

Bagley among the Germans

Review of:

Robert Bagley, *Gombrich among the Egyptians and Other Essays in the History of Art*, Seattle: Marquand Books, 2016, 208 pages, ISBN-10: 0692397140
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The most memorable thing I have ever heard in a faculty meeting was an elderly colleague recalling that 'according to Oleg Grabar, we should all be able to teach all of the history of art.' I wondered in what spirit the celebrated Islamicist had made his remark: ought we to *know everything* published, a vain hope even in the early exploratory days of art history, or are we to adopt a sublime enough perspective that we can meaningfully approach objects and artists that are strange to us? The silence that greeted Grabar's remark must have been as much embarrassed as reverent: we art historians suffer both the specialist's lack of specific knowledge outside our competence, and the specialist's discomfort with bold theorizing.

Fortunately, Robert Bagley is immune to both ailments, and his *Gombrich among the Egyptians* is delightful for the very unpretentious, down to earth way the expert of ancient Chinese art tackles big questions, from how to teach art history to beginners to what to do with the vexed and perennial problem of style, from where to attribute agency in the creative process ('to agents!' is Bagley's sane cry) to how to think about medium and technique in *all* arts and crafts we may wish to think about. He even engages in art historiography: taking to task Meyer Schapiro and Ernst Kitzinger and Erwin Panofsky on style, Erwin Panofsky again on iconography and, as the title suggests, Ernst Gombrich on knowing and seeing and the challenge of a world history of art. In this connection, the book's refreshing directness all too often is a missed opportunity, resulting in a speedy trial, with Bagley as judge and jury. Thus, in the introduction, before we've even had a chance to review Gombrich's sins, they are gathered up in a single sentence that might have pleased Bellarmine: 'He believed that there is one optically correct way to represent the world, and he believed that optically correct representation is or ought to be the sole end of art.' (p. 13) Curiously, a note accompanies this, presumably as evidence, citing a passage from *The Story of Art* (1950, p. 376) where Gombrich compared Constable with Turner and Friedrich: 'However great and deserved was the popular success which some of these Romantic painters achieved in their days, we believe today that those who followed Constable's path and tried to explore the visible world rather than to conjure up poetic moods achieved something of more lasting importance.' *That* suffices to convict someone of thinking there is one correct way to

see the world? Even the sympathetic reader, may wonder whether Bagley is a reliable guide.

In another sense, however, though Bagley's forthrightness consistently overlooks Gombrich's Central European ironies, the book *is* well-titled: what interests Bagley is the confrontation of the expert with alien traditions and what may be learned therefrom, even for those who claim to know those traditions well. Bagley himself is, as the very first words of the book tell us, 'a western scholar applying a western discipline to the study of very unwestern material', a state of affairs that gives him 'an interest in the intellectual foundations of art history along with something resembling a cultural outsider's view of it.' (p. 9) Not that the book is an exercise in postmodern ethnography, or the Grammar of Form: its essence is circumspection. After the introduction, which sums up the papers (5 previously published) and then embarks on an important discussion of the artist's skills and materials, a discussion that sets the tone for the whole book, we are treated to general reflections on style (grounded however in attempts to define and fix the boundaries of the Gothic), the 'first writing assignment', that awkward student paper where instructors sternly order 'no research!' (we might as well ask for 'no thinking!'), and 'Meaning and Explanation', which opposes the logocentrism of iconography by considering Chinese bronzes for whose decoration we have no written sources. Four more papers on those bronzes follow, concerned both with the development of their nearly abstract animal decoration and with their casting and design; finally comes the polemic against Gombrich, which is however at the same time a fascinating disquisition on the mixing of pictures and writing in a Middle Kingdom lintel that makes 'the literate viewer's encounter with the work cognitively complex to a degree for which I can think of no parallel' (p. 13).

Bagley's enthusiasm matches his boundless energy—he applies himself to the secondary literature on Egyptian art in a way that should inspire all of us to reach beyond the familiar. What is his purpose in doing so? Bagley insists that all the individual papers, including those that look like specialist contributions to the *Archives of Asian Art*, were written for art historians in general, and the whole book reads as a brief for how to understand art, artists, and humans better on the basis of a bounded but deep store of knowledge and common sense. Of course, there is always the risk that Arthur Schopenhauer complained of: 'each pursues his bread and butter research, but afterwards wants to have a say about everything.'¹

Bagley ably dodges this risk in the exemplary chapter on style. After asking, strikingly, of the Louvre, 'What is the style of this building?', he shows that the question has no answer, because it has multiple answers: Baroque, classical, French, Perrault, early Perrault, etc. Then he savages Schapiro's unabashedly Hegelian coupling of historical periods and visual styles. Schapiro, being cautious too, allows

¹ Arthur Schopenhauer, *Über das Sehnen und die Farben*, 2nd. ed., Leipzig: Hartknoch, 1854, vi, my translation.

that a period, if not stylistically uniform, will produce 'one style or a limited range of styles'. Bagley pounces:

Suppose he were to say 'Nineteenth century French painting had only a limited range of styles': how much wiggle room would we have to allow to make that a plausible statement? And how much wiggle room *could* we allow and go on believing that the statement says anything? (p. 28)

Comparable chestnuts from Panofsky, Kitzinger, and Janson are sharply rebuked, not without humour: 'St.-Denis is not perfection, not by a long shot, but it *is* the first step *toward* perfection. Abbot Sugar was trying to build Amiens, he just did not quite know how.' (p. 37)

We may reply: 'Perhaps Panofsky's generation took those questions seriously, but that is not the kind of problem I work on.' (p. 19) Bagley is at his best in unsettling such complacency. It may be true that no contemporary medievalist uses the term *gothic* with any explanatory intent, but just the fact of there *being* medievalists, of working within certain disciplinary and factual preserves, attests to our unflinching belief in periods and their coherence. (I wonder if Bagley feels this strongly in his own case; perhaps not, as ancient China is not a 'classic' art historical style, but it is a consequence of his argument that his domain of expertise is equally artificial). Throughout the book Bagley picks on survey writers, principally Horst Janson and Hugh Honour and John Fleming. He does not do so because he considers them particularly stupid, but because survey authors confront questions that other art historians ignore, except when we are teaching introductory courses. Thus Honour and Fleming say that Claus Sluter 'produced some of the last great medieval works.' Would they have bothered to say he produced 'some of the last great fourteenth century works'? And what of people who call the Renaissance the early modern period? 'They have embraced the nineteenth century notion that the Renaissance is us and the Middle Ages are not, which is very bad history.' (p. 30)

Bagley is more even radical than this. Style being 'a roundabout way of talking about an object's relationships with the other objects' (p. 26), 'we must banish from our thoughts the spirit of the age, and with it, the age. Instead, we should think about the training of the artist and the status quo he starts from.' (p. 38) Brave words, and spoken like a true specialist. Indeed, in our monographs, the Spirit of the Age has retreated into artist's contracts, letters to and fro, competitors and clients, the entire panoply of sources favoured by Michael Baxandall, perhaps the only major art historian to escape *Gombrich among the Egyptians* unscathed. But how will that mass of detail help the harried survey lecturer? If style is shorthand, sure we may use Gothic to stand for the peculiar syndrome of church and royal patronage, courtly poetry, school philosophy, pointy shoes and arches? Bagley's emphatic embargo on such talk is curiously like an atheist's complaint that God is unreliable and one should avoid asking his help.

There is another sense of style that Bagley seems unaware of, probably due to his (traditional) art historical concern with periodization. I deliberately choose an example which I know less well than Bagley does Gothic: in Japan before the twentieth century, two schools of painting, Kano and Tosa, dominated elite patronage. Artists educated in one school not only took on its name, but strove to paint in its recognizable canon, which resembled the other less than it did some ancient or foreign styles (Chinese painting in the case of Kano). Would Bagley tell these painters that they are deluded in their adherence to a 'style'? 'The actors in the history of art are people. Styles do not influence people because styles do not exist.' (p. 38) Yet people act on ideas, even if ideas alone are not efficacious without people acting on them. There is a history of communism, and not only of communists.

Bagley, in insisting on attention to the artist's training and status quo, is knocking on an open door. This is standard contextualist art history, denuded of its *Zeitgeist* by clear thinking. However, I should not discount the power of clear thinking to reform a field as hidebound as art history. This virtue shines in the second chapter, on the 'First Paper Assignment.' Here, Bagley demolishes Joshua Taylor's *Learning to Look* (1981) and the whole market niche of specialized introductions to art history writing, 'as if writing about art [is] such an arcane business that the normal rules of good exposition do not suffice.'² (p. 69) Through examination of various objects and texts, including Kitzinger on the Arch of Constantine, for Bagley one of the finest pieces of art historical description, we are shown how good art writing requires prior knowledge and comparison: to deny either is to believe 'in the self-sufficiency of the work of art.' (p. 69)

Very true, and yet some artists may harbour the false belief that their works are self-sufficient, and demand that we approach them only through voluminous description of our visual experience, without taking any context into account. Surely nothing Bagley has said excludes the possibility. In general, Bagley is sound in his demands, but too categorical in his conclusions. The third chapter, the purposely general-sounding 'Meaning and Explanation', suggests that rather than hunting for meaning in intricately decorative works like a Lindisfarne Gospels page or a Shang bronze, we might acknowledge 'visual power' as precisely what the artist and his patron 'felt and valued and sought' (p. 98). Bagley is of course right to say that the growth of archaeological evidence has not been kind to most speculative symbol interpretation, but again, why the exclusive tone? Visual power is just jargon for beauty. And not the hardest formalist has denied that beautiful things might have meaning as well. Surely, as form might cause subjective delight in a subject, it might

² Bagley is unfair to Sylvan Barnett, in claiming that his *Short Guide to Writing about Art* 'is 300 pages long!' As the bibliography indicates, the obese book is the tenth, 2011 edition—early versions were shorter, and better for it.

set off private thoughts that are articulate?³ We may fail to get at the right interpretation, but as a matter of theory, the bare possibility suffices.

Chapter 4, on 'Interpreting Prehistoric Designs', where no written records may be used to check the historian's speculation, is every bit as corrosive. Gombrich appears as the proponent, in his 1979 *Sense of Order*, of natural symbolism, like eyes meant to endow objects with 'protective animation'. Bagley tears down this and many other houses of cards, with a great variety of comparative materials, including some 1950s Buicks. A quotation captures well the dismissive tone:

I have to confess a cynical suspicion that iconography without texts flourishes because it is safe: prehistoric symbols can be interpreted without fear of contradiction. Would an interpreter who confidently explains eyes on prehistoric objects be equally ready to tell us the meaning of eyes on an Egyptian coffin? I doubt it. There is too much danger that a literate Egyptologist might actually know what the eyes mean. I doubt that anyone would claim the ability to penetrate Egyptian iconography without help from texts. (p. 114)

Fair enough, texts are needed for iconography. But one can't help feeling that Bagley's targets are too easy, his refutations too cynical. After all, some charity goes a long way: there are surely prehistoric iconographers who are anxious to get it right and dissatisfied by their lack of corroborating evidence. And an attempt to explain, say, the eyes on the exterior of an archaic Greek drinking cup may prove as intractable, despite the wordiness of Greek vases. Bagley in fact mentions these vase-eyes (n.15, p. 117), but is sanguine that, 'even if some iconographic interpretation should be correct', it is still visual power that explains their presence. Here his complacency matches that of the prehistoric iconographers.

The following three papers, on Shang ritual bronzes (starting with design, going deeper into technique, and concluding with ornament) are the beating heart of the book, concise contributions to specialist debates and at the same time, as Bagley claimed, of wide interest. They are even a handy introduction to Chinese bronze sculpture in this period, though Bagley dislikes periods.⁴ I have not the background to offer much in the way of criticism of Bagley's minute scrutiny of vases and their details. These details, having mainly to do with the question of where part moulds were inserted to produce a given finished surface, reveal, for instance, that a foundry could make bronzes 'to any required technical standard and

³ I argue this for the fresco decoration of the 'Anselm Chapel' in Canterbury Cathedral in 'Iconology and the Logic of Belief', *IKON 7 (Iconology Old and New)*, ed. Marina Vicelja-Matijašić, 2014, 143-56.

⁴ Yet at times he forgets himself and writes things like 'From about 800 to 500 BC the bronze casters experimented with flowing patterns of various kinds and with dragon designs sometimes so reduced in scale as to read only as surface texturing.' (p. 166) Is this an empirical generalization or one of the dreaded statements of period style?

that it was prepared to take shortcuts whenever an opportunity presented itself' (p. 152)—the latter being a transhistorical truth about manufacturers if there ever was one. It is to be hoped that historians of Chinese art, many of whom have encountered these essays already in periodicals, will brave this book despite its title and tell the rest of the art historical community how convincing individual arguments, such as that about the emergence of animal ornament or the self-conscious use of flanges, are to them; to me they looked well-argued and free of the uncompromising quality found in Bagley's historiography. Of course, these essays are earlier, and had to undergo peer review—perhaps, were Bagley to have written the whole book from scratch, the essays in Chinese prehistory would be as bold as his demolition of style, iconography, and Gombrich.

That said, the composite nature of the book, with the earlier, more positive contributions in the middle-rear, works to ground Bagley's efforts, though it takes some stamina on the reader's part to get there. Luckily the author provides at the end of the introduction a theoretical distillation of his decades of empirical study of bronzes. Taking issue with Honour and Fleming's characterization of 'a tension between ends and means', the artist's skills and materials serving as obstacles to the realization of the artwork, Bagley argues that technique and the concreteness of materials should be understood as occasions of design and invention, without which the artist's hypostasized conception would not materialize at all.⁵ The point is driven home by a wealth of empirical examples. The same effects were achieved with the section-mould as with lost wax, though more laboriously: indeed, one of the reasons it took scholars so long to accept the obvious fact that section-moulds were used is that the technique does not dictate any content or form to the artist, it merely opens the door for certain inventions and refinements.

As Bagley puts the matter in the fifth chapter, 'A Shang caster would probably be puzzled to hear that its technique had limitations...We will understand the bronzes better if we think in positive rather than negative terms.' (p. 140) This is certainly true, as is the conclusion that, if technique matters, so do the people who execute the works: 'Technique, design, and factory organization interact at [the foundry of] Houma; they cannot be understood apart from each other...' (p. 154) Again, this holism is almost a platitude in contemporary art history: but Bagley's holism is more lucid than usual, since it admits only human agents. Technique, like style, is never a *deus ex machina* imposing periodization. This runs against much recent art history, which is still impressed by the technological determinism of Walter Benjamin's 'Artwork' essay, and has as often taken instances of technical interrelation between objects as evidence against humanism, especially against the

⁵ Bagley oddly accuses Honour and Fleming of subscribing to Michelangelo's dream of freeing his idea from marble (pp. 14-15). That materials are conditions of possibility of art, and that Dürer or Monet did not 'feel at odds with his medium' (p. 16) did not stop Leonardo, Degas, or Kafka from being frustrated with their work! Bagley's rosy view of artists delighting perpetually in their craft seems to originate in the art historian's perpetual delight in looking.

priority given to the artist in explanation.⁶ Bagley is immune to the romantic-Renaissance fixation on the genius, but he is too clear-headed to dispense with artists, offering the motto ‘we should not be satisfied, in this or any other case, with a formulation that treats a process as an agent.’⁷ (p. 11) Technique, unlike style, exists, but it no more casts bronzes or paints pictures than do philosophical ideas. People do, using the one, the other, or both. This is a logical insight, one that allows Bagley to tackle with confidence (and with vast and careful reading) the techniques and materials of various lands and times and show how humans made things, at times suggesting some probable reasons or at least points of comparison. That is fine world art history, or rather cosmopolitan art history.

There remains the titular essay, placed like a monument at the end of the book. In a way it sums up Bagley’s preoccupations, and can be read alone. It is the cathartic slaying of a villain, Gombrich, who also on the basis of specialist confidence (in Renaissance art) went forth to speak of all art, and in Bagley’s opinion, made a mess of it, ‘dismiss[ing] not particular works but whole civilizations’ (p. 194). The scene of the combat is Egyptian art, often used by Gombrich to contrast an art that shows ‘what we know’ with an art that shows ‘what we see’. Bagley’s procedure is not what one would expect. Gombrich is not brought forth to make his case, but merely paraphrased, his words consigned to page-long endnotes. This frees up the main text for an introduction to hieroglyphs, by way of the limestone lintel of Senwosret III (12th dynasty, mid-19th century BC), which adorns the cover and is reproduced four times in the book. The image is a sophisticated combination of writing and image, with the double, reversed portrait of the seated ruler and his accompanying deities serving both as pictures and as writing, obviating the need for signs disambiguating names as names of men, for instance. Bagley so admires this elegantly symmetrical panel with its interplay between looking and reading that he declares art historians’ troubles with its allegedly rigid, stereotyped quality a mere consequence of illiteracy. ‘The failure is ours: we have failed in the art historian’s basic task of explaining why the panel looks the way it does.’ (p. 182)

The failure is not peculiarly Gombrich’s, since he didn’t discuss this panel; so the topic shifts to the wooden relief of Hezyre, which he did discuss, to Mayan and Assyrian examples, and most extensively, to the Egyptian relief of Ti hunting hippopotamus at Saqqara (2400 BC). This work is remarkable for the closely observed bodies of animals, plants, and servants who vie to hunt for their lord: he

⁶ Chris Wood’s *Forgery, Replica, Fiction: Temporalities of German Renaissance Art*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008, is the most prominent such work. Bagley rejects the Michelangelesque model of genius as an ‘irrelevant importation from Renaissance art theory’ (p.140), but like Baxandall insists on the role of (many) agents.

⁷ Again, a qualification is needed: certainly a material, technique, ‘process’ or even ‘style’ (in the second sense discussed above) might explain some particular effect, and thus be legitimately considered its cause. (Why does this look a certain way? Because x painted it) It is *agential causes*, that is persons, that Bagley is concerned with.

stands there rigidly, feet set apart, in the way Gombrich finds schematic. There follows an imaginary dialogue between Bagley and Gombrich about this relief, modelled perhaps on that between Nietzsche and Buddha in Russell's *History of Western Philosophy*, only less charming, with Gombrich saying heartless things like: 'The patron demanded a baby hippo, so the artist invented a schema for a playful baby hippo.' (p. 192)

It is hard to take this seriously as a refutation, though Bagley footnotes voluminous quantities of obiter dicta from Gombrich that are supposed to convict him of just such dogmatic refusal to look. What results, entertainingly enough, is a ding-dong battle: exactly how Gombrich described his opposition of Egyptian and Greek in a 1999 press release accompanying the reissue of *The Story of Art*. Bagley, with his no-nonsense prose, has no ear for this, but of course a *ding-dong* battle is a kind of Punch and Judy marionette farce, 'more slapstick than real.'⁸ For Gombrich, the 'Egyptian in us' was a heuristic device for understanding what in art served a cognitive, what a sensual purpose. That it led him into any number of chauvinistic, ignorant remarks about Egyptian and other arts cannot be denied. But one must deny stoutly what Bagley asserts in the impassioned conclusion: that one ought not to write about any art one does not love dearly, for in that case one will not have tried hard enough to understand it. One has only to think of Ruskin's writings on Turner to see the limitations of this dictum; how many persons have the skill and the honesty to write truly about what they love? And in any case, Gombrich certainly did not write at length about art he despised, Egyptian or otherwise. The three charges Bagley levels against him, then, are that he is a teleologist (art had to become Greek, and sensually illusionistic), that the distinction between knowing and seeing is a fuzzy one ('The Egyptian in us is perception!' Bagley glories in an endnote; Gombrich might have replied: 'precisely!'), and thirdly, that Gombrich is as wrong to say that narrative art demands illusion as he is to say it requires reading Homer!

Gombrich may be guilty but does Bagley do better? Recall that his explanation of canonical style is that the important personages in Egyptian art ought to look like letters. To explain why this should matter to the Egyptians, he makes the familiar point about the afterlife:

People of high status are drawn like Ti and Hezyre. Why? Perhaps because the mutable individual is thereby turned into something like a word. He is removed from the accidents of the here and now, and made into something outside time. (p. 183)

The 'mutable individual' freed from 'accidents of the here and now' — is this anything else but Gombrich's 'conceptual art', brought up to date by Egyptology? Bagley allows his faux-Gombrich to needle him about the disparity between

⁸ This definition of 'ding-dong battle' is from Frank Herbert, *Dune*, New York: Ace, 1965, 509.

canonical principals and naturalistic side figures: according to 'Gombrich', by painting lunging workmen and playful hippos, the artist overshot his client's expectations, which explains why these wonderful inventions did not enter the tradition. Bagley counters dogmatically, in the manner of the contemporary art historian who sees the power, status, and influence of the client everywhere at work, that nothing in the artwork could have been outside the purview of Ti. It is as if the art historian has assumed the mantle of Egyptian royalty. Gombrich was less reverent. He might have reminded Bagley that Egyptian art did swerve away from its canon, *and* preserved those innovations in a short-lived canon of its own, the so-called Amarna style, during the reign of Akhenaten and his heir. Bagley, who is allergic to style, may want to attribute this interlude to the status quo of its workmen, but there is no denying that his Gombrich has seized on a sore spot in the holism of current art history: artists and clients are not always in harmonious lockstep. Bagley forgets this, and as a consequence his talk of Egyptian art is just as monolithic as that of the art historians he is attacking.⁹

Gombrich is a flawed author. But he is a visionary and ambivalent one as well. Bagley, who is neither, though better informed and sober, can only see what is flawed and trivial in his adversary. This makes his final essay fall short of going beyond Gombrich in bringing all the art humans have made into conversation. That is too bad, because Bagley's view of technique is truly remarkable. It can only be hoped that readers are motivated to think the same issues through more dispassionately, rather than just shrug and say 'to hell with those old Germans.'

The book is published with Marquand, a firm specializing in museum catalogues. The large format is congenial to the many, well-printed images; its diminutive print, coupled with endnotes and bibliographies after each chapter (and no index) make for harder going. Still, Bagley is to be congratulated for making both a thoughtful and a physically pleasant book. Art historians who have published in today's spartan university press conditions will envy this workmanship.

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⁹ He has less excuse. Emmanuel Loewy's classic book on naturalism in Greek art appeared in 1900!