

Kim H. Veltman

Review:

Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing*, (Chicago, 1983), *Kunstchronik*, Munich, Bd. 37 (7), (1984), pp. 262-267

SVETLANA ALPERS, *The Art of Describing*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1983. 273 Seiten mit 175 Abb., £ 48,75.

This is an excellent book because it raises basic questions concerning the nature of pictures. The author presents a brilliant argument with clarity and elegance: there are two distinct kinds of art. One is developed in Renaissance Italy and derives, according to the author, from Alberti's definition of a picture whereby a viewer looks through a picture plane at a substitute world or stage on which humans perform actions based on poetic texts. In this narrative art the dictum *ut pictura poesis* explains and legitimizes images (p. XIX) "through their relationship to prior and hallowed texts". These verbal roots of Italian art explain why so much of it stems from handbooks and treatises.

The author claims that, by contrast, Northern art is produced by craftsmen who are guild members, artists who ignore verbal description and focus on visual description. Whereas Italian art centres around representation of the human body, Northern art is concerned with (p. XXXIII) "representing everything else in nature exactly and unselectively" (cf. p. 78).

This contrast between Italian and Northern art is a conscious development of earlier ideas by Hegel (p. 249), Riegl (p. 251) and is intended as a visual equivalent of Foucault's approach (p. 79). It is also a reaction against and challenge to Panofsky's view which saw the North in Italian terms (pp. XXI-XXIV).

Professor Alpers is concerned, and this makes the book so exciting, with establishing a context for pictorial phenomena of the North in terms of seventeenth century theories of knowledge (p. 249). A first chapter explores the views of Constantijn Huygens expressed in his *Autobiography* and his *Dagwerck*: his fascination with camera obscuras, with purely visual evidence and the interplay of art, experimental science and knowledge. A second chapter develops these themes in relation to Kepler's model of the eye as a camera obscura: (p. 35) "that border line between nature and artifice that Kepler defined mathematically, the Dutch made a matter of paint".

In chapter three the context of image making in the North is further explored. Here the author emphasizes the role of the craft tradition and in turn links this with the writings of Hooke, Bacon and Comenius. Chapter four argues that the mapping impulse in Dutch art offers important clues for understanding Northern art.

In chapter five the author examines three aspects of how words are treated in the visual mode of the North: 1) inscriptions on paintings, 2) letter writers and readers in paintings and 3) captions implicit in narrative works. Italian parallels are not considered. Turning to paintings by Lastman and Bol the author claims they are effectively depicted conversations which are theatrical and (p. 218) "performative" in contrast to Italian counterparts which seek to express inner feelings (*affetti*).

An epilogue outlines how this interpretation of Northern art should help us to understand better the paintings of Vermeer and Rembrandt. In an appendix the author uses Jacob Cats' emblems to challenge De Jongh's interpretation of Dutch art, concluding that if it be emblematic, Dutch art is (p. 231) "something more like a picture language than like hidden meanings".

The evidence reads like a classic detective story. The parallels between Northern art and culture are so striking, the contrast between North and South is so persuasive, that it appears an open and shut case.

If seventeenth century Dutch art arises from a new equation of camera obscura, vision and painting, then it should be photographic in its treatment of Nature. Walter A. Liedtke has, however, come to a different conclusion: "Photographs of the views painted by Saenredam, Houckgeest, Vliet, De Witte and others will affirm that they *all* moved their viewpoints to include an interesting form and occasionally to improve the composition ("The New Church of Haarlem Series: Saenredam's Sketching Style in Relation to Perspective", *Simiolus*, vol. 8/3, Spring 1975-1976, published 1977, pp. 145-166. The quote is from p. 166. For the best recent study which improves on Liedtke see: Robert Ruurs, "Saenredam Constructies", *Oud Holland*, Amsterdam, vol. 96/2, 1982, pp. 97-122). In other words their scenes are a composite or synthesis of realism and phantasy (The sheets on Flemish and Dutch painting in the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin-Dahlem appropriately speak of "Komponierte Wirklichkeit". This theme is being developed by Einar Petterson, Münster). In the paintings of Dirk van Delen or Hendrick van Steenwyck II, printed exemplars by Hondius or Vredeman de Vries in perspectival treatises also play a role. Thus even the most realistic architectural scenes of Dutch art do not record the world precisely as does either a) a camera b) a camera obscura or c) an eye. The equation we are offered may be tempting but it is not true.

In Alpers' presentation the camera obscura is intimately connected with Northern art and science and fundamentally opposed to the principles of linear perspective developed in Italy. Why then should an Italian such as Leonardo da Vinci draw no less than 243 sketches of a camera obscura? Why should Bellotto, one of the most famous artists to use the camera obscura, be an Italian? Why should the first explicit printed reference to a camera obscura in combination with a lens for artistic purposes appear in Barbaro's *Pratica della prospettiva* (Venice, 1568): "Seeing, therefore, on the paper the outline of things, you can draw with a pencil all the perspective and the shading and the colouring, according to nature, holding the paper tightly until you have finished the drawing (See J. Waterhouse, "Notes on the Early History of the Camera Obscura", *The Photographic Journal*, London, vol. 25, May 31st, 1901, pp. 270-290. The translation is from p. 276).

Barbaro sees no opposition between the principles of camera obscuras and those of linear perspective. Nor did the late authority on optics and perspective, Maurice H. Pirenne, who used camera obscuras to demonstrate principles of linear perspective (*Optics, Painting and Photography*, Cambridge: At the University Press, 1970. Professor Alpers cites this work, p. 246). Professor Alpers invites us to disagree with the evidence of history and authority, but does not tell us why. Similarly we are told that the Keplerian mode involving camera obscuras is fundamentally opposed to the perspectival window of linear perspective, which leads to an elegant contrast between (p. 45) two different modes of picturing the world: on the one hand the picture considered as an object in the world, a

framed window to which we bring our eyes, on the other hand the picture taking the place of the eye with the frame and our location thus left undefined.

If the perspectival window is a strictly Italian instrument why is it first published by Dürer (1525, 1528)? Why should it be praised by Simon Stevin, become one of the devices used in the Académie Royale in Paris, receive publicity in the transactions of London's Royal Society and appear on the title page of Newton's *Optics* (1740 ed.)? These might be exceptions to the rule. But why then should the Venetian, Barbaro (1568) associate the device with Albrecht Dürer? And why should it appear in many Northern treatises: e. g. Rodler (or Johann II. v. PfalzSimmern) and Pfintzing? If camera obscuras and perspectival windows are used in both the North and South, the differences between Dutch and Italian art can hardly lie in these instruments.

Panofsky had suggested that these differences stem from alternative perspectival methods. Professor Alpers accordingly contrasts Pélerin's Northern distance point construction with Alberti's Southern *costruzione legittima*. (A 1975 Warburg Institute thesis challenges this traditional view of the two chief perspectival methods. The author also has other strong opinions on technical questions of perspective. For instance, Edgerton, 1975, had suggested a connection between Ptolemy's third cartographic method and Alberti's *costruzione legittima*. Alpers insists that Ptolemy's method is linked instead with Pélerin's method. A demonstration of these connections is wanting.) Again there are problems. If the Italian scene was dominated solely by the *costruzione legittima* why do Piero della Francesca, Serlio, Vignola and Benedetti all describe two methods and insist on their equivalence?

There is also a deeper problem. Pélerin's theoretical treatise in the North undermines Alpers' early claim (p. XXII) that theoretical treatises are particularly linked with Italy and alien to the Northern craft tradition which (p. 71) "never took part in the Renaissance in spite of the struggle of the Italianizers". Why then were the first editions of Alberti and Serlio printed North of the Alps? Why did c. 70 % of all published treatises on perspective prior to 1600 appear North of Italy?

In Alpers' case the authors of perspectival and other theoretical treatises are notably absent from the witness bench. We are not told why Bacon, Hooke and Kepler should be more important than Cock, Hondius and Marolois. To be sure Pélerin is mentioned, Vredeman de Vries cited and Hoogstraten granted a reference. But what of Androuet Du Cerceau, Cousin, Dürer, Has, Haydocke, Hondius, Jamnitzer, Lencker or Schön? By the sixteenth century there are more text-book artists from the North than from Italy.

It bears noting that the influence of these theoreticians goes both ways. That Dürer learns from Italy is well known. That Androuet Du Cerceau and Cock learn from Italy is no secret. But v. Eyck is also said to have influenced Bramante (See T. H. A. Fielding, *Synopsis of Practical Perspective* 2nd ed. ... London: Published for the Author by W. H. Allen and Co., 1836, p. 12) and we know that Stevin was being cited by the Italians in 1583, more than twenty years before he published *Van de Deursichtighe*. In short theoretical texts are not an exclusively Italian concern. Rather, they are a European phenomenon.

Professor Alpers sees Jacques de Gheyn's drawings of mice and men (figs. 46, 48) as examples of a systematic scientific approach to nature characteristic of Dutch art. But are

not Leonardo da Vinci's anatomical drawings and texts explicitly more systematic than this (See, for example, his instructions for drawing the body from 4 viewpoints [K/P 135°, 162] or his more complex method for drawing shoulders from 8 viewpoints [K/P 140"]). Cf. the author's "Visualisation and Perspective", *Leonardo e l'età della ragione*, a cura di Enrico Bellone e Paolo Rossi, Milano: Scientia, 1982, pp. 185-210).

Alpers rightly notes that the human figure is a central concern of Italian art (p. XXIII). We need only to recall Raphael's *Parnassus* or *School of Athens*, however, to remind ourselves that Italians are concerned with painting more than *sacra conversazione*. It may be that the texts of Boccaccio and Castiglione play their role here. But these authors also have their influence on Northerners such as Harsdörffer who saw stage plays as occasions for visualizing poetic scripts (G. P. Harsdörffer, *Poetischer Trichter II*, p. 107: "Wie in den Hirtengedichten der Schauplatz beschrieben wird / so wird er in solchen Spielen gemalt und ausgebildet". I am grateful to Mara Wade for this reference. Her PhD diss. [Michigan] on German *Singspiele* will offer new insights into links between Italian and German conversation).

Meanwhile other Italians are concerned with themes which Alpers would see as Northern. Pisanello draws leopards, falcons, and horses. Bramante writes a treatise on horses. His friend Leonardo studies horses in greater detail. Some of these are recorded in the *Codex* that now bears (Constantyn) *Huygens'* name. Jacopo de Barbari, a master of bird drawings, takes his Venetian skills to Antwerp.

The Dutch may be famous for their landscapes. But landscape is not absent from a Giorgione or a Salvator Rosa. Is it irrelevant that seventeenth century Dutch landscape artists such as Nicholas Berchem or Jan Both (who influenced Cuyp) study in Italy? Is it mere coincidence that the author's own illustrations of the mapping impulse in Dutch art include Orvieto, Montecavallo and the Bay of Naples (figs. 73-75)? Mapping may be a Dutch speciality. But mapping required surveying and since the time of Brunelleschi there is an ongoing Italian tradition linking surveying, perspective, the study of ruins and art (On the links concerning surveying and perspective see for example, the reviewer's article *Military Surveying and Topography: the Practical Dimension of Renaissance Linear Perspective*, Lisboa: Junta de Investigações Científicas de Ultramar 1979. Centro de Estudos de Cartografia Antiga CXXIX).

Italian art concentrates on inner feelings in contrast to the outer "performative" theatrical gestures of figures in Northern art - so the author (p. 218). On the other hand we are told that Renaissance (Italian) art is "a stage on which human figures performed significant actions", not the ideal place for inner feelings. Why the *traités des passions*, which set out to catalogue external expressions of inner feelings should have been a French development (e.g. Le Brun) of Italian ideas is not explained.

Although *The Art of Describing* is primarily about Dutch art, it also makes many claims about Northern as opposed to Italian art. Professor Alpers rightly notes (p. XX) that "one must leave the geographic boundaries of the distinction flexible". The question is, how flexible? In Alpers' analysis both Pélerin and Kepler enter as exponents of Northern culture. The canon of Toul and the astronomer at Prague thus become witnesses in a case where the North stretches from western France to the capital of present day Czechoslovakia. If the intellectual horizons of the Low Countries extend to Prague why should they not include Venice, Milan, Florence and Rome, especially when there are

Medici bankers linking North and South, sending a Portinari altar of Hugo van de Goes or Memling's Danzig triptych to Florence? (Two studies of the interplay of Italian and Netherlandish art, not cited by Alpers, are: Enrico Castelnuovo, *Prospettiva italiana e microcosmo fiammingo*, Milano: Fabbri, 1966. *I Maestri del Colore* 259; Carlo L. Ragghianti, *Filippo Brunelleschi, Un uomo - un universo*. Firenze: Vallecchi 1977, pp. 461-555. With respect to perspective the Italian connection is also stressed by James Mitchell Collier, *Linear Perspective in Flemish Painting and the Art of Petrus Christus and Dirk Bouts*. Diss. for Doctor of Philosophy, University of Michigan 1975.)

In her introduction (p. XXV) Professor Alpers notes that in the case of Northern art no history on the developmental model of Vasari has ever been written and adds "nor do I think it could be". What she proposes to study, therefore "is not the *history* of Dutch art, but the Dutch visual culture". This decision explains why the author has no problems in moving from Leonardo (c. 1490) to Alberti (1434), Poussin (1650's), Kepler (1604), Wotton (1620), Hoogstraten (1641), Saenredam (1636, 1644), Alberti (1434), Pélerin (1505) and Vignóla (1583) in the course of six pages (48-53). Such century hopping may give the book added pace, but must make the historian stop short and insist that one cannot move so easily between 1434 and 1660. In 1434 when Alberti wrote his *On Painting*, Jeanne d'Arc was busy playing her role in the hundred years war. But even so the whole of Europe was Catholic. By the 1540's Protestantism had become a reality in the Low Countries, but they remained, at least nominally, under the Catholic Habsburg emperor Charles V. As Frans Baudouin has masterfully shown, after the separation of the Low Countries into what are now the Netherlands and Belgium, dramatic differences emerged in the art of the two countries ("Religion und Kunst nach der Teilung der Niederlande": *Renaissance - Reformation. Gegensätze and Gemeinsamkeiten*. Kongreß in der Herzog August Bibliothek Wolfenbüttel vom 20.-23. November 1983. Wolfenbüttel 1984, in press). This is not mentioned in *The Art of Describing* where a rhetorical contrast with Italy is so important that differences between the brothers van Eyck and Rembrandt can be overlooked (p. XXV) "because the art did not constitute itself as a progressive tradition".

What the van Eyck brothers owe to their Limburg equivalents or to the Burgundian court is therefore unimportant. It is as if Memling learned nothing from Van der Weyden; as if Quentin Massys' grotesque faces do not build on the experiences of Van den Goes or Leonardo; as if Breughel does not learn from Bosch nor profit from his studies in Rome; as if the Italian experiences of Heemskerck or Cock were also insignificant; as if Hondius and Vredeman de Vries did not build on their examples. We are expected to see Terbruggen, Honthorst and Rembrandt as Dutch; ignore parallels in De La Tour, Le Nain or Zurbaran and forget that there had previously been a Caravaggio. Still needed is a history of Dutch art that explains how influences from the whole of Europe could combine to produce the artistic heights of the low countries.

Some critics may come away unconvinced by Alpers' brilliant polarization of the deep historical bonds between Italy and the Netherlands. Many will find in her book exciting new horizons for the interpretation of Dutch art. All will agree that this book challenges us to look afresh and think anew about the nature of Dutch art and indeed about the phenomenon of picture making itself. That is why *The Art of Describing* is a major book.