

HØGSKOLEN I STAVANGER
Forskningsbiblioteket
HIS/FB



02UR10958



Practice of Persuasion

Paradox & Power
in Art History

Keith Moxey

700.1 MOX

The Practice of Persuasion



Paradox & Power
in Art History

Keith Moxey



Keith Moxey is Ann Whitney Olin Professor of Art History at Barnard College and Columbia University. He is the author of *The Practice of Theory: Poststructuralism, Cultural Politics, and Art History*, also from Cornell, and *Peasants, Warriors, and Wives: Popular Imagery in the Reformation*.

Cover illustration: Hugo van der Goes (c. 1420–82) *The Death of the Virgin*, Municipal Museum, Bruges, Belgium. Photograph © Alinari/Art Resource, N.Y.

This sequel to *The Practice of Theory* stresses the continued need for self-reflective awareness in art historical writing. Offering a series of meditations on the discipline of art history in the context of contemporary critical theory, Moxey addresses such central issues as the status of the canon, the nature of aesthetic value, and the character of historical knowledge. The chapters are linked by a common interest in, even fascination with, the paradoxical power of narrative and the identity of the authorial voice.

"Anyone wanting to see why art history is intellectually exciting right now could hardly do better than to read this extremely lucid, very important book. *The Practice of Persuasion* provides a great opening for debate, a starting point for the discussion of issues where the argumentation is in flux."—David Carrier, 1999–2000 Getty Scholar

"Always provocative, Keith Moxey's work seeks to press at the vulnerable center of art history. In *The Practice of Persuasion*, Moxey marries a historiography of art history with a suggestive approach to art history writing to create a valuable, thought-provoking, and highly original book."—Catherine M. Soussloff, University of California at Santa Cruz

Cornell Paperbacks www.cornellpress.cornell.edu
Cornell University Press

ISBN 0-8014-8675-0



90000



rather than an accumulation of insights that together contribute to some universal conception of knowledge.

This chapter means to test this contention against one of the most radical challenges to its thesis, namely, the National Socialist interlude in Riemenschneider studies. This account of nationalist scholarship serves as an allegory of the dangers of persuasion, dangerous not just because of its political message but because of our failure to accept its status as rhetoric. Once the writings of the German nationalists can be recognized as something other than foundational claims to knowledge, we are in a position to analyze their persuasive strategies for what they are and to acknowledge that our own interventions in the rhetoric of history must also be informed by ethical and political agendas. Rather than consign Riemenschneider's historiography to oblivion, it is possible to recall its danger in such a way as to inform our own historical interpretations with perspectives that counter the nationalist ones. Instead of attempting the impossible, instead of cleansing art history of all bias or contemporary commitment, instead of isolating the presentation of Riemenschneider's art in "white cube" installations that are alien to their own historical horizon, it may be possible to do justice to the complexity of cultural transactions that once animated these works, as well as to the complexity of the intersection of our values with those of the past.

The challenge of the past to the present, therefore, might be to ask whether we have fulfilled our function as the custodians of cultural memory. Have we brought the past to mind in such a way as to manifest the rich potential inherent in the narrative process, or have we purposively constrained and restrained our interpretations so as to be able to aspire to a value-neutral position? Once the distinction between rhetoric and fact has been called into question and the historian's implication in contemporary cultural processes acknowledged, then it seems possible to ask: does the significance we attach to Riemenschneider today adequately reflect not only the circumstances of his artistic production but also those in which we currently find ourselves?

CHAPTER THREE

Motivating History

Under historicism, which entailed the historical study of ancient and modern art as a new paradigm of historical experience, art history handed over lock, stock, and barrel its legitimacy as a medium for aesthetic, philosophical, or hermeneutic reflection.

—Hans Robert Jauss, "History of Art and Pragmatic History"

Fortunately we are presently rather far removed from the period of naïve scientificity during which subjectivity was considered to be the domain of illusion and objective knowledge to be the sole expression of truth. We know now that our subjectivity is not an illusion to be overcome, but rather that it is another part of reality, no less important than any other part.

—Josué Harari and David Bell, Introduction to Michel Serres, *Hermes: Literature, Science, Philosophy*

I begin with an anecdote.¹ One day I went searching for a book in Avery Library, the art library of Columbia University. This time, instead of looking at the shelves as mere supports for the volumes that contained the information I sought, I became aware that what I was looking at was the architecture (or archaeology) of a particular field of scholarly activity, namely, the study of northern Renaissance art. I was struck, in other words, by the physical presence of an aspect of our discipline's cultural imaginary.

The organization of the volumes arranged on the shelves, I realized, was at least as important as the knowledge within the weighty tomes they supported. Rather than the disturbing chaos that characterized the stacks in Borges's tale, "The Library of Babel," these books were organized according to an established pattern. But just what was the system behind their organization? Where did this pattern originate? (Was it any more comprehensible than that which inspired Borges's equally famous account of an ancient Chi-

1. For the function of anecdote in historical narrative, see chapter 6.

nese encyclopedia—an account cited by Michel Foucault?)² How did the category of “northern Renaissance art” come into being as a topic worthy of scholarly interest? Who or what had determined that there should be more books on certain artists rather than on others? What likes and dislikes, commitments and dismissals, do these choices betray? What values went into forming the configuration of books assembled there, and more importantly, what continues to keep those books in place?

The answer, of course, is the canon—that most naturalized of all art historical assumptions. Certain artists and certain works of art that have received the sanction of tradition are unquestioningly regarded as appropriate material for art historical study. Course syllabi are still arranged around artists who are deemed major figures, and the vast majority of publications is dedicated to a consideration of a select number of well-known “masterpieces.” The purpose and function of privileging certain artists and works in this way are rarely questioned. Indeed, critical analysis of the esteem in which the canon is held is not regarded as belonging to art history proper but rather to aesthetics, a branch of philosophy, or to the criticism of contemporary art. For the most part, art history’s disciplinary work is carried on as if there were no need to articulate the social function it is supposed to serve. The discipline’s promotion and support of the canon are all too often still taken for granted. It is as if a consensus had been arrived at sometime in the past, foreclosing further discussion. The library shelves are the physical manifestations of this consensus, the embodiment of an established cultural practice.

In asking for a discussion of the purpose of art history’s dedication to the canon, I hope not to be misunderstood. Mine is not a call for a valuation of works of art, not a plea for a more explicit ranking of canonical works, not a request that students be indoctrinated as to which artist is “better” than another. The problem, it seems to me, is that somehow the notion of “quality,” that most subjective of judgments, is thought to be self-evident and unques-

2. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Random House, 1973), xv: “. . . animals are divided into: a) belonging to the Emperor, b) embalmed, c) tame, d) sucking pigs, e) sirens, f) fabulous, g) stray dogs, h) included in the present classification, i) frenzied, j) innumerable, k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, l) *et cetera*, m) having just broken the water pitcher, n) that from a long way off look like flies.”

tionable. While some of us may dwell affectionately and pleasurably on certain predictable canonical artists and describe their works in glowing terms, there is usually no attempt to argue (or even think about) why one artist should be considered more worthy of study than another, or why certain moments and places in the history of artistic production should be privileged above the rest. As it stands now, the history of art could be described as an unacknowledged paean to the canon, and the intensity of this devotion can, perhaps, be measured by the professorial sobriety with which we accomplish this task.

The conviction underlying such attitudes—which continue to be widespread, if not prevalent in art history today—is the commitment to tradition. The canon of artists and works discussed in art history courses are those which were once found meritorious by previous generations of scholars responding to very different historical situations than those we currently occupy. Like Mount Everest, the works, the artists, and even the methodologies for interpreting them are simply there, and like mountain climbers, it is our mandate as art historians to ascend their peaks and sing their praises to future generations. In doing so, we often unwittingly engage in the unthinking reproduction of culture: reproducing knowledge, but not necessarily producing it. As a consequence, the discipline has often played a conservative role in a rapidly changing society.

The way to start speculating about how we came to this disciplinary moment might be to engage in a cultural history of the discipline, an examination of the classed, gendered, and ethnically marked values that have shaped its development. Such a historiographic survey, however, would range farther than I wish to go. Instead, what follows is a discrete, limited examination of what could be called the founding moment of the canon of northern Renaissance art, the historical point at which a discursive practice first formed around works of art produced in northern Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In other words, this is not a historiographic account of the origins and development of the appreciation of northern Renaissance art so much as an analysis of the political, religious, and emotional sentiments that prompted that appreciation.³ The analysis is meant to be representative; the

3. For a more detailed sketch of the appreciation of early Netherlandish art in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Francis Haskell, *Rediscoveries in Art:*

reproducing knowledge

self-evident
or canon

quality?



northern Renaissance is used here as a case study. (A similar review might also be undertaken for canonical artists and works of other times and places.)

Comparing the ideas that led to the historical study of the northern Renaissance at the end of the eighteenth century with those that informed the way in which the period was studied at the middle of the twentieth century, specifically in the work of Erwin Panofsky, allows us to analyze the role of the practice of history in two very different historiographic moments. How has the function of history changed in the period that separates the late eighteenth and the mid-twentieth centuries? Is there anything we can learn from the ways in which history has been conceived, something that might enable us to rethink the function of history writing in our own time?

Until the end of the eighteenth century, the discipline of art history, founded by Giorgio Vasari, remained focused on the humanist traditions of the Italian Renaissance as they were codified in the art academies of the seventeenth century. Not only were the styles and artistic techniques of the great masters of the Florentine and Venetian schools regarded as the models to which all artists should aspire, but the academies established a hierarchy of genres, according to which history painting—that is, the painting of religious and secular subject matter depicting lofty themes taken from Christian belief and Greco-Roman mythology and history—was ranked at the top, and mere exercises in mimesis—such as landscape and still life—were located at the bottom. Owing to the dominance of the humanist tradition among the European educated elite, there were few significant differences among the artistic aspirations of the schools of visual production that arose in regions that were later to become the major nation-states. Only in the eighteenth century was the dominance of the academy challenged by Johann Winckelmann, who proposed that the true source of beauty was to be found in the art of ancient Greece. Later, in the context of the national-

Some Aspects of Taste, Fashion, and Collecting in England and France (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976); Suzanne Sultberger, *La Réhabilitation des primitifs flamands, 1802-1867* (Brussels: Palais des Académies, 1961); and Bernhard Ridderbos and Henk van Veen, eds., "Om iets te weten van de oude meesters." *De Vlaamse Primitieven—herontdekking, waardering en onderzoek* (Nijmegen: Uitgeverij SUN, 1995).

ism engendered by the European wars that followed the French Revolution, arguments began to be fielded regarding the aesthetic interest of works of art produced at times and places other than ancient Greece and Renaissance Italy.

The first mention of northern Renaissance painting as a location for the discussion of artistic issues hitherto associated only with Italy and Greece is found in the curious and delightful writings of the short-lived young author, Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder. In his fictional *Confessions from the Heart of an Art-Loving Friar* (1796), Wackenroder makes a compelling case for the relativity of artistic appeal. In doing so, he boldly challenges the accepted canon of his day, according to which Italian art of the Renaissance and the Greek art of antiquity possessed greater merit than art produced at any other place and time.

Stupid people cannot comprehend that there are antipodes on our globe and that they are themselves antipodes. They always conceive of the place where they are standing as the gravitational center of the universe,—and their minds lack the wings to fly around the entire earth and survey at one glance the integrated totality.

And, similarly, they regard their own emotion as the center of everything beautiful in art and they deliver the final judgement concerning everything as if from the tribunal, without considering that no one has appointed them judges and that those who are condemned by them could just as well set themselves up to the same end.

Why do you want to condemn the American Indian, that he speaks Indian and not your language?

And yet you want to condemn the Middle Ages, that it did not build temples such as Greece?⁴

Wackenroder parades his appreciation for the art of the northern Renaissance in a chapter dedicated to the praise of Albrecht Dürer. His melodramatic account reveals the nationalistic and religious values that underlie his urge to insert this artist into the canon. Dürer is regarded as just as good an artist as those who constitute the canon because of the quality of his inner spirit, an inner spirit that represents the essence of the German nation.

4. Wackenroder, *Confessions and Fantasies*, trans. M. Hurst Schubert (University Park, Pennsylvania: Penn State Press, 1970), 109-10.



gyp...
Fr. Dürer



When Albrecht was wielding the paintbrush, the German was at that time still a unique and an excellent character of firm constancy in the arena of our continent; and this serious, upright and powerful nature of the German is imprinted in his pictures accurately and clearly, not only in the facial structure and the whole external appearance but also in the inner spirit. This firmly determined German character and German art as well have disappeared in our times . . . and the student of art is taught how he should imitate the expressiveness of Raphael and the colors of the Venetian School and the realism of the Dutch and the enchanting highlights of Correggio, all simultaneously, and should in this way arrive at perfection which surpasses all.—O, wretched sophistry! O, blind belief of an age that one could combine every type of beauty and every excellence of all the great painters of the earth and, through the scrutinizing of all and the begging of their numerous great gifts, could unite the spirit of all in oneself and transcend them all!⁵

The encomium ends with the recounting of a dream in which the friar, having fallen asleep in an art gallery, has a vision in which artists come alive before their paintings and discuss their merits. The shades of Raphael and Dürer appear, whom the friar observes holding hands as they gaze in “friendly tranquility” and mutual admiration at each other’s achievements. By pairing Raphael and Dürer in this way, of course, Wackenroder explicitly claims a heightened status for German painting of the Renaissance.

Wackenroder’s argument concerning the relativity of artistic competence clearly depends upon the principle of historicism which had been introduced into the philosophy of history by Johann Gottfried von Herder a few years earlier.⁶ Herder had argued that there could be no objectivity in the writing of history because

5. *Ibid.*, 115.

6. See George Iggers, *The German Conception of History: The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1968), 34–38. The concept of historicism is subject to a variety of different definitions. See, for example, Maurice Mandelbaum, *History, Man, and Reason: A Study in Nineteenth Century Thought* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971). For an interesting attempt to dissolve the distinction between historicism and history by arguing that all histories share the kind of system-building quality usually attributed to historicist narratives, on the grounds that they are all structured according to rhetorical tropes, see Hayden White, “Historicism, History, and the Figurative Imagination,” *History and Theory* 14 (1975): 48–67.



the historian was himself part of the historical process. For him, there are no transhistorical absolutes; all judgments are contingent upon the time and place in which they are produced. Wackenroder’s artistic relativism—in particular, his claim that Dürer was the equal of Raphael—finds its basis in Herder’s emphasis on the singularity of the historical moment. Wackenroder sees that the unique quality of a historical period, that which makes it unlike anything that preceded or followed it, can serve a national cause. The nationalism of the late eighteenth century, a moment when Germany sought to free itself from the political and cultural domination of France, found in the history of art a means by which its case might be articulated and advanced.

With Wackenroder’s emphasis on the spirituality of art and its capacity to embody and transmit religious emotion, along with his conviction that these characteristics were to be found in the art of places and times that had not yet been hallowed by tradition, *Confessions from the Heart of an Art-Loving Friar* defined the romantic attitude toward the issue of artistic quality. Much the same tone is heard in the influential criticism of the writer Friedrich Schlegel, who, during a stay in Paris, was deeply affected by his experience of the Musée Napoleon. It was in the Louvre that Napoleon’s artistic plunder, pillaged from all over Europe, was placed on view as an unprecedented display of imperial power.⁷ Although Schlegel shared the admiration for Italian art typical of the taste of the day, he preferred the early painters of the fourteenth century. To his eyes their work exuded a greater spirituality. It was his affinity for the religious feeling of old master paintings that allowed him to extend his appreciation to what he called “old German” painting of the Renaissance, by which he meant not only German but Netherlandish art of this period as well.⁸ Schlegel’s advocacy of the virtues of old German painting soon drew the attention of the wealthy sons of a German businessman, Sulpiz and Melchior Boisserée, who traveled to Paris to meet him.⁹ After staying at his house as

7. See Hans Eichner, *Friedrich Schlegel* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1970).

8. Schlegel’s views on art are found in Friedrich Schlegel, *Kritische Friedrich Schlegel Ausgabe*, vol. 4, *Ansichten und Ideen von der christlichen Kunst*, ed. Hans Eichner (Munich: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1959).

9. For a history of the Boisserée brothers and their collection, see E. Firmenich-Richartz, *Die Brüder Boisserée: Sulpiz und Melchior Boisserée als Kunstsamm-*

paying guests, they traveled with Schlegel through northern France and the southern Netherlands, visiting Gothic cathedrals before returning to their native Cologne. In the account Schlegel later wrote of this pilgrimage, he identified the Gothic as the German style of the Middle Ages, extolling its beauties as manifestations of the age of faith.

Schlegel's views were symptomatic of a significant change of taste, one that ensured that his reevaluation of German art of the Renaissance would be underwritten by capital so as to eventuate in the formation of collections and museums. On their return to Cologne, the Boisserée brothers avidly began collecting German and Netherlandish art. Their passion was aided by political circumstances, for the Napoleonic expropriation of the properties of the Catholic church, enforced throughout occupied Germany as well as France, meant that medieval and Renaissance altarpieces that had been part of the neglected fabric of church interiors suddenly entered the marketplace in large numbers. The Boisserées soon assembled the largest and most important collection of paintings of this period, including some of the most admired works of Stefan Lochner, Roger van der Weyden, and Hans Memling. After having been made available to the Prussian crown, which was in the process of establishing what would eventually become the national museum in Berlin, this collection was eventually bought by the King of Bavaria in 1827, and thus found an alternative route to the fulfillment of Schlegel's call for a national museum of old German painting.¹⁰

Both Wackenroder and Schlegel, then, had used history as a means of realizing their critical appreciation of an art that was emotionally laden with religious values, an art which could consequently be appropriated as a glorious manifestation of the German national spirit. In this enterprise, they effectively laid the foundation for the study of what would come to be called northern Renaissance art. The legitimization of the history of northern Renaissance art continues to this day, but in radically different terms. I want to skip ahead a couple of centuries and examine how the

ler. *Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Romantik* (Jena: Diederichs, 1916) and Gisela Goldberg, "The History of the Boisserée Collection," *Apollo* (1982): 210-13.

10. Suizberger, *Rehabilitation des primitifs flamands*, 57.

study of northern Renaissance art has been legitimated in the second half of the twentieth century. What kinds of stories about Netherlandish painting do we tell today and what motivates them?

The analysis of the twentieth-century discourse on northern Renaissance art is located in what is usually regarded as its apogee, namely, the work of Erwin Panofsky. Panofsky's book *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer* appeared in 1943, whereas *Early Netherlandish Painting* was published a decade later, in 1953.¹¹ Rather than using the past in the service of religious, emotional, and nationalistic goals, Panofsky's books appear to have no other ambition than to provide a wealth of information about the subjects under discussion. Both of his texts are detailed and learned readings of the available historical evidence, discussions that are, for the most part, pursued with a relentless "objectivity"—that is, with a positivistic desire to evaluate and supersede the nature and quality of the information given by earlier historians. The introduction to both volumes, however (to turn Panofsky's words against his own project), "betray rather than parade" their ideological agenda.¹²

In his introduction to the Dürer book, Panofsky declares that the German contribution to art history has yet to be acknowledged. He proposes that the artistic accomplishments of Dürer, whom he defines as a representative of the German national spirit, make him worthy of comparison with the great artists of the Italian Renaissance. While there is an interesting continuity to be traced in the nationalism of Wackenroder and Schlegel and that of Panofsky, the historiographic differences in the way they advance their claims are more significant than their similarities. The period of 150 years or so that separates the texts of these authors could be said to have witnessed the triumph of history writing. The historicist principle enunciated by Herder had been developed in the course of the nineteenth century into something resembling a science. The recognition that time decisively affects our understand-

11. Panofsky, *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1943) and *Early Netherlandish Painting*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953).

12. The phrase is a quotation from Panofsky, "The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline" (1940), in *Meaning and the Visual Arts* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1955), 14. It occurs as part of the definition of what he called the "iconological" method of interpretation, the purpose of which was to uncover the cultural attitudes encoded in the "content" of the work of art.

ing of the world transformed all aspects of human knowledge; in addition, the influence of the success of the physical sciences during the same period pushed historical studies into an ever-increasing empiricism. The corresponding transformation in the function of history seems to depend above all else on the elimination of the subjectivity of the historian. Whereas Wackenroder and Schlegel willingly admitted that their interest in history grew from their religious and nationalist beliefs, in Panofsky's case, the historian's agenda is far less explicit.

The nationalism of the introduction to the Dürer book, for example, appears both paradoxical and curious in light of Panofsky's forced exile from Germany by the National Socialists. Inserting Dürer into the Renaissance canon of Italian artists was a much more complicated act than an assertion of pride in national identity. As I have argued elsewhere, Panofsky's view of Dürer as torn between the principles of reason and unreason—for which he used the emblem of Dürer's engraving, *Melencolia I*—has more to do with the political situation of Germany in his own time (that is, with a defense of humanism in the context of National Socialism) than it does with the cultural conditions of sixteenth-century Nuremberg.¹³ Nevertheless, Panofsky's engagement with politics does not register as part of the conscious objectives of his historical biography. Political and emotional beliefs were repressed in favor of Kantian disinterest.

The same "objective" attitude is found in the introduction to *Early Netherlandish Painting*. Here Panofsky argues that Netherlandish naturalism, the characteristic quality of this school, is actually indebted to the invention of one-point perspective, the supreme artistic achievement of Italian art of the same period. The canonical status of Netherlandish art is thus buttressed by its incorporation of one of the pictorial devices that serves to distinguish Italian art. Instead of appealing to the notion of artistic relativity on which Wackenroder and Schlegel had based their claim for the interest of old German painting, Panofsky attempts to include Netherlandish art under the umbrella of traditional taste for

13. See "Panofsky's Melencolia" in my book, *The Practice of Theory: Poststructuralism, Cultural Politics, and Art History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 65–78.

the Italian Renaissance. If Italian painting is part of the canon because it developed mimetic techniques (such as perspective) that enabled it to achieve more convincing kinds of illusionism, thereby heightening the naturalism for which it had been valued, then Netherlandish painting gains status by sharing these characteristics.¹⁴ Similarly, Panofsky's analysis of the complex symbolism of Netherlandish painting, which is discussed at length, could be said to represent an attempt to find an equivalent for the complicated religious and secular allegories that are a feature of Italian art of this period. Once again, the artistic merit attached to early Netherlandish art would result neither from its pictorial autonomy nor from the principle of artistic relativity, but from its similarity to the southern European tradition.

What led to the suppression of the authorial agenda that seems to distinguish Panofsky's treatment of northern Renaissance art from those of Wackenroder and Schlegel? Why did the authorial voice become so much more removed and abstract? What occasioned the substitution of a colorless objectivity for a passionately argued subjectivity? A full answer to these questions would necessitate a history of the idea of history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and would explore the institutionalization of the discipline and the professionalization of its practitioners. It is immediately apparent, however, that history served a very different function for Wackenroder and Schlegel than it did for Panofsky. In the earlier case histories, the writing of history is clearly part of a larger cultural rhetoric; in its later incarnation, however, it seems to be pursued as if it could be an end in itself.

Panofsky's reticence about the larger cultural function of history, his reluctance to articulate the concerns that animate his scholarly work, and his conception of history as a positivistic discipline, find their theoretical justification in "The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline" (1940). In this reflective essay, Panofsky suggests that the historian is involved in two very different types of activity. In responding to the work of art (which he defines as a "man-made object demanding to be experienced aesthetically"), the art historian must both "re-create" the work by attempting to intuit the artistic

14. I analyze the introduction to *Early Netherlandish Painting* in chapter 4.



"intentions" that went into its creation, and then submit it to archaeological investigation. The relation between "aesthetic re-creation" and "archaeological investigation" is an "organic" one.

It is not true that the art historian first constitutes his object by means of re-creative synthesis and then begins his archaeological investigation—as though first buying a ticket and then boarding a train. In reality the two processes do not succeed each other, they interpenetrate; not only does the re-creative synthesis serve as a basis for the archaeological investigation, the archaeological investigation in turn serves as a basis for the re-creative process; both mutually qualify and rectify one another.¹⁵

The aesthetic re-creation of the work is deemed to depend "not only on the natural sensitivity and visual training of the spectator, but also on his cultural equipment."¹⁶ Unlike a naive beholder, the art historian, Panofsky argues, is aware of his cultural predispositions; that is, he is aware of the contemporary perspective he brings to the work of interpretation as a consequence of belonging to a culture different from that under investigation. The point of the historian's recognition of his own cultural values, however, is neither to acknowledge them as part of the historical narrative that will result from his engagement with the past nor to understand that his response will inevitably be filtered through the peculiar configuration of his own subjectivity. Rather, the presence of these cultural values is acknowledged only so that they can be disregarded. It is by means of his knowledge of the past that the historian is to control, if not extirpate altogether, the affective and valuational attitudes he brought to the enterprise in the first place, becoming as "objective" as possible.

He tries, therefore, to make adjustments by learning as much as he possibly can about the circumstances under which the objects of his studies were created. Not only will he collect and verify all the available information as to medium, condition, age, authorship, destination, etc., but he will also compare the work with others of its class,

15. Panofsky, "The History of Art and Humanistic Discipline," 16.

16. *Ibid.*



and will examine such writings as reflect the aesthetic standards of its country and age, in order to achieve a more "objective" appraisal of its quality.

... But when he does all this, his aesthetic perception as such will change accordingly, and will more and more adapt itself to the original "intention" of the works. Thus what the art historian, as opposed to the "naive" art lover, does, is not to erect a rational superstructure on an irrational foundation, but to develop his re-creative experiences so as to conform with the results of his archaeological research, while continually checking the results of his archaeological research against the evidence of his re-creative experiences.¹⁷

Because of the putative elimination of the subjectivity of the historian, Panofsky's approach to interpretation has no way of dealing with issues of artistic merit. This method could, for example, be applied to the interpretation of any work of art regardless of its quality or its effect on the scholar. What is missing is some way of articulating why certain works matter to the interpreter and others do not.

Panofsky was, of course, fully aware that the discipline could not exist without a means of privileging some works above others. His solution was to claim that the greatness of works of art was self-evident. Artistic achievement would disclose itself to the historian in the course of his empirical investigations:

But when a "masterpiece" is compared and connected with as many "less important" works of art as turn out, in the course of the investigation, to be comparable and connectable with it, the originality of the invention, the superiority of its composition and technique, and whatever other features make it "great," will automatically become evident—not in spite but because of the fact that the whole group of materials has been subjected to one and the same method of analysis and interpretation.¹⁸

Panofsky's banishment of subjectivity in favor of positivistic objectivity—the sacrifice of cultural judgment in favor of a re-creation

17. *Ibid.*, 17–18.

18. *Ibid.*, 18 n. 13.

of the artistic intentions of the past, intentions that were to be validated by archaeological investigation—proved deeply influential. Contemporary art historiography has concerned itself primarily with the evaluation and criticism of his methodological concepts, “iconography” and “iconology,” that have for so long dominated scholarly activity in our discipline.¹⁹ The other side of the coin, the fact that this subtle and effective method of historical interpretation succeeded because it obliterated questions related to the personal experience of the historian, deserves to be recognized and explored.

Panofsky's bias against the insertion of the concerns of the present into narratives about the past would appear to be part of a historical tendency that is also manifest in literary studies. Barbara Herrnstein Smith has pointed out that mid-twentieth-century literary critics have also been more concerned with the development of theories of interpretation than with articulating the rationale that occasions their deployment.

While professors of literature have sought to claim for their activities the rigor, objectivity, cognitive substantiality, and progress associated with science and the empirical disciplines, they have also attempted to remain faithful to the essentially conservative and didactic mission of humanistic studies: to honor and preserve the culture's traditionally esteemed objects—in this case, its canonized texts—and to illuminate and transmit the traditional cultural values presumably embodied in them.²⁰

19. See Panofsky, “Iconography and Iconology: An Introduction to the Study of Renaissance Art,” in *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, 26–54. For comment on and criticism of this method of interpretation, see Ekkehard Kaemmerling, ed., *Iconographie und Ikonologie. Theorien, Entwicklung, Probleme* (Cologne: DuMont, 1979); Jacques Bonnet, ed., *Erwin Panofsky: Cahiers pour un temps* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1983); Michael Podro, *The Critical Historians of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982); Michael Ann Holly, *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984) and *Iconografia e Ikonologia* (Milan: Jaca Books, 1992); Keith Moxey, “Panofsky's Concept of ‘Iconology’ and the Problem of Interpretation in the History of Art,” *New Literary History* 17 (1985–86): 265–74; Silvia Ferretti, *Cassirer, Panofsky, and Warburg: Symbol, Art, and History*, trans. Richard Pierce (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Georges Didi-Huberman, *Devant l'Image* (Paris: Minuit, 1990); and Brendan Cassidy, ed., *Iconography at the Crossroads* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

20. Barbara Herrnstein Smith, “The Exile of Evaluation,” in *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 18. It is significant that the book Smith identifies as the most extreme

Panofsky relegated the question of artistic excellence to the realm of the self-evident, and effectively wove this evaluative judgment into the fabric of tradition. From this perspective, one can only tell what is self-evident by consulting what others have considered artistically exceptional in the past. It is alleged that by reading the past we can infer what is appropriate to the present, thus avoiding the necessity of projecting contemporary opinion into the process. The price of interpretive objectivity is the abdication of responsibility for finding in history a means of articulating the cultural dilemmas of the present. The principle of self-evidence is profoundly conservative; it is dedicated to the support of the status quo and ideally suited to the task of providing art history with “scientific” respectability.

Panofsky's equation of canonical value with traditional value was espoused and supported by Ernst Gombrich, arguably the other most influential art historian of this century. In his view, it is because art historians are the custodians of this tradition that they can be distinguished from social scientists, who approach works of art as if they were part of the material of culture. In a 1973 lecture entitled “Art History and the Social Sciences,” Gombrich took it upon himself to defend art history's preoccupation with a canon of works that had been recognized as “great,” critiquing those who advocated the study of works of art as cultural artifacts. He argued that whereas the study of historical circumstance would significantly affect our appreciation of the art of the past, it was no sub-

canon of works
cultural artifacts

version of the anti-evaluationist stance, Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*, was, like *Early Netherlandish Painting*, published in the 1950s. Smith's book is only one of numerous contributions to the debate over the canon in literary studies. For some other perspectives on the canon, see Robert von Hallberg, ed., “Canons,” a special issue of *Critical Inquiry* 10 (1983), which included essays by Barbara Herrnstein Smith, Charles Altieri, Jerome McGann, John Guillory, Richard Ohmann, and others; Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Robert Scholes, “Aiming a Canon at the Curriculum,” *Submagundi* 72 (1986): 101–17, and the responses by E. D. Hirsch, Marjorie Perloff, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, and others in the same issue; Charles Altieri, *Canons and Consequences: Reflections on the Ethical Force of Imaginative Ideals* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1990); Jan Goran, *The Making of the Modern Canon: Genesis and Crisis of a Literary Idea* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Athlone Press, 1991); Paul Lauter, *Canons in Contexts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); and John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

stitute for the connoisseur's capacity to discern quality. For Gombrich, the canon

offers points of reference, standards of excellence which we cannot level down without losing direction. Which particular peaks, or which individual achievements we select for this role may be a matter of choice, but we could not make such a choice if there really were no peaks but only shifting dunes. . . . the values of the canon are too deeply embedded in the totality of our civilization for them to be discussed in isolation. . . . Our attitude to the peaks of art can be conveyed through the way we speak about them, perhaps through our very reluctance to spoil the experience with too much talk. What we call civilization may be interpreted as a web of value judgements which are implicit rather than explicit.²¹

What was it that led leading art historians of the caliber of Panofsky and Gombrich to dismiss any discussion of the cultural qualities of canonical works of art on the basis that they were self-evident? What supported their belief that artistic merit was universally discernible? The unstated assumption underlying their position would appear to be a universalist theory of aesthetics.

According to the aesthetic theory formulated by Immanuel Kant in the late eighteenth century, certain works of art had the capacity to provoke a transhistorical recognition of their extraordinary quality.²² The existence of the beautiful was thus something located in the human response to objects rather than in the objects themselves. By making the capacity to recognize artistic quality part of the definition of "human nature," Kant's theory offered a basis for the identification of canonical status with the judgment of tradition. Both Panofsky and Gombrich belong to the humanist tradition of which Kant's theory is a part. They share the conviction that human nature affords an adequate epistemological foundation on which to understand both the world and "man's" place within it. For this reason, they can assert that the artistic quality of certain cultural artifacts is self-evident.

21. Gombrich, *Art History and the Social Sciences: The Romanes Lecture for 1973* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 54. Northrop Frye also suggested silence as the means by which a critic might validate the equation of the canon with tradition. See Smith, "The Exile of Evaluation," 24.

22. Kant, *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, trans. James Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952).

The humanist conception of human subjectivity as something stable, continuous, autonomous, and unmodulated by circumstances of time and place has itself been subject to devastating criticism in our own time. Psychoanalysis, for example, has tended to emphasize the contingency of human consciousness. According to Jacques Lacan, subjectivity is split by the acquisition of language into that which represents the desires and drives of a pre-conscious condition (the unconscious) and that which represents the codes and conventions that govern social life (the symbolic).²³ On this account, identity is shifting and unstable, constantly under revision as the relation between the unconscious and the social is renegotiated in the light of the everchanging circumstances of everyday life. Such a view of identity formation clearly militates against the concept of an inherent human nature, against the assumption that all human beings react to the same things in the same way, let alone works of art. The idea of a universal human response to art has been further undermined by cultural critics, such as the Marxist sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. In a materialist critique of Kant's aesthetic theory, he showed that in contemporary French society, the response to works of art differed widely according to social class: while certain social groups ascribed exceptional quality to certain cultural objects, others denied them any value whatsoever.²⁴ Anthropologists such as Johannes Fabian and literary critics such as Edward Said have drawn attention to the ideological agenda underlying humanist epistemologies, suggesting that the conception of the human subject as stable and unchanging, a self-conscious entity capable of knowing both the world and itself, is a dimension of the Eurocentrism that characterized Western culture during the colonial period of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.²⁵ The age of empire saw a fusion of the desire for knowledge with the worldwide expansion of European power. The search for knowledge was backed by epistemological assumptions

23. Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the 'I' as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience" and "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason since Freud," in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977), 1-7 and 146-78.

24. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

25. Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983); Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979) and *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993).

that precluded cultural differences; moreover, in every encounter with other peoples, Europe was chosen as the standard by which to judge the rest. The result was a subordination of other cultures to a European conception of civilization and a reduction of the different ways of understanding the world to what we know as "science."

In one way or another, all these critics suggest that the means by which individuals, classes, and cultures invest objects with social value are so varied that such processes cannot be considered to belong to the same category. If this is the case, then the concept of aesthetics, one intimately associated with the humanist conception of an unchanging human nature, is emptied of its content.²⁶ Rather than trying to reduce the rich variety of human responses to art to a single kind of experience, it seems more important to articulate the grounds on which these different responses attain the status of discursive practices.

Panofsky's attempts to naturalize the concept of artistic quality—or, to paraphrase Gombrich, the claim that quality is one of the implicit value judgments that make up our civilization—were never completely convincing. Among the most important (and curiously neglected) arguments recognizing the role of the present in the task of accounting for the past is Leo Steinberg's remarkably prescient 1969 essay, "Objectivity and the Shrinking Self." By insisting that subjectivity mattered, Steinberg rebelled against the antiseptic objectivity, the positivistic empiricism, of the art history of his day. According to him, the way in which the art historian's cultural outlook is modelled by the cultural circumstances of his own time determines the importance he ultimately ascribes to the work of art under consideration. Mannerist art, for example, had long been dismissed because of its negative assessment by the Italian art academies of the seventeenth century, but was rediscovered by twentieth-century Expressionist artists and critics on the basis of their own artistic preferences. In Steinberg's view, there is no evading personal involvement. All historical interpretation is necessarily colored by the beliefs of the interpreter.

It is naive to imagine that you avoid the risk of projection merely by not interpreting. In desisting from interpretation, you do not cease

26. See Tony Bennett, "Really Useless Knowledge: A Political Critique of Aesthetics," *Literature and History* 13 (1987): 38–57.

to project. You merely project more unwittingly. There is apparently no escape from oneself and little safety in closing art history off against the contemporary imagination.²⁷

It was not until the advent of feminism, however, that the equation of the art historical canon with tradition received a lasting challenge. More than any other historian or critic, it was Linda Nochlin in her famous piece, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" of 1971, who placed the issue of artistic merit squarely in the foreground of the discipline's attention.²⁸ She demonstrated just how unsatisfactory the concept of tradition was to a definition of the canonical status of a work of art by underscoring the extent to which a putative *masterpiece* serves to articulate and support a hierarchy of the sexes. There is nothing inherently natural about the selection of great artists and works on which art history depends, because that choice is the product of

27. Leo Steinberg, "Objectivity and the Shrinking Self," *Daedalus* 98 (summer 1969): 836. Svetlana Alpers also drew attention to the importance of the present in the interpretation of the past: see "Is Art History?" *Daedalus* 106 (1977): 1–13. Describing the work of T. J. Clark, Michael Fried, Leo Steinberg, and Michael Baxandall, she claimed that they emphasized the way in which the artistic merit discovered by past critics in works of art needs to be evaluated in the context of the present. In doing so, these authors implied that the canon inherited from tradition was not absolute and that it was subject to revision at the hands of succeeding generations.

Curiously enough, the social history of art inspired by the Marxist criticism of T. J. Clark has by and large taken the existence of a traditional canon for granted. Clark never conceived of the canon as a body of works imbued with historically contingent social meaning. While his own interpretations of canonical works are clearly politically motivated, he rarely calls attention to his own intellectual beliefs and social engagement in the process of his encounter with the past. See, for example, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973) and *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984). For criticism of Clark's failure to address the question of the canon, see Adrian Rifkin, "Marx's Clarkism," *Art History* 8 (1985): 488–95.

28. Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" *Art News* 60 (1971): 23–39, 67–69. See also Lisa Tickner, "Feminism, Art History and Sexual Difference," *Gender* (1988): 92–127, and Nanette Salomon, "The Art Historical Canon: Sins of Omission" in *(En)Gendering Knowledge: Feminists in Academia*, ed. Joan Hartman and Ellen Messer-Davidow (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 222–36. Contributions since this chapter was written include "Rethinking the Canon," a collection of comments by Michael Camille, Zeynep Çelik, John Onians, Adrian Rifkin, and Christopher Steiner, in *Art Bulletin* 78 (1996): 198–217, and Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* (London: Routledge, 1999).



historically determined social attitudes. The equation of artistic merit with tradition, Nochlin argued, honored the cultural achievements of men because social forces prevented women from participating fully in the processes of artistic production. By means of a striking case study of the history of the exclusion of women from drawing or painting the nude in the art academies that dominated artistic education until the end of the nineteenth century, Nochlin suggested that social institutions, rather than an innate lack in female character, were responsible for the underrepresentation of this gender among the "great" artists of the past.

Hopefully, by stressing the *institutional*—i.e., the public—rather than the *individual*, or private, pre-conditions for achievement or the lack of it in the arts, we have provided a paradigm for the investigation of other areas in the field. By examining in some detail a simple instance of deprivation or disadvantage—the unavailability of nude models to women art students—we have suggested that it was indeed *institutionally* made impossible for women to achieve artistic excellence, or success, on the same footing as men, *no matter what* the potency of their so-called talent, or genius.²⁹

Rather than attempt to insert historical women into a social practice that had been constructed on the basis of their exclusion, subsequent feminist critics demanded the complete destruction of art history as a discipline. Griselda Pollock has used semiotics and the work of Foucault to argue that art history is itself a discursive practice, a way of making meaning that is imbued with the attitudes of the dominant gender. She concludes that feminist scholarship has no place within art history as it has traditionally been defined. Instead of addressing the canonical works around which disciplinary activity has revolved, she advocates what she calls "feminist interventions in the histories of art."³⁰

Following Jacques Derrida, Adrian Rifkin has drawn out the consequences of linguistic theory for the art historical canon, focusing in particular on the necessity to recognize that the work of the historian—the historical text—is inevitably colored by the histo-

29. Nochlin, "Why No Great Women Artists," 69.

30. Griselda Pollock, "Feminist Interventions in the Histories of Art: An Introduction," in *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism, and the Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988), 1-17.

rian's position in history and culture. If art history can be regarded as a discursive practice, then it is susceptible to the type of textual analysis known as deconstruction.³¹ Derrida has shown that language is involved in a game of absent presence, that it serves to bestow ontological status on what is otherwise only an unstable and shifting system of signs which draw their meaning not from their capacity to refer to objects in the world, but rather from the cultural attitudes with which they are invested by their users. In such circumstances, the notion of "art" is transformed: no longer referring to a series of cultural objects distinguished by its capacity to provoke a universal response to artistic merit, "art" becomes a series of cultural objects that has been arbitrarily awarded a privileged status by authors whose interests have been served by doing so.³² The cultural category of "art" and the discursive practice of "art history" are social constructs, not constants in the history of civilization.

In the light of these critiques, we must rethink the function of authorial subjectivity in the writing of history, as well as the nature and status of the art historical canon. First, and perhaps most startling, we must realize that the type of appreciation expressed for northern Renaissance art in the work of Wackenroder and Schlegel is more relevant to the process of contemporary historical interpretation than is the work of Panofsky. Once the concept of tradition has been shown to be historically compromised, laden with the cultural attitudes of a particular historical moment, and once every attempt to make textual meaning has been shown to be less about the world than about the projection of authorial bias and prejudice—as well as insight and understanding—then it seems clear that art historians must address the question of why they believe the works they discuss are worth talking about. Once there is no longer anything self-evident about the status of the works that are the focus of art historical attention, it is necessary to explain why certain works have been chosen rather than others. The sub-

31. Adrian Rifkin, "Art's Histories," in *The New Art History*, ed. A. L. Rees and Frances Borzello (London: Camden Press, 1986), 157-63. See also Gerard Merzoz, "Rhetoric and Episteme: Writing about 'Art' in the Wake of Post-Structuralism," *Art History* 12 (1989): 497-509.

32. For a discussion of the way in which works of art are "framed," see Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) and Paul Duro, ed., *The Rhetoric of the Frame: Essays on the Boundaries of the Artwork* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).



linguistic turn



jective attitudes and cultural aspirations of the art historian become just as important an aspect of the narrative as the works that are its object. This is tantamount to saying that there is no canon beyond that which we ourselves construct. Instead of using history to buttress the existence of a traditional canon, instead of making the historical imagination serve the status quo, that is, the tastes of those whose culture we have inherited, a motivated history can be used to destabilize and call into question our culture's assumptions and prejudices by insisting on their contingency and relativity.

But these conclusions have profound pedagogical implications for art history. As a discipline organized around the study of a canon of artists and works guaranteed by tradition, art history was, at least until relatively recently, an agent in what Pierre Bourdieu has called the process of "cultural reproduction." The canonical content of our syllabi, for instance, serves as a means of transmitting "cultural capital" from one generation of the elite to another.³³ By transferring knowledge about a set of works whose merit can neither be questioned nor discussed, art history is often viewed as a conservative force in contemporary culture. How can this situation be transformed? The elimination of a canon seems to be a utopian dream. To suggest that art history could continue as a social institution without choosing which artists and works should be taught and which should not presupposes that the discipline could operate without a cultural agenda. Such manifest naïveté would simply reproduce the circumstances that promoted an unquestioning attitude toward the traditional canon in the first place. If we assume, in the wake of post-structuralism, that there are no disinterested narratives, that all art historical accounts are informed by one bias or another, then it seems wiser to acknowledge that there will always be some works considered to be of greater artistic merit than others. The standards that go into making such judgments change according to the attitudes and interests of different historical groups and individuals.

As I write, it is clear to me that transformations that accord with

33. Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Sage Publications, 1990). For an indictment of the way in which art history serves the process of cultural reproduction, see Carol Duncan, "Teaching the Rich," in *The Aesthetics of Power: Essays in Critical Art History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 135-42.

these arguments are actually being carried out in practice. Rather than assume that the discipline might ever agree on what constitutes "quality," our students more and more frequently encounter concepts of artistic merit that respond to varied political and cultural beliefs. In such circumstances, they may be introduced to a formalist canon, Marxist canon, feminist canon, gay and lesbian canon, post-colonial canon, and so on. Alternatively, they may study the traditional set of works, but be given very different reasons for considering them extraordinary. This plethora of ideals of social value does not pretend to coexist in egalitarian conviviality. The value of acknowledging their struggle for attention is that none can henceforth be regarded as a "master narrative." Decisions to subscribe to one or another of their social agendas must be made with a full recognition of the political and cultural implications of that choice. In view of the alternatives, none of these initiatives can conceal the contingency of its assumptions behind the naturalizing mask of tradition.

Previously sanctioned narratives on which canonical status depended are being called into question by narratives that no longer share their assumptions. Individual artists and works of art—even entire periods—are being reevaluated in a way that places their continued representation in the canon in doubt, just as canonical status is now being sought for artists, works, and periods hitherto unrecognized. Indeed, as David Carrier has suggested, art history would appear to be experiencing a "paradigm shift." Using Thomas Kuhn's notion of the paradigm to refer to forms of art historical interpretation that are regarded as acceptable by the dominant institutions in the profession at any particular point in time, Carrier suggests that our discipline's notion of "truth" is being transformed and that we are witnessing the development of new paradigms of what might count as acceptable forms of interpretation.³⁴ Kuhn's sociology of knowledge not only affords us insight into contemporary circumstances but also presents a means of understanding change. Despite the appeal of some of art history's leading practitioners to an unchanging, constant notion of tradition, one that would stabilize and perpetuate a fixed concept of

34. David Carrier, "Erwin Panofsky, Leo Steinberg, David Carrier: The Problem of Objectivity in Art Historical Interpretation," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 47 (1989): 333-47. For Kuhn's theory of "paradigms," see *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).





quality, the canon has always been malleable, seemingly engaged in a process of continual change.

This chapter, however, is not a descriptive account of art history's metamorphoses. Far from an empirical report, it is an appeal for a broader recognition of the role played by subjectivity in the articulation of historical interpretations. Rather than legitimate a pre-established canon of artists and works following the principle of objectivity, I argue that historians should pursue their own agendas and articulate their own motives for engaging in the process of finding cultural meaning in the art of the past. Rather than regard the subject of art history as fixed and unchanging, scholars have an opportunity to define what that subject might be. In doing so, they can display rather than conceal the cultural issues that preoccupy them. The subject of art history thus becomes manifestly an allegory of the historical circumstances that have shaped and empowered the subjectivity of the author.

This emphasis on the agency of the historian, his or her capacity to subject the values of the past to intense scrutiny and rigorous criticism, as well as to articulate the cultural aspirations of his or her own times, should not be misunderstood. This is not a call for some simpleminded correspondence between interpretation and interpreter, not a suggestion that one should reflect the other. The allegories of consciousness that we call "history" must inevitably be opaque. We can never be fully conscious of the motives that compel us to give one shape to an interpretation rather than another. The unconscious must, by definition, remain beyond our comprehension. Not only is the historian's subjectivity partly determined by unconscious forces, but it is also governed by the ideological traditions that are characteristic of its situation in history. Following Louis Althusser, we might define *ideology* as a social unconscious.³⁵ The historian's work belongs (sometimes knowingly and sometimes unknowingly) to a variety of ways of conceiving the relations between human beings as members of a particular culture, and of the means by which that culture relates to other cultures and to the world. These structures of understanding define his or her identity in relation to all other times and places.

35. L. Althusser, "Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 126-86.

I conclude, therefore, with a paradox. The cultural codes and conventions that serve to define a particular identity also enable it to participate in social life. It is only because the subject is both constituted by and constituting of the circumstances in which he or she exists that the active role of history in the creation and transformation of culture can be understood. The call for a motivated history cannot assume that the historian's motives are transparently accessible. Psychological and ideological determination, however, cannot prevent an author from actively investing historical narratives with political persuasion that addresses the pressing cultural and social issues of the day.

