**Historical Analysis**

Iconographic analysis is used to establish the meaning of a particular work at a particular time. To identify the subject of an altarpiece as a Madonna and Child, however, explains nothing about the use of the altarpiece, how it fit into the surrounding culture, its economic import, or what it may reveal about social and political issues of the period. These questions apply most naturally to the study of objects from the past, but the same methods can be applied to contemporary art. What matters is the way the context is described and what kinds of relationships are established between it and the work or works being studied. This type of analysis is richest when it creates a web of very specific connections. To juxtapose a few generalizations about a historical context with a work from the period without suggesting any particular relationships between the two does not reveal very much.

Like so many kinds of writing about art, historical analysis became the subject of sustained investigation during the 19th century by scholars writing in German. Jacob Burckhardt (1818-1897) wrote the first major studies of art as an aspect of culture in his books about the Italian Renaissance, published during the 1860s. The idea that art should be considered primarily in terms of the economic structure that produced it rather than aesthetics was explored by Karl Marx (1818-1883). The influence on art of culture in its broadest definition, including politics, religion, and social conventions, as well as popular imagery and magical or irrational beliefs, became the subject of systematic study by Aby Warburg (1866-1929) in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Different sorts of questions have been asked in the past few decades, as art historians have considered feminism, gender studies, and the impact of colonialism.

In practice, art historians usually mix the types of analysis they use. The topic being studied may suggest certain questions and preclude others, or the writer may have very specific interests. One person might consider only those issues that are directly relevant to works of art. Another might use art as one type of evidence among many to investigate larger historical questions. The point of view chosen determines the shape of the analysis. For this reason, it is very important for the writer to be clear about his or her objective and then consider the best ways to achieve it. Not all questions and not all sources will be equally useful.

Sometimes contemporary events overwhelm a society, affecting every aspect of life. In *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death. The Arts, Religion, and Society in the Mid-Fourteenth Century*, Millard Meiss (1904-1975) argued that this happened at a moment central to the history of Italian Renaissance art. The book begins with a statement of his purpose:

The present book deals with Florentine and Sienese painting from around 1350 to 1375. . . . [T]hose aspects of reality and those problems of form that had occupied the leading masters of the first half of the century, and that were soon again to occupy the artists of the early Renaissance, were suddenly opposed by other values. The painters became engrossed with qualities which do not easily find a place in the evolution leading from Giotto to Masaccio, or from Simone [Martini] and the Lorenzetti [brothers] to Sassetta. The first part of the book endeavors to show that these qualities, however foreign to this evolution and to classical taste, are coherent and purposeful, and that the more important paintings of the time present a unique range of meaning and form. The subsequent chapters confront the problem of the emergence of
After a number of political and economic disruptions, “unimaginable catastrophe struck both towns. Suddenly during the summer months of 1348 more than half of the inhabitants of Florence and Siena died of the bubonic plague. . . . Those fortunate few who were able to escape those horrible scenes of [death and dying] were . . . overwhelmed by the loss of family and friends.”

Life for survivors of the plague was changed in every respect. Economic disruption had brought great prosperity and political power to some. These new patrons of the arts, Meiss argued, “adhered to more traditional patterns of thought and feeling” which were better expressed by religious art of the late 13th century than by the new styles of the first half of the 14th century. Religious piety became particularly intense, and new subjects entered art while old ones were represented in new ways. “The writing of the period, like the painting, was pervaded by a profound pessimism and sometimes a renunciation of life. . . . [T]he brevity of life and the certainty of death . . . was preached from the pulpits . . . and set forth in paintings, both altarpieces and murals.” Finally, religious institutions were flooded with donations from people who were dying or who expected to die. These resources permitted the beginning of ambitious projects of building and decoration.

Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy by Michael Baxandall (1933-2008), about art made just half a century later than that discussed by Meiss, is not about the extraordinary but about the ordinary. He too studied the “institutions and conventions – commercial, religious, perceptual, in the widest sense social – that were different from ours and influenced the forms of what they together made.” Baxandall tried to recover the assumptions of painters and viewers, the things they would have thought important and the things they would have taken for granted. He considered all sorts of historical information to construct an image of a “Quattrocento cognitive style as it relates to Quattrocento pictorial style.” Religious texts and the nature of the commission determined important aspects of the way religious pictures looked. All images, religious and secular, used conventional ways to represent the human figure, especially in its movements. In Botticelli’s Primavera, “the central figure of Venus is not beating time to the dance of the Graces but inviting us with hand and glance into her kingdom. We miss the point of the picture if we mistake the gesture.” Baxandall also identified ways of describing the world visually that were found in business as well as specialized professions such as medicine, preaching, and dance. Finally, he analyzed the words in a Florentine text about art to establish the vocabulary used by 15th-century viewers of the pictures.

The historical context Baxandall constructed depends upon extensive and inventive archival research, beyond the reach of all but a few scholars. The method he used, however, can be taken as a model:

A society develops its distinctive skills and habits, which have a visual aspect, since the visual sense is the main organ of experience, and these visual skills and habits become part of the medium of the painter: correspondingly, a pictorial style gives access to the visual skills and
habits and, through these, to the distinctive social experience. An old picture is a record of a visual activity. One has to learn to read it, just as one has to learn to read a text from a different culture, even when one knows, in a limited sense, the language: both language and pictorial representation are conventional activities.\textsuperscript{39}

Thinking of a work of art as the product of a conventional activity is useful for any writer.

John Barrell analyzed a different kind of image and a different world in \textit{The Dark Side of the Landscape. The Rural Poor in English Painting, 1730-1840}. He argued that the vision of rural life described by Thomas Gainsborough and John Constable, among others, “can be understood only by understanding the constraints . . . that determined how the poor could, or rather how they could \textit{not} be represented.”\textsuperscript{90} These pictures of rural life offer “the image of a stable, unified, almost egalitarian society.” Only by considering this “mythical unity” in terms of what is shown, how it is organized within the composition, and how this relates to the social realities of the time can the way in which the painters constructed this “artifice” be understood. Furthermore, Barrell suggested, these “constraints still operate in subtle ways today.” “We should ask ourselves whether we do not still, in the ways we admire Gainsborough, Stubbs, and Constable, identify with the interests of their customers [who purchased these pictures] and against the poor they portray.”\textsuperscript{91} In other words, Barrell’s analysis also may explain ways in which modern viewers respond to these pictures.

Even a single work can reveal a great deal about the society that produced it. Simon Schama and Svetlana Alpers both wrote about Jan Vermeer’s \textit{Allegory of Painting} (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna). A major work by Vermeer, it is of great interest for what it suggests, or might suggest, about the artist’s conception of painting.

[Vermeer] portrayed [the artist] from behind, dressed in a fanciful costume from a past era. The importance of the artist’s work is evident in the elegant room in which he paints, with its chandelier, lush curtain, and chairs. Most significantly, the artist is portraying an allegorical figure, Clio, the muse of History.

Clio is posed as described by Cesare Ripa [in his book of symbols], as a girl with a crown of laurel, symbolizing Fame, and holding a trumpet and a volume of Thucydides, symbolizing History.\textsuperscript{92}

Schama and Alpers, however, were not interested in any of those aspects of the painting so much as in the large map that hangs behind the figures on the wall of the studio. For both historians, that one detail offers important information about contemporary attitudes.

For Schama, the map in Vermeer’s \textit{Allegory of Painting} reveals the complexity of the Dutch sense of identity at the time:

It had taken almost a century . . . before “the Fatherland” became exclusively associated in Dutch minds with the seven provinces and their directly governed territories in Flanders, Brabant, and Limburg. Even then, there remained some groups in the population, by no means all Calvinist, who yearned for a “reunion” across the river barriers. Dutch Catholics, who constituted over a
third of the population, stood to gain the most . . . It may be that Vermeer . . . expressed such a nostalgic view of the old Netherlands and its art in his Allegory of Painting . . . In the map that appears so prominently above the figure of the painter (once thought to be a self-portrait) the Fatherland is represented, not in its new guise, as the seven provinces of the Republic, but the seventeen of the humanist Renaissance.93

In this way, Vermeer’s picture both illustrates and seems to prove Schama’s thesis about the development of a national identity. Furthermore, it combines two crucial factors – the physical definition of the country and the role religion played in how people felt. Although Schama’s purpose was not a general discussion of Vermeer, in fact his analysis gives the artist a place and a context that is very relevant to an art historical understanding of the painting and its maker.

Svetlana Alpers wrote about the culture of the period. In The Art of Describing. Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century, she argued for a new way of understanding the art by placing it within contemporary “visual culture” (a term she credited to Baxandall).94 One characteristic of this culture and of its art, she suggested, is “the mapping impulse,” which she defined with a lengthy analysis of Vermeer’s Allegory of Painting. Like Schama, she found the map hanging on the wall to be filled with meaning. Unlike him, Alpers built her interpretation on the visual role the map plays in the picture. First, it is a “powerful pictorial presence” which catches the viewer’s attention in many ways. The details are so specific that the particular map can be identified. It is large, with many visual components, including lettering, pictures, and the lines of the map itself. Finally, Vermeer placed his signature on it. In all these ways, Vermeer likened the painting to the map and, by extension, the act of painting to the act of map-making. For Alpers, this similarity reveals something essential about the Dutch idea of painting:

The aim of Dutch painters was to capture on a surface a great range of knowledge and information about the world. They too employed words with their images. Like the mappers, they made additive works that could not be taken in from a single viewing point. Theirs was not a window on the Italian model of art but rather, like a map, a surface on which is laid out an assemblage of the world.95

Both authors drew upon tremendous knowledge of the period in their analyses of Vermeer’s painting. Both also used the painting as evidence of larger attitudes. Schama’s book is about the historical period though, and the visual character of this particular picture is not relevant. The things at the core of Alpers’s discussion – especially the importance of the map in the composition and the extraordinary amount of detail that can be seen in it – illustrate an idea that is not directly related to the meaning of the painting. For Alpers though, the painting is of interest in all its aspects. The things shown in it as well as their arrangement identify fundamental qualities in Dutch art of the period.

In many ways, the argument made by Alpers about Vermeer’s painting is closer to a stylistic analysis than to Schama’s historical analysis. Although the likeness is real, the differences are important. Like Wölfflin, Alpers identified characteristics in many particular works and used them to form a notion of a period style. The characteristics belong to the culture of the period, however, defined by activities such as map-making and optics, not the appearance of the art. Presenting a particular work as part of the surrounding culture makes a conceptual likeness to
maps more revealing and more useful than a visual likeness to other pictures by Vermeer or his contemporaries. Like Baxandall, she looked at other visual activities of the time to help understand the pictures in their original context.

A more complicated problem of cultural analysis arises when the same work of art plays an important role in very different societies. Sub-Saharan African sculpture, for example, profoundly influenced modern Western artists. Yet, as Frank Willett explained, people from each society would see the works very differently: “A great deal of satisfaction can indeed be found in looking at African sculpture without background information, . . . but one is not necessarily sharing in the sculptor’s experience or enjoying the sensation he intended to convey.”96 Not only is the original meaning lost, but mood and expression, qualities that deeply interested modern artists, are very likely to be misread. Furthermore, the constraints of the original context are completely unknown to the modern viewer. In fact, “there were two forces at work in the creation of traditional African sculpture: the established artistic style appropriate to the type of the object being made, and the individual vision of the carver himself.”97 These are not things that can be understood by looking at a single work, or generalizing from one work to others.

To understand how tribal objects appeared and functioned in the time and place of their making requires an imaginative recreation of an entire world. This involves more than an anthropological study of the society. It also concerns the words and concepts used to describe visual things. Robert Thompson put together a list of nineteen visual criteria Yoruba people mentioned repeatedly when talking about their sculpture. The qualities include: “jijora, or the moderate resemblance to the subject,” “ifarahon, visibility,” or clarity in the massing of the forms, “didon, luminosity, or shining smoothness of surface,” and “gigun, a straight upright posture and symmetrical arrangement of the parts of the sculpture.”98 With this list, Thompson created something like Baxandall’s definition of the 15th-century Italian Renaissance “period eye.”

Roger Fry wrote about and collected African art, one of many modern critics and artists to do so. In his last lectures, given at the Slade School in London during the mid-1930s, Fry argued that modern art owed more to African art than to any other tradition.99 Using the vivid and eloquent language for which he had become famous, Fry described a number of works to indicate the great range of form and style that could be found in African sculpted heads:

[In one head, t]he artist has seized on the dome-like dominance of the forehead, and he has found how to support it by increasing immensely the bulging salience of the eyes and, with slight variations, the prominence of the nose; and against these he has played the straight line of the base of the nose and the terrible horizontal prominence of mouth and teeth. But, as often as not, an African sculptor will suppress the mouth altogether, or reduce it to a slit, and build on the hollow of the eye-orbit, in exact contradiction to the treatment of this head, which eliminates the orbit almost entirely. . . .

[Another work shows] an utterly different choice . . . . The mouth is almost suppressed, and the ridge of the nose becomes a support to the almost plant-like exfoliation of the eyes. These are deeply undercut beneath the eyelids, . . . [creating] deep shadows beneath the weight of the
prominent lids . . . The hair treated with extraordinary delicacy and precision picks up again the almost vegetable regularity of the features. This chevelure folds like a calyx round the forehead. And here again, what delicate sensibility the curvature of the brow shows; how right, we feel, the bold flattening of the cheeks and what a rare discovery is the sharp but delicate saillance of the chin, which seems to close and hold this strangely beautiful plastic sequence.  

In an article about abstract art published just a few years later, in 1937, Meyer Schapiro (1904-1996) suggested how complicated the relationship was between Western artists and “primitive” art. A whole complex of longings, moral values and broad conceptions of life were fulfilled in [this new responsiveness to primitive art]. If colonial imperialism made these primitive objects physically accessible, they could have little aesthetic interest until the new formal conceptions arose. But these formal conceptions could be relevant to primitive art only when charged with the new valuations of the instinctive, the natural, the mythical as the essentially human . . . Time ceased to be an historical dimension; it became an internal psychological moment, and the whole mess of material ties, the nightmare of a determining world, the disquieting sense of the present as a dense historical point to which the individual was fateful bound – these were automatically transcended in thought by the conception of an instinctive, elemental art above time. . . . The colonies became places to flee to as well as to exploit.

Schapiro’s interpretation gives a different sense to Fry’s words. It makes clear the degree to which they are part of Western artistic traditions and Western ways of describing. It also gives them an emotional edge, a sense of discovery that is bound to larger concerns. As Willett suggested, the sculptures Fry saw were not the ones that had been made by particular people in sub-Saharan Africa. Although physically the same objects, they had been transformed in appearance and meaning by historical context.

Gender – of artists, patrons, and viewers, as well as artistic subjects – has become a major area of study in the past few decades. Botticelli’s Primavera is one painting that looks very different in light of feminist and gender studies. An important older art historical study of the nude is by Kenneth Clark (1903-1983), who created a distinction still used today:

The English language, with its elaborate generosity, distinguishes between the naked and the nude. To be naked is to be deprived of our clothes, and the word implies some of the embarrassment most of us feel in that condition. The word “nude,” on the other hand, carries . . . no uncomfortable overtones. The vague image it projects into the mind is not of a huddled and defenseless body, but of a balanced, prosperous, and confident body: the body re-formed. In fact, the word was forced into our vocabulary by critics of the early eighteenth century to persuade the artless islanders [of Britain] that, in countries where painting and sculpture were practiced and valued as they should be, the naked human body was the central subject of art.

Botticelli’s Primavera is one of the many images discussed by Clark. With the figures of the three Graces, Clark wrote, Botticelli “achieved an extraordinary affinity with Greek figures that he cannot possibly have seen.” By presenting them as dancers, he showed their bodies in movement, covered with the flowing lines of near-transparent garments. “So naked beauty
reappeared in the Renaissance as it first emerged in Greece, protected and enhanced by *draperie mouillée*” (or “wet drapery”). The central figure was an ideal “gentle priestess.”

Considering *Primavera* in terms of its historical and cultural context as well as gender studies, rather than the artistic tradition of the representation of the human nude, produces a radically different understanding. Lilian Zirpolo argued that one way the painting should be seen is “as a model of behavior for the bride,” in whose honor the picture had been commissioned:

Botticelli’s Graces... represent not only purity and chastity but also the demeanor that befitted the virtuous Renaissance woman. Their measured and elegant gestures and their unemotional facades evoke not only... [the] concept of the commendable maiden but also... the ideal wife. In the *Primavera*, the Three Graces perform a dance with movements that are as calculated and restrained as the movements... recommended for a virtuous wife.

This is close to Baxandall’s analysis of the figures in terms of gesture and dance. Zirpolo then turned to the nature of noble marriages in the Renaissance, a subject that adds another aspect to her study. Since such marriages were arranged for political, economic, and dynastic advantage, it was essential that the bride submit to the will of her husband. This is also represented in Botticelli’s painting, Zirpolo wrote:

This vision of marriage for the sake of the families and the emphasis on the bride’s submission are expressed by the depicted rape scene showing Chloris pursued by Zephyrus, the West Wind, whose intention is to ravish her... To compensate Chloris for his actions, Zephyrus married her and gave her the domain of flowers, changing her name to Flora.

Within the festive atmosphere that permeates the *Primavera*, the brutality of the rape scene can hardly be discerned. Yet, upon close scrutiny it becomes evident that, in contrast to the other female figures in the painting, who are tall, slender, and graceful, Chloris has a beastlike appearance. Her stance resembles that of a frightened and animal defenseless animal, a panic-stricken creature who tries in vain to flee as she is about to fall prey to her hunter.

Zirpolo supported her visual observations by citing several contemporary traditions about marriage that might justify associating it with rape.

Roger Fry also discussed Botticelli’s paintings:

How all these images are charged with emotive power! To begin with, the nude figure, however idealized and etherealized it may be, as it is here, must carry some vague overtones of sexual feeling. ... [The subject] carries with it a whole mass of suggestions which will vary with the degree of the spectator’s knowledge of Classical poetry... But when we pass from the imagery to the mode in which it is presented, ... we are getting into closer contact with Botticelli’s spirit. ... And at this point we begin to yield ourselves to the rhythmical movements of Botticelli’s linear design, to its mazy interweft of curves leading us on with a charmed motion from one to another with echoes arising from all different parts of the design... But my main purpose has been to make clear to you how complicated a matter a work of art may be and to indicate at how many points two spectators may diverge in their reactions, each starting off, it
may be, upon some side track down which their personal make-up or their past experiences may tempt them.\textsuperscript{107}

In beautiful and evocative language, Fry suggested the potential richness of any work of art. He did not dictate the response of the spectator or the direction of possible research. He only insisted that investigations be based on very careful looking, and that the conclusions be written as clearly as possible.

References:

79. Meiss, 65.
80. Meiss, 70.
81. Meiss, 74.
82. Meiss, 78-9.
84. Baxandall, 40.
85. Baxandall, 40-56.
86. Baxandall, 70; general discussion of the topic, 56-70.
89. Baxandall, 152.
91. Barrell, 5.
92. Wheelock, 98.
95. Alpers, 119-23.
97. Willett, 152-3.
98. Quoted in Willett, 212-3.
100. Fry, \textit{Last Lectures}, 77-8.
103. Clark, 97-8.