



PROJECT MUSE®

Interdisciplinarity and Historians of Victorian Art

Julie F. Codell

Victorian Review, Volume 33, Number 1, 2007, pp. 14-17 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/vcr.2007.0026>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/541680/summary>

such a reader also knows that what appears to be outside and other than her discipline actually comes from within it. She knows that reading reproduces, revises, and updates the boundaries of her discipline to include whatever a literary reading may require by way of a context. To put it another way, the disciplinary reader invariably produces a text that observes the paradox of the Möbius strip, striving at once to put its inside on the outside and to contain the outside within itself.

Works Cited

Foucault, Michel. "Society Must Be Defended": *Lectures at the Collège de France 1975-76*. Trans. David Macey. Eds. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana. Picador; Reprint Editions, 2003.



Interdisciplinarity and Historians of Victorian Art

JULIE F. CODELL



THE STUDY of Victorian art has been by necessity interdisciplinary. Originally a small group—the majority of jobs went to scholars of French or American art—Victorian art historians frequented Victorian studies conferences largely populated by historians and literary scholars. Susan Casteras and Linda Nochlin, the “mothers” of nineteenth-century art history in America, and Marcia Pointon in the UK worked on feminist issues from the 1960s on, so the topic of gender dominates much of the field. Recently, imperialism and postcolonial theory have interested art historians. Having existed on every inhabited continent, the empire fosters awareness of multiple “nineteenth centuries,” allowing Victorianists to interface with Asian, Irish, African, diasporic, Caribbean, and now Latin American studies. Examining Victorian England in the light of other cultures’ histories and viewpoints happily undermines and expands notions of what constitutes “Victorian” art history.

PRACTICE AND IMPACT

Interdisciplinary research attends less to art historical periodization and styles and more to topics that cross disciplines (recently, Anne Helmreich on landscape, Lynda Nead on London’s public spaces, Griselda Pollock and Valerie Mainz on work, Kristina Huneault on images of working women, and Romita Ray on tea). Such amorphous, “undisciplined” topics have expanded the parameters of what constitutes art and the object, provoking reassessments of museums and exhibitions (largely nineteenth-century institutions) and culture’s relations to race, class, gender, nation, and empire. The study of Victorian art offers a vantage from which to critique assumptions about modernism (usually defined by French art; on British modernism from 1880 on,

see work by Lisa Tickner, Elizabeth Prettejohn, and Andrew Stephenson), and art's contribution to formations of Victorian concepts of gender, race, class, and nation. As gender issues broaden to include masculinity and homosexuality, art historians turn to media other than painting (see work by Michael Hatt on Victorian sculpture). Because photography crosses fine, commercial, and amateur art categories, scholars of Victorian photography venture into psychology, imperial history, anthropology, material culture, media, and popular culture, focusing on uses and circulations of objects as material objects—photo albums or *cartes-de-visite*, for example. Recent studies of material culture drawing on anthropology permit art historians to scrutinize the object's physicality and explore topics of circulation, production, dissemination, consumption and reception, and ideology.

Recent consideration of the “visual turn”—one Victorian legacy we inherited—has helped us reconsider the very object of our study. The visual turn recognizes differences between vision (physical and psychological) and visuality (socially and historically constructed recognition and interpretation). The rise of the visual is sometimes dated to early photographic and accessible print technologies in the 1840s. As a research subject, it is more recent and addresses (1) what constitutes cultural objects; (2) how to assess visual objects' excess beyond language; (3) how to map new relationships among cultural objects (image and text, as in work by Gerard Curtis and others); (4) how production and consumption are part of art's “aesthetics”; and (5) what comprises cultural history. These issues now embrace studies of cultural constructions of hearing, taste, touch, and smell, often in connection with visual phenomena in public spaces of spectacles, monuments, rituals, and celebrations—all relatively new topics in art history.

In art history, interdisciplinarity can be both innovative and conventional. Art historians studying “traditional” topics such as patronage, art markets, iconography, artists' lives, and uses of art regularly venture into other disciplines (literature, archeology, economics, and history). But post-structural and sociological methods and questions have redirected these interests towards the institutional nature of art criticism and art production as consumption in museums, dealers' galleries, and reproductions. Social, economic, and ideological constituents of the art object (in criticism or exhibition) “co-produce” the art work or object, as anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu points out. The field of cultural economics offers studies of exchange values, symbolic capital, and consumption patterns. As an outgrowth of political economy, a central Victorian discipline, cultural economics helps art historians address social and national dimensions of economics as symbolic as well as material systems.

Art historians now venture into visual studies (a designation initiated decades ago by the University of Rochester), embracing all visual culture and media, including theatre and spectacle. Spectacle, also the subject of performance studies, includes events such as international exhibitions or panoramas. Spectacles were vital to Victorian life (jubilees, royal weddings, public rallies,

and Chartist marches—most captured in press cartoons, paintings, and photographs) and require a patchwork of disciplines for their study. Anthropologists Elizabeth Edwards and Christopher Pinney and geographer James Ryan have redefined Victorian photography and stereography as colonial photographic media. Scholars of the “new geography” (for example, Matthew Edney) offer many applications to Victorian visual culture and public spaces, as do studies of space and spatiality in architecture (for example, Paul Virillo).

In the end, such studies redefine the object of study itself—one of the happier outcomes of interdisciplinarity—to open doors to disciplines less tied to European notions of art and genius. Anthropology is basic to art histories of Africa, Latin America, and, to a lesser extent, Asia; its methods are now used on European art. Literary scholars such as Carol Christ, Julia Thomas, Kate Flint, Helen Groth, and Lindsay Smith explore Victorian visuality in literature. Curiously, art historians have been slow to examine literature or journalism, other than illustrations by well-known artists or illustrators. Studies of Victorian periodical visuals such as cartoons and engraved portraits are still largely carried out by historians and literary scholars. Few art history departments offer courses in popular culture; broadening has largely meant embracing film studies (if not already taught in literature or communications departments). Advertising, mass culture, and the press (all Victorian creations) merit more art historical attention (Meaghan Clark’s book on Victorian women’s art criticism is exemplary). Studying popular culture requires different methodologies and cultural perspectives, which, when applied to “high” art, help historicize and socialize concepts of “masterpiece” and “genius” (art’s “author/auteur”), as feminists and post-structuralists have done.

Entirely new subjects and literary genres suggest new interdisciplinary explorations for Victorian art history: identities (including imaginary), technology, time, memory, historiography, life writings, and travel writing. These contribute to the interrogation of the archive itself by changing what scholars ask of art history, shifting our view of cultural production and broadening the range of what the archive is and contains from a small category of documents to wider kinds of materials and objects. Clearly the archive itself is a social construct as saturated with power as any other institution. Postcolonial studies, too, have contributed to rethinking the nature of the archive, even linking Victorian culture to contemporary art from former colonies (for example, Chris Ofili, Anish Kapoor). The current popularity of Victoriana in posters, films, and novels deserves attention. *The Victorian Web*, pioneer of interdisciplinary Victorian studies (and still going strong), created a hypertext model decades ago. Its example was followed by the University of Virginia’s Rossetti Archive under Jerome McGann, Lancaster’s Ruskin Library, Glasgow’s Whistler online correspondence project, and many sites on Victorian art and artists (especially Pre-Raphaelites).

INTERDISCIPLINARY ART HISTORY AND THE ACADEMY:
PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

Yet interdisciplinarity has been suspect. Some art historians adopted critical theory from literary models, emphasizing Marxism, psychoanalysis, and semiotics; others called for a “return” to connoisseurship as art history’s proper domain. But connoisseurship does not merit this centrality. Bernard Berenson’s connoisseurship and Giovanni Morelli’s “scientific” approaches were attacked by Victorians Walter Pater and Herbert Horne. Art history is just as rooted in social histories of John Ruskin, William Morris, and modern German art historians (for example, Aby Warburg).

Problems in carrying out interdisciplinary studies range from finding sources to creating intellectual links to other fields. Media and communications studies, for example, are usually in different university spheres from art history. Departmental politics, difficulties with interdisciplinary faculty appointments, and campus geographies work against alliances. The sheer extent of what needs to be known, the extent of the archive that is now vaster and more amorphous, is daunting. Interdisciplinary research requires learning another discipline (or more!), at least at the rudimentary level, and working with colleagues in those disciplines who can help shorten the learning curve.

More university flexibility on team-taught courses would encourage interdisciplinarity in teaching, which is even more difficult to achieve than in research. Cutting-edge research does not always translate into courses. Most art history departments are still tied to period courses or courses on an artist or movement; many art historians specialize in only one medium. Faculty in literature focus on popular culture, but this is not common in art history curricula. Art historians study Academic painting, but courses on Victorian Academic art are rare; Aestheticism has fared better in curricula. Newer topical courses are even rarer. My course on empire and culture draws on poetry, prose, non-fiction, photography, sculpture, the press, and “high” art. Syllabi for similar courses increasingly appear on the Web.

Art history has had thirty years of upheaval and debate over its object of study and methods; re-thinking our discipline is scholars’ intellectual responsibility, though some lament the instability. Art historians should pursue the subversion and historicizing of conventional notions of the archive, the nature of art and artists, art history’s object of study, the senses, popular culture, and relations between empire and visuality.

I wish to thank my colleagues Anne Helmreich, Susan Casteras, Romita Ray, and Lisa Surridge for their comments and suggestions on an early draft of this essay.



Reproduced with permission of copyright owner.
Further reproduction prohibited without permission.