

The Implications for Connoisseurship of the Workshop System of Production

Alejandro Vergara, Senior Curator of Flemish and Northern European Paintings, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid

One of the most obvious responses to a problematic attribution is to say that a picture is “by the workshop” of a given painter. Thanks to research conducted by colleagues in the past, which is still ongoing today, we have all become familiar with the fact that in early modern Europe most leading painters worked with teams of men (and in rare cases also women) that were organized hierarchically, each performing specific tasks. This allowed artists to increase their output and profits. Paintings that resulted from this system are enormously varied, depending on how different masters organized their workshop. Paintings could be considered as the work of the master himself, of his shop, or every degree in between. The head of a workshop could set out to disguise this way of working, so that the pictures coming out of his shop would look as if they were made by him. Or he may have wanted to make the difference between his own and his assistants’ pictures perfectly clear so that he could price them differently - it depended on what business model was being followed.

In the period that concerns most of us in CODART, the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries, the individual talent and achievement of artists was highly valued, and contemporaries worried about issues of attribution in ways that anticipate our own. Examples are legion. Rubens explained in a famous letter of 1618 the degree to which he and his assistants had participated in the creation of a group of paintings that he was offering for sale. In the 1660s, a man who had purchased a series of apostles as originals by Van Dyck that were made decades earlier became suspicious about who had actually painted them, worrying that if they were by the workshop he had paid too much.

Focusing on a few specific paintings, this talk will consider some of the issues raised by the workshop system of production that affect the essential and thrilling activity of connoisseurship.

About Alejandro Vergara

Alejandro Vergara is senior curator of Flemish and Northern European paintings at the Museo Nacional del Prado in Madrid. The son of a Spanish father and a mother from Houston, he studied art history at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid, and received a PhD from the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, in 1994 (with a thesis devoted to Rubens and his Spanish patronage). After teaching at the University of California, San Diego, and at Columbia University, he returned to his home city of Madrid in 1999 to become a curator at the Prado. He has occupied his current post since 2003.

He has published extensively on Flemish sixteenth and seventeenth-century painting, and has curated a number of exhibitions, mainly at the Prado, sometimes with the collaboration of colleagues. Among them are exhibitions on the art of Patinir and the emergence of landscape painting in the sixteenth century, on several aspects of Rubens’s art (which he considers his true specialty), on Vermeer, on Rembrandt as a history painter, and on the art of the young Van Dyck (together with Friso Lammertse). His latest exhibition project and publication examines the art of Clara Peeters. A version of the show, *The Art of Clara Peeters*, will go on display in the Rockoxhuis in Antwerp in June 2016, and will move to the Prado in October. He and Friso Lammertse are currently working on an exhibition on Rubens as a painter of sketches, which will be held in the Prado and Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam in 2018.