

The History of Art between the 20th and the 21st Century

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With the new millennium approaching, to sketch the wider canvas of the state of art historical research at the end of the 20th century is hardly a realistic objective. For those who like to delve deeper into this matter, I heartily recommend Donald Preziosi's recent critical anthology, published by Oxford University Press, called 'The Art of Art History'. Here you will find a survey of the major directions in art historical research since the days that Johann Joachim Winckelmann invented our profession, illustrated by appropriate texts chosen from over the whole period of the mid-18th to the late 20th century.

Art history, in this century, has seen a stormy development. Though rooted in the 19th century in particular, our century saw the rapid establishment of art history through special chairs of art history at universities. Parallel to the coming of age of art history as an academic discipline, the art museums, initially storage houses of the past and the domain of the dilettanti or the depository of the acquisitions of the rich and powerful, became professional institutions run by specialized art historians. Though all branches of art historical research were represented in some form from the beginning, our century, especially the second half, saw in particular the emancipation of the fields of decorative arts, later to be followed by the acceptance of modern and contemporary art as an academic discipline. Finally, photography, film and design entered the field. What museums collected was usually the object of study at the university and vice versa, but not always. It is logical that some natural division of labour occurred, in which the universities tended to embrace the more speculative aspects of our '*fach*', whereas museum art history usually remained firmly object-oriented. However, owning archives as often as objects, some museums became study centres in their own right, and their libraries not seldom outshone those of their colleagues at university. In their display and research museums, however, were generally more influenced by the development of the advanced media and new educational insights than by certain new directions in academic research, like gender studies or deconstructivist theories for which museums in general had little use.

However, some new fields of investigation were shared by university and museum alike. Iconological studies were fruitful on either side of the divide, and in particular the renewed interest in the history of collecting has been taken up with equal zest by Academia and Museum. The name of Professor Francis Haskell here needs to be invoked with special honour. With museum catalogues becoming ever more ambitious (and bulky) university specialists are welcome guests to provide introductory chapters or specialist entries, and because of their high print run, museum catalogues are relatively cheap tools, compared to most university press publishing. Also, museums, working under the pressure of deadlines, publish quickly.

I think it is vital to see both university and museum art historical research as mutually dependent and their joining up as often as possible is crucial if art history is to play a vital role in society in the decades to come. In the Netherlands the art historical research school indeed united art historical faculties of various large universities and several major museums like the Rijksmuseum, the Van Gogh Museum and the Rijksbureau for Art Historical Documentation (RKD). Museums have in many western societies taken the central place in social life that once belonged to the church. The impact of museums like the Louvre and the Metropolitan Museum on the cultural and economic life of Paris and New York respectively needs no further explaining. Museums, often temple- or palace-like in their outward appearance, provide something, moreover, that is needed in a society that tends to become more and more virtual: a sense of place. Many older museum buildings, having for a long time been disfigured by generations of ad hoc interior decorating, now lay stress on their basic architectural features and confirm that the context for works of art matters. Whereas in the past half century museum walls tended to look like designed pages, with many museums even removing the frames around pictures, we now want to experience art again as objects, tangible images, rather than super-slides. The stress on contextuality in modern art history is thereby literally put into practice by museums. The museum has also increasingly understood that it is, in itself, a shaper of art history, a major player in the creation and evaluation of art. Germain Bazin foresaw all this long ago when he wrote that we are living in 'The Museum Age'. The phrase 'All arts aspire to the condition of music', typical for the situation around 1900, can now be supplemented with 'All institutions aspire to the condition of a museum'. No wonder museology has now become a lively branch of art historical research.

Museums, with their direct access to the general public, form an imperfect but nonetheless indispensable bridge to society, as interpreters of university based art historical research. Exhibitions have, for instance, profited from the increased interest in contextuality. In the Netherlands the great Vermeer show of 1998 was accompanied by a whole string of supporting exhibitions providing insight into Vermeer's background as a citizen of Delft and the scientists working there, who shaped the climate in which his marvellous paintings were created.

Museums, moreover, have contributed another dimension to art historical research, in that they are the ideal place to combine classic art historical investigation with multi-disciplinary research in the material aspects of objects. Rembrandt research, for instance, has gained infinitely from our vastly increased knowledge about the dating of panels and the use of pigments. Conservation studies not only contributed impressively to the art of the restorer but have exponentially increased our understanding of the artist's working methods and workshop practice. Conservation science will, in retrospect, certainly be seen as the major contributor to new insights in art historical knowledge in our 20th century.

The other solid foundation on which art history builds is the steady increase of dry facts. Photography and digitalization, and let us not forget, the wealth of images distributed by the art trade - through their catalogues - and we must mention here the role of the international auction houses in particular - have created a visual library of unprecedented scale to assist all areas of art historical research. The new media, such as the computer, the CD-ROM and Internet, are penetrating art historical libraries and will soon cause a watershed in this respect. In my view, all types of time-honoured art historical

practices, will not just benefit from greater accessibility: no, digitization will drastically upset the whole present structure. Data can now be combined ad infinitum, and in particular provenance research and the history of collecting will benefit tremendously. For the first time museums can now publish their holdings of hundreds and thousands of prints, which are impossible to do justice to in book form, on CD-ROMs or immediately on the Net. The Rijksmuseum, to stay close to my home base, will next year publish its 30.000 ornament prints in CD-ROM form. While preparing this vast publication we found out that not only is this the only way to attempt such a feat at all, but the new medium allows many new questions to be asked of the material.

What more can we expect? Well, *œuvrecatalogues* and collection catalogues in digital form no longer have to wait 20 years to go into a new edition, but can be regularly updated with limited effort and cost. Museums can add their new acquisitions to their digital catalogue the week they enter their storage rooms. Museums are a little like icebergs, with most of their treasures in storage, hidden from sight, and they will benefit immensely in terms of access. Digitalization will benefit in particular the often immense holdings of small objects and in particular works on paper and textiles, which have to be kept away from daylight.

Art history students all over the world will soon be able to discuss through CD-ROM or via the Internet a wealth of images no standard textbook could hope to encompass. At a conference in Vienna in October 1998, an impressive array of new programs could be admired, that no doubt will seem kids' stuff in a decade's time. Borromini scholars working on an exhibition were given access to unique archival material through CD-ROMs, which allowed them to work on sources that before would have required them to travel.

Museums and universities in the United States have already combined forces to offer digital images of their collections to subscribing universities, and European museums and universities are now joining in. This project, called AMICO, is a non-profit answer to the failed attempts by major software consortiums to get exclusive hold of our museums' images for commercial purposes. AMICO, run by Maxwell Anderson, the new director of the Whitney Museum in New York, deserves all the support we can give him.

The new media also help scholars to be in regular contact with each other through e-mail, and special Internet-sites. CIHA, the *Comité International d' Histoire de l'Art*, for instance, has its own website, provided by Mexico University, presenting information on forthcoming scholarly events, in particular colloquiums and symposiums.

I already mentioned the role of museum *vis-à-vis* society. Art historical interest in provenance research has also taken on new dimensions in relation to severe art-political concerns like worldwide art robberies, in particular in the third world, where heritage sites are looted at an unprecedented scale. Then there is the matter of the return of works of art stolen by the Nazis from their Jewish owners during the Holocaust. Museums in Austria, France, Belgium, Holland and the United States are currently investigating their holdings closely for objects of dubious origin, and we notice how ill-informed we often are about the provenance of our collections.

Provenance research is also of vital importance to those countries that have ratified the Unidroit Convention, aimed at preventing art loot from third world countries. Increasingly a work of art will be impossible to sell, if no satisfactory provenance can be produced.

There are aspects of art history that could be viewed in a rather less favourable light, especially in relation to the effect on the wider society. In the wake of post-modern trends in art history, such as the so-called New Art History, a lot of writing on art history has been unnecessarily intellectualized. It has had the effect that art appreciation has suffered increasingly from the image that understanding art is possible only after having worked your way through stacks of highbrow art historical publications. Art history used to be a discipline written in reasonably accessible language, without too much jargon, and it produced some eminent stylists, from Winckelmann and John Ruskin, to Gombrich and art historian-novelist Anita Brookner in our time and age. Alas! Increasingly exhibition catalogues, as they become more learned, by heaping fact upon fact, and theory upon theory, fail to produce a coherent story line. Late 20th-century society is inclined to zapping rather than focusing. Art historians, in principle the custodians of the still image rather than the fleeting one, should persist in their ambition to create a complete picture rather than a pile of fragments. Museums, under political pressure to cater for the attention of crowds rather than the individual visitor, cease to be places of contemplation, and in many cases there is a painful contrast between the small numbers that are drawn to the museum's permanent collections, and the mass audience that streams through its gates for blockbuster exhibitions and events. The next onslaught on the museum's solid and time-tested qualities is the idea that museums should become increasingly media-oriented, and adopt virtual modes of presentation. In general art museums do not really fear to be superseded by such trends or by the belief of some that the new media will make it superfluous. On the contrary, museums think that the need for reference to authentic images, rather than virtual ones, will only strengthen their position in the long run. The museum will, in fact, be indispensable as the provider of images. But the pressure to increase the museum's 'amusement factor' is great.

The art historian, with his understanding of images, can play an increasingly important role in our society, which is becoming more and more visually oriented. Sponsors soon found out that association of their products with quality images from the world of art pays dividend. Images can be symbols that give life to ideas. Scholars have not always grasped this fact of life. It was again Francis Haskell, who in his recent book *'History and its Images'* outlined how – and often how little – for instance historians had made use of the knowledge stored in images. It is through images that we can obtain a quicker and better insight into our past, more direct than through any other kind of document. But we have to know how to interpret the image, and art historians consider this their business. As I have indicated, this is a business with a fine, perhaps even turbulent, future.

Though CIHA is in essence an international organization dominated by eminent representatives of university-based art historical research, it will not have escaped you that the views on art historical practice of its president, a museum director by profession, are strongly coloured by his vantage point: the museum. I have certainly neglected to stress the role of academic art history. To do it justice at least in my closing lines, I want to stress that the university, as the proverbial 'market place of ideas', is a major force in moving our field forward. If it does not become too pedantic and inward-looking in its de-constructivist endeavours, it could go forward into areas that the all-too-practical museums would certainly not deal with. We will certainly see the further breaking down

of old hierarchies. The art historical world has always been one of strict hierarchies, in which, for instance, the art of Ancient Greece and the Italian Renaissance, were on a level of their own, and provided the measures by which all subsequent art was to be judged. This hierarchy is rapidly crumbling. Marxist and feminist art histories have been written, High and Low Art have been shown to be closer to each other than we had imagined, and much less mutually exclusive. The pre-dominance of Italian art from Giotto to Titian, of Dutch art in the 17th century, of French art in the 18th and 19th centuries, as well as of New York in the second half of the 20th, all these long-held certainties and established canons are challenged by constant re-discoveries and re-evaluations. The present day art historian of Romanticism has put Caspar David Friedrich next to Eugène Delacroix, and the new standard art history textbook by Hugh Honour and John Fleming calls itself significantly '*A World History of Art*', paying almost equal attention to non-western art, that is, being no longer exclusively Europe-centred, as art history till recently has been¹.

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Note

1. For an exhaustive perspective of modern art history at work in its innumerable manifestations, see the 30th International Congress of the History of Art, held in London from 3 to 8 September 2000. Its central theme is – how could it be otherwise in the year 2000? – TIME. The various sections of the CIHA Congress address the historiography and methodology of our discipline, the material histories of works of art as well as the New Moving Media, like film and digitized images. Western- and non-western practices in art history are central issues.

The key themes are announced as 'Internationalism, Conviviality and Debate', and, typical of the situation of art history as I have described it, the Congress is held in the venues of the University of London and the new British Library as well as of several of London's great museums.