

E. HOW TO VIEW A PAINTING

Jonathan Petropoulos

The analysis and explication of paintings is an enterprise with a long and contentious history. There has never been, and in all likelihood will never be, agreement about the most suitable methodology for ascertaining the manifold meanings contained in artworks. The following suggestions, which might be viewed as steps for pursuing a viable interpretation, will not yield an answer to the perennial methodological dilemmas. In fact, if past experience is a guide, these steps will only provoke disagreement. But successful answers to the following questions will provide specific insights and contribute to a more general understanding.

1. Who is the artist? One might call this homage to Vasari, the Renaissance art historian who was arguably the first of the modern professionals. Beginning with the biographical approach is not only consistent with the history of art history but a logical starting point for further inquiry. Determining the creator of an artwork is also a crucial part of connoisseurship, long the dominant mode of art historical scholarship. By identifying the artist and relating the specific work to a larger oeuvre, the scholar has a strong foundation on which to build a more substantial interpretation. Note that there are often significant limitations to the biographical approach: with certain non-Western cultures, for example, the name of the artist is often of minimal importance.

2. When was the work created, and to what stylistic epoch, movement or school does it belong? Relating a work to others in a similar genre is helpful in terms of understanding the broader circumstances as well as contemporary idioms and debates. Artists often worked on similar "projects," such as the Impressionists' exploration of the nature of light. While one should be careful about implying the existence of group decisions, making these connections can help with the biographical and social history of the artists because of the frequency of collaboration and association, within both the academic establishment and avant-garde circles.

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3. What formal qualities can one discern? Because artists often responded to developments within their discipline, as Clement Greenberg and other critics have argued, an examination of shape, color, materials, and other issues pertaining to the production of a piece offers important information. In discerning trends and the various deviations, one can gain a better understanding of artists' projects. One example is the study of flatness in classical modernism, a crucial concern for many who worked during the first half of the twentieth century.

4. What iconographic and iconological messages are present in the work? Erwin Panofsky, among others, argued for the importance of iconographic investigation, which he defined as the study of the subject matter and meaning of artworks (as opposed to form), and, more specifically, iconological explication, which concerns symbols, myths, emblematic figures, and other encoded messages. In order to ascertain meanings that may be obscure, one might consult a reference source, such as Hans Biedermann, *Dictionary of Symbolism* (1989), or James Smith Pierce, *From Abacus to Zeus* (1977).

5. What are the intentions of the artist? To take a term made famous by Alois Riegl, *Kunstwollen*, or "inner necessity," one should attempt to understand both the motivation and goals of the artist. Riegl, in fact, posited that *Kunstwollen* transcended individual artists and applied to entire cultures. In the latter sense specific cultures collectively drew out elements present in the inherited tradition and, in turn, contributed to art history, which developed in a linear manner. Riegl applied this analysis to Dutch group portraits, examining modifications in certain thematic patterns and formal techniques in such a way as to situate the seventeenth-century Dutch masterpieces in the broader historical context. In short, while issues of intentionality are typically daunting, they often provide interesting points of departure.

6. How might this artwork reflect broader historical or material, political or social, trends? Although crude interpretations positing a correlation between an artwork and the society in which it was produced have been convincingly debunked, it is often the case that the artist meant to address issues beyond formalistic concerns. Certain painters deal with technological and industrial change by depicting trains or cityscapes, while others address contemporary political and military developments, such as Picasso in his masterful *Guernica*. Artists did not work in a vacuum: a knowledge of the historical and social context is important for understanding an artwork. Remember, even an artist's statement "This painting is apolitical" is necessarily a political statement.

7. What can be discovered about the history of a painting's reception? By examining the exhibition venues, critical notices, commercial fate, and subsequent treatment by scholars, one can gain insight into an artwork.

8. How might one's own historic vantage point and subjective views fac-

tor into the analysis? This self-reflective question, while difficult to answer, should be asked. It is naive to think that an interpretation of a painting can be completely objective.

FOR FURTHER READING

- Baxandall, Michael. *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1985.
- Berenson, Bernhard. *Aesthetics and History in the Visual Arts*. New York: Pantheon, 1948.
- Clark, T. J. *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1984.
- Gombrich, Ernst. *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*. London: Phaidon, 1977.
- Greenberg, Clement. *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*. Boston: Beacon, 1961.
- Panofsky, Erwin. *Meaning in the Visual Arts*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970.
- Podro, Michael. *The Critical Historians of Art*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1982.

F. HOW TO READ A PLAY

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No matter how strong the impression may be that a play merely mimics real life, nothing in a drama "just happens"; everything has been put on the page (and on the stage) for us by someone. Every element in a drama serves a purpose, has a function. The main question in reading a play should therefore always be "why?" Why does this character say this? Why is this scene set here? Why is this happening now? We can answer such questions only if we share with the makers of a play not only a certain general knowledge about our own culture but also, more specifically, a certain set of assumptions concerning theatrical representation and dramatic enactment. Such assumptions differ widely from culture to culture: we can only appreciate a play if we are to some extent familiar with the particular conventions upon which it is based.

Genre conventions. A play is usually made up of two types of textual material: the *main text* consists of the characters' utterances, the lines to be spoken by actors on the stage; the term *subsidiary text* designates texts not to be heard during a performance, including stage instructions and other peripheral material such as prefaces and author's comments. Information on the setting of a particular scene might be subtly evoked in the main text or elaborately spelled out in the subsidiary text. In our reading we should aim to cull information from both text types so that we are able to hear and see the play in our minds.

The logic of expectation. At the outset of a play, in what is called the *exposition*, a dramatic situation is defined in which the characters are placed and out of which certain tensions and conflicts will develop. At the end of a play, in the *denouement*, the conflicts can be resolved in definitive closure or allowed to linger on in an open-ended, often new way. Plays invite the audience to make conjectures about the development of the plot according to a shared cultural knowledge concerning theatrical and social conventions. Deviations from this logic of expectation are usually charged with significance, re-

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