

## Connoisseurship in the Shade of Neoliberalism

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The title of this paper is deliberately ambiguous, in its use of the term 'shade'. For shade may suggest protection, or obfuscation, being 'shaded' and therefore shielded, or being 'put in the shade'. This ambiguity may even be suggested by this image of connoisseurs, quite literally in the slide, in Watteau's well-known image (**SLIDE 1**). Watteau and Jean de Julienne are here sheltered in the shade, but also hidden away. It is with some sense of this ambiguity that I approach the question I want to address here: whether the economic, political and social changes experienced in recent years, pushing market forces to the fore (a phenomenon widely understood as representing the rise of 'neoliberalism')<sup>1</sup> represents an attack on the idea connoisseurship, or has, perhaps more unexpectedly, nurtured it.

I will begin, more properly, with two, I think uncontroversial, statements. The first is that the last years have seen very significant cuts in public funding for the arts in the UK. The Museums Association proposes this stands at something like 30% since 2010, and make much also of the closures of museums – apparent in this rather alarming map indicating locations where museums have had to be closed to the public over the last decade (**SLIDE 2**). Even if the degree of these cuts are contested, or their impact questioned, it has also to be acknowledged that in the UK at least the balance between government and private funding of public museums and galleries has shifted considerably, with the latter prevailing or threatening to prevail.<sup>2</sup> The second statement is that the last couple of years have seen an upsurge of complaints about the state of art historical practice, especially in those publicly-funded museums, focussed on a purported 'crisis in connoisseurship'. So we have had presentations and commentaries in various places over the period, including a widely-reported workshop at the Mellon Centre in London, several commentaries in the *Art Newspaper* and online, and an interview in the leading liberal broadsheet *The Observer* with Brian Allen, the chairman of the Hazlitt Group (the old master dealers) raising the alarm: 'Scholars fail to spot nuances in art as true connoisseurship dies out, says expert' (**SLIDE 2**), comments which circulated widely through social media.<sup>3</sup>

I have had a small part to play in these debates, as a contributor to a Paul Mellon Conference in 2014.<sup>4</sup> With that in mind, I want at the outset to be explicit about my take on what 'connoisseurship' may be. I do not consider it to be, as has been suggested, 'trivial'.<sup>5</sup> Quite the opposite. The skills and knowledge generally associated with connoisseurship are fundamental to the work of a museum

curator, and critically important to art historians of all kinds. That I think should not really be in question, and I am not sure where such skills and knowledge are being seriously questioned. Instead, there are important questions about how those skill and expertise are valued, located and described, and this has been a debate which has been represented (and I would suggest, misrepresented) as an attack on connoisseurship as such. Connoisseurship is such a loaded term – associated with socially exclusive ways of gaining knowledge and behaving personally – that I do question the need to use the word at all. Connoisseurship seems to be to be rather less a strictly defined set of scholarly skills, than a disposition, a way of behaving – think of Jean de Julienne, or the comedy connoisseur twiddling his moustache and flicking his handkerchief at a Renaissance nude. It is, in other words, about poise, in the sense meant by Richard Hoggart in his classic account of class and education, *The Use of Literacy* (1957), or a ‘disposition’, as in the sociological work of Pierre Bourdieu.<sup>6</sup> Viewed sociologically, connoisseurship might be approached as an aspect of a social identity, rather than the sum of certain art historical skills or expertise which in their singularity could quite effectively be described in different terms.

As any practising curator will be aware, those elements of connoisseurship, the skills and expertise rather than the social poise, are far more mundane, to the extent that they are easily undervalued or overlooked, and may count relatively little towards the forms of social distinction associated with connoisseurship in its traditional sense. By way of illustration, I could point to a work acquired by Tate in 2012, an 18<sup>th</sup> century pastel (**SLIDE 3**). This was offered to us by an art dealer as a John Russell of, perhaps, one of the well-known black personalities in Britain in the period, Orlando Equiano or Sir Joshua Reynolds’ servant. This turned out to be wishful thinking: the pastel is by Ozias Humphry and represents the running servant of Baron Nagell, the Dutch ambassador in England in the 1790s, and was the picture first exhibited to no great acclaim at the Royal Academy in London in 1795.<sup>7</sup> We were able to establish this through a mix of archival research and stylistic and technical comparison – in particular with reference to contemporary images of servants in livery and Humphry’s portrait of Francis Haward at the National Portrait Gallery, London which exhibits the same unblended hatching in the description of the face (**SLIDE 4**). We also talked to people – Neil Jeffares the great pastels expert, who had in fact already published the pastel as by Humphrey in his magisterial dictionary of eighteenth-century pastellists, various colleagues in the Netherlands, and so on.

So this was an exercise in ‘connoisseurship’ in so far as it involved questions of attribution and identification, and the application of relevant skills, expertise and industry. But it was, firstly, a collaborative enterprise, and there are real questions to be asked about the heroic version of connoisseurship which sees those skills vested in singular individuals, the ‘great expert’. Who are

they, how are they appointed? Who, crucially, do they answer to? Secondly, the attribution and identification of this portrait was vital for its museum acquisition, for various obvious reasons. As an art historian I would argue it matters greatly with regard to the robust and productive interpretation of the image, but we could also imagine questions addressed to this work where it matters less. We could imagine an analysis or display of this image in relation to other representations of non-white figures, where the question of authorship is pretty well irrelevant to the questions brought to the fore in that context. We should remind ourselves, perhaps, that 'art history without names' is hardly the product of fashionable theorising or a politicised social history of art, although sometimes presented as such. Meanwhile, the history of its shifting identification is a story of interest in itself, and the reception history of any work can be written very effectively without, necessarily, ascribing to the kinds of absolute judgements of value or identity associated with connoisseurship. It is, then, possible to concede that the skills and expertise classed under the rubric of 'connoisseurship' are important to art historical analysis, without also insisting that they are inevitably so.

The recent focus on questions of connoisseurship in the UK has, surely, been motivated in no small part by the work of the Public Catalogue Foundation (PCF), now identified as 'Art UK' (**SLIDE 5**). I want to say from the outset that the work of the Foundation has been, fundamentally, a very good thing. They have pulled together or generated images of over 200,000 paintings in oil in public collections in the UK, published them in print and made them freely available online. I know, personally, that this is has been a very good thing because in the winter of 2014-15 I was fortunate enough to have a Paul Mellon Centre Mid-Career Fellowship, which released me to work on my own research topic, the 19<sup>th</sup> century British painter Henry Perronet Briggs. Access to the PCF meant that in mere seconds I was able to pull up the 50 works in public collections identified as by him. Here is what the search looks like today (**SLIDES 6-7**).

This also, inevitably, throws up some problems.

The painting on the right in **SLIDE 7**, in Dulwich Picture Gallery, is not by Henry Perronet Briggs. It is by an even more obscure 19<sup>th</sup> century portrait painter, William Keighley Briggs. We know that because there is a print, reproducing the other version of the work in Innkeeper's Hall in the City of London (**SLIDE 8**).

It is problems of this sort that the PCF seeks to address with a newer initiative, 'Art Detective', whose purpose is clearly described on their website: 'Through Art Detective anyone with specialist knowledge can help public art collections across the United Kingdom', by proposing and contributing to strands of discussion published online. Here is how it looks currently, and as you can see it is largely taken up with questions of attribution and identification, classic 'connoisseurship' stuff

**(SLIDES 9-10)**. Something like 15% of the 200,000 works appearing online have apparently unsolved issues in these areas, so on the face of it this is quite a substantial project being embarked on here, one which could involve a very large and active public.

I say 'apparently', because my work on Briggs involved me in precisely such inquiries - I got to be an 'Art Detective' myself, for a moment. But as things unfolded, the situation turned out not to be quite so straightforward. Here is an anonymous portrait of a young student in Cambridge **(SLIDE 11)**, which I 'discovered' was by Briggs, because Briggs exhibited a portrait of this sitter in 1817, because he painted and engraved the sitter's father, and because stylistically there is a compelling case for this attribution **(SLIDE 12)**. I cheerfully relayed this information to Trinity Hall, the owners of the picture, who were able swiftly to tell me they knew this already, this is the artist named in their card index of pictures in the collection. I was similarly excited in being able to identify this portrait by Briggs in Oxford as being William Henry Ashurt, solicitor and undersheriff of London **(SLIDE 13)**, because of a contemporary print, and wrote to the right person at the Town Hall where the picture is displayed, to be told that they knew this, as there was a great big gold plaque at the bottom saying who the sitter was **(SLIDE 14)**.

The Art Detective initiative has explicitly been positioned as a response to the widely-mooted 'crisis of connoisseurship' in museums, an Editor's Letter in *Apollo* stating that:

The project acknowledges the dwindling of traditional specialist, object-orientated knowledge in our museums and galleries. With hindsight, that general trend seems to have been somewhat inevitable, as art historians schooled in the context-heavy 'New Art History' of the 1980s and '90s have taken up senior museum posts and responsibilities.<sup>8</sup>

Art Detective is proclaimed there as part of an upsurge of 'popular connoisseurship' – media-friendly, participatory, appealing to the mass and, arguably, validated by mass-participation. My own experience suggested that the problem was perhaps not simply around a crisis of connoisseurship so much as with record keeping at the PCF. Perhaps these are isolated examples. But there are questions to be asked about the nature and value of the mass of unidentified works represented in the PCF's records and, more importantly this idea of 'popular connoisseurship' taking up the slack needs to be tested out more fully.

Andrew Greg of the University of Glasgow, has helpfully drawn up these figures, representing the way Art Detective may actually have been used **(SLIDE 15)**.<sup>9</sup> Surveying the first 2000 registered users of Art Detective, he has established that three-quarters, 1564, actually contributed; of these, 1400 proposed only one topic each. A mere handful of individuals proposed a disproportionate number of

topics; one over 200, another between 150 and 199, another between 100 and 149 topics. So what is regularly presented as a mass activity turns out to be engaging a rather tiny number of people.

Perhaps this does not matter? It may be that since December 2015 when these figures were presented, Art Detective has been transformed, and many thousands of new users have got involved. Perhaps, instead, the lesson to be taken here is that the scheme needs to be expanded, greater efforts need to be made to secure a larger level of active involvement from the public. Perhaps, even, there are obstacles, of understanding or technical access, preventing people from getting more involved? Perhaps. But this does matter, because Art Detective has such prominence as a reference point for discussion around the 'crisis of connoisseurship', of public and private responsibilities and funding, and we can note that having started out as privately funded, the PCF has now secured a share of that ever-scarcer public funding, from the Arts Council and Heritage Lottery Fund.

Looking at the figures composed by Andrew Greg is an unnerving experience, I think, for anyone versed in the critical literature around neoliberalism. Because what this seems to lay out is a situation which is uncannily similar to that apparent in the much bigger, more obviously politically urgent, realms of economy and education, where the critics of neoliberalism have observed that the promise of equal access – to wealth, power, education – in multiple national contexts, and through successive political regimes, over the last 40 years – turns out to be anything but. The promise of equality of access - to home ownership, to investment in shares, to education – so prominent as political themes from the end of the 1970s, turns out to involve, yes, access, but also the entrenchment of a minority, the concentration of different forms of capital into fewer hands. As the pre-eminent social scientist David Harvey has observed, 'In the UK the top 1% of income earners have doubled their share of the national income since 1982, from 6.5% to 13%' concluding 'Redistributive effects and increasing social inequality have in fact been such a persistent features of neoliberalization as to be regarded as structural to the whole project'.<sup>10</sup>

In his recent review of further, proposed changes to Britain's higher education system, the intellectual historian Stefan Collini evoked, rather bleakly, the work of the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, and his 'disquieting' proposal that the language of morality has lost all real content, leaving a husk of empty words and a 'barren utilitarianism'.<sup>11</sup> In place of reason or ethical decision, MacIntyre observed, emotivism rules, promoted misleadingly as if it is thoroughly democratic and provides enormous liberties: 'The democratized self which has no necessary social content and necessary social identity can then be anything, can assume any role or take any point of view, because it *is* in and for itself nothing'.<sup>12</sup> In his more particular comments, Collini is observing how in

higher education a presumably sincere commitment to educational access had become wedded to the drive to marketization and mechanistic forms of assessment. This 'consumerist logic' was made 'chillingly clear' in the 2010 review led by Lord Browne of Madingley on educational access and student finance, the report which paved the way to the introduction of student fees and market competition as the overriding means of establishing academic value.

We might wonder whether the same values are triumphing in our own sector. To consider this question we might, for instance, look at the policy makers and leaders involved, and see if we can join up the dots between economics, education, and culture. Are there, perhaps, personalities at work behind all this talk of impersonal market forces? We might want to substantiate our suspicions by looking, perhaps, at the composition of trustee boards, to see if business interests have begun to prevail over the scholarly, the invested over the independent. We might want to put under greater pressure the economic thinking which seems to be everywhere now, and which, for its critics, represents a disavowal of responsibility. Decisions are made not on the basis of an acknowledged political position or strategy, but as the result, supposedly, of economic inevitability.<sup>13</sup>

In our world, in the museum world, and perhaps constituting a special characteristic of our world, the husk of social democratic commitment survives, a husk in the sense of the term deployed by MacIntyre, apparent in the utilitarian focus on numbers. If 20,000 people or 200,000 people like an artist or an exhibition it must then be good, mustn't it? Or better, at least, than the exhibition that appeals only to 10,000 or 100,000 individuals. The former is 'more democratic', surely, at least judged by the standards of emotivism? Importantly, that 'democratic' impulse also seems somehow tied to the elevation of the exceptional, in the form of the artists who seem conveniently to represent another, special kind of freedom, which should, especially be promoted, even as a priority for art museums committed to appealing to the mass: 'The first challenge for the museum of the 21st century is to create spaces that accommodate the way in which artists wish to work, and to develop programmes for these spaces that reflect the public's desire for a more active engagement with the art'.<sup>14</sup> The mass public and the unique artist are locked into partnership in a particular, arguably emotivist and consumerist, logic. If artists, as individuals, are given the freedom to act, to criticise, to do as they like, then that, surely, is a proof of the freedoms we all enjoy?

These last points take us into a new direction, not clearly relevant in this context, although the prevalence of the artistic identity as a model for all working lives is a phenomenon we, as art historians, should be dwelling upon.<sup>15</sup> But we can briefly note, looking to Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello's important *New Spirit of Capitalism* (1999), that the artistic critique has over history a special place in being assimilated into and ultimately assisting the progress of capitalism, and the

social division and concentration of wealth this involves. Their work may teach us to be, at the very least, sceptical about the promotion of artistic freedom as an exemplar of wider societal and economic liberties.<sup>16</sup> Bringing us a little nearer home, we might wonder whether the 'New Art History' of the 1980s and 1990s represents the kind of critique conceived by Boltanski and Chiapello, assimilated by and ultimately supporting a capitalist establishment. Art museums of all kinds will now engage with issues around race and identity, gender and sexuality, and can hardly be seen not to do so – in a way which would have been radical forty years ago. But does this mean that these critiques are merely being absorbed by an establishment which is actually gaining power rather than relinquishing it? One of Boltanski and Chiapello's central points is that the radical critique which emerged in mainly French theory in the 1960s and 1970s 'shared the aim of discarding the responsible subject to whom the alternative between authenticity and inauthenticity presents itself as an existential choice', and we might consider this unsettling of universal value as underpinning much New Art Historical work with its rejection of essentialism (not least, around aesthetic value of the kind traditionally asserted through the practice of connoisseurship). The thesis they put forward is that this discarding of the responsible subject becomes a dimension of new management culture, with job security, externally-recognised expertise, stability, being slighted as 'things of the past', signs of a redundant faith in authenticity. The remedy they offer is 'security and stability' and the 'margin of freedom' that 'furnishes opportunities to resist the abusive expansion of self-control'.<sup>17</sup>

In this context, connoisseurship, in so far as it represents an effort to establish truths about works of art, might be worth salvaging after all. But only, I would submit, if it is shorn of its class specific trappings, and only as part of a larger critical armamentarium, and only if it is embedded within structures representative of, and subject to, the public interest – in a genuine, moral sense, and not, merely, the rough aggregate of market activities, whether literally financial (the art market), or constituted by the market for commodified knowledge which media and technology has allowed to flourish (crowd-sourcing and populist TV). For, in insisting on evaluative acts of judgement, based on experience and skill rather than bureaucratic force, it does at least stand against the political and managerial dependence on either the barren utilitarianism of statistics (the sad, surviving shadow of social democratic commitment) or the outright manipulation of untruths, in the context of marketing and branding (lent legitimacy by the emotivism of contemporary political discourse, and validated by mass consumption). But all that depends on turning the discussion of connoisseurship away from the question of what it is, as I'm quite sure there is not really much dispute about that, towards, instead, the question of, who practices it, where and with what support, and to what ends. Achieving that will require a much more frank and direct acknowledgement of the power and

influence of the market, in all its dimensions, on all our activities, whether in the marketplace or in the increasingly marketised contexts of museum and university. It also means admitting our investments and our positions in those settings, and seeking out and defending whatever rare spaces may yet survive where art historical scholarship can be put under critical and political scrutiny rather than subjected only to the test of the market.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a characterisation and critique see David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford 2007, and for a seminal account of its historical origins, see Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (1944), Boston 2002. Crudely summarised, neoliberalism is the ideological promotion of the unregulated or self-adjusting market at the most efficient guarantee of personal liberties and material comforts. Crucially, the ideological nature of neoliberalism, and the utopian impossibility of its aims, are deeply masked by its rejection of political or state interference in favour of the 'invisible hand' of supposedly a-political and organic market forces. As Polanyi exposed, the implementation of the 'free market' actually required huge levels of state intervention. The advance of neoliberal thinking is now generally accepted as a fact of life in the UK and US, but may seem less familiar in territories where the model of state intervention (perhaps in combination with the promotion of the free market, in the compromise of 'state capitalism') remains in place. This latter, 'Rhinish model', is associated with Northern Europe, including the Netherlands, although some commentators anticipate its displacement by neoliberalism's apparently unstoppable global progress. The very trust invested in the state in these 'Rhinish' countries may itself be helping facilitate the advance of the free market and public funding cuts. Richard Sennett cites former prime minister of the Netherlands, Ruud Lubbers, suggesting that 'the Dutch trust in the government has indeed made possible painful economic adjustments which a more adversarial citizenry would not have accepted' (*The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*, New York and London 1998, p.54).

<sup>2</sup> See for instance the blog post by Bendor Grosvenor of the 7 May 2015, referring to the case of London's Wallace Collection and defending the Tory government's record on cultural funding ([http://arthistorynews.com/articles/3385\\_Politics](http://arthistorynews.com/articles/3385_Politics)): 'it is true that the Wallace's annual "grant-in-aid" has shrunk by about a third [but] despite the Wallace's reduced grant, the museum actually has more income than ever before' because, like other institutions, the Wallace has 'been forced to go out and shake the tin' and derives more income from 'restaurant takings, trading income and donations'. The replacement of state funding with corporate sponsorship and commercialisation may, indeed, bring immediate financial benefits, but does also, arguably, represent the effective privatisation of public cultural assets.

<sup>3</sup> Dalya Alberge, 'Is it a Canaletto or a Bellotto? Don't Ask an Art Historian ...'. *The Observer*, 15 November 2015.

<sup>4</sup> "The Educated Eye? Connoisseurship Now", Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, London, 2 May 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Savage, writing as the 'Grumpy Art Historian', 'Connoisseurship: Notes from a Debate', 20 October 2014 (<http://grumpyarthistorian.blogspot.co.uk/2014/10/connoisseurship-notes-from-debate.html>).

<sup>6</sup> Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-Class Life* (1957), repr. London 1992; Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, London 1984.

<sup>7</sup> The work and its history are described in the full catalogue entry by my former colleague, Ruth Kenny, published online at <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/humphry-baron-nagells-running-footman-t13796>.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Marks, 'Editor's Letter: Connoisseurship Now', *Apollo*, 2 June 2014.

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.slideshare.net/m\\_economou/andrew-greg-university-of-glasgow-and-director-of-the-national-inventory-research-project-crowdsourcing-and-public-engagement-around-the-uks-painting-collections-the-experience-of-your-paintings-tagger-and-art-detective](http://www.slideshare.net/m_economou/andrew-greg-university-of-glasgow-and-director-of-the-national-inventory-research-project-crowdsourcing-and-public-engagement-around-the-uks-painting-collections-the-experience-of-your-paintings-tagger-and-art-detective) (slide 22).

<sup>10</sup> Harvey, *Brief History*, p.16.

<sup>11</sup> Stefan Collini, 'Who are the spongers now?', *London Review of Books*, 28 January 2016, available online at <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v38/n02/stefan-collini/who-are-the-spongers-now>, citing Alasdair MacIntyre, *Afer Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (1981), third edition, Notre Dame 2007.

<sup>12</sup> MacIntyre, *Afer Virtue*, p.32.

<sup>13</sup> See Pierre Bourdieu, 'Job Security is Everywhere Now', in *Acts of Resistance: Against the New Myths of Our Time*, Cambridge 2001.

<sup>14</sup> Sir Nicholas Serota, 'The 21st-century Tate is a commonwealth of ideas: Museums must widen the ways in which they serve their audiences to reflect new forms of social interaction', *The Art Newspaper* 5 January



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2016, available online at <http://theartnewspaper.com/comment/the-21st-century-tate-is-a-commonwealth-of-ideas/>.

<sup>15</sup> See Angela McRobbie, *Be Creative: Making a Living in the New Culture Industries*, Cambridge 2015.

<sup>16</sup> Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (1999), London and New York 2007. See also Julian Stallabrass, 'Contemporary Art in a Neoliberal Climate', lecture from 2007 available online at <http://www.worldofart.org/aktualno/archives/131>: 'In these circumstances, the plausibility and power of art's freedom are waning. Among the opening remarks of Aesthetic Theory, Adorno has this to say about artistic freedom: "... absolute freedom in art, always limited to a particular, comes into contradiction with the perennial unfreedom of the whole." Until that wider unfreedom is effaced, the particular freedoms of art run through the fingers like sand. While they may open a utopian window on a less instrumental world, they also serve as effective pretexts for oppression. To break with the supplemental autonomy of free art is to remove one of the masks of free trade. Or to put it the other way around, if free trade is to be abandoned as a model for global development, so also must be its supplement, free art'.

<sup>17</sup> Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, pp.453, 468.

<sup>18</sup> As Allan Wallach has noted, in reporting on the 'crisis of connoisseurship' debate, 'demystifying connoisseurship, while imperative for critical scholarship, cannot alter the social circumstances in which the connoisseur works ... connoisseurship enables commodity fetishism and thereby all but negates its scholarly function' (<http://journalpanorama.org/alan-wallach>).