

## MARC FUMAROLI'S RHETORIC OF ART HISTORY

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I have been asked to speak about Marc Fumaroli's resonance in America, with special reference to the history of art. This is no easy task since his resonance has been loud and clear and as widespread as America itself. I shall reduce what I might say to just two comments, the first of which takes the word resonance literally. I remember that some years ago Marc told me that the College had changed its traditional rule that the lectures required of the professors be given verbally in French and physically in the College in Paris, permitting instead that they be given anywhere and in any language. With that new provision, France virtually colonized America in two humanistic disciplines at once, literary studies and art history, in the person of Marc Fumaroli.

I say in the person of Marc Fumaroli because anyone who has heard him speak knows that it is a literary and oratorical event of the highest order. One is quite simply entranced by the richness, the beauty, and the brilliance of the words, to say nothing of the ideas, that flow forth in a kind of symphonic splendor for which there is only one word, whatever the language, French. With his innumerable visits to my country, speaking everywhere, wherever ideas count, Marc has been a kind of *Siderius Nuntius* for the French Pleiade. He has raised scholarly discourse, both written and spoken, to the level of an art form, and I believe this word-magic has been an important factor in extending the breadth and depth of his influence. It might be said that in the person of Marc Fumaroli, the College, with the relaxation of the original French rule, has extended its original

mission to educate the people in their own vernacular language, from Paris to the world at large.

My second point follows intimately from the first, for it is surely no accident that what Marc speaks and writes so eloquently about is precisely rhetoric, that is, persuasion as a kind of meta-art. Marc has transformed this purest and most intellectual form of discourse about discourse into a way to think, passionately, about thinking. Considered in this way, rhetoric, is not only about the use of words, but about the presentation of ideas, the fruits of thought, in any medium, and hence its importance, as Marc has amply demonstrated, for the history of art. I speak of two of his books in particular, of course, *L'Age de l'éloquence : rhétorique et "res literaria", de la Renaissance au seuil de l'époque classique*, Geneva, 1980, and *L'école du silence : le sentiment des images au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, 1994 (and now recently the grand collection of his art studies, *De Rome à Paris. Peinture et Pouvoirs au XVII<sup>e</sup> et XVIII<sup>e</sup> Siècles*, 2007), the effect of which I can perhaps best describe with a word of about the history of our discipline in America since World War II. In the wake of Hitler's madness we were invaded by refugee scholars in every discipline, the most notable of whom in art history were from the Warburg school, and most notably in the person of Erwin Panofsky, who brought an entirely new way of understanding works of visual art in terms that were not inherently visual or aesthetic, but intellectual, that is, their meaning as it could be evinced from the ideas represented by their subjects culled from more or less relevant texts, and thus, unlike aesthetic pronouncements, more or less demonstrably valid. Works of visual art thus became repositories of meaning on a level with and equivalent to communication through words. The Warburg method, as practiced by innumerable clones, including myself, became a veritable heuristic system, variously called Iconography or Iconology, that swept the discipline for at least two generations. Simultaneously but not coincidentally, in what is now

commonly called the social revolution of the 1960's, the Warburg heritage was largely superseded by a new invasion, this time from France, in the form of social history as promulgated and practiced by the *Annales*. The *Annales* in turn offered a new way of interpreting works of art, again based primarily on their subject matter, in relation not primarily but in terms of the conditions under which they were created, to which the artist responded, sometimes deliberately, but more often quite unconsciously. For a time "social, economic, and political circumstances," all three together, became an almost universal buzzword repeated *ad nauseum*, often without any explanation, or even concern, for what the words might mean in the particular case, in virtually every American publication on art history by an author under 40.

Along came Marc, and a new age dawned. His work has offered a new key to understanding the *meaning* of works of art. I underscore the word meaning because in a sense his achievement has been paradoxical because rhetoric as such in the classical sense is fundamentally not concerned with the meaning or content of discourse, but with its form and *modus operandi*. Speaking as an art historian, and much as I love and admire him, I should say that Marc was not the first to propose the idea that the classical rhetorical tradition was relevant, indeed essential, to the comprehension of art and hence to the pursuit of art history. The pride of place in this respect is occupied by an Italian scholar, Giulio Carlo Argan (also a master of words, and, by the way, the first to introduce the Warburg method to Italy, where it has also become universal) who in 1955 published an amazing, brief article with the remarkably perspicacious title "The Rhetoric of Aristotle and the Baroque: the Concept of Persuasion as the Foundation of Figurative Meaning" (*La Rettorica Aristotelica ed il Barocco : il Concetto di Persuasione come Fondamento della Tematica Figurativa*). Taken up by Rudolph Wittkower in his Pelican book on Italian Baroque art, rhetoric came to be seen as the key to

understanding the exaggerated, extravagant, and theatrical excesses associated with the style we call Baroque.

Marc Fumaroli has done much more. Cicero was a rhetorician, but in the austere, not in the Baroque manner. Poussin was profoundly imbued with the spirit and discipline of rhetoric as persuasion, but in the classical, not in the Baroque manner. Marc Fumaroli has helped us to understand their work, as well as Bernini's, indeed all works of visual art, in a new and very special way, by reintegrating form and content, style and iconography, not for a particular period, but in principle, as if in the belief, *mirabile dictu*, that works of visual art actually look like what they mean, and mean what they look like. For this, if I may use the royal sense of the pronoun, we in America are profoundly grateful.