

# The Road to Art Modernization from the Perspective of European Jewish Art Dealers — A Book Review of *Belonging and Betrayal: How Jews Made the Art World Modern*

Yanling Yu<sup>1</sup> Jingyi Zhu<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup> Wuhan University of Technology, Wuhan, Hubei 430070, P. R. China

<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author. Email: [yuyanling@whut.edu.cn](mailto:yuyanling@whut.edu.cn)

## ABSTRACT

*Belonging and Betrayal: How Jews Made the Art World Modern* written by Charles Dellheim, portrays the road to art modernization from the perspective of European Jewish art dealers. Based on extensive studies, the author provides insight into the development of modern art and the socio-historical background through accessible and engaging text. This interdisciplinary work will exert a positive impact on art history, Jewish studies, modern cultural history, and other relevant social sciences.

**Keywords:** *Belonging and Betrayal: How Jews Made the Art World Modern, Art history, Jewish studies.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Brandeis University Press published a book in 2021 by Charles Delheim, professor in the Department of History and Jewish Studies and director emeritus of Boston University Killachand Honors College. Art history, as the modern humanities with the history of visual arts as its research object, complements historical research in many fields. Combining art, politics, and the military, this book takes a new perspective—the rise and fall of European Jewish art dealers and tells the obscure stories behind Nazi-stolen art. By exploring the arduous journey of these outsiders on the fringes of European culture to become the new masters of old masterpieces and advocates of modernism, the author obtains the deep connection between Jews and the art world on the road to art modernization.

## 2. BACKGROUND: JEWISH ART DEALERS

European Jewish art dealers are regarded as the medium of modern art, which is mainly reflected in the following two aspects. First, the nature of the Jewish nation and Jewish culture. Jews are

scattered around the world and depend on others as guests. All kinds of factors, such as the loss of farming opportunities, the exclusion of the handicraft industry, the situation of displacement, and the threat of anti-Semitism forced Jews to embark on the path to business and engage in transnational trade. Therefore, extensive historical experience has endowed Jewish dealers with a unique social role — the middleman. They are typical minority middlemen who can mediate between buyers and sellers in various environments. The intermediary and openness of this role directly or indirectly promote the transmission and progress of cultures in the world. Furthermore, the strong adaptability, compatibility, specificity, nationality, and cosmopolitanism of Jewish culture enable it to absorb and collide with others from diverse countries.

Second, Jewish art dealers made significant contributions to the artistic revolution. The Western art world was undergoing a key transformation at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. On the one hand, ancient master paintings were transferred from Europe to the United States; On the other hand, modern artistic schools have achieved the ultimate victory. In this

modernist triumph, Jewish art dealers played a leading role. They are both retailers and connoisseurs, dealers and collectors. As a crucial link between art, artists, collectors, auction houses and museums, Jewish art dealers mentioned in the book, such as Wildenstein, Gimpel, Duveen and Bernheim, are extremely representative and indispensable, and their life stories have brought more possibilities for the study of art and art history.

Before entering the art world, the main characters of the book were horse dealers, antique dealers, or financiers, so what does art mean to them? Generally, today's acclaimed works of art are framed in glass and hung on the walls of museums and galleries, but for those Jewish art dealers, these paintings are only commodities within reach. The art market around the turn of the twentieth century had relatively low barriers while possessing inestimable potentiality. As with other commodities, paintings are also valued for rarity and novelty. In addition to trading the works from current well-known artists, the most common investment way for Jewish art dealers is to imitate aristocratic sponsorship of art. Those Jews hold exhibitions for cooperated modernist artists, encouraging them to create more new works. Even though avant-garde paintings were unpopular with the official art salon during this period, art dealers intend to wait for the appreciation of their works.

For Jewish dealers, art can bring them wealth, which symbolizes the right to survive, thus gaining social status and citizenship, and a recognized sense of belonging. In the field of modernist art, researchers usually pay attention to artists and their works, trying to identify the techniques and genres of the creators, and speculate on their environmental background and psychological activities to explore the pure beauty of art. However, people seldom put themselves into the role of Jewish art dealers hidden behind the works. Accordingly, focusing on these art dealers with far-sightedness will capture a slew of valuable traces for the study of art history, and provide new clues and clear context for weaving and combing the art world of the 19th and 20th centuries.

### **3. BOOK REVIEW**

#### ***3.1 Belonging and Betrayal***

The book *Belonging and Betrayal* consists of four parts, and twenty-three chapters, with one prologue and one epilogue, presenting a portrait that has been drawn over the years, exquisite and

ingenious. It portrays the ups and downs of Jewish art dealers and collectors from the 19th to the 20th century, and the story begins with a specialist officer served in US Army. Towards the end of World War II, the officer and his companions found untold Nazi-stolen art in Buxheim monastery and Neuschwanstein castle in Bavaria, Germany. It is scarcely a coincidence that the owners of these artworks are mostly Jewish collectors thorough investigation. As a result, family history, art history, and political history collided in the struggle for Nazi-stolen art, raising complex legal and moral issues. Among them, the most famous event was the return of Gustav Klimt's *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I* (1907) to its legitimate heirs. The author, however, believes that how Jewish art dealers acquired these great art collections deserves more attention than focusing research on how the Nazis stole thousands of artworks from European Jews.

#### ***3.2 The First Part: Rise***

The first part starts out with the legendary story of the alliance of three Jewish art-dealing families, the Wildensteins, Duveens and Gimpels, as well as the art expert Berenson. From multiple respects such as social transformation, the Jewish plight, the art revolution, and international transactions, it analyzes the life course of European Jews entering the art world and becoming the new masters' works. On the contrary, every decision and choice made by these art dealers has affected the art market and art world directly or indirectly, reflecting the characteristics of the times and the nation. With the decline of the landlord class and the rise of the new capitalist elite, Jews gradually obtained political and legal rights from European emancipation at the turn of the twentieth century. Involved in modernization progress, they seized an increasing number of opportunities to enter the unfamiliar field and participate in the cultural world, which was made possible by the opening of high culture to the public. Jewish art dealers play a vital role in the international art market by utilizing their appreciation ability to make up for their connections, in other words, to use their aesthetic knowledge to support their cultural ambitions. It is essentially the fact that they have made effort to build a bridge between the old aristocracy and the new capitalist rich, connecting Europe and the United States. For Jews, art brings them a coveted sense of belonging. Art research, art transaction, art collection, art sponsorship, and everything related to art will contribute to their wealth accumulation,

cultural adaption, social status, and even rightful citizenship.

### **3.3 *The Second Part: Modernism***

In the second part, the author focuses on the view that modernism became Jewish, which could be explained by the following four reasons. First, Jews have a close relationship with modernism. At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, the emergence of modernist art—a new art form and avant-garde trend of thought gave birth to many art schools such as Impressionism, Fauvism and Cubism. Jewish art dealers and collectors became indispensable keys in these art schools by virtue of their identities as stewards, supporters, and sponsors. Second, these people firmly defend modern art with practical actions. With the disintegration of traditional art, they united like-minded individuals and challenged official academies as representatives, providing channels for new forms of artistic expression and fundamentally changing the aesthetic balance of artistic power. Third, they have made undisputed contributions to modernism. For instance, Benjamin Altman, the greatest collector of this period, bequeathed his collection to the Metropolitan Museum, which affirmed his sense of mission as an art dealer and established the legitimacy and value of modern art. Fourth, they have a profound significance in the world of modern art. Jewish art dealers associate emerging capitalists with avant-garde artists, both of whom are outsiders. From ancient classics to modernist works, the changing preferences of influential collectors reflect the development of the art revolution at the turn of the century. Moreover, this part discusses the personal factors for the success of Jewish art dealers and the specific approaches they promote the development of modernism. Those excellent Jews always attach importance to community connections, and possess economic strength, artistic aspirations, business acumen and aesthetic knowledge, in conjunction with the ability to navigate the divide between bourgeois and bohemian. As talent scouts for artists, art dealers mostly run their own galleries and maintain good relations with their artists. They enhance the popularity of modernist artists and their works by holding exhibitions, setting up magazines, cultivating foreign collectors and inviting artists to create portraits.

### **3.4 *The Third Part: War***

The First World War runs through the third part of this book. Then, the author expounds on the considerable impact of the war on the art world from both wartime and post-war aspects. He further emphasizes the critical role of art dealers as middlemen. The war not only changed the fate of art practitioners but also affected the form of artistic expression and people's acceptance of art. In the early 20th century, the confrontation between modernist factions and official institutions was only reflected in artistic aesthetics and professional competition, which had nothing to do with political ideology or national loyalty; after the outbreak of World War I, the art world was sharply politicized, and Jewish art practitioners had to make difficult life choices—where to stay, whether to enlist, and which side to support. To a certain extent, nationality was destiny. Driven by nationalist hatred, Jewish art dealers were severely condemned and mercilessly treated by the right-wing forces. Nonetheless, the Great War also brought them a chance to claim citizenship and prove their loyalty and responsibility. Throughout art history, this war is both a disaster and a catalyst for the road to art modernization. Military conflicts have triggered culture wars that lead to the disintegration of the avant-garde. Meanwhile, this period saw that art provided people with hope and comfort, sustenance and strength, and guided people out of emptiness, helplessness, confusion, and despair. These Jewish dealers paved the way for the perfect combination of military and art, allowing artists to express their emotions with their works, which aroused the resonance of the people during the war. However, the post-war peace did not bring the art world back to its former state. According to the book, the partnership between dealers and artists, dealers and collectors, and dealers themselves is changing rapidly due to factors including economic conditions, personal positions, resource depletion, anti-Jewish prejudice, and the revival of classicism. At this point, middlemen play a decisive role as a link between multiple parties. Jewish art dealers are middlemen between art and commerce, equally, between the emerging bourgeoisie and the general public. They promoted the development of the world of art with the new strategy of combining modernism and conservatism. Not only did they successfully bring eighteenth-century British classics to the American market with the most purchasing power, but also transferred modern art from the fringes to the heartland relying on their galleries and exhibitions. In addition, dealers could

consolidate their social status through charitable causes such as building museums and donating art, hoping to maintain the balance between art and commerce, strive to bridge the gap between classes, and finally achieve a transformation of identity.

### **3.5 *The Fourth Part: Fall***

In the 1920s and 1930s, the unparalleled status of Jews in the art world was regarded by Nazis as a threat to the German cultural field. Then, modernist art suffered a devastating blow as anti-Semitism became an outlet for ethnic hatred. The fourth part exposes the crimes of the Nazis, and restores the unknown truth of art history during World War II from the two aspects of “belonging” and “betrayal”. Before the Second World War, the Nazis had already begun to cover up their atrocities with highfalutin reasons, using laws as tools to satisfy their own desires. Tens of thousands of artworks were confiscated, looted, resold, and destroyed by the Nazis, most of which came from galleries, museums, and the private collections of Jewish dealers. Considering the symbolic and economic value of art, the Nazis systematically plundered paintings and destroyed the commercial and cultural influence of Jews in Europe at one stroke, which reflected the selfishness, greed, and ambition of the Nazis, together with the racism and anti-Semitism at the core of their ideology. For Jewish art dealers, the sense of belonging is mostly rooted in art and art assets. When Jews lost their property, they also lost their hard-earned sense of belonging and even lost their lives. They were subjected to ongoing condemnation, exclusion and suppression from various fields containing the economy, politics, and culture, which resulted in the fact that their citizenship and right to life were completely deprived by the Nazis. Consequently, anti-Semitism enveloped Europe, and the war brought devastation to Jewish art dealers, whose triple “evil” identities of Jews, Francophiles and modernists, as well as their international reputation made them a more convenient target. After the fall of France, about 80,000 Jews were killed by the Nazis and their French collaborators, while Jewish dealers who had made imperative contributions to French art suffered a ruthless betrayal. Motivated by personal animosity, professional rivalry, anti-Semitic resentment, unbridled greed, and a desire to curry favour with Nazi or Vichy officials, many mercenary Frenchmen added insult to injury and made fortunes at the misfortune of compatriots by colluding, retaliating and secretly informing. In order to escape Nazi persecution, many Jews took

refuge in London or other places, and once again lived a life of displacement and despair. It is admirable that the surviving Jewish art dealers did not sit still despite their inability to stop the Nazi plunder. They struggled to survive in a strange land, insisted on devoting themselves to art and culture, did their best to protect the art they cherished, and fought back against the oppressors in their special way. Even if they lose their proud collections, Jewish dealers can still become irreplaceable by virtue of their own value. Some Jewish art dealers cooperate with local galleries as top connoisseurs; some utilize the power of words to create articles, write books, and continue to publish magazines; some risk their lives to hide and transfer art treasures; some resolutely take up the only artistic weapon to fight back against the Nazis on the side of the Atlantic Ocean, and show their aesthetic pursuit and political stance to the whole world by holding art exhibitions.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

The victory of modernism is a story without end (Gombrich, 1995). The story told by Professor Charles Dellheim in this book restores and recreates the life, work and milieu of some Jews, beginning with the rise of Jewish art dealers at the end of the nineteenth century and ending with the looting of their art collections by the Nazis. But in fact, this story has not yet drawn a satisfactory end, which requires us to constantly study, explore, revise, and supplement the art history. Only when we grasp what art means to Jewish dealers and collectors who love and lose them will it be possible to measure the dispossession of Nazi-looted art. The anti-Semitic war and cultural atrocities launched by the Nazis bring about difficulties in returning artworks, lead to the fragmentation of art history, and result in cracks in the hearts of Jews that can never be erased. In contrast, art endows Jews with an incomparable sense of happiness and belonging, with high artistic value, commercial value, and emotional value, just like the light shining firmly in the darkness. Although the cracks cannot be recovered, we can trace the eternal light through each crack.

This book is of great value to students and researchers in the fields of Jewish studies, art history, and modernist culture. First, the book is worth reading and pondering. It involves a slew of distinguished artists and their paintings, which have both aesthetic and historical values. And the description of the Jews, the art, the history, and the

truth show the inherent power and infinite charm of literature. Second, this book probes into Jewish art dealers and modern art, providing a new perspective and beneficial materials for corresponding study and research. Third, the book calls attention to the return of Jewish art collections, from which people can strive to piece together the broken past, find the original owner of the paintings, and restore the truth of history. It is crucial and meaningful for Jews and art history. Overall, by exploring the road to art modernization from the perspective of European Jewish art dealers, this book demonstrates the transformative power of art, which convinces people the fact that art can convey the beauty of human nature, bring freedom and hope; art can soothe the restless mood and fill the empty heart; art can give people a sense of belonging and never betray.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work was supported by the project from WUT (Grant No. W2019135).

## REFERENCES

- [1] Arnason, H. H., & Mansfield, E.C. (2009). *History of Modern Art*. Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall.
- [2] Gombrich, E. H. (1995). *The Story of Art*. London: Phaidon.
- [3] Guerdat, P. (2019). The Journal of a Transatlantic Art Dealer: René Gimpel 1918–1939. *Journal of the History of Collections*, 31(2), pp. 440-441. DOI: 10.1093/jhc/fhz003
- [4] Hans, B. (2020). The Museum of Modern Art and the History of Modernism. *Archives of Pathology & Laboratory Medicine*, 144(7), pp. 100-114.
- [5] Lapin, D. (2005). *Thou Shall Prosper: Ten Commandments for Making Money*. New Jersey: Wiley.
- [6] Moses, L. P. (1998). The Substance of Jewish Business Ethics. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 17(6), pp. 603-617. DOI: 10.1023/A:1017958917607