From Inventory to Virtual Catalog: Notes on the 'Catalogue raisonné'

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How can one not be painfully affected by the sight of these extraordinary estate sale catalogues? It seemed to be the rule in past times, especially in the North, to hand over collections to the auctioneers, who were only interested in applying a lot number to the goods, portfolio by portfolio. In this way they simultaneously compiled an inventory and a catalogue, without any alphabetical order, without a list of contents; in short, a dog's dinner, more likely to hinder than help the collector.  

Today the term 'catalogue raisonné' is conveniently used to denote a catalog of the output of a single artist, including works in many collections. This is taken for granted in discussions such as the articles on art-historical bibliography in the Macmillan Dictionary of Art. Yet a title such as Catalogue Raisonné of the Collection of Spanish Paintings at the Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, published only last year, suggests that this is not an absolute definition. In fact, if we look further back, to the titles of eighteenth century catalogs, the meaning is precisely reversed. The great majority of 'catalogues raisonnés' of that period are not catalogs of the work of a single artist, covering many collections, but instead catalogs of single collections, covering many artists. This article sets out to cast some light on the origins of this terminological drift.

Origins

The term 'catalogue raisonné' seems to have originated in Paris in the 1720s, in a literary context. The pioneer user of the term for catalogs of art collections was the dealer and friend of Watteau, Edme-François Gersaint (d. 1750), although his sphere was not just 'art' but 'curiosité' in general. This was a broad field, as may be judged from the title of his first printed catalog of 1736: Catalogue raisonné de coquilles et autres curiosités naturelles. So what was a 'catalogue raisonné', as opposed to a simple catalog? The growth of collection catalogs is closely linked to the growth of catalogs for sale by auction, and auctioneers' catalogs had traditionally been little more than inventories, crucially lacking both order and detail, not to mention credibility. As the passage quoted at the head of this article implies, this was standard practice in Britain and the Low Countries. French custom, on the other hand, rendered the distinction between an inventory and a catalog more evident, because the sale catalog was generally published separately from, and ahead of, a second, shorter, document called the 'ordre de vacations,' which contained the lot numbers according to sale order. In fact, this contrast, between the inventory, literally 'as found,' and the catalog, is well expressed by a note in Gersaint's catalog of curiosités sold on 1st December 1737. 'To satisfy all tastes, I shall mix up the items in the course of the sale, so that on any one day everyone can have the opportunity to strike lucky with something in his field of collecting.' That is, an artificial and deliberate disorder had to be reintroduced into the sale process for the purpose of retaining the interest of the customers.

The catalog therefore had to be, at the very least, a production with more than just arbitrary order. Different organizational models emerged: alphabetical by artist, or by engraver, for print catalogs; chronological by date of birth of artist; and by medium. The most familiar division is that of the 'Trois écoles' instituted by Gersaint, the three schools in question being the Italian, the Flemish, and, bien sûr, the French. German painting could always be shoehorned into the Flemish school, though the Spanish were a headache (Velasquez was featured as Italian in some catalogs). The principle of the 'Trois écoles' even found a pleasing counterpart in catalogs of curiosités relating to natural history, with the 'Trois règnes' animal, vegetable and mineral.

After order, the second element lacking in the inventories was detail. It would be easy to multiply examples of lacunose entries in early auction catalogs along the lines of 'A fruit piece,' 'Two landscapes,' etc. A later term, 'catalogue descriptif,' more common in the nineteenth than the eighteenth century, is often paired with the term 'raisonné,' as in 'catalogue descriptif et raisonné,'—an elaboration that acknowledges the addition of detail about the works of art. This can be as basic as information about dimensions and support; it can include observations on the frame and the condition of the work, or it can blossom into full pages and more of basically factual information about the subject of the painting. Given that the expense of engraving plates to illustrate the works of art printed in the catalog was generally prohibitive, a textual description was a logical substitute. As Gersaint puts it in the 'Avertissement' preceding his 1747 catalog of the collection of the vicomte de Forspertsuis: 'My main objective in catalogues of this kind is to try and make the collector aware of the condition of every object, by a fairly detailed description, so that each one can be discerned by the imagination, as it actually is.' Gersaint's descriptions are in fact quite summary, but a fuller example may be drawn from the 1777 Randon de Boisset catalog by Pierre Rémy and Claude-François Julliot. Catalog item number 29 is a canvas by Rubens, of a lady "seated on a chair, wearing white, three-quarter-length, turning her back to the right of the picture, wearing a gray hat with a narrow turned-up brim, trimmed with a feather touching her left..."
shoulder..." and so on for several more lines. Given that there were relatively few images in general circulation in the eighteenth century compared with today, the probability that such a textual description would recall a known image to the collector's mind was considerably higher.

Catalogues raisonnés

Order, detail, and credibility: the eighteenth century Paris marchands worked especially hard to attain the third element. It is salutary to glance back at the title of Gersaint's first catalog: Catalogue raisonné de coquilles et autres curiosités naturelles. The essence of the 'catalogue raisonné,' as opposed to the mere 'catalogue descriptif,' is that it explicitly or implicitly gives thought to the correct identification of the objects it describes ('attribution' is too narrow a term here, as it hardly applies to shells). This is indicated, for example, by notes accompanying the catalog entries, debating the attribution of a painting to 'x' or 'y.' Of course, in a sale catalog, quite possibly paid for by the seller of the collection, fancy footwork may be required to skate over the gap between the cataloger's true opinions about a work and the seller's expectations, and a separate article could be written on this topic alone. But the issue of correct attribution is at least understood and even discussed. In practice, catalog entries have a tendency to slide from the particular to the general. For example, instead of discussing the particular qualities of a painting by Guido Reni, they discuss the general characteristics of Guido Reni's style, in the light of which the painting may be considered to be by him. Of course, this can only be done once or twice (there is no point repeating it endlessly in subsequent entries), which is what gives these ancien régime catalogs their unique flavor.

Gersaint's standards were not always maintained by his successors. The authors of the 1756 catalog of the duc de Tallard's
collection, Pierre Remy and Jean-Baptiste Glomy, state: "we thought it would be permissible to express the merits [of the pictures] even though we are not so arrogant as to try and teach anything to the connoisseurs. Consequently, the notes we have ventured to add to the items in this catalogue are not aimed at them... we have been careful to insert a new paragraph to separate these musings from the item which gives rise to them; in this way the cognoscenti in the field may pass on and spare themselves the trouble of reading them." In other words, they have introduced a further element, éloges, usually translated as puffery, although they are at least honest about it. It is noticeable that the Tallard catalog is entitled Catalogue raisonné..., while another catalog by Remy, of the collections of Jean-Baptiste de Troy in 1764, which uses the same paragraph and font change to separate descriptive notes from commentary, is entitled simply Catalogue....

And once outside the confines of the Paris art scene, we are on even shakier ground. British auction catalogs were much more sophisticated, being more interested in order for the purposes of sale than for intellectual gratification, and never developing the kind of scholarly apparatus that characterizes their French counterparts. This did not, however, stop the terms 'catalogue raisonné' and 'catalogue descriptif' from crossing the Channel. A 1793 Christie's catalog is entitled Catalogue raisonné: [sic] Original Drawings, Which Have Distinguished Bell's Various Editions of the British Classics, perhaps by virtue of the uncharacteristically logical arrangement of the contents. Less justifiable, the 'Descriptive Catalogue' of the important collection of Sir Joshua Reynolds two years later has notes owing more to puffery than to description. Upon occasion, the sense of a 'catalogue raisonné' being a critical catalogs comes through, notably in the 1815 Catalogue raisonné [sic] of the Pictures Now Exhibiting at the British Institution, in which an anonymous member of the Royal Academy savaged the Old Master attributions given in the official catalog. But when one finds the term 'catalogue raisonné' being deployed by an auctioneer named Robins, for the 1829 sale catalog of the painter Benjamin West, credibility goes out the window. Several years later Robins's talent for shameless hyperbole in the catalog of Horace Walpole's collection at Strawberry Hill gave rise to an amusing parody entitled "Catalogue of the Great Sale at Gooseberry Hall." The coverage of collections

Revenons à nos moutons. In eighteenth century Paris, 'catalogues raisonnés' are almost invariably catalogs of single collections including many artists, although Remy did produce one Catalogue raisonné de tableaux, dessins & estampes ... qui composent différents cabinets, but even this covers only about three collections, each treated individually. This generalization includes the numerically fewer catalogs compiled of permanent collections, rather than collections for sale, such as François-Bernard Lépicié's Catalogue raisonné des tableaux du roi (1752-4). However, the seeds of something different were being sown. Already in the seventeenth century the balance of interest had begun to tip from the subjects of works of art towards the artists who produced them, as can be deduced from changes in the catalogs of prints for sale, in which the arrangement is by artist rather than subject. Then, in the 1720s, a publishing project begun whose progress has been described by Francis Haskell in The Painful Birth of the Art Book. The significance that Haskell finds in Pierre Crozat's Recueil d'estampes d'après les plus beaux tableaux...of 1729 is that "it was designed to be a book and not just a collection of related illustrations." But equally striking is the way in which the scope of the project mushroomed, from recording works of art in the great royal collections, to French collections, and then to collections of much of Europe, not to say 'toutes les nations.' In Crozat's Recueil...a kind of virtual catalog was born, even though the infant was sickly and never attained the maturity hoped for by its parents.

The same movement from coverage of single to multiple collections, driven by connoisseurial interest, can be seen in Edme-François Gersaint's 1744 sale catalog of the collection of Quentin de Lorangère. In the Avertissement, Gersaint states: 'I have found this collection so fine and so replete with specimens that are not merely rare but unique, that I was inspired with the idea of being able to give the public a full catalogue of the works of this master [Jacques Callot], by annexing to what the late M. de Lorangère possessed all the examples I could muster, in both the two collections of the Cabinet du Roi and in those of the various serious collectors where I have noted the subject and size of all the works and which are not represented in the late