

CURIOSA ITINERA

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“What is Baroque?”*

The Chair of this session has instructed me not to comment specifically on the individual papers we have heard, but on the general theme of the session. I trust I am allowed to say at least that I found the talks brilliantly informative and stimulating, and I only wish we could spend the next ten minutes or so discussing them.

Nevertheless, in relation to the original theme of the session, which was to focus on issues of principle and method in the development of Baroque studies during the last 30 years, the papers highlight a problem that has preoccupied me for a good many of those years. By and large, as the Chair noted, the papers dealt only indirectly with matters of Baroque principle, and I believe this shyness of theory, as it were, is symptomatic of the field as a whole. What is Baroque, anyway? You will not find a coherent and direct answer in Wittkower’s *Pelican* book, either.

The truth is, I fear, that although our knowledge of the Baroque has increased exponentially, I am not sure our understanding has kept pace. Most of us, confronted with that devastating question, would probably sputter and gasp and fall back on the formulations provided by Wölfflin in the *Principles of Art History*, 1915, or even in his *Renaissance and Baroque* of 1888. But Wölfflin was defining the first principles of a new discipline, whereas we are professional practitioners, too sophisticated, perhaps, to discuss first principles.

Whatever the reason, I think it ironic as well as symptomatic that the best contribution I can make to the intended theme of the session in the next few minutes, is to give you some account of a lecture entitled, “What is Baroque?” presented at a conference held at Vassar College on May 3, 1935 by Erwin Panofsky. The lecture was never published, but it was widely known because he held it in reserve to respond to his frequent lecture invitations, and mimeographed typescripts of it found their way into in many college libraries.

The date is significant because Panofsky describes himself as a lecturer at New York University and Princeton University; he had just settled in America the year before and later that same year he was appointed to the Institute for Advanced Study. It is vintage Panofsky – wonderful English even at that early date, yet with traces of the long, complicated Germanic periods which, as he later charmingly de-

scribed, the need to adapt to Anglo-Saxon usage expunged from his prose style. Please bear in mind that what follows is largely a gathering of quotes from the text, though I will not bother saying quote-unquote at each citation. Please also bear in mind that evidently the lecture was first delivered extemporaneously.

In a letter written 25 years later Panofsky says “I have heard that some industrious Vassar girl typed and mimeographed the lecture at the time but do not own a copy of this document (if it exists) myself”.

I believe the lecture is the most significant effort to define the Baroque since Wölfflin, dating not from 30 years after but from 20 years before Wittkower. I’ve been in love with that Vassar girl, whoever she was, for a long time, and I have recurrent, passionate dreams of editing her transcription¹.

You will remember that Wölfflin’s analysis is based on a dichotomy between two opposing formal systems, Classical and Baroque. His Principles consist not only in the contrasting components of the systems, but also in the notion that they are not temporally fixed; they represent immanent, immutable poles of visual perception, between which artistic form oscillates inevitably.

Panofsky also starts from a fundamental dichotomy, an interior discrepancy he found embedded in the art of the early Renaissance. On the one hand, there was a renewed interest in antiquity; on the other hand, a quite non-Classical interest in naturalism, epitomized by the importation to Florence and influence of Hugo van der Goes’ Portinari Altarpiece. On the one hand, there was mathematical perspective, on the other hand, a persistent Gothicism evident in the tendency of forms to cling to the surface. The great masters of the High Renaissance managed briefly to reconcile this dichotomy into an harmonious balance, which then disintegrated on the battlefield of contradictory forces, the everlasting tension, of Mannerism. The burning of Giordano Bruno, Panofsky said, was an emphatically Mannerist occurrence.

In the Baroque there was again a reconciliation. The conflicts and contrasts between plastic and spatial tendencies, ideal beauty and reality, neo-pagan humanism and Christian spiritualism, while still subsisting, begin to merge. But the merger is now in a new sphere, not in the harmonious balance and classical unity of the High Renaissance, but in highly subjective feelings, picturesque play of light and shadow, deep, irrational space, melting expressions.

Panofsky described the Baroque as the paradise of the High Renaissance regained, but haunted and enlivened by the intense consciousness of an underlying dualism. The essence and novelty of the Baroque lies

precisely in the two-fold nature of this reconciliation of forces — an overwhelming feeling of subjective excitement, and an awareness of that feeling. People of the seventeenth century not only feel, but are also aware of their feelings. While their hearts quiver with emotion, their consciousness stands aloof and “knows.” The experience of many conflicts had led to a kind of awakening, and this endowed the European mind with a new consciousness.

The Baroque, therefore, is not the decline of the Renaissance — we must remember that Panofsky wrote in that bygone day when many people despised the excesses of the Baroque — but its climax: civilizations’ inherent conflicts were overcome, and not by smoothing them away but by realizing them consciously and transforming them into productive energy.

It is clear that Panofsky followed Wölfflin in his evocation of a Hegelian dichotomy, thesis versus antithesis. But there are two essential differences. Firstly, Panofsky’s polarities are not timeless, built-in structures of the mind, they are specifically time-bound, historical conditions; development consists not in a continuous ebb and flow from one extreme to the other, but in a process of inter-reaction between them to create more or less complete, and profoundly differing syntheses.

Secondly, Panofsky’s Principles were not abstract categories of perception and thought, but were instead deeply embedded in the entire fabric of human society: war, religion, science, psychology, even (and this is also vintage Panofsky) humor — the invention of caricature in the seventeenth century exemplified for him that new level of consciousness reached in the Baroque.

All these domains of experience and meaning were reflected in the development of style. In defining the Baroque as the achievement of a new level of consciousness, Panofsky raised our own level of consciousness, as well.

Note

* First delivered at the Annual Meeting of the College Art Association of America. Session: “Baroque Studies Thirty Years after Wittkower,” New York, February 15, 1986.

¹ See now Irving Lavin, ed., *Erwin Panofsky. Three Essays on Style*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, and London 1995, pp. 17-89. This contribution was published *in extenso* in Italian by Scheiwiller in a volume of my essays *L'arte della storia dell'arte*, Milano 2008, pp. 168-182.

