

History of art: the social production of art essay



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“ Works of art .

.. are not closed, self-contained and transcendent entities, but are the product of specific historical practices on the part of identifiable groups in given conditions, and therefore bear the imprint of the ideas, values and conditions of existence of those groups, and their representatives in particular artists. [Janet Wolff, *The Social Production of Art*]. Using one example of an artist whose work falls within the chronological limits of this course, assess the extent to which Janet Wolff’s claim for a ‘ social production of art’ can be defended. I believe Janet Wolff’s claim that art is not an autonomous object but rather inextricably linked to society and social relations is to a large extent appropriate in questioning the epistemological problem of what art is.

Jeremy Tanner in *The Sociology of Art: A Reader*, distinguishes the ‘ dominant idea of the artist’ which has pervaded western preconceptions of art; this is the idea of the artist as an ‘ isolated creator’ and genius who’s art work is the product of ‘ a unique and individual aesthetic vision’. Gustave Courbet in his painting ‘ *The Painter’s Studio: A real Allegory*’ (1855) which incorporates the artist amongst various aspects of the artist’s exterior world seems to refute this idea specifically; it suggests that the artist’s work is contributed to by exterior influences around him and thus cannot solely belong to the artist. In Jacques-Louis David’s ‘ *Death of Marat*’ we see Wolff’s claim can be supported. The 18th century reception of David’s painting would have implicated knowledge of the historical events that occurred preceding the painting. The murder of Jean-Paul Marat, nonetheless, was a

highly publicised event which eventually became a catalyst for political genocides.

The figures of Marat and his murderer, Charlotte Corday, would not be unknown to many. Without knowledge of the importance of these figures and their roles in the French Revolution, 21st Century audiences could not comprehend the relevance of David's depictions of Marat and the murder event. For instance, Marat's affiliation with the Jacobin movement and Corday's Girondin sentiments are the basis of the narrative of the painting. Read also about Furthermore, David's own political motivations and affiliations exert their relevance on the painting. David's sympathies for Jean-Paul Marat and the Revolution give us an insight on the intentional meaning of the painting.

Painting Marat in a neoclassical technique, with Marat bathed in a soft light, alludes to religious paintings, particularly Michelangelo's Pieta, thus almost canonizing and sanctifying Marat. We see that Marat is depicted as a simple, ascetic man with no extravagant attire and particularly no physical superiority- evoking images of Christ. Marat is also in a vulnerable position taking a bath, these all act as sensationalising the actualities of the murder. We see by this analysis of the components within the painting, that David portrays Marat as an unwitting victim and thus reveals David's sentiments when painting the image. Boime (1987) says of the painting that it is ' a moving testimony to what can be achieved when an artist's political convictions are directly manifested in his work'. However, what is most significant about the painting in relation to Janet Wolff's claims is the reception it invoked.

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The painting itself became a symbol of the Revolution, hailing Marat as a martyr. The painting then, becomes significant of a major political feeling of that period in which it was created. If indeed 'Death of Marat' has achieved this status, then we can hardly seek its transcendence into periods which offer no compatibility between history and the painting. Janet Wolff's claim would suggest that a piece of art is temporally restricted to its specific historical context.

David's 'Death of Marat' (1793) falls within the context of the French Revolution and as Marat is a specific historical figure, of such notoriety, he becomes an icon of that era and thus in this fact we see that the painting cannot detach itself from its specific historical relevance. This problem is further induced in that the painting depicts an iconic resemblance of Marat and of course reveals the names of both Marat and Charlotte Corday, announcing that the painting is forever stamped with its historical context. I believe Janet Wolff's claim reasserts the dependence of semiotics on a social consensus between art and the viewers. The paradigm of signs within the painting evokes a familiar story to the 18th Century spectator not simply due to the political resonance of the names Marat and Corday. However, many signs within the painting are not restricted to a specific time; one is able to relate the ascetic quality of the table in the painting with its basic connotations of simplicity, honesty and virtue, these attributes being transferred to the figure of Marat himself, henceforth contribute to a similar impression of Marat as that attained by an 18th Century viewer. Wolff's claim disregards the effect of viewer response, in Roland Barthes essay 'Death of an Author' we see that he believes art becomes an autonomous

object which depends not on time or space, in fact, importance is placed on the response to the art.

The emphasis on personal interpretation of the art piece highlights the permeability of signs into varying contexts and spheres. For instance, a feminist viewer of Marat's painting might note that the domestic kitchen knife is more significant in that it represents Women in general rather than associating it with the figure of Charlotte Corday. Here then we see that the painting does partially transcend its rather limited and historically defined meaning. The feminist reader would indeed have to have knowledge of the historical relevance of the painting but would not be required to associate with the sentiment and political feeling behind it. The feminist reader might derive the meaning that the painting displays anxiety towards women entering the sphere of politics, but she may not associate with the Revolution itself and its political dichotomies. In conclusion, we see that Janet Wolff's claim for a social production of art can be defended when considering art work which narrates a political and thus is a symbol of the political feeling of the time, and here inevitably so due to David's own political affiliations.

However, we see that although one would require an understanding of the historical narrative of David's painting, one can also derive exterior meanings outside of its direct temporal and social context from the painting. Just as a feminist analyst may attain notions of anti-feminism in the painting, the idealised image of Marat can also lead to the interpretation of the downfall of religion and a movement towards secular society.