JEAN-MICHEL SPIESER

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?*

Actually, I was trained in "Lettres classiques", the French equivalent to "Classics", Greek, Latin, and French Literature. I turned quickly to Archaeology, in the French Archaeological School at Athens. Some years later, I get the charge of leading one of the French teams excavating in Caričin Grad and I was called to publish the Byzantine ceramics discovered in the recent excavation in Pergamon. Publishing Byzantine ceramics, as well as some other ceramic productions touches directly upon the question we are discussing today. A ceramic publication can look like an archaeological book, but also like an art historical book, at its best it includes both approaches. Through this archaeological experience, the importance of materiality permeated me deeply. Meanwhile, in the 1970s, my doctoral dissertation on Early Christian Thessaloniki introduced me to art historical issues. Little by little, also through my teaching duties and through personal interest, I shifted my scholarly work to the field of art history. I considered and still consider that artistic productions are to be approached in their historical contexts (historical in its broadest meaning). Therefore, art history is inevitably a transdisciplinary field. I tried to use at my best the inputs given by most of the various turns which structured our field, but without giving an absolute priority to one of them.

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

It is difficult for me to extract three books which played the most important role in orienting my research. I have the feeling that many books which I read, nourished my research, sometimes giving me direct inputs, sometimes leaving a conscious or even unconscious mark. These books came from various fields, expanding my horizons. Nevertheless, I will quote three books which may exemplify the orientations, which I tried to give to my research. Going far back in my memories, I cannot but mention the *Meditations on a hobby horse* by Ernst Gombrich. Already, I was taught in the importance of reception. An

archaeologist has also his place here: André Leroi-Gourhan, actually much more than an archaeologist, in his volumes of *Evolution et technique*, was, I think, the first to stress that the notion of "appropriation" should replace "influence". As third mention, I opt for a book, not the most known, by Claude Lévy-Strauss, *La voie des masques*. I was amazed by his views on the masks of some North American native people. He stressed specially one point, the ways in which the same structures and appearances of a mask take on different meanings in different cultural contexts.

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 would like to emphasize first that "style" and "iconography" are only words, which refer to uncertain and vague notions. The evolution of a painter's style during his or her life and the evolution of style in a cultural context during some decades or centuries are not all to be dealt with in the same terms. Such notions can be misused. This is not a reason to get rid of them. We should not forget that since the 19th century, with the help of these notions, art historians built up, little by little, a stable framework, which, consciously or unconsciously, we still use, even when new attributions, new dating proposals introduce some changes into it. When faced up with a new artefact, the first step to take is still to locate it within the framework. Of course, each work can give us many other answers if other questions are asked. Art history today cannot but pose new important questions that were overlooked in past times. But without some apparently old-fashioned notions, art history is at risk of being diluted no less than it is at risk of staying in old paths, if it does not go beyond.

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?*

I am not sure that art history experienced turns only since the 1990s. I remember André Grabar, in the early 1960s, mentioning his interest in a "linguistic turn". Of course, in the last decades, many turns succeed each other designing a kind of interlacing. The readers of this text have surely inferred from my answer to the second question that my research is grounded in an empirical approach. I am convinced that many methods and approaches can be appropriated for all fields in art history. Trying to understand the decoration of a Byzantine church, I have at my disposal less documentation, and not of the same kind as if I were studying the work of a seventeenth century painter. More than exploring all the ins and outs of one of the various turns, I tried to do my best with some notions. The most important benefit of all these turns has been to make obvious that art can no longer be studied, disputed, appreciated without considering its historical and sociological background, without getting some knowledge about perception, to give only some examples. New, various, and important insights in what we cannot but call artistic

productions became possible in the last decades. It would be reductive to hierarchise the various turns and ignore what is useful for a specific research.

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?*

For instance, the notion of system gave a strong impetus to my research. It helps to understand how images, but also all other objects which belong to "art" in the largest sense of the word, from what is still usually called "minor arts" to architecture and urbanism, are embedded in the same cultural and historical context. This has nothing to do with some "Zeitgeist", but this issue cannot be developed here. The same notion is also very helpful to understand the process of global changes such as Christianisation in the long late antiquity and provides insights as to the ways in which changes in art production are both subjects and agents in these processes. For individual works, of course, some other important notions gained in attraction in the recent decades. The most obvious, maybe, is the attention given to reception. But I think also that reception can be a treacherous notion. The most obvious difficulty is to get rid of the influence of today's reception, our personal feeling, or a supposed mainstream reception, easily understood as some anthropological invariant. Furthermore, reception can be understood on various aesthetic, religious, cultural levels, which may sometimes be differentiated, sometimes not. But such reflections lead us to the meaning, topic of the next question.

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

"Meaning" is not a notion as easy to understand as it seems at first glance. Of course, we can say that the subject of an image is its meaning. It sounds quite obvious for educated Western Europeans in front of an image displaying a biblical or a mythological subject. It is the same for an Australian Aboriginal in front of a picture painted by an Aboriginal painter; it can be the same for me also, but I have first to make some research or to be taught by an informer. But, usually, the mind of the viewer goes beyond this "meaning". Do "meaning" and "message" equate? This question leads to another: do images convey messages? "Message" supposes an intention from the author and the hope that the message will be understood by the viewer. But can the image convey the message by itself without any preconception in the mind of the viewer? In other words, are the religious paintings by Guido Reni a support for meditation without preconception from the viewer? Could anybody acknowledge the spiritual message, being self-evident for Christians, without knowing anything about Christianity? Of course, the image's aesthetic efficacy may stimulate various meditations, but is it then justified to speak about message?

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?*

Actually, I think that I have, at least partially, already answered. As the readers may have understood, I am sceptical about the possibility that the mere visual appearance of images may be enough to make its meaning understandable. Of course, this could be true for images which have a conventional meaning, as is usually signposted in museums by a label under or beneath a picture. It is no more the same for many images in 20th century European painting, when the painter leaves free the imagination of the viewers, even if the use of a label may give an opposite conclusion. I don't know if something similar can be found in non-European cultures. Meaning is also supposed missing in decorative patterns. But this point would need a further development. For the visibility conditions or *mise-en-scène* strategies, I am not sure they determine the meaning. It has been argued that, for the viewer of the Trajan's column, the meaning was obvious even without walking around the column to follow the succession of the scenes or without distinctly seeing the upper part of the column. In the case of an image of worship, we can assume that "meaning" does not correspond to the representation itself, but to the effect it is expected to have on viewers: then an appropriate mise-en-scène has obviously an impact, but is this the meaning of "meaning"?

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?*

The huge development of humanities and social sciences, let us say in the last hundred years, brought many new approaches as to the relationship between images and their viewers. Other criteria for approaching an image than an explicit or implicit comparison with antiquity was a first and necessary step, followed by the affirmation that art is not a necessary concept to apprehend images. We know that social status and education play their part in the perception of images. We have some clues as to how the neurological components of perception may help to understand why images are felt as enjoyable or expressive, but it is a sensitive field. It would be a mistake to overestimate this approach. It could also lead to the "discovery" of supposed anthropological invariants. But it should not be set aside. As I already wrote above, the sensorial and cultural contexts are to be considered. It is difficult and not completely avoidable to withdraw from one's own cultural environment. This approach is necessary not only in the study of images produced in non-European cultures but also for the European past, starting with the 19th century even if it seems closer to us. But this distance does not imply that we should forget the basic tools of art history.

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

In most human cultures, images are not isolated and are not understood or expected to be expressions of an individual self, something that is specific to modern cultures where originality is a kind of requisite for artistic production. But many images in our daily life are still embedded in a web of significations. In a way or another, each image refers to the

system in which it is included. It may be a quite common utilitarian system such as the highway code or a mental or spiritual system such as religious beliefs. For times closer to us, the art market can also be considered as a system in which each artistic production has its place. Having in mind such a fundamental property of images, in my opinion, it should become obvious that each image has numerous and various connections with other images as well with material or concrete items or with mental images, emotions, feelings, etc. Any image may explain, suggest, establish connections, thus inform the perception of the viewer. What may be difficult for the art historian, for the historian or the sociologist is to understand which connections a viewer is making when seeing a given image. I would even say, that, without direct evidence, it is not possible to get the genuine reaction from a given viewer, but a good knowledge of a milieu or a culture can allow the researcher to gain a kind of statistical response.

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

As the reader may expect from my earlier answers, the materiality of images is a key issue. This assessment may be in relation with my archaeological past. But I think that it is as important for art historians as for archaeologists. This materiality can be seen from various points of view. Some appear as quite trivial, but, since they are trivial, they can be easy overlooked or forgotten in the understanding of an image. I mean materiality in the narrowest sense of the word: materials, techniques, and tools used for its production. Yet, I would say that such factors as an image's accessibility, its display in private, public, or remote places, its being located far from the viewer or meant to be seen face-to-face (and we should not forget that the invention of the museum changed deeply the accessibility of many images) belong to the materiality of an image. Some may argue that this is an overly expanded concept of materiality. One could say that, but it is part of a set of data, which can be objectively apprehended. I would have said an objective reality if this word had not become a kind of taboo for some people. Anyway, whatever name you give to this set of data, it is for me a necessary basis for any reflection or interpretation in the field of art history.

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?*

Each image has its place in a human society. So far it cannot but have a social life. The first step of this life brings it from the workshop of its producer to the place for which it was ordered, sometimes in a figurative sense when the painter has to go on site to paint a fresco on a wall. It may therefore be clear that the possibility to speak about the social life of an image is connected with necessary information about the patron or the recipient, often the same, but sometimes a larger community. A second (and further) step of this life is to be considered when the owner of an image changes. The most interesting challenge would then be to understand the possible changes in the relation between the image and the new owner or group of viewers. In some cases, it is obvious that the relation between images and users change, when an image moves from a private

dwelling to a museum or when a private dwelling becomes a place to visit. A church may even in same time be a place of worship and a place to admire paintings, with viewers reacting in different ways.

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.*

All my answers to the previous questions tried to make clear that an image never involves only the sense of sight. But what else? It seems easy to think that touch has no relation with images. But if we consider that an ivory may also be conceived as an image, we can remember that Antony Cutler stresses the pleasure of touching an ivory. In quite another way, a believer can be happy to touch and to kiss an icon. But is the sensory experience in itself the most important part of this encounter? It is a set of mental attitude, which gives its meaning and strength to the bodily contact. Recently some researchers have been interested in the issue of the role of music and songs for the feeling of believers during the liturgy. It is easy to understand that in this context hearing gives or can give a new impetus to the sight of an image or of a set of images. We are near to the notion called *hierotopy* by Alexei Lidov. In my view, an image is never experienced by the sole sense of sight, but the mental disposition is crucial, and, through it, other senses can strengthen the feelings given by the sight.

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?*

The first time I was asked to write about iconicity, I had a look in some dictionaries and I was puzzled that the usual definition did not seem to fit with art historical issues. Eventually I understood – properly I hope – that for the art historians who use this word, it means the possibility for a non-figurative item to become iconic, to have the capacity to be translated by an image or apprehended as an image. It is of course possible to include this property into an art historical narrative. Actually, the most trivial, even crude items may become iconic (see Duchamp), but I think that non-figurative objects, landscape, etc., are not iconic per se: rather, it is the sensibility of people living in a given time that ascribes iconicity to a scenery or to people who, in other times, did not seem worthy of iconicity. The development of objects considered to be worth qualifying as iconic is an important part of the art historical narrative. But I would leave open to discussion whether this narrative is fundamentally different from previous narratives which highlighted the evolution of the usual and most appreciated themes of the images?

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 am not sure that we need new hermeneutic tools to analyse such phenomena. The first point should be to be aware when images are no more present in their original setting. It seems obvious for paintings or statues displayed in museums. But I am not sure that all art historical productions take account of this change of display, between an open space, the *cella* of a temple, or a private room of a patron and the public space of a museum. More interesting are changes in the past, as when an image of Aphrodite, originally intended as a cultic statue, became some centuries later the subject of erotic epigrams, or when images of a shepherd carrying a lamb came to be viewed by Christian people as allegories of Christ and were later displayed as such in museums. In all these cases, it is legitimate (and necessary) to analyse how we are affected by our contemporary sensibility and then to get the historical and anthropological tools which may help us to understand the meaning which could have had the same image within its original setting and cultural context. This context has to be known. It means that we need to have at our disposition hermeneutic tools which go beyond the usual art historical methods.

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 seems to be a twofold question (English vs other languages, Western or not, and Western understanding vs non-European images), but I will deal only with the second issue. We are practising art history and not dealing with mere conceptualizations of art, for all that they may be interesting. Historical elements are therefore an important part of our discourse. Of course, images are created in contexts where less value or no value was given to chronology or other historical elements. Even our Western analysis is able to take this into account and has to do it. Such an analysis can bring out some historical evolution of which their users, as producers or as viewers, were not aware. Let us make a comparison with religion: frequently people practising a religion think that their religion did never change. Historians of religion should not be blind to such evolutions. To summarise a development which would need more space, if we don't accept that the origin of the notion used, Western or not, is not the point, but the adequacy of the used concepts, and if we don't accept that historians or art historians can cross the boundaries of their own culture, we won't get history, but only soliloquies, an Orthodox about Orthodoxy or Byzantine art, an Indian about Indian art and religion...

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

It is surely presumptuous to try to foresee which innovation could give a new impetus to art history. It is easier to pay attention on what could threaten it. So many "turns" have enriched the practice of art history to such an extent that we run the risk of forgetting its foundations. We have always to deal with artefacts, made by a human being for a given purpose, for people supposed to understand it, living in a given time and in a given culture. All these components create a network, which has to be analysed. This has to be done

with the appropriate concepts, European or not. Art is not an isolated practice. The art historian should know the culture and the language or the languages of the culture to which the artefacts, which are of interest for him, belong. If this task is not pursued, art historians will be enclosed, unconsciously, in their own mental systems. For the same reason, art historians should keep away from trends and fads which are at risk to introduce biases caused by changes of sensibility in the contemporary world or by a questionable feeling of the superiority of contemporary trends in our field. Again, the knowledge of the cultural context is the best way not to yield to this evolution.

Jean-Michel Spieser
University of Fribourg
jean-michel.spieser@unifr.ch