

# Motivating History

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Under historicism, which entailed the historical study of ancient and modern art as a new paradigm of historical experience, art history handed over lock, stock, and barrel its legitimacy as a medium for aesthetic, philosophical or hermeneutic reflection.—Hans Robert Jauss<sup>1</sup>

Fortunately we are presently rather far removed from the period of naive scientificity during which subjectivity was considered to be the domain of illusion and objective knowledge to be the sole expression of truth. We know now that our subjectivity is not an illusion to be overcome, but that it is another part of reality, no less important than any other part.—Josué Harari and David Bell<sup>2</sup>

The other day I went searching for a book in Avery Library, the art library of Columbia University. This time, instead of looking at the shelves as mere supports for the volumes that contained the information I sought, I became aware that what I was looking at was the architecture (or archaeology) of a particular field of scholarly activity, namely the study of Northern Renaissance art. I was struck, in other words, by the physical presence of an aspect of our discipline's cultural imaginary.

The organization of the volumes arranged on the shelves, I realized, was at least as important as the information contained in the weighty tomes they supported. Rather than the disturbing chaos that characterized the arrangement of books in Borges's tale "The Library of Babel," these books in Avery were organized according to an established pattern. But just what was the system behind their organization? Was it any more comprehensible than that which inspired Borges's equally famous account of an ancient Chinese encyclopedia cited by Michel Foucault?<sup>3</sup> How had "Northern Renaissance art" come into being? How did this particular category or concept become a topic worthy of scholarly interest? Who or what had determined that there should be more books on certain artists rather than on others? What likes and dislikes do these choices betray? What values went into forming the configuration of books assembled there, and more important, what is it that continues to keep them in place?

The answer, of course, is the canon—that most naturalized of all art-historical assumptions. Certain artists and certain works of art that have received the sanction of tradition are unquestioningly regarded as appropriate material for art-historical study. Course syllabi are still arranged around artists who are deemed major figures, and the vast majority of publications is dedicated to a consideration of a select number of well-known works. Questions regarding the purpose and function of privileging certain artists and works in this way are rarely raised. Others concerning the esteem in which the canon is held are not regarded as belonging to art history but rather to aesthetics, a branch of philosophy, or to

the criticism of contemporary art. For the most part, art history's disciplinary work is carried on as if there were no need to articulate the social function it is supposed to serve. The discipline's promotion and support of the canon are all too often still taken for granted. It is as if a consensus had been arrived at sometime in the past so that there is no further need for discussion. The library shelves are the physical manifestations of this consensus, the embodiment of an established cultural practice.

In asking for a discussion of the purpose of art history's dedication to the canon, I hope not to be misunderstood. This is not a call for a valuation of works of art, not a call for a more explicit ranking of canonical works, not a request that students be indoctrinated as to which artist is "better" than another. The problem, it seems to me, is that somehow the notion of "quality," that most subjective of judgments, is thought to be self-evident and unquestionable. While some of us may dwell affectionately and pleasurably on certain predictable canonical artists and describe their works in glowing terms, there is usually no attempt to argue, and perhaps even think about, why one artist should be considered more worthy of study than another or why certain moments and places in the history of artistic production should be privileged above others. As it stands now, the history of art could be described as an unacknowledged paean of praise addressed to the canon, and the intensity of this devotion can, perhaps, be measured by the sobriety of our professorial demeanor as we accomplish this task.

The conviction underlying these attitudes, which continue to be widespread, if not even prevalent in art history today, is the commitment to tradition. The canon of artists and works discussed in art-history courses are those which were once found meritorious by previous generations of scholars responding to historical situations very different from those we currently occupy. Like Mount Everest, the works, the artists, and even the methodologies for interpreting them are simply there, and like mountain climbers, it is our mandate as art historians to climb their peaks and sing their praises to future generations. In doing so, we are often unwittingly engaged in the unthinking reproduction of culture: reproducing knowledge, but not necessarily producing it. As a consequence, the discipline as a whole becomes a powerful conservative force in a rapidly changing society.

The way to start speculating about how we came to this disciplinary moment might be to engage in a cultural history of the discipline, an examination of the classed, gendered, and ethnic values that have marked its development. Such a task, however, is impossible in the space available to me here. What follows is rather a discrete and limited examination of what could be called the founding moment of the canon of Northern Renaissance art, the historical point where a

discursive practice first formed around works of art produced in Northern Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In other words, this is not a historiographic account of the origins and development of the appreciation of Northern Renaissance art so much as an analysis of the political, religious, and personal sentiments that prompted that appreciation to take place. The analysis is meant to be representative—the Northern Renaissance is used here as a test case. A similar study might also be undertaken for what are considered the canonical artists and works of other times and places.

The ideas that led to the historical study of the Northern Renaissance at the end of the eighteenth century will be contrasted with those that inform the way in which the period was studied at the middle of the twentieth century, specifically in the work of Erwin Panofsky. The point of the contrast is to analyze the role of the practice of history in these two very different historiographic moments. How had the function of history changed in the period that separates the late eighteenth and mid-twentieth centuries? Is there anything we can learn from the different ways in which history was approached, something that might enable us to rethink the function of history in our own time?

Until the end of the eighteenth century, the discipline of art history, founded by Vasari, remained focused on the humanist traditions of the Italian Renaissance as they were codified in the art academies of the seventeenth century. Not only were the styles and artistic techniques of the great masters of the Florentine and Venetian schools regarded as the models to which all artists should aspire, but the academies also established a hierarchy of genres, according to which history painting—meaning the painting of religious and secular subject matter depicting lofty themes taken from Christian belief and Greco-Roman mythology and history—was ranked at the top, and mere exercises in mimesis, such as landscape and still life, were located at the bottom. Owing to the dominance of the humanist tradition among the educated elite, there was little significant difference among the artistic aspirations of the schools of artistic production that arose in the regions that were later to become the nation-states of Europe. It was only in the eighteenth century that the dominance of the academy was first challenged by Winckelmann, who proposed that the true source of beauty was to be found in the art of ancient Greece. Later, in the context of the nationalism engendered by the European wars that followed the French Revolution, arguments began to be fielded regarding the aesthetic interest of works of art produced at times and places other than ancient Greece and Renaissance Italy.

The first mention of Northern Renaissance painting as a

location for the discussion of artistic issues that had hitherto been associated only with Italy and Greece is found in the curious and delightful writings of the short-lived young author, Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder.<sup>4</sup> In his fictional narrative *Confessions from the Heart of an Art-Loving Friar* of 1797, Wackenroder made a compelling case for the relativity of artistic appeal. In doing so, he boldly challenged the accepted canon of his day, according to which Italian art of the Renaissance and the Greek art of antiquity were regarded as possessing greater merit than art produced at any other place and time:

Stupid people cannot comprehend that there are antipodes on our globe and that they are themselves antipodes. They always conceive of the place where they are standing as the gravitational center of the universe,—and their minds lack the wings to fly around the entire earth and survey with one glance the integrated totality.

And, similarly, they regard their own emotion as the center of everything beautiful in art and they deliver the final judgment concerning everything as if from the tribunal, without considering that no one has appointed them judges and that those who are condemned by them could just as well set themselves up to the same end.

Why do you not condemn the American Indian, that he speaks Indian and not our language?—

And yet you want to condemn the Middle Ages, that it did not build such temples as did Greece?<sup>5</sup>

Wackenroder's appreciation for the art of the Northern Renaissance is paraded in a chapter dedicated to the praise of the work of Albrecht Dürer. His melodramatic account makes clear the nationalistic and religious values that underlie his concern to insert this artist into the canon. Dürer is presented as just as good an artist as those who constitute the canon because of the quality of his inner spirit, an inner spirit that embodies the essence of the German nation:

When Albrecht was wielding the paintbrush, the German was at that time still a unique and an excellent character of firm constancy in the arena of our continent; and this serious, upright and powerful nature of the German is imprinted in his pictures accurately and clearly, not only in the facial structure and the whole external appearance but also in the inner spirit. This firmly determined German character and German art as well have disappeared in our times. . . . and the student of art is taught how he should imitate the expressiveness of Raphael and the colors of the Venetian School and the realism of the Dutch and the enchanting highlights of Correggio, all simultaneously, and should in this way arrive at the

Michael Holly was kind enough to make drafts of this paper part of her summertime reading. I am also grateful to Janet Wolff for reading the summertime version.

1. Hans Robert Jauss, "History of Art and Pragmatic History," in *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti, intro. Paul de Man, Minneapolis, 1982, 51.

2. Josué Harari and David Bell, introduction to Michel Serres, *Hermes: Literature, Science, Philosophy*, ed. J. Harari and D. Bell, Baltimore, 1992, xii.

3. M. Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, New York, 1973, xv: "animals are divided into: a) belonging to the Emperor,

b) embalmed, c) tame, d) sucking pigs, e) sirens, f) fabulous, g) stray dogs, h) included in the present classification, i) frenzied, j) innumerable, k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, l) *et cetera*, m) having just broken the water pitcher, n) that from a long way off look like flies."

4. For a fuller sketch of the appreciation of early Netherlandish art in the 18th and 19th centuries, see F. Haskell, *Rediscoveries in Art: Some Aspects of Taste, Fashion, and Collecting in England and France*, Ithaca, N.Y., 1976; and S. Sulzberger, *La Réhabilitation des primitifs flamands, 1802–1867*, Brussels, 1961.

5. W. H. Wackenroder, *Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder's Confessions and Fantasies*, trans. M. H. Schubert, University Park, Pa., 1970, 109–10.

perfection which surpasses all.—O, wretched sophistry! O, blind belief of this age that one could combine every type of beauty and every excellence of all the great painters of the earth and, through the scrutinizing of all and the begging of their numerous great gifts, could unite the spirit of all in oneself and transcend them all!<sup>6</sup>

The encomium ends with a description of a dream in which the friar falls asleep in an art gallery and has a vision in which the artists come alive before their paintings and discuss their merits. Among those that appear in this way are the shades of Raphael and Dürer whom the friar observes holding hands as they gaze in “friendly tranquillity” and mutual admiration at the achievements of one another’s labors. By pairing Raphael and Dürer in this way, Wackenroder explicitly claims a new status for German painting of the Renaissance.

Wackenroder’s argument concerning the relativity of artistic competence seems to depend upon the principle of historicism which had been introduced into the philosophy of history by Johann Gottfried von Herder a few years earlier.<sup>7</sup> Herder had argued that there could be no objectivity in the writing of history because the historian was himself part of the historical process. In this view, there are no transhistorical absolutes, for all judgments are contingent upon the time and place in which they are produced. Wackenroder’s artistic relativism, his capacity to claim that Dürer was the equal of Raphael, finds its basis in Herder’s emphasis on the singularity of the historical moment. For Wackenroder, the unique quality of a historical period, that which makes it unlike anything that preceded or followed it, can be put in the service of a national cause. The nationalism of the late eighteenth century, a moment when Germany sought to free itself from the political and cultural domination of France, found in history a means by which its case might be articulated and advanced.

With its emphasis on the spirituality of art and its capacity to embody and transmit religious emotion, together with the conviction that these characteristics were to be found in the art of places and times that had not yet been hallowed by tradition, Wackenroder’s book exemplified the romantic attitude toward the question of artistic quality. Much the same tone is found in the influential criticism of the writer Friedrich Schlegel, who, during a stay in Paris between 1802 and 1804, was deeply affected by his experience of the Musée Napoléon. It was in the Louvre that Napoleon’s artistic plunder, taken from all over Europe, was placed on view as an unprecedented display of his imperial power.<sup>8</sup> Although Schlegel shared the admiration for Italian art typical of the taste of the day, he preferred the early painters

of the fourteenth century because to his eyes their work exuded a greater spirituality. It was his admiration for the religious feeling of old-master painting that allowed him to extend his appreciation to what he called “old German” painting of the Renaissance, by which he meant not only German but also Netherlandish painting of this period.<sup>9</sup> Schlegel’s advocacy of the virtues of “old German” painting soon drew the attention of the wealthy sons of a German businessman, Sulpiz and Melchior Boisserée, who went to Paris to visit him.<sup>10</sup> After staying at his house as paying guests, they traveled with Schlegel through northern France and the southern Netherlands, visiting Gothic cathedrals before returning to their native Cologne. In the account Schlegel wrote of this journey, he identified the Gothic as the German style of the Middle Ages, extolling its beauties as a manifestation of the age of faith.

Schlegel’s views were symptomatic of a significant change of taste, one that insured that his reevaluation of German art of the Renaissance would be underwritten by capital so as to be realized in the formation of collections and museums. On their return to Cologne, the Boisserée brothers began avidly collecting German and Netherlandish art. Their passion was aided by political circumstances, for the Napoleonic dispossession of the properties of the Catholic Church, enforced throughout occupied Germany as well as France, meant that medieval and Renaissance altarpieces that had been part of the neglected fabric of church interiors suddenly entered the marketplace in large numbers. The Boisserées soon assembled the largest and most important collection of paintings of this period, including some of what are today the most admired works of Stefan Lochner, Rogier van der Weyden, and Hans Memling. After having been made available to the Prussian crown, which was in the process of establishing what would eventually become the national museum in Berlin, this collection was eventually bought by the king of Bavaria in 1827, thus finding an alternative route to the fulfillment of Schlegel’s call for a national museum of “old German” painting.<sup>11</sup>

Both Wackenroder and Schlegel had used history as a means of realizing their critical appreciation of an art that was emotionally laden with religious values and that could be claimed as a glorious manifestation of the German national spirit. In doing so, they laid the foundation for the study of what came to be called Northern Renaissance art. In what follows, I want to analyze the culmination of the discursive practice they inaugurated. I want to compare, that is, the values that inform their writing with those of the recent art-historical past. What distinguishes their approach to history from the one that still characterizes our own times?

6. *Ibid.*, 115.

7. See G. Iggers, *The German Conception of History: The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present*, Middletown, Conn., 1968, 34–38. The concept of historicism is subject to a variety of different definitions. See, e.g., M. Mandelbaum, *History, Man, and Reason: A Study in Nineteenth Century Thought*, Baltimore, 1971. For an interesting attempt to dissolve the distinction between historicism and history by arguing that all histories share the kind of system-building quality usually attributed to historicist histories on the basis that they are all structured according to rhetorical tropes, see H. White, “Historicism, History, and the Figurative Imagination,” *History and Theory*, xiv, 1975, Beiheft 14, 48–67.

8. See H. Eichner, *Friedrich Schlegel*, New York, 1970, 98.

9. For Schlegel’s views on art, see F. Schlegel, *Kritische Friedrich Schlegel Ausgabe*, 35 vols., ed. E. Behler with J. J. Austett and H. Eichner, Munich, 1958–81, iv, *Ansichten und Ideen von der christlichen Kunst*, 1959.

10. For a history of the Boisserée brothers and their collection, see E. Firmenich-Richartz, *Die Brüder Boisserée: Sulpiz und Melchior Boisserée als Kunstsammler. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Romantik*, Jena, 1916.

11. Sulzberger (as in n. 4), 57.

What kinds of stories do we tell today and what motivates them?

The other and contrasting end of this analysis of the character of the discourse on Northern Renaissance art is located in what is usually regarded as its apogee, namely the work of Erwin Panofsky. Panofsky, a German art historian who was deprived of his teaching position by the National Socialists in 1933, settled permanently in the United States in the following year. He is the author of two books that have decisively shaped the study of Northern Renaissance art in our time. These are *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer* of 1943 and *Early Netherlandish Painting*, which appeared in 1953.<sup>12</sup> Rather than using history in the service of religious, emotional, and explicitly nationalistic goals, Panofsky appears to have no other ambition than to provide the reader with a wealth of information about the subjects under discussion. Both his texts are detailed and learned accounts of the available historical evidence, which is pursued with a relentless "objectivity," with a positivistic desire to evaluate and supersede the nature and quality of the information provided by earlier historians. The introductions to both volumes, however, "betray rather than parade," their ideological agenda.<sup>13</sup>

In the introduction to the Dürer book, Panofsky declares that the German contribution to art history has yet to be acknowledged. He proposes that the artistic accomplishments of Dürer, whom he defines as a representative of the German national spirit, make him worthy of comparison with the great artists of the Italian Renaissance. While there is an interesting continuity to be traced between the nationalism of Wackenroder and Schlegel and that of Panofsky, the historiographic differences in the way they advance their claims are more significant than their similarities.

The period of 150 years or so that separates the texts of these authors could be said to have witnessed the triumph of history. The historicist principle enunciated by Herder had been developed in the course of the nineteenth century into something resembling a science. The recognition that time is a decisive factor affecting our understanding of the world transformed the shape of knowledge. In addition, the influence of the achievements of the physical sciences during the same period pushed historical studies into an ever-increasing empiricism. The transformation in the function of history between these two historical moments seems to depend above all else on the elimination of the subjectivity of the historian. Whereas Wackenroder and Schlegel fully articulated the fact that their interest in history depended upon their religious and nationalist beliefs, in Panofsky's case the historian's agenda is far less explicit.

The nationalism of the introduction to the Dürer book, for example, appears paradoxical in light of the way in which the German government had deprived him of his teaching position. What was at stake in inserting Dürer into the Renaissance canon populated by Italian artists was much more complicated than an assertion of pride in national identity. As I have argued elsewhere, Panofsky's view of Dürer as torn between the principles of reason and unreason, for which he used the emblem of Dürer's engraving *Melencolia I*, has more to do with the political situation of Germany in his own time, with a defense of humanism in the context of National Socialism, than it does with the cultural conditions of sixteenth-century Nuremberg.<sup>14</sup> The point I wish to make is that Panofsky's engagement with politics was not permitted to register as part of the conscious objectives of his historical biography of Dürer. Political and emotional beliefs were repressed in favor of "disinterestedness."

The same "objectivist" attitude is found in the introduction to *Early Netherlandish Painting*. Here, Panofsky argues that Netherlandish naturalism, the characteristic quality of this school of painting, is actually indebted to the invention of one-point perspective, an artistic achievement of Italian art of the same period. The canonical status of Netherlandish art is thus underwritten by its incorporation of one of the pictorial devices that serve to distinguish Italian art. Instead of appealing to the notion of artistic relativity on which Wackenroder and Schlegel had based their claim for the interest of "old German" painting, Panofsky attempts to include Netherlandish art under the umbrella of the traditional taste for the Italian Renaissance. If Italian painting is part of the canon because of its development of mimetic techniques, such as perspective, that enabled it to achieve more convincing kinds of illusionism, thereby heightening the naturalism for which it had been valued, then Netherlandish painting gains status by sharing these characteristics. This is, in other words, a kind of canonization by association.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Panofsky's analysis of the complex symbolism of Netherlandish painting, which is discussed at length in the text, could be said to represent an attempt to find an equivalent for the complicated religious and secular allegories that are a feature of Italian art of this period. Once again, the artistic merit attached to early Netherlandish art would result not from its pictorial autonomy, not from the principle of artistic relativity, but from its similarity to the southern tradition.

What led to the suppression of the authorial agenda that seems to distinguish Panofsky's treatment of Northern Renaissance art from that of Wackenroder and Schlegel? Why is the authorial voice so much more removed and abstract? What

12. E. Panofsky, *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer*, 2 vols., Princeton, N.J., 1943; and idem, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, 2 vols., Cambridge, Mass., 1953.

13. E. Panofsky, "The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline" (1940), in *Meaning and the Visual Arts*, Garden City, N.Y., 1955, 1–25. The phrase (14) occurs as part of the definition of what Panofsky calls the "iconological" method of interpretation whose purpose is to uncover the cultural attitudes encoded in the "content" of the work of art.

14. See "Panofsky's Melencolia," in K. Moxey, *The Practice of Theory:*

*Poststructuralism, Cultural Politics, and Art History*, Ithaca, N.Y./London, 1994, 65–78.

15. I have analyzed the introduction to *Early Netherlandish Painting* in "Perspective, Panofsky, and the Philosophy of History," *New Literary History*, forthcoming. Panofsky's text also contains expressions of nationalist views. Some of them were noted by Katherine Crawford Luber in "Nationalism and Panofsky: Albrecht Dürer, Italy, and *Early Netherlandish Painting*," a talk delivered at the College Art Association meeting in New York, 1994.

led to the substitution of a colorless objectivity for a passionately argued subjectivity? A full answer to these questions would necessitate a history of the idea of history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and would have much to do with the institutionalization of the discipline and the professionalization of its practitioners. It is immediately apparent, however, that history served a very different function for Wackenroder and Schlegel than it did for Panofsky. Whereas in the earlier case history was part of a larger cultural rhetoric, in its later incarnation it seems to be pursued as if it could be an end in itself.

Panofsky's reticence about the larger cultural function of history, his reluctance to articulate the concerns that animate his scholarly work, as well as his conception of history as a positivistic discipline, finds its theoretical justification in "The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline" of 1955. In this reflective essay, Panofsky suggests that the historian is involved in two very different types of activity. In responding to the work of art (which is defined as a "man-made object demanding to be experienced aesthetically"), the art historian must both "re-create" the work by attempting to intuit the artistic "intentions" that went into its creation and then submit it to archaeological investigation. The relation between "aesthetic re-creation" and "archaeological investigation" is called an "organic" one:

It is not true that the art historian first constitutes his object by means of re-creative synthesis and then begins his archaeological investigation—as though first buying a ticket and then boarding a train. In reality the two processes do not succeed each other, they interpenetrate; not only does the re-creative synthesis serve as a basis for the archaeological investigation, the archaeological investigation in turn serves as a basis for the re-creative process; both mutually qualify and rectify one another.<sup>16</sup>

The aesthetic re-creation of the work is deemed to depend "not only on the natural sensitivity and visual training of the spectator, but also on his cultural equipment."<sup>17</sup> The difference between a naïve beholder and an art historian is the fact that the latter is aware of his cultural predispositions; that is, he is aware of the contemporary perspective he brings to the work of interpretation as a consequence of belonging to a culture different from the one under investigation, while the naïve beholder is not. The point of the historian's awareness of his own cultural values is not to acknowledge them as part of the historical narrative that will result as a consequence of his engagement with the past, not to understand that whatever he comes up with will inevitably be filtered through the peculiar configuration of his own subjectivity, but rather

to suppress or eliminate all aspects of his approach to the study of the past that might result from his participation in the historical horizon to which he belongs. It is by means of his knowledge of the past that the historian is to control, if not to extirpate altogether, the affective and valuational baggage he brought to the enterprise in the first place. The goal is to be as "objective" as possible.

He tries, therefore, to make adjustments by learning as much as he possibly can about the circumstances under which the objects of his studies were created. Not only will he collect and verify all the available information as to medium, condition, age, authorship, destination, etc., but he will also compare the work with others of its class, and will examine such writings as reflect the aesthetic standards of its country and age, in order to achieve a more "objective" appraisal of its quality. . . . But when he does all this, his aesthetic perception as such will change accordingly, and will more and more adapt itself to the original "intention" of the works. Thus what the art historian, as opposed to the "naïve" art lover, does, is not to erect a rational superstructure on an irrational foundation, but to develop his re-creative experiences so as to conform with the results of his archaeological research, while continually checking the results of his archaeological research against the evidence of his re-creative experiences.<sup>18</sup>

Because of the theoretical elimination of the subjectivity of the historian, the approach to interpretation outlined above has no way of dealing with issues of artistic merit. This method could, for example, be applied to the interpretation of any work of art regardless of its "quality." What is missing is some way of articulating why certain works matter to the interpreter and others do not. The result is an art history absorbed by a positivistic obsession with information.

Panofsky was, of course, fully aware that the discipline could not exist without a means of privileging some works above others. His solution was to claim that "greatness" of works of art was self-evident and artistic achievement would disclose itself to the historian in the course of his investigation:

But when a "masterpiece" is compared and connected with as many "less important" works of art as turn out, in the course of the investigation, to be comparable and connectable with it, the originality of the invention, the superiority of its composition and technique, and whatever other features make it "great," will automatically become evident—not in spite but because of the fact that

16. Panofsky (as in n. 13), 16.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*, 17–18.

19. *Ibid.*, 18, n. 13.

20. See E. Panofsky, "Iconography and Iconology: An Introduction to the Study of Renaissance Art" (1939), in *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, Garden City, N.Y., 1955, 26–54. For comment and criticism of this method of interpretation, see E. Kaemmerling, *Ikonomographie und Ikonologie: Theorien, Entwicklung, Probleme*, Cologne, 1979; J. Bonnet, ed., *Erwin Panofsky: Cahiers pour un temps*, Paris, 1983; M. Podro, *The Critical Historians of Art*, New Haven, 1982; M. A. Holly, *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History*, Ithaca, N.Y., 1984; eadem,

*Iconografia e Iconologia*, Milan, 1992; K. Moxey, "Panofsky's Concept of 'Iconology' and the Problem of Interpretation in the History of Art," *New Literary History*, xvii, 1985–86, 265–74; S. Ferretti, *Cassirer, Panofsky, and Warburg: Symbol, Art, and History*, trans. R. Pierce, New Haven, 1989; G. Didi-Huberman, *Devant l'image*, Paris, 1990; and B. Cassidy, ed., *Iconography at the Crossroads*, Princeton, N.J., 1993.

21. B. Herrnstein Smith, "The Exile of Evaluation," in *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory*, Cambridge, Mass., 1988, 18. It is significant that the book Smith identifies as the most extreme version of the antievaluationist stance, Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*, was, like

the whole group of materials has been subjected to one and the same method of analysis and interpretation.<sup>19</sup>

Panofsky's banishment of subjectivity in favor of positivistic objectivity—the sacrifice of cultural judgment in favor of a re-creation of the artistic “intentions” of the past, “intentions” which were to be validated by “archaeological investigation”—proved deeply influential. So far, contemporary art history has concerned itself only with the evaluation and criticism of his methodological concepts of “iconography” and “iconology,” which for so long dominated scholarly activity in our discipline.<sup>20</sup> The other side of the coin, the fact that this subtle and effective method of historical interpretation succeeded because it obliterated questions related to the subjectivity of the historian, has yet to be recognized and explored.

Panofsky's bias against the insertion of the concerns of the present into narratives about the past appears to be part of a historical tendency that has also affected literary studies in the twentieth century. Barbara Herrnstein Smith has pointed out that literary critics have also been more concerned with the development of theories of interpretation than with articulating the rationale that occasions their deployment. She argues that:

while professors of literature have sought to claim for their activities the rigor, objectivity, cognitive substantiality, and progress associated with science and the empirical disciplines, they have also attempted to remain faithful to the essentially conservative and didactic mission of humanistic studies: to honor and preserve the culture's traditionally esteemed objects—in this case, its canonized texts—and to illuminate and transmit the traditional cultural values presumably embodied in them.<sup>21</sup>

Panofsky's relegation of the question of artistic excellence to the realm of the self-evident effectively wove it into the fabric of tradition. One can only tell what is self-evident by consulting what other human beings have considered artistically exceptional in the past. By reading the past we can infer what is appropriate to the present, thus avoiding the necessity of projecting contemporary judgment into the process. The price of interpretive objectivity is the abdication of responsibility for finding in history a means of articulating the cultural dilemmas of the present. The principle of self-evidence is a profoundly conservative one, dedicated to the support of the status quo and ideally suited to the task of providing art history with “scientific” respectability.

Panofsky's equation of canonical value with traditional value was espoused and supported by Ernst Gombrich,

arguably the other most influential art historian of this century. It is because art historians are the custodians of the canon, Gombrich argues, that they can be distinguished from social scientists, who approach works of art as part of the material of culture. In a lecture entitled “Art History and the Social Sciences” of 1973, Gombrich took it upon himself to defend art history's preoccupation with a canon of works that had been recognized as “great” against those who advocated the study of works of art as cultural artifacts. He argued that whereas the study of historical circumstance would significantly affect our appreciation of the art of the past, it was no substitute for the connoisseur's capacity to discern “quality.” For Gombrich, the canon

offers points of reference, standards of excellence which we cannot level down without losing direction. Which particular peaks, or which individual achievements we select for this role may be a matter of choice, but we could not make such a choice if there really were no peaks but only shifting dunes. . . . the values of the canon are too deeply embedded in the totality of our civilization for them to be discussed in isolation. . . . Our attitude to the peaks of art can be conveyed through the way we speak about them, perhaps through our very reluctance to spoil the experience with too much talk. What we call civilization may be interpreted as a web of value judgements which are implicit rather than explicit.<sup>22</sup>

What was it that led art historians such as Panofsky and Gombrich to dismiss any discussion of the cultural qualities of exceptional works of art on the basis that they were self-evident? What supported their belief that artistic merit was universally discernible? The unstated assumption underlying their position regarding what constitutes the canonical status of a work of art would appear to be a universalist theory of aesthetics.

According to the theory of aesthetics formulated by Immanuel Kant in the late eighteenth century, certain works of art had the capacity to provoke a universal recognition of their extraordinary quality.<sup>23</sup> The existence of the beautiful was thus something located in the human response to objects rather than in the objects themselves. By making the capacity to recognize artistic quality part of the definition of “human nature,” Kant's theory offered a basis for the identification of canonical status with the judgment of tradition. Both Panofsky and Gombrich belong to the humanist tradition of which Kant's theory is a part. That is, they share the faith that “human nature” affords human beings an adequate epistemological foundation on which to understand both the world

*Early Netherlandish Painting*, published in the 1950s. Smith's book is one of several publications dealing with the question of the canon in literary studies (it is telling that there should be no art-historical equivalent). For others, see R. van Hallberg, ed., “Canons,” a special issue of *Critical Inquiry*, x, no. 1, 1983, which included contributions by B. Herrnstein Smith et al.; F. Kermodé, *Forms of Attention*, Chicago, 1985; J. Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860*, New York, 1985; R. Scholes, “Aiming a Canon at the Curriculum,” *Salmagundi*, LXXII, 1986, 101–17, with responses by E. D. Hirsch et al.; C. Altieri, *Canons and Consequences: Reflections on the Ethical Force of Imaginative Ideals*, Evanston, Ill., 1990; J. Goran, *The Making of the Modern Canon: Genesis and Crisis of a Literary Idea*, Atlantic Highlands, N.J., 1991; P. Lauter, *Canons in Contexts*, New York,

1991; H. L. Gates, Jr., *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars*, New York, 1992; and J. Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*, Chicago, 1993.

22. E. Gombrich, *Art History and the Social Sciences: The Romanes Lecture for 1973*, Oxford, 1975, 54. Silence was also suggested by Frye as the means by which a critic might validate the equation of the canon with tradition; see Smith (as in n. 21), 24. For a recent defense of the humanist strategy of silencing discussion of the quality of literary texts (or works of art) in favor of accepting the verdict of tradition, see Peter Brooks, “Aesthetics and Ideology: What Happened to Poetics?” *Critical Inquiry*, xx, 1994, 509–23.

23. I. Kant, *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, trans. J. Meredith, Oxford, 1952.

and "man's" place within it. It is for this reason that it is possible for them to assert that the artistic quality of certain cultural artifacts is "self-evident."

The humanist conception of human subjectivity as something stable, continuous, autonomous, and not liable to modulation according to circumstances of time and place has undergone devastating criticism in our own time. Psychoanalysis, for example, has tended to emphasize the contingency of the subject. According to Jacques Lacan, the subject is split on the acquisition of language into that which represents the desires and drives of a preconscious condition (the unconscious) and that which represents the codes and conventions that govern social life (the symbolic).<sup>24</sup> On this account, subjectivity is shifting and unstable, constantly under revision as the relation between the unconscious and the social is renegotiated in the light of the ever-changing circumstances of everyday life. This view of the subject clearly militates against the concept of "human nature," against the assumption that all human beings could ever react in the same way toward anything, let alone works of art. If we accept the notion that human subjectivity is a construction whose shape varies according to the cultural forces that determine its identity, then it follows that human response to cultural artifacts will vary according to the race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and nationality of the individual. One of the most powerful critiques of Kant's aesthetic theory has been mounted by the Marxist sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who used the concept of class to show that the location of individuals in the social hierarchy is crucial in determining their response to works of art.<sup>25</sup>

Anthropologists, such as Johannes Fabian, and literary critics, such as Edward Said, have also drawn attention to the ideological agenda underlying humanist epistemologies. They suggest that the conception of the human subject as something stable and unchanging, something self-conscious and capable of knowing both the world and itself, is a dimension of Eurocentrism that characterized European culture during the colonial period of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>26</sup> The age of empire saw a fusion of the desire for knowledge with the worldwide expansion of European power. The search for knowledge was backed by epistemological assumptions that precluded cultural differences, so that in the European encounter with other peoples it was always Europe that was used as the canon by which to judge the rest. The result was a subordination of other cultures to a European conception of "civilization" and a reduction of different ways of understanding the world to what is known as "science."

24. J. Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I" and "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason since Freud," in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. A. Sheridan New York, 1977, 1-7, 146-78.

25. P. Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, London, 1986.

26. J. Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object*, New York, 1983; E. Said, *Orientalism*, New York, 1979; and idem, *Culture and Imperialism*, New York, 1993.

27. See Tony Bennett, "Really Useless Knowledge: A Political Critique of Aesthetics," *Literature and History*, xiii, 1987, 38-57.

These critics suggest that the ways in which individuals, classes, and cultures invest objects with social value are so different that such processes cannot be considered to belong to the same category—that is, they cannot usefully be grouped under the rubric of the aesthetic. If this is the case, then the concept of aesthetics, one that is intimately associated with the humanist notion of an unchanging "human nature," is emptied of its content.<sup>27</sup> What becomes more important than trying to reduce the rich variety of human response to a single kind of experience is to articulate the grounds on which these different responses attain the status of discursive practices.

Panofsky's attempt to naturalize the concept of artistic quality and Gombrich's claim that quality is one of the implicit value judgments that make up our civilization were never completely convincing. Not only is the validity of such positions questionable in the light of contemporary theory, but they were also challenged within the historical horizon in which they were enunciated. Among the most important (and curiously neglected) attempts to insist on the role of the present in the task of accounting for the past is Leo Steinberg's remarkably prescient essay "Objectivity and the Shrinking Self" of 1969. By insisting that subjectivity mattered, Steinberg rebelled against the antiseptic objectivity, the positivistic empiricism, of the art history of his day. According to him, it is the way in which the art historian's cultural outlook is modeled by the cultural circumstances of his own time that determines the importance he ultimately ascribes to the work of art under consideration. Mannerist art, for example, which had long been despised because of the way in which it had been assessed by the Italian art academies of the seventeenth century, was rediscovered by twentieth-century Expressionist artists and critics on the basis of their own artistic preferences. In Steinberg's view, there is no evading personal involvement. All historical interpretation is necessarily colored by the beliefs of the interpreter:

It is naïve to imagine that you avoid the risk of projection merely by not interpreting. In desisting from interpretation, you do not cease to project. You merely project more unwittingly. There is apparently no escape from oneself and little safety in closing art history off against the contemporary imagination.<sup>28</sup>

It was not until the advent of feminism, however, that the equation of the art-historical canon with tradition received a lasting challenge. More than any other historian or critic, it

28. L. Steinberg, "Objectivity and the Shrinking Self," *Daedalus*, xcvi, Summer 1969, 824-36, esp. 836. Svetlana Alpers also drew attention to the importance of the present in the interpretation of the past in "Is Art History?" *Daedalus*, cvii 1977, 1-13. Describing the work of T. J. Clark, M. Fried, L. Steinberg, and M. Baxandall, she claimed that they emphasized the way in which the artistic merit discovered in works of art by critics in the past needs to be evaluated in the context of the present. In doing so, these authors implied that the canon inherited from tradition was not absolute and that it was subject to revision at the hands of succeeding generations. Indeed, in a remarkable passage Alpers (6) suggested that knowledge was not to be found but rather it had to be made: "art historians all too often see themselves as

was Linda Nochlin in her famous piece "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" of 1971 who placed the issue of artistic merit squarely in the foreground of the discipline's attention.<sup>29</sup> She showed just how unsatisfactory the concept of tradition was to a definition of the canonical status of a work of art, by underscoring the extent to which a putative *masterpiece* serves to articulate and support a hierarchy between the sexes. There was nothing inherently natural about the selection of great artists and works on which art history depended because that choice was the product of social attitudes that were historically determined. The equation of artistic merit with tradition honored the cultural achievements of men because social forces prevented women from participating fully in the processes of artistic production. By means of a striking case study of the history of the exclusion of women from drawing or painting from the nude in the art academies that dominated artistic education until the end of the nineteenth century, Nochlin suggested that it was social institutions rather than an inherent lack in the female personality that was responsible for the underrepresentation of this gender among the "great" artists of the past:

Hopefully, by stressing the *institutional*—i.e., the public—rather than the *individual*, or private, pre-conditions for achievement or the lack of it in the arts, we have provided a paradigm for the investigation of other areas in the field. By examining in some detail a single instance of deprivation or disadvantage—the unavailability of nude models to women art students—we have suggested that it was indeed *institutionally* made impossible for women to achieve artistic excellence, or success, on the same footing as men, *no matter what* the potency of their so-called talent, or genius.<sup>30</sup>

Rather than attempt to insert women into a canon that had been constructed on the basis of their exclusion, subsequent feminist critics demanded its complete destruction. Writing in the context of poststructuralism, Griselda Pollock used semiotics and the work of Foucault to argue that art history was a discursive practice, a form of making meaning that was imbued with the attitudes of those, namely men, who as the dominant gender had inaugurated and supported it as a cultural institution. Her conclusion was that feminist scholarship no longer had a place within art history as it had traditionally been defined. Instead of addressing the canonical works around which disciplinary activity had revolved,

she advocated what she called "feminist interventions in the histories of art."<sup>31</sup>

Making use of the work of Jacques Derrida, Adrian Rifkin has drawn out the consequences of poststructuralist theory for the art-historical canon, in particular the necessity of recognizing that the work of the historian—the historical text—is inevitably colored by the writer's position in history and culture. If art history is regarded as a discursive practice, a socially sanctioned form of making cultural meaning, then it is susceptible to the type of textual analysis known as deconstruction.<sup>32</sup> Derrida has shown that language is involved in a game of absent presence, that it serves to confer ontological status on what is otherwise only an unstable and shifting system of signs which draw their meaning not from their capacity to refer to objects in the world, but rather from the cultural attitudes with which they are invested by their users. In such circumstances, the notion of "art" is transformed from being a series of cultural objects distinguished by their capacity to provoke a universal response to their artistic merit, to a series of cultural objects that have been arbitrarily awarded a privileged status by authors whose interests have been served by doing so.<sup>33</sup> The cultural category "art" and the discursive practice "art history" are social constructs rather than eternal constants in the history of civilization.

What conclusions can we draw concerning the function of authorial subjectivity in the writing of history and the nature and status of the art-historical canon? First, and most startling, is the realization that the type of appreciation expressed for Northern Renaissance art by Wackenroder and Schlegel is more relevant to our contemporary notions of historical interpretation than is the work of Panofsky. Once the concept of tradition has been shown to be historically compromised, laden with the cultural attitudes of a particular historical moment, as feminist critics have done, and once every attempt to make textual meaning has been shown to be less about the world and more about the projection of authorial bias and prejudice as well as insight and understanding, then it seems clear that art historians must address the question of why they believe the works they discuss are worth talking about. Once there is no longer anything self-evident about the status of the works that are the focus of art-historical attention, it is necessary to argue for the choice of certain works rather than others. The subjective attitudes and cultural aspirations of the art historian become just as important an aspect of the narrative as the works that are its object. This is much the same as saying that there is no canon beyond that which we ourselves

being in pursuit of knowledge without recognizing how they themselves are the makers of that knowledge."

Curiously enough, the social history of art inspired by the Marxist criticism of T. J. Clark has by and large taken the existence of a traditional canon for granted. Clark has never conceived of the canon as a body of works imbued with historically contingent social meaning. While his interpretations of canonical works are clearly politically motivated, he rarely calls attention to his own intellectual beliefs and social engagement in the process of his encounter with the past. See, e.g., T. J. Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution*, Princeton, N.J., 1973; and idem, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers*, Princeton, N.J., 1984. For criticism of Clark's failure to address the question of the canon, see A. Rifkin, "Marx's Clarkism," *Art History*, VIII, 1985, 488–95.

29. L. Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" *Artnews*, LXIX, JAN. 1971, 23–39, 67–69.

30. *Ibid.*, 69.

31. G. Pollock, "Feminist Interventions in the Histories of Art: An Introduction," in *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism, and the Histories of Art*, London, 1988, 1–17.

32. A. Rifkin, "Art's Histories," in *The New Art History*, ed. A. L. Rees and F. Borzello, London, 1986, 157–63. See also G. Mermoz, "Rhetoric and Episteme: Writing about 'Art' in the Wake of Post-Structuralism," *Art History*, XII, 1989, 497–509.

33. For a discussion of the way in which works of art are "framed," see J. Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. G. Bennington and I. McLeod, Chicago, 1987.



construct. Instead of history used to buttress the existence of a traditional canon, instead of the historical imagination made to serve the status quo—that is, the tastes of those whose culture we have inherited—a motivated history can be used to destabilize and call into question the assumptions and prejudices of that culture by insisting on their contingency and relativity.

What are the pedagogical implications of these conclusions? What would happen, in other words, to the educational function of art history, if these reflections were put into practice? In its present configuration as a discipline organized around the study of a canon of artists and works guaranteed by tradition, art history must be considered an agent in what Pierre Bourdieu has called the process of “cultural reproduction.” The canonical content of our syllabi serves as a means of transmitting “cultural capital” from one generation of the elite to another.<sup>34</sup> By transmitting knowledge about a set of works whose merit can neither be questioned nor discussed, art history plays an important conservative role in contemporary culture.

How can these conditions be transformed? The elimination of a canon seems to be a utopian dream. To suggest that art history could continue as a social institution without making choices between what artists and works should be taught and what should not presupposes that the discipline could operate without a cultural agenda. Such deliberate naïveté would simply reproduce the circumstances that promoted an unquestioning attitude toward the traditional canon in the first place. If we assume in the wake of poststructuralism that there are no disinterested narratives, that all art-historical accounts are informed by one bias or another, then it seems wiser to acknowledge that there will always be some works that are considered to be of greater artistic merit than others and that the standards involved in making such judgments differ according to the attitudes and interests of different historical groups and individuals. Rather than assuming that the discipline might ever agree on what constitutes “quality,” let us suppose our students were introduced to concepts of artistic merit that responded to different political and cultural beliefs. In such circumstances, they might encounter a Marxist canon, a feminist canon, a gay and lesbian canon, a postcolonial canon, and so forth. This would make it clear that whatever the discipline’s canonical paradigm happened to be, there was little agreement as to its constitution and shape and that it was always capable of reconfiguration. Far from assuming that this plethora of ideals of social value could coexist in egalitarian conviviality, we can expect a contest of voices to arise in which a struggle for dominance would result in the hierarchization of contestatory discourses. The value of the existence of such alternatives, as well as of their debate with one another, is that none could henceforth be regarded as a

“master narrative.” Decisions to subscribe to one or another of their social agendas would be made with a full recognition of the political and cultural implications of that choice. None of the alternatives would be able to mask the contingency of its assumptions behind the naturalizing mask of tradition.

Some version of this scenario is already playing itself out in our discipline. Traditionally sanctioned narratives on which canonical status depended are being called into question by narratives that no longer share their assumptions. Individual artists and works of art—even entire periods—are being reevaluated in such a way that their continued representation in the canon has been placed in doubt, just as canonical status is now being sought for artists, works, and periods that have hitherto been unrecognized. Indeed, as David Carrier has suggested, art history would appear to be experiencing a “paradigm shift.” Using Thomas Kuhn’s notion of the “paradigm” to refer to forms of art-historical interpretation that are regarded as acceptable by the dominant institutions in the profession at any particular point in time, Carrier suggests that our discipline’s notion of “truth” is being transformed and that we are witnessing the development of new paradigms of what are to count as acceptable forms of interpretation.<sup>35</sup> Kuhn’s sociology of knowledge not only affords us insight into contemporary circumstances but also suggests a way of explaining the fact that, despite the appeal of some of art history’s leading practitioners to an unchanging and constant notion of tradition, one which would stabilize and perpetuate a fixed concept of quality, the canon has always been malleable, seemingly engaged in a process of constant change.

This essay, however, is not a descriptive account of the transformations currently being experienced by art history. Far from an empirical report, it is an appeal for a broader recognition of the role played by subjectivity in the articulation of historical interpretations. Rather than legitimating a preestablished canon of artists and works following the principle of “objectivity,” historians might pursue their own agendas and articulate their own motives for engaging in the process of finding cultural meaning in the art of the past. Instead of regarding the subject of art history as fixed and unchanging, scholars have an opportunity to define what that subject might be. In doing so, they can display rather than conceal the cultural issues that preoccupy them. The subject of art history thus becomes manifestly an allegory of the historical circumstances that have both shaped and empowered the subjectivity of the author.

This emphasis on the agency of the historian, his or her capacity to subject the values of the past to intense scrutiny and rigorous criticism, as well as to articulate the cultural aspirations of his or her own times, should not be misunderstood. This is not a call for some simpleminded correspondence between interpretation and interpreter, not a sugges-

34. P. Bourdieu and J. C. Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture*, trans. R. Nice, London, 1990. For an indictment of the way in which art history serves the process of “cultural reproduction,” see Carol Duncan, “Teaching the Rich,” in *The Aesthetics of Power: Essays in Critical Art History*, New York, 1993, 135–42.

35. D. Carrier, “Erwin Panofsky, Leo Steinberg, David Carrier: The Problem of Objectivity in Art Historical Interpretation,” *Journal of Aesthetics*

and Art Criticism, XLVII, no. 4, 1989, 333–47. For Kuhn’s theory of “paradigms,” see T. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), Chicago, 1970.

36. L. Althusser, “Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses,” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster, New York, 1971, 126–86.

tion that one should reflect the other. The allegories of subjectivity we call history must inevitably be opaque. We can never be fully conscious of the motives that impel (compel?) us to give one shape to an interpretation rather than another. The unconscious must, by definition, remain beyond our capacity to understand. Not only is the historian's subjectivity partly determined by unconscious forces, but it is also governed by the ideological traditions that are characteristic of its situation in history. Following Louis Althusser, we might define ideology as the social unconscious.<sup>36</sup> The historian belongs sometimes knowingly and sometimes unknowingly to a variety of different ways of conceiving of the relations between human beings as members of a particular culture, as well as the way in which that culture relates to other cultures and to the world, and these structures of understanding define his or her subjectivity in relation to all other times and places.

It is only, however, because the cultural codes and conventions that serve to define individual subjectivity also enable it

to participate in social life, it is only because the subject is both constituted by and constituting of the circumstances in which he or she exists, that the active role of history in the creation and transformation of culture can be understood. The call for a motivated history thus does not assume that the historian's motives are transparently accessible, but rather, within the context of psychological and ideological determination, it insists on the author's powers of agency to articulate and promote political agendas that are relevant to the cultural circumstances in which he or she is located.

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