

## Chapter III

### On the Universality of the History of Art\*

The difficulties of writing about the methodology of the history of art are many: fear of being obvious, obscure or doctrinaire; reluctance to raise fundamental issues when established ways seem perfectly acceptable within the academy; a confusing tendency to borrow without reflection from fields such as anthropology or literature in which debates on intellectual procedures and interpretations are livelier; and the absence of a collectively accepted statement of what the history of the visual arts is supposed to be. Yet there is little doubt that, at nearly all levels – in undergraduate courses, meetings of contemporary artists, or august academic gatherings – the field of art history is seething with questions and concerns about its aims and its ways. What follows is neither a profession of faith nor a confession of sins, even if there are in it elements of both, but rather a tentative meditation on one issue, that of the intellectual and conceptual unity of a field of study, with the hope of stimulating further thought and discussion. Four observations serve as starting points for this meditation.

The first is that the range of visual experiences offered to the historian of art, the museum and gallery buff, and the buyer or peruser of art books has, over the past two decades, increased dramatically. Without special effort and excluding exhibitions of contemporary art, I recall during the last two or three years seeing (directly or through catalogs) exhibitions on Courbet, Munch, Pissarro, Picasso, Rodin, Piranesi, Palladio, Ruisdael, Chinese painting, the Mamluks, the Mughals, excavations in China, Alexander the Great, Russian costume, Oceanic ritual objects, the art of Costa Rica, hermeticism, realism, the fourteenth century in France, the Polaroid transfiguration of Raphael, Berenson, the art of Central Asia, American furniture, treasures from the Kremlin, and at least three private collections shown publicly. This astounding, even though randomly recalled, range has several characteristics pertinent to my topic. One is the variety of historical periods and geographical areas involved. Another is that, even though the traditional “high” medium of painting predominates, many of these exhibitions deal, in part if not in entirety, with what used to be called minor

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or decorative arts, and some with reproducible substitutes such as photographs or books. A third characteristic is that although some of these exhibitions tend to completeness (corpus of an artist's creativity, total information about a time or a place), others consist of some sort of selection (a collection, a period, an organizer's whim); the logic of the first type needs no explanation, but there are questions about the second type, as frequently the expressed or hidden reasons for the choices (availability of objects, taste of collector or curator, extent of funds gathered for a show, publicity for a country or a person, among many others) are nearly as interesting as the exhibition itself; in other words, something external to the objects shown is the real justification for the show. The fourth characteristic is that most of these exhibitions are presented in attractive settings, perpetuated in slick catalogs, announced by elaborate press releases, covered in popular journals, and visited by dutifully recorded masses of men, women and children.

My second observation is that it is much more difficult to recall a comparable number of books and articles read with pleasure, profit and excitement during the same period. The intellectual content of most exhibition catalogs is almost never as high as the quality of the exhibition itself and examples of follow-up volumes publishing the deliberations of a symposium or of some other event connected with an exhibition are far too rare. The major professional journals shared by all art historians do not reflect the tremendous extension of the contemporary visual experience but concentrate on frequently excellent studies dealing with the art of Western Europe from Late Antiquity to the end of the nineteenth century. The methodological and conceptual range of these articles oscillates within narrow limits consisting of patronage at one end and attribution at the other, and includes technique, iconography, literary or artistic sources, chronology, and individual or period style. In reality what has happened to writing on the history of art is much more complicated. Alongside the frequently national organs of the institutionalized history of art there has grown a host of specialized periodicals, series and concerns. Some are devoted to specific areas or periods; this type developed first for Classical and Oriental art and has now spread to cover nearly every country and subject. Others are centered on a mass of "isms," "ics," or "logies," some technical, such as those dealing with codicology, dendrology, dendrochronology, archaeometry and glass studies, some theoretical and ideological, such as those dealing with criticism, Marxism, structuralism and semiotics. One reason, therefore, for the paucity of exciting writing about art is that, in contrast to the immediacy of negative or positive (or whatever else) response to the visual experience of exhibitions, the intellectual response to art is hamstrung by an overload of technical, ideological and specialized information, frequently in languages inaccessible to many scholars and to most of the public. But, in a deeper sense, it is as though the mind can no longer process the festival offered to the eye. Or, rather, it is the formal, written expression of thinking that is failing, for

[282] nearly all of us can recall exciting colloquia, arguments and discussions or spontaneous exchanges around a lecture or an object.

My third observation derives from my experience of museums and universities outside of the Western world and the Soviet Union. One consistent feature of these frequently very lively institutions is the absence of Western art. Janson's *History of Art* and the Pelican series are not on the shelves of libraries; there are no darkened copies of Raphael and Hobbema, no third-rate Italian paintings, no nineteenth-century landscapes or genre paintings. What is missing is the set of images, however secondary, and the group of books, however basic, out of which emerge the principles of the classical history of art. On the other hand, the growth of national consciousness, the awareness of a specific cultural and aesthetic past, a new sensitivity to the individual's own visual experience, and, in many areas, an active contemporary artistic creativity have created a world that can no longer be satisfied with aesthetic or critical me-too-ism. It is no longer enough to say that mosques are comparable to cathedrals or that there is a Chinese or Japanese mannerism. What is required of the historian is to discover the national or ethnic culturally discrete meanings of a certain kind of visual language rather than to integrate those meanings within an allegedly universal system, because such a system is often seen as being culturally restricted, if not, in fact, a tool of cultural imperialism. The history of art required by new countries in old worlds is not one that relates them to the West but one that proclaims their differences.

My last observation is more personal, or perhaps generational. Those among us, in the 1950s and 1960s, who specialized in the art of Asia or Africa were for the most part trained in Western art. We more or less accepted as a truth that the linear progression of Italian art from the fourteenth century to the seventeenth was paradigmatic of all artistic developments, but we believed, at least in retrospect, that the establishment of Italian art of the Renaissance and Baroque periods as a paradigm was merely an accident of educational and academic circumstances and that other circumstances would have given this privilege to Sung or Mughal art. The day would come, some of us thought, when introductions to the history of art would be based on any artistic tradition and when African sculpture or Persian miniatures would help us to understand Bernini and Titian. This expectation was not realized, but the assumptions that led to it – for instance that an attribution to Rembrandt requires the same method as one to Sultan Muhammad – still remain, thereby implying a universal history or universal approach to the history of art.

These simple and simplified observations derive from the wealth of written, spoken and visual activities around the art of nearly everyone's past made available nearly everywhere in the Western world and from new expectations on the part of students, scholars and a wider public everywhere in the world. They lead to rather complex questions. Is the extension of the visual range

available in exhibitions a gimmick of museums and galleries or is it the instinctive or thoughtful reflection of new interests and concerns? How can one cope with the plethora of subdivisions within the history of art or of apparently ancillary subfields? Is the history of art as presently practiced adequate to meet the challenge of dealing with the art of the whole world? Is it correct to assume that there exists a single cluster of approaches that can be defined as the appropriate intellectual and methodological tools for research and discourse on the history of art? In short, is there a universal history of art and, if so, is it the one evolved in the early decades of the twentieth century and refined since then?

It would require many discussions, debates and learned or theoretical disquisitions to answer these questions properly. I shall limit myself to sketching two models that seem to me possible in view of the vibrancy of activities around the arts of many times and many places and the apparent inadequacy of the ways we have to deal with them.

The first model is a centrifugal one and may easily be seen as the result of the very successes of art history. Its premise is that the scope and depth of available information, of the tools of research and interpretation, of the areas or periods available in museums and galleries all over the world, and of the expectations of students or of the general public have reached the stage where the general theories and methods issued from ancient, Mediterranean and post-Renaissance Europe are no longer adequate, except perhaps for the subfields in which they were created. Each subfield is, therefore, bound to develop its own approaches, its own methods, its own technical vocabulary, its own set of needs. These subfields could be territorial (the art of Spain), cultural (Buddhist art), social (the art of the bourgeoisie), technical (bronzes or textiles), methodological (patronage), conceptual (semiotics), or any number of other varieties. In other words, there is no doubt about the universality of an activity called art, but there cannot be a universal history of art, because the range of epistemological and psychological needs and expectations has become unmanageable. Our field would go the way of the sciences, where the traditional physics, chemistry and biology have spawned biochemistry, physical chemistry, optics, cellular biology, immunology and many other separate areas of endeavor. This development need not be bad; it could be a very healthy morphogenesis, provided that the administrative structure of our institutions recognizes these changes, as it has done in the natural and physical sciences, and does not treat emerging subfields like stepchildren, as has been the case with archaeology, shunted from anthropology to classics, Near Eastern studies or art history.

It is rather interesting to note that museums, which have a responsibility for everything from the upkeep of artefacts to making them available at all social and intellectual levels, have quite naturally subdivided into departments that reflect the needs of our time; conservation, education and installation are now equal in importance, if not at times superior, to curatorial

connoisseurship. Furthermore, curatorial departments are themselves organized into intellectually reasonable units (Ancient Near East, textiles), even if that practice is still often flawed. Colleges and universities are much more conservative and far less imaginative in their curriculum and procedures than museums have been in their exhibitions and organization: the providers of practical tools, slide librarians for instance, hardly count in departmental deliberations, and professors of Islamic art still have the right to decide on the qualifications of instructors in contemporary American art.

Regardless of how the field would be structured in practice, the point of this model is to recognize that there is by now a very wide range of valid intellectual and methodological subdivisions in the history of art, that these subdivisions need their autonomy in order to grow effectively, and that the assumption of a universal history of art is at best a remnant from another age, at worst a cultural anchor which keeps the field permanently moored. Perhaps, just as statistics and a certain level of mathematical proficiency are required of all physical and biological scientists, there are some areas of proficiency – languages, techniques of making buildings or etchings, possibly philosophical discourse – that would be expected of all historians of whatever art they study.

The second model is less diffuse in its ultimate objective, which is to maintain the unity of the field of art history, but is at present unclear in its procedure. The reason for the lack of clarity is that this model's objective, instead of acknowledging and accepting the autonomy of separate fields, requires rethinking the functions of the history of art. This rethinking must occur simultaneously at two levels.

There is a technical level, which involves the means of transmitting and sharing information. Its challenge lies, on the one hand, in the creation of more thorough, more rapid and more accessible ways of becoming aware of data, ideas and scholarship [283] than exist through our system of selective book reviews, bibliographical repertoires and libraries. On the other hand, its challenge is the pedagogical one of introductory courses, visual materials and textbooks. In all these pedagogical efforts, the tendency to find common denominators has led to a lack of recognition of the intellectual frontiers of the field. Integrating these frontiers into the elementary teaching and vocabulary of the field rather than perennially returning to the concerns and terms developed during the first third of the twentieth century should be an exciting challenge.

Logically, however, pedagogical integration must rely on a second level, which is one of conceptual integration. There is no way of escaping the centrifugal reality I have described earlier, just as there is no way of avoiding the pressures of expanded exhibitions, easy travel, mass media accounts, and a cosmopolitan curiosity demanding explanations and interpretations for nearly everything shaped by man at any time. These explanations, furthermore, must satisfy the stringent criteria of scholarship, the strivings for

national or cultural identity, and the intellectual or sensuous potential of many different audiences. It is only through the development of an accepted set of theoretical issues that operate like so many filters over works of art or groups of objects and buildings that a conceptual integration that would satisfy the conflicting expectations and centrifugal pulls of the field can be achieved.

In order to define these issues, it is essential to clarify the central distinction between synchronic and diachronic (or diatopical, i.e., across space) meanings. The traditional and well-honed techniques of stylistic and iconographic analysis tend, in most cases, to define the synchronic significance of a work of art; their success requires the full use of a mass of data, access to which is restricted to specialists. But whatever synchronic meaning is established must also be provided with its diachronic or diatopical dimensions in two ways. One lies in the continuing meaning of a monument over the centuries or in its relation to other monuments of the same period in different places. The other way is the extent to which the synchronic explanation of a work of art helps in identifying an abstract issue of the functions of art. For example, there is a continuing meaning of Raphael's paintings through time which is not identical with their meaning in the early sixteenth century. Similarly, it is possible to look at Raphael and Behzad together if the argument can be made that there was an early sixteenth-century link between Italy and Iran. Finally, Behzad's or Raphael's paintings are documents for patronage, representation of nature, ideological ferment, and dozens of other issues that are outside the parameters of synchronic or diachronic meanings of works of art. It is the responsibility of every scholar and teacher equipped and trained for synchronic judgments and interpretations to identify the value of whatever monument or topic is studied within this larger net of issues.

It is premature even to try to make a list of these issues and it is in fact likely that, as they are discussed, they will develop their own sets of criteria and definitions. But two of them strike me as being so fundamental and so essential that, by their very nature, they imply the existence of universal principles for the history of art. One is the issue of perception. It is in part a purely physiological question of how one sees, but obviously it is much more important in its psychological, social and intellectual complexity since it leads to nearly all the judgments we make about works of art. It is an issue that is centered on man, on the receiver of the visual message. The other issue is centered on the object and resides in its structure, in its components. In recent years, it has been fashionable to seek in semiology the ways to unravel the structure of a work of art or of an artefact. The assumption has been that, however concretely a subject is represented or however obviously a building compels a human behavior, the manner in which recognition, interpretation, appreciation and use are conveyed can be stated in generalized terms. In other words, *Monsieur Bertin* and Hagia Sophia are in fact a

combination of abstract and largely arbitrary signs that communicate a message, and the ways in which these signs operate are independent of the portrait of an important gentleman in the 1820s or of the Byzantine conception of an imperial church. The difficulties encountered so far with semiological analyses have come from the fact that the formulation of the problems and the terminological definitions have been derived wholesale from other disciplines rather than coming from the historian's own experience with the visual arts.

The essential point is that perception and sign structure presuppose a universal relationship between man and his visual experience. Whether this universality only obtains at a level of obvious generality that would make it almost useless still remains to be seen. But, even if further research and thinking should end up with an elementary or very limited area of universality in the arts, a collective process of thinking about sign structure would accomplish two things. One is that the pernicious and elitist hierarchy of genres and of artistic traditions which still rules the world of art historians, but not that of museum-goers, would be replaced by the more generous and more historically valid position that, even if we like some things better than others, the needs fulfilled by art are equally shared by all men. The other accomplishment is that the increasingly specialized and endless subdivisions of research and knowledge may find their epistemological umbrella in the systemic concerns of the end of the twentieth century, instead of in the classical, biblical or aesthetic culture of an earlier generation. Later generations will discover their own needs and questions.

The true advantage of my second model, however unfocused it may be, is that it reflects the essential reality of dealing with the arts, which is that, whether knowledgeable or not, we all react to human creations. Thousands of people visit museums, buy art books, and go to the most esoteric exhibitions with a passion which is comparable to what happens with music but not with literature. It is the historian's task to provide and develop the intellectual terms and sensual choices that can help us to understand the arts of the past and perhaps those of today. (In my view, at least, the issue of contemporary art is a very different one since it deals with the dynamics of our own cultures rather than with historical periods whose production has been completed, although it continues to fascinate and to be seen in constantly new ways.) But the successful accomplishment of this task demands a special effort. My first model may end up by becoming *de facto* the model of our time, because its objectives are clear, its techniques are known, and its institutional setting is nearly in place.

