Chapter VI

Different but Compatible Ends*

Two sets of impulses have led to what we call now, probably not very accurately, the history of art. One set is the universal human tendency to order and classify whatever is known. Within the immense mass of knowable materials some are artefacts made by man and primarily perceived visually. They range from the flints strewn around by our paleolithic ancestors to the now abandoned (or about to be) huge steel mills of the industrialized world and the contents of a grandmother's attic or of a museum's storeroom. In order to deal with these "things," a large number of methods and techniques for definition, description, classification, restoration, preservation and presentation have been developed. Used properly, these techniques can handle all those remains from the distant past or from the creativity of the last decade which are (or can be made) part of our collective and individual visual experience and which often foster considerable pride of possession among individuals or communities.

The multiplication of primarily taxonomic techniques is as amazing as the range of objects or built ensembles to which they are applied. Dozens of specialties accompany field archaeology, for centuries the exclusive retrieval technique for lost or hidden artefacts. The archival functions of keeping, protecting and presenting documents no longer consist in labeling storage boxes or hanging pictures. Dendrochronology or codicology are just two of the more or less indispensable tools for the classification of objects or of the built environment. The traditional "eye" of the connoisseur requires the support of microphotography and the chemical analyses of materials, just as most physicians begin a diagnosis by taking blood samples. And all these specialized techniques are used for so many different sets of artefacts that the term "work of art" has become either meaningless or applicable to every thing made by man.

The objectives suggested by this set of impulses are all derived from the material attributes of whatever man has made and, ultimately and in a slightly caricaturized form, they are the perfect fiche, the barcoded label which contains all one could wish to know about whatever one happens to

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see. We can only speculate on what led men and women to this passion for ordering things, but the parallel with the natural and physical sciences during their own classification periods is obvious. The main difference between Linnean or Mendeleevian achievements and those of art historians is the assumption (or conclusion) of the categorical and topological finiteness of the natural world as opposed to the infinite number of human creations available from the past and being made continuously just about everywhere. This is one of several reasons why the taxonomic task of the art historian is never completed and never will be. The specifics of this particular argument need more elaboration than can be given to it in this essay, but the objective of a complete [397] mapping such as seems possible to biologists cannot be extended to the remains of human material creation.

The second set of impulses is the complex human practice of reacting to what is seen by engaging in various forms of behavior (moving left or right, stopping, going, praying, crying, laughing), by feeling various forms of pleasure or even pain, and by evaluating or even judging whatever is perceived according to spelled-out or subsumed rules and canons. Whereas the first set of impulses leads to ways of description and of identification, often very sophisticated ones, applied to objects which are "out there," the second set is a human response modifying, at times transforming, the user or observer, the "receiver" of the object. Many variations, at times incompatible ones, exist within this set of impulses as well. There is the simpleminded but quite common "I know what I like," with theoretically total freedom of judgment and an implication of aesthetic anarchy. As elaborated in some of Bakhtin's literary studies and caricatured in Woody Allen's "Kugelmass machine," there is also a transformation of the observer by the object and then, eventually, the transmission of that transformation to the object itself. There is a sensory, even sensuous, reaction which can lead to the need for exclusive possession of whatever one loves and enjoys or, more prosaically, to what used to be called "art appreciation." There are several intellectual constructs or grids, Marxism for instance, which have become, for some, a necessary filter for any reaction to things made and which always lead to a judgment, a verdict of some sort, about objects. There are several psychological impulses, for instance the recognition of deep-seated commonalities between disparate forms like circles, the Golden Mean, frontality, symmetry or color patterns.

The central feature of this set of impulses lies in the making of choices within the mass of classified or classifiable material. Even if eventually justified in terms of allegedly objective criteria of description pertaining to the objects themselves, these choices are always inspired, probably even necessitated, by emotional, psychological, sociological or other characteristics of men and women looking at things or using them, not of the things made by them. If the ideal fiche is the ultimate aim of the first set of impulses, a judgment of love – acceptance or rejection, possession or worship, even, at

possible and occasionally actual extremes, destruction and hate – is the outcome of the second one.

Obviously enough, the two sets do not operate independently of each other. Many approaches – Gombrich's "matching and making;" the binary opposites sought and never found by proponents of the *anciens* and the *modernes* in Western Europe, China, or Japan, as well as by structuralists in more recent times; the various theories of mediation appearing off and on over the past two hundred years; the identification of canons and types – require or imply some sort of interaction between the two. The first set identifies something as fifteenth-century and French; the second one seeks to define the "Frenchness" of certain works of art or compares fifteenth-century French and Persian creations. The two sets need each other. While precision and completeness focused on an artefact are central to the first one, choice of operative attributes becomes typical of the second.

The important conclusion to be derived from the two processes of knowledge I am suggesting is that every object, every work of art, once described and, so to speak, measured in terms of its material "vital statistics," stands at the intersection of two different, if not divergent, histories. One is its *pre*-history, that is to say, everything that went into its being whatever it was at the moment of its first appearance to be used or seen. It includes its techniques of manufacture, the social and cultural contexts which affected it, the practices and aims of its artists, the ambitions and resources of its patrons, the models it used, and the identification of its time and place. Nearly every conclusion or statement within these categories of analysis can, at least in theory, be reached logically, rationally and objectively, in the sense that such statements and most of such conclusions are true or false within existing evidence and can be modified by new evidence.

Then there is a *post*-history. It begins with the first reaction of the first person to see something or to use it. Abbot Suger or Salon and exhibition critics may have been affected by all they knew or guessed about the pre-history of whatever they saw, but their most significant response lay in their opinions and interpretations projected onto the works with which they dealt. Such opinions and interpretations are reactions to something seen which are neither necessary nor exclusive to the understanding of these works. Their range depends as much on the viewer as on the object. The scholar may tend to see primarily the pre-history of any object, to be constantly reminded of what preceded it and of what "looks like" it. The lover of pattern and of color will interpret icons differently from the ways of the deep believer. The formalist will see abstractions and designs where a specialist may uncover iconophoric meanings. The psychologist sees hidden implication, and the publicist or the politician argues for the expression of national, ethnic or spiritual values eternally associated with certain things and monuments. An almost infinite number of post-historical discourses are possible, as every generation, every subculture, and many individuals will

always continue to reinterpret human creations according to their own needs and impulses, and to react to them, even to love them, anew, if differently. The finiteness and the theoretically logical rigor of pre-history are replaced in post-history by the immense, constantly changing, and in some sense cumulative wealth of human taste and emotions. Past and present are engaged in a continuous dialogue in which the scientific or absolute truth about something is less important than the satisfaction of a need or yearning which I will call, reluctantly, the aesthetic impulse. As it is usually not encumbered by the immensely varied technical, linguistic and cultural necessities for any sort of contextual or pre-historic analysis, this impulse allows for all those who feel the need visually, regardless of their learning or sophistication, to express their thoughts, pleasure or emotions. The only constriction on them is that of the power and effectiveness of their ability or desire to communicate.

Why be reluctant to call this impulse "aesthetic"? The main reason is that attitudes toward or doctrines about beauty – whether formal or informal, philosophical or sensory – are only one component of that impulse. Others are pride of possession, ethnic or national glory, patriotic rights to ownership, intellectual or technological functions in many [398] kinds of arguments, personal memories and associations. Literary or political examples of all these strands are easy to provide, but they are only involved with "aesthetics" to the extent that the absence of a reaction to seen artefacts would have made them impossible. The point, however, needs a much longer elaboration, as we seem to be better informed on how we see than on why we react in so many different ways to whatever we see.

There are, then, two different histories of art. One, based on a deep instinct for the ordering of experience, is focused on the discovery and expression of demonstrable truths. The other, issuing from more diffuse "aesthetic" impulses, satisfies immediate needs or reflects deep-seated psychic and emotional drives. It is at times expressed in poetic or philosophically abstruse language, it is occasionally passing and trendy, and it may simply restate in current terms well-known and well-honed truths. Its values are its immediacy, its relevance to current life, and especially its continuous ability to enrich the potential for meaning of anything made by man. These values are added to the artefact and become part of its message and of its factual truth.

The vehicles for scholarship or information about both histories are also varied in kind. Pre-historians have developed a whole range of journals, meetings, colloquiums and associations which, no doubt, contribute to knowledge and help in professional networking. Yet they make exchanges between subfields more difficult, if not impossible, as subtle professional and intellectual segregations and hierarchies render some fields and some topics more accessible and more magisterial than others. As a result, the isolation of often significant thought and information increases, even as the possibility of access to them is being revolutionized by new technologies.

The vehicles of learning in post-history are at the same time omnipresent and elusive. Post-historical attitudes dominate the art criticism of the press, both mass and restricted, which is compelled to make choices in coverage and easily finds solace in conscious or unconscious trendiness. Such attitudes also occur in a specialized critical press with shifting alliances. With a few notable exceptions here and there, they are absent from the journals and magazines which reflect the academic and intellectual concerns of the profession.

Does this analysis lead to thoughts or suggestions about what to do? Can it help to formulate a program, to establish hierarchies of needs in such vital problems as jobs, grants, rewards, fellowships of all sorts, teaching, exhibitions? Should we seek, for instance, ways of matching pre- and post-historical endeavors?

The last is, I submit, impossible. The main reasons are obvious. The growth of specialized knowledge in pre-history is such that no one is able any longer to control information and scholarship in traditional fields like medieval, Baroque, or Islamic, even Spanish medieval, Italian Baroque, or Iranian Islamic. The Western European and New York to Los Angeles parochialism of most nineteenth- and twentieth-century historical studies is evident to anyone who has traveled in the rest of the world and inquired about local artistic interests and activities. The linguistic breadth necessary to the proper pursuit of any one of the established fields and subfields is beyond the capacity of most scholars and critics who have not devoted themselves to that field.

Post-history is equally impossible to grasp as a whole. Only in architecture is it a recognized aspect of studies, as the nature of the medium compels repairs, changes and rehabilitation with or without variations in function. It is partly established as an independent history of taste where it is closely tied to literature, music, fashion and the like, but only where a regional Western centrism reigns and the upper classes dominate. Matters are not any easier if we consider the critical scene. We all partake of contemporary cultural trends, and a few practitioners of scholarship have been able to appropriate gender concerns involving half of humanity. But the new tastes in China and India (well over half of humanity) or the films and television series which are the primary visual culture of 80 percent of humanity are hardly automatic parts of the intellectual or emotional makeup prevalent in the profession. If pre-history is being strangled by necessary specialization, post-history is only too often vacuous for its dependency on passing associations and on relationships to ever-changing forms of social snobbery.

On the whole, however, professional self-flagellation, expressions of anguished anger at the tasks left undone and at lack of appropriate recognition for this or that topic, or sighs of hopelessness are not very useful activities. It may be more fruitful to consider and debate propositions formulating acceptable priorities for the profession and to suggest directives for the

formation of the coming generation of men and women inspired by passion for the visual arts. There are, I would argue, three established "objects" of art history, somewhat arbitrarily isolated here for purposes of argument. One is to describe and to define what something is – a neolithic flint, Chartres, the Sistine Chapel, or a set of dresses from the 1920s. The second is to explain how and why something came to be what it is at the time and in the place where it happened to appear. The third is to evaluate artefacts according to their fate after their creation whether through intrinsic modifications as with architecture, through changes in use, or through the endless expression of judgments about them. Over a lifetime, any one individual may indulge, willfully or not and more or less successfully, in all three of these objectives. But it is essential to reiterate that each one of them is a form of knowledge requiring different, if at times shared, competencies. Each one of the latter tends to become a secluded kingdom inaccessible to all but faithful knights and attendants with the right credentials.

The task facing us all is to find the practical and especially the intellectual means to share knowledge and passions without sacrificing the quality of either. There may well, then, be a fourth "object" of art history, which is to discover or develop the mediating ways that could make the immensity of specialized knowledge accessible to all. We cannot any longer rely on the paradigms of one hundred years ago which neglected three-quarters or more of humanity and then half of all human beings within the remaining quarter. And the abstractions which engaged most of us over the past thirty or forty years turned out to be too theoretical for the concreteness and immediacy of the art historian's experience. A world of visual forms without a finite number of [399] phonemes could not be handled by the linguistic, structuralist and even semiotic ways developed separately from visual experiences and adapted too rapidly to a very special mode of knowledge and communication. The search for this fourth objective may well have to be the main "object" of the profession over the decades to come, if we are to avoid the maintenance of existing independent intellectual baronies and the constant creation of new ones.

Or, perhaps, we may argue that, in a world of expanding technologies of information, the potential increase in the availability of data and of images is so staggering that new and unexpected visual connections will be possible, in fact are being made, without access to, or even need of, the "objective" definitions and data central to the traditional scholarly discourse. Buddhas and Christs will appear at requests for images of holiness, Inca textiles and Matisse paintings will react to a query on color patterns, the Alhambra and the Parthenon will respond to the Golden Mean. The object of art history will, then, be only one of labeling as simply as possible artefacts emerging into visual experience for reasons other than historical. At this stage, the object of the professional man and woman will become an ethical one. It will not be the traditional ethics of selling or buying, stealing or borrowing,

but the deeper ethics of the limits to be given to knowledge. In a world where more is available than can be known and understood, the reasons why we choose to know one thing over another are conscious or unconscious moral choices. The elaboration of an ethic of aesthetic impulses can lift the mass of mundane engineering techniques overwhelming the humanities to a level of debate which can do justice to the physical joy and the intellectual or emotional excitement all historians of art feel in front of man's unending creativity.