

E. H. Gombrich, The values of the Byzantine Tradition: A Documentary History of Goethe's Response to the Boisserée Collection, The Documentary Image ed. G. P. Weisberg, L. S. Dixon, Rome, 1987. [Trapp no.1987F.1]

Any progress from a rigid, obsolete and artificial state toward a free and vital realism also implies a loss which can only be made good by and by, and frequently not before some time has elapsed.

This comment by Goethe on the artistic revolution of the van Eycks and on their departure from the medieval traditions of art occurs in his account of the Boisserée collection published in 1816 in *Aus Kunst und Altertum*. The text of this essay, "From a Journey to the Rhine, Main and Neckar in the years 1814 – 15," can be found in all editions of Goethe's collected works[1] and has also been made available to English readers in the anthology by John Gage, titled *Goethe on Art*. [2] But though this text cannot be called unfamiliar, it is hoped that Elizabeth Holt will accept a comment on this comment as a tribute to her, for she, if anyone, must know how original were the opinions quoted in their time and how far-reaching were their consequences on the historiography of art. The carefully worded statement, judiciously attempting to balance the gains and losses of an artistic innovation, turns out to be the result of Goethe's determination not to be swept off his feet by the enthusiasm of the two German collectors of northern fifteenth-century painting who had become his friends but whose medievalising tendencies he distrusted and resisted.

For facts and documents this study is wholly indebted to the monograph on the Boisserée Collection by Eduard Firmenich-Richartz of which only the first volume came out during the first World War in 1916. [3] But while that work concentrates on the acquisitions and social contacts of the two brothers, I propose to describe mainly the human story, which, as it will turn out, also explains the nature of Goethe's response. If the response will be found to exhibit a strong dose of ambivalence, the reasons must be traced to the beginnings of the two brothers' intellectual formation.

Sulpiz Boisserée (1783 – 1854) and his young brother Melchior (1786 – 1851) were the sons of a wealthy Cologne merchant. As a consequence of the Revolution of 1789, Cologne had moved into the French political orbit, and when Sulpiz (with whom we shall be mainly concerned) was twenty, Bertram, an older friend, suggested that the brothers should visit Paris. It was there in 1803 that they became the disciples and followers of the leader of the German Romantics, Friedrich Schlegel (1772 – 1829), a man Goethe heartily disliked a dislike which was mutual. Having married Dorothea, the daughter of Moses Mendelssohn, Schlegel had gone to Paris a year earlier mainly to escape the disabilities that were still imposed on Jews in German lands. It was there that he learned Sanskrit and secured for himself a permanent place in the history of Indian studies, and it was there, also that visits to the Musée Napoleon opened his eyes to the beauties of preclassical art which he expounded in his journal *Europa*. [4] The fertile mind and personality of this versatile man so impressed the two brothers that they chose him as their guru; they lived in his house and attended his private lectures on literature. A year later they persuaded their master to accompany them to Cologne, using the opportunity for looking at the ancient cities and buildings in Belgium and the Netherlands, paying special attention to Gothic architecture.

It is well known that the new enthusiasm for these formerly neglected monuments was fed by two equally potent factors: the reaction against the anticlericalism of the French Revolution and the upsurge of German nationalism in the face of French cultural hegemony. By the time Friedrich Schlegel arrived in Paris, the first of these movements was well underway. In 1802 there had appeared François René Chateaubriand's seminal book *Le Génie du Christianisme*, which asserted

the superiority of the Age of Faith over the Age of Reason. The roots of German cultural nationalism, of course, go back much further. None other than Goethe had celebrated the greatest of the Strasbourg Cathedral in 1772 in his first publication, *Von Deutscher Baukunst*, in which he naively challenged the French to point to anything they had created which would equal this masterpiece.[5] The erroneous belief that the Gothic style was the national style of the German derived of course from its designation, which had been popularised by Vasari in the sixteenth century; but it needed Germany's humiliation during the Napoleonic wars to turn Gothic architecture into the symbol of a political movement. The incomplete cathedral of Cologne, which Sulpiz Boisserée first undertook to measure and record and later also to restore and complete, became the most potent embodiment of German aspirations.

In considering the career of this gifted amateur, a third historical factor must be taken into an account, one equally connected with the aftermath of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars: the dissolution of the monasteries and the secular administration of the Rhinelands had led to the sale or removal of many church furnishings, including altars and figures of saints dating from medieval times. This was a golden opportunity for collectors with antiquarian interests, among whom the brothers Boisserée became prominent after their return from Paris to Cologne.

They soon found, however, that it was one thing to admire the engaging piety and honest of these relics of a Christian age, but a very different thing to assign them a place in a historical context. The history of German medieval art was a complete blank; next to nothing was known of the date and sequence of styles. No wonder that the meager facts to be found in the earlier writers, notably Giorgio Vasari and Carel van Mander, were used as points of reference against which to plot the development of the newly discovered school of German art. Vasari, of course, had described the rise of Italian Renaissance painting against the foil of the *maniera Greca*, the "ugly and clumsy" style of Byzantine art which had nevertheless prevented art from becoming altogether extinct during the Dark Ages. In one of his rare references to northern art he had also celebrated the achievement of Giovanni da Brugia (Jan van Eyck) as the inventor of oil painting, a new technique that had superseded the tempera painting of the Greeks and their followers. These ideas had gained currency among art lovers and were to form the cornerstone of their historical reconstruction. The process is reflected in the fragments of an autobiography from the pen of Sulpiz:

So far those paintings were considered to date from an earlier period, which were found to be somewhat similar to those of the brothers van Eyck, but less perfect in design and execution. In general one inferred their greater age merely from their greater imperfections rather than from a wholly different conception and formation of heads and draperies. But when we first encountered paintings of apostles in the entrance hall of the St. Laurence church, in which the heads were rendered with broad forms, soft hair and beards and the drapery with simply rounded folds, all executed with a soft fluent brush, we did not hesitate at first to consider them Italian. They seemed to us to resemble the half-length paintings of apostles on golden ground from S. Luigi in Rome which we had seen in the restoration workshop of the Italo-Byzantine manner It did not last long however till we found several such paintings which were doubtlessly of local origin from the 14th and 15th centuries. At the same time we found that paintings with inscriptions and dates, which, because of their imperfections, had formerly been considered to be earlier than the van Eycks, actually belonged to their school. So we had to convince ourselves of a fact of which nobody had so far had the slightest inkling, the fact that the earlier painting of Cologne before the van Eycks, no less than the contemporary Italian school, relied on an old tradition of Byzantine models and that it had emerged from the same foundations of that traditional art, although with distinct individual characteristics.[6]

The modern art historian may here be tempted to connect these vague historical intuitions with the fact that there was indeed an “international Gothic style” that dominated the arts of Europe around the year 1400 before the emergence of the new realism. But subsequent utterances by Sulpiz indicate that he was far from such detailed knowledge of the history of art and that most of his opinions were wildly off the mark.

When in 1808 the brothers succeeded in acquiring the greatest treasure of their collection, Rogier van der Weyden’s triptych from the monastery of St. Columba, (fig. 15.1: Van der Weyden, *Columba Altar*. For copyright reasons, the reader will have to refer to the original illustrations in the text ed.) they had no doubt that they here had an example of the art of van Eyck who was seen to have wholly broken with the Byzantine tradition.

Sulpiz responded to Friedrich Schlegel’s request for advice in matters of medieval art and set out his ideas in much more detail.[7] He refers to the opinion his correspondent had first expressed himself in his journal *Europa* (vol. 4, pp. 5, 30, 109), the opinion “that at first painting among Italians and Germans was bound to have originated from the same point,... and that the earliest Christian paintings exemplified the Greek manner”:

It is precisely this continuous and exclusive persistence of the Greek style and manner in the old German schools of painting and sculpture from the earliest times to those of van Eyck which, due to our discoveries, has become the main foundation of our new understanding of our national art history. That the appearance of a contrasting, wholly nationally German manner which we had thought to be of earlier origin, is entirely due to the van Eycks is the second point; the third and most difficult point of our changed conception concerns the transition to that style from the earlier, wholly Greek manner.

Accustomed as we are to illustrated handbooks, it requires an effort to imagine how difficult it must have been, in the absence of any reliable illustration, even to attempt the construction of a historical picture of medieval art. It was only in the year in which Sulpiz wrote this account that the situation was at least partially remedied by the appearance of the first instalment of Seroux d’Agincourt’s *Histoire de l’Art par les Monuments depuis sa décadence au 4me siècle à son renouvellement au 16me* (Paris, 1811 – 20). Before that the only publication from which Sulpiz could derive any idea of the characteristics of the Byzantine style was the edition by Cardinal Albani of the *Menologium of Basiliius II* (fig. 15.2: The Birth of the Virgin from the Albanai edition of the *Menologium of Basil ii*, 1727), a richly illustrated manuscript in the Vatican library dating from the period around 1000. How much, however, they had to rely on hearsay is revealed in the incidental remark that “art lovers who had seen the neo-Greek paintings by Giotto” had assured them that certain German panel paintings were “very much like them in colour and design.”[8]

The brothers had no more luck in clarifying what they considered the most difficult point in their new view of medieval art history, the transition from the ubiquitous Byzantine style to that of the van Eycks. The misreading of an inscription had led them to the belief that the principal monument of the School of Cologne, Stephan Lochner’s *Dombild*, was dated 1410 (instead of c. 1440) and had thus to be fitted into this transitional period.

Even the most sceptical art historian must admit that we have made a little progress since those days. And yet it will be seen that it was on these shaky foundations that Goethe based his important insights about the inherent values of the Byzantine tradition.

The strange concentration of circumstances which opened the way for these young collectors to approach the virtual dictator of taste in German lands is worth relating.[9] Sulpiz had been asked by a

retired French diplomat who had left the service of Napoleon, Karl Friedrich Reinhard, to find him a country retreat in the Rhineland for the years of his retirement. But in these turbulent years he was abducted by the Russians, taken to a castle by the Dnieper, and only set free after diplomatic intervention. In need of rest, Reinhard went to the famous spa of Karlsbad where he met Goethe, who took a liking to this highly cultured man of the world.

Thus on 16 April 1810, Reinhard wrote a carefully worded letter to Goethe, mentioning that Sulpiz, who had recently moved to Heidelberg, was the owner of a very remarkable collection of old German paintings that he had rescued from perdition. But what would certainly interest Goethe was a project Sulpiz had conceived of publishing a description of Cologne Cathedral and its antiquities together with its history. The drawings were ready, and Sulpiz would dearly love to show them to Goethe and to make his acquaintance: "I can wholly recommend him to you as a well-behaved, upright and good natured person ... I respect and love this young man and am in contact with his house and his family." [10]

Goethe's reply was by no means encouraging. He would not advise the young man to undertake the journey to Weimar; he was much under pressure; and if the visitor came at a time of so much turbulence, he would have even less pleasure and profit than could otherwise be expected: "For as you must feel yourself, a disciple of Friedrich Schlegel would have to remain for a considerable time in my proximity and benevolent spirits would have to inspire both of us with special patience if anything enjoyable and constructive is to result from this encounter." However, having got this off his chest, Goethe felt it necessary to add that Reinhard's recommendation was certain to prepare a friendly reception for the visitor, "indeed in points which are generally hostile to me he will find me more patient and forgiving than I am usually." [11]

Sulpiz was well advised not to come before he had sent the drawings. Having looked at them, Goethe sent a more conciliatory letter to Reinhard, dated 14 May 1810: "One cannot prescribe to anyone to what he should turn his interest and how to cultivate his innate gifts. Moreover everything is very praiseworthy that brings to mind again the meaning of past times, especially when it is done in a truly faithful and critical manner. Accordingly the efforts of the young man which resulted in these drawings are highly laudable." And after discussing details of the drawings and of the cathedral, Goethe continues:

Let this be, then, the sincere and unqualified praise that is due to the art lovers of Cologne. Admittedly it needs this kind of passionate limitation to produce something of this kind. Earlier in my life I was also interested in these matters and I indulged in a similar kind of idolatry of the Strasbourg Cathedral, the façade of which I still consider to be superior as an invention to that of Cologne Cathedral. What strikes me as strangest of all is German patriotism that wants to represent this obviously saracenic plant as sprung from its own soil. On the whole, however, the period in which this taste spread from South to the North remains truly interesting. I look at the whole thing as on a state of caterpillars and chrysalis in which the first Italian artists were also still confined till at last Michelangelo, in conceiving the Church of St. Peter, broke through the shell and presented himself to the world as a miraculously splendid bird.

After returning to more general expressions of benevolence, Goethe added a postscript asking Reinhard not to communicate to the "excellent young man" any of the utterances in the letter that could hurt him. [12]

Meanwhile Sulpiz had written a long and deferential letter to Goethe, declaring it to be his duty "to ask for the judgement of the man whose approval could guide and encourage my work more than that of

any other and is also bound to have a most decisive influence on the completion of the work itself." After detailed discussion of the project concerning Cologne Cathedral he turns to an account of his collection:

We possess not merely remarkable works but paintings which are at least in their expression more noble and more beautiful than can be usually seen in works of the old masters.... But the most important point remains our discovery, due to our collecting zeal, of a style of painting extending as far as the age of Jan van Eyck which continuously shows the traces of Greek influence, such as we hear it described in Italy before Raphael and which no one had expected up to now to have existed in Germany. The most recent of these works from the late 14th and early 15th centuries exhibit this manner in the great beauty of heads and draperies ... the treatment of design and colour is very different and more pleasing than we have expected so far of the German character and its frequently clumsily imitative art. There must be obviously the same foundations, and the early works resemble more and more the clumsy figures known from the Byzantine miniature paintings of the Menologium and other manuscripts.[13]

In his brief but courteous acknowledgement Goethe promised the writer that he could be sure of a most friendly welcome. Reinhard, the faithful intermediary, was not deceived. He wrote to Goethe on June 27, implying that it was probably a mistake not to let him pass on Goethe's misgivings for now the young man immediately thought that Goethe looked at these matters with his eyes. Whereupon Goethe hurried to ask him to enlighten the young friend in Heidelberg sufficiently, because otherwise the impending visit might lead to an unpleasant situation if he had not learned earlier what Goethe's real opinion was. No doubt the young man had done excellent work, but Goethe still thought that the subject was only praiseworthy as documenting a stage of human culture. Admittedly, Goethe concedes, if these nice young men did not consider this transitional state the highest, they could not summon the courage and energy for their labours.

If the knight did not think of his lady as the most beautiful and unparalleled, he would not fight monsters and dragons for her sake. In my life I have experienced a sufficient number of similar situations with young people, which has prompted me recently to keep away entirely even from the better ones. They concede that we have influence, but they think it is they who have the insights and their silent intention is really to make use of the first for the sake of the latter. There is no true confidence to be established here. I don't take this amiss, but I prefer not to deceive myself in a good-natured way nor to further other people's purposes against my conviction.[14]

It is important to keep this frank avowal in mind, if we want to understand what followed. Goethe's fear that he might allow himself to be seduced to support a cause he really detested explains the ups and downs that characterise his behaviour towards Sulpiz Boisserée and also its subsequent inconsistencies, which occasionally bordered on duplicity.

When, on 3 May 1811, the young man of twenty-eight stood at last before the great poet, then in his sixty-second year, he was to experience this ambivalence to the full. The account of this meeting he instantly gave to his brother is heart-warming in its immediacy and deserves to be quoted at some length:

I just come from Goethe who received me stiffly and coldly, I was not to be put off and was also formal and not deferential. The old gentleman let me wait a little, till he came in with powdered hair, the ribbons of his decoration on his jacket. The address was as stiffly unbending as possible. I brought him many greetings. "Very nice," said he. We immediately came to talk about the drawings, the engravers, the difficulties, the publishers Cotta, and all those external matters. "Yes, yes, fine, hem, hem." Then we touched on the work itself, on the fate of the art of old times and its history. I was

determined to counter aloofness with just the same aloofness, I talked as briefly as possible of the high beauty and excellence of the art in the Cathedral, and pointed out that having looked at the drawings he should have been able to convince himself – during all that he pulled a face as if he wanted to eat me. Only when we talked of old painting he somewhat thawed; hearing the praise of neo-Greek art he smiled, he asked about painters between him and Dürer and about Dürer's contemporaries in the Netherlands. He accepted my view that we had such beautiful paintings because the art of the Netherlands had been much more refined and pleasing than that of the rest of Germany. I was as accommodating in all these matters as you know me, but also as determined and free as possible and did not allow myself to be put off by his silence of his "yes, yes, nice, strange." I generously offered him my ideas about the development of painting through the influence of the van Eyck, but very cautiously, and allowed him to sense very clearly that one did not like to express one's thoughts about the fresh discoveries which we have been lucky enough to make. I only gave them in general outline, and he took this in with pleasure.[15]

Only after the conversation had turned to Reinhard and other personal matters Goethe became more affable, "his smiles became more frequent and he invited me to his table tomorrow."

On the next day, 4 May 1811, Sulpiz was able to report a striking change of mood. He had brought Goethe Cornelius' illustrations to *Faust*, which earned applause, after which Goethe showed his visitors the *Four Seasons* by Philipp Otto Runge that hung on his wall and which he praised with genuine enthusiasm. "What, you don't know that? Look what kind of stuff that is, to drive you crazy, beautiful and mad at the same time."

At the next visit, Goethe even offered to come to Sulpiz the following morning "so that we can talk under four eyes, we must make use of the time we are together. By word of mouth and with the drawings at hand one can understand each other really." Sulpiz declined the honour of acting as host to Goethe, but his conquest was by then complete. Not that Sulpiz had any illusions:

One must not forget over these brief spells of youthful enthusiasm that he is an old man and that one cannot expect of him any really active sympathy. All the arguments of the old man against the belief that Gothic architecture was invented by our nation have fallen silent, and everything he said about the Strasbourg Cathedral he soon dropped. Tuesday when I was alone with him with the drawings, he actually growled occasionally like a wounded bear, one saw how he struggled with himself and blamed himself ever to have misjudged such greatness.

Describing their next tête-a-tête at table, Sulpiz reports that hearing Goethe's praise he felt uplifted by the feeling of a great and beautiful cause having remained victorious over the prejudices of one of the most intelligent men "with whom I had to fight a real battle during the last few days I said what came to my mind, I don't know what words I used, they obviously revealed my emotion, for the old man was quite moved, pressed my hand and embraced me. He had tears in his eyes." Their intimacy had grown to the point where Sulpiz even ventured to ask Goethe what he had against Friedrich Schlegel, though here there was no question of breaking down the old man's prejudices against a man he considered to be dishonest.

We need not doubt that Sulpiz was right in claiming a personal victory, for Goethe thanked Reinhard with obvious sincerity for having sent him such a "hand-some man": "One always fares better with worthy people in their presence than in their absence, for at a distance they usually turn that side towards us which we oppose, but when they are near, one easily finds out how far one may agree." [16]

Reinhard, in turn, wrote to Sulpiz that he had pleased the old man through he had hardly converted him.[17] He proved to be right.

Their subsequent correspondence shows Sulpiz wooing the old man like a passionate lover, urging him to visit the Rhineland and their collection: "If ever speech can exert a spell, I hope that heaven will now listen to me kindly and bestow on me the gift to persuade you and to make you proof against all doubts." In the autumn the Rhinelands showed themselves to their best advantage: "Nature herself imposes the law on you that you must visit us, and I count on your honouring a law from that beneficent hand as is your custom." [18]

Since Goethe was not to be moved, Sulpiz suggested they would take the collection to Weimar where it might be displayed: "You see I grasp the hand which you proffered to generously and lovingly with both my hands so that it should be my anchor for my whole life."

But such impetuosity was only too likely to make Goethe withdraw. He warned the young man that it was one thing to come to Weimar as a visitor, when all doors would be open to him, a very different one, however, to try and settle there for a time, which could only lead to disappointment.

Sulpiz was wise enough to take the hint, but he did not allow their friendship to cool down during the year 1812, and he had the great satisfaction at the end of that year to find in the recently published instalment of Goethe's memoirs that the episode of his early enthusiasm for the Strasbourg minister gave the author the welcome opportunity of referring to the revival of interest in Gothic architecture and to find a few words of praise for Sulpiz in this context. Meanwhile the frame of the collection, now displayed in Heidelberg, had grown, and such eminent visitors as Wilhelm von Humboldt and Jakob Grimm, not to speak of a stream of royalty, reinforced its reputation.

At last, in the autumn of 1814, more than three years after their first meeting in Weimar, Goethe's visit to the spa of Wiesbaden provided a convenient opportunity also for a trip to Heidelberg. He arrived on September 24 and stayed till October 9. The visit appeared to be an unqualified success, and a letter written by Sulpiz a fortnight after Goethe's departure shows that he was under the impression to have fully triumphed at last.

Now let me tell you about Goethe. You will have heard that he stayed with us for a whole fortnight, but you don't know as yet that being together for this lengthy time, which was in every respect very instructive and profitable for us, we gained his full confidence and established a very close relationship. There is talk of writing a brief account about our collection, our efforts on behalf of old German architecture, and about the way which led us to these studies. "Confound it," he said to me several times, "the world does not yet know what you have and what you want. We intend to tell them, and since it so demands it we shall offer them the golden apples in silver bowls. When I come home I draw up the disposition that I'll send you for your comment and for looking it over to see what I may have missed, you send me all this and I see to the final redaction. It would be strange if we were incapable of achieving a fine result. It is difficult to write something of this kind, but I know my way about, leave it to me, I return at Easter time and bring it along, then we send it from printing to Mohr and Zimmer." [19]

To realise fully what tremendous impression our picture made on the old but vigorous friend you must know that he had never yet seen a van Eyck and no old German paintings at all except Cranach and a few Dürers. "Oh my dear children," he exclaimed almost every day, "how silly we are, how silly we are. We can't imagine that our grandmother was not also beautiful, those were of a different breed

than we are. Yes, by heaven, their merits have to be acknowledged. They deserve it that Princes and Empresses and all Nations come to pay homage to them." Every morning (except when we were busy with architectural matters) he arrived in the picture gallery at eight and did not budge till lunch time, when everything was reviewed and we had to tell him about all the historical evidence and about our opinions, after which he let us hear his own. He was well satisfied with our calm, philosophical and critical approach to the history of art, and I may say that I learned a good deal from him about the course of art history.[20]

A few days later Melchior reports in a letter to a friend that Goethe intends to write about the collection during the winter and then to return at Easter to revise and to get ready for printing.[21]

It cannot come as a surprise to the reader that these high hopes were not and possibly could not be fulfilled. No open breach is noticeable in the correspondence of the following months, but a note of anxiety creeps in when Sulpiz, having described in a letter the visits of the emperor to their gallery, remarks that however much his collection is praised, people are in need of an authority such as Goethe's and that he should therefore make his own opinions about these works known. In his anxiety Sulpiz repeats the appeal: "Carry out your promise of last year, carry out your promise of last year, you can then do something for German antiquities and for us which will offer pleasures to our contemporaries and bear fine fruits for posterity." [22]

But of course it was precisely this type of publicity which Goethe feared. He still disliked the romantic medievalizers, and he surely did not want to appear as a renegade to his old friends in Weimar who firmly believed in the classical principles of art.

Goethe had arranged to combine the second visit to Heidelberg with a tour of the Rhineland in the company of the Prussian Minister Freiherr von Stein, an idol of the romantics who had been dismissed from the service as *persona non grata* to Napoleon. When the two stood in front of the *Dombild* in Cologne Cathedral, the statesman implored the bystander to refrain from any political remark, because unhappily the great man was averse to all that.[23]

Sulpiz Boisserée who was of the party had ample opportunity to witness such manifestations of Goethe's hardening attitudes towards the creations and the taste of German romantic artists. Open and sincere as always, he sought an opportunity for probing the reasons for this bias by submitting some of his own writings on art to his admired friend, but a letter by Sulpiz of 15 September 1815 shows that Goethe refused to be drawn:

Goethe said he liked my way of describing pictures, only he would not do it that way, because his whole view of art was different. When I asked him what this difference was he first did not want to reply. It was an antimony of their modes of thinking, that could not be helped, it would be useless to try and come to an understanding. We stuck to the subject matter and had to do so, it was right for us, it belonged to our approach, but it was not the ultimate. The minstrel was buried somewhere else (*Der Spielmann sey noch irgend anders begraben*).[24]

We shall see that Goethe's own account of Boisserée's paintings, on which he was to embark a few months later, can serve to explain this cryptic utterance. What he had missed in these enthusiastic descriptions of Christian subjects was the attention to the formal aspects that could be discussed objectively and without gush. No wonder that the second visit to Heidelberg (September 27 – October 7), which was to have enabled Goethe to revise his notes and impressions, proved less of a success than the first. There were too many distractions from visitors, and Goethe lapsed into a depression.

Even so he wrote or rather dictated the piece soon after his return to Weimar and had it published in the journal *Aus Kunst und Alterhum*, where it came out in the following spring.

There is an apologetic note in Goethe's letter to his intimate friend Carl Friedrich Zelter, announcing the arrival of the issue on March 11, 1816:

The little pamphlet "From the Rhine and the Maid, art and antiquities" will reach you soon. I broke it off in the thirteenth sheet, like Sheherazade. Had I recognised the significance of such writings earlier on I would have refused the whole little deal, but I was seduced by and by so let it flow on. In any case I must gratefully acknowledge the fact that without this urgent compulsion I would never have been able to pay attention to the importance of the preservation of the arts through barbaric ages not to the peculiarities of their national and provincial restoration. There is much stuff there that resists our sublimated sensuality and that can only be turned into something by means of rational concepts, for the absurd give us pleasure when we seek to understand it.[25]

If Goethe himself was somewhat noncommittal about his contributions, the Romantics regarded it as contemptible. Thus Dorothea Schlegel, Friedrich's wife, poured out her scorn in a letter on 3 July 1816:

So this is now the diploma of artistic accolade for the sake of which the Boisserées spent so much time tailwagging to the old pagan. And how superfluous! God knows, whoever sees the collection and whose mind is not wholly closed does not need this stamp of approval to realise that the collection is unique in its way. The Boisserées will hardly be very satisfied with this platitudinous twaddle, but they will surely not omit pretending that they are golden words. The old childish man has tried to minimise Friedrich's merits in relation to the new appreciation of our earliest art by not mentioning him anywhere in this whole work.[26]

It can be safely left to the reader, who must be assumed to have the text of the essay (or its English translation) within reach, to judge how far this intemperate reaction was justified, but anyone who reads the account in its original context must feel sympathy for the two collectors who had pinned such high hopes on this publication. Far from being given pride of place, the section about Heidelberg follows after a survey of a good many other cities in the area from Cologne to Frankfurt and Darmstadt. To be sure a few friendly paragraphs are devoted to the two collectors, their intellectual background, and their achievement, but when the reader then expects to be ushered into the gallery he will be presented with a lengthy digression about the fate of art in the Dark Ages. A few pages are devoted to the *Dombild* (which Goethe had seen in Cologne), but strictly speaking only two of the many paintings in the gallery are singled out for description and appreciation, and even these are not so much discussed for their own sake but to illustrate those "rational concepts" of which Goethe had spoken in his letter to Zelter.

It is true that Sheherazade had promised to continue her story, and the brothers never ceased to urge Goethe to keep his promise. It is also true that a third visit which he planned for the autumn had come to nothing as the axle of the carriage in which he travelled with Heinrich Meyer broke, and the two but narrowly missed serious injury. But it cannot be denied that Goethe's theoretical misgivings had won over his personal sympathies and that he virtually let down his friends. If the essay is still worth reading it is precisely for the sake of those "conceptual constructions" which must have been Goethe's own. Indeed there is every reason to believe that this had been one of the points where Sulpiz acknowledged to have "learned a good deal" from Goethe, without, however, fully understanding what he was driving at.

Having given a conventional account of the rigid and mummified style of Byzantine painting which he knew from a few late Russian icons that he owned, Goethe takes a step back and explains the "great

merits" which the style owed to the heritage of the Greeks and the Romans that had been preserved by the guilds.

For when we referred to this style earlier on as mummified we must not forget that even in hollowed out bodies, dried and resinated muscles, the shape of the skeleton asserts its right... The highest task of the visual arts is to decorate a particular interior or to create a decoration in an amorphous space. From this demand derives everything that we call an artistic composition, in which the Greeks and Romans were masters. Whatever is to impress us as a decoration must be articulated, and that in the superior sense so that it should consist of parts which are mutually related to each other. For this to happen it must have a middle, a top and a bottom, a here and a there which first creates the symmetry which can easily be grasped by reason and may be called the lowest degree of decoration. The more manifold however, the elements become, and the more intricate that initial symmetry, hidden, alternating in contrast, confronts our eyes as a visible mystery, the more pleasant will the effect of the decoration be, and indeed it will be perfect when we no longer think of these first foundations but are taken by surprise as if we were facing something arbitrary and casual. It is to this strict and dry symmetry that the Byzantine school always kept and though its pictures become stiff and unpleasant, there still occur cases where the variations in the position of figures confronting each other produces a certain grace...this advantage ...was spread by the Eastern artists and craftsmen over the whole of the converted world.

After mentioning Italian mosaics which he had seen in the "highly esteemed" work of d'Agincourt, Goethe comes to speak of the Netherlands which had equally been dominated by the "Byzantine school."

A general characteristic of the awakening feeling for nature in these regions leads over to what may be called Goethe's masterpiece in Goethe's analytical description, his paragraph on the painting of St Veronica in the collection (figs. 15.3 and 15.4: Cologne Master, *St. Veronica*, c. 1410), "because it can serve in various ways as an illustration of what has been said so far."

Perhaps it will be found one day that this picture, as far as composition and drawing is concerned, represents a traditional type of Byzantine sacred art. The head of Christ crowned with thorns is dark brown, probably darkened by age, and shows a miraculously noble expression of pain. The corners of the cloth are held by the Saint who, little more than a third of life size, stands behind it and is hidden by it as far as her bust. Features and gestures are extremely graceful. The cloth rests at its lower edge on the indicated floor in whose corners on each side there sit very small singing angels, not taller than one foot if they were standing up; they are so beautifully and skilfully composed in two groups that they completely satisfy the highest demand of the laws of composition. The whole manner of thought at work in this picture points to a traditional well-considered and well-tried-out art. Consider the degree of abstraction necessary to present these figures in three dimensions and to symbolise the whole so thoroughly. The little bodies of the angels but most of all their little heads and hands are so beautifully moved and placed in relation to each other that there is nothing to criticise here. If this observation may justify us in deriving the picture from Byzantine art, the charm and the softness with which the Saint is painted and the children are represented demand that we date the execution of the painting into that period of lower Rhenish art which we have already characterised. Combining as it does the twin elements of a strong idea and a pleasing execution it exerts an incredible power over the beholder, an effect to which the contrast between the terrible Medusa-like face and the graceful Virgin with the charming children contributes a great deal.

Turning to the *Dombild*, which, with the brothers Boisserée, he dated a generation too early, Goethe confines himself to the wish that its true merits would be assessed historically and critically, for at present it was "to such extent fumigated with hymns that it is to be feared that it will soon become so

obscured to the eyes of the mind as it was when it was darkened by the soot of lamps and candles.” In any case he places it in the epoch in which Jan van Eyck had already flourished, and so he comes to the artists to whom the complete revolution of art was to be attributed. The reader need hardly be reminded that the Columba altar, from which the brothers and their visitors derived their ideas of the art, was not by the van Eycks but by Rogier van der Weyden, but at least the painting suggested that one of the revolutionary steps was the discarding of the golden background that had marked the Byzantine tradition. As the passionate investigator of the theory of colour, Goethe naturally had something relevant to say about the effects achieved by the “inventor of oil painting.” “Even to mention only the rendering of drapery and of rugs he achieves a splendour of the panel that far exceeds the appearance of reality”: “Indeed that is the task of real art, for our everyday vision is determined by infinite contingencies both regarding our eyes and the objects themselves, while the painter paints according to laws to show how the objects, separated from each other by light, shadow and colour, should be seen in their perfect visibility by a healthy fresh eye.”

In addition van Eyck had mastered the art of perspective and “appropriated the variety of landscape features, especially an infinitude of buildings which meet the eye instead of the meager golden background or cloth.”

But Goethe was obviously reluctant to give unqualified praise to an artist of whom he had never heard and who refused to fit into the classical canon of artistic lands. The time had not yet come for him in which he was ready to proclaim a more latitudinarian attitude in the well known epigram:

But how can ever Jan van Eyck By Phidias' side be set? You must, if my advice you like, Learn each in turn to forget. For if with One we did remain How could we fall in love again? Such is the world, and such is art, That passions come, as passions part.[27]

Being as yet unwilling to forget Phidias, Goethe proceeds to explain his reservations about the doctrine of progress in art, and in doing so he broke entirely new ground.

At this point it may sound strange if we say that, in discarding the material and mechanical imperfections of the preceding artistic tradition, van Eyck also threw overboard a technical perfection that had so far been preserved unnoticed, the idea of symmetrical composition. But this also lies in the nature of an extraordinary mind, that in breaking through a material shell he never considers that beyond it there remains an ideal, spiritual limits against which he battles in vain, to which he must submit or which he has to recreate in his own way. Thus van Eyck's compositions exhibit a maximum of truth and loveliness though they fail to satisfy the strict demands of art. ... In none of his paintings we got to know there is a group that could be set aside those little agnells next to St. Veronica.

And so asking for the patience of his readers, he arrives at the formulation we set at the beginning of this essay, that “any progress from a rigid and artificial state toward a free and vital realism also implies a loss which can only be made good by and by, and frequently not before some time has elapsed.”

There is a curious irony in the fact that this time had actually arrived with the style of Rogier van der Weyden whose triptych had been presented to Goethe as a work by the revolutionary Jan van Eyck. It is by now a commonplace of art historical studies that Rogier van der Weyden harked back to medieval types of composition. As I put it in my *Story of Art*, without, surely, thinking of Goethe's words, “He saved much of the tradition of lucid design that might otherwise have been lost under the impact of van Eyck's discoveries.”

We have seen already that the picture of artistic development in the North worked out by the Boisserée brothers and accepted by Goethe was hopelessly inadequate. But it is precisely for this

reason that one must wonder at Goethe's capacity to extract so profound a truth from such garbled information. One factor we have observed in the making – his reluctance to be entirely drawn to the side of the enthusiastic brothers. He did not want to be one of the incense swingers who were about to obscure the real merits of the *Dombild* and would surely also stand in the way of a just appreciation of the Eyckian revolution. It was part of the critical creed he had absorbed from the ancients that perfection was rare in art. Quintilian is typical there in his review of Greek sculptors: Polyclethus surpasses the others in care and grace, but though he is accorded the prize by many, to avoid nothing being missed they say that he lacked grandeur; while Demetrius, at the end of Quintilian's list, is blamed for having been more fond of realism than beauty.[28] The critic's task, therefore, to look for perfection in the Aristotelian mean between the reprehensible extremes was familiar to Goethe, but the way he turned it into a historical theory was his own. How did he come to conceive it?

All worthwhile criticism contains an element of self-criticism, and a case can certainly be made out for Goethe's having derived his critical insight from an examination of his own past. In the company of the Boisserée he had every reason to remember the days of his youth, his passion for Gothic architecture, and his contempt for the classical rules. As a leader of *Sturm und Drang*, he had thrown the Aristotelian canon to the wind in his play *Goetz von Berlichingen*, which made Herder exclaim, "Shakespeare has quite corrupted you." His slow conversion to classical ideals has been recorded and discussed in innumerable studies. What may not have been stressed, however, is the increasing tolerance he felt for the bugbear of his generation, French classical tragedy. When he went so far, as director of the Weimar theatre, as even to stage Voltaire's *Mahomet*, Schiller, who had experienced a similar conversion after the naturalistic excess of *Die Raueber*, found it necessary to justify this apparent betrayal of earlier ideals in a poem addressed to Goethe.[29] His justification sounds like a pre-echo of Goethe's defence of the Byzantine tradition. At a time of artistic lawlessness, Schiller explains, the French at least held fast to the inherited rules of drama and remained aware of the gulf that separates the realm of nature from the sphere of art. The very artificiality of Voltaire's stilted play could serve as an antidote to artistic anarchy: the value of a tradition, however desiccated, should not be overlooked.

When real art to die appeared resigned,
Wild fancy having all the power gained
The highest and the lowest it combined
In like and on the stage sheer chaos reigned
Only among the French could art you find
Although perfection they had not attained
They held it tight in the unyielding grip
Of rigid rules that it should never slip...
To them the stage is always holy ground
And strictly banished from its festive site
Is nature's raw and unrefined sound
Here speech itself is a melodious rite [30]

In other words: better a mummified classicism than none at all. There is no reason to doubt that Goethe here shared Schiller's view.

These speculations about the roots of Goethe's critical insights must of necessity remain conjectural. What can be documented, however is the influence his analysis had on the budding discipline of art history. In 1827, eleven years after the publication of Goethe's controversial essay, Carl Friedrich Rumohr (1785 – 1842), an almost exact contemporary of the Boisserée brothers, published his *Italienische Forschungen* which may be called the foundation charter of German art historical studies.[31] There we read that "the highest and most indispensable stylistic law of painting ...demands that order and internal relations must be observed both in the composition and distribution of representational and of merely decorative and filling forms and configurations." [32] Having adopted this point of view, it is only consistent that Rumohr expresses the same reservations about Giotto that Goethe expressed about van Eyck. True, he must be praised for his cheerful observations of life, but in developing naturalism he "led to the progressive estrangement from the ideals of Christian antiquity." [33]

The extent to which this re-valuation of artistic values affected the course of nineteenth and twentieth century art appreciation would have to be the topic of a separate study, to be presented to Elizabeth Holt on her ninetieth birthday.

Notes

1. *Aus einer Reise am Rhein, Main und Neckar in den Jahren 1814 und 1815. Goethes sämtliche Werke, Jubiläumsausgabe in 40 Bänden* (Stuttgart and Berlin, no date), XXIX, pp. 235 -332.
2. *Goethe on Art*, selected, edited and translated by John Gage (London, 1980). See also my review in *Art History*, 2 (June 1982): 237-246. The translations in the text are mine.
3. Eduard Firmenich-Richartz, *Die Brüder Boisserée, I, Sulpiz und Melchior Boisseree als Kunstsammler* (Jena, 1916), henceforward cited as F.-R. The translations in the text are mine.
4. *Friedrich Schlegel, Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Ernst Behler, IV (Paderborn etc., 1959).
5. Elizabeth G. Holt, *A Documentary History of Art*.II (New York, 1958), pp. 360-369.
6. F.-R. pp. 63/64. The fragment of an autobiography (undated) was first published by Sulpiz' widow in *Sulpiz Boisserée, I* (Stuttgart, 1862) pp. 15-45. The murals from the church of St. Laurence are lost. A full survey and bibliography of the history of painting in Cologne in the fourteenth and early fifteenth century is to be found in the catalogue of an exhibition at the Wallraf-Richartz Museum, Cologne, March-July 1974, *Vor Stefan Lochner; Die Kölner Maler von 1300 bis 1430* (Cologne, 1974).
7. F.-R., 99-108. The passage quoted is on p. 100.
8. *Ibid.*, 101.
9. *Ibid.*, 61.
10. *Ibid.*, 120.
11. *Ibid.*, 120-21.
12. *Ibid.*, 121-22.
13. *Ibid.*, 122-26.
14. *Ibid.*, 127.
15. For this and the following, *ibid.*, 128-3.
16. *Ibid.*, 144.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*, 148-50.

19. Ibid., 152.
20. Ibid., 206-207.
21. Ibid., 208.
22. Ibid., 213.
23. Ibid., 217.
24. Ibid., 207.
25. Ibid., 229.
26. Ibid., 242-43.
27. "Modernes." See my review in *Art History* 2 (June 1982), 238.
28. Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 12, x: 9.
29. "An Goethe, als er den Mahomet von Voltaire auf die Bühne brachte." (1800).
30. Es droht die Kunst vom Schauplatz zu verschwinden, Ihr wildes Reich behauptet Phantasie; Die Bühne will sie wie die Welt entzünden, Das Niedrigste und Höchste menget si. Nür bei dem Franken war noch Kunst zu finden, Erschwang er gleich ihr hohes Urbild nie; Gebannt in unveränderlichen Schranken Halt er sie fest, und nimmer darf sie wanken. Ein Heiliger Bezirk ist ihm die Szene; Verbannt aus ihrem festlichen Gebiet Sind der Natur nachlässig rohe Töne, Die Sprache selbst erhebt sich ihm zum Lied (The translation in the text is mine.)
31. See Julius von Schlosser's introduction to the reprint 1920(Frankfurt/Main),titled *Carl Friedrich von Rumohr als Begründer der neueren Kunstforschung*.
32. Ibid., 65.
33. Ibid., 273.