

The Art of Trading Art (WEHC Stellenbosch, 9–13 Jul 12)

Stellenbosch, South Africa (WEHC, The XVIth World Economic History Congress), Jul 9–13, 2012

Deadline: Mar 1, 2012

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Session:

The Art of Trading Art. Negotiating the Economic Value of European Art in Asia and the Americas, 1600-1900

What is value in the art world, are there any formal criteria and who defines the concept? Questions like these are not only relevant for our contemporary society, as our current perception of value in the arts is the unwitting result of a century-long process of consideration, deliberation and canonization. Research on the European art market of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries is increasingly adopting a distinct postmodern approach to the value of paintings, tapestries and other works of art, as the neoclassical framework that governed earlier literature on price formation in the historical art markets sometimes proved too rigid. More and more economic and art historians are analyzing value within specific historical settings, and increasingly demystify the market value of art as a complex social, cultural and material construction.

Although this recent research strand brought forward crucial adaptations to the neoclassical framework of art market research, it essentially struggles with the fundamental legitimacy of its own claims. To what extent is this deconstruction of economic value nothing more than a mere Western perspective on an essentially global historical issue? Research into non-European repertoires of art evaluation in the early modern world is urgently needed to overcome this postmodern circular reasoning. In the wake of early globalisation the Western concept of value of art was not simply exported overseas from the seventeenth century onwards: in their effort to market European art, foreign agents had to be sensible to specific demand patterns of local buyers and their repertoires of evaluation. The economic value of European art objects was hardly a given in (early) modern Asia and the Americas, but had to be constantly (re)negotiated and (re)defined in the social and cultural contexts.

Building on the growing literature on economic and artistic interaction between East and West, this session seeks to further explore the trade of European art in Asia and the Americas from the early seventeenth to the late nineteenth centuries. The organizers welcome papers that address the concept of 'value' in the context of the art trade in Asia and the Americas, that preferably - but not exclusively - focus on one of these clusters:

- The geography of the art trade, both the physical (location of sale) and mental (discourse on art trade): how did various cultural variables influence the perceived value of European art in an Asian and/or American setting? Selling the same European painting in a specific salesroom, an outdoor public sale or in the privacy of the buyer's house would likely yield different prices, quite similar to how cross-cultural discourse - developed by players both in- and outside the art trade - could impact the economic value Western art in a non-European context.
- The agents of the art trade, both from a European and an Asian/American perspective: how did the players involved in the art trade influence the value-formation of objects? Trading European art was quite different for diplomats than for dealers, and Asian or American dignitaries had different sensitivities than third-generation Western emigrants. Identifying the main protagonists in the cross-cultural art trade, as well as the social structure of the distribution networks bridging different continents will allow us to elaborate on this crucial question.
- The objects of the art trade: how did the different materiality of the European artwork influence the value-setting mechanism in the Asias and the Americas? Different commercial strategies were necessary to negotiate the value of a European painting, a sculpture, a drawing or a print. In addition, were these works of art integrated in existing repertoires of evaluation and systematically compared with local produce, or rather conceptualised and labelled as foreign?

Paper proposals should be sent to dries.lyna@ua.ac.be before March 1, 2012. All proposals should include a title, abstract of approximately 250 words and contact information. Applicants will be notified within two weeks after the deadline.

Session organisers:

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