

Will Today's Trophies Be Tomorrow's Castoffs?

By CAROL IRISH STRONE



If a work of art cannot live always in the present it must not be considered at all. The art of the Greeks, of the Egyptians, of the great painters who lived in other times, is not an art of the past; perhaps it is more alive today than it ever was. — Pablo Picasso, 1923

Nothing warrants a collective pause for reflection more than a market correction: The bigger the correction, the longer the pause, the greater the opportunity for reflection. As frenzied, indiscriminate consumption at record prices yields to methodical, discriminate collecting at discounted prices, the time comes to ask which of today's trophies of art are destined to become tomorrow's cultural castoffs. The fate of some will emerge in a single auction season; others will take much longer to unfold. This begs a further question: How and why do some artists secure a place in the art-historical canon for generations, centuries, and even millennia, while others do not?

ALL CHANGE (ALMOST) ALL THE TIME

The "great" names in art during any given era are not fixed for eternity. Often they go the way of bursting bubbles and fluctuating tastes. Even global celebrities like the *Mona Lisa* suffer neglect. Some disappear only temporarily before regaining cultural currency. Others are repudiated when hindsight settles on more compelling examples of a particular zeitgeist or "ism." Sometimes, today's transgressions transfigure into tomorrow's triumphs. The overwhelming majority, however, never occupy so much as a fleeting place in the canon. Canonical places of honor are generally reserved for artists who create something innovative for their time, and for those whose vision resonates with the human psyche across the ages.

In today's post-modern, relativist society, people question the notion of a single accepted art-historical canon of "great" artists and works of art. How, after all, can the history of art be distilled to a handful of

JACQUES DE GHEYN THE ELDER (1565-1629)

VANITAS STILL LIFE

1603, OIL ON WOOD, 32 1/2 X 21 1/4 IN.

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK



names and objects without glaring errors and omissions? Yet canonization persists, not only in surveys like *Janson's History of Art*, but in daily dialogues throughout the art world, and beyond, as people confront the vast story of art, either in its entirety from the ancient world to the present, or in a single sprawling sector like contemporary art. To formulate a digestible narrative, a few must stand for the many. So long as the process is infused with a healthy recognition of fallibility, it serves a valuable ordering and reflective function.

In rising markets, the aphorism goes, “a rising tide lifts all boats,” but as Warren Buffett says, “it’s not until the tide goes out that you realize who’s swimming naked.” Indeed, there will soon be many naked swimmers in the art market, especially among hopefuls seeking the same lucrative status as superstar artist-manufacturers Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst, and Takashi Murakami. These digital-era entrepreneurs have revamped what it means to be a successful artist, branding themselves as personalities and their art as luxury goods for conspicuous consumption in a celebrity-obsessed, status-symbol-seeking culture. Through the Midas touch of market-makers like Larry Gagosian, contemporary art has become *the* cultural currency, the ultimate VIP pass to a *modus vivendi* of see-and-be-seen glamour. In a post-Warholian art world, dealers have fast-tracked artists to unprecedented fame and fortune, while collectors have become short-order connoisseurs in a philosophically permissive forum where anything can be art if it is presented as such, with ample room for multiple interpretations to boot.

The market is, of course, more multifaceted than these few Dionysian aspects. Nevertheless, they illustrate the intoxicating highs reached across the board in hot pursuit of the best works by both the living and the dead. A more sober art world will re-examine the value of everything. Orgiastic exuberance comes at a price, lest we forget the Dutch Old Masters craze of the early 1900s or the French Impressionist craze of the 1980s. Many will ride the next wave back up to new skyscraping heights; others will not. Meanwhile, in more Apollonian times, it soothes the soul to reflect on the aesthetic, intellectual, and historical value of art *apart* from economics. *Janson's History of Art* is filled with artists who would never make the grade if price were the determining factor.

EMPEROR'S NEW CLOTHES, OR CANON-WORTHY?

Ten, 100, or 1,000 years hence, how will Tim Noble and Sue Webster's light-bulb dollar-signs fare against Andy Warhol's silkscreened dollar-signs? Or Damien Hirst's \$100 million diamond-covered skull, *For the Love of God*, against a 17th-century Dutch *vanitas* painting by Jacques de Gheyn the Elder? What of Maurizio Cattelan's anti-aesthetic taxidermied horse evoking Marcel Duchamp's ready-made urinal? Or Cai Guo-Qiang's gunpowder drawings channeling classical



WILLIAM-ADOLPHE BOUGUEREAU (1825–1905)
YOUNG GIRL
 1886, OIL ON CANVAS, 63 X 30 IN.
 SPRINGFIELD MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, MASSACHUSETTS

Chinese brush paintings? How will Jeff Koons's slick soft-porn bathers of the 1980s stack up to William-Adolphe Bouguereau's polished adolescents of the 1880s?

Bouguereau exemplifies the ebb and flow of cultural currency. In his day, this Frenchman was widely regarded as one of the world's greatest painters. His virtuoso marketing skills and prolific output made him very rich. Yet his reputation declined soon after he died in 1905 as critics denigrated his idealizing representational style as old-fashioned. A century later, museum exhibitions and seven-figure auction prices resurrected Bouguereau for his technical proficiency and his appeal to conventional tastes. Now that the parameters of accepted “art” have been enlarged by alternative media touting cognitive value, age-old media like painting are newly appreciated for aesthetic value. Representation, formal beauty, and decorative qualities coexist more comfortably these days with conceptual art, in a trend toward artistic desegregation. The Obama-era art world will be more pluralistic than ever, as will the canon.

Canonization occurs when consensus is reached by a complex socio-economic nexus of forums and individuals comprising the “art world.” This includes museums, galleries, auction houses, exhibitions, publications, scholars, critics, curators, collectors, dealers, and consultants. When presented with an object, the group must decide to accept it as “art” worthy of consideration. As philosopher Arthur Danto argues at one extreme, a pile of dirt exhibited by Robert Morris is art only if the art world regards it as such — not visually, but philosophically. Conversely, aesthetic standards still apply as gatekeepers exclude popular representational artists like Thomas Kinkadee, whose name recently made it into *ArtReview's* “Power 100.” Just as bestselling authors do not always pen great literature, powerhouse artists do not always create Leonardo-quality masterworks. The process is imperfect, but somehow consensus emerges among enough power-broking members of the art world for something to enter the canon. As the power brokers change, so does the canon.

In many respects, the canon is its own *vanitas*, borne of the human desire for immortality. It has all the permanence of the bubble, cut flowers, smoke, and coins visible in the *Vanitas Still Life* painted by Jacques de Gheyn the Elder 406 years ago. Look closely at this remarkable image: Laughing and weeping, the philosophers Democritus and Heraclitus gesture to a bubble bulging with a wheel of torture, a leper's rattle, a broken glass, and a flaming heart. Would that this bubble might never burst! ■



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