



PATRICIA EMISON

THE
*S*HAPING
OF
ART HISTORY

MEDITATIONS ON A DISCIPLINE

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FRONTISPIECE: The Danish art historian Niels Lauritz Andreas Høyen (1798-1870), painted in honor of his seventieth birthday by Wilhelm Marstrand. Although known as a promoter of art that would reflect national identity, Høyen is shown standing before framed engravings after two much-lauded works by Raphael, the *Disputa* from the Stanza della Segnatura, Vatican, by Joseph von Keller in 1857, and the *St. Cecilia Altarpiece* in Bologna, made by Mauro Gandolfi in 1833-34 (engraving and etching). Høyen had recently been made director of the Royal Collection, after serving as its curator and after extensive lecturing at the Academy and University of Copenhagen, as well as researching art collections throughout Denmark. As a student, he had been trained in law and theology.

To Chloë and Linnea,
who dwell in possibility

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There is a tradition of Western thought since the Renaissance, which is a tradition of dissent—that is, a tradition of questioning what is traditional. . . .

History is made of conflict, and the history of ideas is a conflict of minds.

—JACOB BRONOWSKI and BRUCE MAZLISH, *The Western Intellectual Tradition*

PREFACE

I'm sure, but I'm not certain.

—ALBERT E. BAUR

Art doesn't need to be written about, just as the Greeks didn't really need temples to conduct their religious rites. The best way to look at a work of art, arguably, is alone and in silence, thinking whatever you want to, on whatever level of articulateness. Works that cannot be so seen, like the *Mona Lisa* with its glass enclosure and crowds, not to mention the precondition of excessive reproduction, tend gradually to lose some of their cachet; on the other hand, seeing a work like Piero della Francesca's *Madonna del Parto*, which used to require a pilgrimage to a tiny chapel amid the lonely fields, offers something as haunting as a religious experience even to the nonbeliever.¹ If looking at a work of art involves a kind of contest between it and the viewer, then letting the work dominate, letting it flow over you like a wave, is a legitimate outcome.

Yet there is a certain pleasure in sharing the experience of looking, not only with flesh-and-blood companions but with a whole host of ghostly predecessors from other lands and other times. This requires a tradition of written articulation about the work of art and its place relative to other works and to history itself—in other words, art history. The art historian's pleasure comes from feeling that he or she has got the work of art by the neck, that she understands exactly how it came to be as it is and what makes it as good as it is. In that moment, one need not identify with the artist, one need not be pledged to the goal of reconstructing intentionality (however liberally understood); instead, one adopts the work as part of

1. The fresco was removed to the museum in Monterchi in 1992. N.B., since it is hoped that this book will be of interest to beginners to the subject, I have not attempted to provide a thorough guide to the vast literature on the many subjects touched on throughout, but instead have tried to keep references to a minimum.

one's own mind. Art historians probably all believe that, at their best, they know a work of art better than ever its creator did. They become the work's lover, while the artist remains a mere parent.

This short book is intended to help enrich the second, the more articulate species of viewing. After all, the first species of viewing needs no help except time and quiet. Here I hope to give readers, including near novices in the history of art, some general background about that ghostly congregation of viewers who have gone before us, including some yet flesh and blood. Art history normally attempts to explicate particular works or phases of the history of art: this extended essay attempts instead to explicate the history of Western art as a whole, but meaning in this case by "history of art" not the works produced, but the writings that purport to explain or at least to explicate the works produced. Deliberately, we turn now to the shadows rather than to the reality. How much sense is there in what we have managed, collectively, to think about works of art up to now? What directions lie open for the future? What possibilities have we allowed to lapse, at least temporarily? Why might the history of art be considered vital even for nonartists who have no ethnic pride in any particular strand of the tradition?

Aristotle in his pithy and provocative *Poetics* attempts to explain what is wonderful about poetry dedicated to imitation, and implicitly, to narrative.² He focuses especially on epic and tragic poetry, with occasional reference to painting, which for him was one of many examples of *techne*: craft, cleverness, know-how, art. Here we review the history of conceptualizing extraordinary *techne*, that is, extraordinary ability to make objects worth much more than their practical or material value. The history of Western art has been deeply bound up with the history of literature since long before Aristotle, since pot painters first responded to Homer and since Homer first compared the imagery of *poesis* and of *techne*. When the Roman poet Horace declared that poetry was like painting (*ut pictura poesis*), he was articulating what was already a truism—or at least it was a truism that painting was like poetry. The merely prose history of art, which as more or less of a continuum dates back only to the Enlightenment, to J. J. Winckelmann in particular, exists as a mediating swamp between literature and art, belonging to neither and yet—I hope to indicate in the course of this book—full of its own potential. That swamp is our subject.

2. See also Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, 1953).

1

WHY NOT JUST WRITE BIOGRAPHY?

Its [a newspaper article's] somewhat ambitious title was "The Book of Life," and it attempted to show how much an observant man might learn by an accurate and systematic examination of all that came in his way. It struck me as being a remarkable mixture of shrewdness and of absurdity. The reasoning was close and intense, but the deductions appeared to me to be far fetched and exaggerated. The writer claimed by a momentary expression, a twitch of a muscle or a glance of an eye, to fathom a man's inmost thoughts. Deceit, according to him, was an impossibility in the case of one trained to observation and analysis. His conclusions were as infallible as so many propositions of Euclid. So startling would his results appear to the uninitiated that until they learned the processes by which he had arrived at them they might well consider him as a necromancer.

—SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE, *A Study in Scarlet*, chapter 2

The first writers on art had little interest in biography. They wrote instead about materials and technique. They recorded for posterity the best ideas had by painters, sculptors, architects, and gem cutters: ideas of practice rather than of theory. They also said a bit about patronage, both the exemplary and the lamentable. Not until Giorgio Vasari took up his pen, shortly before 1550, did anyone think that the artist's life ought to be the organizing principle for writing about art.

The two most important writers on art before Vasari were Pliny the Elder (23–79) and Leon Battista Alberti (1404–72). Pliny wrote an encyclopedic natural history in Latin, thirty-six books' worth, which treated incidentally objects made of nature's materials, whether in marble, bronze, or mineral and botanical pigments. Pliny was no dull compiler: he dared to criticize the emperor Nero (37–68) as a crass patron who equated expensive materials with good art. He related how Nero ordered a portrait of himself to be gilded and thereby diminished its beauty while increasing its material value. He described convincingly the personalities of playful

yet seriously competitive artists: who could paint the thinner line, who could hoodwink even an artist into mistaking paint for reality?

Alberti was more of a theorist than Pliny and prescribed how one would make a more ambitious, a more intellectual art. He was proud of redefining Pliny's project, as was Vasari after him. For Pliny art was craft; for Alberti painting was a liberal art. Alberti wrote a pioneering treatise, *On Painting*, in 1434–35, consisting of three short books on perspective and invention. It was not available in print until 1540 in Latin, 1548 in Italian. Alberti's work constituted an enormous leap of imagination about what the pictorial arts could accomplish. He foresaw a culture in which the best minds would aspire to have something to do with painting, whether directly or indirectly. His vision now seems the less startling because reality so soon conformed to his hopes, but in the 1430s nobody but Alberti was thinking in those terms. His treatise may not have been absolutely instrumental in making it happen, but even if it had had no effect whatsoever (a claim belied, I think, not least by Mantegna's painted and printed inventions; Leonardo seems also to have read Alberti), he would deserve respect for seeing the future so clearly.

Vasari (1511–74) wrote biographies, thereby de facto elevating artists to the status of great men, the likes of emperors, kings, dukes, and saints—although it was part of Florence's mostly quiet social revolution that Lives had also been written during the fifteenth century of the more intellectual ilk of merchants as well as of the biographers themselves, the humanists. Artists started painting and sculpting self-portraits modestly in the fourteenth century, more forwardly in the fifteenth century—not least, the amateur artist Alberti himself, whose plaquette of himself in profile, accompanied by a winged eye, remains among the most memorable of images (fig. 1).¹ Vasari, who well knew that manuscripts (let alone printed books) might survive when paintings and sculptures didn't, wrote three books of lives, 133 in the first edition and 158 in the second (plus some supplemental chapters). Following good humanist principle he organized the whole with prefaces, so that the book had an organic structure, culminating in the longest and most admirable Life, that of Michelangelo. The history of art became a three-act play with Michelangelo, “il divino,” as the *deus ex machina*.

Vasari used two organizing principles: biography and historical period.

1. The circular portrait medal by Matteo de' Pasti includes with the emblem also the motto “quid tum?” (what then?).

Image Not Available

Fig. 1. Leon Battista Alberti, *Self-Portrait*, bronze, c. 1435. Samuel H. Kress Collection, © Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

There was some precedent in ancient rhetorical writing for organizing careers into stylistic periods, but it was slender. Cicero (106–43 B.C.) notably discussed style in his assessment of oratory, and he was followed to some extent by Quintilian (35–95)—two authors nearly as fundamental for the history of Western art as they were for the history of Western literature. The other precedent for Vasari's tripartite scheme can be found in histories of the world, which divided into three basic categories: before Revelation, after Revelation, and the Apocalypse. For example, the *Weltchronik*, a massive illustrated book published in German and in Latin by Dürer's godfather, Anton Koberger, provides an example of a world history that divides the whole into three parts. Michelangelo, by such a measure, counts as apocalyptic, and there is at least a vestige of that attitude left in Vasari.

Vasari somewhat nervously skirted cyclical theories of history; such a theory would have committed him to predicting another onset of artistic decadence like that which he recognized as having begun with Constantine (272–337). Clearly he was worried by that prospect, and hoped his book would help avert what might otherwise seem inevitable. Cyclical theories worked best for those who did not think in terms of either antitheses or continual progress. Pliny, J. J. Winckelmann (1717–68), and Hippolyte Taine (1828–93), like Vasari, tended to think of history as basically cyclical. Commonly such thinkers posited three stages—primitive, classical of some sort, and decadent. An analogy with the phases of individual human life underwrote the scheme.

Ever since Vasari, art historians have been struggling with the concept of historical period. Does the name “Renaissance,” for instance, designate anything? Vasari called his own period “modern.” Europeans continued to be fascinated with pagan culture for three hundred years after the “Renaissance” had ended. What does one actually know when one knows the name, or even when one knows which objects to classify under that rubric?

There is some consistency to how artists, patrons, and public behave at a certain time; they are educated similarly and experience the same social pressures, the same formative historical events. Sometimes shifts to new patterns of behavior are relatively abrupt, sometimes more gradual, but things do change: norms for materials, subjects, styles, scale, patterns of patronage, and markets do evolve. The history of art is a great saga precisely because of this process—though the opposite has also been claimed, that what the history of art offers is primarily a profound lesson in universal

value. Sir Joshua Reynolds in his *Discourses on Art* (1797), for instance, thought that the great achievements of the classical artists (Renaissance as well as ancient) could never be bettered, only emulated—though his boundaries were rather elastic. He showed himself backed by a bust of Michelangelo and looking as if his Titianesque notion of portraiture owed more than a little to Rembrandt (fig. 2). Erwin Panofsky even supposed that both of those claims could be true, that the history of cultures displayed both evolution (at least from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance) and universality (essentially classical form with classical content).² Augustus [sic!] Welby Pugin (1812–52) opposed the classicists not on aesthetic grounds but on moral ones: his defense of the pointed Christian style derived from its functionality, both for a religion focused on resurrection and therefore on verticality, and for a climate defined by precipitation and the accompanying architectural need to shed moisture. Like the classicists, he did not see art as the expression of a historical period but as the expression of a culture, culture itself being partly a function of unchanging climate and geography. His aesthetic preferences reflected his cultural taste, indeed, his identity as an English Christian (though there is a certain irony in this Roman Catholic's rejection of Mediterranean culture).

The spin that the new theorizing has put on this old issue is the claim (catalyzed by Freud) that not only is period an arbitrary construct, but so is aesthetic value. Our minds, according to Freudian thought and some of its descendants, have universal developmental stages, more determining than the specifics of our personal and social environments. Pre-Freudian writers tended either to praise a suprahistorical canon of art or to admire, more comprehensively, the unfolding of the human spirit across the ages. In either case, they sweated conviction about the Old Master period, the era between the medieval period and our modern. The new theorists mock this pre-Freudian dedication to beauty of whatever definition, almost as though they still believed in the identification between beauty and nobility defined by birth, so that they could not reject the one without rejecting the other. For them, we are trapped indelibly in a present defined by a set of universal vices: oppression and exploitation, marginalization, colonialism, and so on. The postmodern viewer thus tends to appear very wary, very frail, despite all the current talk of “empowerment”—and understandably enough, in this world as obsessed with mankind's all too

2. Erwin Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art* (Stockholm, 1960). See further Patricia Emison, “Developing a Twenty-First-Century Perspective on the Renaissance,” in *Renaissance Theory*, ed. James Elkins and Robert Williams (London, forthcoming).

Image Not Available

Fig 2. Sir Joshua Reynolds, President of the Royal Academy, *Self-Portrait*, oil on panel, c. 1780. Royal Academy of Art, London.

obvious fallibility as Enlightenment thinkers were with mankind's perfectibility.

Freud thought that historical period was insignificant by comparison to the fundamental psychic forces of human experience. The relationship to the mother was archetypal; the development of sexuality likewise was to be understood as carrying an internal dynamic, to which issues like child care and even religion were inconsequential. When Freud wanted to interpret a work of art, he looked for help in the "rubbish heap . . . of our observations" rather than in social and historical contexts.³ He did not judge beauty; he did not explain creativity; instead he tried to expand our investigation of artistic intention to certain typical underlying subrational strategies. Freud led the way in making the history of art speculative, non-adulatory, and ahistorical. Post-Freud, much historical thought has been denigrated as "historicist." Freud diagnosed typical art historians as devoting "their energies to a task of idealization, aimed at enrolling the great man among the class of their infantile models—at reviving in him, perhaps, the child's idea of his father."⁴ Even for the social historian T. J. Clark, more recently, the Freudian cast overpowers the historical curiosity. For him, the art historian has advanced to the rank of analyst rather than patient: he ought to be "like the analyst listening to his patient [the contemporary critics]." The artist, for his part, responds to his "public" like the patient to his unconscious: "the public, like the unconscious, is present only where it ceases; yet it determines the structure of private discourse; it is the key to what cannot be said."⁵ It is also the key to what cannot be seen, to what the artist ignores in his visual world and heritage: "one studies blindness as much as vision."⁶

Admittedly, historical period is an infernally evanescent structure, at once both there and not there, its margin ever fading. It is also a heuristic that discredits its own creator, for if we study a period other than our own, how are we to avoid imposing our own intellectual conventions on the foreign material of another era? Even worse than the anthropologist whose very presence changes the society he studies, the art historian studies a place and time he cannot visit, with a mind wired by its experiences to

3. Sigmund Freud, "Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood" (1910), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, 24 vols. (London, 1953–74), 11:222.

4. *Ibid.*, 130.

5. T. J. Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the Second French Republic, 1848–51* (Greenwich, Conn., 1973), 12.

6. *Ibid.*, 15.

interpret visual and verbal evidence in accordance with twenty-first-century assumptions, not all of which is she fully conscious. How can a student of a distant historical period avoid creating a monster, a hybrid version of then and now, pockmarked with bits of the in-between? Yet do we not study the past precisely in order to learn to free ourselves from the platitudes and assumptions characteristic of the present? What is the point, if such freedom is obtained only in some monstrous hybrid of past and present?

Freud tried somewhat naïvely to deny the difference between history and fiction, as a way of solving the problem of historical distance.⁷ The cultural historian Peter Burke, in addressing this issue, suggests that we regard historical fact as having some of the qualities of fiction, and vice versa. To understand people in another culture, we need to understand their “scripts,” their sense of the role they play in their society, the “deep structure” of their actions, that which is programmed for them rather than determined at their individual discretion. He suggests that we conceive of ourselves as observing *commedia dell’arte* being improvised by stock characters amid the distractions of the street: to understand history, we need to grasp the Zannis and the Pantelones of real sixteenth-century life.⁸ In Burke’s writing those types, significantly, are defined culturally, in contrast to Freud’s supposedly universal types.

Yet simply to erase the distinction between fact and fiction is only lily-livered resignation, rather than any satisfactory solution. The mess we make when we refuse to try to tease fiction from fact in our personal past, present, and future compels us to try to do the same in historical inquiry. We don’t have to achieve perfection to make it worth trying to sort out present realities from past ones, and our relatively reliable knowledge from our highly speculative. As with the canon, the attempt to be skeptical tends only to instantiate a new orthodoxy: those who disdain the old facts as naïvely accepted often come to treat their own hypotheses as proven. Faith in history as a record of progress tends to lead to a sense of self-congratulation.

Some historians resolve bravely never to appeal to period, to forbid themselves the word “Renaissance,” for instance—a desperate ploy com-

7. Often a sign of such a strategy is excessive reliance on the personal and anecdotal, a conversational tone in place of the traditional scholarly distance. On Freud’s affinity with fiction, see Chapter 3, below.

8. Peter Burke, “The Sources: Outsiders and Insiders,” in Burke, *The Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Italy: Essays on Perception and Communication* (Cambridge, 1987), 15–24.

parable to trying to eliminate utterly the verb “to be” from the use of language. Others solve the problem by addressing primarily the present, and using historical evidence only as backing for an argument based in the contemporary situation. Art historians as different from one another as J. J. Winckelmann, Hippolyte Taine, and T. J. Clark share the project of using history primarily for the sake of reforming the present. It may be that there is no other legitimate use, that critics are like lawyers and the past is merely a set of precedents to be appealed to as opportunity affords. Artists, as well as art historians, have been known to make such use of the past, and why not?

Still, history’s content is no mere heuristic device but an intelligible force on artists and others. Not all things are possible at all times, as the historian of style Heinrich Wölfflin (1864–1945) memorably put it. That is what he meant by *Zeitgeist*—not a full-fledged determinism but the realization that, for example, even rebellion is culturally licensed rather than an innate right of man, that rebellion was an aberration in the France of Louis XIV and a norm in the France soon after of Louis XVI. Artistic rebellion, other than the most marginal, could not survive in the twelfth century; conformity was nearly as doomed to oblivion in the twentieth. Audiences, viewers, patrons, and curators have habits that are formed by experiences; experience itself changes from one period to the next, sometimes gradually, sometimes more suddenly. It is not that those audiences have no causal role in making their own experiences, but that conscious intentionality is a small part of the causal whole: this was Freud’s fundamental and judicious insight. It was also Aristotle’s, though, when he made efficient cause operate in conjunction with material, formal, and final causes. Wölfflin’s *Zeitgeist* we now call “culture,” i.e., that great conglomeration of knowledge, belief, opinion, monuments, ephemera, projects, infrastructure, fashion, recyclings, noise, public spaces, etc.—all the things that condition us to certain characteristic patterns of thought and forgetting, attention and distraction. Our study of history is in some part an attempt to wrestle with *Zeitgeist*, to change what we are likely to think about and how we are likely to think about things—but not for the sake of some preexisting polemic. The problem with Winckelmann and his ilk, with those who use history as a lever by which to change the present, is that generally they know what about the present they want to change before they make their historical study. That, it seems to me, is a lower-order use of history than one that starts out genuinely curious to find whatever can be found. History deserves a certain sort of purity from its

votaries, which is not to say that what one learns won't be useful, only that its usefulness ought to be as unpredictable as that of any pure research.

It is the anthropologists who taught us most recently that culture ought to be an inclusive concept, that there can be no clean line between silverware, a decorative art, and flatware, a part of material culture, or between the arias within Covent Garden Opera House and the whistling of workers in the market that formerly bordered it.⁹ Archaeologists might have taught us that, but it was a lesson more easily learned from the other side of the disciplinary fence. Since the 1970s art historians speak of the "period eye," a history of vision as conditioned by the changing physical and social environment.¹⁰ The "period eye" splits the difference between Wölfflin's Hegelian *Zeitgeist* and the anthropologists' "material culture," being less metaphysical than the former and more conceptual than the latter.

Biography, on the other hand, can be an attempt to slither out of the shortcomings that result from thinking in terms of historical period. People grow up, have public careers and/or families, and decline into decrepitude whether they have lived in antiquity or in the eighteenth century. Biography makes the past immediately accessible: people love, get angry, have money troubles, and have strokes of luck. Works of art similarly make the past immediately accessible: you don't have to understand the theory of kingship, let alone be a royalist, to admire the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles (conversely, if you hate the grandeur because you hate a dead monarchy, you are cheating yourself). Mere looking at art offers a cheap ticket into other people's lives; it's virtual dress-up for the overaged. To survive, art history has to offer an alternative, or at least a complement, to that considerable pleasure. We art historians don't want to be like a Thomas Aquinas who spoils simple piety, however grand might be the intellectual mazes we could construct if we set our minds to it.

Vasari's scheme of braiding together biography with the three historical periods produced a kind of hybrid vigor: a history that offers both flexibility and integrity. He had a hybrid scheme of causality as well: God sent great artists like Giotto and Michelangelo, but art was reborn in Florence because the air there was good, the folk crusty and critical of one another, and life hard enough that making an effort was the typical *modus operandi*.

9. On the other hand, perhaps there is a fundamental difference between the singing in the Royal Opera House and the mannered reprises of *My Fair Lady* sung for the tourists in the shopping center now outside.

10. Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* (Oxford, 1972), chapter 2.

According to Vasari, determinism can indeed be made compatible with free will.

The other founder figure for art history, J. J. Winckelmann, took a thoroughly different route. He barely mentioned individual artists; he barely admitted that any of Greek art was less than the ideal expression of an ideal people in an ideal climate, for whom life was festival and to whom beauty and freedom came naturally, in art as in life. His highly detailed outline of his project—he is said to have spent a year on the outline alone—is organized by types of subject matter: “The Conformation and Beauty of the Male Deities and Heroes,” “The Conformation and Beauty of the Female Deities and Heroines,” “The Expression of Beauty in Features and Actions (Hair of Satyrs or Fauns, Hair of Apollo and Bacchus, Hair of Young Persons),” “Beauty of the Extremities, Breast and Abdomen.” In fact he was a great student of languages and literature (it is claimed that he might have written his great *History* in French, Italian, or Latin instead of his native German). One of his rare moments of methodological self-reflection sets forth a daunting prospect: in order to study even one period of the history of art (for him there is only one period worth studying—and although he is mocked for his narrow-mindedness, many art historians share the basic attitude), you must first thoroughly acquaint yourself with all the physical, literary, and geographical evidence that can be had. Nothing less will do, for to understand the parts, you must have a whole into which they fit:

If I conceive all the statues and images of which mention has been made by the authors, and likewise every remaining fragment of them, together with the countless multitude of works of art which have been preserved, as present before me at the same time [I will be like an Olympic athlete] . . . venturing on the enterprize of elucidating the principles and causes of so many works of art. . . . Without collecting and uniting them so that a glance may embrace all, no correct opinion can be formed of them; but when the understanding and the eye assemble and set the whole together in one area, just as the choicest specimens of art stood ranged in numerous rows in the Stadium at Elis [Olympia], then the spirit finds itself in the midst of them.¹¹

11. J. J. Winckelmann, *History of Ancient Art*, trans. G. H. Lodge, 2 vols. (1764; Boston, 1880), vol. 1, book 4, chapter 2, 300–301.

It is a daunting challenge, and a warning to us that cultural and social histories are doomed to failure, perhaps an acceptable degree of failure, but failure nonetheless. One can never know the whole, and so, one can never reliably know the parts. Art history isn't geometry, after all; certainty is not our business. Winckelmann's doomed project of a comprehensive social and cultural history helped prepare the ground for Freud's theorizing. That offered the prospect of an art history as confident as the old one of connoisseurs, in place of the daunting prospect of having to know everything in order to know anything. It was an attractive trade.

Neither book learning nor familiarity with works of art answers all the questions. The great and learned Winckelmann is said to have been stumped on one occasion by an artifact he could not identify. A common workman saw it and immediately recognized it as the stopper of a bottle. Like Apelles and the shoemaker (who, Pliny tells us, taught the great painter how a shoe is actually constructed), the art historian has much to learn from the casual passerby about the common things of daily life. For all the emphasis Alberti and others have put on the learned artist (and, by extension, on learned art historians), lay persons can see as well as the learned, and sometimes better. Carlo Ginzburg has argued that art historians should consider themselves diagnosticians, dealing with bits of evidence and making uncertain inference therefrom. Giovanni Morelli, the great connoisseur, was trained as a doctor, as was Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the inventor of Sherlock Holmes. Even when they are not concerned with attribution, Ginzburg argues, art historians, and more generally men of letters, are making claims inferentially, bucking the tide of hard science and its deductive proofs.¹² The task of art historians is not to make their discipline more scientific but to reckon with the truth that the humanities can never pass scientific tests of rigor, and then to invent more appropriate tests of rigor.¹³ Biography, on the other hand, tends to substitute sentiment for rigor.

12. Morelli himself would disagree; he refers to his "experimental method" and the attempt to "attain to a real Science of Art." Giovanni Morelli, *Italian Masters in German Galleries: A Critical Essay on the Italian Pictures in the Galleries of Munich, Dresden, Berlin*, trans. Luise Richter (London, 1883), vii.

13. Carlo Ginzburg, "Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm," in Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore, 1989), 96–214. Cf. E. H. Gombrich, *Ideals and Idols: Essays on Values in History and in Art* (Oxford, 1979). The situation is somewhat more complicated, however. Sherlock Holmes's problem of maximizing his chance of survival in the duel of wits with Moriarity stimulated Oskar Morgenstern's development, in collaboration with John von Neumann, of game theory, the theory of probabilities by which each person maximizes the probability of his success. Scientific rigor is a more complicated topic than it used to

Just as the best art is never simply autobiographical, so the best art history is not limited to the petty struggles of one person's career. The very genre, biography, encourages exaggeration of the heroic aspect, in order to justify such attention paid to a single individual, perhaps more than was paid him during his lifetime. It is no mere coincidence that an age that read Vasari religiously, the nineteenth century, also promoted the cult of the artist more than any other, and believed in Renaissance artistic genius more fervently than had men of the Renaissance. They made in the past the precedent they needed in order to deal with present problems, in particular with a loss of religious faith. Their historical understanding was not irresponsibly distorted, but it could not be utterly pure either. Whenever our sense of historical precedent becomes very convenient for us, exactly then we need most to distrust it. Knowledge, after all, is supposed to be challenging, rather than comforting: *sapere aude* (dare to know), as Horace and Kant put it.

Vasari had a test of sorts for his biographies. What mattered for him, in the end, was what a person had contributed to his art—that is, whether the art of painting, or sculpture, or architecture was better off because Masaccio or Bramante or Lorenzo Monaco had lived. Vasari was a practical man: he judged not only by the direction and momentum given the history of style, but by whether the artist had been respected by his social betters and also well paid.

If the prestige of the profession is the ultimate criterion for art history when written as biography, that leaves open the question of an appropriate criterion for other modalities. Connoisseurship is the part of art history most affiliated with science, that modern and inescapable locus of value. Coincidentally, connoisseurship is most steeped in magic, in amazing revelations that cannot be scrutinized analytically. There we turn next.

be, and the gulf between deductive and inductive arguments less distinct. See further Chapter 5, "The Bottom Line."

2

TOWARD A MORE CHAOTIC DEFINITION OF STYLE

It was easier to know it than to explain why I know it.

—SHERLOCK HOLMES, in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet*, chapter 3



Connoisseurship is the stepmother of the history of art, relied on and yet resented. If only we could finally rid ourselves of it utterly, many an art historian has thought silently, and substitute the science of the conservation lab for the religious intuitions of the “good eye.” Then we could speak unhesitatingly of “visual culture,” and not in respectful whispers anymore either. Matters of art would be elevated to the level of science, thereby healing the great rift in Western culture rent by Isaac Newton.

Otherwise this great incalculable lodges itself in the heart of the discipline, and the mysteries of beauty confound us as the mysteries of the godhead confounded scholastic philosophers. We wake up one morning to headlines that the *Laocoön* isn't from the Hellenistic period at all, but is instead an unrecognized work by Michelangelo; or that the Van Gogh painting of *Sunflowers*, which sold in 1987 for the most money yet paid for any work of art, may actually be a forgery. A previous generation watched as Vermeers degenerated into van Meegerens, and those who had been taken in were accused of missing the obvious. Especially in judgments of authenticity, but also in questions of value, one generation's wisdom is another generation's guff.

In the twentieth century the relationship of art to science was particularly fraught. Modern architecture tried to adopt technology's principle of efficiency. Modern art moved away from the norms of craftsmanship, which seemed irrelevant after the Industrial Revolution. Modern art history has increasingly relied on scientific-sounding neologisms and tends to treat works of art as experiments whose real interest lies in the theories

they can be used to support. The matter has been further complicated by the debate over whether Freud's theories were actually scientific or mere conjecture. Michel Foucault's influential *Les mots et les choses* (1966) substituted the norms of social science for those of hard science, and thereby eased the tension over Freud's heritage. Once society itself became the patient, the effort to diagnose could be excused if it verged on the hypothetical.

Pliny gave a very straightforward explanation of the origin of art: a girl traced her lover's silhouette before he went off to war, as a sentimental memento but also a piece of visual information. Alberti cited the myth of Narcissus, a lad entranced by his own reflection to the point of self-annihilation. Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) thought that cult objects used for incantation belonged to the history of art, and that modern art needed to define itself in relation to that primitive sense of the “aura” of the object.¹ We might argue instead that art only begins after survival seems reasonably assured, after science and technology have raised the conditions of living above subsistence. If so, art owes its existence to science rather than to religion and self-love alone. The girl in Pliny's story devises a means of information retrieval.

As a species, we collect in the first place to make it through the winter, and only secondarily for the sake of Aristotle's wonder—the same wonder that begins philosophy, the philosophy that comprises both science and art. One creates, intellectually or physically, in order to have objects to collect, in order to have more to value in this world of waste and decay. Art is the attribute of a culture's absence of desperation; it flows from the finances of superfluity. Until the age of popular revolution, art was, as a rule, the prerogative of an aristocracy. Seldom has the history of art seen so radical a shift as in the portraits of Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825) pre- and post-Revolution: silks shed in favor of muslin, velvet and wainscoting replaced with spare furnishings, and powdered wigs replaced by casual curls. The late eighteenth century also saw the invention of a machine for making silhouettes; and before long many middle-class folk of unexceptional appearance could afford to put themselves in a frame. Denis Diderot (1713–84) articulated a new attitude for this new era of art, replacing Alberti with a more prosaic ambition for the art and a less modest ambition for the artist. “Genius” is a word that comes readily to his pen,

1. Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936), in Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York, 1969), 217–51.

and few words have changed more radically how artists are conceptualized. On the other hand, he wrote about many works of art for which he claimed no more than that they provided sentiment, a quality well short of “aura.”

Once subsistence doesn’t utterly occupy people, questions of value immediately flood in. Those questions are notoriously recalcitrant to definitive resolution. “Chacun à son goût,” after all. Yet issues of connoisseurship are never satisfactorily resolved by deciding not to care what others think, for we cannot believe our own taste merely arbitrary. Taste shifts across generations; alternatively, it sometimes gets reified across generations. Because taste can be so very fickle, any constancy is granted an inflated significance. John Ruskin (1819–1900) was among those who thought that the judgment of centuries yielded the most reliable aesthetic judgment: “On this gradual victory of what is consistent over what is vacillating, depends the reputation of all that is highest in art and literature.”² Sir Joshua Reynolds (fig. 2) before him had held a similar belief: “The works of those that have stood the test of ages, have a claim to that respect and veneration to which no modern can pretend.”³ Yet one advocated a neomedievalism and the other a neoclassicism of sorts. Leo Tolstoy wanted instead to trust the taste of the common man, for whom, in his opinion, art ought to be made. Modernists decidedly disagree with all three men. For them, the test of time is mere humbug. What suits, suits the present.

Writers on art and philosophy have long tried to provide answers to two basic and partly intertwined questions: what is beautiful, and what is authentic? We want to know, for reasons both spiritual and practical. It is painful for everybody when objects long hallowed or exorbitantly priced are denounced as fraudulent to one degree or another. Whenever we condemn our forefathers as blinkered, we ought at least to have doubts about the limits of our own clear-sightedness. On the other hand, it can be most gratifying when we actually do admire, genuinely and fervently, what our predecessors admired. Then we can allow ourselves to believe that not everything need go to dust and ashes.

Western artistic culture cannot do without connoisseurship, more because of fakers than because of copyists. Fakers are the hackers of art his-

2. John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, 5 vols. (London, 1843–60), vol. 1, part 1, section 1, chapter 1.

3. Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, ed. Robert Wark (New Haven, 1999), Discourse II, 28.

tory; copyists the bootleggers. If we occasionally mistake the work of a good Raphael pupil for Raphael himself, little harm is done, unless our aims are reductively biographical. On the other hand, if we can't tell a nineteenth-century object from a fifteenth-century one (either as an entirety or as a restoration), then we have but shifting ground from which we can say anything valid about the history of art, which is essentially sequential. We need to try to sift out the misleading evidence. Winckelmann, though he knew a great deal of physical evidence closely, combined with a vast knowledge of ancient literature and history, has been much disregarded and scoffed at for his lack of discrimination between Roman copies and Greek originals. He did at least begin to raise the question of whether the statues excavated in Italy were Greek in style.⁴ His understanding of Greek culture is doubtless as out of date relative to modern scholarship as his attributions; it may be that there is enough ongoing progress in reevaluating the facts of art history that no art history can avoid becoming outdated and invalidated. Nevertheless Winckelmann has suffered much condescension for his naïveté. (Vasari, too, has been jeered at by those who fail to recognize how indebted they are to him, because he is at times unreliable, but who is not? Winckelmann and Vasari, both of them, still offer a better read than the whole lot of their detractors, even if the latter come equipped with bibliographical indexes and databases. Both Vasari and Winckelmann, whatever their shortcomings, were careful and devoted observers.) Art history remains readable not because it is without mistakes but because someone of visual sensitivity, intelligence, and learning, who was able to write well, set down his or her thoughts about subjects still worth ruminating about. It also remains readable when we can manage to be curious about both the time described and the time in which the describing was done. Narrow specialization (a tendency, like that intolerance for any error, grafted onto the humanities from science) renders art historical writing more ephemeral than it need be.

There is an expertise in recognizing what is genuine; moreover, it is an expertise no one can learn in a short time. The practice of connoisseurship is inherently patriarchal and thrives on apprenticeship; and exactly for these reasons it grates against the sensibilities of a mass modern culture. We have gotten rid of connoisseurship, or nearly, not because it was invalid (though it was sometimes unreliable), but because its *modus operandi*

4. See further Francis Haskell, with Nicholas Penny, *Taste and the Antique: The Lure of Classical Sculpture, 1500–1900* (New Haven, 1981).

was not to our taste. More than any other aspect of art history, it requires deference to authority. Unless we turn to the conservation lab, it is the very antithesis of science. An old-style connoisseur simply knows, the way practical people often do know and the way book-learned ones mistrust. We may tolerate and even respect a person who knows the ins and outs of daylilies, or of violin construction; it is, in fact, one of the joys of life to meet people who have profited so from their accumulated experience. We may even recognize a hierarchy by which to know one's daylilies is somewhat less impressive than to know the wide range of violin construction, and the vagaries and pitfalls of auction houses and dealers, the tricks of restoration and repair. Perhaps we acknowledge a musician as possessing even more precious and difficult knowledge and skill than the businessman who knows his violins without being able to play them. The musician makes a thousand delicate decisions of interpretation and practices a thousand times to execute his design exactly. When two musicians vie for prominence, both can win. Each can offer a distinctive and excellent interpretation of the same piece. Conversely, when two connoisseurs face off, one goes down in discredit. The connoisseur is perhaps merely a charlatan; it takes but one other connoisseur to make a fool of him.⁵ Connoisseurship can appear a fickle discipline.

Questions of attribution boil down to trusting the judgment of someone who says he is sure. The general public is often put in this trusting, dependent position by necessity. The opportunity to look at the relevant originals is not equally available to all. To some extent the connoisseur can point out the salient physical characteristics of the work that weigh for and against an attribution, and we who listen may be like a jury who listens to prosecution and defense. Art historians who are not specialists in the matter at hand are often in this situation. If we manage to draw the boundaries of expertise closely enough, each connoisseur reigns serenely in his own domain without challenge. Otherwise, there are turf wars, won in the end by he who gets the ear of the most powerful patron. When the market is not involved, as in the case of the "discovery" of an early statue attributed to Michelangelo on Fifth Avenue a few years ago, or an accusation that certain Titian drawings in public collections were doctored counterproofs, the dust may settle without there being a resolution worth noticing. It is when the market is involved, and lawyers, that the dust

5. For a more positive view of the community of connoisseurs, see Nicholas Turner, *The Study of Italian Drawings: The Contribution of Philip Pouncey* (London, 1994).

settles definitively, though not necessarily permanently. The recent brouhahas over Andy Warhol's estate and the authenticity of works associated with his shop provide examples of this.

If a training in art history were—as it has sometimes been—a training in ascertaining the short-term value of tradable objects, no one could call it an impractical pursuit. Dealers need to predict short-term value; curators long-term; most art historians can complacently avoid questions of value altogether. A. Hyatt Mayor's advice was to buy what others weren't and to examine an object upside down to ascertain the quality of the composition.⁶ He, however, was curator of prints at the Metropolitan Museum at a time in which he could count on eventual gifts from those who were chasing the obviously collectable works. Mayor was hired exactly because he wasn't a product of the Fogg Museum's traditional, connoisseurship-oriented training.⁷ A Fogg curator or director, trained by Paul Sachs, was like an exquisite hunting dog trained to hunt down the most noble stag. Mayor was, by comparison, a mycologist, seeking after that which others might step on.

Connoisseurship aims to produce certainty about matters that cannot be proved, a thing as unfashionable among us as is deference to authority. (This was not always so; Freud and *Life with Father* [1936] mark the changing of the tide, later much strengthened by the baby boom and the events of the 1960s.) The finest of connoisseurs is not worth much when he (it is yet a very male occupation, depending as it does on impressive self-assurance) is not certain. Connoisseurs know, and we believe them; otherwise the prices for art would never have gotten as high as they have.

Connoisseurship thus progresses more by death than by reconsideration—although Bernard Berenson notably offers an exception to this. As the man who founded modern connoisseurship in the English-speaking world, he had sufficient authority to be able to revise his judgment. In addition, he worked at a time when photography was coming into its own as a tool for art historical research, and as his photograph collection grew, so did the knowledge upon which he based his pronouncements. He also should be credited with extensive travel to look at the originals, which

6. A. Hyatt Mayor, interview by Paul Cummings (March 21, 1969), Archive of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., 174–75 (full transcript available at www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/mayor69.htm). See also Mayor's "A Truth or Two About Art History," in Mayor, *A. Hyatt Mayor: Selected Writings and a Bibliography* (New York, 1983), 147–54.

7. Mayor, interview, 165. See further Patricia Emison, *The Simple Art: Printed Images in an Age of Magnificence*, exh. cat. (Durham, N.H., 2006), 3.

kept his memory of them fresh.⁸ When the *Burlington Magazine* removed “for Connoisseurs” from its title in 1948, the editor included an article excerpted from Bernard Berenson’s writings as palliative to conservative readers. According to the editor, Benedict Nicholson (also a notable painter), “The word ‘connoisseur’ now conjures up a picture of an elderly gentleman in white bow tie and trim Imperial [moustache], familiar, if not in life, at any rate in the pages of Aldous Huxley.” The leading article in the first issue of the *Burlington*, in 1903, had been by Berenson himself; in 1948 it was by Anthony Blunt, not merely closet Marxist but also Soviet spy, as well as surveyor of the queen’s pictures.

At present a whole new connoisseurship plagues the history of art: matters of taste in methodology. As Tom Lehrer sang of the New Math, it doesn’t matter whether you get the answer right, so long as you understand how you got it. Similarly for art historians, sometimes it scarcely matters what conclusions you offer (better yet to offer nothing so refutable), so long as you understand whom to cite in order to authenticate your open-endedness and ambiguities. Like courtiers, we defer to status these days rather than create status, as did connoisseurs in the age of Morelli and Berenson. To put it more sympathetically, art history has turned from asking the connoisseurs’ question—What is the history of art?—to asking the equally speculative but arguably deeper question—Why is the history of art what it is? Sometimes the new art historians unwittingly lapse back to the original question, answering it differently, however. They create a new canon, demographically refitted, rather than consistently and thoroughly challenging canonicity itself. (Canonicity does have to recommend it the fun of sharing one’s passions with others.)

Connoisseurship hasn’t always existed and won’t always exist in the form of mature men dueling over the relative prestige of their personal opinions. Its modern development began with Giovanni Morelli (1816–91), who challenged Romanticism by looking for personality in the seemingly insignificant detail, in the shape of fingernail or ear lobe rather than in the bold, characteristic stroke, which was obvious and thus ripe for copying.⁹ Connoisseurship was dealt a severe blow by Leo Tolstoy (1828–

8. See Ernest Samuels, *Bernard Berenson: The Making of a Connoisseur* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979).

9. Cf. Abraham Bosse, *Sentiments sur la distinction des diverses manières de peinture, dessin et gravure, et des originaux d’avec leurs copies* (1649); Jonathan Richardson, *Two Discourses* (1719); and Richard Payne Knight, *An Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste* (1805); and, further, David Alan Brown, *Berenson and the Connoisseurship of Italian Painting: A Handbook to the Exhibition*, National Gallery of Art (Washington, D.C., 1979); and Ronald Spencer, ed., *The Expert Versus the Object: Judging Fakes and False Attributions in the Visual Arts* (Oxford, 2004).

1910), who challenged the whole idea of fine (a.k.a. dishonest) art in favor of honest craft: “For the production of every ballet, circus, opera, operetta, exhibition, picture, concert, or printed book, the intense and unwilling labour of thousands and thousands of people is needed at what is often harmful and humiliating work. . . . Fine art can arise only on the slavery of the masses of the people.”¹⁰ If you question the value of the whole project—if all ballet is discarded as silly marionettes twitching in accordance with arbitrary conventions, or slaves manipulated by their master, the choreographer—then judgments of quality within that framework—which dancer is the most precise, the most expressive?—have no value. At roughly the same time, Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) announced he simply wasn’t interested in judgments of beauty, but in meaning (“Sinn und Inhalt,” what we would now distinguish as “significance”). He opened his essay on Michelangelo’s *Moses* by averring, “I may say at once that I am no connoisseur in art, but simply a layman.”¹¹ He wanted not merely to admire, but to analyze the work’s effect. Those who put artists on pedestals, he said, haven’t gotten over their longing for a masterful father figure. The same impulse that produces religion, he thought, produces the social phenomenon of the godlike artist (a phenomenon, incidentally, that was itself largely a nineteenth-century creation, a response to the diminishing authority of church and religion).¹²

The anthropologist Clifford Geertz once felicitously said that the point of interpretation was for us to vex one another ever more ingeniously.¹³ Perhaps, like a chess game, this vexing ought to lead ultimately to some conclusion and then a new game. Connoisseurship issues do tend toward resolution; someone gets the last laugh, at least for a generation or two. But Geertz referred to issues of interpretation, which tend (like family quarrels) never to end. They only grow more complicated.

Connoisseurship is better done than talked about. It involves minimal theory. Two of the leading practitioners, Berenson and Pope-Hennessy, were each able to sum it up well in a single sentence. Berenson proposed simply that connoisseurship “proceeds as scientific research always does,

10. Leo Tolstoy, *What Is Art?* (1896), trans. Almyer Maude (New York, 1960), 81, 146.

11. Freud, “*Moses of Michelangelo*,” in *Complete Psychological Works*, 13:211.

12. See further Patricia Emison, *Creating the “Divine” Artist from Dante to Michelangelo* (Leiden, 2004), especially the Epilogue.

13. Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” in Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York, 1973), 29. See also Gilbert Ryle, “Thinking and Reflecting” (1966–67), in Ryle, *Collected Papers*, 2 vols. (New York, 1971), 2:465–96.

by the isolation of the characteristics of the known and their confrontation with the unknown.”¹⁴ Pope-Hennessy could be equally pithy: “Every attribution must be questioned and each artistic personality defined.”¹⁵ You simply compare two objects, their similarities and differences. You assess the significances of both. You do this for as many objects as necessary to achieve the judgment you seek. The excellence of your connoisseurship depends upon the acuteness of your observations as well as your ability to find the most appropriate examples for the problem at hand. Judgments of hand and of date are hard to do well; they require a degree of talent, lodged largely in visual memory, and they require diligent investigation and a Sherlock Holmesian open-mindedness as to what the possible answers might be. Still, only the laboratory side of connoisseurship involves complicated methods.

Potentially, connoisseurship can free one from the restrictions of biography. Provided you accept that patterns of artistic endeavor do not correlate exactly with the boundaries of a single life, the whole lay of art history can be transformed by connoisseurship into rivers and their tributaries and meanderings running through frontiers, in place of townships with their rigid boundaries. That is, you can decide that works of art, like the portrait bust of Francesco Sassetti now in the Bargello (fig. 3), its attribution debated between Verrocchio and Antonio Rossellino, simply need not be assigned to either. The remaining evidence is inadequate for a sufficiently secure judgment as to hand, and, ultimately, knowing that the work is fifteenth-century Florentine suffices.¹⁶ Though often used to establish the definitions of oeuvres, connoisseurship can also be used to move beyond those narrow issues. That portrait bust is a great one, we know who it portrays, and it helps us to reconstruct the art history of Florence, regardless of which artist made it.

Taste, on the other hand, can be talked about *ad infinitum*. Like politics, it affects daily life, perhaps even the meaning of life overall. It is essential to our sense of identity. When our taste is shared, we feel a community of humankind, and when it is not, we must either feel slightly superior

14. Bernard Berenson, “Rudiments of Connoisseurship,” in Berenson, *The Study and Criticism of Italian Art* (London, 1920), 123.

15. John Pope-Hennessy, “Connoisseurship,” in Pope-Hennessy, *The Study and Criticism of Italian Sculpture* (New York, 1980), 29.

16. See further Anthony Radcliffe, “Portrait-busts in Renaissance Florence: Patterns and Meanings,” in Pollaiuolo e Verrocchio? *Due ritratti del Quattrocento*, ed. Maria Grazia (Florence, 2001), 15–34; Andrew Butterfield, *The Sculptures of Andrea del Verrocchio* (New Haven, 1997), 15–16; and Pope-Hennessy, “Connoisseurship,” 31–34.

Image Not Available

Fig. 3. Antonio Rossellino (?), *Francesco Sassetti*, marble bust, c. 1464. Museo del Bargello, Florence.

or—however defiantly—ashamed. It is, of course, possible to like things we don't expect others to admire. As Virginia Woolf reported of her father, "His taste in poetry was very catholic, and if he liked a thing, it did not matter who had written it or whether the writer was unknown; it 'stuck' to him, and was added to his large store."¹⁷

We continually develop personal taste, even while recognizing a more stable, perhaps even a more Platonic version, under the rubric of relatively impersonal "good taste." Our right to censor is implicated here, for that which is censorable is well beyond the bounds of merely personal bad taste. Taste is not so much mutable as open-ended: we always reserve the right to revise our judgment of quality, to recognize for the first time the true greatness, or the lack thereof, in a work we have seen hundreds of times; conversely, we always reserve the right to see an obscure work, and to recognize in it artistic greatness that has been lying undiscovered. Part of the residual mystery about art is why taste should not be a simpler matter. For Winckelmann, taste was straightforward and clear; there were for him no "unknown masterpieces"—which proves at least that the Enlightenment is no longer with us.

Taste is some vital measure of our apprehension of what matters in the world. Given our finite natures—which may indeed count as a fault, but an uncorrectable one—we must constantly be sifting out that which is relatively lacking in merit in favor of that which has merit. We cannot do this merely as individuals, but also as communities and societies. We measure our own progress as people in part by the progress we make in supporting and promoting the arts, and we generalize about other societies in no small part on the basis of the art they support—whether the highbrow, the popular, or some combination, for societies in which those divisions exist. Art is what we as a society give to the rest of the world and to posterity. The liberal arts are meant to develop taste, and although this is a delicate matter, to do so without indoctrination. In this lies the true importance of attacks on any canon.

It is currently the fashion to deride the notion of a canon, without defining very well what this amorphous and constantly shifting concept might be. If the canon is defined merely as that which our great-great-grandfathers admired, it is blasted at the outset. We might well be curious to know what the taste of another century endorsed, but as a way of

17. "Impressions of Sir Leslie Stephen," in Woolf, *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, 1904–1912*, ed. Andrew McNeillie, 3 vols. (London, 1986), 1:129.

opening up our own options rather than as a way of closing them down. If, alternatively, the canon is simply that which school and university curricula currently favor, it is more a statistical result, measuring current fashion, than an indicator of anything profound, and the canon of 2007 may scarcely overlap the canon of 1907. But if the canon consists of that select portion of intellectual and artistic production that we as individuals are willing to defend earnestly to other individuals of unlike mind, then what can be the harm? The canon is rightly a focal point of legitimate disagreement rather than of that dulling collection of platitudes called consensus. It is the record of human accomplishment relatively unskewed by sentiment—though sentiment will try to creep back in.

Zeitgeist is in some ways a sister concept to that of canon, for *Zeitgeist* too is not so much a determining as a querying. History has a kind of organization to it: T. S. Eliot and the great musicals have something in common; both exploited some potentiality of the cultural moment in partly analogous ways, and this comparability is called *Zeitgeist*. *Zeitgeist* is what licenses us to go looking for other examples of a well-defined phenomenon in diverse other works of the same period, to find different but comparable works. T. S. Eliot and *Anything Goes*, for example, are both works grappling with the problem of the relationship between high and low culture, and with changing norms for public acknowledgment of sexuality. So are many other works from other times and other centuries, but we do feel confident that some of the stimuli that prompted T. S. Eliot (1888–1965) were also prompting Cole Porter (1891–1964), and that to some extent we shall understand both works better once we reconstruct what we can of that context. If art history has anything like a law, it should be this: that historical context makes it reasonable to think of very disparate works as having commonalities; and conversely that ongoing formal issues make it reasonable to think of works of very disparate times as having important commonalities. *Zeitgeist* does not exist any more than historical period, yet chronological proximity does nevertheless sometimes amount to something. The present is what people of the past have had to work with, too.

In societies of internal coherence, taste (and the production of matters for the consumption of taste) tended to run in more predictable veins. When art consisted of altarpieces and sung masses, what art could be elitist? Perhaps the illumination of books of hours, but in that case it was not the taste that was elitist, only its vehicle. On the other chronological end, Hollywood movies of the 1950s could refer casually to Keats and Shelley,

but that ended in the '60s. To quote Tom Lehrer again, "I can't make references I could have made 20 years ago. Kids today are just as smart as ever but not well-read. They can tell you what happened on every episode of *Gilligan's Island*, but nothing about Shakespeare's plays."¹⁸ In the Western cultural revolution of the late '60s, popular taste began more aggressively to signify that which was palatable for mass consumption, fast food for the eye and mind.

Ours is a time—infamously so—of diversity, diversity of backgrounds, of educations, of literateness, of travel. In this regard our society is the child of nineteenth-century eclecticism, which displaced neoclassicism and its forebears, most of which subscribed, in more or less orthodox ways, to the idea that art was essentially classical, that it imitated nature and, to one degree or another, transformed or distilled nature into "art." In the nineteenth century the idea that nature was a simple, unchanging, admirable and even efficient creation lost ground¹⁹—Darwin happened—and with it the basis for supposing that art was not inherently artificial. The twentieth century saw the fulfillment of this idea, as art became whatever artists decided to make it.

Often matters of taste have been conceptualized in terms of opposites, or in terms that have been distorted into opposites: realism versus idealism, classic versus Gothic, modern versus classical, popular versus elitist, or recently with Michael Fried, absorptive versus theatrical. Often those dualities implied no more than good versus bad taste. The history of art was understood as one more epic history in which good ultimately triumphs over bad. Not only Plato but also Hegel supposed that the good and the beautiful had something in common, and that they together explained a good deal. Even after beauty was no longer taken as the goal, that is, in the twentieth century, the idea persists that the history of art represents a series of triumphs over stale or small-minded conventions. The only mistakes a standard history of art admits are the failures of the hidebound to recognize new and valuable work, failures that time inevitably redeems.

Division of styles into antitheses was not the case until academic theory thrived in the seventeenth century, separating Poussinists from Rubenists. *Disegno* and *colore* had already sometimes been treated as opposites, Florentine versus Venetian, but they were originally and properly tripled with

18. Quoted in Jeremy Mazner, "Tom Lehrer, The Political Musician That Wasn't," <http://www.casualhacker.net/tom.lehrer/jmazner/lehrhtml.html>, citing a 1982 interview.

19. "The truths of nature are one eternal change—one infinite variety." Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, I:50.

invenzione. They were understood more as complementary ingredients than as proto-Hegelian antitheses. *Ritrarre* (to make a portrait) was contrasted with *imitare* (to represent nature more perfectly than nature was ever realized in actuality), but as modalities of lower and higher prestige, potentially each appropriate on differing occasions, rather than irretrievable pledges of allegiance to a class identity.

For art to thematize taste is only reflexive, and so, predictably, art often does thematize taste. Comedy in particular tends to get great mileage out of bad taste: what could be more ridiculous than Malvolio's yellow stockings cross-gartered, or modern art as portrayed in *New Yorker* cartoons of the '60s? Often the bad taste is paired with bad or weak morals, as in the case of the young foolish fop in Caravaggio's *Fortune Teller* (Louvre) (fig. 4), one of the first funny paintings (though book illumination and prints had long had their amusing bits). Surrealism, child of Freud in this and other respects, reveled instead in absurdity, a place in which taste is neither good nor bad, life neither comic nor tragic.

It was Wölfflin's brilliance that took art history out of debates about

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good and bad taste, though he still subscribed, and heartily, to the structure of polar opposites. He can scarcely be blamed: he was a German in an age still intellectually dominated by Hegel (1770–1831), and believing as he did in the causal effects of *Zeitgeist*, he could hardly be expected to defy the same. He initiated the two-slide-projector lecture, itself an instantiation of the connoisseur's practice of comparing and contrasting objects, two at a time, until they fall into a linear progression.

Wölfflin, however, ceased to look for a unitary beauty. Despite his admiration for classical style, he tried to understand Renaissance and baroque, classical and Hellenistic, as complementary styles rather than as opposites. When he spoke of open versus closed form, painterly versus linear composition, diagonal versus parallel recession, he was trying not to validate one over the other but to understand them instead as viable alternatives. In this he was followed by no less distinguished a literary critic than Erich Auerbach, who in *Mimesis* (1946) uses the concepts of mannerism and classicism to organize the artistic production of hundreds of years, nonprejudicially. He did so as a refugee from Nazi Germany, like Erwin Panofsky. Both of them struggled to rehabilitate classical culture in the face of its gross misappropriation, and both of them broadened Western aesthetics as they did so. The language of aesthetic triumphalism was at least temporally displaced—or rather, appropriated by the Nazis. Panofsky had a healthy respect for both French and Netherlandish medieval art, as well as for the Italian Renaissance.

The Nazis made the old classicizing aesthetics so distasteful that it was an easy step from postwar to the present situation, in which the Sistine ceiling is no more highly regarded by some art historians than a quilt. Much as I respect quilt makers, including male ones, much as I love to look at quilts, I forebear to go so far as that. Moreover, we have bled passion out of art history even as we have discarded debates over taste. When Winckelmann pleaded on behalf of Greek art as the bastion of the one true beauty, the expression of a free people, he was narrow-minded to be sure, but he sweated conviction, just as much as Pugin did when he decried classicism and defended the pointed style as the one appropriate style for a northern, Christian climate and culture: “If we view pointed architecture in its true light as Christian art, as the faith itself *is perfect, so are the principles on which it is founded*. We may indeed improve in mechanical contrivances to expedite its execution, we may even increase its scale and grandeur; but we can *never successfully deviate one tittle from the spirit and*

principles of pointed architecture” (his emphases).²⁰ Now there was a man who didn’t arrange his taste with an intimidated eye on an unknowable future.

Neither man is right, yet both compel our attention. We could stand to be so wrong ourselves, if so passionate about art at the same time (science, again, has made us phobic about being wrong: better to say nothing refutable than to say anything interesting; we may not believe in truth any more, but we certainly act as though we believe deeply in irrefutability). Both Winckelmann and Pugin, interestingly enough, tied good art to a nostalgic version of society as a kind of festival: Socrates had company when he associated beauty, goodness, and happiness. Good art and a good society were supposed by all these men to be complements. Though the only festivals these days are fund-raising events with publicity budgets and directors rather than the exuberant outpouring of peasant high spirits, we still subscribe at least halfheartedly to the idea that a good society produces good art when we use tax money to subsidize the arts, however stingily. Our contemporary art is supposed to demonstrate to the world the meaning of individual freedom, whose protection is itself supposed to rank as a chief benefit of democracy: why else would Carl Andre’s arrangement of bricks on a floor, *Equivalent VIII* (1966), be worth a sum in 1972 that shocked the non-conscienti when they became aware of the facts in 1976?²¹ Are we really to believe the answer is its “anti-theatrical” quality?

Taine (1828–93) taught that the Renaissance was a particularly propitious moment in the history of society and thus of art—another festival: “The Italians construe life as a delightful festivity.”²² Wölfflin raised the possibility that styles could be different but equal. Then Freud reinvigorated biography and took some of the steam out of facile analogies between art and society. The final nail in the coffin of taste as a matter to be taken seriously was the institutionalizing of the art history survey course, which made indifference to style a matter of creed.²³ The entire history of style was deemed worth learning as a Hegelian epic of progress, and taste became something to hide.

20. Augustus Welby Pugin, *The True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture* (London, 1841).

21. Time has diminished the shock value of a \$12,000 price tag.

22. Hippolyte Taine, *Lectures on Art* (1864), trans. John Durand (New York, 1896), 66. Cf. Bernard Berenson, *The Italian Painters and the Renaissance* (Oxford, 1930), 9: “The more people were imbued with the new spirit [i.e., of the Renaissance], the more they loved pageants.”

23. H. W. Janson’s *History of Art* first appeared in 1962; Helen Gardner’s *Art Through the Ages* goes back to 1926.

Contemporary art history lacks the sense of conviction that motivated the passionate advocacies of Winckelmann and Pugin. They meant to reform society by reforming taste. Art historians raised on the survey course then threw out the baby of conviction with the bath water of narrow-mindedness. The last art historians who wrote about the links between aesthetic and moral value with unabashed fervor were those who took up the humanism of Renaissance Italy as a cause opposed to the perverted classicism of the Third Reich. Panofsky in particular, but Kenneth Clark also, wrote with dignity about theories of virtue and an art that propagandized on behalf of humanism. The parallel between Renaissance humanism and the idealizing style of the Florentines was fruitful ground for émigrés who deplored how the Nazis had co-opted the cultures of antiquity. Those art historians made antiquity respectable again by showing how it had inspired harmless, likable duffers such as Marsilio Ficino and Niccolò Niccoli.

After Panofsky's death in 1968, there was a certain void in American art history. There was also an obvious cause, American art, which signified personal freedom and deserved the grant money that currently is earmarked for Middle Eastern and Asian projects. First Clement Greenberg, then Michael Fried stepped in on behalf of modern American art, the art of minimalism in the latter case (which he advocated calling "literalism"), which became the prototype by which the whole history of art was rewritten as an apotheosis of "absorption," Fried's term for the anticlassical (Fried's "absorption" started out as a term describing cinema as neither high modernist nor anti-theatrical).²⁴ Vasari had his Michelangelo, Ruskin his Turner, and Michael Fried his Anthony Caro and Frank Stella. Or perhaps more like Winckelmann, Fried has his Bernini in anything he deems "theatrical," i.e., demanding the viewer's attention like a priest before a member of a congregation. In Fried's words, the theatrical is "ingratiating." The absorptive, he acknowledged, is much like Svetlana Alper's "descriptive" art: nonnarrative, nonclassical, nonhortatory. Ironically enough, Fried's positive value in the early years as a critic of contemporary art was "conviction": "within the modernist arts nothing short of

24. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood" (1967), in Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago, 1998), 164. "It is the overcoming of theater that modernist sensibility finds most exalting and that it experiences as the hallmark of high art in our time." Fried, in *Absorption and Theatricality, Painting and the Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1980), 184n6, cites Diderot's article on "Absorber" in the *Encyclopédie* (1751), in particular, "being absorbed in God."

conviction—specifically, the conviction that a particular painting or sculpture or poem or piece of music can or cannot support comparison with past work within that art whose quality is not in doubt—matters at all.”²⁵ Ruskin hovers nearby at this point—but not after “absorption” replaces “conviction” and the point becomes relating to a work of art as though it were a host rather than a priest—the viewer “absorbed” rather than entranced.

Panofsky was a historian fundamentally; Fried is as much a critic as an art historian, a one-time crony of Clement Greenberg and an interlocutor of the literary critic Stanley Cavell. Fried was an English major and is a published poet. It is from literary criticism, even from Aristotle indirectly, that Fried inherits the culture of dialectic with its antithetical categories, a culture reinforced by Hegel and then complicated by Foucault (1926–84). Foucault upset the established connotations of the words *classical* and *civilization*, so that they became emblematic of repression rather than freedom. This opened up the history of art, which for so long, despite Pugin and Ruskin, had depended upon the classical norm to keep the universe of art history centralized. After Foucault, Fried gave us Chardin as absorptive, Fragonard as theatrical. Yet to found art history on style is necessarily to commit oneself to the quicksands of taste. Fried had fun toying with notions of taste and with the traditional canon. He made a name for himself by daring to admire the much-denigrated painter Greuze. He also struggled with the anomaly of being a modernist whose themes center around questions of aesthetic value, rather than around revolutionary political tenets—struggled all the way to Washington and the prestigious Mellon lectures. Norman Rockwell, we heard at one point, was a master of absorption.

Fried’s opposite number, T. J. Clark, advocated the social history of art rather than Fried’s aestheticism. Back to analyzing the relationship between art and society, though Clark is quick to distance himself from any positivist project; no gathering statistics on the market for art for him. Whereas Fried started with the modern period and worked back, T. J. Clark started with the nineteenth century and worked up to contemporary art. His ideology, worn unabashedly on the sleeve, is Marxist. Clark is as at home with the politics of the artists he studies as ever Panofsky was with the humanism of his artists. Like Panofsky, his art history has permanent

25. Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” 165. The persistent underlying condition for this art history is rivalry, be it Rembrandt’s or Courbet’s or Chardin’s, with the prestige of Renaissance art.

significance because it is, at some level, about human rights. In some respects he is as Hegelian as Panofsky (Marx himself was, after all, Hegelian *au fond*), though like Marx his cause is the defeat of capitalism rather than the fulfillment of the World Spirit (or, in Panofsky's case, a reign of idealistic philosopher kings). For Fried, the artist creates an alter ego in the absorptive figure he portrays; the value of art is largely self-reflexive. For Clark, art is a tool society sometimes takes up and thereby makes important; the value of art is largely social. The connoisseur, alternatively, believes in "the bottom line"; the value of art is what it brings at sale.

The triumverate of post-Panofsky American art history was completed by Kirk Varnedoe, who practiced a good old-fashioned-style history, culminating in the work of his friends, Chuck Close and others. His was a considerably less grandiose appropriation of Vasari's model than Fried's. "Modernism" was his cause, as the *maniera moderna* was Vasari's. The defense was largely formalist.

This postwar generation of art historians has borrowed liberally from literary theory, linguistics, and anthropology, twinning them with Freudianism to create a criticism diametrically opposed to Vasari's biographical model. Roland Barthes's "death of the author" (echoing Nietzsche's "God is dead") reinforced Freud's diminution of the role of intentionality in life (itself a sort of miniaturization of Darwin's theory) and opened the way for an art history without agents.²⁶ Yet Varnedoe and Fried were in large part writing a kind of style history, one unburdened of both biography and connoisseurship. Ancient art, after all, was in large part anonymous, in large part copies of lost originals, yet easily organized according to developing style.

The problem for these modernist art historians was not so much simply the old emphasis on style, but more exactly the emphasis on a concept of style that was unitary—one inapplicable now to a self-conscious tradition in which style was deliberately complicated. Style history has indeed changed. In general, we look more for modification than for quotation of sources. In place of Gothic-bad, Renaissance-good, we can now see that Cosimo de' Medici may have preferred Michelozzo's less progressive design for his palace not because it was "plainer" than Brunelleschi's design, as Cosimo is reported to have claimed, but because it was linked visually with the Palazzo della Signoria across town. A palace in the new classical

26. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Oxford, 1986), 49–55.

orders, like the Palazzo Rucellai by Alberti, would not have given the Medici the visual endorsement of their palazzo as a satellite of the governmental headquarters, rusticated stonework on both. Similarly, the great artists of fifteenth-century Italy need not be seen as forerunners of the High Renaissance, as Vasari and many others saw them, but as a community of artists whose styles varied, and whose styles had as much to do with looking backward as looking forward. Piero della Francesca is neither more advanced nor less so than Mantegna. Neither is more purely a “Renaissance” artist. Mantegna’s great affinity was with Donatello; Piero’s was with Masaccio before him, though there is as well a touch of the Byzantine icon about his staring Christs. Gradually, and none too soon, style history is taking on some of the complexity that genetics has given to theories of descent in nature—though as it does so, it takes its toll on the concept of period.

The challenge for those art historians who wanted to avoid social history was not avoiding style history altogether but modifying how they talked about style until it could reverberate with literary theory. Art historians typically thrive on similarities and on continuities. Iconographic studies depend upon established traditions; without such traditions, themselves usually derived from a stable textual tradition, there can be no iconography. Similarly, reliable attributions cannot be made of a work that is the sole surviving work of an artist. By contrast, literary historians, who seldom are stumped by issues of authorship, dating, or meaning, more typically write long, detailed commentaries on isolated works.

Despite the long tradition of *ut pictura poesis*—a tradition that lost ground to a comparison with music beginning in the eighteenth century—verbal style is a phenomenon distinct from its visual counterpart. Writers do of course borrow images from one another, and they allude to one another, but they are more musical in their thinking, more prone to borrow sounds, phrases, and rhythms. Readers listen for verbal echoes, whereas art historians tend to look for shadows and mirrors. Readers rarely think that allusion is the point of a text, whereas successful, nonservile allusion (“imitation”) can easily be supposed to be a *raison d’être* for some works of visual art. Ultimately, art alludes to life and life to art, and this is what makes culture (as when my teenage daughter, returning after a week away and finding her father not at home, proclaimed petulantly, “Even the Prodigal Son’s father came to welcome him home”)—but we have been speaking of allusion in a narrower sense. A writer’s imitation tends to center on genre, scale, ambition, and perhaps theme; the artist’s imita-

tion is often more particularized. An exception to this would be the Farnese Gallery (fig. 5), which clearly imitates both the Sistine ceiling and Raphael's loggia decoration for the Villa Farnesina, but most works of art are less isolated achievements than these three, and therefore allusion tends not to be to the work as a whole, but to a formal motif or stance.

Writers and artists alike have supposed that allusion to antiquity was a special case—as special as the case of classical style—that the purpose of education was to make sure readers and viewers understood allusions to antiquity and, conversely, that one was educated by reading and viewing works that practiced such abilities. As Sir Joshua Reynolds succinctly put it, the ancients cannot be plagiarized.²⁷ Neither can the Bible, and perhaps Shakespeare is as appropriable as either. Shakespeare is after all born of outdoor culture, like Greek festival, and oral culture, like the ancients', cannot be plagiarized. The primitive, too, cannot be plagiarized.

Art historians have a taste for formal causes, to borrow Aristotle's language. They like to know that Michelangelo's art was catalyzed by the *Laocoön* and the *Belvedere Torso* (figs. 6, 14). Were they dealing with texts, they would feel they knew something significant when they showed the similarity of *Corinne* (1807) to *Hamlet*, of Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* to *Jane Eyre* and *Ivanhoe*, of *Taming of the Shrew* to *Pygmalion* and *Pygmalion* to *Lolita* and *Lolita* to Dante's *Vita nuova*. It is basically the connoisseur's mentality coming out in them, analyzing similarities and differences. The history of art becomes a sequence of pearls, natural and even baroque ones. Many of the art historian's preoccupations are highly speculative: e.g., did Fragonard respond to Raphael's *Galatea* (or more properly, an engraving after the same) when he painted his *Girl in a Swing*, with its subplot of jealous intrigue and its ornamental dolphins? The literary historian, who teethed on Aristotle, is attuned instead to categorical thinking, to genre and to material cause. To a literary historian, *Corinne* has little to do with *Hamlet* and much to do with the rise of the novel, Romanticism, and female writers. To the art historian, Madame de Staël is in the same business as Shakespeare, remaking the image of the hero[ine] for a new age. To take another example, Mary Poppins to the art historian is visually a version of the Virgin Mary: blue-cloaked, ramrod straight, and beautiful

27. "It must be acknowledged that the works of the moderns are more the property of their authors; he, who borrows an idea from an ancient, or even from a modern artist not his contemporary, and so accommodates it to his own work, that it makes a part of it, with no seam or join appearing, can hardly be charged with plagiarism: poets practice this kind of borrowing, without reserve." Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, Discourse VI, 107.

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Fig. 5. Annibale Carracci, section of the ceiling of the Gallery, Palazzo Farnese, 1597–1602. Palazzo Farnese, Rome.

(in her own estimation at least); but also a God: stern, inscrutable, remote, given to heavenly descent and ascent and other miracles, imperial and even terrible (but of Christlike rank relative to the Lion at the dance), letting the children come unto her, and on occasion forgiving. To a literary historian Mary Poppins belongs to a children's literature that has foregone princesses and fairies. Both art historians and literary ones like to sort, but art historians into big batches and literary ones into small ones. Art historians write extended captions to many images; literary ones write long commentaries on a chosen text of any length. No wonder art historians have been inclined to want to shift more toward literary criticism. Then they can spend less on photographs, and bite off more circumscribed topics. Thus Erwin Panofsky in the 1940s dealt with the whole of Dürer's life in three hundred pages, 325 illustrations; Joseph Koerner fifty years later dedicated five hundred pages to a single painting, with one hundred fewer illustrations.

Literary critics have largely commandeered the business of writing about movies, when an art historian might have supposed that moving, talking pictures were the fulfillment of visual artists' aspirations, no more based on literature than many a history painting. Is a movie based on a combination of the history of icons, narrative painting, landscape painting, on the history of multiples (prints and photographs), or on speech and fully enacted dramatic action? Perhaps, as Aristotle recognized, poetry and painting, the verbal and the visual arts, have never been particularly distinct. Only contemporary bureaucratic demands make them so.

The literary critic tends to be interested in biography in a different way than the art historian, and so the "death of the author," announced by Roland Barthes, means something different too. When the literary critic eliminates the author, he prioritizes genre, like Aristotle; when the art historian abandons biography, she constructs a genealogy of works notable for one reason or another, and ends up thereby back in accord with Pliny. For the art historian, what matters is looking; for the literary critic, what matters is talking. The art is the soloist, even with the artist sidelined, and the art historian the accompaniment; the literary critic's talking about a text is more competitive, words against words like dueling banjos. For both, though, the death of the author/artist conveniently leaves greater glory for the commentator, who becomes the mother of all readers/viewers.

One thing that drew art historians to literary studies is the problem of status, which intertwines matters of both quality and taste. Art historians

who were resisting the preeminence of classical and Renaissance art found a parallel in English departments uninterested in Shakespeare. The fashionable sentiment, “There are no bad books, only bad readers,” seemed to some like a proclamation of emancipation. Anything was now worth reading; this liberalization was the analogue to modern democracy. But just as digital analyses may help to answer some of the conundrums of connoisseurship, so psychological studies on how we perceive beauty may find regularities that transcend cultural conditioning. The psychology of perception was introduced to art historians by E. H. Gombrich, and to a lesser extent Rudolf Arnheim. Many questions remain about how we perceive, and art historians had better be listening to the answers that cognitive science will be providing. Neither digital analyses nor cognitive science are likely to put the art historian out of work, but they will change both what is asked and how it is answered. Like psychoanalysis applied to Leonardo, the experiments cognitive science conducts on present-day subjects won’t necessarily help us understand what was beautiful, funny, or even admirable to that ghostly abstraction, the average fifteenth-century man or woman.

“What is beauty?” was not a naïve question when Tolstoy asked it, though now we ask instead, “What is perceived as being beautiful and why?” Not that we have solved the problem by restating it. Taste is not merely the result of conditioning; nor is it brutally individualistic. It combines many factors, like genes that carry complicated codes expressed in complicated ways. Taste is partly a function of personal circumstances, initiatives, and experiences, partly more broadly culturally conditioned, partly the expression of a more or less quirky self. It is neither irrelevant to the history of art nor easily quantified.

These art historical dilemmas echo the debate in mathematics between the advocates of calculation and those of dead reasoning; in philosophy between the analysts or positivists and the continental philosophers; in anthropology between the material and the cultural schools. If, in each case, the problems to be answered are the same, then the opposed methodologies are merely complementary doors to the same interior. In the case of art history, that interior is where we try rationally to sort out our feelings about art, for the sake of confronting civilly other people doing the same. Ideally in the end no observer will be able to tell which door you came through; what will matter are the complexity and the richness of our communal experience. But if our method dictates the problems themselves, rather than only the means of solving them, then we have

only a maze to live in, partitioned off from whole parties of interlocutors who might, with luck, have jolted us out of the complacency every art historical method eventually fosters and because of which all ought, eventually, to be jettisoned.

Regardless of the (imperfect) parallels with literary history, art history and art connoisseurship remain topics unto themselves. A work of art is confronted in a moment of time, as a text is not; it remains stable, as a performance does not. *Pace* Winckelmann, Pugin, and Taine, it has therefore not much to do with festival, a concept that was to the Enlightenment approximately what “primitive” was to the modern. Even a work of art from the age of art, one that no longer proffers an icon’s access to a sempiternal realm, does still promise the possibility of having the same basic experience a second time, or indefinitely many times, if only we the viewers could shed the particularities of our days and approach the work barefoot, as it were. If art has often been associated with the notion of transcendence, this is because the experience we seek from it is fundamentally impersonal. Not only does it not matter whether Verrocchio or Rossellino made that bust of Sasseti, but one looks at it in order to have an experience that one need not be either oneself or a fifteenth-century Florentine to have. On the other hand, a feeling of certainty about the quality of the work is essential to our satisfaction in looking at it—not that it be of the highest quality, but simply that we know we are able to judge of what quality it is. We need to learn to distinguish fine crystal goblets from soda fountain glasses, Bach from Telemann, sterling silver from stainless steel, and offset lithographs from giclée prints—but also good design from bad within each of these categories. We may not all agree on which of Bach’s compositions is best, but we can hope to achieve at least partial consensus that he was a greater composer than Telemann. Likewise, that Leonardo was greater than Verrocchio, with no offense intended to the latter. It would be unreasonable to expect every good artist to be a genius, or every genius to succeed uniformly in making the best art. Nevertheless, quality differs as radically as does personal talent in the history of art, and our history of art will not make much sense unless we acknowledge such disparities. All men may be born equal, but not all artists.

Connoisseurship need not narrow our history of art, but instead ought to bring it into sharper focus. Our personal favorites need not be the “greatest” works: there is scope for personal preference even in a history of art that obeys certain hierarchies of quality. The history of art is not reducible to a history of genius, but there is, or at least there has been and

we must hope will continue to be, genius within the history of art. This deserves celebration rather than apology, but celebration as being both an individual and a cultural achievement. Instead of trying to write a history of art devoid of genius, we had better redefine how we understand the concept and make of it something more inclusive and diffuse, a quality capable of minor as well as major manifestations. Since genius can too easily be repressed, and doubtless often has been, by circumstance, it is the business of art historians to guard evidence of it—and to hope to find it still alive here and there, like zoologists seeking to find endangered and even “extinct” species.

3

VENTURING SOMEWHAT BEYOND FREUD

With this sense of the splendour of our experience and of its awful brevity, gathering all we are into one desperate effort to see and touch, we shall hardly have time to make theories about the things we see and touch.

—WALTER PATER, Conclusion of *The Renaissance, Studies in Art and Poetry* (1873)

It has been said before, by no less than Plato among others, that art is a lie. Art history has its share of lies too. If you believe something wrong about atoms or planets, once the correction is made, your mistake is forgettable except by historians of science. If you believe something wrong about a work of art, that wrong may become almost a right, depending on how important “you” are. The icon type that was believed to go back to a prototype by St. Luke almost does, since repeating the legend has become so rote.¹ We scarcely stop to ask what the truth is, so busy are we repeating what was for so long believed. The truth of the origin and development of the icon is irretrievable as a matter of exactitude at this point, anyway, so the legend remains particularly useful.

What has been long believed has a kind of truth to it, a patina at least. It may be only a fictional truth, but what has long been believed can never revert utterly to an ordinary mere fiction. St. Christopher may no longer be a saint, but many people drove around for years feeling safer because of the plastic statuette glued to their dashboard, and I, who only witnessed the phenomenon from afar, still feel a certain fondness for the giant so reduced, a kind of inverse of Michelangelo’s boy *David* made huge to protect Florence. Images of St. Christopher held in museums continue to

1. See Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image Before the Era of Art*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago, 1994).

seem as though they have religious content, simply because they did once have it.

The beauty of classical art is another such truth. Its beauty remains for the individual to decide, but that it was long esteemed as the font of beauty must be acknowledged by everyone, and ought to be acknowledged with a modicum of respect. Aesthetics, like religions, require tolerance; and once religious uniformity was no longer expected, aesthetic uniformity was also doomed. Classical beauty no longer reigns as the supreme beauty it long was taken to be, though beauty remains in Western thought a concept indebted to the classical.

Pliny thought the *Laocoön* (fig. 6) was made of one piece of marble, and so did many generations of his readers. This made the statue all the more renowned, and although it is not true, the renown it bestowed on the work is part of art history now. Extraordinary as the statue is, its fame is partly the result of an inaccurate claim. (Critics of art history might say this is the tip of the iceberg, that art history is rife with claims whose factual basis is shaky).

Such claims may include interpretive ones. Panofsky called Dürer's engraving of *Melencolia* a spiritual self-portrait. This too (in my opinion) is wrong (or at least highly Romantic), but it has become part of the art history of that engraving, and most people who know the engraving think that they know that about it. Giorgione's *La Tempesta* was not famous and canonical when it was new—it was a small painting, privately owned. Only when art historians dubbed it a landmark work in the history of landscape painting did it become a “key monument,” to borrow a fraught phrase from H. W. Janson. Yet many people think they know about that painting that it was a breakthrough, that it is one of the most important of High Renaissance paintings. Both of these are truths manufactured by art historians, ones that cannot now be utterly discarded. Their having been believed makes them part of the history of art. It, like currencies off the gold standard, is a belief system.

Many of the claims art historians characteristically make simply don't allow of proof, which makes it hard to discard wrong ideas. If one art historian claims that “the closest antecedent for the expressive visage of the *David* [Michelangelo's] . . . is Tullio Lombardo's *Warrior* [from the Vendramin Tomb, SS. Giovanni e Paolo, Venice],”² and another that this

2. Rona Goffen, *Renaissance Rivals: Michelangelo, Leonardo, Raphael, Titian* (New Haven, 2002), 127.

Image Not Available

Fig. 6. Hagesandros, Athenodoros, and Polydoros, *Laocoön*, marble, first century (?), original restoration. Vatican Museums, Vatican State.

is preposterous, that the closest antecedent is clearly Donatello's *St. George* in Florence, with his furrowed brow and apprehensive eyes, a statue we know was greatly admired in general and an artist we know Michelangelo adored, has the first claim thereby been "proved" wrong? Can we get rid of the weaker idea, or must we encrust every object with myriad notions, like one of Kurt Schwitters's cluttered rooms? Some of the current muddle of art history comes from supposing that any possible interpretation is valid, that many commentaries on the history of art may coexist, each serving a readership that finds it congenial.

Art historians and other humanists may tend to employ a digital model of thought when they ought to use an analogue one: they suppose they must come up with a yes-or-no answer, when in fact the evidence (or even the question itself) will allow nothing more precise than a probable conclusion, which may be, by some standard, "wrong," even if it is also highly probable—or conversely, right even if it is improbable. It is a slippery situation when the interpretation of a work of art cannot be labeled right or wrong but merely probable or improbable. Just as iconographies without a fairly continuous tradition stump art historians, so do situations in which an improbable interpretation or visual source may be valid. Why even devise, let alone by what means defend, an improbable thesis? Yet life is rife with improbabilities. It is improbable, but in this case certifiably true because of the artist's statement, that Michelangelo's *Pietà* of 1500 would have been used as the model for a design for an Iranian monument to the martyrs of the revolution, with the figure of Christ clothed in an army uniform.³ In this case the claim is visually convincing as well, but all too often what convinces one person visually will not convince another. Art historians need both to be able to think in terms of probabilities, and—like Sherlock Holmes—to reject statistics when the evidence vindicates the improbable explanation.

The basic problem lies in considering how our commentaries interlock—not seeking to layer them like stratified rock, but trying to avoid serious fault lines. We may not have reached that utopian state (utopian at least to Arts and Crafts types) in which all of us are artists, but many are now content to be recognized as fabricators, makers of plausible interpretive fictions, with the unfortunate result that the implausible is sadly neglected. This acceptance of the artificiality of thought is one species of alternative to scientific proof and its standards of verifiability, though per-

3. Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis 2*, trans. Anjali Singh (New York, 2004), 127.

haps not the only such, and perhaps a dangerous sort of standard after all. If we all admit to being fabricators, why should historical accounts have any priority? What could justify the study of history, if not the old premise that hindsight can see some things that were once obscure? If we tend to know less history than our forefathers, perhaps it is because we lack their faith in that very premise. Neither nature nor truth is a powerful concept at present; nature is irremediably contaminated by culture, and truth by fiction. Much of this conceptual universe we owe to Freud.

In his earlier and longer study of Leonardo (1910), Freud created a watershed in the history of writing about art. He took the man who was arguably the most revered of all artists (particularly in France) and discussed his personal habits as symptomatic of neuroses. It was a daring move, and Freud apologized lest he give offense to Leonardo's admirers. I do not seek to explain the mysteries of creativity, he explained, or what made Leonardo so great an artist. Instead, Freud asked new kinds of questions, the kinds of questions he thought the psychoanalytic method might answer: why do Leonardo's female figures share so similar a smile? Why was Leonardo constitutionally unable to finish what he started? Why was he so obsessed by the project of flight? Why did he not develop "normal" heterosexual drives?

His answers involved an elaborate reconstruction of Leonardo's early childhood and a dream recorded in the notebooks, as well as other references in the notebooks. Boiled down to the minimum, Freud's idea was that Leonardo yearned for his birth mother, and that it was her faintly remembered smile that adorned his female figures, and the memories of feeding at her breast by which he was obsessed as an adult. Flight Freud took as a fantasy of sexual prowess, and the inability to finish he took to reflect Leonardo's father's detachment from his illegitimate son, a primal relationship itself left incomplete.

Freud is still the single most important contributor to the history of art as it is currently practiced in the United States, long after the profession he founded has cast itself off from his theories and his practice, long after his ideas have ceased to command general respect—indeed quite the opposite. It was Freud who definitively countered the positivism of Taine and others, and who established "theory" as a mode of knowing about art, rather than of knowing about making art.⁴ He turned his particular

4. Though on Taine's possible significance for Saussure, see Hans Aarsleff, "Duality the Key: Saussure's Debt to Taine in Conceiving 'the Double Essence of Language,'" *Times Literary Supplement*, August 20, 2004, 12–13.

piece of Science into something highly theoretical. At the same time his turn toward a universal notion of human psychology helped expunge the lingering taint of chauvinism and/or racism that had been characteristic of much writing about art (e.g., in Vasari, Winckelmann, or Taine). Our special sensitivity to these issues during the second half of the twentieth century helps to explain Freud's ongoing importance.

Freud wrote two essays on art historical subjects, one rather short and essentially what we would now call iconographic, the other a short book, a sort of psychological biography. He published his essay on Michelangelo's *Moses* in the inauspicious year 1914, anonymously, in the journal he edited himself, *Imago*. The statue of Moses, intended for Pope Julius II's magnificent tomb, itself planned as the centerpiece for the new St. Peter's, is Michelangelo's most finished sculpture from the time between the *David* and the Medici Chapel statues. It shows the censorious patriarch seated, his left hand stroking his massive beard and his right arm clutching the tablets of the Ten Commandments against the side of his chest (fig. 7). What a ripe subject for Freud!

While in Rome, Freud had often visited the statue, as had also the Jews of Michelangelo's day, Vasari reported. Freud wondered what precise biblical moment was portrayed there, and it seemed to him that the position of the holy tablets was odd. His theory of interpreting art, like his theory of interpreting life, depended upon seizing small, seemingly causal details—"the rubbish heap of observation"⁵—and using these said details as a lever by which sense could be made of the situation. He acknowledged the example of the physician Giovanni Morelli and his work on the science of attribution, so admired also by Bernard Berenson; psychoanalysis was essentially grounded in the methodology of connoisseurship, so perhaps it is not so strange that the relationship between art history and psychoanalysis has remained close. Both deal with latent meanings and fundamental, emotionally laden themes.⁶

In the case of the *Moses*, Freud decided that the patriarch had not been portrayed as angry but as mastering himself after nearly rising to his feet in anger, and that the tablets had slipped from his grasp and been caught under his arm, inverted, during this largely internal struggle. The resulting form constituted "a concrete expression of the highest mental achievement that is possible in a man, that of struggling successfully against an

5. Freud, "Moses of Michelangelo," 13:222.

6. See Ginzburg, "Clues."

Image Not Available

Fig. 7. Michelangelo, *Moses*, marble, 1513–15. S. Pietro in Vincoli, Rome.

inward passion for the sake of a cause to which he has devoted himself.”⁷ Moses, Freud opined, became a surrogate Julius for Michelangelo, but also the site of some self-projection, and so the nuances of portrayal of this authority figure became quite fraught with issues of Michelangelo’s self-definition.

What Freud took to be his great insight, that the statue was portrayed in a narrative moment invented by the artist rather than derived from his text, a moment exhibiting extraordinary greatness of soul, few would bother to remember when discussing the statue today. But the method by which he worked, finding the minor detail (such as the position of the hand in the beard) and rendering it the centerpiece of an interpretation, was central to Freud’s overall accomplishment. He inferred that Moses is portrayed having just saved the tablets from falling to the ground, by snapping his arm against his side as he recovered from his anger at seeing the

7. Freud, “*Moses of Michelangelo*,” 13:233.

Israelites worshipping the Golden Calf. Although Freud's initial perception of the statue was not far removed from descriptions in the Baedeker guidebooks of the day,⁸ his analysis of Moses as nearly dropping the tablets in the process of his self-overcoming is peculiar enough that not many would accept his detailed and inventive reconstruction of the narrative. But it doesn't matter. Freud knew what he wanted to say about the artist before he ever examined the statue.

In the case of Leonardo, Freud was hugely indebted to a novel, Dmitri Merejkowski's (or Merezhkovsky) *The Romance of Leonardo da Vinci* (1902), which dwells memorably on Leonardo's memory of his mother Caterina's smile, on dreams, on his latent homosexuality. Perhaps Freud's ideas about repression were stimulated by Merejkowski's emphasis on dreams and the mention of a palimpsest,⁹ which is a sort of objective corollary of the lost, partly recoverable memories. Despite such suggestive links between Freud and his fiction reading (he credits the book in his essay, just as he duly credits Morelli), the art historical literature these days barely mentions Merejkowski, preferring to take the Leonardo essay as a pioneering work of historical psychoanalytic analysis.¹⁰ Yet the alliance with fiction is a methodological stance that has persisted more tenaciously than Freud's own psychoanalytical tenets.

From Freud came reams of art history about the artist's manipulation by his own neuroses, and art as the objectification of unconscious drives. Again, the street went both ways: Freud emphasized the erotic and mortality in no small part because he was thoroughly imbued with a Western, Christian cultural tradition in which love and death were primary themes, more so than fertility, for instance, or athletic strength, or the law. He managed, however, to articulate something fundamental to the cultural tradition at the same time that he seemed to turn it upside down by rejecting, in an essentially Jewish way, the worship of the image (or its maker).

8. "Wie er eben vom Sitze aufspringen will." K. Baedeker, *Mittel-Italien und Rom* (Leipzig, 1903), 197.

9. Dmitri Merejkowski, *The Romance of Leonardo da Vinci*, trans. Bernard Guernsey (New York, 1938), 27–28; see also, on Leonardo's memories of his mother and the ubiquitous smile, 361, 365, 372–73, 377, 465ff., 555, 569.

10. The exception is Eric Maclagan, "Leonardo in the Consulting Room," *Burlington Magazine* 42 (January 1923): 54–58, a response to the defense of Freud by the editor of the *Burlington Magazine* 41 (December 1922): 255–56; see also E. H. Gombrich, "The Mystery of Leonardo," *New York Review of Books*, February 11, 1965, 3–4. Gombrich points out that Freud himself called the essay a "Romandictung" in a letter of 1914, and therefore recognized very well the extravagance of his claims. More recently, see Bradley Collins, *Leonardo, Psychoanalysis, and Art History: A Critical Study of Psychobiographical Approaches to Leonardo da Vinci* (Evanston, Ill., 1997).

He loved Renaissance art (besides Michelangelo, Raphael, Leonardo, Dürer, and Holbein were favorites of his) but exercised that passion in a way mostly alien to the late Romantic era in which he lived, which made heroes of artists more than had the Renaissance itself. Even so, Michelangelo is classed as an *Übermensch*; Leonardo as a hero who, “with the help of the oldest of all his erotic impulses . . . enjoyed the triumph of once more conquering the inhibition in his art.”¹¹ Freud’s artists are not so much Romantic heroes as twentieth-century patients: Michelangelo was doomed to failure,¹² Leonardo displayed “inactivity and indifference.”¹³ If modernism was to be iconoclastic toward the works of the Old Masters, Freud anticipated modernism by dethroning the Masters themselves. And if deconstructionism was later to be indebted to Freud’s theory of the mind’s crisscrossing itself, Freud’s own essays on art make explicit the author’s sensitivity to difficulties in reconciling the more primary response with what has been integrated into semiotic systems. That search for equivalence was his quest, echoed and arguably refined much later in Susan Sontag’s call for “an erotics of art” that would deny the “revenge of the intellect upon art” through interpretation.¹⁴ What Freud chose to interpret, in a novel way, was his own baffled response to the work: “Some of the grandest and most overwhelming creations of art are still unsolved riddles to our understanding. We admire them, we feel overawed by them, but we are unable to say what they represent to us.”¹⁵ Freud admitted that his goal was no mere translation into words of the artist’s meaning: “I realize this cannot be a matter of *intellectual* comprehension; what he [the artist] aims at is to awaken in us the same emotional attitude, the same mental constellation as that which in him produced the impetus to create.”¹⁶ Or as Foucault defined his related project, one seeks to study what is “between the already ‘encoded’ eye and reflexive knowledge,” what is between “the ordering codes and reflections upon order itself,”¹⁷

11. Freud, “*Moses of Michelangelo*,” 13:134.

12. *Ibid.*, 13:234.

13. Freud, “*Leonardo and a Memory of His Childhood*,” 11:68.

14. Susan Sontag, “*Against Interpretation*,” in Sontag, *A Susan Sontag Reader* (New York, 1982), 95–104. Cf. my teenage daughter, desperately imploring her father not to pick apart Hitchcock’s *North by Northwest*, expostulating, “I don’t want to understand!”

15. Freud, “*Leonardo and a Memory of His Childhood*,” 11:211. In a vivid microcosm of this phenomenon, my nine-year-old daughter finished *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* in tears, but unclear about what had happened, so poetically understated is Hardy’s text. “I don’t know what happened, but I know it’s sad,” she wept.

16. *Ibid.*, 11:212.

17. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York, 1970), xxi.

a realm that is peculiarly free but also persistently ineffable. Postmodern theory has taught us to celebrate our own inability to know satisfactorily.

Freud's legacy for the current practice of art history is twofold. Before Freud, one wrote about artists in order to praise them; after Freud, it was possible instead to ask on their behalf, "If you prick us, do we not bleed?" No longer do art historians, or other admirers of artistic achievement, need to grovel before "the child's idea of his father."¹⁸

Second and less benignly, Freud, who himself gloried in theory, remains the father figure for theorists, the cross held up against the devil of positivism. Positivism, often associated with British empiricism (for art historians, particularly with E. H. Gombrich following Karl Popper), is a theory of knowledge that prioritizes raw data over any interpretive matrix. It tries to rely on cold, hard fact, on *a posteriori* knowledge, as a corrective to preconceptions of all kinds. An art history founded on positivistic principles might emphasize the economics of the production of art over descriptions of style, or might talk more about the documentary evidence pertaining to an artist than about that artist's interior life, laundry lists rather than dreams (to be fair to Freud, he did study the equivalent of laundry lists, at least when led to them by a novel). When T. J. Clark declares of his study of Gustave Courbet that he is not interested in the actual public for the art but in Courbet's private notion of his "public," he is taking a deliberately antipositivistic stance.¹⁹ When Michael Fried describes his understanding of what makes art absorptive (that it is non-voyeuristic and "both a natural correlative for his [the artist's] own engrossment in the act of painting and a proleptic mirroring of what he trusted would be the absorption of the beholder before the finished work"), he likewise is antipositivistic.²⁰ The act of looking at art has been categorized as fundamentally subjective, and so too any act of interpretation. To a theorist, like any philosophical idealist, facts have lower status than their having been perceived.

Positivism, on the other hand, shares its bed with connoisseurship, which can never stray far from physical evidence. The positivists and the theorists wage perpetual psychomachia with one another. For theorists, the positivists are like people who try to get somewhere using a list of directions from MapQuest, rather than studying a map and developing a picture of the whole. Maps come in different types, like different types of

18. Freud, "Leonardo and a Memory of His Childhood," 11:130.

19. Clark, *Image of the People*, 11–12.

20. Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality*, 51.

theory. The feminist doesn't see what the Marxist does, or the Lacanian what the postcolonialist sees. But all these types of theorists do claim that they see more and better than the theoretically deprived. They have their maps.

If the theory of psychoanalysis was prompted in some part by the study of style and attribution, the tables have since turned, and the history of art has recently been the debtor. Freud's and Morelli's method of fixing on the seemingly insignificant yet pregnant detail was used to great effect by Leo Steinberg in his hugely successful book *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion* (1983).²¹ There phallic details from a profusion of works of art receive a climax of attention that might have had Freud himself protesting that sometimes a cigar is just a cigar. The same basic procedure produced Steinberg's study of the slung-leg motif, in which the crossing of one figure's leg over another figure's leg is taken as a sort of code, or hidden symbol, we might say (borrowing from Panofsky), signifying sexual intercourse.

Erwin Panofsky (1892–1968), different though he was as an art historian from Steinberg, also owes something to the example of Freud. He was a long generation younger than Freud, and north German rather than Viennese, but he could not have failed to be aware of Freud's work. His own theory of interpretation bears some comparison. He explained in a well-known essay that the art historian must begin by trying to have some literal grasp of an image, that is, to be able to look at it without cultural presumptions of any kind: to see a tree, a wooden structure, a baby, and nothing more. One might say that at this stage the art historian resembles a witness to a crime who must try to remember exactly what happened, rather than what he or she thinks happened. Then one looks for iconography. Not all images have iconography, but those that build upon a tradition of coded meanings do. The star on the shoulder of the Virgin's blue cloak signifies that she is the Queen of Heaven. Why? Because it regularly appears there, because she is the Queen of Heaven, and because heaven is blue. There need be no text that asserts that the star signifies her regal status, since there are texts that call her the Queen of Heaven,²² and it is a small inference, given the many correlations, to conclude that the star is an

21. Steinberg's work on Leonardo's *Last Supper*, culminating in *Leonardo's Incessant Last Supper* (2001), started out just as Freud did with the *Moses*, asking which narrative moment is portrayed.

22. For general introductions to the subject, see Melissa Katz, ed., *Divine Mirrors: The Virgin Mary in the Visual Arts* (Oxford, 2001), and Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York, 1976).

attribute of her role thus described. Iconography is in large part a statistical phenomenon (usually done with only seat-of-the-pants statistics): it requires convincing patterns of regular use. When those patterns produce interference with one another, common sense is called for. A personal iconography, especially if it is not accompanied by an explanatory statement, is no iconography at all but merely a conundrum. An art without iconography is possible, but I think it would be fair to claim on Panofsky's behalf that the less iconography an artistic tradition has, the less culturally specific meaning it can bear. In other words, an art with more iconography is likely to have a more prominent place in its own culture. That is why Panofsky preferred iconographic problems. (One might argue also that Picasso's art was possible only because he had the momentum of an iconographically based art behind him, and that he left so little to the next generation because he had deliberately destroyed that iconographically rich tradition in favor of unprecedented personal celebrity and a personal brand of pseudo-iconography). Third, Panofsky spoke of an iconological level, a level at which art historical inquiry merged with that of other disciplines and—this is the part relevant to Freudianism—a level to which artistic intention was irrelevant. In Panofsky's hands, iconological interpretation is very philosophical, and even Hegelian. It concerns itself with the broad historical currents by which civilization is preserved. Panofsky warned that it must not forsake rigor and become the correlate to astrology: "There is some danger that iconology will behave, not like ethnology as opposed to ethnography, but like astrology as opposed to astrography."²³ If this was not a dig at Freudianism, it deserved to be.

Panofsky further devised a theory of disguised symbols as a correlate of his theory of iconography. As the early Netherlandish painters developed pictorial realism, they included objects that might or might not bear symbolical valences (cf. Freud's cigar). The oranges on the window sill in the *Arnolfini Portrait* (London, National Gallery) might refer to Eden, or might not. Some investigation of the social history of Flanders in the early fifteenth century might help explicate how rare and precious an object an orange was, and that might lead the art historical community to agree that no Flemish merchant would have causally left oranges lying around. Even if art historians continue to dither about whether the oranges connote

23. Erwin Panofsky, "Iconography and Iconology: An Introduction to the Study of Renaissance Art" (1939), in Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts: Papers in and on Art History* (Garden City, N.J., 1955), 32. See also William Heckscher, "Erwin Panofsky: A Curriculum Vitae," in *Erwin Panofsky in Memoriam*, ed. Hedy Backlin-Landman (Princeton, 1969), 3–26.

more than privileged economic status, van Eyck would have been a slipshod artist by fifteenth-century standards had he not been clear in his own mind whether the oranges were symbolic or not. A trickier case is the emphasis on the woman's abdomen. Jan van Eyck and his culture both may be taken to introduce here an unconscious symbolism for female fertility, one that looks pretty obvious to us but that van Eyck might have been startled to have anyone notice.

Panofsky was committed to the idea that realism was a nineteenth-century phenomenon, and that earlier painters had engaged in a more complex project than merely setting down what they saw. Disguised symbols were objects that licensed interpretation wherever interpretation was discretionary.²⁴ They helped to open the door for the idea that interpretations could be offered like flowers in a bouquet, jostling against one another for attention, rather than like a single long-stem rose. Panofsky used disguised symbols as evidence that a basically religious world view was still being asserted in these more realistic and secular paintings, that the path away from the altarpiece was gradual, and that the viewers of Netherlandish paintings saw religion both in nature and in naturalistic paintings. The theory of disguised symbols holds reception theory *in nuce*.²⁵

There is nothing particularly recondite about reception theory. It merely cautions us, as did Roland Barthes, that part of a word or image's meaning depends upon the context in which it is received. The ancient Greeks built the Parthenon, so Vitruvius tells us, with its dimensions adjusted for the context in which it would be perceived: thicker columns toward the corners, the stylobate curved convexly, and so on, so that it would be perceived as regular and orthogonal. This may be a distant ancestor of reception theory, but there are closer relatives. We might think of reception theory as an extension of Taine's theory of milieu, that the history of art reflects persons, communities, and governments, as well as climate and geography. Reception theory emphasizes community as a constituent of pictorial or verbal meaning, while stopping well short of an economic or market-driven account of the history of art. What it sacrifices is that sense of historical placement that an artist or author necessarily possesses. The reader or viewer of a work from another period suffers

24. A parallel of sorts are the shots of the night sky after passionate kisses in films that had to be approved by a board of censors, e.g., *Casablanca*.

25. Cf. Michael Fried quoting Brecht on Marx: "It wasn't of course that I found I had unconsciously written a whole pile of Marxist plays; but this man Marx was the only spectator for my plays I'd ever come across." "Art and Objecthood," 171n18.

Zeitgeist confusion and cannot clearly comprehend what the range of possible significances might be. Someone of my generation was genuinely confused when he first saw the film *Angels with Dirty Faces* (1938). The ending shows James Cagney as a criminal apparently afraid to go to the electric chair, and my age peer thought the ending marvelously ambiguous: was Cagney really afraid, or was he pretending to be afraid as a warning to the slum kids he had befriended, so that they would stay on the right side of the law rather than emulate him? My age peer's father was contemptuous of such a complacent resistance to interpretation: anyone who knew the film persona of Cagney would know that he couldn't really be afraid. Reception theory, when it ignores historical period, leads itself into trouble, for to a certain extent viewers are historically conditioned.

When I sent out a New Year's card that showed me in the guise of Laocoön (the Trojan who warned against accepting the gift of Greeks, and who was with his two sons destroyed by a sea monster sent by Neptune), and my daughters as struggling to get my attention as I strain to get disentangled (fig. 8), I intended the photocopied drawing as a witty comment on motherhood and an appropriation of a very male statue to express a feminist point of view. By the time it was delivered, our minds were filled with images of parents whose children had been swept away from them by the tsunami of December 2004, which some Hindus described as like an angry sea god. What might have brought a smile no longer did, because of new and unforeseeable resonances. Significance is constantly being reshaped by circumstance; this is the primary and very salutary lesson of reception theory. But when my daughters trick-or-treated as Marie Antoinette and her guillotine, few of our neighbors asked to whom they were giving candy. Probably no one guessed, because there is no tradition of such a costume choice in Lee, New Hampshire. Some assumed that they saw a princess and a robot, both generic. Since audiences and viewers so often blunder thus, we had better not kill off authors completely. We need all the sources of possible correction we can get.

Similarly, the *Mona Lisa* is a different work in the Louvre than it was in a Florentine *palazzo*, a different work still when it was stolen from the Louvre in 1911, and again a different work when it was sent to the New York World's Fair in 1964. It is a different work when I look at it now in the Louvre than when I first saw it there in 1968: I am different, the Louvre is different, and the world is different. When I saw *Casablanca* at age eighteen and told my father, to his lasting chagrin, that I found it amusing, I had seen the movie from a feminist perspective, during orienta-

Image Not Available

Fig. 8. Chloë Feldman Emison, Spooof of *Laocoön* and *Barberini Faun*, pen drawing, 2004.

tion at a women's college to be precise. What I "got" was the—to us—outrageous line, "You [Rick] have to think for both of us," and not much else. When I saw the movie thirty years later and admired it, I was still a feminist but not only. The truth offered us by reception theory is Heraclitean, that the significance of a work of art is constantly evolving, despite the original intentions of artist or patron. Panofsky's hidden symbolism attempted to import that complexity of reception to the time in which the work was made, and his theory was wrong. It gave fifteenth-century art a twentieth-century ambiguity. This is not to claim that fifteenth-century reception was simplistic, only that it was simpler. Mere passage of time has both camouflaged the symbols and exacerbated the issue of separating art from nature.

Historical practice is supposed to compensate for the confusion created by historical distance. Principles of good historical practice remain relatively constant, even as circumstances fluctuate. These principles, which

themselves used to be called the theory of history, include such elements as the following: that one asks genuine questions (i.e., ones whose answers are not already known), that one collects evidence honestly and diligently, that the evidence, carefully weighed, determines the conclusion, that one looks conscientiously for ways in which the conclusion might be disproved, and that one states one's claims as precisely as one is able, and not a smidgen more so.²⁶

Complex theories belong to physics, complex ideas to art. Leon Battista Alberti wrote the first theory of painting and sculpture in 1434, and once you got past the geometry for systematic linear perspective construction, it was all fairly straightforward. An artist ought to be a good man, since then the patron would be more kindly disposed toward him. He ought not to make his compositions too busy, or to show things better left discreetly hidden. His inventions (subjects and their composition), rather than the materials used, ought to be the source of the work's value. He ought to strive for variety on the one hand, but also for dignity. Simple as this is qua theory, it underlay the work of no lesser artists than Mantegna, Leonardo, and Raphael.

Freud himself was quite modest about the value of his art historical observations. If he claimed more for psychoanalysis itself, his theories of the mind were received gratefully by his contemporaries as offering a way forward in treating hysteria and other neuroses characteristic of the time. He earned the reputation he had, but perhaps he didn't deserve the following he has got. "Humility is endless," T. S. Eliot intoned—or at least it ought to be. Art historians borrowing heavily from recondite theories of culture and belief systems seem to forget the potential simplicity of sufficient theory.

Probably it is unwise to rely quite as much on Freud's theories, even as digested and assimilated by others, as art history currently often does. That artists are not semigods but people with problems is doubtless a good lesson and a durable corrective to what had been a very hagiographic practice. That artistic intentionality is not the beginning and the end of art historical interpretation is another. To complicate the history of art by attending more to the periphery and undercurrents of power than simply to its own pronouncements is eminent good sense. At the same time, it is mere scholasticism to indulge more than very sparingly in mere speculation of whatever sort. A bit of pure speculation may be a valuable comple-

26. Cf. R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford, 1945).

ment to the perpetually deficient supply of evidence, but, like cayenne pepper, a touch suffices.

T. J. Clark is commendably forthright about the political content of his art history. Panofsky, like most new art historians, makes essentially political points *sub rosa*—though scarcely subtly. What is at issue here is not the causes these authors espouse but the use art history is being put to. There is a justifiable anxiety that art history can tend toward being an organ of the establishment; in this it parallels art. Museums are generally state-funded; some art history institutes are too. The National Endowment for the Humanities gives some small (by National Science Foundation standards) grants, most of them these days targeted at politically relevant topics. The art market is not driven by the taste of the masses but by the taste of boards of trustees. What is to prevent art historians from acting as an organ of government or of big corporations, praising the established, prevalent culture, some of which is itself very big business? Vasari's *Vite* were exactly this; arguably Vincent Scully's entertaining survey of American art and architecture was not so different.²⁷ The obvious antidote is to express one's feminism, one's socialism, one's radical views of any of a number of stripes via art historical writing. Then one's art history has obvious importance, just as did Winckelmann's when he set out to reform decadent modern taste and explain to his readers the nature of true beauty. Much art history written post-Panofsky reads like a defense of multiculturalism; much art history written pre-Panofsky reads like a defense of a classical education. Neither is adequate for understanding the history of art from tip to toe.

The situation is complicated by the growth of art history as an academic discipline in the last fifty years. Academia is driven by generational bonds and rivalries more intense than the familial ones Freud analyzed because there is no growing up and moving out, at least not in fields in which candidates far outnumber positions. You must hope to be let stay in the departmental household by the father (and mother) figures you fantasize about slaying, like Freud's primitive tribal chieftains. (Alternatively, if you have incestuous desires, your chances of success are much improved. What is not allowed is independence.) The years up to tenure review can be much more painful than being a teenager.

Old art history encompasses a mixture of types, and since it may be a vanishing breed, permit me a portrait of the type most helpful to the cause

27. Vincent Scully, "New World Visions: American Art and the Metropolitan Museum," co-produced by WNET and the Metropolitan Museum, in association with the BBC (VHS, 116 minutes, 1983).

of theory. For the old art history, badly practiced, is the most important stimulus to the radical version of the new. There is a kind of complacent, verbose art historian who wants to tell you about the trips he took twenty-five or forty years ago, in particular about how little it cost then to travel and to buy art. He went everywhere and can remember each hotel, its cost in local currency, and the conversion rate, and wants to brag about how he did what you never will be able to, and along the way he ate better than you ever will. He tells you, in effect, that your youth is a liability; more important, he tells you nothing about the works of art, only about his microimperialism. He has no sensitivity to his having been an ugly American barging around narcissistically amid the relics of past greatness; moreover, he has no vision of the future at all.

Against such a type, theory was forged. The theoretically armed art historian zaps the old guy's litany of dry bibliographical references and turns them to ashes in his mouth as he speaks. His megalomania is derided by an art history sensitive to self-reference and to all kinds of imperialism, including microimperialism. Such old-style art historians need not be male; but they have no place in their brains for a younger generation to be accepted as peers, or much respect for preceding generations either. They talk of respect, for sure; this is the generation that brought us teaching evaluations that ask whether professors show respect for the students but never take account of the reverse. Similarly they themselves demand respect without giving it to others. They are the smug frat brothers of the academy, and hazing is their *raison d'être*. One senior art historian, honored by the College Art Association as "distinguished," refused to participate in a symposium if a female art historian half his age, from a much less prestigious institution, wasn't "disinvited." She promptly was. Her crime? She had written a sentence or two about him in a book review that wasn't complimentary. He and his ilk will not be missed; the profession will be healthier when flattery is not the dominant discourse. Theory, however, provides no sure antidote for that. All too often, it substitutes its own culture of mutual congratulation in place of the old one.

The danger is that the old geezers will leave in their place only an angry army of theorists, who in their turn have no time for the good traditional art historians who know some slice of the history of objects backward and forward, who have looked carefully at many works and can make valuable connections, or who read outside the approved list for art historians and who think less fashionably than those who cloak their thoughts in the garb

of poststructuralism and its successors.²⁸ There is room for an art history that consists neither of endless lists of ancient formal sources used by this or that artist, perhaps used or might have used, nor of citations from any particular approved priesthood, the fruit of those reading groups of untenured faculty that resemble group dates in which everyone is trying to be both agreeable and totally hip. The theorists, by the way, have improved their chances of survival by adapting to the world of teaching evaluations. Teaching evaluations hurt the humanities in particular, since grading is irremediably somewhat subjective. In the sciences you can hope to be called tough but fair; in the humanities you can't be tough but fair and utterly defensible unless you have taught theory and you ask for a litany back (this involves memorization, as did the old slide identifications, but easier memorization). Thus an important factor in favor of "theory" is that it helps art historians survive teaching evaluations; it neatly reduces philosophical issues to short-answer formats, thereby efficiently processing profundity.

Art history is a discipline contiguous at least to many deep ideas, but it tends to be a bit short on new ideas of its own. It offers instead old ideas about the having of new ideas. Sometimes those old ideas are particularly felicitously expressed, like a new interpretation of a Beethoven sonata. When art history tries to keep up with intellectual fashion, it becomes a tart rather than the stalwart dame it might better aspire to be. As Camille Pissarro wrote to his son Lucien, "Do not vex yourself about doing something *new*," and, as "papa Corot used to say to us: 'I have only a little flute, but I try to strike the right note.'"²⁹ The business of art historians consists in large part of acting as clever custodians of cultural memory, keeping the history of good or powerful ideas from being forgotten and lost, rather than acting as priests in the cult of the present, as the self-ordained "theorists" do, vaguely emulating scientists as they do so. Art history ought to be an essentially modest business. Unlike Marc Antony, we come to praise, not to bury, and at our best to praise people from very different cultures than our own, thereby enriching the present rather than increasing its narcissism. To be retrospective need not entail intellectual conservatism, nor is the historian's caution necessarily a form of timidity.

28. For a sensible survey of the issues and a call for mutual tolerance, see Ivan Gaskell, "Visual History," in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. Peter Burke (University Park, Pa., 2001), 187–217; and also Axel Bolvig and Phillip Lindley, eds., *History and Images: Towards a New Iconology* (Turnhout, Belgium, 2003).

29. Camille Pissarro, *Letters to His Son Lucien*, ed. John Rewald (Mamaroneck, N.Y., 1972), 56, 235.

Theorists can be understood, at least in part, as a generational rebellion against the self-satisfied generation of the '60s. Additionally, theorists were raised to write grants. When one writes a grant, one knows already what the results will be; otherwise one could not justify the grant. And so with theory. The research is a process of presentation rather than of testing, like those cooking shows on television. Joan Kelly wrote of her conversion to feminist scholarship: "I had not read a new book. I did not stumble on a new archive. No fresh piece of information was added to anything I knew. But I knew now that the entire picture I had held of the Renaissance was partial, distorted, and deeply flawed by those limitations [i.e., not thinking specifically about women]."³⁰ Any breakthrough that requires no new knowledge, only an ideological conviction, ought to raise our suspicions.

Theorists have vaccinated themselves against the Popperian counterexample, by which the grandest of thoughts may be pricked by the slightest of contradictory physical facts. Their articles have no arguments; they eschew linear thought; they can never be tested, never found wrong, only wanting. Theory follows the dynamic of conversation, in which outright refutation is sedulously avoided. Like the polite conversationalist, the theorist never baldly asks what his or her interlocutor actually knows or has read. Instead she enjoins some prominent theorist as a fellow thinker with herself ("As *x* has shown . . ."), and her listener or reader is invited to join the group and think the same way. Any movement that invites its initiates to share, rather than to be locked out by some never-ending bibliographical kowtowing, is likely to take some hold.

The art history called the art history of theory is in large part allegorical. It reacts against a society permeated with the language and lies of advertising—a language now adopted by a museum establishment increasingly modeled on corporations—and tries to throw a grenade into the cesspool language has become in an age in which television has replaced the King James Bible and world leaders can hardly construct a sentence. The art history that argues against positivism, against interpretation, against its own masterpieces is protesting against the status quo as surely as was Hippolyte Taine when he held up the Italian Renaissance as a unique moment in human history and decried his own nineteenth-century Paris. Those theorists are in rebellion against the clear-cut claims of science, which peel off layers of ignorance like layers of an onion and uncover only more igno-

30. Joan Kelly, *Women, History, and Theory: The Essays of Joan Kelly* (Chicago, 1984), xiii.

rance below.³¹ The theorists respond with a new religion, in which no time or person or work is special. They erase the whole notion of period (whereas in social history, with its focus on political meanings, some vague analogy between the reign of a political party or issue and a phase of style history operates). Art history *per forza* is born again, but perhaps no richer than it was. Art history ought to aspire to a diversity of means and ends that contribute to a complex whole, rather than resembling the warring city-states of medieval Italy, each carousing within its walls.

The expansion to a world history of art rather than a European history of art, if done responsibly, would enrich us all—as would, arguably, expanding the European history of art beyond objects we admire to those we have distaste and even contempt for, such as Nazi art. Perhaps reception theory has even planted some doubts as to whether all Nazi art would necessarily revolt us if we met it without prejudice, whether our taste might occasionally betray our politics. The medieval origins of Western art as a didactic tradition have left lingering suspicions that all art has some ideological message, and that we had better be on the lookout for it. If we promote social history over connoisseurship, we can ensure that we admire only what we are proud to be caught admiring. We run then no risks by exposing our taste, but we also take away some of the excitement of looking. We need to look without knowing in advance what we think of what we look at. Who could then not be curious about art and artifacts from the entire globe, and from Wallace and Gromit to the bejeweled reliquaries commissioned by kings, and from the ample supply of artists whose obscurity has more to do with historical circumstances than lack of merit? Who could not want to have a more comprehensive historical and cultural context in which to understand a wider variety of objects better? The desirability of a more comprehensive art history is not at all at issue, nor is the objective of keeping the history of art from declining into cultural propaganda. Happily, these two desiderata are potentially complementary efforts.

What is at issue is a harder problem: namely, what makes art history important? In the old days, taste was an attribute of class, and its refinement was one of the goals of a comfortable life. We have rejected this function for the history of art—or at least we have restated it so that the class so defined is not a socioeconomic elite but a self-selecting class of

31. Cf. Bernard Williams, *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*, ed. A. W. Moore (Princeton, 2006), chapter 16.

people who somewhat narcissistically see their own values validated in the history of art by women artists, by homosexual artists, by wealthy patrons, or in general by nonconformists. We have written a history of art that turns Sir Joshua Reynolds's inside out. For Reynolds, the history of art was a record of the superiority of a certain style, the classical as transmitted via the Old Masters; for us, it has become a demonstration of the absence, indeed of the absurdity, of any universalizing norm, a history of the triumph of uninhibited individuality. Reynolds was a Parmenidian at heart, a believer in the essential stability of what matters; many of us are by contrast Heraclitean. Fried's history of art offers an exception to both. He tries to have his cake and eat it too, to seem radically modern while practicing an art history in which a traditionalist can certainly feel at home. His art history is fairly traditional in its heroic structures: theatricality (and the "modernistic") are to be "defeated."³² It offers a deconstructionist's heaven in which tradition itself subverts tradition.

What if we were not to use the history of art to validate our preexisting cultural programs but attempted to separate art and politics, at least provisionally? Freud only asked the questions that his preexisting theories were geared to answer. Couldn't there be art historical questions that we felt compelled to try to answer, about which we would still care even if we couldn't answer them conclusively? Disinterested though not unimportant questions, such as how unorthodox was Bosch's imagination? Did artists help ensure the success of Christianity? Did the visual arts not only reflect but also affect Western thought about politics and sexuality, as well as religion and spirituality more generally? What might Michelangelo's poetry—or Ariosto's—tell us about his sculpture and architecture? How would the history of art change if we included prints among the "major" arts? Was the career of Giovanni Battista Bertani diminished by the religious troubles in Italy; would he otherwise have been remembered as a great talent? How did the rather stunning and special architecture of Lecce come to be built? Can we construct a history of art praised as "primitive" (including the Italian "primitives") as a counterweight to that called "classical"? What were the steps by which it became possible for the visual arts to include humor, even to the exclusion of seriousness? How and when did the growth of advertising affect the production of art? Was Magritte thinking of Le Corbusier when he featured the same briar pipe as had served as the closing illustration of *Vers une architecture* (fig. 9), the same

32. Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 163. Cf. Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality*, 51.

Image Not Available

Fig. 9. Last page of Le Corbusier's *Vers une architecture*, first published 1923.

pipe Foucault would later write his book about, *Ceci n'est pas une pipe?* What was the relationship between the promoters of abstract expressionism and American chauvinism? Has the growth of contemporary art museums helped or hurt the viability of art as a profession? What have been the consequences of understanding the history of art in terms of ever-waxing freedom of expression (i.e., the triumph of art over craft)?

The new history would tell us that there are no disinterested questions, and of course there aren't. We might still make room for questions disinterested in a Kantian sense, the questions a good undergraduate asks, before having been "carefully taught to hate and fear," as the song says: good amateur questions. Not questions that take us to do research in a city we like to visit, or because we are working out our own neuroses, or because we get a kick out of interviewing the artist personally. The history of art ought to be an intellectual playing field where people who have different ideas about gender or about taxation or about God or about the current war can nevertheless engage one another—and not about trivialities either, but about matters worthy of great respect and far-ranging curiosity. It might be better first to discuss art, and then politics, rather than the way we at least implicitly operate now. Can't we study other people's politics without imposing our own? Theorists would say no, but the lure of history is the possibility of understanding better how the world once worked than we are able to understand its present (mal)functioning. We are not only engaged by but also threatened by the present; the past we can try to be disinterested about, and yet still sympathetic toward.

I visited Hungary before the communist regime was challenged, and at the Museum of Fine Arts there I found people working on the history of art with whom I felt perfectly at home, not because they were closet capitalists by any means, or I a closet communist, but because we shared devotion to great art (a category sometimes better left vague; I can agree to honor what you believe to be great art, even if it wouldn't be my choice), and we both respected meticulous study of it. Scholarship survived when freedom of speech in general did not, and not because it didn't matter but because the Hungarians had a tradition of dedication to art that outlasted regimes. A history of art that is either the mouthpiece of established power or the mouthpiece of organized reform (however admirable) is less valuable than one that brings together diverse kinds of people (I don't mean diverse here strictly in its contemporary, limited usage, but all kinds of diversity), brings them together civilly and makes possible a mutual listening along with the mutual looking. I do not mean

to express admiration for Nazis who collected Vermeer but instead to suggest that scholarship, art historical and other, ought to produce communities that bridge standard social identities—but only if scholarship is pursued on lines not dictated by those standard social identities.

When people on the street are as apt to talk about—and disagree about—the permanent collections in their city as about sports, or as apt to tell art historian jokes as Unitarian jokes, then we'll have an art history to brag about, and an art history that links us to people unlike ourselves, except that they share our dedication to a subject that transcends national and religious boundaries. When in Paris I met a North African with whom I could talk about ancient philosophy, and do so with a gusto classrooms rarely engender, education had provided something that made the wide real world accessible to me. Studying Plato was of practical benefit. On a mundane level we had no more in common than any two randomly selected human beings; our politics would not have brought us together—nothing but our interest in books would have. I could talk with him, as on another occasion I spoke with Emily Kimbrough over tea in the Pulitzer mansion about ancient Greek and its benefits *vis-à-vis* Latin. A classical education, like art history, is valuable in no small part as something that can bring together people whose politics, class, age, race, gender, or religion would only tend to separate them. It is not that classical culture is best but that a culture is valuable when it enables one to recognize a basic and profound commonality with a stranger. Classical education did that for centuries of European history, echoing thereby the hospitality to strangers of Homeric Greece. We need a culture now that gives us the classic comic resolution—i.e., recognition—across real distances, and that does so by transcending the culture of the everyday in a particular place in a particular time. Culture is meant to make us happy—not merely because it delights us but because it helps us to practice coping with sorrow and because it produces a sense of community that transcends boundaries, even including death.

Impenetrable theory, even if motivated by generous political aims, excludes the working folk it pretends to honor, and so implicitly declares once again, “Let them eat cake.” The culture we have lost—the culture produced by reading the King James Bible, watching Shakespeare, and making pilgrimages to see the Old Masters—we might consider seeking again in some renewed form, one that takes discriminating account of twentieth-century accomplishments, including aspects of popular culture. The point is to bring together people who value the various fruits of

human talent and diligence, some bland and some more pungent. Art historians ought not despise the art of the Renaissance, while they are admiring quilts. Nobody loved finely wrought fabrics more than the Italians of the Renaissance, after all; their wealth was built on it.

A canon is that which people of different times and local cultures can yet discuss together, like a library in a foreign city in which one immediately feels oriented, even as it is exactly the differences among the various libraries that prove most stimulating. We need to reacquire a respect for achievement, without neglecting to respect cultures with a small “c” and achievement that is largely consumed by the fight for survival. We can assist in preserving the peoples of the Andaman Islands in the Indian Ocean and still hope to train violinists who can master the Berg Concerto as well as audiences who can hear and appreciate it when it has been mastered. In a world of increasing peace and sufficient prosperity, we might hope that artistic accomplishment could flourish, and that culture might be spread both wide and deep. But the wideness is primary, and that width needs to be chronological as well as geographical. I was told recently that at a fancy prep school, a Great Books literature course included only twentieth-century works. That is parochialism, even if it may have met current definitions of “diversity.”

“Theory,” as the current locution has it, is in some sense right, just as connoisseurship is in large part valid. In the latter case, we need to have some means of judging authenticity and quality, and the process cannot be purely objective. That which can be made objective can be faked. In the former, we acknowledge that art has its potency for us in large part for purely psychological reasons, that we cannot understand art simply as the effusion of genius. Art is the compensation we give ourselves for our mortality; it is that which survives us by the deliberate choice of utter strangers, after any personal, sentimental connection has long since died out. “Theory” attempts to understand the history of art at a level more fundamental than personalities and markets, as a communal exploration of consciousness. So it is, though it is also inextricably part of the history of religion, business, and politics, and can never be fully distilled from that complicated mire. Theory, as Aristotle taught us, comes after practice, and *praxis* costs money and time. It takes place in particular circumstances. There are historical limits to what is possible, as well as theoretical ones.

If a discipline is to have integrity it must have questions held in common, progress toward some kind of solution of which is possible. Currently we have commonalities to the point of clubbiness, but we lack

very compelling questions. Some art historical writing reeks of the catechism, when it ought to taste of passionate curiosity and daring. Yet the fundamental art historical question boils down to some variation on the following query, simple enough to state: is this well done (or badly done) by virtue of being normal or abnormal? Connoisseurship is thus built into the quest but need by no means define it. Ideas play a part, but a part trumped by the role of judgment (art historians are like what we used to say of the Japanese, that they did not so much have the ideas that made business thrive as use them effectively). The history of art is so satisfying a subject precisely because success by means of normality and success by means of eccentricity are both possibilities, as are many shades in between. And although the theory of the history of art may best be left simple, its practice, as well as the experience of art it provides, are both challengingly complex.

4

RATED XX

We all have learned reliance
on the sacred teachings of science
so I hope through life you never will decline
in spite of philistine defiance
to do what all good scientists do
Experiment, experiment
Make it your moral day and night
Be curious, though disapproving friends may frown
Get furious at each attempt to hold you down
If this advice you'll only employ
The future can offer you infinite joy
Experiment, experiment and you'll see.

—COLE PORTER, "Experiment," from *Nymph Errant*, 1933

W

hen I teach a course called "Methods of Art History" (a title I inherited), I include some women writers (Susan Sontag, sometimes Svetlana Alpers or Brunhilde Ridgeway), but I don't "do feminism." It is the one art-historical method my students, most of them female, are familiar with; many of them think it is the only good method by which to study the history of art. Accordingly, in the oral reports at the end of the semester, the students "do feminism" for me. Sometimes a third of the class reports on Linda Nochlin. Although I am invested in seeking alternatives—not replacements, but complements—to the scientific model of knowledge, I would just as soon leave feminism undone. I shall try briefly to explain why.

I am a feminist, though that is about as specific a claim as saying that I support democracy. Moreover, it isn't the same claim when made in reference to American culture of the present, such as it is, as when made in reference to some other culture distant in time or place. In the United

States in the twenty-first century, I want women in the workplace to get the same opportunities, pay, and privileges as men. I do not hold as my utopian ideal a world in which 50 percent of all jobs (or slightly more if the sex difference is more) are held by women. Women ought be able to choose whether they want to be mothers or not, and, provided a society's economy permits this luxury, to choose whether they want to work or whether they prefer to partner with someone who will handle the financial needs for both.

What does all that have to do with art history? Not a lot, at least not very directly. Yet feminist art historians are legion. It is generally not their mission to champion styles that have traditionally been deemed feminine, like the rococo. Instead, since Linda Nochlin wrote an essay entitled "Why Have There Been No Great Female Artists?" (1971),¹ they have been hunting the storerooms for works by women who could be rehabilitated into a revised canon, and wondering which of the works that pass under the name of Tintoretto or Orazio Gentileschi are actually by their daughters. Connoisseurship can have its uses, after all.

Some feminist art historians look for female sensibilities in works by women. Is Artemesia Gentileschi taking some voodoo-doll-like revenge on the male sex when she depicts Holofernes decapitated by her stand-in, Judith? When she paints Susannah, is it because she identifies with the female protagonist (or could it be instead that her customers got a vicarious thrill from the parallel between the Old Testament woman who was harassed by old men and the painter who was victimized by her supposed mentor?). When Berthe Morisot painted her child's wet nurse, surely (says Linda Nochlin) she must have put something of the gender and class frictions of that subject into her brush strokes? (She couldn't just have been using a free model, like Rembrandt with his mirror?)² Does the new history of art allow for any simple economies of production, or must every-

1. In Linda Nochlin, *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays* (New York, 1988), 145–78; cf. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London, 1929). See also Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* (London, 1999); *The Guerrilla Girls' Bedside Companion to the History of Western Art* (New York, 1998); Richard Leppert, *Art and the Committed Eye: The Cultural Functions of Imagery* (Boulder, Colo., 1996), chapters 9–10; and John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London, 1972).

2. Though, admittedly, Rembrandt's preference for his own ignoble face implies a certain impishness along with the factors of convenience and economy. For the painting's "signs of erasure, of tension, of conscious or unconscious occlusion of a substantial and disturbing reality as well as the signs of daring and pleasure," see Linda Nochlin, "Morisot's *Wet Nurse*: The Construction of Work and Leisure in Impressionist Painting," in *Perspectives on Morisot*, ed. T. J. Edelstein (New York, 1990), 91–102. The painting is in a private collection.

thing be fraught with overtones and undertones? Why are historians of minimalism and modernism so given to the ornate themselves? As these examples imply, feminist art history tends to view traditional connoisseurship with suspicion; often it allies itself with social history (more so than does “theory”), though it avails itself readily of that part of theory which prioritizes issues of the complexity of both real and perceived power in relation to a conflicted and complicated sense of self. Biographical information is sorted for evidence of the crimes of paternalistic society.

Recent art history has spilled much ink trying to come to terms with the sexualities of Leonardo, Michelangelo, Caravaggio, and others, as these are supposed to have affected their art. Caravaggio’s young Bacchus figures, which Donald Posner taught us to see as homoerotic,³ have morphed imperceptibly into more straightforward essays in spoofing the antique and, in general, the pretentiousness of academic art. Donatello’s bronze *David* (fig. 10), once widely accepted as homoerotic, now can be seen again as revolutionary enough without flagrantly defying the stated social norms of the city the patron virtually ruled. That he is a boy is true to the text; that he has a tall feather (an ornament on Goliath’s helmet) inside his calf helps, like the sword on the outside, to stabilize the structure—as none other than John Pope-Hennessy observed (and it does so much more wittily than with the stump typical of marble sculptures); that David is comely is what you would expect—even without Neoplatonism in the air. If the Florentines didn’t see anything abnormal, if they treated the statue as though it neatly embodied their communal political ideals rather than clandestine practices, why shouldn’t we? There are many beautiful nude or nearly nude youths in Florentine Quattrocento painting and sculpture that are as sensuous as Donatello’s. Yet no one suggests that Luca della Robbia’s dancing youths on the *Cantoria* for the Duomo are homoerotic. Beautiful sculptures of youths, like representations of beautiful Venuses, might inadvertently have stimulated a variety of sexual impulses, but we are I think confusing cause and effect to suppose that they were made in order to express the artist’s own sexual taste and desires. A generation later, Leonardo’s art indisputably records his predilection for beautiful youths, one that evidently his viewers of whatever sexual orientation shared. Michelangelo specialized in the athletic male nude and had very limited access to female models, but despite that, he painted and

3. Donald Posner, “Caravaggio’s Homo-erotic Early Works,” *Art Quarterly* 34 (1975): 301–24.

Image Not Available

Fig. 10. Donatello, *David*, bronze, mid-fifteenth century. Museo del Bargello, Florence.

sculpted many memorable women. Homosexuals they may all or some have been, to one extent or another, but their art is not so personal, nor their unconscious so dominant, as to transmit their sexualities like carbon paper. Their works are cultural artifacts, made in a time when personal traits still seemed less important than communal ideals.

Women artists are customarily now also treated as artists whose sexuality must be at issue, and moreover an issue that affects not only the life but also the work. Back we go to believing in the importance of biography. Even if it cannot be seen to affect the work, that too is grist for the mill. The concept of repression makes all things relevant. The psychology of style, a stock phrase since Heinrich Wölfflin, makes human consciousness into an allegory and looking at art into a therapy session. Feminist art history is ideologically opposed to the proposition that works of art need not carry gender as an attribute. Perception is gendered, they seem to aver, and thereby art is too. Experience may well be gendered to some degree, but personally I would question whether perception itself need be, any more than ratiocination. At the very least it may be said that art history ought not to take as conclusive what science is still investigating.

The provincialisms of multicultural, feminist, and queer-minded art histories represent a logical outgrowth of the earlier generation's specializations. The survey course died because no one, not even the stodgy old art history types, wanted to look at the sweep of art history. Gone are the days when chairpersons taught introductory courses. Everybody wanted their own little corner of turf; nobody had the energy to try to know everything from the pyramids to decaying sharks, let alone to joust with all the other experts in a broadly defined field. It had been a vain project, hadn't it, founded on a practice of art history as long captions to pictures? Yet the sweep of art is real; it is the sweep of art history that fails. The new, new art history we seek ought once again to exhibit an interest in everything and simply admit that much remains to be learned. At present, too often the discipline is practiced pompously, with scarcely a genuine question in sight. Too often the old imperialism has given way to a new provincialism, a bad-faith provincialism that presents its narrow-mindedness as advocacy. It is one thing to oppose an untenable primacy for classicizing art; it is quite another to denigrate all dead white males. Finding ambivalence everywhere can constitute its own form of certainty, as pernicious as the dogmatism that characterized the old connoisseurs. Singly we cannot effectively take a scholarly interest in everything, sad to say, but if we resist the narrowness and conformity that professional demands tend to

foster, collectively we can pursue more questions, and more wide-ranging questions, than at present.

Feminists who don't want men in their classes can't hold sway forever. If being a feminist art historian means addressing only those who already agree with your priorities, then it is nothing more than intellectual isolationism. What could be more deadly than a coffee klatch of art historians discussing their artists' breast-feeding experiences? On the other hand, what could be more crucial to thinking about the history of art as a whole than realizing what roles in its making and reception women could or could not play? That is one of the great variables. The imagery made about women has been as important to the history of art as the imagery made about men; such imagery has plausibly been as important to women as to men. The fact that most of the makers have been men is certainly worth taking note of; it may even call for a degree of caution about the vision of humanity offered in our historical art, but it scarcely calls for obsessive reiteration. I, for one, am as eager to know how men think about women as how women think about women.

The roles of women are variously encoded in the history of art, but to reduce the history of art to evidence of women's rights or lack thereof would be like voting on the basis of the abortion issue alone. The history of art is our main subject, even if we are feminists and most artists have been men. Our project is to understand art's coming into being and its perpetuation. Gender relations are a small, albeit significant, piece of that whole. The problem now is to reinvent the whole, an unHegelian whole and an unRomantic whole, a whole whose sinews are nothing more, and nothing less, than the interest artists and viewers have happened to take in earlier examples and their reasons for that interest, both the negative and the positive interest. The history of art we construct for ourselves becomes a meditation on attitudes toward history, both our culture's and its long line of ancestors'. To reject much of that past because women were mostly busy at home amounts to cutting off our noses to spite our faces.

One of the great themes of art is human suffering. Art allows us to experience suffering virtually. Suffering often incites virtue, and the hope is that virtual suffering can improve us too. Another of the great themes is transience. Art offers us a vicarious experience of immortality. Art also offers us sensuous beauty, and the opportunity to enjoy it without positioning ourselves as to gender. Feminism, at least if crudely practiced, cancels this third value of art. In general, recent art historical practice has

exaggerated the part of the viewer in that balance of power between object, artist, and viewer. In the past, the connoisseur overemphasized the object, the biographer overemphasized the artist, and the iconographer, like the style historian, overemphasized the period. The feminist exaggerates the factor of gender, especially the viewer's. All of the new, theoretical approaches have this in common, that they balkanize the viewer by exaggerating the importance of the particular characteristics of the viewer to the process of looking at art.

Kenneth Clark said of Giorgione's Dresden *Venus* that it was "a poem of sensual ecstasy so beautifully controlled that we hardly recognize it for what it is. But show the picture to a Philistine and there is no doubt what his reactions would be. . . . I doubt if any picture so designated [erotic] could be called a masterpiece. Eroticism is so strong a flavor that it would destroy the balance of sense and form."⁴ Long before reception theory was there to point the way, Clark recognized the role of the viewer as an active one and cautioned against treating the work of art as though it were real rather than a representation. The museum viewer (as opposed to the patron) ought not to approach the work in his male (or her female) identity, but with something akin to Kantian disinterest, just as we ought not to bring our religious interest or disinterest to the task of analyzing an altar-piece, unless we approach specifically in a devotional role. The point is not that no fine work of art can be erotic (even the basically Victorian Kenneth Clark allows that Correggio's *Jupiter and Antiope* [fig. 11] is), but that no viewer whose interest is art historical ought to come looking for titillation. We cannot of course look at works of art with perfectly impersonal eyes, but we can try to make looking at art an exercise in being human rather than merely frail, mortal, cultured, and gendered.

Similarly, when buying a work of art, it is better not to be looking for a souvenir of one's personal experiences, but for something that transcends one's own particularities (it need not be idealizing, but if it has particularities, it is no advantage that they correspond to our own) and can claim to have some general interest. If the Archaic Greeks made their statues smile to make them more pleasing to the gods to whom they were dedicated, we, approaching works of art, ought try to do so in the guise of classical Greek statues, ageless, genderless, and psychologically balanced. Doing so would keep our personal quirks of fancy from getting in the way of our aesthetic delight. Viewing requires an appropriate discipline, a curbing of

4. Kenneth Clark, *What Is a Masterpiece?* (New York, 1979), 28–29.

Image Not Available

Fig. 11. Correggio, *Jupiter and Antiope* (also called *Venus, Satyr, and Cupid*), c. 1523. Louvre, Paris.

our individual “scripts.” Medieval viewers came to art to cast off their troubles; Kant advocated a fine disinterest in aesthetic matters; similarly, we ought to cast off some of our situatedness in order to approach works of art. As Michelangelo said of the Medici portraits he was commissioned to carve that no one would care in a thousand years what they looked like, so with us in our role as consumers of art: when that thousand years has passed, if we’re lucky, the works we admire will still be admired, but by people who don’t care a hoot about our individual identity. Not necessarily the style (i.e., the formal cause), but the function of art (its *raison d’être* or final cause) has a characteristic generality to it. Classicism, you could say, failed to differentiate between the two.

Recently I received an invitation to submit a proposal for a feminist art history conference. Any such proposal ought to “focus on theorizing masculinity and maleness; childhood; violence; and pedagogies. Workshop organizers are free to choose any one (or more) of these plenary topics but are not obliged to consider masculinity.” “Not obliged to consider masculinity”: the phrase is absurd on several levels—not least its high-handed prescriptiveness. If we’ve replaced a flexible and debatable canon with a list of acceptable topics and acceptable treatments of them, we’re not moving in the right direction. Surely scholarship thrives on challenging what have been our own truisms rather than listening to litanies. Looking at art, like buying art, ought to involve a sense of discovery rather than of confirmation. Mere confirmation is so boring.

We’ve come a long way since Panofsky claimed that common sense sufficed as an art historian’s methodology, and we may well wonder how much of it has been in the right direction. Rather like Bible-thumpers past and present, theorists may choose to treat only what affords the opportunity to say what they think needs to be said. In the case of feminists, the majority of humankind has an investment in those assertions. It is all too easy.

By no means do I mean to imply that gender is not an interesting topic or its intersections with the history of art not well worth consideration. Female patrons or partners of patrons, female consumers of art, female rulers, women in general, have been and are integral to the Western cultural tradition. Their changing roles have been a prime dynamic force on how Western culture developed. At times their roles are clearly distinct from those of men. But I don’t believe that there is any work a man made that a woman couldn’t have, and vice versa. I would argue that the sex of

a painter of a particular work of art is about as pertinent as what wood it is on—worth noting, indeed, but scarcely in itself riveting.

The history of art will become more interesting as soon as we let it be, and we can begin by being more focused on the foreign, strange, and sometimes barbarous works of art than on ourselves.

5

THE BOTTOM LINE

He was anything but a negligible art historian, but he had a positive aversion to rational analysis.

—JOHN POPE-HENNESSY

If in many ways our view of the history of art appears through the prism of some experience or other of the present (and it is to the credit of the new art history that we are so conscious of this), we still tend to ignore, both in the present and in the past, the role of money in the making and preserving of art. So consequential are these that they affect the course of governments and religions. Although many people are at least vaguely familiar with Raphael's great cartoons for the Sistine tapestries, most don't know that Leo X, who had commissioned them, left the papacy so bankrupt that the tapestries had to be pawned to pay for the conclave to elect his successor.

Art is often arbitrarily placed above commodification. It is as though art were essentially priceless, as though trying to understand the market rationally and buy art opportunistically was the last remaining heresy in a godless world. Meanwhile, however, artists starve and people live with reproductions—reproductions, moreover, of mediocre quality, many of them sold by the museums themselves, those supposed bastions of refinement. An age in which mass famine threatened nevertheless made art from jewels; in our own time, which at least gives lip service to the idea of the end of poverty, artists who work from scrap materials sometimes do so because they have little choice.

There are some notable exceptions to this discreet silence about the finances of art, not all of them Marxist.¹ Indeed, Walter Benjamin, who

1. E.g., John Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu: A Web of Social History* (Princeton, 1989); Richard Goldthwaite, *Wealth and the Demand for Art in Italy, 1300–1600* (Baltimore, 1993). See

gave us the wand of aura by which art is grafted onto religion and taken out of commerce for much of its history, was himself a Marxist. The economics of the history of art as a factor in its evolution have been, oddly enough, set aside both by Marxists and by Freudians, such as T. J. Clark, who cares more about the artist's idea of his public than his flesh-and-bones market. Nevertheless, generally an artist had to sell his works in order to survive. Only rarely did an artist who didn't need to sell at least some of his works bother to make them with a focus and intensity that produced greatness. This is partly why women have historically usually not been at the forefront of artistic achievement, though it could also be argued that a handful of women still protected by their domestic role from the devastating effects of modern market forces on artistic life have now a peculiarly privileged position—rather like the traditional liberal artist who did not work for mercenary reward—and may achieve something more worthwhile than those regimented by a conventional career track. As for men and the impetus to make a living, Vasari criticized Sebastiano del Piombo for slacking off as soon as he was given a sinecure. Lucas van Leyden, though he married a rich woman, presumably needed to make money for the sake of his self-respect. Van Gogh certainly hoped to sell his work. There have been writers who left their manuscripts to be found after their deaths, but artists generally have careers, however struggling. Market forces, tempered with enlightened patronage, have assisted the making of art, and when they haven't, art wasn't made—though it cannot be said that the profession of artist has seen many benefits from industrialization and incorporation. If academic positions had not arisen to support artists, the profession might already have been nearly erased. Since the Industrial Revolution, that which is time-consuming and labor-intensive is less valued by the bourgeoisie, whose standard of living is made possible by mass-produced articles and who cannot afford to disdain them. The invention of the museum, and with it of the often not-so-enlightened, and more easily flattered, curator-patron, may have had an effect on the making of art not unlike the deleterious effect of government grants on research. A development that might seem on the surface to have opened up opportunities may actually function as a more restrictive club than the club it replaced.

Economic history tends to involve a plethora of factual details that the

further, for a more quantitatively based approach, David Galenson, *Painting Outside the Lines: Patterns of Creativity in Modern Art* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001), and Michelle O'Malley, *The Business of Art: Contracts and the Commissioning Process in Renaissance Italy* (New Haven, 2005).

antipositivists have been reluctant to dirty their hands with. As a consequence, art historians often work with a dearth of hard facts and blinkered by the absence of a statistical picture of how much art was in circulation, old and new, for what prices, relative to what other expenses and priorities. It is often taken as a matter of faith that art must have been important in every time, in every society; its importance therefore need not be investigated. Yet that ought to be one of the basic questions: not just what is the best or most interesting art that has been made, but what art has been valued and with what result, both artistic and otherwise? The history of bad taste and its effects deserves to be written, and must be if we are to ask how our history of art fits into our history of thought. How does the history of art fit into our economic history? How do the two worlds, the materialistic and the dreamy, mesh?

Svetlana Alpers has been a methodologically interesting art historian partly because she refused to ignore the market as a factor in the making of art (her father was a Nobel prize-winning economist), even as she dedicated her studies to the more theoretical end of research, following in the footsteps of Michel Foucault, and even as she also showed herself more aware than some of literary studies (her husband was Paul Alpers). Genre is her prime issue, rather than style; she emphasizes the everydayness of the artistic vision of the Dutch, as had Eugène Fromentin (1820–76) in *The Old Masters of Belgium and Holland*. Her co-author Michael Baxandall also has spent his career looking for alternatives to the history of style. He has tended to see art in terms of its reception among a conditioned population, a more inflected version of conceptualizing art by genre (though genre serves to conceptualize viewership by means of subject matter). Both were fostered by E. H. Gombrich, who had been schooled in Viennese Gestalt psychology—like economics, a social science. Gombrich was a seeker after something more profound in art than meaning or significance, namely, the extension via art of the range of human experience. His critics said he was only interested in the classical tradition and the history of representation, but they could not have read all of his writings when they said so, for it is clear that he took the true value of art to be in its creation of what we now facetiously dub virtual reality, that is, not in its naturalism but in its extranaturalism. The issue of naturalism in art was for him but a gauge by which to measure the residue.

In our own time we like to think we have sorted out the Masaccios from the Gentile da Fabriano, the Chuck Closés and the Gerhard Richters from the Thomas Kincaids. Whether we have a good communal eye

or not remains to be seen (our blind eye for the accomplishments of state funding for the performing arts under communism raises doubts about this), but we can be sure that computer technologies will increasingly affect our access to works of art and the nature of the works themselves. In the world of the twenty-first century, to be famous is to be world famous, and that is a heavy burden for a single object to bear. Unless we can revive local cultures, authentic (though potentially virtual) local cultures, rather than our dismal streets of watered-down chain-store samples of world culture, like bad soup, our principal experience of visual art may be reduced to cinema, and, if we are not careful, cinema made by big studios with huge budgets and low perceived risk. Just as it is not clear that libraries have been good in the long run for the preservation and the creation of literature (we buy books we intend to discard and leave it to libraries to stock quality, even as they need to generate high circulation numbers for the sake of their budgets), so it is not clear that museums have made high art more important culturally than it would otherwise have been: we expect to find quality only in a museum, and only from someone famous, and so we live with less art in our daily lives than cavemen had. Winkelmann's festival has been moved indoors, and indoors is an inherently more sober, though not necessarily a more Puritanical, place.

The development of game theory, by John von Neumann and John Nash, may have applications in the history of art. If we want a theory of how historical periods evolve, rather than simply a description of various phases of style history whose reality we routinely deny, we need to develop ideas about the complex of factors that make for an artistic environment: costs and benefits for artists and patrons, both material and psychological ones, and the succession of equilibria that balance those factors, for a time. It does not erase free will from the history of art to undertake to explain artistic choice as rational: complex certainly, and at times even random, but even so, rational. If an artist like Rembrandt chooses to work in a style that is less commercially successful than that of the meticulous Gerard Dou, the art historian's task is to figure out why that made sense from Rembrandt's perspective. Traditional art history might shy away from the problem by saying that "Rembrandt's genius" was ahead of its time and didn't subscribe to seventeenth-century conventions of finish; a better art history would be willing to try to take account of how the psychological, cultural, and economic pressures on Rembrandt were different from those on Dou, partly because of Dou's own presence in the scheme of things. Granted that Rembrandt was spectacularly different as

an individual from Dou, he was still bound to the realities of seventeenth-century Holland. Genius, too, is a historical entity. We can love a painting or an etching by Rembrandt just for what it looks like, but we cannot know much about it except historically. Even then, knowing it is a perpetually imperfect business, like piecing together shards of an antique vase long since utterly demolished. Perhaps we as art historians can hope to do as well with our historical reconstructions as Wedgwood did with his versions of ancient pottery (figs. 12, 13).

We know less about how an artist should work and how an artist should be paid than did our forefathers centuries ago. We have a schizophrenic conception of the artist as despised and poor, living in a garret, the prophet who sees and refuses to compromise with the faults of his age, and on the other hand, the artist as the lionized genius of society, the guest of potentates, the relatively immortal mortal: the heritage, respectively, of the nineteenth century and the nineteenth century's image of the sixteenth century. These days the celebrity artist is society's fool, one who jests provocatively with those in power but never really threatens them because he needs to live on their scraps. Twenty-first-century viewers too often sit back and wait for curators to tell them what to admire. We are perhaps as blind to the possibility of overlooked modern art as Reynolds was to overlooked Old Masters. Whether or not the Greeks did, we now believe our own myths much too credulously.

Image Not Available

Fig. 12. *Portland Vase*, c. 5–25 CE. British Museum, London.

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Fig. 13. Josiah Wedgwood, copy of the *Portland Vase*, 1790.

6

BACK TO IDOLATRY?

“It was with extreme Difficulty that I could bring my Master to understand the Meaning of the Word Opinion, or how a Point could be disputable.”

—Spoken by the narrator in the Land of the Houyhnhnms; Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, book 4, chapter 8

If you study the history of art as a collection of biographies, it shrinks. It is reduced to the loves and fears, the friendships and hardships, the penury and the maneuverings of many isolated individuals. If you study the history of art as a history of beautiful objects, like visiting an ideal museum, you may well find the experience gratifying, but it is a bit like eating only meringue. One cannot keep up indefinitely the exercise of pretending the history of art has no underbelly, that folks innately desire to make exquisitely gorgeous things and so they do—as water flows to the sea—it is all so simple as that. Even if you expand to treating yourself not only to beautiful but also to extraordinarily expressive, complex, or skilled works, this still will not provide a history of art worth everyone's knowing. This would only be a made-for-children version of the history of art, a pat on the back for humankind which has done so well.

The newish cultural art history has provided a taste of realism by reminding us of social and political issues that attach to the history of art, but the balance was often skewed away from the history of art itself toward those issues. The works of art can degenerate to the level of brand names, props in preestablished patterns of exhortation. As I was told by an English professor after an art history lecture, the arguments were totally familiar; only the examples were novel. Interdisciplinarity ought not to be so limited. Though art may not be didactic these days, art historians often are, and dully predictable as well. Yet not all worthy causes need the active

support of the history of art, and the history of art has enough interest in itself not to need to import worthy causes. Understanding our own history as alien to our values rather than as allied to them is a task we have let slip, quite grievously.

Both the cultural art historians and the poststructuralists turn the profession away from individual objects, as though from dangerous idols. Deconstructionists understand what a previous generation forgot, that art is full of lies and that it lives by lies, as Plato knew. Deconstructionism flowered, however, in a time in which a television announcer could proclaim that the next twenty-five minutes of programming would be broadcast free of “commercial interruption,” only to be subjected to twenty-five minutes of a screen emblazoned with a network logo. If the young T. J. Clark and other social historians tended toward fervor and a touch of temper, the theorists equally understandably tended toward ironic and sardonic laughter.

There need be no divide between “objects” people and “theory” people. As Einstein said of religion and science, writing in 1941, “Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind.” So, similarly, for objects and theory. When Aristotle provided a theory of poetry, he gave us several key concepts: catharsis, as the final cause of tragedy; the tragic hero; imitation; the categories of the class of characters; an analysis of the properties of epic tragedy and comedy; the climax or recognition. All of this helped us to read the texts, or hear them, as each relating to a whole that existed only in the minds of the recipients. Aristotle gave us the delightful sense that we had gained something by coming later and having a tradition to survey, that to know what Aeschylus and Euripides had in common was to possess an important insight. The whole was greater than the sum of its parts.

I would suggest that we need something similar now to help us organize the richness of our own cultural tradition and, in particular, to make a whole of it again, even an ungainly whole. As it stands now, provincialism reigns. We need to be able to argue about what matters in the history of art, rather than to take it for granted that the ultimate goal is to be “professional.” Instead, one of the goals ought to be to reach the amateurs.

What should an art historian know? If we do not dedicate ourselves wholeheartedly to connoisseurship (including Fried’s *nouveau sort*), the most obvious alternative is a version of cultural history. Wincklemann, Taine, Peter Burke, and T. J. Clark, each in their own way, have resolved that in order to understand a phase of the history of art, one must assimilate

as much as possible about the surrounding cultural context. One must get outside the world of art, at least into the worlds of religion, politics, gender relations, and socioeconomic competition, if one is to attempt anything like a historical understanding. To put it bluntly, either you look at the objects from your own historical perspective, as a collector or a would-be collector, or you put some effort into trying to understand how things looked and seemed to our predecessors, because you are interested in how human history works.

The problem with the latter resolve is that it is hard to predict what knowledge might be of use to the history of art. We need to steer between the Scylla of overspecialization (a plague in particular of cultural and social history) and the Charybdis of superficiality (to which style history, connoisseurship, and theory have been prone). The cultural historian wants to know whether the courtroom scene in *The Merchant of Venice* might possibly have been played for laughs in Shakespeare's time, so thoroughgoing was the anti-Semitism; the theorist tars the play with the damning labels of oppression and marginalization and watches disdainfully as a director tries to make a theater out of such a spectacle. The cultural historian approaches *Mona Lisa* by investigating whether a married woman would be portrayed with her hair down; the theorist sees the image as the residue of image-making by male artist and male patron, as the aping of aristocratic patterns of self-promotion, and mistrusts even the quiet dignity portrayed there. Very likely both of them have more trouble simply seeing what is there than the greenest undergraduate, for whom the forest is not yet obscured.

Biography is the traditional compromise between focusing on the objects of art and focusing on the period, or the culture, or the *Zeitgeist*, or the "period eye" whence those objects came. Biography, however, is ultimately too provincial in scope. Even psychoanalysis fails to cure that problem, because it isolates the individual from historical circumstances. What matters most is not who made a work and why, but the present project of making a coherent whole out of human history, by knowing our own past for what it was, or might have been, and by venturing now to make use of that past as constructively as possible.

An art historian needs to seek out whatever information can be had about how people lived, what their visual environment looked like, how they were educated and what books they read, what speeches and sermons they heard, what poems they memorized, and so on. It is not a bad project to try to assemble the entirety of a historical culture as a framework for

some works of art. There may be something slightly horse before cart about it. Nevertheless, like cutting the Gordian knot, we might say that nothing short of universal knowledge of a particular culture will do to equip the art historian. It is hard to acquire, though, especially in time for tenure (the bulk of art historical publishing is by the least seasoned art historians, thanks to the demands of promotion and tenure committees). And then we stumble into an even more difficult problem. In attempting to learn about the breadth of a certain past culture, one loses sight of the whole, and of the question of whether there is a whole to the history of art. Is there a whole greater than the sum of its parts for art historians too, as there was for Aristotle in his *Poetics*?

If there is no whole, there are at least subwholes. There are phases in the history of Western art (and I suspect in the histories of other art similarly) in which “intertextuality,” or a continuity of visual reference that can’t be reduced to iconographic reference, is a major factor. To cut off one period from its past and future is in these cases to sever arteries. Werner Herzog’s *Nosferatu* (1979) tries to redeem German cinema by claiming descent from the pre-Nazi version by Murnau (1922). Michelangelo did not merely imitate the *Belvedere Torso* (fig. 14); he was obsessed by it, by a broken hunk of marble no one else had bothered to notice. What Michelangelo made of the *Belvedere Torso* would not be covered under a cultural art historian’s heading of antique revival. Everybody studied the *Apollon Belvedere*; it took a truly eccentric man to elevate the *Belvedere Torso* to a theme worthy of dozens of variations. The *Belvedere Torso* meant more to Michelangelo than indulgences and their abuse, though both had significant effects for his art (St. Peter’s, of which his tomb for Pope Julius II was to be the centerpiece, was to be funded through increased sales of indulgences; Martin Luther objected, and the ball he started rolling led to the repainting of Michelangelo’s nudes in the *Last Judgment* for the altar wall of the Sistine Chapel). Aristotle would tell us one is formal cause and the other is a kind of final cause, but for art historians under current practice, there is resistance to thinking about the various facets—formal sources, cultural issues, and the essentially psychological issues—embedded in such a choice of obsessions. The tendency is to “do” one or the other. One “does” feminist art history or patronage or queer theory. Conveniently, one’s bibliographical responsibilities are kept manageable by that self-definition. Certainly it is easier to know the writings of select art historians than to know something about the history of art, and too often we settle for that second best, making the authors of academic press books

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Fig. 14. *Belvedere Torso*, first century B.C. Vatican Museums, Vatican State.

into our intercessors. At its worst, this strategy for feasibility makes a discipline whose glory ought to be its wide range and accessibility into a carnival of hermeticisms, a side show in the circus of intellectual thought.

The problem, how do you set about to learn what you need to know in order to understand the history of art, is always going to be daunting. It ought to be. What you may need to solve a particular problem may be a needle in the haystack that only serendipity will reveal. Grant proposal review committees rarely accept general curiosity leavened with serendipity as a research strategy. But if we turn the question around, and ask ourselves what great thinkers of the past (not merely the canonical ones, but ones waiting to be discovered) are both worth studying in themselves and might offer some insight into the making and receiving of works of art, we might get a better history of art. Reading widely, traveling widely, and listening widely might be the best education an art historian can get; reflecting this, perhaps a senior art historian's writing ought to be different in method than a student's.

Seek universal knowledge, and art history will be included. Let what you have learned determine what art you study, rather than vice versa. I once met a prominent theorist walking away from a speech by the president of the World Bank (who was at that time a wise and good man) because she had "work to do." Wouldn't art history have better theory if its practitioners were actively curious about the world and its potential for change? If art historians really want to challenge the status quo, why is so little said about the current market for art and its ruthless promotion of celebrities to the exclusion of many ordinary laboring artists whose works deserve respect and who could use a decent income? It is hard to get a Yankee to spend as much on a work of art once in his lifetime as he spends going out to eat every month, perhaps even as much as he spends on beverages. (I sometimes wonder what the world would be like if the money dedicated to newsletters was spent instead on works of art—and spent by individuals rather than institutions.) In the course of questioning the old regime of connoisseurship, we seem to have produced a public that has no faith in its own aesthetic judgment, and whose collecting is limited to the bad reproductions on postcards. It is one of the ironies of our self-satisfied and self-indulgent society that we make do with reproductions vastly inferior to those produced a century ago, the heliogravures and chromolithographs.

Period, like canonicity, cannot simply be wished into nonexistence. Both are meant to be stumbled over and confronted. Neither is an abso-

lute, but both extend their tendrils into our minds. We recognize period easily in old movies, with, for instance, their quaint notions of gender and ethnicity; less so in contemporary movies, not because we have progressed but because it is harder to see the shortcomings we ourselves partake in.

I have met medievalists who haven't read saints' lives and Renaissance specialists who have never read Ariosto. I sometimes wonder how recently some Manet specialists have read Baudelaire (or, having read him, would be able to interest a literary historian in what they made of him), and how many Fred Astaire movies Picasso specialists have seen (or could comment on interestingly), or even what they know about Diaghilev. Even while the buzzword is interdisciplinarity, if we are honest we must admit that we rarely find the work of colleagues in other disciplines worth following in any detail—only if we can cite it for our own work. Even by the standards of cultural history, we tend not to know enough, and what we know is not primary enough. If we then accuse cultural historians of being chronologically restricted, who passes muster as knowing what an art historian ought? Wouldn't our students benefit if their professors took more time to explore, and weren't forced into the role of specialists beating their chests in self-applause and counting the pages of their CVs while still wet behind the ears? Mostly we read what the members of our particular clan have written, and then write letters of recommendation (sometimes called reviews) for one another. As a culture we are fostering a professoriate in the humanities selected precisely for its lack of intellectual curiosity and its avoidance of challenging the status quo. Those who question the questions and read beyond the reading lists rarely make it, and few of those who do survive have much respect for the process. Tenure committees incline as much in favor of eccentricity as grant-giving committees do in favor of serendipity. Yet eccentricity used to make for some good teachers, not to mention some good art.

We need an art history that isn't determined by fear: fear of making mistakes, fear of giving offense. Our professionalism will be our undoing, because it discourages thought and responsibility. Professionalism can degenerate into a code word for refusing to take risks. Although we might be able to muddle through without either a single theory of art history or a metatheory, we do need both to see more completely and to admit that our view is incomplete. We need to see the history of art itself (both the fact of the history, oral and visual, and its codification by professional art historians) snowballing ever more clumsily through history, as no small part of what artists and viewers have had to contend with. Art histor-

ical methods ought to be uncomplicated, yet not so simplistic as pledging our allegiance to a particular brand. If there is one thing we have lost since art history's primitive days, the time of Berenson, it is the dedication to looking at the originals, many of them, in many different places, repeatedly. (Admittedly, it is discouraging to have to pay fairly stiff fees to get into churches, from St. Paul's, London, to Sta. Croce, Florence; in my salad days, museums in Italy were free to students of any nationality, and the museums in London are still free even if all the churches aren't.)

Art itself lends depth to art history, for the art we care about over the long term addresses deep psychological needs. What art history still needs is breadth: the range to remember Thomas Hardy's Egdon Heath when trying to define what "primitive" might mean, as well as the song and dance at the Museum of Natural History in *On the Town* (1949), as well as the African masks of Picasso, the anachronism of the Pre-Raphaelites, and the Arcadian ideals of Sannazaro, Giorgione, Poussin, and Cole Porter. We need historical context, but also the freedom of the human imagination, which is more free collectively and transhistorically than it is in the mind of the most eccentric genius in the most flourishing and festival-like of cultures.

If an art historian was called in to comment on a Fourth of July fireworks display, he or she would have more to say (we fervently hope) than the typical announcer, namely, that watching these fireworks was the best possible way to spend that evening and that these were going to be the best fireworks ever seen. The art historian might offer some history of the use of fireworks, in China and in Europe, and of the diffusion of firework imagery through prints and paintings, as well as raise questions about the financing of such an expensive public entertainment. The art historian might further be able to say something about the changing techniques and patterns of firework display, their timing and duration, their size and sound. Great firework inventors and designers could be profiled, and the differing place of fireworks in different cultures could be described. Accounts of particularly impressive or disastrous fireworks could be recounted. In short, if television broadcasts used art historians rather than talking heads, the viewers might learn something other than the cultural hubris, the "pumping up," of those announcers. Good art history offers cultural perspective, provided art historians guard against falling into the trap of chauvinism. Connoisseurship has been blamed for this fault of art historians', but judging quality ought properly to be a complex and relativistic task, just as sportsmanship is a different beast than sports fanaticism.

When Cotes wrote his preface to the second edition of Isaac Newton's *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica*, he described three kinds of scientific thinkers. Those same categories might still be applied to art historians: those who have "invented . . . a philosophical way of speaking," which keeps them "entirely employed in giving names to things"; second, those who devise an "ingenious romance" consisting of "dreams and chimeras" ("genius" is to art history what "vortex" was to Descartes); and third—we hope this kind exists—those who "assume nothing as a principle, that is not proved by phenomena." The phenomena need to remain more primary than the principles, and then the art history will be neither chauvinistic nor parochial. It may even be, in some very basic way, once again loosely allied with science.

The history of art has transpired against a great backdrop of history, in which issues of wealth, class, religion, gender—of power—have been pivotal. Perhaps it would be truer to say that the history of art has been the backdrop upon which the shadows of power have fallen. But art is not a transparent window onto history. It is a part of history, sometimes quite formative, sometimes quite inconsequential. The relationship between when art is influential and when it is beautifully or intelligently done is not a simple one. Mapping that interface is one of art history's tasks. Because of that, neither cultural history nor the history of style, even widely construed in both instances, will do by themselves. Nor is there any chance of a simple grafting of one onto the other to create the art history of the future, for each is badly flawed. That study which prioritizes the period tends almost inevitably to idolize it, and that study which prioritizes the style tends almost equally inevitably to idolize a style, often in the person of an artistic genius. We need an art history free of idolatry, as Freud told us, but still about art and not about neuroses, about people's ability to make something good enough to have value even beyond their family, their tribe, their nation, despite their personal and historical tribulations. It might actually not be so bad to go back to idolizing objects, if this time around we could avoid worshipping the artists whom they signify and could exercise tolerance toward those with other idols. For good works of art of many different sorts constitute no small part of the wonder available to humans, as Aristotle recognized. The art historian is like the director of a great historical play or epic enacted by works of art. What the art historian does ought to have great effect on how the history of art looks, yet the history of art should never seem an art historian's creation. The work of art is ever pure, the art historian her guardian.

In the old days, you went to university to study classics or natural sciences. Even then art history was a hybrid, somewhere between epic and encyclopedia, between Homer and Pliny. It requires more training than many disciplines (multiple foreign languages, broad historical knowledge, writing ability, knowledge of the physical properties of media) and offers less recompense (no consulting, little freelancing, expensive reproduction fees, the cost of travel; whereas in the sciences research grants make you better off, in the liberal arts they often cost you money, as does publishing). It is a strange study, but neither artists nor historians will take it on in any systematic way, and the history of art exists only by virtue of being studied. Fortunately the art doesn't absolutely need its history; one can walk ignorantly through even a middling sort of museum or a routine ancient church with a great deal of pleasure, and the works of art will teach the observer some vital things without a bit of the art historian's aid.

If art historians are so superfluous, ought art history to be an established profession at all? Only, I would say, if our own statements about works of the past can be at least as accurate and interesting to our readers as what was set down early on by the nearest contemporary sources. That's meant as a reasonable challenge, not a Holy Grail, since those early sources tend to be both very stimulating and very frustrating. If we do this well, we can have a more comprehensive and a more comprehensible history of art than any previous people has had, one that admits of brilliance and boldness, even at the cost of the occasional honest mistake. *Caveat lector!*

Quanto dirne si dee non si puo dire.

On ne dira jamais de lui tout ce qu'il en faut dire.¹

1. Delacroix citing Michelangelo (*Rime* 250) referring to Dante, in order to express his thoughts about Michelangelo (i.e., that words do not suffice). Eugène Delacroix, *Écrits sur l'art*, ed. François-Marie Deyrolle and Christophe Denissel (Paris, 1988), 124.

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