

Connoisseurship: Authority of Experts and Authority of Science

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To approach a work of art as a connoisseur means, apart from enjoying the work, trying to find out when and by whom it was made. These questions, simple and unsophisticated as they might seem, are obviously fundamental when a work is handed down to us anonymously and without archival documentation.

Connoisseurship is sometimes seen as a purely subjective approach – at least since the days of Aby Warburg –, and as an approach with little analytic potential. These notions are wrong, however, as an example might show, an example that has nothing to do with earlier art from the Low Countries. This painting of a life-size male nude was shown, in my presence, by its owner to a Swiss art lover and connoisseur who was asked for his opinion – it was in fact a kind of test the Swiss was put to, for the owner rightly expected that the other did neither know the painting nor the painter. The connoisseur remarked that the work was from the middle of the 19th century and that it was probably from the circle of Thomas Couture – a famous painter at his time -, but he also suggested that it was not by a French, but rather by a German painter because he felt a certain resemblance to works by Anselm Feuerbach.

And indeed: This nude was painted in 1854 by Viktor Müller, a little known artist from Frankfort, who was a pupil of Couture at the same time when Anselm Feuerbach studied with him in Paris. Thus the judgments of the connoisseur yielded objective and highly accurate results; without knowing the individual artist responsible, he was able to tell the painting's origin quite precisely. We see that connoisseurship can have a marked analytical capability.

Now this successful application of connoisseurship took place under favourable circumstances that are not always given, namely that the connoisseur was not biased; he himself had no pre-existing commercial or whatever scholarly interest in the object he judged, for he did not look for a work to buy and he had no oeuvre catalogue of Couture's pupils or something similar in mind.

The major field of connoisseurship is of course art of an earlier period, and the earlier it is, the more connoisseurship is needed. Our image of Northern painting of the 15th century, for example, was to a large extent shaped by the results of connoisseurship – one may even dare to say that without connoisseurship, we would not have such an image at all.

The panel you see here, in Berlin since 1874 and known as *The Man with the Pinks* was judged very differently by connoisseurs in the course of the last 150 years. When it surfaced in 1855, Gustav Friedrich Waagen immediately recognized it as a Jan van Eyck, and it stayed an unchallenged van Eyck for the next 50 years; it was even immensely praised, called not only the best portrait by Jan but also one of the best portraits of the Netherlandish school in general. Around 1900 however, a change set in, and an increasing number of scholars started to believe that the painting was rather a copy after van Eyck or the work of a later imitator. Its minuteness that was at first admired as “realistic” and immensely true to nature, for example by Crowe and Cavalcaselle, now started to be called “kleinlich”, pedantic. This change is certainly connected with the development of modern art of the time and the growing predilection for a looser brushwork in the days of the impressionists. Today it has been proved, by dendrochronology among other means, that the work was only made around 1500 or later, probably as a copy after a lost portrait by Jan van Eyck. Were the early connoisseurs thus wrong? Yes and no! The attribution of the physical painting to Jan van Eyck was wrong, but the attribution of the image, the motive, seems to be right. Set against the background of the limited knowledge of early Netherlandish painting at the time, the opinions of these connoisseurs are not to blame.

The difficulties to assess the quality of a work of art and to draw conclusions from observations show in the reactions to the doubts about the painting: After the first attack on the current attribution in 1900, both Wilhelm Bode and Max Friedländer defended the work as an authentic Jan van Eyck – being in charge of the Berlin collection, both had, of course, a vital interest in the attribution to the famous master. In the first volume of his corpus of 1924, Friedländer stuck to this attribution, albeit he himself noticed a certain stiffness in it – his conclusion was that it was a youthful work of a still immature Jan van Eyck. Obviously Friedländer recognized some shortcomings but wanted to keep the attribution, and thus his synthesis was to call the panel a youthful work. Even much later, Friedländer stuck to his attribution. This is but one of uncountable examples where connoisseurs are unwilling or unable to challenge their own attributions. In the field of early Netherlandish painting, nearly all scholars tend to maintain their attributions and to defend them against all arguments that might be put forward against them. To defend one’s attribution of course means to defend one’s authority.

The different opinions on the *Man with the Pinks* were, before the 1930ies, a matter of pure connoisseurship and accordingly they would have been based on the individual scholar's eye. At a closer look, however, they do not seem to be completely individual opinions, for all scholars before 1900 agreed that the painting was an original Van Eyck, while nearly all scholars after around 1930 agreed that it was not. Obviously, and little surprising, general opinion and the authority of leading scholars play an important role in connoisseurship.

In 1938 the problem of attribution of this and other paintings was approached in a new way when Alan Burroughs published his seminal study "Art Criticism from a Laboratory". His comparisons, based on x-radiographies, were more comprehensible, and indeed more objective, as he was able to show visually that the painting technique of the *Man with the Pinks* differs fundamentally from that of documented portraits by Jan van Eyck: The facial features were modelled with large amounts of lead white which give the x-radiography nearly the appearance of a black and white photo, whereas a genuine van Eyck, for instance the likeness of Canon Georg van der Paele, reveals the use of very little lead white. Burroughs thus provided a substantial proof for the non-authenticity of the Berlin panel – albeit this was rarely reflected in the subsequent literature on the painting.

However, Burroughs eliminated a work from Jan van Eyck's oeuvre that was already highly suspicious. This was different in another instance where his comparisons of x-radiographs were, as it should turn out later, less successful. I am referring to the notorious case of the *Granada-Miraflores Altarpieces* attributed to Rogier van der Weyden. As all of you know, there are two nearly identical versions of this tripartite work. The slightly larger one, in Berlin since the 1850ies, was almost unanimously regarded as a copy, while the other version – divided between Granada and the Metropolitan Museum – was praised as Rogier's own work. Only until 1981 however, when it was definitely proven that the Berlin version is the original and that the Granada-New York version was made approximately 50 years later in Spain, maybe by Juan de Flandes.

Burroughs in 1938 analysed an x-ray of the New York panel with the Resurrected Christ, then supposed to be the original, and his conclusions completely tallied with the general conviction of the contemporary connoisseurs: He felt the brushwork, as revealed in the x-ray-image, to correspond closely to other work by Rogier and saw this as a proof for Rogier's authorship of the Granada-New York version. This

conclusion was wrong; and the brushwork of the New York copy does in fact not completely correspond to that of original Rogiers like the *Miraflores Altarpiece*, although the resemblance is much higher than in the case of the *Man with the Pinks* and real Eyckian paintings. Maybe the Granada-Miraflores example marks the limits of stylistic comparisons of x-raydiographies. In any event, Burroughs appraisal of the pseudo-Rogierian panel was obviously guided by the then current opinion about the authorship of the work; it was not an independent, let alone scientific approach to the problem of attribution. And the prevailing opinion, which the x-rays seemed to confirm, was nothing else than the judgement of authorities, of accepted connoisseurs. By the bye, in this instance connoisseurship had freed itself almost completely from historical evidence, which had always suggested the priority of the Miraflores version.

Later, in the 1960ies, the Corpus volume on Granada of “Les Primitifs Flamands” likewise confirmed Rogier’s authorship of the Granada-New York version on the basis of the visual evidence of the painted surface and of infrared photos of the Granada panels.

Thus the interpretation of technical images was determined by general belief about the relationship of the two works; it confirmed what was already known. On the other hand, much later it was indeed technical investigations that proved the priority of the Miraflores version, by IRR, and dated the New York panel by the means of dendrochronology to the late 15th century. In contrast to Burroughs earlier technical approach, however, this time the basis for the argumentation was not style or quality, but changes in the creative process of the Miraflores Altarpiece and wood biology. In the end, the stylistic appraisal of an x-radiography or an underdrawing visualized by IRR is basically the same as the appraisal of the surface, and it can be as controversial as traditional connoisseurship. Of this IRR of the *Magdalene Reading* in London, attributed to Rogier van der Weyden, some researchers remarked that it is “mechanical” and that (quote) “there does not seem to be much reason to associate this type of underdrawing with the young Rogier” (unquote), while another scholar wrote that (quote) “it is boldly and quickly executed in broad brushstrokes (...) very similar to, although slightly less assured than, the astonishingly confident underdrawing of Rogier’s Prado *Descent from the Cross*” (unquote). These contradictory judgments on style and quality of the underdrawing are in no way more objective than the appraisal of a painting’s surface or of a drawing on paper with the

naked eye – one might even wonder if the opinions of experts on a drawing on paper would be so much divergent.

X-rays and IRR are techniques that generate images, and thus judgements are based on images just like in classical connoisseurship. This is different in some other investigations of the material properties of paintings, like dendrochronology of the wood used for a panel or the analysis of pigments and binding media. However, even in these cases which might be called “scientific” with some reason, the results are not necessarily objective. Sometimes they are also fundamentally influenced by and based on the appraisal of the work that is to be investigated, and more often than not such an appraisal is based on good old connoisseurship.

This beautiful artwork for example was accepted in 1943 as a genuine Jan Vermeer van Delft – you all know the Van Meegeren-case – both by a certain pressure group of art historians, well-respected connoisseurs like Dirk Hannema and J.G. van Gelder, and also by three conservators. Neither the art historians nor the conservators found out that the work was in fact a brand new fake.

Recent research has shown, among other things, that the blue paint consist mainly of natural ultramarine, but was also stretched with cobalt, a pigment unknown before the 19th century. In 1943 the conservators looked at samples of paint with a microscope but they did not find anything that would have contradicted a 17th century origin of the painting.

However, as Friso Lammertse, to whom I owe all my knowledge of this case, has shown, it was absolutely possible – for a connoisseur – to recognize the fake, for a certain Hendrik Bremmer, who was as little known then as he is now, aptly described it as a shabby fabrication of a quality inferior to the average advertisement paintings on a fun fair.

Surely, methods of analysis have been enormously refined since the 1940ies, and today restorers are probably much more cautious.

By a last example I would like to discuss a different, more complex problem: In a recent study, the portraits attributed to Rogier van der Weyden have been analysed with respect to painting techniques. It became clear that the Berlin portrait of a Young Lady, generally dated early, around 1440, was made in a fundamentally different technique than the Portrait of a Lady in Washington, probably a work of around 1460. There is an opaque layer of flesh colour in the Berlin portrait, smoothly blended in light and shade which creates the firm, enamel-like quality of the surface. Not so in

the Washington Lady, where an extra layer of fawn colour, i.e. beige, lies under the flesh tone. This fawn colour is not completely covered by the final layers of paint, but shines through where there is a transition from light to dark, thus securing the coherence of the carnation. Furthermore, the underdrawing is covered by an imprimatura in the Berlin portrait – as is also the case in the religious paintings attributed to Rogier –, while it is placed on top of the imprimatura in the Washington panel.

In the study, it is taken for granted that both the Berlin and the Washington portraits are by Rogier van der Weyden, the former because it fits well with the painting technique of his “authenticated” religious paintings, the latter because of its quality: (quote) “Rogier’s technique reached an apex in the Washington Lady” (unquote). In other words, the two portraits are painted differently, but as both are highly admired, the study confirms that they are autograph works of one and the same, highly admired master. One is tempted to ask what the conclusion would have been if the painting technique of the two panels would have proven to be identical. In all probability it would have been the same. However, I have to admit that this consideration is a little unfair to the thorough, in depth study on the painting technique of those portraits – the more so as attributions are not the aim of this study. Nevertheless, the study raises questions which have some relevance for the issue of connoisseurship and attribution: For here, the objective findings – a marked difference in the handling of paint – are interpreted as different approaches of one and the same painter at different stages of his career. It is the premise that the works in question are all by Rogier’s hand. In the end, the interpretation of the findings is thus subject to an opinion based on connoisseurship. Reciprocally, the technical study seems, at first glance, to confirm the attribution by seemingly “objective” technical findings. In fact it would be a circular reasoning.

This kind of approach – interpreting technical findings on a painting according to accepted opinions on its authorship – would mean in consequence that those technical findings have no relevance for the attribution of paintings at all. To decide whether a certain painting is by the great, admired master or not, still seems to rest firmly in the hands of connoisseurs, of those connoisseurs of course who enjoy a considerable authority in the scholarly community.