

Richard Clay on iconoclasm

Richard talks about his research into iconoclasm

Duration: 3:14mins.

I'm Dr Richard Clay. I'm a Senior Lecturer in the Department of History of Art at the University of Birmingham and am also the co-director of the Heritage and Cultural Learning hub. My research is very diverse. Some of my research is about 18th century visual cultures, but I've also published on contemporary jewelry, and the current project that I'm lead investigator on, funded by the AHRC and working with the University of Birmingham Special Collections, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, Birmingham City Archives, focusses on the suburban history of Birmingham.

But actually most of my research is focussed on 18th century and early 19th century visual cultures, but as an art historian I take perhaps a slightly unusual angle on this in that what I'm really interested in is the destruction of art. What I research is iconoclasm during the French Revolutionary decade following 1793, and I look at what it is and how it is that people break, alter and destroy art objects. Some of them religious, some of them royal, perhaps some of them revolutionary. Unlike some of the historians of this subject I don't view this as vandalism. Vandalism was a word that was actually coined during the French Revolution to describe iconoclasm, coined by people who oppose iconoclasm. By referring to iconoclasts and vandals they are comparing them to the tribes who sacked ancient Rome - the tribe that was and still is called barbarian. I don't call iconoclasts vandals as I don't think they are barbarians. I think that they actually understand art in very sophisticated ways, and they use modification of it as a way of mediating complex power struggles that they are very very passionate about.

We of course now-days find this treatment of art as problematic. But we're a museum-going generation who have been brought up to think about art's value in particular ways. The people of the 18th century didn't think of art in the same manner. They learned about art objects - their meanings, their values, their functions - in free Catholic primary schools classes. As a result if they thought an object was religiously or politically not valuable or was actually controversial and they didn't like what it stood for, they were far less inclined to respect its physical integrity than we would be. Whilst there were art connoisseurs, art experts and artists at the time like us, actually that wasn't the dominant way of thinking about art. The ways in which we think about art today have come a very long way since the 18th century. So, rather than condemning iconoclasts as ignorant barbarians, what I seek to do is explore the way they saw the world and saw art differently to us.