

Art and Commerce in Great Britain (Rennes, 23-24 Apr 09)

H-Net

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"Art and Commerce in Great Britain, XVIIIth-XXIst centuries."

Key speaker : Julian Stallabrass, Courtauld Institute, London.

Presentation

For now more than three centuries, the art and the commercial activities of the British Isles have been more or less harmoniously bound together. Indeed, it was precisely at a time when, just after the Glorious Revolution, a large middle-class audience suddenly became consumers of culture, that an actual vernacular artistic and visual tradition was born in Great Britain. The growing individualization of British art was made possible during the XVIIIth century thanks to a prosperous economy which was largely due to the country's intense commercial activity, clearly setting the practices of the English and Scottish apart from that of their European counterparts.

The very beginning of the XVIIIth century saw the rise of an organized trading system for British art with the use of go-betweens, or even of merchants, while before that, it had been against the law to import foreign paintings and transactions had been scant, with buyers and artists usually dealing directly together.

The period saw figures like Andrew Hay and Samuel Paris emerge, along with the development of a bidding system and of a network of auction houses. While a royal academy of painting and sculpture was long in the making and only opened in 1768, and in the absence of aristocratic patronage to match that of their French and Italian neighbours, British artists had to deal with a bourgeois clientele whose attitude to money was still fraught with age-old anxieties.

As David Solkin has shown in his book *Painting for Money*, it is the very nature of this new market which gave rise to new genres, among them

Conversation Pieces, ambiguously positioned between genre painting and group portraits. For all the theoretical support of the Academy, history painting carried on being dismissed by buyers thirsty for sensationalist gothic pictures and pre-raphaelite genre scenes.

The new ways in which artworks were commercialised progressively came to have an influence on the way they were produced, reproduction and photoengraving having been developed in order to circulate some of the works and to provide the artists with an income (which in the case of William Hogarth proved to be quite comfortable.) This allowed the artists themselves to join the ranks of the middle-class and to become respected professionals with structured careers. Eventually, the finish and technical niceties of many 18th century paintings were influenced by the anticipation of these modes of dissemination.

Victorian genre painting largely owed its popularity to the tastes and buying power of a new class of avid collectors which came to prominence at the turn of the century. These merchants and entrepreneurs, newly-enriched by the Industrial Revolution, untrained in classical art history and too busy to take the Grand Tour started investing their assets in art collections. While doing so, they shunned old Masters, put off by the risk of gambling their money on one of the many fakes forged at the time, in favour of living artists painting accessible everyday subjects. The tastes of this new moneyed class, anxious for respectability and imbued with family values and a protestant work ethic encouraged story-telling in religious and domestic subjects, attention to detail and the small-scale format of canvases intended to improve the minds of viewers in the comfort of their own homes. The accusation of philistinism levelled by Roger Fry in the early XXth century at a British audience incapable of appreciating French post-impressionism was inherited precisely from the commercial preoccupations of the British art world. This stigma held fast until the end of the XXth century, only to be compounded by a marked condescension for the parochialism of a national art overshadowed by its American counterpart.

Today's context is one in which the internationalisation of the contemporary art world can be seen as both a by-product of and a mirror held to today's globalized commodity culture. In 2007, Damien Hirst therefore decided to capitalize on this duality of today's art, both for himself and for the sake of the British scene. His diamond-encrusted skull, *For the Love of God* was sold to an investment group for £50 million, thus becoming the most expensive contemporary art work in the world and making British art a force to be reckoned with.

Abstracts should be sent along with a short biographical note both to Sophie Mesplede sophie.mesplede@uhb.fr and to Charlotte Gould

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