These are my synopses and thoughts on certain essays in John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*. Although the work consists of 7 essays, I will not be discussing the 3 pictorial essays, nor the 7th essay as it focuses on more contemporary advertising. (Available at: https://www.ways-of-seeing.com/)

1: "If we can see the present clearly enough, we shall ask the right questions of the past"

Berger's first essay is itself based on *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* by Walter Benjamin. (Available at: https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/benjamin.pdf)

Synopsis:

Seeing is the purest most fundamental way to experience. However, how we see is affected by what we believe.

Whilst we see, we are also seen, and this "reciprocal nature of vision" is more fundamental to seeing than to speaking—we use dialogue to verbalise how we see, and to ascertain how others see.

An image embodies a "way of seeing", for example, a painter's "way of seeing" is reflected in how they mark the canvas to produce their image. The more imaginative a work, the more it tells us about the artist's experience and perceptions.

The vision of the image-maker was not always considered part of the recorded image, however, since the Renaissance period an image has become a record of how X saw Y. This stems from an increasing "consciousness of individuality" and growing "awareness of history".

Our perception of an image depends on our own way of seeing, as well as our assumptions about beauty, form, taste, and civilisation. These assumptions obscure the past, which is a "well of conclusions from which we draw in order to act". Mystification of the past leads to works of art becoming "unnecessarily remote" and a lesser ability to draw conclusions from the past. Mystification is the process of explaining away what might otherwise be evident.

History constitutes the relation between a present and past. The fact that comparison can still be made indicates that "we still live in a society of comparable social relations and moral values". "If we can see the present clearly enough, we shall ask the right questions of the past."

From our position in the present we perceive art in a different way. During the Renaissance the convention of perspective was centered on the eye of the beholder. “The visible world is arranged for the spectator as the universe was once thought to be arranged for God.”

The camera destroyed the idea that images were timeless. “The uniqueness of every painting was once part of the uniqueness of the place where it resided”. However, with the advent of photographic reproduction, and television, a single image “enters a million other houses and, in each of them, is seen in a different context.”, and so, “the uniqueness of the original now lies in it being the original of a reproduction.”

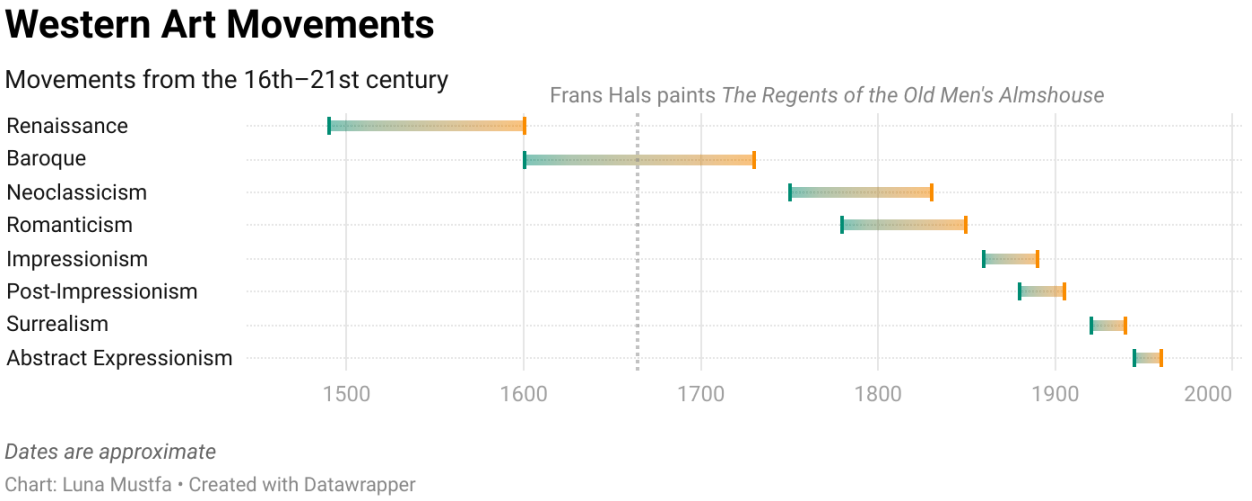
This shift also transformed how the meaning of a work is understood. “The meaning of the original work no longer lies in what it uniquely says but in what it uniquely is.”. “It is authentic and therefore it is beautiful.”

Thoughts:

I interpreted the first portion of this essay as suggesting that sight is the most fundamental way to experience, in the sense that, as a way to experience, seeing is the fullest way to experience reality—not the most accurate. In fact we must reconcile what we see to happen and what we know to happen.

The idea that our own way of seeing impacts our perceptions is hard to disagree with, although, I think, broadly overlooked. The contextual lens through which we see art is evermore relevant—as we move increasingly further from the time of, to use Berger's own example Frans Hals', *The Regents of the Old Men's Almshouse*.[1]

[1] https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/regents-of-the-old-men-s-alms-house-frans-hals/PgFyDj6nLAmfjQ?hl=en (Accessed: 22 January 2025)



Analysis of paintings deals in fact, often focusing on the life of the artist, in an effort to provide much needed historical context. The most interpretive analysis touches on potential symbolic meaning—but never on how the piece should make you feel. There is no objective analysis on the emotional impact of art. This is no mistake as, after all, our own "way of seeing" is deeply impactful to how we understand art.

Herein lies the issue. We reside in the present, and our experiences in this present shape our way of seeing. We bring this present "way of seeing" with us even as we attempt to position ourselves in the past and experience works like *The Regents of the Old Men's Almshouse* in their most original capacity. An example particularly supportive of this issue is Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights*.[2] This work is widely accepted to be a moral and religious allegory, but today no one could be blamed for seeing an erotic and hedonistic piece with its abundant nudity and scenes of indulgence, a celebration of sensuality rather than the condemnation of sin that late-mediaeval Christian theologians would have seen.

This modern impression; a more secular, hedonistic reading is a result of mystification from Dalíesque imagery, reframing the painting as an exploration of the subconscious and distancing itself from its religious roots. This combined with a lack of familiarity with the symbolic language of mediaeval christianity masks a late 15th century understanding.

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2 https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/the-garden-of-earthly-delights-hieronymus-van-aken-aka-bosch/EwHP5mUuUOzqVg?hl=en (Accessed: 22 January 2025)

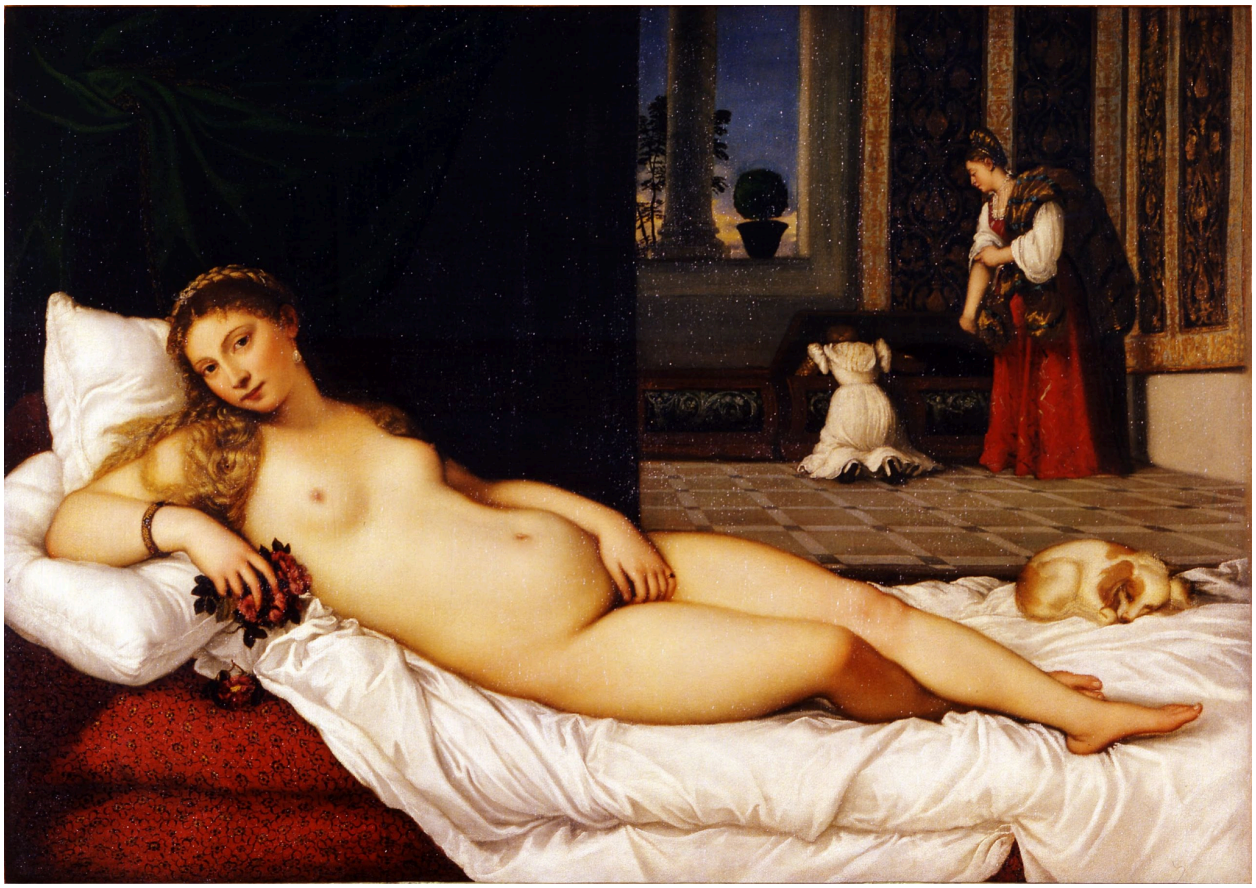
Berger's statement "History always constitutes the relation between a present and its past" drew me to consider the importance of the ever-present effect of applying our own modern assumptions about beauty, form, taste, and society.

There is a credible abstraction from building upon the idea that "we still live in a society of comparable social relations and moral values". In the words of Isaiah Berlin, "to foresee the future is to confuse the future with the present". In the future will there be comparable social relations and moral values? Already there is a disconnect between past and present—how this disconnect grows will impact how future generations interpret art, but is this actually a problem?

Contemporary analysts might suggest that increasing historical and cultural difference enriches interpretation. Berger himself stated that "today we see the art of the past as nobody saw it before. We actually perceive it in a different way." However, he might also argue that as time passes the chance for mystification to occur grows. Berger explains mystification as a mechanism by which evident truths are deliberately obscured to serve ideological or institutional interests. Mystification reframes what could be understood through direct experience or historical context into abstract terms, alienating the observer and assigning the interpretive authority to a select few. By detaching art from its historical context, for example, in the case of *The Regents of the Old Men's Almshouse*, the economic or social context of a work's creation, mystification upholds existing power structures and diminishes a viewer's capacity for personal interpretation. This idea reinforces the necessity

of demystifying art to allow individuals to more deeply connect with it without the mystification of institutionalised narratives.

Whilst I can argue for this point, I think there is an almost conspiratorial angle to the idea. In the last century alone, significant social-political ideological changes have altered the lens through which we view art. This can be illustrated when discussing the feminist movement's impact on Titian's 1538 commission *Venus of Urbino*.[3]



Venus of Urbino was likely commissioned as a celebration of marriage, love, and fertility. The reclining figure of Venus in a context that emphasised her beauty and sensuality—symbols of idealised femininity as well as her direct gaze and the intimate domestic setting articulate notions of marital intimacy and wifely virtues.

During the 1970s and 80s critique of patriarchal constructs in art began to emerge—Charles Hope directly discussed *Venus of Urbino* and Titian's similar works noting

[3] https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/venus-of-urbino-tiziano-vecellio/bQGS8pnP5vr2Jg?hl=en (Accessed: 22 January 2025)

that they often portrayed women as passive subjects, aligning with societal structures that objectified women for visual consumption.[4]

Laura Mulvey's 1975 essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (which developed the concept of the "male gaze") provides a framework for analysing how visual arts position women as objects for male viewers, and while Mulvey originally addressed film, her principles have often been applied to paintings, including *Venus of Urbino*.[5] Increasingly reinterpreted as a reflection of patriarchal norms, where the female body is idealised as a commodity for a male audience, the reclining nude in *Venus of Urbino* now reflects an archetype of women positioned as objects within an androcentric artistic sphere. The direct gaze of Venus, a focal point for critique, can be interpreted as reinforcing the (assumedly male) observer's role as the subject controlling the narrative.

Therefore, whilst originally perhaps a celebration of marital sensuality, today *Venus of Urbino* might be critiqued as a representation of patriarchal beauty standards or even, somewhat alternatively, celebrated as a reclamation of female agency, depending entirely on the lens used.

In the way that the lens (or "way of seeing") of the observer changes how the work is perceived, Berger's suggestion that the words surrounding reproductions of painting change the image has, to me, much credibility after my visit to Sir John Soane's Museum—which lacks labels or panels, allowing a visitor to draw their own inspiration from the museum.[6]

My final thought on Berger's first essay is related to his position on the uniqueness of original works of art. I do understand and, in part, agree with the sentiment that most people experiencing (original) paintings have seen the piece before, and as such the painting is reframed as an "original of a reproduction".

The idea that seeing a painting for the first time has fundamentally changed is, to me, best exemplified in Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*. Whilst the work exists as an original in the Louvre, its cultural significance has been largely transformed by reproductions of this original. Most people who know the Mona Lisa have encountered it in digital images, books, or, perhaps, novelty t-shirts and mugs. These reproductions maintain their own meanings—entirely removed from the context of the 16th century. Through these

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[4] Hope, C. (1980). *Problems of Interpretation in Titian's erotic Paintings*. Tiziano e Venezia. (Available in the Warburg Institute Library but apparently nowhere online)

[5] Miller, M. M. (2021). *Titian's Venus of Urbino: A Comprehensive Art Historical Study with an Interpretive Consideration*. Available at: https://www.proquest.com/openview/4f78c3cb0c1973127c10db74e12ec00b/1?cbl=18750&diss=y&pq-origsite=gscholar (Accessed: 22 January 2025)

[6] Willkens, D.S. (2016) *Reading Words and Images in the Description(s) of Sir John Soane's Museum*. Architectural Histories, 4(1), p.5. Available at: https://journal.eahn.org/article/id/7514/ (Accessed 22 January 2025)

reproductions the *Mona Lisa* has become less of an Italian Renaissance masterpiece and more of a generic symbol of classical art, commodified and removed of its historical context.

When viewing any original work in person, the experience is affected by our own "way of seeing". The original no longer exists as a purely unique work; instead acting as a reference point for its reproductions. This reframing aligns with Berger's argument that, in modernity, the value of an "original" is shaped as much by its physical presence as by the nature of its originality (and market value!).

3: "To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognised for oneself"

Synopsis:

Men and women have a different kind of social presence. A man's presence is always (outwardly) directed toward a power which he exercises on others, whereas a woman's presence expresses her own (inward) attitude to herself. A man's presence suggests what he is capable of doing to or for others, whereas a woman's defines what can or cannot be done to her, revealing an asymmetry in perception.

A woman's self is divided into two distinct parts. She is, alongside herself, "accompanied by her own image of herself"—the surveyor and the surveyed. This surveyor in herself is male, through whom she turns herself into an object—a sight. This internalised male gaze shapes her behavior and self-perception. Men look at women, and women watch themselves being looked at. This dynamic reinforces the idea that women exist to be observed, while men retain the power to act.

Western artistic tradition reflects this divide. Nude paintings depict a female subject aware of being seen. She is not merely naked—she is presented as an object for the spectator's gaze. Her nudity is not an expression of self but a performance for an external viewer.

"To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognised for oneself." A naked body becomes a nude when it is transformed into an object to be seen. In European oil paintings, the nude subject is not the protagonist—this role belongs to the spectator, assumed to be male. Figures are often contorted to be on display to this viewer.

Even when a male lover appears in these paintings, the woman rarely acknowledges him; instead, she continues to engage the spectator. The male lover does not challenge the gaze but rather invites identification, reinforcing the viewer's authority.

Broadly, the principal protagonist is not depicted; he exists outside the canvas as the clothed spectator, to whom the scene is addressed. This absence, somewhat paradoxically, affirms his presence, with the painting's entire composition structured around his gaze.

Nudity, then, is not so much a state of being but a form of disguise. The woman is adorned with her own exposure, her nudity crafted to feed an appetite rather than express individuality.

One can observe this reality in nineteenth-century academic art, such as William Bouguereau's *Les Oréades*, where nude paintings serve to reaffirm male identity and dominance.[7] They function as a reassurance of male authority, reinforcing traditional gender roles, and reminding men of their position.

The tradition of nudity in European oil painting presents a contradiction. It is often framed as an "admirable expression of the European humanist spirit," a celebration of individualism. Yet, while the artist asserts his own subjectivity, the female figure is denied hers—she exists solely as an aesthetic object.

[7] https://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/artworks/les-oreades-153688 (Accessed: 16 February 2025)

This structure persists in the consciousness of many women. As a result, they do to themselves what men do to them: they survey their own femininity. The internalised male gaze ensures that women continue to monitor their appearance, preemptively shaping themselves to fit external expectations.

Women are depicted differently from men, not due to inherent differences in masculinity and femininity, but because the 'ideal' spectator is always assumed to be male. This assumption not only dictates how women are represented but also conditions how they present themselves in society.

Thoughts:

One consideration I would like to make is for the tradition of the nude in European oil painting as a contradiction. I would argue Renaissance and post-Renaissance humanism is one of the key ideals placed under scrutiny in Berger's third essay.

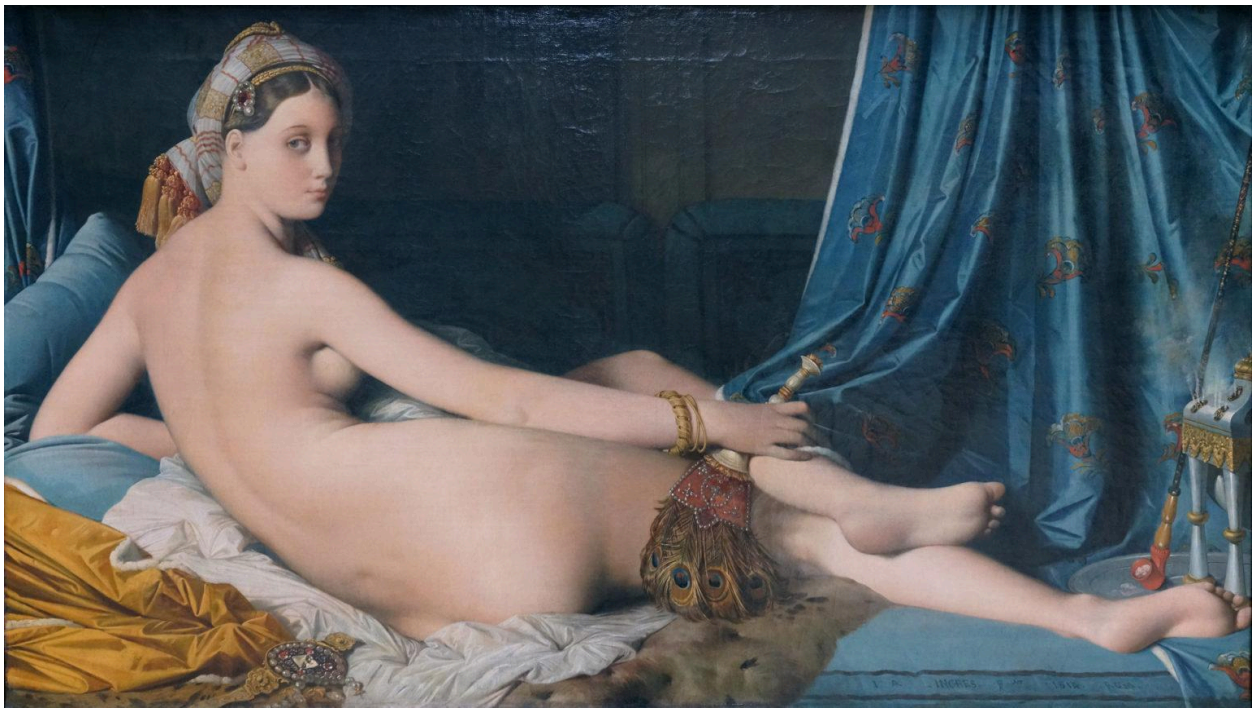
Humanism, in this historical context, describes the intellectual movement that emerged during the Renaissance which emphasises the value, beauty, and dignity of humans. The movement focused on individual potential, classical antiquity, and rational understanding. Directly translating these ideals into art led to a revival of idealising representations of the human form, inspired by Greco-Roman sculpture, in which the nude had become a symbol of beauty, knowledge, and philosophical ideals.

I interpreted Berger's argument as suggesting this humanist approach was often a guise for a more objectifying and possessive gaze. It can be interpreted that the European tradition of the nude in oil painting, while framed as a celebration of humanist ideals, was in practice deeply tied to male spectatorship, where the female body was displayed for the pleasure of a male viewer rather than as an autonomous subject in her own right.

In this regard, the humanist spirit Berger mentions is both an ideological justification for the tradition of nude painting and, almost paradoxically, a framework that enabled the continued objectification of women as the embodiment of artistic ideals in contemporary culture.

Despite this, I'd broadly like to focus my analysis on nineteenth-century academic art. In *Ways of Seeing*, Berger argues that these paintings functioned as tools of patriarchal reinforcement in male-dominated spaces like state and business. The quote—"Men of state, of business, discussed under paintings like this. When one of them felt he had been outwitted, he looked up for consolation. What he saw reminded him that he was a man"—highlights how such art reaffirmed male identity and dominance.

The nude female figure, objectified and passive, contrasted with the active, clothed male spectator, who derived a sense of authority from his position as the "ideal viewer". This dynamic directly reflected societal norms where men occupied public decision-making positions, while women were relegated to aestheticised roles. It is not difficult to argue that this persists in contemporary culture. In her 1988 piece *Vision and Difference* Griselda Pollock highlights that nineteenth-century bourgeois spaces, such as government offices and boardrooms, often displayed nudes to symbolise male control over both art and society—directly supporting and celaborating on Berger's statement. These images served to reinforce the exclusion of women from power.[8] Similarly, Carol Duncan's 1993 *The Aesthetics of Power* argues that such art normalised the idea that women existed for male consumption, both visually and socially, providing objectification that would further pacify women.[9]



In part this illustrates how historically objectification of women in art paralleled their marginalisation in public life—a visual culture perpetuating systemic gender biases. The nineteenth-century "cult of the nude" normalised women's absence from serious intellectual or political discourse, framing them as decorative rather than functional.[10] Representation

[8] Pollock, G. (1988). *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism, and Histories of Art.* Available at: https://archive.org/details/vision-and-difference-by-griselda-pollock/page/n51/mode/2up (Accessed: 16 February 2025)
[9] Duncan, C. (1993). *The Aesthetics of Power: Essays in Critical Art History.* Available at: https://archive.org/details/aestheticsofpowe0000dunc/mode/2up (Accessed: 16 February 2025)

[10] Markowitz, S., Solomon-Godeau, A., Cohan, S. (2001). *Male Trouble: A Crisis in Representation.* Available at:

in art such as Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres' 1814 *La Grande Odalisque* reinforced the notion that women lacked the rationality or authority essential for state and business roles.[11] Depicting a reclining nude woman in an exoticised, Orientalist setting, with her passive pose emphasising her role as an object of male desire rather than an active subject. Often Ingres' work reflected the nineteenth-century fascination with the female body as an object of aesthetic and erotic pleasure. The odalisque's lack of agency and her positioning as a decorative object reinforced the idea that women exist for visual consumption, not intellectual or political engagement.

Contemporary underrepresentation stems, at least in part, from these nineteenth-century norms, men are associated with "agency" and women with "passivity"—forming modern barriers in leadership.[12]

This analysis reveals how nineteenth-century art played a part in naturalising male dominance in public spheres. By positioning women as passive objects for visual consumption, these "cult of the nude" works not only reinforced gendered power imbalances in the nineteenth century but also acted as foundational templates for contemporary media representations, where remnants of this patriarchal gaze continue to inform societal norms. It is in this vein that historical visual culture contributed to systemic gender biases that persist today, and although they exist in largely different forms, there are stark similarities.

3: "Exceptional work was the result of a prolonged successful struggle"

Synopsis:

Oil painting is not just a technique but an art form, although this was not so until there was a requirement to develop the technique. As an art form they often depict commodities which can be purchased, as well themselves being purchasable commodities. Before anything else, they "are objects which can be bought and owned".

Oil paint was first used in the 15th century, however, it wasn't until the 16th that it fully established its own norms, becoming an art form, and although oil paint still continues to

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https://www.researchgate.net/publication/324327819_Male_Trouble_A_Crisis_in_Representation (Accessed: 16 February 2025)

[11]Available at: https://smarthistory.org/painting-colonial-culture-ingress-la-grande-odalisque/ (Accessed: 16 February 2025)

[12] Eagly, A. H., Carli, L L. *Through the Labyrinth: The Truth about How Women Become Leaders.* Available at the British Library (Accessed: 16 February 2025)

be used today the period of the traditional oil painting is roughly set as between 1500 and 1900.

Typically, oil paintings turn every sight into a commodity that can be owned, and contractions like Rembrandt, Vermeer, Turner, etc, are very specific exceptions. The deep contradiction of oil painting stems from the relationship between the tradition of oil painting, and those who are 'masters' of it, or the supreme representatives of the craft. The idea of a 'great artist' is closely associated with a "man whose life-time is consumed by struggle", with "every exceptional work being the result of a prolonged successful struggle".

Art history has not come to terms with the "problem of the relationship between the outstanding work and the average work of European tradition", there is no recognition of what fundamentally differs these works, and this difference is exemplified more so in oil than any other tradition or culture.

Much art produced after the 17th century was not so meaningful to the painter as finishing his commission and selling his work. "The period of the oil painting corresponds with the rise of the open art market". This is because the oil painting has an ability to render tangibility and texture, defining "the real as that which you can put your hands on."

Because of this, despite producing two-dimensional images, oil had a far greater potential of illusionism than sculpture, or, for that matter, any other medium of the time, due to its ability to suggest objects possessing "colour, texture and temperature".

Earlier art forms, such as medieval or Renaissance religious paintings, depicted wealth as a reflection of divine or hierarchical order—symbolising status ordained by God or tradition. In contrast to this rhetoric, with oil painting emerging alongside capitalism, it symbolically, and overtly, celebrating wealth as fluid, self-made, and driven by a market. Rather than reinforcing a fixed social order, as upheld by feudalism or the church, oil glorified possessions and material success, legitimised not by lineage or divine will, but by the purchasing power of money alone. Of course there is a dichotomy that exists—created by the intersection of commodification and religious depiction.

Of course, if oil paintings depict possessions that can be owned, then the metaphysical implications of objects, like *memento mori* are limited. How can we depict metaphysical symbols, such as a skull symbolic of death, when it is just a possession that can be owned. The symbol is made "unconvincing or unnatural by the unequivocal, static materialism of the painting-method."

This is the contradiction which impacts religious paintings of the tradition. They are hypocritical in the regard that everything within the painting is ownable, and takable—undermining their intended spiritual or moral significance. The materiality of oil

painting inherently affirms possession and ownership. Even when a painting seeks to depict transcendence, suffering, or divine intervention, the method itself reduces these elements to objects that can be owned and displayed. A painting of the Madonna and Child, while attempting to represent divine grace, is at the same time an object, undermining this. A depiction of Christ's suffering, while attempting to inspire piety and reflection, exists paradoxically as an object, owned and appreciated not only for its spiritual message but also for its market value.

Thus, oil painting, while capable of illustrating religious themes, struggles to maintain their integrity due to its inherent materialism. The spiritual is rendered into something that is both visually and economically desirable, creating a contradiction between religion and material consumption.

Thoughts:

Early in the chapter Berger discusses the impact of new attitudes to property and exchange, the new power of capital and how the role oil painting took on could not have been found in any other visual art form. I'd first like to elaborate on the context of the sixteenth-century by discussing the "new attitudes to property and exchange" to which Berger refers.

During the early modern period when the shift from feudalism to capitalism was in progress, wealth was increasingly measured in ownable assets rather than inherited land. It was through industrial capitalism that the focus on individual ownership, accumulation, and commodification that art, or in this case, oil painting, became a means by which to display and reinforce the new economic reality.

There is also the question of why oil painting, over any other visual art form, had to portray unique objects in this sixteenth-century. The more accurately a piece could visually embody commodified property and purchasable goods, the closer in value the piece could be argued to be to the actual goods themselves, and thus oil was more appropriate than say, fresco, for visually embodying possessions like jewels, fabrics, and even landscapes or interiors with a level of sensuality that was appreciated by newly capitalist society.

Oil painting, like capital, transformed how value was perceived and understood. Just as capital turned social relations into economic transactions, quantifiable, ownable, and exchangeable, oil painting turned appearances into commodities. Under capitalism, social relations shifted from those based on status and obligation, such as was the case in feudalism, to based on market exchange and private ownership. People increasingly related to one another not through inherited social roles, but through economic transactions—employer and employee, buyer and seller. This commodification of relationships mirrored how oil painting transformed appearances into objects of possession.

Through its ability to render textures, surfaces, and light with precision, oil painting made objects seem tangible, possessable, and desirable, reinforcing a worldview with material wealth and ownership at its core.

In keeping with this, Berger argues that art serves both aesthetic and market functions, creating a tension between artistic value and commercial value.

Exceptional works arise when artists push beyond market-driven conventions, engaging more deeply with their role as an artist, or turning technique and tradition against themselves. In contrast, average works conform to market expectations, prioritising saleability over innovation or meaning. This contradiction between art as a medium of expression and as a commodity, begins to explain the divide between truly exceptional art and the more formulaic, commercially driven majority.

At this point my issue with Berger's views become apparent. Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors* from 1533 is, whilst technically masterful, a commission essentially "serving the ideological interest of the ruling class", and, using what Berger writes in this chapter, you could make the argument this piece is not, in any way, a masterpiece.[13]

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https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/the-ambassadors-hans-holbein-the-younger/bQEWbLB26MG1LA?hl=en
(Accessed: 25 February 2025)

Holbein's piece is quite well recognised to be a masterpiece, however, when examined through Berger's critique of oil painting I believe you can make the argument that *The Ambassadors* is not particularly impressive. Berger argues that oil painting mostly serves to glorify material wealth, stating, "What distinguishes oil painting... is its special ability to render the tangibility, the texture, the lustre, the solidity of what it depicts." This is evident in *The Ambassadors*, where fabrics, instruments, and material is painted in incredible detail, highlighting and reinforcing the power and status of its subjects, as well as the value of the commodities painted. Berger contends that exceptional works challenge the market-driven nature of art, yet, *The Ambassadors* remains conventional in its celebration

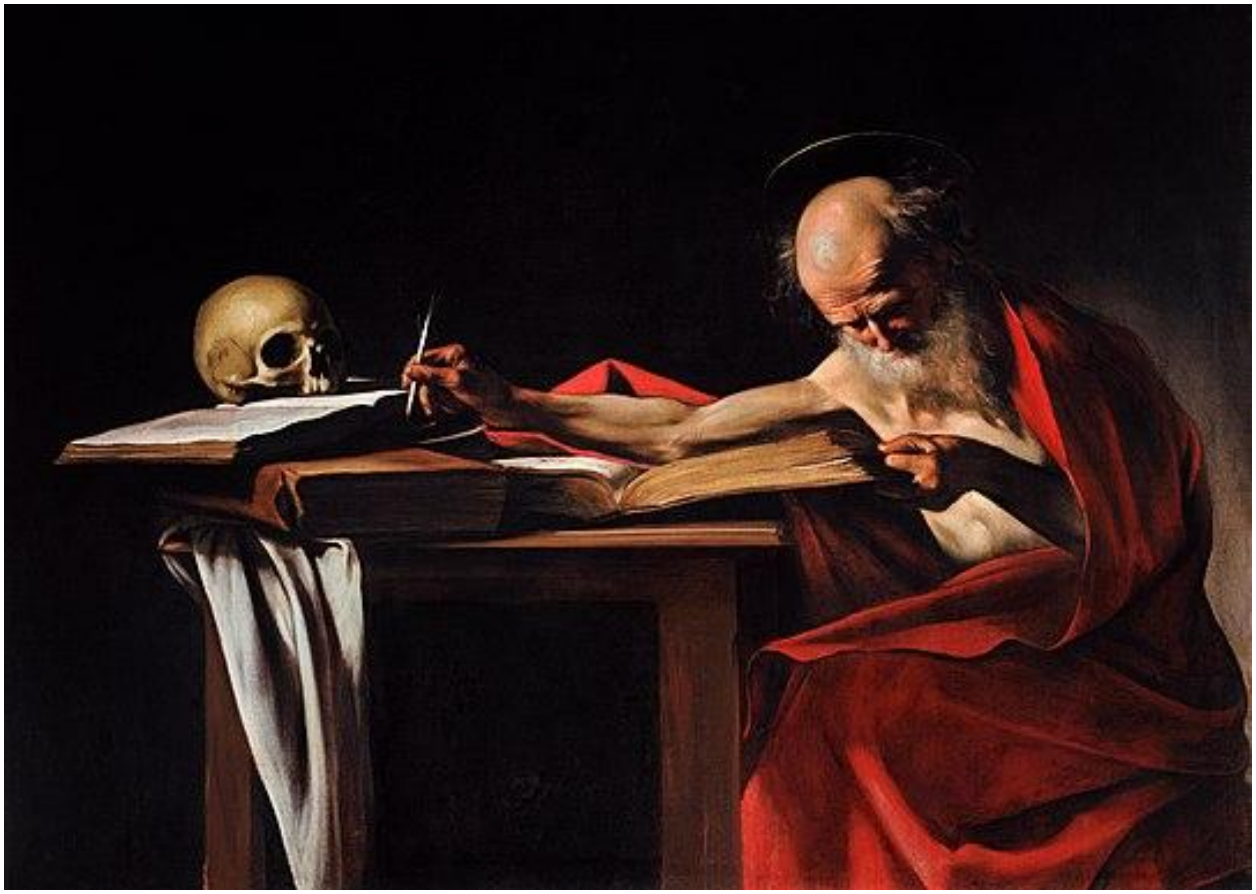
of wealth, aligning with his assertion that “in no other form of society in history has art been so geared to the celebration of wealth.”

Ultimately, *The Ambassadors* exemplifies Berger’s claim that “oil painting did to appearances what capital did to social relations. It reduced everything to the equality of objects.” While complex and visually striking, the painting does not fundamentally question the values it depicts, instead reinforcing the worldview of the ruling class. By Berger’s standards, it remains conventional rather than truly exceptional.

Although, in *The Ambassadors*, the skull is rendered in anamorphic perspective, appearing warped unless viewed from a specific angle. This separation prevents it from becoming just another tangible possession, preserving its symbolic function as a *memento mori*, a reminder of mortality that disrupts the painting’s display of power and affluence. Is this enough of a notion to separate the painting from being just another conventional celebration of wealth?

One might argue that Holbein subverts oil painting’s typical materialism through the anamorphic skull—introducing an element that actively resists commodification. While the painting celebrates wealth and power, it also confronts the viewer with mortality in a way that disrupts this display. Could this tension place *The Ambassadors* among the “exceptional works” Berger acknowledges, where an artist’s vision challenges the market-driven conventions of the medium?

Berger suggests that “when metaphysical symbols are introduced, their symbolism is usually made unconvincing or unnatural by the unequivocal, static materialism of the painting-method.” This statement is one that I unequivocally disagree with.



The claim that oil painting's realism inherently undermines metaphysical symbolism has fundamental issues. Carravagio's *Saint Jerome Writing* proves that a skull can be both a physical object and a vanitas symbol, its realism intensifying rather than diminishing its meaning.[14] Caravaggio's approach demonstrates that oil painting can convey both material presence and deeper philosophical reflection simultaneously—and, personally, creates an incredibly effective *memento mori*.

I could, in fairness, argue that Caravaggio's use of chiaroscuro and dramatic composition prevents the skull in *Saint Jerome Writing* from being reduced to an object. While it is painted with realistic detail, its placement in shadow and its interaction with Jerome's focus and contemplative state elevate it beyond materialism, maintaining its symbolic power. I might assert that symbolism can survive within oil painting when composition, lighting, and narrative counteract the medium's inherent materialism, as asserted by Berger.

[14] https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Saint_Jerome_Writing-Caravaggio_(1605-6).jpg (Accessed: 25 February 2025)