

The Rule of Style¹

Richard Neer

Résumé

Richard Neer met en question l'idée selon laquelle il y aurait deux types d'histoire de l'art, et plus précisément, deux manières d'analyser le « style » d'une œuvre d'art. La première qui serait la compétence d'amateurs éclairés (connoisseurship), et la seconde, l'icologie érudite. Après avoir souligné les contradictions de l'icologie, dont Panofsky est à la fois le fondateur et le meilleur exemple, Neer redéfinit le « style » comme « une grammaire de possibilités conceptuelles se développant historiquement. » Neer conclut que l'histoire de l'art comprise comme connoisseurship est la mieux qualifiée pour appréhender cet objet.

Note: This paper represents a slightly expanded version of a talk given at the session Art History – Aesthetics – Semiotics. The tendency to flit from one to the other is an artifact of the conference format.

It is conventional in America to say that there are two Art Histories.² There is the art history of museums and curators and dealers, dominated by questions of quality, authenticity, attribution, and style: in a word, connoisseurship. Then there is the art

¹This paper has benefited enormously from conversations with Arnold Davidson, Joel Snyder, James Conant, and Stanley Cavell, none of whom is responsible for whatever errors it contains. I'd like to thank, in addition, Robert Morrissey for his hospitality; François Jullien for his collegiality; and Jim Chandler for teaching me how to exit a moving vehicle in a hurry.

²See, e.g., C. Haxthausen, ed., *The Two Art Histories: The Museum and the University* (Williamstown, Clark Art Institute: 2002).

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history of the academy, dominated by the example of Panofsky, specifically the later Panofsky as he institutionalized himself in Princeton. The Panofskian method – once it became well and truly a method, that is, teachable and replicable – articulated a hierarchy of word and image, such that one explained images by reference to words drawn from a real or metaphorical archive.³ The resulting iconologies tended to distinguish peremptorily between pictorial content and pictorial form in order to focus exclusively on the former. At their most extreme, they degenerated into cryptography, decoding images by means of literary ciphers. The underlying premise was that there exists a causal relation between a given text and a picture: pictures have meanings, and those meanings are known through verbal inscriptions. That this method encourages virtuosic displays of erudition may account, at least in part, for its popularity within the academy. It is work performed more in the library than the museum.

The opposition of connoisseurship and iconology is sometimes taken as one between formalism and historicism, hence between Kant and Hegel. Connoisseurship, so the reasoning goes, is concerned ultimately with style as an autonomous system, while iconology is a form of cultural history. But matters are more complex. Indeed, Panofsky's work prior to his arrival in America, supremely his *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, was precisely an attempt to think beyond the opposition of Kant and Hegel: to interleave a Kantian theory of schematized perception with a Hegelian historicism.⁴ Mainstream Anglophone art history tends to overlook this aspect of the Panofskian enterprise; so it is worth discussing further.

³The literature on Panofsky is immense. A fine English-language study is Michael Ann Holly, *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History* (Ithaca, Cornell: 1984).

⁴E. Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*. Tr. C. Wood (New York, Zone: 1991). On this essay, see James Elkins, *Poetics of Perspective* (Ithaca, Cornell: 1994): 187–212; Joel Snyder, *Art Bulletin* 77 (1995): 337–40.

Kant discusses schemata chiefly in the first *Critique*. A “schema,” he writes, “... signifies a *rule* of the synthesis of the imagination.”⁵ A schema is, in Kant’s idiom, the rule according to which intuitions of sense are subsumed under categories of understanding; the rule, that is, according to which the formalization of the manifold in perception takes place. The result is apperception, subjective awareness of the world around us. Kant calls this schema, or rule, “a product and as it were a monogram of pure a priori imagination.”⁶ In calling the schema a “monogram,” at least part of Kant’s point is that the schema is not itself an image. It is not an image of the world, still less an image of the imagination, but what he calls a “representation,” or sign. Following this rule in processing apprehended sense-data amounts to making perceptual images, provisional syntheses of the manifold in perception.

For the young Panofsky, *pictorial* images were derivative of these Kantian *perceptual* images. Just as perceptual images are structured according to rules (schemata), so pictures are structured according to rules of composition and style. Kantian rules link categories – pure concepts of the understanding, such as space, time, magnitude, and cause – with apprehended sense-data. The pictorial equivalent would be the rule or form by which a painting figures space (or time, or magnitude, or cause ...): hence the interest of perspective. But Panofsky did not stop with Kantian schemata. He went further: he historicized schematized perception in and as the history of art. The grand claim of *Perspective as Symbolic Form* was that historical changes in the style or structure of pictures – say from Roman to Late Antique to Medieval to Renaissance – implied a corresponding change *not in*

⁵ I. Kant, *critique of Pure Reason*, tr. P. Guyer and A. Wood (Cambridge, England, Cambridge University Press: 1998), p. 273.

⁶ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 273.

perception – which Panofsky took to be organic and unchanging – but in *the rule for formalizing perception*. That is, changes in style track, changes in the schemata of sensible concepts – changes in the typography, as it were, of the Kantian monogram.

One might suppose that such changes would entail changes in how we actually see, but for Panofsky they did not. Panofsky posited two modes of seeing, psycho-physiological and intellectual, the one unchanging and ahistorical, not rule-bound; and the other subject to rules that change with time. We all see the same way physiologically, and yet our schemata are not universal but historical. Panofsky argues that Greco-Roman perspective corresponds to physiological seeing, while Renaissance perspective corresponds to intellectual seeing. The one gives us the world as we “really” see it, the other as we formalize it rationally. This is puzzling. What is this psycho-physiological seeing, that is at once present to consciousness and (at the same time) not subject to rules or schemata?

Panofsky’s distinction between two modes of seeing echoes the brief account of perception in §26 of Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*. There Kant describes the synthesis of the manifold in perception as a two-stage process. The first stage he calls *apprehension*. Apprehension involves an initial schematization – a pixilation, one might say – of the manifold into quanta of information.⁷ This process is by definition pre-conscious: schematization represents a structural limitation on our perceptual capacities. For Kant, however, this seeming limitation is in fact integral to human freedom itself. It is integral because apprehension is, exactly, pre-conceptual: the faculty of understanding imposes no concept upon it. “[T]he freedom of the Imagination consists in the fact

⁷ A phenomenon is by definition a quantum: “[W]hatever we present in intuition according to the precept of the Judgment (and thus represent aesthetically) is always a phenomenon and thus a quantum” (Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §25, p. 109).

that it schematizes *without any concept*... ”⁸ Indeed, as the raw or “wild” intake of quanta, apprehension can proceed infinitely: it is mere seriation, one damn thing after another. But “Reason,” says Kant, “requires totality.”⁹ We can think the infinite logically, but we cannot grasp it perceptually. In order to make sense of the manifold, the streaming quanta must be subject to synthesis by the faculty of the Understanding. “Reason consequently desires comprehension in *one* intuition, and so the [joint] *presentation* of all these members of a progressively increasing series.”¹⁰ This second stage Kant calls *aesthetic comprehension*. It occurs in conformity to rules: the dictates of Reason itself. Aesthetic comprehension names the application of schemata or rules to the apprehended quanta: it is a synthetic operation, schematism in action.

Panofsky, however, renders this distinction incoherent. For his thesis to work, physiological seeing must be at once present to consciousness and free from historical/cultural rules or schemata.¹¹ The result is chimerical. Kantian apprehension, standing intermediate between the unknowable things-in-themselves and subjective consciousness, is by definition *invisible*. We only see what the mind comprehends, not what the eye apprehends: that is, after all, the whole point of the distinction. Another way of putting it would be to say that we do not see the light that falls on the photoreceptor cells in our eyes: we see what the brain makes of the signals that the eye transmits to it. Sever eye from brain and the result is blindness. Not, however, for Panofsky. For him, Classical art somehow evaded this metaphysical constraint to give the truth in painting (that is, perhaps, the structural function of

⁸ Kant, *critique of Judgment*, §36, pp. 161-62. Italics added.

⁹ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §26, p. 115.

¹⁰ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §26, p. 115.

¹¹ Christopher Wood argues essentially this same point in his Introduction to Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*.

the Classical in modern historiography). This root incoherence of psycho-physiological seeing brings down *Perspective as Symbolic Form*.

In fairness, Kant himself was less than clear on the subject of schematization. He calls the relation of sense to schema “a mysterious art hidden deep in the human soul.”¹² We are all of us artists for Kant: vision is a creative – albeit rational – act. Panofsky was merely taking the phrase literally and studying what we artists do when we actually use brushes and chisels; and he was trying to account for the fact that we do different things at different times and places while yet remaining almost miraculously comprehensible to one another.

Panofsky’s later work largely abandoned these ambitions. Iconology in America was not, and is not, a study of the typography of perception, or an interrogation of rules. But it is the earlier intuition of style as the material correlate of a rule, a rule *in concreto* as Kant puts it, that I wish to emphasize.¹³ I want to see if it is productive, and if it is possible to salvage it from the deep contradiction of the Panofskian formulation. To that end, I want to look at the notion of a rule as it relates to the semiotic account of pictures, and then at how it might give us as sense of art history as a discipline among others.

One way to think of the semiotic account of pictures, as it flourished in the 1980s with Norman Bryson and Mieke Bal, is as an attempt to resolve the contradiction in Panofsky: the contradiction, that is, between physiological and schematized seeing.¹⁴ Semiotics resolved the contradiction by ignoring physiology and

¹² Kant, *critique of Pure Reason*, p. 273.

¹³ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 273.

¹⁴ M. Bal and N. Bryson, “Semiotics and Art History,” *Art Bulletin* (1991): 174-298. In retrospect this essay, which seemed like a manifesto when it first appeared, was in fact a swan song.

focusing on the idea of the monogram: the schema of perception, understood as a sign. It claimed that pictures are signs, hence are like the sign or monogram of *a priori* imagination – the sign, that is, which structures perception. There is an homology between pictures and schemata. How do the two link up? They link up via the concept of a *rule*. The pictorial sign and the “monogram-sign” are both structured according to the same rule – they are both structured like a language (this is the basic claim of structuralism as it came via Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss).¹⁵ Taking the monogram as exemplifying a linguistic rule made it possible to argue that images were linguistic rules put into material practice. They were rules *in concreto*. Panofsky’s physiological seeing disappeared from the account, and all that remained were linguistic rules and their material correlates, that is, pictures.

Now, there are many reasons why semiotics disappeared from art history in America. And make no mistake: it’s gone. There is no more semiotics in American art history in any strong sense of the word; as evidence for that I merely observe that it has been fifteen years since Norman Bryson last published a book. Many of the reasons for this disappearance are bad, by which I mean crudely political: semiotics fell victim, over the course of the 1990s, to the reactionary backlash against postmodernism. But the closest thing to a respectable reason has to do with the difficulty of applying rules to pictorial depiction in the way that semiotics demands. Of course, nobody will deny that there are rules to iconography.¹⁶ Think of Byzantine art, with its elaborate rules for who gets square haloes

¹⁵ E.g. in Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Anthropologie structurale* (Paris, Plon: 1958). The early work of Louis Marin represents a particularly sophisticated application of this thesis. From the American perspective, the essays in N. Bryson, ed., *Calligram: Essays in New Art History from France* (Cambridge, England, Cambridge University Press: 1988) were especially important.

¹⁶ The classic statement being R. Barthes, *Mythologies*, tr. A. Lavers (New York, Hill and Wang: 1972).

and who gets round ones, or whether the crucified Christ should have his eyes open or closed. But what linguistic rule allows us to see figures in the first place? What grammar structures depiction as such? That was the big question for semiotics in the history of art.¹⁷

There are really two problems here. First, although the Saussurean sign is diacritical, it is a notorious fact about pictures that they offer continuous surfaces, not particulate ones. The picture is a continuous surface, so there is nothing that can function as a *meme* or semiotic unit at the level of depiction. Once we have separated figure and ground, then we can talk of discrete units. But a robust semiotic account would have to account for that initial segregation; and the continuous surface makes that operation incompatible with the diacritical postulates of Saussure. The closer you look at any picture, the more difficult it becomes to identify the grapheme. In France, one might consider this objection a Bergsonian one – and I am not going to follow it up, beyond noting that it corresponds to the problem of apprehension, that is, the problem of an inaugural division of the manifold into quanta.

The second problem, and the more interesting one, concerns the notion of a rule in depiction.¹⁸ In a semiotic account this rule would do the work of grammar. For Saussure, languages have grammatical rules, hence linguistic systems of signs must have grammars as well. Saussure’s famous metaphor is the chessboard, and part of the point of that metaphor is that the game of chess has certain rules that you cannot break.¹⁹ You *cannot* put a pawn into check, and

¹⁷ As stated in N. Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (New Haven, Yale: 1983).

¹⁸ For this argument see Richard Wollheim, “On Formalism and Pictorial Representation,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 59 (2001): 127-138. First printed as *On Formalism and Its Kinds* (Barcelona, Fundació Antoni Tàpies: 1996).

¹⁹ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*. Tr. R. Harris (London, Duckworth: 1978): 88.

just so you cannot use words in certain combinations. Saussurean grammar implies the possibility of an ungrammatical sentence. But then the question is: what would be ungrammatical in depiction? It is one of the great lessons of high modernist painting, say Piet Mondrian or Barnett Newman, that *any* mark on a surface may imply a distinction between figure and ground, hence any mark is potentially pictorial. Instead of arguing this point, I will simply quote authorities. Here is Walter Benjamin: "Graphic line is determined in opposition to surface. ... Graphic line designates the surface and thereby determines it by coordinating it itself as its background."²⁰ And here is Clement Greenberg: "The first mark made on a surface destroys its virtual flatness."²¹ I suppose that when Benjamin and Greenberg can agree on something, then it deserves our attention. It follows that pictorial depiction is not rule-bound *in the way that a semiotic account requires*.²² The problem, or, as Gombrich called it, the "riddle," of accounting for historical styles in their history *and* in their potential comprehensibility is something to which the historical study of art is committed.²³ But it is precisely this combination – history plus comprehensibility – that remained unclear in a rigorous semiotics. We need to understand what art historians can possibly think they are doing.

"It looks as if we could say, 'Word-language allows of senseless combinations of words, but the language of imagining does not allow us to imagine anything senseless.' – Hence, too, the language of drawing doesn't allow of senseless drawings?" That's a quotation

²⁰ Walter Benjamin, quoted in Yves-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard: 1990), p. 178.

²¹ Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in G. Battcock, ed., *The New Art: A Critical Anthology* (New York, Dutton: 1966), p. 73.

²² Saussurean linguistics has clear criteria for distinguishing sense from nonsense, but those criteria don't seem to apply to pictures.

²³ E.H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion* (Princeton, Princeton University Press: 1961).

from the *Philosophical Investigations* (§512).²⁴ Wittgenstein asks a question: are there, can there be, senseless drawings? And he answers it as follows: "Suppose they were drawings from which bodies were supposed to be modeled. In this case, some drawings would make sense, some not." So, yes, there are some things that can be called senseless *while yet remaining drawings*. It sounds like a description of what art historians do – but what does it mean? To understand this formulation, it is necessary to recognize that Wittgenstein's concept of grammar is very different from Saussure's chessboard. It is less a matter of how we move the pieces on the board than of how we come to see it as a chessboard in the first place (§31). As opposed to a checkerboard, or a scale model of the floor in a Renaissance fresco, or something bewildering, or an object of indifference.

Importantly, Wittgenstein's grammar precludes *nothing* except the possibility of a totally idiosyncratic, or private, language. Private language is not the violation of a rule but for Wittgenstein a logical impossibility. No rule forbids us to have private language, just as no rule forbids humans from being liquid; it is not as though there is some potential that remains unrealized. Grammar is by definition shared, and once you have two people sharing a language, however simple it may be, then you enter a world of limitless possibility, therefore of limitless vulnerability. "The great difficulty here," he writes, "is not to represent the matter as if there were something one *couldn't* do. As if there really were an object, from which I derive its description, but I were unable to show it to anyone" (§374). You don't have a description of an object and there is nothing you cannot show: you are sharing patterns of language with others, sharing grammars of concepts that include "object" and "description." The only way out of that

²⁴ L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, tr. G.E.M. Anscombe (New York, Macmillan: 1958). Further references will be in the text. Thesis references (§) are to Part I; page references are to Part II.

grammar is into privacy – which is impossible. So you cannot break the rules of grammar, in the sense that you cannot break *out* of them.

Which is not to say that our public languages, by virtue of being shared, cannot cease to be so, cannot break down, or leave us stranded. That is a possibility; but there is no other sort of language to have (§120).²⁵ Hence “[O]ur investigation ... is directed not towards phenomena, but, as one might say, towards the ‘possibilities’ in phenomena” (§90). By “possibility,” Wittgenstein means the very possibility of our using particular concepts, like “chessboard” and “chess” and “game.” When we sit down to play a game, it is not certain *a priori* what will happen. What if we’re playing, and I put your pawn in check (§136)? Now, that’s something that can only happen if we’re already playing (something like) chess. It is not an *arbitrary* occurrence, but it is a *possibility*. You can either call the whole thing off, or try to remind me of the rules as you understand them (and maybe I’ll argue the point). Or you can move to protect your pawn. Something has happened to the schema or rule of chess in that case. The investigation of these possibilities or *événements* is part of what Wittgenstein means by “grammatical” (§90).

Returning to drawings, you can do anything, just as you can make any mark articulate a distinction of foreground and background. Wittgenstein is happy to call such marks “drawings,” that is to say, pictures, but he insists that these drawings will count as sensical only in certain particular contexts, as for instance when one makes drawings for the modeling of bodies. A Mondrian

²⁵ True senselessness is not ungrammatical, it is wholly outside grammar. “When a sentence is called senseless, it is not as it were its sense that is senseless” (§500). A senseless sentence is not failing to attain sense; it has no sense to attain. On the senseless in Wittgenstein see C. Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press: 1991): 73-114.

contains the possibility, always, of being seen as depictive by anyone with the concept of a drawing (anyone, that is, who could see something as depictive); but to someone with the very specific needs that Wittgenstein describes – modeling bodies – or to someone trying to meet those needs by painting a picture, a Mondrian is just not sensical. There is no use for it; they cannot do anything with it. This does not mean that our people would be constitutionally incapable of seeing it as a picture; indeed, the Mondrian might possibly challenge them, much as though someone had put their pawns in check. Mondrian and Wittgenstein’s modelers of bodies share a concept of drawing but may just disagree about the criteria for applying that concept. That’s the key difference with Saussure. The semiotic account cannot admit of the possibility.

The study of what counts as sense in particular times and places is the study of grammar as played out in the application of rules, a playing out that is part of a form of life.²⁶ Wittgenstein explicitly connects this idea of grammar to the idea of style. “Compare a concept with a style in painting,” he writes. “For is even our style of painting arbitrary? Can we choose one at pleasure? (The Egyptian, for instance.) Is it a mere question of pleasing and ugly?” (p. 228; cf. §497). Styles have a grammar just like concepts have a grammar. They are not arbitrary, in the sense that we cannot just choose one at pleasure, any more than we can choose our native tongue. If the result is a question of pleasing or ugly, it is not *merely* or *trivially* so. Styles, and the aesthetic judgments that styles allow, are the lived, everyday application of rules and criteria as organized according to grammars. Style is not a

²⁶ A history of grammatical *événements* would, as Arnold Davidson has argued, look very much like the work of Michel Foucault. See A. Davidson, ‘Foucault and the Analysis of Concepts,’ in *The Emergence of Sexuality: Historical Epistemology and the Emergence of Concepts* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard: 2001), pp. 192-91.

form of life – since, *pace* Focillon, styles are not alive – but it is as it were the fossil of a form of life. It is a form *in concreto*.

The resulting view has some features in common with the Kantian formula of category, schema, image, and picture, but it also involves a fundamental reorientation.²⁷ Like Kant, like Panofsky, like semiotics, Wittgenstein lays cardinal importance on the concept of a rule. Recall that, for Kant, a rule was synonymous with a schema of sensible concepts and with the monogram of the *a priori* imagination. And that Panofsky's claim was that pictorial style is the material correlate of these rules as they change with time (even as he claimed that there existed an unchanging and ahistorical mode of seeing that was not subject to rules). In each case, the rule is prescriptive and *a priori*: a sign or representation of the transcendental categories in and as their practical application. Semiotics replaced these transcendental categories with a metaphysically *a priori* Language. It did so in the interest of a materialist alternative to Kant, but the regulatory force of the rule remained intact. The rule was still prescriptive, not descriptive. Hence the riddle of style – the intelligibility of

²⁷ Stanley Cavell brings out the affinities with, and differences from, Kant in *The Claim of Reason*. (Oxford, Oxford University Press: 1979), p. 77: "To think of a word as embodying a concept," he writes, "is to think of the word as having a grammatical schematism...; the schematism marks out the set of criteria on the basis of which the word is applied in all the grammatical contexts into which it fits and will be found to fit (in investigating which we are investigating part of its grammar). The concept is this schematism... The schematism is the frame of the world, and to exit it should mean to exit from our mutual attunement." The word has certain criteria of use; these criteria Cavell calls a schematism; the schematism is grammatical in the sense of being part of the word's grammar. It is pretty clear that the criteria in question do the work of a Kantian rule or schema. Grammatical criteria are in this sense the transcendental condition of the use of a word, but they are transcendental not in the sense of referring back to any *a priori* category, as per Kant, but only (if that is the word) as applied to a description of the word's use, that is, to its grammar.

other styles – remained insoluble. The problem, I suggest, was not with the concept of style but with the operative concept of a rule.

Well and good, but what about *L'Ordre des disciplines*? I am not trying to argue for a Wittgensteinian art history, or to "reform" the discipline. My point, rather, is that art history is already Wittgensteinian, in practice if not in theory; in part if not in whole. I said at the outset that there are two art histories in America. There is connoisseurship and there is iconology, or, there is formalism and there is historicism. This distinction is an utter mirage. Style is only a riddle if we take it as the material correlate of an *a priori* cognitive typography. It is less mystifying if we take it as evidence for an historically evolving grammar of conceptual possibilities.²⁸ If the experience that Greenberg and Benjamin describe leads to a view of criteria that has less to do with identifying knights and pawns than with recognizing chess-pieces as such, then it follows that rules in painting will not pertain to matters of iconography but of depiction *as such*. The grammar in question is a pictorial grammar, a grammar of the horizon of possibilities *in pictures* at certain times and places. If this sounds like formalism, then perhaps the idea of formalism is itself metaphysical.

The existing branch of art history most closely aligned to this project would be its most-maligned one: connoisseurship.²⁹ Connoisseurship I take in its degree-zero form to be the recognition of an object's origin merely by looking it. You walk into a gallery, you see a painting, you say, "Ah, that's a Rembrandt!" Or,

²⁸ It is this sense of style, I might add parenthetically, that I take Arnold Davidson to have espoused in his essay on "Styles of Reasoning": see Davidson, *The Emergence of Sexuality*, pp. 125-41.

²⁹ I have this point at greater length in R. Neer, "Connoisseurship and the Stakes of Style." *Critical Inquiry* 32 (2005): 1-26.

“that’s a Dutch painting of the 17th century!” Or, “that’s a European painting!” Or you’re indifferent. More broadly, however, I want to recruit for connoisseurship any enterprise that takes style to be indicative of historical facts. On this view, T.J. Clark, Leo Steinberg, and Michael Fried are all connoisseurs.³⁰ That sounds odd, I admit, but once again the oddness is perhaps symptomatic. Clark & Co. are connoisseurs, because in each case it is style that does all the real argumentative work, and style that delivers all the real payoff. (Just to be specific, the payoff for me of Clark consists in seeing Seurat’s pointillism, or Manet’s facture, as the places in which the contingency of Parisian modernity *is and remains for us*, today).³¹ The picture’s formal structure is where the historical action takes place.

What counts as proof in the work of Clark, Fried, and Steinberg is always ultimately the marks on the surface. The picture is its own best evidence. In the case of Fried, either you see how Thomas Eakins assimilated recessive planes of painted water to the planes of a drawing-master’s tablet, or you don’t.³² There is no external evidence that will do the trick on its own. One of the great glories of Steinberg’s account of the *Cenacolo* is his cheerful acknowledgement that it runs counter to Leonardo’s own dicta on the art of painting.³³ If the painter’s testimony fails to jibe with the work as Steinberg sees it, then that’s too bad for the painter’s testimony. The same was true for Morelli: either you saw that the Dresden Venus was by the same hand as the *Tempesta*, or you didn’t.

³⁰ On Clark as a connoisseur, see D. Carrier, “In Praise of Connoisseurship,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 61 (2003), pp. 159-69; Neer, “Stakes of Style,” p. 141.

³¹ T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life* (New Haven, Yale: 1985).

³² M. Fried, *Realism, Writing, Disfiguration: On Thomas Eakins and Stephen Crane* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press: 1987).

³³ L. Steinberg, *Leonardo’s Incessant Last Supper* (New York, Zone: 2001).

In the event everyone has come to agree about Giorgione; many people disagree about Eakins and Leonardo. But by emphasizing the primacy of perceived morphology as evidence for the past, these authors collectively interrogate the extent to which we today do or do not share criteria of judgment, do or do not participate in a shared grammar of concepts, do or do not live a common form of life. Either you see it or you don’t, say the connoisseurs, and the question becomes: do we see the same things, or don’t we? Maybe we don’t: that’s a possibility, as distressing in its own way as my dogged insistence that your pawn is in check.

What I am calling connoisseurship amounts to an interrogation of our criteria by way of an investigation of what Steinberg calls “other criteria,” the criteria of others as played out in images.³⁴ It is thus fair, I think, to class connoisseurship as what Michel Foucault and Arnold Davidson have called an ascetics, an *askêsis*, “an exercise of oneself in thought.” (It is here that the links, ordered or not, between Art History and the other disciplines start to become apparent). Here it is necessary to recall the Greek meaning of *askêsis* as an artistic activity: *askêsis* is artisanal embellishment; the Latin translation is *ars*, that is, Art. You could also call it a *tekhne*. Connoisseurship is the study of art by way of an art of the self.

There is a mythological paradigm for this enterprise, and its transatlantic possibilities, in Henry James’ *Bildungsroman*, *The Portrait of a Lady*. The heroine, Isabel Archer, hopes to make of herself what she calls “a figure essentially,” an image, to paint her own portrait as it were.³⁵ She may be said to begin work on

³⁴ L. Steinberg, *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth Century Art* (Oxford, Oxford University Press: 1972).

³⁵ The novel is available in so many editions that page references are less than useful. I cite here a convenient online edition:

<http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext01/1p1dy10.txt>.

that picture, with "a line sharply drawn," at the moment she recognizes, behind the spectacle of her life in Rome, the work of an authorial hand. The hand is that of her husband, a connoisseur of exquisite taste, who is himself incapable of treating human beings as anything other than *objets d'art*, and who indeed has treated her as a thing or a tool. This man, she realizes, has been deceiving her: the life she leads in Rome is false, a fake. While the husband figures a debased connoisseurship, James presents Isabel's discovery as a moment of connoisseurial attribution: "Ah yes, there had been intention, there had been intention, Isabel said to herself; and she seemed to wake from a long pernicious dream." Recognizing intention and identifying whose it is, recognizing what is true and what is "deeply, deeply, deeply false," these acts are the very stuff of connoisseurial practice. They are, for James, the opening of an ascetics, that is to say an art, of the self: an exercise of self-portraiture in and as applied connoisseurship. It is perhaps necessary to note that, as a woman and a wife, at home neither in democratic America nor patrician Europe, Isabel's situation is a political one – political *in concreto*.

If all of this tells us anything about the disciplines, it is that when we come to talk about them, or about reforming them, we would do well not to think of ourselves as practicing a second-order or meta-discipline (§121). The disciplines are their own commentary; and the critical practice of Morelli, Clark, Fried, Steinberg, Archer, and the rest amounts to an ongoing clarification of the way we, today, mobilize concepts. It does so by *forcing* those concepts. When it is not held captive by certain pictures, Art History asks, endlessly, what we do when we use words like art and history – or combine them in the single word, style. The interrogation of our criteria through the study of other criteria is, I've suggested, an ascetics or *tekhne*. If writing about *tekhne* is called *technology*, then art history is an historical

technology of the self – a history, therefore, of the present. Which is to say that art history, whether it knows it or not, is part of an altogether larger project, one that deserves to be called "interdisciplinary."

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