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SVETLANA ALPERS

## Is Art History?

IT COMES AS NO SURPRISE to a student of art and its history these days to open a book on Italian painting and find an extensive discussion of barrel-gauging, or to turn to a study of Courbet and find many pages devoted to a detailed account of radicalism among French peasants in 1849 and 1850. The books by Michael Baxandall and T. J. Clark to which I am referring are not eccentric texts but among the most inventive and interesting studies of art written in recent years.<sup>1</sup> Distinctive though their emphases are, these writers share a commitment to consider the work of art as a “piece of history.” Baxandall argues that we should consider Piero della Francesca’s pictorial engagement with solid geometric forms in terms of the accepted fifteenth-century training in commercial mathematics. Similarly, Clark argues that an attention to the situation of French rural society enables us to understand the presence (in style, but also inseparably in content) of Courbet’s great works of 1849–1850. I have chosen these two books as among the most rigorously argued of what is indeed a great number of such studies. It is a fashion by now, and almost established as one of the acceptable tools of the art historical trade. The new art history was announced in the title of a series of book-length studies of individual works initiated in the 1960s—*Art in Context*. The traditional mode of art history is represented by Pevsner’s multivolumed *History of Art*, which began appearing in the 1950s and considers the history of art period by period, and country by country.<sup>2</sup>

What is worth remarking about the new look in the study of art is not its emphasis on art and society—for that has a long and somewhat checkered history—but rather the terms in which it is proposed. While previously it was the history of art, conceived in terms of the development and achievement of period styles, which was studied in the historical context (resulting in books like *Der Barock als Kunst der Gegenreformation*<sup>3</sup>), today it is individual works or groups of works, individual phenomena located at a particular time and place. Thus to amplify what I have just said: it is the work of art itself, not a history or sequence of works, which is seen as a piece of history.

A corollary to this change within the discipline is the phenomenon of historians turning to art not for confirmation of the notion of period style (one thinks for example of the use made of art in Friedrich’s *The Age of the Baroque*<sup>4</sup>), but rather for the fact of individual works. It is a historian, Peter Gay, not an art historian, who most recently employed the phrase “piece of history” to describe

the works discussed in his book on Manet, Gropius, and Mondrian.<sup>5</sup> The intellectual atmosphere is one in which historians frequently turn to works of art, and joint projects between historians and art historians flourish. Velázquez is being studied by such a team, as is the patronage of Julius II in Rome. (The nature of patronage is fast becoming a separate topic of study in the field of art history.) The sense of a common enterprise demonstrated in such projects is based on the assumption that the work of art, like any other event, is a piece of history.

The new social history of art as it is carried on by art historians concentrates on the circumstances of the making of an individual work. Who commissioned it, and where was it to be placed? What function (a central term here) did it serve and for what audience was it intended? Seen in this way documents establishing the commission and the later history or provenance of a work of art no longer testify to its pedigree but indeed to its very nature as an object. Specific methods of calculating the cost of paintings—so much per each full-length figure in the case of seventeenth-century Italian commission, for example—could determine, it is argued, the way a work looks. If, because of such considerations, a patron were willing to pay for only seven full-length figures in a picture of the Massacre of the Innocents, then Guido Reni, the artist in question, would have had to come up with his innovative reduced version of this traditionally many-figured scene. A particular compositional organization could be due to the position of the work, the actual site for which it was intended, and the angle from which it was to be viewed. Titian's removal of the Virgin from her traditional central position to the right side of the worshipers in his *Pesaro Madonna*—once considered a protobaroque stylistic invention—is now explained by the fact that the worshipers approached the work from the aisle to the left of the altarpiece. A revisionist interpretation of Michelangelo's Medici Chapel argues that it is less neoplatonic beliefs or stylistic concerns as such than the funerary function of the chapel and the specific liturgy for the dead composed for this place which were determining factors in the artist's inventions.<sup>6</sup> Almost unawares, such studies have come to a demystification of the notion of artistic invention. What was previously puzzled over as a mystery has now come to be understood as the task of fitting a work to a particular task, to a particular set of describable historical conditions. If a work of art is inevitably to be understood in terms of its particular historical circumstances, it is arguable that great art will result from a conscious working out of this recognition. Great art is, in short, in this essential way political in nature. However, those studies of Reni, Titian, and Michelangelo to which I have referred do not admit to this view. One of the things which I want to pursue later is the gap as I see it between the implications of this new social history and its acknowledged sense of itself and of art. In the name of clarity, rationality, and historical objectivity the new art history embraces a potentially radical view of art without accepting its implications.

Analogous to the demystification of artistic creation is Baxandall's bold attempt to demystify the problem of looking, of how we see. His study of quattrocento art addresses itself to how works of art were seen at a particular time by identifying habits of vision, modes of cognitive perception he calls them, as the social practices most relevant to the perception of paintings.

Making what is a kind of social application of Gombrich's perceptual notion of the "beholder's share," Baxandall argues that eyes trained to gauge the volume of containers, to read the body language of sermons, or to respond in certain ways to color or its absence were catered to in just these terms by their artists. To quote him, "It is the highest common factor of skill in his public that the painter consistently catered for."<sup>7</sup> The delight in the complexity of volumetric forms in a Piero or Uccello, or the careful distinction made among various gestures in paintings of the Annunciation, is to be understood in this context. The appeal being made is to common experience, ordinary schooling one might say. Compare Baxandall's instance of barrel-gauging in discussing Piero della Francesca to the claimed artistic relevance of higher, more philosophical mathematics, invoked by Rudolf Wittkower in his landmark discoveries about Palladio, in *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism*.<sup>8</sup> Instead of the mathematics of the humanist we have that of the merchant. Piero himself is here not seen in conjunction with the Golden Section (frequently cited in analyses of the composition of his *Flagellation*), but with high school mathematics for which, as Baxandall points out, the artist himself wrote a text.

Despite a continuing concern to deal with major works, the view of art put forth in these studies is basically a leveling one. And in fact if we look at the broad spectrum of phenomena that are being studied today a leveling tendency is very much in evidence. Wölfflin, in a famous and oft-repeated passage, once argued the stylistic equivalence between Gothic shoes and Gothic architecture.<sup>9</sup> It was in the smallest shapes, he said, that the purest manifestation of a style can be felt. It is thus in the grand order of styles that shoes are the equal of cathedrals. While Wölfflin treated shoes on a par with art, today shoes and cathedrals, but more to our point barns and cathedrals, carpets and frescoes are all treated as products of society. The studies of so-called vernacular architecture (like barns) no longer seem eccentric in an atmosphere in which architecture can be defined not in terms of monuments but as any changes at all that man makes in his environment. Apartment houses and tenements take their place beside town houses and public buildings in this enterprise. In a curious meeting of the old and the newest, Oleg Grabar's article, "An Art of the Object" (occasioned by the Metropolitan Museum's opening of its Islamic installation) brought oriental carpets and designs into the pages of *ARTFORUM*.<sup>10</sup> This publication testifies to the modern blurring of the line between art and craft, seen also in the acceptance of pottery and weaving among the media of art and institutionally in the interest in the historical artifacts being exhibited by newly invigorated historical museums all over the country. But it also testifies to the extension of serious study to the "decorative" (the term is no longer pejorative) traditions of non-Western art. We should be reminded of Riegl's arguments of seventy-five years ago which used the traditional motifs in textiles as a model for the history of style.<sup>11</sup> However, as we saw in the comparison with Wölfflin, there is today no appeal to a higher and more extensive historical reality such as style. It is rather their common functions as social products that bind these various artifacts together.

There is further a healthy decentralization in the view of art, what art is, where and by whom it has been and is produced. More kinds of objects, but also more kinds of makers are being admitted into the circle of artists. Women,

traditionally makers in the household, are a significant group. From studies of art in China and India to Europe there is a similar scholarly attention to the status and working conditions of artist-craftsmen and their influence on the nature and reception of works.<sup>12</sup> When and where were artists born into professional families? When and where were they treated as craftsmen or honored as members of wealthy households? Consider the double or triple professions of many Dutch artists in the seventeenth century: Steen was a brewer as well as a painter; Vermeer was probably both art dealer and innkeeper. This now seems less a case of an underdeveloped country, by comparison with Italy, than an example of a different social and thus artistic situation. The net in which we catch art and artists is spread widely and much more is caught for our consideration. The question, "What is art?" and the old answer that defined it as having aesthetic rather than utilitarian appeal never seemed further from anyone's mind.

One way in which to understand the directions being taken today in the study of art is to see them as offering alternatives to a dominant mode of the first great generations of modern art historians. The most influential figures among these, Wölfflin for example, and Panofsky, largely concentrated their attention and developed their modes of analysis with reference to the art of the Italian Renaissance. Both because of Panofsky's influence inside and outside the field, and because of the explicit way in which his writings lay out his assumptions, I have chosen to let him serve as the example of a general phenomenon. Panofsky's method of iconographic analysis originated in a series of primarily theoretical papers. His iconographic method, loosely construed, has been adopted by students of the pictorial (and verbal) arts of all ages. But Panofsky's interpretive strategy was bound up with Renaissance phenomena and with the study of Renaissance art. In his early papers (which remain untranslated) Panofsky argued against trying to decipher meanings using the notion of style, which was then defined psychologically by Wölfflin as "forms of beholding" (*Sehformen*) or by Riegl as the sociopsychological *Kunstwollen* (variously translated "will to form," "artistic volition," or more literally "that which wills art").<sup>13</sup> Arguing instead for the way in which pictorial images are bound to ideas, Panofsky defined their essential meaning in terms of *Sinn*, later rendered as "intrinsic meaning" in his English publications. Adopting Cassirer's notion of symbolic forms, the great achievement of Panofsky's approach was that it drew attention to the links between pictures and ideas, between art and thought. But whether he is defining the Renaissance as the reintegration of classical motif with classical theme, or pointing to the symbolic force of the use of perspective construction in Renaissance painting, Panofsky in effect posits and confirms a particular notion of man and of art.<sup>14</sup> Man here is a figure located historically in time (acknowledging his historical relationship to antiquity) and in space (employing the device of linear perspective to posit his picture as a window onto a second, substitute world). Man is at the center, viewing the world beyond of which his art is the imagined imitation. The very notion of the viewer's relationship to meanings which are verbally construed and which lie beneath the surface of his meaningful images, is bound up with Renaissance notions of art and the primacy of language. While validating and expounding a certain view of man, and the kind of art he produced, Panofsky was clear at least at first, that this was

distinguished from what came before (Middle Ages) and what came after (the modern age).

But no mediaeval man could see the civilization of antiquity as a phenomenon complete in itself, yet belonging to the past and historically detached from the contemporary world—as a cultural cosmos to be investigated and, if possible, to be reintegrated, instead of being a world of living wonders or a mine of information. . . . Just as it was impossible for the Middle Ages to elaborate the modern system of perspective, which is based on the realization of a fixed distance between the eye and the object and thus enables the artist to build up comprehensive and consistent images of visible things; just as impossible was it for them to evolve the modern idea of history, which is based on the realization of an intellectual distance between the present and the past, and thus enables the scholar to build up comprehensive and consistent concepts of bygone periods.<sup>15</sup>

It is when Panofsky's method was expanded, by him and by the field in general, to other arts and then treated as a normative standard for art and its study that problems developed. Compelling though his study of early Netherlandish painting is, it more and more seems to me that it compels partly by making northern art follow the art of the south.<sup>16</sup> Northern artists, far longer and more persistently than those in the south, trusted to the flatness of the working surface. Although it is true that the illuminated pages of books became more and more picturelike in the Italian Renaissance sense, the flatness of the surface of northern art in general was not killed off by perspective as Panofsky suggests. Neither the flat surface nor the repetition involved in printing techniques disturbed northern European artists, who, unlike the Italians, did not accept the authority of the individual work, created by an individual artist for a located viewer. As an image of the world, northern art is often more like a mirror than like a window. This is true of Van Eyck as it is of Vermeer. The common denominator between both aspects (flatness of working surface and mirror) is the absence of the maker or viewer, clearly posited in space and located in time, that is central to the creation of Italian art. Northern art, it might be argued, moved from the eye of God (Van Eyck's mirror in the *Arnolfini Wedding*) to the optical lens like a reflecting eye (the world cast onto the surface of the canvas as in Vermeer). But all the time a human center, in Panofsky's Italian Renaissance sense, is strangely absent. Finally Panofsky's definition of disguised symbolism—his inventive way of analyzing the combination of new pictorial realism and old medieval symbolism in the art of the north—in effect follows Italian fashions by subordinating surface imitation to meaning. He does not allow for the fact that the appearance of the first seems so often to outrun the verbal presence of the second, even in Van Eyck.

If we turn to Panofsky's masterful study of Dürer, it is characteristic that he sees Dürer as a kind of captive of the alien northern darkness struggling toward the southern light.<sup>17</sup> This of course is how Dürer often saw himself and it is thus in keeping with much of his art. But it is less clear that there is a right and a wrong, a light (the south) and a darkness (the north) here. In view of the accomplishments of Dürer's art one might say that he was far better at a characteristically northern task, print-making, than at a southern one, painting. Or to pursue the contrast further, that his landscapes (northern) are far superior to his nudes (southern).

As heirs to this southern emphasis, students of the northern tradition have until recently been inordinately interested in those artists and works which are bound in some way to the south of Europe. Motifs and meanings have been tracked down with great energy. Despite the evidence of the pictures themselves, an entire moralistic school of interpretation of Dutch seventeenth-century realism has developed on the assumption that hidden meaning, not the surface, is the key to pictorial significance. Despite their pictorial balance and presence, Vermeer's women, for example, are seen as emblems of sin. Although moralizing emblem books were popular in the Netherlands and some paintings followed suit, the impetus for this kind of interpretation can be explained at least in part as an attempt to lend the right kind of significance to an otherwise—by Italian standards—insignificant art. This attitude is widespread. Lord Clark introduces his book on *Rembrandt and the Italian Renaissance*<sup>18</sup> by asking how such an artist could rise from the mediocrity of Dutch art. And he goes on to expound Rembrandt's greatness in terms of Italian models. He thus speaks from a specifically Italian notion of greatness and incidentally leaves precious little room for the more obviously native achievements of a Saenredam, a Ruisdael, or a Vermeer.

Although he is suspicious of subjectivity, Panofsky's view of art and its history is clearly on the side of certain values, certain notions of man, art, and history for which he claims objective validity. Thus although his methods for studying art and its history were historically located as appropriate ways of dealing with Renaissance art, he came to treat them as normative and so they came to be seen by the discipline itself. In the course of his well-known "The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline," Panofsky makes the statement that man is "fundamentally an historian" and that "to grasp reality we have to detach ourselves from the present."<sup>19</sup> He speaks as a Renaissance viewer, located in time and space, detached from what he observes as he is from the process of observing. The very title of this essay, which long has been given to our students as a standard definition of and defense of the study of art history, can now be seen as grounded in Renaissance assumptions about man and art. What happens, one wonders, if the art one wants to study is itself not based on such humanistic principles? Is it not art? Can it not be studied by art historians?

These questions lead us back to the concerns occupying students of art today. My argument is that much of what was previously considered marginal—in terms of kinds of objects, whole civilizations, but also in terms of the questions one would ask about them—is presently holding our attention. In effect, then, questions about our assumptions are raised by what is being done in the study of art as a piece of history. I say "in effect," however, because they are hardly being voiced as questions except by Marxist critics.<sup>20</sup> To them, nothing that I have said will seem new, and much of what I have said will seem mild or too superficial in ideological terms. To ask why such questions are not being addressed is to speak not only to the inertia inherent in any academic discipline, but also to strike to the heart of the discipline's sense of itself as a discipline. For as scholars, art historians all too often see themselves as being in pursuit of knowledge without recognizing how they themselves are the makers of that knowledge.

It is often in recognizing the assumptions underlying one's research, one's

habits of mind in a sense, that new problems are clarified and new issues are made clear. If we recognize our current intellectual stance as a challenge to the previous hegemony of the Renaissance, we should go on to reconsider some things that we have made basic to the study of art. Three issues, basic operating procedures actually, built right into our study of Western art come to mind: (1) the notion of the role or the authority of the individual maker; (2) the notion of the uniqueness of the individual work; and (3) the notion of the centrality of the institution of painting.

It is common procedure to begin any study by attributing and dating the works to be considered and separating them out from any possible imitations. On what basis (other than market value) must we consider the authority of an individual maker as the central feature of every work? Entire modes of art which we are now beginning to include in our studies do not depend on such identification. The assertion of the identity of the maker is properly studied against the background of a much larger production of anonymous objects which were made apart from such a recognition of self. Perhaps there was a conscious attempt at self-effacement, an attempt to blend into an admired style or mode of image-making. In studying a tradition such as Chinese painting, where imitation of an admired style is the rule and attribution a chancy and demanding procedure at best, would it not be useful to ask how appropriate the task of attribution is? How is the individual maker related as an individual to such a powerful and absorbing tradition? How should we deal with the collaborative effort of workshop products, such as medieval illuminated manuscripts or Renaissance frescoed rooms? Should our aim always be first to sort out, to identify the hands? What is the status or nature of collaborative efforts at different times, in different societies? What were the conditions of working together?

Turning to the works themselves, our assumption about the absolute uniqueness of the original work is a counterpart to this notion of individual creators. There are first of all types of objects—prints, but also tapestries or photographs—which are designed to be replicated. Not only does our current method of print connoisseurship lead us, against this very fact, to continue to sort out when and in which order each individual pull of a print was made, but further the very notion of the value of repetition is hardly faced at all. If as William Ivins has argued in his feisty but powerful *Prints and Visual Communication*, one function of a pictorial image is the communication of information (as in a map, or the illustrations to a study of botany, both of which were worked on by Dutch artists in the seventeenth century) then the possibility of repetition is a prime virtue, not a vice.<sup>21</sup> That Rembrandt fought this possibility, often creating essentially unrepeatable etchings, is a different but not necessarily on this account (though it may be on others) a superior artistic achievement. There are entire schools of art, such as the Dutch, or artistic enterprises, such as Monet's series of haystacks or poplars, which might be better understood in the light of a more general appreciation of repetition. The strength of the hold which the original (in the sense of the originating or first in a sequence of inventions) has on us is made clear even in such an independent study as George Kubler's *The Shape of Time*. Kubler begins by proposing that "the idea of art can be expanded to embrace the whole range of man-made things."<sup>22</sup> He proceeds



to search for an order in which to put all these things and insists on establishing distinctions between what he calls “prime objects” and “replicas.” In arguing, for example, that “with European objects we often come closer to the hot moment of invention than in non-European ones where our knowledge is so often based only upon replicas of uniform or debased quality,” he seems to me to reveal a European cultural bias (but of course also an appropriate cultural responsiveness) which we are just starting to reflect on as we expand the bounds of art and its history.<sup>23</sup>

As a final example of new directions in which to turn, consider the notion of painting as an institution—I mean the sense in which in our study of Western art a new subject, like landscape, is considered to have truly arrived only when it is rendered in the most permanent and expensive media, paint. One notes the ease with which students of Western painting commonly speak of sources in a minor medium such as prints, as if they were there just to serve painting. It is as if the transition from one medium to another was not in itself problematic and worthy of assessment. Gombrich, for example, has demonstrated most eloquently that it is not a new look at the actual landscape on the part of painters in the north of Europe, but rather a theory making landscape a suitable subject for art contributed by southern writers that led to the establishment of the new genre of landscape painting. “Here then,” he writes, “was a frame into which the admired products of northern skill and patience could be fitted.”<sup>24</sup> And he goes on to discuss their classification in terms of heroic and pastoral types. Yet as Gombrich himself admits a few pages earlier, citing the example of Dürer, northern skill and patience had already flowered. For Dürer was indeed “one of the world’s greatest landscape painters” though in his topographical watercolors done for his own pleasure, not in paintings for purchase.<sup>25</sup> Is the topographic watercolor not art? And when we look at the great northern landscape painters—Bruegel, and then Van Goyen and Ruisdael—is it true that topography could not be the motif or function for paintings (as contrasted with a watercolor)? Is the birth of landscape painting in the north so at variance with the function of the lesser media? What if the entire tradition of northern art is indeed rather like painted prints? Is the human measure—what Gombrich means by the institution of landscape as a type of painting—essential before pictorial renderings can be considered in the realm of art? We have here indeed the recipe for the makings of Renaissance art, but surely not for all picturing.

Far from being limited to a revisionist study of art, the questions we are touching on here, the very mode of thinking that leads me to pose them, is shared by many thinkers today. The status or nature of the individual creator is, for example, a central concern in all of the works of Michel Foucault.<sup>26</sup> His account of what he terms the archeology of knowledge emphasizes, like Braudel’s study of the Mediterranean, what Braudel calls “that other submerged history, almost silent and always discreet, virtually unsuspected either by its observers or its participants.”<sup>27</sup> This view of the human situation, the slow process of continuing transformation enacted between us and our environment(s) is also confirmed in much contemporary art. We might take as a prime example the writing and the earth-works of the late Robert Smithson—be it his evocation of Olmsted’s Central Park as an “ongoing development” of slow geological changes interacting with an environment for man, or his *Spiral Jetty* made out of, and subsumed once again into, the Great Salt Lake.<sup>28</sup>

To ask these questions is then to acknowledge a common enterprise with historians, critics, artists, and writers of our time, and one would think, to gain strength and insight from such a common intellectual cause. From this vantage point we can now return to our earlier remarks on Panofsky and to his generation of art historians in a slightly different light. For in marked contrast to the generation of Panofsky art historians today, far from acknowledging that they live and work at a certain time and place, in the company of others (all of which would be considered subjective factors) deny this in favor of a notion of objective historical research. Baxandall, a most sophisticated spokesman, argues that “quattrocento intentions happened in quattrocento terms, not in ours.”<sup>29</sup> It is characteristic of art history that we teach our graduate students the methods, the “how to do it” of the discipline (how to date, attribute, track down a commission, analyze style and iconography) rather than the nature of our thinking. In terms of the intellectual history of the discipline our students are woefully uneducated. How many have been asked to read Panofsky’s early untranslated writings, or Riegl, or Wölfflin? Supporting this is that prejudice for the original object and against the desk-bound scholar. To think, to write is itself somehow to forsake the works. At issue is not the method one uses but rather the notion of art and its history, the notion of man and the form that his knowledge of the world takes. For all of Panofsky’s claims to employing an objective method (his three levels of meaning, for example) he accepted the responsibility for his own thought and his commitment to certain values. In studying Renaissance art he was aware of having made certain choices; he was aware of the phenomena that he excluded by making them. He celebrated the accomplishment of a humanistic art and despaired at the loss of it. A certain latitude was possible within this set of mind. Panofsky celebrates what he saw as a kind of cultural wholeness testified to in the symbolic content of Renaissance images. Aby Warburg, more psychological in his sensibility, studied that precarious balance among competing human impulses that is achieved by a society in the ordering of its rituals (the Navajos served him as an example) or by an individual in his patronage of art. In the midst of the current rush of alternatives to an earlier mode of studying art, it is only the radical critics of the field who engage those issues of society and history, those questions of moral values that were, by earlier scholars, accepted as an essential part of their scholarship. To what view of human and societal values, and to what understanding of the sequence of objects that we call history do we tend in our current mode of equating all works as separate but equal pieces of history?

One of the few people to see and address this as an issue has been E. H. Gombrich. Best known for his studies of representation and artistic illusion and the perceptual processes at work in receiving and forming images of the world, Gombrich has devoted himself on a number of recent occasions to the problem of maintaining the values of tradition.<sup>30</sup> His long-standing critique of the notion of *Zeitgeist* is extended here in an argument directed against the social historicization of the study and perception of art and the relativistic view of all values that results. On the one hand Gombrich is firm in his belief that a disciplined study of what he calls “the psychological and technical resources of the visual media” is necessary. But he also speaks to the value of personal response, which, with a characteristic confidence in right-mindedness, he feels will inevitably support traditional canons of taste, support in short the value of tradition itself.<sup>31</sup>

Gombrich's concern with the perceptual processes of vision can be easily accommodated to artistic notions of modernism, even as his analytic rigor can be accommodated to current structuralist modes of analyses. In contrast to modernist art and thought, however, he insists that our visual perception, like our judgment, is validated by external phenomena. For Gombrich the "beholder's share," that happy phrase by which he evokes the part we play in perceiving any representative illusion (or by extension one might say make a judgment), depends on a notion of constancy, constant objects in the world, constant values posited outside ourselves. This is, as Gombrich has often argued, simply a matter of common sense.

But it is common sense—taking this to refer to a community able to agree on certain realities and certain values—that is today being challenged by experience and by research. Many do not share Gombrich's confidence in tradition. Those who do, do not share Gombrich's urgent sense that it needs reiteration. Some of the most interesting work is being produced out a sense of this situation. The studies by Leo Steinberg, Michael Fried, and T. J. Clark that I particularly have in mind are perhaps more accurately called writings. For they are all acts of writing as much as they are reports of research accomplished.<sup>32</sup>

These three scholars differ from one another greatly in subject, attitude, and manner of address. But they share a meditative stance which testifies in each case, I think, to work which is not only reflective in nature but which might also properly be called reflexive. Each one clearly establishes where he stands. It is useful to recall that several years ago in these pages, Leo Steinberg argued eloquently against what he called the rule of objectivity and the shrinking self.<sup>33</sup> For Steinberg the self is a psychological presence, for Michael Fried it is rather a beholder, in a more philosophical sense, of pictorial fictions or images, whereas for T. J. Clark the self is a member of a particular society and class.<sup>34</sup> To the sensible question of whether it is appropriate to deal with Michelangelo, say, or Greuze or Courbet in terms of viewers so conceived, the answer these scholars seem to give is some mixture of evidence from the lifetime of the artist and from continuing human necessity. Surely Baxandall's disembodied desire—one shared by many art historians today—to see quattrocento art in quattrocento terms is as much an intellectual structuring of our time as the others. This too is knowledge we make.

Of these three writers, T. J. Clark comes closest to providing a response to the present problematic of our field as I have described it here. To repeat something said earlier, if art is most powerfully understood in its particular historical circumstances, then it is arguable that great art would result from conscious working out of this recognition. It is this claim that Clark makes for the art of Courbet in the years 1849–1850. Clark's *Image of the People* leads us with care through the social and political upheavals in France during these years. He traces Courbet's roots in the fractured and radicalized world of rural Besançon, his experimentation with popular imagery and popular forms taken from the example of simple popular engravings until Courbet finally comes to a pictorial definition of his audience. In Clark's analysis, the *Burial at Ornans* subverts the expectations of the normal public for high art by filling a work of monumental proportions and presumptions with the disorderly actualities of village society. In contrast to the traditional treatment of Courbet as a realist,

his art is here not only seen as a piece of history but is shown to have been made as such. One of the virtues of this study is that it understands its assumptions. Clark argues for the ideological determinants of art and he attempts to locate these in the complex surface, the figures, but also the very colors and brush strokes of a work. Let us extract some sentences from Clark's description of the *Burial at Ornans*.

He has painted more than forty-five figures life-size in a great frieze over eight yards long, arranging the figures in a long row which curves back slightly round the grave itself; and in places, following the conventions of popular art, he has piled the figures one on top of the other as if they stood on steeply sloping ground. And towards the right of the picture he has let the mass of mourners congeal into a solid wall of black pigment, against which the face of the mayor's daughter and the handkerchief which covers his sister Zoë's face register as tenuous, almost tragic interruptions. He has used colour deliberately and dramatically, in a way which has little to do with the careful materialism of the *Stonebreakers*, to symbolize matter; almost, as our eyes move right, to threaten the faces put upon the solid ground. . . . Beyond this point, when we start to ask about the picture's meaning, the real difficulties begin. What, to put it briefly, is the *Burial's* affective atmosphere? What are the mourners' attitudes and emotions, and what is Courbet's attitude to the event portrayed? . . . We have to answer such questions in the face of an image which deliberately avoids emotions organization: by that I mean the orchestration of forms to mimic and underline the emotional connotations of the subject. . . . Is the *Burial* a sacrament or merely a social occasion? . . . It was precisely its lack of open, declared *significance* which offended most of all; it was the way the *Burial* seemed to hide its attitudes, seemed to contain within itself too many contraries—religious and secular, comic and tragic, sentimental and grotesque. It was this inclusiveness, this exact and cruel deadpan, that made the *Burial* the focus of such different meanings. It was an image that took on the colours of its context; and perhaps it was designed to do so.<sup>35</sup>

But despite all this there are things that are left out. Clark does not intend a traditional assessment of the oeuvre of a master. The exclusions that he makes—many other works, but also other aspects of those he chooses to discuss—are made consciously. One can understand why they do not appear here. Clark can tell us of the social function of the *Burial at Ornans*, but what about Courbet's extraordinary self-portraits? Surely a discovery of self went along with Courbet's discovery of the state of his society when he returned to his village birthplace to paint in 1849–1850. And what if the issues are not self and society? How are we to understand that he painted landscapes and still-lives as he did?

The importance of Clark's work, like Steinberg's and Fried's, is not to demonstrate the strengths or the limits of a particular approach. It is rather that these writings set a standard, offer a level of thinking, of looking, of pictorial analysis that we in art history sorely need. In distinguishing the preeminent problems in our field today, the criticisms that I offered about how they are being dealt with are less criticisms of the particular assumptions made, than criticism of assumptions not perceived, not acknowledged. The pressing need in other words is to recognize just what it is that we are about.

It is curious to note that each of these three very different scholars has been at pains to give an account of the nature and attentiveness of past viewers of the works that they are studying. Steinberg characteristically sets his studies in this very frame, summarizing for us how a work—Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*, for

example—has been seen through the ages. Fried in studying the critiques of the eighteenth-century French salons and Clark in studying the reactions to the exhibitions of Courbet's works of 1849–1850 have made the reactions to the basic material of their research and analysis. More important than the distinctiveness of their approaches (Steinberg might be called a psychoanalytic, Fried a formalist, and Clark a Marxist critic) is the common claim made by these scholars, against the evidence of most art historical writing today, that not only research *about*, but looking *at* a work, takes time. They all show that it took time to look in the past and they offer us ways in which it can today.

In the greater expanse of art history this fact has frequently been lost sight of, though indeed in reading Riegl, Wölfflin, Focillon, or Lawrence Gowing, for example, we find writers who did not. But it is a particularly pressing issue today in the atmosphere and with the kind of intellectual engagements outlined in the opening part of this essay. With such a profusion of objects and cultures, with old hierarchies crumbling, how does one justify such an occupation as looking? It is a daunting question.

#### REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup>Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Florence: A Primer in the Social History of Style* (London, 1972) and T. J. Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution* (London, 1973). Two remarks should be appended by way of introduction to this essay. First, although the examples of both present and past work in art history will come largely from those areas I know best, the Renaissance and after, I think that the points I shall make are not limited to these areas. Second, in choosing to emphasize the directions being taken by innovative work I do not mean to deny that much excellent scholarship of a more traditional kind continues to be done.
- <sup>2</sup>John Fleming and Hugh Honour (eds.), *Art in Context*; Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Pelican History of Art* (London, 1953– ).
- <sup>3</sup>Werner Weisbach, *Der Barock als Kunst der Gegenreformation* (Berlin, 1921).
- <sup>4</sup>Carl J. Friedrich, *The Age of the Baroque* (New York, 1952).
- <sup>5</sup>Peter Gay, *Art and Act: On Causes in History—Manet, Gropius, Mondrian* (New York, 1976), p. 3.
- <sup>6</sup>I am referring here to the following studies: Francis Haskell, *Patrons and Painters* (London, 1963), p. 10 n. (Reni); David Rosand, "Titian in the Frari," *Art Bulletin*, 53 (1970): 206 (Titian); L. D. Ettlinger's as yet unpublished study of Michelangelo's Medici Chapel.
- <sup>7</sup>Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Florence*, p. 40.
- <sup>8</sup>Rudolf Wittkower, *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism* (London, 1949).
- <sup>9</sup>Heinrich Wölfflin, *Prolegomena zu einer Psychologie der Architektur* (1886), reprinted in *Kleine Schriften* (Basel, 1946), see p. 44.
- <sup>10</sup>Oleg Grabar, "An Art of the Object," *ARTFORUM* (March 1976): 36–43.
- <sup>11</sup>Alois Riegl, *Stilfragen* (Berlin, 1893).
- <sup>12</sup>To give but two examples in the work of colleagues at Berkeley: James Cahill's recent study (unpublished), "Life Patterns and Stylistic Directions in Ming Painting," and Joanne Williams, "Caste and the Role of the Painter in Mughal India" (also unpublished).
- <sup>13</sup>Erwin Panofsky, "Der Begriff des Kunstwollens," *Zeitschrift für Aesthetik und Allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*, 14 (1920): 321–339.
- <sup>14</sup>See Erwin Panofsky, "Iconography and Iconology: An Introduction to the Study of Renaissance Art," *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Garden City, 1955), pp. 26–54.
- <sup>15</sup>Erwin Panofsky, "Introductory," in *Studies in Iconography: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (New York, 1962), pp. 27–28. First published in 1939.
- <sup>16</sup>Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting, Its Origins and Character* (Cambridge, Mass., 1955).
- <sup>17</sup>Erwin Panofsky, *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer* (Princeton, 1955). First published in 1943.
- <sup>18</sup>Kenneth Clark, *Rembrandt and the Italian Renaissance* (New York, 1966).
- <sup>19</sup>Erwin Panofsky, "The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline," printed as the Introduction to *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Garden City, 1955); see pp. 5 and 24 for the quotations cited.
- <sup>20</sup>There are of course some exceptions. Early on James Ackerman voiced concerns about the direction being taken by art history in "Western Art History," in *Art and Archaeology* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1963), where he pointed to the noninterventionist stance of American art historians. He

has not been alone among art historians since then in turning to the film (Ackerman has even made one) by way of being more in touch with the realities of modern society. In this connection we should remember that Panofsky himself wrote a piece welcoming and, in certain respects at least definitively defining, this newest of artistic media. As always Panofsky located just where he stood in relationship to it: "It is the movies, and only the movies that do justice to that materialistic interpretation of the universe which, whether we like it or not, pervades contemporary civilization." "Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures," *Critique*, 1, 3 (January-February, 1947), reprinted in Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen (eds.), *Film Theory and Criticism* (New York, 1974), pp. 151-169.

<sup>21</sup>William M. Ivins, Jr., *Prints and Visual Communication* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968). First published in 1953.

<sup>22</sup>George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven, 1962), p. 1.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 39 ff. and p. 44.

<sup>24</sup>E. H. Gombrich, "The Renaissance Theory of Art and the Rise of Landscape Painting," in *Norm and Form* (London, 1966), p. 114.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>26</sup>See particularly Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" *Partisan Review* (1975): 603-614.

<sup>27</sup>Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean*, tr. Sian Reynolds (New York, 1973), vol. 1, p. 16.

<sup>28</sup>Robert Smithson, "Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape," *ARTFORUM* (February, 1973): pp. 62-68.

<sup>29</sup>Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Florence*, p. 151.

<sup>30</sup>For example, see E. H. Gombrich, "Art History and the Social Sciences," *The Romanes Lecture for 1973* (Oxford, 1975).

<sup>31</sup>These comments are based on Gombrich's Erasmus Prize acceptance speech as published in *Simiolus*, 8 (1975-1976): 47-48.

<sup>32</sup>Leo Steinberg has published books, articles, and reviews on many different areas of art. See his *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth Century Art* (New York, 1972), or more recently *Michelangelo's Last Paintings* (Oxford, 1976). Michael Fried, first known for his studies of contemporary artists, has also written on nineteenth-century French art and is now studying its antecedents in the eighteenth century. See his "Absorption: A Master Theme in French Painting," *Eighteenth Century Studies*, 9 (1975-1976): 139-177; and "Towards a Supreme Fiction: Genre and Beholder in the Art Criticism of Diderot and His Contemporaries," *New Literary History* (Spring, 1975): 534-584. Besides his study of Courbet mentioned earlier, T. J. Clark has also written a book on Daumier, *The Absolute Bourgeois* (London, 1973), and has now turned to Impressionism and after.

<sup>33</sup>Leo Steinberg, "Objectivity and the Shrinking Self," *Daedalus* (Summer, 1969): 824-836.

<sup>34</sup>A specific woman's sense of self is also being articulated in art studies today. The ground for such writing was laid (was in effect cleared) by Linda Nochlin in an article first published in 1971, "Why Have There Been No Great Woman Artists," reprinted in Thomas B. Hess and Elizabeth B. Baker (eds.), *Art and Sexual Politics* (New York, 1973). It has been part of the groundswell of revisionist views of art history. If I have not selected out any single woman writer here, it is because it seems to me to be more a chorus than distinct individual voices. A major virtue of the woman's movement in art is that the chorus joins art historians with critics and artists in an easy relationship not usual in these tight professional worlds. This promises much.

<sup>35</sup>T. J. Clark, *The Image of the People*, pp. 82-83.