

## Memorial for John Shearman

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I should like to introduce my brief memorial for John Shearman with a quite personal recollection of this unique person. It was in Princeton, in the winter of 1982, that I believed I had forged an indestructible chain of evidence to corroborate my interpretation of Poussin's self-portrait in Paris. John was among my audience. He had devoted his first book in the field of art history to the landscape drawings of Nicolas Poussin in 1963. Since he was the only expert among my critical public, I was especially keen to hear what he thought of my thesis. But he remained silent in the discussion at the end of my lecture. Only when the lecture room began to empty did he remark to me en passant in his inimitable English accent in an American environment: "I'm a born sceptic" – that's all. I took that at the time as an elegant way of dressing up his total doubt about the proofs I had tried to adduce.

Now, after more intensive reading of his prolific art-historical publications, I think that John revealed an important part of his inner self in pronouncing this sentence. Born in 1931, too young at the end of the war in 1945 to have taken part in the bloody struggle against Hitler's Germany, he began to study art history at the Courtauld Institute in London in 1951. He belonged like me to that generation – we were born in the same year and we both began university studies in 1951 – which one German sociologist defined as "sceptical".

John himself described his scepticism about all historical work in Chapter 3 of his seminal book on *Raphael's Cartoons* (p.45), published in 1972, when discussing the question of "meaning". At the risk of trying your patience, I feel I must quote this passage in extenso. No better access to the personality of the art historian John Shearman could I find than his own words:

"...we need, in this investigation above all, the keenest scepticism – not only to satisfy ourselves but also to satisfy the standards of the period to which the Cartoons belong,

in which can be found admirable examples of ridicule of over-abstruse interpretation. However, the process of iconographical investigation engenders not only scepticism but also pessimism. In a case like this, when there is no contemporary written evidence to provide a foundation for the edifice of interpretation, it is easy enough (and much easier than it looks) to erect an imposing pile of texts from the exegetical literature alongside the work of art and to claim that the one illuminates the other; but at best there exists no proof that we have chosen the right texts and have thereby hit upon the intended illumination. The closest approach to proof comes in those rather rare situations in which we can seize upon some oddity in the design or conjunction of themes that seems to demand a specific explanation, and when we can erect a text-pile that, uniquely, fulfils the requirement. The problems of text-usage are in any case compounded with the natural ambiguity of visual evidence. The capacity of works of art to sustain a plurality of interpretations is on the one hand one of realities that the artist may exploit; in fact it is taken for granted in any hypothesis that seeks to add any other meaning to the literal one. On the other hand plurality of interpretations on our part is limited by nothing except our imagination and experience. Attention to detail, a feeling for the period, and a sense of proportion may save us from some traps, but in the end there is no solution to the dilemma unless it is to be exactly aware of what we are doing. It would be a failure to understand works of art (and ourselves) if we pretended that our conclusions were anything other than hypotheses. Hypotheses, however, are the only alternative to not trying at all and art-history is in this respect no different from any other kind of history."

Let us recapitulate: the work of art can never be construed or understood by one interpretation alone. Contemporary written sources can do no more than transmit the concrete literal literary meaning. But since they are in most

cases lacking anyway, the greatest scepticism is required for any interpretation of a work of art based on texts that do not pertain to it. Historical scepticism consists in being conscious at all times that any kind of conclusion can only be hypothetical. But without hypotheses, any attempt to try to understand a work of art would have to remain unexpressed. In this respect art history is no different from any other task of historiography.

Let us not forget that John Shearman's book *Raphael's Cartoons in the Collection of Her Majesty the Queen and the Tapestries for the Sistine Chapel* grew out of his catalogue work for *The Early Italian Pictures in the Collection of Her Majesty the Queen* (1983). Anthony Blunt, the then Director of the Courtauld Institute and Surveyor of the Queen's Pictures, had entrusted John with this task. In his brilliant catalogues for his monograph on Andrea del Sarto (1965) and *Early Italian Pictures* John succeeded in combining the tasks of the connoisseur and the interpretative art historian in a masterly way. That he found the model for this perfect combination in his academic teacher, the Austrian immigrant Johannes Wilde, is characteristic of the scientific formation of his personality. John also shared an incomparable sharpness of eye for Italian drawings with English museum curators of the older generation such as Popham, Parker, Pouncey and Gere. Kenneth Clark's two volume catalogue of the Leonardo drawings at Windsor Castle (1935) paved the way to a critical understanding of Leonardo as artist and scientist, which was further developed by Popham's *Drawings of Leonardo da Vinci* (1946). The British Museum catalogues of the 1950s and 1960s on the drawings of the Italian Quattrocento, Raphael and Michelangelo set a standard that has remained a benchmark at the international level to the present day. Popham's preparatory work for his unsurpassed three-volume *Catalogue of the Drawings of Parmigianino* of 1971 belongs to the same post-war period. The foundations that Oskar Fischel had laid for Raphael's drawings from 1898, were laid anew by this generation of English connoisseurs. The Prussian Oskar Fischel had emigrated from Berlin to London before the Nazi persecution, but died there soon after the end of the war, so that John was prevented from getting to know this great figure in the field of Raphael research. On the other hand, Johannes Wilde had worked together with A.E. Popham in cataloguing the Michelangelo and Raphael drawings in Windsor Castle and published them in 1949. Then in 1953, i. e. in the early years of John's studies at the Courtauld, Wilde's catalogue *Michelangelo and his Studio (Italian Drawings in the British Museum)* was published. What is remarkable about this catalogue is not only the connoisseurship displayed in elucidating the drawings of a great master, but also the profound interpretation of the frag-

mentarily preserved preparatory drawings for Michelangelo's works.

When John completed his Ph.D dissertation with the title *Developments in the Use of Colour in Tuscan Paintings of the Early Sixteenth Century* under the supervision of Johannes Wilde in 1957, he had treated a subject which had no precedent in the art-historical literature of the English-speaking world, and which is more easily placed in the tradition of the work of Theodor Hetzer or Wolfgang Schöne in Germany. But that is precisely my point! Only in London in the first two decades after the war could one encounter all the methodological approaches of an art history that had once flourished in Berlin, Bonn, Munich, Göttingen, Leipzig or Vienna up till the Thirties. It was the emigré Leipzig-born art historian Nikolaus Pevsner, who, as he himself ironically remarked, had released the English from their inferiority complex about their own architectural past. That's why Pevsner wrote his programmatic little book *The Englishness of English Art* before he set about editing the long series of Penguin Books on the Buildings of England: it was intended as a kind of English counterpart of the Central European art guides of Georg Dehio. The Pevsner – Professor at Birkbeck College, London – who had written the last volume on the Baroque of the so-called *Handbuch für Kunstwissenschaft* while still a professor in Germany before the war, was also the same Pevsner who founded the as yet unsurpassed series of the Pelican History of Art ranging from late antiquity to the modern period. As authors of this series Pevsner enlisted the internationally leading experts of the day, such as the German émigré Richard Krautheimer in New York for the volume on *Early Christian Architecture*, Anthony Blunt for the volume on French Art and Architecture after 1500 or Rudolph Wittkower for the Italian Seicento. As far as I know, John Shearman accepted the commission to write the corresponding volume on Italian Quattrocento painting from Pevsner himself, but he was never able to complete this due to his work on Raphael.

The Courtauld Institute had been founded already in 1932. The flight of the Warburg Institute under its then Director Fritz Saxl from Hamburg to London soon after Hitler's seizure of power in 1933 had drawn to it experts like the medievalist Ernst Kitzinger, the polymath Otto Kurz, Leopold Ettlinger from Halle and Rudolph Wittkower from Rome. But the Fifties in London were not only fruitful for the art history of the Italian Cinquecento, because a wave of immigrants from Central Europe could now academically compete with, and mutually enrich, native art-historical geniuses like Kenneth Clark or John Pope-Hennessy, both of them strongly influenced by the Harvard-trained art historian Bernard Berenson in Florence. The climate in London was especially favourable to art-historical research at that time, because the art market

for old masters was almost exclusively channelled through the auction houses of Christie's and Sotheby's. So it also became the capital of art collectors.

Count Seilern, the Austrian-Hungarian emigré, had already begun to collect old masters in Vienna, inspired by Johannes Wilde's connoisseurship and expert eye. He too moved to London, where his collection grew to become one of the most important of the twentieth century. Count Seilern bequeathed it to the Courtauld Institute, in gratitude to his mentor Johannes Wilde. Its critical catalogue was written with remarkable energy by Count Seilern himself. In cataloguing the Italian paintings he relied of course on the expertise of his compatriot Johannes Wilde, and for the paintings and drawings by Rubens, the core of his collection, on Ludwig Burchard from Berlin, who had also emigrated to London. Burchard's Rubens archive later found its way to Antwerp and still forms an inexhaustible source for the planned multi-volume corpus of all Rubens' works. Perhaps the only survivor of this heroic period of combined collection and art-historical writing in London today is Denis Mahon, who had then developed the Carracci and the so-called eclectics of the Bolognese school as his special field for collection. In 1947 he published, in the Warburg Studies series, his *Studies in Seicento Art and Theory*, a truly pioneering book in our discipline, because he could for the first time demonstrate that a theory of art had determined a change in taste and hence a change in style in the art of the Seicento. Anthony Blunt's Poussin studies found their most intelligent critic in Denis Mahon. But since John Shearman, under the aegis of Anthony Blunt and Walter Friedländer, had edited the volume devoted to Poussin's landscape drawings, published in the Warburg Studies series, it seems strange that Denis Mahon's name never cropped up when John mentioned the studies that had influenced his fields of research. And yet I believe that John's brilliant lecture in Princeton 1963, "Maniera as an Aesthetic Ideal", from which his little book on Mannerism grew, first published in 1967 and now in its ninth edition, was indebted to those new thoughts of Denis Mahon: that the theoretical convictions of artists could be elucidated in their contemporary works.

In 1954 I too had been able to study at the Courtauld Institute for a term. I must to my shame confess that, while I have unforgettable memories of the exciting atmosphere of art-history in this London of 1954, my memories of my colleagues and fellow-students of those times, such as John Shearman, Michael Hirst and Christopher White, have curiously faded. Compared with the cosmopolitanism of Anthony Blunt, who felt just as much at home in French, Italian and German cultural circles as in his quintessentially native English environment, the refugees from the continent appeared curiously provincial. And yet Anthony Blunt later

assured me more than once that he would not have dedicated himself to the Italian Seicento and its most important easel-painter, Nicolas Poussin, without the personality of Rudolph Wittkower at the Warburg Institute. Wittkower was also lecturing at the Courtauld Institute at that time, before he moved to Columbia University in New York. John had attended some of his lectures and often spoke of the impression Wittkower had made on him. About this enormous man – also in purely physical terms – and his way of conducting art history there was nothing small, for he had dedicated himself to the universal genius Gian Lorenzo Bernini during the many years he spent in Rome. Wittkower's research was as a result fundamentally devoted to the connection between the three *arti del disegno*. The sculptor Bernini cannot be separated from the architect and the painter. This same art-historical goal was also pursued by John in his Raphael studies from the very beginning. And yet, in looking back at Wittkower's and John's art-historical work, I think I am not far wrong in assuming that a spark of analytical reflection seemed to the young John Shearman to be missing in Wittkower the Italianist; for Wittkower's book *Born under Saturn* is more concerned with the psychological catastrophes in artists' lives than with the aesthetic changes in their works.

Edgar Wind spent his whole life investigating the meaning of Raphael's frescoes in the Stanza della Segnatura, but published only fragments of his results. Would we be doing Edgar Wind an injustice, were we to ironically attribute the title of his great book of 1958, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*, to his thoughts on Raphael's actual works? After Fischel's death, Wind's was the only voice that could be heard in England at that time that spoke more of the meaning of Raphael's works than of the works themselves. But what really needed to be researched in the works themselves began to be studied in earnest in that very same year, 1958. That was when John Shearman, together with his Courtauld colleague John White, published a seminal paper in the *Art Bulletin* with the title "Raphael's Tapestries and their Cartoons". Here paintings were not interpreted in a vacuum. Here justice was done to Raphael's thought and to Raphael's hand in the execution of cartoons in the service of a theological and liturgical cycle of tapestries for the decoration of the papal chapel in the Vatican. John had already investigated Raphael's artistic roots in the Florentine Quattrocento from various points of view in his dissertation, of which unfortunately only the chapter on Leonardo da Vinci was ever published. While John was simultaneously preparing the first comprehensive monograph on Raphael's Florentine contemporary Andrea del Sarto, his pioneering paper on "The Chigi Chapel in S. Maria del Popolo" was already published in the *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* in 1961. The connection between Raphael,

the architect of the chapel, and Raphael, the painter of the God the Father in the dome, was here clearly elucidated for the first time. How the artist had taken the future spectator into consideration in the calculation of his illusionistic representation of the Almighty, and the Byzantine iconographic traditions on which Raphael had drawn, were investigated more closely by John in the exciting chapter on “Domes” in his Mellon Lectures *Only Connect* of 1988. In this book John acknowledges (p. 192, n. 1) that he had been struck by the main theses of Ernst Gombrich’s Mellon Lectures (1960) *Art and Illusion*: “this book – he declares – has always been at the back of my mind”. In particular Gombrich’s concept of the “willing beholder” in Chapter 3 with the subtitle “The Beholder’s Share” had clearly influenced him. Thus, in Cellini’s bronze Perseus, John declares that it was the artist’s purpose – I quote – “not just to involve the sophisticated (contemporary) Florentine in the fictional plot but also to exploit the expectations be brought to it, to enlist, in other words the spectator as accomplice in the aesthetic functioning of the work of art”. That has nothing to do with the *Rezeptionsästhetik* that concerns itself with the feelings aroused in the spectator by the work of art, which has unfortunately been gaining ground in art-historical studies in the German-speaking area over the last twenty years or so.

In 1963 I visited John in the Courtauld Institute, to show him the drawing of an elephant that I had found in the Kupferstichkabinett in Berlin and that I considered a copy of Raphael’s lost painting of the real-life elephant Annone. Mark you, John’s Andrea del Sarto book was only to appear two years’ later! But already then, in 1963, John Shearman seemed, and not only to me, the authority on all Raphael questions. Our friendship dates from this year. With a generosity such I had only once experienced before in Anthony Blunt, John pulled out all the information he had collected on Raphael’s Annone and gave me for my publication the photo of a less faithful drawing copied from the same lost study from nature by Raphael of the Indian elephant. In our conversation at that time he mentioned to me that it was his purpose to treat Raphael’s works in separate papers, in order to be able to write the definitive monograph on Raphael at a later stage. John’s unsurpassed knowledge of the sources had been acquired in years of arduous work. In each of his articles he adopted a different historical viewpoint. Thus the paper “Die Loggia der Psyche in der Villa Farnesina und die Probleme der letzten Phase von Raffaels graphischem Stil”, published in the *Jahrbuch der Kunst-historischen Sammlungen in Wien* in 1964, is dedicated to the development of Raphael’s style of draughtsmanship. In his later paper, “Raphael, Rome and the Codex Escorialensis” (1977) John argued for an early dating of Raphael’s journey to Rome, because he thought that several drawings

from the antique in the Codex Escorialensis, taken to Spain no later than 1508, could have originated as copies of Raphael’s originals.

In the Friedländer *Festschrift* of 1965, John was the first to distinguish among Raphael’s preparatory drawings for the Stanza della Segnatura also the sheets that he rightly considered Raphael’s “unexecuted projects”. His later paper of 1971, *The Vatican Stanze: Functions and Decoration*, still remains of fundamental importance; it is based on a renewed examination of the contemporary sources as a whole. His paper was not about heroes, writes John mischievously, but about an historical problem: namely, what functions were the renovation of the Vatican Stanze and Raphael’s fresco decoration under Popes Julius II and Leo X intended to serve.

In his further papers such as “Raphael . . . Fa il Bramante” of 1967 or “Raphael as Architect” of 1968, or “A Functional Interpretation of Villa Madama” of 1983, John’s criticism of the sources and philological investigations are just as important as his exact analysis of Raphael’s architectural concepts. The *pittore universale*, as Vasari called Raphael, cannot be separated from his designs for buildings and sculptures. Contemporary poems on portraits painted by Raphael were interpreted by John not only with an eye firmly fixed on the paintings but also with a great deal of understanding of the poetry itself.

For almost four centuries Raphael was the yardstick for artistic values in European painting. The Italian art historian Vincenzo Golzio had collected everything that had survived of the contemporary documentation of Raphael’s life and work in his fundamental monograph *Raffaello, nei documenti e nelle testimonianze dei contemporanei*, published in 1936. John not only revised “Golzio”, but also expanded his corpus with almost 400 new documents. In his huge two-volume opus *Raphael in Early Modern Sources* he wrote an incomparable monograph on Raphael’s life and work. It is incomparable because each source either in its original handwriting or in printed transcription was read through, reviewed and analysed in the light of the historical interpretation of three centuries. Only because John reflected on his own position in the changing generations of art historians and incorporated it into the flow of historical judgements on Raphael, could he penetrate into art-historical *terra incognita*. “I am a born sceptic”, he had said to me over twenty years ago. This historical scepticism has, in my view, given rise to the most important art-historical book of the dawning twenty-first century. John dedicated his book to Anthony Blunt and Johannes Wilde. Neither ever tackled Raphael problems, and yet they were the guides to John’s way into history of art.

What I most admire in John’s art-historical writings is his sceptical, critical, empirical relation to the written word of

the sources combined with his sharp-sighted analysis of the artist's intentions in the concrete work of art. Textual and visual evidence, literary and artistic meaning, are inimitably combined.

I should like to illustrate what I mean by two personal memories of the relationship to the art-historical source in Erwin Panofsky, who especially tried to elucidate the meaning of the work of art on the basis of the written source, and in John Shearman, who was sceptical of the value of an exclusively text-based exegesis of the work of art, and to whom the evidence of the sources was always combined with the visual evidence of the work itself. In the summer of 1961 the Director of the German Art-Historical Institute in Florence, Ulrich Middeldorf, asked his then assistant Matthias Winner to answer a letter from Erwin Panofsky. Panofsky had written from Princeton asking whether the contours of a mouse could be recognized in a part of the marble block of Michelangelo's Night in the Medici Chapel at San Lorenzo that had remained in its unfinished state. The question arose, because Condivi had written in his Life of Michelangelo that the master had intended to carve a mouse in his marble statue of Night; for the gnawing mouse was the symbol of time (*tempus edax rerum*). So I then went to the Medici Chapel and, when no one was looking, climbed onto the pedestal of the sarcophagus of Michelangelo's Night, in order to seek in every square centimetre of the recumbent statue for a piece of marble that had remained in its unfinished state, and that could, with a dose of imagination, have been intended to become a mouse under Michelangelo's chisel. I failed to find it. My written reply to Erwin Panofsky that I had failed to find even the

shadow of a mouse in the uncarved parts of the Night led later to his learned paper with the title "The Mouse that Michelangelo Failed to Carve".

My example of John Shearman's relation to the art-historical source has to do once again with the Berlin drawing of Raphael's elephant I have already mentioned. Also on the basis of the knowledge I was able to share with him in 1963, John had found unpublished sources on Raphael's lost elephant portrait. In a letter of 4 March 1516 Francesco Gonzaga, through his agent in Rome, had specifically commissioned from Raphael a small painted portrait of the elephant Annone which was to be accompanied with its measurements: "E ce manderai lo ditto ritratto e misure". We can read Gonzaga's letter, under No. 1516/2 in John's book *Raphael in Early Modern Sources*. John's art-historical commentary is lapidary: "The portrait of the elephant was undertaken by Raphael. A drawing of Annone the elephant from Raphael's workshop, in Berlin, includes measurements".

So, thanks to John, we can to this day measure the actual size of the elephant which stood before Raphael's eyes as a living model in Rome, by the scale included in the small Berlin drawing.

No visual evidence could be found in the statue of Night to corroborate Condivi as a source for Michelangelo's mouse. So, Panofsky made an art-historical elephant out of a non-existent mouse.

John however maintained the right proportion between historical scepticism and historical hypothesis. That is why his two volumes on Raphael sources can be enjoyed as the best available history of the History of Art.