Discussion

In Defense of Art History: A Response to Brunilde Ridgway

William Hood

As one who shortly must risk his own neck in an essay for the Art Bulletin on art-historical research in Italian Renaissance studies, I am grateful to Professor Brunilde Sismondo Ridgway for having gone first in the series (“The State of Research in Ancient Art,” Art Bulletin, lxviii, 1986, 8-23). Those of us who are not specialists in ancient art will be indebted to her for a long time to come; I know of no other place in which one can find so much useful information so easily, or where those unfamiliar with the literature may correct outdated ideas. Of course, essays in this series will be most useful to art historians who work in fields other than the one addressed; and it may be that methodological viewpoints common in one field will seem inappropriate or even foreign in the context of another one. Thus, of the many valuable questions that Professor Ridgway raises about art-historical means and ends, I should like briefly to respond to but one, namely, the sharp distinction she draws between archaeology and art history. The Renaissance art historian may find the distinction more arbitrary than she does.

For Professor Ridgway, art history is “the study of the history of aesthetically pleasing objects, in a scale ranging from the beautiful artifact to the masterpiece” (p. 7, n. 1). Neither the essay’s tone nor its purpose as an overview of recently published scholarship warrants supposing that she intended this characterization of our discipline to be a manifesto. As such it would not be, as she surely realizes, defensible against all kinds of assaults from philosophers who might challenge one or another of its many underlying assumptions about aesthetics, epistemology or the philosophy of history. That is just as well, because I am not qualified for philosophical discourse in the pages of a learned journal. However, in the spirit of lively inquiry that informs her every sentence, I should like to opine that her description of art history vitiates what I consider to be one of its real, even unique, contributions to historical studies. Furthermore, I cannot avoid thinking that the purpose of this distinction is not so much to say what art history is, as what it is not. What it is not, of course, is archaeology. Unlike art historians, Professor Ridgway tells us, archaeologists are concerned with “uncovering the past . . . and recreating it” (p. 8). Unlike art historians, who are interested only in aesthetically pleasing objects, archaeologists are interested in “any object from the ancient past, regardless of its aesthetic value and artistic importance” (p. 7, n. 1).

Now I would not deny for a moment that the Parthenon frieze is aesthetically pleasing. I would, however, vigorously challenge the notion that its art-historical significance is coextensive with its ability to please the viewer. And, perverse or not, I would argue at the same time that without its aesthetic qualities the Parthenon frieze would serve little purpose beyond documenting an Athenian religious festival in the fifth century B.C. It goes without saying that a written source might do the documentary job far better. May one then infer that, faced with the choice, Professor Ridgway would place less value on the reliefs themselves than on a precisely descriptive contemporary written account of every facet of Greek society that the archaeologists glean from the reliefs? Given both the sculptures and the text, what could the archaeologist learn from the images that she could not learn from the words?

Whether the archaeologists like it or not, works of art communicate their messages chiefly through the resonance of their aesthetic characters, good or bad, with all the various values and institutions that generated them and gave them significance in the first place. It is the art historian’s task to reconstruct those values and institutions and to articulate the position of the work’s aesthetic as well as symbolic and other characters within that configuration. I learned this in an amusing way. Among the keenest memories of my first year of teaching was the shock of discovering that art historians could quite cheerfully, and with an equanimity that then seemed to me quite cavalier, treat the history of objects that by common agreement were aesthetically repulsive. To cite the most notorious example of a mid-seventies conceptual piece (by Alan Sonfist), not even the most fanatical undergraduate artist pretended to relish the stench of a dead rabbit oozing out from the core of its plaster encasement. I learned in my naiveté that studying the dead rabbit for its art-historical meaning did not require my liking it. I learned, in other words, that aesthetic pleasure is an entirely subjective and only accidentally transpersonal experience. It is therefore irrelevant as a tool of historical criticism unless one can show that the pleasure of perceiving was itself an event contemporary with the pleasure-giving object. Even so, wouldn’t studying the history of aesthetically pleasing objects tell one something useful about the culture that found the object aesthetically pleasing?

The fact thus remains that works of art may be said to constitute a class of objects that owes its categorical integrity to the ability of its members to convey unique types of messages to viewers, not to the degree of aesthetic pleasure it gives. No oil lamp, however beautiful, communicates the same kind of message that the ugliest kouros does. That is because there is an absolute difference in the expressive potential of oil lamps and kouroi irrespective of aesthetic quality. That difference makes it possible to study the history of works of art apart from their status as cultural detritus. Indeed, this unique expressive content is what connects the artist to the work, the work to its audience, and members of its audience to each other. Its unique expressive content is what makes art a powerfully civilizing force.

Most art historians of my acquaintance begin their investigations of the past primarily though not exclusively through careful scrutiny of what I have been calling “aesthetic qualities” out of a lazy and even irresponsible acquiescence in Professor Ridgway’s term. I might as well have called aesthetic qualities “style” because by that scrutiny I do not intend taxonomic classification: style in the sense I mean it does not inhere, for example, in whether the facial features of a marble head are asymmetrical (p. 12). That is because artistic styles consist in ensembles of visual and nonvisual phenomena that speak together with remarkable clarity. This notion of style thus goes far beyond the calligraphic details of a particular object and it includes properties not even strictly visual, such as subject matter. Here I think that Professor Ridgway would agree, if I read her interesting comments on the meaning of revivals in ancient art correctly (p. 11). I would even contend for this reason that the stylistic features of a work of art have prior status to all the others. For any period before the eighteenth century, such a contention can be argued as thoroughly historical. That is because I cannot think of a single time before then in which anybody recorded that it was the first obligation of a monumental work of art to give aesthetic pleasure. But there is plenty of evidence to indicate that appearances mattered for a host of other reasons.

The stunted aestheticist notion that art’s primary burden is to please vanished long ago from the working assumptions of art-historical practice for post-Classical fields. It cannot be shown
that aestheticism existed as a causal agent in the history of Western art before the modern period, except for the production of purely luxury objects. What good does it do the archaeologists to persist in the belief that the history of art is "the study of the history of aesthetically pleasing objects"?

The good, I suspect, is less procedural than philosophical or even political. For one thing, pretending that there is an unbridgeable chasm between archaeology and art history makes it possible to maintain separate departments of archaeology. There can in fact be little doubt that Professor Ridgway takes a dim view of art historians. She says so in the summary beginning on page 21. To be sure, on the first page of her essay we learn that she was "encouraged" to read that "the methods of classical archaeology had given art-historical scholarship its rigorous standards." I suppose that we art historians, if left to our own slovenly devices, are all likely to collapse in a collective entropic tendency to "elaborate phraseology and complex aesthetic appreciations that all too often seem to mean little or nothing" (p. 23) Never mind how difficult it is to find words analogous to a visual experience, to use language as a tool for analyzing — not, be it noted, for merely describing — the visual properties of a work of art and then to give voice to their often tenuous and only circumstantial connections with broader cultural issues.

It is everywhere self-evident in the history of art that the empirical possibilities of formal analysis, practiced by a sensitive (not merely trained) connoisseur, can be very great when brought to bear on objects that have been detached from their archaeological contexts. Berenson and Offner, for example, reconstructed artistic personalities that the archivists were only later able to endow with names, birthdates, and economic histories. Only the connoisseur's eye establishes the corpus that subsequent research may greatly modify but rarely eradicate altogether. Professor Ridgway's overview of the work on the Riace Bronzes (p. 8) makes me think that an art historian might suggest orderly, even empirical, ways for the archaeologists to get themselves out of the mess they seem to have gotten into, primarily because they cannot agree about what they are looking at. Some of the most distinguished art historians specialize in the study of Italian Renaissance and Baroque sculpture. Might the archaeologists not gain something from a conversation with these scholars?

As for the historians of ancient sculpture, they are reported to have ceased practicing formal analysis in the traditional sense (p. 11). To an outsider like me that seems a pity. The Ionian sea having so recently handed back two of the most spectacular sculptures to have come down to us from the ancient world, it is too bad that scholars have given up on the possibilities of good, old-fashioned formal analysis in favor of mechanical exercises whose purpose is "to produce generic formulas" that can never, of course, be of very much use in explaining an object's proper stylistic character (p. 12). One would think that the time had come to sharpen the tools, not to throw them away. There is the sense that something has been lost. Or perhaps it has just been discredited. Nobody who has heard it, for example, could forget the exquisite verbal precision of Professor Peter von Blanckenhagen's lectures on the visual properties of Greek and Roman sculpture. His words left hard-nosed graduate students wondering with Matisse where their eyes had been the day before.

But of course formal analysis is a proximate art no matter how exquisitely it be practiced. It is not a science, and that is where the real distinction between art historians and archaeologists seems to lie for Professor Ridgway. Obviously, there are the sheep and there are the goats in a play that seems less a Vergilian pastoral than the final scene of the Last Judgment. One need not follow Professor Ridgway's script as closely as I have to understand that the goats are the archaeologists and the sheep are the art historians. Why? Because nothing seems to embarrass an archaeologist more than the suggestion that the useful study of the past may be something other than demonstrably "scientific." It is unfortunately the case that the word "science," coming from the Latin verb "to know," has in our day become almost synonymous with "technology." And along with the widening capitulation of humanistically trained academics to the real power wielded by our masters the technocrats, I am afraid that the study of human experience, which is what I take the humanities to be, is in very real danger of becoming bloodlessly positivistic. Now art historians use all kinds of scientific and even technological information, from archival research to data banks, as assistance in interpreting the art of the past. But none of them, so far as I know, thinks that he or she is actually a scientist. Or would want to be.

Most art historians seem to want to know, above all else, what it was that artists and their publics (whatever we may mean by all these loaded terms) thought they were doing when they made a work of art and looked at it. Empirical methods lead us to that knowledge and empirical facts give it substance. But only intelligent and informed sympathy, something that lies in a human mind and not in an array of statistical data, will detect the resonance of the work of art with the complex historical forces that gave it meaning. Art historians, or at least this art historian, do not want to be thought of as scientists, or even as particularly scientific, because what they want to know is unquantifiable. It is unquantifiable because it is rooted in the visual expression of our deepest and most passionately held values. Most monumental art of the historical periods is about the darker forces: life and death; God and gods; grace and fortune; love and hate; dominance and submission; self and society. Art is as Dionysian as it is Apollonian and Eros is its demijour. Most broadly, the history of art is the history of the visual imagination brought to bear on the elemental forces of human experience. This is just as true for the art of Classical Greece as it is of Renaissance Italy.

For this reason the very nature of art history is almost inconceivably "interdisciplinary." It would suit my purposes of the moment, for instance, to spend about a year of the mid-fifteenth century as a Dominican friar at S. Marco in Florence. I cannot do that, and will content myself with understanding Fra Angelico's art as best I can. Historians of all stripes have awakened from the Hegelian dream that haunted Schliemann as well as Burckhardt, namely, the possibility of recovering an entire civilization. Art historians, like economic and intellectual and social and military historians, know that their view of the past is irremediably myopic not because they are self-indulgent pleasure-seekers or because they are partially blind, but because the past cannot, ever, under any circumstances defined by time and space, be recovered in its entirety. Indeed, one wonders how we would know we had done it even if we could.

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Reply

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As I hesitated in accepting to write the initial essay on "The State of Research in Ancient Art," so I hesitate now in accepting to answer Professor William Hood's stimulating response to my text.
Could this be a verbal, rather than a written, dialogue, I would take up the challenge with great pleasure, since it would allow for some give and take on either side, and permit clarifications and nuances that are impossible to obtain with the written word, which remains immutable. But the main reason for my hesitation is that, at heart, I agree with Professor Hood. In the best of all worlds, there should be no distinction between the art historian and the archaeologist concerned with ancient art.

In this last statement, the emphasis is on the clause qualifying the type of archaeologist I mean, and a close reading of my printed essay will show that such a person is today as much under fire from archaeological quarters as from “true” art-historical ones (p. 21). Yet I trust there is no doubt that I rank myself with the first group, rather than with the excavators and the anthropologically inclined. On the other hand, I constantly strive not to lose touch with the evidence, and if this qualifies as scientific behavior, then so be it — you can call me a scientist and I shall confess to being embarrassed, were the suggestion to be made that I proceed on the basis of “intelligent and informed sympathy.” Only too often has it happened that a work of art (a masterpiece) has evoked one kind of response when it was thought to date from a certain period, and entirely another when that date was rectified. When no chronological information was available for the Laokoon, it was thought to rank with the highest expressions of pathos and Hellenistic Baroque. When documents seemed to pin down the activity of the three masters named by Pliny to the period around 80 B.C., the same formal analysis was used to point out the theatrical and one-sided appearance of the group. Now that revisions are again in order, it is virtually a free-for-all of stylistic interpretation.

Perhaps the distinction between art historians and archaeologists should be drawn primarily on the basis of what “history” is available. An analysis proceeding from a safe core of documents and information can focus on formal aspects and spiritual content; an analysis that needs to describe and classify in order to reach an even approximate chronological bearing has to be wary of sliding into pure speculation and subjective interpretation that may have no connection with reality. Professor Hood selects the Parthenon frieze to demonstrate one of his points: “... without its aesthetic qualities the Parthenon frieze would serve little purpose beyond documenting an Athenian religious festival in the fifth century B.C.” The truth of the matter is that over one hundred years of speculation on the subject of the Parthenon frieze have not been able to provide an interpretation of the scene that carries total conviction. The dispute is still as lively today as it was when the American Journal of Archaeology was founded, and all textual information available has not been able to provide clues to a single solution. Far from being a document of “an Athenian religious festival in the fifth century B.C.,” the frieze has been claimed to be a mythological representation of the first Panathenaia, a compendium of Athens’ past and present, a commemoration for Marathon, an assertion of democracy, a manifesto of Athenian imperial policy, and a major votive relief — all of these theories originating within the last twenty years. While I would not place less value on the reliefs themselves, were a contemporary written account to surface and give us a clear statement on the subject of the frieze, I would certainly welcome it as a major contribution to my understanding of the work of art, since I am reasonably sure that the frieze, so far, has not been properly understood, despite its continuous ability to please the viewer. I also persist in believing that this aesthetic pleasure would be enhanced by such an understanding.

Should my position of “art meant to please” be considered outmoded, I may still take comfort in the fact that the Greek word 

*agalma* translates into “statue” only as a secondary meaning, but its primary definition is “that wherein one delights,” hence “a pleasing gift, especially for the gods” (Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*). A similar dichotomy between archaeologists and art historians became apparent at the symposium on “Retaining the Original” held at the National Gallery (CASVA) in April, 1985, when it finally dawned on the audience that the word “copy” was used differently by the two groups, the break in meaning approximately coinciding with the end of the medieval period. Yet all participants were honestly trying to discourse about art, not about scientific and technological archaeology versus formal analysis of the creative forces.

Professor Hood suggests that archaeologists at variance over the artistic evaluation of the Riace bronzes should have a conversation with scholars specializing in the study of Italian Renaissance and Baroque sculpture. I could answer with the words of a distinguished art historian, as they appeared in the *New York Times* of December 8, 1985. In “Self-Portrait of an Art Historian as a Young Man,” John Pope-Hennessy states:

One of the things about art history that I found puzzling from the first was that clever art historians (there were stupid ones too, of course, but a lot of them were really clever) should reach diametrically opposite conclusions on the basis of a tiny nucleus of evidence. The reason, so far as one could judge, was that the subjective element in art history was disproportionately large. If this were so, it was not only works of art that needed to be looked at in the original but art historians too, since their results were a projection of their personalities.

It is against the subjective kind of art historian that I feel the need to emphasize my archaeological training. The other kind, the one truly based on historical studies, speaks my own language, and no distinctions — administrative, departmental, or otherwise — need to be drawn. And on such grounds, I am sure, Professor Hood and I can agree.

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