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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?*

From an initial education in Western history and African art history, I have developed a history of images (always considered as objects) in the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia, with a special focus particularly on the different aspects of their making, their status, and their use. The analysis of the ruling systems and artistic productions over a long period, from the 13th to the 19th century, enabled a deeper understanding of the different temporalities of the objects, by encompassing them in the visual and material cultures from which they originated and through which they passed, in order to draw up a history of the statuses accorded to them. Combining different approaches, I have jointly directed several projects on Christian rock art, in particular on the UNESCO World Heritage site of Lalibela, and on the constitutive materials of paintings, technological and artistic processes based on ensembles of wall paintings and a corpus of icons from the museum of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies in Addis Ababa, at the crossroads of history, archaeology and material sciences. On a broader level, my work is reconsidering the conditions and modalities of writing a history of African objects before the 20th century and the issues at stake.

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

While preparing my doctoral thesis, some authors accompanied the questions I was asking myself. Ahead, they had proposed some approaches that allowed me to build my own, adapted to my topics of study. I began my thesis in 1995 and that of Jérôme Baschet, then recently published (*Lieu sacré, lieu d'images, les fresques de Bominaco (Abruzzes, 1263). Thèmes, parcours, fonctions*, Paris-Rome, La Découverte - Ecole française de Rome, 1991) confirmed my conviction to look at the sets of images, murals, and illuminations I was studying at the time as total objects interacting with places, including wall paintings in monuments and illumination in books. It is not this particular book that I would include in my top three readings today, but it was a starting point (I now advise my students to read *L'iconographie médiévale*, Paris, 2008). Moreover, in a history of

Ethiopian art that was still very much marked by the notion of influence when it came to identifying the engravings that had served as models, Serge Gruzinski, and especially *La pensée métisse* (Paris, Fayard, 1999), provided me with clues for thinking about the choice made by Ethiopian kings, clerics, and painters to sometimes make use of foreign images and transform them into new forms. This prompted me to always look for what was the third term of the encounter, what he called the “attractor”, the way in which artistic exchange and transformations could take place within and beyond a connected history. Later, and in relation to other concerns, it was Eric Michaud’s book (*Histoire de l’art. Une discipline à ses frontières*, Paris, Hazan, 2005) that helped me to formulate my research on the intellectual ruts we inherited, and on nationalist and ethnicist approaches to art.

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?*

Without limiting art history to that, dating and attributing – its first operations when it was constituted as an academic discipline – are still fundamental operations in order to avoid anachronistic, even atemporal iconological interpretations. This does not prevent us from reexamining the ways in which we proceed, from reformulating them if necessary, and from reconsidering their meaning. Thus, questions of dating also lead us to reconsider the different ways in which objects relate to time. Furthermore, although attributing is not an objective of my practice, I do address the question of the modalities of creative gestures, of the types of authorship, of how the “author” is designated, whether the latter is perceived as individual or collective, and of the socio-political stakes of these attributions and determinations. In a context of documentary paucity, the notion of style is still needed as a method of inquiry but also as a gateway to explore creative processes. Differentiating styles is not an end but a first operation of sorting things out in the aim to go further. In both cases, there are questions that remain unanswered as to motivations or formal choices, but this provides a basis for examining the modalities and meaning of a figural thinking at work.

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?*

What we call “turns” is often specific to a field of social sciences, or to a community of researchers, which emphasizes or returns to the practices, objectives and subjects of another field. Each of these turns is therefore specific to a particular group, to which one aspires to belong. If we are sometimes called upon to take position in relation to these “turns”, which we do not always feel concerned with, it is – beyond that – very important to always think of our objects as global and to clearly set out our choices of approach and their limits. Furthermore, we need develop a reflexive way of thinking that situates – as much as possible – what we have done and what we are doing in the historiographical

debate but also in a broader way, in relation to systems of thought, moments in history, and places on the globe where we are active and where we are speaking from.

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?*

My ongoing investigations are driven by Walter Benjamin's notion of aura, at least as developed by George Didi-Huberman at the end of *Devant le temps. Histoire de l'art et anachronisme des images* (2000), and more generally by the questions raised by temporal, geographical and cultural closeness and distance, which imply considering the different regimes of historicity experienced by and through objects, as well as reflecting on how on the art historian situates himself in a given place and time in relation to material works.

Moreover, working in Ethiopia and in Africa more generally, it would be interesting to revisit the notion of "thing", already considered by Otto Pächt on the one hand and Jean Bazin on the other, in the aim to investigate the ways in which the so-called sacred thing-object, as it is defined or perceived, is construed in African contexts and then to come back to European ones.

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

How images would convey messages and who would understand them is always a question that implies a reflection on the different operating modes of various kinds of images. This includes an acknowledgment of the creators' intentions (and the tensions that may arise among the different persons taking part in it) and the people works are made for in both the moment of their making and, possibly, in future times. Some images may have been designed and produced as highly elaborate ideological discourses, others as primarily evoking a being or presence, or an effect. Moreover, images can carry different meanings than the religious or political texts from the same period, to which they may refer. How these messages are conveyed remains to be examined in each case. The same subject in the same style, or even the same image, can also have different meanings or effects depending on the context. The pomp and circumstance surrounding the display of images can change the message it conveys to viewers about what it "represents", i.e., the ways in which the displayed image is made present and is invested with a special status.

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?*

Above all, these issues must be addressed systematically. What consideration is given to these elements, as well as to the reception of images, by those who create, commission and display images? Whatever the answer, even if it is completely negative, this can shed light on their makers' expectations and therefore the status, function, or power (for insignificant that it may be) images are invested with.

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?*

Thanks to work such as that of Michael Baxandall, we are in any case better equipped to ask ourselves this question systematically, but we must accommodate our method of inquiry depending on the objects and the available documentation. We can also wonder how the expectations of the viewers at different times contributed or not to the preservation of certain objects, or some specific features of an object. We should take into account the extent to which perception is conditioned by a number of “filters”, such as, most notably, the modification or disappearance of colours.

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

An image reflects a history into which it is embedded. Like art historians, people who look at images are led – at least mentally – to compare the images and their conditions of display, and this comparison is revealing, although it is rarely expressed in words. The ways in which such feelings were apprehended in the past are difficult to reconstruct in our times.

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

That the materiality of the works is on everyone’s lips is no doubt indicative of how much it had been forgotten, at least by a large number of art historians who, unlike archaeologists or museum curators, for example, have a less direct relationship with works, which they mostly know through photographic reproductions. This is even more evident in the case of images, since the iconic turn, which has affected historical disciplines in particular, has focused on the iconology of images without really considering them as three-dimensional objects. But this also leads to the question of the difficulty of accessing the objects directly. All these elements have led to forget for a while that images have a format, a weight, a position in or on an object, etc. Systematized global and material approaches associated with other kinds of analyses are still rare. Nor is it a question of simply identifying the materials, but of understanding their implementation, their arrangements and, beyond that, the processes, technological know-how, and gestures that enable their making. In this way, taking into account the materiality of the images sets the grounds for an art history that participates in the social sciences. This requires a real interdisciplinarity that understands the background, methods, terminology, and objectives of each field, which is not yet fully implemented and therefore does not yet fully bear fruit in terms of developing new paradigms.

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?*

If we understand the social life of images here as what makes them become exchangeable goods at one time or another, this raises the question of the various kinds of value

they may have in different situations. The issue is particularly relevant for images that were disseminated far from the geographic and cultural context in and for which they were created in either their original form or as replicas or reproductions. The study of the categories of value attributed to images by viewers or users is very helpful as it can bring to the fore all the associations images may happen to carry beyond those for whom and for what they were initially intended and explain on which grounds they may be attractive to beholders who do not understand them or ignore their original iconological project. Furthermore, it questions how an image works and how we look at images beyond their social life.

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.*

The experience of images relies above all on the sense of sight, but at the same time it involves more generally the body notably in a kinaesthetic way: beholders interacting with both static and moving objects through their physical movements. This is the case with religious objects carried in rituals, used as focuses for kinetic devotions, and meant for either an uninterrupted or a fleeting display. In any case, this kinaesthetic relationship to the object also involves other senses, such as hearing and olfaction, that may be aroused by the association of images with musical performances, words of all kinds (proclaimed, whispered, official or not), and ceremonial scents, as well as the smell of incense, body odours, etc. All these aspects are part of experience and must be included in the analysis: questions should be asked as to the extent to which such a multi-sensorial dimension of images was acknowledged by their makers and their audiences. Furthermore, touching a work is often problematic but it would be interesting to perceive a work, and even an image, through this medium and see what this adds to our understanding.

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?*

Including non-artistic elements having an iconic dimension into the art historical narrative seems necessary in the aim to work out larger social, political, and religious frameworks to our understanding of specific situations or phenomena in their multiple aspects. It also raises interesting questions and encourages scholars to reassess the definition of visuality in broader terms.

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?*

The first “tool” is to carry out an in-depth study of the context in which these appropriations and transformations take place, the conditions, motives, effects, and the histor-

ical phenomena in which they are embedded. In this respect, it is a hermeneutic and not a ready-made method to apply. This may seem obvious, but it is rarely carried through to the end. I was confronted with this problem when studying the use of the *Evangelicae Historiae Imagines* engravings realized in the 16th century for over four decades: conceived by the Mallorquin Jesuit Nadal and drawn by Italian Jesuits, they were finally engraved and published in Antwerpen, then copied and adapted in other books in the 17th and 18th centuries, and widely used in Ethiopia in the eighteenth century in a context of violent opposition to Catholic aims, where a taste for images disconnected from their provenance prevails. But one could go much further.

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?*

We are facing an imperative of communicability of notions, and we must therefore be able to recognize the structures at work and translate them when dealing with similar phenomena. But to do this, we also need to broaden our knowledge as well as our terminology and lexical practices. It is necessary to carry out, and be able to publish, research on the lexical and semantic history of notions relating to creation, art, divinity, representation, etc. Such studies require time, and will not necessarily offer systematic answers on lexical equivalences in different languages. It is important to remember that these are research topics in themselves.

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

The needs are not necessarily the same in the different fields of inquiry. For the arts of Africa, we still need to go into much greater depth on how to make history even if this will vary according to the periods and areas concerned. In the same way, we need to re-examine the relationship between collection, corpus and heritage and the ways in which we rely on objects to recognize when there is history to write. Recent research in the humanities has fully recognized intangible heritage, but we still do not know exactly how to take them into account in an art historical narrative. More generally, the methods of a real history of forms, embodied in a social history, are still poor. We should also take more specifically into account the conditions and situations (place and time) in which our analyses take place.

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