

Painting Art History

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Review of:

Léa Kuhn, *Gemalte Kunstgeschichte. Bildgenealogien in der Malerei um 1800*, Paderborn: Fink 2020, ISBN-13: 978-3-7705-6453-8, 333pp., EUR 69,00

There was a time, not long ago, when 'self-referentiality' was the highest accolade an historian could award to a work of art. Instances where paintings were deemed able to reflect with pictorial means about their own mediality, materiality, and historicity proved that they were creations equal to literary and philosophical works. 'Interpictoriality' rivalled the complexity of 'intertextuality', and the artist had been elevated to the rank of meta-pictorial philosopher.¹

Notions such as 'meta-pictoriality' seem to have become somewhat stale in recent years. In the eyes of many, these themes have exhausted themselves, and 'self-reflexivity' has become an empty and self-serving ideal, with countless studies adding meta-pictorial theme after theme to the bookshelves.² Art historians today rather seem increasingly enthralled by categories such as 'agency' and 'presence': the sheer, raw, relentless emotional impact of works of art is eulogised.³

In many respects, Léa Kuhn's new book on 'Gemalte Kunstgeschichte' ('Painted Art History') bucks this trend and defends reflexivity against the increasing focus on agency, and the historicity of art over the allures of anachronism. The aim of Kuhn's expansive and thought-provoking book is to highlight how, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, artists increasingly reflected on the historicity of art and their own position vis-à-vis the past. The decades 'around 1800' were undoubtedly a period in which art historical discourse became more and more nuanced and buoyant. The emergence of professional art criticism, and the increasing interest in the history of art as an academic field of study, resulted in ever-increasing layers of commentary that situated and evaluated artworks within their historic contexts. Faced with this

¹ See e.g. Matthias Winner (ed.), *Der Künstler über sich in seinem Werk*, Weinheim: VCH, 1992; Victor Stoichita, *The self-aware image: an insight into early modern meta-painting*, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997.

² Eva Geulen and Peter Geimer, 'Was leistet Selbstreflexivität in Kunst, Literatur und ihren Wissenschaften?', *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, 89.4 (2015), 521-533.

³ Art History has received important impulses from literary studies and philosophy, e.g.: Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *The Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003; Alva Noë, *Varieties of Presence*, Cambridge/MA: Harvard University Press, 2012. On the state of debate in art history: Matthew Rampley, 'Agency, affect and intention in art history: some observations', *Journal of Art Historiography*, 24 (June 2021).

growing degree of textual scrutiny and attention, Kuhn argues, artists reflected anew about their own relation towards the past – and aimed to assert their own authority against the growing constituency of art writers. This is a book about the ‘struggle for discursive primacy’ (VIII), focusing on artists who aimed to develop a ‘counter history’ (258), wrestling away interpretative authority from the writers who glossed over their works. Instead of responding in writing, artists answered with pictorial means, using the ‘brush instead of the quill’ to devise a ‘painted art history’ (XV).

This is an aptly chosen and stimulating starting point, especially given the fact that so many *artists* were key protagonists of the early writing of art history. Kuhn mentions Johann Domenico Fiorillo and Heinrich Meyer (XVIII) – but one could add many Royal Academicians such as John Flaxman or Henry Fuseli who lectured extensively on art history, often defending their own professional expertise against ‘amateurs’ like Johann Joachim Winckelmann. Or, as Joshua Reynolds phrased it: ‘[...] there are many writers on our art, who, not being of the profession, and consequently not knowing what can or cannot be done, have been very liberal of absurd praises in their descriptions of favourite works’.⁴ Kuhn’s publication adds further nuance and complexity to these debates on art historiography and artistic authority. By employing primarily pictorial means, the artists discussed in Kuhn’s study seem to retreat to a certain extent from this contested field, where professional art writers slowly but surely gained primacy.

Tischbein – Dunlap – Capet: A micro-historical approach

Kuhn approaches her subject through three micro-historical case studies, each revolving around the meticulous close reading and extensive contextualisation of a single painting (each chapter is between 80-100 pages long!) that reflects in one way or another about its own historicity. All three chapters are devoted to works by artists that are only rarely discussed in international scholarship: Johann Heinrich Wilhelm Tischbein, William Dunlap, and Marie-Gabrielle Capet. The three names also indicate the scope of Kuhn’s project: spanning three countries and two continents – Germany, the United States, and France – the author clearly signals that her case studies aim to reveal patterns of broader relevance for the period as a whole. Each of the case studies is devoted to a genre that is predestined for meta-pictorial self-reflection: Kuhn studies three self-portraits, in which the artists embed themselves in different genealogical contexts, thus commenting on their own (artistic and historical) position.

The first chapter focuses on Tischbein’s painting *One painting the other*, which the artist submitted for a 1782 exhibition at the Art Academy of Kassel. Tischbein had painted the canvas in Zurich, where he stayed after his return from studies in Rome. The painting shows a scene in the artist’s studio: Johann Heinrich Wilhelm Tischbein and his brother Heinrich Jacob are depicted in front of an easel, debating animatedly. Title and subject matter clearly communicate the enlightened ideal of

⁴ Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, ed. Robert Wark, Yale: Yale Univ. Press, 1997, 78. See Hans C. Hönes, ‘Norm und System. Winckelmann und die Royal Academy’, *Marburger Jahrbuch für Kunstwissenschaft*, 46 (2019 [2020]) 167-188.

conversation and debate as a pathway for idealist self-improvement (63-70). This aligns thematically with the themes of the canvas in the background, showing a scene from ancient history: Diogenes 'searching for an honest man' (30-38). The subject matter clearly declares the artist's credentials as a painter of history paintings, and fashions Tischbein metonymically as a truth seeker, whose art pursues a mission equal to the ancient philosopher's. Next to this painting, several portrait sketches are visible. They depict notable Zurich intellectuals, namely Johann Jakob Bodmer, Johann Caspar Lavater, and Salomon Gessner – again, three enlightened scholars and poets with an interest in the true, original nature of man (49-53).

These professions of originality and aesthetic 'truth' are common enough in artistic discourses of the time – but in Tischbein's case they gain a different nuance. The main theme – the interlocution between the two brothers – clearly reminds the viewer of the artist's family background. J.H.W. Tischbein was a member of one of the largest and most successful dynasties of painters, with literally dozens of brothers, uncles and cousins dominating the contemporary German artworld. Kassel, where the painting was exhibited, was the home turf of one of these powerful relations: Johann Heinrich Tischbein the Elder (J.H.W. Tischbein's uncle) was dominating the local scene with his successful portraiture business (10-18). Stylistically, *One painting the other* stands in a marked contrast to the uncle's late-Rococo manner. Kuhn argues convincingly that the younger Tischbein programmatically aimed to set himself apart from the family's trademark style, by claiming a completely original style of his own. By aligning himself with the likes of Bodmer, Lavater, Gessner and Diogenes, Tischbein is evidently searching for a new, quintessentially original genealogy, beyond the traditions of his family.

Tischbein hoped that his painting would be viewed and appreciated by one man in particular: Kuhn reconstructs convincingly that the painting was intended to open a channel to Johann Wolfgang Goethe, undoubtedly the most influential German (art) writer and patron of culture of his time (76-83). This clearly indicates Tischbein's awareness of the importance of art writing for his own career progression: in order to 'make history', the support of a critic of importance was indispensable. Though 'self-referential' on many levels, the painting probably did not want to be 'autonomous', as a creation that lives in splendid isolation, only communing and communicating with other images. Instead it was intended to 'generate a considerable amount of written text' (86). Tischbein aimed not only to curry favour with Goethe – he also hoped to create a talking point that would give a boost to his career. In many respects, this strategy of Tischbein's seems surprisingly conventional: one wonders whether his self-fashioning differs fundamentally from comparable cases from earlier periods – for example Raphael's 1507/8 self-portrait (today in the Uffizi) which he probably sent to Rome, hoping that it will be shown around in the right circles and gain him future patronage and fame.⁵

The second chapter turns to another, far more peripheral locale - and a far less known artist. Kuhn discusses William Dunlap and an early family portrait of the artist and his parents (1788) that Dunlap painted in New York, after his return from a period of study in London. This is clearly the author's real patch of expertise

⁵ Ulrich Pfisterer, *Raffael*, Munich: C.H. Beck, 2019, 86-102.

- already her first monograph was dedicated to an American artist, John Singleton Copley.⁶ As an artist, Dunlap is not widely known – only few works by his hand have survived. Instead, he is better known as the ‘American Vasari’, who wrote a first history of art in America.

Once again, the painting in question is a self-portrait with added layers of meaning, achieved through integration of an image-within-the-image. Between the artist and his parents, who stand rather aimlessly in a drab interior, is a dark canvas. On it, barely legible, are the schemes of a figural composition – a scene from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. In London, where Dunlap had studied for the last three years, Shakespearian subjects were all the rage, and hailed as fresh subject to demonstrate artistic originality (94-101). But none of such artistic feats is visible in Dunlap’s humble composition. Indeed, the artist rather seems to dwell on the mediocrity of his work; his parents don’t seem enthused by their son’s production either.

This becomes a running thread in Dunlap’s life and career. In his autobiography, published as part of *History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States* (1834), he comments extensively on his own failures as an artist, and blames primarily the socio-economic conditions in the United States for this. Dunlap’s fledging business as a portrait artist never took off, and his autobiographical ruminations seem to have been an attempt to rationalise this failure. At the same time, the artist created a series of introspective self-portraits where he accentuated an eye injury that limited his colour vision – highlighting another biographical element contributing to his limitations as an artist (123-129). The self-portrait with parents equally emphasises this rootedness in an environment that was not supportive for the visual arts – works of art are notably absent from the family’s sparse, Puritan living quarters. The family genealogy almost becomes sign of a regressive artistic evolution – and symbol for a man who was unable, even while in London, to break with the mould of an impoverished American education. Family genealogies and cultural context here become – in stark contrast to Tischbein’s proposal – a burden that one cannot shake off.

It seems likely that Dunlap’s self-stylisation as an eternal and pre-determined failure developed gradually over the course of his career. Kuhn embraces this chronological complexity, and her reading of Dunlap’s painting explicitly argues from a retrospective point of view (148). Dunlap might have been a poor artist, but he was an expert in self-historicization: later in life he included the 1788 painting in exhibitions of more recent works, thus actively exposing his genealogy of mediocrity. This is perhaps where Kuhn’s study becomes most original and innovative: the author programmatically thinks about moments of failure and marginalisation as constitutive factors in artistic careers.

Compared to the case of Dunlap, marginal in so many respects, the next chapter leads back to the centres of the artworld, namely to the Parisian *salon* of 1808. Here, Marie-Gabrielle Capet exhibited a multi-figured studio scene, with herself sitting in the foreground, holding brush and palette. Next to her, at an easel, sits another female artist who receives instructions from a man standing behind her; the woman is evidently working on a portrait of a gentleman. The protagonists are

⁶ Léa Kuhn, *Das erste amerikanische Bild. John Singleton Copley und die Anfangsnarrative nationaler Kunst*, Zurich/Berlin: diaphanes, 2013.

swiftly identified: the model is Joseph-Marie Vien, the greatest painter of the previous generation, and best-known as teacher of Jacques-Louis David. The man instructing the female artist is his pupil F.A. Vincent – who in turn is the teacher (and later husband) of the portraitist, Adélaïde Labille-Guiard – who was Marie-Gabrielle Capet's teacher. Depicted here is a genealogy of a school of artists that comprises both male and female pupils, and is rooted in the most esteemed artist of his generation, Vien (213-223). Kuhn convincingly understands the painting as an opposition to Jacques-Louis David's monumental *Le Sacre* (The coronation of Napoleon), exhibited in the same year and also prominently integrating Vien, together with several of David's pupils, overlooking the coronation from a balcony (223-231). With admirable nuance and detail, Kuhn reconstructs contemporary debates about the place of women in the art world, and specifically about the question whether female artist should be regarded as official members of artist's 'schools' (207-213). With her painting, Capet made a clear statement arguing the case for the inclusion of herself and her peers into such artist genealogies. While some of her female competitors such as Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun embraced a distinctly female mode of self-fashioning, depicting herself as mother and in soft pastels, Capet demanded her place among the male lines of succession – and articulated this ambition with a strong and linear, masculine style to match.

Art historical typologies

All three chapters are feats of deep and sustained research, distinguished by interpretative rigour that leaves no stone unturned, no context unexplored. Kuhn moves aptly between different registers: formal analysis of the paintings themselves, exploration of inter pictorial links with works by other artists, art theoretical contexts, exhibition practice and public reception. This is a rich and exhaustive treatment of all three artworks, and it is difficult to see how each chapter individually could be improved.

The three capacious chapters are bookended by an introduction and conclusion, both of which are comparatively short. The introduction even has Roman page numbers, making it appear more like a preface than an integral part of the book. Both are undoubtedly concise and informative, but the author could have nevertheless reflected in some more detail about the place of her case studies within the larger history of art. Dwelling more extensively on the key themes of her book would have allowed the reader to gain a stronger sense of the underlying concepts and ideas that frame the three chapters and bind them together. Only on the book's last pages does the author discuss the concept of 'genealogy' and its implications in some detail. Kuhn convincingly argues that all three case studies work towards an 'hypothesis of origins', as Foucault called it (260). In the end, each of the three case studies introduces a unique and context-dependent self-positioning towards the past: Tischbein aims to break with the traditions of his family, in order to become visible as his own man; Dunlop, on the other hand, gradually resigned himself to the conditions of his descent, accepting the limitations that America imposed on him; Capet, finally, promotes a concrete genealogy of an artistic school, positioned against direct competitors on the market. The case studies introduce three types of

engagement with one's own historical position: fighting genealogy, resigning to genealogy, proposing alternative genealogies. All in all, the case studies thus present a convincing typology – but given the coherence and self-sufficiency of each case, it is most likely that the book's chapters will be predominantly read and mined independently from each other.

Taken as a whole, the book nevertheless proves a stimulating read for students of art historiography and it opens up further avenues for research. First, the book raises once again the old question of the longevity of certain artistic tropes. Kuhn briefly mentions other artists and their biographies, for example Benjamin Robert Haydon's self-fashioning (XV) – but this might warrant more extensive comparison to cases such as Dunlap's. Generally speaking, each of her artists seems well attuned to the patterns of artist anecdotes that circulated since Vasari; their decision to *paint* a new genealogy might be more strongly rooted in *texts* than the author suggests. Second, it might also be a worthwhile endeavour to follow the idea of a 'painted art history' beyond the book's timeframe – and into a period where the discipline of art history was more firmly established, but perhaps also frequently more concerned with *historical* instead of contemporary art.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, Kuhn's book allows us to reflect afresh about the definition of 'art historiography', beyond the traditional canon set by Julius von Schlosser's seminal *Kunsthistorie*. Kuhn's book highlights the complex entanglement of pictorial and textual commentary in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, and the 'counter histories' that are to be told about the discipline's formation. Some readers might think that the book's title is a bit misleading since art historiography proper plays a surprisingly small role throughout the chapters. But perhaps this is precisely the point: Kuhn's book serves as an important caveat against too teleological an understanding of 'art history' as a discipline.

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