

Faithful to their main aim of proselytizing for a new interdisciplinary point of view, the contributors do their best to steer clear of numerous methodological hazards. This means they gloss over some serious problems with sources—like proverb collections obviously compiled by male chauvinists or medical advertisements apparently made up of commonplace rhetorical formulae. Contributors also avoid tangling with the theoretical side of the various collateral disciplines they draw upon. This usually works, since they leave out the most troublesome—namely, communications theory, psycholinguistics, and literary criticism—and adopt others for inspiration about what problems to examine rather than for lessons on how to find solutions (none of them, e.g., is a structuralist, a semiotician, or a quantifier). Yet they sometimes run into a few difficulties with this approach. One is a certain confusion about what exactly their common object is. Outram carefully delimits “discourse” as a complex of both aural and visual signs used for conveying a single clearly defined set of meanings. The other contributors adopt the term “language” instead. This appears to establish some common ground between those of them who examine the uniquely oral sets of signs—such as proverbs—to which the term “language” usually refers and those who examine uniquely visual sets of signs—such as medical advertisements. This usage also incorporates what is sometimes called “the language”—that is, French, German, and so forth. But if the new subdiscipline must cover every case where signs are used to convey meaning, its purview is broad indeed. Another difficulty is that they sometimes let the theoretical issues go begging. Here is an example. Most of them shape their accounts according to the model of Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault, which says dominant social groups establish hegemony by controlling discourse; indeed, Burke, arbitrarily excluding other models, calls this one “common-sense” (p. 14). Outram claims French revolutionaries adopted their peculiar rhetoric to keep women in their place; and Burke claims sixteenth-century Italian governments and the Counter-Reformation church tried to extend literacy as an instrument of political and intellectual control. Only one contributor questions the power of discourse to effect a group’s hegemonical programs: Jonathan Steinberg, who illustrates the failure of attempts at national unification through linguistic homogeneity in nineteenth-century Continental Europe. And only one adopts the whole of the model proposed by the theorists: McKenzie, who shows that the English missionaries were completely unaware of having hoodwinked the aborigines into submitting to British rule by superimposing their own written forms of consensus, inflexible and legally binding, upon existing traditional ones, flexible and ad hoc. As Foucault and Bourdieu note with irony, the same transcendent force may constrain conquerors and conquered. Rather than joining disciplines, then, this book succeeds in joining historians of many different kinds; and in doing so it argues strongly for an increased sensitivity to the role of language in every period and area specialty.

BRENDAN DOOLEY

Institute for Advanced Study

A Social History of Modern Art. Volume 1: Art in an Age of Revolution, 1750–1800. By *Albert Boime*.

Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987. Pp. xxviii + 522. \$35.00.

This first volume in a projected series that will eventually reach the art of our time offers a thorough discussion of the painting produced in France and England, and, more succinctly, in Italy and the United States. Remarks on sculpture, prints, and

drawings, occasionally on architecture and the decorative arts, are included to give strength to a particular point or if these domains happen to be central to the work of an artist (e.g., Blake). Rather than the specific history of the different arts, the shared affinities of the diverse creative modes during the period are stressed, with the help of comparative illustrations that are particularly suggestive. The overall impression of fifty years of intense creativity and production is perfectly conveyed.

An immediate question concerns the book's status with respect both to general surveys and to studies focused on a particular artist or period. At a glance, it is obvious that Boime's is not a picture book; it has only some 250 small grayish reproductions and a darkly colored dust cover. The compact text that runs with sustained energy for almost five hundred pages is manifestly the backbone to which the illustrations are appended, in marked distinction from those surveys that give the impression of padding an album of color plates with narrative. Yet it is not so much the tight half-century scope of the book that distinguishes it from the national or world histories of art that feed the university introductory art course market, but the author's relation to his sources. Understandably, general texts tend to rely only on secondary sources and, at best, diffuse the most recent state of art historical scholarship and concerns. Boime's ambition is singular in that he often cites early printed sources, which manage to confer the aura of original research to parts of his book. The principles guiding this practice, however, are not apparent: one artist (Canova) might be credited with a very skimpy bibliography, while another (David) is graced with references to publications that only specialists are inclined or meant to read. Bothersome here is not the paternity or originality of thought but the difficulty the reader often has in placing the author's positions within the current debates that permit a critical appreciation. The abundance of the information Boime has assembled is impressive, but at times he sets into motion so many elements in a commentary that he seems to lose control of his argument. In the course of a discussion of David's *Oath of the Horatii*, by far his longest remarks on an individual work (pp. 391–404), various connections are made between the painting and Rousseau's *Social Contract*, Corneille's *Horatii*, the early death of the artist's father, Robespierre's longing in 1784 for a social organization based on merit, the popular American myth of Superman, Füssli's politics, sexual roles in late eighteenth-century France, social psychology in wartime, the group dynamics of the Ku Klux Klan, the distinctive signs of German fascism, the historical events of 1787–89, "inner necessity," and, last but not least in the author's mind, bourgeois disdain for the laboring classes. Boime's bet is that the plurality of these connections, clearly in some instances barely more than personal free associations, will stimulate the reader. The tactic is heavy-handed and questionable, but not unsympathetic: rarely does a historian dare to put his subjectivity up front in his text with such candid directness, and rarely does an art historian give such a shake-up to the object of his study.

The title of the series, as Boime declares in his introduction, echoes the *Social History of Art* published in 1951 by Arnold Hauser. He admires the "sweep" of this antecedent enterprise but finds it "flawed by its inevitable overgeneralizations and a lack of regard for individual artists and their works" (p. xxiii). This remark raises two fundamental questions of method which Boime tends to confront only empirically: the relation between a proximate and any wider context for the specific work of art, and the historical integration of the visual information it can provide.

From the start, Boime makes clear his dependence on Eric Hobsbawm's *The Age of Revolution*, first published in 1962; the pages on the Industrial Revolution in England (pp. 191–94), for example, are simply lifted from this source. Claiming straightfor-

wardly to base his work on the standard Marxist construct of class conflict, Boime has no apparent interest in the discussions that have been going on for the last twenty years on the social dynamics of the French Revolution. As he delivers information on the artists and their patrons, it is no surprise to see that he is led to admit ruefully that more often than not they appear to be a "bundle of contradictions" (e.g., pp. 162, 412, 416, 418). Hobsbawm's book and available historical discussions of particular subjects serve Boime less as structuring or documentary models to be tested than as a means to preestablish a fixed course for his narrative, from which he is regularly sidetracked by his engrossment in the study of individual works and artists and to which he returns rather perfunctorily when concluding. Intent on "moving beyond stylistic divisions and viewing developments in terms of major historical epochs" (p. xx), he is little concerned with the methodological difficulties involved in the relation between social facts and pictorial particularities that have keenly preoccupied Michael Baxandall, among others. Boime gives a particularly refreshing account of the commercial operations of Grand Tour neoclassicism, but he misses the "business of the Enlightenment," which might have been treated by mention of the market for busts of *philosophes* cornered in Europe by Houdon.

In spite of Boime's declared intention to document the repercussions of the times upon the artists of the period and to minimize considerations of style, more than half the book is presented as a demonstration of "how neoclassicism became the visual language of the dual revolution" (p. 183). This assertion is questionable for all but "privileged strata of society" which the author had planned to keep out of the limelight—but few prints or examples of popular art are seriously considered in a book which, in this respect, largely shares the bias of mainstream taste in its choice of artists. The provocative and risky notion that all image making has a potential interest for the art historian (pp. xxi, xxv) is regrettably not given a place to work itself out in the book. Since its writing (1985), the attention given by historians to French revolutionary prints and popular culture has opened perspectives on the art of the period that would probably have facilitated the realization of this aspect of Boime's initial project.

With respect to visual analysis, the commentary rarely aspires to the determined reading of historical meaning in the countless visual signs that constitute a painting that has characterized the work of T. J. Clark, to which Boime renders homage. In a volume of this scope any extended visual commentary was certainly not feasible, but the idiosyncratic nature of Boime's remarks on the execution of individual works betrays their marginal importance within the author's narrative. It is paradoxical that the price of demystification—"a work of art is the result of thousands of decisions made by the artist under the pressure of a community in which he or she participates" (p. xx)—should be such a reserved attitude toward the visual materiality of the object.

Boime evokes the "specifically radical" postwar context for Hauser's text with evident nostalgia: his book is written with the thrust and impulse of a pamphlet. He seizes every occasion to lay bare his positions within his own political environment. In this sense, his is an undertaking that has the grandeur of one of those *textes d'époque* that historians are so keen to study when, with the passing of time, the spirit of a period comes into focus.

PHILIPPE BORDES

Musée de la Révolution Française, Vizille