



EXPOSING THE TASTE MAKERS

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Although different kinds of players in the art world including artists, professional intermediaries and even amateur collectors are agents of change, constantly transforming and challenging new proposals, there has always been the concept of *taste*, understood as an aesthetic standard of reference, that separates inclusion from exclusion. The notion of taste might sound as archaic as the strategies used by the jury of French Salons, but the fact is that there is still a selected group of “experts” that holds considerable influence both within the public and private sectors. By performing the role of authorities, “*taste makers*” shape the viewer’s stance towards art. The role may interfere with the recognition of value and result in the discrediting of honest and technically proficient artworks. It is then essential to ask: Who are these actors? How do they develop their “taste”? Which factors legitimize their authority? And finally, which are the ethical implications and the real influence of these taste-makers in the market industry?

Since the inception of Art History as a discipline, its contributors have come from diverse fields of study and different origins. There is the art collector that becomes a taste-maker. Such is the case of Niccolò Niccoli, the “wealthy Renaissance Humanist of Florence, whose collections of ancient art objects and library of manuscripts of classical works helped to shape a taste for the antique in 15th-century Italy.”¹ Such is also the case of Paul Durand-Ruel, who recognized the artistic and fashionable potential of Impressionism as early as 1870, through the purchase of artworks from Monet, Manet and Pissarro.

There is also the art dealer turned taste-maker. Regarded as the most influential dealer of the twentieth century, Josephn Duveen established himself by selling European masterpieces of Titian, Botticelli, Giotto, and Vermeer to newly wealthy American businessmen. He was the driving factor behind the collection of the National Gallery of Art in Washington.²



Josephn Duveen.

On the other hand, curators and intellectuals have also become taste-makers. Alfred Barr, from the Museum of Modern Art of New York, was indispensable to post-war and abstract artists like Rothko and Newman, whose artworks are sought after today in the auction houses. Great men of letters and professors have certainly been of high importance to the coetaneous collector. For example, Filippo Baldinucci began as bookkeeper for Cardinal Leopoldo de' Medici, brother of Ferdinando II de' Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany, and evolved into the curator of the Grand Ducal collections.³ Specifically, Baldinucci advised

¹ "Niccolò Niccoli." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Web. 29 July 2015. <http://global.britannica.com/biography/Niccolo-Niccoli>

² See: Secrest, Meryle. *Duveen: "A Life in Art"* Chicago: U of Chicago, 2004. Intro.

³ See Delbeke, Maarten, Evonne Levy, and Steven F. Ostrow. "Introduction." *The Life of Bernini*. State College: Pennsylvania State UP, 2006. Sourced in: <http://www.psupress.org/books/samplechapters/978-0-271-73076-9sc.html>

on the acquisition of the great collection of drawings now in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence and assured Bernini a lasting presence in the consciousness of art history.⁴

Finally, gallerists too, have held substantial influence in the taste of an era. For instance, anyone who has admired Picasso, Braque, Juan Gris and Léger owes much of his or her perspective to the gallerist Deniel-Henry Kahweiler, who represented and supported the art-breaking movement of cubism. “Kahnweiler was a great champion of the artists’ revolutionary experiment with Cubism and also wrote an important book, *The Rise of Cubism*, in 1920, which offered a theoretical framework for the movement.”⁵



Gertrude Stein by Picasso.

We have seen that taste-makers come from different backgrounds, but how do they become such important figures in the art industry? The famous expatriate Gertrude Stein, who was among the first Americans to respond enthusiastically to European avant-garde art, held weekly receptions in her Paris apartment, which were populated by European and American artists and writers. The gatherings at Stein’s home “brought together confluences of talent and thinking that would help define modernism in literature and art”.⁶ Stein served as both hostess and inspiration to such American expatriates as Sherwood Anderson, Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald. For (now) famous artists like Gauguin, Cezanne and Renoir, Stein’s early patronage and friendship were critical to their success.⁷

A license or certification is not required to be a taste-maker. Any frustrated artist or unknown gallerist could call himself such with just the legitimization of his assembled contacts and a minor public relations effort. However, a true taste-maker should have a trained eye. He or she must acquire a wide visual culture that enables the subject to discriminate between “good” and “bad” art. The desire of continuous learning then develops into authority and trust. Perhaps knowledge and sensibility are the main foundations in order to become a taste-maker. Ingenuity and eloquence are useful in submitting judgments of value and hierarchies that compromise the art market. And, certainly, proving right one’s assertions in time also helps.

Recently, new international groups such as the “Association of Art Critics”, have emerged in order to afford some formal regulation to the certification of taste-makers.⁸ Gaining an official title through an organized institution may be a plus, but will not suffice however given that there are, in addition to those factors already mentioned, considerable ethical implications in being a taste-maker.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ W. Chapman, Gilbert. “The Essential Guide: Pablo Picasso Spanish.” *Art Institute Chicago*. Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), 2013. Web. 29 July 2015.
<http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/111060>

⁶ “Gertrude Stein.” *Bio*. A&E Television Networks, 2015. Web. 29 July 2015. Sourced in:
<http://www.biography.com/people/gertrude-stein-9493261>

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ See: Lumbreras, Javier. “Cómo Coleccionar Arte Y Llegar a Ser Un Connoisseur.” *El Arte De Coleccionar Arte*. Fomento Cultural Banamex, 2011. 125-127.



Savoring the fame and recognition that lead to intellectual and economic power, some self-called taste-makers impose their personal taste (and/or interests), compromising the truthfulness of their opinions.

The schemes used by taste-makers are as varied as the individuals themselves and may be biased at many different levels, all the way up to legally punishable conflicts of interest. On some occasions, it is almost impossible to decipher the quasi-enigmatic manipulation inscribed in the work of some professionals. However, harmony is not precisely a term that best describes the art system. No formula or method can guarantee the taste-making process. As everybody wants a piece of the economic cake that is the art market, the truth is that financial interests always have the risk of compromising an honest opinion.

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