

Brokerage and Value-Creation: Trading Practices in the English Market of 20th-Century Maps

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Abstract : This paper presents a 9-month ethnographic case study of the value creating strategies employed by an Oxford market-trader of 20th-century maps. Maps are usually valued and sold as either antique objets d'art or useful navigational tools, with 20th-century maps precariously lying between the boundary of the aesthetic and utilitarian value-regimes. Here, the brokerage practices involved in the framing of outdated, lowly valued maps into vintage commodities will be examined. Ethnographic material of the unstudied market of old maps is introduced and situated in the second-hand, antique and collectible spheres of exchange. The map-trader as a broker is the ethnographic and methodological starting point of this paper. Brokerage is understood through the activity of framing that defines and brackets the value-regimes of commodities with the aid of market and framing devices. The trader's activities will be examined in three parts. (1) The post-sourcing industry: the altering, mounting and tagging of maps before putting them into market circulation. Mounts, frames and tags are seen as market devices that authenticates and frames maps with aesthetic and symbolic values along with the disentanglement of its use value. (2) The market-display: the constitution of space that encourages the relations of looking at maps as aesthetic objects, while the categorical arrangement of the display contributes to legitimising of the collectability of maps. (3) The salesmanship strategies of the trader: the match-making of customers with maps of meaningful value, and the mediating of knowledge through the verbal articulation of the map's symbolic values. Ultimately, value is not created in an accumulative sense, but is layered and superimposed to cater to a wide spectrum of patrons. The trader creates demand for his goods by mediating and articulating value-regimes already coherent to potential patrons.

Keywords : art and material culture, brokerage, commodification, framing, markets, value

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