Imagine you are a wealthy Londoner and you want to buy a painting. Where do you go? Who do you trust for advice? What kind of art should you buy? How will you know if the work of art is of good quality? How much should you pay for it? Now imagine you are an artist and you want to sell your work. How do you reach your potential buyers? How do you gauge public taste? How much should you charge for your work? How do you attract attention to your work?

Answers to these questions altered over the course of the long nineteenth century. In this chapter, we explore the changing landscape of the art market in London, which emerged during this period as a major site of production and exchange in the international art market in tandem with its rise as a leading global financial center. Over these decades, the London art market expanded exponentially and was reshaped by the emergence of a dense concentration of dealers, galleries, artists’ societies, and auction houses that aimed their activities at the broad public sphere as well as at wealthy elites. Perhaps the most visible expression of this expanded art market was the large numbers of commercial art galleries clustered in the luxury retail shopping area of Old and New Bond Street in London. These galleries cultivated their publics by hosting series of rotating and heavily advertised special exhibitions, developing specific brand identities, and cultivating press coverage and publicity. Closely tied to this transformation of the art market was the rise of print culture and the emergence of journals and other organs that fueled communication within and about a London-centric art world. These new spaces and practices reshaped relationships between artist, art object, and public in fundamental ways, and gave rise to new kinds of identities and art objects.

In the following discussion we provide an overview of London’s changing art market in the nineteenth century, investigate key agents and terms that marked its rising visibility, and indicate why the art market is critical to understanding the history of nineteenth-century art. While we focus on London, readers are invited to consider the constellation of actors, institutions, and practices we discuss here in the context of other major metropolitan centers. Do the factors that were decisive for the formation of the market in London emerge elsewhere? Do other markets possess distinctive features exclusive to time and place?

London’s Art Market: Growth and Change

The emergence of the modern art market in London depended on several transformational changes. The first was a critical rearrangement of the relationship between
artist and client, linked to a radical re-imagining of the potential art buyer. In the early modern period, Church and state, as well as nobility, were the essential patrons of the arts. Major works of art were typically undertaken as commissions. Guilds, such as the Painter-Stainer’s Company (which received a royal charter in 1581), controlled training via apprenticeships as well as standards of practice, although in Great Britain foreign artists such as Hans Holbein (1465–1524) famously skirted the proscriptions of the Guild. By the late seventeenth century, the Guild no longer played an important role in buying and selling art, and works of art could be legally imported from Europe (De Marchi 2008, 2).

The Reformation and dissolution of the British Monarchy in the seventeenth century altered the role of Church and state as patrons. But the restoration of the Crown and the growing wealth of the city, an important trading and banking center as well as the home of Parliament and Court, translated into a vibrant market over the course of the long eighteenth century. The artist–patron relationship began to shift in favor of artists working on speculation for the open market.

So what were the critical ingredients—agents, institutions, and practices—that enabled the London art market?

**Artists’ Societies**

If an artist was working on speculation—that is, working without a commission—or attempting to garner commissions, how did they attract attention to their goods and skills? Artists gradually recognized that they needed to display or exhibit their work publicly, and thus reach the new commercial society and growing middle class. The Guild, by this time, had no significance for fine artists, and so they formed new collectives to support their professional ambitions.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century the best known of these professional societies was the Royal Academy, founded in December 1768. In addition to its role as a teaching institution, the Royal Academy organized an annual exhibition that has proven to have enduring significance. Looking to the model of the French Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture, founded in 1648, and building on such precedents as the exhibitions of paintings organized at the Foundling Hospital by the Dilettanti Society in the mid-eighteenth century, the Royal Academy developed its annual exhibition as the platform by which artists could achieve stellar reputations and thus sales, while also offering visitors a means by which to refine their sensibilities through the contemplation of works of art. By charging an entrance fee, the Royal Academy not only generated revenue but also ensured an exclusive atmosphere appropriate for
cultivating their desired audience. The Royal Academy was able to simultaneously make a bid for art to be seen as an intellectual enterprise, as opposed to a trade or craft, while also allowing for the pursuit of commercial gain.

The walls of the Royal Academy exhibition became a space of experimentation and competition in order to gain the attention of the press and potential buyers. Highly acclaimed works of art were often translated into reproductive prints, which extended the market reach of the Academy exhibitions. While these annual exhibitions were intended as showcases for the best in British art, they were, also, as art historian David Solkin reminds us, “a doubly commercial enterprise, operating as both a highly profitable spectacle and a marketplace for expensive luxury goods” (Solkin 2001, 8).

The Royal Academy was extremely discreet about the sale of works of art from its exhibitions and did not handle the sales themselves; buyers would have to contact the artist directly. The prestige of the Academy and other exhibition societies, which typically offered prizes in conjunction with the annual exhibition, helped assure patrons of the quality of the work. But other exhibiting societies were more overtly commercial. The British Institution, formed in 1805 by leading patrons of the arts, offered works for sale in its exhibitions of living artists. The Society of Painters in Water Colours was formed in 1804 as a joint stock company. These organizations clearly felt threatened by the rise of the commercial dealers (described below); the Society of Painters in Water Colours, for example, urged that no work be accepted for exhibition that had been shown with a shopkeeper or dealer (Smith 2002, 158).

Dealers and Galleries

The Society of Painters in Water Colours’ perception of a threat from the commercial trade is an indication that the commercial art dealer had become an important player in the art market. Wealthy patrons had long turned to agents or middlemen to help secure works of art, whether by fostering introductions to living artists or sourcing older works of art. But the dealer became an increasingly prominent figure in the art world over the course of the nineteenth century, attracting both criticism and praise.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the most visible dealers were those in the Old Master trade, such as Michael Bryan (1757–1821), who brokered the sale of the Orléans collection, the outstanding Old Master paintings assembled by the Duke of Orléans and sold in the wake of the French Revolution. Bryan, like other dealers in Old Master works such as John Smith (1781–1855), depended heavily on both his social networks and skills in connoisseurship
to foster his business. These dealers also had physical premises; Bryan astutely situated his art
gallery first in Savile Row and then Pall Mall (in the former New Shakespeare
Gallery)—locations in the West End neighborhood of London associated with the luxury retail
trade. As Julia Armstrong-Totten has noted, the gallery became an important meeting place for
dealers, critics, and collectors, and through negotiated private contract sales Bryan determined
the length of time a work of art could be on view there (Armstrong-Totten 2008, 145, 142).
Armstrong-Totten also observes that he established an important precedent for other dealers;
the art dealer William Buchanan (1777–1864), for example, instructed his agent to emulate
Bryan in the presentation of stock to clients: “keep a few large pictures upon the walls to satisfy
callers, and like Bryan pull out the Gems from the other apartments as occasion requires … to
show to those who may be worthy of seeing them” (ibid., 145).

Paintings and other works of art were also available for sale at other kinds of retail
institutions. Artists’ suppliers or “colormen” often functioned as brokers or dealers for works of
art that could be displayed within their spaces (NPG n.d.). Print publishers also emerged as
important venues for the display and sale of art. Rudolph Ackermann (1794–1832), for example,
sold paints as well as color-plate books and fashionable prints. At his Repository of Arts, as he
dubbed his premises at 101 Strand, he also assembled his “Gallery of Ancient and Modern
Paintings and Drawings” for which he charged a shilling entrance fee (NPG n.d.).

As the century continued, these various forms of retail spaces for the sale of art began to
consolidate into commercial art galleries, purpose-built retail spaces dedicated to the promotion
and sale of art, both contemporary and historical. Over the course of the nineteenth century,
these spaces were key drivers in the emergence and normalization of what we recognize as the
modern gallery system today—rotating thematic/one-person exhibitions, purposeful display
strategies, marketing or advertising campaigns, and press reviews and heated exchanges—all
orchestrated to facilitate the sale of art (Fletcher 2011a). By the close of the nineteenth century,
there were hundreds of commercial galleries in London and the second half of the nineteenth
century witnessed a period of exponential growth, as was the case in other metropolitan centers
such as Paris and New York.

As these galleries clustered in retail areas, they developed a shared set of practices.
One of the most important was the development of rotating special exhibitions. These special
shows could range from exhibitions of a single significant picture to shows devoted to the work
of a single artist, either as a career retrospective or, more usually, a thematically united group of
works. One advantage to exhibiting in these venues was the ability to control the display of
works of art more fully than was possible at artists’ societies, where the interests of many artists had to be taken into account, and dealers and artists were inventive in their display practices. Single pictures were often displayed in a room separate from other work on view, generally under low gaslights and festooned with drapery. The larger main gallery spaces could also be quite elaborate, with fabric-covered walls and chairs and other furniture arranged to facilitate leisurely viewing (Figure 6.1). By the late 1880s, single artist shows were also being installed with special attention to particularized wall coverings, lighting, and frames, most famously in artist James McNeill Whistler’s exhibitions at Dowdeswell’s and the Fine Art Society. Indeed, by the last quarter of the nineteenth century, dealers’ premises became increasingly elaborate, spurred on by the model offered by the Grosvenor Gallery, which opened in 1877 and was immediately greeted as a “Temple of Art” in part because of its Neo-Renaissance façade and well-appointed galleries (Denney, 2000) (Figures 6.2 and 6.3).

These design strategies heightened the spectacle and attraction of dealers’ exhibitions. Galleries made money from special exhibitions in at least three ways. First, many of the works of art on view were for sale, though the financial arrangements varied. Often the dealer owned the work of art outright (having purchased it directly from the artist, from another dealer, or at auction). The more familiar commission structure, in which the dealer does not own the work but takes a percentage of the sale price, gradually became standardized over the period. In other cases, galleries exhibited works of art still in ownership as a means of building up an artist’s reputation. For example, when Whistler staged his retrospective in 1892 at the Goupil Gallery, he worked with the gallery manager David Croal Thomson to select carefully the works on view, most of which were in private hands, so that he could both orchestrate his reputation and also perhaps entice collectors to part with works of art at prices that would help elevate his status.

Second, and equally financially important, galleries charged admission fees (usually one shilling) for special exhibitions. This was in part an attempt to distinguish themselves from other kinds of retail shops by emulating the practices of academies and other public institutions, but it was also a significant source of income.

Third, many of the most important dealers of contemporary art also operated as print publishers and sellers, making significant profits from the sale of reproductive engravings of works of art featured in special exhibitions. At least some viewers objected to the impact of this business model on viewing art; a critic for the Saturday Review described the unpleasant experience in 1867:
Every one must have experienced the annoyance of going to see a dealer’s picture which is to be engraved in “the highest style of art,” which means a cheap and rapid mixture of mezzotint and etching with machine ruling and a little burin work. In these cases the dealer is accustomed to employ a gentleman whose chief attainment is a smooth and plausible eloquence. He always descants on some remarkable quality which makes the picture before him the finest of the kind produced. He tells you how many thousand pounds have been paid for it, and for the right to engrave it. He leads you gently to a table, usually covered with green cloth, on which rest two framed prints … and tries to make you write your name in a book. To attain this end, he will tell you anything that you may like to hear. ("Pictures of the Year” 1867, 141)

The story ends with an example of a customer complaining to the dealer about being bothered by the salesman, to which the dealer replied that, “he was quite the right sort of man to get subscribers in country towns.”

Galleries competed to get public attention and publicity for these shows in several ways. In keeping with the practices of the retail trade, they advertised: the exhibiting artists might even design exhibition posters; notices appeared in the press; and sandwich men could be hired to parade the streets. Such broad tactics were complemented by the social practices of invitation-only events, particularly the private viewing. Press viewings also became normalized in this period, and attracting press coverage and critical reviews was perhaps the most important public relations strategy dealers pursued. Galleries relied upon notices and reviews in the periodical press both to attract attention to their wares, and to provide a positive recommendation. This relationship was so close that it has been identified as a cohesive “dealer–critic system” by the pioneering scholars of the nineteenth century art market, Harrison and Cynthia White (White and White 1965).

Galleries also heavily advertised special exhibitions in general interest newspapers and journals. At times, this led to blurred boundaries between editorial and advertising content. In the case of David Croal Thomson, who worked as an editor at the Art Journal from 1892 to 1902 while he was also managing the Goupil Gallery, he clearly sought out critics who could reflect positively on those artists affiliated with the gallery such as Whistler (Fletcher and Helmreich 2008). Dealers also attempted to educate and/or influence the public directly through publishing exhibition catalogues or other supplementary materials. William Powell Frith’s large and exceedingly popular painting of a Railway Station (1862; Royal Holloway College, Egham, Surrey) was accompanied by a long narrative description written by art critic Tom Taylor and published as a pamphlet. Other pictures also had literary descriptions, though sometimes in more ephemeral forms; Henry James described the common practice of visiting single picture
shows “where a still more civil person supplies you with a neat literary explanation of the pictures, majestically printed on cardboard and almost as clever as an article in a magazine” (James 1877, 136).

Over the course of the century, these printed publications became more elaborate (and might even include advertising), and increasingly partisan. In some mid-century examples, all press notices of an exhibition—good and bad—were reprinted, seemingly under the assumption that any critical notice was evidence of an exhibition’s significance. By later in the century, essays might be specially commissioned or famous writers sought out. In 1891, for example, the Fine Art Society commissioned Henry James to write a prefatory essay for Alfred Parsons’s catalogue to his exhibition of watercolors of gardens and orchards. This practice could both mollify critics, who often had close ties to the literary world, and attract publicity. In 1907, the New English Art Club, an exhibition society formed by young progressive painters in 1885, held an exhibition of modern photography. A notice in the magazine *Truth* made special note of the fact that George Bernard Shaw had “allowed some of his writing on photography” to serve as the introduction to the exhibition catalogue. The critic noted “I think the originators of the exhibition are to be warmly congratulated on this, because quite a number of people who might not be interested in the photographs will visit the show in order to read the catalogue, which is thus, as it were, immortalized” (“Art Notes: Art and the Man” 1907, 284).

The partisan tone of these exhibition essays sometimes attracted criticism. A critic for *Truth* in 1912 censured the trend toward “programme-art, whereby no painter is held to have full significance unless he has been interpreted by a literary medium. Programme art, however, tends less to express the meaning of the painter in a convention which he who reads can understand, but rather to imbue the visitor with a prejudice in favor of the painter whose work he may conceivably buy” (“Art: Programme Art” 1912, 404–405).

Galleries also began to develop brand identities and specializations, aiming at smaller niche markets for their goods. One common branding strategy was to link the gallery with a specific country or school of art, such as the French Gallery, the Belgian Gallery, the Dutch Gallery, and the Japanese Gallery (Fletcher 2011b). These international connections did not exist in name only; many London galleries were connected to firms with branches across Europe and the United States allowing them to move paintings through various markets (Helmreich 2011). And dealers from other countries also rented space in London to show their own work, trying to take advantage of London’s advanced retail market.
Conclusion

Why does the art market matter for studying art history? As we have argued, the market makes available a series of choices—possibilities and constraints, opportunities and risks—for the artist and the collector. These choices shape any artist’s given body of work—from the subjects, styles, and even materials adopted—to how effectively a work of art is disseminated, consumed, and perceived. Nineteenth-century British artists understood this very well; in their correspondence the market appears like a challenging, or even bewildering, game they are seeking to master. If I cannot join the Royal Academy, what else might I do? If I exhibit with this dealer, does it prevent me from showing my work elsewhere? If I change exhibition venues, will my patrons follow me? Can I survive this negative review or must I curry favor with this critic? Each decision had to be carefully weighed. And the market itself, as governed by the larger British economy and other changing forces, waxed and waned so that strategies that proved successful in the past suddenly no longer worked. For example, many commercial dealers first emerged in London as print sellers and had to swallow a bitter pill when changing copyright laws and new trends in taste suddenly made reproductive prints a losing proposition. In 1897, for example, the Fine Art Society paid £3000 for Hubert Herkomer’s painting The Guard’s Cheer (1898; Bristol Museum and Art Gallery, UK) in hopes of selling the right to reproduce it for £4000, but the client only offered £500 and the firm was left with a debt of £2500, which was later reduced to £900 when the painting sold for the relatively paltry sum of £600 in 1905 (“The FAS Story” 2001, 12).

While this system often seemed difficult to navigate and impossible to steer, it was nonetheless understood as a system; that is, as an interdependent constellation of actors, practices, and institutions. It is important to recognize the degree to which the art market operating today is deeply indebted to its nineteenth-century predecessor.

References


