


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
of ordinary objects, where the value of the materials and the labor of production and distribution determine price. Even here, however, an authentic silver vessel by, say, Paul Revere is worth much more than a copy, no matter how skillfully done.

Seventeenth-century Holland, with its precocious capitalism and flourishing art world, is particularly interesting as it lies at the intersection of the older system of patronage and the newer one of "on-spec" creation. In Protestant Holland the church was no longer a major art patron, while middle-class persons increasingly collected paintings, sometimes for investment. The loosening of the bonds of the guild system allowed artists to tailor their production more flexibly in response to market conditions.  

Private dealers are central to the modern art market. Today, just as in the days of Durand-Ruel and Kahnweiler, far-sighted dealers nurture tyro artists, keeping them in funds until they can "make the grade." Dealers, then, have a say on which artists will eventually be considered worthy of the historical record.

In the pluralist culture of the late twentieth century, there seems little support for the strong thesis of insidious dealer domination, that is, that dealers conspire to foist certain favored artists on a hapless public. To be sure, some dealers are more successful than others and the artists they handle benefit.

In New York City those with long memories seem to share a sense that the art world has, since 1945, departed more and more from the early days of avant-garde heroism to a mass phenomenon in which commercialism and corruption are ever more the rule. To the extent that this has been the case, art galleries are only one element in the shift, though necessarily a major one. But no one wishes to do away with the profusion of private art galleries, which are one of the few free cultural activities the metropolis affords: generally they charge no admission fee. In any event, claims of widespread corruption require much more research before they can be accepted.

Very large prices paid at auction houses have focused attention on the role of this institution. The entry of new cadres of buyers, such as the Hollywood crowd or wealthy Europeans and Japanese with a new interest in American art, can change relative values. Most scholars are not primarily concerned with price levels, knowing that these reflect scarcity and fashion. There is no doubt that a history of the art market is of considerable interest; however, this interest pertains mainly to the realms of economics and taste, rather than to art history per se.

Another economic aspect of the art world, one almost universally decried even by those who engage in it, is forgery. Excluding fakes from the oeuvre of individual artists is a necessary aspect of connoisseurship. In addition to the practical problem, forgery also poses more fundamental challenges to the theory of art, including problems of authenticity and aesthetic value.

Even if a work looks authentic, the forgers will have trouble establishing a plausible "chain of custody" for the object, that is to say, its pedigree of former owners leading back to the artist who made it. A traditional, though unglamorous aspect of art history is recording the provenance of old master paintings and other venerable works. These records are invaluable aids in seeking to establish authenticity. To be sure, a few authentic works have languished in obscurity for a long time and do not have a proper provenance. But the absence of such a chain of custody should send up a red flag that a forgery or falsification is possible. Falsification occurs, for example, when an anonymous seventeenth-century picture is passed off as a Rubens or a Van Dyck. The painting was not made by a modern forger, but it is not what it is claimed to be either.

Since the occupation is a business, objects are forged that belong to categories of art that are in demand. Patterns of forgery shift in obedience to changes in taste. A full-scale history of forgery would afford revealing glimpses of such shifts in taste—and thereby contribute to a better understanding of the historiography of art.
The remote origins of art theft lie in the trade in relics in the middle ages. These remains of bones or garments of the saints, primarily of religious significance because of the special charisma that was believed to reside in them, proved of great interest to thieves, while the precious reliquaries in which the remains were kept held only a secondary attraction.

Except for plunder during military operations, as the sack of Rome in 1527, art theft does not seem to have been a major problem in former centuries. During Napoleon's regime many objects were "officially" relocated to France from other countries, especially Italy. For the most part these kidnappings were reversed later. Before and during World War II the Nazis looted many art objects. Although many were subsequently restored to their rightful owners, disputes continue in some instances. In 1998, the Russian Parliament voted not to authorize the return of works taken by the Red Army in the closing days of World War II.  

A special case is the Parthenon marbles, taken from Athens by Thomas Lord Elgin beginning in 1803, with the permission of the Turkish government. They were subsequently sold to the British Museum, where they now repose. In recent years the Greek government has requested their return, thus far with no success. In the United States some museums have agreed to restore native American objects to tribal authorities who claimed them.

Theft by private individuals has been a problem of increasing gravity in the twentieth century. On August 21, 1911 an Italian stole Leonardo's Mona Lisa from the Louvre in Paris, with the intention of restoring it to his native country. After the event received wide publicity, the painting was returned.

Smaller museums with less efficient security systems, such as the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, are often victimized in this way. If the stolen objects are famous they are hard to sell; in this case the thieves' motive may be to obtain a ransom, which the original owners will often pay in order to forestall destruction of the works.

As any visit to a modern department store will show, concern about pilferage abounds in the late twentieth century, countered by electronic security systems. Libraries have adopted these protective methods also, but they are not always able fully to secure their rare book and print collections, as thieves, some boasting academic credentials, can slip single items into their briefcases.

Sometimes objects that are stolen suffer damage. In other instances individuals deliberately mutilate art objects in situ. The perpetrators of these attacks are of two type: deranged individuals or activists seeking misguided to make a political point.

The value of works of art is linked to their rarity. From early times, however, those unable to buy unique originals sought to have copies. In ancient Egypt the makers of religious images developed techniques for creating multiple metal figurines from molds. For their sculptural copies, the ancient Greeks and Romans used the pointing machine, which permitted accurate marble copies to be made of bronze originals.

Although block prints originated in the Far East, Europeans began to make woodcuts as early as the fourteenth century as a way of multiplying images. The history of prints is complex; lithography, for example, was introduced as late as 1800.

Today photography is the usual way of reproducing works of art, and it has also emerged as a fine art of its own. Once they became available, photographs became adjuncts to painters in developing their compositions.

Over the centuries art has been about making things. The deployment of technology may already be observed in archaeological evidence of the stone quarrying and shaping methods of Egyptian masons. Sculpture made a great advance with the discovery of the lost wax technique for casting. Even today, however, some sculptors prefer direct carving where, however, they are assisted by modern power tools.
New processes also provide new pigments and other materials. These are not always an unalloyed benefit, however. The sculptor Eva Hesse shortened her life through her bold use of volatile materials in sculpture.

As noted above, photography has offered new possibilities. Photography engendered cinema and cinema made possible the filming of television programs, leading ultimately to video. The role of video as a fine art was championed by Nam June Paik. Today, remarkable effects have been achieved by Bill Viola. However, video has many problems having to do with marketing, presentation, and preservation. There is also the ever-present pressure of popular culture. Because of the amounts of money available, the elaborate and striking music videos presented on MTV strike many as the real center of innovation in this realm.

The effects of technology are seen in a very different way in the use of industrial debris in assemblages, as seen in the work of John Chamberlain and César. The photographer Neal Myers has created striking abstractions from "found compositions," often from metal surfaces in decaying industrial sites.

One of the first sites for the introduction of technology is the human body. Among the Maori and the Japanese tattooing reached a high state of sophistication. While the same cannot be said for the most part of modern body alteration, perhaps its full achievement has not been reached.

Performance art is another way of using the human body, one that usually does not leave a record. It is possible, however, that the "shocking" photographs of sexual and excretory themes produced by Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano should be regarded as records of past performances.

Advances in electronic technology have in recent years made digital scanners cheap and accessible, so that artists may first make a digital copy of an image and then modify it. Images can be readily transmitted over the Internet. It is thought that digitally stored banks of virtual images will shortly replace collections of lantern slides, so that this familiar adjunct of art-historical teaching will disappear.

An important theme in the social history of art is collecting, together with the museums that are often the beneficiaries of it. In early modern Europe, princely collections, the so-called Kunst- und Wunderkammern, contained biological and geological rarities, as well as art objects. Only in our time has the separation between the two types of exhibits been fully achieved.

In terms of origin museums are of two types. The first type is represented by the great princely and aristocratic collections such as the Uffizi in Florence and the Wallace Collection in London, where the scope of the collection still bears the marks of the interest of the former owners. A few museums, such as the Gallery at Dulwich and the original Getty Museum in Malibu, California, were intended to serve in part as mausoleums for their founders. Then there are new museums, such as the National Gallery in London and the Metropolitan in New York City, which were started fresh and maintained to have a broad, encyclopedic character. However broad in claimed intention, American museum collecting policies have been criticized for neglecting work created by women and ethnic minorities.

In some countries, such as Greece, Mexico, and Nigeria the development of museums containing ancient objects has played an important role in fostering national pride. The South Kensington Museum, later the Victoria and Albert Museum, in London was opened shortly after the middle of the nineteenth century to offer examples of the crafts in order to improve industrial production. This type of museum of the applied arts was subsequently emulated in Vienna, Budapest and other cities.

Building new structures for museums offers major challenges. At the cutting edge—or very near it—of contemporary architecture stand fresh-built museums by such architects as Frank Gehry (Bilbao), Louis Kahn (Fort Worth; New Haven), Richard Meier (Frankfort; Atlanta; Los Angeles), and James Stirling (Stuttgart). As happened with Frank Lloyd Wright’s Guggenheim Museum in New York City,
the accommodation of these spaces to their objects sometimes takes years to negotiate.  

In recent times a socioeconomic approach to art has been particularly associated with Marxism. Although his literary interests were both broad and deep, Karl Marx had relatively little acquaintance with the visual arts. His tastes seem to have run to nineteenth-century history paintings that engaged him for their subject matter. He did make the significant point, too little heeded by his followers, that the high quality of the art of ancient Greece cannot be explained by the comparatively primitive economic level of the society that produced it. It seems that there is no easy correlation—in this realm at least—of economic base and cultural superstructure. Some later Marxist writers have, of course, sought to treat art as a continuing and faithful reflection of the historical evolution of the economic base, while others have criticized these efforts as "vulgar Marxism" or "economism" (the striving to subordinate other aspects of human life rigidly to economic determinants). A variant of this approach sometimes taken by Marxists is really Hegelian, for it sees art as part of a whole complex of cultural endeavors, including law, politics, and the economy. The difficulty with this view is that it does not show how the parts fit together, that is to say, what commands in practice, offers a clear answer.

Another problem is ideology, of which art may be regarded as a part. Is ideology to be defined in a value-neutral way, that is as simply one's world view? Or is it a delusive system cynically manipulated by the ruling class to maintain its power, but which can be discarded once we unmask the false consciousness that sustains it? Some version of the latter view is usually preferred by Marxists. Seen in this context, the approach to art is bound to be somewhat reductivist.

Opposed in their explanation of the determination of human behavior, Marxism and psychoanalysis nonetheless have something in common. They are both "schools of suspicion" in that they hold that the surface appearance of things is a delusion. We must strip away the beguiling mask of artifice to lay bare the sordid reality that lies beneath. Moreover, Marxism and psychoanalysis are both "theories of everything" that satisfy a need for universality of explanation formerly proffered by religion. Once mastered, these systems have an addictive quality. First you labor to acquire the jargon, but then you gain continuing reinforcement from applying it. The adept revels in a sense of superiority of the "I know something you don't" kind. In the case of Marxism this elite appeal has the fatal drawback of alienating the working class, who resent the arrogance of the educated with their highfalutin jargon. As with psychoanalysis, there are formidable evidentiary problems; the labor theory of value, inevitability of socialism, immiseration, centrality of the class struggle—all these doctrines have failed to gain substantiation.

In the 1920s and 1930s Central Europe was fertile ground for Marxist explorations of culture. The most important academic focus was the Institut für Sozialforschung in Frankfurt including such figures as Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, Max Horckheimer, and Herbert Marcuse. The Frankfurt school rejected both western capitalism and Soviet communism, seeking to create a body of critical theory that would prefigure social change. Almost forgotten for a time, these thinkers revived under the influence of the New Left.

One writer from this milieu, Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), has posthumously achieved an extraordinary fame denied him in his troubled life: a veritable cult has arisen to honor his memory. In 1915, as a student at the university of Munich, Benjamin attended the art-history lectures of Heinrich Wölflin, against which he reacted strongly. Instead, he was influenced by the scholarship of Alois Riegl, whom he hailed as a forerunner of expressionism and the rehabilitator of a disparaged style, that of the later Roman empire. Benjamin took Riegl's work as a model for his study of seventeenth-century German drama. In his later years he worked obsessively on a vast scholarly project (never completed) on the arcades of nineteenth-century Paris as "urban condensers," sites where the complex interactions
of capitalist society kinetically converged.\textsuperscript{21} This work has application to the study of architecture, especially from a sociological point of view.

A relatively short text, Benjamin's 1936 "Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction," has gained a portentous ascendency among intellectuals that is altogether disproportionate to its slender intrinsic significance.\textsuperscript{22} Central to this essay is the concept of the aura surrounding works of art.\textsuperscript{23} The aura is a primordial resonance stemming ultimately from the world of cult and ritual, and persisting, though with diminished intensity, in the secularized concept of the autonomy of art. Ultimately the age of the mass production of images—the nineteenth century—made the aura obsolete. This change was linked to larger shifts in society and these, in turn, were reflected in new modes of perception and thinking. Benjamin held that it was the ready availability of cheap reproductions—photographs—in the nineteenth century that transformed our concept of art, undermining the "auratic" reverence that had been traditionally attributed to great works. The difficulty with this proposed break is that prints reproducing works of art had been available in profusion since the fifteenth century, so that this change cannot be attributed to the industrial revolution.\textsuperscript{24} Hence Benjamin's link between means of production (replication of images) and consciousness does not hold. In fact Benjamin was not a very rigorous Marxist, but an eclectic who responded to various currents of his day. It is this sensitivity, rather than rigorous thinking, that accounts in large measure for his continuing popularity.

Frederick Antal (1887-1954) was a Hungarian art historian who resided in England during his later years. As a young man Antal was privileged to be a member of the remarkable Sunday Circle formed by the Marxist intellectual Georg Lukács in Budapest in 1916.\textsuperscript{25} In his magnum opus Florentine Art and Its Social Background, which is concerned with the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Antal proposed that style had a social correlate: the gilded late Gothic style was the art of the traditional aristocracy and the austere early Renaissance that of the rising upper middle class.\textsuperscript{26} While some critics found this correlation too simple, most would grant that Antal offered a rich portrayal of a significant period in Western art.

Three years after the appearance of Antal's monograph, another graduate of Lukács's Sunday Circle, Arnold Hauser (1892-1978), essayed a broader canvas, nothing less than a survey from the Stone Age to the present. However, his The Social History of Art was mainly a general history of art along Hegelian cultural-history lines, lacking the factual details that would make the socioeconomic context vivid.\textsuperscript{27} In the Cold War climate that prevailed when the book appeared many reviewers rejected it as too Marxist.\textsuperscript{28} More recently, radical art historians have faulted Hauser's Marxism as attenuated in substance and devoid of political engagement.\textsuperscript{29}

Interest in political approaches to the study of culture reemerged in the 1970s as a product of the radical climate that opposition to the Vietnam war had encouraged.\textsuperscript{30} Many held that the understanding of art would be more complete if it could be anchored in the real world of social and economic determinants. A key point of Marxist theory is that it links understanding with practice. Accordingly, it was urged that art and art history could—and should—play a role in promoting positive social change. One difficulty is that art-world opinion favored avant-garde and abstract styles, while orthodox Marxism held that realism was the only proper style for a socialist society. During the 1930s, left-wing artists had sought to portray themes of social protest in a fairly realistic style, as seen crudely in the agit-prop illustrations appearing in the periodical New Masses or more subtly in the Sacco-Vanzetti series of paintings (1931-32) by Ben Shahn. However, the artistic means employed in these works were not notably different from those in paintings espousing bourgeois values.\textsuperscript{31} And with the passage of time all this art came to seem dated.

In the 1970s and 1980s a new strategy of radical art came to the fore which broke with the traditions of socialist realism. This approach, as shown by the work of Hans Haacke, Yvonne Rainer,
and Faith Ringgold, emphasized the tactic of destabilizing and disrupting the means of communication employed by existing society (advertising, television, and other modes of commercial entertainment). 32 Once these ways of communicating are displaced, the argument went, a space will appear for the proclamation of new values. But when, if ever, will it be possible to pass from stage one to stage two? Some radical artists found consolation in the Constructivist abstractions of the early Soviet years; but this alliance—a temporary, often tenuous one—between the avant-garde and official leftist belonged to a unique historical situation, very different from our own.

In the meantime, some of the art historians who rallied to the new "left academy" continued to follow standard Marxist procedures. 33 In their writings works of art typically figured as straightforward "reflections" of ideologies, social relations, and history. Yet these art historians were not deeply versed in political and economic history, so that these elements tended to be ritually invoked as background to works of art. Then the artists' point of reference was placed in the artistic community, with the latter playing a pivotal role in the regime of "mediations" whereby history is handed down. Finally, these art historians proffered intuitive analogies between form and ideological content; the actual composition of paintings was held to reflect ideological themes. The foregoing account of these pitfalls follows the outline offered by the independent-Marxist art historian Timothy J. Clark, who sought to eschew them in his own work. 34

In his studies of French art during the Second Republic (1848-1851), Clark succeeded in presenting a subtle picture of the artists' situation in a highly politicized era. 35 But, as he acknowledged, the special quality of this era prevents it from being generalized as a model. Clark's two volumes were written in a powerful personal style (not devoid of mordancy) that accomplished something rare in art history—writing that approaches the quality of its subject. The timing of the books was significant, for they were composed in the afterglow of the May 1968 events in Paris, which erupted just 120 years after the revolution that created the original situation Clark charted—and which were followed by a similar disillusionment (though nothing so dramatic as Louis Napoleon's coup d'état).

In the 1970s, when revolutionary fervor had dimmed, Clark extended his gaze forward to essay a portrayal of Parisian art in the 1860s and 1870s in terms of themes: the new boulevards and suburbs, prostitution and places of entertainment. 36 Conveying a mass of new information about the response to art in the period, this book nonetheless failed to reconcile the author's ideological insistence on class struggle with the evidence of the paintings themselves.

A further study, of the American Abstract Expressionist group of painters, discloses some limitations of Clark's approach. 37 He evaluates their work as the manifestation of a certain "vulgarity" reflecting the class interest and culture of the petty bourgeoisie. Yet he does not explain why the avant-garde works he examines differ so radically from the sentimental realism of Norman Rockwell, who indubitably catered to the expectations of the very class that Clark thinks the Abstract Expressionists reflect. The relative superficiality of the essay stems also from a lack of sustained attention to American mid-century culture—the kind of attention that writer mustered for French culture of a century earlier. This contrast suggests that his approach, when it works, is in large measure the function of hard work, rather than a specific method.

When the approach is accompanied by hard work and thorough familiarity with the material it can pay off for others as well, as seen in a monograph on the French Impressionists by a veteran scholar of the period, Robert L. Herbert. 38 Even Claude Monet, often regarded as a pure sensualist, responded to the social environment, as Paul Hayes Tucker has shown. During the 1870s the works of this archimpressionist reflected the growing industrialization of the town of Argenteuil downstream from Paris. During the 1890s Monet's continuing concerns with grainstacks, poplars, and Rouen Cathedral all had parallels in topics of current political interest. 39

The practice of Clark, Herbert, and Tucker generally eschewed grand theory, addressing particular artists and themes. Not so the prolific Fredric Jameson (not an art historian) who has worked
out a grand scheme correlating three stages of capitalism, early, monopoly, and late; with early modernism, high modernism, and postmodernism, respectively. The trouble with such schemes is that they simply reenact the vulgar Marxist project—sometimes termed "economism"—of making the cultural superstructure a mere puppet controlled by the socioeconomic base. Significantly, Jameson seems unfamiliar with the large body of technical Marxist writings on political economy, relying mainly on the popular works of the Trotskyist Ernest Mandel. Even had he mastered these writings, the "economic base" of his construction would likely have proved unsound. For well before the collapse of Marxist regimes in eastern Europe in 1989-91, scholars had undertaken an internal critique. These studies exposed the vulnerability of Marxism's core doctrines in economics, philosophy, and history, fields which constitute its home ground.  

Formerly popular was the idea that art could be discussed in terms of national schools, which reflected the special character of the peoples that produced them. Thus Roger Fry held that French art is characterized as a whole by tendencies to balance and measure, while Nikolaus Pevsner, in The Englishness of English Art, maintained that the art of his adoptive country displayed a recurrent tendency to linear patterning.  

Some have held that without national traditions it is necessary to make regional distinctions. For example, in Italian art many hold that the importance of the dominant Florence-Rome axis, with its emphasis on composition and drawing, must be balanced by Venice, with its concern with color and tonality, and Lombardy, with its realism. Such contrasts are by their nature more evident in large countries than small ones. Thus students of American architecture distinguish the traditions of the Eastern seabord from the Prairies, and these in turn from the building preferences of the southwest. Others see the South as a distinctive cultural region. Still others make a more straightforward contrast between the two coasts and the heartland.  

At all events the study of American art before 1945, long a stepchild of art history, has become more salient and complex. Among the elements enriching this field of study are some of Marxist provenance. This trend is evident in the realm of material culture, wherein a whole vast range of "low" but popular objects from Currier and Ives prints and world's fair souvenirs to fruitbox labels and roadside sculptures are examined. Other Americanist art historians have charged the material culturalists with indifference to issues of quality, while the latter have charged their critics with being elitist.  

Another aspect of the ongoing revaluation of American art came to the fore in the exhibition "The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920," held at the National Museum of American Art in 1991. This exhibition featured studio paintings in the following categories: history painting, images of progress, Indians, everyday frontier life, natural scenery, and inventions. Underpinning the show was a revisionist approach by historians of the American West who had been increasingly questioning the "manifest destiny" concept enshrined in the view that providence had impelled American expansion. They favored a revisionist, multiculturalist approach that emphasized the role of Indians, Hispanics, and women. Some scholars professing this view seem impelled to indict white Americans for all that had gone wrong in the region—and by implication throughout the world. Not only did the curators lean towards this more extreme approach, but they also strove to bludgeon the viewer into accepting it with lengthy, tendentious wall captions. Even Yale's Alan Trachtenberg, who sympathized with many goals of the exhibition, noted that "in their compulsion to demystify, to expose virtually every displayed work as serving a hegemonic function, the curators [produced] a simplistic, negative version of the West—a remythologizing of the subject ... as the locus of all that is wrong with America." Clearly those who wish to reveal the ideological messages that they claim underlie famous works must achieve a better fit between the ascribed meanings and the presented images.  

As the century draws to a close, more and more scholars inclined to a leftist point of view are taking up "cultural studies" of current film, television, popular music, and so forth.
These media products are held to be the true arts of our time—and also the arts of the people. This overtly celebratory approach contrasts with the debunking, skeptical one evinced in "The West as America." Left-leaning cultural critics are thus caught between an affirming populism and a debunking exposure of ideology. Perhaps it is well to have a choice, but how does one decide which of these two contrasting views is appropriate in any particular instance?

Even if popular cultures reflect popular preferences, of what people do they do so? The world role of the United States in setting fashions in this area is inescapable. For this reason objects that may reflect genuine popular sentiment in this country may have an exotic and elitist cachet abroad.

Theories of historical development—including Marxist ones—tend to assume continuity. At most there are successive stages in a relatively uniform development. Another view, however, as old as the Genesis accounts of the Flood and the fall of the Tower of Babel, singles out catastrophes as agents of catastrophic cultural shifts. This approach may be termed saltationist, from Latin saltus, "leap."

It is generally agreed that the drastic decline in the standards of Egyptian civilization known as the Second Intermediate Period (ca. 1786-1570 B.C.) was caused, or at least intensified by the invasion of a foreign people, the Hyksos. Later, when Egypt managed its remarkable recovery in the New Kingdom it had acquired the horse (unknown before the Hyksos introduced it) and an interest in expansion abroad. In comparison with what went before, New Kingdom art has a markedly more elegant and worldly quality. So the barbarian onslaught at first brought decline and destruction; but cultural innovations arose on the ashes.

Since the time of the historian Edward Gibbon (1737-1794), the migrations of the Germanic peoples in the fourth and fifth centuries of our era have been thought to have ended Roman imperial civilization, including its art. Twentieth-century scholarship, however, has shown that important changes appeared in Roman art as early as ca. 170 A.D. so that the barbarian invasions at most helped consolidate a development already under way. It is generally conceded, though, that Norman conquest of England in 1066 led to the introduction of Romanesque architecture into that country. The massive impact of the Normans, which included their French language and law practices, makes one wonder whether England in those centuries might best be interpreted as a colonial society.

In the middle of the fourteenth century Europe was ravaged by a terrible plague, the Black Death, that carried away as many as half the inhabitants of the most affected regions. In a landmark book Millard Meiss argued that this catastrophe was responsible for a change in the mood of art in Tuscany, which shifted from the plastic and joyous art of Giotto and his followers to the flat, abstract, austere style found in the work of Nardo di Cione and Orcagna. Undoubtedly, Meiss was aided in his perceptions of late medieval art by the catastrophes of fascism and World War II, which ended six years before his book appeared.

The 1527 sack of Rome by soldiers in the service of emperor Charles V has been held responsible for the end of the high Renaissance and its replacement by the more ambiguous, tormented style of mannerism. André Chastel has shown that the mannerist traits had already appeared in Rome under the auspices of the Medici pope Clement VII before the sack; nevertheless, the effects on the art world of the eternal city were very serious, for some artists were plunged into a deep and lasting depression, while others dispersed to various parts of Italy and France.

The French Revolution did not alter the popularity of the neoclassical style, which had started earlier—but that event was regarded by many as a great advance rather than a catastrophe. France's loss of the war with Prussia in 1871, together with forebodings occasioned by population decline, undoubtedly conditioned the art and literature of the so-called "decadent" phase, characterized by a sense of psychological introversion and fatalistic resignation. A similar "decadence" (as well as modernist innovation) flourished in Weimar Germany after the military defeat of 1918.

The most remarkable event of the late twentieth century has been the collapse of communism,
which has had an immediate effect on art (if that is what it is to be called) owing to the destruction and removal of countless sculptures of Stalin, Lenin, Dzerzhinski and others. The disappearance of communism has been widely welcomed, but the prolonged and painful period of readjustment in eastern Europe may entail cultural effects that are hard to foresee.

Other dangers loom. If ecologists are correct, the mounting effects of the abuse of the planet will have disastrous effects on the life style of human beings; and this decline must then have cultural consequences.

Political emblems offer interesting case studies in visual communication. Prominent among these are personifications. The image of Britannia, formerly ubiquitous on the copper penny of the United Kingdom, descended from the Roman symbolism of the provinces of the empire. In the United States, Uncle Sam (possibly derived from the initials U.S.) was first mentioned in a Troy, N.Y., newspaper article of 1813. At all events these two figures have acquired a certain bland predictability, probably reflecting the stability of the constitutional organization of the countries they personify. By contrast, France's Marianne has had a checkered career, reflecting the ebb and flow of republican fervor and the opposition it has engendered.52

According to legend, the emperor Constantine saw the emblem of the chi-rho [XP], the first two letters of Christ's name in Greek, in a vision in 312. This form, also known as the chrism, became ubiquitous as a Christian symbol, replacing the fish (derived from an anagram), common during the earlier years in which the church was persecuted.

Two familiar "logos" of twentieth-century totalitarianism, the swastika and the hammer and sickle, reflect different principles of symbol formation. The swastika is an age-old form found in many different cultures with a diverse array of meaning. Early investigators identified the form, also known as the gammadion or fylfot, with the sun or with good luck; it seems to have had no single universal meaning.53 Insisting that its "Aryan" ascendancy (tenuous) was paramount, the Nazis expropriated it. Western visitors, for whom the emblem is forever tainted, are sometimes startled to observe its use in Buddhist contexts in Nepal and Japan.

The hammer and sickle is a device invented in the immediate aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution, reputedly by the book illustrator and ceramics designer Sergei Chekhonin in 1918. The emblem links the hammer, long a symbol of industrialism, with the agricultural implement of the sickle, juxtaposing the two social groups the Communist party claimed to be serving: the workers and the peasants. The hammer-and-sickle pairing lent itself to further combinations. One common design set it at the center of another revolutionary symbol, the red star. Another placed it on the red flag, which as such can be traced back to French dissidents in France in 1832: the combination made the flag specifically Soviet.

It is well known that Hitler and Stalin sought to harness the fine arts to their purposes.54 However, after 1945 much of the art made under Nazi auspices disappeared into vaults in Germany and the United States, where the objects are unavailable for study. Students of art in the former Soviet Union tend to favor nonofficial art, rather than the works produced at the behest of the regime. Many of these latter, too, have disappeared from their former places in streets and squares. It must be conceded, then, that for both totalitarian countries we still know too little about state art policies, and their effectiveness (or not) in consolidating their respective regimes.

In Mussolini's Italy the picture was complex.55 On the one hand, the temptation to grandiose rhetoric based on the purported revival of the Roman empire led to classical gestures in architecture and monumental sculpture. On the other hand, fascism had links to futurism, an avant-garde visual style. The regime also proved receptive to the international style in architecture: Giuseppe Terragni's superbly functionalist Casa del Fascio in Como is the archetypal example.

With their bright colors, bold images, and stark lettering, posters are a distinctively modern
device for "mobilizing the masses." During the two World Wars and after, both sides borrowed freely from each other in creating posters dramatically exhorting the citizen to give his or her all to the cause, while caricaturing the enemy as a fiend in human shape.  

During the 1920s and 1930s such artists as Orozco, Rivera, and Siqueiros covered walls in public buildings in Mexico City and Guadalajara with vast mural cycles depicting the history of their country. This activity, so different from European modernism, seemed to attest that the Mexican Revolution had not only redirected the country's political life, but also revitalized its culture. The Mexican mural movement was directly linked to Revolution. The intellectual background of this work lay in the enhanced awareness of the Mexican people as a fusion of indigenous and European strains—the raza cósmica—and of the importance of the Amerindian contribution (indigenismo). Accordingly, the artists reversed the usual stereotypes, showing the Amerindians as heroic and the whites often as oppressors. This ideology was a distinct achievement of Mexico—no other Latin American country created such a construct—and the art was clearly received as mirroring it.

As enthusiasm for the concept of Mexicans as a harmonious blend of European and indigenous components wore thin, it was explicitly attacked by the noted intellectual Octavio Paz, who emphasized that the Spanish conquest was an act of violence, whose scars were still evident in the Mexican national character.

For their part the muralists depicted the Spanish Conquistadores as cruel exploiters. But their most biting satire was reserved for foreign despoilers of Mexico, especially North Americans, who had come to control substantial shares of Mexican national resources.

It is somewhat surprising to note, then, that during the Depression of the 1930s, the major Mexican muralists also worked in the United States. Here their style was appreciated as distinctively Mexican, but it still influenced the social realist art of American painters. Many North Americans and Europeans traveled to Mexico to admire the new society that they believed was arising in the midst of poverty. North American interest peaked in the exhibition "Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art," held at the Museum of Modern Art in 1940. This presentation united recent Mexican work with pre-Columbian objects that influenced it or were of general interest to the sophisticated New York public.

Often buoyed by social-change sentiment and dislike of Euro-American domination, the mural movement migrated to other Latin American countries. Murals best known to outsiders were painted under the socialist regimes of Cuba and Sandinista Nicaragua. Nor is the mural movement dead in Mexico itself, for in 1998 village painters in Tanierpa, Chiapas, created a 36-foot wall painting of masked Zapatista activists, only to see it demolished by security police on the following day. This act of destruction shows the resonance of murals of this type; this example could not be permitted to remain because its capacity to influence opinion was feared. A mural movement developed among Chicano artists in the United States in the 1960s and 70s, only to falter later.

As time went on, the Mexican Revolution came to be seen in a less glamorous light. Its legends had become coopted to justify the monolithic bureaucracy of the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party. A shift in perception of the murals took place, in which they could not escape the penumbra of their creators who stemmed from the European-derived elite that, despite indigenist slogans, continued to rule the country. No longer acceptable at face value as proclamations of popular sovereignty based on Mexican history, they came to be seen as complicit the regime's self-perpetuation. The enfeeblement of the earlier ideals is clearly evident in one last grandiose enterprise, David Alfaro Siqueiros' enormous March of Humanity Towards the Cosmos installed at the Polyforum Cultural Siqueiros in Mexico City (1964–71). Here the glorification of the Revolution dissolves into a vague "universalist" symbolism.

Some of the newly independent third-world countries have created new capitals. Here they are faced with a significant choice of symbolism, whether to signal a new start by using a modern abstract idiom without roots in the country, as in Louis Kahn's work at Dhaka in Bangladesh, or to reemploy
traditional forms, as in the parliament houses of Papua New Guinea and Sri Lanka.62

Considerable material has accumulated on the effort of states to enhance their power through visual communication. There remains a question supplied by the new field of reception theory: to whom were these proclamations addressed? As a royal household item, the early Egyptian Narmer Palette can only have been directed at a very narrow circle, the pharaoh and his entourage, while later Egyptian renderings of the theme on temple walls reached a larger audience. Ancient Assyrian reliefs were intended to impress even foreign visitors, as did, of course the Mexican murals and the architecture of the capitals in third-world countries. It seems that there should be a new approach, which might perhaps be termed "visual rhetoric" to study the devices used in such works and their effect on audiences.

A related problem is that of the effectiveness of such visual proclamations. Clearly the response depends in large measure on external considerations. The esteem of foreign opinion, its cultural adjuncts seemed with the triumph of European modernism and abstract expressionism the style of the muralists came to seem old fashioned.

The preceding discussion has reviewed a disparate array of objects of study, united only by their political character. In contrast with, say, the deconstruction and psychoanalytic approaches, researchers have as yet no unified body of theory to correlate these studies. Instead of fanning out from the bastion of a single unified theory, scholars are working from a number of "growing points," often in isolation from one another. Yet it may be that this piecemeal approach, which attends to historical specificity and methodological pluralism, will—in the long run—provide a better model than monolithic doctrines imported from outside.

In the 1980s and 1990s the United States witnessed a series of episodes of value conflict; these have come to be known as the culture wars.63 As far as art is concerned, the disputes took place at the interface between avant-garde tastes and public exposure to them, especially as seen in monumental works in cities.64 The controversy over Richard Serra's huge Tilted Arc, removed from New York City's Federal Plaza in the summer of 1989, was a focal point. Understandably, the sculptor protested against the dismantling of his work. Yet during the very same year the removal of statues of Stalin and his associates from public display in eastern European cities showed that not every art work has an inviolable right to remain where it was first placed. Moreover, disputes about public sculpture are not new in America, witness the fate of Luigi Persico's (1791-1860) sculptural groups for the United States Capitol, which were attacked on xenophobic and prurient grounds and consequently removed to storage.65 At the beginning of the century William Randolph Hearst's proposal for a memorial to the battleship Maine in New York met sustained criticism.66

In comparison with what was to come, the offence given by Serra's work seems modest. Increasingly, daring artists—mostly feminist, gay, and lesbian—sought to use taboo material in their art. The most notorious clash engendered by these explorations was triggered by the work of the late photographer Robert Mapplethorpe (1947-1989). In June of 1989 the Corcoran Gallery in Washington D.C. canceled a retrospective exhibition of his photographs because of a few explicit homoerotic images. The exhibition circulated as scheduled to a number of other cities, however, and in Cincinnati the museum director was brought to trial, but acquitted. This controversy, and a similar one surrounding Andres Serrano's Piss Christ (a photograph of a crucifix immersed in urine), drew the ire of conservatives, who assaulted the National Endowment for the Humanities for disbursing funds to create and exhibit such work.

Strictly speaking, one should distinguish the dispute over funding with public money from the prosecution of the museum director with the intent of closing the show and preventing similar ones from opening. Only the latter is censorship. A legitimate debate over whether public funds should be used
for certain types of art is still possible without raising the issue of censorship. After all, pornographic videos continue to flourish without public subsidy. Unfortunately, the urge to censor, which comes from both the right and the left, is increasing in late twenty-first-century America.

Images like those of Mapplethorpe, Wildmon and Falwell and Senator Jesse Helms who believe that the display of such images has a deleterious effect on morals. If these outrageous images of Sodom and Gomorrah. Defenders of a formalist gambit: "look at the masterful way of Sodom and Gomorrah. Defenders of art works advocating "progressive" multinational firms as well as Ronald Reagan have an effect, a beneficial one, on social But can it? And if so, how much?

No one seems to have devised an objective way of measuring such effects.

Moreover, the attempt to create effective "agit-prop" art may lower standards to the point that the effort is scarcely worthwhile. Writing of the 1993 Whitney Biennial, an exhibition notable for its showcasing of left-leaning "political artists," the critic Eleanor Heartney noted "the tendency of artists, curators and art educators to reduce contemporary art to the role of social work or therapy. Much of the work here is numbingly didactic, easily summed up in a sentence or two. In a curious way this tendency to privilege social message over aesthetic demand that art be morally uplifting."

It may be that both sides of the controversy, right and left, harbor excessive expectations of art's capacity to foster social improvement. Others see a negative capacity. Those opposed to pornography claim that it incites to rape and other pathologies, but others dispute this.

In the aftermath of the Vietnam War many artists longed to escape from their formalist ivory tower, and to play a positive role in changing society. Now their wish seems to have been granted, at least on the level of discussion. But talk is not change. The fact that Falwell and Helms trumpet that what they perceive as obscenity is having a pernicious effect is no proof that it actually is.

In any event the controversies raised a host of questions that will take time to sort out. One is whether, in the modern age, art of high quality can also have a mobilizing effect. That is, can the gap between art and propaganda be bridged?

Another issue is the relation of elites to broader public taste. Some modern art has successfully communicated itself to a larger public, but the prospects for postmodern work, including its political discourse, are problematic.

Then there is the question of how artists and themes emerge from obscurity to be inscribed "on the agenda" of the present which, after some sitting, becomes the roster of history. Real obstacles may need to be overcome. Censorship in the visual arts can be documented at least from the days of the New Kingdom in Egypt, and has had a depressingly long life since. Repressive zeal removes works from display, causes them to be damaged and destroyed, and, through its chilling effect, may even prevent them from coming into being in the first place.

Yet in a relatively open society scandal can help an artist to become a household word. Some say that there is no such thing as bad publicity. In this light the would-be censors may actually magnify the reputations of those they detest by lending notoriety to their works. In democratic countries, which cannot suppress cultural expression by stealth, this is the censor's dilemma. In any event, sexuality and gender concepts are issues central to our society today, and art that deals with these questions effectively is likely to continue to be significant. The historiography of such work is still in flux.


35. *Image of the People* deals with the art of Courbet, whom Clark believed had a special destiny of creating, however briefly, a genuine "socialist" art during this period. Clark's complementary *The Absolute Bourgeois: Artists and Politics in France 1848-1851*, Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1973, treats less progressive artists: Millet, Daumier, and Delacroix.


48. Millard Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena After the Black Death*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951. In a reexamination of the issues, Henk van Os confirms the formal shifts identified by Meiss (and, as he shows, anticipated by G. Gombosi in 1926). However, he believes that they came about not so much through a shift in spiritual attitude, but as a result of reorganization of craft production and patronage. These changes, however, were themselves occasioned by the Black Death ("The Black Death and Sienese Painting: A Problem of Interpretation," *Art History*, 4 [1981], 237-49).


57. Lawrence Schmeckebier, *Modern Mexican Art*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1939; Bernard S. Myers, *Mexican Painting in Our Time*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1956. The fact that, in English at least, there have been no more recent syntheses is indicative, first, of the neglect of these painters in the shadow of high Euro-American modernism, and, secondly, of the confusion that still prevails in an era in which the work of these painters is viewed more sympathetically.


60. For both these developments, see Shifra M. Goldman, *Dimensions of the Americas: Art and Social Change in Latin America and the United States* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994).


CHAPTER FIVE. GENDER STUDIES

Gender has long been established in the study of grammar, as those who encounter the concept in learning French, German, or Latin (among other languages) will attest. Since the 1970s, however, the word gender has become an important tool of social analysis. It stands in contrast to sex, understood as the human biological substratum controlled by chromosomes that distinguishes males from females. On this substratum human cultures have constructed a series of concepts or beliefs—sometimes amounting to stereotypes—that determine norms of behavior and professional opportunities open to men and women.

These socially conditioned concepts vary from one culture to another and change over time. For example, until recently our society denied or restricted access to such professions as medicine and the law to women, ostensibly because their emotional sensitivity barred them from the objectivity these professions require. Conversely, men, expected to refrain from cultivating and displaying their emotional response, were thought to be inappropriate in the role of care givers. Changes in these expectations suggest that they are culturally variable, amounting to superstructures imposed over the biological base rather than being dictated by it. Those who deny the cultural variability of such characteristics are sometimes termed "essentialists."

Among the qualities traditionally considered normal to men and women is heterosexuality. In recent decades, however, many have come to acknowledge same-sex attraction as the basis for a viable alternative life style.

In practice gender studies focuses on the cultural accomplishments of women and homosexually oriented persons, both male and female. Some would include also transgenderism, that is the study of cultural manifestations of cross-dressing and transsexuality. Ideally, the field should include the culture of heterosexual men, but this has been less intensively studied.

Gender studies is often connected with movements for the political advancement of the classes of persons it treats. As in the case of Black Studies, this link has produced questions about whether such scholarship should be politically engaged so as to help in producing change or remain detached and objective. This dilemma must be borne in mind in evaluating what has been learned—and it is considerable—in the broad field of gender studies.

It is common knowledge that the first women's movement began in the middle of the nineteenth century to secure suffrage (voting rights) for women and to combat their exploitation in a male-centered society. What is less well known is that the movement also sparked contributions to knowledge, including knowledge of art's past. The first women's movement fostered a number of surveys of the achievements of women artists.¹ After 1920 the movement ebbed, and with it the scholarship that it had brought forth. So these studies had to be reinvented in our own day.

The "Second Wave" of political feminism beginning in the 1960s yielded a far greater scholarly harvest. The first official program in women's studies began at San Diego State University in 1969. By 1982 there were 350 such programs, and the number continued to mount despite the conservative atmosphere of the Reagan-Bush years. By 1992 there were 620 women's studies programs.

The era also witnessed a major intervention in the world of art, one that proved intense and many-sided. Women artists organized in collective bodies to demand more access to exhibitions and museums. Two of the most prominent are the Women's Caucus for Art, a mainstream professional association, and the Guerrilla Girls, an anonymous group based in New York City that has dramatized continuing discrimination against women artists through its "in-your-face" posters. Periodicals such as

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**Feminist Art Journal** and **Women's Art Journal** came into existence, paralleling women’s studies journals in other disciplines. As there was already a large pool of women trained as art historians, those who were inclined were well equipped to contribute to the discussion—though it took time for the conceptual armature to be elaborated.² (A number of male art historians, some of them gay, have also adopted a feminist methodology.)

During the 1970s feminist art historians placed a priority on recovering the works and biographies of neglected artists of the past, such as Artemisia Gentileschi, Judith Leyster, and Louise Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun. Pioneering surveys were produced by Eleanor Tufts; Karen Peterson and J. J. Wilson; and Linda Nochlin and Ann Harris.³ These surveys paved the way for the weighty monographs on individual artists that distinguished the 1980s and 1990s. Recuperations were not limited to makers of art; Claire Richter Sherman and Adele M. Holcomb were able to present a substantial cohort of nineteenth- and twentieth-century women art scholars.⁴

A vital corollary to this activity was the conviction that women artists of the present must not suffer the fate of their foremothers; in fact, they are still engaged in a fight to obtain exhibitions and critical attention appropriate to their numbers. At the same time, it was recognized that the recuperative endeavor would never—for the past at least—yield a roster equivalent to that of men. This imbalance was the subject of Linda Nochlin’s 1971 essay, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?"⁵ In this text, one of the most widely read contributions of all recent art history, Nochlin pointed out that the creation of artists is not an immaculate conception, but is conditioned by a host of social factors. The exclusion of women from academies and art schools, where drawing from the male nude was part of the curriculum, served to deny women training and credentialing. Initially controversial because it was regarded as mere sociology of art, Nochlin’s essay later came to be questioned by radical feminists who dismissed the whole idea of greatness in art. Such are the perils of being a pioneer in scholarship.

Much of the activity of the 1970s focused on gaining and diffusing information about the past and securing the acceptance of women in the art world of the present. At the same time, radical voices began to be heard asking whether women should be content with integration into a male system. This contrast mirrored a long-standing conflict between two types of advocates for social change: the reformers, who believe that the present system can be corrected, and the radicals, who wish to overthrow the system and replace it with another.

At all events the radicals asked important questions. Could it be that for the male canon a parallel female one was being assembled? Instead, shouldn’t one challenge the very notion of the canon? The contrast between great and nongreat artists was questioned. Some writers adopted a version of Roland Barthes’ idea of the death of the author, suggesting that "the artist" is just a metaphor for a vortex of social forces flowing through this individual. This concept is probably too self-denying for most artists, who understandably seek recognition as individuals. Moreover, as Broude and Garrard point out, "if followed to its extreme and logical conclusions, the death of the author as subjective agent posited by postmodernism may lead only to the death of feminism as an agent for positive political—or, indeed, art-historical—change."⁶ Finally, if greatness is rejected, do not all artists, male and female, face the prospect of returning to the modest status of craftspen that was dominant in the Middle Ages?

Others adopted a more specific focus. The possibility of a distinctive feminist sensibility was explored, as well as the idea of the presentation of female sexuality in art. Yet these discussions exposed a dilemma. Women’s distinctiveness in art seemed to require commitment to "essentialism" which treated differences that were probably as much cultural in origin as transhistorical.⁷ On the other hand, if one gave up the idea of female distinctiveness, then the aim of securing justice for women artists and their concerns seemed less urgent.
The imagery of the past has elicited the interest of many younger scholars. Renaissance and Baroque prints offer a rich array: from the Madonna and saints, through such heroines as Lucretia and Judith to the temptresses Eve and Venus and, more generally, women who usurp male prerogatives. Fortuna, often identified with inconstancy, was of course depicted as a woman—but then so were such virtues as Justice and Victory. In the nineteenth-century artists elaborated a more diffuse concept of women’s sphere. Inquiries into these and other themes disclosed a long record of misogyny, a useful reminder that neglect, deplorable as it has been, was often accompanied by open hostility. Some felt that these examinations, though valuable in their own right, were more of a contribution to social history than to the history of art.

As the 1980s advanced, fundamental assumptions of traditional ("patriarchal") art history came into question. Committed scholars proposed new ways of interpreting all art. For example, have women viewers looked at art in a different way from men viewers? This question of gaze and the "viewer’s share" became a major concern in the 1980s.

During this phase British feminist art historians made a major contribution, drawing on a wide range of sources, including psychoanalysis, Marxism, and French theory. Women film scholars, above all Laura Mulvey, blazed a trail in the introduction of ideas from these sources. Some British art scholars, such as Griselda Pollock, asserted that art history itself had failed; as currently practiced it remains "phallocentric" and complicit in the prolongation of the unequal status of women. Art history must be dismantled and replaced by something better. Significantly, Pollock used military metaphors: contest for terrain; occupation of the enemy’s territory.

As this new work gained greater attention a difference emerged between "social constructionist" and "liberal" feminist scholars. The first group, including Pollock and her allies, attacked the notion that art was produced for pure private consumption by geniuses with special insights. They saw the existing art system as deeply compromised by its embrace of consumer capitalism, and its resulting contribution to the continuing mystification of race, class, and gender. In the social constructionist view, art and art history cannot be simply reformed, but must be delegitimized and dismantled as part of a larger program of social reconstruction. By contrast, liberal or centrist art historians continue to maintain the Enlightenment notion that artists (of both sexes) have individual identities and voices that are not solely the products of societal forces, and that are not invariably anti-feminist.

Like the other group, liberal feminists recognize art’s historic functioning as a tool or residual effect of oppression, but they would point also to its historical uses as an instrument of dissent and resistance. In this way the discipline of art history will be gradually transformed from within. As this discussion shows, there are areas of overlap between the two groups and, despite some sharp exchanges, women of differing theoretical allegiances have shown considerable solidarity.

The standard model of the way in which the production of the artist relates to the work of the art historian and critic is a one-sided one in which the former always precedes the latter. The acceptance of this model has been complicated by an adversarial relationship between those who make art and those who write about it. For those active in the women’s art movement this adversarial confrontation has decidedly diminished. Such artists as Judy Chicago, Mary Kelly, and Barbara Kruger have sought to incorporate into their works information and insights gleaned from women scholars and critics. The link between artist-feminists and writer-feminists has been highlighted by the use of words within the art works. Interaction between image-makers and word professionals has always occurred, but it has recently been foregrounded through the sense that women artists and women writers are engaged in a common struggle to create a sphere of autonomy in a culture that continues to be dominated by patriarchal discourse.
Feminist concerns have encouraged research into associations of art and architecture with sex differences—with "gendering" in short. The Roman architectural theorist Vitruvius glossed the Greek orders in terms of gender. "So the Doric column began to furnish the proportion of a man's body, its strength and grace" (De architectura, 4.1.6). This order is particularly suited to temples dedicated to male gods. But a temple of Diana requires the "feminine slenderness" of the Ionic. The third order, the Corinthian was supposed to be modeled on the proportions of a young maiden. During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance buildings themselves took on human attributes; the basilican plan, with its transepts (arms) and chevet (literally head) was likened to a supine man, while residences were thought of as being protected by a "skin" or outer integument. In Roman Baroque palazzi, sober historical analysis permits the identification of distinctive women's apartments and their function. During the nineteenth century some associationist writers characterized Gothic architecture as male and Renaissance architecture as female. An inappropriate combination of the two styles risked a charge of "transvestism." A symposium held at the Princeton School of Architecture in 1990 explored various aspects of the gendering of space, including gay and lesbian perceptions.

The metaphoric of gender inform other arts besides architecture. A clear case has to do with categories of abstract nouns that in the personification allegories of the classical, medieval, and humanistic art traditions usually appeared as female figures. The reason for this preference is that in Latin such abstract qualities as justitia and libertas, as well as names of countries such as Britannia and Hispania, were of the feminine gender. Most Indo-European languages (with the principal exception of English) retain this gendered grammatical classification, hence the continuing female predominance in personification imagery. Perhaps because recent art using such personifications is generally academic, this iconography has been neglected—though New York's Statue of Liberty is an exception. Female personifications certainly go against the purported rule that gendering in art always privileges the male. Sometimes it does, of course. According to Patricia L. Reilly, the centuries-long contest of form and color, whereby the latter (which, at one extreme point, was even identified with the painted faces of prostitutes) tends to be treated as the inferior, has often been enacted as a contrast between the male and female principles.

The subtle (sometimes too subtle) methodology of gendering supplements the older concern with explicitly erotic art. This interest brought about a useful effort to gather and publish examples of material that had been taboo, but the endeavor failed to bring forth an interpretive foundation on which to build. The attack by some feminists on pornography has led to an effort to distinguish visual pornography from erotic art; the discussion is clouded by parti pris on both sides.

Serious study of erotic themes requires that they be viewed within their historical context. A fascinating category is that of the droleries in the margins of Gothic manuscripts, where the gross, often scatological figures provide an ironic commentary to the sacred images that commonly appear on the same page. Such marginalia have their counterpart in the fabliaux or ribald tales of medieval vernacular literature, but the decoding of their secrets is a complex procedure permitting only piecemeal progress.

A model study is Leo Steinberg's examination of Renaissance motifs pertaining to the sexuality of Christ. The fundamental premise of this work is that it is not sufficient simply to catalogue the erotic themes in a given sector of past art. To leave the matter at this stage risks anachronistically retrieving the works only to consign them into some convenient dropping place, obscuring the necessity that commanded their appearance in the first place.

In a number of significant paintings and prints of the life of Christ the New York scholar observed an emphasis on genitalia, especially in infancy and death scenes. Steinberg shows that these manifestations reflect neither Renaissance prurience nor age-old folklore invading Christian subject
matter. Rather, they reveal the intersection—one might almost say the collision—of a traditional theological theme that emphasized the integral humanity of the incarnate Christ with the new striving of the Renaissance artist to achieve visual wholeness. The Renaissance artists rejected the selective, symbolic presentation of Christ’s body favored during the Middle Ages, replacing it with a holistic version obedient to its naturalist imperative. In Steinberg’s view, the significance of the genitalia is not that they are visually present, but that they are shown through hand gestures or other indicia—as irrefutable evidence of Christ’s human nature.

Viewed in this way, the eroticism vanishes—or does it? The title of Steinberg’s monograph speaks of “modern oblivion.” Paradoxically, later generations, guided by the proverbial Mrs. Grundy, actually eroticized this category of Christ images by seeking to deeroticize it—by tabooing discussion of the matter or, in many cases, by overpainting the works so as to minimize or obscure the Lord’s penis. This later history suggests that an account of visual bowdlerism, the excision of motifs because they came to seem unacceptable, would be fruitful. The story of the loincloths Daniele da Volterra was instructed to paint by pope Paul IV (1558) on the nudes in Michelangelo’s Last Judgment is well known; moreover, the recent cleaning has confirmed that the Florentine authorities in the same period saw fit to disguise the genitalia of Masaccio’s Adam in the Brancacci Chapel in Florence—with a tree branch.21

A theme that runs through some contemporary art is fetishism.22 Invented in the eighteenth century, the concept of fetishism came to the fore in the nineteenth-century psychiatry of Richard von Krafft-Ebing. The German psychiatrist, then immensely popular, drew attention to the eroticized focus on such objects as shoes and umbrellas. In the nineteenth century women and gay men fetishized military uniforms; in the twentieth, gay men tended to narrow their interest to sailor suits. Military uniforms figure prominently in the paintings of the gay American artists Marsden Hartley and Charles Demuth.

Fetishism in the sense of compulsive gathering of small objects may be detected in artworks by Kurt Schwitters and Joseph Cornell. In contemporary culture fetishism fuses to a large extent with the so-called leather subculture. Through the fashion world clothing preferences formerly limited to small circles spread throughout society. The spread of piercing practices among young people is a comparable phenomenon.

The history of gender ambiguity in art can be traced back to ancient Egypt, where during the Amarna phase the large-hipped statues of the heretical pharaoh Akhenaten (fourteenth century B.C.) combine masculine and feminine traits.23 Some scholars posit that the Egyptian ruler’s preference for being so represented reflected his overall commitment to universality: a unisex figure is the universal human being. Others believe that the appearance was caused by a glandular condition. (The two explanations are not mutually exclusive). In one instance a statue of a female figure was wrongly, though perhaps understandably interpreted as a depiction of the pharaoh.

The hermaphrodite, a figure combining features of both the male and female, was a common theme in Roman art, though the concept goes back to the Greeks.24 In the influential account of the poet Ovid Hermaphroditus is the offspring of the gods Venus and Mercury. Once when Hermaphroditus was swimming in a stream, the nymph Salmacis, who had fallen in love with him, surrounded him and begged that the two never be part. Her wish was granted and a bisexed being came into existence. In early modern Europe there was much interest in hermaphroditism as a medical problem, though this seems to have had little consequence for art.

During the nineteenth century an increasing volume of public discussion about hermaphroditism and homosexuality (the two were often confused with one another) fostered gender anxiety. A curious case of this occurred in the latter years of the life of Paul Gauguin, who became fascinated with the mahu, cross-dressing male homosexuals of Polynesia.25 For women artists cross-dressing was
sometimes a practical matter. The French painter Rosa Bonheur obtained official permission to dress as a man so that she could visit the stockyards and other male venues; in her case, however, the appeal may have been heightened by her lesbian orientation.

Surely the most famous case of deliberate projection of gender ambiguity by a heterosexual artist is the adoption, at times, of the feminine identity Rose Sélavy by Marcel Duchamp. The contemporary artist Linda Benglis created shock waves when she published a nude photograph of herself with a gigantic dildo projecting from the genital region as an assertion of phallic power. The California-based video artist Matthew Barney, who is heterosexual, has sometimes simulated gay men in his dress and behavior. With changing attitudes towards sexual variance greater expressive freedom in this realm is possible.

The history of gay and lesbian studies is much older than many assume—going back at least to the middle of the nineteenth century. Until recently, however, homoerotic aspects of the visual arts have been relatively neglected, despite the emergence of vigorous gay and lesbian movements in many countries. Given the persecution and obloquy that have so regularly been meted out to sexual nonconformists, disguise ("remaining in the closet") was a standard personal strategy. Given this prudent choice of self-concealment, the first task is simply to identify those artists who were homosexual or bisexual. This effort requires a return to a sort of biographical interest that has come to be regarded as old-fashioned by professionals, but which retains an important place in the popular mind. Despite the flood of scholarly admonitions about the "death of the author/artist," the public still believes that artist's lives are important. Assuredly, some individuals tentatively identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual may not turn out to be such but, if circumstances indicate, the question must be asked and pursued.

So it is that research on gay and lesbian art begins with the same task as that confronting the study of women artists: the gathering of a roster of individuals to make up a "universe" of study. However, there is a significant difference. Women are almost always readily identifiable—the writers George Sand and George Eliot had no real intention to deceive—while homosexual orientation has often remained hidden, not only by the wish of the creative individual but also through the behest of relatives and friends after his or her death. (Even today some heterosexual admirers of Michelangelo, Whitman, Cather and other major figures have difficulty coping with the true character of their sexuality.) Providing that the seal of secrecy remained intact, the reputations of such artists could survive unblemished. That it has been possible, despite these obstacles, to create a fairly large roster is shown by Emmanuel Cooper's compilation, The Sexual Perspective: Homosexuality and Art in the Last 100 Years, which records some 150 male and female artists for the period covered. In addition to artists who are well known, the new research has helped to revive the reputations of those who, like the English painters Gluck (Hannah Gluckstein; 1895-1978) and Duncan Grant (1885-1978), had slipped from view.

Still, one may reasonably ask: what do the artists have in common? Given the differences in personality structure, milieu, and period what could, say, Donatello and Andy Warhol possibly share? One answer is that even in the present homosexual artists, like others who share their orientation, have faced the problem of confronting homophobia and shaping a personality that can cope with it. Naturally, reconstructing this process of self-shaping is easier with recent artists such as Romaine Brooks and Charles Demuth, where plentiful biographical information exists which can then be placed in the social and intellectual setting of the time.

In a stimulating essay James Saslow has shown that this approach may also be validly applied to one of the most complicated artists of all time, Michelangelo. Not a professional writer, Michelangelo nonetheless left behind a body of letters and poetry. The letters occasionally contain veiled references to relations with young men, but it is in the poetry, with the background the genre contained of the neo-
Platonic love ethic together with inherent ambiguities, that Michelangelo wrestled—for himself and a few intimate friends—with what we would now term his sexual nature. In the course of this essay, Saslow grapples with the then-fashionable (late 1980s) doctrine of Social Construction, which decreed that modern homosexuals could have nothing in common with Michelangelo; "homosexuality" came into existence in the second half of the nineteenth century. Fueled by the Counter-Reformation, however, homophobia was increasing in the artist's day, and the problem of the closet perplexed him. At the very least, we have this in common with him, so that the "Chinese wall" of absolute separation between us and earlier eras, as posited by the Social Construction theory, is not valid.

With his book on the figure of Ganymede, Saslow contributed significantly to another aspect of research in homosexuality—iconographical studies. In this volume he confines the study to two centuries of the Italian Renaissance, so that a relation to the changing climate of opinion, especially the advancing homophobia generated by the Counter-Reformation can be shown. The changing treatment of the Ganymede theme during this period shows what a complex pattern of determinants these artist had to observe: these include stylistic imperatives as the early Renaissance shifted to the high Renaissance, information about the myth of Ganymede furnished by classical scholars, and changing discourses about sexuality.

In his study, "It's in the Can: Jasper Johns and the Anal Society," Jonathan Weinberg seeks to show that the prominent New York artist has actually placed himself inside his work. This is shown, according to Weinberg, by the artist's fascination with certain words like "ring" and "fessus" [Latin for weary, which he speculatively associates with faeces] together with the well-known target motifs of the works of the classic phase that made him famous. Unfortunately, Weinberg takes Freudian analysis of the supposed anal character traits at face value, reducing the impact of his study. Just as many women artists have become interested in "central imagery" as a reflection of defining vaginality, so it may be that gay men are attracted to certain bodily parts that express aspects of their sexual being (note also the penises found in some of Johns' target paintings). Examined iconographically instead of psychoanalytically, this may prove to be a promising area of investigation after all. It may ultimately belong to an emerging realm of study of the body as metaphor.

Help in the study of gay and lesbian art may come from film studies where work is more profuse and more theoretically advanced. A good example is a paper by the well-known English film scholar, Richard Dyer. Here he tackles the problematic nature of the concept of the single author/creator as theorized by Roland Barthes. On the one hand the notion of the "death of the author" is widely accepted, at least as a heuristic notion that helps to empower the reader (or viewer, in the case of the visual arts). However, the gay/lesbian creator does have a sense of self, precisely for the reason of the frequent internalization of the identity. This paradox may be bridged, in Dyer's opinion, by the concept of "performance," the sense that one is always potentially under scrutiny.

A remarkable range of interests enlivened the work of the New York writer Craig Owens (1950-1990). Having made his mark as one of the first to examine the fit of postmodernist theory to contemporary art practice, Owens moved on to a critique of the nexus of sexuality and power. He would address sexual difference as well as gay concerns. Owens believed that art history must make fundamental changes in order to address contemporary reality. He also joined the discourse of AIDS, a major theme in contemporary art and criticism. At the time of his death from this disease, Owens seemed to be on his way to a new synthesis. Examining the body of his surviving work, however, one notes with regret how susceptible even a gifted representative of his generation was to the intoxication of the Francophile soup blended from the writings of the "usual suspects" of deconstruction: Althusser,
Deleuze, Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, Lyotard and company.

Few have been as forthright about their orientation as Owens, with the result that the question of art historians and critics who were homosexual has received little attention. Winckelmann's personal proclivities clearly contributed to his adulation of ancient Greek art, where the male body is glorified. But what about his contemporary Horace Walpole who chose the Gothic revival for his house, Strawberry Hill? Perhaps this preference is to be explained as personal taste—but not entirely, because another wealthy English connoisseur, William Beckford (also homosexual) built his home, Fonthill, in the Gothic revival style. The way in which art historian Carl von Rumohr's homosexuality contributed to his reexamination of early Italian art seems uncertain—if it did at all. In the twentieth century, the "butch" persona of Gertrude Stein enabled her to mingle on equal terms with Matisse and Picasso; through her publications and transatlantic contacts, she played a major role in promoting these artists in North America. In 1946 Betty Parsons opened her New York gallery, where she showed the early work of the abstract expressionists. The role of homosexual architectural historians in promoting advanced modern architecture is clear; perhaps the "outsider status" of Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Arthur Drexler, and Edgar Kaufmann, Jr. permitted them to respond to the iconoclastic novelty of the new style more easily than could others at the time.

A popular belief, flourishing among homosexuals and heterosexuals alike, holds that gay people are endowed by nature or experience with special sensitivity. This sensitivity (and not everyone agrees that it exists) may foster artistic creativity. Efforts have been made to substantiate this intuitive belief, but the yield is thin. There is little scientific support for this assumption of gay creativity, perhaps because the question is framed so broadly. More specific propositions might be testable. Are gay male artists more responsive to certain color gamuts than their heterosexual counterparts? Do lesbian artists excel in space perception? The empirical results of asking such questions might be negative or inconclusive, but they should be posed.

Emerging in 1981, the AIDS crisis especially affected gay men, though all elements of the population were at risk. The artistic response shows historical parallels. In the mid-fourteenth century Europe dealt with the Plague, and at the end of the fifteenth with the effects of syphilis.

Some aspects of AIDS art, such as the great Memorial Quilt coordinated by the NAMES Project, with its thousands of panels commemorating the deceased, recall the traditional functions of funerary imagery—to record and to console. Beneficial propaganda as they are, the posters urging safe sex among the living resumed a tradition established in the public health campaigns of the 1930s. Some art works related to AIDS belong to the category that Julia Kristeva has termed "abjection," and offer a candid presentation of the ravages of the disease.

Many-faceted and substantial, the response of the arts community to the AIDS crisis shows, once again, that though future details may be uncertain, the involvement of art with real-life concerns is ongoing and perennial.


32. In examining the problems of method in this section, I am indebted to an unpublished paper by my student Craig Houser, "The Queer Way: An Examination and Introduction of a Queer Methodology in Art History" (May 1992).


39. Carolyn Burk, "Gertrude Stein, the Cone Sisters and the Puzzle of Female Friendship," Critical Inquiry, 8 (1982), 543-64; Brenda Richardson, Dr. Claribel Cone and Miss Etta, Baltimore: Museum of Art, 1986.


