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On the Problem of Describing and Interpreting Works of the Visual Arts

Erwin Panofsky

Translated by Jaś Elsner and Katharina Lorenz

In the eleventh of his *Antiquarian Letters*, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing discusses a phrase from Lucian's description of the painting by Zeuxis called *A Family of Centaurs*: 'at the top of the painting a centaur is leaning down as if from an observation point, smiling' (*ano de tes eikonos hoion apo tinos skopes Hippokentauros tis . . .*). 'This as if from an observation point,

Except for a few changes, that partly emerged from the discussion, this article presents the thread of a talk, that was given on 20 May 1931, to the Kiel section of the Kant Society. It explores the principles that guide an art historian particularly interested in iconographic interpretation in his practical work. The task of the author therefore is not to examine the problems of such interpretative work systematically but rather to exemplify its methodological consequences. And it should not be taken as sign of his undecidedness that he frequently refers back to his own earlier essays.

See Erwin Panofsky, 'Zum Problem der Beschreibung und Inhaltsdeutung von Werken der bildenden Kunst', *Logos* 21 (1932): 103–19. In our earlier translation of Panofsky's 1925 essay, 'On the Relationship of Art History and Art Theory', *Critical Inquiry* 35 (Autumn 2008): 33–71, we sought to highlight the rigorous neo-Kantianism of Panofsky's theoretical arguments by using the English vocabulary of what has become the standard Cambridge translation of Kant's works. So *Sinn* was rendered as 'sense' and *sinnlich* as 'sensible'. Given Panofsky's attempt, in 'On the Problem of Describing and Interpreting Works of the Visual Arts', to accommodate and respond to positions advocated by intellectual opponents from distinctly non-Kantian backgrounds—such as the work of Martin Heidegger explicitly as well, perhaps, as that of Hans Sedlmayr implicitly—and also his undoubted debt to Karl Mannheim's non-Kantian sociology of *Weltanschauung*, it would be perverse here to stick rigidly to this model. Moreover, in such parts of the piece that survive in the 1939 and 1955 revisions in English, we find Panofsky himself constantly using 'meaning' as opposed to 'sense' for *Sinn*. Of course that Panofsky, or a neo-Kantian like Ernst Cassirer, or even Immanuel Kant himself, should necessarily be expected to accept the conventions of scholars in the late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries for the translation of Kant into English, is absurd.

The translators would like to record their thanks to Richard Neer and Joel Snyder for their comments and suggestions.—TRANS.

Lessing notes, obviously implies that Lucian himself was uncertain whether this figure was positioned further back, or was at the same time on higher ground. We need to recognize the logic of ancient bas-reliefs where figures further to the back look over those at the front, not because they are actually positioned above them but because they are meant to appear as if standing behind.¹

Lessing's remarks confront us with the problematic nature of a process we generally take to be very simple and natural because it defines the most basic level at which we deal with a work of art. That is, he highlights the problems of pictorial description as such. Lessing directs our attention to the fact that in the second century after Christ a cultivated person familiar with a highly developed illusionism, to be found for example in Pompeian frescoes, could not simply recognize or describe the pure content of a picture from the fifth century BC, but he had to resort to what we might call the topographical indication of a point on the upper part of the picture plane (*ano*) and to a deliberately unspecific designation (*hoion apo tinos skopes*). For Lucian to have been unambiguous, as Lessing could be, he would have to have understood the work of art not from the vantage point of the second century AD but from that of the fifth century BC. He would also have needed to bring to mind identical or comparable cases and thus to have been aware of changes in the possibilities of spatial expression over the period. In short, he would have to have modeled his description not on the immediate perception of a given object within the picture but on the

1. The passage is in George Lessing, *Briefe, antiquarischen Inhalts* (Berlin, 1778), p. 81. Panofsky's discussion does not note that the original text of Lucian (*Zeuxis or Antiochus 3*) makes clear that what is described is a copy of the original painting (already said by Lucian to be lost). This means that some of the issues of misunderstanding situated by Lessing and Panofsky in Lucian's court may in principle be attributable to the copyist. This makes no difference to the conceptual thrust of Panofsky's case.—TRANS.

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knowledge of general principles of depiction, that include an understanding of style which only a historical consciousness could have provided.

1

To pick a random example: when we try to describe the famous resurrection by Matthias Grünewald, it is clear that the common differentiation between a purely formal and a representational description cannot be upheld, at least not with regard to works of the visual arts (but in my opinion the same applies *mutatis mutandis* to architecture). A purely formal description would not allow even the use of terms like *stone*, *human*, or *rock* but would in principle have to be restricted to colours, contrasted with each other in numerous nuances, that can be combined and drawn together to suggest more or less ornamental, or more or less tectonic, complexes of form, that are frankly meaningless and constitute spatially ambiguous elements of the composition. If we allow ourselves to call the dark area at the top of the picture the night sky or the remarkably differentiated pools of light in the centre a human body, and then if we say that this body stands in front of the night sky we have already put a spatially ambiguous formal entity in relation to a precise and three-dimensional perceptual content [*Vorstellungsinhalt*]. A formal description in the strict sense is simply impossible in practice: any description will—even before it opens—already have had to renegotiate the purely formal elements of depiction into symbols of something depicted. By doing so, a description, whatever path it takes, develops from the purely formal sphere into the realm of meaning. Even in what we usually call a formal model of analysis (for example, in the sense meant by Heinrich Wölfflin), not only the form (that is not my topic here), but also the meaning must be part of the description. However, and this is the key factor, the meaning in this case lies on a more fundamental level than the kind of meaning with which an iconographical study is concerned. When I call the accumulation of light and colour in the centre of the picture a hovering human being with holes in his hands and feet, then, to repeat, I breach the limits of purely formal description; but I still remain within a sphere of meaningful imagination in which the viewer can partake—which is familiar to him from his habitual visual experience, his sense of touch, and other sensory perceptions, in short, from his immediate life experience. However, when I call this accumulation of light and colour an ascending Christ, then I set an additional requirement for further knowledge because someone unaware of the content of the Gospels (for example) might take Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper* to depict an animated dinner party, that—judging from the purse—has fallen into discord on account of some financial disagreement.

Let us call the primary level of meaning, that we can grasp from our direct life experience, the sphere of phenomenal meaning, that we may further differentiate into factual meaning and expressive meaning (since it is important to tell the difference between a pictorial sign as the depiction of a human being and as the depiction of a beautiful, ugly, sad or happy, eminent or dull human being).

Let us call the secondary level of meaning, that we can only grasp fully on the basis of knowledge conveyed by literature, the sphere of meaning dependent on content. I might remark that, within this meaning dependent on content, the art historian has no right to differentiate between ideas which he assumes to be artistically relevant (for example, the reference to the Bible) and those which he believes to be awkward allegories or abstruse symbols, that can be ignored. This distinction, that is so popular, is not between what is artistically relevant and what is not but between what is accidentally (and who can say for how much longer?) familiar within the common culture and what we have to relearn by unearthing sources long lost. It is by no means impossible that in the year 2500 the public will find the story of Adam and Eve no less alien than we now find the ideas that underlie the religious allegories of the Counter-Reformation or the humanist allegories of the Albrecht Dürer circle. At the same time, no one can deny that to understand the Sistine Chapel ceiling it is essential to know that Michelangelo depicted the fall of man and not a *déjeuner sur l'herbe*.²

2

Let us return to Grünewald. We cannot know what the picture conveys in terms of meaning dependent on content without specific previous knowledge taken from literature. We can, however, describe it in terms of its phenomenal meaning, as the depiction of a human being with arms wide, rising from a box amidst an occurrence of light, while some armed men cower in a perturbed fashion and others have tumbled to the ground

2. Compare Panofsky, 'Introduction,' *Hercules am Scheideweg und andere antike Bildstoffe in der neuen Kunst* (Berlin, 1930), pp. vii–xi.

What Panofsky means by this very general reference is unclear since the volume has a brief foreword (pp. vii–xiv) and then plunges in *medias res*. But he was characteristically prescient here. One of the translators (Elsner), when working in the Courtauld Institute in the 1990s, once interviewed a perfectly bright young lady for an undergraduate place and tested her visual skills by showing her a good photograph of Michelangelo da Caravaggio's *Madonna of the Pilgrims* from Sant' Agostino in Rome. Despite reasonable visual acuity, at no point in the course of a half-hour's discussion and some prompting, was this potential and adequately qualified prospective student able to identify the biblical story or the reference to Mary and Jesus; by 1995, let alone 2500, what Panofsky calls the knowledge familiar to the common culture had already begun to slip into the realm of the deeply abstruse.—TRANS.

with gestures of terror or bedazzlement. This description assumes only that we have looked hard at the picture and related it to concepts familiar from our everyday experience. And, yet, even this is not unproblematic. For with the picture before our eyes, we all know from experience what a human being is, what terror is, and what hovering is. Yet the problem lies in the act of drawing all this together. We only have to imagine a painting by Franz Marc instead of the Grünewald—for instance *The Mandrill* in the Hamburger Kunsthalle³—to realize that, while we might have all the concepts to uncover the phenomenal meaning at our disposal, it is not always possible simply to apply them to the artwork in question. In banal terms, it is not always easy to recognize what is portrayed in the picture. We may know what the kind of monkey called a mandrill is, but in order to recognize him in this picture we have to be tuned to the principles of expressionist representation which govern the design here. Experience has taught us that this mandrill, which may appear innocuous today, could not even be identified at the time of its purchase (people went about desperately looking for his snout so as to get their bearings), since expressionist form was still so novel fifteen years ago.

We are here confronted with the reverse problem from that posed by Lucian. In 1919, the people of Hamburg were unable to identify the object painted by Franz Marc because they were not yet familiar with the representational principles of expressionism; Lucian was not able to grasp the consecutive arrangement of the figures painted by Zeuxis because the representational principles of early Greek art had already vanished. In both cases it is apparent that to grasp even the most mundane of experiential conceptions or features in a picture—and hence offer an appropriate description—depends upon familiarity with the general representational principles which govern its design, that is, an awareness of stylistic form which can only be acquired by a sense of historical situation. In the case of Marc that means a subconscious habituation to new forms of visual expression; in the case of Zeuxis that means a return to the past. Even if this sounds paradoxical, it is thus the case that a work of art, unknown to the describer with regard to period or style, has to be classified by him within the history of style even before it can be described.

In the case of the painting by Grünewald, we might unproblematically recognize that the human beings are humans and the rocks are rocks. But on what does the recognition that Christ is hovering depend? The answer

3. Franz Marc was one of the founders of the Blue Rider movement in German expressionism. *The Mandrill*, painted in 1913 and now in Munich, caused an outcry when it was purchased for the Hamburger Kunsthalle in 1919—TRANS.

is that he is located in empty space, without a ground line on which to stand. And this answer is also fully correct (even without the tilted curving of his bodily motion and without the helical rising of the cloth which considerably enhances the dynamics of the process of hovering); but it should be added that this consideration, which works in this case, could be completely misleading in other cases.

If we were to turn to a work from the end of the first millennium such as the *Birth of Christ* from the Gospels of Otto III in Munich,⁴ we may observe that here various elements of the picture—the manger with the Christ child, the ox and ass, and not least Mary—are all positioned in empty space without any hint of a standing line, high above the curiously spherical shapes which denote the ground. And yet, in this case these objects are not meant to hover (even if an untrained observer or a child could understand it in this way), for here the natural or spatial regulations, that are miraculously disabled in Grünewald's image, are not in effect at all. In a miniature like this the dark background does not represent the sky but is an abstract foil, and the human beings and objects are not understood or depicted as real forms in nature which displace space and are governed by gravity but as weightless vessels with a spiritual content or a factual meaning. Grünewald's Christ hovers because the whole representation (in all its irrationality) is governed by the rules of perspectival and plastic naturalism, in light of which the suspension of a body in the void must be interpreted as hovering. The Mary of the Ottonian miniature does not rise because in that case the whole representation is regulated by an antiperspectival and nonplastic spiritualism, in light of which the suspension of a body in the void does not convey anything at all about its actual spatial positioning.

So, in order to describe a work of art appropriately, even if only at the level of phenomenal meaning, we must classify it stylistically (even if only subconsciously and within a fraction of a second) because otherwise we have no means of knowing whether we must apply the norms of modern naturalism or the norms of medieval spiritualism to this suspension in the void. We become aware with some surprise that in a seemingly simple sentence such as 'a human being rises from a grave' we are deciding such difficult and general questions as the relationship between surface and depth, volume and space, stasis and dynamics; in short, we have studied

4. See *Das sogenannte Evangelarium Kaiser Ottos III*, vol. 1 of *Miniaturen aus Handschriften der Königlichen Hof- und Staatsbibliothek in München*, ed. Georg Leidinger (Munich, 1912), plate 17.

the work of art in relation to those 'fundamental problems of artistic creation', whose solution we denote as 'style'.⁵

3

From what I have argued so far, it follows that any initial description of a work of art (that is, an account of its phenomenal meaning) in fact subscribes to an interpretative position on issues of history and representation, even if only implicitly. Moreover, any description of iconography, that reveals meaning related to content, must inevitably go still further in the direction of interpretation. When we attempt to ascertain the meaning dependent on content of any work of art, we are on even less certain ground than when we use knowledge based on everyday experience to legitimize our description of Grünewald's picture as depicting a man hovering. And we cannot assume to be able to ascertain the meaning dependent on content simply by fitting a literary source to the monument or pulling together a range of sources from our store of knowledge which may reasonably seem to be related to it. And indeed we cannot assume that in every case we will be able to locate a relevant literary source at all. Rather, as with uncovering the phenomenal meaning, so in the case of meaning based on content, there needs to be a higher level of authority that legitimizes the synthesis of relevant concepts outside the work of art (in this case content transmitted through literature) in relation to the relevant pictorial aspects. In the case of the phenomenal meaning, this higher level of authority is the identification of style [*Stilerkenntnis*], while in the case of meaning dependent on content, it is the knowledge of types [*Typenlehre*]. I understand type here as a depiction in which a specific phenomenal meaning is so closely connected with the meaning dependent on content

5. Compare Panofsky, 'Über das Verhältnis der Kunstgeschichte zur Kunsttheorie: Ein Beitrag zu der Erörterung über die Möglichkeit kunstwissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe', *Deutschsprachige Aufsätze*, ed. Karen Michels and Martin Warnke, 2 vols. (Berlin, 1998), 2:1035–63, trans. Katharina Lorenz and Jaś Elsner under the title 'On the Relationship of Art History and Art Theory: Towards the Possibility of a Fundamental System of Concepts for a Science of Art', *Critical Inquiry* 35 (Autumn 2008): 43–71; and Edgar Wind, 'Zur Systematik der künstlerischen Probleme', *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* 18 (1925): 438–86, trans. Fiona Elliott under the title 'On the Systematics of Artistic Problems', *Art in Translation* 1, no. 2 (2009): 211–57. Incidentally, what applies to the identification of the object represented is also true of the artistic genre to which any given work of art belongs. It would be a misapprehension to assume that the genre-specific designation of an artwork could be determined as architecture, sculpture, drawing, or painting based purely on observation or on technical criteria; the terminological system of artistic genres (as is particularly evident in borderline cases such as monument, furniture, machine, and so on) is a system of style terms at its core.

that it immediately signals that content—for example, ‘Hercules with lion skin and club’ or ‘the crucifixion between Mary and St. John’.⁶

In a recent monograph, a picture by the Venetian baroque painter Francesco Maffei was taken to depict Salome with the head of John the Baptist.⁷ This identification is coherent in the sense that a decapitated male head is placed on a bowl, just as described in the Gospel of Matthew [see Matt. 14.9–11—TRANS.]. But what is surprising is that Salome carries a sword. Since she did not herself cut the Baptist’s head off, according to the text, she would have had to have taken the sword from the executioner. The presence of the sword prompts one to think that the image represents not Salome but Judith. For the sword is a significant element of the narrative characterisation of Judith, as a sign of her deed of liberation [see Judith 13.8–10—TRANS.]. Yet this assumption is itself complicated by the pictorial motif of the bowl, since no bowl is mentioned in the Book of Judith, and she is explicitly said to have given the head of Holofernes ‘to her maid and told her to thrust it into a sack’ [Judith 13.11—TRANS.].

So here one painting evokes two very different passages in the Bible, that fit the image equally badly. The bowl but not the sword implies Salome; the sword but not the bowl implies Judith. Because we have no further evidence, it is impossible to make a decision on the grounds of textual context alone. However, in this case, the history of types can shed further light on the problem. The history of types offers no example in which Salome carries Judith’s heroic sword, while, especially in North Italian art, there are comparatively numerous instances in which the bowl of John is transferred onto the depiction of Judith. Examples, which are certainly pictures of Judith, because of the presence of the maid, include paintings by Romanino and by Bernardo Strozzi in Berlin.⁸ The history of types—and only this history—entitles us to identify the Maffei picture as ‘Judith with the head of Holofernes’; and from this history’s perspective we can add that the decapitated head on its own, even if placed in a bowl of John, is less a reference to the Baptist than to the traditional type of the despot. This

6. Compare Panofsky, “‘Imago Pietatis’: Ein Beitrag zur Typengeschichte des ‘Schmerzensmanns’ und der ‘Maria Mediatrix’”, *Deutschsprachige Aufsätze*, 1:186–233, esp. pp. 230–31.

7. See Giuseppe Fiocco, *Venetian Painting of the Seicento and the Settecento* (Florence, 1929), plate 29.

8. Tellingly, the catalogues of the Karl-Friedrich-Museum first labelled the Romanino as *Salome*, and later as *Salome or Judith*. The transfer of the motif seems to have taken place around the middle of the sixteenth century because the type with the bowl of John (even as a devotional picture in its own right) had been fixed by then after a long sequence of transmission and propagation in so many examples that the visual consciousness automatically combined decapitated head with bowl: a decapitated head had to be in a bowl, so to speak, whether it was the head of John or of someone else.

rather simple case (that nicely depends on an analogy independent of textual sources) demonstrates that serious errors can occur if one discounts the history of types even when interpreting scenes whose historic or literary referents do not first have to be excavated but are still alive and accessible to us. On the other hand, it also shows the importance of the iconographic even for understanding purely aesthetic values. If one takes Maffei's picture to represent a lascivious girl with the head of a saint, one has to judge it on very different aesthetic grounds than if one sees it as a pious heroine with the head of a sinner.

In this case the history of types allows us to decide between two likely and potentially appropriate texts and to identify the one which matches the picture's meaning dependent on content. In other cases this history may guide us to obscure textual sources which seem hardly to relate to the picture at all. Dürer's so-called *The Dream of the Doctor* (copper engraving B. 76), when seen solely within the history of types, belongs to the genre of depictions of idleness which was widespread in the late medieval period, but—when seen in the context of moralistic tractates and poems—turns out to be closely connected with the relevant chapter in Sebastian Brant's *Ship of Fools*.⁹

Finally, there are cases in which the history of types spares us the search for a literary source from the outset or can help us understand, if we have searched for one in vain, why none exists. If one takes Auguste Renoir's *Still Life with Peaches*, that belongs to the type of still life free of meaning, it would be a mistake to hunt for a text to disclose the allegorical meaning of the fruit (although in studying female personifications of virtue it is common to find both images and texts where the peach is an attribute for *Veritas*).¹⁰ Again in the depiction of the god Mercury in certain medieval manuscripts we may find an eagle flying through the god's legs. There is no text to explain this oddity or any need for one because the ancient type of Mercury was winged, and the puzzle can simply be explained as a misconception of the draughtsman, who reinterpreted the wings around the divine messenger's legs as a complete bird.¹¹

To return once more to the picture by Grünewald, it represents a scene with Christ in the centre which takes place after his death on the cross (we

9. See Panofsky, 'Zwei Dürerprobleme' (Der sogenannte "Traum des Doktors" und die sogenannten "Vier Apostel"), *Deutschsprachige Aufsätze*, 1:337–89, esp. pp. 337–55.

10. See Panofsky, *Hercules am Scheideweg und andere antike Bildstoffe in der neuen Kunst*. The interpretation of the peach as an attribute of truth can be found, among others, in Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia of Uytbeeldinghe des Verstands* (Soest, 1971), s.v. 'verità'.

11. See A. Goldschmidt, 'Frühmittelalterliche illustrierte Enzyklopädien', *Vorträge der Bibliothek Warburg* (1923–24): 215–26, esp. 217 and fig. 1.

may base the authority of this claim on our common education). In order to establish a textual source, we flip through the passages in the Gospels that are chronologically relevant—only to find that there is nothing which fully corresponds to the iconography. The Gospels only narrate how the women close to the Redeemer (whose number may be one, two, or three, or are not mentioned at all) open the tomb and find it empty, and how one angel (or two) tells them that the Lord rose from the dead. Indeed we do not find the process of rising from the dead itself depicted before the twelfth century. Only a detailed study of further textual sources, and especially of the history of types, will tell us that what we call *The Resurrection of Christ* by Grünewald is in fact a highly complex combination of the actual rising-from-the-dead, the Ascension, and the Transfiguration.

4

In Martin Heidegger's book on Kant, there are some remarkable comments on the nature of interpretation, comments which at first sight only discuss the interpretation of philosophical writings but in fact characterize the problem of any interpretation:

Now if an interpretation [*Interpretation*] merely gives back what Kant has expressly said, then from the outset it is not a laying-out [*Auslegung*], insofar as the task of such a laying-out remains framed as the making visible in its own right of what Kant had brought to light in his ground-laying over and above the explicit formulation. Kant himself, however, was unable to say more about this. But with any philosophical knowledge in general, what is said in uttered propositions must not be decisive. Instead what must be decisive is what it sets before our eyes as still unsaid, in and through what has been said. . . . Certainly, in order to wring from what the words say, what it is they want to say, every interpretation [*Interpretation*] must necessarily use violence [*Gewalt*].¹²

We must accept that even our most unassuming descriptions of pictures and their content, since they are inevitably interpretations, are subject to

12. Martin Heidegger, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik* (Bonn, 1929), pp. 192–93; trans. Richard Taft under the title *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* (Bloomington, Ind., 1997), pp. 140–41. Note that this passage contrasts two German words *Interpretation* and *Auslegung* which are normally translated as 'interpretation'. Here Heidegger is distinguishing between two levels of interpretation: that which is concerned with what is stated explicitly (*Interpretation*) and that which brings out what has remained unsaid in an explicit sense, what may deliberately have been concealed or what the author meant to say but was unable to do so or did not have the means at his disposal to do so (*Auslegung*). Needless to say, Panofsky has hit upon something that was not only controversial in its time but must remain so.—TRANS.

the effects of Heidegger's argument. For even the apparently unproblematic statement of phenomenal meaning effectively brings to light 'what is unsaid', and, so, uses 'violence.' The fundamental question arises: who or what draws a line around this violence? First, there is an objective criterion dependent on purely empirical circumstances. For instance, the description of a picture or the interpretation of its content is 'wrong' when, for example, a strong shadow is taken to be a piece of fruit or an elk is mistaken for a hart (two cases which have happened in reality),¹³ just as the interpretation of a passage in Plato must be wrong if it assumes that the Greek word *aner* may be translated not as 'man' but as 'human being'. But over and above this objective and independent criterion, there have to be internal limits to the task of interpretation, and Heidegger himself points to this: 'Such violence, however, cannot be roving arbitrariness. The power of an idea [*Idee*] which shines forth must drive and guide the laying-out.'¹⁴ Yet, even this idea [*Idee*] is necessarily misleading in many cases, since it stems from the same subjectivity that produces the violence in the first place.¹⁵

I shall not take a stand here with regard to the philosophical question of interpretation. But the relevance to art history is as follows. The source of interpretation (that, to repeat, includes pure description) is the cognitive faculty and the knowledge of the interpreting subject, namely, of our vital experience of being (in relation to the phenomenal meaning) and our literary knowledge (in relation to meaning dependent on content). Now the objective corrective that confronts these subjective sources of knowledge is what we might call the history of transmission [*Überlieferungsgeschichte*], that is, in the case of phenomenal meaning the history of style and in the case of meaning dependent on content the history of types. This history of transmission supplies the boundaries within which we can apply violence. If we must disprove a potential meaning, then the history of transmission shows us what could not have been meant because, at a particular place or time, it was not possible to depict it or to imagine it.

The history of transmission is an objective corrective based on facts external to the specific objects discussed. The knowledge of style and the knowledge of types are extrinsic to any given work of art and cannot be derived from studying an individual artwork. This is the case in any disci-

13. See Rudolf Wustmann, 'Dürers Natursymbolik,' *Die Grenzboten* 63, no. 2 (1904): 148–56 and 'Von einigen Tieren und Pflanzen bei Dürer: Mit 13 Abbildungen,' *Zeitschrift für bildende Kunst* n.s. 22 (1911): 109–16, esp. 110–11.

14. Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, p. 141.

15. Panofsky uses the same word as Heidegger (*Idee*), attacking Heidegger's assumptions about the authority that drives interpretation and emphasizing the fundamentally subjective space in which Heidegger rests the interpretative impulse—TRANS.

pline, where the tool that acquires knowledge and the object one attempts to understand are reciprocally related and each effectively guarantees the other. Even the instruments of the physicist are subject to the laws of nature which they want to establish; one might say they almost contain the theory which is to be ascertained or refuted with their aid.¹⁶ The central place of objective fact most clearly emerges when interpretation reaches beyond meaning dependent on content and into the last and most elevated level, that (following Mannheim) we may call the region of documentary meaning¹⁷ or of intrinsic meaning [*Wesensinn*]. When someone greets us on the street, this act's meaning dependent on content is certainly a gesture of politeness (the phenomenal meaning may be described as lifting and tilting the head, while the expressive meaning can vary between friendliness, devotion, indifference, and irony). But over and above this, we receive the impression of a specific disposition which stands behind all these

16. Compare Wind, 'Experiment and Metaphysics', in *Proceedings of the Sixth International Congress of Philosophy*, ed. Edgar Sheffield Brightman (New York, 1927), pp. 217–24 and *Experiment und Metaphysik* (Hamburg, 1930); trans. C. Edwards under the title *Experiment and Metaphysics: Towards a Resolution of Cosmological Antinomies* (Oxford, 2001). Wind proves that what at first sight appears to be a vicious circle is really a methodological cycle ('circulus methodicus') in the course of which tool and object prove themselves through each other. This is like the old joke about the balancing pole: 'Father, why does the tightrope walker not fall down?' 'Because he holds on to the balancing pole!' 'But why does the balancing pole not fall down?' 'Silly boy, because he holds on to it firmly!' The punch line is that the alleged vicious circle does not foreclose the possibility of tightrope walking but facilitates it.

What can be said of the relationship between individual work and type also applies to the relationship between individual work and sequence of development, national style, and so on. In these cases again the classification of the individual work is based on a reciprocity of studying the individual case and drawing on our prior knowledge about general development. Let us assume that an art historian should find, in the archive of the town N. a document according to which the local painter X. was commissioned to produce an altar piece for the Church of St James in the year 1471, depicting a deposition from the cross with saints Philip and James, and he finds an altar exactly matching these specifications in the church. In a case of this kind, he would be very likely to identify this altar with the work attested in the document and to take pleasure in having discovered a securely dated and located object. But there is a definite possibility that the original altar perished during the iconoclasm of the 1520s and was replaced in 1540 with a new altar on the same subject by an immigrant painter from far away. In order to verify his identification, the art historian has to be able to judge whether the preserved work would have been possible at all around 1471 in the area of N.; that means he has to have a grasp of historical development and workshop practice which can only be established on the basis of dated and located monuments!

17. See Karl Mannheim, *Beiträge zur Theorie der Weltanschauungsinterpretation* (Vienna, 1923); trans. Paul Kecskemeti under the title 'On the Interpretation of *Weltanschauung*', *From Karl Mannheim*, trans. Kurt Wolff et al., ed. Wolff (New York, 1993), pp. 136–88.

For discussion of the importance of Mannheim for Panofsky, see Joan Hart, 'Erwin Panofsky and Karl Mannheim: A Dialogue on Interpretation', *Critical Inquiry* 19 (Spring 1993): 534–66, esp. 534–37 and 541–66, and Jeremy Tanner, 'Karl Mannheim and Alois Riegl: From Art History to the Sociology of Culture', *Art History* 32, no. 4 (2009): 755–84, esp. 757–59.

—TRANS.

phenomena. That is the impression of an inner structure to which mind, character, origin, surroundings, and daily circumstances contribute in equal measure and which is 'documented' in the act of greeting independently of the will and knowledge of the one who greets, like other gestures made by the same person. Likewise, but in a deeper and more general sense, the products of art are governed beyond their phenomenal meaning and their meaning dependent on content by an ultimate intrinsic meaning: the unintentional and subconscious self-revelation of a fundamental attitude towards the world which is characteristic in equal measure of the individual producer, the individual period, the individual people, and the individual cultural community. The magnitude of an artistic achievement in the end depends upon the extent to which the energy of such a particular worldview has been channelled into moulded matter and radiates towards its viewer. In this sense, a still life by Paul Cézanne is not only nice but as rich in content as a Madonna by Raphael. It is the ultimate task of interpretation to reach into this level of intrinsic meaning. For it has only reached its actual objective if it covers the aggregate of the different aspects of agency (not only formal factors such as the distribution of light and shadow, or the structuring of surface planes, or even the use of easel, chisel, or engraving tool) and accounts for all these as documents of a unified meaning related to a particular worldview. But in an enterprise like this—in which the exegesis of a work of art is elevated onto the same level as that of a philosophical system or a religious belief, for instance—we must abandon even the knowledge of literary sources, at least in the sense of sources which can be directly related to the relevant work of art. We may well find texts which can enlighten us directly about what Dürer's *Melancholia* represents in terms of its meaning dependent on content, but there are no texts to throw clear light on what it represents in terms of its intrinsic meaning. Even if Dürer himself had commented directly on the ultimate aim of his work (as later artists have attempted on various occasions), it would soon be clear that even these comments miss the true intrinsic meaning of the sheet and, rather than furnish us with its correct interpretation, become themselves objects in urgent need of interpretation.¹⁸ After all, just as the degree of politeness in lifting a hat is a matter of the will and consciousness of the person doing the greeting, but it is not in his power to control what message about his innermost nature others may take from his

18. Compare Erwin Panofsky, 'Die Scala Regia im Vatikan und die Kunstanschauungen Berninis', *Deutschsprachige Aufsätze*, 2:897935, esp. 934–35.

gesture, so likewise even the artist knows only 'what he parades' but not 'what he betrays' (to quote an intellectually stimulating American).¹⁹

The source of the interpretation of intrinsic meaning is effectively the worldview of the interpreter, as is no less apparent in Heidegger's interpretation of Kant than it is in the accounts of Rembrandt by Carl Neumann or Jacob Burckhardt.²⁰ That is, this source of knowledge is fundamentally subjective, and one may say that its absolutely personal nature is even more in need of an objective corrective than either the vital experience of living (with which we grasp the phenomenal meaning) or the literary knowledge (with which we uncover the meaning dependent on content). Such a corrective does exist, and it belongs to the sphere of historically situated factuality which provides a boundary that must not be crossed by any interpretive 'violence' in order not to turn it into 'roving arbitrariness.' It is a sense of general intellectual history which clarifies what was possible within the worldview of any specific period and any specific cultural circle, just as the history of styles delimits the sphere of what kind of representation was possible in a given context or at any time and the history of types clarifies what was imaginable. In summary we might say, the history of styles instructs us about how pure form coalesces with specific factual and formal meaning within the process of historical change; the history of types instructs us about how factual and formal meaning coalesces with specific meaning dependent on content within the process of historical change; finally, a general sense of intellectual history instructs us about how meanings dependent on content (for example, the concepts of language or the melismas of music) are redolent of the outlook of a specific worldview within the process of historical change.

So, for example, art historians use the intellectual testimonia of the

19. This was C. S. Peirce, with whom Panofsky's student Wind had studied in the 1920s. The reference is to C. S. Peirce, 'Issues of Pragmatism', *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. Charles Hartenshorne, Paul Weiss, and A. W. Burks, 8 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1958–1967), 5:297, ¶444n: 'it is the belief men betray and not that which they parade which has to be studied'. See David Summers, 'David Summers Replies', *New Literary History* 17 (Winter 1986): 333–44, esp. n. 4, and 'Meaning in the Visual Arts as a Humanistic Discipline', in *Meaning in the Visual Arts: Views from the Outside*, ed. Irving Lavin (Princeton, N.J., 1995), pp. 9–24, esp. p. 15. We are most grateful to Adrian Anagnost for this reference.—TRANS.

20. Neumann (1860–1934) was a Jew converted to Lutheranism who held the art history chair at Heidelberg from 1911 to his retirement in 1929. His many works on Rembrandt are shaped by nationalistic agendas and presented Rembrandt as the model for a northern *Kunstwollen* both ancestral to German culture and opposed to the Italian Renaissance. Burckhardt (1818–1897), the great Swiss historian of the Renaissance, who held the chairs of art history at Zurich (1855–58) and Basel (1886–93) as well as the chair of history at Basel (1858–86) and was Wölfflin's teacher, was a great apologist of Italy and saw Rembrandt in particular as resisting both the essential energies of the Renaissance and the ideal beauty of the human figure.—TRANS.

Renaissance (among which naturally the writings of Dürer himself must be included) to show the worldview within which Dürer's *Melancholia* united a *typus Acediae* with a *typus Geometriae* and thus for the first time brought together in a single conception the sufferings of creatures with a sense of fateless agency.²¹ The possibilities of this worldview alone draw a line against what we might otherwise lean towards interpreting as depression [*Weltschmerz*] in the modern sense. Likewise the intellectual history of the eighteenth century allows historians of philosophy to see the limits of a Kantian ontological exegesis, provided that such an exegesis has the aspirations and the duties of conforming to the rules of historical interpretation.²²

Let me summarise the problems of art-historical interpretation I have described here in a table. Naturally, such a schema is always in danger of

21. Compare the second edition currently in preparation of the study compiled together with Fritz Saxl, *Dürers 'Melancholia I': Eine Quellen- und Typen- geschichtliche Untersuchung* (Leipzig, 1932). The revision was finally published as Raymond Klibansky, Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion, and Art* (London, 1964). The reasons that a book under revision in 1932 should only see its second edition in 1964 are complex. With the move of the two original authors into exile, the project stalled. Saxl persuaded Panofsky to allow him to bring in Klibansky to put it all together. It was eventually agreed that Klibansky's name should go on the title page, not just in the acknowledgments, but Panofsky vehemently objected to an alphabetical order of authors (Klibansky, Panofsky, Saxl) and wanted the form 'by E. P. and F. S. with the collaboration of R. K.' (Panofsky, letter to Fritz Saxl, 4 June 1939, *Korrespondenz 1937 bis 1949*, ed. Dieter Wuttke, 4 vols. [Wiesbaden, 2003], 2:204). In any event, publication of a revised German edition was prevented by the outbreak of the Second World War, and after the war ended it was discovered that the type (all set but for the title page) had been destroyed as scrap metal (presumably for the war effort). After the war, the decision was made to translate the entire manuscript and publish in English. What Gertrud Bing (assistant director and later director of the Warburg Institute) called in a letter to Panofsky 'the long argument which passed between you and Saxl on this question' was only finally resolved (after some sharp exchanges, especially on Panofsky's side) when Klibansky visited Panofsky in Princeton in 1955 (Bing, letter to Panofsky, 12 Apr. 1949, *Korrespondenz 1937 bis 1949*, 2:1071). Wisely perhaps, publication was held off until 1964, after Panofsky's death. This sorry saga, which may be traced in Panofsky's published correspondence, does not show him in a very generous light. See Panofsky, letter to Saxl, 26 Nov. 1937; letters to Gertrud Bing, 4 Apr. 1949, 19 Apr. 1949, and 20 June 1955; letters to Henri Frankfort, 2 May 1949 and 15 Dec. 1952; and Frankfort, letter to Panofsky, 19 July 1949, *Korrespondenz 1937 bis 1949*, 2:87–88, 2:1066–68, 2:1074–75, 2:1079–80, 2:1085, 3:364–65, and 3:779–82.—TRANS.

22. One could conceive of an approach which declares itself independent of historical correctives on principle and only postulates that the picture it constructs of a given phenomenon is in itself consistent and meaningful, no matter whether it fits into any historic circumstances. Such an approach (which neither extracts from texts what they 'say' nor what they 'want to say' but—adhering to the principle of consistency—what they 'should have had said') can however no longer be defined as 'interpretation' but rather as creative 'reconstruction'. Its value or nonvalue is not dependent on the standard of historical truth but on that of systematic originality and consistency. This approach is unassailable as long as it is aware of its transhistorical or, even, extrahistorical aims, but it must be resisted the moment when it is tempted to defend itself by replacing history with some other aspiration.

Object of interpretation	Subjective source of interpretation	Objective corrective of interpretation
1. Phenomenal meaning (to be separated into factual and expressive meaning)	Vital experience of being	History of styles (the quintessence of what it is possible to represent)
2. Meaning dependent on content	Literary knowledge	History of types (the quintessence of what it is possible to imagine)
3. Documentary meaning (intrinsic meaning)	Worldview Ur-behaviour	General intellectual history (the quintessence of what is possible within a given worldview)

FIGURE 1.

being misinterpreted as a form of rationalism out of touch with everyday life. It relates to the actuality of intellectual process somewhat like the grid of intersecting lines on a map relates to the reality of the Italian landscape. But in conclusion what is self-evident should be stressed. These processes which our analyses have extrapolated as seemingly separate movements on three separate levels of meaning and also as border skirmishes between the violence of subjective interpretation and the skilful application of objectively verifiable criteria, in practice, are intertwined to form a process both unified and in tension. Any given instance can only *ex post facto* and theoretically be dissolved into individual elements and special actions.