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# Collectors, Dealers and Artists

Paolo Coen (ed.), *The Art Market in Rome in the Eighteenth Century. A Study in the Social History of Art*, Brill

*By Marion Amblard*

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**Being the capital of the arts in western Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Rome was also an important center for art dealing. An innovative, interdisciplinary approach allows to investigate different aspects of this particular art market in the age of the Grand Tour.**

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*The Art Market in Rome in the Eighteenth Century. A Study in the Social History of Art* is not a traditional art history book that deals with the provenances and prices of the numerous works of art and objects purchased during the 18<sup>th</sup> century by Grand Tourists.<sup>1</sup> Instead, it presents the characteristics of the Roman art market and offers an innovative analysis of the evolution of the supply and demand of this market over the long 18<sup>th</sup> century, at a time when the Eternal City was still the capital of the arts in western Europe and attracted a growing number of travellers.

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<sup>1</sup> The Grand Tour was an extended journey on the European Continent which was traditionally undertaken by young male aristocrats during the 17th and the 18th centuries. This was considered as an essential part of a nobleman's education. During this Tour, they would traditionally visit Belgium, France, Switzerland, Italy, Germany and Holland. They would spend more time in Italy where, with the help of a scholarly guide, they studied the remains of classical antiquity and the masterpieces of the Italian Renaissance. Thanks to the Grand Tour, the young aristocrats deepened their knowledge in arts and their language skills in French and Italian. This also gave them the opportunity to polish their social skills by frequenting the polite society of the European continent.

Since the end of the 1980s, many books have been published on the Grand Tour.<sup>2</sup> Though much has been written on 18<sup>th</sup>-century Rome, the Roman art market has been a topic which, comparatively, has received little attention from scholars. *The Art Market in Rome in the Eighteenth Century. A Study in the Social History of Art* is in fact the first book published in English which uses a variety of approaches to investigate different aspects of this particular art market in the age of the Grand Tour.

## **An interdisciplinary approach to the 18<sup>th</sup>-century art market in Rome**

The book contains eleven chapters organised in chronological order. The first two contributions, by Paolo Coen and Peter Burke, form an introduction to the volume. Coen offers an overview of the Roman art market in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, he stresses its vitality and presents the different players who were then involved in the art business. During the period under investigation, the supply and demand for works of art was great and several professional dealers were able to amass a fortune, as it was the case of Thomas Jenkins, who quickly abandoned his artistic career to turn to the much more lucrative business of art dealing.

Peter Burke's chapter does not deal with any aspect of the Roman art market in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but provides the reader with an analysis of the evolution of the social history of art. He argues that, since the 1970s, the social history of art has been developing rapidly and he distinguishes no fewer than ten different approaches concerned with the reception of the works of art, the history of collecting, with gender, economics and the anthropology of the arts, to name but a few. The development of these various approaches, which are in most cases closely intertwined, has contributed to the revitalisation and diversification of art history, which no longer focuses on individual artists but instead investigates the relation between works of art and their environment. For instance, with the economic approach to art, the economist turned art historian Michael Montias has been able to explain the increasing specialisation of Dutch artists in what was considered as minor pictorial genres (seascapes and still-lives) as a strategy of product differentiation at a time of increasing competition. Thus Burke's contribution enables us to understand the reasons why the editor has opted for an

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<sup>2</sup> *The Grand Tour* by Christopher Hibbert (1987), *The British Abroad. The Grand Tour in the Eighteenth Century* by Jeremy Black (1992), *Grand Tour: The Lure of Italy in the Eighteenth Century*, and more recently, in 2012, Rosemary Sweet's *Cities and the Grand Tour: the British in Italy, c. 1690-1820*, are some of the reference books on the Grand Tour published in English and all of them stress the importance of Rome as the most popular destination with 18<sup>th</sup>-century Grand Tourists. Numerous publications have also been devoted to arts in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Rome, such as *Art in Rome in the Eighteenth Century* by Edgar Peters Bowron (2000) and Carolina Brook and Valter Curzi's *Rome and Antiquity. Reality and Vision in the Eighteenth Century* (2010), not to mention the various monographs on individual artists who lived and worked in the Eternal City.

interdisciplinary approach which gives us a fuller picture of the Roman art market in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, revealing its artistic and economic conditions as well as its main characteristics.

## **{{{The art market in Rome from historical and economic perspectives}}}**

The contributions by Renata Ago and Patrizia Cavazzini focus on financial aspects of the art market in 17<sup>th</sup>-century Rome and highlight its vitality and evolution over the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. In her study, Ago reveals that collectors had several possibilities to enhance the financial value of their collection. For instance, they could use the different forms of advertising available at the time such as catalogues, prints, drawings and etchings to make their collections known to a greater number of people. A description in a guidebook was another efficient way of promoting the reputation and prestige of a collection. The way in which the works of art were on display was also a means of conferring value to the collection as is shown by Ago who takes the example of three minor collectors. However, the author clearly demonstrates that there was sometimes a wide discrepancy between the fancied value that the collector attached to his collection and the real market value.

In the fourth chapter, Cavazzini investigates the key-role of art dealers in the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Roman art market and their influence on both supply and demand. If in the 18<sup>th</sup> century dealing artworks was a full-time occupation, it was not the case in the previous century as it was still a side-activity of barbers, tailors, shopkeepers, innkeepers and painting-gilders who usually displayed the works for sale in their shop. With the growing number of painters settling in Rome from the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the competition between contemporary artists increased and many of them had to rely on dealers to sell their works, even renowned painters such as Nicolas Poussin had to sell their paintings through intermediaries. Dealers contributed to establish the reputation of artists they dealt with by word of mouth and played a significant role in shaping the tastes of minor collectors. Cavazzini noted a correspondence between what dealers had sold and what could be found in the house of minor collectors. The presence of still-life and landscape paintings in middle-class houses was indeed largely due to the influence of art dealers. Other chapters in the volume show that, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, dealers continued to play a major role on the art market, influencing both supply and demand.

Another efficient way of influencing the art market was to publish a promotional book as Jan Meyssens did with his portfolio entitled *{Image de divers hommes d'esprit sublime}*. First published in Antwerp in 1649, this volume included engraved portraits of living or recently deceased painters and engravers well-known in Europe accompanied by a biography including information about the artists' reputation, specialities and the name of their most famous patrons. Several editions were published in Flanders and in England, where the book was

particularly successful and influenced several generations of collectors and art dealers. As Rafaella Morselli explains, the intended purpose of Meyssens's portfolio of artists was very original, being conceived as a promotional tool to advertise the artists whose works were on sale on the art market at the time. This form of advertising was first popular in Flanders and in Britain but, from the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it became more common in the art market in Rome mainly through the influence of four British art dealers, Thomas Jenkins, James Byres, Colin Morison and Gavin Hamilton. Indeed Hamilton's *{Schola Italica Picturae}*, published in the 1770s, can be considered as an adaptation of Meyssens's album to the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Roman art market.

## **{{{The art market in Rome in the 18<sup>th</sup> century: collectors, dealers and artists}}}**

The general belief that neoclassicism began to develop from the 1760s under the influence of the French is a misconception that Valter Curzi aims to dispel by showing that the origins of this artistic movement dated back to the early decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and that this was a British phenomenon. Indeed, at the time, the cultural and political context stimulated a vivid interest in the classical civilisations among the British aristocracy. From the first decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a growing number of British Grand Tourists went to Italy and took advantage of their visit to Rome to purchase important collections of classical art drawings and commissioned paintings on subjects of Roman history. Thomas Coke, first of Earl of Leicester, who was in Rome between 1714 and 1717, was one of the first patrons who commissioned a series of paintings inspired by classical subjects and representing actions of courage and virtue or *{exempla virtutis}*. Many other British Grand Tourists followed Coke's example and thus stimulated the demand for this type of paintings which became extremely popular in western Europe during the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Yet the market was not just influenced by patrons, as artists and art dealers sometimes worked together to meet, stimulate and shape the demand as is shown by Coen who takes the example of the 'Mosman drawings'. The 277 drawings, now at the British Museum, were produced by Nicolas Mosman at the request of the English art dealer Thomas Jenkins for his client, Brownlow Cecil, ninth Earl of Exeter. Brownlow Cecil took advantage of his two visits in Italy during the 1760s to update the family collection. The drawings the Lorrain-born painter Mosman made for Brownlow Cecil satisfied several needs: they were souvenirs of the patron's Grand Tour and fulfilled a documentary function by recording some of the most famous artworks to be found in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Italy. These drawings were also used by Jenkins

as advertising tools as they were produced to inform Brownlow Cecil of the artworks available on the market and to stimulate his will to buy some of them for his collection.

The works of art purchased by British Grand Tourists, such as Brownlow Cecil, were sometimes sent overland to Britain but in most cases they were conveyed by sea. The voyage was hazardous even more so when Britain was at war, as reveals Brian Allen's chapter. Indeed the ships carrying the purchases of Grand Tourists could be confiscated as it was the case of the British merchant ship, the *Westmorland* which was captured by the French in 1779. Recent studies carried out by the author with a team of Spanish scholars have brought to light the nature of the goods confiscated by the French onboard the *Westmorland* and have revealed that, contrary to popular belief, in the 1770s, British art collectors purchased very few original works by celebrated masters, which were difficult to find on the Roman art market, and instead contented themselves with copies. Among the confiscated goods there was also a large number of ancient marbles – genuine sculptures or antique works restored by contemporary artists – as they were highly sought after by collectors in Britain. As the demand increased, the prices of ancient marbles rose drastically in the late 18th-century Roman art market. With the opening of the Pio Clementino Museum in 1771, a great number of the most elaborate and best-preserved ancient sculptures were bought on the official market on behalf of the Pope. There was also an important demand for ancient marbles from foreign collectors who, on average, paid a higher price than the Pope to buy sculptures of a much lower quality. According to Daniela Gallo, foreign collectors were so eager to own antique sculptures, which were symbols of social distinction across Europe, that they were sometimes willing to pay prices which were four times higher than the starting value.

## **}}{Concluding remarks}}{**

*{The Art in Rome in the Eighteenth Century. A Study in the Social History of Art}* offers fascinating insights into the world of the art market of Rome to all those with an interest in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Rome and the Grand Tour. Very few books have been devoted to the subject so far and all them focus on one type of artefacts. Indeed, Ilaria Bignamini and Clare Hornsby have published two volumes entitled *{Digging and Dealing in Eighteenth-Century Rome}* (2010) in which they have studied in detail the excavations led by British excavators and art dealers and the trade of antique works. The evolution of the supply and demand for paintings in the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Roman art market has been the subject of Paolo Coen's *{Il Mercato dei Quadri a Roma nel Diciottesimo Secolo}* (2010). Composed of two volumes, this groundbreaking study has yet to be translated into English.

Thus *{The Art Market in Rome in the Eighteenth Century. A Study in the Social History of Art}*, which gathers contributions by international specialists, is essential reading for students and researchers of artistic, cultural, intellectual and social history. This lavishly illustrated

book will surely lead to further investigation as many aspects of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Roman art market still need to be explored.

Paolo Coen (ed.), *The Art Market in Rome in the Eighteenth Century. A Study in the Social History of Art*, Leiden & Boston, Brill, 2018, 234 pages.

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