approaches in the 1970s and early 1980s, in our twenty-first-century close scrutiny, as a means of uncovering an artwork’s idiomatic representational and material language, retooled as “technical art history,” has been canonized as a legitimate part of art history’s academic curriculum. Materials, for example, perceived as the fractional means that build up an artwork’s physical but also signifying totality, are the research objective of “Materialikonographie,” the recent and noteworthy methodology deployed in the teaching of art history at the University of Hamburg. In her book Das Material der Kunst: Eine andere Geschichte der Moderne (2001) Monika Wagner, the pioneering force behind this project, formulates the hope that her study will become the impetus for an alternative history of modern art based on “a fundamental engagement with the materiality of artworks.”

Studies like Daniel Arasse’s and Georges Didi-Huberman’s have clearly borne rich fruit: the unassuming detail is steadily changing the entrenched whole.

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Notes
1. Carlo Ginzburg, contribution to “Notes from the Field: Detail,” Art Bulletin 94, no. 4 (December 2012): 496. This collection of views on the theme of “the detail,” bringing together art historians, artists, conservators, historians, theoreticians, and literary critics, suggests the persisting and multidisciplinary interest of the subject.
2. Johannes Endres, contribution to “Notes from the Field: Detail,” 494.
7. Didi-Huberman, “L’art de ne pas décrire,” 106: “Mais surtout, ce que montre la peinture, c’est sa cause matérielle, c’est à dire la peinture.”
9. The exemplary instance of such collaborative enterprise is the ongoing Rembrandt Research Project, launched in 1968.
12. In his book Rembrandt: The Painter at Work (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1997), Ernst van de Wetering, a participant in the Rembrandt Research Project, provides a model application of the methodologies of “technical art history.” His approach, inspired by the methods and conclusions of the RRP, is a fascinating exploration of Rembrandt’s thought and practice, style and technique within the broader artistic culture of his time. The book is illustrated with beautiful details that invite the reader’s close looking.
13. See http://www.uni-hamburg.de/ Kunstgeschichte/Forschung/Matikonographie.html.

EUGENIO BATTISTI
L’antirinascimento

Christopher S. Wood: We both responded to Rachael’s question with the same answer: L’antirinascimento by Eugenio Battisti, a book that was not only widely neglected when it appeared in 1962 but has also never been translated into English. It covers a whole range of material and topics that didn’t fit—or, in 1962, didn’t fit—into standard art historical narratives of the period. So, for example, automata, magic and talismanic images, wonders and portents, the Wanderhunger, astrology, alchemy, the topos of the witch and the wild man.

Michael W. Cole: There is also a lot on peasants and scenes of everyday life, on gardens and the elements, as well as chapters by an overly narrow concept of art, whether that was art as expression, art as superstructure, art as a mode of critical thinking, whatever. I also liked that the book was unimpressed by patrons and by the state. I didn’t see Battisti as commenting particularly on Mannerism because I think of Mannerism as a burst of creativity under suddenly emancipated conditions, that is, art created for the first time openly under the sign of art. In Mannerism, the awareness of newly won freedom is part of the content of the works. For me Battisti’s book must have resonated instead with David Freedberg’s
Power of Images (1989). I also didn’t think there was anything particularly Italian about it. It seemed to me everything he said was true about northern art as well.

Cole: There are moments when he does try to distinguish the two. He suggests, for example, that whereas the north had a popular art that constituted some kind of alternative to religious art, Italy did not, and that this is because “high art” (arte culta) in Italy had already in some way absorbed folkloric imagery. Mostly, though, what’s Italian about the book is its negative: he’s writing against a historiographical tradition, dating to the Renaissance itself, that would see Brunelleschi and Masaccio as the exemplary Florentines and Florence as normative for the Renaissance as a whole.

Wood: I agree, it is basically a reactive book. It is as if he were recoiling from an image of the Renaissance, prevalent in Italy, as a serene, perfect, or, as he says, “meta-physical” moment of equilibrium. You know, form guided by geometry and coordinated either with an ethical, rational humanism or with the constants of nature and cosmos.

Cole: Such an image was prevalent not only in Italy: think of Wittkower’s Architectural Principles.

Wood: Well, exactly, Wittkower represented for me in the 1980s, and I am sure I am not the only one, all the established discourses that I didn’t want to participate in. This raises an apparent puzzle about Battisti that I haven’t managed to solve. How is it that the author of L’antirinascimento, which downplays the role of the individual artist, was also the author of monographs on Cimabue and (of all artists, hardly a standard-bearer for an anti-Renaissance) Piero della Francesca?

Cole: He does make that amusing remark in the conclusion that even in Piero’s and Raphael’s pure classicism there’s a naturalistic, anti-classical charge, one that “with an attentive montage of photos, could move these masters to the other side of the barricades” (p. 379). You then notice that even in this book, he frequently shows only details of large paintings, masking out the familiar context.

Wood: Okay, point taken, but I still can’t quite grasp how the chronicler of the unfulfilled, self-contradictory qualities of the Renaissance was also the founder of the Society for Utopian Studies? Or that the author of a monograph on Brunelleschi was also a major scholar of modern industrial architecture? He practiced so many different modes of scholarship. I can’t find the figure in the carpet.

Cole: I don’t think he’d want you to. His anti-Renaissance is by definition discontinuous, and that, to him, is both what makes it modern and what makes it appealing. There’s also a scholarly principle here: he writes that “the possibility of reducing everything to a few simple concepts is a methodological myth, the fruit of ignorance and laziness” (p. 48).

Wood: Yes, I would agree, that is what makes him a great historian. André Chastel, in the introduction to the expanded second edition of the book in Italy, from 1989, described the book as a “centipede: it doesn’t proceed in an easily discernible fashion, it calls everything into question” (vol. 1, p. 8). Still, I would want to try to figure out what the book is doing beyond just gathering up topics neglected by orthodox or establishment art history. Would you say that Battisti breaks the metaphysical spell by introducing the ugly, the abject, the informe, the irrational, the uncontrollable? It is a move that is all too familiar today—just think of Georges Didi-Huberman stressing the symptom, the rupture, the material, the index in quattrocento art as a way of loosening the grip of Vasari’s or Panofsky’s idealism, or maybe better: the hidden idealism that governs their theories of representation.

Cole: Of course, I loved Battisti’s notion that Giambologna’s Appennino, dissolving into the garden around it, is an early example of the informe.

Wood: At one point he says that the anti-Renaissance is nothing more than the preference for the dynamic over the stable—for “the tumultuous, the indefinite, the protean, the psychologically aggressive, the repugnant, the seductive” (p. 32). He invokes the demimonde of acrobats and minxes as well as the mechanical devices that rouse an archaic terror.

Cole: Yes, and he also speaks about popular traditions as the “connective tissue” that unites all the seemingly discontinuous aspects of the anticlassical (p. 54).

Wood: The phrase “popular culture” was just entering into academic discourse in that decade, replacing “folklore.” I noted that he used it at least once (p. 287). In the later 1960s and 1970s it was ubiquitous, especially in English and French. Battisti does deal with some images that might be said to have been produced for or even by the “people,” like the woodcuts depicting peasants in the chapter entitled “From the ‘Comic’ to ‘Genre.’ ” This is what you could call his “northern” material.

Cole: He actually reproduces woodcuts by Dürrer and Holbein as well as Italian examples.

Wood: But Battisti’s proflouner thesis, which you mentioned earlier, was that in Italy the popular was absorbed into high art so that there was no need for popular art as a separate entity. It is like what someone might say about, I don’t know, Barnett Newman: that Newman didn’t need to cite or represent American vernacular experience in a vulgar, obvious way, it is simply present all the time in his work.

Cole: I guess Battisti might have said the same about, for example, Titian. But maybe a better and clearer example, and one that figures conspicuously in the book, is Andrea Riccio. He is the artist who may be most central to Battisti’s thinking, the one whose work is on the book’s cover. Battisti gives us quite a different Riccio from the one who has emerged in recent years. Not the Riccio of the university town, but the international figure, in exchange with northern Europe. Not the Riccio that Pomponius Gauricus took as a key figure when using literary theory to make sense of the arts, but a Riccio who is “capable of an authentic and genuine openness to the popular” (p. 157). Not the favorite of local classicists, but the maker of “an Anti-Venus from the sea of monstrosity” (p. 136), of witches and toads.

Wood: Not that Battisti played much of a role in the recent exhibition catalog devoted to Riccio.

Cole: Can we return to the topic of Battisti’s targets in L’antirinascimento? It’s possible that non-Italian readers miss the book’s political orientation, or at least its political starting point. Lionello Venturi, Battisti’s teacher, lost his job and went into exile when in 1931 he refused to take an oath of loyalty to the Fascist Party—the only art historian among the twelve university professors in all of Italy who did so. I thought of that when Battisti quoted an older German scholar, Hans Hess, on the “new tolerance toward the individual” that characterized sixteenth-century art (p. 160). Battisti was attracted to a sixteenth-century art that could accept the most diverse material—feather art, for example. He remarked that prints of ugly witches did not represent witch hunts but rather invited them (p. 116). Certainly the book’s anticlassicism reads differently when we think of the way the Italian state had appropriated classical forms just a few decades earlier.

Wood: Absolutely: it is not Brunelleschi’s Florence that he was trying to demystify but the spurious geometries of Mussolini’s EUR. And anyway, the Brunelleschi of his monograph is a figure of incongruities and incompleteness who only recedes further into mystery when you study the buildings empirically, brick by brick. Any idealizing reading of Brunelleschi’s architecture, for Battisti, is an imposition. Just as in the cases of Piero or Raphael.

Cole: The anti-Brunelleschi turns out to be Brunelleschi himself. This is what he means when he says that once we recognize all the things that represent the anti-Renaissance, there’s no Renaissance left. Already in the book we’re reviewing, he wants to offer a Brunelleschi who exemplifies “civil morality” (p. 20).

Wood: Battisti was always straightforward about his liberal politics, which were not static but restless. In one of the texts he added to the 1989 edition of L’antirinascimento he concedes that in 1962
the effort to “sanctify the witches and demonize the monks” could possibly be considered “an act of social justice” (vol. 2, p. 686). It was as if the context of Vatican II was already rolling over into the context of the student and labor movements of 1967–69. Then he goes on to say that, in effect, “sympathy for the devil” is no longer enough in 1989, in part because the original utopian strivings that the book was trying to trace were transformed in modernity—and he saw this process accelerating in his own time because of the mass media—into an evasive and dystopian irrationalism. Instead he speaks about violence and technological change on a planetary scale, suggesting that the real laboratory of his hypotheses in modernity is above all the massive, ongoing, dystopian-utopian experiment of the United States. In 1989 he says that the book would need to be rewritten and entitled L’antirinascimento.

Cole: He had been teaching in the United States since Penn State brought him there in 1965, initially as a visiting professor and then as a regular faculty member. That is where he wrote some of his most important books, including the Piero and Bruselleschi monographs. At the same time, he was very aware of what was happening around him. Learning of a project the anthropologist Richard Plunz had led, trying to understand and improve conditions in a Philadelphia ghetto, he collaborated with his students to launch a similar initiative in San Leucio, Italy. He also taught seminars on American art and politics and edited a volume on the topic in 1973.

Wood: I agree, it would seem there is no equivalent among American scholars of Renaissance art. But it makes sense in the context of his involvement with contemporary art in Genoa in the early 1960s, his connections to the literary neo-avant-gardists Gruppo 63, his own founding and directorship of the journal Maratò, to which Umberto Eco, Enrico Crispoli, and other important critics all contributed.

Cole: Germano Celant also studied with him in the early 1960s. Celant later credited Battisti with forming his path as a human being, no less than as a scholar and writer. Wood: For these reasons, no doubt, he had somewhat of a rocky ride in Italy, despite his academic pedigree and his many publications.

Cole: Many indeed! Just in the years 1960 to 1963, he published—in addition to L’antirinascimento—the long book Rinascimento e barocco, individual monographs on Giotto and Cimabue, an exhibition catalog on Hogarth, a short book on the Sistine Chapel, an edition of Gian Pietro Bellori’s Vite, and a translation of Robert Rosenblum’s Cubism and Twentieth-Century Art, along with dozens of essays. How did he do it, and still read all he did? The Preface of Robert Clements’s Michelangelo’s Theory of Art thanks “Dr. Eugenio Battista [sic], the prolific Renaissance scholar in Rome.” Perhaps that’s another reason that L’antirinascimento got so little attention at first. People couldn’t keep up.

Wood: After a few years teaching at Genoa he was suddenly thrust into a kind of exile at age forty (he was born in 1924). Penn State seems to have been an enlightened place; they had a series of distinguished visitors from abroad in these years, including Anthony Blunt. The art historian Robert Enggass may have been the one who first brought Battisti over. After a couple of years they gave him a permanent position. Penn State, by the way, was also the first stop in the United States for Erich Auerbach right after the war.

Cole: In 1969, after Philipp Fehl left the University of North Carolina, Battisti took a position there, knowing that the department was open to making it a permanent position, but he seems to have stayed only a short time. And beginning in 1970, he held a series of posts in Italy. But all the while he never cut his ties with Penn State, retiring from there only in 1984.

Wood: His career path gives the impression of someone who was never really content in any of his posts.

Cole: I think there’s a more positive way of seeing his movements as well. Venturi and his students represented the strongest Italian alternative to Roberto Longhi and his school. And one of the many things that put Battisti at odds with the Longhians is that Longhi largely thought in terms of regions while Battisti did not. Longhi’s response to the hegemony of Florence was to devote attention to Emilia-Romagna, Venice, Parma, the north of Caravaggio. Battisti’s was, first, to turn Florence inside out, arguing that the important Florentine art was not what we thought it was, and second, to show that art’s similarity not just to Ferrarese painting but to Dürrer and Bosch’s as well. He also read widely about art from outside Europe: we’ve noted his remarks on feather art, one of several key appearances that Latin America makes in L’antirinascimento.

Wood: Battisti translated the book on Aztec civilization by the American anthropologist George Vaillant already in 1957. And Tony Cutler, who knew Battisti at Penn State in the 1960s and 1970s, told me that Battisti was always heading off to São Paulo or New Mexico, and when asked why, would simply answer, “That’s where the art is!”

Cole: I wonder if Battisti ever had any trouble “processing” Battisti’s book.

Wood: Maybe. In the first edition, the illustrations are grouped together as separate plates, not always near the relevant text. This was common enough for the era. But then there are no figure references in the chapters. Several illustrations appear not to correspond to any passage at all. One way of explaining this would be to say that he doesn’t want the illustrations to be understood as just, well, illustrations. For anyone trained in the Anglo-German tradition, all of this is likely to make the book seem rather fugitive, even alienating.

Wood: That is really interesting, I never would have put it that way. You are saying that we are all iconographers, finally: we are interested in meaning. And so from one point of view at least the book is “incomplete”—that there is no payoff unless the author can help us understand a work of art? Do you or I really feel that way—that “art history” finally must deliver interpretations of works of art?

Cole: Surely yes. I can’t think of anything you’ve written that doesn’t interpret the works you chose to reproduce.

Wood: And just compare the pages and pages you devote to Cellini’s Perseus and Medusa to Battisti’s rather bizarre treatment of
that work. Battisti reproduces the work alongside an image of an extravagant fifteenth-century helmet crested by an eagle, somewhat like the one Perseus wears. Yet in the book itself he never discusses either Cellini’s sculpture or the helmet.

Cole: It is as if he feels that having read his book we ought to be able to figure out for ourselves why the illustrations are significant.

Wood: Illustration as a discursive mode in its own right. In any case, I don’t think Battisti is vulnerable to the charge that he wasn’t sensitive to works of art. He had a highly developed sense of the density and the enigmatic quality of the work of art. There is a passage in the review he wrote of Eco’s Open Work (L’opera aperta, 1962) where he speaks of “devotional statuettes,” which appear minimally ambiguous (that is, “closed”) but which in fact succeed in “storing” enormous quantities of information about divinity.

Cole: So what do you see as the limits of L’antirinascimento today? You remarked earlier that you were not in tune with everything.

Wood: I should restate that. I don’t object to anything in the book, it is just that there for me is something missing, some extra dimension that would complete the basically humanistic and anthropocentric picture of the period that I share with Battisti. I am talking about subjectivity, the experience of the individual, the cultivation of psychological inwardness. These are topics that I believe are completely compatible with his anti-Renaissance, if you define “Renaissance” as the mystification of authority and the artificial stabilization of form and meaning. Perspective, for example, and this may seem paradoxical, could have played a role in his book. Linear perspective is the symbolic form of subjectivism. Perspective privileges the individual point of view. It is anti-idealistic.

Cole: Battisti had read a lot of Panofsky, in German and in English. Would you say that he nevertheless missed Perspective as Symbolic Form—a book, by the way, that was translated into Italian in 1961—or missed its implications? That might have provided him a way of reading the Brunelleschian paradigm in terms of subjectivity rather than metaphysics.

Wood: Yes, I agree. And related to this is the limited space Battisti devotes to religion in the book. Unless it is the survivals of pagan animism or earth cults or belief in demons, he is so anticlerical that he is ready to mask out the entire Christian sphere. That is true about Aby Warburg, too, by the way.

Cole: A book on art and popular culture in the Renaissance really has to deal more with religion.

Wood: Like Battisti, I am anticlerical, but like a lot of others in our field today—excluding you—I believe that popular, everyday religious experience in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and indeed beyond—private prayer, paraliturgical rituals, pilgrimage and relic cults, so-called superstitions, devotion to icons, and so on—was a key matrix of the modern construction of subjectivity. None of that makes it into Battisti’s book.

Cole: And I imagine you would also then say that if he wants to pursue the themes that interest him, he could be looking at an even wider range of objects?

Wood: Yes; for example, he has nothing to say about popular devotional prints or small panels. It’s the independent picture, the easel painting or the drawing or print, the mobile work, that’s crucial. It appeals directly to the mind and the emotions. The one-on-one encounter between the individual and the picture is something like a virtually intersubjective experience. I would also point out that Battisti is not very interested in portraiture.

Cole: Of course, the Ricciros are all mobile works. But where he gets closest to a sense of subjectivity may be in the chapter “The Magic of the Elements.” The idea there is that the cinquecento saw an “insurrection of the material”: artists discovered that nature had a dynamic they could identify, indulge, and stimulate, and as a result art became humble. It’s an exciting argument inasmuch as it’s a complete inversion of our conventional account of the period, which sees the sixteenth century as willfully artful and postnaturalistic. Battisti sees art not as a mastery of nature but as negative capability.

Wood: Hence his attention to sculpture and the decorative arts alongside painting.

Cole: Yes, but even more interesting to me is the way Battisti frames and qualifies the Burckhardtian starting point we often use to talk about the Renaissance. As Battisti sees it, the Burckhardtian moment was the quattrocento, when the artist “scornfully imposed his proud, precise proportional projections on every field when the public allowed him” (p. 187). After 1500, a confident, solar, domineering art gave way to something more doubtful, conscious of its limitations.

Wood: Well, there is a tradition of seeing the cinquecento as a fall into confusion and obscurity, and it is already present in Burckhardt, in his chapter “Der Sturz der Humanisten,” “the fall of the humanists,” where he talks about the humanist scholars and philosophers losing their way, descending into immorality and irrelevance. And isn’t this view of things enshrined in the whole “Sack of Rome” topos?

Cole: Except that for Battisti it’s not a decline. It’s the skeptical, “Shakespearean” Renaissance that attracts him.

Wood: In the beginning of his book Battisti mentions an American classic that inspired him, Hiram Haydn’s Counter-Renaissance (1956), a book that stressed the “anti-intellectual, anti-moralistic, anti-synthetic, and anti-authoritarian” aspects of sixteenth-century literature and thought (p. xiii).

Cole: It is a book that is still read by literary historians, or at least it was when I was in graduate school.

Wood: Battisti does not so much lament this eclipse of the solar quattrocento confidence as, first, show that the quattrocento was not so “cold and inhuman” after all but was shot through with incongruities, and second, welcome the incongruities as the welling up of the real. And this is what permits for a more meaningful long-run pursuit of utopian goals.

Cole: Definitely, in fact I am convinced that Battisti’s notion of the real is what finally binds together much of this otherwise eclectic book. He uses the word in reference to the city of wood behind the classifying stone facades, the breaches in decorum that distinguish the nonheroic sculpture of Donatello, the tutelary presences invoked by personal emblems and portraits, the fears one experiences hearing a fairy tale or visiting the Sacro Bosco at Bomarzo—in short, all the nonsymbolic meanings of things.

Wood: This point about realism dovetails with Battisti’s own statement about the true spirit of anticlassicism as mutable, restless, empirical, and not so impressed by books and “culture” (p. 53).

Cole: Another paradox: no one loved books more than Battisti.

Wood: I know you are also interested in his pages on cinquecento allegorical painting and its roots in archaic totemism. And at one point Battisti speaks of the general modern indifference to symbols and allegories as if this were something he wanted to get away from. I was even thinking that a good comparison to Battisti’s book would be Angus Fletcher’s Allegory: Theory of a Symbolic Mode of 1964.

Cole: Very interesting: Fletcher, too, sees the allegory as a demonic or magic rather than a cognitive mode. Though wouldn’t you say that Fletcher is ultimately more interested in the psyche? His demons are like drives, working inside the allegorical poems. That’s not Battisti’s image.

Wood: Fletcher did not think historically about the sixteenth century. What about Battisti? I am not sure he has any overall image of the “shape of history” unless it is the eternal return of the anti-Renaissance spirit in the Baroque or in Romanticism.

Cole: Well, he does see the sixteenth century, by contrast to the fifteenth, as a period of de-skilling, also as one in which the arts broke free of their traditional subjects to finally engage fully with society and nature. He’s pretty explicit in places that the book is intended to be an account of the beginnings of modernism.
Wood: I didn’t really see that much of a commitment on his part to the epochal threshold of 1500. I even wonder whether Battisti, in allowing the anti-Renaissance mentality to “flood” through time in the way he does, might not be underestimating the irreversible compounding that is involved in the transformation of experience into art. What I am talking about is the way life gets taken up into art over time. Once that happens, it is hard to undo. Older art becomes part of the content of newer art. That is what gives the history of art a certain directionality. So, for example, I resist somewhat when Battisti speaks about the topos of the wild man in folklore or in late fourteenth-century imagery together with the garden sculptures at Bomarzo. They are not the same thing. Bomarzo is a post-1500 interpretation of the themes of monstrosity, wildness, and so on that draws on an accumulated imaginaire of wild people and other topos. The wild man and Bomarzo are on different sides of the epochal threshold.

Cole: I also resist Battisti’s equation of the two. Still, one of the most challenging parts of the book for me is the section on fairy tales, which raises precisely this question. As he sees it, fairy tales maintain their form through the centuries and represent a kind of lingering base experience across epochs of cultural change. The wild man and the monsters of Bomarzo both express this.

Wood: This is the part of the book that interests me most. Art is perpetually reframing experience and in that way introduces a distance from experience that can only be collapsed artificially, by a primitivism or something like it—that is what I have always believed. But the fiaba or folk tale or fairy tale would seem to elude this reframing. This is relevant for the whole question of the “popular” in Battisti. He maintains that popular cosmology and teratology and storytelling and the realistic view of things all inevitably rise to the surface and enter into art. The vernacular and the real “get through” somehow—but how?

Cole: In the case of Bomarzo, he thinks it happens unintentionally; the site “is a spontaneous product, nearly unaware of its purpose, almost the product of constructive madness” (p. 127). I wonder whether he’d say the same about, say, the Piero di Cosimo “madness” (p. 127). I wonder whether he’d think it’s not just a matter of looking at different sources. Battisti was fascinated with the relation between writing and art; every chapter in L’antirinascimento has an appendix of little-known Renaissance texts relevant to its arguments. Yet as he repeatedly states, what he’s trying to find is that which escapes the literature. He knows very well that only certain kinds of things get written down, especially in a culture where literacy was mostly limited to a small group of elite men.

Wood: With the visual arts, it is not so clear what the mechanisms are that would translate ordinary experience into the artwork. There is an alchemy involved that can’t be grasped. There is no treatise by Dante or anyone else on what “vulgar eloquence” in the realm of artifacts and pictures might be.

Cole: And so his solution is to turn to anthropology, the discipline he thinks can help him find things that cultures share but do not always equally describe them. Are there other strategies he might have tried? I think of Pamela Smith’s recent work on what she calls “artisanal knowledge,” the thinking that is embodied by certain ways of making.

Wood: I am sure he would have been sympathetic to this approach. He would also have recognized that the question of the relation of ordinary life to art is basic to modernism; in fact, it is an ongoing question: How does the artist pump everyday experience into the artwork without denaturing it?

Cole: I take Battisti’s book to be more about the problems we face in the other direction. Just what “experience” is an artwork “about,” and what means do we have of getting at this? And how can we use our own experience of art to shape a historical project?

Wood: It is Baxandall you are describing. That is exactly how he proceeds.

Cole: Yes, and that is what made his mode of historical scholarship so vital and appealing, like Battisti’s. Battisti concludes the preface of his book with a remark about the “human experience” of writing it (p. 15).

Wood: You could say that Dempsey proceeds in the same way, and, for that matter, Tim Clark, too. They are all supposedly interested in popular or collective or ordinary experience, but in fact their inquiries begin with, take their cue from, highly refined works of art.

Cole: Still, Battisti stands apart from the group you mention in that a central topic of his book is the opening up of art into what we now might call “visual culture.” One of his best insights about automata is that their mimetic, anticlassifying subject matter ends up providing models for painting and sculpture, which in turn abandon their old limitations. Modernity arrives with new media.

Wood: I agree he is different. But the way you put it, the criterion of success is whether “visual culture” ends up contributing to our interpretations of elite works of art. Whereas I wonder whether Battisti doesn’t invite us to think about the problem the other way around. That is, let’s start from a layer of shared experience—dreams, superstitions, worries about the future, prejudices, pragmatism—and see where it leads. Rather than starting from a work of art and working backward.

References

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