

Reprinted Excerpt from *Written in Water: The Ephemeral Life of the Classic in Art* (2024), by Rochelle Gurstein, and an Interview with the Author

ROCHELLE GURSTEIN

Q&A with Rochelle Gurstein, conducted by Caterina Domeneghini and Claire Barnes (November 2024)

Caterina Domeneghini: The title of your book, *Written in Water* (2024), reminded me of the nearly homonymous *Written on Water* (2023), a collection of writings by Chinese novelist and essayist Eileen Chang published by NYRB Classics just a year prior. Chang's essay "Unforgettable Paintings" opens with a statement that in my view nicely captures the central argument of your study: "There are some paintings I will never be able to forget, but only one of them is famous, Gauguin's *Nevermore*."

This line immediately suggests that equating "classic" with "popularity" can be misleading. Your book demonstrates that there were times when artworks now considered "classics" were far from "unforgettable." At the same time, Chang offers a deeply personal experience of consecrating (largely) little-known masterpieces that resonate with her—a perspective more immediate and affecting than any traditional art history book, catalog, or auction listing could provide.

Rochelle Gurstein: Yes, I began this project with the hope that, through a study of the history of taste in art, I would be able to establish the reality of a "timeless classic." As someone whose imagination and moral and aesthetic judgment have been formed by my lifelong engagement with canonical works of art and literature, this idea meant a great deal to me personally. Even more importantly, I have long subscribed to Hannah Arendt's beautiful

idea that works of art and literature that endure over vast expanses of time make a home of the earth for us, linking generations of the past to those in the present and the future. So it came as a shock and bitter disappointment to discover that history let me down—I could find no single work of art that held its place consistently over time.

Let me give some examples: few people today would disagree that Michelangelo's *David* at the Galleria dell'Accademia in Florence and Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* at the Louvre are rightly considered classics. But before 1873, the *David* stood outside the entrance of the Palazzo Vecchio in the Piazza della Signoria, unprotected from the natural elements, and was not a favorite of art lovers; rather, his now-neglected *Moses* in the church of San Pietro in Vincoli in Rome held that distinction. As for the *Mona Lisa*, Vasari wrote rapturously about its "divine" beauty, but because it was acquired by King Francis I for his private collection, it was largely forgotten until 1797 when it was moved to the newly formed Louvre Museum. But, even in its new highly visible location, it went largely unnoticed until the middle of the next century when influential writers like Goethe, Théophile Gautier, Swinburne, and Pater wrote rhapsodic paeans to it, which began its meteoric rise in viewers' imagination. Equally disorienting, from the sixteenth century until the middle of the nineteenth, Leonardo was rarely mentioned by art writers, and Michelangelo's reputation waxed and waned. The most revered Renaissance artist was instead a painter who has little appeal to viewers today, Raphael. For close to four centuries, Raphael's masterpieces had been held as the exemplar of perfect beauty and were reproduced more often than any other artists; they were the very definition of the enduring classic. That the history of taste revealed not only many additional instances of wildly fluctuating reputations, but also of stunning rediscoveries of long forgotten or previously demeaned artists, lost classics, and unstable canons put my original project of establishing the reality of a timeless classic in jeopardy, and forced me to reconsider what turned out to be a number of my own unexamined assumptions, which resulted in the book I ultimately wrote.

Claire Barnes: Eileen Chang’s case, exemplified by the quote above, also illustrates an individual’s situatedness in responding to art, which seems to contrast with the notion of “the classical tradition” as a “now-lifeless phrase,” as you describe it in Chapter 11, “Art as a Substitute for Religion”: that is, something one inherits passively and/or takes for granted. Do theories of reader-response, in which the locus of meaning shifts from text to reader, artwork to viewer, inform your work in any way?

RG: I came to this subject as a historian of ideas and I traced how closely connected ideas like the classic, standards, taste, and beauty changed over time, first and foremost, in the practice of art, but also in the way influential writers experienced and wrote about paintings and sculpture, both past and present. Early in my graduate education, I read J. G. A. Pocock’s *Machiavelian Moment* and Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*. Each of them—Pocock in political thought, MacIntyre in moral philosophy—paid close attention to how and why linguistic paradigms shifted over great expanses of time. These books made a lasting impression on me not only in terms of what their histories revealed, but also as a method of writing history. I should also say that I did my graduate work with Christopher Lasch, who approached history as a form of social criticism. His belief that history could shed light on our current situation—aesthetic, cultural, social, political—by recovering forgotten or wrongly discredited ideas has animated almost everything I write.

CB: What do you think are the key takeaways of your research moving forward?

RG: When I first began thinking about this subject, I had a specific idea of the classic in mind, which I had taken for granted: the rare work of art that miraculously transcends its time and place and speaks to us as if it were made for us; self-contained, autonomous, in need of little, if any, prior knowledge or interpretation. It was not until I had written the largest part of my book that I realized that this idea was a rather late development. It was closely tied to aesthetic autonomy in the writings of Bernard Berenson, Roger Fry, and Clive Bell, and to the idea that aesthetic value is what sets works of art apart from and makes them deeper and more emotionally resonant than all other things in the world. That these ideas were only as old as

the turn of the twentieth century, that they emerged out of the void left by the collapse of both the humanist tradition and religious faith, took me by surprise, for I had wrongly assumed they had deeper roots.

The idea of the classic that endured the longest was one largely unfamiliar to us today: a work of art that exemplifies the aims, aspirations, and excellences of a flourishing practice of art. In the classical practice of art, which lasted from the sixteenth century through the middle of the nineteenth, ancient sculptures and High Renaissance painters who imitated and tried to rival them were held to be exemplars—that is, classics—and, in turn, the single, indisputable standard of taste. Taste, when it is securely rooted in a practice of art, is not relative. This discovery was important to me because one of my hopes in writing this book was to discover forgotten intellectual resources that might move us beyond the stalemate of our current disputes about taste, standards, classics, and canons.

As long as a practice of art is in good working order and artists and viewers feel themselves part of its intellectual and aesthetic continuum, they can confidently judge works of art, both present and past. Where trouble sets in is if a practice becomes exhausted. At such moments, and they happen with increasing frequency during the twentieth century, the most ambitious artists, in their desire to go on, innovate, often unintentionally, which introduces a rival standard of taste, and with it, rival classics and canons, and seemingly interminable disagreements about them. Viewers committed to competing paradigms might very well be able to recognize the exemplar of the rival paradigm, but how the viewer judges or feels about the artist or art movement in question is another matter. That is when we say it is a matter of taste, and taste in this instance is open to dispute—relative—since it is founded in nothing more substantial than the viewer’s personal feelings, attitudes, and preferences. This is not where I wanted to land.

But I need to qualify this. The history I uncovered also revealed that, in disputes about conflicting paradigms of art, where one stands temporally is all important. When people are caught in the heat of the moment, what they believe is at stake blinds them to their opponent’s perceptions. With the passing of time, however, and the cooling of passions, it becomes possible to

enter rival standpoints in imagination before a particular work of art. What was previously a subjective and disputed claim then becomes the condition of plurality in our own—the manifold expression of these writers’ humanity expressed by the variety of their responses. This, I have come to believe, is how to best understand what the idea of the classic had made and continues to make possible.

CD: You open your book with a panoramic view on the American “culture wars,” which have received considerable attention in our special issue. We wonder whether, running in parallel with that over-exploited umbrella term, there was also a more specific sense of “art wars” emerging out of the Sixties, which, in Homi Bhabha’s words, aimed to “interrogate ‘identity’ rather than assert its inviolability.” Do you recall a seminal text, or a pivotal moment or exhibition, that advocated for radical change in the art world and its representation politics—akin to, say, the radical intervention of Lauter and Kampf’s *Politics of Literature: Dissenting Essays on the Teaching of English* (1972)?

RG: Studying the art that was made in the 1960s and what was written about it, there is no evidence that “identity” and “representation politics” were the pressing concerns of the time. The most pressing concern, as it was clearly articulated by two leading artist-writers of the time, Allan Kaprow and Donald Judd, was how to go on after the achievements of the abstract expressionists. Kaprow decided “to give up painting entirely—I mean the single flat rectangle or oval,” and take up literal enactments of Jackson Pollock’s “act of painting” through performances in makeshift galleries that he called “happenings.” Judd was also convinced that the future of art lay in “getting clear of the circumscribed forms” of painting and sculpture, which led him to venture into the material, three-dimensional space of what he called “specific objects.” During the 1960s and ‘70s, artists engaged in varieties of experimentalism, some allied to Kaprow’s happenings or to Judd’s minimalism, others in opposition to them and one another: performance, video, post-minimalism, conceptualism, process, mixed media, earthworks, feminist art. From the point of view of champions of modernism, these new movements represented nothing less than what Harold Rosenberg called “the de-defin-

ition of art.” He repeatedly warned that “the history of art as a distinct category of artifacts seems to have reached a dead end.”

And of course, in a different vein, there was the explosion of pop art. If I were to choose a pivotal exhibition that, as you put it, “advocated for radical change in the art world,” it would be the *International Exhibition of the New Realists* mounted by Sidney Janis at his gallery in 1962, which showcased Warhol, Lichtenstein, Rosenquist, Claes Oldenburg, and other Americans as well as artists from France, England, Italy, and Sweden. Janis was the primary dealer of important European modernists and American abstract expressionists. When the exhibition opened, Mark Rothko, Adolph Gottlieb, Philip Guston, and Robert Motherwell immediately registered their disavowal of both pop art and Janis: they all left the gallery. Willem de Kooning was the only one who stayed with Janis.

CD: If the classic is not timeless, as you rightly conclude at the end of your survey, and only “lives on” in textbooks and museums, it follows that cultural and educational institutions bear great responsibility in deciding how to present these works to students and the general public. You make an interesting remark on “plurality” towards the end of “The Future of the Classic,” particularly in relation to the “common world.” Can you briefly expand on both terms?

RG: What I had in mind was Hannah Arendt’s idea of “plurality” and the making of a common world through inhabiting the imaginations of other people. The way particular works that have attracted the attention of art lovers over long expanses of time provides us with the rare occasion to experience the plurality of their multiple sensibilities when we look at the *same* work of art through their eyes and our own as well. We feel kinship and differences; it is an enlarging experience very different from the subjective and limiting experience of the personal impressions, associations, or flights of imagination that a work of art stirs in any individual viewer.

CD: Alongside the erosion of classical authority in the syllabus and in the arts, there is also a history of violent re-appropriations of the “classic/al” by extremist political groups. Your frequent references to the *Apollo*

Belvedere in the book brought back memories of a terrible moment in American politics. In September 2016, a white supremacist group named “Identity Evropa” (now known as the American Identity Movement) targeted college campuses with a hate campaign featuring posters that bore slogans such as “Our Future Belongs to Us,” “Protect Your Heritage” and “Let’s Become Great Again,” superimposed onto images of the *Apollo* and other classical figures like Julius Caesar. This is all the more current in the light of the 2024 presidential elections.

For obvious historical reasons, the story you have told in the book is largely focused on Europe, but it would be great to hear more about how American art institutions view their ethical responsibility towards what is “classic” today.

RG: That white supremacists and neo-Nazis use classical sculpture as propaganda for their dogmas and rallies speaks to something symbolic that exists in those works, but which, for the greatest part of their history, went unnoticed, for it had nothing to do with the intention of the artist or the meaning of the work. Given how little presence the *Apollo Belvedere*—or, for that matter, classical sculpture as a category of art—has in anyone’s imagination these days, it is amazing that such groups are even aware of it. I guess it must come from their voracious appetite for images associated with Nazism. I don’t know what American art institutions can do when classical sculpture is despicably misused—and perverted—by such groups. I think it would be more profitable to try to address the social conditions that give rise to such groups—which is not the function of art institutions but rather of democratic political institutions, leaders, movements, and associations.

CB: Your book importantly sheds light on the slipperiness of “classic” as a “timeless” category of value, and the problematic assumptions that such an equation can play out in consequence. Similarly, the periodization of art as “classical” (as opposed to “archaic,” “Hellenistic,” “modern,” and so on) invites a similar line of questioning. Did this come up in the course of your research?

RG: Yes, I devote a chapter to the origins of formalism—and I discovered that the periodization of art first appears with the emergence of the modern disciplines of classical archeology and art history in Germany at the turn of the twentieth century, which fatally neutralized the idea of the classic as an exemplary work of art that will be appreciated in all places and times.

Adolf Furtwängler’s pioneering *Masterpieces of Greek Sculpture* (1895) was the first to categorize into distinct styles and schools works of sculpture previously thought of simply as “ancient” or “antique.” Even though it was not his intention, Furtwängler’s use of extant Roman copies of missing Greek originals as his source material to write his history delivered what was a decisive blow to long beloved favorites such as the *Apollo Belvedere* and the *Venus de’ Medici*, for this led to the perception that they were *inferior* Roman copies of missing Greek originals—the distinction between copies and originals, Roman and Greek, had mattered little to anyone before this time.

The idea of the timeless classic came under even more pressure in a path-breaking book by Heinrich Wölfflin, *Art of the Italian Renaissance* (1903), in which he attempted to restore luster to the High Renaissance—what he christened “classic art”—by painstakingly analyzing how the masterpieces of “Cinquecento” artists systematically departed from and improved upon the formal elements of the “Quattrocento.” His emphasis on distinct period styles led him to reject the Vasari story of the inspiration for the “second birth” of art being the discovery of ancient sculpture unearthed during the great building projects of the Renaissance. Contrary to that long-accepted explanation, Wölfflin reconceived the masterpieces of Raphael, Michelangelo, and other high Renaissance artists as the fruit of a self-contained period style belonging to a particular phase in the development of Italian art. These new, historical-minded ways of understanding long-celebrated ancient sculptures in the history of art effectively deprived them of the central role Vasari had assigned them as the fountainhead of the High Renaissance, and thus the founding episode of Western art.

CB: You highlight a current paradox where “few of us know enough about tradition to feel we are fettered by it, let alone that we are in need of any guide through the vast realms of the past. And so we are thrown back on our

own limited stock of resources and into the very compressed space—as narrow intellectually and imaginatively as it is temporally shallow—of our present moment.” As a final reflection, how might someone reading this today avoid the “provincialism” of the present moment without falling back on the assumptions of canonicity which your book seeks to unpick? If some sort of grounding in literary and cultural history is crucial, how might it be reintroduced more responsibly?

RG: The main assumption about canonicity that my book demonstrates to be unsustainable is that a certain body of work is timeless and universal. But that does not mean that we should not take seriously and try to imaginatively recover what generations of sensitive, thoughtful people experienced before works of art that were long adored, but no longer have immediate appeal in the present. The book I have written is a step in this direction. When I go to the Uffizi and view the *Venus de' Medici*—a sculpture to which I, as a thoroughly modern viewer, had no response at all before I wrote my book—I now see it and experience it with all the many, many voices of the generations of viewers who have written about it and with the many, many sculptures and paintings that took it as their model, which releases me not only from the confines of our own time and place but also from the limits of my own personal preoccupations and prejudices. This is true of classical sculpture in general as well as of once beloved painters whose work meant little to me before I immersed myself in the long history of writing about them. I have to stress that writing this book took me a very long time and the enlarging and deepening of my taste and sensibility—not to mention my capacity for unexpected aesthetic pleasures—came only after I made a sustained effort to raise myself to the demands of the artist’s vision, which also took time.

Most importantly, I believe that anyone concerned about the questions we have been considering needs to have a conservationist ethos regarding the fragile mortal accomplishments that make up that equally fragile edifice that we call culture. And here I will give the last word to Walter Pater: “The essence of humanism is the belief [...] that nothing which has ever interested living men and women can wholly lose its vitality—no language they have spoken, nor oracle by which they have hushed their voices, no dream which

has once been entertained by human minds, nothing about which they have ever been passionate or expended time and zeal.”

This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

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Part IV: The Death of the Classical Tradition

The Emergence of Formalism, Modern Art, and Its Aftermath

14. The Future of the Classic

Modern art lovers found themselves in an inescapable and unsettling situation: long-revered masterpieces continued to stand in their old places in churches, museums, and palaces, but the ground of their former appreciation had been pulled out from under them. Against all odds, Berenson and Fry managed to arrest the free fall of at least some old favorites through the discovery of what amounts to a new gravitational force: form, the intrinsic artistic quality that endures once everything else is forgotten or dissolves under the pressure of time. I had taken for granted that classics miraculously speak across time to future generations because of their aesthetic amplitude, that their power to express the deepest dimensions of existence is what gives them their singular status among the things of the world. That this understanding was only as old as the turn of the twentieth century took me by surprise, for I had wrongly assumed that it had deeper roots.

It made me realize—quite belatedly—that there was a contradiction in my original project: I had intended to write a history of the idea of taste in order to demonstrate that something outside of history, beyond relativism—the timeless classic—nonetheless existed. As a historian, I knew quite well that ideas emerge out of a particular time and place and are embedded within a larger, ongoing argument. Yet, because of my desire for the depth and per-

manence that I believed only great, lasting works of art can provide, I had unconsciously reserved a place for art as a realm of transcendence, of miracles. This, I now see, is an illusion. Aesthetic autonomy—and timelessness and universality—are themselves historically situated, born of modern alienation from the humanist tradition and religious faith. They are ingenious—if imperfect and contested—solutions to the problem of appreciating classics once viewers no longer know or have rejected their original aims or cultural traditions. These are the ideas we have inherited from our predecessor culture of modernism, and they have moved to the center of our contemporary disputes about taste, standards, classics, and the canon.¹

This history has also presented us with an alternative to the modernist understanding of the classic: the rather unglamorous eighteenth-century idea of exemplar, a work that embodies the excellences of its particular practice and is taken by artists as a model for imitation and by viewers as the single standard of taste. This workmanlike idea of the classic was nothing like the miraculous idea of the classic as timeless that I had expected to find, but what it failed to deliver in terms of transcendence, it more than exceeded in terms of solidity. And as long as the classical practice of art was in good working order, and artists and viewers felt themselves part of its intellectual and aesthetic continuum, they knew what “ideal beauty” looked like and could confidently judge works of art, both past and present. There was nothing arbitrary or subjective about it nor was it elitist, for it was open to anyone who gave him or herself over to the rigors of the practice. But the classic as exemplar and indisputable standard of taste ran into trouble when painters and sculptors were unable to further the practice they inherited, and its ideals and aspirations began to feel inadequate to them and to viewers. Over the course of this book, we have witnessed what happens at such moments of crisis: artists innovate, sometimes inadvertently, sometimes by design, which can inflict havoc on the established order.

In the case of the works that appeared in the period 1490 to 1530 in Florence and Rome, the innovations were so sweeping that they amounted to a rival practice of art, which made the old one obsolete. Once sculptors viewed Michelangelo’s magnificent Christian sculptures of the *David* and the *Moses*

and his equally imposing classical *Dusk and Dawn*, they abandoned old techniques such as gilding wooden sculptures that had produced poignant works like Donatello's *Penitent Magdalene*. And so it was with painters whose eyes were opened by the breathtaking technical advances of Raphael's magnificent paintings of subjects from ancient history and myth, such as *The School of Athens*. The understanding of frescoes and sculptures as a visible form of Christian worship, expressing what Rio called "profound mystical significance" (think of Giotto's *St. Francis Receiving the Stigmata*, was displaced by the idea of art as a virtuoso practice with particular techniques and methods—linear perspectival space, oil paint, freestanding wooden panels or canvas—which produced ever more lifelike, if idealized, imitations of natural forms encompassing a variety of genres—history painting but also portraiture and landscape, to which genre painting and still life would be added.

With his magisterial *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, Vasari established the history, principles, aims, methods, and exemplars of classical art that reached its apex in the work of the "divine" Raphael and Michelangelo. For the next three hundred years, artists and art lovers were sustained by the Vasari story, even as they elaborated and revised the practice of art. By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, a crisis of authority unfolded as the most ambitious artists found themselves increasingly frustrated in their quest to excel the Old Masters. In their labors to rejuvenate the grand style, the unexpected happened: Turner's transcriptions of the optical sensations of sky, water, air, and mountains, Ruskin proclaimed, surpassed the "ancients," and Delacroix's intensely expressive, dramatic history paintings, in Baudelaire's estimate, achieved the same feat. Although both "modern" painters continued to imitate natural forms, their deviations from the classical practice were felt to be so extreme that they led to a bitter, irresolvable dispute about taste, standards, classics, and the very nature of art, setting the template for future disputes about innovations in art.

By the turn of the twentieth century, an even more radical innovation shook the art world: the "revolution" initiated by Cézanne that broke definitively with the long-standing practice of imitating nature in favor of creating a new

reality contained within the space of the picture plane—what Fry spoke of as “a world by itself, independent, complete, autonomous.” This was the rival paradigm of art announced by such stunningly original visions as Cézanne’s *Madame Cézanne in a Red Armchair*, Van Gogh’s *Starry Night*, Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger*, Matisse’s *Dance*. And it proved as decisive for the practice of living artists as the shift from the earnest spiritual expression of early Christian painters to the virtuoso imitation of nature by High Renaissance masters that had occurred four centuries earlier. For most of the twentieth century, representational painting in any genre as well as figurative sculpture vanished from the artist’s repertoire. Abstraction became the ruling style.

We have also seen that artistic revolutions have equally momentous consequences for the classic exemplifying the abandoned paradigm and, with it, the artist’s dream of secular immortality. At best, dethroned classics are granted an afterlife in art-history books and museums as representative of a particular historical period with identifiable formal features, thanks to the value-free history of artistic styles introduced by Wölfflin. Still, such works are always in danger of being erased from cultural memory or physically destroyed, especially if the new paradigm significantly alters viewers’ perception and taste. This we witnessed in the startling footnotes that Mrs. Foster appended to almost every page of her translation of Vasari’s *Lives*. Following one of Vasari’s electrifying descriptions of a work by Cimabue, Giotto, Masaccio, Fra Angelico, Mantegna, or Piero della Francesca that makes the reader want to see it with his or her own eyes, we learn that the work has been “barbarously destroyed,” “retouched beyond recognition,” “white-washed over,” “lost.”

Long-treasured ancient sculptures suffered a kindred fate. As a consequence of their reclassification as Roman copies of missing Greek originals at the close of the nineteenth century, many of the old favorites have effectively ceased to exist as works of art in their own right. They now languish in an art-historical netherworld, their restored parts removed in the name of authenticity, as curators relegated them to the ancient Greek section of the museum—their only claim to attention being as surrogates for lost master-

pieces from an earlier and allegedly superior time. This has not been the fate of the *Venus de' Medici*, whose restorations are still intact. It continues to stand in the Tribuna at the Uffizi, but it now exists only as a nameless decorative object among others pictured in the postcard of the gallery, which was restored as a historical room from 2009 to 2012. The name the museum believes to be important is that of the once-celebrated designer of the room: “Bernardo Buontalenti (Firenze 1523–1608), *Tribuna*, 1584.”

It is this apprehension that worlds go extinct—the cultural disaster that the classic is supposed to avert—that anguishes art lovers when long-revered paintings and sculpture come under attack by artists and critics with rival projects, even as they find it hard to believe they are on the wrong side of history. Recall the writer who was alarmed by the high status accorded to the early Christian painters and the Pre-Raphaelites who took them as their exemplars. In 1856, he warned if their “revolution” succeeded, “the decisions of three centuries are overthrown, ancient landmarks removed, and great names disinherited.” This was the reaction of a number of sophisticated viewers to the post-impressionist exhibitions as well. Robert Ross, a friend of Oscar Wilde’s and an acquaintance of Fry’s, denounced the 1910 exhibition as “a widespread plot to destroy the whole fabric of European painting.”²

Ross, who was anything but an old-fashioned Victorian, had good cause to worry. When Fry wrote his “Retrospect” essay in 1920, he noted how much had changed in the ten years since the first post-impressionist exhibition: “Now that Matisse has become a safe investment for persons of taste, and that Picasso and Derain have delighted the miscellaneous audience of the London Music Halls with their designs for the Russian Ballet, it will be difficult for people to imagine the vehemence of the indignation which greeted the first sight of their works in England.” And twenty years later, Virginia Woolf, in her biography of Fry, observed, “It would need today as much moral courage to denounce Cézanne, Picasso, Seurat, Van Gogh, and Gauguin as it needed then to defend them.”³ That modern art carried the day with what appears to be astonishing velocity was, in truth, a development that had been in the making in all the academic history paintings of the nineteenth century. But, with a speed that is astonishing, the art cre-

ated after Cézanne—the successive movements classified by art historians as fauvism, expressionism, cubism, futurism, dada, suprematism, constructivism, de stijl, surrealism—ran into trouble after fifty years. The depletion of resources that brought the classical tradition to a standstill after more than three centuries was compressed to a half century when it came to advancing the form most closely identified with modern art: abstract painting.

Which raises the question: What is the future of the classic? If the past offers any guidance, there are two closely related aesthetic domains that provide a secure foundation for the classic. One is the practice of art: a continuous, well-ordered practice that is rich, capacious, and elastic enough that artists can successfully advance it into the future. The other is critical appreciation: writing so perceptive, persuasive, exquisite, or emotionally vibrant that it gives viewers the eyes to appreciate works that moved beyond exhausted conventions—Ruskin on Turner, Baudelaire on Delacroix, Fry on the post-impressionists; or to appreciate anew works that had been cast aside as imperfect predecessors—Rio and Ruskin on the early Christian painters; or that had been judged by the wrong standards—Berenson and Fry on the many varieties of non-Western art; or that had once been revered as classic but no longer appealed to contemporary viewers—Pater on the *Mona Lisa* and Fry on *The Transfiguration*.

[...]

The De-Definition of Art

Over the course of this book, we have seen a succession of clashing paradigms of art—ancient, Christian, classical, modern—each with its particular aims, standards of taste, classics, and pantheon, and the acrimonious, interminable disputes that arose each time a new paradigm challenged the authority of the old. The reaction of the abstract expressionist painters to pop art was a preview of what would become an equally acrimonious, interminable dispute about postmodernism. In 1962, the art dealer Sidney Janis, who represented the abstract expressionists and many of the most important European modernists, organized the *International Exhibition of the New Realists* at his gallery, showcasing Warhol, Lichtenstein, Rosenquist, Claes

Oldenburg, and other Americans as well as artists from France, England, Italy, and Sweden. Rothko, Gottlieb, Philip Guston, and Motherwell immediately registered their disavowal of both pop and Janis: they severed their relationships with the gallery. Only de Kooning stayed on.

What the emerging paradigm of postmodern art meant—aesthetically, existentially, morally—to sophisticated viewers whose sensibility had been forged during the catastrophes of World War II was most forcefully expressed by Harold Rosenberg. The abstract expressionists' delvings into the psychic state of creation, "their ambition to translate the profoundest feelings into psychological equivalents inherent in art materials," had struck him as heroic, near miraculous, and he became one of their most perceptive champions. And so during the 1960s and '70s, when pop and the many other movements that disowned expression in painting and sculpture were gaining legitimacy in the art world, Rosenberg made no secret of his loathing for what he was seeing. The essays he wrote for the *New Yorker* and elsewhere fill eight volumes, and his searing analyses of these early manifestations of postmodernism and the commodification of art, what he described as the "increasing amalgamation of painting and sculpture into the US cultural-educational-entertainment system," have yet to be surpassed.⁴

Like Berenson, who adhered to the spiritual ideals of classical culture long after they lost their hold on the modern imagination, Rosenberg was a dyed-in-the-wool modernist living in a time when the instant popularity and commercial success of showmen like Warhol was making a mockery of everything he held sacred—his tragic view of life, ethos of strenuousness, unyielding stance of opposition to everything habitual and mechanical, his reverence for the artist's vocation. Like earlier sophisticated insiders who found themselves estranged from the art of their day, Rosenberg was stunned by his situation. This was especially acute in his case, since he prided himself for being on the side of the avant-garde and fully capable of appreciating innovations in art. Nevertheless, as we have repeatedly seen when paradigms clash, the new practice and taste are not understood by either their champions or the conservators of the established practice as

simply new; they are seen as rival systems of art representing rival world-views that must be vanquished at any cost.

The dispute over pop art quickly assumed this predetermined shape. Alloway promoted artists' "quotations" of the images and objects of popular culture as a legitimate vanguard strategy, and he spoke of it in glowing, politicized terms as "democratization." Rosenberg, because he held that "every avant-garde work is a rebellion"—specifically, a rebellion against mass society's demand for conformism and the standardized formulas of the commercial entertainment industry that were numbing the human spirit—denounced this strategy as a form of bad faith, "furthering, under present conditions of mass production in the arts, the assimilation of painting and sculpture into the system of directed creation dominated by Hollywood and Madison Avenue."⁵

This dispute extended to artists' self-conscious collapsing of the distinction between art and non-art—whether it be the distinction between art and life (happenings), art and demonstrations of formalist theory (post-painterly abstraction), art and mass-produced entertainment (pop), art and industrial processes (minimalism), art and ideas (conceptualism), art and ordinary objects (postminimalism), art and the phenomena of nature (earthworks), or art and polemical statements (feminist art). For Alloway, these blurrings of boundaries represented a freeing of art from what he called "the iron curtain of traditional aesthetics which separated absolutely art from non art." Rosenberg, because he defined art as "that form of thinking that arrives at its conclusion through the physical handling of materials," perceived this same development as a dire epistemological crisis. He feared it was introducing "the threat of an ultimate dilution that will do away with art entirely," what he called "the de-definition of art." As early as 1967 he could make a statement that surpassed not only Berenson's darkest thoughts about the survival of classical art at the dawning of the twentieth century but also the gravest misgivings expressed by today's critics of those who would revise the canon based on the standard of social inclusiveness: "The history of art as a distinct category of artifacts seems to have reached a dead end."⁶

Like earlier art lovers who could not quite believe their world was disappearing, Rosenberg was repelled by what was displacing it. He was alarmed that “artists of the avant-garde” had “made it a rule to execute paintings with paint-rollers, silk-screening, and other touch-eliminating devices and to have sculptures produced in factories or assembled from ready-made elements,” for this made impossible the very qualities he valued most in art: the transformative touch of the artist’s hand and, with it, creativity, individuality, freedom, spontaneity, imagination—the “uncontrolled or even undiscovered powers of mind” that had taken his breath away in the paintings of the abstract expressionists. A decade later, reviewing an exhibition at the Whitney Museum in 1976, *Two Hundred Years of American Sculpture*, which gave an entire floor to artists associated with minimalism, conceptualism, process, and earthworks, Rosenberg could not contain his incredulity and outrage: “Nothing is anything but what it is. No ideas are to be discerned except ideas of what sculpture can be, and once it has been relieved of its ‘mushy humanistic content’ sculpture can be anything that is not painting—that is not a flat surface, which now includes unpainted canvases.” What dismayed Rosenberg most was the “stubborn literalism,” the “literal tangibility” of the objects on display; “everything is as literal as a shovel and proved by the smoking pistol.”⁷

For one who belonged to the clan of alienated moderns, who sought in art the existential depth and spiritual expansiveness previously found in religion, the vacuousness and banality of these objects were signs of the time as revelatory and distressing as any that Ruskin had ever interpreted: “If one had to choose the single outstanding feature of the art of the 1960s, it would be the attitude, varying from indifference to soured ideological hostility, taken toward the metaphysical feelings and exalted psychological states of the Abstract Expressionist generation of painters and sculptors.” A few months earlier, reviewing a show at the Museum of Modern Art, *Drawing Now: 1955–1975*, showcasing Johns, Rauschenberg, and other contemporary artists, he reached the same dismaying conclusion: “The development of art from the fifties to the present consists largely of further counterstatements to Abstract Expressionism. Barnett Newman’s call for ‘subject matter that is

tragic and timeless' was answered with a hail of hamburgers, Coca-Cola bottles, and comic strips."⁸

Postmodernism: Liberation or Destitution?

Rosenberg did not live to see what he detested about the art of his time theorized into the defining features of a new paradigm of art—postmodernism—in such influential books as Jean-François Lyotard's *Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), Hal Foster's *Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (1983), and Andreas Huyssen's *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (1986). In Terry Eagleton's summary of the postmodern aesthetic, we see how completely the assault on the modernist values of seriousness, aesthetic autonomy, originality, and metaphysical depth initiated by pop artists had penetrated the practice of art: "There is, perhaps, a degree of consensus that the typical post-modernist artefact is playful, self-ironizing and even schizoid; and that it reacts to the austere autonomy of high modernism by impudently embracing the language of commerce and the commodity. Its stance towards cultural tradition is one of irreverent pastiche, and its contrived depthlessness undermines all metaphysical solemnities, sometimes by a brutal aesthetics of squalor and shock."⁹

Even though artists who went the way of Kaprow and Judd left behind the "circumscribed forms" of painting and sculpture, they were consumed with the historical problem of how to advance the avant-garde after the formal breakthroughs of the abstract expressionists. The next generation felt little or no pressure of history. A prime tenet of postmodernism is that "grand" or "meta-narratives," like Greenberg's theory of the formalist evolution of modernist art, were dead. A number of artists who made their names in the 1980s—Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, and Jeff Koons (to name a few)—treated new subjects, such as identity politics, institutional critique, and consumer culture, but these subjects did not press them to invent original forms of expression, as earlier avant-garde artists had; they simply applied the preexisting strategies of conceptual and pop art to their purposes. At the same time, other emerging artists felt that the experimentalism of the 1960s and '70s had run its course or that its strictures were leaving lit-

tle room for the expression they were after. This led them to take a step that confirmed the irrelevance of modernism—especially its prime values of originality and creativity—even more emphatically than any silk-screen image of Marilyn Monroe by Warhol or comic book panel by Lichtenstein: they returned to the style that the most advanced artists of the twentieth century had repudiated—figurative painting—in the guise of “neo-expressionism,” the “neo” indicating an ironic, if meaningless, nod to history.

As early as 1984, Judd felt compelled to take a stand, singling out painters who quickly became “art stars” in the hypercharged commercial market of the time as “mediocre” and “bad art.” Where Rosenberg had been repelled by the metaphysical and psychological nullity of the work that Judd made and championed, now it was Judd who found himself in the demoralizing position of the sophisticated insider estranged from the latest art of the time. He was appalled by its lack of rigor, seriousness, formal inventiveness—the modernist values that specific objects had kept alive: “It’s pretty depressing to feel that the activity I like is disappearing, that there may be little to see. New work and life is vital.”¹⁰ Like defenders of the established order before him, Judd, too, had good reason to worry.

The practice of art *had* entered a new phase, which, beginning in the 1980s, has been characterized by a resurgence and multiplication of historical styles that is fueled, first and foremost, by the absence of any shared project, and then accelerated by the rapacious appetite of the art market and museums for novelty. In 1993, when Arthur Danto, one of postmodernism’s most tireless promoters, spoke of the situation as “objective pluralism, by which I mean that there are no historically mandated directions to go in,” he was accurately describing a situation previously unimaginable to forward-looking artists and their champions: an art world without vanguards. Where virtually all the painters, sculptors, and writers who have peopled this book would have experienced this lack of direction as a state of intellectual destitution, enthusiasts of postmodernism found it liberating. Danto, in a state of euphoria, announced that “the art world” was now “a field of possibilities and permissibilities in which nothing is necessary and nothing is obliged.” And this, he declared, was “the mark” of a “posthistorical period of art”:

“everything is possible at this time, or anything is.” But even Danto could not wholeheartedly revel in the anarchy of “posthistorical” art, since he also granted, “It is, if you like, a period of artistic entropy, or historical disorder.”¹¹ Always the detached ironist, Danto meant no negative judgment here. Yet, with the passing of time, the directionless proliferation of styles that is now the normal state of postmodern art has raised troubling questions about what constitutes a coherent, let alone a well-ordered, practice of art, which, as we know, used to be the most secure foundation of the classic. In consequence, for the first time in the long history of art, there are as many incommensurable standards as there are coexisting schools and styles. And like earlier paradigm shifts, postmodern art is unleashing havoc on the established canon.

The Classic and the Common World

The directionless proliferation of styles that defines postmodern art, whatever its emancipatory potential, has proven as corrosive as the force of time to the secular immortality once afforded by a classic rooted in a vital practice—what kept Raphael alive in the imaginations and affections of artists and art lovers for close to four centuries. When it came to the founding masters of modernism—Manet and Cézanne—they were carried in the hearts of Matisse and Picasso throughout their long lives, but, as Matisse feared, the modernist practice that was his own would not outlast him and Picasso. Owing to the internal disorder of art, and compounded by the relentless demand for novelty by the art market and museums, few artists who came after them have been able to exert influence on their contemporaries for any length of time, let alone on future generations. Instead, those who gain prominence are treated as figures who originated a style belonging to the decade in which their movement came to prominence. This is what Newman bitterly objected to when he learned that *New York School: The First Generation* exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art did not include any work made after 1959: “It seems to me that the attitude toward the show by those who organized it is as if we were all dead.” (The year was 1965.) Judd lodged the same complaint when he spoke of “the artists my age, who are not only of the 1960s, incidentally, but of right now.”¹² (The year was 1984.)

If the conditions of postmodernity spell ruin for the immortality that comes when an artist is kept alive in the work of future artists, what are the prospects for the idea of the classic as a work of art that, by virtue of outlasting the mortal person who made it, provides a sense of permanence, solidity, and shared reality to what otherwise would be the ever-shifting ground of human existence—the necessity of making a lasting home for ourselves during our life on earth? The conservation and sustaining of a common world is also under siege by our pervasive historical amnesia. The only way for this dimension of the classic to survive is if we who live in the present can summon the kind of sympathetic engagement with worlds past that will enable us to enter, first, the imagination of artists whose works have arrested the attention of viewers over the longest period of time, and then, the varied responses of writers who have returned to these works generation after generation.

Which brings us to the other foundation of the classic: writing that is so perceptive, persuasive, exquisite, emotionally vibrant, or intensely critical that it compels viewers to see and feel what the writer experienced before a specific work of art. Over the course of this book, we have seen that this kind of writing has taken many forms: lectures, lives of artists, artists' memoirs, the record of testimony before government committees regarding purchases of art, travel writing, histories of art (impressionistic and academic), volumes of collected essays, exhibitions catalogues, and periodical literature (book reviews, exhibition reviews, appreciations of and attacks on individual artists and schools). The capacity to imaginatively enter the competing standpoints of these many artists and writers, to experience and judge a particular work from their particular perspectives, now that the tempers of the time have died down and their quarrels no longer inflame anyone, is not to bow to relativism—the very condition I hoped to escape in writing this book—but rather to share in the plurality of their responses, the plurality of their humanity. Not only the painting or sculpture but also the artists and writers—their thoughts and feelings and sensibilities, the reality of the worlds they inhabited—come alive as we see the same object with the simultaneity of their perspectives in our imaginations, and feel, in all its enlarging intensity, what

they felt, both our kinship with them and our differences. This is what the history of taste makes possible: an expansive, enduring common world.

And this is true of once-classic works that have all but ceased to exist today. The *Venus de' Medici* springs to life again, as do all the people who were ever touched by it: Pliny, Vasari, Gibbon, Winckelmann, Reynolds, Canova, Napoleon, Byron, Emerson, Lord Lindsay, Hawthorne, and of course the Englishman (this list could go on), but also Hazlitt, Ruskin, Hiram Powers, Henry James, Furtwängler, as well as “the Yankee,” who were *not* touched by it. The more fully we are able to experience what they thought and felt in the presence of the same work of art, the more completely we are released from the provinciality of our own time and place, lifted out of the suffocating confines of our own subjectivity. If instead we use a painting or sculpture as an occasion merely for personal thoughts and idiosyncratic associations, or can only see in it what the ideology of our moment dictates, the effect is the same as walking right by without notice. The work of art is as good as dead and we remain unchanged, as we began. And so my story comes full circle. The classic makes possible not only a lasting common world, but also the enlargement of the self that the Englishman called “general civism.”

Notes

1. See my “Rethinking the Culture Wars,” *Salmagundi* 210–11 (2021): 130–39.
2. Anonymous, *The Eclectic Review* 11 n.s. (1856), 1, 2; Robert Ross, “Review,” *Morning Post*, November 7, 1910, 3.
3. Roger Fry, “Retrospect” (1920), in *Vision and Design* (1920; repr., London: Chatto and Windus, 1929), 292; Virginia Woolf, *Roger Fry* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1940), 159.
4. [Original footnote 28] Harold Rosenberg, “Ideal and Real” (1976), in *Art and Other Serious Matters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 252; Rosenberg, “Then and Now” (1975), in *Art and Other Serious Matters*, 41.
5. [29] Harold Rosenberg, “Hypothesis for Criticism” (1967), in *Artworks*, 127.
6. [30] Harold Rosenberg, “Defining Art” (1967), in *Artworks*, 31, 32. Also see Rosenberg, *The De-Definition of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972).
7. [31] Rosenberg, “Hypothesis for Criticism,” 126, 127; Harold Rosenberg, “Art and Its Double” (1968), in *Artworks*, 22–23; Rosenberg, “Ideal and Real,” 253.
8. [32] Rosenberg, “Ideal and Real,” 253; Harold Rosenberg, “American Drawing” (1976), in *Art and Other Serious Matters*, 245.
9. [33] Terry Eagleton, review of “Lyotard, Postmodernism Explained for Children,” *Times Literary Supplement*, February 20, 1987.
10. [34] Donald Judd, “A Long Discussion Not About Master-Pieces but Why There Are So Few of Them, Part II” (1984), in *Complete Writings*, 77. He named Georg Baselitz, Anselm Kiefer, David Salle, Sandro Chia, Francesco

Clemente, and Julian Schnabel.

11. [35] Arthur Danto, "Art After the End of Art," *Artforum* (April 1993): 64, 65. It is worth noting, given Heinrich Wölfflin's central place in this book, that Danto presents his idea of a "posthistorical period of art" in contrast to Wölfflin's famous claim "that not everything is possible at every time"; Danto, "Art After the End of Art," 64.
12. [36] Newman quoted in James Breslin, *Mark Rothko* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 450; Judd, "Long Discussion," 76.

About the author

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