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GENDER AND THE MARKET FOR MODERN ART IN THE UNITED STATES

Looking at gender as a factor in changing attitudes to art market values in New York, and the key role of tastemakers in this process

Abstract:

Between the inter-war years and 1960s, there was a radical shift in the art market status of modern art in the United States. This was not simply a matter of time. This article argues that there was a re-gendering of the discourse of art patronage in America, with modern art being re-presented—as never before—to the potential collector as being if not masculine then 'not feminine'. It is argued that the Museum of Modern Art, New York, explicitly set out to re-gender collecting discourse as part of its overall aim of enhancing the status of modern art in America.

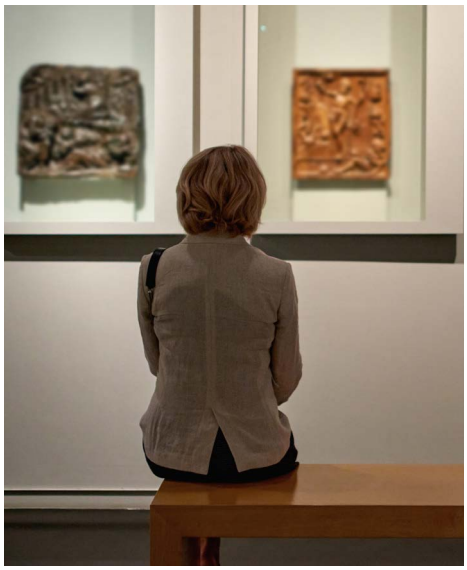
Conventionally, art collecting has been discussed in terms of 'great collectors', focusing attention for the most part on the wealth and status typically associated with such individuals. It is only quite recently that any attention has been paid to gender as well as class, with respect to analysing collector motivations and behaviours

It has become something of an art history cliché that the period between the 1940s and 1960s heralded the critical 'triumph' of modern art in the United States. Less frequently discussed has been the concurrent shift in the market for modern art in America. Whereas in the inter-war years or early 1940s, the values of modern art were really quite low (Robson, 1994), by the late 1960s, modern art was *'long recognized as a sound area of investment'* (Grant, 1968, cited in Cras, 2013, p.3). The question then is: what explains this change? This article argues that a key factor was a shift in the discourse of art patronage in the United States. More specifically, the collecting discourse was re-gendered. This did not happen of its own accord, and it will be argued that a key tastemaker in the American art world—the Museum of Modern Art, New York—played a fundamental role by deliberately setting out to re-gender collecting discourse, so as to raise the status of modern art in the United States.

Collecting more generally has been defined as a form of socially sanctioned acquisitive activity, whereby the symbolic value of such singularized objects is linked to enhanced monetary value (Brimo, 1938/2016). A collection—and this includes art—is seen variously as: a concrete expression of a collector's taste; as having a psychological dimension; representing an intense connection between collector and objects; and as indicative of a collector's identity traits, imaginative capabilities and even world view. Personal motives for collecting can be difficult to define, but typically involve personal taste, fashion, the desire to possess, and an ambition to impress both one's inner circle and society at large. Art collecting, historically, has been regarded as transforming the meaning of objects from the profane—i.e., mundane, ordinary, commonplace, the realm of commodity—to the sacred—i.e., capable of generating reverence, a vehicle of transcendent experience (Potvin and Myzelev, 2009). Further, elite or 'grand style' art collecting has typically not merely demonstrated a collector's wealth, but conferred a singular status upon the collector concerned, evidenced their ostensibly highly developed aesthetic discrimination, and provided a means of being memorialised (Johnson, 1986). For such reasons, as Saarinen (1959, p.346) noted, art collecting in America was attractive because *'art is conveniently endowed with exactly the right characteristics to make its pursuit not only pleasurable but also wise and virtuous.'*

Conventionally, art collecting has been discussed in terms of 'great collectors', focusing attention for the most part on the wealth and status typically associated with such individuals. It is only quite recently that any attention has been paid to gender as well as class, with respect to analysing collector motivations and behaviours. This is an important omission for, as Belk and Wallendorf note, in a consumption society *'collecting makes visible the gender distinctions governing social life'* (1994, p.251). With respect to wider socio-gender norms, in Western societies, the attributes associated with masculinity are more closely aligned to highly prized cultural values than the norms of femininity. In the United States, a prime 'individualistic' culture, masculinity i.e., being 'self-oriented' (self-assertive, autonomous) is typically prioritised over femininity i.e., being 'other-oriented' (nurturing, deferent) (Baily Wolf *et al*., 2015). Indeed, despite ostensible advances for women in America in both political and economic terms post World War I, and the increasing currency of the idea of the *'new woman'* in the 1920s, the inter-war era was also impacted by conservative gender norms. In particular, a new prominence was given to Sigmund Freud's notions of female sexuality as 'naturally' passive and acquiescent, with the *'innate'* natures of men and women being fundamentally different (Chafe, 1973, p.100). Even in the 1930s, despite substantial changes in women's actual lives, gender norms of men's superiority over women continued to hold sway, and indeed Freudian notions of 'innate' gender difference had a further renaissance in post-World War II America (Meyerowitz, 1994).

In cultures typified by inherent gender difference—ergo Western nations—'elite' collecting (that of high value art exclusively) has historically been characterised as calling for personal attributes such as aggression and overt ambition, characteristics conventionally seen as untypical of women (Belk and Wallendorf, 1994). Significantly, the 'elite' collecting ethos strongly reflects what has been



identified as the early twentieth century ideal of American manliness: individualistic competitive success (Rotundo, 1993). In the Gilded Age (last quarter of the nineteenth century) American self-made men had been, for the first time, encouraged to see art as an opportunity for profitable investments (Vottero, 2013). By the early 1900s, when art collecting in the United States was becoming better established, 'grand' collections—and more particularly the European 'Old Masters' collections of industrialist-plutocrats such as J. Pierpont Morgan—were being lauded as exemplifying novel American cultural tropes. These tropes were: the *'businessman with taste'* as American hero; New World attainment of cultural complexity via accumulation of the treasures of the Old World; and the successful combination of tradition—the function of the ruling class—and timely modernity—the business attitude and public commitment of the private collector (Santori, 2003, p.71). Conversely, where woman as collectors was concerned, contemporary male anxieties about a supposed turn-of-the century feminization of American culture meant that women as an entity were criticised (if mentioned at all) as signifying only the perils of poor collecting practice (McCarthy, 1991).

In gender terms, art collecting has enabled men to participate in the so-called 'feminine' world of consumption, while at the same time not subverting their more conventional identification with the 'masculine' world of production (Belk and Wallendorf, 1994). More importantly, within collecting discourse, men have conventionally been identified with the 'ideal' collector: someone with the ability to make disinterested aesthetic judgements; those with a vision for their collections; and who viewed their holdings as *'an ensemble with a philosophy behind it'* (Saisselin, 1984, p.68). Male collectors, in the early twentieth century, were alone seen as having the capability to *'exhibit objects in both public and private venues for the spectatorial pleasure of others'*, i.e., did not build collections for exclusively personal reasons (Tierstein, 1996, p.31). Conversely, women were characterised as bound by their synecdochic nature—i.e, preoccupied with *the cares of the particular* and regularly reminded of their *'fleshly limitations'* (Alcoff, 1996, p.15). Inherently lacking the supra-personal mind-set of the 'true' collector, women were regarded as unable to make disinterested choices as to aesthetic quality, and as capable only of acquiring art for purely personal or merely decorative reasons.

Typically, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the expectation of social decorum meant that American women's collecting was typically restricted to favouring those fields—such as decorative arts or folk art—as yet disdained by wealthy male connoisseurs or the art establishment, or perhaps they adopted a more *'pioneering'* role in favouring the work of *'new'* or as-yet under-valued artists (McCarthy, 1991, p.155). For American women, art collecting was *'a sort of private investment'* (Time, 1936, p.28) in artists rather than in pictures per se, with collections based primarily upon personal relationships (Watson, 1931). In the terms of collecting discourse, this inevitably meant these collections lacked the same status as the more 'disinterested' collections of males. These gender preconceptions found expression in early American collections of modern art such as that of Museum of Modern Art founders, Elizabeth (Lillie) Bliss or Abby Rockefeller. These factors might seem unimportant to art market status, and the consequent sales values

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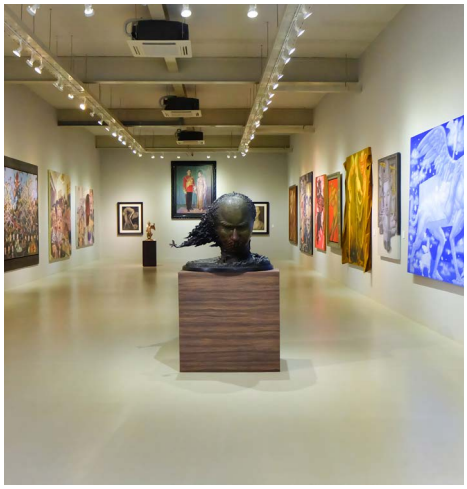


The first significant introduction of modern art to the American public was the 1913 Armory Show, with commercial galleries beginning to present such art from the 1910s onwards

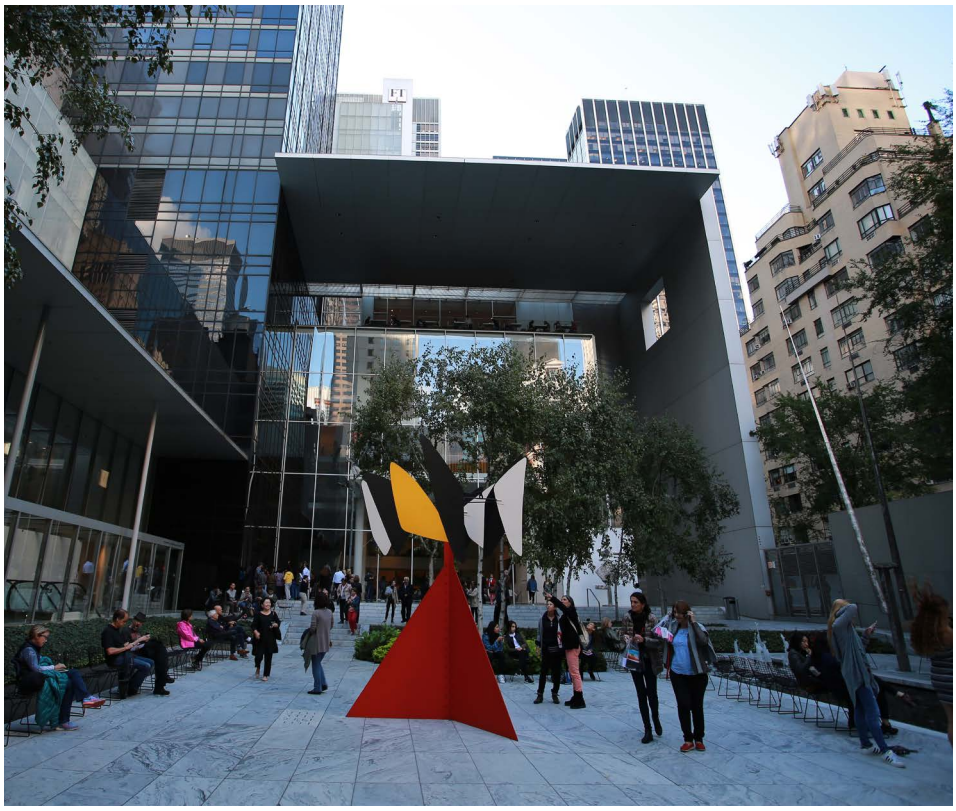
of modern art, in the United States. However, the lens of such collecting discourse in America could be seen to impact upon the status of women's collections, and, more importantly, the art which they collected might be devalued by association. For any institution such as MoMA, concerned with raising the status of modern art, this had obvious implications.

Almost by definition, the art with the highest cultural standing and comprising the 'grand' collections in the United States in the early twentieth century, was European 'Old Masters'. For modern art to enter 'elite' collections, it had to achieve an enhanced status, i.e., have museum standing, if it were to ensure the interests of the most important collectors. In the United States, a key reason for this was Federal taxation policy, which encouraged private philanthropy in the form of tax-exempt charitable donations to public institutions. This meant that modern art needed to have clear support from public not-for-profit institutions, in order to attract high-status collectors who might want to memorialise their art patronage via the public realm (Robson, 2019). This process took some time and effort to achieve. The first significant introduction of modern art to the American public was the 1913 Armory Show, with commercial galleries beginning to present such art from the 1910s onwards. However, modern art remained controversial in American institutional eyes for some time. The nation's most prestigious art museum, the Metropolitan Museum in New York, acquired its first 'modern' art, a late nineteenth century Cezanne, in 1913, but ignored modern painting later than Impressionism during the 1920s and 1930s. In the 1920s, moreover, there were no other publicly chartered not-for-profit institutions in New York where the public could see modern art (McCarthy, 1991). By the late 1920s, supporters of modern art in the United States recognized that this situation had to be addressed if the status of modern art was to be enhanced. This led to the establishment of the first American chartered museum dedicated to modern art, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, in October 1929.

The Museum of Modern Art, New York (subsequently referred to as MoMA) had two main aims. The first was to help people enjoy, understand, and use the visual arts of our time. Its success as a critical tastemaker has been explored extensively. The second—to 'encourage patronage of modern art by the public' (Soby, 1944, cited in Messer, 1979, p.152)—is, however, what concerns this article. The founding of MoMA in 1929 was hailed as marking the final acceptance of modern art by *'respectable'* society (Goodrich, 1929, p.664), and by the 1940s, New York art dealers considered MoMA as seminal in encouraging both public and collector interest in modern art. The initial expectation was that as MoMA's founders were the very pinnacle of 'respectable' New York society—the figurehead of the new museum was Abby Rockefeller, wife of the-then richest man in the United States—social status would be sufficient to encourage other well-to-do Americans to support modern art. However, it was soon realized that another factor was impacting upon the art market potential of modern art: gender. As a museum commissioned 'A Report on the Development of the Museum of Modern Art' (1935-36) argued:

> *one of the greatest barriers to the healthy development of [modern] art interest in America is unquestionably the fact that it has been so largely cultivated hitherto as an interest peculiar to women. (Chamberlain, n.d., p.152)*

This claim, by external consultant Artemis Packard, might be seen as unexpected, as MoMA had only recently been founded by three women collectors: Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, Elizabeth Bliss and Mary Quinn Sullivan. However, the claim was perhaps not surprising, as it was representative both of contemporary societal gender norms and collecting discourse.



Unusually for a United States art museum, when chartered in 1929 as a public institution, MoMA had no core collection or initial endowment. In consequence, the Modern was uniquely dependent for its survival, let alone growth, upon attracting support in the form of donations of works of modern art, as well as financial contributions or bequests, from wealthy American private art collectors

In light of contemporary socio-gender preconceptions and collecting discourse, and despite the fact that women collectors were so essential to founding the Museum of Modern Art, it is perhaps not surprising that Alfred Barr Jr., Director of Collections at MoMA, concurred with the proposal put forward in the 1936 Packard Report, that modern art had to cease being seen primarily 'as an interest peculiar to women.' That it was MoMA, rather than any other American art museum of the time, which explored strategies to this end, is rooted in the circumstances of the museum's foundation in 1929, and its financial situation over its first decade or so. Unusually for a United States art museum, when chartered in 1929 as a public institution, MoMA had no core collection or initial endowment. In consequence, the Modern was uniquely dependent for its survival, let alone growth, upon attracting support in the form of donations of works of modern art, as well as financial contributions or bequests, from wealthy American private art collectors (Robson, 2019).

Barr set out to re-gender attitudes toward collecting modern art via a range of museum activities, some overt, some covert. In a public-facing context, which is beyond the scope of this paper, was the institution of a mode of gallery presentation, such as the to-be standard 'white cube' gallery, aiming to suggest modernism as separate from feminine allure, charm or comfort, and as, if not masculine, then 'not feminine' (Hankins, 1999, p.106), echoing the views of key early twentieth century modernist architect-theorists such as Adolf Loos or Le Corbusier (Wigley, 2001). Within the remit of this paper, however, are strategies aiming to link modern art with the cultural trope of the American 'businessman with taste' noted above as lionised in critical commentary prior to World War I. Barr termed this sector as his 'Action Group': 'wealthy business people [ergo men] who might be attracted by the modernity of the Museum's image … [and] … though they had not yet accepted the idea that good art is good for business, were not opposed to the idea' (Chamberlain, n.d., p.150). As Barr was to argue:

> *the question of the value of modern pictures is very important, especially if you, as salesmen, are going to talk over the desks of businessmen who may not be interested in modern pictures but who certainly are interested in an increase in value of 200,000 per cent. (MacDonald, 1953, p.169)*

Subsequently ongoing attempts were to be made to enhance the critical value of modern art via exhibition and publication, as might be expected of a publicly chartered art museum, but also, more unusually, by activities aiming to promote modern art as having monetary value.

In terms of overt—public facing—strategies aiming to enhance patronage of modern art, MoMA strategized exhibitions as a tool for re-gendering collecting discourse. Starting in the 1930s, there was an occasional series of special exhibitions publicizing collectors involved with either MoMA or modern art *per se*. That these shows should be seen as a tool for re-gendering is suggested by the fact that—in comparison to fourteen shows of works from MoMA's own permanent collections—there were thirteen shows highlighting private collectors. The re-gendering potential of these shows is further suggested by the fact that the ratio of male to female collectors presented was more than three-to-one, with an emphasis given to businessmen

collectors as much as those of the social elite (which might have been the more conventional tactic). Alongside museum exhibitions was a sequence of members' visits to private collections in their domestic settings, which again seems to have prioritized male collectors. In a public context, press releases were to be used to attract the attention of both the specialist art and mainstream media to the monetary value of modern art in in terms sympathetic to attracting the 'Action Group'. Among covert, i.e., private efforts by MoMA to promote the economic potential of modern art was the practice of museum curatorial staff to advise individual collectors on the economic aspects of patronising modern art: i.e., current art market trends, or the tax benefits of collecting modern art (the latter of which gained in importance as Federal tax regulations were amended over the years) (Robson, 2019).

Against a quarter century of continuing conservative gender, discourse MoMA's founding strategies to re-gender American collecting discourse had borne fruit by around its 25th anniversary in 1954, when MoMA was being cited by the press as the key tastemaker in the New York art market. In 1954, Vogue, in an article reminiscent of Barr's early strategy intentions, celebrated the monetary values of thirty-three artists and works in MOMA's permanent collections as *'a record of rewarding speculation, backed by some brilliant hunches and rare streaks of luck'* (Vogue, 1954, p.169). Success in re-gendering collecting discourse might also be deduced from the increasing coverage given to modern art in the American business press. For instance, *Fortune Magazine's* 1950 article 'The Businessman and Picasso', or its 1955 'The Great International Art Market' featured not just Old Masters, but also the twentieth century 'modern masters' strongly promoted by MoMA, as significant investment opportunities for the successful businessman. The latter article's language of 'blue-chip stocks' or 'speculative growth issues' surely also echoed Barr's earlier re-gendering strategy (Hodgins and Parker, 1955). The Modern was, to quote MoMA curator Andrew Ritchie: *'the bourse. Everything we did the dealers knew about before we did it, and prices were affected accordingly'* (Lynes, 1973, p.250). Success at re-gendering the patronage of modern art might also be seen in the emergence in the late 1950s of major corporate art collections—for instance, Chase Manhattan Bank—as a newly respectable signifier of contemporary American corporate vigour.

By 1958, American attitudes to modern art collecting seem to have been definitively re-gendered. Now there was, as Time noted in that year: *'a new force … loose in the art markets … the buccaneer investor who does not know what he likes but knows a good investment when he sees one'* (Time, 1958, p.66). This surely echoes the early century trope linking the 'businessman with taste' with American national hero, though now it was modern art rather than Old Masters which provided the nexus between American cultural values, gender and collecting discourse. Modern art, and its patronage, was no longer to be devalued as an 'interest peculiar to women.' Instead, the discourse of art collecting in America had been successfully re-gendered, albeit in a manner which in effect reinforced rather than challenged conservative gender norms.

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