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Remarks on the Method of Art History: I

THE following are a few casual thoughts, in no sense systematic, on the method of art history, which have occurred to me while looking through some art-historical literature of the past years.

It is, of course, platitudinous to say that art history deals with the history of art, that it combines and connects art and history. It is equally obvious that the method used in art history, as in other disciplines, undergoes certain changes from generation to generation. That of each generation depends on how it views art and how it views history and on the differing combination and proportion of the two components which, as a result, arise afresh in every generation.¹ So the method of art history naturally constitutes a part of the prevailing intellectual outlook, the problems and interests, of successive periods. Alterations in art-historical methods do not in the least cancel out achievements of previous generations, but only effect a shift of accent which brings into relief ideas in art, as in history, which the particular generation considers most important. For not only do the various methods differ in the importance they accord to history, but they are also largely determined by the preoccupations of historical research itself in the period in question.

Compared with earlier methods (say, with Karl Justi, who described the cultural background and the personal character of great artists), Wölfflin's formalistic method conceded, relatively, the smallest place to history. His approach, to a greater degree than that of his predecessors, tended ultimately to reflect the then prevailing doctrine of art for art's sake. This thesis, as is well known, had been conceived by a group of French Romantics and propagated by them mainly in the fifties and sixties of the nineteenth century writers and poets, who believed in erecting an ivory tower for themselves, who considered art to be detached from the ideas of their time, and who stressed in it the 'eternal', the 'absolute', that is, the purely formal values.² Wölfflin's very lucid, formal analyses, behind which is an undisguised bias in favour of the classicist Cinquecento composition, reduced the wealth of historical evolution to a few fundamental categories,

a few typified schemes. The Viennese school of art history, to which Riegl, Wickhoff, and Dvořák belonged, gave a far more prominent place than did Wölfflin to history and the historical development of style.³ Here, works of art were treated as threads in the stylistic development, and so great was the value placed upon the continuity of this evolution that so-called 'dark periods', 'periods of decay', like those of the late antique, of mannerism, of baroque, that is, periods of which previous art historians had disapproved, were no longer recognised as such, but were studied constructively and with particular thoroughness. Although scholars of the Viennese school made most exact, formal analyses, even as inexorably logical as Riegl's, they – the late Riegl himself and particularly Dvořák – combined them with analyses of themes and of thematic features. Continuing Riegl, who, in his late phase, regarded his notion of the 'art-will' as dependent on the outlook of the period in question, Dvořák, in his latter years, dealt with art history as part of the history of ideas, of the development of the human spirit. As I was myself a pupil first of Wölfflin and then of Dvořák, I can still feel the great difference in the spiritual atmosphere of these two scholars. I should like to mention a characteristic example of the wide-embracing scope of Dvořák's approach. When writing of the art of the Van Eycks as early as 1904 he remarked that art history had so far offered no explanation of its sudden emergence, but that the exploration of the sources of the new bourgeois culture in Flanders, of which this art was a product, could only be found in books of economic history. Wölfflin would never have said anything approaching this.

However, it has been chiefly in recent decades since Dvořák's death, as a more general interest has been taken in economic and social questions, that economic and social history within history has made such rapid strides – parallel to the sudden rise of sociology and the social sciences. It was almost twenty years after writing his *History of England* that G. M. Trevelyan gave us, in 1942 – a sign of the new trend – his *English Social History*. How the history of ideas, which previously led a comparatively isolated existence, has come to be closely connected with social history, so that certain types of outlook, in a given period, take on a clear outline, is well seen

¹ This, of course, is over-simplification. It was particularly during the heroic years around 1900, spiritually so rich and complex, that various methods of art history, to a certain extent, over-lapped. However, seen in perspective, the main trend of development is clearly discernible.

² In A. CASSAGNE'S well-documented book, *La Théorie de l'Art pour l'Art en France*, Paris [1906], we read how this theory, originated by Théophile Gautier, developed and under what social and historical circumstances it finally got the upper hand, in spite of early resistance from Victor Hugo and George Sand.

³ It is no mere chance that, at the University of Vienna, the Art-Historical Institute took its place within the framework of the Austrian Institute of Historical Research. In his articles on Riegl and Wickhoff, Dvořák describes the struggle of both these scholars against æsthetic dogmatism, and characterises Riegl's method as the victory of the psychological and historical conception of art history over an absolute æsthetics.

in R. H. Tawney's *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (London 1926), a justly renowned example of this new tendency. The importance of social and religious history for an understanding of the history of literature and the entirely new interpretations resulting from it are shown – to name one book among many – by G. Thomson's *Æschylus and Athens* (London 1941).⁴ The favourite field of art history, the Italian Renaissance, has lately been worked through, from the new angle, in A. v. Martin's *Sociology of the Italian Renaissance* (English translation, London 1944). Like the other historical sciences, the history of religion or the history of literature, art history too is now taking notice of, and using for its own purposes, the ever closer co-operation between the various historical disciplines and the broadening that has taken place in historical research through a mounting interest in social history. All the more, since our views not only on history but also on art have been modified. We have come to look at art, just as history, in a less esoteric light, associated more closely, in devious ways, with problems of real, everyday life; hence, for instance, the increasing attention given to the subject-matter of works of art – a clear indication that the art for art's sake point of view has much weakened.⁵ It is this new combination of the two components which characterises the method of art history in our generation.

Here it was Warburg, with his wide range of interest in many cultural and historical disciplines, who did most of the pioneering work and whose life-long activity so clearly contained the germs of a new method of art history. I will confine myself here to recalling his numerous well-known essays, between 1902–07, devoted to the examination of the mentality and artistic taste of the Florentine middle-class patrons at the time of Lorenzo de' Medici. Since his death his research work has been continued in the same spirit by the Institute which bears his name and which is now incorporated into London University. Warburg's point of view is best summarised in the words of his own disciples. In her introduction to Warburg's writings, Dr Gertrude Bing describes how, aided by material in the Florentine archives, he succeeded in rescuing the work of art from the isolation with which it was threatened by a purely æsthetic and formal approach. In examining in each case the inter-dependence between the pictorial and literary evidence, the relation of the artist to the patron, the close connection between the work of art, its social *milieu* and its practical purpose, Warburg took into consideration not only the products of great art but also minor and æsthetically insignificant works of pictorial art. Or, to use the terminology of another scholar associated with the school of Warburg, E. Wind:⁶ Warburg was just as averse to the autonomy of a Wölfflinian, isolationist art history as to the artificial boundaries between the 'purely artistic' and the 'non-artistic' factors, constructed by art historians. In fact, works of popular and half-popular art were, and are, constantly adduced by War-

burg himself and by scholars of the Warburg Institute, in particular by the late F. Saxl, for an understanding of the whole art and the whole world of thought of a period.⁷

The severely historical spirit of the school of Vienna and the resolutely anti-art for art's sake attitude of Warburg together paved the way for a deeper, richer, and less nebulous study of art history, which can draw upon the very tangible results of the historical disciplines, in particular of social and economic, of political and religious history (not exclusively of the history of literature and philosophy) as well as of an historically-intentioned social psychology. Art historians are now in a position to take seriously into account the many-sidedness of any one period, the complexity of types of outlook, and the mode of thought among various sections of the public⁸, in order to discover which style belongs to which outlook on life – the notion of style, of course, not being restricted to formal features, but including subject-matter. If we look at the whole of society, not only its topmost layers, we come to understand the *raison d'être* of all pictures, not only the best, the most famous, the full meaning of which cannot, indeed, be really grasped in isolation. The more carefully it is scrutinised, the more easily and naturally does the social, intellectual, and artistic picture throughout a period slowly unfold itself and the way in which its parts are connected becomes increasingly clarified. This, then, is the kind of process now taking place in art-historical literature, particularly, but by no means exclusively, in America.

The various authors represent very different individual shades and manners of approach, yet, historically speaking, they all form part of one trend. I cannot, of course, list the multiplicity of themes which have been examined of recent years in closest connection with the actual life and thought of different periods. But readers of this journal would, I think, like to cast a rapid glance at a few suggestive examples.

Herbert Read, treating the function of art in society, has explored the general nature of the links between the forms of society at any given period and the forms of contemporary art.⁹ R. Krautheimer has shown that the purely formal approach of recent times to medieval architecture had entirely obscured the elements which, in the view of medieval men,

⁷ How little Saxl cared for the 'boundaries' of art history, is shown, to take one instance, in his article 'The Classical Inscription in Renaissance Art and Politics' (*Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, iv, 1940–41), where he has treated together copies made by humanists of ancient inscriptions and of ancient monuments, stressing the political implications of the former for the men of the Renaissance.

As is well known, scholars of the Warburg Institute have often been able, by means of an historical approach, to explain the subject-matter and to recreate the real meaning and spirit of works of art which previously had been entirely misinterpreted by generations of writers. In the case of Botticelli's mythological pictures, this has just been rectified by E. GOMBRICH ('Botticelli's Mythologies: A Study in the Neoplatonic Symbolism of his Circle', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, viii, 1945), in that of Mantegna's by WIND (*Bellini's Feast of the Gods*, Harvard University Press, 1948). On this occasion, Gombrich writes: 'The beautiful pages which have been written by masters of prose on the emotional import of Botticelli's figures remain purely subjective unless the context in which these figures stand can be established by outside means', and Wind: 'Mantegna's *Parnassus* has had the singular misfortune of being praised for the very qualities which it attempts to mock'.

⁸ What G. M. TREVELYAN writes of England is true of all countries: 'In everything the old overlaps the new – in religion, in thought, in family custom. There is never any clear cut; there is no single moment when all Englishmen adopt new ways of life and thought. . . . To obtain a true picture of any period, both the old and the new elements must be borne in mind'. (*English Social History*).

⁹ *Art and Society*, London [1947].

⁴ Some forgotten but valuable books have now become topical for the same reason. In consequence of the interest recently taken in social analyses of the literary public, A. BELJAME's book of 1881, *Le Public et les Hommes de Lettres en Angleterre au 18e siècle*, has just been translated and published in English.

⁵ That is why – to take an outstanding example – such a widespread interest is now shown among the public in Hogarth, who, not many years ago, was still looked down upon in art history and dubbed a 'literary' artist.

⁶ See his introduction to the *Bibliography on the Survival of the Classics*, edited by the Warburg Institute, London [1934].

were outstanding in an edifice: namely, its religious implications, that is, its 'content'.¹⁰ M. Schapiro's numerous writings have also thrown completely new light on certain aspects of the art of the Middle Ages: he has associated, for instance, the style of the Ruthwell Cross of seventh-century Northumbria, or the differences between the Mozarabic and the Romanesque styles practised concurrently at the end of the eleventh century in the monastery of Silos in Castille, with the religious struggles and the social and political transformations of those times.¹¹ For the past decade or so, an ever-increasing literature has been appearing on the working conditions of artists of the Italian Renaissance, particularly in Florence, on their position within the guilds, on the various kinds of commissions, on patronage, on the prices received, etc.¹² Above all, we begin to see more clearly than before how the various styles within Italian art of this period were deeply rooted in the types of outlook and in the social and political conditions of the period.¹³ M. Meiss, for instance, when enumerating the characteristics of Tuscan painting in the second half of the Trecento – abandonment of three-dimensionality and of perspective, limitation of the movements of figures, contrasting colours, ascetic or emotional expressions – has defined them as expressing a state of mind influenced by the economic crisis beginning in the forties and by the shift of power from the merchants and bankers to the lesser guilds and the lower middle class, bearers of a more conservative culture.¹⁴ It is worth mentioning that, working independently through the same historical sources and the same literature of social history, I came to identical results myself, contrasting the Florentine painting of this period with the realist classicism of the early fourteenth (Giotto) and early fifteenth centuries (Masaccio) when the more rationalist upper middle class was in power.¹⁵ E. Gombrich, having demonstrated how Botticelli's mythological pictures are firmly rooted in the literary and philosophical outlook of Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici's circle, suggests an important parallel between the different political views of Lorenzo il Magnifico and Lorenzo

di Pierfrancesco and their differing artistic tastes: Ghirlandaio and Bertoldo in contrast to Botticelli.¹⁶ A. Blunt has sketched the connection between the social and political events, the mode of thought and the artistic theories in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy.¹⁷ In an article on Greco's so-called *Dream of Philip II*, the same author derives the formal features from the complex thematic elements, theological (Adoration of the Holy Name of Jesus) as well as political (Holy League of the Papacy, Spain, and Venice).¹⁸ Again, in his book on Mansart, Blunt points out how the somewhat romantic classicism of this architect was suited to the court aristocracy and the rich financiers imitating them, for which he worked;¹⁹ and further, how the style of Mansart's churches differs according to the particular type of religious belief of the order in question.²⁰ Saxl has equally sought the explanation of Aniello Falcone's realistic battle pictures which contain no specific hero, in the social type and taste of the particular Napolitan patrons of this artist in the second-third of the seventeenth century.²¹ Wind has demonstrated that Reynolds' grand solemn style and Gainsborough's simple, natural style corresponded to the two types of outlook then prevailing: the first to the heroic nature of Dr Johnson's and Beattie's attitude, the second to the human and sceptical conception of Hume.²² In another of his writings the same author has shown how a new trend in history painting, based on an accurate rendering of contemporary events, drew its impulse from the democratic ideas proclaimed by the American artists, West and Copley, at the time of the War of Independence; further, he makes revealing comparisons between the styles of history painting as they arose from the American and French Revolutions.²³ Schapiro has indicated how the discovery and appreciation of the folk art of the lower classes took place in a circle of radical artists and writers, among them Courbet, who sympathised with the Revolution of 1848, and how a knowledge of this art had a definite bearing upon

¹⁶ *Op. cit.*

¹⁷ Alberti's rational art theory, BLUNT finds (*op. cit.*), was dependent upon his political outlook, that of the pre-Medici Florentine city-state, while the mystical Neoplatonic art theory was suited to the state of mind prevailing during the Medici autocracy. He asserts that the irrational, neo-medieval tendencies of mannerism and mannerist art theory, are only comprehensible against the background of political and religious reaction caused by the destruction of the great merchant republics with which the Papacy had been allied and by the Papacy's move from a leading place among the progressive states of Italy to one of reaction, subsequently allied with an almost feudal Spain.

¹⁸ 'El Greco's "Dream of Philip II": An Allegory of the Holy League' (*Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, iii, 1939–40).

¹⁹ He explains its difference from the severe classicism of Poussin and Corneille, who express the progressive and earnest ideals of civil servants and of the merchants of Paris and Lyons (*Mansart*, London, The Warburg Institute, 1941).

²⁰ In his book on the artistic theories in Italy, Blunt has shown that the worldly, emotional religion of the Jesuits preferred the emotional, pre-baroque tendencies in mannerist painting (Barocci).

²¹ Wealthy gentry and cool-headed business men, not warrior types nor politicians but closely associated with and affected by warfare and civil strife (Masaniello) and having a preference for violent and descriptive realistic art, such as was produced in various parts of Europe ('The Battle Scene without a Hero: Aniello Falcone and his Patrons', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, iii, 1939–40).

²² 'Humanitätsidee und heroisiertes Porträt in der englischen Kultur des 18. Jahrhunderts' (*Vorträge der Bibliothek Warburg*, ix, 1930–31).

²³ 'The Revolution of History Painting' (*Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, ii, 1938–39). In his *English Expressionist Artists in the 19th Century* (Thesis at the Courtauld Institute, 1938), E. M. Zwanenberg-Phillips bases his explanation of Blake and his followers upon an analysis of the social background.

¹⁰ 'Introduction to an "Iconography of Medieval Architecture"', (*Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, iv, [1940–41]).

¹¹ In Northumbria, the struggle took place between the Celtic, particularist, monastic Church, shaped by the conditions of tribal society and the Roman Church, which was aiming at the integration of local peoples into the larger ambient of European and Mediterranean life ('The Religious Meaning of the Ruthwell Cross', *Art Bulletin*, xxvi, 1944); in his other article ('From Mozarabic to Romanesque in Silos', *Art Bulletin*, xxi, 1939) Schapiro has explained the coexistence of the fantastic, conservative with the more naturalistic modern style as due to the steady change then occurring in the outlook of the increasingly centralised Spanish Church and ultimately to the transition of Christian Spain from scattered agricultural communities to powerful centralised states with urban secular middle classes. I see that Dr Joan Evans' *Art in Medieval France: A Study in Patronage* has just been published by the Oxford University Press; she shows French medieval art as the mirror of society for which it was produced by explaining that this art took the forms it did because of the needs of the different sections of society who commissioned it.

¹² A. BLUNT has shown that the struggle of the artists to better their social position decisively influenced their art theories (*Artistic Theory in Italy 1450–1600*, Oxford, 1940).

¹³ Warburg's friend, the economic historian, Doren, already saw, half a century ago, the emptiness of unhistorical discussions on Florentine art. In his book of 1901 on the Florentine woollen industry of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, a standard work on this period, he affirms that the knowledge of social and economic history of that time would dispel for ever the conception of Florence as a community living in conditions of carefree prosperity, general harmony, and timeless beauty.

¹⁴ 'Italian Primitives in Konopiste' (*Art Bulletin*, xxviii, 1946).

¹⁵ *Florentine Painting and its Social Background* [1948].

Courbet's realism.²⁴ 'Backward' pictures, even of recent epochs, are now considered to be interesting and worth explaining on account of the particular outlook they represent. For instance, in 1938, two exhibitions were organised at the Baltimore Museum of Art and the Walters Art Gallery: one centring round Courbet, the other displaying his contemporary adversaries, the academic counter movement; the explanatory lectures by members of different faculties of Baltimore University, later published, went at length into the point of view not only of the naturalists, but also of the conservative official artists of the Second Empire.²⁵ And finally, to include a work which deals with modern art, S. Giedion

²⁴ SCHAPIRO has further noted how the difference in the social and political constellations existing before and under Napoleon III caused Courbet's friend, Champfleury, who had also belonged to this circle, to give different interpretations of popular art during the two periods ('Courbet and Popular Imagery', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, iv, 1940). The rediscovery of the *le Nains* by Champfleury ('The Revival of the *le Nains*', *Art Bulletin*, xxiv, 1942) and that of Vermeer by Bürger-Thoré, when a political exile under Napoleon III, have equally been shown by S. MELTZOFF to be a result of the predilection for realism of the same circle, whose aesthetics were influenced by their democratic ideas ('The Rediscovery of Vermeer', *Marsyas*, ii, 1942, New York University).

²⁵ *Courbet and the Naturalistic Movement*. Essays read at the Baltimore Museum of Art, edited by G. Boas (Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1938).

has examined the relation between architecture and social development in Europe, particularly in London, and in America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.²⁶

To acknowledge the significance of social development and of different types of outlook for understanding the diversity of styles and stylistic evolution does not, of course, carry with it an underestimation of the formal features nor detract from the enjoyment of their quality nor imply that real results already achieved in art-historical literature through formal analyses have lost their validity. Rather the contrary.²⁷ We can foresee that within two or three generations a new overall pattern of stylistic developments will have been evolved. Such a pattern will buttress and clarify the purely formal evolutions already established by pegging them to a basis wider than previously thought possible.

(To be continued)

²⁶ *Space, Time, and Architecture* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press 1941).

²⁷ The results on re-gothicisation during the Quattrocento at which I arrived some twenty-five years ago through formal analyses have now been confirmed through my study of the whole historical material. In a recent article ('Observations on Girolamo da Carpi', *Art Bulletin*, xxx, 1948) I have also tried to show how the continuation of Quattrocento Gothic in mannerism, which I saw in my older writings mainly as a formal process, was ultimately based on the social changes.

Shorter Notices

Two Signed Portraits by Paul Van Somer

BY JOHN STEEGMAN

THE portrait of Anne of Denmark, Queen of James I, in the Royal Collection has generally been considered hitherto as the only signed portrait by Paul Van Somer. It is inscribed in capital letters 'P. VAN SOMER/A°. 1617'.¹ Quite recently two more signed examples have come to light. The fact that both are signed and dated makes them of considerable interest to students of early seventeenth-century portraiture in England, but it must be admitted that, beyond this fact, they have so little in common with one another that they do not get us much further in our attempts to establish Van Somer's artistic personality. Had they not been signed, it is doubtful whether either of these portraits would have been attributed to Van Somer. Indeed, one of them, that of Lord Windsor, might well have been attributed to Cornelius Johnson.²

The first of these two signed portraits belongs to the Shipley Art Gallery at Gateshead.³ It represents an unknown man, and is on canvas with sight-measurement 27½ by 23½ in. In the upper right corner is the inscription '*Æta. Sux* 54/1611'. In the upper left corner the otherwise unbroken background is relieved by a niche containing the *memento mori* device of a diminutive skull resting on an hour-glass and the inscription '*Sic tua vita*'. At the top of this niche is a cartel inscribed 'P. Van Somer Londo. . . ' (last letters illegible). This signature, unlike those on the *Anne of*

Denmark and the portrait next to be described, is painted in a cursive script. The picture is in a somewhat damaged condition and the paint has a coarse and crumbled appearance. Nothing is known of this portrait's *provenance* save that it came as part of a large bequest to the Shipley Art Gallery from the late J. A. D. Shipley, of Gateshead, 1823-1909 (Figs. 27 and 29).

The second portrait belongs to the Earl of Plymouth,⁴ through whose kindness it is now on loan to the National Museum of Wales; it was until 1947 at Hewell Grange. This portrait represents the present owner's ancestor, Thomas Windsor, 6th Baron Windsor, K.B., 1591-1642, and is signed and dated 1620. It is painted on panel, with a sight-measurement of 30 by 23½ in., and the half-length figure is seen within a painted oval. In the lower left spandril of this oval is a prominent inscription 'Thos. Ld. Windsor', which has been painted across part of another inscription 'PAVLVS. VAN. SOMER Ft.', with the N of VAN reversed; in the lower right spandril, in a style corresponding with the signature, is the date 1620. Both date and signature are visible in a strong light, but are otherwise not easy to see (Figs. 26 and 28).

It would be difficult to find two portraits by one artist more widely different than these two, even discounting the differences due to condition and those between painting on canvas and painting on panel. The 1620 *Lord Windsor*, because of its good condition, is likely to be more useful in the study of Van Somer than the 1611 *Unknown Man*. Judging only by a photograph of the former, it might well be said that here Van Somer, in the penultimate year of his life, bears a close resemblance to Mytens – or to what passes for Mytens. Looking at the original, however, one can see a very close resemblance to Cornelius Johnson of the early 1620's (though none to later Johnson of the 'thirties). The thin, smooth paint, the reliance on drawing rather than modelling, and the sharply defined eyelids are more nearly akin to early Cornelius Johnson than to anyone else of that still uncharted decade. These characteristics also occur in the National Portrait Gallery's

¹ Catalogue of Exhibition of the King's Pictures, Royal Academy, 1946-7.

² *Walpole Society*, [1921-2], Vol. x.

³ I am indebted to the Curator of the Shipley Art Gallery for permission to reproduce this portrait; and to the Director of the National Portrait Gallery for drawing my attention to it.

⁴ I am indebted to the Earl of Plymouth for permission to reproduce this portrait here.