

Manifest Orientalism: Roots of the Teacher Centered Approach in Canonical Art History Texts

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Abstract

In this paper I trace the roots of the teacher-centered approach in art history pedagogical practice to the Eurocentric structure of the art history survey textbook. Review of the literature concerning pedagogical practice in art history survey courses points to the structure and content of the survey textbook as problematic. The textbook has been noted as an idealistic linear progression of style towards artistic perfection from the Western perspective, thus it emphasizes a formalistic approach to analysis and understanding of global artistic production. This approach and structure of the textbook, I argue, only encourages the ineffective teacher-centered lecture based approach wherein there is disregard for student centered constructivist pedagogy to teaching resulting in minimal student engagement.

Introduction

In 2003 art educator, Kevin Tavin (2003) implied that art history is, to use his term, fossilized; because, for centuries art historians have subscribed to notions of universal truths and have utilized fixed hermeneutic criteria that only perpetuate rather than challenge the canon (Tavin, p.202). As such art history is a discipline whose discursive and pedagogical practices have come under much scrutiny in recent decades (Bersson, 2006; Gioffre, 2012; Graham, 1995; Kinkley, 2009; Kundu, 2008; and Phelan et al., 2005) Furthermore, Arthur Efland (1990) points out that although art history is a relatively young academic discipline in America, the canonical texts for teaching art history have been slow to reflect a more inclusive, thus accurate history of global art (Efland, p.258), and scholars have begun to seriously challenge the authority of the survey text (Graham, 1995; Reeves, 1982; and Schwazer, 1995). While strides towards "new art history" have been made and the grand art historical narrative of the white European male artistic dominance has been challenged, I contend the texts from which art history is taught remains fossilized in the Eurocentric tradition and teacher centered approach, which reflects disinterest in student engagement (Tavin, p.209). Therefore, in this paper I trace and challenge the fossilization of the teacher-centered approach in art history from its roots in canonical texts by Giorgio Vasari and Johann Winckelmann to contemporary survey texts by Gardner.

In 1982, Muriel Reeves claimed that the art history textbook offers the most insight into how art history is taught (Reeves, 1982). Nearly a decade later, Mitchell Schwarzer surveyed the history of the survey text beginning with Winckelmann and posited that the modern survey text still maintains a nineteenth century worldview, focused on authoritative ideals of beauty and knowledge (Schwarzer, 1995). Bradford Collins (1995) and Laura Trafi-Prats (2009) also claim an "allegiance" (Collins, p.23) to nineteenth century German ideals of pedagogy within the discipline, which has, according to Reeves (1982), made its way into the structure of modern survey text structure. Schwarzer ultimately questions the use of such idealistic and hierarchical texts within the "unrelenting randomness of postmodern culture" (Schwarzer, p.28).

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And, Mark Miller Graham (1995) answers this question unequivocally by demanding the wholesale elimination of the problematic text; and in his own work specifies that it is the discipline's insistence on "canonicity, chronology, closure, and subjectivity" – those nineteenth century ideals – reflected in the survey textbook that plagues art history (Graham, p.30). But even before contemporary scholars called for such dramatic change, in 1954 Albert Elsen (1954) labeled the art history textbook as "detrimental" to effective teaching in art history (Elsen, p.198). So, why after over 60 years of scholarship calling for change is the problematic survey text still the dominant resource in survey courses? Although scholars have seemed to settle on allegiance nineteenth century ideals, and although Schwarzman traces problematic issues in the eighteenth century as the origin to our textbook problems, I contend the issue is rooted much earlier and continues to hold our "allegiance" (Collins, p.23) to a teacher-centered pedagogical practice. To trace this problem, I employ Edward Said's (1994) discussion of Orientalism to propose that since its inception, the discipline of art history has relied on the latent binary of occident and orient manifest in the content and structure of historical art history texts and later survey textbooks. (Said, 1994) It is this persistent binary of viewing and teaching the history of art from the Western (Occidental) perspective that keeps the dominant approach to teaching art history as egocentric and teacher centered.

Theoretical Perspective: Art History as Latent Orientalism

According to art historian Donald Preziosi, (1998) "Art history is one in a network of interrelated institutions and professions whose overall function has been to fabricate a historical past that could be placed under systematic observation for use in the present... Art history shared with its allied fields, especially museums, the fabrication of elaborate typological orders of 'specimens' of artistic activity..." based on the objects produced (Preziosi, p.13, 17). Therefore, art history interprets then creates meaning formed from observation of physical characteristics. Preziosi's ideas here set up an interesting framework for understanding what exactly art historians do and have done since the modern foundation of the discipline. Edward Said (1994) defines *latent* Orientalism as the "unconscious positivity" about the East as a definite and negative binary to the West (Said, p.206). So, when compared to Said's discussion of how the West (Occident) has historically viewed the East (Other), we see an unfortunate similarity between latent Orientalism and art historical methodology described by Preziosi (1998) in terms of the West's understanding of the Other via containment, categorization and "systematic observation" of others and objects primarily via their physical characteristics. In his 1978 work, *Orientalism*, Said describes the Western view of the East as "rarely seen or looked at; they (those of the East) were seen *through*, analyzed not as citizens, or even people, but as problems to be solved or confined..." (Said, 1994). Therefore, those of the East, these "Others," were systematically analyzed as specimen understood through "unconscious positivity" (Said, 1994) within specific confines of the Western perspective, just as Preziosi (1998) describes as the still current methodology of art history for viewing art of any culture. Furthermore, Preziosi claims:

"From the beginning, the principal concern of historians and critics of the visual arts was the linkage of objects to patterns of causality assumed to exist between objects and makers, objects and objects, and between all of them and their various contemporary contexts. Underlying this was a family of organic metaphors linked to certain common theories of race in the early modern period: in particular, the presumption of certain demonstrable kinship, sameness, homogeneity among objects produced or appearing at a given time and in a given place" (Preziosi, p.17). Edward Said also discusses "theories of race in the early modern period" (Preziosi, 1998) in terms of Orientalism. According to Said, "Theses of Oriental backwardness, degeneracy, and inequality with the West most easily associated themselves early in the 19th century with ideas about biological bases of racial inequality (Said, p.206). He continues, "To these ideas was added second-order Darwinism, which seemed to accentuate the "scientific" validity of the division of races into advanced and backward, or European-Aryan and Oriental-African" (Said, p.206). Connecting Preziosi's (1998) discussion of art historical methodology infused with the discriminatory racial biases clarified by Said, art history can be understood as a discipline infused with latent Orientalism from its inception.

Theoretical Perspective: The Art Historian as Modern Orientalist

This latent Orientalism is manifest in the teacher centered approach that plagues the teaching of art history today. The teacher centered approach is "an 'ego-trip' for the teacher, who is held as the subject 'expert', most likely to engage in 'instruction', teaching via minimally interactive didactic, lecture-style performances (Morrison-Saunders and Hobson, 2013). The lecture approach, like Schwarzman's assessment of the textbook, remains reflective on outdated and problematic ideals of past centuries (Schwarzman, 1995). Furthermore, the lecture approach has been proven is as less effective than methods wherein students engage in learning with one another.

According to a study published by The National Training Lab in Bethel Maine (Bresson 2006), when students are engaged in more constructivist learning processes the learning retention rate is nearly 90% versus only a 75% retention rate via the lecture model of learning (Bresson, p.10). And although a few intrepid art historians have challenged this approach, according to Robert Bresson (2006), there remain too many “who strongly resist enlarging our instructional methods and educational possibilities” (Bresson, p.8).

I contend that the art history textbook has developed, reinforced, and normalized this teacher centered approach, since it too is latent orientalism manifest through text. Therefore, to trace this approach, we need to begin with what is largely considered to be the first published text recognized as an art history survey text - *The Lives of the Artists* by Giorgio Vasari (1998). “It would not be overestimating his achievement to state that Giorgio Vasari virtually invented the discipline of art history” (Vasari, 1998). The first edition of Vasari’s *Lives of the Artists* (both editions are most commonly referred to as *Lives*) was published in 1550 and is referred to as the Torrentino *Lives*. The second revised and expanded edition, the Giutina *Lives*, was published in 1568. *Lives* takes the format of a biographical survey of “great Italian artists,” (Vasari, 1998) who were, for the most part, contemporary to the cinquecento and Vasari, an artist himself. It is, according to Schwarzman “a developmental movement of style toward perfection” through discussion of artist biography. (Schwarzman, p.24). Additionally, Vasari gives detailed description and discussion of several works by the artists he discussed; hence the work’s consideration as an art history text. Without Vasari’s *Lives* art historians today would not have such intimate knowledge regarding now canonical artists like Michelangelo or his very early works completed under the patronage of Lorenzo de’ Medici (Vasari, p.414-424). The art historical value of in terms of insight into what was then contemporary Florentine and Italian art discussed in Vasari’s *Lives* is unquestioned. However, the credibility and bias of Vasari have been challenged by scholars for decades. This study adds to that discourse by applying the Orientalist lens to Vasari’s *Lives* – the foundational text written by the “father” of art history.

Aside from what scholars have noted as the “artist-slanted” (Rejaie, 2006) tone and subject of Vasari’s *Lives*, (1998) looking at the text through the lens of Orientalism shows that even at its foundations, the only art and art makers important enough to have been recorded in text and educated to others was that of white Western males; every chapter of Vasari’s *Lives* is devoted to one individual white male Italian artist of the period. It is also noted generally in scholarship that Vasari’s discussion of these artists, one in particular, is sycophantic. In his discussion of Michelangelo, Vasari terms Michelangelo as *il divino* – the “Divine One,” whose earthly existence and heavenly genius had been planned and executed specifically by God to fill a creative void on Earth (Vasari, p.414). Both the Torrentino and Giutina editions of *Lives* focus entirely on this demographic as not only great artists, but in discussing only white males as artists, this implies that in 16th century Italy (or what would eventually become Italy) the term “artist” meant only white male; those of non-white or female demographics could not hold this identity. As we read in Said’s (1994) theories, women are not considered as active producers of knowledge or culture in the Orientalist Occident view; they are “more or less stupid” (Said p.207). As such, it makes sense that in a patriarchal society such as Vasari’s cinquecento Italy that women would be considered as “Others.” This is supported by Vasari’s (1998) text that, originally, discussed only four female artists in comparison to his discussion of 34 male artists. But these discussions have, throughout the centuries, become excluded from subsequent editions and reprints of *Lives*, because as “Others” these women were viewed as unequal to their male counterparts, thus their removal from text is easily justified. Therefore, Vasari’s foundational text has remained exclusionary of women but celebratory of males; and, as the foundational art history text, helped to establish and normalize the Western male as Occident for future art historical texts.

Because Vasari’s *Lives* is notably biased, male “artist-slanted,” (Rejaie, 2006) and is also really a work of biography and criticism, rather than history, according to Whitney Davis, it is *History of Ancient Art* by Johann Joachim Winckelmann that many other art historians consider as the foundation art history text (Davis, 1994). Winckelmann’s *History of Ancient Art* published in 1764, almost exactly 200 years after Vasari’s Giutina edition of *Lives*, is the first history of art text to attempt “systematic stylistic analysis, historical contextualization, and even iconographical analysis” (Davis, 1994). However, Winckelmann’s work is also a linear narrative of stylistic perfection (Schwarzman, p.24). But, according to Davis, “To put it succinctly, Winckelmann’s *History* inaugurally integrated the twin methods of what later became the professional discipline of art history...” (Davis, p.40).

Therefore, Winckelmann's history of art goes beyond biography and mere description, it "fabricate(s) a historical past that could be placed under systematic observation for use" in Winckelmann's era. (Preziosi, 1998). And "fabricate" he did. Although Winckelmann's *History of Ancient Art* (1755) provides contextualization and analysis of art beyond the artist's life, Winckelmann is also criticized for bias and glorification of elements of ancient art, ancient Greek art and culture specifically, for which he felt personal affinities (Davis, 1994). But a larger criticism of Winckelmann's text is against his subjectivity and fetishization about a culture of which he had little knowledge.

For example, in Winckelmann's discussion of Greek sculptures of naked young boys, he attributes the beauty of these forms (of the naked boys) to the "favorable" Greek climate (Davis, 1994). Winckelmann had no knowledge of how ancient Greek climate affected young boys, or even what exactly the ancient Greek climate was. More importantly, Winckelmann had no source of knowing how the sculptors were affected by the ancient Greek climate because Winckelmann was looking at Roman copies – not the original Greek sculptures – leaving open the possibility for inaccurate copying (Davis, 1994). In doing so, Davis proposes that perhaps Winckelmann in this and other examples found in *History of Ancient Art*, was "exploring his sexual and ethical attractions – actively filling them out with images, information, and social and historical reality, both through and in the very doing of his research – he finally transposes them all into another narrative for others" (p.42). While this may very well be what Winckelmann was doing, either consciously or not, his text served as a canonical text for generations of art historians in Europe and later, America (the West). Even Davis, who points out the faults in Winckelmann's text still maintains that *History of Ancient Art* is the "true first history of art" (p.40). As with Vasari's *Lives*, the male and Eurocentric slant is prevalent, thus exposing one facet of Orientalism within Winckelmann's *History of Ancient Art*. However, another perhaps more interesting note of Orientalism in Winckelmann's text is his fetishization of ancient Greek culture, which is seen in his analysis of ancient Greek art. For example, Winckelmann opens his discussion, "Natural Beauty" with: "Good taste, which is becoming more prevalent throughout the world, had its origins under the skies of Greece...We are told that Minerva chose this land, with its mild seasons, above all others for the Greeks in the knowledge that it would be productive of genius" (Winckelmann, 1755). Much as Vasari's *Lives* show clear bias for one particular Western patriarchal culture, so too do we see that in Winckelmann's text.

But, for Winckelmann, ancient Greece is a fixed, static, and frozen idea of "eternality" (Said, 1994). In his glorifications of a culture he has no real access to other than through his own imagination and through looking at Roman copies of art, Winckelmann's writings are similar to Said's writings of the Western view of the East as an "ultimately immobilized" and uninformed fictitious creation (Said, 1994). Just as 17th century Orientalists did not view the East as a living and thriving set of distinct diverse cultures, rather only as a fixed place of "otherness" in binary opposition to the West, Winckelmann reverses this idea to fix a very inaccurate view of ancient Greece in his mind and subsequent biased writings about their culture and art. Unlike later editions of *Lives*, which exclude "Others," Winckelmann's *History of Ancient Art* does include brief discussion of non-Western artistic traditions. However, as may be expected by the discussion so far, Winckelmann's mention is not complimentary. Winckelmann points out that "The only way to become great or, if this possible, inimitable, is to imitate the ancients." (Winckelmann, 1755). However, in his view the "great" ancients are Greeks; and, he clearly maintains that "workmanship...of Syria and Egypt rarely equals" that of ancient Greek art (Winckelmann, 1755). Another example is found in Winckelmann's discussion of "Noble Simplicity and Quiet Grandeur" wherein he states, "The general and most distinctive characteristics of the Greek masterpieces are, finally, a noble simplicity and quiet grandeur, both in posture and expression" (Winckelmann, 1755). Comparing this sentiment to Said's discussion of Orientalism in 18th century Europe shows a clear connection to ideas of the "Other" as unequal and sub-standard to the West (Occident). Said states:

"Along with all other peoples variously designated as backward, degenerate, uncivilized, and retarded, the Orientals were viewed in a framework constructed out of biological determinism and moral-political admonishment. The Oriental was thus linked to elements in Western society (delinquents, the insane, women, the poor) having in common an identity best described as lamentably alien" (Said p.207). As such, art of ancient Syria or ancient Egypt, anything other than Winckelmann's Western idealized notion of perfection - ancient Greece - could not obtain nor possess "noble simplicity and quiet grandeur" because cultures (and art) of the East, such as Syria and Egypt (insane, irrational, delinquent) were inherently opposite to the Western ideal of reserved nobility; rather, they were uncivilized and equal to the insane (Said, 1994). As an educated man of 18th century Europe, Winckelmann was studying and writing about art, culture and history at the pinnacle of historic Orientalism discussed by Said, which is evident in Winckelmann's text.

Both Vasari and Winckelmann's canonical art history texts reveal a Western male bias and as both were written by Western males to teach others about artistic masterpieces and genius, it also shows the birth of the "'ego-trip' for the teacher" in art history (Morrison-Saunders and Hobson, 2013). In these cases Vasari and Winckelmann, the authors, are "held (by themselves) as the subject 'expert'...teaching via minimally interactive didactic" texts (Morrison-Saunders and Hobson, 2013).

Furthermore, as teacher-centered objects of art (history) education, the texts reflect the very Eurocentric bias of both authors that parallels Said's description of 18th century Orientalists. But surely the art history text and approach to teaching the subject has changed since Vasari and Winckelmann? Unfortunately, it has not. Fast forwarding from 1755, when Winckelmann published *History of Ancient Art* to 2009 when the 13th edition of *Gardner's Art through the Ages* (Kleiner and Gardner 2009) was published, we see a similar teacher centered approach and elements of Orientalism apparent in canonical texts by Vasari and Winckelmann. Widely used and considered a staple in most undergraduate art history survey classrooms today, the *Gardner's* text (in any edition beginning in 2001) is part of the lineage of canonical survey texts in art history. But, unlike the Vasari and Winckelmann texts, the *Gardner's* text is a survey of global art, meaning it does address art other than that created by Western male artists. But, although *Gardner's* addresses non-Western cultures, it is the way in which they are addressed that speaks to ideas of Orientalism. The *Gardner's* text is laid out chronologically, beginning with Paleolithic cultures and ending with Contemporary art. And, although no longer referred to as "Primitive," which was the actual term used for non-Western cultures in the early 20th century, *Gardner's* discussion of these cultures are awkwardly forced between the Byzantine and Early Medieval Europe, which is not historically accurate for all cultures addressed (Kleiner and Gardner 2009). This heavily structured chronological formatting is reminiscent of Said's description of the Western view of the East as "rarely seen or looked at; they (those of the East) were seen *through*, analyzed not as citizens, or even people, but as problems to be solved or confined..." (Said, 1994). Therefore, the intentional miscategorization in *Gardner's* reflects the authors' need for a systematic ordering of *things* rather than an understanding of diverse non-Western cultures who do not fit neatly within the fixed and ordered timeline of Western art.

The Kleiner and Gardner text does separate the art of Africa from the "Native Arts of the Americas" but oddly omits art of the Pacific Islands. In the abbreviated Kleiner and Gardner "Backpack edition" art from all non-Western cultures is excluded entirely although the title of the text includes the phrase "A Global History" (Kleiner and Gardner, 2009). This reflects a similar persistent discomfort with how to present and adequately teach the history of art by non-Western cultures, as is seen in Winckelmann's text. But rather than intentionally discredit the art of non-Western cultures as Winckelmann does, the *Gardner's* text forces inadequate discussion, which reflects a similar insulting tone of Winckelmann. For example, aside from the misplaced discussion of art from the African continent and exclusion of Pacific Islands, *Gardner's* discussion of Asian art also reflects an uncertainty or discomfort in how to teach the art of the "Other." The *Gardner's* text emphasizes what appear to be more important cultures through broader more informative discussions, for example Greek and Roman art (meaning Western art, as in texts by Winckelmann and Vasari). In contrast, *Gardner's* discussion of Korean art in the 2009 edition addresses the past notion of the derivative referenced by earlier art historians in saying Korean art "is not merely derivative" and has a "distinct identity" (Kleiner and Gardner, 2009). However, Kleiner and Gardner's discussion of this distinct culture filled with its own artistic identity is tacked on the end of the chapter about art of China and is only 2 pages in length (Kleiner and Gardner, 2009). Thus, as we see with the intentional exclusion of women in Vasari's text, art history remains fossilized in its understanding and presentation of the non-Western, which is still the "Other."

Challenging the Fossil

Although art history is a relatively young academic discipline in America, we have had nearly a century to make significant progress in pedagogical practice, but the canonical texts for teaching art history have been slow to reflect a more inclusive, thus accurate history of global art (Efland, p.258). We see this when comparing canonical texts of the past with texts prominently used today in teaching art history. Additionally, according to Efland's (1990) survey, *A History of Art Education*, discussion of art history education remains focused on how the history of art has been studied rather than how it has been taught. That means discussion of art history remains focused on those who practice and instruct the subject rather than on how students of art history learn or produce new scholarship.

Fortunately, since Efland's claim art historians have begun to re-evaluate pedagogical practice, but much remains to be done if the problematic survey text still dominates our classrooms. This will remain a challenge because from its inception in antiquity, art history has remained a teacher centered individual research activity focused either on object or artist of the teacher's biased and 'ego-centric' research interests (Efland, 1990). Unlike studio art education, which is more subject centered and student centered, art history is not traditionally a collaborative discipline nor are students of art history considered as active (or valid) producers of new material. And, students of art history rarely are required to produce works of visual art to help them apply and physically work with artistic concepts from past traditions in art. Rather, students of art history are only passive receivers of information from historically Orientalist, Eurocentric texts, particularly those students at the undergraduate level. Unfortunately, despite calls for change since 1954 we continue the teacher centered and historically Eurocentric culture in art history, and it has only perpetuated art history's reputation of academic elitism and irrelevance to its students. Furthermore, I contend our "allegiance" (Collins, p.23) to the traditional teacher-centered approach still maintains a dangerous hold on the necessary progression toward multi-culturalism and student-centered instruction (SCI) in art history – a progression that will challenge the elitism by welcoming and engaging with new diverse voices through collaboration.

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