

The Biography

Although visual and stylistic analyses are fundamental to the practice of art history, the most familiar way of grouping art is by artist. The relationship is so close that common English usage drops the “by” in “a painting by Manet,” so that it becomes “a Manet painting” or even “a Manet.” In the last, only the small word “a” indicates that the “Manet” being discussed is an object rather than a person. This assumption of an intimate and important connection between the maker and the made has very practical implications. It rests on the belief that the actual historical person matters, the person who was born on a certain day and died on another. Exactly how and why the person matters is what determines how and why the life is important. This, in turn, will determine the questions considered in a biography. Like all assumptions of critical analysis, biographical ones should be examined closely.

The identity of the artist has been regarded as one of the most important facts about a work of art for centuries in the West. Beginning with the Greeks, names of great artists have seemed to be worth recording, and stories about them exist even when their works do not. Pliny the Elder and Pausanias, two Romans whose writings are among the richest sources of information about Greek art, approached their subjects as today’s art historians do – from the distance of centuries, gathering what was said in older sources without necessarily having seen the original works.⁵² The first history of art in the post-Classical world, Giorgio Vasari’s *Lives of the Artists*, published in Italy in the mid-16th century, also organizes the art in terms of the biographies of its makers. Since Vasari was a contemporary or near-contemporary of the artists, his vivid anecdotes suggest the authority of personal knowledge.⁵³

Even assuming that the identity of the artist is an essential part of understanding a work of art, however, different artists suggest different questions, and different historians write very different kinds of studies. For one scholar, the artist’s life consists of an orderly succession of opportunities and achievements, with his or her relationship to the works determined by conscious choices made in response to external events. For another, perhaps even writing about the same person, every scrap of work reveals the genius of the artist, and obstacles that have been surmounted demonstrate the power of the person’s talent. Unfinished works may seem more important than finished ones, because they suggest a more immediate access to the creative process. In a psychoanalytical biography, all of the work is thought to reveal the unconscious, just as dreams do.

The same artist always can be studied from different points of view, but some present the historian with especially dramatic choices. The life and work of Vincent van Gogh have seemed to many to be especially close, his art an expression of the deepest truths about his innermost self. Most historians have presented Van Gogh as the quintessential troubled genius, beset by mental illness and constantly undermined by loneliness and financial difficulties. Individual works are seen as illustrations of the artist’s emotional distress, with space that recedes too rapidly or tilts unexpectedly indicating mental imbalance, while twisted trees and dark foreboding cypresses reveal his melancholy. Furthermore, because the most famous works look so different from those by his contemporaries, the pictures seem to be without debt to a conventional artistic education or established masters.⁵⁴

In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger pointed out how profoundly our knowledge of Van Gogh's death from a self-inflicted gunshot wound influences the way we see his art. On one page of his book, above a small black-and-white reproduction of *Crows over Wheat Fields* (Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam), Berger wrote "This is a landscape of a cornfield with birds flying out of it. Look at it for a moment. Then turn the page." The reader turns the page to find the same reproduction, but with an italicized, apparently handwritten caption beneath it: "*This is the last picture that Van Gogh painted before he killed himself.*" Then, in a new paragraph, the text continues in the typeface used throughout the book: "It is hard to define exactly how the words have changed the image but undoubtedly they have. The image now illustrates the sentence."⁵⁵ In fact, the belief that Van Gogh was working on this particular painting when he shot himself has become the basis of almost everyone's response to it, influencing explanations of the subject as well as the technique.

In her monograph about Van Gogh, Judy Sund tried to understand *Crows over Wheat Fields* as a work of art rather than as a revelation of inner life. She built her interpretation on Van Gogh's own words, taken from the many letters by him that survive. In early July of 1890, writing about tensions that made him feel as if his life were "threatened at the very root," he began to paint "vast fields of wheat under troubled skies." Sund discussed these pictures:

The artist wrote . . . of painting two 'big canvases' in this vein, and it is generally agreed that [*Wheat Field under Clouded Sky* (Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam) is one of them and] the famed *Crows over Wheat Fields* is the other. Often romanticized as Van Gogh's last painting (which it almost certainly was not), *Crows* has been read as a virtual suicide note – its blackening sky and flock of dark birds taken for portents of his imminent death. Though Van Gogh would, in fact, shoot himself in a wheat field at the end of July, he probably had no plan to do so when he painted *Crows*, a vibrantly hued and lushly textured picture. Indeed, the artist felt that, despite their sad and lonely tenor, his vistas of wheat under heavy skies were visually expressive of something he had trouble describing verbally: a sense of 'the health and fortifying forces I see in the country.'

After this linking of the artist's own words with his painting, Sund considered other letters by Van Gogh to situate the picture in the larger context of his work:

Despite *Crows*'s turbulent weather and low-flying birds, [it represents] the spectacle of a mature crop Enraptured by the allusive connotations of the rural work cycle, [Van Gogh] . . . took comfort in the glimpses of a grand schema ('the infinite') that nature's cycles afforded. . . . It is also probable that Van Gogh related the swooping birds . . . to the sinister forces that undermine the efforts of the [Biblical] parable's sower . . . *Crows* would seem to proclaim the defeat of those agents of evil, since birds cannot harm a crop that stands ready to be reaped.⁵⁶

In other words, separated from biographical legend and fit to Van Gogh's own sense of landscape, *Crows* becomes an affirmation of life in its subject as much as in its composition, colors, and brush strokes.

Artemisia Gentileschi is another artist who offers historians a dramatic choice about how to connect her life to her art. Gentileschi learned to paint in the studio of her father. In May of

1612, when Gentileschi was 19, her father sued an assistant named Agostino Tassi for raping his daughter. Tassi had been hired to teach her perspective and, according to court documents, had raped her in May of the previous year. After a lengthy trial, during the course of which Gentileschi was tortured to discover whether the allegation was true, Tassi fled from Rome while Gentileschi married someone else and moved to Florence. She went on to have a successful career as a painter in Italy and England.⁵⁷

Mary Garrard wrote a monograph about Gentileschi in which she considered the artist in terms of issues raised by her gender. She argued that Gentileschi's major figure paintings of Biblical and Classical heroines should be read, at least in part, as expressions of the personal feelings of the artist. For example, Gentileschi's *Susannah and the Elders* (Collection Graf von Schoenborn, Pommersfelden), which depicts a subject popular among artists at the time, presents:

a reflection, not of the rape itself, but rather of how one young woman felt about her own sexual vulnerability in the year 1610. . . . *Susannah* does not express the violence of rape, but the intimidating pressure of the threat of rape. Artemisia's response to the rape itself is more probably reflected in her earliest interpretation of the Judith theme, the dark and bloody *Judith Slaying Holofernes* [(Uffizi, Florence)] . . . Once we acknowledge, as we must, that Artemisia Gentileschi's early pictures are vehicles of personal expression to an extraordinary degree, we can trace the progress of her experience, as the victim first of sexual intimidation, and then rape – two phases of a continuous sequence that find their pictorial counterparts in . . . *Susannah* and . . . *Judith* respectively.⁵⁸

Griselda Pollock argued against Garrard's interpretation of Gentileschi's *Susannah and the Elders* as a form of autobiography:

[Garrard's] reading of *Susannah and the Elders*, of the awkwardly twisting, and distressingly exposed body, surmounted by the anguished face in the painting that places us so close to the vulnerability of the naked woman with the men so menacingly near, is true to what we now see. But how do we understand what we are seeing, historically?

Just as Sund placed Van Gogh's *Crows* in the context of the artist's own words, so Pollock tried to understand what *Susannah* might have meant to a viewer in Italy in 1610:

There is an excess in the nude body, in its sharp body-creasing twist, the flung-out hands, the taut neck and the downcast head. The face of Susannah is also disturbing. Its expressive tenor is pitched almost too high and its position draws it away from the body, creating distinct registers of representation. . . . These elements of pose, gesture and facial expression, the grammar of historical painting bequeathed by the High Renaissance Academy, endow the female body that is the luminous centre of the painting with an energy, a pathos and a subjectivity that does indeed run counter to the figuration of the female nude on display . . . That shift in effect is not, I would suggest, the result of Artemisia Gentileschi's knowing intention or her experience. The painting might suggest the tentative beginning of a possible grammar, arising out of inexperience as an artist, resulting from difficulties in resolving the integration of elements and of managing space as a narrative device.⁵⁹

In Pollock's view, then, the painting describes a popular subject, depicted by an artist who was not yet able to manipulate all of the pictorial elements needed for a large figural composition. The awkwardness and twisting of Susannah's body is connected to Gentileschi's life, but by representing a stage in her artistic development, not her personal experience.

The examples of Van Gogh and Gentileschi may seem too extreme to be very revealing for ordinary art historical writing, never mind student papers. Nonetheless, they demonstrate how assumptions about the relationship between the life of the artist and his or her art can change the way the art is interpreted. Even a decision as simple as studying only one period in an artist's career has consequences. Whether intended or not, it separates some of the work from the rest, and does so using the artist's life to define the group. That such choices are made by art historians all the time is unavoidable, but they must be understood as choices. Objects do not come labeled this way.

References:

52. Pollitt, ix-xii.
53. Julian Kliemann and Antonio Manno, "Vasari. III," in *Grove Art Online. Oxford Art Online*, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com> (accessed August 22, 2008).
54. See, for example, Stokstad, 515.
55. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), 27-8.
56. Judy Sund, *Van Gogh. Art & Ideas Series* (New York: Phaidon Press, 2002), 295-7.
57. Ann Sutherland Harris and Judith W. Mann, "Artemisia Gentileschi," in *Grove Art Online. Oxford Art Online* <http://www.oxfordartonline.com> (accessed August 22, 2008).
58. Mary D. Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: the Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), quoted in Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon. Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 106.
59. Pollock, 114.