

CHARLES BARBER

1. *In the last thirty years, images have been a focus of scholarship from many different viewpoints, and they have been pivotal in the many scholarly movements, or “turns”, attempting to methodologically reframe the study of art history in general. Can you briefly explain which was your original focus of interest and in which directions your scholarly approach developed over the course of time?*

My initial work was focused upon the liturgical framing of the reception of the image. This led to a greater interest in the words used to articulate works of art in both the past and the present (the work of art, rather than image, remains my preferred term). My attention to words continues as I engage with the varied ways in which works disclose themselves.

2. *Please name up to three books that you consider to have played an important role in orienting your research.*

Martin Heidegger, *On the Origin of the Work of Art*; Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*; Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*.

3. *What is your assessment of traditional art history, with its emphasis on controversial notions and often rigid distinctions between “style” and “iconography”? What do you see as its hermeneutic limits and advantages? Do you think it should be thoroughly replaced with new approaches, or simply revised and integrated into the present-day art-historical discourse?*

I am not so sure that a “traditional” art history is so readily definable; what we see today is a continuation of a long history of methodological fluidity that defines our ill-disciplined “discipline”.

4. *Since the 1990s, our field has experienced many different “turns”, each laying emphasis on one of the multiple dynamics in which images are involved. To what extent did your research benefit from such scholarly debates?*

These changing foci have certainly helped me to shape fresh questions, whether through adopting/adapting the point of view being explored (materiality, for example) or by reacting against the terms proposed (object agency, for example).

5. *In your opinion, which specific notions have become particularly relevant to our present-day understanding of images, and how have they affected your own approach?*

I can only suggest notions that have currency in my own work (framing, dislocation, fracture, resistance), I am reluctant to propose a definition of “our present-day understanding of images”.

6. *What is your specific understanding of “meaning” in visual objects? How do images manage to convey messages, and what are the implications?*

I think that “meaning” resides in our persuasive appropriations of what images propose.

7. *To what extent is “meaning” determined by factors not immediately associated with the specific visual appearance of images, such as mise-en-scène strategies, conditions of visibility, and more generally the experiential dimension of viewers?*

When is meaning determined?

8. *In your view, are we now better equipped to reconstruct and more deeply understand the complex relationship between the visual appearance of an image and the expectations of its viewers?*

Better equipped than whom? I have my doubts that we (or those that came before us or those that will follow us) can claim a superior point of view.

9. *To what extent can images contribute to informing their viewers’ understandings of other images and other aspects of reality and experience?*

This would depend upon the work to which the viewer chooses to put any given image.

10. *What is your assessment of the materiality of images?*

It is both fundamental and but one aspect of the work of art.

11. *In your view, how can we approach the “social life” of images? In what sense can we assume that images interrelate with their viewers and users?*

This would depend upon the work to which the viewer chooses to put any given image.

12. *Does the experience of images exclusively imply the exercise of sight, or do other senses also play a role? If possible, please cite a relevant case from your research field.*

Icons could be seen, eaten, smelt, touched, and heard. Whether our process as art historians is bound to one of these senses or can embrace some or all of them is a situational choice we can make as practitioners within the field.

13. *Recent studies have emphasized that “iconicity” (or “visual efficacy”) is not an exclusive property of artistic images but can also be regarded as an attribute of non-figurative objects, such as elements of landscape, natural materials, and living beings. To what extent can such objects be included in an art-historical narrative?*

This may depend upon whether we understand iconicity to be a manifestation of productive knowledge or a mode of framing things in the world.

14. *Many studies have focused on the dynamics by which images originally meant for a specific viewing context come to be transferred to, appropriated by, and transformed and reshaped in another. Which hermeneutic tools can be useful in our analysis of such phenomena?*

Genealogy, per M. Foucault.

15. *English is more and more the lingua franca of global art-historical scholarship. To what extent may we avoid applying to non-European contexts notions drawn from an essentially Western European understanding of images and their materiality and meaning?*

By listening.

16. *Finally, what are we still lacking? In which direction should we pursue our studies in the following decades?*

That is for each of us to decide.

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