

The limits of connoisseurship. Attribution issues and mistakes. An introduction.

Valérie Kobi

In a collection of essays published in 1942 under the title *On Art and Connoisseurship*, the German art historian and specialist in early Netherlandish and German paintings Max J. Friedländer offers a methodological insight into the operating procedure of connoisseurship.¹ According to the scholar, judgment and attribution primarily rest upon the force of intuition as a 'school for the eye',² thus limiting the value of more objective criteria, such as signatures and monograms, documentary evidence, or formal comparisons. The recourse to such arguments, usually presented in order to convince 'others of the truth of [...] verdicts',³ contributes to a rhetoric that merely participates in the theater of the proof deployed by the expert. As Friedländer argues:

It is noticeable that gifted experts in particular, who make their decisions with inner certainty, have little inclination to provide proof (...). False attributions are often presented with an excessive display of acuteness, and of arguments which sound irrefutable. False Raphael pictures are accompanied by whole brochures. The weaker the inner certainty, the stronger the need to convince others and oneself by lengthy demonstrations.⁴

Hidden behind Friedländer's obvious criticism appears a couple of circumstances at the center of the present journal issue. The idea that the eye of the specialist, along with his or her individual talent and innate knowledge, constitutes an 'inner certainty' of artistic expertise has formed a central *topos* of the literature for centuries. So pervasive has this outlook been that it often overshadowed the various protocols at the origin of the process, thereby allowing the connoisseur to discreetly conceal his or her own methodology. Recent studies on the topic have unanimously

¹ Max J. Friedländer, *On Art and Connoisseurship*, London: B. Cassirer, 1942. For more on Friedländer, see among others: Till-Holger Borchert, 'From Intuition to Intellect: Max J. Friedländer and the Verbalisation of Connoisseurship', *Jaarboek Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen*, 2004–2005, 9–18; Simon Elson, *Der Kunstkenner. Max J. Friedländer. Biografische Skizzen*, Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2016; Dagmar Korbacher, *Der Kenner im Museum. Max J. Friedländer (1867–1958)*, Berlin: G+H Verlag, 2008 as well as Joris C. Heyder's article in the current issue and the forthcoming conference *Max J. Friedländer (1867-1958): art historian, museum director, connoisseur* to be held on 8 June 2017 at the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

² Friedländer, *On Art and Connoisseurship*, 160.

³ Friedländer, *On Art and Connoisseurship*, 163. On the concept of the 'theater of the proof', see Bruno Latour, 'Le théâtre de la preuve', in Claire Salomon-Bayet, ed., *Pasteur et la révolution pastoriennne*, Paris: Payot, 1986, 335–384 as well as Liliane Hilaire-Pérez, *L'invention technique au siècle des Lumières*, Paris: Albin Michel, 2000.

⁴ Friedländer, *On Art and Connoisseurship*, 167.

recognized the need to deconstruct this belief and to situate the practice within the context of its sociocultural conditions.⁵ Indeed, one ought to view the attribution as the final affirmation of a long and manifold procedure. This approach requires not only a probing of the practical knowledge that informs the act of attribution but also a consideration of the network in which the judgment takes place, as well as its artistic, political, and conceptual stakes.

The execution of such a multifaceted consideration, though, is made difficult by the very practice of attribution itself. As Friedländer acknowledges, connoisseurship – and more generally any scientific cultivation of knowledge – relies for the most part on tacit practices that tend to elude the historical analysis. Controversy, disagreement, and doubt almost uniquely escape this reality as they generate 'lengthy demonstrations'. If the history of science has since the 1980s understood the viability of this situation for the investigation of past practices and intellectual traditions,⁶ art history has not yet fully embraced the possibilities presented by this approach.⁷ Attribution issues and mistakes often remain in the shadow of the history of collections, the provenance research, and the art market studies. Despite this peripheral status, they nevertheless grant a privileged access to the connoisseurs' mind and strategies as well as provide an interesting perspective on the knowledge economy at play in the constitution of art historical facts. In other words, their examination allows for a better understanding of the intellectual context in which they occurred and reveals the multiple discrepancies between connoisseurial theory and its practical application.

With this particular focus in mind, the articles that follow encourage a reflection on the operative and normative processes of connoisseurship and their respective limits. They do so by analyzing a few case studies – coming from different time periods and artistic media – that question the procedures guiding the

⁵ This literature is too extensive to be exhaustively reviewed here. For an introduction on the topic, see: Pascal Griener, *La république de l'œil: l'expérience de l'art au siècle des Lumières*, Paris: O. Jacob, 2010; Charlotte Guichard, *Les amateurs d'art à Paris au XVIII^e siècle*, Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 2008; Charlotte Guichard, ed., 'Les formes de l'expertise artistique en Europe (XIV^e-XVIII^e siècle)' [special issue], *Revue de Synthèse*, 132:1, 2011; Patrick Michel, ed., *Connoisseurship. L'œil, la raison et l'instrument*, Paris: École du Louvre, 2014.

⁶ See for example: Simon Schaffer and Steven Shapin, *Leviathan and the Air-Pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the Experimental Life*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985. And for a broader overview see: Dominique Pestre, 'L'analyse de controverse dans l'étude des sciences depuis trente ans. Entre outil méthodologique, garantie de neutralité axiologique et politique', *Mil neuf cent. Revue d'histoire intellectuelle*, 25, 2007, 29–43.

⁷ Only a couple of publications have addressed the topic: Lena Bader, *Bild-Prozesse im 19. Jahrhundert. Der Holbein-Streit und die Ursprünge der Kunstgeschichte*, Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2013; André Chastel, 'L'identité du tableau: ambitions et limites de l'attribution', *Revue de l'art*, 42, 1978, 4–14; Valérie Kobi, *Dans l'œil du connoisseur. Pierre-Jean Mariette (1694-1774) et la construction des savoirs en histoire de l'art*, Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2017, chapter 3; Joachim Rees, 'Les mains de Michel-Ange. How Eighteenth-Century Connoisseurs Made Sense of the Artist's Hand', *Revue de Synthèse*, 132:1, 2011, 53–74; Ronald D. Spencer, *The Expert Versus the Object. Judging Fakes and False Attributions in the Visual Arts*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

(re)attribution of artworks and the theoretical or practical tensions generated thereby. The first series of papers leads this investigation by concentrating on connoisseurship's 'arts of doing'.⁸ Through a close examination of sources, such as Salon *livrets*, artists' fluctuating *œuvres*, or infrared reflectography (IRR) images, they thematize the way textual and visual rhetoric work towards the crystallization of artistic personae and the cultural significance that may be extracted from this evolving figure.

David Pullins opens the journal issue with an article on the historical, economical, and sociocultural factors that spurred an increasing appreciation of painters' authorship in eighteenth-century France. Observed in sales catalogues, Salon *livrets*, signing and hanging practices, among others, this tendency seems *a priori* to contradict certain artistic habits of the time, like the production of multi-authored artworks.⁹ Pullins shows, however, that the taste for *pastiche* in eighteenth-century Paris paradoxically contributed to the consolidation of authorship by engaging the connoisseur in a playful relation with the artwork. While the viewer was forced to consider the hand(s) presented on the canvas, he entered into a dynamic of comparisons that helped foster his own certainty on the artists' individual characteristics. In this context, 'opposition rather than overlap' shaped authorial identity.

Catherine B. Scallen continues the discussion by interrogating the artistic image of Rembrandt carried through Jakob Rosenberg's influential monograph *Rembrandt. Life and work* (1948), and of its later revised editions (respectively in 1964 and 1980). Taking into account the mistaken attributions made by Rosenberg in this book, the author raises the question of the understanding and reception of Rembrandt during the course of the twentieth century. She problematizes the *œuvre* of the artist as a reflection of a scholarly tradition that 'might be called the Berlin school of Rembrandt connoisseurship' and underlines the scientific representations linked with a methodology still anchored in nineteenth-century historiography.

Noa Turel addresses the impact of IRR on the connoisseurship of Early Netherlandish painting in the 1970s on and the role played by underdrawings in the definition of a technical art history. She shows that, ironically, the technology led to the deconstruction of a central notion for connoisseurship: that individual authorship. Going back to the eighteenth century, the importance attributed to drawings, in particular through the connoisseurial fascination for the artist's hand, generated the expectation that IRR images would give solid evidence on which to base attributions of Early Netherlandish paintings. Instead, these visual documents shed light on the practices of the painters' workshops and revealed 'an industry at work'.

Joris C. Heyder's article undertakes a study of the rhetorical strategies chosen by connoisseurs, such as Bernard Berenson or Max J. Friedländer, in order to

⁸ See: Michel de Certeau, *L'invention du quotidien. Arts de faire*, Paris: Gallimard, 1990 [1980].

⁹ On this artistic tradition, see: David Pullins, 'Stubbs, Vernet & Boucher Share a Canvas: Workshops, Authorship & the Status of Painting', *Journal18*, 1, Spring 2016, unpaginated [<http://www.journal18.org/334>].

build their arguments. What is outlined here are not only the general figures of speech and *topoi* at the center of the expert's language but also the processes of normalization and canonization that shape the constitution of a certain history of art. Comparison, as a main tool of connoisseurship, receives specific attention. Heyder analyzes how this stylistic device relies on a 'paradigm of resemblance' and shows how the language of connoisseurship ultimately bears at its core the downfall of the practice as a reliable methodological instrument.

The second series of papers focuses on art objects – whether they be prints, sculptures or paintings – that raise connoisseurial problems due to their relation to or status as a copy. Among the notions thematized in the following section are those of authenticity, authorship, originality, and value in regards to the practices and visual or textual evidence that help contextualize the role of such artworks in the definition of art history.

Stefano Pierguidi starts this line of inquiry with a review of Giorgio Vasari's connoisseurship in the field of engravings and the attention the historian paid to the medium in his successive editions of the *Vite* (1550 and 1568). When it comes to attribution, the distinction to be made between the *inventor* and the *sculptor* of a print seems to some extent to complicate the judgment of the Italian connoisseur. Looking in detail at the life of Enea Vico of Parma and at the mistakes punctuating this text, Pierguidi stresses the lack of precision demonstrated in the matter of engravings by Vasari and the external reasons that may have influenced the identification process.

Sharon Hecker examines various sculptures for a long time thought to be from the hand of the Italian artist Medardo Rosso, but today either reattributed to his son Francesco or credited to later castings. The artist's ambiguous statements and behaviors towards posthumous casting during his lifetime, as well as the non-artistic background of Rosso's heirs, render any generalization on the legal and artistic status of these works impossible. This situation encourages a debate on the authenticity and value of these posthumous casts and on their delicate position in Medardo Rosso's *œuvre*. Despite this uncertainty, Hecker proposes to read these casts as a component of Rosso's 'greater strategies of propaganda, in order to assure his renown on a long-term basis'.

Pamella Guerdat's contribution closes the journal issue by retracing the attribution history of a painting – the property of the art gallerist René Gimpel, and later of his heirs (Gimpel Fils Gallery, London) – long identified as the *Self-Portrait* that the French artist Nicolas Poussin made for his patron Jean Pointel. In the course of the 1950s, the reappearance in Berlin of an identical *Self-Portrait* – today at the Gemäldegalerie, Berlin – incited an animated controversy that culminated in the 1990s to the final recognition of the Gimpel's Poussin as a replica. Guerdat uses this example to demonstrate the way the life of an artwork is constructed around a succession of identities, or around meanings and values won or lost over time.

The seven articles of this special issue participate in the recent rethinking of connoisseurship and its methods of analysis that may stimulate a new approach to

the field.¹⁰ By means of well-documented study cases, the authors demonstrate the evolving and ever-changing dynamics that define the intellectual and cultural conditions at the origin of art historical knowledge. At the same time, the authors unveil the operating mechanisms and normalization process that govern the integration of such knowledge within the discipline. Thus, the scope of this journal issue is, in the end, less the result of the false attributions than the underlying thoughts and reasons that brought them forth.

Valérie Kobi received her Ph.D. in Art History from the University of Neuchâtel (Switzerland) in 2014. Her first book on the French amateur Pierre-Jean Mariette explores the emergence of art history as a scholarly discipline in the eighteenth century (Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2017). She has held fellowships from the Swiss Institute of Rome (2010-2011), the Swiss Science Foundation (2010-2011, 2014-2015) and the Getty Research Institute (2012-2013). Since May 2015, she has held the post of postdoctoral researcher at the Bielefeld University (Germany) and is associated with the research project *Parergonale Rahmungen. Zur Ästhetik wissenschaftlicher Dinge bei Goethe*.

valerie.kobi@uni-bielefeld.de



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

¹⁰ In addition to the literature indicated before, I also would like to mention the interdisciplinary conference organized by Emanuele Lugli in March 2016 at the University of York on *Connoisseurship/Diagnostics/Forensics: Looking and Knowing in the Arts and in the Sciences*.