

*Maria Bogucka*

## REFLECTIONS ON ART IN HISTORY

Several years have already elapsed since November 1988 when Jan Białostocki formulated his remarks introducing the session of the Association of Art Historians entitled *Art and History*. This outstanding Polish scholar, at that time already seriously ill, had confirmed the existence of strong ties between the history of the arts and broadly understood history, and cited the view worked out in the 19th century that everything that concerned the past had long been presented in terms of historical art consisting among other things in the study of historical artistic forms<sup>1</sup>. Since then we have witnessed many heated theoretical discussions concerning historiography, especially sharp in the USA, England, Germany and France, where the notions of history, historical methodology, the access to the sources and the possibilities of their interpretation have been continually redefined. The critique of the “Annales” school — a school that has dominated the Polish historiography till today — is very intensive (L. Stone, C. Ginzburg, F. Dosse, M. Gauchet, G. Lloyd). Some theses that to many seem outrageous have been put forward by postmodernists who, with their main theorists Franklin Ankersmit and Hayden White at the head<sup>2</sup>, call into question the possibility of objective knowledge in social sciences, because of the personal commitment of scholars as well as the pressure their milieu and some institutions exert on them. On the basis of the linguistic theories issued by

---

<sup>1</sup> J. Białostocki, *Sztuka i historia. Kilka uwag na wprowadzenie (Art and History. A Few Introductory Remarks)*, in: *Sztuka i historia. Materiały sesji Stowarzyszenia Historyków Sztuki, Kraków, listopad 1988*, ed. M. Bielska-Łach, Warszawa 1992, pp. 9–10.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. F. R. Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic. A Semantic Analysis of the Historian's Language*, The Hague 1983. H. V. White, *Metahistory: the Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Baltimore 1973, *passim*.

“the philosopher of deconstruction” Jacques Derrida as well as Roland Barthes’s reflections, postmodernists have developed the thesis that historical reality is not able to transcend its own description. A historian has no access to the events of the past, only to the texts that describe and discuss them. What a historian tends to treat as a reconstruction of the past is only a text he has created himself.

As a result historiography cannot be seen as a search for historical truth, as it has frequently been declared, but is simply a way of creating some description by a historian according to the standards and needs of his epoch and his milieu.

Postmodernists also categorically deny the essential cognitive value of the “objective” numerical and statistical data thought to be an unquestionable element that verifies the picture of the past as in sociology or biological sciences. According to these theses the quasi-empiric, “scientific” methodology is completely misleading and useless in historical research. Postmodernists think there is no difference between literary works and the work of a historian, between history and literature. Heyden White openly declares that historical writings are a literary artefact, a product of an artistic and not scholarly activity.

There is nothing new about this view. As early as the first half of the 19th century the German philosopher and writer Theodor Lessing considered historiography to be an arbitrary pseudo-science (*nicht Wissenschaft sondern Willenshaft*), since a historian shapes the picture of history according to his preferences and ideas, endowing it with the meaning that suits him<sup>3</sup>. In the 20th century these opinions were echoed by the poet Paul Valéry, who said that history is the most dangerous product created by the chemistry of the human mind. History romanticizes reality and seduces the peoples, arouses mistaken memories, intensifies impulses, opens the wounds that had been healed, causes unrest, leads to megalomania or the mania of persecution, embitters nations, shapes their pride, their vanity, their intolerance and turns them sour<sup>4</sup>. Valéry put the work of a historian and a poet on a par. Just like a poet, a historian produces dreams and fleeting fantasies and does not always arouse positive emotions<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> T. Lessing, *Geschichte als Sinngebung des Sinnlosen*, München 1919, *passim*.

<sup>4</sup> P. Valéry, *Regards sur le monde actuel*, Paris 1931, p. 41.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*.

Such formulations must have caused the protest of the scholars influenced by the "Annales" school with its strivings to give historiography a scientific character. Let us pose a question whether and to what extent they also concern history of the arts.

To find an answer to this question one should first analyse the relation between history of art and history. Already at first glance we may say that the two fields differ by the object of their study. A historian examines facts (events) and processes that took place in the past, a historian of art studies works of art created in the past or today. The difference in the object of their study is of enormous significance to their methods and methodology of their work. A historian has only an indirect access to his object of study, through the surviving sources (a random selection) which testify to the facts and processes, and describe the people who are dead, whom the scholar will never see face to face. A historian of art seems to be in a much better position — he does not study a description, a relation, but a concrete surviving object, a work of art — a building, picture, sculpture which he can see or even touch. This direct contact enables him to interpret the work, to bring out its meaning and then, through it, to reach the world of ideas of the creators, their patrons and recipients, that is the mentality of the people in some way connected with the work of art. This stage of work of a historian of art is in fact similar, and even identical with the work of a historian. Without having a direct access to the world of artistic ideas (written programmes are extremely rare), a historian of art reconstructs them on the basis of the preserved, physically existing works, he constructs the picture of artistic trends and programmes just as a historian constructs the picture of the events of bygone epochs. As a result both have the same purpose: to study human beings, their social position, their achievements, ideas and way of thinking. And both work it out with the aid of indirect records. A historian of art resembles especially both an archaeologist and a historian of material culture — they also have at their disposal direct sources such as all kinds of relics, and on their basis they reconstruct the appearance of the people and the objects that surrounded them and indirectly — also the world of beliefs, ideas, intellectual horizons of individuals and whole social groups. As a result, it seems that history of art, just like archaeology and history of material culture only partly can be con-

sidered as a discipline different from history, for based on material sources, accessible to direct cognition. The analysis of such sources has always another, higher stage where they constitute only the building material for the construction of the area of their formation, their social, cultural and political role. At this point the work of a historian of art stops being different from that of a historian — and both become the object of the critique of postmodernists.

This problem is connected with the position of the arts in history. The roots of artistic creativity, including the factors that influence it and its patronage, are closely connected with the general historical process. The arts appear together with the rise of social ties, and spring mainly from the need for communication. Its important condition is also the appearance of the capability of abstract thinking and transforming the view of reality into signs and symbols. This was also connected with the development of religious beliefs and the rise of differentiated social needs (among others for the achievement and confirmation of social prestige through patronage) as well as political ones (political propaganda, the consolidation of the image of the ruler, dynasty and state)<sup>6</sup>. Art had also its influence on the consolidation of regional<sup>7</sup> and state<sup>8</sup> ties. Worthy of note is also the sense of aesthetic and beauty, changing in various epochs, but always constituting an important element both of creativity and patronage, and shaping them according to the spirit of a given era. Indeed, the arts are totally immersed in history, arise in definite historical conditions as a reply to the needs defined by history, in accordance with definite tastes and conditions which change in time. An additional, not negligible tie between history and the arts is represented by the subject of those works, which almost to this day has either been religious (*historia sacra*), or historical (*historia profana*). Painting, sculpture, architecture have for ages

<sup>6</sup> Cf. J. Chrościcki, *Sztuka i polityka. Funkcje propagandowe sztuki w epoce Wazów 1587–1668 (Art and Politics. Propaganda Functions of Art in the Times of the Vasa Dynasty 1587–1668)*, Warszawa 1983, passim.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. e.g. *Sztuka półwyspu Bałtyku. Materiały sesji Stowarzyszenia Historyków Sztuki, Gdańsk, listopad 1976 (The Art of the Baltic Coast. The Association of Art Historians Session Materials, Gdańsk, November 1976)*, ed. H. Fruba, Warszawa 1978.

<sup>8</sup> T. Chrzanowski, *Sztuka w Polsce Piastów i Jagiellonów (Art in the Piasts' and Jagiellons' Poland)*, Warszawa 1993; T. Jakimowicz, *Temat historyczny w sztuce ostatnich Jagiellonów (Historical Topics in the Art of the Last of the Jagiellons)*, Poznań 1985.

immortalized great historic events — battles, marches of armies, defeats and victories, armistices, coronations and funerals of rulers, ceremonious entrances, famous executions etc. J. Białostocki recalled that in the middle of the 17th century the role of painting as illustration to history was taken for granted<sup>9</sup>. Only in the 19th century did the awareness arise that art has also other tasks, which gradually gained the upper hand of historicism.

History has over whole centuries been largely conceived as *magistra vitae* — a great teacher of the behaviour of individuals and whole social groups. The functions of art, on the other hand, were more differentiated and depended on the epoch. In Antiquity art was to provide touching feelings, to delight the recipient with the beauty and perfection of the forms it presented. In the Middle Ages the imperative of *delectare* was replaced by the watchword *docere* — to teach, which was connected with the strong link of the art of that era with religion, with didacticism and evangelization, which produced a symbiosis of medieval art with *historia sacra*. The Renaissance and Baroque, with their fascination with Antiquity, meant a revival of the watchword *delectare* and its predominance over the didactic functions of art. But all through that time, apart from those two basic functions of art, a more or less intensive element could be felt of trying to *épater* the spectator, to arouse in him, apart from admiration, also negative emotions: fear, repulsion, abhorrence. Hieronymus Bosch and dozens of painters who represented on canvas the terrifying scenes of the Last Judgement, the sadistic tortures of the holy martyrs, the images of drastic temptations, and agonies of sinners in the depths of Hell, created their works to shock the viewers. In the 19th century the tendency to shock the spectator got separated from religious didacticism, with which it was connected in previous centuries (the scenes of the agonies of the damned were to serve as warning for the believers) and became a purpose in its own right. To win acclaim and arrest attention the artists tried to *épater* and shock the spectator, which method slowly, towards the end of the 20th and at the beginning of the 21st century, gained prominence in the visual arts. Here I have in mind, e.g., the works of Lucien Freud (among others his “The Manageress’ Well Deserved Leisure” — a picture of a repul-

<sup>9</sup>J. Białostocki, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

sive nude fat woman), the American John Currin and his kitsch, cloying, as if plastic, little portraits, or the Englishwoman Jenny Saville — the creator of gigantic nudes who look like caricatures of Rubens' models. The turn of the 20th century carried a veritable flood of ugliness, an avalanche of representations of mutants and hybrids. Such hybrid-dolls and human-like monsters are created with zest e.g. by the Australian of German descent Ron Mueck, and the English brothers Jake and Dinos Chapman. The German Günther von Hagens constructs his works from fragments of real human corpses (this arouses a suspicion of some terrible hangover from the Holocaust and the imitation of production of lampshades made from human skin in Auschwitz). In Poland, large renown is enjoyed by Katarzyna Kozyra, the creator of "Olympia" — a portrait of a woman after chemotherapy, referring to Manet's famous "Olympia", as well as of "The Bath", shocking by the view of nude women filmed by a secret camera. Dorota Nieznańska in her search for fame exposed male genitalia on the Cross. We frequently come across stagings presenting as artistic artefacts such objects as a bag of litter (a scandal broke out in London when a sober-minded cleaner threw it out) or a jar with excrement. Popularity is gained by primitive happenings (for example a woman on the stage busied with peeling potatoes at Warsaw's Zachęta Gallery).

There is certainly a fashion for ugliness, primitivism, and the striving to arouse repulsion. This is probably the result of the great shock of the Second World War and the victory of mass, popular culture, which has for ages relied on noisy vulgarity, over the "elitarian" culture that requires education and reflection. Of some significance are also the deliberate actions of some originals seeking publicity. Thus, for example, the demand for pictures presenting hybrids was initiated by the eccentric millionaire and art collector Charles Saatchi.

This kind of fashion is reigning not only in visual arts, it also appears in music and theatre, which increasingly start to refer to productions held at fairs in the bygone ages. Let me cite a few examples. At the beginning of 2004 in Zurich a great show *Attabambi Pornoland* was presented where live pigs were slaughtered on the stage and the director Christoph Schlingensiefel bathed in a tub with excrement. In the same 2004 on the stage of Berlin's Komische Oper the director Calixto Bieito, notorious for his

extravagance, employed professional prostitutes in his staging of Mozart's *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, and introduced to it the scenes of cutting off the nipples of females in streams of blood; he contended he wanted to show the poetics of violence in this way. The spectators were shocked, but "Tagespiegel" and some other German journals published laudatory, almost enthusiastic reviews. In Brussels during the performance of *Tannhäuser* a naked pregnant woman masturbating herself was shown on the stage, while the pictures of the moving foetus were shown on the screen. Was it a contribution to the discussion about abortion? In Austria, Hans Neuenfeldt introduced the scenes of incest and scalping into Johann Strauss's operetta *Die Fledermaus*: this was during the Salzburg Festival in 2004. In 2003 Peter Konwitschny presented Mozart's *Don Giovanni* in Berlin's Komische Oper with scenes of orgies and homosexual love; he also distorted Mozart's score, entrusting the male roles to women, and the female — to men. Feverish fantasy seeks ever more drastic forms of expression, discarding any norms and inhibitions. Talent is being replaced by inventiveness. The ancient-Renaissance purpose of a work of art, which was meant to enchant the spectator, has disappeared, replaced by a wish to shock with cruelty and ugliness. The drastic meaning has merged with the primitivism of the form. Scandals that now break out during vernissages, exhibitions and theatrical performances are an unavoidable result of the transformations that a work of art has undergone in recent years.

This is connected with the problem of perception of a work of art by a common spectator, not a connoisseur. The question arises how the aesthetic sensitivity has developed over the ages, how people perceived the beauty embodied in the works of art, how they reacted to it? The perception of art, as many sources show, was in medieval, Renaissance and Baroque times very sensual, concrete, close to the way the world was perceived by primitive people who appraised things comprehensively, and did not separate their immaterial, ideological features from their weight, size, colour, smell and taste. The works of art were seen in such a concrete way, and the spectator did not separate their beauty from their material value. What strikes us in the surviving descriptions made by travellers, as well as in mentions and in memoirs, is a considerable number of figures. Attempts were

made to measure everything and estimate the weight and worth of every object. Frequently a kind of a bill was produced as a result of contact with beautiful architecture, sculpture or picture. Maciej Rywocki, the teacher of the sons of the voivode of Płock — young Polish noblemen Szczęsny and Wojciech Kryski, while visiting Palazzo Pitti in Florence in 1585 noted that the walls of the palace were “very beautiful, made of costly marble”, and that “there is a very beautiful marble table in this palace, framed with silver (...) worth eighty thousand zlotys.” In the Florentine Baptistry Rywocki’s attention was arrested by a bronze door with Lorenzo Ghiberti’s bas-reliefs, about which he wrote: “In this church there are two doors, very big, made of brass, each two span thick, seven ell high, a span broad. On one of these doors there is the *Old Testament* ingeniously cast, on the other the *Passion*”<sup>10</sup>. The thickness and size of the doors impresses the viewer more than the subjects they represent and their ornaments.

The diary of a journey made to Germany, France, Italy and the Netherlands, written in the 1660s by a well-educated patriot from Gdańsk Georg Schröder<sup>11</sup> as well as many other memoirs and diaries of journeys<sup>12</sup> may serve as classic examples of descriptions containing many detailed elements of the material estimation of the worth of the works of art. A characteristic example is the description of Our Lady’s Church in Gdańsk prepared by the writer of the City — Michael Hancke. Hancke in the first place calculates precisely the time that the construction of the church took — 157 years, which testifies to the great effort and investment put into this project. Then he calculates the height of the tower (with 311 stairs), of the vaults (53 ell), the length of the building (179 ell), its breadth (109 ell), gives the number of its altars (48), windows (372), towers (11). All in all, his description of an architectural gem resembles the pages of a merchant’s account book<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> *Antologia pamiętników polskich XVI wieku (An Anthology of Polish 16th Century Memoirs)*, ed. R. Pollak, Wrocław 1966, pp. 112–113.

<sup>11</sup> Polish Academy of Sciences Library in Gdańsk, MS department, MS 925.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. *Reiseberichte als Quellen europäischer Kulturgeschichte: Aufgaben und Möglichkeiten der historischen Reiseforschung*, ed. A. Mączak, H. J. Teutenberg, Wolfenbüttel 1982.

<sup>13</sup> M. Bogucka, *W kręgu mentalności mieszczańska gdańskiego w XVII w. Notatnik Michała Hancke (In the Orbit of the Mentality of a 17th Century Gdańsk Burgher. Michael Hancke’s Notebook)*, in: *Ars Historica: prace z dziejów powszechnych i Polski*, ed. M. Biskup et al., Poznań 1976, p. 624.

Thus the perception of a work of art depended on the value of the material used for it, its size (size was valued, but also small size held its fascination — hence the popularity of miniatures), the time devoted to its production, the cost of preparation (including the artist's fee and the cost of material). The worth of a work of art was measured rather by these data than by the aesthetic impression it made, of which the diaries and relations generally keep silent. Some separation of the estimation of the worth of a work of art from its purely physical features came with the appearance of a market for works of art, when they acquired a commercial value, that is as early as the 16th–18th centuries<sup>14</sup>. In the 19th and 20th centuries the link between the worth of a work of art and the material it is made of became weaker. Moreover, in the second half of the 20th century a tendency appeared to use in art more and more simple, primitive materials, often outright rubbish (old newspapers, rags, strings, empty tins etc.). The shocking expression, so fashionable today, is connected to the shocking form and kind of material. It seems that in answer to this type of phenomena, the work of art which as a result of the historical process has undergone such a far-going metamorphosis, requires a new definition.

Can we speak of parallelism in the development of art and history? It would be mere truism to say that the works of art arising in various historical epochs have various social, political, religious and intellectual roots. Art always served religious and political purposes, there are many examples of that from Antiquity until the 19th and 20th centuries. As a result the artistic trends and styles have changed largely over the ages, and the attitude to art, its theory and practice also change. The historical process also has many stages and undergoes continual change — change and movement are in fact the essence of history. Thus, we may ask a question to what extent the development of art is autonomous, and to what extent it parallels the historical process, does the former depend unilaterally on the latter, or is it governed by its own laws? At first glance it seems that both are interdependent. The Gothic world was strictly connected with the Middle Ages, the French historian Georges Duby was right when he spoke of “the era of cathedrals”. Both medieval and Renaissance and Baroque times, and even the 19th and 20th

<sup>14</sup>Cf. *Economic History and the Arts*, ed. M. North, Köln–Weimar–Wien 1996.

centuries willingly and frequently reached for art to legitimize their current political, religious and social strivings and claims, and to express their attitudes. Polish art provides especially eloquent examples in this respect. Its form and expression had been for many decades determined by the loss of Poland's independence. Throughout the 19th century the outstanding and highly valued works of Polish visual art had been shaped by a strong potential of patriotism of their authors. This was the period of the great efflorescence of historical and symbolic paintings, presenting the downfall of Poland, the martyrology of the Polish nation and the hopes for the recovery of the independence of Poland (Artur Grottger, Jan Matejko, Jan Styka and many others). In the inter-war period Polish art in a large measure continued to serve the nation and the resuscitated state, by introducing to its works strong current political accents (among others the glorification of Józef Piłsudski and the Polish Legions). Many examples of that can be found in the metaphorical paintings of Jacek Malczewski or the works of Włodzimierz Tetmajer. Still more expressive linking of art to current history can be observed in the birth and development of the so-called avant-garde, especially in Germany and Russia.

However, the involvement of art in history is not always simple. This problem touches on the correlation between economy and art, and as a result between economic history and history of art. In the 18th century the English historian of music Charles Burney wrote: "All the arts seem to have been companions, if not the produce of successful commerce, and they will, in general, be found to have pursued the same course [...] that is, like commerce, they will be found, upon enquiry, to have appeared first in Italy; then in Hanseatic towns; next in the Netherlands"<sup>15</sup>. In accordance with this opinion historians and historians of art in the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries accepted tacitly that art develops at the time of economic prosperity, and declines during economic recession and crisis. The first to undermine this conviction was the Italian historian Roberto Lopez who observed in his lecture delivered at the Metropolitan Museum of Arts in New York in 1953 that the Italian economy flourished in the 13th century, and not during the Renaissance. As a result he put forward a thesis that the so-

<sup>15</sup> C. Burney, *A General History of Music*, London 1776, vol. 2, p. 584.

called difficult years stimulate investment in culture more than the periods of economic prosperity when investing in economic enterprises is easy and profitable. In contrast, in times when industry and agriculture do not offer good conditions for investment, arts — architecture, sculpture, and painting — attract greater outlay that is profitable for their patrons both socially (greater prestige) and economically (good investment of capital that may bring in the future considerable profit)<sup>16</sup>. Lopez's thesis proves right not only in relation to Italy but also to other places, for example Gdańsk in the 16th–18th centuries<sup>17</sup>. Thus the *communis opinio* saying that at the time of an economic crisis expenditures on culture are cut down first and most drastically in comparison to others, must be questioned, and its application largely limited. This opinion certainly springs from the suggestion contained in the sociological research of 19th and 20th century budgets, especially those of the working class and petty bourgeois families where indeed the first expenditures to be cut down in case of difficulties (for example unemployment) were those on newspapers, books, cinema, theatre, to say nothing of buying pictures. The current state policy (especially in its Polish version) also acts in this direction — when difficulties start, it begins tightening the national budget by reducing the outlay on culture and science. This mechanism, typical of the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries, was earlier unknown. On the contrary, frustration caused by the economic crisis was frequently recompensed by intensified cultural patronage, especially investment in art (the examples of Italy in the 16th and 17th centuries and Gdańsk in the 18th century).

Thus the vicissitudes of history of art lead us to questions about the rules governing the historical process and historical phenomena, and about the permanence of the links between history and art. Recently (1989) Francis Fukuyama declared that history had reached its end, a thesis difficult to accept (from which he withdrew, at any rate), which aroused many protests. As long as humankind exists, history must exist too, since in its essence it is the process of life of society; its end would signify

---

<sup>16</sup> R. S. Lopez, *Hard Times and Investment in Culture. The Renaissance: Six Essays*, New York 1962, pp. 29–54.

<sup>17</sup> M. Bogucka, *Economic Prosperity or Recession and Cultural Patronage. The Case of Gdańsk in the XVI–XVIII Centuries*, in: *Economic History and the Arts*, op. cit., pp. 49–53.

the total destruction of our civilization, the apocalyptic end of the world. The vision of the death of art, which is taking place before our very eyes, so to say, is however, more realistic. The victory of primitive mass-culture over the "high", elitarian culture that came at the turn of the 20th century, carries a specific degeneration of creativity. When the creators present to the public their excrement as a work of art or organize primitive shows devoid of any meaning — we are no longer dealing with art, which is replaced by vulgar, senseless happening. In such a context the link of arts with history, consisting over the ages in the historicism of its forms and meaning, is also broken. Hence Fukuyama might have announced rather the end of art in its traditional understanding — or perhaps the end of art altogether.

*(Translated by Agnieszka Kreczmar)*