

ART
HISTORY'S
HISTORY

VERNON HYDE MINOR

Art History's History

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Foreword



The history of art is a comparatively young discipline, at least in relation to other humanistic studies. Critical approaches to biography, to classics, to literature, and to philosophy preceded serious and integrative investigations of the style and meaning of a work of art once it had already been created. Prescriptions for ideal works of art were not uncommon during antiquity or the Renaissance, but fifteenth-century treatises like Alberti's *The Art of Painting* took little interest in the study of pre-existing works, preferring pure theory to critical reflection. When in the next century Giorgio Vasari (who has been called the grandfather of art history) wrote his *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, he established the pattern of presenting the history of art as a sequence of historical biographies. Vasari, however, had little interest in relating the work of art to the larger religious and political issues of his time, and his biases toward the art of his own region (Tuscany) and of his own day (the middle of the sixteenth century) hardly conform to the qualitative criteria that subsequently would guide critics and historians into the modern era. Yet even as later generations of critics would soften one set of aesthetic prejudices they would congeal another, and in most instances ideal preconceptions continued to take priority over attempts to evaluate a work of art on its own terms.

Erwin Panofsky once said that that the best way to make an art historical point was not to illustrate it. Before photographic book illustrations or lantern slides became widely available in the twentieth century, most discussions of art went unillustrated and were thus by nature freer to discourse in a manner that could be both more opinionated and more offhanded. The densely illustrated book and the phantasmagoric slide lecture have changed all of that, reuniting the practice of simultaneously looking at and thinking about art. What could seem more natural? Since the 1950s enrollments in introductory art history courses have grown and publishers' profits have swelled, whether the course and the book are engendering art appreciation

and coffee table etiquette or aspiring to provide their audience with something more.

In recent years, something very strange has occurred. As book and lecture hall illustrations have become more numerous and color film technologies more refined, an increasingly large number of art historians have turned away from the work of art as the primary object of their study. Although this may not yet be evident from the titles of courses offered in college and university curriculums, it is the only conclusion to be drawn from the topics listed on the program of annual meetings of the College Art Association of America or on the table of contents of even the most moderately progressive professional journals. Theoretical issues have come again to the fore while an obsession with methodology has led many to adopt disciplinary perspectives borrowed from other fields like literary criticism, social history, and women's studies. The political and social context of a work of art is no longer seen as merely being reflected in an image, but issues of class and gender are now believed to be densely interwoven into that image. Accordingly, the role of the artist who created the work is diminished in importance. As more of the "New Art History," as it is called, filters down to undergraduate course levels and into texts read by the general public, the more perplexed will be those who hold the traditional expectations for formal analysis and connoisseurship, conventional iconography, and a little history. The casual museum-goer with little or no academic training in art history and a high regard for artistic genius will regrettably be the most disaffected of all.

It is for this audience—students, those that teach students, and the museum-going general public—that Vernon Hyde Minor's book will be of the greatest value. Clearly written in refreshingly plain language, the author traces the entire history of art criticism and theory. His intention, as he states in the Introduction, is "to attempt to describe . . . what art history is, where it came from, what ideas, institutions, and practices form its background, how it achieved its present shape, and what critical methods it uses." Not since Lionello Venturi's *History of Art Criticism* was published in 1936 has so ambitious a task been addressed. Venturi's effort to be complete at times led him to be too encyclopedic, and his coverage of contemporary criticism ends with the theories of Walter Gropius and Frank Lloyd Wright. Minor's text is more selective, more focused, and more readable. More importantly, it takes us up to the present with insightful and incisive treatments of the most current approaches to the study of art. The last third of the book explains, with patience and sympathy, the new perspectives of art taken by Marxist, feminist, deconstructionist, semiotic, and psychoanalytic critics, while the final chapter, "Culture and Art History," offers a brilliant summary of the challenges today's student of art history faces in our multicultural society.

Whether one agrees or disagrees with any of the arguments reviewed in this text is less important, I think, than whether one understands them and is able to see how in the past or the present they can affect the study of art. As

terms like theory and methodology, ideology and revisionism replace ones like style and quality, originality and genius in art historical discourse, the educated person of today needs to be better informed about critical theory than he or she did only a decade or two ago. For Americans especially, whose cultural background may make them wary of both the power of images and theoretical speculations in general, this book will make that task a great deal easier.

JOHN VARRIANO



Preface



When I set out to write a text on the critical theories of art history, I realized that my archeological investigation of this discipline would cross quite a few boundaries. Art history results from so many different forms of academic discourse that it hardly qualifies as a unique field of study. The histories of criticism, aesthetics, and philosophy count for much in the study of art history. History itself is a complex field of inquiry in the modern university and can have the appearance of either a social science or a humanistic discipline. It can make sense to teach art history within an independent university department, a traditional history department, a humanities department, or a department of fine arts. Art history, it seems to me, is a hybrid and sometimes a handmaiden of other disciplines. I realized that writing about art history as a form of inquiry (which is something very different from the “history of art”) would result in a text of mixed but perhaps not blended parts. And so this book is about the study and teaching of art and art history, about the histories of philosophy, religion, and aesthetics, and the currents of contemporary criticism in art history and other humanistic disciplines. I hope that the breadth of this text makes up for its lack of homogeneity.

One of my concerns was to make the book as widely accessible as possible, which meant that I would have to avoid jargon, become a generalist rather than a specialist (and thereby disclaim a high degree of authority), and assume relatively little art historical background on the part of the reader. This survey, therefore, is only an introduction to the nearly limitless number of issues in art history and should not be taken as anything like the final word. I certainly do not expect agreement upon all points touched upon in the text; rather, I’m anticipating that interested readers will use their objections or demurrals to launch them into further study. This prefatory

apology, however, does not absolve the author from errors of fact and substance. For these, I assume full responsibility.

And finally there are those whom I wish to thank. Bud Therien, editor of art and music for Prentice Hall, has helped me, talked with me, and reassured me from the inception of the text to its printing. Prentice Hall's reviewers, Michael Camille of the University of Chicago, Howard Risatti of Virginia Commonwealth University, and David G. Wilkins of the University of Pittsburgh, shared their wealth of knowledge of art history and its literature and helped to lead me in some fruitful directions. And there have been my teachers. Morris Weitz taught a course on aesthetics at The Ohio State University that, nearly thirty years ago, caught my interest in the very questions that I bring up in the text. Marilyn Stokstad encouraged me as a graduate student and continues as a valued colleague to share her knowledge, good humor, and advice. To my mentor Robert Enggass I owe an enormous debt of gratitude and inspiration. My mother, Eleanor Minor, made a point of leaving art books around for me to peruse and dream over when I was very young and forever impressionable. And of course there are friends and colleagues too numerous to mention who have assisted my learning. I wish to thank specifically Paul Gordon and Claire Farago for reading and commenting on parts of my text. My sons remained endlessly tolerant (and largely unaware) of my writing of this book, for which I must thank them. And then, of course, there is my muse.



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Introduction



When I was an undergraduate and took my first art history course, I encountered an almost legendary text. H. W. Janson's *History of Art* has led generations of eager undergraduates through the history of art from the Old Stone Age to the present. Janson's name has become synonymous with the title "Survey" in an art history course. What impressed my fellow students and me back in 1963 was the sheer quality of the book: solid, beautifully bound, a handsome layout, and probably the best art reproductions any of us had ever seen. The black and white illustrations were sharply detailed, with a full tonal range from dark to light, and always in perfect "register" (no blurriness of detail). And the color plates, bound in separate sheaves, were—and this is the word I remember we used—breathtaking. Most of my friends were studio majors, which made them, I believe, especially keen on the quality of the text. And as we sat down to do the assigned reading, we found Janson's prose, on the whole, clear, precise, careful, explanatory, but sometimes difficult or too evocative. In the colloquialism of the day, we couldn't tell quite where he was "coming from." For instance, in comparing Cimabue's *Madonna Enthroned* (fig. 1), with earlier Byzantine icons, he writes: "His huge altar panel, *Madonna Enthroned*, rivals the finest Byzantine icons or mosaics; what distinguishes it from them is mainly a greater severity of design and expression, which befits its huge size." Now, there's certainly nothing wrong here, but much seems unsaid or implied. And as a freshman art history student, I wasn't too sure what to make of so short a characterization of such a large and, according to my professor, very important painting. Even though Janson wrote several more sentences on the panel, it just didn't seem enough to us. What were we supposed to make of Cimabue's "rivalry" with Byzantine icons and mosaics (fig. 2)? Was there some sort of competition for grandeur? Perhaps. And "the greater severity of design and expression"—what, exactly, does that mean? More square, more solemn? Janson never told us; we hoped our professor would explain things. We assumed

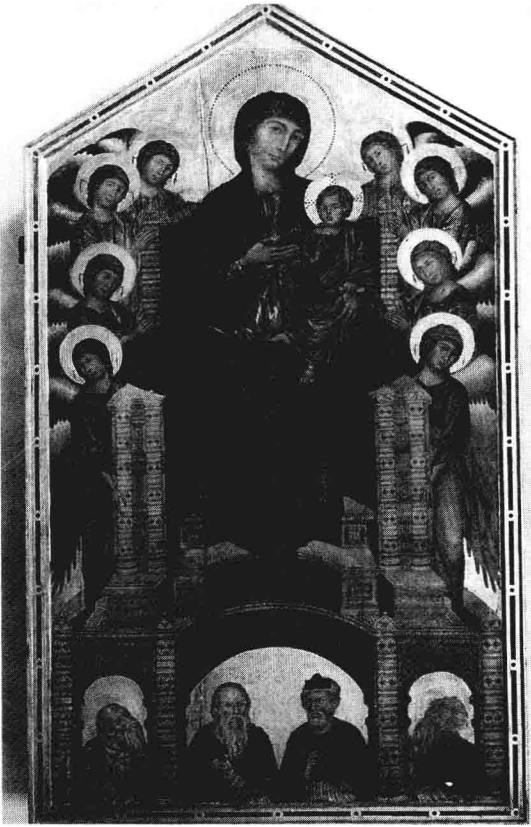


Figure 1. Cimabue, *Madonna Enthroned*, c. 1280. Uffizi Gallery, Florence. Photo: Alinari, Florence.

that the textbook was written in a kind of shorthand that was best deciphered by listening to further lectures and looking at slides. But often we heard more of the same in lectures: professors characterizing works of art rather than analyzing them. Such phrases as “note the subtle modulation from plane to plane” were not uncommon in describing Greek sculpture, for instance. And here’s another quotation from Janson, this time on Jean-Antoine Fragonard’s *The Bathers*: “A franker ‘Rubéniste’ than Watteau, Fragonard paints with a fluid breadth and spontaneity reminiscent of Rubens’ oil sketches. His figures move with a floating grace that also links him with Tiepolo, whose work he had admired in Italy.” All right, so his paintings look like those of Tiepolo and Rubens. What does that tell a student? Fragonard’s art has fluidity, breadth, grace, and spontaneity. So does a well-played baseball game. I do not wish to diminish the enormous contributions to the discipline of art history made by Janson and other eminent art historians, such as Gombrich, Gardner, and Hartt, but as was pointed out in a review that appeared in the *Art Journal*, there are problems with the texts by these authors because they emphasize the idea of appreciation at the expense of

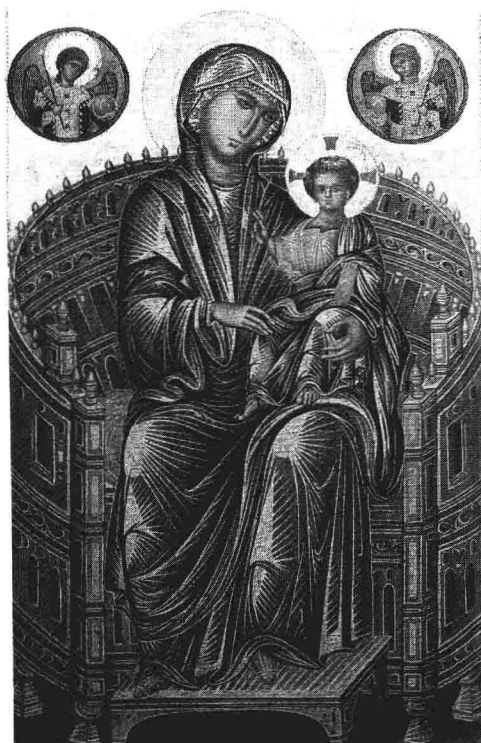


Figure 2. *Madonna Enthroned*, late 13th century; pane $32\frac{1}{2} \times 19\frac{1}{8}$ ". Andrew W. Mellon Collection,² National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Photo: © 1993, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

other methodologies and forms of criticism. I believe readers are aware, just as I was as an undergraduate, that courses in history, literature, philosophy, chemistry, and physics do not proceed this way. The methods in these disciplines seem more geared toward a conception or version of "truth," or a process that leads toward "understanding." Art history, we thought, was about "appreciation," although we weren't entirely sure what that word meant either. "Appreciation" seemed to be some skill developed by experts and sophisticates.

And to develop that skill, one needed a certain vocabulary. Students try their best to imitate their teachers and their textbooks, often with unnerving results. Now as a teacher, well remembering my many frustrations as an art history major, I tell my students that I do not want their papers to adopt the pseudo-anonymous and authoritative voice of a textbook. And when looking at works and attempting verbal analyses, I expect them to go beyond such catch words as "fluid," "buoyant," "graceful." But of course, we as professionals are ultimately to blame for language that is frequently strange, unnecessarily inflated, overly decorous, and sometimes frivolous. I

think our problem arises from an unclear sense of the purposes, nature, origins, and assumptions of the discipline of art history.

So it is my intention to attempt to describe in this book what art history is, where it came from, what ideas, institutions, and practices form its background, how it achieved its present shape, and what critical methods it uses. The audience I hope to reach consists of those who are encountering art history for the first or nearly the first time, who are curious not just about the art, but why we say the things we do about it. I would like to convince the reader who believes that there is only one way to talk about art—the text's way—that this point of view is simply too reductive and authoritarian. At the other extreme, I wish to persuade the resistant and laconic reader how invalid is the belief that all art is merely personal, and that everyone's opinion is equally valid. Along the way, the reader will become aware, I hope, of what makes art history humanistic.

The humanities study not only discrete works of art and literature, but also concern themselves with process as well: how one reads, looks at, understands, and enjoys art. Literary theory, for example, has blossomed in academic circles over the past fifty years, to the point where there are many now who fear that theories of criticism are of equal or greater interest to graduate students and professors than the original texts. Murray Krieger has written that a piece of literary criticism is “a fully autonomous literary object” (*Arts on the Level: The Fall of the Elite Object*, Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1981, p. 40). In this intentionally provoking statement, Krieger wants to challenge the notion that critics and teachers serve the artist and his or her work, trying with our meager powers to interpret things for those less enlightened than we, and at the same time teaching the skills of interpretation. But there never used to be any question about who has priority, who's the boss: the artist and the work of art have been in charge. Krieger of course says no. The critic is equal to the artist; the criticism is equal to the work of art (although, in the visual arts at least, it probably wouldn't sell for quite so much).

Until recently, the scenario in art history has not been anything like that of its sister disciplines. We take seriously the original painting, statue, craft work, performance, or building, sometimes preferring to contemplate it in silence. John Keats addressed a Grecian urn, “Thou foster child of silence and slow time.” This constitutes an aesthetic condition and experience we sometimes can feel when moving through the still halls of a great museum looking at mute works of art. But we as teachers and students tend toward loquacity, just like the literary critics. We talk and write about art. So serious is this desire that it has been appropriated, for better or worse, by the “academy” (the universities, museums, galleries, and the art world), institutionalized and turned into a discipline. The “New Art History” is more theoretical than ever before. Times have changed. Perhaps not even the works of art have stayed the same.

What follows are chapters, or more properly speaking essays, on this dis-

cipline of art history. Much of the first part of the book will be historical, for “history” is in fact half of our name. History is remembering, and through this act of “anamnesia” we can come to have some understanding of why things are the way they are.

The modern academy, as a place for studying art, begins in later sixteenth-century Italy as a professional forum for artists. It often encouraged theoretical discourse on the arts, sometimes to less-than-enthusiastic artists. But as a cultural and ideological phenomenon, its influence has been keenly felt; it is experienced today perhaps more strongly than ever. The nature of the academy, whether an independent artistic organization under the protection of the papacy—Rome’s *Accademia di San Luca*—or a royal academy controlled by Louis XIV’s lieutenants, or the modern university, creates agendas and influences artists and art historians in one manner or another. These and related matters will be explored in more detail in the first part of my text.

History meets aesthetics in the chapters on theories of art from Plato to the nineteenth century; history backs off somewhat in my treatments of theories of criticism in the twentieth century. Ways of doing art history, what we call methodology, have become very complex in the twentieth century, especially since the 1960s. The College Art Association’s annual meetings, where artists get together with other artists and debate contemporary issues, and where art historians give talks or participate on panels, have changed substantially in character since the mid-1980s, all in an effort to come to terms with shifting methodologies, ideologies, and practices. We art historians are the self-appointed keepers of the sacred flame of understanding art. And how we do it is very interesting, especially at the turning of this new century. Just the richness of the variety of recent art historical approaches with which this text deals gives some suggestion of how involved our project is: semiotics, deconstruction, Marxism, psychoanalytic approaches to art history, feminist critiques, multiculturalism—to name only the better known. As I write about each of these approaches, I’ll try to show how they apply to individual works of art.



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