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The Role of Writing in the Interpretation of the Visual Arts

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As I say everybody has to like something, some people like to eat some people like to drink, some people like to make money some like to spend money, some like the theatre, some even like sculpture, some like gardening, some like dogs, some like cats, some people like to look at things, some people like to look at everything. Any way some one is almost sure to really like something outside of their real occupation. I have not mentioned games indoor and out, and birds and crime and politics and photography, but anybody can go on, and I, personally, I like all these things well enough but they do not hold my attention long enough. The only thing, funnily enough, that I never get tired of doing is looking at pictures.

Gertrude Stein, *Lectures in America*

I.

SOME YEARS AGO, a leading art history journal commissioned me to review a pair of anthologies of writing about art mostly by novelists and poets. In my essay, I contrasted the beautiful, lively, and historically perceptive writing of these imaginative authors with the lugubrious writing of too many art historians who deliver their thoughts in what I referred to as “industrialized prose.” Not long before the review was to appear, the book review editor informed me that the then editor-in-chief and managing editor of the journal were most indignant at my charge, and they insisted that I make changes in what I had written, in other words, retract what I had said, since it displeased them. The book editor remarked to me that although I was being muzzled, his hands were tied. He could do nothing. So much for academic freedom. Rather than revise my review to satisfy the editor of the journal, I withdrew it. Ironically enough, some years later I was asked by another editor of the same journal to do a piece on writing about art, and I obliged by delivering a

version of the same essay that I had previously withdrawn. When my essay appeared, I received an outpouring of emails, letters, and phone calls from art historians around the country, many previously unknown to me, who thanked me for denouncing the dull, obfuscating art historical writing too common in the field. They were glad, I was pleased to learn, that somebody voiced their complaint about insipid and ponderous art historical prose. Like me, they were tired of reading it. I seem to have touched a nerve.

On another occasion, I wrote an essay for a *Festschrift*, which was evaluated by “readers” who recommended against publication because my piece (which was a bit of a tease, but nonetheless serious) did not fit with the “tone” of the volume in which it was to appear. I protested against this decision and fortunately the editors ignored the recommendation not to publish. I cannot speak for my critics, but I suspect that they objected not only to the polemic of my essay but also to its jocularity. They were clearly not amused. As is well known, humor is something too rarely encountered in the art historical literature. Anticipating criticism, because my essay was light-hearted, I invoked Tristram Shandy’s plea for tolerance. He wrote that “there is no disputing against Hobby-Horses.” He also suggested, in his infinite wisdom, that “so long as a man rides his Hobby-Horse peaceably and quietly along the King’s highway, and neither compels you or me to get up behind him,—pray, Sir, what have you or I to do with it?” And that’s that! But we art historians can be very contentious, indeed intolerant.

2.

IN THE VAST body of writing about art, no matter *what* is being said, there is too much of what Virginia Woolf called “ugly academic jargon.” For instance, one prolific and distinguished writer on art referred recently to the “stylisms” of Lucien Freud. “Stylisms”? Might the author have written more simply about Freud’s preoccupation with styles and

avoid such a tedious term? Or what about the well-known, highly accomplished art historian who recently wrote about the “art-ness” of Cy Twombly. Art-ness? Do we really need this technical philosophical term, well-intentioned as its deployment might be? And do we need other such terms that have crept into the writing of art history and criticism, including “*visuality*” “*culturality*,” “*stylisticality*,” “*normativity*” and “*opticality*”—not to mention “meta-opticality”?

Art historical writing is stuffed with unnecessary terms like “haptic gaze” or “material turn.” One recent writer has spoken unnecessarily about “the artist’s metatechne—the objectness” of the artist’s work. Another has written about “amorous metapictoriality,” whatever that means. In addition, not infrequently words that once upon a time were perfectly fine, such as “discourse,” “text,” and “agency,” among others, have been so overused that they have become clichés that deaden the prose in which they are employed. One scholar has recently written a piece entitled, “Restoring agency to the discourse on hybridity.” Is this not gibberish? Or is it simply academic blather? I also think we are really in trouble when a leading scholar of Baroque art needed to write in a major journal about “devisualization?” and, even worse, “hypercontextualization?” There has got to be a better way of writing about the decline of interest in the visual and the extreme attention to context. Pompous, pseudo-philosophical language reflects a deep art historical insecurity. It needs to be addressed.

Sometimes heavy-handed jargon invades and takes over the description of works of art. Here is how a highly respected scholar of architecture defines what we would otherwise call a piazza: “*an institutionally produced field structured around a Foucauldian nexus of power and knowledge, of epistemically legitimized optical and design methodology.*” I think we probably have a sense of what the author is trying to say, and we might even be able to translate his jargon back into colloquial English. Deadly prose diminishes the art it professes to describe. Or, what about the following

discussion of Donatello's bronze *David*: "*The word 'androgynous' suggests, however, an organic hybridity that papers over the actual synthetic construction of gender in artistic representation.*" The language here is, if not hideous, tedious. It lacks a sensuous beauty commensurate with that of the statue. In short, the writing needs editing. We can never revise enough.

Jargon-laden prose is not the only kind of bad writing to which one can point. There is the type of tedious, almost soporific prose which conceals the enthusiasm that drew scholars to their subjects in the first place. It is not surprising that scholars who are lively teachers in the classroom also sometimes write dry-as-dust prose. I think many art historical writers are unaware that in their written work they manage somehow to transform passion into dullness.

Let me offer one more (and final—I promise!) specimen of dreadful art historical writing, in this case, what used to be called a "topic sentence." "*To articulate a narrative account of the history of art is to authorize a relational experience that is, ultimately, strategically situated.*" This is the very first sentence of the first paragraph of an essay that is especially notable for its opacity. It is hard to believe that the sentence I have quoted, muddy in the extreme, leads anywhere.

I once gave a polemical talk at an art historical think tank in which I denounced the bad writing of many theoretically inclined art historians. In the discussion that followed, an official at the institute asked me why I was so hostile to theory. She assumed that because I objected to the obscure or ugly prose in some theoretical writing, I therefore was hostile to theory in general. Not at all! I just dislike having to read bad writing, and in art history there is too much of that.

Bad writing is not peculiar to theorists. One finds it in the prose of social historians of art, connoisseurs, and iconographers alike. One reader of art historical prose recently suggested to me that when he reads such writing he often feels like somebody whose legs have been tied to cement blocks by the Mafia before they toss him into the waters below. Yes,

one can think of excellent prose stylists among art historians writing in various languages: Kenneth Clark, André Chastel, Roberto Longhi, among others. But these writers are exceptional, not typical of the discipline.

I think the reasons for tedious academic writing are obvious. Writing about art is often highly intuitive, indeed deeply subjective, even when we aspire to objectivity. Seeking to escape from subjectivity, scholars aspire to a scientific or philosophical certainty, or at least probability, no matter how quixotic their quest. Consequently, these scholars write in a kind of mock scientific or mock philosophical prose—a language not commensurate with the aesthetic virtues of the art about which they are writing, whether an oil painting, a bronze bowl, or a straw basket.

I believe that in the history of art (as in other fields in the Humanities) insufficient attention has been paid to the role of writing in interpretation. I believe, too, that in order to interpret a work of art it is necessary to describe it, no matter how imperfectly. All description is surely less than perfect, despite our best efforts to bridge the gap between the mute object and the language employed to apprehend it. Nevertheless, diction, clarity of phrasing, poetic figures of speech, tone, rhythm, and composition are just some of the features of descriptive writing that can be employed to approach and illuminate works of art—in effect, to interpret them. Since no description of a work of art is ever perfect, as I have just suggested (and the point cannot be emphasized enough), one might justifiably say that there is no definitive interpretation of a work of art.

At the same time that we attend to works of art, we also consider their context. There are many contexts: social, political, economic, scientific, religious, technological, psychological, anthropological, geographical, stylistic, to name but a few. It is commonplace nowadays for art historians to write at length about these varying contexts, often very informatively, while evading the works of art seen in these contexts. Works of art that are not described are, in a sense,

under-interpreted. When art historians do describe works of art, too often they do so in a language that is alien to these works—foreign to how these works appear. Language used to describe works of art should be appropriate. It is a matter of decorum or rhetoric. It is deeply ironic that scholars who write about the role of rhetoric in the writing of the past care so little about their own rhetoric.

Think of ever so many art historical accounts of well-known works of art, which are in effect piles of quotations from texts that are insufficiently assimilated to the description of what we *see* in the works of art themselves. Bronzino's so-called *Venus, Cupid, Folly and Time*, has been much discussed, but I hazard the suggestion that it has been inadequately described and thus in a sense insufficiently interpreted. Texts that influence works of art or are related in some way to works of art are not the same thing as descriptions of those works. Such descriptions can be too schematic. It is one thing to say that Bronzino's painting is a work of gelid sensuousness, quite another to convey or express this erotic tone sufficiently in a language itself erotic and thus worthy of what we are given to see in the work of art. Think about it! Since the 1960s and 70s scholars have talked increasingly about erotic art—but how utterly unerotic they have done so thus far. An excellent account of an erotic work of art should not be pornographic, nor should it be like that of an art historian who in a lecture described sex as “inter-corporeal relationality”—a definition so absolutely terrible, indeed laughable, that it rises to the condition of humor (if accidentally). In any event a description of an erotic work should be appropriate to that work and give the reader a certain sensuous shiver of delight.

There are ever so many details in Renaissance erotic art that open up possibilities for discussion—details previously unobserved that require attention and description as subtle as the work of art itself. Consider, for example, the concealed, tilted right leg of Correggio's *Danaë*, mostly covered by bed clothing. It goes undiscussed. Do notice, however, that it is

bending receptively to Jupiter's desire and is thus expressive of the smiling maiden's own pleasure as well as that of the keen observer—no matter what his or her own sexual sensibility. One might also write an ode to the voluptuousness of the bed clothing in Correggio's picture and the way it pleasurably caresses Danae's left thigh. Or one might describe voluptuously the way in which she fingers her bed clothing. In the spirit of these few observations, I hazard the suggestion that the successful book on Renaissance erotic art, when it is eventually written, will be written erotically. How a work of art is described matters, is intrinsic to its interpretation. A painting such as Bronzino's is far more than the sum of the myriad texts to which it has been related.

Art historical writing is often inadequate to the playfulness of art. Such writing is often lacking in an appropriately playful tone. In the spirit of that observation, I once read an appropriately perceptive comic poem by Ursula Fanthorpe ("Not My Best Side") about an amusing work of art, (Uccello's London *St. George and the Dragon*) to a group of scholars in a seminar at an art historical institute that infuriated the director. He apparently assumed I was not being serious. For the director of the institute where I spoke there was apparently no place for playfulness in a scholarly setting. No matter that the playfulness of the poem's diction captured the playfulness of the work of art it described.

Or, apropos playfulness, think further about Bronzino's *Venus, Cupid, Folly and Time*. A shrewd scholar once observed that in the picture as Venus and Cupid kiss, she is subtly disarming Cupid by removing an arrow from his quiver—a detail so playfully subtle that it usually goes unnoticed by writers about the picture. In the spirit of that observation, only one writer I know of has nearly captured in words something of the playful subtlety of Bronzino when he suggests that the painter also pictures wily Cupid artfully removing the bejeweled crown of Venus as they kiss—a detail so devious that it, too, remains largely undetected. The trick is to suggest in ever-so-subtle language the painter's coyness. The

problem remains: how to capture in words Bronzino's elusive slyness when he places directly before the viewer actions that (almost) escape detection? If Venus and Cupid deceive each other so cleverly, the real deceiver here is Bronzino himself, who both invents their deceptions and thus deceives the viewer. The double theft of Bronzino's picture might well be described in a language or verbal imagery that approaches the deceptive imagery of the painter. It is more than appropriate to observe that the painter renders a creature who has the face of a pretty little girl but who holds, as one eventually notices, a scorpion's tail in her hand. She is the treacherously duplicitous embodiment of Deception herself. Art historians have often noticed this clever detail. The trick here, however, is to try to be comparably as subtle in one's use of language as the painter is subtle in the rendering of his image.

3.

THERE ARE CERTAIN obvious reasons for poor writing in academe. In the first place the teaching of writing in elementary school, high school, and college is extremely difficult and should be, but often is not, labor intensive. Too frequently it is not successful. The inevitable outcome is student writing that lacks both clarity and grace. Art history students are sometimes introduced to books on how to write and research an "art history paper," but the formulas of these primers, though well intentioned, offer no guarantee of achieving vivid prose. In graduate art history programs, lip service is paid to good writing. Writing that is not terrible is adjudged adequate, and writing loaded with deadly jargon is often not discouraged. In graduate studies, more emphasis is placed on methods and theory than on lively prose, even though interpretation cannot be separated from how one writes. When graduate students come of age and become publishing scholars they write prose that is, not surprisingly, too often ponderous at best. (Analogously, students are not instructed sufficiently in how to deliver a lecture in such a way that it is as

entertaining as it is informative.) As they race towards tenure, young scholars have little time to refine, polish or deepen their prose, and tenure committees, as well as publishers, tolerate their too often highfalutin jargon. I am not saying that art history fails to deliver vast bodies of fascinating and useful information and/or knowledge, and such contributions should be recognized, if not applauded. But do ill-shaped data or mechanical and dry prose suffice, given the role of descriptive writing in interpretation? Can we not do better?

Consider the fact that throughout the history of writing about art that can be traced back to classical antiquity and forward to the present there are certain writers who are exemplary in their prose dedicated to art: for example, Vasari, Winckelmann, Diderot, Gautier, Zola, Hawthorne, Dostoyevsky, and Proust, to name a few. These writers are remembered in art history courses dealing with the history of writing about art, but the exemplary virtues of these authors are too often ignored—that is, not emulated. The late painter and film critic Manny Faber once said that the language of writing about art “ought to emulate the art.” He underscored his point by adding, “I do not think you can be mimetic enough.” Celebrating a book on the music of Charlie Parker, the music critic David Hajdu praised the author of the book for writing the life of Parker in a “free-flowing and severe, volatile, expansive, allusive and indulgent” style like that of Parker’s music. “From bravura sentence to serpentine paragraph,” he adds, “the book is a virtuoso performance of musical-literary mimesis.” Imagine writing about painting with comparable imitative verve. Such writing would achieve what William Hazlitt referred to as the verbal “equivalent” of the image—or, we might say, the compelling illusion of such equivalence?

4.

HAVING LAMENTED the paucity of vivid art historical prose, I now want to present a kind of ever-so-brief anthology of

exemplary writing by selected art historians, art critics, poets, and novelists. I hope that aspiring art historians and others will pause to reflect more self-consciously on what is possible in the way of art historical description that conveys appreciation, critical judgement and, ultimately, understanding.

I begin with the witty British novelist Julian Barnes who has often written about art, most notably about Gericault. In a review of a book about French writers and artists, Barnes opens with the following description of Manet's *Nana*:

You see her from a distance, at the end of a long enfilade of rooms. As you approach, you notice that she is already turned toward you. She is in her fortified underwear: a light blue bodice, white slip, light blue stockings; in her raised right hand, a powder puff like a vast carnation. To the left, over a chair, is the blue dress she will soon put on. To the right, though you might not at first observe him, is an impatient, mustachioed figure in evening dress, his top hat still—or already—on his head. But once again, you are aware that she has eyes only for you.

There are many virtues in this brief passage: the ways in which the author brings out the courtesan's attention to the viewer/voyeur, the writer's suggestion of the color harmonies of blue and white, the attention to the top hatted client of *Nana*, the focus on the simile of powder puff and carnation, the play between dress and undress, etc. The description is by no means complete, and there are elements that are debatable—subjective impressions. (Is the gentleman with top hat impatient?) But what is so impressive about Barnes's description is the way it is composed: with simplicity and clarity. His account is such that all the parts cohere beautifully in a larger whole—in a composition so seemingly effortless. One is eager to read on.

Another exemplary description, hence interpretation, of a work beguiling in different ways is to be found in Anne Barriault's *Selections: Virginia Museum of Fine Arts*. Educated as an art historian but known for her beautifully wrought

Moroccan Musings, the author evokes the magical luminosity of Edward Hopper's *House at Dusk*:

Dusk: an exquisite hour. Edward Hopper was fond of quoting the poet Paul Verlaine on the subject that he painted many times. As dusk falls and natural light dims, electric light begins to glow. The vanished sun leaves a sky touched with yellow and streaked low by wisps of soft violet clouds, catching its last rays. Creeping shadows start to shroud the building, stone steps, and treetops. A lamppost illuminates a path; a ceiling light, a room, and a floor lamp, a corner . . .

Here, as we look into private spaces, lit behind half-drawn shades, a woman leans upon the sill, looking out. Indoor light escapes to strike the window frame, reflecting green trim against the violet-gray building as daylight fades. Chimneys line the rooftops; inside, the edge of a fireplace mantel can be seen. Cornices and quoins trace the building's lines: dentil molding, rusticated blocks, and scroll-like reliefs punctuate its spaces. Hopper casts the house itself—or, rather, its looming upper floors—in relief against the darkening green trees.

This is just a highlight from a longer description that I urge you to read in full in order to savor both Hopper's painting and Barriault's beautiful description and appreciation of it. Nowadays, the word "appreciation" has negative connotations. Art historians implicitly resist it as something old-fashioned, merely expressive, indeed subjective, but Barriault's description captures ever so much of what one sees objectively in Hopper's picture: its haunting mood, its richness of color, its architectural detail, its hints of the activities of the building's occupants toward nightfall, and its magical rendering, above all, of the almost uncanny, glowing picture's principal subject: light. If Barriault's book were reissued as a handbook filled with vivid descriptions of art, it would be an inspiring model for students to emulate, not imitate slavishly.

Sometimes ever so much can be suggested in just a sentence or two. Listen to what Ingrid Rowland, art historian and polymath, has to say about Raphael's fresco of Galatea in the villa of Agostino Chigi: "*Raphael . . . rose to the challenge [of*

the commission] with a fresco of the nymph Galatea scudding across the Aegean in a dolphin-drawn seashell chariot, nymphs and mermen gamboling around her in a sparkling, white-capped sea." Here in just a few words we get the vivid sense of speed and sparkle in Raphael's fresco. Scholars often look down their noses at journalists who write without the expertise of those who have done the research. But Rowland, who writes numerous reviews, is a scholar with an enviable journalistic flair. She writes with her own considerable energy when appreciating Raphael's vivacity.

Writing well about art depends on diction, finding *les mots justes*. Listen to the scholar Willibald Sauerländer picture in words Piero della Francesca's *Misericordia Polyptych*: "*Dressed in a luminous red robe, Mary towers like a column over the other figures, her open cloak reminiscent of an apse.*" The sensitive art historian here employs seemingly perfect architectural figures of speech in his description of Piero's painting. Sometimes the writing on Piero becomes a sort of historical fiction, as in the essay on the painter by the Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert. The poet writes of Piero: "*What do we know about his life? Nothing or almost nothing . . . It is impossible to place him in a romance. He hides so thoroughly behind his paintings and frescoes that one cannot invent his private life, his loves and friendships, his ambitions, his passion and grief. He has received the greatest act of mercy by absentminded history, which mislays documents and blurs all traces of life. If he still endures, it is not through anecdotes of the miseries of his life, his madness, his successes and failures. His entire being is in his oeuvre.*" Herbert is not the first person to celebrate the artist's impersonality. Think of Berenson who, inventing the modern critical appreciation of Piero, celebrated the artist's "impersonality," as when he described figures in the foreground of one of Piero's pictures "like eternal rocks." Even when we lack facts from the artist's life, the art historian or poet will try to imagine that life. Herbert writes: "*I imagine him walking along a narrow San Sepolcro street towards the town gate—*

with only the cemetery and the Umbrian hills beyond. He wears a grey robe over his broad shoulders. He is short, stocky, strolling with a peasant's assurance. He silently returns salutations." This is not history but historical fiction, a historical fiction that quickens our sense of the contrast between the image of the humble peasant and the grandeur of the painter's noble figures. Herbert's poetic evocation sharpens our sense of the haunting dignity of the artist's work. He concludes with a highly suggestive appreciation of the artist's extraordinary luminosity: "*Tradition holds that he went blind towards the end of his life. Marco di Longara told Berto degli Alberti that as a young boy he walked the streets of Borgo San Sepolcro with an old painter called Piero della Francesca. Little Marco could not have known that his hand was leading light.*"

Let us listen to another art historian and critic who also writes with a journalistic vivacity when he pictures in words the figure of Mary in Sebastiano del Piombo's Viterbo Pietà: "*A colossal Virgin sits . . . on a rocky outcrop, a mountainous blue pyramid of silent piety. The Virgin does not touch or look at Christ . . . but gazes up with expressionless clamped jaw at the moonlit sky, massive hands held over her heart, half praying, half imploring.*" Thanks to James Hall, the picture is vivid in the reader's mind's eye. Writing with comparable vividness, the redoubtable Camille Paglia sensitively captures an aspect of Donatello's *Mary Magdalene*: "*With her weathered, leathery skin (unlike the alabaster of Florentine ladies), she seems like a stony outcropping beaten by the elements. Her still graceful hands, with her elongated fingers, almost meet in prayer, like a Gothic arch.*" Once again, the poetic device of simile quickens one's sense of the work of art, in this case, the beautifully sensitive and prayerful hands of the saint, like a gothic arch.

I remarked earlier that much writing about erotic art lacks the erotic charge of the art that it fails to describe adequately. Sometimes one must turn to the poets who describe such works with sufficient sensuousness, for example, Randall

Jarrell's classic, voluptuous poem, "The Bronze David of Donatello." Here are a few fragments that I have recast in prose. In his diction, the poet captures the statue's eroticism: "*The boy David's body shines in freshness, still unhandled, and thrusts its belly out a little in exact shamelessness . . . The head's [Goliath's] other wing . . . grows like a swan's wing up inside the leg.*" The description perfectly addresses what one sees in the statue—a body seemingly not yet handled and a feathery caress of his inner thigh.

Art historians can learn a great deal from contemporary art critics and art journalists about vivacious prose. Holland Cotter, senior art critic at *The New York Times*, displays considerable vivacity in his prose when he writes a brief description of a self-portrait drawing by Rembrandt: "*'Are you looking at me? I certainly hope so.'* *If pictures could speak, these would be the words delivered by a small bust-like ink drawing of a youngish man with a big nose, small eyes, the ghost of a mustache and artfully tousled hair at the Morgan Library & Museum. He frowns a little, as if wary of serious attention, but you can tell he's kidding-serious, trying out a pose of artist as prodigy.*" The writing is fresh and not without a certain humor appropriate to the self-portrait drawing. Cotter writes with a comparably admirable, light touch in his appreciation of the central panel from an altarpiece seen in an exhibition of Sieneese painting—a picture of the *Adoration of the Magi* by the late fourteenth-century painter Bartolo di Fredi. Let us attend to his characterization of Bartolo's picture. "*He introduces the cast of characters high on the right in the picture's background, where an exotic caravan of camels, dogs, monkeys and chatting horsemen is wending its way through olive-green hills. In the party are three princely figures in Conehead caps who point to a comet-bright star guiding their search for a reputed new King of the Jews.*"

Cotter gives us a sense of the sweep of Bartolo's picture, a sense of the movement of figures. But he also seizes upon numerous details, such as the "chatting horsemen." He

encourages us to look and then to see. He continues: “*Their route brings them to the gates of Jerusalem, which, with its pink brick walls and candy-striped cathedral, looks very much like medieval Siena. Their host, Herod, the local Roman ruler, greets them and asks what brings them so far from their native lands in Asia and Africa. When they tell him he grows agitated. He meets with his councilors: What should we do about this King of the Jews they’re looking for? Then he sends his visitors on their way with a smooth request: Report back what you find; I’d love to meet this ruler myself.*”

Cotter turns the picture, which emphasizes a single moment, into a story unfolding through time—and he does so with a playful tone as when he has Herod dispatch his visitors with a “smooth request” to report back what they find. The tone here is engaging; it projects the viewer into the world of the image.

Keen observer and master story-teller, Cotter draws us still further into the subject of the picture: “*So off the travelers go, back among the hills. Then suddenly they’re right in front of us, in the painting’s foreground, at Bethlehem, Jesus’ birthplace. This is an exciting moment. Everyone feels it. Horses, barely restrained by harried grooms, crash into one another and stomp the ground. Gawking courtiers crowd together, pushing toward the right where the Virgin sits mute in a pavilion. The three kings kneel, the oldest one touching the child, while a second gray-haired man, Joseph, takes their lavish gifts and at the same time inserts himself between his young family and the mob of modish and insistent pilgrims.*”

Cotter captures the excitement of the moment and all that contributes to it; for example, the barely restrained horses stomping the ground. He has a marvelous eye for detail and, with a prose that is appropriately vivid, he captures ever so many details that delight the beholder.

Cotter’s account reaches a climax in the following summary: “*Bartolo has attended to every last inch of the picture,*

from the veins that stand out in Joseph's tensed, workingman's hands; to the tissuey, filigree texture of the tunic on the youngest king, the pattern painstakingly cut from gold leaf over paint; to the painting's connect-the-dots constellation of human and animal eyes, a network that binds the scene psychologically in an atmosphere of breath-held tumult. If the real drama of art is in its details, this is visual stagecraft on an exalted level."

Cotter's light-hearted description seems effortless and inevitable, but it is in fact based on careful looking and the very careful translation of wordless details into a coherent, effectively described account of what he has seen. His word picture is a tour de force and a model for anyone interested in describing a picture with gusto. It is Cotter's diction that makes his description so compelling.

Cotter's description is that of a critic or art journalist who writes with pleasure and who in turn gives pleasure to his readers. His audience is not the specialist but the educated amateur. The beauty of his account is that it is by no means complete. His celebration of the lively horses of Bartolo's picture might well lead to a sympathetic appreciation of the picture's unique rendering of close to a dozen highly animated, yapping canines, above all the cowering brown hound in the left foreground, which is under foot, or I should say, under hoof. One account of a picture leads to the next and the next after that. No description, as I have said before, is ever definitive. One can go on to describe the painting's bright festive colors that animate the picture surface so effectively, the fervent gazes downward of the Magi and their entourage. Such vivacity should be one of the goals of the professional art historian.

5.

CONSIDER, TOO, the liveliness in the writing of Harvard professor Joseph Koerner, who is one of the most distinguished art historians pursuing his craft today. His scholarship is based on impressive research and informed by penetrating,

often highly original observations. Unlike many scholars, Koerner knows how to reach a wide audience of readers. In fact, when he wrote a stunningly excellent essay on Max Beckmann's *Self-Portrait* in the Busch-Reisinger Museum at Harvard, he pitched this essay in *The Harvard Magazine*, to well educated, intelligent alumni, not to specialists. Like Cotter, Koerner knows how both to inform his readers and to entertain them. He does so with a superb appreciation of the picture and an excellent account of the painting's historical context. Also, in contrast to his writing of voluminous books, he writes here with admirable brevity. I will quote from but a portion of Koerner's relaxed, straight-forward description of the picture, but I urge readers to read the piece, found easily online, in its entirety, in order to experience the synthetic richness of the essay.

Koerner is a keen observer but he also writes in a compellingly simple and direct prose that matches the insouciance of Beckmann as he appears in his self-portrait. Here is what Koerner says in a prose that is appropriately witty:

One of the features that makes the painting so visually compelling is the casualness with which the sitter—Beckmann—confronts us, with one hand on his hip, the other holding the cigarette ready, the two hands bringing the body together at its center. This man (the setup tells us) can stand here a long time; the cigarette even gives him something to do. Probably nowadays, because he wouldn't be allowed to smoke in the galleries, he'd be holding his cell phone so that he could see the screen. But he's not smoking his cigarette or checking his phone: he's looking at us. And that is the other incredible feature of the painting: this confrontational relationship to the viewer.

The painter's relation to us is too direct and too intimate to be friendly. His frontal gaze has almost an aggressive character. And as anyone who paints will know, it's very hard to paint a frontal likeness of someone convincingly. The look of a face is better captured slightly from the side, in what's called a three-quarters view, where the outlines of the nose and the shape of the forehead, cheeks, and chin are clarified. Frontality is natural to self-portraiture, because

the painter looks straight at the mirror. But in Beckmann's hands, the frontal view gives rise to a highly complex image of the human face, as we'll see.

The last feature I want to point out are the artist's clothes, that black tuxedo which makes everyone, as they enter the gallery, feel a little bit underdressed in comparison—unless, of course, you are lucky enough to be at some museum opening and wearing a tuxedo, too. But even then, Beckmann will be there before you, and seem more at ease. And in how he stands and where he's chosen to stand, it's also clear that he can leave, that he can move out the door just to his right. Again, the sense that he belongs here, that he knows better than you how to dress and what to do, gives the impression that you aren't an audience viewing him, but that he is giving you an audience instead.

Koerner captures Beckmann's suavity, and he does so with a disarmingly and refreshingly simple and direct prose. Keen observation is matched by great clarity of style. The writing is beautifully and appropriately wrought.

Sometimes vigorous prose is put in the service of invective, harsh criticism that can even be funny, hence playful. Listen to what the esteemed architectural critic, Martin Filler, says about Santiago Calatrava's design for the World Trade Center Transportation Hub: "*What was originally likened by its creator to a fluttering paloma de la paz (dove of peace) because of its white, winglike, upwardly flaring rooflines seems more like a steroidal stegosaurus that wandered onto the set of a sci-fi flick and died there. Instead of an ennobling civic concourse on the order of Grand Central or Charles Follen McKim's endlessly lamented Pennsylvania Station, what we have on top of the new transit facilities is an eerily dead-feeling, retro-futuristic, Space Age Gothic shopping mall with acres of highly polished, very slippery white marble flooring, like some urban tundra.*"

Not everybody will share Filler's view, but even those who do not might well admire the comic devices he employs to debunk Calatrava.

Much can be expressed in very few words. The poet Stanley Plumly begins an essay on Whistler's *Nocturnes* with a

very brief exchange between Whistler and his painter-friend Walter Greaves rendered as a kind of epigram:

Greaves—The stars are fine tonight.

Whistler—Not bad, but there are too many of them.

The playful response to Greaves nicely captures Whistler's delight (and ours) in the darkness of the *Nocturnes*. One might also say that Plumly appropriates Whistler's wit and makes it his own by placing the exchange with Greaves right before his own celebration of Whistler's various renderings of "indeterminacy, obscurity, water darkness."

Whistler's teasing wit brings us back to the theme of playfulness, which presents itself in so many ways. The effects of such playfulness manifest themselves in the words of those art historians who try to capture the ludic tone of the work of art; for example, Robert Rosenblum, writing about a beloved painting by Gauguin that "*creates the aura of a fairy tale, childlike in feeling and in style.*" I speak of *Still Life with Three Puppies* in which "*we sense the elementary nursery rhythms of ritual and mystery, in this case, the ABC magic of three, as in The Three Little Pigs, Goldilocks and the Three Bears, and Love for Three Oranges.*" Rosenblum does not so much capture the intentions of the painter who was likely not thinking about the Three Little Pigs or Goldilocks, but he does find words that convey the childlike innocence rendered so cunningly by Gauguin in his picture of, among other things, three puppies, three glasses, and three pieces of fruit—three groups of three, a treble entendre.

Nowadays, I think it fair to say, writers who dwell on describing what they see in the work of art are often portrayed as "formalists"—formalists, because description inevitably suggests, at least in part, the forms or shapes that we see and apprehend in art. Formalism is frequently set against contextual analysis, which relates the work of art to the world in which it was made. Form and context, however, are by no means incompatible. Even so, the negative connotations of the word "formalism" persist. It is important to

recall here, however, that our word “form” is related to the Latin, *formositas*, which means “beautiful.”

6.

THERE ARE other beautiful (and instructive) phrases and passages besides those discussed here that bring works of art alive—writings that stand apart from the vast laborious, often deadening body of academic prose—even though such texts are never the last word on the subject. But rather than go on indefinitely surveying such texts, I will conclude with one of the greatest of all appreciations of a work of art. I speak of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s description of the famous Praxitelean *Marble Faun*—a text that should occupy a central place in any history of writing about art. As the artful description of a great work of classical art, it stands in the tradition of Winckelmann’s famous description of the *Apollo Belvedere*.

In the first chapter of his novel *The Marble Faun*, Hawthorne almost magically puts forth an image of the statue that is so uncannily direct and seemingly simple that it appears not that he is describing a work of art; rather, he seems to create the illusion that what he has written is somehow the experience of seeing the statue itself. What is particularly remarkable is the length of Hawthorne’s description. It is arguably among the longest appreciative (I did not say “analytic”) descriptions of a sculpture ever written and arguably the single most profound characterization of a statue ever rendered in words. I believe it superior to Winckelmann’s account of the *Apollo Belvedere*. Hawthorne’s account of the *Marble Faun* is certainly well known, but it has not played a major role in the story of writing about art. I think this so because his exposition appears in a novel, not a work of art history. And art historians are often highly suspicious of literary effects as when, for example, they refuse to appreciate the role of fiction in Vasari’s *Lives*. Let us read but part of Hawthorne’s transformation of the statue into words—his performance, we might say, of the statue. What

follows is approximately but half of the total description. Reading it slowly, I urge you to pay attention to Hawthorne's diction as he breathes life into the marble statue:

The Faun is the marble image of a young man, leaning his right arm on the trunk or stump of a tree; one hand hangs carelessly by his side; in the other he holds the fragment of a pipe or some such sylvan instrument of music. His only garment—a lion's skin, with the claws upon his shoulder—falls half way down his back, leaving the limbs and entire front of the figure nude. The form, thus displayed, is marvellously graceful, but has a fuller and more rounded outline, more flesh, and less of heroic muscle, than the older sculptors were wont to assign to their types of masculine beauty. The character of the face corresponds with the figure; it is most agreeable in outline and feature, but rounded and somewhat voluptuously developed, especially about the throat and chin; the nose is almost straight, but very slightly curves inward, thereby acquiring an indescribable charm of geniality and humor. The mouth, with its full and delicate lips, seems so nearly to smile outright that it calls forth a responsive smile. The whole statue—unlike anything else that ever was wrought in that severe material of marble—conveys the idea of an amiable and sensual creature, easy, mirthful, apt for jollity, yet not incapable of being touched by pathos. It is impossible to gaze long at this stone image without conceiving a kindly sentiment towards it, as if its substance were warm to the touch, and imbued with actual life. It comes very close to some of our pleasanter sympathies.

Although I have here given you only a portion of Hawthorne's description of the Praxitelean *Faun*, I urge you to read it in full at your leisure in order to enjoy it in all its richness. What you have already read, however, will give you much to ponder. It is a coherent image of what you will see if you follow Hawthorne's description. The trick for the beholder of the *Faun* or of any work of art (and it is almost a magic trick) is to metamorphose what he or she sees into words that adequately render a vivid and coherent image of the work of art. To many, such an exercise will seem almost

trivial. But if one is interpreting a work of art, it is necessary, as I have already emphasized, to describe the work, that is, describe what one sees in the work that one might otherwise overlook. Verbs or words rooted in verbs tell us ever so much. Hawthorne captures the Faun *leaning*, one of his hands *holding* a musical instrument, his garment *falling* down his back. Writing about the figure of the Faun, he conveys its nudity and its beauty—the *gracefulness* of the body. He renders in words the *roundness* of form, the *fleshiness* of the figure, the *voluptuousness* of the head, the face, its nose and mouth, and also the Faun’s throat. Many adjectives and nouns bring out the *subtle smile* of the Faun, the *charm* and *geniality* of the *amiable* and *sensual* creature, his *mirthfulness* and *jollity*. What Hawthorne is doing is telling us what he sees that we might see. In short, he captures the *humor* of the work, as well as its charm, as when he refers to the Faun’s *sylvan* pipes or goes on to write of the Faun in relation to “*unsophisticated man*” among “*trees, grass, flowers, woodland streamlets, cattle, deer.*” Hawthorne implicitly places the statue in a pastoral world—a rich point of departure for further understanding.

One could go on and on in appreciation of Hawthorne’s deep observations that bring *The Marble Faun* alive. Suffice it to say, if there is such a phenomenon as “the history of art,” it behooves the art historian to acknowledge the artfulness of art by describing the work of art artfully before rushing to its context. I am not saying there is only a single right way to write about art. I am not saying there is only a single correct way to study the history of art. Nor am I saying there is no place for analytical writing in the history of art. What I am saying, however, is that art deserves to be appreciated for what it is: Art! And to do this one needs to write respectfully about art, and what this means is writing artfully. The art historian has to write vividly and to think of herself as a writer who respects her readers. The art historian needs to think more deeply than has been the custom about what it is to write adequately and effectively, to write compellingly,

gracefully, and lucidly—in short, to write well. I presumably whistle in the wind, but I think that it is time for universities, publishers, and scholars of art history to rethink the role of writing in the fashioning of art history.



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