

ART HISTORY

A critical introduction to its methods

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IMAGINE AN ART GALLERY. A guard sits in the corner yawning while the visitors stroll around stopping in front of the paintings. Some of them discuss the works of art, some look at them on their own in silence. What is this painting about, what does it *mean*? A bell rings and the guard begins to usher people from the room. Once the visitors have gone he turns out the light. What do the paintings mean now? Are the meanings the visitors discussed somehow still there? Or do the paintings have no meaning in the dark with no one looking?

This is a difficult question. Some have claimed that artworks do not have a meaning unless someone is looking at them; others have argued that the meaning of a painting is intrinsic. But whether the meaning of a work is independent of the viewer is in fact moot, because, even if it is, this meaning is not objectively accessible to us. We simply do not have any way of knowing this meaning if we are not there. All we know is what happens when we are in front of a work of art and this suggests another possibility. Perhaps an artwork has as many meanings as there are viewers. People bring all kinds of past experience to the act of looking and understanding and they interpret artworks differently. However, this does not mean that all interpretations are equally valid. Some are better than others.

Why is this? What makes one interpretation better than another? Some ways of interpreting are more comprehensive than others. They have fewer contradictions and account for more detailed observations – both in terms of the visual appearance of the work and the historical evidence relating to it. If you have a framework within which to view an artwork your interpretation will be more plausible and more persuasive. The more systematic thought you bring to a work of art the more you get out of it. This book is concerned with these frameworks for viewing works of art which are usually called ‘methods’. Every art historian relies on some method, although they do not always acknowledge it. They are committed to some underlying beliefs about art and its history which determine the meanings they find. In this book we offer an account of the most important methods that have been used in art history since the early nineteenth century. Our aim is to make explicit what commitments each one entails. The result is an account of how we go about things when we practise art

history and an invitation to think critically about what is sometimes taken for granted.

Before we go any further, a word about our terminology. Sometimes people use 'theory' and 'method' as interchangeable terms. However, in our view it is important to distinguish between the two. We use theory to mean a comprehensive explanation which deals with a set of phenomena. Method, on the other hand, is the particular way in which a theory is applied. Think of theory as a map and method as the way in which it is used to find one's way. Asking questions about art patronage or the art market is not a method, although it may be part of the way in which a method is practised. There is also a distinction between theoretical questions in art history and the philosophical discipline of aesthetics. While aesthetics is interested in the universal characteristics involved in the perception of beauty, art historians require theories that negotiate the relationship between the specific and the general. While aesthetics looks at the universal features of the perception of art, theoretical art history focuses on historically and culturally specific ways of seeing. Indeed, the assumption that art is fundamentally historical explains why theory is needed in art history. If we cannot appeal to universal conditions of seeing then how is it that the art produced at one place and time can be interpreted by a viewer in another? One purpose of theory in art history is to explain how a work can be understood by someone from a cultural standpoint outside its original context.

Each of the methods or frameworks discussed in this book provides a particular perspective on its chosen subject and entails certain commitments. Each gives an account of some things at the expense of others that lie outside its frame. The same thing applies to this book. We too are writing from a particular perspective which determines what we deal with and what we have left out. Others would do it differently and might quarrel with the methods we have chosen to discuss. Some people might think we have taken a rather narrow view of the discipline. It could be argued that we have ignored the most important development in art history in recent years, the rise of the study of 'visual culture'. The study of 'visual culture' can mean one of two things. On the one hand, the phrase is often used to describe the way that, in recent years, art historians have expanded the range of visual phenomena with which they deal; not just painting and sculpture, but television, computer games, hairstyles and so on. As it stands, this extension of art history's range does not raise any questions of method. The assumption is that the existing methods of art history are sufficiently powerful to be applied to this wider range of objects. But sometimes a stronger claim is made, namely that visual culture is a fundamentally new discipline with radically new methods. Perhaps that will prove to be true

in the future but as it stands, this claim is premature: what the methods of 'visual culture' might be has not yet been worked out.

We can imagine other objections to our selection of methods. For example, it might be said that we have opted for the most familiar names in art history and have ignored some of the most productive but less celebrated practitioners in the field. But the familiarity of the methods we have chosen is precisely why we discuss them. They have, in our experience, been the most widely influential and have done the most to shape the discipline of art history. Admittedly, we can think of a number of art historians and approaches we would like to have dealt with in more detail – we have no chapter on Ernst Gombrich, Michael Baxandall, or on deconstruction, for example – but clearly a book like this can never be exhaustive. Nevertheless, it is our hope and belief that what we have provided will be sufficient to allow the reader to develop a critical engagement with the discipline.

The main aim of the book is quite straightforward. We want to provide an introduction to these key approaches and to set them in context. We want to present these methods in relation to each other in order to explore how they are part of a continuous debate. This comparative approach will also help to make clearer the distinctiveness of each method. Extracts from the original texts that we discuss are now relatively easy to come by. In recent years many have appeared in a number of anthologies which we list in the annotated bibliography at the end of this introduction. Yet, valuable though these collections are, the fact that they consist of excerpts from much more extensive texts risks misunderstanding, particularly if the principles behind the author's work are not clearly grasped. There are also a number of books listed in the bibliography which deal with particular issues of theory and method. While these discussions offer very stimulating perspectives, one needs a certain breadth of knowledge of methods and its history in order to engage with them productively. Moreover, unless one is fluent in German (in which case there is more critical literature available), it is very difficult to get a sense of the continuing intellectual debates which spurred the development of different methods as responses to one another.

The book is organised chronologically. We begin with the very beginnings of art history as a discipline, which we find in the work of the German philosopher Hegel, and end with one of the most important contemporary developments – postcolonialism. It is a story which moves from mono-causal accounts of history – that is, explanations where historical change is referred back to a single, prime factor – to multi-causal accounts – explanations in which many factors interact. This is why the

book is divided into two parts and you will see that we identify an important shift somewhere in the 1960s.

However, some warnings should be given now. First, this is not a story of progress. We do not suggest that art-historical methods get steadily better and better. The story we tell is one of gains and losses. The turn away from mono-causal accounts limits our capacity to explain the development of art through time, although it leads to a more socially specific account of artworks. Second, one should not assume that the emergence of a new method makes previous approaches redundant. On the contrary, new approaches often depend on aspects of earlier ones. It is, for example, hard to imagine how many of the points made by feminists could have been presented without using the formalist technique of 'compare and contrast' – that is, the juxtaposition of two revealing objects next to each other. Similarly, every iconographical discussion of Renaissance art is greatly dependent on the achievements of connoisseurial attribution. Indeed, most art historians would not wish to align themselves with only one of the methods we outline here. They would rather rely on different methods for different purposes. This does not mean that one can simply mix methods at will in an arbitrary manner. Different methods are not necessarily compatible; as we shall see, the theoretical bases of feminism and formalism, or of iconography and connoisseurship are in many ways antithetical. Any historian has to decide what his or her fundamental commitments are. We return to this issue in our conclusion.

For now, we simply want to make the point that different methods can be, and are, combined by scholars, but that there are limits to how this can be done. A further point to note in advance is that the chronological organisation of this book is not rigid. For example, we treat psychoanalysis as a contemporary approach, the reason being that it has been widely used in art history only from the 1970s onwards. Yet its origins date back to the turn of the twentieth century. Finally, we should guard against the idea that the use of theory is somehow restricted to modern art history and that earlier art historians were naive or unreflective in their approach. In this book we set out to overturn this notion. In our view, the best art history has always been underpinned by sophisticated reflections regarding the determinants of art and its changing appearances. In this sense, theory has been a permanent feature of art history.

Each of the chapters in this book has more or less the same structure. With each approach we give a brief definition and a brief description of its historical context; followed by an explanatory account which introduces key terms and examines important examples of the method in practice. Each chapter ends with a critical evaluation of the method drawing out the

questions it has enabled us to ask, and how it has responded to perceived deficiencies in other approaches. We also ask to what extent the approach fulfils its aims and offer some criticisms, either that have been made by others, or our own. Before we begin our historical accounts we provide a simple overview of what follows – a trailer before the main feature, if you like. In this trailer a single work is analysed, albeit very briefly, from the point of view of the various approaches we explore later. The purpose is partly to give the reader some idea of what to expect, but, more importantly, to emphasise a fundamental idea: that the approach a historian adopts depends upon the interests that he or she brings to the work of art and the questions he or she wishes to ask of it. Such questions are circumscribed by one's methodology. Thus, no approach can ever provide a comprehensive account of a work of art.

Here is a brief summary of the subsequent chapters. Part One, which is concerned with mono-causal explanations, begins with **Hegel** (Chapter 3). The argument is that two new notions which became widespread at the end of the eighteenth century led to art being seen as intrinsically historical and so made possible the emergence of art history as a discipline. The focus of the chapter is Hegel's postulation of an 'Absolute Spirit' which underpins his account of the differences between the artworks produced in different societies while at the same time postulating a developmental logic between them. This is followed by **Connoisseurship** (Chapter 4). This term is often used to refer to people who take an unhistorical approach to art, who think of the appreciation of art as a discriminating kind of visual enjoyment. Our point is that the connoisseurs represented a serious reaction against Hegel's speculative approach to art and it was this that led them to emphasise rigorous empirical and archival research. Connoisseurs like Giuseppe Morelli and Bernard Berenson shared an exalted notion of individual creativity. Then comes **Formalism** (Chapter 5) and the work of Alois Riegl and Heinrich Wölfflin. Formalism too is often misunderstood and presented as an unhistorical exercise in description. On the contrary, we argue, Riegl and Wölfflin are of fundamental importance to the extent that they raise the question of the historicity of vision. Following this we move on to a discussion of **Iconography–iconology** (Chapter 6), and Erwin Panofsky's contribution to the discipline. Panofsky's attempt to show 'how under different historical circumstances particular themes or ideas are articulated' will be shown to be dependent on his commitment to neo-Kantian philosophy. The final chapter in Part One, on **Marxism and the social history of art** (Chapter 7), marks a turning point in the book, since it embraces the shift from the search for a single causal explanation for historical change to the more

multi-factorial recent approaches discussed in Part Two. Both the work of orthodox Marxist art historians in the earlier part of the twentieth century, like Frederick Antal and Arnold Hauser, and the attenuated models of historical agency applied by later practitioners like T. J. Clark will be examined. What we argue is that social art history as it is now widely practised has left behind some of the fundamental principles of classical Marxist theory.

In Part Two we examine more recent approaches. All of these give up the idea of a single explanation for the changes in art through history. We start with **Feminism** (Chapter 8). In our view, feminist art history brings together a number of different ideas. Not only does the subject of investigation for feminists vary – for instance, the work of women artists, or images of masculinity – but feminism is also methodologically diverse, since feminist art history often draws on Marxism and psychoanalysis, as well as other theoretical traditions. We then move on to **Psychoanalysis** (Chapter 9). This chapter highlights the difference between those psychoanalytical interpretations influenced by Freud, which tend to concentrate on the way unconscious desires are expressed in works of art, and those approaches which, following Lacan, discuss how such desires are culturally determined. **Semiotics** (Chapter 10), which follows, is an approach based on the analysis of language developed by Ferdinand Saussure and Charles Peirce, among others. In art history it has been used to try to grasp more clearly the different functions of pictorial elements and forms of representation. Finally, we look at **Postcolonialism** (Chapter 11). We emphasise that postcolonialism in art history does not simply mean examining the art of non-Western cultures, but is concerned with interpreting the dominant Western culture from the point of view of the outsider. A distinction is made between two positions; one, following Edward Said, which polarises Western and non-Western culture, the other arguing that all cultures are created by cross-cultural exchanges. Our **Conclusion** sums up the basic theses of the book, although we end up asking more questions than offering final judgements. We ask which approaches are compatible with which, and why problems arise in trying to synthesise some theoretical models with others.

Bibliography

Belting, Hans, *The End of the History of Art?*, trans. Christopher S. Wood (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). This book is not an introduction to methods, although Belting discusses art-historical scholarship from Vasari to the present. It is a polemic in favour of a non-historical approach to the understanding of art, one that is decidedly contemporary in its focus.

Cheetham, Mark A., Holly, Michael Ann and Moxey, Keith (eds), *The Subjects of Art History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). This collection of essays by contemporary cultural historians expands the themes and subjects of debate selected by Preziosi, although it does not provide a sense of their controversial relationship.

Edwards, Steve (ed.), *Art and Its Histories* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press in association with The Open University, 1999). This is only to a limited extent an introduction to approaches in art history. It is intended as a source book for six further volumes, each of which discusses the historical development of a subject under particular scrutiny in contemporary art history (the canon, the genius of the artist, gender, the avant-garde, postcolonialism, displays). As a consequence, the reader (which contains primary and secondary sources referred to in the series) only indirectly introduces the variety of methods employed in art historical discussions.

Fernie, Ernie (ed.), *Art History and Its Methods* (London: Phaidon, 1995). This was the first reader for art-historical methods to appear in English. It opens with a short introduction to the development of art history from antiquity to the present, followed by extracts from art historians whose significance is highlighted by brief commentaries. A glossary of critical terms concludes the book.

Hyde Minor, Vernon, *Art History's History* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994). This is the only textbook in English (in contrast to Germany, which has a long tradition of historical and critical reflections on the discipline) that gives an account of art history's method from Vasari to the present and is written by one author. It is, however, not particularly useful in its presentation of methods developed in the second half of the twentieth century.

Mansfield, Elizabeth (ed.), *Art History and Its Institutions: Foundations of a Discipline* (London: Routledge, 2002). This book contains a number of articles on the history of art history, often addressing seminal but forgotten issues. Like all the other edited books in this list, it does not provide a critical or comparative account of art history's methods.

Nelson, Robert S. and Schiff, Richard (eds), *Critical Terms for Art History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). The aim of this book is not to introduce approaches to art history chronologically, but to provide clarification and commentary by specialists on twenty-three terms used in contemporary art history.

Preziosi, Donald (ed.), *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). Rather than treating the authors and their texts in this collection as paradigmatic examples of particular approaches, Preziosi has organised his selection around particular debates and themes, which are introduced by him in a way that signals to the reader that the production of knowledge in art history is controversial and non-teleological.

Schneider Adams, Laurie, *The Methodologies of Art: An Introduction* (Boulder and Oxford: Westview, 1996). This book provides a useful although highly selective account of methods in art history. Nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century approaches are not the strengths of the book. Its merit lies in its accounts of semiotics and psychoanalysis.

Smith, Paul and Wilde, Carolyn (eds), *A Companion to Art Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).

This work provides a wide range of discussions by specialists on topics of importance in contemporary art history. It is not an introduction to art theories, nor does it provide a comparative account of them.

Williams, Robert, *Art Theory: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004). This book is not about art history's methods and theories, but introduces the theories used and developed by artists themselves.



Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger (O Version O)*, 1935, oil on canvas, 243.9 × 233.7 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest. (Digital Image©2003 The Museum of Modern Art/Scala, Florence, and Succession Picasso/DACS 2006)

LOOK AT EXHIBIT A (frontispiece). As art historians we feel we should be able to say something significant about this image: to find a meaning in it, to explain why it looks the way it does. Most of us would assume that it is our specialised art historical knowledge and training that allows us to do this, and this is certainly true. But it is worth reminding ourselves that much of our understanding of art depends on our more general experience. This experience in turn is a product of our particular historical and social situation: our culture, our status, our gender and so forth. In other words, we should remember, in practising art history, that we are historical subjects too. An obvious example of this is the very fact that we see Exhibit A as a work of art. This is by no means a self-evident description. We take Exhibit A to be an artwork because we are part of a world which accepts Western aesthetic values. Yet, although we are part of that world, or have experience of its cultural products, and, therefore, immediately comprehend that Exhibit A is an artwork, there is still no certainty that we shall understand the image. After all, what do we see here? Five apparently unfriendly naked women with weird features and stylised body parts inhabit a shallow, fragmented and distorted space. Some viewers might turn away from the image, dismissing it as childish and not worth attention. Others of us might want to look at it more closely in order to see if we can make it meaningful, and it is at this point that a little art-historical knowledge comes in handy.

As it happens, Exhibit A is one of the icons of modern art. Surely every art historian, as well as very many interested non-art historians, knows that it is a painting by Pablo Picasso and that it is called *Les Femmes d'Alger*. It was painted in 1935. Some may also know that it is to be found today in the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Let us pretend, however, that we do not know any of this. Assuming ignorance in this way is a reminder that, if we are to understand this work historically rather than passing an aesthetic judgement on it, our first move must be to identify and date it. Only when we have done this and put it in some kind of relationship to other works of art can we start to address what is particular to this image. So, the first thing that any art historian does is to give a picture a place in a historical sequence. We might do so by its formal characteristics or by its content, or, more likely, both. In this case, we might

compare Picasso's use of space, line and colour or his treatment of the female nude with that of other pictures. In order to come up with these comparisons we need to be familiar with a significant range of artists, yet the comparisons themselves need no more than close visual attention. Indeed, many art historians will perform this kind of operation seemingly instantaneously, given their mental archive of images and styles. So, let us make some comparisons.

There is, for example, a certain similarity to the all-over design of angular planes in paintings by El Greco, who worked in Spain in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Yet the narrative in our image bears little relation to the biblical and religious subjects that concern El Greco and formally the differences are greater than the similarities; the colours are less hallucinatory and the angularity more intense. The figures' character and composition have more in common with a Turkish bath scene painted in the mid-nineteenth century by the French artist Ingres, but while it is thematically similar it lacks Ingres' suggestive eroticism. This lack of sensuality and its formal approach brings the picture closer to the turn-of-the-twentieth-century French artist Paul Cézanne. So could it have been painted by him?

In Cézanne's pictures figures and background are fused for the first time since the so-called discovery of the perspectival illusion in Renaissance art. Cézanne does this in a way that indicates his knowledge of the illusionistic rendering of space (so we are never in doubt that his works belong to the history of art since the Renaissance invention) yet he does not use it as the structuring device for his pictures. Instead Cézanne's figures are woven into the picture plane like patterns in a tapestry. In our picture, however, the painter has gone even further than Cézanne in abandoning the sculptural modelling of his figures. They are represented by straight lines and overlapping planes in a way that makes them flat and weightless. The high keynotes of the colours in the picture are reminiscent of Cézanne's French contemporaries, for example Paul Gauguin, and of his successors, such as Henri Matisse. The image's background changes from the browns, pinks and terracottas that dominate its left-hand side via grey in the centre to blue with accents of green and orange at the right. The image, however, has nothing of the harmoniousness of colour and form achieved in pictures by Gauguin and Matisse. The fierceness of the figures and the spatial dislocations suggest quite the reverse.

There can be no doubt: the image was created at the turn of the twentieth century, and is related to the fashion for paintings of groups of naked figures that we see in the paintings of Cézanne, Matisse and Gauguin. It also shares their abandonment of the illusionistic rendering of nature in

favour of abstract figure and form. We now have an approximate date but no artist. One particularly striking feature of the image may allow us to get closer to finding a name. While the painting resembles a classical figure composition, there is nothing classical about its appearance. Many artists around 1900 used non-classical means to convey classical themes, such as showing human beings naked and in a state of nature, but this image is different. The right half of the picture differs markedly from the left. Not only are its colours cooler, the planes are smaller and are more jagged and dynamic in appearance. Most striking, however, is the difference in the depiction of the women. While the three figures on the left and centre are shown in monumental, classical-type poses and their faces are depicted in simplified archaic forms, the two on the right seem to be wearing masks. Their faces are simplified – one might say, distorted – into the most basic sign languages. Small ovals are used for their mouths; they have massive, flat-ridged noses with dramatic shading and their eyes are out of line. The daemonic character of the figures and the sign language of the masks has been seen as an echo of sub-Saharan masks while the women's faces on the left resemble archaic Iberian stone sculptures. This incorporation of forms to be found in artefacts from primeval and non-Western cultures points to Picasso. Other artists of the period were fascinated by these artefacts (which were starting to appear in museum collections following France's colonial conquests) but it was Picasso who, more than anybody else, tried to use their conventions in his pictures. The subject matter suggests Picasso, then. Does a formal analysis bear this out?

Formally, it is the radicalism with which natural forms, be they figures or spaces, are broken up into semi-abstract, shallow, shifting and tilting planes and this confirms the artist as Picasso. In 1909 Picasso and his friend Braque launched a modern style of painting that they called 'Cubism', and this painting clearly anticipated it. The figures and spaces are not yet disassembled, nor are the colours as monochrome as they would later become. The noses of the two women in the centre of the picture are drawn in profile although the faces themselves are frontal – a device which was to become a hallmark of Cubist depictions. Picasso began to develop this way of representing figures in 1906 and 1907. We have now come pretty close to making an attribution for the painting and giving it a date. Once they have got as far as they can in placing a painting by its style and subject matter, art historians use whatever documentary evidence they can find to identify artist and the date. Naturally, this tends to be more difficult the older the work of art is. From the nineteenth century, most works are signed and dated. Bills, letters and account books also help. In the case of the *Demoiselles* we have many accounts by visitors to Picasso's studio (for

example, the writer Gertrude Stein) that confirm the origin of the painting in Picasso's studio, and that he worked on the painting between 1906 and 1907.

What we have accomplished at this stage is the work of the connoisseur. We have an artist's name and a date for the picture. The connoisseurial process was empirical, involving close visual analysis and comparison; although it also revealed certain assumptions evident in the kind of judgement made, such as whether an image was harmonious or sensual or erotic. The most important assumption, however, was that there would be something particular to an artist and to his work, and this in turn presupposes a conception of art as specific to its time and place. But simply to register this is insufficient. Changes from one historical moment to another are not random, and so have to be explained systematically. The fullest articulation of such a system is to be found in Hegel's aesthetics which we introduce in Chapter 3.

For now let us return to Exhibit A. We have an identification, but does this mean we have uncovered a meaning in the work? The answer to this question will vary from person to person. Quite often those who engage in the connoisseurial task of identifying and attributing works of art take a biographical approach to their meaning. In the Western world we often hold the deeply ingrained belief that whatever the fruits of our labour, they will bear the traces of our unique individuality and this belief implies that the way to gain understanding of the meaning of a work of art is to relate it to an artist's personality and experience.

Many have tried to explain Picasso's *Demoiselles* in this way. It has often been described as an act of personal exorcism. Biographers have pointed to Picasso's anxiety about women at that time as the source of the painting's power. Picasso's original title was 'The Brothel of Avignon'. Thus Picasso practised his formal techniques not on representations of classical Venuses but on hardbitten prostitutes looking for clients. Biographers have pointed out that at the time the painting was done Picasso was afraid that he had contracted a venereal disease while visiting brothels in Barcelona's red-light district. The distortions of the faces of the women were a response, it has been argued, to the artist's anxiety and echoed the horrific facial disfigurements that people suffering from syphilis develop in its advanced stages. Other biographers have pointed to Picasso's strained relationship with his mistress, Fernande Olivier. 'How could he wrestle the whole tradition of European art to the ground with his mistress sitting lazily by, fussing over her toilette, spraying herself with Chypre, doing precious little housework (visitors were horrified by the mess), distracting Picasso with her maddening "little ways"?' asked Picasso's most thorough English biographer, John

Richardson. Richardson concludes from diaries, statements and letters, as well as from his own later personal acquaintance with Picasso, that Fernande was trying to get Picasso's attention by making him jealous: 'All the more cause for the misogyny that fuelled this *chef d'oeuvre*' (John Richardson, *A Life of Picasso*, vol. 2, London, Jonathan Cape, 1996, pp. 19–20).

For a formalist, like Alfred Barr, for example – who as director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York did more than anybody to make the painting into a twentieth-century icon – this kind of explanation would not do. For the formalist, an artist's personal experience is no more relevant to the significance of a work of art than the trees from which our simian ancestors descended are to the evolution of human beings. What matters to the formalist is where the picture is to be placed in the progressive development of art. The formalist focuses on its technical radicalism. For Barr, who put the *Demoiselles* on display in New York in 1939, the picture (together with Matisse's very different *Joie de Vivre* of 1906) marked 'the beginning of a new period in the history of art' (Alfred Barr, *Picasso: Fifty Years of his Art*, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1946, reprinted 1974, p. 56). According to Barr, the *Demoiselles* mattered because it was the start of a shift in interest from using painting for the imitation of natural appearances to realising the expressive potential of art's formal aspect.

If asked to agree with either the connoisseurial/biographical interpretation or the formalist one, you may feel that you would want to reply: neither. On the one hand, to say that the painting does no more than reflect Picasso's private experience with women seems rather banal. On the other hand, the formalist approach seems to tell us nothing of historical interest. Surely a work of art has a wider significance? What about the meaning of its subject matter? This is what art historians who take an iconographical approach are committed to. Although they do not doubt that the formal appearance of a work is significant, they argue that a change in style indicates a change in content. It is not so much that Picasso changes the form in which his subject – the nude female – is depicted, but that his conception of female nudity itself has changed and it is that which generates the technical radicalism of the painting, according to an iconographer. Look, for example, at the two figures at the centre of the picture with their arms raised. They are represented in the pose of a very old classical image of female beauty, the pose of Venus Anadyomene. If we were to trace the history of this image in texts and pictures it would bring us closer to the meaning that female nudity has in this picture, the iconographers believe. Again, it is a matter of establishing a background – in this case the theme of the Venus Anadyomene – in order to fix what is different and distinctive about its use in a particular case.

The image Venus Anadyomene is based on the myth of Venus's birth. In his anger for being thrown into the underworld, Uranus's son, Cronus, severed his father's genitals. The severed genitals were thrown into the sea, which caused the water to foam, and from that foam Venus emerged. Thus her birth is not from a mother's womb, but she emerges beautiful and fully formed. The depiction of Venus's birth became popular in nineteenth-century French painting as a symbol of ideal female beauty. But in the images by Ingres and others her horrific origins are forgotten and Uranus' mutilated body has disappeared. Venus appears as a universalised, unspecified, unblemished female figure emerging from sea foam, with her arms raised, ostensibly to wring water from her flowing hair but also displaying her perfect form all the better to the viewer. In Picasso's *Demoiselles* the two central figures are presented to the viewer by the woman on the left who draws a curtain back to reveal them. Francis Francina has argued that they call up the idea of the female body as the embodiment of beauty and pure desire. Yet no woman appears unblemished in this picture; far from it. All have more or less horrific bodily distortions (Francis Francina, 'Realism and Ideology', in C. Harrison, F. Francina, and G. Perry, *Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction: The Early Twentieth Century*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1993, pp. 112–33). Knowing the traditional meaning of the pose of Venus Anadyomene allows us to become aware of Picasso's deviation from the tradition. His violation of the traditional ideal of feminine beauty seemed like a violent assault to his contemporaries. In contrast to the formalist interpretation of the picture as a point of origin for modern art, this iconographic reading interprets it as an act of fierce, daemonic destruction. The meaning you ascribe to the picture depends on the direction from which you approach it and that, in turn, depends on your interests.

You may still feel unsatisfied with our interpretation. While an iconographical approach explores the way that changing style is symptomatic of a changing conception of the female nude, it may seem a rather disengaged or impersonal conclusion. What, after all, is the point of all this intense study if works of art have nothing to say to us personally? To ask how works of art can help us find answers to contemporary questions is a dominant theme in art history today and approaches which start from such a position are the concern of the second part of this book.

Marxist and social art historians led the way in rejecting the idea that art requires disinterested contemplation, or that history can be practised from a neutral, objective stance. This was simply impossible, they argued – all interpretations are made from a standpoint and informed by particular experiences and interests. Instead, their own engagement with art gave priority to their concern with social inequality and exploitation. In relation to Picasso's *Desmoiselles*, for example, such critics have drawn attention to

the role of prostitution in capitalist societies. The proliferation of prostitutes in the growing cities of the late nineteenth century were visible indicators of the way in which commodification and alienation were entering all areas of life, even the realm of love. The prostitutes in Picasso's image were also the focus for considerable social anxiety. Rather than being high-class courtesans of the kind represented as glamorous and tragic in Verdi's opera *La Traviata*, Picasso's *Demoiselles* are at the bottom of society: 'Picasso's subjects are humble brothel denizens, women who would have been on call, if not always on their feet, from noon until three o'clock in the morning, available to any passerby with a modicum of disposable income' (Anna C. Chave, 'New Encounters with *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*', in *Art Bulletin*, vol. 76, no. 4, December 1994, p. 601). A generation before Picasso, Edouard Manet had painted a courtesan, *Olympia*, but while she catered for bourgeois clients, *Les Demoiselles* plainly serve a poorer class. Social historians emphasise that part of what made the image so disturbing is its suggestion of social slippage: the prostitutes undermine the traditional boundaries between work and sex, and their appearance in Picasso's work also mixes their lower-class clientele with the bourgeois elite who constitute the public for such works of art.

Marxist and social art historians' interpretations see injustices of past and present societies inscribed in the artworks produced in those societies. Feminists have taken this further to explore these injustices as they relate to women. Anna Chave's discussion of Picasso's *Demoiselles* is a good example of how feminists bring together a number of different approaches in order to address this concern. Chave's starting point is the horrified reaction that the picture received from male spectators. In her view, 'prostitutes and femme fatales admittedly make less than perfect feminist heroines'. Although 'the demoiselles can never function successfully as models of empowerment, they have, nonetheless, already functioned effectively as lightning rods for fear of the empowerment of women and people of color' (Chave, 1994, p. 610). Chave argues that the social slippages implicit in the picture trigger anxiety in male viewers. She also uses an iconographic approach in order to mount her feminist argument. According to Chave, the Venus Anadyomene motif in the two central figures means that a buried subtext of the image is 'the story of a woman coming to power at the expense of a patriarch whose authority was unexpectedly and irretrievably revoked. From a masculinist vantage point, this is certainly a horror story, but from a feminist one it could be, to the contrary, a fable or even a good omen of vengeance won against male tyranny' (Chave, 1994, p. 604).

The theme of castration then provokes a psychoanalytic development. A central theme of psychoanalysis is male castration anxiety. According to Freud, the female body appears in men's fantasies as a castrated version of

their own. Thus the female body inspires anxiety, provoking the unconscious fear in the male viewer that he too could potentially be castrated. In order to assuage this fear the female body can be fetishised, that is made unblemished, ideal and separated from any particular woman or social situation. Yet in Picasso's image recognition of this fear coexists with the strategy of disavowal implicit in the image of Venus Anadyomene. While the monumental posture of Picasso's prostitutes makes them phallic in appearance, and thus disavowing castration anxiety, the picture's formal characteristics cancel this fetishistic effect. 'The type of space', Chave argues, 'that *Les Femmes d'Alger* inaugurated or, rather, prognosticated is a shallow space where voids seal over, becoming solid, while solids flatten and fragment' (Chave, 1994, p. 602). The faceting of forms is a reminder to the viewer of the cutting edge of the knife. It forbids the penetration of the depth of the canvas's space on pain of castration. The significance of Picasso's painting, read from this perspective, lies in the way that it registers male anxiety about female power.

Postcolonial theorists also develop their interpretations from a contemporary concern. In their case it is not primarily the inequality of classes, or sexes, but of nations and peoples, the legacy of European colonialism. Postcolonialism in art history is not simply about non-Western artefacts; nor is it the straightforward tracing of non-Western influences on Western artists, but it is the telling of history from the perspective of the margin rather than the centre. So a postcolonial account of the West's use of non-Western art would discuss it as part of the colonial enterprise, since it is about the appropriation of other cultures and their misinterpretation in Western discourses, aesthetic or anthropological. Postcolonialists might also use other approaches addressing their historical question, but for the most part they turn to social history in order to explore the function of images and artefacts from non-European cultures in European art.

Patricia Leighton, for example, is concerned to reconstruct the forgotten meaning of 'Africa' in turn-of-the-century France in relation to *Les Femmes d'Alger*. She argues that the Iberian faces of the central figures in the painting allude to Picasso's own self-image as a 'primitive' Spaniard coming from outside the French classical tradition. The African masks worn by the figures on the right, however, summon up 'an imagined ruthless barbarity that the male modernist makes it his mission to confront' (Patricia Leighton, 'Colonialism, L'Art Nègre, and *Les Femmes d'Alger*', in Christopher Green (ed.), *Picasso's Les Femmes d'Alger*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 93). According to Leighton, 'Picasso simultaneously condemns the colonial policies that brought such masks to Europe, yet embraces the very stereotypes that would see African culture as a

recuperative cure to degeneration "at home" rather than abroad' (Leighton, 2001, p. 96). This ambivalence is symptomatic, she claims, of Europeans' attitude towards non-European cultures. Picasso valued non-Western artefacts as a primitive source for the regeneration of European forms and exploited it for his own ends; he shared the colonial discourse and attitudes of his day.

So, in Marxist, feminist, psychoanalytic and postcolonial approaches the painting is viewed in relation to specific psychic or political interests. A semiotic account of our image would allow all of these interpretations discussed so far, however much they might seem to contradict one another. Its starting point is that images have no objective significance in themselves but acquire their meaning in the context of the sign systems within which they circulate. In other words, meaning is not simply there in the image waiting to be excavated, but is produced in the act of viewing. It is not the artist who creates the significance of his or her work, but those who look at it. This argument was advanced by Rosalind Krauss in her seminal essay 'In the name of Picasso'. Picasso's collages, she argued, provided the first systematic investigation in art of 'the indeterminacy of the referent, and on absence', and thus one of the works' pleasures was what she called 'hospitality to polysemy', to multiple readings (Rosalind Krauss, 'In the name of Picasso', in Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge MA, MIT Press, 1985, p. 39).

A strict semiotic reading, like Krauss', avoids interpreting art from a committed standpoint, such as a concern with class, or gender inequality. Instead it focuses on the conventional character of the individual elements that make up the image and the ways in which they acquire their meaning from the rules and conventions of representation. Christine Poggi has provided such a reading for *Les Femmes d'Alger*. Picasso's Cubism was impelled, she argues, by an urge to highlight 'the conventional rather than the imitative nature of representation' (Christine Poggi, *In Defiance of Painting*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1992, p. 45). *Les Femmes d'Alger* quotes from disparate sets of symbolic images, such as the Venus Anadyomene, African masks, Cézanne's bathers and Degas' squatting dancers without unifying them into a single, coherent new meaning. Like Krauss, Poggi concludes that what Picasso is seen to be doing is providing a meta-discourse on art's language and significance. This is art about art, an image that reveals the way in which meaning is derived not from references to the world, but from other representations and the possible readings these present to the viewer.

In different ways, all these contemporary approaches share certain convictions. First, they all believe that artworks do not develop in an

independent and neutral world of their own, but are determined by their contexts, whether that be political and social (as it is for Marxism and feminism) or linguistic (as it is for semiotics). Second, these different methods all begin from a personal perspective. There is no authoritative vantage point from which we can, like gods, survey history and find an immanent meaning. Our own interests will always play a part in our interpretations. This means that it is not only legitimate to interpret artworks in the light of contemporary concerns, but obligatory. As we have seen, many contemporary approaches to art history can be applied in conjunction with each other. Feminist, psychoanalytic or postcolonial enquiries are often combined with Marxist and social art history, for instance. However, they can also be associated with a radical semiotic approach. In that case, the link to social art history is attenuated and the focus turns to the relationship between the image and the contemporary viewer. Most of today's art historians acknowledge that connoisseurial, biographical, Hegelian, formalist, iconographic and orthodox Marxist approaches have useful, often indispensable, contributions to make. Yet they refuse to accept that any of these analyses are fully adequate and they dispute some of their most basic assumptions about art and its history. This comes, as we argue in Chapter 7, at a price. The gain, however, is that there is no closure to the range of interpretations that can be brought to Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* (O. J. 114) — or, indeed, to whatever other images art historians turn their attention to. The one requirement, we hasten to add, is that there should be committed viewers with some sense of what constitutes a rigorous enquiry similar to, if not the same as, those encountered in the following chapters.