

Art History in Context

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It is scarcely debatable that of all the branches of history that have culture as their subject, art history has played a leading role over the past quarter century and more. This leadership has taken two main directions, which reflect the major developments in the field itself. One has to do with the meaning of works of art and is largely associated with the Warburg-Panofsky school of iconographical studies; broadly speaking, it brought the history of art into the realm of the history of ideas, counterbalancing the functional and aesthetic approaches that had predominated earlier. From a relatively narrow focus upon the history and significance of visual images the notion of "symbolic form" has been enlarged to encompass not only literature (the influence of emblem books on Metaphysical poetry) and music (the "iconography" of musical themes), but also broad sociological phenomena such as court ceremony and even political institutions. The second sphere of influence is that which is concerned with the history of style. Here, too, the achievements of art history in analyzing formal structure and describing stylistic change have been immensely fruitful for other disciplines, so that now we hear of Mannerist literature, and Baroque monarchies.

On the other hand, these achievements could not have occurred without a heavy input from other fields. One that has contributed greatly is anthropology. On a banal level, the discovery of prehistoric art of high quality, especially the cave paintings, and the discovery of high quality in primitive art helped to induce the art historians'

reevaluation of their traditional anthropocentric conceptions of birth, maturation and decline in art. A second important contribution came from economic history. Until art historians began to appreciate the growth of trade as a major factor in the development from the early to the high middle ages, their understanding of the art of the pilgrimage roads was naïve and lopsided. Most dramatic, however, has been the shift in recent years toward a social view of art. We are no longer content to think of meaning and style in the narrow senses of these words, but now strive for a more wholistic view that perceives works of art as part of the very fabric of the context in which they were created. This development is in its infancy, but it has already produced some astonishing results. It is well known that preparatory drawings for architecture, sculpture and painting are virtually non-existent in Europe before the Renaissance, a fact that had been explained as an accident of preservation—the collecting of works of art, including drawings, only began in the Renaissance. Some years ago, a German art historian challenged this assumption; he argued that the medieval tradition of workshop training and practice virtually from infancy obviated advanced preparation of this sort by a mature artist, whereas the academic system that emerged in the Renaissance required it. Whatever the truth may be, the challenge forced us to see this seemingly purely artistic problem against the background of the artist's position and role in society at large.

I am convinced that historians of art and historians of culture generally need to have their minds stretched farther and more often in this way; and I am convinced that the stimulus will come from the social sciences, which ask questions the traditional historical disciplines do not dare to pose. I should add that my view of the relationship between cultural history, other historical fields and the social sciences, is essentially heuristic. I

recently attended a seminar of social scientists and "straight" historians in which a computer study of medieval saints' lives was discussed. I was the only one present who defended the study. The others were concerned, fairly enough, with the statistical and historical validity of the results (i.e., how "true" is a thirteenth century life of a twelfth century saint?), whereas I was fascinated by the kinds of questions implicit in the data that had been fed into the computer, and by many parallels between the hagio-graphical patterns that emerged and the history of style in art. It is precisely the stimulation to be augured from a lateral linkage across attitudes, as opposed to a vertical linkage through time and within disciplines, that I find exciting.