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Gratias summas tibi, magnifice rector, totaeque Facultati agere hora et voluntas aequae me impellunt. Non vero sum inscius me minime dignum esse tanto honore. Laudatione audita, oculis demensis stupeo, nec advenit responsum:

Lingua sed torpet, tenuis sub artus Flamma demanat...

Cum autem conspicio turbam istam egregiam amicorum benevolentium crescunt mihi fortitudo viresque. Erubesco sane linguam vestram Hispanicam nescire. Sed iucunda et suavis auribus meis est istae venerabilis caerimoniae sermo. Latine enim fuit iuramentum quod Universitati Vindobonensi iuravi quando dignitatem recepi doctoris, non honoris sed laboris causa. Latine etiam erant solemnitates apud Universitates Oxonii (et) Cantabrigiaeque ubi progressoris munere olim functus sum. Nihil aptius: quoniam ista gloriosa lingua multa per saecula communis et velut universa erat Reipublicae litterarum. Cuius Reipublicae me civem fecerunt benigna Fata. Nam Austriaca patria profugo refugium mihi sodalitas academica Britanniae praebebat, ut Bibliotheca Warbugenis ex Germania iam feliciter translata studia humanitatis me secure persequi concessit. Laborabant enim illo tempore talia studia in angustiis ob fanaticorum insaniam. At nunc, cum de tribulatione nostri saeculi sit disserendum, liceat mihi ad linguam hodiernam transire.

I feel today the Republic of Learning and of Letters is again threatened by the madness that grips mankind from time to time. I speak of the epidemic of extreme nationalism, chauvenism and indeed tribalism that has recently torn whole states assunder and menaces others of Europe and of Asia with disintegration and chaos. Corruptio optimi pessima (the corruption of the best is the worst) - to revert to Latin for a moment. Patriotism, the love of one's country, is surely a virtue, but the pride and arrogance that produces hate and contempt for others is equally surely a vice. It is not for nothing, after all, that pride, superbia, was reckoned among the deadly sins. It is against this deadly sin of vanity, this denial of the brotherhood of man, that my subject, the history of art, should offer an antidote.

Other branches of the histories, such as the history of literature, can be pursued on a narrow national basis, since only those who know the national language can appreciate its literary masterpieces. The language of the arts has rightly been called universal. For all his admiration of the bizarre visual sermons of "Hieronymus Bosch" (Jeroen van Aken, from s'Hertogenbosch), Phillip II of Spain was none the less a fervent admirer of the sensuous glories of the Venetian master, Tiziano Vecelli. I know very well that even our studies have been misused and exploited in the interests of nationalist ideologies, but these tendencies are manifestly absurd. No historian of art would deny that centres of excellence have developed in the past which rightly secured for themselves international fame. But such centres in their turn could never have emerged without contact with practically the whole of mankind.

With your permission I should like to tell you here of an experience I had last year when I was invited to the Italian city of Faenza, a city famous for its ceramic productions, which gave the name of fayence to a very popular type of ware. The circumstances of my visit compelled me to study the history of this centre of excellence, and it was thus that I discovered the global connection of all the

arts. I learned that the type of ceramics known in Italy as Maiolica derived its name from the Spanish port of Majorca. It was from Majorca that the Italians imported the beautiful plates and dishes which we now call Hispano-Moresque, and which were indeed product of traditions brought to Spain by the Moors. Their excellence can be traced back to the Islamic workshops of the Middle East where Arabic craftsman invented the greatest variety of colours and glazes to satisfy the princes and merchants of their region. But what surprised me was the discovery that these beautiful wares, in their turn, had been created in competition with exports from China which were acknowledged to be unsurpassed. It appears that the Chinese kept their secret of how to produce porcelain, a secret that was not lifted before the 18th century. But the very excellence of the Chinese models inspired the Italian craftsmen to equal or surpass them. What they could not imitate – since they did not know the technique – they could at least emulate, and it was this aspiration that produced new forms and new industries. Maybe the creators of Maiolica in Faenza had never heard of distant China, and yet it had been argued that their achievements reached them by a kind of osmosis. Without the glories of Far Eastern pottery Faenza might never have become the centre of excellence of which its citizens are so justly proud.

It should not be too difficult to prove that a similar process of osmosis can be observed anywhere, wherever we examine the great artistic masterpieces of the past. You don't have to be an art historian to know the name and sequence of the principal styles of European art, of Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque and so on. Any traveller knows that there are examples of these styles anywhere in Christendom from Spain to Scandinavia. To be sure, the great cathedrals and palaces created in these styles in various countries exhibit a difference idiom or dialect, as it were, but we would not guess their period if the patrons who commissioned them and the architects who built them had not been in direct or indirect contact with the original creators of these styles. And does not the same apply to the history of the figurative arts? Is not the tradition of sculpture and painting throughout the Middle Ages permeated by the memory of ancient art? Or think of those signal inventions that mark the Renaissance in Europe, such as the development of perspective and the technique of oil painting, and remember how quickly they spread. Their very existence obviously created a demand among patrons which artists all over Europe had to satisfy if they were not to lose their livelihood. There is no local school that did not sooner or later have to yield to their pressure, and no school either never profited from the influences arriving from outside. Need I even mention the name of the master you call El Greco, who left his native Crete and acquired his skill in Venice? Remember the career of that great Fleming, Peter Paul Rubens, who absorbed the mastery of the Italians, and was no less feted here in Madrid than in his native Belgium, in France and in England. Or think of the visual discoveries of Caravaggio and their impact on Europe. To talk of "influence" here may be to underrate the interest of this problem. I know it is far from clear how many of his paintings, or even those of his Neapolitan followers, were known in Spain or in the Netherlands, but somehow the process of osmosis worked again, so that the oeuvre of the two towering masters of the 17th century, Rembrandt and Velásquez, would certainly have looked different without them. What, finally, would Manet have been like without his contacts with Spain – what indeed would the art of our century be without Picasso? In our century the world of art has become a hall of mirrors. Journals and exhibitions see to it that any art student in his first year becomes aware of what is fashionable in New York or in Paris. It seems to me quite natural, perhaps inevitable, that this sway of fashion has led to a healthy reaction on the part of those who wish to preserve their identity. Let them never forget, however, that this very identity will only emerge in contact and conflict, in other words, in the process of choice with which the arts confront them. "No man is an island", said the great English poet John Donne. Certainly no artist ever was an island. Even we historians of art can only do our work by taking cognizance of each other's works and views. By your generous initiative, honoured members of the Faculty, you have made sure that an art historian from distant lands will now be able to profit from his welcome contact with Spanish colleagues. *Quod faustum sit.*

(Translation of introductory passage)

Rector Magnificent, promoted by the needs of the hour and by my own desire, I wish to express my heartfelt gratitude to the whole faculty. In truth I am only too aware of being unworthy of so great an honour. I hear your Laudatio with downcast eyes; dumb-struck, words fail me:

My tongue cleaves to my palate My body burns....

But then, when I look around me and see this assembly of noble and well-wishing friends, my courage and strength returns.

Indeed I must blush for my ignorance of your Spanish tongue. Yet how sweet and pleasing to my ears are the words of this venerable ceremony! For Latin was the language of the oath I swore at the University of Oxford and Cambridge, where once I held a Chair, Latin is the language in which they conduct their ceremonies. Nothing could be more fitting: seeing that it is this glorious tongue which, for so many centuries, was shared by all the members of the Republic of Letters: that same Republic of which kind Fate made me a citizen. For, forced to flee Austria, my native land, I was offered refuge by the academic community of Britain, at the Warburg Institute, happily removed from Germany. There I was granted a haven to pursue my study of the Humanities, studies at that time imperilled by the madness of fanatics. But now, since I must speak of the tribulations of our age, I ask your permission to cross over into the language of today.

This address, delivered by Sir Ernst Gombrich on the occasion of the conferment of an honorary degree at the Universitas Complutense of Madrid, on 28th January 1991, is published here as a personal tribute to professor Jan Bialostocki, who, in the author's own words, was a "most highly esteemed friend" "surely a genuine Humanist."