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Art and the Evidence of Attribution. Giovanni Morelli, Morellians and Morellianism: Thoughts on ‘Scientific Connoisseurship’

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ART AND THE EVIDENCE OF ATTRIBUTION. GIOVANNI MORELLI, MORELLIANS AND MORELLIANISM: THOUGHTS ON ‘SCIENTIFIC CONNOISSEURSHIP’

What sort of evidential procedure can enable us to identify the creator of a particular work of art? In the nineteenth century, Giovanni Morelli, an Italian doctor and connoisseur, claimed to have developed a new ‘science’ of connoisseurship, that relied not on visual intuition or documentary research but on empirical, comparative morphological analysis of forms in paintings. Such a procedure, based on ‘facts’, was compared to the techniques of the natural sciences. This essay examines Morelli’s claims. It argues that what Morelli developed was less a scientific practice than an ideology. Morelli’s own use of his method was sporadic and infrequent, and he often had recourse to less scientific methods that he himself had attacked. The status of the method, even among Morellians, was ambiguous: was it a method tout court or a supplement to other techniques? And claims for the novelty of ‘scientific connoisseurship’ tended to ignore the already established technique of detailed morphological analysis both in art history and archaeology. If they were not systematically used, were viewed ambivalently and were not novel to art history, why did Morelli’s claims prove so controversial? One answer stresses Morelli’s credentials as an Italian nationalist, engaged in a patriotic struggle to preserve the nation’s cultural heritage, connecting his approach to quarrels with foreign (especially German) museum officials bent on acquiring Italian national treasures. Though persuasive, this view fails, I argue, to appreciate the nature of Morelli’s criticism of the entire modern art system, both in Italy and abroad. Morellianism was not the ideology of a scientific moderniser but of a cultural conservative.

‘If you want to understand what a science is, you should look in the first instance not at its theories and findings, and certainly not at what its apologists say about it; you should look at what practitioners of it do’ (Geertz, 1973, p. 5).

In this essay I want to focus my discussion on Giovanni Morelli and his so-called ‘scientific connoisseurship’. In doing so I raise a number of general issues: What is connoisseurship doing? Who are the connoisseurs? What is the end or aim of connoisseurship? How do connoisseurs connect to cultural patrimony and the art market? What were the competing views of what constituted evidence of an art work’s attribution? The model I adopt is performative; the question to ask is not, ‘what is connoisseurship’, a question that tends to lead to ahistorical answers, but rather ‘what is connoisseurship doing in particular historical circumstances’, for what counts as evidence has in part to do with what that evidence is for and how it is being used.

I will not dwell in great detail on this well-known story, though, as we shall see, like most well known stories, this is a misleading one. Morellianism, as propagated most famously by Morelli in his introductory dialogue on method in the edition of his collected works, as elaborated in the essays and comments of the early (though not the later) Bernard Berenson, and as praised by such admirers as Lady Eastlake, Sigmund Freud and Carlo Ginzburg, claimed that the Italian patriot, physician and senator had developed a new, scientific form of connoisseurship which prioritised the scrupulous inspection of works of art (rather than an attempt to adduce their history through documents, or their authorship through a swift, intuitive glance at a work's general impression, or 'Totaleindruck') in order to isolate their morphological characteristics, and thereby to identify not just their place in regional schools of art but the authors of the works themselves (Berenson 1902, 1927; Eastlake, 1891, 1892; Ginzburg and Davin, 1980).

The priority here (I will return to this issue of what connoisseurship was for) was not aesthetic pleasure but a positivistic inventorying of works of art, played out on two overlapping (and sometimes contradictory) fields – the artistic patrimony of the nation state and the universal museum. Many accounts – from Elizabeth Eastlake's in the nineteenth century, to Jaynie Anderson's in the present – tell a heroic story about Morelli as an Italian patriot whose concern for the political entity of an emergent Italy (and I would be the last to question Morelli's patriotic credentials) was mirrored in his determination to establish an accurate and full picture of the new nation's cultural patrimony in order to secure its conservancy (Agosti et al., 1993; Anderson, 1987b, 1991, 1996; Morelli, 1999; Eastlake, 1891).

As a 'scientific' procedure, this sort of connoisseurship emphasised repeated and painstaking visual comparisons, and highlighted the value of particular features of paintings (landscape and drapery – two often forgotten features – as well as such body parts as ears and hands). Morelli directed the connoisseur to small, insignificant details as particularly telling signs of authorship because they were rendered in a routine, unconscious manner. And it was this, of course, that excited both Freud and Ginzburg, and led them to recruit Morelli to their cause: the former because it seemed to mirror the procedures of psychoanalysis; the latter because it seemed to exemplify the homological model that he employs to build totalities out of traces and fragments (Ginzburg and Davin, 1980).

Morelli's claims to originality and to priority were sustained by his emphasis on the weakness and unreliability of 'traditional' methods. Morelli rejected any art historical work that did not make the object the centre of its attention, and any art history that used the artwork as a way of recovering the spirit of the times. Art historians, whether in the academy or the museum, were, in his view, far too immersed in books and documents, housing art history in the library and the archive rather than working in the myriad repositories – the churches, town halls and private houses – in which art rested. At bottom, the problem with art historians was that they did not look. The proper subject of art history was the work of art itself; rigorous art history depended on the meticulous examination of large numbers of paintings. 'It is absolutely necessary', Morelli concluded, 'for a man to be a connoisseur before he can become an art historian' (Morelli, 1892, p. 15).

This criticism is well known. What is less emphasised is Morelli's critique of the technique of the 'coup d'oeil', the intuitive first glance – Malcolm Gladwell's 'blink' (Gladwell, 2005). Such a procedure, Morelli seems to be saying, has no grounding, no means of verification, no evidentiary base. He also implies that it is slipshod, a sort of easy short-circuit to attribution, unlike the painstaking rigours of scientific observation. Here, as so often, Morelli is playing fast and loose. It was never the claim that anyone's immediate intuition produced a good attribution, just that someone with accumulated visual experience could use that experience and knowledge to intuit a good attribution. The difference is a procedural one: Morelli's method is one that appears to demand that one proceeds from the parts of a work to its whole; the intuitive method proceeds in the opposite direction, from the whole to its parts, seeking corroborative evidence to substantiate the original judgment.

In treating connoisseurship as 'scientific', Morelli seemed to be taking it out of the realm of humanist conjecture and into the world of scientific investigation. 'Observation and experience', he wrote, 'are the foundation of every science'. Just 'as the botanist lives among his fresh or dried plants, the mineralogist among his stones, the geologist among his fossils, so the art connoisseur ought to live among his photographs and, if his finances permit, among his pictures and statues' (Morelli, 1892, p. 11). In explaining why he so often differed from the numerous experts who had written about the attributions in German collections, Morelli claimed that his conclusions were 'based upon indisputable and practical facts, accessible to every observer, and are not merely subjective and aesthetic, dependent upon individual taste and impressions, as is usually the case in critical writings on art' (Lermolief [=Morelli], 1907, p. 10).

Thus, Morelli and the Morellians wrote themselves into what we might characterise as the progressive narrative of connoisseurship, one of cumulative improvement in our understanding and identification of works of art as a result of the application of new techniques, methods or technologies. They invented, in fact, an ideology, Morellianism, that, as we have already seen, has proved extraordinarily seductive. It offered a comforting narrative (and continues to do so), one that had a wide public appeal in the age of positivistic science and remains potent in a technophilic age. Oddly enough, it remains a part of art historical orthodoxy, its claims taken at face value, even when they are disputed. The usual question posed of Morellianism is whether or not it produced good evaluations, not about what sort of ideological work it was performing. But, as we shall see, Morellianism was not a very good guide to what connoisseurs (including Morelli) were doing in the period; it performed other functions. If we want to get beyond the progressive grand narrative of 'scientific connoisseurship', we will have to look to a more embedded analysis, one more like a micro or case history, digging deeper into what is at stake in connoisseurship and its application as expertise at a particular historical moment.

So let us start to take Morelli's and the Morellians' account apart. To me, one of the most astonishing features of the discussion of Morelli's scientific connoisseurship is the almost total lack of attention (with a couple of exceptions) to the question, not of whether Morelli's attributions were true (much comment here), but of the grounds and procedures he actually used, rather than those he championed. Put crudely, did his practice embrace his ideology? One of the few full studies of this issue, Matteo Panzeri's examination of Morelli's notes and annotations on La Collezione Lochis, written in 1865, finds that in his entire account there is only one recorded instance of the use of morphological features to make an attribution, the case of a virgin and child by Cosme Tura: 'Caratteristiche le orecchie lunghe e cartilaginose, le palpebre come conchiglie di nautilo' [features long cartilaginous ears, eyelids like nautilus shells] (Agosti et al., 1993, p. 232). Instead, the overriding ground for attribution is quality. Similarly, if we examine Morelli's famous account of works in the Borghese and Doria Pampfili collections, qualitative judgments abound – works are 'feeble', 'weak', 'lifeless', 'too spirited in conception and too warm in colouring', 'coarse and unskillful', 'too hard and too feeble', and so on. When necessary, Morelli adopts a biographical approach and elaborates on Vasari – as in the case of Bacchiacca (Morelli, 1892, pp. 101–4) – and shows himself to be happy with documentary evidence provided it serves his purpose. As Maria Loh has pointed out, Morelli's attribution of the Dresden Venus to Giorgione was based 'on a pithy line in Marcantonio Michiel's Notizia d'opere di disegno' (Loh, 2007, p. 22). Morelli's account of how he made his famous attribution of the Borghese Giorgione, though not based on documentary evidence, also does not sound like a systematic morphological analysis: 'One day, as I stood before this mysterious portrait, entranced, and questioning, the spirit of the master met mine, and the truth flashed upon me. "Giorgione, thou alone", I cried in my excitement; and the picture answered, "Even so"' (Morelli, 1892, p. 249). Of course, on occasion, morphological detail occupies centre stage – as for example in his discussion of how to distinguish the work of Pesellino from that of his master, Fra Filippo. But Morelli knows, as he shows in his discussion of Botticelli, that the details of master and pupils may share the same morphological characteristics, and that then qualitative judgment comes into play. In short, Morelli frequently made attributions using methods and approaches that he condemned in his theoretical writing.

There is other evidence that Morelli's take on morphological analysis was a bit more ambivalent than he and some of his proponents would have us believe. Morelli himself often insisted, especially when he was accused of being 'mechanical' in his attributions, that examining such particulars was only one facet or part of his technique. He disparaged the famous illustrations of ears and hands, which are reproduced again and again in modern discussions of connoisseurship, calling them 'caricatures made to engage the public', and when he was preparing the definitive edition of his works he deleted them from the proofs (Anderson, 1996). And he denied that his method could be reduced to a mechanical process in which attributions were read off, using a small detail. 'It has been asserted in Germany', he complained, 'that I profess to recognise a painter and to estimate his work solely by the form of the hand, the finger-nails, the ear, or the toes. Whether this statement is due to malice or to ignorance I cannot say; it is scarcely necessary to state that it is incorrect. What I maintain is, that the forms, more especially those of the hand and ear, aid us in distinguishing the works of a master from those of his imitators, and control the judgment which subjective impressions might lead us to pronounce' (Morelli, 1892, p. 32).

Yet this whole issue was fraught with ambiguity: were morphological details Morelli's method or were they a supplement? Morelli and his followers could never quite decide. They wanted the benefit of morphological scientism – rigour and a high degree of certainty, as well as what they saw as the badge of distinction conferred by the approach – but wished to avoid accusations of mechanical and rote learning. When enthusiasm for Morelli's work was at its peak, in the last decade of the nineteenth century, Morellians strongly hinted that his method was a passepartout that gave almost anyone the key to attribution. Jocelyn Ffoulkes, the English translator of Morelli, described his method as the means 'whereby beginners may hope to attain to a certain amount of proficiency in distinguishing one master from another', concluding, 'This road is open to all'. Lady Eastlake, in a fulsome tribute to Morelli, imagined a time when, thanks to his method, the public could 'more easily learn to know a painter's special style, and, after a time, could themselves, without the help of art critics, detect if an imposter had been foisted upon us' (Brewer, 2009, p. 52). And, as we have seen, Morelli himself was not averse to claiming that his conclusions were 'based upon indisputable and practical facts, accessible to every observer, and are not merely subjective and aesthetic, dependent upon individual taste and impressions, as is usually the case in critical writings on art'.

But as Morelli's methodological claims came under attack as the approach of what Charles Eliot Norton called 'the ear and toenail school', his defenders were quick to point out that, 'those purely mechanical tests which are so frequently and so closely associated with his name form but a comparatively small part of his system' (Monkhouse, 1883) and were easily abused. 'In the hands of those whose faculties of comparison are themselves mainly mechanical, they degrade art criticism to the level of chirography' (Monkhouse, 1883). So, conclusion number two: the status and force of the Morellian method was always ambiguous, especially among its proponents.

Which brings us to the issue of novelty and to the question, which has recently much exercised Morellian scholars, of the sources or origins of Morelli's method. Carlo Ginzburg and others have connected the Morellian method to his training as a doctor, emphasising the similarities between medical diagnostics and the use of fragments to 'diagnose' attributions. Richard Pau and Jaynie Anderson, drawing on the Morelli archive, have pointed to Morelli's notes and anatomical drawings made during his time as a student of Dollinger at the University of Munich, and have traced his approach to Cuvier's methods of identification through the use of fragments, 'the correlation of parts' (Agosti et al., 1993; Anderson, 1987a, 1987b). This concern to isolate a special 'source' of Morelli's ideas is, I think, connected to the assumption that in some way his method was novel, and that its origins had to be outside the realm of art history and the humanities. In other words, it takes at face value Morelli's claim to be developing a science with an 'experimental method'.

Here I think it important to bear in mind that, as Morelli himself acknowledged, there were many art scholars in Italy who did not see his method as especially novel. As Donata Levi has pointed out, Giovanni Batista Cavalcaselle, who accompanied Morelli on a trip through Le Marche and Umbria to inventory art works there for the new nation state, used precisely the sort of morphological detail emphasised by Morelli in his armoury of attribution (Agosti et al., 1993). Such an approach had a strong pedigree in Italo-German scholarship, particularly in a field that seems to have been largely neglected by Morelli scholars, namely classical art and archaeology. In the eighteenth century, Winckelmann, of course, was one of the first to use trivial details (knees etc.) to make identifications. By the early nineteenth century, German and Italian scholars of ancient art and artefacts were routinely using formal analysis in this way. Figures like Heinrich von Brunn of the Deutsche Archälogische Institut in Rome, in the words of the *Dictionary of Art Historians*, 'pioneered the method of determining date and source of sculptural fragments through a rigorous analysis of the representation of anatomic detail' (https://dictionaryofarthistorians.org/brunnh.htm). And, of course, the primacy of the visual, of the astute eye, over the textual, was one of the chief emancipatory strategies of classical archaeology in its attempt to free itself from literary classicism.

The general point I want to make here is not one that disparages Morelli and his achievement, but rather to point to how he took up and developed mainstream ideas not just from nineteenth-century positivistic science, nor from the technique of investigation described by Huxley as 'retrospective prophecy', but from within the worlds of art and archaeology. Claims about Morelli's novelty, in other words, seem to me to be exaggerated. A fair response to this might be the one that Morelli himself made to accusations that he lacked originality – if he was so mainstream why all the fuss?

One well-known answer to this question, elaborated most convincingly by Jaynie Anderson, is that what lay at the heart of Morelli's notoriety was cultural politics. In particular, that the vicious and escalating quarrel between Morelli and von Bode of the Berlin Museums was as much about the politics of cultural patrimony as it was about connoisseurial method. As she writes, 'the differences between Morelli and Bode were political, or in other words about the politics of acquisitions between competing nations and their developing national museums. From the time that Morelli invented a scientific method of attribution in the 1850s, connoisseurship, as practised by patriots rather than dealers, became a political activity. In the creation of national museums connoisseurship was an important diagnostic activity, used to determine who should have the best works of art. He who succeeded, created the national patrimony for the future of a nation' (Anderson, 1996, p. 107). Anderson is surely correct in locating the issue of connoisseurship within the questions of cultural patrimony, museums and the nation state. As in the case of his famous trip to Le Marche and Umbria in 1861 with Cavalcaselle (and a further extended series of trips with his assistant Frizzoni between 1874 and 1877, when he travelled through Italy making an inventory of art works for the Italian government), Morelli was very much concerned to record Italy's cultural patrimony. Because of all the controversies raised about specific attributions (a matter to which I will return), it has been rather forgotten that Italian connoisseurship in the second half of the nineteenth century was about a general exercise in recuperation, rescue and discovery. Berenson in an early essay compared the task of the connoisseur to that of a contadina rescuing lost sheep. The *Burlington Magazine*, in a wide-ranging discussion of connoisseurship, talked about its threefold task as 'discovery, attribution and classification', and praised connoisseurs who had 'rescued from obscurity a large number of personalities, some doubtless of little account, but many of profound interest, whose acquaintance we can now make through their work' (*Burlington Magazine*, 1904). This was an enterprise analogous to that of the archaeologist, the unearthing of the obscure, the rescuing and reconstruction of a lost culture, and thus the creation of an Italian patrimony. And hence the frequent heroic accounts – in the writings of Morelli, Cavalcaselle, Berenson and Langton Douglas – of the intrepid connoisseur as a forager and explorer undergoing personal hardship and privation in order to explore newfound lands. In the first instance, the object of connoisseurship was less the identification of difference, the observation of the singularities that identified a particular master, than the discovery of similarities that made up a regional style or school. Berenson makes this abundantly clear in his essay on connoisseurship of 1902. Taking the example of the Venetian school, he writes, 'we wish to know how it originated, how it ripened to maturity, how it decayed, and what were its characteristics in all these phases' (Berenson, 1902, p. 121). This, Berenson argues, cannot be achieved without a full inventory of Venetian art, and the first duty of the connoisseur is to identify affinities among works in order to identify schools and periods. This process of resurrection was also the means by which a process of proper discrimination could be undertaken. Such inventories helped undermine the prevalent and casual assumption that a school or regional style was made up almost exclusively of old masters. Only when it was in place could the great works be distinguished and identified. The process, which Berenson actually described as 'dialectical', involved lumping and splitting: aggregating and disaggregating. It seems fairly obvious – at least to me – and is borne out by the notes and diagrams of Cavalcaselle and Morelli themselves, that a morphological analysis – put another way, formalism – was, in fact, a rather sound procedure when trying to group together schools and identify their characteristics. Here, the object in view was not beauty or aesthetic judgment but rather the development of a taxonomy of art.

But of course this splitting and lumping is only part of the story. It did not take place in an atmosphere of unanimity and accord, but one of great conflict. Anderson and others are right to insist on Morelli's patriotic agenda – it is noticeable how his hostility to Bode and the German museums escalated after 1874 when the north Europeans began buying works of Italian art in significant numbers. But Morelli's view of Italy, one that was shared by many of his British admirers and saw the new nation as a centralised constitutional monarchy on the British model, was under constant challenge from the Left, whose values grew out of the Mazzinian, republican tradition that Morelli opposed, and which also supported more regional autonomy and local power. In this, as in so many other respects, Morelli and his great rival Cavalcaselle were at odds. And, just as Morelli's hostility to Bode grew with German purchasing power, so Morelli's antipathy to Cavalcaselle grew as the latter became more and more important as a cultural administrator, after the Left defeated the liberal conservatives in 1876 and dominated administrations over the next ten years.

My argument here is that personal, political and aesthetic issues all became terribly confused. Personal relations between Morelli and Cavalcaselle were never more than polite after their trip together in 1861. But more important was the issue of who was to be the guardian, interpreter and proprietor of Italy's cultural heritage – was it to be the rather patrician, erudite amateur and collector whom Morelli embodied, or was it to be the democratic functionary personified by Cavalcaselle, working with local museums and authorities that combined patriotism with campanilismo? Crowe and Cavalcaselle's *A New History of Painting in Italy from the Second to the Sixteenth Century* (1864), and its subsequent and expanded iterations in German and Italian, made a powerful case for Cavalcaselle's proprietorship, not least because, unlike most of Morelli's writings, it constituted a history of art, constructed with the aid of local archivists and antiquarians. Morelli and Cavalcaselle may not, as we have seen, have differed much in their connoisseurial practices or techniques, but they did differ in what they produced, in what they made that connoisseurship do. Morelli wrote about Italian painters and about collections, Cavalcaselle wrote a history of Italian art that gave a great deal of attention to works in both their physical and historical location. (The idea, propagated by Morelli, that such art history saw artworks as mere cultural illustration is a willful mischaracterisation of Crowe and Cavalcaselle.) Of course Morelli was extremely knowledgeable about the sort of art that Crowe and Cavalcaselle discussed, and used it on occasion to challenge museum attributions; he also had very fixed ideas about the organic and local nature of styles of art that in his view were determined by their environment. However, what his writing sets out to create and control was not the history of art (about which he was, as we know, extremely and inaccurately disparaging) but a body of art work, whose true meaning and significance was available to only a very few. Bode, in his notorious attack on Morelli in the *Fortnightly Review* shortly after the latter's death, implied that Morelli was some sort of populist, making the meaning of art accessible to all (von Bode, 1891). Sometimes, as we have seen, Morellians expressed similar sentiments. But this, as I am sure Bode knew, was all nonsense. Morelli constantly emphasised how inaccessible the true meaning of art was to the viewer. He dismissed curators and other museum functionaries as people who did not have the time to examine art properly (!); this was also his repeated reason for why he would not take up any formal position in the administration of art in the new Italy. He dismissed the new art history professors in the universities as bookworms and pedants, given to metaphysics and history rather than art. (Though, ironically, his most lasting legacy was probably at the University of Vienna, where his technical formalism was much admired and underpinned the work of the Viennese school of art scholars from Franz Wickoff to Julius von Schlosser.) He blamed the presence of copies in the art world on the greed of merchants and bankers. He saw the amateur as far superior to the professional. 'I hold that amateurs who have a real love of art, and who, like myself, have a collection of their own, are quite as much entitled to express an opinion on a work of art as – nay, even better entitled to do so, than – so-called professional critics, who really care no more about a picture than the anatomist cares about the dead body he is dissecting' (Morelli, 1892, p. 33). But being an amateur was entirely consistent with being a patient and persistent observer: 'The study of all the individual parts, which go to make up "form" in a work of art, is what I would recommend to those who are not content with being mere dilettanti, but who really desire to find a way through the intricacies of the history of art […]. Such studies, however, are not a matter of weeks, months, or even years' (Morelli, 1892, pp. 75–6). 'The art connoisseur', he writes, 'ought to live among his photographs and, if his finances permit, among his pictures and statues' (Morelli, 1892, p. 11). The appreciation of works of art was a lifetime avocation, a calling; what it was not, was a profession.

The position that Morelli takes about who is able to make an informed and skilled judgment about a work of art is, in other words, both anti-modern and elitist. No wonder he railed against the disasters perpetrated under 'democratic progressive government'. Morelli may have been an Italian patriot, but he was an exceptionally conservative figure in the art world of the late nineteenth century, who clung to the values of disinterested amateurism and did not like the international art market, nor the functionaries who inhabited the new nineteenth-century art institutions – public museums, universities – whether in Italy or abroad. He used every weapon at his disposal to combat these new forces (I use the metaphor advisedly; Morelli was fond of such deliberately combative language). The war was waged ad hominem: the index to the first volume of the English edition of his works lists 55 entries for von Bode, all but two of which are pejorative; Crowe and Cavalcaselle command 49 footnotes, four of which confirm their attributions, all the rest list errors. No Italian artist commands anywhere near as many entries. As Carol Gibson Wood pointed out many years ago, the explicit articulation of a Morellian method came late in Morelli's career, and it is hard not to see it as a means of distinction, another way of differentiating him from his rivals (Gibson-Wood, 1988). I do not mean by this that he invented the method as a form of distinction. He was, from a very early stage in his writings, deeply sceptical of ungrounded aesthetic judgments (though never averse to evaluating the quality of a painting), and strongly committed to a rigorous formalist analysis as the key to understanding and appreciating art. He also certainly wanted the understanding of art to be 'a science', though in this he was like many of his contemporaries, even though they may have had different notions of what that meant. But I am inclined to suggest that late in his career, in an exquisite irony that would no doubt not be lost on him, Morelli played up his 'modern' scientific method to further a deeply conservative vision of the art world.

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Insights

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