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THE INTERNATIONAL ART MAGAZINE

## The art world must do more to support experts

Thomas Marks

27 MARCH 2017



The likely closure of Christie's South Kensington (CSK), which was mooted by the auction house in early March while the contemporary sales were still spurting in London, has been met with widespread disappointment by collectors, art dealers, and curators – indeed by almost anyone with an

interest in the fine and decorative arts, including many current and former employees of Christie's. Writing for Apollo online – [where I urge you to read her article](#) – Susan Moore describes how 'the move smacks of corporate short-termism as well as hubris [and Christie's] putting all its eggs in one or two baskets – modern and contemporary art.'

The auction house has defended the proposed closure of its saleroom dedicated to mid-range art and antiques by pointing out that the market for such material has increasingly migrated online. But surely even the chief bean-counter at Christie's recognises that it is not (yet) possible to feel the weight or texture of an object, or get any real sense of its condition from images viewed online, however high resolution. Experts still need to assess objects before they are posted on websites.

The most consistent reaction to the CSK news has been to rue the further atrophying of auction house expertise in traditional collecting fields (it is anticipated that many of the proposed 250 job losses at Christie's relate to the closure of CSK). One former CSK staffer wrote on social media that her three years there 'proved to be the best experience anyone in the art world could wish for [in] a remarkable and unique environment for learning, selling and developing connoisseurship'. There is a nice reminder here that financial and cultural valuation, though not the same thing, overlap in important ways in traditional fields – and that value can still be related to knowledge.

This brings us to well-trodden ground, and to the long-lamented death of connoisseurship. In a world in which cultivating the clients of the future were as important as chasing those of today, Christie's would have revamped its South Kensington saleroom as a place in which people might have trained not just (as employees) to be experts but (as clients) to be collectors. Such an idea seems remote from the company's current strategy.

Let them bask in their Basquiats. The broader demise of the type of knowledge gained through close looking, handling, and researching objects should be of concern not only to the art trade but also to museums and academic art historians. For how, in the future, will we continue to define the significance and quality of artworks if we lack the experts to distinguish between them? And how will we succeed in preserving heritage if all things are increasingly

studied only through images? It is time to get over the tired cries of elitism. It is not elitist to know about materials and makers, and how and why they were prized in the past.

The planned closure of CSK has generated more anger than resignation, suggesting that there is life in the experts yet. Now is the moment for those who lament the passing of connoisseurship to make the strongest possible case for what is at stake, and to work together to encourage its revival. We have already seen some of the younger Old Masters dealers give their field a shot of razzamatazz. At its best, that glamour acts as a grace note to expertise, taking exceptional paintings and sculptures and making us all feel involved in them.

That is not a model that will work in all fields, but the principle of inspiring or stirring people through an unprecedented intimacy with historical objects has many applications. I urge art dealers to do all they can to work with A-level and university art-history students, welcoming groups to discuss and handle objects; university art-history departments might even offer credit for researching them. And art fairs should set up formal programmes to host junior curators for handling sessions and workshops – after all, every fair has its lulls, and what more profitable way to fill them?

I encourage readers to send in further ideas that might help to revive connoisseurial knowledge. Then let's turn them into actions.