

Mein Leben and beyond: Wilhelm Bode, commerce and art

Review of: *Wilhelm Bode and the Art Market: Connoisseurship, Networking and Control of the Marketplace*, edited by Joanna Smalcerz, Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2022, 292pp., 60 col. illus., €135.00, ISBN: 9789004521902 (hdbk), ISBN: 9789004532458 (e-book).

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Wilhelm Bode and the Art Market: Connoisseurship, Networking and Control of the Marketplace is a valuable, wide-ranging and well-researched contribution to the burgeoning field of art market studies.¹ Wilhelm Bode (1845-1929)—also known as ‘von Bode’, following his ennoblement in 1914—was a key player in the European art world, with a career spanning the period from the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 to the aftermath of the First World War. This was, of course, a period in which art was becoming ever more a symbol and a tool of the new nationalisms: paintings and sculptures, both old and new, were crossing borders and being used as status symbols to demonstrate wealth, power and taste. Bode was particularly caught up in the exodus of European paintings to Gilded Age America: several chapters in this volume debate the apparent paradox of his dealings with both individual collectors of all nationalities, and his strong dedication to the expansion of the German national collections. As noted in one of the later essays, there is a ‘vast and variegated literature’ relating to Bode and his work, focusing particularly on his role as creator of the institution then known as the Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum and now named in his honour.² The analysis of Bode’s life and work has thankfully long since moved on from a hagiographic over-reliance on his posthumous autobiography *Mein Leben* (1930), and many of the chapters here draw heavily on archival sources including those available at the Zentralarchiv of the Berlin Museums.

This volume brings together nine essays, building on a conference originally held at the University of Bern in 2018.³ Number sixteen in Brill’s series on ‘Studies in

¹ Joanna Smalcerz (ed.), *Wilhelm Bode and the Art Market: Connoisseurship, Networking and Control of the Marketplace*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2022.

² Fulvia Zaninelli, ‘Some Remarks on Wilhelm Bode and the Art Market in Italy, 1880s–1909: The Cases of Pietro Foresti (1854–1926) and A. Chiesa’ in Joanna Smalcerz (ed.), *Wilhelm Bode and the Art Market: Connoisseurship, Networking and Control of the Marketplace*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2022, (151-205) 151. A bibliography of work relating to Bode is briefly outlined in the introduction to this volume; see also especially Lee Sorenson, ‘Bode, Wilhelm’ in *Dictionary of Art Historians* (online resource), <https://arthistorians.info/bodew>.

³ It is perhaps a pity that Lynn Catterson’s contribution to the conference has been published as two separate papers elsewhere, as her work would have dovetailed well with several of the essays here. See Lynn Catterson, ‘Art Market, Social Network and Contamination: Bardini, Bode and the Madonna Pazzi Puzzle’ in Lynn Catterson (ed.), *Florence, Berlin and Beyond: Late Nineteenth-Century Art Markets and their Social Networks*, Leiden, Boston: Brill,

the *History of Collecting & Art Markets*, the volume is well-set on high-quality paper and features colour illustrations throughout. Following an introduction by Joanna Smalcerz, who also edited the volume, the book is split into four sections:

- 1: Deploying Connoisseurship to Affect the Market;
- 2: Navigating the Italian Marketplace through Networks of Dealers and Intermediaries;
- 3: Art Advisory and Strategic Relationships with Collectors; and
- 4: Bode's Double Game.

As these titles suggest, the volume aims to offer a broad view of Bode's activities, including his relationships with a geographically diverse network of collectors outside the upper echelons of collecting. The essay contributors include well-established scholars from the art market, heritage and academic sectors, alongside a smaller number of emerging researchers. There is a particularly welcome interaction in many of the essays with both primary sources and secondary literature in languages other than English, including Czech, Dutch, French, German and Italian.

Smalcerz's introduction, subtitled 'The Entanglement of Art Historical Scholarship, Connoisseurship and the Art Trade in the Late Nineteenth Century', does give a brief outline of Bode's life and work, but largely assumes the reader's familiarity with this key art market player.⁴ Instead, she uses the introduction to pull together the themes present across the collection of essays, identifying these as the 'strategic multidimensionality of [Bode's] network' (a slightly unclear phrase that seems to refer to his wide-reaching list of contacts); his 'multi-faceted and frequently conflicting roles within the marketplace'; and 'the complexities of his entanglement between art historical scholarship, connoisseurship and art market activity'.⁵ The essays are also intended to

shed some new light on Bode, his maneuvering and its resulting consequences, contradictions and the sheer hypocrisy, if not cynicism, of his marketplace policies, by showcasing examples of the double games he played, essentially becoming a ruthless operator in many sectors of the late nineteenth-century art world.⁶

These overlapping themes will ring true to scholars of this period of art market operation; indeed, explicit (if brief) comparisons are made through the volume to Bernard Berenson, the famous art market chameleon a generation younger than Bode.

2020, 498-552; and Lynn Catterson, 'Duped or Duplicitous?: Bode, Bardini and the Many Madonnas of South Kensington', *Journal of the History of Collections*, 33:1, March 2021, 70-91.

⁴ Joanna Smalcerz, 'Introduction: The Entanglement of Art Historical Scholarship, Connoisseurship and the Art Trade in the Late Nineteenth Century', in Joanna Smalcerz (ed.), *Wilhelm Bode and the Art Market: Connoisseurship, Networking and Control of the Marketplace*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2022, 1-15.

⁵ Smalcerz, 'Introduction', 3-4.

⁶ Smalcerz, 'Introduction', 5.

Given that the volume grew out of a collection of conference papers, it cannot be expected to be a comprehensive overview of Bode's art market activities; this is acknowledged by Smalcerz, who calls for future research into broader understandings of his social network, including through the application of digital visualisation technologies.⁷ 'Like other art historians of the time involved in the commerce of art,' Smalcerz writes, '[Bode] was entangled in the reciprocal dynamics and interdependencies of the nascent discipline of art history, connoisseurship and the art trade'.⁸ Such dynamics and interdependencies are ever more of interest in the context of a wide range of newly discovered and available art market sources, as well as the implementation of new tools and methodologies of analysis.⁹

Michael J. Ripps opens the initial section on 'Deploying Connoisseurship to Affect the Market' with a paper entitled 'Wilhelm Bode and His Loyal Lieutenants: The Trade in Dutch Pictures, 1879–1914'.¹⁰ Ripps' detailed essay draws on over a decade of research into Bode's papers at the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin-Zentralarchiv. The chapter ranges over Bode's background and psychology, before discussing his travels during the 1870s to view Dutch paintings in British collections and his subsequent interactions with various 'industrious fellows in Bond Street' and beyond.¹¹ I look forward to reading a future version of the paper that the author himself describes as a 'work in progress', along with the much-anticipated monograph of his 2010 PhD thesis.¹²

Catherine Scallen's essay, 'Wilhelm Bode and Charles Sedelmeyer in 1882–83: The Start of a Fateful Relationship', centres on an event mentioned in passing in Ripps' chapter: Bode's acquisition in 1883 of three paintings then attributed to Rembrandt for the Berlin Gemäldegalerie (*Susannah and the Elders*; *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife*; and *Daniel's Vision*, now alternatively given to Willem Drost or even described as a recreation by Joshua Reynolds).¹³ Building on her impressive and influential 2004 monograph on the collecting of Rembrandt's work, Scallen draws on the letters received by Bode from Parisian dealer Charles Sedelmeyer to build up

⁷ Smalcerz, 'Introduction', 7.

⁸ Smalcerz, 'Introduction', 11.

⁹ See, for example, my own monograph in the same series as this volume: Alison Clarke, *Spaces of Connoisseurship: Judging Old Masters at Agnew's and the National Gallery, c.1874-1916*, Brill: Leiden/ Boston, 2022; Laura Noble, Valentina Vavassori, Alan Crookham and Stuart Dunn, 'Networking the Archive: The Stories and Structures of Thos. Agnew's Stock Books', *ACM Journal on Computing and Cultural Heritage (JOCCH)*, 15: 1, February 2022, 1-14; and Alan Crookham and Stuart Dunn, 'Reframing Art: Opening Up Art Dealers' Archives to Multi-disciplinary Research', *Visual Resources*, 35: 1-2, 2019, 180-3.

¹⁰ Michael J. Ripps, 'Wilhelm Bode and His Loyal Lieutenants: The Trade in Dutch Pictures, 1879–1914' in Joanna Smalcerz (ed.), *Wilhelm Bode and the Art Market: Connoisseurship, Networking and Control of the Marketplace*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2022, 19-45.

¹¹ Ripps, 'Loyal Lieutenants', 31.

¹² Ripps, 'Loyal Lieutenants', 20.

¹³ Catherine Scallen, 'Wilhelm Bode and Charles Sedelmeyer in 1882–83: The Start of a Fateful Relationship', in Joanna Smalcerz (ed.), *Wilhelm Bode and the Art Market: Connoisseurship, Networking and Control of the Marketplace*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2022, 46-66; 'Follower of Rembrandt and Joshua Reynolds', RKD, <https://rkd.nl/en/explore/images/262746?langen=> (accessed 5 July 2023).

a picture of their professional relationship and interactions.¹⁴ Her careful and well-argued analysis sheds light on broader issues within the European art market, such as the competition between national galleries— particularly in London, Paris and Berlin—for the limited supply of high-quality old master works. The tactics used by art dealers to persuade an undecided client or to chase a missing payment are also highlighted as ‘standard in the trade, then and now’.¹⁵ The relationship between German curator and French dealer was to culminate in the Bode-authored and Sedelmeyer-published Rembrandt catalogue (1897-1906). This catalogue, elsewhere evocatively characterised by Antoinette Friedenthal as a ‘catalogue contaminé’, features evidence of what Scallen describes as Bode’s ‘complicity’ in including questionable works despite his ‘evident doubts about their authenticity’.¹⁶ This context of doubt, and the question as to what extent Bode was involved in the contamination of the canon, run like a thread throughout the essays in this volume.

As Scallen acknowledges, the relationship between Bode and Sedelmeyer is further scrutinised in the chapter that follows: Esmée Quodbach’s discussion of Bode’s contribution to the revival of the work of Johannes Vermeer (‘Wilhelm Bode and Johannes Vermeer: Creating a Taste and a Market’).¹⁷ Quodbach persuasively argues that Bode’s role in Vermeer’s rediscovery has been unfairly overlooked to date, making a strong argument for his behind-the-scenes influence in persuading both museums and collectors to invest in paintings by (or, at least, attributed to) the Dutch master. Bode’s international network was only strengthened in 1907 when his protégé Wilhelm Valentiner joined the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and Quodbach outlines how Bode continued to work closely with American collectors throughout the early twentieth century. This essay also makes an interesting point about the accessibility of paintings and collections in the mid-nineteenth century, and the ways in which this affected connoisseurship and the development of knowledge relating to the artist’s canon. Quodbach highlights, for example, how Bode ‘had probably seen and studied more Vermeers in person than any of his contemporaries’.¹⁸ The chapter ends with a discussion of Bode’s approval of several Vermeer forgeries that came onto the market in the 1920s, towards the very end of his long life: Quodbach attributes his willingness to authenticate these works to his age, financial circumstances, and a sense of loyalty to his long-established networks.

Michela Zurla’s essay, ‘Wilhelm Bode and the Italian Art Trade in Renaissance Sculpture: The Case of Genoa’, introduces the second section of the book: ‘Navigating the Italian Marketplace through Networks of Dealers and

¹⁴ Catherine Scallen, *Rembrandt, Reputation and the Practice of Connoisseurship*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004.

¹⁵ Scallen, ‘Bode and Sedelmeyer’, 63.

¹⁶ Antoinette Friedenthal, ‘Catalogue raisonné or Catalogue contaminé? Art Historians at the Crossroads’, *Passepartout: Skifter for kunsthistorie*, 23:41, 2021, 107-9; Scallen, ‘Bode and Sedelmeyer’, 63.

¹⁷ Esmée Quodbach, ‘Wilhelm Bode and Johannes Vermeer: Creating a Taste and a Market’, in Joanna Smalcerz (ed.), *Wilhelm Bode and the Art Market: Connoisseurship, Networking and Control of the Marketplace*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2022, 67-96.

¹⁸ Quodbach, ‘Bode and Vermeer’, 87.

Intermediaries'. This chapter is the first in the volume to focus on Bode as a scholar and connoisseur of Italian Renaissance sculpture, giving a welcome breadth to the discussion and emphasising Bode's expertise in multiple genres of art.¹⁹ In the context of an increasing interest in Genoese art both domestically and internationally towards the end of the nineteenth century, Zurla frames Bode as almost literally walking in the footsteps of influential Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt in his visits to Genoa. She goes on to dissect how—over the course of more than forty years—Bode built up a network of intermediaries (including Italian dealers Stefano Bardini and Giuseppe Baslini) to give him the edge over other competitors on the ground. As a result, Berlin's Bode-Museum today boasts valuable specimens of Genoese sculpture in addition to its collections from the (traditionally) more highly regarded Tuscan and Venetian schools.

In the next chapter, 'Bardini and Beyond: Wilhelm Bode and the Art Dealers in Florence', Patrizia Cappellini moves south of Genoa to concentrate on Bode's associations with local art dealers in his 'chosen city' of Florence.²⁰ The first half of the essay offers a nationalist framework for Bode's curatorial career and outlines his influence on the emerging field of museology; Cappellini then goes on to discuss in more detail his relationship with four Florentine dealers (Stefano Bardini, Elia Volpi, Luigi Grassi and Emilio Costantini). She notes, importantly, a point echoed in many of the essays in this volume: that the modern distinction between the professional roles of art historian, curator and art dealer is an anachronism when applied to the period in which Bode was operating. Instead, Bode should be seen as a multifaceted figure who acted as antiquarian, art advisor, client, collector, dealer, expert and/or mediator depending on need. Cappellini also draws on her PhD thesis in a welcome discussion of the particular importance of photographic technologies in sustaining connoisseurship and commerce across national borders.

Fulvia Zaninelli opens the third section of this volume, 'Art Advisory and Strategic Relationships with Collectors', with 'Some Remarks on Wilhelm Bode and the Art Market in Italy, 1880s–1909: The Cases of Pietro Foresti (1854–1926) and A. Chiesa'. This essay adopts an art market network approach, contrasting what Zaninelli characterises as the 'horizontal' channel of 'museums, government officials and academia' (the latter of which was relatively a underdeveloped sphere, at least during Bode's early career) with the 'vertical' channel of 'high end collectors and world class dealers [...] local shop owners and amateurs'.²¹ While Zaninelli does briefly acknowledge that this idea of the horizontal and vertical markets is borrowed from the field of market analysis, greater scrutiny of this framework would have been appreciated; a clearer explanation of the distinctions between these horizontal and vertical channels might have clarified how, as she claims, they

¹⁹ Michela Zurla, 'Wilhelm Bode and the Italian Art Trade in Renaissance Sculpture: The Case of Genoa', in Joanna Smalcerz (ed.), *Wilhelm Bode and the Art Market: Connoisseurship, Networking and Control of the Marketplace*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2022, 99-124.

²⁰ Patrizia Cappellini, 'Bardini and Beyond: Wilhelm Bode and the Art Dealers in Florence' in Joanna Smalcerz (ed.), *Wilhelm Bode and the Art Market: Connoisseurship, Networking and Control of the Marketplace*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2022, 125-148.

²¹ Zaninelli, 'Some Remarks'. 152-35.

can enable a better understanding of the interaction between ‘art history and connoisseurship, art market and art collecting’.²² Zaninelli also touches on ideas of nationalism, provincialism and class in this wide-ranging paper, which culminates in the discussion of Bode’s dealings with collector Pietro Foresti and A. Chiesa, ‘an individual of obscure identity’.²³ These two case studies (based on 13 letters received from Foresti and four from Chiesa, all of which are reproduced in Italian in the appendix to this paper) are intended to exemplify Italian collecting and dealing practices outside the major trade centres of Rome and Florence. However, it is unclear why these two examples were chosen: there seems to be no direct evidence that Bode ever purchased artworks from Foresti, while Chiesa comes across as a minor dealer or intermediary. I do, nevertheless, agree with Zaninelli’s closing call for a ‘systematic and close analysis of Bode’s vast network’.²⁴

I imagine that many of the readers of this volume will be (as I admit I am) relatively unfamiliar with the history of collecting and the art market in eastern Europe. Michaela Watrelot’s exploration of Bode’s relationship with prominent Czech collector Adalbert Lanna is therefore a welcome contribution to the literature.²⁵ For example, the discussion of the activities of the Society of the Patriotic Friends of the Arts—formed in 1796 with the intention of preventing the sale of important artworks to overseas buyers and of promoting the development of a national collection—forms an interesting counterpoint to similar developments taking place across the western half of the continent throughout the nineteenth century. The chapter opens with a short outline of Bode’s links to private collectors across Europe, before going on to describe Lanna’s life, collecting practice and philanthropic outlook, and finally exploring in more detail the connection between Bode and his ‘dear friend’ Lanna.²⁶ Despite Bode’s reputation for cultivating relationships with collectors as ultimate donors to German museums, Watrelot argues that this particular relationship demonstrates ‘another aspect to Bode’s personality’ through his apparent willingness to offer ‘gratuitous service’ to public art collections in Prague.²⁷ For example, Bode’s work towards the production of a catalogue for the Rudolfsium—Prague’s ‘magnificent temple of culture’, which opened in 1885—is notable as he did not usually contribute to catalogues for public collections outside Germany. Bode was also instrumental in introducing to the Prague museums Johann II, Prince of Liechtenstein, who was to become a key supporter of these institutions.²⁸

²² Zaninelli, ‘Some Remarks’, 153.

²³ Zaninelli, ‘Some Remarks’, 176.

²⁴ Zaninelli, ‘Some Remarks’, 180.

²⁵ Michaela Watrelot, ‘Wilhelm Bode and the Collector Adalbert von Lanna’, in Joanna Smalcerz (ed.), *Wilhelm Bode and the Art Market: Connoisseurship, Networking and Control of the Marketplace*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2022, 206-234.

²⁶ Watrelot, ‘Bode and Lanna’, 225.

²⁷ Watrelot, ‘Bode and Lanna’, 206.

²⁸ Watrelot discusses Bode’s links with the Prince in more detail in Michaela Watrelot, ‘Wilhelm von Bode and Prince Johann II von Liechtenstein: the Private Correspondence 1882–1925’ in Lynn Catterson (ed.), *Florence, Berlin and Beyond: Late Nineteenth-Century Art Markets and their Social Networks*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2020.

The final two essays in this volume, brought together under the title of ‘Bode’s Double Game’, take a more sceptical view of his dealings and commercial associations with the art market. Martin Gaier’s essay ‘The Spy of Venice: Gustav Ludwig and Wilhelm Bode between Art Market and Art Research’ — an updated version of a previously published book chapter — draws on the letters written to Bode and other art market actors by Venice-based German photographer and art critic Gustav Ludwig.²⁹ As in many of the other chapters in this volume, Gaier emphasises the importance of private correspondence in revealing more about ‘intentions, methodology, instruments, networks and interest groups’ than contemporary published sources. Much of the essay focuses on the export of Giovanni Bellini’s *Resurrection of Christ* and its acquisition by Bode for Berlin. The context here is the disappearance of many Italian works of art into American collections in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and various attempts either to capitalise on sales opportunities or to stop the exodus from happening. Given this atmosphere of nationalist self-interest, however, I would contest Gaier’s claim that Ludwig’s interest in art was ‘of a purely scientific nature’.³⁰ To argue this simply because he was neither a dedicated art dealer nor a collector is to oversimplify the picture, which is conspicuous in a volume otherwise dedicated to teasing out complexities.

In their final chapter, ‘Wilhelm Bode and the Rise and Fall of the Grand-ducal Gallery of Oldenburg’, Sebastian Dohe and Malve Anna Falk draw attention to what they portray as the unjustly neglected history of the collections assembled by the Grand Duchy of Oldenburg in Lower Saxony.³¹ Building on a recent research project carried out by the Landesmuseum für Kunst- und Kulturgeschichte Oldenburg, the authors posit that the gallery’s rapid rise and fall offers key insights into the ‘art market, politics, art history and the new definition of museums in the Weimar [R]epublic’.³² This well-structured and persuasive essay draws on newly discovered letters dating from 1921 to 1925 by Bode, who had a significant role in the growth, cataloguing and ultimate dispersal of the collection. It forms a fitting close to the volume in its analysis of the skilfulness, ruthlessness and professional devotion demonstrated by Bode in his multiple roles as networker, rhetorician and authoritative expert.

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²⁹ Martin Gaier, ‘The Spy of Venice: Gustav Ludwig and Wilhelm Bode between Art Market and Art Research’, in Joanna Smalcerz (ed.), *Wilhelm Bode and the Art Market: Connoisseurship, Networking and Control of the Marketplace*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2022, 237-261. See also Martin Gaier, *Kunstforschung, Fotografie und Kunsthandel um 1900. Gustav Ludwigs Korrespondenzen mit Wilhelm Bode, Aby Warburg und anderen*, Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2021.

³⁰ Gaier, ‘Spy of Venice’, 238.

³¹ Sebastian Dohe and Malve Anna Falk, ‘Wilhelm Bode and the Rise and Fall of the Grand-ducal Gallery of Oldenburg’, in Joanna Smalcerz (ed.), *Wilhelm Bode and the Art Market: Connoisseurship, Networking and Control of the Marketplace*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2022, 262-283.

³² See Sebastian Dohe and Malve Anna Falk, ‘Out of sight, out of mind: The (almost) forgotten fate of the grand-ducal gallery of Oldenburg’, *Journal of the History of Collections*, 32: 3, November 2020, 491-502; Dohe and Falk, ‘Bode and the Rise and Fall’, 262-3.

translator (French/Italian). Having held several postdoctoral and project management roles, in spring 2023 she took up a Research Associate position in Insights North East, a new Research England-funded knowledge brokerage unit. Her first monograph, *Spaces of Connoisseurship: Judging Old Masters at Agnew's and the National Gallery, c.1874-1916*, was published by Brill in 2022.

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