

Erwin Panofsky, *Three Essays on Style*, edited by Irving Lavin with a memoir by William S. Heckscher. Cambridge, The MIT Press, 1995, 245 pp.

Allister Neher

Volume 21, Number 1-2, 1994

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1072673ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1072673ar>

[See table of contents](#)

---

**Publisher(s)**

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

**ISSN**

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

**Cite this review**

Neher, A. (1994). Review of [Erwin Panofsky, *Three Essays on Style*, edited by Irving Lavin with a memoir by William S. Heckscher. Cambridge, The MIT Press, 1995, 245 pp.] *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 21(1-2), 131–137. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1072673ar>

work confirms the importance of contemporary philosophical thought in relation to British eighteenth-century painting, provides a worthy reassessment of much eighteenth-century British art and, most importantly, challenges traditional assumptions of the moribund style-history approach of previous studies. In *Painting for Money. The Visual Arts and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century England* David Solkin advances the potential for lively intellectual debate in an area which has, at long last, come of age.

SONIA LOCHNER  
University of Victoria

- 1 Paul Monod, "Painters and Party Politics in England, 1714-1760," *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 26 (1993), 367-98; Stephen Copley, "The Fine Arts in Eighteenth-Century Polite Culture," in *Paintings and the Politics of Culture. New Essays on British Art 1700-1850*, ed. John Barrell (Oxford and New York, 1992), 13-37.
- 2 George Turnbull, *A Treatise on Ancient Painting, containing Observations on the Rise, Progress, and Decline of that Art amongst the Greeks and Romans* (London, 1740), 15, 134-37.
- 3 Shaftesbury, Anthony Ashley Cooper, 3rd Earl of, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711), 2 vols. in 1, ed. John M. Robertson (Indianapolis and New York, 1964), I, 46.
- 4 For example, J. Douglas Stewart, *Sir Godfrey Kneller and the English Baroque Portrait* (Oxford, 1983).
- 5 Henry Felton, *A Dissertation on Reading the Classics, and Forming a Just Style. Written in the Year 1709, and Addressed to the Right Honourable John Lord Roos, the Present Marquis of Granby*, 2nd edn (London, 1715), 66.
- 6 Elizabeth Einberg, "Introduction," *Manners and Morals. Hogarth and English Painting 1700-1760*, exhibition catalogue (London, 1987), 13.
- 7 The "Notion" was first printed in French in the *Journal des Scavans* in November of 1712 and appeared in English separately in 1713, but was also included in the second edition of Shaftesbury's *Characteristics* in 1714.
- 8 Francis Hutcheson, *An Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, 4th edn (London, 1725), 235.
- 9 Walpole, *Anecdotes of Painting in England*, II, 316-36; III, 1-26.
- 10 Brian Allen, *Francis Hayman* (New Haven and London, 1987); *idem* "Francis Hayman and the Supper-Box Paintings in Vauxhall Gardens," in *The Rococo in England: A Symposium*, ed. Charles Hind (London, 1986), 111-33.
- 11 Adam Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), eds. D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfier (Oxford, 1976), 38-39.

ERWIN PANOFSKY, *Three Essays on Style*, edited by Irving Lavin with a memoir by William S. Heckscher. Cambridge, The MIT Press, 1995, 245 pp.

Style has long ceased to be a central concept in the study of art, and the work of Erwin Panofsky holds little more than passing interest for most contemporary art historians. The attraction that these essays will possess then for most readers will be simply historical, which of course is not to say that they are inconsequential; after all, art history has become much more preoccupied with its status and foundations as a form of inquiry, and what could be more germane to those with an interest in such questions than a set of posthumous essays, by one of this century's most influential art historians, on a notion that has had a hold on art history since its inception as an academic discipline? Since Panofsky's principal themes are no longer topical and his essays add no new factual information to the issues he considers, my concern will be with more general questions that this collection raises about Panofsky's approach and its place within the history of art history. This is a good opportunity to track the *Theoriewollen* in the first half of the twentieth century.

The first of the three essays, "What is Baroque?," was originally composed around 1934-5, when in the Anglo-

Saxon countries "the term Baroque was not as yet employed in the sense of a definite or at least definable period of art history but merely in a derogatory sense" (endnote 12, p. 202). Panofsky's intention was to change "Baroque" from a term of opprobrium to a inoffensive period designation and to provide an account of what gives this art its perceivable unity as a style. Like the other essays in this volume, "What is Baroque?" came into existence as a lecture for non-specialists. Correspondingly, Panofsky's tone is more informal than usual, and the text lacks the customary ballast of learned footnotes that readers familiar with Panofsky's writings have come to expect. Because this more relaxed approach precludes detailed arguments, the general themes and, more importantly, the assumptions that Panofsky brings to his study are more immediately available for scrutiny. Panofsky's central thesis is that "in Italy . . . Baroque means indeed a revolt against mannerism rather than against the 'classic' Renaissance. It means, in fact, a deliberate reinstatement of classic principles and, at the same time, a reversion to nature, both stylistically and emotionally" (p. 36). The "Baroque is not the decline, let alone the end of what we call the Renaissance era. It is in reality the second great climax of this period and, at the same time, the beginning of a fourth era, which may be called 'Modern' with a capital M" (p. 88).

Panofsky sets his case in motion by invoking a charge that has often been made against Wölfflin. The *Principles of Art History* "does not mention a single work of art executed between, roughly speaking, the death of Raphael in 1520 and the full-fledged seventeenth century. And when we thus simply eliminate what happened in the hundred years in between, we do receive the impression of a straight, diametrical contrast between Baroque and Renaissance where, in reality, a much more complex development had taken place" (p. 20). Panofsky does have a more complex picture of what was happening in the hundred years overlooked by Wölfflin, and of the three centuries comprised in the canonical categories of Renaissance, Mannerist and Baroque art. At the heart of Panofsky's vision of things abides a dichotomous tension that was issued in by quattrocento artistic ambitions: "The Renaissance movement itself, based as it was on both a classical revival and a quite nonclassical naturalism, and enforcing these tendencies within the limits of an essentially Christian civilization, had given rise to a style that, with all its merits, reveals a certain inner discrepancy" (p. 25). This is immediately discernible in a work such as Ghirlandaio's *Adoration of the Shepherds*, Florence, S. Trinita. It should be added that this "inner discrepancy" is made evident through more specific conflicts in pictorial composition: Ghirlandaio, for example, "has a satisfactory command of perspective, the typical Renaissance method of suggesting three-dimensional space, but this spatial tendency is counteracted by the persistence of a Gothic spirit that makes the figures cling to the frontal plane and to each other, so that the landscape appears as a backdrop rather than as a comprehensive three-dimensional medium" (p. 25).

All these contradictory tendencies, according to Panofsky, were reconciled in the classical harmony that characterizes the work of such late Renaissance artists as Leonardo and Raphael. This repose though did not last for long. The first generation of mannerists, Tuscans such as Pontormo, Rosso and Beccafumi, were anticlassicists who were still beholden to the Gothic spirit and quattrocento traditions. In Pontormo's frescos at the Certosa di Val d'Enza, "we have almost no perspective at all, and in addition the plastic forms are dissolved by means of a curiously loose, oscillating technique. The movements do not show the classical contrapposto, but either shrill contrasts or rigid stiffness; the proportions are elongated in a deliberately unnatural way. The whole composition is compressed into a seemingly unearthly network of figures" (p. 29). Later generations of mannerists adopt different compositional approaches in order to accommodate the contradictory tendencies that still lay claim to their art, but of all of them it

can be said that there is "a similar increase of intensity and a similar tendency toward pictorial dissolution at the expense of equilibrium, clarity, and plastic compactness . . ." (p. 29). It is only with the inception of Baroque art that there is "a reaction against exaggeration and over-complication, and that is due to a new tendency towards clarity, natural simplicity, and even equilibrium" (p. 23). Baroque art is a liquidation of mannerist strategies and a restatement of classical principles and a reversion to nature. And so, in the end, the entire sweep of art from the late fourteenth century to the late seventeenth century is driven by the contradictory tendencies embodied in early Renaissance art.

There is more to the story, but this seems a good place to begin. In his Introduction the editor, Irving Lavin, says of the movement outlined above that "it is clear that Panofsky's process of thesis versus antithesis followed by synthesis was a Hegelian transfiguration of the bipolar principles of Riegl and Wölfflin" (p. 8). There is some truth to this, if a sufficient number of qualifications are made. The first, and most important, is that one does no service to the efforts of Panofsky (nor Riegl or Wölfflin) if one associates him with such a dreary and jejeune caricature of Hegel. It was Fichte who introduced into German philosophy the three-step model of thesis, antithesis and synthesis (Schelling, too, adopted this way of speaking, but neither of them had a simple conception of dialectical development). Hegel never employs these terms in this way and in this combination; in fact, he openly scorns the idea (he uses them together once, in his lectures on the history of philosophy, where he reproaches Kant for his rigid architectonic approach, but that is an entirely different matter). This notion of a happy little three-step *Volkstanz* by the *Weltgeist* is an absolute impediment to having any idea at all of what is going on in the *Phenomenology of Mind* and the *Logic*, not to mention Hegel's writings on the history of philosophy and aesthetics. Hegel is without doubt one of the most complex and subtle philosophers in the Western tradition, and such a low-level caricature of his work renders unintelligible the enormous impact he had on European thinking. As for Lavin's claim, it should simply be noted that the movement delineated by Panofsky doesn't even fit the logic of this three-step model.

If there are Hegelian elements in Panofsky's thought, they are of a much more unspecified nature; the presence of Hegel (and Kant) in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century German art history is pervasive but not reducible to the acceptance of a certain number of fixed doctrines. With sufficient caution, we could say that Panofsky's account of artistic change is Hegelian in its basic character

because, even though Hegel has no set model for dialectical development, all the situations that he describes are ones in which change and transformation are propelled by inner conflict and opposition. Panofsky is as well indebted to that very Hegelian idea, an idea that also underlies the writings of Riegl and many other art historians of the epoch, that the art produced in different eras varies because it expresses different ways in which consciousness has formed its relation to the world. And so we find Panofsky saying that the Baroque is “the beginning of a fourth era, which may be called ‘Modern’ with a capital M. It is the only phase of Renaissance civilization in which this civilization overcame its inherent conflicts not just by smoothing them away (as did the classic Cinquecento), but by realizing them consciously and transforming them into subjective emotional energy with all the consequences of this subjectivization” (p.88). The Baroque attitude “can be defined as being based on an objective conflict between antagonistic forces, which, however merge into a subjective feeling of freedom and even pleasure” (p. 38).

The unity that is presumed to exist in the “Baroque attitude” is of course another assumption of Hegelian (though not solely Hegelian) origin. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that this presumption of unity is a neo-Hegelian assumption that Panofsky shared with Ernst Cassirer, his colleague and philosophical mentor during the decade that preceded the writing of “What is Baroque?”. Cassirer was deeply committed to the idea that all of the cultural products of an age form an ideal unity that is grounded in a common formative principle. And this seems very much to be the leading idea in Panofsky’s essay. We are told that landscape painting proper comes into existence in the Baroque era because now “a tension between the two-dimensional surface and three-dimensional space is utilized as a means of subjective intensification. This is a fundamental attitude of Baroque art. A conflict of antagonistic forces merging into a subjective unity, and thus resolved, is also, or rather most particularly, to be observed in the realm of psychology” (p. 51). And so Panofsky goes on to argue that this is what characterizes the psychological attitude of Baroque portraiture and religious representation (p. 51f), as well as the formal inventions of Baroque architecture and sculpture (p. 45f). Furthermore, we find in this attitude a new self-consciousness: the people represented in Baroque art “not only feel, but are also aware of their own feelings. While their hearts are quivering with emotion, their consciousness stands aloof and ‘knows’ ” (p. 75). This newly gained self-consciousness is what makes possible the emergence of such diverse phenomena as the sense of humour particular to caricature and the philoso-

phy of Descartes (p. 80f); all is resolved into that grander unity described as the Baroque attitude: “The release or deliverance achieved by the Baroque period can be observed in every field of human endeavor” (p. 67). Not surprisingly, it is also to be found in greater historical events: “The Baroque (I am speaking only of Italy, where the style originated) had overcome the crisis of the Counter Reformation. A *modus vivendi* had been found in every field; scientists were no longer burnt at the stake like Giordano Bruno (whose death might be called an emphatically manneristic occurrence, while the release of Campanella by Urban VIII was a Baroque event)” (p. 67).

This desire, this will, to see unity and coherence in the products of a particular time or place is as well the principal determining assumption behind the third essay, “The Ideological Antecedents of the Rolls-Royce Radiator.” In this piece, Panofsky allows himself even greater scope and indulges in that long-standing bad habit of historians from all disciplines: speculation on ethnic and cultural identity. His goal is to set out the principles that have defined English art from the time of England’s origin as a recognizable social entity. The reader who begins this essay under the supposition that it will be in some way akin to a contemporary form of ideology analysis will be soon disappointed. Not surprisingly, Panofsky’s use of the word “ideology” lacks Marxist antecedents, and is more in harmony with the late seventeenth-, early eighteenth-century sense that the OED assigns to it: the science of ideas; that department of philosophy or psychology which deals with the origin and nature of ideas. The essay in fact was first presented as a lecture, in 1962, to the American Philosophical Society.

The date is worth noting, for 1962 was almost three decades away from 1934 (recall: “Three Decades of Art History in the United States: Impressions of a Transplanted European”). In 1934, or so some commentators continue to maintain, we were still in the presence of the “German” Panofsky; by 1962 we supposedly had the “American” Panofsky who, having cleansed himself of the obscurities of German philosophical thought, adapted himself to the bracing, practical empiricism of the United States. It is true that Panofsky’s literary style changed; however, as we shall see, he was still working with most of the presuppositions of the 1934 essay. That said, it should be noted that in his choice of title Panofsky displays a certain self-deprecating humour about his possible connection to that, not solely German, tradition of art history that created sweeping studies linking ethnic identity and artifacts. (Lavin mentions the apparent relation that Panofsky’s essay has to this kind of characterological study, but then in an attempt to make Panofsky more current he goes on to claim that “the tradi-

tion is far from obsolete. Albeit in different contexts and guises, the effort to characterize ethnically and geographically defined styles might be said to underlie recent works such as M. Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy. A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* (Oxford, 1972) and S. Alpers, *The Art of Describing. Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago, 1983); and it continues to pervade the current preoccupation with multiculturalism” (p.205). It is at least misleading to say that this tradition continues in these works; true, there are topical similarities, but surely it is of greater consequence that the motivations, methodologies and philosophical frameworks are entirely different). But back to Panofsky.

In “The Ideological Antecedents of the Rolls-Royce Radiator” we again have a dichotomy of opposing impulses propelling the development of art. The following passage can serve as a complete statement of Panofsky’s thesis:

In short, the English eighteenth century stands, at one and the same time, both far to the right and far to the left of contemporary developments on the Continent: a severe formal rationalism, tending to look for support to classical antiquity, contrasts but coexists with a highly subjective emotionalism, drawing inspiration from fancy, nature, and the medieval past, which, for want of a better expression, may be described as “Romantic.” And this antinomy of opposite principles—analogue to the fact that social and institutional life in England is more strictly controlled by tradition and convention, yet gives more scope to individual “eccentricity” than anywhere else—can be observed throughout the history of English art and letters (p. 142).

Panofsky begins his account with a comparison of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century gardens and the houses they were meant to accompany. Setting off directly from a contradiction, Panofsky quotes Pope’s famous phrase that a garden should be “nature unadorned.” Seeing the perversity of this, Sir Joshua Reynolds proposed instead that a garden be thought of as “Nature to advantage dress’d,” and this does indeed seem to be a good characterization of the English garden during this era, “which retains and accentuates precisely those ‘natural’ values which the formal garden intended to suppress: the qualities of picturesque variety, surprise, and apparent infinitude . . . and, consequently, the power of appealing to the emotions instead of gratifying the sense of objective and rational order” (p. 131). Interestingly, at the same time Palladian classicism was the dominant architectural style of the houses built in these gardens, and so we see a designer such as Henry Boyle, Third Earl of Burlington, build himself Chiswick House after the

model of Palladio’s Villa Rotonda and surround it with garden that subverts any sense of rational order.

The same conflict, Panofsky tells us, can be found in English illuminated manuscripts from ca. 1250. In the Rutland Psalter, for example, we find wildly phantastic drolleries roaming in the margins in vivid contrast to the principal pictures that are “dominated by a solemn formality approaching the hieratic” (p. 142). True, drolleries exist in the manuscripts of other cultures, but only in England is the contrast in style so sharp and dramatic.

Panofsky’s purported antinomy also reveals itself in English sacred architecture, especially and most obviously in churches conceived in the mid-fourteenth century that combine windows of the “perpendicular style” and fan vaulting as, for instance, in the Cathedral of Gloucester. In the perpendicular style “the tracery was simplified into a uniform grill composed, in principle, of rectangular fields” (p. 147). On the other hand, the fan vault “gives the impression of a *monde renversé*”; “the apex of a fan vault forms a plateaulike surface delimited by the bases of the conoids; and, to make this inversion of the normal situation doubly conspicuous, the English builders liked to drop from these ‘plateaus’ huge pendants which tend to produce an effect not unlike that of stalactites” (p. 147).

Panofsky tracks his opposing principles through the course of medieval English letters as well, drawing on literary and descriptive work from a variety of sources. But I will end here, for Panofsky’s argument is essentially the same in all cases, and it is not a very convincing one. In “What Is Baroque?” I thought that it was stretching matters considerably to call the oppositions he draws attention to “antinomies,” but in this essay there doesn’t seem to be any reason at all to use this word. Mixing fan vaults and perpendicular-style windows may create an odd effect, but it is not a contradiction in principle. And even if the seemingly opposed mixes that Panofsky discusses are only contraries and not contradictions, they are not the same kind of contrary. Is a medieval hieratic image in an illuminated manuscript governed by the same rational, formative principles as a Palladian country house? Are the hieratic images in the Rutland Psalter even rational in any but the widest and most empty sense of the term? Are eighteenth-century gardens conceived as “Nature to advantage dress’d” creations that serve the same artistic ends as phantastic, medieval drolleries? Uniting these phenomena in one category is plausible only if the sense of that category has been specified in the most general and indeterminate way. And this is what Panofsky has done. In fact, his oppositions are at bottom dependent upon that old, terminally vague distinction between the classic and the romantic. This is a stylistic dis-

inction that was given, at least in part, a more concrete formal characterization by Riegl and Wölfflin; I mention this because Panofsky seems not only to have allowed himself a less rigorous approach than his predecessors (something that he wouldn't have permitted in his famous 1920 essay "Der Begriff des Kunstwollens"), but also to have forgotten the import of his critique of Wölfflin: "And when we thus simply eliminate what happened in the hundred years in between, we do receive the impression of a straight, diametrical contrast between Baroque and Renaissance where, in reality, a much more complex development had taken place" (p. 20). Wölfflin may have neglected a century, but Panofsky has overlooked quite a few in putting together his sweeping generalizations that run from the early Middle Ages to the nineteenth hundreds. Furthermore, Panofsky has based his case on a limited number of objects that have been very selectively chosen. On this basis we are asked to accept a description of the entire history of English art and of the English character that supposedly underlies it. (The central feature of this purported English character is, alas, practicality: "This uncanny sense of practicality (even where it conceals itself behind an almost paradoxical appearance) is a third and very important aspect of the English character—the character of a nation both 'romantic' and conservative yet rightly renowned for its positivistic outlook and blessed with a special aptitude for craftsmanship and technical invention" p. 151.)

In fairness to Panofsky, this was an occasional piece delivered as a lecture to a gathering of non-specialists and not meant for scholarly publication, and Panofsky does make it clear in the text that the line of argument is speculative. Nevertheless, this format—as I stated in my introductory remarks—lets significant assumptions come to the fore. One, which was perhaps the most seductive idea that came to be associated with stylistic analysis in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was that the analysis of a style will reveal a generating principle that embraces not only all the arts associated with that style but as well all the other cultural phenomena of the period or place. The concept of style thus became a powerful new tool for historical investigation—one that offered access to the basic constitutive elements of the world's cultures. This idea received its fullest statement in certain German-speaking art historical circles, dominated by figures such as Vöge, Riegl, and Wölfflin, whose general philosophical frameworks combined popularized neo-Hegelian and neo-Kantian theses and contemporary psychological theories. Panofsky was the last great spokesman for this idea, and it seems to have been basic to his thinking throughout his career, which can be seen in the two essays so far considered, separated as they

are by three decades. It is also present in his early theoretical papers indebted to his predecessors, and in such well-known later works as "Iconography and Iconology," where, we recall, he argues that synthetic intuition is required to find the unifying principles that connect the art of an historical period with its greater cultural world and reveal the general and essential tendencies of the human mind. As Lavin rightly points out, style was never a purely formal concern for Panofsky; his primary goal was always "to illustrate how style or expressive form lends meaning to subject matter, and thus relates the work of art to the full range of extrastylistic factors that condition its creation" (p. 14).

The final essay to be considered is "Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures," which also had its beginnings as a lecture for non-specialists. It was first presented in 1934 and subsequently published in three different versions; the last of these came out in 1947, and is the one included in this collection. In 1934 of course film studies did not have the prominence that they now have, and there were few art historians who were willing to take the movies seriously and give them the kind of consideration that was reserved for the "high" arts. That Panofsky did this indicates that he was not as ill-disposed to contemporary developments as his unfortunate exchange with Barnett Newman in 1961 in *Art News* seemed to indicate.

Panofsky appears to have been an enthusiastic fan of the movies, and quite excited by the fact that "film art is the only art the development of which men now living have witnessed from the very beginnings" (p. 93). It was this newness of film and its relatively unexplored state that led him to try to set out what exactly was specific to the medium of Betty Boop and Greta Garbo, and what followed from this about the style of the art of motion pictures. Apparently, his analysis found a receptive audience, for as the editor informs us, "already reprinted at least twenty-two times, it is by far Panofsky's most popular work, perhaps the most popular essay in modern art history" (p. 10).

Panofsky's approach to the social history of film is based almost solely on anecdotal evidence and personal speculation. According to him, for instance, two facts determined film's early origins: "First, that the primordial basis of the enjoyment of moving pictures was not an objective interest in a specific subject matter, much less an aesthetic interest in the formal presentation of subject matter, but the sheer delight in the fact that things seemed to move, no matter what they were. Second, that films . . . are, originally, a product of genuine folk art (whereas, as a rule, folk art derives from what is known as 'higher art')" (p. 93). It was a product of genuine folk art because it drew its narrative material from the popular culture of the "lower classes" and,

perhaps for this reason, it is today “the only visual art entirely alive,” the only one that would be missed by the population at large if it were to disappear.

It is part of the dialectic of Panofsky’s account of the development of film that it be opposed to the medium of theater, that “the imitation of a theater performance with a set stage, fixed entries and exists, and distinctly literary ambitions is the one thing that film must avoid” (p. 95). “The legitimate paths of evolution were opened, not by running away from the folk art character of the primitive film but by developing it within the limits of its own possibilities” (p. 96). Two principles that are unique to the nature of film and its possibilities are the *dynamization of space* and the *spatialization of time*; Panofsky admits that these are “self-evident to the point of triviality,” but when their logical consequences are drawn from them, we can set out what exactly is unique about the position of the spectator and the techniques of composition in film. And we can then come to an appreciation of why for instance there is in film “an untold wealth of themes as inaccessible to the ‘legitimate’ stage as a fog or snowstorm is to the sculptor” (p. 98), or how “movies have the power, entirely denied to the theater, to convey psychological experiences by directly projecting their content to the screen, substituting, as it were, the eye of the beholder for the consciousness of the character” (p. 98). It is from this last point that the role of language in film is also revealed as unique, for “any attempt to convey thought and feelings exclusively, or even primarily, by speech leaves us with a feeling of embarrassment, boredom, or both” (p. 98). “In a film, that which we hear remains, for good or for worse, inextricably fused with that which we see; the sound, articulate or not, cannot express any more than is expressed, at the same time, by visible movement” (p. 100). In other words, film is subject to what Panofsky calls the *principle of coexpressibility*.

In harmony with Panofsky’s greater vision of art, films evolve out of the initial forms realized in the medium; there are primordial or *Ur-forms* for movies: “the films produced between 1900 and 1910 preestablished the subject matter and methods of the moving picture as we know it” (p. 102). Furthermore, they set out the basic semiological principles and iconography that allowed the viewing public to see sense in this new form of representation (film as symbolic form), though obviously film’s semiological principles were transformed and refined by audience sophistication, technical innovations—Panofsky is all for technical invention—and fundamental changes to the medium, such as the advent of the talking motion picture. Panofsky also has a good sense of how, in connection with the previous point, methods of

acting had to be invented and reinvented to fit this new instrument of communication.

If film acting is unique and distinct from stage acting, so too is the screenplay distinct from the theater play, or so states Panofsky’s fourth and final principle: “From the law of time-charged space and space-bound time, there follows the fact that the screenplay, in contrast to the theater play, *has no aesthetic existence independent of its performance, and that its characters have no aesthetic existence outside the actors*” (p. 116). Ultimately, the reason for this is that “stage work is continuous but transitory; film work is discontinuous but permanent” (p. 118).

One reason why film’s uniqueness was construed as evidence of its inferiority was that movies are so obviously connected to commercial interests. Panofsky redresses this assessment by, first, reminding the reader that most of what is now taken to be significant art was produced under conditions that can only be described as commercial; and, secondly, by giving a spirited defense of commercial art’s commitment to communicability: “It is this requirement of communicability that makes commercial art more vital than noncommercial. . . . For, to revert to whence we started, in modern life the movies are what most other forms of art have ceased to be, not an adornment but a necessity” (p. 120). Movies maintain their vitality because, as modern “folk art,” they do justice to contemporary culture’s “materialistic interpretation of the universe”: “the movies organize material things and persons, not a neutral medium, into a composition that receives its style” (p. 121). “The medium of the movies is physical reality as such” (p. 122).

Six decades have passed since Panofsky first conceived the major themes of this essay, and subsequently a very large body of material has been written on film as a medium, with the result that probably every claim that Panofsky made has been contested. But although the essay offers nothing new to those working in the area, I think that it could still be used (though not by itself) to introduce art history students to questions about the distinctiveness of the medium. It also has the virtue of being a clear, well-conceived and engaging piece of writing by one of this century’s most important art historians.

Finally, for those who have an interest in Panofsky’s personality and approach to his work, I recommend the closing piece of this volume, William S. Heckscher’s “Erwin Panofsky: A Curriculum Vitae.” Heckscher provides a considerable amount of material that supplies us with a fuller picture of the concerns behind Panofsky’s subjects. He also grants us occasional glimpses into Panofsky’s working methods and the tools of his trade (wouldn’t you like to know which books were Panofsky’s favourite and trusted refer-

ence sources?). Heckscher's article, as is to be expected, is a laudatory intellectual biography that constructs a very sympathetic portrait of Panofsky and discloses little of his personal life, though the Panofsky we meet is a humane and attractive figure in harmony with the humanistic principles associated with his writings. Panofsky's humanism was of course related to his intellectual tradition, but it was also contemporary. At the end of the *Critique of Practical Reason*, in a well-known and beautiful passage, Kant states that the two things that fill him with respect are the starry heav-

ens above and the moral law within. Heckscher relates to us that "at the end of an electrifying evening with Ernst Kantorowicz in which the topic of discussion had been man's innate sense of the Sublime, [Kantorowicz], stepping out of the house on Battle Road, remarked, 'Looking at the stars, I feel my own futility.' To which Panofsky replied, 'All I feel is the futility of the stars'."

ALLISTER NEHER  
Humanities Department, Dawson College  
Montreal, Quebec

WAYNE FRANITS, *Paragons of Virtue: Women and Domesticity in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993, 271 pp., illus.

ELS KLOEK, NICOLE TEEUWEN AND MARIJKE HUISMAN, eds, *Women of the Golden Age: An International Debate on Women in Seventeenth-Century Holland, England and Italy*, Hilversum, Verloren, 1994, 190 pp., illus.

#### Dutch Culture and the Politics of Difference

Two recent publications, *Paragons of Virtue: Women and Domesticity in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art* by Wayne Franits, and *Women of the Golden Age: An International Debate on Women in Seventeenth-Century Holland, England and Italy* edited by Els Kloek, Nicole Teeuwen and Marijke Huisman, reveal that issues of gender are becoming increasingly central to (re)writing the history of seventeenth-century Dutch culture. While the concerns of "women's history" are not new to historical understandings of this period, both Wayne Franits and Els Kloek point out that there is still much work to be done on the place of women in early modern Dutch society. As Franits states in the preface to *Paragons of Virtue*, the fields of Dutch seventeenth-century art, women's studies and social history have recently undergone sweeping changes.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, these changes are ongoing, as the study of gender relations opens these disciplines to new questions about the operation of power in the past. Thus, *Paragons of Virtue* and *Women of the Golden Age* are both significant contributions to considerations of seventeenth-century Dutch culture. An examination of these two books accesses recent methodological debates which converge and often conflict at the disciplinary intersections of women's history, socio-economic history, literary studies and art history.

Franits carefully draws the parameters of his study and, with clarity of style, limits his analysis to seventeenth-century genre paintings imaging domestic virtue and the ways in which they functioned in Dutch society. Negotiating his

way through ongoing methodological contests over the interpretation of Dutch genre painting, Franits incorporates some of the concerns of feminist social art history in an examination of the role that these images of women played in reinforcing the patriarchy. Virtuous domesticity is conflated with ideal femininity as Franits argues, "the paintings were carriers of cultural significance,...they shaped and in turn were shaped by a firmly established system of beliefs and values about women that were endorsed within the patriarchal social order of the day."<sup>2</sup> Paradoxically, while this method opens the paintings to fresh interpretations, in the final analysis, it serves to close off meaning and to circumscribe "Dutch women" within the extremely rigid categories of a patriarchal value system.

This incongruity can be explored in terms of the manner in which *Paragons of Virtue* both moves beyond, yet remains constrained by recent, often heated, critical debates which fragment the field of seventeenth-century Dutch art history. These debates are by now well-rehearsed, and are most often discussed in terms of disparities between the approaches of two art historians, Eddy de Jongh and Svetlana Alpers.<sup>3</sup> Influenced by Irwin Panofsky's notion of concealed symbolism, Eddy de Jongh has used emblem books, prints and popular literature to tease out moral meanings which lie hidden behind ostensibly realistic representations. In disputing this method, Svetlana Alpers has called for renewed attention to the descriptive surfaces of Dutch paintings, which, she argues, function in terms of seventeenth-century empiricist theories of knowledge.<sup>4</sup> Thus, allegory, or content, has been pitted against naturalism, or style. Because both de Jongh's and Alper's methods have been extensively criticized, scholars working on Dutch genre paintings struggle to find effective new approaches. Franits rightly argues that the naturalism/symbolism split is a false polarization, and that style and content intertwined impart meaning: "The propensity in much current scholarship to divorce form, that is, pictorial style, from content is therefore anachronistic for both are inextricably bound together."<sup>5</sup>