

Tel Aviv University

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**“Bringing to light – Keeping out of sight”**

**The history of Israeli’s fine art  
collecting/collectors**

**and its propensity to Canon creation**

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## **The history of fine art collecting and collectors in Israel and its propensity towards art canon creation**

This summary presents the results of a study that examined the interrelationship between the art collectors in Israel and the emergence of an Israeli canon of art, in order to better understand the channels of influence and the degree of their effect on the canonical art in Israel. The study analyzes the phenomenon of collecting Israeli art in Israel, and it documents and characterizes the components and subfields of the phenomenon. The study also maps the forces operating in the world of collecting Israeli art, the connections among those forces, and the connections between them and other parties with an interest in the art field.

The study mapped the art collecting population in Israel and revealed extensive information about past and present collectors and their collections. In addition, information about collecting and collections in Israel was gathered from other parties with an interest in the art world: academics, gallery owners, artists, art dealers, curators, and art critics.

The study identified and mapped two hundred collectors who were active in Israel during the past hundred years and those who are currently active, from pre-state times to today. It bears emphasizing that for various reasons not all the collectors could be identified, and we have no doubt that the collectors described in this study constitute only part of the population of art collectors in Israel. In researching the realm of fine art collection and identifying the collectors, a number of factors raise obstacles: firstly, art historians focus on artists, works of art, and historical context rather than attaching importance to collectors or to the act of collecting, and thus little information about collectors is documented. The prevailing hierarchy among the art world's cultural mediators and tastemakers also treats collectors as unimportant. Privacy and anonymity of collectors for tax reasons, personal safety and security, and a low level of commitment as private individuals to the public world, together with a socialist tradition, with personal modesty, and with conflicts of interest for collectors who occupy positions of power, are some of the reasons that the collectors themselves may decline to be interviewed and to open their hearts and their collections to the public eye.

Most of the interviews for the study were conducted face to face. There were 75 interviewees of whom the collectors, their heirs, and their relatives make up 55 percent (41 collectors out of the 75 interviewees). The 34 remaining interviewees include gallery owners, auction house owners, art advisors, present and former curators, artists, academics, and cultural and art historians. When an interviewee occupies more than one category (for example, a curator who is also a collector and an art advisor), we have chosen the category matching the interviewee's primary occupation. By gender, the 75 interviewees included 25 women. Among all the respondents, the ratio is 22%

women to 78% men. (Some of the women are independent collectors or joint collectors, academics, gallery owners, curators, and art dealers.) It bears noting that among the overall population of past and present collectors men constituted 79%, which is consistent with the known international data indicating that among collectors men form a 70% majority, while 21% of the collectors (or relatives of collectors) interviewed for the study were women. This figure amounts to fewer women than in the international ratio, where they are a 30% minority of collectors. The number of female collectors mapped for the study comes to 44, most of them collecting as part of a couple and fewer collecting independently. It must be noted that collecting couples were counted as individuals according to whichever was dominant in collecting. That is to say, if a couple were active together in collection, we determined which was first or which was dominant and we recorded the gender accordingly.

The central research question investigated in this study is whether collectors influence the process of canonization in the Israeli art world and, if so, in what ways. Secondary questions addressed the identity of the collectors and the nature of their collections, the importance of the connection between the collectors and the art world then and now, and the weight of the economic aspect over the years of collecting in Israel. The study examined the question of whether the canon unilaterally influences purchasing decisions of the collectors or whether the influence is mutual. Also examined were the inheritance-related processes in ownership of family collections, as were the effects of communications technologies (the online community) on collecting and on the ties between artists and collectors. The influence of globalization and of social networks on canonization were examined as well.

The word “canon” in Greek means “rule” or “model,” and in Arabic it means “law,” helping clarify that a canon is a sort of paradigm or criterion defining a set of guidelines or of creations that form an agreed cultural base. In the classical world, the scholars of Alexandria officially defined a list of masterpieces. In religion, the canon is a tenet with legal force, specifying which texts are holy for believers. The function of canonization belonged to leaders of the religion, such as cardinals and important priests. Canonical works were seen as socially and culturally important.

In this study, we employed theories and tools of cultural research that examine phenomena and processes in the world of culture in the contexts of interdisciplinary history, society, economy, and psychology. The study examines the interrelationships between canonization and the collecting of fine art in Israel, and it uses the tools and theories of cultural research, such as Bourdieu’s “field power” approach, Ann Swidler’s “tool kit,” the “project” theory of Luc Boltanski, and concepts from libertarian theory and from the theoretical framework of web community analysis. Bourdieu presents a broad picture touching on the forces that act in the “artistic creation field” or in the “art world.” His description explains that the social field is a realm where various forces are active (sometimes individuals and sometimes groups or organizations) in their attempt to win the “top prize,” which is achieving recognized canonical quality with one’s work in the artistic creation field. Bourdieu calls the process by which an individual artist attains the status of a creative genius “coronation” or “sanctification.” Bourdieu’s teachings deal with the habitus and with the field as a

developing, variable professional space, and they speak mainly of the power struggles and of the movement within the field toward its center and toward the positions of power and control.

Other cultural researchers provide other tools for examining cultural processes and cultural changes. Ann Swidler points to the beginning of the network structure, describing it in terms of “chains of action” and links that connect cause and effect; and to the tool kit of repertoires with which the subject can select, from among a given set of options, a method of coping culturally that can be adapted to the subject’s needs.

Boltanski attempts to broaden the paradigm and returns the focus to change and power (the conflict model). He reframes more fully the understanding of the conflict dynamic and of the complex relationships between the economic interests of the various economic players on the one hand and their wish to receive moral approval on the other hand. The collectors are characterized by libertarian stands (being people of means and businesspeople), influenced by the process of projectization prevailing in the art world. An essay by social philosopher Axel Honneth on “Disrespect and Recognition” presents an interesting commentary in which a significant sociological force catalyzing the canonization process is the collector’s need for social recognition. At the center of discussion in Honneth’s socio-moral approach are the concepts of recognition, appreciation, and respect. Art collecting is seen as a tool in the hands of the modern liberal bourgeoisie, and the rich bourgeois collectors are portrayed as seeking cultural, social, and class legitimization, essentially hoping that recognition and appreciation will morally strengthen the basis for their actions.

The canon preserves the cultural values of the past and makes clear society’s taste and aesthetic values. Society’s values and taste generally serve the holders of power, the social and cultural elite, and the authority figures within society.

Sela-Shefi presents the canon conflicts as a dynamic of cultural preservation and renewal. She offers a visual metaphor well known in the field of culture, the “patina.” Canonicity is measurable by patina; the layer of patina confers “historical depth.” Sela-Shefi mentions two principal situations where canonization occurs: First, in fields that involve an official canon, further items can continually be sanctified so that the canon gradually grows and changes; in principle, that is the process that stabilizes and strengthens an existing canon. The other situation, in realms where until a certain juncture no palpable, official canon existed, is a stage where a canon begins to form. In the latter case, the process appears to be a more dramatic one involving invention and innovation.

#### Theories of modelling the canonization process

In economics and in culture, studies have sought to model the system that creates and conveys economic value for works of art. Because the financial link between collectors and art works is considered significant, various models attempt to clarify the system’s components, its methods of action, and the place of the collectors in the system. Dormot’s model names five components that help bring art from the studio to the museum or to private purchase: the “creation of art,” the “quotation,” the “interpretation” stage, the “reconstruction” stage, and the “consumption” stage in

which the artist's work is bought, experienced at a museum, or purchased as reproductions or in other forms that present the work. An additional model is the artistic ecosystem model, which was formulated by a British strategic and cultural research company. This study is quoted by Chong, and it names different parameters, such as the network of interrelationships that promote the predication of the artist's symbolic/aesthetic value.

The canonization process is depicted as a complex system including the various art styles, the many players, and the complex interactions that compose the art world. In addition, the holders of various positions (agents) are mentioned in defining the concept of "subscriptions" in parallel with the concept of canonization. The process of separating "the wheat from the chaff" is accomplished by a network of artistic peers, international art experts, academics, curators, dealers, art critics, artists, and purchasers (collectors) who provide intersecting streams of advice and impart recognition to an artist's work by means of exhibits, reviews, and private and public purchases.

Rodner and Thomson's "art machine" model also includes various components, and its purpose is to attain cultural/symbolic acceptability and value as well as, of course, economic value. Stages include the artist's training at an art school, penetration of the market, the critics and the intensity of their criticism, the secondary market, the activity of collectors, and more.

Given those models as a basis, this study sought to investigate which processes support the process of canonization in Israel, and to analyze them; and to investigate which processes run counter to that process, creating an opposite process of de-canonization. The context, the influences, and the associations with canonization were examined with reference to technological processes, global processes, and economic processes.

The art market, or art economy, is free of government activity and operates with a view to maximizing profits by means of market forces of supply and demand in the libertarian spirit. The financial focus on art, on consumption of its output, and on market value and its measurement all serve the "canon industry" because of the depth and "weight" of the economic interests of all concerned: the creators of art, the art institutions, and of course the art consumers themselves. According to an estimate from the European Union of Arts, the annual turnover in art grew from 18,000 million euro in 2003 to 47,000 million euro in 2013; and today works of art serve to diversify investment portfolios and as security for debts — in other words, as financial instruments. A report from Deloitte notes that the unprecedented burgeoning of the art market in recent years has led to "financialization" of the market.

Forbes points to a number of indicators and indices that serve international art investors, and it explains the factors involved in their calculation. The central fact that Forbes presents relates to the indices, which are all based on transparent data from the world's public auction houses but do not include central data on the art market amounting to some 53% and covering transactions by private galleries and art dealers — transactions for which transparent data does not exist. It is also significant that although e-commerce could have been expected to make extensive data available regarding online trading, it has not done so and is not included in today's widely used formulas and



indices. The main indices today in the art investment market are the Mei Moses and Artnet indices. The Mei Moses index is a unique index that observes the price gap between artworks in the past and present. The Artnet index is composed of shares of publicly traded art companies. These indices are compared against the S&P index, which examines the advisability of investing in works of art.

Technology and the web have become significant in contributing to de-canonization processes. The opening of the canon to influences from around the world, and the new accessibility of plentiful and varied knowledge to the artists themselves, to collectors, and to art aficionados among the public, have broadened their understanding and the foundations of the knowledge underlying their day-to-day activity. The influence of technology is also felt, of course, in financial activities. The market values of artworks are open and transparent to all (public auctions, but not private sales and not gallery sales), obliging various players in the market to relate to them while setting prices for works of a specific artist, both at the artist's studio and at galleries.

The interviews and the literature indicated clearly that technology, communications, and social networks significantly broaden both the availability of the information and the visibility of the various participants in canonization and that, by their way of doing so, in practice they hinder the very processes of canonization. The main reasons are that technological communications are by their nature a de-canonizing process because they bypass and diminish the power of the intermediaries and of the traditional holders of authority, control, information, and knowledge. A look at the influence of technology on the world of art collecting reveals an improvement in various processes: supplying accessible information to collectors, strengthening the direct connections between artist and collector, and strengthening the connection between the artist and the general public — broadening the base of purchasers and broadening the collector's horizons in the global context (international art). There is agreement that technology makes plentiful data easily available for collection-related activities as evidenced particularly in the secondary market. That is to say, the information that collectors use in price comparisons regarding a given artist's works for a public auction has become significantly more extensive. There is also a positive influence on the connection with the collectors, no longer only face to face at the opening of an exhibition or at the artist's studio. By means of Facebook, Instagram, and other social networks, the collector is continually updated with respect to the artist's activity, new works, exhibitions around the country, and more.

Another process inextricably linked to technology and communications is the globalization process. It too contributes to de-canonization in the art world. According to Efrat, globalization, like the pluralism which prevails in the global art world, is helpful to art both in the academic realm where young artists are trained and in the art market. In the academic realm, pluralism and globalization promise good "industrial relations" because there is no need for styles to compete with one another over power, or for opposition groups to mount a quest for dominance. An abstract approach is fine, so is figurativism, and while video stands for innovativeness, stills from a video are also accepted as art. Realism, neo-realism, conceptual and neo-conceptual art, surrealism,

expressionism, and semi-abstract art are all acceptable. Globalization and pluralism are also helpful to the art market, in that they broaden the supply of artworks and increase the number of galleries where those works may be shown, helping to match the public's tastes to the artists' styles. Various testimonies gathered in our study highlight the influence of globalization on broadening the boundaries of the canon and giving it flexibility that nourishes the de-canonization process, a process also reflected in the activities of Israeli collectors.

From analysis of the interviews and of the chief themes that arose in them, a set of operations was assembled that are constituents of the "collector's profile" and the collector activity. Someone with a collector's profile of the Collector type studies the artist well, knows the artist's work, and purchases the artist's work (principally from galleries or at auctions). Someone with a collector's profile of the Liaison type introduces a young artist to a gallery, a critic, a curator, a senior artist, a teacher, a pupil. The Liaison figure, by means of connections, influences the choice of an artist for an exhibition, the purchase made by an institution, or the awarding of a prize. Someone with a collector's profile of the Patron type purchases works from the artist, finances the artist's studio, or provides the artist with a property to use as a work space. Sometimes the Patron finances a trip to an exhibition, the cost of a show, the cost of a catalog, a stipend, or even a monthly salary and art materials — generally over a long term. Someone with a collector's profile of the Donor type makes contributions to art institutions, to scholarships, to purchases for museums, to the mounting of exhibitions, and to educational and publicity activities without targeting any specific artist and without personal involvement, whereas someone of the Investor type purchases artworks and is interested in their increasing value for the sake of selling at a profit. The Investor will generally buy a large body of artworks from a young or little-known artist, purchasing from the artist directly if the artist is starting out or from the estate of the artist. These activities may be distinguished in terms of the collecting activity's general character, for example as "enablement collection," "preventive collection," or "speculative collection." These categories highlight the focus of the particular collector's activity. The study also produced various metrics for characterizing collector activity, and thus for further characterizing the collector, including a risk index for the collection, an index of its specificity, and an index of its dynamism.

The risk index estimates, as a percentage, the ratio between the number of works in the collection that were purchased from established artists (in terms of their artistic capital) and the number purchased from younger artists. By purchasing works of a known, respected artist, collectors do not raise or diminish the artist's place in the local canon. They may help the works to maintain a steady price — in other words, they reinforce the existing canon.

The specificity index refers to the targeting that the collector practices in choosing purchases for the collection. Does the collector purchase a few works from each of many artists (a "horizontal" collection) or, on the contrary, purchase many works from each of a small, identifiable group of artists (focusing in depth or "collecting in depth"). The specificity index can refer to focusing not only on an artist but also on a period, a style, or a technique of execution.

The third index emerging from the study is the index of dynamism. It describes how much the collection “moves around” and to what degree works from the collector’s private collection are lent for exhibition. The index of dynamism examines the extent of the contribution the collection, and collector, make to society and to the Israeli art world, primarily by cooperating in the lending of works for showing at exhibitions and at institutions and museums. The index of dynamism found mention in many interviews with collectors. It is an indication of sorts to the collector regarding the importance of the works in the collection. In addition, it discharges a sort of debt on the collector’s part to the artist whose works are lent, in that the artist receives exposure at the exhibition.

This study maps official and unofficial forms of leverage used by collectors in their various collector activities. These forms of leverage are the tools with which the collectors translate their activity (intentionally or unintentionally) into influence on the formation of the Israeli canon. The leverage is divided into official leverage and unofficial leverage.

Among the official leverage:

1. Participation in prize committees at a museum. (Financial contribution to an artist who meets given criteria.)
2. Membership in the “friends” association of the museum, in the board of trustees, or in the executive committee.
3. Membership in an exhibits committee (influencing the museum’s purchases).
4. Membership in public institutions such as the Israel Council for Culture and the Arts or an international exhibitions committee (Documenta, Bienalle) of the Plastic Arts Unit at the Israel Ministry of Culture and Sport.
5. Donating a collection to a museum during the collector’s lifetime or as a bequest. Donating part of the collection (works of a number of artists) for a specifically themed exhibit, or donating a set of items from the collection permanently or temporarily to the museum as an exhibit.
6. Donating money to the museum (for setting up a wing, room, or hall).

Among the unofficial leverage:

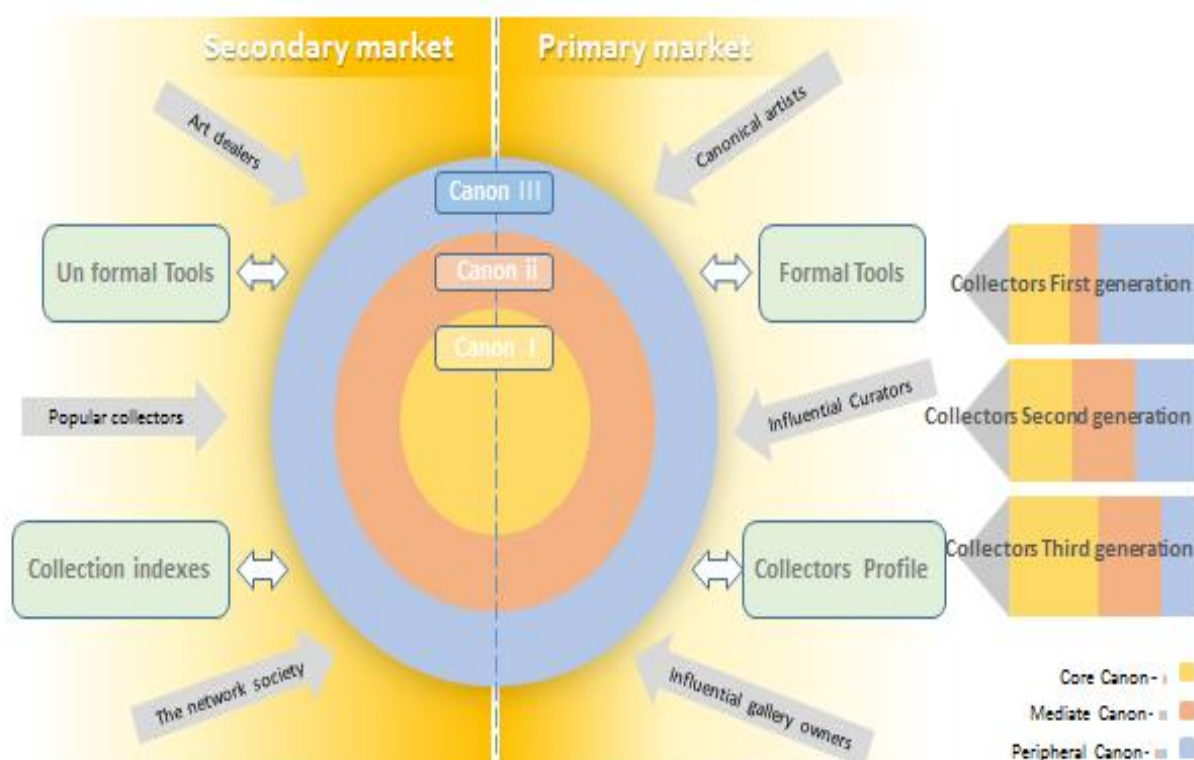
1. Financing an artist’s activities or requirements (covering travel expenses for an advanced course overseas; financing a studio; providing living expenses or salary; financing an exhibition, a research study, or the catalog of an exhibition).
2. “Marketing” the artist, setting up connections and communications between an artists and a gatekeeper such as a museum curator, independent curator, art historian, researcher, gallery owner, or senior artist; and bringing the artist and the artist’s work to the attention of professionals in the field (gallery owners, curators, other collectors).

3. Purchasing works by the artist at the studio, at graduation exhibitions, at galleries, or at auctions.
4. Mentoring a young or new collector.
5. Acting as a curator for an exhibit from one's own private collection, at a museum or gallery.
6. Providing guidance for an artist, watching over the artist's professional development, and giving advice regarding the artist's work.
7. Social homology / social networks

Our study has combined the indices, the collector's profiles, and the forms of leverage into an integrative conceptual model that includes the various components through which the collectors are associated with and influential in artistic canonization. The model of interrelationships between collectors of fine art and canonization in Israel is presented below. It represents the study's main output.

Research findings are as follow:

**The Model - Fine art collecting/collectors and its propensity to Canon creation**



The model of interrelationships between collectors of fine art on the one hand and canonization processes in Israel on the other hand includes the various parameters whose existence, at a given time and under the conditions of the period (also included as a component of the model), reveal the complexity of the circumstances, the methods, and the tools by which interrelationships and influences are generated between the collectors and the field's other interested parties.

The model presents the two active markets of the art world, the primary and secondary markets, as well as the layers of the canon (the core, the intermediate layer, and the peripheral layer). The artists of the canon, the gallery owners and trading houses, and the various categories of collectors all influence the layers of the canon differently. The types of collector behavior differentiated by the "collector's profile" indicate the main characteristic among a range of activities performed by the collector. Collectors with a certain collector's profile (Donor, Liaison, Collector, Investor, or Patron), using official or unofficial leverage, will differently influence the canonization processes. For example, if the collector is active primarily in the secondary market, and the collector's profile is Collector (buying in galleries and at auctions), and the leverage is unofficial such as homology, and the collection has a low risk index, a low index of dynamism, and a high specificity index, then the collector will influence the canon's persistence more greatly and its formation less greatly. In contrast, if the collector's profile is Patron, and activity is in the primary market, and the collection's risk index is high, the specificity index is low, and the index of dynamism is high, then this collector may influence the formation of the canon and the success of young artists more significantly than the first collector does. Each of them, of course, operates within a set of circumstances influenced by the type of market, the currently active canonical artists, the use of technology, and the strength of the influence from social networks.

Another notable aspect of the model helps clarify the different types of layers in the canon. The central layer is described as the firmest layer or the "core" of the canon. It includes artists whose presence in the canon is uninterrupted over the decades. The artists of the second or intermediate layer are included during a certain period but not with any permanence, and the peripheral layer is one from which artists can "enter" a more interior layer or alternatively slip out of the culture's memory. Also noted is a bidirectional influence whereby the various layers of the canon influence the activity of collectors and the collectors' activity influences the canon.

## Conclusion

In the light of the study's findings, it appears clearly for the first time (in a way that previous research literature in Israel and elsewhere did not reveal) that collectors, varied as they are in their types, quality, and characteristics, have an important place and play an important role, sometimes even critical, in influencing, or even determining, the processes of entry into the various layers of canonization. The extent and nature of the influence change in accordance with the make-up of the human community that is active in the field, with the current circumstances, and with the period. The study thus justifies the statement that the collectors' role and standing are important and influential with respect to the way art history is created in Israel, and that in certain cases they even shape the future of the art market in Israel.

Given this study and the theoretical framework that it suggests for investigating the interrelationships between the collectors and the canon, it is possible for the first time to use empirical, scientific, quantitative tools in examining the nature of collector activity, the methods, and the implications of the varied parameters regarding the activity in Israel's world of art. The study contributes to clarifying the components of the art world, the mechanisms at work in it and how they function, so that they need no longer be an enigmatic "black box."

This study, investigating art collecting in Israel, is the first of its kind, but further investigation of various topics is certainly called for and should give attention to comparative research into art collections; to the place of gender in the process of collecting; to technology's influence in the collectors' marketplace, on public auctions, and on the standing of the "new collectors" as changers of priorities; and to the influence of art collecting on Israeli art. In addition, deep investigation should target the processes of globalization in the art world and the integration of Israeli artists into the global art world, the ties between galleries and collectors, the ties between galleries and museums, the phenomenon of private museums, the collector–advisor relationship, and more. Being a first in its field, this study provides ample ground for additional and engrossing research.