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978-0-521-18107-5 - The Arts of Collecting: Padre Sebastiano Resta and the Market for Drawings in Early Modern Europe

Genevieve Warwick

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

Towards a Historical Anthropology
of Collecting

'For love and delight' – Sebastiano Resta explained his activity as a collector of drawings thus (Fig. 1).¹ The historical nature of his delight is the subject of this book. Intertwined with issues specific to Resta's world is a broader enquiry into the cultural practice of collecting, understood as the relationship between an inherited artistic tradition and its historical audiences. Two sets of questions structure my analysis: what were the consequences of economic, cultural, social, and religious change for art collecting in early modern Europe; and how may the phenomenon of the collector be understood as an expression of both sociological and semiological identity? Thus my work is driven by considerations of the historian concerning specificities of time and milieu, but also by universalising questions of the social sciences on the roles of material culture.

Who was Padre Resta? Familiar to students of *seicento* Italy, and of the history of drawing collections, he remains an elusive figure outside those fields. Yet contemporaries recognised his collection as among the most noteworthy of the day, including over 3,500 drawings bound in some thirty-one volumes. In certain respects Resta was unusual, for although born in Milan of a noble family, he joined the Oratorian order and conducted his collecting from his cell in Santa Maria in Vallicella in Rome. Moreover, his purpose as a collector was that of charitable work; he assembled drawings into albums to present to prominent patrons, soliciting financial donations for church charities in return. In other respects, however, his example typifies historic developments in art collecting of the period. Born in 1635, he collected chiefly between 1680 and his death in 1714, making him a key figure for understanding the dusk of the Italian

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tradition. Paradigmatically, we see through his career the collapse of native patronage and the sale of Italy's artistic patrimony overseas as the eighteenth century dawned. Italian modes of viewing accompanied this migration of art objects: through Resta's life and work we can study the impact of Italy's courtly traditions on early modern collecting and connoisseurship, and of Catholic devotional attitudes on the social formation of the eighteenth-century amateur. Moreover, his example poses broader questions about the study of art collecting outwith specialist fields. While the conclusions I have drawn from this research must remain, ultimately, specific to the study of Resta's world, the questions I have posed may also further scholarly investigation of collecting and patronage in other spheres, places, and periods.

My path has differed from existing scholarship on patronage and collecting above all in its emphasis on the sociological.² I have analysed the individual collection as shaped by its cultural circumstances, the particular collector as exemplifying a social field. I examine the collection as a site of reception and dissemination, studying the trajectories of the collectable in terms of a 'biography of objects'.³ Its physical characteristics require us to transcend the parameters of an intellectual history of reception, however, to consider also anthropological analyses of material culture. Thus I see the meanings of collected objects as dynamic, rather than static, arguing that they acquire and shed their changing cultural nuances through their evolving place in a web of human relations.

The problematic of change, more generally, is understood in terms of historical fracture. For these reasons, too, the collection is best understood as dynamic, formed by a tangled web of contradictory intentions modified by constantly changing patterns of cultural consumption. Resta's epoch, on the cusp between a fading Italian cultural dominance and an emerging modernity led by northern Europe, spawned in him a disjunctive vision of his own work. He both harkened back to canonical Italian practices, and anticipated new ways of valuing art that were to pave the way in the century to come.

To these ends I have pursued the theme of collecting as a form of material reception from various angles. Tracing the type of social web through which collectables may circulate, and to what purpose, Chapter I maps changing patterns of consumption in the market for drawings circa 1700

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through the prism of Resta's collection.⁴ In Resta's case, his intention was to wrest the drawing from the orbit of the artist's workshop, where it bore the stigma of a working tool, and transform it into a luxury collectable accessible only to those of requisite social standing. With the collapse of native patronage, however, Resta like so many other collectors of his day was forced to seek buyers abroad. Through this example the historian may study the impact of changing economic circumstances upon social ties, and upon the circulation of art as a luxury good.

Following anthropological research on modes of exchange,⁵ Chapter 2 questions the social significance of its various forms. Art collecting, then as now, is torn between an economic impetus for profit common to any trade, and its function as a hieroglyphic for status conducted through socially circumscribed modes of exchange. For early modern elites, gift giving was the privileged form of exchange, and nowhere more than in the exclusive world of art collecting. Within Resta's circle, gifts of art were intended to function as bonds of 'marriage', to create social links of obligation like those of anthropological kinship ties.⁶ Resta himself saw gift-giving as a means of portraying his trade in the image of a chivalric past, casting collectors as knights and drawings as courted ladies to be placed in appropriate 'marriages'.

Looking further at the functioning of an art market through the eyes of a sociologist, among its most salient characteristics are the methods used to determine the value of its objects of exchange. It was in Resta's period that a nascent connoisseurship developed; Chapter 3 analyses how this was shaped by the social identities of those who practiced it. Notwithstanding the development of connoisseurship as a result of economic stimuli in an increasingly competitive art market, collectors like Resta represented their work as a form of 'conspicuous leisure',⁷ in accordance with aristocratic mores that disdained the social stigma of either trade or labour.

A collector's choice of objects, too, may be understood as an affirmation of identity, the subject of Chapter 4. Collectables may be read as ciphers of social status;⁸ moreover, they may be understood as narratives of an ideal self constructed by the collector. Further, the collection may function as a touchstone for social memory,⁹ its objects from the past serving to commemorate those aspects of tradition with which the

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collector wishes to be associated. Resta's drawings sought to evoke the memory of two intertwined aspects of Italian aristocratic mores: courtly models of elite deportment, and noble conventions of love.

Linking the various conceptual frameworks of this book is an examination of collected objects both as semiophores and as commodities in late *seicento* Italy, and a presentment of their status as appropriated cultural signs for eighteenth-century northern Europe. The story is, then, an analysis of the collection as a form of passionate loss, adumbrated in Resta's sense of nostalgia.¹⁰ Tinged with regret for Italy's lost cultural leadership, Resta and his circle collected as an attempt to conserve the memory of that past in objectified form. They sought to exchange and preserve their beloved drawings within bonds of friendship among a circumscribed community of fellow art lovers, even as they witnessed the crumbling of this society all around them. Thus they privileged objects that could be assimilated into their social codes of chivalric love, not only through a preference for certain artistic styles, but also through an increasing appreciation of the drawing itself. Its sketchy qualities were seen as representing both a masterful dissimulation – the hallmark of courtly bearing – and a feminine-gendered indeterminacy appropriate to the valorised pliancy of a court lady. My narrative, then, is one of Resta's love for the drawing, both as a particular chapter in the history of its collection, and as a broader study of collecting as nostalgia, the comfort of culture in the face of a civilisation's decline.

COLLECTING AND DISPERSAL

Existing scholarship on the history of artists' drawings in early modern Europe¹¹ has clustered in two areas: the emergence of drawings during the Italian Renaissance,¹² and the eighteenth century in Northern Europe as the 'golden age' for their collection.¹³ A focus on Italy circa 1700 bridges a chasm between these fields, and so brings to light the strong historical connections between them. The legendary northern collectors of the eighteenth century, for whom Italian drawings were highly prized, in fact owed their success to the work of their *seicento* predecessors. Figures such as William Cavendish, second duke of Devonshire (1672–1739), succeeded in amassing large numbers of drawings because they did not

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collect sheet by sheet, but bought wholesale collections such as that of Sebastiano Resta.¹⁴

Indeed, dispersal is the preeminent story of late *seicento* art history. Historians have generally studied the rising economic and cultural supremacy of the North Atlantic from the point of view of the north; my study differs by giving voice to the Italian ‘underdog’. In analysing the embarkation of material culture from one country to another, this book seeks to elucidate a pivotal, transitional era in the history of art collecting.

Despite the seminal importance of late seventeenth-century Italian collections for the formation of the great eighteenth-century cabinets, they remain little known today. Assembled before collectors’ marks came into widespread use, their assimilation into eighteenth-century northern European cabinets makes them virtually impossible to reconstruct. Thus entire collections left Italy to disappear, the drawings preserved but their provenance no longer recognisable.¹⁵ Ironically, it was their very success as collections that has obliterated them from the historian’s view. Resta’s collection stands out both as representative of these historical trends, and also as exceptional in the amount of surviving evidence relating to it. The rich nature of the Resta material makes possible a broad view of the perception of the drawing during his tenure of ownership, framed by a clear intimation of what came before and what would come after.

Moreover, the sources pertaining to Resta’s collection are unusual in bringing together the world of seventeenth-century connoisseurship and collecting with that of contemporaneous art history, theory, and criticism. While almost all the prominent writers on the arts in late seventeenth-century Italy were themselves collectors, and specifically collectors of drawings – Giovanni Pietro Bellori, Carlo Cesare Malvasia, Marco Boschini, Padre Pellegrino Antonio Orlandi – almost nothing is known about the nature of their collections or about their own appreciation of specific sheets within them. This lacuna is reflected in the scholarly literature on the collection of drawings, which roughly falls into two categories: on the one hand, discussion of the contents and provenances of collections; on the other, discussion of critical appreciation of drawing based on textual sources. Julius Held’s article of 1963, which surveyed critical evaluation of drawings from Vasari to Roger de Piles, still best represents the latter category. A recent book edited by Gianni Sciolla on

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the great private collectors of drawings from Renaissance Florence to twentieth-century America provides a much-needed synthesis of the former. Typically, however, the Sciolla team's earlier book on drawings included a chapter that surveyed changing critical attitudes towards drawings by charting the history of the term *disegno*, without relating this to actual collections of drawings.¹⁶

While I have looked much further afield for determining contexts for examining Resta's collection, I have not overlooked the most immediate one – Resta himself. Rather, I have treated the facts of his situation as signposts to broader avenues for the historian's consideration. His letters and notes contain surprisingly little biographical discussion, yet his collecting was, I believe, shaped by his experience as a Milanese, a nobleman, and an Oratorian living in Rome. I wish, therefore, to conclude here with a documented description of what can be known about Resta's particular circumstances, and the specific nature of his collection, to provide the reader with the material basis upon which this study is founded.

PADRE SEBASTIANO RESTA:
THE COLLECTOR AND HIS COLLECTION

Like those of so many of his contemporaries, much of Resta's collection went to an Englishman, John, Lord Somers, in the early years of the eighteenth century. Typically, the Somers albums were dismantled, and the drawings sold and assimilated into other cabinets. Resta's collection, however, had an unusually high survival rate.¹⁷

Six of Resta's albums that did not go to England have come down to us intact.¹⁸ Moreover, Somers had each drawing numbered when he dismantled his Resta volumes, so that it is possible to reconstruct a further fourteen volumes.¹⁹ Many of Resta's drawings are still to be found in eighteenth-century English collections at Chatsworth, Christ Church Oxford, and the British Museum.²⁰

In addition to the wealth of drawings from Resta's collection that are identifiable today, significant numbers of his letters have also survived from what must once have been a voluminous correspondence with various friends, patrons, critics, and fellow collectors.²¹ They constitute an important source for the economics of art collecting in this period, the

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early history of connoisseurship, and the vast network of social relationships through which drawings circulated in an early modern art market. In addition, a book of letters written by Somers's agent in Italy, John Talman, provides a counterpoint, documenting the acquisition of a collection such as Resta's from the English point of view.²²

This rich cache of documentation is further enlivened by Resta's extensive historical and connoisseurial notes about each drawing in his albums, which have also been preserved. Contemporaries noted this singularity as one of the most important distinguishing features of the collection, as John Talman described:

I have lately seen a collection of Drawings, without doubt, the finest in Europe, for the method and number of rare designs. . . . They were . . . collected by the famous Father Resta . . . a person so well known in Rome, and all over Italy, for his skill in drawings, that it would be needless to say anymore of him, than that these collections were made by him, and that through the whole work, he has an abundance of observations . . . nowhere else to be seen; every book being filled with Notes on each drawing. . . .²³

Recognising the importance of these notes, Somers had them transcribed in a manuscript today preserved at the British Museum (ms. Lansdowne 802) when he disbanded Resta's volumes, and they were consulted by such eminent critics and connoisseurs of the eighteenth century as the Jonathan Richardsons.²⁴ These notes show how early modern collectors worked in their critical evaluation of art, providing evidence of the *mentalités* and social contexts through which drawings were viewed.

Although he was born into one of Milan's oldest and most powerful noble dynasties, Resta's lineage was that of a cadet branch.²⁵ He was thus representative of the seventeenth-century's expansion of drawing collecting into the ranks of minor nobility and men of letters. His education was both humanist and legal, acquired through the academic institutions of the Catholic Church – the seminary in Milan and the Borromeo college in Pavia.²⁶ In 1665 he joined the Oratorians in Rome at Santa Maria in Vallicella, known as the Chiesa Nuova.²⁷ He is thus representative of Italy's intertwined Catholic, aristocratic, and intellectual traditions.²⁸

In addition to his academic education, Resta received training in the rudiments of painting from Ercole Procaccino the Younger, at that time

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head of the Ambrosiana Academy in Milan.²⁹ According to Angelo Paredi, Milanese sources document two paintings by the young Sebastiano in the city, dated 1655, which are unfortunately no longer traceable today.³⁰ In addition he was heir to a family tradition of art patronage and collecting, to which his letters often refer.³¹ In a story that reveals the family's importance to the cultural and political life of Milan as subject city to the Spanish crown, Sebastiano relates that his father chose a painting by Correggio, *The Agony in the Garden*, for the city's governors to present to Philip IV of Spain in 1657.³² To complement this gift, Sebastiano later sent a drawing to Philip V that he believed to be a preparatory sketch for the painting.³³ Given this background it seems likely that Resta began collecting art from his early youth, although it is not possible to document any acquisition of drawings before the 1660s, and he does not appear to have collected in substantial numbers before the 1680s. From this period on, his collecting continued until shortly before his death in 1714. Family money supported his collecting, a practice permissible to the Oratorian community, which allowed its members to keep private property.³⁴

Travel throughout the Italian peninsula played an important part in familiarising Resta with the country's artistic heritage, and in establishing a wide range of contacts to help support his collecting. He went to Naples in 1683 for several months, where he enjoyed the hospitality of Gaspare de Haro y Guzman, the marquis del Carpio, Spanish viceroy in Naples from 1683 to 1687 and member of a prominent family of collectors.³⁵ According to Bellori, del Carpio owned thirty volumes of drawings, at least two of which contain sheets with inscriptions in Resta's hand, indicating that the padre had worked on this collection, perhaps advising del Carpio on purchases, attributions, and the arrangement of drawings in albums.³⁶ It was surely this common bond as collectors, as well as loyalty to Spain, that prompted Resta's visit. Here he made important contacts with the Neapolitan art world that were to serve him in his future acquisition of drawings.

In 1690, accompanied by his friend the artist Giuseppe Passeri, Resta spent six months travelling to the great art centres of central and northern Italy: Florence, Bologna, Modena, Faenza, Loreto, Cremona, Parma, Correggio, and Reggio Emilia, as well as to his native Milan. He called

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this his *corso studioso*, which he used above all to familiarise himself with the artistic styles of the northern painters Correggio, the Carracci, and their school. At other unspecified dates he travelled to the art centres of Assisi, Perugia, and Spoleto nearer Rome.³⁷

Resta's network of friendships with artists like Passeri was extensive, and included Giovanni Maria Morandi, Carlo Maratta, the elderly Pietro da Cortona, Ciro Ferri, Lazzaro Baldi, Salvator Rosa, Luca Giordano, Pier Francesco Mola, and Giuseppe Ghezzi. Similarly, he enjoyed the company of some of the period's greatest collectors, in addition to del Carpio, including Queen Christina of Sweden, Princess Barberini of Palestrina, Cardinal Orazio Spada, and Don Livio Odescalchi, as well as artist-collectors like Maratta, Ghezzi, and Benedetto Luti. He also counted among his friends the most prominent art critics and historians of the day: Bellori, Malvasia, Passeri, Baldinucci, Orlandi, and the Spanish Canon Vincente Vittoria, most of whom were also collectors. Furthermore, his correspondence brings to light an extensive network of collectors across Italy, including figures such as the Bolognese scholar Giuseppe Magnavacca, the Florentine Cavalier Francesco Maria Gabburri, and the Tuscan Bishop Giovanni Mattei Marchetti of Arezzo, giving precious details about the subsoil of collecting during this period, for which we otherwise know so little.

Over the years from 1680 to his death in 1714 Resta acquired over thirty albums containing some 3,500 drawings (that I have been able to trace, either as whole volumes, as remnants, or as described in letters and notes). These may be divided into three major series: five albums originally destined for collections in his native city of Milan; a four-volume series for the bishop of Arezzo, Giovanni Mattei Marchetti; and four volumes exclusively devoted to the study of Correggio, also intended for Marchetti. The remaining twenty-odd albums were of various themes and sizes, as will be discussed later.

The Milanese albums included: a small book of nine Rubens drawings after antique sculptures, still intact at its original home, the Biblioteca Ambrosiana;³⁸ the *Galleria Portatile*, also still intact at the Biblioteca Ambrosiana and the best known of Resta's volumes today, containing 252 drawings spanning the centuries from Giotto to the Carracci and their students;³⁹ the *Piccolo Preliminare al Grande Anfiteatro Pittorico*, still extant but

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now at the Biblioteca Nazionale in Rome, containing fifty-two drawings by Cortona and his students;⁴⁰ a smaller volume no longer extant entitled the *Piccola Galleria ò sia Piccola Serie*, described as containing seventy-two drawings by artists from Perugino to Baciccio;⁴¹ and finally, a large volume entitled the *Anfiteatro Pittorico Moderno*, later split into smaller albums but originally intended as a sequel to the *Galleria Portatile*. This last album was to begin where the *Galleria Portatile* left off, from the Carracci and their students to the modern manners of Poussin, Bernini, Pietro da Cortona, and their followers.⁴² Its contents are now scattered; however, a handful of drawings at the Teylers Museum in Haarlem bear inscriptions in Resta's hand, two of which clearly relate to the *Anfiteatro Pittorico*, suggesting that other drawings in Haarlem, now unfortunately unrecognisable, must also have come from Resta's albums.⁴³ The other volumes later made from the large *Anfiteatro Pittorico*, which were to end up in London, were the *Arena del Anfiteatro Pittorico*, containing eighty-one drawings from Donatello and Francia to Titian, and the *Ingresso al secolo d'oro*, which spanned the years from Barocci and the Zuccari to Maratta and Gaulli in 168 drawings.⁴⁴

For Bishop Marchetti, Resta assembled over 1,000 drawings in four volumes that spanned the history of art from the *primi lumi* to the late seventeenth century. Unfortunately, none of these albums have survived intact, although the copy of Resta's notes undertaken by Somers (ms. Lansdowne 802) records the contents of the first three. Resta described the series as follows:

The first volume shows the first appearance of painting reborn from Cimabue to Masaccio, and of its progress from Masaccio to Leonardo da Vinci. In the second we delighted in . . . the century . . . from Leonardo to the Zuccari brothers. . . . In [the third] volume we see . . . the Zuccari and the Cavalier [d'Arpino], with the addition of Rubens and some other Flemings.⁴⁵

The fourth book traced the development of style throughout the seventeenth century, beginning with the Carracci and their students, followed by the midcentury work of Pietro da Cortona, Bernini, and Poussin, and concluding with Maratta and his contemporaries at the end of the *seicento*.⁴⁶

To Resta, the finest part of his collection was the four volumes exclusively devoted to the study of Correggio. One of these albums remains