

Art History and Visual Studies in Europe

Transnational Discourses and National Frameworks

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THE IDEA OF THE CANON AND CANON FORMATION
IN ART HISTORY

Hubert Locher

Canon: A Critical Term for Art History?

The use of the word 'canon' in a critical sense in art-historical literature is, surprisingly, of fairly recent date. It is explained in one dry sentence in Duro and Greenhalgh's *Essential Art History*: 'In art the term refers to works of a given artist, period or school accepted "into the canon" as genuine . . . by connoisseurs.'¹ Although the term is used as a central critical category in the six-volume series *Art and its Histories* published by The Open University in the 1990s, it does not figure among the *Critical Terms for Art History*.² Nor does it appear in the *Metzler Lexikon Kunstwissenschaft* published in 2003, although 'Kanonisierung' ('canonization') is at least mentioned in the introduction, by which the editor refers to the purportedly canonical status of the one hundred terms selected.³ Eventually we find a short entry in Jonathan Harris's *Art History: The Key Concepts* (2006).⁴

One reason for this belated appearance might be that the term has not been understood as a critical concept. Traditionally, questions of the canon and of the canonical in art were hardly ever discussed in a critical manner; they were not considered the business of a historical discipline, the task of which was rather, in the first place, to register and, second, to interpret what had been done. Its purpose was not seen explicitly as judging, praising, and finally compiling a selective best-of list of works

¹ Paul Duro and Michael Greenhalgh, eds., *Essential Art History* (London, 1992) 73.

² See Colin Cunningham and Gill Perry, *Academies, Museums and Canons of Art* (London and New Haven, CT, 1999); Robert S. Nelson and Richard Schiff, eds., *Critical Terms for Art History* (Chicago, IL, 1996). The term does not appear in the revised 2003 edition either.

³ Ulrich Pfisterer, ed., *Metzler Lexikon Kunstwissenschaft: Ideen, Methoden, Begriffe* (Stuttgart, 2003) vii.

⁴ See 'Canon, Canonicity' in Jonathan Harris, *Art History: The Key Concepts* (London, 2006) 45–6. For a more recent discussion in reference to contemporary art see Rainer Metzger, ed., 'Über das Kanonische', *Kunstforum International* 162 (2002).

that would eventually be called the 'canon' of art history. More commonly used and intensely debated in other disciplines of the humanities, the term 'canon' is nevertheless firmly rooted in the history of art.⁵ Indeed, it is its implicit role in framing judgements and decisions within the discipline that makes the examination of the role of the canon and canon formation all the more pressing.

As a metaphor stemming probably from architecture, it is a basic notion in one of the very earliest Western theories of art: 'Canon' (Greek/Latin for 'measuring rod', 'standard') was the title of a lost theoretical treatise by the Greek sculptor Polykleitos.⁶ In his *Natural History* (XXXV, 55), Pliny the Elder relates that other artists called one of the sculptures, the *Doryphoros*, made by Polykleitos, 'canon', because it was considered to be the perfect, proportioned image of man. The term is also used to refer to a model in the sense of a guideline, a set of rules, or a schedule or list of dates serving as reference points. It is important to note that the notion was very early on connected to law, and, even more significantly, to religion. Whereas in early Christianity the term was only used in application to religious law (canonical law), from the fourth century onwards the term was also used in reference to the definitive and authoritative nature of the body of sacred scripture, a use of the term that classical antiquity did not know, neither in application to religious nor to secular literary texts.⁷ The word 'canonization' was also used to designate the act by which the

⁵ A reference to the 'Western canon' of literature in an affirmative sense can be found in Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and the School of the Ages* (New York, 1994). Manfred Fuhrmann, *Der europäische Bildungskanon des bürgerlichen Zeitalters* (Frankfurt am Main, 1999) looks back to a once probably functioning 'Bildungs-Kanon' ('canon of cultivated education') in Germany, rather than in Europe. For contributions to the more recent critical discussion see Maria Moog-Grünwald, ed., *Kanon und Theorie* (Heidelberg, 1997); Gerhard R. Kaiser and Stefan Matuschek, eds., *Begründungen des Kanon: Beiträge aus der Literatur- und Kunstwissenschaft, Philosophie und Theologie* (Heidelberg, 2001); Renate von Heydebrand, ed., *Kanon, Macht, Kultur: Theoretische, historische und soziale Aspekte ästhetischer Kanonbildungen* (Stuttgart, 1998).

⁶ The history of the word is given by Herbert Oppel, 'Kanon. Zur Bedeutungsgeschichte des Wortes und seiner lateinischen Entsprechungen (regula—norma)', special edition of *Philologus* 30.4 (1937). A thorough discussion of the problem can be found in Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (Munich, 1997) 103–29. See also Herbert Beck and Peter C. Bol, eds., *Polyklet: Der Bildhauer der griechischen Klassik. Exhibition Catalogue Liebighaus, Museum alter Plastik Frankfurt am Main* (Mainz, 1990); Hans von Steuben, 'Der Doryphoros und der Kanon Polyklets', *Städte-Jahrbuch* 15 (1996) 7–18; Thuri Lorenz, 'Polyklet: die Geschichte vom "Kanon"', in *Festschrift für Götz Pochat zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Johann Konrad Eberlein (Vienna, 2007) 11–19.

⁷ See the introduction to Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders, eds., *The Canon Debate: On the Origins and Formation of the Bible* (Peabody, MA, 2002) 13, and Eugen

Christian Church declared a person to be a saint, or the imposition by (canonical) law on the whole Church of the universal public veneration of an individual.

Today a canon is usually understood as a group of works, objects or, more often, texts, recognized within a defined social group as being exemplary and thus embodying a set of binding provisions. Undeniably, some of the religious connotations remain present in the modern use of the term; as the Egyptologist Jan Assmann has pointed out, this is evident when we still understand a canon not only, as in antiquity, as the correct measure made to the right proportion, but also as the right thing according to a higher authority.⁸

Generally, to canonize a set of objects, works or texts, means to declare that they are of the highest importance as timeless models of their kind. It is obvious that there are problems if one were to speak in this sense of canonization and of a canon when art history as a scholarly discipline is concerned. In the course of the nineteenth century art historians increasingly distanced themselves from normative judgements, focusing more and more on the 'objective' registration and description of art-historical 'facts'. This did not mean to deny that certain works should be counted amongst the 'Denkmäler der Kunst' ('monuments of art'), or that some 'Masters' were more 'important', or just more interesting than others. However, art historians usually tried to evaluate not an object's *absolute* value, but its relative or historical value, which became apparent when an object had been regarded by other artists in some way as a model. Although such value judgements were widely practiced and accepted, most art historians still usually avoid addressing these issues in a critical way, implicitly suggesting that it was not for them to select and decide about the prominence to be given to an object, but rather to 'history', the 'market', or 'the public'.

Even those art historians interested more in what we may call the aesthetic aspects or aesthetic value of art would not usually see their task in identifying a list of master models, but rather in describing the specific aesthetic quality of certain works, without indulging too much in questions of ranking. On the other hand, it cannot be disputed that aspects of ranking were and still are of considerable importance in the art world.

Ulrich, 'The Notion and Definition of the Canon', in McDonald and Sanders, *The Canon Debate*, 21–35.

⁸ Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, 115.

When, in the thirteenth century in the region of the Île de France, rival cities each tried to build the highest and most beautiful cathedral, just to give one obvious example from medieval history, it can be taken for granted that they were acting in a competitive situation. Likewise artists of the modern era, from the Renaissance onwards, were constantly looking at each other's work, trying to create works of outstanding and exemplary character, more beautiful, grand or significant than those of their rivals. This sense of competition is epitomized in the literary work of the artist and writer Giorgio Vasari, sometimes said to be the father of art history, who, in his *Vite de pittori* lists the biographies of Italian artists according to their achievements, suggesting that all artists were trying to surpass their predecessors, thus setting up both the idea of progress and a canon of the most important (Italian) artists of the then past two centuries.⁹

Art historians of more recent times may argue that while artists have always striven to create works worthy of universal praise, their own task as historians was merely to observe, describe and analyse these works in an appropriate way; according to this view the question of ranking would be a historical phenomenon, and the role of the art historian would thus be to discern the evidential record of previous qualitative judgements. But this approach seems to be too simple in assuming the possibility of a 'disinterested' historian. If there are good reasons to distance oneself in art-historical practice from partisanship with regard to art production, one has nevertheless to acknowledge that the art historian inevitably is and always has been a player in the game. Any historian has to make choices, deciding which work to think about, to publish, or to exhibit. His or her choices involve value judgements, which sooner or later contribute to the establishing of a set of objects that become more visible, are discussed more, and thus deemed more valuable than others, which results in what one has called the 'canon of art history'.

Canon Formation and Collective Identity

A canon, in general, is a system of reference produced in a certain cultural context. Canon formation as a historical process may occur especially, as Jan Assmann argues in his survey of cultural memory in early advanced civilizations, if a society is in crisis. This applies to the formation of the

⁹ Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de più eccellenti architetti, pittori et scultori italiani, da Cimabue insino a' tempi nostri* (Florence, 1550; 2nd enlarged edn. 1568).

canons of sacred scriptures in ancient cultures, such as Egypt, or Israel, or in early Christianity. The canon is, according to Assmann, 'the principle of a collective constitution and stabilization of identity, which is at the same time the foundation of individual identity, as a medium of individuation by socialization, and of self-realization by insertion into the "normative conscience of an entire population" (Habermas). A canon constitutes a nexus between the identity of the ego and collective identity. It represents the society as a whole and at the same time a system of values and interpretations, to which the single person avows and to which he or she builds his or her identity as a member of the society'.¹⁰ In this sense, canon formation is concerned with the formation and confirmation of individual and group identity. The individual finds her- or himself addressed and represented in the canon. Its function is to give orientation, which can only be achieved if the reference system is relatively stable.

Whether such a reference system exists in Western art cannot easily be answered. It seems doubtful that we can reasonably talk of a canon of Western art in the same sense as we can talk of a canon of sacred scriptures. It is true that in the art-historical literature of the last one and a half centuries we find certain names and objects time and again. But a closer look at the history of the formation of this list would show that it is constantly changing; some names disappear, while new ones are added. The more established names appear in different narratives, are valued and interpreted in different ways, according to the relative position of the writer who is trying to situate him- or herself and his or her social group by referring to objects within the larger system of art, or rather European or Western art in general. While these narratives are suggesting or even explicitly supporting the idea of a timeless and all-encompassing canon of works of Western art, even of 'world art', which is used as a reference system to establish sub-canons such as national canons, we have to assume that there is a certain range within which choices are made, and that even the criteria of selection are subject to change.

Thus, the so called canon of Western art (or the canon of art history) seems to be permanently under construction, which contradicts the very notion of a canon, or forces us to introduce the concept of an 'open canon'. Even if historians, collectors, dealers or politicians tried to establish 'the' canon of art, there is at any time a very broad set of possibly acceptable canonical objects, which are all artefacts classified as 'art'. From this field

¹⁰ Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, 127.

the objects of reference are chosen and marked as outstanding by critics, art historians, dealers, and collectors, according to the specific interests of the person acting or the group or institution this person represents, and laid down in some kind of listing—such as, for example, the national lists of historical monuments protected by national law, or the Unesco world heritage list, or, of course, the many art-historical surveys recommended to students of art history. Moreover we should take into consideration that not only the selection of artefacts canonized in such ways, but also the criteria according to which artefacts are classified as ‘art’ is mutable. We have thus not one ‘art-historical canon’ but competing canons, canons embodying national identity, or canons for groups of individuals within it, who are trying to develop a specific identity, not in contradiction, but in relation to society at large by using the reference system of art. Each canon will have its own specific history, structure and purpose.

Examples of Canon Formation—Canons of World Art and National Canons

Given this situation we should rather talk of continuous canon formation than of an open or closed canon of art or art history; or we could say that, in fact, no set canon in the strict sense (as a closed reference system) exists but a tradition of canon formation, which is characteristic for Western culture. Canon formation can be observed in Western culture since antiquity. Probably the first list intended as some kind of a canon of works of art was established in the third century BC as the famous ‘Seven Wonders of the World’.¹¹ These Seven Wonders, or objects to be admired, are usually not ranked, but each example is remembered as a superior and unsurpassed achievement of its kind. Yet, each one of these monuments can also be remembered as representing the specific cultural power of one more or less defined nation playing an important role at some time within the ancient world. This is certainly how the Roman poet Martial (40–104 AD) read the list. In his *Liber Spectaculorum* he mentions the seven monuments as representing their respective nations, in order to compare them to the cultural power of Rome, epitomized in a newly

¹¹ See Peter Clayton and Martin Price, eds., *The Seven Wonders of the Ancient World* (London, 1988); Kai Brodersen, *Die Sieben Weltwunder: Legendäre Kunst- und Bauwerke der Antike*, 2nd rev. edn. (Munich, 2004). The first complete list handed down might be that compiled by Antipatros of Sidon between 150 and 120 BC.

added monument, the Flavian amphitheatre.¹² This is a characteristic example of somebody trying to expand and differentiate the canon.

When the list of the Seven Wonders was reactivated in the Renaissance, the canon of antiquity was treated as a fixed and authoritative reference system. We can observe now that monuments of the authors' own time and nation were added or compared with the canonical wonders of the ancient world. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, the German humanist Jacob Wimpfeling from Strasbourg referred to the Seven Wonders in order to glorify the Minster of his hometown as a structure that surpassed all buildings of Europe.¹³ Some two centuries later, the historical perspective became more important. We find the Seven Wonders of the antique world prominently placed on the first pages of Johann Bernhard Fischer von Erlach's *Outline of a Historical Architecture* ('Entwurf einer historischen Architektur') of 1721.¹⁴ In this first attempt at a history of world architecture all objects are allocated to their nations of origin, following the purpose of showing the 'building manners' of each, finally leading to the present time and back to the European world, or more precisely to the work of Fischer von Erlach himself. We may see in this approach an early mode of discriminating national styles, which became common towards the end of the eighteenth century, and a leading category for structuring the large art-historical handbooks of the nineteenth century. For the present discussion the most significant aspect of Fischer von Erlach's text is his reference to a traditional canon, which was global and international, in order comparatively to define his own manner, connecting his own and his nation's works of architecture to the acknowledged monuments of great art.

Architectural objects are by nature immobile and permanently on public view and thus often from the outset conceived of as symbols of a local group. The situation is different when we look at a painting or a sculpture. Given the fragile character of these works, their mobility and the fact that a painter or a sculptor usually produced a greater multitude of works in

¹² See Kathleen Coleman, ed., *Martial: Liber Spectaculorum* (Oxford, 2006); see, too, Brodersen, *Die Sieben Weltwunder*, 14–15.

¹³ Jakob Wimpfeling, *Epitome rerum Germanicarum* (1505) (Marburg, 1562) 70. See Harold Hammer-Schenk, 'Architektur und Nationalbewußtsein—Wandlungen vom 16. bis zum 20. Jahrhundert', in *Funkkolleg Kunst: Eine Geschichte der Kunst im Wandel ihrer Funktionen* I, ed. Werner Busch (Munich 1987) 559–85.

¹⁴ Johann Bernhard Fischer von Erlach, *Entwurf einer historischen Architektur*, in *Abbildung unterschiedener berühmten Gebäude, des Alterthums und fremder Völker* (Vienna, 1721).

a lifetime, it has been common practice since ancient Greece and Rome to remember, in the first place, the names of the artists, and only in the second place their works. There thus tend to be lists of canonical painters rather than lists of canonical paintings. In Vasari's *Vite*, important artists and their biographies are listed in the first instance and only secondarily, lists of works of art are noted. Their works document, in this context, the life achievements of artists even when they are meticulously described and characterized. Paintings and sculptures are therefore treated as exemplary representations of the work of an artist in its entirety, while this is the case to a lesser degree with regard to architecture. The exemplary nature of paintings and statues makes for their status of collectibles that can stand for wider artistic and cultural contexts, whereas architectural monuments can only be assembled in their representations (descriptions, illustrations). Collections of man-made 'mirabilia', and, among them, paintings and sculptures, have been of crucial importance for the formation of the notion of art in modern times, and substantial to the formation of the canon of art. Since the sixteenth century it has been common practice to collect and display paintings as works of art according to national or regional 'schools'. One can observe the formation of sub-canons within these partitions, but the early collectors, in most cases using their galleries as spaces for political representation, usually did not exclusively collect just the masters of one school but tried to collect works by important masters of the most important schools. This concept is developed and reflected in the literature of art. The small handbook for amateurs of painting, for example, published by the French painter and writer Roger de Piles in 1699, contains among other texts a historical sequence where a canonical list of painters from antiquity to the then present time is given.¹⁵ This list is ordered chronologically but also according to regional or national schools. De Piles mentions the Roman, the Venetian, the Lombard, the German, the Flemish and, finally, the French School. His sequence shows that typically the canonical listing is used to define the writer's own position, placing the French school at the end. Since the late eighteenth century this order became, for some time, the 'logic of the museum', its quintessential example being the Louvre. It was not only the place where the historical collection of paintings of the European schools were shown—among them, of course, most prominently the French—but also where

¹⁵ Roger de Piles, *Abregé de la vie des peintres. Avec des reflexions sur leurs ouvrages et un traité du Peintre parfait etc.* (Paris, 1699).

contemporary French painting was exhibited periodically in the nearby 'Salon'. Displaying the canonical frame of reference, the modern museum was to become the most important institution for the formation of art-historical canons, and especially the place where the formation of national canons was staged. In the course of the nineteenth century, these national canons were to become more and more important throughout Europe.

While many modern artists aimed at ranking themselves among the 'great masters' presented in the modern museum, it should also be noted that any collection is a construction in its own right and variable according to the will of the institution, the owner or its curator, and does not necessarily present the frame of reference (canon) observed by the artists working at the time. With regard to the formation of national canons of art we can observe that occasionally the foundation of museums was supported in order to encourage the formation of a local (national) tradition of painting, or with the intent of *differencing* the art-historical canon, by canonizing (or musealizing) the local tradition on the understanding that what could be seen in the museum was part of a canon. In the nineteenth century the institution of art history naturalized such constructions. It was then that art history as a scholarly discipline emerged and flourished, beginning in Germany, with many other countries following in its wake. The discipline was then also institutionalized in state-funded universities, as a result of which it could and did serve in its specific way in articulating and propagating notions of national identity.

Interpreting Canons

If one accepts that canons are not given entities but more or less collectively developed and agreed reference systems, representing sets of values deemed to be important for society as a whole, or for groups within it, then canon formation has to be considered as a social and political enterprise. It is not by chance that the term 'canon' in the modern sense occurred in art-historical literature at a time when some scholars started to see more clearly and address the fact that their discipline was deeply concerned not only with the beautiful and the precious, but with society at large and its values.

One of the first to address the issue was Ernst H. Gombrich. In a lecture delivered in 1973 Gombrich, as a 'humanist', thought it necessary to defend the appreciation of art and the history of art as the history of great achievements of 'great masters', and thus—he uses the word—the 'canon'

of art as the approved list of masterworks serving as models and as an indispensable reference system against moral and aesthetic 'relativism'.¹⁶ Gombrich's defence of the canon was directed against those unnamed social scientists (of Marxist persuasion) who, he thought, considered art history to be just another social science, or, at best, an *ancilla sociologiae*. The most obvious example might have been Arnold Hauser, whose *Social History of Art* Gombrich had reviewed in its English translation two decades earlier, but he might also have been aware of the interest of a younger generation of scholars who started in these years critically to rethink art history. From the beginning, the critique of the traditional canon of the 'masters' was a central issue, but there seems to have been an initial hesitation to use the word 'canon'; it does not occur, for example, in one of the seminal contributions by Linda Nochlin, who provocatively asked in 1971: 'Why have there been no great women artists?'¹⁷ The critique of the canon in this sense continued to the 1990s—most of the time without using the term as a critical concept but with the intention to expand and broaden the field of study by including marginalized artists, in particular women, and overlooked artistic genres. It was the feminist art historian Nanette Salomon who explicitly criticized 'the art-historical canon' as being 'among the most virulent, and ultimately the most vulnerable' of canons within academic disciplines.¹⁸ Despite their fundamental disagreement with approaches like that of Gombrich, radical art historians rarely went as far as fundamentally reconsidering the principle of traditional art history, which was, as Adrian Rifkin noticed in 1986, the production of a 'series of valued objects'. 'More often than not', Rifkin argued, radical art historians fell 'into line' with traditional art history, 'although they might first insist that the canon gets filled out a bit'.¹⁹

¹⁶ For this see Ernst H. Gombrich, 'Art History and the Social Sciences', in *Ideals and Idols* (Oxford, 1979) 131–66; Gombrich, 'Canons and Values in the Visual Arts: A Correspondence with Quentin Bell', *Critical Inquiry* 2.3 (1976), reprinted in: *Ideas and Idols*, 167–83.

¹⁷ Linda Nochlin, 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?' in Nochlin, *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays* (New York, 1988) 145–78. First published in 1971.

¹⁸ Nanette Salomon, 'The Art Historical Canon: Sins of Omission', in (*En*)gendering Knowledge: *Feminists in Academe*, ed. Joan E. Hartman and Ellen Messer-Davidow (Knoxville, TN, 1991) 220–34. A German translation was published in *kritische berichte* 21.4 (1993) 27–40. The chapter was republished in Donald Preziosi, ed., *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology* (Oxford and New York, 1998) 344–55; see also, in Preziosi's anthology, the explanation of the term 'canon' in the glossary, 577.

¹⁹ Adrian Rifkin, 'Art's Histories', in *The New Art History*, ed. Alan L. Rees and Frances Borzello (London, 1986) 157–63, quoted 159. For an interesting approach to the problem see Karen-Edis Barzman, 'Feminists, Postmodernism, and the History of Art', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 52.3 (1994) 327–39.

The problem of the art-historical canon was then brought to the attention of the readers of *The Art Bulletin* in 1996, as part of the series 'A Range of Critical Perspectives', where several authors presented their views on 'Rethinking the Canon', which was approached from different areas of the study of visual culture; this involved not only an expansion of the traditional canon, but a critical analysis of canons *per se* and canon formation.²⁰ Griselda Pollock's study, published in 1999, attempted to 'difference the canon' by trying to relate a feminist re-reading of canonical modern 'masters' with readings of canonical artists of feminist art history.²¹ But even this ambitious book consciously remained a contribution to the project of expanding and reforming the canon from within art history, without aiming, as the author underlines, for the 'more political' option of abolishing canons altogether, which would imply the inclusion of all cultural artefacts as having equal significance. This latter option would in fact mean discarding the notion of the work of art entirely. In this way, one would dispose of the problem by leaving the field of art history and embarking on the larger project of 'visual culture studies'. If this remains an option—and it is surely becoming more attractive in times when 'visuality' is steadily growing in importance as a cultural form—it seems useful, nevertheless, to concentrate on the still more or less definable and well-institutionalized field of 'art' in order to analyse and understand the mechanisms and functions of this protean instance of Western culture in the multitude of its meanings. This would include, of course, the study of the institutions regulating and organizing it by studying their strategies and arguments, among them the process of canonization.

Today, it is generally acknowledged that canon formation is still a key issue in art history. Donald Preziosi rightly observed that because of the 'core interest of the discipline of art history in questions of quality, taste, and social and historical significance, the systemic institutional role of "canonization" has remained intact'.²² In his introduction to

²⁰ Michael Camille, Zeynep Celik, John Onians, Adrian Rifkin and Christopher B. Steiner, 'Rethinking the Canon', *The Art Bulletin* 78 (1996) 198–217; Marlite Halbertsma, 'The Call of the Canon: Why Art History Cannot Do Without', in *Making Art History: A Changing Discipline and Its Institutions*, ed. Elizabeth C. Mansfield (New York, 2007) 16–30. See, too, Anna Brzyski, ed., *Partisan Canons* (Durham, NC, 2007), especially Anna Brzyski, 'Introduction: Canons and Art History', 1–25.

²¹ Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* (London and New York, 1999).

²² Preziosi, *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, 577: 'Many of the debates over art-historical "theory" and "methodology" during the last quarter of the twentieth century also concerned the valorization or canonization of specific subject matters worthy of

The New Art History Jonathan Harris states that he will have to return ‘many times . . . to the definition and problems of the canon—that is, the set of artefacts deemed worthy of study, and by extension to those forms of study equally regarded as legitimate within the discipline—and to the ways and contexts in which canons are assembled and maintained’.²³ It seems that there still is some way to go in this direction. In order to understand what art history is actually about, it still seems useful to explore the mechanisms and purposes of canon formation, to ask what ‘the’ canon in art history actually might be or rather, what canons do we have and why they have been constructed, and how do they work in, for example, museums, or archives, by representations, reproductions, and images? To achieve such a critique of canon formation, one needs to broaden the view, to frame ‘the’ canon, and investigate the inclusions in relation to the exclusions that have been made. The principle of canon formation being that of selection, it is important to know the criteria, as well as the pool of objects, from which selections are made.

Having answered these questions, we might know more about the use of canons or the canonical, and we might then proceed to the big question of whether we need something like a canon of works of art at all. But this is of secondary importance because, obviously, art history still continues to be very much about establishing or confirming selections of symbolic objects, declaring some of them to be of special importance, more worthy of remembrance than others, more beautiful and desirable than others—for reasons still to be explained, and, as history shows, somewhat changeable.

professionally or public attention. In this regard, one group’s “masterpieces” and another’s “politically correct” or “socially relevant” artworks perform equivalent disciplinary roles in maintaining hierarchical distinctions among cultural objects.’

²³ Jonathan Harris, *The New Art History: A Critical Introduction* (London, 2001) 10.