

FLORIANA CONTE

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. Iconographica has contributed to this debate by housing articles that approach images from multiple, including transdisciplinary and transcultural, perspectives. Can you briefly explain which was your original focus of interest and in which directions your scholarly approach developed over the course of time?*

Until my twenties I read novels, some essays on history and literature, I watched many films. In the books I preferred, images played a role in emotional and social life, they could take on a supernatural efficacy, imitating nature as simulacra or even taking revenge on the neglect of men: I hadn't read Kris and Kurz or Schlosser, I didn't know anything about the “legend of the artist” nor of the functions of imitation of art. The narrative around the images that conditioned me was in works of fiction such as Balzac's *Cousin Bette* and *Cousin Pons* and Wilde's *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*; the strategy of staging, and static or dynamic reworking of images of the past and of the contemporary was in movies such as *Rocco and his brothers* and *Conversation piece* by Visconti, *The Age of Innocence* and *Life Lessons* by Scorsese and *Novecento* by Bertolucci. In the last two years of my university studies, I have channeled my interests towards the history of art. *Patrons and Painters* and *Rediscoveries in art* by Francis Haskell then broadened the terms of the investigative mechanism of research that reconstructs the history of images in relation to those who created, wanted, paid for them, and the environment in which they were born, to that for which were commissioned under the conditions in which they have come down to us.

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

Geschichte der Portraitbildnerei in Wachs: ein Versuch (1911) by Julius von Schlosser: while I was studying for the Ph.D. at the Scuola Normale in Pisa and I was twenty-four, I began to familiarize myself with German, so first I read Pommier's 1997 French translation, without fully understanding all the implications of Schlosser's method. Ten years later, while I was writing a book in which funeral sculpture with a memorial function had a decisive place in the reconstruction of the history of art between the State of Milan and the Kingdom of Naples after the death of Caravaggio, I actually read the essay thanks to

the best of three Italian translations released in 2011 (*Storia del ritratto in cera. Un saggio*, edizione annotata e ampliata da Andrea Daninos, 2011).

Rediscoveries in Art. Some aspects of taste, fashion, and collecting in England and France by Francis Haskell (1976): looking at the works and studying the books, history rises again as it really is. I indicate *Rediscoveries* also because, like other books by non-Italian art historians that I consider important, it is written in a clear and engaging language: in fact, the chapters rework a cycle of educational conferences from 1973.

Storia moderna dell'arte in Italia (1990-2009) by Paola Barocchi: it teaches not to separate the "history of art criticism" from the history of art, and to build a very difficult type of book, the history of art book made of literary and visual sources, completely different from an anthology.

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?*

Especially in Italy in the twentieth century and due to the authority of Roberto Longhi, who was only a bit interested in iconography, "style" coincided with the link between quality and the only form of exercise possible for a connoisseur who is also an art historian: the sequence of images of works linked by a name and a progressive chronology using a mimetic language. Today, anyone who imitates Longhi without being an equally excellent connoisseur of images and of the language to be used to write about them risks considering the works in a purely sequential way, to the detriment of their history. Today's history of art still produces important results when it absorbs Longhi's lesson from the first «Paragone», from *Proposte per una critica d'arte* to the following experiences, including popular ones. After all, the history of art can continue to benefit from the fruitful relationship between the recognition of the materiality of the images, the ability to attribute them, the study of the sources and the fortune of both told with the mastery of language and narrative techniques.

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?*

Rather than investigating the meaning in the visual arts and the power of images, I still find profitable those in which images are intended as historical sources to learn about the past and better understand the present. The perspective of the history of reception and the historical fortune of images is an objective starting point even when the research requires specifying a chronology, an attribution, a production context, etc. A revealing case study in my research was that of the Pescocostanzo altarpiece by Tanzio da Varallo: after the historian Gaetano Sabatini (1928) had published the document that allowed its attribution and dating to 1614, and after Roberto Longhi (1943) had proposed the same attribution and dating (apparently independently), for decades the iconography of the altarpiece re-

mained a mystery to all the scholars who dealt with it. Art historians sought an answer in seventeenth century studies, not in those about other periods, and the results of the ruminations were truly imaginative. In 2012 I realized that the central scene of the altarpiece led back precisely to the iconography of images of devotion famous in southern Italy that dated back to the cult, renewed in the seventeenth century, of the icon known as the Madonna of Constantinople: I had known since at least 2001 *Il pennello dell'Evangelista. Storia delle immagini sacre attribuite a san Luca* (1998) by Michele Bacci, and other studies about this medieval image and its fortune.

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?*

Narrative (cf. 1), photography (of works of art and as work of art) and the re-presentation of images of the past in motion in cinema are relevant filters in the understanding of images after the 1950s. Even for non-specialist audiences, these are visual filters that allow access to different forms of knowledge, not just the history of art and images. A certain way of creating and presenting images is now common both in fictional storytelling and in the study of history and artistic creation. Then there is the relationship of images with words: the language guarantees the attempt to reproduce the illusion of movement and the relationship with space. The words, the syntax, the language of ekphrasis in general are fundamental in the historiographic mechanism: the expressive research must be different if you write about the fifteenth century in Florence or about Pop art in Rome.

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

For me, images contain primarily the message of the past, which is also useful for better understanding the present. Francis Haskell demonstrated this concept with the contradictions and the open problems of *History and Its Images* (1993), trying to reconstruct some aspects of the impact of images on historical imagination. Images explain how reality is conditioned by taste, fashions, religious beliefs, money of some men, the actual availability of certain objects on the market at a given historical moment, by contemporary art which always represents the key to access images of the past, from the techniques of reproducing images, from the increasingly technical language that is needed to talk about art and artists.

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?*

The staging strategies, the conditions of visibility, the experiential dimension of the spectators are increasingly decisive factors for the deciphering of an image. Let me explain with two eloquent examples of the relationship between images, their preparation, and the experiential dimension of the spectators: the series of photographs by Thomas Struth. In *Museum Photographs*, the room behind visitors to international museums also frames

the works of the past they are admiring, creating a new image intended for the external viewer. In *Audience*, spectators are also photographed from the front in the halls of the museums, favoring the illusion of inclusion in the external viewer. In both cases, the two most traditional means of reproducing images, painting and photography, merge into a single image that focuses on the spectators who become part of the set-up and of a contemporary architectural and exhibition landscape.

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?*

I believe that photography of works of art and photography as work of art (see 7) have assumed a decisive role (often, however, with photography prevailing over direct inspection of works) also for the interpretation of the meaning of the works placed in their original context or in museums. A work interpreted by a photograph, by an installation, by a new location in an environment different from the one for which it was designed opens the way to different cognitive attitudes, not necessarily contingent on its original meaning. The atlas of images significantly titled *Opere allestimenti fotografie* that Paola Barocchi organized for vol. III**. *Tra Neorealismo ed Anni Novanta, 1945-1990* of *Storia moderna dell'arte in Italia*: the atlas opens with a table dedicated to the visual interpretations of antiquity in which three zooms on the *Annunciation* by Gentile Bellini and on the *Reception of the ambassadors* by Carpaccio. These details were chosen by Roberto Longhi for its *Viatico per cinque secoli di pittura veneziana*, and they make clear that the photography of work of arts is the main language of art history, which in turn owes a lot to the cinema for the concept of the selection of images details.

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

The reproductions and citations of images from the past allow us to decipher the visual language of contemporaneity. The images reproduced in art history books, in academic and popular magazines, especially in electronic publishing, on television, in social media, offer the art historian the tools around which to build critical reflection on how language is evolving in national and international figurative arts and how it affects the social, political, and taste-related orientations of the population. Images inform viewers about the present: in particular, they allow us to understand aspects of the iconography of political communication and that of commercials and advertising photographs. Deciphering the images we are bombarded with every day, and putting them in series giving shape to a centuries-old sequence is also a very efficacious way for teachers to deal with issues of civics.

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

For my generation and for subsequent ones in Italy, the history of art is primarily a history of photographs that transform three-dimensional objects into images. A certain

way of making history of art is based on these images, essentially based on the attributive rearrangement that often ignores the materiality of the objects that are studied in effigy. But the objects have executive characteristics, anomalies, manufacturing findings, which cannot be reproduced in the images. So also because at least since the 1970s the history of art and the works of art themselves (think of the performing arts) coincide with photography, which hands down their occasional materiality, I believe that the materiality of the images coincides now in the common idea with the immateriality of the art they reproduce. It is no coincidence that the twentieth century is the century of the “immaterial form of art”, the Performance Art, which some protagonists of it historicize by exploiting the presumed affinity with the material art par excellence, sculpture, because of the common difficulty of sculptors and performance artists in raising funds from the clients to be compensated. The “immaterial form of art”, which has the body as its main material and its behavior as iconography, finds in documentary photography controlled by the artists the means through which it can be turned into material art: photographs are sold, even if the work of art is immaterial and therefore unsaleable. The concept of the artist as a star is also linked to these photographs that document intangible art, whose image is a simulacrum to be idolized, even if it does not create objects. In this sense, today the materiality of images is transferred from the created object to the artist who creates nothing.

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?*

Images are traditionally related to the viewers through the position of the objects in the architecture that contains them, of the architecture in the urban context, of the city in the territory and in the landscape. In this way, the images always take on a “social life” that coincides with their civic and political function, even when their historical fortunes are studied: if you study street art you get to investigate illegal buildings and landscaping, then to study the social role that certain images had when they were created and the one they are invested with in the course of time, as the context preserving them changes. Furthermore, even the fakes conceived for deceptive purposes explain the “social life” of images: one understands how one century sees another, as for example in the nineteenth century the sculpture and painting of the Quattrocento that wealthy collectors wished to buy.

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.*

In addition to sight for each field concerned with the history of style and iconography, touch should certainly be mentioned, as it is useful for investigations of the surface of panels (especially if you are in doubt about their authenticity) and of sculptures.

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?*

In figurative painting, the landscape is inserted into an image from the point of view of man, even if no human figures are represented in the image. The narration on the landscape adheres to it on a perceptive basis. A historical-artistic narration that gives value to the recovery of the visual experience also as a personal emotional experience has a consolidated and renewable twentieth-century tradition even today in the genre derived from periegetic literature, such as the travel books by Cesare Brandi (*Persia mirabile, Pellegrino di Puglia*, etc.). More generally, images enable viewers to see the landscape through figurative diaphragms: it is natural for an art historian, but also a citizen of average visual culture, to wish to preserve a stretch of landscape that reminds him or her of the environment of Latium and Tuscany pictorially celebrated by Poussin, Lorrain and Salvator Rosa. If one deals with Italian and American painting of the 1960s, the language must adhere to the urban landscape that inspires figurative painters, whose visual elements (petrol pumps, advertising billboards, signs, signs, cars on road etc.) are the real subjects of the painting, not its background. Obviously, the continuous scars have progressively destroyed the fluid connection between place, architecture, city, work of art and art history that was typical above all of the Italian tradition, in which the landscape is closely connected to literature and art and it is part of the same cultural heritage.

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 stringent links between the reproductions of images in an attribution-based analysis that also includes, where appropriate, iconographic issues, is always the basis of the art historian's instrumentation. This instrumentation cannot ignore the knowledge of techniques, materials, styles, architecture, the market, artistic institutions, sources, historiography, language, literature, philosophy, reproduction, conservation, and restoration. All the other professional skills that accompany art historians in their research (the chemist, the restorer, the computer engineer, etc.) are very useful but cannot replace the figure of the connoisseur who becomes a historian. Non-invasive diagnostic investigations and IT-assisted humanities are an increasingly dominating presence in popular and scientific publishing and university courses, to the point of downplaying the specific role of art history, even if they have nothing to do with the latter's focus and expertise.

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?*

The global and prevailing Western point of view is about the concept of "art that imitates nature". The relationship between art and nature, the "imitation", involves numerous points in the fields of culture and the classification of reality. In other cultures, with other languages, imitation is not the base of art. And each culture has precise words to speak about its concept of art. So "basic English" helps to understand each other during oral and written expositions, but it strongly sets limits to the topics for which every cul-

ture and every language have technicalities, discursive models, argumentative styles, grammatical and syntactic structures, visual systems typical of the community that uses it and not always transposable into other languages, unless we run the risk of impoverishing our argumentation skills. The exclusive use of basic English leads to the perspective of an Anglophone monoculture (Harald Weinrich 2002), which offers the undeniable advantage of disseminating information in a fast and universally understandable way. Yet, this may result in an excessively simplified diffusion, which does not allow for argumentative subtleties and semantic nuances, may trivialize communication, and lead to the loss of history. If a language no longer has the words to convey a scientific message (in the history of art or any other science), it turns into a mere communication tool for daily occasions or a little more.

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

Ultimately, the primary task of the art historian always remains to connect series of words and series of images to reconstruct history and put it in direct relationship with people's lives. Our studies are often conditioned by the simplifying methods of analysis of contemporary art criticism even when we study the art of the past. Art is asked to entertain, not to represent a unifying, identifying element that breaks down social barriers and improves reality. The relationship between generalism and specialism, today skewed in favor of the latter, should also be overturned to resurrect the all-encompassing system of culture promoted by humanists.

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