

1000 franc banknote: Jacob Burckhardt, 1818-1897 Historian of art and culture

Jacob Burckhardt decisively shaped our understanding of the development of our modern culture. He is best known for his scientifically sound and aesthetically appreciative studies of the Italian Renaissance. But Burckhardt was also a persistent and far-sighted critic of the state's aspiration for power. Today Burckhardt is admired as a brilliant historian, seminal art historian and prophetic critic of his age. His writings in historiography are literary accomplishments as well as pioneering works that helped to establish art history as a modern academic discipline.

The Age of Constantine the Great (1853)

Burckhardt's first major work presents the age of the Emperor Constantine the Great as a crucial transitional epoch between the waning ancient world and the rise of Christianity that was pivotal to the development of the culture of the Middle Ages.

The Cicerone (1855)

The Cicerone is a scholarly study of Italian art and a comprehensive history of architecture, sculpture and painting from ancient Rome to the 18th century in the form of a travel guide. For the next sixty years, this work was the unrivalled textbook for German-speaking tourists in Italy.

The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy (1860)

Burckhardt's comprehensive and brilliant study of the history of the Renaissance pioneered a fundamental discussion on the development of the modern age, in particular modern Europe. According to his thesis, mediaeval man saw himself only in terms of society. Modern man's awareness of himself as an individual first emerged only in the Renaissance because that era held individuality in greater esteem.

History of Greek Culture (published posthumously 1898-1902)

The four-volume History of Greek Culture is not structured as a chronological series of events and facts. Rather, it concentrates on the social developments and forces behind the events. Burckhardt was also one of the first to break with the idealist view of ancient Greece by drawing as realistic a picture as possible. By criticizing eminent figures - including Pericles and Plato - he was able to demonstrate the uniqueness of the ancient Greeks' achievements more convincingly than ever.

Force and Freedom: Reflections on History (published posthumously 1905)

The second major work of Burckhardt's later years dealt with fundamental questions of the philosophy of history. Unlike Hegel and Marx, who sought to construct theories to explain all history, culminating in the "end of history itself", Burckhardt sought to identify in historical developments those elements that were constant and typical of all ages.

The heart of his thesis is the "three great powers, state, religion and culture". The historical powers state and religion preserve the stability of ways of life and claim absolute validity. If necessary, they will use coercion and violence to support their power. Culture, in contrast, offers a space in which man can move freely. State, culture and religion are in constant interaction and have shaped epochs differently. Culture was the determining power in ancient Athens or in Florence in the Renaissance. The religion of Christianity replaced the late-Roman state and dominated the culture of the Middle Ages. The absolutist state seeks to extend its tyranny to all aspects of culture. The modern centralized state feels threatened by the growing power of technology and industry.

Burckhardt studied not only periods of very gradual development, but also the "accelerated processes", the "crises of history": mass migrations of peoples, "uprisings of classes and castes", events such as the Reformation and the French Revolution. He noted that crises sweep away rigid forms of state and religion to make room for the emergence of new forms, pointing out at the same time the danger of a reversal into terror or militarism.

Finally, Burckhardt questioned the role of fortune and misfortune in the history of the world. He was sceptical about any idea that holds out promise of a better society, be it a political utopia, heightened national greatness, economic expansion or the security of civilization. Unlike many of his contemporaries, who saw history exclusively as so-called progress from one epoch to the next, Burckhardt was not blind to the "defeated forces, that were perhaps nobler and better".

Chronology

1818	Jacob Burckhardt, the son of a pastor, was born on May 25 in Basel.
1837 - 1843	Studied theology, history and art history at the Universities of Basel, Berlin and Bonn.
1843	Visited Paris, where he came into contact with French and Spanish art.
1844 - 1845	Lecturer in history at the University of Basel while working as a correspondent for the Basler Zeitung.
1846 - 1848	Visited Rome. Last lengthy visit to Berlin. New editions of his teacher Franz Kugler's textbooks of art history.
1848 - 1852	Lecturer in Basel.
1853 - 1854	Journey through the art centres of Italy which laid the foundation for The Cicerone.
1855 - 1858	Lecturer in art history at the Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich.
1858 - 1893	Held the chair of history and art history at the University of Basel. He travelled regularly, mainly in Italy and France. In 1872 he was offered chairs in Tübingen and Berlin, the latter as successor to his teacher, Leopold von Ranke, both of which he declined.
1897	Jacob Burckhardt died on August 8 in Basel.