

Introduction

The Sister-Arts Moment

We are fond of tracing the resemblance between Poetry and Painting, and, accordingly, we call them Sisters; but where shall we find bonds of connection sufficiently strict to typify the affinity betwixt metrical and prose composition? They both speak by and to the same organs; the bodies in which both of them are clothed may be said to be of the same substance, their affections are kindred and almost identical.

– William Wordsworth, Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, 1800

When Wordsworth composed the Preface to accompany the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, he assured his readers that “[e]xcept in a very few instances” they would find “no personifications of abstract ideas” in the volume.¹ But only a few pages later, in his search for an appropriate comparison for the relationship between poetry and prose, he seems unable to help himself. As he casts around for a suitable expression of the natural affinity between “metrical and prose composition,” he lights on the personified allegories of Painting and Poetry and their sisterly bond.² Their unquestioned kinship serves for Wordsworth as a model for the even closer bond of poetry and prose, whom he personifies as nearly identical twins. Unlike poetry and painting, poetry and prose are so alike in Wordsworth’s account that they “speak by and to the same organs,” meaning they are both textual and can therefore, unlike painting, be apprehended through the eye *and* the ear.³ In Wordsworth’s formulation, the close bond of poetry to prose relies on, and is recognizable through, his certainty of the sisterly personification of painting and poetry. He does not say we *sometimes* call them sisters, nor that *some people* call them sisters. His language is clear and unqualified.

What was it about the idea of the sister arts that was so powerful, or perhaps so commonplace, that it warranted suspension of Wordsworth’s usual disavowal of personification? Only the paragraph before he makes this statement regarding sisterly affinities, Wordsworth uses Thomas Gray’s sonnet “On the Death of Richard West,” with its personification

of the sun, “Phoebus,” to illustrate the stark difference between neoclassical poetic language and language that should “in no way differ from that of prose.”⁴ So what about this particular personification was so alluring that he was willing to use the sister arts as justification to go so far as to personify those *very* “abstract ideas” that comprise the central tenet of his argument in the Preface?

The term “sister arts” is a personified allegory whereby whole artforms take on the lovely shape of singular human women, adorned with all the wonderful charms mimesis can provide. During their reign, they were a truth universally acknowledged. As Chapter 1 illustrates, the sister arts had the power to consecrate what they touched. They could celebrate grace in form, balance in subject, and beauty in composition. Muse-like, they dignified what Western culture deems its highest forms of art. They adorned with laurels the great practitioners of the liberal arts, whose well-made works both teach and delight. Perhaps it is little wonder that Wordsworth chose a personification with such gravitas as a means to justify his connection between poetry and prose. Still, serious questions remain. From our perspective, the sister arts seem distinctly neoclassical, part of Gray’s tradition, not Wordsworth’s. Daughters of Nature, they were birthed in Renaissance idealism and raised by seventeenth and eighteenth century neoclassicism. How could such vestiges from the tradition that Wordsworth was writing *against* appear in a place so central to his argument?

The answer requires a thoroughgoing revision of our understanding of the sister arts in the Romantic period. Most work on the sister arts identifies their separation from literary theory as an achievement of eighteenth century rationalism. In some versions of the story, British empiricism replaces an idealist neoclassical version of nature with a nature wrought from the material world.⁵ Scholars nowadays, if they think about the sister arts at all, think of an idea that began in the Renaissance and ended after 1766, when Gotthold Ephraim Lessing published the *Laocoön*, an essay that sets rational limits on the relationship between poetry and painting.⁶ In the years after Lessing’s criticism of the natural affinity of painting to poetry, the story goes, the sisters began to wither, along with the unified theory of the arts they represented, weakened by the argumentative force of antipictorialist writings by theorists like Edmund Burke.⁷ Yet for Wordsworth to deploy the sister arts as part of rhetorical strategy that ultimately claims poetry’s superior capacity to represent the imagination, they must have been alive and well. Critics have argued that the sisters were not at all well – and moreover that they were in fact killed by a

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“Romantic” objection to allegory, or an appeal to naturalism of exactly the kind we see in Wordsworth’s Preface.⁸ So what could they possibly be doing, looking quite vibrant, in a document so hostile to neoclassicism? Certainly they could not act to raise the status of poetry any higher. Poetry’s status as a liberal art being long established, Wordsworth had moved on to pursuing a place among the disciplines of knowledge, as Robin Valenza has shown.⁹

Reinserting the sister arts into their central place in the Romantic period requires a change in perspective. The sisters as I have described them thus far live in a space of transcendent idealism, where all the imitative arts are unified in sweetness and light. In this book, though, I want to catch at the hem of the sisters’ neoclassical drapery and pull them down from the ether, planting their shapely feet on the dirty floor of the artist’s studio, the printshop, the Pall Mall gallery. To do this, the sisters must be understood as distinct from the related simile *ut pictura poesis*. Although later literary theories have tended to conflate the two, Wordsworth in the “Preface” does not. There is something irreducible in sisterhood. To suggest that the sister arts are merely alike, as does the “Horatian formula” *ut pictura poesis* (or “as is painting so is poetry,” as it is often translated) misses the aspect of relational complexity embodied in personification. Sisters can be friendly or antagonistic. They may be alike in their affect but physically different, or the reverse. Think of the sisters you know. Sisterhood is fundamentally asymmetrical. One is older. Perhaps she is more established in life. Perhaps one or the other is the prettier, the smarter, the nicer of the two. Sisterhood invites comparison but it does not suggest equality. Personification, it seems to me, invites a scrupulous, embodied comparison of what the Horatian formula reduces to simile.

These personified female allegories played a key role in the professional status of English visual artists, who had always lagged behind poets when it came to laurels, fame, and fortune. Many kinds of visual artists, painters especially, learned to use the sister arts as a flowery means to a pragmatic end. If the relationship suggested by the sister arts holds – if painting is, in fact, related to poetry – then painters were kin to poets – despite the dirt and rags and oil, despite the physical labor of mixing paint, despite the required mechanical knowledge of substances like resins or varnishes or encaustic wax. If painting is akin to poetry, then an image of the poet, with his desk and quill, could potentially replace one of a “mechanick” painter laboring in his studio. Even as the popularity of pictorial poetry was losing ground in favor of a new kind of Romantic visualization, the sister arts

were pressed into the service of visual artists looking to reform a reputation sullied by the ungentlemanly labors of their own hands.

Moment

Less ambitious than a full-blown period, I wish to make a case for a particular moment that changed the cultural landscape. It is a moment structured by artists' uneasy relationship to a class of potential patrons: connoisseurs and collectors with cosmopolitan and antiquarian leanings. The narrative that defines this moment is fairly simple. Visual artists, painters especially, objected to pressures asserted by a small group of heavy-handed antiquarians who sought to interfere with artists' professional and aesthetic development. To widen and diversify their publics, artists opted to depict scenes from British literature and to model their profession on literary authorship. This tactic required the use of mechanical reproduction in the form of engraving, but that reproduction came at a cost. While *words* were reproduced by compositors, typesetters, and printers, who considered themselves craftsmen, *images* were reproduced by engravers – who considered themselves artists. Painters became authors at the cost of relegating engravers to the rank of craftsmen. These and other professional tensions exploded the analogy between painting and poetry and prompted a “crisis in the arts” around 1805; while the sister arts lost their use value, the connection to literature had changed the cultural landscape enough for artists to decisively separate themselves from the influence of antiquarian connoisseurs and assert themselves as autonomous professionals by “authoring” arguments in what had previously been literary genres.

To tell the story of this moment, *Romantic Art in Practice* takes up where most literary scholars end their sister-arts narratives, and it intervenes in what I understand to be related discussions about periodization and professionalization. The story begins in the 1760s as antiquarians moved from collecting habits that artists found objectionable to something even more threatening. Antiquarians associated with the Society of Dilettanti embarked on their own visual publishing enterprises. Not only did they employ artists as copyists, but they also sought to meddle in contemporary visual production by providing what they considered to be the better models than anything artists could invent themselves. In turn, artists adapted literary works and used print in ways that would ultimately bolster their authority and autonomy. They produced work for galleries and publishing ventures that institutionalized the sister arts. When those

galleries failed and the sister arts lost their usefulness, they used what they had learned to reframe their claims to authority and autonomy from the idealized classicism espoused by antiquarians. The moment ends in 1816, when despite boisterous antiquarian objection, a group of artists influenced the British Parliament to purchase the Parthenon marbles from Lord Elgin. In the interim, from the moment of threat to the moment of victory, painters used their association with literature and authorship to structure an ad hoc resistance to pressure exerted by a group with far more wealth and cultural capital than they had themselves. The sister arts provided artists an alternative understanding of their own authority and expertise. If painters could appeal to wide audiences the way poets could, they needn't bend to the whims of wealthy patrons.

Arguably the most famous and in-depth study of the sister arts is Jean Hagstrum's 1958 *The Sister Arts: The Tradition of Literary Pictorialism from Dryden to Gray*, and in many ways my study is a response to what has been dismissed as an old and dated book. The sister-arts moment would not have occurred had not the literary giants of eighteenth century Britain – Dryden, Pope, Addison, Thompson, Gray – written poetry that was “like a speaking picture.” My sister-arts narrative begins where Hagstrum leaves off, and I do so by shifting focus in two ways: First, I exchange the history of an idea for a narrative about on-the-ground practice, a method that requires careful attention to the making and distribution of the physical media that comprises my archive. Second, this book exchanges painting for poetry, and in so doing reveals how an Augustan legacy of “sister-arts practice” was a key feature in the making of artistic authority. Hagstrum, who was writing at a time when periodization was far more certain, felt no need to justify his beginnings and ends. He goes no further than to acknowledge that although “pictorialism is not . . . an isolated historical matter bounded by the frontiers of one epoch,” his concern is “the neoclassical pictorial image” and thus beginning with Dryden in the late seventeenth century and ending with Gray in the mid-eighteenth obviously suited his purposes.¹⁰ In these less sanguine days, Hagstrum's casual references to the writings of Lessing and Burke do not seem quite sufficient to declare a period or a literary movement over and done.¹¹ Hagstrum never bothers to define a period because he relies on assumptions about literary and cultural movements as well as established conventions that declare the eighteenth century over in 1789 – whereupon it was succeeded by a new period called “Romanticism.”¹² But changes in disciplinary and professional configurations in our own time have caused literary scholars to

apply considerable analytical pressure to traditional period frameworks. These days, a list of dead authors will not do.

While the Modern Language Association has leaned toward longer, more expansive periods defined by date alone, many researchers have identified shorter periods or moments that elucidate a particular historical situation. Gregory Dart, for example, recently identified a “Cockney moment” that began abruptly with Leigh Hunt’s libel sentence.¹³ While the “sister-arts moment” does not have quite the same genesis event, it is marked by two specific endpoints in the first decades of the nineteenth century, both of which occurred after Wordsworth’s use of the sister arts in his Preface. It began less clearly, with the dawning of William Hogarth’s legacy, as more and more artists came to understand that circulation in print was the path to fame and freedom to create what they wanted. Its end was marked first with the collapse of the “literary galleries,” a group of Pall Mall institutions built on the assumption that British literature would be the salvation of British art. Although the galleries offered little in the way of salvation, the terrible aftermath of their collapse left British artists in crisis – but also with tools they could use for a more fully autonomous professional life, as evidenced by the second event, the acquisition of the Parthenon marbles.

The sister-arts moment, pressed into being as it was by a combination of forces exerted by antiquarians, artists, literary authors, and various kinds of publishers, emerges from the archive and offers insight on a new kind of professional artist with a new kind of expert knowledge. As Jon Klancher has shown, similar claims to professional knowledge and expertise occurred across many disciplines in Romantic Britain, including authorship.¹⁴ It is important to note that I do not discuss the emergence of the authorized artist against some stable category of “literary author.” As Paul Keen has taught us, the term *literature* was deeply in flux in the period I describe.¹⁵ The Augustan poets, however, and Alexander Pope in particular, did offer a model of professional authorship long before Wordsworth’s manifesto-like claims for the knowledge and status of the poet. Klancher’s discussion of the emergence of the artist-as-art-critic against a backdrop of increasing outside management of their work is of particular relevance to this study.¹⁶ Pope, unlike his intellectual rival Colley Cibber, managed to use print circulation to avoid sycophantic obedience to a patron.

Unlike Ted Underwood, who in *Why Literary Periods Mattered* speculates that periodization is “nothing more than a sort of mathematical abstraction,” I want to make a case not for big data but for the deep archive.¹⁷ Rather than abstraction, the archive offers physical traces of a

connection between the concept of the sister arts and the laboring bodies who took it up. Like Klancher, I foreground Romantic-era institutions, which consolidated a wider republic of letters into specifically administered nodes of knowledge production and distribution. In my focus on the labor of media production, however, I read the archive not as a repository of ideas but as an accretion of human labor, both intellectual and physical. Literary periods certainly do operate as Underwood claims they do, as a placeholder for a particular kind of disciplinary prestige – though whether, as his provocative title suggests, periods no longer matter is up for debate. Clearly, however, they *did* matter. The sister-arts moment began when visual artists, aware that authors gained readership and notoriety through the circulation of works in print, began to employ strategies they learned from literary authors and editors. The autonomy of literary production in the eighteenth century, which Underwood situates as fundamentally attached to the processes of periodization, was of vital concern to visual artists.¹⁸ The moment I claim here is not a literary one, although it certainly has to do with cultural practices predicated on perceived literary autonomy and prestige. In choosing to examine the media ecology of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a period that Underwood himself acknowledges was the first to produce periodization as a means to artistic autonomy, I wish to make a claim for this moment's historical relevance on its own terms. Regardless of what Underwood might prescribe for our profession, his book clearly reinscribes the period *as a historical formation* that was (and is) organized around discontinuity and change.

The Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, itself a periodizing document, informs us that the age of neoclassical pictorialist poetry is over, as its reading of Gray's sonnet attests.¹⁹ By 1816, Keats traveled Homer's "realms of gold" by resorting to Chapman's fresh-feeling sixteenth century translation, as opposed to Pope's stale eighteenth century one. The Augustan Age well behind them, two generations of Romantic poets eschewed the overwrought images of Dryden, Pope, and Gray in favor of a new kind of ekphrastic, sometimes synesthetic, visualization. As Hagstrum insists, English neoclassical poetry referenced *specific* graphic representations from painting to structure pictorial images.²⁰ Romantic poetic visuality operated differently, occasionally even demonstrating a scopophobic disdain for a specific visual referent, as with Shelley's "Ozymandias." Wordsworth gleaned his poetic images from what he thought of as unadorned nature, abandoning "a large portion of phrases and figures of speech which from father to son have long been regarded as the common inheritance of

Poets.”²¹ This break with tradition legitimized poetry not as a vehicle for mimetic delight but as *specialized knowledge* with its own set of linguistic tools. In the 1802 expanded Preface, Wordsworth compares the poet’s knowledge, which “cleaves us with our fellow beings,” to that of the chemist, the mathematician and the anatomist.²² Later, as Kurtis Hessel has recently argued, Coleridge would use chemistry’s fundamental unit, the element, as a way to structure the “disciplinary autonomy of literary criticism and historicism, while simultaneously reaching beyond the limits of that field, establishing in humanistic inquiry an inchoate hostility to disciplinary closure.”²³ If Hagstrum’s assertion that the Augustan poets understood themselves as adorning nature with decorations worthy of human dignity as a means to validate the *communitas* of polite society, Wordsworth’s efforts to professionalize poetry did indeed have a very different aim. Wordsworth’s Preface ushered in a shift in literary culture that replaced the leisured man of letters with the professional author of poetry. In using the sister arts to do so, he registered a similar shift toward the professional artist, an artist who, like Wordsworth himself, broadcast his message through the medium of print.

To clarify, then, I do not contend that the use of the sister arts began in the later part of the eighteenth century or that it ended in the first decade of the nineteenth, nor do I argue that the painting of literary subjects was limited to this short period of time. Stuart Sillars has taught us that early century painters became quite adept at reading and interpreting literary texts.²⁴ On our side of the sister-arts moment, Pre-Raphaelite paintings of literary subjects like Ophelia’s drowning and the Lady of Shalott continue to operate as a staple of middlebrow art. As Hagstrum points out, the idea of the sister arts was hardly bounded by one epoch, so they certainly cannot be bound by something so modest as a moment. My aim, rather, is to highlight a time when the sister arts carried a particular historical weight. The sisters index the emergence of a modern artist whose professional identity was predicated on the success of the modern author. Visual artists found themselves needing a way to combat pressure from classical antiquarians, art connoisseurs who were exerting what was felt to be undue influence on artists’ ability to produce what they pleased. The 1760s saw a new connoisseurial use of print, which circulated scenes and artifacts from classical antiquity. Antiquarians began to finance multivolume large-format “art books” like Stuart and Revett’s *Antiquities of Athens* (1762); Sir William Hamilton’s collaboration with Pierre d’Hancarville, *A Collection of Etruscan, Greek and Roman Antiquities* (1766); and Chandler, Revett, and Pars’s *Ionian Antiquities* (1769). In response to antiquarians, who notoriously

believed artists to be mere mechanics, artists turned to British poetry. The sister arts invited artists to join poets and by extension other literary authors on their path to professional autonomy.

The emergence of Romantic authorship described by Valenza has been more recently taken up by Klancher.²⁵ For Klancher, literary Romanticism is defined by its relationship to a declining republic of letters and Romantic authors' "own innovative acts to rethink (and sometimes reenact) that history of letters by way of extraordinary imagination and invention."²⁶ In his account, after 1800 new cultural institutions "transfigured" the arts and sciences, in large part by administrating and bureaucratizing what had heretofore operated as an ad hoc "republic," where a hubbub of undisciplined intellectual and creative agents used a combination of epistolary and print networks to spread their ideas. Both Klancher and Valenza mark a shift away from what Valenza calls the "fractured communicative landscape"²⁷ of eighteenth century letters and toward something much closer to Pierre Bourdieu's "fields" of cultural and knowledge production, which operate in a constant struggle for autonomy.²⁸ The sister-arts moment formed around distinct acts of protectionism by visual artists who felt their autonomy under threat. I see my act of periodization as one that emerges from efforts first to institutionalize and then to reimagine the sister arts as a route for artists to authorship, both actions taken in the interest of what we now call discipline formation.

Origins

There is nothing ancient about the sister arts.²⁹ They stepped onto British soil at the very end of the seventeenth century. Although the two sisters are often conflated with the Muses, the Graces, or other personified allegories, and although they are often associated with the ancient formula *ut pictura poesis*, they never bathed on the slopes of Helicon, and their names were never spoken in any Roman forum. Rather, the sisters slipped into seventeenth century art theory, conveniently simplifying what is to this day an unresolved theoretical problem. The question of how verbal and graphic arts relate is a thorny one. To simply agree *that there was a relationship* suited neoclassical artists, and the personified allegories thus developed as an emblem that authorized visual artists to produce narrative artwork, especially artwork based on poetry. The English phrase "sister arts" did not appear until 1695, when the poet John Dryden introduced it in his Preface to du Fresnoy's *De Art Graphica*. It is this use of the sister arts, one invented by a poet in his work translating and writing visual art

theory, that I will trace. Other sisters have come and gone, but painting and poetry were the first English sister arts, and this is their story. These female personified allegories also coexist with other formulations of the relationship between painting and poetry, as I describe later. For artists, though, the fact that the sisters could be represented graphically made them the best candidates for integration into their theory and practice. The sister arts were painted, sculpted, and engraved into art theory.

The connection of painting with poetry in Western thought goes back to the Greeks, but earlier comparisons do not suggest a family resemblance. For Plato, painting was hardly worth mentioning. Banished from the republic, both painting and poetry represented dangerous mirrors, reflecting the half-truth of mere appearance. While Aristotle compares tragedy to painting in the *Poetics*, he certainly does not make them sisters, nor does he press analogy between the arts in any consistent way. Plutarch reports that it was Simonides who articulated the most anthropomorphic articulation of the simile, that poetry is “a speaking picture” and painting “a dumb poem.”³⁰ Even here, however, Simonides’ metaphor calls into being only the apparatus of human speech, or its lack. Poetry speaks and painting is silent, which certainly makes his formula an example of personification. But Simonides’ arts are not fully formed figures, they have no gender, and they are not related by blood. The personified sisters are nowhere in ancient Greece.

And what of Rome? Anglophone literary critics have largely understood Simonides’ simile as a directive to classically educated (or motivated) poets, handed down from the Roman poet Horace in his *Ars Poetica*. The phrase *ut pictura poesis*, or “as is painting so is poetry,” appears in that work – or seems to. A staple of Renaissance neoclassicism, the *Ars Poetica*, or *The Art of Poetry*, as it was known in England, was freshly translated in the early 1680s by Dryden’s contemporaries Roscommon and Oldham.³¹ In Roscommon’s translation,

Poems (like Pictures) are of different Sorts,
 Some better at a distance, others near,
 Some love the dark, some chuse the clearest light,
 And boldly challenge the most piercing Eye³²

Twentieth- and twenty-first century critics agree with Jean Hagstrum, who notes in *The Sister Arts* that the sloganized “Horatian formula” of *ut pictura poesis* serves as a shaky foundation for a formal connection between the two branches of art. The formula is predicated on a seemingly willful mispunctuation of the phrase *ut pictura poesis ecriit*. The clipped phrase,