Svetlana Alpers is a major figure in the field of art history in the late twentieth century. Although Alpers has not been a prolific writer, her books have provoked a disproportionate amount of interest and controversy because of her penchant for confronting difficult and complicated issues. In spite of the fact that most of her writing has concentrated on problems connected with visual culture of the Baroque period, each of her books has had a very different and unusual thrust and character. While she is certainly a "progressive" art historian, her work as a whole is not easily categorized under any of the common methodological rubrics of what is sometimes referred to as "the new art history."(1) In fact, Alpers appears to take pride in her independence from scholarly fashion. She once said in an interview: "I'm suspicious of programs and of labels like 'the new art history.' I resist the appellation. I do my work, and I'm not conscious as I'm doing it that it's part of the new art history. I'm studying art. This is a difficult thing to do. I'm simply trying to do it in the best way I can."(2)

In 1983, Alpers, then a professor of art history at the University of California, Berkeley, with a growing reputation as a progressive scholar interested in examining the history and mechanisms of the discipline,(3) published The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century. In it, her main thesis was that Dutch genre painting of the period, in its apparent preoccupation with the description of interiors and domestic scenes, was fundamentally different in character from contemporary Italian painting, with its narrative portrayals of events, typically from classical mythology or the Bible. Alpers argued that the descriptive Dutch painting should not be subjected to analytic and critical methods, such as Panofskian iconography,(4) which had been developed for use in the interpretation of the narrative imagery of Italian painting. She particularly castigated a favorite method of some of the recent scholars of Dutch painting, which was to use the imagery they found in emblems(5) to interpret, by extension, the subject matter of the genre paintings. To her, subjecting the immediacy and simplicity of Dutch painting to minute, iconographical analysis was an aberration. Not surprisingly, some of the most vituperative criticism of The Art of Describing was written by the "emblemists."(6)

Alpers supported her principal assertion—that Dutch paintings, and the
national visual sensibility behind them, were descriptive rather than narrative—with a fascinating array of ideas and data culled from many different fields, including optics, perspective theory, and cartography. The Art of Describing was widely acclaimed for the breadth of its erudition and Alpers's brilliant insights into individual works of art, but it was criticized for her alleged selective use of evidence—employing only information that supported her theories while jettisoning facts that were inconvenient to them.\(^7\)

In her next book, Rembrandt's Enterprise: The Studio and the Market (1988), Alpers narrowed her focus to the career of one artist, who had been much in the news because of the reassessment, and in some cases, reattribution, of many of his most famous paintings by the Rembrandt Research Project.\(^8\) But far from being a traditional art-historical monograph on the development of style or use of subject matter by an artist, Alpers's book on Rembrandt investigated the strategies he employed to market his art. This examination of a venerated cultural figure in economic terms seemed to make many of the book's reviewers uncomfortable:

Useful as a counterbalance to earlier romantic appraisals of Rembrandt though this book may be, its narrow focus on his mercantile values ultimately impoverishes the art. This is not simply because portions read like an economics textbook, but because Alpers never fully intimates Rembrandt's aesthetic ingenuity or spiritual expression. Obviously, these are challenges for which the disciplines and vocabulary of economics and social history are ill-equipped.\(^9\)

In 1994 Alpers and Michael Baxandall, a fellow progressive art historian and Berkeley faculty member, produced a book that was a very different kind of venture for both of them. In Tiepolo and the Pictorial Intelligence, Alpers and Baxandall provided a close examination of the main characteristics of Tiepolo's painting, including his unconventional use of pictorial space and portrayal of subject matter, and analyzed his drawing and painting practice to show how it related to his inventive process. A third of the book is devoted to the work the authors call "Tiepolo's most interesting picture," his 600-square-meter Apollo and the Four Continents fresco (1752-1753) in the Grand Staircase of the Würzburg Residenz, and its challenging setting. The book was very favorably reviewed by critics who sounded almost relieved that Alpers and Baxandall had avoided controversial issues and written what amounted to a celebration of Tiepolo's opulent frescoes. One even asked, rhetorically, "Is it possible, then, to combine postmodern political awareness with visual sensitivity?"\(^10\)

Alpers's most recent book, The Making of Rubens, was published in 1995, although she had been working on it intermittently since the late 1980s. In three loosely linked chapters she examined Rubens's political vision as reflected in his oil painting of a peasant festival, The Kermis; discussed the reception of Rubens's work in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France; and proposed that the fat, drunken figure of the bacchant Silenus that appears in several of the artist's paintings and drawings is Rubens's symbol for ecstatic creative abandonment.

In 1983, Alpers became a founding co-chair of the editorial board of the progressive interdisciplinary journal, Representations, which was soon to develop into an influential and widely-cited publication. Her article, "Interpretation without Representation, or, The Viewing of Las Meninas,"
was published in the journal's first issue in February 1983. Alpers held the co-chair through the publication of issue number 43 in Summer 1993, when she stepped down, though she continues to serve on the board.

Footnotes


3 She had already published some major journal articles: for example, a 1960 examination in the Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes of Vasari's use of verbal descriptions (or ekphraseis) of art works in the Lives, and a much later (1977) piece in Daedalus comparing attitudes behind recent progressive scholarship in art history with those of an earlier generation of scholars.

4 Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968) was a German art historian who emigrated to the U.S. in 1934. In his books Studies in Iconology (1939) and Meaning in the Visual Arts (1955), he developed an influential theory of iconography, which is the identification and study of subjects and themes in works of visual art. Iconology, a closely related field, advances beyond the mere identification of themes and studies their deeper cultural significance. (It has been said, by way of clarification, that iconography bears the same relation to iconology as geography does to geology.)

5 An emblem is a small printed picture illustrating an aphoristic concept which was usually spelled out in an accompanying motto and a brief explanatory text. Emblems were especially popular and widely disseminated in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Typically, they would be collected and published in books, such as Andrea Alciati's Emblemata (1531).


8 An effort, begun in 1968 with financial support of the Dutch government, to reassess and recatalog all of Rembrandt's paintings. See <http://parallel.park.org/Netherlands/pavilions/culture/rembrandt/rrp/>


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For more information about Svetlana Alpers see her [Curriculum Vitae](http://prelectur.stanford.edu/lecturers/alpers/index.html).