



A GUIDE TO EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ART

LINDA WALSH

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A Guide to Eighteenth-Century Art

Linda Walsh

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Introduction

Style, Society, Modernity

The Question of Style

This book offers guidance on how to study eighteenth-century art, rather than a survey of the prominent artists of that time. Approaches to this subject have changed radically since the 1970s. Since the Renaissance, favored methods of studying art included biographical surveys of the “complete works” of a recognized canon of artists; a tendency to discuss art-historical periods in terms of stylistic trends and developments; or connoisseurial analysis of the styles of different artists, partially with a view to accurate attribution. Scholarly texts, such as Michael Levey’s 1966 work *From Rococo to Revolution: Major Trends in Eighteenth-Century Painting* (Levey, 1966), or Mary Webster’s 1978 *Hogarth* (Webster, 1978), remain invaluable sources of knowledge and critical discussion; are still extremely useful for beginners; and continue to inform more recent art-historical writing.

A shift in methodologies occurred, however, with the growing significance of new fields of knowledge, including sociology and psychology, that stressed the relationship of artistic production, or of an individual creative mind, to broader social and cultural developments, values and concerns. This has involved a much greater emphasis on the role of audiences and publics in determining the nature of art as well as on the issues of class, economics, institutions and politics that shaped their taste. The 1994 (fifth) edition of Ellis Waterhouse’s *Painting in Britain 1530–1790* includes an Introduction by Michael Kitson (Kitson, 1994, xi–xxvii) that illuminates with great clarity this shift of focus within art history, from the study of the careers and stylistic achievements of individual artists

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(Waterhouse's book, first published in 1953, contains separate chapters on Reynolds, Hogarth, Gainsborough and Wright of Derby, among others); to methods of analysis derived from linguistics and literary theory of the visual language artists deployed; to a focus on the influence of the broader social, political, institutional, educational, cultural and ideological contexts in which they worked. The current book seeks to illuminate eighteenth-century art through the prism of these wider considerations, while remaining indebted to earlier surveys and approaches.

In earlier histories of eighteenth-century art, the most significant narrative concerning style is the rococo's early dominance giving way, from the 1760s, to a preference for neoclassicism. It is now accepted that the style labels often applied to histories of eighteenth-century art did not have currency at the time. "Rococo" (derived from *rocaille*, relating to the shell work found in fantasy grottos) was a late-eighteenth-century term implying excessively convoluted and eye-distracting forms. The tendency to view art history as a sequence of style labels embedded in unifying grand narratives about art, cohesive bodies of works or neat linear, autonomous aesthetic developments, has been exposed as a means of obscuring the more fundamental social and economic causes of cultural change (Rosenblum, 1967, vii–viii, 4; Craske, 1997, 8, 246–247). Such narratives also gloss over the uneven nature of artistic change across different nations. Centralizing powers in Britain, France and Spain (the Georgian and Bourbon monarchies) oversaw relatively unified artistic cultures. However, the more diverse governments of Central and Eastern Europe, including the Habsburg Empire, whose territories were run with varying amounts of autonomy by a range of electors and princes, were associated with more pluralistic patterns of patronage and stylistic development (Kaufman, 1995, 342–379).

The rococo was implicated in its own time in the demise or pollution of grand history painting and in creating tensions between the different orders (classes) of society who vied for the status its affluence conferred (see Chapter 2). Its style and subject matter constituted an assault on the imagination and an explicit evocation of physical sensation. The rococo style was characterized in interior décor by white panels, gilded frames and cartouches, and abundant decorative plaster work; shiny satins, brocades, silks and flocked wallpapers, some imported from China and the Far East; and sparkling mirrors decorated with C-scroll, palm and ribbon motifs. In painting it was characterized by extensive use of pastel shades, flesh tints and "S" shaped curves derived from shells, rocks and plants; and in sculpture by an emphasis on graceful flowing curves, asymmetry and decorative detail, for example, the ribbons and *putti* often embedded in pedestals (Scott, 1995, 1–5). Grander schemes might involve large-scale

mural *trompe l'oeil* (literally “deceiving the eye” or powerfully illusory) representations of buildings, arches and ruins, such as those for which Italian artists were often commissioned in the first half of the century.

The influence of the style spread across the courts of Europe, and through affluent owners of private mansions. It permeated the stylistic vocabulary of all genres, embracing genre subjects, portraits and even religious paintings (Tarabra, 2006, 328–331), as well as mythological (“history”) subjects. François Boucher (1703–1770) and even the allegedly xenophobic William Hogarth (1697–1764) were among its main practitioners (Simon, 2007, 56, 170). Its influence spread to those nations wishing to emulate the latest French fashions including those, like England, where anti-Gallic feelings existed alongside the desire to keep up with foreign competition (Colley, 1984, 10–17; Victoria and Albert Museum, 1984). In part its influence was so pervasive because it relied, like the fashion for neoclassicism that succeeded it, on a unity of effect throughout all aspects of a room’s décor, even if that “unity” resulted from the complex diversity of a range of commercial, industrial and technological processes used in the production of rococo goods (Scott, 1995, 6). The style was above all an exemplar of the “decorative” defined in the 1762 Dictionary of the French Academy (cited by Scott, 1995, 7) as embellishment arising from the deployment of ornament on and in a building.

According to traditional art-historical narratives, negative reactions to “gallant mythologies” and the dominance of decorative art spread more widely, especially with the unfolding of the historical and cultural movement known as the Enlightenment, which placed emphasis on reason, knowledge, moral and social progress. In the art world this led by the 1750s and 1760s to a revival of interest in classical culture subsequently identified as neoclassicism. The aim in neoclassical art was to reassert the gravitas of antiquity through reference to its themes, narratives, costumes and architectural motifs. Some artists achieved this by returning to a more simplified, austere, linear style derived from ancient friezes; compositional austerity and a minimal use of ornament; and “still” figures in heroic and dignified poses and restrained draperies that hugged the body (Rosenblum, 1967, 5). These tendencies later reached their dramatic and radical conclusion in the art of Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825). The term “neoclassical” was a Victorian invention (Coltman, 2006, 1–2). It was uttered in a derogatory spirit and at time when artists and critics viewed the past with an ill-disguised condescension that served their own claims to a regenerative “modernity.” The retrospective invention of the term was motivated by a critical response to what was perceived as a reactionary “re-warming” of an old aesthetic based on uncritical copying of the styles

and subjects of ancient Greek and Roman art. In the eighteenth century the term “true style” was more common when referring to the neoclassical style of painting later developed by David and his followers. However, neoclassicism was characterized by stylistic pluralism, ranging from the austere to the sensual and the decorative (Coltman, 2006, 7–8). It has been described recently as a “frame of mind” or “style of thought” rather than a specific combination of formal elements (Coltman, 2006, 7, 11) (see Chapter 2). In this respect, it is ill-fitted to sum up a coherent or progressive narrative of style.

Within eighteenth-century art, both “baroque” and “classic” styles gained acceptance throughout the century, the former often “corrupted” into the rococo in the early part of the century and subject to eclectic treatments in the middle decades; the latter common in the late-century, pronounced linear clarity of David’s neoclassicism, the sculptor and draughtsman John Flaxman (1755–1826) and others. The terms “classic” and “baroque” derive from the broad classification of styles as outlined in the *Principles of Art History* (first published in German in 1915) by Heinrich Wölfflin (1864–1945). Each of Wölfflin’s style categories may be applied across a broad chronological range. The style label “baroque” may be applied not only to many works in the “Baroque” period of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but also to works from other periods. Wölfflin characterized the baroque style as consisting of freer, loose brushwork, contrasts of light and shade, dramatic suggestions of diagonal movement and uncertain arrangements of space. The style often incorporated an exuberant abundance of detail. The art of Rubens offers a common example of such tendencies. Wölfflin characterized the “classic” as a combination of a more stable, planimetric composition (i.e. based on a grid of clearly defined horizontal and vertical planes) and an emphasis on line (e.g. clearly outlined figures and buildings) rather than mass: Raphael and Poussin might serve as examples here (Wölfflin, 1950, 14–16). In reality of course, many paintings of the eighteenth and other centuries were more complex stylistically than this duality suggests.

Modernity and the Public Sphere

Opinions vary on the compliance of eighteenth-century art with our own recent conceptions of “modernity.” Social hierarchies, significant due to the continuing dominance of aristocratic patronage and taste; and hierarchies of artistic genres, which placed grand history painting at the top, landscape and still life at the bottom, are often considered to have inhibited

any impulse toward modernity, since they generally engineered the stabilization, rather than evolution, of cultural life. The European Enlightenment, a cultural movement that began in the seventeenth century but peaked in the middle to late decades of the eighteenth, included a compulsion to construct taxonomies and classifications in all fields of knowledge and creativity, and to create encyclopedias and dictionaries. The latter are often credited with “fixing” culture, although in fact such initiatives were linked at the time with ambitions to disseminate and advance knowledge. The Enlightenment’s preoccupation with ordering and clarifying is seen as “holding back” the dramatic breakthroughs in stylistic innovation and individual creative freedom with which, for example, the Romantics and Modernists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have become associated (Wrigley, 1993, 313, 353).

Eighteenth-century artists are often seen as being closely directed by the guilds (in the case of the “mechanical,” industrial or decorative arts) or (in the case of the “high” liberal arts of painting and sculpture) prestigious royal academies concerned with the glory of state or monarch. The continuation of slavery, imperialism, religious persecution, the massive movement in land enclosures, the persistence of absolutist monarchies in many countries and of aristocratic government in all, are among those eighteenth-century phenomena seen to indicate a resistance to liberty or liberation of any kind. Canonical art from the century continued to pay homage to antique Greek and Roman history and mythology, even if the stylistic treatment of these subjects varied.

Seen from other perspectives, the century is viewed as the time when progressive Enlightenment ideals such as liberty, progress and a critical attitude to authority; rapid urbanization (especially in Britain and France and, later, Germany); and cosmopolitanism allowed new markets for art to challenge the power of older hierarchies at court and artistic academies (Craske, 1997, 11). Although classical influences remained central, the Enlightenment’s emphasis on scientific method or direct observation of nature (“empiricism”) was increasingly important, particularly in genres other than history painting. “Modernity” is not after all a “simple, agreed upon” concept (Said, 2003 [1978], xiv). The following outlines some of the varied meanings and complexities of the term as applied to the history of eighteenth-century art.

The Enlightenment is often regarded as a progressive influence in social, educational and political terms. It was subject to national variants. In France, for example, there was a much deeper dissatisfaction with the status quo in institutions of government (the Bourbon monarchy, also powerful in Spain) and religion (the Catholic Church), and a focus on the

formulation by a largely aristocratic class of writers of new, abstract ideals relating to liberty and justice. In Britain, where a more tolerant church and a constitutional (Georgian) monarchy facilitated more open discussion of issues by writers from a broader range of social backgrounds, there was often a marked concern with more practical issues of reform. The term “the Enlightenment” has, nevertheless, a broad currency. It is sometimes defined as a chronological period, but is also used to describe a widespread reaction, in many European countries, against prejudice and ignorance (Porter, 2000, 48), and a belief in progress. Thinkers such as John Locke (1632–1704) and Isaac Newton (1643–1727) stressed the importance of knowledge gained through independent reasoning and direct experience:

...God had surely given men powers sufficient to discharge their earthly offices. Herein lay the enormous appeal of Locke’s image of the philosopher as “an Under-Labourer in clearing Ground a little, and in removing some of the Rubbish, that lies in the way to Knowledge”, so as to beat a path for the true “master-builders”.... (Porter, 2000, 60)

The Enlightenment opened up new ways of seeing and thinking, with many of its faithful consciously seeking their own version of “modernity,” forms of knowledge and creativity that relied less on past models and sources of authority and patronage such as royal courts and the Catholic Church, and sought to emulate rather than copy the art of classical antiquity (Porter, 2000, 3–4, 32–33, 47, 52). Nevertheless, certain ingrained hierarchies of value persisted, with classical civilization in particular providing a constant touchstone of value and achievement.

Another familiar narrative concerning eighteenth-century cultural change is that it represented a shift from Enlightenment rationalism, scientific method, objectivity and classicism to Romanticism, with its greater emphasis on subjectivity, feeling, originality, rule-breaking and fantasy. There is some truth in this (Pagden, 2013, 1–18). By the early nineteenth century “Romantic” values were in the ascendant in much European culture. As with style labels, however, these cultural dualities often disintegrate when faced with actual examples of artistic production. Many “Enlightenment” artists sought to be original, exercise their imagination and express the feelings of those they represented or arouse those of their viewers, while many “Romantics” adhered to the Enlightenment values of empirical research, first-hand observation of nature and classicism (Walsh and Lentin, 2004a and 2004b). There was no style of painting unique to or distinctive of either the Enlightenment (Kaufman, 1995, 455) or of Romanticism; nor any consistent differentiation of the stylistic trends of

each movement, even if certain “family resemblances” may be discerned. Arguably, however, both movements contributed to our own understanding of modernity: the first through its dedication to intellectual critique and reasoned principle; the second in its attention to the less controllable workings of the individual mind.

Much art-historical debate on eighteenth-century art in Europe has focused on British and French art, and this is often the case in the present study. In defense of such a bias it is common to cite the pervasive influence of French language, manners and culture in “cultivated” European courts such as those in Berlin, Madrid, St Petersburg and Sweden (Brewer, 1997, 84; Craske, 1997, 19–21; Tite, 2013a, 5; Tite, 2013b, 36–45; Weichsel, 2013, 70–71). Such developments did not go unchallenged, however. Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), advocate of a distinctively German Gothic tradition, as opposed to the cosmopolitan classicism that held sway, was among those thinkers who felt that distinctive national languages and cultures were necessary, since they represented a *Zeitgeist* that resisted easy translation (Gaiger, 2002, 4–5; Barnard, 2003, 6, 38–40). Royally sponsored academies of art in Paris (founded in 1648) and London (1768) served as models for academies established in many other European cities, the French Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture (Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture, referred to henceforth as Académie royale) spreading its influence to Rome through its annexe at the French Academy there. Rome also served as a meeting point for artists from all over Europe, thus emphasizing the cosmopolitan nature of many developments in eighteenth-century art, especially neoclassicism. In Italy more broadly, French manners and culture served as a model for those wishing to stake a claim to “modern” sophistication (Pasta, 2005, 209).

Royal courts such as those in Madrid, London and Vienna welcomed artists from other countries, thus helping to disperse trends and influences (Tite, 2013a, 6). The Georgian court in Britain initially favored portrait artists from northern Europe and decorative artists from Italy; the court and Royal Academy in Madrid favored French and Italian artists in the early part of the century. The art of Francisco Goya y Lucientes (1746–1828) was, for example, influenced by the work of other nations’ artists whose work he had seen and by cosmopolitan Enlightenment ideals, to which his art is not, however, reducible (Pérez-Sánchez, 1989, xvii–xxv; Luxenberg, 1997, 39–64). In all European courts open to the influence of Enlightenment writers and thinkers, there was a competitive attitude toward keeping up with the vanguard of knowledge. Joshua Reynolds (1723–1792) was a member of societies that brought him into contact with major writers such as Samuel Johnson (1709–84), and Goya frequented

circles where he met leading financiers, lawyers, collectors and enlightened social and political reformists. At the same time, in the second half of the century, European nations began to aspire to France's achievements by establishing or encouraging their own national schools of artists.

Scholarly assessments of the relative “modernity” of eighteenth-century art have proceeded beyond ill-defined notions of openness to change or the progressive, to consider more historically specific factors. Central to any progression toward modernity in this period was the development of a new bourgeois “public” as theorized and described by Jürgen Habermas (born 1929) in his 1962 work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (*Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*). This new social grouping gained in numbers and confidence throughout the eighteenth century so that it generated a corpus of critical opinion in cultural affairs located between previously dominant autocratic royal courts, and the realm of private life, as evident, for example, in family life, sociable discussion and private property ownership. An expanding class of professional people merged with or aspired to the lifestyle of the feudal nobility. Encouraged by greater freedom of the press, increasingly popular urban forms of sociability such as the coffee house, tea drinking, the salon (an informal club or private gathering for the educated and culturally aware), learned societies and art markets that offered alternatives to traditional forms of patronage, this section of society was able to assert its taste and opinions in the name of a new form of “civil,” “elegant,” “polite” or “good” society (Habermas, 1992 [1962], xi–40). Having rehearsed its cultural expertise in the private domain of the family, it achieved the status of a self-empowered audience:

The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labour. (Habermas, 1992, 27)

The role of this new public in facilitating cultural and artistic change has been extensively analyzed in recent decades (Crow, 1985, 1–6; Solkin, 1992, 187, 214; Brewer, 1997, 94–95). It exerted its influence through commerce and trade, helping to create an art market in which culture was consciously transformed into a commodity (Solkin, 1993, 1–2, 30; Bindman, 2008, 16). As an audience it was often self-consciously critical; for example, in requiring (especially from the 1760s) as a “commodity”