

Introduction to “Questionnaire on Impressionism and the Social History of Art”

Alexis Clark, Washington University in St. Louis
and
David Peters Corbett, The Courtauld Institute of Art

The social history of art, an offshoot of Marxist cultural criticism, has defined many, but not all, of the types of questions asked and answered about Impressionism. Since its inception in the 1970s, the social history of art has argued that Impressionist works of art did not passively reflect class and politics but rather actively produced them. Too often, however, this approach has been errantly reduced to the leaden study of context, often with the accusation that the formal elements of the works of art under study receive limited or, oppositely, exaggerated attention. In a review of Robert Herbert’s *Impressionism: Art, Leisure, and Parisian Society*, Joel Isaacson thus cast context as the social history of art’s *cri de guerre*:

Robert Herbert’s ambition in this admirable book is to present a formal history of Impressionist painting in the only way in which he believes it can be meaningfully carried out, by reinserting paintings into the social world in which they were conceived and produced...[Herbert] states his view that a great deal of art-historical writing is short on history.¹

Herbert, and before him T.J. Clark, launched the social history of art as an approach to studying the art of the realists and Manet and the Impressionists.² Building on the idea that social structures shape and even dictate the form art takes, Clark’s 1973 *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and*

¹ Joel Isaacson, review of *Impressionism: Art, Leisure, and Parisian Society*, by Robert Herbert, *Art Journal* 49, no. 1 (Spring, 1990): 63-68. Isaacson’s review underscores the many ways in which Herbert’s *Impressionism* may be read as a response to T.J. Clark’s. Newspaper reviews picked up on the importance of context in exhibitions and studies of Impressionism in this period as well. As an example, see Michael Brenson, “Impressionism Revisited: Context Is King,” *The New York Times* (12 February 1989): <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/02/12/arts/art-view-impressionism-revisited-context-is-king.html> (accessed 5 June 2017).

² Herbert credited Clark with making real strides in this area, although he was quick to conclude that he and Clark articulated a different social history. See Robert Herbert, *Impressionism: Art, Leisure, and Parisian Society* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), p. xiii. Herbert admitted that, before the 1978 lectures on which his book had been based, “fellow historians had been turning increasingly to the social context of Impressionism, a shift that has now made it the dominant approach among younger scholars. Numerous articles and exhibitions of recent years have studied Impressionism in light of contemporaneous society, and one book has almost single-handedly reoriented the field: T.J. Clark’s *The Painting of Modern Life, Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers*.”

the Second French Republic 1848-1851 resolutely summarized the questions, rhetoric, and issues dismissed by practitioners of the social history of art:

I am not interested in the notion of works of art ‘reflecting’ ideologies, social relations, or history. Equally, I do not want to talk about history as ‘background’ to the work of art—as something which is essentially absent from the work of art in its production, but which occasionally puts in an appearance...I also want to reject the idea that the artist’s point of reference as a social being is, *a priori*, the artistic community...Lastly, I do not want the social history of art to depend on intuitive analogies between form and ideological content.³

Published simultaneously with its companion, *The Absolute Bourgeois: Art and Politics in France, 1848-1851*, Clark’s *Image of the People* deployed the social history of art to explicate “links between artistic form, the available systems of visual representation, the current theories of art, other ideologies, social classes, and more general historical structures and processes.”⁴ To him, those links were indubitably political: simply put, “politics and art could not escape each other.”⁵

Clark developed this line of inquiry further in a continuation to his work on realism, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Contemporaries*. In it, Clark contended that Courbet, Manet, and, to a more modest extent, the Impressionists produced art that produced political discourse.⁶ Catalyzing Clark’s research into the realists and the Impressionists was an interest in the public’s presence, albeit phantastical, as a participant in that discourse.⁷ In Clarkian terms, mid- and late-nineteenth-century art and criticism (the conditions of the production, exhibition, and reception of art) were to be read as a relational dialogue enacted “between artist and critic, between critic and critic, between critic and public,” in which the public came to be paradoxically present through lacunae, contradictions, inconsistencies, hushed silences, and awkward repetitions in critical texts and images.⁸ This search for the nineteenth-century public led Herbert, Clark, and those who followed them to research a wide array of texts, from art criticism to guidebooks and travelogues, as well as other written ephemera.

As Hollis Clayson remarked in a review of Paul Tucker’s *Monet at Argenteuil*,

³ T.J. Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the Second French Republic 1848-1851* (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1973), 10.

⁴ Clark, *Image of the People*, 9; and T.J. Clark, *The Absolute Bourgeois: Artists and Politics in France 1848-1851* (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1973).

⁵ Clark, *Image of the People*.

⁶ T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (New York: Knopf, 1984).

⁷ It should be noted that Marxist art histories experienced an uptick in the 1970s. As an example, see Nicos Hadjinicolaou, *Art History and Class Struggle* (London: Pluto Press, 1978).

⁸ Clark, *Absolute Bourgeois*, 11.

[I]nterest in the social history of art has grown rapidly in recent years. A belief in the indispensability of a social reading of Impressionism is now so well entrenched in mainstream art history that no serious student of the material dares any longer to question the existence of its iconography.⁹

Already, by the time that Clayson wrote in 1984, the social history of art had come to be the dominant scholarly approach to Impressionism. Yet not all appreciated this new paradigm—at least not initially or at least not as written by Herbert or Clark. In their respective reviews of *The Painting of Modern Life*, John House and Beatrice Farwell (like a number of others) could only grudgingly thank Clark for his contribution to the study of Impressionism.¹⁰ To Farwell, his book testified to a “paradigm shift” as those in art, art history, and art criticism experienced “a new phase of both artistic production and critical discourse, with a predicted initial period of confusion that is almost certainly not yet over.”¹¹ Other commentators were less gracious but insisted that the Clarkian social history of art, in its emphasis on reading content from critical silences and ellipses, privileged the clearly political Manet over the prettified Impressionists.¹²

Concurrent with this criticism, the method underwent internal reform and experienced external rebuke, often due to the perception that practitioners of social art history themselves remained too silent on issues related to sex/gender and race/ethnicity and, thus, reified the male- and white-dominated canon.¹³ In broad strokes, feminist art histories demanded the study of sex and gender

⁹ S. Hollis Clayson, review of *Monet at Argenteuil*, by Paul Hayes Tucker, *Art Bulletin* 66, no. 2 (June 1984): 346. As an example of post-Clarkian work on art and artists under study in *The Painting of Modern Life*, one may consult the edited anthology by Paul Hayes Tucker, who had once been Clark’s postgraduate student. See Paul Hayes Tucker, ed., *Manet’s Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). In tandem with R. Bradford Collins’ almost contemporaneous edited anthology *12 Views of Manet’s Bar*, Tucker’s volume constitutes a response and, at times, rebuttal to the work by Clark. Indeed, much of the post-Clarkian work on Manet especially may be read as a response to Clark’s contributions.

¹⁰ Beatrice Farwell, review of *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Contemporaries*, by T.J. Clark, *The Art Bulletin* 68, no. 4 (Dec., 1986): 687; and John House, review of *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Contemporaries*, by T.J. Clark, *The Burlington Magazine* 128, no. 997 (Apr., 1986): 297. Indeed, it would seem that most reviews shared the mixed sentiment of Françoise Cachin, who wrote, “Clark has found very interesting critical writings in the press of the time, and although he shows undeniable sensitivity when he allows himself actually to look at paintings, his convictions, inconsistencies, and intellectual quirks distort what might have been a useful approach.” Françoise Cachin, “The Impressionists on Trial,” trans. Mimi Kramer, *The New York Review of Books* (30 May 1985), <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1985/05/30/the-impressionists-on-trial/> (accessed 5 June 2017).

¹¹ Farwell, review of *The Painting of Modern Life*, 684.

¹² In Cachin’s estimation, Clark condemned the Impressionists as “guilty of having had a serene vision of industrial modernity, for instance of having seen a motif of lyric modernity in the Gare Saint Lazare; guilty, in short, of having seen something more in the symbols of modern life than the suffering they could mask and the reproach they should convey.”

¹³ Albert Boime’s monumental multivolume *The Social History of Modern Art* comes to mind. That series concluded in 1871, before the first Impressionist exhibition, only to then be followed by his *Art and the French Commune*. In each volume, Boime worked to separate his social history of art from that of Clark; the former’s studies constitute a microscopic examination of art through collective thought at the time of its production and exhibition. Seemingly in response to concerns raised feminist art historians to Clarkian social history, Boime’s research further led him to

in their intersection with class and politics.¹⁴ In equally broad strokes, postcolonial and decolonial art histories insisted on the study of race and ethnicity as constructed, represented, and mediated by texts, works of art, and institutions.¹⁵ Each new approach worked to attend to those un(der)-represented in social, political, and ideological structures and silenced in elite systems of knowledge (of which the history of art and its canon counted as one).

If the social history of art initially provoked “confusion” and “violent response[s]”¹⁶ and operated as a more “militant” iteration of Marxist art history,¹⁷ in the decades since Herbert and Clark developed this approach, it has undeniably shaped the discourse around Impressionism. The many publications and exhibitions on Impressionism in the 1980s and 1990s, often written and curated by students of Herbert or Clark, testify to the lasting importance of the social history of art.¹⁸ Though studies with an express interest in the “social philosophy and political ethics” of Impressionism continue to be published,¹⁹ by the turn of the millennium, its continued import had been called into question. A panel at the 2000 College Art Association panel queried “Whatever

discuss women’s critical roles in the Paris Commune and, in these books and elsewhere, the representation women and people of color by the Impressionists, Post-Impressionists, and other nineteenth-century artists.

¹⁴ For examples, see Norma Broude, *Impressionism, A Feminist Reading: The Gendering of Art, Science, and Nature in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Rizzoli, 1991); and Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988). It has to be stressed that these are but two of many examples of feminist studies of Impressionism.

¹⁵ The recent research of Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby demonstrates the critical inroads made by the study of race and colonialism in relation to Impressionism. See Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, “Still Thinking about Olympia’s Maid,” *Art Bulletin* 97, no. 4 (December 2015), pp. 430-451.

¹⁶ Klaus Herding, “Manet’s Imagery Reconstructed,” trans. John William Gabriel, *October* 37 (Summer, 1986): p. 123.

¹⁷ Farwell, 685: “Modernism in art and formalism in criticism seemed for a long time to hold the field, and were scarcely challenged by the few serious Marxist-oriented art historians whose voices have been heard since the 1930’s - Schapiro, Klingender, Antal, Hauser - except insofar as they insisted on the relevance of the social history that has accompanied and affected style in art. A new, more militant generation has recently emerged, however, promoting a more doctrinaire orthodoxy which seeks to find the meaning of art in terms of class struggle, and which rejects such assumptions of traditional art history as that style is a function of time and place, and that the history of art is the history of art.”

¹⁸ The Impressionist exhibitions mounted in the immediate aftermath of the social history of art are too extensive to list here. To provide some examples, *Impressionism: A Centenary Exhibition* (1974); *Gustave Caillebotte* (1976); *Manet, 1832-1883* (1983); *A Day in the Country: Impressionism and the French Landscape* (1984); *Renoir* (1985); *Berthe Morisot, Impressionist* (1987); and *Degas* (1988). Together with these exhibitions, the 1980s witnessed many thematic exhibitions, including *The Crisis in Impressionism, 1878-1882* (1980); *Edgar Degas: The Painter and the Printmaker* (1984); *The New Painting, 1874-1886* (1986); and *The Origins of Impressionism* (1994). Many, but, of course, not all, of these exhibitions were curated by a roster that includes Richard Bretell, John House, MaryAnne Stevens, and Paul Hayes Tucker.

¹⁹ John E. Buchnan, Jr., and Michael Conforti, Foreword to *Pissarro’s People* exh. cat. (Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 2011), 9. Other than the foreword, the catalogue’s text was written by Richard Bretell, whose work on Impressionism, it has to be said, more often falls in the formalist camp, with its emphasis on the painterly stroke and color harmonies, than that of the social history of art.

happened to the social history of art?” John House, who had earlier expressed ambivalence about the social history of art as applied to Impressionism, argued that the late-twentieth century had witnessed the proliferation, diversification, and competition between approaches—formalism, feminism, structuralism and poststructuralism, and, of course, social history—to the point that the domination of any one approach in the discourse had ended. Where John Rewald’s *The History of Impressionism* had once been *the* history of Impressionism, and where Clayson had earlier articulated the absolute “indispensability of a social reading of Impressionism,” House cautiously surmised that no one approach dictated the way in which Impressionism could be studied.²⁰ Rather, the complexity of that art demanded it be seen and studied through multiple approaches and methods.

While once radical in its interrogation of the relations between art, class, and politics, the social history of art thus has transformed the discourse to become one of the standard, and indeed expected, ways through which Impressionism has been and continues to be seen, studied, and understood. In order to determine whether this exhaustive approach has been exhausted or whether it may continue to lead to deeper, broader understandings of the subfield, we have asked nine art historians and curators working in the United States, Great Britain, and France to reflect on the importance of the social history of art as it has shaped the discourse around Impressionism, with particular attention to the intertwined futures of this methodology and this subfield. Each essayist has been asked to respond to the below questions:

- 1) How has the social history of art shaped the discourse on Impressionism?
- 2) Is the social history of art finished? If not, how might the types of questions raised by the social history of art—around race/ethnicity, gender/sexuality, and especially class—be reworked in the future? What new perspectives, approaches, and insights might those reworked questions produce in relation to the study of Impressionism?
- 3) What is the future of the social history of art?

While all duly attest to social history’s role in shaping the discourse around Impressionism and most express reluctance to entirely abandon it as an approach, this questionnaire has also shown that the social history of art must reconceptualize the social in different terms. Some respondents interrogate how the social history of art has tended to substitute the political for the truly social and indeed relational. Thus, Morna O’Neill has volunteered that the social history of art must tackle the global market for Impressionism and so attend to the circulation of artists, artworks, and audiences far beyond the boundaries of Europe and the United States. Frances Fowle has likewise underscored the importance of exploring the international art market in tandem with those artists who were once part of the French Impressionist circle but who have been since sidelined in art histories. Extending that argument, Emily Burns has underscored the need to comparatively analyze Impressionisms worldwide with an attention to elasticity of “impressionism” as a concept. In turn, Samuel Raybone has demanded that the social history of art not privilege the painted *objet*

²⁰ John Rewald, *The History of Impressionism* (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1973). It is interesting to note that Clark published his books on realism with the same publisher in the same year as the reissued *The History of Impressionism*, perhaps making the confrontation between formalism and social history almost inevitable. John House, *Impressionism: Paint and Politics* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2007).

but that it better attend to that *objet* in relation to more playful activities and social pastimes. In posing this questionnaire as part of *H-France Salon*, it has been our intention to produce a social space that will facilitate further and future discourse. It is thus our hope that other students and scholars will respond to these essayists, post their own responses, and engage in this dialogue.

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, #1