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### **THE CONCEPT OF ART IN CONTEMPORARY ANGLO-AMERICAN ART HISTORY**

*В данном материале рассматривается определение понятия искусства в англо-американском искусствоведении с 1930-х гг. до настоящего времени. В частности, анализируется влияние марксистской, феминистской и пост-колониальной теорий о его формировании современных представлений о его содержании. Особое внимание уделяется динамике соотношения понятий «высокое искусство» и «ремесло».*

The distinction between art and crafts is an issue of considerable importance in the context of art history teaching, the subject and scope of which it serves to define. Traditionally, art historians focused on painting, sculpture, and graphic arts, as well as architecture, as the principal media of artistic expression, and regarded ceramics, jewellery, glassware, fabrics, and furniture as artisan production, matters of craftsmanship and skill rather than the work of creative genius. The concept of “high art” as distinct from craft, enforced by art academies, museums, and exhibitions, defined the scope of traditional art history and secured the special status that artists enjoyed in Western society, even though this status did not necessarily bring recognition, material wealth, or prestige.

In the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the division between art and crafts became increasingly blurred due to the gradual rejection of the concept of “high

art” by the majority of art practitioners, historians, and critics. This tendency not only had important implications for the nature of artistic practice, the principles and methods of artistic training, and the type of objects displayed at art exhibitions, but also called for redefining the subject, scope, and methods of art history as an academic discipline. Focusing on the tradition of Anglo-American scholarship, this paper examines the factors that brought about these changes and assesses their impact on art history research and teaching.

The exodus of scholars from Germany and Austria following Hitler’s rise to power was one of the main factors that shaped the development of art history in Britain and the United States before World War II. Influenced by the ideas of Aby Warburg (1866-1929), the majority of these scholars, who included Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968), sought to interpret works of art by reference to their intellectual and literary context. Warburg’s interest in esoteric symbolism, allegory, and myth was largely a reaction against the formalist approach to the study of art, exemplified by the Swiss art historian Heinrich Wölfflin (1864-1945) and the influential British critic Roger Fry (1866-1934), who were concerned primarily with the development of artistic styles. The emphasis on the meaning and subject matter of works of art and the use of various sources (ranging from sonnets to cabalistic treatises) for their interpretation, lay at the core of the iconographic method developed by Panofsky. This approach gained important strongholds in the United States, where Panofsky settled from 1933, and in Britain, following the transfer of the Warburg Institute (including Aby Warburg’s library and photographic collection) from Hamburg to London in the same year.

The development of the iconographic method encouraged the study of works of art with complex subject matter and symbolism, created for the educated elite. The interest in meaning and interpretation, which required classical erudition, underlay the humanist agenda of art history as an academic discipline, strongly advocated by Panofsky. Limited to the discussion of works of art with recognisable figurative themes and motifs and executed in the traditional media (painting, sculpture, drawing, and print-making), the iconographic method served to confirm the status of “high art” as the exclusive subject of art history, assigning the primary role in the interpretation of individual artworks to their immediate intellectual and literary context.

In the meantime, important changes within the artistic scene put the validity of this approach into question. Throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, artists experimented with new materials, previously regarded as unsuitable for artistic purposes, and developed non-traditional techniques of painting and sculpting. Pablo Picasso’s collages and assemblages and Vladimir Tatlin’s

counter-reliefs explored the aesthetic possibilities of combining miscellaneous domestic or industrial materials (pieces of wall paper, newspapers, tin, timber, or cloth) and introduced novel forms of their display, forerunners of modern-day installations. In addition to the conventional techniques of modelling, casting, and carving, sculptors adopted assembling and constructing as standard ways of making sculpture. The advanced mechanical methods of reproduction put into question the time-honoured status of works of art as unique objects. The blending of art and design in the mass-production of consumer goods as practiced by the staff and students of the Bauhaus introduced objects created according to the “high” aesthetic principles into middle-class homes. Marcel Duchamp’s “readymades,” divorced from their functional overtones in the pristine gallery setting, further undermined the distinction between works of art and objects of everyday life. The development of photography encouraged painters to explore expressive possibilities other than naturalistic representation, turning their interest towards abstraction. Jackson Pollock’s rejection of easel and brushes in favour of the “dripping” technique raised questions regarding the role and status of the traditional methods of painting.

Although these important artistic developments undermined the distinction between art and crafts as postulated by traditional art history, they did not result in the immediate rejection of the established views regarding its subject and scope. The first significant attempt to subject the ideas and methods shared by the majority of art historians to critical revision came from Marxist scholars. Most distinguished among them were Frederick Antal (1887-1954), Arnold Hauser (1892-1978), Meyer Shapiro (1904-96), and John Berger (b. 1926). Drawing on Marx’s concept of ideology and placing artistic changes in the context of social developments, these critics were equally sceptical of both “formalist” and “iconographic” approaches to the study of art. Rejecting the notion of the artist as an independent creator, inherited from German Romanticism, they defined artistic production as the expression of a system of social, political, and economic relations, focusing their attention on such issues as the principles of artistic patronage, collecting, and display; the nature of the art market; and the organisation of labour within a workshop or a studio. They encouraged looking at works of art not as purely aesthetic statements or pictorial or plastic equivalents of intellectual or literary conceits, but as expressions of political power and instruments of political propaganda.

Marxist critique of the traditional approach to the study of art resulted in the creation of what is generally described as the social art history. Social art historians absorbed the influence not only of Marx, but also of his opponents,

such as Max Weber, who emphasised the importance of religion as an expression of distinct systems of values that underlie all aspects of human activity. The influence of religious attitudes on the production or, in the case of iconoclasm, the destruction of images became an increasingly important focus of art history research in recent decades. Maintaining that history of art is an integral part of social and cultural history, social art historians advocate the importance of documentary research, along with visual analysis, for understanding the function and message of works of art. Their contribution to art history helped to redefine its subject and broaden its methods, bringing under its scope previously neglected areas, such as the study of fabrics, jewellery, and furniture.

Another significant attack on the traditional approach to the study of art came from Feminist critics. Feminist ideology emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as part of the suffragist movement, but later became transformed from a political position into an intellectual trend, steadily gaining ground in North American universities from the 1970s onwards. Insisting that the traditional art history was written from an essentially male perspective, they argued that it presented a distorted picture of both the portrayal of women in art and the importance of women artists. Women, maintained Feminist critics, were stereotyped in art as passive and inane beings through making their bodies objectified and exposed to the gaze of the male viewer. Excluded from workshop or academy training, they generally lacked opportunities to receive formal artistic education and had to practice traditionally “female” crafts, such as embroidery, pottery, and quilt-making. Even when their status as artists was recognised officially (as in the case of Lavinia Fontana, Judith Leyster, and Angelica Kaufmann), women found it hard to compete with their male colleagues and often had to terminate their artistic careers following marriage or pregnancy.

In some ways, Feminist art historians went even further than Marxist critics, questioning the very canon of Western art. If the standards of artistic greatness concern only the media traditionally practiced by men, then these standards, they argued, can no longer be regarded as true. In scrutinising gender or cultural stereotypes that give certain works of art a privileged status, Feminist scholars largely shared their agenda with Post-colonial critics. Their joint contribution to the history of art included the emphasis on native traditions or local crafts in the production of works of art, the rediscovery of art created by suppressed ethnic minorities, and the interest in African, Pre-Columbian, and Australian and Oceanian aborigine cultures.

In the world of today, the growing role of technology and the diversification of the means of artistic expression (installations, body art, and video art) re-

sulted in the crisis of traditional media. The rejection of the concept of “high art” and the denial of the exclusive status of the Western artistic tradition practically eliminated the division between art and crafts in contemporary art history. As a result, we now have a more comprehensive and adequate picture of the development of art, but a very limited scope for its aesthetic appraisal, without a clear distinction between the artistic value and historic importance of individual works.