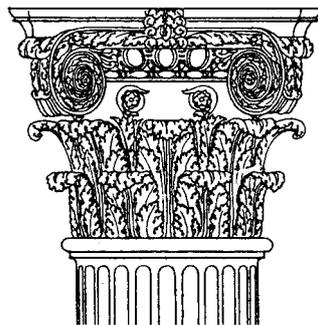


Raising the Eyebrow: John Onians and World Art Studies

An Album Amicorum in His Honour

Edited by

Lauren Golden



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Pictures and Words

E. H. Gombrich

Inaugural lecture, Slade Professor of Art, Oxford, 1950¹

All lectures on art, after all, may be described precisely this - pictures and words - though mixed in different proportions, and so you will expect me to be a little more specific. Of course, you will have guessed what I really had in mind. I want to draw your attention to that fearful problem of the relation of words to pictures - or rather of their relevance. For are not the best words about pictures those that remain unsaid? I expect you know the noble saying of Schopenhauer who advised us to deal with a work of art as we would deal with a Prince - that is to wait till we are spoken to. It is an excellent advice, but it does not always work. One of the reasons, I fear, is that our education sadly neglected its princely language. All our training and learning is predominantly through words. The more intellectual our education, the more we do feed on a diet of printer's ink. And so pictures too often remain mute to us simply because they are painted and not printed and because we have not learned to see. We need words as intermediaries not so much to teach us any secret of art but simply to make us look, to devote more than a glance to those medleys of tones and shapes we call pictures.

This may be a rash thing to say but I hope I can more or less prove it to you. This is a famous picture by Rubens in the Palazzo Pitti. (fig.1) It happens to be one of the few pictures by a famous master of which a description from the pen of that master has been preserved and I am now going to read it to you though it contains nothing but a simple enumeration of what the picture represents. It is, in fact, because of this very simplicity that I have chosen it for my demonstration purpose. The description occurs in a letter by Rubens to an agent who had commissioned the picture for the Duke of Tuscany and who was anxious to know exactly what the subject was. It was written in 1638, towards the end of Rubens' life.

The principle figure is Mars who, leaving open the Temple of Janus (which it was a Roman custom to keep closed in times of Peace) advances with his shield and his bloodstained sword, threatening the nations with great devastation and paying little heed to VENUS his lady, who strives with caresses and embraces to restrain him, she being accompanied by her Cupids and Lovegods. On the other side, MARS is drawn on by the Fury ALECTO, holding a torch in her hand. Nearby are monsters representing Pestilence and Famine, the inseparable companions of war; On the ground

lies a woman with a broken lute, signifying harmony, which is incompatible with the discord of war; there is also a MOTHER with her babe in her arms, denoting that fecundity, generation and charity are trampled underfoot by war, which corrupts and destroys all things. In addition there is an architect, lying with his instrument in his hand, to show that what is built for the commodity and ornament of a city is laid in ruins and overthrown by the violence of arms. I believe, if I remember right, that you will also find on the ground, beneath the feet of MARS, a book and some drawings on paper, to show that he tramples on literature and the other arts. There is also, I believe, a bundle of arrows with the cord which bound them together undone, they, when bound together, being the emblem of CONCORD, and I also painted, lying beside them, the caduceus and the olive, the symbol of peace. That lugubrious MATRON clad in black and with her veil torn, despoiled of her jewels and every other ornament, is unhappy EUROPE, afflicted for so many years by rapine, outrage and misery, which, as they are so harmful to all, need not be specified. Her attribute is that GLOBE held by a PUTTO genius and surmounted by a cross which denotes the Christian orb. That is all I can tell you...²

I hope that this example has convinced you of what I might call the pedagogical value of verbal description. We are all inclined to sweep our eyes across a picture just to take in the general impression. The pedagogical value of words is often simply that they slow down the motion of our eyes and force them to rest for a moment on the spot that is mentioned. This is no small matter. In fact, it is so important a discipline that I would advise any of you who really want to deepen their acquaintance with pictures to adopt this technique of description as a method of practice, just as one practices music, for instance. You need not always do it with a pen in hand but the pen slows you down and that in itself is an advantage. For the same reason it may sometimes be useful and illuminating if a lecturer thus takes stock of the inventory of a picture and points to each figure one by one. But this pedagogical usefulness of words in front of a picture should not lure us into the complacent belief that they necessarily add to our knowledge of understanding. And it is here, of course, that the problem of pictures and words becomes really interesting. At the same time we have to walk warily.

All writing on art, as I said, consists after all on pictures

¹ Ladies and Gentlemen, I think I owe you first of all an explanation of the rather cryptic title I have chosen for this first lecture I have the great honor to give at this place.

² Ruth S. Magurn, *The Letters of P. P. Rubens*, Cambridge, MA., 1955, No.242, pp.408-9.

and words and all the problems of method with which we are afflicted could somehow be subsumed under this head. A catalogue of these problems would help you little. I hope that the opportunity will arise sometime to arrange discussions on them the morning after my lecture. Today I shall be quite content when I can make you aware of the existence of these difficulties and thus turn you into more critical readers of writings on art. For it is really in these two things that I see the main function of University teaching of this kind - we must try to make you use your eyes and your critical faculty. This is at any rate how I should like you to listen to me - as a speaker in a debate which has gone on for centuries and to which, one day, you also wish to contribute.

The first problem, then, as I see it, arises not so much from the nature of art as from the nature of language. It is by no means a new discovery, in fact, it was known, for instance, to Leonardo da Vinci who exulted over it in his famous *Paragone*, the comparison of painting with the other arts. It is here that he says to the poet:

Your pen will be worn out ere it has described what the painter with his skill places immediately before your eyes. Your tongues will be paralysed by thirst, your body exhausted by fatigue and hunger before you have finished to describe in words what the painter shows you in a single instant.³

You see, when I asked you to take a pen and describe pictures for yourself, I really sent you to a dreadful fate. For Leonardo's statement means that a real as distinct from a pedagogic description is impossible; it could never end. Obviously, he is right. Wherever you might want to begin to describe this picture - be it at the marble column with its veins or at the drapery - it is clear that you could go on piling words upon words without ever exhausting a single square inch. If our notion of an ideal description should ever have been a kind of complete inventory, one, that is to say, that would allow us to reconstruct the picture exactly if it were ever lost, the answer is clearly that words cannot do this. It is a trivial observation but one with rather important consequences. All our troubles really start from here. The relation of words to pictures can never be symmetrical, as it were. There is no hope of establishing any kind of complete correspondence, a two-way traffic which would allow us to reverse the process, of translating pictures into words and back again into pictures without loss.

Now it has often been said by practising artists that all talk on art is pretty futile for what can be translated into words is not art and what is art cannot be translated into words. Much as I sympathize with such a vigorous opinion, I think it is important to stress that the primary reason for this has really nothing to do with art at all. If we cannot describe

this picture in words this is not primarily due to the fact that art has some ineffable mystery but that the idea that any individual thing could be so 'translated' rests on a misunderstanding of the nature of language. Language, after all, deals primarily with universals or concepts, words denoted classes of things and qualities, and this is lucky, for if it were not so any language would have to contain an infinite number of words. It is simply due to this structure of language that any particular things will always slip through the meshes of its net. In this sense, any pebble you pick up or any dime in your pocket is as ineffable a mystery as this masterpiece by Rubens.

Every description must be selective. In daily life this selection is made automatically by the function. In the case of the dime we are usually only interested in what it can buy, and we do not look or describe the exact shade of colour that it has. But what are the qualities we should pick out for selection in front of a picture? To some the answer seems clear. We must select that feature that makes it precious to us and leave out the rest. This, of course, is the critic's answer as it was formulated by the great nineteenth-century critic Walter Pater. The aim of aesthetic criticism, he wrote, was to ask "What is this song or picture...to me? What effect does it produce on me?" The critic, in other words, uses his own mind as an instrument of selection and detection of qualities he wants to single out. He turns from a study of the object in front of him to a scrutiny of his own response.

But in a way this only shifts the problem without solving it. For let us imagine that we have stood in front of the original in the Pitti for a long while, that we have peered into our mind and analysed our own reactions that we have savoured it to the full and let it melt on our palate - does this bring us nearer to a solution of the problem how to communicate our response to colour, shape and movement in another medium, in words? There is a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke in the sonnets to Orpheus in which the poet asks the warm and silent maidens to dance him the taste of the orange. It is a beautiful poem and when you come to think of it, the demand is hardly more perplexing than the request would be to describe the taste of the orange in words. Once more the real underlying problem has as much to do with the nature of speech as that of art. For as a matter of fact your plight would be very similar to that of Rilke's maidens. You may know perfectly well how this picture affects you but as you grope for the precise word you might find that there is none.

Now, frankly, I do not think that this should drive you to despair. The whole idea of the *mot just*, after all, presupposes a magic universe in which words are not only conventional counters but really charged with meaning as with a potent force. Just as the magician who pronounces the right compelling spell can produce the effect so the writer of critic who finds the words of power can conjure up the precise shade of meaning.

Now I am not going to tell you that there are no *mots just*.

³ Leonardo da Vinci, *Treatise on Painting*, ed., A. Phillip McMahon, Princeton, 1956, 36.

Anybody who has ever had the privilege of listening to a critic telling of his impressions or of reading the books of such masters of language as, say, Winckelmann or Pater, knows that the words or image can sometimes illuminate. For there is a magic in language - we call it poetry. Somewhere in the crucible of the poetic mind the miracle of transformation does take place and colours and flavours are transmuted into words and rhythms. It rests on a very real experience. In the depths of our consciousness all sensations seem indeed to merge and to become interchangeable. Colours strike us as sounds, sounds have a colour, shapes assume a physiognomy, physiognomies a flavour. In this living centre of our experience where images are born from the seeds of dreams and dreams from metaphors, we seem to find an escape from the logical structure of language. We may find it quite natural to say that the Rubens is like a trumpet call or like a thunderstorm. Perhaps, we even discover that to us it is the exact equivalent of a certain fanfare in Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* or of a thunderstorm we once experienced in Timbuktu. But we do well to remember that any such analogy is private.

The images which crowd the pages of most writings on art tell us a lot about the writer's mind - and if that mind is worth knowing we have much to be thankful for. The great examples of imaginative criticism, Winckelmann's prose hymn to the Torso of the Belvedere or Pater's homage to the Mona Lisa are poetry in their own right. To expect to learn anything from these pages about the Torso or the Gioconda would be as uncivilised as to read the *Ode to the Nightingale* for its ornithological information. But here lies the rub. There is a curious and even tragic discrepancy between the conscientious critic's ceaseless search for the precise shade that hits exactly the right chord and the vagueness of his meaning to others. It is strange how often these fastidious phrases of criticism could be transferred from one work to another without seeming less appropriate. The thunderstorm and the fanfare might do service for almost any picture of some violence, from Rubens to Turner, from Dürer perhaps to Klee. It would be invidious to pick out a real example in public but if you try it at home behind closed doors you may come to discover how trivial the rationale of comparison often remains. When Rilke's girls danced the taste of orange it was, I am sure, a beautiful sight - but not the most perceptive outsiders could have known it was not the taste of the plum they danced.

So here we are back at the problem of addressing the understanding, of talking some intelligible sense about shades, tones and shapes which seem to slip through the mesh of language as soon as we approach them. What can we do? We can, of course, try to improve our terminology. The language of everyday life, as you know, is fairly unevenly developed. We have many more terms for certain classes of experience than for others. Thanks to geometry and perhaps crystallography we have a good many words for different shapes, while our colour terminology, though not as crude as that of the ancient

Greeks, is rather underdeveloped.

In Britain there is an organization called the British Colour Council, which tries, among other things, to remedy this deficiency. It turned out, for instance, that few people mean the same thing when they speak, say, of colours of varying intensity, saturation, brightness or luminosity. The Colour Council wants to achieve some agreed conventional meaning for these and similar terms so that people writing on colours can avoid ambiguities without going into long explanations. It will not surprise you that the initiative for such a standardisation of terminology did not come from art critics but from the technicians in the industry.

I have mentioned this case because the description of colour provides quite a good example of the problems involved in the scientific description of qualities. What the scientist does, if I understand the matter correctly, is that he tries to approach the procedure to that with which he can best cope, the measurement of quantities. Where qualities cannot be reduced to quantities such as wavelength and so on, he tries at least to construct a graduated scale of even progression, for instance a colour table arranged according to the spectrum, against which each shade he wants to describe can be matched so that at least it can be said with assurance that its tone must lie within this and that fixed point.

There have been attempts, as you may know, to imitate this scientific procedure somehow in the discussion of pictures, attempts, that is, to isolate some quality which would allow us to arrange pictures according to some agreed scale - for instance, whether they are more or less faithful imitations of nature, more or less stylized, more or less orderly in arrangement and so on. Some of the best minds of art historians have spent a lifetime trying to work out such categories which would allow us to group and classify pictures according to some such standard of comparison. You can imagine that for certain purposes such terminological conventions prove as time-saving and useful tool as these of the Colour Council. But you will not be surprised that they also have their dangers when handled mechanically.

There is always a temptation to believe that what we have at last learned to describe or classify is really the one thing that matters, the essence of the work. Thus the use or neglect of perspective devices are relatively easy to discern and describe with the result that art was almost identified with the representation or creation of space. Degrees of symmetry or asymmetry can also be easily described and labelled and so our selective descriptions usually fasten on them. As long as these comparisons are used as a pedagogic device, to bring out different possibilities of representation or arrangement they are surely immensely useful for they may draw attention to features which are otherwise easily overlooked. But I think once in a while we should ask ourselves how far these selective description of individual pictures in terms of shapes and lines adds to our knowledge, but this is another of my worries.

In his book, *Die Klassische Kunst* - a really epoch-making work when it came out half a century ago - Wölfflin discussed Raphael's *Madonna del Cardellino*. (fig.2):

It is a composition on the pattern of the equilateral triangle. The contours are drawn with a delicacy otherwise unknown in Florentine art and the masses are balanced against each other on the most sensitive of scales. Why does the Virgin's cloak slip from her shoulder? It is to prepare the bulging outline where the book protrudes, so that the line seems to glide down in an even rhythm.⁴

I am sure you all remember similar passages in books and talks on art appreciation. They usually sound rather impressive. But what is their status? There is not really a triangle here, least of all an equilateral one. What is more, the very idea of reducing the outline of the group to such a crude geometrical figure destroys in a sway that sensitive rhythm of the contour that is to be praised. But it is when I hear the word 'because' that I prick up my ears. Why does the Virgin's cloak slip? Because "it is to prepare us" etc. It is not often possible to disprove this kind of statement but in this case it happens to be easy. For Raphael was fond of this way of draping the cloak and he often used it also when there was no protruding cloak. You find it in several of the drawings. (fig.3) He was also fond of the motif of the 'book', but he did not always balance it with a bulge. (fig.4)

Now I know perfectly well that it must sound like hair-splitting to devote so much time to what is after all a minute slip in a great book but I choose it because I think it illustrates what seems to me the main weakness of this type of formal analysis. It is that it is always made *post factum*, as it were. First Wölfflin had the experience of balance and harmony - had he been a critic of Pater's he would have tried to convey it through some musical analogy. But as his aim was scientific he tried to account for it by pointing to some demonstrable correspondence of forms. But who can doubt that if Raphael had draped the Madonna differently he would have talked with even greater justification of the lovely unbroken line that led from her neck to the tip of the book? The familiar saying that pictures cannot be translated into words remains true on several levels. Or perhaps we should say that there can never be a total interpretation of any picture; if it ever aimed at this, formal analysis would fail as surely as the critic's introspective methods.

This sounds a rather negative result and you may well wonder why I am ever talking or writing about art if I do not believe we can say anything relevant. But I do. And it remains for me in the short time at my disposal to indicate what I think *is* the use of words in relation to pictures. I can put it very briefly. It is to impart knowledge. For if I doubt whether words are very relevant to pictures except as pointers I have no doubt whatever that statements are. I

hold the very unoriginal view that the more we know about a picture and the context in which it was meant to stand, the more chance we have to understand it. I believe this is the view, perhaps the only methodological view to which the Warburg Institute is committed, that research Institute of London University to which I belong. Its founder, the great historian of the Renaissance, Aby Warburg, once put it that his device was '*Das Wort zum Bild*', to join the word to the picture, not our word, that is, but rather the text or document, which illuminates it. I know that this device is open to misunderstanding and that there is a school of thought which believes that if a little learning is a dangerous thing, more learning - at least in matters of art - may be even more dangerous. All the texts and documents, all the historical, biographical or sociological facts which the historian may manage to unearth cannot touch the work of art itself. Indeed, they cannot, but therein lies their strength. They simply provide the setting, the context, and let the work of art speak for itself. Of course, the context may become important in all arts, but the degree in which it matters surely varies.

I want to give you some of the reasons why I think that on the whole a picture is more directly dependent on such contextual factors than, say, a poem or a symphony. One of these reasons has to do with logic, the other with aesthetics. The logical one concerns the nature of the visual image. This is, to me at least, a fascinating subject but one which has hardly been sufficiently investigated. For us here it may be sufficient to say that a picture, unaided by words or by any context, is much more ambiguous than we usually realise. It does not tell us its meaning. We must infer it through outside aids. We are not usually much bothered by this because traditions of types and of usage are so well established that we find our way through these ambiguities without even noticing them. The Rubens you have just seen was not a snapshot of some weird incident but an allegory, the Raphael Madonna not a portrait of a mother with child nor an illustration of how to hold babies, but the Holy Virgin, and so on. The context that establishes the meaning is to a large extent given to us. But as soon as we are confronted with a somewhat unusual image where these aids let us down we find that we are really at sea.

You may know Dürer's print called *The Knight, Death and the Devil*.⁵ (fig.5) Ruskin, the great Victorian critic, wrote:

This plate has usually been interpreted as the victory of human patience over death and sin. But I believe later critics are right in supposing it to be Dürer's often mentioned Nemesis and that the patience and the victory are meant to be Death's and the Fiends' not the riders'.

Actually these critics were mistaken. We now know that

⁴ Wölfflin, H., *Die Klassische Kunst*, 2nd ed., Munich, 1901, p.79.

⁵ I have subsequently discussed this print in greater detail in, Charles Singleton, ed., *Interpretation, Theory and Practice*, Baltimore, 1969, "The evidence of images", II.

Nemesis was the name of another print. But this only underlies the importance of outside aid. An historical theory changed the character of the print for Ruskin. In a way the ambiguity has not yet been resolved. For the image represents a simple juxtaposition of figures: A knight, or rather a horseman, for whom Dürer used an old study of a *landsknecht*, and the two apparitions. We may see him as the undaunted knight who knows no fear of death or hell and as a symbol of such daredevilry the print was actually dear to National Socialist propaganda. It was Göring's bookplate and Goebbels invoked the picture of the fearless knight when he wanted to whip up German resistance. But of course Ruskin's second reading is not contradicted by the picture either. In fact, one may well ask whether the idea that the knight disregards death and the devil is at all what Dürer could have had in mind as a good Christian. Should he not rather think of them all the time? Is not the image meant as a *memento mori et diaboli* all the more poignant because the knight's armour is of no avail against them? Perhaps both these interpretations go too far, perhaps Dürer meant the man in armour to represent the *equus Christianus* on his perilous journey and leave the issue in the balance. But what matters to us is that the image alone will never tell us. Not even the expression on the knight's face. On the contrary. You will find that the expression changes from proud defiance to wickedness according to the interpretation you adopt.

We must search for a wider context in the texts of the time to solve the dilemma, if indeed we can ever solve it. And one more thing: If the figures would but move we would soon see the outcome of the context. Thus, while the lack of syntax, as it were, the way in which the visual symbols are linked, puts the image at a disadvantage vis à vis the verbal statement, the absence of the time element deprives it of that development which gives meaning to music.

The second aesthetic reason for the importance of the context in the visual arts I should like to demonstrate briefly by means of a slightly more frivolous example which has, however, its serious side. I mean the *cause célèbre* of the world of art, the Van Meegeren forgeries.⁶ I call it frivolous mainly because the public shows great interest in it, but frankly I think the public is right and that the art experts who disparage this interest as mere sensation-mongering are not. If art history and aesthetics have nothing to learn from such resounding failure, when could they ever learn?

The facts are these: This painting of *Christ and the Disciples in Emmaus* (fig.6) was published in the Burlington Magazine in 1937 by the greatest authority on Dutch art then living, the late Professor Bredius, who had the discovery of several great paintings by Vermeer to his credit. He wrote:

It is a wonderful moment in the life of a lover of

art when he finds himself suddenly confronted with a hitherto unknown painting by a great master, untouched...just as it left the painter's studio... .

He calls it *the* masterpiece of Vermeer, quite different from all his other paintings and yet every inch a Vermeer:

The expression is wonderful, expression indeed is the most marvellous quality of this unique picture...In no other picture of the great master of Delft do we find such sentiment...a sentiment so nobly expressed through the medium of the highest art... .

Bredius' enthusiasm was catching. He himself not only urged that the picture must be preserved for the nation but even advanced part of the enormous purchase sum of 200,000 pounds. It went to the Beuymans Museum of Rotterdam. A German critic wrote that when it was exhibited the crowds, which flocked to the room where it was, fell silent as a chapel. The picture was discussed and praised in all subsequent books on Vermeer and though it is now said that there were dissentient voices they certainly did not appear in print. I suppose I ought to add that I never saw the painting but that I certainly adopted Bredius' opinion.

You may know what followed. During the war a number of similar but much cruder paintings turned up on the market and one of them was bought by Göring. After the war the dealer who had sold it was arrested as a collaborator and since the name of a certain painter Hans van Meegeren was found among he files he, too, was arrested, though actually he had nothing to do with that particular deal. In prison Van Meegeren lost his temper and boasted to the authorities that it was he who had painted the famous Vermeer at Beuymans. He was at first not believed but he produced convincing proof, not only by painting a work of similar character under supervision but, by telling exactly what old canvas he had used for the forgery and what traces of an old picture an x-ray would therefore reveal. A well-known monograph on Vermeer had to come out in what malicious people called a second and greatly reduced erudite edition.

Now we all enjoy the deflation of experts - but what has this story to do with pictures and words? I think it does because you often hear the argument that aesthetically it should not make any difference whether the painting is by Vermeer or by Van Meegeren. If it is a great aesthetic achievement when labelled Vermeer, it should remain so when labelled Van Meegeren - that was, of course, also how the forger argued. When I said that knowledge of the context is relevant, not only logically for the establishment of meanings but also aesthetically for the assessment of value, I meant that in my opinion this argument, however plausible, is not valid. I think on the contrary that the simple verbal statement: this painting is by Van Meegeren, the attribution in other words, does transform the picture in

⁶ Cf. P. Coremans, *Van Meegeren's faked Vermeers and de Hoghs*, London, 1949.

front of us by changing the historical context.

Just imagine for a moment the absurd eventuality that both Bredius and Van Meegeren would be proved wrong, that some sensational but irrefutable document would turn up which would prove *beyond* a shadow of a doubt that the painting was, in fact, painted by Giotto in the fourteenth century. It simply would be the greatest miracle known, for not only would such a discovery transform the picture itself, but at a blow the whole of Giotto's art. What seemed a matter of style and inner compulsion would turn out to have been a matter of deliberate choice. We would see that Giotto usually rejected the naturalism and sentiment of the picture by an act of free decision, much as, say, a modern artist does, and this proof would transform the aesthetic function of its forms. But however absurd such a mental experiment may be, it is, of course, only a magnified parody of what actually happened when the painting was attributed to Vermeer.

The initial mistake of Bredius was one of historical scholarship. Once you granted this premise the conclusion, that this painting revealed quite a new aspect of Vermeer, that it was unique in the seventeenth century and all that, was perfectly correct. If Vermeer, the painter of calm, serene genre scenes had painted this picture charged with sentiment it would be moving - for we know him not to be a sentimental artist, we have learned to trust his integrity and restraint. In this sense the name of Vermeer on the label means to us that we are in the presence of a genuine religious feeling and that we are not being had on the cheap. There is in the appreciation of art something akin to what psychoanalysts call 'transference'. We are not ready to surrender ourselves to everything and everybody. We must first establish a bond of confidence that we may respond to the suggestion and guidance of the work without needing to be ashamed as we are when we come out of a tearful film. Call it snobbism or suggestibility if you like, but there is a little more in it than only that.

For now I have a shock in store for you: Two authentic Van Meegerens that he published under his own name. I am sorry to have to desecrate this screen with this pretty nauseating trash but I need it for the sake of this very argument. You see, Van Meegeren was a semi-pornographic sentimentalist with a certain knack for drawing. In a time like ours when, rightly or wrongly, mere representational skill counts for nothing in art, when the artist is expected to express his feelings or dreams - he did so, with a vengeance. Had he lived in a century with a firm tradition, which prescribed to the artist his subject matter and the mode of its treatment, he would not have been a Vermeer but quite a respectable artist, perhaps a Metsu. His despair about the modern concept of art, which disregards what he could do and demands what he could not, his hatred of the present art world, was quite justified. He was a misfit, he himself demanded a different context. And yet, when we return from his authentic work to the forgery we see it in a different light. You see what would

have been an utmost exertion of religious fervour for the restrained and manly Vermeer was the deliberate damping of his sentimentalism by Van Meegeren in the interest of deception. Once you change the frame of reference the whole aesthetic value changes - which may be summed up in the Latin proverb '*Si duo faciunt idem, non est idem*'.

For consider yet for a moment the implications of Van Meegeren's masterstroke. For some time there had been vague talk among art historians that the realism of Vermeer might be explained by his acquaintance with Caravaggio. Van Meegeren supplied the longed for evidence and this was indeed the bait by which he hooked us. The composition of the Disciples recalls that of several Caravaggios. I show you here one from the Royal Collection, though he may have combined several models. (fig.7) Now, if Vermeer had really performed such a transformation of Caravaggio's composition, if the evidence that he knew and studied these violent pictures were genuine, it would mean that it was from these that he distilled the deliberate calm and restraint of the Disciples. Clearly, such a renunciation of loud effects, such an act of choice would mean a great deal, it would throw light on the artist's whole outlook and would perhaps have been as impressive and expressive as, say, the late Rembrandt's deliberate renunciation of external dramatics. But if it was Van Meegeren who merely adapted a Caravaggio composition to please the experts - the relationship is merely expressive of his slickness.

But the relevance of the context goes beyond such general interpretation. It changes the actual expression we see. Take the *Head of Christ* (fig.6) on the Van Meegeren which was the object of much fine writing. A well-known art historian wrote quite correctly that it had no parallel in the whole of Dutch art, not even in Rembrandt's oeuvre. "The covered eyes give Christ the expression of deep inwardness." "Behind these closed eyes" - writes another - "there lies a deep secret, the experience and awareness of things momentous and mysterious."

But if you put the head in the context of *other Van Meegerens* (figs.8 & 9), other forgeries and the ghastly Mother you just saw, you will find that the expression changes without any more words. These closed eyelids do not hide any mysteries. They are the variations of an endless Frankenstein mask which re-occurs under different titles in Van Meegeren pictures. (fig.10) If they are expressive of anything they express the soul of a fraud who cannot look into your eyes. You see how far wrong the pathetic attempts of these writers went to translate the expression into words, and how easily it is put right through the simple verbal statement that this is a forgery by Van Meegeren. Which brings me back to my formula that while pictures cannot be translated into words, words cannot contribute in countless ways to the restoration of the original context.

You may wonder whether I am not overworking this point, for in practice the importance of the historical context has

always been recognised. But I thought it might be necessary to re-affirm this belief on a slightly more theoretical level, for the aesthetics of recent years have tended to undermine our belief in the relevance of historical facts. The aesthetic creed of Croce, above all, has come to insist on the insularity of the work of art, on its uniqueness and isolation from all other spheres of life, and, as a collateral, on the aesthetic irrelevance of anything outside the work itself. Art, to this creed, belongs to the sphere of pure expression with the effect that each work of art is really incommensurable and unapproachable except through intuition. I hope I have done justice to what seems to me valuable in this point of view, when I insisted on the impossibility of a total interpretation of any work of art. But Croce's idea of expression as an irreducible quality and independent sphere seems to me to be the cause of much misunderstanding and vague talk which has seeped into the general jargon.

I do not think that this idea of expression as an irreducible message from soul to soul can help us much. Even in daily life the meaning of expression depends on our reading of the situation, our knowledge of conventions. The same smile that can be extremely moving in one circumstance, may, of course, be a mere empty grin in another or just a conventional mask. It is only against the background of known situations and conventions that the actions and reactions of people become meaningful in daily life, no less than in art and history. The most striking example of this interaction between convention and expression seems to me always the understanding of music. Where we lack the background, as with Oriental music, we cannot tell if the tune is sad or gay, martial or religious. By contrast we understand what is called the expression in western music, because we approach it with a frame of reference, a firm set of expectations which can be either fulfilled or disappointed in a myriad of expressive ways.

The purpose, then, of my Van Meegeren digression was to explain my belief that the visual arts, too, are more governed by such situational and conventional factors than is sometimes allowed for in theoretical discussions. In each period and every society the man who looks for or commissions a work of art approaches the subject with a certain set of expectations. They are the result of what he has seen before. In the late Middle Ages this expectation found even expression in legal practice. It was quite usual, when commissioning, say, an altar painting, to insert a clause in the contract saying that what was wanted was the kind of thing that had been done by another painter in the neighbouring parish ten years before. This is just one instance of what I might call the Institutional element in art. All art lives in such an institutional framework; portrait, caricature, landscape or still life could be described as such institutions. It is in the way the artist lives up to or modifies the expectations, the way he reacts to the institutions, conventions and traditions of his environment, that much of what we call expression resides. But if I am right there, if all these factors I have called contextual really matter, then, of course, words have a

greater theoretical chance of being of use. For as I said, institutions and traditions have one useful quality for us - they concern universals, they can be talked and reasoned about, argued about and checked through documents. Here the work of interpretation simply merges with that of the historian - which means to say that as our records are incomplete, we can never achieve finality in our reconstruction of contexts, that we can never complete the interpretation of a work of art, but that we have at least a good many means at our disposal to eliminate wrong interpretations and check flights of uncontrolled fancy.

Here, then, is a thing that words can certainly do. They can remove wrong contexts, cut out misunderstandings and by eliminating false responses clear the path for better ones. All this may be called peripheral. It does not touch the core of a work of art. Thank God it does not. No one can tell us what a work of art really means because the word meaning is only metaphorically applicable to the totality of a picture. Its subject may have a meaning, its relation to other works may - for instance, it may be a parody - have a private meaning to the artist or to the patron, but the picture as a whole and unrelated means nothing but itself.

The dream of art as a kind of universal language, which bridges the centuries and speaks immediately to our understanding without the tiresome intervention of knowledge and convention is - a dream. True, art can give us the precious illusion of such immediate understanding, of such communion of minds, for once we know the background, once we have the framework we may and must forget it and surrender ourselves completely to the work itself. We do not think of syntax when we hear Mozart. And yet it is important to remember that as long as we are here on earth we are not disembodied souls who read others minds without the intervention of matter. That to us mortals even a faint glimpse of understanding is only given at the price of honest, prosaic work.

I apologize if this sounds a little priggish. But it is again worry which drives me to underscore the need for work if we do not want to lose the understanding of our artistic heritage altogether. Many of the contexts in which these works grew are slipping away from us. The number of people who cannot tell what a classical scene, even an episode from the gospels is illustrated in the great works in our museums, is increasing daily. The idea that all this does not matter, that you can enjoy the works of art without understanding their cultural context is all the more alluring. Sure, you can enjoy them - just as you can enjoy a mountain scenery or a sunset. But if you want to understand what the artist wants to say you must learn the language of his age and nation. Learning languages needs sweat and toil. In the case of art it needs a good deal of unlearning of our own languages and conventions. But if, at the end of this toil, you feel that you have even moved an inch nearer to what a genius such as Rembrandt meant, you may find that it was worth the effort.



Fig.1. Rubens, *The Horrors of War*, Palazzo Pitti, Florence



Fig.2. Raphael, *Madonna del Cardellino*, Uffizi, Florence



Fig.3. Raphael, *Studies of the Virgin and Child*, British Museum, London.



Fig.4. Raphael, *The Solly Madonna*, Staatliche Museum, Berlin



Fig.5. Dürer, *The Knight, Death and the Devil*

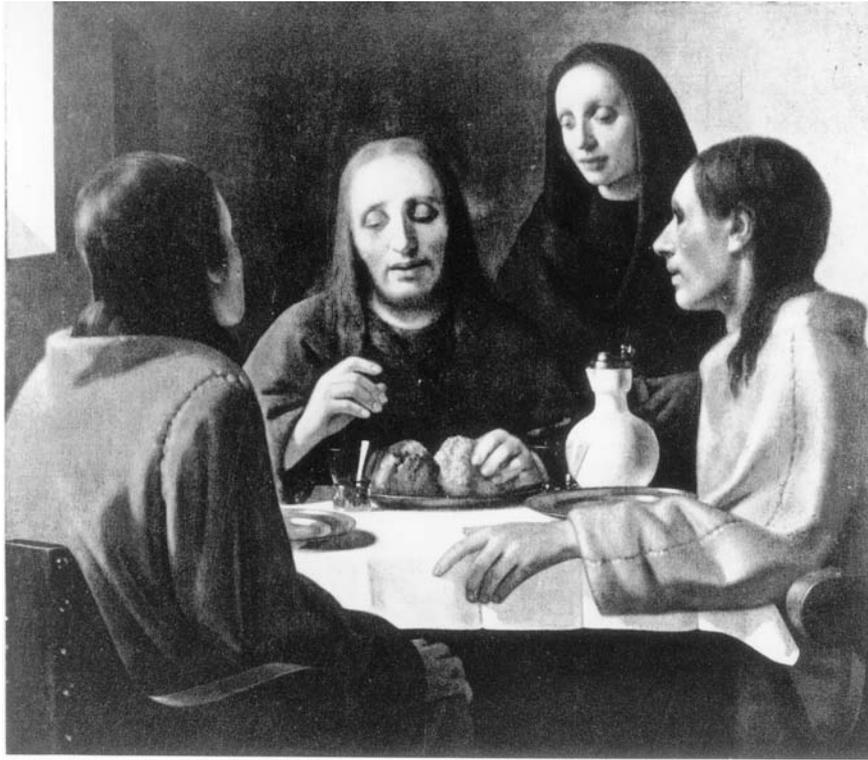


Fig.6. Van Meegeren, *Christ and the Disciples in Emmaus*, Beuymans Museum, Rotterdam



Fig.7. Carravagio, *Disciples at Emmaus*, National Gallery, London



Fig.8. Van Meegeren, *Mother and Children*, (drawing)

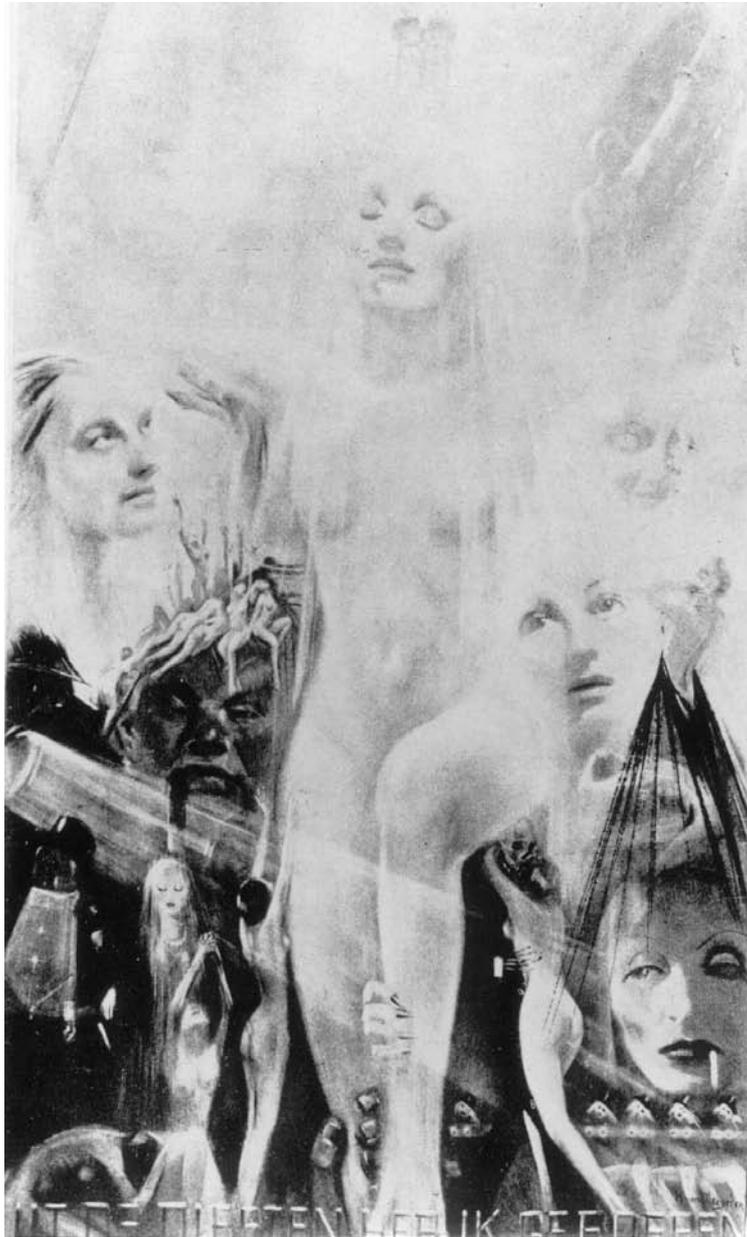


Fig.9. Van Meegeren, *I have summoned up the depths*

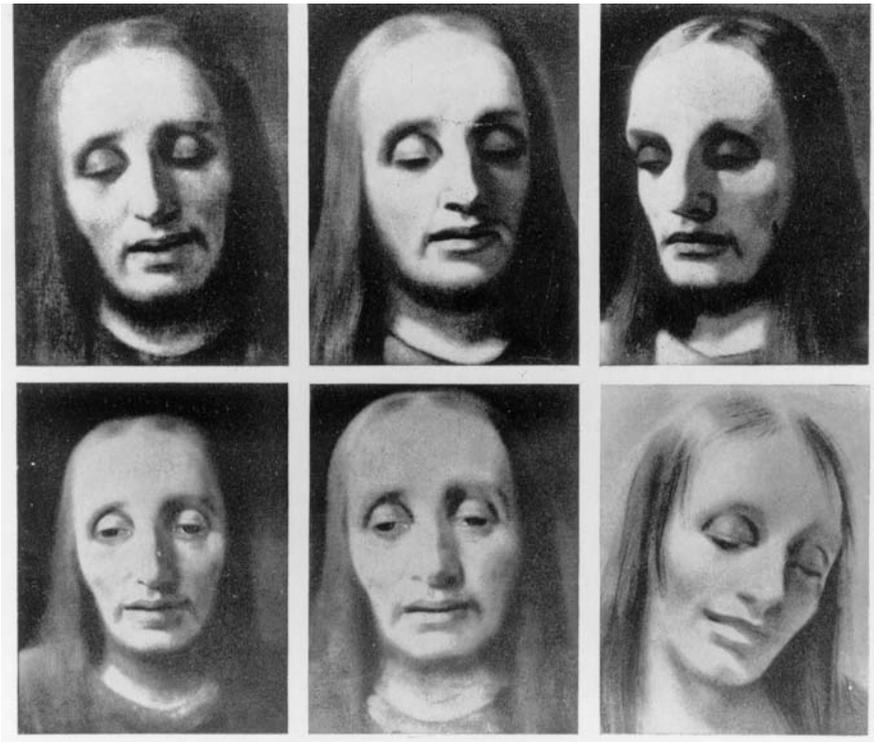


Fig.10. Comparison between the heads of Christ in the faked paintings [From left to right, and from above downwards: 'Disciples at Emmaüs', 'Woman taken in adultery', 'Washing of the feet', 'Bust of Christ' and 'Last Supper'] and the head of the mother in the drawing 'Mother and Children'

