

Book Reviews

HANS BELTING AND
CHRISTIANE KRUSE

*Die Erfindung des Gemäldes: Das erste
Jahrhundert der niederländischen
Malerei*

Munich: Hirmer Verlag, 1994. 552 pp.;
262 color ill.; 137 b/w. DM 298.00

Before the Second World War, through Max J. Friedländer and Friedrich Winkler, the study of 15th-century Netherlandish painting was wholly dominated by scholars writing in German. The Nazi takeover, and the forced exile to America of a crucial sector of Germany's academic elite, brought this situation brutally to an end. During the 1950s and 1960s, English overtook German as the primary language in this field, as in many others. The new "classics" of the discipline were published in English, from Erwin Panofsky's famous study to the more recent works of Barbara Lane and Craig Harbison.¹ At the same time, young German art historians avoided late medieval Northern European painting on ideological grounds: as a field, it had been too distorted by the Nazis' celebration of "Germanness." That a German art historian with the reputation of Hans Belting has now co-authored a monumental study of early Netherlandish painting is particularly important in this context. The book marks the recuperation of German *Kunstwissenschaft*—and of its own hermeneutical traditions—for a field of scholarship that it had neglected for nearly half a century. Other recent publications, such as those of Jochen Sander, Winfried Wilhelmy, and Michael Rohlmann,² presage a veritable rebirth in Germany of the study of Netherlandish art of the 15th century.

Nineteen ninety-four, the year of the 500th anniversary of Hans Memling's death, witnessed the publication of numerous general studies of the *primitifs flamands*. In addition to Belting and Kruse's book, there appeared the collective volume published under the direction of Roger van Schoute and Brigitte de Patoul,³ striving to be both as encyclopedic and as objective as possible, this volume constitutes a true "state of the question." Two other works of a more personal and speculative nature were also released in the same

year. Otto Pächt's *Altniederländische Malerei: Von Roger van der Weyden bis Gerard David* (Munich, 1994) publishes posthumously the lectures on early Netherlandish painting which the author delivered as chair of the Department of Art History at the University of Vienna; and Paul Philippot's *La Peinture dans les anciens Pays-Bas: XVème–XVIème siècles* (Paris, 1994) reworks his own *Pittura fiamminga e Rinascimento italiano* of 1970. The book by Belting and his student Christiane Kruse is as much an encyclopedic treatise as it is a personal essay. It therefore occupies an intermediary position among the three works cited above. While Kruse's entries attempt to totalize the present state of knowledge about the major works of the 15th-century Netherlandish masters, from the van Eyck brothers to Hieronymus Bosch, Belting's long introductory text proposes a "reading" of the evolution of painting in the late Middle Ages in the Low Countries based on the concept of the painted *tableau*, or (in German) *Gemälde*.

Belting rightly deplores the absence of any lexicological and historical study of the word and object *Gemälde* (p. 33). This problem of terms is particularly acute, it seems, in English, where the notions designated by the German *Gemälde*, the Italian *quadro*, or the French *tableau* have no true equivalents. During the period analyzed by Belting, the Low Countries themselves possessed only a rather ambiguous vocabulary in this regard, since neither the French *ymaige de peinture* nor its Netherlandish counterpart, *schilderye*, covers completely the semantic field of the words *tableau*, *quadro*, *Gemälde*, or *Tafelbild*. These only became current in the 17th century, as the result of an evolution that one recent commentator has proposed to define as a process of "painting's coming to consciousness through itself."⁴ From this perspective, Belting's text seems an audacious, even rash, attempt to trace what might be referred to as the "prehistory" of the idea of the *tableau*, concentrating notice on its "invention" by the Netherlandish "primitives."

In a forgotten but interesting article of 1935, Fritz Baumgart proposed to study the ancient *tabula picta* (whose rebirth he situated, as does Belting, at the beginning of the 15th century) as a "spiritual form."⁵ In so doing, Baumgart attempted to transcend the

strict dichotomy between "style" and "iconography," in order thereby to lay the grounds for an investigation of the very mechanisms of representation. To be sure, the author had no way of knowing the possibilities today offered by the study of communicative media ("medialogy"), hence the differences between his conclusions and those of Belting. For Baumgart, the panel painting, or *Tafelbild*, is a self-enclosed reality. Taking the example of a still life depicting a basket of fruit, he writes: "There is nothing in the image other than itself [i.e., the basket], and it fits into no other context than what is delimited by the image's frame. Beyond the frame, there exists no extra-artistic relationship." For Belting, by contrast, the invention of the *Gemälde* is deeply linked to the desire to endow the image with the character of a "representation of the world" (p. 10). The new type of support, far from closing the image in on itself, would on the contrary open it up to the real, as much from the thematic as from the conceptual point of view.

According to Belting, therefore, the main innovation of the 15th-century Netherlandish painters consisted precisely in their attempt to enlarge the *tableau*'s field of reference at the expense of other types of media. Henceforth the painted panel would serve as the medium for votive images as much as for images in bedrooms, for narrative scenes with multiple figures as much as for still life, for full-length group portraits as much as for moralizing genre painting. The *tableau* ceased to be confined to a particular thematic repertory, as had formerly been the case. In *Likeness and Presence*, Belting demonstrated that up to the 12th century the painted image as inherited from classical antiquity had survived essentially in the form of the icon, of the isolated sacred figure.⁶ After 1200, narrative scenes of sacred subjects, devotional images, and profane portraits begin to be painted as well. Up until the time of the van Eyck brothers the *tableau* was thus used only for a small number of subjects. Other thematic categories, notably those of a profane nature, were associated at the time with different types of support: fresco, tapestry, jewelry, the book.

Beyond its thematic variety, one of the most important characteristics of the new

1. E. Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting: Its Origins and Character*, Cambridge, Mass., 1953; B. Lane, *The Altar and the Altarpiece: Sacramental Themes in Early Netherlandish Painting*, New York, 1984; C. Harbison, *Jan van Eyck: The Play of Realism*, London, 1991.

2. J. Sander, *Hugo van der Goes: Stilentwicklung und Chronologie*, Mainz, 1992; W. Wilhelmy, *Der altniederländische Realismus und seine Funktionen*:

Studien zur kirchlichen Bildpropaganda des 15. Jahrhunderts, Münster/Hamburg, 1993; M. Rohlmann, *Auftragskunst und Sammlerbild: Altniederländische Malerei im Florenz des Quattrocento*, Alfter, 1994.

3. R. van Schoute and B. de Patoul, eds., *Les Primitifs flamands et leur temps*, Louvain-la-Neuve, 1994.

4. V. I. Stoichita, *L'Instauration du tableau: Méta-peinture à l'aube des temps modernes*, Paris, 1993, 9.

5. F. Baumgart, "Zur geschichtlichen und soziologischen Bedeutung des Tafelbildes," *Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, xiii, 1935, 375–406.

6. H. Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, trans. E. Jephcott, Chicago, 1994 (originally published as *Bild und Kult: Eine Geschichte des Bildes vor dem Zeitalter der Kunst*, Munich, 1990).

Netherlandish *tableau*, according to Belting, is that it constitutes (to use his terminology) a "painted anthropology of the gaze" (p. 51). The author means here not merely the well-known motif of the *Blick aus dem Bilde*—that "gaze emanating from the picture" which Alfred Neumeyer studied in a pioneering work that merits reconsideration today.⁷ For Belting, the thematization of the gaze in the *tableau* corresponds in fact to a new quality of the gaze before the *tableau*, and it touches directly on the problematics of vision as discussed during the 15th century by the mystics of the *devotio moderna*. This existence of a "double gaze" constitutes for Belting an essential interpretative key for unlocking the universe of the Netherlandish *tableau*.

Belting draws close to certain conclusions of one of the most interesting essays on "medialogy" published recently, namely that of Régis Debray.⁸ In spite of the distance necessarily separating an art-historical study from a strictly "medialogical" analysis, both Belting and Debray share a desire to make apparent, within the history of the Western gaze, the dimension of symbolic efficacy.

By taking into consideration the question of "media," Belting is able to account for the stylistic change observable between the end of the 14th and the beginning of the 15th century. "The discipline of art history," he notes, "was more concerned with the history of painting as a stylistic phenomenon, and instead of discovering the origin of the *tableau*, it discovered the birth of a new style of painting" (p. 13). The passage from the "courtly idealism" to "bourgeois realism" was not, however, the result of a natural and necessary evolution, as had been maintained by a particular art-historical discourse that took its explanatory models from the natural sciences. Belting shows that the problem of style is intimately linked to the dimension of medium, and that in the final analysis it was the birth of a new support—the *tableau* in the modern sense of the term—that made necessary the new style.

The idea of competition also occupies a privileged place in Belting's panorama of early Netherlandish painting. The history of this art, he suggests, often results from solutions devised by "great masters" in the face of challenges posed by works of immediate predecessors and contemporaries—for example, Belting interprets Rogier van der Weyden's *Miraflores Triptych* as "a critique of the Eyckian image-window" (p. 85). To this competition amongst painters was added the rivalry between painting and sculpture, which gave rise to those amazing painted images of statues (traditionally termed *grisailles*). Belting mentions also the latent conflict between an aesthetics of precious materials as in

jewelry (*Materialästhetik*) and an aesthetics of "production" that relied on the notions of creation and invention, as, for example, in the art of painting (*Produktionsästhetik*) (p. 13). The van Eycks' imitations of precious jewelry must be understood from the perspective of the latter conflict (pp. 63–64).

Belting's essay itself seems to originate from an anxiety of emulation. The particularly critical tone it assumes with regard to Panofsky cannot conceal the fact that the latter's *Early Netherlandish Painting* constitutes a negative model for *Die Erfindung des Gemäldes*. The division of historical periods is nearly identical. Both works place the same emphasis on the generation of the "Founders" (the van Eyck brothers, Campin, van der Weyden), while successive generations (Bouts, van der Goes, Memling) get only very limited consideration. Moreover, the masters of the southern provinces of the Low Countries receive the most attention; among northerners, only Geertgen tot Sint Jans is treated in depth. In contrast to Friedländer, who, in the sixteen volumes of his *Alt-niederländische Malerei* (Berlin and Leiden, 1924–37), covered the history of painting in the Low Countries up to the moment of political division between the north and south (1579), Panofsky and Belting hardly move beyond 1500. And again unlike Friedländer, they both reach back to Parisian art of the late 14th century as the early history of the Netherlandish "primitives."

In reproducing so openly the framework of *Early Netherlandish Painting*, Belting and Kruse invite the cultivated reader to make comparisons, to measure their work against Panofsky's. Their implicit reference to the great art historian from Hamburg indeed makes particularly apparent one of the strong points of their work: the analysis of the art of Hieronymus Bosch (pp. 86–93). Panofsky, who devoted but a single page to the master of s'Hertogenbosch, had obvious difficulty integrating him into his vision of early Netherlandish painting, which he saw as obsessed by the drive to give a natural form to preestablished theological contents by means of the famous device of "disguised symbolism." The conception of an obscure and esoteric Bosch current in the 1950s, during the period when Surrealism searched for illustrious predecessors in European museums, clearly influenced Panofsky as well. When he writes, "In spite of all the ingenious, erudite and in part extremely useful research devoted to the task of decoding Jerome Bosch, I cannot help feeling that the real secret of his magnificent nightmares and dreams has still to be disclosed,"⁹ he shows himself to be very much a man of his generation.

For Belting, whose perspective here is

fairly close to that of Paul Vandenbroeck,¹⁰ Bosch is in no sense a "heretic," since his "painted ideas garnered him fame and prestige in dominant social circles" (p. 86). The painter is simply an innovator: his art manifests a literary and subjective character that breaks with the tradition inaugurated by the van Eyck brothers. Painting no longer has as its task to reproduce the world as in a mirror. Rather, it has become "a personal language," in which the artist is given free rein to "argue." "The motifs of his images are means of communication" allowing the artist to "make a statement and take a position" (p. 90). This subjective and literary conception of art implies a new sort of relation to texts, one which makes the *tableau* a veritable transcription of language into vision. Belting's interpretation of the *Garden of Earthly Delights* in light of the book of Genesis is particularly enlightening here (pp. 123–29). Moreover, this same conception shows up in the use that the artist makes of *grisaille*, as it does in his choice as regards pictorial technique. For Bosch, painting in gray tones is no longer simply a *trompe-l'oeil* imitation of virtual sculptures. The representation in *grisaille* of whole scenes inserted into a landscape makes these into authentic fictions that offer themselves to the viewer precisely as fictions, thus rendering all the more manifest their character as "signs." As to pictorial manner, it no longer possesses any of that Eyckian objectivity, where technique disappears behind the reality it renders visible. The artist's thick touch makes it evident that the image is nothing but "the author's personal vision" (p. 90). While Panofsky tried in vain to locate Bosch's art within "the founders' heritage," Belting offers a reading grounded in the subsequent evolution of art in the Low Countries. In fact, Pieter Aertsen, Joachim Beuckelaer, Pieter Bruegel, and, after them, the genre painters of the Dutch *Gouden Eeuw* were all to develop the Boschian conception of painting.

The reconstitution of the Netherlandish artistic past poses multiple problems for historians. Despite the recent contributions of dendrochronology, the dating of the works, and thus the relative chronology of the production, remains far from certain. Contradicting Panofsky,¹¹ Belting, following Felix Thürlemann,¹² maintains that the famous lost *Deposition*, known principally through a drawing in the Louvre, as well as through a series of painted copies (and even a sculpted group in Detroit), must have preceded the great *Descent from the Cross*, now in the Prado in Madrid (pp. 103–12). These two works, generally attributed to Rogier van der Weyden, were given by Thürlemann to the Master of Flémalle. For Belting, the *Deposition* is a work of the Master of Flémalle, to which

7. A. Neumeyer, *Der Blick aus dem Bilde*, Berlin, 1964.

8. R. Debray, *Vie et mort de l'image: Une Histoire du regard en Occident*, Paris, 1992.

9. Panofsky (as in n. 1), 253.

10. P. Vandenbroeck, *Jheronimus Bosch: Tussen volksleven en stads cultuur*, Berchem, 1987, 9–10.

11. Panofsky (as in n. 1), 465.

12. F. Thürlemann, "Die Madrider Kreuzabnahme und die Pariser Grabtragung: Das ma-

lerische und das zeichnerische Hauptwerk Robert Campins," *Pantheon*, LI, 1993, 18–45. For a summary of previous positions, see M. Comblen-Sonkes, *Dessins du XVème siècle: Groupe Van der Weyden*, Brussels, 1969, 138–39.

Rogier was "responding" in the Prado *Descent*. In fact, though, nothing proves that the *Deposition* is the earlier of the two. Both compositions present, at the far right, a weeping Magdalen whose arms form a triangle around her face. Does the Prado Magdalen, standing upright, constitute the final version of this plastic idea, as Belting believes (p. 112)? Or should we rather view the kneeling Magdalen of the lost *Deposition* as the ultimate development of the corresponding figure in the Madrid retable? A number of arguments support the latter hypothesis. Painters of the 15th century—notably the disciples of Rogier—seem in any case to have considered the *Deposition* Magdalen as "definitive," since it is this version that they imitated, rather than its sister in the Prado. The kneeling saint with arms forming a triangle appears in numerous imitations in the Rogierian style, executed both by the master's students and, in the Bientina Triptych, by the Bruges Master of the Legend of Saint Godelieve.¹³ The Magdalen in the *Lamentation* from Brussels, now in the Mayer van den Bergh Museum in Antwerp,¹⁴ as well as one painted by Geertgen tot Sint Jans on a retable shutter now in Vienna,¹⁵ also derives from the corresponding figure in the *Deposition* and not from the Prado *Descent*. Nonetheless, in the 15th century, the latter was a perfectly accessible work, as it stood in Louvain in the church of Onze Lieve Vrouw van Ginderbuiten. If artists neglected this model, it was probably because, in Rogier's circle, they did not acknowledge in it the aesthetic authority of the *Deposition*. The *Deposition* Magdalen thus seems rather to result from a "dramatization" of the *Descent* Magdalen: to the latter's bent arms was added a body hunched up by the flexed position of the subject's knees.

It would not do justice to the work of Belting and Kruse, however, to focus on such details. The importance and interest of their book lie elsewhere: it places the Flemish Renaissance in the new perspective of the

"invention of the *Gemälde*." One could ask, in fact, to what extent this concerns exclusively art north of the Alps, as the two authors imply. Perhaps a similar examination of contemporary Italian art would reveal the existence of parallel developments in the south. Perhaps one might even reach the idea of a "double invention of the *Gemälde*," or even of a "multiple invention."

The relationship between Flanders and Italy is a classic theme in the historiography of art. Among the recent works examining this question, Philippot's contribution (mentioned above) constitutes one of the most significant. The author, who barely touches on the "medial" aspect of this material, concentrates on the representation of space, and compares the Tuscan and Flemish solutions to this problem in a highly instructive manner.

It was indeed Belting himself who, in *Likeness and Presence*, showed that the form and function of icons were completely refigured in Italy during the quattrocento. Not only was the figurative representation of nature transformed, but a new type of image also appeared: the *quadro*. Other recent studies, among which those of Christa Gardner von Teuffel and of Hubert Locher are particularly noteworthy,¹⁶ have underlined the fact that, in the evolution of the retable altarpiece, Brunelleschi's discovery of single-point perspective led to a redefinition of the coordinates of the sacred image. This permitted, to use Gardner's phrase, the "invention of the renaissance *pala*." On the basis of such research and of numerous suggestions found in Belting and Kruse's study, a new approach to one of the key periods in European art, the 15th century, both north and south of the Alps, is now emerging. This should resolve certain questions which until now have remained in suspense.

Belting and Kruse's study, which will make its mark as much in the field of early Netherlandish painting as in that of the "medialogical"

study of images, itself invites a reading that is multiple. Belting's long introduction (121 pages, 67 illustrations in black-and-white) is followed by 262 color plates reiterating his text in a different mode—that of a notebook of full-page illustrations. Whenever possible, the authors and editors have attempted to reproduce the *tableaux* in their original sizes and with their original frames. This care is praiseworthy, considering the "medialogical" premise of the authors' approach. The progression of images is striking, alternating between large scenes and details. Indeed, this section of the book offers itself to the gaze of an attentive reader as an almost independent and coherent discourse. Finally, the book closes with Kruse's notes (141 pages, 70 illustrations in black-and-white). This third section is written in dialogue with Belting's introduction, which it completes with equal intelligence and erudition.

Lying at the intersection between art history and "medialogy," *Die Erfindung des Gemäldes* is something of a historical paradox. This is incontestably an exemplary art book, a model of the genre which it will be difficult to surpass. And yet it is being published at a time when we are witnessing the birth and development of new media of communication which call into question the very medium of the book itself.

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13. See M. Friedländer, *Altniederländische Malerei*, Berlin/Leiden, 1924–37, II, nos. 90, 91; and D. Martens, "Le Triptyque de Bientina: Motifs et sources," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, CXX, 1992, 157–58.

14. Friedländer (as in n. 13), II, no. 99.

15. *Ibid.*, v, no. 6a.

16. G. Gardner von Teuffel, "Lorenzo Monaco, Filippo Lippi und Filippo Brunelleschi: Die Erfindung der Renaissancepala," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, XLV, 1982, 1–30; H. Locher, "Das gerahmte Altarbild im Umkreis Brunelleschis: Zum

Realitätscharakter des Renaissance Retable," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, LVI, 1993, 487–506; and idem, *Raffaël und das Altarbild des Renaissance: Die "Pala Baglioni" als Kunstwerk im sakralen Kontext*, Berlin, 1995.