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On Art and Money
By Robert Hughes
1.

The twin figures of the art impresario and the art star, performing for a large audience, have been with us since the eighteenth century. It was in Georgian times that dealers started to matter—emerging as people who exerted a real force on taste, as distinct from mere anti-quarians serving the existing taste of patrons. At the same time, English and American artists, envying the huge entrepreneurial success of men like Rubens, craving status, longing to be set free from the condition of mere craftsmen, began organizing themselves and their market: their instrument was the Royal Academy, led first by an Englishman, Sir Joshua Reynolds, and second by an American, Benjamin West. Today's relationships between art and money wind back to the time of Burlington House, and the north and south poles of an artist's attitude to the market were summed up in two eighteenth-century utterances. "Where any view of money exists," wrote William Blake, Sir Joshua's dogged but powerless enemy, "art cannot be carried on." On the other side, Samuel Johnson was just as categorical. "No man but a blockhead," he said, "ever wrote, except for money."

We would do well to seek the truth somewhere between these two utterances, perhaps more on the Johnsonian than on the Blakean side. The fact is that art has always been carried on very nicely, thank you, where views of money exist. The idea that money, patronage, and trade automatically corrupt the wells of imagination is a pious fiction, believed by some utopian lefties and a few people of genius like Blake, but flatly contradicted by history itself. The work of Titian and Bernini, Piero della Francesca and Poussin, Reisener and Chippendale would not exist unless someone paid for them, and paid well. Picasso was a millionaire at forty and that didn't harm him. On the other hand, some painters are millionaires at thirty and that can't help them. Against the art starlet one sees waddling about like a Strasbourg goose, his ego distended to gross proportion by the obsequies of the market, one has to weigh the many artists who have been stifled by indifference and the collapse of confidence it brings. On the whole, money does artists much more good than harm. The idea that one benefits from cold water, crusts, and debt collectors is now almost extinct, like belief in the reformatory power of flogging.

So I will not rehearse the now-familiar neoconservative complaint about unnecessarily pampered American talents living the life of Riley on giant grants from the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities. Anyone who knows the realities of American culture also knows that this is about as real as Ronald Reagan's vision of the undeserving poor buying vodka with food stamps to carouse in their welfare Cadillacs. Of course the endowments waste money, since there is no known way of determining the cost-effectiveness of works of art; and some objects of their patronage are a minority taste, liked mainly by an elite. On the other hand, the NEA does not, so far as I know, charge the taxpayer $433.45 for a screwdriver, or $1,700 for a metal ladder, as does the Defense Department; and war itself, the sophist might add, is a minority taste, liked mainly by an elite. So my main quarry here is not how the relation of money and art affects the artist, but how it bears on the public—a public which, necessarily, includes artists and other art professionals, but has become enormously large in the last twenty-five years. More Americans go to museums than go to football games. Last year almost 4.5 million people went to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Similar figures can be quoted for virtually every other major museum in the country.

The museum has very largely supplanted the church as the emblematic focus of the American city. It has become a low-rating mass medium in its own right. In doing so it has adopted, partly by osmosis and partly by design, the strategies of other mass media: emphasis on spectacle, cult of celebrity, the whole masterpiece-and-treasure syndrome, to which I shall return in a little while. Only by these means can it retain the loyalty of its unprecedentedly large public, or so it thinks. In the meantime, that public—conditioned by its museums, by the art market, and by the pervasive journalistic attitude that only finds works of art interesting if they are fabulously expensive or forgeries, or ideally both—has willed the glamour of big money onto art in a way that is, I believe, historically unique. And this transference doesn't happen in a vacuum. Americans have long been taught, and have believed, that the basic use of art is to provide oases in a fallen world. The residue of Transcendentalism teaches us that art refines, educates, makes people better. Such was the charter of American museums, at the dawn of the museum age in the late nineteenth century. They were not meant to be repositories of plunder, but moralizing institutions. When these traditional assumptions meet the burgeoning commercialism of the real and overpopulated art world, vortices start to spin.

Two million dollars for a Pollock. Four million for a Zurbarán still life, $4.5 for a bronze figure attributed to Lysippus; $5.5 for a Velázquez; no decent Matisse available for less than a million, no major one for less than two. The late Lord Clark's late Turner seascape of Folkestone, for £7 million. Prices are creeping up, as we all know.

It should be fairly obvious that the whole question of the relation of art to money in this culture does not hinge solely on million-dollar art sales. But because seven-figure prices for art have such an emblematic power to so many people, we have to know if they are, in fact, historically unique; if so, why; and if not, whether previous ages made the immense fuss over the expensive artwork as cultural spectacle that we do.

Dealers tell us that the day of the ten-million-dollar painting is at hand. Probably it is, though I am not trying to guess which work of art the messiah will be. So I'll take a painting that won't come on the market but would certainly make ten million if it did: Raphael's Sistine Madonna. I choose Raphael as an example because his reputation has fluctuated very little; it has always been high, partly because—questions of genius aside—he has appealed to the streak of sentimentality in every king and pope, no matter how ferocious, with the sweetness of his madonnas and bambinos, while confirming the authoritarian bent of connoisseurs by his invention of the grand manner.

A constant reputation gives us a clearer impression of relative price. Raphael did not suffer like Vermeer, who was forgotten after his death—which is why Vermeer's prices have gone up by roughly 5 million percent in the last two hundred years. Vermeer was still a minority taste when Proust had Bergotte suffer his fatal heart attack while contemplating the yellow patch of wall in the View of Delft. In the late eighteenth century he was a nobody. In 1813 his Lacemaker sold for £7; in 1870 the Louvre bought it for the equivalent of £51. Vermeer's head of a girl, which the Wrightsmans bought for more than a million dollars in 1959 and is worth several times that sum today, changed hands in Rotterdam in 1816 for three florins.

But Raphael's reputation was never of this kind; he was never obscure. In fact, two hundred years ago, the Sistine Madonna was the most expensive painting in the world and renowned as such. It had been sold, in 1754, by the monks of Piacenza to Augustus III, king of Poland and Saxony, for the unheard-of sum of 17,000 gold ducats—the equivalent of £8,500 in the currency of George II.

Now if art prices were really keyed to the cost of living, and if the Raphael were really worth the same then as now, we would have to conclude that the pound of George II was worth more than 780 times the pound of Margaret Thatcher; and although inflation is bad, it isn't that bad.

When Augustus paid £8,500 for his Raphael, Goldsmith's parson was considered to be "passing rich on forty pounds a year"—and although forty went further then than now, we can't multiply it by 780 and give rural clergy a yearly stipend of £31,200. The English historian Roy Porter recently suggested that we multiply eighteenth-century prices by 40 to 60 to get modern equivalents. And this works for low incomes and figures, but it doesn't apply to the expenditures of the rich—and rural laborers or ribbon vendors were not the ones who bought pictures in Hogarth's day.

The conversion rate inflates for the rich. In 1750 nobody could live like a gentleman for much less than £400 untaxed income a year, the equivalent of about £100,000 or 150,000 pretax dollars in early 1984.

So I will very tentatively suggest that to convert the rich man's spending money into its modern equivalent—the kind of discretionary income that is spent on art, rather than meat and potatoes—one should multiply by about 100. Which gives us at the most an equivalent price of 850,000 Thatcher pounds, or 1,275,000 Reagan dollars, for the Sistine Madonna.

Much the same ratio would seem to apply to the work of extremely fashionable living artists, then and now.

In 1779 the earl of Radnor commissioned a Holy Family from Sir Joshua Reynolds for £1,400, and in 1786 Catherine the Great paid him £1,575 for a painting of the infant Hercules struggling with serpents. These prices were considered enormous: they were veritable wonders. But multiplied by 100 they scarcely compare at all with the half-million dollars or so that Leo Castelli was asking and apparently getting for new works by Jasper Johns last spring. On the other hand, the Reynoldses were subject pictures which, until the American mania for adopted ancestors took over in the 1920s, were ten times as expensive as his commissioned portraits. At the peak of Reynolds's career as president of the Royal Academy and arbiter of taste in English art, when he epitomized the Grand Manner and all it stood for, you could expect to pay £200 for a full-length portrait—perhaps $30,000 in 1984 currency, only a little more than the standard fee for a portrait by Andy Warhol.

I must stress, once again, that these figures are very impressionistic: converting art prices between pounds and dollars across a gap of two hundred years is fraught with wild variables and may be no more accurate than the effort to convert wampum to lire.

Still, two aspects of the conversion interest me. The first is that some modern art prices are by no means as fantastic, when compared to the prices of the past, as we might casually think. But the second is that a discrepancy really does exist. A million and a quarter dollars or so for a Raphael is an imposing sum. But it would not buy any known painting by Raphael today, especially not one of comparable importance to the Sistine Madonna, the Madonna della Sedia, or the little Alba Madonna in Washington, for which Andrew Mellon gave the Russian government nearly a quarter of a million pounds, or about $1 million, at the height of the Great Depression in 1931. One and a quarter million dollars is not $10 million. There is still a big gap to be explained.

Its reasons lie in the greater liquidity of modern capital. There is far more cash in circulation today. Far more money is printed than was minted. Very large amounts of credit are available, and the highly abstract qualities of modern finance favor the swift conversion of assets into cash; most of all, our culture has been schooled to think of works of art as investment commodities. These conditions did not apply in the eighteenth century. Most of them did not exist in the nineteenth either.

The great fortunes of preindustrial Europe were land-rich but, relatively, cash-poor. To raise large sums of money you had to sell acreage, and when fortunes were frozen in entailed lands that was hard to do; to do it for the sake of a few square feet of canvas would generally have been considered improvident lunacy.

Although the informed art audience was deeply interested in art prices, the idea of using art as a form of investment was unknown in the eighteenth century and barely even mooted, except among a few picture dealers, in the nineteenth. One bought paintings for pleasure, for status, for commemoration, or to cover a hole in the ancestral paneling. But one did not buy them in the expectation that they would make one richer.

Consequently the big historical prices looked somewhat gratuitous, even freakish—the gestures of potentates, signaling the vast dimensions of their surplus wealth.

The most expensive pictures of the eighteenth century, after the king of Saxony's Raphael, were a pair of Claudes—the so-called Altieri Claudes, one depicting the landing of Aeneas and the other the sacrifice to Apollo. The dilettante William Beckford, who enjoyed a handsome income from his family's sugar plantations in the West Indies, bought these in 1799 for £6,825. Beckford was already famous for his extravagances: once, planning to sup at a country inn, he directed the landlord several weeks in advance to hang his bedroom with hand-painted French Reveillon wallpaper. Buying the Altieri Claudes confirmed his reputation as a financial madman. But as sometimes happens in the art market, this price created its own reality—at least for a time. Four years later, pressed for cash, Beckford sold them to a dealer for £10,500, and the dealer unloaded them for £12,600 within a few weeks. That is, nearly $2 million today. The sad coda to this story is that when the Altieri Claudes went on the block at Christie's in 1947 they made only £5,300, a drop in real-money value of more than 95 percent.

In those days when there were no art investors, and when nobody could get tax write-offs by giving their collections to museums—because there was no personal income tax and there weren't many museums either—people applauded the big price and the daring collector rather as they did the heroic rake, the deep gambler, or the three-bottle man. The Georgians respected dandyism and eccentricity. High art prices could not readily be rationalized, defused as it were, by the claim of public benefit. Very few people sympathized with Lord Elgin's efforts to get money back from the British government after he had brought the educationally incomparable Parthenon marbles to London, even though he nearly bankrupted himself doing so. Whereas, when the Metropolitan Museum in New York paid nearly $5.5 million a decade ago for Velázquez's portrait of his mulatto servant Juan de Pareja, it could invoke a host of justifications for this vast price apart from the arguable quality of the work: educational value, for instance, and solidarity with the black community. We may be quite sure that Augustus III felt no such obligation: the costly painting disappeared into the regal or ducal collection as into a social tomb.

2.

The idea of investing in a work of art did not begin to affect the art market until well into the nineteenth century, and it did so in a rather circuitous way. I mentioned the high prices Reynolds sometimes got on commission, but these were exceptional. Benjamin West, the American Wunderkind who succeeded Reynolds as president of the Royal Academy, once—only once—got £3,000 for a painting. This was in 1811, but between then and the arrival of the Pre-Raphaelites the magic barrier of £1,500 was probably broken less than half a dozen times by living artists; not until 1885 would anyone pay a five-figure price for a Turner, and that person was Cornelius Vanderbilt.

Meanwhile, of course, the real value of money was declining, and so, with a few eddies and exceptions, was the Old Master market. A Botticelli cost a third as much as a Lord Leighton in the 1870s. In 1879 the National Gallery in London paid £9,000 for Leonardo's Virgin of the Rocks, which compares well with the £10,000 a newly arrived German financier straight out of Trollope, Albert Gottheimer, alias Baron Grant, gave a few years earlier for a large hunting scene by Sir Edwin Landseer. And meanwhile the ground was littered with major and minor Renaissance paintings, from primitives and gold-ground icons of the trecento right through to the sixteenth century. These could be and were picked up for a few dollars, until Bernard Berenson and Lord Duveen completed their heavy task of reconditioning the cultural fantasies of the American rich.

Piero della Francesca's Nativity in the National Gallery in London, which would certainly be a ten-million-dollar picture on today's market, cost less than £2,500 in 1874, two-thirds the price of a gloomy landscape of a Hebridean bog by Sir John Millais. No cost-of-living multiplier will bring such prices into line with today's. The sum Isabella Stewart Gardner gave the earl of Darnley in 1896, through Berenson, for the Titian Rape of Europa that is one of the glories of Boston may not seem big to us now: it was less than $100,000, about £21,000. But the last time that picture had changed hands had been only forty years previously, and then it was bought for less than 2 percent of that price: £288 10s, in Christie's. That is what happens when Americans get into the act.

The second half of the nineteenth century was, for the market, the great age of the living painter—at least, of some living painters. Agnew's paid £11,000 for The Shadow of Death, by the Pre-Raphaelite William Holman Hunt; that sum, at the time, would have bought you the entire oeuvre of Manet, from the Fife-Player to the Olympia. In 1892 a large watercolor by Meissonier—a copy of a battle scene already owned by Cornelius Vanderbilt—made the same price as the Titian Rape of Europa, perhaps the equivalent of 1.5 or 2 million in modern dollars. You could have had four or five autograph works by Velázquez for that. A Victorian nonentity called Edwin Long saw his works reach between £4,000 and £6,000 in the 1880s, and £5,000—say 25,000 old or 600,000 new American dollars—was a common price for the large Landseers that would be selling for $50 or $100 two generations later.

Such figures are always invoked by people who want to draw a parallel between today's inflated prices and those of a century ago. Look, the argument goes, the cost of the big Victorian guns was in preinflationary gold pounds and dollars and francs, and untaxed at that; you must multiply by at least 25, maybe 35, to get an equivalent today. Moral: pictures may not be cheap now, but they are not crazily expensive.

I think this argument needs to be taken with a handful of salt. Most of the time, when you look at deals like Agnew's purchase of the Holman Hunt, you find that the figure included all reproduction rights to the picture. The ownership of these rights was of vast importance to the Victorian art market. It affected the price of popular pictures in exactly the same way that the market for film and TV rights affects the price of popular novels today. Ten years later, in 1883, another Holman Hunt of comparable size, finish, and popularity—The Triumph of the Innocents—sold for just a third of that price because its reproduction rights were already signed away.

What transformed the popular market for living artists in the nineteenth century was the steel-faced engraving plate, which made it possible for just about everyone in England to have a three-shilling print of The Light of the World or The Monarch of the Glen on the parlor wall. And Gerald Reitlinger, whose book on the rise and fall of picture prices, The Economics of Taste, published nearly a quarter of a century ago, is by far the most thorough study of this subject, points out a curious detail that might elude many art historians: namely, that this print market couldn't have come into existence in Victorian England without the repeal of the tax on glass, which reduced framing costs of works on paper to a level ordinary people could afford.[*]

For an audience that valued exactly those features of the picture that could survive reproduction—the story, the moral, the iconographic detail, the close attention to nature—and didn't mind, as we do, missing out on the authentic, expressive, incarnated touch of the artist, these engravings were real popular art, and had a far higher status than any photographic reproduction of a Pollock or a Picasso could have for us today. But this aspect of the Victorian art market is one of several that make it difficult to compare with today's. The price of a Picasso or a Bonnard is simply the price of an object: it does not give the owner entry to a profitable world of secondary rights. And if the Victorian story-picture had not engaged the public imagination—if it had not become mass-reproducible by its success in the Salon or the Royal Academy—then its relation to big money was not magical at all. We do not expect the cost of our star paintings to be underwritten by a plebiscite, but the Victorians did; in some ways they were culturally rather more democratic than we are.

Therefore I think we can say at the very least that the similarities between today's art market and those of previous centuries are more apparent than real. There is no historical precedent for the price structure of art in the late twentieth century. Never before have the visual arts been the subject—beneficiary or victim, depending on your view of the matter—of such extreme inflation and fetishization.
3.

But I would go further. I think that the whole relationship between art and money shifted so greatly after the Second World War—really, after 1960—that our way of perceiving art in its social relations (what we expect from it, how we approach it, what we think it is good for, how we use it) has been deeply, if not always consciously, changed. What we are seeing, in the last years of the twentieth century, is a kind of environmental breakdown in the art world. It is caused, as breakdowns customarily are, by a combination of shrinking resources and exploding population. And the cultural pressures it has set up have altered our relationship to all art in a way that our fathers—or even our younger selves—could not have imagined or predicted.

The art market we have today did not pop up overnight. It was created by the great liquidity of late-twentieth-century wealth. Sell a block of shares, shift the money elsewhere. But liquids do not flow where you want them to go unless you dig channels, and this patient hydraulic effort has been, since 1960 at least, one of the wonders of cultural engineering. The big project of the art market over the last twenty-five years has been to convince everyone that works of art, though they don't bear interest, offer such dramatic and consistent capital gains along with the intangible pleasures of ownership—what Berenson might have called "untactile values"—that they are worth investing large sums of money in.

This creation of confidence, I sometimes think, is the cultural artifact of the last half of the twentieth century, far more striking than any given painting or sculpture. Its origins lie in the mid-1960s, and although it is hard to assign a single starting point to a cultural movement so diffuse and international in scope, I think of it as beginning with a curious enterprise called the Times/Sotheby Art Indexes, which created much interest in London and afterward in New York around 1966. These indexes were the brainchild of a public-relations man who had been hired by Peter Wilson, the chairman of Sotheby's, to spruce up the somewhat fuddy-duddy image of his house; and what they purported to give was reliable statistics on the price movements of all manner of works of art—seicento Bolognese drawings, netsuke, Old Master prints, nineteenth-century animalier bronzes, Chinese porcelain—showing, in an extremely generalized way, how everything was going up by 25 to 200 percent per year. They were short, undetailed, memorable, and embellished with graphs.

Perhaps it was the graphs that did it. They gave these tendentious little essays the trustworthy look of the Times financial page. They objectified the hitherto dicey idea of art investment. They made it seem hardheaded and realistic to own art. From this modest beginning the idea ramified, and for the next ten years it was rare to open an airline magazine without finding yet another excited piece of hackwork puffing the idea of art investment. By 1980 the idea had become so familiar that it was no longer necessary to stress it, and the collector-as-investor dropped out of favor as a journalistic hero; even the dealers felt that such people should not be paraded too much, partly because it seemed a bit vulgar and partly, I would guess, because prices had already gone so high, and confidence in their continued ascent was so well implanted, that it was time to talk about eternal spiritual values again.

This confidence feeds and is fed by a huge and complicated root system in scholarship, criticism, journalism, PR, tax deductions, and museum policy. And it cannot be allowed to falter or lapse, because of the inherently irrational nature of art as a commodity. Art prices are determined by the meeting of real or induced scarcity with pure, irrational desire, and nothing is more manipulable than desire.

The market is always converting works of art into passive fictions of eternity and immutability, of transcendent value for which no price may necessarily be too high. When the word "priceless" crops up, the haggling has only just begun. Hence the battered state of the word "masterpiece," which used to mean a work that proved an artist's graduation into full professional skill, but now means an object whose aura and accumulated myth strike people blind temporarily and render their judgment timid. It refers more to myths of status than processes of comparison, and that kind of mythmaking is the seed of what the New York dealer Ben Heller, in one of the great Freudian slips of recent art history, was heard to call "creative pricing."

It is the element of fantasy in the art market, the sense that art prices are so weakly tied to more mundane kinds of economic activity, and that there is something neurotic about them, that gives them their odd lability. The art market can be set pitching and rolling by a single act, which is why it is so notoriously vulnerable to manipulation. A ring of three or four promoters can bid up the price of a dubious young star painter at auction, and although the New York art world may know what's going on, the collectors in Akron, Ohio, are not so likely to—all they see is the price, which was, after all, publicly bid and duly paid, and is henceforth true.

A large wine-dark painting by the late Mark Rothko was sold at Sotheby's some months ago to a Japanese collector for a record price for Rothkos—$1.6 million. It was not merely restored, but—according to a previous owner, William Rubin of the Museum of Modern Art—extensively repainted, as a result of damage done to it by French handlers in a European loan show. Close to a square meter of its original paint was gone, and it had spent many months being redone in that costly Forest Lawn for elderly, battered abstract expressionists run by a restorer on Long Island. Now at the time of the sale there were several Rothkos of equivalent quality and historical interest on the New York market, none of them damaged, all priced at around $400,000. If ever a record price was attained by ignorance, this was it. Yet nobody minded; the painting is now comfortably ensconced in some distant tokonoma, and the sale, instead of being seen as a freakish event concerning a compromised picture, doubled Rothko's prices overnight.

Something much more dramatic happened with Jackson Pollock's Blue Poles, which was sold to the Australian government for $2.2 million more than ten years ago. My fellow countrymen were rather proud of beating Ben Heller's creative asking price down from $3 million. Nobody had even thought of asking so much for a Pollock; but of course the market gratefully rallied behind this heroic example and every Pollock in the world quintupled in price overnight, thus enabling the National Gallery of Australia to announce that Blue Poles was really cheap. The Australian press, in its skepticism, refused to buy this, and the resulting hullabaloo over the price of Blue Poles helped to bring Gough Whitlam's Labor government down in 1973. But by that time the myth of price attached to Blue Poles was unstoppable. Around 1977 the Shah of Iran tried to buy it from Australia for $8 million; Australia refused, and the extravagant Shah had to find another way to fall. The moral of such events, the skeptic would say, is that the fair price of art defines itself reflexively. A fair price is the highest one a collector can be induced to pay. Once it is established it shows its fairness by reforming the level of the market.

The art market today takes its stand on two articles of faith. The first is the dogma of the Perpetual Resurrection of the Dead. It holds that everything old can be revived. The second concerns the Miracle of Van Gogh's Ear, which teaches the unbeliever that nothing new may be rejected. To say that these propositions might contradict each other is impolite. They do, but it makes no practical difference. Their purpose is to ensure a heavy flow of product for the art market, despite the fact that the supply of good past art is dwindling and the supply of good present art is, to put it mildly, not getting that much more copious.

Let us look at the implications for historical art first.

One hundred or two hundred years ago, Old Master prices were low—with all exceptions granted—because the supply exceeded the demand. From the attics of ducal homes in Kent to the crypts of churches in Umbria, Europe was crammed with unrecorded, uncleaned, unrestored, unstudied works of art, the raw material for another century of intensive dealing. The number of collectors then, as against today, was tiny. And the support system that we take for granted as a normal part of the landscape did not exist: few and unsystematic museums, fewer departments of art history. No museum had an income of $1 million a day, as the Getty now does. The pensioni of Florence were not full of anxious doctoral candidates swotting up for their dissertations on the size of the Christ Child's organ in a previously unrecorded predella fragment by the Master of the Bambino Vispo, and whether this holy member signified ostentatio or pudicitia.

It must have seemed, then, that there was no possibility of the demand for Old Master painting outstripping the supply. The historical deposit seemed as inexhaustible as the herds of elephants on the Serengeti plain. In fact, it was as soon depleted. Our great-grandfathers could not have foreseen what the growth of the museum age would do. And as the major works entered museums, there was more competition for the minor ones; and then the task of revival and reevaluation of schools and artists for whom our Victorian forebears had no time at all began in earnest. In due course there would be no schools or artists left to rescue from oblivion. There is no oblivion. Today, virtually everything that was made in the past is equally revived: there will be more argument about its meaning and its relative merits, but the universal resurrection of the formerly dead is pretty well an accomplished fact.

In this way the disinterested motives of the scholar go hand in hand with the intentions of the art market. To resurrect something, to study and endow it with a pedigree, is to make it salable. And what is not worth studying for aesthetic ends can generally be revived by an appeal to the sensibility of camp. Twenty years ago the word "antique" had an agreed-upon meaning: it denoted something not less than a hundred years old. Today it is used indiscriminately of anything made the day before yesterday, like 1940s' nutmeg graters. For those objects that were too ephemeral, ugly, dumb, or recent even to pass as modernist archaeology, the word "collectible" was invented.

But where the intellectual consequences of the depletion of available works of art were felt was not in the market for this sort of trivia, but rather in the balance between aesthetic experience and the rhetoric of sales.

As the body is resurrected, it is gloriously transfigured. Theology teaches us this and, by God, art history confirms it. Minor works become major ones; major ones, masterpieces; and masterpieces are rendered almost invisible by the effulgent aura of their value. We have seen a perfect example of this coercive process in the market movements that followed the great work of scholarly reevaluation of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American art carried out by a succession of historians from Lloyd Goodrich and John Bauer to John Wilmerding, Barbara Novak, and Theodore Stebbins. Of course, it was long deserved, and it is right to give the best works of Kensett, Fitz Hugh Lane, Bierstadt, and Church their place among the achievements of nineteenth-century culture as a whole, while patiently examining their special links to an American cultural and moral ethos. Some of their work is on the same exalted plane as Melville or Whitman, and the time for Americans to realize this was long due.

But market pressure has sent us into sort of nationalist frenzy. There is no genre painting, however mawkish, of frontiersmen skinning the coon or strawberry-pink New England children dancing around the blueberry bush that does not find its way into some corporate collection in Tuscaloosa or San Diego at prices that would have seemed a bit steep for Winslow Homer or George Caleb Bingham a few years ago. No grave of a provincial reputation remains unopened. There is gold in them thar holes.

Well, you may say, caveat emptor. The art market has always been the emblematic stronghold of laissez-faire economics—though like so much supposedly laissez-faire activity it benefits from a huge US tax subsidy—and the buyer has always had to be on his or her toes. Quite true, but the difference today lies in the sheer number of people who are doing the buying and selling, and the porousness of the barrier that separates the language of disinterested evaluation from sales talk. What concerns me is the drift of hyperbole to places it does not belong: for instance, the museum.

At forty-five, I am among the last generation that conducted its basic art training in empty museums, without ever thinking about the cost of their contents. And although I am grateful for the volume of scholarly attention that the art market has helped to direct on art, I cannot help feeling a twinge of regret—not to say an occasional surge of nausea—at the way in which the monetary value of museum art has been moved to the forefront of people's experience. Twenty-five years ago it was easier to appreciate works of art in their true quality: what the masterpiece, laden with fetishistic value, has lost today is a certain freedom of access—a buoyancy, an availability to the eye and to the mind. It has been invested with a spurious authority, like the façade of a bank.

This process began, for many of us, when the Metropolitan Museum spent $2.3 million on Rembrandt's painting of Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer, and put a red velvet rope in front of it to distinguish it from all other Rembrandts. Simultaneously, the painting was imposed on us as an authoritative object—money talks—and withdrawn as a communicative one. It was as though not only Rembrandt and his painting, but Homer as well, and Aristotle too, had been appropriated as passive icons of status. Time magazine, for which I did not work then, unwittingly summed this up by putting the painting on the cover with a gold border around it instead of the customary red one—a gesture that helped to cement Americans' unconscious identification of art with treasure. Twenty years later, the two have fused to a disconcerting degree.

One of the great influences on the way the public thinks about art and money has been the masterpiece-and-treasure show. These spectacles, loosely known as blockbusters, have been thick on the ground over the last decade. It used to be believed that, in order to get crowds, you had only to put on The Search for the Gold of the Tomb of the Mummy of Someone-or-Other and in they would come. Now museums are not quite so certain, since it appears that the people who attend blockbusters show no more loyalty to the museum afterward than the people who saw Raiders of the Lost Ark did to the cinema in which they saw it. However, this device—The Treasures of the Vikings, The Gold of the Gorgonzolas—helped to reinforce the illusion that art was basically a kind of bullion. The difference between masterpieces and treasures was made clear. Treasures had gold in them, whereas masterpieces did not. For the new mass audience, this only made the confusion between price and value worse, especially since the size of the crowds guaranteed that nobody could look at anything for more than three seconds.

The same mass art audience, in its role as collectors, has also transformed the conditions that surround the work of living artists. I do not think that anyone in 1945 could have predicted what the growth of American art education would do. Forty years ago it seemed an entirely marginal affair. Today, according to the best statistics I can find, 35,000 painters, sculptors, potters, art historians, and so forth graduate from the art schools of America every year: this means that every two years this culture produces as many art-related professionals as there were people in Florence at the end of the quattrocento. Behind them are millions of people interested in art, as previously noted; and hundreds of thousands who collect it.

Does this mean that we have a new Renaissance? Nope. It means that we have a severe unemployment problem at the bottom and an exaggerated star-system at the top of the artist population; while among the consumers, we have a lot of free-floating anxiety that precipitates itself in fairly irrational ways, and is more vulnerable to fashion than ever before. The art world now looks more like the fashion industry than like its former self. That is, its anxieties, which are real enough, are corporate; they tend to stem from the overriding need for a smooth flow of product. As the artist and critic Walter Darby Bannard recently remarked, the market pressure for accessible, undemanding, lavishly emotional art is now extreme. It has stepped up because the mass audience has to buy something. Despite those 35,000 people a year, the amount of good art being produced doesn't change much. The market must therefore figure out ways of selling mediocre-to-bad art at prices which are high enough to stifle aesthetic dissent.

That, in a nutshell, is the market history of postmodernism so far. It is the story of Van Gogh's Ear, without Van Gogh himself.

Nobody, and I least of all, would deny that there are admirable collectors and dealers—people who really can and really do think and look; whose sense of responsibility is not inflated into pompousness; whose eyes have histories, and who buy from informed love rather than herd instinct.

But they are not necessarily the ones on whom the contemporary art market, in its present form, depends. The ones that the market needs are the people whose apartments are shifting anthologies of the briefly new. They buy large quantities of art because they are infatuated with the art world as a system. For them it is glamorous and slightly alien, full of people—above all, young artists—who can be obsequious one moment and mysterious the next. It is, in short, "Art-World," the cultural equivalent to Disneyworld, full of rides and haunted houses and historical fictions; and they are tourists in it. Because they have been stuffed with propaganda about the increasingly vital role, the quiet power, of the collector they mistake the events in this world for the real stuff of art history, not noticing the extent to which it is a public-relations project—an imaginary garden with a few real toads in it. They are rich. Sometimes, the degree of their success and wealth is puzzling to them, and there is something a little expiatory about the way in which they buy. Most of the time they buy what other people buy. They move in great schools, like bluefish, all identical. There is safety in numbers. If one wants Schnabel they all want Schnabel; if one buys a Keith Haring, two hundred Keith Harings will be sold.

Above all, their grasp of art history is only twenty years long and their connoisseurship is not quite a fathom deep. Many of them seem to believe, quite sincerely, that Western art began with Andy Warhol. The others only behave as though it did. The idea of a present with continuous roots in history, where an artist's every action is judged by the unwearying tribunal of the dead, is as utterly alien to most of them as it is to the average American art student, raised like a battery chicken on a diet of slides. They want to believe that they are living, right now, in the middle of one of the great creative moments of Western art, something like Paris in the late nineteenth century. And in a sense they are right, because at no time since 1900 has the ground been so crusted with academic art—except that the academicism is not that of Cabanel or Bouguereau or Meissonier: it is the academicism of the spray can and the pat gesture of deep expressive involvement that signifies only routine picture-making, the academicism, not of a depleted ideology, but of an exhausted plurality. However, a Cézanne or a Seurat would have to struggle even harder to break through this crust today than he did a hundred years ago, because the mechanisms by which taste is handed down have improved.

The size of this sector of the new art audience, the gratifying uniformity of its taste, and its insecure obsession with mutually recognizable signs of status, produce many consequences for artists. One of these is that the race is not necessarily to the swift, but more likely to the voluminous. The successful artist today must exhibit more widely than ever before. He or she is apt to get locked into a market structure which resembles, and parodies, that of the multinational corporation. Twenty or thirty years ago, dealers in New York used to struggle against dealers in Paris or London, each affirming the national superiority of their artists. These transatlantic squabbles are now extinct. What you have instead, on the multinational model, is associations of galleries selling the one product in New York, London, Düsseldorf, Paris, Milan. The tensions of national schools are dissolved. But this means that the successful artist must work on an industrial scale. How many pictures does Georg Baselitz, the Fritz Scholder of Germany, paint in a year? How many Pencks have been scribbled in the last five? The kind of market pressure we have now tends to encase artists in a formula, but it also makes it hard on the person who paints ten pictures a year: the conditions of maximum exposure demand two a week. That is why Frank Auerbach, who to my mind is incomparably the best, the most intense, the most self-critical expressionist artist at work today, as good a painter a Giacometti was a sculptor, has almost no reputation in the United States: he does not paint enough pictures to supersaturate the market. Whereas everyone has heard of rubbish by Salome, Fetting, or Luciano Castelli.

So it seems to me that, today, we are repeating one of the peculiarities of the Victorian art market, though on an industrial scale. By and large, historical art is better value than contemporary art; and contemporary art is overpriced. And this takes place against a background of considerable nervousness. Nobody of intelligence in the art world believes this boom can go on forever. There is a jittery feeling that we are heading for something like the slump that hit the once-dominant French art market in the Fifties, in the decline of the Ecole de Paris. Except that instead of one Bernard Buffet, we have twenty. And except, too, that when the shakeout comes, it will be much more traumatic.

In the past, the contemporary art market has always been sustained by the way in which the novelties of today turn into the museum art of tomorrow. There is no guarantee that they will keep doing so, especially with our present sense of innovational drift—the feeling that stylistic turnover gets more and more gratuitous. What is built on novelty perishes by obsolescence, and it is likely that there will be no secondary market for some of the most fashionable art today. Does anyone really imagine that graffiti art, the vogue of 1983-1984, is going to keep passing and repassing through the auction houses for the next two decades, its price outstripping inflation? If you believe that you will also believe in the tooth fairy.

Perhaps it is not the business of critics to predict, but I am going to try anyway. I don't have a date for the crash but I do have a story line. At present the contemporary art market is very extended. It is so extended—meaning that so many pictures by newly fashionable names have been lodged with collectors who expect to realize on them one day—that the old processes of defending an artist's prices may no longer work. The traditional method, when a work by X came up in the salesroom and his dealer wanted to be sure it would not fall below the gallery price for X's work, was to bid it up. The auction room, as anyone knows, is an excellent medium for sustaining fictional price levels, because the public imagines that auction prices are necessarily real prices. However, it may be that a dealer, or a group of dealers, may not be able to defend the price levels of so much work. The slide will begin with graffiti and it will gather momentum from there. It will not affect every artist, because there are many reputations with the justifiable solidity that will enable them to survive such vicissitudes. But it will shake the confidence of the art market, and of the art world, as a whole. It won't happen in 1985, or in 1986, but we shall see what has happened as the millennium crawls closer by 1990. Nor will all its effects be bad. One does not lament the pricking of the South Sea Bubble, or the sudden collapse of the Tulip Mania. At the very least, it may cure us of our habit of gazing raptly into the bottom of the barrel, in the belief that it contains the heights of Parnassus.

Notes

[*] Gerald Reitlinger, The Economics of Taste: vol. 1, The Rise and Fall of the Picture Market, 1770–1960 (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964); vol. 2, The Rise and Fall of the Objets d'Art Market Since 1750 (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965).