



# PANORAMA

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## A Collegial Response to “Whither Connoisseurship?”

This is a joint response to the Bully Pulpit, “[Whither Connoisseurship?](#),” by members of New York’s Americanist Art Salon, all of whom were affiliated with the Ph.D. Program in Art History at the CUNY Graduate Center. Because the Bully Pulpit elicited a great deal of discussion in our salon, we resolved to put our ideas in writing. Our attempt at a group response proved unwieldy, so three of us have responded individually. We are grateful to the editors of *Panorama* for publishing our responses, and to one of the Bully Pulpit contributors, Alan Wallach, who joined our December 2015 meeting and provided additional insight into the topic.

**Chelsea Bruner** – liberal arts faculty at Ringling College of Art and Design, editing, in collaboration with Margaret Laster, an anthology on Gilded Age art in New York.

**Sheila Gerami** – independent scholar writing a book on Stanford White’s Hall of Fame for Great Americans in the Bronx.

**Margaret Laster** – associate curator of American art at the New-York Historical Society, working with Chelsea Bruner on the Gilded Age anthology.

**Paul A. Ranogajec** – independent scholar specializing in nineteenth- and twentieth-century architecture.

**Jillian Russo** – curator at the Arts Students League, working on a biography of Holger Cahill.

**Sally Webster** – professor emerita of American art at Lehman College and the CUNY Graduate Center and author most recently of *The Nation’s First Monument and the Origins of the American Memorial Tradition*.

## Wither Not!

Sheila Gerami

Connoisseurship is dying out: professors disparage it as a lesser trade and museum curators are overburdened with administrative work, thus leaving little time to focus on such endeavors (Theodore Stebbins). Yet, connoisseurship, a practice involving verification, appraisal, and notions of quality, should not be allowed to wither. A connoisseur reassures viewers that the art they are looking at is authentic and not a copy or, even worse, a forgery. Yes, such expertise is a “doubled-edge sword” as it “enables commodity fetishism” (Alan Wallach), but I agree with Erica Hirshler that connoisseurship is not so tainted by the market that it has no value to the field.

If art is to be a study in its own right, it is necessary to look closely and see the art object/image—repeatedly and for a significant period of time—in order to understand the subject at hand. Looking generally refers to the gaze, recognizing a presence, whereas seeing is more active, a visual search to understand. The difference is similar to that of hearing and listening. One may hear something, but may not really be listening. Scholars have chosen different terms such as “close-looking” (Wallach) or “intense engagement” (Jennifer Greenhill) for a visual approach to the object/image. Regardless of what one calls it, this method is an extremely useful way to begin to understand the artwork. It is also fundamental for connoisseurship. Such viewing takes patience and practice; one should focus close to the surface of the piece, looking at details and nuance, as well as from a distance, taking in the work as a whole. Form and content are related: observation and seeing is followed by research, which “fleshes out” understanding of the object/image and its subject matter by taking into consideration issues including, but not limited to, social and historical context, patronage, and reception, as well as biographical information about the artist. The order of research methodologies is not fixed: there are many routes to interpretation and understanding, but since my focus is *visual* art, I think looking and seeing are the best points of departure. They are also a pleasure, which is what drew me into the field in the first place.

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## Crisis and Method

Paul A. Ranogajec

To answer the editor’s question directly, art history without some form of connoisseurship is neither conceivable nor desirable. But what exactly is connoisseurship? My preferred formula has three parts: formal analysis plus attribution plus authentication. The last two of these tend to be emphasized in discussions of

connoisseurship, and it is against the perceived ethical lapses related to those components that practitioners are usually criticized. But in the zeal to undermine the connoisseurial enterprise, we risk losing both the basic skills associated with formal analysis and the more specialized abilities related to attributing and authenticating works of art—skills and abilities that are critical to the art historian’s privilege and duty to safeguard artifacts from the past.

Erica Hirshler’s contention that the connoisseur “takes responsibility for puzzling out” authorship and attribution is important if incomplete. For undocumented or orphaned art, “puzzling out” is an essential practice. It directs our attention to the material object, the circumstances of its production, and the life or lives of its maker(s). Going further, there is the broader issue of caretaking. As historians, we concern ourselves with documents, ideas, and interpretations. But as *art* historians particularly, we take special interest in the material objects we use in our studies. It makes me nervous to think we can give up on the skills and practices that are necessary and essential to safeguarding this material heritage. Shall we become unwitting iconoclasts?

Joan Saab observes that as scholars of the last two generations have turned away from connoisseurial approaches, an “explosion in the international art world” of dealers, auction houses, financiers, and consultants has made connoisseurship “less about knowledge” than market value. That has always been at least partly true. But as art historians cede the ground of the “informed eye” to purely commercial actors and institutions, all questions of connoisseurial interest are necessarily turned into questions of monetary value. Theodore Stebbins recognizes this when he remarks on the fact that today connoisseurship is risky for museums and academics but finds its place, and protections, among dealers and auctioneers. Social-economic circumstances such as those of the present may conspire to degrade the work of connoisseurship, but it remains essential to see where and how the practice is not tied to pecuniary interest.

Saab’s disparaging remarks about certain collectors and their connoisseurial advisers in the first age of American collecting—the “Robber Barons” (a now mostly discredited term) and their “discerning minions”—divert attention from the importance of institutions for establishing what we might call the national cultural (and political) project at the end of the nineteenth century. I do not want to discount that project out of hand, given what we now understand about the importance of common cultural horizons for the prospects of a just democratic politics. If we see the work of Berenson and subsequent generations of connoisseurial specialists only in terms of conspicuous consumption or the shoring up of class identity, we will miss the important long-term consequences of the building of art institutions that remain vital not just to the discipline of art history but also to their communities and to the larger sense of the nation’s cultural achievement. Some scholars may not want to defend that achievement, and Americanists in general remain ill at ease with the thorny questions of nationalism it raises. I do not mean to discount the salutary skepticism surfaced in Marxist analyses of the process of bourgeois class formation through culture, such as those of Sven Beckert and Alan Wallach. But I do insist that the history of connoisseurship’s relation to both

the discipline of art history and to art's institutions in the United States is neither one-dimensional nor altogether unseemly.

Wallach for his part argues that art-historical education “in fact emphasizes close looking.” This raises the question of how “close looking” relates to traditional ideas of formal analysis. “Close looking,” to my mind, suggests the Prownian material culture method, which may begin with formal analysis but proceeds quickly down different paths. If, as it seems, Wallach’s “close looking” means something like traditional formal analysis, then I am suspicious of the claim that art-historical education today emphasizes it. That kind of training was peripheral in my own education. The methods courses I encountered (in two graduate programs) were almost entirely about contemporary critical theory, with only brief nods to formal analysis and older historiographical traditions. Those courses taught nothing about how to use archives; how to examine objects, images, and artifacts in systematic—and ethical—ways; how to make attributions; how to judge copies from originals; or how to find and interpret the clues that lead to identifying individual or school styles. Where exactly are these skills being taught?

One can agree with Wallach that connoisseurship may sometimes have the aspect of a “double-edged sword,” performing the necessary work of sorting and authenticating, while also seeing how it fuels commodity fetishism. To focus on the latter, however, is too cynical a view. It can lead easily to the wholesale disparagement of the connoisseurial approach. And it too easily ignores—and scorns as false consciousness—the interest in beauty and sensuous material form, which is one of the things that drew many of us (I would hazard to guess) into this discipline in the first place.

An absolute rejection of connoisseurship may also unwittingly reinforce our conformity with the neoliberal restructuring of the academy and the discipline. The expensive and time-consuming work of connoisseurship certainly makes it exclusive—an undertaking, traditionally, of the financially secure. But at the same time, if equitably funded and supported broadly across the field (conditions which do not hold at present), such work may be able to challenge the neoliberal scholarly economy of quick turnaround, “results,” and the valorization of long CVs of dubious quality. As Saab rightly notes, connoisseurship is a “certain type of knowledge”: a type built upon on a systematically cultivated, slowly acquired set of skills. Wallach contends that “strike-it-rich aesthetics” is the basis of “the crisis of connoisseurship and of art history generally.” That may be part of the problem. But a positive response to the crisis should include the recognition that the practices and skills nurtured by connoisseurship are among those needed to withstand and counter the assault on humanistic values.

## Top Ten Ways To Become a Connoisseur

Sally Webster

Because connoisseurship has become a taboo practice, I herewith offer time-honored steps to demystify the process.

10. Visit an artist's studio and ask her to describe her working process.
9. Support your local artists: go to art openings.
8. Take a drawing or a printmaking class.
7. Look at and describe a painting by Cézanne with an artist friend.
6. Describe to someone the formal differences between Winslow Homer's *Breezing Up (A Fair Wind)* (1873-76, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.) and Thomas Eakins' *Setting Out After Rail* (1874, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston).
5. Spend more time in a museum than in the library.
4. Take field trips to Mount Rushmore, Gettysburg, Newport, Yosemite, Vizcaya.
3. Visit a conservation studio.
2. Study Old Master drawings.
1. Embrace visual pleasure.