

PART ONE

THEORY OF ART

Chapter I

History of Art and History of Literature: Some Random Thoughts*

At first glance it does make sense to consider together the history of art and the history of literature. As histories, both are meditations on and explanations of time. Both have a practically accepted and theoretically formulated aesthetic content. Both live in a state of tension – at times confusing, at other times enriching – between criticism and history as well as between concern for the concrete work of art and the need for abstract frames of reference. Since Horace's *ut pictura poesis* a possible formal correlation between painting and poetry has been proposed. A roughly analogous periodization of the visual arts and of literature does occur. Moreover, the temperament and training of investigators has made it more likely for them to consider together art and literature than either field and chemistry or economics, to use examples of areas which do have a bearing on the arts.

Complications arise as soon as one seeks to go beyond fairly obvious parallels of “literary” paintings or sculptures and “pictorial” poems or novels with “painterly” visual effects or descriptions. Some of the complications are comparatively minor. Thus the considerable problems which occur in defining chronologically the Romantic period in English, French or Russian literature and in German or French music and painting do not necessarily invalidate a common terminology for all these phenomena. In general, chronological neatness rarely operates as satisfactorily as one would like, but, after all, coherent periodization is only one aspect of history or of criticism. Other complications result from a different kind of historiography. Thus while the history of art and the history of literature share a common technical vocabulary of epistemological description, individual terms vary considerably in meaning. This is particularly true as one moves from the very general level of “style” or “subject matter” to more precise words like metaphor, icon, image and so forth. The word “genre,” for instance, has remarkably different meanings in literature and in the arts. The history of art, [560] younger than the history of literature, with fewer practitioners, and still

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immensely bound to specific periods and regions, has not been able to come up with a generally accepted terminology – or at least a range of accepted meanings – or an identification of concerns similar to what is found in Wellek and Warren's *Theory of Literature*. It is sufficient to compare the *College Art Journal* with *College English* over a period of years to see an extraordinary discrepancy of concerns and of terms, at first glance very much to the discredit of the history of art.

The point is simply that, beyond an apparently valid intellectual and epistemological correlation between the two fields, equivalences and contrasts often become superficial or contrived, or else they require constant and wearisome definitions of terms, a small number of exceptions notwithstanding. The investigator or the critic often ends up either with secondary works of art or literature or with a more or less obvious one-to-one relationship between *a* painting (far more often than a sculpture or a work of architecture) and *a* work of literature (an event in a novel or a poem). Even in instances such as Baudelaire, who was an acute art critic and who was inspired by paintings or by painters for some of his best known (and also worst) poems, one may question whether the literary merit as opposed to the source of inspiration of *Les Phares* owes much to the painters who are evoked by the poem. Similarly the greatness of Delacroix's illustrations of Dante owes probably less to the subject than to the genius of the painter. In other words, demonstrable inspiration from the verbal to the visual or vice versa forms a major part of the history of taste or of the personality of individual artists but is not likely to elucidate the topic proposed by the editor of the journal [*New Literary History*]: the relationship between the history of art and of literature.

For a variety of reasons, some of which will be discussed further on, it is probably not possible at this time to construct an elaborate "meaning of meaning" type of parallelism between artistic and literary histories. Nor is it likely to be fruitful to list in any detail the differences and resemblances between literature and visually perceptible arts, although one or two points will be mentioned. It also does not seem to me to be pertinent in the context of this essay and within the format of a symposium to provide any coherent sort of bibliographical apparatus or survey of existing considerations on the subject; however much one may be indebted to others in the formulation of generalities, this debt can be better repaid at a later stage of more definitive intellectual commitments than at this tentative moment of suggested hypotheses. What I have preferred to do is to put forward four propositions which seem to me to be pertinent to the topic and which may form a basis for [561] discussion. Such a format makes it possible to circumvent the need to define an immense number of terms and of concepts, a task which is clearly premature. It goes without saying that these tentative propositions should not be considered as more than an invitation for criticism and do not by any means cover the subject in its entirety.

One last preliminary point. What follows deals primarily with the arts and with literature before 1900. Such a position is justified to the extent that a coherent historical perspective is difficult to establish for contemporary art and it is particularly easy to pick up the exception rather than the norm in the mass of available documents. Furthermore, it is precisely a characteristic of much recent artistic endeavor that it seeks to overcome some of the limitations and conventions of the past, whether successfully or not being at this stage immaterial. However exciting and pleasurable the experiments of Joyce, of the *nouveau roman*, of Jackson Pollock, or of Frank Stella may be, I am not convinced that they help the historian in organizing coherently his understanding of the past, organization being here deliberately distinguished from appreciation.

(1) A parallel consideration of the history of art and of literature can only be undertaken if both the visual arts and literature are subsumed under some wider intellectual category. Adapting slightly a formulation developed by Lévi-Strauss, the historian assumes both to be a “tangible” system of signs serving to express or to lead to some sort of “intelligible” idea, conception or action that exists and can be defined independently of the tangible means used to express them. Three further remarks are pertinent to this point, two of which unite both fields while the third one separates them.

The last is easiest to define. The character of the tangible system is affected by a medium of expression, a ceramic or a brick construction, a drama or an epic poem. Each medium possesses its own range of possible effectiveness in transmitting what was meant to be “intelligible.” This is a fairly obvious point, just as any number of examples exist in which attempts have been made to utilize one medium for the expression of values belonging primarily to another. It is in theory possible to suppose that in the process of shifting from one medium to the other, relatable kinds of structural changes occur, whether one deals with the visual or with the literary worlds.

But, on the whole, the activity of a Persian potter of the thirteenth century utilizing the surface of a normally small object to represent in monumental fashion the taking of a fortress by a whole army – a subject ill adapted to the shape of a plate – is hardly comparable to Baudelaire’s activity in composing a *poème en prose*. For at this level [562] of investigation, the range of any one medium is of far greater importance than whatever may unite the “intelligible” idea, conception or act to be communicated.

The first point which unites all the arts is that, under the hypothesis I have proposed, they are automatically affected by the standard formula of communication theory, a message coded by a sender and transmitted to a receiver. While elaborations on this formula are standard fare among linguists and have occasionally been utilized for literature, far less comparable work has been done by art historians. In my subsequent remarks I shall pick up one or two themes derived from communication theory. For the time being we may simply accept the facts that all the arts belong in some fashion to a

general theory of communication, and that considerations of a “message” from the various points of view of the “sender” or of the “receiver” are but abstractions of the traditional activities of historians and critics. Problems arise, of course, when one recalls that not all means of verbal and visual communication are works of art, and that deciding which ones are usually precedes their analysis as a system of communication. Clear areas for investigation are the process by which such decisions are made and the degree to which the decisions are affected by the sheer bulk of available monuments. It is far easier for a prehistoric painted ceramic from Iran to be considered as a work of art than for a nineteenth-century novel. Regardless of the processes involved and keeping in mind the possibility that some of them can be fitted within general communications theory, it seems clear that all the arts are united by the fact that the historian of the visual arts and of literature has made a number of more or less coherent, more or less arbitrary, and more or less definitive choices among a mass of monuments existing in any one medium.

(2) One of the key questions posed by transformational linguists has been that a general theory explaining the processes and ways in which a message is communicated must also explain how an intelligible message hitherto unknown to the receiver can be understood by him. The problem is pertinent, even central, to all arts. In part it concerns a certain number of internal characteristics of the message itself, for instance the ratio of redundancy and entropy found in it. But as I have suggested earlier, the message itself, the individual work of art, is closely tied to the range of its medium and thus any generalization would be modified in a still unknown fashion by the medium’s semantic potential. The theoretical possibility that a silver inlaid bronze candlestick from thirteenth-century Egypt and a love sonnet by Pushkin may have required the same ratio of innovations and of accepted and partly repetitious conventions requires for its elucidation investigations which go [563] much beyond the purposes of this paper (not to speak of its author’s competence).

I should like instead to bring up another aspect of the same question, to wit, the nature of the stored knowledge necessary in the recipient – viewer or reader – for an understanding of the intelligible source of inspiration of a work of art.

Let me begin with a group of examples. One of the most common functions of literature and of art is narrative. Whatever other values it may have, a novel or an epic poem tells a story with heroes, developments, climaxes and presumably some sort of finale, or at least end. Whatever personages, settings or themes tie the narrative together, the narrative is perceived in time as a series of sequences which can be micro-dynamic, as in the frames of a movie, or elliptic, as in a succession of *tableaux vivants*. There are plenty of visual equivalents to this sequential perception of a written message. In the narthex of the cathedral of San Marco in Venice, the

mosaic decoration of the domes is divided into concentric circles, each circle being subdivided into small units of approximately equal size. These units have been used to translate into visual form stories from the book of Genesis. In the story of the Creation days are symbolized by angels, one angel for each day, with God enthroned at the end, majestically surrounded by six days, greeting the seventh day of rest. In the third-century synagogue at Dura Europos a similar device of a series of single iconographic units set next to each other illustrates as a sequence in time the celebrated vision of Ezekiel being taken by the "hand of the Lord" (dutifully shown as a hand appearing from above) to the valley of dry bones (represented as a series of heads, arms, legs and torsos strewn all over the field). Finally, the Freer Gallery in Washington owns a unique Persian goblet of the twelfth or thirteenth century which is also divided into superimposed strips and units. Each unit contains an episode from the dramatic story of Bizhen and Manizheh taken from the *Shahnameh*, the great Persian epic, and the order of the images corresponds to the development in time of the story.

It would not be very difficult to collect other examples of the existence in the visually perceptible world of the arts of groups of images which, like a comic strip, tell a story through sequences of time, with heroes, with changes of setting, and occasionally even with a development of emotional or physical characteristics. But there is one crucial difference between the narrative of a novel and the narrative through images. The difference is that, while the fact of a narrative structure can easily be recognized in both, the specifics of the narrative and [564] even the identity of the personages involved in a visual presentation cannot be understood without a previous knowledge of the story. The San Marco mosaics or the Dura frescoes are quite meaningless, at least in their presumed narrative function, without an awareness through other means than those of visual information of the stories of Genesis or of Ezekiel. The angels symbolizing days only make sense if one knows that one of the key points of the story lies indeed in the sequence of days. On the Freer goblet it is easy to identify as a prisoner a half-naked personage being led away by a rope around his neck, but there is no automatic visual knowledge of who the prisoner is. In fact the mosaicists of Venice added as a border to their images parts of the appropriate text from Genesis, just as many manuscript illustrations or paintings or sculptures provided identifications of personages. As to the Dura synagogue, one of its problems has been for several decades the exact identification of scenes, and we are all aware of the immense difficulties faced by art historians dealing with pre-Columbian or ancient Near Eastern art, where they can often identify the narrative character of a sequence of images without knowing their actual specific subject matter. In other words, a narrative in visual form is effective as *narrative* only when its textual source is present (as in manuscripts or through inscriptions) or when the viewer already knows the story.

It is therefore proper to conclude that, while a narrative can be understood as a type of representation, the subject of the narrative can only be understood, even in its own time, through a previous awareness of the events of the story depicted. Narrative images do not serve to tell a story but to remind the viewer of a story. Exceptions seem to me to occur only at extremely elemental levels, such as pornography, although even then an actual or imagined experience must precede an understanding of a narrative sequence. The contrast with a literary genre like the novel is striking for, even though one may well grant that a knowledge of French or Russian social history is important for a proper understanding of the purely narrative aspects of Balzac's or of Dostoevsky's novels, the dramatic or emotional development of the story can be perceived, if not always appreciated in full, without any other special or technical knowledge than that of the language (original or not) in which one reads.

My point so far is, then, that the understanding and appreciation of the visual world requires the previous acquisition of a far more concrete and conscious knowledge than the abstract and automatic awareness of vocabulary and of grammar necessary for the elucidation of a literary work.

Several further considerations derive from this point. First, one of the [565] art historian's key concerns lies in the establishment of the typology of a time or culture, i.e., the presumably accepted combinations of formal and iconographic elements which appear as automatic vehicles for whatever "intelligible" was being expressed. Thus a Persian miniature of the fifteenth century illustrates almost every subject with the same stock of landscape, architecture, personages and compositions, and Gothic architecture uses a consistent typology of constructional and compositional elements. Quality lies in the internal perfection or consistency of the typology and in the wealth of expressions achieved within a typology. There is no doubt that parallels do exist in literature, as in French seventeenth-century drama or poetry. But, on the whole, since the vehicle of literature lies in an innate or acquired knowledge of language, opportunities for effectiveness in communication are far greater in literature than in the visual arts. One may wonder in fact whether images illustrating Christian theology could ever persuade anyone of the intricacies and even significance of Christian thought, and whether the depth of Buddhist thought can be perceived by a mere contemplation of Buddhist art.

The second consideration is a corollary of the first. If, in expressing as common an "intelligible" message as the narrative, visual art fails to communicate much that is new, then we are faced with two possibilities. One is that the visually perceptible world was always epigonic, a secondary luxury, at best a *memento* or a *nota bene* for otherwise known things. The other is that it sought to communicate an entirely different *kind* of "intelligible" message. Many arguments can be adduced for the first possibility, as in manuscript illumination and illustration or even in the decoration of churches. But it can also be suggested that the communicative function of

the arts was meant to be restricted to a general mood or impression. The point of the San Marco mosaics would have been to indicate the importance of a divine narrative to the faithful, not to tell a concrete story. The point of Buddhist sculptures would have been to provide an impression of hieratic holiness and of Goya's drawings to horrify. In other words the world of the visual arts is to be defined by a series of *modes*, of devices serving to connote a large variety of possible realities and submerging the concrete signs of the images themselves. Since the study of modes in the visual world, of their psychological associations, or of their formal expressions has barely begun, there is little point in pursuing the matter. I would prefer to end this section with a paradox. It is as though the abstract possibilities of language lead in literature to concretely definable subjects and images, while the concrete elements perceived visually lead to a definition of the arts in abstract "modal" terms. [566]

However one is to resolve the paradox, the key point seems to me that entirely different aspects of man's innate or acquired make-up are necessary for an understanding of literature in contrast to an understanding of the arts.

(3) The third point I should like to make is simple in itself, although its consequences are complex and rather elusive. Whereas the critical or historical responses to a work of literature utilize the same vehicle as literature, i.e., language, the parallel responses to a work of art are never in the same medium. In other words, the historian or the critic of the visual world removes himself from the means of expression of the subject of his investigation or contemplation. Furthermore he has no choice but to do so if he wants to communicate, in fact to think. Even the traditional and on the whole intellectually deplorable judgment of a painting or of an object according to "feel" does not utilize the medium of the monument itself. On the other hand, the historian or critic of art can become through his response the creator of major literature, as was the case with Ruskin. The reverse is impossible.

Several consequences can be drawn from this point. One would be a confirmation and further development of the remarks made earlier that the visual arts form a world apart, different in essence from the world of literature, and that existing correlations are of secondary importance. Another consequence is perhaps more of a question. Should we consider, therefore, that any history of art is an epistemological translation, the imposition on tangible signs of constructs and systems from another source? Or should we always seek to find some system of interpretation which would be common to all arts and which would have to be para- or possibly meta-linguistic? The question is not entirely idle if one recalls that the notion of meta-linguistic values has been applied to poetry.

A third consequence concerns the visual arts themselves. It may indeed be that the true function of the visual arts is to express something which is

impossible, or at least very difficult, to express verbally. What this “something” is cannot as easily be defined. An old position had been that the perception of the visual arts, especially of representations, involved a kind of time which tended to avoid the sequences of literature. But, aside from the fact that the literature with which such comparisons were made was the comparatively recent novel rather than poetry or drama with a more complicated kind of time perception, recent research indicates that the perception of the visual arts does not require the temporal immediacy which had been imagined. It may be proposed that, inasmuch as our understanding of the visual world is a translation into language of another type of knowledge, a greater freedom [567] of interpretation exists for the visual observer than for the literary reader. Monstrous compositions of living beings can be simply ornamental or deeply tragic; there need not be anything ridiculous about Mary of Medici arriving in an entourage of tritons and of buxom mermaids, and an anachronistic Christ in a fifteenth-century setting is not blasphemous. On the other hand, a Connecticut Yankee at the court of King Arthur is comic, birds describing mystical life in Persian literature are eminently serious, and Jesus Christ Superstar is somewhat disturbing. To be sure, some of Gogol’s short stories and of Molière’s comedies are ambiguous, as are many poems. But if we identify our concern as one of *range* rather than of definitive certitude, the visual world, because it is generally interpreted in another medium than itself, possesses intrinsically a semantic field which is almost as large as the intellect of its observer. In other words, the “receiver” may be considered as more important than the “sender,” perhaps even than the “message.”

(4) Most of what preceded has tended to emphasize the differences between the arts and literature and hence the differences between the tasks of the historians of the two fields. My last point is to suggest that, regardless of a large number of obvious differences, the overall contrast is the result of insufficient knowledge in a very specific area and thus may not necessarily be permanent. In a nutshell, the historian of literature has now at his disposal considerable theoretical and practical information on language itself, on the vehicle of primary communication between men. Terms have been defined and, in spite of continuous controversies of methods and of views, a *koiné* of accepted data does exist. The art historian’s work is stymied by an almost total absence of consistent work in two areas. One is the equivalent of the dictionaries or, more broadly, lexicography of languages. It is sufficient to point out that the archaeologist who is faced with, say, nearly a million fragments of ceramics with decorative designs from a single site is usually capable of providing a coherent technical typology but almost never an artistic one. It is rather curious that the considerable grammatical or systematic sophistication of the academic connoisseur or of the stylist has not been matched by an equally developed definition of the formal elements which are arranged grammatically in a work of art. And this is where the art

historian's second area of uncertainty lies. For it is only very recently that any sort of consistent work has been accomplished in the nature and theory of visual perception. And yet it is by perceiving that the artist creates and that the historian or the critic understands his subject.

I do not mean to imply that linguistic methods or those of cognitive [568] psychology can simply be adapted to the study of the arts, although both may be worth a try. Nor is it necessary for a historian of literature to be a linguist, although many important concepts and terms of contemporary literary history have come from linguistics, especially structural linguistics. Rather the historian of literature is, so to speak, "covered" on the fundamentals of language in general or of any one language. The historian of art still lacks this security. It is an open question whether it is he who must turn to these other fields and run the risk of quack knowledge or whether he should await or sponsor appropriate research by trained psychologists or structural linguists. It seems, however, quite certain to me that any consideration of the history and meaning of "works of art" will remain weak as long as the masterpiece cannot be intellectually and practically related to the sum of human creativity.

It is obvious that the preceding remarks are neither systematic nor definitive. At best they are merely a series of random thoughts about the problems faced by a discipline. Hence there are no conclusions to draw from them. I only want to make one final point. Most of the examples given above have been of representations. Architecture and some of the industrial arts pose a number of additional problems which may or may not be solved by the propositions outlined in this essay. The case of architecture is particularly striking in that, far more than traditional representational art, it can be assimilated to language. It is strongly affected by the material of construction. Yet a brick or a marble panel are not in themselves any more meaningful than a phoneme. Architecture is constricted by a far more elaborate set of practical, grammatical rules than painting, be it only because of the law of gravity. Finally, also like a language, architecture is necessary to and used by all men, in large part automatically and unconsciously as a setting for highly private or totally public life, but at times as the most unique expression of man's ambition and aesthetic drive. Yet even these greatest achievements are structurally of the same order as the humblest dwellings and subject to the same restrictions and rules. A similar kind of reasoning can be developed for metalwork, textiles or ceramics. It raises the more fundamental question whether a historian's task in dealing with acknowledged masterpieces, literary or visual, is not first of all to identify their position within a complex set of technical, social or other variables. But this is altogether another topic.

