Beyond the Useful and Agreeable Man

Art becomes a great concern for the polite public and a great deal more than a polite public concern. Those late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century art commentators who penned their earnest complaints concerning the debasement of art at the hands of ‘the public’ assumed that the issues they addressed were of great public concern. To get seriously embroiled in heated public debate on the theory of artistic genius or the nature of the inventive process was not, as it might have been in the grandfathers’ generation, regarded as unusual or downright ridiculous. With good reason these commentators expected their view on art to be of interest to more than a tiny group of élite readers. A they had perhaps forgotten, art was only regarded as of great concern because of its initial exposure to the public whose views on art the despised.

In the mid-eighteenth century the benefits accruing from the exposure of the visual arts to a broader public had been clear to many members of the art professions. The Parisian painter and art commentator Charles-Nicolas Cochin (1715–90), for instance, looked back on the revival of the Paris Salon in 1737 as a blessed intervention which rescued the arts from obscurity brought about by a serious failure in the private patronage system. By stimulating the interest of a wider public this ‘fortunate establishment’ was deemed to have transformed the careers of the mass of artists who until that time had lived ‘in a state of mediocrity verging on poverty’ and ‘saved painting, by a prompt showing of the most worthy talents and by inspiring with a love of the arts number of people who, without the exhibition, would have never give them a thought’.

It was very soon recognized elsewhere in Europe that the new Salon exhibitions would give France a genuine economic and cultural advantage over its competitors. On 25 August 1737 the Daily Post, a prominent London newspaper, published a report from a foreign correspondent who had recently been to see the first exhibition of the revived Parisian Salon at the Louvre. With a tone of genuine excitement, the correspondent records the sight of a huge crowd competing ‘with great earnestness’ to see the pictures. He lamented that, althoug
there might be similar enthusiasm for painting in Britain, there were no publicly organized ways of channelling it.

What a discouragement it is to the ingenious men of Great Britain that we have no yearly prizes to reward their pains and application for the service of mankind; or publick honour to bestow on their services as in France! They might well complain that we don't imitate the French in their best qualities, but take particular care to outdo them in their worst. Good painters, Engravers, and Statuaries are very useful men; they add to the capital stock as well as to the honour of the Country, besides the noble and instructing amusement which they afford.

The newspaper readers for whom this piece was intended were obviously in need of a little persuasion that the visual arts were worth approaching with the 'great earnestness' of their neighbours across the channel. The correspondent was forced to appeal to his readers on the most practical level by reminding them that artists were 'very useful men' who could add 'to the capital stock' and help to improve the moral tone of public life. It was a line of argument probably calculated to appeal to the paper's more practically minded City readers who might not have been persuaded by a less down-to-earth defence of the liberal arts.

The intellectual precept of this piece—a precept which seems not to have been absorbed by all this paper's readers—was that the visual arts deserved encouragement because they were good for society. The social efficacy of the arts could be appreciated in simple economic terms. It could also be argued that, if artists kept themselves to 'noble and instructing' subjects, art could become a useful tool for civic instruction. On a third level the visual arts were deemed good for society because they were wholesome 'amusement', because they inspired pleasing emotions which kept society agreeable and harmonious. Exposure to the arts could also be considered as indicative of the general tone of civic life in the state and function as an important guide to the level of civilization encountered therein. The display of the visual arts in the public forum could act as a useful means of measuring the quality of civic life in one European nation against another.

As the Daily Post's correspondent was fully aware, Britain measured up to its Continental neighbour and traditional foe rather poorly when judged by such criteria. Some three years later in his Treatise on Ancient Painting of 1740 George Turnbull covertly reminded his readers of the same point:

the general and national Character of a People may be conjectured from the State of the Arts amongst them: and reciprocally, the State of the Arts amongst any people may pretty certainly be divin'd from the general, prevalent Temper and Humour of that People as it discovers itself by other symptoms of Government, Laws, Languages, Manners, etc.

At this time Britain still had no public system for the promotion of the arts. However, by the mid-1750s, with the foundation in London of that most 'useful' of institutions, The Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufacture and Commerce, with its scheme of prizes and public exhibitions, the situation was much improved. The effect of institutional encouragement of the arts on the moral tone of the nation was difficult to gauge accurately and highly disputable. The effect on the 'capital stock', however, was easier to determine. In the forty years following the foundation of the Society artists were indeed to prove 'very useful men' to Great Britain. Prints, for instance, were to become not just an important British export product but one of the most successful export products of the early Industrial Revolution. If an early nineteenth-century report in the Morning Post is to be believed, Francesco Bartolozzi (1727–1815) alone 'added to our revenue at least a million sterling'.

Such examples could not be ignored. Across Europe the idea that the visual arts deserved the attention of the responsible patriotic citizen gradually became a commonplace. In the central decades of the eighteenth century there was a major upsurge of interest in the foundation of public institutions for the encouragement of the arts. By the 1780s virtually every major metropolis in Europe had a public scheme or series of schemes under full sway. A European state simply could not be considered fully civilized or economically competitive without one.

The consensus of public opinion in most European countries that had thriving art publics gradually shifted towards the idea that the visual arts constituted an important and profound form of social communication. As a truly elite field of interest in the early eighteenth century painting and sculpture struggled for a place of honour within the canon of liberal arts. In his The Theory of Painting of 1715, for instance, Jonathan Richardson (1665–1745) was obliged to resort to vehement argument in an attempt to persuade his contemporaries that painting could be studied theoretically and was widely mocked for so doing. By the late eighteenth century it was rare to encounter a man of intellectual substance who argued, as did Louis-Sebastien Mercier (1740–1814), that the visual arts were not a matter for serious consideration. Mercier was assuming the role of a maverick flying in the face of public opinion.

By the mid-eighteenth century serious enquiries into matters art historical and theoretical were becoming major successes for the publishing industry. Winckelmann's History of Ancient Art (1764) became art history's first international 'best seller'. Across Europe the demand for serious enquiries into matters artistic by those who did not aspire to a multilingual education was serviced by a steadily growing industry in translations. Translated excerpts of Winckelmann's works, for instance, appeared in English magazines within months of their initial publication.
The mass of theoretical works which entered the polite literary arena in this period bombarded Europe's art publics with a perplexing variety of intellectual stances. Much as a multiplicity of art publics arose in the second half of the eighteenth century, a multiplicity of points of debate arose to polarize and differentiate these publics. By no means all prominent texts promoted the notion that the visual arts, and artists themselves, should find a purpose in society through their moral usefulness. Indeed, many of the most influential works emerging from early and mid-eighteenth-century Paris—works most frequently quoted and bastardized in popular literary forms—ran explicitly counter to 'civic humanist' and utilitarian dictums. The works of Charles Coypel and the Abbé Dubois, in particular, placed more stress on the artist's task of gratifying the sensual appetites of the connoisseur than his duty morally to elevate the citizen.

Despite the pluralism of views on the question of moral utility most strands of opinion within the mid-eighteenth century discourse accorded with the belief that the visual arts should be some sort of 'amusement'; that they should incite agreeable sensations and rationally controllable emotions. Art, the basic argument ran, could only be deemed 'good' and useful to the formation of civilized society if it inspired sensations which ultimately pleased and civilized the spirit. However, with the publication of Edmund Burke's Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful (1757) the British art world, and to a lesser extent that of the rest of Europe, gained access to a serious and accomplished argument which began to liberate the visual arts from their long subjection to polite ideals of emotional decorum.

Burke promoted a notion of art which stressed the expression of strong, ungovernable 'sublime' emotions. History paintings displaying such passions could be disturbing to behold. This undermined a strong early eighteenth-century tradition—a tradition derived from the theoretical works of De Piles and Du Fresnoy—which insisted that the characters depicted in history painting should behave towards each other with *bon sens* and *bienséance* (terms which rather inadequately translate as 'good sense' and 'good manners'). Much of the major work of James Barry, a long-time friend of Burke, was designed to run against these sort of decorous, polite conventions. He complained bitterly about the tendency of the English public to affect 'such nice feelings and so much sensibility, as not to be able to bear the sight of pictures where the action turns upon the circumstance of distress'. Barry's *King Lear and Cordelia* (etching, 1776) exhibited a wildness totally contrary to the spirit of *bon sens* and *bienséance*. To live and work to perpetuate such tame values as *bon sens* and *bienséance* was deemed by Barry and many of his contemporaries as positive insult to a man with a claim to grand and unrestrainable genius.

By the 1770s the idea that, in order to be accepted as a worthy field of interest, the visual arts needed to be fundamentally agreeable was losing its consensus in many European art worlds. However, the idea that art should be useful both in economic and social terms was less uniform in its decay. In some quarters of European society it was soon to reach an unparalleled importance, particularly in the school of David and in Revolutionary France where the visual arts were emphatically tied to the wheel of the propaganda machine. As we shall see, French artists' rebellion against the authority of civic humanist ideals was dramatically expressed soon after the end of the terror. In other parts of Europe where art was not so heavily associated with programmes of political reform the process of disintegration began earlier and took a more gradual course.

To argue, as did the contributor to the *Daily Post* that art justified its importance to society by becoming a 'noble and instructing amusement' and an economic boon to the state, was to adopt a rather primary position. It was, as we have seen, the sort of argument which persuaded those with little prior interest in the visual arts that they were worth supporting on crude social and political grounds. Utilitarian ideology proved irksome to some within the generations of artists who followed the founders of useful societies and worthy academies. Equally the doctrine began to fail to appeal to sectors of the art-buying public who disliked the notion that they were considered fodder for social indoctrination and were bored by their exposure to sonorous, worthy works. By the late eighteenth century there were a number of artists—most notably, as we shall see in Chapter 3, the patently amoral satiric moralist Thomas Rowlandson (1756-1827)—who made their entire careers by exploiting sectors of the art market bored by instructive art works.

For many of Rowlandson's contemporaries, including the prominent officers of art academies, the very idea of the usefulness of art and the artist seemed degrading. It turned the unique vocation into one profession amongst many and seemed to assemble the nation's artists into a sort of creative civil service. For Henry Fuseli the very notion that the arts were capable of improving the public was a trivialization. Like James Barry, he argued that great art was a medium for the exploration of lofty and unrestrained emotions. He went further than Barry in the argument that such emotions ought to be pursued whether the sight of images depicting them was good for the public or not. Whilst he retained the notion that the level of public life could be measured by the state of the arts, Fuseli argued that the arts did not need to be, in any obvious sense, good for the citizen to achieve this end. Indeed, on occasion he argued that, when reduced to the banal role of public instruction, the arts gave a poor showing of the level of public life. A genuinely healthy state did not need art for its economic and social
welfare, it produced great art. Great art and great artists were by definition men unconcerned with the necessary, the useful, and the superficially agreeable.5

Fuseli represented an extreme, intentionally elitist, and possibly marginal, position. His very vehemence was, however, much in tune with his times. In the period of Fuseli’s prominence in the art world (c.1770–1810) public debate on the arts began to excite strong emotions; the rhetorical tone of European discourse on the visual arts became more typically forthright, vehement, and heated than august and polite. As the assumption that art should incite polite and obviously pleasing emotions decayed, so also did any vestiges of politeness evaporate from debate between various factions of the art world. Art ceased merely to be taken seriously in the public sphere, it became the object of violent disagreement. As we shall see below, a number of self-portraits of artists of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century include references to bitter conflict and scenes of tribal war.

Artists all over Europe began to embrace extreme positions. Earnest commitment to one’s cause to the point of suicide or financial ruin, taking dramatic risks, dicing with the political or professional authorities on points of principle, began to signal the true artist. For many, art was becoming more than a matter of public concern, more than something pleasing or cultivating; it was becoming a matter for quasi-religious zeal. It was the era when Europeans began to regard art works (in particular antiquities) with a reverence formerly reserved for saintly relics, to whisper before ‘great art’ in public galleries, and consistently to employ religious metaphor in their discussion of art.

Artistic celebrity, artistic failure, and artistic self-expression: the problem of excessive numbers of artists

Like the literature of art theory and history, the genre of the art memoir or biography grew dramatically in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. To a greater extent than other literary forms associated with the visual arts it became an acknowledged field for public entertainment. Biographies certainly could take the form of worthy moral tales pointing out the wages of folly, such as the competing monographs published on the life of the disreputable George Morland (1763–1804) shortly after his death. More often, however, they were amusingly anecdotal in tone. The art memoirs compiled by J. T. Smith and Étienne Delécluze are, indeed, comic masterpieces. No matter how trivial or quizzical the productions of this anecdote industry might appear, they registered a serious new development in the history of the social role of the artist in Europe. The lives of famous artists were becoming public property; they were becoming ‘celebrities’ in something like the modern understanding of the concept.

The peddling of gratuitous, entertaining, or spurious biographical anecdotes was not in itself a new development in the art world. Vasari was, by most modern estimates, a master of the genre. The popularity of his Vite in the late eighteenth century did much to stimulate the thirst for contemporary art anecdotes. It was the sheer immediacy of its anecdotal trivia which set the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century apart. The ‘celebrity’ artist could find himself consumed by a voracious and prurient anecdote and gossip industry. He or she, for female artists such as Angelica Kauffmann (1741–1807) were of particular interest to the gossip industry, might find even the most casually dropped comments dissected in the public arena or their romantic liaisons the topic of public speculation. Gossip could dictate careers. Rumours concerning a supposed romantic connection between the English society portraitist, Thomas Lawrence (1769–1830) and an impressionable princess for a time threatened his career, as female sitters refused to be left in his company. As the memoirs of celebrities such as James Northcote (1746–1831) and Antonio Canova (1757–1822) record, learning to handle the press, to deal with the ephemeral whirl of public criticism, was considered an essential part of the job of a modern artist.6 Finding himself yet again the object of speculation in the popular press, Northcote stoically remarked:

A man in a conspicuous position must stand strict examination; every fault of his own, or even his family, will be raked up, and, if possible, brought against him; the world will not let him enjoy his distinction for nothing, for it is looked upon by them as an infringement upon their common rights.

It was not without reason that Vasari’s Vite and art-historical anecdotes pertaining to the relationship of great artists to great patriotic figures began to assume a new importance in the later decades of our period. Perhaps the central cause of this phenomenon was a strong cultural identification with epic phases of history. The growing conviction of many who lived through this period of European history was that they were also witnessing great times; times which in future would be compared to the Renaissance, the nascent Roman Republic, or Periclean Athens. The powerful sense of the consequence of the times emerged from the mid-eighteenth century onward. Horace Walpole described his writing of Anecdotes of Painting in England (1760–71) as his ‘Vasarihood’ and, though he described the genesis of a national tradition which was a limited success, considered himself to be charting the beginnings of something which might become great. Later, with the burgeon of the empire and national confidence, it became more common to believe that the biography of a modern English artist might have some importance to posterity equivalent to their Vasarian prototypes. John Flaxman’s (1755–1826) posthumous eulogy of the sculptor Thomas Banks (1735–1805) made this point clear.7 Here Flaxman compared Banks to Nicola (1458–78) and Giovanni
invited his rival Jean-Baptiste Perronneau to make a portrait of him whilst secretly working on a self-portrait. Through the offices of his friend Jean-Siméon Chardin (1699–1779), he arranged for this self-portrait to be hung in the Salon next to that made by Perronneau. Thus, the public were allowed to witness de la Tour’s superiority by way of a clear comparison. Through such manoeuvres de la Tour was able to drive up his prices to levels which would have been difficult to contemplate in the seventeenth century.

The potential of that particularly eighteenth-century form of communication, the newspaper, for the promotion of the artist was very soon realized. This was the first era in which artists started regularly to advertise themselves and their works and to use the services of friendly journalists to compile ‘puffs’ (an eighteenth-century term for a favourable piece of publicity in which the person or group of persons publicized had an unacknowledged hand). The very concept of news began to be exploited by resourceful artists who needed to establish their reputation. Moving to Dublin under strained financial circumstances Francis Wheatley (1747–1821) launched himself on that city’s public by immediately setting out to sketch the most newsworthy event of the times, a meeting of Volunteers on College Green which took place on 4 November 1779. To exploit the patriotic mood of the moment he had his painting of the event shown at the Society of Arts in William Street and engraved forthwith. It was as close as the technology of the day could make him to reportage. The publicity stunt appears to have worked. Wheatley’s reputation grew by association with a good patriotic story.

Fame grasped through such transient media was itself transient. It was a sign of the times when the English newspaper The World of 29 April 1790 greeted the young Julius Caesar Ibbetson (1759–1817)—an artist who had made his public reputation with a canvas recording George Biggin’s first ascent in Lunardi’s balloon—as ‘the most conspicuous genius of the year’. Ibbetson’s choice of an image of a manned balloon ascent to make his reputation was very appropriate. Balloon ascents, and the gawking crowds which gathered around them, became powerful metaphors for the transience of urban life and public reputation. A brilliant comic French print of the 1780s (Anon., The Devotees of Physic, 1783) makes this point clear: a man drifts across the sky on a huge breath of hot air and life in the city beneath turns to chaos as all fall over themselves to keep his image in view.12

Long before the invention of the hot-air balloon, images of transient hot air, in particular of children inflating bladders, had been used as vanitas symbols. The invention of the balloon, a large and highly public bladder, simply gave artists an ideal opportunity to turn this tradition to the depiction of the transience of fame in that bubble that was the public sphere. Before the invention of the balloon the image of the
inflated bladder was also adapted to these purposes and was used to symbolize the transience of the artistic fame of those who were perceived to put too much faith in that mass of hot air which was the vox populi. A print relating to Greuze, including the device of the air blader, was published for the delectation of his rivals and detractors. It showed a monument to the artist collapsing and falling on his engraver M. Lavasseur who had shared in his fortunes. An inscription explained that the image showed:

M. Lavasseur crushed by the fall of an obelisk erected in honour of the deject celebrity of Greuze—an accident caused by a pin-prick in one of the bladders as a foundation to the monument on which may be seen the portrait of Greuze crowned by thistles and peacock feathers... the whole completed by a cat-call.\textsuperscript{13}

It is an indication of the enmity inspired by Greuze's success that the first edition of this print sold out in three days. Celebrity artists were by this stage capable of inciting public hatreds and jealousies akin to those inspired by politicians. The imagery of this print may, indeed, have been borrowed from the iconography of political satire. In Britain, Pitt the Elder, a politician who pioneered the strategy of appealing to raw public opinion, had been shown floating in the air on a bladder of hot air (Anon., \textit{Si Transit Gloria Mundi}, early 1760s), his magnificent cushion of public acclaim ready to burst at any time. The career of the celebrity artist and that of the politician striving to stay in office in an increasingly democratic urban world were not altogether dissimilar.

The image of the artist building himself up on bubbles of hot air was particularly appropriate, to this the first era when the furnaces of the various European art worlds began to be stoked by critics. Greuze's rise and fall had itself been associated with the whim of critical reviewers. His career, more or less, pivoted around the poor critical reception of his first major attempt in the genre of history painting, the \textit{Septime Severe} of 1760. It is an indication of how seriously he took poor critical reviews that he himself penned a long and spirited counterblast to his detractors in \textit{L'Avant-Couerue}.\textsuperscript{14}

The rise of the critic contributed significantly to the ephemeral nature of artistic celebrity in this period. The art profession was quick to realize that it was in the professional or social interest of the ambitious critic to be destructive and ruin reputations. As Joseph Farington (1747–1821) grumpily observed in 1797, the critic was 'likely to take the safe side of remarks, knowing that to object signifies a superior taste,— while to approve may be to hazard something'.\textsuperscript{15}

No artistic 'celebrity' of the age was able to build a reputation solid enough to ignore a sustained period of critical abuse. Even a powerful artist such as J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851) felt obliged at the height of his career to write cringing verses to a prominent newspaper critic who praised his work.\textsuperscript{16} The power of the press in Britain meant that here, more than anywhere else in Europe, artists were forced to 'dirty tricks' to promote themselves publicly. Fuseli was just one of those artists who wrote favourable reviews of his own work under newspaper pseudonyms. As art critic for the \textit{Morning Post} John Hoppner (1758–1810) not only praised himself but also savaged rivals.

By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century any serious attempt to introduce something new or redefine the role of the artist required the pen of an individual capable of explaining the theoretical basis of the novelty to the public at large. German artists living in the Rome of this period were particularly reliant upon such support. The career of the Danish artist Asmus Jacob Carstens (1754–98) in Rome was much dependent upon the support of his friend Karl Fornow, who bombarded the public both at home in German-speaking Europe and in Rome with favourable reviews of his work. Carstens was sold to the highly select readership of Fornow's articles as 'the creator of a new art ideal'. His somewhat radical and forbidding works—he declined to use colour or perspectival devices—enjoyed a measure of success which it is difficult to imagine them attaining without having the support of an accomplished and eloquent theorist.

Rome, the city in which Carstens sought to establish himself as an international celebrity, was simply overflowing with artists from all over Europe. The extraordinary lengths to which he went to promote and differentiate himself is a clear indication of the competitive atmosphere in the city. In late eighteenth-century Rome, as in contemporary Paris and London, artists and art commentators regularly complained about the surfeit of artists. As Carstens was probably aware, the great majority of artists who came to Rome experienced financial hardship. No matter how many wealthy connoisseurs came to Rome, the City remained, as far as the majority of artists were concerned, a 'buyers' market. It was, as we shall see below, a world in which a figure such as the Earl of Bristol could force even a highly respected artist such as John Flaxman to work at an unprofitable rate.

By the late eighteenth century the majority of urban art worlds in Europe were experiencing a glut of artists. Despite the consequent difficulty of surviving in the competitive market, the art professions maintained a glamorous image which attracted young men like moths to a candle. In his opening Academy lecture of 1807 John Opie (1761–1807) made special point of attacking the idea that entering the Academy was a place for young men who wanted 'easy and amusing... profitable profession'. Art, he insisted, was not an easier way of turning a penny than an ordinary job. He challenged anyone to leave who hoped to 'get rid of what he thinks a more vulgar or disagreeable situation; to escape confinement at a counter or desk'. As Opie's colleague James Northcote observed, the memoirs of famous artists filled the
public imagination with images of a glamorous life-style which was, in practice, the privilege of a tiny minority. The majority of young hopefuls drawn into the profession by the prospect of riches and celebrity found themselves in penury. Northcote humorously observed that it would be in the public interest for someone to publish biographies of a few of the most tragic failures.17

Whilst Northcote blamed the writers of art memoirs for the problem, it seems more likely that it was caused by the fundamental disparities between the formulation of the public ideal and the realities of life in the public sphere (a problem which I introduced at the beginning of this book). The extraordinary increase in the number of European art academies, institutions for the improvement of arts and manufactures, and drawing schools inevitably produced thousands of young men whose expectations were bound to be shattered. As one notable nineteenth-century critic of the eighteenth-century European academic movement sardonically observed: ‘The great effect of the academies has been to elevate the standard of mediocrity, and greatly to multiply the number of artists.’18

No matter how large or how pluralistic the art markets of cities such as Paris, London, and Rome might be, they were not as big as those who officially represented the operations of the public spirit assumed them to be. Much as the later part of this period was plagued by grandiose projects for public monuments which failed because they never could be practically or economically supported, the will of national institutions to produce artists exceeded the public’s capacity to support them. This was a serious problem. One early nineteenth-century critic of British schemes for the improvement of the arts writing in the Gentleman’s Magazine even considered proposing that such public projects should be abandoned as they merely helped to litter the streets with destitute artists. One need only look at the lists of artists being turned out of the British Royal Academy schools, the great majority of whom do not now merit a footnote in the pages of art history, to see that the worries of this critic were genuine.

The sheer number of artists in the art market was, on occasion, taken to induce creative sterility. Chardin, for instance, complained in 1765 of the ‘two thousand wretches (who) break their brushes in the futile attempt to imitate the worst paintings in the Salon’.19 On most occasions, however, the phenomenon was powerfully associated with the production of an unhealthy number of novelties. Though it is difficult for our twentieth-century minds to grasp it, novelty was generally presented as a thoroughly negative concept in eighteenth-century art commentaries. It carried inflections somewhat similar to the modern concepts of ‘gimmicky’ or ‘trickery’. In its most pejorative sense ‘novelty’ was associated with the fickle appetites of the public and the effects of petty consumer demand on the visual arts. Hogarth and some of his colleagues in the St Martin’s Lane coterie were running against the general tide of European thought when they publicly stated their belief that the vigour of the market and the boredom of consumers should throw up a variety of interesting new products and artistic ideas.20

From the 1760s onward the concept of novelty started to exist in uncomfortable relationship to that of artistic ‘originality’, a phenomenon which was considered in an altogether more positive light. Originality in most of its eighteenth-century usages was a form of novelty which arose from imitation; to be original, or ‘an original genius’, was to show exceptional skill in the ‘inventive’ combination or reinterpretation of hallowed precepts and traditional elements. In a sense the concept of artistic originality—a concept which is one of the defining preoccupations of the later eighteenth-century European art world—was promoted as a means of making ‘novelty’ socially and academically respectable. To draw distinctions between a mind concerned with cheap novelties and an original thinker was to exercise one’s social prejudice. One man’s original genius was another man’s perpetrator of cheap artistic gimmicks.

It can be no coincidence that texts concerning original genius—works such as Edward Young’s Conjectures upon Original Composition (1759) and Alexander Gerard’s An Essay on Genius (1774)—appeared in those decades when the problem of excessive numbers of artists really began to have an impact on the art world. To appropriate the reputation of an original genius—a capacity which most theoreticians asserted was innate and could not be acquired—was an excellent way of an artist differentiating himself from his many ambitious peers. It was, similarly, a forceful means of justifying his spectacular novelties as something worthy of critical respect. Art historians have given little thought to the problem of why the concept of original genius rose to prominence in this period. It is presumed to have occurred for no better reason than the immanence of ‘the romantic movement’. I suggest that the concept was socially generated by the appearance of conditions of excessive economic competition within the new public art markets of northern Europe and Rome.

The connection between fear of competition and doctrines of original genius is most clearly ascertained from Henry Fuseli’s literary works. Fuseli was clearly much concerned by the growing competition between artists and regarded the consequences as a rising tide of mediocrity and spurious novelty. Airing, as he was prone to do, his disgust at his own times he implored his contemporaries to: ‘Expect no art in those [times] that multiply their artists beyond their labourers.’ His feelings on the matter were so strong he was even drawn to imply in his second Academy lecture that modern academies and public art institutions had achieved little but to encourage a ‘mass of self-taught and
tutored powers' to 'burst upon the general eye.' Novelty was, for Fuseli, a decadent phenomenon which emerged when art ceased to be grand and exclusive and artists resorted to 'popular amalgama' intended to 'please the vulgar.' Real elevated geniuses—in which class of men he, by implication, placed himself—were born with a gift for genuine original invention. His anxiety to cast himself and those he admired in a totally different class of humanity from the competitive throng of ordinary talents and perpetrators of cheap novelties was, we can posit, directly related to his fears that he might in truth be one of them.

Inevitably the immense competition for social recognition within the European art world warmed the debate on how the status of the artist was to be defined. The original genius was just one new 'product' of the extreme commercial pressures of the late eighteenth century. Much as these pressures threw up a whole new variety of art products, genres, and specialist producers, they encouraged artists and art commentators to invent myriad new ways of defining the role of the artist. The role of the artist was ultimately redefined in the social interests of those who lived out the new role. Failure in accordance with the ideas of one's competitors on what constituted success could be translated into success within a set of new criteria defined by oneself and one's allies.

Every competing faction and successive generation fought to redefine success in accordance with their own interests. Prominent academicians naturally sought to define their success, at least partially, in terms of their titles of office, regalia, and bureaucratic responsibilities. This in turn drove those who were marginalized from the centre of institutional power to seek the endorsement of wider public acclaim or to retreat entirely from public life with the consolation that they would satisfy the demands of posterity. Similarly the fact that a proportion of the art profession sought to improve its material condition through its labours, and patiently aspired to a life of public respectability and domestic comfort, drove others to untidy garrets in search of higher ideals.

Of all the new ways of considering the function of the artist that arose in this period the most important, at least as posterity has considered it, was the notion that the essential concern of the artist should be to express himself or to give physical substance to his 'imagination' or personal vision. The ideology of self-expression is held to be the defining ideology of aesthetic of the 'romantic movement,' the primary new way of thinking about the role of the artist to emerge in the early nineteenth century. Abrams, whose *The Mirror and the Lamp* (first published 1953) exercised enormous authority over late twentieth-century conceptions of this period, considered that the world of literature was completely transformed by the arrival of this new aesthetic. He argued that: 'The year 1800 is a good number and Wordsworth's

Preface a convenient document, by which to signalise the displacement of the mimetic and pragmatic by the expressive view of art in English criticism.' Like most scholars of his generation Abrams was more concerned with tracing the origins of the development of 'the expressive view' than with suggesting historical causes for its appearance. It is thought to have come into vogue for no better reason, one presumes, than that it was part of the inevitable 'romantic movement'.

In his *Art and Illusion* (first published 1960) E. H. Gombrich, also a believer in the transforming powers of the 'romantic movement', applied the Abrams stance to the analysis of the visual arts. In the final section of the book entitled 'From Representation to Expression' he points to the art of John Constable (1776–1837) as a defining example of this transition. He isolates, somewhat inevitably, a passage in Constable's published correspondence when he refers to his motivations for becoming a painter.

The sound of water escaping from mill-dams, etc., willows, old rotten planks, slimy posts, and brick work, I love such things... I shall never cease to paint such places... painting is with me but another word for feeling, and I associate 'my careless boyhood' with all that lies on the banks of the Stour; those scenes made me a painter.

Had Gombrich looked for a German parallel to this phenomenon he could well have pointed to the landscapes *Garten* of Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840) in which landscape is similarly turned into a medium of physiological or spiritual biography. Friedrich was, perhaps, even more emphatically committed to his task than Constable. His device of including his own portrait within his landscapes as a lay figure seen from behind—a device intended to invite the viewer to look at the world through the medium of the artist's personal perception—constituted a remarkably inventive adaptation of the generic conventions of landscape painting to the demands of creative self-expression.

The historic significance of artists who showed an overt interest in self-expression has, perhaps, been exaggerated. This aspect of their work seems important and representative in hindsight largely because it happens to represent the beginnings of an aesthetic idea that went on to become predominant in the twentieth century. It seems reasonable to question whether those painters interested in self-expression can be held as typical figures of their times. I argue on the contrary, that, they were rather untypical and that self-expression was consciously a statement of a minority, if not isolated, position. In the field of the visual arts as distinct from poetry, 'the expressive view of art' developed as one of many new ways of thinking about the role of the artist and one which, at least initially, was more associated with the margins of the European art professions than their centres.
The ‘expressive view of art’ was born, at least in part, of a dissatisfaction with the competitive atmosphere of the early nineteenth-century urban art markets and with the hustle and bustle of cities themselves. Both Constable and Friedrich were interested in the notion of the private and personal encounter with nature. Friedrich indeed, was, captivated by the notion of encountering nature in solitude on the pinnacles of mountains, which was about as far from urban civilization as European man could get. The very conception of ‘self-expression’ was, in its earliest manifestations, powerfully associated with that of physical and spiritual isolation. Accordingly, the artist who looked to explore his own emotions stood outside the throng competing for a slice of consumer markets or resorting to gimmickry in order to assert and maintain their positions.

To a greater or lesser extent those who pioneered this view of art did so in the expectation that the majority of potential patrons would not understand their point. It was a common characteristic of those artists that they were at one time or another profoundly misunderstood and that they continued, despite this, to pursue their personal vision. Indeed the very fact that those who pioneered the ‘expressive view of art’ were so frequently misunderstood is in itself a powerful indication of the degree to which this view of art was outside the mainstream and beyond common comprehension. They cannot be held representative of the aesthetic movement of their times.

The ‘expressive view of art’ was not necessarily the ideal of radicals nor did it constitute a ‘revolution’ in the European art world. It was not, as Gombrich postulates with reference to Constable, a radical ‘anti-establishment’ doctrine necessarily related to a revolutionary turn of mind; a counterblast to ‘timidity’ and ‘conservatism’ in ‘the higher ranks of art and society’. Contrary to Gombrich’s insinuation, Constable was no romantic revolutionary. Indeed, he described his own work as the expression of permanence, continuity, and sobriety; an attempt to give ‘one brief moment caught from fleeting time a lasting and sober existence’. Those who became concerned with self-expression were not consciously constructing a ‘romantic revolution’, as Gombrich describes it, in order to accompany the earlier revolution in the political sphere. Both Constable and Friedrich were, in some respects, conformists who at one time or another sought a place within the art ‘establishment’. They were frequently torn between a role as social ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’. Friedrich on one occasion sought isolation, on another stipended academy positions. Far from being a radical, Friedrich appears to have been of highly conservative political bent. Constable similarly appears from his published correspondence to be at one time a fairly canny careerist and art politician while, at another, a declared ‘outsider’ resolving not to become the sort of artist that was blithely accepted by the public.

It is significant that neither Constable nor Friedrich were *dramatis personae* or eccentric individuals. The ideology of self-expression, the exploration of one’s individual vision, was something quite distinct from playing the public role of being an extraordinary individual. In certain respects, indeed, to be interested in self-expression was to take up a stance against artistic eccentricity; to opt for a life of serious, private creative enquiry as opposed to a life revolving around the public display of superficial difference.

Firebrand eccentric artists were, ironically, quite the norm in the art world which Constable and Friedrich inhabited. Much as the competition between artists produced a variety of novel art products and gimmicks it forced artists into turning their whole public persona into a gimmick. The late eighteenth and early nineteenth century was an era in which to be ‘normal’ as an artist was to be different. A shrewd and somewhat sardonic wit, the sculptor Francis Chantrey quickly identified the majority of artistic eccentrics of his day to be little more than careerist in a sophisticated guise. One of his biographers recalls that: ‘He had but little feeling for the eccentricities of genius; he thought it but an excuse of the ambitious to usurp the place of real and developed talent, and an appeal to the public by presuming individuals of slender abilities.’

In this climate truly serious artists who did wish to follow Chantrey’s example and become stage conformists were naturally attracted towards more profound notions of personal identity and idiosyncrasy. William Blake (1757–1827), for instance, set out to be something far more than an eccentric. He became a type of artist who was challenging to the whole notion of token weirdness; at times he seems to have conducted his life as a self-conscious parody of the eccentric artist. Of the handful of patron who did employ him most seem initially to have been quite ready to give work to an eccentric genius but found, to their chagrin, that he was interested in expressing a personal cosmology and had radically individualistic ideas about artistic form. Dr Thornton, who employed him to illustrate his *Virgil* of 1820, was so shocked by the results he needed persuasion to publish them and only did so along with the disclaimer that: ‘they display less art than genius, and are much admired by some eminent painters.’

Blake’s career demonstrates a willingness to pursue a personal vision to the point of social marginalization and financial ruin which we shall explore in detail in the next section of this chapter. It was an effective strategy for emotional survival in a competitive art world where failure was the inevitable fate of the majority. To fail because one embraced failure was at least to be in control of failure. It was a means of preserving one’s dignity in commercial conditions which seemed to require an artist to exhibit extraordinary political intelligence or commercial acumen to survive.
Genial geniuses and ungovernable genies
The European Enlightenment is frequently associated with optimistic philosophic doctrines which expressed man's natural gravitation towards 'sociability'. To be civilized was, in the view of David Hume (A Treatise on Human Nature, 1739–40 and Of the Standard of True Taste, 1757) and others, to be bonded by natural sympathy to one's fellow man, to be part of a moral community. Wherever a strong urban public developed in the eighteenth century individuals gravitated towards clubs. Such organizations were the forum where private individuals became public citizens. Man, especially creative man, was construed as a facet of a broader social organ, the public urban community. Mid-eighteenth-century artists (particularly Parisians and Londoners) proved, for the most part, a highly 'clubbable' community. Academies and artistic societies can, indeed, be regarded as expressions of a broader tendency towards artistic sociability in the mid-century. Freemasonry, in particular, attracted artists all over Europe. Hogarth was an archetypal example of a social and community man: a freemason, a stalwart member of numerous worthy charities, a less stalwart member of a number of less than worthy but highly amusing clubs, a wit, a boon to his friends but a terror to his enemies, a lover of his country, friend of his city, and a hater of foreigners. His art was, accordingly, highly concerned with cultivating the social bonds of the polite community and the moral improvement of the citizen.

In clubs and societies eighteenth-century artists mixed not only with the blood gentry but also a host of other professionals. Through his clubbable persona the artist expressed the notion that he was part of a respectable profession analogous to other professions. The club or society became a venue where the artist could feel part of a stolid professional élite, part of a profession whose public profile was rising simultaneously with his non-artist friends. These friends were, to an increasing extent, also his patrons. By the mid-eighteenth century writers, doctors, actors, theatrical impresarios, etc. were reflecting their new-found wealth and status in becoming major sponsors of the visual arts. In England, for instance, David Garrick, the actor and theatre manager, became one of the single most important art patrons of his time.

The fact that artists frequently came to work for their peers is, perhaps, one of those essential factors which distinguish the eighteenth-century European art world from its predecessors. Portraiture, in particular, was transformed by the closure of the gap of deference between sitter and artist. Jean Baptiste Pigalle's (1714–85) extraordinary bronze bust of Denis Diderot, affectionately inscribed on the reverse 'En 1777, Diderot par Pigalle, son compère, tous deux âgés, de 63 ans', is, perhaps, the quintessential image of enlightenment sociability. Diderot's extraordinary frank and characterful expression communicates a sense of 'sympathy' which is unique to its times.

Enlightenment conceptions of artistic 'genius' were, to a large degree, adapted to the culture of sociability. A high value was set on the concept of ingenium, which was translated into English as the concept of 'wit' and into French as the concept of 'esprit'. On the whole, mid-eighteenth-century thinkers perceived the genius, or more often the person with genius, as an essential part of the moral community. A Kinteret Jaffe has pointed out, the mid-eighteenth century typically stressed the common ground between the man in possession of genius and his fellows:

Most of the philosophes believed that the laws of nature could be understood by a method of reasoning that is shared by all men; every human mind is capable of perceiving the world through the senses and organising these senses in logical manner.

The capacity for genius did not, Jaffe points out, make a man intrinsically different from all other men, 'it only made him a better perceive and imitator of nature'.26

40 BEYOND THE USEFUL AND AGREEABLE MAN
Throughout the eighteenth century, particularly in the tracts of William Duff and Alexander Gerard, genius was strongly associated with powers of combination and 'invention' which gave rise to 'agreeable' productions. The genius, these theorists held, was defined by an extraordinary capacity for invoking pleasing harmonious sensations which were, in general terms, useful to society and consistent with the maintenance of decorum and public order. Wildness and uncontrollable flights of the 'imagination' were largely frowned upon as displeasing to the world at large. To say an art work was 'inoffensive' or 'pleasing' was a veritable compliment in many mid-eighteenth-century circles.

Probably because these doctrines were so heavily ingrained into European literary culture the backlash against them was remarkably powerful. Late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century European art worlds began to become populated with a myriad of extreme social outsiders; artists who wished to stand beyond economies, beyond petty codes of public decency, beyond professional associations and societies, and beyond public service. By the early nineteenth century the notion that artistic genius might be by definition a state of madness—a state of mind which placed a man outside the moral community and was feared more emphatically than death in the enlightenment psyche—was becoming commonly acceptable. The idea had, indeed, become so fashionable in early nineteenth-century England that Charles Lamb felt obliged to publish an essay on The Sanity of True Genius (1826). As George Becker explains in his exploration of The Mad Genius Controversy, in the early nineteenth century European thought swung towards a notion of genius 'as a defining mark of an extraordinary individual. 'The aura of mania', he adds, 'endowed the genius with a mystical and inexplicable quality that served to differentiate him from the typical man, the bourgeois, the philistine, and quite importantly the mere man of talent; it established him as the modern heir of the ancient Greek poet and seer and like his classical counterpart, enabled him to claim some of the powers and privileges of the divinely possessed and inspired.'

The revival of classical notions of the genius as a demonic presence or ungovernable 'genie' to be let out of its bottle with caution, is, perhaps, best encapsulated in Henry Fuseli's drawn self-portrait of c.1775. Here we capture the artist brooding over a sketch book. His intense gaze and furrowed brow are probably intended to be intimidating to the 'ordinary' viewer. He is a living representative of terribilità, that magnificent turn of mind often associated at the time with the genius of Michelangelo. This was a man born to be different.
self-portrait for a frontispiece for his Los Caprichos series of etchings (first published 1799) [5]. Goya's self-portrait is, in many respects, an expression of the classic Enlightenment conception of genius as defined by the majority of the philosophers. The comparison clearly illustrates the degree to which Fuseli had moved away from this conception.

The self-portraits share something important; a rather unpleasant expression intended to disturb the viewer. Goya's scowl is intended to prepare the person looking at his series of prints for a discomforting view of the world. It was described by his contemporaries as a 'malign' and 'satiric' expression and has since been recognized as an adaptation of Charles Le Brun's expression for 'contempt'. Unlike Fuseli, Goya profoundly believed in the capacity of art, in particular these prints, to improve the moral condition of society. His scowl prepares the viewer for the idea that the prints contain some uncomfortable lessons. Goya's truths were painful, he did not expect to be liked for airing them. Goya, like Fuseli, seems to have regarded himself as an uncomfortable 'outsider'. He too had moved away from the mid-eighteenth-century polite Parisian notion that art should be pleasing. Goya, however, only stands outside society in as far as society at large had become a place in which polite sociability and reasoned debates were held in contempt. The Los Caprichos etchings themselves depict the world at large as a place of madness and display the typical enlightenment horror at the sight of insane frenzy. Goya differentiated himself from his society by his extreme sanity. This self-portrait is a reaction against, rather than endorsement of, the association of genius with madness, frenzy, and what Alexander Gerard described as 'irregular' fantasy. It would, in fact, have made an equally good frontispiece for Charles Lamb's The Sanity of True Genius.

Neither Goya or Fuseli could be regarded as outright outsiders to the art worlds of their day. Both men sought and obtained official academic posts. Their slight embarrassment at becoming part of the establishment was similarly reflected in their speeches as Academy officers in which they purposefully subverted the fundamental doctrines which the academies had been founded to promulgate. The very acceptance of such forceful and irreverent characters as prominent academic officers does, indeed, pose the question of whether the academies in which they served can be held as representative of the art 'establishment' at all. As, in the final six decades of our period, anti-academic opinions became entirely conventional it became inevitable that it would be difficult to find artists of credibility who were not anti-academic or in some way anti-establishment. Thus the institutions associated with the art establishment became the haunts of the anti-

establishment. Many of Europe's royal and princely foundations became meeting places for radicals and democrats. In England King George III was so convinced that his Royal Academy had become a hotbed of radicalism he refused royal visits.

This situation, of course, drove those artists who wished to be considered seriously 'anti-establishment' figures to adopt ever more extreme stances. Similarly, it led to sectors of the public becoming rather cynical about artists' postures of unconformity. E. J. Pigal in his comic lithograph of a supercilious Academician (published 1833) set out to expose the hypocrisy of the anti-establishment, establishment man [6]. The academician, his fine waistcoat bulging out before him, is depicted as an archetypal prosperous professional. His ear-ring remains an incongruous formal concession to the unconventionality and the anti-establishment air expected of the 'real' artist of the day.

Pigal's second line of attack was directed at the pompous professional aspirations of the Academician. His print was, indeed, part of a