

The Burlington Magazine and the Publication of Works of Art in the Trade

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Good afternoon,

(SLIDE: Burl cover) I will talk today about the Burlington Magazine and the publication of works of art in the trade or of works of art that are privately owned. Anyone who picks up an issue of the Burlington will immediately notice that the front section of the Magazine is taken up by a good number of advertisements, many of them from dealers and auction houses. This has in fact been the case ever since 1903, when the Magazine's first issue rolled off the press. There has thus continuously been a strong connection between the Magazine and the trade. This is perhaps not surprising in light of the fact that the Burlington has always, from its very beginnings to this day, concentrated on object-related art history, that is to say that it has always concentrated on what one could describe as the building stones of art history. Sometimes such building stones can be fairly pedestrian, but frequently they are very exciting, such as when an unpublished work by a famous artist is discovered **(SLIDE: Burl cover Titian)**.

The idea was and is that we first need to know exactly what we have before us, before we move on to drawing more general conclusions or engage with art history from a more theoretical perspective. This was the Magazine's matter-of-fact stance in 1903, and in many ways is still the Magazine's attitude today. Questions of attribution and connoisseurship loom large in this approach, and of course such matters are by their very nature of interest to the trade, and in this respect the Burlington and the trade are not entirely unexpected bed-fellows. For the first 45 years of its existence, the same was also reflected in the Magazine's full title, *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*. **(SLIDE: left, Burl 1903)**

It may be useful at this point to recall briefly how the situation was perceived by the group of historians and connoisseurs who founded the Magazine in 1903,

which included Roger Fry, Herbert Horne, Bernard Berenson and Charles Holmes. They felt that despite the existence of certain publications, such as, for example, the *Connoisseur* (**SLIDE: left Burl; right Connoisseur**), which had been founded a few years earlier, there was – to quote the Editorial in the very first issue of the Burlington – the need (**SLIDE: quote 1st Ed**) ‘*to remove a curious and shameful anomaly, this namely, that Britain, alone of all cultured European countries, is without any periodical which makes the serious and disinterested study of ancient art its chief occupation*’.

I suppose we could dwell here for a moment on the word ‘*disinterested*’ in this quote, especially, of course, in relation to the topic of this conference. ‘Fair-minded’, ‘unbiased’, ‘impartial’ and ‘objective’ are all valid equivalents of the word ‘*disinterested*’, and I’m sure this is what was meant. But was it in fact a very carefully chosen word that was also meant to convey that the study of art should not be corrupted by a conflict of interests? I’m sure to a certain degree it was, and yet in the second-ever Editorial in the April 1903 issue we read that, and I quote (**SLIDE: quote 2nd Ed**): ‘*It will be seen that we begin this month a series of illustrations of various fine works of art with descriptive notes. Some of these belong to private collectors, others are in the possession of dealers of repute. We make no apology for including the latter; some of the finest works of art that find their way to London pass through the hands of the great dealers, often on their way to America, or Berlin, or Amsterdam*’.

Today some may think those were innocent times. Others – perhaps especially those who work in the trade – might applaud this rather care-free approach. But it is interesting that the writer of the Editorial felt the need to mention it, which clearly illustrates that there could be a problem. It is equally interesting that almost straight away there must have been considerable complaints. In the June 1903 issue – the Magazine is by then only 4 months old – the editor felt the need to devote an entire Editorial of two-and-half pages to the subject (**SLIDE: JUNE 1903 EDITORIAL**). We read that, and I quote, ‘*suggestions have, it seems, been made in certain quarters that some corrupt or at least commercial arrangement with the dealers concerned is accountable for the publication in the Magazine of objects belonging to them*’. It shows that the idea that there could be a tension

between the study of art and the selling of art is hardly a new problem. It should also be borne in mind here that in the early 20th century art history as a profession was in its infancy, so that this kind of connoisseurial approach was informed by a continual sense of discovery and perhaps largely aimed at the well-informed amateur or collector, which must have made up a considerable part of the Magazine's readership at the time. The Editorial I have just quoted acknowledged the possible conflict of interest highlighted by the Magazine's readers, but it did not consider it so significant to warrant a change of attitude. Indeed, completely undeterred, we find in those early years many articles that have the collector in mind. We see articles on **(SLIDE: list)** 'Criticism and Commerce'; 'Some Difficulties of Collecting'; 'The Past Season-Its Sales and Tendencies'; 'What Modern Pictures are Worth Collecting?'; 'How to Collect Old Furniture'; 'The Extinction of the Middle-Class Collector'; 'In the Auction Room'; 'The Auctioneer as Dealer'; and so on, and so on.

It is equally important to remember that the number of art publications was then far more limited than it is today. So while today the Burlington refrains from publishing articles along those lines, we can do so also in the knowledge that such topics are very well taken care of by other publications. But that was not so much the case in the early 20th century. And indeed the trend continued. Between 1925 and 1938 Albert Charles Robinson Carter wrote in the Magazine about forthcoming sales at least 7 or 8 times per year, while from 1925 until 1979, that is, well within living memory, the Magazine published the series '*Notable Works of Art Now on the Market*' **(SLIDE: Notable)**, initially once a year, but from 1954 twice a year. I cannot help but draw your attention to the wonderfully archaic language used in the opening line of the very first instalment, where we read that '*Advertising, in one form or another, has become, like the telephone and the automobile, a necessary complication of modern life*'. And we see here that the Burlington adopted a strategy that we still see today in many fashion magazines, that is: to use for such promotional pages the familiar magazine layout to give the page the appearance and cachet of the Editorial pages in the Magazine, while in actual fact we're of course dealing with paid-for advertising pages, as the disclaimer in small print at the bottom indicates.

In the quote mentioning advertising as a necessary complication of modern life, I don't think the word 'complication' was necessarily referring to what one might call an ethical complication. And yet complications in that sense of the word were certainly possible and did creep into the pages of the Magazine.

The example I would like to discuss to illustrate that such problems are not at all imaginary means that for a moment I have to digress into the realm of fakes, or, more precisely, what we would now call 'hyper' restorations. The subject of restoration has been on our minds at the Burlington because we have commissioned from various authors a series of articles – to be published over the next two or three years – which will explore the history of conservation from the 17th to the 20th century.

Exactly 10 years ago there was an exemplary exhibition held in Bruges in which for the first time an attempt was made to come to a fuller understanding of the restoration methods adopted by the well-known Belgian restorer Jef Van der Veken (**SLIDE: Veken**). We now know that he was responsible for a good number of so-called 'hyper' restorations of Early Netherlandish paintings. Van der Veken had completely immersed himself in the painting technique employed by the Flemish Primitives, and was so good at this that to this day his copy after the lost panel of the Ghent altarpiece is still used to fill the gap in the altarpiece for the stolen panel of the *Just Judges*. We now know that his radical restoration method involved entirely scraping off a painting's heavily damaged areas down to the surface of the panel in order to apply a wholly new layer of paint, retouching the abraded areas and simulating craquelure in such a way that the boundaries between old and new can hardly be detected with the naked eye. The most telling example is the *Virgin and Child* in Tournai (**SLIDE: Left: Tournai**), which is also known as the 'Renders Madonna', which you can see on the screen in its current state, and (**SLIDE: Right: Tournai 1920s**) now next to a photograph taken during its restoration by Van der Veken in the early 1920s.

Only in 2001 did researchers from Leuven publish their findings and attribute the transformation of the painting to Van der Veken, although already in 1993 Hubert von Sonnenburg had proposed that the same Van der Veken had been responsible

for a similar treatment of a *Man of Sorrows with a donor* in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. All this was brought to public attention in an exemplary fashion in the exhibition held in Bruges in 2004.

(SLIDE: Veken and Renders) What is important for the purpose of this talk is that many pictures that were ‘hyper’ restored by Van der Veken were in the collection of Emile Renders, seen here on the right. He was the son of an antiques dealer but himself became a businessman who later in life developed a keen interest in the Flemish Primitives. He was also, we now know, Van der Veken’s most important patron. In the 1920s he was considered to have one of the most important private collections of Early Netherlandish paintings in the world, many of which were exhibited at the famous 1927 exhibition of Flemish art held in London at Burlington House **(SLIDE: cover 1927 exh)**. There were already then voices expressing doubt about the authenticity of some works from his collection. One of the founding editors of the Burlington – Roger Fry – wrote an article in the Burlington specifically on the authenticity of works from the Renders collection. I’m afraid that Fry did not seem to think there was much cause for concern. We now know that Fry was wrong and was entirely deceived by the brilliance of Van der Veken’s handiwork. Fry can be excused to some degree, as only in the early 21st century have we come to a better understanding of the Van der Veken phenomenon, while those who have visited the exhibition devoted to Early Netherlandish diptychs, held some 7 years ago in Washington and Antwerp, may remember seeing the Renders Madonna in that show **(SLIDE: Renders Madonna)**. It is indeed an astonishing piece of ‘hyper’ restoration, and with the naked eye it is virtually impossible to determine where Rogier van der Weyden ends and Jef Van der Veken begins, so to speak.

What is very interesting is that Emile Renders was so much considered to be an authority on the matter of Flemish Primitives that he was subsequently allowed to write an article in the Burlington in 1928 **(SLIDE: Renders article)** which described in detail what the craquelure in a so-called authentic work should look like. But what is now very clear, is that the article was not so much an attempt to provide a scientific description of such craquelure but rather an attempt to prove the authenticity of works owned by Renders, which he knew perfectly well were

very heavily restored by his good friend Van der Veken, with whose methods Renders must have been very well acquainted. He thus described not what a genuine and well-preserved original painting looked like but rather what a genuine Van der Veken hyper restoration looked like.

My point is, then, that here there was, of course, a genuine conflict of interest. It is surprising how long it took for art history to shake off this slightly naïve or amateurish attitude, although it is perhaps unfair to call it that. Some of the most exciting discoveries are made because someone takes a personal interest in a subject, or indeed collects the very objects that he or she writes about. For many years the Burlington remained quite happy for authors to indulge in this kind of approach. Indeed, the longest-serving Editor that the Magazine has ever had, Benedict Nicolson (**SLIDE: BN**), clearly belonged to a tradition of scholars who trained their eyes by collecting what they studied. Thus in an article in the Burlington in 1956 in which he discusses Hendrick ter Brugghen's *Incredulity of St Thomas* in the Rijksmuseum and the chronology of Ter Brugghen's work, he mentions the artist's *Young woman tuning a lute* in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna (**SLIDE: BN and Brugghen**), pointing out that it exists in two autograph versions, one of which (**SLIDE: BN QUOTE and Brugghen**) is, I quote, 'in my collection'. And for the record: here it is (**SLIDE: 2 X BRUGGHEN**). In 2010 the painting was acquired from the heirs of Benedict Nicholson by the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge. My point is, however, that this would be unthinkable today. Should a Burlington editor happen to own a work of art relevant to an article, he or she would not be allowed to publish it in the magazine.

So when did attitudes change and why? I think the first watershed occurred more or less when Benedict Nicolson died in 1978. He died far too young at the age of 64, and unfortunately his associate editor, Keith Roberts, died some 9 months later. It was they who had been compiling for many years the 'Notable Works of Art Now on the Market', the series I mentioned earlier, and thus the series almost inevitably came to an end. Having said that, I think that series had anyhow become a slightly problematic section of the Magazine because it would only discuss works in the hands of dealers who would also advertise in the Burlington. One can

imagine how this caused friction with other dealers whose works were not represented. This shows how fraught such a section devoted to the art market can be. Under the subsequent editorship of Terence Hodgkinson and after him Neil MacGregor, reporting news from the art market pretty much stopped altogether. I suppose the idea must have been that an increasingly professionalised stance would in fact increase the respectability of the Magazine, which would be better served by complete Editorial independence.

Another important change occurred when under the editorship of Neil MacGregor the way the magazine operated was changed from a purely commercial model under the ownership of Thomson Publishers, to a model not unlike the one used today by the Guardian newspaper here in the UK. That is, in 1986 a Trust was set up both to safeguard the Burlington's survival in tougher times and to set up the Magazine as an educational charity, and it is self-evident that even the appearance of a conflict of interest does not sit well with such a status.

(SLIDE: 1903–2015) So what is the situation today? The Burlington does publish works of art in private collections, as it would be somewhat peculiar only ever to publish discussions of works in public collections. But, especially if a work is the main subject of an article, we always seek assurances, as far as this is possible, that a work of art is not immediately for sale. Such assurances are by no means a guarantee, but we do try our best to gauge as best as we can how likely it is that a work will soon appear on the market. It is not so much a matter of the Burlington 'stamp of approval' immediately increasing the value of a work of art. I'm not even sure that this is the case. It is far more to do with the ethos of the Magazine. While we hope that the circa 140 exhibition reviews and around 120 book reviews that we publish each year give our readers a good overview of what is happening in the international museum and academic community, we are nevertheless clear in our minds that our primary purpose is to provide a platform for important new scholarly research and discoveries. And in the context of our position as a scholarly journal, we have no choice but to avoid even the appearance of a conflict of interest.

A far more complex discussion might be had around modern and contemporary art. As devoted readers of the Burlington know, the Magazine publishes a wide array of book and exhibition reviews that cover modern and contemporary art, but its main articles tend to cover older art. There are of course similar problems attached to publishing articles on modern and contemporary, but in that field the roles of artists, dealers, critics and museums are so much interconnected that it is far more intractable, and I won't go into that now, because that is a subject for another day.

Thank you.