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*Independent Scholarship, or the Emancipation of the Art Work*

The status of art in society has risen to high levels. But maybe status is not exactly the right word, since it comes from aristocratic times past. Better might be: the popularity of art. Gone in the last decades are the quiet strolls on squeaking parquet floors along the masterpieces: the traveling public flocks and clogs the great museums and galleries. These days one has to know Walter Liedtke intimately to see the Dutch Masters in the Met or be on very friendly standing with Emilie Gordenker in the Mauritshuis to have that lazy, trancelike experience of gradually dissolving in *The View of Delft*.

Nowadays the artwork in a museum is a click with the smart phone to be brought home as a trophy. Or as proof of something people want to prove to themselves or their community, like: 'I have been there', 'I have seen that', 'I have taste', 'I am a person of culture' or 'I do not just shop for Vuitton handbags'. The Met and the Mauritshuis are on the to do list of the city traveler. This modern popularity is not something to be condescending about at all. Love, not to be confused with understanding, love for art has many expressions. We have to adapt to the idea that 'we' is not we anymore.

The broader public has also a deep interest in the trade and its glamorous financials. If the *New York Times* on the one hand and the Dutch pedestrian news site *NOS Nieuws* on the other may count as examples, then we see on both sides of the ocean pieces on for example – for a well chosen example – Sotheby's when it sold in last fall's auction season over a billion dollars' worth of art in an eight day's span. We read about record sales and about prices and markets, which are going down and then again up, flowing with the general economy or even better in contrast with that. We read about private collectors, who were in the old days members of an almost secret and sacred sect. Now we know how they earned their enormous

capitals in business and trade, we know or guess what they buy at auctions and how they have built-up vast art collections. And about, the newest trend, collectors building their own museums in all corners of the globe, in long-standing art capitals such as Paris, Berlin and London, and in new cities like Baku to Nanjing. We read that many collectors see art works as investments, and that those works are treated and manipulated like other investment tools like stocks and bonds and real estate. These days even individual art dealers, auction house personnel and curators make the news, sometimes in scandalous settings. Main Street's appreciation of art and the glitzy art world, and Wall Street's valuation of art seem these days the driving forces in our community.

As you may understand we are – with the words scandalous and manipulation – getting closer to my subject: independent scholarship. And that again brings us on the wings of irony to the great scholar Bernard Berenson. Rachel Cohen describes him in her recent biography with the telling subtitle *A life in the Picture Trade* of course as a pre-eminent authority on Renaissance art. That authority was based on connoisseurship, rooted in “a discriminating eye, exceptional memory, perceptive intelligence, and humanistic learning” as the Encyclopedia Britannica summarizes it. Berenson's opinion on the authenticity of a work was not just an opinion, but a verdict, with enormous consequences for the value of a painting.

We know now that Berenson was as much an art historian as an art dealer and his secret dealings with Duveen added to his 5 percent regular commission for acquisitions often another for the buyer invisible 20 percent. Cohen writes: “This clear conflict of interest has thrown into doubt many of his authentications for Duveen and a number of these have been shown, through careful examination, to have become more optimistic, therefore considerably more valuable, once he was working for Duveen.”

The burning question is whether the relative coziness in the not-for-profit, the for-profit and the for-a-lot-of-profit art world these days are hiding the same issues as

in the Berenson-Duveen period. Rachel Cohen formulates it rather open, however suggestive: “The sale of an Old Master Painting is an ethical quagmire. The seller, the authenticator, the dealer and the purchaser are all constantly being implicated in uneasy compromises and having to fend off worries about forgeries, misattribution, gaps in provenance, contested wills, the transfer of works out of their countries of origin, import tax evasion, hasty and destructive restoration, and the wildly fluctuating value of paintings. Everyone involved in the transaction stands to gain the most if the painting is considered to be a great work by the hand of a master, but no one wants to be caught holding the thing at the moment the tide of opinion suddenly changes.”

Cohen calls in this commercial context the art historian (and the restorer, I assume) an *authenticator*. Her or his role is brought back to the bare minimum – gone academic honor, gone esthetic depth – the bare minimum that is, but at the same time to the most powerful role in the trade.

It gets a bit hot, so I want to lighten up the conversation for a minute with a small excursion to what authenticity can be from the perspective of a buyer. Standing in front of Monet’s *The Garden at Sainte-Adresse (La Terrasse à Sainte-Adresse)* (1867) in the Met with a client, the client says: “This work cannot be by Monet. Monet was an avid sailor and he would never have painted a ship with its sails in this direction when the wind blows in that direction.” The client is an avid sailor himself and he felt the direct connection amongst sailors, where ‘shipmanship’ must trump esthetics.

The painting is however very well documented and my client could have read in the Guide of the Metropolitan Museum that Monet called it in his correspondence “the Chinese painting in which there are flags” and that his friend Renoir referred to it as “the Japanese painting”. And further he could have read: “In the 1860s, the composition’s flat horizontal bands of color would have reminded the sophisticated [viewers] of Japanese color wood-block prints, which were avidly collected by

Monet, Manet, Renoir, Whistler and others in their circle. The print by the Japanese artist Hokusai that may have inspired this picture, "Turban-shell Hall of the Five-Hundred-Rakan Temple" (1830), remains today at Monet's house-museum at Giverny."

We can be pretty sure that Monet was less moved by the reality of the wind direction, than by the Asian esthetics he wanted to emulate in this scene.

Since the painting was not for sale anyway, I don't think anyone will blame me that I left the remark at that moment uncontested. But in the long run I will have to speak up: I can't let the narrative take hold that the Met has a fake Monet. The public needs to know, just as the collector, that everything they see in that museum - and all the other museums for that matter - is real, is authentic. The visitors are willing to buy a fake and cheap Vuitton bag in Manhattan's Chinatown on their city trip, but they want to be sure that they don't bring home a fake Monet on their smart phone. They want to be sure that that Monet is real and very, very expensive. Authenticity became scarce in our world and the museum is one of the last refuges for that good.

The authenticator has, as said before this excursion, a powerful and therefore responsible role. We know from Berenson's life that it was and still is rather easy to bend interpretations for 'practical reasons', being those for individual gain or prestige or for use in popular culture.

I was in my previous career involved in a case where the hand of the master would really make a serious difference. Although you are mostly Dutch art specialists, you all know there are two versions of Leonardo's Madonna of the Yarnwinder. One is the Duke of Buccleuch's version; the other is called The Lansdowne Madonna. There is a more or less elegant fight going on of which is the most authentic one, or to be more precise: to what extent the master actively participated in each of the two versions. It is tantalizing to imagine these paintings in a Berenson-Duveen vs. Another-Party context, although the outcome would be rather predictable.

As an art professional I initially took sides in this case as well, but understanding the limited validity of the connoisseurial arguments in the long run, with major scholars disagreeing, I shifted my focus on the extensive research that was done in the course of years on the The Lansdowne Madonna at the Opificio delle Pietre Dure in Florence. The Lansdowne version was exposed to the widest range possible of noninvasive techniques a painting was ever exposed to – I cite the report – to: “X-ray radiography; ultraviolet analysis; IR-RGB scanning (which encompasses infrared reflectography, color scan, mixed color with infrared and false color); X-ray fluorescence (XRF); particle induced X-ray emission (PIXE and PIGE); fibre optics reflectance spectroscopy (FORS); profilometric analysis; and Computed Axial Tomography (CAT) scan.” At a later stage also the Buccleugh version underwent a whole series of technical analyses in England. The results were telling and interestingly enough not particularly favorable or negative for any of the versions but rather emphasizing the work method of Leonardo and his workshop to work on multiple versions at the same time. The technical examination revealed strikingly complex and similar underdrawings in both these versions of the painting, indicating Leonardo’s direct involvement in the design of both pictures.

For those who know the art world, it might not come as a surprise that some scholars rather than making these results part of the intellectual discourse, kept supporting one of the two versions based on connoisseurship, rooted, and I am exaggerating here on purpose, in “the discriminating eye”, suppressing the results of the research.

I tell this story because I would like to stress here that when we are able to use aforementioned and other scientific techniques – and I know that that is not always the case – the authenticators should feel obliged to use them. Both owners of a version of the Madonna took the risk to use independent scholarship and maybe loose or win some authenticity, but in the long run it will be worth it.

Sometimes authenticators can only rely on archival, historical and connoisseurial knowledge. In my opinion in those cases the art works should be vetted, not superficially á la TEFAF and other art fairs, but openly by specialists in the field. For the art loving lay people one could make a nice reality show out of that competition! If the sale of a painting is indeed an ethical quagmire, openness can help to drag us out of the swamps. The work of art should be visibly freed, emancipated that is, from all the dangers it is surrounded by in a commercial situation. I think that the report of the Hague Congress last year May on Authentication in Art gives a great framework.

I have one last question: 'Wouldn't you all like to live in Villa I Tatti?' I know you will answer along the lines of Epictetus saying: "Wealth consists not in having great possessions, but in having few wants." But still, talking about income inequality there is an enormous gap between academics and dealers. We know some academics fall into that gap, some honorably by changing jobs and some not so honorably by not changing jobs. For me standing at the other side it is easy to talk about this matter, but as a community we cannot be silent about it. Also here we need really independent scholarship.

Thanks so much for your attention!