

MODERN ART
PRACTICES AND DEBATES

Modernity and Modernism
French Painting in the Nineteenth Century

Francis Frascina Nigel Blake Briony Fer
Tamar Garb Charles Harrison

YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS, NEW HAVEN & LONDON
IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE OPEN UNIVERSITY

INTRODUCTION

by Briony Fer

When we consider the vast array of objects that are called 'modern art', how can we begin to make sense of the sheer range with which we are confronted? It's a range that can appear more disparate than unified and it includes works of art with seemingly so little in common that we may be entitled to ask whether they can sensibly be discussed in relation to one another, let alone thought to share something significant called the 'modern'. These are the problems that this introduction seeks to address, by asking what the 'modern' in art means.

I want to start by considering how we might begin to characterize one particular work of art – one that doesn't lend itself to easy interpretation. *Jubilee* (Plate 1) is a painting of 1959 by the North American artist Jasper Johns. The paint has been roughly applied and there is no recognizable imagery – only patches of black, grey and white paint and stencilled words, some of which are almost entirely obliterated. The words stencilled onto the canvas are labels which stand for colours, but for colours which are not present *as* colours in the painting. Less evident in the reproduction you see here, are the bits of paper which Johns has pasted onto the canvas. What has been painted out and painted over seems to be as much a part of Johns' work as the patches of paint that we see. How do we begin with a painting like this? Without a context for Johns' work, we might see it as a painting which has simply gone wrong. The roughness, the painting out and painting over, may seem merely to show the artist's mistakes and his unsuccessful attempts to correct them, until, exasperated, he abandons the work with nothing to show – a false start. I exaggerate here to make a point – that without an appropriate context and a sense that the work was deliberately made to look like this, it may simply fail to register, or it may register only as a series of wrong moves. So is it possible, with the help of an appropriate context, to see those wrong moves as right moves, or at least as meaningful in some way? If we compare *Jubilee* with another painting by Johns of the same year, called, as it happens, *False Start* (Plate 3), we may be prompted to notice something different going on in *Jubilee*. *False Start* is similar to *Jubilee* in many respects, but Johns has used bright colours – predominantly red, orange, yellow, blue and white. As a consequence, the effect of the work is quite different, although the same format and elements are used in both. The words labelling the colours stand in a different relationship to the colours actually used – sometimes they correspond with the colours on the canvas, sometimes they do not.

Looking at the two works together makes the 'wrongness' or arbitrariness appear at least more deliberate, as if there is a *point* to the mismatch between the painted words and the roughly painted areas, coloured or otherwise. And seeing them as companion pieces suggests that *Jubilee* is not the result of some kind of failure to put colour *into* a painting, as we might initially have supposed. For Johns, it was a question of how to take colour *out* of a painting, or at least to see what would happen if you left *in* a painting only labels for colours which you don't actually see. We may not have the visual sensation of the colours, and it may be hard to define exactly what is compelling in an encounter with a work like this, but figuring out what is going on in the picture seems to be an important part of its character. In other words, a puzzled response to a painting may be quite valid, rather than something that the study of art can or should rise above, by having, or claiming to have,

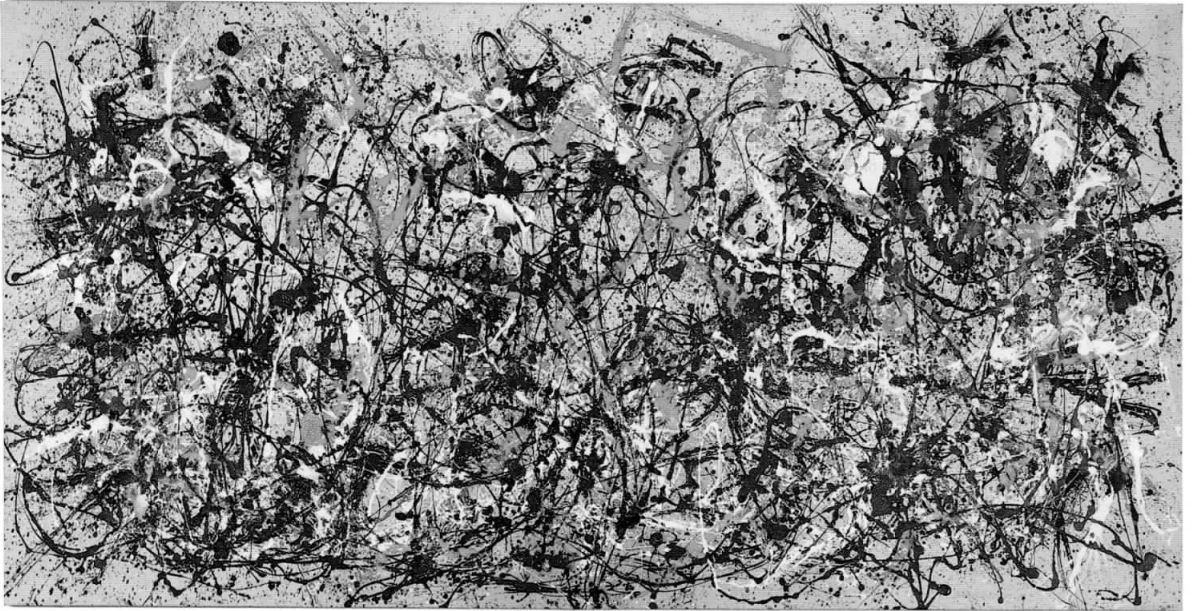


Plate 2 Jackson Pollock, *Autumn Rhythm*, 1950, oil on canvas, 271 x 538 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, George A. Hearn Fund 1957. © 1992 The Pollock-Krasner Foundation/ARS, New York.

all the answers. Much can be said about the effects and resources of Johns' work and the meanings it generates. All I want to signal here is that works of art may legitimately invite speculation.

If we modify the context for viewing Johns' work again, we can compare it with a slightly earlier painting by another North American painter, Jackson Pollock. *Autumn Rhythm* of 1950 (Plate 2) was not painted with a brush as Johns' work was. Instead, paint was dripped and splattered over a large canvas spread out on the studio floor; the canvas was only later stretched on a frame. (The usual way of working is on a ready-stretched canvas, in an upright position: on an easel, for example.) If we see Pollock's work as some sort of prior context for Johns, as an available point of reference, then we might notice the way that Johns both continues Pollock's interests and departs from them. He adopts the practice of making marks which do not depict objects in the world but which extend equally over the whole surface of the canvas. The marks may be different in kind, but both kinds make evident the way the work has been made: drips and brushwork are part of the process of making the work and are what we see on the canvas. To see the painting as openly revealing the working process is clearly a different way of interpreting *Jubilee* from our earlier suggestion of making and covering up mistakes. In parts of *Jubilee* the paint has been left to drip down the canvas, and in this context the drips look less like sloppy work than the cultivation of certain unforeseen effects. Johns could be seen to be courting the arbitrary effect and seeking out mismatches in quite deliberate moves. The dripped paint in Johns' work may even begin to look like a reference to Pollock's work and technique. And the stencilled letters of the words look, in this context, more like an addition, however much they are worked into the picture (sometimes underlying and sometimes overlying the areas of brushwork). They may even seem intrusive in some way, creating a barrier of sorts between us, as viewers, and the gestural marks which make up the rest of the painting. We can see Johns both extending some aspects of Pollock's practice and also, perhaps, distancing himself from them, even questioning what they stood for.



Plate 3 Jasper Johns, *False Start*, 1959, oil on canvas, 709 x 371 cm. Private collection . Photograph by courtesy of Leo Castelli Photo Archives, New York. © Jasper Johns/DACS, London/VAGA, New York 1991.

I do not want to suggest that this is a sufficient context for viewing Johns' work, or that paintings make sense only by comparison with other paintings. My point is simply this: the way we order and group works of art, and the context we place them in, will affect the way we see them. When we characterize something, we characterize it in relation to something else, even though we are not necessarily conscious of the comparisons we are making. So learning about modern art is, at least partly, learning how to establish what the relevant points of reference might be. It also involves deciding what constitutes an appropriate context, because the kinds of judgements we make about works of art tend to hinge on the kinds of context we think they inhabit. But there are no fixed answers: the way works of art are characterized, categorized and contextualized is open to question and subject to changing views. For this reason, the four volumes of essays which make up this series offer an account of the practice of art since the mid-nineteenth century but also engage with the debates surrounding modern art. Rather than providing a survey of great artists or great paintings, each of the essays will address a particular set of ideas in relation to works of art produced at a specific historical period, and different authors will adopt different views and standpoints. This series of books can itself be situated in a context, as part of a contemporary debate about what it is to engage in the study of art.

What is modern?

The purpose of this introduction is to point to a field of speculation. Firstly, I want to address some preliminary comments to the term 'modern', because disagreements over its boundaries, its validity and its meanings are at the core of the history of art of this period.



Plate 4 Édouard Manet, *Berthe Morisot with a Fan*, 1872, oil on canvas, 60 x 45 cm. Musée d'Orsay, gift of Étienne Moreau-Nélaton. Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux Documentation



Plate 5 Berthe Morisot, *La Nourrice (The Wet-nurse)*, 1879, oil on canvas, 50 x 61 cm. Private collection, Washington. Photograph by courtesy of Holyoke College Art Museum, South Hadley, Massachusetts.

We might commonly use the term 'modern' quite loosely, to mean 'of the present' or up-to-date. In this informal sense it refers to the contemporary and is defined by its difference from the past. But even when we use it in what appears to be a neutral, descriptive way, it is worth bearing in mind that we do so selectively, to refer to some aspects of the present as opposed to others which we see as old fashioned or traditional and in some way left over from the past: that is, we use it to mark out differences *within* the present as well as *from* the past. When it is applied to art, the term 'modern' can designate a period of history (though when that period begins is variously interpreted), and it can be used to discriminate between different types of art produced within that period. In the language of art criticism, then, it is also used selectively. 'Modern art' does not necessarily mean the same as 'art of the modern period', since not all the art that has been produced within that period is deemed to be 'modern' – only certain types of art are regarded as having a claim to be modern.

So what is it that the term 'modern' singles out, and what is supposed to give some paintings a claim to be 'modern' as opposed to others? Let me put forward a fairly conventional comparison. If we compare a group of paintings by Édouard Manet (Plate 4), Berthe Morisot (Plate 5) and Claude Monet (Plate 6) with a work by the Academic painter, William-Adolphe Bouguereau (Plate 7), all produced between 1870 and 1880, it is fairly



Plate 6 Claude Monet, *Camille au jardin, avec Jean et sa bonne* (*Camille in the Garden with Jean and his Maid*), 1873, oil on canvas, 59 x 79 cm. Private collection, Switzerland.

easy to see, I think, the difference between the Impressionist works on the one hand, and the painting by Bouguereau on the other. Whereas the first group treats contemporary subjects with a sketchy brushwork, the Bouguereau conforms to an established model of Academic painting. The figures are not depicted in contemporary dress (though they are undoubtedly nineteenth-century facial types) and are set in an unspecific Italianate landscape; the scene is painted in much more detail, with little obvious evidence of brushwork; it has a much finer finish and careful attention has been given to the modelling of the figures (that is, the gradual shading of contours, used to give an illusion of three dimensions). I would not want to overstate the significance of this sort of comparison. There is no doubt that such contrasts tend to exaggerate certain features and suppress others. In fact, Academic painting was much more varied than this one example indicates; its standards were subject to change and its range wide enough to include topical and modern subjects. But here I simply want to register the point that a 'modern' art practice is constructed out of a sense of *difference*. We could even say that the modern is a form of difference, and that from the mid-nineteenth century, at least as far as painting is concerned, it entailed a particular relationship between the kinds of contemporary *subject* and the kinds of *treatment* that we find in the Manet, the Morisot and the Monet.

One way of describing the difference is to draw attention to the way in which the three paintings all appear, by comparison with Bouguereau's monumental composition, to break up the surface of the painting into distinct and sketchy brushstrokes. Instead of carefully modelled figures convincingly situated in a landscape, we find the figures treated with the same broken brushwork as their settings (whether they are located in an interior or a landscape). Bouguereau concentrated on the faces of his figures and idealized them, but the 'modern' paintings (Plates 4–6) all seem at least partially to obliterate the face as a possible focus of the painting. There is the almost blurred, imprecise treatment of



Plate 7 William-Adolphe Bouguereau, *Mother and Children* ('*The Rest*'), 1879, oil on canvas, 164 x 117 cm. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Hinman B. Hurlbut Collection 432.15.

the Morisot, the shadow cast by the parasol in Monet's work, and the intrusive fan with which Manet covers the woman's face. In all three, we could identify this erasing of the details of a woman's face as a device to redirect our attention elsewhere, *away* from what is often regarded as the psychological centre of a painting – the human face – onto other parts and characteristics of the painting. I would add that the peculiar device shared by these paintings might be coincidental if it were not linked with some more *general* movement or set of interests. The comparison with Bouguereau takes us only so far in this respect (and doesn't exhaust the interest of any of the paintings). For the poet and art critic Charles Baudelaire, this set of interests was identified with what he called 'modernity'.

In an essay called 'The painter of modern life', first published in the French newspaper *Le Figaro* in 1863, Baudelaire used the term '*modernité*' to articulate a sense of difference from the past and to describe a peculiarly modern identity. The modern, in this context, does not mean merely *of* the present but represents a particular attitude *to* the present. This attitude is related by Baudelaire to a particular *experience* of modernity, which is characteristic of the modern period as distinct from other periods. Such a self-conscious experience of modernity only developed in the middle of the nineteenth century, when, applying it to art, Baudelaire could define it in this way: 'By "modernity" I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable' (*The Painter of Modern Life and other Essays*, p.13). These two aspects – the transitory or fleeting, on the one hand, and the eternal on the other – were two sides of a duality. There was a mutual dependence and a productive tension between them. Baudelaire argued, for example, that painters should paint figures in contemporary dress, rather than in archaic costumes from the past, and that the contemporary, in all its diverse and fleeting guises, had an heroic or epic dimension. Baudelaire's idea of modernity was not merely a question of being up-to-date or subject to swiftly changing

fashions, although these were symptomatic of a modern type of experience. It claimed that the modern in art related to an experience of modernity – that is, to an experience which is always changing, which does not remain static and which is most clearly felt in the metropolitan centre of the city. As soon as we try to pin modernity down or to define it in a simple formulation, we risk losing this sense that it is, by definition, constantly subject to renewal, that it marks out shifting ground. For Baudelaire, new subjects required a new technique; just as there were appropriate forms that the modern in art could take, so too there were inappropriate forms. In these terms, paintings might not be inherently modern – by virtue, say, of the techniques used in them – but modern by virtue of the context in which they were produced, and in relation to other representations. The terms ‘modern’ and ‘modernity’ are not a matter of fixed definition but are relative and subject to historical change.

Clearly not all modern paintings depict modern or contemporary subjects, but the relationship between subject, and technique, or means of representation, was a persistent concern for artists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. We could put this slightly differently and suggest that there was an uneasy co-existence, or a tension, between the aims of modern painting and those of modernity, if we understand ‘modernity’



Plate 8 Umberto Boccioni, *Dinamismo di un giocatore (Dynamism of a Soccer Player)*, 1913, oil on canvas, 193 x 201 cm. Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection.

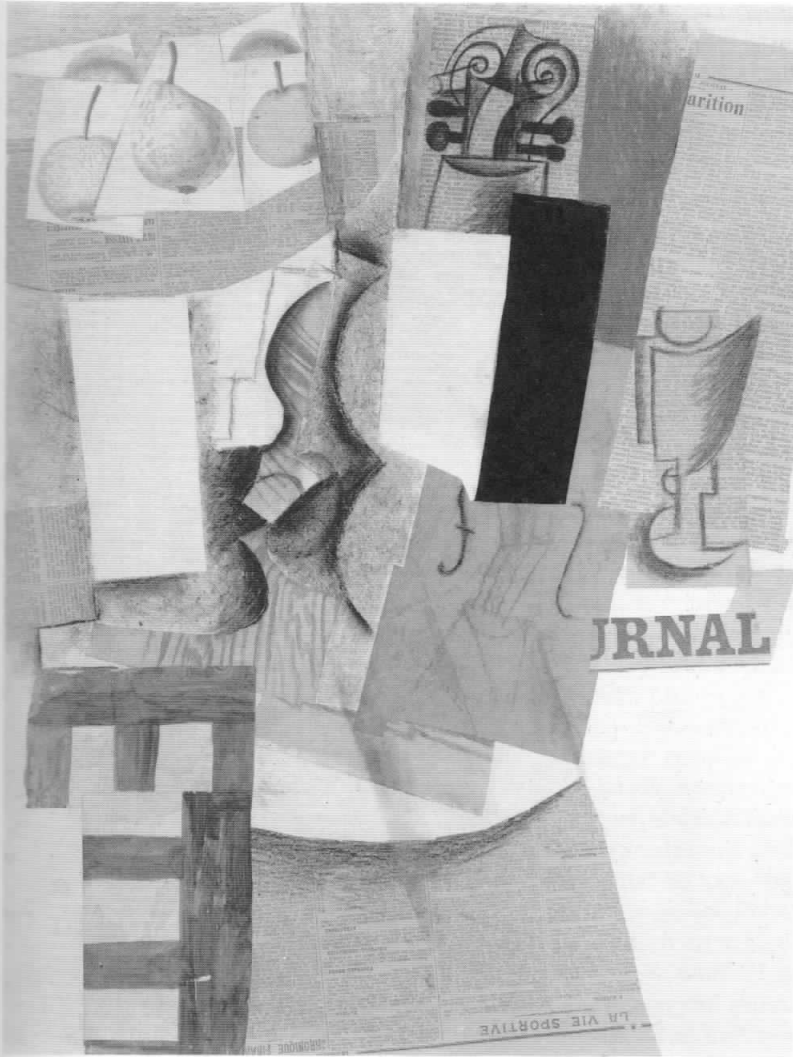


Plate 9 Pablo Picasso, *Bowl with Fruit, Violin and Wine Glass*, autumn–winter 1912, pasted papers, gouache and charcoal on cardboard, 65 x 50 cm. Philadelphia Museum of Art, A.E. Gallatin Collection. © DACS, London/SPADEM, Paris, 1991.

to refer to the changing forms of modern, metropolitan social life. I want to leave this open, but a few examples illustrate something of the changing priorities at stake, and indicate the ways in which interests diverged in different historical and geographical contexts. Umberto Boccioni's *Dynamism of a Soccer Player* (Plate 8) is a painting that demonstrates the Italian Futurist concern with modern life – the modern sporting hero, here, could even be seen as an updated Baudelairean motif. Yet Picasso's *Bowl with Fruit, Violin and Wine Glass* of 1912 (Plate 9), if we think about its motif for a moment, is a fairly conventional still-life, which departs from the conventions of still-life painting by including only fragmentary references to objects, interspersed with elements of collage (pieces of coloured paper, 'ready-made' images of fruit, and bits of newspaper) stuck onto cardboard. In both these pictures, despite the different media, the *means* of representation have been foregrounded. In the Picasso, an aspect of contemporary life may be signified by the inclusion, or intrusion, of a 'real' bit of newspaper, but the representation of modernity hinged also on the fragmentation of the whole, on making the means of representation apparent. The words '*la vie sportive*' ('the sporting life') – suggestive of a modern-life theme like Boccioni's – may be printed on the newspaper at the bottom of the picture, but the piece of newspaper, one of many inversions in the work, is turned on its head, and the meaning remains elusive.

Plate 10 Boris Kustodiev,
The Merchant's Wife, 1915,
 oil on canvas, 204 x 109 cm.
 State Russian Museum, St Petersburg.
 Photo: Novosti Press Agency (APN).



I would like to consider a further example to draw attention to the shifting relationship between modern subjects and the means of representation. Both Boris Kustodiev's *Merchant's Wife* (Plate 10) and Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* (Plate 11) were painted a couple of years before the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia in 1917. Kustodiev paints a merchant's wife, a contemporary type, in contemporary dress, and is seemingly within the modern tradition in doing so. But when Malevich exhibited his recent abstract paintings, including the *Black Square*, he asked his audience to 'spit on the old dress and put new clothes on art', calling Kustodiev one of the 'rag merchants' and 'pedlars of the past' ('From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism', p.27). Malevich's language is iconoclastic, much more so than Baudelaire's, but it is worth noting that both used the metaphor of women's fashion to evoke a sense of what modernity meant, while neither equated the modern with the simply fashionable. We shall go on to ask more questions about Malevich's abstract painting later, but here I simply want to register the point that Malevich may not have been any more 'of the present' than Kustodiev. His work may appear to be far removed from the concern with modernity and contemporary social types

that had earlier characterized, for Baudelaire, the task of the modern artist, but Malevich self-consciously addressed what it was for art to be 'modern' in a way that Kustodiev did not. By *this* date and in *this* set of historical circumstances to be 'modern' meant – in part at least – refusing to paint figuratively. For Malevich, it also meant addressing the concerns of the most recent work produced by modern artists in other European centres, such as the Italian Futurists and the French Cubists (Plates 8 and 9). My point is that modern painting was a product of a modern culture, but not the only product; it was one form of production among many other complex forms of visual representation, including Academic painting, popular illustration, photography and so on. Different forms of representation are produced in the same culture and can be shown to interact, to share conventions and assumptions about the world *and* to contest what is significant in that culture. It may be that Malevich's *Black Square* has more in common with Kustodiev's *Merchant's Wife*, in a paradoxical way, than at first glance seems plausible. These two works make competing claims for what is *significant*, for what art should be like. And although they look nothing like one another, I would suggest that the meanings of the one are generated to some extent out of the meanings of the other.

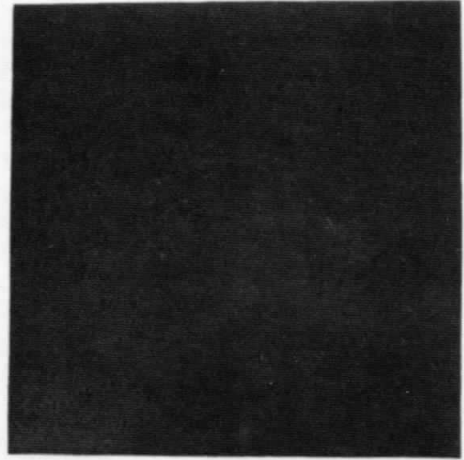
I now want to turn to the idea of a modern *tradition*, and consider how that tradition has been established and interpreted. One way of explaining the development of modern art has been to suggest that art is a self-governing or 'autonomous' field of activity, and that there is an inner logic to its development. This logic is supposed to be basically independent of other causal factors. Such a view will be examined from different standpoints in subsequent chapters of this book, but I simply want to sketch here one or two of its key suppositions, as they came to be expounded by the North American critic Clement Greenberg, who was at the height of his influence in the early 1960s. Greenberg's was only one voice among many – although a powerful and persuasive one – in what has come to be called a 'Modernist' approach to art.¹ Although the terms 'modernist' and 'modernism' are used to refer to the kind of modern *practice* I have already outlined, we shall use 'Modernism' with a capital 'M' to refer to this particular tradition in *criticism*.

As a critic, Greenberg saw his task as identifying what he took to be the best contemporary and recent art (for example, Pollock's drip paintings, see Plate 2) and accounting for it. This involved situating it within a tradition of modern art which he and others saw as having emerged in mid-nineteenth-century France, in the work of Édouard Manet. For Greenberg, the key motivating force within modern art was the pursuit of quality. 'Art', he wrote, 'is a matter strictly of experience, not of principles, and what counts first and last in art is quality' ('Abstract, representational and so forth', p.133). What Greenberg means by 'experience', here, is the practical aspect of making art (which he contrasts with the idea of art demonstrating a pre-existing set of principles or theories), and the artist's attention to the medium of painting. In his view all successful modern painting had in common an acknowledgement of the surface of a painting – that is, the flatness of its support. By contrast with the illusion of depth pursued by the 'old masters', this flatness revealed rather than concealed the medium of painting. In Greenberg's formulation, Pollock's work of the 1940s and 1950s did not leap straight from the conclusions of Manet's in the 1860s, but a logical development could be traced through a gradual process of interaction over the intervening one hundred years.

Greenberg's view depended on hindsight, so that the later work of Pollock, say, shed light on the development that had gone before and Greenberg could claim: 'Manet's paintings became the first Modernist ones by virtue of the frankness with which they declared the surfaces on which they were painted' ('Modernist painting', p.6). This refers to the way in which Manet painted his subject with sketchy brushstrokes and with very little depth – the way the nude figure of *Olympia* (Plate 14), for example, is painted as an

¹ The development of Greenberg's ideas can be traced in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*. I pick out Greenberg here because his views have given rise to much subsequent debate, although a type of Modernism was also developed by influential figures in the institutions and museums of modern art.

Plate 11 Kazimir Malevich, *Black Square*, after 1920 (later version of 1915 painting), oil on canvas, 110 x 110 cm. State Russian Museum, St Petersburg.



expanse of white flesh edged with abrupt grey outlines which draw attention to the flatness of the picture surface. Greenberg's judgements were thus made on *formal* grounds – which is not to say that he was blind to the subject depicted, but that he thought the quality of modern works of art depended on the acknowledgement of the medium, on the way in which a work was painted. Art moved forward by engaging critically with the most ambitious modern art to have preceded it, and it was 'self-critical' for Greenberg in this respect. In this view, priority is given to the *autonomous* properties of painting, because it is these which give painting its particular character, and which distinguish it from any other art. 'Flatness', for Greenberg, is the most important feature of painting, because it is this two-dimensional characteristic which is peculiar to it and which makes it like no other art.

The Modernist account has privileged the work of certain artists at the expense of others. The 'canon' it has established consists of exemplary works of modern art, which are seen as having an *aesthetic value* over and above other works. It tells you what is good art, and provides a framework for doing so, but the *terms* in which it does this have been contested. What is in dispute is how far aesthetic value can be seen as independent of other values and interests – social, political and cultural. But if one wishes to refute the Modernist account, as many art historians have done, especially since the early 1970s, then what is to replace it? Is all art equally worthy of attention? Is Bouguereau's or Kustodiev's work – contrary to what received wisdom tells us – of as much interest as Manet's or Malevich's? What does 'interest' mean? What other process of selection do we adopt?

Many feminist art historians have seen Modernist criticism's emphasis on a particular notion of 'aesthetic value' as a powerful mechanism of exclusion which, by the very terms it sets up, marginalizes women artists. As a consequence, the critical task has not been to tinker with this canon, but to reconsider the way art is made, who it is made by, who it is made for, and in whose interests the canon itself came to be put in place. This is to say that 'value' in art is something that is fought over, rather than something that can simply be assumed. The picture we have of the art of the past is constantly being reshaped. Judgements about what is significant in the art of the past, which will always operate whether or not they are clearly stated, vary according to different interests in pursuing the subject – and indeed what the subject is seen to be.

Perhaps the easiest way to point to the kind of diversity I mean, is to look again at the three paintings (Plates 4–6) I rather casually linked together earlier. All three depict

women: Manet uses Berthe Morisot as his model for a contemporary Parisian, Monet depicts his wife, child and nurse in a domestic setting, Morisot paints a working wet-nurse feeding Morisot's own child. At times the figures in each are painted so sketchily that they seem to be threatened with illegibility – this is something that they have in common. But we might also attend to the equally important differences between the works, not only in terms of what they look like, and the representations of gender and class they entail, but also how they came to be made. We might consider how men and women, as artists, were operating under different constraints in this respect; for example, we might ask about the significance of the artist's gender in determining how these paintings were produced and what they represent. In Manet's painting, for example, the signs of Morisot the artist are part of what is made illegible, although it is questionable how far it could properly be called a portrait, so anonymous is the figure made to appear.

In the chapters that follow, you will encounter competing claims for the character and status of the modern in art. You will find arguments, for example, for the way painting relates to the *social* experience of modernity, for the modern as a *qualitative* distinction, and for the role played by *gender* in representation. Though not necessarily mutually exclusive, different sorts of interests may lead us to characterize works of art in different ways. Now I want to consider the question of interpretation further, but from a different angle.

Invisible pictures: visual representation and language

As soon as we use concepts to think about pictures or ascribe meaning to them, we use language. The experience of looking at a picture is not directly translatable into verbal language, yet we necessarily talk and write about it *in* language. What is more, visual representation has often been talked about as a language, or as *like* language, especially in the modern period. The idea of a 'language' of art has the advantage of focusing attention on the medium of painting, the means of representation, and has therefore seemed a particularly appropriate way of drawing attention to the prime concerns of modern painting. By pausing to think about how language is used to describe paintings, I shall point to some of the clearest differences between visual representation and verbal language, in order to see more clearly how closely the one is bound up with the other.

If I offer a description of a painting, it may be useful to see how far, if at all, it is possible to construct in our minds an image of that painting.² The commentary I have chosen is by Max Buchon, a writer and critic. It was written in 1850 and describes a painting by Gustave Courbet, *The Stonebreakers*. The complete text contains a discussion of this and another painting by Courbet, *The Burial (or Funeral) at Ornans*. It was published in a left-wing journal, *Le Peuple*, in 1850, in anticipation of the exhibition of both works, which was to follow a couple of months later.

The painting of *The Stonebreakers* represents two life-size figures, a child and old man, the alpha and the omega, the sunrise and the sunset of that life of drudgery. A poor young lad, between twelve and fifteen years old, his head shaven, scurvy, and stupid in the way misery too often shapes the heads of the children of the poor; a lad of fifteen years old lifts with great effort an enormous basket of stones, ready to be measured or to be interspersed in the road. A ragged shirt; pants held in place by a breech made of rope, patched on the knees, torn at the bottom, and tattered all over; lamentable, down-at-heel shoes, turned red by too much wear, like the shoes of that poor worker you know: that sums up the child.

² This line of questioning was initially prompted by Michael Baxandall, in the introduction to his book, *Patterns of Intention*.

To the right is the poor stonebreaker in old sabots fixed up with leather, with an old straw hat, worn by the weather, the rain, the sun, and the dirt. His shaking knees are resting on a straw mat, and he is lifting a stonebreaker's hammer with all the automatic precision that comes with long practice, but at the same time with all the weakened force that comes with old age. In spite of so much misery, his face has remained calm, sympathetic, and resigned. Does not he, the poor old man, have, in his waistcoat pocket, his old tobacco box of horn bound with copper, out of which he offers, at will, a friendship pinch to those who come and go and whose paths cross on his domain, the road? The soup pot is nearby, with the spoon, the basket, and the crust of black bread.

And that man is always there, lifting his obedient hammer, always, from New Year's Day to St. Sylvester's; always he is paving the road for mankind passing by, so as to earn enough to stay alive. Yet this man, who in no way is the product of the artist's imagination, this man of flesh and bones who is really living in Ornans, just as you see him there, this man, with his years, with his hard labour, with his misery, with his softened features of old age, this man is not yet the last word in human distress. Just think what would happen if he would take it into his head to side with the Reds: he could be resented, accused, exiled, and dismissed. Ask the prefect.

(M. Buchon, 'An introduction to *The Stonebreakers* and *The Funeral at Ornans*', pp.60-61)

This appears to be a thorough description of the picture, so how much can we tell from it about the appearance of the work? Two principal figures, 'life-size', we are told, are described in some detail. Buchon pays particular attention to their physical attitudes and their clothing. The child is lifting a basket of stones on the left, the old man is kneeling and lifting a hammer on the right, a soup pot is somewhere nearby. Apart from these references, Buchon tells us very little about the way the figures have been formed or the way they relate to the composition as a whole. We can deduce that they are painted in great detail, because it is this detail that Buchon sees as so vividly evocative of a particular way of life. It is an *iconographical* description, in that Buchon tells us about the subject-matter of the picture but almost nothing about how the subject-matter is treated or the *form* the painting takes.

Buchon's commentary invests the painting with real-life protagonists: the old man 'really lives in Ornans'. He talks about the figures not as painted configurations but as if they were real. He reads from the painting a lived social reality and weaves a narrative around the figures, giving them a past, a present and a future: a past – a long life of drudgery; a present – working everyday on the roadside; and a future – what if the stonebreaker rose up in revolt against his oppressors? Buchon tells us a great deal about what could be inferred from the painting in 1850, when it carried powerful references to social and class division. He speaks of the painting's political content through a description of the subject depicted. It is only when Buchon turns to consider the other painting, *Burial at Ornans*, that he writes (almost in passing) that this scene, 'in spite of its fascination, is merely imperturbably sincere and faithful to reality ... in front of [it] one feels so far removed from whimpering tendencies and from all melodramatic tricks'. Here Buchon is making a comparative statement about how this painting, as a representation – one that is sincere and faithful – differs from other types of representation, which he associates with sentimental and melodramatic effects. Of course, Buchon knows all along that what he is talking about is a representation, he is not actually confusing the painting with a real scene. But what is significant for our purposes is that he uses the convention of describing the figures *as if* they were real.

The Stonebreakers was destroyed in the Second World War and all we now have as a visual record of the painting is a photograph (Plate 12). The photograph is a visual analogue of the painting, reproducing its form and content, and approximately, its colour, but like all reproductions it cannot reproduce the scale, the tonal complexity or the texture of the original work. When we work with photographs of paintings, such as the reproductions in this book, we are referring to substitutes for the actual works, in this case a

substitute for a painting that no longer exists. We could not have reproduced the picture from Buchon's verbal account. His aim, of course, was not to provide a substitute for the painting but a commentary to complement the painting. Because Buchon was describing a picture his audience had not yet seen, he had to give them a verbal picture, however partial, of what they were to see. Reading his verbal account is very different from looking at the picture, or even the photographic image of the picture that we have here. One of the most obvious differences is the way Buchon, in his narrative, has to put the figures in some kind of sequence: he lists them. In the painting, on the other hand, the whole scene is available at once; we can take in the whole picture, we can concentrate on particular details, we can scan the painting from left to right or right to left. It is possible to see Buchon following a lead suggested by Courbet in the way he discusses the boy first. This is to 'enter' the picture, as it were, led by the direction of the boy's step – the movement of the leg could be seen as a fairly conventional device for leading the spectator's 'eye' into the picture. But even if this were so, we would not simply rest when we reached the figure of the boy and look at no more of the picture until we had fully taken in the details of his clothing and bearing. The ordering of a verbal account simply does not equate with the way we scan pictures.

Buchon's account 'sees' both more and less than is in the painting. 'Less' in that he concentrates on certain details at the expense of others. He omits any reference to the landscape as well as to the formal and technical aspects of the representation – the way Courbet has applied the paint on the canvas, for instance. 'More' in that he reads from the painting a narrative about the protagonists and the lives they lead. Partly because we have nothing to go on but the photograph, we strain to see the features of the old man's face, about which Buchon wrote, 'his face has remained calm, sympathetic, and resigned'. Yet despite the limitations of the photograph, we can tell that the *invisibility* of the faces of the protagonists is a notable feature of the painting – the boy's turned away, the old man's shadowed by the straw hat. Buchon's confidence in describing the features of the face, as he goes on to refer to the 'softened features of old age', seems to derive from his observations of men such as this in actuality – and he sees it as quite legitimate to weave this into his narrative about the painting. The effacement of the individual faces in the painting focuses attention on the figures' physical movement, their poverty, and the nature of their work. Buchon seems to project back from these class references the kind of facial expression he might expect to find in workers of this type. Likewise, in the painting the tobacco box pokes out of the stonebreaker's pocket – so much is visible – but Buchon actively invites his readers to connect the detail to their observation of men like this one offering 'a friendship pinch' of tobacco to passers by. Here Buchon is engaging in imaginative projection, and asking his readers to participate in that projection; this, it is implied, is an appropriate way to look at the work.

Buchon was a friend of Courbet's and because of their close association, this text has been taken to be the clearest expression we have of the artist's own intentions (see T.J. Clark, 'A bourgeois Dance of Death'). Buchon's approach is certainly similar to the way in which Courbet himself wrote about the painting in a letter of 1849 to Francis Wey:

There is an old man of seventy, bent over his work, pick in the air, skin burnt by the sun, his head in the shade of a straw hat; his trousers of rough cloth are patched all over; he wears, inside cracked wooden clogs, stockings which were once blue, with the heels showing through. Here's a young man with his head covered in dust, his skin greyish-brown; his disgusting shirt, all in rags, exposes his arms and his flanks; leather braces hold up what is left of a pair of trousers, and his muddy leather shoes are gaping sadly in many places. The old man is on his knees, the young man is behind him, standing up, carrying a basket of stones with great energy. Alas, in this occupation you begin like the one and end like the other! Their tools are scattered here and there: a back-basket, a handbarrow, a ditching-tool, a cooking-pot, etc. All this is set in the bright sun, in the open country, by a ditch at the side of the road; the landscape fills the whole canvas.

(quoted in Clark, *Image of the People*, p.30)

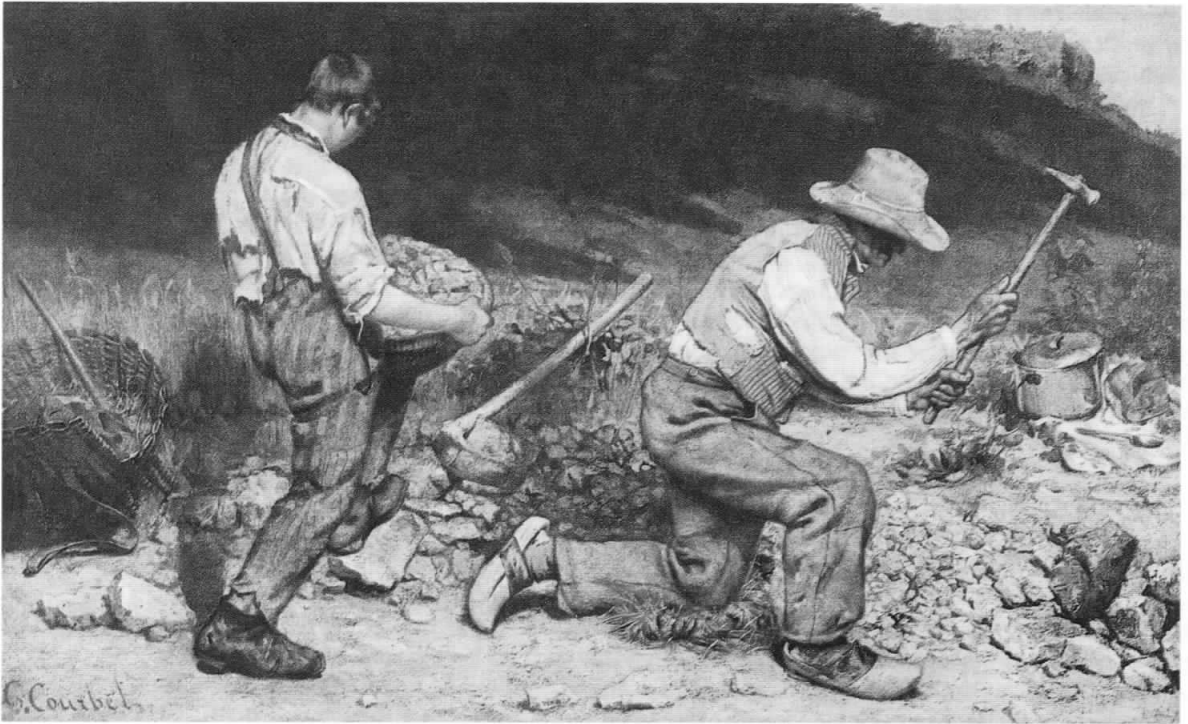


Plate 12 Gustave Courbet, *The Stonebreakers* (*Die Steinklopfer*), 1849, oil on canvas, 159 x 259 cm (destroyed 1945). Gemaldegalerie Neue Meister, Dresden. Photo: Deutsche Fototek Dresden, Sächsische Landesbibliothek, Dresden.

Read in isolation, this could be taken – until the final sentence – as a description of a real scene; read in conjunction with the picture, it picks out those iconographical elements of the work that Courbet, like Buchon, saw as its key features. It seems that Buchon read the painting ‘correctly’, if ‘correctly’ is taken to mean the way Courbet intended it to be read. In that sense, Buchon could be seen as the ideal spectator of the work, the spectator who could interpret it in the way Courbet envisaged. Buchon’s text is not merely a straightforward description, it is an account of what he saw as meaningful in *The Stonebreakers*. He picked out what was for him the significant interest in the picture, which, we can fairly reliably assume, was also its significant interest for the artist. The extent to which their interest in the painting should correspond with our own is open to question.

I want to turn now to a very different piece of criticism. It was written some seventeen years later than Buchon’s, in 1867. This is the writer Émile Zola talking generally about Manet’s work:

Our task then, as judges of art, is limited to establishing the language and the characters; to study the languages and to say what new subtlety and energy they possess. The philosophers, if necessary, will take it on themselves to draw up formulas. I only want to analyse facts, and works of art are nothing but simple facts.

Thus I put the past on one side – I have no rules or standards – I stand in front of Édouard Manet’s pictures as if I were standing in front of something quite new which I wish to explain and comment upon.

What first strikes me in these pictures, is how true is the delicate relationship of tone values. Let me explain ... Some fruit is placed on a table and stands out against a grey background. Between the fruit, according to whether they are nearer or further away, there are gradations of colour producing a complete scale of tints. If you start with a ‘note’ which is lighter than the real note, you must paint the whole in a lighter key; and the

contrary is true if you start with a note which is lower in tone. Here is what I believe is called 'the law of values'. I know of scarcely anyone of the modern school, with the exception of Corot, Courbet and Édouard Manet, who constantly obeys this law when painting people. Their works gain thereby a singular precision, great truth and an appearance of great charm.

Manet usually paints in a higher key than is actually the case in Nature. His paintings are light in tone, luminous and pale throughout. An abundance of pure light gently illuminates his subjects. There is not the slightest forced effect here; people and landscapes are bathed in a sort of gay translucence which permeates the whole canvas.

What strikes me is due to the exact observation of the law of tone values. The artist, confronted with some subject or other, allows himself to be guided by his eyes which perceive this subject in terms of broad colours which control each other. A head posed against a wall becomes only a patch of something more, or less, grey; and the clothing, in juxtaposition to the head, becomes, for example, a patch of colour which is more, or less, white. Thus a great simplicity is achieved – hardly any details, a combination of accurate and delicate patches of colour, which, from a few paces away, give the picture an impressive sense of relief.

I stress this characteristic of Édouard Manet's works, because it is their dominating feature and makes them what they are. The whole of the artist's personality consists in the way his eye functions: he sees things in terms of light, colour and masses.

(*'Une nouvelle manière en peinture'*, pp.31–2)

Zola's view of the significant interest of a painting has little in common with Buchon's. Judging by this text, it seems that the sense of what it is to look at a painting has changed. Zola's use of the phrase 'some subject or other' gives an indication of the relative unimportance he attributes to subject-matter. It is not that he is unaware of subject-matter, he simply does not judge it to be relevant to his experience of a work of art (just as Buchon was aware that *The Stonebreakers* was a representation, but saw no need to discuss the forms and colours which Courbet used). Zola's focus is on the effect of Manet's art, but he also refers to the treatment of tonal values in the art of Courbet, placing the stress on a different aspect of Courbet's work from that which concerned Buchon. Buchon's imaginative projection related *The Stonebreakers* to a lived social reality and to class relationships; Zola regarded the significant interest of Manet's painting to be the form it took and the visual effect of the paint on canvas. The shift in priorities is clear throughout the passage. Zola writes: 'A head posed against a wall becomes only a patch of something more, or less, grey'; in other words, a 'real' head becomes something else as soon as it is painted: it becomes a patch of colour on canvas.

It is, of course, no more possible to establish an image of Manet's work from Zola's text, than it was from Buchon's description of *The Stonebreakers*. (*The Philosopher* of 1865, Plate 13, is an example of Manet's work of this period.) Zola points to a series of techniques and effects, though, which are particular to an artistic practice, and he deliberately renders inappropriate, even illegitimate, the imaginative weaving of a story around the figures, such as Buchon had engaged in. As well as commenting on Manet's work, Zola was also making a statement about the nature of the job of a modern art critic – this passage begins, for example, by setting limits on what the task entailed. The critical task was to establish what Zola calls the 'language' and the 'characters'. 'Language' referred to the medium of painting itself; 'characters' referred to both the temperament of the artist and that of the figures represented as social types in the paintings. What is important here is that he could draw a distinction between the two, and that he could consider the 'language' of painting as separate from its subject-matter. Zola used the idea of language to refer to the means of representation, and not the story-telling aspect of representation. Yet he had to describe the effect of this pictorial language in words; his criticism is a written text which attempts to describe verbally the visual effect of the medium. 'What

Plate 13 Édouard Manet,
Le Philosophe drapé (*The Philosopher*),
 1865, oil on canvas, 188 x 109 cm.
 Arthur Jerome Eddy Memorial
 Collection, Art Institute of Chicago
 1931,504.
 Photograph © 1990, The Art Institute
 of Chicago. All Rights Reserved.



strikes me ...', he says more than once, and what he remarks upon are those technical aspects of Manet's works which seemed remarkable to him as a spectator.

Zola's text, like Buchon's, only takes on a reasonably precise sense when it is read in conjunction with the works of art discussed. Both texts need to be seen in a reciprocal relationship with the works they describe. Thus Zola was not describing Manet's work as devoid of figuration – what we would now see as abstract painting – or conceiving of it in that way. This was simply not a possibility available to Zola, or something anyone could have envisioned in 1867. He placed emphasis on Manet's treatment of the formal aspects of the medium of painting at the expense of other aspects – this constitutes, for Zola, the interest of the works. His is not a straightforward description (any more than Buchon's was), but an interpretation of what is significant in Manet's work, and a conception of what it is that makes a work of art effective as a modern painting.

At the time this article was written, Zola's was a novel approach to art, contrasting with contemporary critical views, which retained an emphasis on the story-telling content of artworks. But his preoccupation with the means of representation, rather than with the subject depicted, has itself become a conventional way of talking about modern paintings. The idea that the value and interest of Manet's work resides, first and foremost, in the medium of painting is characteristic of later Modernist accounts. Clement Greenberg writes, for example, that the modern artist derives his chief inspiration from the medium