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Perspective

actualité en histoire de l'art, no. 2028 – 1

Interpreting

Deadline for proposals:
11 January 2027



Pietra paesina, limestone from the Arno Valley (Tuscany, Italy), Paris, Museum national d'histoire naturelle, collection of minerals and gemstones (Caillois donation, 1983–1985). Photo © Marie-Lan Tay Pamart

***Perspective*, for volume 2028-1, is adopting a resolutely methodological angle, by choosing to question the interpretation of visual objects—that is to say, the ways in which we attribute significance to them. What does it mean to interpret a painting by Artemesia Gentileschi, an installation by Danh Vo, a Gothic church façade, an internet meme, or a *dałdałagamł* transformation mask? What are the various methods that give sense to these objects?**

The art historian "does not only concern themselves with the historical dimension of artworks, but seeks above all to interpret them; we are therefore hermeneuts," wrote Roland Recht in 2006 (Recht, 2006, p. 13). This affirmation is less obvious than it seems. Hermeneutics, in its narrowest sense, designates a specific branch of the discipline—one associated primarily with Erwin Panofsky—that has iconology as its method, 16th- and 17th-century European art as its object, and the search for artworks' learned meanings as its aim. Not by chance did Audrey Rieber devote much of her article "Herméneutique," from the recent volume Histoire de l'art (Rieber, 2026), to Panofsky and iconology. Yet Recht invites us to understand hermeneutics in a broader sense, as an imperative at the core of art history, understood as a discipline that is at once historical and interpretive. The idea is not entirely new; as Jacob Burckhardt already noted: "If [the work of art] could be expressed in words, then art would be superfluous and its works would remain unbuilt, unsculpted, unpainted" (Burckhardt, 1855). Put another way, the art historian's task consists in translating one medium to another, the visual to the textual, which necessarily implicates a certain level of interpretation, in the performative sense of that term.

When Recht assimilates the process of art history with hermeneutics, it is inscribed within a context largely dominated, according to him and a few others (Michel, 2000), by a disciplinary hesitancy, both in academia and museums, with regard to methodological experimentation and theoretical reflection. Where are we today? Is this idea, according to which "we are all hermeneuts," widely shared? Measured against the discipline's contemporary developments, we can ask the question for at least three different reasons.

Firstly, hermeneutics suffers from the prevalence of a weak and simplified version of the Panofskian iconological method, which became widespread in postwar art history and offered its epistemological basis, according to which one no longer had to interpret or translate works of art, but simply to read them. According to certain critiques of iconology, art would no longer be anything but the decorative illustration of erudite discourse (Didi-Huberman, [1990] 2005). Moreover, in the context of a professionalized academic field and the influence of scientific norms increasingly taken from the so-called "hard" sciences, the subjective or speculative character of hermeneutics' results became suspect (Gadamer, 1960/1990). In certain realms, it lost territory to approaches perceived as more empirical and positivistic. Likewise in archaeology, a discipline where the study of objects is fundamental: while it is traditionally twinned with art history in university departments, based on their common roots—the stylistic study of ancient objects—archaeology, given the anthropological turn of the 1960s and the influence, over the past two decades, of the so-called exact sciences (population genetics, archaeometry), today seems to have objectives totally distinct from that of the formal analysis of objects. Similarly, if the material turn puts the focus on the art object, it also valorizes technical and technological approaches seemingly far removed from hermeneutics.

Secondly, art history has expanded to encompass the study of popular arts and visual culture, indeed of visuality itself. For a number of art historians, this development in research arises from the legitimate desire to no longer celebrate the western artistic canon, the narrative of an autonomous evolution of forms or the legend of great artistic geniuses. The history of art becomes, in some such studies, a cultural history of images or seeing (Bryson, Holly, Moxey, 1994, p. xvi). The discipline's opening to visual studies has sometimes been accompanied by a relegation to the background of objects' formal dimension, making art but one social activity among many, even if credited with a capacity to produce symbols of a strong ideological valence (Clark, [1974] 1995). These approaches desacralize art and politicize its study.

If anthropology has notably contributed to the decentralization of western art and its hierarchical system of aesthetic values, it has also helped conceive the limits of the art object as a concept. Not only is the art object no longer considered the exclusive production of an artist, it is understood within its range of uses. In this way, the aestheticizing presentation of artifacts in ethnographic museums has been long critiqued by many anthropologists; isolated and assimilated as works of art, the objects lose a significant portion of their meaning.

As soon as art history integrates new objects and, in order to understand them, draws upon other disciplines—economic and social history, gender history, colonial and imperial history, etc.—it is, according to some authors, susceptible to be at the disposal of new approaches that threaten it, further distancing art history from its mission to interpret artworks and images. According to Jonathan Harris, hermeneutics has turned from the study of artists' intentions to that of viewers' reactions (Harris, 2001). Michael Ann Holly assesses that the "new" critical art history, rather than illuminating the works themselves, puts art at the service of a theoretical and ideological rereading of the past (Holly, 2018, p. 7-8). Christopher Wood, in the conclusion to his *History of Art History*, worries about the loss of the discipline's meaning if it does not pursue research questions that are rightfully its own: "Why should an art historian answer questions posed by other disciplines? How will such an art history profile itself against those disciplines? What is the expertise of this art historian?" (Wood, 2019, p. 407).

Thirdly, walking in step with sociology and anthropology, art history is increasingly interested in "reception," "consumption," and recently the "use" of objects and images, both in daily life and in particular moments such as rituals (Scott, Williams, 2004; Bartholeyns, Charpy, 2021), not to mention in places of sale, circulation, exhibition, and the museum. In this way, the biography of objects has become a prolific genre of research. The conditions behind the "production" of objects also arouse many studies; one now examines the careers of artists; their training, working conditions, and collaborations; the place of gender, sexual orientation, or origin in their success or failure; etc. Other art-world actors become in turn the object of historical, biographical, and sociological research: models, collectors, dealers, gallerists, patrons. In such a context, what becomes of images and the formal properties of objects?

This issue seeks to take stock of the resilience of interpretive practices in different fields, as well as aspects of their renewal.

In the 1970s, some authors profoundly renewed the question of interpretation: they include, among others, Michel Foucault in history and philosophy; Umberto Eco in literary criticism, with his concept of the open work; and Clifford Geertz, in his essay collection *The Interpretation of Cultures*, which had a major influence on anthropology (Foucault, [1969] 2002; Eco, [1962] 1989; Geertz, 1973). Since then, emphasis has been placed on the

motivations (sometimes unconscious), social position (dominant or oppressed), and culture of the person who does the interpreting. The history and sociology of science, for which Bruno Latour and Lorraine Daston are the preeminent representatives, has completely upset the common assumption of objectivity in research praxis (Latour, Woolgar, 1979; Daston, Galison, 2007). Scientific knowledge is an "exercised judgement," a mastered interpretation. The subjectivity implied by the latter is no longer considered a defect, but rather a precondition of the scientific process and, according to Gadamer, the "game" which defines it, a positive quality (Cassegrain, 2015).

Far from the temptation of resolving "the enigma of the image" by interpreting "secret codes and allusions" as in "detective stories" (Gombrich, 1972, p. 19-21), authors such as Meyer Schapiro (Schapiro, 1996), Louis Marin and Hubert Damisch have explored the route of visual semiotics, a semiology of art, to attempt to define qualities particular to the language of images. For Marin and Damisch, these are most evident in "theoretical objects," which is to say particular works of art that neither represent something nor express the artist's intentions, but reflect the way in which they are made, how they function, how they "speak." "The theoretical object is constructed in a deterministic work based on the totality of statements that reflect on their own enunciation. This reflexivity internal to the work, in certain of its fragments, define its theoretical dimension: it offers, totally or partially, a 'conscious or theoretical subject' in acting upon the construction of a 'theoretical object'" (Marin, 1989, p. 17, our translation). The work of art, in other words, is a "theoretical object" when it offers a *mise en abyme* of its own way of being a work of art. This concept resolves, in a remarkable way, the problem posed by the interpretation of works (Dumora, 2004; Careri, 2018): but is it still operative today, with regard to the cultural history of art?

In the lineage of Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco, the semiotics of images has developed based upon the analysis of advertising and political messaging, in order to decrypt visual communication strategies devised by marketing agencies (Barthes, 1964; Eco, 1970; Joly, 2002). In parallel, semiotic research based on the works of Algirdas Julien Greimas and Jacques Fontanille have, in recent years, extended to the visual field (Dondero, Fontanille, 2012). The information and communication sciences both cast images as a linguistic system (Bonaccorsi, 2020; Cailloux, 2021). The indiciary paradigm, coming out of Charles Sanders Peirce's semiology, and which Carlo Ginzburg made into the basis of a historical method, has found many uses in the history of art, photography, and cinema, but also in the anthropology of art, by way of Alfred Gell (Krauss, 1990; Gell, 1998; Besson, 2004; Thouard, 2007; Ledoux, 2019).

Meanwhile, iconology is a tool claimed by many art historians, well beyond the study of Renaissance and classical European painting. In the 1980s, W. J. T. Mitchell made it the core of visual studies and his own approach to popular imagery (Mitchell, 1986). In parallel, "political iconology" has become a field in its own right (Bredekamp, 2022). The *Handbuch der politischen Ikonographie*, published in 2011, is founded upon the serial study of over a thousand images and some 200,000 files indexed at the Warburg Haus in Hamburg (Fleckner, Warnke, Ziegler, 2011).

How do these methods renew art history's hermeneutic practices, expanded to the realm of visual history?

The social history of art is far from neglecting the analysis of singular art objects. Beginning with the foundational essay entitled "On the Social History of Art"—the first chapter of a book published in 1973 devoted entirely to the interpretation of Gustave Courbet's *L'Enterrement à Ornans*—T. J. Clark lamented that Marxist social art history, like that of Arnold Hauser, or

the social history of artistic institutions developed after Haskell, led away from artworks and the thorny ideological problems that their interpretation arouses (Clark, 1973, p. 9-20). In his "Preliminary Arguments: Work of Art and Ideology" published in 1977, Clark pleaded for a social history of art attentive to works themselves: one must privilege an analytic path that brings one to look, to better see the object, and the approaches through which its visual form marries particular and complex tasks (Clark, 1977). How was this requirement respected? In the same manner, Linda Nochlin did not, in her feminist art history, separate the study of gender from formal analysis (Nochlin, 1989). Disability studies offer an experiential and intellectual opening that usefully questions methodological habits (Kleege, 2018).

In ethnology, recent approaches have questioned the aesthetic signification of objects and their methods of interpretation. The formal qualities of these objects allow them to be interpreted as a means of symbolizing cultural values (Descola, 2021). These methods attest to a certain convergence of anthropology and art history around forms that merit attentive examination. In the same spirit of comparison between different cultures, one can ask if the interpretation of works of art and images do not depend on local visual traditions, despite the general tendency for the global circulation of images.

Finally, the meaning of interpretation itself depends upon its mediums and supports. From the scholarly monograph to museum wall labels, from artistic response to social media content, the way of comprehending and formulating that which we think of as the visual object is subject to variations which, today, manifest a plurality of possible viewpoints and forms, both within and beyond academic discourse.

To summarize, this volume seeks not only to study the role of interpretation in the methods used by various fields—art history; archaeology; the histories of architecture, cinema, and photography; the anthropology of art; and visual studies—but also the place of visual objects in the numerous orientations taken by the discipline. We are interested, in other words, in the interpretive methods of disciplines related to culture's visual dimension and their intersection with object-oriented research. We hope that this volume will serve as a critical guide and a manual, destined for the kind of school of critical looking that Recht calls for, such that art history can "reconquer our own power over images, [to] no longer let ourselves head in directions that images do not want us to go" (Recht, 2006, p. 81).

We seek proposals for articles that bring together methodological or historiographic reflections with the analysis of concrete cases, for which visual examples should be at the center of the discussion and not simple illustrations. We will privilege proposals that fit within the following axes:

1. **The critical study and posterity of the theoretical object.** How did Marin and Damisch theorize and deploy this notion, and what are its more recent uses? What critiques can be offered?

2. **Semiotics of visual objects.** What are the methods that consider artworks and images as part of a system of signs, or as a visual language?

3. **The legacy of iconology.** From Panofsky to Mitchell and beyond, what are the continuities and differences in terms of approach and method in the interpretation of artworks and images, and in terms of their relationship to discourse and culture (learned, popular)?

4. **Beyond the limits of the object.** What reasons keep certain researchers at a remove

from artworks and visual objects? Are these reasons related to the evolution of contemporary art, to a more sociological approach toward objects as cultural goods, or to an analysis of art within its environment?

5. **The meaning of forms.** Beyond attributive methods that seek the identity of artists through the formal configurations of artworks, how is the relationship between substance and form discussed today by the methods of archaeology, art history, and the history of images?

6. **The mediums of interpretation.** What role does the diversity of formats and supports play in the interpretive process of artworks and images? How does academic art history open itself to, or else close itself off from, new forms of inscribing visual knowledge?

[**translation**: Matthew Gillman]

Perspective : actualité en histoire de l'art

Published by the Institut national d'histoire de l'art (INHA) since 2006, *Perspective* is a biannual journal which aims to bring out the diversity of current research in art history, highly situated and explicitly aware of its own historicity. It bears witness to the historiographic debates within the field without forgetting to engage with images and works of art themselves, updating their interpretations as well as fostering intra- and inter-disciplinary reflection between art history and other fields of research, the humanities in particular. In so doing, it also puts into action the "law of the good neighbor" as conceived by Aby Warburg. All geographical areas, periods, and media are welcome.

The journal publishes scholarly texts which offer innovative perspectives on a given theme. Its authors contextualize their arguments; using case studies allows them to interrogate the discipline, its methods, its history, and its limits. Moreover, articles that are proposed to the editorial committee should necessarily include a methodological dimension, provide an epistemological contribution, or offer a significant and original historiographic evaluation. Depending on the subject, the wider bibliographical corpus and the geographical area and time period under consideration, two types of contributions are possible:

- **Focus**
  An article based on a specific case that permits the examination of a historiographic, theoretical or methodological question of current interest (3,500-4,000 words / 20,000-25,000 characters);

- **Grand Angle**
  An essay or critical assessment addressing a broader question, an art-historical movement or a methodological or theoretical issue that takes into account recent changes in orientation or approaches on the basis of a selective bibliography (7,000 words / 40,000-45,000 characters, excluding the bibliography).

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Editor: Thomas Golsenne (INHA)
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Please send your proposals (a summary of 200-500 words/ 2,000-3,000 characters, a working title, a short bibliography on the subject and a brief biography) to the editors (revue-perspective@inha.fr). **Proposal deadline: 11 January 2027.**

Proposals will be examined by the editorial board regardless of language (the translation of articles accepted for publication is handled by *Perspective*).

The authors of the pre-selected projects will be informed of the editorial board's decision in **February 2027**. The full articles must be received by **1st June 2027**. The texts submitted (4,000-7,000 words/25,000-45,000 characters, depending on the format chosen) will be accepted in final form after an anonymous peer-review process.

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