

**Reading between the brushstrokes:**

**Art as a primary source in history<sup>1</sup>**

**by Nicolas Kenny**

"The sources of the historical work," suggests one art historian "are to be found in just about every place but the archives."<sup>2</sup> Although this may sound like a cavalier dismissal of the very foundations of our discipline, it is clear that contemporary trends of historical inquiry are taking us to ever more distant reaches on the vast landscape of human intellectual and cultural production. Historians scorned Literature, or 'fiction', while information passed along through oral traditions were decried for being 'unreliable.' But as the distinctions between truth and fiction, real and imagined, become blurrier in historiographical debates, scholars are embracing the idea that novels and folk tales can significantly illuminate conventional readings of the past. In a similar way, visual material has also received comparatively little attention from historians committed to working with the written record. My objective in this essay is to explore some of the ways in which a consideration of visual sources can serve historical writing.

Historians interested in the use of visual material have been slow to formulate the terms for a philosophical debate on the practice, generally raising theoretical quandaries only in passing. The late historian Francis Haskell, for instance, is widely acknowledged for the innovative connections he made between art and history but he was relatively uninterested in discussing methodological concerns. Recognising their importance, he

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Ann Holly, *Past Looking: Historical Imagination and the Rhetoric of the Image*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996): 184.

hoped that, "I have not unduly neglected them."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, part of the challenge in assessing the historical value of visual sources is the wide range of types available. Film, photography, drawing, sculpture, or even architecture can each confront us with its own set of problems and challenges in our attempts to understand what they say about their epoch. To keep a manageable scope, I will focus specifically on paintings, examining some of the methodological issues they can raise, and suggesting ways they can inform historians' work. By way of example, I will briefly discuss two works by nineteenth-century French painter Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. Before proceeding, it is important to point out that the use of visual sources does not preclude the concurrent use of traditional written sources in a historical project. Instead, I mean to suggest that historians can do more with images than merely include them as illustrations alongside their work; they can turn to them as another set of primary sources in their own right.

The paucity of debate on this issue stems from historians' continuing uneasiness with the seemingly foreign task of interpreting art. Haskell explains that ancient Roman and Greek scholars often made use of images in their attempts to understand the stories of their communities, but that "with the passing of time, serious historians showed themselves to be increasingly reluctant to use evidence offered by art or artefacts when trying to interpret the past." Instead, they accepted as valid only the written record, leaving the task of studying artwork to "antiquarians" who could make far less convincing claims to the intellectual and moral lessons that historians taught through written sources.<sup>4</sup> The long-standing primacy of written text within the discipline has produced a distinct hierarchy dictating the value of different sources. Because written

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<sup>3</sup> Francis Haskell, *History and its Images: Art and the Interpretation of the Past*, (New Haven, Ct: Yale University Press, 1993): 7.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*: 1-2.

documents dominate, historians are inclined to subordinate "imagistic evidence" to little more than a complementary role in their focus on "verbal evidence".<sup>5</sup> As a result, visual approaches to history, which may on the surface appear to question the content of images, often wind up merely "supplement[ing] what is already known from the written record."<sup>6</sup> As we come to the realisation that visual images often do provide unique information about the past, however, it is increasingly clear that the sort of formulation which equates "serious historians" with written sources must be revised.<sup>7</sup> If historians neglect such information, they risk selling themselves short, or even, as historian John O'Connor puts it, committing "an injustice to the subject."<sup>8</sup> This is certainly the case in the study of civilisations that have left no written traces and for which the only records we have are visual. Alternatively, the twentieth century bombarded us with visual stimuli and "seeing" can sometimes help us understand the more recent past better than can "reading."<sup>9</sup>

The trouble with a visual approach, however, is that looking at pictures can be deceptively difficult. Students of history are trained and accustomed to reading the written documents pertaining to their field and gleaning from them both the explicitly stated facts and opinions as well as the more nuanced subtleties one obtains from 'reading between the lines.' Historians interested in what works of art can reveal about a particular period need, in a sense, to learn how to read between the brush strokes. As theorist Hayden White suggests, "modern historians ought to be aware that the analysis of visual

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<sup>5</sup> Hayden White, "Historiography and Historiophoty," *American Historical Review* 93.5 (1988): 1193.

<sup>6</sup> Haskell: 3.

<sup>7</sup> Hayden White, "Historiography and Historiophoty," *American Historical Review* 93.5 (1988): 1194.

<sup>8</sup> John E O'Connor, "History in Images/Images in History: Reflections on the Importance of Film and Television Study for an Understanding of the Past," *American Historical Review* 93.5 (1988): 1200.

<sup>9</sup> Haskell: 3.

images requires a manner of 'reading' quite different from that developed for the study of written documents." Indeed, images that represent "historical events, agents and processes" must be consulted in terms of their specific "lexicon, grammar and syntax," what White calls "a language and discursive mode," which differs from the verbal discourse through which we conventionally approach our study of the past. Drawing historical insight from a letter, diary, newspaper article or government report requires a certain approach to the material and the use of works of art poses much the same challenge.<sup>10</sup>

In a general sense, historians ask the same questions of their visual sources as they would of any written document. What information does its content reveal? One social historian, for example, argues that he can observe seventeenth century Dutch painting in ways that provide insight into people's daily interaction with the military. He focuses on specific items like officers' clothing and equipment and draws on his own understanding of military history to explain how these elements in the painting represent significant aspects of people's daily lives.<sup>11</sup> Other questions historians ask with respect to their sources touch on their background and context. By getting at the purpose of a work of art's production, by looking at who made it and with whose collaboration, as well as at the political purposes motivating its creators, historians can obtain a fuller understanding of the meaning about the past in their artistic sources. Haskell urges us to remember that "most of the great art that has come down to us was created for a comparatively limited

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<sup>10</sup> White: 1193.

<sup>11</sup> J W Smit, "History in Art," *Art in History, History in Art: Studies in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Culture*, ed. David Freedberg, and Jan de Vries, (Santa Monica, CA: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1991):

number of privileged patrons, whose aspirations it was designed to satisfy."<sup>12</sup> This suggests the importance of verifying who purchased the painting and at what price. Before assuming that a particular work of art reflects anything about a society, it must be determined whether it might simply be the reflection of a wealthy buyer's tastes. It may also be appropriate to ask what, if any, historical influence a painting has had. What meaning did the piece have for the people who saw it at the time of its creation and, even more fundamentally, who looked at it?

In the case of older works of art, one might also ask whether the painting is still in its original state. For instance, if a painting has been voluntarily altered, this might say something about the values held by generations subsequent to the artist's. If a damaged work of art has ever been restored, it is necessary to find out how this was done, whether the work was significantly changed in the process and whether any political or financial pressures motivated its restoration. These questions are essential, for if we are to presume that a work of art says something about its time, we need to know whether or not we are looking at the same image that its maker created decades or centuries ago.

As with written material, historians approach their visual sources by asking questions pertaining to their specific type of investigation. Gleaning historical evidence from a work of art, however, is not necessarily obvious. Historians who study art agree that paintings are not particularly useful for insight into specific, real events. Although an image may have an important historical event as its theme, such as a battle or a coronation, it may not be reliable in its factual representation. Details may be altered or omitted and, depending on the artist's purpose, the scene is likely to look very different on canvass than it did in reality or than it might in a written account. Moreover, a picture

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<sup>12</sup> Haskell: 5.

can represent only a moment in time and not a sequence of events that make up a historical narrative. In other words, what we see in a painting is simply an artist's perspective on a particular event, person or place. Through their use of colour, light and technique, painters can convey a mood or atmosphere in a way that is perhaps verbally inexpressible.

Conversely, paintings may be revealing for what they leave out. Historian Raymond Grew suggests that if artists create images that recount their time, French art of the early nineteenth century should abound with representations of lower class life.<sup>13</sup> This is not the case, however, and the author explains that in the official art world of the period, political sensibilities precluded artists from depicting harsh social realities and favoured tamer, even comical, representations of the people. Such omissions, as Grew suggests, can be most revealing about the values of a time and place. It is precisely these sorts of perspectives and impressions that are valuable to historians. While archival sources tell us about dates and events, art can offer a reflection of social and cultural values, mores and customs.<sup>14</sup> In the words of celebrated art critic and poet Charles Baudelaire, what stands out in art is "la morale et l'esthétique du temps."<sup>15</sup>

The historian's task, then, is to use images in conjunction with other sources and critically assess the extent to which a particular work of art or set of artefacts effectively reflects the time and place in which it originated. Historians know that no document stands alone and that it is crucial to 'read around it' before accepting its message as

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<sup>13</sup> Raymond Grew, "Picturing the People: Images of the Lower Orders in Nineteenth Century French Art," *Art and History: Images and Their Meanings*, ed. Robert I Rotberg, and Theodore K Rabb, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988): 203-232.

<sup>14</sup> O'Connor: 1206.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Baudelaire, "Le Peintre de la vie moderne," *Oeuvres complètes de Charles Baudelaire*, ed. Jacques Crepet. 16 vols, (Paris: L Conrad, 1922) 2: 51. This essay was first published in 1863.

historically representative. Visual sources pose much the same challenge. While scholars can aspire to a certain degree of fairness and open-mindedness in their work, it remains that they are subjectively interpreting what is already a subjective interpretation of reality. Conscious of the need to embrace their own partiality however, historians must pay particular attention to the biases of the artists whose work they are consulting. As Haskell reminds us, "even images formerly assumed to depict only what could be seen by an 'innocent eye' were in fact the product of conscious or unconscious manipulation."<sup>16</sup> Art scholar Francis Francina notes that both art and history are representations, the products of work done "within changing systems and codes." His warning to scholars interested in art sources is beneficial:

these systems and codes are the means by which people represent some kind of cognition of their world. Individual works of art, therefore, do not provide transparent illusions of 'reality', or of the 'world', but constitute determined and produced allusions to it. Such allusions are specific combinations of the formal and thematic elements of a picture and may be seen as an expression of the way people relate their lives to the conditions of their existence. This is to regard paintings as produced images of, ideas about, and positions on the world; as forms of ideology which represent systems of ideas, values and beliefs. And it should be realised that as

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<sup>16</sup> Haskell: 5.

mediated, or worked, representations of reality, they are not self-evident or transparent.<sup>17</sup>

In writing about the past, historians who explore the various meanings found in paintings gain additional perspectives into both the society they are studying and the individuals who chose art as the means to record the preoccupations of their time.

In light of these difficulties in interpreting painting for historical purposes, it seems to follow that historians can benefit from interdisciplinary collaboration with art historians. Although one field of study is concerned more with the art itself and the other with the broader society the art may speak to, historian Theodore Rabb and art historian Jonathan Brown, elucidate a number of concrete ways in which the two disciplines converge. Both fields are concerned with producing plausible, convincing narratives that explain how and why human activity changes over time and across space. Significantly, the two disciplines have the past as their principal referent. Although they are seeking to illuminate different aspects of the past than their colleagues, historians can learn ways to interpret works of art that will enhance their own readings of history and take them in new directions rather than in 'wrong' ones.<sup>18</sup> As another team of scholars puts it, history and art history "are driving in opposite directions on a common street, but the street is a broad one, and with some good will, the two vehicles should be able to share it without

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<sup>17</sup> Francis Frascina, ed., *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, (London: Harper and Row, 1985): 4. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>18</sup> See Theodore K Rabb, and Jonathan Brown, "Introduction," *Art and History: Images and Their Meanings*, ed. Robert I Rotberg, and Theodore K Rabb, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

fear of collision."<sup>19</sup> Building on shared objectives and concerns provides common ground. From there, scholars will move in different directions, but the possibilities afforded by a variety of intellectual frameworks will certainly enrich the journey.

To this list of challenges must be added a final important obstacle, namely the remoteness of the paintings historians may choose to interpret. While photographic reproductions are easily accessible, they are necessarily a poor substitute for the real thing. One of the first intellectuals to make this point was Walter Benjamin, whose work is increasingly topical among historians who rely on visual sources.<sup>20</sup> Deeply interested in the explosion of mass visual culture in the first decades of the twentieth century, Benjamin wrote "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," an essay which appeared in 1936 as a response to Nazi appropriation of the cinema for propaganda purposes. The crux of his argument is that short of being in the physical presence of a work of art, it is impossible to ascertain its authenticity, to know if we are looking at what the artist truly created.<sup>21</sup> Historians must contend with the fact that in dealing with reproductions, the authority of the image in question is diminished.

What is lost in the photographic reproduction of art? To answer, Benjamin draws on the idea a work of art's "aura", that which "withers in the age of mechanical reproduction." His own poetic analogy explains it best: "If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which

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<sup>19</sup> David Freedberg and Jan de Vries, eds., *Art in History, History in Art: Studies in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Culture*, (Santa Monica, CA: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1991): 4.

<sup>20</sup> See especially Vanessa R Schwartz, "Walter Benjamin for Historians," *American Historical Review* 106.5 (2001): 1721-1743.

<sup>21</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans Harry Zohn, (London: Fontana, 1992): 211-244.

casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains."<sup>22</sup> There is something impressionistic, a particular quality of 'being there' that a camera is simply unable to reproduce. Benjamin attributes this to the fact that a lens is "adjustable and chooses its angle at will." When we look at a photograph, we are effectively seeing the imposition of a human agent who has selected a particular size, angle and perspective from which to show us the painting. We are unable to take advantage of the fact that looking at a picture in multiple ways, focusing on details of content and technique or on the global impact of the image, tells us different things about it. Critical use of reproductions demand that their interpreter discover the purpose for which the reproduction was made and the contrary or unintended effects it may convey.

For Benjamin, early twentieth-century trends toward higher volumes of 'mechanical reproductions' reflected what he perceived as deeper problems surrounding the mass commercialisation of art. He feared that modern popular culture, in its quest to bring art closer to consumers, was diluting the uniqueness and originality of artists' work.<sup>23</sup> I'm quite sure Benjamin would roll over in his grave at the sight of the following reproductions of two paintings by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, himself famous for blurring the boundaries between high art and popular culture, and to which I turn to provide an example of how paintings can help answer various types of historical questions. Both *Au bal du Moulin de la Galette* and *Au Moulin Rouge* offer remarkable insight into the social tumult which characterised the famous Parisian neighbourhood of Montmartre.

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*: 215-216.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*: 217.

Long a working class neighbourhood, Montmartre was known as a site of political and social subversion. Famous for its role in the civil uprising of the 1871 Paris Commune, the community projected an image of vice and disorder. Bohemians and anarchists, rife with anti-bourgeois sentiment, were drawn to this underworld of political radicalism, well doused in absinthe and enlivened by *femmes fatales*. Artists and writers were also attracted to this spirited locale, not only for the entertainment and cheap rent, but also for the atmosphere of change that welcomed their protest to the rigid artistic and literary norms of the Académies.<sup>24</sup> For painters, the half-rural, half-urban landscapes offered splendid possibilities and it was in Montmartre that noted painters including Renoir, Manet, Degas and later, Picasso, revolutionised the world of art.<sup>25</sup> The district's atmosphere of contestation had influences that extended beyond painting and historians are interested in how Montmartre's subversive community challenged fundamental societal conventions relating to class, gender, sexuality and entertainment, in ways that heralded twentieth century social and cultural transformations.<sup>26</sup> All of these themes shine through the work of Lautrec, which provides a striking view of the social tumult that defined the neighbourhood.

*Au bal du Moulin de la Galette* (Image A) painted in 1889, depicts one of Montmartre's original dance halls but conveys a distinctly gloomy mood. Although the

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<sup>24</sup> Many historians have discussed Montmartre's bohemian and anarchist character. In English, see especially Richard D Sonn, *Anarchism and Cultural Politics in Fin de Siècle France*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989) and Jerrold Seigel, *Bohemian Paris: Culture, Politics and the Boundaries of Bourgeois Life, 1830-1930*, (New York: Viking, 1986).

<sup>25</sup> See Sylvie Buisson and Christian Parisot, *Paris Montmartre: La naissance de l'art moderne, 1860-1920*, (Paris: Terrail, 1996).

<sup>26</sup> A recent and highly engaging assessment of these questions is Gabriel Weisberg, ed., *Montmartre and the Making of Mass Culture*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001).

dancing crowd seems to be enjoying itself in the background, the focus of the picture is the melancholy group of three women and one man sitting in the foreground. As art historian Reinhold Heller suggests, "the viewer is made to participate in the scene by being positioned at a wooden table with a pile of bowls for serving mulled wine balanced precariously on it and by being made to look across the diagonal of a railing directly at the profile of a woman." We are in the scene, but if we look at it carefully, we may be anxious to get out. Scholars agree that the three women are prostitutes and that the man with them must be their pimp. Their dreary demeanour, coupled with the artist's use of murky colours and dim lighting suggests that behind a world of entertainment and music halls lay much darker social problems.<sup>27</sup> Lautrec's painting offers first-hand insight into the conflicting images of gaiety and depression that characterised turn-of-the-century French society.

Lautrec's interest in popular entertainment continued into the 1890s with the growing success of another famous Montmartre nightspot, the Moulin Rouge. In *Au Moulin Rouge*, completed in 1895, Lautrec again provides viewers with the feeling of being in the scene, this time by placing us on the dance floor and having us look into an alcove where we see a few regulars of the Moulin Rouge.<sup>28</sup> Though less sombre than *Galette*, this painting also makes use of unique tones and angles to convey a dreamy, almost hallucinatory feeling which we can associate with the turmoil of life in late nineteenth-century Montmartre. This is especially true of the figure to the right of the

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*: 54-55.

<sup>28</sup> Heller: 25. The author identifies at the table, from left to right, the poet Edouard Dujardin, the dancer La Marcona, the photographer Paul Sescou, the vintner Maurice Guibert, and the dancer Jane Avril. Behind them we see two dancers, La Goulue and La Môme Fromage as well as Lautrec himself and his cousin Gabriel Tapié de Céleyran. Another dancer, May Milton, appears at the far right.

image. Her eerily lit face and frail complexion immediately attract the viewer's attention and evoke the precarious nature of life in the *belle époque*, when an exuberant desire for thrills and pleasure was forever counteracted by the uncertainties of an unprecedented modern order.

Lautrec's portrayal (Image B) of dance hall scenes was revolting to elite purveyors of official culture. Repeatedly rejected by state-sponsored salons, Lautrec displayed his work in avant-garde exhibitions and galleries in Paris and Brussels. The painter's desire to produce art in daring new ways is itself telling of how mentalities were changing in the late nineteenth century. As Heller puts it, "[r]adicality in art formulated the subversion of established aesthetic standards and their institutions in collusion with efforts to destroy society's hegemonic order and to substitute a new utopian milieu."<sup>29</sup> Although Lautrec was never involved in formally political activities, it is telling that an artist of noble upbringing would concern himself with the unseemly issues of the lower classes as he did in *Galette* and other paintings. With the rise of popular culture in places like Montmartre, the late nineteenth century witnessed unprecedented changes in class conventions and Lautrec's paintings provide a unique perspective from which to consider these subversions of social mores.

Other questions that preoccupy historians revolve around sexuality and gender. These are broad issues, but a good look at some of Lautrec's paintings can open up new ways of thinking about changing gender norms of the period. *Au bal du Moulin de la Galette* and *Au Moulin Rouge*, hint at prostitution, homosexuality, men and women in social interaction, showgirls, women with alcohol, in short, scandalous themes for the

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*: 44.

period. Other paintings by Lautrec, particularly those set at the Moulin Rouge and in local brothels, are far more explicit in their portrayal of these themes. To the intrigued middle and upper classes, promiscuity and sexual license were the fascinating trademarks of the lower classes.<sup>30</sup> As in virtually all spheres of French society in the nineteenth century, women in Montmartre were subordinate to the district's male artists and writers. Women were a source of artistic or poetic inspiration, or alternatively, objects of a dangerous sexual desire, but never colleagues or equals. As historian Elizabeth Menon demonstrates, women were beginning to make significant progress in society at this time but Montmartre's male artists preferred to focus on an "intriguing duality: the visualisation of vice and virtue."<sup>31</sup> Indeed, the various female characters in these paintings, from the prostitutes in *Galette*, to the distinguished, if perhaps menacing, ladies in *Moulin Rouge*, reflect this distinction. Lautrec's portrayal of men and women contributes to our understanding of how perceptions of masculinity and femininity were reorganised in avant-garde circles, revealing to historians the extent to which Montmartre represented "a new cultural terrain that challenged the traditional middle class in search of a cultural identity."<sup>32</sup> As the visual experience of observing these paintings demonstrates, Lautrec was particularly adept at producing a unique sensory encounter that gives viewers a look into the transience of an era in a way that the innumerable written texts on Montmartre are unable to simulate. While these paintings do not narrate specific events from the past, they are useful to historians for their insight into the

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*: 40.

<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth K Menon, "Images of Pleasure and Vice: Women on the Fringe," *Montmartre and the Making of Mass Culture*, ed. Gabriel Weisberg, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001): 37.

<sup>32</sup> John Kim Munholland "Republican Order and Republican Tolerance in Fin de Siècle France: Montmartre as a Delinquent Community," *Montmartre and the Making of Mass Culture*, ed. Gabriel P Weisberg, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001): 33.

broader social and cultural questions that characterised their period. Moreover, both works of art create distinctive moods and evoke emotions that attest to the artist's own preoccupations with his world. Personal and collective identities based on class and gender were changing during these years and Lautrec's work, seen in conjunction with other primary accounts, help illuminate the nature of these transformations.

Lautrec's artistic commentary is only one example of how the work of an artist can be used to address historical questions normally dealt with on the basis of written text. It is apparent from the lack of theory in the field that questions about how to use visual sources such as these are increasingly needed. After all, the evidence which societies produce and historians evaluate is just as often visual as it is written.<sup>33</sup> In many areas of historical study, we will have little choice but to complement our reading of written text with a conscientious examination of the visual record in order to arrive at the fullest possible understanding. If nothing else, we would be remiss to neglect what Rabb and Brown refer to as "something that is difficult to quantify but dangerous to dismiss - a sense of delight, awe and beauty."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> White: 1193.

<sup>34</sup> Rabb and Brown: 5.

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Image A



Image B