

## THE IDEA OF THE CANON AND CANON FORMATION IN ART HISTORY

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### *Canon: A Critical Term for Art History?*

The use of the word 'canon' in a critical sense in art-historical literature is, surprisingly, of fairly recent date. It is explained in one dry sentence in Duro and Greenhalgh's *Essential Art History*: 'In art the term refers to works of a given artist, period or school accepted "into the canon" as genuine... by connoisseurs.'<sup>1</sup> Although the term is used as a central critical category in the six-volume series *Art and its Histories* published by The Open University in the 1990s, it does not figure among the *Critical Terms for Art History*.<sup>2</sup> Nor does it appear in the *Metzler Lexikon Kunstwissenschaft* published in 2003, although 'Kanonisierung' ('canonization') is at least mentioned in the introduction, by which the editor refers to the purportedly canonical status of the one hundred terms selected.<sup>3</sup> Eventually we find a short entry in Jonathan Harris's *Art History: The Key Concepts* (2006).<sup>4</sup>

One reason for this belated appearance might be that the term has not been understood as a critical concept. Traditionally, questions of the canon and of the canonical in art were hardly ever discussed in a critical manner; they were not considered the business of a historical discipline, the task of which was rather, in the first place, to register and, second, to interpret what had been done. Its purpose was not seen explicitly as judging, praising, and finally compiling a selective best-of list of works

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Duro and Michael Greenhalgh, eds., *Essential Art History* (London, 1992) 73.

<sup>2</sup> See Colin Cunningham and Gill Perry, *Academies, Museums and Canons of Art* (London and New Haven, CT, 1999); Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff, eds., *Critical Terms for Art History* (Chicago, IL, 1996). The term does not appear in the revised 2003 edition either.

<sup>3</sup> Ulrich Pfisterer, ed., *Metzler Lexikon Kunstwissenschaft: Ideen, Methoden, Begriffe* (Stuttgart, 2003) vii.

<sup>4</sup> See 'Canon, Canonicity' in Jonathan Harris, *Art History: The Key Concepts* (London, 2006) 45–6. For a more recent discussion in reference to contemporary art see Rainer Metzger, ed., 'Über das Kanonische', *Kunstforum International* 162 (2002).

that would eventually be called the 'canon' of art history. More commonly used and intensely debated in other disciplines of the humanities, the term 'canon' is nevertheless firmly rooted in the history of art.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, it is its implicit role in framing judgements and decisions within the discipline that makes the examination of the role of the canon and canon formation all the more pressing.

As a metaphor stemming probably from architecture, it is a basic notion in one of the very earliest Western theories of art: 'Canon' (Greek/Latin for 'measuring rod', 'standard') was the title of a lost theoretical treatise by the Greek sculptor Polykleitos.<sup>6</sup> In his *Natural History* (XXXV, 55), Pliny the Elder relates that other artists called one of the sculptures, the *Doryphoros*, made by Polykleitos, 'canon', because it was considered to be the perfect, proportioned image of man. The term is also used to refer to a model in the sense of a guideline, a set of rules, or a schedule or list of dates serving as reference points. It is important to note that the notion was very early on connected to law, and, even more significantly, to religion. Whereas in early Christianity the term was only used in application to religious law (canonical law), from the fourth century onwards the term was also used in reference to the definitive and authoritative nature of the body of sacred scripture, a use of the term that classical antiquity did not know, neither in application to religious nor to secular literary texts.<sup>7</sup> The word 'canonization' was also used to designate the act by which the

<sup>5</sup> A reference to the 'Western canon' of literature in an affirmative sense can be found in Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and the School of the Ages* (New York, 1994). Manfred Fuhrmann, *Der europäische Bildungskanon des bürgerlichen Zeitalters* (Frankfurt am Main, 1999) looks back to a once probably functioning 'Bildungs-Kanon' ('canon of cultivated education') in Germany, rather than in Europe. For contributions to the more recent critical discussion see Maria Moog-Grünwald, ed., *Kanon und Theorie* (Heidelberg, 1997); Gerhard R. Kaiser and Stefan Matuschek, eds., *Begründungen des Kanon: Beiträge aus der Literatur- und Kunstwissenschaft, Philosophie und Theologie* (Heidelberg, 2001); Renate von Heydebrand, ed., *Kanon, Macht, Kultur: Theoretische, historische und soziale Aspekte ästhetischer Kanonbildungen* (Stuttgart, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> The history of the word is given by Herbert Oppel, 'Kanon. Zur Bedeutungsgeschichte des Wortes und seiner lateinischen Entsprechungen (regula—norma)', special edition of *Philologus* 30.4 (1937). A thorough discussion of the problem can be found in Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (Munich, 1997) 103–29. See also Herbert Beck and Peter C. Bol, eds., *Polyklet: Der Bildhauer der griechischen Klassik. Exhibition Catalogue Liebighaus, Museum alter Plastik Frankfurt am Main* (Mainz, 1990); Hans von Steuben, 'Der Doryphoros und der Kanon Polyklets', *Städte-Jahrbuch* 15 (1996) 7–18; Thuri Lorenz, 'Polyklet: die Geschichte vom "Kanon"', in *Festschrift für Götz Pochat zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Johann Konrad Eberlein (Vienna, 2007) 11–19.

<sup>7</sup> See the introduction to Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders, eds., *The Canon Debate: On the Origins and Formation of the Bible* (Peabody, MA, 2002) 13, and Eugen

Christian Church declared a person to be a saint, or the imposition by (canonical) law on the whole Church of the universal public veneration of an individual.

Today a canon is usually understood as a group of works, objects or, more often, texts, recognized within a defined social group as being exemplary and thus embodying a set of binding provisions. Undeniably, some of the religious connotations remain present in the modern use of the term; as the Egyptologist Jan Assmann has pointed out, this is evident when we still understand a canon not only, as in antiquity, as the correct measure made to the right proportion, but also as the right thing according to a higher authority.<sup>8</sup>

Generally, to canonize a set of objects, works or texts, means to declare that they are of the highest importance as timeless models of their kind. It is obvious that there are problems if one were to speak in this sense of canonization and of a canon when art history as a scholarly discipline is concerned. In the course of the nineteenth century art historians increasingly distanced themselves from normative judgements, focusing more and more on the 'objective' registration and description of art-historical 'facts'. This did not mean to deny that certain works should be counted amongst the 'Denkmäler der Kunst' ('monuments of art'), or that some 'Masters' were more 'important', or just more interesting than others. However, art historians usually tried to evaluate not an object's *absolute* value, but its relative or historical value, which became apparent when an object had been regarded by other artists in some way as a model. Although such value judgements were widely practiced and accepted, most art historians still usually avoid addressing these issues in a critical way, implicitly suggesting that it was not for them to select and decide about the prominence to be given to an object, but rather to 'history', the 'market', or 'the public'.

Even those art historians interested more in what we may call the aesthetic aspects or aesthetic value of art would not usually see their task in identifying a list of master models, but rather in describing the specific aesthetic quality of certain works, without indulging too much in questions of ranking. On the other hand, it cannot be disputed that aspects of ranking were and still are of considerable importance in the art world.

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Ulrich, 'The Notion and Definition of the Canon', in McDonald and Sanders, *The Canon Debate*, 21–35.

<sup>8</sup> Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, 115.

When, in the thirteenth century in the region of the Île de France, rival cities each tried to build the highest and most beautiful cathedral, just to give one obvious example from medieval history, it can be taken for granted that they were acting in a competitive situation. Likewise artists of the modern era, from the Renaissance onwards, were constantly looking at each other's work, trying to create works of outstanding and exemplary character, more beautiful, grand or significant than those of their rivals. This sense of competition is epitomized in the literary work of the artist and writer Giorgio Vasari, sometimes said to be the father of art history, who, in his *Vite de pittori* lists the biographies of Italian artists according to their achievements, suggesting that all artists were trying to surpass their predecessors, thus setting up both the idea of progress and a canon of the most important (Italian) artists of the then past two centuries.<sup>9</sup>

Art historians of more recent times may argue that while artists have always striven to create works worthy of universal praise, their own task as historians was merely to observe, describe and analyse these works in an appropriate way; according to this view the question of ranking would be a historical phenomenon, and the role of the art historian would thus be to discern the evidential record of previous qualitative judgements. But this approach seems to be too simple in assuming the possibility of a 'disinterested' historian. If there are good reasons to distance oneself in art-historical practice from partisanship with regard to art production, one has nevertheless to acknowledge that the art historian inevitably is and always has been a player in the game. Any historian has to make choices, deciding which work to think about, to publish, or to exhibit. His or her choices involve value judgements, which sooner or later contribute to the establishing of a set of objects that become more visible, are discussed more, and thus deemed more valuable than others, which results in what one has called the 'canon of art history'.

### *Canon Formation and Collective Identity*

A canon, in general, is a system of reference produced in a certain cultural context. Canon formation as a historical process may occur especially, as Jan Assmann argues in his survey of cultural memory in early advanced civilizations, if a society is in crisis. This applies to the formation of the

<sup>9</sup> Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de più eccellenti architetti, pittori et scultori italiani, da Cimabue insino a' tempi nostri* (Florence, 1550; 2nd enlarged edn. 1568).

canons of sacred scriptures in ancient cultures, such as Egypt, or Israel, or in early Christianity. The canon is, according to Assmann, 'the principle of a collective constitution and stabilization of identity, which is at the same time the foundation of individual identity, as a medium of individuation by socialization, and of self-realization by insertion into the "normative conscience of an entire population" (Habermas). A canon constitutes a nexus between the identity of the ego and collective identity. It represents the society as a whole and at the same time a system of values and interpretations, to which the single person avows and to which he or she builds his or her identity as a member of the society'.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, canon formation is concerned with the formation and confirmation of individual and group identity. The individual finds her- or himself addressed and represented in the canon. Its function is to give orientation, which can only be achieved if the reference system is relatively stable.

Whether such a reference system exists in Western art cannot easily be answered. It seems doubtful that we can reasonably talk of a canon of Western art in the same sense as we can talk of a canon of sacred scriptures. It is true that in the art-historical literature of the last one and a half centuries we find certain names and objects time and again. But a closer look at the history of the formation of this list would show that it is constantly changing; some names disappear, while new ones are added. The more established names appear in different narratives, are valued and interpreted in different ways, according to the relative position of the writer who is trying to situate him- or herself and his or her social group by referring to objects within the larger system of art, or rather European or Western art in general. While these narratives are suggesting or even explicitly supporting the idea of a timeless and all-encompassing canon of works of Western art, even of 'world art', which is used as a reference system to establish sub-canons such as national canons, we have to assume that there is a certain range within which choices are made, and that even the criteria of selection are subject to change.

Thus, the so called canon of Western art (or the canon of art history) seems to be permanently under construction, which contradicts the very notion of a canon, or forces us to introduce the concept of an 'open canon'. Even if historians, collectors, dealers or politicians tried to establish 'the' canon of art, there is at any time a very broad set of possibly acceptable canonical objects, which are all artefacts classified as 'art'. From this field

<sup>10</sup> Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, 127.

the objects of reference are chosen and marked as outstanding by critics, art historians, dealers, and collectors, according to the specific interests of the person acting or the group or institution this person represents, and laid down in some kind of listing—such as, for example, the national lists of historical monuments protected by national law, or the Unesco world heritage list, or, of course, the many art-historical surveys recommended to students of art history. Moreover we should take into consideration that not only the selection of artefacts canonized in such ways, but also the criteria according to which artefacts are classified as ‘art’ is mutable. We have thus not one ‘art-historical canon’ but competing canons, canons embodying national identity, or canons for groups of individuals within it, who are trying to develop a specific identity, not in contradiction, but in relation to society at large by using the reference system of art. Each canon will have its own specific history, structure and purpose.

*Examples of Canon Formation—Canons of World Art and National Canons*

Given this situation we should rather talk of continuous canon formation than of an open or closed canon of art or art history; or we could say that, in fact, no set canon in the strict sense (as a closed reference system) exists, but a tradition of canon formation, which is characteristic for Western culture. Canon formation can be observed in Western culture since antiquity. Probably the first list intended as some kind of a canon of works of art was established in the third century BC as the famous ‘Seven Wonders of the World’.<sup>11</sup> These seven wonders, or objects to be admired, are usually not ranked, but each example is remembered as a superior and unsurpassed achievement of its kind. Yet, each one of these monuments can also be remembered as representing the specific cultural power of one more or less defined nation playing an important role at some time within the ancient world. This is certainly how the Roman poet Martial (41–104 AD) read the list. In his *Liber Spectaculorum* he mentions the seven monuments as representing their respective nations, in order to compare them to the cultural power of Rome, epitomized in a newly

<sup>11</sup> See Peter Clayton and Martin Price, eds., *The Seven Wonders of the Ancient World* (London, 1988); Kai Brodersen, *Die Sieben Weltwunder: Legendäre Kunst- und Bauwerke der Antike*, 2nd rev. edn. (Munich, 2004). The first complete list handed down might be that compiled by Antipatros of Sidon between 150 and 120 BC.