Chapter 4
Thinking about art history

One of the most interesting aspects of art history is the way in which it enables us to think about the ideas of a range of writers and theorists and in turn how their work has interacted with the visual. I want here to show you briefly the ways in which art history can incorporate the richness of Western thought into the analysis of visual subjects. The term 'Western thought' is used purposefully only to prescribe the limitations of my discussion.

In Chapter 1 I discussed what we mean by the term art history and I distinguished it from art appreciation and art criticism. One of my main points was that for art to have a history there has to be some kind of method or approach to the way in which the narrative or story of art history is put together. In other words, putting art objects in chronological order or in stylistic groups is not enough. The way in which a range of schools of thought and philosophical ideas have been used to put together these narratives of art is an important part of art history. I am not calling here for some slavish devotion to theory at the expense of the objects themselves – to do that is as meaningless as putting art in chronological order. In Chapter 1 I suggested that the work of art is our primary evidence, and it is the interaction between that evidence and our method of enquiry that is the substance of art history. This chapter builds on the discussion in Chapter 2 where the various traditions of writing art history were considered. Here the different ways of thinking about art history – its social, cultural, and aesthetic meaning – are the focal points of discussion. Clearly, these are related topics, but Chapter 2 concentrated on selected works and writers. Here we see how art history relates to and forms part of a broader discourse around the historical formulation of issues such as class and gender.

We have already seen how writers such as Winckelmann helped found the discipline of art history. But at the time when he was writing, the status of visual experience was generally considered inferior to human thought. The fundamental problem with this

paradox is that art history should rank second to other kinds of history or, perhaps more accurately here, other kinds of knowing. The rational scientific idea of knowledge that predominated in the 18th century was that thought was superior to sensory knowledge. It was an extension of Descartes' notion of *cogito ergo sum* – I think therefore I am – humankind's ability to reason made up the core of our being. By the mid-18th century this hierarchy of knowledge was being challenged and as a consequence ways of thinking about the importance of art history changed. One of the key developments was the appearance of the term 'aesthetics', a mode of thought that considers sensory perception as equal to rational or logical thought. Logic is based on verbal reasoning, whereas aesthetics is based on the senses, in our case sight. This goes back to one of the questions raised right at the beginning of this book about the problems of writing about visual experience – the art we experience through sight, but articulate using words. The language we use to describe art objects can be at odds with our experience of the objects we see.

One of the first philosophers to think about these issues was Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten. He wrote a lengthy treatise in Latin on the subject, entitled *Aesthetica* (1750–58). This put art, for the first time, within a framework that did not have any hierarchies. Beauty equalled perfection, but here this was perceived and understood by the exercise of taste (in this context taste means a very clear sense of perception) rather than reason. This challenged the idea that the purpose of art is to imitate nature, which was fundamental to the system that had been set up by Winckelmann. Instead, art should create sensory knowledge by forming perfection out of indistinct images. The most important point to take from Baumgarten is the idea that an individual's judgement or taste about aesthetics could have value and meaning to other people.

This is the cornerstone of Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, published in 1790. Kant analysed our ability to make individual judgements about aesthetics, and described the way in which he perceived that these judgements underpinned the concept of 'genius'. A judgement about the quality of an artwork would be made in terms of its beauty and purpose. Kant's notion that there could be a range of aesthetic tastes, in contrast to Winckelmann's hierarchical system, also encouraged the view that beautiful objects arouse our sensations in the same way as moral judgements do. In this way, aesthetics and ethics become intertwined and the concepts of genius and taste are intrinsically linked with the moral character of the artist or viewer. Kant's ideas squarely challenged the supremacy of the classical ideal championed by Winckelmann.

Kant's idea of the aesthetic was refuted by that most influential thinker about history and in turn art history – the early 19th-century German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel. Hegel is

sometimes referred to as an idealist or metaphysical thinker because he believed that all events are part of a process that leads towards a self-knowing divine spirit. For Hegel, this spirit was the inner nature of the world, which expressed itself through the spirit of the nation, or *Volksgeist* as it is known in German. The spirit is also manifest in the spirit of the age, or *Zeitgeist*, as discussed in Chapter 2. These two elements constitute the always-moving dynamic of history. Hegel wanted to understand the entirety of history as both a system and an ongoing process. Although he saw sensory experience as a debased representation of knowledge, art remained for him one of the most important means of seeing and understanding history as the spirit. The history of the spirit can be broken up into three periods – the symbolic, the classical, and the romantic. These three periods relate very neatly to the way in which art history has traditionally been divided up – first there is non-Western and early art; second there is the Graeco-Roman tradition, which we sometimes also call classical art; and finally there is the art of Christianity and German Romanticism, coming to the fore at the time at which Hegel was writing. This period, as far as Hegel was concerned, was the end of art, as this epoch would be absorbed into the spirituality of Christianity. Despite the strong religious underpinning in Hegel's thought, Graeco-Roman art remains the central plank of a Hegelian view of art. And like many other writers, including Winckelmann, he uses Greek art as a means of defining beauty. In each of Hegel's three periods there is a beginning, middle, and end, at which time art reaches perfection and then goes into decay. In the case of the art of Graeco-Roman times, perfection could be found in the early beginnings, referred to as the Archaic period – as seen for instance in the stillness and serenity of the figures on the Parthenon frieze, and went into decline with the decadence of the Hellenistic period, when the human figure was shown in a much more emotional state of movement. Although Hegel places great emphasis on the bigger picture of art history, he also thought it important to look very carefully at the objects themselves in order to understand them fully. That said, he did not think that art history was all about connoisseurial values. Instead, art objects were, in his view, very much a part of a larger historical process.

Hegel has been extremely influential on the way we think about art history as a systematic enquiry into historical knowledge. Although his concept of the spirit or divine was rooted in Protestant Christianity, his ideas paved the way for historians to pay less attention to religious art, which was a mainstay of artistic production in the West, and think instead about the idea of progress and how society is represented in the art forms it produces. In other words, how art operates as part of the Hegelian 'spirit of the age', which is his explanation of history. If we think about this in relation to Reynolds' *Three Ladies Adorning a Term of Hymen* (1773), which has already been discussed in Chapter 3, we can think about this painting in terms of the later 18th-century preoccupation with antiquity and how the values of that society were adopted

and used as a model for their own. This spirit was also manifest in the architecture, literature, music, and other cultural outputs of a society that considered itself equal to that of the ancients.

Karl Marx, perhaps one of the most important thinkers of recent times, was also significantly influenced by his 19th-century contemporary Hegel. Marx's analysis or approach to history largely followed the model developed by Hegel. Cultural forms – including art – change throughout history and the manifestations of the spirit. But for Marx the spirit was not some real entity or ideal, it was instead the economic basis for society. This relationship between the economic base and the product or superstructure (in this case art) is known as historical materialism. Marx argued that everything around us is determined by our social class, and that as a result there are many historical 'truths' depending on your class or cultural viewpoint. Leading on from this, Marx introduced the notion of 'ideology' to examine our relationship to art. Ideology is all to do with the manipulation of power, and for Marx there are always two social groups: the exploited and the exploiters. For Marx, then, art was about the dynamics of power operating between these two groups. Art is part of this concept of ideology as it influences the relationship between us and our context. It makes us think about ourselves in a certain way. This can be explained in more detail, and to demonstrate the connection between Marx and Hegel I will use the same example of Reynolds' *Three Ladies Adorning a Term of Hymen*, 1773 (Fig. 13). If you think back to the discussion of the Grand Tour in Chapter 3, I talked about how collections of artefacts of ancient Greece and Rome became part of the must-have items for the elite and how this trend helped to promote the popularity of the classical revival in art. The interest in antiquity can be identified as part of the 'spirit of the age' in 18th-century Britain. This 'spirit' is manifest across all forms of cultural production. For instance, many of the country houses in this period were designed using architectural elements copied from ancient Roman buildings. In this way these objects were part of the ideology of a certain class, and this relates to Marx's idea of a belief or value system. If you appreciated them, understood them, and best of all owned some of them, you were part of this social group. Here, membership of this group is based on wealth; certainly the artefacts from antiquity were expensive, and so money underpinned this cultural activity.

For Marx there is an essential relationship between economic structures and the culture of a society. It is the social production and consumption of art that matters rather than the individual artist or patron. One further example is helpful here. In Chapter 1 I talked about John Constable's *The Cornfield* (1826), an idyllic representation of the English countryside that has enjoyed enduring popularity. But this depends on who is looking at it. For those members of early 19th-century society who had been displaced from their

rural communities as a result of the Acts of Enclosure and the Industrial Revolution, this image must have seemed remote from their everyday experience. *The Cornfield* presented the ideology of a rural idyll – but it was land owned by the elite. The notion of ideology as a basis for power has been an important tool in the way art history has been written in the last few decades and I present some examples of this later in this chapter.

Hegel and Marx show us how in the 19th century there was great interest in the idea of history in both meanings of the word – the events that happened in the past and the study of them. Both their ways of thinking about art are important as they enable us to see art outside of the context of individual artists and patrons; instead it is more of a barometer of social, cultural, and political forces – in other words external pressures and influences. And as we have seen in Chapter 3, the 19th century was an important period in the formation of museums and galleries. The attitudes of these institutions towards history and aesthetics when presenting art history ran parallel to and intersected with these ways of thinking about art history.

The divergence between the formalist or aesthetic critique of Kant and the contextualizing frame provided by Hegel and Marx has remained a mainstay of art history through to the present day. This is particularly evident in relation to our preoccupation with the meaning of objects and how this meaning is conveyed. These concerns converge around the idea of a semiology of art. Semiotics is a long-established strand of philosophical enquiry that was initially concerned with language and communication. Its beginnings in art history are seen in the work of scholars such as Erwin Panofsky and Aby Warburg, as well as Ernst Gombrich, whom we discussed in Chapter 2. For these art historians, semiotics was seen as commensurate with iconology, and was concerned with the analysis of content rather than form. I discuss this in more detail in Chapter 5. In the first half of the 20th century, iconology was a distinct way of thinking about art that concentrated on connecting visual imagery with other kinds of cultural outputs. In more recent times, it has become a looser practice that is more to do with thinking about the meaning of the subject matter of a work of art rather than its style or broader context.

Semiotics has become part of what is now generally referred to as critical theory – the academic theory of criticism. Critical theory is a collective term for structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, and post-colonialism, to name but a few strands. These schools of thought are concerned (respectively) with the challenging of the notion of absolute truth and reality, the study of the human subconscious, and cultural production and thought in a world where the colonial imperative no longer has the

sovereign status it once enjoyed. I have briefly mentioned New Art History, which is seen to be the champion in using critical analysis to think about the visual. I want to highlight a few of the important ways critical theory has influenced how we think about art history.

One of the most important texts in recent decades is Michel Foucault's *What Is an Author?* An innocuous enough question that really gets to the heart of our enduring preoccupation with the artist as a genius. Foucault is considered both a structuralist and post-structuralist – both are schools of thought that look at systems and organization in culture and then use these systems to analyse those cultures. Foucault's argument is directed at our concerns about authenticity and authorship in relation to value and quality. Not only does this help us to separate out the meaning of a work from its author, but it also allows us to see anonymous objects as equally important signifiers of social and cultural practices. Art history is more than part of the personal biography of an artist. We do not know, for instance, who carved the Easter Island statues (Fig. 18), nor do we know who painted the manuscript illustration of the Evangelists (Fig. 17), but this does not necessarily impinge on our analysis of them. This should also be possible where the artist is known. For instance, if it were proved that Leonardo da Vinci did not paint the *Mona Lisa*, there would be no material change to the work. And if our analysis of its artistic and cultural significance is valid, surely these arguments would remain intact despite the work's anonymity. We also have to bear in mind that many artists ran large studios and used assistants or apprentices in their work. And, in the case of sculpture, some artists did not carve or cast their own work. For instance, Rodin's marble sculptures (Fig. 19) were carved by his workshop using his original bronze casts as models.

The ideas of 18th-century aesthetic philosophers such as Kant, who was interested in the aesthetic and in cognition, found their reprise in the latter half of the 20th century in the work of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, who is generally referred to as a deconstructionist. Derrida is perhaps best known for his work on the practice of 'reading', where we are compelled to explore the ways in which things that may appear unified are also a series of contradictions. The implications of this practice of deconstruction for art history are quite far-reaching, and Derrida's first writings on the visual arts, *The Truth in Painting*, which appeared in 1978, sums up his ideas. Like his 18th-century predecessors, Derrida was concerned with the question of whether aesthetic objects (paintings, sculpture, and the like) could be considered as autonomous, possessing their own 'code'. This 'code', in Derrida's view, is like other ways of thinking about art as having a meaning, just as we might think about the social or cultural context of art. It is really an issue of where the boundaries of a work of art lie. This

enables us to think about the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ of a work of art, which can be a very helpful technique.

19. *The Hand of God*, 1896, by the sculptor Auguste Rodin. Rodin’s marble works were carved by his workshops using his original bronze casts as models.

In *The Truth in Painting*, Derrida calls into question every aspect of a work of art. The notion of the ‘outside’ of a work includes, for instance, the frame of a painting or the signature of an artist on their work. But these categories go beyond the work itself to cover museums, archives, and the way in which art is bought and sold as a commodity on the open market. For Derrida all these impinge on the ‘inside’ of the work – the fundamental nature or aesthetic of the work, which is always modified by these external factors. As a result, Derrida sees the inside and outside as merging – both being forms of writing or graphic notation that can be read. In this way Derrida returns to Kant’s

ideas about cognition of an autonomous aesthetic that is distinct from pure reasoning. Like Kant, Derrida's argument for this distinction is an important touchstone for art and its history – that is to say art history as a discipline in its own right in which the aesthetic is a legitimate field of enquiry based on sensation rather than reason. If we look at Monet's *Rouen Cathedral*, 1894 (Fig. 1), we can begin to think about the consequences of what Derrida is saying, albeit in a rather simplistic way. The 'inside' aesthetic of the painting relies very much on sensation – the subject matter is self-evident and the work evokes the fall of light on the cathedral in full sun. The 'outside' of the picture is very much to do with the high market value on works by Monet, our preoccupation with him as an artist, and his prime position in many public collections. All of these 'outside' elements inflect on the way in which we see the 'inside'.

The 20th century – especially the opening decades – witnessed a growing interest in the human mind, and this facilitated ways of thinking about art in a completely different way. Psychoanalysis is the study of the unconscious mind and was championed by Viennese psychiatrist Sigmund Freud. He used methods such as free association (the generation of a series of related ideas without focused thought) and dreams as a means of exploring the human mind. His ideas are now quite familiar to us – a slip of the tongue that reveals the speaker's hidden or repressed thoughts is often called a Freudian slip – and so it is hard for us to imagine how new and revolutionary Freud's ideas must have seemed at the time. Freud described the human self as comprising the id, that is the unconscious mind, and the ego, the conscious mind, the term with which we are perhaps most accustomed. He also proposed the idea of the Oedipal nature of relationships between children and their mother and, as we shall see, this has been a touchstone of different ways of thinking about art. To demonstrate what he meant, Freud used Leonardo da Vinci's *The Virgin and Child with St Anne and St John the Baptist* (Fig. 15). The appearance of the two women, Mary sitting on her mother's lap, was, according to Freud, the result of Leonardo's feelings of insecurity about the fact that he was illegitimate.

Psychoanalysis allows us to think about meanings in art that run parallel to those the artist intended when the work was made. This is important as it is a process through which we can separate the art from the maker. You might recall that the strong relationship between artist and art is a hallmark of a more connoisseurial approach to art history. Hegelian and Marxist ways of thinking about art instead place emphasis on context. Here, the processes and practice of art are seen to be an internal process of the artist's unconscious mind. We have already seen how Jackson Pollock's technique of painting was meant to connect the unconscious mind to artistic practice.

In this brief introduction to these ideas, my aim has been to try to provide some sense of how the visual can be a subject in its own right, the different ways in which we can think about it, and the close relationship between visual and verbal forms of communication. All of this underscores how we think about art history and what the subject can bring to our understanding of culture and society, as well as ourselves.

The result of these various ways of thinking about art history is a range of schools of thought or approaches to visual subjects – each has a particular focus and invites us to think about the visual in a nuanced way. This can be very important for breaking down barriers between us, the viewer, and art that can at first appear inaccessible. Also, these approaches have been and remain very effective as a means of breaking down the dominance of the canon of art history.

By now Marxist historical, political, and social theory will be familiar – in name at least. Similarly, I have already mentioned at numerous points through this volume that feminism has influenced how we think about the visual, in terms of the way art has been used as a means of endorsing – and indeed challenging – a patriarchal society. Feminism has also made us think about ways in which women are placed and represented within society. I think it is becoming clear how these two ways of thinking about art history are related. Both rely on the notion of ideology and the sets of social relationships that this represents. In the case of Marxist art history, we have seen that the principal concern is class struggle, or at least the relationships between social groups. Feminism is concerned with the same kinds of principles, but with reference to the relationship between the sexes. Recently 'queer theory' has questioned gender as a socially constructed artifice rather than the biological destiny of the male and female sexes. This sheds a different light on social relationships and the ideology of art – indeed the two mini exhibitions I 'curated' in Chapter 3 demonstrate how gender can be constructed or determined through art.

In addition to these ways of thinking about art history we also find approaches that are based on notions other than the dogmas of the philosophy of history. An important element here is psychoanalytical theory – how these modes of thinking are used to analyse the visual in order to construct social and sexual identity. We have seen this to some extent in Freud's analysis of Leonardo. Alongside this, we have the semiotic (also referred to as semiological) concepts which, along with structuralist methods of analysis, concentrate on art as being a sign that has to be decoded to reveal its meaning. The last two ways of thinking about art history are in part a process of disassociating art from its immediate historical context and play more on the meaning and interpretation of art. These are still valid practices within the discipline of art history – although some

would argue against it. The visual is a rich topic that can be questioned in many ways. And these methods add to the expanding discourse of art history, rather than replace other ways of thinking about art.

There remains however, in all of these ways of thinking about art, one problem. How do we think about the aesthetic? This is a recurring theme to which I have returned at several points in this book, and to my mind it is one of the mainstays of art history. Without it, art just becomes another stepping stone or gateway into the past, a visual means through which we explore the social, political, psychological, or semiotic circumstances of the past (or indeed the present). But we run the risk of throwing the baby out with the bathwater if, as art historians, we try to deny that there is a category of the aesthetic and that to many there is such a thing as great art – however that is defined.

So what do we mean by the aesthetic? We have already discussed this in rather abstract Kantian terms. But a lay person's definition might include some recognition of the existence of beauty in art. Alongside this we might recognize the merit in making judgements in order to identify qualitative difference between different artists and their work. In addition would we also perhaps want to include the idea that looking at art can be a pleasurable experience. For those of you who are 'new' to art history, this may well be your prime motivation in reading this book. Do we want to accept art is another ideology and its aesthetic just a part of it? I am aware of the very powerful arguments for this to be the case. Impressionist pictures, or works by Picasso or Van Gogh, sell for huge sums of money – is this not an example of the pleasure principle of the aesthetic at work? Or is it part of the process of buying into a social caste, just as the Grand Tourists did in 18th-century Britain? Are the paintings that sell for such huge sums and hang in company vaults as investments not just examples of the excesses of a capitalistic society? For most of us the chance of owning an expensive artwork is remote. We might instead enjoy a print, mouse mat, or screen saver of it.

In the next chapter of this book I want to introduce some ways in which artworks themselves can be the starting point for how we read art history. A combination of different ways of writing, presenting, and thinking about art history converge on the works themselves to show how important it is to not lose sight of these objects and how art can indeed have a history.

Chapter 5
Reading art

We have already seen throughout this book that there are many questions we need to ask when we look at a painting or sculpture. Here I want to think about how we answer the question 'what is the meaning of this picture?', in other words to explore the levels of meaning we can find in an artwork and the ways in which we can begin to understand it. Throughout this chapter I use the term 'read' as the interplay between the verbal and the visual. It is important to remember that art – a visual phenomenon – is described, historicized, and appreciated using words. The visual translates into the verbal and the meanings revealed become part of art history. In bringing the discussion back to the artworks themselves, the emphasis shifts to what we can read from the objects rather than what we can read around or into them. These latter ideas have informed the discussion in the previous chapters in this volume and they are helpful here as they provide intellectual contexts for art history. In this way we come back to the objects themselves to see how subject matter, materials, and methods combine in the process of reading art.

Artworks can be read on a range of levels that can be derived from the objects themselves, and it is helpful to outline these. Perhaps the most obvious starting point is the notion of the representational meaning of art. The idea of representation in relation to art is often connected with the perception of an image of the world we think we see. Mindful of this, this chapter focuses on figurative art – that is to say work that represents something we think we see rather than an abstract image. There is no doubt that abstract or conceptual art has the same kind of representative qualities discussed here and that it can be read in a variety of ways. But in order to introduce these ideas, I am limiting my discussion to one kind of figurative representation – the human form. And it is true that certain periods appear more preoccupied with the representation of reality or nature of the human form than others. For instance, 17th-century Dutch art as seen in the paintings of Vermeer is considered to be realistic in its use of perspective and close attention to detail. Similarly, the interest in naturalism of Italian Renaissance