Before Modernism, narrative painting was one of the most acclaimed and challenging modes of picture-making in Western art, yet by the early twentieth century storytelling had all but disappeared from ambitious art. France was a key player in both the dramatic rise and the controversial demise of narrative art. This is the first book to analyse French painting in relation to narrative, from Poussin in the early seventeenth to Gauguin in the late nineteenth century. Thirteen original essays shed light on key moments and aspects of narrative and French painting through the study of artists such as Nicolas Poussin, Charles Le Brun, Jacques-Louis David, Paul Delaroche, Gustave Moreau, and Paul Gauguin. Using a range of theoretical perspectives, the authors study key issues such as temporality, theatricality, word-and-image relations, the narrative function of inanimate objects, the role played by viewers, and the ways in which visual narrative has been bound up with history painting. The book offers a fresh look at familiar material, as well as studying some little-known works of art, and reveals the centrality and complexity of narrative in French painting over the course of three centuries.

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Painting and Narrative in France
From Poussin to Gauguin

Edited by
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Introduction
Narrativity and (French) Painting

Peter Cooke and Nina Lübbren

The central theme of this book is visual narrative in French art – predominantly history painting – from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century. Over the period of these three centuries, history painting occupied an unparalleled central theoretical and institutional position in French artistic culture, and it was discussed as the narrative genre *par excellence*. At the same time, countervailing voices and practices ensured a continuing lively and artistically productive engagement with the issues of pictorial narration and generic conventions, both within and without the Academies of Art. For this reason, France offers a particularly fertile field for the diachronic study of narrative in Western painting. This introduction discusses questions of narrativity in relation to painting more generally, before focusing on French *peinture d’histoire*.

Writing in 1960, Ernst Gombrich observed that ‘in the whole history of Western art’ there has been a ‘constant interaction between narrative intent and pictorial realism’.1 Yet, almost three decades later, Wendy Steiner felt able to affirm that ‘the narrativity of pictures is virtually a nontopic for art historians’.2 Indeed, during a long period, dominated by Modernist formalism, storytelling has frequently been anathema to high art, and ‘literary painting’ used as a term of aesthetic abuse.3 Art history has not been immune, however, to what Gerald Prince has called the ‘narrativist turn’4 in scholarship, which, in recent decades, has fostered the exploration of narrativity in a wide range of media. Indeed, in recent years there has been a proliferation of major studies focusing on narrative in European painting.5 Moreover, since the 1980s, in the general context of various initiatives that have endeavoured to transform art history, there has arisen a new interest in the once neglected genre of history painting, although it has to be said that most of these studies have focused more on the allegorical content and the socio-historical context than on questions of narrativity.6 Nonetheless, it is clear that, with the critical rethinking of formalist aesthetics, the central importance of narrative, in its various forms, to Western art is once more gaining recognition. Symptomatic of the shift in perspective is the contrast between two seminal studies of the painter Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres. In his monograph on the artist, first published in 1967 and reprinted in 1990, Robert Rosenblum analyses Ingres’s paintings with great visual sensitivity, privileging the formal qualities of the portraits and nudes.7 In a later book, published in 2009, Susan Siegfried shifts the focus largely onto

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Ingres’s complex engagement with his historical and literary subjects, and studies closely the artist’s reworking of the tradition of narrative history painting. Yet, despite all these encouraging signs, it has to be conceded that in comparison to the highly developed practice and theory of literary narratology, the analysis of narrative in painting remains rather in its infancy.

**Word and image**

The issue of visual narrative overlaps with the question of the relationship (or opposition) of word and image more generally. For analytic purposes it is, however, important to keep these two concepts quite distinct. This is particularly pressing as some scholars have denied the potential of images to narrate precisely because they do not contain words. Aron Kibedi Varga, Michael Titzmann and Werner Wolf, for example, argue that pictures cannot tell stories independently of a verbal source and can at best illustrate or comment on a pre-existing, word-based narrative text. Implicitly, these three scholars presuppose an intrinsic separation between texts and pictures that, to them, corresponds to a polarity of narrative versus non-narrative modes of representation. According to this perspective, words can tell stories, images cannot.

Even if we concede that the collaboration between word and image may be accepted as an important cultural phenomenon, it still does not automatically follow that the link of verbal to pictorial communication is necessarily a narrative one. For example, Norman Bryson’s important analysis of ‘word-image’ relations in French painting of the Ancien Régime, *Word and Image*, pays little heed to narrative as such. Bryson is more interested in the tension between what he calls the discursive mode of painting (aspects that are anchored by text or verbal signs) and the figural mode (autonomously pictorial aspects of images) than he is in the minutiae of storytelling. In late seventeenth-century French painting, Bryson argues, textuality became a kind of power that could be mapped onto the power of the king at Versailles, a court itself made up of the signs of power. Bryson’s suggestive analysis of Charles Le Brun’s composition *Franche-Comté Conquered for the Second Time* (c. 1678, Musée du Louvre, Paris) reveals that his concept of the discursive encompasses allegory and symbol, neither of which, it could be argued, is a particularly narrative trope. In Bryson’s discussion of the painting, timeless doxa triumphs over the telling of a specific event with specific, identifiable personages (half the cast, for one, consists of allegorical figures such as Victory, Fame and the river Soux). These personifications, one could argue, are profoundly non-, or even counter-, narrative; they are precisely not *actants*, in Julien Greimas’s sense of narrative ‘characters’ or ‘agents’. Their meaning depends on extra-pictorial, textual knowledge, and they are deployed in the painting as are elements of a sentence, but they are arguably not there to tell a story but rather to enhance the king’s authority — which is indeed how Bryson interprets them.

Bryson’s approach is a semiotic one, and semiotic approaches have had more to say about the relationship of words (linguistic signs or, in Charles Peirce’s terms, ‘symbolic signs’) to images (pictorial signs, or, in Peirce’s terms, ‘iconic
The linguistic turn has resulted in pictures being ‘read’ like texts themselves, but they have not necessarily been read like stories. For example, Louis Marin’s ‘reading’ of Poussin’s *Arcadian Shepherds* (1638–39, Musée du Louvre, Paris) focuses on how that painting combines two semiotic systems, speech (or script) and painting. Marin believes that in order for an iconic utterance to become a narrative utterance, there needs to be some form of translation of image into words. He points to the ‘semiotic limitations’ of pictures because an image is only ever a spatial fragment. Marin (as others) collapses the distinction here between the verbal and the written. However, the difference between the ‘symbolic’ sign system exemplified by the words ‘ET IN ARCADIA EGO’, carved into the tombstone in Poussin’s picture, and the ‘iconic’ sign system of stone, shepherds, landscape and shadow is perhaps not as irreducible as sometimes suggested.

From Lessing to Wickhoff: How images can narrate

The origins of the tendency to oppose texts and images runs deep in Western culture, and its most influential formulation over the past 300 years can be traced to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s seminal essay *Laocoon, or The Limits of Painting and Poetry* of 1766. Lessing drew a fundamental distinction between the literary arts (poetry) and the visual arts (painting and sculpture), a distinction which, for him, coincided with that between temporal and spatial arts: visual arts extend in space whereas poetry unfolds in time. As it happens – and this is a crucial point – Lessing himself did not doubt the ability of the visual arts to narrate a story, although he stressed that images narrate in a different way from poetry. An artist, Lessing argued, can never represent more than one single moment of a particular story:

> If the artist can only ever make use of one single moment out of ever changing nature; and if the painter in particular can only make use of this moment from one single point of view; if, what is more, their works are made not only to be seen, but to be contemplated, then it is certain that this single moment and the single chosen point from which it is viewed cannot be too fruitful.

> Now that alone is fruitful which gives free play to the imagination. The more we see, the more we must be able to add in our imagination. The more we add in our imagination, the more we must believe that we see.

Lessing’s discussion of the single ‘fruitful moment’ was to have a long and productive afterlife in both theory and artistic practice. A number of points deserve to be highlighted here. Firstly, it should be noted that Lessing refers solely to single-scene images; he does not consider multi-image visual narratives such as medieval stained-glass windows or Renaissance fresco cycles. His remarks are therefore limited to a particular type of art and a particular moment in art, albeit one that dominated the visual arts for close to 500 years, until the advent of the motion picture.
Secondly, Lessing displaces the work of narration from the image onto the viewer’s mental activity. Ultimately, the story is located not so much in what is represented as in what is not shown. Indeed, the ‘fruitful moment’ ought to be carefully chosen precisely for what it leaves out; it is a moment that does not in and of itself tell very much: ‘The more we add in our imaginations, the more we must think we see’. If we take Lessing’s argument seriously, this means that it is never enough simply to analyse the form and iconography of a given visual narrative representation; we must always take into consideration viewers’ responses, and the way audiences are addressed and invited to complete the storytelling process begun by the image itself. This is in some ways an ultimately Aristotelian view of the importance of audience involvement, and will be taken up again later by twentieth-century reception aesthetics (to which we will return below).

Thirdly, it is important to remember that Lessing was operating with a conception of narrative art that presupposes an informed viewer who is familiar with the narratives represented. Lessing’s image is never entirely independent of its textual source. Indeed, much could be said about the essential role played by the titles of narrative pictures, which, among other things, serve as verbal bridges between the visual images and the source texts on which they depend for much of their meaning. In order to complete the visual stories in our imaginations, we must know who the depicted figures are, what has happened to them up until the moment chosen, and what will happen to them hereafter. This conception of narration as a form of discourse dependent on a shared body of knowledge is arguably a key factor in not only visual but also textual stories right up into the eighteenth century. The majority of pictorial stories were familiar to audiences and taken from a stock canon of history, myth and religious sources. The nineteenth century, on the other hand, saw a considerable expansion of the subject matter used by painters, including contemporary literature, a development that often made it necessary to include explanatory texts in exhibition catalogues. The century also saw the breakthrough of new kinds of pictorial fictions that were entirely invented by their makers and therefore necessitated new kinds of storytelling. To what extent Lessing’s ‘fruitful moment’ is helpful in analysing such later visual narratives would need to be tested in each case. This caveat, however, does not detract from the productive influence of Lessing’s concepts, which extends well into the decidedly anti-narrative critiques of high Modernism.

In the wake of Lessing, nothing much was written about visual narrative until Franz Wickhoff’s ground-breaking text on early Christian book illustrations, published in 1895. Wickhoff developed a general classificatory scheme for visual narration, proposing three principal modes of pictorial storytelling and illustrating each with examples from ancient Greek, Roman and early Christian art. The modes are: komplettierend, kontinuierend and distinguierend, translated in the English edition of 1900 as ‘complementary’, ‘continuous’ and ‘isolating’ (literally, they translate as ‘completing’, ‘continuing’ and ‘distinguishing’). Firstly, the complementary mode of narration represents within one and the same scene two or more events that happen at different times, but without repeating any one character. This is supposedly the oldest of the three narrative modes and distinctive
of Hellenic art, exemplified for Wickhoff by Kleitias’s François Vase. On this sixth-century BC black-figure vase painting, depicting the death of Priam’s son Troilus, everything related to the central event is shown, and all its successive consequences can be taken in at a glance. Secondly, the continuous mode of narration repeats the same figure in different scenes that occur at different times but are represented within the one space, as is found, for example, on Trajan’s column and within the sixth-century illuminated manuscript of the Vienna Genesis. Wickhoff argued that continuous narration was a method typical of Roman art that went on to last for fifteen centuries but was unknown to the ancient Greeks. Finally, the isolating mode of narration represents a single moment in a single scene, without repeating any character. Examples include the individual panels of Giotto’s fresco cycle in the Arena Chapel in Padua. According to Wickhoff, the isolating mode entirely replaced the continuous from the seventeenth century onward, remaining the exclusive mode of visual narration in his own day (that is to say, 1895). It is this mode that Lessing addressed in his remarks on the ‘fruitful moment’.

Wickhoff’s classification remains highly suggestive, not least because no other system has really succeeded it. Kurt Weitzmann, in 1947, offered a critique of Wickhoff’s scheme, but in fact only proposed minor tweakings of its terminology, such as replacing the word ‘isolating’ with ‘monoscenic’. 20 The new term ‘monoscenic’ is certainly useful in identifying what is distinctive about the modern portable tableau and the academic theory of the unities of space, time and action that post-Renaissance artists inherited. Later lexical adjustments, such as ‘monophase’, ‘pluriscenic’ or ‘single still’ picture remain ultimately (even if at times unwittingly) indebted to Wickhoff’s schema. 21

Wickhoff’s three categories remain the only formal methodological system of narrative that art historians have so far devised. In contrast, the field of literary narrative, or narratology, is well established and looks back on a rich and complex history. What follows is not intended to provide a comprehensive overview but to offer brief glimpses into some key narratological concepts, selecting those we consider to be most promising for an enquiry into pictorial narration. To begin with, let us look at some basic definitions suggested by narratologists of what constitutes a narrative.

From Aristotle to Bal: How words narrate (and beyond)

Out of the great variety of narrative models that have been proposed and debated, some key common elements may be distilled. A narrative consists of a succession of events that unfold in time, are linked by causal connections, and are experienced and acted out by characters. Narratives have a beginning, middle and end, a requirement that is indebted to Aristotle’s Poetics. 22 At the beginning of a narrative text, we are presented with a particular situation of equilibrium; then something happens to upset this initial situation, and by the end of the story, a new situation of equilibrium has arisen. 23 This basic template of narrative was developed for sequential forms of storytelling and has therefore proved most fruitful for the analysis of novels, fairy tales, drama, epic and films. As can immediately
be seen, however, the model presents a number of difficulties when transferred to static images.

The principal obstacle is the core assumption that narratives unfold in time. This is a consideration that owes much to Lessing’s distinction between the time-bound literary arts and the spatial nature of the visual arts. However, although images themselves do not unfold in time, viewers do perceive them in time (as Ernst Gombrich pointed out in 1964). Our gaze roams across the painting and, if primed with sufficient clues, we will readily interpret spatial intervals as temporal intervals. Still, one might object that the gaze follows a non-linear pattern and that pictures do not display the strict linear temporal sequence needed for narration; they do not impose a prescribed order of telling. Nor do images have a beginning, middle and end in the Aristotelian sense, although viewers may read them as if they did have such a structure. However, what renders these objections largely moot is the existence of the crucial prerequisite of causal connection in addition to linear sequence. Simple temporal succession is not enough to make a story; narratives need also to construct a cause-and-effect relationship among the narrated events. It is this fundamental point that opens up the entire field of visual representation to narrative potential.

E. M. Forster’s oft-quoted ‘king-and-queen’ example may serve as a useful introduction to the issue of narrative causality:

> We have defined a story as a narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence. A plot is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality. ‘The king died and then the queen died’ is a story. ‘The king died, and then the queen died of grief’ is a plot. [. . .] If it is in a story we say: ‘And then?’ If it is in a plot we ask: ‘Why?’

Forster’s terminology is a little outdated, but his distinction is clear enough: a proper narrative requires there to be a causal link between actions. Indeed, so strong is the narrative impulse and the need for audiences expecting a story to construct logical links between actions that we will tend to assume a causal plot even if we are not presented with one. The narratologist Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan argues that we do not need to be explicitly presented with causal connections in order to apprehend a text as narrative. Causality may be inferred from sequentiality; that is, we tend to construct causality from temporal succession. In her words: ‘Temporal succession is sufficient as a minimal requirement for a group of events to form a story [. . .] causality can often (always?) be projected onto temporality.’ That is, if we read ‘first x happened, then y happened’, we will infer from this that y happened because x happened or as a result of x happening. So, pace Forster, when we read ‘The king died and then the queen died’, we will conclude from this that there is some sort of link between the two events without being told this directly. This is because we have already been primed by the fictional demarcations of ‘beginning’ and ‘end’ to expect a logically plotted story, unless proven otherwise. This principle was summed up by Roland Barthes in the Latin phrase post hoc, ergo propter hoc (after which, therefore because of which).
point is crucial for an understanding of visual narration because images, while not unfolding in time, do construct causal connections. However, we need to rephrase Barthes’s maxim to make it work for images: not post hoc but iuxta hoc, ergo propter hoc, that is: ‘next to which, therefore because of which’. In an image, contiguity implies causality (not temporality). Things depicted as juxtaposed in space can be read as being causally connected.

The literary critic and narratologist Gérard Genette has taken this argument one step further by insisting that once text replaces orality as the principal mode of storytelling, the visual lay-out of script on the printed page is itself a spatial presence that dissolves the boundaries that Lessing drew between literature and the visual arts. Genette argues that in a text we map narrative time onto space: ‘The data of order, or of frequency, can be transposed with no problem from the temporal plane of the story to the spatial plane of the text’. He also contends:

Written narrative exists in space and as space, and the time needed for ‘consuming’ it is the time needed for crossing or traversing it, like a road or a field. The narrative text, like every other text, has no other temporality than what it borrows, metonymically, from its own reading.

This is profoundly anti-Lessingian, or rather, it turns Lessing’s dichotomy of spatial versus temporal arts on its head. Genette suggests that in effect all text-based narration has only the ‘pseudo-time’ of story-time and exists in and through ‘the effects of metonymic displacement’. According to Genette, the text-based arts are fundamentally spatial; they are, in effect, a type of visual art. Taking Genette’s point to its logical conclusion, it would seem that the difference lies not so much between written versus visual narratives as between written/visual versus oral narratives. An orally told story does indeed unfold in time but, strictly speaking, a written text does not. In one elegant swoop, Genette’s schema does away with the opposition of text versus image. This is highly suggestive for the analysis of visual narrative. If the cornerstone of narrative theory, the written fictional text, proves to be only elusively time-based, then the knotty problem of images existing not in time but in space is after all not so very knotty a problem. It is not so much a matter of time versus space as of symbolic signifiers (letters and words) inviting a linear reading versus iconic signifiers (figures and ground) inviting a reading guided by spatial dynamics.

And yet, Lessing continues to cast a long shadow — or perhaps it is more accurate to say that a particular reading of Lessing casts a long shadow, a reading that conflates the narrative or the literary and the textual (and conversely, the non-narrative and the non-textual). This reading is in itself indebted to Clement Greenberg’s influential re-working of Lessing’s text on the Laocoon sculpture in ‘Towards a Newer Laocoon’. Greenberg hitched Lessing to a Modernist system of value that aims to strip each individual medium to its supposedly ‘pure’ essence. That is, in order to be effective, a visual medium must be only visual; and in order to be only visual, words must be purged from it. In his notorious panning of the work of the nineteenth-century Russian Realist painter Ilya Repin,
Greenberg argued that when faced with the choice between Repin, Pablo Picasso and an Orthodox icon, a notional Russian ‘peasant’ would always choose Repin, and to a significant degree because Repin’s work ‘tells a story’ and offers ‘self-evident meanings’. Greenberg’s message is clear: narration has no place in visual art. Even in the writings of those scholars who do not, in the main, share Greenberg’s value judgements, the notion that stories and pictures do not mix persists. For example, Norman Bryson argues that the genre of still-life evicts narrative, and thereby the verbal: ‘if language cannot enter the image, it automatically attains a certain autonomy.’

Mieke Bal is one of the few narratologists to have systematically considered visual narrative in her theoretical writings. Bal first discussed visual narration in the context of focalisation. Focalisation concerns ‘the relationship between the “vision”, the agent that sees, and that which is seen’. In a literary text, the narrator tells the story but it is through the focaliser’s subjective perceptions that we, the readers, ‘see’ the events. In her seminal book *Narratology*, Bal analyses an image under the rubric of focalisation, the seventh-century bas-relief of *Arjuna’s Penance* at Mahabalipuram in the south of India (144–46 AD). The carving depicts Arjuna meditating in the yogic ‘tree’ position, copied by a cat that is in turn mocked by some mice. Bal notes:

>The spectator sees the relief as a whole. Its contents include a succession in time. [. . .] These three successive events [Arjuna meditating, cats copying, mice laughing] are logically related in a causal chain. According to every definition I know, that means this is a fabula.

[i.e. story] In line with Rimmon-Kenan’s suggestion, Bal here privileges causality over temporality. For Bal, the fact that the image itself does not unfold in time is irrelevant; it is enough that causal relationships are represented, and that the scenes depicted side by side in space are interpreted as happening successively in time. They do not actually have to happen successively in order for them to be interpreted as such, and hence, they constitute a narrative act of communication. The example ‘suggests that, and how, narratological concepts are relevant for the analysis of visual narrative without absorbing the image in language’. Bal calls the use of geometrical perspective in Raphael’s *Betrothal of the Virgin* (1504, Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan) the ‘pictorial equivalent of a narrative told by an imperceptible, external narrator’. What is distinctive about Bal’s analyses is that they anchor narrative strategies and effects within the formal system of visuality. They do not confine the discussion of narrative to the story that is being ‘illustrated’ by a picture but root it within the pictorial fabric of individual images. Bal’s mention of Raphael, in effect, maps space (geometrical perspective) onto narrative strategy, and it does so by, in effect, suggesting that visuality is focalised through a narrative agent (as happens with ‘visual’ description in literary texts).

Elsewhere, Bal distinguishes between two issues arising from the question of visual narrativity: the visuality of written narrative and the narrative of visual
images; ‘the visual dimension of narrative’ and ‘the narrativity proper to, or possible in, visual images’. She attempts to subvert the distinctions usually maintained between text and image. In texts, visuality operates through metaphor and, especially in novels, through description. In a formulation indebted to Genette, Bal argues that the ontological difference between word and image, held dear by many theorists, needs to be rethought, not least because ultimately even ‘reading itself requires constant visualisation’.

The viewer is in the picture

If narrative can manifest itself in all modes and media, it does not always do so to the same degree. Gerald Prince suggested that narrative is not an absolute quality that is either present in a work or not. Rather, narrative is scalar, and in this sense it makes more sense to speak of grades of ‘narrativity’. Narratives can be ‘weak’ or ‘strong’, depending on how many of the core elements needed for the telling of a story (or ‘narratemes’) are present within them. Werner Wolf takes up Prince’s concepts and concedes that images may tell stories, but notes that the ‘pictorial medium offers considerable resistance to narrativity’. Wolf suggests the terms ‘tendential or quasi-narrative’ to describe monoscenic images in which ‘chronology, causality and suspenseful teleology can only be inferred’. However, Wolf ends up reducing the narrative potential of images that had been opened up by Lessing, Wickhoff and Bal. Crucially, he dismisses the receptive side of narration in referring to ‘merely tendentially narrative pictures which make heavy use of the viewer’s faculty to narrativise’. Arguably, there is no narrative picture that does not make ‘heavy use of the viewer’s faculty to narrativise’; indeed, a picture’s narrativity can be measured by the extent to which it is able to draw on the narrativising propensities of its viewers (or narratees). As Erika Langmuir so pithily put it, it is not pictures that tell stories, it is people.

Not only do all narrative pictures require viewers to tell their story; all narratives, no matter the medium, rely on listeners, readers, audiences or other kinds of storytelling recipients. To draw on Prince’s concept: all narratives address themselves to narratees. Narrative theorists who treat narratee and narrative text as mutually reinforcing and dialectically related are particularly indebted to reception theory, or Rezeptionsästhetik, as elaborated by German literary historians from the 1960s onward, in particular by Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss. In art history, Wolfgang Kemp has been instrumental in elaborating reception theory within the context of the visual arts, and in particular with respect to narrativity in painting.

Kemp draws on Iser’s concept of the Leerstelle (or constitutive ‘blank’) to develop a peculiarly pictorial approach to interpreting visual narrative. With regard to William Hogarth’s prints Before and After (1736), for example, Kemp notes that the temporal indicators of ‘before’ and ‘after’ (intact mirror versus broken mirror, excited dog versus sleeping dog, the changed angle of light falling through the window) contribute to telling the story of a man seducing a woman into sex. Moreover, in these images, space itself bends the laws of mimesis in
order to narrate: the perspective of the floorboards is reversed in *After*. If we are to imagine the two prints positioned side by side, then the combined vanishing points of each set of floorboard orthogonals would be located in between the two images, in the space of narrative ellipsis which is the constitutive blank: the place (and moment) of the sexual act. Kemp argues that this constitutes ‘an exploitation of perspective for narrative ends’.54 In the monoscopic *The Execution of Marshall Ney* by Jean-Léon Gérôme (1867, City Art Gallery, Sheffield), Kemp discerns a new form of narration that activates narrative space and background to address viewers as narratees and to draw them into the constitutive blanks of the space that thereby becomes dynamic, ‘narrative’ space. Kemp argues that nineteenth-century painting provided a novel model for visual narrative in that ‘the artist no longer acted as a manufacturer of fixed data and relations but arranged spaces and planes that were open to the viewer’s projection’.55 Kemp is interestingly at odds with Hans Belting here who has argued that pictorial narrative developed in the early Renaissance in counterpoint to the mode of the icon; it is the Byzantine icon that addresses viewers and draws them into an immediate one-to-one relationship with the represented saint or divinity. Narrative pictures, by contrast, operate in the third person and leave viewers outside the pictorial events, turning them into voyeurs who peek in on actions that happen independently of them.56 Both Belting and Kemp, though, share the conviction that viewers are crucial as recipients of pictorial narrative address.

Contrary to Wolf’s ideas, then, reception is crucial to constructing narrative meaning. Both novels and plot paintings aimed to elicit reader-viewers’ responses; they invited their audiences to ‘complete’ the plot, to fill in the ‘constitutive blanks’. To reformulate this point in semiotic terminology, if the narrative is in textual format, readers will retell the symbolic letter-signs in verbal form; if the narrative is in pictorial format, viewers will retell iconic signs, also in verbal form. In both cases, a translation process takes place in reader-viewers’ minds: we retell the stories offered to us, and we retell them to ourselves and to one another. If one analyses paintings, novels and other works in this light, the customary opposition of ‘word versus image’ may be recast as a dialogic circuit in which both words and images operate to similar story-generating ends.

**History painting**

No pictorial genre has invited comparison with literary narrative more than history painting. The roots of French *peinture d’histoire* lay in Italian Renaissance theory and practice. Here the founding concept was that of *historia* – the composition of a narrative painting centred on the human figure – which, in his seminal treatise *De Pictura* (1435), the Humanist theorist Leon Battista Alberti compared to the practice of poetic and oratorical invention. Despite the persistence into the sixteenth century – or the reinvention – of certain aspects of medieval practice,57 it is evident that new narrative challenges were posed by the Renaissance conception of the picture as a ‘window on the world’, a self-contained visual fiction governed by new conventions of naturalistic representation. As the temporal sequencing
of juxtaposed images, the repetition of the subject within the same image (what Wickhoff called the ‘continuous’ mode of narration), and the explicit interplay of word and image common in medieval representation came to be increasingly abandoned, the central problems of the expression of narrative in the modern monoscopic tableau arose. One such problem was painting’s silence: without verbal supports, how was the artist to convey thought or speech, aspects of narrative signification that are so important in written texts?\textsuperscript{58} One important answer was found in the attempt to express ‘the working of the mind as reflected in the movements of the body’, as Leonardo da Vinci put it,\textsuperscript{59} an ambition that led to the development of the academic system of corporeal eloquence. History painting – especially in France – became dominated by the theatrical paradigm, centred on the expression of the *affetti*, the ‘passions of the soul’, through a codified rhetoric of gestures, poses and facial expressions, which sought to mime the emotive drama staged in the picture.\textsuperscript{60} This paradigm, although beginning to be questioned in the eighteenth century at a time when immobile and impassive beauty was cultivated, nevertheless remained central to the academic tradition through to the end of the nineteenth century.

Despite its origins in Italian Renaissance theory, in post-Renaissance France history painting developed along specific national lines that favoured the ascendency of a particular vision of narrative. *Peinture d’histoire* was given its modern, theoretically coherent form as a genre by the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture, founded in 1648 under Louis XIV. Within the context of a royal policy of centralisation and control of culture, the Académie vigorously promoted the primacy of a learned type of painting, in opposition to the workshop practices perpetuated by the guilds. The ideals of this officially sanctioned art were formulated in the conferences published by the Académie.\textsuperscript{61} Most importantly within the present context, a hierarchy of subjects or genres was elaborated in which history (both sacred and profane), mythology and allegory were considered to reign supreme.\textsuperscript{62} This aesthetic hierarchy, which, in its theoretical essence (rather than in actual practice), remained remarkably stable until the last decades of the nineteenth century,\textsuperscript{63} was founded on notions of the supremacy of humans over other beings and of the universal over the particular. *Peinture d’histoire* was thus devoted to the depiction of human (or divine) actions of universal significance, in pictures governed, in theory, by Aristotle’s theatrical unities of time, place and action. The twin aims of this valorisation of an intellectual conception of narrative or allegorical painting were the devotion of painting to the service of royal power and propaganda, on the one hand, and the self-promotion of the painters themselves, on the other.\textsuperscript{64} Artists were keen to improve their previously humble social status by raising painting and sculpture up from the status of crafts to that of liberal arts. The model for the type of painting that the Académie wished to promote was found in the art of Nicolas Poussin. Charles Le Brun and André Félibien, the chief founders of the academic doctrine in France, insisted on Poussin’s mastery of learned, literary subjects. Painting was lauded as *muta poesis* – a silent poetry.\textsuperscript{65} The *ut pictura poesis* doctrine,\textsuperscript{66} inherited from Italian Renaissance theorists, was thus further developed in France.
Despite the Académie Royale itself having been abolished during the Revolution, the academic doctrine survived until the beginning of the twentieth century. The Académie Royale was replaced, to some extent, by the Académie des Beaux-Arts (part of the Institut de France, founded in 1795), and academic teaching was dispensed by the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris (controlled by the Académie des Beaux-Arts). Here a series of competitions, devoted to different aspects of figure painting and drawing, culminated in the Grand Prix de Rome de Peinture d’Histoire. History painting was thus inscribed at the heart of the official academic system from the middle of the seventeenth century right through to the end of the nineteenth century. It is fitting then that the chronological sequence of this book should begin with a chapter on Nicolas Poussin, the ‘father’ of French history painting.

This book

Ancien Régime

Although, in its broad outlines, the French humanistic theory of painting was dominated by the literary paradigm, the specificity of pictorial ‘language’ continued to assert itself. Claudine Mitchell uses Poussin’s canonical *The Manna* (1637–39, Musée du Louvre, Paris) to study the modalities of narration and signification in one of the most complex of all classical figure paintings. Engaging closely with Charles Le Brun’s famous analysis of Poussin’s picture, she shows how the painter conceptualised his biblical subject matter in terms of a triadic pattern of logical phases, creating a system of causal relationships whose temporality differs fundamentally from the verbal narratives to which the painting refers. Like the reader of a verbal text, the ‘reader’ of a painting has to interpret a system of signs: in the case of painting, the notion of ‘reading’ involves conceptual transpositions in relation to our understanding of the configuration of the human figure.

Poussin exemplified the painter of the self-contained portable tableau, which for centuries constituted one of the central paradigms of Western art. Another important paradigm, though, was that of large decorative cycles. Marianne Cojannot-Le Blanc re-examines Le Brun’s narrative and allegorical décor in the Grande Galerie at Versailles, painted between 1679 and 1684 to glorify the exploits of Louis XIV in the war with the Netherlands. Here Le Brun, who had evinced a subtle interpretation of the narrative and semantic system developed by Poussin in his easel pictures, was faced with very different pictorial challenges. In opposition to the traditional notion of a crisis or even renunciation of narration in the Versailles cycle, Cojannot-Le Blanc applies essential aspects of Gérard Genette’s narratological theory to a detailed analysis of key parts of the décor in order to study the precise ways in which Le Brun’s narrative and rhetorical system operates. While maintaining a sharp awareness of the décor’s pictorial specificity and the ways in which it engages with the viewer, she thereby reveals striking parallels between Le Brun’s paintings and contemporaneous literary debates about the epic.
If one of the high points of history painting as a serious, complex, narrative and signifying discourse was reached in the seventeenth century, the crisis of the semantic system of multi-figure painting in the 1730s and 1740s is the focus of Susanna Caviglia’s contribution. The seeds of this crisis had already been sown in the previous century, in Félibien’s recognition of ‘pleasant subjects’ from mythology, alongside subjects from classical or biblical history. After the death of Louis XIV, in the context of a pleasure-seeking aristocratic society, a new aesthetics of inaction questioned narration in history painting. Analysing examples of mythological painting by artists such as Charles-Joseph Natoire, François Boucher and Carle Van Loo, Caviglia demonstrates how these new modalities led to the creation of techniques of representation that were highly problematic in relation to traditional academic expectations.

In contrast, and in reaction against the phenomenon analysed by Caviglia, the final decades of the eighteenth century witnessed an important revival of serious history painting, exemplified by the work of Jacques-Louis David and his school, in the context of the urge towards moral and social regeneration that was soon to lead to the French Revolution. The Neoclassical style is traditionally emblematized in historiography by the intense austerity of pictures such as David’s *Oath of the Horatii* (1784, Musée du Louvre, Paris). In his essay for this book, however, Mark Ledbury demonstrates that, despite the theoretical call for clarity and legibility, history painting of that period was in fact a remarkably permissive and, at times, unruly genre. In contrast to received ideas of an orderly, rational art form, Ledbury shows how *peinture d’histoire* was open to novelty, eccentricity and obscurity in its vast and uncontrolled ambitions. Driven by fierce competition and the need to maintain the interest of the enlarged contemporary public, many of the most ambitious painters of the Neoclassical generation, including David, explicitly chose to base major compositions on little-known, violent, morally dubious and narratively complex subject matter.

**Restoration and July Monarchy**

After the Revolutionary period, new, ever expanding audiences, a new understanding of history, and new developments in fiction and poetry all contributed to a reinvention of history painting. Although antique subjects fell out of favour during the Restoration, the narrative complexity favoured by some Neoclassical artists was taken up in a different form by the Romantic generation, at a time when modern literary genres were posing an unprecedented challenge to the traditional Aristotelian dictate of unity of action. Examining pictures by Eugène Delacroix based on texts by Walter Scott and Lord Byron, Beth Wright demonstrates how, by means of ingenious pictorial techniques, the painter created a truly literary art that managed to capture the full richness of the narrative’s expository arc, its development of character and its foreshadowing of incident.

The reinvention of narrative painting in the post-David era is examined by Richard Wrigley through the example of Léopold Robert’s *Arrival of the Harvesters in the Pontine Marshes* (1830, Musée du Louvre, Paris), exhibited to critical
acclaim at the Salon of 1831, at the beginning of the July Monarchy. Positing that focusing on narrative is a matter of historicising the connections which pertain between visual structure and prevailing ideas, Wrigley analyses Robert’s picture in terms of the relation between the subject and its geographical and historical referents in order to appreciate how the artist manipulated the expectations of his public. He thereby suggests how narratives are less inherent in the work of art than constructed by its makers, viewers and analysts.

Paul Delaroche, once dismissed as the ‘literary painter’ par excellence, but now recognised as a great and innovative visual storyteller, made key contributions to the updating of pictorial narrative under the July Monarchy. Analysing The Assassination of the Duc de Guise (1834, Musée Condé, Chantilly), which attracted enormous attention at the Salon of 1835, in relation to the expectations of peinture d’histoire, Patricia Smyth shows how Delaroche engaged with contemporaneous developments in the theatre, as well as with emergent discourses that reversed the traditional dominance of literary expression. Transgressing accepted conventions of composition and the hierarchy of objects in history painting, Delaroche created new effects of unmediated experience and authenticity that greatly impressed the public.

Second Empire and Third Republic

History painting after 1848 has traditionally been neglected in favour of the study of Realism and the painting of modern life. Yet, although at the time the object of much anxiety, history painting maintained an important place in French visual culture. Far from lying in a state of stagnant and irrelevant obsolescence, peinture d’histoire continued to transform itself as painters found new ways of revitalising the tradition and communicating with their public. For example, Delaroche’s novel use of inanimate objects for narrative purposes was taken up and developed further by later artists such as Jean-Léon Gérôme and Jean-Paul Laurens. Drawing on narratology, ‘thing theory’ and the history and theory of detective fiction, Nina Lübbren examines the mode of inanimate narration in several paintings created in the second half of the nineteenth century. Lübbren shows how this new kind of mute eloquence – which contrasts strongly with the uncontested primacy accorded to the human figure in the academic tradition – functioned within the narrative economy of pictures such as Gérôme’s Death of Caesar (1867, Walters Art Museum, Baltimore) and Laurens’s Excommunication of Robert the Pious (1875, Musée d’Orsay, Paris).

Despite the anti-theatrical developments of the eighteenth century and the novel narrative techniques developed by Delacroix, Delaroche, Gérôme and other painters, the theatrical paradigm remained central to academic training until the end of the nineteenth century. Detailing and contextualising Gustave Moreau’s aesthetic and moral critique of the academic tableau and particularly its rhetoric of bodily pose and facial expression, Scott Allan shows how, in reaction against this tradition, and above all its updated, positivist avatars in the nineteenth century, Moreau created a new poetics of silent pictorial eloquence. By privileging detail and ornament, within an aesthetic of absorptive immobility, he not only subverted central
tenets of the narrative tradition of history painting but elaborated a determinedly anti-theatrical poetics.

While situating this anti-theatrical reaction within the aesthetic tendencies of Moreau’s generation, Pierre Sérié contrasts it with the new emphasis on the dramatic that was cultivated in the decades between 1860 and 1880 by painters such as Gérôme and Laurens. Whereas the latter artists developed a new form of understated, suggestive pictorial drama, exploiting the viewer’s imagination to the full, Georges Rochegerosse delighted in a quasi-Baroque representation of paroxysmic action and excess. To Modernists, Rochegerosse exemplified the discredited ‘theatrical’ art against which Naturalism and the avant-garde reacted, but one could also see Rochegerosse as the nineteenth century’s last convulsive attempt at breathing life into history painting as a popular medium, one that was to leave a lasting mark on twentieth-century cinematic narration.70

Although the primacy of human action lies at the heart of history painting, narrativity is by no means confined to the grand genre. Indeed, the narrative techniques of genre painting alone would merit another book. While Pierre Sérié discusses developments in what Scott Allan has called ‘the afterlife of French history painting’,71 Belinda Thomson examines narrativity in the avant-garde art of Paul Gauguin. Through the discussion of a variety of examples, she shows how, while warily negotiating what were perceived to be the dangers of being seen as a ‘literary’ painter at a time when the specificity and autonomy of art forms was becoming an aesthetic dogma, Gauguin exploited a range of verbal and non-verbal techniques in order to invest his work with a poetic suggestiveness that often possesses a narrative dimension. Indeed, it is clear that, in his maturity, Gauguin harboured ambitions that were not unrelated to the traditional narrative and allegorical aims of peinture d’histoire.

Key issues of pictorial narrative

The final two chapters revisit many of the key issues addressed throughout the book. Peter Cooke re-examines, in particular, the central problem of temporality through the analysis of a series of French history paintings, stretching from Nicolas Poussin to Gustave Moreau. Within the context of historically determined narrativity and allegorisation, focusing, above all, on the evolving roles assigned to the viewer. The post-Renaissance system of synthetic temporal exposition, with its extensive ‘perusal time’, that Poussin placed at the service of didactic allegorisation is seen to have given way, by the Romantic period, to the representation of emotively charged dramatic moments whose latent narrativity dilates into the subjectivity of the spectator’s imagination.

In his theoretical closing chapter, Étienne Jollet, operating within a wider framework of figural poetics, and focusing on the early modern period, opens out a number of interrelated avenues of enquiry for the study of narration in painting. Starting from Aristotle’s definitions of mythos as both ‘the representation of action’ and ‘the system of facts’, and taking into account wide-ranging developments in
art history, Jollet invites us to go beyond the representation of human action in order to explore the implications of the complex interplay between the constituent elements of the work of art and the viewer. He proposes that only by studying the different components of mimetic representation in relation both to each other and to the viewers’ different levels of response can we develop our understanding of pictorial narrativity. We must therefore take into consideration such diverse and problematic aspects as the relationships between figures and other motifs, including inanimate objects; the various forms of temporality; and the representation of space within historically determined systems of imitation and knowledge.

Several central themes emerge from this book. In terms of the genre of history painting, it is clear that, despite the perpetuation of a body of normative academic theory, painters were always ready to transgress expectations. In fact, it could be argued that the prescriptive doctrine, transmitted by academic institutions and conservative critics, perpetually invited transgression. Theory provided a conceptual framework of narrative and semantic conventions against which individual painters could redefine the art of visual narration. Another key theme involves the particular demands that narrative painting makes on the viewer. Modernist formalism has not fostered the skills required to engage meaningfully with the narrativity of painting. If we are to avoid superficiality, we need to follow Poussin’s famous exhortation to ‘read the story and the picture’.72 The act of reading is both specific to the decoding of pictorial signs and related to the literary culture that surrounds history painting. Painting’s interaction with other art forms, notably literature and the theatre, is another theme that emerges strongly from the present book.

The sheer variety of narrative techniques devised by painters, in response to changing public expectations, means that the specificity of individual works of art, in the context of the historical circumstances of their production and reception, needs to be carefully examined before attempting to construct any overarching theory of visual narrativity. In light of the studies below, however, it seems safe to make the following generalisation. The narrativity of painting emerges from the complex interplay between artists (with their training, ideological conditioning, conscious intentions and subjective investment), subject matter (with its literary sources and iconographic traditions), painting (with its internal system of figuration and pictorial materiality, comprising both an ensemble and constituent parts), and viewers (with their historically and socially conditioned perspectives, expectations and knowledge, and their individual subjectivities).

It is hoped that the chapters in this volume will inspire further research into one of the richest subjects in art history.

Notes


8 Siegfried.


11 Algirdas Julien Greimas replaced the concept of ‘character’ with that of ‘actant’, a person, object or abstract concept involved in an act; characters are simply organised lexemes. See his book Structural Semantics: An Attempt at a Method, trans. by Daniele McDowell, Ronald Schleifer and Alan Velie (Lincoln, NE, and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1983).


14 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Laokoon; oder über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie [1766], in Werke 1766–1769, ed. by Wilfried Barner, vol. 5/2 of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Werke und Briefe in 12 Bänden, ed. by Wilfried Barner et al. (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1990). The translations below are by Nina Lübbren.

15 Ibid., p. 32.


17 Clement Greenberg’s Kantian take on the Laocoon is a salient case in point for how Modernist agendas could choose to ignore the narrative points made by Lessing: ‘Towards a New Laocoon’, Partisan Review, 7 (1940), 296–310.


23 In the words of Gérard Genette (1983, p. 18ff., quoted in Prince, ‘Revisiting Narrativity’, p. 43): ‘as soon as there is an action or event, even a single one, there is a story because there is a transformation, a transition from an earlier to a later and resultant state’.


28 For a good discussion using the terminology of ‘story’ and ‘plot’ (roughly as translations of the Russian *fabula* and *syuzhet*), see Bordwell and Thompson.


30 Roland Barthes, ‘Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives’ [1966], in *Image, Music, Text*, ed. and trans. by Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), pp. 79–117. Aristotle recognised but decried the propensity of audiences to imagine causal relations; of Homer, he says: ‘This is the false inference. In cases where the existence or occurrence of A implies the existence of B, people imagine that if B is the case then A also exists or occurs – which is fallacious’ (*Poetics*, p. 41).

31 See Brian Richardson, ‘Causality’, in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, ed. by David Herman, Manfred Jahn and Marie-Laure Ryan (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 49. If events are too widely separated in space and time, they are generally not thought to constitute a narrative.


34 Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, p. 34.


37 Clement Greenberg, ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch’ [1939], reprinted in Harrison and Wood (eds), pp. 536–37. Greenberg was responding to Dwight Macdonald’s article on Soviet Cinema in *Partisan Review* wherein Macdonald had imagined a peasant faced with Repin versus Picasso, and had argued that the only reason the peasant would choose Repin was because the Soviet state told him to, and that Picasso’s abstractions were, in fact, like religious icons. Greenberg disagreed and insisted that the masses preferred ‘kitsch’ (his untheorised term for Repin’s kind of art) of their own accord. For more historically grounded interpretations of Repin, see Elizabeth Kridl Valkenier, *Ilya Repin and the World of Russian Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989); and Ulrike Schmiegelt, ‘Geschichtsdarstellung als Form politischer Kritik? Zum Historienbild bei Il’ja Repin und Vasilij I. Surikov’, *Kunsthistorisches Jahrbuch Graz*, 27 (2000), 95–111.


Prince, ‘Revisiting Narrativity’.


Narrativity and (French) Painting


63 Thus, Salon critics generally ordered their reviews of pictures in accordance with the conventional hierarchy of genres, beginning with history painting.

64 For a discussion of the political and social stakes of the academic doctrine, see Paul Duro, The Academy and the Limits of Painting in Seventeenth-Century France (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

65 The locus classicus for the notion of ‘mute poetry’ in French writing is Charles-Alphonse Du Fresnoy’s didactic poem De arte graphica (1668), which circulated both in the original Latin and in translation (see, for example, L’Art de peinture de C.A. Du Fresnoy, traduit en français, enrichy de remarques, & augmenté d’un dialogue sur le coloris & plusieurs figures d’académie, 2nd edn (Paris: Nicolas Langlois, 1673).

66 See Lee.


69 For a major study of French history painting in the second half of the nineteenth century, see Sérié, La peinture d’histoire en France. The notion of the obsolescence of nineteenth-century history painting was also critically debated at the 2005 conference of the College Art Association (Atlanta, Georgia) in a session chaired by Paul Duro, ‘Preminent or Moribund? The History of History Painting in Nineteenth-Century France’.


71 Allan.