

# Connoisseurship, or Knowing a Masterpiece When You See One



Artist unknown, *The Hall of Emperors*, 1812–15, Musée du Louvre

Photo: © Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, NY

We see connoisseurship in action every week on public television’s *Antiques Roadshow*. The word *connoisseur* is French for “expert,” and *connoisseurship* is an anglicized term meaning “expertise.”

Expertise in art is based on knowledge, understanding, and judgment. The ability to distinguish between a great work of art and one that is merely good (or even fake) is acquired over time through seeing and mentally filing away impressions of hundreds and hundreds of related examples. The same principles apply whether the work is a monumental sculpture or a tiny cylinder seal.

Identifying works of art has been made immeasurably easier by photography, chemical analysis, resonant imaging, and other techniques. Yet it is generally agreed that connoisseurship is not a science; a “great eye” is the combination of knowledge and intuition. Art museums serve the critical function of making great works available for enjoyment and comparison, so that new discoveries can be readily evaluated.