

Introduction

The law of unintended consequences is responsible for the evolution of art connoisseurship. British aristocrats of the eighteenth century could hardly have imagined that the art collections they assembled as the result of the Grand Tour would play a central role in the development of art history during the nineteenth century. By acquiring Italian Renaissance art in large quantities, they were making statements about their wealth, discernment and social status; that they also provided the foundation for a new academic discipline was happenstance.

In terms of the types of paintings they acquired, eighteenth century aristocratic collectors followed the principles laid down by the first President of the Royal Academy, Sir Joshua Reynolds.¹ For him, Raphael, Michelangelo, Leonardo and Titian – the great painters of the late Italian Renaissance – occupied the summit of artistic achievement. It is therefore no surprise that these painters were over-represented – in name, if not in fact – on the walls of the grand houses and London mansions of the aristocracy and landed gentry.

Questions of attribution, authenticity, or quality were seldom asked and, if they were, the level of art scholarship was so limited that the answer was unlikely to be authoritative. As the result, private collections contained many paintings which were wrongly attributed to one or other of the well known painters of the Italian Renaissance. They also contained paintings that were either copies masquerading as originals, or were outright forgeries painted to sell to gullible Grand Tourists whose wealth and enthusiasm to build an art collection outran their ability to distinguish the genuine from the fake. The result was that, in terms of attribution and authenticity, buying Italian Renaissance paintings became an elevated game of blind-man's buff.

In the early years of the nineteenth century, things began to change. German scholars started to develop a chronological history of art. Questions of attribution were essential to this end. These scholars realised that to compile a history of art it would be necessary to compare and contrast large numbers of paintings. In the 1830s, they began to study Britain's aristocratic private collections and revealed the scale of the art treasures they contained. Their initial judgments on attribution, authenticity, and quality were tentative, but they initiated an evolutionary process for connoisseurship which gathered pace during the nineteenth century. British art history owes a lasting debt of gratitude to these German scholars. Very soon, British connoisseurs began to emerge and connoisseurship gained momentum. It is this process that provides the focus for the following pages which aim to construct a first history of connoisseurship as an identifiable nineteenth century phenomenon.

At the outset, it is reasonable to ask what these connoisseurs actually achieved. Were they little more than players in a sophisticated parlour game designed to offer solutions to questions of attribution – or did they make a lasting contribution to the art world?

Many of their achievements speak for themselves. The connoisseurs began by revealing and describing the art treasures in Britain's private collections. In the middle years of the nineteenth century, they made the first translations of key German texts on art; wrote major iconographical studies; and produced ground-breaking works on the materials and history of painting. They wrote the first monographs on artists and created the foundations of an important strand of art literature; they reviewed and categorised Italian schools of painting; as well as facilitating the largest art exhibition ever held in Britain. One laid the foundation for a great national collection of paintings as well as ensuring that the new invention of photography was available to a wider public; another created a new and radical attributional technique. Collectively, they contributed to the creation of a chronology for the history of art and led an expansion of taste to include the early Italian painters. This book aims to re-consider their achievements and allow their contributions to be recognised and appreciated in the twenty-first century.

Though there are many connections linking the new connoisseurs – it is not possible to give this history a single narrative arc. Instead, each chapter explores the work and biographies of one or more of the new connoisseurs or highlights key factors influencing their work. Together, this montage of people, events, and techniques illustrate a formative stage in the development of connoisseurship that, by extension, began to establish art history as a recognisable discipline.

The first element in this montage highlights *Collectors and Collecting* and asks a central question: when eighteenth-century collectors acquired Old Master paintings, did they buy what they thought they were buying? By and large, the answer to this question is no. Grand Tourists may have acquired a valuable historical artefact and a thing of beauty – but they did not, in many cases, acquire a canvas by the hand of the Renaissance master to whom the painting was attributed by its vendor. In the early nineteenth century, even London salerooms were full of works masquerading under false names or carrying attributions given to them by tradition or ambitious owners.

Whilst the elimination of these copies or forgeries was part of the process of connoisseurship, it was not its intended outcome. The primary aim of the new connoisseurs was to identify authentic works of art. Only the identification of authentic works could establish a chronology for art history.

Through an analysis of Italian Old Master paintings sold by London salerooms during the nineteenth century (Appendix 1) it is possible to explore the buying habits of British collectors. It is also possible to consider whether art collectors acquired art for its investment potential and, if so, what rate of return it generated. Economic research concludes that, during the period, investment returns on Old Master paintings were disappointing. It seems unlikely that the acquisition of art simply for the purposes of speculative profit was a significant motivational factor for most nineteenth century art collectors.

German scholars and their influence introduces the first wave of the new art scholarship by Johann David Passavant and Gustav Waagen. They

began to develop an empirical framework through two surveys of British private collections. In 1836, Passavant published *Tour of a German Artist in England* and, two years later, Waagen published *Works of Art and Artists in England*.² These books paved the way for the work on which Waagen's reputation is founded – *Treasures of Art in Great Britain*.³ Passavant and Waagen brought the scale of Britain's private art collections to the attention of a wider readership. One of the important art publishers was John Murray and his approach to the new art literature offers an interesting perspective on these landmark publications. Because many of these books were initially written by German authors and published in Germany, questions of copyright and translation became relevant to the development of art literature.

In 1857, Waagen's *Treasures of Art* volumes played a key role in identifying Old Master paintings and potential donors for the *Art Treasures of the United Kingdom* exhibition in Manchester. This exhibition was (and still is) the largest art event ever held in Britain. Opened by Prince Albert, it was visited by Queen Victoria, European royalty, politicians, as well as many of the celebrities of the age (see Appendix 2). Sixteen thousand artworks were on display and seen by almost one and a half million people – the majority of whom were northern factory workers. Apart from bringing hundreds of Old Master paintings into the light of day for the first time, the Manchester exhibition also helped to shift taste towards an appreciation of early Italian paintings.

Apart from the published surveys by Passavant and Waagen, how did the new connoisseurs function in practice? *Authorship and uncertainty* recounts an example of connoisseurship that has remained largely unnoticed by the art literature. In 1850, a number of prominent connoisseurs examined the collection held by the Liverpool Royal Institution that mainly consisted of early Italian paintings previously owned by the banker, historian, and poet, William Roscoe.

Nineteenth century attributions of early Italian paintings are best considered as a work in progress rather than a definitive judgement because, at the time, so little was known about the artists of the period. The connoisseurs' visit to Liverpool illustrates this all too clearly. It would be

an understatement to say that they failed to reach any sort of consensus. Their conflicting appraisals were nevertheless published in the Royal Institution's 1851 catalogue and *Authorship and uncertainty* compares some of these attributions. This chapter also focuses on two of the connoisseurs involved in the process – Anna Jameson and Giovanni Cavalcaselle – and asks if their backgrounds shaped their approach to connoisseurship. How important, for example, was the influence of German culture to Anna Jameson and to what extent was Cavalcaselle influenced by his commitment to the cause of Italian nationalism?

The most serious test for the emerging art of connoisseurship came in the mid-nineteenth century. London's National Gallery had achieved little during its first thirty years of existence. By 1854, the national collection totalled just 265 paintings with more than half (169) being acquired by way of gift or bequest. For a country enriched by the proceeds of the industrial revolution, the state of the Gallery became an issue of national prestige – particularly when it was compared with its counterparts on the continent. *In the National interest* focuses on ten years, 1855-1865, during which the foundations were laid for the Gallery's historic collection of Italian Renaissance paintings.⁴ During these ten years, its first professional Director was appointed and given the freedom, authority and resources to make acquisitions. At the age of 62 years, when many men would be contemplating retirement, Sir Charles Eastlake took on this task. In just ten years, he acquired 137 Italian Renaissance paintings and more than 30 non-Italian paintings. He spent around £100,000 (about £7 million today) of public money and successfully completed a unique programme of public investment.

Today, the majority of these paintings are recognised as priceless masterpieces. Appendix 3 analyses the Gallery's acquisitions from 1855 to 1865. This analysis allows Eastlake's connoisseurship to be assessed by comparing the attribution given to a painting at the time of purchase with its current attribution. As an illustration of the level of discernment he brought to his task, Appendix 4 contains Eastlake's report to the Gallery's Trustees after his continental tour of 1857. It reveals the number of paintings viewed by him and rejected on grounds of attribution, cost

or condition and demonstrates the extent to which Eastlake's connoisseurship was central to the task of building a national collection. Eastlake's report has been transcribed from the original manuscript in the National Gallery's archives and is published here for the first time.

The new connoisseurs did not just limit themselves to questions of attribution, authenticity and quality. They were also instrumental in expanding public taste to include early Italian painters. By so doing, they brought about the first significant movement in artistic taste for more than one hundred years. *Questions of taste and reputation* shows how this process was informed by the writings of Alexis François Rio, Anna Jameson and Charles Eastlake. Major exhibitions, such as the Manchester Art Treasures in 1857, allowed the public to see early Italian paintings at first hand.

The cultural establishment also gave a lead in shifting taste. In 1853, a Parliamentary Committee on the National Gallery issued a specific mandate for the acquisition of early Italian paintings. Their inclusion within the scope of contemporary taste was all the more remarkable because they mainly depicted Roman Catholic imagery at a time of widespread anti-Catholic sentiment in Britain. As another example of the way artistic taste evolved during the nineteenth century, this chapter also traces the rehabilitation, after centuries of neglect, of Botticelli's reputation and how he became one of the most favoured Renaissance artists for the Victorians.

Today's experts have many scientific tools at their disposal to inform their judgments and play a part in the attribution process. In the nineteenth century, however, only one technology emerged to help connoisseurs – photography. In Paris, Daguerre's photographic process was presented to a joint meeting of the Academy of Sciences and the Academy of Fine Arts in January 1839. Just a few days later, Fox Talbot's process was revealed by Britain's leading scientist Michael Faraday, to a meeting of the Royal Society in London. *Photography and connoisseurship* considers the influence of this new invention. One of the connoisseurs (Eastlake) was instrumental in persuading Fox Talbot to make his invention available to the general public. Whilst photography provided the nineteenth

century with its first accurate visual narrative, initially it had limitations in representing the colour tonality of paintings in black and white. However, photography soon attracted a number of innovative developments which made it increasingly suitable for capturing fine art images and it rapidly became an indispensable aid to connoisseurship.

Despite the advent of photography, connoisseurs still had to rely on an acute visual memory developed from a lifetime studying paintings. This library of retained images supports connoisseurship's key skill – the art of comparison. Many connoisseurs, now and in the nineteenth century, also trained as artists. There are, nevertheless, very important differences between the nineteenth century and today. In the nineteenth century, science had not yet provided the tools to corroborate a connoisseur's judgment. They had to make decisions based simply on their expertise and knowledge. It is important to remember that many of their decisions were not made in the relative comfort of a brightly lit studio. Eastlake, for example, often had to examine paintings from the top of a ladder in a dimly-lit palazzo. Given these factors, the achievements of nineteenth century connoisseurs are all the more remarkable.

The nineteenth century did see a one new technique emerge – scientific connoisseurship – the invention of Giovanni Morelli. *Scientific Connoisseurship and market value* considers his technique which is based on the belief that the minor physical characteristics of a figure – the shape of a finger-nail or the lobe of an ear, for example – could reveal the hand of the artist because they were painted in an unconscious fashion. Though Morelli never claimed anything more for his technique than it was a corroborative tool, it created a controversy in the art world. This chapter reviews the limitations of the technique as well as its actual contribution to connoisseurship. It also examines the way in which it was developed by Morelli's chief disciple, Bernard Berenson.

Berenson's engagement with the commercial art market on his own account and through his secret partnership with the art dealer Joseph Duveen sets him apart from other connoisseurs of the period. Together, Berenson and Duveen were mainly responsible for the extensive transatlantic trade in Old Masters which flourished during the closing years of

the nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth century as hundreds of paintings were acquired by newly wealthy American industrialists. It was a process that depended on Berenson's connoisseurship and Duveen's salesmanship – a potent concoction that would give connoisseurship a bad name. It became seen as simply an element in the price-fixing process. Without defending the partnership between Berenson and Duveen, connoisseurship has always had a connection to the art market – and the clash between commerce and aesthetics is a false conflict. Questions of authorship, authenticity and quality are the province of connoisseurship *as well as* being indisputable components of value in respect of all art works, and particularly Old Master paintings.

At the outset, it is necessary to distinguish the connoisseurs of the nineteenth century from the art critics of the period. Critics were mainly concerned with an aesthetic response to art and its moral content. Connoisseurs had a more modest, but arguably more important aim: to try to establish authorship and context. In contrast to art critics, their literature is unassuming in style; their opinions frequently tentative. Their higher purpose was to construct a history, rather than respond to individual works of art.

Throughout the nineteenth century there was an underlying tension between art critics and connoisseurs. Connoisseurs were dismissed on the basis that they knew, 'everything about one thing and nothing about anything else.'⁵ On the other hand, connoisseurs claimed that art critics preferred, 'mere abstract theories to practical examination; it is their wont to look at a picture as if it were a mirror in which, as a rule, they see nothing but the reflection of their own minds.'⁶ The sniping of the critics failed to deflect the new connoisseurs from their purpose: to establish a chronology for art history. The distinction between these turbulent priests of the art world is best expressed by Max Friedländer, 'Critics enter the museum with ideas; art connoisseurs leave it with ideas. Critics seek what they expect to find; art connoisseurs find something of which they know nothing.'⁷

This is a dispute that history seems to have decided in favour of the art critics – perhaps because their skill as authors make them infinitely more

quotable. These pages do not attempt to re-run this largely synthetic debate. Art critics of the nineteenth century had fundamentally different objectives and served different masters. Connoisseurs, generally pursued more modest and far less assertive intentions.

In much the same way, this book simply aims to share an idea: that most of the progress in creating a history of art during the nineteenth century was made through the work of the new connoisseurs. In their different ways, they illuminated the art world but have now become footnotes of Victorian history. This book aims to re-assess and re-examine their work.

The legacy we have been left by nineteenth century connoisseurs can be seen today on the walls of the world's great galleries. It is a remarkable fact that a large number of the Renaissance paintings that have pride of place in these major collections were acquired during the nineteenth century – a period when connoisseurship was still an art and before it became a science.

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- ¹ Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792), painter and art theorist became the first President of the Royal Academy in 1768.
- ² Johann David Passavant, *Tour of a German Artist in England*. 2 vols. Translated by Elizabeth Rigby (later Lady Eastlake), (Saunders and Otley, London, 1836) and Gustav Waagen, *Works of Art and Artists in England*. 3 vols, (John Murray, London, 1838).
- ³ Gustav Waagen, *Treasures of Art in Great Britain – being an account of the chief collections of paintings, drawings, sculptures illuminated MSS etc*, Volumes I-III (John Murray, London, 1854); Volume IV (Supplemental Volume) (John Murray, London, 1857).
- ⁴ The terms ‘early Italian art’, ‘the primitives’, and ‘Renaissance art’ are used interchangeably. I have used the definition of the Renaissance employed by John Hale in *England and the Italian Renaissance*, (Faber and Faber, London, 1954), p.xv. ‘The Renaissance, as far as Italy was concerned, had come by the middle of the nineteenth century to mean the period from Cimabue to Michelangelo.’ In broad terms, this covers the years from 1240 to 1564.
- ⁵ *A Discerning Eye, essays on Early Italian Painting* by Richard Offner, ed. Andrew Landis, (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), preface.
- ⁶ Giovanni Morelli (Ivan Lermolieff), *Kunstkritische Studien über italienische Malerei: die Gallerien Borghese und Doria-Panfilj in Rom*, tran. Johannes Schwarze, (Leipzig, 1890), cited in *Art History and its methods*, ed. Eric Fernie, (Phaidon, London, 1995), p.107.
- ⁷ Cited in *A Discerning Eye – Essays on Early Italian Painting* by Richard Offner, p.7.