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**Back from Oblivion**

*Past and Present in Art and Taste: Selected Essays*

by Francis Haskell

Yale University Press, 255 pp., \$35.00

There must be almost as many varieties of art history as there are art historians. Some are concerned with style, others with subject matter, with social conditions, or with intellectual history. Every one of these specialists will find something to read with profit and interest in Francis Haskell's splendid new volume of essays. The iconologist will be grateful for the chapter on "The Apotheosis of Newton in Art," for that on "The Manufacture of the Past in Nineteenth-Century Painting," and for its sequel on "The Old Masters in Nineteenth-Century French Painting." The historian of ideas will be especially grateful for the essay, "Gibbon and the History of Art," with its convincing suggestion that the first history of medieval art, Seroux d'Agincourt's *Histoire de l'art par les monumens, depuis sa décadence au IV<sup>e</sup> siècle jusqu'à son renouvellement au XV<sup>e</sup>*, was inspired or stimulated by Gibbon's Decline and Fall. The connoisseur of style will find much food for thought in Chapter 11, "A Martyr of Attributionism: Morris Moore and the Louvre Apollo and Marsyas," while the social historian will do well to ponder the evidence presented in the papers on "Art and the Language of Politics" and on "Enemies of Modern Art."

Even so, Francis Haskell's variety of art history is entirely his own. He was trained as a historian, and though he may not hold with the wording of the corny schoolboy joke that "geography is about maps and history about chaps," he would certainly endorse its substance. "Any sociological theory of the arts and of taste can," he writes, "only be based on the close study of very large numbers of individual case histories." Four of the case histories he offers center on characters who seem almost too good to be true. There is the Baron d'Hancarville, described as an adventurer and art historian in eighteenth-century Europe; there are Giovanni Battista Sommariva, the Italian patron of French Neoclassic art, Morris Moore, the combative owner of Apollo and Marsyas, the much-attributed painting in the Louvre, and Khalil Bey, the hero of the essay, "A Turk and his Pictures in Nineteenth-Century Paris."

Francis Haskell has brought each of them back from oblivion and made them live again in his eloquent pages. Only one of his subjects has refused to come to life: Benjamin Altman, whose name is familiar to grateful visitors to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York for the generous donation of his collection. The bachelor businessman who started collecting at the age of sixty-four succeeds in preserving his near-anonymity despite the fact that his correspondence with dealers was made

available to Professor Haskell. Almost the same—dare one say it?—applies to the late editor of the *Burlington Magazine*, the unforgotten Benedict Nicolson, that most reticent of men whom even the warmth of his friend's tribute does not quite bring back from the dead. But perhaps it would be unjust to characterize Haskell as a historical portraitist. His aims, particularly in the first three of the studies here mentioned, extend much further.

At a time when "conventional" art history is under strong attack from those who deplore its lack of intellectual content, there may well be something to be gained from looking at the influence exerted by a man whose genuine passion for ideas only rarely met with that critical and yet sensitive response which is always necessary if the subject of art history is indeed once again to become truly significant.

It turns out that "Baron" d'Hancarville, in whose biography this passage occurs, not only had a fertile imagination when inventing aliases or evading his creditors. He never ceased to reflect on the larger issues of art and archaeology, and it is to him rather than to Richard Payne-Knight that we must attribute the discovery of the role that phallic symbolism plays in many productions of early art. More striking still, his suggestion that the history of sculpture "consists of a continuous tension between two opposing forces,... the 'sign' and the 'figure' " can be seen to survive in a variety of forms down to the theories of Wilhelm Worringer.

The story of the remarkable but unscrupulous patron Giovanni Battista Sommariva makes, if possible, even more enthralling reading. Born in 1760 near Lodi in northern Italy, he was said to have begun life as a barber's assistant; he became a barrister and rose during the turbulent years of Napoleon's rule in northern Italy to the position of the virtual dictator of Milan when he made a gigantic fortune and bought the beautiful Villa Carlotta near Como, which is still and rightly graced by several stars in our guidebooks. After his fall from favor, to quote Haskell's stylish account, "he offered a diamond necklace to Josephine, who turned it down, and an extremely expensive watch to Talleyrand, who accepted it." Having moved to Paris he was "a very rich man, but he was a discredited, hated and ridiculous figure" when "he began to call upon art to save the situation." He commissioned works from Canova for the Villa Carlotta and soon enjoyed a fresh prestige in Paris as the patron of virtually all eminent artists of his period. It is in probing the character of these works done for him until his death in 1826 that Haskell comes to the conclusion that "the taste of this parvenu was more 'aristocratic' than that of any aristocrat." In an age dominated by the heroic style of the Empire he went on cultivating the preferences of the ancien régime for the erotic and the idyllic.

The account of Khalil Bey and his patronage stands in characteristic contrast. Through his beautiful mistress Jeanne de Tourbey, who had been educated by Sainte-Beuve, he seems to have come into contact with Courbet, who painted for him that strange painting of *Les Dormeuses*. Once launched on the career of a collector he avidly bought works from nearly all the notable masters of the period, until his gambling debts forced him to sell his collection. Always anxious to be fair, Haskell stresses that we must not overlook the nobler features of this Oriental who was in fact instrumental in introducing into Turkey the more liberal ideas of nineteenth-century France. Chiding the journalists of his day for

the condescending manner in which they typecast him as an Oriental pasha, Haskell makes him emerge from these pages with his prestige enhanced and his reputation rehabilitated.

Even in the case of Morris Moore, who all but dedicated his life to the proposition that he had discovered and owned a masterpiece by Raphael, Haskell manages to enlist our sympathy for an irascible paranoid who made war on the London National Gallery and all the connoisseurs (mainly German) who doubted his claim. To compound the confusion surrounding this picture, it might be here mentioned that a drawing in Venice, which looks like a preparatory cartoon for the controversial panel (and which naturally played an essential part in the discussion), formed part of an early-nineteenth-century collection on which another shadow of suspicion has recently been cast. The German art historian Hans Ost, in a book published in Berlin in 1980, has claimed that the owner of that collection, Giuseppe Bossi, not only forged many of the items but also the alleged self-portrait by Leonardo in the Royal Library of Turin.

In any case Haskell's sympathy in this whole tangled affair belongs to Anatole Gruyer, who bought the picture for the Louvre as a Raphael, though he had secretly come to doubt this attribution in which he had once believed. After all, as Haskell says elsewhere, "art history may not matter all that much, but art does." In his study, "Giorgione's *Concert champêtre* and its Admirers," he fully agrees with the French critic Roger de Piles, who wrote in 1677 that in front of a picture we admire, as in front of a woman, our first reaction should always be the exclamation, "Ha, voilà qui est beau!" It is from this firm belief in the superior values of art that he derives the detachment with which he treats the critical prejudices of the past no less than those of the present.

In his preface the author explains how his interest in what he calls the relativity of taste led him early on to explore the once admired and later neglected stars of the nineteenth-century Paris Salon, only to discover that unbeknown to himself he was part of a "movement" — a movement, it may be added, that has now received the official seal of approval in the new Musée d'Orsay in Paris, in which we are at last enabled to decide for ourselves how far we want to carry the now-fashionable revisionism that would not even permit us to laugh at Bouguereau any more.

It is the merit of Haskell's detachment that he does not go overboard in his appreciation of once-derided masters. Witness his account of Gustave Doré, that astounding talent flawed by overambition whose views of London he discusses in a sensitive essay. The same detachment also enables him to deal without condescension with those favorite salon subjects, the historical costume picture and the illustrations of episodes from the lives of artists, even using modern methods of statistics to plot their rise and fall in the annual exhibitions. Not that he can, or need, suppress a smile; for who, as he says, "would not like to know more about the occasion on which Bramante introduced Raphael to Leonardo as he was at work on his portrait of the Mona Lisa, or Rembrandt with biting cynicism repelled the friendly homage of Rubens"?

But Haskell's investigation of the vogue reveals many interesting facets, such as the emergence of imaginary scenes from the childhood of the old masters, which appears to coincide with the new interest in the art of the child. He also draws attention to the touching image of artistic altruism that is presented in many of these sentimental episodes; it stands in striking contrast to the popular view of the antisocial bohemian. Can this trend have been entirely unconnected with a dream of artistic brotherhood that extends from the Nazarenes to the Pre-Raphaelites and beyond to the abortive association between Van Gogh and Gauguin?

Not that Haskell is likely to be unaware of this connection. As an admirer of eighteenth-century culture he has absorbed to the full Voltaire's dictum that "le secret d'ennuyer...est de tout dire." Indeed in one of his brief essays Haskell carries restraint to extremes. Having traced the popular theme of the sad clown back to the early-nineteenth-century comedian and mime Jean-Gaspard Debureau, he stops short of the immortal embodiment of that role in our century, Charlie Chaplin. Instead he rewards us by hinting at the "strange processes of the unconscious" which appear to favor such paradoxes of contradictory roles like the sacred sinner or the prostitute with the golden heart. One must agree that not even a heavy tome would suffice to say everything on this elusive topic.

There is one subject, however, where we would wish the author to have transcended the essay form—I am referring to his two connected papers, "Art and the Language of Politics" and its more substantial sequel "Enemies of Modern Art." Always impatient of the stereotypes that haunt the historiography of art, Haskell sets out successfully to dispose of the fable convenue that identifies the opposition to artistic innovation with political reaction and the champions of the modern movements with progressive ideologies. The evidence to the contrary he has collected is overwhelming. Especially the second of the articles should become required reading in all courses on nineteenth-century art.

It is all the more a pity that the essay stops short at more recent history when the same tired clichés inspired Stalin and Hitler to wage their nefarious wars on modern art. For the history of these intellectual and human tragedies still holds surprises; how much did Tolstoy's book of 1898, "What is Art?", contribute to the hostility against formalism and elitism that triumphed in Russia? More disquieting still is the pedigree of the slogan of "degeneracy," popularized, it so happens, by Max Nordau, a Zionist still commemorated in Israel, whose book *Entartung* of 1892 was translated into all European languages and gave a specious scientific veneer to the charge of degeneracy which the National Socialists leveled against modern artists.

Maybe we really still lack the distance to analyze the folly and horror of these events dispassionately. But the moment will come when we must ask ourselves how these hostile attitudes toward modern art arose in the nineteenth century and how they came to enlist the power of the police in the twentieth.

One of the reasons must be the changed conditions in which art was produced and viewed in these periods. To put it briefly; works of art were displayed in the salons and in other exhibitions, where they

were expected to compete with each other to be liked. There was an element of the marriage market in the situation in which the prospective buyers had to ask themselves, would I like to live with this work? Maybe the implied question led to a subliminal identification of works of art with people. When Zola wrote that what he seeks in a work of art is a man rather than a painting, he may only have articulated what others felt. To use a shorthand formula, art has become physiognomized. Just as we categorize our acquaintances as sympathetic or unpleasant, describing some as good-natured and others as pompous, so we can adopt an attitude in which we assign to every work of art a character of its own, which enlists our sympathy or arouses our hostility. I would not claim that such reactions were entirely unknown to earlier centuries. The physiognomic difference between Raphael and Michelangelo, after all, was a commonplace, but as long as most works of art had a function as devotional images, portraits, or decorations, this physiognomic reaction remained within bounds.

It was the decline of these functions that must have triggered the switch in approach. An analysis of the terms used by critics for commendation or condemnation would, I think, confirm the increasing frequency of terms with strong moral overtones such as "sincere" or "affected," "honest" or "meretricious." To be sure there are many precedents here in the terminology of ancient critics of oratory ever since Plato accused the Sophists of trickery and showmanship. There can be no exact precedent, however, to the reaction to an unfamiliar language which makes many more demands on our judgment. Just as our intuitive assessment of people's handwriting presupposes a coherent system—we cannot tell if a letter written in a foreign script looks honest or devious—so our physiognomic sense lets us down when we encounter a member of a foreign culture or an entirely unfamiliar milieu. Would we (to ask the traditional questions) allow our daughter to marry him or would we even buy a secondhand car from him? We are really at a loss, but don't want to take risks. Small wonder that the departure from familiar ways and idioms in art sometimes resulted in a reaction bordering on panic. Are we confronted with impostors? Can these artists really mean it, or are they pulling our legs? It is this loss of security that has contributed so much to the rejection of radical innovations as a threat to the well-being of art. If the history of twentieth-century persecutions is any guide, they were also felt to be a threat to our common humanity, a menace to civilization as such.

Magical fears may have played their part in these denunciations of alleged distortion and willful ugliness in modern art, fears that may never lie far from the surface, no further, at any rate, than the disgust felt by the sophisticated for the insinuating eroticism of cheap commercial products. I suspect that these instinctive "gut reactions" have more to do with the fluctuations of taste that rightly interest Francis Haskell so much than do our critical opinions of any artistic performance. One can rationally acknowledge the mastery of a work that one may still not want to have around because it makes one sick.

I would not have indulged in this brainstorming if I were not convinced that there is nobody better equipped to guide us through these uncharted regions than Francis Haskell. If I were as rich as Sommariva I'd commission him to take up the topic of pompier and of kitsch and to advise us where

we should draw the borderline between subjective and objective judgments in these matters. I am sure, whatever his answer, I would exclaim: "Ha, voilà qui est beau!"