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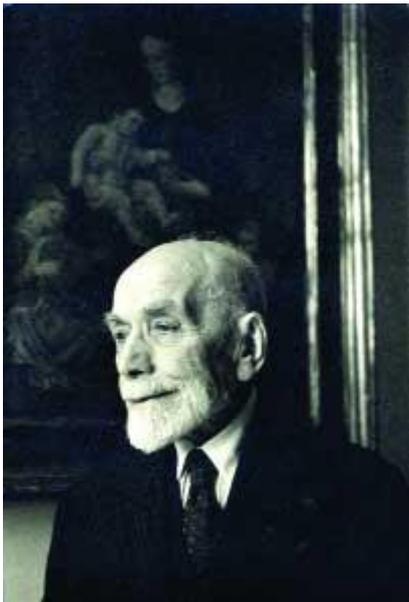
THE ART NEWSPAPER

We don't need the 'new' connoisseurs

Contriving the resuscitation of connoisseurship on the basis that its worth is self-evident may be retrogressive, says Tate Britain's curator Martin Myrone

By Martin Myrone. Comment, [Issue 258](#), June 2014

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Bernard Berenson was famous for his connoisseurship of Renaissance art. Photo: Cecil Beaton

There has lately been some dark talk in certain corners of the British art world about a crisis in connoisseurship and the need to revive traditional scholarship. The debate at the Mellon Centre last month was, I imagine, intended to expose such murmurings to greater scrutiny and test their merits and demerits in a reasoned and open way.

See also:

- • [Do we need a return to connoisseurship?](#)

While I was very pleased to be able to take part, I also had cause to wonder what was really going on here. As someone educated in art history in the 1990s, entering the museum world at the very end of that decade, my formative influences were the so-called “new art history” with its emphasis on the contexts and meanings of art, the “two art histories” debate, which addressed an apparent divide between scholarship in museums and the theoretical emphasis of university academics, and the legacy of institutional critique.

Questions of methodology, cultural value and the extension of access to and engagement with art across society felt very alive. There was little serious talk of connoisseurship in these contexts, and the idea that it is now due to be revived, rebranded as “new connoisseurship”, strikes me as extremely odd, even suspicious.

If there was, those 15 years ago, a tendency among colleagues and commentators to pitch “new” against “old” art histories and art historians, it was also always clear that the reality was far more complicated. There were plenty of university academics engaged in conventional cataloguing projects and plenty of museum curators concerned with critical theory. Crucially, the questions of attribution, technique and provenance traditionally associated with connoisseurship were being actively folded into wider-ranging explorations about the meaning and value of works of art, their legibility as historical evidence, their collecting histories and aesthetic presence.

So what has changed? The idea that establishing authorship and intuiting quality are sufficient ends in themselves has not, to my knowledge, gained any new credibility. On the other hand, my own experience of working in academic and museum settings would lead me to observe that they have never disappeared from the field of art-historical practice, despite the polemical claims of some advocates of connoisseurship.

Instead, contriving the resuscitation of connoisseurship on the basis that its worth is self-evident may be retrogressive, obscuring the stakes and investments actually brought into play as the different parties involved (academics, curators, dealers and so forth) establish their relative authority and their claims to public attention.

It is perfectly possible to talk about technique, authorship, authenticity and quality without recourse to the rubric of connoisseurship. Moreover, the application of skill in these various matters is part of the everyday work of the art historian and curator, tending in practice to be rather modest and mundane. It is just part of the job.

Arguably, the only thing that now distinguishes connoisseurship as such is the element of

economic and social purposefulness, its specific role as a way of talking about art and asserting aesthetic merit in terms which are readily translatable into economic value. The language of connoisseurship is simply more compliant to the needs of the market than other forms of art historical discussion, which may be more open-ended and questioning, less certain about the judgement of value.

Moreover, allowing the issues of authenticity and authorship to overshadow all the other issues and questions around historical works of art risks impoverishing our understanding and enjoyment of art's rich and complex histories and our ability to communicate this in genuinely open-minded, engaging and thought-provoking ways.

There is nothing, I think, radical or outrageous in pointing out that connoisseurship has served to reinforce social difference and further material interests over history. There are numerous studies which testify to this. What would be absurd would be to claim that this has somehow abruptly stopped in the present age and that connoisseurship is now absolutely removed from struggles over cultural authority. It is, admittedly, difficult to acknowledge as much in a contemporary framework. This requires a degree of self-scrutiny, of the kind we tend scrupulously to avoid when engaging in scholarly discussion: we need to ask who are the people promoting or challenging connoisseurship and why, where do they come from, what interests do they represent, what is the basis of their authority?

We need to ask why, given that the history of connoisseurship ensures that the term is freighted with a sense of patrician condescension and entitlement, should anyone even try to mobilise it? I suspect that there is more at stake here than a question of methodology—how we address issues of authenticity and authorship, what weight we put on these as compared to questions about making, meaning and reception.

We are, certainly, witnessing shifting allegiances and affiliations. Museum curators and university-based art historians are working more closely than ever, bonded by new forms of research funding and a new emphasis on collaboration and the efficiencies it promises. The relationship between curators in national museums and those in regional and smaller organisations is changing too, under the same pressures. And perhaps most importantly, the status and character of public galleries will change if the widely-reported decline in government funding continues. In straitened circumstances, the promotion of public duty, reasoned judgement and open-ended critical reflection may appear hopelessly idealistic or anachronistic. But we in the public sector are duty bound to pursue our task with special care. Work on attribution, identification and aesthetic evaluation can not, in that context, take the form of snap-judgements or a sort of media-friendly parlour game, entertaining as these may be.

Meanwhile, the vaunting of a noticeably under-defined “new connoisseurship” as a feature of university training might conveniently create an impression of continuity between the academy and the commercial art world, an alluring prospect for some students in a unprecedentedly tough job market.

But do we really appreciate what is at stake? We need perhaps, to

re-state the case for the public rather than the commercial value of art, and to work harder at maintaining a critical understanding of cultural heritage as something open and dynamic, something which can be disputed, rather than falling back blindly on the bland reassurances of connoisseurship.