

# *Perspective*

*actualité en histoire de l'art*

*Anachronisms, no. 2025 – 2*



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Suzanne Husky, *La Noble  
Pastorale. Non aux grands projets  
inutiles*, 2016-2017, Jacquard  
tapestry, 203 × 247 cm.  
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**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.

The journal publishes texts with an emphasis on current questions that drive research in art history and neighboring disciplines, particularly those that speak to all of us as citizens. Each article thus calls creating links with the great societal and intellectual debates of our time.

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In 2008, *Perspective* published an issue on periodisation in art history. In his introduction, Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann noted the “discontents” expressed since the 1960s by art historians like Ernst Gombrich with regard to sweeping western approaches that classified artworks and artists in successive stylistic periods and even based the discipline on these temporal and formal categories (DACOSTA KAUFMANN, [2008] 2010). This re-assessment concerned universalist systems such as those of Heinrich Wölfflin, Wilhelm Worringer and Henri Focillon at a time when research was generally moving towards a fragmentation and specialisation of analyses. The globalisation of the discipline called for putting modern European periodisation schemes into perspective, while the spread of iconology and the social history of art encouraged researchers to circumscribe their approaches to specific cultures. Each scholar is thus a specialist for a historically determined and geographically situated period with specific principles of intelligibility, such as Michael Baxandall’s concept of the “period eye” demonstrated so admirably in the 1970s (BAXANDALL, 1972). These critical approaches have served to call into question the 19th-century “historism” that confused the scholars’ temporal categories with the historical phenomena themselves, just as they have redefined periods as designations of time, or “chrononyms” (KALIFA, 2016a-b and 2020). In practice, however, it is clear that the period remains more than ever the temporal unit within which we conceive art history and study it.

That said, other voices had also been raised in history, philosophy and art history to deconstruct in epistemological terms the practice of historical research based on periodization. Even if the subject of anachronism in art history emerged much earlier (LA SIZERANNE, 1894), for reasons that merit further consideration, it genuinely became worthy of interest for the epistemology of the historical sciences at the turn of the 21st century. Thus, the historian Nicole Loraux, the philosopher Jacques Rancière, and art historians Georges Didi-Huberman, Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood have all drawn attention – for different reasons – to the interest of

anachronism as a method. The challenge is considerable: anachronism in history has been denounced at least since the 17th century, when French theologian and orator Jacques Bénigne Bossuet defined it as “the confusion of time”, just as historian Marc Bloch was to characterise it nearly three centuries later as “the most unpardonable of sins in a time-science” (BLOCH, [1949] 1984, p. 173). Indeed, the error that (art) historians want to avoid at all costs is that of imposing the ideas, categories and judgments of their present on the societies of the past. According to historical doxa, anachronism is at best a necessary evil; we cannot avoid speaking on the basis of our language, culture and present and we will never be able to put ourselves in the place of a 15th-century viewer and look at Botticelli with a Quattrocento eye. But we can attempt to reconstruct a visual experience from the past, to produce a representation that is as faithful as possible, as Baxandall maintains. Loraux, meanwhile, defends “a controlled use of anachronism”, on the principle that history should be a dynamic narrative going from the present to the past (by raising contemporary questions) and from the past back to the present, “weighed down with ancient problems” (LORAUX, [1992] 2004). It is more interesting, for example, to understand which Greek problems survive in today’s democracy than to examine the “modern” aspects of ancient Greek democracy, for such an approach would allow us to trace the phenomena of repetition throughout the historical periods and undertake an ethical consideration of the preventive or restorative virtues of anachronism. For his part, Rancière believes that the rejection of anachronism by historical doxa is the result of a rhetoric intended, on the one hand, to hide the historians’ construction of the past in order to assert their objectivity and, on the other, to make each period a cultural totality from which its members cannot escape (RANCIÈRE, [1996] 2015). From this perspective, the accusation of anachronism would be a political instrument aimed at disqualifying historical counter-narratives coming from marginalised minority groups. Rancière believes that, on the contrary, it is necessary to examine how, within each period and culture, “anachronies”, or forms of resistance to the dominant zeitgeist, manifest themselves. Didi-Huberman, meanwhile, starts out from a philosophy of the image which, by its very nature, would be anachronic or “dialectical” (to use Walter Benjamin’s term), in other words, always torn between the present and the past (DIDI-HUBERMAN, 2000 and 2003). The role of art history is precisely to study how images manifest this double temporality by breaking up the chronological series or the unity of the periods and proceeding by montage, in the manner of Aby Warburg in his *Mnemosyne Atlas*. Nagel and Wood, last of all, approach anachronism as a montage of temporalities within the historical cultures themselves and the artworks belonging to them. Their book *Anachronic Renaissance* thus shows that artists and scholars of that time continuously associated forms and references from different eras and that these kinds of temporal associations are what characterise the period (NAGEL, WOOD, 2020).

There are several reasons motivating us to come back to these debates today. First, it is worth pursuing the reflection on the use of periodisation in art history because, as widespread as it remains, it is hardly questioned in practice. How can we explain, for example, that in French universities, the history of “contemporary art” covers a period beginning in the 19th century, while in museums, “contemporary” designates the 1960s on? More generally, it is striking to observe that art history still makes frequent use of concepts such as “Renaissance”, “medieval art” and “prehistoric art” that were forged two centuries ago. Are these anachronisms re-examined today?

Second, the linear model of time which underlies traditional historical classification in the West is now confronted with other cultures of time, as

brought out by decolonial studies (WAINWRIGHT, 2011) and certain trends in anthropology (DETIENNE, [2000] 2008). How do these practices affect the understanding or presentation of the art objects? In addition, the flourishing of feminist or queer approaches in art history (POLLOCK, 2007; SULLIVAN, MIDDLETON, 2020) in recent years has provoked as many re-evaluations of the ways of writing about art as criticisms of their pretended anachronism (in the same way that Marxist art history was accused of anachronism fifty years ago). How do the protagonists of these methods reply to such criticisms, which often imply a political point of view? To what extent can we develop Giovanna Zapperi's argument, based on her research on feminist art critic Carla Lonzi, that these approaches promote a "discontinuous and nonlinear" conception of art history, where the montage of artworks and images offers a fundamental method (ZAPPERI, [2012] 2019, p. 51)? What forms of research, teaching or museography forego the traditional (i.e., chronological) way of presenting images and artworks and invent other methods of giving them meaning? Museums would seem to play a crucial role here, given that presentations based on temporal montages go back to the post-war period (SCARPA, 2014) and probably much earlier (we might even think of ancient Greek sanctuaries as anachronistic proto-museums). But within this kind of approach with overtly political stakes, there are also studies that assert the interest of the non-anachronistic reading of art history. It might thus be possible to distinguish the anachronistic methods, which still need periods as backgrounds, from transhistorical approaches, which compare objects from different periods.

Third, in the wake of Rancière, and Nagel and Wood, what are the studies, that address historical anachronies? We can cite, for example, those carried out in recent years on modern and contemporary perceptions of prehistoric art (LABRUSSE, 2019; STAVRINAKI, [2019] 2022) and "medievalisms" (POWELL, 2012; DENOËL *et al.*, 2023), as well as the crucial role of the 19th century, with the triumph of both chronological historicism and all the "neo-" styles. There are also studies and exhibitions on anachronisms in popular visual cultures and film (VALANCE, ZHURAULOVA, 2002), or paleofuturism and the imaginaries of the future (as attested by the period room on Afrofuturism at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York). This issue of *Perspective* will attempt to make an initial assessment of these efforts.

To this end, three main topics emerge for proposed articles:

1

### **DISCIPLINARY ANACHRONISMS**

Investigations of the anachronisms that implicitly or unconsciously inform the categories currently employed in art history and archaeology in order to understand why they are still operative and determine whether it is possible to break with them and substitute other classifications.

2

### **METHODOLOGICAL ANACHRONISMS**

Studies and museographical approaches, drawing on other disciplines or not, which accept certain forms of anachronism and propose non-linear art history narratives.

3

### **HISTORICAL ANACHRONISMS**

Analyses of the anachronistic configurations produced by artists and observable in collective visual cultures, ancient and recent.

[English translation: Miriam Rosen]

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Editor: Thomas Golsenne (INHA)

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Editorial board members [here](#).

Please note: Proposals are expected to be grounded in a historiographical, methodological or epistemological perspective. A summary of 200-500 words/ 2,000-3,000 characters, a working title, a short bibliography on the subject and a brief biography should be sent to the editors ([revue-perspective@inha.fr](mailto:revue-perspective@inha.fr)).

**Proposal deadline: 17 June 2024.**

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 **July 2024**. The full articles (4,000-7,500 words/25,000-45,000 characters, depending on the nature of the project) must be received by **1 December 2024**. These will be accepted in final form after an anonymous peer-review process.

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