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Whither Connoisseurship?: Croll Senior Curator of American Paintings, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

On Connoisseurship

There’s a grey suit available for purchase online called the “classic connoisseur ... the most practical suit you [could] own.” Of course, it’s a man’s suit; I wonder what would happen if a female museum curator were to put it on. Would it endow me with the connoisseur’s superpower to distinguish one maker’s hand from another? Could I then make definitive distinctions between a painting by John Sargent and, say, one by his contemporary and sometime copyist Reginald Eves? Does connoisseurship matter anymore?

Of course it does. Let’s confront the economic implications head-on. No Eves has sold at auction for more than \$35,000. Sargent’s record price at auction is \$23 million. It’s my fiduciary responsibility to be able to tell the difference, to spend the museum’s limited funds wisely. And lest academic art historians think their efforts are immune from market issues—they are not. The most under-valued paintings often are by artists no one has studied. Once someone publishes an article or a book, the market is inevitably affected—that grimy canvas someone discovered in the attic is now by a known artist. In today’s society, name brands simply are valued more than generics.

Is connoisseurship, as many have argued, so tainted by associations with the market that it has no value to the field of art history? I would emphatically say no. A connoisseur also takes responsibility for puzzling out whether an object is genuine. Fakes cannot teach us about the past, although they reveal much about the time of their own making. Science helps, for the discovery of a twentieth-century pigment in a nineteenth-century landscape is an instant tip that things may not be as they appear. But science has limits. Two paintings made at the same time in the same place will often employ similar materials; scientific analysis cannot tell us who held the brush. Sometimes only connoisseurship can offer insight as to whether something is likely or unlikely to be correct; to situate it in time and place. It’s admittedly only an opinion, subject to disagreement, discussion, and—we must acknowledge—malleable with the passage of time. Knowledge is power, but it may never be absolute.

I share the belief that ordinary things can teach us as much as extraordinary ones can. That hardly rules out connoisseurship, for the term simply means one who has knowledge—it could be of trade cards, marbles, or cigar boxes. What makes me cautious about connoisseurship is its traditional practice of categorizing things into good, better, and best, an effort that has had a checkered history of excluding certain things from the canon (another topic ripe for our bully pulpit). If Connoisseur Q judges Painter X to be superior to Painter Y, we will teach Painter X in our surveys, feature him (yes, it’s usually a him) in our

exhibitions, write more articles about him. But inevitably a champion of Painter Y will eventually emerge, and we will “rediscover” a deserving artist. Whither then, the qualitative judgment of Connoisseur Q? But that very history of connoisseurs and their opinions—an element of the history of taste—is part of the history of art.

Let’s not dismiss a connoisseur’s quality judgments as intrinsically unfair, however. Sometimes the connoisseur is the artist. “Have the Mr. Marquand if you want it,” wrote Sargent to an exhibition organizer. “I don’t think it is below the average—only ... I think Mme. X is worth ten of it.”¹ The Marquand painting is very fine; fluidly rendered, intense, with those prehensile fingers that lend Sargent’s portraits such energy and perhaps speak here to Marquand’s prowess as a collector and museum founder. But it’s no Mme X.

So let’s hear it for connoisseurship—a practice with which every art historian engages simply by choosing a topic. But let’s have connoisseurship with self-awareness about our own prejudices and the taste of our time, humility about the lasting authority of our judgment, and a continual quest for knowledge.

Notes

¹ John S. Sargent to Walter L. Clark, January 13, 1924, The John Singer Sargent Archive, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (www.mfa.org/collections/john-singer-sargent-archive/letters/SC-SargentArchive-9-16).