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Book Reviews

Picture Titles: How and Why Western Paintings Acquired Their Names. By RUTH BERNARD YEAZELL. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press. 2015. Pp. 331. $35 (hb). ISBN 978-0-691-16527-1.

Julius Caesar opens his treatise *The Gallic Wars* by commenting that "*Gallia est omnis divisa in partes tres*" ("all Gaul is divided into three parts"). One opens Ruth Bernard Yeazell's *Picture Titles* to find that she divides the topography of her treatise into three parts as well. The three parts are arranged in a chronological order. Each part successively moves the art-historical narrative forward in an historical sense. In addition, each of the three major steps in her text introduces the reader to new aspects and players in the complex evolution of how titles came to be attached to paintings. This reader found himself continually fascinated by the skillfulness of Yeazell's unpacking of the social and economic factors that entered the titling, or naming, process throughout the centuries. Yeazell's superb mastery of art history is supplemented with philosophical insights, historical developments and economic realities. Reading her text is to take a graduate level course in art history. It is truly education at the highest level.

The Prologue provides the reader with a map of what will be discovered on the journey. An initial distinction is drawn between the perceptual acts of reading the words of a title and looking at the painted image. This distinction between word and image will be addressed throughout the text. As such, it provides linkage among various eras of art history and sheds light on innovative permutations of the relationship between these two concepts. A second distinction, which appears throughout the text to be a distinction without a difference, concerns the words "title" and "name." Yeazell's own decision regarding the title of her book incorporates both words as synonyms for one another.

Perhaps the most surprising point of the Prologue is Yeazell's puncturing of the assumption held by many, including this reader, that it was always the artists who provided the titles for their works: "this identification of artists and authors is misleading" (5). In fact it is not until the twentieth century that museums began providing space for the labels identifying paintings. Yeazell argues that we must look to the late seventeenth century to discover the origins of the historical process that has brought us to our current understanding of pictures and the titles that accompany them.

Surprisingly, Part I of the text ("Naming and Circulating: Middlemen") locates the genesis of picture titles not with the artists themselves but with a series of middlemen. The seventeenth century witnessed both "the decline of patronage and the rise of the art market" (13). Yeazell sees in this dynamic the origins for the need of a title. A patron commissioning an artist to paint a particular topic, e.g., the Holy Family, would have no need of a title. But when an artist begins to paint for some anonymous buyers, the potential buyers would want to know the identity of the painting they were purchasing. Merchants began to buy works of art for the express purpose of reselling them to their art-buying clients. Such middlemen would be well served to know the identity of a painting to enable them to pass on this information to their clients.

As the art market expanded internationally in Europe, the buying and selling of artworks entered the world of commercial economy. Artworks placed at auction would need to be inventoried, identified, and catalogued by notaries whose job it was to make sure buyers and sellers were not cheated. These notaries were the first to classify various

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as-yet-untitled paintings into various categories: a landscape, a portrait. Sometimes notaries thought they knew the subject of a portrait and would identify it as such, for example, Aeneas carrying his father Anchises. Yet sometimes notaries would not know the subject matter and so would rely on a more generic subject: a portrait of a man carrying an elderly man. These notaries (another species of middlemen) were interested in the identification of paintings because they were being bought and sold on the open market, a market becoming more and more mobile. Paintings produced in Holland in the seventeenth century were being sold in France or Italy.

Public art auctions required cataloguers, who thus joined the list of middlemen existing between artist and viewer. Cataloguers provided descriptions of the various works of art. These descriptions were printed in catalogues distributed to potential buyers. Before there were titles for art works, there were descriptions. Yeazell distinguishes the typical expansive descriptions of early French cataloguers from the lean, compact descriptions of the English. These descriptions provided what today we would call "classifications" rather than titles. Yet, in time, many of these descriptions took on a title-like quality, particularly when the definite rather than the indefinite article was used. A painting classified as "a Holy Family" came to be catalogued as "The Holy Family."

The eighteenth century witnessed the advent of the public display of paintings. The democratization of many European countries gave birth to the desire for galleries and museums in which paintings could be displayed and viewed without being sold or purchased. Like the emergence of the guilds, painters in France and England formed their Academies. These Academies sponsored annual displays of art produced by their members. Each display was accompanied by a booklet (Yeazell preferring the French *livret*) which assisted viewers to better understand the paintings on display. These booklets, produced by cataloguers, contained what we today call "descriptions" of the paintings.

It is to early printmakers that Yeazell attributes the shift from describing to titling a work of art. The printmaking technology allowed for images to be multiplied and published. In addition, the technology provided a relatively easy way for a title of the image to be included in the engraving of the image itself. As Yeazell points out, it is the printmaker (not the artist of the original art work) who provided the name or title of the work. The printmaker is yet another middleman. The success of the titling of prints moved artists to consider titling their paintings. Yeazell identifies "the 1790s as the crucial decade in the emergence of the modern picture title" (62).

Part II of the text ("Reading and Interpreting: Viewers") focuses on the viewers of the paintings. This is not an arbitrary decision by Yeazell, but one that continues the historical evolution of the relationships among artist, painting, and viewer. Key to this historical evolution is the democratization of reading emerging in the late eighteenth century. A painting's title, like a proper name, has "the function of singling out one individual in particular" (81). It "typically provides our first key to interpreting–or, as we often put it, to "reading" the image" (81). The titles provided by printmakers gained wide circulation. Images came to be read and interpreted based on the titles provided by the printmakers. The advancement of public education (including reading) was accompanied by the process of secularization in European society. This process resulted in the titles of some paintings being changed. Works that had previously been understood as having religious subjects were now given more amorphous titles; a work entitled *The Holy Family* might now be retitled as *A Carpenter's Household*.

The confluence of the democratization of reading and the increased mobility of the image "furnished the conditions for the modern picture title" (115). As museums sprouted up throughout Europe in the 1800s, descriptive catalogues disappeared in favor of the concise labels placed near each painting to assist the viewer in interpreting the artwork. Yeazell quotes George Brown Goode's definition (1889) of a museum as "*a collection of instructive labels, each illustrated by a well-selected specimen*" [Goode's emphasis] (117). The

emergence of labels brings into relief the distinction between reading the label and decoding the meaning of the painting. Typically it is easier to read a label than to decode the meaning of a painting. In this museum context, the viewer performs two tasks: reading and viewing. Reading a picture's title or name certainly affects the viewer's perception of the painting. Yeazell emphasizes this point by devoting an entire chapter to "The Power of the Name" (97). The age-old problem of the relationship between word and image remains or, as James McNeill Whistler phrased it, the "war … between the brush and the pen" (122).

Despite the power of a specific title, viewers (especially art critics) may use the painting's title as a launching pad for their criticism of the *ensemble* of the artist, the art work, and the title. A portrait of a young woman entitled Mary Magdalen can be critiqued as having nothing to do with the biblical Mary Magdalen and is better viewed simply as a portrait of a young woman. A painting titled *The Scapegoat* can be reinterpreted as nothing more than a painting of a goat in the desert. Yeazell calls this form of criticism "reading against the title" wherein "the critic sketches an alternative narrative" (133).

Part III of Yeazell's text ("Authoring as Well as Painting: Artists") presents chapters on six artists who saw different possibilities inherent in their own authoring of names for their paintings. Each chapter provides a twist on how the creativity of the artist spilled over from the production of a painting into the related production of the title for the piece. Yeazell sees in the titling process the artist assuming the role of author. The creator of the image also creates the word attached to the image.

Jacques-Louis David's *Oath of the Horatii* is the first work studied by Yeazell. She points out that this eighteenth-century work is an early example of "a painting whose title unequivocally originates with its creator" (149). In her scholarly analysis of the *Oath*, Yeazell describes the various strategies David employed in his creative configuration of the painting as well as his blurring of the line between historical nonfiction and fiction. David's painting demonstrates a more aggressive approach by an artist in the selection and execution of an artistic idea. David transgresses the traditional boundaries of history and myth in his composition and titling of the *Oath*. David is also an early example of artists literally painting words in their works. The perennial dialectic of word and image finds new expression in David's art.

Across the Channel at this time, J. M. W. Turner was also experimenting with the interrelationships between word and image: "As in the mischievous instance of *Appulia in Search of Appulus*, the artist characteristically deploys his titles both to evoke particular associations and to frustrate them" (170). Yeazell sees Turner as an artist who is also an early entrepreneur. He is aware of the importance of his works' being well received by the art-loving public and how a cleverly concocted title could generate a positive response to his work. This is not to say that Turner always drew a straight line between a painting and its title. Many of his titles are merely suggestive rather than historically accurate. For Turner, "the adoption of vague and evocative titles rather than denotative ones became an explicitly articulated strategy" (180). In Turner, the artist takes control not only of his canvas, but also of its interpretive narrative by way of the title given to it.

In mid-nineteenth century France, Gustave Courbet was taking Turner's ideas even further: '"You see, the painting has no title. I shall try to give you a more precise idea of it by describing it to you plainly"' (183). For him, the artist was understood to be the authoritative, if not sole, interpreter of the meaning of a painting. Courbet's heightened valuation of the role of the word is seen in his titling of some early self-portraits as "portraits of the author," rather than portraits of the artist (188). Courbet was also a central figure in the extended debate regarding the title of one of his most important works, *The Painter's Studio: A Real Allegory Determining a Seven-Year Phase of My Artistic Life*. The debate centered on the meaning of the words "real allegory." Yeazell comments on this debate by arguing that "until the mid-twentieth century, Courbet's "real allegory"–the titular paradox–probably had more impact on the history of art than did the image it characterized" (197).

From the perspective of an artist self-consciously titling his work, "[T]he full title of his huge canvas was an instruction for viewing that was intended to double both as manifesto and self-advertisement, and in all three capacities that title did its work" (202).

A contemporary of Courbet, James McNeill Whistler, also contributed to the emerging debate regarding an artist's role in titling a painting. In the mid-1800s, Whistler "inaugurated a provocative titling system of his own, having exhibited his first painting with a musical title" (204). To ensure its permanence, Whistler wrote the words *Symphony in White, No. III* directly onto the canvas. This is an early example of an artist aggressively naming a work, thereby removing any and all middlemen from the titling process. Yeazell uses the metaphor of baptism for Whistler's naming act. The metaphor is apt in that baptism is the moment of the formal conferral of a child's proper name. Whistler's inscription of words on his painting revives the perennial tension between the word and image, between the pen and the brush. In addition to his forays into musical titles for his paintings, Whistler also explored offering abstract titles for his works. His titles would incorporate words such as "composition" or "arrangement." His well-known *Whistler's Mother* actually bears the full title of *Arrangement in Grey and Black, No. 1: Portrait of the Painter's Mother.*

During the first decades of the twentieth century, Rene Magritte revisited the debate over words and images in yet another creative way. For Magritte, the artist first paints his image and only later searches for a title for the image. An appropriate title must be *found*. This can be the result of the artist's own search or through the suggestions of associates or friends of the artist. As such, Magritte's searches for titles became collaborative experiences. In many of his works, "Magritte played with the relations between verbal and visual signs" (227). This play often circled around what Magritte called the "mystery" of his art work. Word and image interacted in a dance that invited viewers to discover different meanings in the work. As such, Magritte's titles were often enigmatic in nature.

Yeazell concludes her study with an exploration of the art of Jasper Johns and his contributions to the debate over titles. By deleting articles, Johns offered titles such as *Flag*, rather than *A Flag* or *The Flag*. This process drew together more tightly the notions of subject and object. *Flag* was both subject and object simultaneously. Johns also explores the philosophical notion of negation in his art and in his titles. Yeazell studies Johns' 1961 work simply entitled *No*. How does one paint negation? How does one paint "no"? Johns is truly both thinker and artist. He ponders the relations among thoughts, words, and images. For him, thinking, writing, and painting are intertwined aspects of reality. In contrast to Magritte, who believed titles needed to be found after an image was created, Johns compiles lists of possible titles which may in turn serve as titles for works of art not yet created. By creating art which intentionally introduces ambiguity into the image, Johns causes the viewers to slow down their reading and interpretation of the art work. Johns the thinker-artist-writer takes control of the viewer's normal viewing experience.

Yeazell's book is a pleasure to read on so many levels. The intellectually stimulating material encountered on every page is complemented by her impeccable use of the English language. Her impressive scholarship is employed to enlighten the reader. In *Picture Titles*, reading is education.

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Naming Race, Naming Racisms. By JONATHAN JUDAKEN. New York: Routledge. 2013. Pp. vii + 246. $48.97. ISBN 13: 978-041-584-9029.

In 1758, Swedish taxonomist Carl Linneaus published the tenth edition of *System Naturae*. In this version, *Homo sapiens* was divided into several varieties. There was *Homo europaeus*, a white, inventive, law-governed, intelligent, muscular people; *Homo*