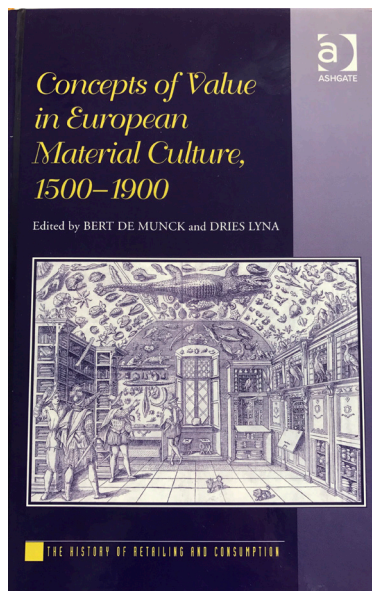


Book Review

Bert de Munck, Dries Lyna, eds., Concepts of value in European material culture, 1500 – 1900 (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2015), 304 pages, ISBN 9781472451965

by Barbara Pezzini



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This collection of eleven essays stems from a workshop titled “The Location of Value in Early Modern Discourse and Economic Practice”, organised by Bert De Munck & Ilja Van Damme at the Centre for Urban History at the University of Antwerp in September 2010. All contributions, except the chapters by Anneleen Arnout, Helen Clifford and Adriana Turpin, were presented as papers there, with titles very similar to their final printed version. With the substitution of Dries Lyna to Ilja Van Damme as co-Editor with Bert De Munck, the line-up of the book has switched towards the discussion of value within artistic production. In fact, if at the original workshop four papers examined art appraisal and the remaining eight analysed value in material culture, in the printed book six essays out of eleven deal with matters related to art.

Even in its changed format, the book adopts the workshop’s ample horizons. It promises reflections on a vexed and complex subject – value – and for a wide range of objects and approaches – material culture. Its wings spread on a large geographical territory – Europe – and on a long chronological period – 1500 to 1900. This immediately poses

a problem to anyone but the most erudite reviewer – who possesses the sum of historical, philosophical and sociological knowledge necessary to comment on such a broad range of analyses? I shall, for intellectual honesty, declare that this review is written by a historian, whose published work spans the years 1850 to 1970, and whose main research interest is principally the commerce, criticism and collecting (private and institutional) of high-end European paintings. There may be, therefore, subtleties about the earlier periods and regarding different methodological approaches that escape my own reading of this book, which aims to review its strengths and weaknesses in the fields of sociology and social history, and its relevance to scholars of the art market.

The focus of the collection is tight and well defined. Its first chapter, which also serves as introduction, written jointly by the collection Editors De Munck and Lyna, is titled “Locating and Dislocating Value: A Pragmatic Approach to Early Modern and Nineteenth-Century Economic Practices”. It makes a well-argued case for the necessity of this book within art market studies, and states that the project aims to “understand how the relationship of social contexts, institutions and culture on the one hand and economic practices, on the other, transformed in the run-up to the modern industrial and consumer society” (p. 2). To do so, its essays connect “economic practices to broader historical transformations from the late Middle Age through the nineteenth century” (p. 2). An important keyword to understand this chapter, and indeed the whole book, is “pragmatic” – the authors in fact do not deal with the philosophical concept of value, but adopt the approach of historic materialism, making a plea for the return to central stage of the issues involved in the theorisations by Karl Marx, Karl Polanyi and Max Weber of the processes of “commodification”, “rationality” and “calculability” (p. 28).

The book is divided in three parts. The first, “Expanding Markets and Market Devices”, borrows the term “market devices” from Michel Callon’s performativity theory to illustrate how the networks of value functioned in seventeenth-century Münster (Christof Jeggle), eighteenth-century Austrian Netherlands (Dries Lyna), seventeenth to nineteenth century Antwerp (Ilja Van Damme) and nineteenth century Brussels. The subjects treated are cloth merchants, art auctions and strategies of branding, which are used to illustrate principally the changing – and mutually informing – relationship between concepts of quality and concepts of value. The second part, “Conventions, Material Culture, and Institutions” treats the assessment of value and quality, and how these were consolidated and/or changed by new institutions and practices, in subjects such as real estate, paintings, and buttons and buckle manufacturing. Geographically, the essays in this section deal with early modern Milan (Michela Barbot), eighteenth-century France, (Tomas Macsotay), and eighteenth to nineteenth century northern Italy (Barbara Bettoni). The third and final part, “The Old and the New”, examines how quality came to be understood within early modernity through valuations of “old” and “new”. This section presents two case studies of determination of value: the first analyzes glass in early modern Venice (Corine Maitte) and the second silver in eighteenth-century Britain (Helen Clifford). The book concludes with a bird’s eye view of collecting practices in early modern Europe (Adriana Turpin). The essays present much of interest to historians of the art market, also beyond the boundaries of their chosen specialism.

Among the contributions, I wish to mention these by Van Damme and Arnout. Van Damme's essay on branding strategies, which presents lucid and compelling reflections on asymmetric information, importance of credit, negotiation and trust. Arnout's paper on auctions of paintings in Brussels gives a noteworthy methodological counterpart to Thomas Bayer and John Page's *The Development of the Art Market in England: Money as Muse, 1730-1900* (London: Routledge, 2011). Whereas Bayer and Page display the statistician's faith to interpret their sample of auction data from Christie's as explanatory of the whole art market in England, Arnout brings forward very eloquently the subtler point that there are multiple auction cultures which are historically mutable and which locate value in different ways.¹

The first chapter of this collection is a recommended read for all historians of the art market because of its lucidity in presenting questions and problems crucial to the discipline, and its ability to navigate a complex and vast literature on such a complicated subject as value. This reader, however, regretted the absence from the debate of the works by Princeton University-based economic sociologists, such as Lyn Spillman and Viviana Zelizer, who have produced a wealth of essays which deal with the same impasse described by De Munck and Lyna – e.g. the methodological individualism of economists, Marxists determinism and the structuralist approach of Pierre Bourdieu – and who present a methodological alternative to economics.² The authors, instead, have preferred to refer to “heterodox” economic sociologists, such as Lucien Karpik, or sociologists connected to Actor-Network-Theory such as Michel Callon, whose readings of the market still fall within the discipline of economics, although presenting a “heterodox”, more socially conscious, version of it (p. 9).³

A fundamental point that De Munck and Lyna make in their introduction is the historicisation of the concept that they define as the “location of value”, a term borrowed from Elizabeth Honig (pp. 10-12).⁴ The need for this concept stems from the problem of identifying and examining the shifting parameters of value across time. By “location of value” De Munck and Lyna mean the identification and tracking of the repertoire of practices that individuals, groups, and institutions have at their disposal to enact evaluations. In

1 For Bayer and Page, see Anne Helmreich's review in *Nineteenth Century Art Worldwide* 11 (Spring 2012), available online <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/spring12/the-development-of-the-art-market-in-england-money-as-muse-17301900-by-thomas-m-bayer-and-john-r-page> (Accessed March 2017).

2 For instance, Lyn Spillman, 'Causal Reasoning, Historical Logic, and Sociological Explanation', in Jeffrey C. Alexander, ed., *Self, Social Structure, and Beliefs: Explorations in sociology*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 216–233; Viviana Zelizer, *Economic Lives: How Culture Shapes the Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

3 Lucien Karpik, *Valuing the Unique: The Economics of Singularities*, tr. Nora Scott (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); Michel Callon, 'What Does it Mean to Say that Economics is Performative?' in Donald MacKenzie et al., eds., *Do Economists Make Markets? On the Performativity of Economics*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 311–357.

4 Elizabeth A. Honig, 'The Beholder as a Work of Art: A Study in the Location of Value in Seventeenth-Century Flemish Painting', in Reindert Falkenburg, Jan de Jong, Herman Roodenburg and Frits Scholten, eds., *Beeld en Zelfbeeld in de Nederlandse Kunst/Image and Self-Image in Netherlandish Art 1550-1750*, (Zwolle: Waanders, 1995), 253–297.

the course of the book, editors and authors show how the “location of value” functioned and transformed in various European places during the early modern period. De Munck and Lyna problematize the accepted interpretation that sees the change from a definition of value based on intrinsic qualities (medieval approach) to one determined by extrinsic qualities (modern approach). This shift from “material” to “context” is examined through processes such as marketing, accessory publications, and retail spaces.

If De Munck and Lyna’s use of the tools of sociology and economics is rich and sophisticated, their refusal to engage with any kind of theorisation of broad superstructure in historical trajectories – which the authors interpret as teleology – strikes this reader as a self-imposed limitation of their approach. As they write (emphasis added), “we would rather suggest that transitions at the level of markets, institutions and agency should be linked to transformation at the level of the relationship of subject to objects. What changed, after all, was the very relationship of individuals and groups to products and, ultimately, to matter and materiality” (p. 25). This is a textbook Actor-Network Theory approach: there is no such a thing as a social super-structure or metanarrative, there are only connections and interactions that form a social structure in a continuous process of conjunction and disjunction.⁵

Yet De Munck and Lyna seem to go beyond this approach soon after, when they break away from this realm of pragmatic network analyses to state that (emphasis added) “these essays nonetheless *point to broader historical transformations* in Europe” (p. 26); earlier they had also hinted to following broad concepts of periodization when they mention “the transition to the nineteenth century” (p. 23). Their well-argued and nuanced introduction lacks, in my opinion, a reflection on how the social and commercial networks and personal relationships that create “locations of value” trespass and crystallize into broader structures. It feels as if a logical and critical (in the sense of critique) passage is missing. Because this collection of essays ultimately is about history as much as it is about economics, a paragraph on historiography would have been enlightening to the writers as well as the readers, with references to concepts such as the theory of social history, metanarratives and “multiscopic” history.⁶ It would also have helped the editors to express a stronger conceptual thread throughout their collection of essay. These are very complex topics and De Munck and Lyna are certainly not expected to resolve them in a few hundred words, but some discussion of them would have undoubtedly enriched their argument, and perhaps even helped them to resolve the impasse between the closer focus of their case studies and how they fit within broader processes, a crucial problem to which they refer to only laterally. This is a point that I would wish to present to all historians of the art market: when tackling a broader analysis, not to limit

5 For an overview of ANT, see Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: an Introduction to Actor–Network Theory*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

6 Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon and István M. Sziójártó *What is Microhistory? Theory and Practice*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2013).

ourselves to sociology, aesthetics and economics, but to construct and refine our arguments using also the toolbox of historiographical theory.

Finally, my editorial eye caught throughout the book a scattering of proofing problems that tarnish the scholarship of the essays. For instance, “Donna Macleod” in error for “Dianne Sachko Macleod”. There is also a tendency (of which some authors are more guilty than others) not to give page numbers in the footnotes. These omissions make it difficult for the readers to find in the texts cited the passages used by the authors to construct their arguments. The language is, at times, a little strained, with the use of terms such as “aforementioned” and “plethora” that mar the otherwise elegant phrasing. More importantly, to refer to collectors in general exclusively with the male pronoun is not only outmoded and exclusive, but also historically incorrect. This is a blunder that should not have passed the editors’ red pen and it is my most serious complaint. Overall, the book would have benefitted from a supplementary reading by a copy editor, a final reference check and to be furnished with some additional material such as maps, timelines and – most importantly – a general bibliography. It is a true chore for the reader to try and keep track of all the rich reading material referred to in the footnotes.

Apart from my principal point on historiography and these perhaps pedantic editorial comments, I found much to praise in the thought-provoking reflections presented by this book. Its editors and authors have provided art market scholars with a pioneering, solid and well-argued sifting of the concept of value to which other scholars will undoubtedly need to refer when writing on issues such as production, consumption, and market exchange.

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