

Renaissance Old Masters and Modernist Art History-Writing

The “New Art History” emerged in the 1980s in reaction to the dominance of modernism and the formalist art historical methods and theories used to teach art history from the late 1930s into the 1960s and 1970s.¹ Most often such a formalist modernism, or “aesthetic modernism” as it is often called, is linked to Clement Greenberg, whose writings are thought to have standardized modernism as a term referring to abstract, flat, formalist art.² Thus, as Johanna Drucker points out in *Theorizing Modernism*, recent art scholarship often sets Greenberg up as a straw man and oversimplifies the idea of modernism in order to promote new methods and approaches to art and art history.³ These new methods often seek to elaborate an artwork’s historical and cultural context or to draw conclusions about art’s content based on new theoretical models such as psychoanalysis or feminism.

Making distinctions between formalist and content- and context-oriented approaches to art has always played a role in art history, however, and has fueled debates among philosophers and art scholars since antiquity. Of interest here are the decades of the 1880s through the 1910s when both scientific and idealist methods of art scholarship were emerging in England, and art history as a university discipline was being established. In these decades, debates about whether artworks were to be treated as autonomous entities or as products of specific contexts were common, as were debates over whether the form or content of a painting was most important in assigning it value.⁴ Yet these issues were only symptoms of a larger crisis fueling the construction of art history and aesthetic theory in England in these decades. At stake was the ontological position of art in English society.

Italian Renaissance art stood at the center of this crisis. In the late nineteenth century, just about every art critic, connoisseur, and

historian in Europe focused his/her attention on the Italian Old Masters. As more and more Italian art became available in the market from the early nineteenth century onward, connoisseurs, collectors, and historians established attributions and chronology scientifically and scrutinized such knowledge in international debates. In the 1890s, 1900s, and 1910s, if one wanted to offer a new theory or history of art, one had to contend with the Italian Renaissance.⁵ This seemed especially true in Germany: for historians whose goal was to establish Germany's superior cultural history, the Italian Renaissance and Italian art were primary challenges.

In these decades Germans produced the majority of aesthetic theory and art history. Theodor Lipps's concept of *Einfühlung*, or "empathy," established the contemplative subject as the basis of aesthetics and influenced Bernard Berenson and others in the English art world. Adolf Hildebrand's 1893 *The Problem of Form in Painting and Sculpture* was translated into English in 1907, but even before translation, this work greatly influenced Berenson and Fry. Hildebrand's "architectonic method" refers to the artist's method of determining the "unity of form lacking in objects themselves" or "the permanent factor of all art" (19). Instead of imitating and representing nature, Hildebrand's artist perceives the formal relations and eternal laws governing objects in nature and "reconstructs" this latent "reality" in his art (112). Such theories about the contemplative subject and form are foundational to the formalist theories of art that we have traditionally associated with modernism.

German art histories produced at the turn of the century also influenced modernist views. Texts such as Heinrich Wölfflin's *Renaissance and Baroque* (1888) and *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art* (1915), and Wilhelm Worringer's *Abstraction and Empathy* (1908) and *Form in Gothic* (1912) transformed historical period concepts into terms referring to styles of art and modes of perception. Nationalism influenced the construction of these period styles; for example, Wölfflin and other German art scholars such as Wilhelm Bode narrated the German Baroque to be a period equaling if not surpassing the Italian Renaissance. While scholars in England were influenced by German (and Italian and American) art scholarship, this book does not make all of the connections that could be made between German and English art history.

English theories of art and art history were shaped most by events and trends within English culture, especially the art market and the popular consumption of Renaissance art. In early twentieth-century

England, as art critics tried to legitimize modern art and ascribe to it special ontological status within English society, they had to contend with the public and the immense popularity and commercial nature of both Italian Renaissance art and contemporary art based on classical conventions. To explain the state of contemporary society and taste and to justify the new modern art, they began to create histories of art that used the typological and allegorical structures of classical cultural history, inheriting both the ideas and the contradictions contained therein, as formulated by their predecessors Ruskin, Burckhardt, Arnold, Symonds, and Pater.

By connecting the methods and contents of art history texts to their wider cultural contexts, this study takes a slightly different approach to modernism than recent art historical scholarship does. Three overlapping waves of new art history connect “Modernism as Formalism” to the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century English art historians this book analyzes, but I argue all three are limited because they tend to equate modernism with formalism. Many studies also assume a (false) division between modernism (as formalism) and nationalism.

In the first wave, which dates to the early 1980s or earlier, art historians reacted to the basic tenets of modernist formalism—namely, the ideas that art objects are formal and autonomous entities unconnected to cultural and historical context and that art is about appreciation, spectator response, and subjective vision. These critics traced the development of formalism in the writings of modernist art critics such as Clive Bell and Roger Fry and in their precursors such as Walter Pater. Although helpful, such studies often assume formalism was the single concept dominating modern art criticism in these decades. Beverly Twitchell in her 1987 *Cézanne and Formalism in Bloomsbury*, for example, sees Roger Fry as the “single greatest impetus to formalism’s fifty-year domination of the visual arts” (4).⁶ Recently Bernard Berenson, the premier connoisseur and critic of Renaissance art from the late 1880s through the first half of the twentieth century, has been reread as part of this genealogy of “modernism as formalism.”⁷

In the second wave, national concern inspires the writing of alternative histories to show how the English outside of Fry and Bell developed other strands of modernism. John Rothenstein’s *Modern English Painters* series of the 1950s and 1960s initiated this line of inquiry as it reacted against Fry and his narrow focus on French art and created instead a genealogy of English modern art.⁸ More recently this nationalist concern for the marginality of English art within the narrative of modernism has fueled new scholarship.⁹ Michael Saler’s

The Avant-Garde in Interwar England: Medieval Modernism and the London Underground (1999) argues that although formalism is one way to think about modern art in the interwar period, other equally modern art movements were occurring. In fact, Saler argues modern art in this period was dominated by those concerned for art's moral and spiritual function in society who "deliberately associated modernism with national traditions" (8). These approaches tend to connect an autonomous "modernism as formalism" with Fry and Bell.¹⁰

In response, a third wave of scholars are rewriting the story of Fry to distance him from the formalist label. While these studies expand the definition of modernism to encompass more than formalism, they tend to ignore Fry's views of the Renaissance.¹¹ In his edited 1996 *A Roger Fry Reader*, for example, Christopher Reed wants to show that Fry was not just the "Father of Formalism" but also an "activist" whose concerns, interests, and "social mission" can be associated with those of postmodernism (4). Instead of seeing any continuity between Fry's writings on Italian Renaissance art and those on modern art (and in fact, Reed does not include any of Fry's writings on the Renaissance in his volume), Reed instead narrates Fry's thinking on modern art as a "revolutionary" break with his Renaissance scholarship (10). In contrast, I see Fry's views on the Renaissance and modern art as always intimately connected.

While informative, these studies revolve around some notion of formalism as a self-contained method of approaching art, which is assumed to be contrary to nationalism. Additionally, such studies tend to ignore the historical perspective art theorists had in these decades and consequently any links there might be between their views of Italian Renaissance and modern art. While elements of formalism certainly arise in my discussions of Berenson, Fry, Bell, and Hulme, among others, outlining the development of formalism is not the nexus upon which my argument turns. Rather, I am most concerned with the methods and contents of the histories of art envisioned by these art scholars and the material and social contexts in which these histories emerged. Theories of art are always connected to theories of history, and theories of any kind are always connected to material events and historical situations. By focusing on the art histories of the 1880s through the 1910s and their contexts, we can learn more about the establishment of the period terms that have shaped twentieth-century discourse as well as about the values and identities assigned to these period terms, the reasons for such assignments, and consequently the ontological status accorded to the art of various periods within English society. As for the classical cultural

historians discussed in Part I, interpreting the Renaissance shaped what it meant to be modern and to be national for art historians in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Instead of equating modernism with formalism and opposing it to nationalism, I describe modernism as a turn to the “spiritual.” As Sanford Schwartz describes in *The Matrix of Modernism*, both modernist poetics and modern philosophy in the 1900s and 1910s began to be concerned with the opposition between surface and depth, conscious and unconscious, ordinary experience and hidden mental life, conceptual abstraction and immediate experience or sensation, form and flux (3–5). Seeing themselves as inverting Platonism, some modern philosophers believed reality was not in an abstract realm beyond human experience, but rather was hidden within a realm of sensation, inner flux, the unconscious, and immediate experience (12). Reacting against conventions, abstract conceptual schemes, and instrumental reason, poets and philosophers began to theorize a new ontology. Art theorists and historians also participated in this new focus on structure, and perhaps helped initiate it, as they began to discuss art’s relation to a “spiritual” realm, to develop “spiritual” nonscientific methods of writing art history, and to see art as a religious phenomenon. Such concerns make English modernist art historians not as different from Ruskin as they thought they were; they, too, believed art could have a spiritual function for the nation, albeit no longer a Christian one.

In their turn to the spiritual, English modernists were not the anti-functional, anti-communal formalists twentieth-century criticism has made them out to be. Rather, much as Michael Tratner sees modernists in *Modernism and Mass Politics*, Berenson, Fry, Bell, and Hulme all describe this spiritual realm as a collective realm larger than the individual human being. Admittedly, while all but Hulme saw the experience of art occurring on a subjective, individual level (following both Arnold and Pater), this experience was nonetheless one in which all humans could share. It required one to shed all of one’s conceptions and ideas so that one could freely become a part of this “extra-human” universal realm. Many modernists assigned to such an experience a social and moral function. As Tratner says, modernists wanted to “produce mass culture” so that society could be improved (2). Art, they felt, could help transform English life by bringing society in touch with a spiritual realm that transcended capitalism, scientific claims, objective knowledge, conceptual systems, materialism, classical conventions, and social classes. Although some argued against the State control of culture, these modernists

nonetheless felt art should hold a key ontological position within English society; in fact, instead of religion, they felt art could redeem society.

Shifting the focus to modernism as being concerned for the spiritual and the social, instead of merely for art's formal qualities, presents a much more sympathetic view of Berenson, Fry, Bell, and Hulme than they perhaps have received in decades. It also connects the development of what was later called formalism to cultural nationalism: to think about the function of art and culture in the larger social world was to be a part of the general climate of the age, and modernist art historians fully participated in such projects. Gradually from Berenson to Hulme, these writers reacted more and more against what they saw to be dominant, elitist, and foundational to modernity: the Italian Renaissance and its influences in English culture. Instead of a capitalist-bound, classicist, and scientific art, they theorized an art that was democratic, communal, essential, and universal—an art for the masses—and they rewrote art history using typology and allegory to legitimize their views.