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Linda Nochlin

Whither the Field of Nineteenth-Century Art History?

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Abstract:

Five senior scholars offer their personal views on where the discipline has been, where it is today, and what might be ahead.

Whither the Field of Nineteenth-Century Art History?

commentaries by Annette Blaugrund, Werner Busch, Henri Dorra, Lynda Nead,
and Linda Nochlin

Editor's Introduction

For more than thirty years the field of nineteenth-century art history has been the terrain *par excellence* to experiment with new theoretical approaches to the study and interpretation of art. At the same time, revisionism—the attempt to open and broaden the canon—has been applied more aggressively to nineteenth-century art than to any other period. Our field has led the way in allowing for the inclusion of caricatures, book illustrations, posters, photography, and other forms of visual culture.

All of this activity has had both positive and negative effects. On the one hand, nineteenth-century art history has become one of the most exciting and challenging fields in which to work; on the other hand, it has often seemed like a battlefield on which scholars of different viewpoints and persuasions fight to defend closely held opinions.

Now that we have entered the new millennium, the nineteenth century has become one century removed from our own. Many of us cannot help but wonder what will happen to the field. To paraphrase Gauguin, we know whence we came, but where are we, and where are we going? As editors of this journal, we have mapped out one avenue that parallels the direction the wide world is going—globalization. Yet there are other paths, both old and new, that also lead to insights and innovative ways of understanding.

To map out some of these paths, we have asked five distinguished colleagues, none involved in the journal's creation, to share their thoughts on these matters. No formal guidelines were provided to the commentators, who were asked simply to reflect upon the field and its future. Thus, their statements range widely in length and tone. We hope their reflections will stimulate you and possibly even entice you to email your own thoughts to us.

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The past twenty-five years have witnessed many changes in the significance, study, and analysis of nineteenth-century American art, which has shifted from a field with few publications to one with many. This productivity has drawn upon investigation of obscure artists, once-neglected regions, and newly uncovered works of art; historical and cultural contextual information; and evaluation of a wider variety of objects, such as sculpture, watercolors, sketchbooks, drawings, and decorative arts, including frames.

The question whether nineteenth-century art will remain relevant in our new century can be answered with another question: Has earlier art—be it Greek, medieval, or Renaissance—become irrelevant? The answer is, of course, no. The art of the past informs and influences not only today's artists but also their audiences. Why should this not hold true for the nineteenth century?

Without doubt, nineteenth-century styles and themes have impacted on current art. Witness the Hudson River-like landscapes of Stephen Hannock, whose smoothly sanded canvases in gilded frames mimic nineteenth-century American landscapes. And Red Grooms, whose two- and three-dimensional images of earlier artists memorialize their achievements while using current innovative print and oil techniques. Or Ellsworth Kelly's simple line drawings influenced in part by John James Audubon's watercolors of birds. Many contemporary artists emulate or use as their starting point imagery from this earlier time.

The revival of interest in American art of the nineteenth century is demonstrated through such exhibitions as "Paris 1889: American Artists of the Universal Exposition" (National Academy of Design, 1989–90)—in which I brought to public attention works by artists whose names were once familiar but had become obscure: Frederick Bridgman, T. Alexander Harrison, George Hitchcock, (Daniel) Ridgway Knight, Gari Melchers, Julius Stewart, and Edwin Lord Weeks—and "1900: Art at the Crossroads," organized by MaryAnne Stevens and Robert Rosenblum for the Royal Academy of Arts and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, respectively. Stevens and Rosenblum juxtaposed unlikely pairs of contemporaneous works that revealed influences and parallels, some of which forecast modernist trends. Exhibitions of this nature will recur and surely will foster new audiences for nineteenth-century art.

Another encouraging sign is the space museums now allocate to the nineteenth century. Particularly relevant is the formation of an institution such as the Dahesh Museum of Art in New York, dedicated to academic painting and sculpture.

Of utmost importance is that nineteenth-century art history—European, American, international—continues to be taught. Changes in the methodology of teaching nineteenth-century art over the last fifteen years, including semiotics and deconstruction, seem to have reached the end of the continuum, and it is hoped that a more balanced manner of studying art—including formal analysis and technical examination, among other traditional methods—will be reinstated. Linking careful observation with psycho-socio-cultural factors will allow students once again to look and read the work of art—not just read into it.

Affecting all of this in a truly positive sense is the Internet. This worldwide network should help bring to light many works that have languished in private collections and museum storage. It will also help disseminate information, making library holdings and digitized images accessible and opening new doors for examination and discovery, and thereby introducing unexplored areas for research.

For the National Academy of Design, one of the oldest art organizations in the United States, the challenge is similar. Rather than reinventing itself, this artists' institution,

founded in 1825 to promote American art through exhibitions and education, preserves the past while making itself relevant. To this end, the academy's academicians are striving to elect artists of diverse stylistic bents and encourage participation by all factions. They have embraced the use of the Internet and other electronic means while holding fast to traditional modalities of architecture, graphics, painting on canvas, and sculpture. The academicians are encompassing the past, present, and future of American art in a number of ways: by preserving a historical collection of art frequently exhibited and consulted by art students; by teaching these students; and by holding exhibitions of nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first-century art from elsewhere.

In the twenty-first century, I foresee nothing but excitement for those entering the field, and I envy them the opportunity of researching and dispersing their findings through new technologies such as this very e-journal. It is indeed a brave new world for the study of nineteenth-century art.

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Werner Busch

Discourse theory and deconstruction have led to a questioning of authors' intentions and also of the possibility of unequivocally understanding the meaning of works of art. There is always something authoritarian about assigning meaning. So far, so good.

More and more, cultural and historical approaches such as gender studies and socio-history are being employed to obtain insights into a work of art. This, too, is good. However, such a democratization of approach brings with it the danger of an "anything goes" attitude, and imposes a real threat on a core aspect of art history. The art of describing aesthetic experience is in danger of being lost, for despite whatever conditionality surrounds a work of art, description is nevertheless capable of conveying something of its intrinsic value. For some art of the twentieth century one may justifiably question the existence of such a value, but for the art of the nineteenth century its presence is indisputable.

The much-contested autonomy of art in the tradition of Kant and Schiller means nothing more than art reflecting on its own productive and receptive possibilities in the wake of the loss of its immediate function for state and church. The nineteenth century is the century that sought to sound out all artistic possibilities in the light of technical and scientific advancement, the ever-increasing complexity of which art could at best only reflect. The loss of the means to explain the world (Hegel) is compensated for in the manifestation of the arbitrary, the fragmentary, the repulsive, the questionable, and the uncomplicated as the reality of life. Aware of what has been lost forever, art conserves, and in this it is deeply human.

The goal of future art historical scholarship will be to place this dimension of nineteenth-century art into a historiographic context, but also to preserve it. Large areas of research could be:

- The relationship between art and natural sciences
- The change from religion to aestheticism
- The emancipation of the lower genres
- The effect of new methods and technical achievements on existing ones
- Explaining the interdependency of the evolving academic discipline of history and the diminishing importance of history painting
- The description of art as a field comprising the coordinates: artist, critic, art history, art market, and museum; the result would be the history of the changing status of the arts
- The attempt to define an aesthetic theory that would incorporate the relationship between production and reception

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Henri Dorra

The tools of the historian of nineteenth-century art have improved vastly in both quantity and scope in the past few decades. A number of new and revised catalogues raisonnés have appeared on Delacroix, Ingres, Cézanne, Gauguin prints, Khnopff, Moreau, and others. Among the published correspondences are Cassatt, Pissarro, and Courbet, the Van Gogh archives in Amsterdam, and the edition of Gauguin in progress. New facsimile editions of artists' own writings have uncovered hitherto unsuspected gems and eliminated apparent nonsense. On-line and CD-ROM bibliographical indices and on-line library catalogues have turned out to be wonderful time-savers. Documentary archives have been expanded and new ones (such as the Getty's) established. American prints and drawings rooms—if not all others—serve scholars generously and effectively.

Extraordinary photographic libraries—the Frick, Witt, Louvre, Bibliothèque Nationale, and many more—offer huge collections. Despite their flaws, abundant color plates adorning even banal publications afford new possibilities for studying the colors of works of art difficult to access. Important museums now permit photography, and fast film insures fair results. The portable computer obviates the need for carrying index cards when traveling—in advance of a hernia, to paraphrase Duchamp—and makes it possible to file one's research notes immediately and efficiently, while the electronic printer has eliminated the need for expensive and occasionally temperamental typists.

Although the bibliographic, photographic, and technological tools of art-historical scholarship have been enhanced significantly in the past few decades, millions of titles printed on pulp paper during the nineteenth century are turning to dust. Only a few libraries worldwide are attempting to save some, and then only on a minor scale. Great storehouses such as the Bibliothèque Nationale, unable to cope with the vastness of the problem, seem more intent on letting these resources rot than on making them available to scholars for a last look. Duplicating such books would cause them further harm, but would also make their contents available for a long time to come. The mutilation of books in libraries is extraordinary, as are losses through theft and inaccurate filing.

In addition, the hoarding of works of art is worsening: tax evasion, purchase with ill-gotten funds, the reasonable pursuit of privacy, and concerns about provenance and safety all

come into play. I was once asked to examine a painting in a Geneva bank vault, only to find myself in a dazzling museum!

Also on the debit side is the temptation of some recent scholars to link art with politics, sociology, and "gender" in a somewhat empirical mode, which has occasionally turned art history into a platform for subjective cognition and ratiocination. A reversal of this trend is in order.

Quite unable to chart the future, I prefer instead to identify some of the projects I am sorry not to have tackled.

An abundant supply of post-Grande Revolution periodicals at the Bibliothèque Nationale, most containing Salon reviews, as well as the literature of romanticism lend themselves to studying the evolution of landscape painting in France from Joseph Vernet to Valenciennes, Michallon, Bertin, and Corot. Valenciennes, much influenced by the color practices of Joseph Vernet and himself a student of light, authored a treatise on landscape painting that had considerable impact. This area is relatively uncharted and could be very rewarding.

Closer to aesthetics, a study of the evolution of the concept of naturalism in relation to artistic developments, from the time of Rousseau and Senancour to impressionism and post-impressionism, could be rich. This would take into account Sand and Leroux, Thoré-Burger, Castagnary, Baudelaire, Duranty, Flaubert, Zola, and many others.

The kaleidoscope of Ruskin's aesthetics in relation to the development of British art should receive more thorough treatment than it has to date. Increasingly, Ingres stands out as a vigorous, subtle, and sometimes cunning portraitist. The character and temperament of his sitters can be evaluated on the basis of their social and political role and from their correspondence. A study of Ingres as a psychological portraitist seems promising.

Scenes by Delacroix inspired by literature have been linked successfully with their sources, yet the scope of his iconographic inventiveness—in terms of the spirit and imagery of romantic literature—has never been analyzed thoroughly. Such a study would break important new ground. Nothing has yet been written of the day-to-day political and social goals of Daumier. Anyone who would become familiar with his era's newspapers—now largely available on microfilm—could produce a monumental study of the artist's thought in relation to the politics and society of his time, throwing light on all three. Since caricaturists must express complex thoughts and emotions with a few lines, they are necessarily part-symbolists. Such a study could throw light on Daumier's contribution as a proto-symbolist in the days of romanticism and naturalism.

Linda Nochlin's sensational article on the iconography of *Bonjour, Monsieur Courbet*, and an equally impressive one on *Studio of the Artist...* have added immeasurably to our understanding of Courbet's allusions to social and political developments achieved through means that foreshadow symbolism. Seen in this light, the Barbizon artists also appear as proto-Symbolists, a fact that did not escape van Gogh. These characteristics deserve to be studied in the broader context of romantic and naturalist developments. Indeed, the

symbolism of such artists as Hugo, Meryon, and Bresdin deserves systematic study. The same can be said of Moreau and Puvis and, above all, Redon.

Light and witty books have been written on the iconography of the Pre-Raphaelites. It so happens that these artists' psychological characterizations also have a powerfully dramatic side, which emerges indirectly in symbolic ways. Here, too, a study of these works' iconography in relation to the writings of artists and critics, and the general literature of the time, could break new ground.

I am currently completing a study of Gauguin's symbolism. With evidence provided by the works themselves and by his writings, it is possible to assign a symbolic meaning to practically every one of his repetitive figures as well as others. Such meanings remained quite consistent throughout his career, and it is essentially through a play of permutations and combinations of these figures that the overtones of symbolic meaning emerge. Similar results would probably be harder to reach in connection with the work of van Gogh, but there is no doubt in my mind that a systematic study of his writings would also reveal much about his symbolism and thus enrich our understanding of his achievement. The illustration of Belgian and Dutch symbolist books deserves attention, as does the symbolist invention of the great craftsmen, from Gallé and Lalique to Vever.

Ultimately, one failing which sometimes mars nineteenth-century art history must be overcome. The accumulation of data and its classification and systematic analysis are all of crucial importance, yet by themselves they are useful only in the way a telephone directory is—and no more. Evoking the lives, goals, and achievements of the artists listed therein, and the patterns therein, are quite another matter. As Mallarmé put it: "[I]f the precious stones with which one adorns oneself do not convey a state of the soul, one has no right to wear them." Objectively speaking, of course!

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Lynda Nead

Nineteenth-century art history has played an equivocal part in the development of the discipline. Often in the vanguard of new approaches to the study of visual images (I am thinking here of the influential work of scholars such as T. J. Clark and Griselda Pollock), nineteenth-century study has also frequently been at the tail-end of art historical innovation, as witnessed in the seemingly endless reiterations of Impressionist masterpieces and the equally tiresome obsession with artistic value and canonical objects of study.

One of the ways in which nineteenth-century art history has led the field, and made a significant contribution to cultural history more generally, is in its exploration of interdisciplinary research. The best historians of nineteenth-century art have drawn (broadly, but discriminatingly) on diverse areas of the humanities and social sciences in order to produce rich and nuanced analyses of the cultural production and consumption of the period. Interdisciplinarity is not, however, a catchall solution to the problems and limitations of the discipline; nor is it an easy answer to the correct and rather prim question "Whither Nineteenth-Century Art History?"

Interdisciplinarity raises as many problems as it provides answers. Its strength lies in its potential to call into question what counts as a single discipline, or as academic expertise. But all too easily it can be accused of academic eclecticism; or, conversely, of fostering intellectual protectionism under the guise of disciplinary competence. And yet, interdisciplinarity—in the sense of a drawing together of intellectual materials and protocols in order to open up new intellectual sites—still has much to offer the future of art history. Rather than an easy complementarity between individual disciplines, I would seek a critical engagement and resistance of subjects within the interdisciplinary.

It is helpful to hold on to a degree of uncertainty when working across disciplines. Interdisciplinarity should test and strain the boundaries of individual subject areas; we should expect misfit and inconsistency as much as conformity and reiteration. Interdisciplinarity, then, ought to produce new questions, new objects of study, and new forms of knowledge. It ought not to provide additional support for the same campaigning ground.

Experience here strengthens my theoretical conviction. I recently worked on a project called "Law and the Image" with colleagues from Critical Legal Theory. Although we assumed, somewhat intuitively, that from the beginning there would be considerable common ground in our shared concern with the relationships between art and power, we discovered that we came to the issue from different directions and with divergent approaches. But out of this compound the project did produce new formulations of questions of the aesthetic, judgment, evidence, and representation.

A critical interdisciplinarity should bring about a reexamination of the nature of individual disciplines. If it fails to do this, it will also fail to advance and expand the history of art. The most powerful constraint on the development of nineteenth-century art history has been its dependence on canonical works of art. It is this convention which has tied the discipline to a tradition of connoisseurship and which so often relegated other mass or commercial forms of visual imagery to supplementary evidence or historical illustration.

To the methods of interdisciplinarity I would therefore add an attention to the historical study of relationships across visual media. This approach, which has been described as "intermediality" and which has emerged out of the history of early film, will, I believe, enrich and expand the intellectual parameters of nineteenth-century art history. It might also generate a renewed dialogue between our understanding of the historical past and the present.

We live in a multimedia, digital society which has produced a renewed interest in and preoccupation with all forms of the visual image. The digital image is not projected or constituted from without, but emanates from within the computer. This new form of image production and manipulation has affected fundamentally our understanding of representation, creativity, technology, and the aesthetic. It also has affected our perception of the history of visual culture, generating new questions regarding the prehistory of electronic imaging and the nature of connections across different visual media in earlier periods. This concern with intermediality is at the heart of the new subject grouping of

which I am a part at Birkbeck College, University of London. In the School of History of Art, Film, and Visual Media we are developing an historically driven, critical study of the visual which attends equally to digital culture and lantern slides, painting and early cinema, and photography and architecture. This does not mean that paintings, sculpture, prints, photographs, and moving images are thrown into an undifferentiated melée labeled "visual culture," or that the category "high art" has to be abandoned. Far from it; this cross-medial approach should be even more attentive to cultural distinction than previous forms of art history. But it probably does mean an end to art historical revisionism and to the pointless pursuit of novel ways of interpreting the same old canonical works of art.

The shape of the discipline will necessarily alter; perhaps its name should change as well. The history of art has, paradoxically, proved to be remarkably unself-conscious about the main elements of its name—that is, how its objects of study are defined and what kind of history it has produced as a result. A shift toward a history of visual media would force a reappraisal of the material of the discipline and its nature as an historical field of study. To examine a painting or stereoscopic slide at various moments in the nineteenth century would be to locate them in an environment of technological transformation in which definitions of, for example, "high culture" and "commercial culture" are constantly shifting and creating new modes of production, new types of audiences, and new spaces of consumption.

The definition of a discipline's objects of study determines the kinds of history that are finally produced. The nineteenth-century canon has limited the potential of art history as an historical discipline. Working across the full register of visual media in the period creates a different historical profile; it attends to the connections and relationships between different forms of visual representation and can be described truly as a history of visual culture.

So what routes should nineteenth-century art history take? They should be interdisciplinary and intermedial. But they should not be prescriptive. Intellectual forecasting is an outrageous act of hubris and seems to invite academic nemesis in the forms of institutional and governmental intervention. Ultimately, the direction of the discipline likely will be determined by factors that are external to the academy and related to funding and the organization of cultural capital. Nevertheless, in an appropriate spirit of humility we can hope for intellectual invention, imagination and collaboration as the aims of nineteenth-century art history.

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Linda Nochlin

It is difficult to decide, before the fact, just what should be on the agenda for art historians of the future, but here are some of the categories I have come up with:

Old-fashioned digging in archives, museums, libraries, and other relevant places.

Always relevant to renew and give meaning to our projects, be they on feminism, queer theory, gender in general, social history, or ideas about race and ethnicity.

The cutting off of art from its creator—from the human acts of making, changing, and suffering—at a certain moment had a point: to deflate overblown notions of genius and specialness. But now the time is ripe for a return to biography in a new sense, to biography as a history of personal making in the world, within community and society. I am not sure how this is to be done, but I am intrigued by Hannah Arendt's ideas about biography. This is especially important in the case of women artists.

On "facts," on objects, on bodies, on history. I mean to put "meditation" in opposition to "research," and yet there is no reason for them necessarily to be opposing methods. Musing, thinking, and meditating can be part of the research process, and an essential part. They must, ultimately, draw on imagination—daring leaps into the meanings produced by visual representation, of all kinds, high and low. The more technologized the means of art history (computers, digitalization, virtual museums, etc.), the more individuated and personal the ends should be.

One must think of the specificity of the nineteenth century, of its character, if you will. Why are the central figures in criticism Baudelaire and Ruskin and, later, Pater and Mallarmé? Or, in painting, Manet and Cézanne, who changed our notions of art and above all, of beauty?

And the so-called minor critics and artists, among them books like Champfleury's *Les Eccentriques*, that bring to life a different but living area of a certain time and place. Strange artists, too, who in their strangeness incorporate another aspect of the period or move the center to the peripheries. Peripheries are as typical of periods as they are of centers. The recent exhibition "1900: Art at the Crossroads" revealed the importance of peripheral art and artists in a consideration of the century—unthought-of places like Australia, or thought-of places like Belgium, or what was going on in Japan or China in relation to Western art.

Scale: Why was "The Big Picture" so important in the nineteenth century? And what sort of big pictures? Appropriate for what? Smallness as a reaction to bigness—Manet's letterheads, the notion of a personal and intimate art as opposed to a public one. The role of the Nabis in forging this notion of the intimate, the personal, and the domestic, as well as the role of gender.

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