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What *Was* History Painting
and What *Is* It Now?
Edited by MARK SALBER PHILLIPS and JORDAN BEAR

In the European academic paradigm, history painting sat at the top of the hierarchy of genres, inextricably entwined with a rigid theory of conventions. In this position of undisputed sovereign authority, it became the ogre against which Modernism emerged. So the story goes. Mark Salber Phillips and Jordan Bear, with ten other scholars, offer case studies that destabilize this simple tale. They look at how history painting consistently did not correspond to the fixity of theory, and then see what of history painting has percolated, almost clandestinely, into Modernist and contemporary art.

The book is an intellectual endeavour that pushes beyond the ontological parameters of what we think history painting is while, curiously, reifying those parameters. Mark Salber Phillips is an intellectual historian who has spent much time writing about the concept of history in European thought.[1] As he summarizes in the Introduction, he has come to position "distance" as a relational term, imbued with affect and experience that, in turn, functions to mediate our relationship with the past. Over the last decade, he has turned to examine history painting through the same lens, often within stimulating milieux such as CASVA, the Yale Center for British Art, and the Clark Art Institute. This book is an output of this project. Several of the authors focus on the phenomenology of time—discursive, durational, historicizing, immersive, subjective, and sensual—which, in turn, draws upon Phillips, Benjamin, and other intellectuals' extensive consideration of the same subject. Correlations are also made with contemporaneous discourses that range from academic art theory and twentieth-century art journals to the writing of history, the philosophy of aesthetics, as well as popular literature and the press. Likewise, the subjects of each essay are often situated within the broader terrain of visual culture: venues such as salons, print shops, and wax museums, as well as a panoply of panoramas, dioramas, and other things. All of these, in turn, position and enunciate the viewer's experience while also accentuating the affecting tensions and overlays of relative distances, neutrality, and intimacy. *En masse*, the essays counsel the reader to think of history painting with what Phillips calls "the breadth and malleability of a heuristic rather than the rigidity of theory" (11).

History painting, according to its theory, is narrative, didactic, heroic, monumental, iconic, and, above all, classicizing. The book is divided into three parts. The essays in Parts One and Two show how, even as the theory was settling into place, the exigencies of changing economies and social orders in European society were demanding something else. In Part One, using Bronzino's confounding and sensuous *Martyrdom of San Lorenzo* (1569), Stuart Lingo exposes how Alberti's *istoria* of narrative unity was quickly shouldered aside in the sixteenth century by the emphasis on the artist as godlike creator, with Bronzino also undermining the imperatives of political and religious authority. Susanna Cavilgia addresses the reorientation of attention on the viewer in eighteenth-century France, from the passive receptor of Louis XIV's heroic exploits to the active participant in the phenomenological intimacy of bourgeois interiors, in line with emergent aesthetics and sensualism. Likewise, Phillips takes apart the monolithic stature of history painting in Britain from Joshua Reynolds to David Wilkie, in step with and in response to Edgar Wind's seminal 1938 essay "The Revolution of History Painting," by coupling history painting with imperial secular nationalism and the turn toward the everyday. This is coeval with a distancing and re-distancing of the past in the writing of history amidst the rise of sentiment.

Cynthia Ellen Roman's essay on James Gillray and his *Death of the Great Wolf* (1795) at the beginning of Part Two acts as a poignant segue in the move from a focus on the affecting human figure to the consideration of history painting within the broader context of visual culture. Roman posits Gillray's satires, especially *Wolf*, as effective alternatives to painting in late eighteenth-century England, emphasizing the print shop as a viable venue for dissemination—satire or not—to a multivalent market that ranged from window gazers to collectors. Next, Bear uses Benjamin Robert Haydon's *Napoleon Musing at St. Helena* (1829) as an entry point to interrogate the metaphorical and spatial dimensions of distance, in the particularly rich case of Napoleon's exile to the island of St. Helena. Bear dwells on ambivalences: the fluctuations between Napoleon's presence in London via his many things—his carriage, his horse, and his coachman—yet his bodily absence; intimacy and estrangement; and authenticity, neutrality, and eyewitness. He ends with the intermingling of

Tussaud's wax museum and Hiroshi Sugimoto's 1994 photograph of the Duke of Wellington at Napoleon's deathbed. Neither are, of course, paintings but both purport to tell historical truth. Part Two concludes with Tim Barringer's account of Thomas Cole's *Course of Empire* (1833–1836). Barringer sets the paintings against Cole's own experience of profound ecological disruption in both England and America, brought on by wanton industrialization and Jacksonian imperialism, as well as redolent currents of Romantic pessimism and melancholia. Thus the *Course* is read as a poignant and gritty historical landscape of the present day that prompts meditation on history as well as the future.

Part Three, consisting of a fulsome introduction by Bear and six essays, recalibrates the discussion and asks, what is history painting in light of Modernism? It challenges the entrenched teleology of the decline and fall of history painting and demonstrates that although it lost its sovereign and institutional authority—with the consequent withering of its monolithic ideology—history painting continued to resonate as a conceptual and pictorial resource. It was fragmented into its constitutive features and often was and continues to be decoupled from its medium. However, the tradition (another highly affective term) of history painting lives on.

Mary K. Coffey parses out history painting's heroic mythologizing as it migrated to Mexico and evolved into the classicizing of indigeneity in the late nineteenth century. She then pits Diego Rivera's *History of Mexico* (1929–35) against José Clemente Orozco's *The Epic of American Civilization* (1932–34). Both, of course, are murals which, by the 1930s, had become the dominant format for the (often political) articulation of historical narratives. She shows that, despite Rivera's Modernist rendering and use of the Marxist dialectic as both subject and compositional device, he was still caught up in the European historicist idiom of heroic mythologizing. Orozco's mural, by contrast, entwines the viewer in a "system" that offers flashes of recognition, in the manner of Walter Benjamin, that demonstrate the barbarism of civilization and catastrophe of progress amidst the Western emphasis on nation-stateness in the 1930s. James Nisbet's essay is an ontological study that examines history painting after conceptual art, invoking, alongside Michel de Certeau's sense of tactic, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's articulation of the power of the minor space, the place where history painting came to reside. After discussing David Ligare's tensions between abstraction and realism, Nisbet looks at the migration of history painting into photography, particularly the ambivalent place of citational strategies within the endemic disputation of originality. His primary focus is Jeff Wall's large-format work that so excited the luminaries of history painting scholarship (Michael Fried, Thomas Crow, T.J. Clark, and Norman Bryson). Nisbet ends with Robert Mapplethorpe's charged use of classicism "as an operation" that ultimately reinfused classicism with an eroticism long rendered dormant. Dexter Dalwood, whose own painting is discussed by Phillips in the Introduction, focuses on history painting's use of embedded reference by Richard Hamilton, Rita Donagh, and Jörg Immendorf. The resultant effect plays upon the viewer's memory recognition and thus continues to activate the paintings long after the historic moment has passed. Michael Godby then captures the complexity and cohesiveness of William Kentridge's *Triumphs and Laments: A Project for Rome* (2016) along the Tiber, an extraordinary meditation on the universality of truth and history expressed in a synthesis of medium, scale, place, time, and content. Pairing nicely with Coffey's examination of Orozco, Elizabeth Harney examines Julie Mehretu's layered, oscillating, and overwhelming large-scale paintings which subjectively articulate the collapse of emergent utopias in the predatory global economy. The book concludes with Mark Cheetham's positioning of eco-art as revived history painting; he connects the nineteenth-century Romantics' call for greater understanding of natural science in the creation of landscape painting with the galvanizing aims of contemporary eco-artists.

The case study format functions as an effective litmus test, prompting the reader, as Phillips and Bear do in their respective introductions, to consider other works of art while grappling with the idea of history painting as a heuristic. Other media slide naturally into this space, as many of the contributors show. The result intelligently complicates history painting, both neutralizing the authorial grip of the theoretical paradigm while also enhancing the nuance of the work under scrutiny. However, while many of the authors position the image in relation to text, few consider the charged nature of that relationship. Consequently, the trait of permanence inherent to text that contributes to its authoritative position is underplayed. However, the idea of permanence is rigorously explored vis-à-vis the works of art, especially in terms of the medium. Here, as in the book, is a good place to end: the multi-media, and multi-sensory, work of eco-artists Rúrí, Mariele Neudecker, Katie Paterson, and Isabelle Hayeur pick up on the most efficacious feature of history painting for our time: a call to action. ¶

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[1] See especially, Mark Salber Phillips, *On Historical Distance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).