

64. For the following paragraphs I am grateful for some observations made by my student David Buncel in his Hunter College M.A. thesis, "A Study of E. H. Gombrich’s Theory of Representation" (1992).


70. Duchamp must not be held responsible for all the vagaries of his followers. One dubious legacy, though, is his love of punning. In 1920 he exhibited, under the name of his alter ego Rose Sélavy, a miniature set of French windows, entitled "Fresh Widow." Presumably the "fresh widow" is the fictional creator, and the title makes the connection with the work. Punning became a common practice among the surrealists, as with Max Ernst’s collage cycle "La Femme Cent Têtes," the woman with a hundred heads, which can be read as "La Femme Sans Tête," the headless woman. Today such puns have become an annoying tic of much postmodernist writing.


CHAPTER TWO. BIOGRAPHICAL CRITICISM AND PSYCHOLOGY

The Western tradition of compiling biographies of notable persons began with the ancient Greeks. Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, from the early second century of our era, is the outstanding landmark. Plutarch was preoccupied by politicians and intellectuals; his fifty surviving Lives contain no artists. Elsewhere in Greek literature, though, picturesque anecdotes about the pride and eccentricities of artists vividly convey their allure as personalities in their own right. The most outstanding figures were not mere craft workers, but strong-willed individuals whose company was sought by the elite.

The Greeks provided a general model for group biography, as well as specific data about artist's lives. But as far as artists were concerned, they did not combine the general and the specific. This fusion was finally accomplished by Giorgio Vasari in sixteenth-century Italy. Still being read profitably today, his vast *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects* (1550; enlarged edition, 1568) has a general narrative theme of artistic progress, which he parcels out in a series of chapters devoted to individual creators. Vasari is properly attentive to the works, for they are the objects of our ultimate concern. Yet he takes pains to blend in many nuggets of the personal foibles and idiosyncrasies of the artists, knowing that these piquant details sustain reader interest.

Today this fascination with personal lives fuels publishers' output of popular biographies, including the highly subjective accounts of Pablo Picasso and Frank Lloyd Wright by Norman Mailer and Brendan Gill respectively. A few contemporary artists, including Julian Schnabel, Cindy Sherman, and Jeff Koons, have achieved celebrity status in the media. Others, such as the artists depicted in the gallery of portraits by Chuck Close (born 1940), are household names in the art world—at least in that of New York City.

Biographical data about artists are by definition unique, for particulars are what establish their character as individuals. For this reason it is hard to generalize about the personalities and careers of artists.

This problem is not limited to the study of artists. A Latin proverb asserts that *individuum est ineffabile*, the individual is indescribable. We all seek to guard this uniqueness, in the sense that we do not wish to be confined by a simple label, as "So and so is just an entitled" or "So and so is a typical Texan," even though we may take legitimate pride in such status.

These objections to generalization are significant. Yet we still find it hard to refrain from hazarding general estimates about individual human beings. Of course (we will acknowledge) Napoleon was a unique individual; but he was also a Corsican who became a French general and emperor. It seems that we can make general statements about individuals, while still preserving their quality as unique persons.

Granting then the permissibility of generalizations, there remains a further issue. For these general statements may be field-specific. Every walk of life exhibits certain qualities. Opera singers are temperamentally and accountants are cautious. Stereotypical though they may be, these assertions seem not totally unfounded, even though there are exceptions. There are two main reasons why such characterizations have some merit. Success as an opera diva depends on the ability to convey emotions, and this talent is likely to spill over into other situations. Conversely, careful handling of the financial records of others requires prudence and discretion—again qualities that may be more generally expressed. So the behaviors are rooted in the job itself. The other factor is the internalized sense that one must live up to expectations. Since people assume that opera stars are temperamentally and accountants cautious, those electing these professions tend to "read from the script." Stereotypes become reality to the extent
that people embrace and enact them.

Records of artists from earlier centuries disclose several persistent patterns, which constitute legends about artists’ careers. Whether strictly true or not, this body of folklore tells us about how artists have been viewed over the centuries.

The first such category of legend—what literary scholars term a topos—has to do with the discovery of the young artist’s talent. In a characteristic example (which happens to be the first known), Vasari reports that Cimabue, an established Florentine artist, was strolling one day (perhaps around 1280 A.D.) in the countryside. He came across a shepherd who had made in the sand some drawings of great promise. The boy’s name was Giotto. Cimabue took the young man under his wing and trained him in the craft of painting. Eventually the pupil surpassed his teacher.

Such stories are told about a number of artists, including Andrea del Castagno, Domenico Beccafumi, Jacopo Sansovino—Italian artists; and Francisco de Zurbarán, and Francisco Goya—Spanish artists. (A contemporary parallel, though it has an inner-city setting, is Andy Warhol’s discovery of the Haitian-American Jean-Michel Basquiat, when he was doing graffiti.)

The pattern of these stories reveals two important beliefs. The first is the idea that artistic talent is inborn and will reveal itself even in an unlikely setting. The second assumption is that artists generally reach maturity, cultivating their inborn talent, under the guidance of particular teachers. Detection of such a relationship allows us to compare the works of the pupil with those of the teacher with a view to learning something of the younger creator’s formative process.

Another story pattern, different from the one concerning the revelation of artistic talent, has to do with the contest of two mature artists, one of whom surpasses the other with a marvelous display of skill. As a challenge to a colleague, the ancient Greek painter Zeuxis was reputed to have depicted a bunch of grapes so successfully that birds flew down to peck at them. Unfazed, his rival Parrhasios went off to execute a painting of a linen curtain. Invited to view the rival work, Zeuxis haughtily demanded that the other artist draw back the curtain to reveal his painting. Then his opponent responded that the curtain was in fact the painting. During the Renaissance a number of artists demonstrated their illusionistic virtuosity by depicting spiders and flies with such verisimilitude that the viewer is tempted to try to flick them off.

In today’s world of spectacular special effects at the movies, such feats of illusion are no longer considered integral to the visual arts, where they could not be matched. Yet other types of achievement are from time to time ascribed to noted artists, who may boast of them. Picasso, for example, enjoys the legendary repute of having completed a series of tests for entrance to the Barcelona academy that normally required thirty days in a mere three days. In fact he completed the requirements in the normal span.

Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, who initiated the study of legends about artists, refer to them as "primitive cells" making up the elements of biography. In addition to utilizing these building blocks, the biographer of artists adheres to certain narrative expectations. The case of Giorgio Vasari, who set forth the great exemplar of the art-biographical genre, is instructive. Concerns that affected Vasari’s writing included classical rhetorical models, a desire to memorialize individual artists as solid citizens, the idea of competition, and a wish to enliven his texts by vivid anecdotes, some evidently derived from the short stories that were currently in vogue. The recurrence of these motifs, which the reader gradually assimilates almost unconsciously, provides a kind of "road map" through the various lives.

Over the centuries writers have sifted and evaluated changing concerns based on the social situation of artists. For example, accounts of artists like Peter Paul Rubens, Gian-Lorenzo Bernini and Charles Le Brun, who served rulers and popes, highlight these connections. Conversely, biographers of modern figures, such as Manet, Cézanne, and Rothko, often stress the precarious position of the
innovative artist as an outsider, pursuing his or her lonely path with great dedication despite many obstacles. Accounts of women artists will stress the obstacles they had to overcome in achieving professional status.

The Euro-American sense of the artist as belonging to a caste apart, contrasts with the more integral concept honored in traditional China, where the literati, indispensable to the bureaucratic elite, figure as central to painting and calligraphy—as practitioners, as collectors, and as writers on aesthetics and history. These activities could be pursued during hours not occupied by official duties, as well as over longer periods when the literatus found himself out of office. Over the centuries the "amateur ideal" of the disinterested scholar producing paintings in his spare time has been lovingly cultivated by historiographers of Chinese art. James Cahill has shown that this concept was more an ideal than a constant, in as much as many painters in fact worked for money. Still the prevalence of the ideal guided the selection of painters recorded in histories and critical writings. Those who could not be made to fit the mold, such as the Zen Buddhist painters, tended to be left out.

Broadly speaking, contemporary biographies in our own society are of two types. One is represented by the venerable old-master monographs published over the years by the Phaidon firm, first in Austria and then in England, which stress the works. A good example is Rudolf Wittkower's Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1955), where a concise short account of the life and significance of the artist precedes a substantial catalogue raisonné, listing and evaluating all the works the author regards as genuine. In some cases the biographical data needed to supplement the essay may take the guise of a compact "chronology" of a few pages, where the main landmarks of the life appear ranged in the order of dates.

Another type of artist biography concentrates on the life itself. A moving instance of this type is James E. B. Breslin's Mark Rothko (1993), which while offering hardly any detailed analysis of the works nonetheless provides a remarkably nuanced account of the artist's difficult life.

Rare is a work of major scope, such as John Richardson A Life of Picasso (two volumes; 1991-, in progress), that blends, in equal proportion, the approach based on the works with the approach based on the life.

Scrupulously researched academic biographies are admirable, but the general public often derives its information from more popular sources. During the twentieth century films have played a prominent role in shaping the "image" of major artists. An early example is the lushly atmospheric "Rembrandt" (1936), directed by Alexander Korda, with Charles Laughton impersonating the Dutch master.

In "Lust for Life" (1956), based on the book on Vincent van Gogh by Irving Stone, Kirk Douglas played the anguished central figure, but Anthony Quinn made off with the Oscar for his Paul Gauguin. Another adaptation from Stone, "The Agony and the Ecstasy" (1965), with Charlton Heston playing Michelangelo, has drawn criticism for excluding the artist's homoerotic sentiments. By contrast, "Caravaggio" (1986), directed by the British gay activist Derek Jarman, perhaps overemphasized the homosexual side of this bisexual artist.

Andrei Tarkovsky's affecting but sometimes grimly realistic filming of the medieval Russian artist Andrei Rublev's life was at first banned by the Soviet authorities, but then released after it won a prize at the Cannes film festival in 1971. The artist Julian Schnabel's 1996 film on [Jean Michel] "Basquiat," who died of a heroin overdose at the age of 28, shows many aspects of current New York City art life.

On its release in the United States in May 1998, the French film "Artemisia" [Gentileschi] drew brickbats from American feminists—including Gloria Steinem and Mary Garrard, the author of the leading monograph on the artist—who accused the filmmaker, Agnès Merlet, of reshaping the facts so as to
exculpate and romanticize the artist's rape at the hands of her teacher, Agostino Tassi. This controversy has raised the issue of how far makers of historical movies are entitled to depart from the historical record in search of their own vision. In the case of "Artemisia" the director and her associates probably went too far. But how is this excess to be determined? It is interesting that in cases like these, even those who generally lean towards deconstructionist ideas of the relativity of truth offer judgments that, by contrast, assume objective standards of historical veracity. And why should we not assume them? The transcript of the rape trial has, after all, been published. In my view, we must accept some criteria of historical objectivity: by these criteria "Artemisia" probably fails.

As a matter of principle, the large body of documentary art films, which have not achieved wide distribution and therefore have not materially shaped the public image of creative figures, are not considered in the preceding brief review of influential films about artists.7

While today's politics discourages ranking of artists (and others) as an elitist enterprise, most of us tacitly assume that there is a select company of figures whose names and general qualities every educated person should recognize. In view of all the other information modern minds must store, this list of artists cannot be limitless; for practical purposes the pantheon might comprise somewhere between fifteen and forty individuals.

In his theoretical treatise Idea del Tempio della Pittura (1590), the Milanese artist and writer Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo selected seven top artists, correlated with seven planets and seven metals. Lomazzo's artists are Michelangelo, Gaudenzio Ferrari, Polidoro Caravaggio (these two unfamiliar names are those of local luminaries, and would not necessarily have been accepted by other contemporary critics), Leonardo, Raphael, Mantegna, and Titian. Along with Michelangelo, these last four certainly would command assent. In as much as Italy was then the center of the art world, most authorities there would probably have endorsed Lomazzo's "Security Council" of the big five, with the possible addition of one or two others such as Correggio and Giorgione.

When Lomazzo's treatise was published in English in 1598, the translator Richard Haydocke inserted the names of English artists, such as Nicholas Hilliard and Isaac Oliver. This "improvement" shows how nationalistic and other subjective factors may play a role.

In Timber or Discoveries: Observations on Men and Manners of 1641, the English dramatist Ben Johnson cites as "famous painters in Italy": Raphael, Michelangelo, Titian, Correggio, Sebastiano del Piombo, Giulio Romano, and Andrea del Sarto. Giulio Romano, by the way, is the only artist mentioned in all of the writings of William Shakespeare.

In his Cours de peinture par principes (1708), the French critic Roger de Piles introduced a new criterion: grading the artists. He assembled a list of sixty artists of some note—Italian, French, German, Dutch, and Flemish—and marked them according to four criteria: composition, drawing, color, and expression. Since each category has a possible 20 points, the highest grade achievable is 80. Two artists, each with totals of 65 points, compete for the highest honors: Raphael and Rubens. Both excel in composition and expression. Raphael also does well in drawing but falls down in color, while with Rubens it is the opposite. The fact that De Piles can favor both a champion of high Renaissance formalism (Raphael) and an exuberant baroque painter (Rubens) shows an emerging catholicity of taste.

And what of today? A comparison of artists chosen for three major collections spanning the period from the late fifities to the present, the Encyclopedia of World Art, the wonderful Rizzoli monograph series of over 100 volumes, and the fine new Phaidon monographs (just now appearing), yields a list of the "top forty," a consensus mirroring the whole span of the second half of the twentieth century.4

In order to appear in the following honor role, each artist had to garner a "triple crown"—nomination from all three accredited pools. Here is the list: Fra Angelico, Bellini, Bosch, Botticelli,

A hundred years ago Hieronymus Bosch and El Greco, then regarded as wayward and minor, would have failed to make the grade. Now they are popular favorites; no museum director lucky enough to possess one of their masterworks would ever dare even think of taking it off the walls.

To use a term common among literary scholars (who have studied the phenomenon in their field), the "canon" evolves slowly, but it evolves. However that may be, at the end of the twentieth century the list just presented seems a little out-of-date. The recipe seems to be as follows. First make up a rich basic stock of old masters, then add seasoning: major modern figures. All the ingredients that go in the pot are the proverbial "dead white European males."

No Americans or women have made the top forty—at least this one. These absences probably reflect the "drag effect" of the two earlier rosters, Encyclopedia and Rizzoli, generated for the most part in the 1950s and 1960s. The Phaidon list, the latest of the three—but which according to the rules of the competition commands only one vote per artist in this polling—includes several Americans and/or women, including Artemisia Gentileschi, Jasper Johns, Frida Kahlo, Georgia O'Keefe, Mark Rothko, and Andy Warhol. The test of time will determine whether these figures—accompanied by others yet to make their mark—keep their place. Moreover, in all likelihood growing global consciousness will mandate the addition of artists standing outside the European-American tradition.

We can all rejoice when an artist, previously neglected, receives his or her rightful place. Little noticed, however, is the phenomenon whereby artists once regarded as belonging to the front rank of their time, begin to fade. This has happened with Georges Braque (overshadowed by Picasso) and Henry Moore (whose public sculptures have been banalized by their stamp of "official approval"). In some cases, an artist's reputation may slip, only to recover again, as has occurred with the surrealist paintings of Salvador Dali.

Actually, Dali never forfeited popular acclaim. It was critics and art historians, disenchanted by his exhibitionism and disregard of the formalist qualities they admired, who disdained him. Although the gap between popular admiration of Dali and his status among the cognoscenti has narrowed, the difference points to an interesting problem. The works of Andrew Wyeth, whose wistful "Christina's World" (1948) is one of the best known of mid-twentieth-century American works, have failed to capture the esteem of the elite. In the summer of 1998 the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City held an exhibition "Unknown Terrain: The Landscapes of Andrew Wyeth," in a laudable attempt to bring the elite and popular perceptions into synch. However, the critic Roberta Smith, while striving to be sympathetic, nonetheless found the artist's main interest to lie in his connection with the American national character: "Mr. Wyeth's fear of pleasure, his plodding diligence, his elevation of the rural and his nostalgia for a past that never existed are among the signal traits of our national character."9

Today (to choose a very different name), many working artists look upon Marcel Duchamp as the creative figure of the century. The general public, while relishing some of his more daring works, declines to bestow on Duchamp its sustained admiration, so that the almost incessant drumbeat of Picasso exhibitions is not paralleled by presentations of his French contemporary. Perhaps rankings are to some extent a property of the groups that make them, so that it is unrealistic to expect universal agreement.

Over the centuries, a persistent theme is that artists display a particular temperament. In former times such figures as Michelangelo, Pontormo, and El Greco had the reputation of being eccentric, moody, capricious, and melancholy—a condition formerly ascribed to the prevalence of the Saturnine temperament. This condition could result from an interaction of the "humors" whose mixing regulated
the human constitution, or from external forces relating in some way to the planet Saturn (astrology). More recently, madness or near madness has been ascribed to such artists as Vincent Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin. Genius, so the assumption goes, places particular strains on the individual who possesses it—leading to neurosis or worse.

Today, Renaissance explanations based on outdated medical and astrological theories no longer pass muster. Why then are artists still regarded as eccentric and moody? In part it may be simply that the stereotype has become so deeply rooted in the public consciousness that the fledgling artist feels obliged to honor it, to "act like an artist." Having donned the mask, so to speak, he or she finds it hard to take it off. A simpler explanation has to do with the day-to-day routines of the profession. As a rule, artists are exempt from the rigid scheduling that characterizes most middle-class jobs. In modern parlance, they have more flex-time, being able to schedule their work when they will, sometimes toiling over long stretches and then taking off for a considerable period. This "irregular" job pattern sets them apart from ordinary working stiffs. Here artists enjoy a kind of liberty many aspire to. The freedom that artists seem to flaunt may even elicit envy, tempting lay people to attribute flaws to them by way of psychic compensation.

Certainly many artists have been workaholics, preferring to labor obsessively over long periods during which they shun company and even ignore their need for food. A famous example is the repeated expostulations of Paolo Uccello who asserted, when his wife asked him to come to bed, that he could not—he was contemplating the wonders of perspective!

Sometimes the opposite tendency occurs, with artists who procrastinate or suffer having their creativity temporarily blocked. This condition resulted in the unfinished works of Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Washington Allston. Of course, in some instances the impatience of the patron, who cannot brook delay in receiving the finished work, has unfairly aggravated this sense of procrastination. Vasari claims that Cosimo de' Medici, exasperated by the tardiness of Fra Filippo Lippi in completing some frescoes in Cosimo's residence, had the artist locked in the building—to be released only on satisfactory completion. But Lippi eluded his patron-captor by tying bed sheets into a rope by which means he escaped from an upper window. Some artists wrongly flagellate themselves for insufficient productivity. Eugène Delacroix, one of the most prolific painters of the nineteenth century, castigated himself for laziness.

A few artists have had an inordinate fear of being poisoned. Absurdly, Albrecht Dürer was warned not to sup with Venetian artists when he visited their city; that would surely be the end of him. More realistically, this fear may be legitimately grounded in the hazardous materials they have often been forced to use.

Alcoholism has sometimes been a group problem, but probably only in response to transient cultural fashions. Excessive drinking is not typical of artists as a whole. However, in twentieth-century America novelists William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway, much in the public eye, had a serious drinking problem. When the abstract expressionist painters took up drink in the 1940s, they may have been responding to a sense that this is what macho creative people do rather than to anything inherent in the artist's profession. They were enacting a stereotype, fortunately one that has rarely prevailed. Certainly a prolonged drinking habit would spoil many types of art which require precise and sustained execution.

One outcome of a troubled life is suicide. Some notable artists who have taken their own lives include Rosso Fiorentino, Francesco Bassano, Francesco Borromini, Vincent Van Gogh, Arshile Gorky, and Mark Rothko. Other names could be added. However, it is not known whether artists are statistically more likely to commit suicide than people in other walks of life. Probably they are not.

As regards politics, modern opinion views artists as typically leaning to the Left, in some instances openly "subversive" and insurgent. Providing that they can retain the integrity of their work,
they commonly endorse progressive causes. However, this affinity between artists and the Left is at best about two centuries old. It reflects the dissolution, in the course of the eighteenth century, of the bonds that had linked the artist to the aristocracy, and the consequent emancipation, precarious as it often was economically, of the formerly subservient artist. The conviction that artists and the Left are allied crystalizes in the term avant-garde, applicable to both; significantly this term came into general use only towards the middle of the nineteenth century.

A further puzzle deserves mention. During the Renaissance many artists, such as Masaccio, Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Raphael came to be known by the first names only. When an artist’s fame declines the privilege is withdrawn. Guido Reni, who was formerly known only by the first name (and even hailed as the “divine Guido”), now requires the last. This habit suggests a certain confusion in the way people have looked upon artists. On the one hand, they have been admired in breezy, perhaps even slightly belittling ways. On the other hand, such is the fame that attaches to them that they need not be cited in full: the first name, or even a sobriquet, suffices. This combination of two opposed attitudes reveals the ambivalence in which Renaissance, and many later artists too, have been held. As has always been the case, the Renaissance artist remained a craftsman, doing manual labor. Yet in some respects, the artist is, as Leone Battista Alberti said in 1435, an alter deus, tantamount to a god.

Today familiar monickers mark standard media references to such celebrities as Elvis, Marilyn, and Madonna. They have attained pantheon status. Others who would attain it by this means have not been so lucky. Examples are César, Christo and his wife Jeanne-Claude, and Marisol, where the artists insist on using only those first names. That is, they choose the reduction; we don’t do it for them. Though many would probably recognize “Andy,” in actual practice this short form may seem pretentious, suggesting that the user had a greater familiarity with the artist than may have actually been the case: “Andy Warhol” is the proper way to refer to him.

Interest in the personalities of artists has been historically variable. Sometimes demand for this kind of information has been intense, only to slacken in other periods. With the rise of the concept of period style (as noted in Chapter One, above), biography tended to take a back seat to art-historical approaches emphasizing the development of art as a collective force transcending individual peculiarities. Nonetheless the demand for books recounting the intimate details of the lives of artists continued, and the later decades of the nineteenth century generated many respectable biographies buttressed with better information, gleaned from careful archival research. At the same time curiosity abounded about the personal idiosyncrasies of artists based on the romantic idea that their personalities were odd, perhaps even "near to madness allied." In the study of Michelangelo this viewpoint emerged almost from the beginning, recurring today in popular approaches to Van Gogh, Gauguin, and perhaps Frida Kahlo and Yayoi Kusama.

Such highly personalized views of art as the emanation of the emotional life of the creator, regarded as a unique genius, are characteristic of the Western (Euro-American) tradition. Other traditions, such as the South Asian (Indian) and the Native American ones, have been more concerned with craft and collective identity. The recent controversy over “the death of the author” (Roland Barthes) suggests that, if you will, a deliberate muting of the concept of personal authorship may have some rewards. A hundred years ago, Heinrich Wölfflin commended the concept of an “art history without names.” Such an approach permits one to concentrate on the larger, transpersonal issues of style character and style change.

Through much of its course Western art shows its rejection of the ideal of anonymity through the practice of artist's signatures, which are not only an expression of pride of authorship, but also represent, for the purchaser, a guarantee of authenticity. In ancient Greece Euthykartides of Naxos was the first
sculptor known to have inscribed his signature on a statue (about 630 B.C.). In vases the Corinthian potter Timonides signed a work in the 580s, while the Athenian painter Sophilos did so in the 570s. These early texts often take the form "X made me," suggesting the persistence of an animist concept in which the work speaks, as if to express gratitude to its maker.

During the middle ages, signatures were more important than is usually thought. Following the examples of notaries and scribes who affixed a carefully stylized signature to guarantee the legal validity of written material, illuminators would sometimes complete their books with a colophon declaring their authorship and the circumstances in which it was done. Signatures also appear in monumental sculpture, as seen in the work of Wiligelmus of Modena and Gislebertus of Autun, both of the twelfth century.

Virtuoso signatures mark the Renaissance. A common type seen from the time of Antonello da Messina to that of El Greco appears on a scrap of trompe l’oeil paper, which may even be depicted as cast casually to the ground. Many Renaissance artists preferred monograms to the full name, as Albrecht Dürer, who became known for his characteristic combination of A and D.

In modern paintings such as those of Monet and Picasso the signature may be so prominent as almost to make up part of the composition. Whether intentionally or not, such signatures cater to the personality cult of the artist.

In our own time, the personalist preoccupation has spilled over into popular culture, as with Irving Stone’s novelized biographies of Michelangelo and Van Gogh. These effusions cater to a significant commercial market. Yet the interest all too readily descends the slippery slope to wallow in pure gossip. Some chroniclers of Picasso and Warhol—whose lives are of course documented in minute, sometimes embarrassing detail—succumb to this temptation. But is gossip all bad? Getting talked about is one of the primary preoccupations—one might almost say privileges—of our society, and it would be needlessly austere to ask artists to forego the pleasures of celebrity—not to mention the sacrifice asked of those who would celebrate them.

At all events there are legitimate questions about biography that bear directly on each individual artist’s achievement. Among these are (as noted in the discovery legend mentioned above) matters relating to the beginning of the artist’s vocation. What sort of training did he or she obtain and what was the relationship with the teacher? Surviving teacher oevtres often provide a clue to the starting points, the juvenilia if you will, of the pupil. For example, consulting Perugino’s sober, workmanlike Central Italian paintings assists our understanding of the early work of his disciple, the celebrated Raphael. And Thomas Hart Benton’s figural work in the American regionalist mode helps us to understand the work of Jackson Pollock before he became an abstractionist. In a few cases the instructor was the artist’s own parent, as Picasso was first guided by his father, a provincial teacher of painting and drawing. This is true of many women artists of former times, who were able to circumvent the professional obstacles placed in their path by the good fortune of being born into an artistic family.

As in many other realms of society today, credentialing is an issue. Did the artist obtain a degree from an art school, a liberal arts college, or simply find his or her own way? In the last case it is common to label the individual a "naive” or “outsider” artist. Many credentialed artists come to reverse the process by becoming teachers themselves. Then, when they are sufficiently established, they may drop the expedient, working full time in the loft or country home. Others, of course, remain devoted teachers.

Some artists started somewhat late, as did Vassily Kandinsky and Donald Judd. With greater acceptance of mid-career changes this pattern may be expected to become more common. Other artists undergo interruptions in their profession for various reasons. Lured apparently by the prospect of more stable employment, the gifted Meindert Hobbema abandoned painting about 1688 to pursue his duties in the wine-import division of the Amsterdam customs service. Some changes are forced, as with the
Milanese mannerist painter Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo who went blind at the age of thirty-three (1571); he found a new career as an art theorist and autobiographer.

A more perplexing question has to do with when artists begin to "ship out," so to speak, by repeating tired formulae so that, in terms of their contribution to art, that effectively stops some years before they cease actual production. Two artists who participated in the Fauve movement in France in the early years of the present century did not escape this fate: André Derain and Maurice Vlaminck. In these cases it is hard to know whether the blame is due to exhaustion of their own creative powers or to the decline in favor of the movement in which they participated.

Some effects are clearly external. Among these are the distorting effect of wars and other commotions, such as the sack of Rome in 1527, which drove many artists from the Eternal City, contributing, some scholars believe, to the development of Mannerism. After the fall of Paris to the Germans in June of 1940 a number of artists, aided by Peggy Guggenheim and other altruists, were able to make their way from Marseilles to the United States, where their presence helped catalyze the Abstract Expressionist movement.

Quite varied are relations with patrons and dealers. Patrons tended to be more important in earlier centuries, while dealers have been essential players in the diffusion of art since the middle of the nineteenth century. While accounts abound of venal or unreliaible dealers, many have been ethical persons who nourished the artists under their care not merely with money but with psychological support and advice. The dealers Wilhelm Uhde, Léonce Rosenberg, and especially Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler played indispensable roles in the development and diffusion of Cubist painting.

There is also the matter of peer groups or circles. Examining the English Bloomsbury group, and the "bande à Picasso," the friends in Montmartre at the beginning of the present century, we can study the interaction of artists with other intellectuals, including the general public as a group. This was true of the antiacademic Eight" in 1907, and the Canadian landscapists "The Seven," were eventually enlarged to nine members, suggesting that such may prove unwise.

As noted above, the portraits of Chuck Close document a closely knit circle of friends in today's New York art world. A larger assemblage is recorded in the oeuvre of Alice Neel. Today Internet chat lines, such as the excellent ones maintained by the Whitney Museum of American Art, are fostering the emergence of more informal groupings of art world people.

More problematic is the idea of generations, larger groupings of individuals who do not necessarily know one another but who interact with the one being studied, often over a long period. Recently it has been proposed that we study these relationships for themselves, in a dyadic approach. This method has proved fruitful for the couples Sonia Delaunay and Robert Delaunay; Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant; Lee Krasner and Jackson Pollock; and Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg.

Since the Middle Ages artists have interpreted their roles and personalities in a notable series of self-portraits. When these are numerous over the artist's lifetime, as with Rembrandt, they may be said to form a kind of autobiography in paint.

Written autobiographies, even of the "as-told-to" type have been uncommon, even in the Renaissance when humanistic ideals ought to have impelled painters, sculptors, and architects to put pen
to paper. A simple explanation, probably too simple, is that artists are dedicated to working in the visual media and deliberately eschew words, for which they may not be temperamentally or educationally suited. Actually, it may a matter of time budget; the fact that they are fully employed with their often laborious works leaves little room for other activities, causing a dearth of verbal self-accounts. On some occasions when artists have had time on their hands they have turned to autobiography. The Italian sculptor and goldsmith Benvenuto Cellini started to dictate his autobiography in 1557, when he was under house arrest for sodomy and unable to continue his work in the foundary. In the 1930s the American architect Frank Lloyd Wright began what turned out to be a lengthy autobiography in the leisure time afforded him because the Great Depression had caused most of his commissions to dry up. Other genres of writing, not necessarily intended in the first instance for publication, attest that artists can be eloquent. Examples include the Journals of Eugène Delacroix, the Letters of Vincent Van Gogh, and the South Sea memoirs of Paul Gauguin. Some recent artists, such as Mary Kelly and Martha Rosler, have merged autobiographical texts with their public work.

Much can be learned from the careful accumulation of facts and patterns about artists that can be recovered from many sources. Some observers, though, have sought to probe more deeply, in hopes of uncovering the wellsprings of creativity. This interest took a special turn with the appearance of psychoanalysis, the movement initiated by Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) at the beginning of the twentieth century. (Later, several parallel but different systems were created, notably by Freud’s former followers Alfred Adler and Carl Gustav Jung; it is convenient to place all these modes of interpretation under the rubric of “depth psychology.”)

Freud’s creation of psychoanalysis, marked by intense self-examination, culminated in the major work Traumdeutung (The Interpretation of Dreams), published at the very end of 1899— but issued by the publisher with the date "1900" as if to inaugurate the new century. A series of papers followed, extending such key concepts as the dream-work, the unconscious, and sexuality into a variety of realms.

Even for a cultivated Viennese, Freud’s preoccupation with art and art history was exceptional. In an 1883 letter to his fiancée he disclosed his “discovery” of art in a visit to the Dresden gallery, famed for its outstanding Renaissance works. In 1898, during a visit to a Milanese bookshop, he purchased a volume by the connoisseur Giovanni Morelli (1816-1891). Morelli may have influenced him earlier, even affecting the emergence of psychoanalysis. In any case, Freud clearly recognized the affinity: “It seems to me that [Morelli’s] method is closely related to the technique of psychoanalysis.” Morelli’s critical method assembled seemingly minor clues in order to determine the authorship of paintings; by this means the authorship of a work was “unmasked.” Similarly, psychoanalysis sought to strip away the ego defenses, revealing the individual’s true identity. Thanks to the Morelli connection, Freud’s tastes in art, which placed the Italian masters of the high Renaissance at the summit of accomplishment, achieved a particular inflection.

Freud had another consuming artistic interest, one which found realization in his own collection, consisting mainly of statuettes and other small works from the eastern Mediterranean: Greece, the Levant, and Egypt. To these cherished works he turned for relaxation between analytic sessions; like household gods, some of them also presided over his dinner table. They buttressed Freud’s speculations on early cultures, as seen in Totem and Taboo (1913) and Moses and Monotheism (1937-39). These archaic objects have been kept together in his last home in London, now a museum. 

Doubtless conditioned by his Jewish heritage, Freud’s curiosity about the background of his antiquities led him to much serious reading in archaeology. This involvement paid a dividend in his own theorizing, for it helped to crystalize his concept of the three functions of the psyche, the superego, the ego, and the id, which are conceived as superimposed, horizontal zones, like archaeological strata. This triple scheme, set forth in 1923, did not form part of the original repertory of psychoanalysis.
Freud's 1910 paper on "Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of Childhood" has become the touchstone of the psychoanalytic interpretation of art. Although this paper mainly concerned a giant of the Italian Renaissance, Freud managed to bring Egypt into it as well. He began by disavowing any intention of belittling the great artist, seeking simply to make a contribution to the understanding of his personality. Despite his brilliant gifts, Leonardo was a dilatory worker who had difficulty finishing his art works; he was often diverted by scientific pursuits, including his fascination with the possibility of flight. Leonardo's insecurities may stem from the fact that he was illegitimate, and brought up not by his natural mother but by his father's wife, who was childless.

Freud saw the key to Leonardo's psychology in his unconscious preoccupation with homosexual fellatio. In his view this preoccupation transpires in a recollection the artist jotted down of his early childhood. "It seems that I was always destined to be... deeply concerned with vultures: for I recall as one of my very earliest memories that while I was in my cradle, a vulture came down to me, and opened my mouth with its tail and struck me many times with its tail against my lips." Freud then entered on an enthusiastic archaeological digression, centering on the vulture-headed Egyptian mother-goddess Mut.

The American art historian Meyer Schapiro subjected the Leonardo essay to withering criticism. He pointed out a key mistake in translation. Freud followed a German rendering (imitated in the translation given above) in which the bird, nibio, "kite," was wrongly rendered as "vulture." Since there was no vulture in Leonardo's original account, comparisons with vulture lore are otiose. Schapiro also noted that when Freud sought to extend his observations to works of art he was hampered by insufficient knowledge of the field. He assumed, for example, that the Anna Metzerl theme, that is the Virgin and Child with St. Anne, was an invention anchored in Leonardo's mother fixation (which was in turn linked to his sexuality); in fact the theme was common in North Italian painting of the time.

Apart from these missteps, this kind of analysis suffers from a basic problem of logistics. When Freud wrote, Leonardo had been dead for almost four centuries, and could not supply analytic material in the usual manner. It is curious that those who practice the psychoanalytic approach to art do not, for the most part, use material from living artists obtained in the analytic session. (Whitney Davis has suggested that Freud's case study of the "Wolf Man," an amateur artist who made a drawing of an early memory of his own, could be used as a model, but the quality of the Wolf Man's art is so amateurish that this does not seem a very inspiring prototype.) In any event, modern psychoanalysts have followed Freud's lead in the Leonardo study and directed their attention to dead artists, from Michelangelo to Picasso. A clearing house for these studies is the annual edited (from 1985 onwards) by Mary Matthews Gede, Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Art.

Art and Psychoanalysis by Laurie Schneider Adams, who is both an art historian and a psychoanalyst, illustrates the wide range such an approach affords. The book also abounds in instances of inherent problems. As her starting points, Adams cites papers by Freud and those in his camp that are pertinent to the visual arts, also noting major critiques, as those by Meyer Schapiro and Leo Steinberg. She mingles these discussions with her own psychoanalytic interpretations of painting, sculpture, and architecture, together with aspects of her clinical work with analysands she considers pertinent. Rejecting the present-mindedness of some psychoanalytically oriented art historians who address only works produced during the last century—works embedded in the same general cultural climate that gave rise to psychoanalysis—her scope embraces examples from European prehistory to the present. Adams bypasses the question of whether psychoanalysis is universally applicable or whether it relates essentially to our own age or our own culture. If psychoanalysis is universally valid, then why not extend the method to interpret East Asian or Pre-Columbian objects? Yet if its scope is restricted to our own era, clinical evidence from contemporary clients may not be relevant to the interpretation of works by Leonardo and Michelangelo, who lived long ago.
Adams avoids the ongoing—and very lively—discussions of the legitimacy of psychoanalysis itself as a discipline. She simply assumes this legitimacy, permitting herself to set up a kind of free-fire zone in which such problematic notions as the Oedipus complex, castration anxiety, bisexuality as arrested development, and the phallic woman are attached, almost casually, to well known artists and works. No standards of proof or disproof are adduced.

All this is not to say that psychoanalysis has no relevance for art at all. Freud’s scientific status remains problematic, but his powers of persuasion have proved formidable. His writings influenced many contemporary writers and artists—surrealists in particular—including some figures like René Magritte who rejected his system as a whole.

Still, these connections do nothing to secure the ultimate validity of psychoanalysis, any more than the statues of the Greek gods on the East pediment of the Parthenon establish the ultimate reality of the Hellenic religion. Ultimately the cogency of psychoanalytic studies in art depends upon the adequacy of psychoanalysis itself, and that is contested. The overarching question which one can and must ask of psychoanalysis is: What is its logical status today? That is, apart from its role as a belief system held by psychoanalysts and their followers, can it claim standing as a scientific discipline? Broadly speaking, two approaches to this problem have been followed.

(1) The view urged by the late Sir Karl Popper is that its key propositions are so framed as to evade the test of refutability. Popper, a major philosopher of science, had shown that the key test of a scientific proposition is not its verifiability, but its refutability. Many appealing statements, which may have value in the realm of politics or human affairs, illustrate the temptation to frame statements that are not refutable. Take for example, the slogan “The people united will never be defeated.” If the people (however defined) are in fact defeated, one can always claim that this disaster occurred because they were not united. Thus the statement may be an effective rallying cry, but it is not a proposition that has any predictive value, precisely because of the fact that it always “comes true.” In Popper’s view, psychoanalysis guilefully equips its propositions with escape clauses of this type, so that they defy the test of refutability. Hence it enjoys no scientific status.

(2) Other observers, including some sharp critics of psychoanalysis, differ from Popper, asserting that its key concepts are indeed properly formulated—though they may fail empirical tests. The problem is that such testing has scarcely been undertaken. After a rigorous review of the problem, the philosopher Adolf Grünbaum has concluded that "If there exists empirical evidence for the principal psychoanalytic doctrines, it cannot be obtained without well-designed extraclinical studies of a kind that are for the most part yet to be attempted." The sort of free-association in the clinical setting that is commonly offered as evidence is not persuasive. Grünbaum proposes that such therapeutic successes as psychoanalytic treatment may have enjoyed can be explained by its function as a placebo. Even assuming that psychoanalysis harbors some propositions that can meet strict standards of empirical testing, it may be that many will not. For example, extensive studies have attacked the psychoanalytic notion that paranoia is linked to homosexuality because the paranoid represses his same-sex wishes. In this way of looking at the matter, homosexuality is confirmed by overt behavior and sentiments, and also by their absence. This “heads I win, tails you lose” argument functions to evade the criteria of refutability.

Some (though not all) feminists have been critical of Freud’s male-centered point of view. Other commentators have questioned his ethical standards, his social Darwinism, and even suggested that certain key doctrines came to him under the influence of cocaine, with which he certainly experimented.

If after almost a century of existence, the value of psychoanalysis has not been conclusively established, perhaps it deserves to be discarded. But its adepts resist doing so. Wherein, then, lies the attraction? The ultimate roots of psychoanalysis lie in romanticism with its conviction that feeling rather than logic is central to human existence. In addition, psychoanalysis is a megasystem, or world view, that seems to have all the answers; such systems have the appeal of a religion or all-embracing
philosophy. And indeed psychoanalysis filled a practical void left by the recession of religious practice: the analytical session was a form of confession. Authority figures were attracted by the potential for social control: rebellious youths learned to "adjust." In this light psychoanalysis functioned as an instrument of regimentation posing as liberation.

Another methodological caveat is in order. Even if the foundations of psychoanalysis were perfectly sound, one would still have to assess its value in relation to particular artistic problems. Adopting a methodology that is sound in its own right (which in my view Freudian psychoanalysis is not) is no guarantee of cogency in interpretation. No system offers a universal hermeneutic key. Taking their cue from the field of semiotics, several gifted scholars have sought to apply principles of this discipline to the study of cubism, but with results that have left other specialists unimpressed. Its triumphs in linguistics, anthropology, and popular culture notwithstanding, semiotics may not be well suited to the study of paintings.

Psychoanalysis focused attention on the individual creator. Regardless of the ultimate fate of this discipline, the need for probing biographies of artists remains. This does not mean that one should blithely accept the current fashion for sensationalizing accounts of the sexual and excretory behavior of such artists as Pablo Picasso and Jackson Pollock; this gossip should probably be banished to the supermarket tabloids.

A very different approach to art derives from the work of the Swiss analytical psychologist Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961), who was associated with Sigmund Freud from 1907 to 1912, breaking with him in the latter year.

Although the reason usually given for the break is Jung's downplaying of sex, which Freud had regarded as a fundamental human drive, it may be that other differences were at play also. In two recent probing studies Richard Noll has laid bare Jung's attachment to Dionysian and gnostic mysticism, movements that we would today classify as "New Age." Such interests would have clashed with Freud's commitment to Enlightenment rationalism.

As a medical student at the turn of the century Jung had encountered a mental patient who produced a circular diagram. During World War I, as a form of self-therapy, the psychologist began to produce such diagrams himself. Recognizing their relationship to the cosmic diagrams of Indian religion, he termed them mandalas.

Subsequently, Jung's investigations of these forms acquired a parallel in his fascination with the symbolism of alchemy, which he regarded as the vehicle of an ancient mode of thought driven underground by officially recognized philosophy and religion. These delvings into then little-known modes of visual expression, found independently in many parts of the world, led him to conclude that the imagery embodies a set of universals, the archetypes of the "collective unconscious."

Such followers as Marie-Louise von Franz, Aniela Jaffé, Erich Neumann, and James Hillman have elaborated Jung's interests into a method of investigating visual symbolism. To non-Jungians, however, all this seems problematic. The Asian mandalas are probably better understood as concretizing specific Buddhist, Tantric, and Taoist cosmic ideas than as manifestations of some universal archetypal system. Students of alchemy—admittedly a difficult subject—are inclined to believe that Jung imposed a psychological content not present in the originals on its imagery. Finally, the core concept of the "collective unconscious" strikes many as mystical and undemonstrable.

Jung directed attention to the remarkable imagery produced by mental patients, an interest that resurfaced in the 1990s as "outsider art." The formal similarities of the work of these untrained individuals, working in isolation at many different times and places, call for an explanation. Such work is often passionate and obsessive, qualities found in much mainstream modern art as well. Moreover, interest in work produced by marginalized individuals responds to a current wish
to broaden the sphere of art beyond the elite, to allow it to be, so to speak, the vehicle of all of society's voices.

Many decry Jung's supposed excursions into mysticism and the irrational. Yet art, which draws as much or more on the right brain as on the left brain, has always incorporated a strong intuitive element. For this reason Jung's ideas have intrigued many artists and critics. In combination with other findings, yet to be disclosed, perhaps Jungian analytical psychology may yet lead to new insights about the creative process.


After the eighteenth century this tradition of collective national biography became extinct. What replaced it was the dictionary/encyclopedia of art and artists, culminating in the remarkable thirty-four volumes of The Dictionary of Art, London: Grove, 1996. What works of this kind gain in comprehensiveness and ease of alphabetical consultation, they sacrifice in the coherence that results from the effort to marshall the biographies in chronological order to tell a story, the story of art.


5. A full history of art biography is lacking. For some stimulating observations, see Catherine M. Soussloff, The Absolute Artist: The Historiography of a Concept, Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1997.


8. Not used for this sampling is the new Macmillan Dictionary of Art. The scope of the artist entries in this thirty-four volume set is commendably broad and inclusive, but for this very reason the Dictionary is not suited for the exercise in ranking. The Phaidon selection is a "wish list," in which most of the monographs are yet to be published. It is forward looking, as (probably it is fair to say) the Encyclopedia of World Art and Rizzoli are backward looking. All the same, the composite list is a result of empirical compilation, rather than the author's personal judgment (which, if applied, would have a different result).


11. There is no comprehensive study of artist's signatures, but see the essays collected in the special number (26) of Revue de l'art, 1974.

12. For the connection with notarial signatures, see Béatrice Fraenkel, La signature: Genèse d'une signe, Paris: Gallimard, 1992.


work appears in Margaret Iversen (ed.), "Psychoanalysis in Art History," special issue of Art History, 17:1 (September 1994).


23. Her neglect extends to carelessness as to what Freud originally wrote. On p. 176 she attributes the terms "anaclitic" and "catheysis" to Freud. In fact these expressions were not used by him in the German texts, but have been propagated by his English translators and interpreters.


For art produced in another kind of total institution, see
CHAPTER THREE. SEMIOTICS, STRUCTURALISM
AND DECONSTRUCTION ("THEORY")

Semiotics is the discipline that studies the use of signs across the entire spectrum of human behavior, including gesture and language. Some would even extend the scope of the discipline to animals (e.g. the "language" of bees) and plants (strategies employed by flowers to attract insects).

Modern semiotics derives from two major thinkers, the Swiss Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and the American Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914). Saussure's theories, which focus on the binary relation between the signified and the signifier, derive from the study of language and find application to visual phenomena only in a general way. Peirce was more concerned with things seen. Although he produced a number of variants of his theory in the course of a long life, his triad of icon, index, and symbol has proven useful. To describe the matter in the simplest possible terms, an iconic relation occurs when there is a morphological similarity between the depiction and the thing shown, as in a picture of an apple. The indexical relation occurs when one can infer the thing from some visual evidence, as in the smoke coming from the chimney of a cottage which shows that a fire is present within. Finally, there are symbolic relations, as in an octagonal stop sign, which has no direct connection with the command to the motorist to stop; the meaning must be culturally learned.

Semiotics embraces many modes of communication, ranging from simple systems like Morse code to the complex genres of the theater and the circus. These will not be treated here.

One semiotic sphere of obvious relevance to the study of art is gesture. Some gestures, such as teeth baring and grimacing, are transcultural and find analogies with our primate relatives, but most gestures are culturally determined. Thus in some parts of Europe the display of the joining of the thumb and forefinger to make a circle means "success" (completion), while in others it means "failure" (zero).

Greek and Roman art demonstrate a rich variety of gestures of popular origin. Yet writers such as Quintilian make it plain that there was also a refined system to assist orators in their techniques of persuasion. Rigidly hierarchical, the Roman imperial system evolved a system of gestures as part of statecraft, and these appear in official art. In Asia Buddhism generated a highly codified set of religious gestures, known as mudrā.

Some medieval art styles, such as the Ottonian and late Gothic, emphasized hanō gestures. During the seventeenth century, scholars gave much attention to gesture, a preoccupation paralleled in the paintings of such artists as Caravaggio and Poussin. However, the same era witnessed the start of a trend to prune away the more flamboyant gestures, a reductive process that gradually impoverished the repertoire of gestures honored in northern Europe.

At the end of the seventeenth century the court artist Charles Le Brun, whose authority long persisted in France, codified facial expressions as a vehicle for displaying the passions. Two generations later his approach began to yield to another, advocated by the critic Denis Diderot, who departed from Le Brun's almost exclusive interest in the face as a vehicle for emotion with a commendation that the whole body must be expressive. Diderot's ideas were enthusiastically endorsed and vigorously exemplified by the neo-classic painter Jacques-Louis David.

Much has been accomplished, both historically and empirically, in the study of gestures as such. Yet relatively little has been done to apply the information gleaned to the work of more recent figural
artists, as seen for example in portraiture where the sitter is commonly captured displaying a characteristic gesture. In the course of their career portrait painters inevitably observed the play of body language prevalent in daily life, adopting gestures that were appropriate to their patrons' ideas of correct behavior.12

Of course semiotics deals with much more than gesture. The relative lack of interest the broad discipline of semiotics has elicited among art historians is puzzling, though Meyer Schapiro is a prominent exception.13 Semiotics has been successfully applied to architecture and cinema, but it has yielded less in the study of painting, where the subtler features of execution and communication, so important to the essence of the works, seem to slip through the interstices of the broad-meshed semiotic net.

Following a different path, one rooted in traditional erudition, the art-historical subdiscipline of iconography has broached some allied problems. The term iconography is currently used in two senses: (1) the standard way of representing a particular subject—so that we speak of the iconography of the Descent from the Cross or the iconography of the Choice of Hercules; and (2) the modern discipline which considers the whole body of such representations.

For the scholars who turned to iconography as a branch of study, it was clear that such research was an essential complement to the formal preoccupations that had dominated late nineteenth-century art history. One might almost say that style + iconography made a whole, and that dyad was all of art history. (Today many would insist that social, economic, and psychological considerations are also vital.)

The primary documents that often serve as starting points for iconography are a series of Renaissance "recipe books" of images—such as the manuals of Vincenzo Cartari (ca. 1520-ca. 1570) and Cesare Ripa (ca. 1560-before 1625)—specifying the way in which major themes and ideas were to be represented.14 For example, an anchor stood for hope, while a nude woman represented truth. These compilations were a godsend to artists, and it has not been difficult for modern scholars to show that they offered the key to the interpretation of many otherwise puzzling features. In short the books serve as iconographical storehouses.

During the seventeenth century classical scholars had used the word "iconography" in a narrow sense to refer to portraiture, so that "the iconography of Trajan" would be the product of the collection and analysis of all extant portraits of that emperor.

In the mid-nineteenth century, Roman Catholic scholars effected a fundamental transformation of these concerns. This activity belonged to the context of the Catholic revival with its return to scholastic philosophy and such great enterprises as the resumption (in 1837) of the Acta Sanctorum, the monumental critical publication of the lives of the saints begun by Belgian Jesuits in the seventeenth century, and Jacques-Paul Migne's vast sets of the Latin and Greek fathers, the Patrologia Latina (217 vols., 1844-55) and the Patrologia Graeca (162 vols., 1857-66). For medieval art the French scholar Adolphe Napoléon Didron attempted an ambitious synthesis of Christian Iconography, first published in French in 1843.15 This work is arranged not alphabetically or historically, but hierarchically, beginning with the imagery of divinity itself (the Trinity) and then descending the ladder of being. (This plan persisted a hundred years later in Louis Réau's Iconographie de l'art chrétien.16) The greatest exemplar of this school of iconography was, however, Émile Mâle (1862-1954), whose major works may still be profitably consulted.17

A further important contribution stems from a group of German scholars working in Hamburg under the general inspiration of Aby Warburg in the first third of the twentieth century. These scholars sought to fuse the classical concept of iconography, which lay at its foundations, with the more recent Christian one, using the insights of comparative religion as well. Using similar premises others have studied Buddhist and pre-Columbian iconography.18
Because of its history, the discipline of iconography has tended to be closely linked with religion. Yet other scholars have studied secular iconography. The German historian Percy Ernst Schramm devoted most of his life to the examination of tokens of state power: regalia, ruler images, coronation rites and their representation. And it has long been recognized that still lifes have an iconography stemming in part from the vanitas tradition and the idea of the five senses.

In 1939 the art historian Erwin Panofsky (formerly at Hamburg; 1892-1968) published his Studies in Iconology, a book occasioned by the author's concern with thorny problems in Renaissance art. At the outset a general theory was needed. In the introductory, theoretical chapter, he outlined a system of levels of art-historical interpretation, modifying an earlier scheme he had advanced in a 1931 lecture at Kiel. Although the term iconology was used in the title of the book, it did not figure in the scheme in its earliest form. The word iconology had been used by Aby Warburg, but he employed it essentially as a synonym for "iconography." 21

The final version of the system appeared in Panofsky's collection of representative essays, Meaning in the Visual Arts (1955). It stipulates three levels of interpretation, beginning with the most basic types of identification and advancing to a vision of totality. Panofsky starts by defining iconography as "that branch of the history of art which concerns itself with the subject matter or meaning of works of art, as opposed to their form." For the purposes of exposition he subscribed, though only provisionally, to the truism that art history consists of two elements only—subject matter and form—to the exclusion of other interests, say, in socioeconomic or psychological factors. In Panofsky's view, the meaning of meaning is a complex affair.

He illustrates this complexity with the charming, though now somewhat quaint instance of a gentleman raising his hat. The first level of meaning is the straightforward one: the observer notes that a man coming towards him is raising his headpiece. This is "factual meaning," which is "apprehended by simply identifying certain visible forms with certain objects known ... from practical experience." Registering this perception, the observer experiences a certain reaction to it—is the hat tipper in a good or bad humor?—yielding another aspect of meaning, termed "expressional." Closely linked as they are, factual and expressional meaning "constitute the class of primary or natural meanings." Further reflection, however, leads the observer to conclude that the gesture, a residue of medieval chivalry, is a unit feature of the etiquette of modern Western society—as distinct from other cultures where it may be unknown. This further meaning, a new level, is termed "secondary or conventional." Finally, the gestural event of the hat raising communicates something of the personality of the doer in the broad sense of a twentieth-century person, with all the conditioning and cultural assumptions that that status brings with it. This ultimate level is called "intrinsic meaning or content."

Applying these observations to a Renaissance painting of The Last Supper one might begin by observing certain configurations of line and color, advancing to note that the painting shows thirteen men seated around a table. These asseverations, reflecting factual and expressional meaning, constitute the first level of interpretation. Then, based on one's comparative knowledge of Christian imagery, the viewer could go on to identify the scene as an instance of the theme of the Last Supper. This is the level of secondary or conventional subject matter. Finally, we approach the work by "ascertaining those underlying principles which reveal the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion." This last is the level of intrinsic meaning or content. If the second level had taken us into the realm of iconography, the final one enlarges the purview to that of iconology. 25

Panofsky had issued a formidable challenge to those who would follow in his footsteps. A huge fund of knowledge was required; and at its core lay disciplines (Greek and Latin, for example) that are peripheral to the American educational experience. In keeping with its origins, the method worked best with learned art works, whose subtle meanings had been obscured by the passage of time.

What of cases where the original work is thought to have had a meaning, but this cannot be
recovered? This is true of most prehistoric works, such as the megalithic monuments of Stonehenge and other sites in the British Isles and Brittany. And the extensive pre-Inca lines of Nazca of southern Peru, probably created for use in processional rites, have fascinated many contemporary artists, including creators of Earth Art.

Some nineteenth-century Symbolist works, such as those of the Belgians Fernand Khnopf and James Ensor, seem to have been deliberately ambiguous so that the observer senses a meaning, yet cannot characterize it precisely. This uncertainty principle is not a tease, but is meant to affirm the artists' conviction that the truly important things are those that can only be intuited or suspected, and not defined precisely.

These cases apart, it seems that a combination of semiotics and art-historical iconography and/or iconology would be useful. Indisputably, works of art are signs—though they are usually more as well—and Panofsky's sophisticated system, with its three levels of interpretation, shows some similarities to that so influentially set forth by Charles Sanders Peirce.

Another realm, less rigorously organized than iconography and iconology but now increasingly topical, has to do with the "migration of symbols" across cultural boundaries. Sometimes these migratory elements are specific iconographic motifs; in other cases a more general impression passes from an old culture to a newer one.

To begin with specific motifs, it has long been recognized that the archaic Greek category of nude male youth, the kouros, derives from a standard type of striding figure from pharaonic Egypt. The derivation is attested by the fact that one foot, usually the left, is advanced in both types, while the hands are held stiffly against the sides of the body. Then the disembodied eyes found on Greek eye cups derive from the so-called eyes of Horus depicted on the exterior of Egyptian coffins. These two Egyptian-to-Greek motifs were transmitted with little understanding of the original religious and social context of the motifs; this knowledge was not required as the intrinsic appeal and adaptability of the motifs sufficed to make them at home in their new context.

In other cases, however, the motifs are passed along with the ideology in which they are embedded—usually a religious system. The transmission of the Buddhist faith from India across the Silk Route to China and ultimately to Japan brought both image types (representing Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and guardian figures, among others), as well as a semiotic system of hand gestures and sacred markings noted above, the mudrā.

There is also borrowing in which a general sense of the import of the donor cultures art is what is transmitted. This is the case in twentieth-century European interest in the so-called "primitive" arts of Africa and Oceania. Rarely did collectors and artists trouble to learn the specific meanings, rooted in the social and religious contexts, of the pieces they admired. Rather they were seeking a general sense of "vigor" or "plastic values" in the objects. The last consideration seems to have been foremost with the English sculptor Henry Moore when at the end of the 1920s he sought to duplicate the effect of the Maya reclining sculptures known as chacmool. Frank Lloyd Wright, in his borrowings from Maya architecture during the same period, seems to have had a sense that such architecture, being indigenous, was particularly suited to the American West.

Many of the reservations that had come to be felt about the modernist interpretation of works of primitive art came to a head in the controversy that swirled around a major exhibition held at New York's Museum of Modern Art in the winter of 1984: "Primitivism in Twentieth Century Art." This exhibition was intended to reexamine the connection between advanced European art of the first half of the twentieth century and ethnic arts, especially of sub-Saharan Africa and Oceania. Marshaling formidable scholarship (and formidable funding), the organizers showed that many facile comparisons between European works and ethnic pieces that supposedly inspired them were invalid because the artists
could not have known the pieces in question. This critical reexamination of commonly accepted legends about the catalytic role of particular pieces deployed one of the genuine strengths of art history as a critical discipline.

However, the MoMA organizers did not stop there. They wished to preserve the older idea of a deep accord between the aims of advanced European art in the opening decades of the present century and ethnic arts. To accomplish this the exhibition proffered a dubious notion of "affinity" which seemed to make any linkage acceptable that occurred to the observer, based ostensibly not simply on formal similarities but on analogies of spirit. Improbably, it was claimed that the affinities "measure the depth of Picasso's grasp of the informing principles of ethnic sculpture, and reflect his profound identity of spirit with the tribal peoples." How was this depth of grasp achieved? Sometimes the organizers seemed to believe in some archetypal deep structure that links the two kinds of art. When one looks for exemplification of this on the formal level—in the actual appearance of the two categories of art—it comes down to degrees of abstraction and "conceputal" arrangement. These links simply amount to saying that the works do not conform to the norms of Western naturalistic art from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries—a rather unremarkable conclusion.

Sometimes the understanding of another culture seeks greater profundity. In the late nineteenth century, when Europeans and Americans imported large numbers of Japanese art objects they accepted various stereotypes about the people that made them. Later, however, they sought to assimilate the principles of spontaneous creation found in Zen paintings, as well as the "less is more" spirit of the wabi-sabi, the deliberate cultivation of effects of poverty and irregularity found in Japanese stoneware. The Japanese scholar Daisetz Suzuki played an important part in explaining Japanese culture in the West, having notable success in propagating Zen, the Japanese form of Ch'an Buddhism. After World War II, many Americans had experience in Japan through service in the armed forces. Zen became a component of the "beat" counterculture, as seen in such figures as Gary Snyder and Jack Kerouac. Some American artists of the abstract expressionist school were also influenced by Zen paintings and concepts.31

Still, the sense of mystery lends appeal. Some recent earth artists and others have been influenced by Stonehenge and other prehistoric circles and alignments of ancient Europe, while others have traveled to Peru to inspect the impressive Nazca lines. The full import of these works will probably never be known. This incompleteness, together with a sense of primordiality, accounts for the continuing fascination with the archaic products of human artistic awareness.

At the beginning of the third millennium it may be anticipated that the increasing pace of globalization will facilitate further changes, and that art will show an increasing process of hybridization.

We must now return to the terrain of semiotic theory. During the 1960s France engendered a version of semiotics under the name of structuralism.32 Appealing as a methodology particularly suited to the humanities, this trend quickly migrated to English-speaking countries.

While structuralism has its roots in linguistics, the greatest initial impact appeared in anthropology, particularly in the version espoused by the brilliant Claude Lévi-Strauss (b. 1908).33 Among Americans the anthropological work of Franz Boas, Ruth Benedict, and Margaret Mead (influential from about 1925 to 1950) had stressed how different human cultures were—anticipating the late twentieth-century cult of "diversity." This emphasis on cultural variation had a bracing effect on American provincialism and exceptionalism, but provided no single key to discovery—except for diversity itself. By contrast, Lévi-Strauss, who had done important field work in Brazil and who had taught in New York City during World War II, believed that it is possible to recover broad, perhaps universal themes underlying the richness and diversity of tribal cultures. For example, while all sorts of foods are consumed, with a bewildering array of regulations and taboos pertaining to them, most cultures distinguish between the raw and the cooked. Sometimes, though the two could be expanded to three, as
by adding a category of "high" or rotten to the raw and cooked food contrast just mentioned. Nonetheless, structuralism tended to emphasize dichotomies or binary patterns.

The French anthropologist was a superb popularizer of his own work, as seen in *The Savage Mind* and his mordant autobiography, *Tristes Tropiques.* The later work, as seen in the vast four-volume *Mythologiques* series, proved too technical for most non-specialists. For their part, some specialists contradicted Lévi-Strauss's analysis of the primary material. Though he continued to be widely respected, the reputation of the French scholar began to fade among the intelligentsia—the name was recognized but he was not often read.

Lévi-Strauss was the son of an artist, and through his father's friends he became acquainted with the Parisian avant-garde art world of the 1920s. He has visited the subject of artworks on several occasions in his long productive life. An early short paper of 1944-45 concerns the question of split representations, important in Northwest Coast art and Chinese. Late in life he showed a surprising interest in European high art as seen in the work of Nicolas Poussin.

The French structuralist's major contribution to art is seen however in a monograph on the art of the coastal peoples of British Columbia and Alaska, *The Way of the Masks.* In this book he contrasts the Swaihwé masks, which generally have white coloring and protruding forms, with the Dzonokwa masks, which are dark with concave forms. Investigation of the underlying mythology shows that the Swaihwé are associated with the sea, with the growth of wealth, and generally with the male. By contrast, the Dzonokwa are linked to the forests of the hinterland, loss of wealth, and are generally female. In this way both the forms of the masks and the mythology they reflect are seen in terms of binary contrasts.

In this book Lévi-Strauss attempted briefly to refute the claim that structuralism was static and incapable of dealing with change. Other adherents came to find it arid and detached from the world. Figures like Julia Kristeva and Mieke Bal sought to enrich structuralism by integrating elements of psychoanalysis.

The major reaction, though, came in the guise of deconstruction. To this difficult phenomenon we now turn. Deconstructionist ideas found their ultimate rationale in the philosophical doctrines of such thinkers as Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida, names that will recur. If those who rallied to the new theories—often propounded simply in the singular: "theory"—expected a simple set of invariant principles they were quickly undeceived. The new approaches had a strong relativistic (some would say nihilistic) component. Not only were older assumptions about particular meanings ascribed to literary works brought into question, but the possibility was broached that there could be no ultimate interpretation, that we must live with a radical indeterminacy.

At the same time iconoclastic voices from the newly established programs in ethnic and women's studies challenged the established canon of great literature as prescribed in university curricula. Why is it, they asserted, that the roster of great writers, from Plato to Joyce, consists almost solely of dead white European men (DWEMs)? Increasingly, demands were heard to expand the canon, to replace it with a new one, or to abandon the canon principle altogether.

The more radical attack on the canon meshed with an intense preoccupation with popular culture, as seen in film, television, rock music, and advertising. Younger scholars, whose had grown up in a new world saturated by the electronic media, took the lead in this reorientation. The contrast of high versus low culture came under attack as elitist and dualistic, and the expanded roster of studies was welcomed under a new rubric of "cultural studies." This movement has a strong political thrust. J. Hillis Miller, an older scholar of English and comparative literature sympathetic to the cultural-studies insurgents, has characterized their project in this way:

Their goal is the transformation of the university by realigning present departments and
disciplines and establishing new ones. Through the refashioning of the university they want to dismantle the present dominant culture and empower ones that are at present peripheral—minorities, women, gays and lesbians, all those disadvantaged, silenced, without power. This empowering means not just preserving the minority cultures as they are or have been, but giving members of those minorities cultures the ability to transform their own cultural forms and to repair the damage done to them by the dominant culture in new self-determined and self-determining creations.\textsuperscript{40}

These new currents—relativism, challenge to the canon, and cultural studies—meshed with the ideal of multiculturalism, which would, it was passionately urged, at last grant an appropriate place to non-European cultures abroad and also to groups of non-European origin encapsulated within the advanced industrial countries.\textsuperscript{40} Implicit in this approach is a polar contrast between Western and non-Western. For too long, the multiculturalists avowed, Western civilization has been privileged; it is now time to give the rest of the world a chance. Yet usually glossed over in the multiculturalist project is that it confuses, usually implicitly rather than explicitly, two quite different objects of attention: autonomous cultures of non-European lands and minority cultures within European and Europe-derived societies. Studying a Japanese-American writer, however valuable for its own sake, tells us little about Lady Murasaki, and vice versa.

In any event, many teachers and scholars came to believe that the academy was not neutral. If older structures persisted, then academia stood condemned for its collusion with the corrupt established order. But by rallying to the new approaches, and teaching them to students, academics could make a contribution to positive social change.

New journals, such as Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, Critical Inquiry, Representations, and Genders became established institutions. Even those who did not agree with the programs espoused by these periodicals found them stimulating, though sometimes opaque reading.

All this suggests that the shift in climate in the humanities was part and parcel of a left agenda, and indeed it was often advocated and perceived as such.\textsuperscript{41} Yet the principle of relativism of reading was not in itself leftist, and was even disdained by some advocates of social change as eroding the common ground of discourse on which radical appeals rested. In fact some who objected to the new approaches, such as the Marxist historians Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene Genovese, came from the left. Others felt that the new program was being imposed in an arbitrary and dictatorial manner, that its advocates, sure of the righteousness of their cause, were not playing fair. These opponents, emphasizing the political aspect of the changes, termed them "political correctness" or PC for short.\textsuperscript{42} The PC controversy led to polarization and an alarming decline of civility on college campuses, while exposing the proponents to ridicule from the outside world.

The closing decades of the twentieth century witnessed winds of change in the humanities, sometimes gusting with gale force. Although these currents blew somewhat less vigorously and a little later in the field of art history, blow they did. The sense grew that art history must bring itself up to date to keep pace with its sister disciplines. There was also dissatisfaction with the internal state of art history, which was felt to be almost stagnant—too confined to the ivory tower and too formalist. The principles only recently deemed to have reached their final perfection in the method of Erwin Panofsky came to seem smugly Olympian and exclusionary; they were unsuited to examining the political and social issues that had acquired, for some at least, great urgency. The classical tradition embodied in the art of ancient Greece and the Renaissance now seemed Eurocentric (perhaps even Germano-centric) and one-sided. Moreover, the methods and interests this tradition embodied had proven unsuited to the task of analyzing modern art, the distillation of our own sensibility.

Still these charges were exaggerated. The claim that established art history was exclusively formalist was refuted by the iconological work of Panofsky himself and the Warburg school from which
he derived (discussed above). As regards the charge of selectivity, earlier art history had not restricted itself to classical eras but had made important contributions to the study of medieval, Egyptian, and Near Eastern art. Links with other forms of cultural expression, such as literature and philosophy, had been forged. Furthermore, the socioeconomic matrix had not been entirely neglected.

In the young Turks' indictment, the long history of art history itself, with its many changing methodologies and interests, was neglected. This simplified view encouraged the myth that the discipline started and remained locked into a kind of "one-note samba" of Wölflinian formalism. To suit present-minded arguments the collective memory of art history was foreshortened and caricatured.

During the 1980s postmodernism enjoyed the status of a vogue word. Swayed by the almost magical powers of its utterance, the utterer came to accept that modernism had been completely superseded, yielding to it all-conquering successor.

And what is that successor? The answer is not easy, as there are two postmodernisms. The first is salient in architecture. In that field the word designates a neo-historicist approach whose practitioners feel free to raid the past to produce an eclectic mix that may be regarded as either reinvigoration or pastiche, according to the point of view of the critic. The reasons for this new openness include dissatisfaction with the austerity of the International Style, which in debased form produced soulless glass boxes; reaction against the devastation wrought by "urban renewal"; the positive evaluation of old buildings (historic preservation); a new understanding of neglected architectural styles of the past, such as the "Revolutionary" architecture of Ledoux and Lequeu; increased travel and exposure to different traditions on the part of architects; desire for variety, sentiment, and "fun" instead of antiseptic purity.

By contrast, the second postmodernism, that of contemporary painting and sculpture, negotiated no corresponding peace treaty with tradition. It was assumed that visual art would continue the momentum of "transgressive" innovations. Postmodern painting and sculpture often took the form of a jumbled mélange of high and low elements, which was thought to expose the "gauze of representation"—the superficial understanding that the mass media encourage. Social protest on behalf of women, ethnic minorities, and gays, became common, often employing deliberately crude means, as seen in the 1993 Whitney Museum Biennial.

Despite this conflict, the two postmodernisms shared common features. There was a widespread reaction against the kind of purity and formalism associated with the critic Clement Greenberg; this approach, which had sought to provide sure touchstones of quality, came to seem prissy, provincial, and time-bound.

In view of its diversity, there arose the question of whether the postmodern phenomena really mark a break from modernism, or merely continue it—albeit in a creative and challenging form.

In short, one must guard against fetishizing the term "postmodernism." The spread of a new term does not in itself prove a fundamental shift. Moreover, the popularity of the term may signal an undue preoccupation with periodization, born of an historical study and an interest in detecting breaks and discontinuities.

With all these elements in ferment many art historians, especially new recruits to the field, concluded that the time for change had come. For some years they had been looking enviously at the exciting new trends revitalizing the study of literature, philosophy, and mainstream history. Why should the study of art lag behind? As agents for change, the potential of psychoanalysis and Marxism, of structuralism and poststructuralism must, they held, be accessed.

More broadly, there was a strong sense that art and the study of art must no longer linger in the sacred groves of ethical neutrality, but should emerge to take stands on the burning issues of the day. Such commitments came to seem more urgent as the contemporary art world plunged into controversy.
In the age of AIDS and sexual frankness artists addressed issues that made many lay people uncomfortable. As a result, the new art encountered a rising tide of demands for censorship from such conservative activists as the Reverend Donald Wildmon of Tupelo, Mississippi, and Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina.

The animating spirit of postmodernism, its inmost core—many hold—is deconstruction. But let us step back a bit and ask the question: Is Deconstruction a Method or a Mode? If it is the latter, is it possibly transient? Certainly the close of the millennium reveals signs of fading vigor.

The new trends in art history take much of their nourishment from conceptual shifts in the humanities generally. As has been noted above, the forces conditioning these changes in the humanities are disparate, impelled in part by differing social agendas. Still, the insurgents have achieved a certain consensus in their aim of radically reorganizing the humanities under the banner of cultural studies. Central to the new approach are the following principles: denial of the assumption that there are fixed, stable realities or truths that reason can uncover; distrust of the "essentialist" belief that there are transhistorical constants of human nature; skepticism about the capacity of language to mirror the external world; rejection of the ideal (and possibility) of objectivity and neutrality in the realm of scholarship; scorn for models of influence and development regarded as mechanical and self-generating; questioning of accepted ideas of periodization and stylistic sequences; denial that art itself is an autonomous category; and rejection of the idea of a canon of accepted masterpieces and the great figures ("geniuses") who created them.

As these points indicate, there is more agreement about what should be rejected or questioned than about any doctrines to be positively embraced. Still, one should not be too quick to dismiss such approaches as simple negativism. Austerely and ultraskpticist, renunciation of positive assertion has forebears in the Dionysian tradition of medieval Europe and the Taoist philosophy of the Far East.

Pervasive as the climate of interrogation has been, one also discovers a certain parting of the ways. Some adherents of these views are radical skeptics, who believe that one must always doubt and question. Others regard the work of challenge and destruction as only a first stage; once the dismantling is completed, one can proceed to the erection of a new structure of ideas that will both accord with reality and serve to advance the cause of human liberation. But the outlines of this new Heavenly City remain unclear.

The themes just outlined owe much to European thinkers, such as Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, and the above-mentioned Claude Lévi-Strauss. Ideas stemming from these Continental sources have been proffered as a new theory of culture. Whatever the merits of individual components, there remains the question of whether they add up to a unified body of thought—the theory of deconstruction, to acknowledge the most popular label. Indeed, many adherents of deconstruction insist that it cannot be summarized; its power lies in the details. For this reason any attempt to summarize the theory (including the one presented in the following paragraphs) will be dismissed by deconstructionists as inadequate. In the belief that the principle of the unity of knowledge requires that all theories submit to examination, that attempt is nonetheless essayed here.

What are the sources of this much heralded movement? During the second half of the twentieth century, American intellectuals eagerly embraced three major imports, all from France, but finding great success in North America: existentialism, structuralism, and deconstruction. French provenance, yes, but made in France?—that is not so sure. Behind the first and third of these fashions stands the portentous figure of the authoritarian German Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), whom some regard as the greatest thinker of our age.44

In a common pattern, Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty crafted their own versions of
existentialism from Central European sources. France has, after all, made little significant original contribution to philosophy in two-hundred years. At all events Francophile Americans jumped at the bait: the "new" thought was more appetizing in this Francophone version than in its Teutonic materia prima. After World War II the Nazi era had made Germany itself seem taboo; its intellectual products could only be assimilated if, in effect, they had passed through the filtration of the French customs service.

With its interest in such matters of ultimate concern as life, death, and human consciousness, existentialism contrasted with the more rigorous, but often forbiddingly austere and technical writings of the Anglo-American analytic school—as seen, for example, in the logical studies of a Peter Strawson or a Saul Kripke. The English and American thinkers seemed to have sacrificed significance for the sake of precision.

For those domiciled outside the technical redoubt of philosophy precision was not enough. So it was that in the 1940s, and increasingly afterwards, a different option beckoned: one could go to France for prescriptions to remedy the perceived anemia of native thought.


6. Richard Brilliant, Gesture and Rank in Roman Art: The Use of Gestures to Denote Status in Roman Sculpture and Coinage, New Haven: Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1963


12. Some contemporary critics apply the term "gestural" to painting that emphasizes the artist’s expressive brushwork. Since these forms are not gestures in the sense discussed here, they do not lend themselves to semiotic analysis.


23. For iconology, see Jan Bialostocki, "Iconography and Iconology," Encyclopedia of World Art, 7 (1963), cols. 769-85; and Ekkehard Kaemmerling, ed., Ikonographie und Ikonologie: Theorien, Entwicklung, Probleme (Bildende Kunst als Zeichensystem, 1), Cologne: Dumont, 1979. As used by Panofsky, the term has Hegelian overtones, of which he may not have been fully aware. In his later years, however, he grew more uncertain of the concept of iconology, and seldom used the expression.

24. For the most recent attempt to decipher Stonehenge as a cosmic instrument, see John North, Stonehenge: A New Interpretation of Prehistoric Man and the Cosmos, New York: Free Press, 1996.


27. The relationship of Egyptian civilization to Greek has recently become very controversial. Martin Bernal, for example, holds that Greece was colonized by Egypt and essentially owes its accomplishments to the Nile Valley. Others defend the autonomy of Greek civilization. In the present context, it is best to keep to specific motifs where the migration of forms can be documented.

29. For these interests in Moore, Wright and other occidental figures, see Barbara Braun, *Pre-Columbian Art and the Post-Columbian World: Ancient American Sources of Modern Art*, New York: Abrams, 1993.


42. There is a very large periodical literature on this question. For a balanced selection, see Paul Berman, ed., *Debating P.C.: The Controversy over Political Correctness on College Campuses*, New York: Laurel, 1992. Some supporters of the new trends allege that the very term political correctness is a slur invented by the right. This is false. The concept long circulated in Marxist circles: Walter Benjamin used it in a 1934 lecture. The present author can attest to hearing PC deployed in all seriousness in leftist gatherings of the early seventies. At these meetings those labeled as espousing "counterrevolutionary" views were urged to exchange them for ones that were "politically correct."


CHAPTER FOUR. SOCIAL CONCERNS

During the twentieth century interest in the social and political dimensions of art has waxed and waned. As noted in Chapter One, many analysts—from Roger Fry to Clement Greenberg—have held that modern art excels in formal innovation reflected in the way works look. Postimpressionism looks different from impressionism; Abstract Expressionism contrasts markedly with the geometrical abstraction of the 1930s. Even in architecture, where structural imperatives are paramount, changes in fashion may introduce visual discord. Thus in the 1920s the break represented by the International Style with previously dominant modes of architecture was a sharp one; today, its effects are impossible to miss in the urban landscape of our cities. As these examples show, artistic change cannot be simply reduced to social and economic determinants. But these factors should not be ignored either.

Recent scholarship has detected political elements even in fauvism and cubism, two breakthrough pictorial styles of the early twentieth century that have long been regarded as citadels of formal experiment. In the 1920s overt political art was prominent in Germany and the Soviet Union; in the 1930s, in the United States. During the seventies and eighties interest in creating contemporary political art strongly revived. In Europe Joseph Beuys and Anselm Kiefer have explored formerly taboo issues of Germany's past. In North America artistic production by women, African Americans, Latinos and Latinas, gay men, and lesbians has become prominent and increasingly political. In New York City these trends peaked at the controversial 1993 Biennial Exhibition of the Whitney Museum of Art.

Scholars and critics have also addressed political dimensions, including those evident in the distant past. In part this interest reflects a turning away from the concept of the absolute autonomy of art inherited from nineteenth-century aesthetics. It parallels the growing politicization of contemporary art.

All art has an economic aspect; the professional artist expects to be paid, and even the amateur producer must still purchase materials. For those making artworks for gain two basic strategies have prevailed. One is that of executing works of art on commission, the usual practice in periods when art obeys the commands of religion and the state; the other is the practice, which has become dominant in modern times, of creating works "on spec" with the hope that eventually someone will buy them.

During the Middle Ages cathedrals constituted some of the most ambitious human enterprises ever undertaken. Some were completed in a mere fifty years, while others took centuries. Urged on by powerful bishops and interested laity, the pace of construction nonetheless depended on elaborate funding schemes that could be derailed by war, famine, and popular resistance. For the late Gothic period, surviving records permit one to trace these financial patterns, which were governed by an interplay of accelerating enthusiasm and decelerating constraints, showing the crucial link between money and piety. To be successful, these arrangements required complicated negotiations among participants of various social classes that foreshadow today's struggles in community boards over urban development.

For Renaissance Florence, as Richard A. Goldthwaite has shown, we have information about a wide range of building projects, affording a sense of the growth of the urban fabric as a whole. In a pathfinding monograph, James Ackerman showed that the villas of Palladio were not only superbly harmonious creations for the leisure of the Venetian aristocracy, but also economic centers facilitating the agricultural exploitation of the Veneto hinterland.

The economic aspect is particularly salient in the applied arts, where artisans are commonly required to work in factory-like circumstances. Surviving account books permit scholars to reconstruct the workers' pay and conditions. The marketing of objects of the applied arts often seems closer to that