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HISTORIANS OF NETHERLANDISH ART REVIEWS

BOOK REVIEWS

Moving Pictures. Intra-European Trade in Images, 16th–18th Centuries (Studies in European Urban History, 1100–1800, 34)

By Neil De Marchi and Sophie Raux, eds.

Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2014. xiii, 324 pp, b&w illus. ISBN 978-2-503-54808-1

Review published November 2016

A detail of Jean-Antoine Watteau's well-known painting *Gersaint's Shopsign* (1720) figures on the cover of this volume. The painting depicts the shop of the art dealer Edme-François Gersaint as a site of noble trade – as a setting where connoisseurs are entertained. The image bore little resemblance to Gersaint's actual shop located on Paris' Pont Notre-Dame, a site that was in fact associated with cheap and bad pictures throughout the eighteenth century. Diderot for instance, vehemently criticized the Pont Notre-Dame as a place where talent was destroyed and ignorant buyers were deceived to buy bad pictures from corrupted traders. The dissonance between Diderot's judgement and Watteau's painting relates to one of the central issues in this book: the tension between beauty and profit, between artistic and economic interests.

Ever since the groundbreaking work of John Michael Montias, art historians have investigated the economic strategies employed by painters. For good reasons, then, this book opens with a discussion of the work of Montias. The joining together of artistic and economic interests is indeed at the core of the eleven essays following the Introduction by editors Neil De Marchi and Sophie Raux. The demystification of art that followed from the work of Montias and others who investigated the economic aspects of art production and art trade was a welcome change from earlier research, but, as De Marchi and Raux emphasize, art objects are quite unlike ordinary commodities in one crucial respect: “They are unique, or at least plausibly presentable as such, and it is in the interest of artists, dealers and auction houses to stress that uniqueness” (2). The authors of this volume, in one way or another, all consider the interests and expected behavior of various players on the art market.

The volume is the result of a four-year international research collaboration entitled *Art Markets in Europe 1300-1800. Emergence, Development, Networks*. In the book, the timespan is somewhat limited to the sixteenth to eighteenth century, while there is also a strong geographical focus on Europe’s major centres of art trade. The period saw a change from primary to secondary markets, a more international art market, and a much greater mobility of artists, dealers, and goods. Throughout the book, the emphasis on the Southern Netherlands is most noticeable: the region’s art production and trade with other parts of Europe (the Northern Netherlands, France, and Northern and Southern Italy) are discussed in a great number of chapters (1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 11). The rising art markets of Paris and London are discussed in detail in chapters 3, 8, 9, and 10.

In the opening chapter, Koenraad Brosens discusses the export of tapestry from Brussels over three centuries (1450-1750). Because the production of tapestry was capital intensive, the Brussels’ *tapissiers* relied on different institutions and strategies to control risks. Crucial was the foundation of the tapestry *panden* in Brussels and Antwerp, which simultaneously provided better information and

credit. Brosens draws an interesting parallel between the tapestry *panden* and the general commodity exchanges in the Low Countries, while also highlighting differences between the market for tapestry and paintings.

Throughout the seventeenth century, Antwerp artists produced a surplus in painting. Neil De Marchi, Sandra Van Ginhoven, and Hans J. Van Miegroet investigate the possible size of the painting surplus by combining evidence from a range of sources (both on the supply and demand side). This chapter not only offers methodological innovation, but also concrete numbers based upon very cautious calculations: for the period 1630-1680, painting surplus in Antwerp ranged from 1.8 to 2.5 times local demand, which comes down to around 2,522 paintings a year. Consequently, actors were looking for new markets and new strategies to export paintings all the time. A number of legal and illegal ways in which paintings were distributed outside Antwerp come up in the following chapters.

Sophie Raux discusses the variety of strategies employed by painter-dealers from Brabant to export paintings, such as fairs, auctions and lotteries, as well as the opposition from local painters who saw their production threatened by the influx from outside of town. One captivating way in which Antwerp paintings reached other parts of Europe was via lotteries. Raux provides a detailed account on how and by whom lotteries were organized in the Spanish Netherlands and North-Western France, while Mickaël Szanto suggests that through this channel, possibly thousands of Flemish paintings reached France (where, from 1606, the king sold rights for lotteries). Szanto's chapter deals mainly with the changing fate of the abovementioned Pont Notre-Dame, which appears to have been the site with the greatest concentration of pictures in eighteenth-century Europe (the Flemish dominance was long gone by then), comparable only to the position of Antwerp's *Schilderspand* in the second half of the sixteenth century. And even though the Paris bridge slowly acquired a bad reputation, the site also became a place "of a double freedom" (91): freedom of creation (from academic dictates) and freedom of judgement (from connoisseurial presumptions).

Natalia Gozzano and Isabella Ceccheni consider the flow of paintings from the Southern Netherlands to Italy – respectively to Southern Italy (Sicily in particular) and Northern Italy. The flow in this direction was far from impressive, even though trade networks and trade routes were well established, both over sea and over land (the latter was of particular importance for the trade with Northern Italy). Both authors draw a similar conclusion: there were so many Flemish immigrant artists living in Italy that there was no point in buying imported (and hence relatively more expensive) Flemish paintings. Gozzano shows in detail Flemish merchants' networks in Italian port cities. Most Flemish dealers in Italy, even those who at some point acquired the name of art dealer, were ship owners for whom the trade in paintings was but small and subordinate to the trade in other goods. Furthermore, as Cecchini argues, Italian buyers were surely interested in 'Flemish' style paintings, but they also wanted adjustments to local subjects and a local manner.

Artworks from the Southern Netherlands not only traveled to the South but also to the North. Claartje Rasterhoff and Filip Vermeulen uncovered archival material from the Zeeland Toll, through which they examine the export of art goods from Antwerp to the Dutch Republic (for the period 1628-1695). Cautious calculations render a number of around 500 paintings per year on average (although the actual number, they acknowledge, may have been even higher – around 625). Not all these paintings were for consumption in the Dutch Republic; a good number was probably on its way to destinations farther to the North or East. Interestingly, they also discuss the flow of tapestries, books, and harpsichords.

Patrick Michel, Charlotte Guichard, and Bénédicte Miyamoto discuss the rising art markets and auction houses of Paris and London in the eighteenth century. Michel discusses the flocks of English and Russian buyers in Paris and the consequential worries of French commentators about the loss of great works of art. The maturation of the Paris art market in this period was exemplified by the figure of the dealer-expert. One of them was Jean-Baptiste Lebrun, whose archives of annotated sales catalogues are investigated by Guichard. She concludes that Paris

was a dealer's market where a tight network of professionals increasingly supplanted the private bidding of *amateurs*. Whereas Paris dealers fashioned themselves as gentlemen of good taste, British auctioneers fashioned themselves as honest merchants, not necessarily claiming artistic knowledge. Miyamoto discusses this self-fashioning of dealer-auctioneers in London, who were responding to buyers' tastes more than imposing taste (again, a "freedom of taste"). Based upon Christie's archive of auction catalogues from 1767 to 1779, a detailed account of British taste comes to the fore. In the final essay Dries Lyna stresses that all European art markets shifted from primary to secondary markets in the eighteenth century, among other things as a result of changing consumer patterns. Contrary to the received view, Southern Netherlandish dealers played an active and international role as they acquired paintings at local auctions and then resold them in other European cities.

The authors of this volume are to be praised for the wide range of newly uncovered source material, which has not only yielded an array of new factual details but also new analyses of those facts. Although well chosen, the concentration on major European trade centres would have benefitted from more geographical variation. The chapters provide detailed and nuanced analyses of economic strategies used by players on the art markets, while the comparisons between the art market and other markets are thought provoking and among the highlights of the volume. Overall, issues of taste and connoisseurship are eloquently integrated with strategies of trade and profit. Despite a slight emphasis on economic interests, the book lives up to the promise made in the Introduction: artworks are like other commodities, while they are also quite unique. The authors themselves have indeed demonstrated "freedom of creation" and "freedom of taste" by integrating in a new and fresh manner different types of sources and analyses.

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