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ART HISTORY “ITALIAN STYLE”

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Old age brings many ills, but also some good. It pains me today to have to speak in a privileged moment, that is, at the end, of an international colloquium as prestigious and fruitful as this one, which honors the master of us all, Adolfo Venturi. It is a privilege of old age that I may choose to speak nostalgically of a past that is by now antiquated, if not entirely lost. It is also an advantage that I may speak of things from which I was largely extraneous and of which I know practically nothing.

I suppose, or I suspect, that I find myself in this unenviably advantageous position thanks to various conversations I have had in recent years with my great friend and admired colleague Marisa Dalai Emiliani about the progressive loss of the great Italian tradition that was distinctively referred to as the philology of the history of art. That is, the way in which Adolfo Venturi was able, as Maurizio Calvesi has justly noted, to “put things in order” (*mettere le cose in ordine*).

I begin with a perhaps overly ingenuous question: Who reads Venturi today, to learn the history of art, as I did a half-century ago? In America, at least, I can say, no one. But what do you expect? No iconology, no social-economic-political context, no theology, no self-representation, no rhetoric, no collectionism. Venturi seems, truly, a fossil.

And yet, none of these new approaches to the history of art would have been possible, or even conceivable without the 25 volumes of Venturi’s *Storia dell’arte italiana* (1901-38), and the intellectual and cultural mind-set, they represent. Although of course rooted in the great synthetic works of Lanzi 1795-6, Crow and Cavacaselle 1864-6, and Magni 3 vols. 1901-3, Venturi’s enterprise was in essential ways unprecedented and unsurpassed, unique. In scope: it comprises all three major categories of Italian art, painting, sculpture and architecture. In continuity: it comprises the entire history of Italian art, from the beginning in the early Christian

period through what was then considered its apogee in the Renaissance. In scale: its treatment is effectively complete, including all significant works and artists, major as well as minor, with a complement of illustrations that remains unparalleled. (I was once approached by a major Italian publishing house to write a “modern” version of the three volumes on sixteenth century sculpture, X,1-3, which I was prepared to undertake on condition that I could have the same number of illustrations—the negotiations ended there!) In breadth: it comprises all of Italy, which is conceived as a kind of cultural family tree, with branches spreading through every corner of the peninsula. And above all, in coherence, of conception and of method: Venturi’s *Storia dell’arte italiana* represents a single vision of a single cultural landscape from a single point of view. It is significant that virtually all these features, which make Venturi’s work the unique monument it is, were abandoned in its only modern competitor, the *Storia dell’arte italiana* published in twelve volumes by Einaudi (1978ff.).

Among these special features of Venturi’s achievement, I want to focus on the one that was perhaps least explicit, its method. First of all, Venturi did not provide a “methodological introduction” to explain his “theory,” a sin of omission that would be unforgivable in a comparable enterprise today. No such introduction was necessary, I suppose, or even contemplated: Venturi simply took it for granted that the way to “mettere in ordine” the history of Italian art was *visually*, through the history of style. Grandiose, comprehensive, coherent, Venturi brings order to the history of art in Grand Style. Indeed, the fact that the work is entirely about style may be a major reason why it is not read today. It is symptomatic and ironic, that a recent English language dictionary of art described Venturi’s work, somewhat superciliously, as written in the “connoisseurship style.”

It is also ironic that Italian has no equivalent word for “connoisseurship,” which English borrowed from French. Morelli was a “conoscitore,” but Venturi was not at all concerned with the minutiae, the subliminal details, conceived as unselfconscious idiosyncrasies of form and representation, that permitted an “objective” identification of the artist’s unique individuality. Nor does Venturi pretend to be “scientific” in the positivist sense to which Morelli, Freud, and Sherlock Holmes aspired, as Carlo Ginsburg demonstrated in his brilliant essay on that golden age of what might be called the significant “inadvertent”— assuming, of course, that the artist made details without thinking about them.

Instead, Venturi was concerned with the perception, description and coordination of a comprehensive vision, a Gestalt, of the character and quality of the work of art as a whole, which he sought to coordinate in a collective definition of affiliations, families, schools, regions, developments, and periods. It was a systematic philology of style—the term and method borrowed from the great nineteenth-century humanistic discipline of linguistic philology—that was most closely associated with Italian art history in my youth.

I remember another term for Italian art history among the German refugee art historians with whom I trained in New York after World War II, who brought with them challenging new intellectual and contextual attitudes, notably the famous Warburg method. I was in fact converted to art history as an undergraduate at Washington University in St. Louis by a former student of Panofsky’s in Hamburg, Horst W. Janson, whose description of our discipline still rings in my ears: “the history of art is the history of ideas.” When I subsequently studied in New York at the Institute of Fine Arts, created by Walter W. S. Cook, who coined the famous phrase “Hitler shook the trees and I gathered the apples,” the place was literally populated by eminent fugitives from Fascism, the likes of Erwin Panofsky, Karl Lehmann-Hartleben, Walter Friedlaender, Richard Krautheimer, Guido Schoenberger, Martin Weinberger, José Lopez-Rey. I was employed as research assistant to Friedlaender, distinguished for his earlier writings on stylistic developments, Mannerism and Anti-Mannerism. He was then preparing his pioneering book on Caravaggio (1955), which revolutionized the field by arguing that Caravaggio was not just a “realist,” for which he had been both praised to the skies and damned to the depths, but a radical reformer in the orbit of the social and religious proletarianism of Filippo Neri and the Oratorians. Today, no one speaks of Caravaggio without reference to Neri and the Oratorians. (I learned subsequently from Eugenio Battisti, *Rinascimento e barocco*, Turin, 1960, 211, that the link between Neri and Caravaggio had been proposed much earlier by Pierre Francastel, “Le réalisme de Caravage,” *Gazette des beaux-arts*, July-August, 1938, 45-62, and that Lionello Venturi also appreciated Caravaggio’s religiosity.)

Friedlaender had a favorite word for Italian art history, and for his special *bête noire*, Roberto Longhi, whose insights he acknowledged but whose writing (insofar as he, or any of us, could understand it) he ridiculed and essentially dismissed as “attribuzerei” (attribuzionismo): at best connoisseurship, at worst marketing, expertism for profit. Both expertism and journalism,

traditions that have always flourished in Italy, were and remain outside the pale of German and American academic art historical culture.

Almost by chance, as it were, this period with Friedlaender prepared me for one of the experiences that most affected my life as an historian of art. It happened one day in 1961, in the course of my stay in Rome as a Fulbright scholar, that I received a telephone call from the American embassy: the illustrious Professor of the History of Art at the University of Rome “La Sapienza,” Giulio Carlo Argan, had requested the name of a young scholar with whom he might arrange to have conversations to improve his English. I agreed readily, of course, and from the very first moment Argan and I discovered that we had in common a great passion for the work of Caravaggio, about whom he was the working on an essay. He reported that he had read with admiration Friedlaender’s Caravaggio monograph because he, too, was convinced that the popular realism of Caravaggio was not an end in itself, but represented a complex artifice laden with profound social and religious significance, sophisticated and at times even provocative. For my part, I had read and equally admired Argan’s famous essay on the art of the Baroque as rhetoric (1955). Only a few pages, the essay was quickly adopted by Rudolph Wittkower (*Art and Architecture in Italy 1600-1750*, 1958, esp. p. 92) as the key to his interpretation of the period, and subsequently became one of the foundation stones of current historiography of the Baroque. Today, no one speaks about Baroque without mentioning rhetoric. It struck me also that Argan considered himself, and not without reason, a pioneer importer to Italy of the rigorously intellectual and interdisciplinary method of analysis developed in Germany before the first World War, associated with the Warburg Institute.

I am myself very conscious of having participated devoutly in this literally ideological conversion. But I must confess that I also see it as a mark of Cain, signaling the eclipse of that tradition of conceiving our discipline philologically, “all’italiano,” to which I refer today nostalgically. That tradition arose with the history of art itself: Ghiberti with very subtle observations on the styles of individual artists perceived collateral and consecutive relationships among them and constructed the first true history of art, a history of Italian art, made all’italiana. In sum, the history of art is Italian! And what else than that is Vasari? But then, with the arrival of art theory, there emerged a more precise definition of what I call the history of art all’italiana, which lies at the heart of the ignorance and nostalgia of which I spoke at the outset. I refer ultimately to Michelangelo’s notion of the “giudizio dell’occhio,” which conveys in two words

everything I have to say, because it expresses the almost mystical conjunction between physiological perception and the operations of the brain, a conjunction that seems to me to lie very close to the essence of human nature.

For all this, I think, we must celebrate and not lose the vast, unique, and never surpassed Venturian monument of the Italian way of putting things in order, deliberating on and with that imponderable but precious gift of *giudizio dell’occhio*.