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Barry Schwabsky, "Putting the Art Back in Art History"

Christopher S. Wood's *A History of Art History* will be eye-opening for anyone who cares about art.

November 9, 2019

Its plain-spoken title makes Christopher S. Wood's new book, [*A History of Art History*](#), sound pretty dry — *solo per gli addetti ai lavori*, as the Italians say: of interest to specialists only, or maybe even just to subspecialists. Historiography is a tough sell.

But this substantial volume is more than just a chronicle of half-forgotten scholarship or a thrashing out of methodological issues of little import. In fact, *A History of Art History* will be eye-opening for anyone who cares about art, and besides, it's not really about art history, although it's true that Wood spends the greater part of his space on the work of academic art historians.

But that's because their writings are so intimately linked to his true subject, which might well have served as an alternate title: I'd have called this book *Art and Historical Consciousness*. Or perhaps instead of "historical consciousness," I might have borrowed a phrase from the subtitle of Hayden White's famous book *Metahistory* (1973) and called Wood's book *Art and the Historical Imagination*.

Artists are acutely aware of the historicity of their work, and so it's hardly surprising that one traditional starting point for narratives of the history of art history — though it's not Wood's starting point — is with a history composed by an artist, namely Giorgio Vasari's *Le Vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori* (The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects), whose first edition was published in 1550, though a substantially larger version, the one best known today, came out in 1568.

Wood's chronicle starts much earlier than that. In his Introduction he cites the second century Greek geographer Pausanias, whose detailed accounts of temples, tombs, and the like made him a commentator on buildings and statuary, and the first chapter proper leads off with a look at the 11th-century *History of the Bishops of Hamburg* by one Adam of Bremen, who in one passage endeavors to explain the significance of some statues of Swedish gods found in a temple in Uppsala.

For Adam, according to Wood, the iconography of these statues can be understood by Christians who do not accept the Swedes' pagan beliefs; in fact, Christians can understand the Swedes' art even better than the Swedes do themselves, since it is possible for an outsider like Adam to see that these northern gods are, as Wood summarizes, "mere imitations of the Mediterranean gods" (such as Mars) who had already been definitively written off as untruths by Christianity. True knowledge comes with the dissipation of an original illusion.

Adam of Bremen was an iconographer of sorts, but he seems not to have paid much attention to another historically variable dimension of the arts, namely style or technique. For the Renaissance, this would be an issue. Just as there could be a true religion, which some peoples in certain times have grasped while those in other periods and places remained ignorant, so there might be a true style — and the men of the 15th century felt certain they were heading there.

“Would you not esteem my judgment as poor,” asked one humanist of the day, “if I, desiring to be a painter, imitated Giotto more than Raphael? Even though Giotto is so strangely praised by your Vasari?” Looking historically, one could see that the best efforts of one time could not match those of another, even if awkward efforts of yore had helped make the more sophisticated present possible. It’s a perspective that allows for a very limited sort of historical relativism: artists of the past may not have been as skilled as those in the present, so Vasari thought, but one could still discern those who were better, more advanced, than their contemporaries.

But Wood points out that, in an era when literary learning was prized above visual acuity, the importance of the New Testament, which, with its “simple, vernacular style [...] had special prestige because of its proximity to Christ,” lent authority to an intuition that the simplicity of earlier times was superior to contemporary worldliness.

In art, too, old works began to be prized for that reason alone; for instance, the Flemish painter and writer Karel van Mander, a couple of generations after Vasari, used the art of previous generations to disparage “the hard or angular modern manner which looks so unattractive.” In contrast to Vasari, as Wood says, “This is not a relativizing apology for the deficiencies of the old painters but an ironic overturning of the modern norm: van Mander is saying that the old compositions *really were* better, simpler, more effective.”

To this day, Vasarian stories of contemporary superiority are still duking it out with van Mander-like odes to the virtues of past practice. Clement Greenberg’s progressive history, which aimed toward Apollonian balance, and what Wood calls “Wilhelm Worringer’s sympathy for the barbarians” — two sides of modernism — are 20th-century manifestations of the same dichotomy.

It’s important that artists such as Vasari and van Mander were also writers. The blossoming of artists’ writing shared a material basis with an increase in the importance of drawing. “The conflict between past and present intensified when artists began to record their impressions” (on newly affordable paper) “and were not so dependent on their memories,” Wood points out. Artists began to collect drawings. And, of course, to collect and write down testimonies as to the doings of their precursors and colleagues. Thus the importance of Vasari: his book, “more than any other European text up to this point, established a feedback loop between writing and art-making.”

It is the changing shape and reach of this loop that Wood endeavors to chronicle in the remainder of his book. Art history is not entirely a disinterested practice intended to reconstruct an image of the past, but has a bearing on artistic practice in the present. What he perhaps does not emphasize sufficiently is that the comparability of different art practices — which is precisely what makes history useful to the artist — presumes a certain kind of formalism. It’s already there in Vasari, whose “ekphrases bring icons, altarpieces, decorated organ shutters and worldly pictures displayed in banquet halls and bedrooms to a common plane. He would seem to have adopted a secular understanding of art, that is, a capacity to assign value to paintings independent of their referential claims [...] or their contribution to ritualized communications with divinity.” With this, we have

already arrived at something like André Malraux's "museum without walls" — just add photomechanical reproduction.

The history Wood traces is basically European (and, eventually, American), but not entirely Eurocentric. He understands that "the reciprocal, self-perpetuating relationship between the production and the commentary of art" — that Vasarian loop — was actually something that had long since been developed in China; unknowingly, the West was playing catch-up.

His chronology ends at around 1960, with the general art historical surveys of E.H. Gombrich and H.W. Janson, a pessimist and an optimist respectively about the art of their own times. The former adumbrated "an obscure future where art may be unrecognizable and where the entire modern project of art history breaks down" — that is, a time in which art loses all sense of definition — where Janson saw "a continuity of purpose carried by form" from past to future.

Whose story does Wood find more convincing, that of Gombrich or of Janson? Without Gombrich's nostalgia, Wood emphasizes the half-truth that "the refusal of the authority of the past is the very program of modern art," implying that an irreversible break has occurred. But does denying the unimpeachable authority of the past make history unusable?

Wood points out that contemporary image-based culture — the profusion he can barely sum up by listing "advertising, fashion, celebrities, television, tattoos, toys, comics, pornography, politics, iPhones, and stuff in general" — is impossible for art history to grasp, even though it is to a great extent the content of contemporary art. But his belief that today's art "is no longer preoccupied with form" is one that would hardly be accepted by most artists or anyone else who is involved in contemporary art on a daily basis.

The somber tone of Wood's conclusion suggests that he is a historian to the core, prey to a melancholy such as Nietzsche might have predicted. While his narrative of the historical imagination in art is full of lively twists and turns — a baroque profusion that I could not imagine trying to summarize in the brief compass of a review such as this — he finds only entropy in the present.

As for me, he makes me want to pick up once again that old tome of Janson's that I haven't cracked since I was in college. I know it must be around here somewhere. Wood considers Janson naïve for believing that "there are no breaks and no sense that art in the modern world has either lost its way or come into its own." Janson's view, which assumes that most times, however tumultuous, are more ordinary than they may appear from within, just seems realistic. Tales of catastrophe and transcendence are great for rousing the historian out of his saturnine torpor, but not so helpful to the daily practice of painting.