Could 17th-century Italy provide a useful model for today's challenging art market?

An exhibition in New York spotlights an intriguing episode in trade history , in which an influx of foreign artists to Rome 400 years ago prompted everyone from barbers to lawyers in the city to develop side hustles as art dealers. By **J. Cabelle Ahn**

Long before art fairs, advisory firms and mega-galleries, there were barbers, tailors and innkeepers managing the flow of art in 17th-century Italy. *Beyond the Fringe* (until 22 May), an exhibition at Nicholas Hall gallery in New York, spotlights this understudied corner of the early art market, when a dramatic increase in the supply of art helped expand the trade to a surprising new class of participants.

Featuring 30 works on loan from public and private collections, the show and its catalogue explore the key factors in an increasingly commercialised engagement with art during this period: the impact of foreign artists in Rome, the emergence of tradesmen and professionals as part-time dealers and the rise of art as an alternative asset class. The show unsettles the assumed primacy of aristocratic and ecclesiastical patronage by tracing how the success of artists such as Caravaggio and Artemisia Gentileschi coincided with the emergence of a decentralised network of collectors, dealers and middlemen, offering a timely examination of art market democratisation.

Cornelis de Wael, *The Slaves' Meal* (around 1640-45). De Wael was a Flemish artist who migrated to Italy and associated with other Northern European painters there who found success selling their paintings in shops

New artists, new genres

Much of the scholarship on historical art markets to date has focused on Northern Europe, owing in part to the robust documentation on, and systemisation of, the Dutch trade's infrastructure. But new research in the catalogue by the art historians Patrizia Cavazzini and Caterina Volpi highlights how 17th-century Italy gave rise to an art economy independent of traditional hierarchies of power and taste.

"We can say that the modern art system began in 17th-century Europe," Volpi tells *The Art Newspaper*. "I often tell my students that Rome in the first half of the 17th century is comparable to Paris at the end of the 19th century or New York in the 1960s," she adds, referring to other inflection points when avant-garde artists and growing internationalism reshaped art commerce.

"Italy in the 17th century was a place of opportunity for foreign artists," says Hall, a veteran Old Master dealer. "It's similar to how artists such as Arshile Gorky and Willem de Kooning came to New York in the 20th century."

Among the most impactful of these expatriates were the so-called Bentvueghels ("birds of a feather"), a community of Northern European painters then active in Rome. Known for their bacchic revelry and disdain for elite patronage, the group turned to landscape and genre scenes that could be "produced relatively quickly and sold in shops", according to Lara Yeager-Crasselt, a curator at the Baltimore Museum of Art. "The rise of interest in the works of someone like Flemish artist Paul Bril from around the turn of the century, for example, to the explosion of so-called *bamboccianti* works, a kind of genre scene depicting Roman street life, by artists such as Pieter van Laer and Jan Miel, demonstrate the presence of novel subject matter," she says.

Barber-dealers and secretary-collectors

The influx of artists and subsequent appearance of new genres led to a more improvisational secondary market. Some artists, such as Cornelis de Wael, Jan Swerts and Nicolas Régnier, became directly involved in the trade, leveraging their pre-existing proximity to artists and patrons. Others, unable to secure apprenticeships, made a living working for painter-dealers. The period also saw an unprecedented range of professionals and tradespeople moonlighting as art dealers, including barbers, innkeepers, lawyers, tailors, pigment sellers and carpenters, many of whom were sometimes paid for services with works of art – and soon began trading them.

Alongside this surplus supply of dealers and works, a larger network of minor collectors emerged, including cardinals' secretaries, chamberlains, masters of wardrobe, businessmen and even courtesans. Among the most enterprising was Giovanni Stefano Roccatagliata, an usher for Pope Urban VIII, who speculated on works by the likes of Bril, Caravaggio and Nicolas Poussin.

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>
> *Caterina Volpi, art historian*

"There was suddenly a lot of disposable income, and people became aware that you didn't have to be a prince or a pope to be a collector," says Hall. "Art could be bought in public spaces like Piazza Navona, in a pub, or even in a paint shop. I find that this history resonates with museum directors and curators who are looking for ways to make art accessible to the public."

Decentralising art, then and now

The surplus of art in 17th-century Italy paradoxically offered greater opportunity to artists and collectors by expanding the art audience to a lower-class, yet more entrepreneurial, patronage network. "The fact that one could buy a painting in a barber's shop for a reasonable price, and that people eagerly sought paintings of various subject matters, to me reflects the value – and not just monetary [value] – of art's role in people's lives," says Yeager-Crasselt. "That idea seems to have shifted in our world today, where certain types of art are not accessible to many."

Still, recent efforts have surfaced to leverage the excess supply of contemporary art toward more democratic models of collecting. For example, in 2024 the artists William Powhida and Jennifer Dalton launched the Zero Art Fair, which uses an unorthodox "store-to-own" contract to offer the public a cost-free avenue to acquire works that would otherwise remain siloed in storage. The would-be collectors need only sign a contract pledging to safeguard the work for a vesting period of five years and, should they ever resell it, ensure that 50% of the sale proceeds go to the artist.

This year's edition of the fair (8-12 July) will be hosted and sponsored by the Flag Art Foundation in Manhattan. Describing the project by email as "more of a not-for-profit conceptual intervention" than a typical trade fair, Powhida and Dalton also call Zero "a living, functioning response to some of the issues of artificial scarcity, exclusivity and access built into the contemporary art market". They add: "Our fair also allows people who usually can't afford original artwork to have a chance to live with art." Four centuries on, maybe it is once again time for the barber-dealers to have their day.