



Wither Art History? Wither Art History?

Author(s): Shao Yiyang

Source: *The Art Bulletin*, June 2016, Vol. 98, No. 2 (June 2016), pp. 147-150

Published by: CAA

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43948872>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

CAA is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Art Bulletin*

WHITHER ART HISTORY?

Wither Art History?

Shao Yiyang

When I entered the Department of Art History and Theory at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing in 1989, art history and theory were the farthest things from the minds of many artists. In fact, for the generation who survived the Cultural Revolution, history and theory were rather suspect concepts, tainted by ideology. During the Cultural Revolution, students had not been allowed to study even the Chinese tradition of art historical writings dating back centuries, considered a legacy of the past feudal society.

As a discipline, art history first appeared in the People's Republic of China in the 1950s. Until the 1990s, there were only two art history departments taking both undergraduate and graduate students, the Central Academy of Fine Arts and the former Central Academy of Crafts in Beijing.¹ Students were trained in the method of traditional art history, mainly derived from the Soviet model,² which was generally defined as being about style, attributions, dating, authenticity, rarity, restoration, the detection of forgery, as well as the rediscovery of forgotten artists and the meanings of pictures.³

Modern Western art history and theory, introduced with the reform policy in China, have been particularly popular among the younger generation since the 1980s.⁴ As a recent discipline with its foundations not yet established, art history carries the joy and excitement of exploring the new.

The works of Alois Riegl, Heinrich Wölfflin, E. H. Gombrich, and Erwin Panofsky have been translated into Chinese since the late 1980s and added as part of the curriculum. In the following years, a wider range of texts became available in Chinese, including those by Michael Baxandall, Arnold Hauser, T. J. Clark, Meyer Schapiro, Leo Steinberg, and Hans Belting.⁵ These translations and studies have helped transform and restructure the entire discipline of art history and theory in China. Not only has the discipline been greatly expanded, it has also in turn become accessible to scholars throughout Chinese art studies. For instance, iconography has become one of the most widely employed methodological approaches for studying Chinese Buddhist art and traditional Chinese painting.

By the end of the 1990s, art history as a scholarly discipline had gained greater independent status in China but was still primarily allied with an art academy. The advantage of this association is that the art historian can benefit from empirical studies of visual experience, while the artist can be inspired by history and critical theory. This intersection of theory and practice in the Chinese art academy has arguably fostered the development of Chinese art.⁶

Since the introduction of the new art history, Chinese scholars have become aware that in the past decades, the discipline of art history in the West has been greatly enlarged by various postmodern critiques, including Marxist, feminist, psychoanalytic, and sociopolitical ideas. The rise of the social

history of art and the later manifestation of visual culture studies entailed a rethinking of the relation between art and history and drew attention to the issues of the definition of art as well as what constitutes art history. The new art historians question the status of art and the automatic assumption that art only carries meaning in certain media and styles, and how such objects and not others came to be called "art" in the first place, and why they alone are worthy of study.⁷ They claim that a work of art could be a piece of history analyzed like any other historical event.⁸

The main position of "visual culture," as W. J. T. Mitchell explains, "must be grounded not just in the interpretation of images, but also in the description of the social field of the gaze, the construction of subjectivity, identity, desire, memory, and imagination."⁹ Mitchell's "manifesto" of visual culture offers the potential for the inclusion, expansion, reevaluation, and critique of the "old" discipline of art history. Certain deconstructionist techniques as well as gender, race, and class theory have been useful in bringing about a revision of practices in the humanities.

While most art historians suggest that expanding the disciplinary boundaries of art history is an enriching process and inclusion acts to revitalize the field, some have argued that the discipline of art history already possesses the tools and techniques necessary to deal with the expanding world of visual culture. For instance, Australian art historian Bernard Smith maintains that "art history needs to be more alert to the challenges that come from the empirical sciences than from those that proceed from fashionable philosophers who dabble in art history and from current ideologies."¹⁰ He outlines the main components of art history as identification, classification, evaluation, and interpretation and devotes much effort to the defense of the existing scholarly rigors of the discipline. Those defending art history against the emerging concept of visual culture recapitulate debates that have been going on for some time. Even Mitchell warns: "Visual culture must resist the temptation to the sort of easy pluralism that would deny any general force to its central concept . . . vision."¹¹

The last decade has also seen the introduction of "interdisciplinary" visual culture studies in China, giving rise to concerns about its threat to the emerging discipline of Chinese art history. With the vast expansion of the university across the country in the early twenty-first century, some new art history departments were instituted, while some were placed within the newly established school of humanities.¹² In 2008, the first department of visual culture was formed at the National Academy of Fine Arts at Hangzhou.¹³ Visual culture theory has since been added to the teaching curriculum at the Central Academy of Fine Arts.¹⁴

This new development certainly raised more questions for the newly established discipline, such as: If "the new art

history" or "visual culture studies" have applied critical methods to its own practices in the West,¹⁵ can it aid in refining the methodology of other cultures, including Chinese art history? While it is possible to critique the social conditions of the reception of "non-Western art" such as "Chinese art," how can one critique the "traditional" history of Chinese art if it is not recorded in the same way as European art?

China has a long history of scholarship in art, especially in Chinese painting. Evidence of this goes all the way back to the fourth century.¹⁶ One of the earliest recorded writings on art is Xie He's "Six Principles of Chinese Painting" (*Huihua liufa*), taken from the preface to his book *The Classification of Old Paintings* (*Guhua pinlu*), written about 550, pertaining to "ancient" and classic practices. Based on his "six principles," Xie He believed that artists' primary objective is to capture the vitality of the subjects as well as to demonstrate their own taste, spirit, and moral sensitivity in the paintings. His theory is more concerned with the criteria for aesthetic evaluation and principles for the painter to cultivate than in giving a canonical description of the past.

It was Zhang Yanyuan who initiated the style of writing on art history in China. His "On Famous Paintings in Past Dynasties" (*Lidai minghua ji*, 847) added the practices of recording, appraising, collecting, circulating, and even mounting as components indispensable to painting and gave rise to the integral research system of Chinese painting history. The book extensively covered the major developments and significant theories on the history of painting. The biography section consisted of comprehensive records of painters' lives, thoughts, and works. Zhang Yanyuan agreed with Xie He's theory that art has moral functions. He also stressed the importance of imagination and creativity in painting, which he believed very much relied on the artist's taste, education, knowledge, and personality.

Zhang Yanyuan's treatise, like many other ancient scholarly works on Chinese painting, applied Confucian and Taoist precepts and thought to the subject, which is thus believed to constitute a purely Chinese way of writing about and understanding art. It was also noted by Chinese scholars that Zhang Yanyuan's "On Famous Paintings in Past Dynasties" appeared more than seven hundred years earlier than the first book on Western art history, by Giorgio Vasari.¹⁷ But the texts of these ancient scholars are rather succinct and difficult to translate with their full meaning. The interpretative methodology of Chinese painting is based on the Chinese traditional cultural context, such as the significance and purpose of art expression and presentation, the undifferentiated way of reading both painting literature and calligraphy. Taken from this context, "On Famous Paintings in Past Dynasties" reads simply like a catalog, chronicle, or story, which may be seen as the foundation or source of modern art historical writing rather than art history itself. The method of writing, as James Elkins has argued, is "fundamentally different from nineteenth- and twentieth-century art history in purpose and narrative structure."¹⁸

Modern art history in China emerged in the early twentieth century, influenced by the Western model. Teng Gu's *Zhongguo meishu xiaoshi* (A brief history of Chinese art, 1926) offered a new theoretical framework for Chinese art, featuring a linear and progressive conception of time. This Darwinist approach

is particularly apparent in his periodization of Chinese art. Teng Gu divided the history of Chinese art into four periods related to style transformation: growth (*shengzhang shidai*, from the emergence of art to the Han dynasty), cross-fertilization (*hunjiao shidai*, encompassing the Wei, Jin, and the Six Dynasties), the flourishing period (*changsheng shidai*, from the Sui to the Song), and stagnation (*chenzhi shidai*, the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties).¹⁹ He saw an artistic decline during the later dynasties. Most impressively, Teng Gu considered the cross-fertilization and flourishing periods as producing tremendous innovations in art. During that time Chinese culture was actively integrated with others. The descriptive terminology for the periodization invented by Teng Gu and shared by other Chinese scholars demonstrates their effort to establish a scientific discipline of Chinese art history, to position Chinese art in parallel with Western art, and to elucidate the comparability of Chinese art to Western art.

The power structure of contemporary art history and theory, however, makes a general theory of art and unified methodology seem unlikely to many. Art historians around the world need to have their own voice within the main forums of international art history and theory. Chinese scholars should look to Chinese tradition and their own scholarship on art; literati painting on landscape, for instance, may help to clarify why narratives of Chinese art history should not purely depend on the West. But is there a purely "Chinese way" of writing and thinking about art? How is the Chinese way of understanding art commensurate with the concept of art history as it is practiced in the European and North American model?

The institutional situation in which art history finds itself in twenty-first-century China, very different from the Western context, is the background against which the argument between art history and visual culture will be played out. The main threat to art history in China may come not from the new methodology of the West but from the economic and ideological agenda dominating decision making in the Chinese system of education. Mitchell's formulation that "aesthetics is an eighteenth-century discipline, art history a nineteenth-century one, and visual studies that of the twenty-first"²⁰ may well pertain to the European and North American situation, but it certainly cannot apply to the Chinese academic situation. As a rather new practice, art history in China must justify its place culturally within Chinese art institutions and universities. Most of the universities do not have an art history department; instead, they have departments of aesthetics, fine arts, or design with art historians on staff.²¹ As an academic discipline, art history has never been taken as seriously as history, literature, or archaeology among the studies of humanities. If a defense of art historical scholarship is called for, it may be imperative only in this cultural situation. Given the rather isolated cultural conditions surrounding the study of art history in China, the "tools" of visual culture should not obscure the initial need to construct the aesthetics and discipline of Chinese art history. This need is particularly acute in relation to the study of Chinese art. The traditional art history model, based on empirical study, is closely harnessed to many of the newly established art galleries and museums and their collections.²² This is not to say that art history in China should retain its previous form, but it is necessary to protect and defend the



1 Xu Bing, *Phoenix*, 2008–15, installation view at the Venice Biennale, 2015, industrial waste, female: 20 ft. 8 in. × 101 ft. 8 in. × 23 ft. 8 in. (6.3 × 31 × 7.2 m), male: 15 ft. 3 in. × 98 ft. 3 in. × 28 ft. 2 in. (4.7 × 30 × 8.6 m). Private collection (artwork © Xu Bing; photograph provided by the artist)

disciplines, while at the same time encouraging new interdisciplinary approaches.

Just as the contemporary Chinese social economy largely joined the generalized global market, the new method and interpretative protocols for art history have been inevitably pervasive in the current way of writing, thinking, and speaking. If the “global community” of art historians should not consist, in Hayden White’s words, of “congeries of historians from various countries who have adopted the ‘standards of practice’ of Western professional historians,”²³ how could non-Western art historians apply the apparatus of Westernized art history, and, at the same time, make use of the interpretative methodologies from their own past?

While the debates between “old” and “new” art history and the introduction of visual culture studies might contribute to an understanding of the field’s potentialities, new research on historiographical Chinese interpretative norms, the enormous growth of library collections and translations, the opportunity to travel, and the possibility to take part in international workshops also afford Chinese art historians new outlets to make their own contribution to the discipline. It is important for Chinese art historians to carry out detailed historical research, but also keep up with contemporary theories and methods, which is perhaps an ideal model for the future of the discipline.

Is art history withering? The presumption of the end of the discipline might just be like someone holding a dark mirror

to an optimistic future. It seems unlikely to happen under the threat of visual culture on its trajectory toward interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary study, as long as it resists being tied to a single grand narrative. The discipline of art history may have been infected or threatened by excursions across disciplinary boundaries, but art history is also growing from the experience. Perhaps the best way to move forward is to find the purpose of art history, which is vital for establishing mutual understanding among all cultures, instead of marginalizing any culture or discourse.

In China, art history is certainly not withering but, on the contrary, thriving. The rapid growth of the discipline in China has involved all levels of the education, production, circulation, valuation, and collection of art. Although there is still some way to go for greater academic freedom and independence in art history, as well as in other social sciences, more contact with others in this discipline worldwide will lead to the progress of Chinese academic research. The 34th Congress of the International Committee of the History of Art (CIHA), 2016, in Beijing will possibly open up more prospects for transformation. The widely open topic “terms” encourage cross-cultural, cross-discipline communication, aiming to constitute a sturdier platform from which to delve into the past, while maintaining a perspective firmly focused on the future potential of writing about world art as well as Chinese art. The new art history may not take purely historical perspectives but instead look to the future: What are the most promising new

approaches? How can they aid our understanding of visual art? Thoughts about temporalities and a philosophical base of historical understanding are necessary to help direct the present and open up more possibilities in the future.

In his manifesto "All the World's Futures" for the Venice Biennale 2015, curator Okwui Enwezor invoked Walter Benjamin's famous interpretation of Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus*, the angel of history, who flies ahead while looking back.²⁴ Despite the catastrophic destruction wrought by modern progress, the future beckons. Chinese artist Xu Bing's installation *Phoenix* at Venice aptly addresses this topic (Fig. 1). As a sort of imaginary hybrid with features of many different birds, the phoenix has been represented in Chinese art and literature for at least seven thousand years. The majestic bird was painted on pottery and described at length in the classic text *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* (*Shan hai jing*). According to legend, the phoenix is only to be seen at the dawn of a period of great harmony.

Xu Bing represented the mythical bird of Utopia as an enormous floating statue composed of the detritus of urban construction. The physical structure made of useless and discarded objects bears people's Utopian aspirations for a harmonious world. Weaving together the fabric of Chinese traditional myth and contemporary reality, the artist interrogates the nature of present and past, spectacle and materiality, the historical process and global contemporaneity.

The phoenix myth flows through the philosophy of Walter Benjamin with an optimistic historical perspective: that a cultural tradition can be renewed without clinging to its conventions and that the deep wisdom of tradition can be invoked with a vocabulary capable of articulating the contemporary. The implications of this symbolic work can also be applied to the worldwide conversation on the spread of art history on global terms: chaotic but integrated; cultural circulation and exchange; the possibility of mapping through tradition, and moving art history forward.

Shao Yiyang, professor of art history and theory, especially modern and contemporary art and theory, is deputy dean of the School of Humanities at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing. Her publications in Chinese include Art after Postmodernism, Beyond Postmodernism, and Modern European Art History since the Seventeenth Century [Central Academy of Fine Arts, no. 8 Huajidi South St., Chaoyang District, Beijing, China 100102, shaoyiyang@cafa.edu.cn].

Notes

1. The first art history department was set up in the Central Academy of Fine Arts at Beijing in 1957. The first generation of art historians was sent to the USSR in the 1950s and was instrumental in establishing Western art history studies. Among them, Shao Dazhen, Cheng Yongjiang, and Li Chun taught Western art history in the Department of Art History in the Central Academy of Fine Arts, and Xi Jingzhi played a crucial role in establishing the art history department in the former Central Academy of Craft and Design in 1983.
2. In 1960, a textbook on Western art history produced by the Ministry of Culture came out. It ranged from the premodern period to the end of the nineteenth century. It was formally published in 1984.
3. In the early 1960s, experts on Chinese traditional art authentication such as Zhang Heng, Xie Zhiliu, and Xu Bangda were invited to give lectures on the authentication of Chinese traditional paintings and calligraphy in art schools and museums throughout the country. They constructed the framework of modern studies on Chinese art authentication.
4. Art historian Shao Dazhen's series of articles published in the journal *Shijie meishu* in 1979 and his later books on modern Western art history of 1982 and 1983 made groundbreaking efforts to bring Western modern art into Chinese art practice and research. See Shao Dazhen, *Xian dai pai mei shu qianyi* (Shijiazhuang: Hebei meishu, 1982); and idem, *Chuantong meishu yu xiandai pai* (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin, 1983).
5. Except for individual books, the translations of essays on Western art history and theory were mainly published in art journals, such as *Meishu*, *Shijie meishu*, and *Meishu yanjiu* in Beijing and *Meishu yicong* and *Xin meishu* in Hangzhou. See also Cao Yiqiang, ed., *Yishushi de shiye* (Hangzhou: Zhongguo meishu xueyuan, 2007), a collection of forty-eight translations of essays on Western art methodology, which were originally published in *Xin meishu* from 1986 to 2006.
6. Shao Yiyang, "Chinese Art and Education in 1980–1990s" (originally written in English and translated into German), in *Kunstausbildung: Aneignung und Vermittlung künstlerischer Kompetenz*, ed. Peter J. Schneemann and Wolfgang Brückle, Vereinigung der Kunsthistorikerinnen und Kunsthistoriker in der Schweiz (Munich: S. Schreiber, 2008).
7. A. L. Rees and Frances Borzello, eds., *The New Art History* (London: Camden Press, 1986).
8. Svetlana Alpers, "Is Art History?" *Daedalus* 106, no. 3 (1977): 1–13. The new approach can be seen at the 33rd International Committee of the History of Art (CIHA), "The Challenge of the Object," held in Nuremberg, February 2012.
9. W. J. T. Mitchell, "Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture," in *Art History, Aesthetics, Visual Studies*, ed. Michael Ann Holly and Keith Moxey (Williamstown, Mass.: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2002), 544–45.
10. Bernard Smith, "In Defence of Art History," *Art Monthly Australia*, no. 130 (2000): 6.
11. Mitchell, "Showing Seeing," 544–45.
12. The art history departments in the Central Academy of Fine Arts and the Hangzhou-based National Academy of Fine Arts were placed within the newly established School of Humanities, including departments of art history, art education, curatorship, and cultural heritage.
13. The international conference "Visual Culture and Architecture" was held at the National Art Academy at Hangzhou in October 2008, organized by Professor Cao Yiqiang, the chair of the School of Humanities, National Academy of Fine Arts. The establishment of the Department of Visual Culture was announced at that time.
14. Visual culture theory was first introduced at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in the graduate course led by Shao Yiyang. Shao Yiyang's "Cong xing-shi meixue dao shijue wenhua" [From formalism to visual culture], *Meishu guan*, no. 12 (2003): 80–83, was among the first essays to introduce the visual culture theory in art history. For the debates about visual culture and art history, see also idem, "Art History and Visual Culture" (in Chinese), *Meishu yanjiu*, no. 4 (2009): 102–7.
15. Donald Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 19–31.
16. Citations of scholarship on art can be found even before the fourth century. Many of these writings and texts were not well preserved, so few of the actual texts are extant. However, throughout history, many of these writings and texts have been quoted by ancient Chinese scholars, historians, and authors.
17. See Xue Yongnian, "Ershishiji zhongguo meishushi yanjiude huigu yu zhanwang," *Wenyi yanjiu*, no. 2 (2001): 112–27.
18. James Elkins, *Chinese Landscape Painting as Western Art History* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 58.
19. Teng Gu, *Zhongguo meishu xiaoshi* [A brief history of Chinese art] (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1926).
20. Mitchell, quoted in Holly and Moxey, introduction to *Art History, Aesthetics, Visual Studies*, ix.
21. There is no art history department in Peking University. The study of art history has been available through the art center, which offers introductory courses and takes only graduate students. The art history department in Tsinghua University belongs not in the School of Humanities but in the Academy of Arts and Design, which was the former Central Academy of Crafts.
22. For the development of new museums, see Clare Jacobson, *New Museums in China* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2013).
23. Hayden White, "The Westernization of World History," in *Western Historical Thinking: An Intercultural Debate*, ed. Jörn Rüsen (New York: Berghahn Books, 2002), 112.
24. Okwui Enwezor, "All the World's Futures," La Biennale, Art, 56th Exhibition, <http://www.labiennale.org/en/art/exhibition/enwezor/>.