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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?*

What first seduced me in art history was the translation process: saying adequately what one saw. It characteristically addressed signed works of attested excellence with literary subjects – though there was always the challenge of verbalizing why some anonymous or subjectless work deserved respect – and its intention was deeply humanistic: to mobilize one’s own educated and cultivated sensibilities. Renaissance painting seemed its ideal site. Learning to “see” Romanesque art was a long, earnest effort that finally forced me to look at things, not style and literacy. Manuscripts liberated me from the hegemony of both artist and masterpiece – manuscripts were the product of multiple hands and eras, spoke to multiple senses, assumed meaning on radically different levels, and absolutely could not be assigned significance on grounds of quality alone. Nonetheless, I still craved images. Here Cyprus entranced me. I encountered it in the Crusader era, which imposed an earnest immersion in the role of art as an instrument of social critique. It has been not the Crusader mélange, however, but the intensity of Byzantine images – even modest Byzantine images – that truly challenges me. How to address them adequately is my biggest challenge.

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

Hans Belting’s *Bild und Kult* forced me into thinking about images rather than art. It both drew my attention to icons – which till then I had, like my mentor Hugo Buchthal, “done my best to avoid” – and at the same time dispelled the notion that icons were immaterial “windows on another world.” The eye rests, indeed leans on, the icon’s surface. Robert Farris Thompson’s *Face of the Gods. Art and Altars of Africa and the African Americas* (Munich, 1993) made a deep impression on me, because it offered me whole new ways of thinking about talking about art – in terms of verbs; of faces as altars (and vice versa); or of his quotation from Robert Motherwell that “the function of the artist is to

make actual the spiritual, so that it is there to be possessed" (by whom?). I devoted careful, methodical attention to Robin Cormack's *Writing in Gold* and later *Painting the Soul*, deeply appreciative of the way he laid out one critical question posed by the shift from appreciation to reception and agency, and talked them through. But really, *books* were less impressive than the *articles* of people like Barbara Zeitler, Lucy-Anne Hunt, and Robert Nelson, because they were tackling real objects, not just ideas.

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?*

It's easy enough to drop art historical notions like name artists, or masterpieces. However, since I work on images that function through powerful visual and liturgical canons, style and iconography play an ongoing role in my thinking. They can be variously used in varied combinations, but I cannot imagine dismissing them. This said, less and less of what art history treats actually does consist of images with either visual or literary canons; an "image" can be as composite as a cityscape or as intangible as a sound, and "style" can run from brushstroke to what Margaret Conkey so deliciously called "styles of use." There are questions about setting; material, weight and value; modes of exchange or transmission; access and conditions of perceptibility; issues of power and identity – and there is room in art history for many dispensations. However, I don't believe the mere fact that something is visual makes it material for art history. It needs philosophical ballast; material culture has different parameters. And I believe that we owe it to each other to verbalize very clearly what we believe we have *seen* in an artifact. We need to engage thought, and we need to enable sight.

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 first challenged me in art history was the translation process, and I regarded it as deeply humanistic: designed to mobilize one's own educated and cultivated sensibilities in response to the artist. All of this shifted as works of art became diagnostic tools of social critique. Looking became a way of exposing relationships of power; artistic individuality lost force in the face of group identities – gender, class, ethnicity, religious or ideological affiliation; and an essentially humanistic response became a confession of one's parochial inability to see beyond the limits of one's own history and education. The visual became a form of social science. This is much what I do in Crusader Cyprus. More recently, I sense a frustration with the visual itself. Any directed response is not merely visual, or even merely social, but organic, engaging a vast network of neuromuscular systems that run beyond individual senses into the physical and environmental forces that bodies interact with. Efforts to make neurobiology, environmental ecology, the chemistry of materials, the physics of sound an integral part both of artifacts themselves and

their adequate appreciation is drawing us into uneasy domains that are hard to anchor in the terminology of either art or history. We need to remain in some basic way a humanistic endeavor.

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 am older than a lot of this group, and I've seen the "obvious" message of many of the artifacts I study and love change radically over time. I loved art history because I could "see" things' messages; I loved icons because they subjected words to their own truth. But in the end, artifacts rely on perceivers and so lead deeply volatile lives. I'm sobered by the layered complexity of their lives in time. What is the most honest way to address it? Shifting theoretical lenses become distinct performances, interesting perhaps if they're adroit, but eerily independent of the artifact itself. Is there anything beyond "what you make of it if you try on *this* lens"?

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

My understanding has become very tied to the material I work on, where it has at least two forms: 1) can a work make visible and resonant within itself at least a portion of what I have come to understand about the subject from the writings of the Greek fathers, ancient or more recent; 2) can it stimulate my serious effort to see how that particular burden of content has been tailored to engage the needs and concerns of a living audience, whether contemporary with or after the time and place of its production. The means are capacious: selection, elaboration or exclusion of thematic elements are of course important, but so are scale; material, color and texture; accessibility; location (relative to what?); illumination; hierarchy; compositional or locational rhythm, sequence, cadence, and surprise; exposure or occlusion, especially by clothing; varied forms of writing ... But I have never seriously abandoned the role of a topic or subject.

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?*

How something looks can't be separated from how it works. To some extent, anything inside the work is functioning through the conditions in which it is being seen, and they can't be separated. But there are many degrees of separation, and most of them offer some degree of *both* gain and loss. The obligation incumbent on all of us is to be clear about what we are and aren't seeing. *Mise-en-scène* is fickle: I spent my early years on Cyprus lamenting that churches were dark, icons occluded, interiors dilapidated, and people self-involved; today I spend my life yearning for precisely that lost "authenticity." But both conditions offer some gifts, and they make the same demands: are you really seeing what can be seen?

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?*

My generation has been so fortunate: in our ample opportunities for frequent travel to see “the real thing” or the “real place”; in our incredible cameras and visual enhancement devices to bring “the real thing” to our fingertips; in our ability to move with unprecedented confidence across multiple linguistic, religious, and cultural systems. And we’ve had a good century of critical theory to nudge us to ask who is looking and how. So yes, I think we are better equipped today to probe the relationship between the way things look and the ways they are seen. But we have left behind us a clearly perceptible history of shifting romanticisms in the interpretation of peoples and their things. So are we getting closer to truth, or just grasping different parts of the elephant? As historians – even *visual* historians (as long as we remain that way) – we remain subject to the distorting lenses of our own intellectual fashions.

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

I really believe it is by seeing, not reading, that we learn to see. A text can alert us to the fact that someone saw X in a certain artifact, but it is when WE see it that X becomes a meaningful part of our visual equipment. In this respect, I believe images are constantly teaching viewers to see.

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

I am irredeemably a “painting person.” Even my gestures in speaking of art suggest flat surfaces, not volumes. Thus I am endlessly being booby-trapped into thinking of artifacts as visual planes. Even a virtual image is never *just* a visual plane. It has working parts, and one will never really understand how it works without them. So yes: I am recurrently grateful to be reminded that images are just abstractions. Neither I nor the Byzantine people I ponder ever encounter Byzantine artifacts that are just images. I am also very conscious of the fact that my way of relating pictures to the surfaces they occupy, and my way of relating the seen artifact to other things in the world, are both quite different from what I sense among the devotees of the icons I study. When I become absorbed in the picture I’m seeing, it essentially becomes a virtual image, innocent of size or weight or heft. I think when many medieval viewers became similarly abstracted into the picture’s image, it became a person, who could even be seen sometimes walking in other places. But without the thing it was pictured on, the person wouldn’t exist, any more than my abstractions would exist without the thing my eye bumped into. Here again, I am grateful whenever I am reminded of this. But I have not therefore constructed a discourse of meaning that is distinctive to materiality. Materials condition perception but they don’t talk.

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?*

Social life can be hard on images. Probably the single most useful way of approaching it is by turning away from the images altogether to find out what has been said about them, when and by whom. More concretely, though, we can pay attention less to the images as such than to the way people behave in their presence, especially (but not only) if they are in some way *in situ*. Modifications that have been made to images are valuable. Even more indicative are evidences of use. How keenly can the historian pick up on the flymarks of what have people done to make images and their artifacts work, or at least work better, for them? Valuable to me has been Margaret Conkey's idea of "styles of use," because uses have patterns and codes and can themselves open avenues of inquiry. Use, like appreciation, is a form of consumption – it eats away at things – so we're always trying to see it away. But it can be very informative, even if hard on the images.

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 mingled smell of beeswax and olive oil in a space sharply heightens my receptivity to icons, probably much as the sound of church music enhances many people's receptivity to religious art. I am sure the painters who adorned the churches I enter expected that lamps and candles would constitute a steady part of devotional and liturgical practice in those spaces, that their fragrance would come to permeate the atmosphere there, and that their paintings would thus be accompanied by that odour. Yet the icons were there always, even if regular devotions were not occurring and generating their smells, and they were still expected to function to hallow the space. Musically, too, even in cases in which paintings incorporate rhythmic or proportional elements drawn from music performed beneath them, the paintings are expected to be visible and functioning to move viewers, even if no music is being made. So I tend to regard such poly-sensory responses as accessory, an addition to my own equipment, rather than as an ingredient integral to the image and its functionality. I guess it's one of the cases in which I still believe that artifacts do exist outside of the way in which I perceive them.

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 is interesting, and certainly it can deepen our understanding of how we invest our world with properties like significance and emotional inflections. But it serves as a comparison.

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?*

This is such a present and pressing question for me, as suggested already in Question 5). I launched decades ago into a study of a certain great icon over time. I did so in order to

show how it shifted over time. My mantra became “the afterlife of images” – that is, how they live on into new meanings. But now that project has become an albatross, because it really isn’t enough just to show what chameleons images are. That is essentially reception theory: it presumes that there is a “real,” stable image, and the curiosity lies in the fact that viewers – who are, after all, outside the image and experiencing it not in reality but inside their own hermetic world – always do seem to smudge the image in absorbing it. The icon is up to something else. Its image *does* change. It is not simply seen differently; it looks different at different time/places. I am reasonably sure that it is being altered to keep it looking the *same*. But so far, art history is proving more skilful at dissolving an image into multiple perceptions than at integrating it again to grasp what it is that holds all the variables together.

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?*

As we surge out into “globalism,” we just really need to stop *talking* so much and start *listening* much harder. I am often gobsmacked listening to people from another tradition talk seriously about artifacts, as with *Faces of the Gods* in question 1. The kinds of qualities Thompson chose to talk about, and the language he used, were fresh, and they left me scrambling to see *what they were doing for him* – what questions they were answering; what structures he had set up for talking about his altars. The classes I took with Yasser Tabbaa were similarly compelling – partly of course because he really is a mathematician, but also because the science and philosophy he was drawing on were being used to answer questions I hadn’t even *thought* about asking when looking at the artifacts he was working on (what became *Transformation of Islamic Art during the Sunni Revival*). Similarly, Pavel Florensky’s *Iconostasis* makes a strong impression on me each time I read it. These authors are fully within “art history” and using many of its basic strategies. But they are not the kind of outsider that I am, for instance, to Byzantine art, trying to impose my Anglophone mode of eye-tongue coordination on a different cultural system.

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

A theme that emerged as I was answering these questions was the degree to which I believe that artifacts do exist outside my own perceptions of them. And I think this is something I crave as we sally forth under the banner of globalism to conquer the world and absorb it into [Anglophone] art history. We need honestly to believe that artifacts are out there independently of us, and learn to listen to the things their own environments are saying about them.

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