

**Taste as Relearning:
Neuroaesthetics and the Perceptual Foundations of Connoisseurship
in the Venetian Art Market**

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Abstract

Connoisseurship has traditionally been described as a form of accumulated knowledge: the trained eye recognises the hand of the master because it has seen, compared, and catalogued enough examples to notice what a naive viewer overlooks. This paper argues that this description, while not wrong, is incomplete. Drawing on the Learning–Unlearning–Relearning (LUR) framework developed in cognitive and educational research, on findings from neuroaesthetics and predictive-processing accounts of perception, and on the specific historical laboratory of the Venetian art market, the paper proposes that the connoisseur's taste is best understood not as the simple accumulation of visual facts but as a case of relearning: a perceptual updating of the brain's generative models of what a painting is and how it should be seen. Giovanni Morelli's nineteenth-century method of attribution — developed and tested largely on Venetian paintings, and consolidated by collectors and connoisseurs working in and around Venice's own museums and dispersed patrician collections — is read here as a historical case study in exactly this process. The paper further argues that the Venetian art market itself, from the workshop economies of Bellini, Titian, and Tintoretto to the rise of the modern auction and the archival reconstruction of provenance, offers a second, institutional register of the same relearning cycle: not only individual eyes but entire market mechanisms have had to unlearn inherited assumptions about authorship and value, and relearn how to recognise it. The paper closes by considering what this dual reframing implies for how aesthetic taste is taught and evaluated, in Venice and beyond.

Keywords: neuroaesthetics; connoisseurship; relearning; unlearning; perceptual updating; predictive processing; Giovanni Morelli; Venetian art market; provenance; Bourdieu; aesthetic taste

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1. Introduction: What the Connoisseur's Eye Assumes

This paper was prepared for Inside the Art Market: Venice as a Global Hub from the Renaissance to Today, the summer course taught by Arianna Candeago, PhD, at Ca' Foscari University of Venice (27–31 July 2026), and it takes its starting point directly from that course. Two threads of the syllabus in particular motivate the argument that follows: Lecture 7, “Authenticity, Attribution, and Forgery: Taste, Desire, and Deception,” and Lecture 8, “Modern Collecting and Connoisseurship in Venice,” both of which treat taste and expertise not as fixed personal qualities but as historically constructed capacities that had to be built, contested, and revised. This paper asks what building, contesting, and revising a capacity of that kind actually consists of, cognitively, and proposes that the course's own material — Morelli's method, the Venetian workshop economy, the rise of provenance research and the auction, and the historical entanglement of connoisseurship with forgery — is best read through the lens of a specific cognitive structure: Learning, Unlearning, and Relearning.

When Giovanni Morelli examined a disputed Madonna in the late nineteenth century, he did not begin with the painting's overall beauty. He began with an ear. His comparative method held that a painter's unconscious, habitual rendering of small anatomical details — the curl of an ear, the shape of a fingernail, the construction of a hand — betrayed authorship more reliably than any deliberate stylistic flourish, because such details lay beneath the level of conscious imitation (Ginzburg, 1980; Morelli, 1900). This is usually told as a story about knowledge: Morelli simply knew more anatomical particulars than his rivals, and therefore saw more. That telling is true but incomplete. Morelli's own contemporaries did not so much fail to notice his evidence as dismiss the method built on it — critics derided it as the ‘ear and toenail school’, and Wilhelm von Bode, his most formidable rival at Berlin's Gemäldegalerie, called it a ‘dangerous dilettantism’ (Beckman, 2022). The resistance, in other words, was not to the facts but to the idea that such facts could be the primary basis of judgement at all — which suggests the disagreement was less about evidence than about what counts as a legitimate way of looking in the first place, and it is precisely that kind of disagreement, over the legitimacy of a way of looking rather than over a fact, that this paper takes Unlearning to be about.

This is not an incidental detail for a course grounded in Venice. Morelli formed his method largely on the Venetian school — Bellini, Vivarini, Carpaccio, Cima — precisely because Venetian workshops had produced, over three centuries, an unusually dense body of near-identical replicas, variants, and copies against which unconscious habit could be isolated from deliberate style (Wollheim, 1973). The Venetian art market, in other words, did not merely provide Morelli's case studies; its own workshop structure, described in the course's second lecture, is what made his method possible in the first place. This paper takes that entanglement seriously. It proposes that connoisseurship is not simply a larger stock of facts about paintings sitting behind the same act of looking, but a change in the act of looking itself — a change with a specific structure, describable in the vocabulary of Learning, Unlearning, and Relearning (LUR), explicable at the level of mechanism by neuroaesthetics, and visible at the level of institutions in the historical development of the Venetian market itself.

Morelli's method also has an intellectual afterlife well beyond art history, and it is worth pausing on before turning to the paper's theoretical apparatus, because it clarifies exactly what kind of method this is. Morelli trained as a physician before he became a connoisseur, and his procedure for reading a painting was modelled directly on clinical semiotics: the bedside practice of inferring a hidden condition from marginal, involuntary signs the patient does not consciously control. Carlo Ginzburg (1980) famously argued that this move — treating the overlooked, unintended detail as the key to a hidden reality — places Morelli within a wider nineteenth-century “conjectural paradigm” that also produced Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis and, at one remove, Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes. Freud acknowledged the debt directly, noting in his 1914 essay on Michelangelo's Moses that Morelli's attention to “unconsidered trifles” anticipated the logic of psychoanalytic interpretation (Freud, 1914): just as Morelli inferred authorship from an unconsciously repeated earlobe, Freud inferred unconscious conflict from a slip of the tongue or a seemingly trivial dream detail, on the shared premise that habitual, deliberate self-presentation is far easier to falsify than the involuntary trace that escapes it. Conan Doyle's Holmes, though modelled directly on Doyle's own medical teacher Joseph Bell, works by the same diagnostic logic, reasoning from cigarette ash or a scuff on a boot to a conclusion its owner never intended to reveal — and, in a convergence Ginzburg himself notes, resolves “The Adventure of the Cardboard Box” by identifying a severed ear through precisely the kind of anatomical comparison Morelli used to identify a painter's hand. The point of the parallel, for this paper, is not novelty but precision: it

suggests that what Morelli contributed to art history was never connoisseurship narrowly construed, but one application of a diagnostic habit of mind trained first on the body and then transferred to the canvas — and it is exactly that transfer, the retraining of a diagnostic eye from one domain to another, that the LUR framework introduced below is built to describe.

Three bodies of thought are woven together to make this argument, and it is worth being explicit about how they interlock before proceeding section by section. The first is Halchenko's (2025) Bonsai Thinking framework of Learning, Unlearning, and Relearning (LUR), which supplies the paper's central claim: that expertise is not a single process of accumulation but three distinct processes — each, in Halchenko's model, governed by a different form of intelligence — that are routinely collapsed into one another in both popular and pedagogical accounts of taste. The second is the cognitive-linguistic account of conceptual metaphor developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), which gives Unlearning a precise mechanism: a conceptual frame is not a belief that can be argued away, but a structure that organises perception itself, and releasing one is therefore a different kind of act than simply learning a counter-fact. The third is neuroaesthetics (Zeki, 1999; Chatterjee & Vartanian, 2014), which gives Relearning a plausible neural substrate in predictive-processing models of vision (Friston, 2010): if the brain perceives by generating and revising standing models of what it expects to see, then relearning to look is not a metaphor for a change in generative modelling, it is a description of one. None of the latter two literatures was written with connoisseurship in mind, and neither was developed alongside the LUR framework itself; read together with it, however, they make it possible to say something more precise than “the connoisseur has a trained eye” — namely, what training an eye actually changes, and why that change is so much harder to teach than the facts that are meant to produce it.

The paper proceeds in five further steps. Section 2 sets out the LUR framework in full and maps its three stages onto the specific history of Morelli's method, distinguishing what his students merely learned from what they had to unlearn and, ultimately, relearn. Section 3 turns from history to mechanism, asking what neuroaesthetics and predictive-processing accounts of perception can tell us about how such a relearning is neurally possible at all, and why beauty itself — rather than being incidental to the process — appears to function as the signal that makes sustained perceptual revision worthwhile. Section 4 returns to Venice specifically, arguing that the same LUR structure is visible not only in the individual connoisseur's eye but in the market institutions — workshops, archives, auctions — that had to develop alongside it, and closing with Bourdieu's (1984)

sociological account of taste as a necessary complement to the neural one. Section 5 draws the individual and institutional strands together into a single reframing of what taste is, with direct implications for how it might be taught. Section 6 concludes.

2. The Learning–Unlearning–Relearning Framework

The Learning–Unlearning–Relearning (LUR) framework used in this paper follows Halchenko’s (2025) model of Bonsai Thinking, developed explicitly for what she terms the age of continuous adaptation. Bonsai Thinking treats expertise not as a single process of accumulation but as three distinct developmental processes, each doing work the others cannot: Learning adds a new competency onto an existing structure; Unlearning deliberately releases a structure that once worked but now constrains; and Relearning is neither of these — it is a change in the perceptual and conceptual architecture through which the domain is subsequently experienced. Halchenko’s framework further associates each stage with a distinct form of intelligence: emotional intelligence drives Learning, spiritual intelligence drives Unlearning, and aesthetic intelligence drives Relearning (Halchenko, 2025). It is this last association that motivates the present paper directly. If Relearning is, at its root, an aesthetic capacity — if the intelligence that does the work of perceptual revision is specifically an aesthetic one — then the connoisseur’s trained taste is not merely a convenient illustration of relearning. It is a historically documented instance of exactly the process Halchenko’s framework describes, and neuroaesthetics, taken up in Section 3, is the discipline best placed to explain what an aesthetic intelligence of that kind consists of at the level of the brain.

Halchenko’s model explicitly distinguishes itself from earlier work on knowledge life cycles in professional and educational settings, most notably Bedford’s (2015) content analysis of the library and information science curriculum, which found extensive documented evidence of Learning but comparatively little theorised treatment of Unlearning or Relearning (Bedford, 2015, as cited in Halchenko, 2025). Where Bedford’s study identifies this gap, Halchenko’s contribution is to close it with a positive account of what Unlearning and Relearning consist of, and with which faculties — spiritual and aesthetic intelligence, respectively — each is achieved. The framework this paper builds on throughout is Halchenko’s.

The distinction maps cleanly onto the cognitive-linguistic account of conceptual metaphor given by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), for whom human understanding is organised not by abstract propositions but by inherited, largely invisible conceptual frames. A frame is not a fact that can

simply be supplemented; it is the structure inside which facts become visible or invisible in the first place. Unlearning, on this view, is the deliberate surfacing and release of such a frame once it has stopped serving; Relearning is the adoption of a new frame capable of carrying the same experience more adequately. Applied to vision rather than language, this is precisely the transformation connoisseurship requires.

2.1 Learning: A New Unit of Perceptual Analysis

The first, and easiest, stage of Morelli's method is genuinely additive. A student can be taught, as a fact, that Cosimo Tura draws ears in one characteristic way and Ercole de' Roberti in another. This is Learning in the ordinary sense: new information laid onto an existing way of looking at paintings, without disturbing that way of looking. Crowe and Cavalcaselle's later contribution — combining stylistic observation with rigorous documentary and archival research — belongs to this same stratum: it enlarges the evidence base without requiring the viewer to look differently in the first instance.

2.2 Unlearning: Releasing the Gestalt

The harder stage is Unlearning, and it is here that Morelli's method becomes genuinely radical rather than merely erudite. The default way of looking at a painting is holistic: the viewer forms an overall impression — beauty, harmony, devotional feeling — and judgements of authorship are made, if at all, against that impression. Morelli insisted this default was precisely what a competent forger or copyist could most easily reproduce, because it was the only thing the forger's conscious attention was trained on (Ginzburg, 1980). To adopt Morelli's method, a viewer had to unlearn the assumption that the overall impression was where authorship lived at all — a deliberate release of an inherited, serviceable, but in this specific context misleading conceptual frame (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

2.3 Relearning: Perceptual Updating, Not Repetition

Relearning is not learning the same lesson twice, and it is not a rebuild from nothing. It is what remains possible once Unlearning has cleared the ground: a genuine change in what the eye is disposed to register first. A connoisseur trained in the Morellian method does not consciously recall the rule “attend to the ear” each time a painting is examined; the ear, the hand, the fingernail have become the perceptual default, the place looking begins rather than a fact retrieved after the

fact. Bernard Berenson's concept of "tactile values" describes something structurally similar operating at a different level of the image: not anatomical minutiae but the sense of three-dimensional, touchable form a painting conveys, which the trained eye comes to register immediately and involuntarily rather than infer through deliberate comparison (Berenson, 1901). In both cases, the diagnostic sign has migrated from the end of a reasoning process to the beginning of a perceptual one. That migration is what this paper means by relearning.

3. Neuroaesthetic Foundations of Perceptual Updating

The claim that relearning is a perceptual rather than a purely conceptual event would remain a metaphor without some account of the underlying mechanism. Neuroaesthetics — the study of the neural bases of aesthetic experience founded by Zeki (1999) and given its most influential contemporary synthesis by Chatterjee and Vartanian (2014) — offers exactly this account, because its central finding is that aesthetic experience is not passive reception but active, hypothesis-generating construction.

3.1 The Aesthetic Triad and the Predictive Brain

Chatterjee and Vartanian's aesthetic triad describes aesthetic experience as an emergent interaction between three neural systems: sensory-motor, emotion-valuation, and meaning-knowledge (Chatterjee & Vartanian, 2014). None of these systems is a passive recording device. This fits a broader predictive-processing account of perception, in which the brain does not build percepts upward from raw sensory data but instead generates a standing model of what it expects to see and revises that model against incoming evidence (Friston, 2010). Looking at a painting, on this account, is an iterative cycle of prediction and revision — which is exactly the mechanism relearning requires. To relearn how to see is to change the generative model itself, so that the brain's predictions about a Bellini Madonna are henceforth structured around anatomical particulars rather than devotional gestalt.

3.2 Beauty as an Epistemic Signal

Sarasso, Neppi-Modona, Sacco and Ronga (2020) give this revision process a motivational mechanism. Their model of the perception-action cycle distinguishes "moving for knowledge" — an approach-oriented, exploratory mode of engagement — from "stopping for knowledge", in

which the sense of beauty functions as a hedonic signal that inhibits habitual motor and attentional routines for long enough to allow deeper perceptual learning to occur. In Sarasso et al.'s terms, beauty is not the end-point of looking but the trigger for staying with an image past the point a naive viewer would move on.

The harder question is how a previously unremarkable detail, such as the curl of an ear, comes to acquire that triggering power in the first place, and here the two halves of Berridge and Kringelbach's (2015) reward model need to be kept separate rather than treated as interchangeable. "Wanting", or incentive salience, is carried chiefly by mesolimbic dopamine, and is well established to be learnable: a cue that reliably predicts a rewarding outcome comes, through ordinary associative and prediction-error learning, to capture attention and motivate approach in its own right, independently of the reward it originally signalled. "Liking", the hedonic reaction Sarasso et al. assign the stopping function to, is carried instead by much smaller opioid and endocannabinoid hot-spots, and is considerably less plastic; there is no comparably secure evidence that a hedonic "liking" reaction can simply be trained onto a new stimulus by repetition alone. The more defensible claim, then, is not that connoisseurship retrains liking directly, but that sustained Morellian practice — the repeated, rewarded experience of arriving at a correct attribution once the ear or fingernail has been noticed — is exactly the kind of associative sequence a dopaminergic "wanting" system is known to learn from, attaching incentive salience, and with it spontaneous attentional capture, to the anatomical detail itself. Whether that dopaminergic retraining is sufficient on its own to also shift the hedonic "liking" response, or whether liking instead follows secondarily once wanting has already done the work of redirecting attention, is not something the current literature settles, and this paper does not claim more certainty on the point than the evidence allows. What the model does support is narrower but still substantial: that connoisseurship trains where attention is drawn before any deliberate judgement occurs, and that this redirection is achieved through ordinary, well-documented mechanisms of reward-based learning rather than through some *sui generis* faculty of taste.

3.3 Two Ways of Looking

McGilchrist's (2009) account of hemispheric lateralisation offers a further, complementary vocabulary for the two perceptual modes connoisseurship must hold together. The left hemisphere, on McGilchrist's synthesis, is oriented towards narrow, decontextualised, already-categorised

detail; the right towards broad, contextual, newly encountered wholes. Morelli's method of attending to the isolated ear is, in this vocabulary, a disciplined narrowing of attention; Roberto Longhi's later insistence that a work be read within its full historical and cultural context is a disciplined widening of it. The mature connoisseur does not simply choose one mode over the other but learns to move between them — narrowing to the diagnostic detail and widening to the historical whole as the situation demands. That capacity to shift mode deliberately, rather than defaulting permanently to either, is itself a relearned skill rather than an innate disposition.

4. The Venetian Laboratory: Market, Provenance, and the Social Life of Taste

Individual perceptual relearning is only half of what Venice makes visible. The city was, from the fifteenth century onward, one of the earliest sites of a genuinely international art market, with its own mechanisms for constructing reputation, exporting a recognisable cultural “brand,” and regulating the relationship between artistic reputation and demand (North & Ormrod, 2016). Understanding connoisseurship only as an individual cognitive achievement misses the extent to which the Venetian market itself had to undergo comparable cycles of unlearning and relearning at an institutional level, before the individual connoisseur's judgement could carry economic weight.

4.1 Workshops and the Later Unlearning of Solitary Authorship

The large Venetian workshops directed by Bellini, Titian, and Tintoretto produced paintings through reused cartoons, delegated execution, and replicated compositions, and patrons largely accepted this collective production as a guarantee of quality rather than a compromise of it (Spear & Sohm, 2010). No strict single-author ideal needed to be unlearned at the time: the Romantic assumption that a painting's value depends on the unmediated touch of one hand did not fully harden until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, well after the workshop system was already an unremarkable economic norm. The distributed, collaborative concept of authorship the Venetian workshop presupposed was not itself an achievement of unlearning; it was simply the prevailing condition, prior to any single-author ideal against which it might have needed to be defended.

The unlearning this history required happened later, and to a different audience. By the time Morelli began working, connoisseurship and the wider art market had absorbed a Romantic assumption of solitary authorship that the surviving Venetian paintings themselves did not respect.

It was Morelli's generation, not Bellini's, that had to release the assumption that authenticity was a question of one hand alone, in order to make sense of workshop production on its own historical terms — which is to say that the Unlearning this paper locates in Section 2.2 belongs squarely to the nineteenth century, even though the authorship practices it had to come to terms with were three hundred years older.

4.2 Provenance, Archives, and the Rise of the Auction

As the course's fifth and sixth lectures trace, value in the Venetian and broader Italian market increasingly came to depend not only on stylistic judgement but on documentary reconstruction: inventories, sale catalogues, and archival records used to establish an artwork's provenance (Haskell, 1980; Federico & Pagani, 2011). This is Learning in the LUR sense described above — the accumulation of an evidentiary record — but the rise of the modern auction as an institution required something closer to Unlearning: a shift away from valuing works primarily through inherited aristocratic association, towards valuing them through a market mechanism capable of assigning price independently of lineage, and then relearning provenance itself as a form of evidence to be verified rather than simply asserted by a seller. Nineteenth-century dispersals of Venetian patrician collections, following the pattern the course examines through major sales of the period, are the moments at which this institutional relearning becomes most visible.

4.3 Forgery and the Market's Incentive to Misread

Venice's long history as a centre of both artistic excellence and deliberate falsification (Lenain, 2011) sharpens the stakes of the perceptual argument made in Sections 2 and 3. A forger profits precisely by exploiting whatever perceptual default the market has not yet relearned past — which is why forgery, historically, clusters around exactly the moment before a new connoisseurial method becomes widely adopted. The forger's workflow, as the course's seventh lecture sets out, depends on studying the original closely enough to reproduce what the ordinary, un-relearned eye still checks for, while remaining ignorant of, or indifferent to, whatever unconscious detail a Morellian eye would check instead. Authenticity disputes are therefore not simply disagreements about facts; they are moments at which two different perceptual regimes — one relearned, one not — are forced into direct comparison.

4.4 Taste as Distinction: A Sociological Complement

Bourdieu's (1984) account of taste as a form of social distinction adds a dimension the neuroaesthetic argument alone cannot supply. For Bourdieu, aesthetic preference functions as cultural capital: the capacity to perceive and appreciate in a particular, socially legitimated way marks and reproduces class position, independently of whatever is happening neurally in any individual viewer. Venice's modern collectors and connoisseurs — the subject of the course's eighth lecture — did not simply relearn how to see paintings; they relearned in a manner that was immediately legible to others as expertise, and therefore convertible into cultural authority. This suggests that the relearning this paper describes has never been a purely private, cognitive event. It has always also been a performance, calibrated to a field of other viewers who could recognise it as connoisseurship rather than eccentricity. The neuroaesthetic and the Bourdieusian accounts are not competitors here: the first describes the mechanism by which an individual eye is retrained; the second describes why that retraining was worth pursuing, and how it came to be socially recognised once achieved.

5. Taste as Relearning: Reframing Connoisseurship

Put together, these findings support a specific and testable reframing of what aesthetic taste is. Taste is not a store of preferences sitting on top of ordinary vision. It is ordinary vision after it has been through a cycle of Learning, Unlearning, and Relearning — after inherited perceptual defaults have been surfaced, released, and replaced by a generative model tuned to different diagnostic features, sustained by a liking system retrained on those features, and capable of shifting between narrow and broad modes of attention as the object demands. On this account, the historical progression traced from Morelli through Crowe and Cavalcaselle, Berenson, and Longhi is not merely an accumulation of better evidence. It is a series of successive relearnings, each one changing not just what the connoisseur knew but what the connoisseur's eye was disposed to see first — and, as Section 4 argues, each one shadowed by a parallel relearning at the level of the Venetian market itself, from workshop to archive to auction house.

This has a direct implication for how taste is taught, and for why it has historically resisted being taught as a checklist. A list of Morellian anatomical markers, learned as facts, produces Learning but not Relearning: a student can recite the criteria and still fail to see an ear before a face. What produced the shift in Morelli's own students was closer to an apprenticeship in Unlearning —

sustained, supervised practice in overriding the default holistic glance for long enough that a new default could form. A pedagogy grounded in direct engagement with Venetian institutions — the Gallerie dell'Accademia, Palazzo Grimani, the Museo Correr — is therefore not simply illustrative; site-based looking, sustained in front of the object itself, is plausibly the condition under which relearning of this kind actually takes place, rather than an optional supplement to it.

6. Conclusion

Aesthetic taste, understood through the connoisseurial tradition running from Morelli to Longhi, and tested against the specific historical case of the Venetian art market, is not simply knowledge added to sight. It is sight itself, relearned — unlearned of its inherited holistic default, retrained on a new order of diagnostic detail, and re-motivated by a liking system that has learned to linger somewhere new. Venice offers a rare vantage point from which to see this relearning happen twice over: once in the individual eye of the connoisseur, and once in the market institutions — workshops, archives, auctions — that had to learn to recognise and price what that eye could see. Science can confirm or contradict a judgement of attribution once that relearning has taken place; it cannot supply the relearning itself. That remains, as it always has, a discipline of the trained eye — and, in Venice, of the trained market around it.

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