Timothy J. Clark (usually identified as T.J. Clark) is the most significant Marxist art historian of the post-1945 period. He has also done more than any other scholar to question and redefine, both theoretically and through empirical studies, what ‘Marxist art history’ might actually mean.

In two books published in 1973 concerned with Gustave Courbet and French painting in the mid-nineteenth century, Clark established the ground-rules for the ‘social history of art’. Based on his PhD completed at the Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London, the better-known of these two studies, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution* (1973), rapidly became the paradigm for a theoretically-informed yet empirically-rooted Marxist account of art practice. Its companion volume, *The Absolute Bourgeois: Artists and Politics in France 1848—1851* (1973), extended Clark's analysis of the social and historical conditions in which art was made in that country at the time of the 1848 Revolution.

Clark's studies were premised on two interrelated propositions. The first of these was that art should be understood always as the product, in and out of a particular conjuncture of conditions and relations of production. These were economic, social, ideological, but also specifically aesthetic and material: based, that is, on the particular artistic practice that a certain artist undertook in an identifiable historical moment. Second, Clark claimed that great modern art was necessarily negative or critical of prevailing conventions and conditions in a specific society — that such art was a work against dominating artistic—aesthetic and socio-political orders. Clark's book on Courbet pursued these ideas through a dense web of empirical and socio-historical sources, insisting that the theoretical basis of his work had to be married to, and revised in the light of, such a rigorous analysis. Clark's detailed consideration of key paintings by Courbet produced in the 1848—51 conjuncture — *The Stonebreakers, Burial at Ornans, Peasants of Flagey Returning from the Fair* — examined their relation to, and departure from, the conventions (and implicit political meanings) of traditionally idealist academic French art. Clark established Courbet's ‘realism’ in these works as based in conjuncture, and meaningful only in this context of reference to other past and contemporary art. Clark also presented a groundbreaking analysis of contemporary critical responses to Courbet's works by those writing about the exhibitions of art held annually at the Salon in Paris. This study anchored Clark's analysis of Courbet's artworks in the forms of mediation that such historically-specific institutional circumstances and critical response represented.

Clark's significance in the development of Marxist art history since World War Two was secured because his study of Courbet operated, first, as a decisive critique of earlier prevailing Marxist accounts of art, and, second, because it offered a devastatingly powerful challenge to contemporary conventional art-historical practices that had always claimed a superior knowledge of the actual nature and meaning of art and artistic tradition (‘the art works themselves’). The critique and challenge were bound up together. Clark attacked, mostly implicitly, the weaknesses of antecedent Marxist art history on two grounds: first, that it was hardly really ‘historical’ at all in that it reduced art, artists and social development to a set of highly crude and reductive formulae (an example being Arnold Hauser's *The Social History of Art*, 1951); second, that this Marxism in particular could not adequately understand (indeed could not even really recognize) the specific and irreducible qualities and materials of art at all. Clark's notion of Courbet's ‘realism’ was based not on any simplistic sense that such paintings showed actual real life, or
mobilized a set of pictorial conventions that had an essentially truthful character to them, but rather on the principle that their realist affect, or charge, lay in how they ‘disappointed’ and differed from — critically negated — the prevailing artistic and socio-political conventions, practices, institutions and values of the day.

With this emphasis on the analysis of specific artworks and their materiality (understood as medium, as pictorial convention, as a core element in a tradition of art practice), Clark went for the ground of central scholarly activity that non-Marxist art historians had seen as theirs for several decades. But, as Clark indicated in a highly influential essay published in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1974 (‘The Conditions of Artistic Creation’), such contemporary ‘ordinary’ art history had destructively supplanted the work of the most important ‘cultural art historians’ of the first part of the twentieth century. Though Aby Warburg and Heinrich Wölfflin, Clark noted, had certainly not been Marxists, they had been concerned to place the meaning and value of art in social and historical circumstances, not in a vacuously idealist tradition of ‘great artists’ abstracted from any place in actual cultures and societies. Clark, therefore, projected his studies of art and artists as the continuation of this tradition, which he called the ‘social history of art’, and absolutely not as the heir to a reductive Marxism from the 1950s. This social history of art would also be the scathing enemy of all the forms of deracinated contemporary art history practised by connoisseurs, formalists and mere ‘symbol-hunters’.

Through the later 1970s and 1980s Clark's interests moved forward historically, though he continued also to research and write on the origins of ‘the modern’ in art and society at the end of the eighteenth century in France. But it was modernism that became Clark's specific and enduring concern from the mid-1980s to 1999. Modernism became, for Clark, the name for the critical, negating art practice he had identified in the key paintings of Courbet, a socialist and ‘realist’ artist concerned with modern French society: if not yet a modernist, then certainly moving rapidly towards such a stance, composed of complex and interwoven artistic, social, political and intellectual elements. Clark's study of Edouard Manet (1984) draws the study of the socio-historical ‘modern’ and the fully-fledged ‘modernist’ artist together, yet the title of the Manet book maintains the decisive significance of conjunctural analysis. Clark's subject is *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers*. Once again, Clark's dual concern is with sustained, extraordinarily careful and perceptive readings of specific paintings — for example, Manet's *Olympia* and *Bar at the Folies-Bergère* — along with analyses of the relations between these works and their critical interlocutors, such as Charles Baudelaire.

In a series of essays written around the time of the publication of *The Painting of Modern Life*, Clark began to make it plain that, though a Marxist in intellectual perspective and political persuasion, he thought extremely highly of some of the contemporary critics supportive of Modernism in the visual arts. This had, of course, been true, though it had remained mostly implicit in Clark's earlier studies, where Baudelaire, for example, had figured largely. But Baudelaire had been an overt critic of art and social life in France in the mid-nineteenth century — there was a clear, if complex, political character to his writing. In a 1982 essay about Clement Greenberg, and in subsequent replies to criticism from Michael Fried on this piece (two post-1945 critics usually identified derogatively as ‘formalists’), Clark allied himself to what might be called the critical modernist tradition in art and writing. The novelty of these essays should certainly not be overplayed. Clark had been interested in Greenberg's criticism and had taught twentieth-century modernist art (particularly that of Jackson Pollock, Greenberg's favoured
Abstract Expressionist) for many years before publishing these essays on abstract painting and formalist criticism in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s in the United States.

But the original essay on Greenberg and the resulting exchange with Fried dramatized and clarified three issues which dominate Clark's apparently summative study Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism, published in 1999. These issues concern, first, the selection and evaluation of certain art works as ‘great’, and how Clark has defined and justified this practice in his work; second, the complex relationship between Marxist analytic principles and evaluative protocols in critical writing on modernist art; and third, the diagnostic potential within Clark's intellectual perspective, in terms of the likely future of both art and capitalist society at the end of the twentieth century. Clark's analysis of Greenberg's account of modernist art, in the highly influential essays the latter produced between 1939 and the 1960s, indicated that the critical modernist tradition Clark sees as beginning with Manet can be tracked in the art works of artists active between the late nineteenth century and the early 1950s — the tradition, that is, of ‘Manet to Pollock’.

Though Clark agrees with Greenberg — and is quite open about this — that the critics and historians usually identified as ‘formalist’ did correctly select the truly great painters in the modernist tradition, Clark believes their artworks achieved ‘greatness’ (that is, they were significantly historically affective in particular conjunctures) because they continued critically to negate prevailing fabrication techniques, pictorial conventions, iconographic schemas and implicated socio-political ideologies. This is as true of Courbet's Burial at Ornans, as it is true, Clark believes, of Paul Cézanne's The Large Bathers, Pablo Picasso's Man with a Pipe or Pollock's Autumn Rhythm: Number 30. Not that all of these pictures had the same degree of political significance: the reverse in fact. Clark's ‘farewell’ is precisely to the possibility of art making a difference socially and politically within the culture of advanced capitalism, the ‘society of the spectacle’ identified by Guy Debord, one of Clark's formative influences from the 1960s. Modernism for Clark, therefore, is always (and increasingly as he moves through the twentieth century) a ‘failure’ to change the world, or to change it in desirable ways. The socialist and anarchist modern artists Clark mostly writes about want their art to be a representation of an alternative social, post-capitalist, order: they ‘figure’ this in their paintings in different ways. And they want the social order to be transformed. But art cannot change the world. Clark bids farewell to this utopian idea, then, as much as to Modernism's critical project.

Clark's Marxism, like his understanding of Modernism, is equally interrogated and revalued in his essays and books of the 1980s and 1990s. If Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution had offered a learnable model of analytic principles and protocols which could be adapted by others within a tradition of ‘social history of art’ writing, then by 1999 Clark is saying goodbye also to the idea that he can — or wants to — supply a method or argument for anyone else to use. Marxist theory, in the period between 1973 and 1999, developed and diversified radically, spawning at least several distinct kinds of perspective, conceptual systems and evaluative mechanisms. Gone was ‘Stalinist’ Marxism, as the USSR itself disappeared by 1991, but gone also was any single or certain set of definitions for Marxism: ‘culture’, ‘the state’, ‘ideology’, ‘politics’, ‘materialism’, ‘aesthetics’ and many other concepts attained an opacity that rendered them inimical to any one explanation or system of meanings. Clark's Farewell to an Idea (1999) reflects this development and is, amongst other things, a record of a brilliant individual consciousness, not the textbook for a movement.
Clark's contribution to art history, however, remains constant. From the early study of Courbet, through that of Manet, to the later analyses of Camille Pissarro, Picasso and Pollock, Clark has produced extraordinarily insightful readings of particular artworks and made strikingly original claims for the significance of these works. Indeed, Clark's readings have been so influential (especially in producing creatively antagonistic responses — from feminists, for example) because he has valued these artworks so highly and has attempted to explain, to himself and to others, why he has felt them to be so compelling. His analysis of some paintings, particularly Manet's *Olympia*, has become virtually synonymous with the works themselves. That is to say, his accounts match, as far as Clark is concerned, the brilliance of touch these paintings demonstrate.

**Biography**

Timothy J. Clark. Born 1943. Clark studied at the Universities of Cambridge (Modern History) and London (where he took his PhD). He has held lectureships at the University of Essex and at Camberwell Art School, and professorships at the University of Leeds (where he established the MA in the Social History of Art in 1978), the University of California at Los Angeles, Harvard University, and the University of California at Berkeley.