

# Skimming Through the History of Art with a Wide-Angle Lens: Review of Hauser's *Social History of Art*

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doi:10.56397/AS.2023.02.05

## Abstract

Arnold Hauser's scholarly theories as a master of the sociology of art have sparked a paradigm shift in Western scholarship regarding the study of art history. In Hauser's first book, *The Social History of Art*, published in 1951, he was groundbreaking in clarifying the dual determinist position of art, applying classical sociological theorizing to the study of art history. To a certain extent, it dissolves the principle of artistic self-regulation, highlights the materialist-historical perspective, and unmasks the mystery of artistic development. As a central figure in the field of art historical studies who has driven a change in research perspectives, Hauser has contributed to a diversification of perspectives in art historical research and in the process has refined the theoretical system of art sociology, becoming a pioneer in the field of art sociology.

**Keywords:** Arnold Hauser, art sociology, art history, artistic self-regulation

## 1. Introduction

In a radio dialogue programme, the famous philosopher and literary theorist Lukács once said: "If I could talk about Hauser's work, I would say that his extraordinary merit lies in prompting many sociologists and historians who are in the midst of the new positivist wave to maintain a sense of relevance to reality as it becomes weaker and weaker." Such an evaluative tendency was not common in West German scholarship at the time, but today it does provide a subtle nod to Hauser's own position in the construction of the discipline of art sociology and the outstanding contribution he made. Arnold Hauser (1892-1978) was a leading sociologist and art historian whose work contributed to a change of perspective within the discipline of art history in the twentieth century and was influenced by scholars such as William Morris, Wilhelm Hausenstein and Frédéric Antal, who, together with Lukács and Adorno, have been called 'the most important cultural sociologists of the twentieth century'.

Before the nineteenth century, Western scholarship was used to studying works of art, focusing on the intuitive perceptions of the viewer, the forms of expression and the evolution of styles. With the industrial revolution and advances in science and technology, many scholars began to explore more "rational" methodologies. Morris, for example, delivered a lecture on *The Art of the People* during the Arts and Crafts movement, in which he addressed the subject of the relationship between art and society: "Art is a product of the reality of life; it should be owned by the protagonists of real life; literature enters life and influences the beautification of life." (Lei Yuemei, 2020) But such attempts to link culture and art to social reality were not taken seriously at the time, and art history never produced a systematic theoretical system with sociological links, and it was in this context that Hauser's grand view of the sociology of art was born. It was only after Hauser that the sociology of art began to become a systematic and progressively more robust discipline questions such as 'how artworks are linked to the social context in which they were born', 'the impact of the social class of artists and consumers on artworks' and 'the link between social power structures and the development of art', which had previously been relegated to the realm of sociology, are beginning to take on a new dimension in the field of art historical research.



Since the publication of his first book, *Social History of Art*, in 1951, Hauser has written four books in the field of the sociology of art: *The Philosophy of Art History*, *Mannerism: The Crisis of the renaissance and the Origin of Modern Art*, and *Sociology of Art*. During a third of his life, Hauser completed these works, which contributed to the diversification of perspectives in art historical research, the further development of the discipline of art sociology, and the transformation of the discipline of art historical research.

It is for this reason that this detailed first work, *Social History of Art*, can be called the perfect way to open the door to Hauser's world of thought, to systematically understand the construction of Hauser's theoretical system and his main academic work in the field of art sociology. The book discusses a wide range of artistic phenomena, including literature, painting, sculpture, music, architecture, theatre, and film. Systematic application of an interdisciplinary approach to the study of art history, with an interdisciplinary examination and analysis of various art phenomena. This book, which spans the fields of philosophy, aesthetics, religion, sociology, intellectual history and cultural history, opens up a broad horizon for the study of art history, provides a historical overview of the relationship between art and society, attempts to discuss how images reveal social messages and how art conceals ideologies, and challenges traditional art history. (Liu Xiangjuan, 2016)

## 2. The Double Determinism of Art History

In the second chapter of *The Social History of Art*, which provides a survey of the development of urban culture in the ancient East, Hauser mentions that "the freedom of form and line composition that can still be seen on statues from the end of the Pre-Dynastic and First Dynasties in ancient Egypt was subsequently lost and later regained with the tide of the intellectual revolution." The Portrait of a Village Chief in the Cairo Museum and the Portrait of a Bookkeeper in the Louvre, for example, still appear today in a distinctly naturalistic style, preserving the lively tendencies of the reign of Amenophis IV. But after the Middle Dynasties, when the cognac aristocracy, in pursuit of a strong hierarchy, came to power, and for the first time in the history of human culture, the rigid ritual forms of court art emerged, the paintings of this period are invariably 'display portraits', and the positive law was widely applied to ancient Egyptian artworks. This mode of interpretation, which projects changes in the context of social institutions onto shifts in the style of artistic expression throughout the *Social History of Art*, demonstrates 'a profound development based on the assumption that artistic forms and their social relations are necessarily historical in nature'. (Jonathan Harris, 1999)

Hauser's dual deterministic approach to the history of art reveals that, on the one hand, the development of artistic expression and style is indeed influenced by its own internal laws, while on the other hand, external factors such as the social environment in which the artist lived and the context in which the style was born, also condition the way in which the work of art ultimately appears. At the same time, he stresses that there is no absolute 'first factor' between the internal and external factors that influence the development of art history, and that specific social circumstances influence the evolution of art, but not in an absolute correspondence. This means that while we can find in the rigid hierarchy and religious dogma of the Middle Kingdom period in ancient Egypt the reasons for the stereotypical rigidity of the artwork of that period, we still cannot conclude that whenever such a social climate was present, there was necessarily a shift in the development of art in a style like that of the period. The ancient kingdom of Babylon, born in Mesopotamia, is a compelling case in point, where the economy became more dynamic and urban life more developed, but art forms were more old-fashioned. This is known as the 'Babylonian phenomenon', when artists were not given names and were only ranked alongside craftsmen, and the Hammurabi Codex carvings show that abstract rationalism was more prevalent at this time than in the past.

## 3. Appropriation of Sociological Theory and Response to the Principle of Artistic Self-Regulation

Hauser's premise in constructing a model for the study of the social history of art is that art is not entirely self-regulating but is complexly linked to a wide range of social factors. These factors include, but are not limited to, political systems, laws, levels of science and technology, religious beliefs, aesthetic habits, etc. It is therefore difficult to bypass Hauser's response to the principle of artistic self-regulation when trying to understand his seminal contribution to the field of the sociology of art. The concept of "artistic self-discipline" has been introduced since Kant to ensure that the specificity of art is maintained. In his *Critique of Judgement*, Kant sees aesthetic judgement, pure reason, and practical reason together as the faculties that underpin the subject's ability to exercise self-discipline. Kant argues that art itself has a 'purposeless purposiveness', that its emergence is independent of the utilitarian external purposes that exist in social reality, and that its existence and development is therefore not subject to external volitional forces, which are other-directed. Marcuse further concretizes the principle of artistic self-regulation, suggesting that what is called artistic self-regulation refers to art's rejection of social interference in general, a revolutionary force of rebellion against materialized consciousness. In this sense, *The Social History of Art* can be seen as a response to and a new reading of the principle of artistic self-discipline.

Hauser assimilates Lukács' view of 'totality' in its entirety. In *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács draws



from Hegelian philosophy on the idea of wholeness and discusses the concepts of history, social ideology, and objectification. He also quotes a keynote sentence from Marx in *The Poverty of Philosophy*: “The relations of production in every society form a unified whole.” This means that there are complex and diverse links between production, distribution, exchange and consumption, the links of social production, “which constitute the various parts of a totality, the differences within a unity.” In his later works, Hauser discusses Lukács’s ideas in more detail, for example by proposing a holistic view of the existence and development of art, arguing that in addition to the ‘totality of life’, which refers to the totality of human existence and sensation, art is also equally holistic, because integrity can be embodied in a work of art in its entirety, not only because of its authentic and detailed appearance, but also because the subject matter of the work is fully expressed, the author’s intentions are fully expressed, and there is a unity of style and a harmony between the various parts of existence. In other forms of social existence, integrity is likely to be difficult to embody in its entirety. The integrity that characterizes a work of art is the very essence of art.

In his adaptation of classical sociological theory, Hauser was also clearly influenced by Weber’s modern theory. Weber’s ‘rationalization’ refers to the process by which people choose the tools they need to achieve greater efficiency in defining and acting on their goals, tools and instruments that are more efficient and make it faster and easier to achieve them. This includes the rationalization of individual actions and perceptions, and such a process can also be extended to the development of social institutions and organizations. Weber understood the history of the development of Western society as a process of rationalization, a gradual integration of matter and thought. Hauser retains the more flexible parts of Weber’s theory of modernity to construct a macroscopic picture of art history and social development, while also retaining Marx’s critical consciousness. Hauser agrees that there is a complex interrelationship between matter and consciousness, and he also follows the neo-Marxist view that research should be analyzed in concrete terms, rather than following the logic of sole materialism. Take Byzantine art during the Eastern Roman Empire, for example, when artistic expression was mysterious and serious, a clear link to the highly centralized rule of religious belief in the Byzantine Empire, where the emperor held sole religious power and therefore needed his subjects to remain maximally loyal to him, so he needed to display his power in a way that would stimulate the imagination, and had to give power a glamorous appearance and a cloak of mystery.

However, the fundamental reason for the religious mystique displayed in the art of the Byzantine Empire lay in the fact that it had fixed taxes and rational government economic behavior, which allowed for a thoroughly balanced state budget and the money reserves it possessed made it possible for the emperor to control various localist and liberal tendencies. With freedom of economic activity, there is no need to rely on large landowners.<sup>1</sup> This situation explains why the Byzantine Empire, with its thriving commercial and urban economy, did not make the market economy its dominant economy, and the serious religious elements of the Church, as a subordinate department of the emperor, naturally replaced the lively style of the market economy as the dominant feature of artistic expression in the Byzantine Empire.

#### **4. Artistic Demystification: A Materialist-Historical Research Position**

Introduced by his friend Mannheim, Hauser joined the Sunday Club in 1916, a left-wing Hungarian camp led by Lukács, in which Mannheim, a sociologist of knowledge, and Balázs, a film critic, were the core members of the club and established the “liberal school of the humanities”. Hauser has taken up the influence of this school of thought and places the interaction and conflict between art and social factors in a specific historical context, identifying the ‘reflecting and being reflected’ relationship between artistic style, world view and class structure.

In his studies of art history at a macro level, Hauser also frequently invokes classical concepts and propositions from Marxist historical theory, making frequent attempts to integrate the analysis of artworks with the social lives of artists, to understand artworks in the context of a particular period, and to analyze the economic patterns and social class structures of art production. Although the Marxist doctrine rarely comments directly on artistic phenomena, he refers to many theories related to the materialist position during his discussion of the problems of labor, matter, and ideology. For example, in the *Introduction to Political Economy* and the *Theory of Surplus Value*, Marx proposed such topics as “the economic base determines the superstructure”, “the unbalanced relationship between artistic production and material production” and “capitalist production is hostile to literature and art”. The social nature and social function of art, the social production and consumption of art, the fate of art in capitalist society, and the social and class nature of ideology are considered in various ways. (Zhou Jiwu & Li Xing, 2022) Although in several subsequent books, influenced by political factors, Hauser deliberately and conspicuously avoided too much influence from Marxist theory, these classical theories of materialist history did provide the intellectual starting point for Hauser’s sociological construction of art in the process of creating *The Social History of Art*.

This led to the removal of the mysterious, subjective, inwardly extended aesthetic illusion veil that pre-19th century artworks had been given, and a shift from a romantic to a materialistic perspective on the process of



artistic existence and development. It can be said that the materialist-historical research position of the sociology of art has, to a certain extent, contributed to the process of demystifying art. Thus in *The Social History of Art*, for example, with regard to the encounter between Classicism and Romanticism that emerged during the French Revolution, Hauser interprets it as follows: “Romantic art was art prepared in a period of revolution, and the occurrence of the Revolution created the conditions for the emergence of such a society” “Each expression of individuality has its own unique principles, and for art, this was the great achievement of the French Revolution”<sup>2</sup> He argued that the class antagonisms of the French Revolution led to the coexistence of different artistic styles. We can see Hauser’s tendency to examine the interaction and conflict between art and various social factors in relation to each other, to develop an ‘isostructural’ narrative in art history in conjunction with sociology, and to include social factors in the production, distribution and consumption of art in the study of art history, allowing social historians of art to start with a sociological research paradigm before thinking about art itself, thus beginning a new era of considering artistic activity as a complete practice.

## 5. Conclusion

Since the first publication of *The Social History of Art* in 1951, Hauser’s theoretical construction of the sociology of art has faced a long period of mixed reviews. On the one hand, European art historians consider him to have departed from the positivist conception of art historical research and to have failed to enter the realm of formalism, and to have been too forceful in his extrapolation of flows in art history, lacking logical and rigorous supporting evidence. Such criticism was also driven by political factors, as Hauser’s *Social History of Art* was published in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, and Hauser was often accused by Western “liberal scholars” of using materialist ideas such as “historical determinism” in his research, as Gombrich, for example, has pointed out, and the overly Marxian background of Hauser’s sociological study of art was an important reason for the criticism of Hauser’s *Social History of Art*.

On the other hand, his sociological interpretation of art strove to adhere to the disciplinary standards and norms of art history, and thus gained the approval of mid-twentieth-century liberal and left-wing critics, with Greenberg, for example, stating that *The Social History of Art* did a good job of showing that social factors helped to explain aesthetic shifts and the development of artistic styles.<sup>3</sup> Since the rise of neo-Marxist studies after the 1970s, Hauser’s theories have gained renewed attention and recognition. Art historian Peter Burke refers to Hauser’s sociological theory of art as a ‘macro-sociology of art’, arguing that Hauser’s approach to art history places greater emphasis on the universality of art production, links artistic styles to class and cultural factors, and explores the roots of various artistic phenomena in the conflict and interaction between socio-economic and other material conditions and social culture, and is therefore a macro-constructive approach to art history.<sup>4</sup>

It is only since then, as the number of scholars and publications in the field of art history that have taken a sociological approach to art history has increased, that the foresight, importance, and theoretical value of Hauser’s theory of the social history of art has become apparent. In China, the discussion and study of Hauser’s scholarly thought started much later, with the Commercial Press in Beijing only publishing a Chinese translation of *The Social History of Art* for the first time in 2015, and the translator of this edition, Mr. Huang Laoyu, also mentions in his preface that the lack of research on Hauser in the domestic academic community is not unrelated to the serious lag in the translation of his research in China. In my opinion, Hauser’s macroscopic view of art in *The Social History of Art* is like setting a wide-angle lens on nearly a millennium of art history, and its breadth of vision, scope and content make it a classic in the field of art sociology. Some of the book’s contents are, as mentioned, oversimplified and crude, and the deductions sometimes seem arbitrary and illogical, but there is more to it than meets the eye. If Hauser has always advocated placing works of art in the context of their time, then today’s readers can see the groundbreaking significance of this book for the discipline of art sociology when they place it in the context of the society in which it was born.

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<sup>1</sup> Arnold Hauser, (2020). *Social History of Art*, Huang Liaoyu, Beijing Commercial Press, 122-123.

<sup>2</sup> Arnold Hauser, (2020). *Social History of Art*, Huang Liaoyu, Beijing Commercial Press, 587-588.

<sup>3</sup> New York Times Book Review, Dec. 23, 1951.

<sup>4</sup> Fan Limeng, (2016). From Social History of Art to Sociology of Art—A Review of Arnold Hauser's Academic Thought. *Nanjing Social Sciences*, (04), 120-126.

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