Doing connoisseurship. Yesterday, today, tomorrow. Introductory remarks[1]

Joris Corin Heyder

The impact of connoisseurship is twofold: The first approach is to regard connoisseurship as a specific historical *community* which emanated, particularly, from an enthusiasm for antiquarianism, discourse, and collection and classification of art in late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France, Germany, Netherlands, and England. Connoisseurship can also be understood as a *practice* that, from an academic perspective, is often frowned upon, and usually associated with a positivistic art historical approach that is said to be confined to the art market or museum.[2] This second understanding of connoisseurship is first and foremost dedicated to questions of artistic attribution[3] and authentication.[4] The special section

[2] This dismissive attitude in academic circles has a long tradition. Aby Warburg, for instance, who distanced himself very decidedly from an attributing art history in the course of his life, referred to colleagues like Bernard Berenson and Wilhelm von Bohde disparagingly as 'attributzlers': Warburg Institute Archive, General Classification, A. Warburg to A. Goldschmidt, 9 August 1903. Gombrich, however, assumes that the letter might not be quite serious: Ernst H. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986, 141–144.
[3] A good example for a contemporary approach to attribution is offered by: Frédéric Elsig, '*Connoisseurship et histoire de l'art: considérations méthodologiques sur la peinture des XVe et XVIe siècles*', Geneva: Droz, 2019. However, attribution is the core element of connoisseurial practices, which is why, also from a historiographical perspective. the implications of the practice of attribution were repeatedly thematised. Most recently, Valérie Kobi has enlarged onthe topic: Valérie Kobi, 'Les procédures de l'attribution: un exemple tiré de la correspondance Mariette', in Patrick Michel, ed., *Connoisseurship. L'oeil, la raison et l'instrument*, Paris: École du Louvre, 2014, 69–74.
[4] See, for instance: Andrew W. Brainerd, *On Connoisseurship and Reason in the Authentication of Art*, Chicago: Prologue Brown, 2007; John H. Brown, 'Connoisseurship: Conceptual and

of this issue, however, does not confine itself to either the first or the second notion of connoisseurship, but instead, seeks to shift the focus towards all forms of practices that had and still have a direct impact on the formation of connoisseurial knowledge, and to systematically link historiographical insights with current and future practices of connoisseurship in order to critically reconsider our own working procedures as an academic discipline. In the following, this attention to practices is indicated by chapters entitled *seeing through* (**Valérie Kobi**), *verbalising* (**Elvira Bojilova**), and *generating knowledge* (**Thomas Ketelsen, Peter Bell, Fabian Offert**) that each address, in some way or another, one of the *three domains of connoisseurship*, but also other practices such as *comparing* and *judging*.

Three domains of connoisseurship

It has become a historiographical commonplace to describe connoisseurship as the natural forerunner of academic art history. In doing so, connoisseurship has been treated either as something outdated or as an early form of art historical methodology, neither of which is entirely correct. Until today, the art market depends on connoisseurship, as does empirically-oriented art history (often labelled as basic research), and even most of the theory-oriented approaches are not indifferent to the three central domains of connoisseurship highlighted by Roger de Piles (1635–1709) and Jonathan Richardson (1665–1745) in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, namely (i.) the judgment of an artwork's quality,[5] (ii.) the attribution to a certain artist, and, lastly, (iii.) the question whether the art work is a copy or the original.[6] Up to today, in all questions related to artworks, those connoisseurial domains still offer crucial information. After all, attributing art is not

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Epistemological Fundamentals', in Jason C. Kuo, ed., *Perspectives on Connoisseurship of Chinese Painting*, Washington D. C.: New Academia Publishing, 2008, 137–176.

[5] Quality is a category that has already played a crucial role in Italian and Flemish seventeenth-century amateurship. Cf. for instance: Anna Tummers, '"By His Hand": The Paradox of Seventeenth-Century Connoisseurship', in Anna Tummers, Koenraad Jonckheere, eds, *Art Market and Connoisseurship. A Closer Look at Paintings by Rembrandt, Rubens and their Contemporaries,* Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008, 31–68. See also E. H. Gombrich, 'The claims of excellence' in Richard Woodfield (ed), *Reflections on the History of Art*, Oxford: Phaidon, 1987, 179-185; originally published as a review of Jakob Rosenberg, *On Quality in Art: Criteria of Excellence Past and Present*, London: Phaidon 1967 in the *New York Review of Books*, 1 February 1968.

[6] Even earlier conceptualisations of connoisseurial practices can be found in the writings by Giulio Mancini. For a brief overview: Silvia de Renzi and Donatella Livia, 'Mancini, Giulio', in *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani,* vol. 58, 2007, Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 500–509. However, his *Considerazioni* were only accessible in manuscript copies; they were first edited in twentieth century: Adriana Marucchi and Luigi Salerno, eds, Giulio Mancini, *Considerazioni sulla pittura*, 2 vols., Rome: Accad. Nazionale dei Lincei, 1956–1957. On Mancini's impact on Filippo Baldinucci's *Notizie de' Professori del disegno* (1681–1728): Isabell Franconi, *Die Notizie de' Professori del disegno von Filippo Baldinucci. Verwissenschaftlichung kunsthistorischen Wissens im 17. Jahrhundert,* Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2020, 269–320; as well as: Gabriele Bickendorf, *Die Historisierung der italienischen Kunstbetrachtung im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert,* Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag, 1998.

necessarily trivial. Celebrated by famous connoisseurs like Roberto Longhi (1890–1970) as the pinnacle of an artwork's description that conveys its stylistic features, attributions often appear as skilfully written arguments that are based on a series of previous observations and a network of comparative operations.[7]

It is clear that specific fields within art history as a discipline are more interested in an attribution-oriented methodology than others. While an anonymous medieval object that surfaces on the art market will in most cases first be categorised and indexed by connoisseurs before it is discussed within a particular theoretical setting, in the field of contemporary art questions of authorship arise less frequently. However, even here, questions regarding the originality and authenticity of an artistic concept or the quality of an artwork keep being raised. At the same time, it is needless to say that these are extremely difficult categories, because both quality and originality (or authenticity) are bound to a common judgment that depends on unstable, or at least not explicitly stated criteria.

Connoisseurial negotiation processes thus continue to occur at very different levels, but they are all characterised by interlinked practices as well as through discursive, medial, cultural, and material arrangements: One might think of national prejudices, fashions within the scientific community, idealistic premises, routines of ordering and schematising artefacts, implications of memorising or marginalising objects. Moreover, digitised artefacts in relational databases, their inherent spacelessness, and progressing improvements in deep machine learning are expanding the already complex field of connoisseurial practices in our times and will continue to do so even more in the future. The goal of this special section is to explicitly take into account the 'doing' of connoisseurship yesterday, today, and tomorrow, embedded into its specific temporal, spatial, and contextual conditions, as demonstrated by spotlighting some exemplary practices in the following. This (re-)entanglement emphasises the unbroken significance of connoisseurial practices as such, even if they are merely on the side lines of the methodological spectrum of art history and visual culture studies today.

Judging

Connoisseurial practices usually involve a concrete judgment regarding at least one of the above-mentioned three domains of connoisseurship.[8] Yet, the process of how those judgments are formed often remains rather opaque. Especially in early connoisseurship, but also still today, premises such as 'taste'[9] played a vital role in reaching a certain judgment. In the eighteenth-century French context, for instance, 'taste' was first and foremost understood as a personal impression; it depended on

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[7] Carlo Ginzburg described Longhi's approach as follows: 'attribution often came at the end of ekphrasis, as a conclusion of it.': Carlo Ginzburg, 'On Small Differences: Ekphrasis and Connoisseurship', *Visual History*, 2, 2016, 11–29, here 16.

[8] See, for instance: Joris C. Heyder, 'Does Comparing Equal Judging? Aesthetic Judgment in Early Connoisseurship', in Stephanie Marchal, Beate Söntgen and Hubert Locher, eds, *Judgment practices in the artistic field*, Munich: Edition Metzel/Verlag Silke Schreiber [in press].

[9] Charlotte Guichard, 'Taste Communities: The Rise of the Amateur in Eighteenth-Century Paris', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 45:4, 2012, 519–547.

emotion, sensation, and pleasure.[10] The amateur developed a certain taste by seeing art objects and—ideally—this came along with some criticism (‘*sens critique*’) that was obviously founded on practices of comparison (see below). As a concept, ‘taste’ is so intriguing because it stands for the aesthetic experience as such and shifts between the faculties of sense and reason, but is neither purely sensual, nor intellectual. Immanuel Kant’s (1724–1804) work on the *Critique of judgement*[11] is ground-breaking in this respect, for he first described the judgment of ‘taste’ as something that is, at least partly, concealed in a black box. Tellingly, it is still unresolved as to what extent the interplay of body and mind, materiality and knowledge, discourse and practices, dynamics and consolidation shape judgments in one way or another. Above all, cultural, discursive, medial, and material arrangements of the human gaze determine how we judge an artwork,[12] and, as a result, there cannot be any such thing as a ‘neutral’ process of seeing, let alone judging. After all, ‘bodily and mental patterns are necessary components of practices and thus of the social’.[13] As improbable as ‘neutral’ sights are, as unlikely are socially undetermined judgments and perhaps most of our judgments are based on socio-practical knowledge and everyday routines. Easily overlooked everyday practices of connoisseurial judgments were (and at least partially still are), amongst others, gluing, cutting, arranging, measuring, indexing, annotating, categorising, and, of course, comparing visually. And while all these practices are part of any connoisseurial judgement to some extent, they sometimes appear to be premise and result at the same time. This is due to the fact that judgements are necessarily processual or performative. Usually, it is not clear exactly at what point during the process the judgment has been consolidated. However, the capacity to judge is mostly interconnected with the beholder’s movement between a detail and the overall composition of an artwork or between close reading and grasping a vista. Therefore, to judge often means to switch modalities.

Comparing

One way to establish such a switch is by comparing artefacts, concepts, aesthetic experiences, contexts, discourses, authorities, qualities, nations, and schools, etc. In recent years, the practice of ‘comparing’ received increased attention in art history

[10] Fabienne Brugère, *Le goût: art, passions et société,* Paris: Presses Univ. de France, 2000.
[11] Nicholas Walker, ed., *Immanuel Kant, Critique of Judgement,* Oxford (et al.): Oxford University Press, 1989 [1952]. In their commentary, Manfred Frank and Véronique Zanetti offer one of the richest insights into Kantian aesthetics I have been able to find so far: Manfred Frank and Véronique Zanetti, eds, *Immanuel Kant, Schriften zur Ästhetik und Naturphilosophie. Text und Kommentar,* 2 vols, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2001.
[12] Johannes Grave, Joris C. Heyder and Britta Hochkirchen, eds, *Vor dem Blick. Zurichtungen des Bildersehens*, Bielefeld: Bielefeld University Press, 2021 [in press].
[13] Andreas Reckwitz, ‘Toward a Theory of Social Practices: A Development in Culturalist Theorizing’, *European Journal of Social Theory* 5, 2, 2002, 243–263, here 252. https://doi.org/10.1177/13684310222225432 [last access: 22.1.2019].

and visual culture studies.[14] In order to analyse the preconditions, merits, and pitfalls of connoisseurship until the present day and beyond, it is worth looking at how working routines, publishing strategies, or the formation of 'communities of practice' are rooted in an early eighteenth-century understanding of comparing and categorising. In fact, long before Wölfflin's famous slide double projection[15] – an epistemological method that has been absorbed as part of an (academic) art historical self-understanding ever since – the 'imperative of the comparative viewing'[16] was already a well-established routine. By the same token, Jean-Baptiste Dubos's claim of the so called 'taste of comparison'—'un "*goût de comparaison*"'—in his 1719 *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture*[17] highlights the importance of practices of comparing with regard to the connoisseurial judgment very early on.

In order to trace the tacit knowledge or 'savoir-faire' of comparing practices in connoisseurship, displays or working aids such as albums ('*recueils*'), digital repositories, libraries, note boxes, etc. provide valuable resources. Often those contextual insights help to clarify how particular norms and fashions were established. In the eighteenth century, the album surely was the place where primary visual experiences took place, and most judgments on art were achieved on the basis of infinite comparisons. At the same time, the album became a (fixed) archive, a laboratory, a chronological timeline, an ordering principle, an instrument of pedantry,[18] and maybe even a virtual unfolding of a larger idea.[19] Today, artworks are being democratised in their availability, as **Thomas Ketelsen** has

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[14] Lena Bader, Martin Gaier and Falk Wolf, eds, *Vergleichendes Sehen,* Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2010; Joachim Rees, 'Vergleichende Verfahren – verfahrene Vergleiche. Kunstgeschichte als komparative Kunstwissenschaft – eine Problemskizze', *Kritische Berichte,* 2, 2012, 32–47; Johannes Grave, 'Vergleichen als Praxis. Vorüberlegungen zu einer praxistheoretisch orientierten Untersuchung von Vergleichen', in Angelika Epple and Walter Erhart, eds, *Die Welt beobachten. Praktiken des Vergleichens*, Frankfurt. a. M./New York: Campus Verlag, 2015, 135–159; Jaś Elsner, ed, *Comparativism in Art History*, London/New York: Routledge, 2017; Matthias Bruhn and Gerhard Scholtz, eds, *Der vergleichende Blick: Formanalyse in Natur- und Kulturwissenschaften*, Berlin: Reimer, 2017; Johannes Grave, Joris C. Heyder and Britta Hochkirchen, eds, *Sehen als Vergleichen. Praktiken des Vergleichens von Bildern, Kunstwerken und Artefakten,* Bielefeld: Bielefeld University Press, 2020.

[15] See for instance: Hans Christian Hönes, '"Bloß zufällig. Kritik und Selbstkritik des Bildvergleichs bei Wölfflin"', in Bruhn and Scholtz, *Der vergleichende Blick*, 2017, 55–68.

[16] In art history as an academic subject, Heinrich Dilly was the first who constated an 'imperative of comparing': Heinrich Dilly, 'Einleitung', in Hans Belting (et al.), eds, *Kunstgeschichte. Eine Einführung*, Berlin: Reimer, 1986, 7–16, here 12.

[17] Jean-Baptiste Dubos, *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture*, 2 vols, Paris: Chez Jean Mariette, 1719. The text passage is discussed in: Joris C. Heyder, '"Goût de comparaison". Practices of comparative vision in 18th-century connoisseurship', in Epple, Erhart and Grave, *Practices of Comparing*, 257–295.

[18] For the interconnection of pedantry and science, see: Markus Krajewski, 'Genauigkeit. Zur Ausbildung einer epistemischen Tugend im 'langen' 19. Jahrhundert', *Berichte zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte*, 39:3, 2016, 211–220. doi: 10.1002/bewi.201601772 [last access: 28.10.2020].

[19] Ingrid R. Vermeulen, 'Paper Museums and the Multimedia Practice of Art History: The Case of Stefano Mulinari's *Istoria Practica*' (1778-80) in the Uffizi', in Maia Wellington Gahtan, ed., *Giorgio Vasari and the Birth of the Museum*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2014, 215–231.

stressed in his contribution to this special section, although the vast majority of artefacts still remains subject to restricted accessibility. But this development, however revolutionary it may seem, poses a new problem. Just as the best reproduction prints could never fully emulate the original painting, even the best and most colour-true photographs can only give an incomplete impression of the original, particularly with regard to material and physical features. Detecting the limits of established forms of comparisons, and consequently, limits of connoisseurship, thus remains of vital importance.[20]

Seeing through

Following up on the notion of connoisseurship as a community, the field particularly benefited from an interdisciplinary orientation right from its inception. The biographies of early connoisseurs spanned a wide range, from individuals with a background in the natural sciences to artists, physicians, or philosophers, raising questions of how to examine the distinctive preconditions of working methods implemented in different connoisseurial practices. How did technical and empirical know-how shape a particular epistemological interest? And what kind of questions and requirements arose from a culture in which collectors, art dealers, philosophers, artists, or natural scientists were entangled in a complex discourse on the judgment of art?

Valerie Kobi's contribution discusses the impact of optical devices on connoisseurial practices in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, zeroing in on the new mode of reception that resulted from 'looking through' a lens, be it a magnifying glass or even a microscope – instruments that slowly found their way into connoisseurial practices due to their inherently interdisciplinary community. Contrary to earlier art theoretical principles, connoisseurs started to examine artworks up close by focussing on the smallest of details. This practice was not only represented in countless caricatures and in Antoine Watteau's celebrated painting *Enseigne de Gersaint* (1720), but also encouraged the emergence of an entirely new set of vocabulary. The use of optical devices gave strong evidence for the connoisseurs' increased interest in a material-oriented, technically informed way of viewing, reflected in new forms of description and even modes of detail reproduction that could only be revealed through the use of optical lenses. As a result, 'epistemic virtues' such as accuracy, objectivity, attentiveness, etc. became crucial criteria for a professional attitude that guaranteed the credibility of the connoisseur's account.

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[20] Valérie Kobi, 'The limits of connoisseurship. Attribution issues and mistakes. An introduction', *Journal of Art Historiography,* 2017, 16/VK1. https://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2017/05/kobi-introduction.pdf [last access: 3.4.2021] and E. H. Gombrich, 'Rhetorique de l'Attribution (*Reductio ad Absurdum*)', *Revue de l'Art* 42, October, 23-25; English version 'The rhetoric of attribution – a cautionary tale' in Richard Woodfield (ed), *Reflections on the History of Art*, Oxford: Phaidon, 1987, 91-96.

Verbalising

While experimental comparisons of reproduction as in Adam von Bartsch's *Catalogue raisonne [...] de Rembrandt* (1797) or Jean Baptiste Seroux d'Agincourt's *Histoire de l'art par des monumens* (1823) remained the exception for quite a while,[21] Kobi points out the massive transformation, specialisation, and multiplication of connoisseurial vocabulary in the early eighteenth century. But from the late nineteenth through to the middle of the twentieth century, parts of this connoisseurial vocabulary hived off and took on a life of their own, as shown by **Elvira Bojilova**. Connoisseurial literature increasingly worked with formulations of similarities and distinctions, often playing with literal references or normative judgments such as canon formation, delimiting, or establishing quantitative quality and other linguistic features that are characteristic for connoisseurial writings in general.

In her contribution, Bojilova discloses the reoccurring use of expressions, notions, and phrases in the early scholarship on drawing, and particularly on 'sketches'. Her focus lies on the connoisseurial writings by Bernard Berenson (1865–1959), Max J. Friedländer (1867–1958), and Bernhard Degenhart (1907–1999), which show, in one way or another, parallels to the formalistic approaches of Heinrich Wölfflin (1864–1945). Bojilova demonstrates the authors' genuine use of expressions as a means to conceptualise drawings – sometimes as markers for an epochal style, sometimes as a graphological source. The author traces the use of the same vocabulary by different connoisseurs and art historians, but also analyses how it could change in meaning over time, arguing that the same expressions could stand both for the attempt to emphasise a rational or a spiritual aesthetic. Moreover, Bojilova unveils implicit narratives upon which connoisseurial writings are based or which they help to consolidate, indicating the strong impact of language even in a field that is usually considered to be devoid of theoretical premises or preconditions – a field that does not necessarily rely on language, yet shaped vast parts of the early scholarship on drawing by virtue of its specific vocabulary.

Generating knowledge

Language is only one of several ways for connoisseurs to 'generate' or 'secure' knowledge. As mentioned above, practices like collecting, indexing, evaluating, exchanging information, etc. were and still are part of connoisseurial endeavours. Although from a praxeological perspective, it is highly unlikely to reconstruct all practices that lead to a certain state of knowledge, we know that the interest in the knowledge of connoisseurial practices has always circled, in one way or another, around the three domains mentioned above.

In his contribution, **Thomas Ketelsen** offers insight into the production of knowledge regarding these domains. In so doing, he follows up on concepts discussed by Kobi from a historical perspective (optical aids, etc.), combining the impact of digital resources and methods with a genre introduced by Bojilova,

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[21] Heyder, '"Goût de comparaison"', 2020, 285–288.

namely Old Master drawings. He highlights a new form of digital availability that at least hypothetically allows access to drawings with hitherto restricted accessibility. This potential availability is a crucial factor in generating knowledge, facilitating, among other benefits, a review of connoisseurial arguments. Moreover, the digital space enables methods such as cross-linking that helps to cluster as much information as possible. For Ketelsen, this also includes research results received from collaborating with natural science; and newly generated knowledge on drawing materials, for instance, might help complete our picture of an artist's habits and creative characteristics – a field that, regardless of Ketelsen's cutting-edge approach, is still considered a traditional branch of connoisseurship.

Peter Bell and **Fabian Offert** present an excerpt from their current research into the perspectives of computational connoisseurship. Successful machine learning is based on a comprehensive database of examples. In three experiments, the authors are able to demonstrate the extent to which a deep machine learning system can be trained to recognise or even to 'see' particular forms, patterns, and colours. Fascinatingly, it appears that Giovanni Morelli's (1816–1891) approach[22] is a remarkably successful training method for automated research. The authors not only reflect on their experimental premises, but also stress the significance of a phenomenological and epistemological foundation of their training. Today, a 'digital connoisseur' can already provide valuable assistance. However, its training and coding, arrangements and classifications lie in our hands—they will be only as reliable as our own connoisseurial doing.

Outlook

The broad spectrum of contributions in this special section notwithstanding, there seems to be one aspect that is marginalised, yet crucial: 'Correct attributions generally appear spontaneously and "prima vista". We recognize a friend without ever having determined wherein his particular qualities lie and that with a certainty that not even the most detailed description can give.'[23] The argument is clever – Max J. Friedländer was well aware of the fact that the complex interaction of somatic perception and practical knowledge withstands the capability to objectify connoisseurial processes. By introducing the term 'intuition', he acknowledged that connoisseurship could only be taught, learned, verbalised, or even objectified to a certain degree.[24] So far, the notion of intuition as an inherent part of connoisseurial judgment remains a veritable black box. Intriguingly, deep machine learning has shown to provide valuable support in the attribution process, as long as the visual sources are clearly indexed for the training process. However, the core of deep machine learning, i.e., convolutional neural networks, is a black box, too, given the fact that the training benefits significantly, but in a seemingly obscure way, from algorithmic shortcuts and the detection of presumably irrelevant areas of an image.

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[22] Ivan Lermolieff [Giovanni Morelli], *Die Werke italienischer Meister in den Galerien von München, Dresden und Berlin,* Leipzig: Seemann, 1880.

[23] Max J. Friedländer, *Early Netherlandish Painting from Van Eyck to Bruegel*, London: Phaidon, 1956, V–VII, here: V.

[24] Max J. Friedländer, *On Art and Connoisseurship,* Boston: Beacon Press, [1942] 1960, 163–178.

In this sense, and paradoxically enough, the results generated by a computer are very much analogous to that of a traditional connoisseur, mirroring a kind of inexplicable intuition.

Without doubt, connoisseurial practices will continue to play a crucial role in future art historical endeavours. Evidently, digitalisation and deep machine learning will increasingly shape working practices and will help to bundle and to evaluate information to an unprecedented extent. However, a critical approach to connoisseurial premises and practices yesterday and today will help us remember that even tomorrow, connoisseurship will occasionally not create facts, but mere approximations.

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