

Teaching the Social History of Art

Alexis Clark

Washington University in St. Louis

“But how do you do social art history?” asked a puzzled undergraduate in my recent research and methodologies seminar. Perkily, their classmate pressed a related point: “how does one detect all those transactions, mediations, relations, and ambiguities? How does one find the political in art?” Good questions. Such deceptively simple questions may still cause those who practice social history to wrestle with a response. Searching T.J. Clark’s introduction to *Image of the People* will not yield a quick answer. Indeed, Clark, as has been noted in the introduction to this questionnaire and elsewhere, described the practice of social history more by what it was not than what it was.¹

After reading Clark’s enumeration of all that social history of art does not do, students understandably may be left asking what social history does do. Putting this methodology into practice takes practice. Yet as Marnin Young has written in his response to this questionnaire, social history and its implicit questions has come to be the expected, even standard approach so much so that textbooks of nineteenth-century art written today do not explain this approach but assume that undergraduate students understand its questions and conclusions. What’s more, these textbooks may assume that students, in turn, can execute and so perpetuate social history without instruction. But the professoriate, I tend to think, would expect neither undergraduate nor even graduate students to immediately be experts at applying post-structuralist or postcolonial theories. So why should it be expected that all students already understand social history?

One of the outcomes of this questionnaire, then, has been not simply to trace the past, present, and future of the social history of art as it has been enmeshed with the study of Impressionism or to speak to a specialist readership within the sub-field of Impressionist studies, but to provide a pedagogical tool useful to undergraduate and graduate seminars in art history methods. To that effect, this questionnaire highlights the origins, intentions, and, ultimately, importance of social history for students, who may themselves write such histories in the future. Undoubtedly, those instructed in art history today will rewrite the history of Impressionism and conterminously rework social history. For those students, this questionnaire provides concrete examples for the application of social history in the early twenty-first century; it underscores points of intellectual confluence and departure; and it illustrates how social history now shapes the research questions asked and answered about art-objects insofar as they relate to social, political, and material conditions.

¹ T.J. Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1972), 10. Craig Clunas, “Social History of Art” in *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

Harmon Siegel here observes that this questionnaire “seems to ask how a twentieth-century methodology shaped twenty-first century understandings of nineteenth-century art.” Yet the essays herein also attest to the continued applicability of this methodology as its practitioners respond to shifting parameters of the social and political, and *pace* Emily Burns, respond to elastic conceptions of Impressionism. As these essays detail the diversity of social history’s applications, they simultaneously reveal to its futurity and mutability. When students today query, “how do you do social art history?” the responses to this questionnaire reply. And when future students query, “how *did* you do social art history?” the responses to this questionnaire will still reply.

Copyright © 2017 by the H-France, all rights reserved. H-France permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. H-France reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Salon nor re-publication of 3 any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

H-France Salon

Volume 9 (2017), Issue 14, #3