

A History of Art Criticism

It is conventional to explain the origins of criticism as following the establishment of regular art exhibitions by the Académie in the Louvre in 1737. . . . Yet the various ingredients that came together to form Salon criticism pre-existed the instigation of annual exhibitions.

—RICHARD WRIGLEY, IN *THE ORIGINS OF FRENCH ART CRITICISM*, 1993

In his immortal Salons, Diderot . . . founded the criticism of painting.

—THÉOPHILE GAUTIER, 1854¹

THE BIRTH OF A GENRE

Defined broadly, art criticism clearly has a lengthy history. Men and women have been talking and writing about buildings, sculptures, and paintings with discernment—and so practicing art criticism, in one sense of the word—for thousands of years. As early as the first century BCE, for instance, the ancient Greek geographer Strabo pondered the effect of an ancient temple of Artemis that, “insofar as the size of the temple and the number of votives is concerned, falls short of the one in Ephesus; but, in its well-designed appearance and in the artistry visible in the fitting out of its sacred enclosure, is much superior.”² And in the fifth century CE, a Byzantine scholar named Procopius recorded his reaction to the vast dome of Constantinople’s Hagia Sofia. “From the lightness of the building,” he argued, “it does not appear to rest upon a solid foundation, but to cover the place beneath as though it were suspended from heaven by the fabled golden chain.”³

¹Quoted in Snell, *Théophile Gautier*, 206.

²Pollitt, *The Ancient View of Greek Art*, 171.

³Quoted in Lethaby and Swainson, *The Church of Sancta Sophia Constantinople*, 26.

Such writings point to the long-standing existence of intelligent discussions regarding art, and they also imply that one could construct an interesting history of art criticism that incorporates ancient and medieval examples. Or, we should add, examples from a range of cultures: at about the time that Procopius recorded his reaction to the Hagia Sofia, the Chinese writer Hsieh Ho (sometimes spelled Xie He) developed a list of six traditional principles to consider when judging a painting; these principles, which included “spirit resonance,” or the vitality embodied in the image, soon became widely influential.⁴ So, the history of art criticism can be told in various ways, depending on the criteria we employ. Importantly, though, none of the writers mentioned would have described his work as art criticism—the term only emerges as a specific and self-conscious category of writing in the early eighteenth century. Taking that moment, then, as its point of departure, this chapter offers a largely linear history of the ways in which art criticism evolved as a discrete genre. Of course, it’s worth remembering that there has never been complete consensus regarding the nature or the aims of art criticism, and that the critics we’ll meet in this chapter felt very differently about the purposes of art and of art criticism. Nevertheless, even the most diametrically opposed positions often share meaningful linkages, and this chapter describes some of the innovations, reactions, and webs of influence that have contributed to the development of criticism as a genre.

The earliest use of the term *art criticism* is often associated with the English painter and writer **Jonathan Richardson the Elder**. Between 1715 and 1719, Richardson authored several books, including *An Essay on the Theory of Painting* and *An Essay on the Whole Art of Criticism*. In the latter book, he set out seven categories that he felt were integral to the success of a painting (these included invention, composition, drawing, and coloring); by assigning a score of between 0 and 18 in each category, he claimed to be able to assess the rough worth of any picture (Figure 2). At the same time, he also claimed that such a system could, in theory, be employed by any earnest observer. “One Man may be,” wrote Richardson, “as Good a Judge as Another if he applies himself to it.” Due in part to this inclusive spirit, Richardson’s writings appealed to an English middle class that was beginning to collect pictures and to practice the art of connoisseurship, as it gave them a set of terms with which to discuss art. And his use of the term *criticism*, in turn, gave such an activity a name, which soon began to appear in the titles of other works, as well: in 1719, for example, the French politician and historian Jean-Baptiste Dubos published *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture* (*Critical Reflections on Poetry and Painting*). Art criticism was beginning to coalesce as a distinct discipline.

For the most part, however, Richardson concentrated on paintings that were already decades, or even centuries, old; his criticism rarely involved discussions of contemporary art. In that sense, the development of regular, public exhibitions of contemporary art in Paris and London in the mid-1700s (see sidebar on page 26) was a meaningful phenomenon. The Salons and Summer Exhibitions stoked public interest in contemporary art and prompted

⁴Sirén, *The Chinese on the Art of Painting*, 18–21.

<i>Countess Dowager of Exeter.</i>		
V. DYCK.		
OCTOBER the 16th, 1717.		
FACE.		
<i>Composition</i>	10	18
<i>Colouring</i>	17	18
<i>Handling</i>	17	18
<i>Drawing</i>	10	17
<i>Invention</i>	18	18
<i>Expression</i>	18	18
<i>Grace and Greatness</i>	18	18
<i>Advantage</i>	18	<i>Pleasure</i>
	<i>Sublime.</i>	16

Figure 2 Jonathan Richardson's scorecard for evaluating Anthony Van Dyck's *Countess Dowager of Exeter*, from his *Essay on the Art of Criticism*.

Source: The Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

writers to think, in print, about what they had seen. Although each Salon was accompanied by an official *livret*, or catalog, which was sold inside the exhibition and included a brief entry on every work, writers unassociated with the Academy soon began to publish independent responses that were often issued in pamphlets sold outside the exhibitions, or in newspapers and magazines. Such responses both catered to and fostered public interest in the Salons and constituted an important step in the evolution of criticism.

Early Voices in Art Criticism

An anonymous text of 1741 is often advanced as the earliest surviving sustained commentary on the *Salon*. Written in the form of a letter, it began with a long—and withering—commentary on the aristocrats who attended the Salon, casting them as members of a ridiculous old guard that was now eclipsed by a more savvy general public. It then moved into a discussion of individual paintings, in the order in which they were displayed at the Salon. Repeatedly, the author recorded the subject matter of the works, and sometimes offered comments on the relative realism with which they were

The Rise of Public Exhibitions in France and England

Until the mid-1700s, the majority of people in Paris and London never had a chance to view most of the paintings and sculptures produced by their country's leading artists. They might happen to see an altarpiece newly installed in a church, but since there were few public art galleries or regular exhibitions, and since auctions of works of art were usually open only to members of the upper classes, the ordinary citizen rarely experienced contemporary art directly. Unable to count, consequently, on any established public interest, journalists in the early 1700s rarely wrote at length about particular artists or works of art.

Beginning in 1737, however, this situation changed dramatically, due to the development of regular public exhibitions by the Royal Academy of painters and sculptors—the most important organization of artists in France. Founded in 1648, the Academy had long held occasional shows of work by its members. But in 1737 it began—perhaps in an attempt to spur artists to produce stronger work, or to advertise the accomplishments of France under the king—to plan an annual exhibition. Known as **Salons** (after the *Salon Carré*, a room in the Louvre palace in which it was first held), these exhibitions featured work by dozens (and, eventually, hundreds) of artists associated with the Academy, and ran for up to two months. And, from 1737 on, they were open and free of charge to all members of the public.

The inclusion of the public at large prompted some unhappiness among members of the cultural elite. A few observers complained of overcrowding, and contrasted the smell of commoners with the sophisticated scents that emanated from the wealthy. There were reports, too, of pickpocketing. Among the most nervous observers, however, were the artists, who wondered if their work could be seen with understanding by those with no formal training in the visual arts. Regardless, the response of the public was clearly enthusiastic. Salon attendance generally rose, over the course of the 1700s, and so did the number of artists who participated in the Salon; if artists sometimes objected to the sharp assessments of critics, they clearly valued the exposure that inclusion in the Salon could bring.

Perhaps inspired by the success of the French Salons, British artists soon followed suit. In 1760, a group known as the Society of Arts organized a free, public exhibition of a number of recent works by English painters. The show inspired considerable interest, and prompted, in *Imperial Magazine*, a glowing evaluation of Joshua Reynolds's contributions. A year later, several artists joined to form the Spring Gardens gallery, which also showed contemporary work; beginning in 1769, the recently formed British Royal Academy hosted a very popular Summer Exhibition that was open to the public at large, and that is still held annually.

Over the course of roughly three decades, then, French and English artists began to enjoy a much broader public than they had previously known. And art critics, in turn, began to compose for—or even to write on behalf of—this enlarged public, shaping an unprecedented relationship between artists and society.

Painted, as in this passage on the painter Jean-Baptiste Oudry's *Bizarre Antlers of a Stag Taken by the King on Last July Fifth*:

I believe that there has never been anything better in the genre. You could take the *Horns of the Stag* in your hand. They seem to stand against

Planks which are so deceiving that one can scarcely keep from believing that the artist did not work directly on these very boards, and though we know we are in a Salon of painting, we must apply our powers of reasoning to convince ourselves that this is only a work of art.⁵

Admittedly, as such pamphlets were often issued in small runs, and were rarely collected or archived, it is entirely possible that even earlier examples may have been published and subsequently lost. Nevertheless, it seems fair to argue, as the art historian Thomas Crow did in a 1985 book, that the pamphlet of 1741 “stands near the beginning of a persistent and consistently appealing strain of Salon commentary.” Sparked at least in part by the newly public Salons, such publications offered a tangible reaction to, and record of, the interest that such shows inspired.

If the earliest art criticism was a response to the newly public displays of art, however, it can also be seen as the product of other large forces and ideas. For example, the existence of a venerable journalistic culture and a lively publishing industry clearly benefited the earliest critics, who often took advantage of extant outlets in distributing their own writing. By the early 1700s Paris already boasted several weekly publications, including the venerable *La Gazette*, first printed in 1631; London, meanwhile, was the home of a range of publications that included the *Tatler*, a literary and social journal founded in 1701, and the *Daily Courant*, first published in 1702. Furthermore, the two cities were prime locations for pamphleteering, in which authors hired printers to produce limited runs of original texts that were then commonly sold on the street. As a result, the earliest French and English art critics could rely on a range of relatively established publication options—and, by extension, an established reading public—in composing and distributing their work.

The existence of an increasingly specialized artistic vocabulary also seems to have facilitated the work of early critics. Historians have observed that the foundation of the French and British Royal Academies (in 1648 and 1768, respectively) soon resulted in the creation of new words and phrases that were bandied about the royal studios. Writers in Paris and London could thus draw, in turn, on these nuanced terminologies. And so a reader who picked up a copy of London’s *Morning Post* in the 1780s might have come across a discussion of a painting that employed, for example, the terms *pictorish* and *pingible*. Such terms may now sound dated and obscure, but they offered early critics a specific means of speaking about art, while also suggesting that such critics were familiar with both current studio practice and theory.

Finally, early art criticism can also be seen as the product of a shifting political landscape. Interest in painting and sculpture in Europe had long been associated with the upper classes, and particularly with the king. With the evolution of truly public exhibitions, however, common people were also

⁵Quoted in Crow, *Painters and Public Life*, 97.

afforded a close look at recent work, and written criticism often positioned itself as an expression of the populace at large. Thus, though the earliest written responses to the Salons and Summer Exhibitions were often emphatically individualistic, they nevertheless gained a certain degree of legitimacy by claiming to represent, on some level, public opinion. Consequently, some historians see early art criticism as typical of a broader Enlightenment motion toward democracy, and it has even been cast as an outcome of a struggle against the absolute states that had long dominated European politics.⁶

The earliest written responses to the Salons were not, however, untouched by tradition or by external pressure. Indeed, although examples of criticism from the early 1740s varied widely in format and voice, they tended to involve consistent praise for the works that they discussed. This deference was likely due, in many cases, to a respect for (or fear of) the king, whose name was associated with the Salon through his sponsorship of the Royal Academy. But it was also a result of the active efforts of the Academy, which tried to limit negative assessments of its members' work. Given that every publication produced in Paris technically required royal consent, the threat of censorship was real, and the earliest art critics seem to have avoided open condemnation of works.

The generally positive tone of the era's criticism, however, was altered in 1747, when a politically liberal writer named **La Font de Saint-Etienne** wrote an essay entitled *Réflexions sur quelques causes de l'état présent de la peinture en France* (*Reflections on Some Causes of the Present State of Painting in France*).⁷ Rooted in a discussion of the Salon of 1746, the text included a number of positive assessments of individual works but also offered a frank dismissal of pictures by the painter François Boucher. Opposed to imagery based on carefree, playful subjects (and thus dismayed by the frivolous, lighthearted Rococo imagery common at the time), La Font advocated a clear and dignified style of painting that could offer patriotic models of resistance to what he saw as a despotic culture. Moreover, he insisted that the most valuable, or most objective, reactions to paintings came not from painters but rather from the public at large: "It is only in the mouths of those firm and equitable men who comprise the Public, who have no links whatever with the artists . . . that we can find the language of truth."

La Font's open attack on active painters—and, indirectly, on the government of royal France—was both unprecedented and inflammatory, and it provoked an energetic response. Supporters of the Academy reacted in a range of ways. Some wrote pamphlets to refute La Font's specific charges or to portray him as feeble-minded; prints caricatured him as a blind man (Figure 3). But in

⁶Certainly, the point could be debated: in some cases, one could also claim that the existence of a seemingly independent criticism created the illusion of free speech in political systems that were in fact far from liberal. But it does seem that as early as the 1740s, art critics were positioning themselves as members of the general public, and that this strain of egalitarianism contributed, along with the growth of the journalism industry, to the development of criticism as a professional genre.

⁷For translated excerpts of the text, see Harrison and Wood, *Art in Theory, 1648–1815*, 554–561.



Figure 3 Claude-Henri Watelet, *La Font de Saint-Yenne*, c. 1753.

Source: Bibliothèque nationale de France.

certain circles such responses only heightened the force of La Font's arguments, and soon the Academy felt that even more drastic measures were called for. It thus canceled the Salon of 1749, in order to preclude further criticism. Ironically, though, that gesture merely confirmed the growing cultural legitimacy of the early art critic. As La Font had argued, the public was now assuming an increasingly active role in shaping the terms with which art was discussed.

The Salon was reinstated in the 1750s, although many exhibiting artists did worry that further pieces of criticism might damage their reputations or lead to lost sales. Indeed, it may have been in the hopes of allowing painters more time to produce especially strong work that the Academy decided to move to a biennial, instead of an annual, format beginning in 1751. Such a move, though, did not silence the critics. A loose circle of writers that included La Font extended, in a series of pamphlets issued in the early 1750s, his criticism of the Rococo style, and continued to clamor for a more serious classicism. Moreover, in making such an argument, they often suggested that their call for reform was not simply due to their own taste but was rather the will of the public or nation as a whole. By extension, then, Parisian critics in the early 1750s perpetuated the notion that they were

acting as spokesmen for the masses, and that anyone who opposed their view was acting in a despotic, or undemocratic, manner.

Diderot and the Specter of Censorship

Such allegations were provocative, and soon the king intervened, ordering all unregulated writing regarding the Salon suppressed. This policy of censorship lasted through the 1760s and seems to have been effective: very little in the way of independent, overtly political criticism survives from that era. Instead, the pamphlets that were permitted typically voiced only praise for the colorful and pictorial Rococo efforts of the Academy. As a result, those critics who desired a greater freedom of voice sometimes turned to clandestine presses, and often wrote anonymously, in order to protect themselves from serious punishment. Or, in at least one famous case, they wrote for an international, rather than a Parisian, audience. When Denis Diderot—who was already celebrated for his work as the editor of the *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* (*Encyclopedia, or a Systematic Dictionary of the Sciences, Arts, and Crafts*), published between 1751 and 1772—began to write Salon reviews in 1759, he sent them to *Correspondance littéraire*, a publication that was banned in Paris, but was mailed twice a month to a secret international readership. Unpressured by the Academy or the king's censors, Diderot could speak relatively openly and at great length: his 1765 review is roughly 180 pages in length, or equal to all of the criticism written, by all authors, about any Salon held in the 1750s!

Partly as a result of his limited readership (only a few dozen individuals), Diderot's *Salons* were not widely known in 1760s France. In time, though, they came to interest nineteenth-century critics, and Diderot is now widely seen as one of the earliest, and most important, of all art critics. In writing on the Salons between 1759 and 1781, he discussed a huge number of paintings and sculptures, offering an entertaining mixture of praise, complaints, and witty observations. In the process, he also forged a new sort of writing, as he studied the interplay between his own ideas and closely observed objects of art, attempting to explain exactly why certain works struck him as important or powerful. Frequently, he emphasized the compositions of, and the ideas behind, works of art; his criticisms repeatedly centered on perceived violations of common sense or narrative plausibility. Rather like La Font, he had little patience for paintings that lacked a moral purpose, and he supported art that was serious in theme, realistic in approach, and relatively austere in form.

In this light, it is worth pointing out that Diderot was writing at a time when French painting was generally turning—partly, perhaps, in response to the earlier urgings of La Font—from the frothy Rococo style to a more sober Neoclassical idiom. Interestingly, Diderot occasionally voiced frustration, in his later *Salons*, that his criticism had little direct effect on the sorts of paintings produced by the Academy. Nonetheless, his critical writings supply a lively combination of reactions, prescriptions, and advice and are widely seen as pioneering works in the medium. As the critic Lawrence Alloway wrote in 1984, “To a certain extent the genre [of art criticism] remains what

it was when Denis Diderot invented it, the record of spontaneous response and fast judgment to the presence of new work.”

English Art Criticism in the Later 1700s

Even as Diderot in Paris wrote for the secretive *Correspondence littéraire* in the 1760s, art criticism in Britain was becoming more visible and more ambitious. An exhibition held by the Society of Arts in 1762 prompted a reply in the form of an anonymously written pamphlet, and over the next few years journals such as the *Public Advertiser* began to run occasional comments on the arts. The year 1766, however, represented something of a milestone, as a show sponsored by the Incorporated Society at Spring Gardens inspired a range of responses. At least two pamphlets—one in verse—were distributed in response to the show, the *Public Advertiser* ran a piece criticizing those pamphlets, and a writer in the *London Chronicle* praised John Singleton Copley’s *A Boy with a Flying Squirrel* (“Very clever. I am told this is the performance of a young artist, if so, with proper application there is no doubt of his making a good painter. The shadow of the flesh is rather too dark”).⁸ These very early examples of English art criticism soon became part of a rising tide, as the foundation of the Royal Academy in 1768 heightened public interest in contemporary art and the critical response.

As in France, however, early English critics were fully aware of the risks of open condemnation of art, and they commonly resorted to anonymity or pseudonyms. Technically, total anonymity was illegal, precisely because it could result in libelous attacks (such as one centered on Joshua Reynolds, in 1777). Yet few writers wanted to be openly linked to potentially incendiary remarks. As a result, critics sometimes initialed their pieces, as a sort of compromise. Or they selected cryptic second names that sometimes implied an attitude—the notice in the *Public Examiner*, mentioned above, was signed by a “Smirk”—or that pointed, in a sort of smoke screen, to established authors. Nevertheless, the true identity of the critic did often become known, and historians can speak with confidence of the writers who stood behind pieces published under names such as Peter Pindar, Candid, and Pasquin. In rare cases, though, such pseudonyms did successfully shield writers; writings signed by a Fresnoy, for instance, were only assigned to the Reverend James Willis more than a century after his death.

What was a pastor doing, writing art criticism? For most early critics, in both France and England, criticism was only a part-time engagement. Apparently, many of these writers were, like Diderot, middle-aged men; a few, however, were in their twenties, and may have seen authoring pamphlets as a possible means to a literary career, or an entry into urbane society. Some, despite professional prohibitions against artists writing criticism (given their biases, and the temptation to settle scores), were active painters. And, in at least a few cases, the authors of early notices practiced puffery, in which they accepted small payments in exchange for a positive review. Instead of

⁸Whitley, *Artists and Their Friends*, vol. 1, 214; on Smirk, below, see 213.

being an open conversation among professionals, then, early art criticism in France and England was more of a sporadic iteration of views by a range of interested individuals who only sometimes made their identities public.

By the 1770s, though, art criticism was undoubtedly becoming an established field. Several London newspapers, including the *Morning Chronicle*, had begun to review exhibitions in a systematic manner. And in France, the relaxation of the strict censorship codes that had dominated the 1760s led to a flowering of public commentary on the Salons. Admittedly, the Academy still tried to influence public discourse, and some painters and at least a few commentators continued to complain that criticism represented an affront to polite society, or a threat to the social order. Increasingly, however, independent critics enjoyed a general legitimacy, and their writings often appeared in newspapers such as the *Journal des Débats* and the *Mercure de France*, which had a respectable press run of 7,000 in 1778. Independent pamphlets were now sold with regularity in bookstores and were sometimes even hawked on the steps outside the Salon. Thus, although there were still no journals dedicated solely to art criticism, critics in both London and Paris were able to boast, with some accuracy, that they were read by—and, by extension, represented—a relatively large audience that preferred their accounts to the tame prose proffered by the Academy.

Politics with a Vengeance

French art criticism of the 1780s still represents a sort of momentary crescendo. With criticism now established as a feature of the French literary landscape and royal power on the wane—the monarchy would be toppled in the Revolution of 1789—critics felt empowered to write frankly, and frequently, about the state of the arts. They did so, moreover, in a variety of ways, and the 1780s saw a remarkable diversity of tones and formats. From refined observations that emanated from the circle of Voltaire to a hodgepodge of satirical songs, elaborate dramas, and imagined monologues (occasionally written in the voice of a dead man, or a blind observer, as a means of mocking the implied superiority of so-called experts), Parisian critics stretched the boundaries of their genre in attempting to create forms that echoed the multiplicity of attitudes toward art.

While the Salon was still a central topic, it inspired increasingly radical evaluations, or criticisms. An anonymous 1782 tract entitled *Sur la peinture* (*On Painting*), for instance, attacked the Academy and Parisian elites for supposedly having corrupted artists. Antoine Joseph Gorsas, a future revolutionary leader, authored a range of explicitly political writings on art in the 1780s; and a series of anonymous pamphlets, widely believed to have been written by the playwright Louis de Carmontelle, offered thoughtful analyses of the proper role of art in society. It is probably too simple to suggest that critics in the 1780s felt completely free from external pressures; in at least a few cases, Parisian writers left a blank where a corrosive comment was implied, suggesting that they were aware of the possibility of censorship (even as they were also preempting the pen of the censor). But surviving evidence

suggests that the 1780s saw production of a greater volume of French art criticism than any other decade in the 1700s. And the content of this discourse reflected the excited political discussions that reached a peak in 1789.

The Revolution brought dramatic changes to the artistic landscape. Since the Republic was opposed to any vestige of royal privilege, the Salon was thrown open, in 1791, to all French artists. Two years later, the Academy was abolished. These steps arguably weakened the Salon, as they involved the dissolution of entrance standards that had long been enforced by the Academy, but they also fostered a period of considerable artistic innovation. Critics, in the meantime, enjoyed a period of relative press freedom. And the public continued to devour writings on art—a fact that led to the foundation, in 1799, of the *Journal des arts*, a publication devoted to the consideration of the visual arts, music, theater, and literature.

With the rise of Napoleon in 1799, however, this period of liberalization quickly ended. The Consulate—the acting government from late 1799 until the declaration of Napoleon's empire in 1804—soon moved to limit the freedom of the press, excepting only scientific and cultural journals from strict censorship. Openly political newspapers and journals were thus forced to tread carefully. Interestingly, though, since writings that dealt primarily with cultural topics enjoyed less strict standards of censorship, art criticism often became the site of veiled political commentaries. Or, in the words of the historian Richard Wrigley, “cultural criticism served as an outlet for coded references to proscribed subjects.” These references frequently appeared in the *feuilleton*, a newspaper supplement or a section in the lower half of the page, usually printed in smaller-font text and often consisting of gossip and literary and artistic commentaries. And, although they used a cautious language, such political references are usually assumed to have been clear to politically savvy readers. The critic Julien Louis Geoffroy, for instance, nominally claimed to be concerned with purely artistic issues but was understood to be advancing a pro-Napoleonic agenda.

The increasing complexity of French art criticism seems to have paralleled—and may have kindled—a continued surge in French public interest in the arts during the reign of Napoleon. Wrigley has observed that “by the early nineteenth century, the Salon had, on one level, become a ritual performance, displaying pictures that . . . everyone wanted to talk about.” New journals were founded in order to accommodate this public excitement; among them was the *Annales de Musée*, the first fully illustrated art periodical in France—it employed engravings—which debuted in 1801. And, too, the regularization of the *feuilleton* as a feature of several newspapers allowed critics to develop specific voices and aesthetic positions.

In turn, the fall of Napoleon in 1814 and the formation of the Bourbon Restoration brought further changes in the field. Napoleonic strictures on the press were eased, and journals proliferated. Less afraid of the prospect of retaliation, and increasingly interested in cultivating public personalities, critics now commonly signed their work. At times, too, they found their work featured in the main sections of Parisian papers; the rising legitimacy of the visual arts as a topic led to some disagreement, apparently, about

whether criticism was mere cultural diversion (in which case it should remain relegated to the *feuilleton*) or legitimate news. Regardless, art criticism had earned a semiofficial space in the complex landscape of French culture.

Romanticism versus Neoclassicism

Notably, the dissolution of Napoleon's empire, with its vast military and diplomatic corps, meant that numerous suddenly unemployed civil servants were seeking an income. Many of them turned to writing, and some of them to writing art criticism, contributing to a profusion of styles, voices, and formats in French criticism of the 1820s. Accounts of Salons from the period sometimes included, for instance, recounted dreams or complex conceits involving narrators who had fallen asleep for years, only to wake to a purportedly new style. Among those new critics was Marie-Henri Beyle, a former civil servant who assumed the pen name Stendhal, settled in Italy, and composed several successful novels and a number of works of art criticism. In essays on the Salons and on Italian art, Stendhal opposed what he saw as the aloof, irrelevant Neoclassicism that had dominated French painting since the days of Diderot and that was most closely associated with the painter Jacques-Louis David, and argued instead that art should be appropriate to its age. Stendhal was not always clear about what, exactly, that meant, but he consistently applauded work that struck him as individual and psychologically intense.

In this sense, Stendhal was typical of the emergent movement of **Romanticism**, and he thus played a prominent role in a larger conflict that colored much French writing on art in the 1820s. On one side stood the Neoclassicists, headed by Étienne-Jean Delécluze, who had studied as a pupil under David and would become a biographer of the elder painter's. As the influential lead critic for the *Journal des Débats* in the 1820s, he consistently defended Academic traditions and classical ideals. Delécluze, like most other classicists, tended to prefer crisply delineated and carefully finished forms to loosely modeled ones, and—due largely to his respect for ancient Greek and Roman culture—saw sculpture, rather than painting, as the ultimate embodiment of pure beauty. In using time-honored techniques, he argued, the artist could produce work that was capable of edifying and elevating its audience. On the other side of the rift stood Romantics such as Stendhal, who saw the traditional system as lifeless and urged artists to take up subjects and styles that suited them. Rejecting what they saw as an increasingly formulaic and irrelevant classicism, Romantic critics saved their applause for art that involved a clear degree of individuality and an openly emotional, or expressive, quality. To be fair, the two camps were not always strictly opposed—both Delécluze and Stendhal, for instance, were admirers of Italy and Italian art, and the two conversed frequently on literature—but their differences did spark vigorous debates in French art criticism.

Indeed, single pictures could act as flashpoints. For example, the inclusion of the painting *Dante and Virgil in Hell* (Figure 4), by the young painter Eugène Delacroix, in the 1822 Salon resulted in a violent division of opinion among French artists and writers. Such controversy was perhaps predictable, as Delacroix's canvas both upheld and challenged some of the most cherished ideas of the Academy. His work was rooted, arguably, in a classical approach



Figure 4 Eugène Delacroix, *Dante and Virgil in Hell*, 1822.

Source: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.

to the figure (his figures reminded some viewers of Michelangelo's), and it did—like many celebrated Academic works—involve a subject drawn from a canonical literary work. However, Delacroix's painting relied on dramatic color and movement to produce an emotional tone that was far from the cool restraint usually associated with Academic work. As a result, Delécluze was not pleased, and complained in *Le Moniteur universel* that “this picture is no picture at all; it is, to use the jargon of art students, a real *tartouillade* [daub].”⁹ Some critics, though, were more open to Delacroix's innovative approach. Adolphe Thiers, a lawyer who also worked as a journalist, referred approvingly to a “savage power, ardent but natural,” and to Delacroix's “burst of talent, the surge of nascent superiority which revives our hopes.”¹⁰

Such dramatic divisions of opinion persisted into the 1830s, but Romanticism—and, with it, a spirit of change—was in the ascendancy. In 1834, Delacroix gained the backing of the man who was perhaps France's most widely read critic at the time: Théophile Gautier. Gautier was a prolific writer who employed a casual, seemingly effortless, and frequently lighthearted style that depended largely upon virtuosic descriptions and was peppered (like Diderot's) with anecdotes and tangents. He was also known, and sometimes

⁹Quoted in Sérullaz, *Èugene Delacroix*, 76.

¹⁰Thiers's assertions are best known, perhaps, for being cited in Baudelaire's *Salon* of 1846. See his *Art in Paris 1845–1862*.

mocked, for the consistently positive tone of his criticism: in Gautier's view, a critic who was unable to enjoy at least *some* element in a work of art had wasted a day. Admittedly, the elements that Gautier enjoyed tended to be rather traditional ones, as he stressed the importance of the nude model, and he often employed conventional terms such as *beautiful* and *perfect* in his writing. In 1834, however, he wrote a glowing article about Delacroix, in which he cited the originality, color, and sheer variety of the painter's work. Delacroix claimed to have been unimpressed by this tribute (he argued that the critic lacked a guiding philosophy), but Gautier's conversion represented an important moment in the legitimization of French Romanticism.

English Criticism: Hazlitt and Ruskin

And what was happening in the rest of Europe during the ascendancy of Romantic criticism in France? Certainly, there were active art critics writing in Germany and Russia, and the genre was taking shape in other regions, as well (see sidebar). It seems fair to say, though, that the only European city that rivaled the artistic culture of Paris in the early 1800s was London. Like their counterparts in France, English critics often sought to position themselves as intermediaries who stood at the center of the recently evolved relationship between artists and the public; in their writings, they thus aimed to shape both artistic practice and public reaction. And, as in France, the most famous critics in early-nineteenth-century England were often exponents of Romanticism (although, to be fair, English commentators often held that literature could be even more expressive than paintings). William Hazlitt is perhaps the best known of English critics from this period; a highly regarded essayist and philosopher, Hazlitt was also a skilled painter, and he began to write art criticism after an 1802 trip to Paris. His writings on art were characterized by a deep, almost rhapsodic pleasure in the art, and by an overarching belief that the arts and sciences could help to disseminate knowledge and thus reinforce a natural tendency in humankind toward the good.

Despite Hazlitt's general optimism, he was not always enthusiastic about the direction that English painting was taking. Revealing, in this regard, is Hazlitt's evaluation of the work of J. M. W. Turner, the most popular British landscapist of the early 1800s. Turner, born in 1775, had entered the Royal Academy of Art at the age of fourteen and had a work accepted in the Academy's annual exhibition a year later. In the later 1790s, his seascapes and landscapes were widely admired for their attention to detail and picturesque aspects. But by the early 1800s, Turner's style began to grow considerably more abstract: precise forms were often lost in veils of haze or mist, and atmospheric effects and evanescent light dominated many of his paintings. This turn away from the familiar tradition of carefully rendered forms troubled Hazlitt, and he now wrote of Turner as "the ablest landscape painter now living, whose pictures are, however, too much abstractions of aerial perspective." But in fact Hazlitt's reservations were modest when compared to the reactions of some other English critics of the time. Sir George Beaumont, for example, grumbled that Turner's "foregrounds are comparative blots, & faces

Nineteenth-Century Criticism beyond Paris and London

Accounts of nineteenth-century art criticism usually focus on French and English writers, but in fact the field was already notably international in scope, and critics were often familiar with the work of writers active in other countries.

German art criticism had enjoyed a wide prestige since the 1755 publication of Johann Joachim Winckelmann's *Thoughts on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture*, a work that celebrated what Winckelmann termed the "noble simplicity and quiet grandeur" of ancient works of art and that was translated into French and English by 1765. By the late 1700s, several German writers were defending themes—such as artistic spontaneity and imagination—that were to become vital elements of the Romantic movement. The years around 1800 also saw an efflorescence of philosophical criticism in Germany, in the writings of Johann Wolfgang Goethe and G. W. F. Hegel. And, finally, art historians such as Gustav Waagen—who traveled to Italy, England, and France, and authored the important *The Treasures of Art in Great Britain* in the 1850s—combined an interest in older and contemporary art.

Russia was also an important center of critical activity. Until the 1850s, Russian artistic production was generally divided into two streams: Moscow was a center of traditional icon painting, while St. Petersburg hosted the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts, which promoted an idealizing Neoclassical style and drew heavily on French examples. Consequently, it was Saint Petersburg that attracted most critics—including Waagen, who advised the hanging of the imperial collection there. As in France, though, the Academic model began to face substantial challenges in the 1850s, as art critics such as Nikolai Chernyshevsky argued for a new sort of modernist consciousness and students began to resist the traditional expectations of the Academy. And (much as Champfleury promoted the paintings of French realists, in Paris) the critic Vladimir Stasov championed a group known as the Wanderers, who produced work governed by liberal social and political philosophies.

Even the United States could boast, by the 1860s, of a culture of art criticism. Buoyed by a tradition of public intellectualism and interest in the Hudson River School, a growing number of American journals and magazines allocated space to regular articles on art. Several of these, such as *The Crayon* and the *New Path*, closely echoed English ideas (and specifically John Ruskin's positions), but other critics explored the idea of a specifically American art. Furthermore, a range of New York-based newspapers, such as the *Herald*, the *Post*, and the *Tribune*, ran regular reviews that slowly became increasingly confident and sophisticated in their tone and their level of analysis. For the most part, American art critics tended to accept existing Academic standards, but as artists began to cross the Atlantic with increasing frequency even the relatively conservative American viewer became aware of the debates that were taking place in the pages of French and English journals.

Paris and London may have been the most important centers of nineteenth-century art criticism, then, but they formed only part of a much broader cultural sphere.

of figures [without] a feature being expressed.”¹¹ Another wag contended that Turner’s landscapes were “pictures of nothing, and very alike.”¹² And by 1845, Turner’s ethereal marine paintings provoked open critical ridicule. An 1845 painting of whalers on the open sea, for example, was seen by one critic as embodying “one of those singular effects which are only met with in lobster salads and in this artist’s pictures. Whether he calls his picture ‘Whalers,’ or ‘Venice,’ or ‘Morning,’ or ‘Noon,’ or ‘Night,’ it is all the same; for it is quite as easy to fancy it one thing as another.”

Such attacks troubled at least one reader: the young John Ruskin, who was born in 1819 and who had, even as a teenager, a deep affection for the paintings of Turner. In 1843, Ruskin published—anonymously, in order to conceal his youth—a book called *Modern Painters*, in which he argued, at considerable length and in great detail, that Turner’s paintings were actually *more* true to nature than the supposedly naturalistic Academic works from which they differed. Ruskin did this by offering close analyses of natural forms—rocks, clouds, the ocean’s surface—and their treatment in Turner’s works; the result, in the words of the art historian E. H. Gombrich, was “the most ambitious work of scientific art criticism ever attempted.”¹³ At the same time, Ruskin was a superb writer, and his lush, crafted prose is often held up as a pinnacle of descriptive criticism. At all points, however, his central goal was clear: a return to nature as a standard. As he wrote in an 1843 letter, “We are overwhelmed with a tribe of critics . . . well acquainted with the technical qualities of every master’s touch. . . . But . . . whatever, under the present system of study, the connoisseur of the gallery may learn or know, there is one thing he does not know—and that is nature.”¹⁴

Ruskin’s book was read relatively widely, and it does seem to have altered Turner’s reputation to a degree: when the painter died, in 1851, he was widely hailed as England’s most important painter. That said, Ruskin had never been—despite his later insinuations to the contrary—Turner’s only supporter. Regardless, neither he nor Turner’s other allies could convince *every* doubter. In 1850, a German critic grimly concluded that “the raptures, therefore, of many of Turner’s countrymen, who prefer these pictures to those of his early period, I am not able to share.”¹⁵ Closer to home, conservative British publications such as *Blackwood’s Magazine* and *The Art-Journal* (which in 1851 had a circulation of nearly 25,000) generally dismissed Ruskin’s views, as they saw his enthusiasm for Turner as part of a worrisome movement away from traditional classical ideals.

Ruskin was undeterred, and he proved to be a prolific and wide-ranging critic. He eventually wrote four companion volumes to *Modern Painters*, in which he turned away from Turner as a subject and focused instead on architecture and medieval and Renaissance painting. In the early 1850s, he published *The Stones of Venice*, an influential three-volume treatise that argued that architecture must

¹¹Quoted in Davies, *Turner as Professor*, 111.

¹²For this and the quote below, see Thornbury, *The Life of J. M. W. Turner*, 191 and 195.

¹³Quoted by David Barrie in the introduction to Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, 13.

¹⁴Quoted in Helsing, *Ruskin and the Art of the Beholder*, 14.

¹⁵Quoted in Thornbury, *The Life of J. M. W. Turner*, 193.

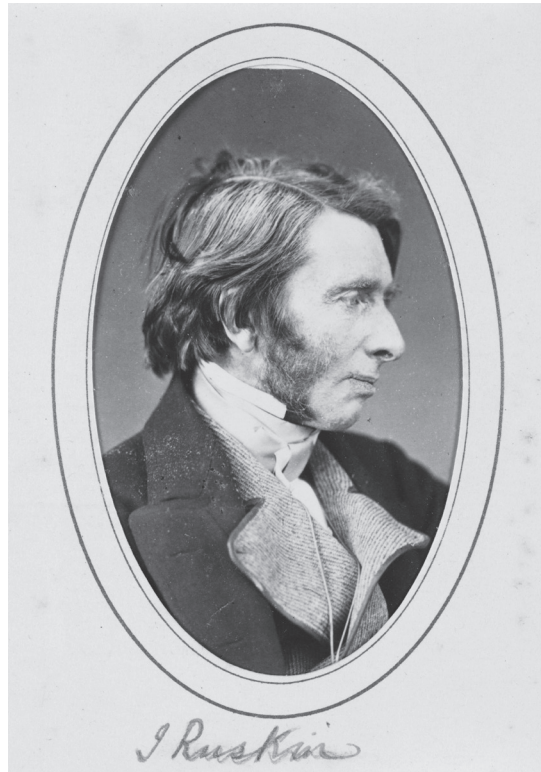


Figure 5 Carte-de-visite portrait of John Ruskin, taken at the studio of Elliot & Fry, London, in about 1870. National Media Museum, Bradford, Great Britain.

Source: SSPL/National Media Museum/Art Resource, NY.

be seen in relation to morality, and that the “Decorated Gothic” represented—partly because of its communal aspect—the noblest form of architecture to date. That argument pointed, in turn, to Ruskin’s developing liberal political beliefs, and in subsequent years he wrote bitterly of the costs of laissez-faire capitalism and urged a return to the medieval tradition of homemade handicrafts. Such beliefs led him to promote, as well, the work of the Pre-Raphaelites, a group interested in medieval tradition and in handicraft, as he saw in them an alternative to industrialization and mass production. By the late 1850s, however, Ruskin had largely abandoned art criticism as he turned to more direct political activities; in the 1870s, for instance, he penned a series of open letters to British workmen, under the title *Fors Clavigera*. Still, in under two decades, Ruskin had done a great deal to change English art criticism into something more than a simple battle between Neoclassical and Romantic work, and to extend the sense of art’s larger import that had already been voiced by Hazlitt.

The Development of French Modernism

In France, meanwhile, the landscape of criticism was shifting in other ways. Public interest in the visual arts had never been higher, and the rise of an affluent, artistically savvy urban audience was reflected in increasingly

frequent and ambitious exhibitions. The Salon, for example, grew and grew; whereas the 1806 Salon had included 707 pictures, its 1848 counterpart found room for a staggering 5,180 paintings executed by 1,664 artists. In turn, the Salon was discussed by hundreds of critics in a remarkable range of publications: between 1848 and 1851, French readers were served by no fewer than 1,100 papers and journals, many of which ran regular or occasional pieces on the arts. Museum guides and extended monographs were also issued at a breathtaking pace, and it thus seems fair to assume, as the art historian George Heard Hamilton once did, that “in no other country was public interest so widespread or criticism so extensive and vociferous.”

But if the French were hungry for commentary on the arts, they did not always see their needs completely met by their established writers. Admittedly, Gautier remained a widely read critic, and still managed, at least on occasion, to influence public opinion: an 1842 essay on Goya fanned interest in the painter. Nevertheless, the sheer pace at which he wrote often yielded a repetitive and predictable tone, and his consistent emphasis on the art of the past often ignored newer developments. Similarly, although Delécluze continued to write criticism until 1863, his conservative advocacy of eighteenth-century ideas now struck many readers as irrelevant. In short, there was room by the 1840s for a novel angle on the subject of contemporary art that might transcend the tired dialogue that opposed Academic classicism and Romanticism.

Enter Charles Baudelaire, the most prominent of the several French critics who began, in the 1840s, to devote considerable attention to recent work. Born in 1821, he is now best known for his poetry, but he wrote a good deal on art, beginning with a review of the 1845 Salon. An opinionated writer, Baudelaire claimed that “criticism should be partial, impassioned, political—that is to say, formed from an exclusive point of view, but also from a point of view that opens up the greatest number of horizons.” His work often embodied such a goal in a very spirited manner; his criticism emphasized his own responses to work, and did not shy away from controversial or outspoken assertions. Generally, Baudelaire—like Stendhal—had little patience for Neoclassical works, which he usually found dull or insipid, but he was a tireless supporter of Delacroix, whose paintings he considered in a series of articles (and in a poem that celebrated some of his favorite painters).

At the same time, however, Baudelaire felt that Romanticism had largely run its course. And so he urged painters, beginning in his *Salon* of 1846, to attempt something more ambitious than merely assuming a position in the decades-old quarrel between classical and Romantic painting. “It is true,” he admitted, “that the great tradition has been lost, and that the new one is not yet established.” But he then attempted to outline, in a series of articles published in *Le Figaro* (and eventually published, in 1863, as “The Painter of Modern Life”), the shape that he thought contemporary painting should take. “The painter,” he wrote, “the true painter, will be he who can wring from contemporary life its epic aspect and make us see and understand, with color or in drawing, how great and poetic we are in our cravats and our polished boots.” In other words, he sought a sort of painting that extolled the emerging qualities of modern urban life.

It is worth pointing out that Baudelaire's criticism drew in large part on the work of earlier art critics. Diderot's 1759 *Salon* was reprinted in 1844, after years of being out of print, and many scholars assume that Baudelaire soon read it; the conversational tone of his own first Salon review seems derived from Diderot's. Similarly, Baudelaire's notion of a modern art that reflected its time seems to have depended in part upon Stendhal, who had advanced comparable ideas in his own writings. Baudelaire was also familiar with Thiers, whose *Salon* of 1846 quotes Stendhal's evaluation of Delacroix at length. Furthermore, Baudelaire's respect for Gautier was expressed in an 1859 essay on the older critic, and a dedication in *Les fleurs du mal*, Baudelaire's celebrated volume of poetry, seems intended to honor Gautier.

But while Baudelaire's art criticism profited from earlier examples, it was also inventive, which helps to explain its remarkable influence. For one thing, Baudelaire's method of writing, in which he sought to illuminate the *effects* of artworks instead of merely describing them, won him many adherents, and it generally displaced the descriptive criticism that had been popularized by Gautier. Furthermore, his insistence that art should reflect and celebrate contemporary urban life, and his claim that contemporary artists should embrace change and the spirit of modernity, both became virtual clichés over the next hundred years. His interest in the city was later shared by a range of artists, including the Impressionists and the Surrealists, and "The Painter of Modern Life" can read like a virtual prophecy of later Impressionist explorations of themes such as the crowd, the dandy, and prostitution. In short, Baudelaire's attention to the larger purpose of painting, and his emphasis on direct engagement with one's immediate surroundings, allowed him to appreciate some of the most innovative painting being done in Paris. Although he is sometimes criticized, in retrospect, for largely overlooking the accomplishments of his contemporary Édouard Manet (Baudelaire instead advanced Constantin Guys, now considered a relatively minor artist, as an ideal painter of modern life), Baudelaire's ideas carried immense weight in popularizing relevant contemporary art at the expense of the conservative products of the Academy.

Yet Baudelaire was never the only important critic active in France. The late 1840s and early 1850s were a period of feverish political change. The revolution of 1848 felled the Orleans monarchy and led to the creation of the Second Republic—which, in turn, led to the brief elected presidency, and subsequent installation as emperor, of Napoleon III. In such a heated environment, it was perhaps inevitable that art, and art criticism, would assume a political dimension, and certainly some critics did advocate works that aligned with their political views. For instance, the novelist and critic Champfleury (the pen name of Jules François Félix-Husson) became a vocal supporter of realist literature and painting. In throwing his considerable weight as a critic behind Gustave Courbet in 1848, he emphasized the painter's formal and technical control—but also applauded Courbet's depictions of humble members of the working class, which struck him as essentially democratic in spirit. Soon other liberal critics began to consider realism as a politically acceptable style: Baudelaire, for example, wrote enthusiastically

of the bluntly unromantic work of Honoré Daumier, and Théophile Thoré-Bürger, exiled from France for his political views in 1849, began to write on seventeenth-century Dutch art, whose lower- and middle-class subjects appealed to his own populist sensibilities.

If these critics hoped that their writings might result in real change in the public, political arena, they were likely disappointed. But the instruments of art criticism did, in fact, change significantly. The rise of illustrated papers such as *Le Charivari* and *Le journal amusant* during the Second Empire led, in turn, to a new genre of art criticism: humorous caricatures and lighthearted sketches that often attempted to skewer the pretenses of the Academy. At the same time, several periodicals dedicated exclusively to art—the *Gazette des beaux-arts* and *L'Artiste* are examples—offered a subtler and more deliberate brand of criticism, as they ran regular extended reviews. Perhaps the most important development, however, involved the Salon. In 1863, the judges rejected more than 3,000 works for inclusion—an unprecedented number, and one that led to widespread complaints, and condemnations of the judges. Hoping to defuse the controversy, Napoleon III permitted the excluded artists to show their works in a *Salon des refusés*, or Salon of the Refused.

Many of the works shown in the *Salon des refusés* were unabashedly experimental in subject and in style, and thus provoked considerable public mockery and critical doubt. James McNeill Whistler's *Girl in White*, for instance, and Manet's *Luncheon on the Grass* attracted clots of viewers, many of whom shook their heads at the paintings' scumbled surfaces, roughly finished forms, and brash nudity. Gautier, unimpressed by work that showed little interest in traditional dramatic value, simply stayed away. Manet was apparently shaken by this cold reaction, but he continued to paint, and in 1865 his *Olympia* was accepted by the Salon—only to experience an even more violent response. Conservative critics decried the work as immoral, and journalist Antonin Proust later wrote that the canvas had only escaped destruction at the hands of the public through the intervention of the Salon's organizers. In short, reactions to Manet's work were often visceral, rather than rational. As George Heard Hamilton once commented, "What seems, even a century later, so exasperating about this criticism is not so much the brutality—even the cruelty—of much of it . . . as the general disinclination on the part of the critics themselves to make any attempt to understand the intention of Manet's work."

Against this background of boisterous condemnation, however, a few critics did begin to find value in the artist's work. Thoré-Bürger, writing in *L'indépendance belge*, called Manet a magician, and praised the luminosity of his paintings.¹⁶ Baudelaire sent the painter a warm letter in the dark days of 1865, when the painter's work was being roundly insulted. Even more important, however, was the assessment of **Émile Zola**, a young writer who himself gained a measure of notoriety in 1865 with the publication of a sordid autobiographical novel. Zola wrote occasionally on art, as well, and declared Manet's *Olympia* a masterpiece, reasoning that "when other artists correct

¹⁶Thoré, *Salons de W. Bürger*, vol. 2, 98–99.

nature by painting Venus they lie. Manet asked himself why he should lie. Why not tell the truth?"¹⁷ A year later, Zola went even further: "I am so sure," he wrote in 1866, "that Manet will be one of the masters of tomorrow that I should believe I had gotten a good bargain in buying (if I had the money) all of his canvases today. In fifty years they will sell for fifteen or twenty times more." Such enthusiasm did not, to be sure, silence Manet's doubters, but it did suggest the legitimacy of an alternative point of view.

By the late 1870s, in fact, that alternative point of view was firmly established. The first Impressionist exhibition, held in 1874, further undermined the legitimacy of the Salon, which now struck many observers as little more than an outdated venue for the display of anachronistic traditions. The Academy still emphasized beauty, drawing, modeling, appropriate subject matter, and finishedness, but three decades of modernist art and criticism had clearly weakened any sense that such standards were truly universal. Or, as Zola gleefully put it, "The ridiculous common standard no longer exists."¹⁸ Instead, the emergence of a viable avant-garde meant that a band of artists and critics was continually investigating new possibilities and criteria. For Zola, originality and subjective vision were important concepts; to other forward-looking critics of the time, painting was a complex dance between an attention to the objective truth of detail and the subjective truth of emotion. More broadly, references to modern art and modern life became increasingly common, and they were given a concrete form in 1879 with the foundation of an illustrated weekly entitled *La vie moderne*.

The 1880s saw **modernism** gain further traction, as artists continued to produce novel work, and a small group of dedicated critics—often friends of the painters whose work they reviewed—sought to explain their resulting excitement. In an enthusiastic review of the Sixth Impressionist group show, held in 1881, **Joris-Karl (J.-K.) Huysmans**, a poet who had begun to write art criticism in the 1870s, lauded Paul Gauguin's *Étude de nu*, which had struck many observers as improper, or coarse. Arguing that classicism was now little more than a dull, tired formula, Huysmans provocatively claimed that beauty was "here in the streets, where those wretches who have slaved away in the Louvre cannot see it."¹⁹ Five years later, **Félix Fénéon** celebrated the paintings of Edgar Degas by stressing the expressive qualities of the painter's controversial depictions of working women. Further, frustrated by the harsh reception that had greeted George Seurat's pointillist (or, as Seurat would have called it, divisionist) painting *La Grande Jatte*, Fénéon offered a series of mathematical equations intended to illuminate the complex optical effects of the work. Fénéon admitted that "those critics who yearn for the anecdotal will grumble."²⁰ But the most engaging work being done, he contended, stood on something other than sheer narrative charm.

¹⁷Quoted in Hamilton, *Manet and His Critics*, 99; for the subsequent quote, see 85.

¹⁸Quoted in Shiff, *Cézanne and the End of Impressionism*, 30.

¹⁹Quoted in Harrison et al., *Art in Theory, 1815–1900*, 893.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 968.

Even relatively conservative critics now sensed that the ground had begun to shift. Writing in *Revue des deux mondes* in 1882, Henry Houssaye was plainly discouraged by the diminished influence of the Academic style and the increasing popularity of modern, urban subjects. “We deplore,” he asserted, “the lack of interest in serious painting as it once was understood. Not only [do] we think that a bit of Greek drapery has more grace and nobility than overalls and overcoats, but we particularly regret the absence of scenes of mythology and ancient history because they are the only subjects suitable for the nude.”²¹ At the same time, though, even Houssaye had to admit that his view was far from universal. “Doubtless,” he added, “everyone does not judge this way. . . . In not admiring the Impressionists we may then be as blind as [the French art critic] Kérétry who wrote that [Théodore Géricault’s] *Medusa* dishonored the Salon. Kérétry was mistaken but he was honest, just as we ourselves are.”

The Rise of Formalist Criticism

Precisely because of his honesty, meanwhile, John Ruskin found himself in an embarrassing situation. Like France, England had witnessed the evolution of new exhibitions that represented alternatives to the more traditional Royal Academy show. One of these was the Grosvenor Gallery exhibition, which first opened on May Day of 1877; it featured a number of artists whose participation had been solicited by Sir Coutts Lindsay, and whose work tended to embrace modernist ideas. In a June letter to *Fors Clavigera*, Ruskin praised the work by the Pre-Raphaelite Edward Burne-Jones but then expressed real reservations regarding Whistler’s *Nocturne in Black and Gold*, an emphatically abstract work. “For Mr. Whistler’s own sake,” he wrote,

no less than for the protection of the purchaser, Sir Coutts Lindsay ought not to have admitted works into the gallery in which the ill-educated conceit of the artist so nearly approached the aspect of willful imposture. I have seen, and heard, much of Cockney impudence before now; but never expected to hear a coxcomb ask two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public’s face.²²

On July 28, 1877, Whistler promptly sued Ruskin for libel, claiming damages of 1,000 pounds. The trial was postponed, in early 1878, due to Ruskin’s failing mental health; later that year, however, after listening to testimony from Burne-Jones, Whistler, and others, the jury found for Whistler.

The case tarnished the reputation of Ruskin, whose comment was widely seen as vindictive, but was also symbolic, on a broader level, of the waning influence of an art criticism that favored naturalistic depiction. Whistler’s victory pointed to the growing acceptance of pure, abstract form as a viable subject matter in its own right. This was not an entirely new

²¹Quoted in Hamilton, *Manet and His Critics*, 253; the quote below appears on 254.

²²Quoted in Merrill, *A Pot of Paint*, 1.

development: rather, it had been explored by a number of midcentury critics interested in the experiments of contemporary artists. Baudelaire, in fact, had once written that “a well-drawn figure fills you with a pleasure which is absolutely divorced from its subject.” Similarly, Walter Pater, an English critic and essayist, had contended in 1866 that “in its primary aspect, a great picture has no more definite message for us than an accidental play of sunlight caught as the colours are in an Eastern carpet.”²³ And, of course, Ruskin himself had stood up, decades earlier, in defense of Turner’s impressionistic imagery. Aware of these precedents, Whistler pushed even further in exploring increasing degrees of abstraction in the 1870s, and argued (as Roger Fry later put it) that “the forms presented were to have no meaning beyond their pure sensual quality.”²⁴

So Whistler’s ideas had a prehistory—and they also had a real influence on later critics. Abstraction intrigued, for example, Oscar Wilde, who had been tutored by Pater while at Oxford, and who argued in his creative way for an aesthetics that prioritized pure form and color over conventional subject matter. And in France, in 1890, the painter Maurice Denis converted a similar idea into a sort of manifesto when he wrote that “a painting—before being a war horse, a naked woman, or some anecdote—is essentially a flat plane covered with colours arranged in a certain order.”²⁵ But it was really in early-twentieth-century England that such attitudes attained their greatest prominence. Through the work of Roger Fry and Clive Bell, English **formalism**—that is, an emphasis on the physical forms that artists create with colors and shapes—became a coherent critical philosophy.

As a curator and art historian in the 1890s, Fry had not been especially interested in formalism as an approach. He was, however, intrigued by modernist art and thus aware of the common movement away from traditional subject matter. In 1910, he organized a London exhibition of recent French art, which he called post-Impressionist. The show did inspire some criticism (the *Times* condemned the painter Henri Matisse for merely attempting to “épater le bourgeois,” or shock the middle class—a phrase that had earlier been a rallying cry of Baudelaire). But such comments only prompted Fry to defend the work in his show, and he did so in a 1910 lecture in which he argued that the work of artists such as Paul Cézanne and Matisse marked a conscious and sensible turn away from the scientific mimesis that had served as a standard goal since the Renaissance. To Fry, post-Impressionist art represented an attempt to discover the visual language of the imagination, and a valuable rejection of the basic dishonesty of paintings that pretended to be figures, or landscapes.

Fry’s work proved deeply influential, at least in some quarters: Virginia Woolf, for instance, wrote of his lecture that “on or about December 1910 human character changed.” Heartened by such comments, Fry curated, in 1912, a Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition. In the process, he became the

²³Quoted in Carrier, *High Art*, 74.

²⁴See Fry, *A Roger Fry Reader*, 22.

²⁵Quoted in Arwas, *Art Nouveau*, 211.

most prominent English spokesperson for modernism, and was thus largely responsible for introducing educated English readers to the centrality of abstract form in modern art. Working in the same direction, though, was Clive Bell, who was a close friend of Fry. Bell's 1914 book *Art* argued that the most important aspect of any successful work was a quality he called significant form, and his art criticism often focused on trying to identify and isolate that quality. By 1920, Fry and Bell had slowly moved, together, toward an extreme formalism that assumed that the subject matter of a work of art was nothing more than a distraction from the real matter at hand: the pure formal elements of the work. "It's all the same to me," Fry argued in 1920, "if I represent a Christ or a saucepan since it's the form, and not the object itself, that interests me."

Such a claim was certainly provocative, but it was not *only* provocative. Fry hoped to create an art criticism that was not simply the result of personal, subjective reactions; instead of the impressionistic tone that had dominated writing on art since Baudelaire, he sought to articulate a virtual system of aesthetic response. Such an approach was informed by similar movements in literary criticism, which also stressed pure aesthetic attitudes. The New Critics (a group first active in the 1910s but only given a name with the publication of John Crowe Ransom's 1941 book *The New Criticism*) approached works of literature as if they were self-contained; they emphasized close readings of the text and disregarded the author's intentions and biography and the reader's response. Similarly, the formalist art critics of the 1920s insisted on seeing works of art as autonomous objects: any external references in a painting (such as literary references or representational forms) were simply ignored. Instead, principles such as unity and order, rather than simple subject matter, struck Fry as worth investigating, and as potentially universal in their effect.

Taken seriously, such an approach yielded fascinating results. Because he held that the language of forms was universal, Fry was hardly interested in social and historical contexts. But, by the same token, he was unusually open to African and Asian art: art that could confuse viewers who found its subject matter unfamiliar but seemed to Fry to participate in a common language of form. Moreover, this abiding interest in universal artistic communication also led Fry, who had been raised in reform-minded Victorian England, to emphasize the value of criticism that could speak to the common man. His writings aimed at clarity, and he often lectured to large crowds; as Virginia Woolf later wrote, Fry spent "half his life, not in a tower, but traveling about England addressing masses of people, who'd never looked at a picture and making them see what he saw." Both the content and the format of Fry's lectures, then, were products of his interest in modern art and social reform.

Admittedly, Fry's arguments did not always convince readers. The art historian Jakob Rosenberg, for example, later lambasted Fry for pushing formalism "*ad absurdum* by ignoring, as being artistically irrelevant, the original intention of a work of art and its historical circumstances, its cultural function and its content." But formalist criticism did reflect, in an important

way, the turn toward abstraction in European art, and ultimately proved immensely influential, as we shall see, in the history of twentieth-century American art and criticism.

Paris in the Early 1900s

Paris at the turn of the twentieth century was still, of course, a vitally important center of artistic activity. But the artistic calendar and the attention of critics no longer centered on the state-run Salon. Weakened by the *Salons des refusés* in the 1860s, and a series of independent Impressionist exhibitions in the 1870s, the Salon was further shaken in 1881 when the government withdrew its support of the exhibition. A group of artists formed, in response to this crisis, the Société des Artistes Français and assumed control of the Salon, but their emphasis on showing young artists soon led in turn to a secession and to the formation of the alternative, and more conservative, Salon du Champ de Mars. Finally, in 1903, a group of painters and sculptors that included Pierre-Auguste Renoir and Auguste Rodin, reacting against what they saw as a conservative turn in this new Salon, founded yet another Salon: the Salon d'Automne. Salons of modern art, in other words, were multiplying. And at the same time, Parisian art galleries were also beginning to show avant-garde work with increasing frequency; Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, for instance, emerged as an important art dealer as he began to represent Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, and other young contemporary artists in 1907.

Guillaume Apollinaire had stepped into this complex and exciting artistic landscape when he moved to Paris in 1902. Born in 1880 and educated on the French Riviera, Apollinaire was already steeped in the Symbolist poetry of the day when he arrived in the capital, and he soon began to attend events hosted by literary journals. Hoping to delay returning to his mother's house in the suburbs, he often frequented bars and cafés while awaiting the last train home, and there he began to meet figures central to Paris's artistic landscape. By 1904, he had encountered André Derain, Maurice de Vlaminck, and Picasso, and over the next few years he became a close friend of Robert Delaunay and personally led a group of Italian Futurists on an informal tour of Paris. Indeed, as the art historian Harry Buckley later claimed, "He seemed to be involved in everything that eventually emerged as fundamental to the course of modern art."

Soon Apollinaire began to write about the artists he had come to know, initially publishing his work in small journals in which he sometimes had a financial interest. In 1905, he published a short piece on Picasso, thus becoming one of the first critics to express admiration for the still little-known artist. In 1907, he authored one of the earliest positive assessments of the work of Matisse; between 1907 and 1910 he wrote at a feverish pace, often churning out an article a day for publications such as *L'Intransigeant* and *Paris-Journal*, and establishing himself in the process as the most knowledgeable writer on Parisian avant-garde art. At the same time, he was also earning a reputation as an experimental poet of note. Due to his growing



Figure 6 Photograph of Guillaume Apollinaire taken by Pablo Picasso in the fall of 1910.

Source: Image © Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY. Art © 2012 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

renown, in 1911 he was given a regular column in the influential *Mercure de France* but even then continued to author pornographic novels under a pseudonym in order to supplement his modest income as a critic.

The years between 1911 and 1914 were remarkably fertile ones for Apollinaire. In his writings, he introduced Parisians to the work of the painter Marc Chagall, and his willingness to use an inventive vocabulary in referring to emerging trends ultimately left a deep imprint on the history of art. He was one of the earliest art critics to use the term *Cubism* (which was apparently derived from a reference, by Matisse, to the “*petits cubes*” of certain artists), and is said to have introduced the art world to the terms *Orphism* and, in 1917, *surrealism*. To be sure, not every critic active in Paris at the time shared his enthusiasm for avant-garde art: a manager at *Les Soirées*, for which Apollinaire occasionally wrote, once complained that the paper “was not created to support the ignorant and pretentious painters with whom you surround yourself only because they flatter you.”²⁶ But those who were

²⁶Quoted in Buckley, *Guillaume Apollinaire as an Art Critic*, 73.

open to innovation acknowledged his centrality. The critic Louis Vauxcelles, for instance, once referred to him as an authority on contemporary art.

Apollinaire's importance, however, did not merely derive from his intimate fluency with avant-garde art. His writing style also proved deeply influential. His quick, easy prose style loosely echoed the casual banter of the cafés in which he spent much of his time. And his willingness to employ poetic analogies and abstract imagery set him apart from the relatively staid art criticism of the later 1800s. Typical of this tendency is his claim, in an early essay on Picasso, that the artist "bruises us like a sharp, sudden winter cold": the simile is unexpected, but evokes the icy colors of Picasso's Blue Period, and effectively conveys Apollinaire's sense of the tone of Picasso's work. Such poetic criticism was more interested in subjectivity and suggestion than in objectivity and definitiveness, and it later influenced a generation of critics in the 1950s and 1960s. Thus, while Apollinaire's attempts at hard description or theoretical analysis sometimes fell flat, and while he could be overenthusiastic in extolling the work of his friends, his expressive critical writings revealed a deep familiarity with the landscape of contemporary art.

European Criticism between the Wars

After enlisting in the French army during World War I, Apollinaire died in the influenza epidemic of 1918, leaving a significant void in the postwar Parisian art world. As the writer Gertrude Stein commented in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, "Guillaume would have been a bond of union [after the war]; he always had a quality of keeping people together, and now that he was gone everybody ceased to be friends." Despite his absence, Paris remained a hive of artistic activity in the 1920s and 1930s; artists as diverse as Picasso, Jacques Lipchitz, and Chaim Soutine worked there, and the city was the primary home of the Surrealists, who were especially prominent in the 1920s. But the general political and social atmosphere in the capital had turned more conservative, and Parisian art criticism between the wars was often conventional and sometimes little more than a vehicle for the growing art market. In response to a question regarding the usefulness of art criticism circulated in 1927 by the newspaper *Paris-Midi*, the author Pierre Mille cynically responded that "if art criticism did not serve a purpose, art dealers would not have it done."²⁷ The art collector Paul Poiret was even more dismissive. "It is useful," he concluded, "in the sense that it provides a living for a bunch of ignoramuses." And even art critics did not necessarily disagree: the painter and critic Jean Bazaine dismissed, late in his life, the value of the criticism that he himself had written in the 1930s.

Elsewhere in continental Europe, changing political conditions conspired to partially limit the effect of even the most ambitious art criticism. In Russia, for instance, a strand of dynamic modernist criticism soon wilted in an increasingly stifling public environment. Between 1917 and 1925, Russia was actually a hotbed of artistic thought and activity: Russian art was

²⁷Quoted in Kemp, *The Oxford History of Western Art*, 514; the subsequent quote can be found on the same page.

remarkably varied, and Russian critics, alert to developments in Paris, aware of the writings of their innovative contemporaries in literary criticism, and often personal friends of avant-garde artists, offered an exciting range of responses. By 1925, however, the Soviet national government had made it clear that abstract art—and any criticism that approved of it—was ideologically suspect. In 1934 the First All-Union Writers' Conference formally proclaimed socialist realism to be the only acceptable form of art, and Russian criticism became, largely, the voice of a conservative regime.

In Germany, likewise, the early 1920s had produced a rich vein of art criticism, much of it associated with the Frankfurt School, a group of writers whose work was informed by a Marxist approach that drew on a variety of disciplines. One of those writers, Theodor Adorno, was a close friend of Siegfried Kracauer, who worked as the chief film editor at the *Frankfurter Zeitung* from 1922 to 1933; both Adorno and Kracauer, in turn, knew Walter Benjamin, whose writings on the implications of mechanical reproduction and on Baudelaire are still widely read today. Each of these writers, though, was of Jewish descent, and the rise of Hitler (who became the chancellor of Germany in 1933) soon led to their exodus (Adorno and Kracauer both left Germany by 1938, eventually settling in the United States; Benjamin died while apparently attempting to emigrate in 1940). At the same time, Nazi opposition to avant-garde art culminated in a 1937 exhibition of so-called *entartete Kunst* (degenerate art). Germany was no longer promising soil for artistic innovation or meaningful commentary.

The situation, though, was somewhat brighter in England. The modernist poet Ezra Pound wrote art criticism for the *New Age* between 1917 and 1920; among his readers was **Herbert Read**, who, after serving in World War I, had joined the civil service and had then been transferred to the Victoria and Albert Museum. Ignoring Fry's emphasis on the post-Impressionists, Read turned his attention instead to the modernism of Picasso and Braque, and in 1929 he published a widely read essay on the meaning of art, in the *Listener*. In the 1930s he met the artist Henry Moore, who led him to Hampstead, where Read encountered the work of Moore's contemporaries Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth. Thus he began to write on one of the most celebrated generations of English artists. Known for a writing style that managed to be both intelligent and accessible, Read was eventually knighted for his work as an art critic and art historian.

American Criticism Comes of Age

American art criticism of the early twentieth century is often overlooked—a fate that it probably does not deserve, as it offered interesting variations on European ideas, began to articulate a quite self-conscious nationalism, was often characterized by an open excitement regarding new developments, and played a major role in shaping the ideas of later, better-known American critics such as Clement Greenberg. It is true, though, that much American criticism written before World War II was conservative, or simply derivative. In fact, one reason that histories of criticism often skip over the period is that

the most powerful voices in American art criticism at the turn of the twentieth century were those of conservative writers, known as traditionalists.

The most prominent of these were Kenyon Cox, who had trained as an Academic painter in Paris; **Royal Cortissoz**, who wrote for the *New York Herald Tribune* for more than half a century; and **Frank Jewett Mather**, who lived in Italy for several years before becoming widely known for his work in *The Nation*. While these three did craft distinct critical identities—Cox employing a bold, impatient tone, Cortissoz an elevated and superficially patient voice, and Mather a tempered, scholarly approach—they shared a central conviction that art should combine technical skill, order, and a classicizing combination of idealism and realism. Said Cortissoz shortly before his death in 1948, “My belief, as an art critic, has been, briefly stated, that a work of art should employ an idea, that it should be beautiful, and that it should show sound craftsmanship.”²⁸ But that was not all; the American traditionalists also believed, like Ruskin, that art exemplifying such characteristics could promote social harmony by creating a powerful bond between artist and viewer. Importantly, this interest in social cohesion and communication also colored the traditionalists’ approaches to writing. As Kenyon Cox once put it, he was trying “to interest ‘the school-teacher at Oshkosh,’” and he and the other traditionalists aimed at clear, accessible prose.²⁹

Inevitably, though, their emphasis on a universal art and on conventional standards of technical merit and classicism meant that the traditionalists could find little to admire in the increasingly abstract and often insistently individualistic art of European modernists. Such a limitation became dramatically apparent in 1913, with the arrival of the much-discussed Armory Show, which featured the work of a number of contemporary European modernists (see sidebar on page 52). Face-to-face with the revolutionary work of Matisse, Picasso, and others, Cox could only sputter that “this thing is not amusing; it is heartrending and sickening.”³⁰ Cortissoz, meanwhile, offered at least a degree of civility in announcing that “I disbelieve in modernism because it seems to me to flout fundamental laws and to repudiate what I take to be the function of art, the creation of beauty.”³¹

Such reactions were hardly surprising, but they did point to the limits of the traditionalist view, which seemed simply incapable of appreciating nonrepresentational art. Consequently, there was suddenly room for other critical approaches, and into the void sprang Willard Huntington Wright, an American who embraced the early formalist writings of Fry and Bell but gave them a particular twist. In his *Modern Painting*, written in 1915, Wright argued for a deterministic, evolutionary view in which the visual arts were gradually moving “nearer and nearer [to] abstract purity.” More specifically, he anticipated—and here he was also thinking, in all probability, of the earlier ideas of the German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel, who had seen the

²⁸Quoted in Morgan, *Keepers of Culture*, 99.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 41.

³⁰Quoted in Brown, *The Story of the Armory Show*, 159.

³¹Quoted in Morgan, *Keepers of Culture*, 82.

Critical Responses to the Armory Show of 1913

A “curious splinter-salad”; a “dynamited suit of Japanese armor”; an “elevated railroad stairway after an earthquake.” When Marcel Duchamp’s brazenly non-naturalistic *Nude Descending a Staircase* first traveled to the United States, as part of the International Exhibition of Modern Art, or Armory Show, of 1913, many viewers struggled to describe exactly what they saw. Crowds gathered around the painting, *American Art News* offered a \$10 prize to the reader who identified the supposed nude of the title, and art critics tried to top each other’s characterizations of the painting’s subject.

Despite such responses, however, the viewers who paused, baffled, before Duchamp’s painting were arguably standing in one of the most important exhibitions of the century. Initially featuring 1,200 works by American artists and European modernists, the show offered many Americans their first chance to see the work of



Figure 7 Seeing New York With a Cubist: *The Rude Descending a Staircase (Rush hour at the subway)*, as in the *New York Evening Sun*, March 20, 1913. (The Museum of Modern Art Archives: Armory Show Scrapbook).

Source: “The Rude Descending a Staircase (Rush Hour at the Subway).” March 20, 1913. Publisher: The New York Evening Sun. Armory Show Scrapbook (1913), compiled by Harriet S. Palmer. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York. Location: The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, U.S.A. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY.

active members of the European avant-garde. It sparked both public interest—in the form of 290,000 paid admissions—and occasional outrage, as students at the Art Institute of Chicago staged a mock trial of Matisse and burned copies of his works.

Many patriotic reviewers lauded the relatively conventional American works on display. But how did they respond to the more avant-garde works? Initial press coverage was quite positive—a fact due both to the respected reputations of the organizers and to an anti-Academic strain then common in the New York press. In time, though, several critics offered more nuanced analyses. Harriet Monroe, in the *Chicago Sunday Tribune*, concluded that the European modernists had fostered a “revolt of the imagination against nineteenth century realism,” while Christian Brinton offered the unusual view that modern art was not, really, very revolutionary at all, but rather a return to the synthetic vision of primitive man.

More widely repeated, however, were sharp condemnations. Shocked by the turn toward abstraction—and away from traditional ideals of craftsmanship and composition—many critics argued that the artists were crazy, amoral, or anarchist. The *Brooklyn Life* called the exhibition a “temporary lunatic asylum” and alleged that some of the paintings were merely the “blear-eyed daubs and phantasmagorias of the insane,” while *The New York Times* discerned a movement “to disrupt and degrade if not to destroy not only art but literature and society too.” Perhaps the most famous response, though, involved Duchamp’s painting: in *Everybody’s Magazine*, Julian Street identified the painting’s subject as “an explosion in a shingle factory.”

Such criticism appealed to many readers who doubted the value of modern art—but also, at times, to the organizers of the exhibition, who realized that even skeptical reviews offered publicity. After publishing Royal Cortissoz’s dismissal of the show, Frank Crowninshield—who edited *Century*, and was sympathetic to the modernist movement—urged the show’s organizers to read it in a positive light: “with Cortissoz writing in the *Century*, even writing adversely, we shall attain serious consideration for our subject.” Crowninshield may have been thinking optimistically, but his position was soon redeemed: the next few years saw a sharp increase in the number of American galleries willing to carry avant-garde art, and Matisse and Duchamp were soon seen as influential pioneers, rather than as members of a lunatic asylum.

history of art as a process of purification—the “elimination of all superfluities.” Art was being reduced, as he saw it, to its formal essence.

The combination of Wright’s enthusiastic formalism, a developing familiarity with modern art, and the increasing international prominence of New York City following World War I led, in certain circles, to a palpable excitement about the place of American art. Early in 1921, for instance, the art critic Henry McBride devoted part of a column in a magazine called *The Dial* to a description of the moment in art history. “Little by little,” he concluded, “all the elements of the vast machine necessary to propel art activities in metropolitan centres seem to be assembling in New York. . . . When the Louvre had been definitely closed *pour cause de la guerre* . . . it was impossible for the sentimentalist not to recognize that the recording angel had turned over a much scribbled-upon page in art history, and that a brand new leaf lay before us, waiting for daring writers.”

Those daring writers, as it turned out, included a group of critics known as experientialists, who opposed Wright’s formalism and, relying on the

philosophies of William James and John Dewey, saw all artworks as shaped by their immediate cultural context, instead of dependent upon merely abstract laws. Their turn away from pure formalism and toward experientialism was only buttressed by the arrival of the Great Depression, which seemed to establish beyond doubt the importance of environmental factors. In this sense, the career of a critic such as Thomas Craven can act as a summary of a more general trend. A formalist early in his career, Craven began to mock, in the 1920s, what he saw as a cultish devotion to significant form, and in his 1931 book *Men of Art* he argued that the best artists were especially sensitive to the native tendencies of their own countries. Like many American critics of his generation, Craven had been born a formalist, only to grow into a nationalist.

In his nationalist bent, Craven was hardly alone: indeed, the 1930s witnessed a powerful formulation of what is often called Americanism in both art and art criticism. The first few years of the decade had seen the emergence of the so-called regionalists—a loose group of painters whose best-known members were Thomas Hart Benton, John Steuart Curry, and Grant Wood, and who generally tended to eschew abstraction and urban subjects in favor of legible images of the American heartland and agrarian tradition. The work of the regionalists was, it's fair to say, a conscious rejection of French influence: indeed, Wood wrote a 1935 pamphlet in which he claimed that American artists were no longer looking to Paris for subject matter and style. Instead, they were interpreting their own hometowns and native geography—a point that was soon developed by many American critics. In 1939, for instance, Edward Alden Jewell, a *New York Times* critic, published *Have We an American Art?*, in which he answered his own rhetorical question in the affirmative: in fact, he largely pointed to the accomplishments of the regionalists as evidence. Similarly, Peyton Boswell cheered what he viewed as an emerging turn, in American art, away from Parisian ultramodernism, and Forbes Watson publicly called for a “democratic” art that would be free of any French influence.

How to explain such a turn? Importantly, it was not simply due to an ignorance of contemporary French art: both Benton and Curry had spent time in Paris, and Jewell was acquainted with the work of Parisian modernists. That said, there was a way in which the dire conditions of the Depression had yielded a growing interest in local American idioms; in fact, Wood argued in his pamphlet that poverty had prevented many artists from traveling to Paris, and had thus contributed to the rise of regionalism. Moreover, many American critics were offended by their Parisian counterparts' dismissive reactions to regionalist work in a 1938 show of American painting at the Jeu de Paume. Finally, the arguments of Craven, Jewell, and other critics in the 1930s can also be seen in relation to a growing strain of xenophobia and isolationist sentiment that only intensified in response to the arrival of waves of immigrants fleeing Nazi Europe.

As we've seen, though, the immigrants included some individuals who were notable critics in their own right, such as Adorno and Kracauer. And, interestingly, those displaced European intellectuals soon began to offer an angle of analysis that complemented, in sophisticated ways, the patriotic

dimension of Americanist criticism. This new analytical tool was Marxist theory, which stressed the larger social and economic conditions in which art was made and viewed and which thus loosely paralleled the similar tendency in American criticism. But if Adorno and Kracauer were important exponents of Marxist criticism, its most famous practitioner in the 1930s may have been a Lithuanian immigrant named **Meyer Schapiro**. In his 1936 essay “The Social Bases of Art,” Schapiro argued emphatically for a link between works of art and the social conditions that give rise to them. And while Schapiro opposed Craven’s nationalistic theories, the two shared a common distrust of pure formalism and a general sympathy for the sort of social realism then common in American galleries. American criticism, then, was still defining itself through a complex contrast with and reliance upon Europe, but it was also beginning to develop an identity of its own.

Abstract Expressionism and Harold Rosenberg

The early 1940s solidified New York City’s place as a center of both modern art and contemporary art criticism. In addition to hosting arrivals such as Meyer Schapiro, the city became the home of a vibrant community of emigrant European artists, including Piet Mondrian and Marc Chagall, and a talented group of young American artists and writers. Thus, although postwar New York still had a relatively undeveloped gallery scene, it hosted an almost bewildering range of artistic approaches and, in response, critical criteria. In a 1941 letter to the *New York Times*, an art dealer named Samuel Kootz claimed that he had haunted New York’s galleries and noted an interest in conventional subject matter—but then added that “I have not discovered one bright white hope.”³² At around the same time, James Soby commented upon the decline of surrealism in American painting, while Denys Sutton stressed metaphysical tendencies. And a few critics began to turn away from painting, and toward a newer medium: film. James Agee, for example, began to write film criticism for *Time* and *The Nation* in 1942; a year later, Manny Farber began to write regularly on film for *The New Republic*. Through their regular weekly or monthly essays, the two helped to establish the cinema as a legitimate subject of consideration, and film criticism as a viable essayistic form. Indeed, in 1944 W. H. Auden called Agee’s film reviews for *The Nation* “the most remarkable regular event in American journalism today.”³³

But it was, in fact, a group of painters who generated New York’s first internationally consequential movement. In 1943, Mark Rothko, Adolph Gottlieb, and Barnett Newman wrote a brief manifesto that was published in the *New York Times* and that stated their preference for large paintings, for paintings that did not deny their basic two-dimensionality, and for a view of art as “an adventure into an unknown world.”³⁴ Such a position clearly

³²Quoted in Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, 65.

³³Quoted in Lopate, *American Movie Critics*, xv.

³⁴Quoted in Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, 75.

echoed some of the claims of the French modernists—such as Maurice Denis’s emphasis on the flatness of any painting—but the American artists’ combination of pure abstraction and expressive brushwork yielded, at the same time, something new. And it soon began to appeal to a small circle of tastemakers. In 1943, Kootz wrote a book on this new circle of artists in which he accented the contributions of the German-born painter Hans Hofmann, and also included the work of the Americans Robert Motherwell and Jackson Pollock (who was given his first one-man show, at the Art of This Century gallery, the same year). The Abstract Expressionists, as they were commonly called by 1946, had arrived.

Initial critical assessments of Abstract Expressionism tended to be rather simplistic. Even the most sophisticated commentators employed established concepts and categories, and popular magazines sometimes did little more than pose incendiary hypothetical questions. In 1947, for example, Clement Greenberg, who had worked as a translator and customs agent before beginning to write criticism in 1937, wrote in *Horizon* that Pollock, who had recently begun to pour paint directly onto the canvas, was “the most powerful painter in contemporary America.” Arguing that the violence of Pollock’s work recalled that of Faulkner and Melville, Greenberg proposed an essentially American interpretation of the artist that clearly reflected the nationalist approach that was now more than a decade old. Similarly, when he then offered an examination of scale and surface in Pollock’s work, he was using terms that had already been employed by Rothko in the *Times* four years earlier. But if Greenberg’s analysis was relatively conventional, it was surely more complex than the approach of *Life*, which, when it addressed contemporary art, often did so in starkly simplistic terms. In 1949, *Life* ran a four-page spread on Pollock that opened with a bold headline that asked, “Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?”³⁵ Such a question called for judgment, but did not necessarily invite substantive analysis.

By the early 1950s, however, American criticism began to offer a much more nuanced account of contemporary art. In 1952, Harold Rosenberg—who had worked as an art editor in the late 1930s under the Works Progress Administration, and who would later become the art critic at *The New Yorker*—published an essay called “The American Action Painters” in *ARTnews* (and later anthologized in *The Tradition of the New*). The art historian Stephen Foster later described the essay as “perhaps the most controversial piece of criticism ever to address the postwar American painting scene.” Rosenberg suggested that some contemporary American painters (he used the term “action painters” but was clearly writing about certain Abstract Expressionists) could largely be understood through their attitude toward the act of painting. Or, as he put it, “At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act—rather than as a space in which to reproduce.” The image was the result

³⁵See “Jackson Pollock.”

of a spontaneous encounter, and the painter now thought, and expressed thoughts, *through* the canvas, instead of recording thoughts *on* it.

Rosenberg's interpretation did draw on earlier European ideas. In some ways, his argument was at its core a Romantic one: paintings were the results, or residues, of a dramatic inner conflict, and action painting was thus irreducibly individual in nature. At the same time, however, Rosenberg was also influenced by existentialist philosophy and its emphasis on the need for the self to assert its individual identity in the face of the oppressive anonymity of modernity. Action painting, for Rosenberg, offered just such a possibility, and he cast the creative process as a process of self-actualization. But if Rosenberg's essay was informed by certain earlier currents of thought, it rejected others. For instance, Rosenberg was no formalist. Rather, in claiming that "a painting that is an act is inseparable from the biography of the artist," he ignored formalism's exclusive interest in the work itself, and held that art and life must be considered together.

"The American Action Painters" soon inspired a lively response. Perhaps the most quotable reaction was that of the critic Mary McCarthy, who questioned Rosenberg's emphasis on the act of painting, rather than on the finished product. "You cannot," wrote McCarthy, "hang an event on the wall, only a picture."³⁶ Other critics focused on the confusing place of judgment in Rosenberg's approach: although his means of thinking about pictures was refreshingly novel, it seemed to offer little in the way of useful criteria. Rosenberg referred to the authenticity, or seriousness, that certain artists brought to their work, but how was one to gauge such qualities? Such doubts, though, only fueled further discussion of Rosenberg's piece and thus extended, in the short term, its influence.

ARTnews and the Poet-Critics

Rosenberg's essay may have played a critical role in establishing the perceived importance of Abstract Expressionism, but it was hardly the only factor in the apotheosis of that style. In fact, *ARTnews*—the monthly magazine in which Rosenberg's essay first appeared—was a consistent champion, in the late 1940s and 1950s, of the emerging idiom. Founded in 1902, the magazine had offered rather conventional artistic commentary until the executive editorship passed, in 1949, to Thomas Hess. Hess, who had studied French art and literature while at Yale and then worked briefly at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) before serving as a pilot in World War II, soon became a prominent supporter of the Abstract Expressionists; in fact, his 1951 book *Abstract Painting* was the first serious, extended treatment of the movement. In turn, *ARTnews* soon began to reflect his preferences, as it ran glowing reviews and full-color reproductions (still relatively rare in publications of the time) of paintings in the new style.

³⁶Quoted in Frascina, *Pollock and After*, 185.

ARTnews under Hess, though, was no mere mouthpiece for Abstract Expressionism. Rather, it celebrated a particular branch of Abstract Expressionism associated with Willem de Kooning, while largely ignoring the accomplishments of other painters in the movement, such as Mark Tobey. It also placed a consistent emphasis on the process of making art. This note was most prominent in the title of Rosenberg's essay, but it was also reflected in regular features in which a critic observed a painting, or sculpture, in progress, and then summarized the process by which the work took shape. Such articles—poet James Schuyler's "Alex Katz Paints a Picture" was one of many in the series—implied a consistent interest in viewing art as a process, rather than as a static set of formal relationships.

Above all, though, *ARTnews* was famous (or infamous, in some circles) for its employment of active poets as critics, and for a resulting voice that was often emphatically abstract and given to surprising similes or analogies. To be fair, *ARTnews* regularly ran essays by established scholars such as Kenneth Clark, Bernard Berenson, and Meyer Schapiro. But Hess seems to have actively recruited poets, who were often happy to find a source of regular income, and by the early 1960s *ARTnews* had published criticism by, among others, Schuyler, Kenneth Rexroth, Randall Jarrell, Frank O'Hara, and **John Ashbery**. These writers—now seen as some of the leading voices of midcentury American poetry—were members of the loosely defined New York School, a network of writers who generally wrote energetic, celebratory verse, and who were often personal friends of the visual artists about whom they wrote. Instead of fretting about a conflict of interest, though, Hess valued the poets' freshness of voice, and often played up the vocation of his critics, running a series of articles entitled "Poets and Painters."

To be sure, poets had long written art criticism: Stendhal, Baudelaire, Champfleury, and Apollinaire had all been prominent poets, and in fact Baudelaire had once written that "the best account of a picture may well be a sonnet or an elegy." But art criticism in the United States had largely been written by journalists or academics, and *ARTnews* thus offered a novel turn toward belle-lettristic (from the French for a stylish, entertaining mode of writing) criticism. Confident in their linguistic abilities, the poet-critics of the 1950s often sought to produce in their readers an experience analogous to that of the viewer of the work of art under discussion. In some ways, this approach resembled that of Diderot, who sometimes seemed more interested in how he experienced an object than in what an object was. But the poet-critics employed a language that was much more associative than anything that Diderot had penned. For instance, James Schuyler claimed in a 1959 review that the work of Richard Pousette-Dart struck him as "like a pouring of jewels: live ones, as though the fishy ranks in their infinite water-fresh vividness streamed by, school after school—his pictures have presence, commanding and reticent, as though they themselves knew there is much to see, not much time to look, and had enough self-esteem to expect what they merit." Furthermore, the language of *ARTnews* often

depended upon unexpected comparisons, as in a 1956 Hess article that discussed the work of Ad Reinhardt: “Actually Reinhardt’s dark paintings are like . . . a night-world; a storm is breaking-up, blackest clouds scud beneath lighter black clouds, somewhere above a possible incandescence reminds you of the moon.”

Granted, such prose did not please every reader. A 1961 letter from a Leonard Kirschenbaum to the magazine, for instance, complained about the magazine’s thicket of similes:

Sir:

That does it! It’s time to pick up my pen and write you: I’m still waiting to read an article that ain’t got a “like a” followed by an “as though” in it. Look fellows, either “it is” or “it isn’t.”

But for many readers, especially in the 1950s, *ARTnews* represented a powerful critical institution. Years later, *Newsweek*’s lead art critic Peter Plagens would remember the enthusiasm with which he had devoured the magazine: “It appealed to me, hunched over the latest issue . . . drooling at the nuances of ‘handling’ in the macho full-page color repro of the latest Easter-egg de Kooning.” Even distant Australia was subject to the magazine’s influence. Robert Hughes, a native Australian, recalled learning about Abstract Expressionism through issues of the magazine:

The bottle in which its messages washed up on our shores (since the paintings themselves did not cross the Pacific) was the magazine *ARTnews*. Its hagiographic tone was clear. Except for the titans of the history books . . . we had never read the kinds of claims made for any artist that Harold Rosenberg or Thomas Hess made for figures such as Barnett Newman and Willem de Kooning.

Thus, the poet-critics, active artists in their own right, usually offered a sympathetic voice in reviewing the work of artists who were frequently their personal friends. This was perhaps truest of O’Hara, whose writing on art was often shot through with an irrepressible delight, and who was a magnetic force in the New York art world. When he died in an accident in 1966 at only forty, the painter Philip Guston sadly observed that “he was our Apollinaire.”³⁷

Clement Greenberg and the Return of Formalism

ARTnews, however, was far from the only game in town. In fact, the diversity of American art criticism in the 1950s was considerable. *It Is*, a journal published by a circle of New York artists and writers, first went to press in

³⁷Quoted in Yau, *The Passionate Spectator*, 42.

1956, and immediately sought to differentiate itself from *ARTnews*. (In its initial issue, Ruthven Todd coldly wrote, “I do not think that the mere fact that a writer is writing about art should serve as an excuse for amorphous prose.”) Similarly, *ARTS*—a redesigned version of *Art Digest* that first appeared in 1955, under the direction of its outspoken and willfully curmudgeonly managing editor Hilton Kramer—also cast itself as an alternative to *ARTnews*. Issuing a regular drumbeat of calls for clear language in art criticism, *ARTS* emphasized forceful judgments and tended to prefer the writing of promising scholars to that of poets. Robert Rosenblum, who later became a celebrated curator and art historian, penned several book reviews for the magazine, and **Leo Steinberg**, then working on his doctorate in art history, wrote a remarkable series of essays that won him, in 1957, the Frank Jewett Mather award for art criticism. Meanwhile, in other venues, architecture and film criticism were becoming increasingly visible: Lewis Mumford’s “Sky Line” column for *The New Yorker* was widely read, and Dwight Macdonald’s film criticism for *Esquire* treated a subject that was often seen as merely popular, and thus ephemeral, with insightfulness.

The most dramatic development in American art criticism in the late 1950s and early 1960s, though, was the rise of Clement Greenberg as a critic and cultural commentator. Greenberg had begun to write criticism in the 1930s, and his relatively early celebration of Pollock had suggested an ability to identify emerging trends. Greenberg is best known, however, for a series of articles, written between 1955 and 1965, in which he argued that contemporary painting should be seen as a late stage in the larger history of modernism. According to the critic, modernism was essentially a process through which artists had gradually identified the properties specific to each medium and eliminated all nonessential attributes. All painting, he argued, was characterized at root by flatness and the delimitation of flatness (that is, by the edge of the canvas), and the most important contemporary abstract painting accepted these basic properties, and thus represented the end of a process of formal simplification. Put differently, the best avant-garde art was characterized by a relentless self-criticality that took the form of a close attention to its own formal principles and physical properties. Or, in Greenberg’s words, “The task of self-criticism became to eliminate from the specific effects of each art any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other art.” In such a way, he concluded, “would each art be rendered ‘pure.’”

Like Rosenberg, Greenberg drew heavily on earlier ideas. After all, William Huntington Wright had already argued, a generation earlier, that the “elimination of all superfluities from art” was part of its natural evolutionary development, as it moved “nearer and nearer [to] abstract purity.” Similarly, Hans Hofmann had stressed an attention to the specific qualities of individual artistic mediums. Greenberg also knew, and drew on, the ideas of formalists such as Whistler, Fry, and Bell and could thus comfortably argue for an art that was not driven by representational or social concerns. Furthermore, he related his ideas to the work of earlier German philosophers: to G. W. F. Hegel, and to Immanuel Kant, who had suggested using reason to determine, in turn, the limits of reason. This network of influences

and references gave Greenberg's writing an ambitious basis, and, in combination with his crystalline prose—which was markedly rational, assertive, and precise—yielded a criticism that seemed deeply rooted and nearly inevitable in its logic. Or, as the art historian Hal Foster later wrote, Greenberg's art criticism employed “a near-scientific view of art history to support its semi-subjective judgments of aesthetic quality. . . . No wonder such criticism appeared so powerful and, to its opponents, so presumptuous.”³⁸

The end result was a line of analysis that was dramatically different from Harold Rosenberg's. Where Rosenberg emphasized the actions of the artist, and was thus a descendant of the experientialists of the 1930s, Greenberg was at root a formalist. And yet, he also differed in at least one important way from the formalists. Where Fry, for instance, had tended to accent spatial relationships (or what he called plastic form) in painting, Greenberg valued flatness. Like Fry, however, he saw the history of art as essentially internal, or limited to the realm of art; world wars were less important to artists than attention to the properties of their medium. And so formalism, which had enjoyed a brief vogue in American criticism before receding in the years before World War II, now returned with a vengeance.

Also contributing to the rising influence of Greenberg was the fact that enthusiasm for Rosenberg's ideas had already begun to fade in the late 1950s, as American interest in existentialism dwindled. The painter Josef Albers supposedly sent Rosenberg a note, at one point, claiming that “angst is dead,” and the critic Irving Sandler later wrote that “when existentialism went out of fashion, so did Harold.” And Greenberg was there to replace him. The publication of Greenberg's essay collection *Art and Culture* in 1961 cemented his reputation, and the artists favored by Greenberg—Pollock, Jules Olitski, Kenneth Noland—began to command staggeringly high prices. Consequently, for most of the 1960s Greenberg was perhaps the only active art critic who could boast of a broad reputation as a public intellectual. Doubtless, it would be too simple to view Greenberg's accomplishments merely in relation to Rosenberg's. But in fact the two were often seen as opposite poles in a vigorous debate about contemporary art, and observers sometimes spoke of them as though they were locked in battle. “Who won,” Irving Sandler once asked, “the art-critical war? Clem prevailed over Harold because Harold's writing struck young critics in the 1960s as excessively romantic.”

1960s Formalism and *Artforum*

Greenberg's perceived importance was also due to the emergence of a group of intellectual heirs who read Greenberg closely and sought to explore the implications of his formalism while combating what they saw as the vague and subjective prose of *ARTnews*. Unlike Greenberg, though, these critics generally had advanced degrees, and they employed a dense, theoretical rigor that substantially changed the tone of American criticism.

³⁸Quoted in Yau, *The Passionate Spectator*, 47.

Michael Fried was an undergraduate at Princeton in 1958 when he sent Greenberg a note, expressing admiration for the critic's writing. The two met shortly afterward and, although Fried soon embarked for England on a Rhodes scholarship, remained in touch. In 1961, while still in England, Fried began to write notices for *ARTS*, and he met the sculptor Anthony Caro, whose work affected him deeply. In the subsequent summer, he returned to the United States to begin work on a Ph.D. in art history at Harvard; as a graduate student in 1965 he curated a show called *Three American Painters*. The show featured three artists—Noland, Olitski, and Frank Stella—whose work had already been endorsed by Greenberg, but Fried's ambitious catalog essay offered a level of analysis that was largely unprecedented in its ambition and complexity, and a tone that struck many readers as brightly intelligent.

Over the next few years, Fried honed his brand of rigorous formalism, which was ultimately predicated on Greenberg's ideas but nonetheless often modified them in notable ways. In a 1966 essay, for example, Fried offered a slight alteration of Greenberg's notion of purification that introduced a degree of historical specificity into a theory that had been largely abstract:

What the modernist painter can be said to discover in his work . . . is not the irreducible essence of all painting, but rather that which, at the present moment in painting's history, is capable of convincing him that it can stand comparison with the painting of both the modernist and the pre-modernist past whose quality seems to him beyond question.

But Fried is perhaps best known for a 1967 essay called "Art and Objecthood." In that piece, he drew on Greenberg's claims regarding the purification of the arts, in insisting that minimalist art—a new style featured in a 1966 show of sculptures called "Primary Structures"—involved what he saw as an inherent theatricality. Such sculptures, wrote Fried, involved or confronted the viewer in a direct, physical sense; they were usually large in scale, and their presentation sometimes involved a dramatic quality. In embodying theatrical qualities, though, such works violated Greenberg's dictum that the various arts ought to remain distinct, and so Fried found minimalism lacking, or even theoretically dangerous: it was theater in the guise of sculpture.

Fried's piece inspired a considerable response, from a variety of directions. Despite the popularity of his writing, though, Fried soon realized that the very sort of theatricality he opposed was ascendant, and by 1969 he largely stopped writing art criticism, focusing his energy instead on art history. Greenberg's legacy, however, remained temporarily alive, largely in the person of Rosalind Krauss, who like Fried was working toward a Ph.D. in art history at Harvard in the late 1960s. Krauss began to write criticism in the mid-1960s, and although she sometimes gravitated toward the sort of minimal art that Fried distrusted, she generally relied heavily in her early writings on a variant of Greenbergian formalism. Her 1971 catalog essay on the work of the painter Morris Louis, for instance, concentrated on the relationship between the paint and its physical support, or form. "Louis embedded the release of color," wrote Krauss, "within a surface that was

mural-like, that was oriented to the wall in terms of its continuity and its resistance to being bounded.”³⁹ Critics such as Krauss and Fried, then, were willing to tackle new artworks but sought to extend (or slightly modify, where necessary) the lessons of Greenberg.

Fried and Krauss wrote for a range of publications, but much of their most important work appeared in the pages of *Artforum*. Founded in California in 1962, *Artforum* initially embodied an attempt to establish an alternative to the New York bias of most of the existing publications. Its earliest issues were often delightfully unpredictable, and *Artforum*'s willingness to engage newer media seriously—it soon ran regular columns on photography and occasional film reviews—quickly attracted the attention of younger readers and critics. In the process, *Artforum* largely displaced *ARTnews* as the center for engaged art criticism. As Phil Leider, *Artforum*'s editor-in-chief in the 1960s, later recalled in Amy Newman's *Challenging Art* (an oral history of *Artforum*), “My colleagues and I were very conscious of the artists of our generation. Tom Hess's *Art News* was losing contact with what was happening.” As a result, Leider was able to recruit a stable of wildly talented and ambitious young critics, who brought a remarkable intensity to their public dialogue. The September 1965 issue of *Artforum*, for instance, reads as a virtual who's who of 1960s art criticism, as it featured writings by Fried, **Max Kozloff**, Lawrence Alloway, Irving Sandler, Sidney Tillim, and Barbara Rose. But that same issue was also telling in a second sense: it was devoted to the New York School of painters, and included no reviews of Californian art. *Artforum* had become, like the establishment that it had initially sought to challenge, centrally interested in New York City. Two years later, the magazine moved its editorial offices to Manhattan.

Emerging Alternatives to Formalism

Viewed from a broad perspective, *Artforum* was only one part of a general efflorescence of American art criticism in the 1960s. Perhaps due in part to the success of Greenberg's *Art and Culture*, the decade saw the appearance of an unprecedented number of books of art criticism. Several critics, including Rosenberg and Kozloff, published anthologies of their work, and others became interested in the earlier history of criticism, turning to the work of Diderot and Baudelaire (whose *Salons* were published in English in 1965). The development was certainly due in part to the academic backgrounds of many of the emerging critics, who were conversant in the larger history of art, and whose backgrounds were often manifested in an increasingly scholarly brand of criticism. For instance, footnotes, virtually unknown in criticism before 1960, soon sprouted like mushrooms in the pages of *Artforum*. Opening quotations linked the work of young scholars to their intellectual ancestors, and the language of criticism became, in some cases, increasingly obscure or hermetic. As Kozloff later recalled, “The technical language we used, with its inner references, aspired to a certain kind of solidarity, to be recognized by fellow insiders.”⁴⁰

³⁹Quoted in Carrier, *Rosalind Krauss and American Philosophical Art Criticism*, 27.

If the most ambitious art criticism was becoming less accessible, however, it certainly did not prevent a general boom in the popularity of contemporary art. In 1964, the critic John Canaday noted that whereas there had been only a handful of New York City galleries in the early 1950s, there were now more than 350—roughly one gallery, he added, for every bakery in the city. The sheer volume of work being produced, then, presented real problems for any magazine that hoped to be comprehensive in its coverage of the arts. And the forms that the new work took were remarkably diverse. Minimalism emerged as an alternative to both Abstract Expressionism and what Greenberg had termed “Post-Painterly Abstraction.” Pop art, too, had arrived with a splash, in a 1962 show at the Sidney Janis Gallery; by 1966, Lucy Lippard had written a book on the new movement, which tended to embrace banal imageries and the principles of commercial design. Allan Kaprow was refining his Happenings (which were early forays into performance art), and Nam June Paik, who moved to New York in 1964, was creating pioneering video work.

This explosion of forms and approaches presented a substantial challenge to the Greenbergian model of formalist criticism, which had been developed largely in relation to nonrepresentational painting but was now called upon to explain a much broader spectrum of work. Initially, critics sympathetic to Greenberg’s approach proceeded as if little had changed. Fried, for example, argued that Pop art was seriously undermined by its open use of extrinsic material: instead of reducing itself to its basic essentials, it willingly pretended to be something that it was not. Soon, however, such attempts to rely upon the familiar assertions of Greenberg in discussing new art struck many observers as misguided and limiting.

As early as 1963, Kozloff sensed that Greenberg’s governing emphasis on flatness and the delimitation of flatness was a theoretical cul-de-sac since, as he wrote, “It can have no logical conclusion, no distillation of final ‘purity,’ other than a blank canvas.” By the late 1960s, such concerns about the limitations of Greenberg’s scheme had become widespread. In a 1968 lecture, Leo Steinberg voiced reservations about the way in which Greenberg’s theories inevitably consigned all works of art to theoretical series, or progressions: pieces became mere props in a larger purported evolution. Similarly, a year later, the sculptor and critic Donald Judd stated in *Studio International*, “I have a lot of complaints. Most of these are about attempts to close the fairly open situation of contemporary art. . . . In the last three years or so I’ve thought that Clement Greenberg and his followers have been trying to form a similar closed situation.” As a result, even Greenberg’s closest intellectual heirs realized that the ground beneath them was shifting. In 1971, Rosalind Krauss added a note to her thesis, on the sculpture of David Smith, in which she emphasized that “while this study was taking form, a rash of attacks on the critical procedures of formal analysis broke out.”⁴¹

⁴⁰Quoted in Newman, *Challenging Art*, 177.

⁴¹Quoted in Carrier, *Rosalind Krauss and American Philosophical Art Criticism*, 71.



Figure 8 Clement Greenberg speaking in New Delhi in 1967 at a presentation of the MoMA exhibition “Two Decades of American Painting”.

Source: Clement Greenberg speaking at the opening of the exhibition, “Two Decades of American Painting.” March 25, 1967 through April 15, 1967. Lalit Kala Academy, New Delhi, India; organized by the International Program of The Museum of Modern Art. International Council/International Program Exhibition Records. “Two Decades of American Painting”: VII.SP-ICE-30-62.20. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York. Photo by R. Komai. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY.

Reenter Politics

Objections to a purely formalist criticism were initially rather abstract, but the political turmoil of the late 1960s soon underlined, in a more concrete and dramatic fashion, the basic insularity of formalist criticism. The year 1968 alone witnessed student and worker strikes that nearly toppled the French government, the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy, the escalation of the conflict in Vietnam, and student protests against the war that culminated in a takeover at Columbia University that temporarily shut the institution down. The work of energized contemporary artists, in turn, moved toward the more explicitly political: after years of producing abstract work, for instance, Leon Golub began to produce assertive figural work that often carried explicitly political overtones. As a result, art criticism that was limited to remarks about the purification of painting suddenly seemed trivial or even irresponsible. As the critic **Kim Levin** later recalled, “Around 1968—in the midst of napalm and dropouts and widespread disruptions—the optimistic approach of modern art . . . became untenable . . . Purity was not possible in an impure world. Modernity had lied.”

The result, in some circles, was an art criticism that foregrounded political and socioeconomic issues. As early as 1967, Sidney Tillim had observed, in a symposium on the state of criticism, that “it may therefore be more accurate to say that there is not so much a new criticism as a new tone in criticism, a certain aggressiveness sponsored by the new socio-critical awareness.”⁴² Over the next few years, the violent cultural clashes of the

⁴²*Art Criticism in the Sixties*, n.p.

day affected the worldview of many artists and critics. Lucy Lippard later remembered 1969 and 1970 as “troubled years in which real-life dissent penetrated even the art world.”⁴³ And so the subtle shift that had been noted by Tillim became, in the writings of many critics, a substantial change in approach. **Robert Pincus-Witten** might be taken as typical, in this sense. After years of writing an essentially formalist criticism for *Artforum*, Pincus-Witten began to feel, in the late 1960s, that a new approach was needed. “By the end of the sixties,” he explained in *Eye to Eye*, “art defended by high formalist writing was no longer capable of seizing the imagination, well, my imagination. Stella and Olitski-derived painting, formalist art in general, had been challenged by a new set of imperatives tempered in the crucible of Viet Nam, and energized by the insurgency and success of the Women’s Movement.” Much as American art critics in the 1930s, writing during the Great Depression, had begun to acknowledge the importance of socioeconomic factors, their descendants in the late 1960s found it increasingly difficult to ignore the relevance of political events.

Film criticism, too, took a turn toward the political. Broadly speaking, American film criticism in the early 1960s had been relatively conservative, and was often little more than a bully pulpit for the large studios: in 1963, in fact, Twentieth Century Fox banned the critic Judith Crist from its screenings after she panned *Cleopatra* in the *New York Herald-Tribune*. By the late 1960s, in an attempt to establish a truer freedom of speech, many newspapers had hired regular film critics. But even the most prominent of these often took predictable stances and had little to say about new styles. Bosley Crowther of the *New York Times*, for instance, dismissed *Bonnie and Clyde*—now widely viewed as a major accomplishment in American filmmaking—by calling it “a cheap piece of bald-faced slapstick comedy.”⁴⁴ In San Francisco, however, a young **Pauline Kael** was drawing notice for her film reviews, which appeared both on the radio and in print and often featured a disarmingly personal voice, an openness to the work of young directors, and an attention to the larger economic contexts in which films were made and seen. In a 1969 essay, for instance, she skewered film classes that presented the act of filmmaking “as if the conditions under which a movie is made and the market for which it is designed were irrelevant, as if the latest product from Warners or Universal should be analyzed like a lyric poem.”⁴⁵ For Kael, as for Kozloff, an acknowledgment of financial realities and pressures formed an essential part of the mission of film criticism.

In 1972 Rosalind Krauss announced her defection from the formalist camp. In an essay entitled “A View of Modernism,” Krauss argued that—despite the claims of Greenberg, Fried, and others—the supposed irrelevance of narrative content in modernist formalism was only an illusion. In fact, she wrote, content had always lain just beneath the surface of modernist criticism: indeed, Greenberg’s claims that the best painting was undergoing a process

⁴³From *the Center*, 266.

⁴⁴Quoted by Bordwell, in his introduction to Ebert’s *Awake in the Dark*, xvi.

⁴⁵Kael, *For Keeps*, 204.

of purification depended upon the very sort of narrative that he disdained in painting. Furthermore, she questioned the assumption—shared by formalists from Fry to Greenberg and at the heart of much of Krauss’s own earlier writing—that art criticism could ever establish a truly universal language of form. To Krauss, such a view now seemed arrogant, or presumptuous:

I began as a modernist critic and am still a modernist critic, but only as part of a larger modernist sensibility and not the narrower kind. Which is further to say that what I must acknowledge is not some idea of the world’s perspective but simply my own point of view; that it matters who one sounds like when what one is writing about is art. One’s own perspective, like one’s own age, is the only orientation one will ever have.

Krauss’s stark emphasis on her own subjectivity and historical context had an important precedent in the history of criticism: Baudelaire, more than a century earlier, had argued that criticism should be “formed from an exclusive point of view, but also from a point of view that opens up the greatest number of horizons.” In the early 1970s, though, it also marked a decisive break with the confidence of Greenbergian formalism, and pointed the way toward a more open recognition of individual tastes and preferences: in other words, toward a postmodern criticism. In 1966, the architect Robert Venturi had condemned what he saw as “puritanically moral language” in writings on architecture, and lauded instead “elements which are hybrid rather than ‘pure’ . . . messy vitality . . . richness . . . rather than clarity of meaning.” Venturi’s emphasis on complexity, contradiction, and individuality, and his doubts regarding supposedly absolute truths, soon became seen as typical of a body of thought now termed **postmodern**. Building on this set of ideas, and arguing further that interpretations were inevitably mediated by language, culture, and class, critics such as Krauss had begun to seek alternatives to Greenberg’s tidy decrees.

Early Feminist Criticism

Even as they began to question Greenbergian formalism, critics in the 1970s and 1980s were also invigorated by the sheer variety of artistic work being produced. In 1977, the architect Charles Jencks wrote that “a realistic assessment of the situation [in contemporary architecture] suggests that schizophrenia is the only intelligent approach.”⁴⁶ Three years later, the critic Kim Levin quoted Jencks, and extended his observation. “He was speaking of architecture,” she concluded, “but it might as well have been of art, which seemed to have splintered into a million individual pieces.” Or, as Harold Rosenberg saw it in the mid-1970s, there was simply no clear dominant paradigm. “Sometimes,” he wrote, “all the movements are in the dark and the circle of the spotlight is vacant. This seemed to be the case since 1971.”

Feminism represented one ascendant movement. Much as feminist art historians of the 1970s were beginning to research largely overlooked female

⁴⁶Quoted in Levin, *Beyond Modernism*, 26.

artists and to investigate ways in which women had been depicted over the centuries, several art critics began to devote their energies to the study of work by contemporary women artists and to a consideration of the relevance of sexual difference and gender in art. In part, this reflected a similar tendency in the arts themselves. In 1972 American artists Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro oversaw the creation, at the California Institute of the Arts, of an installation known as *Womanhouse*, in which 25 female artists were allotted space in a 17-room mansion; much of the resulting work centered around the theme of gendered identities. A year later, Mary Kelly released a video related to her *Post-Partum Document*, a project in which she archived a range of objects and documents related to the first year of her son's life; the objects were paired with quasi-scientific data and theoretical references that related to the notions of female fetishism and identity formation. And in 1974, the artist Lynda Benglis arranged to have her dealer pay to run, as advertisements in separate issues of *Artforum*, four photographs of herself in poses and dress that suggested a range of gendered and sexual stereotypes. In one, she posed fully nude, wearing only rhinestone sunglasses and a diamond stud earring and holding a cast-latex dildo between her legs.

Such work sparked a flurry of interest (despite the fact that several *Artforum* editors co-signed, in the same issue of the magazine, a letter in which they denounced Benglis's gesture as one of "extreme vulgarity"), and the 1970s saw the foundation of several feminist art journals. *The Feminist Art Journal* began publication in 1972, *Womanart* in 1976, and *Chrysalis* in 1977. These journals had short lives, due in part to a lack of institutional support and in part to their limited audience; none of the three lasted more than five years. Even so, the 1970s witnessed lively debates among feminist art critics, especially regarding the notion that men and women were somehow biologically—and thus essentially—different. European feminists widely adopted an essentialist position—an approach that was initially echoed in American feminist art criticism but that soon gave way to an emphasis on the role of social expectations and forces, rather than biology, in shaping identities.

Lucy Lippard was probably the best known of feminist critics in the 1970s. After resigning from *Artforum* in 1967 due to her frustration with the magazine's lack of coverage of female artists, Lippard wrote a series of essays, in a variety of journals and catalogues, that concentrated on women creators and suggested that the common experience of femaleness could result in shared female visual interests. She also experimented with various structures in her criticism, sometimes writing in parallel columns in order to yield juxtapositions of meaning, and she embraced a personal and subjective voice. The publication of a group of her essays in a single volume, *From the Center*, in 1976, solidified Lippard's importance as a feminist critic.

At the same time, several other female art critics also began to gain notice for their work. Some of them, like Lippard, employed experimental voices, vocabularies, and formats in their writing as a means of seeking alternatives to practices that they saw as associatively male and as ultimately limiting. **Arlene Raven**, for instance, often used an intentionally disjointed writing style that could be said to resemble collage and that suggested, to **Donald Kuspit** (who

edited a volume of Raven's criticism), that "through the accretion of fragments a new female wholeness might spontaneously generate, or at least be imaginatively glimpsed." Other feminist critics, meanwhile, offered substantive critiques of conventional wisdom and practice. Norma Broude, an art historian who specialized in the study of nineteenth-century painting, repeatedly advocated an attention to issues related to gender, and she gained a measure of notoriety by responding to Hilton Kramer's 1980 claim that feminism eroded standards of greatness in art with a flat rejoinder that those standards thus needed to change. Broude also coedited, with Mary Garrard, several volumes of collected feminist essays on the arts; in the introduction to the first, they defined their mission in part as an attempt "to complete art history by restoring its female half." Given the substantial overlaps between art history and art criticism, such a mission can be said to have extended, as well, to the band of feminist criticism that had emerged only a few years before.

Neo-Marxism and October

Another approach common in the 1970s was not really very new at all. American critics interested in political analysis began to return in earnest, for the first time since the 1930s, to Marxism as a means of analyzing the socioeconomic forces that stood behind the production and consumption of art. Admittedly, Marxist ideas had evolved considerably since the 1930s; in fact, they changed dramatically in the years following May of 1968, when a leftist challenge to the French government was put down—after a series of strikes and street fights—by the de Gaulle regime. A moment that had struck many Marxist sympathizers as potentially revolutionary had thus resulted in the perpetuation of extant systems of power, and some observers found their belief in imminent upheaval and historical determinism challenged. Nevertheless, many critics continued to rely upon Marx's terms and ideas in creating a politically aware criticism.

Max Kozloff, for example, had become one of the editors of *Artforum*, and he helped to steer that journal, through a series of essays, toward a more explicitly political stance that emphasized the economic realities that supported the facade of contemporary art. In a bitter 1971 piece entitled "The Multimillion Dollar Art Boondoggle," he derided a group of artists who had participated in a show that paired them with prominent American industrial companies, giving the artists access to the vast resources of the firms. Pointing out that some of the companies were linked to the production of weaponry, Kozloff argued that even as students were being slain on the campuses of Kent State and Jackson State, "American artists did not hesitate to freeload at the trough of that techno-fascism that had inspired them." Similarly, in a 1973 essay, he sketched an alternative history of Abstract Expressionism, interpreting it not in terms of formalist self-criticality but rather in relation to Cold War rhetoric. The American government, he argued, had underwritten a series of traveling shows of Abstract Expressionist work because the loose, nonrepresentational paintings suggested an environment of artistic freedom, in contrast to the social realist works of Soviet

artists. The history of painting, Kozloff suggested, was less a refined purification of the medium than a result of coarse political power.

As Kozloff outlined the oppressive nature of the military-industrial complex, though, other art critics employed a more optimistic tone, using their criticism as a means of stressing the continued possibility of political change. **John Berger**, for example, oversaw the production of a 1972 BBC television series and accompanying text, both entitled *Ways of Seeing*, that revealed the capitalist logic of advertisements and the baldly materialistic subject matters of traditional European oil painting. Couched in straightforward, accessible language, both the series and the book were designed to speak to a broad audience and to effect change; instead of attempting to appeal to an elite, Berger hoped to empower the masses. A year later, in the introduction to a study of nineteenth-century French art, the critic and art historian T. J. Clark wondered if contemporary art could really participate in a project of political mobilization. Ultimately, he decided, it could: “Could there be any such thing,” he asked, “as revolutionary art until the means existed—briefly, abortively—to change those basic conditions? Yes! Long live the Revolution!”

Clark’s enthusiasm can read, decades later, as naive, but it is worth remembering that he was writing in an atmosphere in which, as the art historian David Carrier later remarked, “It was not absurd to hope for an alliance between radical avant-garde art and leftist political movements.”⁴⁷ And, indeed, Clark repeatedly stressed what he saw as the need for an art (and a view of art) that was not restricted to abstract, Greenbergian formal values but that was instead explicitly related to a larger political or socioeconomic environment. In an essay on Greenberg’s theory of art, for instance, Clark argued that even the emphasis on flatness that Greenberg had seen as fundamental to modernist painting was in fact linked to larger social patterns—or to values, as Clark put it, “which necessarily derived from elsewhere than art.” Such a position was a direct attack on the tradition of pure formalism and soon inspired a dyspeptic rebuttal from Michael Fried. By evoking the idea that all art depends upon a larger context, however, Clark was implicitly also arguing that, in that broader context, art could help to effect change.

Perhaps the most important and durable manifestation of that hope, though, was the foundation in 1976 of the quarterly journal *October*. As Rosalind Krauss had drifted away from *Artforum* and Greenbergian formalism, she had become interested in the notion that avant-garde art could assume a meaningful political function. Working with Annette Michelson, who had also written for *Artforum*, she named her new publication after a 1927 film by the Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein that had commemorated the tenth anniversary of the Russian October Revolution. Or, as the editors put it in a note in the first issue, “We have named this journal in celebration of that moment in our century when revolutionary practice, theoretical inquiry and artistic innovation were joined in a manner exemplary and unique.”⁴⁸ Clearly, in the context of the Cold War and the bicentennial of the United States, such

⁴⁷Quoted in Carrier, *Rosalind Krauss and American Philosophical Art Criticism*, 104.

⁴⁸“About *October*,” 3.

a gesture was a provocative one, but *October* soon drew considerable interest for its commitment to criticism that emphasized the economic and social bases of artistic practice. Such an emphasis may sound familiar—after all, it had been common in Meyer Schapiro’s writings, as well, as early as 1936—but the criticism published in *October* frequently involved relatively intricate analyses of Marxist theory and open challenges to perceived misuses of Marx’s ideas. A 1980 essay by Serge Guilbaut, for instance, derided Greenberg’s use of Marxist terms, ultimately seeing his political philosophy as superficial and opportunist. In this sense, the critics writing for *October* participated in a broader conversation regarding the legacy and the relevance of Marxism.

In addition to acute political analysis, *October* also stood out through its design and its relatively open-minded attitude toward novel forms of contemporary art. Featuring a limited number of images and flatly eschewing color photographs, *October* did not have to attempt to attract advertising dollars to offset expensive printing costs. Instead, the publication concentrated on content, offering an array of translated documents, involved analyses, and discussions of avant-garde forms that had generated little interest in earlier publications. Thus, as the filmmaker Jeffrey Skoller later pointed out, in James Elkins’s *The State of Art Criticism*, “For me and my generation . . . the importance of *October* was that it was the first place that really insisted on the idea that avant-garde cinema, video and photography had a serious place in art history.”

October was significant in at least one other way, as well. Much of the criticism that it published was colored by a range of theoretical assumptions that were often derived from European ideas. In turn, *October* was typical of a general embrace of theory in 1970s American art criticism (see sidebar), and it played a vital role in establishing the legitimacy of such an approach. The critics who wrote for the journal were frequently professional academics, and their prose often reflected their interest in ambitious, abstract analysis. Despite the implicitly populist aspect of the journal’s title, the criticism that ran in *October* was never interested in attracting a mass readership. Instead, it insisted on the value of sophisticated analysis—and thus validated, in a way, the artist Joseph Kosuth’s concern that “the artist has just become a sort of a prop man, a dummy, and the critics do all the thinking and order the way in which you see it, and any sort of thinking around the work is presented by them and not by the artist.” Perhaps such a tendency had already been visible in the 1950s, in the ambitious, encompassing ideas of Rosenberg and Greenberg, but *October* helped to multiply and enshrine circulating theoretical approaches and thus played a role in a more general dissolution of any sense of a master narrative of art.

The 1980s and the Culture Wars

Subjectivity and fragmentation did not appeal, however, to every viewer, and the 1980s saw visible resistance in some quarters to these developing tendencies. Generally, the American political landscape became more conservative, and contemporary art attracted relatively regular outcries from

The Rise of Theory in Art Criticism

In a sense, all art criticism draws on theory. The earliest Salon criticism was rooted in ideas regarding the ideal function of painting and the value of classical forms, and criticism of the 1930s often referred to the Marxist claim that the economic bases of a society determine its cultural superstructure. Generally, though, historians of art criticism agree that in the 1960s and 1970s a number of critics began to draw on theoretical systems in increasingly elaborate ways. Embracing ideas and terms that had been developed in other fields and that were often associated with European thought, art critics drew on a range of theoretical models, many of which still color the language of criticism.

In the 1960s, as Clement Greenberg's formalism came under increasing fire, critics turned to other traditions of thought in search of alternatives—or supplements—to his explanation of modernist painting. Some, certainly, reread Marx. Others, though, employed semiotic theory, which was pioneered by linguists and involved the study of how signs convey meaning. Michael Fried's 1969 "Art and Objecthood," for instance, discussed the juxtaposition of I-beams and girders in the work of the sculptor Anthony Caro in this way: "The mutual inflection of one element by another, rather than the identity of each, is what is crucial—though of course altering the identity of any element would be at least as drastic as altering its placement." The elements of Caro's sculpture worked, for Fried, like words in a sentence.

Other critics drew on other bodies of theory. Some turned to structuralism, which was associated with the sociologist Claude Levi-Strauss and argued that cultural significance was produced through paired opposites (such as raw and cooked, or light and dark). Rosalind Krauss's 1979 "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" offered a structuralist analysis of contemporary sculpture by creating a grid that mapped the possible relations between landscape, architecture, and their opposites. Psychoanalytic theory also intrigued art critics. Barbara Rose, for example, argued in 1973 that "on one level, every stylistic change in the history of art may be viewed as an Oedipal confrontation," and feminist film critics contended that the pleasures of traditional narrative cinema were voyeuristic and aimed at a presumed ideal male spectator. And, following the success of Edward Said's 1978 book *Orientalism*, still other critics embraced postcolonial theory and its critique of Western images of the Other.

The rise of theory in criticism was sometimes questioned. Adherents of particular theories could be viciously parochial—a process mocked in Tom Wolfe's 1975 *The Painted Word*. And the sheer complexity of some of the theories employed resulted in prose that was far from clear. Still, the notion of drawing on extant bodies of thought was hardly controversial. In his *Salon* of 1765, Diderot boasted that "I collected the verdicts of old men and the thoughts of children, the judgments of men of letters, the opinions of sophisticates." The names and ideas, of course, have changed, but the idea of invoking the ideas of others has not.

indignant public officials. In 1981 Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* was removed, after numerous complaints about its unsightliness, from its site in the plaza of a New York City government building, and in 1989 Senator Alfonse D'Amato, furious that Andres Serrano, the artist behind a photograph of a crucifix submerged in urine, had benefited from grant moneys overseen

by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), denounced the image as “abhorrent” and demanded reform in the grant process. A year later, the NEA vetoed grant proposals from four performance artists—the so-called NEA Four—due to allegedly controversial subject matter, even though the proposals had already been endorsed in a peer-review process. Complicating matters further was the intensifying AIDS crisis, which decimated the New York arts community in the 1980s but was widely seen, by conservative commentators, as a simple consequence of homosexual promiscuity.

Against this backdrop, American art criticism often assumed a sharply combative, polemical tone. Leftist critics offered spirited defenses of art that they saw as politically responsible: Krauss, for example, was one of a number of art critics who argued publicly against the removal of Serra’s piece. Just as often, though, they found themselves resisting allegedly reactionary attitudes or institutional policies. Douglas Crimp, who had worked as a managing editor at *October* since 1977, began to urge the journal to adopt a more activist stance toward the AIDS epidemic, before finally quitting in frustration in 1990. Feminist critics, too, continued to challenge what they saw as restrictive patriarchal assumptions, and they did so in new venues: *Woman’s Art Journal* (founded in 1980) and *Frauen Kunst Wissenschaft* (founded in Germany, in 1987) were simply the most prominent of a spate of new publications dedicated to commentary on art by, and involving, women. Finally, a number of critics, influenced by Edward Said’s well-regarded 1978 study of the ideology of Orientalism, began to employ variants of postcolonial theory in critiquing the presentation of foreign cultures in museum settings. The logic of MoMA’s 1984 show “‘Primitivism’ in Twentieth-Century Art,” for example, was challenged in extended essays by **Thomas McEvilley** (writing in *Art in America*) and **Hal Foster** (in *October*); both writers offered sophisticated analyses of the exhibition’s purported use of non-Western artifacts to buttress and to reinforce Western concepts of quality. And in 1987 Rasheed Araeen founded the journal *Third Text* as a venue that he hoped might help to “develop a common platform for those who are positioned as marginal by the dominant culture.”

On the other hand, conservative critics saw the intensely theoretical and generally liberal art criticism of such critics as misguided, and urged a return to clearly written prose and to traditional notions of artistic quality. Probably the most outspoken exponent of such a position was Hilton Kramer. As early as 1959, he had complained about the fustian prose of the poet-critics associated with *ARTnews*; in Kramer’s view, such writing stood out as poor even in “a genre where one has come to expect turgid vocabulary, arbitrary syntax and a total indifference to the felicities of common speech.” In 1965, Kramer joined the *New York Times*, where he wrote for nearly 20 years; by the early 1980s, however, he had become exasperated, once again, by the state of American criticism. Unconvinced by the Marxist tendency to read art in relation to “the iron laws of history,” and suspicious of both feminism (which he saw as a victimizing radical whirlwind) and post-modernism (which he viewed as little more than mere aesthetic relativism, or as an abandonment of standards), Kramer was also frustrated by critics’

reliance on opaque, obscurantist writing. As a result, he resigned his post at the *Times* in 1982 in order to cofound *The New Criterion*, a monthly journal that published a range of cultural criticism and that soon became a prominent venue for conservative voices.

Undoubtedly, though, it would be too simple to see 1980s criticism as a mere clash between left and right. After all, it was also true that the global art market was booming: in 1987, van Gogh's *Iris*es sold for a record \$53 million, and bids for new work by artists such as Keith Haring and David Salle regularly shattered auction house estimates. The swelling market, in turn, occasioned relatively broad public interest in art, and that interest was met largely by critics writing in major newspapers and mass-market weeklies. Beginning in 1984, for instance, Arthur Danto—a philosopher who, after being deeply impressed by Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*, had begun to write on contemporary art in the early 1960s—joined the staff of *The Nation* as the magazine's resident art critic. Although he was writing for a national audience, Danto insisted on real intellectual rigor, and earned a broad reputation for his ability to write in an accessible manner about challenging work; his 1990 book *Encounters and Reflections*, which collected his first essays for *The Nation*, won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Art Criticism.

Two other critics also won plaudits in the 1980s for their ability to engage a large audience effectively and meaningfully. Robert Hughes, the Australian who had worked for several London publications before joining the staff of *Time* in 1970, was widely respected by 1980s readers for his clear-sightedness and healthy skepticism regarding intellectual fads. Similarly, **Roberta Smith**, who joined the *New York Times* in 1986, soon earned a reputation for directness and an ability to approach a variety of topics in a lucid, open style. Thus, while Hughes and Smith may have done relatively little to influence the thinking of the avant-garde, they were able, through comprehensible prose, to introduce a large readership to some of the major issues surrounding contemporary art. Or, as Peter Schjeldahl saw it, in the *Village Voice* in 1981, "The newer critics are the progeny of a semieducated middle-class audience that repels the older critics. This audience has some virtues, including an influential appreciation of clarity and style in writing. Its vices, faithfully mirrored by many critics, include laziness, voyeurism, cynicism, and envy."

Festivalism, Globalism, and Institutional Critique

If the field of art criticism between 1940 and 1990 was dominated by American voices, though, the 1990s saw a shift toward a more truly international conversation. This was related to larger political forces, of course (such as the fall of the Berlin Wall, in 1989), but it was also due to the emergence of a number of talented artists from around the globe, and to the evolution of a slate of biennials and art fairs that sought out and promoted such work. To be sure, regular art exhibitions were nothing new in the contemporary art world: the Venice Biennale, after all, had first been held in 1895, and had been a prominent venue for the display of contemporary art since 1948. The São

Paulo Art Biennale had been a major event since 1951, and documenta, an exhibition of modern and contemporary art held every five years in Kassel, Germany, had attracted art critics since its formation in 1955. But the push toward globalization in the late 1980s and 1990s soon resulted in a bevy of competing events. The Istanbul Biennial was unveiled in 1987, and was soon followed by the Asia Pacific Triennial (in 1993), the Gwangju Biennale in South Korea (in 1995), and the Shanghai Art Biennale (in 1996). Within the course of a decade, the calendar of the contemporary art world had become packed, and critics such as Schjeldahl spoke of a spirit of festivalism.

In turn, the profusion of biennials prompted a surge in the globalization of the art world. As Julian Stallabrass would later put it, in his 2004 book *Contemporary Art: A Very Short Introduction*, “The interests of all the bodies, private and public, that make up all the alliances around which biennales are formed tend to produce an art that speaks to international concerns.” But the new slate of international exhibitions also represented a real opportunity for critics, who now had a regular series of natural topics and unprecedented access to the work of a host of international artists. Consequently, an emerging globalism soon characterized much art criticism. **Holland Cotter**, who had studied Indian and Islamic art before working as an editor at *Art in America* and as a freelance critic at the *New York Times*, began to write increasingly in the 1990s on new Asian art, and he was among the first critics to bring contemporary Indian art to the attention of Western readers. Largely on the strength of that work, he subsequently won a Pulitzer Prize.

In Europe, meanwhile, art journals such as *Circa*—an Irish publication founded in 1982—became decidedly less parochial in their outlook. As Medb Ruane noted, in a 2002 survey of the first 99 issues of *Circa*, “Younger generations less concerned with ideologies of race and nation, right or left, were more interested and able to develop practice in a global frame where attitudes could be played with and transformed.” And in France, **Nicolas Bourriaud**—who worked as the Parisian correspondent for *Flash Art* from 1987 to 1995 and founded *Documents sur l'art* in 1992—identified a common interest, in the work of a number of artists active in the early 1990s, in what he termed “the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space.” He published his observations, in extended form, in a 1998 booklet called *Relational Aesthetics*, which was probably the most widely discussed piece of art criticism written in the 1990s.

But significant art criticism was also being written, with increasing frequency, by authors born outside Western Europe and the United States. Geeta Kapur, a curator and critic based in New Delhi, began to write on contemporary Indian art in the 1970s, and coedited the 1997 volume *Contemporary Art in Asia*. The Russian-born Boris Groys authored widely read analyses of several contemporary artists in the 1990s, and the Chinese curator and critic Gao Minglu edited the 1998 book *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*. And Olu Oguibe, who was born in Nigeria in 1964 and has lived in London and the United States, wrote on modern and contemporary African art for a broad range of publications, including *Nka*, a journal established in 1994 as a forum for discussions of contemporary African art by the Sudan-born Salah

Hassan and the Nigeria-born **Okwui Enwezor**. Both Hassan and Enwezor, in turn, earned wide respect in the 1990s for their own criticism; Enwezor was given the Frank Jewett Mather Award for Art Criticism in 2006.

Interestingly, though, the rise of biennials also undermined, in a basic sense, the importance of the art critic as a cultural arbiter. Because biennials, like any exhibition, inevitably involve implicit assertions about the worth of the work selected, they foreground the decisions of the curators who develop them. Critics, in other words, now played a passive and reactive role, and often seemed, as a result, peripheral to the entire process. Or, as the critic Claire Bishop observed in 2006, “In Europe at least, the influence of the art critic began to diminish in the early 1990s, and was replaced by the curator as the figure who makes or breaks an artist’s career.”⁴⁹ Realizing this, a number of critics soon began to participate in the curatorial process. Enwezor is perhaps the foremost example of this tendency; in addition to writing regularly on contemporary art, he oversaw the second Johannesburg Biennale, in 1997, and served as the director of documenta XI, in 2002. But he was hardly alone in combining critical and curatorial practices. Hassan, too, curated a range of shows; Bourriaud cofounded and codirected the Palais de Tokyo, in Paris; Oguibe curated the 2001 Venice Biennale; and Robert Storr and Helen Molesworth have also done visible work as critics and curators. Whereas a few earlier critics, such as Fried and Lippard, had organized shows, a large group of individuals now earned attention both for writings on art and for exhibitions that featured, in their organization and selection of works, comments about the state of contemporary art. Curating was a virtual branch, in some cases, of criticism.

But if a number of critics began to take part in the organized display of art in the 1990s, others sought to question the very institutions that facilitated such display. Here, they were often spurred by the work of a number of artists who practiced what is generally known as institutional critique: work, that is, that called attention to the conventions and assumed normalities of the art world, with the goal of pointing to their hidden ideological aspects and, often, of challenging or dislocating established practices. The artist Michael Asher, for instance, had begun, as early as the 1960s, to subtly alter gallery spaces in order to draw attention to the environment in which art was displayed. And in 1976, the artist Brian O’Doherty had written an influential essay, published in *Artforum*, in which he exposed the normally ignored conventions and associations of the pristine environment of the standard white-walled gallery. In the 1990s, however, such inquiries became considerably more common and sophisticated, as artists from Fred Wilson to Andrea Fraser worked within the conventions of museums (whether as curators or tour guides) to reveal the subjective logics that governed such structures. In turn, art critics began to embrace a comparable approach. In a series of writings, for instance, Carol Duncan examined the ways in which museums facilitated ritualistic behavior and thus resembled traditional temples, or religious buildings.

⁴⁹See Crawford, *Artistic Bedfellows*, 204.

Still, it is worth noting that not every art critic in the 1990s was participating in, or questioning, the display of art. Several critics earned reputations for their abilities as talented wordsmiths, rather than ambitious theorists. Schjeldahl, for instance, had been a professional poet in the 1970s, and after he became the lead art critic at *The New Yorker* in 1998 he quickly became known for a graceful tone that combined verbal precision with an ability to address complex themes in approachable language. **Dave Hickey** earned a large following (and, in 2001, a prestigious MacArthur Fellowship) for essays that tackled a wide swath of visual culture, and did so in deeply creative language. Hickey, in turn, publicly admired the critical work of Bill Berkson, best known for his work as a poet. **Herbert Muschamp**, *The New York Times*' lead architectural critic from 1992 to 2004, was as lauded for his arch style and lush, evocative imagery as for his passionate defenses of post-modern architects such as Rem Koolhaas and Zaha Hadid. And Jerry Saltz earned plaudits for a tone that was sometimes brash, sometimes sensitive, and often irreverent. In a decade, then, in which the display of art was subjected to intense scrutiny, a number of writers also crafted prose in distinct and memorable voices.

Art Criticism since 2000

Succinctly summarizing the multiple strands of criticism that have thus far characterized the twenty-first century is difficult, but at least a few generalizations seem possible. For one, critics have shown an acute interest in the past, present, and future of their field. Admittedly, previous decades had seen occasional attempts—from Lionello Venturi's 1936 history of art criticism to Leo Steinberg's assessment of formalist criticism in 1968—to offer overarching views of criticism. But recent decades have seen a surge in the number of books, roundtables, and symposia dedicated to the nature, if not the present state, of art criticism. In part this may be due to the realization that a centuries-old practice has never been analyzed very fully: in 2007, for instance, George Baker observed that "we as of yet do not have any such thing in the field of art as a 'history of art criticism.' No established accounts, no historical narratives really pertain. The story is up for grabs."⁵⁰

Above all, though, the recent spate of commentaries on criticism seems to have been motivated, at least in part, by a growing sense that the genre has somehow lost its way. Noël Carroll's 2009 book *On Criticism*, for instance, was sparked in part by a sense that contemporary criticism has largely forfeited its responsibility in shying away from judgments. For other observers, criticism has simply become irrelevant, or obsolete. That, at least, was the upshot of a 2001 *October* roundtable that addressed the place of contemporary criticism, and of an influential, polemical 2003 essay in *Art in America* by Raphael Rubinstein (which was subsequently republished in the book *Critical Mess*). Similarly, the idea of a criticism unmoored from any larger purpose colored the comments of participants in several seminars organized

⁵⁰Quoted in Birnbaum and Graw, *Canvases and Careers Today*, 22.

by the art historian James Elkins in 2005. Admittedly, the precise positions voiced in such discussions differed. But most echoed on some level the claim of the critic Eleanor Heartney that “critics aren’t really sure what their role is anymore. Are they talent scouts, advocates, or educators?”⁵¹

What prompted such uncertainty? In part, recent doubts about the value of criticism have been fueled by the growing realization of the important role played by galleries, publicists, and curators. “No doubt,” wrote David Carrier in 2007, “reviews in the *New York Times* or *Artforum* have practical significance for the careers of emerging artists. But what matters now is gaining support from dealers, curators, and collectors. Nowadays, art writing plays very little role in this commercial system.” Jerry Saltz agrees: “At no time in the last 50 years has what an art critic written had less of an effect on the market than now.” Or, we might add, on the public at large. *Time* and *Newsweek* both ceased to run, in around 2000, regular comments on contemporary art, and downsizing at many newspapers led to the release, in some cases, of local critics. Opinions regarding the elimination of such positions have varied. But the verdicts have often echoed the claim made by Elkins in his 2003 book *What Happened to Art Criticism?* that the craft is in “worldwide crisis.”

Even as a growing contingent of critics contended that criticism had grown irrelevant, though, others held that reports of its demise had been exaggerated. The American critic Katy Siegel, for instance, argued in Rubinstein’s *Critical Mess* that the purported crisis was really only a “dissolution of influence,” due to the increasing confidence of middle-class observers in looking at art. And in 2008 Isabelle Graw, a German art historian and critic, argued that where some Americans discerned a crisis in criticism, European observers often perceived, instead, an evolving strength, as critics seemed well equipped to contribute to an emerging knowledge-based economy.⁵² Oddly, then, the first decade of the twenty-first century witnessed a lively debate, in multiple venues, about a field that is purportedly waning, or even already obsolete.

Despite such confusion, though, critics certainly did not stop writing, or speaking. In fact, the 2000s saw a proliferation of critical venues and publications. In a few cases, already extant magazines simply began to reach a broader audience. This was the case, for instance, with *Flash Art International*, which typically features contributions from a wide range of internationally based critics and curators, and *Frieze*, which, having published its first issue in 1991, has since become an increasingly important venue in the field of art criticism. In other cases, however, new journals were founded to fill perceived needs. For example, *Grey Room*, launched in 2000, was prompted in part by a frustration with *October*’s waning engagement with contemporary art; characterized by a comparable theoretical rigor, *Grey Room* soon began to attract a number of influential critics. Meanwhile, other new journals extended the movement toward internationalism: for instance, 2003 witnessed the establishment of *Bidoun*, which published commentary

⁵¹Rubinstein, *Critical Mess*, 103.

⁵²Birnbaum and Graw, *Canvases and Careers Today*, 6.

on the arts of the Middle East, and of *Asia Pacific Arts*, dedicated to the burgeoning Asian artistic landscape.

With the emergence of such publications, art criticism had arguably become a truly global endeavor. Whereas Robert Hughes could remember, 50 years ago, copies of *ARTnews* arriving in Australia like bottles cast upon the seas, the direction of art criticism over the last decade has been far from unidirectional: instead, criticism has become a largely decentered enterprise. The poet and cultural commentator Ranjit Hoskote, for instance, gained notice for his work as an art critic for India's *The Hindu* from 2000 to 2007, during which period he also published several books on Indian artists. In China, the Beijing-based artist and curator Zhang Zhaohui has become an important critical voice, partly on the strength of his work with contemporary art portal chinese-art.com, and the Russian-born Lev Manovich has gained a wide following for his analyses of new media, and of the conjunctions between fine art and technology. Thus, while it is true that New York, London, and Berlin remain critically important sites in the production and reception of contemporary art, recent criticism has hardly been governed by traditional borders.

Part of the reason for that is the emergence of Web-based criticism, which has changed the field. Although the 1990s saw a few tentative efforts at online criticism, the years since the millennium have seen an explosion in the number of electronic publications. For example, Manovich has been a frequent contributor to *Rhizome*, a site dedicated to the discussion of new media and emerging technologies. *Afterall Online* features a wide range of reviews, essays, and interviews, while *art & education* offers a combination of news, announcements, and critical essays. The ambitious *artcritical*, edited by David Cohen, publishes criticism by a host of established writers and archives recordings of regularly held review panels, in which critics discuss, before a live audience, recent exhibitions. Meanwhile, numerous blogs offer more personal and less formal critical takes on the landscape of contemporary art. Tyler Green's widely read *Modern Art Notes* comments on developments in the museum and gallery worlds, while *CultureGrrl* (written by Lee Rosenbaum, who also works for the *Wall Street Journal*) and *Culture Monster* (which is the product of a number of contributors) revolve around quick takes on recent developments and shows.

This evolution of online critical venues has been paralleled by developments in the tone and shape of critical writing in more traditional formats. In recent years, the term art writing has been applied increasingly to commentary on the arts that seems more interested in generating a range of positions and variations of voice than in creating a mood of absolute authority or final judgment. Chris Kraus, for example, has garnered acclaim for a series of books on art and visual culture that draw on numerous genres—biography, theory, history, and fiction—in producing an unmistakably subjective, but also complex, set of interpretations. But Kraus, who won the Frank Jewett Mather Award for Art Criticism in 2008, is only part of a larger movement away from traditional criticism. As the critic and curator J. J. Charlesworth has observed, "The steady shift from criticism to art writing is one of increasing introspection, [rooted in] sensitive interpretation and not-too-far-reaching valuation."

In spite of the changes in critical writing reflected in the online world, though, it would be misleading to suggest that recent criticism is completely divorced from the variants that preceded it. There are meaningful connections, for instance, between the criticism of Whitney Chadwick, an American art historian, and the work of earlier feminist critics. Chadwick, who is perhaps best known for her work on female artists in the Surrealist movement, authored a widely read 1990 book on women, art, and society that concluded with a series of thoughts on contemporary trends, and in 2010 she took part in a Bay Area workshop dedicated to a discussion of the importance of critical dialogue to the health of the visual arts community. Similarly, some of the work of David Carrier clearly draws on earlier examples of institutional critique; his 2006 book *Museum Skepticism*, for instance, was informed by the writings of critic Carol Duncan, while nevertheless pushing toward a more systematic critical analysis of museum layout and design. And, finally, the overlap between critical and curatorial activity has grown even more profound since 2000; indeed, today it is often pointless to try to draw distinctions between practicing artists, curators, and critics, as single individuals now often fill all three roles.

But the proliferation of new permutations, venues, and voices has also led, in some circles, to a sense of exhaustion. James Elkins argued, in 2003, that the criticism produced had become so ubiquitous, and was issued in so many formats, that it simply could not be processed by any one individual. As a result, Elkins wrote, criticism was both “massively produced and massively ignored.” And, to an extent, such a claim is hard to dispute. From newspaper columns and online posts to academic articles, television-based criticism, and essays in journals and exhibition catalogs, the sheer volume of art criticism has grown so great as to have long ago dissolved any sense of a coherent, centralized conversation.

Conclusions

Viewed from a certain angle, though, contemporary art criticism is only the latest form of a genre that has a long and varied history. At times, art criticism has been distinctly influenced by external events and by the sort of art being produced at a particular moment; at other times, it has assumed an active role in prompting changes in large institutional practices or in promoting certain types of art. It has at times drawn ambitiously on other fields, and at times it has looked inward, offering a self-reflexivity. At times art criticism has occupied a prominent place in the landscape of cultural conversation, and at others it has been marginalized, if not largely ignored.

At the very least, then, a knowledge of the history of criticism can offer a useful context within which to assess its current state. Consider, for example, the recent assertions that art criticism no longer enjoys the influence or legitimacy that it was granted in the 1950s and 1960s. In 2009, Saul Anton—a former editor for the online version of *Artforum* who is also known for a

book that offered imagined dialogues between the artists Robert Smithson and Andy Warhol—was writing a dissertation on the criticism of Diderot. This prompted Martha Schwendener, an art critic at the *Village Voice*, to wonder “if the ‘crisis in criticism’ hasn’t opened things up by driving us back to our origins, which were considerably more eclectic and heteroglossic than most 20th-century art criticism.” In other words, where the 1950s and 1960s were largely dominated by the monolithic American voices of Harold Rosenberg, Clement Greenberg, and their adherents, the contemporary critical landscape perhaps bears a closer resemblance, in its multiple voices and decentered formats, to the pamphlets, numerous newspapers, and anonymous lines of verse that formed the body of 18th century Parisian criticism. Obviously, much has changed over the course of 270 years. But the present is never completely unmoored from the past. A full understanding of current criticism depends, in several ways, on a recognition of the past forms and practices of the genre.