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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?*

My original formal training as an art historian was in Byzantine Art and Iconoclasm. That means simultaneously in visual/material *and* conceptual art history, embedded in archaeologically-attested materials as well as those preserved above ground, with a strong focus on integration in related questions of religion, rhetoric (especially polemic and apologetic), highly complex and unreliable literary sources with philological difficulties, anthropology and disputed historical contexts. One may say all these strands have remained in my work as it has extended back to Roman and Greek antiquity, forwards to later medieval, early modern and recent receptions of Classical art, and across Eurasia to Islamic, Chinese and Indian art. The approaches I have most championed include the viewing of art in relation to different kinds of materiality and the significantly understudied three-dimensional semiotics of the ways objects (like boxes, polyptychs, buildings) offer themselves to experience. A continuing interest in rhetoric has led both to the study of the historiography of the discipline in its own right and to a specific focus on the problems of ekphrasis as an intermedial discourse designed tendentiously to ‘translate’ the silent materiality of works of art into items appropriable by text, textual argument and analysis.

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

Oh dear. Very difficult! I have spent so much time at war with Gombrich’s *Art and Illusion* (1960), which is brilliant, brilliantly written and wrong-headed. His version of naturalism (and notably his subtle Eurocentric argument for the superiority of European models of representation) continues to be a target for attack! Because I work on late antiquity, I too have been caught (like so many of my predecessors) in the great war between Riegl’s *Spätromische Kunstindustrie* and Strzygowski’s *Orient oder Rom* (both published in 1901). Both are superb as explorations of empirical data – the former in its rigorous formalist descriptions and range of materials, the latter in its pioneering movement outside the geographic norms of its time into the arts of the late antique east and late ancient Egypt; both are fundamentally wrong – Riegl in the proposition of *Kunstwollen* as some

kind of salvific underpinning for the discipline and Strzygowski in the racism that ended up so sympathetic to National Socialism. I see most of what the discipline has been doing in our time as the legacy of the line between *Spätromische Kunstindustrie* before World War 1 and *Art and Illusion* in the wake of World War 2.

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 don't believe new approaches have really changed things very much. The great value of the traditional discipline is its rigorous standards (formalist, stylistic, iconographic, and philological), which will always form the empirical basis. We are now past the post-structuralist wave that glutted the field with a lot of literary-derived theoretics that have less applicability to material culture than its cleverer exponents imagined. I think 'theory' needs always to be flexible and adopted *ad hoc* in relation to the topic at issue in any given art historical account. Some of the more recent approaches I very much do espouse, like comparativism or an ecologically-grounded art history, are themselves rooted in the old universalist ambitions of the great generations of art historians in the first half of the twentieth century and in the traditional instinct to put objects into contexts.

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?*

We live in the present. The most interesting aspect of a historiographical study of the field is that you may imagine you are looking at the study of Roman art or Renaissance art, but in fact you are looking at the playing out of ideologies and political/social positions held by the participants at the time of writing in relation to those topics. We are no different. Current debates ('decolonizing the curriculum', questions of gender and sexuality, the environmental crisis) are 'where we are at', as they say, and ramify against what we write now. In my case, my current work is comparative (looking at art in the world religions and especially early Indian Buddhist art by comparison with late antique early Christian and late ancient Jewish art, all of roughly the same periods), but it has also inevitably confronted questions of landscape ecology and colonial histories...

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?*

We live in a revolutionary era of the image: the rise of the digital, the streaming culture of movies and series, texts and novels recalibrated (usually in trivialising forms) into visual epitomes as films or documentaries, advertising in still and moving images, AI, all aspects of our lives conducted by screen, the video recording of our every move, the faking of truth in all kinds of ways using the psychological power of images in eliciting impulses to desire or aversion, the arousal of anger... This incredible revolution (at least as

great as the move from roll to codex or the rise of the printing in the history of the book, but now so much directed translinguistically to the use of images) is what we live *now*. We cannot have the distance to grasp or assess it, but it is driving our study of art more than any notion or concept.

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

I am not a fan of the idea of images as some kind of instrumental conveyor of ‘messages’ or ‘concepts’. This is too linguistic a model for how art works. Nor do I like the metaphors of ‘communication’ or ‘conveyance’. Images ‘speak’ silently and with multiple meanings depending on the psychological and cultural experience of those who view them. They cannot be entirely controlled (although the attempts to do so are frequent) and they always occupy a spectrum of potential significances. Meaning is something viewers may choose to impute into art, but also to withhold from assenting to. One issue in the current culture and the rise of screens is the concomitant loss of a sense of the materiality of objects – three dimensions, tactility, weight, tangibility, smell. All these are part of what we might call ‘meaning’.

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?*

Since I do think relevant meaning (which is not the same as authorial intention or understandings at different viewing eras) is constructed at the point of reception, such factors as *mise-en-scène* strategies, visibility conditions and the experiential dimension are essential. These can to some extent be controlled by the maker or propagator of images, but – even in so ritually circumscribed a space as a church – the choices of what to look at, in what order and with what obedience to or disregard of decorum makes a great deal of difference.

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 do not believe in progress or evolutionary development when it comes to the human sciences. Why should we be more advanced or intelligent about issues of visual subtlety, visual appearance or viewing than that old enemy (and lover) of art Plato or than a great apologist of painting like Leonardo? Why should our art history, so less learned than that of Riegl, Panofsky or Wind, be better than theirs? No one has thought through the psychological complexities of the visual or of its description more brilliantly than Philostratus (whose *Imagines* were written in the third century AD) – the subject of a book I am currently engaged on with my friend Michael Squire. So we are only better equipped in the sense that we have (if we pay attention) access to the deep thinking of the past and we have issues of our own, compelling to our time, that were not necessarily foregrounded at other times. However, that does not mean progress!

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

I do think images comment on other images and on their viewers' viewing of them. At any rate, so many of the reliefs I am studying now (from the great stūpa of Amarāvātī in south eastern India, 1st century BC to 3rd century AD) stage their scenes in the context of representing multitudes viewing them and the events they depict. That observation – that scenes are staged with a surrounding of viewers within the image – is equally true of imagery in Roman art or Attic painted pots. The Amarāvātī sculptures perform a commentarial role both on other images and on other monuments at the site. That commentary plays out against the scriptures to which they allude and the commentaries on those scriptures on which they riff. That problematic of images playing on other images, commenting and being commented on, is no different from the ways Christian art plays on other Christian art, sometimes on earlier pagan art and always on Scripture, nor is it so different from the use of digital imagery in film or on the web. Sometimes contiguities work by careful choice (e.g. an art historian's powerpoint), often by the happenstance of what google throws up or Pinterest offers to a random click.... What you see is framed by what else is present and you as the viewer have the choice to go with that or edit the context out...

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

I think materiality is key, all the more so in the traditional fields because our dominant means of communication now is online and virtual. Of course, virtuality also has its materialities (from AI glasses to computers to screens) but these are not the materialities of the objects visualised. My father was a potter and I remain keenly aware of the need to complete a pot by handling, lifting, cupping it, as of the need to complete a painting by viewing it in the flesh... How old fashioned and conservative I have become!

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?*

Clearly, both the idea of a social life to images and the rich recent art history of this theme have real substance. Whether we take this as a matter of patronage and making, or of viewing and reception, or more anthropologically according to something like the 'nexus' proposed by Alfred Gell, it is obvious that images stand in a space between their makers, promoters and users, supplying different kinds of signification to all these groups as well as to individuals within them. How much further current approaches can get in this area, I am less sure. But there is a case for attempting to construct parallel and comparative social lives for similar kinds of images (or for the same images that move between cultures though trade or gift exchange).

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 sole emphasis on sight is a terrible aberration and the result among modern students of too much internet! All objects have a smell (remember the not wholly pleasant

cow-glue in old books and the dry scent of dust). All objects have weight. Ekphrasis in antiquity is obsessed with the sounds, smells, even tastes of the visual (including the ways it plays in the imagination), since the visual is really a route into the synaesthetic. No image executed in pre-digital materials is fully flat or dematerialised: even analogue photographs have negatives and positives played out on the surfaces of the paper chosen for the print. In my fields of work, the play of engraving and stippling on metal or stone against the voluminous implications of deep relief carving (even in 'flat' reliefs as opposed to fully 3-d sculpture) is essential for the material, visual and rhetorical articulation of almost all ancient art (Classical, Chinese, Indian, Mesoamerican). And the thickness or thinness of paint on plaster or paper or canvas or board is no less important than colour, form and design.... This is before we start on questions of function such as works of art that are intended to supply scent (like censers) or light (like lamps).

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?*

It has always been the case in monumental art that the choice of a site is as much part of the monument as the man-made addition to the site that might transform the whole into 'art'. The 3000 BC stone circle at Castlerigg in Cumbria is small – nothing like Stonehenge – but nonetheless a substantial monumental act in the mountains. What it does, *in its site*, is to define the circle of mountains around it (visible as circling peaks across 360 degrees from the spot) as precisely that – a totally natural, magical circle whose phenomenological and environmental circularity is defined through or made sensibly present for human participants by the smaller circle of stones (made from the materials of those mountains but differently and humanly configured). The dialogue is what makes the art. It is in the category of all great landscape art (Smithson, Goldsworthy, Ai Wei Wei etc) but in a different league.... How can we exclude the non-figurative, landscapes, natural materials, living beings from art, iconicity or art history?

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?*

I think part of the nature of art is its magical quality of transformation – the metamorphosis of raw materials into something alive in a different way from those materials in the viewer's experience. That goes for all kinds of bricolage, spoliation, appropriation, copying, replication and so forth. The problem with generalized hermeneutic tools here is that the historical and contextual situations are different in all cases and the hermeneutics need to be adapted to the discursive story being told by the art historian.

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?*

This is a fundamental question. It has two elements. First, it is actually a disaster that English should be the lingua franca: the great strength of art history (and I write as an English-speaker) is its multiple European languages/conceptual systems of expression: reducing them to one is to write out so much of what has been done and what is possible. The aesthetic and philosophical sensibilities of what can be said in French, Italian, German, Spanish, Russian are different from and massively enriching by contrast with what can be said in English. Second, all these European languages are grounded in Eurocentric assumptions founded in the Christian reception of the Classical tradition and their joint reflections on images. This entire tradition is totally inadequate to cultural systems founded on entirely different conceptual models – notably, for instance, the rejection of real presence in the ‘emptiness’ of Buddhist traditions in e.g. India, China, Korea and Japan, the rejection of linear time and the denial of the notion of a single lifetime as the one and only life of a given human being or animal in traditions from Hinduism to many oral cultures in Australasia or Africa and so forth. Whatever is meant by concepts like ‘art’, ‘image’, ‘relief’, ‘sculpture’, etc., in the multiple cultures west, south and east of Europe has never been properly studied – and to reduce these multiple things to deeply ancestral European terminologies is frankly reductive and ridiculous (quite apart from neo-Colonialist apologetic politics, whether explicit or not).

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

Above all, we need two huge projects. First, to grasp the key terms relevant to art history in all the ancient and living literate cultures/languages east of Europe – Arabic, Persian and so forth as far as Japanese – as well as south (one thinks of ancient Egyptian, Sudanese, Ethiopian, Yoruba as well as Islamic north African) and as far as is possible looking also at the literate ancient (pre-European) cultures of the Americas. That is a philological project for hundreds of scholars gathering all written references and understanding the concepts within their own cultural encyclopaedias and taxonomies of meanings across time. Second, there needs to be an anthropological project of the same kind looking at the extremely rich conceptual languages for what we think of as ‘images’ in the vast range of oral cultures (for whom literacy is a post-colonial creation) in the Americas, Africa, Australasia. I realise this is a fantasy: no one will ever fund such a thing and few people are equipped to conduct the enterprise. But the result would be the possibility to create a genuinely global, non-Eurocentric art history, capable of comparativism and of a robust critique of colonial assumptions.

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