

## Acknowledgements

It is a rare pleasure in one's academic life to be able to collaborate in the writing of a book. We have both found this an immensely stimulating process; indeed, although we originally anticipated writing this book quickly we found ourselves discussing it over many more years. On more than one occasion the book was merely the starting point for exploring unknown intellectual territory together and it is sad to think that this might come to an end now. Our debates emboldened us and gave the book a polemical aspect that we had not anticipated. On many occasions this project has benefited from discussions with other friends and colleagues. In particular we like to thank Michael Rosen for his intellectual rigour and encouragement. Thanks are due to Morna O'Neill and Rebecca Scragg for help with illustrations. We would also like to thank our students at the University of Warwick and the University of Nottingham who have impressed on us the need for this book, and without knowing shaped its argument.

## Introduction

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IMAGINE AN ART GALLERY. A guard sits in the corner yawning while the visitors stroll around stopping in front of the paintings. Some of them discuss the works of art, some look at them on their own in silence. What is this painting about, what does it *mean*? A bell rings and the guard begins to usher people from the room. Once the visitors have gone he turns out the light. What do the paintings mean now? Are the meanings the visitors discussed somehow still there? Or do the paintings have no meaning in the dark with no one looking?

This is a difficult question. Some have claimed that artworks do not have a meaning unless someone is looking at them; others have argued that the meaning of a painting is intrinsic. But whether the meaning of a work is independent of the viewer is in fact moot, because, even if it is, this meaning is not objectively accessible to us. We simply do not have any way of knowing this meaning if we are not there. All we know is what happens when we are in front of a work of art and this suggests another possibility. Perhaps an artwork has as many meanings as there are viewers. People bring all kinds of past experience to the act of looking and understanding and they interpret artworks differently. However, this does not mean that all interpretations are equally valid. Some are better than others.

Why is this? What makes one interpretation better than another? Some ways of interpreting are more comprehensive than others. They have fewer contradictions and account for more detailed observations – both in terms of the visual appearance of the work and the historical evidence relating to it. If you have a framework within which to view an artwork your interpretation will be more plausible and more persuasive. The more systematic thought you bring to a work of art the more you get out of it. This book is concerned with these frameworks for viewing works of art which are usually called 'methods'. Every art historian relies on some method, although they do not always acknowledge it. They are committed to some underlying beliefs about art and its history which determine the meanings they find. In this book we offer an account of the most important methods that have been used in art history since the early nineteenth century. Our aim is to make explicit what commitments each one entails. The result is an account of how we go about things when we practise art

history and an invitation to think critically about what is sometimes taken for granted.

Before we go any further, a word about our terminology. Sometimes people use 'theory' and 'method' as interchangeable terms. However, in our view it is important to distinguish between the two. We use theory to mean a comprehensive explanation which deals with a set of phenomena. Method, on the other hand, is the particular way in which a theory is applied. Think of theory as a map and method as the way in which it is used to find one's way. Asking questions about art patronage or the art market is not a method, although it may be part of the way in which a method is practised. There is also a distinction between theoretical questions in art history and the philosophical discipline of aesthetics. While aesthetics is interested in the universal characteristics involved in the perception of beauty, art historians require theories that negotiate the relationship between the specific and the general. While aesthetics looks at the universal features of the perception of art, theoretical art history focuses on historically and culturally specific ways of seeing. Indeed, the assumption that art is fundamentally historical explains why theory is needed in art history. If we cannot appeal to universal conditions of seeing then how is it that the art produced at one place and time can be interpreted by a viewer in another? One purpose of theory in art history is to explain how a work can be understood by someone from a cultural standpoint outside its original context.

Each of the methods or frameworks discussed in this book provides a particular perspective on its chosen subject and entails certain commitments. Each gives an account of some things at the expense of others that lie outside its frame. The same thing applies to this book. We too are writing from a particular perspective which determines what we deal with and what we have left out. Others would do it differently and might quarrel with the methods we have chosen to discuss. Some people might think we have taken a rather narrow view of the discipline. It could be argued that we have ignored the most important development in art history in recent years, the rise of the study of 'visual culture'. The study of 'visual culture' can mean one of two things. On the one hand, the phrase is often used to describe the way that, in recent years, art historians have expanded the range of visual phenomena with which they deal; not just painting and sculpture, but television, computer games, hairstyles and so on. As it stands, this extension of art history's range does not raise any questions of method. The assumption is that the existing methods of art history are sufficiently powerful to be applied to this wider range of objects. But sometimes a stronger claim is made, namely that visual culture is a fundamentally new discipline with radically new methods. Perhaps that will prove to be true

in the future but as it stands, this claim is premature: what the methods of 'visual culture' might be has not yet been worked out.

We can imagine other objections to our selection of methods. For example, it might be said that we have opted for the most familiar names in art history and have ignored some of the most productive but less celebrated practitioners in the field. But the familiarity of the methods we have chosen is precisely why we discuss them. They have, in our experience, been the most widely influential and have done the most to shape the discipline of art history. Admittedly, we can think of a number of art historians and approaches we would like to have dealt with in more detail – we have no chapter on Ernst Gombrich, Michael Baxandall, or on deconstruction, for example – but clearly a book like this can never be exhaustive. Nevertheless, it is our hope and belief that what we have provided will be sufficient to allow the reader to develop a critical engagement with the discipline.

The main aim of the book is quite straightforward. We want to provide an introduction to these key approaches and to set them in context. We want to present these methods in relation to each other in order to explore how they are part of a continuous debate. This comparative approach will also help to make clearer the distinctiveness of each method. Extracts from the original texts that we discuss are now relatively easy to come by. In recent years many have appeared in a number of anthologies which we list in the annotated bibliography at the end of this introduction. Yet, valuable though these collections are, the fact that they consist of excerpts from much more extensive texts risks misunderstanding, particularly if the principles behind the author's work are not clearly grasped. There are also a number of books listed in the bibliography which deal with particular issues of theory and method. While these discussions offer very stimulating perspectives, one needs a certain breadth of knowledge of methods and its history in order to engage with them productively. Moreover, unless one is fluent in German (in which case there is more critical literature available), it is very difficult to get a sense of the continuing intellectual debates which spurred the development of different methods as responses to one another.

The book is organised chronologically. We begin with the very beginnings of art history as a discipline, which we find in the work of the German philosopher Hegel, and end with one of the most important contemporary developments – postcolonialism. It is a story which moves from mono-causal accounts of history – that is, explanations where historical change is referred back to a single, prime factor – to multi-causal accounts – explanations in which many factors interact. This is why the

book is divided into two parts and you will see that we identify an important shift somewhere in the 1960s.

However, some warnings should be given now. First, this is not a story of progress. We do not suggest that art-historical methods get steadily better and better. The story we tell is one of gains and losses. The turn away from mono-causal accounts limits our capacity to explain the development of art through time, although it leads to a more socially specific account of artworks. Second, one should not assume that the emergence of a new method makes previous approaches redundant. On the contrary, new approaches often depend on aspects of earlier ones. It is, for example, hard to imagine how many of the points made by feminists could have been presented without using the formalist technique of 'compare and contrast' – that is, the juxtaposition of two revealing objects next to each other. Similarly, every iconographical discussion of Renaissance art is greatly dependent on the achievements of connoisseurial attribution. Indeed, most art historians would not wish to align themselves with only one of the methods we outline here. They would rather rely on different methods for different purposes. This does not mean that one can simply mix methods at will in an arbitrary manner. Different methods are not necessarily compatible; as we shall see, the theoretical bases of feminism and formalism, or of iconography and connoisseurship are in many ways antithetical. Any historian has to decide what his or her fundamental commitments are. We return to this issue in our conclusion.

For now, we simply want to make the point that different methods can be, and are, combined by scholars, but that there are limits to how this can be done. A further point to note in advance is that the chronological organisation of this book is not rigid. For example, we treat psychoanalysis as a contemporary approach, the reason being that it has been widely used in art history only from the 1970s onwards. Yet its origins date back to the turn of the twentieth century. Finally, we should guard against the idea that the use of theory is somehow restricted to modern art history and that earlier art historians were naive or unreflective in their approach. In this book we set out to overturn this notion. In our view, the best art history has always been underpinned by sophisticated reflections regarding the determinants of art and its changing appearances. In this sense, theory has been a permanent feature of art history.

Each of the chapters in this book has more or less the same structure. With each approach we give a brief definition and a brief description of its historical context; followed by an explanatory account which introduces key terms and examines important examples of the method in practice. Each chapter ends with a critical evaluation of the method drawing out the

questions it has enabled us to ask, and how it has responded to perceived deficiencies in other approaches. We also ask to what extent the approach fulfils its aims and offer some criticisms, either that have been made by others, or our own. Before we begin our historical accounts we provide a simple overview of what follows – a trailer before the main feature, if you like. In this trailer a single work is analysed, albeit very briefly, from the point of view of the various approaches we explore later. The purpose is partly to give the reader some idea of what to expect, but, more importantly, to emphasise a fundamental idea: that the approach a historian adopts depends upon the interests that he or she brings to the work of art and the questions he or she wishes to ask of it. Such questions are circumscribed by one's methodology. Thus, no approach can ever provide a comprehensive account of a work of art.

Here is a brief summary of the subsequent chapters. Part One, which is concerned with mono-causal explanations, begins with **Hegel** (Chapter 3). The argument is that two new notions which became widespread at the end of the eighteenth century led to art being seen as intrinsically historical and so made possible the emergence of art history as a discipline. The focus of the chapter is Hegel's postulation of an 'Absolute Spirit' which underpins his account of the differences between the artworks produced in different societies while at the same time postulating a developmental logic between them. This is followed by **Connoisseurship** (Chapter 4). This term is often used to refer to people who take an unhistorical approach to art, who think of the appreciation of art as a discriminating kind of visual enjoyment. Our point is that the connoisseurs represented a serious reaction against Hegel's speculative approach to art and it was this that led them to emphasise rigorous empirical and archival research. Connoisseurs like Giuseppe Morelli and Bernard Berenson shared an exalted notion of individual creativity. Then comes **Formalism** (Chapter 5) and the work of Alois Riegl and Heinrich Wölfflin. Formalism too is often misunderstood and presented as an unhistorical exercise in description. On the contrary, we argue, Riegl and Wölfflin are of fundamental importance to the extent that they raise the question of the historicity of vision. Following this we move on to a discussion of **Iconography–iconology** (Chapter 6), and Erwin Panofsky's contribution to the discipline. Panofsky's attempt to show 'how under different historical circumstances particular themes or ideas are articulated' will be shown to be dependent on his commitment to neo-Kantian philosophy. The final chapter in Part One, on **Marxism and the social history of art** (Chapter 7), marks a turning point in the book, since it embraces the shift from the search for a single causal explanation for historical change to the more

multi-factorial recent approaches discussed in Part Two. Both the work of orthodox Marxist art historians in the earlier part of the twentieth century, like Frederick Antal and Arnold Hauser, and the attenuated models of historical agency applied by later practitioners like T. J. Clark will be examined. What we argue is that social art history as it is now widely practised has left behind some of the fundamental principles of classical Marxist theory.

In Part Two we examine more recent approaches. All of these give up the idea of a single explanation for the changes in art through history. We start with **Feminism** (Chapter 8). In our view, feminist art history brings together a number of different ideas. Not only does the subject of investigation for feminists vary – for instance, the work of women artists, or images of masculinity – but feminism is also methodologically diverse, since feminist art history often draws on Marxism and psychoanalysis, as well as other theoretical traditions. We then move on to **Psychoanalysis** (Chapter 9). This chapter highlights the difference between those psycho-analytical interpretations influenced by Freud, which tend to concentrate on the way unconscious desires are expressed in works of art, and those approaches which, following Lacan, discuss how such desires are culturally determined. **Semiotics** (Chapter 10), which follows, is an approach based on the analysis of language developed by Ferdinand Saussure and Charles Peirce, among others. In art history it has been used to try to grasp more clearly the different functions of pictorial elements and forms of representation. Finally, we look at **Postcolonialism** (Chapter 11). We emphasise that postcolonialism in art history does not simply mean examining the art of non-Western cultures, but is concerned with interpreting the dominant Western culture from the point of view of the outsider. A distinction is made between two positions; one, following Edward Said, which polarises Western and non-Western culture, the other arguing that all cultures are created by cross-cultural exchanges. Our **Conclusion** sums up the basic theses of the book, although we end up asking more questions than offering final judgements. We ask which approaches are compatible with which, and why problems arise in trying to synthesise some theoretical models with others.

### Bibliography

Belting, Hans, *The End of the History of Art?*, trans. Christopher S. Wood (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). This book is not an introduction to methods, although Belting discusses art-historical scholarship from Vasari to the present. It is a polemic in favour of a non-historical approach to the understanding of art, one that is decidedly contemporary in its focus.

Cheetham, Mark A., Holly, Michael Ann and Moxey, Keith (eds), *The Subjects of Art History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). This collection of essays by contemporary cultural historians expands the themes and subjects of debate selected by Preziosi, although it does not provide a sense of their controversial relationship.

Edwards, Steve (ed.), *Art and Its Histories* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press in association with The Open University, 1999). This is only to a limited extent an introduction to approaches in art history. It is intended as a source book for six further volumes, each of which discusses the historical development of a subject under particular scrutiny in contemporary art history (the canon, the genius of the artist, gender, the avant-garde, postcolonialism, displays). As a consequence, the reader (which contains primary and secondary sources referred to in the series) only indirectly introduces the variety of methods employed in art historical discussions.

Fernie, Ernie (ed.), *Art History and Its Methods* (London: Phaidon, 1995). This was the first reader for art-historical methods to appear in English. It opens with a short introduction to the development of art history from antiquity to the present, followed by extracts from art historians whose significance is highlighted by brief commentaries. A glossary of critical terms concludes the book.

Hyde Minor, Vernon, *Art History's History* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994). This is the only textbook in English (in contrast to Germany, which has a long tradition of historical and critical reflections on the discipline) that gives an account of art history's method from Vasari to the present and is written by one author. It is, however, not particularly useful in its presentation of methods developed in the second half of the twentieth century.

Mansfield, Elizabeth (ed.), *Art History and Its Institutions: Foundations of a Discipline* (London: Routledge, 2002). This book contains a number of articles on the history of art history, often addressing seminal but forgotten issues. Like all the other edited books in this list, it does not provide a critical or comparative account of art history's methods.

Nelson, Robert S. and Schiff, Richard (eds), *Critical Terms for Art History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). The aim of this book is not to introduce approaches to art history chronologically, but to provide clarification and commentary by specialists on twenty-three terms used in contemporary art history.

Preziosi, Donald (ed.), *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). Rather than treating the authors and their texts in this collection as paradigmatic examples of particular approaches, Preziosi has organised his selection around particular debates and themes, which are introduced by him in a way that signals to the reader that the production of knowledge in art history is controversial and non-teleological.

Schneider Adams, Laurie, *The Methodologies of Art: An Introduction* (Boulder and Oxford: Westview, 1996). This book provides a useful although highly selective account of methods in art history. Nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century approaches are not the strengths of the book. Its merit lies in its accounts of semiotics and psychoanalysis.

Smith, Paul and Wilde, Carolyn (eds), *A Companion to Art Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002). This work provides a wide range of discussions by specialists on topics of importance in contemporary art history. It is not an introduction to art theories, nor does it provide a comparative account of them.

Williams, Robert, *Art Theory: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004). This book is not about art history's methods and theories, but introduces the theories used and developed by artists themselves.

## PART ONE