

Response to Ulrich Pfisterer's review of *Looking for Lines. Theories on the Essence of Art and the Problem of Mannerism*

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The title of my book has a double meaning, which is supposed to inform the reader right from the start what he may expect. And what not to expect. I am really sorry to have disappointed Ulrich Pfisterer in the expectation that my book is about the historiography of Mannerism in all its aspects. Which it is not. Nor is it about the history of the term Mannerism, on which there are already good publications, as Pfisterer rightly notices, including adequate bibliographies to help the reader further understand this topic.

The title (*Looking for Lines*) first refers to the tenacious search for abstract linear patterns in art, held to be something that can be separated from their illusionistic or figurative effects in order to distil an assumed essence of Art. For a long time in the historiography of art this division was (and often still is) taken for granted and strongly influenced the analysis and assessment of works of art. The uncritical ease with which it was considered to be applicable even to those periods in which neither artists nor critics were thinking in terms of such a dichotomy, has always struck me. By travelling back in time I have traced in reverse the ancestry of this idea; step by step, from student to teacher, ending in the early eighteenth century. For I believe it was around that time that the dichotomy was beginning to take shape in various branches of art literature. It was to grow into one of the main modern measures for the analysis and judgement of paintings and sculptures as good or bad, whether recently created or belonging to earlier styles or periods; Mannerism being one among them. When eventually after the Second World War a preponderance of abstract linear patterns was appreciated as one of the cardinal features that transform a figurative representation into a work of Art, the way was finally paved for the aesthetic reappraisal of Mannerism. This has been the reason for me to draw attention to this period style; especially because this 'modern' view was one of the pillars of Shearman's influential theory in favour of Mannerism, in spite of his argument that we should understand it on its own (sixteenth-century) terms. Thus instead of discussing the complete construction of the literature on Mannerism, I have to admit that my book is only about one of its pieces, though a crucial one for the mechanism to work.

Moreover, and that is the second meaning of the title of my book, the dichotomy came to be applied as a means to find lines or patterns in the history of art. Or rather, it served as a new tool for the old problem of making order out of the chaos of the great amount of artists and their works left by the past. For centuries (art)historians had been accustomed in the wake of Vasari - or Pliny if you like - to look for the degree of illusion. Accordingly works of art (or artists) were arranged in a chronological order from less to more successful imitation of (beautiful) nature, or the other way round in the case of the transition from ancient Roman art to medieval art. When from the eighteenth century on, however, the degree of illusion as found in the depiction of, for example, anatomy, drapery and expression,

gradually lost its dominant value as an artistic standard, its function as a historical criterion was beginning to be undermined as well. Works of art (and artists) came to be arranged historically by the distinction of period styles according to the degree of balance between linear patterns and figurative illusion. Certainly, I agree with Ulrich Pfisterer that ideas about colours did also play an important role in all this, but that would have required another book, or one at least twice as thick.

I am pleased with Ulrich Pfisterer's quotation of Roland Fréart de Chambray's remark. This reference to Chambray's use of the term 'manieristes' and his remark about 'beaux contours', however, may be a little bit misleading. The reader of the review might think that Chambray here writes extensively about the Mannerists and discusses the colours and beautiful contours in their works, but definitely neither is the case. Chambray uses the word 'manieristes' only once, referring to artists like D'Arpino and Lanfranco (page 120; for an English translation of the passage on the Mannerists, see Philip Sohm, *The Artist Grows Old. The Aging of Art and Artists in Italy 1500-1800*, Yale University Press 2007, page 146), and when he writes about the importance of colours and lines (page 62) he does so in a completely different context. Even so, Chambray's is a relevant remark. It would have been in place in my book, indeed, if only because it seems to confirm my thesis that in 1662 the term contour was still used in the context of the imitation of beautiful nature. Chambray refers to the rendering of muscles, not to an abstract, formal element in its own right as it was later to become.

I like to make just one last remark and that concerns Ulrich Pfisterer's criticism of the epilogue. According to Pfisterer, for whose serious reading of my book I am really grateful, the epilogue gives the impression 'that art historians today pursue their research unaffected from the historic and cultural conditions of the eye, aesthetic perception and adequate phrasing'. To me this remark seems odd. I am fully aware that the recent history of our discipline shows quite the opposite: many art historians today are fond of historically and culturally contextualising art from the past as being the product of various, different ideas and attitudes, including their own. It is an illuminating and fruitful approach. But if there is one impression I get from art history today, it is the opposite of the impression Pfisterer thinks I want to give. In my opinion the emphasis on contextualisation runs the risk of making us forget that there still is a logic of image making and perception - I do confess to admire the writings of E.H. Gombrich - which is related to the contours (no pun intended) of the human brain, that is, to our perceptual and cognitive mechanisms and skills. So if I am allowed to be a little stubborn: attempts to understand art and its history by means of contextualisation without taking this logic into account cannot but be in vain.

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