

# The Narrative Methods in Contemporary Art History Theory

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## Abstract

With the deepening of research in art history, the significance of methodology is also receiving increasing attention. For any art history methodology aimed at fully explaining the function of works of art in the society in which they are created and accepted, and how to play this role, it is a necessary step. This article uses historical and literature research methods to analyze the issue of transforming the cognitive perspective of art history, aiming to propose different theories of art history writing and reading, as well as a significant transformation in their process, to demonstrate the need for art historians to gain a new understanding of art history methods and applications. This article first clarifies the importance of constructing the methodology of art history, which is a powerful basis for confirming the narrative paradigm of art history. Then, discuss the differences in various methods of art history and elucidate the relationship between the methodology of art history and contemporary art practice. In the conclusion and key part, this paper concludes that under the background of globalization and Internet culture, the edge of art history research has been constantly broken. Appropriate and effective "narrative methods" are the core of art history, and the narrative structure of art history is the key.

**Keywords:** Art History Narrative, Methodology, Art Interpretation.

## 1. Introduction

From the perspective of the development of the discipline of art history, it can be mainly divided into two types, namely art theory and art experience. The former focuses on integrating art theory into the study of art history experience, while the latter focuses on empirical research on art history facts or literature research. In recent years, Duan and Lian have focused on discussing modern Chinese art using the method of summary narrative, attempting to outline the grand scenes of modern art and breaking the internal and external limitations of art history research (Duan, Lian, 2021). Popov studies the methodology of art from the perspectives of sociology, cultural studies, and art history, with a focus on three key criteria for comprehensive analysis of art. He believes that the combination of these three fields of thinking may have a universal standard for the most comprehensive evaluation of the essence and purpose of art (Popov, Evgenii, 2021) Joyeux Prunel has launched a new reflection on the research methods of global art history based on a broader historical and social institutional background, aiming to re-examine the openness of interdisciplinary thinking in global art, and believes that the globalization of the art market has played a greater

role in art historians using globalization methods to conduct art history research than postcolonial theory. (Joyeux Prunel, 2019) Graves, Nelson, based on the narrative of the Dak Art Exhibition and using the works of three African artists, showcases non-Western art styles and history, attempting to construct a narrative of artistic modernism, modernity, and contemporaneity, showcasing various artistic voices (Graves, Nelson, 2023). This study mainly explores the methodology of artistic history narrative, focusing on its important stages of development, content, analytical context, theoretical paradigms for research, as well as its application and significance in practical contexts. This is of great significance for us to study art history, understand and analyze the meaning of artworks, and ultimately explore the laws of the development of art history.

## 2. Development of Narrative Methodology in Art History

### A. The Important Stage of Narrative Methodology in Art History

There are several important stages in the methodology of art history, namely the stage of collecting art historical materials, the stage of verifying historical

materials, and the stage of digesting historical materials. The outstanding historical knowledge, objective spirit, broad imagination, and meticulous thinking of art historians cannot be separated from these stages. However, when entering the stage of digesting historical materials, the skills of art articles and the transcendence of ideas are especially indispensable conditions. The so-called digestion of historical materials, in other words, is the writing of art history. In the writing of art history, it is necessary to integrate historical materials and present them in a new way, so it cannot be without the use of rhetoric and ideas. What new appearance will historical materials present after integration and integration? What is the function of the article and ideas here? That's where the crux lies. This involves the issue of artistic history narrative and the interpretation of artistic works.

Western classical art history has gradually developed a methodology for art research, which is to find a narrative mode for art history writing and integrate historical materials into this narrative. For works like Giorgio Vasari's *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (Modern Library Classics) or Heinrich Wölfflin's *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Early Modern Art*, strictly speaking, the distinction between art history and chronicles based on this methodology is unclear. Chronicles are only descriptions of genres, and we cannot assume that historians do not have their methodology for writing based on genres. Similarly, methodological art history written under the methodology of vulgar history is not superior to chronological art history, as the so-called "methodology" may be a self-established linguistic structure, and authors are easily lost in the network of textual compilation. However, overall, both the stage of classical art writing and the early writing of Western modern art history have failed to break free from the historical framework of linear art history. Under the influence of postmodern philosophy and new historiography, Western art history has undergone significant changes. The writing of art history has rapidly shifted from the chronicle stage to the post-apocalyptic art history, and the fundamental criterion for evaluating the writing practice of "post-art history" or new art history is not a linear narrative approach.

## **B. Three Aspects of Methodology in Art History**

The methodology of art history can be understood as a confirmation of historical research obtained through its association with two theories. To determine what is the main object or goal of historical research, as well as how to use ideas to organize historical materials, summarize historical logic, etc., is impossible to do without the support of methodology and methodological paths. The core is a method that is consistent with history and logic (Xia Yangjing, 2021). We believe that the methodology system of art studies is usually divided into three categories: firstly, objective methods aimed at the research object of art history, namely historical facts, causal relationships, determining factors, and their development laws in the development process of art history; Secondly, a practical historical methodology applicable to the research function of art history, including the study of selecting research fields, determining historical data basis, determining art history facts, knowledge of the source and non-source sources, interpretation of works, historical periodization, and other issues; Thirdly, the "nonpractical methodology of art history" applicable to the research results of historical history includes analysis of research conclusions, examination and value evaluation of general rules and artistic history narratives, and exploration of the methodological structure of art history

### **3. What is the "Methodology" of Art History Narration**

The field of methodology in art history refers to the theoretical principles based on which art activities are observed and the meaning of artworks is explained in the research process of art history. This is the ideological method and theoretical model that guides the entire work of art history and summarizes the historical process of art. Therefore, it is called the "methodology" of art history. The research methods of art history are directly influenced by the research object, purpose, and perspective, and these influencing factors are all specific and have certain internal connections. The methodology of art history narrative used in this study is based on the deepening of the concept of art history methodology, including the examination of the concept of art history, that is the exploration of the rules of art operation. In other words, it will start with a systematic review of the construction and evolution of art history, and based on summarizing historical experience and lessons, strive to

reveal the objective regularity of the development of art history. The methodology of artistic history narrative includes both specific methodology and foundational methodology. The so-called specific methodology mainly studies the specific technical issues in the narrative process of art history, such as the organization, analysis, and specific writing of art historical materials, which are also the focus of this study.

The early research methods of artistic history narrative mainly include literature description and verification, physical inspection and identification, and the use of artistic sociology methods. From the perspective of its research paradigm, style analysis, and imagery have strong operability. The research process of artistic history narrative includes two independent but closely related aspects. Firstly, emphasize the study of the style, techniques, and specific media of artistic works, and use systematic methods and theories to analyze and study past art forms and methods; On the other hand, the focus is on exploring the themes, meanings, and related historical and cultural backgrounds of artistic works. The content involved in the study of art history is very extensive, just like the infinite and rich visual language used by humans to express their seeing, hearing, feeling, and thinking. We can summarize it into two aspects: internal research and external research, with the former focusing on factors such as context, ideology, history, society, and gender. The latter includes pursuing art history to determine the environment in which the artwork was initially created and perceived.

#### **A. Methodology of Narrative Art History**

If art history narratology wants to become an objective humanities discipline, it must establish its research logic and methods. It inherits the greatest feature of art history: a complete theoretical system and rigorous methodology. After the Enlightenment, the formation of human knowledge relied on methodology, and the construction of methodology was crucial for us to construct art history. The commonly used methods of concentration include stylistic modeling, sociological methods, iconographic methods, semiotic and structuralist methods. The research on the theory and methodology of art history has made significant progress under the promotion of overall historical research, such as the history of art philosophy, art appreciation, art exchange, art dissemination, art economy, comparative art history, and various types of

art history, as well as ethnic art history, art social history, and religious art history. The methodology of traditional art history is not suitable for modern artworks, and the trend of combining archaeology and art history research with human science research in the late 19th century led to the emergence of new research methods. It is using typological methods, combining art history research with typological and morphological research methods. Classify artworks by type and category. Later, typology was used in art studies and gradually gave rise to art typology. Compared to other forms of material and cultural spirit, art has more personality tension and variation, making it more suitable for typological methods. Due to its unique theoretical function, typology has become a powerful tool for systematic and theoretical art studies. The main purpose of writing art history is to fully depict the systematic landscape of the art world, reveal the general essence of art, display the rich and diverse forms of art, and discover the development laws of art in history. Therefore, it is even more necessary to use various types and concepts at different levels as the main framework for constructing the art system.

#### **B. The Paradigm of Contextual Analysis in Art History**

Karl Popper's situational analysis is a process of analyzing potential future events by considering various possible outcomes. It is an objective theory and understanding of human behavior. By considering and analyzing various results and their impacts, it helps decision-makers make wiser choices. He believes that situational analysis is a method for building models, and the models established in situational analysis are "ideal" rational models, which are a combination of sociological methods and methodological individualism. This is one of the characteristics of Popper's situational analysis and also a difference from other models. Situation analysis is an anti-psychological interpretation. Although its analysis relies on human thought and behavior, such as language, culture, and other social concepts in history, as well as psychological analysis, it cannot be classified as a subjective psychological method. It is a social science analysis method based on logic and rationality. In the West, research on the "historical context" of art history generally includes biographies of artists, appreciation of works, works, namely the "ontology" of art history, catalog compilation, formal analysis (style, visual structure), image chronicles (context), art social history (context), textual research, and other aspects.

#### **4. The Structure and Characteristics of Narrative Art History**

Any historical order ultimately exists in the narrative itself, rather than in many constructed events (David Carrier, 2020). In addition to using general thinking methods, the study of history also requires the use of professional methods such as narrative, analysis, comparison, and hypothesis (estimation). The most commonly used methods may be narrative and analytical. Polish historian Topolski distinguishes between two types of narratives. Dynamic narratives, which focus on describing the process of events and the causal chains contained in unique events, are commonly seen in traditional historiography; Structural narratives, which describe not the process of events, but the types of repeated behaviors or actions, are commonly found in analytical narratives. Narrative and analysis are two common methods in the study of art history, each with its characteristics and complementary to each other, and both are indispensable tools in historical research. The techniques of artistic history narrative constitute the main content of professional training for historians. The narration itself is an explanation, and the historical narrative must revolve around specific themes. When organizing a narrative, historians must arrange various interrelated facts into a meaningful sequence of facts based on a central clue, usually called a plot, to form a clear and clear narrative system. The theme is a key factor that reflects the connection between individual facts and the whole. Narration also requires the use of concepts. New Narrative Paradigm: Analytical Narrative (Analysis and Description complement Each Other), Analytical Narrative encompasses Changing Narrative.

##### **A. Narrative and Art History**

Narrative refers to a discourse pattern that incorporates a specific sequence of events into a language structure that can be understood and grasped in chronological order, thereby endowing it with meaning (Peng Gang, 2017). Narrative studies focus on exploring two levels, the first being the structure of narrative, including its nature, form of expression, and functional role. Next is the narrative content, which refers to the time pattern and narrative process represented by the text content. Breaking through some artificial limitations in narratology, it not only focuses on the study of the form of narrative works, but also enters multiple levels related to form through form, including the completely overlooked aspects in

traditional narratology research, such as the association with society, history, literary development, and the creative subject. Narrative is a structural literary factor in the discourse of art history, and the basic characteristic of traditional history is narrative. Hayden White believed that the writing of history can be seen essentially as a narrative. Narrative is the most effective form of discourse for artistic works to practice their writing purpose. It is generally believed that history is about telling stories, and the use of narrative in historical works is hardly a choice, as if it is a natural and logical thing, leaving no other form. However, there are various ways to reproduce history, such as in Chinese history books, which not only use narrative forms, but also include books, tables, factual records, and case studies.

##### **B. Art History Narrative and Art Criticism**

Similar methods to art history writing, such as description and interpretation, are commonly used in art criticism research. The difference between art history and art criticism lies in their different tasks and goals. Art history writing mainly involves completing historical narratives based on value judgments, with a focus on the arrangement and narration of art history; Art criticism, on the other hand, sublimates a judgment that serves "evaluation" in the description and interpretation of art, with a focus on prompts or warnings. In summary, criticism targets phenomena and historical selection phenomena; Criticism provides materials, and history selects materials; Criticism creates concepts, and history selects concepts. Art historians can create writing styles, and change analysis, and evaluation, but they cannot use unused concepts to describe historical facts. The focus of art history is on the restoration of history and the confirmation of the value of artworks. Art criticism is the discovery of the value of artworks and the controversy surrounding the writing of contemporary art history. The essential significance of writing art history books is a critical activity of art, or in a sense, a "special interest" within the discourse of art criticism. In the process of studying art history, art criticism cannot be avoided. It is a thought-provoking, critical, and selective approach to artistic processing.

## **5. Interpretation of Art History and Principles of Writing**

### **A. The Object of Art History Interpretation**

The interpretation of artistic objects in art history is in the most prominent position. There exists a tradition of attempting to make the intended meaning of artistic objects real. Early explanations and recent explanations are equally important, and the issues that art history focuses on are historical. Carrier's writing of these art histories takes into account historical considerations in different fields, which is consistent with the historical concepts presented within them. An explanation does not need to directly match the work, treating it as true, as it depends on social structure. Carrier's research revolves around two elements, namely the study of texts by art writers and the analysis of conventions in which these texts are created. His artistic writing of historical considerations in different fields is consistent with the historical concepts presented within it. Dividing art history into its "pre-self-awareness" stage, at that time it was simply explained, but when it explained self-awareness, it was its modern period. Similarly, artists first only create images, and then create themselves consciously. He starts from the relationship between "artistic writing" and "art history", and believes that art history is a history of changes in literary styles parallel to artistic writing styles. Karill specifically pointed out that art history is not about rebuilding the "mental state" of art creators, but about providing ambiguous interpretations of them from different levels. Only through the effect of acceptance can the "restoration" and "protection" of works be completed.

### **B. Semantic Analysis of Narrative Art History**

One of the central tasks of art historians is the hermeneutics of art history, striving to achieve a comprehensive understanding of works, not only to solve why these works reflecting human history have such appearances but also to solve why art events occur. Art history often contributes to the study of history. Artists and architects can influence history through the cultural value of their architectural creations. Therefore, the history and historical research of art and architecture are inseparable, although they are two different disciplines. Art historians study visual works and architecture created by humans. They divide artworks into traditional categories such as architectural sculpture and two-dimensional art, as well

as arts and crafts and artistic design. Artists from different eras do not strictly distinguish themselves in their creations, especially in today's era where multimedia works are abundant. Starting from the earliest art critics of ancient Greece and Rome, they studied creators who consciously regarded them as "works of art" and gave them official names during their creation. Art historians must determine the age of each work they study before interpreting the history of art. Chronological sequence is an essential issue in the study of art history to determine the age of works of art and architecture. Position it within the framework of art history. The common criteria for judgment include material materials, literature, visual information, and stylistic features.

### **C. The Cognitive Field of Art History Narration**

The artistic field of art history narrative is developed from the concept of "field" by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. It is defined as a network or structure comprising objective relationships between different positions. The so-called art field is a tool for sociological analysis of art, which constructs a generative structural theory of art production and reception through the art field. The theory of the artistic field is directed towards space, which describes the metaphorical characteristics of theories within social space. The art field includes spatial and social relationships. Space is the carrier of the art field, and the field is the internal connection of the art space. In the narrative of art history, the art field is seen as a system, connecting art phenomena and social historical contexts, reminding art historians to think about the various elements of social production in art in a relational manner, and to include all actors in the field within the scope of "art production". The theory of "field" undoubtedly provides a comprehensive sociological perspective for the art field, helping it return to the process of social and historical development, and preventing the writing of art history from deviating from the social background. The transformation of art is not only a change in style but also includes the dissemination and influence of art between different regions. The art field provides direction for understanding artistic works, restoring artistic contexts, and observing the influence and acceptance of arts.

### **6. Narrative of Digital Art History**

According to the judgment criteria of classical art history, the length of writing is arranged according to

the position of the work in art history. The selected illustrations are also representative works of various periods of art, with mutual verification and rich discourse, but there are also some problems. Although it can be partially preserved, more and more researchers are inclined to analyze all works of art as visual materials. Therefore, how to break free from writing centered around masters and their works is a common issue in the study of art history. After abandoning the classic writing approach, all authors will soon find themselves facing a massive amount of data that needs to be collected and processed, and how establishing connections between works and literature to reveal research questions will also become a more challenging problem. Undoubtedly, this is a huge preliminary work, and traditional methods are no longer applicable. We must use contemporary digital tools to establish a set of contemporary art history research methods, namely digital art history.

The core of digital art history is to introduce new methods of computational technology into traditional art history research, from artists to artworks, from styles to genres, from regional to cross-regional, and so on. The use of digitalization as a means of art history can be traced back to the application of digital methods and tools by art collectors to make it easier for the public to access the work of art. The digital content that art historians focus on is established through basic databases to establish relationships between text, images, and objects, making them easy to replicate and use. The big data analysis in the study of digital art history can be conducted from three aspects: text, space, and network. Text analysis is the mainstream of digital humanities, but its application in art history research is not yet widespread. Spatial analysis uses digital technology to draw the movement trajectories of artists, artworks, and art institutions within a geographical spatial range, which helps to reveal patterns that have not been discovered in previous research. Network analysis is based on abstract nodes, that is, based on mathematical relationships rather than necessarily geographic or spatial relationships. One application of it in art history is the analysis of artists' social networks.

Establishing a comprehensive and detailed art history database should not only cover discovered works or artworks, but also comprehensively record historical information such as themes, materials, sizes, storage locations, time, location, characters, motivations, and

how they were created. It should also be continuously updated according to the actual situation and accurately and quickly searched. In the database, on the one hand, "masters" and "masterpieces" become data information with equal status to other works. Through search and comparison, more helpful interrelationships can be established for research. In addition, outside of the literature, a large amount of image data itself may also present some research entry points. The establishment of an image database is not a one-time task, nor is it flawless. It disrupts the originally clear and visible connections between various artworks, containing various universally recognized values and aesthetic concepts of the times, which will be masked in the database. The database will combine computational analysis techniques to reveal the historical characteristics of art in a new way, prompting art historians to rethink the identity, medium, purpose, and artistic value of their research objects, and to raise new questions about historical events at both micro and macro scales. This will be a new attempt to break the limitations of classical art history writing, and art history writing based on database and computer analysis models can be considered a possibility for future writing.

## 7. Result and Discussion

As an independent discipline, art history is scientific. Therefore, the study of art history needs to adopt scientific research methods, such as art interpretation methods, art standards, and art history theories, or a shared knowledge body of art history. Art history is also up-to-date and has a strong interdisciplinary nature. It has achieved significant results in theoretical, historical, critical, and interdisciplinary research over its long development. At present, whether in the East or the West, the development of art has established a new system, which not only combines new media, new technologies, and new disciplines, but also focuses on the construction of digital art history, art theory, and art education in the new era (RGCCAS, 2022). These aspects are particularly important for our understanding of art history and the study of art history. Throughout the development history of art history narrative, we not only need to analyze, understand, reflect, and draw inspiration from established art history phenomena and theories in the past, but also need to focus on the analysis, criticism, comparison, tracing, and reflection of art phenomena and their special historical materials in the new era.

This is of great significance for the research of art history methodology and narrative characteristics and also opens up a path for the construction of art history methodology with academic significance. However, the study of narrative in art history is a process that requires continuous deepening. For the study of art history, it is still necessary to integrate traditional historical materials and research methods, foreign theories, contemporary technological means, and the problems faced for a long time to promote academic progress. This study explains the digital construction of the development of art history in the end but does not provide a profound analysis. Its progressive and constantly changing characteristics make it a sustained focus of contemporary art history narrative research, and also a focus of attention in the later stage of this study.

## **8. Conclusion**

The narrative of art history, like the study of art history, cannot be limited to one method. It should be combined with interdisciplinary research methods to apply to art history, to promote new methods in art history. The understanding of historical concepts, the level of understanding of a certain field of art, and the cultural beliefs of art historians themselves greatly affect the research objects, scope, perspectives, and methods of art historians when writing texts. When art historians make judgments about the nature and attributes of their research works and historical events, they also need to rely on their assumptions about the research scope. According to Pankowski's viewpoint, scholars unconsciously follow the principle of pre-selection when deciding on a topic, which not only refers to the historical materials chosen by artists as writing objects but also the concepts and categories of the problems they analyze and discuss. Finally, this study suggests that art historians need to pay attention to current issues and narrative purposes in narrating art history and determine the narrative methods and content. They should adopt appropriate writing forms and narrative methods for different narrative content. The entire narrative research cannot be separated from its era and artistic environment. This is the key to ensuring the authenticity of art history narratives and the core of contemporary art history narratives.

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