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Michèle Hannoosh,
Jules Michelet: Writing Art and History in Nineteenth-Century France.
University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2019.
248 pp.; 31 b&w illus.; bibliography; index.
\$94.95 (hardcover)
ISBN: 978-0-271-08356-8

Éric Michaud,
The Barbarian Invasions: A Genealogy of the History of Art.
Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019.
280 pp.; 16 b&w illus.; notes; index.
\$35.00 (hardcover)
ISBN: 9780262043151

Martha Nussbaum,
The Cosmopolitan Tradition: A Noble but Flawed Ideal.
Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019.
320 pp.; notes; index.
\$27.95 (hardcover)
ISBN: 9780674052499

Matthew Rampley,
The Seductions of Darwin: Art, Evolution, Neuroscience.
University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2017.
200 pp.; notes; bibliography; index.
\$34.95 (hardcover)
ISBN: 978-0-271-07742-0

Christopher S. Wood,
A History of Art History.
Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019.
472 pp.; 24 b&w illus.; index.
\$35.00 (hardcover)
ISBN: 9780691156521

Art History's Paradox

Art history has been sustained by its historiographic continuo since the nineteenth century. As all the books under consideration here suggest, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were a key period for the invention of art history's principles and theories. Moreover, during the nineteenth century—when different ways of accounting for works of art and architecture coalesced into an academic discipline—historiographic considerations became as much a sign of disciplinary self-doubt as self-regard. Art history's uncertainty, like its exceptionalism, derives from the discipline's unique faith in art as historical evidence. The presumptive specialness of art—its supposed aesthetic, social, or metaphysical difference from other examples of cultural expression—complicates its evidentiary status. Certain branches of art-historical research, like patronage studies or art market studies, sidestep this issue by prioritizing social behavior as evidence. But when works of art themselves are used to make historical arguments, art needs to behave like evidence. Whether art is more like an archival document, a geologic specimen, a confession, or a virus doesn't really matter as long as it can be made to fit the relevant conventions for evidence.

Despite recourse to established taxonomies and schema, art history has continually betrayed its anxiety about the reliability of its analytic models. For Matthew Rampley, art historians' desire to elevate the status of their studies to be on a par with the sciences helps to explain the discipline's adaptations of evolutionary theory to the study of art. The insufficiencies of these adaptations fostered further doubts, however, and art historiography can be seen as a kind of disciplinary hand-wringing. Christopher S. Wood likewise casts art history's historiographic impulse in psychosomatic terms. "The peculiar self-regard of this discipline has its psychological origins in fear: fear that modern scholarship is alienated from art and fear that modern art is alienated from power" (205). Again, doubt drives art history's compulsion toward self-analysis. More precisely, it is the discipline's dilemma regarding the status of art, of how to manage "knowledge about a kind of non-knowledge" (126).

If, as Wood and Rampley suggest, anxiety and fear are pricks to art history's disciplinary self-scrutiny, the recent publication of several ambitious historiographic studies signals that we are in a moment of heightened vigilance. The reasons for this are not self-evident. Conditions appear to be as favorable for the prospects of art history as for any other humanities discipline, maybe even more so. In the academy, where art history has historically maintained a small but steady percentage of overall humanities majors, the discipline is attracting a greater proportion of Black, Latinx, and Asian students than ever before.^[1] Access is, of course, a crucial factor here, but a new sense of art history's relevance among university students is another. The global art market continues to accelerate, and art museums worldwide are enjoying unprecedented prestige and cultural relevance—even during a pandemic. Public art and related debates around censorship, likewise, have taken on renewed significance with the rise of social media and its mobilization for political action and civil protest. The potency of art and its relationship to history are topics of popular interest, even direct civil action. What, then, is prompting this moment of apparently widespread concern about the status of art history?

Earlier eruptions of collective self-doubt were likewise marked by a deep draught of historiography as a kind of intellectual tonic. A useful precedent to the current historiographic compensation is the publication in 1982 of a special issue of *Art Journal* devoted to “The Crisis in the Discipline.” Its editor, Harvard professor and curator Henri Zerner, began with an observation that could justly be made today:

A growing minority of art historians, especially those of the younger generation, are convinced that art history, which at the turn of the century seemed to be at the forefront of intellectual life, has fallen behind; that far from progressing it has deteriorated [into] an uninspired professional routine feeding a busy academic machine.^[2]

One stark difference between today’s disheartened scholars and those of 1982 is the former’s lack of reverence for their forebears. If the books by Michèle Hannoosh, Éric Michaud, Matthew Rampley, and Christopher S. Wood here under consideration are any indication, nostalgia for the intellectual ambitions of an earlier generation of scholars is not the dominant mood.

What Zerner identified as the “younger generation’s” antidote to the hollowness of academic practice were fresh approaches to the study of visual and material culture known collectively as “new art history.” But the real crux of the matter for him was the paradox on which the discipline was founded and with which it continues to struggle.

One of the weaknesses of traditional art history is its deep ambivalence. On the one hand it holds on to an idealist theory of art according to which art is an absolute autonomous value that transcends history, that is not subject to the constraints of time and place, so that, strictly speaking, there can be no *history* of art. On the other hand it is attached to an optimistic form of nineteenth-century positivism, to a belief in facts that can be ascertained as the basis of definitive explanation.^[3]

Put plainly, art history’s problem is art. The historiographic impulse that “The Crisis in the Discipline” flagged in 1982 was largely preoccupied with explaining and promulgating various forms of the new art history.^[4] The “art problem” was deferred in favor of a comfortably distracting preoccupation with methodology, a familiar disciplinary coping mechanism in the humanities.

Another episode of disciplinary self-critique occurred in 1996. While the new art history may have relieved for a time the existential pressure exerted on the discipline by its paradoxical dependence on the metaphysical necessity and historical impossibility of art, these methods inevitably ran up against the problem identified by Zerner. Marxist critique, energetically and persuasively integrated into social histories of art since the 1970s, served to hasten the discipline’s next confrontation with the conundrum. Once inflected by Marxism’s wariness of reification, it was only a matter of time before the paradox of art-as-history would again present itself. The social history of art had become the discipline’s dominant methodology by the 1990s, so its ensnarement in the paradox effectively brought the discipline to its familiar impasse. Without a stable object of study, the discipline of art history becomes

intellectually insupportable. This time, the solution to the paradox was to abjure art for visual culture.[5]

By the mid-1990s, the term “visual culture” was in wide use to refer generally to the myriad objects and phenomena created by humans to serve as part of their environment. In this sense, visual culture encompassed everything from advertising billboards and movies to automobiles, condos, sandals, gardens, and toys. Easel painting and sculpture were likewise subsumed within visual culture, thereby mitigating the imposition of ahistorical, culturally-specific, or prejudicial aesthetic hierarchies. “Visual culture” was also used increasingly to describe a disciplinary practice apart from art history. The disciplinary aspirations of visual culture as much as its democratizing pretensions prompted another seismic event in art historiography. In 1996, the editors of *October*, a journal known for its application of new art history to modern and contemporary art, circulated a Visual Culture Questionnaire to nineteen prominent art historians and art critics; their responses comprised the Summer special issue. Rosalind Krauss and Hal Foster, two of the journal’s editors, explained the rationale for the issue in their Introduction: “Whether one welcomes the notion or dismisses it, visual culture is likely to remain, and this issue of *October* offers an initial account of its uses and abuses.”[6] This disinterested position falters within a few paragraphs, however, and the concerns underlying this historiographic project are eventually laid bare. Visual culture is associated by the editors with a recently announced partnership of the Guggenheim with Deutsche Telekom that would result in exhibitions of “multimedia projects” at the venerable museum’s newly opened SoHo outpost.[7]

That the Guggenheim should allow the telecommunications industry to set its agenda, necessarily redefining the nature of art object and public alike as it does so, is yet another example of a restructuring in the interests of an economic imperative into which the efforts of the “avant-garde” might have no choice but to flow.[8]

October’s commitment to the study of avant-garde art was intellectual and political, holding to the belief that only by maintaining a critical stance vis à vis authoritarianism and consumer capitalism could some forms of culture deflect or impede economic or political instrumentalization. The editors’ stance did not prevent contributors from expressing a range of views on the import of visual culture, with some dismissing it as a passing trend and others seeing it as an existential threat to art history.

Among the respondents to the Visual Culture Questionnaire was Christopher S. Wood, whose *A History of Art History* is perhaps the most ambitious and comprehensive contribution to art historiography now available in English. Back in 1996, Wood registered his reservations about the efficacy of visual culture. Among its shortcomings were its lack of methodological rigor and its intellectual basis in a strawman definition of art history.[9] After dispensing with these problems of method, Wood turned to one of visual culture’s chief complaints, art history’s necessary commitment to the historically and intellectually insupportable category of art. This concern he took more seriously. If art history is “too deeply implicated in aestheticism and the cult of fine art . . . it might well be a reason to revamp the discipline.”[10] Wood concluded that visual culture had it wrong here, too. Cast in then-current terms of discourse analysis, Wood used the phrase “aesthetic textuality” to denote aesthetic quality or artistic (as opposed to purely functional) intent.

Antagonism to the “art” in art history is grounded in resentment not of aesthetic textuality, but of the institutions and interests that protect the aesthetic within our culture. Art history is derided when it serves as research assistant to the museums and auction houses, or court chronicler. Clearly, when a culture favors or rewards some kinds of textuality over others, or ranges them in an invidious hierarchy, then that culture is asking for critique. But one could not proceed at all without some advanced concept of textuality. And it is hard to imagine what thoroughly nonaesthetic figurality (or visuality, for that matter) would be like.[\[11\]](#)

The ideas touched on in Wood’s brief response to the Questionnaire are significantly and provocatively amplified across the 408 pages of *A History of Art History*. And the paradox of art’s irreconcilable status for the discipline is the book’s central concern. But with a crucial twist. For Wood, the paradox noted by Zerner is not a problem to be resolved or overcome; instead, art’s seemingly irreconcilable claim to both metaphysical and material status is the necessary precondition for art history. The paradox of art is the discipline’s *raison d’être*.

Wood provides the reader first with a deeply informed account of the precursors and early writers of art history. These commentaries are arranged chronologically—in the strictest sense. Chapters are titled as date ranges, narrowing as the book advances so that the six centuries covered by the first chapter are reduced to a single decade by the time Wood takes up the late 1800s. By proceeding from the ninth century, Wood begins his history of the discipline with European antecedents such as medieval clerics’ commentaries on pagan images and the early modern appreciation of ancient Etruscan pots as well as the Chinese tradition of connoisseurship and artists’ biographies of the Tang Dynasty. Despite occasional references to art writing in China and Persia, Wood’s book is primarily addressed to the European practice of art history—though not because he believes art history is a European invention. “The art-historical mentality is hardly a European monopoly. It is shared by all societies that have collected art as art” (10). Yet, as widely shared as the “art-historical mentality” may be, Wood acknowledges the book’s predominantly European scope (10). While objection to “having one’s cake and eating it, too” might reasonably be made here, such criticism perhaps misses the point.

Wood’s identification of an “art-historical mentality” neatly shifts long-standing debates regarding the possibility of World Art to a novel consideration of art history as a potentially transcultural social practice. World Art Studies is the latest incarnation of the persistent inclination to prove that art, if only it could be properly defined, is the product of a universal impulse toward cultural expression. The lure of this idea has been a disciplinary blind alley since the eighteenth century. At best, the desire to confirm the existence of an aesthetic category recognized innately by all humans results in well-meaning but strained arguments and false equivalences; at worst, it leads to the violent suppression of certain forms of cultural expression that do not conform to a universal ideal. Wood gives World Art Studies a wide berth. Shifting the focus from art to art history, Wood points away from dead-end debates about the canon and relative cultural value and toward potentially more productive discussions about the social practice of art history, which needs to be foregrounded if the discipline is to carry on as something more than an adjunct to European economic and cultural imperialism.

Wood is a gracefully elusive writer, and he mostly refrains from making explicit his positions on how art history could or should be practiced. His apology for relativism is a telling exception, however, for it makes clear that his intent is not only to provide a thoroughgoing account of art history's history but to rehabilitate the discipline's cosmopolitan ethos. "One cannot justly hold up one culture's yardstick to another culture's art" (10). This dictum distinguishes the modern paradigm of art history from allied discursive practices like art criticism or aesthetics.

Relativism expanded the canon, revealing that great art has been made in all times and places. It may look different, but it isn't. For a long time, to prefer or even grudgingly admire the art of little-understood cultures, such as India or Africa, was for the European (as for the Chinese, for that matter) unthinkable. But those obstacles fell away, and relativism of historical form—though not relativism of artistic value itself—became the principle of the Musée du Louvre and the Metropolitan Museum of Art (11).

Wood's distinction between historical and aesthetic relativism is key for his understanding of art history, and it allows him to propose that visual culture and art belong to different categories. Both are of historical interest, to be sure, and no researcher should neglect the full range of cultural expression in play in any given place at any moment. Objects "like costumes and firearms, they too testify to a worldview, to a lifeworld" (11). But the art historian is responsible also for attending to the differences between art and other registers of cultural production.

Failure to account for the difference between art and "stuff in general" is the chief shortcoming Wood sees in the discipline today. This lapse is especially evident in studies of contemporary art, though Wood is quick to say that presentism is not the cause of the problem. Not all art historians share Wood's view. Indeed, the discipline's bias toward contemporary culture has generated a separate outbreak of historiographic analysis.^[12] Academic art historians may lament the shrinking number of faculty lines devoted to art before 1900 and students' emphatic preference for courses on contemporary art. But Wood sees these as inevitable consequences of the project of modernism. "The real reason that students and increasingly teachers of art history are ready to jettison the past . . . is that the refusal of the authority of the past is the very program of modern art. To invest in modern art existentially is to agree to carry out that program" (378). This makes sense and accords to students a greater degree of intellectual engagement than do the usual complaints about apathy, poor preparation, or lack of curiosity about the past. Indeed, far from rehearsing decades-old skepticism regarding the rigor or value of contemporary art studies, Wood states that "the great merit of the commitment to critical contemporary art is that it reinforces confidence in art generally" (407). That said, Wood nonetheless faults the practice of contemporary art history—especially in the classroom—for its general unwillingness to confront art as a particular cultural category. Without acknowledging the different registers of cultural production, the art historian cannot fully account for the social significance of a work not to mention whatever intrinsic interest or even value it might hold.

How should art history, with its specialized conceptual toolbox, solve the puzzle of entertainment when society itself has two or more minds about everything, admiring,

for example, Hollywood movies that break box-office records on their first weekend and at the same time revering Vincent van Gogh because he was unappreciated in his own time—and yet not knowing exactly what, if anything, differentiates a painting by van Gogh from a well-crafted movie (380).

Wood admits that contemporary culture poses particularly difficult challenges for the art historian and critic. With contemporary art, social critique commingles with unapologetic consumerism, and activist stances refract as ironic poses. Untangling and describing these registers is hard work, and it can be politically and personally fraught, too.^[13] Intellectual lassitude may be one explanation: “The art history of the present has nothing to say about mass culture that art itself doesn’t already tell us” (380). But Wood also offers another explanation, one that puts the lie to accusations that the study of contemporary art is something apart from the practice of art history. It is the instrumentalization of art history that Wood here deplors, not its field of inquiry.

Wood delivers some stinging criticisms in the final chapter of *A History of Art History*. But he also hints at an alternative path forward for the discipline. Among his “Conclusions” is a return to the concept of relativism first discussed a few hundred pages earlier. A revival of sorts is needed. “Historicist relativism was allied instead with the neo-Christian reaction to Enlightenment” (389). This strand of art history, what Wood identifies as the “fabulous” or ironic mode as distinct from the annalistic or typological mode, has the capacity to recognize art as at once fully metaphysical and wholly material. Paradox isn’t a problem for Romantic thinkers. “Art history protects art as one of the few places in modern life where disparate ways of thinking about time are protected: eternity, flow, reversals, and switchbacks. All around art is linear time, directed and convergent, the time of mere experience that governs modernist progressivism” (392). This description encompasses such European manifestations of the art-historical mentality like antiquarianism or Romanticism, but it also accommodates long traditions of art writing in China and Persia, for example, that have generally been held apart from art history.

Art, in Wood’s account, can be liberatory. And, therefore, the intellectual project of sustaining art as something distinct from stuff is more than political action, it is also an assertion of the ongoing value of humanism. The art historian’s commitment to relativism —“intercontinental, ecumenical, nonpartisan”—is an ethical as well as intellectual position more often associated with antiquarianism than with academic art history. Driven by aesthetic sensitivity and curiosity as well as acquisitiveness, the antiquarian is unconstrained by disciplinary norms for the categorization and evaluation of objects of interest. But this does not make antiquarianism an inherently ethical practice. The antiquary does not *choose* relativism over another approach. Here, the possibility of cosmopolitanism as way of framing the practice of art history is suggested. A timely reappraisal of cosmopolitanism in relation to contemporary globalization, Martha Nussbaum’s *The Cosmopolitan Tradition: A Noble but Flawed Ideal* is as relevant to the stewardship of culture and history as to the establishment of universal human rights. Cosmopolitanism insists on a non-hierarchical approach to human experience. To view difference—be it cultural, ethnic, economic, geographic, religious, racial, or based in gender, sexuality, cognitive ability—as bearing intrinsically superior value is anti-cosmopolitan. This doesn’t mean that the cosmopolitan position ignores or seeks to suppress difference (a longstanding complaint against cosmopolitanism that Nussbaum refutes); it is simply that difference isn’t hierarchized. In

this way, Nussbaum's cosmopolitanism points to a model for the historicist relativism that Wood suggests is intellectually and politically liberatory while not conceding aesthetic relativism, a possible way forward for art history that will be taken up again at the end of this essay.

As intellectually advantageous as relativism might be for a cosmopolitan art history, this position has come at a cost to the discipline. Matthew Rampley sees art history's ecumenical tendency as a source for its marginalization. Which isn't to imply that Rampley discounts the value of relativism for art-historical inquiry. Not at all. But his real concern in *The Seductions of Darwin* is the discipline's historic and ongoing vulnerability to facile charges of dilettantism (7). Relativism, in Rampley's account, has been art history's academic Achilles' heel. Rampley persuasively traces art history's insecurity to its nineteenth-century installation as an academic discipline. To vanquish actual as well as anticipated assaults on the rigor of their discipline, art historians asserted a rational, scientific approach to the study of culture. Rudolf Eitelberger, the founder of the Vienna School, gave voice to this strategy at the first-ever international convening of art historians in 1873: "art history was created through scientific work—and it is only through scientific work that it has a future" (7). This desire to shore-up art history's claims to *Wissenschaftlichkeit* facilitated the adaptation of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) for the scientific study of cultural development. The application and, more common according to Rampley, misapplication of poorly understood Darwinian ideas to the history of art imparted a specious scientism to a good deal of the foundational work of the modern discipline. But Rampley accords to those scholars working around 1900 a more or less benign place in the historiography of Darwin's reception by art history, as dubious as their models of cultural development were. He presents the theories of Henrich Wölfflin, Alois Riegl, and Aby Warburg as historical artifacts responsive to the ideas and expectations of their time. Truly alarming for Rampley are more recent and ongoing efforts toward reconciliation between the sciences and humanities, beginning with C.P. Snow's 1959 disquisition on the "Two Cultures."

It is not Snow's identification of the gulf separating scientists from humanists as intellectually disingenuous and institutionally short-sighted that troubles Rampley. In this, Snow was right in his diagnosis of post-war academic alignments and institutional practices. Where Rampley finds cause for concern is in some of the attempts to remedy the two cultures problem, especially in the guise of "consilience." Biologist E.O. Wilson popularized this mode of rapprochement in a campaign that culminated in the publication of his *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* in 1998. Ostensibly intended to revive the broad-based application of systematic analysis to all forms of natural and cultural phenomena associated with the Enlightenment, consilience instead, in Rampley's view, promotes a one-sided agenda in support of the STEMification of higher education and advanced research.

Calls for such cross-disciplinary activity have been prompted less by a search for a dialogue of equals and rather more by a desire for intellectual imperialism, in which the proponents of the natural sciences lay claim to superior explanatory power. . . . They envisage not a meeting of equals but, instead, an encounter in which the purported illusions motivating the humanities are shown for what they are and replaced with a properly rational program of research (5–6).

In the case of art history, as Rampley lays it out, lingering attachments to relativism have been dispensed with through successive administrations of evolutionary theory, neuroscience, and systems theory.

The Seductions of Darwin is unquestionably, transparently, and engagingly polemical. Rampley's account of art history's unique implication in the neoliberal economy of contemporary higher education is bracing, and the breadth of his inquiry is at moments exhilarating. The book provides thorough-going introductions to art-historical methodologies derived from the biological and social sciences. Each of Rampley's four chapters begins with a detailed yet accessible explanation of a particular methodology; and each chapter concludes with Rampley's equally dispassionate assessment of that method's complete failure to cohere either as a form of scientific *or* humanistic analysis. Exemplary is Rampley's third chapter, "Brains, Caves, and Phalanxes: Neuroaesthetics and Neuroarthistory." It concerns the "creative explosion" theory put forward in the late 1990s by archaeologist Steven Mithen, who attributes the geographically diverse examples of Paleolithic cave painting to the distinctive brain size and capacity of hominids that evolved in that era. From the art-historical theorizations of archaeologists and anthropologists seeking to account for material culture by way of cognitive science such as Mithen, Rampley quickly shifts to accounts of art history that have been guided by brain science. These developments track with technological advances as well as political opportunism.

The development of brain imaging technologies in the final quarter of the twentieth century, culminating in the 1991 invention of fMRI (Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging), made it possible to observe brain activity in real time as research subjects responded to various visual stimuli. Certain parts of the brain—in some instances, even specific neurons—were confirmed to be responsible for processing specific types of visual phenomena. Within a decade of the invention of fMRI, neuroscientists (sometimes in collaboration with art historians) were studying the brain's response to works of art. Their observations confirmed distinct brain activity when test subjects viewed, for instance, straight lines, or bright areas of color—formal characteristics found in many of the twentieth century's major art movements. Movement, too, elicits strong neural attention. Little wonder, then, from a neuroscientific perspective, that Alexander Calder's mobiles should enjoy such wide appeal. Also apparent was the brain's receptivity to faces. Portraiture elicited distinctive responses, as did realistic imagery in general. The brain's strong response to both recognizable imagery and visual puzzles or ambiguity led neurobiologist Semir Zeki, among the first researchers to engage in a sustained study of the application of brain science to art history, to suggest that this might explain the ongoing popularity of the painting of Jan Vermeer.

Rampley's response is roundly dismissive. "The neuroscientific approach . . . commits a basic category error, for it conflates the observed *correlation* between neural activity and subjective experience with the idea of a *causal* relation" (100). Also worrisome is the method's flattening of phenomenal experience. No consideration is given to the perceiving subject's "age, gender, social class, educational background, culture" (100). The most important objection that Rampley raises is against Zeki's explanation for the presumptively broad appeal of Vermeer's painting. "He draws no distinction between the viewing of artworks and visual

perception in general. What is the difference between everyday facial recognition and the viewing of a portrait? For Zeki there is none” (102). Rampley acknowledges that “it might be argued that these objections are based on an outmoded humanist attachment to the idea of art” (103). Yet, Rampley is quick to note experiments with subjects observing various forms of visual phenomena do register distinct responses to works of art when viewed in relation to non-art objects with similar formal properties. The problem is that these apparent differences in the brain’s response to art cannot be properly assessed without explaining art as a category of visual stimuli (71). Like Wood, Rampley recognizes that the paradoxical character of art is not incidental to its status as historical evidence. Failure to account for art’s metaphysical as well as its social and material qualities is a first-order breakdown of method. Compounding the lack of concern about whether or how art might constitute a distinct category of cultural production, the experiments of Zeki and the other researchers discussed in this chapter are designed to test subjects’ responses to works from the European canon: Vermeer, Constable, Picasso, Mondrian, Dali. In this way, neuroarthistory attempts to naturalize what is a supremely contingent social construct.

In all the art-historical methods and models for cultural analysis discussed in *The Seductions of Darwin*—which include Richard Dawkins’s meme, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s rhizome, Niklas Luhmann’s account of modern art via systems theory, and John Onians’s conception of World Art History—Rampley discerns an inevitable reductionism that results in unverifiable conclusions. In other words, they all rely on arguments that lack precisely the evidence-based, data-driven objectivity its apologists attribute to scientific models.

Any cultural practice, by virtue of the fact that it endured over a period of time, can be argued to have been adaptive. . . . Similarly, the fact that most cultural practices change—and even vanish—over time would mean that *all* cultural practices can potentially be labelled maladaptive, a point that in its universality explains very little (69).

So, in the end, the various attempts to endow art history with scientific rigor through recourse to evolutionary models, expose, in Rampley’s view, the disingenuousness of consilience and, in consequence, the salubrious uncertainty of humanism. Humanities scholars are acutely aware of the insufficiency of over-arching models based on systems that do not and cannot account for the behavior of individuals or the particularities of a single work of cultural expression. “The reluctance of scholars of the humanities to embrace evolutionary models stems in part from the fact that they resemble a throwback to that earlier stage of historiographic thought” (70). For art history, that earlier stage is typically identified with Johann Joachim Winkelmann’s promulgation of a systematic approach to explaining the history of visual art.

In none of the books here under consideration is the Enlightenment as art history’s intellectual crucible accounted for in more damning terms than Éric Michaud’s *The Barbarian Invasions: A Genealogy of the History of Art*. To state Michaud’s thesis baldly: art history is an inherently racialized if not racist discipline. With race as art history’s central organizing principle, efforts to deracialize or decolonize the discipline and its institutions will take more than reformation of the canon. Art history’s disciplinary roots do not just run parallel with those of institutionalized racism in the West: the two derive from the same sources. In fact, so enmeshed are they that Michaud offers little hope for understanding

much less practicing art history in non-racialized terms. He is not, of course, the first to point out art history's habitual reliance on racialized if not frankly racist categories. Among the first to do so was philosopher and writer Alain Locke. This historiography was energized in the 1980s and 1990s by such scholars as Kobena Mercer, Maurice Berger, Michele Wallace, and bell hooks, to name just a few. What distinguishes Michaud's contribution to this historiography are two related points. The first is his contention that Winckelmann's systematic identification of certain aesthetic proclivities and practices with specific peoples set into motion a disciplinary rubric that could only be played out in racial terms. The second is that the Romantic rehabilitation of "Germanic peoples" recalibrated that rubric to advance local claims to racial superiority—claims that aligned with the political and economic ambitions of particular European nations. "In the eternal war of races" commenced in the eighteenth century, "it was the same conquering peoples who always triumphed over the same conquered races" (194). The reassessment of northern, "barbarian" culture undertaken in the midst of surging nationalism adjusted a racial model for cultural analysis into a racist one.

Michaud argues that two key assertions in Winckelmann's influential *History of Ancient Art* (1764) initiate a racialized discourse that has been systemic to the discipline. First is the contention that different peoples produce distinct cultural forms. That is to say, Winckelmann held that it was possible to recognize an "Egyptian" style of art as something different from a "Greek" or "Etruscan" style because works of art from any given culture possess some shared formal characteristics that are unique to that culture. Winckelmann was not original in thinking this way. Giorgio Vasari also classed works in relation to regional or national schools, like Florentine or German, as had writers in antiquity. Winckelmann's second assertion, Michaud argues, served to compound the racist potential of the first. Not only does Greek visual art display a certain style, its formal properties correspond with the actual appearance of Greeks living at the time of a work's creation. This presumption of self-mimesis on the part of the Greeks is a well-known feature of Winckelmann's account, but its import for the racialized history of art has been left largely unexamined. Michaud's insistence that these two analytical moves in Winckelmann's writing be understood in relation to one another brings the smoking gun into view. Winckelmann's logic runs thus: classical Greek sculpture possesses objectively identifiable and uniquely combined formal features; the formal features of Greek sculptures are beautiful; the appearance of beautiful features in Greek sculpture is a consequence of the beauty of the Greek people.

This logic inevitably organizes aesthetic quality in relation to racial and ethnic hierarchies. German philosopher and dramatist Gotthold Ephraim Lessing would close the loop a few years later in his *Laocoön*: "If beautiful men created beautiful statues, these statues in turn affected the men, and thus the state owed thanks also to beautiful statues for beautiful men."^[14] Here, Michaud explains, the circularity not only between art and life but between society and race is codified. At the same time that Winckelmann was elaborating the specific characteristics of Greek art, he was also promulgating Greek classical art as a universal standard of aesthetic value. This doesn't mean that Winckelmann did not recognize culturally-specific notions of beauty (70). But he was not a relativist: ideal beauty was not available to all peoples. Those who lived in regions subject to extremes of cold or heat, in Winckelmann's assessment, were bound to have "ill-formed" bodies (26–27). Their art, perhaps beautiful-seeming to them, would inevitably fall short.

Relativism is not without significance in Michaud's book. Like Wood, Michaud sees in antiquarianism the laudable attributes of open-minded curiosity and heart-felt aesthetic appreciation. Antiquarianism offers to both Wood and Michaud access to a kind of prelapsarian practice of art history. For Michaud, it is French antiquary and connoisseur Anne Claude de Caylus who stands as a useful counter-example to Winckelmann and whose method might yet be of value to today's scholars. This is not to say that Caylus did not seek to classify or understand objects as representative of particular geographies; but his taste was catholic, and he wrote approvingly of the capacity for artistic forms to transcend or transgress borders. Here is Caylus in 1756 describing his approach to the study of antiquity:

The historian of the ancient world delights in finding, in its monuments, a mixture of the tastes of the nations. . . . The historian sees how the various tastes gradually converge, and then he finds them mixed and intermingled in a single work. . . . Such is the spectacle that monuments offer to the imagination, and, in particular, this one: a Grecian Venus, of Roman workmanship, seated in the attitude and the taste of an Egyptian Isis (27).

Here, Caylus approaches something similar to Wood's "relativity of judgment" (42). Though not couched in terms of relativism, Michaud's discussion of Caylus applauds the connoisseur's suspicion of the historian's application of a priori systems to culture. Indeed, Caylus seems to anticipate some current frustrations with humanities scholarship: "I would like the historian of the ancient worlds to banish entirely all types of systems from his work. I consider them to be a sickness of the mind, caused by inflammation of self-regard (30)."

Caylus's condemnation of a rigidly systematic approach in pathological terms is echoed by Michaud in his discussion of the consequences of Winckelmann's model:

Once Winckelmann had established this intimate and organic link between a people and its art, it became customary to see art not simply as a social activity (as it was for Caylus), but as a peculiarly natural function of the body of a people: i.e., as a sort of bodily secretion of the nation as a whole. Only then did a theory of the hereditary transmission of styles become possible (32).

In fact, not only does Michaud charge Winckelmann with making the theory of hereditary transmission of aesthetic forms possible, he essentially establishes a direct causal link between Winckelmann and the enormously influential culture-as-heredity model developed in the following century by Hippolyte Taine.

By the late eighteenth century, a scholarly as well as popular sympathy was emerging for the so-called barbarians held responsible for the collapse of the Roman Empire, and Western European deference to the presumptive cultural superiority of Classical Greece and Ancient Rome was eroding. Rising nationalism was one reason for this shift. In most European countries, this shift expressed itself as claims to descent from northern forebears: Goths, Franks, Gauls, Celts, Norsemen—the real or imagined cultural forms of these supposed national ancestors were championed as more authentic manifestations of national identity. Not surprisingly, these forms were also held to possess greater technical ingenuity and expressive force than those of classical antiquity. This rehabilitation of the barbarians

introduced into aesthetic and art-historical discourse a decidedly racist (as opposed to simply racial) system of cultural analysis. As long as classical antiquity was held in common as the epitome of cultural achievement, Europeans could imagine themselves on a more or less even footing, and all that could be done to gain advantage in this cultural economy was to emulate the classical past. Reclamation of the barbarians changed all this. Among the most persuasive champions of the barbarians' case was French historian Jules Michelet (1798–1874), whose *History of the Roman Republic* (1831) Michaud identifies as exemplary of the trend:

If you seek life and freshness, go to the north. . . . The barbarian races, with their blond hair, their ruddy cheeks, their eternal youth, are still there. It falls to them to revive the green age of the world; Rome was once renewed by the invasion of the men of the north (106).

Michelet looms large in Michaud's genealogy. Art was not the only index of a society's ethnic makeup and environmental conditions; history itself was a product of heredity and geography. Michelet translated Romantic fantasies of nationalism as political expressions of ethnic or hereditary bonds into confident historical narrative. Furthermore, Michelet took the crucial step of intertwining history with biology in his concept of a "people." Neither precedes the other, in Michelet's conception: a nation's history is influenced by the essential qualities of its people, just as a people is shaped by its history. "We must first locate the race with its proper aptitudes, its surroundings, and its natural inclinations; then we may study it in the fabrication of its gods, who in their turn influence the race. This is the natural *circulus*" (77). Though not insisting that race is cultural destiny, Michelet's braiding together of nationality, biology, and history prepared the way for explanations that predicated social conditions on biology, like Hippolyte Taine's long-enduring attribution of history (including the history of art) to "*la race, le milieu et le moment*." [15]

Taine and Michelet figure as close kin in Michaud's rendering of art history's family tree. Near-contemporaries, both promulgated a racialized understanding of history and culture. They also share another historiographic distinction: neither was exclusively, nor even primarily, an art historian. And yet, like the Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt—about whose seminal 1860 *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* Wood observes that its "open secret . . . is that it doesn't deal with the visual arts" (248)—Taine and Michelet exerted a powerful influence on the course of art history as it was becoming an academic discipline. For his part, Burckhardt was largely responsible for launching what would be art history's primary preoccupation for more than a century: Renaissance Italy. Taine's contribution was more insidious. Among the first to hold an academic appointment in the nascent discipline, Taine advanced to a greater extent than perhaps any other writer on art both the racialized analysis of culture inaugurated by Winckelmann and the racist distinction between "Latin" and "Germanic" peoples through recourse to a scientific methodology. So virulent was Taine's formulation that trace borrowings were potent enough to fortify early twentieth-century European and American eugenicists as well as anti-Semitic and racist regimes like that of Nazi Germany. The horrific consequences were enough to sideline Taine from serious historiographic study for decades after the war. [16] Where Taine's legacy has been easy to condemn, the racist foundations and racist methodologies of art history have been less contested. Taine's and Michelet's implication in this genealogy drives Michaud's analysis of their writings.

Michaud's interpretation of Michelet's art writing differs markedly from that of Michèle Hannoosh in *Jules Michelet: Writing Art and History in Nineteenth-Century France* (2019), [a book first reviewed in this journal in Spring 2020](#). Reviewer Beth S. Wright justly commends Hannoosh for bringing to light the Michelet's use of art "to invent a way of writing history, inspiring the discipline of art history itself." Hannoosh shows how Michelet's sustained engagement with art affects his major works of history, using his journal along with published and unpublished lectures to reveal the extent to which art was a preoccupation for the author. Altarpieces, tombs, portraits in sculpture and painting, religious engravings, Gothic cathedrals, Renaissance stuccowork and frescos, and post-Revolutionary history painting furnish Michelet with ready evidence of the political conditions, personal ambitions, and spiritual struggles recounted in his historical studies. In the same texts that Michaud so convincingly aligns with art history's fatal genealogy—Michelet's *The People* (1846), *History of the French Revolution* (1847), and the multi-volume *History of France* (1855)—Hannoosh reveals instead elegant passages of ekphrasis where works of art stand as historical evidence as well as catalysts for emotional self-examination.

Hannoosh brings to her subject a sympathetic as well as critical perspective, possibly because she, like Michelet, writes about art and artists from an extra-disciplinary perspective. Hannoosh's primary appointment as a professor of French and comparative literature may also account for the absence of any sign of the disciplinary anxiety or existential doubts that often accompany works of art historiography. Her treatment of Michelet's writing is unabashedly appreciative, which isn't to say that the book fails to engage critically with cultural politics and intellectual uncertainties. It does. But Hannoosh makes room to enjoy as well as explicate what Proust pronounced "Michelet's greatest beauties"—passages in his writing where Michelet is as alive for the reader as the history he reanimates through his prose. Writing history through art, according to Hannoosh, facilitated this quality in Michelet's prose. His extended visual descriptions as well as his regular use of artistic metaphors endow his writing with an unusual combination of immediacy and authority. "Writing about art was not just an ekphrastic exercise, but rather crucial to historical discovery and understanding."^[17] This approach to writing history through art implicates or seduces the reader, who is made to feel complicit in the historical argument by virtue of having been first utterly persuaded by Michelet's visual analysis. As Wright notes in her review, Hannoosh "allows us to see the mind of an innovative and lyrical historian, responding to the world, considering its deeper meaning, forging a way for contemporaries to grasp the 'living chain' with the past."

Hannoosh argues that works of art were for Michelet interlocutors as well as forms of historical evidence: "Michelet's . . . most fundamental historical concepts lie in the artworks that he associates with them; these do not merely illustrate his idea but define, broaden, and deepen it, bringing out its complexities and contradictions, and frequently leading him to modify it significantly."^[18] This is precisely the understanding of art that Matthew Rampley finds missing in the various approaches purporting to advance consilience between science and the humanities, where "art is treated as visual stimulus or data" (138). Michelet's approach to writing history, of course, long predates Wilson's call for consilience and, unlike Taine, Michelet was not attempting to develop an *a priori* system to describe (or, worse, predict) cultural forms and patterns of artistic development. Michelet's capacity to engage at once metaphysically and empirically with works of art as historical evidence answers the

concerns of Wood and Rampley even as it is implicated in what Michaud identifies as the mystification of a racialized art history. Taken together, what these books bring to light is the discipline's dilemma: to posit art as a distinct cultural category is to risk reifying fictions of political, economic, and biological destiny, race among them; to relinquish the category of art is to abandon the possibility that some forms of cultural expression resist or exceed instrumentalization by systems of economic, political, environmental, or cultural oppression.

How and even whether to sustain art as a meaningful category of culture are questions proper to the discipline of art history. To abrogate such considerations to institutions where the status of art is of exclusively commercial, material, or legal consequence represents a dereliction of duty on the part of art historians. Michaud comes closest to yielding the terms of debate to economic forces, acidly noting that "signs of belonging to a non-Western racial and ethnic group (signs that have been and still are a source of stigma in most social situations in the West) have equally become a source of profit . . . in the contemporary art world" (210). He then ends the book with the warning, "the global art market could well become a permanent exhibition of a powerful and dangerous competition between the 'races'—the very same competition between races that drove the first art historians to found the discipline" (211). Michaud's conclusion caricatures his own arguments, undermining a timely if unnuanced intervention into disciplinary history. Yet, it is easy to understand why many art historians might be weary of wrestling with the art problem. As noted earlier, the paradox of art has been a perennial challenge, and a great deal of energy has been devoted to attempting to resolve the conundrum via new methodologies. Most scholars just want to get on with the work they are doing. Yet, concomitant with the publication of the books discussed here are calls for the implementation of another methodological solution: decolonization. If past interventions are any guide, the adoption of decolonial methodology as a means to bring art to heel, effectively to discipline art, will bring only temporary relief. Short of extinguishing art altogether—and, to some extent, visual culture explored this possibility—the problem will resurface, providing the focus for a future round of historiographic publications. And maybe art itself isn't the problem. Perhaps, rather than turning to theory for the solution, we should attend as Wood does to the practice of art history? Toward this end, Nussbaum's historiography of cosmopolitanism offers a potentially useful perspective.^[19]

That cosmopolitanism is concerned with many of the problems driving the current wave of historiographic scholarship on art history is no accident. The historiography of cosmopolitanism tracks with that of art history, especially in their reorientation during the Enlightenment. Cosmopolitanism's origin is credited to the Greek philosopher Diogenes, who, when asked where he was from, famously replied, "I am a citizen of the world [*kosmopolitês*]." Nussbaum's initial definition of cosmopolitanism in fact draws from Diogenes' example:

A Greek male refuses the invitation to define himself by lineage, city, social class, even free birth, even gender. . . . And by calling himself not simply a dweller in the world but a citizen of the world, Diogenes suggests, as well, the possibility of a politics, or a moral approach to politics, that focuses on the humanity we share rather than the marks of local origin, status, class, and gender that divide us (1–2).

Nussbaum is careful to note that her historiography of cosmopolitanism remains tethered to its origins in Greek, especially Stoic, thought. In this way, she is able to attribute to cosmopolitanism a resolutely non-hierarchical engagement with other individuals and other societies. The historiographic kinship between cosmopolitanism and art history begins in classical antiquity. Though not as fully developed in Greek and Roman antiquity as philosophy, art history nonetheless finds disciplinary antecedents in Plato's theory of forms, his many discussions concerning mimesis, and the implication of visual representation for his allegory of the cave. Pliny the Elder's account of ancient artists and artists' materials is likewise a precursor. Both art history and cosmopolitanism entered a phase of quiescence in Europe with the fall of the Roman Empire and through the Middle Ages. Humanism reignited awareness of philosophical cosmopolitanism in the early modern Europe as it steered artists' biographies into a recognizable genre. But it was the Enlightenment that had a galvanic effect on both cosmopolitanism and art history. What all of the works of art historiography presently under consideration share is the recognition that post-Enlightenment habits of thinking shaped the discipline, for better or worse. Where Wood and Hannoosh identify the conditions for intellectual freedom and tolerance of disciplinary eccentricity, Michaud finds the origins of a specious scientism that has found safe harbor in the misapplication of Darwinism traced by Rampley and in "today's discourse of the gene" (14). The Enlightenment also figures prominently in Nussbaum's historiography of cosmopolitanism. In this, Nussbaum's account of cosmopolitanism is not unique, but it is distinctive in the role it accords Enlightenment thinkers.

The Cosmopolitan Tradition is ultimately an argument in support of the capabilities approach, which Nussbaum casts here as an ethical framework that improves upon the core principles of cosmopolitanism. Nussbaum's account of the capabilities approach anchors its fundamental commitment to a non-hierarchical view of social, cultural, emotional, and biological difference in Stoic conceptions of cosmopolitanism.^[20] From early modern European philosophers Hugo Grotius and Adam Smith, Nussbaum draws ethical positions responsive to the particular conditions of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe. The Wars of Religion, an expanding global economy, European colonization of other continents, European participation in the global slave trade, and the state-sanctioned use of enslaved Africans and indigenous Americans in the furtherance of European nations' economic and political power. The entangled historiography of art history and cosmopolitanism means that the ethical framework put forward by the capabilities approach should comport readily with the discipline of art history.

Creating and experiencing works of art via imagination *and* reason is among the "10 Central Human Capabilities" that Nussbaum cites here as basic necessities. Nussbaum's formulation of this capability acknowledges the value of art's paradox.

Being able to use imagination and thought in connection with experiencing and producing works and events of one's own choice, religious, literary, musical, and so forth. Being able to use one's mind in ways protected by guarantees of freedom of expression with respect to both political and artistic speech, and freedom of religious exercise (241).

Though Nussbaum does not refer explicitly to the visual arts, presumably they are encompassed in her citation of works “literary, musical, and so forth.”

Art history is not unfamiliar with cosmopolitanism. Claims to cosmopolitanism by art historians have been made before, notably by scholars of the Vienna School who sought to distance themselves from the nationalism of their own day.^[21] These and more recent appeals to a cosmopolitan art history have met with skepticism, perhaps justly, insofar as the European discipline of art history has been unwilling to reconsider its practice in terms of a necessary relativism, an “art-historical mentality” rather than a systematic or scientific methodology.^[22] Nussbaum’s cosmopolitanism—the capabilities approach she puts forward in *The Cosmopolitan Tradition*—offers a different and perhaps more apposite ethical model for art history today. For one thing, Nussbaum’s cosmopolitanism is unequivocally non-hierarchical without denying the value of cultural difference. Dignity inheres in cultural difference. Cosmopolitanism is also emphatically horizontal: it does not proceed from a center. Categories of periphery or margin, likewise, do not obtain. A cosmopolitan art history may be relativistic about history without disavowing the diversity of cultural categories. Perhaps most intriguing, is Nussbaum’s association of the human capability of “being able to use imagination and thought in connection with experiencing and producing works and events of one’s own choice” with cosmopolitanism (241). This capability is as essential for the creation of art as for the practice of art history. Contemplated in these terms, art may cease to be a source of disciplinary anxiety and instead be understood as a necessary paradox in whose service the discipline of art history can yet responsibly act.

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Notes

- [1] “Disciplinary Distribution of Bachelor’s Degrees in the Humanities” and “Racial/Ethnic Distribution of Bachelor’s Degrees in the Humanities,” in Humanities Indicators, American Academy of Arts and Sciences, accessed July 11, 2021, <https://www.amacad.org/>.
- [2] Henri Zerner, “Editor’s Statement: The Crisis in the Discipline,” *Art Journal* 42 (1982): 279.
- [3] Zerner, 279.
- [4] This historiographic wave included Linda Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?,” *ARTnews* 69 (1971): 22–39, 67–71; Heinrich Dilly, *Kunstgeschichte als Institution* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1979); Michael Ann Holly, *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985); Donald Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); David Carrier, *Principles of Art History Writing* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1991).
- [5] I discuss this history of the social history of art at greater length in “Social Art History in Retrospect,” in Anthony E. Grudin and Robert Slifkin, eds., *The Present Prospects of Social Art History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 11–31.
- [6] Rosalind Krauss and Hal Foster, “Introduction,” *October* 77 (1996): 3.
- [7] Guggenheim SoHo opened in 1992 and closed in 2001.
- [8] Krauss and Foster, 4.

- [9] Christopher Wood, "Visual Culture Questionnaire," *October* 77 (1996): 68.
- [10] Wood, "Visual Culture Questionnaire," 69.
- [11] Wood, "Visual Culture Questionnaire," 70.
- [12] Patricia Mainardi, ed., "The Crisis in the Discipline," a special issue of *Visual Resources* (December, 2011): 303–43. Mainardi's contribution, "Art History: Research That 'Matters,'" along with Pepe Karmel's, "Just What Is It That Makes Contemporary Art So Different, So Appealing?," specifically address the challenges that contemporary art studies pose for the discipline of art history, with Karmel taking the more sympathetic—and pragmatic—position. Donald Kuspit's *The End of Art* (Cambridge University Press, 2004) was an early herald of this "crisis."
- [13] On the personal, political, and commercial entanglements and conflicts inherent to the study of contemporary art, see Anna Chave, "Minimalism and Biography," *Art Bulletin* 82 (2000): 149–63. On challenges posed by contemporary art to art historians see Aruna d'Souza, *Whitewalling: Art, Race, and Protest in 3 Acts* (New York: Badlands Unlimited, 2018).
- [14] G.E. Lessing, *Laocoön*, first published in German in 1767. Cited in Michaud, 76.
- [15] Hippolyte Taine, *Histoire de la littérature anglaise* (Paris: Hachette, 1864), l:xxii–xxiii.
- [16] See Mary G. Morton, "Art History on the Academic Fringe: Taine's Philosophy of Art" and Philip Hotchkiss Walsh, "Viollet le Duc and Taine at the École des Beaux-Arts: On the First Professorship of Art History in France," in Elizabeth Mansfield, ed., *Art History and Its Institutions* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 85–99 and 215–28.
- [17] Michèle Hannoosh, *Jules Michelet* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2019), 11.
- [18] Hannoosh, 13.
- [19] Relevant discussions of cosmopolitanism include Pauline Kleingeld, "Six Varieties of Cosmopolitanism in Late 18c Germany," *JHI* 60 (1999): 505–24; and Siep Stuurman, "Cosmopolitan Egalitarianism in the Enlightenment," *JHI* 68 (2007): 255–78.
- [20] Nussbaum's description of the capabilities approach builds on the work of philosopher Amartya Sen. For a lengthier treatment of capabilities approach, see Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
- [21] Rampley, "Art History and the Politics of Empire," *Art Bulletin* 91 (2009): 446–62.
- [22] A sympathetic consideration of the possibility of a cosmopolitan approach to art history, especially in relation to contemporary art, is Mark A. Cheetham, "Theory Reception," *Journal of Art Historiography* 1 (2009), n.p.