

## “BLUE CHIP ART”

ROI.

I am almost completely convinced that most of you would know what those three letters stand for, but until a few days ago, I did not. “What’s the expected ROI?”, I was asked by a board member at a meeting I attended to discuss a potential branding and marketing project I have become involved in. I could not answer her question. I had no clue what an ROI was - the boardroom and its jargon is an alien world to me. It turned out to mean Return On Investment.

Unlike me, terminology like “Return on investment” clearly belongs in a boardroom, but like all else in a world possessed by the notion that anybody can do anything (did you hear that Britney Spears has now written a children’s book?), jargon seems to seep and creep across borders and boundaries – moving effortlessly between boardroom and auction room, gambling hall and art gallery. So, it probably comes as no surprise that ROI is now a recognized incentive for buying works of art or that the term “blue chip” is used not only to refer to casino money, but to a secure investment as well.

“Did you know that the expression “blue chip” comes from the game of Poker - thereby retaining hints of the element of risk? But in referring to the highest value chips, it also implies an assured choice.” The source of this wonderful tit-bit? None other than the (and here, dear reader, please allow me to gush) doyenne of South African art books, Esmé Berman.

A few weeks ago my editor suggested I write an article about “Esmé Berman’s idea of blue chip art and artists”. I was little bit perplexed but did not want to sound completely out of the loop (I imagined that it was a term Berman used in her comprehensive anthology/bibliography), so I did not question the origin of “blue chip artists” - I just believed that when I start doing my research I will come across the reference and take it from there. But alas, in **Berman's Art and Artists of South Africa (An illustrated biographical dictionary and historical survey of painters, sculptors & graphic artists since 1875)** no such category or list was to be found. I realized soon enough that the most likely source for such a selection of (lucky) artists might be found in a small handbook for collectors she edited and published in 1972 . Entitled **The South African art market, 1971/72: a handbook for collectors** (Johannesburg, Art Institute of South Africa, 1972) it was an attempt to answer the questions most frequently put to her by the public. But search as I may, I could not find a copy of this rare little gem. So, I took the plunge and e-mailed Mrs Berman with a list of questions pertaining to the so called “blue chip artists”.

“I got myself into hot water”, she replied in reference to “handbook for collectors”. “Among several informative articles contributed by knowledgeable writers was a segment for which I had called upon half-a-dozen nationally respected art experts to evaluate the collectibility of the artists whose works had been sold in various notable commercial galleries and on auction sales during the preceding year. Their selections were carefully collated and the top recommendations in the fields of painting, sculpture and graphic arts were presented in declining sequence. The outcome? I was not among the arbitrators, but I was pilloried by artists who considered themselves far more important than the experts had decreed. My good friend Cecil

Skotnes actually expressed the fear that my career in art was over!”

It is ironic that she had to take the blame for other's opinions as she, like most others with an academic or creative inclination, has never been comfortable with the commercial aspects of art. Yet, with the wisdom that only experience brings she warns against casting the first stone. “It would be incorrect to hold contemporary collectors responsible for “commoditising” art. That began a long time ago – the tendency merely intensified as the 20<sup>th</sup> Century proceeded – and ultimately it brought about a radical reaction. The 1960s witnessed the rise of movements that deliberately emphasized *process* and/or *abstract concept*, to the detriment of the end-product or *art object*. Hence, Conceptual Art, Performance Art, etc.”

Mrs Berman has no quarrel with the practice of investing in art, she assured me. There is, however, a definite distinction between ‘investing’ and ‘speculating’, she hastens to add. “For genuine investment offers the promise of more than financial appreciation.” Most “good” art appreciates in financial value over time – even if the appreciation is not spectacular and worthy of a newsflash. What is infinitely more valuable is the aesthetic pleasure it provides during that time, she suggests. “It may actually exceed any profit to be gained from its increased financial value.”

Who's the next “sure thing”, I dared to ask. “When it comes to ear-marking the potential ‘Blue Chip Artist’, the reckless stick their neck out. The wisest dealers did not recognize the investment worth of Vincent Van Gogh during his life-time. Who dreamed during the 1930s that the ‘appalling’ Irma Stern would ultimately become the highest priced South African artist.”

“‘Blue Chip Artist’ certainly does not apply to the *Flash-in-the-Pan*, to the *Politically Correct* or to the current *Wunderkind* – voguish figures that can more appropriately be described as ‘Hot’! And it is the case of the ‘Hot Artists’ that confuses the issue – and reinforces my personal disinclination to associate myself with financial values. I was very much aware, for instance, as I observed the art scene during many years in Los Angeles, that several of the most prominent collectors there – determined to be seen to be on the cutting edge – made a beeline for the ‘Hot Artists’. Indeed, in many cases it was their patronage that accounted for the artist's ‘Heat!’ Yet, I was often dubious about the durability of the talents they espoused. ‘Blue Chip Art’ implies stability, which usually requires a certain test of time. And, by then, the apposite artists, more often than not, are no longer active – or alive!”

“How then does one make the wisest choices?” She posed the question. “My advice to prospective investors is – and always was – “Educate your eye!” While keeping track of market factors, cultivate your personal judgment by looking, looking, looking – in important art books, at significant exhibitions, in the company of expert commentators. No matter how ‘hot’ an artist make appear, remember that you have to *like* the work, after all, you have to live with it. And could you really live with a bottled cow in your living room?! Buy works that give you pleasure – if you have done the necessary work on developing your *aesthetic* appreciation, it is more than likely that financial appreciation will accompany the rewards that you derive.”

Thank you, Esmé Berman. As always, a pleasure to work with a master of their craft – especially when they are wise and wonderful as well!