

## Conclusion

This chapter has defined theory and made a case for its importance in contemporary art history. The definition of theory proposed here is utilitarian, a working definition that can help you engage with these ideas. When writing this chapter, I looked at a number of theory handbooks and websites to see how they defined theory (I'll admit that I was struggling to come up with a clear, concise definition). Interestingly enough, a number of sources I consulted plunged right into the discussion of theory without defining it first, as if assuming readers knew this already. That didn't seem right to me, and so in this chapter I've tried to supply a basic discussion of theory as a common starting point for all readers. Where you, the readers, will end up is, of course, an open question.

## A place to start

The guides listed below will help you get a broad understanding of the history of critical theory as it relates to the arts and culture. The readers provide helpful overviews of movements and authors, but, more importantly, they also include excerpts of primary theoretical texts.

### Guides

- Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1983, and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996; 2nd edition, 1996.
- Harris, Jonathan. *The New Art History: A Critical Introduction*. London and New York: Routledge, 2001.
- Macey, David. *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000, and New York: Penguin, 2002.
- Sturken, Marita and Lisa Cartwright. *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*. New York: Garland, 1999.

### Readers

- Fernie, Eric, ed. *Art History and Its Methods: A Critical Anthology*. London: Phaidon, 1995.
- Hall, Stuart and Jessica Evans, eds. *Visual Culture: The Reader*. London: Sage, 1999.
- Mirzoe, Nicholas, ed. *The Visual Culture Reader*. London and New York: Routledge, 1998.
- Preziosi, Donald, ed. *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Richter, David H., ed. *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*. 2nd edition. Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 1998.

## Chapter 2 The analysis of form, symbol, and sign

The heart of this chapter deals with iconography, along with iconology—a closely associated theory of interpretation—and semiotics. Both iconography and semiotics address the meaning of works of art: what they mean and how they produce those meanings. Within the discipline, art historians developed iconography as a distinctive mode of inquiry first, but semiotics is actually older as a philosophy of meaning: its roots go back to ancient times.

As an introduction to these ideas, I'll briefly review some theories of formalism, an approach to works of art that emphasizes the viewer's engagement with their physical and visual characteristics, rather than contextual analysis or the search for meaning. Keep in mind that the methodology of formal analysis, as you practice it in your art-history courses, is distinct from the theory of formalism. The chapter closes with a short discussion of "word and image" and the sometimes knotty relationship between images and texts in art historical practice.

## Formalism in art history

Art is significant deformity.

Roger Fry quoted in Virginia Woolf,  
Roger Fry: A Biography (1940)

Formalists argue that all issues of context or meaning must be set aside in favor of a pure and direct engagement with the work of art. The artwork should be enjoyed for its formal qualities (e.g.

composition, material, shape, line, color) rather than its representation of a figure, story, nature, or idea. Although this perspective runs counter to the direction of much contemporary art history, the idea that works of art have a unique presence, and impact on us, is hard to dismiss.<sup>1</sup> In fact, it's an idea with a long history: the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), for example, famously argued for the special character of aesthetic experience. He wrote that the poet seeks “to go beyond the limits of experience and to present them to sense with a completeness of which there is no example in nature” for “as their proper office, [the arts] enliven the mind by opening out to it the prospect into an illimitable field of kindred representations.”<sup>2</sup>

In art history, the theories of form and style proposed by the Swiss scholar Heinrich Wölfflin (1864–1945) were highly influential during the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. Writing at a time when sciences and social sciences were uncovering seemingly immutable laws of nature and human behavior, Wölfflin argued that a similarly unchanging principle governed artistic style: the cyclical repetition of early, classic, and baroque phases. He likened the functioning of this “law” to a stone that, in rolling down a mountainside, “can assume quite different motions according to the gradient of the slope, the hardness or softness of the ground, etc., but all these possibilities are subject to one and the same law of gravity.”<sup>3</sup> According to Wölfflin, the way to explore this dynamic was through rigorous formal analysis based on pairs of opposing principles (e.g. linear vs. painterly, open vs. closed form, planar vs. recessive form).

Wölfflin focused primarily on Renaissance and Baroque art, but with the rise of modern art, formalism found another champion in Roger Fry (1866–1934), an English painter, critic, and curator, and part of the Bloomsbury Group of artists and intellectuals. Fry held that artwork is irreducible to context: for him, the power of art cannot be “explained away” by talking about iconography, or patronage, or the artist’s biography. Fry’s personal and intellectual resistance to the growing field of psychoanalysis—which very directly addresses the relationship between form and content, whether in dreams or works of art—may have influenced his opposition to the discussion of content in art.<sup>4</sup> Unlike psychoanalysts, or some earlier art historians such as Alois Riegl (1858–1905), Fry argued that artworks have no real connection either to their creators or to the cultures in which they’re produced. In 1912

he organized an influential exhibition of Post-Impressionist painting in England, and his catalogue essay explains his vision: “These artists do not seek to give what can, after all, be but a pale reflex of actual appearance, but to arouse the conviction of a new and definite reality. They do not seek to imitate form, but to create form; not to imitate life, but to find an equivalent for life . . . In fact, they aim not at illusion but at reality.”<sup>5</sup>

Henri Focillon (1881–1943), an art historian who worked in France and the United States, developed a widely debated theory of formalism: the 1992 reprint of one of his most famous works, *The Life of Forms in Art* (1934), has renewed interest in his work. Focillon saw artistic forms as living entities that evolved and changed over time according to the nature of their materials and their spatial setting. He argued that political, social, and economic conditions were largely irrelevant in determining artistic form, and, like Fry, he emphasized the importance of the viewer’s physical confrontation with the work of art. In *The Art of the West in the Middle Ages* (1938), Focillon traced the development of Romanesque and Gothic style in sculpture and architecture, emphasizing the primacy of technique in determining artistic form. (Of course, from a different perspective, political, social, and economic conditions could be seen as primary factors in determining the availability of materials and the development of technology, both of which shape technique; see the discussion of Michael Baxandall in Chapter 3.) For him, the key to understanding Gothic art was the rib vault, which “proceeded, by a sequence of strictly logical steps, to call into existence the various accessories and techniques which it required in order to generate its own architecture and style. This evolution was as beautiful in its reasoning as the proof of a theorem . . . from being a mere strengthening device, it became the progenitor of an entire style.”<sup>6</sup>

Even after the death of Roger Fry, modern art continued to have its formalist defenders. Perhaps chief among these was Clement Greenberg (1909–1994), a prolific and controversial American art critic who championed Abstract Expressionism. His first major piece of criticism, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” (1939), appeared in the *Partisan Review*, a Trotskyist Marxist journal; in it he claims that avant-garde art, unlike the kitschy popular art promoted by Stalin’s regime, presented the only true road to revolutionary change. This was soon followed by “Towards a Newer Laocoön” (1940), in which he argued that the most important modernist painting had

renounced illusionism and no longer sought to replicate three-dimensional space. Each art form had to develop, and be critiqued, according to criteria developed in response to its particular internal forms. In "Modernist Painting" (1961), Greenberg developed these ideas further, contending that the subject of art was art itself, the forms and processes of art-making; modern art focused on "the effects exclusive to itself" and "exhibit[ed] not only that which was unique and irreducible in art in general, but also that which was unique and irreducible in each particular art."<sup>7</sup> Abstract Expressionist painting, with its focus on abstraction, the picture plane, and the brush stroke, was ideally suited to this perspective, although Greenberg took pains to emphasize that modernism was not a radical break from the past but part of the continuous sweep of the history of art.<sup>8</sup>

Early in her career, the American art theorist and critic Rosalind Krauss was an associate of Greenberg's, but she broke with him in the early 1970s to develop her own very distinctive vision of modernism. Her work often stresses formalist concerns, though through post-structuralist semiotic and psychoanalytic perspectives (see "Semiotics" later in this chapter, and Chapter 4). Her essay "In the Name of Picasso", first delivered as a lecture in 1980 at the Museum of Modern Art, is a prime example. In it, she argues against using biographical or contextual information to interpret Picasso's Cubist works, especially the collages, precisely because the works themselves reject the task of representing the world (or mimesis). According to Krauss, Picasso's collages engage in "material philosophy," that is, through their form and materials they assert that representation is fundamentally about the absence of actual presence.<sup>9</sup> Krauss criticizes the practice of interpreting artworks primarily in terms of artists' biographies, a phenomenon that she witheringly labels "Autobiographical Picasso."<sup>10</sup> She further challenges the way that art history ignores "all that is transpersonal in history—style, social and economic context, archive, structure" and as an alternative emphasizes the potential of semiotics as a concept of representation.<sup>11</sup>

### Iconography and iconology

Iconography means, literally, "the study of images." At its simplest level, the practice of iconography means identifying motifs and images in works of art: a woman with a wheel in her hand represents St. Catherine, a figure sitting cross-legged with hair in a

topknot and elongated earlobes represents the Buddha. Sometimes iconographers focus on a particular element within an image, such as a human figure who is part of a larger crowd scene, or a flower motif used to decorate a capital; at other times, they focus on the image as a whole, such as the Last Supper. The process of identification may not be all that simple: it often requires extensive knowledge of a culture and its processes of image-making.

Although the terms "iconography" and "iconology" are often used interchangeably, they actually refer to two distinct processes of interpretation. Iconology, in a way, picks up where iconography leaves off. It takes the identifications achieved through iconographic analysis and attempts to explain how and why such imagery was chosen in terms of the broader cultural background of the image. The idea is to explain why we can see these images as "symptomatic" or characteristic of a particular culture. So, for example, once you've determined that a statue represents St. Catherine, then you may want to ask why St. Catherine was depicted in this particular place and time by this particular artist.

Unlike some of the theoretical approaches discussed in this book, which developed in other disciplines and have been adapted by art historians, iconography and iconology were developed first by art historians specifically for the analysis of art. In a sense, iconography, as the identification of images, has a long history: the Roman scholar Pliny (AD 23–79), for example, in his *Natural History*, took care to discuss the subject matter of the images he was discussing. Iconography became more systematized in the sixteenth century, when iconographic handbooks that explained different themes and allegorical personifications were published for the use of artists and connoisseurs. Somewhat later, the Italian art connoisseur and intellectual Giovanni Pietro Bellori (1615–1696), in his *Lives of the Modern Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (1672), combined elements of his predecessor Giorgio Vasari's influential biographical approach with iconographic analysis, as he tried to explain the literary sources of images. In the eighteenth century, the German scholar Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768) laid the foundation for the modern, systematic approach to iconography in his studies of subject matter in ancient art.<sup>12</sup>

### Panofsky's iconography and iconology

Working in England, the Austrian art historian Aby Warburg (1866–1929) and his students developed modern iconographic