

Canon Wars

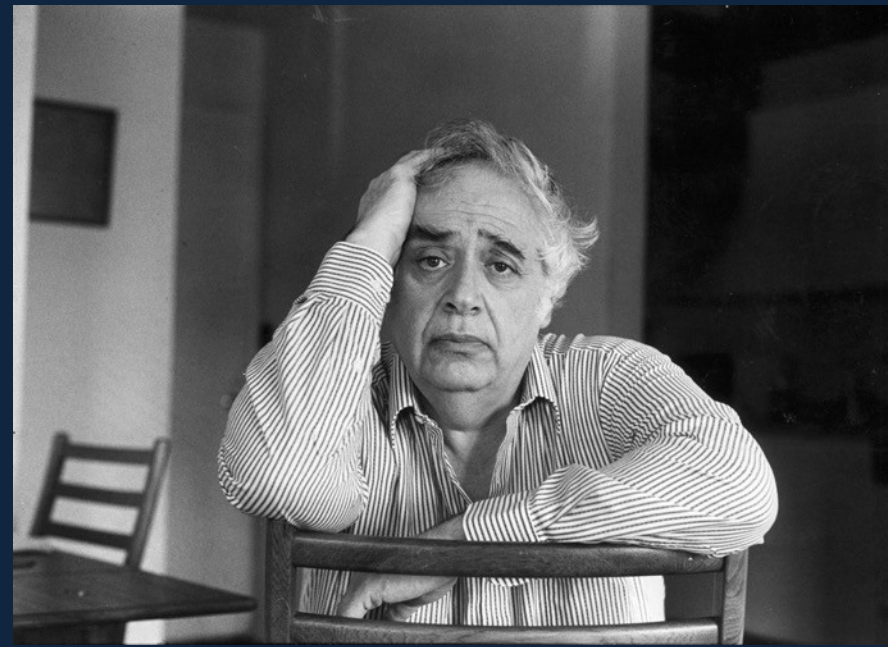
The Values and Objects of Art History

2 March 2023

The
WESTERN
CANON

The
Books and School
of the Ages

HAROLD
BLOOM



Harold Bloom
The Western Canon (New York,
1994) p. 527

C.

The Democratic Age

I have located Vico's Democratic Age in the post-Goethean nineteenth century, when the literature of Italy and Spain ebbs, yielding eminence to England with its renaissance of the Renaissance in Romanticism, and to a lesser degree to France and Germany. This is also the era where the strength of both Russian and American literature begins. I have resisted the backward reach of the current canonical crusades, which attempt to elevate a number of sadly inadequate women writers of the nineteenth century, as well as some rudimentary narratives and verses of African-Americans. Expanding the Canon, as I have said more than once in this book, tends to drive out the better writers, sometimes even the best, because pragmatically none of us (whoever we are) ever had time to read absolutely everything, no matter how great our lust for reading. And for most of us, the harried young in particular, inadequate authors will consume the energies that would be better invested in stronger writers. Nearly everything that has been revived or discovered by Feminist and African-American literary scholars falls all too precisely into the category of "period pieces," as imaginatively dated now as they were already enfeebled when they first came into existence.

ITALY

Ugo Foscolo

On Sepulchres, translated by
Thomas G. Bergin
Last Letters of Jacopo Ortis
Odes and The Graces

Alessandro Manzoni

The Betrothed
On the Historical Novel

Giacomo Leopardi

Essays and Dialogues, translated
by Giovanni Cecchetti
Poems
The Moral Essays, translated by
Howard Norse

Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli

Roman Sonnets, translated by
Harold Norse

Giosuè Carducci

Hymn to Satan
Barbarian Odes
Rhymes and Rhythms

Giovanni Verga

Little Novels of Sicily, translated
by D. H. Lawrence
Mastro-Don Gesualdo,
translated by D. H. Lawrence
The House by the Medlar Tree,
translated by Raymond
Rosenthal
The She-Wolf and Other Stories,
translated by Giovanni
Cecchetti

SPAIN and PORTUGAL

Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer
Poems

Benito Pérez Galdós

Fortunata and Jacinta

Leopoldo Alas (Clarín)

La Regenta

José Maria de Eça de Queirós

The Maias

FRANCE

Benjamin Constant

Adolphe
The Red Notebook

François-Auguste-René de

Chateaubriand

Atala and René, translated by
Irving Putter
The Genius of Christianity

Alphonse de Lamartine

Meditations

Alfred de Vigny

Chatterton
Poems

Victor Hugo

The Distance, The Shadows:
Selected Poems, translated by
Harry Guest
Les Misérables
Notre-Dame of Paris
William Shakespeare
The Toilers of the Sea
The End of Satan
God

Alfred de Musset

Poems
Lorenzaccio

Gérard de Nerval

The Chimeras, translated by
Peter Jay
Sylvie
Aurelia

Théophile Gautier

Mademoiselle de Maupin
Enamels and Cameos

Honoré de Balzac

The Girl with the Golden Eyes
Louis Lambert
The Wild Ass's Skin

Old Goriot

Cousin Bette

A Harlot High and Low

Eugénie Grandet

Ursule Mirouet

Stendhal

On Love

The Red and the Black

The Charterhouse of Parma

Gustave Flaubert

Madame Bovary, translated by
Francis Steegmuller
Sentimental Education
Salammô
A Simple Soul

George Sand

The Haunted Pool

Charles Baudelaire

Flowers of Evil, translated by
Richard Howard
Paris Spleen

Stéphane Mallarmé

Selected Poetry and Prose

Paul Verlaine

Selected Poems

Arthur Rimbaud

Complete Works, translated by
Paul Schmidt

Tristan Corbière

Les Amours jaunes

Jules Laforgue

Selected Writings, translated by
William Jay Smith

Guy de Maupassant

Selected Short Stories

Émile Zola

Germinal
L'Assommoir
Nana

SCANDINAVIA

Henrik Ibsen

Brand, translated by Geoffrey
Hill

WHAT IS A CANON?

Bloom's aims:

- To provide a basic framework of great works of art and literature as a means of setting shared universal standards
- To affirm the *intrinsic* aesthetic value of great works of art and literature (note the criticism of scholars who see works of art and canons as the product of 'race, class, gender and national interests.')
- To affirm the *self-evident* nature of artistic and literary value

not appropriate to our anguished society. Greatness in the West's literature centers upon Shakespeare, who has become the touchstone for all who come before and after him, whether they are dramatists, lyric poets, or storytellers. He had no true precursor

Bloom, *The Western Canon*, p. 521.

What is a Canon?

- From the Greek term κανών / kanon = straight rod, rule or standard
- ‘... an obligatory syllabus of knowledge to be learned by heart and to be referred to as authoritative in critical discussions and situations’ (Jan Assmann, p. 121)
- - Legitimizing power of a canon
 - Best and normative
 - Most representative and significant
 - Must be studied as exemplary
- - Creating of the notion of the ‘classic’ text / work of art

Jan Assmann, ‘Tradition, Writing and Canonisation’ p. 121

The Canon:

‘The term [canon] 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.’

Hubert Locher, ‘The Idea of the Canon’ in Rampley et al, eds,
Art History and Visual Studies in Europe (Leiden, 2012) 31

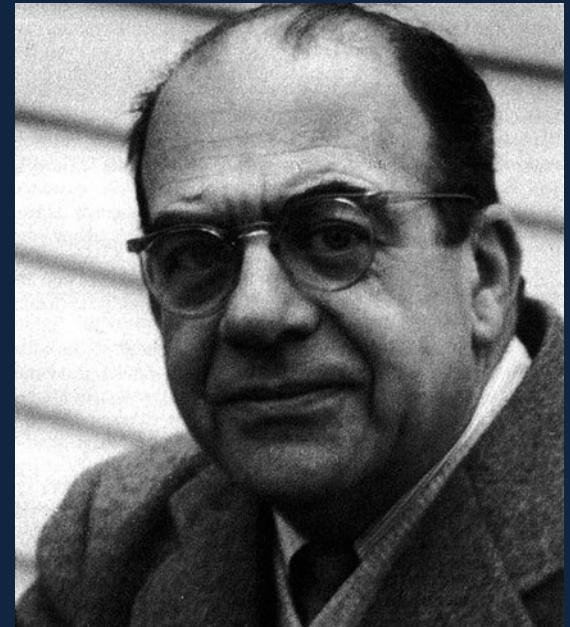
‘The canon is emblematic not merely of authority but of the authoritative weight of the past. Infused by tradition, the canon often shapes norms and so becomes the vehicle for shared culture. In its more prominent manifestations, the canon does merely inspire culture. Rather, it comes to command where attention is directed.’

Anita Silvers, ‘The Canon in Aesthetics’ in *Oxford Art Online* (2013)

The Weight of the Past ...

‘The humanist, then, rejects authority, but he respects tradition. Not only does he respect it, he looks upon it as something real and objective which has to be studied and, if necessary, reinstated: *nos vetera instauramus, nova non prodimus* [we conserve the old, we do not bring forth the new] as Erasmus puts it.’

Erwin Panofsky, ‘The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline’ in Eric Fernie, ed, *Art History and its Methods* (London, 1995) 85.



Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968)

‘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.’

Locher, ‘The Idea of the Canon’ 33.

A canon is ...

‘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.’

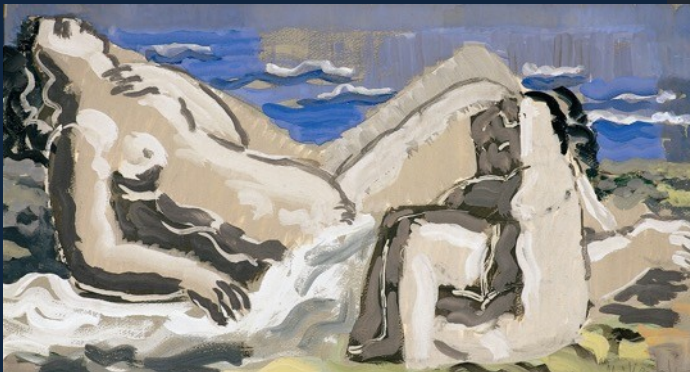
Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* (Munich, 2007) p. 127



‘Status as a classic is not an either/or matter, but a matter of degree. At any given time, the canon is represented by a series of concentric circles. At the center are texts with the highest degree of canonicity, while at the periphery are those whose classical status is most tenuous. This means that historical changes in the canon are not simply matter of inclusion and exclusion, but also matters of location between the center and the periphery.’



Merold Westphal, ‘The canon as flexible , normative fact,’
The Monist, 76 (1993) p. 436





Kenneth Clark *Civilisation* (London, 1969). This was a hugely popular television series broadcast in 1970.

‘This series has been filled with great works of genius, in architecture, sculpture and painting, in philosophy, poetry and music, in science and engineering. There they are; you can't dismiss them. And they are only a fraction of what western man has achieved in the last thousand years, often after setbacks and deviations at least as destructive as those of our own time. Western civilisation has been a series of rebirths. Surely this should give us confidence in ourselves.’

Civilisation p. 347.

Assmann identifies different processes of canonization:

- Primary canonization: the creation of cultural norms and general cultural literacy, ideas of timeless validity, *mouvance* (Paul Zumthor)
- Secondary canonization: the fixing of canonical texts and norms

‘Secondary canonisation means the combination of strict fixation of surface structure typical of sacred texts and complete semantic transparency typical of cultural texts ... Cultural texts that undergo the process of secondary canonisation must not be changed, they must be understood’ (Assmann, p. 124)

Table 2.2. The fifty most cited artists in the *BHA* database, 1972–1987, with the number of citations for each.

Rank	Artist	No. of citations	Rank	Artist	No. of citations
1	Picasso	757	26	Poussin	202
2	Dürer	616	27	Ingres	201
3	Rubens	600	28	Manet	200
4	Michelangelo	537	29	Blake	199
5	Leonardo	526	30	Giorgione	191
6	Raphael	460	31	Velázquez	181
7	Rembrandt	442	32	Piranesi	180
8	Titian	418	33	Friedrich	177
9	Goya	391	34	Bosch	163
10	Palladio	377	35	Rodin	162
11	Van Gogh	283	36	Duchamp	161
12	Turner	270	37	Brughel the Elder	160
13	Cézanne	267	38	Ernst	159
14	Brunelleschi	243	39	Degas	156
15	Klee	240	40	Munch	155
16	Matisse	224	41	Cranach	154
17	Bernini	220	42	Watteau	152
18	Alberti	218	43	Monet	151
19	Courbet	215	44	Viollet-le-Duc	151
20	Le Corbusier	214	45	Gauguin	147
21	Schinkel	213	46	Donatello	145
22	Caravaggio	211	47	Van Eyck	145
23	Delacroix	209	48	Tiepolo	144
24	Kandinsky	205	49	Constable	141
25	Giotto	203	50	Lotto	141

Source: James Elkins, 'Canon and Globalization in Art History' in A Brzyski, ed., *Partisan Canons* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2007) p. 66

Table 1.2. Artists ranked according to the total number of citations found through a subject heading search of the library catalogue of the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (July 2004). A “t” denotes a shared position in the ranking.

Rank	Artist	Citations		Rank	Artist	Citations	
		Total citations	since 1990			Total citations	since 1990
1	van Gogh	383	58	27	Millet	51	4
2	Goya	261	38	28	Menzel	49	6
3	Cézanne	231	28	29	Rossetti	48	6
4	Gauguin	221	21	30	Friedrich	40	9
5	Lautrec	175	16	31	Moreau	33	6
6	Degas	159	14	31t	Böcklin	33	2
7	Turner	155	7	33	Morisot	32	6
8	Munch	154	13	34	Millais	31	1
9	Rodin	151	14	34t	Sargent	31	5
10	Delacroix	147	14	36	Cassatt	30	4
11	Renoir	142	11	37	Sisley	25	2
12	Monet	131	24	38	Runge	24	1
13	Daumier	130	6	39	Puvis de Chavannes	22	0
14	Manet	127	12				
15	Ensor	108	9	40	Hunt, H.	18	1
15t	Ingres	108	11	41	Gérôme	17	3
17	Courbet	107	10	41t	Rousseau	17	0
18	Blake	102	9	43	Meissonier	16	0
19	Whistler	99	7	44	Delaroche	13	1
20	Corot	94	7	45	Girodet	10	2
21	Constable	79	4	46	Bonheur	9	0
22	Canova	76	9	46t	Bouguereau	9	0
23	Seurat	62	13	46t	Caillebotte	9	3
24	David	59	4	49	Rude	7	0
25	Pissarro	54	3	50	Couture	5	0
26	Géricault	53	5				

Source: Robert Jensen, 'Measuring Canons' in A Brzyski, ed., *Partisan Canons* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2007) p. 37

CRITIQUING THE CANON



Michelangelo – The Creation of Adam,
from the Sistine Chapel Ceiling (1512)

The current official selection of great works of art owes much of its present composition to the ubiquitous standard college text by H.W. Janson, *The History of Art*, first written in 1962 and reprinted at regular intervals ever since.² Janson did not invent this list, although his personal selection from a limited number of possibilities is itself a text worthy of analysis. In fundamental ways, the art historical canon, as it appears in Janson (and in others who follow him with unembarrassed exactitude), ultimately and fundamentally is derived from the sixteenth-century book by the Florentine artist and writer Giorgio Vasari, *Le Vite De' più eccellenti Architetti, Pittori et Scultori Italiani*, first published in 1550 and reissued in a much enlarged edition in 1568.³ This

Nanette Salomon, 'The Art Historical Canon: Sins of Omission,' in Donald Preziosi, ed., *The Art of Art History* (Oxford, 1998) p. 344.

COSMOPOLITAN
MODERNISMS

EDITED BY KOBENA MERCER

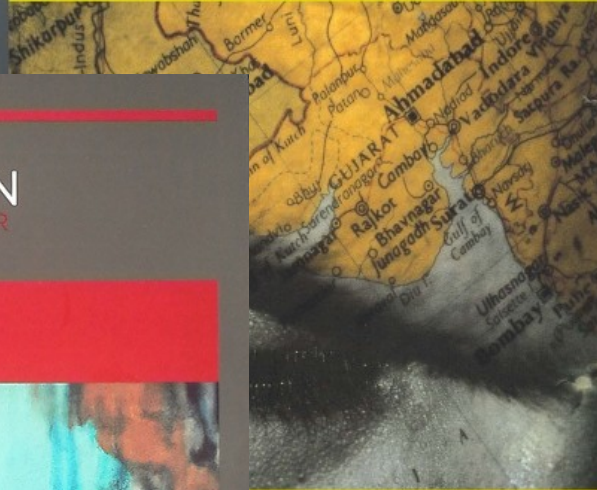


Kobena Mercer, Annotating Art's Histories (2005-2008)

ANNOTATING ART'S HISTORIES

EXILES, DIASPORAS
& STRANGERS

EDITED BY KOBENA MERCER



ANNOTATING ART'S HISTORIES

DISCREPANT
ABSTRACTION

EDITED BY KOBENA MERCER



ANNOTATING ART'S HISTORIES

POP ART AND
VERNACULAR
CULTURES

EDITED BY KOBENA MERCER



MODERN ART IN EASTERN EUROPE

FROM THE BALTIC TO THE BALKANS, ca. 1890–1939

RECIPIENT OF THE 1997 C.I.N.O.A. PRIZE

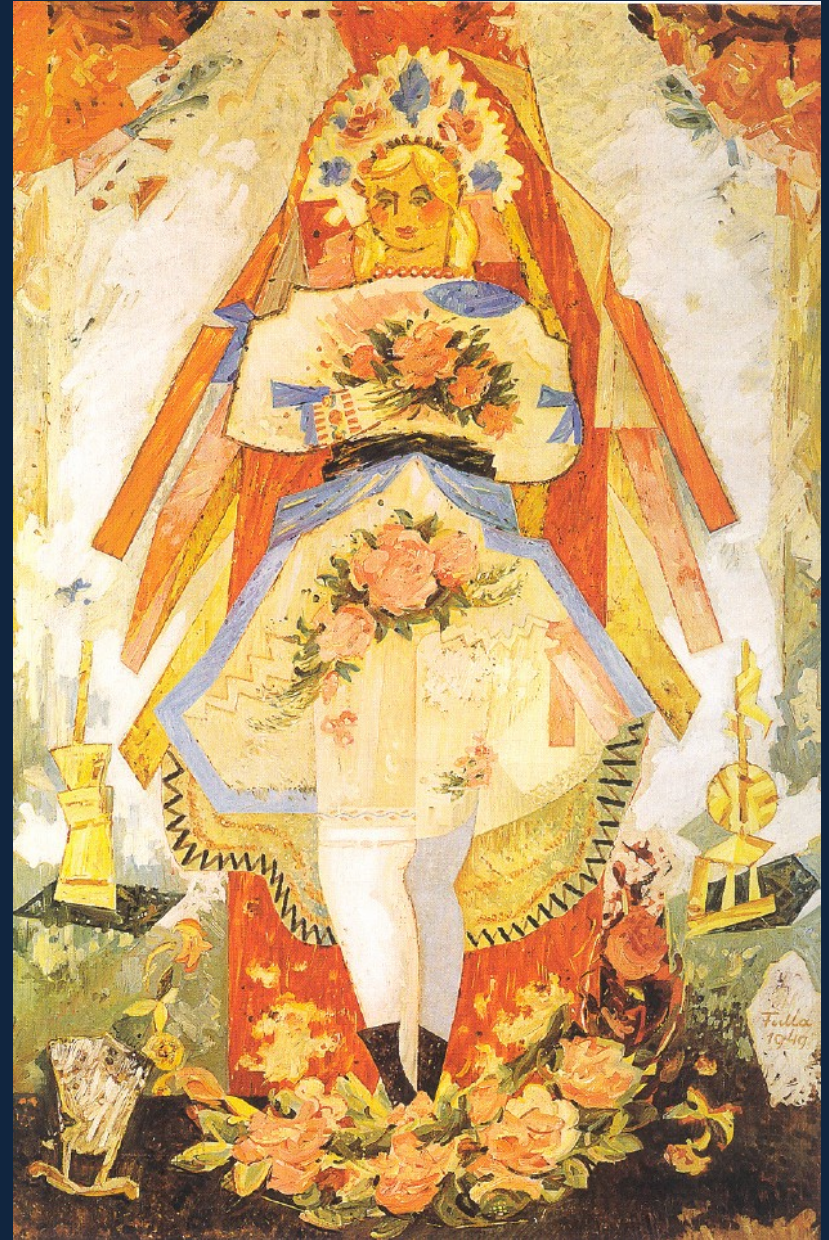


S. A. MANSBACH

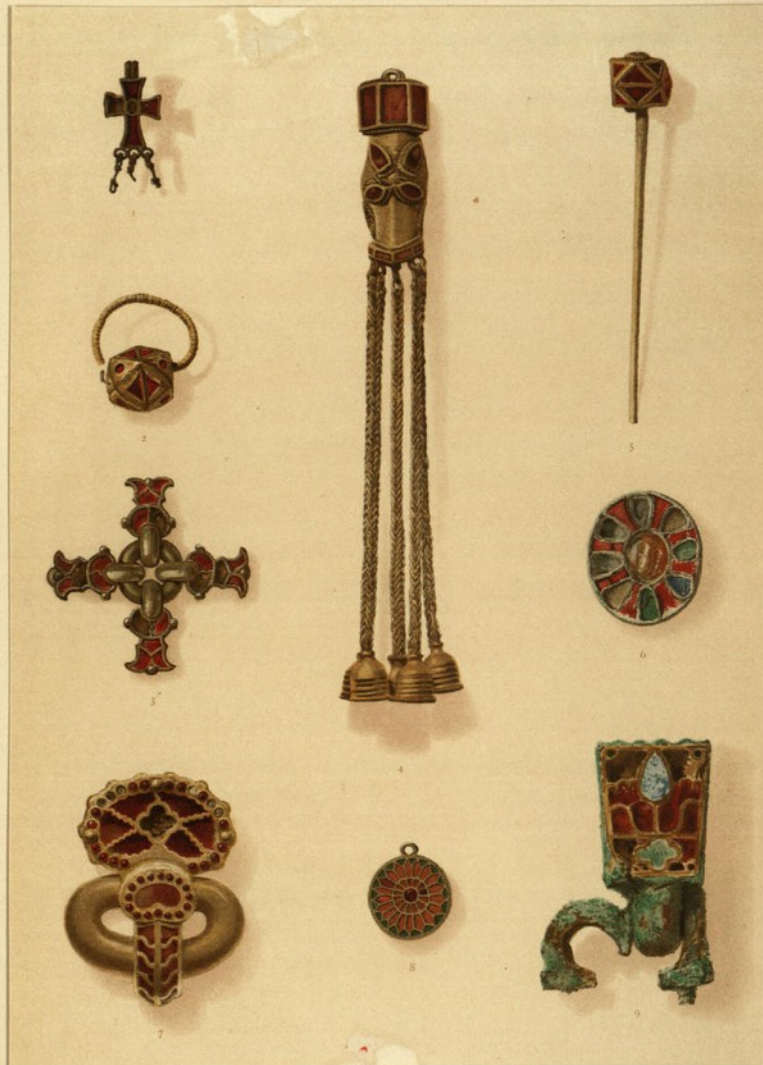
Steven Mansbach, *Modern Art
in Eastern Europe* (Cambridge,
1999)



L: Eduard Wiiralt, *Music* (1925)



R: Ludovít Fulla, *Slovak Bride* (1949)



GOLDSCHMIEDEARBEITEN MIT GRANAT-EINLAGE

Nr. 1 & 8
Museum Spalato
Nr. 47
Museum Klausenburg

Nr. 2 & 5
Kais. Kamtsammlungen Wien

Nr. 3
Österreich. Museum Wien
Nr. 9
National-Museum Budapest



L: Plate of gold jewellery from Alois Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry* (1901)

R: El Greco, *The Vision of St. John* (1608-14). See Max Dvořák, *Art History as the History of Spirit* (1924)

‘The history and sociology of art have completely fulfilled their purely empirical task when they have made plain the material, technical, social and psychological conditions of the new style. In so doing they do not “evaluate” the Gothic style in relation, say, to the Romanesque or Renaissance style ... Rather, the interest of the works of art and their aesthetically relevant individual properties ... is something given from outside... it is given by the aesthetic value of the work of art, which cannot be established by the empirical disciplines.’

Max Weber, ‘The Meaning of Ethical Neutrality in Sociology and Economics’ (1917) in Weber *The Methodology of Social Sciences* (Atlantic Highlands, 2011) 30

The Fact / Value Dichotomy

‘An empirical science cannot tell anyone what he *should* do - but rather what he *can* do — and under certain circumstances — what he wishes to do. It is true that in our sciences, personal value-judgments have tended to influence scientific arguments without being explicitly admitted.

[...]

... we regard as *objectively* valuable those innermost elements of the "personality," those highest and most ultimate value-judgments which determine our conduct and give meaning and significance, to our life ... Only on the assumption of belief in the validity of values is the attempt to espouse value-judgments meaningful. However, to judge the *validity* of such *values* is a matter of *faith*.’

Max Weber, ‘ “Objectivity in Social Science”.’ pp. 54-55.

Hence:

- If canonization is based on a *faith* in the validity of certain values, what *are* those values?

Two examples:

- ‘texts are classics because we find in them an inexhaustible (or at least not yet exhausted) source of meaning. They speak to us, they address claims to us, they put us in question.’

(Westphal, ‘The canon as flexible, normative, fact,’ p. 439)

- ‘The enigma of Shakespeare is his universalism: Kurosawa’s film versions of *Macbeth* and *King Lear* are thoroughly Kurosawa and thoroughly Shakespeare ... The miracle of Shakespeare’s universalism is that ... the great characters and plays accept being embedded in history and in society while refusing every mode of reduction.’

(Bloom, *The Western Canon*, p. 524)

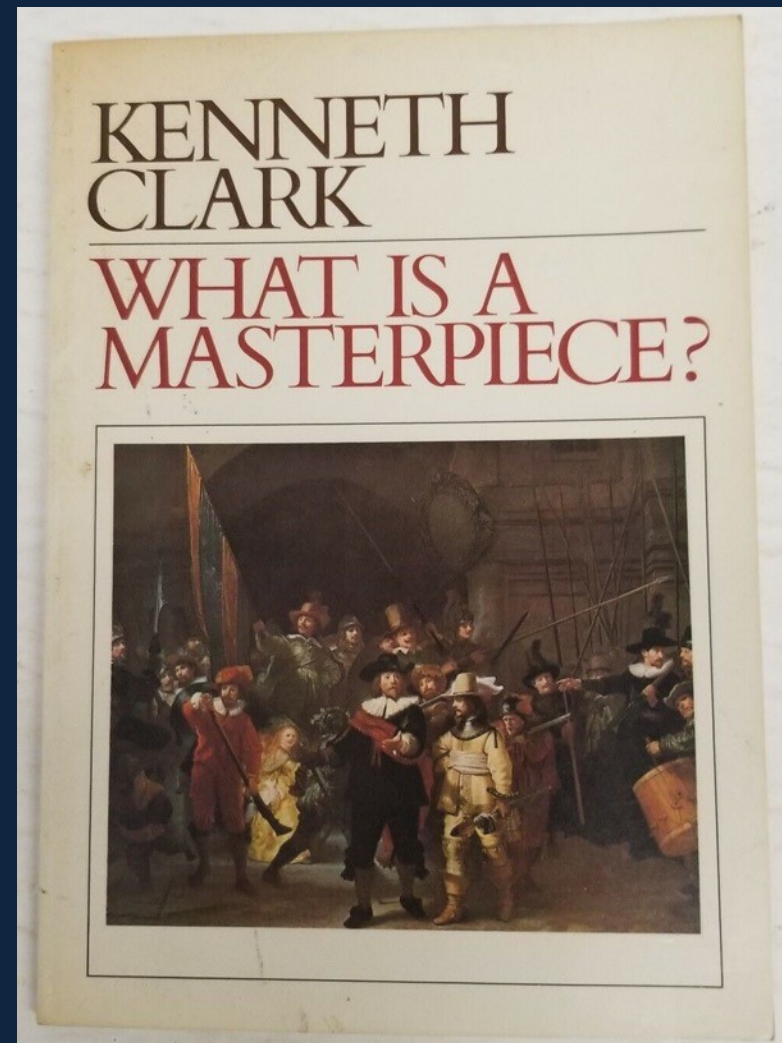
However:

Are these values *valid*? Where does the belief in the value of inexhaustible meaning come from? How is it justified?

When Bloom et al. talk about *universal* values as the grounds of the canon, who are they speaking for? Do Shakespeare / Michelangelo etc speak *universal* values?

‘Although many meanings cluster around the word *masterpiece* it is above all the work of an artist of genius who has been absorbed by the spirit of the time in a way that his made his individual experiences universal.’

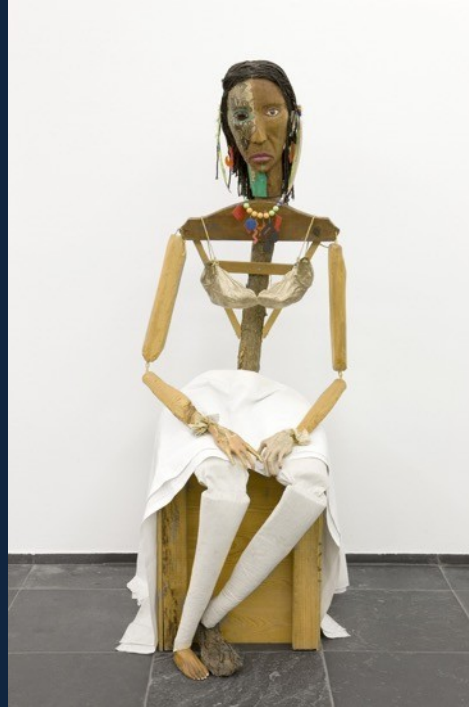
Kenneth Clark, ‘What is a Masterpiece?’ *Portfolio* (1980) p. 53



And:

- What about the value placed on *originality*, for example?
- And can a canon reflect the values of 'society as a whole' (Assmann)?
- And if canons aid 'the formation and confirmation of individual and group identity' (Locher) are groups / cultures / societies comprised of single, coherent sets of values?

Perhaps it is no accident that it was in the USA that the idea of the canon was first challenged



Clockwise from left:

Cindy Sherman, Jimmie Durham, Robert
Judy Chicago, Jean-Michel Basquiat

If literary canons are the product only of class, racial, gender, and national interests, presumably the same should be true of all other aesthetic traditions, including music and the visual arts. Matisse and Stravinsky can then go down with Joyce and Proust as four more dead white European males. I gaze in wonder at the crowds of New Yorkers at the Matisse exhibition: are they truly there because of societal overconditioning? When the School of Resentment becomes as dominant among art historians and critics as it is among literary academics, will Matisse go unattended while we all flock to view the daubings of the Guerrilla Girls? The lunacy of these questions is plain enough when it comes to the eminence of Matisse, while Stravinsky is clearly in no danger of being replaced by politically correct music for the ballet companies of the world.

THE LOGIC OF THE CANON

So, *if* the character of the canon is to be criticized because:

.... it is *not* as universal as its proponents believe

... is it based on a set of values that are a matter of fait

... its values involve exclusions

Is the solution merely to expand it to be less exclusive / more inclusive ?



Raphael
Transfiguration (1516-20)



Ernst Ludwig Kirchner
Berlin Street Scene (1914)



Albrecht Dürer,
Self Portrait (1500)



L: Romare Bearden, *The Dove* (1964)



UR: Jenő Krón, *The Wounded* (1919-20)



LR: Lee Krasner – *Celebration* (1960)

Answer Not necessarily, if we take Griselda Pollock's criticisms seriously

Canonicity exists in many forms, the better to produce, at the cultural and ideological level, the single standard of the greatest and the best for all times. 'Tradition' is the canon's 'natural' face, and in this form cultural regulation participates in what Raymond Williams names social and political hegemony. In distinction to gross forms of coercive social or political domination, the Marxist term *hegemony* explains the way a particular social and political order culturally saturates a society so profoundly that its regime is lived by its populations simply as 'common sense'. Hierarchy becomes a natural order, and what appears to survive from the past because of its inherent significance determines the values of the present.

Pollock, *Differencing the Canon* (London, 1999) p. 9



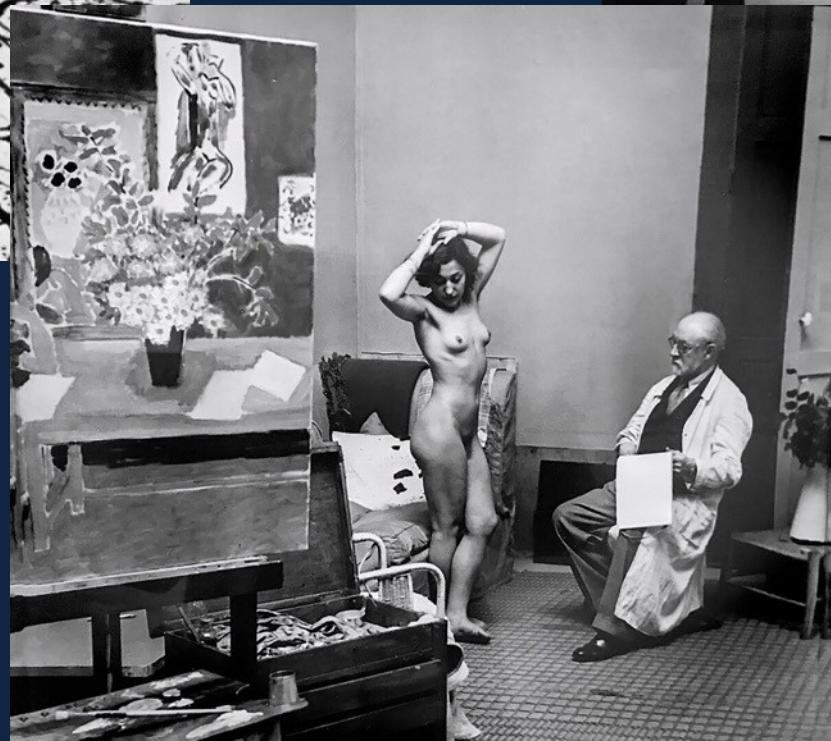
More than a collection of valued objects/texts or a list of revered masters, I define the canon as a discursive formation which constitutes the objects/texts it selects as the products of artistic mastery and, thereby, contributes to the legitimation of white masculinity's exclusive identification with creativity and with Culture. To learn about Art, through the canonical discourse, is to know masculinity as power and meaning, and all three as identical with Truth and Beauty. So long as feminism also tries to be a discourse about art, truth and beauty, it can only confirm the structure of the canon,

Pollock, *Differencing the Canon* (London, 1999) p. 9

Canons are defended with an almost theological zeal that indicates more than the historical coincidence between the ecclesiastical use of the word *canon* for the revered and authenticated texts of the Bible and its function in cultural traditionalism. The canon is fundamentally a mode for the worship of the artist, which is in turn a form of masculine narcissism.

The excessive valorisation of the artist in modern Western art history as a 'great man' corresponds with the infantile stage of idealisation of the father. This phase is,

Pollock, *Differencing the Canon* (London, 1999) pp. 12 and 13





This theme of the artist as incorporating both worship of the idealised father and narcissistic identification with the hero leads to another observation which should resonate for the reader thinking about canonical art history and its typical forms of monograph, biography and *catalogue raisonné*. If the artist functions as a heroic object of narcissistic fantasy, inheriting the adoration accorded to the father, this might explain the strong interest in biography, psychobiography and the way, in art history for instance, that so much of the work on art works functions to produce a life for the artist, a heroic journey through struggles and ordeals, a battle with professional fathers for the final winning of a place in what is always his – the father's – canon. It also takes us beyond the issues of sexism and discrimination, for the artist is thus a symbolic figure, through which public fantasies are given representational form. To an extent these fantasies, infantile and narcissistic, are not gendered exclusively masculine. But they do function to sustain a patriarchal legend.

But what happened if we abolished the canon I ?

- Is the proposal: (a) to abolish a particular *kind* of canon based on mythic ideas of the artist or the masterpiece, or (b) to abolish the idea of canonicity (i.e. the idea of certain works having a normative status, or of there being a hierarchy amongst works of art)
- Ad (a): this seems to be the most straightforward, but

Is it possible to privilege certain artists and artworks above other *without* being vulnerable to the criticism that they are still mythification?

What would it look like to privilege *certain* artworks in a non-hierarchical way?

Radical art historians may challenge the canon, but they mostly replace it with another canon of works / artists selected for *other* reasons

But what happened if we abolished the canon II ?

- Is the proposal: (a) to abolish a particular *kind* of canon based on mythic ideas of the artist or the masterpiece, or (b) to abolish the idea of canonicity (i.e. the idea of certain works having a normative status, or of there being a hierarchy amongst works of art)
- Ad (b): if we have *no* norms or frame of reference, if we abolish hierarchy, how do you decide what is worth studying?

Is it possible to study works of art without having an opinion as to whether they are *worth* studying?

Is a value-free history of art possible?

But what happened if we abolished the canon III ?

- If we have *no* norms or shared frame of reference, what stops the selection of artworks being arbitrary and random?
- If the canon serves to shape a shared frame of reference or 'cultural literacy' (Assmann) on what basis can debates and scrutiny of claims take place if there is no common knowledge ?
- So can the *idea* of the canon be defended - even if not *Bloom's* vision of the canon?



L: Josef Mánes, Family Portrait (1859)



UR: Toyen, Object Phantom (1937)



LR: Jiří Kolář, Apple (1965-70)