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Making Pictures Marketable': Expertise and the Georgian Art Market

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Marketing Art in the British Isles, 1700 to the Present

A Cultural History

Edited by
CHARLOTTE GOULD and SOPHIE MESPLÈDE



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Marketing Art in the British Isles, 1700 to the Present

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A Cultural History

Edited by Charlotte Gould, University Paris 3-Sorbonne Nouvelle, France, and Sophie Mesplède, University of Rennes 2, France

A cultural history of the first truly modern art market, *Marketing Art in the British Isles, 1700 to the Present* furthers the burgeoning exploration of Britain's struggle to carve a niche for itself on the international art scene. Bringing together scholars from the UK, US, Europe, and Asia, this collection sheds new light on such crucial notions as the internationalization of the art market; the emergence of an increasingly complex exhibition culture; issues of national rivalry and emulation; artists' individual and collective strategies for their own promotion and survival; the persistent anti-commercialism of an elite group of art lovers and critics and accusations of philistinism leveled at the middle classes; as well as an unquestionable native British genius at reconciling jarring discourses.

Essays explore the unresolved tension between artistic aspirations and commercial interest—a tension that has come to shape Britain's national artistic tradition—from the perspectives of artists, dealers and (super-)collectors, and the upwardly mobile middle classes whose consumerism gave rise to the British art market as it is known today. Specific case studies include Whistler, Roger Fry, Damien Hirst, and Charles Saatchi; essays consider art markets from London and Manchester to Paris and Flanders.

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Chapter 6

‘Making Pictures Marketable’: Expertise and the Georgian Art Market

Bénédicte Miyamoto

A *Painter* was of old look'd upon as a *common Good*. These *Artists* thought their *Works* too much conceal'd if they were not exhibited in *public Places*. Some of these chose rather to give their *Labour gratis* to their Country than to set any Value upon them ...¹

In 1734, the poet Hildebrand Jacob strove to elevate painting at the level of poetry in his essay *Of the Sister Arts*, and his system of correspondence compelled him to sever any ties paintings could have with trade. Continental academic ideals intimated that the value of art came from conversing with the muses, not from converting canvases into money. The new buyers that had emerged on the British market were often ridiculed both in print and on stage,² and Jean André Rouquet's *On the Present State of the Arts in England* (1755) underlined that taste was often perverted by the workings of the new market for pictures.³ Yearning for the academic structures developed on the continent, British writers on the art of painting in the first half of the eighteenth century often endorsed the flattering comparison of their age with the Roman period of Augustus, and they elaborated a distinctly liberal theory of painting in which painters were to seek

¹ Hildebrand Jacob, *Of the Sister Arts; an essay* (London, 1734), pp. 9 and 36–7.

² See for example the 1730s print of William Henry Toms, after Egbert van Heemskerck II, *A satire on Picture Auctions* (BM Sat1863), or Samuel Foote's comedy *Taste* (London, 1752).

³ '[At auction] you shall see a woman of quality grow as pale as ashes, when she finds herself in danger of losing a wretched pagod which she does not want, and which upon any other occasion she would not have purchased', in Jean André Rouquet, *On the Present State of the Arts in England* (London, 1755), p. 125.

shelter in the patronage system alone, and steer well away from market valuations.⁴ However, the relationship between a painter and his (or occasionally her) public and clients was not so disinterested, and could not viably be so.

From a Client Economy to a Market Economy – the London Art World, 1690-1760

Around the 1720s, the art world in London shifted – rather than evolved – from an artisanal trade ‘on demand’ to a market economy where the processes of valuation and exchange were further complicated by the resale of paintings that were often imported. The Painter-Stainers’ corporation was dwindling without having resolved the questions of efficient recruitment and adequate training to compete with foreign production.⁵ The guild furthermore never had, and never aimed at asserting, an oligopolistic control of the resale market for pictures, especially when those were imported or Old Masters.⁶ By 1721 Nathan Bailey's *Universal Etymological English Dictionary* already restricted the definition of ‘Painter-Stainer’ first and foremost to ‘one who Paints Coats of Arms and other Things belonging to Heraldry’ – and the guild was largely regarded as unfit to represent the academic and liberal aspirations of London portrait and landscape painters, as well as the little number vying for the grand genre of history painting. Self-proclaimed ‘academies’ and attempts at running drawing schools were numerous, but they remained small-scaled enterprises, while the growing publication of (often pirated)

⁴ See for example the prefatory texts in William Aglionby, *Choice observations upon the art of painting* (London, 1719 [1685]).

⁵ David Ormrod, ‘The Art Trade and its Urban Context: England and the Netherlands compared, 1550–1750’, in Jeremy Warren and Adriana Turpin (eds), *Auctions, Agents and Dealers: The Mechanisms of the Art Market 1660–1830* (Oxford, 2008), pp. 11–5; Richard Johns, ‘The Painter-Stainer’s Company and the “English School of Painters”’, in *Art History* 31/3 (2008): pp. 322–41.

⁶ The freemen of London were free to buy and sell without being limited to one type of merchandise or by guild restrictions, since 37 Edw. 3. c. 5.

drawing-manuals further evidenced that the lack of training was acutely felt. Traditional patrons were a ‘dying breed’⁷ in the words of Louise Lippincott, and their number had never been sufficient enough to sustain a native group of painters that could have evolved into a distinct school of art, as accomplished as the other branches of craftsmanship in the Georgian era.⁸ The Crown had long since stopped exercising much prerogative over demand or creation of art. The Church mainly saw in religious pictures a ‘badge of superstition’,⁹ and in the rare instances when churchwardens commissioned a new altarpiece for their London parishes, most were pulled down by order of the Bishop.

According to many patrons, painters as well as paintings were to be imported from abroad. Apprenticeship was often a family affair in the London *émigré* communities of Greek Street or Compton Street in Soho for example. This group of citizens seemed competent enough and in a sufficient number to keep pace with the capital’s low demand for art, thereby almost creating a monopoly situation, in which they also provided the public with import-substitution pieces.¹⁰ The community from the Low Countries produced Italianate genre scenes in the tradition of the

⁷ Louise Lippincott, *Selling Art in Georgian London: the Rise of Arthur Pond* (New Haven and London, 1983), p. 31.

⁸ A far more systematic collection of evidence is still needed so as not to underestimate patronage, according to Robert D. Hume, ‘The Economics of Culture in London, 1660–1740’, in *Huntington Library Quarterly* 69/4 (2006): pp. 487–533.

⁹ Clare Haynes, *Pictures and Popery: Art and Religion in England, 1660–1760* (Aldershot, 2006), p. 120.

¹⁰ Jan de Vries, ‘Art history’, in David Freedberg and Jan de Vries (eds), *Art in History, History in Art: Studies in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Culture* (Santa Monica, 2001); David Ormrod, ‘Cultural production and import substitution: the fine and decorative arts in London, 1660–1730’, in Patrick O’Brien, Derek Keene, Marjolein ‘t Hart and Herman van der Wee (eds), *Urban Achievements in Early Modern Europe: Golden Ages in Antwerp, Amsterdam and London* (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 210–33.

Bambocciantis, or copies of Old Masters *à la* Flemish for example, while French *Huguenots* engravers disseminated the taste for rococo.

As early as the 1680s, an unregulated secondary market for pictures had started to flourish unchecked in London, through the means of auctions. After an initial boom in 1689–1692, the number of picture auctions in London decreased. However, from 12 important picture sales from 1700 to 1705, the area from Cornhill to the West End in London witnessed a dramatic increase in picture auctions, with 42 (1705–1710), 137 (1710–1715) to 382 such sales (1715–1720), according to evidence of extant catalogues and newspaper advertisements.¹¹ By the 1720s, picture auctions had become an essential feature of the London sociable scene, catering for the British collectors *extraordinaires*, but also increasingly for the middle class amateurs.¹²

Developing on the methods of Dutch auction and sale by candle, the market had innovated a sophisticated system that became known as the English auction, and which was taken up by French dealers in Paris from the 1720s.¹³ Auctions in London quickly harmonized their organisation and all auctioneers seem to have been generally working according to the same rules by the 1720s. Commissions depended on the results of the sale and security of payments and deposits rapidly became habitual measures. A

¹¹ We have included some household sales in the count, but only when these made a pointed reference to paintings up for sale, for example putting forward ‘fine pictures by the best Masters’ or ‘a curious collection of limnings and prints’, and therefore bearing an explicit indication of numerous or exceptional pictures to be bid for. Few of the extant British catalogues we have consulted for the first half of the eighteenth century afford hammer price information.

¹² Iain Pears, *The Discovery of Painting: the Growth of Interest in the Arts in England, 1680–1768* (New Haven and London, 1988).

¹³ Neil De Marchi, ‘Auctioning Paintings in Late Seventeenth-Century London: Rules, Segmentation and Prices in an Emergent Market’ in Victor A. Ginsburgh (ed.), *Economics of Art and Culture* (Amsterdam, 2004), pp. 97–128.

proportional minimum bid was enforced, the catalogues specifying that ‘No Person (was) to advance less than 6 deniers under a Pound; above a Pound 1 s.; above five Pounds, 2 shillings 6 deniers and so on in Proportion’.¹⁴ The British public had quickly taken to such a system and most catalogues in the following decades, directed by Christopher Cock (active 1720–1749), Abraham Langford (1711–1774) or Mr. Ford (active 1741–1757) for example, laconically cited ‘conditions of sale as usual’.¹⁵ These conditions of sale placed the sellers under the 1677 Statute of Fraud¹⁶, protecting them from buyers that failed to honour their promise and pay for the lot they had bid for, while bidders could count on the catalogue’s content to be binding if not stated otherwise in the conditions of sale¹⁷. Although unlicensed until 1777, the profession of auctioneer therefore showed a high level of self-regulation.

Iain Pears’s groundbreaking study explained the growth of the London art market by the lifting of the ban on picture imports.¹⁸ But we must pay heed to the supply-based hypothesis that such an argument could imply if stretched too far. The legal system probably yielded under the pressure of demand rather than *created* a new British relationship to painting by a flooding of offers – throughout the eighteenth

¹⁴ See for example Langford, *A catalogue ... of George Holmes, Esq* (London, 1749), [ESTC: T14348]. This system is explained at large in Rouquet, *State of the Arts in England*, pp. 121–4.

¹⁵ The mention of ‘conditions of sale as usual’ referring to a proportional bidding appears as early as 1690, in *A Collection of Paintings of Several Rare Masters* (London, 1690), [ESTC: R214259].

¹⁶ In practice, Statute of Fraud was however more often used to litigate in case of secret or private sales, and cases of litigation after auctions considered the contract as having been public, and therefore as ascertained by the public..

¹⁷ “And were things are sold by auction, and in the printed conditions of sale there is a statement and warranty of the title, the things shall be deemed to be sold under such title, and the declarations of the auctioneer at the time shall not be admitted to vary or qualify it.” Section 12, *Richards v. Barton*, Espin N.P.C. 268. Later ascertained by 19 Geo. 3. c. 56. f. 11.

¹⁸ Pears, *The Discovery of Painting*, pp. 207–10.

century, the market remained a seller's market, in which goods were scarce and sellers could keep the prices high¹⁹.

A Growing Public for Pictures – the Rise of Commercial Venues for Viewing Art, 1760–1805

The auction rooms on viewing days were filled with members of the 'middling sort' much at ease with the merchant spirit who now had both money and leisure at hand.²⁰

David Solkin writes about the 'disorientating process of hybridization' British taste underwent – and this was certainly influenced by the increasing, and increasingly varied, offer of pictures on the secondary picture market in London.²¹

A new and impersonal art relationship was seeing the light, characterized by middlemen who kept up with the changes of taste and influenced them by providing a variety of modern and Old Masters paintings. The auction of British contemporary or close contemporary artists linked high art to commerce during auctions and put a public and fluctuating price tag on pictures of living artists. The foundation of a Royal Academy of Painting in 1768 did little to usher in an academic system on the continental model that would have severed any ties between the liberal artistic production and the picture market. By the end of the eighteenth century, some painters even deployed strategies in their artistic creation that showed they had internalized the

¹⁹ David Ormrod maps this debate in 'Art and its Markets', *The Economic History Review*, New Series 52/3 (1999): pp. 548–9.

²⁰ See Maxine Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 199–246; Jonathan Barry's introduction in Jonathan Barry and Christopher Brooks (eds), *The Middling Sort of People: Culture, Society and Politics, 1550–1800* (Basingstoke, 1994); Henry R. French sums up the debate on the use of the term 'middle sort' in *The Middle Sort of People in Provincial England, 1660–1750* (Oxford, 2007), pp. 1–25.

²¹ David Solkin, *Painting for Money: The Visual Arts and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven, 1993), p. 2; Lippincott, *Selling Art in Georgian London*, pp. 55–74.

mechanisms of the modern art market. According to Joseph Farington, then member of the hanging-committee of the Royal Academy, Sir Peter Francis Bourgeois confided in 1797 to Richard Cosway that ‘he did not care for commissions, he painted and sent his pictures to Auction – some sold better, some worse²² – an extraordinary attitude for someone who had been made court painter to George III.

Just as Sir Peter Francis Bourgeois did not count exclusively on royal patronage, agents and middlemen showed little hope of obtaining consequential royal custom.²³ In June 1790 the auctioneer James Christie received a letter written from France by his agent Philip Joseph Tassaert, a Flemish-born picture cleaner and dealer. Upon his inspection of the Orléans collection up for sale, Tassaert wrote:

At all events it's a hazardous undertaking ... if your complaisance should lead you to sell it in parts to a Lord Shelbourne or a Ld Asburnham or any other Lord or Duke, you'll damn your collection and be foiled in your expectation of advantage or gain. I am persuaded if you could find a place twice the size of the large exhibition room of the Royal Academy at Somerset house ... and make an exhibition at half a guinea a head they might produce 8 or 10 thousand pounds ... if its possible to make an exhibition and to open a subscription by way of a raffle or a lottery, 100 000 pounds may be made out of the collection. ... As to disposing of these pictures to the King of England you know that's out of the question, he is too niggardly to buy.²⁴

²² Joseph Farington, *The Diary of Joseph Farington*, ed. Evelyn Newby (London, 1998), entry for 7 August 1797.

²³ One must however keep in mind Holger Hoock's convincing reappraisal of the artistic patronage of George III in *The King's Artists: The Royal Academy of Arts and the Politics of British Culture, 1760–1840* (Oxford, 2003), especially p. 4 and pp. 136–80.

²⁴ I am particularly grateful for the assistance of Lynda McLeod, Librarian, Christie's Archives, London, who granted me access to James Christie's remaining personal correspondence, and to the auction catalogues with which to build a price index.

Tassaert was a painter and a reliable expert – but he was also a shrewd middleman, and had learned to recognize the profit opportunities offered by a new public for the art that was growing larger each day. As early as 1777, he had himself been so bold as to stage a ‘Great Museum, or General Exhibition of Arts and Sciences’ set to open on the same day as the annual exhibitions of the Royal Academy and of the Royal Incorporated Society of Artists.²⁵ Admittance, as for most of the other entrepreneurial month-long exhibitions that started to flourish in London in the wake of the Society of Artists’ first exhibition in 1760, was fixed at one shilling. And indeed longer-running ventures as Thomas Macklin’s Gallery of the Poets and John Boydell’s Shakespeare Gallery respectively opened in 1788 and 1789 in Pall Mall, were still successful at the time of Tassaert’s letter. Catering for a large public of leisure consumers and fuelling their growing interest in the arts went largely unchecked indeed in Georgian London. The *Académie Royale* in France jealously protected its monopoly on exhibitions – and therefore its definition of art, and the economic structure painters were supposed to live by – and that in the whole of the French Kingdom, since its authority was relayed by the provincial academies and the awarding of such titles as ‘amateur honoraire’, an amateur granted academic credentials.²⁶ In Britain on the contrary, Samuel Johnson’s introduction to the catalogue of the Royal Academy’s own exhibition in 1770 labelled the public indifferently as ‘judges or purchasers’,²⁷ and innumerable art exhibitions with a distinctly commercial goal took place. They mixed art and commerce, and blurred the boundaries between genres and activities. Selling and

²⁵ See for example *The Public Advertiser*, 21 April 1777.

²⁶ Charlotte Guichard, *Les amateurs d’art à Paris au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 2008), pp. 23–52.

²⁷ Quoted by James R. Northcote, *Memoirs of Sir Joshua Reynolds, Comprising Original Anecdotes and a Brief Analysis of his Discourse* (London, 1813), vol. 1, p. 56.

exhibiting at the same time was frequent, as for example in the case of Michael Bryan's sale by private contract of M. de Calonne, Baron Nagel, and Sir Joshua Reynolds' collections on the 27 April 1795. The catalogue warned that the 'truly superb collection being intended as well to gratify the curiosity of the amateurs of the fine arts by a temporary exhibition of them, as for the purpose of sale by private contract, the purchasers cannot have their pictures delivered till June, when the exhibition closes'.²⁸ The intertwining of art and commerce is all the more apparent if we consider that this was furthermore the exhibition of paintings that had recently been auctioned off to wide publicity. The major part of Mr de Calonne's picture collection for example had been sold by auction in Spring Gardens by Skinner and Dyke on 23 March 1795. When the unsold content of Bryan's 88 Pall Mall gallery went under Peter Coxe's hammer in 1804, the first two days of sale were held in the very rooms of the Royal Academy.²⁹ Near by, the Polygraphic Society, created by the artist Joseph Booth of Golden Square, exhibited yearly from 1784 to 1794, its 'pictures copied by a chymical and mechanical process ... exhibiting with the original from which they have been taken ... as specimens of what the Polygraphic Society engages to deliver to those who honour them with their Subscriptions'.³⁰ One such original was Philip James de Loutherbourg's *A Summer's Evening, with a View of a Public Road*, which had been exhibited at the Royal Academy annual exhibition in 1776 and which was now hung next to its

²⁸ Michael Bryan, *A Catalogue of that Superlatively Capital Assemblage of Valuable Pictures formed from the Sales of the Several Celebrated Collections of Mr de Calonne, Baron Nagel and Sir Joshua Reynolds* (London, 1795), [Lugt 5299a].

²⁹ Peter Coxe, Burrell and Foster, *Whole Valuable Content of Mr. Bryan's Celebrated Gallery of Original Pictures, of the Very First Importance [sic]* (London, 1804), [Lugt 6800].

³⁰ Joseph Booth, *A Catalogue of Pictures copied by Chymical and Mechanical Process* (London, 1787), title page.

‘specimen’ copy which was up for sale and readily available, allegedly, for *quasi*-mass production.

Such varied commercial and artistic projects effectively granted the role of ‘Patrons of Native Genius’³¹ to a larger public, identified as a body through the single act of extending money. This was not only by the act of buying a painting, or even a copy, but could be through lottery, subscription, or more modestly by the act of paying for the entrance fee and/or entrance catalogue, a stable mode of revenue since the first coffee house auctions.³² On the art market, many actors were vying for the role of arbiters of taste, which did not always best please the academicians. When Michael Bryan, a picture dealer, secured the Italian paintings of the famous Orléans collection through a moneyed consortium, the Royal Academicians battled to be granted the position of arbiters of its artistic worth, by asserting that if the exhibition was of national importance as it claimed, they should be awarded a permanent right of entry.³³ They also demanded the right to give their comments out loud at Bryan’s exhibition, in a bid to jealously safeguard aesthetic evaluation from market valuation, in keeping with Farington’s repeated defiance of picture dealers in his diary: ‘They know how to make

³¹ For example, the subscribers to Boydell’s Shakespeare Gallery 1789 book of prints received the following exhortation: ‘The encouragers of this great national undertaking will also have the satisfaction to know, that their names will be handed down to Posterity, as the Patrons of Native Genius.’ See Winifred H. Friedman, *Boydell’s Shakespeare Gallery* (New York, 1976), pp. 85–6.

³² C. Suzanne Matheson, “‘A Shilling Well Laid Out’: The Royal Academy’s Early Public’ in David Solkin (ed.), *Art on the Line: The Royal Academy Exhibitions at Somerset House, 1780–1836* (New Haven and London, 2001), pp. 39–53.

³³ Farington, *The Diary of Joseph Farington*, January 1799. In contrast to Farington’s commentary, it would be interesting to research the eighteenth-century art commentaries’ obsession with quoting the prices, which would probably show how much the workings of the art market were trusted.

pictures marketable, but that does not prove them to be good.’³⁴ By the end of the century, although commercially-minded exhibitions were rife and although picture dealers and auctioneers took part in London's genteel social life, many artists were still keen to steer clear of pricing what in academic theory was to remain priceless.

This relationship between connoisseurs – a title the above painters claimed for themselves since the foundation of the Royal Academy – and the art dealers was therefore outwardly characterized in Britain by an ‘acknowledged mutual need, but distrust’³⁵ according to studies establishing the comparatively superior connoisseurship of Parisian art dealers.

The Connoisseurship of London Auctioneers in Question – James Christie’s Picture Auctions, 1756–1789

Can we ascertain the level of expertise of British auctioneers? And if so, from which surviving documents? British auction catalogues are notoriously terse, if not laconic.³⁶ The comparison between the learned productions of the Parisian *marchand-merciers* Edme-François Gersaint, Pierre Rémy and Jean-Baptiste-Pierre Lebrun for example, and the auction catalogues produced for London auction sales in the eighteenth century has often led researchers to comment disparagingly on a knowledge gap between

³⁴ Ibid. 22 July 1796.

³⁵ Neil de Marchi and Hans J. Van Miegroet, ‘The Rise of the Dealer-Auctioneer in Paris: Information and Transparency in a Market for Netherlandish Paintings’, in Anna Tummers and Koenraad Jonckheere (eds), *Art Market and Connoisseurship: A Closer Look at Paintings by Rembrandt, Rubens and their Contemporaries*. (Amsterdam, 2008), p. 151.

³⁶ Brian Cowan, ‘Arenas of Connoisseurship: Auctioning Art in Later Stuart England’, in Michael North and David Ormrod (eds), *Art Markets in Europe, 1400–1800* (Aldershot, 1998), pp. 153–66.

connoisseurs and art dealers in Britain.³⁷ Focusing principally on the Parisian art dealers, Krzysztof Pomian has called eighteenth-century catalogues ‘a literary genre in its own right’.³⁸ These catalogues did not shy away from attributing a picture to a lesser known artist than had previously been established, hereby making a show of both the dealer’s honesty, and of his connoisseurship in more obscure names: ‘many amateurs believe this painting to be by Van Dyck: assuredly, one could judge it to be so at first glance’, Parisian art dealer Pierre Rémy explains in 1771, ‘but although it does display all the qualities of a Van Dyck, we are inclined to consider it an original by Jean Vankalcker’.³⁹ Far from relying on a dazzling faculty – the proverbial ‘coup d’oeil’ of the *virtuoso* – the auctioneers fostered trust in the buying public by furnishing ampler technical details, thus assuring participants that the foundation of their knowledge was professional, reliable, attainable for novices and transparent.⁴⁰

In contrast to the French auctioneers’ complex descriptions, a study of the entries in the auction catalogues of James Christie for sales spanning the period 1767–

³⁷ Burton B. Fredericksen, ‘Survey of the French Art Market between 1789 and 1820’ and Linda Whiteley, ‘The Language of Sale Catalogues, 1750–1820’, in Monica Preti-Hamard and Philippe Sénéchal (eds), *Collections et marché de l’art en France, 1789–1848* (Rennes, 2005), pp. 21–2 and 35–45; de Marchi and Van Miegroet, ‘The Rise of the Dealer-Auctioneer in Paris’.

³⁸ Krzysztof Pomian, *Collectors and Curiosities: Paris and Venice, 1500–1800* (Cambridge, 1990), p. 163.

³⁹ ‘Plusieurs amateurs croient que ce tableaux est de Van Dyck: il est certain qu’au premier coup d’oeil on pourrait le juger tel, mais quoi qu’il en ait pour ainsi dire tout le mérite, nous sommes portés à le croire original de Jean Vankalcker’, in Pierre Rémy, *Catalogue Raisonné des tableaux, desseins, estampes ... qui composent le cabinet de feu M. Boucher* (Paris, 1771), [Lugt 1895], p. 5, lot 11, ‘Un Bourgmestre’.

⁴⁰ On transparency, see Hans J. Van Miegroet, ‘The Market for Netherlandish Paintings in Paris, 1750–1815’, in Warren and Turpin (eds), *Auctions, Agents and Dealers*, pp. 41–51.

1789 generally yields meagre results.⁴¹ Descriptions are rare, and adjectives sparse, ranging mainly from ‘fine’ to ‘very fine,’ from ‘capital’ to ‘very capital,’ or from time to time ‘richly finished’ – and it would be tempting to underline the slant towards financial interests and motivations in the use of such vocabulary.⁴²

This should not lead us to conclude that James Christie was not himself capable of verbose descriptions, and that the British audience was immune to the charm of ekphrastic descriptions peppered with smatterings of connoisseurship. The Pall Mall auctioneer was known as the ‘King of Epithets’ in a 1782 caricature, a satirical allegory of eloquence that portrayed him at his rostrum like a jack-in-the-box. Calling on his audience for more bids, the auctioneer applies to the ‘inexhaustible Munificence of your superlatively candid Generosity’.⁴³ James Boswell records that as he ‘dined at Malone’s with General Paoli, Sir Joshua Reynolds, Mr. Byng’, a distinguished company, ‘Malone said Johnson had made an era in the English Language. Everybody wrote a higher style, even Christie’s in advertisement’.⁴⁴ The usual marked difference between the catalogue’s arid language and the auctioneer’s verbose performance was not a particularity of James Christie. London auctioneers seem to have been notorious for their silver tongue, in direct opposition to their catalogues, as explained by the aptly named Mr. Puff in Richard Sheridan's comedy *The Critic* (1781):

⁴¹ The last lots, however, which as we will see later reached the highest bids, generally had longer and more detailed entries by the 1780s.

⁴² The term ‘capital’ is used in auction catalogues as a qualitative adjective meaning ‘first-rate, standing at the head’. The more elliptical economic sense of ‘wealth in any form used to help in producing more wealth’ was in common usage at the time according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* and might have, by association, reinforced the idea that pictures were treasures, both economically and culturally.

⁴³ [British Museum: J,2.23]

⁴⁴ James Boswell, *The Applause of the Jury, 1782–1785* (London, 1960), p. 337.

The Auctioneers I say, tho' the rogues have lately got some credit for their language – not an article of the merit their's! – take them out of the pulpit, and they are as dull as catalogues. No sir; 'twas I first enriched their style. 'Twas I first taught them to crowd their advertisement with panegyric superlatives, each epithets rising above the other, like the bidders in their own auction rooms! From me they learned to inlay their phraseology with variegated chips of exotic metaphors.⁴⁵

Christened by Mr. Sneer 'the God of Traffic and Fiction',⁴⁶ Mr. Puff has not extended his talents to the dull auction catalogues – which after all in Britain were not so much a literary genre as a sales instrument with legally binding conditions to serve as preface. This commercial document could not easily come to terms with puff. French auction sales did not unfold according to the order of the *catalogue raisonnée*, but were organised as distinct events – the catalogue being an expertise tool that was not first and foremost designed for practicability during the run of the sale⁴⁷. We would therefore like to point out the pitfalls of comparing French *catalogues raisonnés* with the London auction catalogues, which would be more fairly matched with the French *feuille de vacation*⁴⁸ kept at hand during the sale. London auction catalogues were indeed devised as a guide to the sale. In the manner of the Royal Academy exhibition catalogues which took the visitor step by step by listing the wall-to-wall hanging of the pictures, the

⁴⁵ Richard B. Sheridan, *The Critic or a Tragedy rehearsed* (London, 1781), Act I, sc. 2, p. 34.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* p. 35.

⁴⁷ See for example Pierre-Jean Mariette's annotated copies of the Tallard and Julienne sale catalogues at the National Art Library's special collection, R..EE.39b and R.C.EE.40, which include a separate numbering in the margin of the sales' order. See Edouard Kopp and Jennifer Tonkovich: 'The judgment of a connoisseur: P.-J. Mariette's annotations to the 1767 Jullienne sale catalogue: Part I (paintings)', *The Burlington Magazine*, 151 (December 2009), pp. 821–24.

⁴⁸ I thank Dries Lyna for having called my attention to this aspect and discussed auction transparency. See also Patrick Michel, *Le Commerce du tableau à Paris dans la seconde moitié du XVIIIe siècle* (Lille, 2008), p. 239.

auction catalogues were bare lists running all the lots in their selling order. Generally distributed *gratis*, they were to be found in various coffeehouses for consultation, an advertising practice that had been well established since the end of the 1680s. On the title page of his picture catalogues, as early as 1737, Christopher Cock advertised that ‘any Gentlemen that want the Prices mark’d in their Catalogues, Mr. Cock has given his Servant leave to do it’.⁴⁹ By the end of the century, the trade in annotated catalogues had become international, for records of prices were deemed an invaluable information source for connoisseurs as well as dealers.⁵⁰

The title pages of catalogues in their overwhelming majority advertised collections according to the fixed ranking order of ‘Italian, French, Dutch and Flemish’ pictures, which corresponded loosely to the academic hierarchy ranking history painting above still-life or genre. The names of the most famous painters sold at the auction made it to the title page, as an added incentive to the sale, and these too were classified in the order established by the title, in columns. When present, British painters would be added in the last column.⁵¹ Inside the catalogue however, the selling lists were not classified by schools – nor by subjects. *A Descent from the Cross* by the Italian painter Perugino, for example, was sold right before a *Sea Engagement* by Joseph Wright, and a ‘capital boar hunting’ between a *Magdalen* and a *St. Sebastian*, whilst an unsigned

⁴⁹ Christopher Cock, *A catalogue of those valuable collections of the Hon. Sir Thomas Seabright, Bart. and of Thomas Slater Bacon, Esq* (London, 1737), [Lugt 473], title page.

⁵⁰ On annotated catalogues in Southern Netherlands, see Dries Lyna, ‘Tools of Innovation? Printed Auction Catalogues and the Economics of Information’, in ‘The Cultural Construction of Value: Art Auctions in Antwerp and Brussels (1700-1794)’, unpublished PhD, University of Antwerp, 2010, pp 151–91. For France, see Michel, *Le Commerce du Tableau à Paris*, pp. 239–40.

⁵¹ The layout of advertisements for picture auctions in the various London newspapers often reproduced those columns by schools.

Italian painting was sold as ‘in the style of Morrillio’.⁵² Scholarly identification such as ‘school of’ or ‘copy from’ were regularly given and seem to indicate a certain level of transparency, while from the 1780s onwards, provenance was increasingly imparted when the pictures could be tracked to previous illustrious collections. However, sales were routinely fleshed out by diverse other stocks of pictures. Most of the time the provenance or the merging of collections was neither specified in the entries nor indicated on the title page, and were at the auctioneer’s discretion.⁵³

If these English sales catalogues were not divided by any apparent historical criteria, and showed an overall lack of transparency, an economic organisation was however clearly at play in the *viva voce* presentation of the lots as well as in the ‘curatorship’ of the lists.

A copy of James Christie’s *Catalogue 1788 of a Superb and Truly Valuable Collection ... of Mr. Vandergucht* survives, in which an eighteenth-century hand has counterbalanced the brevity of the catalogue entries by apparently jotting down Christie’s performance. The catalogue entry for lot 18 on the second day of sale laconically states for example ‘TENIERS – a fine imitation of Bassan’. The annotation on the verso of the catalogue’s title page, on the other hand, reads:

It is by far the best Nudity, tho’ there is fine expression in them both, this picture is Brimfull of Character. The Stile of Bassan, the necessary and chaste correctness of Teniers and [unreadable] or Claude. A fine Picture, I have no doubt of its being one of this pleasing Master’s, all the richness and colouring of Titian. ... it is a collection of itself, there is only one thing against it that is there – hanging any other picture near it – it will so far eclipse

⁵² James Christie, *A Catalogue of a Capital Valuable Collection of Italian, French, Flemish and Dutch Pictures, the Property of a Nobleman* (London, 1780), [Lugt 3102], lots 83 to 95.

⁵³ This can be reconstructed in the master copies of Christie’s catalogue by the manuscript initials next to the typed entry lots, corresponding to the anonymous seller.

them, it dispels the Gloom of the Day ... Gentlemen I hope you will do Justice to your Judgement and taste by bidding good price for this Picture for this appears to be a Superb Virgin Picture of this great master, all the richness of velvet Bruegel.⁵⁴

Christie's not only puffed the picture, but offered the buyer to settle for a given lot as a substitute purchase for a greater name. More than connoisseurship, James Christie was here displaying commercial astuteness by making his offers correspond to the public's taste and demand. This commercial technique actually corresponds to the 're-bundling ... according to pleasure-yielding principles' identified in Parisian sales of the same period, in which Netherlandish landscapes were presented as desirable substitutes for unaffordable or unavailable pictures by Claude Lorrain, for example.⁵⁵ This technique was repeatedly used in Christie's sales, in which he underlined a specific manner that could be compared to more sought-after painters' works, with second-rate masters hoisted to the level of higher ranking artists, with descriptions such as 'equalling the best works of Guido'⁵⁶ or 'much in the style of P. Potter'.⁵⁷ In 1782, James Christie advertised some of the pictures of the patron of the arts Charles Montagu specifically as substitute purchases. *A Landscape with a Waterfall* by Ruysdael is 'for grandeur equal to the best of S. Rosa's works' and *A Large Italian Sea Port* by Johann Anton Eismann is 'painted with great spirit, and may be said to vie with the best works

⁵⁴ James Christie, *Catalogue of a Superb and Truly Valuable Collection ... of Mr. Vandergucht* (London, 1788), [Lugt 4283]. Annotated copy of the National Art Library, II.RC.DD.17. The tight-written quotation runs for a full page of similar praises.

⁵⁵ Miegroet, 'The Market for Netherlandish Paintings in Paris, 1750–1815', pp. 46–7.

⁵⁶ James Christie, *A Catalogue of the very Capital Collection ... of Gerard Vandergucht* (London, 1777), [Lugt 2656]. Second Day's Sale, lot 51, 'Charity' by Carlo Cigniani.

⁵⁷ James Christie, *A Catalogue of the capital and well-known collection ... Earl of Ferrers* (London, 1779). Second Day's Sale, Lot 96. 'Landscape' by G.

of Salvator Rosa’, while some cabinet pictures by Filippo Lauri are ‘esteemed equal to the merits of the large works of Guido or Dominichino’ and therefore advertised as value for money and mini collections of their own.⁵⁸

The sequence of lots in the catalogues also bore testimony to a certain expertise, which is why we have used the expression ‘curatorship’ to characterise the process of drawing up the lists for the sale. We have reconstructed the crescendo of prices at Christie’s picture auctions from the opening lot to the final lot from 1767 to 1789, spanning the years James Christie operated as a picture auctioneer before the disruption of the French Revolution.⁵⁹ Our choice of catalogues dismissed exceptional sales indicating a famous provenance, to prefer more average collections, typically ‘from a Man of Fashion, deceased’ or from ‘a Gentleman, going abroad’. Since we wanted to probe the level of connoisseurship of auctioneers and art dealers, the choice of an unexceptional provenance excluded sales for which the auctioneer ‘purposely forbore passing any Encomiums, and has called every Picture as he found them in the family printed Catalogue’.⁶⁰

The English auction did not only keep to an ascending pattern from bid to bid, but also from lot to lot. The prices consistently show that the sales were carefully orchestrated, and that the auctioneer’s valuation was generally confirmed by the public’s corresponding desire for the items on sale – testifying that the auctioneer had acquired a

⁵⁸ James Christie, *A Catalogue of the Truly capital and Superb Collection ... of the late Earl of Halifax [sic]* (London, 1782), [Lugt 3409]. Sale’s day 2, lots 61, 70 and 73.

⁵⁹ The index was built on one sale per year, spanning two to three days of sale, with data from the master copies of auction catalogues indicating full prices and buyers (as well as many sellers and agents) kept at Christie’s archives, King Street, London.

⁶⁰ James Christie, *A Catalogue of a Noble and Superb Collection of Pictures late the Property of the Count Schulenburg, of Zell* (London, 1775), [Lugt 2395], preface.

connoisseurship in pictures as well as a fine understanding of the British public's hybrid and changing taste.

[Insert Fig. 6.1 here – Portrait]

Fig. 6.1 An exciting performance: the upward-sloping price curve for bids reached at a 1779 picture auction [Lugt 3008]

The orchestration often verged on the manipulation, if one considers the frequent inflexion of prices before the penultimate crescendo as well as the lower finale price. Such waxing and waning often happened mid-sale before the auction of statues, bronzes, and other antiques took place as some sort of intermission. It can coherently be interpreted as the will to puff up the sales, by making more mediocre pictures benefit from the frenzy of the bids directed at the 'centrepieces'⁶¹ of the auction. The catalogues often listed those pictures of lesser qualities as 'pairs', 'dittos' or 'companions', whereas the centrepieces were often provided with more developed – if not always satisfactorily transparent entries – which could run for up to ten lines, with more precise description of the subjects, as well as more developed artistic evaluation, precise provenance, anecdotes on the artist's life and conservation information on the picture.

By heightening the expectations of the buyers, the auctioneers aimed at raising the prices and at enlivening their performance. In the auction arena, the audience as well as the auctioneer were well aware of the usual development of a sale and mastered its price pattern. First lots were struck down for meagre sums even though they bore names such as Raphael or Titian. A 1773 auction catalogue of Christie attracted prospective buyers by putting the sought-after name of Titian on its title page, in the columns dedicated to the star painters. However, the only painting by Titian for the whole three

⁶¹ Lippincott, *Selling Art in Georgian London*, p. 63.

days of sale (apart from copies after Titian) was a portrait, the second lot of the first day's sale – and the bids reached a paltry £1 5s.⁶² The attribution is therefore doubtful, but in categorizing the catalogue as lacking transparency, we would be forgetting that the London public was at ease with the auction's sale pattern. Not many in the assembly, and certainly not amongst the dealers and agents which made up most of the actual bidders, would have expected lot 2 of the first day's sale to be a prized cabinet piece.

[Insert Fig. 6.2 here – Portrait]

Fig. 6. 2 – A predictable pattern: the superimposed price trends of picture auctions, 1756-1789

The reliance on a minimal description in catalogues sprang also from the desire to use plain language, far from foppish exaggeration, which referred the British reader to concrete information. The preface to James Christie's 1796 catalogue of Benjamin Vandergucht's picture collection praised the late collector 'whose Taste and Judgement the Public has had sufficient Testimonials'⁶³ – since Benjamin Vandergucht had been a Royal Academician, the late owner of a public gallery of historical paintings and a renowned picture-restorer – thus stressing that the lots for sale were under the protection of a verified reputation and a life-long experience. It also gave the following justification for the lack of ekphrastic descriptions in the catalogue's entries: 'It is presumed that this Selection, in which are included some of the most Capital Pictures in

⁶² James Christie, *A Catalogue of a Capital Collection of Pictures of Joseph Salvador, Esq.* (London, 1773), [Lugt 2107].

⁶³ James Christie, *A Catalogue of the Genuine, Capital and Valuable Collection ... of Benjamin Van Der Gucht.* (London, 1796), title page.

their various Classes, now offered to the Public, will speak for itself without exaggerated Praise.’⁶⁴

Conclusion

The expertise the English auction displayed looked for legitimacy first and foremost in its expected bidding price, and in a commercial culture both the auctioneer and its London public shared and mastered. At the end of the century, far from adopting the disinterested stance of Hildebrand Jacobs, Joshua Reynolds – none other than the President of the Royal Academy of Painting – would admit to his assistant James Northcote that ‘a picture given by the painter as a present was seldom considered, by the person who received it, as of much value; whilst, on the contrary, those paid for are esteemed, as their values are thereby ascertained’.⁶⁵ Art and commerce in Britain, it seems, were not at such odds in practice as they were in theory.

⁶⁴ Ibid. p.1

⁶⁵ James Northcote, *Memoirs of Sir Joshua Reynolds* (London, 1813), vol. 2, p. 110.

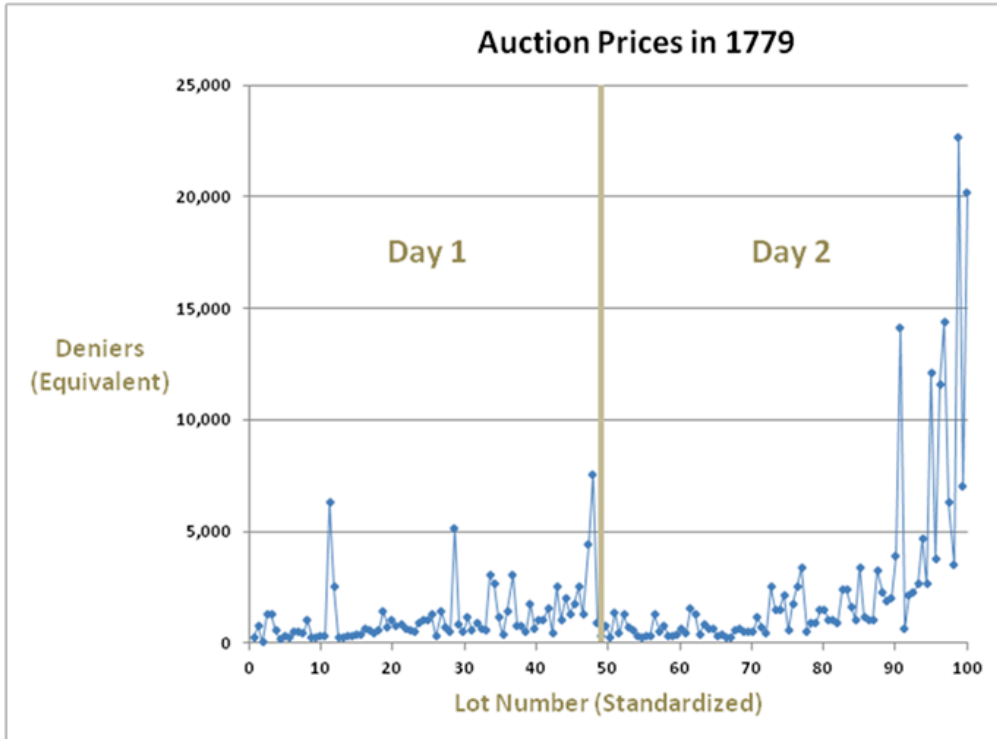


Figure 1 – An exciting performance: the upward-sloping price curve for bids reached at a 1779 picture auction [Lugt 3008]

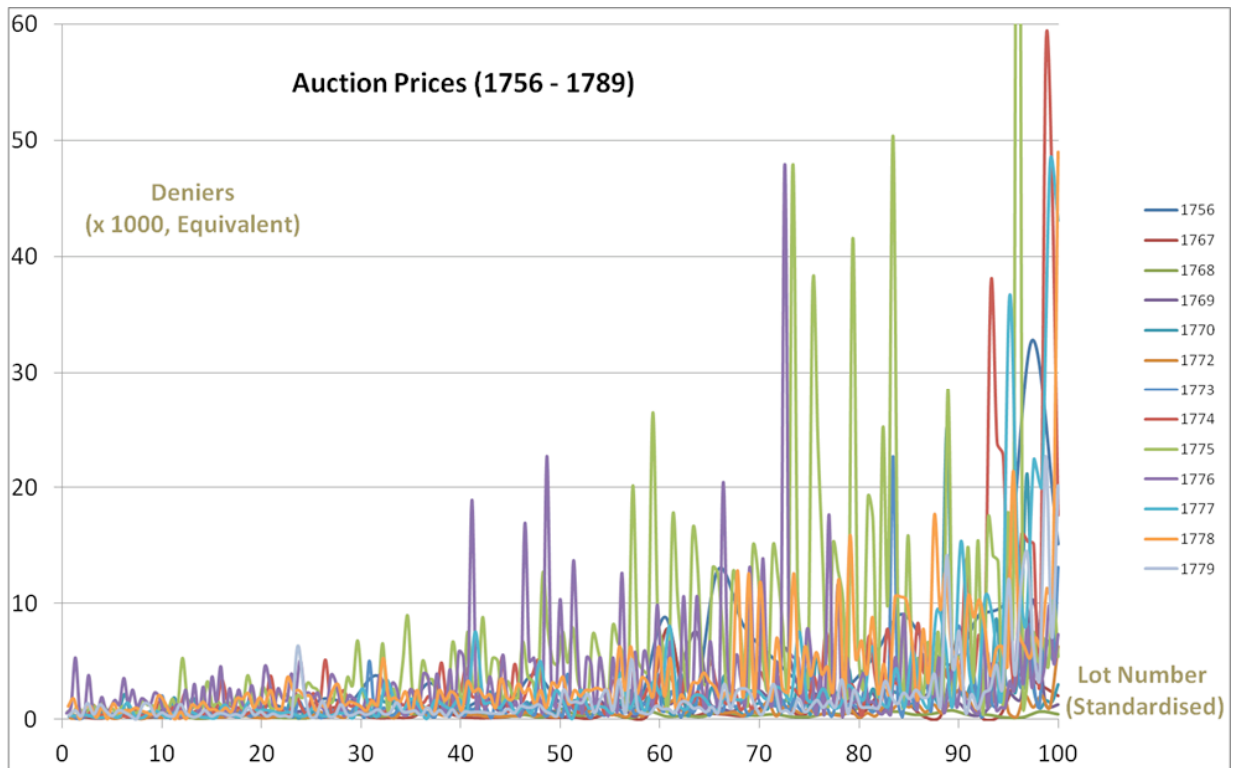


Figure 2 – A predictable pattern: the superimposed price trends of picture auctions