Origins, Imitation, Conventions
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For Anne, Tony, Sarah, and Jesse
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PREFACE

The following studies are based on articles and lectures written during the past decade,
since the publication of my earlier collection, Distance Points (MIT Press, 1991).

These studies reflect my—not always conscious—absorption of poststructuralist criticism
of the traditional historical-critical métier. Much of this is too pertinent to be ignored,
even by one whose age justifies a relaxed attitude toward seeking rebirth. My earlier
work, like that of so many of my contemporaries, was guided by a narrative that assumed
a development of the arts as they responded to social, economic, political, and cultural
changes. I articulated this view many years ago in an article entitled “Art and Evolution”
in Nature and the Art of Motion, ed. György Kepes [New York, 1965], 32–40. The idea
of progress—or at least of continuous steps away from the past—was intensified in the
romantic period, as art and criticism distanced themselves from the classical tradition (a
phenomenon discussed below in the essay “Imitation”). The idea gained momentum in
the age of modernism, intensifying the concept of an avant-garde (borrowed for the arts
by Saint-Simon from the military designation for small units that advanced beyond the main force) whose function was to lead the arts into new territory. The possibility that artists’ engagement with the past, which in many ways is inevitable, might also produce something desirable rarely occurred to writers of my generation.

The papers in the following pages center on the tension between the authority of the past—which may act not only as a restraint but also as a challenge and a stimulus—and the potentially liberating gift of invention. So the approach to history in these pieces, parallel in some respects to that of anthropology, addresses the ways in which artists and writers on art have related to and contended with ancestors and with established modes of representation as well as with contemporary experiences.

“Origins” in my title applies to the first four pieces collected here: studies of the earliest art history and criticism, the beginnings of architectural drawing in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, the first architectural photographs, and Leonardo da Vinci’s sketches for churches, the first in the Renaissance to propose supporting domes on sculpted walls and piers, anticipating the design of St. Peter in the Vatican and much of later ecclesiastical architecture.

“Origins” in this sense are innovations, more notable for their departure from than for their dependence on preceding modes. Thus the term avoids, I hope, the strictures of Michel Foucault and later Manfredo Tafuri (whom I regard as the outstanding architectural historian of our time) against the presumption that a historical event can be shown to have had its origins in certain preceding events. The achievements discussed in the essays on art history and criticism and on architectural photography were indebted to forms established previously in practices outside the fine arts—the former to those of ancient Roman rhetoric, the latter to representation in print media—and are therefore in part dependent on imitation. Only the achievement of architectural drawing was apparently without precedent; the architectural elevations and sections of the thirteenth century appeared as spontaneously as the theory of the solar system in the late Renaissance. But, as revealed in my final essay, once
these astonishing graphic inventions had been achieved, they immediately became conventions and resisted change over the centuries.

“Imitation,” described in the essay of that name, a key concept of ancient rhetoric, had a special meaning within the classical tradition. Prior to the modern era, whenever and wherever a type of representation in the arts already existed, it was virtually impossible for the artist not to be affected by it and in some way to relate to it. The concept of imitation, as applied to the relation of the artist to his or her forebears, however, did not involve either a suppression of individuality or a limitation on invention; it encouraged—even demanded—both, but with the understanding that the achievements of the past constituted a structure of support and a challenge. So the inventiveness discussed in the sixth through eleventh essays was built, both consciously and unconsciously, on what had survived from the past and was accessible in the present.

The graphic work of Leonardo da Vinci, the subject of the sixth essay, was a special case. Leonardo was virtually alone among artists of the Renaissance in his minimal engagement with ancient sculpture, architecture, and theoretical writing, yet his readings of ancient and medieval scientific and technological texts influenced his early theories and empirical investigations (which in some cases proved to be a detriment), and, like his contemporaries, he pursued ancient themes in figural studies. His anatomical, mechanical, and cartographical drawings anticipated major advances in graphic conventions but had no impact on his successors because they remained out of circulation in his notebooks and portfolios of drawings.

Though conventions are the exclusive concern only in the final essay of this book, they are an issue in many of the preceding ones. They function like languages in facilitating communication between the artist and the viewer, but they are both more universal (being readable by people in cultures whose languages differ) and more fixed (resisting regional and spontaneous variation that might diminish the clarity of their communication).
Earlier versions of the studies in this volume have been published as indicated below.

The categories of Origins, Imitation, and Conventions, then, are interactive; most acts of representation partake to some degree in all three.

I am grateful for a fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation in 1993 that helped me to develop studies on Renaissance criticism and art theory, and to my wife, Jill Slosburg-Ackerman, for keen criticism of each study and for enriching the text with her drawings. I want also to acknowledge the exceptionally helpful editing of Matthew Abbate and the enterprising contribution of my assistants, Kathleen Christian and David Karmon, for whom I wish and augur distinguished careers as teachers and scholars.
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On the Origins of Art History and Criticism
For there to be a history of art, art-making must be perceived as an activity distinct from other human activities and the sequence of past products of that activity as potentially exhibiting some describable pattern of change. These preconditions did not effectively exist in the Middle Ages, when art in the modern sense was rarely distinguished from other functional productions of shop artisans, and when there were not even names to differentiate classes or periods of artifacts of the past.

The history of modern art history begins in the Italian Renaissance, though with far-reaching dependence on ancient antecedents. But the achievement of a historical consciousness liberated from the unsophisticated mentality of the chronicler was a much more difficult task than we have realized. It remained undeveloped in antiquity and it was still inchoate in the mind of the Renaissance writer who is accepted as the father of modern art history, Giorgio Vasari.

The problem was that the most obvious aspect of works of art that could be represented as evolving or at least changing with time was their likeness to nature. History could be an account of the progressive conquering of obstacles—in Renaissance terminology, “difficulties”—to mimesis. The difficulties were overcome by inventions, of which an obvious example would be painter’s perspective; that meant that the history of art could be constructed on the kind of model later adopted for the history of science or of technology. This was consistent with the definition of *ars* in antiquity and the Middle Ages as “technique” or “craft.” That satisfied the ancient and pre-Vasarian writers, even though it must have been obvious to them that the works of art themselves were pursuing other, less mechanical and more resonant goals. But those goals were embodied in the artist’s imaginative reconstitution of nature, and in order for them first to be recognized and described and second to become the motivator of change, a new critical consciousness was required.¹ In one sense, this essay concerns the role of art criticism as the motivator of history.

A historical consciousness more subtle than the recognition of progress in mimesis or in the imitation of the antique first emerged in Vasari’s *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* of 1550, and more fully in the enlarged edition of 1568. It was manifested in
a nascent sense of individual and regional style that became the foundation of an exceptional hypothesis, that of a period style. These represent two distinct levels of ambition. Vasari’s predecessors could grasp the individuality of an artist by induction, without caring to formulate the style of a period. The concept of a period—a part from the gross distinctions of antiquity, darkness, and rebirth—was a historian’s invention, an artifact, an abstraction of certain features selected from individual instances.

Vasari’s style-determined period and sequence of periods have been the motivator of modern art history, and have been established as the only plausible way to construct an image of what has occurred over time in the production of what we call art. But while it is legitimate to see the invention of period style as historically important in the formation of modern historical practice, its relevance and utility probably ended with the eclipse of modernism. Contemporary art and criticism have made it no longer relevant, or possible.

The earliest Renaissance commentators on art have been keenly examined by Michael Baxandall in his book *Giotto and the Orators*, a fundamental study of humanist views on art and their relation to the classical rhetorical tradition. He begins with a fourteenth-century text, Filippo Villani’s *De origine civitatis Florentiae et eiusdem famosis civibus* of 1381–1382, which celebrates the distinguished citizens of the author’s city and reviews the painting of the preceding century in terms already suggested by Dante and Boccaccio.

So let it be proper for me ... to introduce here the excellent Florentine painters, men who have rekindled an art that was pale and almost extinguished. First among whom John, whose surname was Cimabue, summoned back with skill and talent the decayed art of painting, wantonly straying far from the likeness of nature. . . . After John, the road to new things now lying open, Giotto—who is not only by virtue of his great fame to be compared with the ancient painters but is even to be preferred to them for skill and talent, restored painting to its former worth. . . . for images formed by his brush agree so well with the lineaments of nature as to seem to the beholder to live and breathe. . . . Many people judge . . . that painters are of a talent no
lower than those whom the liberal arts have rendered magistri. As from a most copious and pure spring, glittering brooklets of painting followed from this admirable man and brought about an art of painting that was once more a zealous imitator of nature.

Villani’s passage continues with accounts of a number of more recent painters, stimulated by Giotto, who consolidated the salvation of the art. The whole sequence is presented in what Baxandall calls the Prophet-Savior-Apostle mode. It is not quite a historical method, but also it is not simply a medieval chronicle; the metaphors—the road to new things that lies open, the brooklets issuing from a spring—suggest a new ambition, to give the sequence of events a common purpose. This common purpose is to explore all aspects of the imitation of nature, an undertaking so demanding that those who succeed in it must be regarded as the equal to university graduates in the liberal arts. From the very start, the new effort to endow art with its own history is linked with the identification of a category of craftsmen as fine artists, and with their social empowerment—their escape from the guild and the stigma of belonging to the artisan class. What is notable in this passage is not only that painters are represented as equivalent to scholars, but that they appear in a chronicle of contemporary events, which implies that their works are historical events.

The most ample model for this proto–art history and for the motivating mechanism of mimesis had been found in the accounts of Pliny the Elder, written as a section of his encyclopedic Natural History in the first century A.D., where one artist after another surpasses his predecessors in achievement measured by the attainment of verisimilitude. Pliny’s account, which had been known in the Middle Ages, did provide a working vocabulary for the discussion of painting and sculpture, which Lorenzo Ghiberti appropriated in his Commentarii. Pliny’s evolutionary historical framework was implicit in his simplistic conception of the aims of art: since art moved ahead as it came closer to nature, it could be discussed in the same way as the history of technology, each successive achievement representing an advance toward a goal and in some way rendering its predecessors obsolete.
Pliny's lengthy chronicle had been anticipated in a paragraph written two generations earlier by Cicero, who contributed perhaps more than any ancient writer to the formation of Renaissance art historical consciousness. E. H. Gombrich has called attention to this passage in Cicero's *Brutus*, an essay on oratorical style, which was to be lifted essentially verbatim by Vasari in the preface to the second section of his *Lives*.

*What critic who devotes himself to the lesser arts does not recognize that the statues of Canachus are too rigid to reproduce the truth of nature? The statues of Calamis again are still hard, and yet softer than those of Canachus. Not even Myron achieved enough truth though one would not hesitate to call his work beautiful. Still more beautiful are the works of Polycleitus, and in my opinion, even quite perfect. The same may be seen in painting . . . and I take it to be true of all the other arts.*

An important difference between the antique historical models and Villani, and subsequently Vasari, is that the ancients represented only a steady forward progress (Pliny, writing centuries after the perfection of Polycleitos, wrote: “Art has made extraordinary progress, in technique first and afterwards in audacity”), while Villani and Vasari recognized that something had happened after the moment of perfection which, while it was not exactly a decline, was primarily an exploitation of the achievements of the great master or masters.

There are numerous texts in Pliny and other writers on ancient art intended to illustrate the achievement of perfect mimesis. In one, horses led past a series of horse paintings submitted to a competition neighed only at that of Apelles. In a competition between Zeuxis and Parrhasios, the former exhibited a picture of grapes so convincing that birds flew onto the stage to peck at them; elated by this verdict, he turned to his rival and asked him to remove the curtain that covered his work, and was told that the curtain was the work. Zeuxis forthwith ceded the palm, saying that it was far more prestigious to deceive a painter than a bird. Stories of this kind, which are mythical in character, must have lingered on from an earlier time when artists were simply craftsmen, either