

Panofsky's History of Art

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Upon consideration, it is really quite remarkable that art history should be the one branch of cultural history represented at the Institute for Advanced Study. After all, the visual arts had since antiquity been low man (or low woman, since the arts are always represented as women) on the totem pole of human creativity, far behind literature, music, and history, for example. Painting, sculpture, and the like were classed as mechanical, rather than liberal arts, since they were considered the products of manual, rather than intellectual labor.

To appreciate how an art historian came to be a charter member of the Institute faculty one must know something of the nature of Panofsky's singular achievement.¹ A fundamental common denominator underlies all his vast outpouring of articles and books on an immense variety of subjects, from his astonishing dissertation on Albrecht Dürer's theoretical studies of human proportions (published in 1914 when Panofsky was 22, it brought him instant notoriety as a kind of child prodigy) to his last major work, published posthumously in 1969, a volume on Titian which he produced only at the urging of friends because, as he said, he felt inadequate to write about his favorite artist.² The study of Dürer's proportion theory revolutionized our understanding of the position in European history of Germany's great national painter, who had previously been treated as the epitome, the very incarnation of the pure, mystical German national spirit. Panofsky showed, to the dismay of many, that Dürer was in fact the principal channel through which the classical tradition of rational humanism, reborn in Italy in the Renaissance, was transmitted to Germany, transforming its cul-

ture forever (figs. 1, 2). At the end of his career Panofsky revolutionized our understanding of Italy's most beloved painter of the Renaissance by showing, again to the dismay of many, that Titian was not just the painter's painter *par excellence*, the pure colorist, the virtuoso of the brush, the unrestrained sensualist of form and light. On the contrary, Titian was also a great thinker who suffused his brilliant displays of chiaroscuro with layers and layers of wide learning and profound meaning, like the many layers of oil glazes that lend to his canvases their luminosity and depth. Ironically, and most appropriately, one of the prime instances of this transformed understanding of Titian—and how one understands Titian is how one understands the nature of painting itself, indeed of visual expression generally—was his analysis of one of Titian's seminal works, commonly known by the rather common title of *Sacred and Profane Love* (fig. 3). Panofsky showed that the picture, which includes two females, one scrumptiously dressed, the other divinely nude, in fact belonged in a long tradition of intellectual allegories; it can only have been providential, I might add, that the same tradition ultimately produced the Institute for Advanced Study's own official seal contrasting an adorned figure of Beauty with a naked figure of Truth (fig. 4).

Thus, Panofsky did not come to the Institute merely through the coincidence that, owing to Hitler, one of the world's leading art historians happened to be available at the moment when what was to become one of the world's leading institutions of higher learning was being established. He deserved his place at the Institute because of the way he did art history. He was the

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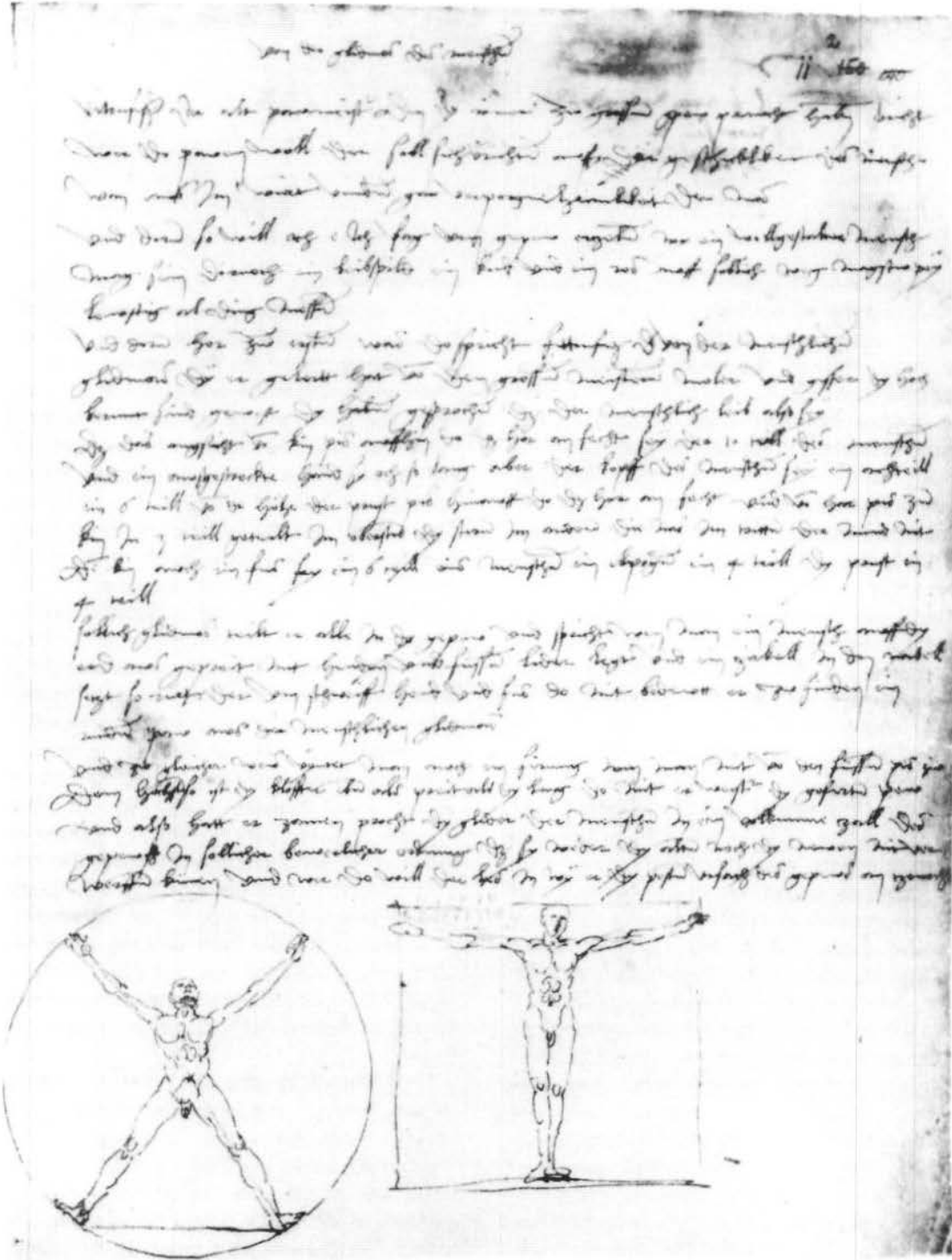


Figure 1. Albrecht Dürer, Vitruvian man, drawing. British Museum, London

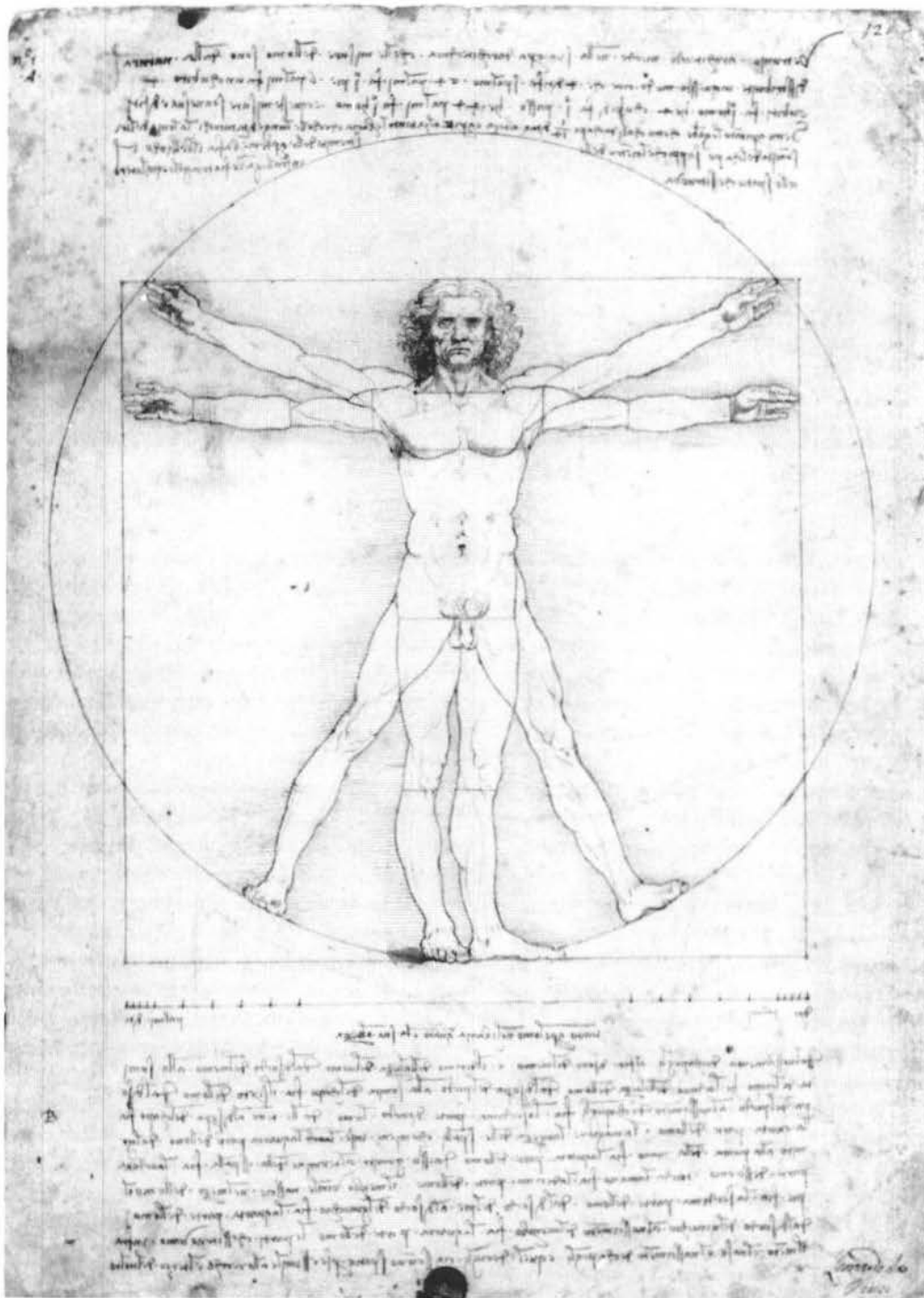


Figure 2. Leonardo da Vinci, Vitruvian man, drawing. Galleria dell'Accademia, Venice



Figure 3. Titian, *Sacred and Profane Love*. Galleria Borghese, Rome

first to hear clearly, take seriously, and apply systematically to all art, what artists since the Renaissance—Leonardo, Raphael, Dürer, Michelangelo, Titian, and the rest—were saying, sometimes desperately: that art is also a function of the brain, that man can speak his mind with his hands. Whereas his predecessors were concerned mainly with the classification of artists, styles, and periods, or with the social, religious, and political contexts in which art was produced, or with the psychological and formal principles that determine its various forms, Panofsky was concerned first, last, and foremost with meaning. The artist had something special to say and found special ways to say it. (Panofsky wrote a miraculous essay on precisely this subject with respect to what would now be called “filmic” technique.³) It was this insistence on, and search for, meaning—especially meaning in places where no one suspected there was any—that led Panofsky to understand art, as no previous historian had, as an intellectual endeavor on a par with the traditional liberal arts like literature and music; and in so doing he made art history into something it had never been before, a humanistic discipline. It was this elevating, intellectual approach—not to mention, of course, the bril-

liance, perspicuity, and charm with which he pursued it—that put Panofsky justly in the company of Einstein, Gödel, and those other miracle workers who performed their tricks in the citadel of higher intellect and imagination that this strange new institution was intended to provide. And that is how art history at the Institute was born.

I conclude by quoting three brief paragraphs from the famous “little” volume of essays Panofsky published in 1955 under the title, the significance of which I hope my remarks so far have helped to make clear, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*.⁴ The passages give at least a soupçon of the quality of Panofsky’s intelligence, humanity, and wit, and not incidentally, his uncanny command of the English language, which he learned to speak and write fluently only after he moved here at age 41. But mainly, I intend the readings to provide some idea of the past, present, and future of art history as Panofsky saw it.

The first two passages come from the essay “Three Decades of Art History in the United States. Impressions of a Transplanted European.” Near the beginning, Panofsky speaks of his transferral from Hamburg to New York and the Institute:



Figure 4. Seal of the Institute for Advanced Study

And when the Nazis ousted all Jewish officials in the spring of 1933, I happened to be in New York while my family were still at home. I fondly remember the receipt of a long cable in German, informing me of my dismissal but sealed with a strip of green paper which bore the inscription: "Cordial Easter Greetings, Western Union."

These greetings proved to be a good omen. I returned to Hamburg only in order to wind up my private affairs and to attend to the Ph.D. examinations of a few loyal students (which, curiously enough, was possible in the initial stages of the Nazi regime); and thanks to the selfless efforts of my American friends and colleagues, unforgettable and unforgotten, we could establish ourselves at Princeton as early as 1934. For one year I held concurrent lectureships at New York and Princeton universities, and in 1935 I was invited to join the newly constituted humanistic faculty of the Institute for Advanced

Study, which owes its reputation to the fact that its members do their research work openly and their teaching surreptitiously, whereas the opposite is true of so many other institutions of learning.⁵

In the second passage Panofsky describes the difference between European and American scholarship, and what the latter meant to him as an immigrant intellectual:

But what made the greatest impression on the stranger when first becoming aware of what was happening in America was this: where the European art historians were conditioned to think in terms of national and regional boundaries, no such limitations existed for the Americans.

The European scholars either unconsciously yielded to, or consciously struggled against, deep-rooted emotions which were traditionally attached to such questions as whether the cubiform capital was invented in Germany, France, or Italy, whether Roger van der Weyden was a Fleming or a Walloon, or whether the first rib-vaults were built in Milan, Morierval, Caën, or Durham; and the discussion of such questions tended to be confined to areas and periods on which attention had been focused for generations or at least decades. Seen from the other side of the Atlantic, the whole of Europe from Spain to the Eastern Mediterranean merged into one panorama the planes of which appeared at proper intervals and in equally sharp focus.

And as the American art historians were able to see the past in a perspective picture undistorted by national and regional bias, so were they able to see the present in a perspective picture undistorted by personal or institutional *parti pris*.⁶

In the third passage, which comes from an essay called "The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline," first written for a lecture series in 1937–38, Panofsky is discussing what he says

the ancients called the *vita contemplativa* as opposed to the *vita activa*, and the relations between them:

The man who takes a paper dollar in exchange for twenty-five apples commits an act of faith, and subjects himself to a theoretical doctrine, as did the mediaeval man who paid for indulgence. The man who is run over by an automobile is run over by mathematics, physics and chemistry. For he who leads the contemplative life cannot help influencing the active, just as he cannot prevent the active life from influencing his thought. Philosophical and psychological theories, historical doctrines and all sorts of speculations and discoveries, have changed, and keep changing, the lives of countless millions. Even he who merely transmits knowledge or learning participates, in his modest way, in the process of shaping reality—of which fact the enemies of humanism are perhaps more keenly aware than its friends.* It is impossible to conceive of our world in terms of action alone. Only in God is there a "Coincidence of Act and Thought" as the scholastics put it. Our reality can only be understood as an interpretation of these two.⁷

After the word "friends" at the end of the fourth to last sentence of this passage Panofsky added a footnote that must have had deep personal and intellectual meaning for him; in it he cites a letter-to-the-editor published in a popular British magazine of current affairs, not long after he had been expelled to America:

"In a letter to the *New Statesman and Nation*, XIII, 1937, June 19, a Mr. Pat Sloan defends the dismissal of professors and teachers in Soviet Russia by stating that "a professor who advocates an antiquated pre-scientific philosophy as against a scientific one may be as powerful a reactionary force as a soldier in an army of intervention." And it turns

out that by "advocating" he means also the mere transmission of what he calls "pre-scientific" philosophy, for he continues as follows: "How many minds in Britain today are being kept from ever establishing contact with Marxism by the simple process of loading them to capacity with the works of Plato and other philosophers? These works play not a neutral, but an anti-Marxist role in such circumstances, and Marxists recognize this fact." Needless to say, the works of "Plato and other philosophers" also play an anti-Fascist role "in such circumstances," and Fascists, too, "recognize this fact."

With the change of disquietingly few words the same letter might have been written by some of those who denigrate "the canon" today.

Notes

This essay was first printed in the pamphlet *From the Past to the Future through the Present. Conversations with Historians at the Institute for Advanced Study* (Princeton, 1992), 21–25; portions were incorporated in my paper "Iconography as a Humanistic Discipline ("Iconography at the Crossroads")," in B. Cassidy, ed., *Iconography at the Crossroads* (Princeton, 1992), 33–42.

1. Panofsky describes the circumstances of his appointment at the beginning of the essay on art history in the United States, mentioned below.

2. *Die theoretische Kunstlehre Albrecht Dürers (Dürers Aesthetik)* (Berlin, 1914); *Problems in Titian, Mostly Iconographic* (New York, 1969).

3. "Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures," first published in 1936 and often reprinted, most recently in E. Panofsky, *Three Essays on Style*, ed. I. Lavin (Cambridge, MA, 1995). Reprinting the essay in 1947, the editors of *Critique. A Review of Contemporary Art* referred to it as "one of the most significant introductions to the aesthetics of the motion picture yet to be written." A critical discussion of the text, by Thomas Y. Levin, will be found below.

4. *Meaning in the Visual Arts. Papers in and on Art History* (Garden City, N. Y., 1955). The first sentence of the preface begins, "The essays collected in this little volume."

5. *Meaning*, 321–22.

6. *Meaning*, 328.

7. *Meaning*, 23.