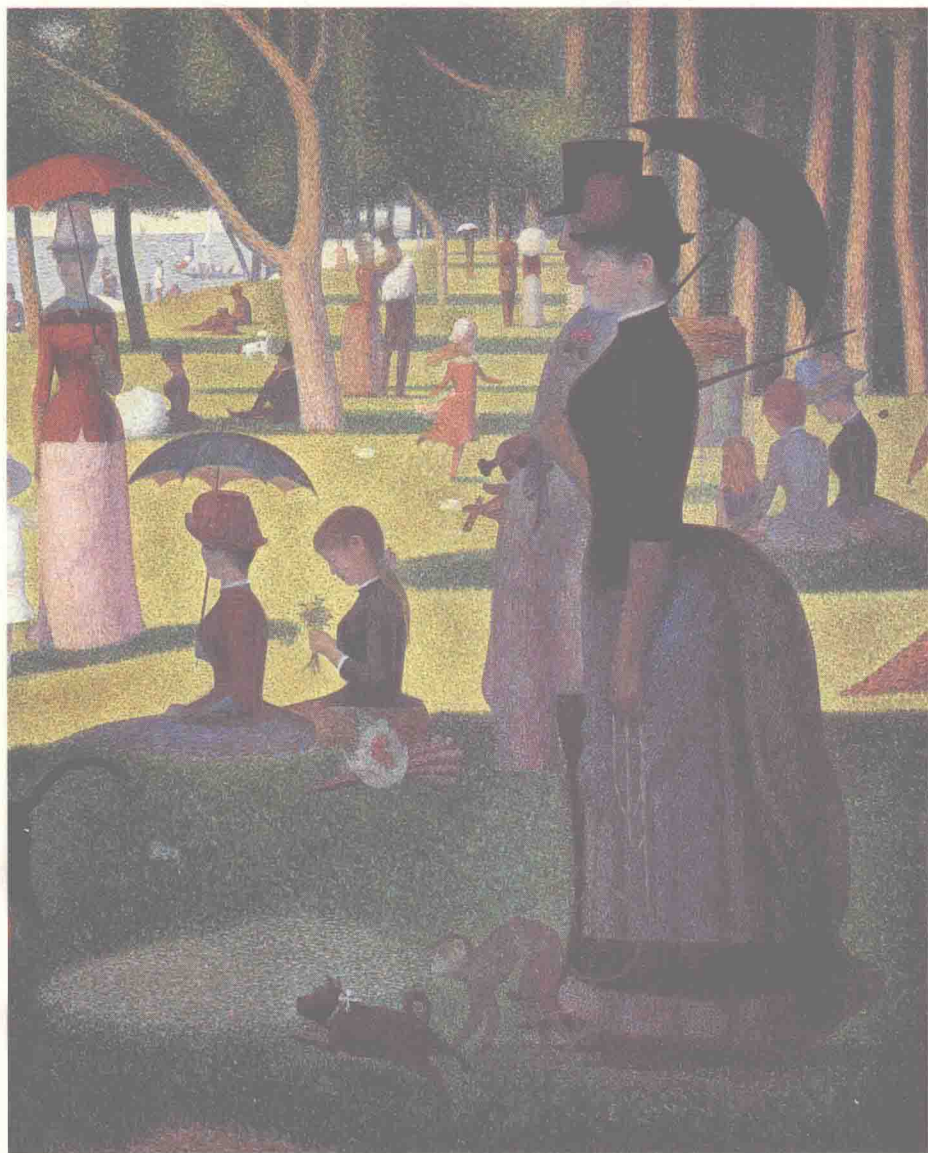


The Politics of Vision

Essays on Nineteenth-Century
Art and Society



Linda Nochlin

The Politics of Vision
*Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art
and Society*

LINDA ~~NOCHLIN~~

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Introduction

Any attempt on the part of an art historian to deal with the issue of art and politics must first engage with the politics of art history itself. And this politics, of course, has a history, which is replicated in the career of any single practitioner in the field. In this sense, every art-historical Bildungsroman is, in microcosm, a social history of art history, and deserves examination, however cursory, in terms of the paradigms within which, or—more rarely—against which, new art-historical writing is inevitably formulated.

In my own case, starting out in the field at Vassar and New York University's Institute of Fine Arts in the late forties and early fifties, the dominant paradigm was formalism, manifested, in the case of the art history of the nineteenth and twentieth century, in the triumph of Modernism. At the Institute, Walter Friedländer, then in his eighties, taught me nineteenth-century art, and his echt-formalist *David to Delacroix* (Wölfflin recycled for the early nineteenth century, even then a revered classic) served as our text. Although issues of subject matter were touched on, serious studies of the *content* of painting and sculpture were reserved for earlier periods, where such investigations were isolated under the heading of iconography. Modern art, by definition, it would seem, was iconography-free: indeed, in its most simplistic formulation, the whole point of the Modernist effort, from Manet on, was to rid art of its encumbering subject matter, leaving the production of meaning—understood

always as an outmoded emphasis on moralism or story-telling—to Academicism and outer darkness.

This summary of the situation in the fifties is of course unfair and partial. There were art historians—at the Institute and elsewhere—who were approaching their subject from a more integrated, socially grounded viewpoint. Noteworthy in this respect was the classicist Karl Lehmann, whose course on Late Antique Art, with its emphasis on the whole grand sweep of imperial art production (a wonderful potpourri of institutional standardization, bizarre appropriation, and outrageous antinaturalism), its reading list, which featured Riegl and Wickhoff, and, above all, its insistence on a social basis—most significantly, the triumph of popular, lower-class codes of representation—for the striking formal changes marking the shift from classical to post-classical styles, provided me with a powerful model for my own work. Yet this was, of course, outside my major field of interest: the art of the nineteenth and twentieth century. Indeed, the serious study of nineteenth-century art was still, in many respects, in its infancy, and serious students were expected to focus on earlier periods. In fact, not many courses were offered dealing with art after 1800.

I came on the art history of the nineteenth century, then, at a formative moment in the field; options were still open as far as constituting a history of modern art was concerned. At this historic moment, the choice of Courbet and Realism as the subject of my dissertation was significant. It offered the possibility of dealing with content, with form, and above all, with the problematic relation of both to French politics around the time of the 1848 Revolution and drew on a varied range of methodologies and archival resources. Indeed, one might say that my approach to this project constituted a form of initiatory bricolage, a sort of scholarly and conceptual tinkering and experimentation which eventually produced the ad hoc but not unsophisticated methodological scaffolding—open to change but consistently engaged—that still supports my work, using what seemed useful and rejecting what did not. My main difficulty, bluntly stated, was putting Courbet's realist style together with his politics.

It was here that Meyer Schapiro's seminal article "Courbet and Popular Imagery"¹ played a crucial role. Schapiro demonstrated that Courbet's stylistic originality in those key monuments of realism, *The Burial at Ornans* and *The Peasants of Flagey*, owed an enormous debt to the impact of popular imagery, and that popular imagery itself was thoroughly imbricated in the complex of cultural innovations associated with the 1848

Revolution and *garante-buitardisme* generally; further, the article suggested that the relation of the political to the pictorial need not be formulated in terms of a specifically “political” subject matter, nor thought of in terms of the consciously political intentions of the artist at all, but rather, must be conceptualized within more complex systems of mediation. In short, Schapiro’s article, which I came upon in 1953 in the course of writing a graduate school paper on art and the 1848 Revolution, suggested the question animating all my efforts from that point on: how to *think* the political in art.

For the art historian, the problem of how to think the political leads inevitably to the politics of art history itself. In recent years, this politics has taken the form of revisionism: it is only within the context of a certain revised version of art-historical theory and practice that the political can be effectively conceptualized. Relevant to my project in this volume, then, is a brief consideration of the models offered by revisionism to the study of nineteenth-century art. First, of course, there is the model of the social history of art, Marxist in its orientation, most conspicuously embodied in the work of T. J. Clark, but predicted in that of Robert Herbert of Yale and Albert Boime of UCLA, and predated by such ancestor figures as Frederick Antal, Arnold Hauser, and F. J. Klingender. Second, there is what might be called the “supplementary” or “they-also-ran” model of the revisionist project: that of the revivalists, the resuscitators of dead reputations and minor achievements. Gerald Ackerman’s monograph on Gérôme and Gabriel Weisberg’s exhibition of minor French realists are examples of this revisionist mode, as are the monographs of certain feminist scholars, reviving forgotten women painters of the period. Third, there is the pluralist or “let-a-thousand-flowers-bloom” model, most prominently espoused by Robert Rosenblum, a model which, without completely rejecting the value judgments of the past, nevertheless attempts to incorporate a far wider range of stylistic and national possibilities within the art-historical purview.

All of these revisionist models have much to offer compared with the relatively restrictive formalist model of my youth, and I have drawn on all of them, especially that of the social history of art. Yet certain problems are posed by each as well. The social history of art, for example, seems to sidestep the crucial issue of the canon and canonicity, taking for granted that the same list of “great artists” and “major movements” sanctioned by pre-revisionist art history is to be the subject of its discourse.

Then, too, the social history of art often fails to question the status of history itself, accepting historical discourse as a given, a kind of originating or causative ground, and then positioning visual representation as a result or secondary phenomenon. The difficult or thorny issue of mediation is, understandably, often sidestepped by the social history model, leaving a heap of historical or social data on one side of the equation and a detailed analysis of pictorial structure on the other, but never really suggesting how the one implicates the other, or whether, indeed, there really is any mutual implication.

Both the “supplementary” and the pluralist models of revisionist art history—while deserving only of praise for revealing how the art production of the nineteenth century was actually much more varied and inclusive than we had been led to believe—run the risk of distorting the historical situation in a different way: by depoliticizing the art historical field of investigation. Rejecting a critical reading of the past, these branches of revisionism fail to deal with the crucial issue of ideology, both in terms of the specific significations produced by the redeemed and rediscovered works themselves, and in terms of the effects of such canon-revision on contemporary market forces directed to the provision of new, consumable masterpieces for the art-buying public.

My own response to revisionism and especially its problematic relation to the political—and I stipulate it as a response, certainly not as a solution—can be summarized, rather inelegantly, it is true, as “thinking art history Otherly.” By this I mean to suggest that my commitment to feminism, both as theory and as politics, has provided me with a vantage point of Otherness, and that if one sees art history from the vantage point of the Other, politics necessarily informs the very construction of the subject; it cannot be construed as an additional element. For me, the very act of producing art history implicates the art historian politically, in a wide variety of ways.

This group of essays, written over the course of more than twenty years, raises many of the issues and problems involved in trying to think art history “Otherly.” The first (and first-written) chapter questions the very formulation of the notion of the avant-garde current in the formalist paradigm and attempts to reinscribe its political meaning by investigating how the idea of a cultural vanguard was produced within a specific historical situation. The last (and most recently written) chapter, like the first, critiques the *telos* of formalism and the traditional occlusion of the social

in Seurat's *La Grande Jatte*—much less its reading as social critique—and suggests that formalism, far from merely being a *partial* construction of the art-historical problematic, actively functions to mystify and to prevent the viewer from seeing the work historically.

The chapters on the Puerto Rican painter Francisco Oller, the Belgian Léon Frédéric, and the popular French illustrator Paul Renouard are not intended primarily as “revivals” of these artists in the “supplementary” mode of revisionism but rather as a questioning of the status of the canon itself. The studies of Oller and of French nineteenth-century Orientalism demonstrate, among other things, how canon formation connects with colonialism and cultural imperialism. I, like the practitioners of “supplementary” revisionism, believe that Gérôme should indeed be dealt with as a crucial figure in the history of nineteenth-century art, but not in the sense of adding him to the canon or, in the “thousand flowers” mode, proclaiming him the pictorial peer of Degas, but rather because, like Degas himself, Gérôme gives us access to important problems of ideology and domination—of politics, in short. Examining Degas himself within the context of the Dreyfus affair and the discursive formation of nineteenth-century French anti-Semitism, on the other hand, demonstrates what happens when you look at a canonical figure against the grain, from a position outside the usual ones offered by art history, revisionist or otherwise.

Central to the project of “thinking art history Otherly,” however—what really displaces, repositions, and transforms the disciplinary object itself most drastically—are the questions of sexuality raised by feminism. “If the production of meaning is inseparable from the production of power, then feminism (a political ideology addressed to relations of power) and art history (or any discourse productive of knowledge) are more intimately connected than is popularly supposed,” asserts Lisa Tickner, in a searching analysis of the relation between the two. “Feminist inquiry is not the alien, bastardized or self-interested import its opponents despise, but a form of motivated scholarship that has . . . the most searching questions to address to the discipline as a whole.”² Although not as evident in this volume as in the essays published in *Women, Art, and Power*, it is nevertheless the case that a feminist problematic lies at the heart of much of *The Politics of Vision*, underlying the questions of sexuality, subject position, difference, and subordination inherent to the production of meaning in the pictorial discourse of the nineteenth century. The feminist

vantage point is most prominent in the discussion of Manet's *Masked Ball at the Opera* and the piece on Orientalism, in both of which the demonstration of the historically imposed arbitrariness of codes of sexual difference is paramount to my analysis. Feminist art historians are often accused of not looking at the works of art in question. I believe that texts like the one on Manet or the Orientalists demonstrate that, far from diverting attention from the visual object, the insights of feminism force the committed scholar to rethink what she or he is looking at and how she or he is looking at it: to look harder, more steadily, more critically, and more self-consciously. Drawing on a wide range of models and methodologies—psychoanalytic theory (*not* psychobiography); structuralism and post-structuralism; Marxist theory; literary criticism; and yes, aspects of traditional art history and its revised modes—feminist art history reproblematises and reconstitutes the central issue of how meaning is produced in form within the work of art.

History, including the history of one's own production, remains inert without the revivifying touch of the contingent and the circumstantial. Each of these pieces was formulated in response to specific circumstances, in answer to particular questions at a particular historical moment and within a specific intertextual context. Some account of the actual genesis of each essay, the process of its construction, and the way specific conclusions were reached seems in order.

"The Invention of the Avant-Garde" was written in 1968 for an issue of the *Art News Annual* devoted to the avant-garde. It is very much a product of its historical moment, a time when cultural revolution was in the air and the relation between politics—particularly radical politics—and cultural production, that of the past as well as the present, seemed to cry out for articulation. If I had written the piece later, I would have had to take account of Peter Bürger's crucial differentiation, in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*,³ between the authentic historical avant-garde, which questioned art's institutional status, and the aestheticism and insistence on autonomy characteristic of Modernism. During the twenty years since the publication of "The Invention of the Avant-Garde," there has been a plethora of investigation and reinterpretation of the work of Gustave Courbet, the centerpiece of the essay, most notably by T. J. Clark,⁴ and more specifically of Courbet's ambitious allegorical painting *The Painter's Studio*, which has been the focus of my own much fuller and quite