
SOME CRITICAL APPROACHES

Aesthetics is for me as ornithology must be for the birds.

—Barnett Newman, interview of 1972

The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe.

—John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 1972

Ask a toad what beauty is, the Beautiful? He will answer you that it is his she-toad.

—Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, 1764

Most of this book thus far has been devoted to writing about what we perceive when we look closely at a work of art, but it is worth noting that other kinds of writing can also help a reader to see (and therefore to understand better) a work of art. For example, one might discuss not a single picture but, say, a motif: Why does the laborer become a prominent subject in nineteenth-century European painting? Or: Why do Europeans and Americans on the whole put a much higher value on nineteenth-century African art than they do on African art of the second half of the twentieth century or the early twenty-first century? Essays of this sort usually involve analyzing artworks in terms of their context, the world around them. The larger context may be, for instance, the artist's life, or it may be the religious or political world in which the artist moved, or it may be the world of those persons who created the market for the artist's goods.

This chapter sketches some of the chief methodologies or ways of approaching art—for instance, by setting art in its historical context or by examining the psychology of the artist—but it is important to understand that these approaches are not mutually exclusive. It's not a question of one method *or* another; art historians use all of the tools they feel comfortable with. There are times when, so to speak, one stands back from the work, and times when one gets up close, times when one uses a telescope and

times when one uses a microscope. What follows is an introduction to some of the methodologies or sets of principles that art historians have found helpful when they study art.¹

SOCIAL HISTORY: THE NEW ART HISTORY AND MARXISM

Discussions of subject matter may be largely **social history** (art seen in a context of social relations), wherein the aesthetic qualities of the work of art (as well as such matters as whether a work is by Rembrandt or by a follower) may be of relatively little importance. Social historians assume that every work (if carefully scrutinized) tells a story of the culture that produced it. Thus, Michael Baxandall in *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (1972) implies his approach in the first line of his Introduction: "A fifteenth-century painting is the deposit of a social relationship." Similarly, Gary Schwartz, in *Rembrandt: His Life, His Paintings* (1985), says that his intention is to study Rembrandt as "an artistic interpreter of the literary, cultural, and religious ideas of a fairly fixed group of patrons" (page 9).

¹For a collection of writings about art, from Vasari (sixteenth century) to Griselda Pollock (late twentieth century), see *Art History and Its Methods*, ed. Eric Fernie (London: Phaidon, 1995). Fernie also includes a thoughtful, readable glossary (about forty pages) of terms ranging from *art* and *avant garde* through *typology* and *vocabulary*, with mini-essays on each term. Jonathan Harris's *Art History: The Key Concepts* (2006) offers lucid mini-essays (about a page or two apiece) on several hundred terms, from "abstract expressionism" to "zeitgeist." For brief discussions (with excellent suggestions for further reading) of twenty-six theorists including Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Edward Said, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, see Jae Emerling, *Theory for Art History* 2005).

Inevitably, new critical approaches bring new critical terms. A few terms, such as *cultural materialism*, *deconstruction*, *Orientalism*, *postcolonialism*, and *text*, are used in the present chapter, but dozens of others are now in use, some (such as *discourse*, *text*, and *queer theory*) whose meanings are not as simple as they seem to be at first glance. The only way to understand these terms is to read a good deal of contemporary criticism, thereby absorbing the terms within their contexts, but considerable help can be found in a work mentioned in the preceding chapter, Thomas Patin and Jennifer McLellan, *A Glossary of Contemporary Art Theory* (1997). The *Glossary* offers definitions ranging from two or three sentences to a page or two. For essays (not always models of clarity) on such newly popular terms as *gaze*, *postcolonialism*, and *simulacrum*, see *Critical Terms for Art History*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (2003).

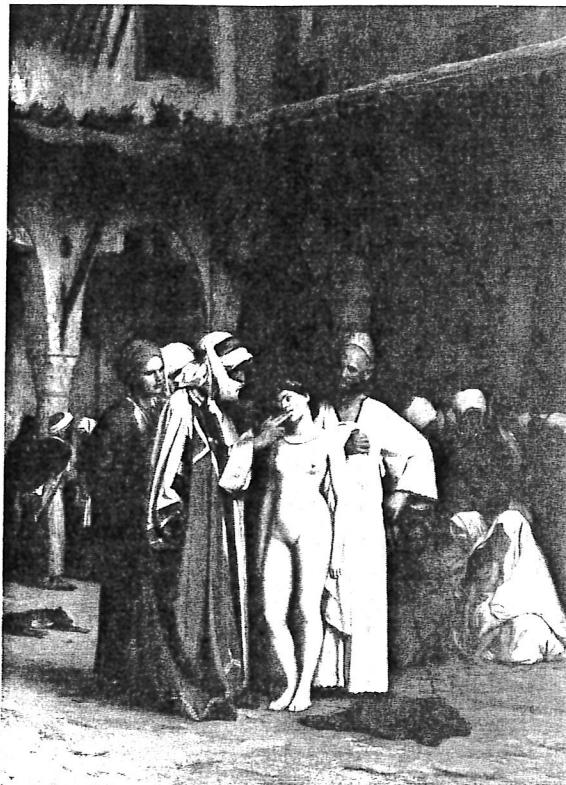
Useful online glossaries are *Artlex* and Robert J. Belton's *Words of Art*.

Notice the interest in patrons. Much social history is interested in patronage, confronting such questions as "Why did portraiture in Italy in the late fifteenth century show an increased interest in capturing individual likeness?" and "Why did easel painting (portable pictures) come into being when it did?" The social historian usually offers answers in terms of who was paying for the pictures. Obviously a Renaissance duke or the wealthy wife of a nineteenth-century businessman wanted images very different from those wanted by the medieval church.

Let's consider what the social historian's point of view may reveal if we scrutinize, say, French "**Orientalist**" paintings—nineteenth-century pictures of North Africa (e.g., Algeria and Morocco) and the Near East by such artists as Delacroix and Gérôme, painted for the middle-class European market. We might find that these paintings of part of the Islamic world, such as Gérôme's *The Slave Market* (see page 247), do not simply depict locales; rather, the paintings also depict the colonialist's Eurocentric view that this region is a place of laziness, savagery, and abundant sexuality (beautiful slaves, male and female). The pictures offered viewers (or at least some of them) voyeuristic pleasure by providing images of carnal creatures, and at the same time the pictures allowed the viewers comfortably to feel that the region was badly in need of European law and order and the work ethic.

In short, the pictures can be seen as European constructions that justify colonialism, for instance, the French occupation of Algeria (1830) and the British occupation of Egypt (1882). Even Matisse's pictures of bare-breasted odalisques reclining on cushions and staring blankly can reasonably be said, by today's standards, to embody the colonialist's views, or at least the early twentieth-century bourgeois male's views of North Africa and of women as sensuous and passive beings waiting to be enlivened by the white male who gazes at the pictures. And, of course, white males were the chief purchasers. (We will return to this idea—that the *gaze* of the viewer implies power over the depicted subject—when we discuss images of female nudes as viewed by males later in the chapter.)*

*For a survey of views concerning Orientalism, see John M. MacKenzie, *Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995). MacKenzie offers a vigorous defense of the view that these pictures do not denigrate the Islamic world. For a severe view of the Orientalists, see Linda Nochlin's essay, "The Imaginary Orient," *Art in America* May 1983: 118t, reprinted in her book *The Politics of Vision* (New York: Harper, 1989), 33–59. See also Rodger Benjamin, *Orientalist Aesthetics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); *The Orientalists: Delacroix to Matisse: The Allure of North Africa and the Near East*, ed. Mary Anne Stevens (1984); and (on Victorian photographs) James R. Ryan, *Picturing Empire* (1997).



Jean-Léon Gérôme, *The Slave Market*, c. 1867. 1955.53, oil on canvas, $33\frac{3}{16}'' \times 24\frac{3}{16}''$. © Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts/The Bridgeman Art Library. Gerald M. Ackerman, writing in *Arts Magazine* 60 (March 1986): 79, says that this picture of a slave market "could only be seen as abolitionist." Richard Leppert, in *Art and the Committed Eye* (Boulder: Westview, 1996), 239, emphatically disagrees: "We are *not* invited by Gérôme to gaze at this image in order to critique slavery; we are invited to look and to salivate, all the while saying out loud to anyone within earshot, 'Tsk, tsk.'"

Orientalism, European colonialism or imperialism, multiculturalism, identity politics, whiteness studies, and the ways in which colonized people are depicted and indeed are changed by colonization are the concern of postcolonial theory. The term *postcolonial*, coined in the 1980s, is a bit odd; it chiefly means something like "studies in the light of our new awareness of colonialism." Postcolonial studies in art history are especially concerned with "pictorial colonialization," that is, with the ways in which

Caucasian colonial powers have depicted (especially in the nineteenth century) persons of color in the colonies as “other,” for instance, as disorderly, female, and irrational (especially erotic)—in short negatively—whereas they have depicted the West as orderly, male, and rational—in short, positively. This division, widely accepted a century ago, is no longer acceptable. In the words of Griselda Pollock, in *Avant-garde Gambits, 1888–1893: Gender and the Color of Art History* (1992), “In a post-colonial era, no Westerner can be complacent about the late nineteenth-century conjunction of aesthetics, sexuality and colonialism” (page 9).

Further, the cultures of both the colonizer and the colonized inevitably intermingle to some degree, with the results that hybrid cultures develop; the colonized in some degree adapt to the colonizers, and the colonizers in some degree adapt to the colonized. At this point we should note that the term **global art history** sometimes refers merely to works of art created throughout the world—anonymous Polynesian decorated shields as well as drawings by Picasso—but “global art history” and especially **globalization** chiefly refer to a contemporary theory that is shaped by an awareness of Western colonial interactions with other traditions. The effects of colonialism can be seen in earlier centuries—for instance, a “traditional” Navajo blanket is made of wool from sheep descended from those brought to the New World by the Spaniards, and its zigzag pattern probably goes back (through Mexican shepherds who derived it from Spain) to the Moors of North Africa—but writers concerned with globalization tend to concentrate on the influences on local communities of widespread economic forces.*

Whereas the formalist critic emphasizes the uniqueness of each work, for the social historian a work of art (like a religious, legal, or political system) is a creation deeply implicated in the values of the culture that produced and consumed it. Indeed, some critics avoid the words “art” and “creation” on the grounds that they smack of individualism. To call something (let’s say an image of the Buddha) a work of art is allegedly to take it out of its original context—out of the world in which it was a vital thing—and in effect to steal it and put it into a museum of the mind, where it becomes lifeless.

In this view, the concept of “art” is a modern idea that wrongly values only the sensuous work, whereas in reality the work is a “text” or “production” whose attractive surface is a mask. The student, by resisting its aesthetic seductions and perhaps by “reading against the grain” (a common

*For readings concerned with globalization and with hybrid art, see Jonathan Harris, ed., *Globalization and Contemporary Art* (2011). For encyclopedia-like definitions (ranging from about half a page to six pages) of some 140 terms such as *black Atlantic*, *colonialism*, *hybridity*, and *third world*, see Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, ed., *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, 2nd ed. (2007).

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[°] See Jonathan Harris, *Definitions (ranging from Atlantic, colonialism, etc.)*, Helen Tiffin, ed.,

expression referring to the attempt to get at what the artist may have tried to hide or may have been unaware of), “interrogates” or “demystifies” or “deconstructs” the work. The approach, which denies that the individual artist establishes the meaning of a work, is called **deconstruction**.

The study of the social and political history of art, especially of matters of class, gender, and ethnicity, in a context of Marxist, feminist, and psychoanalytic theory, and most especially when conducted in a somewhat confrontational manner, is sometimes called the **New Art History** to distinguish it from the earlier art history that was concerned chiefly with such matters as biography, connoisseurship (attribution and evaluation), history of style, and iconography (symbolic meanings of subjects). In the eyes of the New Art History, traditional art history was elitist and was marked by gender and class bias.

Briefly, in this view, art history was:

- Too much concerned with issues of connoisseurship and the art market, such as (a) Which Old Master (almost always a white male) created the work? and (b) How good is it, i.e., How much is it worth?
- Too little concerned with ethical issues such as (a) Are we paying adequate attention to the achievements of women, people of color, colonized people, and people with sexual interests other than our own? and (b) Do we recognize that the art market—by means of which an African or a pre-Columbian religious sculpture ends up in an American museum or on the mantelpiece in a rich American home—deprives nations of their cultural heritages?

The new approach, dating from about 1970, was summed up decades ago in Kurt Forster’s “Critical History of Art, or Transfiguration of Values?” published in *New Literary History* (1972). Dismissing the traditional art history, Forster argued that because its practitioners admired the objects they studied, these art historians could not study them critically—that is, they could not see that the objects served the vested interests of the classes in power. Calling for a new approach, Forster argued that “the only means of gaining an adequate grasp of old artifacts lies in the dual critique of the ideology which sustained their production and use, and of the current cultural interests that have turned works of art into a highly privileged class of consumer and didactic goods” (pages 463–464).

In this view, because the work is implicated (or “imbricated”) in the economic and cultural demands of the world in which the artist worked, we must examine these demands, i.e., the circumstances in which art is produced and consumed. And we must also examine ourselves—taking account of the influences of such factors as our race, class, and sex—in order

to understand why we regard certain works as of special value. That is, art historians must realize that their understanding of the past depends in part on their own social situation. Our responses to a work are not universal spiritual responses; rather, these responses are a matter of cultural conditioning.

This kind of analysis, which studies a work (often called a "text") in terms of the conditions of its production and reception, is commonly called **cultural materialism** or **cultural criticism**. The interest is less in aesthetic judgment than in moral or political judgment, especially in matters of race, gender, and class. Thus, cultural materialists, influenced by Karl Marx (1818–1883) and especially by the theoretical writings of Michel Foucault (1926–1984), are far less likely to ask, "Is this work by Rembrandt or by a follower?" (a question of connoisseurship that probably gets into matters of quality) than they are to ask, "What is the social system that caused people to value productions of this sort?" and, "How does this object sustain—or undermine—the prevailing power relations?" and, "Why do we today value this work?"

For instance, confronted with a Renaissance painting of an angel facing a young woman above whose head is a halo—a depiction of the Annunciation (the announcement by the angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary, "You shall conceive and bear a son, and you shall give him the name Jesus")—cultural materialists are likely to be less interested in the ostensible subject matter than in an Oriental rug on a table ("In sixteenth-century Europe, rugs of this sort were expensive and conveyed high status, and therefore they were much coveted by the aristocracy and the wealthier members of the bourgeoisie"). Similarly, for a cultural historian, a portrait painting tells the viewer more about the society in which the sitter lived than about the sitter's personality.

A chief goal of the New Art History, then, is to unearth or reconstruct the often neglected, forgotten, or unperceived ideological assumptions or cultural values or social meanings that inform artworks. Cultural studies are especially concerned with struggles for power and usually concentrate on disempowered groups, notably women and people of color.

A related concern is to show that works of art not only reflect ideology—and therefore are far more than mere examples of beauty—but also actively participate in ideological conflicts. In this view, every work is political; in effect it says to the viewer, "See things *this* way, not some other way." Whether or not the men and women who fashioned the works were politically aware, the works produce political actions.⁸

⁸For a collection of essays along these lines, see *The New Art History*, ed. A. L. Rees and Frances Borzello (1986). Another good place to begin is Emma Barker, ed., *Contemporary Cultures of Display* (1999), in a series called *Art and its Histories*. For a judicious survey, see Jonathan Harris, *The New Art History: A Critical Introduction* (2001).

as of special value. That is, art history of the past depends in part on what is a work are not universal spiritual values, but a matter of cultural conditioning. Art (often called a "text") in terms of which art is commonly called **cultural** history is less in aesthetic judgment than in matters of race, gender, and class. Karl Marx (1818–1883) and Michel Foucault (1926–1984), are far more critical of art by a follower?" (a question of quality) than they are likely to value productions of art that undermine—the prevailing aesthetic of work?"

A painting of an angel facing the Virgin Mary in the Annunciation (c. 1500) by Giovanni Bellini shows Mary, "You shall conceive and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus"—cultural history. An intangible subject matter such as "rugs of this period" (in Italy or France before they were much produced by the bourgeoisie"). A portrait painting tells the viewer more about the sitter's personality. A painting of a birth or reconstruction of a city reflects political assumptions or ideologies. Cultural studies are likely to concentrate on the social context.

"Art does not only reflect ideologies of beauty—but also ideologies of power. Art work is political, but not in the other way." Art works were politi-

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The interest in patrons (essentially, "who paid for it, and why?") is only one aspect of the social historian's concern with the production and consumption of art. Other points of interest include the particular artists in any given period and the sorts of training they received. In *Art News* (January 1971), Linda Nochlin, then an assistant professor, asked a fascinating sociological question: "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" (The essay is reprinted in Nochlin's book, *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays*, 1988.) Nochlin rejected the idea that women lack artistic genius, and instead she found her answer "in the nature of given social institutions." For instance, women did not have access to nude models (an important part of the training in the academies), and women, though tolerated as amateur painters, were rarely given official commissions. And, of course, women were expected to abandon their careers for love, marriage, and the family. Furthermore, during certain periods, women artists were generally confined to depicting a few subjects. In the age of Napoleon, for example, they usually painted scenes not of heroism but of humble, often sentimental, domestic subjects such as a girl mourning the death of a pigeon.

The social historian assumes that works of art carry ideas and that these ideas are shaped by specific historical, political, and social circumstances. The works are usually said to constitute ideologies of power, race, and gender. Architecture especially, being made for obvious uses (think of castles, cathedrals, banks, museums, schools, libraries, homes, malls), often is usefully discussed in terms of the society that produced it. (Architecture has been called "politics in three dimensions.")

Social historians whose focus is **Marxism** examine works of art as reflections of the values of the economically dominant class and as participants in political struggles. Works of art themselves do some sort of economic or political work—they commemorate the dead, or serve as intermediaries with the gods, or display the power of their owners. For Marxists this work usually is, at bottom, the reinforcement of the class ideology. In this view, the meanings and value of a work can be understood only by putting it into the social situation that produced it.⁸ In the words of Nicos Hadjinicolaou, in *Art History and Class Struggle* (1978), "Pictures are often the product in which the ruling classes mirror themselves" (page 102).

⁸See Janet Wolff, *The Social Production of Art* (New York: St. Martins, 1981). Among important Marxist writings on art are John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (1972), T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life* (1985), and Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990). For a comment about Marxism and the evaluation of art, see page 247. For sourcebooks of readings, see Berel Lang and Forrest Williams, eds., *Marxism and Art* (1972) and Andrew Hemingway, ed., *Marxism and the History of Art: From William Morris to the New Left* (2006).

Of course, the mirror is not really a mirror but a presentation of the ways in which the ruling classes wish to be seen. For instance, the landowners whose wealth is derived from the soil, or more precisely from the agricultural labor of peasants, may present themselves as in harmony with nature, or as the judicious and loving caretakers of God's earth. Artworks thus are masks; their surface is a disguise, and the Marxist art historian's job is to discover the underlying political and economic significance. Other artworks, instead of reinforcing a society's dominant values, work the other way; that is, they subvert the values, but in either case art is part of an ideological conflict. As John Tagg says in *Grounds of Dispute* (1992, page 43), the question a Marxist asks of an artwork is not "What does it express?" but "What does it do?" Not surprisingly, Marxists sometimes call the people who produce works of art *art workers* rather than *artists*, just as prostitutes are now sometimes called *sex workers* to emphasize that their work *is* work, and that they labor not for their own pleasure but for that of others.

In short, the Marxist art historian, fundamentally concerned with social inequality, is likely to address the following questions:

- What was the social status of the patron?
- What was the social status of the artist?
- What ideology shaped the work?
- Where was the work displayed, and for what purpose?

Where does beauty come in? To the question, "Why does this work give me pleasure?" the Marxist historian—or at least Hadjinicolaou—replies in this way:

Aesthetic effect is none other than the pleasure felt by the observer when he recognizes himself in a picture's visual ideology. It is incumbent on the art historian to tackle the tasks arising out of the existence of this recognition. . . . This means that from now on the idealist question "What is beauty?" or "Why is this work beautiful?" must be replaced by the materialist question, "By whom, when and for what reasons was this work thought beautiful?"

—Nicos Hadjinicolaou, *Art History and Class Struggle* (1978), 182–183

GENDER STUDIES: FEMINIST CRITICISM AND GAY AND LESBIAN STUDIES

Gender studies, a comprehensive field including feminist and gay and lesbian historical scholarship and criticism, attempts to link all aspects of cultural analysis concerning sexuality and gender. These methodologies

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Artforum (1978), 182–183

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usually assume that although our species has a biologically fixed sex division between male and female (a matter of chromosomes, hormones, and anatomical differences), the masculine and feminine roles we live out are not "natural" or "essential" or "innate" but are established or "constructed" by the society in which we live. Society—or cultural interpretation—it is argued, exaggerates the biological sexual difference (male, female) into gender difference (masculine, feminine), producing ideals and patterns of gender (masculinity, femininity) and of sexual behavior (e.g., the idea that heterosexuality is the only natural behavior).

It is argued that in our patriarchal society (literally "rule by fathers," less literally "rule by males")—parents, siblings, advertisements and so forth teach us that males are masculine (strong, aggressive, rational) and that females are feminine (weak, nurturing, irrational), and we (or most of us) play male or female roles in a social performance, "constructing" ourselves into what society expects of us. Simone de Beauvoir, an early exponent of the feminist theory of gender, in *The Second Sex* (1949) puts it this way: a "Woman" is constructed as "Man's Other," thus "one is not born a woman; one becomes one." Because (according to the view that gender is socially constructed) ideals and patterns change from one time or culture to another, analysis based on an awareness of the social construction of gender can help the viewer better understand works of art by or about men and women, heterosexual and homosexual.⁶

Unfortunately, this useful distinction between *sex* (biological) and *gender* (cultural, socially constructed), developed in the mid-twentieth century, was soon eroded by the popular press, which uses *gender* simply as a fancy-sounding word for *sex*, as in "Classrooms in some schools are separated by gender," or "Artists of both genders are represented."

Feminist art history and criticism begins with the fact that men and women are different. As we have just seen, some writers believe the difference is chiefly "essential"—for instance, women menstruate and bear children—and that certain qualities in works of art by women are the natural expression of their biology, independent of race, class, and culture. Others, however, believe the difference is chiefly "constructed," a matter not of biology but of the roles women occupy in society. And of course, in this view the art of men is also an expression of the social roles men occupy. In Mary D. Garrard's words,

⁶See *Gender and Art*, ed. Gill Perry (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999). On the essentialist/constructionist issue, see also Amelia Jones's introductory essay in an exhibition catalog, *Sexual Politics* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), edited by Jones. Jones's catalog is largely devoted to Judy Chicago's installation, *The Dinner Party*, a work discussed in this book on pages 235–36.

The definitive assignment of sex roles in history has created fundamental differences between the sexes in their perception, experience and expectations of the world, differences that cannot help but be carried over into the creative process where they have sometimes left their tracks.

—*Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art* (1989), 202

One can make further distinctions, arguing, for instance, that the experiences of women of color differ from those of white women, but here we will concern ourselves only with the most inclusive kind of feminist writing. This writing is especially interested in two topics:

- How women are portrayed in art and
- Whether women (because of their biology or socialization or both) create art and see art differently from men.

The first topic is centered on subject matter: How do images of women (chiefly created by men) define “being female”? Are women depicted as individuals with their own identity or chiefly as objects for men to consume? The second topic, woman as artists and viewers of art, is closely related to the first. It is probably true that (at least until recently) in a world of predominantly male-created public works of art, the implied viewer is male. Consider pictures of nude females. To use language introduced on pages 79–80, the bearer of the *gaze* (and, therefore, the one who yields the power) is male; the eroticized object of the gaze, the “powerless Other,” is female. (Erotic gazing is sometimes called *scopophilia*, “pleasures of the eye,” a word borrowed from Freud.) The nude woman may be unaware that she is being spied on—perhaps she is about to bathe—or she may be aware, in which case she may be shielding her breasts or her genitals, an action that only emphasizes her vulnerability. In any case, the female nude is an object created largely for the enjoyment of men. The male artist, it is said, constructs images of the female body that satisfy male viewers.

Why, one can ask, do some heterosexual women take pleasure in some images of female nudity? Here are three of the many answers that have been offered: (1) these women, socialized by a patriarchal culture (i.e., deceived or coerced into accepting male ideologies), may negate their own experience and identify with the heterosexual, masculine, voyeuristic, penetrating gaze; (2) some female viewers may narcissistically identify themselves with the female images depicted (this explanation is sometimes used to account for images of female nudity found in advertising directed toward women); (3) “being female is only one aspect of a woman’s experience,” and although it may sometimes determine her response as a viewer, at other times it may not. (This third view is offered by Carol Ockman, in *Ingres’s Eroticized Bodies*, [1995].)*

*For more about the gaze, see Marcia Pointon, *Naked Authority: The Body in Western Painting, 1830–1908* (1990).

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Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art (1989), 202

instance, that the experience of women, but here we will focus on feminist writing. This

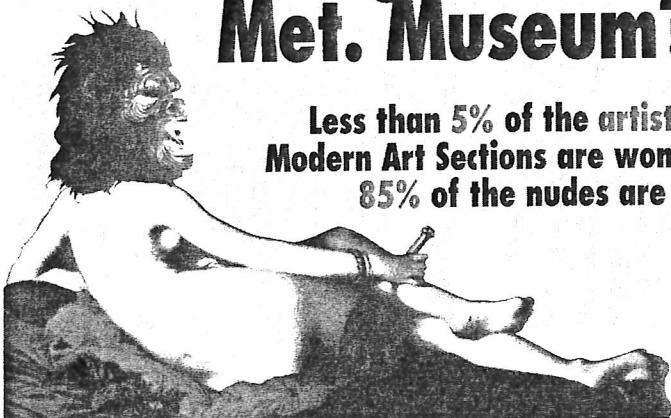
(or socialization or both)

images of women (chiefly depicted as individuals to consume? The second is related to the first. It is of predominantly male. Consider pictures of 1790, the bearer of the is male; the eroticized gaze is sometimes (inferred from Freud.) The —perhaps she is about shielding her breasts sensibility. In any case, the of men. The male to satisfy male viewers. take pleasure in some answers that have been culture (i.e., deceived their own experience artistic, penetrating gaze; themselves with the female account for images of men); (3) "being female though it may sometimes not. (This third view is [1995].)

The Body in Western

Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?

Less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art Sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female.



Guerrilla Girls, *Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?*, 1989. Poster, ink and color on paper. Private collection. Courtesy of Guerrilla Girls. © Guerrilla Girls, www.guerrillagirls.com. Since 1985 a group of women, wearing gorilla masks, have put up posters and issued other materials calling attention to the under-representation of women in the art world. The image on this poster is based on Ingres's *Grande Odalisque* (1814), a painting that few viewers would deny offers an eroticized woman as the object of the gaze. Interestingly, the painting was commissioned by a woman, Queen Caroline Murat.

To turn to women as artists: Are the images created by women different from those created by men?

- In working in the "masculine" genre of the female nude, does a female artist (e.g., Suzanne Valadon) produce images that significantly differ from the images produced by males working in the same artistic milieu? (The images produced by males are usually said to be passive objects, constructed by male desire.)
- Are there certain genres in which women chiefly worked?
- Are certain traits that are said to characterize the works of many women artists—e.g., sentimentality—not weaknesses but strengths, evidence of a distinct way of resisting the male status quo?²⁰

²⁰On the issue of differences in the approaches of male and female artists, see Judy Chicago and Edward Lucie-Smith, *Women and Art: Contested Territory* (1999).

Some writers have emphasized connections between events in the lives of women artists and their work. For instance, we know that Artemisia Gentileschi was raped by one of her father's apprentices. Some scholars have suggested that Gentileschi's depiction of Judith, the beautiful widow who according to the Bible saved the Hebrews by beheading Holofernes, an Assyrian general, was Gentileschi's way of taking revenge on men. Other writers, however, have pointed out that the subject was painted by men as well as by women, and still others have expressed uneasiness over the tendency to interpret the work of women in terms of their lives. Mary D. Garrard, in the *New York Times* (22 September 1991), calls attention to the implications in some biographical studies when she says that the art of women is often seen in personal terms whereas the art of men is seen in universal terms.

A glance at certain writings about Frida Kahlo (1907–1954), the politically radical painter, supports Garrard's comment. Kahlo suffered greatly, both physically (at the age of eighteen she was partly paralyzed by a horrendous traffic accident in which her spine was fractured, her pelvis was crushed, and one foot was broken) and mentally (her husband, the painter Diego Rivera, was notoriously unfaithful). Discussions of Kahlo's work usually emphasize the connection of the imagery with her suffering, and they tend to neglect the strong political (Marxist and nationalistic) content.

Speaking of "strong" ideas, keep in mind that such words as *strong*, *seminal*, *potent*, and *powerful*, when used to describe artworks, are not gender-neutral but are loaded in favor of male values. Indeed, much of the language of art criticism—*masterpiece* is another example—tends to put women and their work at a disadvantage. *The Guerrilla Girls' Bedside Companion to the History of Western Art*, a book that appropriately describes itself as "a wildly entertaining and much-needed corrective to traditional art history," quotes (page 41) a telling example by the art historian James Laver:

Some women artists tend to emulate Frans Hals, but the vigorous brush strokes of the master were beyond their capability. One has only to look at the work of a painter like Judith Leyster to detect the weakness of the feminine hand.

Today we rub our eyes in amazement that such stuff passed as serious art history.

It is easy to see why many art historians now argue that the traditional distinction between "fine art" or "high art" (a portrait of Henry VIII by Holbein) and "decorative art" or "low art" (a quilt by an anonymous woman) masquerades as a universal truth but is really a patriarchal concept designed

between events in the story, we know that Artemisia was a good student and a good apprentice. Some scholars have suggested that she painted Judith, the beautiful widow who avenged her sister's death by beheading Holofernes, as a way of expressing her revenge on men. Other scholars believe that the subject was painted by men themselves, reflecting their uneasiness over the increasing power of women in their lives. Mary D. Garrard (1991), calls attention to the fact that she says that the art of Artemisia is seen in the art of men is seen in the art of women.

Kahlo (1907–1954), the most famous woman artist of the twentieth century. Kahlo suffered from polio at age six, which left her partly paralyzed by age ten. Her spine was fractured, her pelvis broken, and she died of uterine cancer (her husband, the painter Diego Rivera, died of heart disease). Discussions of Kahlo's art often focus on her imagery with her suffering, her political beliefs (Marxist and nationalistic) and her personal life.

Such words as *strong*, *seemingly unbreakable*, *semibelligerent*, *semifeminist*, are not gendered language. However, much of the language used to describe women and their art is gendered. In her *Bedside Companion to Feminist Art History*, Linda Nochlin quotes James Laver:

...but the vigorous brushwork of a woman artist... One has only to look at the weakness of the

brushwork to know that it is not passed as serious art

It is interesting to argue that the traditional portrait of Henry VIII by Hans Holbein the Younger (an anonymous woman) reflects a patriarchal concept designed

to devalue female creativity. The battle seems now to have been won: The Whitney Museum of American Art in 2003 presented an exhibition entitled *The Quilts of Gee's Bend*, consisting of sixty quilts made by African-American women between 1930 and 2000 in a rural community, Gee's Bend, Alabama. The museum's newsletter for March–May 2003 described the material thus:

Originally created for practical use in the home, the quilts were often made from the fabrics of daily life. Reflecting a painterly approach to working with textiles, the quilts are outstanding examples of a great American art form. . . . (10)

Before, say, 1970, it would have been inconceivable for a publication of a major art museum (other than a museum devoted to folk art) to speak of quilts as "a great American art form," and to say that they reflect "a painterly approach."*

Earlier in this chapter (page 251) we quoted Linda Nochlin, and we can end this short discussion of feminist art history by quoting another passage from her writing:

Feminist art history is there to make trouble, to call into question, to ruffle feathers in the patriarchal dovecotes. It should not be mistaken for just another variant of or supplement to mainstream art history. At its strongest, feminist art history is a transgressive and anti-establishment practice, meant to call many of the major precepts of the discipline into question.

—*Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays* (1988), xii

*Examples of feminist criticism and historical scholarship can now be found in almost all journals devoted to art, but they are especially evident in *Women and Art*, *Woman's Art Journal*, and *Women's Art*. For collections of feminist essays, see Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, eds., *Feminism and Art History* (1982); Arlene Raven, Cassandra L. Langer, and Joanna Frueh, eds., *Feminist Art Criticism* (1988); Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, eds., *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History* (1992); and *Feminism—Art—Theory: An Anthology, 1968–2000*, ed. Hilary Robinson (2001). For a survey of feminist art history, see Thalia Gouma-Peterson and Patricia Mathews, "The Feminist Critique of Art History," *Art Bulletin* 69 (1987): 326–357; and the follow-up by Norma Broude, Mary D. Garrard, Thalia Gouma-Peterson, and Patricia Mathews, "An Exchange on the Feminist Critique of Art History," *Art Bulletin* 71 (1989): 124–127. For a valuable survey of feminist methods and themes, see Lisa Tickner, "Feminism, Art History, and Sexual Difference," *Genders* 3 (1988): 92–129. For a listing of feminist writing about art—including more than a thousand items, with brief summaries—see Cassandra Langer, *Feminist Art Criticism: An Annotated Bibliography* (1993).

In brief feminist art historians—who need not be female—usually ask questions (in addition to How are women portrayed? and Do women see art differently from men?) of this sort:

- Did the artist's sex determine the kind of training he or she had?
- Is the subject matter of the work especially associated with male or with female artists? Why?
- Is the subject matter especially associated with male or with female patrons? Why?

Gay and lesbian art criticism, following feminist criticism, operates from the principle that varieties of sexual orientation make important differences in how artists portray the world, love, and eros, and in how viewers receive and interpret those images.⁶

Like feminist criticism and history, gay and lesbian art history faces certain questions of definition and scope. Most broadly, it is concerned with

- art *about* gay men and lesbians (or, more generally, homosexuality and bisexuality in all their various forms),
- art *by* gay and lesbian artists, and
- art *addressed to* homosexual audiences (e.g., advertising images in mass media).

“Gay art” is not synonymous with erotic art or pornography. It can include, for example, genre scenes of gay life (by, e.g., Francis Bacon, David Hockney), portraits of famous individuals who were gay or lesbian (Bernice Abbott’s photographs of the literary lesbians of Paris between the two world wars), political art around issues of concern to lesbians and gay men (AIDS posters), and mythological or historical subjects (Jupiter and his cupbearer Ganymede, the lesbian Greek poet Sappho).

Gay and lesbian art writing looks at homosexuality as both “text” and “context”: as subject matter, and also as a factor that may help to shape the desires of a patron, the work of an individual artist, or its reception by various audiences. It asks about differences or parallels in the ways that love, sexuality, gender, and daily life are depicted by heterosexuals and homosexuals, and it seeks to uncover distinctive expressions of gay and lesbian experience that have, in the past, often been suppressed or misunderstood (Caravaggio’s mythologized portraits of Roman adolescent boys, Rosa

⁶Except for the last paragraph (p. 261), this discussion of gay/lesbian/queer criticism is by James M. Saslow (Queens College and the Graduate Center, City University of New York), author of numerous studies including *Ganymede in the Renaissance* (1986) and *Pictures and Passions: A History of Homosexuality in the Visual Arts* (1999).

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Bonheur's self-representation in male clothing). It should be emphasized, however, that not all art by gay people (or by heterosexuals) can be reduced to biographical illustration.

While biography and psychology are important tools for understanding some art by gays and lesbians, gay art history and criticism are linked equally closely to both political and social history. Political because, throughout much of Western history at least, homosexual expression, when not silenced altogether, has often been forced to operate indirectly, in a sort of code that requires inside knowledge to be understood. Moreover, images of homosexual life have been created by heterosexuals seeking to propagate negative attitudes toward their subject, which need to be placed in historical perspective (e.g., a 16th-century Flemish print recording the public burning of men convicted of the sin of sodomy).

In confronting such images, it is important to avoid projecting the moral attitudes of one's own time back onto earlier art. One should not assume, for example, that all cultures “naturally” condemn homosexuality; rather, one should try to discern what artists were trying to say about it within their own cultural framework. Gay criticism is thus closely linked to social history, because interpreting art about gay experience requires a knowledge of attitudes about sex and gender in various societies. Not only attitudes, but even the very definitions of sexual identities and roles have varied greatly throughout history. “Homosexuality” is itself a modern Western term, and vase-paintings of male adolescents addressed to classical Greek men (who were generally what we would now call bisexual), or woodblock prints showing two women making love in Ming China (where no equivalent of our contemporary lesbian culture existed), need to be interpreted in terms of the categories of sexual experience and the social patterns of those cultures.⁹

Most of this discussion has focused on iconography (see pages 254–59); there is little to suggest any distinctive formal traits that might constitute a “gay style” before the emergence of self-conscious homosexual subcultures in the 18th century. However, in visual terms, the issue of the *gaze*, adopted from feminist criticism, is important in gay and lesbian analysis as well. The “gaze” refers to the act of looking itself, including how it is established within works of art and what kind of outside viewer is implied. Students should ask such questions of pictures as “Who is doing the looking?” and

⁹Two excellent recent surveys integrating images and historical context are Louis Crompton, *Homosexuality and Civilization* (2003) and Robert Aldrich, ed., *Gay Life and Culture: A World History* (2006).

"Who is being looked at?" Consider, for example, the multiple possible meanings of a male figure when he is painted or viewed by various kinds of individuals:

- a heterosexual male artist or viewer, for whom the sitter is primarily an object for impersonal study and a traditional subject in drawing class
- a gay man, for whom the subject also has a potential erotic interest and perhaps some significant personal connection (e.g., Michelangelo's drawings of ideal men presented to his beloved, Tommaso de' Cavalieri)
- a heterosexual woman, who, like a gay man, may also be erotically or emotionally interested in the male body
- a lesbian, who, like a heterosexual man, has no erotic interest in the sitter, but who might feel political or cultural kinship (e.g., Romaine Brooks's portrait of Jean Cocteau)

Since the 1980s, many critics, historians, and artists have defined themselves as "queer" rather than gay/lesbian. In one sense, the postmodern category of "queer" serves as an umbrella term for a more inclusive range of minority sexual identities, often abbreviated LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer). More fundamentally, however, it questions the very notion of individual identity as something innate and fixed that provides a shared basis for a minority subculture. As we saw on page 253, such scholars critique the idea of an inherent self as "essentialist," emphasizing instead how desire is formed, expressed, and perceived by multiple and shifting cultural forces. To those who condemn minority sexualities as "unnatural," they reply that nothing is natural, and that even ostensibly "normal" people frequently break arbitrary social conventions.⁶ Lesbian artist Deborah Kass has painted a multiple image of actress Barbra Streisand from a film where she impersonated a male rabbinical student, titled *Triple Silver Yentl: My Elvis*. Gay/lesbian critics would view it mainly as an image of the artist's lesbian desire; queer critics would see an example of how mass media paint everyone's mental canvas, and how Yentl's gender is superficial and temporary.

In reality, we are all an unstable amalgam of innate desires and cultural conditioning, of *both* body and mind, nature and nurture. To be "queer" is to stand outside one's own cultural box, to view the values, practices, and images of any culture from a skeptical distance: "What does this picture want to make

⁶For the fundamentals of queer theory, see Whitney Davis, "'Homosexualism,' Gay and Lesbian Studies, and Art History," in *The Subjects of Art History*, eds. Mark A. Cheetham, Michael Ann Holly, and Keith Moxey (1998); Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (1996); and *Feminism Meets Queer Theory*, Elizabeth Weed and Naomi Schor (1997). It should be mentioned that much more work has been done on gay (male) art history than on lesbian art history.

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me think? Why?" That task is more urgent for an artist or viewer who is part of a problematic minority, but it faces anyone who wishes to understand art engaged with the culturally charged topic of sexual orientation.

Indeed, the topic is so culturally charged that a few students, confronted with works that strongly challenge their values, such as Robert Mapplethorpe's homoerotic photographs, respond not with gasps or giggles but with inflammatory language (*fags, dyke art*). This book has several times affirmed the importance of listening to one's initial responses, but it has also affirmed the importance of examining these responses in an effort to enlarge experience—in short, in an effort to educate oneself. Don't let preconceptions—whether about art or about morality—bar you from trying to understand images that may seem subversive.

BIOGRAPHICAL STUDIES

Biographical writing, glanced at in the preceding comments on gender criticism, need not be rooted in gender. True, one might study the degree to which Picasso's style changed as he changed wives or mistresses, but one could also study his changes in style as he changed literary friends—Apollinaire affecting Picasso's Cubism, Cocteau his Neoclassicism, and Breton his Surrealism. In fact, John Richardson's multivolume biography is built on a remark by Picasso: "My work is like a diary. To understand it, you have to see how it mirrors my life." Thus, in the second volume of *A Life of Picasso* (1977), pages 19–20, Richardson argues that the distorted faces of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (page 35 in the present text) are partly indebted to Picasso's deteriorating relationship with his mistress, Fernande Olivier.

Speaking broadly, we can say that biographical studies are of two sorts, those that emphasize the individual artist's genius ("the life of") and those that emphasize the artist's social context ("the life and times of"). The first kind is as old as Vasari, whose *Lives of the Artists* (1550) is traditionally said to be the first modern example of art history. Vasari emphasizes the mysterious genius of the individual artist (in Renaissance Italy, all were white and almost all were males): Giotto was a child prodigy who later was able to draw a perfect circle freehand, Michelangelo was a God-like creator, etc. The second kind of biographical study, emphasizing the social context, is very different; it sees the artist not as a mysterious genius, a creative power, but as a team player, someone aided by (for example) the artists of the past and fellow-artists, assisted by patrons and by apprentices in the studio, efficiently producing a commodity in response to the market.

As for the charge that biographies depend at least in part on the chance survival of written documents, defenders of life-and-times biographical studies argue that they set the works of art in their original historical and

authorial contexts, and are concerned with the issues that most concerned the artists themselves—such things as “Who is paying?” and “How is the workshop organized?” Still, readers may feel that the traditional biographical-historical approach to art history tends to reduce art to its alleged historical determinants, and it conveys very little sense of why we today value these earlier works of art.

PSYCHOANALYTIC STUDIES

Many of today's biographical studies can be called **psychoanalytic studies**. Such writings follow in the tradition of Sigmund Freud's *Leonardo da Vinci: A Psychosexual Study of Infantile Reminiscence* (1910), which seeks to reconstruct Leonardo's biography and psychic development by drawing on certain documents and, especially, by analyzing one of Leonardo's memories (for Freud, a fantasy) of an experience while he was an infant. Thus, it seems that Leonardo had two “mothers,” a biological mother (a peasant woman) and a stepmother (the woman who was Leonardo's father's wife). In accord with this information, Freud sees in *The Madonna, Child, and St. Anne* Leonardo's representation of himself as the Christ Child, the peasant woman as St. Anne, and the stepmother as the Madonna. St. Anne's expression, in Freud's analysis, is both envious (of the stepmother) and joyful (because she is with the child whom she bore).

In a 1931 letter Freud wrote that an artist's entire repertory might be traced back to “the experience and conflicts of early years,” and most psychoanalytic studies of artists have followed Freud in concentrating on early experiences. But there are exceptions; one example is Henry Adams's psychoanalytic essay (in *Art in America*, February 1983) on Winslow Homer, which argues that the works are related to crises in Homer's life. For instance, *The Life Line* and *The Undertow*, two pictures that show men rescuing women, are said to reveal Homer's love for his mother and his desire to rescue her from death. While we are talking about Homer, Nicolai Cikovsky, Jr., in *Winslow Homer* (1996) says that “The sharks in *The Gulf Stream*, for example, circling the helpless boat with sinuous seductiveness, can be read as castrating temptresses, their mouths particularly resembling the *vagina dentata*, the toothed sexual organ that so forcefully expressed the male fear of female aggression” (page 379). In reading psychoanalytic interpretations, it is well to remember a comment attributed to Freud: “Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.”

Psychoanalytic interpretations of works of art, then, are likely to see the artwork as a disguised representation of the artist's mental life, and

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analytic study of Leonardo da Vinci's *Madonna da Vinci*, which seeks development by drawing on Leonardo's own words. He was an infant. His biological mother (a peasant girl) died shortly after birth. Leonardo's father, a notary public, married again. The new wife, Beatrice Salina, became Leonardo's stepmother. She was the mother of Leonardo's half-sister, Anna, and half-brother, Giovanni. Leonardo's stepmother, Beatrice Salina, died when he was about ten years old. Leonardo's father, Ser Piero, died when he was about fifteen years old. Leonardo's mother, Caterina, died when he was about twenty years old. Leonardo's half-sister, Anna, died when he was about twenty-five years old. Leonardo's half-brother, Giovanni, died when he was about thirty years old.

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especially as a manifestation of early conflicts and repressed sexual desires. The assumption is that the significant “meaning” of the work is the personal meaning that it had (consciously or unconsciously) for the artist. However, as we have seen (pages 23–25), this view is not popular today.

Further, in some psychoanalytic studies the works of art almost disappear. Many pages have been written about why van Gogh cut off the lower part of his left ear and took it to a brothel, where he gave it to a prostitute with the request that she "keep this object carefully." Among the theories offered to explain van Gogh's actions are the following: (1) Van Gogh was frustrated by the engagement of his brother, Theo, and by his failure to establish a working relationship with Paul Gauguin. He first directed his aggression toward Gauguin, and then toward himself. (2) Van Gogh identified himself with prostitutes as social outcasts. He had written that "the whore is like meat in a butcher shop," and so now he treated his body like a piece of meat. (3) He experienced auditory hallucinations, and so he cut off a part of his ear, thinking it was diseased.⁶

Still, if the job of the art historian is (as is commonly said) to explain not only what works of art meant in their own time but also to explain *why works of art look the way they do*, one can hardly dismiss biographical information. To take a single example: The paintings that Claude Monet made of his garden in the second decade of the twentieth century and in the first few years of the third decade look very different from his earlier paintings of a comparable subject: The whites of earlier paintings became yellow, the blues and greens tended to become purple, and the forms were less clearly defined. In 1912 Monet was diagnosed with cataracts (a disease in which the lenses of the eyes are covered with an opaque film), and in 1923 he had an operation on one eye. Because in subsequent years his paintings became closer to his earlier work, it seems reasonable to think that the work of, say, 1920–23 is what it is because of Monet’s impaired sight, and that the later work shows the effect of the operation. Other explanations for the distinctive appearance of the 1920–23 paintings are conceivable—perhaps he was experimenting with a new style—but the medical explanation seems plausible.

Although most psychoanalytic studies of art have been concerned with the process of artistic creation (the study of Winslow Homer is an example), in recent years psychoanalysis has been interested in a second area, the

^o On van Gogh, see William M. Runyan, *Life Histories and Psycho biography* (1982), 38–41. For a survey (somewhat dated but nevertheless valuable) of psychoanalytic scholarship and art, see Jack Spector, “The State of Psychoanalytic Research in Art History,” *Art Bulletin* 70 (1988): 49–76. On Leonardo, see Bradley L. Collins, *Leonardo, Psychoanalysis, and Art History* (1997).

source of the perceiver's aesthetic enjoyment. Studies of this topic, often couched in terms of *the gaze*, are primarily concerned with how differences in pleasure are linked to differences in gender and class. (See pages 264 and 254.)

ICONOGRAPHY AND ICONOLOGY

One kind of highly specialized study that keeps the image in view is **iconography** (Greek for "image writing, i.e., writing about images"), or the identification of images with specific symbolic content or meaning. In Erwin Panofsky's words, iconography is concerned with "conventional subject matter," the iconographer showing us that certain forms are (for example) particular saints or gods or allegories. An iconographic study might point out that a painting by Rembrandt of a man holding a knife is not properly titled either *The Butcher* or *The Assassin*, as it used to be called; rather, an iconographer might argue, it depicts St. Bartholomew, who, because he was skinned alive with a knife, is regularly depicted with a knife in his hand. (Saints, often hold an **attribute**—that is, some object that serves to identify them. St. Peter, e.g., holds keys, in accordance with Jesus's words to Peter, as reported in Matthew 16.19: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom.")⁶

But is every image of a man holding a knife St. Bartholomew? Of course not, and if, as in Rembrandt's painting, the figure wears contemporary clothing and has no halo, skepticism is warranted. Why can't the picture be of an assassin—or of a butcher or a cook or a surgeon? But a specialist in the thought (including the art) of the period might point out that the identification of this figure with St. Bartholomew is reasonable on two grounds. First, the picture, dated 1661, seems to belong to a series of pictures of similar size, showing half-length figures, all painted in 1661, and at least some of these surely depict apostles. For example, the man with another man at his right is Matthew, for if we look closely, we can see that the trace of a wing protrudes from behind the shoulder of the accompanying figure, and a winged man (or angel) is the attribute or symbol of Matthew. In another picture in this series a man leaning on a saw can reasonably be identified as Simon the Zealot, who was martyred by being sawn in half. Second, because

⁶In addition to saints, pagan gods and also personifications often hold or wear attributes. Thus, Jupiter holds a thunderbolt, Hercules wears a lion's skin, Death holds a scythe, and Justice holds scales (weighing competing claims). An animal may also identify or symbolize a person or deity: A lion may stand for St. Mark or St. Jerome, an eagle for Jupiter or St. John.

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The image in view is **iconographic** ("about images"), or the identification of meaning. In Erwin Panofsky's "conventional subject forms are (for example) the graphic study might point out that a knife is not properly called to be called; rather, St. Bartholomew, who, because he was martyred with a knife in his hand. What that serves to identify him is Jesus's words to Peter, 'Cut off thy hand, it is easier for thee to enter into the kingdom.'")¹⁰ Who is St. Bartholomew? Of course he wears contemporary clothing. Why can't the picture be about St. Peter? But a specialist in the field points out that the identification is based on two grounds. First, there are pictures of similar figures, and at least some of them with another man at their side, so that the trace of a companion figure, and that of St. Matthew. In another word, he can reasonably be identified as St. Bartholomew. Second, because

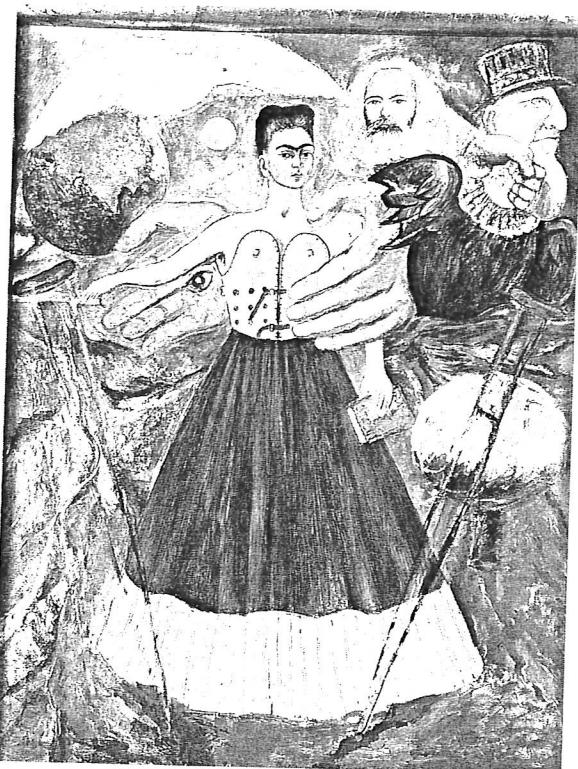
Death often hold or wear attributes. Death holds a scythe, and also identify or symbolize a scythe for Jupiter or St. John.

the Protestant Dutch were keenly interested in the human ministry of Christ and the apostles, images of the apostles were popular in seventeenth-century Dutch art, and it is not surprising that Rembrandt's apostles look more like solid citizens of his day than like exotic biblical figures. In short, to make the proper identification of an image, one must understand how the image relates to its contemporary context.

The study of iconography—the study of the ideas that the artist conveyed through the subject matter—is not limited to the study of artists of the past. Scholars who write about the Mexican painter Frida Kahlo (1907–1954), for instance, call attention to her use of Christian, Aztec, and Marxist images. They point out that in her *Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird* (1940),

- the thorn necklace alludes not only to the crown of thorns placed on Jesus' head—Kahlo as guiltless sufferer—but probably also alludes to the mutilation that Aztec priests inflicted on themselves with thorns and spines.
- The hummingbird, sacred to Huitzilopochtli, god of the sun and of war, is an Aztec symbol of the souls of warriors who died in battle or on a sacrificial stone.

Or take another of Kahlo's self-portraits, *Marxism Will Give Health to the Sick* (1954), painted a few months before she died (see page 266). As noted earlier in this chapter, in her youth Kahlo had been partly paralyzed by a traffic accident. In this picture she shows herself strapped in an orthopedic corset but discarding her crutches, although one of her legs had been amputated in the year before she painted this picture. (The painting is in the tradition of an *ex-voto*, a picture given to a church in fulfillment of a vow made by someone who prayed to a saint for help, and whose prayer was answered, for instance, by a miraculous cure. Such pictures customarily show the saint at the top and the recipient of the miracle in the center; for Kahlo, Karl Marx is contemporary humanity's savior.) In the upper right, Marx strangles an eagle with Uncle Sam's head (i.e., Marxism destroys American imperialistic capitalism). Below Uncle Sam are red rivers—presumably rivers of the blood of America's victims—and a shape that probably represents the mushroom cloud of an atomic bomb. At the top left, the dove of peace counterbalances the wicked eagle. Beneath the dove a globe shows Russia, from which flow not rivers of blood but blue rivers, rivers of life-giving, cleansing water. Kahlo, holding a red book (Marx's teachings), is supported by large hands (great power) near Marx; in one of the hands is an eye, a symbol of knowledge (Marx sees all and understands all).



Frida Kahlo, *Marxism Will Give Health to the Sick*, 1954. Oil on masonite, 30" x 24". Collection of the Frida Kahlo Museum. Art © 2013 Banco de Mexico Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D.F./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

The Tehuana dress that Kahlo wears in this picture also appears in several of her other paintings. Janice Helland, speaking of this dress in another painting, explains the iconography:

This traditional costume of Zapotec women from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec is one of the few recurring indigenous representations in Kahlo's work that is not Aztec. Because Zapotec women represent an ideal of freedom and economic independence, their dress probably appealed to Kahlo.

—“Aztec Imagery in Frida Kahlo’s Paintings,”
Woman’s Art Journal 11 (Fall 1990–Winter 1991): 9–10

Helland cites three references supporting her interpretation of the Tehuana dress.

Iconology (Greek for “image study”) seeks to relate the symbolic meanings of objects and figures in art to (in the words of Erwin Panofsky) “the political, poetical, religious, philosophical, and social tendencies of the

personality, period or country under investigation" (*Studies in Iconology*, 1939, reprinted 1967, page 16). That is, iconology interprets an image for evidence of the cultural attitudes that produced what can be called the meaning or content of the work. For instance, iconology can teach us the significance of changes in pictures of the Annunciation, in which the angel Gabriel confronts Mary. These changes reveal cultural changes. Early paintings show a majestic Gabriel and a submissive Virgin. Gabriel, crowned and holding a scepter, is the emblem of sovereignty. But from the fifteenth century onward the Virgin is shown as Queen of the Angels, and Gabriel, kneeling and thus no longer dominant, carries a lily or a scepter tipped with a lily, emblem of the Virgin's purity. In this example, iconology—the study of iconography—calls to our attention evidence of a great change in religious belief. In short, iconology tells us *why* images mean what they mean. (Panofsky, who introduced the terms, later dropped "iconology" and preferred to speak only of "iconography" and "iconographical interpretation.")

The identification of images with symbolic content is not, of course, limited to images in Western art. Here is a brief passage discussing a veranda post for a palace, carved by an African sculptor, Olowe (c. 1875–1938), whom John Pemberton III calls "perhaps the greatest Yoruba carver of the twentieth century." The post (see page 268) shows a seated king wearing a conical beaded crown that is topped by a bird whose beak touches the crown. Beneath the king are a kneeling woman (a junior wife) and a palace servant, and behind the king is the senior queen. Pemberton says:

When the crown . . . is placed upon his head by the senior queen, his destiny (ori) is linked to all who have worn the crown before him. The great bird on the crown refers to "the mothers," a collective term for female ancestors, female deities and for older living women, whose power over the reproductive capacities of all women is held in awe by Yoruba men. Referring to the cluster of birds on his great crown, the Orangun-Ila said: "Without 'the mothers,' I could not rule." Thus, the bird on the Ogoga's crown and the senior queen, whose breasts frame the crown, represent one and the same power—the hidden, covert, reproductive power of women, upon which the overt power of Yoruba kings ultimately depends. . . .

—John Pemberton III, "The Carvers of the Northeast," in
Henry John Drewal and John Pemberton III *Yoruba: Nine Centuries
of African Art and Thought* (1989), 210^o

Until fairly recently, discussions of African art rarely went beyond speaking of its "brute force," its "extreme simplifications," and its influence on Picasso and other European artists. But it is now recognized that African

^oReprinted by permission of the Museum for African Art.



Olowe of Ise, 1860–1938. Nigeria (Yoruba), Veranda Post of Enthroned King and Senior Wife (Opo Ogoga), 1910–14, wood, pigment. H: 65 in (165 cm). Formerly collection of Amy and Elliot Lawrence.

art, like the art of other cultures, expresses thought—for instance, ideas of power such as prestige, wealth, and fertility—in material form. In short, the forms of African art embody worldviews. (See, for example, Suzanne Preston Blier, *The Royal Arts of Africa*, [1988].)*

This discussion of iconography has spoken of “the proper identification of an image.” Here we have a clue to the chief assumption held by most people who study iconography: a work of art is a unified whole, and

*By the way, the term “African art” may have a highly restricted meaning. It commonly is used to refer to material produced only in the sub-Saharan area, i.e., it excludes the art of the Maghreb (Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia), Egypt, and Sudan, and it sometimes excludes art showing European influences.

its meaning is what the creator took it to be or intended it to be. In our discussion of meaning (pages 23–26), however, we saw that many art historians today (especially those associated with the New Art History) do not accept this assumption.⁹

Bibliographic Note: Several introductory books offer surveys of the chief methods used to study art history.

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⁹For a discussion of the strengths and limitations of iconographic studies, see the excellent introduction to Brendan Cassidy, ed., *Iconography at the Crossroads* (Princeton: Index of Christian Art, 1993). See also Roelof van Straten, *An Introduction to Iconography* (1994).

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