

Review of journal article by Carol Gibson-Wood:
“Picture Consumption in London at the End of the Seventeenth Century”

Robert Milton Underwood, Jr.

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Review

Dr. Carol Gibson-Wood's essay, "Picture Consumption in London at the End of the Seventeenth Century," presents a Marxist analysis of the burgeoning interest of the middle class for pictures¹. She began her essay by pointing out that at the beginning of the eighteenth century, the two most prominent English writers on art expressed displeasure with the popularity of art among the middle classes for what they thought was a shallow use of art for decoration, rather than for deeper, more intellectual reasons. The two art critics, moralist Lord Shaftesbury and painter Johnathan Richardson, were disappointed to see the middle classes develop "false taste" and overlook art for its "instructional potential" (Gibson-Wood 491).

Among other things, Gibson-Wood made three major points: (1) by the 1690s, the middle class in London were buying pictures to decorate their homes, (2) a large percentage of the pictures on the open market in London and surrounding areas were by painters living in London, and (3) discussions of "taste" needed to be reevaluated to accommodate the new interest. As primary sources for her research, Gibson-Wood referred to London and Westminster auction catalogs from 1689 to 1692, and probate-related domestic inventories from within the same two cities during the period 1695 to 1745. Probate records had already been used by art historians to study art of the Netherlands, but a similar focus had never been placed on English art.

¹ The word "picture" may have been occasionally used to designate a framed print, but far more often than not, it referred to original paintings.

The initial significance of auction houses that primarily catered to upper-class patrons was that it gave the middle classes something to aspire to. It gave them a sample of what good taste was all about with regards to pictures. But condescending elite views eventually tended to *distance* the middle class, not *attract* it. Gibson-Wood wrote that there was no evidence to support the claim that middle class buyers wanted paintings to emulate aristocratic collections. The middle class may have been initially inspired by the upper classes to appreciate art, but they began to love the acquisition of pictures for the practical purposes of decorating, and not for investment.

A market for pictures therefore developed for the middle class, but it could not have developed without the expanding economic growth that occurred in the late seventeenth century that spurred a consumer revolution. The upper class represented only about two to three percent of the population. In comparison, the middle class grew to almost a quarter of the population, and their ranks represented all sorts of people from countless walks of life, including merchants, tradesmen, shopkeepers, lawyers, apothecaries, doctors, grocers, and fishmongers.

The probate records that Gibson-Wood analyzed were originally compiled by assessors to determine a record of possessions after someone died, especially when heirs were involved. The records listed individual items, but assessors made no attempt to accurately identify pictures or their creators, nor did they assign values to individual pictures. Values were estimated for contents of an entire room.

Middle class Londoners didn't just display pictures conspicuously to impress guests. They also placed them all around the house, including in bedrooms, kitchens, powder rooms and even in servants' rooms. This act of hanging pictures almost anywhere within the house showed that they were more interested in pictures as decorations, like nice drapery, rather than as

investments. Values of these pictures averaged around 10 shillings, about as much as a woman's petticoat (Gibson-Wood 493).

Since the middle classes couldn't afford to regularly travel abroad for the acquisition of pictures, most were bought in London. A burgeoning business developed, with many artists of average talent working in the area and getting a chance to paint and sell their pictures.

Many were bought at public auctions, the concept having already been successful in the Netherlands earlier in the century. The reason Gibson-Wood used auction catalogs as one of her two primary sources of information was because there weren't any published records on what was kept and sold at local shops or artists' studios. Where auctions were held to sell pictures, advertisements were made in advance in the form of auction catalogs. These catalogs usually offered around 300 pictures, but some offered more than twice as many. Details about individual paintings were usually minimal, referred to them instead with colorful language such as "finely done," "nicely painted," and occasionally "extraordinary" (Gibson-Wood 494).

Not everyone who attended the auctions did so only for buying pictures. The auctions were actually social events and many people attended for entertainment value. Gibson-Wood mentioned one lady who didn't buy anything, but had fun socializing and sure liked the excitement of the event (494).

Prices at the auctions were not typically recorded, but were expected to have been in the range of shillings (i.e., less than a pound), with the starting bids set low (at six pence) in order to stimulate initial interest.

The percentage of households in the London area with pictures rose from 54 percent in 1675 to 79 percent in 1695. The picture craze was so popular that many instructional books were

published so that beginning painters and dilettantes could learn to paint or improve their techniques.

It is easy to see why art critics Shaftesbury and Richardson would have been shocked when they first observed pictures being bought in mass by the middle class. They had observed the earlier practice of the upper classes buying collectible paintings because of their value and their ability to metaphorically represent the best in humanity. Buying for the purposes of decoration and not investment meant that English art history then needed to include the new trend.