

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The Power of Images* by David Freedberg

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One or other of these sections might have thought to devote an entry to Jan Bruegel the Elder who was in Italy by 1590 and resident in Rome between 1592-95. He is known to have visited Milan in 1593 and 1596. On another front, both the Lombard and Roman chapters seem to harbour an ingrained resentment or prejudice against, or perhaps it is just plain lack of interest in, the possibility that early still lifes, and even Vincenzo Campi's market scenes (where the evidence is abundant), might be imbued with symbolism. Lombardy boasts the earliest dateable Italian still life, a superbly accomplished *Plate of peaches*, c.1591-94, by Ambrogio Figino. An inscription on its reverse reveals that the painting expresses a *vanitas* theme. This picture is critical evidence that is inexplicably thrown out of court: we read that '*il caso di Figino è troppo isolato e, in un certo senso, troppo emblematicamente letterario per poter realmente contare*'. Yet, Figino's simple composition is the archetype of Lombard still lifes, and for once we know the date.

Perhaps it is unfair to criticise specialised essays for narrow viewpoints. I hope that the next edition of this book will include an Introductory Essay in order to consider such questions as: Where and when did independent still life painting begin in Italy? What did the earliest examples look like? Was the invention of still-life painting influenced by ancient Roman mosaics and paintings and/or references in classical texts to still lifes? Were later still-life specialists influenced by classical art or literature? Were Northern European still life paintings (documented earlier) determinative influences on the invention of still life painting in Italy? What was Jan Bruegel the Elder's rôle? Were the first Italian still lifes emblematic or not? What is the earliest reference to a still life in an Italian inventory?

Zeri's *La natura morta in Italia* offers five essays on specialised themes separate from the regional survey of the main text. Eugenio Battisti has written a semiotic view of still lifes, 'Meditando sull'inutile', which leads in fact to several interesting observations on their meaning. The essay submitted by Alberto Veca, entitled 'I soggetti della natura morta', is difficult to square with its professed title, since the approach is philological, not iconographic, and twenty-four of Veca's twenty-five illustrations turn out to be non-Italian still lifes from a private collection. Nicole Dacos, the leading expert on Giovanni da Udine, has written a valuable survey of the artist and his influence on subsequent paintings of floral festoons and garlands. Giuseppe Olmi's 'Natura morta e illustrazione', is an informed and extremely useful survey of the natural science forebears of Italian still lifes. Finally, two authors, Antonella Casazza and Marco Rosci, have contributed a statistical analysis of a random and unrepresentative selection of previously published Italian inventories. As the authors point out, their data have no significance. In this particular sample, still lifes by Rubens, Cantarini, and Canuti occur as frequently as works by Porpora, Cerquozzi, and all the Ruoppolo in Naples.

It is true that early inventories and other documents on patronage can be extremely informative sources for still-life painters, who were mostly ignored in the standard artists' biographies. Some excellent work in this vein is published by Ludovica Trezzani in the second volume. From several unpublished inventories of Roman private collections (including Chigi, Pamphili, and dal Pozzo) Trezzani has culled the still-life notices and drawn many interesting conclusions regarding the careers and reputations of specialists in this genre. Elsewhere, for still-life painting in Piedmont, Andreina Griseri points out the decorative scheme of the Castello del Valentino. Amongst the Florentine examples are the still-life emblems of the *pale* of the Accademia della Crusca, which were first investigated by Mina Gregori. One critical episode of still-life patronage is inexplicably omitted, though: the cycle of musical still lifes that was commissioned from Evaristo Baschenis for the library of San Giorgio Maggiore, Venice. The details of this commission, which was already mentioned in the eighteenth century by F.M. Tassi, provide us with the only documented date in Baschenis's *œuvre*, and, given Baschenis's importance, this now-dispersed cycle of works (one of the paintings is in the Accademia, Venice) surely qualifies as a landmark in the history of the genre. In a future edition of this book a separate essay on still-life patronage would be a welcome addition.

In the current state of scholarship, the connoisseurship of Italian still lifes remains more art than science. Distinguishing the lemons, peaches, and figs in one black-and-white photograph from another would make even a Morelli despair. So often the original canvases are inaccessible in private collections. And certain pictures are particularly perplexing: one attractive still life of flowers and fruit (Fig.1025) has already been attributed to Andrea Belvedere, Bartolomeo Bimbi, the Neapolitan School, and Luca Forte, without ever finding a perfect fit. The anonymous Master of Palazzo San Gervasio, who once was credited with pioneering still-life painting in Naples and who was placed front and centre in the *Civiltà del Seicento a Napoli* show five years ago, suddenly finds himself put out to pasture: no longer Neapolitan, not worthy of an entry, still not identified.

In view of these rife uncertainties, and the frequent necessity to change one's mind, many scholars would do well to tread more lightly when they beg to differ with their colleagues. After a thousand pages of this catalogue prose, '*inaccettabile*' – the word most applied to a disputed attribution sounds positively gracious compared to phrases such as '*del tutto improbabile*'. Even the priests at the Cathedral in Toledo, Spain, are '*assurdo*' because they have not changed the label on their Caravaggesque St John the Baptist. The vehemence with which many authors express their disagreements with other scholars is possibly indicative of youthful zeal. That time and experience will teach forbearance, I would like to hope.

JOHN T. SPIKE

The Power of Images. By David Freedberg. 534 pp. + 189 b. & w.ills. (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1989), \$45.95; £31.95. ISBN 0-226-26144-1.

In this ambitious book, David Freedberg argues that aesthetic response is based on a 'radical disjunction between the reality of the art object and reality itself', and that it involves the repression of emotional reactions in which the distinction between art and life is disregarded. Sexual arousal, religious adoration and violent hostility are the most dramatic examples of responses to images that are 'of the same order as our responses to reality', and Freedberg claims that such reactions are not confined to primitive or pathological viewers, or to extracanonical images: were it not for the evasive strategies of critics too embarrassed to acknowledge their 'kinship with the unlettered', they would inform the discourse of high art as well.

As an outline sociology of aesthetics, *The Power of Images* is hardly original: Ortega y Gasset's well-known essay 'The Dehumanization of Art' (to which Freedberg does not refer), and Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction* both argue that the defining characteristic of 'good taste' is indifference to the basic human concerns that preoccupy the uneducated. Unlike Bourdieu, Freedberg emphasises the rôle of aesthetic discrimination in the ideology of a professional rather than a social elite. He argues that classifying an image as 'art' diminishes its potency by limiting response to academic discussion, and does not investigate the possibility that the power of an image is enhanced by becoming the cultural (and often legal) property of the dominant class. He is concerned with images (e.g. ex-votos, pornography, fetishes) that are of more importance to the people that use them than to art historians, and not with images which, unless consecrated as 'art', would be of little interest to anyone.

Apart from the two chapters on erotic art, Freedberg's study focuses on the significance of images in popular piety. He has an enviable familiarity with the primary and secondary sources regarding the use of images in the Christian tradition, and the central section of the book contains rich and illuminating discussions of pilgrimage, meditation and miracle. Considered simply as a study of responses to religious imagery in the medieval and early modern periods. Freedberg's work is interesting and valuable. What makes his approach unusual is the assumption that art historians should take account of these non-aesthetic responses to visual imagery, and admit their own aggressive, erotic or devotional impulses. The iconographical traditions of western art suggest that the resulting liberation may be of special benefit to heterosexual male theists, but it is right to insist that there is something both absurd and dishonest about ignoring the erotic appeal of a nude, or the pathos of a crucifixion. Following Panofsky, the transition from the pre-iconographical level (where artistic images are interpreted in the same way as other types of visual information) to the iconographical (where they take on their

traditional meaning) has become almost automatic, and Freedberg is justified in pointing out that, by restricting the psychological impact of the image to its cultural significance, art historians have diminished the range and depth of their subject.

To rectify this situation, Freedberg proposes a new discipline, the 'history of images', which would not discriminate between 'art' and 'non-art', and would incorporate insights from psychology, philosophy and the social sciences. The suggestion has much to recommend it, and it is thus regrettable that this audacious and impressively learned book is not always a good advertisement for interdisciplinary research. Its methodology is the source of many difficulties, for the argument proceeds 'by exemplification, not by abstract concept', which allows Freedberg to multiply examples of a single type while disregarding entire categories of images that do not fit his thesis. Although he maintains that 'the project is intended to embrace the non-figurative as well as the figurative', he makes no attempt to apply his argument to abstract or decorative art; he discusses few narrative pictures, and no genre painting (a surprising omission – given Schopenhauer's remarks on the subject, one might have expected a chapter on hunger and the still life). There is a marked concentration on sculpture (excluding relief), and on images that can be viewed or held at eye level. There are almost no images from ceilings, floors or walls. The overwhelming majority of the illustrations depict single human figures – notably Christs, Virgins, and female nudes. The selective nature of the evidence might suggest that emotional responses to these images are exceptional cases involving the culturally sanctioned transference of emotions associated with living human beings to a convenient inanimate substitute. But Freedberg argues that such reactions are typical of the spontaneous human response to images in general, and explains their absence in other contexts in terms of repression.

The concept of 'repression' plays an important but incongruous rôle in the argument. To look at art dealing with erotic themes without the excitement or embarrassment that would be caused by

non-artistic representations of the same subjects may, as Freedberg suggests, require the repression of an instinctual reaction. But it is difficult to see how the artistic appreciation of religious imagery (the source of most of Freedberg's examples) involves anything comparable. It has often been suggested that devotional responses to religious images are themselves the result of repression, and the move from a devotional to an aesthetic response might thus be better understood in terms of secularisation. However, Freedberg does not consider how social changes such as secularisation, the rise of capitalism, or the civilising process might have modified responses to imagery. Despite proposing the end of the seventeenth century as the period in which repression became the norm, he makes no reference to Norbert Elias's thesis that this was the time at which most forms of expression became subject to restraint, and writes as though the absence of affective response to imagery was an atypical form of self-control.

Although he pays lip-service to the need for contextual interpretation, Freedberg sometimes handles his sources uncritically. He uses stories of images coming miraculously to life to illustrate the belief that 'living and lively qualities inhere in the figured object', without reflecting that miracles are, by definition, events that people find extraordinarily improbable: statues, being proverbially immobile, miraculously move, just as animals, being proverbially dumb, miraculously speak. Similarly, the commonplace of the man or animal tricked by artistic illusion is not, as Freedberg implies, primarily an indication of the tendency to perceive the presence of the prototype in the image, but a trope about the skill of the artist. Freedberg would have done well to follow Kris and Kurz (of whom he is unduly dismissive) in focusing more attention on the social rôle of the artist, since some of the superstitions surrounding image-making have more to do with the fear of technical accomplishment than the fear of images, and have numerous parallels in the history of science and medicine. For example, one might compare the passage describing awestruck reactions to a painter in Hawthorne's short

story 'The Prophetic Pictures' (which Freedberg claims 'announces some of the most crucial issues in the history and ethnography of images') with the account, in *The Scarlet Letter*, of the reception of Roger Chillingworth, a medical man.

It is when viewed in a wider cultural context that Freedberg's argument appears to least advantage. His central contention is that because many art-works can be perceived as being to some degree 'life-like' we must recognise that: 'Response to all images, and not only ones perceived to be more or less realistic, is predicated on the progressive reconstitution of material object as living'. The problem with this conclusion is that the responses he discusses are not peculiar to visual imagery. The written word has proved an equally effective means of inspiring devotion, desire and fear, yet words are not thought to represent reality through resemblance, and can never be mistaken for the people or objects they describe. It is therefore unnecessary to assume that all emotional responses to visual images must be founded on a momentary inability to distinguish sign from signified, image from prototype. Freedberg's hypothesis appears to conflate three distinct psychological events: transferring feeling from a human being to an object; recognising or imagining an image's extra-pictorial referent, and mistaking an image for reality. Of the three, the first is common in play, sexual fantasy, psychotherapy and religion; the second takes place whenever an image is read as a sign, and the third (whether it involves taking a two-dimensional image for a three-dimensional object, or an inanimate object for a living body) is an error that occurs infrequently and is usually corrected immediately.

Although Freedberg's theory of response is eccentric and tendentious, his long, sometimes rambling book is strewn with so many illuminating insights into such a wide range of neglected topics that no one with a serious interest in art history can fail to benefit from reading it. It is a pity that the whole proves to be rather less than the sum of its parts.

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Publications Received

The Visions of Tondal from the Library of Margaret of York. By Thomas Kren and Roger S. Wieck. 62 pp. inc. 26 col. pls. and 16 b. & w. ills. (The J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu, California, 1990). \$14.95. ISBN 0-89236-169-7.

Published to coincide with the exhibition 'The Visions of Tondal' and *Manuscripts from the Time of Margaret of York* at the Getty Museum, this book reproduces in colour all the miniatures from the copy of the *Visions of Tondal* written for Margaret of York by David Aubert in Ghent in 1474 and now MS 30 of the Getty Museum. Translated excerpts of the text encourage consideration of the miniatures as illustrations and reveal that, while at times the author's words were closely followed, at others a more conventional range of after-life imagery was introduced. The text is discussed in the context of

the traditions and functions of visionary literature in the opening introductory essay; the other two essays consider Margaret of York, her library and patronage and the miniatures, their attribution to Simon Marmion and their place in the development of Netherlandish illumination of the 1470s. Although the problem of reconstructing Marmion's *œuvre* is acknowledged, the reader is never told what constitutes the 'largely circumstantial evidence' on which illuminations have been attributed to him and it is the plates rather than the text which will contribute to the debate on whether this manuscript belongs to the *œuvre* and the *œuvre* to Marmion. The reproductions are handsome and there are some useful comparative illustrations, including, tantalisingly, an opening from the recently acquired Prayerbook of Charles the Bold, now MS 37, held to be a documented production of

the illuminator Lieven van Lathem. Let us hope that the Getty Museum will continue to share the riches of their manuscript collection and that this key work will be the subject of a similar publication.

C.R.

The Medici Aesop. Spencer MS 50. From *The Spencer Collection of the New York Public Library*. Introduction by Everett Fahy. Fables translated from the Greek by Bernard McTighe. 175 pp. incl. 146 col. pls. (Harry N. Abrams Inc., New York, 1989), £32.25. ISBN 0-8109-1542-1.

Spencer MS 50 is a small parchment manuscript, possibly made for Piero di Lorenzo de' Medici, formerly in the library of the Rev. Henry Drury (1778-1841) and then in the Collection of Sir Thomas Phillips; it was acquired by the NYPL in one of the