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Whither Connoisseurship?: Alan Wallach, Professor Emeritus, The College of William and Mary

In May 2014, the Paul Mellon Centre for British Art hosted a one-day conference entitled "The Educated Eye? Connoisseurship Now."[1] As might be expected, several speakers complained that, in the words of the connoisseur-dealer Bendor Grosvenor, "the basic element of being a connoisseur isn't appreciated or encouraged enough anymore." In a similar vein, Professor Elizabeth Prettejohn lamented that today's art history students lack "not only the knowledge but also the connoisseurial skill to cope with an object that wasn't of a type that was already familiar to them." The implication, evident not only in the speakers' words but also in the aggrieved tone with which they voiced their complaint, was that teachers of art history had abandoned connoisseurship and close looking—"real nose-to-the-canvas looking," in Grosvenor's words—for less essential pursuits such as theory, social history, and psychoanalysis.

The speakers thus restaged the division between connoisseurship and academic art history that goes back at least to Hegel, who disdained connoisseurship because it concerned appearances and who exerted a powerful influence on the development of German art history, which by the mid-nineteenth century was drawing a sharp distinction between *Kunstkenner* and *Kunsthistoriker*.[2] Despite attempts to see connoisseurs and art historians contributing to the same scholarly project (Erwin Panofsky thought "the connoisseur might be defined as a laconic art historian and the art historian as a loquacious connoisseur"[3]), the antagonism between the two has often been real enough and perhaps no more so than in recent decades. Martin Myrone, another speaker at the Mellon Centre conference, recalled that when he was a student at the Courtauld in the 1990s, "connoisseurship was not a term that was actively used, at least in a positive sense. If connoisseur and connoisseurship were referenced at all, it tended to be in a strictly historical sense or with a broadly negative inference."

But does the longstanding division between connoisseurship and academic art history mean we now confront a crisis of connoisseurship, one in which the education of the art-historical "eye" has been neglected or at least called into question? The title of the Mellon Centre conference, "The Educated Eye?" suggests the crisis is upon us. Yet if there is a crisis of connoisseurship, it isn't to be found in art-historical education, which in fact emphasizes close looking (the prerequisite for connoisseurship), if not always connoisseurship per se. In my view, the crisis lies elsewhere.

To begin with, the term connoisseur defines a social role as well as a type of scholarly capability. Because of connoisseurship's centuries-old association with upper-class claims to refinement and cultural superiority, Hugo Chapman, speaking at the Mellon Centre conference, announced he would "rather gouge my eyes out with a rusty penknife than

describe myself as a connoisseur." Chapman, who is Keeper and Curator in the Department of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum, prefers the title "expert" to connoisseur, in effect exchanging a social role associated with snobbery and genteel amateurism for a job description. In the hands of an expert, the labor of the connoisseur loses its aura of aristocratic leisure, is indeed reduced to the mundane exercise of an acquired skill. Thus at the Mellon Centre conference Martin Myrone noted that, despite the "broadly negative inference" that was associated with connoisseurship during his student years, he routinely employs the tools of connoisseurship as part of his duties as Lead Curator for British Art to 1800 at Tate Britain.

Still, demystifying connoisseurship, while imperative for critical scholarship, cannot alter the social circumstances in which the connoisseur works. By authenticating and classifying artifacts, connoisseurship plays a foundational role in the discipline.[4] However, the connoisseur's expertise is a double-edged sword. By certifying the authenticity of artifacts that make their way onto the art market, connoisseurship enables commodity fetishism and thereby all but negates its scholarly function. Authenticated works of art, often astronomically priced, become raw material for late capitalism's voracious media spectacle. "Antiques Roadshow" in the United States and "Fake or Fortune" in the United Kingdom attest to the ubiquity of commodity fetishism when it comes to art and of what might be called "strike-it-rich aesthetics."

This is the crisis of connoisseurship and of art history generally. There is no remedy.

Notes

[1] A video of the conference is available at http://livestream.com/accounts/7709097/connoisseurshipnow. The words of the speakers quoted here are drawn from this video.

[2] See Stefan Muthesius, "Towards an '*exakte Kunstwissenschaft*'(?), Part II: The New German Art History in the Nineteenth Century: A Summary of Some Problems," *Journal of Art Historiography* 9 (December 2013), 1-16.

[3] Erwin Panofsky, "Art as a Humanistic Discipline," in *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1955), 20.

[4] For a superb if sometimes overly optimistic account of connoisseurship's raison d'être, see David Freedberg, "Why Connoisseurship Matters," in Katlijne Van der Stighelen ed.*, Munuscola Amicorum: Contributions on Rubens and his Colleagues in Honour of Hans Vlieghe* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006), 1: 29-43.