

REITH LECTURES 1960: Art and Anarchy

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Lecture 3: Critique of Connoisseurship

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In speaking about connoisseurship one cannot help stumbling over the word connoisseur. Although English experts on art have been eminently skilful in ascribing old drawings and paintings to the right masters, the English language has not produced a native word for that kind of skill. The connoisseur is still what he was in the eighteenth century, a character set apart by virtue of certain refinements of taste for which a French word seemed the right designation.

To form an idea of an eighteenth-century connoisseur, it would be dangerous to entrust oneself unreservedly to Hogarth. Hogarth disliked anything French, also anything that sounded French. Moreover, he was engaged in a private war with a group of gentlemen whom he called 'dealers in dark pictures', which was his own way of fighting the perennial battle of the moderns against the ancients. Nevertheless, Hogarth knew what he hated, and intelligent satire is always enlightening. I shall therefore quote from a vivid but nasty letter which he published in a daily newspaper over the signature 'Britophil'. In it he described how an innocent Englishman was bamboozled into paying a large sum for a 'dark' painting which he did not particularly like. His tempter persuaded him to commit this folly by addressing him in a superior way:

'Sir, (he said), I find that you are no connoisseur; the picture, I assure you, is in Alesso Baldminetto's second and best manner, boldly painted, and truly sublime...' - Then, spitting in an obscure place, and rubbing it with a dirty handkerchief, [the quack] takes a skip t'other end of the room, and screams out in raptures, 'There's an amazing touch! A man should have this picture a twelvemonth in his collection before he can discover half its beauties!'

Hogarth had a genius for catching essentials; and almost all the essentials of eighteenth-century connoisseurship are present in this little travesty. The first essential is to attach a painter's name to an anonymous picture, to make what is called 'an attribution'; and Alesso Baidminetto is a fair deviation from Alesso Baldovinetti, who had the good fortune to exist. The second essential is to be precise about it; hence we are told that the picture belongs to Baidminetto's second period. The next essential is to point to an obscure detail in the painting and blow it up into something important; and the final and perhaps the most significant touch is to make a gesture which suggests that no reasons can be given for the judgment passed by the connoisseur, because it is all a matter of perception, and hence ineffable.

Since the days of Hogarth, attention to the authenticity of ancient paintings has greatly increased, and, the connoisseur's importance has correspondingly grown, not only for museums, collectors, and the trade, but also in the more abstract pursuits of academic

art history, where he has become an indispensable and vigilant critic. Let anyone propose an ambitious theory about Leonardo da Vinci, for example, and the connoisseur will inquire whether the drawings on which the theory rests are really by Leonardo's hand. It is not unusual for the prettiest intellectual structures to come tumbling down as soon as the magic rod of connoisseurship begins to tap the foundations. Of the importance of the connoisseur to our understanding of the art of the past there can therefore not be the slightest doubt. But what has he to do with Art and Anarchy today?

He would have nothing to do with it at all, if he still performed only the sort of hocus-pocus that disgusted Hogarth; but those days are more or less over. Connoisseurship of painting has become a solid craft, and, like every other craft, it has its philosophy. As a craftsman the modern connoisseur knows how to feel the pulse of a picture, to distinguish the genuine from the counterfeit; he has a sense of authenticity. As a philosopher (that is to say, as an aesthete) he regards those traits which reveal authenticity as the most important parts of a painting. I shall try here to discuss both aspects of his work, the technique as well as the underlying aesthetic.

The technique of connoisseurship was rationalized in the nineteenth century by a clear-headed amateur, who did his work so exceedingly well that it passed almost imperceptibly into the work of his professional successors. I mean the great Italian innovator Giovanni Morelli, to whom I shall devote much of this talk. Himself a connoisseur of exceptionally wide experience and outstanding ability, he detested the grandiloquent verbiage which always renders the study of art unnecessarily suspect. He was determined to show that there is nothing mysterious about making an attribution; that like any other skill, it requires a certain gift, and regular exercise; that it rests neither on irrational nor on super-rational powers but on a clear understanding of the particular characteristics by which the author of a painting can be recognized in his work. For this purpose he worked out a well-defined method, for which he claimed that it transformed attributions from inspired guesses into verifiable propositions. Decried as charlatanry when it was first published, but soon adopted by Frizzoni, Berenson, Friedländer and others, and now in use in all the schools of art history, Morelli's method rests on a meticulous technique of visual dissociation—an extreme case of the kind of detachment which makes our perception of art a strictly marginal experience.

We may then find that what looks at first like the professional eccentricity of a specialized method is actually a refined, precise, and therefore valuable statement of a far profounder eccentricity in which many of us share. In other words, I make bold to suggest that in certain of our habitual ways of approaching art we are something like unconscious Morellians; or to put it more precisely, that the Morellian method has carried some of our artistic prejudices to their logical conclusion. We can recognize ourselves in it as in a sharp caricature which overdraws our features and thereby makes them unmistakable. If Hogarth thought of the connoisseur as a marginal figure in the artistic life of his day, and a sort of nuisance which might be eliminated with profit, I would venture to say that the connoisseur's way of looking at art has become for us ingrained, because art itself has moved to the margin. Let us then examine three questions, to see if these reflections have any truth: first, what kind of a man Morelli was; secondly, exactly what his method is; and, thirdly, what bearing it has on our current ways of responding to art.

Morelli was a native of Verona, where he was born in 1816 by choice a citizen of Bergamo, to which he left a small and exquisite collections paintings.

Trained as a physician and an expert in comparative anatomy, he held for a short time a post in the University of Munich, but he never practised medicine. His life became absorbed in two avocations, politics and art. As a young man he moved in the circle of Bettina von Arnim, he befriended also the poet Rückert, and frequented the studio of the painter Genelli, for whom he even posed frightful thought-as Prometheus; but from 1848 to 1871 his ruling passion was that of an Italian patriot, fighting for the liberation and unification of Italy. It was only late in life, when he had acquired the dignity of Senator of the Kingdom of Italy, that he found the leisure to publish his disturbing discoveries in the field of Italian art. Perhaps in order to secure for them an unprejudiced hearing, and to satisfy a certain romantic taste he had for ironic make-believe, he published them under a bizarre pseudonym and in a foreign language.

He pretended that his books were written by a Russian, Ivan Lermolieff (a Russianized anagram of Morelli), and translated into German by a writer who called himself Johannes Schwarze (which again means Giovanni Morelli). In a lively and lucid German prose, with no trace of Teutonic obscurity in it but many touches of Slavic wit, his Russian double plays the part of a bewildered but determined young sightseer. On a visit to Florence he encounters an anti-clerical Italian patriot who introduces him to what Berenson was to call the 'rudiments' of connoisseurship. 'As I was leaving the Palazzo Pitti one afternoon' our Russian writes, 'I found myself descending the stair in the company of an elderly gentleman, apparently an Italian of the better class ...'. In that casual tone the revolutionary chapter on 'Principles and Method' opens.

Morelli had tactical reasons, beyond the mere fun of it, for placing his arguments in a fictitious setting. The use of dialogue made it possible for him to contrast his own plain Socratic statements with the inflated language of his opponents. On an imaginary visit to the Dresden Gallery the presumed Lermolieff becomes involved in polite conversation with an opinionated German blue-stocking of noble birth, Elise von Blasewitz, in the presence of her father. The lady is frightfully lettered, quotes Vasari and Mengs as readily as the Schlegels, but when Lermolieff tries to explain to her why 'The Reading Magdalen' is not a painting by Corregio, her literary reminiscences interpose themselves between the picture and her gold rimmed spectacles. In the end she dismisses his views as 'Russian nihilism'. It is as if Morelli had foreseen the insidious kind of attack to which his new method would be exposed.

As late as 1919-that is, twenty-eight years after Morelli's death-a well-known critic, Max Friedlander, could still refer to him as a sort of charlatan, although he added a few significant reservations. In the first place he did not question Morelli's results; he questioned only the way in which Morelli claimed to have reached them. The disputed point thus appeared to be the Morellian method, but even that is saying too much, since Friedlander did not deny that the method was useful; he employed it himself. What he meant to deny was the possibility of obtaining by that method the spectacular results that Morelli had obtained. In Friedlander's opinion, Morelli's attributions were produced by intuition, while Morelli claimed that he had produced them by science, and apparently that made him a charlatan.

Undoubtedly, the new attributions were spectacular. To give just one example, the 'Sleeping Venus' by Giorgione is today such a familiar picture that we might imagine it to have been known always as a great work by Giorgione; but until Morelli had taken a good look at that painting it was catalogued in the Dresden Gallery as the copy of a lost Titian by Sassoferrato. That sounded so learned that it satisfied everyone; and no doubt it would have pleased Hogarth. In the Dresden Gallery alone, forty-six paintings were renamed because of Morelli's discoveries, and in other museums the upheaval was on a comparable scale. Morelli's friend, Sir Henry Layard, did not exaggerate when he wrote that Morelli had caused a revolution.

And now a word about the Morellian method. Like other revolutionary devices, it is simple and disconcerting. Morelli explained that to recognize the hand of a master in a given painting it is necessary to arrest, even to reverse, the normal aesthetic reaction. In looking at a picture our first impulse is to surrender to a general impression and then concentrate on particular effects which are artistically important: composition, proportion, colour, expression, gesture. None of these, Morelli says, will reveal with certainty the hand of a particular painter because they are studio devices which painters learn from each other. It may be true, for example, that Raphael grouped some of his figures in the shape of a pyramid, but pyramidal composition became a commonplace of the school of Raphael, so that its presence does not assure us of the hand of the master. Raphael's figures often express devotion by raising their eyes in a sentimental way, but Raphael had learned that trick from Perugino, and so any painter of his own school could have learned it from him. When we see a painting of a youthful head ascribed to Leonardo da Vinci, we inadvertently concentrate on the smile which is regarded as characteristic of Leonardo's figures, but we must not forget that innumerable imitators and copyists have concentrated on that smile before, with the result that it is rarely absent from their paintings. What is more, since expression and composition are artistically significant features, the restorer will try to preserve them. It is in them that the hand of the master is first obliterated by being reinforced; and, of course, they also attract the forger.

Morelli drew the only possible inference from these observations. To identify the hand of the master, and distinguish it from the hand of a copyist, we must pay attention to small idiosyncrasies which seem inessential, subordinate features which look so irrelevant that they would not engage the attention of any imitator, restorer, or forger: the shape of a finger-nail or the lobe of an ear. As these are inexpressive parts of a figure, the artist himself, no less than his imitator, is likely to relax in their execution; they are the places where he lets himself go, and for that reason they reveal him unmistakably. This is the core of Morelli's argument: an artist's personal instinct for form will appear at its purest in the least significant parts of his work because they are the least laboured.

To some of Morelli's critics it has seemed odd 'that personality should be found where personal effort is weakest'. But on this point modern psychology would certainly support Morelli: our inadvertent little expressions reveal our character far more than any formal expression that we may carefully prepare. Morelli put his case plainly:

As most men who speak or write have verbal habits and use their favourite words or phrases involuntarily and sometimes even most

inappropriately, so almost every painter has his own peculiarities which escape him without his being aware of them...Anyone, therefore, who wants to study a painter closely, must know how to discover these material trifles and attend to them with care: a student of calligraphy would call them flourishes.

Morelli's books look different from those of any other writer on art; they are sprinkled with illustrations of fingers and ears, careful records of the characteristic trifles by which an artist gives himself away, as a criminal might be spotted by a fingerprint. Since any art gallery studied by Morelli begins to resemble a rogues' gallery, we must not be too severe in our judgment of those who at first regarded Morelli's tests with consternation: they do offend against the idealistic spirit in which we like to approach great works of art. Morelli seems to invite us to recognize a great artist not by the power with which he moves us, or by the importance of what he has to say, but by the nervous twitch and the slight stammer which in him are just a little different from the quirks of his imitators. But let us not lose sight of Morelli's purpose: it is the hand of the master that he wants to discover, and as long as that remains our well-defined aim we must not recoil from the unflattering tests by which one hand is distinguished from another. Morelli himself put it more picturesquely: 'Whoever finds my method too materialistic and unworthy of a lofty mind, let him leave the heavy ballast of my work untouched, and soar to higher spheres in the balloon of fancy'.

However, behind the Morellian method lies a particular and very deep feeling about art. It is not just the assignment of a name that interests the connoisseur of painting; it is the authentic *touch* which he seeks to feel and for which the name is merely an index. For Morelli, the spirit of an artist resides in his hand; and if another hand is superimposed on his work, it means that the spirit has been obscured, and we must search in the ruin for the few, fragments in which the artist's original perception may have remained intact. On these true relics the eye must seize for its instruction. At first glance, Morelli's concentrated study of the lobe of an ear might seem like Wöfflin's curious concern for a nostril, to which I referred in my last talk. Wöfflin, however, uses the small detail as a unit of measure — what an architect would call a module—for building up the larger structure, whereas Morelli's eye rests on the small fragment as the trace of a 'lost original'. An intensely romantic view of art is implied by this method. Whether intentionally or not, Morelli leaves one with the perplexing impression that a great work of art must be as tough as it is fragile. While the slightest fading or retouching or over-cleaning of a detail seems to throw the whole picture out of balance, yet through the distortion by coarse restorers and by clumsy copyists the aura of the 'lost original' remains so potent that concentration on a genuine fragment is sufficient to evoke it. We must remember that Morelli was born in 1816, and that his cult of the fragment as the true signature of the artist is a well-known Romantic heresy.

Distrust of the Finished Work

Quite apart from questions of preservation, the Romantic in Morelli distrusted the finished work and its conventions. Whatever smacked of academic rule or aesthetic commonplace he dismissed as deceptive, hackneyed, and unrewarding, and withdrew from it to those intimate, private, and minute perceptions which he felt to be the only safeguard of pure sensibility. Clear-sighted about the logic of his method, he came to

regard the study of drawings as more fundamental than that of paintings. The spontaneous sketch retained in its freshness what the labours of execution tended to stale. To this day, much of our approach to art is under the spell of this particular Morellian preference. We do not feel that we have fully entered into the spirit of a painting until we have traced it back to those bold notations in which the master's hand vibrates and flickers. Intently we listen for the inspired stammer which preceded the grammatical sentence. The finished masterpiece is dead, but the inchoate sketch helps us to revive it.

It is here that the peculiar sensibility of the connoisseur, which guides him in making an attribution, merges with a far more universal foible of the imagination in which most of us share, -connoisseurs or not. In looking at paintings, we are all caught up in the pursuit of freshness. We are under the spell of spontaneous brushwork and cherish the instantaneous sensation with which it strikes the eye. How often have we not heard admirers of Constable repeat the insufferable cliché that only his bold sketches reveal his force as an artist, whereas the meticulous labour he bestowed on his finished paintings was a deplorable aberration, for which he paid dearly by loss of spontaneity. The richness of texture in a finished Constable is, indeed, less spontaneous than the first excited draft, but it is a maturer and mellower image, which must be seen with a less nervous eye, and observed at a range sufficiently close not to let the eye skip over the detailed nuances.

And how afraid we all are to let Hogarth's paintings exercise our eye as he wanted it to be exercised: he meant 'to lead the eye a wanton kind of chase', as he called it, but we are much too impatient to pursue the calculated intricacies of his finished designs. Instead we gloat on the superbly sketched 'Shrimp Girl' or on the unfinished 'Country Dance' and regret that, not all his paintings were left as sketchy, and hence as fresh as these two.

Because the instantaneous sensation means more to us than the sustained imaginative pursuit, we fall into that typically Romantic predicament which Wordsworth described as 'a degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation'. Hence we put a premium on the inchoate work of art, arrested at its inception for the sake of spontaneity: On the production of art this prejudice has a debilitating effect: it encourages a striving for the immediate, a peculiar sophistry of production by which each work, no matter how laboured, hopes to give the impression of being freshly improvised. Never has the capriccio in art, the effective arrangement of striking irregularities, held quite the commanding position it holds today. According to Ortega y Gasset, all the extravagances of modern art become comprehensible if they are interpreted as attempts to be youthful. If we consider the youth of our artistic octogenarians, the attempt has been remarkably successful. Nevertheless, there is weakness in an art which refuses to ripen.

Morelli's Constructive Technique

It is obvious that the impulses which I have here described lie far deeper than the Morellian method, which is nothing but a refined, well-circumscribed, and remarkably early symptom of them. The technique itself has worked wonders in our discernment of art, and it would be foolish to think we could do without it. Ever since Morelli published his books, all serious connoisseurs have been Morellians, whether

passionate Morellians like Berenson, or irritable and reluctant Morellians like Friedländer. Moreover, since questions of authenticity enter into every phase of the study of art, it is inevitable that a Morellian is concealed in every art-historian who has mastered the elements of his discipline. It would be absurd to suppose that Raphael's art could be sensibly discussed without a knowledge of the criteria by which it can be decided, or at least debated, whether a drawing is by Raphael or not. It seems to me therefore a groundless fear that connoisseurship may be going out of fashion. One might as well fear that palaeography might become unfashionable in the study of manuscripts.

We must, however, distinguish clearly between a valid technique which should be applied to the study of art, and the personal outlook on art in general by which the great masters of that technique were inspired and sustained. The weakness of the connoisseur's relation to painting is that he inclines to sacrifice almost everything to freshness. His test is pure sensibility, a feeling for the authentic touch, and so he cultivates the spontaneous fragment, which turns all art into intimate chamber art. He cherishes the condensed, unadulterated sensation, from which the force of the original vision sprang; but he tends to be impatient of the external devices by which the vision is expanded and developed. Connoisseurs, it seems to me, are over-anxious not to let the artistic experience run its full course, but to arrest it at the highest point of spontaneity.

It is true that Berenson was not satisfied with pure connoisseurship and played with the psychological aesthetics of the eighteen-seventies, from which he took his ideas of empathy and tactile values, but it is fortunate that his achievement does not rest on these shaky props. No one would seriously maintain that his view of art was formed on the optical theories of Robert Vischer. It was shaped by Morelli.

A False Philosophy

It has repeatedly happened in the history of scholarship that a technique has outlasted the philosophy which prompted it. The differential calculus is still in use, but its users are not expected to accept the metaphysics of either Leibniz or Newton. In modern linguistics the old phonetic laws have retained their value, although few linguists, I am told, believe in their automatic action. No doubt, in psycho-analysis likewise, certain techniques introduced by Freud and Jung will remain effective long after Freud's or Jung's conceptions of the *psyche* have acquired a quaint archaic flavour. Freshness is important in works of art, and we should be grateful for a technique which pursues it. Nevertheless, 'freshness is all' is a false philosophy, and the view of art which it entails is lopsided. Undoubtedly, 'all that a man does is physiognomical of him', and a rapid sketch may reveal an artist's physiognomy more perfectly than the finished artifact; but if we allow a diagnostic preoccupation to tinge the whole of our artistic sensibility, we may end by deploring any patient skill in painting as an encroachment of craftsmanship upon expression.