

CHANGING MY MIND

Annual Meeting, College Art Association, Philadelphia, 19 February 1983

Introduction

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

I stand before you in Peter Janson's shoes, and they are much too big. At the invitation of the art history program chairman for this year, Marsha Hall of Temple University, to whose "brainstorm" we are indebted for this session, Peter developed the idea and corralled the super-distinguished roster of scholars you will hear. To convey the purpose and something of the genesis of the program, I can do no better than quote from some of the letters he wrote to the prospective speakers. The session, he said, "would have the unprecedented but I think worthy purpose to bring together the 'founding fathers' (he used the phrase even in his letter to Elizabeth Holt) of our discipline in this country. The idea...is that the younger generation of art historians knows the names and the writings of the 'founding fathers' but does not know what they look like or what kind of people they are.... I am calling the session 'Changing My Mind,' and I am giving each participant twenty minutes for a piece of intellectual autobiography—simply telling the audience what has excited them in recent years and has perhaps changed this or that aspect of their perspective on the history of art....We would like to know something of your intellectual interests and how they have, or have not shifted over the past ten to twenty years. "

Like almost everything else Peter undertook, his efforts succeeded splendidly and we are all his beneficiaries. Apart from quoting his letters, however, I want to add a word about Peter Janson himself in this context. A task he might have accomplished no less successfully than that of organizing this session would have been that of participating as one of the speakers. Among the chief effects of his protean dynamism was an extraordinary intellectual flexibility that made it possible, even urgent for him to learn from others, especially the young, and indeed, to change his mind. More than thirty years ago, when I first studied with Peter, he, like nearly everyone else those days, treated nineteenth-century academic art as a ridiculous foil for the avantgarde movements that led to Modernism. That same "bad" art became the consuming passion of his later years, culminating in a major new study and reevaluation of nineteenth-century sculpture—to be published soon, I hope—which was not only his last but I suspect may ultimately be regarded as his most important scholarly achievement. As on one of his beloved tomb sculptures, the awful specter that appears to ordinary men as the uttermost defeat, he transformed into an ultimate victory.

I am sure you will agree that this is one occasion when the speakers really do not need introductions, and I will forego making any. They will simply follow one another in alphabetical order and I will add a word of epilogue at the end.

EPILOGUE

I trust you will agree that our speakers have given enough of themselves to satisfy Peter Janson's wish, and confirm my belief that there is no point in being anything else than an art historian. I think it is chronologically safe to say that all of us here throughout

our professional lives have been nurtured (and I use the metaphor advisedly) by the writings and example of the founding parents we have just heard. I hope they will regard this gathering as our collective tribute to their collective effort. But in addition to thanking them, and you, I cannot resist taking advantage of the opportunity to make a comment of my own on this session.

The original premise was that the senior scholars in our discipline have not made themselves felt at CAA meetings in recent years, and I have heard this said of them in derogation, as if they felt themselves superior or somehow above it all. Although I have not made a study of the matter, my own sense is that the observation is true, but the explanation false. I suspect that the disappearance of the older generation followed mainly in the wake of the great student revolts of the late 1960s and '70s, which opened a period of mutual distrust and alienation that left everyone much poorer, but perhaps also a little wiser.

Judging from our speakers' generous participation and from your enthusiastic response, this afternoon's session has brought that period happily, and let us hope definitively, to a close. Personally, I have only one reservation. The theme of "Changing My Mind" seems a little one-sided, since it focuses implicitly on being wrong. After all, at least some of the founding parents in at least some respects may not need to change their minds, because they were right in the first place!

Thank you all again, and see you next year.