Whither Connoisseurship?: A. Joan Saab, Chair, Department of Art and Art History, University of Rochester

CONNOISSEUR
 1: expert; *especially***:** one who understands the details, technique, or principles of an art and is competent to act as a critical judge
 2: one who enjoys with discrimination and appreciation of subtleties <a *connoisseur* of fine wines>

For those of us who practice a form of visual studies or socially informed art history, the very notion of connoisseurship may seem antithetical to what we do. Yes, we look closely at images and objects and yes, we make critical judgments about what we see, but the elitism embedded in the very term undercuts the social and cultural contexts that undergird much of our scholarship, thereby making it seem like a dirty word in contemporary academia. Can you imagine telling your Chair that you'd like to teach a course in connoisseurship next term? I can't either, and I'm the Chair.

From the Latin *cognoscere,* "to know," connoisseurship implies a certain type of knowledge, one that is acquired not only from careful looking but also from having the "eye" to distinguish fakes and forgeries and to validate market value. The term carries with it the weight of centuries of collecting practices, from European Royalty to American Robber Barons, who scoured the markets for suitable pieces to add to their collections, often with the aid of discerning minions such as Bernard Berenson, who famously advised Isabella Stewart Gardner on what to buy or bought the works for her sight unseen. Fetishizing "the eye" in this way negates any sense of pleasure the collector might take from the object aside from its worth in the marketplace, thus discounting other forms of value as sources of pleasure and reflection.

Over the past forty years or so, such market-driven approaches to validating quality have fallen into disfavor in academia, as scholars have focused more on the social and cultural contexts of the objects they study, on their networks of production and circulation, on their vernacular uses, and on the multiple social, political, and aesthetic conditions that art objects can contain, rather than on provenance or market worth. Not coincidentally, this shift has paralleled an explosion in the international art world where auction houses and art dealers measure success through astronomical sales figures**.** Thus**,** connoisseurship has become less about knowledge and more about the authorization of a certain type of market value.

Accompanying these shifts has been a related attack on the field of art history and the Humanities in general for their lack of "utility" in the current marketplace. Even President Obama famously privileged the centrality of economic success to one's academic choices when he told an audience last year, "I promise you folks can make a lot more, potentially, with skilled manufacturing or the trades than they might with an art history degree." Obama's remarks seem wedded to earlier models of art history, to a discipline more closely aligned with discerning eyes and informed connoiseurship than to the informed critique about the production and consumption of objects that contemporary art history provides—an enterprise that I believe is actually quite useful for today's citizens of the world.

I don't want to reclaim connoisseurship; that is not in my mind a useful exercise. I do, however, want to find a way to value what it is we do as art historians in the twenty-first century and what we teach our students to do in our classes: to look carefully and understand the relationship between seeing and knowing; to find pleasure, and power, in all forms of knowledge; and to examine visual objects not only for their authenticity or how much they are worth, but for what they reveal about the worlds they contain.