry conviction,"²² and "Because of the absence of spontaneity, the letters and figures do not give the impression of authenticity."²³

These examples, which are *not* untypical, show that a "good" painting retains its power of conviction, even in the absence of the qualities which are supposed to make it good, while no surfeit of technical evidence will make a "bad" one look any better. They make me doubt whether the further refinement of the "instruments of connoisseurship" which Sauerländer praises is going to be of much use. Given their priorities, connoisseurs are unlikely ever to define the rules for using those instruments.

If, then, the connoisseur establishes the relation between a work and a category by ad hoc means and if the categories themselves are demonstrably inaccurate, of what value can a connoisseur's attribution be?

This question, if I am not mistaken, is being asked, in various forms, by many if not all connoisseurs. Their collective reaction, to date, has been to change not the substance but the style of connoisseurship, in an attempt to neutralize the effects of what Sauerländer calls "subjectivity and time-boundedness." The encyclopedic connoisseur who depends on his individual sensitivity is being replaced by interlocking circles of specialists. More importantly, present-day connoisseurs make eager use of old and new scientific techniques for peering below the surface of their objects of study. These developments are intended to objectify attributions.

If my analysis of the logical defect in connoisseurship is correct, however, then subjectivity is not a root problem. How else but subjectively can one pair, by whatever means the occasion seems to call for, an object of uncertain status to an historically untenable category? To do this by committee rather than individually, to consult autoradiographs and thread counts in addition to qualitative criteria, to average out the results by a process of consensus cannot change this. In fact, such developments will probably only aggravate things, as art historians enlist the aid of scientists in the search for chimeric proofs of authenticity, defined by stricter and stricter standards.

The issue at hand has been addressed in slightly different form by the philosopher Nelson Goodman in an essay entitled "Art and Authenticity," first published in 1968 and reprinted in 1983. Asking how we are to distinguish between "Rembrandt's original painting *Lucretia* and [...] a superlative

imitation of it,"²⁴ Goodman establishes that sense perception cannot do the trick,²⁵ and concludes: "the only way of ascertaining that the *Lucretia* before us is genuine is thus to establish the historical fact that it is the actual object made by Rembrandt."²⁶ This leads us, I believe, to the crux of the matter. The connoisseur's close examination of an object can only produce an attribution on the model: "This painting is a Rembrandt because it displays such and such aesthetic qualities and/or such and such chemical and physical properties." This is not only an ahistorical statement, it is actually at odds with the historical statement: "This painting is a Rembrandt because certain evidence proves that it was made by Rembrandt van Rijn," which implies nothing whatever about aesthetic or physical properties. In judging the competing claims implicit in those two approaches to authenticity, I follow Goodman in concluding that the only way of ascertaining the authorship of an object is to establish the history of its production. The other claim, which seeks proof of authorship in the object itself, is simply unfounded. It assumes that the artist — whether original creator, studio assistant, copyist, forger or restorer — leaves a fingerprint in every work, a fingerprint whose whorls can be properly interpreted by the later observer who knows what to look for. The Morellian part of this assumption has never been proved. Despite valiant attempts by critics, psychologists and physiologists, we still do not know whether the sum total of stylistic and technical features of a work amount to a fingerprint.²⁷ To go by the record of connoisseurship as a means of attribution, one would sooner conclude that nothing in art is inimitable.

The second part of the assumption — that the fingerprint is interpretable to the good observer — pays a thoroughly undeserved compliment to the perspicacity of the connoisseur. The annals of forgery, let alone the infinitely vaster ones of restoration, should be enough to undermine one's faith that the examination of a work of art, by even the most sophisticated observer, puts one in touch with the psyche or handwriting of the maker. The link provided by the work of art between the creative personality of the artist and the response of the modern connoisseur is too tenuous to justify the ahistorical attribution. What is said of forgeries — that they seldom retain their power of conviction for longer than a generation — is equally true of attributions, for much the same reasons. The study of technical and stylistic properties may lead to a presumption of period and place strong enough to withstand reasonable doubt — and in that sense I agree with Sauerländer — but to employ them as indications of personal authorship is to court self-deception.

The consequences of this go far beyond the specific area of

attributions. In general art history, as well, the works of individual masters are still described as embodiments of personal stylistic and technical attributes recognizable to the knowing eye. Art historians, trained from the start to toggle back and forth between historical and ahistorical approaches to art, never seem to notice the basic contradiction between them.

The application of Goodman's conclusion makes it possible to define relations between works and categories more consistently. To begin with, the works and categories themselves will be different from those of the connoisseur. The hard core of material will be much larger than the connoisseur's, namely *all* the artists and works known from sources and documents. These will be studied in the context in which they are encountered, embedded in the treatises, poetry, government records, contracts, inventories, testaments — in the lives — of the times which produced them, not in the museum world of today. (There is no compelling need to despair of studying material from prehistorical or non-verbal cultures in the same way. Their archaeological or anthropological context can be every bit as revealing as written records.) The relationship which we will be called on to define will be given to a great degree by that context. It will be far more varied than the brush-and-canvas relation sought by the connoisseur, and will touch on all aspects of the family, religion, politics, finances and social life of the artist, his patrons and their ambience.

A special place in this body of basic material will be occupied by the connoisseur's central examples: the existing objects whose authorship and provenance are certain. Now, however, we will understand them in relationship — even in quantitative relationship — to the total production of art in the society in which they originated, including lost works. This would provide a greatly needed framework for the scientific examination and stylistic analysis of these works, which in turn would give structure to the more general study of the physical and stylistic attributes of works of art. The attributions and "de-attributions" one might make at that point, armed with so much more powerful weapons than out-of-context stylistic comparison alone, should be far better founded than the ahistorical ones of the connoisseur. But that would not be its main purpose. Even if most undocumented works end up with what one might call generic as opposed to brand-name labels, our understanding of those works as well will have been put on a firmer footing than ever before. To admit to our uncertainty with regard to the authorship of the great majority of undocumented works will cause pain and frustration, especially to collectors, but it will clarify for art historians and their public the reality of the case. No one — least of all

institutional or individual buyers of art — benefits in the long run from the pretense that the author of a work can be identified by the “close-reading” techniques of connoisseurship.

I have presented here the sharpest concise critique of connoisseurship I am presently capable of formulating. I have done this not for the sake of argument, but out of the deep conviction that connoisseurship incorporates ahistorical values which are irreconcilable with the historical ones that have grown increasingly important to me in recent years — and not to me alone, if I may judge from the tone of many recent essays. To continue practicing connoisseurship as if the only problems it presents are technical limitations and the need to dispel the misunderstandings of the ill-informed will, I fear, put our field out of step with the other humanities and sciences and rob it of the enviable position it has won in our century.

At the same time, I am equally convinced that proclaiming the abolition of connoisseurship is no answer to the problem, even if such a thing were possible. The cultivation of the connoisseur’s sensibility and the insights it offers is of great benefit to our appreciation of art as individuals and to the scholarly study of art objects, which after all come to us with an ahistorical dimension. Moreover, we have a responsibility as museum officials to account as well as we can for the authenticity and quality of the works we purchase or care for. Even if we stop short of attaching names to undocumented

works, we will still need connoisseurship for sorting them into broader, more defensible categories, and for explaining our value judgments, however tentatively.

The conclusion which I would attach to the foregoing arguments is that connoisseurship occupies the wrong position within art history. As the central clearing house for the objects we study as well as those we buy, it introduces into the heart of our field a self-perpetuating system of institutionalized value judgments, a system which is coming under heavier external criticism and internal strain all the time.

I would argue for the subjugation of connoisseurship to a more structured historical approach to art on the lines sketched above. Within such confines, connoisseurship would be freed from the perennial demand to promise too much — the certainty of truth — only to deliver too little: an all too hypothetical opinion. Connoisseurship in the historical mold would no longer be called upon to make distinctions of the classical “Yes-Maybe-No” variety. (The ill-advised A, B and C categories of the Rembrandt Research Project distort the vast and valuable information in its *Corpus*). Its judgments would be guided by the more graduated scale of historical relationships in the sources and documents, and would be capable of fine adjustment.

In this way, I feel, a place of honor can be preserved for connoisseurship, as art history attempts to hold its own in what is shaping up to be a highly competitive twenty-first century.

This article was written during my tenure as a Getty Scholar of the Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, Santa Monica, 1986-87. The Getty Center provided an environment for lively critical debate, giving me the exceptional opportunity to discuss the issues presented here with distinguished art historians on the Getty staff and with visiting scholars of the Getty Center and Getty Museum programs. Their reactions were of great benefit to me in putting the article into final form. I would like to express my warmest thanks to the Center for its furtherance of my work and to the colleagues there, in particular Ben Lifson, who took the time to listen to and to comment on my text.

It was also presented as a lecture on February 14, 1987, at the 75th Annual Meeting of the College Art Association in Boston, at a seminar entitled “The Theory and Practice of Connoisseurship at the End of the Twentieth Century,” chaired by Konrad Oberhuber and Henri Zerner. The stimulus to participate in the session was provided by John Walsh, who thrust the call for papers under my nose and urged me to work out the position I had begun to formulate in “Rembrandt bij de tandarts”, *Hollands Maandblad*, November 1973, pp. 3-9.

¹ The word “connoisseurship” is used in this paper in its technical art-historical sense: namely the determination of the authorship, date or place of origin of an art object on the basis of close examination and comparison.

² B. Berenson, *Rudiments of Connoisseurship: Study and Criticism of Italian Art*, New York, 1962 (first published 1902).

³ M. Friedländer, *On Art and Connoisseurship*, London, 1942.

⁴ J. Rosenberg, *On Quality in Art: Criteria of Excellence, Past and Present* (The A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, 1964), London, 1967.

⁵ Friedländer, *op. cit.* (note 3), chap. XXIX, “On Personality and its Development,” p. 200.

⁶ W. Sauerländer, “Alterssicherung, Ortssicherung und Individualisierung,” in H. Belting *et al.*, *Kunstgeschichte: eine Einführung*, Berlin, 1986, pp. 116-44.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 138.

⁸ “Im ganzem aber nimmt die Individualsicherung bei der kunsthistorischen Beschäftigung mit den vielen namenlosen oder durchschnittlichen Werken aus der Vergangenheit heute nicht mehr die

gleiche zentrale Stellung ein wie noch vor wenigen Jahrzehnten." *Ibidem*, pp. 139-140.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 138.

¹⁰ M. J. Bok, in his essay "Artisans or Gentleman Painters?: the Social Background of Utrecht Painters in the Early Seventeenth Century," presented at the 75th Annual Meeting of the College Art Association in Boston (1987), mentions that in Utrecht, between 1611 and 1625, 36 masters were enlisted in the Guild of St. Luke as painters, only 16 of whom are known from existing works. My guess would be that this figure is typical, and that about half the documented artists living in Western Europe between 1400 and 1900 are artistic unknowns. This ratio is in strong contrast with that between named and unnamed surviving works from that period, as encountered in museum and auction catalogues. That ratio is closer to ten assigned works for each anonymous one.

¹¹ H. Hahn, *The Rape of La Belle*, Kansas City (Frank Glen Publishing Company), 1946, p. 103.

¹² In his essay in the same issue of this publication, entitled "Connoisseurship as Practice," David Ebitz actually embraces the ghost, praising connoisseurship as an instance of irrational knowing by recognition rather than analysis. I would be not as content as he seems to be to regard scholarly work as a universal physiological process attended by rationalization after the fact.

¹³ O. Benesch, "Worldly and Religious Portraits in Rembrandt's Late Art," *Art Quarterly*, 19, 1956, pp. 335-56, p. 348.

¹⁴ W. R. Valentiner, "The Rembrandt Exhibitions in Holland, 1956," *Art Quarterly*, 19, 1956, pp. 390-403, p. 400.

¹⁵ S. Slive, "An Unpublished *Head of Christ* by Rembrandt," *Art*

Bulletin, 47, 1965, pp. 407-417, p. 415.

¹⁶ A. Bredius, *Rembrandt: the Complete Edition of the Paintings*, revised by H. Gerson, London, 1969, p. 614, no. 628.

¹⁷ K. Bauch, *Rembrandt Gemälde*, Berlin, 1966, no. 229.

¹⁸ J. Bruyn *et al.*, *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings* (Rembrandt Research Project), vol. 1, The Hague etc., 1982, no. C 23.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, no. A 21.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, vol. 2, 1986, no. C 76.

²¹ *Ibidem*, no. A 80.

²² *Ibidem*, vol. 1, 1982, p. 584.

²³ *Ibidem*, vol. 2, 1986, p. 794.

²⁴ N. Goodman, "Art and Authenticity," *The Forger's Art: Forgery and the Philosophy of Art*, Berkeley etc., 1983, pp. 93-114, pp. 93-94.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 98: "Nothing depends here upon my ever actually perceiving or being able to perceive a difference between the two pictures." In Goodman's example, the knowledge that one painting is an original and the other a copy is given. His observations, however, apply *mutatis mutandis* to a situation in which the status of both works remains to be established.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 105.

²⁷ Attempts to describe systematically the characteristics of a master's style and the criteria by which to measure them, such as Maurits van Dantzig's "pictology," are avoided by practicing connoisseurs. The main reason, I believe, is that any such systematization inevitably leads either to attributions which are unconvincing to the eye, or to the introduction of compromises in the system itself.