

Svetlana Alpers

4. Style Is What You Make It: The Visual Arts Once Again

To ask an art historian to speak on the subject of style is to expect something straight from the horse's mouth. Even when the topic is not set, colleagues in the other humanistic disciplines assembled (to take a typical academic situation) for a qualifying examination will turn to the art historian as the acknowledged bearer of, definer of, style. "How would you describe the style of the baroque lyric in France," or "Could you comment on the development of the German baroque drama?" The questions are put to the student, but the professor of French or German looks across at the art historian for confirmation. We know the answers, for it is we who set, who validated, the questions.

It is at moments like these that I begin to squirm. And, indeed, I have done a certain amount of squirming in preparing this essay. For the normal invocation of style in art history is a depressing affair indeed. One might prefer, as I have tried in my own writing and teaching, to avoid its terminology altogether: to insist, for example, on teaching Dutch art of the seventeenth century rather than northern baroque; to discuss the nature of some works by Rubens with reference to the relationship between manner and meaning rather than style and content; to avoid questions about the baroque aspects of Rembrandt and turn rather to consider description and narration in his works. Yet the issue (can it really be called a concept?) of style touches on some essential phenomena and—call it *style* or, as I shall suggest, by another name—one surely must deal with them.

Style, as engaged in the study of art, has always had a radically historical bias. It is this that has always impressed, and I think had such an unfortunate effect on, the neighboring humanistic disciplines.

Svetlana Alpers

Musicologists, literary scholars, and historians following the example set by art historians have felt that the nomination of period styles and sub-styles is a more honorific (because it is scientific) activity than the critical appreciation of and interpretation of individual works. The serious implications of this enterprise are hardly suggested by the endless art historical articles and books which multiply stylistic terms—we have baroque, early, high and late, and then early, high, and late baroque realism—in order to denote and group art objects. In the handbooks of art history today the denotative stylistic terms, far from admitting to an historical and aesthetic bias, are treated as attributes of the works or groups of works. Thus it is characteristic in art historical discourse to move from the locating of a work in a period style to the analysis of its stylistic (for which read “formal”) components and its iconography (for which read loosely “content” or “meaning”). Categories are developed in the interest of externality and objectivity, freeing the observer from any responsibility for them. These presumably objective categories of large historical classifications are then (silently) treated as aesthetic properties of each object. Style, designated by the art historian, is treated as if it were possessed by each object. Thus presumably denotative terms are made to serve as explanations, are pursued (“In what respects is Rembrandt’s *Blinding of Samson* baroque?”) as leading to the proper interpretation of images.

The most diplomatic yet enthusiastic account of style that we have is the well-known piece by Meyer Schapiro.¹ Its thrust was well summarized by George Kubler when he wrote, “The notion of style has long been the art historian’s principal mode of classing works of art. By style he selects and shapes the history of art.”² The nature of the objects to be studied has much to do with this situation. The speed of the glance with which one can take in the “look” of an image or object contrasts with the time it takes to read through a verbal artifact. There is something immediate, in other words, about the perception of *style* in this formal sense. Added to this is the enormous task the student of art faces in identifying and ordering the objects of his study. Nowhere is this more evident than in the study of societies, such as those studied by Kubler, where artifacts often stand alone

¹Meyer Schapiro, “Style,” in *Aesthetics Today*, ed. Morris Philipson (Cleveland: World, 1961); originally in *Anthropology Today*, ed. A. L. Kroeber (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953).

²George Kubler, “Style and the Representation of Historical Time,” *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 138 (1967): 853. Kubler himself dissents from this view and has continued to do so in his later work.

Style Is What You Make It

without any verbal record. The style of artifacts is not then only taken historically; it itself constitutes the historical sequence. It permits art historians to enter in where students of literature would simply have no place. Finally, and paradoxically, it is not only the fact of our distance but the desire for discriminating possession—the art market, in short—that drives us on in stylistic placing. Often the value of an object depends on assigning it a stylistic identity. This clearly involves treating style as an individual attribute. It is a major problem in classification that is essentially assigned to a group of specialists in the field known as connoisseurs. Even dealing with traditions such as that of Chinese painting, or in media such as prints, where replication rather than origination is the principle of making, the stylistic view looks for the first invention. This validation of primacy in invention, which of course has sources in the West that go much deeper than the whims of the art market, sits awkwardly, it seems to me, with a notion of stylistic ordering by period.

There are certain questions suggested I think by even this cursory summary of the use of style in the practical operations of the study of art. To summarize the conclusions of my last two paragraphs: How, without altering our notion of style, do we get from a frankly external system of style classification to a discourse that posits art objects possessing stylistic features and validates the originator of those features?

Busying themselves with the kind of activities I have just outlined, few art historians would readily agree with E. H. Gombrich's introductory statement to his *Art and Illusion* that "the art historian's trade rests on the conviction once formulated by Wölfflin that 'not everything is possible in every period.'"³ But it is no exaggeration to say that it is just this view of the historical nature of the stylistic problematic that has been the basis for the most serious thinking about style and art. Although Gombrich's quotation from Wölfflin is couched in terms of exclusions (and these are basic to Gombrich's Popperian approach to stylistic phenomena), it speaks to constancies. While there have been different explanations (Wölfflin appealing to the history of vision, Riegl to his ample and ambivalent *Kunstwollen*, Gombrich to making and matching), there has been agreement on locating style in the constancies exhibited by objects within a particular period of time. Pursued single-mindedly, this approach has radical effects on our study of "objects" and "images." I use these terms because even the validation afforded an object by calling it art is here

³E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion* (Princeton: Bollingen, 1960), p. 4.

Svetlana Alpers

called into question. Let us take that issue first: What objects are the proper concern of such an investigation of style, or how do we distinguish art from non-art? In a famous remark, Wölfflin, arguing the stylistic equivalence of a Gothic shoe and a Gothic cathedral, suggested that stylistic constancy extends beyond the range of objects we in the West would normally consider art.⁴ Yet when he writes *Principles of Art History*, Wölfflin restricts himself to what, since the eighteenth century at least, would have been called the fine arts—architecture, sculpture, and painting. There is nothing inherent in the notion of style itself that encourages such distinctions being made. In other words, value—as between various objects made at one time, or between different time spans—is not at all at issue. Finally, such a notion of style skirts the issue of the nature and role of the individual maker and in effect questions the entire notion of authoring or creating. For if the question of stylistic persistence is our prime concern, there is no emphasis given to the uniqueness and/or inventiveness (hence discontinuity versus continuity) that are commonly associated (once again in Renaissance and post-Renaissance art of the West) with the unique individual maker. Taking this as our starting point, it might be that the persistence of an animal among the Scythians' gold, or of patterns within oriental carpets, rather than the works of a Michelangelo, would attract the student of artistic styles.

This is indeed just what concerned the keeper of textiles in the Vienna Museum of Arts and Crafts in the 1880s, Alois Riegl, who has written the most persuasive and profound account of style so conceived. In a series of works published between 1891 and 1908 on the textiles of the ancient mid-East, the art of late antiquity, Dutch group portraits, and post-Renaissance Italian art, Riegl proposed what in retrospect is an essentially structuralist interpretation of the course of art.⁵ Though he indeed moved closer and closer with each study, he

⁴Heinrich Wölfflin, *Prolegomena zu einer Psychologie der Architektur* (1886), reprinted in his *Kleine Schriften* (Basel: B. Schwabe, 1946), p. 44.

⁵Riegl's major writings are *Stilfragen* (Berlin: Siemans, 1893); *Spatrömische Kunstindustrie* (Vienna, 1901); *Das holländische Gruppenporträt* (Vienna: Österreichischen Staatsdruckerei, 1931; 3d edition, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1964), originally published as an article in 1902; *Die Entstehung der Barockkunst in Rom* (Vienna, 1908), published posthumously. There has been a flurry of modern reassessments of Riegl's work: Otto Pächt, "Art Historians and Critics, VI: Alois Riegl," *Burlington Magazine* 105 (1963): 188-93; Henri Zerner, "Alois Riegl: Art, Value, and Historicism," *Daedalus* 105 (1976): 177-88; Willibald Sauerländer, "Alois Riegl und die Entstehung der autonomen Kunstgeschichte am Fin de siècle," in *Fin de siècle*, ed. Roger Bauer (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1977), pp. 125-39. A most positive presentation of Riegl from a structuralist point of view is found in Sheldon Nodelman,

Style Is What You Make It

specifically avoided what is, as I shall argue a bit later in this essay, the often unacknowledged normative center of art historical studies—the art of the Italian Renaissance. Riegl dealt with art that was at best considered marginal, at worst the degenerate version of previously great styles. (It is worth pointing out that it is no accident that the greatest chronicler of the Italian art of the Renaissance, Vasari, is generally acknowledged as the first art historian. In many ways Riegl offers an alternative to this.) It is also significant that like structuralists today—Lévi-Strauss in Brazil, or Piaget among school children—Riegl turned to phenomena to which he stood, by *their* nature, but also by *his* distance, in a nonparticipatory relationship. He chose, in other words, a position from which to see all the better the essential structure without an interpretive bias.

The historical and deterministic aspects of Riegl's system, his Hegelianism in short, have been severely criticized by Gombrich and others. I am less interested here in the undoubted evolutionary thrust implicit in Riegl's devising and use of the term *Kunstwollen* (variously translated as will to art, that which wills art, and the aesthetic urge) than in the psychological terms in which Riegl on many occasions employs it. Although Riegl wants his study of art to be valid for any observer (hence he makes the claim to objectivity of analysis that I have just described), he sees the production of art as dependent on a particular maker or community of makers. The drive or the necessity of making is a matter of the psychological relationship established between man and his world. Art is, in short—though the term is mine and not Riegl's—a mediation between the maker and the world. This is the most valuable aspect of Riegl's rigid developmental scheme of art from the haptic (tactile) and objective Egypt to the optic (subjective) nineteenth century. And we find its virtues less in the theoretical stance as such than in the local passages of writing about particular works. In his discussion of Dutch group portraits, formal analysis of surface, space, and figures yields to an analysis of the relationship of the individual portrayed to the group within the work, and from individuals within to the viewer of the painting. Works that, like northern art in general, seem disorderly and unresolved from an Italian stylistic point of view are rendered comprehensible.

Let us look briefly at the earliest of Dutch group portraits—the members of the Company of St. John as depicted by a fellow member

"Structuralist Analysis in Art and Anthropology," in *Structuralism*, ed. Jacques Ehrmann (New York: Anchor Books, 1970), pp. 79–93.

Svetlana Alpers

and artist, Geertgen tot Sint Jans, as they attend the finding of the bones of St. John in the wing of an altarpiece dating from the 1480s (Figure 1).

Riegl begins his very lengthy analysis by asking if anything holds the portraits of these twelve individuals together:⁶ "Whoever has trained his eye—as have most art historians nowadays—in front of Italian works of art will be of the opinion that . . . the inner unity has by necessity already been given through the narrative character of the subject matter, including all participants in one story by characterizing one sector of them as engaged in action, the rest as passive bystanders."⁷ Here, however, this does not happen.

Although the legendary event furnished the means by itself to arrive at a unifying interpretation, the painter has done all he could to reverse the situation in order to blot out the unity of action and to represent the figures as mutually independent of each other and of their action . . . he deprived the main action as much as possible of every subordinating effect, first by introducing contrasting side shows, and second, by attempting to replace the active will and its possible domination of the events with an expression of passive feelings.⁸

Riegl continues the contrast with Italian art in terms of the viewer of the picture: "The figures of the Renaissance are conscious of the fact that within one pictorial unit they find themselves in mutual relationship. That means: an onlooker is pre-supposed, one who wants to see single figures in a picture united, and therefore everything has to be avoided that could disturb the impression of such unity."⁹ He goes on to propose that an attitude toward the individual figures is tied to certain compositional habits.

It was . . . a general principle of early Dutch painting to avoid subordination and to isolate figures from one another outwardly through coordination. . . . At the time when Geertgen's painting . . . originated, subordination had already been developed into keen pyramidal compositions in Italy. Their element is the diagonal, in other words, the combining line on the picture plane. Just this line is totally missing in

⁶The following quotations are taken from the fine translation of a section of Riegl's *Das holländische Gruppenporträt*, which appeared in W. Eugene Kleinbauer, *Modern Perspective in Art History* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1971), pp. 124–38.

⁷Ibid., p. 128.

⁸Ibid., pp. 129 and 130.

⁹Ibid., p. 132.



Figure 1. Geertgen tot Sint Jans, *The Burning of the Bones of John the Baptist*.
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

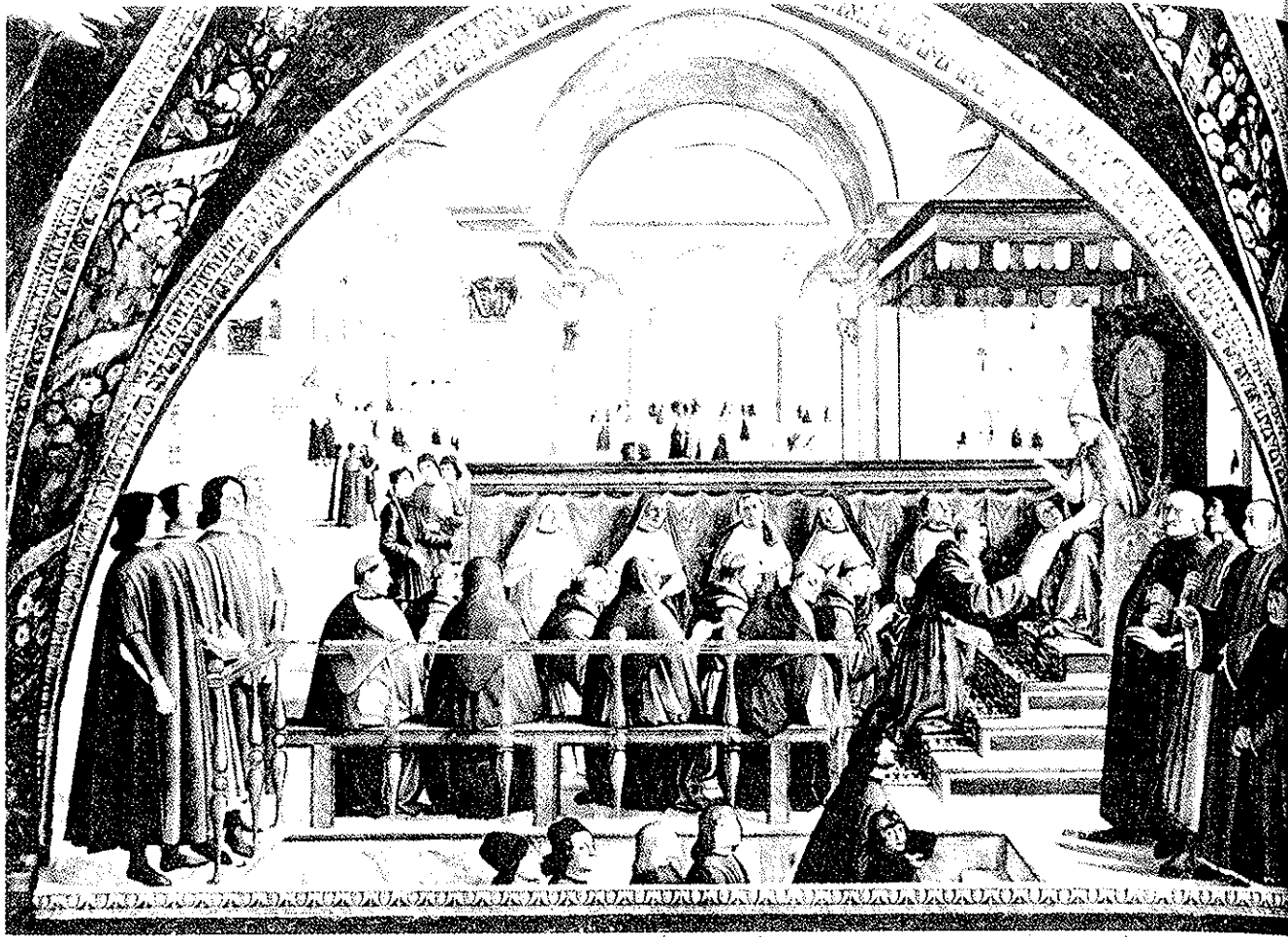


Figure 2. Domenico Ghirlandaio, *Confirming the Rule of St. Francis*. Santa Trinità, Sassetti Chapel, Florence. Photo by Alinari/Art Resource, New York.

our painting; where it could not be avoided, as in the detail of the executioners, it was defeated as inconspicuously as possible. Most of the figures by far, including in part even the few who are really acting, retain a strictly vertical pose in order to stand side by side, without combining diagonals, as purely isolated and coordinated vertical axes.¹⁰

Riegl offers a comparison with the Italian artist Ghirlandaio in regard to the nature of the spectators in the picture (Figure 2): “Again one has to compare these (Geertgen’s) heads with, say, those by Ghirlandaio in order to recognize how (the latter’s) figures, even when shown as passive spectators, present their fair existence with self-complacency and thirst for conquest . . . the eyes of the Haarlem people are rather turned inward, gathering the world outside as in a

¹⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 133 and 135.

Style Is What You Make It

mirror."¹¹ And Riegl finally ties the nature of the depiction to the attitude of the putative viewers of northern and Italian works (Figure 3).

The portrait of Cardinal Francesco Gonzaga by Mantegna . . . with its captivating look, protruding eyeballs, and lips shown in sensual tangibility . . . makes the immediately impressed viewer totally oblivious of himself. In comparison, our Johannites appear unpretentious, yet full of inner life, their vision directed as much inwardly as outwardly in such a way that one remains unaware of the physical eye itself. As they look about, they can only be appreciated in their spiritual significance through a truly intimate contemplation by an observer who has enough time finally to discover himself.¹²

The viewer "discovering himself" in contemplation of these individual painted portraits is contrasted by Riegl to the Italian onlooker desiring unified action and composition in Italian art and losing himself in admiration of Gonzaga.

The distinction that Riegl repeatedly makes between Geertgen's work and Italian works introduces a major theme of this essay: namely the degree to which style in art historical discourse has always been perceived and defined on the basis of Italian examples. It is a curious fact that the same bias persists if we follow the Dutch group portrait up into the seventeenth century. In the face of a continuing Dutch emphasis on what Riegl calls coordination of distinct individuals, historians of Dutch art argue that the most brilliant, the culminating, solution to the pictorial problematic presented by the group portrait is Rembrandt's famous *Syndics*. This work is praised not only for its great individual portrayals, but specifically because Rembrandt has invented an action (the figures look out as if in response to a query) designed to subordinate the individuals to a single unity. This is the Italian prejudice once more, which here sees Rembrandt's departure from northern concerns as the best way of dealing with them.¹³

Although the particulars of Riegl's psychology are considered dated and unacceptable today, it is to the relational or, perhaps better, the modal nature of his understanding of style that I wish to draw

¹¹Ibid., p. 133.

¹²Ibid., p. 134.

¹³I am not disputing this analysis of Rembrandt's *Syndics*—it was indeed Riegl's own analysis of the work—but rather the peculiar validation that is given to the picture in the eyes of historians of Dutch art because it conjoins an Italianate with a Netherlandish mode.



Figure 3. Andrea Mantegna, *Cardinal Francesco Gonzaga*. Camera degli Sposa, Mantua. Photo by Alinari/Art Resource, New York.

Style Is What You Make It

attention. Compositional and dramatic unity, or rather the lack of it, and the very nature of portrayal in art are, as Riegl subtly argues, psychological issues setting forth the measure of man through his relationship to others and to the world.

In turning away from style and toward mode, I am of course indebted to Northrop Frye's formulation of a Theory of Modes: "Fictions, therefore, may be classified, not morally, but by the hero's power of action, which may be greater than ours, less, or roughly the same."¹⁴ The term *mode*, as several commentators on Frye have argued, refers to the fictional hero's strength relative to his world—and thus we have Frye's mythic, romantic, high mimetic, low mimetic or ironic modes.¹⁵ The hero is thus a modular for the verbal construct. Two problems appear to arise when, in applying these terms, we turn from literature to art. In dealing with art at large we are not limiting ourselves to fictional narratives or their equivalent, and it seems clear that, as Riegl's commentaries reveal, the viewer himself is an essential part of the modular equation. While this is so in principle, it is not so in practice in Frye's application of his categories. The relationship of maker or viewer to the putative world of the work seems a more basic dimension here than that of hero to narrative fiction. Further, and related to this, the categories, perhaps even the need for categories, into which Frye organizes his fictions seem not clearly applicable to the range of materials we include in the visual arts.

Although he has had his partisans, Riegl has not had a central or lasting influence on the main course of the study of art. One reason is his fiercely difficult German and, for the non-German, the fact that he has never been translated. But historically the most important reason is the interjection, early on, of the interpretation and interpolations of Erwin Panofsky. In the name of clarifying Riegl's term *Kunstwollen*, Panofsky directed attention away from the structural elements caught in a web of psychological drives and connotations to an objective meaning intrinsic to a work. Artistic volition (*Kunstwollen*), wrote Panofsky, cannot be anything else than what resides in artistic phenomena as their essential meaning.¹⁶ The energy and the psychologi-

¹⁴Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 33.

¹⁵See Paul Alpers, "Mode in Narrative Poetry," in *To Tell a Story: Narrative Theory and Practice*, ed. Robert M. Adams (Los Angeles: William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, 1973), pp. 26ff., and his comments in turn on Angus Fletcher, "Utopian History and the *Anatomy of Criticism*," in *Northrop Frye in Modern Criticism*, ed. Murray Krieger (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), pp. 34-35.

¹⁶See Erwin Panofsky, "Der Begriff des Kunstwollens," in *Erwin Panofsky: Aufsätze zu Grundfragen der Kunstwissenschaft*, ed. Hariolf Oberer and Egon Verheyen (Berlin, 1964), p. 39. This article originally appeared in 1920.

cal complexity of art-making according to Riegl are sacrificed in the name of, quite literally the nomination of, art's possession of meaning. The relation between meaning and image that Panofsky desired in his aesthetic and the notion of the work as an object were found peculiarly in the art of the Italian Renaissance, which Panofsky therefore made the center of his study. By the same token he shifted the meaning of a work of art from the relations of man to his world to an objective phenomenon within a cultural setting.¹⁷

It would seem, and I think art historical practice has since confirmed, that Panofsky changed the basic issues. What Riegl called questions of style are preempted by, absorbed into, questions of meaning. Iconography (which Panofsky had first referred to with the Kantian *Sinn*, or intrinsic meaning, and then the Cassirerian *symbolic form*) is split off from style or at least given more weight. This is certainly the basis on which art historians have operated in the interpretation of works ever since. The resulting unproblematic identification, and then relating, of style and iconography (form and content) as two stages of analysis contrast sharply with the problematic consideration of these issues in literary and, more recently, historical studies. For Riegl the activity of art-making absorbs and, mysteriously, accounts for all. Panofsky's essentially objectifying impulse (the impulse to treat the work of art as an object already made rather than as a process of making) had the inevitable effect of raising the question, and then asserting the unity, of form and content. Panofsky's original argument for the autonomous nature of the art object is contained in a theory of aesthetic distance. But as this is presented in his studies of perspective, proportion, Dürer, or the Italian rebirth of antiquity, it is revealed to be, after all, not a theoretical stance as much as the analysis of a particular historical situation. The assumption of the physical and psychological distance between artist or viewer and image is, historically, part and parcel of the invention of the perspective system which is basic to much, though not all, Italian Renaissance picture-making. A maker or viewer is posited whose location and size are the module or measure for the figures and space

¹⁷The objectifying of, and thus granting a cultural meaning to, artworks won out over the often vague psychologizing and historicism of Riegl. However, the contrast I wish to draw attention to is different: that between a modal (or relational) model of the making and perceiving of art versus the autonomous object posited by Panofsky. The following studies were most helpful in sorting out these issues: Jan Bialostocki, "Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968): Thinker, Historian, Human Being," *Simiolus* 4 (1970): 68-89; Diane Brouillette, "The Concept of *Kunstwollen* in the Early Writings of Erwin Panofsky" (M.A. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1970).

Style Is What You Make It

around them in the painting. The objecthood of the image, if I can put it that way, is in other words part and parcel of the status of the image or the relationship set up between viewer and image in the Renaissance. The modal nature of art-making proposed by Riegl is not dismissed, but one possibility, one mode, is isolated as it was practiced at a particular time and place.

There seems to be in a similar way an empirical rather than a theoretical basis for Panofsky's famous "principle of disjunction."¹⁸ His argument, a powerful one historically, was that the Renaissance achieved for the first time the reuniting of antique forms (the nude being a prime example) with antique content (the gods) which had been treated separately but not together in the intervening centuries. The Renaissance sense of distance from ancient form and content (objecthood, in other words) is very similar to that found in the perspective system and Panofsky gives a very persuasive account of the Renaissance rebirth of antiquity. But this has the effect of leaving the negative term *disjunction* to serve as an analysis of what Panofsky himself terms the *realer*, because less distant, engagement with antiquity in the art of the intervening centuries. (He speaks movingly of a medieval sense of the classical world as both a menace and a possession.)¹⁹ The principle of disjunction, like the system of linear perspective, posits a perfect, conjoined unity perceived at a distance from the viewer. But why was there not a different kind of art object made during the Middle Ages? And if we grant such art objects separate status, should they then be seen as conjoining (that is, uniting) at all? It is assumed by Panofsky that distance (detachment) and the perception of unity are more essential to what we call art than a lack of unity and a sense of identification. (Riegl's analysis of Geertgen comes to mind once more.) In much the same way as the perspective theory reifies the accomplishment of an art object separate from us, so the theory of disjunction is really a justification of the unity possessed by such objects.

What we have presented to us by Panofsky are not theories of interpretation but historical exegesis dealing with one mode of art among many. This mode, however, has provided in effect a normative center for much of the discussion of art and its nature ever since. This aesthetic view might not be far from what we find in literary studies, but the roots can be more clearly traced here. It is no

¹⁸For the fullest setting forth of the "principle of disjunction," see Erwin Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art* (New York: Icon Books, 1972). This was first published in 1960.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 112-13.

Svetlana Alpers

exaggeration to say that the entire sense of what it means to be addressed or studied as a work of art is tied up with the art object as it was defined (in certain quarters) in the Renaissance.

While Panofsky was ambivalent about the normative nature of the phenomena he studied, all this has become explicit in the work of E. H. Gombrich. (One might demonstrate this difference by comparing their treatment of linear perspective: Panofsky seeing it as a symbolic form, and Gombrich claiming it to be true.) Think of the subtitle, for example, of Gombrich's well-known essay "Norm and Form: The Stylistic Categories of Art History and Their Origins in Renaissance Ideals." There is an air of discovery but not of demystification in this piece. Gombrich, arguing that "description can never be completely divorced from criticism," puts his trust, and assumes that we put ours, in the norm of "lucid narrative and presentation of physical beauty," which is central to Italian Renaissance art.²⁰ His *Art and Illusion* calls attention in a twentieth-century mode to the mental and perceptual processes involved in all visual perception—style is thus inevitably part of any artifact since no work can be identical with nature. But the "beholder's share" can contribute only to seeing illusions of people, things, actions, and space: the object of Renaissance art. Let us recall at this point Kubler's phrase that summarizes the practical strategies of most students of art: "The notion of style has long been the art historian's principal mode of classing works of art. By style he shapes the history of art."

How can one conduct a study of all art with tools and assumptions developed in the service of one?

This problem is far from new. Italian commentators in the sixteenth century wrote that they simply could not deal in their terms with the (non-Italian) art of northern Europe. It is the nature of "their terms" to which I want to call attention before I go on to consider how we might deal with the non-Italian phenomena. Here is a passage from one of the best-known Italian accounts of Flemish art—a statement attributed by Francesco de Hollanda, a Portuguese writer, to Michelangelo himself:

The Flemish pictures please women, especially the old and very young ones, and also monks and nuns, and lastly men of the world who are not capable of understanding true harmony. In Flanders they paint,

²⁰E. H. Gombrich, the title essay in *Norm and Form: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance* (London: Phaidon, 1966), pp. 81 and 96. This essay was originally published in 1963.

Style Is What You Make It

before all things, to render exactly and deceptively the outward appearance of things. The painters choose, by preference, subjects provoking transports of piety . . . But most of the time they paint what are called landscapes with plenty of figures. Though the eye is agreeably impressed, these pictures have neither art nor reason; neither symmetry nor proportion . . . In short, this art is without power and without distinction; it aims at rendering minutely many things at the same time, of which a single one would have sufficed to call forth a man's whole application.²¹

This sounds churlish though not wholly incorrect. Landscape, detailed renderings—all this is descriptively right though art historians have traditionally argued that what the Italians did not realize was that the north, too, was involved in a Renaissance. Van Eyck's *Madonna of the Canon van der Paele* (Figure 4) and Veneziano's St. Lucy altarpiece (Figure 5) can provide us with the handbook comparison. While light in Italy places figures in space, in the north it is reflected off surfaces of objects. We have two different ways—one detailing surfaces, one generalizing bodies in space—of trying to capture the world observed, which was a new aim of art. But notice the curious claim that northern art is an art for women which lacks all reason and proportion. The implication, it is clear, is that Italian art is for men and is reasonable and proportioned. If we turn to Alberti—one of the first spokesmen for this new art—we find that he starts by positing a viewer, the artist, from whose location and according to whose size the entire world of the picture is constructed. The picture plane is here defined as a transparent glass or window that cuts through the visual pyramid. Vision, or sight, is not here a matter of the glow of light and different colors, but rather of our geometrically constructed relationship to the world. The world is fitted to our measure and position. Man—and Alberti himself quotes Protagoras—is the mode and measure of all things, and the size of all things in a painting is known by the size of a man depicted there.²²

This relationship of the human figure to the world and to the space and objects in it is certainly central to our experience of Italian Renaissance art, though not, I would argue, to our experience of the art of the north. And this is what the writer means when he says that

²¹Translated from the Portuguese in J. Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (New York: Anchor Books, 1954), p. 265.

²²Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting and on Sculpture*, trans. Cecil Grayson (London: Phaidon, 1972), pp. 49 and 51.

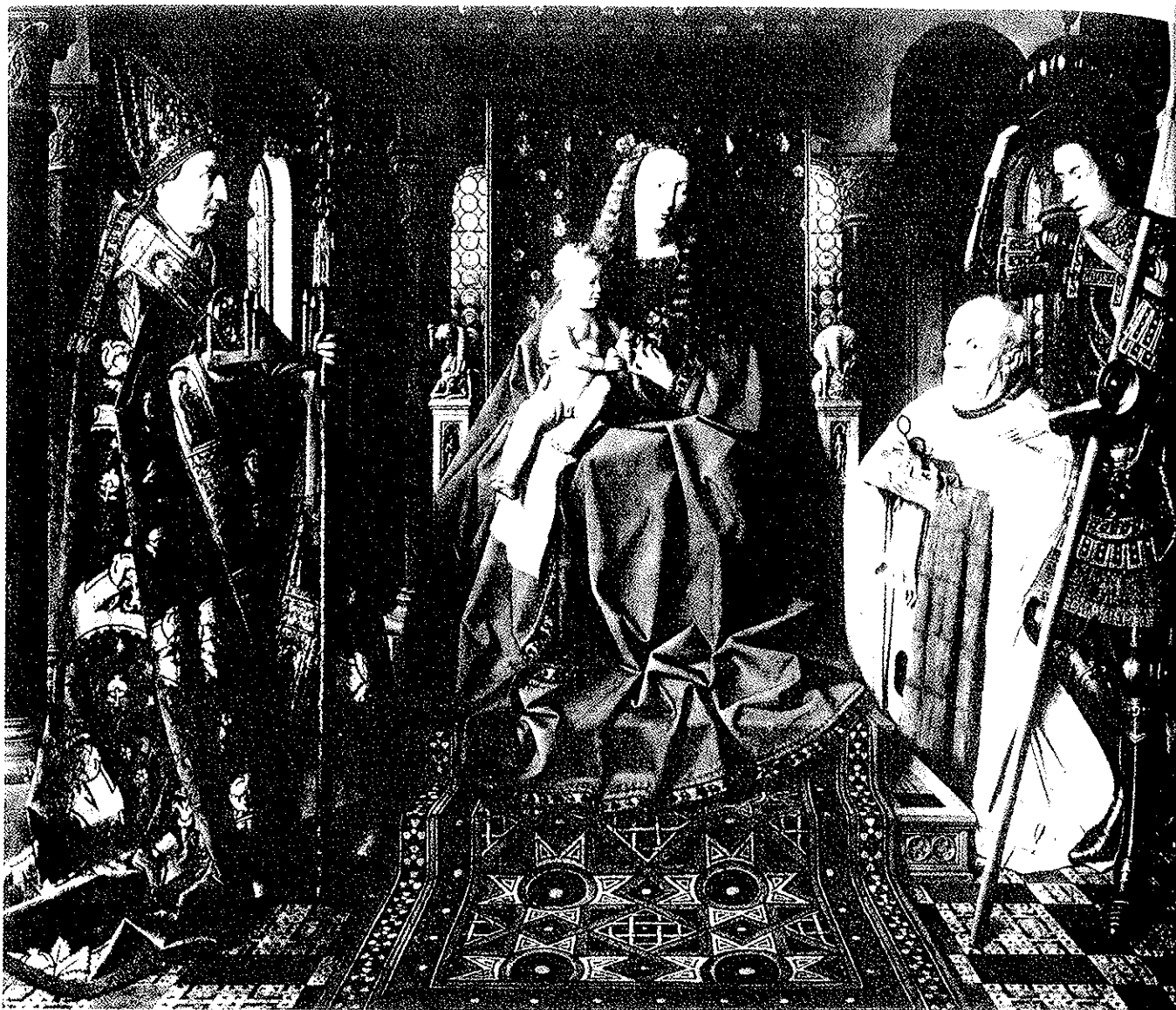


Figure 4. Jan van Eyck, *Madonna of the Canon van der Paele*. Musée Communal des Beaux-Arts, Bruges. Copyright A.C.L.-Bruxelles.

northern art is for women. As a gloss to this let us turn to a handbook on painting, also dating from the fifteenth century, by Cennino Cennini: "Take note that, before going any farther, I will give you the exact proportions of a man. Those of a woman I will disregard for she does not have any set proportions . . . I will not tell you about irrational animals, because you will never discover any system of proportion in them. Copy them . . . from nature and you will achieve a good style in this respect."²³ To say an art is for women is thus to reiterate that it displays no measure, but rather, to Italian eyes,

²³Cennino d'Andrea Cennini, *The Craftsman's Handbook*, trans. Daniel V. Thompson, Jr. (New York: Dover Books, 1954), pp. 48-49.



Figure 5. Domenico Veneziano, *Madonna and Child with Saints*. Uffizi, Florence. Photo by Alinari/Art Resource, New York.

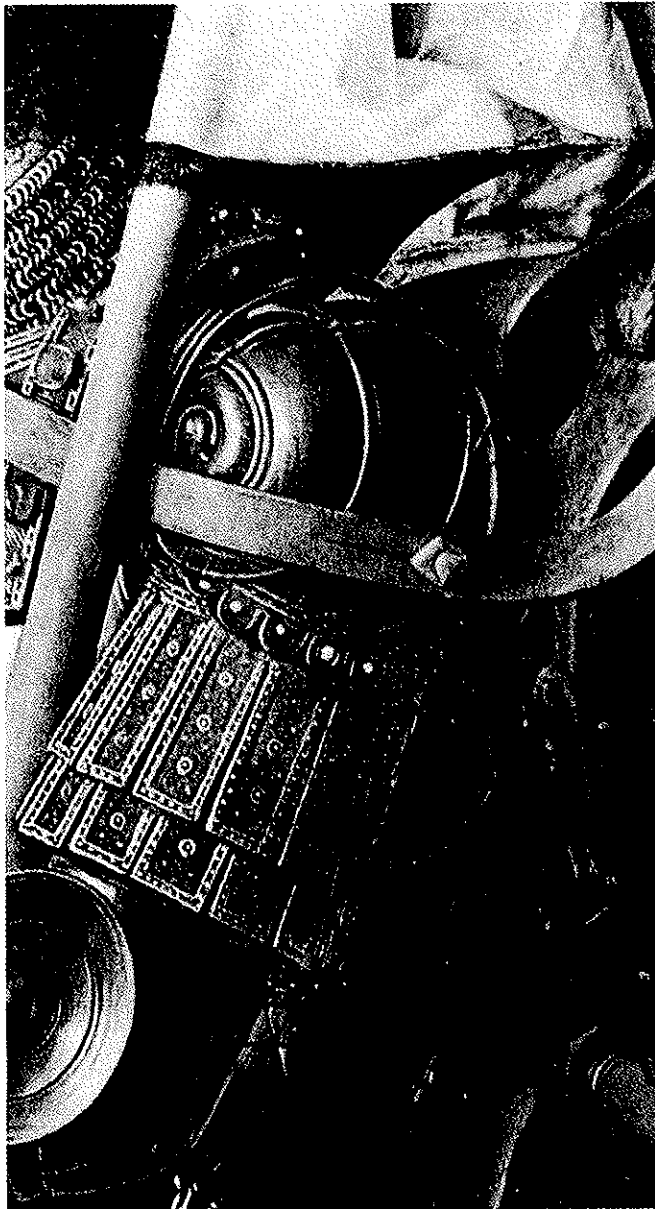


Figure 6. Detail of Figure 4.
Copyright A.C.L.-Bruxelles.

a flood of observed, unmediated detail. Renaissance writers like Alberti were certain only of the mode of their own making, but their self-consciousness about the process itself offers us a way to deal with human making of different kinds.

Let us consider the question of human measure in a northern work. An interesting gauge of it is, I think, the way in which the artist posits himself (Figure 6). Consider the image of van Eyck reflected on a piece of St. George's armor.²⁴ We find van Eyck not standing back, providing a location and size from which to look through the window of art, but actually caught on the surface, mirrored as a tiny image among all the others described on the mirroring surface of the

²⁴It is unfortunately, but significantly, very hard to reproduce such a reflection.

Style Is What You Make It

panel. This curious phenomenon is far from unique. The artist at his easel is frequently reflected on the surface of objects in Dutch still-lives of the seventeenth century. These self-portraits literally reflect not a lack of measure, as the Italians would have it, but a different measure, a different mode. The maker is absorbed into the work and is measured, as it were, by the myriad objects of the world among which he is seen as a tiny part.

We can profitably distinguish two aspects of this artistic mode (aspects indeed of every artistic mode): (1) a question of scale (our size relative to the world); and (2) a question of place (our situation in relationship to the world). Both of these aspects are handled with a flexibility in northern art, ranging from confusion to daring, which contrasts with the clarity of the relationship between viewer and object-work in Italian art and questions the stylistic unity created there. (It strikes me that a comparison of English and Italian poetry in the Renaissance can be made in similar terms.)

In Pieter Bruegel's *The Carrying of the Cross* (Figure 7), for example, the juxtaposition of scale is striking. We look down and across the landscape filled with small, compact, active, and singularly dispassionate figures of the common people, among whom is Christ himself. The carrying of the cross takes place in the present. Then in the foreground and to the right, on an elevated plot of ground, stand the tall, lean, angular figures elaborately mourning, which are quoted from the Passion as it was staged in the art of the past. There are two body sizes and types, two ways of responding to the death of Christ, neither of which is clearly open to us. We are larger than the common people and do not appear like them, and we are cut off from the holy figures by the convention of their bodies and expressions. How does one respond to the Passion? The event is part and parcel of the mode of presentation and the question is left unresolved, perhaps unresolvable.

In that curious northern seventeenth-century art-game, the peep-box, the question of scale is joined to the question of place. These are different from the contemporary illusionistic Italian ceilings to which they are so often compared.²⁵ Here the viewer is not placed on a spot standing beneath a fictitious architectural vault. In the peep-box the

²⁵A basic survey of the few surviving peep-boxes can be found in Susan Koslow, "De wonderlijke Perspectyfkas: An Aspect of Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting," *Oud Holland* 92 (1967): 35-36. What seems to me to be misleading in this account is the familiar attempt to equate all experimentation with the representation of the seen world with the particular assumptions about picturing the world which were built into Italian linear perspective.

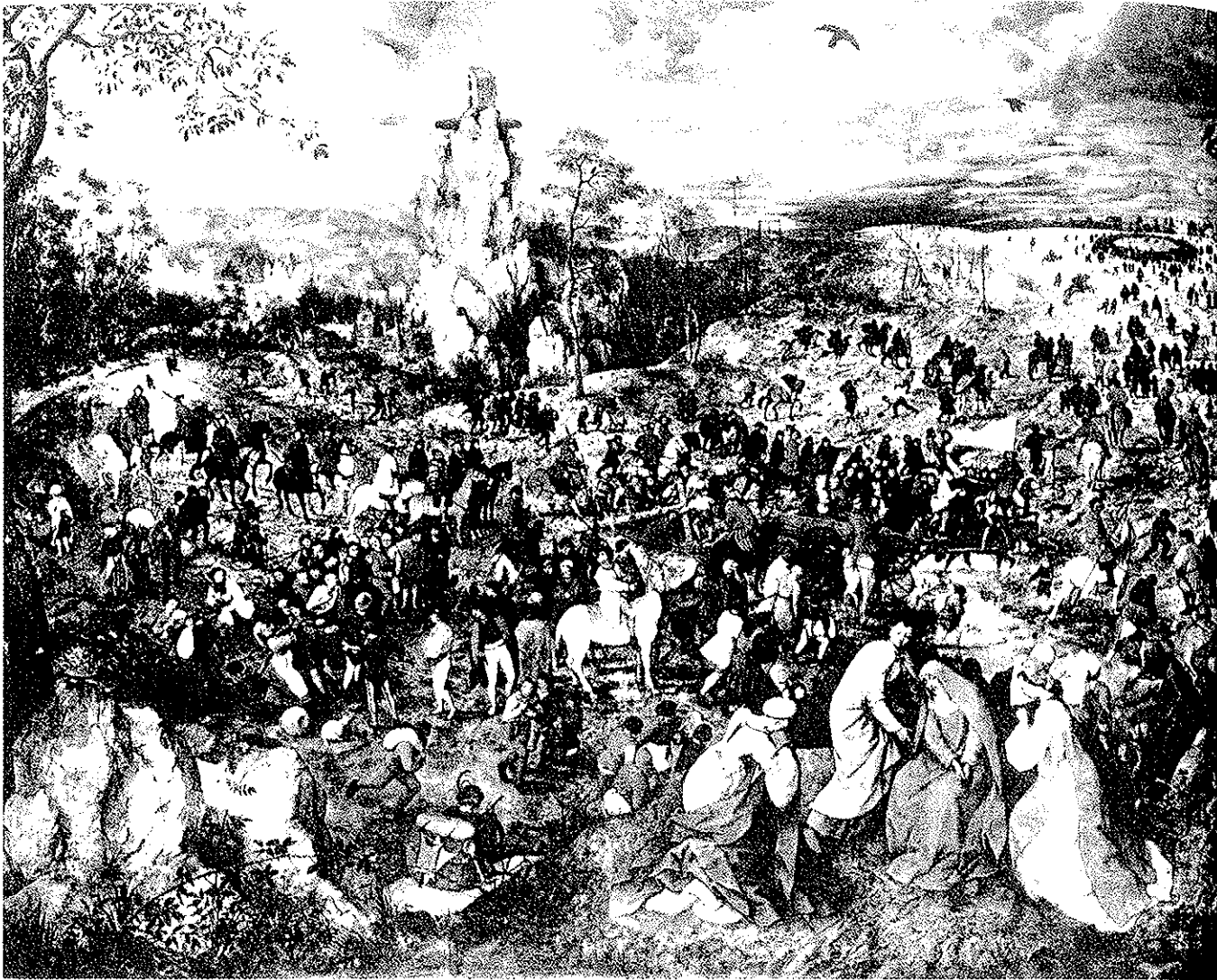


Figure 7. Pieter Bruegel, *The Carrying of the Cross*. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

viewer's eye is fixed at a hole, thus cut off, isolated from his body. Sense of place and of proportion are both wiped out. As to the overgrown Alice looking into the inaccessible garden in *Wonderland*, or Monet looking into his lily pond, or Vermeer gazing at Delft, to such a viewer the world perceived is dependent on the eye alone.

In their very making, these northern works give evidence of modality against the Italian claim that they are somehow beyond or outside of measure. We have not, however, developed just ways of talking about northern works. When, as in Riegl, the modal (relational) nature of art is assumed, the tendency is to see the north as divergent from, usually a polar opposite to, the norm of scale and position assumed in the making of an Italian work. (Riegl's terms here were subjective north and objective south.) However, the added

Style Is What You Make It

difficulty in the case of art is that the art of the north, unlike Italian art, is not so uniquely accommodated to verbal constructs or models. To find the verbal terms in which we might distinguish and characterize such basically epistemological modes of northern art is one of the most difficult problems.²⁶

This becomes very clear in the attempts made to account for the rise of landscape—a peculiarly pictorial subject, one would think—as a separate subject in western art. This northern European preoccupation and prowess (the pseudo-Michelangelo, you will remember, made this point) came into prominence as an independent artistic concern in the sixteenth century in the north (one thinks of Bruegel's works), and in the seventeenth it spread throughout Europe. Claude, Poussin, and the Dutchman Ruisdael are the great representatives of this new kind of art. Gombrich has argued in a basic paper that the rise of landscape is not due to the atrophy of religious motifs, nor to a new look at the actual landscape, but rather to the combination of northern skills with Italian theory that made landscape a suitable subject for art. "Here then," he writes of this theory, "was a suitable frame into which the admired products of northern skill and patience could be fitted."²⁷ The frame, which Gombrich also describes as an "aesthetic attitude" toward the depiction of landscape, turns out to be couched in terms of distinctions such as those between heroic and pastoral—both modes in the humanistic categories of Italian art. Gombrich is perhaps the most articulate living exponent of the Renaissance point of view. He is here arguing that not until man is the measure in the particular terms in which he is in heroic and pastoral modes, and not until this is *institutionalized* (the word is Gombrich's) in painting (as opposed to watercolors or prints), can landscape art exist. In view of the topic of this essay, it is interesting that Gombrich specifically makes the point that it is what he calls the *institutional* aspect of landscape art, not its stylistic development, that is his concern. For example, he argues that though Dürer's skill and patience already made him (to the stylistic approach) one of the world's greatest landscape painters in the sixteenth century, this skill came out in topographical watercolors for his own delectation, not in institu-

²⁶Panofsky revealed this problem when he resorted to the by now often repeated visual analogy between the art of Jan van Eyck and a microscope and a telescope. See Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1953), 1:182. Wölfflin's foray into the north in *Italien und das deutsche Formgefühl* (Munich: F. Brückmann, 1931) admits openly to such problems.

²⁷E. H. Gombrich, "The Renaissance Theory of Art and the Rise of Landscape Painting," in *Norm and Form*, p. 114. This essay was first published in 1953.

Svetlana Alpers

tional, marketable paintings. But what does institution mean in Gombrich's usage but what is for him the normative, Renaissance painting style—one kind of art, I repeat, among many.

It is appropriate to look at a landscape by a Poussin or by a Claude as accommodated to human measure in just Gombrich's terms. But what do we do with the northerners, with Dürer's watercolors or with such a work as Ruisdael's *View of Haarlem* (Figure 8)? It becomes clear when we look at the Ruisdael that such a panoramic view is not seen by a single viewer, of certain size, located in a certain position. Yet the unlocated viewer, the heightened descriptive function, the concern with surface and extent rather than with volume and solidity, all constitute art. It is not irrelevant that Holland was the first country to produce and hang maps as common domestic wall decoration. Maps were sold by the same dealers who handled prints and books. This serves to remind us that there was less distinction felt between a work of art and an image functioning as a map than Gombrich feels there to be. It is man's recording of the world, observation itself in a Baconian sense, which constitutes the mode of such a pictorial making.

The study of styles and genres seems to me always in danger of extracting, by naming and singling out, the accomplishment of specific modes that seem by virtue of this nomination to have preeminence. But style is what you make it and the mode is in the making. The Renaissance model appeals to students of style and aesthetics because it produces the material for their study: works judged when completed, objective, outside the maker and prior to the viewer and presumably not tied to a function in the world. It is only certain modes that posit such an objective world and maker. Questions about style and iconography are appropriate for Renaissance art, but we want questions that are appropriate for all art. The main question, it seems to me, should be modal. And it goes something like this: "What would it (reality, the world) be like if the relationship between us and the world were to be this one? This formulation has the virtue of not distinguishing form and content, of not excluding function, of not choosing in advance between the parts played by the individual maker, his community, certain established modes of perceiving the world, or the viewer.

What then is art? Does the perceiving or granting of modality to any human construct mean that the thing so dealt with is art? Is the writing of history, for example, no different, as Hayden White would seem to have it, from narrative fiction in this sense?

For anyone concerned with art, the issue is a very real one today.

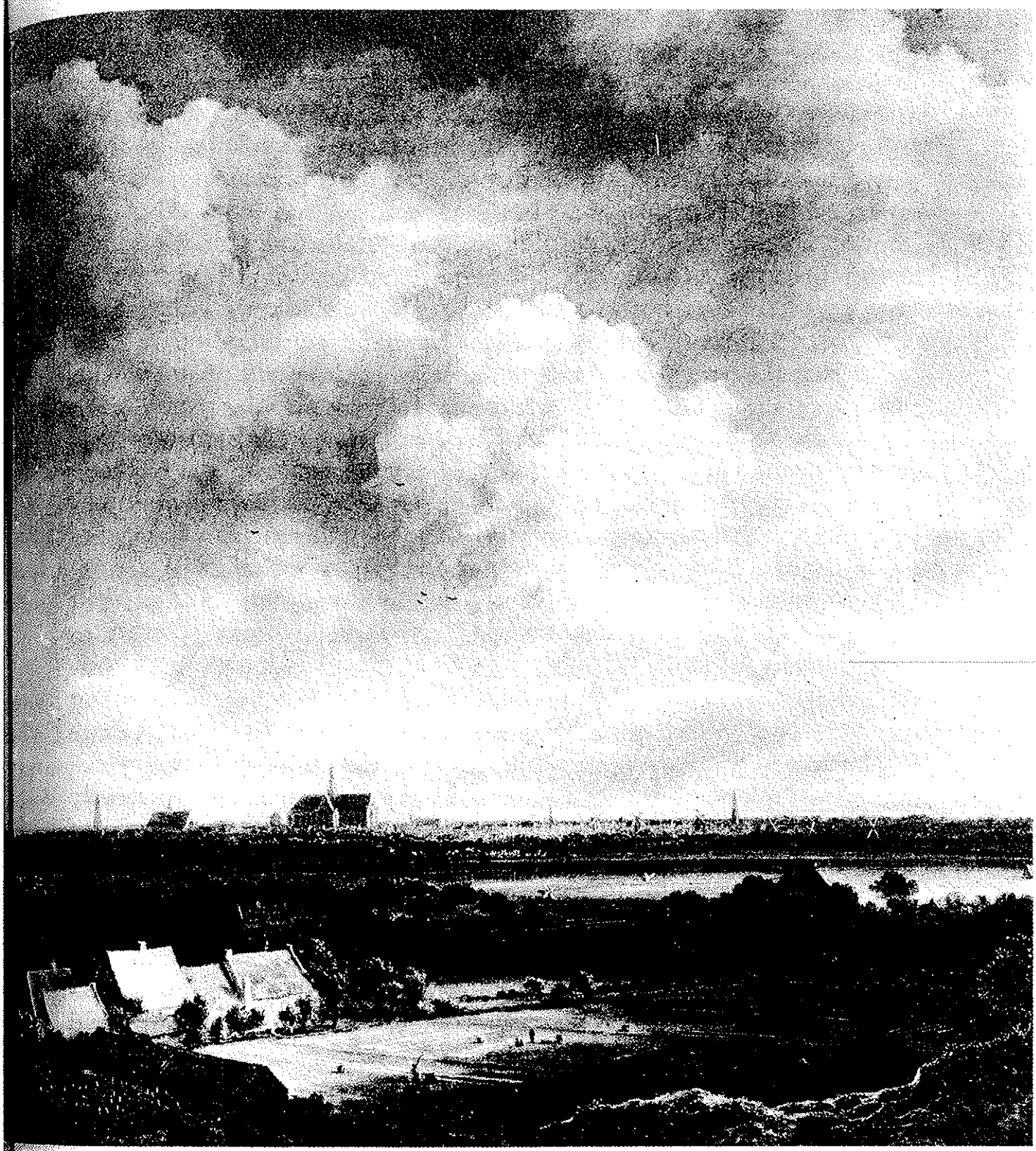


Figure 8. Jacob van Ruisdael, *View of Haarlem*. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

We are in the midst of what might be described as a leveling upward in the arts. Paintings and drawings at Sotheby's and Christie's are joined by furniture, maps, books, carpets, spinets, watches, and even wines. We are also faced by an outward spread. Berkeley's Telegraph Avenue is a model for streets everywhere where leather goods, dyed shirts, and flowers under glass are sold by their makers. On Berkeley's nearby streets refurbished Victorian houses are signed by their house painters. Objects of tribal societies are exhibited in art museums, not as the source, but as the equal, of Western art. Artists who once worked in studios and made things to be shown in galleries are out making photographs and TV strips, digging ditches, making spiral jetties of rock, mapping, criss-crossing the countryside with fences—in short, taking to task (while perhaps also taking advantage of) the privileged position of art. A common element here is a concern with the exercise of craft, human making in its myriad forms. The distinction between art and craft, but also between crafted objects of one culture and another seems less significant. "Art" seems to be endangered.

We find ourselves in a situation much more extreme than that which Riegl faced when he turned from the Renaissance to try to comprehend the world of textiles, late antique sculpture, and post-Renaissance painting. Though there is probably general agreement on what is "great" among the art of the past, few today share Gombrich's certainty about a norm, about those qualities which make a work of art good, which make a work "art." Yet curiously the accustomed standards are still being applied. An installation of tribal art opened recently in a San Francisco museum with the injunction to the viewer to "pick the masterpieces."

In an interesting essay written some years ago, Paul Oskar Kristeller argued that we owe the modern system of the arts to the eighteenth century: painting, sculpture and architecture, music and poetry then took their places as the proper objects of the newly articulated aesthetic interest.²⁸ Students of Renaissance art are well versed in the history of the validation and successful struggle to elevate painting and sculpture from the category of the mechanical to that of the liberal arts. We tend to react to this history as if finally the truth was out. But Kristeller's account suggests that this certainly, though hard won, is contingent on the particular attitudes of maker as well as of viewer. These attitudes did not exist in antiquity (when the visual arts

²⁸Paul Oskar Kristeller, "The Modern System of the Arts," in his *Renaissance Thought II* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965), pp. 163-227.

Style Is What You Make It

were never ranked with poetry), and they are under some question, consciously and unconsciously today. Even more radical arguments have been made about literature: by Michel Foucault,²⁹ who dates its birth to the nineteenth century, and by Stanley Fish,³⁰ who argues that all literature is simply language framed and is thus a matter of attitude.

This issue then is what is involved in making and perceiving something as art? This seems particularly complicated in the visual arts where there is not even a shared medium such as language. Sticks, stones, paint, mortar, photographs, and so on have all been used. And the functions of art are so diverse. At different times and in different societies something that has carried water or served as a map can be seen as art. The answer might well lie in the area of purpose—but this must be doubly viewed as purpose intended by the maker and purpose perceived by the viewer. Historical texts can be read as literature even as a waterjug can be seen as a work of art. This does not mean that there are no such things as historical accounts (as distinct from literature) or water jugs (as distinct from art). It is a self-consciousness on the part of the maker, the viewer, or their communities which makes the difference.

A few years back in an exchange with Gombrich over the use of stylistic designations, H. W. Janson went a step further than his colleague. Granting Gombrich's point that all period terminology is value-charged, Janson looked ahead to the time when its "relative importance will probably shrink as art historians turn increasingly to non-Western fields where such terms never existed."³¹ In actual fact, however, these terms and the notions of making, progress, and artistic achievement that go with them are being sent on ahead as a way to order all art. What one would hope is that the questions raised by the spreading out I have described would reverberate back on our own studies to question the use of those terms even here. For the study of art is an empirical, historical, and inevitably an ideological, rather than a theoretical, pursuit.

This formulation leads to more questions than it answers, but at least I think that the questions it leads to are real ones and worth pursuing. Let me close with one important question. In turning away

²⁹Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, English trans. (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), esp. pp. 229–300.

³⁰Stanley E. Fish, "How Ordinary Is Ordinary Language?" *New Literary History* 5 (1973): 52–53.

³¹H. W. Janson, "Criteria of Periodization in the History of Art," *New Literary History* 1 (1970): 121–22.

Svetlana Alpers

from style as historical ordering to the mode of making, how do we then account for continuity, for the fact that art (the arts) has a history? This is essentially the problem of the relationship of a maker to the tradition of making. In asking it we are right back where we started.

I am more and more dissatisfied with the convention of "artistic problems" which seems to me to explain continuity after the fact by defining, in terms of problems posed and problems solved, the one path taken of the many that were indeed available. Let us consider the phenomenon—which provides interesting parallels between seventeenth-century art and the art of our time—of an artist "finding himself." Look at an early, representational painting by Clyfford Still, for example, and a history painting by Vermeer. At a certain point early in their careers, both Still and the Dutch painter turned away from an established mode (and in each case from one that was highly valued at the time—away from representation and away from narration) to something else at which they were both much better. Still turned to large abstractions, Vermeer to small renderings of women in interiors. Do we call this "finding himself" or "taking on a style" (by which we mean hooking into the stylistic problematic of the time)? The problem occurs again in those artists with great old-age styles: Titian, say, or Rembrandt. It is noticeable that some artists paint in their old age in a way that is strikingly individual, out of kilter with the art of their contemporaries. But there again is the question. Do we account for this by saying that they are particularly in touch with themselves, or by saying that they are, like the aging scientists described by Thomas Kuhn, simply out of touch with the current paradigm of style?

My suspicion is that these are not questions that can be answered. For a dichotomy is built in (a false dichotomy to my way of seeing) between the individual style and the period style that cannot be bridged as long as we persist in speaking in stylistic terms. In taking on a modal way of thinking, we realistically link the maker, the work, and the world and leave the fiction of the stylistic problematic to be just that—one of the many modes in which man makes meaning of his experience.

**THE
CONCEPT
OF
STYLE** REVISED AND
EXPANDED EDITION

EDITED BY

BEREL LANG

CORNELL UNIVERSITY PRESS

ITHACA AND LONDON

Copyright © 1979, 1987 by Cornell University

All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations in a review, this book, or parts thereof, must not be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the publisher. For information, address Cornell University Press, 124 Roberts Place, Ithaca, New York 14850.

First published 1987 by Cornell University Press.

International Standard Book Number 0-8014-9439-7

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 86-16233

Printed in the United States of America

Librarians: Library of Congress cataloging information appears on the last page of the book.

The paper in this book is acid-free and meets the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council on Library Resources.



inv 9950