

Rethinking the Artist's Biography in the 19th Century (Laren, 12 Jun 26)

Singer Laren, Netherlands, Jun 12, 2026

Deadline: Feb 1, 2026

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SALON Conference 2026.

Unreliable Lives: Rethinking the Artist's Biography in the Nineteenth Century.

Can Gauguin's work ever be separated from the reputation of a sexual predator with a colonialist gaze? What is at stake in questioning Caillebotte's sexual orientation? And how should we confront Degas's antisemitism?

Since Vasari, biography has been intrinsically connected to the analysis of art and its history, but its use and relation to artists' work always remained a subject of debate. From lexicons to psychological profiles, art history's biographical traditions forged the expectations we bring to artists' lives, and these expectations continue to shape how figures are celebrated, condemned, or reclaimed. Today, as questions of moral accountability are being newly tested, the very function of biography, alongside its authority, biases, and blind spots, demand renewed scrutiny.

During the second half of the twentieth century, poststructuralist critique – epitomized by Barthes's declaration of the 'death of the author' – cast a persistent shadow of suspicion on biography as an object of scholarly inquiry and as a tool in interpreting works of art. This suspicion thus privileged a focus on the artwork as an autonomous construct of form and meaning. In recent decades, however, biography has enjoyed renewed attention, both in the emerging interdisciplinary field of 'life writing' and in art history itself. As noted by Marleen Rensen and Christopher Wiley, this does not mean a return to the uncritical biography of individual geniuses, but rather a new interest in 'the artist as socio-historical being [...] who reflects, represents or takes up reflections of society at large relating to ethnicity, gender and class' (Transnational Perspectives on Artists' Lives, 2020, 6).

While Charles G. Salas's edited volume *The Life & the Work: Art and Biography* (2007) sought to revive the debate on the relation between artist and work, other studies (e.g. Karin Hellwig's *Von der Vita zur Künstlerbiographie*, 2005, or Gabriele Guercio's *Art as Existence: The Artist's Monograph and Its Project*, 2006) focused on the development of different types of 'life writing' that shape our understanding of artists' lives. Building on Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz's groundbreaking *Die Legende vom Künstler* (1934), particular attention is being paid to the constructed nature of artists' biographies, its underlying strategies, and motives of identity formation, whether within a national framework (such as the work of Julie F. Codell, and Karen Junod on British artists), as a transnational process (Rensen and Wiley, 2020) or as a means of self-fashioning artistic personae

(e.g. Sandra Kisters, *The Lure of the Biographical*, 2017, orig. 2010). Finally, publications such as Claire Dederer's *Monsters: A Fan's Dilemma* (2023) fueled recent debate on how to deal with artists whose lives challenge contemporary ethical norms.

As many of these publications demonstrate, the long nineteenth century was a pivotal moment in the history of the artist's biography and its reception. It was the era that entrenched the Romantic genius, anchored the figure of the artist in mass media and popular culture, codified national artistic identities, and reframed artistic production within new social, racial, and gendered hierarchies. Many of the structures through which artists are still understood – by scholars, museums, contemporary artists and the public alike – were forged in this period, and the reputations thus constructed continue to shape interpretation today. Yet the biographies that emerged from the nineteenth century were never neutral: they were shaped by ideology, narrative convention, institutional or personal interests, and the imaginative demands of a rapidly changing world.

This international conference invites participants to examine the nineteenth century as the crucible of the artist's life story, and to consider how these biographical frameworks continue to inform (and distort) art history today. We welcome research that challenges established narratives, reconsiders biography as a historiographical tool, and probes the ethical and methodological questions it raises for contemporary scholarship and curatorial practice. We are especially interested in papers that connect the specific and the individual to the broader issues and themes at stake. We are primarily looking for research focused on nineteenth-century Europe and North America, but we also welcome case studies that place these issues within a wider global perspective.

Conference Themes

The organizers welcome papers addressing any aspect of the topic. Themes may include, but are not limited to:

1. Biographical Construction: Text vs. Objects

- a. The ego-document, autobiography, strategic self-fashioning, and narrativization
- b. The influence of the nineteenth-century novel on biography, and the persistence of fictional tropes
- c. The role of art criticism
- d. Works of art as biographical evidence and its implications

2. Problematic Figures and Ethical Reckonings

- a. Artists whose lives challenge contemporary ethical norms
- b. Curatorial strategies for presenting difficult or contested biographies
- c. The separation (or entanglement) of life and work in public discourse

3. Crisis, Vulnerability, and the Artist

- a. Narratives of suffering, failure, illness, addiction, and suicide
- b. The romanticization of struggle and the historiographical uses of crisis
- c. The afterlives of biographical tragedy (e.g., Gros and the Restoration)

4. Ideology, Identity, and the Nineteenth-Century Life

- a. Nationalism and the creation of "schools" and national artistic character

- b. The institutionalization of race, gender, class, and sexuality in biographical writing
- c. Colonial frameworks and the transnational circulation of artists' lives

5. The Uses and Limits of Biography Today

- a. Is biography an indispensable interpretive tool or a disciplinary obstacle?
- b. Alternatives to the biographical model: systemic, collective, or material histories
- c. Historiographical lacunae: missing biographies and figures who've been left off the page

We encourage contributions from art historians, historians, literary scholars, museum professionals, and researchers working across the humanities and social sciences.

Submission Guidelines

Please submit:

- A paper abstract (300 words): each presentation should be no longer than 20 minutes
- A short presenter bio (150 words)
- Contact information and institutional affiliation

to e.a.deneer@uu.nl (Eveline Deneer) and c.kang@rijksmuseum.nl (Charles Kang) by 1 February 2026.

Applicants will be notified by 15 February 2026

Reference:

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