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The Development of the Art Market in England: Money as Muse, 1730-1900

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Thomas M. Bayer and John R. Page, *The Development of the Art Market in England: Money as Muse, 1730-1900.* London: Pickering and Chatto, 2011.? xi + 267 pp.? \$99 (hardcover), ISBN: 978-1-84893-043-8.

Reviewed for EH.Net by Robert Jensen, Art Department, University of Kentucky.

Since the pioneering work of John Michael Montias, economic historians have increasingly come to investigate Western markets for art.? This interest exists despite the fact that the art market represents a small part of any economy.? Does, then, the value of this research rest in increasing our understanding of economic behavior in general or does it teach us new things about art and artists by understanding their respective markets?? Thomas Bayer and John Page?s *The Development of the Art Market in England* belongs firmly to the Montias tradition of art market research, and the strengths of their research closely parallel the contributions of Montias? work.? The authors? principal claims appear to be that the ?commoditization? of art usefully contributes to artistic innovation, and perhaps more importantly, to the ?democratization? of art.? The English art world, the authors argue, developed a frankly commercial approach to art and created ways of thinking about and selling art that culminated in the enormous popular success of Victorian artists during the 1850s and 1860s.

The Development of the Art Market in England represents a skillful blend of primary and secondary source material as well as some significant quantitative data compiled from over 42,000 sales catalogues published in England between 1709 and 1913.? After an introductory chapter (which is largely a synthesis of secondary sources) that connects the earliest development of the English market to the rise of the picture market in continental Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the authors then leave continental Europe behind to concentrate on the evolution of the English art trade.? In successive chapters they trace the development of ways of thinking and describing works of art that were especially conducive to commerce, then look at the developing commercial behavior of English painters during the eighteenth century, followed by an analysis of the role art criticism and art auctions play in creating the widest possible consumer base for paintings.? Finally, the authors trace the professionalization of

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picture dealers and their increasing centrality in the English market for both old master and contemporary English painting.

The second half of *The Development of the Art Market in England* describes the commercial art world of Victorian England, a period the authors repeatedly characterize as the "golden age" of English art. The authors begin by analyzing the close interaction between picture dealers and the auction market from the 1840s to 1900. One of their more striking discoveries is that art dealers acquired two thirds of all paintings sold at English auctions. (Their auction data also demonstrated that whereas before the 1840s picture dealers primarily were sellers at auction, they later rarely did so.) Picture dealers clearly used auctions to sustain the market value of the artists they represented. They describe how exhibitions of individual works were popular social events with admission fees often generating very considerable profits. The success of these ventures was further supported by an art criticism that drew attention to the elements in these pictures that ensured their popularity with the broadest possible public. Most importantly, the authors analyze the role reproductive print sales played in the commercial success of Victorian artists, noting that the reproduction rights and exhibition entrance fees for a painting frequently yielded much higher revenues than did the sale of the picture itself. The authors make a very convincing case that printed facsimiles enabled the economic success of Victorian painters during the 1850s and 1860s. They also largely attribute the decline of the particular kind of narrative, sentimental historical and genre paintings we most associate with Victorian art to the collapse in the print reproduction market, a collapse engendered primarily by technological innovations that made reproductions so cheap that they effectively lost their value to artists and their dealers.

Bayer and Page's auction data defines their research agenda, and because of this, like Montias' work on seventeenth-century Dutch art, they struggle to correlate innovations in market structures with the production of important, innovative art. Since they work from English auction catalogues they rule out comparisons with art markets on the continent, thereby making indirect and undefended arguments about the exceptionality of the English market. And since their goal is to establish the virtues of an anonymous market, they dismiss the continued value of direct patronage for artistic innovation. So, for example, Bayer and Page leave eighteenth-century English portraiture, which depends on such patronage, largely out of their discussion; yet most art historians would probably say that it was this period's most important genre. Conversely, Bayer and Page want to link the mass market for Victorian genre painting to artistic innovation. However, if we compare the achievements and lasting importance of this type of Victorian art with those of the contemporary and near contemporary French Impressionists and Postimpressionists, artists who were sustained by only a handful of collectors, this would suggest that market size contributes to the wealth of artists and their retailers, but not necessarily to the production of important art.

The Development of the Art Market in England raises a number of interesting questions that I hope the authors will address in future studies. Since the decline of the Victorian picture trade predates the relative decline of the British economy, what was it about the market structure and corresponding behavior of English artists that made the English art world less adaptable to changing technological and artistic conditions than, say, the contemporary French art world? Is it possible that Christie's monopoly over English auctions somehow put a break on

English artistic innovation or at least limited the English artists' ability to adapt to changing circumstances??

There is much to be learned about the English art market in this remarkable synthesis by Bayer and Page and I share the authors' conviction that the market has long been a primary engine of artistic innovation.? However I think their approach here is rather monolithic and too anxious to celebrate the market forces that led to one aspect of English art at the expense of other market and artistic behaviors found both in England and on the Continent during the period they survey.

Robert Jensen is an art historian long interested in the history of Western art markets.? He is the author of *Marketing Modernism in Fin-de-si?cle Europe* (Princeton University Press) and has co-authored (with David Galenson) the essay 'Careers and Canvases: The Rise of the Market for Modern Art in Nineteenth Century France.'

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