

The History of Art as a New Humanistic Discipline

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There are four topics for this afternoon's discussion. How might we go about teaching and scholarship in better ways? What alternatives are there to the "West and the Rest" model? How should our disciplinary methods change? And what are the "affective implications" of global education for our students? I will consider all of these, but in different order, beginning with the last. It is certainly my experience that students are most eager and even anxious to be given ways to the sympathetic understanding of cultures other than their own. Nothing was more striking to me after 9/11 than how little students, as representatives of the culture to which they belong, knew about the culture of Islam, which had been brought suddenly and violently to their attention. Their reaction was not to retreat into stereotypes, rather they suspended judgment, wanted to know, and given the specialized state of scholarship, there were—and still are—few academics to answer their questions. This situation has not improved very much. We may consider the more recent examples of the Danish caricatures. Whether or not the conflict could have been prevented by an expanded education, and whether or not the problem has been exploited and exacerbated by other political conflicts, it may be asked why people educated in the humanities in the West should not know that representation, and the religious use of images, has been a major factor in the histories of the three Abrahamic religions. Violent episodes of iconoclasm, repetitions of the episode of the Golden Calf, took place at Bamiyan under the Taliban, but were also part of the European tradition

from Byzantium to the Protestant Reformation, and Islam from its beginnings differentiated itself from other religions by its opposition to images. The Reformation and the subsequent wars of religion in Europe not only involved images, but resolution of the conflicts in which they were involved contributed to the modern Western ideas of freedom of religion and speech. By and large these issues are settled in European cultures, but it would be valuable to know just how they *came* to be settled. Why should educated people not know about the historical issues involved? Again, why shouldn't we have thought about the significance of the omnipresent, but culturally highly specific, modern genre of caricature?

In order to address such questions, it would be necessary to change the history of art, in which they continue to be peripheral, but it would also be necessary to change the relation of this reconstituted history of art to the humanities in general, as I will explain later.

In general, the relation between higher education and culture has changed very much in the years I have taught. With some exceptions, there is more suspicion of, and less sympathy for, the Western literary and artistic canon as exemplary for continued efforts of the same kind. Suspicion of the authority of one's own culture, while encouraging valuable institutional critical awareness, also throws a monkey wrench into the mechanisms of the hermeneutic circle, which has been basic to modern education in the humanities (as opposed to the natural sciences). It is hard to learn about the past in order best to enact what one has come to understand through the past in the present—the

hermeneutic goal—when the past is not trusted, or is shunned altogether on the assumption that there is nothing positive (and much negative) to be found there.

Under these historical conditions, I think it is also fair to say that one ideal of culture, once closely identified with the humanities, has been supplanted by more properly anthropological and sociological definitions of culture. There are fewer to defend the ideal of a “cultured person” (as it emerged in the 19th and 20th centuries) from charges of elitism, political conservatism, and snobbish resistance to what we call “popular” culture. On the other hand, as the distinction between “high” and popular culture itself indicates, we speak freely of the “culture of violence,” “youth culture,” “biker culture,” or any number of other “cultures,” all of which coincide closely with lifestyles, market niches, and a certain economic understanding of personal freedom. I don’t think it is possible—or desirable—to retreat to earlier times, but I think it might be possible to lay foundations for a broader “culture,” or at least to point out new and useful ways in which education might make anyone a “cultured” person, or perhaps better, an “intercultured” person. It is my strong feeling that students would not only welcome this, but they would find it very compatible with what they expect from their educations.

As we know, “globalization” is not a neutral word, and in my experience it associates most readily to the global spread of capitalism, or—what is often the same thing—the global spread of American popular culture (McDonald’s, Tony Soprano, special effects of all kinds) and is thus a synonym for post-Cold-War economic imperialism. After many years of thinking about some of the problems we are addressing, I have become

very aware that choices must be made and risks must be taken in order to begin to face the many complex problems raised by what we call “globalization,” which I have come to prefer to think of in terms of the simple and urgent acknowledgement of the fact that the peoples of the world simply *are* now in altogether unprecedented contact and communication, however satisfactory or unsatisfactory one or another interaction might be.

I mentioned earlier a reconstituted history of art, which I will now try to explain. The history of art is a young discipline, which really only became a member of the humanities in this country after World War II, so that, for example, I have come here from a Department of Art in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Virginia. The European roots of the history of art are not much older, reaching back only to the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These European roots, if not much older than their American variants, are very deep, and in fact reach to the conceptual and methodological foundations of the discipline. This has very familiar consequences. The fields of specialization in the history of art—medieval, Renaissance, baroque, for example—correspond with few exceptions to the periods of European culture. Asian art, or some Asian art, is one of the exceptions, certainly because, if the Chinese and Japanese languages are known by few, the traditions descending from Chinese painting are approachable as highly developed illusionistic styles with complementary traditions of criticism, collecting, and connoisseurship in Europe and America. This preference, of course, leaves very much about Chinese and Japanese art unexplained and unexplainable, and other traditions—Islamic art, African art, Indian and Southeast Asian art, as well as

indigenous art of all kinds—remain marginal and even exotic. Textbook publishers have attempted to correct this situation by adding chapters on other traditions, but I think it is fair to say that these chapters are seldom incorporated into introductory courses, which continue to tell much the same story, leading from Paleolithic painting to the ancient Near East, Greece, Rome, and on through the Middle Ages, to the Renaissance, the stirrings of Western modernity, finally to the Guerrilla Girls and Sherrie Levine, or wherever the lecturer happens to wind up in the last class.

I think it has been difficult to break this pattern because it is founded on very deep assumptions about what art is and what it does. One apparently ineradicable assumption is that art is imitative, and imitative in the specific sense of representing appearances. Plato was the first person to write about painting in this way, and Aristotle wrote that we like to see things we recognize even if what we recognize is ugly or unpleasant in itself, much as we like to be sad at tragedies. However ancient it may be, the goal of the imitation of appearances is still a common standard of skill and value in art, and even though 20th-century modernism supposedly taught us that this is not so, the standard is not only alive and well, it might also be said to have gone underground to re-emerge as an implicit theory of general progress in art. Writers still often point with something like relief to examples of the description of appearance in art of all kinds, as if such description were the goal of art, and as if it is possible in such examples finally to see the emergence of real skills.

*Modern* Western assumptions about art—that it is essentially formal, aesthetic, and expressive—are not much more helpful, and correspond more or less exactly to the expectation that we see art in museums. Before the 18th century (when the discipline of aesthetics was founded, and the word itself came into use), from Classical Antiquity, through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance and its aftermath, “arts” were teachable human practices that were more or less manual, and their teachable principles more or less theoretical. If an art was more manual, then it was called servile or mechanical, thus to imply a fundamental social distinction; if it was more theoretical, like the arts of the trivium and quadrivium, then it was liberal, an appropriate pursuit for free persons. In the 18th century the “fine arts” were grafted to the liberal arts, a graft that obviously took. To make a long story short, this resulted in a thorough dematerialization of art. All art, or all *fine* art, all art worthy of the name—I am thinking of Immanuel Kant—came to be theoretically grounded in the faculty of imagination, understood as the play of pre-representational “forms” initiated by works of genius. We take delight in this play, or can be taught to take delight in it. The discipline of aesthetics itself has remained marginal, but these ideas have nonetheless had enormous consequences. The definition of art as the pre-rational, world-constituting imaginary coincided with the emergence of the idea of culture itself, and by the 19th century, when the history of art took disciplinary shape, it was possible to talk about the “spirits” and “wills to form” of entire cultures, entire peoples and periods. According to this view, the deepest dispositions of cultures could be read off from the expressive forms of the things their members make, and for a long time art historians were the specialists who did just that. We are still familiar with notions of collective “style,” which were amplified by such powerful 19th-century ideas as

nationalism, one or another form of cultural evolutionism, and biological decadence, all of which were (and are) terrible ideas, with terrible consequences, in which the history of art was in many instances complicit.

I have argued in *Real Spaces. World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* that the idea of the “visual arts” underlying this modern Western formalist view of art should be abandoned and replaced by the idea of the “spatial arts,” and that art should be addressed in terms of the social spaces cultures have made, and the uses to which artifacts and images have been put in those social spaces. In these terms, art is not abstracted to “form” as the initial stage of analysis and consideration, and this means that art is not simply a matter of individual expression and corresponding individual aesthetic experience. Rather, I have assumed that people come in smaller or larger groups, and have variously constructed their social spaces and broader worlds in relation to the sizes and necessities of their physical existences, and that categories grounded in these sizes and necessities are both irreducible and culturally varied, which in turn means that they must always be presumed to be culturally specific. It is in these irreducible terms that all cultures are comparable, and comparability entails both similarities and differences.

To put the matter in other terms, if we want to think beyond the “West and the rest” model, we cannot do this—and I think this generalization might be extended from the history of art to all of the humanities—if we continue to think of art itself in the ways we do. This does not mean that there are no great works of art; on the contrary, people in many traditions have made, and continue to make, artifacts of high aesthetic quality. But

it *does* mean that we cannot understand why any of this art—whatever art we may identify with—was made just as it was in purely aesthetic terms. In order to understand why it was made as it was, we must think of it in its first space of use.

The definition of art must be substantially broadened. Again, this does not mean that cultural canons must be dismembered and abandoned, but rather that, in order to understand the canonical works of any tradition, it is necessary to understand the non-canonical works that precede them or come between them.

At a certain degree of generality, the temporal framework underlying our historical imagination becomes crucial. I think it is fair to say that we think of historical time as linear, and this linearity easily becomes progressive. That is, history as a whole progresses toward the modern. This is true in some ways—there were no light bulbs in antiquity, and we might write a progressive history of illumination—but analogous ideas (art progresses toward naturalism, or naturalism progresses to photography, or to abstraction) present more difficult problems. Back in the days of the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns, it used to be said that, whereas, for example, the moderns had better carriages and windmills than the ancients, no one had ever written better poetry than Homer. Similarly, our televisions work wonderfully, but the art of distant times and places may still teach us any number of ways of human space making. Again, in the terms I am suggesting, art is always more than aesthetic, more than the uniqueness in our own experience it makes possible. What we call art was always shaped to circumstances very different from our own, and possibilities at hand were and are ways in which human

lives were shaped and lived. In many cases these ways are lost or survive only in what we are able to imagine of them, but even then they present possibilities in the present.

One of the principles of *Real Spaces* was taken from a book called *The Shape of Time. Remarks on the History of Things* by one of my teachers at Yale, George Kubler, published in 1962. Kubler rejected the idea of universal, uniform time in favor of “shapes of time,” by which he meant connected series of artifacts and images, all of which change at different rates and in different combinations. Taken altogether, these series make up traditions, each with its own cultural configuration. Series also interact with other cultural configurations, which are, however, substantially distinct, or to put the matter more relevantly, were substantially distinct until modern times, when interaction assumed new complexity in new terms.

I have always resisted the idea that there are people without histories (or shapes of time), and it has always seemed unfortunate to me that, just when the theoretical and practical tools for the creation of any number of local histories have become available, intellectual style in the history of art swerved in the direction of what I consider to be a lopsided concern with texts. In the scheme I am describing, history preserves possibilities in the present, but it also protects existing cultures, if only because *we* explain things to *ourselves* in historical terms. A multiplicity of histories makes us able to think and enact cultural interrelations in different ways. It also makes it possible to put an enormous amount of existing information into action. The problem in the history of art is not a lack of specialized knowledge about the art of other cultures, and therefore about these

cultures generally, rather the problem is that there has not been a conceptual base from which this knowledge may be presented. In the terms I have proposed, the West may be said to take its place among the rest. All are ways of world-making and world-enacting.

The installation of a new professional conceptual system is a slow process. People are trained to go about things in a certain way with the reasonable expectation that they will continue to do things in that way through their professional lives. The history of art has always been interdisciplinary and therefore “contextual” in the sense that it is necessary to look in a number of places in order to explain the appearance of works of art. As contextual factors have multiplied, field specialization has become more concentrated.

There is another, deeper issue: A steady change in intellectual climate in the last 30 or 40 years has firmly planted the assumption that more is accomplished by opposition and conflict than by consensus and accommodation. In a more extreme version, the assumption is that things can *only* be accomplished by opposition and conflict. But the history of art as the study of the “visual” arts was founded on the idea of a very general commonality of human imaginative energies, which assumed one collective form or another, and in these broad terms the change to spatial arts builds upon that foundation. The common terms, however, are based in the conditions of human spatiality, which are always deeper than any cultural shaping they have been given.

The reconstituted history of art I have been outlining, presented in social and personal spatial terms, is not so much objective or subjective as it is inferential and empathetic,

less concerned with telling others what they do and think than with providing a basis for *asking* them what they do and think. In *Real Spaces* art is explained, not in relation to presumed viewers, but in relation to “observers,” preserving a significant ambiguity in that English word. “To observe” may mean to see, but it may also mean to behave appropriately, as when we “observe” a custom or a holiday. Most works of art come to us from unfamiliar spaces of use, and we do not know what was to have been done when those for whom a work was made actually put it to use. We should make the effort to understand these things.

In the scheme I am proposing, an appropriately reconstituted history of art plays an important role. This is more than disciplinary chauvinism. The history of art has always had a simple advantage among the humanities, that it can be significantly introduced without language study. I must immediately say that it is not possible to get far beyond an introductory level in the study of art *without* language study, but cultures may still be presented in basically comparative terms, as the prelude to more specialized study of fields (and languages). This would mean that more faculty, also fluent in these comparative terms, and in the appropriate languages, should be trained.

I wrote—and rewrote—*Real Spaces* in the years spanning the change in intellectual style from structuralism to post-structuralism. In more concrete terms, these were the years during which “globalization” became both a growing concern and a growing reality. When I first addressed the problems surrounding the formulation of the theory and practice of an intercultural history of art, anthropologists confidently set out the patterns

of meaning of groups of people—usually small groups of people—and although there was anxiety about the survival of these patterns, there also seemed to be a certain optimism with regard to the possibility of reclaiming, preserving, or restoring them. I am thinking of anthropologists teaching Native American women traditional birthing techniques, or helping Native American artists in the recovery of lost skills, monuments, and iconographic themes. This anthropological confidence and optimism are pretty much gone now, and “structurally pure” cultures have assimilated features of the surrounding culture. One of the tasks facing the study of human cultures must be the best integration of the traditional and modernity; and basic to this must be the question of how best to bring members of these cultures into the conversation about integration.

To be sure, the West among the rest presents a powerful and aggressive model. In *Real Spaces* I made a sharp distinction between a world of places, the sites of cultures of greater and lesser size, which for all intents and purposes developed independently of one another, and the modern world of metric space, the space of prediction, control of energy and communication. In these terms, the world has changed around the history of art itself in deeply significant ways. St. Denis, burial place of French kings and birthplace of the Gothic style, last came to world attention as one of the suburbs of Paris, a scene of angry rioting and arson, about which the world knew immediately. Many such examples might be given, and contradictions between modern and traditional cultures are everywhere to be seen. I happened to read the other day about a new expressway in India, built (as I recall) between a village and the precinct of a temple of the goddess Kali. The expressway is easily understood as a manifestation of the economic development of

India, the sort of thing to be expected as modern systems of transportation and distribution take shape in the country. The expressway, however, caused alarm among the people who brought their joys and troubles to Kali in that place, whose ancestors for many generations had presumably done the same. I don't mean this to be a simple example, nor is it obvious to me what should have been done. It is more important to establish terms in which such issues might be best negotiated. Most modern people are inclined to think favorably of economic development and increased productivity, and they are also inclined to think of traditional practices as, if not superstitious, then as merely arbitrary and therefore as dispensable. But then 30 years ago, it might have seemed clear that the precinct of the temple should be respected, and that the temple and access to it should be preserved and maintained. It is certain in any case that, if not this temple, many others in many places will be gone, and that expressways will be like expressways in other modern countries. From the standpoint of the study of human culture, however, examples of ways of life will be gone, much as languages disappear, or species. The people who built and use these ways of life should have histories in the modern world.