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Wine and Art: artistic images and the selling of wine

WINE AS ART

The distinguished American wine geographer, Harm de Blij, asserts that «*A great bottle of wine is a noble creation, a work of art as well as science, a triumph of talent and initiative, a progeny of natural environment and cultural tradition. As complex as a Monet landscape and as intricate as a Bach partita, such a wine is to the senses of smell and taste what painting is to the eye and music to the ear*» (de Blij, 1983, xi).

The association between wine and art is a close one. Wine is seen as a symbol of civilization, and has come to be associated with other aesthetic and sensory pleasures – literature, poetry, music, sculpture. The wine-art collector Alfred Fromm identifies a longstanding romance «*between wine and the arts, between wine and the artist*» (Fromm, 1979, v). He argues that, unlike any other beverage, wine is a work of art – «*a catalyst drawing people together in the gracious aspect of civilization and culture*» (ibid.). Similarly, the vineyard owner and art collector Donald Hess believes that «*both wine and art are about creativity and communication. They are cultural phenomena that must be experienced directly to be appreciated fully. [...] Generally, you are communicating with the same audience: meet a wine lover and you find an art lover, or at the very least a lover of art de vivre*» (Spurrier, 1998, 84).

WINE AND ART HISTORY

This association between wine and art can be traced back to the early history of civilization, and many scholarly histories of viticulture make extensive use of

contemporaneous art to illustrate the evolution of wine-making and wine drinking (Hyams, 1965; Johnson, 1989; Weinhold, 1978; Younger, 1966). Such sources draw upon the artistic forms of Egyptian tomb paintings; Greek krater and kylix; Roman frescoes and mosaics; medieval tapestries, Books of Hours, woodcuts and manuscript illustrations; and C17-C18th painting, to illustrate the nature and detail of viticulture.

Wine in art is thus to be found in the art galleries of the world, but also in more specialized collections of wine-related "art" – the Musée de Chateau Mouton Rothschild, the (former) Wine Museum of San Francisco, or in the collection of portraits of the British luminaries of the Port wine trade in the Factory House of Oporto (Rothschild and Beaumarchais, 1983; Baird, 1979; Delaforce, 1979).

However, the focus of this paper is not with trying to demonstrate the place of wine in fine art, but rather with seeking to illuminate the ways in which fine art has been utilized and exploited by the wine industry for commercial ends – and the efforts made by the trade to make implicit or explicit linkages between Wine and Art as kindred elements of aesthetics, culture and civilization.

There is, of course, the question of defining "what is art"; after all, most wine advertising and the material shown on wine labels and in adverts is good commercial art and stylish graphic design. For the purpose of this paper, the focus is upon the appropriation of established examples of fine art, or its shadowing; work produced by established artists specifically for the wine trade; and, more debatably, work which might find its way on to the walls of an art gallery.

WINE, ART AND BIG BUSINESS

In the competitive world of the international wine trade, producers, wholesalers, and retailers must keep their product before the eye of the market and the final consumer. Despite the persisting (and deliberately fostered?) image of wine as the product of small-scale producers and specific plots of land (with unique wine-creating characteristics), wine is increasingly part of global commerce, and a significant element in the portfolios of Transnational Beverage Corporations. As such, wine has become subject to the same kind of marketing strategies as TBCs apply to their global brand name beers and spirits. Although some "brand wine" images – Le Piat d'Or, Blue Nun, Black Tower – have been created, most wine is not a global product like Coca Cola, Guinness, or Cointreau. The nature of wine marketing and publicity, therefore, has to be somewhat different and to positively emphasise the virtues of difference.

The wine geographer Tim Unwin claims that increasing wine consumption in Britain and the USA from the 1960s was a product of rising real incomes, «*against*

which mass advertising could successfully propagate increasingly middle class aspirations throughout society» (Unwin, 1996, 349). As a consequence, he argues, most wine advertising has concentrated on projecting wine «as a symbol of well-being and contentment» (ibid.). Although the TBCs have worked to establish brand names for the global market for their beers and spirits, in the case of the more fragmentary wine trade, «they have been keen to ensure that wine has retained its image as a prestigious symbol'» (ibid., 353).

As a consequence, most agencies involved in the wine industry – whether they are part of a TBC, or a trade association, or a still-independent winemaker, wholesaler, or wine merchant – are active in advertising their wares. The publicity material involved includes television and press adverts, brochures, maps and wine labels.

Given that, unlike beer and spirits, wine is not (generally) a standard brand, and that traditionally it has been produced in relatively small quantities and can vary in quality from year to year, marketing of the specific product of a winery and vintage has great significance. As Charters et al note, the way a product is packaged is a crucial factor in influencing consumer purchase, a fact, they observe, which is «increasingly being recognised in the wine industry, with a wide diversity of new styles of bottles, labels, and associated packaging being introduced to encourage consumers to make a specific purchasing decision» (Charters et al, 1999, 183).

Unwin has argued that, of all alcoholic beverages, «wine is the one which probably has the greatest history of cultural symbolism» (Unwin, 1992, 210). Given this notion that wine is a prestigious and cultural symbol, there is a tendency to associate it with *other* prestigious and cultural symbols. Examination of any wine magazine, the publicity of any wine trade organization, or even the shelves of a wine store, will reveal the kind of images and associations which are purveyed. Illustrations commonly include such subjects as grapes and vineyards, wineries and chateaux, Old Masters and chic youngsters, elegant wining and dining, antiquities and modern glassware and, especially in the case of France, rocks, pebbles and earth – in support of the claim of the uniqueness of French *terroir!* These images seek to persuade us that wine is part of the “good life”, and that «by drinking this wine or that vintage we shall become not only beautiful but discerning people» (Dickenson, 1992, 39).

The relationship between wine and art is well explored by Antonio Núñez López, when he poses the question «Is the relation between art and publicity natural?» (Núñez López, n.d., 96). In his view, the relationship is «a marriage of convenience», in which publicity becomes art, and art becomes publicity (ibid., 97 and 76). The use of images from art by winemakers, he suggests, allows their product to benefit from the halo of admiration and prestige which surrounds the picture and the name of the artist (ibid., 76).

WINE AND ART – A FRAMEWORK FOR STUDY

The wine-related art collected by the Christian Brothers, and which formed the basis of the collection of the San Francisco Wine Museum was categorized under seven headings:

- the grapevine and its cultivation;
- the harvest;
- winemaking and wineselling;
- wine in mythology;
- wine in religion;
- wine drinking;
- wine in humour and satire (Baird, op.cit.).

Baird's commentaries on these works of art can be seen as equally apposite to viticulture. He describes paintings of grapes as «*beautiful works of art*» demonstrating the diversity of grapevines; the significance of the harvest to the vintager; the «*unexplainable wonder*» of the transformation of the juice of the grape into wine; the «*artistic inspiration*» of Dionysus/Bacchus for «*sculpture, art, literature and drama*»; the significance of wine in the Bible and biblical art; the portrayal of convivial gatherings of wine drinkers by «*generations of artists*»; and the satirical representation of wine in the life-style of nineteenth century Europe (ibid., 101, 106, 110, 114, 119, 127).

These themes and perspectives in the historic role of wine in art are equally relevant to an analysis of the utilization of art in the modern wine industry.

ART IN WINE PUBLICITY

At its most basic, a naked linkage is made between fine wine and fine art – advertising slogans such as “The fine art of wine”, “Original Masters”, “Un art, une passion, une tradition”, “Wine as art” “Masterpieces from Down Under” are coupled with familiar images from painters as diverse as Canaletto, Klimt, and Miró. In some cases, the linkage is even more explicit, not merely in the slogan, but in the association of the bottle with the tools of the artist.

The closest linkage between wine and art is to be found in the direct appropriation of well-known works of art, such as those of da Vinci or Canaletto, or the manipulation of the painting to make such a linkage. In extremis this might be an unspoken but blatant association between wine, a great artist, and a country, such as Picasso and Spain.

The significance of “Tradition” in wine-making and wine quality sustains a very

direct appropriation of art in the service of wine-selling. The grape was a staple of the C17/18th still life painting of Redouté and others; today the traditional artistic style is maintained, but the accompanying text expounds the wine-making qualities of the specific grape type!

Similarly, traditional landscape painting is borrowed to portray rustic “winescapes” of viticulture. The notion of long-established traditions, and the implication that the best wines are the product of generations of experience, is also to be found in the use of portraits of vineyard owners as Old Masters, and in the use of old prints and drawings of chateaux and vineyards.

Even if the art is less familiar, we can find examples of the use of easily recognizable artistic styles to convey the subtle message of association – in traditional or modernistic still lifes, collage, or modern art.

THE “ART” OF THE WINE LABEL

Wine bottle labels carry a diversity of information, much of it required by national or regional wine legislation – including producer, grape variety, designated quality such as Appellation Contrôlée, and vintage. Recent research suggests that labelling can be a significant factor in influencing wine purchase – and the price at which a bottle can be sold – such that «*increasing numbers of wine producers are thus experimenting with novel label designs*» (Charters et al, *op.cit.*, 183).

The geographer Gary Peters observes that wine labels contain a wealth of geographic and other information, and that they can be «*colorful, eye-catching, and even aesthetic – sometimes approaching works of art*» (Peters, 1997, 110). Alberto Ramos states that the label must attract the attention of the consumer, stimulating and interesting him in the product which is advertised (Ramos, n.d., 68). «*The illustration*», he argues, «*is fundamental, and is destined to attract attention by its form, colour, and by the idea it seeks to transmit*» (ibid.). The design is significant – it must be recognizable by the consumer; it may have cultural significance for him; and it may be in a variety of styles – «*modernist, abstract, hyper-realist, etc*» (ibid.).

In the case of sherry, Ramos records the utilization of recognizable and culturally significant subjects such as brilliantly-coloured landscapes; historical, regal and fictional personages such as Isabella II and Don Quixote; scenes from Spain’s glorious past; the national flag and heraldic devices; religious figures; “noble” animals such as the bull, horse and lion – that is, images of Spain dominated by *la guitarra, la pandereta, el flamenquismo y la tauromaquia* (ibid., 72-3).

A pioneer in the use – or exploitation – of art in the wine trade was Baron Philippe de Rothschild, owner of the eponymous and now First-growth Bordeaux chateau. He commissioned the architect and stage-designer, Jacques Carlu, to

produce a label for the 1924 vintage (Ray, 1974, 47). Rothschild's innovation was associated with a shift towards chateau-bottling, so that designer-labels came to distinguish the classed growth wines of the Bordeaux chateaux, and replaced the previously simple and austere claret labels of Bordeaux shippers or English wine merchants. Mouton Rothschild continued to use variants of Carlu's design until 1945, when the baron selected a new design to celebrate the end of World War II – and a great vintage – and hit upon the idea of asking a *different* contemporary artist to design a label for *each* vintage. Ray observes that the subsequent list of artists involved «reads like a *Who's Who of contemporary art*», with labels by Cocteau (1947), Braque (1955), Dali (1958), Henry Moore (1964), Miró (1969), Chagall (1970) (ibid., 49).

The Mouton labels nicely illustrate the evolving relationship between wine and art. Between 1945 and 1970 almost all of the labels have some kind of evident vinous theme – grapes, vine leaves, glasses, sometimes with associated human figures. Those from 1971-81 (with the exception of Andy Warhol's 1975 photomontage of Baron Philippe) are much more abstract works of modern art, with no overt reference to wine (Rothschild and Beaumarchais, op.cit.). Significantly, payment was to be in the form of 10 cases of Mouton wine – «*Wine for art. Art for wine*» (Greenwood, 1984, 201).

The process has also had the curious consequence of making bottles collectors' items for their labels, rather than their contents, as wine buffs seek to complete their "sets". The distinguished English Bordeaux writer, Edmund Penning-Rowsell, notes rather disparagingly that as a result of this craze in the 1980s, single bottles of the poor 1946 vintage, which had sold for £88 a case in 1973, were being sold for £2,300 in 1984 (Penning-Rowsell, 1985, 508).

In the sherry country, Maldonado et al note the emergence at the end of the nineteenth century of labels for the wines of the province of Cadiz, distinct «*in theme and style*», and portraying the landscapes, folklore, people, and animals of the region – «*The quintessence of a picturesque and pure Andalusia*» (Maldonado et al, 1997, 80). Many of these images, to judge from the examples given, were derived from local artistic traditions, but there are also special and prestigious labels, which were scarce and intended for collectors, which are the work of established artists – for example, the Conde de Osborne Solera Gran Reserva Jerez brandy, designed by Salvador Dali (ibid., 81).

In the USA Robert Mondavi was a pioneer in using a designer label, showing his elegant Oakville winery in the Napa Valley. Cyril Ray describes them as exemplifying the stylishness of the Napa, and as having intrinsic quality (Ray, 1984, 43). Designed by Mallette Dean, a wood-engraver, printer, and typographer, the label has been described as «*the standard to almost everyone in California who thought about a wine label*» (ibid., 99-100). Other California winemakers –

Kenwood, Edmeades, and Pecora – have followed the example of Mouton-Rothschild, by commissioning different labels for each vintage from Californian artists (ibid., 44-48).

In the retailing of wine an interesting facet of the link between wine and art is to be found in the patronage of “art” by wine merchants. Examples include an introductory guide for retailers on selling wine to customers, produced by Brown and Pank (Brown and Pank, 1967). This simple but wide-ranging handbook is elegantly illustrated by the beautiful engravings of David Gentleman, today one of Britain’s most distinguished graphic artists. These show the seasonality of the wine year, and characteristic scenes from the wine regions of Europe.

Similarly, the English wine merchant chain, Oddbins, has made much use of the work of the artist and illustrator Ralph Steadman for its publicity, especially its wine lists. Steadman’s style is stark, graphic and often brutal, and has something in common with nineteenth-century caricaturists. The range and diversity of his work can be seen in his *The Grapes of Ralph*, where he writes «*I do go along with the belief that grapes, soil, microclimates, techniques and the vagaries of weather are so diverse from one year to the next that it takes a real artist, with the soul of Faust, to cheat the devil and produce a wine so fine as to deny anyone else’s attempt to do the same. The essential qualities are passion, natural cunning and an individual’s mad impulse to juggle the odds to create a masterpiece of balance and delicate complexity. It is the artist in me which responds to such a challenge and I salute the masters of winemaking*» (Steadman, 1992, 8). A similar association can be seen in the equally acerbic work of Ronald Searle, originally produced to publicise the wines of Clos du Val in the Napa and Taltarni in Australia (Searle, 1986).

In Britain, supermarkets have taken a major share of the wine trade, within which sales of their “own brand” wines are increasingly important. Since, by definition, these will be “bulk” wines of lower price and quality, the supermarket chains are obviously anxious both to sustain overall sales, but also make it easy for the consumer to identify specific wines. Supermarket “art work” therefore tends to be simple and iconic.

WINE AND MODERN ART

Sheldon Williams observed that modern painters and sculptors «*have been eager to demonstrate their affection for the grape*», citing as examples Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, Dufy, Ben Nicholson and Maurice Utrillo (Williams, 1970, 93).

At this more elevated level, we might note the patronage of artists by wine agencies, in which an implicit association is made between wine and art as “high culture”. A most elegant example is that of the anthology *Arte y Cultura del Vino*

de Rioja, sponsored by the Consejo Regulador de la Denominación de Origen Calificada Rioja (Pascual Corral, 1995). This brings together commentaries from a variety of sources on the virtues and qualities of Rioja wine with specially commissioned wine-related pictures. These vary considerably in style, from naturalistic to abstract, but include as subjects vines, vineyards, bodegas and drinkers. It claims that painters, poets and musicians have obtained from the wines of Rioja «a fountain of creative inspiration»; but it is also conceded that, in addition to being such a source of artistic inspiration, there has been a «*motivo de comercio*» (ibid., 5). It is interesting to note that this presentation of wine and high art has later been subverted by the use of the same pictures in more direct advertising. Similar examples are to be found in work sponsored by the Instituto Español de Comercio Exterior and the Argentinian Bodegas López (Watson, 2000; Bodegas López, 1998).

It might be possible to argue that, in addition to the incidental appearance of vinous subjects in established art, and the appropriation of fine art as one of the elements in wine trade publicity, recent burgeoning interest in wine has encouraged the emergence of artists specializing in vinous subjects – as in the work of David Gentleman, Graham Clarke, Margaret Loxton, or the Bordeaux portfolio of the Wine Arts collection (Wine Arts, n.d.).

WINE AND OTHER ARTISTIC FIELDS

The definition of precisely what constitutes “art” in the wine trade is unclear, and might well be extended to include the use of maps; the typography of labels which depend simply on elegant lettering; regional “art” such as the vinous *azulejos* of Portugal; or even the postcards of vineyards and wine-sellers.

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