When Attitudes Became Form

CHRISTOPHER S. WOOD ON MICHAEL BAXANDALL (1933–2008)

“MONEY IS VERY IMPORTANT in the history of art.” Everyone was struck in 1972 by this placid assertion, so lucid and disillusioned, on the very first page of a slim, learned tract on Renaissance painting. That study, Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style, immediately installed itself on every university curriculum and in every museum bookshop. It is still the first book that many people read about Renaissance art. The author, Michael Baxandall, a philologically inclined scholar trained at Cambridge University, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the Warburg Institute, was throwing open the gates of that prestigious field, so it seemed, to the barbarians. “It is an important fact of art history,” he offered in his cultivated deadpan, “that commodities have come regularly in standardized containers only since the nineteenth century: previously a container—the barrel, sack or bale—was unique, and calculating its volume quickly and accurately was a condition of business.” Of course, until that moment it had not occurred to anyone that the packaging of commodities might be an important fact of art history.

Baxandall, who died on August 12, 2008, at the age of seventy-four, was one of the most refined and original art-historical minds of the second half of the twentieth century. A reserved and elusive person, and an oblique, ironic teacher, he had a considerable presence in the United States, not only through his books but also through his teaching at the University of California, Berkeley, from 1986 to 1996.

Baxandall’s Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany (1980) is a fully realized, full-dress exercise in a contextual history of art. In this work, as in the earlier and more concise book on Italian painting, Baxandall invited readers to adopt the cognitive skills and ways of seeing of historical beholders. German sculptors of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, he argued, could count on their audience’s intimate knowledge of the properties of wood and on their eye for fancy calligraphy. The artists expected viewers to hold strong notions on the function and doctrinal appropriateness of decorated altarpieces. Baxandall mollified traditional art historians, alert to the possibility that heavy-handed contextualism could flatten works of art to mere tokens of worldview or ideology, with his attentive, self-conscious prose, a linguistic instrument of extreme sensitivity and tact. Limewood Sculptors seemed at the time to do everything that good art history ought to do.

His next volume, Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures (1985), a series of fiercely antimedhodical lectures on the method of art history, has been little understood. The book is a cat’s cradle of reflection and meta-reflection, so original and unassimilable to ordinary art history that it may take decades to grasp it. Tiepolo and the Pictorial Intelligence (1994), written with Svetlana Alpers, is an exercise in almost pure criticism, a discriminating celebration of the internal ironies and equilibriums of this most sumptuous and elusive of artists, the last painter of the Renaissance.

But the real marvel remains Painting and Experience. Here Baxandall asked the reader, in effect, to occupy the body of the fifteenth-century Florentine patron of altarpieces and frescoes, typically a “church-going business man, with a taste for dancing.” That businessman, forced to gauge by inspection and rapid calculation the capacities of large barrels, had a keen eye for the robust bodies, composed of elemental geometric units, of Piero della Francesca. Attuned by sermons and devotional treatises that psychologically parsed the encounter between the Virgin Mary and the anunciating angel Gabriel, that same beholder savored in Fra Angelico’s paintings nuances lost to the modern secular admirer of art. Botticelli, finally, when arranging his graceful figure groups, addressed an audience adept at dance. The painter could count on “a public skill in interpreting figure patterns, a general experience of semi-dramatic arrangements.”

In Baxandall’s Florence, “art” was the medium of a social relation among artists, patrons, and other beholders, sustained by a common repertoire of skills, mental and affective habits, and bodily disciplines. This was a world in which art was still woven tightly into the tissue of daily experience, and of civic life, and yet was already recognizable as art—that is, as a refined and beautiful supplement to practical life.

How can one account for the impact, immediate and enduring, of this little book? The idea that vision is historically conditioned is, after all, the basic axiom of modern art history. Baxandall was hardly the first to say it. Heinrich Wölfflin’s Principles of Art History (1915) began with the proposition that “vision itself has its history, and the revelation of these visual strata must be regarded as the primary task of art history.” Every intellectually ambitious art historian from Alois Riegl to Erwin Panofsky to Ernst Gombrich, from Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli to Pierre Francastel to
Meyer Schapiro, has asserted the historical relativity of vision. Art history in Britain, to be sure, was especially conservative. But the claim made by one obituary in an English newspaper that before Baxandall “most art history [in Britain] had been written from the viewpoint of connoisseurship and attribution” is an exaggeration. One of Baxandall’s key mentors at the Warburg Institute had been Gombrich himself.

To grasp the appeal of *Painting and Experience*, we must seek the book within the book. Baxandall’s achievement was to reintroduce art to life by restoring life to the people who paid for art and used art. He did this by stressing their practicality and sensuality. Like Jacob Burckhardt, whose cultural history *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860) dominates all modern study of the period, Baxandall downplays the revival of antiquity, the philological and archaeological study of the relics of ancient civilization that gave the period its name. He also downplays the mystery of learned texts that permitted the encoding of arcane wisdom, profane and sacred, in works of art. Instead, the book gives us the embodied eye of the period, the eye that attends, reacts, feels, savors, calculates with lightning speed.

Baxandall pays a price for this restoration of vital force to the patron: He drains the works themselves of some of their life. They are not allowed to live in time. The paintings he describes are not engaged in transhistorical or intertextual conversations with other paintings. The work is little more, in his analyses, than a “deposit of a social relationship.” “In the fifteenth century,” Baxandall comments, with a touch of almost sadistic anti-aestheticism that must have outraged and gratified readers in equal measure, “painting was still too important to be left to the painters.”

But such violence was perhaps, in 1972, the condition of a truly novel art-historical rhetoric. For the first time the reader was invited to participate in the historically remote everyday by a process of bodily triangulation: We would feel with our bodies, and see with our embodied eyes, what the beholders of Masaccio and Filippo Lippi saw. Baxandall tells us this is strange knowledge that we need to work to acquire, like ethnologists. Here he is disingenuous, for it is not at all difficult to imagine what it was like to size up barrels or to step slowly through the pages of a courtly dance; it is pleasurable to do so. Now, finally, the artwork was stripped of its screens of intimidating knowledge—the classical heritage, arcane symbolism, the mathematics of perspective and proportion. Only a historian of great erudition could have performed such an iconoclasm.

Baxandall demystified Renaissance art by re-creating it as a kind of process art, whose very content is materials, labor, the mass of the body, the force of gestures. Process art, as explicated by Harald Szemann in his catalogue *When Attitudes Become Form* (Bern and London, 1969), reintroduced “a high degree of personal and affective engagement” and thematized an “interaction of labor and materials” in order to break the grip of the galleries and museums. In the same way, Baxandall’s Quattrocento painters appear to evade the convention-bound expectations of the church by connecting directly with the sensations and everyday experiences of their audiences.

The result is an appealing picture of a Quattrocento poised for one magical moment between the Middle Ages and modernity; between the rigidity of ecclesiastical ritual and theological doctrine, on the one hand, and, on the other, the heavy, self-conscious overlay of academicism, criticism, historiography, and theory first imposed in the sixteenth century and very much still with us. In the fifteenth century, so it can seem in Baxandall’s pages, artist and beholder met one another no longer under the supervision of the clergy, and not yet in the collector’s cabinet or the museum, but rather, as it were, in the piazza, in public, where they listened side by side to the mendicant preacher who coordinated the biblical tales with the affections of the heart, and where all practical men, susceptible to the beauty of things, could openly share their intimacy with materials, tools, and craft.

In this way, inside the scholarly treatise, art and life find their way back to each other. *Painting and Experience* describes the same “dilation of art’s limits” that the sculptur Scott Burton wrote of in his introductory essay in *When Attitudes Become Form*. In the new art of process and situation, in Burton’s phrase—and here he could have been speaking of Baxandall’s Florence—“the quotation marks get further and further apart.”

The “social history” that Baxandall’s subtitle promises is not a dynamic one. There is no conflict in his fifteenth century, no diachrony, no concealed springs. Instead, creativity flows through society like a vital stream uniting the commercial transaction, the civic rite, and the devotional exercise, a stream undulated by ideological toxins. We are actually rather far, here, from *Ways of Seeing*, the BBC television series and book by John Berger, also of 1972.

*Painting and Experience* and its success cannot perhaps be understood outside the long-term context of English and American fascination with Quattrocento Florence, cultivated by the painters of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood; by the Victorians Robert Browning, George Eliot, and John Addington Symonds; by Henry James and Bernard Berenson; and stoked by Burckhardt’s *Civilization of the Renaissance*, a book first translated into English in 1878 and never since out of print. Baxandall’s attentiveness to the hidden poetry of craft and gesture in no way troubles the myth of the naïveté and charm of the Florentine painters. The dream of an artistic practice tightly woven into public life was an aspect of that myth. *Painting and Experience* presents itself as a primer in the social history of art, and indeed the book was read by art historians of my generation, certainly, as a general paradigm of art-historical method. But it is, perhaps, a book that could only have been written about the Quattrocento. □

Christopher S. Wood is a professor of the history of art at Yale University.