

Same, similar, semblable – languages of connoisseurship

Joris Corin Heyder

I. Introduction

'Doch alles ist ähnlich und alles ist anders'¹

'Yet everything is similar, and everything is different (...)' – This enigmatic phrase by Wilhelm Vöge captures in a nutshell the author's fascination with an early gothic Reims sculptor – a follower of the so-called *Peter and Paul master*. Vöge continues by using another oxymoron, asserting that the sculpture he discusses appears to be 'more animated and more fixed at the same time'.² While the first sentence emphasizes the sculptor's ability to constantly find new artistic solutions for comparable tasks, the second one is full of preconditions, because as a comparative form it automatically constructs a diffuse other, i.e. one which appears less animated and less fixed.

Vöge's article *Die Bahnbrecher des Naturstudiums um 1200* from 1914 is a good example of applied connoisseurship in the academic milieu around 1900. In a time when connoisseurship still played a crucial role in art historical research, regardless whether in museum, art dealing or universities,³ and scholars like Adolph Goldschmidt defined criteria for cataloguing works from anonymous (medieval) artists taken seriously even today,⁴ Vöge's contribution tries to go a step further. In contrast to the rather carefully weighing and categorizing approach represented by the work of Goldschmidt,⁵ he concentrates on the verbalization of observations almost entirely drawn from stylistic comparisons between artworks. More than in

¹ Wilhelm Vöge, 'Die Bahnbrecher des Naturstudiums um 1200', *Zeitschrift für bildende Kunst*, 25:8, 1914, 193–216 [215–216].

² '(...) das ganze bewegter und starrer zugleich (...)', Vöge, 'Die Bahnbrecher des Naturstudiums', 216.

³ Scholars like Jakob Burckhardt and Aby Warburg articulate a rather critical attitude concerning connoisseurial writings, as one of Warburg's delicate letter drafts to Adolph Goldschmidt, dated 1903, shows: '(...) Bayersdorfer, Bode, Morelli, Venturi, Berenson, sowie das schnuppernde Gelichter (...)' [literal translation: '(...) as well as the sniffing riff-raff'], Ernst H. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg. Eine intellektuelle Biografie*, Hamburg: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 2006, 182.

⁴ For a comparison between Vöge and Goldschmidt, see: Kathryn Brush, *The shaping of art history: Wilhelm Vöge, Adolph Goldschmidt, and the study of medieval art*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

⁵ Stefan Trinks, 'Goldschmidts Corpuswerke als Taxonomien des Wissens', in Kai Kappel, Claudia Rückert and Stefan Trinks, eds, *Atlanten des Wissens. Adolph Goldschmidts Corpuswerke 1914 bis heute*, Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2016, 98–117.

earlier connoisseurial literature in his article language becomes a methodological tool in its own right. The condition of language, by which the connoisseur presents results, could therefore be an important criterion for an evaluation of possibilities and limits of connoisseurship. Extreme cases as Vöge's study may prominently unveil the strong entanglement of a 'manipulating' language and the connoisseurial judgment, but the intuition says that what comes to light here touches, in fact, a rather general phenomenon.

To put it more precisely, by analysing the form and style of sculptures in Chartres and Reims, Vöge seeks to reconstruct two hitherto 'ignored' anonymous early Gothic French masters. It is sufficient to read the above mentioned two short fragments to get an idea of how the author uses language in an almost literary manner to address a highly problematic issue: the lack of 'hard facts'. Then again, the first phrase contains two key terms of connoisseurship, namely 'similar' and 'different', which are among the most recurring adjectives in the literature on connoisseurship.⁶ By conflating these two terms, he seems to remove the object of scientific analysis from the connoisseurial scope, which is typically based on the distinction between similarities and differences. On the other hand, by blurring this particular boundary through his choice of words, he creates a restlessness that may illustrate both the artwork's and the sculptor's main quality – a quality that might elude the connoisseur's desire for clarity.



Figure 1 Last page of Wilhelm Vöge's article 'Die Bahnbrecher des Naturstudiums um 1200'. © Wilhelm Vöge, 'Die Bahnbrecher des Naturstudiums um 1200', *Zeitschrift für bildende Kunst*, 25:8, 1914, 216.

The same applies to the second passage selected here: It appears that the technique of description – the connoisseur's principal tool – fails to clarify the sculpture's condition. However, what he describes as 'more animated and more fixed at the same time' expresses an ambiguous potential that addresses the reader's

⁶ As far as I know, an evaluation of central notions of connoisseurial literature is still pending.

feelings rather than his or her mind. Consequently, the article closes with a photograph of a surprisingly verist sculpted head of an old man (figure 1). It is here that the author's dynamic approach of micro-comparison culminates: the picture stands for itself, while the connoisseur's words may linger on in the reader's mind, and any remaining doubts vanish in light of this characterful head resembling a death mask. In that sense, Vöge's language is best described as a solemn soundtrack that accompanies a vigorous choreography of black and white figures.⁷

To speak about 'languages of connoisseurship' could be misleading or even wrong. After all, connoisseurship can neither be exhaustively defined in terms of a certain methodology, as for instance the history of style and form or Giovanni Morelli's approach,⁸ nor is it limited to a certain text genre or even a genuine language. Nevertheless, as countless instances prove, connoisseurship had and still has a certain recurring vocabulary as well as a predictable rhetorical repertoire. This is also true for the following textual example, as well-learned and self-reflexive as it may appear. Driven by the desire to form a new corpus of manuscripts around an anonymous illuminator – the so-called *Master of the White inscriptions* –, the erudite scholar Hanno Wijsman not only summarizes older research, but also takes a position of his own by using the following phrases: 'sont clairement de la main du maître', 'style proche du', 'semble sans aucun doute', 'semble très clairement du même style', 'attribue de façon convaincante', 'montrent également des ressemblances avec' or 'ces ressemblances sont très lointaines'.⁹ At least two things can be gleaned from such expressions: First, the author has a tendency of using clauses that suggest clarity and confidence. 'Without any doubt' and 'clearly' are examples of this group of expressions. Second, resemblance – be it positively or negatively connoted – is the main argument for accepting or rejecting an attribution. What the author does not tell the reader is what kind of resemblances he actually refers to, so that one either has to cross-check the assumptions or just follow the author's judgment. While the aim of this article probably was not to develop a precise attribution for every cited manuscript, by using the aforementioned set of clauses and key words the author constructs an atmosphere of 'authority'. This authoritativeness of expert opinion, which was understood 'to be absolute' in

⁷ Linguistic analyses of an art history 'de haute virtuosité littéraire' such as the one by Roberto Longhi has already been presented by: Bernard Vouilloux, 'L'écriture de l'histoire de l'art', in Dominique Vaugeois and Ivane Riolland, eds, *L'écrivain et le spécialiste. Écrire sur les arts plastiques au XIX^e et au XX^e siècle*, Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2010, 13–33. See also: Bernard Vouilloux, 'Les fins du modèle rhétorique', in Lena Bader, Georges Didi-Huberman and Johannes Grave, eds, *Sprechen über Bilder – Sprechen in Bildern. Studien zum Wechselverhältnis von Bild und Sprache*, Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2014, 241–253 [244–245].

⁸ Valentina Locatelli, 'Es sey das Sehen eine Kunst'. Sull'arte della connoisseurship e i suoi strumenti', *Kunstgeschichte. Open Peer Reviewed Journal*, 2014, <http://www.kunstgeschichte-ejournal.net/365/> (accessed 30 April 2017).

⁹ Hanno Wijsman, 'William Lord Hastings, Les Faits de Jacques de Lalaing et le maître aux inscriptions blanches à propos du manuscrit français 16830 de la Bibliothèque nationale de France', in Bert Cardon and Jan Van der Stock, eds, '*Als ich can*'. *Liber amicorum in Memory of Professor Dr. Maurits Smeyers*, Paris: Peeters, 2002, 1641–1664.

Wilhelm von Bode's day and age,¹⁰ is still very much relied upon in contemporary connoisseurship.

Therefore, in this paper, I will argue that such linguistic conventions and 'tricks' have made – and continue to make – academic scholars chronically suspicious of connoisseurship. It is all the more surprising that this issue has not yet been addressed in the literature. While Michael Baxandall has alluded to the very problem of Language of Art History/Art Criticism in the context of the linguistic turn,¹¹ his considerations went in a slightly different direction than the argument presented here. The lacuna was once more pointed out in the mid-1990s by Roland Recht.¹² In relating a disciplinary history of the history of art the lacuna has been filled, for instance, by studies of Hubert Locher or Johannes Rößler.¹³ Both authors convincingly reflect the disciplinary consequences of the indissoluble entanglement between language and art history. Paul Tucker's more linguistic oriented 'evaluations' on art historical lexis, however, discuss the necessity to 'compare not only varying combinations and lexical realizations of the functions but also their varying modes of interactions with each other and again – no less importunately and revealingly – with neighbouring extra critical discourse'.¹⁴ Such an approach begs the question of whether or not the central ideas of a text run the risk of getting lost in the course of meticulous micro-analysis. The same would apply to linguistic macro-analysis such as a study recently presented by Jérôme Delaplanche, which – just like Tucker's approach – would benefit from a clearer methodological framework.¹⁵

Furthermore, the question has to be raised of whether practiced connoisseurship is at all conceivable beyond a paradigm of 'resemblance'.¹⁶ From a

¹⁰ Pascal Griener, 'The Conflict of the Faculties. The Human Eye Versus Scientific Experience (Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries)', *Studiolo. Revue d'histoire de l'art de l'Académie de France à Rome – Villa Médicis*, 11, 2014, 53–64 [59].

¹¹ Michael Baxandall, 'The Language of Art History', *New Literary History*, 10:3, 1979, 453–465.

¹² '(...) à la différence des historiens, les historiens de l'art n'ont pas fait porter leurs réflexions sur l'écriture de l'histoire de l'art', Roland Recht, 'Du style en général et du Moyen Âge en particulier', *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte*, 47, 1994, 577–593 [582].

¹³ Hubert Locher, *Kunstgeschichte als historische Theorie der Kunst 1750–1950*, Munich: Fink Verlag, 2001 and Johannes Rößler, *Poetik der Kunstgeschichte: Anton Springer, Carl Justi und die ästhetische Konzeption der deutschen Kunstwissenschaft*, Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 2009.

¹⁴ Paul Tucker, 'Inferential Muscle' and the Work of Criticism: Michael Baxandall on Adrian Stokes and Art-Critical Language', in Stephen Bann, *The Coral Mind*, University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008, 161–188 [185]. See also: Paul Tucker, 'Eyesight, Knowledge, Argument: Charles Fairfax Murray on 'scientific' Connoisseurship', *Studi di Memofonte. Rivista on-line semestrale*, 12, 2014, 106–143, <http://www.memofonte.it/contenuti-rivista-n.12/p.-tucker-eyesight-knowledge-argument-charles-fairfax-murray-on-scientific-connoisseurship.html> (accessed 30 April 2017).

¹⁵ Jérôme Delaplanche, *Un tableau n'est pas qu'une image. La reconnaissance de la matière de la peinture en France au XVIII^e siècle*, Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2016. See also the review by Valérie Kobi, 'Review: Jérôme Delaplanche, Un tableau n'est pas qu'une image. La reconnaissance de la matière de la peinture en France au XVIII^e siècle', *Sehepunkte*, 17:2, 2017, <http://www.sehepunkte.de/2017/02/29276.html> (accessed 30 April 2017).

¹⁶ Peter Parshall describes resemblance and difference as genuine criterion of connoisseurship: 'À un certain niveau, toute interprétation est fondée sur la structure chronologique et géographique dans laquelle nous avons placé nos objets d'étude. Cette

theoretical point of view, it is remarkable that already the late-medieval philosopher Nicolas Cusanus would have stated: 'nothing is understood by a human except in a likeness',¹⁷ while contemporary philosophers such as Gilles Deleuze would rather call attention to difference and repetition, which are prior to every 'Same and Semblable in representations'.¹⁸ While these positions are certainly driven by an ontological interest, they do allow us to catch a glimpse of the true problem of connoisseurship: connoisseurs have to compare the outer shell of an artwork with regard to similarities and differences; as a matter of fact, however, they look for a certain recognizable principle. In that sense, connoisseurship is a thoroughly ontological praxis.

The writings of two protagonists on the question of connoisseurship, the contemporaries Bernard Berenson (1865–1959) and Max J. Friedländer (1867–1958), may help to shed light on the considerations outlined above. A necessarily brief insight into the famous Hubert-and-Jan-van-Eyck dispute will enrich the discussion. This dispute is one of the earliest, most prominent, and still ongoing debates on attribution and therefore an almost inexhaustible source of insight into text-critical research and methodological questions.¹⁹

II. Berenson/Friedländer

'Much as the search for 'facts' depends in hypotheses,
the construction of theories is not possible without facts'²⁰

When taken seriously, the above quote by Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann touches upon a weakness of applied connoisseurship. One commonly accepted practice of connoisseurship, following the discovery of something which might be turned into a 'fact', is to generate a hypothesis, which later on – usually without further examination and frequently through an intervention by another author – actually does become a 'hard fact' that is then habitualized and used to support a more far-reaching theory. A brief example may illustrate such transmissions from assumption to fact: in 1981 Patrick de Winter wrote a much-noticed article on the prayer book of

structure est organisée selon des caractéristiques morphologiques déterminées par nos conventions collectives à l'égard des rapports de ressemblance et de différence (...)', Philippe Bordes, Frédéric Elsig, Charlotte Guichard, Peter Parshall and Philippe Sénéchal, 'Le Connoisseurship et ses révisions méthodologiques', *Perspective. La revue de l'INHA*, 3, 2009, <http://perspective.revues.org/1303> (accessed 30 April 2017).

¹⁷ 'Non enim res intelligitur per hominem nisi in similitudine', Nicolai de Cusa, 'De Visione Dei, c. 21, n. 89', in Nicolai de Cusa, *Omnia opera, iussu et auctoritate academiae litterarum Heidelbergensis ad codicum fidem edita*, Leipzig/Hamburg: Meiner, 1932, vol. 6, 70.

¹⁸ '(...) du Même et du Semblable dans la représentation', Gilles Deleuze, *Différence et répétition*, Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2015 [1968], 217.

¹⁹ For a critical discussion on the state of affairs of the *Ghent altarpiece*, see: Stephan Kemperdick, Johannes Rößler and Joris C. Heyder, eds, *The Ghent Altarpiece. Aspects of its History, Reproductions, Scholarly Debates*, Berlin: Michael Imhof Verlag, 2017 (forthcoming).

²⁰ Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, 'Reflections on World Art History', in Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, Catherine Dossin and Béatrice Koyeux-Prunel, eds, *Circulations in the Global History of Art*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2015, 23–46.

Isabella of Castile in Cleveland.²¹ In two of his footnotes he attributes every time more than a dozen anonymous Flemish manuscripts to two illuminators and at the same time brings the codices in a chronological order.²² More than thirty years later the scholar Lynn Ransom was able to precisely date to the year 1508 a rather disregarded manuscript in the possession of the Bavarian State Library that formed part of De Winter's lists.²³ She was not the first one who did so, but referred to a catalogue of the Breslauer collection, where the date 1508 was stated without any given reference.²⁴ It is very likely that the authors of the Breslauer catalogue took the information directly from one of De Winter's list – that proposes a date of origin of 'c. 1508' – and erroneously erased the adverb *circa*. In reality, the manuscript gives no clues for an exact dating at all. Such little mistakes may be excusable but, as another example from Ransom's article shows, they have the force to corrupt entire arguments. The author assumes that the Flemish illuminator Simon Bening took over the workshop from his father by 1510, when 'Alexander's [his father Alexander Bening] last recorded entry in the records [the guild books of the Bruges confraternity] was made'.²⁵ The problem is that no such record is known and, of course, that Ransom brought no evidence for her sophistic argument; however, in De Winter's article we find the presumption that 'Alexander seems to have stopped practicing his art by 1510'.²⁶ De Winter's working hypothesis transformed after all probability into 'fact' not because of an attempt to deceive, but for a lack of external reasons. The assertion 'last recorded entry' gives the reader the deceptive feeling of factuality; a problem at the heart of this paper. Linguistic inattentiveness to 'facts' has resulted in a great amount of confusion and might be one of the main sources of error in connoisseurship. However, the problems of the rhetoric of connoisseurship are a result not only of factual inaccuracies reproduced over the course of time, but also on daring conclusions drawn from rare, and often resilient, sources. Inventories, bills, genealogies, any kind of dates, and historical events form the grid of any attribution. As texts, they are open to interpretation, and it is the task of the connoisseur or art critic to handle them carefully.²⁷

²¹ Patrick M. De Winter, 'A book of hours of Queen Isabel la Católica', *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art*, 68:10, 1981, 342–427.

²² De Winter, 'A book of hours', 424.

²³ Lynn Ransom, *Simon Bening. Das Stein Quadriptychon. Kommentarband zur Faksimile Edition des Stein Quadriptychons*, Simbach am Inn: Müller & Schindler, 2014, 66, no. 49

²⁴ William M. Voelke and Roger S. Wieck, *The Bernard H. Breslauer collection of manuscript illuminations*, New York: Pierpont Morgan Library, 1992, 98, cat. no. 21.

²⁵ Ransom, *Simon Bening*, 17.

²⁶ De Winter, 'A book of hours', 357.

²⁷ Till-Holger Borchert has highlighted the methodical difference between the Belgian connoisseur Georges Hulin de Loo, who 'cloaked [his judgements] in the form of historical facts, thereby denying their inherent subjectivity', and Friedländer, who stated: 'naturally I shall seek to follow historical sequence. And if, directly or indirectly, my notions should enlarge history, all the better. I shall not, however, go searching for connecting threads, for I am utterly convinced that to do so is almost tantamount to improvising them', see: Till-Holger Borchert, 'From Intuition to Intellect: Max J. Friedländer and the Verbalisation of Connoisseurship', *Jaarboek Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen*, 2004–2005, 9–18 [11, 14].

Besides Berenson's famous essay *Rudiments on connoisseurship*²⁸, in which the author tries to develop a manual to determine the authenticity of paintings – a method strongly inspired by the work of Morelli –, it is much more instructive to watch the scholar at work in one of his books on Italian Renaissance paintings.²⁹ It is the author's particular strength to meticulously describe formal observations and to analyse a given painting's space, technique, and characteristics. However, in doing so, Berenson displays a tendency towards linguistic idiosyncrasies and a normative conception of art.³⁰ They could be described as statements of canonizing, delimiting, and establishing quantitative quality, to name only three possible categories. The following examples will exemplarily retrace these categories in Berenson's writings.

Processes of epistemic canonization can be observed time and again in *connoisseur* literature in many different ways. When arguing for the Lombard origin of a painting, for example, Berenson describes a certain architectural feature and emphasizes that it is 'so characteristic of Lombard architecture'.³¹ Quite unsurprisingly, the author concludes that the painting must have originated from the Lombard region. As important as such detail observations might be for classifying anonymous paintings, there is great risk in establishing a rule out of individual findings. This is also true for the second, closely related category, i.e. delimitation. By stating that 'canopy seems to have existed in Verona and Mantua only'³² and then, some lines further down, converting this unproven assumption into certainty is a valid tactic for building a more and more convincing argument. Berenson's persuasive strategy is not the single argument but the accumulation of circumstantial evidence, which leads us directly to the third category: quantity. According to the author, a certain painting has 'an even closer parallel in Domenico Morone's masterpiece – to which I shall return again and again'.³³ Notwithstanding that *resemblance* is the principle argument in this short clause, the announcement of returning to 'Morone's masterpiece (...) again and again' enormously strengthens the appearance of plausibility of this comparison. While in and of itself, quantity does not necessarily make the comparison any more convincing, Berenson seeks to impress the reader with exactly this type of diffuse reasoning from the outset.

These purposefully chosen examples hardly constitute extreme cases of manipulation, but rather subtle rhetorical interventions with which we are all familiar. Is it even possible to avoid them altogether? Friedländer would respond with a clear 'no', referring to his idea, first formulated in *On Art and connoisseurship* in 1942, that '[t]hat which exists is given the eye as appearance. The spirit interprets the appearance, and deduces from it something that exists, builds up its vision and thereby the work of art; in so doing it not only supplements, fills in, and emphasizes,

²⁸ Bernard Berenson, 'The Rudiments of Connoisseurship (a Fragment)', in Bernard Berenson, *The Study and Criticism of Italian Art*, London: George Bell, 1902, 111–148.

²⁹ Bernard Berenson, *Three Essays in Method*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927.

³⁰ For critical remarks on a here implicit idea: '(...) [d'un] classicisme normatif et régulateur vers lequel tendraient finalement toutes les évolutions stylistiques de toutes époques', Recht, 'Du style en général', 591.

³¹ Bernard Berenson, 'Nine pictures in search of an attribution', in Bernard Berenson, *Three Essays in Method*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927, 1–71 [19].

³² Berenson, 'Nine pictures', 19.

³³ Berenson, 'Nine pictures', 21.

but also exercises tolerance, forbearance and selection'.³⁴ In this respect, our language can never be conceived of as being free from corrupting elements; and this is not to be lamented, but should be regarded, first and foremost, as a chance for scholars to apply their capacity of abstraction and, at the same time, strive for exactitude. As early as in 1932, Erwin Panofsky's considerations on describing and interpreting works of art struck a similar chord by stressing that every simple description of an artwork already assumes a stylistic judgement.³⁵ Another of Friedländer's assumptions even seems to anticipate current research on the praxis of comparison.³⁶ Clairvoyantly, the scholar summarizes his argument as follows: 'Every judgement on art is the result of at least a subconscious comparison'.³⁷ Therefore, it is not surprising that the 'opposite pole', the counterpart present in remarks on resemblances or differences, almost always forms the core element of a *language of connoisseurship*. Its rhetoric is necessarily judgmental, comparing, manipulating. In loosely knitted textures of sources, notions and concepts, many authors set out to establish evidence, but end up in a *circulus vitiosus*.³⁸ Sometimes, as Panofsky and, before him, Edgar Wind have noted, this may already suffice to establish a serious idea on an artwork's attribution or origin.³⁹ In other cases, as for instance the *Ghent altarpiece*, it appears that the circle cannot be overcome even after 200 years of research.

To sum up, although both Berenson and Friedländer wrote manuals on connoisseurship, it is simple to discern certain rhetorical habits in their own writings that express, first and foremost, a tendency of canonization based on a supreme system of reference, which Ernst Gombrich describes as 'quasi-biological'.⁴⁰ In their work, both authors point out the psychological aspect of connoisseurship, i.e. the necessity to make oneself familiar with an artwork and to develop a certain

³⁴ Max J. Friedländer, *On Art and Connoisseurship*, London: B. Cassirer, 1942, 32.

³⁵ '(...) um ein Kunstwerk, und sei es auch rein phänomenal, zutreffend beschreiben zu können, müssen wir es – wenn auch ganz unbewußt und in dem Bruchteil einer Sekunde – bereits stilkritisch eingeordnet haben, da wir sonst auf keine Weise wissen können, ob wir an jene 'Suspension im Leeren' den Maßstab des modernen Naturalismus oder den Maßstab des mittelalterlichen Spiritualismus anzulegen haben (...)', Erwin Panofsky, 'Zum Problem der Beschreibung und Inhaltsbedeutung von Werken der Bildenden Kunst', *Logos. Zeitschrift für systematische Philosophie*, 21, 1932, 103–119 [108–109]. For an insight into the historical framework of the 'Kunsturteil', see Locher, *Kunstgeschichte als historische Theorie der Kunst*, 26–66.

³⁶ See, for instance: Lena Bader, Martin Gaier and Falk Wolf, eds, *Vergleichendes Sehen*, Munich: Fink Verlag, 2010; Johannes Grave, 'Vergleichen als Praxis. Vorüberlegungen zu einer praxistheoretisch orientierten Untersuchung von Vergleichen', in Angelika Epple and Walter Erhart, eds, *Die Welt Beobachten. Praktiken des Vergleichens*, Frankfurt am Main/New York: Campus, 2015, 135–59. In January 2017, I started a new research project on 'Practises of Comparative Viewing in Connoisseurship and Early Art History' at the Collaborative Research Center *Practices of Comparison* at Bielefeld University.

³⁷ Friedländer, *On Art and Connoisseurship*, 178.

³⁸ Panofsky, 'Zum Problem der Beschreibung', 114–115, no. 1.

³⁹ Panofsky, 'Zum Problem der Beschreibung', 114–115, no. 1.

⁴⁰ Ernst H. Gombrich, 'Meditations on a Hobby Horse or the Roots of Artistic Form', in Ernst H. Gombrich, *Meditations on a Hobby Horse and Other Essays on the Theory of Art*, London: Phaidon, 1971, 1–11 [7].

'tolerance for standards of formal correspondence'⁴¹ between related objects, while a self-reflexive discussion of the language potential is almost entirely lacking. What they want to capture linguistically thus exceeds the capacities of connoisseurial empiricism (as exemplified by Morelli's method), even though it often is precisely this type of information, which eventually makes its way into a *catalogue raisonné* – according to Pascal Griener, the 'most powerful weapon'⁴² of practised connoisseurship. Martin Heidegger, however, would have argued against that, claiming that what really matters is the 'unsaid', which is 'brought before the eyes' of the world by the 'said'.⁴³ To 'wrest' the 'unsaid' from the 'said', every evaluator has to use 'force' ('Gewalt').

III. Some remarks on the Hubert–and–Jan–van–Eyck dispute

'Doch alles ist ähnlich und alles ist anders'⁴⁴

Once more, Vöge's statement serves as a starting point because, to put it bluntly, it helps to sum up almost two hundred years of research. It is no secret that the question of the *Ghent altarpiece's* attribution remains unsolved until today. Whether Hubert or Jan, or even both brothers, were responsible for the preliminary drawing is just as uncertain as their role in the execution; the only certainty is that the panels were finished by Jan van Eyck.⁴⁵ More or less all possible alternatives have been discussed in the past, but – to paraphrase a critical review of the Hubert–and–Jan–van–Eyck problem by Friedländer from 1924 – for most scholars, the different parts of the altarpiece appear to melt into each other, like something that is inhomogeneous only for a brief moment before becoming fluid.⁴⁶ Furthermore, Paul Faider points out the aspect of an increasing technical uniformity in Early Netherlandish paintings, which casts even more doubt on attribution.⁴⁷

Other scholars, as for instance Liévin de Bast, Max Dvořák or Erwin Panofsky, believed that they could decide whether or not Hubert or Jan had painted certain parts of the *Ghent Altarpiece*. The strongest motivation for these persistent

⁴¹ Gombrich, 'Meditations on a Hobby Horse', 7.

⁴² Griener, 'The Conflict of the Faculties', 60.

⁴³ '(...) wie denn überhaupt in jeder philosophischen Erkenntnis nicht das entscheidend werden muß, was sie in den ausgesprochenen Sätzen sagt, sondern was sie als noch Ungesagtes durch das Gesagte vor Augen legt. Um freilich dem, was die Worte sagen, dasjenige abzurufen, was sie sagen wollen, muß jede Interpretation notwendig Gewalt brauchen (...)', Martin Heidegger, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, Bonn: F. Cohen, 1929, 192 cited in Panofsky, 'Zum Problem der Beschreibung', 113.

⁴⁴ Vöge, 'Die Bahnbrecher des Naturstudiums', 215–216.

⁴⁵ Stephan Kemperdick and Johannes Rößler, eds, *Der Genter Altar der Brüder Van Eyck. Geschichte und Würdigung*, Berlin: Michael Imhof Verlag, 2014, 20.

⁴⁶ 'Beim Durchforsten des Genter Altars, der merkwürdigerweise beim ersten Anblick vielspältig erscheint, bei jedem Versuch einer Auseinanderlegung sich wie flüssige Materie zusammenschließt, ist die Probe aufs Exempel nicht zu gewinnen (...)', Max J. Friedländer, *Die Altniederländische Malerei. Jan van Eyck*, Berlin: Cassirer, 1924, vol. 1, 87.

⁴⁷ Paul Faider, 'L'état présent de la question des frères Van Eyck [lu dans la séance du 18 avril 1934]', *Mémoires de la société Nationale des antiquaires de France*, 80, 1937, 105–116 [115].

efforts has been astutely recognized by Friedländer, who remarks: 'The attribution of hands in the Ghent Altarpiece is so important because it would enable us to solve the question of whether Hubert or Jan has been the *genius* that decided the future of Dutch art'.⁴⁸ It is astonishing to see how clearly Friedländer recognized the narrative of the 'genius' as a driving force behind the unbroken interest in the Hubert-and-Jan-van-Eyck problem, even though he could never really distance himself from this powerful narrative in his own writings.⁴⁹ Pascal Griener has particularly stressed the effectiveness of such a system of 'peak art history', which has never really lost its attraction for art history until today. Questions may have changed as well as methods and theories, but certain artistic personalities still are, and probably have to be, coordinates for rather general classifications.⁵⁰

The first decades of scholarly appraisal for the Ghent altarpiece sparked attempts to attribute the artwork following an evolutionist approach. The main impulse, however, probably came from an inscription. In 1823, Gustav Friedrich Waagen commanded the removal of the green paint from the outer frame of the altar wings held at the Berlin Museum, and the famous quatrain reappeared.⁵¹ In the same year, Liévin de Bast published a transcript of the quatrain written by the Ghent citizen Christoph van Huerne (c. 1550–1629) at the beginning of the seventeenth century.⁵² Thanks to van Huerne's transcript, Waagen and other scholars were able to

⁴⁸ 'Die Scheidung der beiden Hände im Genter Altar ist deshalb so dringlich, weil wir damit zugleich die Frage lösen, wer, ob Hubert oder Jan, die genial bewegende Kraft besessen habe, die das Schicksal der niederländischen Kunst entschied', Friedländer, *Die Altniederländische Malerei. Jan van Eyck*, 41.

⁴⁹ Consider, for example, the following quote: 'An Umfang, Vielteiligkeit und enzyklopädischem Reichtum des Inhalts alle niederländischen Altarbilder des fünfzehnten Jahrhunderts überragend, ist dieses Werk wahrlich geeignet, die Stoßkraft genial umwälzender Tat fühlen zu lassen, und wurde auch zu allen Zeiten als das entscheidende Denkmal betrachtet (...)', Friedländer, *Die Altniederländische Malerei. Jan van Eyck*, 22 (italics added by the author). For an elaboration on Friedländer's belief in artistic evolution, see Bernhard Ridderbos, 'From Waagen to Friedländer', in Bernhard Ridderbos, Henk Th. van Veen and Anne H. van Buren, eds, *Early Netherlandish Paintings: Rediscovery, Reception, and Research*, Los Angeles, CA: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2005, 218–251 [250].

⁵⁰ 'To be effective, this system [i.e. system of beliefs] had to be based on the infallibility of a single man of genius (...)', Griener, 'The Conflict of the Faculties', 60.

⁵¹ The quatrain can be read as follows in its present state: 'Pictor Hubertus eeyck * maior quo nemo repertus Incipit * pondus * q(ue) Johannes arte secundus (Frater perfe)cit * Judoci Vyd prece fretus VersU seXta MaI * Vos CoLLoCat aCta [1432]'.
⁵² Liévin De Bast, 'Sur les tableaux des frères van Eyck, placés dans l'église de S. Bavon à Gand et plus particulièrement sur les mérite d'Hubert van Eyck comme peintre', *Messenger des sciences historiques, des arts et de la bibliographie de Belgique*, 1823, 257–268. The whereabouts of Van Huerne's manuscript *Sepulturen en monumenten vande stadt Ghendt, hoofdstadt vanden graefschep van Vlaendren bij een versamelt voor zig en voor de zijne door Jo Christophorus van Huerne (...)* are unknown. Apparently, the trail went cold in 1933 in the collection of Baron Ch. Gillès de Pélichy. See: Jozef Aloïs Jan Duverger, 'Het Graftchrift van Hubrecht Van Eyck en het Quatrain van het Gentsche Lam Gods-retabel. Met een aanhangsel: Natuurwetenschappelijk onderzoek van de opschriften en de lijst van het Lam Gods-retabel', *Verhandelingen van de Koninklijke Vlaamsche Academie voor Wetenschappen, Letteren en Schoone Kunsten van België, Klasse der Schoone Kunsten*, 7:4, 1945, 39.

complete the partially destroyed inscription on the frame. To date, more than a dozen philological studies have been written on these four verses alone, and subsequently, even secondary topics such as the existence of chronograms in inscriptions of the fifteenth century have been widely discussed.⁵³ A definitive argument *pro* or *contra* the fifteenth-century authenticity of the quatrain has yet not been put forward.

It appears, however, that the discovery of the inscription was and is of utmost importance for the *Ghent altarpiece's* history of attribution, because it gives facts such as the names of the artists, the name of the patron, and the date of origin, which was initially considered to be authentic. These 'facts', in turn, leave room for interpretation, which inevitably leads to a debate over the 'right interpretation'. In that sense, the existing research on the *Ghent altarpiece* is, above all, a good example of text-critical scholarship. Discussions about the quatrain itself, but also about many other textual sources have sparked highly complex arguments,⁵⁴ as can be seen in the recent controversy between Hugo van der Velden and Volker Herzner.

While the questions themselves are simple – 'Who was/were the author/s of the Ghent altarpiece, and how many hands were involved in its execution?', 'Is the inscription a forgery?', 'What did the altarpiece originally look like, and was it planned as polyptych from the beginning?' –, any answer to either one of these questions would have to be based on so many unknown variables that the result would hardly generate consensus in the research community.

What is interesting in the context of languages of connoisseurship is that the attributional problem of having to differentiate between two hands arose only with the discovery of the quatrain and written sources from the sixteenth century. It was in light of this textual evidence that scholars turned towards the question of which parts were executed by Hubert, and which ones by Jan van Eyck. Together with the lower inner panel showing the *Adoration of the Lamb*, the upper panel with the Deity, the Virgin and St John Baptist (figure 2) is the most controversial part of the *Ghent altarpiece* with regard to its authorship.

De Bast believes that the enthroned *Deesis* represents a style 'plus grandiose, qui semble se rattacher à l'ancienne école Byzantine' and therefore must have been painted by Hubert, while the mystic lamb was made by Jan because of the 'finesse

⁵³ For the most recent contributions, see: Hugo van der Velden, 'The quatrain of *The Ghent altarpiece*', *Simiolus. Netherlands quarterly for the history of art*, 35:1/2, 2011, 5–39; Volker Herzner, 'A response to Hugo van der Velden, "The quatrain of *The Ghent altarpiece*"', *Simiolus. Netherlands quarterly for the history of art*, 35:3/4, 2012, 27–130; Hugo van der Velden, 'A reply to Volker Herzner and a note on the putative author of the Ghent quatrain', *Simiolus. Netherlands quarterly for the history of art*, 35:3/4, 2012, 131–141; Volker Herzner, 'The quatrain of *The Ghent altarpiece*, again', *Simiolus. Netherlands quarterly for the history of art*, 37:2, 2013–2014, 95–99; Joris Corin Heyder, 'Further to the discussion of the highlighted chronogram on *The Ghent altarpiece*', *Simiolus. Netherlands quarterly for the history of art*, 38:1/2, 2015–2016, 5–16. See also: Joris Corin Heyder, 'The Ghent Altarpiece and an Interminable Scholarly Dispute', in Stephan Kemperdick, Johannes Rößler and Joris C. Heyder, eds, *The Ghent Altarpiece. Aspects of its History, Reproductions, Scholarly Debates*, Berlin: Michael Imhof Verlag, 2017 (forthcoming).

⁵⁴ Elisabeth Dhanens, *De Vijd-Borluut Fundatie en het Lam Godsretabel: 1432–1797*, Brussels: AWLSK, 1976.



Figure 2 *Deesis* [Inner upper panel of the Ghent altarpiece], 1432, oil on wood. Ghent, Sint-Baafskathedraal. © Wikimedia Commons.

dans l'exécution des petites figures de la composition'. Almost a century later, Dvořák sought to break with the evolutionary concept of De Bast, Waagen and others, but reached more or less the same conclusion by conjecturing a dialectical idea of classicism vs. anticlassicism: '(...) the eyes [of the Ghent Deity] are empty and without soul; they do not look, they stare (...) How boring and scholastic the classicistic, almond-shaped eyes appear in contrast to the ever-changing variations by Jan'.⁵⁵ The author needs to appreciate certain parts of the altarpiece, and depreciate others, in order to develop an argument for an innovative naturalism. Quite possibly, the scholastic and classicistic convictions presented here even resonate with the spirit of his time, seeing as anticlassical tendencies such as impressionism became more and more widespread after 1900. A few years later, Hermann Beenken proposed an entirely different approach:

(...) all the pictures of the outer side must have been designed only when the two-tiered plan of the present altarpiece was already decided upon. The same may be said with regard to the three central pictures of the upper tier of the inner side, for formal and iconographical reasons. They are conceivable neither as a centre of a one-tiered altar nor as an isolated work. As to the motive, the figure of the *Potentissimus Deus* as the only centre of a pictorial

⁵⁵ 'Diese Augen [des Genter Gottvaters] sind leer und seelenlos, sie blicken nicht, sondern starren (...) Wie langweilig und schulmäßig erscheint die hergebrachte klassisierende Mandelform des Auges den stets neuen Variationen Jans gegenüber (...)', Max Dvořák, *Das Rätsel der Kunst der Brüder Van Eyck*, Munich: R. Pieper, 1925, 60.

composition would be an anomaly. Therefore, its combination with the Dove and the Lamb in the lower central picture must be original.⁵⁶

The author built his argument on discrepancies between the lower and upper inner panels of the *Ghent altarpiece*, which he regarded as one unit, and concluded that they could not have originated from one and the same campaign. Therefore – in contrast to almost all other scholars before him – he believed that the upper inner panels were painted by Jan, while parts of the lower inner panel, in particular the landscape, were Hubert's work. Strongly inspired by the idea promoted by Hulin de Loo, in his book on the *Milan hours*,⁵⁷ that both Hubert and Jan worked as outstanding illuminators in the early 1420s, he could imagine Hubert not only as a painter of monumental, statuary figures, but also as landscapist and miniaturist. Erwin Panofsky followed Beenken with regard to the idea of a 'super-retable'⁵⁸ composed of three already existing pieces, but once more came to an independent explanation for its genesis:

The real difficulty is presented by the 'upper triptych'. Intended, as I believed them to be, for an independent altarpiece, the three majestic figures, each enveloped in a veil of solitude, exist in the absolute (...) we cannot doubt that the three panels were thoroughly gone over by Jan. But when we turn from accident to substance, from epidermis to structure, so to speak, we cannot fail to see what even those who believe in Jan's exclusive authorship were forced to admit: that they are hard to reconcile with his authenticated or universally accepted works. In spite of vigorous modeling and – in the figures of Our Lady and St. John the Baptist – foreshortening, the figures seem to be developed in two dimensions instead of in three. The drapery is 'scooped out' to such an extent that the general impression is one of concavity rather than convexity (...) in comparison with the fleshy hands of the Baptist and the large-boned right of the Lord, even the hands of the rustic Adam appear almost elegant. And the physiognomies – excepting that of the Lord, which must have been entirely repainted by Jan – differ decisively from his customary types.⁵⁹

By using vivid metaphors such as 'from epidermis to structure', Panofsky effectively conjures up the image of a precise medical examination, with his observations serving as X-rays on the object of analysis. In reality, however, what he does is something different altogether. Although he agrees with the premise that the whole upper inner panel was painted over by Jan, he calls into question his exclusive authorship both because of the figures' flat dimensions and an inelegance that he

⁵⁶ Hermann Beenken, 'The Ghent Van Eyck Re-Examined', *The Burlington magazine for connoisseurs*, 63, 1933, 64–72 [67–68]. See also: Hermann Beenken, *Hubert und Jan van Eyck*, Munich: Bruckmann, 1941, 35–57 [49–50].

⁵⁷ Georges Hulin de Loo, *Les Heures de Milan*, Paris: Van Oest, 1911.

⁵⁸ Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting. Its Origins and Character*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966, 222.

⁵⁹ Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, 227–228.

establishes *ex negativo*.⁶⁰ His argument amounts to a general differentiation of the Deity, the Virgin and St John Baptist with other 'customary types' that are characteristic of Jan's oeuvre. As a matter of fact, the only possible way of distinguishing Hubert's alleged contributions is by comparing them to Jan van Eyck's authenticated works. This is why rhetorical elements such as canonizing and delimiting have frequently occurred and are still present in recent studies, as for instance, the one by Bernhard Ridderbos. In his historiographical essay, *From Waagen to Friedländer*, the author displays a certain scepticism towards connoisseurship, but in fact, the imponderability of stylistic judgments is concealed by a presumption of objectivity: '(...) technical examination has shown that the underdrawings do not confirm the differences noted by Dvořák and seconded by Panofsky; they form a stylistic whole and correspond to those of Jan's authenticated works'.⁶¹ The new normative frame is set by 'technical examinations', which serve the same purpose as Panofsky's epidermis metaphor. For here, too, the judgment is still a stylistic one, even though this time it relies on X-ray analysis, infrared reflectography, or other methods that make the underdrawing visible. After all, it cannot be ruled out that the underdrawings of two brothers, who most likely had been trained in the same workshop, would be hard to differentiate from each other in terms of technique and style. Gombrich once put it so appositely that fake attributions are generally based on the connoisseur's working theory,⁶² and, this also applies for correct attributions. Every connoisseurial judgement is based on a normative framework, as well-informed and technologically oriented as it may be. However, this is no argument against connoisseurship in general. Perhaps it would not be so easy to lose sight of the accomplishments of connoisseurship if it were *opinio communis* that its results depend on linguistic limitations as well as on an analytical framework that is always subject to historical contingencies. Languages of connoisseurship can help to give back voices to hitherto nameless and placeless artworks. The connoisseur's words primarily situate the artefact somewhere and relate it to something. The intuitive aspect of the connoisseur's work – the 'unsaid' – may seem difficult to bring up, particularly in light of contemporary standards of scholarly accuracy. Wilhelm Vöge's phenomenologically oriented approach may be understood as such an attempt, which, even though it might not be considered convincing in our days, nonetheless demonstrates the potential power of articulated intuition.⁶³

⁶⁰ Like Panofsky, Elisabeth Dhanens has stressed the flatness of the three monumental figures of the upper panel: 'The great figures of Christ, the Virgin and St John the Baptist are spread over the greater part of the panels which they occupy and their draperies are treated in terms of flat pattern rather than three-dimensional form. (...) The contrast with the boldly-placed figures of Adam and Eve, and with the solid beings portrayed in Jan's independent works, is evident (...)', Elisabeth Dhanens, *Van Eyck: The Ghent Altarpiece*, London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1973, 117.

⁶¹ Ridderbos, 'From Waagen to Friedländer', 242.

⁶² Ernst H. Gombrich, 'Art and Scholarship', in Ernst H. Gombrich, *Meditations on a Hobby Horse and Other Essays on the Theory of Art*, London: Phaidon, 1971, 106–119.

⁶³ In search for the 'unspeakable' – the dividing between word and image – Anja Schürmann and Florian Lippert emphasise the potential of metaphors, comparisons and constitutive blanks, see Florian Lippert and Anja Schürmann, 'To Speak the Unspeakable? Tropes and Negativity in Writings about Art', in Linda Báez-Rubí, Deborah Carreón and Blaine

Joris Corin Heyder studied Art History, New German Literature and Philosophy at the Free University Berlin and Sorbonne-Panthéon, Paris. He has worked as research assistant and lecturer at the Free University Berlin and is currently finishing his PhD on *Simon Bening and the Art of Repetition* that was supported by the Gerda Henkel Foundation. He is now working as research assistant at the chair of Prof. Dr. Johannes Grave and prepares an habilitation on *Connoisseurship and the practices of comparison*. Relevant publications: Joris C. Heyder and Christine Seidel, eds, *Re-Inventing Traditions – On the Transmission of Artistic Patterns in Late Medieval Manuscript Illumination*, Bern: Peter Lang, 2015.

j.c.heyder@uni-bielefeld.de



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)