THE IDEA OF THE CANON AND CANON FORMATION IN ART HISTORY

Hubert Locher

*Canon: A Critical Term for Art History?*

The use of the word ‘canon’ in a critical sense in art-historical literature is, surprisingly, of fairly recent date. It is explained in one dry sentence in Duro and Greenhalgh’s *Essential Art History*: ‘In art the term refers to works of a given artist, period or school accepted “into the canon” as genuine … by connoisseurs.’ Although the term is used as a central critical category in the six-volume series *Art and its Histories* published by The Open University in the 1990s, it does not figure among the *Critical Terms for Art History*. Nor does it appear in the *Metzler Lexikon Kunstwissenschaft* published in 2003, although ‘Kanonisierung’ (‘canonization’) is at least mentioned in the introduction, by which the editor refers to the purportedly canonical status of the one hundred terms selected. Eventually we find a short entry in Jonathan Harris’s *Art History: The Key Concepts* (2006).

One reason for this belated appearance might be that the term has not been understood as a critical concept. Traditionally, questions of the canon and of the canonical in art were hardly ever discussed in a critical manner; they were not considered the business of a historical discipline, the task of which was rather, in the first place, to register and, second, to interpret what had been done. Its purpose was not seen explicitly as judging, praising, and finally compiling a selective best-of list of works.

---

that would eventually be called the ‘canon’ of art history. More commonly used and intensely debated in other disciplines of the humanities, the term ‘canon’ is nevertheless firmly rooted in the history of art.⁵ Indeed, it is its implicit role in framing judgements and decisions within the discipline that makes the examination of the role of the canon and canon formation all the more pressing.

As a metaphor stemming probably from architecture, it is a basic notion in one of the very earliest Western theories of art: ‘Canon’ (Greek/Latin for ‘measuring rod’, ‘standard’) was the title of a lost theoretical treatise by the Greek sculptor Polykleitos.² In his *Natural History* (XXXV, 55), Pliny the Elder relates that other artists called one of the sculptures, the *Doryphoros*, made by Polykleitos, ‘canon’, because it was considered to be the perfect, proportioned image of man. The term is also used to refer to a model in the sense of a guideline, a set of rules, or a schedule or list of dates serving as reference points. It is important to note that the notion was very early on connected to law, and, even more significantly, to religion. Whereas in early Christianity the term was only used in application to religious law (canonical law), from the fourth century onwards the term was also used in reference to the definitive and authoritative nature of the body of sacred scripture, a use of the term that classical antiquity did not know, neither in application to religious nor to secular literary texts.⁷ The word ‘canonization’ was also used to designate the act by which the

---


⁷ See the introduction to Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders, eds., *The Canon Debate: On the Origins and Formation of the Bible* (Peabody, MA, 2002) 13; and Eugen