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Whither Connoisseurship?: Theodore E. Stebbins Jr., Curator of American Art, Emeritus, Harvard Art Museums

The Death of Connoisseurship?

Only rarely have I been called a “connoisseur.” I dislike the term. It evokes pretension and snobbery, Berenson and opinions for hire, musty drawing rooms and phony accents. However I do not mind being called an expert, in American paintings in general, and especially on the work of Martin Johnson Heade, about whom I have written two catalogues raisonnés (1975, 2000). I was trained at Harvard by two German scholars, Jakob Rosenberg and Max Loehr. Ours was an exciting age of discovery: I leapt to sort out taxonomic matters of authenticity, condition, dating, provenance, exhibition history, and categorization for the little-known Heade, John Wilmerding did the same for Lane, William H. Gerdt for the still-life painters and neo-classic sculptors, and so on. I hope that my work, even with its inevitable errors, makes a contribution for others—collectors, dealers, curators, students and other scholars, to use and build upon.

Many scholars of my generation worked as museum curators, and those who did not, Barbara Novak and David Huntington for example, were closely involved with museum exhibitions and private collectors. We were committed to building important public collections, and we worked with private collectors, conservators, and dealers. We were keenly aware of the potential for conflicts of interest, and we understand our successors’ concern with the mercenary, even corrupting nature of the marketplace. I take great pride in having built the Yale collection during my years there (1968-77), and in my work at the Museum of Fine Arts (MFA) and at Harvard. Over twenty percent of the MFA’s collection of American paintings came to that institution during my 22 years as curator; many because of my efforts to make each acquisition the best of its kind. Expertise is required for this kind of work, not theory. At Harvard, my colleagues and I produced two substantial catalogues of the American paintings collection (2008, 2014). This gratifying work was based on careful study and the building within ourselves as authors the expertise necessary to deal with each painter.

My generation admired the work of our predecessors, Lloyd Goodrich, Edgar Richardson, and others, but found them limited in their nativist emphasis on the honesty and “Americanness” of the artists they admired. We in turn should not have been shocked when the next generation of scholars, many trained at Yale by Jules Prown or influenced by him, rejected our methodology and replaced it with a new one based on the social history of art. Few of them work as curators. For these scholars, art is used more as a means of examining a culture than as an object of study in its own right. We begin, as Prown does, with systematic formal analysis and careful description of the work. For us, however, the

painting is primary. A mutual friend of Jules and myself has written me insightfully to say, “It seems that what you disagree with is Prown’s stake in the way culture can open insight into the work’s ‘unconscious.’”

My successor at Harvard, Ethan Lasser, and I have discussed the changing of the guard. In the American field, the age of acquisition, and the kind of expertise it required, are over, replaced by the age of ideas and interpretation. In my fifty years as an art historian, much has changed, including my own approach. It has been an exciting time, as American art gained recognition nationally, then internationally. My own views have been enlarged and enriched by the writings of David Lubin, Jennifer Roberts, Sarah Burns, and many others. However, I still wince when even the very best scholars move from the possible, to the barely plausible, to flights of fancy, as when Roberts puts such a heavy burden of associations on Henry Pelham’s misshapen left ear, or when Lubin labors to persuade us that Robert S. Duncanson’s unexceptional landscapes really speak to matters of race. But I realize that my generation grew up in the cautious years of the Eisenhower presidency, and that we are careful by nature, while my younger friends, with their speculative ideas, are themselves products of the unsettled years of the later twentieth century when speculation of every kind has affected the culture. These scholars are enormously well read, they formulate original, in-depth interpretations, and if occasionally they often push their arguments beyond reason, no harm is done. Fortunately, we do not practice brain surgery; our mistakes at worst become subjects for future debate.

Without connoisseurship, how are the public, the collector, or the scholar to be confident that they are considering an authentic work, rather than a forgery or a misattribution? What is surely dying out is expertise in the form of connoisseurship among university or museum scholars. The professors disdain it as a lesser trade; they make their reputations with adventurous, innovative, sometimes flawed writing. The curators, for their part, are increasingly pressed by the widespread devaluation of their profession and by increasing administrative burdens; they have little time or motivation to serve the field – and inevitably the market- in the ways we did. Among other things, connoisseurship has become enormously risky. Museums discourage their staffs from offering expert opinions, and threat of litigation clouds the field. Many of the most knowledgeable experts today are dealers and auction house experts, and it is they—protected by their employers—who will increasingly carry on the practice of connoisseurship.