BLOOMSBURY AESTHETICS

Philosophy of Painting

ANCIENT, MODERN, CONTEMPORARY

Jason Gaiger

BLOOMSBURY

Philosophy of Painting

Bloomsbury Aesthetics

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BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
1385 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, USA
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, Ireland

First published in Great Britain 2022

Cover design by Louise Dugdale
Cover image: Angela de la Cruz, Larger Than Life (Knackered), 2004. Installation view, Corner Space of Galerie Thomas Schulte, Berlin, 2015. (Photo by Sergio Belínchon. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Thomas Schulte).

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN: HB: 978-1-3501-0491-4
PB: 978-1-3501-0490-7
ePDF: 978-1-3501-0489-1
eBook: 978-1-3501-0487-7

Series: Bloomsbury Aesthetics

Typeset by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk

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Preface to the Second Edition

This book is a revised and expanded edition of *Aesthetics and Painting*. The main addition is a new chapter on 'Contemporary Painting', but I have made revisions throughout to bring it up to date and to reflect some changes in my own thinking. The structure of the book, which is organized into chapters that follow on from one another both thematically and historically, readily permits the inclusion of a chapter dedicated to contemporary painting. Moreover, the emphasis on painting as a historical practice that guides the latter part of the book seemed incomplete without consideration of more recent developments. I was initially hesitant to write about contemporary art, unsure whether it would be possible to address from a philosophical perspective such a rapidly developing field. I was reminded of Lessing's observation in his *Laocoön* that when La Mettrie had himself depicted as a second Democritus, it proved impossible to capture in paint the fleeting phenomenon of laughter: after repeated viewings his smile turns into a grimace. However, it soon became apparent that the additional chapter afforded an opportunity to deepen the enquiry and to extend it in new directions. I have endeavoured to stay close to the interests and concerns that inform contemporary painting by allowing the chapter to be strongly example-led, while also establishing points of connection that link closely to problems addressed elsewhere within the book. My aim has been to provide a non-conservative defence of contemporary painting, which acknowledges the pressures placed on painting as an art by the emergence of new digital technologies and the expanded field of art practice, while still preserving a place for painting on both sides of the digital divide.

The change of title for the second edition also requires some explanation. Although the term 'aesthetics' is widely used in philosophy to encompass the study of individual art forms, serving as a catch-all description for the philosophy of art as well as the appreciation of nature and everyday objects and activities, it is employed in a different way by artists and critics. In the contemporary art world, aesthetics still tends to be associated with connoisseurship and a restrictive emphasis on the visually rewarding features of artworks. This can be traced, in part, to the use of the term by Clement Greenberg and other modernist critics, with whom it is indelibly associated. The title *Philosophy of Painting: Ancient, Modern, Contemporary* avoids confusion on this issue and it captures more accurately, I believe, the aim and contents of the book. I hope this change will encourage those with a wider interest in painting – who might otherwise be dissuaded – to consider reading it, and that this new edition will prove as enjoyable to read as it was to write.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Derek Matravers, the series editor, and to Collen Coalter and Becky Holland at Bloomsbury for the opportunity to publish this new edition. The image costs were supported by research funding from my college, St Edmund Hall, Oxford, and I have gained enormously from the opportunity to share ideas with colleagues and students both in college and at the Ruskin School of Art. I would like to record my thanks to Angela De La Cruz, Katharina Grosse, Wade Guyton, Julie Mehretu, Gerhard Richter and Lynette Yiadom-Boakye for their generosity in allowing me to reproduce their work and for the assistance provided by their galleries. The publication of this book also provides me with an opportunity to express my gratitude to David Davies, Andy Hamilton, Paul Smith and Lambert Wiesing for their guidance, support and intellectual generosity. The book is dedicated to Maggie, Emilia and Edward, who bring new life.

1

Philosophical Questions

The Relevance of Philosophy

Philosophy is said to begin in wonder.[1] But it also begins in perplexity, doubt, curiosity, and a stubborn insistence on asking difficult questions, including questions about the nature and purpose of philosophy itself. This book is a study in philosophy – more precisely, that branch of the discipline that has come to be termed the philosophy of art. It is therefore important to start by asking what, if anything, philosophy can tell us about painting and why painting should be considered an appropriate subject for philosophical enquiry. Although directed at the same underlying issue, these two questions tend in different directions. The first asks whether philosophy can reveal something about painting that might otherwise remain obscure or hidden: in what ways might it deepen our understanding and how does it differ from other forms of writing and thinking about art such as art history and art criticism? The second question asks why philosophers should be interested in painting in the first place. Does painting raise a distinctive set of problems that are not already addressed within other areas of philosophy? And might reflection on these problems cast light on more abstract philosophical concerns?

Painting is a non-discursive art form whose effects are realized through the arrangement of shapes and colours on a material support. A painting does not depend on axioms or chains of inference, nor, even in the most extended sense, can it be said to raise a claim or defend a position. It is therefore far from obvious that a discipline that is primarily concerned with abstract reasoning and logical argument is equipped to provide special insight into a creative practice that operates through images rather than words. Although we might criticize a painting on the grounds of artificiality or insincerity, we cannot assess it in terms of its truth or falsity. Such an approach surely rests on a category mistake. But that we cannot argue *with* a painting does not mean that we cannot argue *about* it. One of the reasons why painting has been a source of enduring fascination to philosophers is that it is irreducible to verbal description. It is not merely that words are inadequate to capture the full visual content of a painting – an idea that finds popular expression in the cliché that 'a picture is worth a thousand words'.

Rather, linguistic description and pictorial representation appear to provide two radically different means of communication and expression.

To describe something through language requires us to place a series of abstract symbols – letters, words, phrases, sentences – in an ordered sequence. As has frequently been noted, neither the symbols themselves nor the order in which they are presented need bear any resemblance to what they stand for or represent. The sentence 'A woman is peeling apples' does not look like a woman peeling apples, nor does the word 'apple' look like an apple. Different languages, of course, have different words for the same objects, so even if we were tempted to look for some common feature, we would also have to find a way of accounting for the differences between the French word *pomme*, the Italian word *mela*, the German word *Apfel*, and so forth. It is therefore widely agreed that the relation between a word and what it represents is fixed by convention rather than the possession of a set of shared characteristics. To understand a language, we need to know not only enough words but also the specific rules that govern their combination into meaningful sequences. By contrast – or at least, so it might first seem – when we look at a representational painting such as Pieter de Hooch's *A Woman Peeling Apples* of c. 1663 (Plate 1) we do not need to possess any such prior knowledge. Unlike a verbal description, the painting provides us with an experience that is similar in certain respects to the experience of looking at the depicted scene – in this case, the sunlit interior of a house in which a seated woman hands a length of apple peel to a waiting child. The intuitive, or pre-philosophical, way of accounting for this is to say that, unlike a sentence, a picture looks like or resembles what it represents.

As we shall see, however, the idea that pictures resemble their subjects is potentially misleading and surprisingly difficult to articulate in a coherent theoretical form. This recognition has led some philosophers to reject our intuitive assumptions and to argue that pictures are, after all, best understood on the model of language. The existence of such conflicting views is testament to the considerable complexity of explaining how pictures work. We can broadly distinguish two different approaches to depiction. The first, perceptualist approach, contends that pictures are to be explained in terms of the psychological effects that they produce in the viewer: to understand the nature of pictorial representation we need to examine the underlying psychological and perceptual processes that allow us to see an apple in a picture of an apple. By contrast, adherents of the symbol-based approach argue that pictures, like language, depend on the correlation of a set of marks with a field of reference, and that pictures are to be analysed as complex symbol systems. More recently, philosophers have sought to produce hybrid theories that combine the strengths of both approaches.

What Ernst Gombrich termed the 'psychology of pictorial representation' in the subtitle to his book *Art and Illusion* in 1960 has proved a rich and fertile field of enquiry.[2] Although Gombrich's ideas are currently out of fashion among art historians, they have been taken up, revised, challenged and extended by analytic philosophers, who have used his work as a starting point to develop their own accounts of the nature of pictorial representation. Remarkably, Gombrich's importance is acknowledged not only by advocates of the perceptualist approach, but also by the principal exponent of the symbol theory of depiction, Nelson Goodman.[3] Gombrich's stated goal in *Art and Illusion* is to 'restore our sense of wonder at man's capacity to conjure up by forms, lines, shades, or colours those mysterious phantoms of visual reality we call "pictures"'.[4] How is it that a pattern of marks upon a flat surface is able to provide a convincing representation of a scene or object that is not physically present before us? Are the same perceptual processes at work when we see an object represented in a painting as when we see it in everyday experience? How can something static and two-dimensional succeed in presenting spatial relations or the appearance of movement? What is the role of the viewer's imagination in filling out and completing partially occluded or foreshortened objects? And are there standards of correctness against which different forms of representation can be measured?

These questions are of intrinsic significance and connect in a variety of ways with larger issues in the philosophy of perception. However, it is clear even from this short list that the analysis of pictorial representation intersects with but does not exhaust the philosophical interest of painting. First, not all painting is figurative. The emergence of fully abstract painting in the early years of the twentieth century revealed that painting can dispense with the depiction of recognizable objects, scenes and events without forfeiting its claim on our attention. A central aim of this book is to show that representational content is only one aspect of painting as an art and that equal importance needs to be given to internal or 'configurational' properties, including properties of form and design. Second, although most paintings are pictures, not all pictures are paintings. Stick figures, maps, heads on coins, architectural plans, cartoons, billboard advertisements, newspaper illustrations and computer-generated imagery are all pictures of one sort or another. Despite the high aesthetic value that is traditionally ascribed to painting, its very complexity as an art form and the many different functions it has been made to fulfil make it difficult to accommodate within any single explanatory framework. The more sophisticated or original an artist's work, and the more remote from our everyday concerns, the more recalcitrant it is likely to prove as an example for philosophical analysis.

One response to this problem has been to argue that 'demotic' forms of representation should be taken as fundamental: just as philosophers of language begin by studying basic propositional sentences rather than elaborate verbal conceits or the highly compressed and metaphorical language of poetry, so philosophers who are interested in depiction should start by analysing images that are 'a product of the people rather than the art world'.[5] Only once we have understood these putatively more basic representations will we be in a position to address the greater challenges posed by paintings that are artworks. Although this approach has clear advantages for the construction of a general theory of depiction, it assumes that the communicative and referential function of pictures should be given primacy. As a result, it risks severing philosophical enquiry into painting from the sustaining interests of artists, viewers and critics. Many of the core problems of pictorial representation are studied by other disciplines for quite different purposes. To give just one example, the development of visual recognition software that allows computer programmes to process visual data is frequently modelled on an analysis of information processing in the brain, including the way in which we can read two-dimensional surfaces as containing representations of spatial depth. It is not unusual for there to be an overlap between philosophical enquiry and scientific research, and there is no doubt that philosophy has much to learn from developments in science and technology. However, the isolation of a discrete set of technical problems cannot do justice to the full complexity of the issues that are raised by painting. The claim that 'pictures are at bottom vehicles for the storage, manipulation, and communication of information' may hold true as the basis for a general theory of visual representation, but it is tendentious when extended to works of art, for it relegates aesthetic considerations to secondary status.[6]

The Practice of Painting

In a panel discussion held in 1952 on the subject of 'Aesthetics and the Artist', the American painter Barnett Newman made an observation that has passed into the folklore of twentieth-century art. Responding to Susanne Langer's suggestion that the research she and her colleagues were carrying out in aesthetics might be of interest to contemporary artists, he replied: 'I have never met an ornithologist who ever thought that ornithology is for the birds.'[7] Newman's remark captures in witty and memorable form the view that the philosophy of art is external to what it describes and thus has no real significance for artists, who are motivated by different interests and concerns.

This claim needs to be assessed on its own terms, independently of the circumstances in which it was voiced. However, it is worth noting that at the same time as he was developing his characteristic 'signature style' of vertical stripes against a coloured ground, which he first explored in his painting *Onement I* (1948, Museum of Modern Art, New York), Newman was also writing and publishing essays in avant-garde periodicals.[8] His theoretical reflections on topics such as 'primitivism' and the concept of the sublime do not provide a rationale for his work at this time, but they do suggest that his search for a type of painting that was appropriate to the age in which he lived was not carried out in isolation from ideas about the place and purpose of art. Indeed, writing and thinking about art seems to have played an important role in his recognition that *Onement I* constituted a significant breakthrough rather than a failed experiment.[9]

Newman is not the only artist to have suggested that philosophy is irrelevant to art. Wyndham Lewis told the critic and philosopher T. E. Hulme, 'I do it, and you say it.' More brutally, Picasso once retorted to someone who was trying to explain his work: 'Don't speak to the driver!'[10] What lies behind these remarks is the belief that the artist is one step ahead of the philosopher, who frequently arrives too late on the scene and whose efforts at comprehension never quite live up to the originality and excitement of the creative process. The opposing point of view – that without philosophy to interpret it art remains 'mute' – is forcefully expressed by the German philosopher Theodor W. Adorno in his book *Aesthetic Theory*, which was published posthumously in 1970.[11] Adorno's position is difficult to summarize without distortion, but his central idea is that since the meaning of an artwork is necessarily indeterminate, it requires philosophy to disclose its full significance. Unlike, for example, a propositional sentence, whose content is intended to be directly communicable, a work of art does not explicitly declare its meaning. It is this very indeterminacy that makes art different from – and potentially richer than – conceptual thought. According to Adorno, philosophy has need of art since art expresses something that cannot be fully captured through rational argument. However, without interpretation by philosophy – that is to say, without critical reflection upon its meaning and significance – art remains incomplete. The two therefore stand in a reciprocal relation in which each is dependent on the other.

The problem with both approaches – represented, on the one hand, by Newman's dismissive attitude towards philosophy and, on the other, by Adorno's insistence on its indispensability – is that they rely on a forced opposition between theory and practice in which philosophy and painting are treated as fully distinct forms of activity. The relation between painting and philosophy cannot be reduced to that between 'doing' and 'saying', as if

painting were an unreflective process carried out by individuals who are unaware of the significance of their work. The French expression *bête comme un peintre*, which means 'stupid as a painter', or more literally, 'a beast or dumb creature like a painter', reminds us that painters were once derided as mere craftsmen or skilled labourers, whose trade depended on the physical activity of mixing and applying paint. The artist Marcel Duchamp, who is perhaps best known for having 'abandoned painting' in favour of presenting found objects as works of art – including the notorious act of exhibiting an upside-down urinal in his *Fountain* of 1917 – claimed to have been motivated by a desire to get away from this conception of the artist. Rejecting what he described as the merely 'retinal' satisfactions of oil painting, he sought to produce works of art that were addressed to the mind rather than to the senses.[12] Duchamp's belief that painting had become obsolete led him to explore new forms of artistic activity, but the opposition between art as a mere craft or technical skill and art as a vehicle for the presentation of ideas goes back to some of the oldest disputes about painting.

Rather than accepting these divisions at face value, we should acknowledge that painting and philosophy are independently valuable modes of enquiry. Newman is perhaps unusual in having published theoretical essays at the same time as producing major works of art, but advanced art practice has always been characterized by a high degree of critical self-reflection. There have, of course, been 'learned' painters, such as the seventeenth-century French artist Nicolas Poussin, who was praised by his contemporaries for his erudition and classical knowledge. And there are other examples of artists such as Newman who have written in a highly insightful – and sometimes highly misleading – way about the ideas behind their work. However, most artists have expressed their thoughts about art through the practice of painting. Painting has its own internal complexity, a complexity that is largely worked out in and through painting itself rather than by means of manifestos and statements about art, even though these are sometimes produced alongside it. It is this internal complexity that philosophy needs to address, and there is therefore a moment of truth in Adorno's observation that without interpretation artworks remain silent.

While the writings of artists are clearly important, they do not provide an infallible guide to understanding their work. Even if we set aside those cases – more common than one might think – in which the artist sets out deliberately to mislead or to provoke the reader, there remains a considerable gap between the artist's self-understanding and the kind of explanation that is provided by philosophy. This can be seen by considering the analogous case of moral action. If we want to understand why someone acted in a certain way, it makes sense to enquire into her motives and to consider what

may have led her to behave in the way she did. However, we do not thereby assume that because someone engages in moral deliberation, she is able to provide a fully developed theory of moral action or to give a rationally defensible explanation of the meaning of terms such as 'justice' and 'responsibility'. Philosophy asks questions that are both more general and more abstract than the ones we wrestle with in everyday life. Precisely because of its distance from concrete decision-making, it can investigate the implicit assumptions that sometimes guide our actions without our being aware of them. It also aims at a degree of clarity in the use of concepts and the presentation of arguments that would be otherwise be hard to sustain. Similarly, even though artistic activity involves a wide range of practical and theoretical decision-making, artists are not necessarily in a privileged position to address the distinctively philosophical issues that are raised by their work. The questions that philosophers ask touch upon but do not always coincide with the questions addressed by artists. One of the challenges in writing about painting is to remain sufficiently attentive to the specific goals that have motivated artists at different historical periods while at the same time addressing fundamental questions that pertain not just to this or that artist's work but to painting as such.

The real provocation behind Newman's remark lies in the suggestion that art has nothing to learn from philosophy. Most of us would, I think, be willing to agree that moral philosophy can help us to clarify our moral intuitions and that critical reflection on our most basic ethical commitments is an important and worthwhile activity, even if it does not necessarily make us better human beings. (Few moral philosophers would hold themselves up as paragons of moral virtue even though they spend much of their working lives thinking about the subject.) Similarly, we do not need to share Adorno's view that art is somehow incomplete without philosophy to recognize that philosophy has a valuable role to play in elucidating the nature and purpose of art. The idea that art is beholden to philosophy is itself, perhaps, based on the mistaken assumption that philosophy has a prescriptive rather than a merely explanatory role. Philosophy of art, in its modern guise at least, does not aim to provide a set of rules or instructions that can serve as a guide for artistic practice. Nor does it offer a set of principles for judgment that can enable us to evaluate the relative merits of different works of art. It is therefore to be distinguished from both art criticism and connoisseurship, though it may contribute to both. The distinction between a descriptive and a normative theory of art has not always proved easy to sustain. Nonetheless, it is important to distinguish between these two goals. Whereas a normative theory seeks to *justify* a particular type of artistic practice or a particular set of aesthetic preferences, a descriptive theory seeks to *explain* these

phenomena, either by showing how they come about or by analysing their constitutive elements.

A Preliminary Definition

If asked to give a typical example of a painting, most readers of this book would probably choose a work that falls under the category of easel painting: a work that is executed on a portable support such as wood, paper or canvas. Since it is not bound to a specific location, an easel painting can be framed and transported, as well as traded, bought and sold. This type of painting is mentioned by Pliny the Elder in his *Natural History*, which dates from the first century AD, but evidence of its existence goes back even further to the ancient Egyptians. From the thirteenth century onwards, easel painting gradually rose in importance and, in the West at least, it is what most of us now think of under the rubric of painting as an art. The rise to prominence of easel painting is closely connected to the emergence of the idea of aesthetic autonomy: the view that art is intrinsically valuable and that it is, or should be, free of any determinate social function. The very portability of an easel painting – its physical independence from the place at which it was made – allows it to be treated as a discrete object of attention. A painting that is made to be hung on a wall can be moved from room to room, or from building to building, without this changing the work itself. It therefore seems natural to us to assume that the internal relations between the various parts of a painting are more important than the external relations that connect it to a particular site. To see that this was not always the case, we need to remind ourselves that an altarpiece would have been painted for a particular church, that a portrait of a monarch or high court official would have been designed for display where it could convey a sense of the individual's power and prestige, and that prior to modern technology a mosaic or fresco would have been physically inseparable from the wall, floor or ceiling of the building of which it formed a part.[13]

The dominance of easel painting can lead us to overlook the plurality of functions that painting has traditionally fulfilled and to assume that the meanings we attribute to the practice of painting are timeless rather than socially and historically conditioned. Despite the unprecedented availability in museums and through reproduction of many thousands of years of art belonging to a wide diversity of cultures and traditions, painting remains elusive and enigmatic. Once we become aware of the variety of circumstances in which paintings have been produced and the range of purposes for which they have been made – ceremonial, religious, decorative, commemorative,

etc. – we are forced to question the assumption that a single concept can be used to accommodate such divergent practices. Some philosophers hold that any systematic study of the arts must rest on the firm foundations of definition and classification. Others have countered that the attempt to identify universal and necessary conditions for a practice such as art, which is not only socially and historically variable, but, by its very nature, subject to revision and transformation, is both fruitless and potentially misleading.[14] Without attempting to offer a strict definition of painting – an achievement that would potentially impede rather than further our enquiries – a provisional investigation into the meaning of the term and the range of objects that it can be taken to designate is helpful if we are to grasp what is distinctive to painting as an art.

One of the earliest myths about the origins of painting is related by Pliny the Elder in his *Natural History*.[15] There he tells how a 'Corinthian maid', despairing at the prospect of her lover's imminent departure, drew the outline of his face on a wall by tracing the shadow thrown from a lamp. Fanciful as this story may be, it already contains the basic elements needed for an account of painting: the purposive marking of a surface through direct bodily movement to create a visual image. Let us consider each of these elements in turn. I have described the making of marks as purposive to distinguish painting from naturally occurring shapes and patterns. It is possible for us to see the striations of a rock face or the stains left by water on a wall as resembling the outline of a face, but we would not normally be prepared to describe these fortuitous configurations as paintings. (I will discuss the reasons for this in Chapter 3.) Second, painting requires the modification of a surface through the making of marks. This part of the description helps to distinguish painting from other art forms such as music and architecture. As we shall see, however, there are many ways in which a surface can be marked or modified and for this reason I have deliberately kept the terms broad. Third, the observation that the marks are made through direct bodily movement provides a way of distinguishing the humanly constructed character of painting from merely mechanical or natural processes. One way of thinking about this is to note that Pliny locates the origin of painting not in the shadow cast by the lamp, but in the drawing of the shadow by the maid. If this is right, then, we need to rule out not only the temporary images created by optical devices such as the camera obscura, but also the more permanent record provided by photography, film and digital media. Finally, I have described the marks as resulting in a visual image to distinguish painting from writing, which can also be characterized as the purposive marking of a surface through direct bodily movement. This part of the description also serves to exclude non-artistic forms of painting, such as painting a wall or a

chair where the goal is to protect the object and perhaps to make it more beautiful, but not to create a pattern of marks that has a discernible meaning.

The fluid yet more or less viscous substance that we term paint is normally put on with a brush, but it can also be worked with a palette knife or, as in the case of the late Titian, applied directly with the fingers. Oil paint can be built up in thick layers so that it is encrusted on the surface. A striking example is provided by Rembrandt's *Man with a Golden Helmet* (c. 1650/5, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin) in which the gleaming surface of the soldier's headpiece is built up out of layers of pigment that stand proud of the rest of the canvas. At the other extreme, twentieth-century colour field painters such as Morris Louis used heavily thinned oil paint to soak into and stain unsized and unprimed duck-weave canvas, a technique that was first employed by Helen Frankenthaler in *Mountains and Sea* (1952, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.). This method of applying paint so that it is absorbed into and becomes one with the surface rather than sitting on top of it is also used in watercolour and in fresco, in which pigment is applied directly onto wet lime or gypsum plaster. Paint can also be sprayed, dripped or thrown, as in Jackson Pollock's all-over drip and splatter paintings, which required laying the canvas flat on the floor rather than propping it up on an easel. (For an example, see Plate 16: *Silver over Black, White, Yellow and Red*, 1948.) Different types of paint such as oil, enamel, acrylic and watercolour have different properties, as do different types of support such as paper, oak, copper and plaster. While most painting involves the use of variously coloured pigments, some techniques limit the palette to monochrome. Examples include grisaille, which is restricted to various shades of grey, and sepia, which employs the warm range of browns that can be derived from cuttlefish ink.

The account of painting that I have derived from Pliny's story of the Corinthian maid – the purposive marking of a surface through direct bodily movement to create a meaningful visual image – is too loose to serve as a strict philosophical definition. With sufficient determination it is possible to find examples of paintings that it fails to cover. Thus, for example, Damien Hirst's 'spin paintings' rely on the centrifugal force created by a revolving table to create randomly coloured circles. The deliberate cultivation of chance effects is intended to undermine the connection between the finished work and what I have termed the purposive marking of its surface. It is also possible to find examples of visual images that meet the requirements I have identified but which do not aspire to aesthetic interest. A good example would be the illustrations that accompany the instructions for flat-pack furniture. Nonetheless, this provisional attempt to identify the defining features of painting does provide a useful way of thinking about what distinguishes a painting from other objects and artefacts. It helps us to see that although the

term painting is frequently used in a restrictive sense to refer to works of art made using oil paint, acrylic, gouache, ink or some other semi-liquid medium, the specific substance through which the marks are made does not play a determining role. If this is right, then we may need to expand the scope of our enquiry to include a broader class of objects.

Support for this suggestion can be given by considering the example of mosaic, an ancient method of creating images and decorative designs that has been used for over five thousand years. A mosaic is constructed by embedding small, uniformly shaped pieces called tesserae into a mortar or cement base. Tesserae can be made from a wide range of natural and man-made materials, including stone, shells, terracotta and glass. Plate 2 shows a mosaic dating from the second century BC that was found in the Villa of Cicero at Pompeii, but which has been relocated to the National Archaeological Museum in Naples. Signed by Dioskourides of Samos, it is thought to show a scene from a Roman comedy play in which the stage is occupied by a group of masked street musicians. The work is sufficiently detailed that anyone who is interested in ancient theatre or music making can learn a great deal about Roman costumes and instruments. What lifts it into the realm of artistic rather than merely historical interest is the vivid impression of life and movement, and the way in which the masked figures are individualized through their actions and postures. These are not mere ciphers, but players and dancers, whose weighted bodies cast shadows on the stage and who interact with one another in a remarkably convincing and life-like representation of a vanished world. Part of our admiration for the work surely consists in the felt contrast between the laborious and time-consuming process of its construction and the freedom and liveliness of the resulting image. However, the fact that it has been made by cementing coloured pieces of stone rather than applying dabs of paint has little bearing on its status as a work of art. Despite the difference in the manner of its execution, this mosaic surely deserves consideration under the rubric of painting.

The English language lacks a suitable generic term that groups together all and only these art forms that meet the basic requirements that I have identified for painting. The term 'visual arts' is too broad, since it is normally taken to include sculpture, film and architecture. The same problem arises with the term 'graphic arts', which derives from the Greek word for writing (*graphē*) and embraces calligraphy and typography as well as painting and drawing. The term 'pictorial arts' suffers from the opposite problem insofar as it gives undue weight to picturing or figurative representation. I therefore propose to go against conventional linguistic usage by employing the term 'painting' to describe a wide range of different methods of making images and abstract designs, including not only drawing, etching, engraving,

lithography and other forms of printmaking, but also mosaic, intarsia (inlaid wood), embroidery, tapestry and collage. This is standard practice among philosophers who take the nature of pictorial representation to be central to the philosophy of painting, but it reopens the question, treated somewhat summarily at the start of this section, as to whether photography should be included in the present enquiry. There I suggested that since painting is a product of direct bodily movement, we could rule out photography, film, digital media, and other forms of image-making that depend upon mechanical or automated processes. However, the distinction between human agency and automation starts to break down when we consider the role played in photography by the artist's choice of the subject matter, viewpoint, exposure, and so forth, together with the possibilities for subsequent manipulation of the resulting image, whether this be a photographic plate in the darkroom, or a pixelated image uploaded onto a computer. Although photography depends upon causal processes in a way that painting does not, human decision-making and intervention also play a crucial role.[16]

I should therefore concede from the outset that the decision not to make photography central to the present enquiry is, in part, a matter of convenience. Photography, film and digital media raise several distinct philosophical questions that require independent consideration. Since painting predates the invention of photography by several millennia, many of the core issues concerning, say, the nature of pictorial representation or the relation between surface and subject, can be addressed without considering the impact of modern technologies of visual imaging. The richness and complexity of these questions provides ample material for the present study without extending the enquiry further. Nonetheless, the development of painting from the mid-nineteenth century onwards has partially been shaped by its relation to photography and to this extent photography does form part of the subject matter of this book.[17] It is arguable, for example, that photography's ability to fulfil many of the traditional functions of painting played a key role in the turn toward abstraction in the early twentieth century. I return to these issues in Chapter 6, which also examines how artists such as Gerhard Richter have responded to the success and ubiquity of the photographic image by incorporating elements of photography into the practice of painting. The concluding chapter addresses the prevalence of digital image-making and the pressures that are placed on contemporary painting by the seemingly limitless capacity for storing, manipulating and distributing visual information that is provided by new technologies of reproduction. However, the focus is on painting as it has come to terms with photography and digital media rather than on photography and digital media as independent forms of art.

Two Requirements

I would like to conclude these preliminary remarks by establishing two requirements on a theory of painting. These play an important role in what follows since many of the rival theories of painting that I discuss in this book, while helping to illuminate key features of painting as an art, fail to satisfy one or both. The first requirement, which bears on the relation between the marks that make up the surface of a painting and what those marks are taken to stand for or represent, is widely acknowledged among philosophers working in the analytic tradition. However, the second requirement, which bears on the historicality of painting, has received less attention and is potentially more controversial. I shall offer a brief account of these requirements here, but their full significance will emerge in the course of the book.

To view a painting as a work of art is to attend both to what can be seen in the painting – what it depicts or shows – and to the structure and organization of the painting itself. Whereas mimetic theories give primacy to a painting's representational content, formalist theories give primacy to its design or composition, treating features such as line, shape and colour as independently significant pictorial elements. In their strong versions, both theories fail to acknowledge that the marks on the surface of the canvas and what those marks are taken to represent stand in a relation of reciprocal tension and enhancement. The attentive viewer responds not only to the subject or content of the painting and to its painted surface but also to the way in which the one is sustained in and through the other. It is a requirement on a theory of painting that it acknowledge the complexity of this relation and that it be able to account for the interaction of both representational and configurational elements in a single, dynamic experience.

Painting is an historical practice, in which artists respond to the work of other artists, as well as to wider social and cultural developments. We cannot therefore examine a painting in isolation as if its full meaning were somehow distilled into its visible properties, which simply await sufficient scrutiny to disclose their significance. Our responses to art are tractable in relation to external knowledge and information. Without some attempt to identify the differences between the culture in which a painting was produced and the governing assumptions of our own, we run the risk of imposing our own prejudices and assumptions. However, the task of historical recuperation is potentially endless since it requires not only that we seek to make intelligible other cultures that are temporally and geographically remote from our own, but also that we try to reconstruct the complex motivations that may have guided the work of individual artists. To what extent is philosophy bound by

the results of historical scholarship? And how are we to understand the differences in approach that distinguish philosophy of art from art history? Such questions are easier to raise than to answer. Philosophy cannot hope to match the depth of historical knowledge that art history is able to provide, but it is enormously to its benefit to be able to draw on the information that specialist studies make available. The demand for historical understanding raises the spectre of relativism: the abandonment of a unified theory of painting in favour of a merely additive account of a plurality of different practices. Philosophers are understandably anxious to identify a coherent set of problems that are amenable to analysis and to avoid the fragmentation that results from the piecemeal study of individual cases. Nonetheless, questions concerning art's historical character cannot be treated as marginal or secondary to the philosophy of painting. The distinction between the philosophy of art and the philosophy of art history – a curiously cumbersome designation that equates reflection on art's changing character with reflection on the academic discipline that describes those changes – leads us into a *mise en abyme*, in which the conjunction of art and history is endlessly deferred.

The second requirement on a theory of painting, then, is that it sustain the connection between painting and historical knowledge. At a minimum, this means opening the field of investigation to include what Michael Podro terms the 'changing pressures and possibilities of pictorial imagining'.[18] This is vital, I would argue, not only for understanding the art of the past, but also for understanding the specific conditions under which painting is practised today. The strategy that I pursue in this book is to start out from debates that are internal to philosophy and then to show that these debates can be opened to broader social and historical considerations. The earlier chapters are primarily analytic in orientation insofar as they are concerned with the most basic features of pictorial representation. This is particularly important in steering a way through the highly involved debates on seeing-in and denotation, and it allows for a gradual increase in complexity as the book progresses. Over the course of the book, the account of painting is deepened and extended to include questions concerning the historical development of art and the role of historical explanation. Such questions are particularly germane to the period extending from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, which saw the emergence of an historically self-conscious avant-garde. However, they are also directly relevant to the period extending from the 1960s through to the present day, for the very status and value of painting as an art has been challenged by the emergence of new visual technologies and alternative forms of art practice. Some theorists have argued that contemporary art is separated from the past by a kind of break or caesura, brought about – or, more persuasively, brought to cognizance – by the

conceptual art movement of the 1960s, which rejected the idea that the artist is constrained to work within a specific medium such as painting or sculpture. This view is reinforced by an increasingly internationalized museum culture that privileges installation, video and performance over traditional forms of making. The final chapter of this book challenges some of the assumptions underpinning this account and offers a non-conservative defence of contemporary painting that acknowledges the pressures that arise from the changed cultural and historical circumstances under which artists work today. A philosophical investigation of contemporary painting therefore seems timely, and I hope that the arguments presented here can contribute to these wider debates.