

# IN MEMORIAM

Michael Baxandall

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## MICHAEL BAXANDALL

Michael Baxandall, who has died aged 74, was an art historian of extraordinary perceptive and analytical powers whose writings on painting and sculpture are as important as they are original.

In 1958, Baxandall began formulating a thesis topic on concepts of decorum and restraint in the Italian Renaissance and, in 1959, he was awarded a two-year fellowship at the Warburg to work on this, under the direction of Ernst Gombrich. He began investigating how humanist literature on art was shaped by the traditions of classical rhetoric. Although this research never resulted in a PhD, it provided material for his acclaimed first book, *Giotto and the Orators* (1971), which acutely highlighted the limitations as well as the achievements of Renaissance discourse on art.

He returned to the Warburg in 1965, as a lecturer in renaissance studies. The course on the Renaissance which he taught to undergraduates exploited this experience and bore fruit in the bestselling *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (1972). Lucid and provocative, this "primer in the social history of pictorial style", as he called it, continues to interest countless readers in early Renaissance pictures and the society in which they were created. It was this book that introduced the concept of "the period eye;" Baxandall's idea was that at different times and places, certain features of the knowledge and culture of viewers attuned them to aspects of images which are not naturally picked up today, but which the historian, with the help of texts and contexts, can elucidate and recover. The notion was further refined in relation to sculpture in *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany* (1980), in which, for example, the scrolls of Nuremberg calligraphy were related to stylistic elements. This book, which evolved from the Slade lectures at Oxford in 1974, was awarded the Mitchell prize for the history of art.

He came to reflect more and more on the difficulties of the historian's task. These issues, articulated in *Patterns of Intention* (1986), were encouraged by his friendship and then

collaboration and close association with Svetlana Alpers. Together they wrote *Tiepolo and the Pictorial Intelligence* (1994), an intriguing mix not only of art criticism and art history but of the styles of two contrasting personalities.

By the time these latter works were published, Baxandall was an academic celebrity. He had been given a London University chair in 1981 and been elected to the British Academy in 1982; he had also held a visiting professorship at Cornell University in New York state and a fellowship in Berlin, and been awarded prizes by the University of Hamburg and the MacArthur Foundation (both 1988). Since 1986 he had held a part-time post at the University of California, Berkeley, initially in combination with his job at the Warburg Institute. Thereafter, until his retirement in 1996, he spent part of the year in California. But he retained old habits of thought along with old ties and loyalties. The work of Gombrich on perception remained an important point of reference as he himself became increasingly interested in modern as well as historical theories about visual attention, especially primary focus and peripheral vision. The most important publication of his later years, however, was *Shadows and the Enlightenment* (1995), in its persuasive juxtaposition of scientific analyses of shadows with the pictorial practice of 18th-century artists, notably the quiet, but "in some ways slyly showy" Chardin.

Baxandall's last years were lived under the shadow of Parkinson's disease. He had never relished large gatherings and with the progression of illness, he tended to avoid any encounters in public places. His last book, *Words for Pictures* (2003), a collection of essays that returned to the subject of art and humanism, also included a long piece on Piero della Francesca's Resurrection.

He is survived by Kay Simon, daughter Lucy and son Tom.

Michael David Kighley Baxandall, art historian, born August 18 1933; died August 12 2008

Submitted by Michael Conner, September 7, 2008