

1974

Timothy J. Clark (1943–) can be credited with succeeding where Arnold Hauser failed (text 17, 1959), that is, in making the social context and conditions of production central aspects of the study of works of art, as in his most influential books on Courbet and Manet – *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution* (1973) and *The Painting of Modern Life: the Art of Manet and his Followers* (1985) as well as in articles such as that on Manet's *Olympia* (1980). He is a graduate of the Courtauld Institute of Art in the University of London, and has held the professorship of Fine Art at the University of Leeds (1976–80), where his influence is still discernible, and a professorship at Harvard and then one at the University of California at Berkeley.

In the article reprinted here, which originally appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement*, Clark gives an overview of the history of art history in the twentieth century by dividing it into three periods, contrasting a golden age in the early decades with a more cautious and unadventurous period in the middle of the century, and concluding with a statement of how he hopes it will develop in the future. He defines the golden age by recalling that, in the 1920s, the Hungarian Marxist philosopher and critic Georg Lukács (1885–1971) chose two art historians out of three scholars in his selection of the truly important historians of the recent past (Riegl and Dvořák, along with the historian Wilhelm Dilthey). For Clark, the scholars of this period were great because they asked important questions, especially about the way in which art was produced by the artist and received by the audience. He singles out for praise Panofsky's work on perspective as symbolic form, which uses the subject to clarify and explain the ways in which people think about everything, not just visual representation. Behind this generation he sees the uncompromising work of Hegel.

history of
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Golden
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In the second period, that of the post-war generation, art historians, in Clark's view, stopped asking the important questions which had been posed by the previous generation and substituted 'methods' such as formal analysis; they used iconography, not in order to understand the connection between an artist and a context, but as 'desultory theme-chasing'; they stopped producing provocative studies like that of Panofsky on perspective and descended into a 'dreary professional literature'; and they rejected the Hegelian structures on which the golden age was based. Instead the subject became the servant of the art market or the provider of second-hand notions of taste and the good life.

Post War
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formal or
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Turning thirdly to the future, Clark proposes that, in order to re-establish the previous stature of the history of art, we should excavate what was worthwhile in the heroic period and disinter the legacy

Future

of Hegel. We need to substitute for the current notion of artistic creation one of artistic production and to establish a hierarchy of importance among the resources available to the artist, namely between technical means, pictorial tradition, and ideas. We need facts about patronage, art dealing and the status of the artist, and questions on the relationship between art and ideology. Ideology should in fact be central to our interests: we should study the way in which social classes use works of art to maintain their position; style should be analysed as if it were an expression of an ideology in visible form; we should explore the extent to which the conditions and relations of artistic production explain that relationship, and how it was received and perceived by patrons and audiences. Such an investigation could result in telling us how ideologies work. This should be the scope of the ambitions of the history of art.

Clark's essay can in part be assessed by posing the following four questions. First, how accurate are his accounts of the state of the history of art in the golden age and the post-war period? Clark's assessment of the status and worth of the art historians of the golden age would probably find wide agreement and is certainly supported by the evidence presented elsewhere in this book. It is more difficult to be certain about what he says of the post-war generation, where he mentions no names. It is easier to be specific about those one is praising than those one is criticizing, but even with this proviso his silence over Gombrich in particular is significant, not only because of his prominence but also because there is a good case for arguing that, whatever their differences, Panofsky and Gombrich have more in common than any other two eminent art historians working in the twentieth century.

It is also relevant that one can cite specific instances from the writings of members of this generation which provide a social context for artistic production. Gombrich begins a discussion of iconology with an analysis of the circumstances surrounding the designing of the statue of Eros at Piccadilly Circus, and how these may have affected its meaning. Similarly Andrew Martindale's book on the rise of the artist deals with most of those questions of production and social status which Clark seeks, his account revealing a great deal about the range of work in which artists were involved, as well as about the attitudes of a society towards humour and the psychology of status.²

Despite this sort of contrary evidence Clark's generalization makes a point, since many, if not most, studies of artists presented their subject without asking any questions about their social context or the conditions which might have contributed to the formation of the objects which they produced.

The character of the texts of the golden age themselves raises another question. Clark notes that few of the important publications of the period had by 1974 been translated into English, and blames this on 'snobbery and lassitude ... and fear'. Perhaps these are the causes, but Dilthey's *magnum opus*, *Introduction to the Human Sciences*, for example, presents such a dense skein of words and ideas one need not be surprised that its translation waited for over a century.³ Even the scholars of the golden age themselves could be defeated by such texts, as with Frankl's *The System of Art-historical Knowledge*, a thousand-page study of the theory of the development of architectural form which sank like a stone even in Germany because of its length and impenetrable language.⁴

Secondly, what are the contexts of the criticisms voiced in the article? The first is the ferment of the late 1960s and early 1970s in the university world, with its student activism and a new openness to continental ideas (see, for example, 'poststructuralism' and 'discourse analysis'). There is also the

more personal context of the area of the history of art on which Clark was most actively engaged at the time. Many of the criticisms which Clark voices are specifically applicable to the art history of the modern period, and may appear less justified when applied to other periods, where (as the writings of Gombrich and Martindale to some extent illustrate⁵) Clark's important questions were more frequently confronted. Finally there is the most important context of all, the place of publication and the presumed readership of the article. This is an occasional piece directed at an audience wider than the art-historical world, written to make a specific point, which may explain not only its power, but also its omissions and lack of qualification.

Thirdly, how justifiable is the uncompromising demand for the exclusive use of his own approach? Clark argues that art-historical investigation should begin with society, and that this social historical method should be used to the exclusion of all others. The crux of the matter lies in whether investigators choose, broadly speaking, to start with the object and work towards the idea, or the other way round, and that choice rests in part with what impels them to undertake an investigation in the first place; the degree of their success should be the basis for judgement. The result may be a highly productive social history of art which starts with the object. (See also 'art history, 'theory and 'subjects/disciplines.)

Finally, how radical is Clark's proposal for the future? His article is a call for a complete change in the direction and character of the subject, an intervention intended to lead not to the diversification of the subject but to a renewed concentration under the umbrella of the social history of art where the big questions can be asked. Clark's approach belongs to a strong intellectual tradition: he identifies his ideal history of art as one which has its roots in older art-historical traditions and he sets Panofsky up as a sort of ideal art historian. He rejects trendiness by distancing himself from those who want to study the history of art in terms of what he calls sub-Freudian, filmic, feminist, or radical modes of enquiry, all of which he sees as 'hot-foot in pursuit of the New'. While 'Marxist analysis plays an important part in his argument, he stresses that there are no simple answers, such as those offered by Marxists who have sought to identify specific artists as representatives of the consciousness of specific classes.

While the revolutionary character of Clark's article is therefore somewhat ambivalent, many scholars nevertheless saw it as marking the start of what has come to be called the new art history. It can therefore be used to define a significant break in the development of the subject. (See also 'art and 'style.)

¹ T. J. Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution*, London, 1973; *The Painting of Modern Life: the Art of Manet and his Followers*, London, 1985; and 'Preliminaries to a Possible Treatment of *Olympia* in 1865', *Screen*, 21, 1980, pp. 18–41.

² E. H. Gombrich, *Symbolic Images: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance* (1972), 3rd edn, reprinted, London, 1993, pp. 1–5; Andrew Martindale, *The Rise of the Artist in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, London, 1972, pp. 50–2. Martindale cites, for example, the duties of the resident artist of the castle of Hesdin in the early fifteenth century, which included maintaining the amusement machines which covered unsuspecting onlookers with jets of water or bags of flour or soot, or dumped them through a trap-door in the floor into a sackful of feathers.

³ Wilhelm Dilthey, *Introduction to the Human Sciences: an Attempt to Lay a Foundation for the Study of Society and History* (1883), translated by Ramon J. Betanzos, London, 1989. Michael Podro's *The Critical Historians of Art*, New Haven and London, 1982, provides an account of the historians of the golden age and their fore-runners which may have supplied a part of what Clark was looking for.

⁴ Paul Frankl, *Das System der Kunstwissenschaft*, Leipzig, 1938. See James Ackerman, foreword to Paul Frankl, *Principles of Architectural History: the Four Phases of Architectural Style, 1420–1900*, translated by J. F. O'Gorman, Cambridge, MA, 1968, p. vi.

⁵ See note 2.

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'The Conditions of Artistic Creation', 1974

T.J. Clark, 'The Conditions of Artistic Creation', Times Literary Supplement, 24 May 1974, pp. 561-2.

(the new 'art history'?)

I could begin by saying that art history is in crisis, but that would have too strident a ring. Out of breath, in a state of genteel dissolution - those might be more appropriate verdicts. And in any case, in whatever form it was proposed, it would be such an ordinary diagnosis - stock accusation, stock deprecatory smile - that perhaps the first question to ask is this: why should art history's problems matter? On what grounds could I ask anyone else to take them seriously?

To answer that question I have to remind you, remind myself, of what art history once was. There's a passage from Lukács's great essay of 1922, Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat, which sticks in my mind, and will do to conjure up an alien time:

'And yet, as the really important historians of the nineteenth century such as Riegl, Dilthey and Dvořák could not fail to notice, the essence of history lies precisely in the changes undergone by those structural forms which are the focal points of man's interaction with environment at any given moment and which determine the objective nature of both his inner and outer life. But this only becomes objectively possible (and hence can only be adequately comprehended) when the individuality, the uniqueness of an epoch or a historical figure, etc., is grounded in the character of these structural forms, when it is discovered and exhibited in them and through them.'

That passage is haunting for several reasons. First of all it proposes a difficult and fertile thesis about history - it comes, of course, in the middle of an argument, and I don't present it for use on its own - that art historians might care to contemplate again. But let's leave that aside for the moment. Let's simply look at that curious phrase, 'the really important historians of the nineteenth century', and the way the examples that come to mind include two art historians out of three names cited! What an age was this when Riegl and Dvořák were the real historians, worrying away at the fundamental questions - the conditions of consciousness, the nature of 'representation'? And Lukács could have looked around him in 1922 and pointed to the debate going on, unresolved, sharpened, often bitter.

The roll-call of names - Warburg, Wölfflin, Panofsky, Saxl, Schlosser - is not what matters exactly. It is more the sense we have, reading the best art history of

this period, of an agreement between protagonists as to what the important, unavoidable questions are. It is the way in which the most detailed research, the most arcane discoveries, lead back time and again towards the terrain of disagreement about the whole nature of artistic production. What are the conditions of artistic creation? (Is that word 'creation' allowable anyway? Should we substitute for it the notions of production or signification?) What are the artist's resources, and what do we mean when we talk of an artist's materials - is it a matter, primarily, of technical resources, or pictorial tradition, or a repertory of ideas and the means to give them form? Clearly - convenient answer, which has become the common wisdom now - it is all three: but is there a hierarchy among them, do some 'materials' determine the use of others? Is that hierarchy fixed?

It seems to me that these questions have been scrapped by art history now. And perhaps we ought to ask what made it possible to pose them at all, to ask them of dense, particular evidence. And why did the problems die? Why are we left with caricatures of certain proposals in an ongoing debate, arguments that have been miraculously turned into 'methods' - formal analysis, 'iconography'? We won't answer those questions by sanctifying the past, and that is the last thing I want to do. Heaven knows, one is tired of the old stories of the great generation - beautiful Wölfflin, Riegl and his carpets, etc. I don't want to add to that abstraction, and one thing we badly need is an archaeology of the subject in its heroic period: a critical history, uncovering assumptions and allegiances. But nevertheless, we need to rediscover the kind of thinking that sustained art history at that time.

In part it really is just this: a mode of argument, a habit of mind. Take this example from Panofsky's marvellous Perspective as Symbolic Form, published in 1925. He is talking here about the ambiguity of perspective, the way it makes the visual world objective, measurable, and yet makes it dependent on the most subjective point of reference, the single all-seeing eye:

'It mathematizes ... visual space, but it is still visual space that it mathematizes; it is an ordering, but an ordering of visual appearance. And in the end it is hardly more than a question of emphasis whether the charge against perspective is that it condemns "true being" to the appearance of things seen or that it binds the free and, as it were, spiritual intuition of form to the appearance of things seen. Through this location of the artist's subject in the sphere of the phenomenal, the perspective view closes to religious art the territory of magic within which the work of art is itself the wonder worker ... but it opens to religious art ... the territory of the vision, within which the wonderful becomes an immediate experience of the spectator ...'

That is dialectical thinking, with all the strength of dialectic - its power to open up a field of enquiry, to enable certain questions to be asked. And Panofsky's essay is full - inconveniently full - of the same mode of discourse: whether he is arguing that the Middle Ages' negation of spatial illusion is 'the condition for the truly modern view of space', or wondering why it is that innovation is so often bound up with a renunciation of previous achievements, with primitivism, setbacks, reversals, 'so that we see Donatello emerging not from the faded classicism of the followers of Arnolfo but from a definite tendency towards Gothic revival'.

Linda Nochlin's thesis too

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In the best art-historical circles now, this mode of thinking is scorned – a Hegelian habit, juvenile exercises that Panofsky grew out of. On the contrary, I believe they are what kept his thinking alive; and the absence of them – in the dreary professional literature of perspective that follows – is what produces loss of problems, loss of the problems' dimensions. It is odd how reactionaries of Right and Left present as their clinching case, these days, the same caricature of Hegel – a cardboard idealist Hegel, a Christian Hegel, Hegel without 'the love and labour of the particular'. In art history – and, I believe, elsewhere – it is precisely the Hegelian legacy that we need to appropriate: to use, criticize, reformulate. To do any of those things, we shall need to disinter it. We shall need, apart from anything else, a massive work of translation. What kind of situation is it where my working copy of Riegl's *Spätromische Kunstindustrie* [text 9, 1901] is a miserable abridged Italian version? Why are Dvořák, Warburg, even Burckhardt in the role of art historian, still locked inside their mother tongue? Because of snobbery and lassitude, I suspect; and an understandable fear of the texts in question.

Up to now I have been talking, deliberately, about the past. But the question is, of course, how did the past disappear? How was it that those questions, that paradigm, got lost?

There are many answers, and some of them I shall avoid, with a kind of fastidiousness. I don't propose to discuss the way in which art history became manservant of the art market, checking dates for the dealers, providing pedigrees for rich collectors – though I'm surrounded by evidence of the stupidity, and straightforward corruption, that resulted. Kurt Forster has written elsewhere of the way in which art history became the vehicle for reach-me-down notions of taste, order and the good life, 'compensatory history' for the *Bildungsbürgertum* [cultured society]. (I relished the moment, some years ago now, when a vice-chancellor's wife was pictured sitting on a camp-stool on the steps of an occupied university building, with a copy of a well-known art history book displayed on her lap: it was part of her protest, she told an enthusiastic local press, 'against militancy and in favour of civilization'.)

These are, so to say, external problems – crucial, but unsavoury. And it seems as if art history hardly needed prodding, as if it was ready to fall apart at the seams. Iconography is the notorious example: in a generation it has declined from a polemic about tradition and its forms, an argument over the conditions in which an artist encountered an ideology, into desultory theme-chasing – 100 pictures of the Noble Savage, with fifty early blast furnaces thrown in. And that is only the most obvious case of a general decomposition.

Why? Because, as I have hinted already, the terms in which the paradigm problems were posed were incapable of renovation. We have to discover ways of putting the questions in a quite different form, and that is where the social history of art – my brief, my 'speciality' – comes in. It ought to be clear by now that I'm not interested in the social history of art as part of a cheerful diversification of the subject, taking its place alongside the other varieties – formalist, 'modernist', sub-Freudian, filmic, feminist, 'radical', all of them hot-foot in pursuit of the New. For diversification, read disintegration. And what we need is the opposite: concentration, the possibility of argument instead of this deadly coexistence, a means

of access to the old debates. That is what the social history of art has to offer: it is the place where the questions have to be asked, and where they cannot be asked in the old way.

That can look deceptively simple: it cannot be done merely by shifting one's ground. True enough, the old questions of art history were structured around certain beliefs, certain unquestioned presuppositions: the notion of the Artist, of the artist as 'creator' of the work, the notion of a pre-existent feeling – for form, for space, of the world as God's or the gods' creation – which the work was there to 'express'. These beliefs eroded the subject; they turned questions into answers; they ruled out of court, for instance, any history of the conditions of artistic production. (The great paragraph in *The German Ideology* on Raphael and the division of labour – which adumbrates a whole history of art as work – was ignored by Marxist and anti-Marxist alike.) And needless to say the beliefs – the sheer vulgar metaphysic – are all that present-day art history is left with; the actual work that Riegl or Panofsky did, against the grain of the concepts they used, has been put aside.

To escape from this situation, it seems to me we need a work of theory and practice. We need facts – about patronage, about art dealing, about the status of the artist, the structure of artistic production – but we need to know what questions to ask of the material. We need to import a new set of concepts, and keep them in being – build them into the method of work. Let me indicate, briefly, the kind of questions I mean.

The first kind of question has to do with the relation between the work of art and its ideology. I mean by ideologies (the concept seems to me to be indelibly plural, though all ideologies feed off each other and share the same function) those bodies of beliefs, images, values and techniques of representation by which social classes, in conflict with each other, attempt to 'naturalize' their particular histories. All ideologies claim for a quite specific, and disputable, relation to the means of production a quality of inevitability, a seat in human nature. They take as their material the real constraints and contradictions of a given historical situation – they are bound to, otherwise what content would they have, what would they be for? – but they generalize the repressions, imagine the contradictions solved.

The work of art stands in a quite specific relation to these ideological materials. Ideology is what the picture is, and what the picture is not. (We might say that 'style' is the form of ideology: and that indicates the necessity and the limitations of a history of styles.) Ideology is the dream-content, without the dream work. And even though the work itself – the means and materials of artistic production – is determinate, fixed within ideological bounds, permeated by ideological assumptions; even so, the fact that work is done is crucial. Because the work takes a certain set of technical procedures and traditional forms, and makes them the tools with which to alter ideology – to transcribe it, to represent it. This can be anodyne, illustration: we are surrounded by duplicates of ideology: but the process of work creates the space in which, at certain moments, an ideology can be appraised. The business of 'fitting' ideological materials most tightly, most completely into the forms and codes which are appropriate to the technical

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materials at hand *is also* a process of revealing the constituents – the historical, separable constituents, normally hidden beneath the veil of naturalness – of these ideological materials. It is a means of testing them, of examining their grounds.

Take Vermeer, for me a kind of touchstone – of quality, clearly, but also of the elusiveness of this process at its most intense. It seems to me that Vermeer's work exploits the fact that any ideology is by its nature incoherent: its parts do not fit; its expanding generalizations cannot quite coexist with any one image, with any precision (and the precision itself is always partial, always made out of ideology) in the materials you work with. What we attend to in Vermeer is the subtle – infinitely subtle – lack of synchronization between two different interiors, which ideology wants us to believe are consonant: between the space and furnishing of those ascetic, gaudy rooms and the space and furnishing of a particular gaze, a particular inner life.

Or again, what holds us is our sense, on the one hand, that vision in these pictures is unproblematic, under control (with the help, naturally, of the latest mechanical aids); on the other, as we look further, that the visible is a tissue of improbabilities, strangeness, losses of focus, looming nearness, unreadable shifts in space. Light itself is offered to us here, as nowhere else, as something neutral and ineffable; and yet even light is allowed into these rooms, even its clarity is presented to us as the technical achievement it was – the unflawed glass, the uncluttered decor.

This is the beginning of an account: I'm well aware of its deficiencies. But I offer it as an example of the kind of relationship we are dealing with – just how problematic, and yet how capable of point-by-point description, the contact of work and ideology might be.

I have hardly space to indicate the other kind of question which belongs to the social history of art. It is this: what exactly were the conditions and relations of artistic production in a specific case? Just why are these particular ideological materials used, and not others? Just what determined this particular encounter of work and ideology. When I called these another kind of question from the first, I didn't mean to imply any rigid distinction. On the contrary, you cannot pull them apart from the others I have described: I would go so far as to say, in the face of derision from the semiologists, that one question cannot be asked at all without the other. I do not believe, for instance, that we can even *identify* the work's ideology without asking questions of this kind.

Where do they lead us? Towards a description, a close description of the class identity of the worker in question, and the ways in which this identity made certain ideological materials available and disguised others, made certain materials workable and others completely intractable, so that they stick out like sore thumbs, unassimilated. Towards an account of how the work took on its public form – what its patrons wanted, what its audience perceived. To find that out, we have to look for the wordless appropriation of the work which sometimes leaves its traces in the margins of the critics' discourse, in the dealers' records, in the casual transmutation of a title as the picture passes from hand to hand.

All of these questions lead back to the territory beyond ideology: they indicate the materials out of which ideology is made, and unmade; they remind us that the

idea of a specific ideological 'instance' is nonsense – it is of the essence of ideology to be unstable, protean, omnipresent but nowhere, using everything and altering nothing, alternately a content and a form. For the same kind of reasons, though, this would have to be a separate argument. I believe that access to ideology is always incomplete – and it is the lack of finish that counts, in our explanation of an artist's production. The notion of the 'representative' artist, who gives us a complete depiction of the 'possible consciousness' of a class – a notion dear to a certain brand of Marxist history – seems to me a figment. (It's their constant awareness of these facts that makes Walter Benjamin's work on Baudelaire or Sartre's *Conscience de classe chez Flaubert* so much more useful than most of their 'scientific' opponents.)

What we are considering at this point is the conditions in which a certain 'subjectivity' – utterly false, utterly undeniable – was constituted and given form. No topic, of course, is more open to an ideological treatment; it is here that the old concepts come crowding back, insistent, ingratiating, promising keys to the mystery. And yet, if it could be done properly, no enquiry could tell us more about how ideologies work.

That, after all, is the scope of of art history's ambitions. Or it was, and it ought to be.