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Interdisciplinarity from Within

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As a graduate student in the history of art at Yale in the late 1970s, I scorned the heavy suitcase full of assumptions that, in my mind, the word connoisseurship carried: Old. Male. Elitist. Eurocentric. Tedious. Yet ten years later, I found myself setting up five slide projects in a row as I carefully examined the Morellian details of drawings made by nineteenth century Kiowa and Cheyenne warriors with names such as Chief Killer, Little Shield, and Making Medicine. I found that determining the identity of and attributing names to formerly anonymous Plains Indian artists was a legitimate and satisfying task—even for a feminist art historian whose training bridged anthropology and the social history of art. With experience, I discovered that connoisseurship is merely a tool; like any other tool, it depends on the skill of the hand that wields it.

The distinguished historian Carlo Ginsburg offers my favorite insight into the meaning of connoisseurship. He characterizes it as “interdisciplinarity from within,” remarking that it has “a cognitive richness which is unsuspected by its detractors as well as by some of its practitioners.”¹ Ginsburg points out, for example, that to conduct research on just one material object— a German still life painting of flowers—requires inquiry into botany, archival sources, paleography, and watermarks—as well as art history. True connoisseurship means understanding the full range of information an object can tell us.

Nearly four decades’ worth of cultural studies, post-colonial analysis, and feminist critique has taught us that we must use all art historical, historical, anthropological and archival data critically. We must understand them as constructions that are contingent, growing out of particular historical circumstances in which blinders of race, religion, ethnicity, gender, and class, among other things, set limits on what queries scholars thought to make, and what answers they listened to. But connoisseurship can ask—as well as answer—numerous questions that are still highly pertinent for a 21st century history of art.

NOTES

1. Carlo Ginsburg, “Vetoes and Compatibilities,” *Art Bulletin*, LXXVII (4), 1995, p. 536. [↩](#)