

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide

a journal of nineteenth-century visual culture

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book review of

The Rise of the Cult of Rembrandt: Reinventing an Old Master in Nineteenth-Century France by Alison McQueen

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide 5, no. 1 (Spring 2006)

Citation: Amy Von Lintel, book review of *The Rise of the Cult of Rembrandt: Reinventing an Old Master in Nineteenth-Century France* by Alison McQueen, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2006), <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/spring06/the-rise-of-the-cult-of-rembrandt-reinventing-an-old-master-in-nineteenth-century-france-by-alison-mcqueen>.

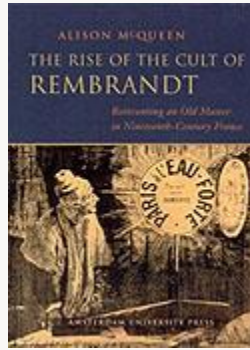
Published by: [Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art](#)

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The Rise of the Cult of Rembrandt: Reinventing an Old Master in Nineteenth-Century France

Alison McQueen

Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003

388 pp.; 80 b/w illus., 20 color illus.

Retail price: \$55.00 (cloth)

ISBN: 9053566244

What is the "cult" of an artist? When did this notion emerge? Why is this term so rarely defined or historicized? The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines "cult" as "a system or community of religious worship and ritual" often considered "extremist or false," and as "obsessive, especially faddish devotion to or veneration for a person, principle, or thing."^[1] Both of these connotations of "cult" are implicit in Alison McQueen's *The Rise of the Cult of Rembrandt: Reinventing an Old Master in Nineteenth-Century France*. Presenting detailed archival research, including many texts and images never before translated or reproduced, McQueen's study is invaluable for a particular audience: scholars of nineteenth-century French art. The book's broader significance remains uncertain, however, and the reader is left wondering about the implications of McQueen's framing concept of Rembrandt's "cult."

Tracing the reception of Rembrandt within the context of nineteenth-century France, McQueen allows both the negative and positive meanings of cult to resonate. On the one hand, she argues that French critics and artists rewrote Rembrandt's biography to fit their agendas, blatantly ignoring contradictory documents. On the other hand, she also emphasizes the profound reverence that these figures had for the "Rembrandt" they created in print and in paint. McQueen demonstrates how the cult of Rembrandt collapses the man and his art, a gesture that retains its force today. The J. Paul Getty Museum's recent exhibition of Rembrandt's late religious portraits, for instance, interpreted these paintings in part through the artist's biography, highlighting his particular individuality.^[2] This artistic individuality has held powerful interpretive weight throughout the history of art history. What McQueen's book begins but fails to carry out is a historical, critical investigation of the artist as a concept and the "cult of the artist" as a product of this concept. And what better artist than Rembrandt for such a project?

Since his earliest critical reception, Rembrandt's life and work have been amalgamated in various typologies of the artist, and the name "Rembrandt" has come to signify artistic value unequivocally. Indeed, Mieke Bal chose Rembrandt as the focus of her 1991 book, *Reading*

"Rembrandt: Beyond the Word-Image Opposition, precisely because of his "exemplary" status as high artist "par excellence," which allowed her to challenge the institutions of art history and the museum from within.^[3] Moreover, Rembrandt remains the only artist for whom an international research team is dedicated to defining and maintaining his oeuvre.^[4] McQueen's book attempts to chart the establishment of this status for Rembrandt, which she localizes to nineteenth-century France. According to her study, French writers and artists designated Rembrandt as both "old master" and model modern artist, accentuating certain biographical aspects to invent (or reinvent, a tension to which I shall return) a persona of independence, autonomy, and individuality. As McQueen convincingly argues, Rembrandt's French followers had artistic and political stakes in presenting a certain version of the Dutch artist. In particular, she positions Rembrandt's reception within the romantic and modernist challenge to traditions such as academic doctrine, absolutist government, and Catholicism.

In her first chapter, McQueen lays the groundwork for her study, summarizing the criticism of Rembrandt and the rewriting of his biography in France. Although she provides a wealth of well-researched material, McQueen bombards the reader with her synopses of numerous critics and their conclusions. Rembrandt emerges variously as "individualist . . . self-taught, bohemian, liberally-minded, anti-bourgeois, anti-traditional, marginalized, unappreciated, virile, and sexually active" (p. 63). While this palette of responses demonstrates the range of readings of Rembrandt, the lack of an intellectual or conceptual field for these terms leaves them unanalyzed and without a nuanced historical contextualization.

The second chapter of McQueen's study further examines the artistic and political stakes in Rembrandt's reception at this time. McQueen traces changing notions of beauty and links Baudelaire's 1863 essay "The Painter of Modern Life" to the increasing interest in Rembrandt's unidealized depictions of everyday life and practice as a self-taught observer of nature. She situates Rembrandt's rising status in light of French realism. She also explores the political agendas behind the reception of Rembrandt's art, life, and culture, which were variously lauded as independent, democratic, and Protestant.

McQueen's third chapter argues that the visual representations of Rembrandt produced in nineteenth-century France are as important in the reconstruction of the artist's biography as are written texts. Although her premise is apt, this chapter is the least critical of McQueen's five chapters. Here the author covers a broad territory, reproducing and briefly discussing all fifteen of the extant period portraits of the Dutch artist. However, her analysis remains on the level of iconography, as she reads the subject matter of each image through the period criticism she has already summarized. Little to no emphasis is placed on the spectatorship and reception of the images themselves, a startling lacuna given her claim that they constituted a parallel means of rewriting Rembrandt's biography.

The final two chapters are the most original and successful. Both focus on the construction of Rembrandt as a model for French printmakers. First, McQueen points up the celebration of Rembrandt as painter-printmaker, and his significance in the debates between reproductive and original printmaking and the recent invention of photography. Indeed, the first book to be photographically illustrated from glass-plate negatives reproduced a set of Rembrandt's prints, while at the same time, Rembrandt was continually invoked to

"buttress the value of prints" against the threat of photography (pp. 176 and 178).^[5] McQueen discusses the availability, display, and circulation of Rembrandt's prints in France, which, including eighteenth- and nineteenth-century reprints, "gained considerable currency," and attained "levels of circulation that surpassed that of all other Old Master printmakers" (p. 214). The author also devotes substantial energy to Rembrandt's role within the original print movement, and particularly the etching revival. She describes Rembrandt's influence for the important Société des Aquafortistes, which sought to promote etching as a personal, expressive, and thus "original" form of printmaking. In this context, Rembrandt's etchings became exemplars of creativity in the medium. McQueen argues that "for advocates of print rooms, societies, journals, and independent printmakers, Rembrandt's status grew to cult-like proportions" because of the need "to bolster the cause of original French etchings," thereby reinforcing the link between the rise of Rembrandt and issues of French nationalism in the arts (p. 261).

Like Stephen Bann's 2001 *Parallel Lines: Printmakers, Painters, and Photographers in Nineteenth-Century France*, which covers similar territory, McQueen's final chapters make convincing claims about the centrality of printmaking to French artistic discourse in the nineteenth century. Because Bann focuses on reproductive engraving and its importance in academic circles, and McQueen concentrates on original printmaking outside the academy, these studies complement one another and together offer a more complete picture of the period's history. Both authors also deal with issues of originality and reproducibility and challenge the now-famous theses of Walter Benjamin—Bann explicitly, and McQueen implicitly.^[6]

It seems that something happened in the nineteenth century, allowing the "cult of the artist" to gain momentum, and perhaps McQueen's and Bann's work on artistic reproduction touch upon a deep structural link. Benjamin and others have noted the transition from a "cult value" housed within the religious functions of art to a different sort of "cult value." For Benjamin, this new value is one of "secularized ritual" found in a "cult of beauty" that "developed during the Renaissance and prevailed for three centuries."^[7] A different but similarly secular alternative is posed by Benjamin's contemporaries, Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, in their 1934 *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist*: they identify a developing cult of the artist.^[8] According to Benjamin, the final separation of art from a cult value is brought about by the "technological reproducibility" of art. Bann and McQueen argue, on the contrary, that new cultic powers associated with art developed precisely *because of* technological reproducibility. These powers are manifested both in the images themselves, as Bann argues, and in the artist whose name is tied to the images, as McQueen explores with regard to Rembrandt.^[9]

McQueen's focus on the cult of Rembrandt in nineteenth-century France gets quickly to this important connection. However, without providing a sense of the development of the cult of the artist in history, the strength of her conclusions is diminished. Her title phrase "the rise" implies, but does not directly state, an origin in her focal period, and her text never clarifies the connotations of either "rise" or "cult." Only in regard to French etchers does she identify a "veritable 'cult' of Rembrandt;" she later credits these printmakers with "the final impetus in the formation" of the cult, again linking reproducibility to cult formation, but without fleshing out these connections (p. 160 and 217).

On the one hand, McQueen's limited frame of Rembrandt's French reception implies that the "individual" Rembrandt and his cult are nineteenth-century phenomena. However, several studies of the artist in his own time, none of which are cited by McQueen, claim that individuality was an active construction on the part of Rembrandt himself.^[10] Svetlana Alpers argues that Rembrandt's autonomy was a product of his entrepreneurial making and marketing of art.^[11] H. Perry Chapman goes further, attesting that Rembrandt was the source of his own myth, grappling to define his "self" and artistic identity through his numerous self-portraits.^[12] Both Alpers and Chapman contest the notion that Rembrandt's cult was an anachronistic imposition upon the artist, and seek the origin of its formation in his own existence, whether externally (Alpers) or internally (Chapman).^[13] Although she calls the French critical response a "reinvention" of the artist, McQueen qualifies this process as a misrepresentation, something "invented" without ties to Rembrandt's own self-fashioning. This allows her to assert that the "modern" Rembrandt was a product of nineteenth-century modernism, a conclusion central to her book. Yet, as studies like Alpers's and Chapman's make clear, the relationships between the modern, individuality, and the concept of the artist are much more complex than they appear in McQueen's account—by no means are these relationships simply a product of modernism.^[14]

On the other hand, the author's failure to historicize the cult of the artist beyond Rembrandt deprives the reader of a sense of the power of this concept and Rembrandt's importance to its development. In a recent study that theorizes a cultural concept of the artist, Catherine Soussloff finds evidence, like Kris and Kurz, for "the cult of the individual artist" as early as the Italian Renaissance.^[15] According to Soussloff, it is with Kris and Kurz that the "idea of the artist in culture arises as a concept in historical consciousness for the first time," an insight missed by McQueen.^[16] Moreover, Soussloff points out that a critical concept of the artist in art history has rarely been pursued; because it constitutes a "major epistemological issue" for the discipline, she writes, the artist remains "absolute, unexamined, and uninterpreted."^[17] Unlike McQueen, then, Soussloff completes some of the theoretical legwork required to repair this gap in the scholarship.

In a single sentence of her preface, McQueen mentions the disciplinary challenges of "feminism, postmodernism, and multiculturalism." However, she cites no specific studies, and thus avoids locating her work within or as a response to such revisionist methodologies. In doing so, she passes up an opportunity to explore the cult of the artist in recent theoretical debates. Whereas feminism has attempted to expose this concept as a patriarchal, ideological practice, cultural theorists like Barthes and Foucault have unseated the naturalized figure of the author, defining it instead as a product of discourse.^[18] McQueen's reluctance to deal with the broader implications of her project, allows the idea of the cult of the artist to continue to operate as a naturalized myth. As Soussloff attests, "disciplinary taboos follow upon the heels of mythic cultural figures."^[19] And for the discipline of art history, the artist is one such mythic figure.

In the end, McQueen's contribution to art history falls short of its potential: she succeeds in describing the myth within history, but fails at interpreting a history of the myth. Her study avoids the philosophical queries posed by scholars like Hubert Damisch. In his "myth-work," Damisch applies critical pressure to the concept of myth itself in order to determine its historical function.^[20] McQueen, by contrast, leaves the origins and workings of myth

untapped. Missing from McQueen's work are the structural and conceptual links between myth and history, between the concept of Rembrandt as an artist and the discipline of art history. The cult of the artist is a normative one in art history, and while McQueen circles around this concept, she does not dislodge it from its quite stable position.

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Notes

[1] *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (2000), 4th ed., s.v. "cult." The term dates to the early seventeenth century. *Oxford Dictionary of English* (2003), 2nd ed., and *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (2003), 11th ed., s.v. "cult."

[2] The introductory wall text and brochure begins with his biography—"In the last decade of his life, following a series of personal and financial losses, Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn (Dutch, 1606-1669) painted a group of biblical figures of haunting beauty and psychological intensity"—and then quickly qualifies his painting technique as "vigorous and highly individual." The exhibition ran from June 7 to August 28, 2005

[3] Mieke Bal, *Reading "Rembrandt": Beyond the Word-Image Opposition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 9-10.

[4] On the Rembrandt Research Project, see McQueen, 7, 288, and 296; Mariët Westermann, *Rembrandt* (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 2000), 27; and Svetlana Alpers, *Rembrandt's Enterprise: The Studio and the Market* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 11 and 125 note 9. McQueen dates the project's commencement to 1968, while Westermann and Alpers claim 1969. Whereas in 1898, Rembrandt's oeuvre included over 900 canvases, the Project has validated around 300 of them.

[5] The book was issued in 1853 by Gide & Baudry with a text by the critic Charles Blanc. The photographs were taken by the Bisson brothers.

[6] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age its Technological Reproducibility," in *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings*, vol. 3, eds. Michael W. Jennings and Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 101-40.

[7] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," 105. The author also mentions a much briefer "cult of remembrance" of the portrait photograph, where "in the fleeting expression of a human face, the aura beckons from early photographs for the last time." See 108.

[8] See Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist: A Historical Experiment* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 4 and 126. Both Benjamin and Kris and Kurz see the final stages in this transition occurring in the nineteenth century. For the latter, the climax was an increasing individuality for the artist, while according to Benjamin, it was the final destruction of any authenticating "cult value" for art—religious or secular.

[9] More might be said here about the cult of the artist being fortified through the ballast of a proper name. Whether "Michelangelo," "Van Gogh," or "Rembrandt," the artist's name became a signifier of value in art historical discourse that tends to collapse meaning and identity. On the ways the proper name circulates in art historical discourse, see Rosalind Krauss, "In the Name of Picasso," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1985), and Griselda Pollock, "Artists, Mythologies, and Media Genius, Madness and Art History," *Screen* 21 no. 3 (1980): 57-96.

[10] McQueen's only review of the Rembrandt literature appears in a footnote and limits itself to historiographical studies of Rembrandt's posthumous European reception. See McQueen, 299-300 note 5.

[11] Alpers, *Rembrandt's Enterprise*, as in note 4.

[12] H. Perry Chapman, *Rembrandt's Self Portraits: A Study in Seventeenth-Century Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

[13] On this distinction, see H. Perry Chapman's book review in the *Art Bulletin* 87 no. 2 (June 2005): 346.

[14] Catherine Soussloff writes: "While I would agree that every artist's idea of artistic individualism differs in degree, I would argue that 'free artistic individualism' is not and never has been confined to only the avant-garde. It adheres to the concept 'artist' from the Renaissance on." See Soussloff, *The Absolute Artist: The Historiography of a Concept* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 190 note 7.

[15] Soussloff, *The Absolute Artist*, 77, 81 and 89. On this, she quotes Martin Kemp: "the cult of the individual artist, as an individual with a recognizable creative personality worthy of biographical attention, may fairly be regarded as one of the signal characteristics of Renaissance art." Soussloff gives evidence for this development and discusses this quote in detail, returning to it several times.

[16] *Ibid.*, 98.

[17] *Ibid.*, 6 and 10.

[18] On the feminist viewpoint, see for example Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" in *Theorizing Feminism: Parallel Trends in the Humanities and Social Sciences*, eds. Anne C. Herrmann and Abigail J. Stewart (Boulder: Westview Press, 1988), 93-116; Griselda Pollock, "Vision, Voice and Power: Feminist Art Histories and Marxism," in *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism, and Histories of Art* (New York: Routledge, 1988), and Lisa Tickner, "Feminism, Art History, and Sexual Difference," *Genders* 3 (Fall 1988): 92-128. On rethinking authorship, see Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 142-48 and Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?" in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 101-20. Soussloff picks up where Foucault leaves off, but applies his proposed investigation to the artist, not the author, similarly attempting to "release" this figure from an "absolute" or naturalized state. Soussloff, *The Absolute Artist*, 5. She also notes how art history was barely provoked by the "death of the author" to investigate the artist as a cultural figure. *Ibid.*, 142.

[19] Soussloff, *The Absolute Artist*, 10. She continues: "A genealogy of the artist intersects not only with the concepts of artist, art, and the biography of the artist but also with the question in contemporary cultural theory of how disciplines construct their own objects of study, their own methods, and, hence, their 'discipline.'" *Ibid.*, 14.

[20] Hubert Damisch, *The Judgment of Paris*, trans. John Goodman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), especially 306-308.