

# Introduction: art and the city

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The creative and decorative arts are the new sources for historians – and social, economic and urban history are the arenas in which scholars of literature, fine art and design increasingly operate. This special edition of *Urban History* has evolved from a conference on the theme 'Imagining the City in Art, Literature and Music' held in April 1994 at the University of Nottingham under the aegis of the Urban History Group, and is devoted to an exploration of aspects of the 'new cultural history', focused on 'art and the city'.

Cultural practices have, of course, been an area of interest for many historians since the early 1960s, when the *Annales* group first introduced the concept of 'mentalités', and such phenomena as rituals and riots, carnivals and crowds, gossip and rumour moved into the foreground of historical preoccupations.<sup>1</sup> The early 1980s marked another shift in focus towards the analysis of 'cultural production', building on the belief that like cultural practices, texts, or art objects, or objects drawn from everyday life provide us with a privileged understanding of social reality. Literature and language led the way in the study of this new relationship between cultural production and the social past. Inspired by the realist dimensions to some works of literature, by the use of literature and particular forms of language as vehicles for social protest or for depicting social relationships and values, historians have arrived at a better understanding of the 'active role of language, texts and narrative structures in the creation and description of historical reality'.<sup>2</sup> Critics of social science history, notably Hayden White, have stressed the narrative and inventive features of all historical writing.<sup>3</sup> Products of the creative imagination

- 1 For a survey of these developments see Lynn Hunt, 'History, culture and text', in L. Hunt (ed.), *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1989).
- 2 L. S. Kramer, 'Literature, criticism, and historical imagination: the literary challenge of Hayden White and Dominick LaCapra', in Hunt, *The New Cultural History*, 97–130.
- 3 H. White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, 1987).

may provide limited statistical insight, but they are valuable in other ways.<sup>4</sup> To cite Wilhelm Dilthey, the late nineteenth-century philosopher and historian, art is a 'privileged repository of the understanding of life'.<sup>5</sup> So notable practitioners of this new history, such as Natalie Zemon Davis in her work on pardon tales in sixteenth-century France, have employed stories and story-telling as points of access to ordinary people's understanding of their sometimes chaotic social worlds, and thereby arrived at conclusions that would not have been possible through any other means.<sup>6</sup>

The fine arts took a little longer to move into the arena of mainstream historical concern, partly because of the intimidating traditions of connoisseurship associated with the field, and partly because of the dominating role of the art institutions and professional-commercial hierarchies in defining the proper subjects for enquiry. But today many of the leading practitioners of 'fine art' place their emphasis on the social context in which art is created, and its social role and dynamic. This 'new historicism' – a term borrowed from literary studies – has provided fertile ground for a range of scholars. Marcia Pointon has been one of the pioneers in Britain. Her controversial account of 'gendered' discourses within art, and her feminist interpretation of depictions of the body in great paintings have been enormously influential.<sup>7</sup> More recently, Pointon's study of portraiture<sup>8</sup> – the 'cinderella' art – within its eighteenth-century social and economic context has fuelled an exciting theme of current discussion on the body, its adornment and representation.<sup>9</sup> Art production and images as a manifestation of elite values and social relationships provided the focus for *The Culture of Capital: Art, Power and the Nineteenth-Century Middle Class*, a collection of essays edited by Janet Wolff and John Seed.<sup>10</sup> Whilst the visual language of the commercialized working-class press is addressed by Patricia Anderson in *The Printed Image and the Transformation of Popular Culture, 1790-1860*.<sup>11</sup>

The decorative arts have also become a focus of interest, especially among historians with a background in social and economic history

4 On literature and history, and some of the problems in reconciling the two disciplines, see J. Kelly and T. Kelly, 'Social history update: searching the dark alley: new historicism and social history', *Journal of Social History*, 25 (3) (1992), 677–94.

5 Quoted in S. Nenadic, 'Illegitimacy, insanity and insolvency: Wilkie Collins and the Victorian nightmares', in A. Marwick (ed.), *The Arts, Literature and Society* (London, 1990).

6 N. Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and their Telling in Sixteenth-Century France* (Stanford, 1987).

7 M. Pointon, *The Body Imaged: the Human Form and Visual Culture since the Renaissance* (Cambridge, 1993).

8 M. Pointon, *Hanging the Head: Portraiture and Social Formation in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven and London, 1993).

9 See, for example, D. Roche, *The Culture of Clothing: Dress and Fashion in the Ancient Regime* (Cambridge, 1994).

10 J. Wolff and J. Seed (eds), *The Culture of Capital: Art, Power and the Nineteenth-Century Middle Class* (Manchester, 1988).

11 P. Anderson, *The Printed Image and the Transformation of Popular Culture, 1790-1860* (Oxford, 1991).

because of the association between manufactured objects and commercial-industrial innovation and the development of mass consumerism. 'The Consumption of Culture', a series of seminars held at UCLA in the early 1990s, giving rise to an edited volume, provided a wonderfully eclectic showcase for a range of studies on the social dynamics of the decorative arts.<sup>12</sup> A recently-founded journal – *Things* – is devoted to some of these issues, and institutional developments linking the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Royal College of Art have produced new taught courses. The relationship between academic history and museum practice, especially advanced in the United States, has also become a focus for new areas of scholarship and creative interaction.<sup>13</sup>

For the economic, social or urban historian the preoccupation with cultural production marks an ideological shift – a departure from economic determinism and a broadly left-wing approach towards alternative, often non-material explanations of historical change. There is also a shift away from statistical sources and scientific methodologies, towards narrative, and forms of interpretation that require visual or linguistic-literary skills. The new cultural history is overtly philosophical in its terms of reference, and since innovations in literary theory and philosophical methodology of the past twenty years have been dominated by Jacques Derrida – best known for his account of the meaning of language within its social context, and for the analytical technique known as 'deconstruction', pioneered in his influential text *Of Grammatology* – this has provided an inspiration to historians.<sup>14</sup> German-French intellectual developments beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century with Nietzsche, and extending through Heidegger to Foucault, have been especially powerful influences in the emergence of the new cultural history, but alternative approaches abound, some founded in mainstream philosophy, others in sociology, social anthropology or ethnography.<sup>15</sup> There is no overarching paradigm and no single grand narrative – at a basic level, anything goes. This particular manifestation of pluralism – a sort of cross-disciplinary mayhem – may be a response to newness and an early search for coherent direction, but it is also part of the organizing dynamic of the new cultural history, which adopts an anti-modernist position, rejects unifying theory, stresses the value of all approaches, and makes a virtue of diversity.

The playful eclecticism of the new cultural history was demonstrated to good effect in the April 1995 conference programme of the Interdisciplinary Nineteenth Century Studies group – an organization, according to its own promotional literature, of 'scholars in art history, cultural studies,

12 J. Brewer and R. Porter (eds), *Consumption and the World of Goods*, 2 vols (London, 1993).

13 C. Carson, 'City museums as history', *Journal of Urban History*, 18, 2 (1992), 183–91.

14 See, for example, G. Stedman-Jones, *The Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History 1832–1982* (Cambridge, 1983).

15 This diversity is addressed in Hunt, *The New Cultural History*.

history, literature, philosophy and related fields'. The conference, held in Santa Cruz, was devoted to the theme, 'The Nineteenth-Century City: Global Contexts, Local Productions' and dealt with such topics as Thackeray's London and the imperial culture of *Vanity Fair*; photography and the city; urban spectacles; sacred spaces in the city; bohemian life and many more. The museum and urban culture was one of the major themes of this meeting, and the essay by Nick Prior which is reproduced in the present volume was first presented at the Santa Cruz conference.

The thematic diversity of the Santa Cruz meeting highlights the extent to which the city can provide a valuable point of focus for many practitioners of the new cultural history. There are many reasons for this. Art, literature and music, as well as most types of decorative objects are produced in cities because it is here that one finds the concentrations of those wealthy individuals and institutions that provide the patronage or the commercial markets for such cultural production.<sup>16</sup> Cities can be viewed as a set of power relationships concentrated in a fixed geographical space. One of the abiding preoccupations of powerful individuals and institutions throughout history has been the desire to articulate an image of their own power for consumption in the present and for posterity, and this is commonly expressed through city building and urban art. To quote the late seventeenth-century French politician Colbert, 'in the absence of outstanding deeds of war, nothing marks the nobility of mind of princes better than the buildings which captivate and awe the people ...' Governments today seek to represent their power and prestige through urban buildings, as witnessed by the continuous process of innovation associated with the Louvre in Paris, and the spectacular Louvre-Tuileries complex, now extended to the Rond Point de la Défense. Other powerful groups in modern cities, particularly the industrialists and commercial giants, have signalled their claims to prestige through architecture.<sup>17</sup> Building design, public sculpture and city development have provided fertile ground for the new cultural history. Richard Sennet's *The Conscience of the Eye: the Design and Social Life of Cities*<sup>18</sup> is an exercise in intellectual eclecticism that has been especially influential among architects, historians and urban sociologists. This *tour de force*, the last and most challenging in his series of studies of urban culture, ranges from ancient Greece, through sixteenth-century Spain, to Simone Weil in the 1930s, and late twentieth-century New York. Its method and ambiguity exemplifies the spirit of the new cultural history. Not surprisingly, Richard Sennet gave the closing 'key-note' lecture at the Santa Cruz conference.

16 A good illustration is provided by D. H. Solkin, *Painting for Money, the Visual Arts and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven, 1992).

17 See D. T. Alessio, 'Capitalist realist art: industrial images of Hamilton, Ontario, 1884–1910', *Journal of Urban History*, 18, 4 (1992), 442–69.

18 R. Sennet, *The Conscience of the Eye: the Design and Social Life of Cities* (New York, 1991).

The importance of the city in the development of the new cultural history also arises from the fact that cities provide a residential focus for communities of artists and writers, and it is here that one finds their training schools, publishing and exhibiting networks, and such phenomena as café culture.<sup>19</sup> One of the most powerful inspirations for art and literature in the modern world has been the development of the mass experience of urban living.<sup>20</sup> Urban problems and the associated technical alienation that has accompanied modernism since the mid-nineteenth century have also provided a rich vein of creative responses in art, or literature, or music.<sup>21</sup> Many of these multiple themes were addressed last year at the 'Imagining the City' conference in Nottingham. Fifteen papers, mostly dealing with modern European topics, were presented to an audience comprising urban historians and scholars from a literary studies, fine art, music and cultural studies background. At times the gap between the urban historians and the rest seemed almost unbreachable, particularly since the linguistic conventions of the new cultural history are often obscure and difficult for the uninitiated, yet at the end there had clearly been an enlightening exchange of ideas and interests. Two papers addressed the relationship between the urban and music. Katherine Ellis (Open University), talked about Berlioz and his construction of an imaginary musical city called 'Euphonia', and Deon van Tonder (Africana Museum, Johannesburg) looked at the popular musical response to urban growth through the experience of black South Africans in post-war Johannesburg. Living on the margins of the city, as either the 'flâneur' or the working-class poor, produced papers from Giles Peaker (Derby) and Judy Rowbotham (Nottingham Trent). Several papers looked at aspects of art and literary production within a twentieth-century European context. Malcolm Gee (Northumbria) addressed the exciting phenomenon of Weimar Berlin and Deborah Lewer (Manchester) considered the Dada cabaret in Zurich during 1916. John House (Courtauld) gave a paper on Pissarro and his construction of an instantly identifiable image of Paris in the later nineteenth century, whereas Michael Phillips (Edinburgh) provided an account of William Blake's London. Urban images and ideals were addressed by Robert Tavernor (Edinburgh) who compared the work of Alberti and Le Corbusier, whilst Gervase Rosser (Oxford) looked at images and civic identity in English medieval towns.

A major theme of the conference, and the one that is reflected in the papers contained in this special edition, was concerned with the development of public art as an aspect of civic and national culture. This particular subject has been selected from the range of papers presented at

19 Described, for example, in J. Seed, 'Commerce and the liberal arts: the political economy of art in Manchester, 1775–1860', in Wolff and Seed, *The Culture of Capital*.

20 Examined so convincingly by S. Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: an Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (London, 1985).

21 See the many works that are cited by Gee and Steward in their account of art and the central European city, contained in this edition of *Urban History*.

Nottingham because it refers to a theme that is immediately accessible to historians with a direct interest in urban social and economic development, yet maintains a strong foot in the camp of the new cultural history. Jesús-Pedro Lorente provides a survey of national gallery development in Britain and France from the late eighteenth century, and the theme is developed by Nick Prior in his account of the National Gallery of Scotland and Scottish demand for art in the early nineteenth century. Dorothy Rowe shifts the focus towards the character and impact of a particular artistic and commercial event, the Berlin Trade Exhibition of 1896 and the influence and views of George Simmel. Late nineteenth-century Birmingham was a scene of remarkable creative endeavours connected to the fine arts, architecture and industrial design, and the reasons for this are explored in the next essay by Roy Hartnell. Finally, Malcolm Miles in his geographically wide-ranging essay writes from a present-centred perspective about the use of art in urban regeneration projects – a late twentieth-century preoccupation that mirrors the nineteenth-century concern with the use of art in the articulation of civic culture in cities like Birmingham, and finds parallels in some of the projects described by Lorente.

Prefacing the essays and providing a parallel to this introduction, is a short account by Malcolm Gee and Jill Steward of the development of the intellectual concern with the relationship between art and the modern city as seen through the eyes of practising art historians. Their discussion is placed within the context of an extended report on a conference held in Newcastle in September 1994, devoted to the theme 'Cultural Boundaries: the City in Central Europe since 1800', which attracted a number of distinguished participants with an art history background.

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