

Obituary

Hans Belting (1935–2023)

An acclaimed scholar of Byzantine and Western medieval art, Belting won a wide readership with his book 'Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art' (1990). Not long after, he took up a chair at the newly founded Staatliche Hochschule für Gestaltung, Karlsruhe, where he developed an anthropological theory of the image that moved well beyond art history.

by CHRISTOPHER S. WOOD

HANS BELTING, WHO died on 10th January 2023 at the age of eighty-seven, wrote one of the strangest, most unexpected and at the same time most influential art-historical books of our time. *Bild und Kult: eine Geschichte des Bildes vor dem Zeitalter der Kunst* (1990), translated into English as *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art* (1994), retold the history of European art from late Antiquity to the sixteenth century through the seemingly narrow lens of the image of the holy personages – divinities and saints.¹ Such portraits of the gods and religious heroes are called 'icons'. The icons were surrogate bodies. In Belting's telling, this is the essential function of the image. No elaborate theory of representation is necessary to grasp the workings of the icon: the image simply shows you what it shows you, god or human being. Modern, secular paintings that treat the human body as an artistic content like any other, or decline to depict anything recognisable at all, have strayed from the immemorial vocation of the image.

Like other obsessives convinced of the great significance of their apparently marginal or recondite topics – one thinks of Alois Riegl's *Dutch Group Portrait* (1902), Walter Benjamin's *Origins of the German Tragic Drama* (1928) or Ernst Kantorowicz's *The King's Two Bodies* (1957) – Belting made no apologies. *Likeness and Presence* gave us the story of the rise and fall of the icon as the principal and indispensable story. The drama mounted as the book approached the Renaissance, the threshold of modern art. Here the reader might expect the icon, with its direct address to the beholder, subservience to liturgy and ritual and indifference to human time-frames to recede, making way for all the sophistication and sensuality of the art of the Renaissance. But that is not the story Belting told. In his account, the Renaissance, with its celebration of the freedom of art and the intellectual status of the artist, was a fall from grace. The medieval image had enjoyed what Belting called a *Sitz im Leben*, a 'setting in life'. The art of modernity is by contrast only loosely anchored in public life.

Likeness and Presence was the keystone of an unorthodox art-historical career. Belting's doctoral dissertation for the University of Mainz on early medieval wall painting in southern Italy (1959) and his subsequent monographs and articles on Italian and Byzantine painting earned him a professorship at the University of Heidelberg. Early in his career Belting made the pilgrimage to Dumbarton Oaks to study with the eminent émigré scholar Ernst Kitzinger. Belting's monograph on the Upper Church of the Basilica of St Francis at Assisi (1977) took on one of the classic art-historical questions, the authorship of the frescos illustrating the Legend of St Francis.

In 1980 Belting was 'called', as the Germans say, to the University of Munich to occupy the prestigious chair once held by Heinrich Wölfflin and Hans Sedlmayr – so do the Germans reckon their art-historical

genealogies. Belting's inaugural lecture in Munich, published as the pamphlet *The End of the History of Art?* (1983; translated into English in 1987), threw down a gauntlet and presaged a major shift in his own work. Until then Belting's scholarship was addressed to other specialists. Now suddenly he was broadcasting to the whole discipline of art history, and beyond. In this book Belting argued that art history as a scholarly project had been underwritten by a succession of theories of art, the latest being the avant-gardism of the twentieth century with its myth of permanent innovation. The avant-garde has no interest in the historical past. This means that art history was broken in two: one art history (teleological) for Western Modernism, another (historicist) for all the rest.

But Belting believed that the heroic modernist narrative of progress had lost its lustre. In the then-fashionable spirit of 'postmodern' disillusionment, he asserted that the art of his own day was no longer contributing to that narrative. In fact, according to Belting, there was no longer any agreed-upon and coherent theory of art. And this was our opportunity. For now finally it was possible to imagine an art history that would embrace both traditional and modern art. The key – revealed in Belting's own subsequent scholarship – was to replace the now-fatigued concept of 'art' with the concept of the 'image'. In this way we might achieve 'a synthetic treatment of older and modern art'.²

In the 1980s Belting taught as a visitor at both Harvard and Columbia, when the present author had the opportunity to study with him and to translate *The End of the History of Art?* into English. Working on the translation provided an insight into his peculiar way of thinking and writing: one moment circling and indirect, the next moment assertive, apodictic.

Belting's seminar at Harvard was on trecento panel painting and his lecture course was on trecento frescos in the public, civic context. He was an inspiring teacher, giving his pupils the sense of taking part in a major realignment of scholarship on medieval and early modern art. Belting, it was noted, was reading recent books from well beyond art history: Hans Robert Jauss on reception theory, for example, and Paul Feyerabend's *Against Method* (1975). But Belting himself was neither a philosopher nor a theorist. Instead, he thought through the fundamental problems of art-historical method by his own lights. At one point – before his years of greatest fame – he confessed to the present writer a certain apprehension, a sense of his own hubris, as he wrestled with art-historical forebears such as Erwin Panofsky or Ernst Gombrich. Later he overcame such qualms.

Belting shared with the Marxist art historians of his own generation a certain nostalgia for the central role that art had once played in society – that lost *Sitz im Leben* – as well as scepticism towards any formalism or aestheticism. It was the function of the work of art that mattered, not its

form or its content. But what separated him from the Marxists was his lack of confidence in narratives of emancipation and his unwillingness to identify class conflict as the motor of change, as well as his somewhat uncritical embrace of a postmodernism that supposedly brought the straightforward mimetic image of the human figure back into the scene, especially in photography and video.

Throughout the ensuing decades Belting went on producing highly original, often surprising, works of scholarship on European art, including *The Image and its Public in the Middle Ages: Form and Function of Early Paintings of the Passion* (1981; translated 1990); *Jan van Eyck as Narrator: Early Panel Paintings in the Orbit of the New York Diptych* (1983; with Dagmar Eichberger); *Giovanni Bellini, Pietà: Icon and Pictorial Narrative in Venetian Painting* (1985); *The Invention of the Picture: The First Century of Netherlandish Painting* (1994; with Christiane Kruse); and *Hieronymus Bosch, Garden of Earthly Delights* (2002; translated 2012). The last of these books – to give an example of his independence and iconoclasm – interprets Bosch's famous triptych in the Prado not as a moralistic condemnation of the sensual depravity of the modern and fallen world, as most do, but rather as a positive image of the life-affirming utopia that would have been ours if we had not fallen. In *Florence and Baghdad: Renaissance Art and Arab Science* (2008; translated 2011), meanwhile, Belting challenged the Eurocentric account of the invention of perspective in fifteenth-century Florence.

Belting also wrote several books expounding his heterodox views on modern art, which were not always well received by the modernist establishment: *Max Beckmann: Tradition as a Problem in Modern Art* (1984; translated 1989); *The Germans and their Art: A Troublesome Relationship* (1992; translated 1998); and *The Invisible Masterpiece: Modern Myths of Art* (1998; translated 2001). In his last years he worked, together with his

partner, Andrea Buddensieg, on the 'global art world'. Willibald Sauerländer, an older colleague of Belting in Munich, once conceded in conversation that Belting was 'a periodical to which we should all subscribe'.

Over time, Belting's thinking increasingly drifted away from the traditional concerns of art history, and he came to feel constrained by academic convention. In 1992 he more or less threw over his academic career in midstream, abandoning the Munich chair for a position at the Staatliche Hochschule für Gestaltung in Karlsruhe, an experimental art school founded in that very year. On the curriculum of this glamorous digital Bauhaus were not painting and sculpture but the New Media. Here Belting had complete freedom. Among his colleagues were Peter Sloterdijk, Boris Groys and Thomas Struth. No longer supervising dissertations on medieval art, he developed an alternative art history that involved little art, and was not very much interested in history, either. This was to be an anthropology of images, to use the title of his programmatic book published in 2001 (translated 2011). That book described the primordial somatic vocation of the image: the direct delivery of the human body across an infinite range of material supports, or media. This common denominator permitted him to treat in that manifesto-like book the effigies, mummies and death masks of ancestor cults, body paint and tattoos, puppets and anatomical models alongside the photography, film, video art and digital art of the present day.

'Images migrate across the boundaries that separate generations and cultures', he wrote. 'The history of images [...] can also be read as a cultural history of the human body'.³ *An Anthropology of Images* was one of the major salvos in the campaign for a so-called *Bildwissenschaft* (image studies), a

Hans Belting, photographed in 2011. (Photograph © Basso Cannarsa; opale.photo).



dominant tendency in German academia that was meant to repudiate the bourgeois cult of art and replace the discipline of art history. *Bildwissenschaft* never really caught on in the Anglophone world (it is not identical to Visual Culture Studies). Belting developed his brand of *Bildwissenschaft* in such treatises as *The True Image: Image-Questions as Questions of Belief* (2005) and *Face and Mask: A Double History* (2013; translated 2017).⁴

In these writings Belting speaks of images as if they were something like ideas or souls. His image-anthropology aims to restore the image to the human being, undoing the alienation of the body from its own image brought out by art. The images that most perfectly realise the promise of any image are death-images: tomb-effigy, memorial portrait, death-mask – substitutes that make the dead present among the living. Today the photograph, the performance and the statue recover some of that ideal exchangeability. But without the connection to the death of the body, Belting writes, ‘images merely simulate life and therefore fall into an empty circularity.’⁵ Death guarantees the image. Here he transcends anthropology, usually a reliably materialist discipline, and gestures towards something like an immanent theology of the image. In this way Belting’s late work on the anthropology of the image links back to his early studies of the medieval icon that culminated in *Likeness and Presence*.

That magnum opus had a dynamic effect within art history. Medievalists felt liberated by Belting’s exposure of the aestheticist assumptions underlying the historiography of Western art. Never again would a medieval cult image be dismissed as ‘not yet art’. Scholars of Renaissance art, meanwhile, were emboldened to bring out the persistent

cultic and functional character of many paintings and sculptures enshrined in museums as paragons of fine art. Still other scholars felt provoked by Belting’s polemics to better define the value and power of the modern concept of autonomous art.

Belting taught as a guest professor at many universities worldwide. From 2004 until 2007 he was Director of the Internationales Forschungszentrum Kulturwissenschaften in Vienna. He was elected to numerous learned societies and awarded countless prizes and other honours, including the Pour le mérite of the Republic of Germany (1998), an honorary degree from the Courtauld Institute of Art, London (2003), and the Balzan Prize (2015).

It remains to be seen whether Belting predicted the art history of the future, and whether his later, anthropologically orientated, texts will have a longer life-span than his earlier and outstanding art-historical studies. For now, what lingers is the vivid impression of Belting’s incredible intellectual restlessness, his drive to innovate and his power to shape discourses.

1 See J. Hamburger: ‘Art History Reviewed XI: Hans Belting’s “Bild und Kult: eine Geschichte des Bildes vor dem Zeitalter der Kunst”, 1990’, THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE 153 (2011), pp.40–45, repr. in R. Shone and J.P. Stonard, eds: *The Books that Shaped Art History: From Gombrich and Greenberg to Alpers and Krauss*, London and New York 2013, pp.202–15.
 2 H. Belting: *The End of the History of Art?*, transl. C. Wood, Chicago and London 1987, p.39.
 3 H. Belting: *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body*, transl. T. Dunlap, Princeton 2011, p.17.
 4 *Face and Mask: A Double History* was reviewed by David Carrier in this Magazine, 160 (2018), p.614.
 5 Belting, *op. cit.* (note 3), p.126.

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