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### Art market features

#### ART MARKET FEATURES

# Museums and the art trade: dangerous liaisons?

The relationship between public institutions and private dealers has historically taken many forms, and is anything but simple

by **BEN LUKE** | 1 April 2016



The dealer Charles Knoedler, philanthropist Andrew W. Mellon and Henry Clay Frick take a ride in 1898.  
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The foggy world of art dealers' historical relationships with museums is coming into sharper relief. When the National Gallery in London acquired the archive of the dealers Thomas Agnew and Sons in 2014, it marked a growing interest in exploring this history, following the Los Angeles-based Getty Research Institute's acquisition of the Knoedler Gallery's archive in 2012 and the Colnaghi archive's installation at Waddesdon Manor.

The National Gallery's conference on 1 and 2 April, *Negotiating Art: Dealers and Museums 1855-2015*, will explore this relationship through the latest research, taking a broad historical sweep, from mid-19th-century London to fin-de-siècle Paris and 1930s Detroit. It is an opportunity, says Alan Crookham, Research Centre manager at the National Gallery, to look at a complicated relationship. "How does it manifest itself in the exchange of expertise, or helping develop collections... And are people reluctant to talk about that because of the public nature of museums?"

Michael Tollemache, a London dealer who will speak at the event, says he aims to show "the reality that primary research is not the exclusive preserve of curators and academics—art market practitioners do it too". Among the figures he uses to illustrate his point is Thomas Blayds, the scholarly Victorian art dealer: of the 2,000 lots sold from Blayds's collection at auction in London in 1849, around "125 objects are recognised as having come from his collection in the British Museum alone", he says.

His argument is that "the symbiotic relationship" between museums and dealers "is pro bono publico and not to the disadvantage of the public good". But the papers given at the conference, some of which are previewed by the speakers here, shows how complex liaisons between the trade and museums have been.

### **Gentlemen versus players: The National Gallery**

Debate raged about the National Gallery's engagement in the art market in the 19th century. John Ruskin warned against the gallery spending its funds "like pebbles in London auction-rooms". The relationship between the National Gallery and art dealers in that period was inconsistent, says Barbara Pezzini, who is researching the Agnews archive for the National Gallery and University of Manchester. "There was a huge mistrust, but at the same time the first keeper of the National Gallery, William Segar, was a dealer, so there is a kind of fusion as well."

The 19th century saw a range of people dealing in pictures, from auctioneers to "agents" (freelance dealers, often with other jobs) to gentlemen who "didn't want it to be known that they were dealers", Pezzini says. A famous dealer in the 1850s and 1860s, Chrétien Jean Nieuwenhuys, "would present himself as a gentleman. He would go to the houses of gallery directors and present things on a personal level, never as a business." The Agnews were the first to present dealers "as an honourable profession, saying straight and clear that they were dealing, and making their margins known", Pezzini says.

National Gallery directors responded differently to the situation. Charles Eastlake was a "networker", Pezzini says, who in an unregulated market had a host of agents in Italy. William Boxall, who followed him, was risk-averse and bought works expensively through Nieuwenhuys when they had sold at auction for very little two years previously.



Bellini's Agony in the Garden (around 1465). © The National Gallery

“Dealers are so important in shaping museum collections, but they’re so difficult to pin down in museum records,” Pezzini says. The UK Treasury instructed the National Gallery not to buy from London dealers, so the gallery would obscure any dealer connection in the documentation. “If something is bought at Christie’s, it’s rarely spelt out in all the documents I’ve seen,” Pezzini says. “In only three works that were bought at Christie’s is the name Christie’s mentioned. Normally, the collection where they come from is emphasised—say, from the Davenport-Bromley collection [among them Bellini’s Agony in the Garden]—because you want to emphasise that this work has a good pedigree.”

### Leaning on the academics: The Frick After Frick

When he died in 1919, Henry Clay Frick “left a very open and open-minded bequest”, says Inge Reist, the director of the Center for the History of Collecting at the Frick Collection. There was an endowment, although it was not strictly for acquisitions, but crucially, neither was there a director or curator until 1931. “For 11 years, the trustees were essentially making these decisions themselves and rather heavily under the influence of Frick’s daughter Helen,” Reist explains.

It took them more than four years to buy something, and when they did, they responded more directly to “the art market and what was out there”, Reist says. Frick had established “a fairly narrow range of taste” she says; in the main it was “famous men, beautiful women, gentle landscapes and the odd genre piece”, with a few “tougher pictures” like Goya’s *The Forge* (1815-20). But, among much else, the trustees bought Italian primitives, “the gold-ground pictures that are now so famous in the Frick Collection” and Ingres’s *Comtesse d’Haussonville* (1845). These purchases, Reist argues, “broaden what you would now call Frick taste”.

Frick’s principal dealer was his close friend Roland Knoedler, though “in dollar amounts, [Joseph] Duveen either surpasses Knoedler or is a close second”. Through analysing the archives, Reist has found that the trustees’ approach to acquisitions was in stark contrast, working with different dealers but also seeking wide scholarly validation. “Whereas Frick trusted his dealers and his own eye, the trustees, maybe in part because they felt the weight of responsibility of stewardship, but also because Helen was the way she was, would look for advice.”



Duccio's Temptation of Christ on the Mountain (1308-11)

Helen showed this more academic approach to collecting before buying Duccio’s *Temptation of Christ on the Mountain* (1308-11) from Duveen, seeking the views of the scholar and dealer Frederick Mason Perkins and her close friend the connoisseur Robert Wit, “just to be sure that she was on safe ground”, Reist explains. But the Fricks still leaned on old relationships. “In 1927, Mrs Frick, the widow—but I am sure at the urging of her daughter—tells Duveen that she is seriously counting on preferential treatment on the Duccio panel,” Reist says.

### Smuggled to safety: the Detroit Institute of Arts

Ferdinand Möller was one of the few dealers authorised by the Nazi propaganda ministry to sell so-called degenerate art confiscated from German museums. Before the Nazi period, he had been crucial in bringing German Modernism into the US market. Working with Möller, says Megan Reddicks, a doctoral student at Tyler School of Art, Temple University, the German director of the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA), Wilhelm Valentiner, had built a collection of German Expressionist art as early as the 1920s. “They had some sort of good rapport, I hesitate to go

as far as to say that it was a close friendship,” she says. But they collaborated frequently, including on a 1923 exhibition of German contemporary art in New York.

The entry in the DIA’s collection of Wassily Kandinsky’s *Study for Painting with White Form* (1913), a painting once owned by Möller, was far from simple, however. In 1938, Möller offered Valentiner a loan of 18 paintings by artists including Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, Otto Dix and Kandinsky. “Despite Möller having this free pass by the Nazis to deal in German Expressionist art, it didn’t matter any more; the Nazis were destroying degenerate art,” Reddicks says. The works were from Möller’s own collection. “He didn’t want them destroyed, so he essentially smuggled them out of Germany to the US to be exhibited by his friend, who was running the Detroit museum.”

Valentiner moved on from Detroit in 1945 but when Möller attempted to get his paintings back, Reddicks says, the US government refused to allow their export to an enemy foreign national.

Möller died in 1955, but his wife Maria took over the dispute, eventually getting the works back in 1957. “I’ll note that she bought them back even though they were technically her own property,” Reddicks says. But the Kandinsky was one of two paintings that remained in the US “as a thank-you to Wilhelm Valentiner and to Detroit for holding these paintings in safekeeping since 1938”.

### **America Calls: the Tate Gallery**

From today’s perspective, the Tate took an unorthodox approach to building its collection of American art. In the 1950s and the 1960s, under the directors John Rothenstein and Norman Reid, “a lot of those early acquisitions reflect a very Paris-centric view of the international art world”, according to Alex Taylor, a research fellow in American art at the Tate. The artists acquired, such as Sam Francis, had built their reputations in Paris rather than New York, and were represented in London galleries.

Among the other early American works bought by the Tate is one by Hassel Smith, a West Coast artist—it was his first major museum acquisition anywhere—and a work by Ben Shahn, bought in 1959 from London’s Leicester Galleries. “Even in the shadow of Abstract Expressionism and its undeniable importance, someone like Shahn [is seen by the Tate] as a major, important figure in American Modern art,” Taylor says, which represents a “messy polyglot picture of American art” that “the commercial market made true”.

There were undoubtedly missed opportunities. Rothenstein travelled to New York in 1956, the year Pollock died, to deliver lectures; he recommended only that the Tate buy a John Marin watercolour from 1923. “It’s tempting to see that as maybe a conservative choice, but in 1956 in New York John Marin was understood as a very important American Modernist. So while history might make that decision seem a little regrettable, actually, it probably was on the money, and where it was acquired, the Downtown Gallery, really was the place to go to see this kind of early American Modernism.” By the late 1950s, though, the Tate was talking to the key AbEx dealers, such as Sidney Janis and Betty Parsons; Pollock entered the Tate collection in 1960. Taylor describes “radiating circles of influence and access that start here at Millbank and end up in West End galleries and then end up in New York. And all of those are conspiring to shape what vision of American art it was possible for the Tate to have.”

### **A Dealer’s Pressure: the Musée du Luxembourg**

The artist Gustave Caillebotte’s bequest to the Musée du Luxembourg in Paris in 1894 is now seen as the bedrock of Impressionist collections in French museums. A significant chunk of the original

collection finally entered the Musée du Luxembourg in 1897, but only after a complex process involving the dealer Ambroise Vollard, the French museum establishment and the artist's executors—his brother Martial and Auguste Renoir.

“Vollard saw the Caillebotte bequest entering into the Luxembourg as a way to ensure that Impressionism was a lucrative investment for the people he was selling paintings to,” says Alexis Clark, a lecturer at the University of Southern California (USC). “The museum's curator Léonce Bénédite understood that Impressionism was part of the contemporary art canon,” Clark says. “Bénédite also realised that people like Vollard were selling Impressionism for increasingly high prices and that those paintings were out of the reach of the museum.”

Although the bequest was “a real windfall for the museum”, Clark says, some figures in France's Ministry of Fine Arts, either did not want the collection or wanted only part of it. Also, to accept it, the Luxembourg would have to change its policy of holding no more than three works by any one artist.

Vollard's 1895 survey of Cézanne's work was staged amid the Caillebotte bequest negotiations. “He was attempting to apply pressure on the museum to accept these works. He's making the argument that these works by Cézanne are highly profitable for him, are saleable, of interest to the public and should the museum not acquire Impressionism and Cézanne, they will lose this French patrimony to private collections and public museums abroad.”

The bequest's final acceptance in 1897 was a short-term victory. A conservative artist committee was installed, ensuring that buying Impressionist art would remain difficult for the Luxembourg for many years.

### **Exploiting the market: the German experience**

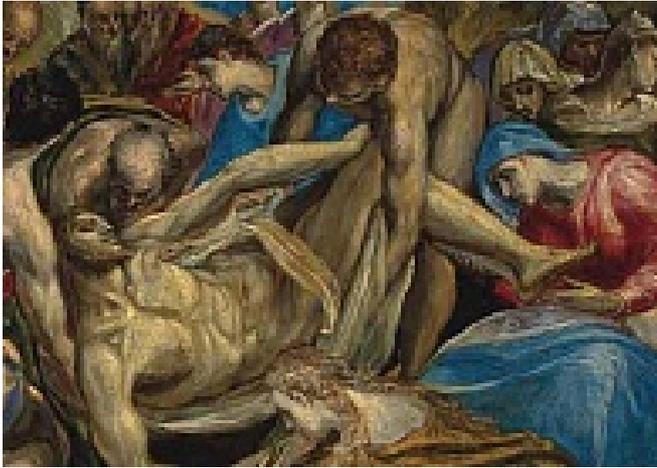
The foundation of the German Museums Association, even as the First World War raged, in 1917, was notionally to represent museum staff. In reality, according to Andrea Meyer, who teaches art history at the Technische Universität Berlin, it addressed a phenomenon that “everybody in the art scene was aware of”: the morally dubious activities of museum curators in the art trade, including writing certificates of authenticity, and pocketing the fees. The leading figure in German museums then was Wilhelm von Bode, who, Meyer says, was “inextricably involved in confidential relations to private collectors, to art dealers, to agents. There's no evidence that he ever took payment for his certificates or for his many, many forewords in auction catalogues, but he turned this network to the advantage of the museums he was heading. Many of the collectors he advised donated pieces of their collections to the museums.”

The Kaiser Friedrich Museum, now the Bode museum, “was a kind of art dealer shop, because he would receive works, he would look at them, he would say: ‘We need to get rid of this, maybe we could talk to private collectors, see if they want it.’”

The high-minded principles of the association's founders, Karl Koetschau, Gustav Pauli and Georg Swarzenski, were watered down. Meyer says that a few days after they told Bode about their plans for the association “because he was such an influential figure of the time that they couldn't get around him”, Bode published an article in an art journal describing the art market as wild and degenerate, and calling for an association to be founded to fight that. Meyer argues that Bode “wanted to find an instrument to divert the public's attention from his own dealings with the trade”. His canniness saw him credited publicly as the saviour of the reputation of German museums.

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