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Wood, Christopher S. A History of Art History

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Wood, Christopher S.

A History of Art History.

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019. Pp. 459 + 24 b/w ill. ISBN 978-0-691-15652-1 (hardcover) US\$29.95.

As someone who teaches in a graduate program focused on the historiography of art history, this book by Christopher Wood will live constantly on my priority bookshelf. Wood's welcome synthesis of the essential sources from which art history created itself as a discipline is revelatory on many levels, not least because it clarifies the extent to which such a historiography can never be totally comprehensive nor totally consensual. While historiographers have long relied on compendia of excerpts from, and analyses of, "essential" primary sources, Wood offers a narrative approach to the long and winding road from the medieval to the modern age: a story of monuments, men (mostly but not exclusively), museumification, and modalities of art historical inquiry.

In terms of those modes, Wood identifies three kinds of history writer: the annalist, the typologist, and the fabulist; the fabulist puts relativism first, but relativist thought is endemic to the annalist and typologist as well. Empirical scholarship, however, is associated with disinterest, establishing itself as a methodology when the study of historical art separated itself from art schools and entered the university. Disconnecting history from art (if not from relativism) paved the way for Modernism and the pre-occupation with form. As Wood puts it, "The successes and failures of the form-oriented approach to art history allowed us to imagine art history's eventual endpoint. But what was its origin?" (21). This book takes us back to that origin—to the brink of the new art history, which unravelled history through its emphasis on presentism.

Wood's approach is chronological, moving through time from 800 to 1960, tracing origins and influences, examining key texts in the history of art history through comparison and contrast: a time-honoured art historical methodology since Wölfflin. Every informed reader will come away from the book with some startling new coalescence of insight. For me, for example, it's Wood's observation that it took art history forty years to recognize the import of Benjamin and Heidegger for our discipline, followed by his precise, elegant synopsis of the metaphor of the *Ursprung*: "The primal leap is unconditional: it is not produced by a chain of events or any past at all but instead commences something" (334), separating art from the historical but not, in Wood's

subsequent critique, without some inherent contradiction on Heidegger's part. Wood's great strength has always been his deep knowledge of the sweep of German art history from the medieval period, to Dürer and Altdorfer, to the Vienna School (on which he published an anthology in 2000). This book is steeped in Wood's deep understanding of the twentieth-century school of German philosophers who invented the discipline of art history and brought it, through exile, to the Ivy League universities of America. The rupture of exile provoked its own crisis of history that embraced the nonrelativist possibility of Modernism's preoccupation with form.

The book also makes it clear that art history was created by men. I had to comb the index to find any contributions by women, and those are notably sparse. Interestingly, two of the cases cited were women working outside of the standard European canon: Anita Brenner on Mexican votives (in 1929) and Stella Kramrisch's *The Hindu Temple* (1946), finding space on the margins. Otherwise, there are short references to the "leisured scholarship" of Mrs. Merrifield (236), a thoughtful and wistful analysis of Vernon Lee (the pseudonym of Violet Page) and her "never-written history of Renaissance art" (281), Susan Sontag on the camp sensibility (148), and very few other passing mentions. A history of the discipline since the 1980s would look very different, as does the discipline itself.

Born as an essentially Eurocentric hybrid, in the twenty-first century art history continues to assert its essential adaptability; beginning the work of decolonizing its precepts, degendering theory, adopting a more global approach to the decipherment of its primary objects of study, continually redefining those objects, and embracing the essential amorphousness of the material and the visual as they are constantly transformed by the virtual and digital. In the end, though, it does seem ironic that a discipline predicated, since the nineteenth century, on the liberation of art from history, or the liberation of history from art, remains so preoccupied with its own past.

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