

The Quacksalver and the Art Market in Seventeenth-Century Netherlands

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In 1648, Adriaen Van Ostade, a prominent Dutch painter and printmaker, created an etching entitled *The Quacksalver*. A Quacksalver, or charlatan, was a salesman who peddled fraudulent cures for medical illnesses from one area to another. While the term “kwakzalver” was fairly new at the time, most ordinary citizens would understand the representation of a quacksalver and could resonate with the imagery. During the time that this print was created, the art market was growing and developing in ways which had never been seen before. However, like with any change, there will inevitably be criticism. In this paper, I will argue that Adriaen Van Ostade, by depicting a quacksalver, was paralleling the practices of the quacksalver and the artists, dealers, and market in the Seventeenth-Century Netherlands.

Art Market as Quacksalver (innovations in art market):

During the seventeenth century, the art market in the Netherlands started transforming into a market that closely resembles the art market seen today. The formal ideas of patronage and exclusive galleries were undermined, and, due to the rising middle class and flourishing economy, an open, more accessible art market was created. However, this does not mean that all art was attainable to those who did not intend to spend copious amounts of money. Some members of the middle class could not afford the costly court portraits and instead opted to purchase smaller landscapes and mass produced prints.¹ When compared to the high quality portraits and genre scenes painted by some of the Dutch Masters, these prints seemed almost fraudulent by nature. The induction of mechanical reproduction into the art market was met with mixed responses with some believing that mechanical reproduction took the singularity out of art and could no longer be characterized as a direct product of the artist’s genius.²

¹Fred S. Kleiner, *Gardner's Art Through the Ages: The Western Perspective, Volume II*, (Cengage Learning, 2009) 558

² Emily Heersink, “Expensive Wallpaper: The Belittlement of Meaning in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art,” *The Western Undergraduate Journal of Art and Visual Culture*, 2007/2008, http://www.uwo.ca/visarts/research/200809/bon_a_tirer/Emily%20Heersink.html (accessed 13 March 2014).

These prints, however, were cost effective for both the artist and the anonymous buyer. For example, while a painting attributed to Adriaen Van Ostade sold for sixteen guilders in 1664,³ well below the average price of thirty-six guilders for a painting attributed to a known artist at the time,⁴ the average price of a print in the seventeenth century was roughly three guilders. Using these calculations, an artist could create an etching, sell more than twelve, or in Ostade's case five, prints, and make a handsome profit. If an artist was only producing art for the sake of earning money, this method would be preferable to creating one, time-intensive painting.

Prints were also a viable alternative for those who could not afford the costly, original paintings. By the mid-seventeenth century, the average salary for a semi-skilled craftsman was three hundred and sixty-five guilders a year, or one guilder per day.⁵ With this annual salary, the craftsman would be able to purchase a print of a genre scene or still life that would resonate with them comfortably, but would most likely be unable to devote a month's salary to the acquisition of one painting.

While the advancement of mechanical reproduction made art more accessible to the masses, it arguably did so by degrading the term "art". They seemingly put prints up on a pedestal and, while they did not hold the same clout as a commissioned portrait, they were still considered art worthy of being displayed and appreciated in the home. The acceptance of this idea as appropriate is reminiscent of a quacksalver. Contemporaries may have seen the elevation of prints as high art as the unraveling or devolution of the art market. This idea of turning a blind eye and treating a work that arguably takes less skill, like a print, in the same regard as a commissioned portrait may have been seen as almost sacrilegious by a serious painter. By producing this work, it is possible that Ostade was connecting the

³ John Michael Montias, "Inventory of Nicolaes Lenerts," *The Montias Database of 17th Century Dutch Art Inventories*, <http://research.frick.org/montias/browserecord.php?action=browse&-recid=1717> (accessed 13 April 2014)

⁴ Etro, Federico and Stepanova, Elena "The Market for Paintings in the Netherlands during the Seventeenth Century", Working Papers, Department of Economics, University of Venice "Ca' Foscari:10"

⁵ *ibid*

idea of a quacksalver hyping up his goods in order to legitimize them with the idea of the art market trying to legitimize prints as “higher art” than they truly are. However, since this piece may be a critique of mass produced art, the fact that Ostade portrayed it in an etching is interesting. However, Ostade, an artist revered for his etchings, may have been making a statement about the inferior, less time consuming prints on the market by portraying this subject matter in such a high quality, intricate print.

Dealer as Quacksalver (innovation in art market):

While Ostade may have intended to comment on the state of the art market with his depiction of the quacksalver, he may also have been trying to comment on the new practices of buying and selling art during this time. With the digression from direct patronage and the newfound possibility of resale, the role of the dealer, both formal and informal, arose. Due to the generic depictions found in contemporary art, dealers no longer had to worry about appealing to a niche clientele. They could acquire a piece that would be relatable to the masses through any number of, oftentimes less than reputable, means and be confident that they could find a buyer for it. While some dealers truly cared about the pieces they were offering, there was a “lower- quality end of the market, second-hand dealers, usually women called “*uijtdraegsters*,” [who] resold works of art...which they had bought at estate sale”.⁶ These dealers frequently bought shoddy works of art and immediately marked them obscene amounts, earning them a quick, hefty profit. These disreputable dealers, like the quacksalver, have no vested interest in their business, but instead are focused solely on obtaining money through dishonest measures. Ostade, a reputable guild member, would most likely hold ideals similar to those of guild members in Amsterdam who proposed “...official recognition of a gallery they had set up and through which... artists might sell, under strict supervision of masters.”⁷ The proposal of a regulated

⁶ John Michael Montais, “Art Dealers in the Seventeenth-Century Netherlands”, *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* Vol 18 No 4, 1988:245

⁷ Neil de Marchi, “The role of Dutch auctions and lotteries in shaping the art market(s) of 17th century Holland”, *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, Vol 28 issue 2: 210

gallery, they argued, would curb semi off-market sales and allow “Lovers of art” to understand “...the truth about what they buy...”.⁸

While I previously used the term dealer, it is not quite accurate. Oftentimes, the “dealers” of this time were really merchants and investors whose sole goal was to make a quick profit. These investors would attend auctions held the *Desolate Boedelskamer*, the Bankruptcy Chamber, or an estate sale where they could purchase fine art among other household goods, such as pots and furs.⁹ These auctions virtually became an extension of the merchant’s business activity.¹⁰ It is of no surprise, then, that four out of every five buyers of art at the Orphan Auction paid not in cash, but with credit.¹¹ This furthers the idea that these men had no intention of keeping the art, regardless of the quality, but rather were looking to turn a quick profit. This can be equated to the quacksalver, who does not truly believe in the importance of his medicine, but is merely interested in making a quick profit.

Dealer as Quacksalver:

The idea of the quacksalver travelling from place to place may seem trivial in the larger context, but may have actually played a larger role than expected in the creation of Ostade’s piece. At this point in time, the guilds of Haarlem wanted to corner the art market with local art by drafting exclusionary policies that made the sale of imported works nearly impossible.¹² However, like with any exclusionary law, there are those willing to risk the consequences, in this case a fairly substantial fine, in order to make a profit. In the market at this time, the majority of those fined for these illicit activities were not

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ John Michael Montias, *Art at Auction in 17th -Century Amsterdam* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003), 11

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ John Michael Montias, *Art at Auction in 17th Century Amsterdam* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003), 16

¹² John Michael Montias, “Art Dealers in the Seventeenth-Century Netherlands”, *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* Vol 18 No 4, 1988:247

locals, but rather foreigners.¹³ If found out, these outsiders, like the quacksalver, could flee from the penalties they incurred and perform the same actions in a completely new area where they were relatively unknown. The negative portrayal of Ostade's quacksalver perfectly mirrors the xenophobia found in the seventeenth century art market.

Dealer as Quacksalver:

While the exclusionary laws placed on foreign art were directly created in order to promote the purchase of local art, they also, either knowingly or unknowingly, helped curtail the market for copies of genuine pieces. However, the fact that this practice was curtailed does not mean that it was not prevalent in both Amsterdam and Haarlem. Illegal auctions that bypassed guild regulations altogether were notorious for the "...large numbers of paintings of questionable provenance and quality..." that came through their doors. While one may believe that only uninformed collectors would not recognize a reproduction, the works these dealers tried to pass off as true originals were not the "...simplest copies or poor quality work by pupils ..." but rather "...equivalent to the best originals available in Amsterdam."¹⁴ While these were not low quality copies like an Amsterdam Guild insinuated, they were nonetheless fraudulent works of art.¹⁵ Like the remedies of the quacksalver, these works appeared to be what they depicted, but in reality were gross exaggerations of originals. They, while equally as expensive as genuine products, lacked the true qualities that constituted its assumed value; therefore, one could argue that Ostade was taking a subtle approach in criticizing the phony art dealers in the Netherlands by comparing them to notoriously obvious criminals.

The Businessman Artist as Quacksalver:

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ Neil de Marchi, "The role of Dutch auctions and lotteries in shaping the art market(s) of 17th century Holland", *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, Vol 28 issue 2: 207

¹⁵ *ibid*

During the mid-seventeenth century, some non-affiliated artists took on the role of both artist and businessman. For the artists without dealers, their studios and the local community became the areas where they sold their pieces. In 1623, the Guild of St. Andrew forbade the sale of art in outside places and, in 1635, the guilds prescribed that art could not be sold door to door.¹⁶ The fact that latter restriction was implemented shows a parallel between some artists and a quacksalver. Both groups skirted around common etiquette in order to hawk their goods and were eventually driven out of a public space by laws created by reputable groups. Also, the door to door sale of artwork can be compared to the quacksalver moving from one area to another. Both interactions with the clientele are brief and sales based. The client has to act quickly in order to acquire the good the seller is retailing, whether it is of high quality or not. If the artist's work is subpar, they, like the quacksalver, have already moved on and "fled" to a different district, where they will inevitably use the same sales tactic.

Artist as Quacksalver:

The basic tenets of being a quacksalver dictate that the quacksalver himself is a less than reputable man who hawks diluted goods, oftentimes masking them as something of a much higher quality. While quacksalvers usually peddle their medical goods, this reduction of quality can also be applied to subpar pieces of artwork sold during this time period. With the rise of availability of art in the revolutionary, open art market came a drastic decrease in price. Artists producing uncommissioned works, mostly for the constantly growing middle-class, were no longer making the profits found in higher end commissions and oftentimes took a more economical approach with their work. They emphasized keeping the cost low rather than quality and oftentimes ended up "...us[ing] a monochromatic palette in their landscape painting and allow[ing] the colour and texture of the support

¹⁶ Emily Heersink, "Expensive Wallpaper: The Belittlement of Meaning in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art," *The Western Undergraduate Journal of Art and Visual Culture*, 2007/2008, http://www.uwo.ca/visarts/research/200809/bon_a_tirer/Emily%20Heersink.html (accessed 13 March 2014).

to show through” rather than using a more costly, but higher quality impasto.¹⁷ Even though Ostade’s *The Quacksalver* is a monochromatic print, the homochromatic palette mimics the palette discussed above. In this regard, the artist is no better than the quacksalver, promoting something seemingly of high quality, but in reality far inferior.

The drastic drop in quality of both materials and technique by inferior artists simultaneously increased the prolificacy of said artists and transformed their art into the much less reputable craft. While these terms may seem synonymous nowadays, the main distinction is the fact that craft is solely created for financial gain, while art is created out of passion. The quacksalver, we can argue, is only in his field for the monetary gain and financial success. He knows his actions are immoral, yet he continues to deceive people in order to make a nice living. He has no shame in lying, either directly or by omission, to achieve his intended outcome. We can parallel this with the craft-making artist. He knows that his work is subpar, yet he deceives the masses into believing his work to be legitimate. With this etching, it is very possible that Ostade was calling out his contemporary “fraud” artists by comparing them to the master of immoral deception.

Even though Ostade’s *The Quacksalver* may be viewed solely as a genre etching upon first glance, it is extremely likely that there is at least one, if not many more, political undertones regarding the art market and those who are involved in it present. Ostade’s position as a guild member in one of the most renowned guilds only solidifies the likeliness that he is expressing his dissatisfaction of the deteriorating state of the art market through subtle clues and hints.

¹⁷ The Hungarian Art Gallery, “The Dutch Art Market in the Seventeenth Century” Accessed March 5, 2014 <http://dutch.arts.gla.ac.uk/markets.htm>

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