In the late twentieth century, whether by choice or by circumstance, many men and women find no place for themselves in academe, and yet they wish to pursue their scholarly work and publish it as "independent scholars." They send their writings to book publishers and journals, where they may be received with varying degrees of respect because they lack the cachet of an academic affiliation. Surely their "independence" has a honorable history.

"Scholarship is the art of understanding, explaining, and restoring the literary tradition. It originated as a separate intellectual discipline in the third century before Christ through the efforts of poets to preserve and to use their literary heritage, the 'classics.' So scholarship actually arose as 'classical' scholarship" (Rudolf Pfeiffer, History of Classical Scholarship, Oxford, 1968, 3). Precedents for the scholarly enterprise go back to earlier attempts to interpret Homer on the part of Greek poets, dramatists, and historians in terms applicable to the proper conduct of human affairs. This artistic and critical effort was further refined by the Greek philosophers, especially by Aristotle and his school, who extended the range of scholarly interests and critical writing beyond literature to encompass history, art, anthropology, and the natural sciences. Soon enough these part-time scholars began to gather in institutions dedicated to learning, criticism, and science, such as the Great Library in Alexandria. In coming together in Alexandria, Pergamon, and Athens, scholars began to lose their independence, becoming professionalized and academic, and thus increasingly dependent on the positive reception of their work by patrons, administrators, and other scholars. Scholarship became institutionalized; the directions and modes of research were increasingly codified; the quality of scholarly production and the language of its exposition were more and more judged by the standards set by the academy.

Roman scholarly writers, such as Marcus Varro and Pliny the Elder, were the prosaic heirs of this Hellenistic tradition; both were encyclopedists, and, characteristically, Pliny inserted his annalist treatment of the history of Greek art into his discussion of the exploitation of metals, ores, minerals, colored earths, and stones in Books 54–36 of his Natural History. Both Varro and Pliny were traditional Roman careerists, active in military service, and they began their scholarly activities as learned amateurs. Yet, in Pfeiffer’s sense of the term, a truly informed scholarly interest pervaded Roman poetry, most markedly in the richly allusive works of Horace, Virgil, and Ovid, whose knowledge of Greek literature and of the Alexandrian critical tradition is well known. With the possible exception of Varro, who ended his days as Caesar’s librarian in Rome, none of these Roman writers would have thought of themselves primarily as scholars, since they were members of the Roman upper classes and academics were not. Their status, and of many others who followed them in the Roman world, was that of an independent person with scholarly interests, resembling in many ways the well-established scholar-poet/artist/bureaucrat of traditional Chinese culture.

Scholarship of the encyclopedist variety persisted throughout the Middle Ages, as critical interpretation and analysis were largely devoted to the explication of religious texts and the law. It was, however, those great Italian men of letters Petrarch and Boccaccio who revived the tradition of the Alexandrian scholar-poets in the fourteenth century. They set the course of literary scholarship that would be followed by generations of independent-minded Renaissance humanists, culminating in the great Dutch, French, and English scholars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, such as Erasmus, Scaliger, and Bentley. With the rise of the university in modern times, scholars and scholarship in the humanities have become increasingly academic, and especially so after the model reconstitution of the German universities by Wilhelm von Humboldt early in the nineteenth century. If the academic environment energizes scholarly activity because it brings together a critical mass of scholars, supports their teaching and research, and encourages them to publish, it also tends to force some degree of conformity upon them, shaped by the expectations of the institution and the social demands of professional colleagueship. Yet, in the eighteenth century, when scholars were already gravitating toward the university, three of the most important and influential scholars of the time were wholly independent of the academy in spirit, if not in fact: Edward Gibbon, a gentleman and the first modern historian; Giambattista Vico, a neglected Neapolitan professor, whose Sciencia nuova revolutionized modern historiography; and Johann Joachim Winckelmann, a librarian, private secretary, and the first modern art historian.

I could go on to list scholars of the past two centuries who were independent of mind, often independent of means, and sometimes unaffiliated with academic institutions, who produced seminal works of scholarship, even in the history of art. Given this honorable tradition, it is the practice of The Art Bulletin to consider all submissions without regard to the academic status of the contributor, because it is the quality of the submission, not the institutional status of the contributor, that counts. Surely, all scholars should be much encouraged by Vico’s final remarks in his Autobiography (1731):

He however blessed all these adversities as so many occasions for withdrawing to his desk, as his high impregnable citadel, to meditate and to write further works which he was wont to call “so many acts of vengeance against his detractors.” These finally led him to the discovery of his New Science. And when he had written this work, enjoying life, liberty and honor, he held himself more fortunate than Socrates. . . (The Autobiography of Giambattista Vico, trans. M.H. Fisch and T.G. Bergin, Ithaca, 1963, 200).

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Editorial: The Return of the Independent Scholar