

**Meaning
in the Visual
Arts:
Views
from the
Outside**

A Centennial
Commemoration
of Erwin Panofsky
(1892–1968)

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Contents

Preface	ix
A Note on the Frontispiece	x
Panofsky's History of Art IRVING LAVIN	3
Meaning in the Visual Arts as a Humanistic Discipline DAVID SUMMERS	9
ANTHROPOLOGY	
Introduction SHELLY ERRINGTON	27
Panofsky and Lévi-Strauss (and Iconographers and <i>Mythologiques</i>) . . . Re-Regarded JAMES A. BOON	33
Making Things Meaningful: Approaches to the Interpretation of the Ice Age Imagery of Europe MARGARET W. CONKEY	49
Re/Writing the Primitive: Art Criticism and the Circulation of Aboriginal Painting FRED MYERS	65
Myth and Structure at Disney World SHELLY ERRINGTON	85
HISTORY	
Introduction ANTHONY GRAFTON	109
Something Happened: Panofsky and Cultural History DONALD R. KELLEY	113
Panofsky, Alberti, and the Ancient World ANTHONY GRAFTON	123
"Item Perspectiva ist ein lateinisch Wort, bedeutet ein Durchsehung": A Reformation Re-Vision of the Relation between Idea and Image KRISTIN E. S. ZAPALAC	131

Preface

The papers published in this volume are the permanent record of a symposium held at the Institute for Advanced Study October 1–4, 1993, to commemorate the centennial of the birth of Erwin Panofsky (1892). The chronological discrepancy may reflect indirectly a certain time warp that is perhaps endemic to this institution; but the delay is a direct result of the fact that the building in which we gathered, Wolfensohn Hall, was under construction during 1992, and we thought it convenient as well as appropriate to wait until this splendid new facility was completed.

By a perverse kind of logic one might think of our symposium as a happy outcome of one of those unlikely historical events that Panofsky liked to call "accidents on the highways of tradition": I refer to the coincidental advent of the Nazi terror in Germany, and the foundation of the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton. The collision of those two diametrically opposed forces made it possible for some of the most creative minds of the twentieth century to work out their lives and develop their full potential under ideal conditions. Having been dismissed as a Jew from his professorship at the University of Hamburg, Panofsky, already famous in the scholarly world, immigrated to America in 1933; in 1935 he received one of the first permanent appointments in the nascent School of Historical Studies at the Institute. When he died in 1968 he left not only a great legacy of classic publications on an amazing variety of subjects, but also what might well be regarded as a new field of the humanities masquerading under an old name. No longer the narrow province of an elite band of specialists, of only anecdotal interest to "serious" scholars in other fields, art history had become fair game for anyone with the imagination to perceive the depth and breadth of the contribution

of visual artists to the content of human culture. By now, few serious historians or social scientists neglect to consider visual culture in one form or another. I believe this profound change is due in good measure to the enormous influence of Panofsky, and in particular to his own method of explicating works of art by reference to other contexts, such as philosophy, literature, theology, and science. In this way, he showed that works of art are in turn relevant to those fields, as well.¹

In recent years there has been a veritable flood of interest in Panofsky, and the literature on his ideas and scholarship is growing by leaps and bounds (I am not aware that anyone has yet undertaken a full-scale biography, but that will surely not be long in coming). Even so, the importance of his work as a stimulus in other fields has been surprisingly neglected. I therefore thought it might be interesting and appropriate to commemorate Panofsky's centennial by exploring some of the vast extraterritorial domain he helped discover. Hence the dual theme of the symposium: *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (this was his own phrase for his principle mission in life and the title of one of his most influential books, a volume of essays in which he sought to define how the visual arts convey meaning—intellectual sense, not just aesthetic pleasure—as no one had before);² and *Views from the Outside*.

The papers, in great majority by representatives from disciplines other than art history, illustrate how thinkers whose primary goal is to elucidate non-visual subjects perceive the relevance of the visual arts to their purpose. The point was not to eulogize Panofsky, but rather to address the problem of visual signification that he posed as an 'art' historian, from the different perspectives of other disciplines for which his work was a stimulus; one paper in each section considers

Panofsky's own work in that light. Many important subjects have been reluctantly omitted—I am particularly pained by the absence of philosophy. On the other hand, special concessions have been made to two of Panofsky's own special interests: the History section has been devoted to the Renaissance, Panofsky's trademark subject, and Film has been included because Panofsky's seminal work in that field—a single, brief essay—is relatively unknown to non-specialists. The composition of each section was worked out in close consultation with the chairpersons, deliberately keeping the number of professional art historians to a necessary minimum: David Summers, who writes about Panofsky's own concept of meaning in the visual arts, is really half a philosopher, anyway; Martin Kemp was the only historian we could think of who could cover the range of Panofsky's interests in the history of science. (In an unpublished lecture titled "What is Baroque?," which I revived for the occasion, Panofsky spoke for himself.³) Three other distinguished art historians in turn give us their views of our proceedings as commentators-at-large: Horst Bredekamp, Willibald Sauerlaender, and Craig Smyth. I count our fourth commentator, Carl Schorske, as at least an honorary art historian, with a special interest in cultural history.⁴

I first broached the idea for a commemoration of Erwin Panofsky with the faculty of the School of Historical Studies, who demonstrated their collegiality with their official *nihil obstat* and personal encouragement. The Director of the Institute, Phillip Griffiths, responded to my proposal immediately and enthusiastically, allowing his staff to expend enormous amounts of time and energy to bring it to fruition. The Associate Director, Rachel Gray, and the Public Relations Assistant, Ann Humes, have borne with perfect grace a double burden: that of preparing and pursuing every detail, from fund-raising to dinner menus; and that of dealing through it all with a cantankerous, demanding and aging art historian/organizer who is forever grateful to them. I feel personally indebted to the participants in the

symposium; I have badgered them aplenty, but I hope and trust that, all having been said and done, they feel their efforts have been worthwhile. Elizabeth Powers has been most kind in representing Princeton University Press, and Timothy Wardell has been most able and patient in editing the texts and shepherding the work into print.

The symposium and publication were made possible financially by generous grants from The Arcana Foundation, Inc., The Gladys Krieble Delmas Foundation, and Emily Rose and James H. Marrow.

A Note on the Frontispiece

The splendid portrait of Panofsky that serves as the frontispiece of this volume was commissioned from Philip Pearlstein in 1993 and is now installed in the Institute's library of the Schools of Historical Studies and Social Science. Although not yet very old, the portrait already has an interesting history, because it resulted from another of those Panofskian accidents, this time involving a collision of at least a half-dozen vehicles of history. First, in 1964 one of the Institute's Trustees, Harold Lindner, gave a modest sum for art for our library, in memory of Senator Robert Lehman. Evidently long forgotten, the existence of the fund was very kindly brought to my attention some years ago by our librarian, Elliott Shore, but it proved devilishly difficult—the second coincidence—to hit upon an appropriate and really first rate work for the amount available. The difficulty was in fact providential because—the third coincidence—the money was still there when Panofsky's centennial approached and the idea, which seems inevitable in retrospect, dawned on me that it would be singularly appropriate if we could obtain for the centennial of one of the leading art historians our time, a portrait by one of the leading artists of our time. That artist, Philip Pearlstein, was also inevitable and providential. Pearlstein had already done a double portrait of



Figure 1. Snapshot of Erwin Panofsky

two leading American art historians, Linda Nochlin and Richard Pommer, and a portrait of Panofsky by him would stand in the grand tradition of Max Liebermann's portrayal of Wilhelm von Bode, and Oskar Kokoschka's painting of Hans and Erika Tietze. A fourth coincidence, probably not altogether unrelated to the third, was that Philip and I have known each other for more than forty years, ever since we were graduate students together at the Institute of Fine Arts in New York, where we both heard—and this is the fifth coincidence—the lectures of none other than Erwin Panofsky, who taught there regularly. I telephoned Philip and made him an offer which, under those circumstances, he could hardly refuse. What came as an astonishing surprise, however, was that instead of producing a modest little sketch or drawing, which is all I expected

at the agreed price, Pearlstein made a grand and labor-intensive painting.

Pearlstein's unusual artistic generosity was matched by an equally unusual scholarly generosity. Besides his own memories of Panofsky, he based the portrait on several snapshots I sent him, some of which were kindly lent by Gerda Panofsky (fig. 1).⁵ Well-trained art historian that he is, when he finished the picture Pearlstein sent me the following documentary letter describing his working procedure, along with several slides:

May 1, 1993

Dear Irving,

Enclosed is the original slide, my painting and the studio set-up crudely improvised—I suspended a piece of transparent vellum from an old canvas-stretcher frame that is leaning against an unused easel, onto which I projected, from the rear, the original slide which then became my "model." (fig. 2) I tried to paint as if from a still-life. Projecting the slide this way allowed me to keep on the usual studio lights I work with. You can see that I re-positioned the hand holding the eye glasses, to compress the composition, and as I told you, I painted the details of the hand from my own hand as a model—there simply wasn't enough detail in the photo—and my hand is just as pudgy as Panofsky's! Thanks for the opportunity to do this.

Yours,
Philip

The artist's use of the word compression is a dead giveaway, for by this device he transformed the snapshot into a modern, Philip Pearlstein version of those powerfully analytical and evocative portraits by Early Netherlandish painters like Jan van Eyck. In fact, with its close-up view, body and arms hidden below the frame leaving visible only the hand with fingers holding a personal symbol (eyeglasses for the scholar), the portrait of Panofsky is reminiscent of the so-called *Man with a Pink* in Berlin (fig. 3). The next-to-last coin-

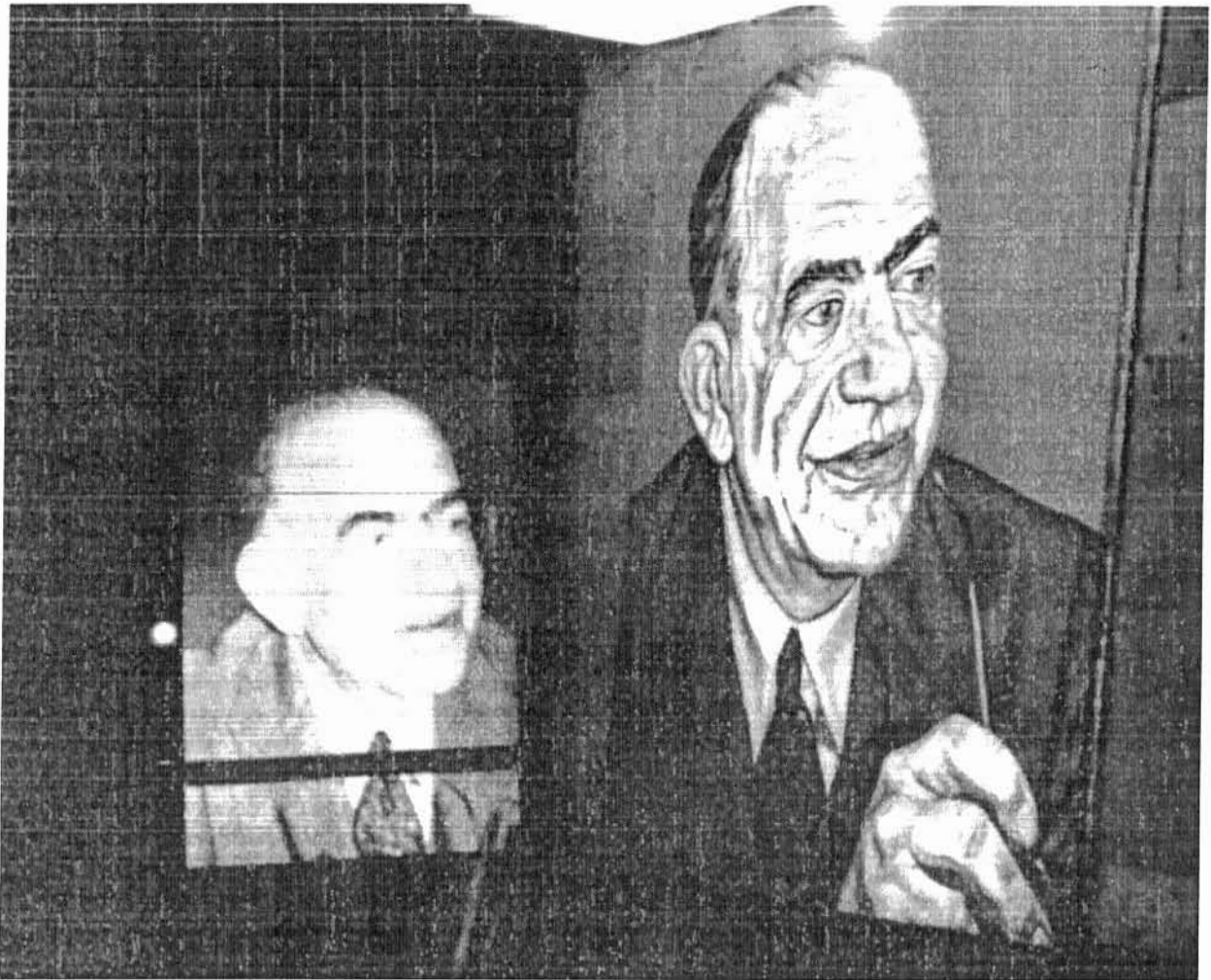


Figure 2. Philip Pearlstein, snapshot of easel set-up for Panofsky portrait

cidence is that the lectures Panofsky gave in New York in the early 1950s were none other than the manuscript of what later became one of his most important books, entitled *Early Netherlandish Painting*, and the *Man With the Pink* was one of the well-known works he discussed. The final coincidence is that Pearlstein actually bears an uncanny personal resemblance to Panofsky, both physically (not only the pudgy hands) and in his personal warmth and good humor; hence Pearl-

stein's portrait of Panofsky may also be viewed as an appropriately whimsical indulgence in that fateful tendency of artists described in the Renaissance by the famous aphorism, "every painter paints himself" (*ogni dipintore dipinge se*), which Leonardo considered the painter's "worst defect."⁶

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Figure 3. Sometimes attributed to Jan van Eyck, *Man with a Pink*. Staatliche Gemäldegalerie, Berlin

Notes

1. The interest of the historical disciplines in art has a long and complex history, which has been traced by F. Haskell, *History and its Images. Art and the Interpretation of the Past*, New Haven and London, 1993. Equally significant has been the cooptation in literary studies, especially over the past half-century, of art-historical concepts, notably: Baroque (F. J. Warnke, *Versions of Baroque. European Literature in the Seventeenth Century*, New Haven and London, 1972) and Mannerism (J. V. Mirollo, *Mannerism and Renaissance Poetry. Concept, Mode, Inner Design*, New Haven and London, 1984); the visual categories of Heinrich Wölfflin and Alois Riegl (a seminal transferral was that of E. Auerbach; *Mimesis. Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländische Literatur*, Bern, 1946, and see, especially in relation to Panofsky, M. A. Holly, *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History*, Ithaca and Lon-

don, 1984, 36–68, 69–96); the space-time synthesis of Wilhelm Worringer (J. Frank, *The Idea of Spatial Form*, New Brunswick, 1991); and the structuralism of Guido Kaschnitz-Weinberg (S. Nodelman, "Structural Analysis in Art and Anthropology," *Yale French Studies*, XXXVI–XXXVII, 1966, 89–103). Aside from the use of art objects simply as historical illustrations, however, these relationships were mainly concerned with matters of style, whereas Panofsky showed how works of art are articulate expressions of significant ideas.

2. *Meaning in the Visual Arts. Papers in and on Art History* (Garden City, N.Y., 1955). Panofsky's concept of the work, including its title, may have been indebted to T. M. Greene, who edited a lecture series by various authors delivered in 1937–38, in which Panofsky's essay on the discipline of Art History, mentioned below on pages 7–8, was first published: *The Meaning of the Humanities. Five Essays by Ralph Barton Perry, Augustus Charles Krey, Erwin Panofsky, Robert Lowry Calhoun, Gilbert Chinard*, ed. T. M. Greene (Princeton-London, 1940).

3. Soon to be published in E. Panofsky, *Three Essays on Style*, ed. I. Lavin (Cambridge, MA, 1995).

4. As it appears here, the session on Science is unfortunately unbalanced by the absence of two papers that were delivered at the symposium but were not forthcoming for publication: "Styles of Reasoning: From the History of Art to the Epistemology of Science" by Arnold Davidson, and "Constructing Modernism: the Cultural Location of Logical Positivism" by Peter Galison.

5. I have been informed by Panofsky's son, Wolfgang, that the snapshot was taken by the latter's son, Edward, then aged 15, in Kennebunkport, Maine, in July 1962.

6. M. Kemp, "'Ogni dipintore dipinge se': A Neoplatonic Echo in Leonardo's Art Theory?" in C. H. Clough, ed., *Cultural Aspects of the Italian Renaissance. Essays in Honour of Paul Oskar Kristeller* (Manchester, 1976), 311–33; F. Zollner, "'Ogni pittore dipinge se.' Leonardo da Vinci and 'Automimesis,'" in M. Winner, ed., *Der Künstler über sich in seinem Werk. Internationales Symposium der Bibliotheca Hertziana. Rom 1989* (Weinheim, 1992), 137–60.

