IGNORANCE, THE END

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Iris est fille de Thaumantis. L’admiration est fondement de toute philosophie; l’inquisition, le progres; l’ignorance, le bout.—Montaigne III. xi.

At least one curator in an art museum has made the discovery that anything which is simple and obvious for him remains so only as long as he never thinks about it and that when he does try to think about it it promptly turns into something very complex and doubtful. For a long while, fearing that this was a symptom of some kind of incurable folly, he tried to keep it to himself, but, as he began to look into the matter and to trace it down in strange books of a kind that are not usually associated with the business of curating art, he discovered that many other men in other callings seem to have suffered from the same trouble without losing their reputations as serious persons.

A typical specimen of this kind of difficulty took its start from a casual consideration of the following argument about forgeries:

It is a commonplace in the art museums of the world that while a forger can fool his contemporaries he cannot fool their grandsons. The reason for this is that the forger writes or builds into his handiwork the ideas of his contemporaries about how an old work of art should look. When the grandsons come along they look at his work and they see that according to their ideas it contains far more of what they recognize as 1880, let us say, than should an object made in 400 B.C. or A.D. 1370, as the case may be. This is a very simple and reasonable argument, and as yet no one seems to have been able to find any holes in it. The trouble with an argument of this kind, however, is that it will not obey us and run back into its kennel at command—it insists on carrying on, and sometimes with the oddest results.

The reproductions of old prints which accompany this article have been brought together because they were made over a period of some four hundred years and all purport to represent identically the same object. In spite of this identity of subject they do not look alike and are in many respects contradictory and irreconcilable. Each bears the distinct marks of its time and of the nationality of its maker.

If we may assume that a competent draughtsman represents an object truthfully as he is acquainted with it, . . . but here, even before the puzzled curator has begun to tell his tale of woe, he finds that he should stop and give a word of warning. He has just used the terms “competent,” “represents,” “truthfully,” and “acquainted.” The first of these words is the easiest perhaps, for the phrase “competent draughtsman” is obvious enough in its meaning for anyone to understand—unless, that is, he makes the mistake of stopping and thinking about it. As in skating on thin ice, all is well in this kind of discussion so long as one moves fast enough, but one stops at one’s peril. It is probable that a competent draughtsman is one that competent judges regard as being competent. But what is the competence of the competent judge in a matter of competency, and how and by whom is it to be competently determined? Upon what can any judge predicate his judgment of the competence of other observers unless upon the agreement of their results with his own particular personal experiences, prejudices, and limitations? Great learning and the most capacious of memories, while always very impressive, carry no implication of the simultaneous possession of sharp eyes, logical acumen, or the ability to draw sound conclusions. In passing it may be pointed out that the word “sound” is “another of the same.” These, and lots more like them, are really very pretty questions and most attractive; but perhaps it is best to skate rapidly away from them lest we go through the ice.

So, to begin again. . . . If we may assume that
As it appears in a photograph by Alinari
a competent draughtsman represents an object truthfully as he is acquainted with it—an assumption without which it would seem impossible to have faith in any representational statement whatever—any time-series of pictorial statements about identically the same object becomes of very great interest. The differences between the pictures here reproduced cannot be explained away as mere matters of comparative skill or care in drawing, for drawing is wholly a matter of seeing and reporting, and seeing and reporting between them involve the whole of the problem we are considering. So far from being either negligible or correctible these differences present the crux of a real and most serious question that lies at the very foundation of all museum knowledge.

As on many other occasions, we cannot go behind the record made by a dead man of his sensuous reactions or awarenesses and say that when he carefully and explicitly drew A, B, and C he really meant to draw X, Y, and Z. We cannot, in fact, even say that the old draughtsman ought to have drawn X, Y, and Z, instead of A, B, and C. And we cannot say this because we have no way of knowing what was really there to be seen except in so far as the record made by the dead man himself gives us that information. All we have to base ourselves upon in overriding his statement is the pure assumption that the object has not changed. In strict logic we have no way of knowing or proving that the object has not changed, either slowly or rapidly, continuously or by jerks, and—as shown by our illustrations—we have every certainty that as men saw it it did change. All philosophers assure us that we can have no possible knowledge of the thing in itself, or (to use its official names) the Ding an sich or ontological object. Also, we know only too well that the epistemological object (again to use the official name) which you and I see with our own eyes is different to the eyes of everyone who sees it. If it were not for this there would never be any trouble in matching ribbons or any discussions about fakes and originals, and art experts would be out of luck and fees.

If the object were the same for all of us, then some bright fellow would long ago have invented a fine “scientific” gadget that would give us automatic self-recording dial readings for everything of importance about the object and would thereby have reduced our aesthetic perceptions and valuations to a sort of engineering practice about which practical and successful men would allow no disagreement. It would absolve us from the boring and tedious task of going to museums and looking at works of art. We could look up any works of art we like in some handy set of tables and, by finding their logarithms or stars or the sizes of the type their names are printed in, would know all about them and their desirability without bothering to move from our swivel chairs, let alone going to look at them. To an extent that is little realized this is what actually is accomplished in the short histories of art and the starred lists of Baedeker and Murray. A charming example of it is to be found in the system of capitalization utilized by Béraldi in his Graveurs du XIX° siècle, which was the firm basis for most of the American “taste” of the eighties and nineties for French nineteenth-century prints. If Kunstwissenschaft were really a scientific pursuit it would ultimately come to some such desirable and economical end as that; and it must be admitted that for those who have taken its thirty-third degree a knowledge of books and photographs is much more important than any mere first-hand acquaintance with actual works of art. (In passing it may be remarked that a photograph is not a record of a human sensuous awareness of an object but only the possible occasion of an infinite number of such awarenesses of a photograph, which is a very different thing. Much the same is true of a cast.)

It would seem, therefore, that there is nothing for it but to admit that the particular piece of sculpture represented in our illustrations was actually different for each of the men who made a picture of it. This allows us at least two different intellectual ways of looking at the matter. We can take the attitude either that a new and different statue was specially created for each beholder each time that he beheld it, or that the statue was elastic and pro-
As Marco Dente (died 1527) engraved it.

As Sisto Badalocchio etched it about 1606.

As the illustrator of Marliani's "Urbis Romae topographia," Rome, 1544, made a woodcut of it.

As Thurneysen engraved it for Sandrart's "Sculpturæ veteris admiranda, sive delineatio vera . . .," Nuremberg, 1680.
teen and constantly changed its shape without changing its identity—much like the comic little rubber heads that used to be the delight of small boys at Coney Island and Revere Beach. As between these two choices it is the elastic one that, miracle for miracle, is the easier to swallow, because it leaves at least some sort of nebulous substratum for conversation.

If we regard time as a kind of dimension, more or less as it seems to be thought of by many modern thinkers, then the changes in form called for by the elastic alternative become neither more nor less than additional examples of the sort of change we are accustomed to in perspective. We know, as matter of the common experience that is built into all our practice in life, that when we shift our position in space with regard to an object our sensuous awareness or report of it undergoes great change, e.g., white round drums become red rectangles, pine forests become blue clouds, and the sound made by a railroad train changes its key as it approaches and leaves us. Reason tells us not only that this is the price paid for a homogeneous space but that without the assumption of a homogeneous space there could be no physical science of the kind we are acquainted with; for the very possibility of that science seems to be predicated upon constancy of the interior relations of an object through all its spatial displacements, i.e., constancy of a kind that simply could not exist in a non-homogeneous space. There should be no difficulty, therefore, in accepting similar changes as the result of displacements in time. If there is any serious difficulty about it, then there can be no homogeneity of time; and if that is so, then it may be asked: What about everything—especially in an art museum?

Thus, for an object to have any definite physical form, its apparent shape and condition must change as we shift our positions with regard to it in time as well as in space. This is only another way of saying that, so far as “I” am concerned, the shape, color, etc., of an object depend fully as much upon “me” and my spatial and time relations to the object as upon the object itself. In still other words, the apparent shape of an object is at least a three-term proposition, and any change in any of the terms changes the final apparent result. As the passage of time prevents there being any such thing as a permanent apparent condition of an object, so also does it prevent there being any such thing as knowable or recognizable “original condition” of an object, as is shown by the impossibility of determining when that so interesting condition either came into being or ceased to exist or what it was like. This means that it is impossible for us ever to see or know an object out of the past as it was seen or known in the past, and, incidentally, that it is impossible for us to “restore” an old object to its “original condition.”

The implications of these two facts are so serious that they should be indicated even though there is no space here to deal with them in an adequate way.

The fact that it is impossible for us to know what things have looked like in the past (remember that three or more term proposition!) is of importance because it directly and inescapably contradicts the usual assumption that we can and do know old objects as they were known by their makers and their contemporaries. Innocent as this point may seem it has rather unexpected consequences because it means that a very great deal of the most orthodox and “scientific” art history and writing and teaching about art is reduced to the status of mere fiction, the value of which is to be sought not in any objective knowledge or information that it may purport to convey but in its purely subjective literary merits. Goethe, Hazlitt, Fromentin, Ruskin, and Pater are still read, not because they “knew about art” but because they had interesting ideas and emotions and especially because they were literary craftsmen who were able to demonstrate by their choice and handling of words that when they wrote about style they knew what they were talking about. If “les messieurs en -us, au delà du Rhin,” as Sainte-Beuve called the Lépnius and Curtius of his time, and their emulators and imitators in other tongues, have not fared so well with posterity, the reason, in spite of all their tremendous learning, is not
As Ransonnette engraved it for Poncelin's "Chef-d'oeuvres de l'antiquité...," Paris, 1784

As Piroli engraved it for the "Musée Napoléon," Paris, 1804

As it was engraved for the complete edition of Winckelmann, Prato [1834]

As it was engraved for the "Clarac," Paris, 1839-1841
far to seek. It would seem that book-learning and book-keeping of their particular formless and dessicated kind about wine, women, song, and art imply no acquaintance at all with those exciting things in the only ways that are interesting or dangerous or that do anyone any good; and the world, for all its stupidity, doesn’t take long to find it out and, yawning, to forget.

A curious side issue of this general situation is that by far the best way to discover what people at any time in the past thought older art was like is to explore not the pages of the learned writers but the dark storerooms of the museums to which are retired the fakes and forgeries that have fooled people. The work of such a skillful forger as Dossena undoubtedly tells more about what the “competent” groups from 1910 to 1930 thought old statues should look like than all the learned essays and ponderous treatises that were issued during those years. Nothing could possibly be more illuminating for our knowledge of what past generations have thought about the art of their past than a carefully selected and arranged collection of good old forgeries, but as yet no great museums have had the courage (or possibly the forgeries?) to make such collections available to the public—except of course in their classical departments, which, the world over, have always had a strong penchant for the “Roman copy.”

Except in initial intent there would seem to be little ultimate difference between museum restorations and the skillful effects produced by the men who fake old objects for sale. The most we can do to an object is to make willful alterations in it which put it in a condition we prefer to that in which we found it. Call the process anything you like, make all the learned arguments you like; when you are all through, it comes down just to that and not to anything else. Our practice in regard to this kind of thing is wholly illogical and inconsistent. We have every moral certainty that no tidy housekeeper in ancient Athens or Thebes, any more than one in modern Cambridge, would have been happy or content with runcible utensils—and yet we are most careful to preserve the patination on our ancient bronzes even though we are certain that it prevents us from knowing whether they were decorated by the use of several different colored alloys and whether they were in part plated with antimony. Connoisseurs of painting cherish the crackle on their old panels, although it comes only with time and stands irremovably in the way of any knowledge of or restoration to “original condition.” Contrariwise, in the same collections, we see ancient statues and woodwork from which the polychromy (sic) has been recently and officially scraped and dissolved away in the hope of revealing on the newly scarred and tortured surfaces traces of what is euphemistically called the “original paint.” In view of all the solemn and polysyllabic talk about that kind of paint it is well to remember that there is no demonstrable way of recognizing it when it is reached or of holding on to it when it has been recognized. A high proportion of the fine old prints with the desirable “old ivory tone of time” had to be reduced to the laundry whiteness that reeks of chlorine before that tone could be achieved by means of discreet applications of appropriate coloring matter. It is said that a sufficiently thick soup made of musty old books about art is the very best pigment for the purpose. In the eighteenth century they covered their vulgarly bright Dutch paintings with brown goo, which for the connoisseurs of the time produced the very best of original conditions. In the middle of the last century Gothic sculpture was covered with modern paint—gaily, as a means of restoration to original (and salable) condition, and presciently, as a means of enabling later experts to make reputations by removing it. In the event all this kind of thing boils down very simply to a question of contemporary tastes in original conditions—for there is obviously a very wide choice among those proffered by the experts—and the selection in fact is made on the basis of current fashion. When anyone is foolish enough to say “Now we know,” he says only that it is the current fashion to think thus and so and that he follows the fashion in these matters just as he does in his use of the current technical jargon.
As engraved on wood for Dr. Lübke's "Grundriss . . .," Stuttgart, 1868

As illustrated in Murray's "History of Greek Sculpture," London [1890]

As it was photographed recently by Alinari

As it was taken by another contemporary photographer
and the cut of his pants. But perhaps, as a museum man, it is disloyal to the family to make suggestions such as these. It may be that it is our family duty to make and put down restorations for our successors to undo and make reputations with, just as the Englishman of several generations ago put down port so that his grandsons also could enjoy the gout.

Dan Daly (or was it T. W. Higginson?) said, “Of course you can never be like us, but be as like us as you’re able to be.”

Apparently we are faced by a dilemma. Either our works of art exist for us only as we are sensuously aware of them in the present or they are at most handles or indices to abstract ideas which have no locus, no physical being, and only a conceptual (as distinct from a sensuously apparent) form. In the first case they are tangible objects, in the second they are mere reminders of things that lie the other side of Aleph naught, in the strange country where there are no existence theorems and no law of excluded middle:

Where Alph, the sacred river, ran  
Through caverns measureless to man  
Down to a sunless sea.

Some of the difficulties about tangible objects have been indicated above. The evil of the trans-Alephian things comes out when we use them, as we constantly do, as justifications for making concrete alterations in concrete objects—because then we are trying to make the known conform to the unknowable. As the Red King might have said, these are very neat sentences if you know what they mean.

In any event it is obvious that the next to the best way to get all balled up is to try to think about simple and obvious things. The best way, of course, is to take them for granted and never think about them at all.