

# Observing Art

Facts, Meaning, Theory



*M. Thausing*

'[Art history] has nothing whatsoever to do with deduction or speculation: what it publishes are not aesthetic judgments, but historical facts which might then serve as a subject for inductive research. The benchmarks of the history of art are as little of an aesthetic nature as political history serves as the subject for moral judgments [ ... ] the question whether a painting is beautiful or not is actually not in any way justifiable in the history of art, and the question for instance of whether Raphael or Michelangelo, Rembrandt or Rubens achieved greater perfection is an art historical absurdity.'

Moriz Thausing (1838-84)

'The Place of Art History as an Academic Discipline [Wissenschaft]'  
(1873)



Giorgio Vasari – Frontispieces of *The Lives of the Most Excellent Architects, Painters and Sculptors* (Florence, 1550 and 1568)



Giorgio Vasari – Self Portrait (1566-68)



Cimabue (ca. 1240-1302)

L: Maestà (1280)

R: Flagellation of Christ (1280s)





‘Giotto truly eclipsed Cimabue's fame just as a great light eclipses a much smaller one. Hence, Cimabue was, in one sense, the principal cause of the renewal of the art of painting, but Giotto, though his follower, inspired by a praiseworthy ambition and helped by Heaven and his own natural talent, was the man whose thoughts rose even higher and who opened the gates of truth to those painters who have subsequently brought the art of painting to that level of perfection and grandeur at which we see it in our own century.’

Giotto – Kiss of Judas (1305)  
Arena Chapel, Padua.

Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*,  
trans. Julia Conway Bondanella  
(Oxford, 1991) ‘Cimabue,’ p. 13.

'I have endeavoured not only to tell what such men [i.e. artists] did but, as I narrate, to pick out the better works from the good ones, and the best works from the better ones, noting with some care the methods, colours, styles, traits, and inventions of both painters and sculptors. To inform those readers who would not know how to do so for themselves, I have investigated as carefully as I knew how the causes and origins of their styles as well as the improvement or decline of the arts which have occurred in various times and among different peoples.'

Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, trans. Julia Conway Bondanella (Oxford, 1991) Preface to Part 2, p 48.

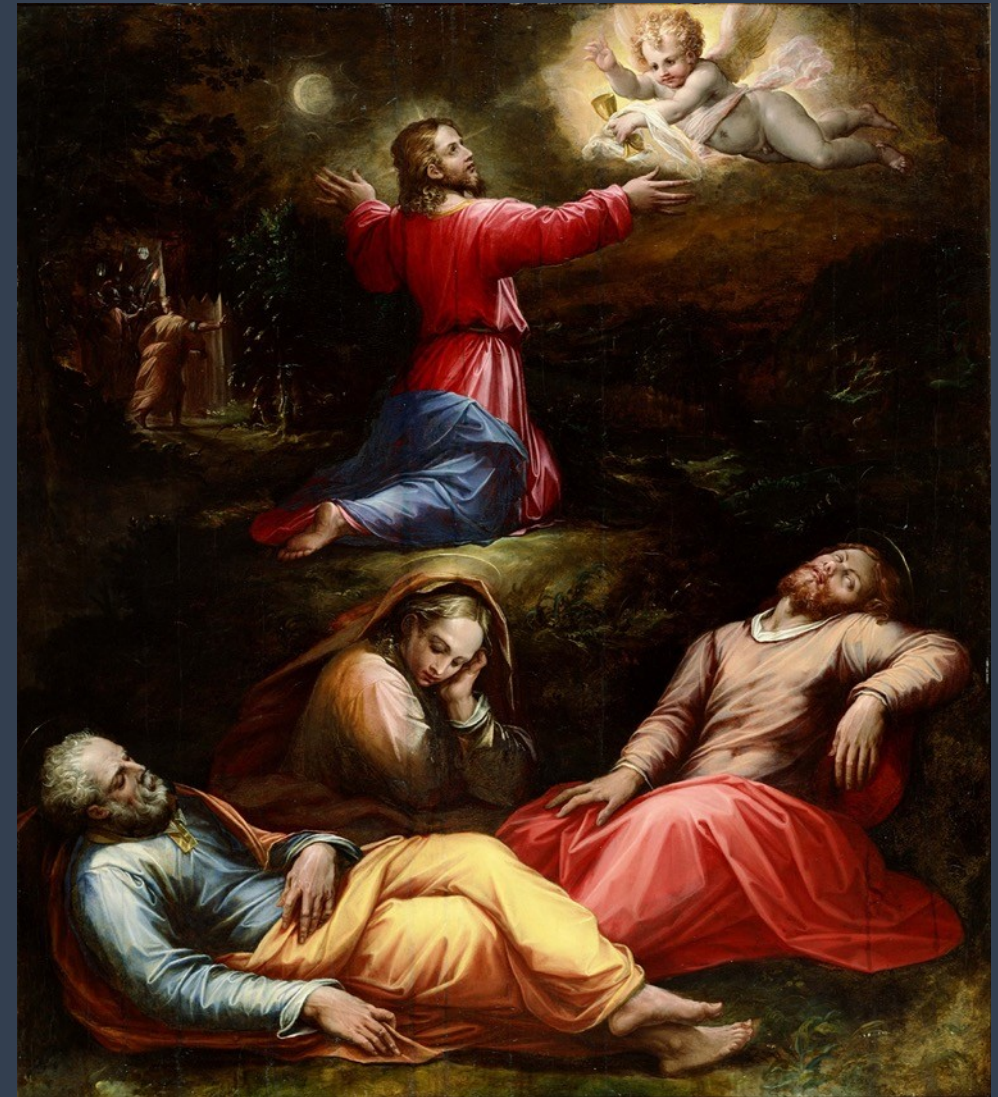


DESCRIZIONE DELL'OPERE DI  
GIORGIO VASARI

*Pittore, & Architetto Aretino.*



AVENDO io in fin qui ragionato dell'opere altrui, cō quella maggior diligenza, e sincerità, che ha saputo, e potuto l'ingegno mio, voglio ancho nel fine di queste mie fatiche raccorre insieme, e far note al mondo l'opere che la diuina bontà mi ha fatto gratia di condurre, per cio che se bene elle non sono di quella perfezzione, che io uorrei, si uedra nondimeno da chi uorrà con sano occhio riguar-  
darle, che elle sono state da me con istudio, diligeza, & amore uole fatica lau-



Giorgio Vasari  
*The Garden of Gethsemane* (1569)

The turn to a 'positive science'





Moriz Thausing (1838-1884)

‘The aestheticizing approach has been a great disadvantage for the reputation of a discipline which has only recently been successfully inaugurated ... It created the impression that history of art represented a sort of intellectual sofa – a sort of snack which carries with it the threat of indigestion - and not a hearty intellectual fare, a field fraught with difficulties and satisfaction like any other scholarly endeavour. For these reasons, the history of art has been unnecessarily often associated with aesthetics, and we are here all the more admonished to clarify the distinguishing characteristics more strongly than the common elements.’

Moriz Thausing

‘The Place of Art History as an Academic Discipline [Wissenschaft]’ (1873)

'I can imagine the best history of art in which the word 'beautiful' does not at all occur. Art historical judgments are limited to the conditions under which a work of art was created, as these are discovered through research and autopsy.'

Moriz Thausing

'The Place of Art History as an Academic Discipline [Wissenschaft]' (1873)

## In Defence of Vasari ....

‘To those who think I have excessively praised some artisans either old or modern, and that drawing comparisons between the older ones and those of this era would be a laughing matter, I do not know how else to reply except that I intended to give praise not simple-mindedly but, as they say, with respect for places, times, and other similar circumstances; in truth, taking the example of Giotto, no matter how highly praised he was in his own day, I do not know what would be said of him and other older artisans if they had existed in Buonarroti's time; moreover, the men of this century, which has reached the peak of perfection, would not have attained the heights they have reached if those who came before had not been as they were, and it can be believed, in short, that what I have said in praise or in blame was not said maliciously but only to speak the truth, or what I believed to be the truth. But one cannot always have in hand the goldsmith's scales.’

Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, pp. 509-10



Carl Friedrich von Rumohr (1785-1843)

Author of *Italienische Forschungen* (Italian Enquiries) (Berlin, 1827)

Pioneer of the 'Philological Method'  
borrowed from historians at the Humboldt  
University, Berlin

Friedrich Gröger  
Portrait of Carl Friedrich von Rumohr (1802)

# The Historical Critical Method

Origins in the interpretation and criticism of biblical and classical texts:

Barthold Georg Niebuhr (1776-1821) - *Roman History* (Berlin, 1811-1832)

David Strauss (1806-75) – *The Life of Jesus, critically Analysed* (Tübingen, 1835-36)

Leopold Ranke (1795-1886) – *German History in the Age of the Reformation* (Berlin, 1839-47)

Based on systematic and critical reading of historical source texts

Guided by belief in objectivity and idea of presenting history ‘as it really was’ (Ranke)

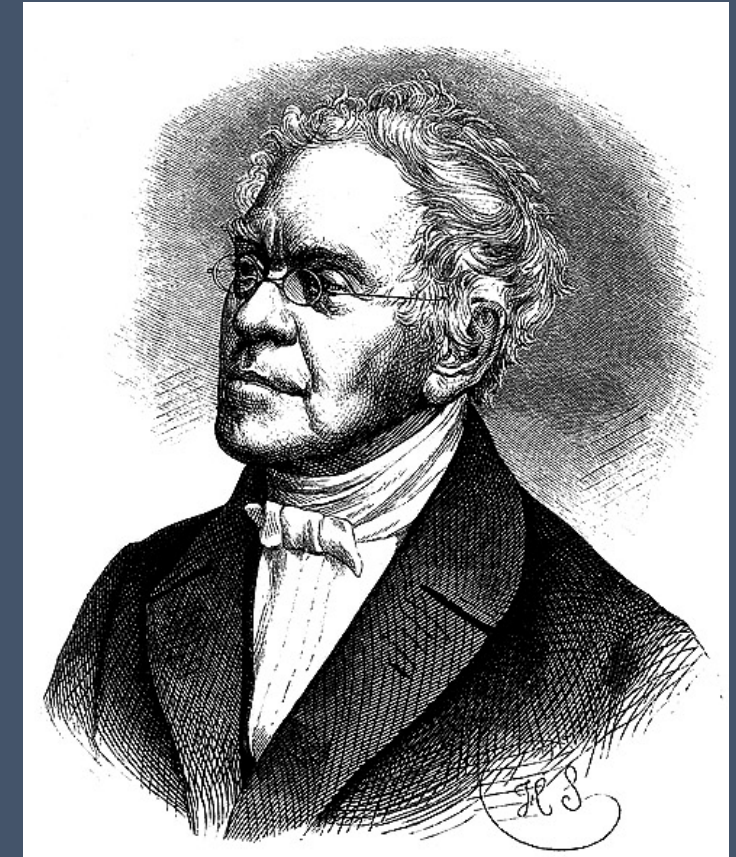
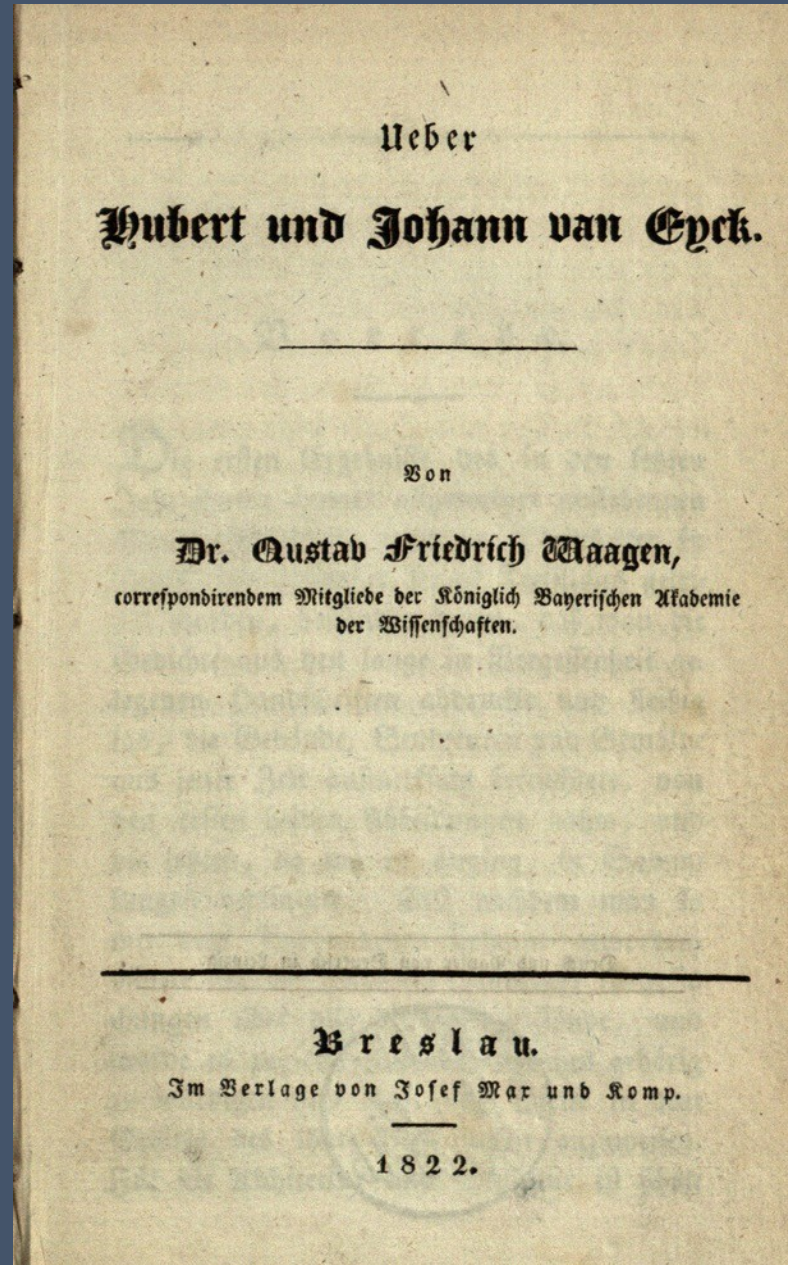
Gustav Friedrich Waagen  
(1794-1868)

Director of the Art Gallery,  
Berlin

Author of *Über Hubert und  
Johann van Eyck* (Breslau,  
1822)

First catalogue raisonnée

Use of historical sources and  
critical analysis of their  
reliability



‘The information preserved for us by Vasari about Johann van Eyck ... has been contradicted in many ways, and moreover its credibility has been challenged due to his claim that he has no source. It cannot be denied, he provides no guarantor for what he says about van Eyck. And yet he is not entirely silent about his sources. In the paragraph where he deals with van Eyck and many other Netherlandish painters, he says, when discussing the painter Lambert Lombard: “Domenico Lansonio of Liège, a highly learned man with fine judgement in all matters, told me many things about the excellent qualities of this Lambert in his letters”.’

Waagen, *Über Hubert und Johann van Eyck*, pp. 4-5

für angebe, angefochten worden \*). Auch läßt sich nicht läugnen; daß er für das, was er über J. v. Eyck sagt, im Einzelnen keinen Gewährsmann anführt. Er hat jedoch über seine Quellen nicht gänzlich geschwiegen. In dem Abschnitte nämlich, worin er von dem J. v. Eyck und vielen andern niederländischen Künstlern handelt, sagt er, nach Erwähnung des Malers Lambert Lombard: „Von den trefflichen Eigenschaften dieses Lambert hat mir M. Domenico Lansonio von Lüttich, ein in den Wissenschaften viel erfahrner Mann, und in allen Dingen von großem Urtheile, durch seine Briefe viele Nachrichten mitgetheilt.“ \*\*)

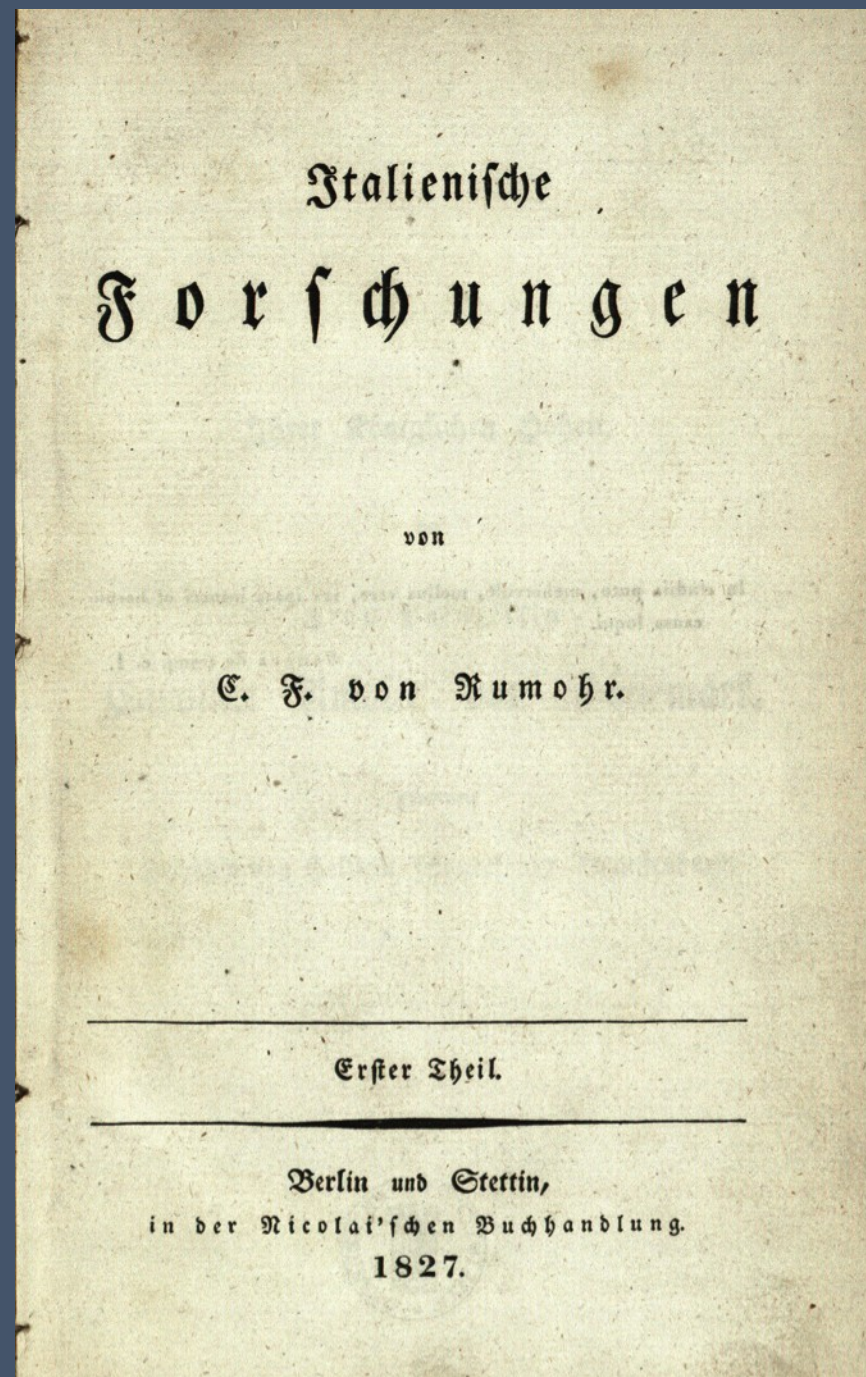
Er erwähnt darauf noch namentlich einer Biographie des Lombard in lateinischer Sprache, welche er von demselben erhalten habe, und gibt den Inhalt seines ersten Briefes vom Jahre 1564 an. Dieser Lampson, damals Secretair des Bischofs von

\*) S. Lambroni in der Vorrede zu Cennino Cennini Trattato della pittura. Roma 1821. p. 57.

\*\*\*) S. den 3ten Band. p. 271. der Ausgabe, welche von 1648 bis 1665 zu Bologna in 5 Bänden in Quart erschienen ist, von denen der erste die beiden ersten Theile, die andern beiden aber den dritten Theil des Werks enthalten. Unsere Citate beziehen sich immer auf diese Ausgabe, da wir nicht Gelegenheit hatten, eine andere, bessere benutzen zu können.

‘The reader should not expect any literary accomplishment ... when establishing individual facts that provided a point of support in obscure periods, I found it necessary to present them in an intricate manner and their connections extensively, since any benefit that I can bring to others with my work rests on the reliability of the details, I can assure, have been fully weighed up, examined and inspected in every way.’

Rumohr, *Italienische Forschungen*, Vol. I, p. ix.





QUELLENSCHRIFTEN  
FÜR  
KUNSTGESCHICHTE  
UND  
KUNSTTECHNIK DES MITTELALTERS  
UND DER  
RENAISSANCE  
HERAUSGEGEBEN VON  
R. EITELBERGER v. EDELBERG.

X.  
DES JOHANN NEUDÖRFER  
SCHREIB- UND RECHENMEISTERS ZU NÜRNBERG  
NACHRICHTEN  
VON  
KÜNSTLERN UND WERKLEUTEN DASELBST  
AUS DEM JAHRE 1547  
*nebst der Fortsetzung des ANDREAS GULDEN, nach den Handschriften und mit  
Anmerkungen herausgegeben*  
VON  
DR. G. W. K. LOCHNER  
STADTARCHIVAR ZU NÜRNBERG.

WIEN, 1875.  
WILHELM BRAUMÜLLER  
K. K. HOF- UND UNIVERSITÄTSBUCHHÄNDLER.

DÜRERS *binden  
rot*  
BRIEFE, TAGEBÜCHER  
UND  
REIME *+ C 7079 <sup>0/5</sup> =*

NEBST EINEM ANHANGE  
VON  
ZUSCHRIFTEN AN UND FÜR DÜRER

ÜBERSETZT UND MIT  
EINLEITUNG, ANMERKUNGEN, PERSONENVERZEICHNISS UND EINER  
REISEKARTE VERSEHEN  
VON  
MORIZ THAUSING.

WIEN, 1872.  
WILHELM BRAUMÜLLER  
K. K. HOF- UND UNIVERSITÄTSBUCHHÄNDLER.

QUELLENSCHRIFTEN  
FÜR  
KUNSTGESCHICHTE  
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KUNSTTECHNIK DES MITTELALTERS  
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RENAISSANCE  
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R. EITELBERGER v. EDELBERG.

XIV.  
ARNOLD HOUBRAKEN'S  
GROSSE SCHOUBURGH  
DER  
NIEDERLÄNDISCHEN MALER UND MALERINNEN.  
ÜBERSETZT  
UND MIT EINLEITUNG, ANMERKUNGEN UND INHALTS-VERZEICHNISSEN VERSEHEN  
VON  
DR. ALFRED VON WURZBACH.  
I. BAND.

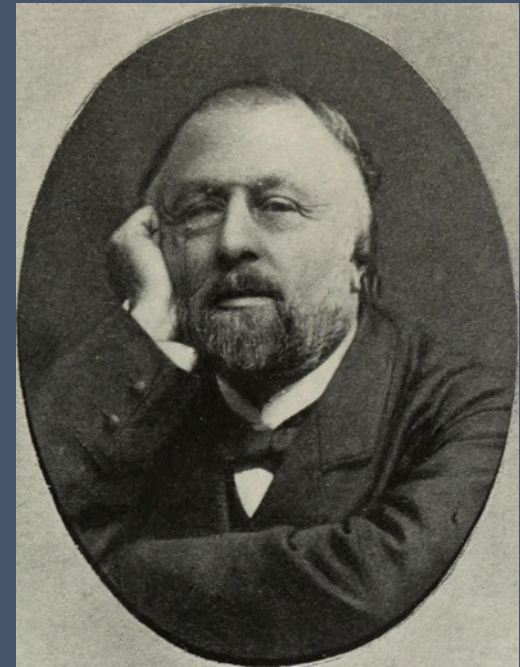
WIEN, 1880.  
WILHELM BRAUMÜLLER  
K. K. HOF- UND UNIVERSITÄTSBUCHHÄNDLER.

## The Idea of Positive Science (1)

‘ ... just like the physical sciences, research [into culture] culminates in the establishment of constant relations between facts ....

‘The entire secret of our practical progress, 300 years, is encapsulated here: we have separated out and defined pairs of facts [i.e. causes and effects], such that whenever the first appears, the second one never fails to follow ...’

Hippolyte Taine, *Essais de Critique et de l’Histoire* (Paris, 1858) p. xxiv and xxv



Hippolyte Taine  
(1828-1893)

## The Idea of Positive Science (2)

‘The key ideas are as follows: (1) An emphasis upon verification (or some variant such as falsification): Significant propositions are those whose truth or falsehood can be settled in some way. (2) Pro-observation: What we can see, feel, touch, and the like, provides the best content or foundation for all the rest of our non-mathematical knowledge. ‘

Ian Hacking, ‘Positivism’ from Hacking, *Representing and Intervening* (Cambridge, 2012) p. 41

# Positivism, objectivity and their problems

# Examples of Art Historical Positivism

- Research into who painted / sculpted / engraved / installed what, where and when (questions of provenance, attribution etc.)
- Research into the life history of artworks (who owned them, how much they were sold for etc.)
- Catalogues raisonnées
- Topographical Studies
- Iconological dictionaries

‘Research into sources leads, as every expert knows, to the singular item; hence the results of my research disintegrated into a series of ragged treatises, for which I could provide no external coherence. In order to avoid repetition of this, it therefore seemed all the more necessary to determine the point of view from which I was grasping the individual objects. I was thereby prompted, against my wishes and initial purpose, to reach into the domain of theory ...’

Rumohr – *Italienische Forschungen*, p. ix

lich erwogen und auf alle Weise geprüft und gesichtet worden.

So viel von dem Inhalte der zweyten Abtheilung dieser Schrift, welche der ersten unmittelbar nachfolgen soll. Doch auch von dieser werde ich erwähnen müssen, weshalb und wie sie entstanden.

Urkundliche Forschungen führen, wie es Sachkundigen bekannt ist, gar sehr ins Einzelne; und so zerfiel auch das Ergebniß der meinigen in eine Reihe abgerissener Abhandlungen, denen ich keine äußere Verbindung zu geben wußte. Desto mehr schien es mir nöthig, um Wiederholungen auszuweichen, von vorn herein den Standpunct zu bezeichnen, aus welchem ich das Einzelne aufgefaßt. Hiedurch ward ich über meinen Wunsch und ersten Zweck hinaus veranlaßt, in das Gebiet der Theorie hinüber zu greifen, was der reinsten Wille, das Gedeihen der Kunst und den ungetrübten Genuß ihrer Werke zu fördern, auch bey denen entschuldigen mag, welche auf die Sache minder, mehr auf die Form sehen.

Allein auch in historischer Beziehung bedurfte das Vereinzelte und Abgerissene eines gemeinschaftlichen



David Teniers the Younger  
Archduke Leopold in his Art Gallery in Brussels (1647-51)

‘The hundreds of pictures in a gallery ... Art History places them in a context they do not possess in themselves, and for which they were not painted, and from which there arises a sequence, a continuity, under the influence of which the painters of these pictures stood without being aware of it.’

Gustav Droysen, *Historik. Enzyklopädie und Methodologie der Geschichte* (1858) (Munich, 1958) p. 35

‘ ... if historians are to contribute distinctive knowledge, annals of events have to be ordered according to some principle. The alternative ... amounts to nothing more than a “planless conglomeration of human actions.” But what might serve as an ordering principle? This question in turn raises other questions. Does history have meaning? Shape? Pattern? Direction? Stages?’

John Hall, *Cultures of Inquiry* (Cambridge, 1999) p. 35.



‘The topics of socio-historical inquiry are not pre-formed things in the world itself. Instead, inquiry draws aspects of the world into focus through concepts like “industrialisation”, “social movement”, “coup d’état” and “citizenship” ... we are best served by assuming that these organizing rubrics are not only historically saturated but also mediated by a welter of meaningful interests that shape inquiry.’

John Hall, *Cultures of Inquiry* (Cambridge, 1999) p. 33

Some art historical examples:

- Renaissance
- Medieval
- Modern(ism) / modernity
- 'Early', 'late'
- Baroque, Classical / Neoclassical, Gothic
- Italianate
- Avant-garde
- Archaic



Max Weber (1864-1920)

‘Objectivity in Social Science and Social Policy’ (1904)

‘The quality of an event as a “social-economic” event is not something which it possesses “objectively.” It is rather conditioned by the orientation of our cognitive interest, as it arises from the specific cultural significance which we attribute to the particular event in a given case.’

*On the Methodology of Social Sciences* (Glencoe, 1949) p. 64 and 80.

Max Weber (1864-1920)

‘There is no absolutely "objective" scientific analysis of culture. ... All knowledge of cultural reality ... is always knowledge from particular points of view. ... An “objective” analysis of cultural events, which proceeds according to the thesis that the ideal of science is the reduction of empirical reality to “laws,” is meaningless [because] the knowledge of social laws is not knowledge of social reality but is rather one of the various aids used by our minds for attaining this end.’

*On the Methodology of Social Sciences* (Glencoe, 1949) p. 64 and 80.



'Knowledge is not produced by passively perceiving individuals, but by interacting social groups engaged in particular activities. And it is evaluated communally and not by isolated individual judgement. Its generation ... must be accounted for by reference to the social and cultural context in which it arises. Its maintenance is not just a matter of how it relates to reality, but also of how it relates to the objectives and interests a society possess by virtue of its historical development.'

Barry Barnes, 'Conceptions of Knowledge' in C. Harrison, ed., *Modernism, Criticism, Realism* (London, 1984) p. 104

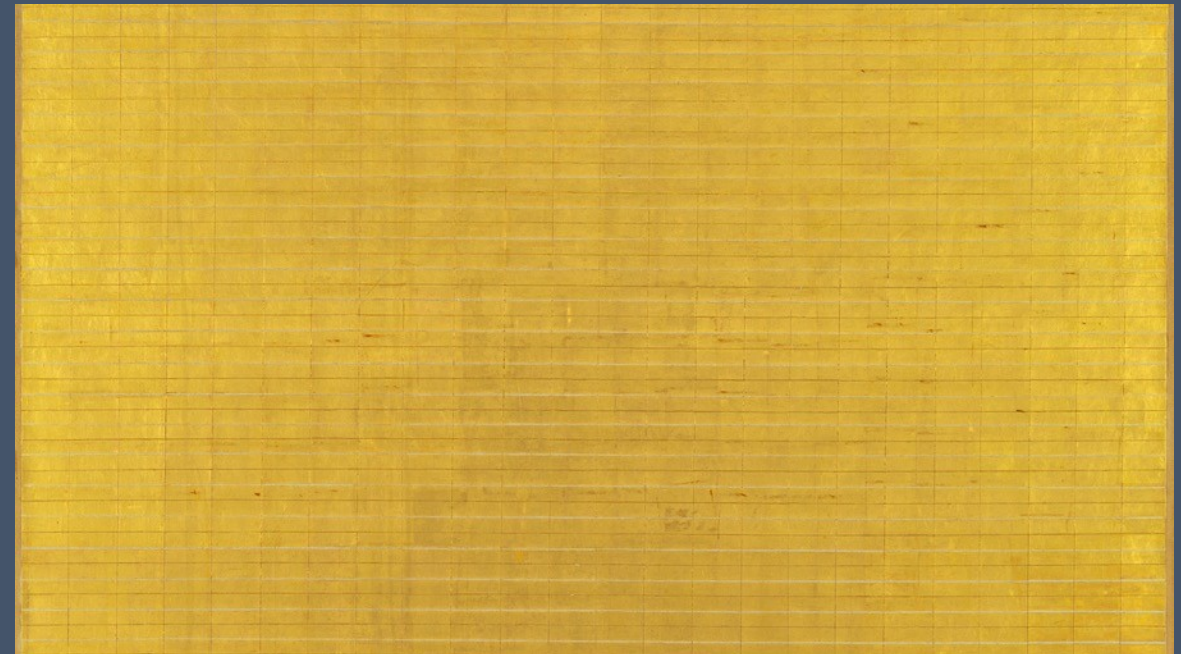
# Objectivity in Interpretation

# Case Study 1: The Nature of Modernism

For Clement Greenberg the rise of modern painting was dominated by the quest for artistic autonomy in the face of popular culture ('kitsch').

The logic of modernism was driven by an emphasis on the physicality of painting, resulting in a flattening of the pictorial space and, eventually, abstraction.

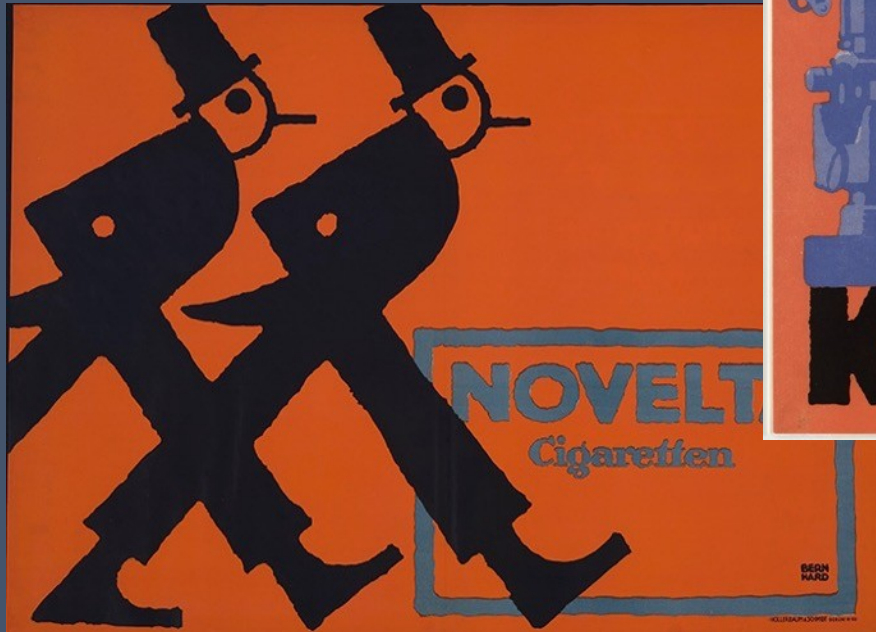
Greenberg, Clement (1939).  
'Avant-Garde and Kitsch,' in  
*Partisan Review* Vol. VI No. 5, pp.  
34-39.





For Thomas Crow the flatness of modernist art was a positive engagement with popular culture, and in particular, with the flat surfaces of advertising posters.

Thomas Crow, 'Modernism and Mass Culture in the Visual Arts' (1985)



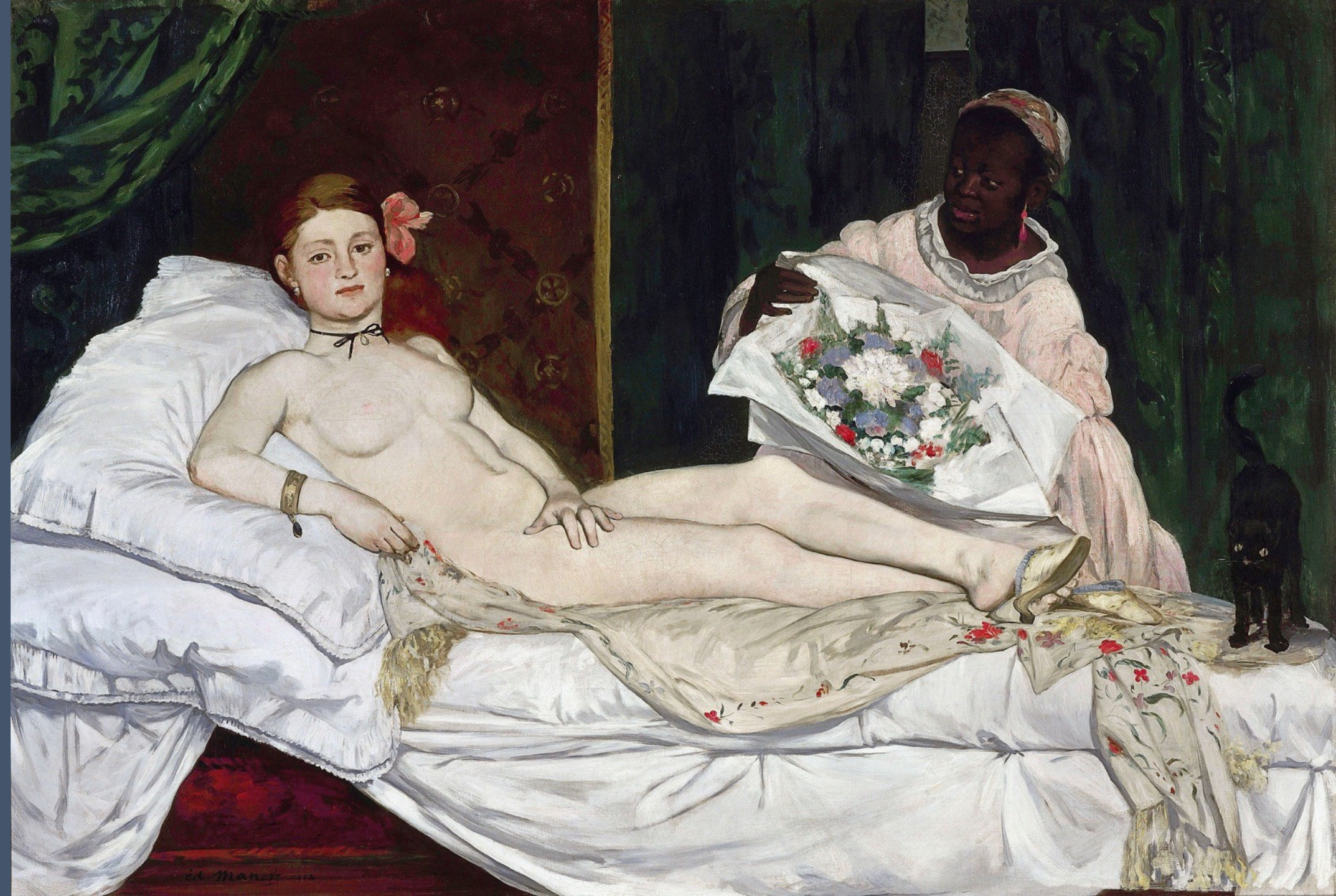
For Rosalind Krauss, modernity brought about a crisis in subjective experience, as a result of which modernism was concerned with interrogation of identity.

Consequently, for Krauss, it is *surrealism*, rather than abstraction, that is of key importance.

Krauss, Rosalind, *Amour Fou. Photography and Surrealism* (Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1985).



# Case Study 2: The Meaning of Olympia



Edouard Manet  
Olympia (1863/65)



Left: Titian, Venus of Urbino (1534)

Right: Giorgione / Titian, Dresden Venus (1510-11)





T.1299

Goya, The Naked Maya (1797-1800)



MANETTE, ou LA FEMME DE L'ÉBÉNISTE, par MANET.

Que c'est comme un bouquet de fleurs.

(dit-on.)

Ce tableau de M. Manet est le bouquet de l'Exposition. — M. Courbet est distancé de toute la longueur du célèbre chat noir. — Le moment choisi par le grand coloriste est celui où cette dame va prendre un bain qui nous semble impérieusement réclamé.

BERTALL Caricature of Olympia, Le Journal Amusant, 2



MANET.

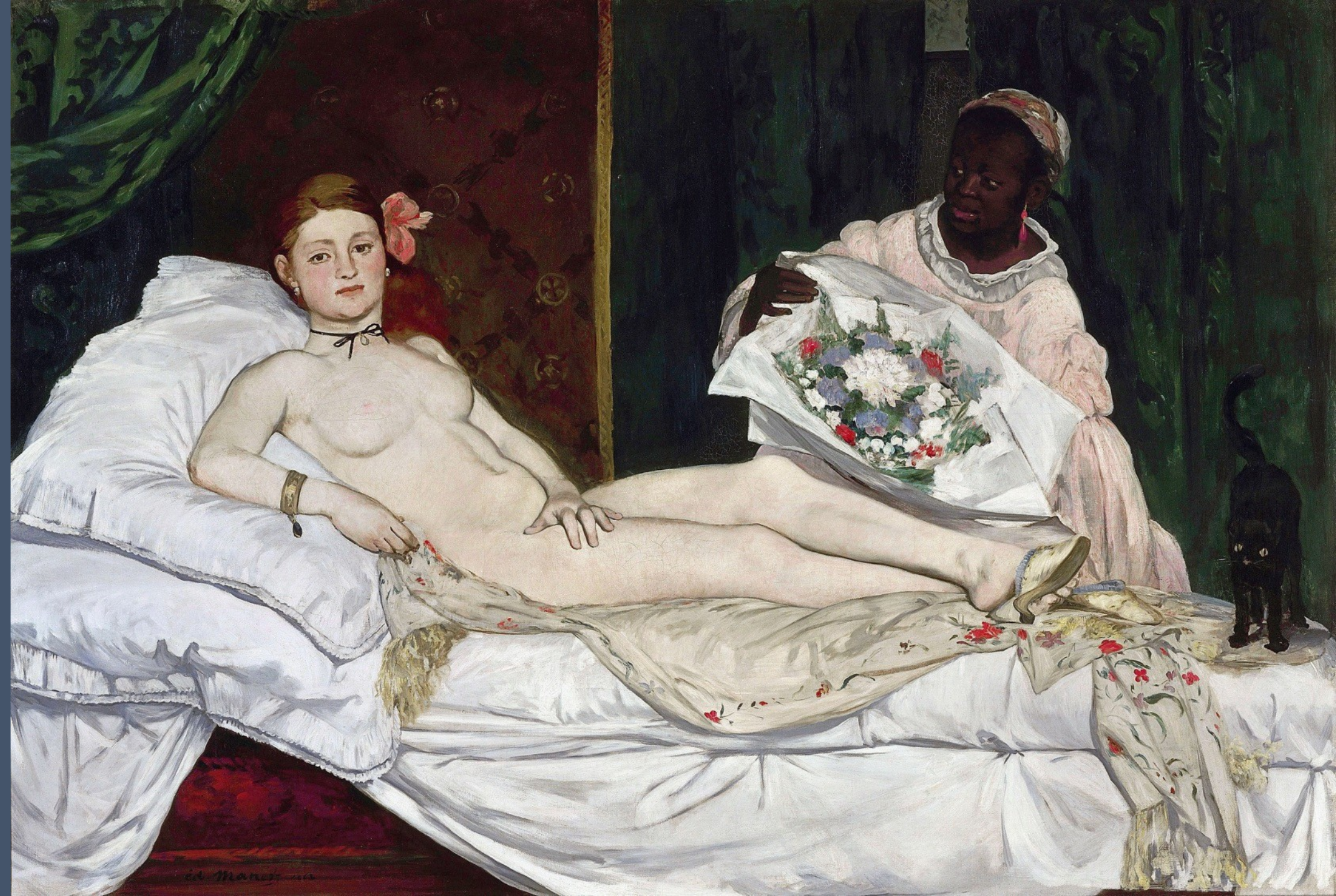
*La Naissance du petit ébéniste.*

M. Manet a pris la chose trop à la lettre :  
Que c'était comme un bouquet de fleurs !  
Les lettres de faire-part sont au nom de la mère Michel  
et de son chat.



La queue du chat, ou la charbonnière des Batignolles.

Chacun admire cette belle charbonnière, dont l'eau, liquide banal, n'a jamais offensé les pudiques contours. Disons-le hardiment, la charbonnière, le bouquet dans du papier, M. Manet, et son chat, sont les lions de l'exposition de 1863. Un bravo senti pour M. Zacharie Astruc.



Edouard Manet  
Olympia (1863/65)





Gustave Courbet  
Bathers (1853)

'I want to argue that, for the critics of 1865, sexual identity was precisely what Olympia did not possess. She failed to occupy a place in the discourse on Woman, and specifically she was neither a nude, nor a prostitute: by that I mean she was not a modification of the nude in ways which made it clear that what was being shown was sexuality on the point of escaping from the constraints of decorum — sexuality proffered and scandalous.'

T J Clark, 'Preliminaries to a Possible Treatment of "Olympia" in 1865,' *Screen* 21.1 (1980) p. 32

'Let me make what I am saying perfectly clear. Olympia refuses to signify — to be read according to the established codings for the nude, and take her place in the Imaginary. But if the picture were to do anything more than that, it (she) would have to be given, much more clearly, a place in another classed code — a place in the code of classes.'

T J Clark, 'Preliminaries,' p. 39

For Clark, therefore, *Olympia* is a failure:

The meaning of Manet's *Olympia*, according to Clark, is (or was in 1865) open rather than closed, unfixed rather than established or tied down, shifting, runaway, endless, interminable, lacking a brake or an anchorage, destabilised, not maintained or kept in being, multiple rather than single or uniform, not adding up, not endowed with coherence, not articulated, inconsistent, insignificant, ineffective. In short, a failure. Manet's *Olympia* colludes in

Peter Wollen, 'Manet: Modernism and Avant-Garde,' *Screen* 21.2 (1980) p. 15

'This, it seems to me, is the point where Timothy Clark, in his exegesis of Olympia, is most confused. 'The signs of social identity are as unstable as all the rest'. Does he really think that class identity is something necessarily clearly and definitely fixed? That a successful prostitute might carry the signs of more than one class seems inadmissible to him. Yet a prostitute, particularly one who employs a servant, wears jewellery, refuses to be abject as she should and to abhor luxury, simply is not an unambiguous proletarian ....

Wollen, 'Manet,' p. 16.

'The problem lies in the very project of Realism, the idea that there is Reality and here am I (and Olympia, and Manet, and Courbet) and I can recognise my place in it — tied down, got right, given an identity ...'

Wollen, 'Manet,' p. 17.

Here, therefore, is the difference between these interpretations.

For Clark, *Olympia* has all sorts of ambiguities and lack of clarity because Manet *failed* to convey the class / sexual identity of the prostitute consistently,

For Wollen, *Olympia* has all sorts of ambiguities because it reflects the contradictory and ambiguous nature of reality

‘Fundamentally, the problem is whether to accept or reject contradiction in the real, whether to categorise all inconsistencies as signs of cognitive dissonance or failure to signify, or possibly as reflections in knowledge of a contradictory reality’

Wollen, p. 20

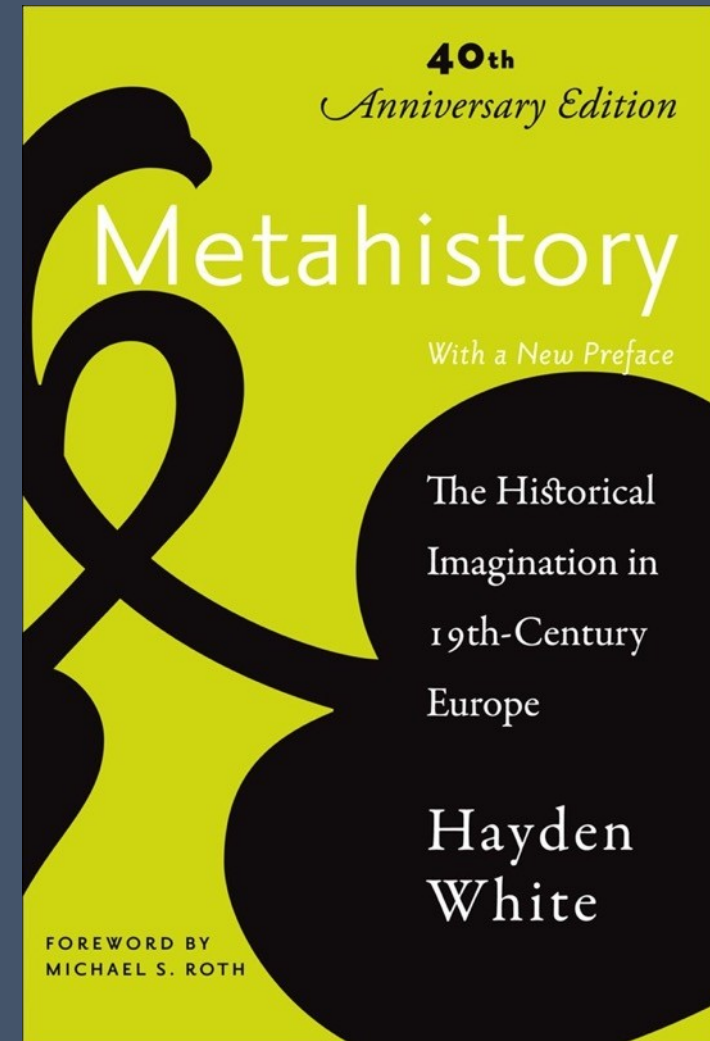
But the point is that *no appeal* to objective facts can settle this argument.

# Historical Narration

Hayden White (1928 - 2018) - history as a kind of writing that maps historical events onto narrative structures ('emplotment').

First the elements in the historical field are organized into a chronicle by the arrangement of the events to be dealt with in the temporal order of their occurrence; then the chronicle is organized into a story by the further arrangement of the events into the components of a "spectacle" or process of happening, which is thought to possess a discernible beginning, middle, and end. This *transformation of chronicle into story* is effected by the characterization of some events in the chronicle in terms of inaugural motifs, of others in terms of terminating motifs, and of yet others in terms of transitional motifs.

White, Hayden, *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe* (Baltimore, 1973) p. 5



It is sometimes said that the aim of the historian is to explain the past by “finding,” “identifying,” or “uncovering” the “stories” that lie buried in chronicles; and that the difference between “history” and “fiction” resides in the fact that the historian “finds” his stories, whereas the fiction writer “invents” his. This conception of the historian’s task, however, obscures the

extent to which “invention” also plays a part in the historian’s operations. The same event can serve as a different kind of element of many different historical stories, depending on the role it is assigned in a specific motific characterization of the set to which it belongs. The death of the king may be a beginning, an ending, or simply a transitional event in three different stories. In the chronicle, this event is simply “there” as an element of a series; it does not “function” as a story element. The historian arranges the events in the chronicle into a hierarchy of significance by assigning events different functions as story elements in such a way as to disclose the formal coherence of a whole set of events considered as a comprehensible process with a discernible beginning, middle, and end.

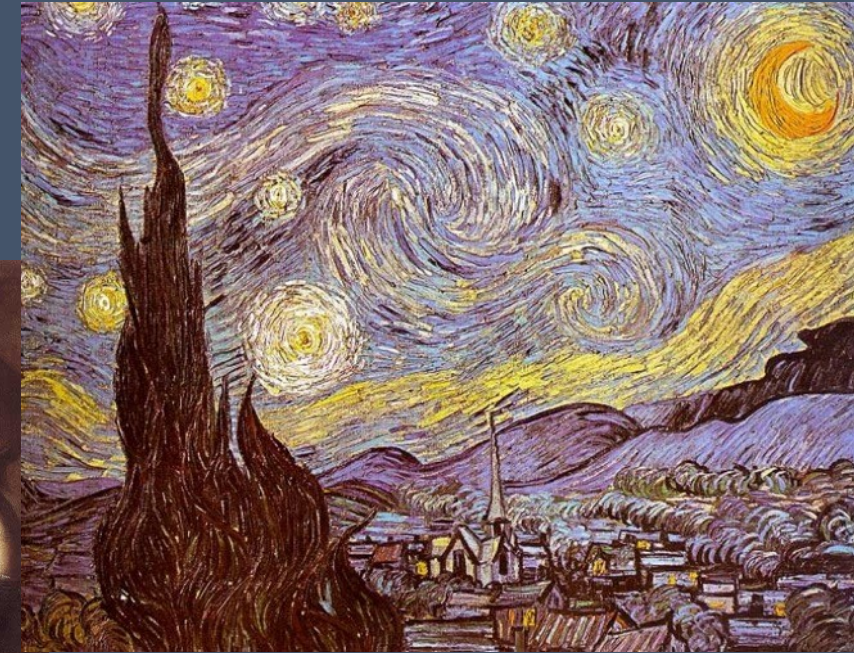
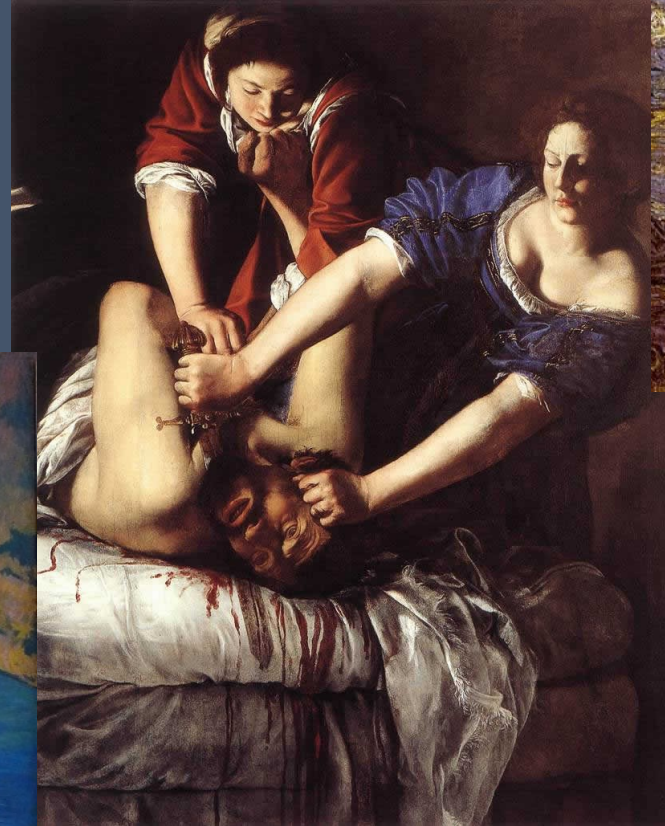


### ☞ *Explanation by Emplotment*

Providing the “meaning” of a story by identifying the *kind of story* that has been told is called explanation by emplotment. If, in the course of narrating his story, the historian provides it with the plot structure of a Tragedy, he has “explained” it in one way; if he has structured it as a Comedy, he has “explained” it in another way. Emplotment is the way by which a sequence of events fashioned into a story is gradually revealed to be a story of a particular kind.

White, Hayden, *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe* p. 7

Consider the tradition of artists' biographies, which involves constructing a narrative about the artist's life, using emplotment according to a particular literary genre. Thus, Artemisia Gentileschi is heroic, Suzanne Valadon is romantic, van Gogh is tragic ....



.... Tracy Emin is satirical



### The Artist's Model

A chance encounter between Tracy Emin and Lucian Freud have an unsettling influence on young Matthew.....

Tracy met Matthew and Keith on the way home  
buy us a drink Trace

Only if I can sit next to Keith

Suddenly Tracy spots Lucian Freud wandering in front of a bus  
Quick, save him

They yank the man to safety

Thank you, I was thinking about a painting I'm working on

come to the pub

in the pub

I'm an artist and I would like to thank you with a free portrait

groovy

I'll leave you to decide who it is

definitely me

more next week