

Connoisseurship Training: Yes, No, Other ... Explain

Edited transcript of a paper presented at a Christie's Education Symposium panel discussion on 'Connoisseurship and the Digital Age', London, 14–15 July 2016.

Elizabeth Herridge

Welcome, and thank you for joining our presentation today.

First, let me say that looking at art has always been a great pleasure!

In the late 1990s, at the start of my career in the cultural sector, I had the great good fortune to attend the new Master of Arts program offered by Christie's Education in New York. I was in the first graduating class (1999) of the program, which focused on connoisseurship training. In fact, the degree was called 'Connoisseurship and the Art and Auction Market'. I cannot overstate how important this training became in my subsequent career in museum management and now as a consultant in the art and cultural sector.

So, it is wonderful to be able to discuss the subject of connoisseurship training with you today at this Christie's Education Symposium in London.

Before we examine the current state of the field of connoisseurship training, let's define what we mean by the terms 'digital image' and 'connoisseurship'.

A **digital image** is one that has been created through the process of transforming images from analog media (generally, formats or objects that we can see) into electronic data that we can save, organise, retrieve and restore through electronic devices into perceptible surrogates of the original works.¹

The Art Dictionary defines **connoisseurship** as the technique or 'art' (emphasis mine) of recognising works of art, especially the attributes of:

- **quality** through its evaluation ... and appreciation
- the ability to **determine the time and place of its execution**
- the **identity of the artist**.

Why is connoisseurship – and connoisseurship training – necessary? Where did it come from?

A brief look at history reminds us of the following:

- The Medici family in Renaissance Italy, and those who advised them on their collecting, were examples of those who practised and developed a connoisseurship methodology for their age, and for the art made in that period and previously.
- The cultural policies of Louis XIV of France encouraged patronage and collecting, the founding of academic institutions and the historiography of art.
- Connoisseurship emerged as a focus in the study of art history, especially in 17th-century France and Italy.
- The subsequent amassing of art collections by private individuals led, in the UK, to the founding of the Society of Dilettanti in 1739, the pursuit of the Grand Tour, and the development of theses on moral and aesthetic education.
- Henry VIII's secularisation of church property, and its subsequent sale as a means to raise funds to finance his military campaigns of the 1540s, meant that a large quantity of art and cultural material changed hands, with little or no provenance information available. This necessitated its identification by new owners. The difficulty was that limited information was available to thoroughly research and identify the items, and few trained connoisseurs were available for consultation.
- One of the consequences of the French Revolution was that a large quantity of visual and decorative arts came on to the market. The aristocratic families who owned this material used the proceeds of its sale to escape the crumbling political and economic situation in France. As with the dissolution of the monasteries in England, this dispersal was large in scale and necessitated the identification of the materials to enable their sale. As a quick sale was desired, the methods used to identify artworks were limited and many misattributions were made, both deliberately and through lack of care.
- The expansion of the Napoleonic Empire in the late 18th and early 19th centuries saw vast numbers of paintings disappear from their original locations/contexts and appear in the art market, where they were subsequently collected by national museums in France, Germany and the UK. This resulted in many lost works, and many circulated works were studied and identified.
- In the 19th century, agents from large museums searched for acquisitions for their institutions. This led to the development of a visual philology, or a desire for methodological rigour of the historical sciences and textual philology.
- In the 20th century, collectors and museums continued to provide stimulus for connoisseurship, but towards the end of the century its role has been the subject of debate.

So, where are we today?

Most undergraduate and postgraduate programs in art history and studio art do not include formal training in connoisseurship. Why not?

I believe there are three possible reasons:

1. Academics teaching today were themselves not trained in the traditional object-based model of connoisseurship and so do not teach it to their students. I will be suggesting possible reasons for this.

2. The artistic mould that is based on the figure, modelling from light to dark, and the depiction of planar space and perspective, is no longer in fashion. I will discuss this further in the paper.
3. The proliferation of and access to digital images is an adjunct to, and possible replacement for, object-based experience and analysis.

It is this last point that is the principal subject of this paper in the context of the panel's broader topic of connoisseurship in the digital age.

In considering the three reasons just mentioned and taking them in turn, I wondered why connoisseurship training and education is on the decline – and apparently has been declining for some time.

A conversation with the late Robert Rosenblum on an occasion when we were working together came to mind. He asked me if I was doing any teaching. I told him that I was, and that I was having a hard time getting the students to look at art in person. I planned to assign my students a paper that would be a connoisseurship exercise, as it would require them to experience an image in person and then to write about it.

Bobby said, 'Good for you. Most people who teach, after they have been doing it for a while, don't bother to look at [original] art anymore.'

I was rather amazed by this.

'Many teachers think that slides are perfectly adequate,' he said, and laughed!

That was almost 15 years ago and we used slides in those days. Digital images weren't yet widely available. Those of you who remember the days of slides will understand how limiting they were, and how one had to remind the students and oneself that slides were a visual reference only and weren't to be considered an adequate representation of 'the real thing'.

Looking at this issue also in terms of trends, the late art historian and conservator James Beck observed that the decline in connoisseurship is attributable to current fashions in art. These, he said, act as 'powerful forces upon our mode of seeing'. Specifically, he is referring to modern art and 'every artistic movement in the 20th century'. These 20th-century art movements, he says, have altered the mould by consciously rejecting older precepts – specifically, the human figure, the modelling from light to dark, the planar construction of space and perspective – as 'obstacles to overcome'. The result, he concludes, is 'an abyss between the contemporary era and the past'.²

Beck also attributes the decline in connoisseurship and connoisseurs to a dependence on restorers to interpret technical data, something that 'this generation of curators are ill equipped to perform'.³ Here one supposes that he is referring to a shift in the focus of art historical training away from the object-based model.

Beck asserts that there is still a need for connoisseurs even though new diagnostic techniques have become available. Again, one supposes he is discussing the scientific techniques that aid in determining the probable date of an image's creation, or the identity of the artist – in other words, factors contributing to questions of authenticity and which are fundamental to connoisseurship.

If one subscribes to these ideas, then perhaps we are experiencing the confluence of several factors. Changing tastes and formats, a shift in the educational landscape of art historians and artists, the availability of digital images and technology, together with other elements, may be having the effect of moving us away from traditional models of connoisseurship to one that (perhaps) includes digital technology.

Let's test this theory by considering some discussions that are taking place today.

The Royal Academy's summer 2016 *RA Magazine* includes an article by Anna M. Dempster in which she makes the case for an object-based approach, such as the three-strand educational programming adopted by the Academy, that (1) provides a chronological overview to situate works or art and artists; (2) uses theory to explore and interpret their complex natures; and (3) uses the object-based experiential approach to provide a tangible link with the past that can be considered in context.⁴

This theme was also discussed in the Spring 2016 of *RA Magazine*, when a debate concerning attribution was conducted between the artist Doug Fishbone and the art historian David Ekserdjian.⁵ The question was whether a label fundamentally influences the viewer – in particular, concerning the object or image.

Regrettably, there is not enough time to examine these articles further, but I commend them to you. There seems to be more discussion on the subject, and these are just two recent examples.

Should there be new models of connoisseurship for the visual, technical and scientific fields? And, if so, could this be a response to the development and proliferation of digital technology – something that has greatly expanded the availability of images and text? Or has some other factor arisen that has moved us away from traditional connoisseurship training?

Whether from benign neglect, lack of recognition of its limitations, or the belief in its superiority versus the traditional object-based approach, the use of digital images has become pervasive in investigating works of art.

The subject of this panel is connoisseurship in the digital age, but technical innovations are nothing new; they have been addressed in relation to the art of their time as well. Perhaps we are just having the same conversation again, but the topic in our time is the development and use of digital technology.

A technical innovation in the 19th century was black-and-white photography. As a new medium, it became arguably more exalted than the subject matter of the images produced. Prior to that, works of art were reproduced and disseminated via engraving and lithography, which as media could also be viewed as art forms in and

of themselves. Both were important technological innovations and perhaps precursors of some of the issues we face today.

Technology may have already influenced our perceptions and experience of art. I refer again to James Beck, who suggests that photography has changed our habits of viewing the physical world and the manner in which artists perceive nature.⁶

This suggestion is important to our discussion, because the inference is that 'science' – or technology, if you will – is perceived as having greater claims to veracity than traditional methods of connoisseurship that rely on the cumulative experience and training of a connoisseur and the ongoing training of their eye.

Putting the printing press aside for a moment, and using the development of photography in the early to mid-19th century as a starting point, we can see that the adulation of new media has been going on for some time. Implicit is the underlying belief that 'science' is truth and should be accepted as an absolute, a notion that has led some to believe its results without question. Might we be considering digital images to have a similar claim?

One wonders whether we are conferring undue authority on science and technologically based developments. Does it follow that if we have full confidence in the 'technical' or digital technology, we also put our trust in those who use it and can demonstrate their results convincingly? In other words, are we using bad logic in making these judgments and thereby ascribing greater validity to them without testing their attributes?

To be fair, it is not just the latter-day 'technologists' who may have altered our way of seeing. Beck notes that landscape painters, for example, transformed our way of seeing natural landscapes because of the manner in which they filtered their representation of it, presumably through the lens of their own experience and vision.⁷ Of course, it is this representation of their interpretation that has been a focus of traditional connoisseurship. However, the images created by these painters were not exact representations of the landscape, and were not intended to be so; yet, we seem to want that kind of depiction and this may be a reason why digital images are of such interest.

We have already discussed early photography, and I would suggest that it probably reinforced the 17th-century English maxim of 'seeing is believing' – even if what we are looking at is produced via the lens of a machine, rather than the lens of the eye of an artist, his hand and his conscious intention. In its own way and time, is early photography not rather similar to the 'lens' through which digital images are conveyed today? Both held great fascination and were/are regarded with wonder in their own time and represent technological advancements developed by man.

Taken together, these factors suggest that in the past 100-plus years, we have become habituated to comprehend the world as two-dimensional through the images available to use or created by us.

How is this affecting our judgment as art historians? Is all that is available confusing us? Do we really understand the limitations and advantages of digital technology? Are we possibly afraid to look for ourselves, to trust our own eyes?

The whole notion of connoisseurship education is fraught with challenges in terms of learning to make judgments and evaluations. In this society of 'do your own thing' and 'I'm OK, you're OK', people may be less willing to commit themselves to a definite point of view for fear of ridicule, or of being politically incorrect, etc. One is also aware of a certain mystique to connoisseurship training that can be quite intimidating. After all, it is multi-faceted and multi-sensory, and requires the ability to successfully integrate a variety of experiences and knowledge. It also requires some talent, as not everything can be taught. For many, it is a lifetime's pursuit.

So, if looking at art is intimidating to many people, why not use digital technology as a shortcut to help them see and to make it more accessible? If you cannot see the *Venus de Milo* in person, a digital image should work just as well, shouldn't it?

In considering this last point, I couldn't resist briefly looking at some of the scientific work that has been done on vision, art and the brain. What do we know about how this works, and can it help to inform the discussion of whether traditional connoisseurship has been subsumed by digital technology and whether that is alright? Let's investigate.

In 1999, an article by Mengfei Huang entitled 'The Neuroscience of Art' appeared in the *Stanford Journal of Neuroscience*.⁸ Huang explored the premise that, despite differing methodologies, artists and scientists are co-investigators of reality in their common goal: the quest for knowledge.

The 'Op Art', or optical art, movement of the 1960s is cited as an example of artists using new knowledge of visual perception. The term *Op Art* was coined because of its focus on retinal effects that 'embraced new discoveries about how the retina processes contrast and colour'.⁹

The work of Semir Zeki, a pioneer in the field of neuroaesthetics, is also prominent in this context. This is a large subject, but I will make just one or two observations.

Zeki holds that 'the artist is in a sense a neuroscientist exploring the potentials and capacities of the brain, though with different tools', and that 'ambiguity is a distinguishing trait of great artworks which offer the viewer multiple interpretations, all of which are valid'.¹⁰

His view is reminiscent of the experience and practice of connoisseurship training in the sense that a different 'lens' is applied when examining an object in order to understand and explain it. I am thinking not only of the visual examination of the object, but of the determination of its historical context in order to interpret it.

Zeki's colleague V.S. Ramachandran, with William Hirstein, wrote the seminal paper entitled 'The Science of Art: A Neurological Theory of Aesthetic Experience' and maintains that 'all art contains a distortion along a single dimension, such as in form

(Hindu Sculptures) and colour (Impressionism),’ and that ‘the purpose of art is to enhance, transcend, or indeed to distort reality’.¹¹

Perhaps it is no surprise that these gentlemen have contributed views that are held by some as controversial. They have been criticised for confining their studies to specific eras in Western painting and, in Ramachandran and Hirstein’s case, for not including contributory factors such as emotion, intention, memory and knowledge on the part of the artist.¹² But it is important to include mention of their views in the discussion and to acknowledge that art and vision is a complex issue, one that has become the research interest of scientists and art historians alike.

The Harvard psychologist Patrick Cavanagh also subscribes to the notion of artists as neuroscientists, ‘because they understand that the visual brain uses a simpler, reduced physics to understand the world ... and incorporates these shortcuts onto the canvas through physically impossible shadows, colours, reflections, contours that typically go unnoticed by the viewer’.¹³ Margaret Livingstone, a Harvard neurobiologist, believes that the attention of our peripheral and central vision to different levels of resolution causes us to focus differently on differing parts of an image.¹⁴

So, what does this all mean? Obviously, artists are extremely talented people with whom scientists feel a great sense of kinship!

Fundamentally, however, we are talking about focus – in other words, the way the eye focuses, how it perceives and transmits information to the brain, and where it is processed. Semir Zeki, in his article ‘Art and the Brain’, argues that seeing is a passive process, while understanding is an active one. ‘Vision is an active process that depends on the operations of the brain and the external physical environment.’¹⁵

So, the question is: Are we just seeing, or are we exercising vision, and if dominantly through the use of digitally created images, what effect does this have on what we perceive?

Does the use of this technology cause us to overlook nuances that would more fully flesh out our experience of an image or object, but that our eyes and brain would need to see in person?

In terms of connoisseurship training, can digital images provide this same experience? Are we dumbing down this process to its and our detriment by relying on digital images? For example, one can ignore issues of scale by examining in close detail, via a digital image, all the elements in a way never intended by the artist. Does this approach contribute to a different analysis than that produced through an encounter with the object? Can this analysis be considered the ‘art’ of recognising works of art, as provided in *The Art Dictionary’s* definition of connoisseurship? Or are we deluding ourselves by laying this responsibility off on to technology and relying on extremely magnified details, completely out of proportion with the rest of the image, and using them as determinants in our analysis rather than merely factors?

After all, 'digital' is not real. It is a construct of a physical object, in a virtual sphere that has itself been created and is made accessible via platforms developed to facilitate this.

Digital as a created hyper-reality is capable of hyper-stimulation of the brain. We now know that using computer screens and other devices with screens (such as smartphones) has the effect of lighting up parts of the brain, thereby hyper-stimulating our awareness and engagement. What effect does this, or will this, have on our visual sensory perception now and in the future?

Will we lose the desire and ability to make first-hand visual judgments because of the convenience of digital images? Will the importance of first-hand experience of an object be reduced or eliminated? Will we acculturate ourselves to accept as real an increasingly digital world that only *looks* real, but is not 'the real thing'?

The manner in which we use this technology will affect the practice of connoisseurship in the 21st century.

I think of Tim Jenison's reaction in the film *Tim's Vermeer*, which Dr. Reiss discussed. How different, he said, after spending time with the actual painting, 'the real thing' was from any image he had seen of it. He spoke of how alive it was, how dynamic, how much MORE it was, than what he could have imagined or expected. To my knowledge, Dennison has not had formal training in connoisseurship. He started this experiment as a talented inventor, which suggests that he understood notions of space, volume, perspective and form. His experience with colour *per se* wasn't readily apparent, but I would venture that, after completing his painting, he now knows more about form, colour, space and perspective than many artists. Experience is a great teacher, and it was only a century ago that art students copied from plaster casts of great sculpture in order to learn. Dennison's experiment is perhaps not so different from this type of art education.

Everyone is 'looking' all the time, but what do they 'see'? We recognise what we see in general terms, but the practice of connoisseurship takes things further by identifying and incorporating nuances, thereby providing a specificity and interpretation that adds to the experience not only by recognising art, but by enabling a richer encounter with it.

The visual element is important to connoisseurship, but so is the tactile element – touch, which cannot be experienced through digital images. Even the notion of 'touching with one's eyes' relies on the viewer having had the physical experience for the brain to imbue it with the required sense of tactility.

This fact is pretty ironic, because we are taught as children not to touch. Sculpture, as an example, is made to be touched, but we don't do it. Milko Den Leeuw, a conservator and founder of The Hague-based Authentication in Art Congress, regards contact with the physical object as crucial. True size, context and colour depth cannot be experienced even through the best digital representations, he says. Further, one cannot become aware of an object's construction without first-hand experience of the materials. The artist works from the inside out, Den Leeuw explains, and this

intention is apparent only through one's personal experience of the surface and materials.¹⁶

Lastly, I must mention the brain's limbic system in terms of connoisseurship training. The philosopher Ronald de Sousa describes the brain as modular in regards to recording and integrating our experience of the world. Memories are being put down all the time and when the brain recognises objects or images, it activates the limbic system, causing the viewer to have an emotional response. When it comes to art, de Sousa believes these mechanisms work in the brain without our being conscious of their existence or the manner of their functioning.¹⁷ If this is the case, does it matter whether we look at 'the real thing' or a digital representation? I wonder whether each produces the same response in the viewer? I would venture that the answer is 'no', if only based on Dennison's reaction when he viewed the real Vermeer in The Royal Collection.

If we allow our judgments of artworks to be dominantly informed by two-dimensional images, can our analysis be valid?

I think we have to be very careful here not to fall into a trap. With the decline in connoisseurship training, there are fewer art historians and artists practising with these tools. What seems like a great technological advance may turn out to be anything but. We need to look at this carefully and seriously.

And finally, what about artists who have chosen deliberately to create using a digital medium such as photography? Is there a connoisseurship model for their work?

This Buddhist *mandala* entitled *Indra's Jewels* has been created by manipulating digital photographs of mid-century Las Vegas motel signs that are in the collection of the Neon Museum in Las Vegas, Nevada. The artist, James Stanford, is a long-time Zen practitioner. In following Buddhist precepts, Jim created something sacred – indeed, sacred space – by using materials to hand and manipulating digital photographs that he had taken of the signs. I am including this example because it suggests a number of interesting challenges to the traditional connoisseurship model. In examining the status of connoisseurship training today, we need to consider the use and existence of digital formats as formats for artistic expression.

As I mentioned, this work was created by manipulating digital images; however, as with a painting, the artist's hand is apparent. The image exists in space, albeit a created space, and has volume, colour and form, balance and good composition. It can exist both three-dimensionally when printed and two-dimensionally in a digital format. It has been imbued with a spiritual intention by the artist and has a transporting quality when viewed. All of these factors are common to good art, and so what is the difference, may I ask you? There are possibly many questions to consider.

The bottom line is that the world has changed, and we should thoughtfully consider the value of new technological developments alongside traditional connoisseurship methodology. We stand to lose a lot if we discard the former ways and seemingly accept new precepts without really testing them. We stand to lose even more if we don't provide connoisseurship training to artists and art historians.

I still maintain that there is nothing like ‘the real thing’; but perhaps what is termed ‘real’ should be subject to redefinition, and a modified model of connoisseurship methodology formulated and implemented – one that also addresses the new technological platforms being utilised by artists.

Thank you for your attention.

Endnotes

- ¹ <https://www.bowdoin.edu/dam/digimage/index.shtml>, accessed 1 July 2016.
- ² James H. Beck, *From Duccio to Raphael: Connoisseurship in Crisis*, Florence: European Press Academic, 2006, p. 30.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 30.
- ⁴ Anna M. Dempster, ‘What’s the Best Way to Learn about the History of Art?’, *RA Magazine*, Summer 2016.
- ⁵ David Ekserdjian and Doug Fishbone, ‘Debate: Should We Care about Attribution?’, *RA Magazine*, Spring 2016.
- ⁶ Beck, *op. cit.*, pp. 40–42.
- ⁷ Beck, *op. cit.*, p. 35.
- ⁸ Mengfei Huang, ‘The Neuroscience of Art’, *Stanford Journal of Neuroscience*, vol. II, no. 1, Fall 2009, pp. 24–26.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.
- ¹⁰ Semir Zeki, ‘Art and the Brain’, *Daedalus*, vol. 127, no. 2, Spring 1998, pp. 71–103.
- ¹¹ V.S. Ramachandran and William Hirstein, ‘The Science of Art: A Neurological Theory of Aesthetic Experience’, *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, vol. 6, no. 6–7, 1999, pp. 15–51.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 25.
- ¹³ Patrick Cavanagh, ‘The Artist as Neuroscientist’, *Nature*, vol. 434, March 2005, pp. 301–7, at p. 301.
- ¹⁴ Margaret Livingstone, *Vision and Art: The Biology of Seeing*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2002.
- ¹⁵ Zeki, *op. cit.*, p. 74.
- ¹⁶ Milko Den Leeuw, <http://authenticationinart.org>.
- ¹⁷ Ronald de Sousa, ‘Is Art an Adaptation? Prospects for an Evolutionary Perspective on Beauty’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 62, no. 2, 2004, pp. 109–18.