
How an Art Historian Connects Art Objects and Information

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THE HYPOTHETICAL, NORMATIVE art historian, posited in the title of this essay, relies on memory, intuition or judgment, and luck to establish a *context* for any work or object of art. Only within some context, itself a mental construct of persuasive authority, can the work of art have significance and a place in history. Only then can it become worthy of those efforts of interpretation and analysis that constitute the discipline of art history and shape its scholarly goals.

Yet no object seen for the first time—directly or through some form of reproduction—can appear entirely innocent of categorization. Its inclusion in the class of “art object” immediately bestows upon the object all the implications of that special category of objects made by artists, considered by critics and aestheticians, and studied by art historians. The class may often be taken for granted as part of a received tradition that requires no reconsideration, but the rise of new standards or positions of aesthetic judgment involve the history of taste while impinging upon the nominal, descriptive conventions of art and its subject matter, such as landscape, portrait, or still-life. The mutability of these conventions and their displacement by broader, more analytical terms already inform the study of modern art, but their theoretical implications for the study of the history of art as a whole have had little effect.

Art historians are expected to study works of art in a historical context and with a manifest point of view. The question (usually unstated) of whether the object at hand is a work of art may be of great intrinsic interest, especially if the object—an African mask, a Mesopo-

tamian cylinder seal—might not have been so considered when it was made or the issue never arose. Scholarly attitudes toward such objects, however, are usually governed by institutional positions which depend on the conventional treatment of like objects in museums and in print, but these conventions, too, have their own history. Despite their acknowledged usefulness as conventions, they do not have the authority of eternal laws because they are, to such a large degree, time and culture bound. Whether or not Mesopotamian cylinder seals are art objects—and they are avidly collected and studied—they retain their great historical interest as artifacts, as tokens of economic activity long ago, and as rich repertoires of a ritualized iconography more than 2,000 years in the making. Their similarity to coins or to postage stamps or to objects of craft, so admired in the 19th and 20th centuries, may indeed provide important analogies for the historian while challenging their status as works of art. Yet the inclusion of cylinder seals in standard histories of ancient Mesopotamian art not only gives them a privileged status as objects of art, but it also shapes the expectations scholars and collectors have for their treatment and the public's reception.

The aesthetic distance from *collectible* to *art object* may or may not be very great, but it is a perception worth exploring. At the very least, an art historian should be conscious of the critical import of the classification "art object" and its potential for illusory gratification. Perhaps art historians need not derive aesthetic pleasure from the objects they study and publish—more's the pity—but classification alone will not distinguish them from those historians and anthropologists who investigate the products, producers, and consumers of material culture, nor should it. The fact that the classification of an object may be in issue demonstrates the continuous gradient of an object from artifact to art, from the subject matter of history (or anthropology) to that of art history. Accordingly, the permeability of the boundaries of art history must be understood as a condition of research and so too the dependency of the art historian on the resources of the library in the humanities and social sciences.

Once the object has qualified as an artwork, the scholar's memory comes into play, and it has two different directions of activity. Primary is the internalized memory of like objects in the whole or in part which gives rise to mental images or the revisualization on command from the observer's trained experience. Most art historians can do this fairly well; some great scholar-connoisseurs have extraordinary visual memories. It is said that John Beazley, the famous expert on Greek black- and red-figured vases, could recall the appearance of every pot or substantial fragment of painted Greek pottery he had ever seen. He brought his vivid recollection to bear on the vase before his eyes, sharpening his examination of the piece by an exquisite sense of the comparable. In

doing so, Beazley established both a general frame of reference and a more specific context for the persistent objectives of his researches—to locate the vase in time and space and to describe accurately its figured repertory.

Although few art historians have Beazley's visual memory, they all must begin their study of an object with some form of "It looks like..." and then seek to find the other objects and images which complement the proposed resemblance. If art historians cannot rely on their own mental repertoires of artworks—even Beazley had his limitations—then they must look outwardly to those existing collections of comparable images and forms with which, as trained scholars, they should be familiar. These are (1) objects in museums, in galleries, and in private collections that are physically accessible; (2) archives of photographs or other forms of two-dimensional reproduction such as microfiche, video-discs, and even photocopies; and (3) illustrated publications.

Unfortunately, direct access to comparable objects may be very difficult given the wide dispersion of artworks. In addition, the scholar might not even know of their existence because of the inadequacy or absence of publication. So-called comprehensive indexes, miscellaneous corpora, subject-specific lexicons, or general catalogs—the familiar staples of the reference collections of any decent research library—do offer the scholar considerable help in gaining preliminary access to pertinent objects and to relevant information. Yet their value is seriously compromised when such publications rely heavily on verbal descriptions of the artworks and contain few or no pictures. Expense or the alleged distortions of reproduction may once have been legitimate excuses for such omission, but they are no longer acceptable given the new modes of image making brought about by modern technology.

Consider then the inherent limitations of an authoritative index recently advertised in a 1987 Wasmuth (Berlin) book catalog:

Iconclass Indexes. A Series of iconographic reference works. Editors: Roelof van Straten and L.D. Couprie. Doornspijk 1987ff. (The Series, when complete, will index a full range of iconographic traditions in the West. Volumes planned include catalogues of: Dutch and German prints, Early Netherlandish Painting, and Dutch paintings and drawings of the Golden Age. The Iconclass Indexes will give access to these great and multifarious traditions by means of a standard, internationally recognized process of classification which should prove an immense boon to the study of the visual arts. Each volume will contain full references to reproductions of works discussed in standard art-historical publications of the subject. Upon publication, the Iconclass Indexes will become an invaluable staple in the field of iconographic research.)

And what if the library, contemplating the purchase of this expensive reference work, does not contain the "standard art-historical publications of the subject?" Even if the program of an image may be set out in words, an iconographer needs to examine the images themselves. How much more useful this publication would be if, in the manner developed recently by the University of Chicago Press, the volumes were to be

accompanied by microfiche of many, most, or all of the artworks discussed. The availability of the complementary images in microfiche at reasonable cost more than makes up for the modest quality of the reproductions. That too will certainly improve in the future as will the capacity of the microfiche readers.

In the field of classical art, the *Encyclopedia dell'Arte Antica*, published in Rome a generation ago, set a high standard of scholarly writing and generous illustration that was emulated by the McGraw-Hill *Encyclopedia of World Art* and other similar publications. These volumes have served as important reference works for students and scholars alike for years, primarily because they present good up-to-date articles and a useful collection of illustrations and at fair prices for each series of volumes.

Some newly published reference works, already deemed "indispensable," are very expensive, although they are valuable. Such is the *Lexicon Iconographiam Mythologiae Classicae* (Zurich); three of the fourteen planned volumes have appeared since 1984 but only the complete series can be purchased. The double volume one and two contains 190 line drawings and 688 plates, volume three has 741 plates, and together they contain thousands of illustrations. These magnificent volumes offer an up-to-date, authoritative treatment of classical iconography from the end of the Mycenaean Age to the beginning of the Early Christian period, and emphasize images and their development as exemplified by sculptures, paintings, mosaics, coins, gems, etc. with extensive reference to relevant ancient texts. Wherever the serious study of Greco-Roman and Renaissance art is to be undertaken, there must be the *Lexicon*.

Not every art history library can afford it nor many other well-illustrated reference works. Yet for art-historical research which concentrates on the art object itself, ready access to large numbers of images is essential to the successful investigation of matters of style, composition, motif, iconography, connoisseurship, the constitution of an artist's oeuvre, the definition of figural repertories, etc. Thus without such images in abundance, the act of comparison—the methodological basis of the discipline of art history—cannot come into full play and the research facility fails to serve its users. Certainly the modest demands of the undergraduate may be met by modest resources, while advanced research requires much more, but interlibrary loan arrangements will not meet the absolute need for the images of works of art.

Ways to meet this need do exist: Catalogs of "blockbuster" exhibitions are readily available although their coverage is often capricious, their agenda far from being objective, and their scholarship uneven, but they are usually well-illustrated. In recent years many excellent *facsimiles* have been published, ranging from Medieval and Renaissance illuminated manuscripts and incunabula to the notebooks of artists

such as Leonardo, Turner, or Picasso. These facsimiles bring the semblance of the original works to the scholar's eye—often with considerable fidelity—and contribute effectively to the creation of “museums without walls.” To further the attainment of this objective, *photographic archives* have begun to reproduce their holdings either as photographs or in microfiche—e.g., the Bartsch corpus of prints, the Marburg Medieval archive, the Courtauld series of drawings in private collections, the complete Anderson photo archive of monuments and artworks in Italy, views of Roman topography from the Fototeca Unione, and the photo collections of the German Archaeological Institute in Rome.

These collections, already on the market, are available for study but rarely for reproduction without permission. It should be noted that the Photo Archive of the Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities contains more than 1 million photographs and will acquire several million more in the next few years. However, because the Getty Center does not control the copyright to these photographs, it cannot lend them out for publication or reproduction. As a result, although the Getty Photo Archive is an important scholarly preserve for those scholars who can visit the Center in California, at present its holdings cannot be distributed to other less well-endowed institutions.

The Getty Center cannot bear the burden itself, but there is something anachronistic, even dysfunctional, about this limitation of its powers as a resource. This is especially the case when one considers that the transmission of photographic images over telephone lines is so well established. In addition, high quality digitalized image processing and storage have both developed rapidly in the past ten years and are becoming progressively more subtle and less costly. Some way should be found to distribute the visual information contained in these various photo archives to other centers of art historical research. Perhaps the solution lies in a fee system geared to the quality of reproduction desired and the frequency of its use which nevertheless respects the reproduction rights of the copyright holder; an accounting procedure for doing so certainly exists.

Laser disk technology and the development of high-resolution video screens make it possible to bring a world of images to the attention of students and scholars. Long familiar from satellite photographs, the sophisticated *digitalized color processing* of paintings for compositional and technical analysis and for reproduction (in whole or in part) is currently under development at Stanford University and elsewhere. This sensitive process transcends the color and tonal limitations of the conventional black-and-white photograph whose familiar distortions have been calmly accepted by generations of art historians. Similarly, *computer aided design functions*, ultimately derived from existing industrial practice, are being employed to capture the elusive three-dimensional appearance of works of sculpture and architecture through the manipulation of transient points of view. Accordingly, the different

sides of an object in space can be visualized through the rotational display of an "object" or design on a viewing screen thereby breaking the two-dimensional prison of the photograph if only in transit. However, even this last process can be preserved for study on videotape.

These and other developments will surely extend the visual memory of all art historians (who have access to them) in unprecedented ways, since the hunger for images is ultimately insatiable. For example, once taking on the publication of an unknown "Roman portrait," to be able to compare that marble head with thousands of works—previously defined as Roman portraits—on a console and in three-dimensions, will lead either to an extraordinarily thorough and definitive study or to some self-indulgent contemplation of the apparently infinite variety of the artistic repertory and of human physiognomy. The risk of the latter's occurrence (not without its own rewards) remains acceptable because the opportunity to create a visually discrete and comprehensive scholarship of the art object is so irresistible. Indeed, as the class of comparable objects grows, the need to develop more discriminating methods of visual and formal analysis, so often neglected, becomes more insistent, and this too will focus ever greater attention upon the object. The price of the new technology will be high but the opportunity cost cannot be ignored.

However, such a focus on the art object cannot be exclusive. Visual memory alone is insufficient to place the object historically and to interpret it properly despite the alleged correspondence of like-appearing objects in a particular period and culture. Art historians may act like art critics in grasping the visual properties of objects, but they act like historians in surrounding the artifact with causes, effects, and circumstances—the ingredients of significance. The historical dimension of art history then requires the kind of information found in books, in periodicals, in old records, and in the varied forms of data collection and control which depend on texts and on writing. Learning about an art object diffuses the scholar's effort since context is a generalized abstraction; only gradually, as the connections become clear, can the historian close in on the subject of research.

If the art library incorporates the discipline's mine of historical information, then the enterprising scholar must know where and how to dig up the bibliographical lore, always hoping to find a few unexpected treasures. Experienced art historians possess a useful, active memory of the relevant bibliography, buttressed by the inevitable 3 inch by 5 inch index cards and by a special "feeling" of where to look next. That feeling, a scholar's developed intuition, is engendered by the conceptualization of the problem of research at hand and of the historical situation in which it falls. At the same time, the researcher's sense of the history of scholarship itself channels the lines of investigation while sharpening critical sensitivity to the attitudes of the authors of the books, articles, and papers consulted. Indeed, when reading an article in

an older or unfamiliar journal, it has always been this author's custom to read all the articles in the particular issue and in the one before and after. By this means the editorial policy of the journal and the attitudes of its authors can be known thereby allowing the positioning of the article consulted in a wider intellectual or professional context. And sometimes serendipitous discoveries of other useful articles or reviews are made, adding to the stock of index cards and contributing to the next project.

Old dogs know the tricks. Some even prefer card catalogs to the new-fangled consoles, viewing screens, database searches, and all the devices of modern technology that have infiltrated the modern library. The machines are so often "down" and their product is often controlled by technicians—"computer-types" who may not be scholars themselves nor very good at reading foreign languages. Access to large databases like CLIO (Columbia Libraries Information Online) Art Bibliographies, supported through the RLIN (Research Libraries Information Network) by Stanford's RLG (Research Libraries Group), is enormously useful for the identification of current or recent publications even if there are intermediaries between the scholar and the information. But for art historians, older books and articles in scholarly journals are vital resources for effective, accurate, and valid research; there is little or no access to this massive, authoritative, and scholarly past in the contemporary bibliographies provided by the databases and the online services. This limitation seriously affects the progress of research, especially for students and younger colleagues who tend, naturally, to rely on these restricted, computerized databases rather than the card catalogs which are themselves out of date and usually discontinued.

Every scholar begins research with known bibliographical sources and moves from known sources to the unknown through the references, the footnotes, and the bibliography provided by the source. The referential network is expansive and may be very productive. But when the sources are inadequate or become a dead end or are not to be found in the library, graduate students and colleagues in art history at Columbia University use CLIO to develop and follow a line of research, thereby expecting to gain access to the recent relevant literature and through it to extend the referential network once again. They also use many of the standard general reference works and art bibliographies itemized in E. Arntzen and R. Rainwater, *Guide to the Literature of Art History* (London 1980).

In an informal survey conducted recently by my research assistant, Sheree Jaros, in the Avery Library, certain patterns of research procedure emerged and some bibliographical favorites stood out. After CLIO and the RLG search (if the terminals were working), most of the graduate students and colleagues started with *Art Index* and *RILA* (International Repertory of the Literature of Art), the latter an important newcomer. Of course, for those interested in the history of architecture,

the *Avery Index to Architectural Periodicals* enjoyed similar favor. In the next rank, and somewhat more field-specific, were the *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, the *Répertoire d'art et d'archéologie*, the *Annuario Bibliografico di Storia dell'Arte*, the *Art Bibliographies Modern*, and *Fasti Archaeologici*. In the third rank were the specific bibliographies such as the *Index to 19th Century American Art Periodicals*, the *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, the *Archäologisches Bibliographie* (of the German Archaeological Institute in Berlin), and many, many others not necessarily in the Avery Library but rather in the general university library. At the fourth level scholars had recourse to the published catalogs of art libraries, to a variety of topical serials containing annual bibliographical lists, and last—but by no means least—to the reviews and lists of books received for review printed in major journals such as the *Art Bulletin*, *Art History*, the *Bollettino d'arte*, and the *American Journal of Archaeology*.

In the physical sciences, the rapid turnover in knowledge places heavy emphasis on journal publication and requires immediate access to the articles and scientific reports provided by abstract services and computerized databases. Unless one is a historian of science or interested in the epistemological implications of scientific research, for the most part old (not very) science is not deemed worthy of the active research scientist's attention. As a result, scientific books and the tradition of scientific research are not valued highly and their preservation deemphasized. Art history, although sometimes faddish in its interests, is not so topical, is not so pressured by the import of recent discoveries, and is not free from its own history as embodied in the literature. Even for those who devour journals on a regular basis, the current pace of journal publication in art history puts pressure on the scholar to keep up, to control the short view of particular topics of study within the context of *la longue durée*. Therefore, computerized databases of journal articles and major reviews, organized according to the priorities outlined above—or determined by a more “scientific” survey—are a necessity, and the task must be done by trained personnel.

Quis custodiet ipsos custodes? Who will watch over the cataloger-programmer who transforms the substance of these journal articles into accessible items of bibliographical information? No one would imagine that indexing by the title and/or author of a journal article by itself would suffice. Well-defined subject-matter guides alone will provide the requisite access to the periodical literature which, given the nature of such publications, tends to be specific and narrow. Precision in classification seems to vary almost inversely with flexibility, but sometimes small items are important. When our hypothetical art historian continues the research on an unknown Roman portrait and has advanced a tentative identification after viewing many images on a videodisc, it would be very useful to discover whether that portrait type has been published elsewhere; famous names might turn up on the

computer, but when the notice is embedded in an article dealing principally with other matters, access might be hard to come by. The association of art object and published reference, a commonplace of the catalog entry, could be gainfully explored with the new technology.

However, the refinements of classification may be so particularized as to render the item fairly inaccessible to the casual user who might otherwise profit. The scholar who finds precisely what he is looking for is also the scholar who may come upon something else close to it and also useful. Stretching the potential of a successful search not only depends on the knowledge, ingenuity, and luck of the researcher. It also depends on the permeability of the classes of information so that when separate rubrics in the database impinge on one another, the likelihood of productive access can be enhanced. Of course, any definition takes on additional complexity when foreign language publications are analyzed; lack of linguistic skill often leads to such schematic simplifications of content that the point of an article or study is obscured. As one of the respondents in the informal survey stated: "If only the *Zeitschrift* weren't in German. It would be so useful."

The present lexicon of art history is a product of practice and consensus. Its categories of reference are naturally those employed in a database although ideas and theoretical concepts are hard to codify. The ambitious *Dictionary of Art*, planned by MacMillan for publication in twenty-eight volumes with about 16,000 illustrations and hundreds of articles, may have a considerable impact on this lexicon especially in its redefinition of worthy subjects and in its pursuit of general and theoretical issues. Given the scope of this venture and the participation of so many leading art historians, it is possible that some categories of reference will be changed and new subjects of inquiry will be created. Any living discipline must undergo change, even one as slow-moving as art history, and the database must reflect such changes to remain responsive and responsible. However, because of the effort expended and the vastness of its coverage, a database may tend to preserve a frozen terminology to the disadvantage of its users. Therefore, all such systems which process art historical information for scholars must have sufficient built-in flexibility to respond to significant innovations in the discipline. The decoding and interpretation of art objects and their comprehension within a historical context of creation and reception are not governed by fixed laws.

The problem is not academic. Although it might be useful to computerize the *Index of Christian Art* as it is, because the *Index* then would be more available to scholars at large, one must question whether the *Index* should first be radically revised because its principles of organization go back more than sixty years. The *Index* surely preserves an important artifact of scholarship, but the historical "period" to which it refers and the very nature of "Christian Art" itself which the *Index* purports to illuminate are differently conceived by today's poten-

tial users. Sometimes tradition has to give way, especially when the objects of art become restless in their familiar places.

The reader might get the impression that some art historians connect art objects and information in capricious and unsystematic—although creative—ways. Objects by themselves do not connect with anything even if artworks can fix the attention of the observer, incite the delight of the connoisseur, and arouse the possessiveness of the collector. Art objects—once so defined—have only the connections given to them by a critic or art historian with a vision, whether that vision be historical, iconographic, stylistic, phenomenological, aesthetic, or some combination thereof. Art objects can exist without reference to any particular observer, but the historical fact and character of that existence needs to be demonstrated by someone capable of showing a persuasive connection between *this* object and *that* time and place. Historical research, if properly done, denies the isolation of the object and posits a nexus of objective, historical associations, acceptable to others with access to the same supporting information, properly presented to them by the scholar.

Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes used to write his opinions first and then find the cases and precedents to support his views. He did so confident in his vision of the law which incorporated facts, constructions of those facts, and prior decisions, and gave his opinions meaning; to satisfy his colleagues in the law, his argument was clearly expressed and he cited the necessary cases and evidence. Some of his opinions became law, some did not, and some are no longer law. Yet his point of view survives as a way of construing issues and all his opinions directly addressed the fact and the legal implications of the situation before him.

Art historians rarely have the lapidary style of a Justice Holmes, but they have, or should have, similar objectives in their work: to interpret the object, to make the historical argument clearly, to document that argument fully, and to give to the audience all that is necessary to make a fair judgment on the matter presented.