HANS BELTING AND CHRISTIANE KRUSE

Die Erfindung des Gemäldes: Das erste Jahrhundert der niederländischen Malerei

München: Hirmer Verlag, 1994. 552 pp.; 262 color ill.s.; 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 “classes” of the discipline were published in English, from Erwin Panofsky’s famous study to the more recent works of Barbara Lane and Craig Harbison. 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 “Germaneness.” 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 Sandner, Winfried Wilhelm, and Michael Rohmann, presage a veritable renaissance 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 Schoutte and Brigitte de Patouil, 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 Gerhard 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 tableau 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.” 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 Baumgärt 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.” In so doing, Baumgärt 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 (“mediality”), hence the differences between his conclusions and those of Belting. For Baumgärt, 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 tableaux ceased to be confined to a particular thematic repertoire, 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. After 1200, narrative scenes of sacred subjects, devotional images, and profile 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

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Netherlands* *tableau, according to Belting, is that it constitutes (to use his terminology) a “pa*nted anthropology of the gaze” (p. 51). The gaze 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 thematicization of the gaze in the tableau corresponds in fact to a new quality of the gaze that produces 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 Netherlands* *tableau.

Belting draws close to certain conceptions 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.82

Belting takes the generation of 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 predeces* sors 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 (Materialität) and an aesthetics of “production” that rested on the notions of creation and invention, as, for example, in the art of painting (Produktionsästhetik) (p. 13). The van Eyck’s imitations of precious jewels 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 particu* larly 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 northern* ers, only Geertgen tot Sint Jans is treated in depth. In contrast to Friedländer, who, in the sixteen volumes of his Altniederländische Malerei (1924–37), covered the history of painting in the Low Countries up to the moment of political division between the north and south (1957), 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 “primit* ives.”

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 predeces* sors 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 "pa-tented 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 motif 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 trans* scription 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’œil, a technique used to represent 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 artist’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 his* torians. 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. 105–12). 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

9. Panofsky (as in n. 1), 253.
11. Panofsky (as in n. 1), 465.
Rogier was "responding" in the Prado Descente. 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. The Magdalen in the Lamentation from Brussels, now in the Mayer van den Bergh Museum in Antwerp, as well as one painted by Geertgen tot Sint Jans on a retable shutter now in Vienna, also from the corresponding figure in the Deposition and not from the Prado Descente. Nonetheless, in the 15th century, the latter was a perfectly accessible work, as it stood in Louvain in the church of Our Lady of Stavelot and in Ghent. 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 hunching 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 an "double invention of the Gemälde," or even of a "multiple invention."

The relationship between Flanders and Italy as a classic theme in the historiography of art. Among the recent works examining this question, Philippin'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, 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 "mediological" 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 "mediological" 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 Entfaltung der Gemälde 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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14. Friedländer (as in n. 13), ii, no. 99.
15. Ibid., v, no. 6a.