

## What is Art History?

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Bertrand Russell once defined truth as what happens when someone confronted with the equation 2 plus 2 equals 4, exclaims "ah ha!" What Russell meant is that we recognize truth when we see it, but in the last analysis we cannot define precisely what it is. The basis of my art-historical life is a somewhat analogous principle, which I should describe as the "light bulb effect." When a meaningful observation is made about a work of art, at least an observation meaningful to me, an inner light goes on. I cannot say what makes the observation meaningful or why the bulb lights up, but I can illustrate what I mean. One of the standard clichés about the elaborate initial pages in early insular manuscripts is that they show the Celts' barbaric love of decoration. By contrast, I once heard Meyer Schapiro say that for the Celts emerging from a barbaric state of illiteracy the letters of the alphabet had something of the quality of magical signs. With the first statement, the inner light stayed dark; with the second it shone brightly and since then my life has never been quite the same. It became clear that the Celtic illumination was a fundamental statement by the artist concerning the nature of communication, and that Schapiro's observation was an equally fundamental decipherment of the statement by someone whose bulb had lit up before mine. The observation lays bare an area of common experience that links human beings across the centuries and, within its own context, it will stand like Einstein's  $E = MC^2$ .

In conjunction with the "light-bulb effect" I operate on certain assumptions, that is, concepts which I call assumptions because I doubt whether in the long run any of them is demonstrably valid or invalid. The assumptions are five.

The first is that anything man-made is a work of art, even the lowliest and most purely functional. Man, indeed, might be defined as the art-making animal, and the fact that we choose to regard some man-made things as works of art and others not, is a matter of conditioning. Our conventions in this respect are themselves, in a manner of speaking, works of art.

The second assumption is that everything in a work of art was intended to be there by its creator. A work of art is a totally deliberate thing, even when "accidents" are built into it deliberately. We can never say that the artist didn't know what he was doing, or that he wanted to do something other than what he did.

The third assumption is that every work of art is a self-contained whole. It includes within itself everything necessary for its own decipherment. Information gathered from outside the work may be useful, but is not essential to the decipherment.

On the other hand, outside information (which includes information about the artist himself) is essential if we want to explain how the work came to have its particular form and meaning.

The fourth assumption is that every work of art is an absolute statement. It conveys as much as possible with as little as possible. The work of art is perfect, in the sense that it is 100 percent efficient and, to paraphrase Leon Battista Alberti, nothing could be added or taken away without changing its message.

The fifth assumption is that every work of art is a unique statement. It says something that had never been said before and would never be said again, by the artist himself or anyone else. Copies or imitations, insofar as they are recognizable as such, are no exception, since no man can cease being human, no matter how hard he tries. Conversely, no matter how original the artist is, his work to some extent copies others, and it is purely a matter of convention that we tend to evaluate works of art by the quantity of differences from their models.

The chief virtue of these assumptions is that they help to assure each human creation its due. What it is due may be defined as the discovery of the reciprocity it embodies between expressive form and content. To me the brightest bulbs are those which illuminate the fact that the artist is saying something, and that what he says and the way he says it are one and the same thing.

I do not pretend that my own work has ever met the criteria implicit in any of these assumptions. Yet they are much more to me than philosophical abstractions. They represent the obscure but persistent demons that prod me to think about a work in the first place, and, once the process begins, to reject an explanation like Celtic love of decoration as fatuous. They are intellectual pangs of conscience that lead me to mistrust distinctions between conscious and unconscious creativity, between mechanical and conceptual function, between the artist's goal and his achievement. Finally, they are what drive me from the work itself to archives, libraries and classrooms in the hope of coaxing my own filament to conduct.