

**E. H. Gombrich, Review of John Shearman, *Only Connect...Art and the Spectator in the Italian Renaissance*, *New York Review of Books*, 4th March, 1993, pp.19-21 [Trapp no.1993E.1]**

## **Getting the Picture**

*Only Connect...Art and the Spectator in the Italian Renaissance* by John Shearman, National Gallery of Art/Princeton University Press, 281 pp., \$49.50

A few years ago I visited the Accademia in Venice in the company of a friend, an excellent painter and highly successful teacher at one of our leading art schools. As we were standing in front of Titian's *Presentation of the Virgin*, which covers a large wall, I happened to remark, after a period of silence, how touching I found the lonely figure of the young Virgin standing on the steps of the Temple. "Where is the Virgin?" asked my friend. I couldn't help asking him how he could possibly have failed to recognize her in the very center of the composition, but he assured me that he never looked at the subject matter; what interested him were mainly the negative shapes resulting from the representations on the canvas.

It was hardly a failure on the part of the painter to obey the injunction "Only connect..."(the title of the lectures under review) that was responsible for this blindness. My friend had simply been conditioned to make inappropriate connections to abstract shapes even when confronted with the evocation of a Christian legend. If there are still lovers of art who are similarly conditioned, this book should present a welcome corrective. It is true that the obsession with formal analysis has long given way in art historical teaching to iconology—an inclination, that is, to connect works of art with philosophical symbolism. But this approach has inevitably led to a bias for secular topics and has proved less rewarding for the study of religious paintings, which form, after all, the vast majority of works of art in the Italian Renaissance.

It is indeed to this field that Shearman's book makes the most valuable contribution. His discussion of a group of paintings by Raphael, Michelangelo, Pontormo, and others which represent the Entombment is a case in point. He is wholly convincing when he reminds us that "never in Renaissance art is it more necessary that we read attentively, and realistically, what is described as happening, narratively and before our eyes; and never is the failure to connect as an engaged spectator more misleading." In guiding our concentrated attention to the action that unfolds in these compositions the author has taught us to make the relevant connections and thus to see these deeply moving works with fresh eyes.

The author would never claim to be the first to perform this kind of service to his readers. It was only at the turn of our century, when the term "anecdotal" became a dirty word, that close attention to the subject matter was considered *infra dig*. Though the reaction against this taboo was slow in coming, the author is able to refer to a long list of more recent writings which concern the role of the spectator. (Thomas Frangenberg's *Der Betrachter, Studien zur florentinischen Kunstliteratur des 16 Jahrhunderts*,<sup>1</sup> which contains many relevant texts, obviously came too late to be considered.)

In contrast to some of the authors he quotes Shearman obviously prefers to teach by examples rather than by theoretical considerations. For this is essentially an autobiographical book, in which the author tells of his personal response to some two hundred works of the period that have engaged his

attention during a lifetime of study. The only brief excursion into theory the author permits himself is the proposal to use the grammatical term "transitive" for the kind of relation between the work of art and the spectator that interests him, quoting the Oxford English Dictionary for the definition of the term as "taking a direct object to complete the sense" (etc.). Not everybody will find this application of the term apposite. It is true, for instance, that the word "to paint" in its transitive use demands an object but not an addressee. When I say, "I paint my bedroom," I may speak of redecoration or of an emulation of van Gogh, but in neither case is a spectator implied.

There is a term in rhetoric which comes a little closer to the meaning the author has in mind: it is the term "apostrophe," which was defined by Quintilian (in a speech at the Law Courts) as "the diversion of our words to address some person other than the judge." But apart from the awkward possibility of it being confused with its more familiar meaning as a grammatical indicator, the device does not necessarily imply a living addressee. "Milton! thou should'st be living at this hour" is specifically addressed by Wordsworth to a poet of the past.

It may be useful at this point to step back a little and to consider the topic in a more general context: there are cultures in which the work of art is intended to act as a spell or a prayer addressing the spirit world or supernatural powers; there are also conceptions of art in which each creation is entirely self-sufficient, regarding any outsider as an intruder or worse. Traces of these positions have occasionally surfaced in later centuries, including our own, but by and large the historian of any art is entitled to think that composers and playwrights intended their works to be performed, that authors hoped to be read, and that architects, sculptors, and painters had a public in mind that would appreciate their inventions. It is within this general assumption that we may try to differentiate, however crudely, between the various devices that may serve this universal aim.

Anyone devising a message in whatever medium will first be concerned with its *sensory form*, which allows it to be clearly perceived. Speech and music must adjust to the facts of acoustics, the visual arts to optical conditions. There are notoriously musical compositions in the Renaissance and in our century that disregard this demand, since their complexity is bound to elude the listener, and there are many works, especially of decorative art, that cannot properly be seen by the unaided eye. By contrast many artists have carefully calculated the optimal position from which their work is seen to the best advantage. The sculptor's concern with the best aspect from which his statue should be viewed first comes to mind, a concern which gives way to the aim of allowing the spectator to walk around and to experience the intended transformations. A refinement of this calculation is mentioned by Plato, who tells us that the sculptors take account of the high positioning of their statues by stretching their proportions, which will right themselves when seen from the ground. The calculation of effects due to distance is mentioned by Vasari for sculpture and was a commonplace in the discussion of paintings where the beholder was supposed to step back for the picture to come to life.

In the Renaissance artists must have found that the tricks of perspectival representation that were universally adopted raised as many problems as they appeared to solve. What is the ideal place from which such a painting is to be viewed? Leonardo discussed this matter and in the seventeenth century Pozzo notoriously marked the place in S. Ignazio in Rome from which the illusion that the church has a dome became perfect. A limiting case is the device of anamorphosis which only looks right when viewed sideways, preferably through a peephole. Nor must the alternative trick be forgotten, paintings which appear to move with us as we change our position. Mantegna's *Christo in scurzo* may be a case in point, where the wounds of Christ always appear to face us, to enhance their spiritual appeal. A more sophisticated device was used by Vasari on the ceiling of his own house in Arezzo: he represented Virtue trampling on Envy and, seizing Fortune by her hair, hitting both of them

with a stick; "and what gave much pleasure at that time," he writes in his autobiography, "was that if you walked around the room it sometimes looked as if Envy was above Fortune and Virtue, and then again Virtue above Envy and Fortune just as it often happens in real life."

It may be useful to distinguish these sensory or optical devices from psychological methods intended to ensure the receipt of the "message." What is needed is clearly to ensure the listener's or the viewer's *attention*, a need that admittedly also has its sensory component, witness the toastmaster's ritual call, "Pray silence for..." Without the physical condition of silence, attention would be impossible. Equivalents in music are the loud chords sometimes preceding the first movement of a composition, often and rightly described as "a call to attention." In the visual arts it is the conspicuous frame or other means of isolating the message from its distracting surroundings which serves this purpose. The study of the advertiser's art would reveal any number of further ways of grabbing attention.

Since we are all egocentric, we are more likely to pay attention to a message addressed to us than to anybody else. The rhetorical figure of apostrophe mentioned above has often been used for this purpose. In literature, of course, an address to the reader has been commonplace throughout the centuries, never more effectively than in the epitaph at Thermopylae: "Stranger, tell the Spartans that we lie here in obedience to their laws." What makes this text so poignant is the fact that the reader is asked to transmit the message because the fallen cannot. Religious discourse has always addressed the individual, as in the "thou shalt not" of the Decalogue, but it needs a master such as John Donne to give it new force: "Never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for *thee*." Any number of changes have been rung on this device in literature; it took the wit and daring of Laurence Sterne to precede his account of his own conception in *Tristram Shandy* with the injunction "Shut the door." Needless to say it is again the advertisers who have introduced further variants by "personalizing" their circulars, inserting the name of an addressee for the traditional "dear customer."

These varieties are worth mentioning only to underline the resources of language which the unaided image cannot match. Witness a popular print of the seventeenth century showing four donkeys captioned "Siamo Cinque" (we are five), implying teasingly that the spectator is also an ass.

It may be convenient to distinguish such "framing conditions"—the envelope, as it were, in which the message arrives—from that message's intrinsic capacity to arouse the recipient's *emotions*. Little need be said about this universal concern of all the arts except that the notorious formula "sex and violence" did not have to wait for this century to be discovered. In addition to this universal disposition the sender of any message is also likely to rely on expected personal or topical *associations*, which are bound to vary with the cultural context. Social satire and political cartoons gain their effect from such ephemeral allusions.

This finally leads to the possibility of devising messages with a *selective appeal* which may be intentional or unintentional. Literature, music, and the media have long recognized this possibility of addressing a particular audience. Today there is an obvious distinction in the visual arts between the "comic" and the art one sees in exhibitions, not to forget the refinements in mixing the two. There were no children's books in the Renaissance but Francisco Hollanda makes Michelangelo say that the devotional art of the North is most fit for women.

There was no need for Shearman to observe these abstract distinctions and indeed he appears to have deliberately avoided them. His reference to one of the few theoretical texts of the period specifically discussing a way of ensuring attention almost looks like an afterthought. It is only in a footnote that he quotes L.B. Alberti's *On Painting* (c. 1435):

I like there to be someone in the *historia* who tells the spectators what is going on, and either beckons them with his high hand to look, or with ferocious expression and forbidding glance challenges them not to come near, as if he wished their business to be secret, or points to some danger or remarkable thing in the picture, or by his gestures invites you to laugh or weep with them.

Clearly Alberti here attempts to transpose the rhetorical figure of apostrophe into the medium of painting in a way which reminds one of the role of the chorus or of the prologue on the stage. Admittedly it is not easy to point to a Renaissance composition which literally follows Alberti's advice, though the "chorus effect" is often assigned to bystanders.

Shearman's chosen starting point is another "framing device"—the pleasant conceit of turning the spectator into a witness of the moment when framing *putti* unroll a scroll for him to read. Maybe, however, the author somewhat overemphasizes this device as a symptom of what he calls "a more engaged spectator." He is aware of medieval precedents, but one of them is more than a mere precedence: Giotto's tremendous vision of the Last Judgment in the Arena Chapel in Padua where two flanking angels appear to roll up the whole painting surface, illustrating the passage in *Revelations* (VI14) "And the heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together." Can one really assume that spectators of such scenes were less engaged than those of the Renaissance?

It is in the second chapter, entitled "A Shared Space," that the author turns to the innovation of perspectival illusionism we associate with the Renaissance. Again he appears to be determined to bypass more obvious examples for the sake of subtle observations not all of which are equally convincing. The book by Michael Kubovy, *The Psychology of Perspective and Renaissance Art*,<sup>2</sup> could have reminded him of Mantegna's bold trick of painting a fictitious banister across his fresco in the *Eremitani* over which one of the figures appears to lean—not to mention the most famous example of a shared space in Renaissance art, Leonardo's *Last Supper*.

In the lecture on domes, on the other hand, the author comes fully into his own. He makes a good case for his thesis that even in Byzantine art the image is not wholly self-sufficient and that the figure of the Pantocrator (Christ as the Ruler of the Universe) tends to be placed so as to take account of the position of the faithful. He postulates that those entering the church would most likely look up toward the ceiling before walking up the steps that lead from the nave to the crossing and that it is at this point that the vault is seen to its best advantage. He makes the same assumption for Raphael's mosaics in the dome of the Cappella Chigi in Rome, and for Correggio's cupolas in Palma, convincing us of the risks of studying these masterpieces only from photographs. No reader of this interesting chapter is likely to forget it when visiting these churches, but neither will he be prevented from inspecting the parts of the decoration that were still occluded when seen from the demanded position. One cannot help wondering whether the artist would not have wanted his whole composition to be taken in and admired. Again the author leaves the ordinary difficulties in seeing a ceiling painting on one side. It is generally believed that Michelangelo altered the scale of his figures on the Sistine vault after he had seen the first section from the floor. One would have liked to hear Shearman's opinion about this theory, which raises its own problems. True, he returns to the question of visibility from afar in a later chapter, where he argues persuasively that Michelangelo's *David* must have originally been calculated for a high position.

It is in the third chapter, on portraiture, that we find the author meditating on the psychological conditions of viewing a likeness. His intimate familiarity with Renaissance literature enables him to

quote many epigrams, which speak of the poet's real or fictitious response to the images they wish to celebrate. It is true that many of them ring the changes on commonplaces inherited from classical antiquity—either praising the portrait that "only lacks the voice" or deploring the inability of art to portray the sitter's mind. Witness the lines flanking Shakespeare's portrait in the First Folio:

This Figure, that thou here seest put,  
It was for gentle Shakespeare cut;  
Wherein the Graver had a strife  
with Nature, to out-doo the life:  
O, could he but have drawne his wit  
as well in brasse, as he hath hit  
His face; the Print would then surpass  
All, that was ever writ in brasse.  
But, since he cannot, Reader, looke  
Not on his Picture, but his Booke.

No doubt many of Raphael's or Titian's sitters were familiar with these commonplaces, and the historians should not ignore them, but here as elsewhere we must not neglect the autonomy of literary traditions which tend to take on a life of their own: the same formulas turn up in Byzantine poetry devoted to works of art that look to us anything but lifelike.

Approaching the question of the selective appeal from the side of the Middle Ages also would lead to unexpected results. If we want to believe the theologians, the Church considered visual images as a means of addressing those who were unable to read. We cannot apply this to the Renaissance, but the author's choice of examples leads him to somewhat over-sophisticated conclusions. He wants us to distinguish between Raphael's tapestries destined for inside the choir of the Sistine Chapel from the one he supposes to have been placed outside the screen and was therefore addressed to a less learned public.

This is not the only passage where one suspects that the author is tempted to project his own sophistication onto the unknown members of sixteenth-century society. For if there is one pervasive theme in this book, it is the effort to recover the associations Renaissance masters wished to elicit from their audiences. Here he has not quite freed himself from the assumptions that have sometimes vitiated iconological research. Having successfully argued against political and symbolic interpretations that were made of Donatello's bronze David, he still wishes to confirm the "homoerotic" character of the group by referring to later versions of the theme. Despite the testimony of the Bible he refuses to acknowledge that David here embodies the humility of the victor that so clearly corresponds to the message of Donatello's later group of Judith and Holofernes, originally created also to stand in the courtyard of the Medici Palace. "Donatello's David does not seem humble to me," he writes, ignoring the contrast of the pensive pose with the artist's earlier conception of a swaggering youth. Instead he reminds us that the biblical narrative "offers other possible metaphorical interpretations."

No doubt it does, since a millennium of exegetic literature has "connected" almost any biblical figure with almost anything else under the sun. To quote the introduction to the fourteenth-century *Speculum Humanae Salvationis*, "When King David committed adultery and murder, he prefigured not Christ but the Devil, but when he loved his enemies and helped them, he assumed the figure not of the Devil but of Christ." It is in the nature of associations that they may connect quite unpredictably. One thinks of

Goethe's lines in his *Faust*, where Mephistopheles in his conversation with an aspiring student mocks the logic of the Schools:

Methinks the workshop of our mind  
Resembles those looms of a special kind  
Where the treadle a thousand threads will lift  
While the shuttles are flitting in both directions  
The woven tissue invisibly shifts  
And one move makes a myriad connections.

The historian can never recover the rich tissue of associations that may have arisen in the mind of any individual Renaissance observer. What he can sometimes suggest is the framework of values that were shared by many people of the period. Shearman concentrates on one of these values, the idea of the heroic, which he rightly identifies as an important characteristic of the period style. But no students of the past can overlook the hierarchy of values that dominates our tradition up to the threshold of our own time, the contrast between the noble and the rustic, between honor and low life, chastity and lewdness. The relevance of such general categories to the architectural orders has recently been demonstrated in John Onian's book *Bearers of Meaning*.<sup>3</sup> There may still be scope for extending this analysis to sculpture and painting.

It is in moving from the general to the particular that the author courts the danger of failing to recover original connections. He mostly steers clear of postulating those topical or political references that other commentators have so frequently wished to discover in works of the period, but the connections he seeks by associating individual paintings with their presumed models among classical sculpture or later canonic works also raise serious problems.

We know that the education of artists was based on a study of acknowledged models of excellence, types, and formulas that entered their bloodstream, as it were, and dominated their creations. To an age brought up in the cult of originality, this habit, which pervaded all forms of artistic expression, presents an obstacle. How can we study the practice of imitation without losing respect for the creativity of the masters?

The author's answer to this vital question is somewhat ambiguous. It would seem that he agrees with those who find this search for "sources" contemptible, but he still hopes to redeem it by reinterpreting the artist's undeniable use of precedents as visual allusions addressed to the educated beholder. Not everyone will want to follow him along this slippery path. One example from his last chapter, entitled "Imitation, and the Slow Fuse," must suffice. He may well be right in suggesting that the rich pattern of crumpled folds across the breast of Michelangelo's *Pietà*, deeply channeled by a diagonal strap, is modeled on a Roman statue of Diana. But did the artist really wish therefore that we should associate the Holy Virgin with the pagan goddess because she was also a virgin? Must we think of the difference between the strap with which Diana carries her quiver and that by which Italian mothers carried their babies?

It is the trouble with such connections that they are more easily made than undone. Associations are like gossamer threads; however light they may be, they tend to cling. Perhaps the injunction "Only connect..." is misleading. We want the switchboard operator to make only the right connections. It will be remembered that Shearman triumphantly did so in his earlier comments on the very subject of Mary's mourning over the dead Christ. Is it not a pity that he has here obtruded such erudite

irrelevancies into our experience of one of Michelangelo's most moving images? We writers on art may carry a greater burden of responsibility in such matters than is sometimes realized.

**Notes**

- 1 Berlin: Brüdermann Verlag, 1991.
- 2 Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- 3 Princeton University Press, 1988.