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Norman Bryson
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Word and image

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*This book was awarded the
Prix de la Confédération Internationale des Négociants
en Oeuvres d'Art 1980*

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WORD AND IMAGE

*French painting of the
Ancien Régime*

NORMAN BRYSON

Fellow of King's College, Cambridge



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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Tokyo, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521276542

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First published 1981

First paperback edition 1983

Reprinted 1985 1986 1987 1994 1995 1997

Re-issued 2011

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Catalogue Card Number: 81-10124

ISBN 978-0-521-23776-5 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-27654-2 Paperback

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For Alan and Linda Rubin

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Finally the journey leads to the city of Tamara. You penetrate it along streets thick with signboards jutting from the walls. The eye does not see things but images of things that mean other things: pincers point out the toothdrawer's house; a tankard, the tavern; halberds, the barracks; scales, the grocer's. Statues and shields depict lions, dolphins, towers, stars: a sign that something – who knows what? – has as its sign a lion or a dolphin or a tower or a star . . . The wares, too, which the vendors display on their stalls are valuable not in themselves but as signs of other things: the embroidered headband stands for elegance; the gilded palanquin, power; the volumes of Averroes, learning; the ankle bracelet, voluptuousness. Your gaze scans the streets as if they were written pages: the city says everything you must think, makes you repeat her discourse, and while you believe you are visiting Tamara you are only recording the names with which she defines herself and all her parts. However the city may really be, beneath this thick coating of signs, whatever it may contain or conceal, you leave Tamara without having discovered it. Outside, the land stretches, empty, to the horizon; the sky opens, with speeding clouds. In the shape that chance and wind give the clouds, you are already intent on recognising figures: a sailing ship, a hand, an elephant.

Italo Calvino

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Preface

ACCORDING TO LEGEND, the birds paid homage to the great realist painter of antiquity, Zeuxis, by flying down to eat from his painted vine. The grapes of Zeuxis form the limit-case of an aesthetic which has rarely been far from the centre of art in the West: the utopian dream of art as a perfect reduplication of the objects of the world. Yet the legend of the grapes of Zeuxis points also in another direction which art in the West has always followed, and with as much enthusiasm: the idea of art as a place where certain dimensions of the real world are to be renounced. For the birds, pursuing the utopian objective of painting as the site where objects reappear in all their original presence and plenitude, everything which stands in the way of perfect reproduction is impediment, obstacle. But for ourselves, for humanity, art begins where an artificial barrier between the eye and the world is erected: the world we know is reduced, robbed of various parameters of its being, and in the interval between world and reproduction, art resides. An image by Hilliard may well stand for the universal type of the work of art, for very deep in human thought, as the anthropologists tell us, lies the idea of art as miniaturisation. All miniatures seem to have an aesthetic quality about them, and conversely the vast majority of works of art are small scale. One might think such a characteristic to be primarily an affair of economy of means and materials; and one might appeal to support from works which are undoubtedly artistic but are also on a grand scale. Indeed, a very cogent aesthetic was propounded by Burke in defence of almost the opposite case: the Sublime appears when we contemplate objects on a scale which exceeds the familiar – and here ‘scale’ may include not only physical size, but emotional intensity; Sublimity appears in the faces of men in the throes of death as well as in the spectre of Brocken. But one must be clear about the idea of reduction. In contemplating a painting of the Alps, or such a work as the *Raft of the Medusa*, we are still within reduction: that which was colossal is now miniature. In the case of the spectre, as in all those instances where a peculiar aesthetic emotion is released by contact with the panoramic – and this is perhaps why people visit the Grand Canyon or the Pyramids, and look in a certain way at the night sky – the *frisson* is again triggered by a collapse of normal awareness of scale. The measure of six feet

is experienced as minuscule; and in that overthrow of habitual measurement lies an aesthetic value. Even such work as the frescoes in the Sistine Chapel are a small-scale model, despite their impressive dimensions, since the subject they depict is the End of Time; and the same is true of the cosmic symbolism of religious monuments. However much these may approach the colossal they are still miniature in relation to those other spatial, temporal, and numinous dimensions they invoke. And the catalogue of Western arts is itself a list of renunciations: with sculpture, of texture and colour; with painting, of volume; with both, of time.

Two impulses, one to resurrect and one to renounce, seem between them to define the painting of the West. On the one hand, what Lévi-Strauss calls the 'avid and ambitious desire to take possession of the object', a desire which calls into being all those refinements within the technology of reproduction which for antiquity, as for the Renaissance, constituted painting's progressive history; and on the other hand, an impulse which runs counter to the first, demands a diminution or sacrifice of the object's original presence, and strips away from its unwanted repletion aspects which impede the release of 'aesthetic emotion'.

The most striking manifestations of the second impulse concern the removal of one or more parameters of the physical world. Less obvious is the curtailment of the image through its conversion into a site of meaning. Only rarely has the image been granted full independence – allowed simply to exist, with all the plenary autonomy enjoyed by the objects of the world. Throughout its existence, painting has sought to circumscribe and delimit the autonomous image by subjecting it, as part of the overall impulse of renunciation, to the external control of discourse.

Stylistic history takes as its mission the description of successive visual styles, following one upon the other in unbroken dynastic order. But alongside this familiar and untroubled saga of continuities lies another, semantic history, only partly visible to the stylistic eye, and full of turbulence; a history not merely of meanings, but of ceaseless conflict between the image as it seeks fullness and autonomy, and the renunciatory impulse which refuses the image that primal plenitude, and seeks its conversion from an end to a means, a means to meaning. It is with a fragment of the history of that conflict that this book is concerned.

Acknowledgements

THIS BOOK owes a debt of gratitude to many institutions and individuals without whose support it simply could not have been written: to the Confédération Internationale des Négociants en Oeuvres d'Art, and in particular to Julian Agnew and Henry Rubin in London, and to Georges Baptiste in Brussels; to King's College, Cambridge, which awarded the Fellowship enabling me to carry out the research project of which this study is one part; and to the British Academy, for the generosity that made possible a number of vital field trips to libraries and museums outside the United Kingdom. I would equally like to thank Tim Clark, John Barrell, Frank Kermodé, Tony Tanner, and Anita Brookner, who read through the manuscript at various stages, and whose valuable comments I have tried to reflect in the present version.

In this respect no different from any other text, the book is mysterious about its origins. I am aware that it bears the traces of many past discussions, whose degree of influence over it I am, however, powerless to assess; I may single out with certainty only a fraction of that perhaps indeterminable number, and recall, with thanks, conversations with Alan Rubin, Nick Jolley, Neil MacGregor, Jesse Allen. In the case of the daily, yet always exceptional, stimulation of the intellectual environment at King's, things are possibly even more indistinct, though the debt itself is clear. Where osmosis is at work all lists elide, yet any list must include the names of my colleagues Colin MacCabe and David Simpson; just as I would like it to include the names of those who, in different ways, hosted me through the period of the book's writing: Ray Edwards, Charles-Henri Nabias, Peter Canadine, Marja Lew-Ostik-Kostrovicka, and Bentley Angliss.

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xviii ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Edinburgh (21, 53, 74); Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, the Jules S. Bache Collection, 1949 (26); F.-M. Collection (27); National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Samuel H. Kress Collection (28, 101); Die Staatliche Schlösser und Gärten, Schloss Charlottenburg, Berlin (30, 48); the Trustees of the British Museum (32, 46); the National Trust, Waddesdon Manor, Bucks (33); New Orleans Museum of Art (35); the Trustees of the Wallace Collection, London (36, 37, 38, 39); Musée Granet – Palais Malte, Aix-en-Provence (40); Banque de France, Paris (43); Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut (44, 81); Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (49); the National Swedish Art Museums, Stockholm (51, 52); State Hermitage Museum, Leningrad (55, 62); Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lyon (56); Pushkin Museum, Moscow (58, 71); Laborde Collection, Paris (60); trustees of private collection, Switzerland (63); the Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon, gift of Mrs Marion Bowles Hollis (65); Galerie Fischer Sale 1968 (66); the Art Institute of Chicago, Illinois (67); the Academy, Leningrad (69); Musée des Beaux-Arts, Marseille (75, 89); Collection of Sir Alfred Beit, Malahide Castle, Dublin (77); Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Wolfe Fund, 1931 (78); Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lille (photo: Giraudon) (80); Caisse Nationale des Monuments Historiques et des Sites © Arch. Phot., SPADEM, Paris (82, 91); Musée de Fontainebleau, Musée du Louvre, Paris (85); Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches Architecturales, Paris (86); National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin (87); Musée des Beaux-Arts, Cherbourg (93); Musée des Beaux-Arts de Strasbourg (94); Musée de l'Hôtel de Ville, Paris (96); Musée des Beaux-Arts de Dunkerque (97); Patrimoine des Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels (99); (photo copyright) Musée de l'Armée, Paris (102); Musée Ingres, Montauban (103). Van Gogh, *Wheatfield with Crows*, on pp. 5 and 6, is reproduced by permission of the Collection: National Museum Vincent Van Gogh, Amsterdam.

King's College, Cambridge
May 1980

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