

Commentary – Questions of Connoisseurship



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Those who raise a claim to connoisseurship argue that they are able to deliver valid judgements in their area of expertise. [1] The basis for their judgement is expert and specialist knowledge on the one hand, which generally has been acquired by education or a specialized academic study, as well as by research or by being self-taught. Experience and analytical abilities are claimed on the other hand. Concerning a work of art, judgements by connoisseurs aim above all at the assessment of authorship, originality, condition, time of origin, place of origin, and quality.

Especially during recent years, judgements by connoisseurs, which Aby Warburg once described as “a neutrally balanced approximation” [2], came into discredit as being a subjective expression of opinion and, therefore, a scientific chimera. Responsible for this evaluation was, and is, the inherent differences in every science, on the one hand, and on the other hand – and this is much more serious – the strong commercialization of cultural activities and the perception resulting from it of art history as a commercial “service on demand” [3]. [4] This putative “crisis of connoisseurship” [5] recently appeared at the exhibition of *The Masters of Flémalle and Rogier van der Weyden* seen in 2008 in the Frankfurt Städel Museum and in 2009 in the Berlin Gemäldegalerie. It also appeared at the exhibition, *Alexandra Exter et ses amis*, the works by Exter being confiscated by the police in a spectacular act only a few days before its official closing at the Chateau Musée in the city of Tours, south of Paris.

While the Frankfurt exhibition demonstrated how a supposedly “would-be representative of a distinctive and very specific art historical trend in revenge makes a case for those who question the whole methodology of connoisseurship becomes a danger to the credibility of the whole discipline because his pride has been injured” [6], the exhibition in Tours became the scene of a conflict between two experts who, each for his own, publicly raised the claim of connoisseurship. The one founded his connoisseurship on the assertion of having inherited the moral right [7] from a pupil of Exter, and the other founded his judgements of value, in the lineage of Louis XIV, on the absolute claim to power stated in the simple and at the same time authoritarian, “L’expert c’est moi” (“I am the expert.”)

Besides the display of injured vanities, what both examples make evident is that the public and partially unfounded claims of connoisseurship and competence as reported in the press discredit the whole field of the history of art because, in the end, it should be about professionalism and not about micropolitics. In this context, then, it is necessary to recall what the content and subject of the history of art are, and to work out what the imperatives and ideals are that distinguish this discipline.

The object whose investigation is embraced in art history is clearly named by the two words of this academic science [8]: Art and History. Already its concrete manifestation – the work of art – is the result of an evaluating judgement because the

work of art differs from other human artifacts by the fact that the special quality to BE art is awarded to it by a series of individuals, groups, and institutions. This process can at no time be considered completed because what is perceived as art is revalued and reassessed over and over again. [9] What consequences this may have become clearly visible in the many-faceted reception of the Russian avant-garde movement which changed over time between contempt and acclaim.

Besides defining the object itself (*Gegenstandsbestimmung*), the so-called securing of evidence found within the object (*Gegenstandssicherung*) and object-related interpretation (*Gegenstandsbezogene Deutung*), are other art historical fields of research. For these fields, different basic professional competences [10] have developed in the history of this science which form the basis of art historical practice. The very first requirement and therefore the most important technique of art historical, especially style-critical, reflection about a picture is the method of comparative seeing (*Vergleichendes Sehen*), and this ever since Heinrich Wölfflin published his *Principles of Art History (Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe)* in 1915. Whoever wants to orientate himself in the fullness of the visual or claims to have a general pictorial competence, must be able to see comparatively. Simply by the fact that objects are being brought onto a level of comparison where visual analogies are being formed and a pictorial memory is being trained do critical judgements become possible.

From the disciplinal imperative of comparative seeing, two other, but not less, important techniques appear: the love of detail and joy in the verbal description of all the perceived differences. [11]

That it is a history-describing discipline [12] was gained by art history mostly by the fact that it looks for explanations of historical processes. This search is reflected above all in the criticism of authenticity, attribution, dating, and localization of works of art. [13] In order to respond to these issues one can make use of a large number of methods as, for example, the study of primary sources and other historical subsidiary sciences, stylistic analysis and the history of style, formal criticism, iconography as well as iconology, to name only some of the most important.

Most of these methods are borrowed from neighbouring academic disciplines [14]. But from apparently remote disciplines like the natural sciences art historical knowledge also benefits. The starting point of the natural sciences to lend themselves to art historical questions lies in the fact that works of art are accessible to scientific analysis on account of their materiality. The existing fears of contact with natural

scientific methods of analysis on the part of art historians already existed before Erwin Panofsky [15] and it would indeed be naïve to accept the findings of the natural sciences uncritically. Rather, one should use scientifically gained knowledge systematically as an aid to answer the question of the origin and the “biography” of a work of art. Even if the possibilities and limitations of a co-operation between art history and the natural sciences have not been defined as yet, one can see clearly that the natural sciences will complement the repertoire of the methods of art history in the future.

The identification of the object, its analysis and objective interpretation, with the support of academically defined methods as well as its articulation and application, are therefore the major tasks of art history. The judgement by connoisseurs should be based on these specialist duties, supported by the factor of “experience”, and thus are more than a mere “rhetorical finger exercise” [16] or a well kept secret. True connoisseurship, then, includes all aspects of the multi-faceted discipline of art history, to culminate in true “expertise”.

Expertise is the result of competence in one’s field of research, knowledge, and experience. Expertise therefore supports the securing of evidence about the object and forms the basis of every other art historical investigation. Consequently, the term connoisseurship means more than “*discrimen veri ac falsi*”. It is all about competence, thus it is all about using a scientific approach.

Footnotes

- [1] See: Zembylas, Tasos: Kunst als evaluatives Konzept. In: id.: Kulturbetriebslehre : Grundlagen einer Inter-Disziplin, Wiesbaden 2004.
- [2] The handwritten note is printed in: Gombrich, Ernst H., Warburg, Aby: Eine intellektuelle Biography, Frankfurt a. M. 1984, p. 182.
- [3] Bättschmann, Oskar / Gelshorn, Julia / Gramaccini, Norberto / Nicolai, Bernd / Schneemann, Peter J. (Eds.): Dienstleistung Kunstgeschichte? Art History on Demand?, Berlin 2008.
- [4] Questions concerning the practice of connoisseurship will be dealt with in one of the next issues of the Journal of InCoRM.
- [5] Thürlemann, Felix: Die Kennerschaft zelebriert ihre Krise. Beobachtungen und Überlegungen zur Ausstellung »Der Meister von Flémalle und Rogier van der Weyden«. In: Kunstgeschichte. Texte zur Diskussion, 2008-2. (Download September 26, 2009)

- [6] König, Eberhard: Commentary on Felix Thürlemann: Die Kennerschaft zelebriert ihre Krise. Beobachtungen und Überlegungen zur Ausstellung »Der Meister von Flémalle und Rogier van der Weyden« (Kunstgeschichte. Texte zur Diskussion 2008-2). In: Kunstgeschichte. Texte zur Diskussion, 2009-21 (urn:nbn:de:0009-23-18073).
- [7] Moral right or Droit Morale: http://impactasso.free.fr/spip/article.php3?id_article=9 (Download September 26, 2009).
- [8] The term “science” here refers to systems of acquiring knowledge based on scientific methods.
- [9] Warnke, Martin. Gegenstandsbereiche der Kunstgeschichte. In: *Kunstgeschichte. Eine Einführung*, Berlin 1988, pp. 19.
- [10] Dilly names these basic competences even as codes of honor or as “Eignungstest für das kunstgeschichtliche Studium und den Beruf” (aptitude test for studies and profession), Cf.: Dilly, Heinrich: Einleitung. In: *Kunstgeschichte. Eine Einführung*, Berlin 1988, pp. 11 – 12.
- [11] Often cited among art historians is the maxim of the Hamburg art historian, Aby Warburg: “God is in the details”. The realization of this postulate which states that all material relevant to a scientific object is to be completely considered, to be worked out thoroughly, and to be placed in respect to each other made Warburg the founder of modern iconography and iconology. Cf.: Dilly (1988).
- [12] Art history is an extremely self-reflexive science and thinks itself to be in crisis constantly. This means that art history, being a historical science, also questions its own history and methods. A decisive contribution to this discourse came from the famous art historian, Hans Belting, who provocatively put up for discussion “the end of art history”. Cf.: Belting, Hans: *Das Ende der Kunstgeschichte?*, München, 1983. The latest shift in these discourses was initiated by the increasing digitization of the picture.
- [13] The estimation of the commercial value is also called for as a criterion of the expertise. Nevertheless, this aspect is not the job of the scientists but of the art dealers.
- [14] Thus Warburg already called the construction of a cultural-scientific library an important condition for interdisciplinary research which should contain not only art historical sources and secondary literature, but among other things also religious, scientific and cultural-historical works.
- [15] Making use of the most modern technologies for art historical questions has a long tradition in Germany. Thus the Königliche Museen in Berlin in 1888 was the first to have received a laboratory for scientific analyses of artistic material. Cf.: Reitz, M.: *Auf der Fährte der Zeit*, Weinheim 2003.
- [16] “Rhetorische Fingerübung”. König, E.: Kommentar zu Thürlemann: Die Kennerschaft zelebriert ihre Krise. Beobachtungen und Überlegungen zur Ausstellung »Der Meister von Flémalle und Rogier van der Weyden« (Kunstgeschichte. Texte zur Diskussion 2008-2). In: *Kunstgeschichte. Texte zur Diskussion*, 2009-21 (urn:nbn:de:0009-23-18073), download of September 26, 2009.

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