

POSTNATIONAL  
ART HISTORIES:

WHAT IS  
POSTNATIONAL  
ART HISTORY?

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PERIMETER

DURING THE PAST HALF-CENTURY, contemporary art practices, theories and criticism have engaged intently with notions of the postnational. Nonetheless, the presence of the nation-state and nationalisms in art history remain steadfast. In posing the question 'What is postnational art history?' this publication aims not for definitive answers, but rather to broach the broader concept of postnationalism and how it might function to disrupt, rethink and complicate established discourses around national art. Conceived as part of a colloquium of art historians convened at the Buku-Larrngay Mulka Centre – the Yolŋu art centre in Yirrkala, situated in north-east Arnhem Land, in Australia's Top End – this publication aims to tease out and better understand the transnational resonances and connections between artists across cultures and borders that increasingly shape the emerging post-Western world. Through its collection of essays, reflections and conversations – many of which position the iconic collaborative paintings, the *Yirrkala Church Panels*, as a central motif – *What is Postnational Art History?* provides an interdisciplinary base for sketching out countless potential futures, and foregrounding Indigenous, diasporic and postcolonial studies, to expand the history of art beyond the default of the nation-state.

*Edited by*  
CHARLES GREEN  
AND IAN McLEAN

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HISTORY BEFORE  
ART HISTORY:

THE FLAWED  
RESURRECTIONIST  
POSTNATIONAL IN  
NINETEENTH-CENTURY  
FRANCE

*Margaret MacNamidhe*

WANDERING AMONG ROYAL TOMBS as a child, Jules Michelet, one of the first professional historians in nineteenth-century France, believed that he saw long dead kings and queens 'sit right up' in his presence.<sup>1</sup> This memory – one prompted at the short-lived Museum of National Monuments in Paris – never left Michelet. In 1846, it became the origin story for his resurrectionist narrative of the French nation. One indivisible people assumed Christ's sacrificial role, reborn not as the result of a singular crucifixion, but through the 1789 Revolution, from the ashes of a withered church.

I thought of the power that this memory exerted over Michelet as I contemplated the *Church Panels* at Yirrkala. Michelet could see sculpture come to life, the longer he stood in fascinated reverence before it. And he moved seamlessly to the next stage: giving agency to the figures he saw represented, both creative and baleful.

In this account, the presence of two university disciplines founded in the nineteenth century, anthropology and art history, are not at that point in evidence. Decades later, the two disciplines would impose their respective theories on Michelet's response. On the one hand, an apprehension of the miraculous in a solemn but nonetheless secular environment would not linger as a distinctively Gallic frisson claimed for elite self-validation. Anthropologists routinely trace instances of the animist principle at work in people's responses to singular, non-reproducible works. On the other, the capacity of marks made by human hands to affect a sensory shift in the viewer had not yet been conceptualised by art history. The kind of moment Michelet experienced so ecstatically in 1846, beyond the realm of visual and material representation, would be firmly constrained to that realm by the new discipline's methods. Not that many of its inaugural scholars said anything about the singular, privileged beholder: the capacities Michelet enjoyed as he freely entered and just as freely moved around an imperialising museum. Leaving his subject position not only unassailed but contentedly in place, art historians – notable exceptions aside – assumed it was the default

1 Jules Michelet, quoted and translated by Michèle Hannoosh, *Jules Michelet: Writing Art and History in Nineteenth-Century France*, Penn State Press, University Park, Pa., 2019, p. 2.

mode of *all* viewing.<sup>2</sup> Not until the 1960s were art history's most exclusionary methods – style analysis, formalism and 'theme-chasing', to adapt T.J. Clark's description of iconography at its most shallow – consigned to disciplinary obsolescence.<sup>3</sup> Yet we still have something to learn, or so I suggest in the pages to come, by attending not only to the initial methods of art history – the hoary style analysis of Heinrich Wölfflin makes a prominent appearance – but also its pre-history. All of which brings us back to Michelet among royal tombs.

Michelet's response predates both institutional art history and anthropology. What might a postnational art history gain from consideration of this supreme example of a nationalist historian? And what might I learn about myself, as I strive to honour the extraordinary dimensions of the *Church Panels*?

The process begins with the realisation that Michelet came to mind because of the vividness of his writing. At every opportunity, he strove to collapse the boundaries between what he thought of as the past and the present. The historian and literary critic Michèle Hannoosh has detailed how Michelet did this: by dipping into his own life for material; by using unacademic modes of writing

2 My definition of art history in this essay comes from its institutional recognition. Plaques on doors, curricula, salaries (modest) were won by scholars benefiting from Wilhelm von Humboldt's reforms in the Prussian state. I allow myself to bypass storied names separated by centuries (Pliny the Elder, Giorgio Vasari, Denis Diderot and Johann Joachim Winckelmann). But this essay suffers an absence: the influence of the scholar Aby Warburg, who did not comply with the German research university's career dictates but mined seams arguably far greater in import for the discipline than Wölfflin's pursuit of style. Depths later codified by Erwin Panofsky – iconology descending below second-level iconography; the first level was deemed simply stylistic – would be reached by Warburg much earlier. It is no coincidence that Panofsky's first major appointment – in 1927 – was in Hamburg, Warburg's birthplace. Particularly telling is Warburg's comment that he 'acquired an honest disgust of aestheticising art history'. Particularly fascinating is Warburg's comparison of the work of art to a battery storing a charge. Warburg's opinion is quoted and translated in E.H. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography*, Warburg Institute, London, 1970, p. 86. For iconography and iconology stratified in a table, see Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance*, Harper and Row, New York, 1967 [orig. ed. 1939], p. 12. For the remarkable idea of a work of art as a charged battery, see Charles Green and Lyndell Brown, 'Robert Smithson's Ghost in 1920s Hamburg: Reading Aby Warburg's Mnemosyne Atlas as a Non-Site', *Visual Resources: An International Journal of Documentation* 18, June 2002, pp. 170, 167–81.

3 T.J. Clark, 'The Conditions of Artistic Creation', *Times Literary Supplement*, 24 May 1974, p. 562.



such as interior monologue and free indirect discourse.<sup>4</sup> It's no surprise, as art historian Stephen Bann has emphasised, that Michelet remained unshaped by the new methods of the research university.<sup>5</sup> This institution essentially launched art history and anthropology as discrete disciplines. Their governing academic protocols were in development, however, in the exact decades Michelet was writing. They were constructed with great seriousness to provide research with guarantees of neutrality. These in turn secured the modern research departments' promises of translatability, exportability and internationalism.

No figure was more significant in fostering methods that promised neutrality than Michelet's near-exact contemporary, the German historian Leopold von Ranke. Twenty-two years before the appearance of Michelet's *The People* (1846), Ranke proclaimed the sacrosanct status of primary sources. Any 'judging of the past', Ranke warned, or 'instructing the present for the benefit of the future', was beyond the scholar's remit. A 'strict presentation of the facts' was what mattered, 'contingent and unattractive though they may be'.<sup>6</sup> Having set in place what the historian of anthropology James Clifford has called a "'documentary" paradigm' of research, ensuring that anthropologists in particular would carry with them an 'enormous checklist' of tasks, Ranke followed up his 1824 proclamation with an enlargement of the University of Berlin's seminar system.<sup>7</sup> The seminar was that 'new medium' of the nineteenth century, in Bann's words, where group testing and discussion ensured the

4 Michèle Hannoosh, *Jules Michelet: Writing Art and History in Nineteenth-Century France*, Penn State Press, University Park, Pa., 2019, pp. 7, 87, 116, 117.

5 Stephen Bann, *Romanticism and the Rise of History*, Twayne Publishers, New York, 1995, p. 19.

6 Ranke said that works of history written before his set as their priority too much 'judging' and 'instructing'. Ranke said he wanted 'to show what actually happened'. Contemporary documents took precedence (such as the diplomatic reports from the fifteenth-century Republic of Venice that Ranke had investigated). This standard of modern historiography was set by Ranke's *Histories of the Latin and Germanic Peoples* and its appendix, *On the Criticism of Writers of Modern History*, Fritz Stern, *The Varieties of History: From Voltaire to the Present*, Palgrave, London, 1971, p. 52; quoted in Bann, *Romanticism*, pp. 18, 20.

7 The term "'documentary" paradigm' comes from a discussion of Marcel Griaule, professor of ethnology at the Sorbonne, and the term 'checklist' is used in specific relation to Marcel Mauss as Griaule's early mentor. James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1988, pp. 65, 74.

'refinement and development of basic historical research within the academic community'.<sup>8</sup>

How exactly did the two new disciplines of art history and anthropology stake out their particular claims for inclusion within a community committed to a 'strict presentation of the facts'?<sup>9</sup> I turn first to anthropology to see how it became identified with the study of animism.

A landmark 1871 definition by Edward Burnett Tylor, the English evolutionary anthropologist, is my source here. To be sure, more than a century's worth of criticism has destabilised Tylor's highly problematic arguments about the origins of religion, his understanding of animism very much included. It can still be noted, however, that the eclectically educated Tylor brought to his definition of animism an ingenious mix of sources that allowed for 'a strict presentation of the facts'. He reached back to the seventeenth-century laboratory experiments of Georg Ernst Stahl at the University of Halle: Stahl had claimed that organic matter was chemically unstable and completely passive. The body's pulse, he said, proved that animation had been infused into it; animation was distributed by the blood: an animating spirit fuelled the body's journey through life.<sup>10</sup> Tylor said that this 'doctrine of Stahl' could be thought of as modelling the way animism worked for believers: an animating spirit infused particular places, beings and objects just as invisibly, just as effectively, as the process Stahl described. But Tylor's reference to Stahl was accompanied by one to the 'German school', indicating his awareness that Stahl's experiments were centuries out of date.<sup>11</sup> In fact, Hermann von Helmholtz's demonstration of the myograph – twenty two years before Tylor

8 Bann, *Romanticism*, p. 18.

9 Anthropology's emergence as a university department does not parallel art history's, with its particular, and inaugural, ties to the University of Berlin. That emergence brought with it crucial Anglophone and Francophone strains. See Clifford.

10 I acknowledge here that vitalism does not align with one tradition nor concept, but is best understood as a much debated set of terms under constant review in the centuries when the biological sciences in seventeenth and eighteenth-century European universities were seeking legitimation. See, for example, Charles T. Wolf, 'Models of Organic Organisation in Montpellier Vitalism', *Early Science and Medicine*, 22, June 2017, pp. 229–52.

11 Edward Burnett Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art and Custom*, John Murray, London, 1871, pp. 426, 443–4.

published his definition of animism – has been flagged by the historian Anson Rabinbach as marking the definitive end of vitalism's reign in the sciences.<sup>12</sup> The myograph, which gauged and recorded the force and duration of a nerve's impulses, was followed by ever more zealous recorders of movement, developed by physiologists and later by experimental psychologists.<sup>13</sup> By the 1870s, an 'incorrigible optimism', in the words of Rabinbach, was abroad, one generated by a conviction that the body was a kind of 'machine' that produced its own 'movement', a consequence of its own 'internal economy that deploys force', in accord with its functioning as a whole.<sup>14</sup>

'Religion from below' buoyed Tylor's omnibus account.<sup>15</sup> His account was able to – at one and the same time – encompass plurality and singularity. A multiplicity of places and things were able to be considered sacred, as expressions that were non-reproducible, vested in discrete entities. Tylor didn't have to lean on individual instances of animism for his definition, nor regional or national traditions. He met the criteria for 'a strict presentation of the facts' by signalling his awareness of chemical and physiological experiments. An enormously wide range of cultural practices could be gathered up by Tylor, and indeed were. The body itself was made to conform to universalism, bypassing nationhood and biography. In one fell swoop, Tylor achieved a plausible continuation of the 'mystery of vitalism' in his definition of animism. Stahls's seventeenth-century emphasis on the pulse – a beat heard in every body – was ingeniously revived.

In the exact same way, an 'aesthetics from below' secured the status of art history's inaugural guidebook

12 Anson Rabinbach, *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1991, p. 66.

13 Andreas Mayer, *The Science of Walking: Investigations into Locomotion in the Long Nineteenth Century*, trans. Robin Blanton and Tilman Skowronek, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2020, pp. 99–141.

14 Rabinbach, *The Human Motor*, pp. 66, 90–91.

15 I have concocted this phrase from the translation by Zeynep Çelik Alexander of a phrase (*Aesthetik von unten*) in a 1876 study (*Vorschule der Aesthetik*) by the physicist Gustave Fechner. See the discussion of Fechner in Alexander, *Kinaesthetic Knowing: Aesthetics, Epistemology, Modern Design*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2017, pp. 48, 44–50.

when it appeared in 1915.<sup>16</sup> Heinrich Wölfflin's *Principles of Art History* was devoted to formal analyses. According to Wölfflin, the professor of art history at Ranke's university, his principles could instruct everyone to appreciate artistic form no matter where that form was made, or by whom. Each double-page spread of *Principles* puts a work of art before the reader's eyes to show how each obeys formal correspondences – starting with the linear and the painterly – conceived of as eternally possible, oppositional terms. A 'strict presentation of the facts', was for Wölfflin, according to the architectural historian Zeynep Çelik Alexander, enabled by experimental psychology – especially its 'godfather', the physicist Gustav Fechner, who, when it came to art, disregarded opinion in favour of a 'statistics of comparative aesthetic impression'.<sup>17</sup> Although *Principles* was published in 1915, Wölfflin had consolidated his method of formal analysis by 1888.<sup>18</sup> That analysis, at its core, asked for no more prior education than the human eye's inherent ability to study a work of visual art in two or three dimensions. Wölfflin can be said to have availed himself of the same 'unmitigated optimism' as had Tylor, but his source came from later in the nineteenth century: experimental psychology, which had in turn developed from the physiology of Tylor's 'German school'.

Psychology came to assume a privileged status within the research university, because it was seen to provide – according to Alexander – a 'bridge' between all departments.<sup>19</sup> Wölfflin was able to acknowledge the multiplicity of artistic media; he did not restrict himself to singular works. Yet his embrace of reproductive media ultimately depended on an exaltation of drawing, understood as an aid to the education of any individual eye. Etching or engravings were acceptable (there are many in *Principles*), but only because of their ability to

16 See the account of the book's complicated wartime publication in Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Early Modern Art*, Evonne Levy and Tristan Weddigen (eds), Jonathan Blower (trans), Getty, Los Angeles, 2014, pp. 1–28.

17 See the discussion of Fechner, as well as an account of an 1871 debate over the authenticity of two sixteenth-century altarpieces – one in which Fechner got involved – in Alexander, *Kinaesthetic Knowing*, p. 75.

18 See Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*, p. 25.

19 Alexander, *Kinaesthetic Knowing*, p. 53.

capture originary gestural marks made on the initial plate.

In the inaugural arguments for the value of anthropology and art history as university departments, its proponents proceeded to a claim for relevance that availed them of the universalism supposedly afforded by purely corporeal processes. Parties from both disciplines justified the nascent characteristics of their professional existences – all the while sticking to Ranke's methodologies – by two versions of universalism that were 'pre-national'. The problematic status of the nation was supposedly avoided – it hadn't been allowed to begin.

This brings me back to my assuredly inadequate response to the *Yirrkala Church Panels*, determined as it initially was by a framing of expectations for what singular works of art could do, one that I had internalised from an idiosyncratic chronicler of French history. But is it possible to me to wring any sense of the postnational from Michelet's writing? Not if I accept his teleological history. He ingeniously stripped Christianity of its central ideal and gave it to the French Revolution. As Roland Barthes pointed out, Michelet made the Revolution an end-point for history.<sup>20</sup> But the historian tried to transcend the logic of this terminus.<sup>21</sup> A key attempt was though his visionary idea of a 'social fraternity' of nations, with the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity stretching around the globe as linked human values.<sup>22</sup> With the 1789 Revolution conflated with the Crucifixion, though, how could any other nation occupy anything more than a supporting role? The French belief in French universalism was morally fortified by the pedigree given to it by Michelet: one specific sacrifice. I might suggest that Michelet contributed to the 'ardour' identified by Frantz Fanon as essential to the 'cynicism' that powered European expansionism.<sup>23</sup> (And appropriately enough, in 1905, a battleship was named after Michelet.)

Recall, however, the degree of activity that those 'sleeping figures' – in the childhood memory Michelet

20 Barthes, 'Michelet, l'histoire et la mort', *Esprit* 19, April 1951, pp. 497–74, quoted in Hannoosh, *Jules Michelet*, p. 155.

21 Hannoosh, *Jules Michelet*, pp. 155–57.

22 Hannoosh, *Jules Michelet*, pp. 142–3, 149.

23 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Constance Farrington (trans), Grove Press, New York, 1967, p. 313, quoted in Edward W. Said, *Freud and the Non-European*, Verso, London, 2003, p. 20.

chose to introduce *The People*, arguably his most famous work of history — had to exhibit for them to leave an impression on him. They had to sit bolt upright. There is nothing here of animism in Stahl's sense, conveniently buried, invisible in the body. And the descriptions Tylor used when 'spirituality' had to be invoked are assuredly those spectral modes Victorian culture accorded to ghosts, 'phantoms', and things that are 'vaporious' and 'immaterial'.<sup>24</sup> The childhood memory that came to Michelet's mind has nothing of *this* animism.

At the least what can be said, then, is that Michelet wasn't afraid to take on the immaterial, and to do so in a way that felt to him utterly material.<sup>25</sup> It was this that generated his startlingly vivid storytelling, which has stayed with me and any number of readers up to the present. His lack of need for a training in formal analysis gave him resources for describing paintings by Jan van Eyck not only as a master of glazing, the key technique that inaugurated oil painting, but as an artist who invited the viewer to project himself unabashedly into the scene.<sup>26</sup> It is as if there was no time to signal the ineluctability of representation, or any awareness that, to quote the scholar of psychoanalysis Mikkel Borch Jacobsen, the plight and the subject of 'the Moderns' is representation.<sup>27</sup>

Michelet eventually fell out of enchantment with the illusionism he unsurprisingly responded to in the earliest oil paintings. The illusionist spell couldn't take Michelet beyond the altarpieces of Jan van Eyck. For Michelet, van Eyck's portraiture was for 'just bodies', just nature.<sup>28</sup> In addition, paintings by artists much better known to the historical record than van Eyck enabled Michelet to project his acquaintanceship with their biographies.<sup>29</sup> But this also allows me to suggest a parallel to Terry Smith's sense

24 Martin D. Stringer, 'Rethinking Animism: Thoughts from the Infancy of Our Discipline', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Society* 5, December 1999, p. 544.

25 Admittedly, this is ultimately beholden to the lure of the real, generated by something already underway by the 1830s: a demand that the past present itself in ever more illusionistic forms. See Bann, *Romanticism and the Rise of History*, pp. 104–7.

26 Hannoosh, *Jules Michelet*, p. 73.

27 Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, *The Emotional Tie: Psychoanalysis, Mimesis, and Affect*, Douglas Brick (trans), Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1993, p. 133.

28 Hannoosh, *Jules Michelet*, pp. 80–1.

29 Hannoosh, *Jules Michelet*, pp. 81–3.

of the 'coeval'.<sup>30</sup> As Smith writes, 'coeval communality ... will definitely entail thinking together, feeling together, experiencing together, *after struggle*.' It wasn't the case that Michelet claimed to cross a threshold to experience the past. In his mind, it was incumbent on the past to greet *him*, via the lure of the real.<sup>31</sup>

Michelet gives us a way of seeing that does not depend on the choice between art history and anthropology. I don't want to imply Michelet's pre-disciplinary writing is a solution to the exclusionary tendencies of our inherited disciplines. What we can take from Michelet is not the symbol of resurrection, but the recognition that what may stay with us the longest is writing by academics unafraid of the personal or of startlingly vivid, emotionally charged stories – provided there is also the admission that the personal cannot pretend to universalism, that it preserves alterity while opening itself to fuller engagement.

And, finally, what might be taken from the German university is method, specifically, the enforcement of delay. Research developed as integrally linked to the seminar format made space for protracted time. The two years that have gone by since the event at Yirrkala, has offered me an opportunity to reflect, to think better – specifically in relation to my own educational restrictions and the kinds of interpretation I saw applied to the *Church Panels*. In that sense, Michelet's pre-disciplinary perspective can be folded into my response, as an unexpected but intriguing opportunity to weigh the potential of the postnational.

30 Terry Smith, 'Marking Places, Cross-Hatching Worlds: The Yirrkala Panels', *e-flux* 111, September 2020, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/111/345649/marking-places-cross-hatching-worlds-the-yirrkala-panels/>, accessed 7 April 2021.

31 Smith, 'Marking Places'.