

Entry “Art Criticism” from the *Grove (Oxford) Dictionary of Art*

James Elkins

This material was originally posted on [www.jameselkins.com](http://www.jameselkins.com).

Please write [jameselkins@fastmail.cn](mailto:jameselkins@fastmail.cn) with comments, or for an up-to-date version.

**Art criticism** can be provisionally defined as writing that evaluates art. Yet it has no formal definition or agreed-upon meaning. The sense of the concept is compromised by two fundamentally antithetical usages: on the one hand, art criticism is understood as an historical practice, embracing writers from Pliny or Vasari to the present; and on the other, it is taken to be a way of writing that is potentially independent of historical conditions. There is no reliable history or philosophy of art criticism, and virtually no literature on its concept or nature. Some philosophers deny art criticism exists as such, and others say it subsumes art history—so that this entire *Dictionary* would be an example of critical writing. Given that disparity, it is best not to presuppose art criticism has a consensual meaning, but to take the alternate definitions seriously. This entry is divided into two sections:

1. Art criticism as a kind of writing
2. Art criticism as an historical practice

1. When art criticism has been treated as a kind of writing, it has normally been considered as evaluative or judgmental rather than descriptive. The traditions of judicative and philodoxic (ostensibly neutral, “knowledge-loving”) discourse begin in ancient Greek texts, and are still both distinct and mingled today (Trimpi, 1983). But this distinction between art criticism and art history has been criticized on at least three grounds.

(a) Philosophically, each definition of art criticism that opposes it to the ostensibly more neutral, descriptive work of art history represses both the inherent and continuous judgments in all historical writing, and the philosophic arguments that description and evaluation are inevitably mixed in all writing. Much of art history depends on such a refusal, and maintains its philodoxic purpose in part by excluding art criticism and defining it as judicative (Preziosi, 1989). The complementary exclusion can be observed in art criticism. Lionello Venturi’s *History of Art Criticism* calls the distinction between art history and criticism a “grave error,” and adds “if a fact referred to is not considered as a function of judgment, it is perfectly useless”; but such observations could not be consistently carried through without making the project of a history of art criticism incoherent (Gilbert, 1962; Venturi, 1964, 20). Similarly Luigi Grassi and Mario Pepe’s *Dizionario della critica d’arte* contains a brief entry on art criticism noting it is inseparable from historical writing (Grassi and Pepe, 1978, 135).

(b) Art criticism has also been distinguished from art history by noting that criticism has a different rhetorical purpose, since it is intended to persuade rather than inform. But this does not provide a stable definition since no art historical text leaves its reader unaffected by its implicit judgments regarding value and significance (Fried, 1990). Some of the most eloquent art historians, such as Roberto Longhi, create persuasive

revaluations of past art at least as much as they produce authoritative compilations of facts. Although Heinrich Wölfflin insists “there is no question” of judgment in his work, his descriptions are persuasive precisely because they are such strong judgments (Wölfflin, 1914, 1).

(c) The historiography of art history provides evidence that many of the practices that gave rise to art history were conceived as critical enterprises. Vasari is frequently cited as an example of mixed critical and factual narrative (Alpers, 1960), and there is also the seventeenth-century practice of *ars critica*, which laid the foundations for the higher biblical criticism and furnished “the example for classical, and later modern, philology” (Borkowski, 1936; McKeon, 1944, 163) that in turn proved so fruitful for the developing discipline of art history (Podro, 1982). For these reasons it is philosophically, rhetorically, and historiographically untenable to maintain the distinction between art history and art criticism on the grounds that one evaluates and the other describes.

The problem is symmetrical: like most art history, some art criticism is conceived as nonjudgmental and philodoxic. In particular criticism can be understood as imaginative re-enactment of creation or perception, with no determinate relation to evaluation. Ekphrasis can function this way, and has from Pliny, Callistratus and Philostratus through Vasari (Bertrand, 1893; Alpers, 1960; Mitchell, 1994, 151–81). In turn-of-the-century German aesthetics, the doctrine of empathy provided a foundation for writing that critically reimagined the bodily experience of artwork (Lipps and Vischer, 1994). In the United States, John Dewey proposed that criticism should not appraise or judge but that “we lay hold of the full import of a work of art only as we go through in our own vital processes the processes the artist went through in producing the work” (Dewey, 1934, 325), and Benedetto

Croce's slightly earlier concept of imaginative understanding is similar (Croce, 1910, 42). Venturi's *History of Art Criticism* can be read as a second-order work of this kind, since he aims in part to relive older critical experiences without judging them (Gilbert, 1962, 59; Venturi, 1964, 8–9).

When art criticism is imagined as an evaluative activity, it can be conceived either as personal response without explicit purpose or thesis, or else as measured judgment governed by premeditated principles. The two provide divergent genealogies for the juridical aspect of art criticism. In general the second strategy derives from Enlightenment philosophy and results in texts that aim to present an ostensibly true, universal, or reliable assessment of the value of an artwork, and the first comes from romantic poetry, confession, and reverie, and yields texts that can be read as the potentially idiosyncratic exercise of individual sensibility.

(a) As a defining trait of the more personal sense of art criticism, writers have pointed to the intimacy of writing about art, and they have emphasized its dependence on the idea of sensibility or taste (Grassi, 1970, 47). Thus Charles Baudelaire called for criticism that would be “partial, passionate, and political” (Baudelaire, 1923, 87), and Friedrich Nietzsche practiced a personal and psychological criticism of philosophy and art (Nietzsche, 1989). Ultimately these tendencies could be traced to Plato's dialectic criticism, where dialogue and opinions constitute the medium in which critical judgments emerge, as opposed to Aristotle's “scientific” criticism, which is based on expository description and the rational unfolding of knowledge (McKeon, 1944, 162); but contemporary art criticism that depends on sensibility, personal reflection and taste is more often understood as a fundamentally romantic and post-romantic enterprise (de Man, 1983).

A limitation of this approach is that it restricts the history of art criticism to certain strains of nineteenth- and twentieth-century writing, excluding writers such as Winckelmann (Potts, 1982), Diderot, and even Clement Greenberg, to the extent that each of them proposed to speak according to explicit principles as much as from personal sensibility. In addition, this way of construing art criticism risks blurring the line between art criticism and any writing with strong personal content. In the twentieth century there have been various attempts to question the distinction between “philosophy” and “writing,” and more specifically to produce hybrids of art criticism that are partly “philosophic,” depending on the rational unfolding of principles, and partly “literary” in this sense (Deleuze, 1993; Deleuze and Guattari, 1994). But it could be asked whether those forms of writing fail to take seriously the conventional and institutional divisions that continue to distinguish art criticism from art history.

(b) In the Enlightenment philosophic tradition, the word *Kritik* took on a specific meaning: it denoted the principled negotiation between destructive skepticism and constructive systematics (Schneiders, 1985; Ricoeur, 1992). A critique in this sense is neither purely critical nor merely hortatory, but uses explicitly developed principles and assumptions in order to achieve a moderated position. Argument takes the place of assertion, and dubiety replaces dogma (Booth, 1974). This orientation produces texts that are governed by “the philosophic principles assumed in the critical judgments,” the “conception of artistic purpose” and of art, and the selection and application of critical criteria and evidence (McKeon, 1944, 130): that is, it produces texts where the rational examination of argument comprises part of the structure and meaning of the text.

This form of inquiry continues to be common in philosophy, but relatively little art criticism makes important or consistent use of named principles, though there are contemporary counterexamples (McEvelley, 1993; Danto, 1992). Nor is such writing usually a continuation of the Enlightenment tradition of critiques as measured negotiations between conflicting propositions, so that contemporary art criticism sometimes becomes more dogmatic, excoriative, or symbuleutic (tending to give advice) than exploratory, open-ended or elenctic (Socratic). Instead of seeking to navigate between antinomies or conflicting assumptions in order to produce moderate solutions, such writing takes on the more rigid rhetorical forms of dogmatic criticism (Kramer, 1985). For both these reasons evaluative art criticism that proceeds from named principles is uncommon, and criticism that works in a more intimate, personal way is more frequent.

2. Attempts to define art criticism as a kind of writing have to contend with historical definitions that include a variety of practices under the name “art criticism.” In the West, art criticism has been considered as an historical practice in two potentially contradictory ways: (a) it has been described as a collection of texts and passages without reference to any strong organizing principle, and (b) it has been restricted to times and places when the term “art criticism” or its cognates were in use by the writers themselves.

In definition (b), art criticism is a relatively recent practice, since the distinction between criticism and history was not made in modern terms until early in the eighteenth century (Richardson, 1715). But most histories of art criticism pay only intermittent attention to that criterion, and in accord with definition (a), begin instead by assembling a wide variety of authors

from different periods in Western culture. By reading retrospectively, the modern Western sense of art criticism can be partly or intermittently discerned in ancient, medieval, Renaissance, and non-Western texts. Thus Luigi Grassi opens his history of art criticism with Plato (Grassi, 1970), and Venturi begins his in the third c. BC with Xenocrates of Sikyon and Antigones of Karystos (Venturi, 1964; Pliny, 1896; Kalkmann, 1898), and continues through Roman authors including Vitruvius and Lucian, to St. Augustine, Theophilus, the Polish student of optics Witelo, and Dante's observations about Cimabue and Giotto. A difficulty with such an approach is that critical writing about art can be found practically anywhere. The Latin author Heraclius wondered how the Romans incorporated gold into their glassware, and Venturi mentions him along with more philosophic questions of expression raised by Theophilus, and Witelo's preference for almond-shaped eyes (Venturi, 1964, 65–69).

For later periods this method becomes more cogent, since there is a continuity of preferences among Renaissance writers from Ghiberti and Filarete to Vasari (Krautheimer, 1956; Tigler, 1963; Boase, 1979). After the Renaissance, critical literature becomes recognisable as a genre, especially in the writings associated with the French Academy such as Le Brun, Perrault, de Piles, and Denis Diderot (Mortier, 1982). In other words, definition (a) becomes more coherent as it approaches definition (b).

The criticism of the salons in Paris forms a large resource for historians of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Parson, 1986; McWilliam 1991a, 1991b), and the reception of Impressionism helped consolidate the practice into a profession. But the definition begins to weaken again when we move away from the later nineteenth century and into the twentieth century (Dresdner, 1915; d'Ancona and Wittgens, 1927).

Even as early as the beginning of the nineteenth century, philosophers such as Hegel and August Wilhelm von Schlegel had begun to challenge distinctions between the criticism, philosophy, and history of art (Schlegel, 1801–02; Hegel, 1844). The span from Jonathan Richardson’s definition of art criticism to Schlegel’s revaluation is only eighty years—a short range in which the term art criticism is both explicit and relatively unchallenged.

The problem is exacerbated in the twentieth century, not least because contemporary art criticism no longer takes place within the nationalist, academic and anti-academic discursive frames that first gave it meaning, but is combined with cultural criticism in general and with pieces of formerly unrelated kinds of writing. A contemporary art critic might write about journalism or shopping as much as about art, and it can be difficult to see how such writing can sensibly be described as a descendent of eighteenth- or nineteenth-century practice.

In addition to this problem of historical focus, historical definitions of art criticism are also difficult to apply to non-Western writing about art. Several cultures developed aesthetic discourses about their own art independent of Western influence, but none have terms strictly comparable to “art criticism.” Instead they present collections of critical practices. For Africa, there is a large literature reporting the ways that sculptors judge their work, but much of it either involves nonverbal judgments, as in a study of BaKwele preferences (Child and Siroto, 1971), or linguistically simple assessments requiring only comparative adjectives (Crowley, 1971). When indigenous words are applied to the evaluation of art, as in the Yoruba concept of *iwa* or the Fang concepts of opposition and vitality, they tend to be common to various areas of non-art experience, making it difficult to assess whether their meanings are adequately reported by researchers who



necessarily bring other concepts to their research (Fernandez, 1971; Abiodun, 1983, 1991; Vogel, 1986). Because art criticism does not constitute a separate discourse in African traditions (Sieber, 1971), it can only be called art criticism in the rudimentary sense of “discourse about art” rather than for any more coherent correspondence to Western aesthetics and criticism.

In China there has been writing about visual art since the fifth c. AD. In treatises by Guo Hsi and Guo Ruoxu (both c. 1050 AD), terms that a Western reader would call descriptive, critical, formal, and philosophic coexist (Sirén, 1936), so that it would be no less inappropriate to say that they are writing amalgams of art history and criticism than to say Vasari was writing in those genres without being fully aware of the fact. Several key concepts, such as “spirit consonance” or “spiritual communion” (*shenhui*) have no adequate correlates in Western languages, making it difficult to find common ground (Guo Ruoxu, 1951, 15). The *Li dai ming hua ji* [*Record of the Famous Painters of all the Dynasties*] by Zhang Yanyuan (c. 847 AD) begins with descriptions of painting’s power to promote Confucian ethical values, and its magical connection with the “divine permutations” of nature (Zhang Yanyuan, 1954, 61, 82): a double origin that places the remainder of the author’s critical terms, no matter how familiar they might appear, outside the domain of Western aesthetics—even though Zhang distinguishes between criticism and history in a Western manner (Zhang Yanyuan, 1954, 143).

In the Islamic tradition, texts such as Qadi Ahmad’s *Calligraphers and Painters* (c. 1606 AD) also mingle theological concepts with graphical, historical, and critical terms. The concept of the *qalam* (the calligrapher’s pen and the painter’s brush) is at once a divine creation, since it was made by Allah; a term in historical narrative, since it was passed on from one style

and one artist to the next; and a critical tool, because it enables the author to speak about the particular beauties of each artist's work (Ahmad, 1959, 48–51). In each of these cases, the specific differences between the texts and traditions militate against a parallel with Western art criticism, and the task for a more reflective historiography would be to find other categories to put in its place (Heidegger, 1971).

There is no single account of art criticism that is not counterintuitive, anachronistic, ethnocentric, artificial, or naïve. The term exists in nearly meaningless dispersion, and gains coherence as authors acknowledge the disparate influences of conflicting definitions, and demonstrate where they harmonize or chafe with one another.

## REFERENCES

Pliny, *The Elder Pliny's Chapters on the History of Art*, trans by K. Jex-Blake (London, 1896).

Zhang Yanyuan, *Li dai ming hua ji [A Record of the Famous Painters of All the Dynasties]*, abridged translation by William Acker (Leiden, 1954 [c. 847 AD]), pp. 59–382.

Guo Hsi, *An Essay on Landscape Painting*, translated by Shio Sakanishi (London, 1935 [c. 1050 AD]).

Guo Ruoxu, *T'u-hua chien-wen chih [Experiences in Painting]*, translated by Alexander Soper (Washington, 1951 [c. 1070 AD]).

Qadi Ahmad, *Calligraphers and Painters*, trans. by V. Minorsky. Freer Gallery of Art Occasional Papers vol. 3 (Washington, 1959 [c. 1606 AD]).

Jonathan Richardson, *An Essay on the Theory of Painting* (London, 1719).

August Wilhelm von Schlegel, *Vorlesungen über schöne Literatur und Kunst* (Berlin, 1801–02).

Georg Wilhelm Freidrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik* (Mainz, 1844).

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York, 1989).

Eduard Bertrand, *Etudes sur la peinture et la critique dans l'antiquité* (Paris, 1893).

A. Kalkmann, *Die Quellen der Kunstgeschichte des Plinius* (Berlin, 1898).

Benedetto Croce, *Problemi di estetica* (Bari, 1910).

A. Dresdner, *Die Kunstkritik* (Munich, 1915).

- Charles Baudelaire, *Curiosités esthétiques*, in *Œuvres complètes* (Paris, 1923).
- P. d'Ancona and Fernanda Wittgens, *La moderna critica d'arte* (Milan, 1927).
- John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York, 1934).
- S. von Dunin Borkowski, *Spinoza*, vol. 4, *Aus den Tagen Spinozas* (Münster, 1936).
- Osvald Sirén, *The Chinese on the Art of Painting* (Beijing, 1936).
- Lionello Venturi, *History of Art Criticism*, trans. Charles Marriott (New York: Dutton, 1964 [1945/1964]).
- Richard McKeon, "The Philosophic Bases of Art and Criticism," part two, *Modern Philology* 41 (1944), pp. 129–71.
- Martin Heidegger, "A Dialogue on Language Between a Japanese and an Inquirer," in *On the Way to Language*, trans. by Peter Hertz (San Francisco, 1971).
- Richard Krautheimer, *Lorenzo Ghiberti* (Princeton, 1956).
- Svetlana Alpers, "Ekphrasis and Aesthetic Attitudes in Vasari's Lives," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institute* 23 (1960), pp. 190–215.
- Creighton Gilbert, "Lionello Venturi," *Arts Magazine* 36 no. 5 (1962).
- Peter Tigler, *Die Architekturtheorie des Filarete* (Berlin, 1963).
- Luigi Grassi, *Teorici e storia della critica d'arte*, prima parte, *Dall'Antichità a tutto il Cinquecento con due saggi introduttivi* (Rome, 1970).
- Irwin Child and Leon Siroto, "BaKwele and American Aesthetic Evaluation Compared," in *Art and Aesthetics in Primitive Societies*, edited by Carol F. Jopling (New York, 1971), pp. 271–89.

Daniel Crowley, "An African Aesthetic," in *Art and Aesthetics in Primitive Societies*, edited by Carol F. Jopling (New York, 1971), pp. 315–27.

James W. Fernandez, "Principles of Opposition and Vitality in Fang Aesthetics," in *Art and Aesthetics in Primitive Societies*, edited by Carol F. Jopling (New York, 1971), pp. 356–73.

Roy Sieber, "The Aesthetics of Traditional African Art," in *Art and Aesthetics in Primitive Societies*, edited by Carol F. Jopling (New York, 1971), pp. 127–31.

Wayne Booth, *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent* (Chicago, 1974).

Jerome Jordan Pollitt, *The Ancient View of Greek Art: Criticism History, and Terminology* (New Haven, 1974).

Luigi Grassi and Mario Pepe, *Dizionario della critica d'arte*, 2 vols. (Torino, 1978), v. "Critica d'arte," vol. 1, pp. 135–36.

T. S. R. Boase, *Giorgio Vasari: The Man and the Book* (Princeton, 1979).

Roland Mortier, *Diderot and the "grand goût"* (Oxford, 1982).

Michael Podro, *The Critical Historians of Art* (New Haven, 1982).

Alex Potts, "Winckelmann's Construction of History," *Art History* 5 no. 4 (1982), pp. 377–407.

Rowland Abiodun, "Identity and the Artistic Process in the Yoruba Aesthetic Concept of Iwa," *Journal of Cultures and Ideas* 1 no. 1 (1983).

Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight, Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Fiction*. *Theory and History of Literature*, edited by Wlad Godzich and Jochen Schulte-Sasse, volume 7. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

Hilton Kramer, *Revenge of the Philistines: Art and Culture, 1972–1984* (New York, 1985).

- W. Schneiders, “Venünftiger Zweifel und wahre Eklektik. Zur Entstehung des modernen Kritikbegriffes,” *Studia Leibnitiana* 17 no. 2 (1985), pp. 143–61.
- Christopher Parson, *A Bibliography of Salon Criticism in Second Empire Paris* (Camnbridge, 1986).
- Susan Vogel, *African Aesthetics* (New York, 1986).
- Michael Fried, *Coubet’s Realism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).
- Rowland Abiodun, Henry Drewal and John Pemberton, *Yoruba Art and Aesthetics* (New York, 1991).
- Neil McWilliam, *A Bibliography of Salon Criticism in Paris from the ancien régime to the Restoration, 1699–1827* (New York, 1991a).
- —, *A Bibliography of Salon Criticism in Paris from the July Monarchy to the Second Empire, 1831–1851* (New York, 1991b).
- Arthur Danto, *Beyond the Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in Post–Historical Perspective* (New York, 1992).
- Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, translated by Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
- Gilles Deleuze, *Critique et clinique* (Paris: Minuit, 1993).
- Theodor Lipps, in *Empathy, Form, and Space: Problems in German Aesthetics 1873–1893*, translated by Harry Francis Mallgrave and Eleftherios Ikonomu (Santa Monica, CA: Getty Center for the History of Art and Humanities, 1994).
- Thomas McEvelley, *The Exile’s Return: Toward a Refedinition of Painting for the Post-Modern Era* (New York, 1993).
- W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory, Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

JAMES ELKINS