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Author(s): Erwin Panofsky

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Reflections on Historical Time

Erwin Panofsky

Translated by Johanna Bauman

As an epilogue to “Über die vier Meister von Reims,” a study attempting to assert a new chronology for the four master builders of the cathedral at Reims published in 1927 in the Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte, Erwin Panofsky wrote a short theoretical text on the problem of historical time. These theoretical reflections were reprinted as “Zum Problem der historischen Zeit” in a collection of Panofsky’s German essays of the nineteen-tens and twenties published in 1980.¹ More recently the entire study has been reprinted as part of a new collection containing all of Panofsky’s German writings.² These theoretical reflections were never meant to stand alone and are actually an epilogue to the appendix in which he addresses the chronology of the sculpture adorning the cathedral. Panofsky developed this chronology in the process of trying to reconstruct the building history because he found it necessary to use the stylistic attributes of the sculpture and sculptural decoration and their position on the building to determine when certain architectural elements were put in place. In attempting to connect the stylistic development of the sculpture to the building history, Panofsky discovered that there were limitations to applying stylistic change in establishing chronology because the presence of disparate styles in the same period of time seemed to contradict the possibility of drawing parallels between stylistic and historical developments.

This study was written at a time when Panofsky was working through the theoretical issues that would underlie the art historical methodology he would later develop in the United States after leaving Germany in 1933. For this rea-

1. See Erwin Panofsky, “Zum Problem der historischen Zeit,” *Aufsätze zu Grundfragen der Kunstwissenschaft*, ed. Hariolf Oberer and Egon Verheyen (Berlin, 1985), pp. 77–83.

2. See Panofsky, “Über die Reihenfolge der vier Meister von Reims,” *Deutschsprachige Aufsätze*, ed. Karen Michels and Martin Warnke, 2 vols. (Berlin, 1998), 2:100–40.

son, it should be read in conjunction with his important essays “Der Begriff des Kunstwollens,” “Das Problem des Stils in der bildenden Kunst,” and “Die Perspektive als symbolische Form,” in which Panofsky was coming to terms with the theories of his contemporaries Alois Riegl, Heinrich Wölfflin, and Ernst Cassirer, respectively. These essays, all published before 1927, focused on the anatomy of the art object as reflected in the problem of stylistic change and the problem of meaning per se.³ In considering the problem of historical time, Panofsky shifted his attention by looking at how stylistic divergences seem to contradict and make impossible the placement of works of art into a diachronic series, whereby his subject became the problem of history itself. By bringing together ideas about historical temporality from Georg Simmel’s 1916 essay “Das Problem der historischen Zeit” with Cassirer’s neo-Kantian emphasis on both time and space as the “pillars” upon which cognition and knowledge stand,⁴ Panofsky outlined the process by which it is possible to connect the cultural order and the natural order through the symbolic form of historical time.

While Panofsky’s study of the chronology at Reims, which was based upon the misconception that the no longer extant labyrinth held the key to understanding the building history of the cathedral, is outdated and of interest pri-

3. These early essays have been variously studied and translated; see Michael Ann Holly, *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1984); Sylvia Feretti, *Cassirer, Panofsky, and Warburg: Symbol, Art, and History*, trans. Richard Pierce (New Haven, Conn., 1989); and Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, trans. Christopher S. Wood (New York, 1991) and “The Concept of Artistic Volition,” trans. Kenneth J. Northcott and Joel Snyder, *Critical Inquiry* 8 (Autumn 1981): 17–33.

4. See Ernst Cassirer, “Mythischer, ästhetischer und theoretischer Raum,” in *Symbol, Technik, Sprache*, ed. Ernst Wolfgang Orth and John Michael Krois (Hamburg, 1985), p. 93: “Raum und Zeit nehmen schon, wenn man sie lediglich als *Objekte* der Erkenntnis faßt, eine besondere und ausgezeichnete Stellung ein: sie bilden innerhalb des architektonischen Baues der Erkenntnis die beiden Grundpfeiler, die das Ganze tragen und das Ganze zusammenhalten.” See also Georg Simmel, “Das Problem der historischen Zeit” (1916), *Brücke und Tür: Essays des Philosophen zur Geschichte, Religion, Kunst, und Gesellschaft*, ed. Michael Landmann (Stuttgart, 1957), pp. 3–31.

ERWIN PANOFSKY began his career as a scholar in Germany in the early twentieth century. After emigrating to the United States he became an influential figure in the development of the art historical discipline through the publication of such books as *Studies in Iconology*, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, and *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art* and through his art history professorship at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton University, where he taught until his death in 1968. JOHANNA BAUMAN received her doctorate in art history from the University of Virginia in 2000. A specialist in medieval and Renaissance gardens and landscape history, she is currently working at the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design, and Culture in New York City, where she is overseeing the design and implementation of a NEH-funded digital archive of historic gardens and landscapes.

marily to the specialist in the historiography of medieval art history,⁵ his observations on historical time are relevant in attempting to reconstruct the genesis of Panofsky's art historical methodology. The most significant ideas articulated in the reflections on historical time are related to the discussion of periods and their validity, a theme Panofsky develops more fully in *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art*,⁶ as well as the attempt to reconcile the polarization of knowledge between the *Naturwissenschaften* (natural sciences) and the *Geisteswissenschaften* (cultural sciences or humanities), making possible a greater understanding of human culture, which is one of the central points of "The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline." The importance of this enterprise is frequently discussed in the literature and is fundamentally related to Panofsky's neo-Kantian roots.⁷ In addition to outlining these larger themes, it is in a footnote to the text on historical time that he first draws the connection between the connoisseur and the art historian, both of whom, according to Panofsky, are engaged in an organic process of understanding whereby the diagnosis and the identification of symptoms take place all at once. While he does not cite the earlier essay in "The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline," the passage in the later work bears a strong resemblance to the text of the second footnote.⁸ There are aspects of the text, moreover—such as the discussion of primary and secondary orders in relation to natural and historical time—that seem to anticipate the distinction between primary and secondary subject matter so central to Panofsky's iconological method as outlined in "Iconography and Iconology: An Introduction to the Study of Renaissance Art."⁹

—Johanna Bauman

5. See Peter Kurmann, *La Façade de la cathédrale de Reims: Architecture et sculpture des portails: Étude archéologique et stylistique*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1987), 1:26–30.

6. Panofsky even cites his earlier text in *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art* (New York, 1972), p. 3 n. 2.

7. See Panofsky, "The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline," *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (1955; Chicago, 1982), p. 7 n. 6; originally published in *The Meaning of the Humanities*, ed. Theodore Meyer Greene (Princeton, N.J., 1938); for a discussion of the importance of this reconciliation, see Feretti, *Cassirer, Panofsky, and Warburg*, pp. 213–20, and Holly, *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History*, pp. 142–47. In a related essay, Edgar Wind effects a formal comparison between the methodologies of history and the natural sciences, leading him to conclude that both are objects of human knowledge and experience. Betraying his hermeneutic roots, Wind declares that both history and science are determined by the observing subject, whose intervention contributes to the final interpretation of data. The implication of Wind's essay is that developments in physics by such thinkers as Einstein and Heisenberg represent the sciences owning up to the fact that it is they who should aspire to be like the humanities and not the other way around. See Edgar Wind, "Some Points of Contact between History and the Natural Sciences," in *Philosophy and History: Essays Presented to Ernst Cassirer*, ed. Raymond Klibansky (New York, 1963), pp. 255–64.

8. See Panofsky, "The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline," pp. 18–19.

9. See Panofsky, "Iconography and Iconology: An Introduction to the Study of Renaissance Art," *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, pp. 28–29; originally published in *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (New York, 1939).

In the preceding text, the author has dared to propose a provisional and in many cases emendable grouping of the most important sculptures at Reims. Such an undertaking arose out of the realization that attempting to reevaluate the succession of architects at Reims also required taking a position on the problem of the sculpture. (It is, however, up to more qualified scholars to rectify any erroneous claims and, especially, to explore more closely the relationship of Reims to Amiens, as well as the possible relationship of Reims to Chartres.)¹⁰ Nevertheless, the author has not lost sight of the difficulty of this task, especially because of the singular way in which observing the sculptures at Reims engenders an image of an unending, polychrome web, within which the most diverging threads become intertwined, running now beside each other and now in opposite directions. These individual stylistic directions (their marked differences in quality notwithstanding, which would seem to prohibit proposing a coherent, linear evolution) do not merely progress in parallel, indifferent to any interconnections; rather they penetrate one another and, not only that, they return again and again. Reims can be viewed from the standpoint of the problem of generations or—more to the point—from the standpoint of what may be called the problem of historical time because the problem of generations is really just a specific instance of historical time, and not even the most important one at that. In fact, this problem appears pressing enough here that we may be justified not only in coming to terms with Reims under the aspect of the problem of historical time but, conversely, in coming to terms with the problem of historical time under the aspect of Reims. In the course of fewer than three human lifetimes, an impressive number of sculptural works were created here: within the confines of a single stonemason's lodge, under the direction of masters who, it must be assumed, were vested with unlimited authority; in the course of a fairly short and nearly uninterrupted building activity; and in the middle of an artistic movement whose impetus came not from the outside but rather—if such a thing is possible—emerged spontaneously. One may ask whether it makes any sense at all to assimilate art historical observations into a temporal course of events, given the circumstances in which contemporary works are stylistically so disparate that they appear to have been created at different times. It is self-evident, after all (and from the outset serves as a warning not to renounce too hastily the conception of simultaneity on principle), that the conception of historical

10. One might also want to approach the questions already posed elsewhere, if perhaps the style of the Strassburg ecclesiastical workshop was not only influenced by Chartres but may also have been influenced by Reims.

simultaneity would require relinquishing its correlative counterpart, historical dissimultaneity, whereby the idea that there is a relationship between time and history would prove to be impractical, not to mention completely illogical.

From the start it must be conceded, as the art historian will instinctively and readily admit, that historical (cultural) time is not the same thing as astronomical (natural) time. When a historian says “around 1500,” he does not mean a point in time at which, according to a conventionally determined starting point, the earth has made 1500 rotations around the sun. Rather, he means a point in time that is indicated not only by concrete events but also by specific and concrete cultural characteristics. As everyone knows, the sixth decade of the fourteenth century (the well-known differences between the generation of twenty-year-olds and sixty-year-olds notwithstanding) signifies something completely different for the historical, linguistic, and intellectual customs of Byzantium than it does for the West, that it signifies something different for Italy than it does for Germany, and that it even signifies something different for Cologne than it does for Schwäbisch-Gmünd. Thus it turns out that each instance of historical time is dependent upon a specific historical space, except that—as has already been implied—this historical space has as little to do with geographical space as historical time does with astronomical time. If a Tuscan painter is stranded on a desert island and continues to paint, he will paint in a Tuscan style, despite the impact of his surroundings, which will likely have an effect on the materials he uses and the mood he conveys. If he should end up in Bruges, however, he not only changes his geographical location but also enters another cultural sphere of influence and, more importantly, another artistic context. It becomes clear that for the historian the conception of time as well as the conception of space are for the most part nothing other than a unity of meaning¹¹ (and for the art historian in particular, nothing other than a unity of style) that shapes a discrete group of isolated phenomena and ties them together into a network of phenomena. In this way a school, a workshop, and even an individual artist, not to mention genre-specific groups of phenomena such as the clay sculpture of Nuremberg, can

11. In keeping with his neo-Kantian influences, Panofsky frequently uses the word *Einheit* in compound words that refer to the synthesis effected when items or meanings are grouped together to form new concepts. In his translation of Cassirer's *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 4 vols. (New Haven, Conn., 1953), Ralph Mannheim has established the convention of translating *Einheit* as unity, which is why I have chosen the translation as well. It is important to note, however, that one might also translate a *unity* of meaning, of style, and of cause as a *unit* or *unification* of meaning, of style, and of cause. While these terms are synonyms of unity in English as well, such a translation reinforces the synthetic aspect of these unities by emphasizing their thingness.—TRANS.

be identified as art historical networks of space; the only difference is that this unity of meaning is viewed under the aspect of succession in the one case and under the aspect of contiguity in the other. Once one has accepted this, it becomes obvious that the world of the art historian represents above all an unending variety of individual frames of reference within which space and time determine and even bring one another into being. The gothic basilica, the Swabian wood sculpture of the fifteenth century, the Byzantine illuminations of the post-iconoclastic period, the sculpture of the Parthenon, the art of Albrecht Dürer all constitute such frames of reference in which a particular segment of historical space is observed and analyzed within a particular span of historical time (or, conversely, a particular span of historical time is framed by a particular historical section of space). And each of these frames of reference exist within a limited, but increasingly complex, extension of the space-time continuum that takes the spatial and temporal components and weaves them together, giving rise to an essentially indivisible unified structure determined by its individual parts. This may be seen most clearly in the fact that every attribution of a work of art represents a judgment process by which a temporal and spatial attribution are made all at once, without giving the one precedence over the other. If a connoisseur, whose judgment ultimately implicitly contains everything that the analysis of an art historian explicitly carries out,¹² identifies a sculpture

12. Lying at the root of the argument between connoisseurs and art historians [*Kunstwissenschaftler*] is an alternative that has been assumed erroneously. The word *cancer* coming from the medical diagnostician communicates everything that the medical theoretician can explicitly demonstrate about this illness (for even if the basis for the diagnosis that has just become evident is only one symptom of a hundred, the demonstration of the other ninety-nine, inasmuch as they are symptoms of cancer, are already anticipated in the act of making the diagnosis). In the same way the connoisseur's attribution Esais van der Velde (which automatically entails the further determination north Netherlandish and first quarter of the seventeenth century) implicitly contains, if for the most part unconsciously, everything that an art historical analysis seeks to lay out explicitly with respect to composition of space, figures, and light, taking a position on the problem of landscape, and so on. It follows from this that judgments based on connoisseurship and art historical knowledge [*Kunstwissenschaft*] are neither mutually exclusive nor complementary, but rather represent the twofold aspect of the same thing. For when an art historian explicates what the connoisseur diagnoses, the artistic diagnosis is itself connected to the possibility of art historical proof because although the diagnosis has come into being in the realm of subjective intuition, it nevertheless makes a claim to the complete context of objective validity. Just as it lies in the essence of art historical analysis to be potentially contained in the judgment of the connoisseur, so too it lies at the essence of the judgment of the connoisseur to be transformed into an art historical analysis. And in fact, for this reason, the judgment of the connoisseur cannot actually be proven, but can only be made somewhat logical as part of such a transformation. For an appeal to individual symptoms, such as the form of folds or fingernails, only means the reduction of the substance of the judgement, whereas bringing in documents is only equal to a confirmation from a completely different side because the documents would have sufficed to identify the work of art in question without the judgment of the connoisseur.

as late gothic, he is able to do this only because he is familiar with an artistic circle within which the stylistic attribution into the later gothic period is possible, and if he identifies it as north German he can do so only because he can cite an artistic period in which this style was possible in northern Germany.

Thus this endless multiplicity of frames of reference, which seems to primarily constitute the world of the art historian, amounts to a confusing and unformalizable chaos. If, we may ask, historical time itself is only valid within a particular historical space and, conversely, historical space is nothing other than that realm into which we superimpose the course of a particular amount of historical time, are we not then faced with a completely inhomogeneous contiguity of such frames of reference, which, to use Simmel's terminology, remain frozen in self-sufficient isolation and irrational specificity?¹³ Mustn't we, in fact, refrain from imposing anything like an absolute temporal order on the totality of these frames of reference, which, after all, seem to stand opposite one another as completely incommensurable entities? For if within these frames of reference individual historical and spatial values are valid, in other words, if without them both space and time must be viewed not only as concrete objects [*quantum*], but also as qualities [*quale*], then it is incontrovertible that Massacio's period of artistic production no more represents a mere part of a homogenous amount of time than the artistic circles of Florence or Verona represent merely a section of a homogenous region of space. Nevertheless, this consideration need not cause us to question whether or not we can view history in its entirety as homogeneous and always ordered. We must, however, be willing to concede that this order is, as it were, a secondary one. One might say that this order can only be realized after the fact, in other words, through a reanchoring of the historically qualified frames of reference within the course of homogeneous natural time and in the breadth of homogeneous natural space. All that is given is the artistic object, and the primary order that we can impose upon this endless multiplicity is actually based on nothing more than meaningful connections and frames of reference. The other circumstances of which we may be certain are that these objects were created at some point and somewhere by real persons who lived at a particular time and in a particular location, that these persons' work was influenced by the existence of a real artistic environment and a real artistic tradition, and that we can be informed about their production by dispatches of all sorts: Reims cathedral

13. See Simmel, "Das Problem der historischen Zeit." Our conception touches in many ways upon that of Simmel without, however, covering all of the same issues, to begin with because Simmel does not see that the problem of historical time is connected to the problem of historical space.

was begun in 1211 and partially dedicated in 1241; Filippino Lippi experienced a particular stretch of the course of astronomical time and worked in very particular places in geographical space; he was able to see the work of Massacio, but Massacio could not have seen his work; and so on. As a result, it becomes possible, indeed necessary, to reassociate the primary and therefore inhomogenous order, arranged according to culturally determined temporal and spatial frames of reference, with the secondary (because, in relation to works of art, dates, documents, and biographical information are for us in fact secondary sources) and therefore homogenous order, arranged according to naturally determined temporal and spatial connections. These broader or narrower unities of meaning that we project onto historical phenomena are, at the same time, unities of cause that actually bind phenomena to one another in a concrete manner [*in concreto*]. These smaller or larger¹⁴ frames of reference, in which we see symbolized a meaningful and, as it were, purely static coherence, are at the same time relational systems, within which and between which dynamic connections can be established. These are connections that political history is accustomed to referring to as *purpose* and *consequence*, *cause* and *effect*, *action* and *reaction*—while art historians designate these with such terms as *influence* and *reception*, *stimulus* and *response*, *tradition* and *innovation*—and whose discovery may not be the goal, but the inevitable outcome of every grouping based on stylistic criteria. Regardless of their self-sufficiency, the seemingly relative, one might say incommensurable, frames of reference are, however, able to be brought into an absolute, albeit indirect, order. Natural time and natural space are, as it were, the constants to which countless variables can and must be related again and again (in other words, we locate a particular span of historical time in a particular stretch of natural time, no differently than we locate a particular segment of historical space in a particular place in geographical space). And this is precisely what determines the essence of a historical phenomenon: that it represents, on the one hand, an object of knowledge that transcends the scope of natural space and time but is, on the other hand, fixed at a very particular moment in natural time and in a very particular place in natural space. Lightning striking on a particular day in a particular location is, regardless of its singularity, not yet a historical event until it sets a cathedral on fire or strikes down a prominent person and thereby intervenes in a particular context. If a collection of art objects of unknown provenance and time of creation were to appear somewhere in the market, they would not, regardless of their significance, be historical documents because they could not be ordered with a particular context of natural space and time.

14. See below, note 16.

This inherent problem of the historical discipline, which, as it were, employs two very different conceptions of time and space but which, at the same time, must always be related to one another, explains all of those paradoxes that would seem to force us into a kind of skepticism, if not nihilism. It is only the result of the duplicity of terms that the same quantum of natural space, historically speaking, in one moment seems to possess a larger, and in another moment a more limited expanse. And that the same quantum of natural time, historically speaking, in one moment encompasses a larger, in another moment a more limited significance. (So that it would make sense to claim that the Occidental artistic circle in the age of the international style around 1400 was narrower than it was in 1450, or that the fifteenth century in the Netherlands signifies a longer development than it does in Byzantium, not to mention the fourteenth century in the Netherlands itself.)¹⁵ And the resulting duplicity of terms seems to make the conception of simultaneity historically untenable. Simultaneity itself may either be understood in terms of natural or historical time. And just as at any given time the historical expanse of a particular geographical area—and the historical content of a particular span of astronomical time—will be determined by the narrowness or breadth of its context and causality, within which the localized phenomena are connected to one another, so too we may say that actual, naturally occurring simultaneity approaches historical simultaneity to the extent that there is a compression of the contextual and causal connections between the phenomena, in other words, to the extent that the historical space to which they belong becomes narrower. The one extreme is represented by two closely connected works, two creations by the same artistic personality in which the difference between natural and historical simultaneity can be practically ignored. The opposite extreme is seen in two conceivably unconnected works, such as an African sculpture made in 1530 and Michelangelo's Medici Madonna, in light of which the difference is so great that the connecting natural simultaneity is historically irrelevant. In the cases that lie between these, however, the concept of historical simultaneity may be used but is made relative by the fact that something akin to a region of historical simultaneity is created not by the coincidence of two or more isolated phenomena in a natural point in time but rather merely by the coincidence of two or more frames of reference in one (depending on the scope of the more or less extensive total context)¹⁶ stretch of time.

15. It must be taken into account, however, that these judgments are also dependent in part upon the richness of the remaining evidence and on the extent of the existing research on the subject.

16. The question of the largest or smallest frame of reference is a purely factual one. The breadth of the (in each case) smallest frame of reference is determined by the possibility of demonstrating differences, so that within the network known as *Rembrandt* a whole host of

Thus the task of dating a given work of art may be broken down into the problem of first seeking out the smallest frame of reference into which we may insert it most sensibly and, second, fixing this smallest frame of reference in natural time. Every historical phenomenon, however, must necessarily belong to a multitude of frames of reference. The human beings who created it lived through a particular number of years and not only left a series of older generations behind them but also witnessed a series of younger generations growing up beside them. They entered into new spheres of influence through their own journeys and through contact with traveling artists or works of art. Thus each of their creations in a sense represents the intersection of numerous frames of reference that confront each other as products of different spaces and times and whose interaction in each instance leads to a unique result.¹⁷ For this reason, the formula must be extended, such that dating means balancing, in other words (first) searching for all of the smallest and at the same time recognizable frames of reference that, as it were, approach the intersection within the observed phenomenon and (second) to locate this point of intersection in the course of natural time.

Perhaps it is precisely from this point that it becomes clear the extent to which and in what sense a continuous temporal order of artistic phenomena is possible despite differences of type, generation, and quality. The broader the scope of research becomes and the more it fathoms the ramifications and complications of individual subjects, the more precisely it will know how, on the one hand, to assess and weigh the diverging historical worth of numeric dates (so that it will become clear what 1230 means with respect to the various sculptural groups of one and the same cathedral) and, on the other hand, to be able to discover in the most backward as well as in the most developed, in the poorest as well as in the most outstanding work the traces of what the works already reveal, in spite of their backwardness and poor quality, or what they do not yet reveal, in spite of their progressiveness and quality. In this way one is able to acknowledge historical dissimultaneity in the objectively simultaneous (and vice versa), just as the opposite one is able to discover the objectively simultaneous in the his-

smaller frames of reference can and must be distinguished. The breadth of the largest frame of reference is determined by the possibility of finding connections so that, for example, we may be able to speak of a western artistic region or the art of the Mediterranean, but are not yet able to assert a frame of reference that would be able to encompass the Fiji islands.

17. The works of the Bamberger *Heimsuchungsmeister* (Master of the Visitation), for example, belong both to the Bamberg frame of reference and the Reims frame of reference; to the late romanesque frame of reference and the high gothic frame of reference. The same applies to the late work of the Bamberger *Chorschrankenmeister* (Master of the Choir Stall), but with completely different assumptions and a completely different result.

torically dissimultaneous (and vice versa). Thus the Wetzlaer sculptures, as old-fashionedly romanesque as they may appear to be and to a certain extent are, in fact prove to be post-Bambergian, and—within their own artistic circle!—to bear characteristics of the period around 1260. And thus the task of creating a chronology of Reims, although far from solved, may, in a very particular sense, be identified as a legitimate undertaking.