

ART HISTORY AND ITS INSTITUTIONS

Foundations of a discipline

Edited by Elizabeth Mansfield



London and New York

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ART HISTORY AND ITS INSTITUTIONS

What is art history? The answer depends on who asks the question. Museum staff, academics, art critics, collectors, dealers and artists themselves all stake competing claims to the aims, methods, and history of art history. Dependent on and sustained by different – and often competing – institutions, art history remains a multi-faceted field of study.

Art History and Its Institutions focuses on the professional and institutional formation of art history, showing how the discourses that shaped its creation continue to define the field today. Grouped into three sections, articles examine the sites where art history is taught and studied, the role of institutions in conferring legitimacy, the relationship between modernism and art history, and the systems that define and control it. From museums and universities to law courts and photography studios, the contributors explore a range of different institutions, revealing the complexity of their interaction and their impact on the discipline of art history.

Contributors: Frederick N. Bohrer, Kathryn Brush, David Carrier, Claire Farago, Ivan Gaskell, Marc Gotlieb, Helen Rees Leahy, Elizabeth Mansfield, Andrew McClellan, Mary G. Morton, Steven Nelson, Donald Preziosi, Eric Rosenberg, Catherine M. Soussloff, Christopher B. Steiner, Jacqueline Strecker, Greg M. Thomas, Philip Hotchkiss Walsh, Gabriel P. Weisberg.

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INTRODUCTION

Elizabeth Mansfield

Art history possesses its own mythology. Like all social organizations, an intellectual discipline coheres around a community with a shared history, a common language, and seemingly similar beliefs and goals. Fundamental to any social organization is a myth of its origins. Art history, as practiced and theorized in the West, enjoys a particularly active etiological impulse. Perhaps in an effort to minimize differences within the various endeavors described as “Art History,” historiographers of the discipline are keen to assert and reassert our common intellectual heritage. We have an abundance of fathers. Among the most frequently cited are Giorgio Vasari (often called “the father of art history”); J.J. Winckelmann (busier than Vasari, he is known as “the father of archaeology” as well as “the father of modern art history”); Georg Hegel (Gombrich’s “father of art history”); and recently Bernard Smith has been given the appellation “father of art history in Australia.” An orphan discipline, apparently, art history goes motherless.

Genealogy, or rather biography, remains the preferred genre for art historiography. This is not surprising given that art history has long relied upon a biographical model for scholarly as well as popular discussion. That art historiography should similarly privilege the monographic approach testifies to the degree to which the discipline has naturalized and internalized its intellectual conventions. The recent proliferation of book-length studies devoted to the lives and writings of Vasari, Winckelmann, Karel van Mander, Giovanni Bellori, Alois Riegl, Bernard Berenson, Aby Warburg, Ernst Gombrich, Erwin Panofsky, and Michael Fried among others points to the predominance of the biographical approach for historiographers.

Hagiography may contribute to a discipline’s mythic constitution, but it cannot fulfill the requirements of historiography. Mythology comes from within a culture, defining that culture according to its own terms and values. Historiography, on the other hand, must decipher, analyze, and interpret rather than mythologize a disciplinary culture. This involves examining the culture from within as well as without. Ideally, the historiographer maintains a critical position at once inside and outside a discipline. But this diffuse self-positioning cannot take place independently of institutional critique. As both products and

producers of culture (including intellectual and professional cultures), institutions often determine a discipline's center and periphery as well as its frontiers and wastelands. Institutional history, then, necessitates an ontological critique of a discipline insofar as it involves scrutiny from points within and without its presumed intellectual, cultural, idiomatic, epistemological, and professional borders.

This volume seeks to understand the history as well as the culture of art history through its institutions. Fundamentally, institutions are organizing principles. Cultures – whether intellectual, political, religious, ethnic, or regional – depend upon institutions to amass, distill, unify, and circulate their beliefs and conventions. In this way, institutions promulgate myth as they provide communal stability, history, and identity. Institutions may take physical form as a temple or schoolhouse or judicial chamber. But institutions may remain intangible as organizing principles such as customs or beliefs. The institutions of art history, then, are diverse. Ranging from material sites and organizations to jargon, professional ethics, pedagogy, codes of conduct, civil laws and moral canons, various institutions formed and continue to influence the discipline.

The discipline's institutional origins can be traced largely to the nineteenth century. Though the practice of art history dates back at least as far as the fifteenth century, its formation as a distinct professional or academic discipline took place centuries later. Nineteenth-century Western society sustained precisely the conditions necessary for the discipline's florescence. Characterized by industrial expansion and empire building as well as new forms of cultural and educational enfranchisement, the period offered firm purchase to a discipline with uncertain holds in commercial as well as cultural concerns. Art history found itself welcome in new institutions for urban leisure, commerce, science, public education, and national pageantry. The appearance of these institutions cannot, of course, be neatly bracketed by the years 1800 and 1900. Many developments associated with the nineteenth century – political and economic along with moral and aesthetic – percolate through adjacent eras. For this reason, the chapters written for this volume necessarily delineate an institutional history distinguished less by its chronology than its social and cultural character. With its *terminus a quo* marked by Enlightenment formulations of an ideal museum and its *terminus ad quem* designated by the vagaries of modern academic publishing, this volume affirms both the expediency and impossibility of periodizing art history's institutional origins.

Art history has a vexed institutional history. Myriad – and often competing – institutional forces combined to forge art history into a professional discipline during the nineteenth century. Museums, galleries, auction houses, publishers, cultural trusts, universities and academies, in addition to institutions such as magic lantern shows, department stores, and world fairs, left their imprint on the nascent discipline. The diverse activities now collectively termed art history are a direct consequence of these motley origins. Innately heterogeneous, the discipline has undoubtedly benefited from its rich institutional heritage. But

without a critical consciousness of this history, methodological or even practical differences can appear to be marks of a discipline “in crisis” rather than an inherently multifaceted field of inquiry. One way in which art history appears fragmented rather than multiform is the tendency of art historians to ally themselves along professional rather than philosophic lines. Institutional loyalties, in other words, often precede disciplinary interests. Museum professionals, for example, occasionally find themselves circumscribed in opposition to academics. For their part, academics come under fire for pursuing research methods deemed “irrelevant” or too theoretical. Art historians affiliated with a gallery or auction house, on the other hand, may be distinguished from their non-profit counterparts as motivated by commercial rather than other, more high minded concerns. At these moments, art historians find themselves concomitantly inside and outside their discipline. The present tendency for professional affiliations to rent or redefine the discipline makes essential an inquest into art history’s institutional origins.

The institutions addressed in this volume, therefore, constitute an inevitably fluid definition of the concept. In its most general sense, an institution is simply that which institutes, or brings into being. Resonating its liturgical as well as legal origins, the term suggests effects both evanescent and concrete, personal and social. Expanding on this definition, some recent theorists have characterized institutions as loci of social, or specifically political, power. Not surprisingly, Marxist and materialist thinkers have directed a great deal of attention to this notion of institutional behavior and discourse. In contrast to a pragmatic perception of institutions as uninflected social tools, Marxist-generated inquiries posit institutions as founts or conduits of ideology. As such, they provide essential means for social control. Louis Althusser offers a useful Marxist exploration of the functioning of institutions in his chapter “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.” Here, Althusser defines a class of institutions that are shaped by the very ideologies they propagate. These he calls Ideological State Apparatuses. A conduit for belief systems, Ideological State Apparatuses both receive and transmit ideologies. Althusser explains:

I shall call Ideological State Apparatuses a certain number of realities which present themselves to the immediate observer in the form of distinct and specialized institutions ... Ideological State Apparatuses are part ... of the private domain [as in] Churches, Parties, cultural ventures, etc. etc., ... it is essential to say that for their part the Ideological State Apparatuses function massively and predominantly *by ideology*, but they also function secondarily by repression, even if ultimately, but only ultimately, this is very attenuated and concealed, even symbolic.¹

Institutions, in this sense, cannot be considered apart from a culture’s need to sustain its social beliefs and political system.

Other recent institutional theories classed broadly as poststructuralist offer a more diffuse understanding of institutions. Not simply sources of power or ideology, institutions are folded into discourse. Michel Foucault exemplifies this position when he writes:

... basically in any society, there are manifold relations of power which permeate, characterize and constitute the social body, and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse. There can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses of truth which operates through and on the basis of this association.²

Expansively conceived and securely intertwined, discourses are systems of social networks. Discourse includes physical manifestations of a culture such as libraries or prisons as well as ephemeral vehicles like speech acts or gestures or scholarly publications. Power – or, in the case of an intellectual discipline, authority – is brought forth, organized, expressed, and ultimately made material by discourse.

The institutional models outlined above underlie the volume's tripartite organization. Part I, "Putting Art History in Its Place," includes chapters that address the establishment of literal sites or contexts for art historical practice. This section begins with my chapter on "Art History and Modernism," which traces the institutional origins of art history through an archaeological approach based on Walter Benjamin's incomplete *Arcades Project* (*Passagenwerk*). Benjamin's method encourages historiographers to explore the middens of cultural history as well as its tumuli. For art historiographers, this means finding the discipline's abandoned campsites as well as its fortified settlements like museums or academies. Among the sites I explore in my search for art history's institutional origins are Paris's first department stores, the scene of Poe's "Murders in the Rue Morgue," the Uffizi Gallery, and the fantastical Fonthill Abbey. Donald Preziosi pursues another notion of art history as place with his contribution "Hearing the Unsaid: Art History, Museology, and the Composition of the Self." Here, the discipline manifests itself in the West theologically and ritually via the museum. Preziosi traces in museum practice a dual history. One thread of this twin strand leads back to the Idealist traditions of the Enlightenment exemplified by Sir John Soane's house-museum. The other carries the expectations of early capitalism and nationalism and is illustrated by the 1851 Universal Exposition. This ambivalent institutional history, according to Preziosi, has given rise to a discipline with inherently conflicting beliefs and ambitions.

The museum's role in creating a form of secular theology is further analyzed by Andrew McClellan. His chapter "From Boullée to Bilbao: The Museum as Utopian Space" challenges recent critiques of the museum. The tendency to demonize the art museum as an oppressive agent of nationalism, cultural bias,

or aesthetic imperialism encounters here sharp refutation. McClellan rehabilitates the museum – and the mission of art history – through an analysis of the utopian architectural and verbal rhetoric that often suffuses museum building projects. Kathryn Brush, in “Marburg, Harvard, and Purpose-built Architecture for Art History, 1927,” explores and affirms the ties between art history’s intellectual, material, and social impetuses. Through her exemplary case studies – one German, one American – Brush shows how art history becomes architecture. Next, Philip Hotchkiss Walsh traces the establishment of art history at the embattled *École des Beaux-Arts*, revealing the roles played by scientific debate, political reform, and student activism. “Viollet-le-Duc and Taine at the *École des Beaux-Arts*” treats Viollet’s humiliating retreat from his jeering students and Taine’s triumphant ascent to the lectern as products of social as much as aesthetic concerns. This section concludes with Jacqueline Strecker’s “Colonizing Culture: The Origins of Art History in Australia.” In this chapter, art history’s professional and academic presence in Australia is seen as a product of various colonial and post-colonial institutions. Strecker’s account accommodates institutions as diverse as religious organizations, Mechanics’ Institutes, and universal exhibitions in addition to galleries, academies, universities, and museums.

Part II, “Instituting a Canon: Placing the Center and Margins of Art History,” concerns the role of institutions in establishing and transmitting disciplinary orthodoxy, authority, or heresy. Here the reader will find chapters dealing with institutional effects upon canon formation, scholarly legitimacy, professional success, or disciplinary resistance. The arguments presented in this section are introduced by David Carrier’s “Deep Innovation and Mere Eccentricity: Six Case Studies of Innovation in Art History.” Through a series of compelling case studies, Carrier shows how institutional discourse has – and continues to – set the boundaries of the discipline. Conferring “insider” status upon those scholars and texts that accede to disciplinary conventions, art history’s institutions also determine what is outside the scope of serious scholarly consideration. And, as Carrier reveals, the conditions that dictate “outsider” status can range from faulty argumentation or methodological novelty to the vagaries of market forces on book publishers or journal editors.

Succeeding chapters in this section offer directed inquiries into questions raised by Carrier. Christopher B. Steiner and Ivan Gaskell invite further reorientation of the discipline’s professional assumptions and standards through their analyses of the impact of art dealers and collectors on art history. Steiner’s “The Taste of Angels in the Art of Darkness: Fashioning the Canon of African Art” shows how dilettantes and collectors have physically and ideologically defined African art history. African art history has long been skewed, narrowly or capriciously defined, according to Steiner, due to amateur collectors’ limited and often romantic conception of African culture. Challenging long-standing attitudes toward “the trade,” Ivan Gaskell reminds us that the art market remains one of art history’s most enduring – and most influential – institutions. Often marginalized by the discipline for their overt commercial concerns, dealers and

galleries serve as reminders that art history is a discipline – no matter where or how practiced – that remains linked inescapably to objects with market value (indeed, a market value that fluctuates in response to even the most rarified disciplinary activities). This actuality often leads to anxiety among art historians who believe their professional endeavor transcends material concerns, appealing instead to aesthetic, philosophic, or even moral concerns. And this anxiety propels the discipline’s undervaluation of “the trade.”

Shifting next to a discussion of the relationship between canon formation and art historical method is Marc Gotlieb’s contribution “How Canons Disappear: The Case of Henri Regnault.” In this chapter, Gotlieb evaluates the inconstancy and significance of Henri Regnault’s critical reception from the time of his death in 1871 to the present day. The institutional and other forces that managed Regnault’s apotheosis after his death in the Franco-Prussian War were, by the mid-twentieth century, pushed aside by shifting political as well as aesthetic alliances within the discipline. Gabriel P. Weisberg, in his chapter “Using Art History: The Louvre and Its Public Persona, 1848–52,” likewise turns to France and the intersection of politics and art history in his chapter on the ideological re-formation of the Louvre during the Second Republic. Tracing the transformation of the museum under the direction of the ardently republican Philippe-Auguste Jeanron, Weisberg shows how cultural institutions were brought into the service of a new social order, an effort largely suspended after the *coup d’état* that delivered to Napoleon III his imperial throne. Claire Farago’s “Silent Moves: On Excluding the Ethnographic Subject from the Discourse of Art History” finds art history’s most insidious institutional influences to be the Protestant and Catholic Reformations, European imperialism, as well as the disciplines of anthropology and ethnology. Looking at Aby Warburg’s legacy through the lens of Jean de Léry’s sixteenth-century representations of New World cultures, Farago confronts the tendency of art historians to ignore or, worse, willfully misunderstand the anthropological or ethnographic origins and consequences of their methods. Mary G. Morton’s analysis of Hippolyte Taine’s art historical career provides a revealing example of the facility with which institutions confer, in Carrier’s terms, insider or outsider status. In “Art History on the Academic Fringe: Taine’s Philosophy of Art” Morton traces a career remarkable for its institutional resilience. Prior to his 1864 appointment as professor of art history at the *École des Beaux-Arts*, Taine made his name and reputation on the academic fringe. Because of his politically unpopular views, the first influential decade of Taine’s career developed outside conventional institutional boundaries. Morton argues that this situation finds its rhetorical echo in Taine’s art historical method.

The final section of this volume, “The Practice of Art History: Discourse and Method as Institution,” features chapters that apply an institutional critique to the language, habits, and conventions of art history. In contrast to the material institutions examined in Part I, the chapters gathered here take their cue from Foucault’s concept of an institution as part of a complex weave of material and

ephemeral signs that he terms discourse. Publishers, journals, newspapers, and other forums for scholarly exchange and disciplinary identity remain immeasurably powerful – and often invisible – institutions. Part III begins with Helen Rees Leahy’s “‘For Connoisseurs’: *The Burlington Magazine* 1903–11.” Rees Leahy’s account of the foundation and fractious early years of the *Burlington* outlines the journal’s growth as an institution. In addition, Rees Leahy makes clear the *Burlington*’s role in shaping other British arts institutions such as the National Gallery, the Royal Academy, and the Chantrey Bequest. Turning to another vehicle through which art history established its institutional character, Frederick N. Bohrer examines the influences of photography on the discipline. “Photographic Perspectives: Photography and the Institutional Formation of Art History” takes as its starting point the assertion that no other form of technology has influenced art history’s institutional character as profoundly as photography. Every form of art historical practice remains indebted to the intervention of photography: research, pedagogy, exhibition, preservation and conservation as well as acquisition and sales.

The four chapters that bring Part III, and the volume, to its conclusion discuss the methods and language of art history as discursive institutions. In “Instituting Genius: The Formation of Biographical Art History in France,” Greg M. Thomas presents a compelling, multilayered exploration of the interdependencies among art history publications, disciplinary methods, canon formation, political ideologies, and professional aspirations. Thomas posits the “naturalist biography” as a model derived from mid-nineteenth-century political as well as methodological concerns. Arguing that artists’ biographies served a variety of art history’s institutional interests, Thomas concludes with a provocative commentary on the significance of myth for history and historiography.

Eric Rosenberg’s “A Preponderance of Practical Problems: The History of Art in the United States between 1886 and 1888” refocuses our attention on North America. Here, Rosenberg offers a close reading of the language of art history and criticism as it appeared in American journals between 1886 and 1888. Through a lens that converges social history and deconstruction, Rosenberg reveals the rhetorical consequences of art history’s professionalization in the United States in the late nineteenth century. The uneven and contested institutional status of American art history is exposed in Steven Nelson’s analysis of Freeman Murray’s *Emancipation and the Freed in American Sculpture: A Study in Interpretation*, one of the earliest attempts to theorize as well as produce African-American art history. Nelson demonstrates how institutional influences as diverse as the Emancipation Proclamation, the American Negro Academy, the Declaration of Independence, the Civil War, and the conventions of nineteenth-century American art history served to propel as well as undermine Murray’s project. Catherine M. Soussloff finds in turn-of-the-century photographic criticism a crucial moment in art history’s institutional development. At once forming and formed by Art Photography, institutionalized art history divulges its assumptions and limitations as well as its ambitions

in its resolution of photography's aesthetic claims. Art Photography's engagement with scientific, social, and philosophic concerns mirrors art history's own ambiguous disciplinary status at the time. For this reason, Soussloff posits the discourse around Art Photography as a particularly apt vehicle for inquiries into art history's institutional history in Europe as well as North America.

The organization of *Art History and Its Institutions* will highlight points of intersection as well as divergence while aiding the reader's navigation of the issues presented. This may diminish the need for textual orienteering, but the path laid out by no means offers the only or even best route. Readers undoubtedly will encounter numerous unmarked intersections.

NOTES

- 1 L. Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, New York, Monthly Review Press, 1971 [essay orig. pub. 1969], pp. 143–5.
- 2 M. Foucault, "Two Lectures," trans. A. Fontana and P. Pasquino, in C. Gordon, ed., *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, New York, Pantheon, 1980, p. 93.

Part I

PUTTING ART HISTORY
IN ITS PLACE

1

ART HISTORY AND MODERNISM

Elizabeth Mansfield

Art history stands apart from other humanistic disciplines. Galvanized into a professional, academic field during the nineteenth century, the discipline took shape in response to distinct and often novel institutional pressures. Humanistic inquiry in the West had, until the appearance of art history, largely traced its methods and goals to classical or medieval models. The fields of history, literature, and philosophy, for example, inherited institutional traditions and legitimacy from the academies of ancient Greece and the universities fostered by Scholasticism. Art history does not share this genealogy. Though its academic practices resemble those of the traditional humanities, art history maintains a distinctive disciplinary character. In practice, art history combines the authenticating and valuating mission of the connoisseur, the hagiographic indulgences of the biographer, the cataloguing impulse of the botanist, the alternately reflective and reflexive tendencies of the historian, and the philosopher's willingness to calibrate aesthetic transcendence. During the nineteenth century, these ambitious and contradictory pursuits were conjoined – by no means seamlessly – to form a new profession. Confidently secular, apologetically commercial, and ambivalently poised between scientific and philosophic aims, art history is a liberal discipline born of modernism.

Art history's unusual status complicates its institutional history. The institutions most often associated with art history's professionalization are the museum and the academy. Indeed, one could convincingly argue that the vocational history of art history begins with Jean-Dominique Vivant Denon's appointment as director of the Musée Napoléon in 1803 or Gustav Waagen's 1844 installation as professor of art history at the University of Berlin. As the most prominent and plentiful employers of professional art historians in the nineteenth century as today, the museum and the academy enjoy a justifiably high profile in histories of the discipline. They are not, however, the only institutions to guide art history's disciplinary formation. A much broader institutional history informs the field.

At this point, I wish to clarify my understanding of institutional history. By "institution," I refer generally to any organization or matrix capable of the sustained production and dissemination of social beliefs or customs.

Institutions, in this sense, may or may not manifest themselves as physical sites of social exchange. They must, however, function as vehicles for social discourse long enough to be able to claim an internal tradition or history.¹ Whether as tangible as a Catholic cathedral or as evanescent as technical jargon, institutional discourse helps to shape our perceptions of reality. Institutional history, then, involves the study of the development of these ideologically responsive organizations as well as their effects.

One of the main challenges facing a historiographer concerned with institutional practices is the opacity of institutional discourse. At most points embedded imperceptibly into social discourse, discrete moments of institutional pressure often remain below the radar of historiographic scrutiny. Louis Althusser has, perhaps most trenchantly, shown how modern institutions can both disguise and reveal the elusive and falsifying effect of ideology.² Multifarious in its relationship to ideology, institutional discourse participates in its reception, manipulation, and dissemination. Cultural institutions serve as capacitors of ideology, distorting and disguising their relation to social practice. We may, however, detect traces of their influence in our work. By treating our texts, methods, and policies as the realization of our institutional history, we begin to discern its effects. For example, the stories we write about art may in fact be read as myths insofar as they carry reassuring references to our disciplinary purpose and history. In particular, those stories that manage to absorb and sustain our scholarly attention may yield most readily to interpretation as myth.

Among the most persistent stories to arise in recent art historical scholarship concerns the history and significance of modernism. Hundreds of exhibitions, books, articles, and symposia have addressed this subject in the past decade. This scholarly preoccupation demands historiographic scrutiny. Undoubtedly, art historians find in modernism an intriguingly complex history as well as an interpretive challenge. What scholars who pursue this challenge generally fail to acknowledge is its inherent self-reflexivity. The history of modernism circumscribes the history of art history. Equally responsive to post-Enlightenment aesthetic and cultural debates, to the economic and social revolutions of the nineteenth century, and to the entrenchment of these once radical challenges, modernism and art history have followed parallel courses. Any exploration of modernism, then, produces a historiographic echo. Quietly resonating, this historiographic pulse somehow fails to captivate our scholarly attention.

The aim of art history, then, is to define the role of art, a role which has already been played out.

Hans Belting, *The End of the History of Art?*

The concomitant maturation and, some would argue, disintegration of art history and modernism has been observed most pointedly by Hans Belting. In *The End of the History of Art?* (1987), Belting implies but does not pursue a

historical evaluation of art history's institutional relationship to modernism.³ A possible model for such an inquiry may, however, be gleaned from T.J. Clark's *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (1999). In this summa, Clark proposes a history of modern art belated to a history of socialism. Though adamantly unhistoriographic, Clark's book does offer a motive of discursive "codependency" that invites historiographic application. Initially lamenting that "clearly something of socialism and modernism has died," he then wonders: "If they died together, does that mean that in some sense they lived together, in century-long co-dependency?"⁴ I find embedded in Clark's question its historiographic corollary: in what sense is the history of modernism the history of art history?

Before broaching the question of art history's relationship to modernism, a brief characterization of the latter is required. The recent explosion of publications attempting to chart modernism's fractious history indicates both an urgent desire to define modernism and a perception that this task remains incomplete. Modernism's unsettled relationship to scholarly discourse is, of course, fundamental to its nature. Rooted in the Industrial Revolution, modernism was forged in the repeated collisions between antithetical philosophical and political traditions.⁵ Philosophically, modernism grows out of the positivist as well as the idealist traditions articulated in the eighteenth century and codified in the nineteenth. Politically, modernism's unstable alloy includes bases of mercantile capitalism as well as utopian socialism. Modernism, then, is a condition of tension, instability and, ultimately, irresolution. What is more, modernism participates in an unfulfilled dialectic. By this I mean to say that modernism exhibits a seemingly dialectical reliance upon antithetical impulses as well as a potential for synthetic resolution/revolution. This is the character ascribed to modernity by Clark.

Despite the teleological underpinnings of Clark's definition of modernity, it does provide a practical armature for an inquiry into modernism's relationship to art history. According to Clark, modernism is the cultural consequence of modernity, a social shift in which "the pursuit of a projected future – of goods, pleasures, freedoms, forms of control over nature, or infinities of information" supersedes dependence upon tradition, ritual, and "ancestor worship."⁶ The political and aesthetic potentiality that Clark ascribes to modernity reveals itself most forcefully in the visual arts. Manifested first in Jacques-Louis David's *Death of Marat* (1793), modernist art makes its final appearance in American Abstract Expressionism of the 1950s. I agree with Clark's description of the relationship between modernism and modernity as well as his assertion that the latter is a largely nineteenth-century phenomenon bracketed by moments of intense political and cultural self-awareness in the eighteenth and twentieth centuries. I do not, however, share his optimistically Marxist faith that modernism carries a promise of resolution/revolution of class conflict. Modernism could never participate in a radical social realignment because modernism depends upon *irresolution*. To return to the Hephaestian metaphor, modernism is the hammer blow, not the resulting amalgam.

I wish to ascribe a similar condition to art history. Arising from conflicting epistemological positions, art history is unmistakably modern in its origins.⁷ Evidence of its discordant nascence remains embedded in cultural institutions formed during the period of art history's methodological and professional standardization. The art museum provides a concrete example of the condition I describe. Few art museums existed prior to the nineteenth century because the social conditions required for their proliferation were not yet established.⁸ Museums are profoundly modern institutions because they attempt to reconcile both a positive and intuitive impulse. The fundamental mission of the art museum – to collect, preserve, and exhibit works of art – testifies to its modernist roots. On the one hand, the museum defines art objects as quantifiable: they can be gathered, classified, and displayed like so many zoological specimens.⁹ On the other hand, museums make a qualitative distinction in the works they choose to collect and exhibit by judging objects according to such ephemeral standards as “quality,” “cultural significance,” or “aesthetic merit.” Or, as Walter Benjamin points out:

Museums unquestionably belong to the dream houses of the collective. In considering them, one would want to emphasize the dialectic by which they come into contact, on the one hand, with scientific research and, on the other hand, with “the dreamy tide of bad taste.”¹⁰

The museum, of course, is not the only art historical institution negotiating the legacy of modernism's Janus-faced origins. In the academy, the problem has recently manifested itself in the United States through the vocal debates surrounding traditional survey courses.¹¹ Despite persistent criticisms regarding the reductive nature of courses that neatly categorize artistic production according to periods and movements, few American art historians are willing to jettison completely this pedagogical framework. The determined attempt by the academy to reconcile the rival claims of positive and intuitive (or interpretive) approaches offers a tangible consequence of art history's manifold origins.

Our uneasiness with the ambiguity of our discipline is not new. Roger Fry, writing early in the century following art history's institutionalization, felt obliged in his inaugural address as Slade Professor of Art at Cambridge to justify his discipline's very existence in the university's curriculum. Emphasizing that art history “is inextricably involved in a number of studies which are regarded as eminently worthy of Academic status,”¹² Fry promises an art history “in which scientific methods will be followed wherever possible, where at all events the scientific attitude may be fostered and the sentimental attitude discouraged.”¹³ Conceding a few paragraphs later that “we must abandon all hope of making aesthetic judgments of universal validity,” Fry leads his audience across the familiar – and rhetorically hallowed – terrain of dialectic. He then offers the hopeful synthesis that

In trying to show, first that the search for an objective standard of aesthetic values is hopeless and secondly that, could we attain it, the mere knowledge of that standard would be entirely useless to us, I have been trying to bring about something like a shift of perspective in our attitude to aesthetic values.¹⁴

This comment reveals itself to be something of a red herring, however, as his concluding remarks point to a different purpose:

It is possible, I think, by some such methods to circumvent our native prejudices and predilections and to acquire a more alert passivity in our attitude. And it is by cultivating such an attitude that we can best, I think, increase the delicacy and sensibility of our reception of the messages of the present artists. It is the fulness, richness and significance of our feelings in face of works of art that matters.¹⁵

Initially vowing allegiance to the discipline's positive or "scientific" strain, Fry ultimately offers a passionate defense of art history's association with aesthetic idealism. Fry's apologia bears close resemblance to his long and ardent defense of modern art. For example, in a 1917 address to the Fabian Society, later published as "Art and Life," he finds "something analogous in the new orientation of scientific and artistic endeavour." He goes on to explain that:

Science has turned its instruments in on human nature and begun to investigate its fundamental needs, and art has also turned its vision inwards, has begun to work upon the fundamental necessities of man's aesthetic functions ... On the other hand, the artist of the new movement is moving into a sphere more and more remote from that of the ordinary man. In proportion as art becomes purer the number of people to whom it appeals gets less.¹⁶

Mirroring his listeners' appreciation for scientific objectivity, urging them to relinquish their prejudices, then confessing that aesthetic perception remains available to only a gifted few, Fry attempts to gloss over the contradictions presented by academic art history as he had the discordances of modern art. In his use of similar rhetorical strategies, Fry invites comparison between art history and modernism and their uneasy institutional status.

While Clark and Fry's discussions indicate points of contact between art history and modernism, neither offers a means to explore the institutional bases for this connection.¹⁷ For such a model, we must look outside the discipline. As previously mentioned, Louis Althusser's analysis of institutional discourse may be applied to the study of art history's disciplinary formation. Althusser ascribes to various cultural institutions the status of Ideological State Apparatus (ISA), which complements Marx's more fundamental and repressive State Apparatus.¹⁸

Althusser's ISAs subtly reveal the interdependency of politics and culture via institutional discourse. In addition, his critique implicates modernism as a discursive manifestation of high capitalism. Althusser may give us a useful means to analyze the effects of ISAs, but we still face the task of uncovering those institutions most germane to art history. Again, I wish to enlist an approach developed by a historian associated with the Frankfurt School. Specifically, Walter Benjamin's unfinished *Arcades Project* (*Passagenwerk*) will, I believe, provide a practical example to complement Althusser's theory of ISAs.

Expansive in its scope and complexity, the *Arcades Project* pursues the interconnected histories of modernism, capitalism, and post-revolutionary Paris. Its eventual – and unintended – publication as a collection of notes, observations, and related essays nonetheless conveys the ambitiousness of Benjamin's unrealized plan. Furthermore, the *Arcades Project* reveals his unbounded comprehension of the relationship between material history and representation. Throughout the work, Benjamin shows a determination to analyze history as a *representation* of ideologically responsive institutions (not unlike Althusser's ISAs). This fluid admixture of materialism and narrativity makes the *Arcades Project* an especially promising template for an institutionally focused history of art history. Constantly traversing and redrawing the boundaries between visual and verbal representation, art history – as well as art historiography – requires a method attentive to representational practices.¹⁹

The *Arcades Project* may also be taken as exemplary in its very *form*. It has been observed that the unfinished state of the *Arcades Project* endows it with a montage-like narrative analogous to the representational mode Benjamin advocated for social criticism.²⁰ Alternately fleeting and sustained, focused and indirect, the present state of the *Arcades Project* reveals that sidelong scrutiny is often best for observing the flickering effects of ideology. Benjamin's mode, therefore, as well as his method offer promising models for a study of art history as a discipline shaped by modernism and its institutions.

To look at a star by glances – to view it in a side-long way, by turning toward it the exterior portions of the retina ... is to behold the star distinctly – is to have the best appreciation of its lustre – a lustre which grows dim just in proportion as we turn our vision fully upon it ... By undue profundity we perplex and enfeeble thought; and it is possible to make even Venus herself vanish from the firmament by a scrutiny too sustained, too concentrated, or too direct.

Edgar Allan Poe, "Murders in the Rue Morgue"

What, then, are the institutions of modernism? Where does high capitalism find new circuits for ideological exchange? Benjamin's response, dispersed throughout the *Arcades Project*, succinctly coalesces in the essay "Paris: The

Capital of the Nineteenth Century.”²¹ Here, he examines the development of modernism through the city’s embrace of post-industrial cultural and commercial innovations. Modernism, according to Benjamin, is found in the new shopping arcades, in the wide boulevards of the city designed by Baron Haussmann, in the dark alleys described by Charles Baudelaire and Edgar Allan Poe, in the parlors and bedrooms of the middle class, in the stalls of the Opéra, and in the exposition pavilions. It is not, therefore, to the academy and the museum alone that we must look for institutions kindred with art history. Rather, Benjamin would direct us as well toward the department store, the advertising agency, the popular press, the commercial gallery, the law courts, and the union halls in our exploration of the institutional origins of art history.

There are relations between department store and museum, and here the bazaar provides a link. The amassing of artworks in the museum brings them into communication with commodities, which – where they offer themselves en masse to passerby – awake in him the notion that some part of this should fall to him as well.

Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*

It was the cathedral of modern business, strong and yet light, built for vast crowds of customers. In the central gallery on the ground floor, after the bargains near the door, came the tie, glove, and silk departments; ... and ... a colossal gallery decorated with excessive luxury, in which he even ventured to hold picture exhibitions.

Emile Zola, *The Ladies’ Paradise*

The head of an agency should expect the art director to keep in touch with art organizations and attend art exhibitions. He should expect the art director to watch for “comers” among the younger artists and to help them develop their talents. Early recognition of a new artist of unusual ability may mean much to an agency.

The Advertising Agency: Procedure and Practice (1927)

Art history was formed by the same impulse that created the advertising agency, the department store and even the labor union: the need simultaneously to reveal and disguise the commodification of culture. Whether the commodity is a patent medicine, a marble sculpture, or a day’s labor, its commercial worth and availability must be established while its desirability is heightened precisely by elevating its status beyond market standards. Marx ascribed to this situation a fetishistic character. For Marx, fetishism describes the process through which an object is transformed into a commodity. The fetishized object bears no sign of its production; its value is determined strictly through its participation in a circuit

of market exchange. In semiotic terms, the fetish signifies monetary value as opposed to its own production. Mass produced, flawless, and attractively packaged, the fetish masks its own manufacture, its own history. The commodity-as-fetish described by Marx subverts expectations of authenticity or originality. Art history works both with and against this process. On the one hand, art history supports the commercial status of art by certifying the attribution, condition, age, and medium of a work. On the other hand, art history has developed categories such as “style” or “form” that facilitate aesthetic appreciation but defy commercial quantification. In other words, the discipline’s historical enterprise functions contradictorily, both establishing commercial worth and asserting autonomy from market forces. To see this awkward tension in practice, one has only to visit a museum during a scheduled gallery talk or docent’s tour. After elucidating the historic significance or aesthetic relevance of a new acquisition, for example, the lecturer may entertain questions. The naive but eager patron who asks the cost of the work will receive a disapproving look in place of an answer. The following notes will, I hope, enkindle an art historiography that seeks to address the impulses behind the patron’s question as well as the lecturer’s reticence. Rather than dismiss or skirt the ambiguous and contradictory nature of our endeavor, let us seek out its sources in the Benjaminian arcades of art history.

Because I must limit the scope of my exploration, I have selected two exemplary fragments from the history of art history. Each fragment corresponds to one of the polarities ascribed to the *Arcades Project* by Susan Buck-Morss in her important and innovative encounter with Benjamin, *The Dialectics of Seeing*.²² Buck-Morss attributes to the *Arcades Project* a deep structure that – to severely and unavoidably simplify her analysis – resolves the *Arcades Project* into conceptual hemispheres: one of “dream” and another of “waking.” The dream hemisphere is populated by “the prostitute, the gambler and the flâneur,” who symbolically pursue “wish images,” or the fetishistic pleasures promised by commodity culture. In the waking hemisphere, Buck-Morss finds instead “the collector, the ragpicker, and the detective,” who allegorically circulate among the fossils and the ruins of pre-commodity culture. I believe the art historian moves comfortably between these hemispheres and may be identified with, among other Benjaminian characters, the *flâneur* as well as the detective.

Marx speaks of the fetish character of the commodity. “This fetish character of the commodity world has its origin in the peculiar social character of the labor that produces commodities ... It is only the particular social relation between people that here assumes, in the eyes of these people, the phantasmagorical form of a relation between things.”

Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*

BECKFORD, PATER, PHANTASMAGORIA

Bracketing the period of art history's professional and institutional crystallization are two extraordinary examples of disciplinary renitence: William Beckford's *Biographical Memoirs of Extraordinary Painters* (1780) and Walter Pater's "A Prince of Court Painters" (1887). Through recourse to fantasy, both works sidestep art history's claims either to scientific objectivity or aesthetic transcendence. The use of a forthrightly fictional narrative form signals both authors' recognition – and rejection – of art history's conventional genres. At the same time, this gesture demystifies the discipline's unselfconscious role as a guarantor of art's value as commodity.

William Beckford (1760–1844) earned celebrity in his lifetime for his extravagant personal excesses as well as his Orientalist fiction. *Vathek* (1786), his most successful work, was rumored to record his own overindulgences as well as that of his eponymous protagonist. Beckford's name rarely appears in art historical studies. When mentioned, it is usually in reference to his extensive art collection or his neo-Gothic mansion, Fonthill Abbey. *Biographical Memoirs*, however, has not attracted the scholarly interest of art historians. This idiosyncratic contribution to art writing lampoons one of the most staid genres of the discipline: the artist's biography. This genre, codified in the sixteenth century by Vasari and embraced by subsequent generations of scholars as well as dilettantes, offers an orderly and seemingly dispassionate method for the classification and analysis of art. The artist's biography became, in the wake of Vasari's *Lives*, the standard format for discussions of technique, provenance, authenticity, and meaning. Beckford, however, uses the genre to recount the lives of seven *fictional* sixteenth-century painters. Broadly satirical, *Biographical Memoirs* describes the painstaking method of Aldrovandus Magnus, the dramatic careers of his apprentices Andrew Guelph and Og of Basan, their rivals Soorcroust and Sucrewasser of Vienna, the cultivated barbarian Blunderbussiana, and the fawning Watersouchy. Published when Beckford was just 20, the book foreshadows his endeavors as author of gothic tales and ambitious patron and collector.

The precise circumstances of the book's production and publication remain uncertain. According to Beckford's earliest biographers, he wrote the volume after overhearing the housekeeper expounding to visitors upon his family's picture gallery. When some visitors expressed skepticism at the housekeeper's extraordinary explanations – based on information supplied puckishly by Beckford himself – he promised to "prove" the veracity of these accounts by publishing them:

My pen was quickly in hand composing the *Memoirs*. In the future the housekeeper had a printed guide in aid of her descriptions. She caught up my phrases and her descriptions became more picturesque, her language more graphic than ever! ... Mine was the textbook, whoever exhibited the paintings ... I used to listen unobserved until I was ready

to kill myself with laughing at the authorities quoted to the squires and the farmers of Wiltshire, who took it all for gospel. It was the most ridiculous thing in effect that you can conceive.²³

Received by critics with puzzlement, *Biographical Memoirs* nonetheless went into second and third printings.²⁴

Though Beckford's text may have confounded contemporary reviewers, it now carries historiographic import. *Biographical Memoirs* records an intriguing juncture in the history of art history as a professional, authoritative discourse. If the recorded explanation of the volume's playful origins is to be believed – and I see no reason the gist of it should not – Beckford's "guidebook" served to detach his family's picture collection from the apparatus normally used to assign commercial value to art. Mocking the paintings' attributions, the circumstances of their production, and their aesthetic merit, Beckford's gesture undermines their status as commodities. His youthful, aristocratic disdain for his middle-class visitors' interest in the works' provenance challenges the commercial application of art historical method. Beckford's satire exposes the absurd reliance his visitors place on pedigree as a measure of aesthetic merit. Paintings, Beckford seems finally to say, are not the same as spaniels or Herefords. With *Biographical Memoirs*, Beckford seeks to shield works of art from the debasement threatened by the growing professionalization of art history.

By satirizing art historical convention, *Biographical Memoirs* marks an instance of aristocratic resistance to incipient capitalism and its concomitant commodity fetishism. "A Prince of Court Painters," the second chapter of Pater's *Imaginary Portraits*, registers a decidedly different moment. By the time Pater wrote *Imaginary Portraits*, commodity fetishism had attained maturity. For this reason, I believe "A Prince of Court Painters" – indeed the whole of *Imaginary Portraits* – is a gesture of belated rhetorical resistance to culture's complicity with capitalism. Like Beckford, Pater employs a genre that imparts a "reality effect" to his text. Written as a series of diary entries, "A Prince of Court Painters" documents the life of Antoine Watteau as perceived by a life-long female friend. The diaristic mode gives the text an authentic flavor: each entry is dated and events are documented with scrupulous detail.

Pater's *Imaginary Portraits* participates in a broader strategy to defy the encroachment of capitalism on culture and scholarship. Aestheticism, Benjamin observes, seeks to undercut the hold of capitalism. He outlines this struggle in "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century":

The non-conformists rebel against consigning art to the marketplace. They rally round the banner of *l'art pour l'art*. From this watchword derives the conception of the "total work of art" – the *Gesamtkunstwerk* – which would seal art off from the developments of technology. The solemn rite with which it is celebrated is the pendant to the distraction that transfigures the commodity.²⁵