



JOHN SHEARMAN AT THE COURTAULD INSTITUTE OF ART, IN THE 1970S.
Photographer: Paul McNicholls.

John Kinder Gowran Shearman

1931–2003

WHEN JOHN SHEARMAN died on 11 August 2003 at the age of seventy-two one of the last protagonists of the post-war generation of great Italian Renaissance scholars passed away. He had corrected the proofs, but did not see, the publication of *Raphael in Early Modern Sources* (New Haven, CT, 2003), the crowning achievement of his focused yet prolific career, in which he set new standards for precise and uncompromisingly rigorous scholarship in nearly all art-historical genres. At the time of his death he was the Charles Adam University Professor Emeritus at Harvard University, where he had taught since 1987. Harvard was his second university position in the United States, after Princeton, to which he had moved in 1979. His heart, however, belonged to the Courtauld Institute of Art in London, where he spent the first half of his career, both as a student and teacher. It was here that he absorbed his methodological tools and laid the foundation for nearly all of his major publications.

Born on 24 June 1931 in Aldershot, he was the first of two children of Evelyn White and Charles E. G. Shearman, a British army brigadier and amateur painter. His paternal grandfather was Ernest C. Shearman, the Neo-Gothic architect who built six churches in the London area of austere designs, influenced by the Mendicant orders of Italy. With this background and encouraged by his headmaster at Felsted School in Essex, young Shearman dabbled in landscape and seascape painting and assisted a picture restorer. On a school trip to London, however, he drew the attention of the old Samuel Courtauld, who promised to reserve Shearman a place at the Institute after he left school. With a tweak of his moustache,

Shearman would later pride himself on having been the last student personally recruited by Courtauld.

Before starting there in 1951 he did his National Service in Germany, where a visit to the destroyed city of Dresden took great emotional toll on the young Englishman. Whether this experience was critical to Shearman's decision not to follow in his father's footsteps is difficult to determine, but seems unlikely considering his previous artistic leanings. In fact, he arrived well prepared at the Courtauld, quickly gaining a scholarship, graduating with honours in 1955 and completing his Ph.D. only two years later in 1957. That same year he began teaching at the Courtauld, and swiftly climbed the ranks from Lecturer to Reader, Professor and Deputy Director after Anthony Blunt's retirement in 1974.

Central to Shearman's intellectual formation was doubtless his primary adviser, Johannes Wilde, to whom he dedicated the great monograph *Andrea del Sarto* (Oxford, 1965). The Hungarian-born émigré from Vienna probably was in the back of Shearman's mind in every major publication. Wilde's innovations were many. They included the pioneering use of new technology, such as X-radiography, for the interpretation of images as well as a concern with function and the physical site of artworks. Of greatest impact on Shearman, however, was Wilde's preoccupation with developing rigorous concepts of analysis. According to Shearman, who with Michael Hirst edited Wilde's posthumously published Michelangelo lectures and who wrote his only truly historiographic article on his mentor: 'Wilde is one of the historians who have done most to establish solid standards of quality in our discipline, particularly quality of argument and proof.' Throughout Shearman's career, it was those standards of rigour, that engrossed and motivated him much more than methodology and theory: 'The Art History we write is too much concerned with conceptual novelty, too little with quality.'

In a way, Anthony Blunt is to blame for the fact that Shearman's dissertation on *Developments in the Use of Colour in Tuscan Paintings of the Early Sixteenth Century* remained unpublished. At the time, Blunt was working on the catalogue raisonné of Nicolas Poussin and charged the fresh post-doctoral researcher to assist with the tricky section on landscape drawings in volume 4. His contribution, which appeared in 1963 (*The Drawings of Nicolas Poussin*, volume 4: London), offered Shearman the opportunity to emulate Wilde's brilliant catalogue of Michelangelo's drawings in the British Museum. It also constitutes his only extended effort in connoisseurship. With aplomb: on the basis of circumstantial and stylistic evidence, he assigned a body of drawings in the Albertina to

Poussin's brother-in-law, Gaspar Dughet; an attribution which, since then, most scholars have accepted.

The dissertation did not, however, lie forgotten. In 1962 Shearman published the chapter on 'Leonardo's colour and chiaroscuro' in the *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* (25, 13–47). With few exceptions, scholars previously had not analysed the use of colour systematically but in vague, atmospheric terms, or had even limited themselves to naming the colours appearing in a painting. Shearman, instead, started with an exact, structural description that facilitates a precise understanding of painting technique. In fact, he not only explained Leonardo's tonal unity but also the colour modelling of the preceding generation. This forms the basis for an investigation of Leonardo's art-theory writings and a contextualisation with his contemporaries. But what really distinguishes Shearman's approach is that he always combines the empirical with an investigation of effect and function. Thus, while the article is formalism at its best and offers a structural understanding of the use of colour in painting on the verge of the High Renaissance, it also points to the effects of the new technique. Accordingly, the primary achievement of Leonardo's tonal unity is no longer its advancement of naturalism, which is mainly what previous scholarship had noticed. Instead, 'Leonardo's greatest contribution to Florentine art was energy, both formal and psychological.' From a discussion of technical innovations of the use of colour and chiaroscuro Shearman had arrived at the new function of painting and its perception at the beginning of modernity.

The dissertation also led to Shearman's second book, the monograph on the Florentine early sixteenth-century painter Andrea del Sarto. Shearman worked on this project at the same time that Sydney Freedberg was writing his study on the artist, which appeared in 1963 (*Andrea del Sarto*, two volumes, Cambridge, MA). The comparison is revealing. Freedberg delivered a chronological overview of Sarto's oeuvre, dealing with each aspect of the artist's life and work as he went along. Shearman, instead, was far more analytical. He dedicated a separate chapter to Sarto's vita and personality and made 'no attempt to discuss every work, nor to preserve chronological consistency; it seemed to me more interesting to isolate certain themes—the Scalzo, Portraits, Colour—and to treat them separately'. Only in the second part did he include a catalogue and list of documents, a section which earned him the explicit praise of John Pope-Hennessy, who called it simply the best catalogue raisonné to date. By abandoning the biographical model in order to study systematically important aspects of Sarto's work, Shearman gave

the artist monograph a much more scientific structure. In fact, the thematic format, a novelty at the time, remains a model for many artist monographs to this day.

Two things may have led to Shearman's innovative approach. Sarto suffered like few other Renaissance artists from what Shearman calls 'the Romantic fallacy that the circumstances of an artist's life are the key to the understanding of his work'. In his biography of Sarto, Giorgio Vasari had characterised the painter's wife Lucrezia as 'faithless, jealous, vixenish with the apprentices'. This provoked all kinds of fantastical speculation and romantic elaborations, including the famous poem *The Faultless Painter* by Robert Browning (1855). Shearman's division between vita and work at once wiped all this romantic clutter off the table. In addition, colour initially drew Shearman to Sarto, and he thus considered it necessary to treat it separately and systematically. According to Shearman, Sarto was the first painter bred with Leonardo's tonalism, through which the Florentine developed from an abstract rationalism that does not correspond to the facts of vision towards a new naturalism. But Sarto simultaneously combined this with a 'tendency towards the expression of beauty of colour as an end in itself'. Sarto is, indeed, 'the only artist who expressed the new aesthetic ideals of *maniera*, *grazia* and *sprezzatura* in colour'. Already, thanks to this accomplishment, he deserved, for Shearman, a much more central position in the History of Art. The impression of Sarto's alleged marginalisation might seem ironic considering that in the stretch of just two years two double-volume monographs appeared, written by some of the most prominent art historians of their time. But not much preceded or came after Freedberg and Shearman, who, by the way, wrote their books in a benevolent spirit of collegial competition. Shearman, however, cannot be blamed that his attempt 'to redress the balance' was only a partial success and Sarto remains a relatively marginal figure compared to his contemporary Raphael or even Fra Bartolomeo. If anything, Shearman demonstrated that Sarto could easily compete with their visual intelligence and significance in the history of Renaissance art.

In fact, Sarto's treatment of colour as autonomous also makes him a protagonist in *Mannerism* (Harmondsworth, 1967), Shearman's third book in a period of five years. Featured in the Penguin *Style and Civilization* series, this slim and affordable volume, which ran to ten editions and was translated into eight languages, undoubtedly remains his most influential publication. Here Shearman famously coined Mannerism as the 'stylish style', a characterisation that, with all its limitations, has remained the most useful of this notoriously complex and seemingly infinitely contro-

versial concept. Shearman pointed out that because Mannerism is a style rather than a period or movement, the term only applies to works which possess '*maniera*' (that is, style). Since in the sixteenth century '*maniera*' was considered a highly desirable quality, distinguishing both art and human beings, works qualifying as 'mannerist' must aim to be beautiful and to please. 'We require, in fact, poise, refinement and sophistication, and works of art that are polished, rarefied and idealized away from the natural: hot-house plants cultured most carefully. Mannerism should, by tradition, speak a silver-tongued language of articulate, if unnatural, beauty, not one of incoherence, menace and despair; it is, in a phrase, the stylish style.'

Shearman argued his case in what remains a model for a rigorous historical (or, what Michael Baxandall would later call 'period eye') approach. He exclusively considers contemporary sources and for the first time here reveals his impressive command of early modern music and poetry. In concise yet beautifully written analyses, he demonstrates that between 1520 and 1570, the time in which Mannerism was at its peak in Italian culture, all the sister arts possessed an unusual degree of self-awareness and were driven by a desire to impress and convey skill, sophistication and *sprezzatura*. Rather than constituting a break with tradition, this tendency to pursue higher ideals of beauty that transcend the empirical evolved organically out of the concerns of the High Renaissance. Moreover, just one among several coexisting styles, the concept does not apply to the naturalism of the Venetian school or to highly expressive works such as those of El Greco.

It testifies to the great success of the 'stylish style' that it seems absurd today that until the second half of the twentieth century Italian art of the sixteenth century had a bad reputation and was considered a decline after the great accomplishments of the High Renaissance. Such early luminaries as Jakob Burckhardt, Carl Justi and Walter Friedländer even called it 'degenerate', the symptom of a 'sick' era in crisis. At the time when Shearman was writing his book, the humanities were still heavily politicised and scholars exploited the characterisation of Mannerism as a symptom to make connections to the disasters and conflicts of the twentieth century. Only three years before Shearman, Arnold Hauser had published his *Mannerism: the Crisis of the Renaissance and the Origin of Modern Art* (London, 1964). For Hauser, and similarly for Max Dvořák and Gustav René Hocke before him, Mannerism was a subjective style that expresses the conflicted identity of an alienated individual. As such, it allegedly prefigures the modern subject struggling even harder with the

effects of isolation and individualisation in advanced capitalism. These scholars, then, did not hesitate to draw pseudomorphic formal analogies between sixteenth-century and modern works of art.

While avoiding polemics, and rather simply by the force of his precise and strictly historical argumentation, Shearman managed to put this appropriation of Mannerism for political causes to rest and thus silenced a debate that had occupied generations of mostly German-speaking scholars. Tacitly, and even less polemically, *Mannerism* also turned against Erwin Panofsky's *Idea: Ein Beitrag zur Begriffsgeschichte der älteren Kunsttheorie* (Leipzig, 1924), a book Shearman always considered too schematic. While Panofsky's Neoplatonic characterisation might seem much more compatible with the 'stylish style', it spiritualises Mannerism and asserts that by pursuing higher ideals of beauty the works transcend nature only in order to reach out to invisible, metaphysical ideas. Even for Panofsky, then, Mannerism is a form of escapism and a symptom of crisis. Shearman instead insists on the exclusive prevalence of the material realisation with craft and skill (*technē*) of works of art designed primarily to promote their maker rather than a spiritual concept (*idea*). Discussing Rosso Fiorentino's drawing of *Mars and Venus* (1530), he observes: 'What the work stimulates positively is not belief in a narrative, not the evocation of something real outside itself, but fascination in itself, in its complexities, its visual jokes, its *tours de force* of manipulation and technique, and its accumulated demonstration of artistic capacity.'

The great virtue of Shearman's restriction of the 'stylish style' to formal means and the reason for his overwhelming success is that it provides rigorous, verifiable criteria to determine what according to this definition constitutes a 'mannerist' work. This clarity was missing especially from the pseudomorphic presentations, which overburdened the concept and applied the term inflationary across the entire history of art. In addition, Shearman offered a similarly straightforward explanation for the motivations of mannerist artists that served as an antidote to the iconological rage of post-war art history, which in part ran the risk of psychologising and exaggerating with its convoluted and, to Shearman's conviction, hypothetical allegorical interpretations.

At the same time, it seems fair to say that Shearman's characterisation was probably too narrow and reduces Mannerism to its smallest common denominator. He emptied Mannerism by radically withdrawing it from any concerns with content as well as by insulating it from the political realities of sixteenth-century Italy, facilitated by largely confining his examples to courtly art and highly sophisticated artistic patronage. Even

his period-eye approach is ultimately too rigid and slightly uncritical for he takes most statements at face value without considering their historical contingency and the self-fashioning of their authors. In fact, Shearman later criticised *Mannerism* for being too brash and considered it his least successful book. With hindsight, it might seem that just as the political and psychological interpretations were the children of the troubled first half of the century, Shearman's approach relates to the nascent formalism of a depoliticised post-war generation. But these qualifications cannot diminish the great methodological merits of what still is the most coherent and powerful discussion of Mannerism. Shearman managed to claim the topic from a long tradition of German scholars and offered what to this day remains an undisputed standard book.

Methodologically, Shearman's next book could not have been more different from this sweeping argument. *Raphael's Cartoons in the Collection of Her Majesty the Queen and the Tapestries for the Sistine Chapel* (London, 1972) grew out of the first article he had published as a young scholar in 1958 in collaboration with John White on 'Raphael's tapestries and their cartoons' (*The Art Bulletin*, 40, 193–220). Commissioned by Anthony Blunt, then Surveyor of the Queen's Pictures, the resulting monograph is a model in its comprehensive command of the material, which it interprets in circumspect yet illuminating ways. In the preface Shearman advances his famous methodological statement, which in its assertive, even aggressive tenor is certainly not short of *Mannerism's* brashness, so that one wonders whether the statement could also apply to the earlier book: 'I do not believe that the reader needs to be told that Raphael's Cartoons are beautiful, and I am fairly certain that I cannot explain why they are. Nor do I think that the reader wants to be told that his eye follows the composition from the bottom left-hand corner, or from the right, as the case may be; I know that my eye only needs to be given this sort of instruction for it to start doing something else. And if it is anybody's proper function to offer such analyses, as they are hopefully called, it does not seem to me to be the historian's.'

Shearman, however, does not suddenly discount what he did so eloquently in *Mannerism*. He never turned against formalism, connoisseurship, let alone visual analysis, and, in principle, did not even oppose the psychology of art, to which the second part of the passage apparently refers. In fact, throughout his career, he used all of these approaches to great effect, wherever they seemed appropriate to the specific task at hand. Shearman continuously reminded his students that method derives from the formulation of the question. Rather, his target here, as always, is the

dangers of a lack of rigour and precision. Thus, when Shearman discusses the pursuit of beauty in mannerist art, he never offers simple judgements of taste but reconstructs the reasons why contemporaries must have considered specifically these works so beautiful. In the wake of Rudolf Arnheim's *Art and Visual Perception: a Psychology of the Creative Eye* (London, 1954) and Ernst H. Gombrich's *Art and Illusion: a Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (London, 1960), the psychology of art and its tendency to identify universal patterns of perception became a hobbyhorse of art history. Shearman considered their methods largely non-scientific and repeatedly challenged students who arrived in class with elaborate reconstructions of the geometries that allegedly guide the eye through a composition. This is not to say, however, that he was not concerned with perception—far from it; and Gombrich always remained an esteemed colleague (notwithstanding the latter's cavillous and somewhat patronising review of one of Shearman's books). But he was of the firm conviction that an historian's stuff is the past and that it is a fallacy to think that the past is like the present. He feared that the psychology of art all too often ignores temporal distance in its concern with patterns of perception. However, when it keeps an historical perspective, as in Baxandall's discussion of the relation of intervals and proportions in Renaissance paintings to contemporary mathematics in *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (Oxford, 1972), he could be full of admiration.

Indeed, notwithstanding his statement in the preface, *Raphael's Cartoons* provides a case in point for Shearman's remarkable methodological flexibility. The titles of its five chapters read as if they were taken from the syllabus of a survey class in art history methods: 'Patron and Commission', 'Reconstruction', 'Meaning', 'Design' and 'History'. In the 1970s, some of these approaches, namely patronage studies, were still nascent in the discipline. Yet he uses them strictly because they served his systematic investigation of Raphael's cartoons. Owing to his education at the Courtauld Institute, he was particularly sensitive to the risks of overly obscure iconographic interpretations. Accordingly, he frames his discussion of the cartoons' meaning with a balanced word of caution that, significantly, serves also as an encouragement: '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 other kinds of history.' The self-proclaimed disbeliever, who clearly revelled in identifying the weak link of an argument, called it

‘scepticism misplaced’ and an ‘unjustifiable demotion to triviality of the sincerity and seriousness of so many responsible contemporary witnesses’ if one failed to think hard about the connections of the cartoons to contemporary theology.

In order to draw nearer to this seemingly infinite field of signification opened up by Raphael, Shearman defines his foremost task as the ‘collection, criticism and presentation of whatever material seemed relevant to an understanding of these great works’. To identify what is relevant and keep the amount of material and pitfalls of interpretation at bay, Shearman provides a checklist of five so-called ‘controls’. They serve the reader to keep in mind that the tapestries will express orthodox ideas; their sources were easily accessible and popular; every tapestry is part of a coherent cycle and relates to the physical situation of the Sistine Chapel; each interpretation is hypothetical; and the message must be universal, familiar and direct.

All these interpretative ‘controls’ thus take into account that Raphael related the tapestries to the physical realities of the space in the Sistine Chapel where they served a particular purpose and audience. Prior to discussing form and meaning, Shearman, therefore, establishes the function of Raphael’s decoration. He lays out the personal, political, religious and artistic concerns of the patron Pope Leo X before scrupulously reconstructing the original arrangement of the tapestries on the chapel walls. Only on this basis does he proceed to discuss Raphael’s engagement with the theological and political programme of the cycle, which, according to Shearman, was most probably crafted by a second-tier theologian. Shearman argues that, roughly speaking, it centred on the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles, a metaphor for the contemporary Lutheran crisis from which the Medici pope would deliver the Church to usher in a new Golden Age. By reconstructing the structure, he argues that in Raphael’s cycle the scenes served a similar purpose to the sermons, which were regularly preached in the Sistine Chapel and which similarly employed a dense network of meanings, references and allusions.

Shearman picked up this attention to function from his teacher Johannes Wilde who, in the same year as Shearman and White’s article, published a pioneering functional analysis, in which he discussed how Michelangelo’s frescoes responded to the conditions of light and visibility on the Sistine ceiling (‘The decoration of the Sistine Chapel’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 44, 61–81). Ian Verstegen has, in fact, characterised attention to the realities of space and the task set before the artist as Wilde’s greatest legacy: ‘Gone were the speculative sketches of stylistic art

history or deep iconological analysis' (*Journal of Art Historiography*, 1, 2009, p. 4). By providing a concrete analytical framework that combines visual analysis with larger concerns of meaning, functional analysis offered a way out of the methodological deadlock of twentieth-century art history. In fact, *Raphael's Cartoons* demonstrates that Raphael not only excelled in conveying the programme handed down to him but always managed to maintain his personal voice as an artist. Accordingly, Raphael drew compositional and colouristic connections to the already existing fifteenth-century fresco cycle above the tapestries. He, therefore, combined iconography and formal means to tie the chapel's entire decoration together and engage it in the rendering of the message of the Medici papacy.

This was the first time that a single monument had been studied so systematically and thoroughly. The result is far from tedious. *Raphael's Cartoons* reads so well not only thanks to Shearman's concise and direct language, but also because of his deferral of seemingly less relevant material and alternative readings to extensive notes, which, as many have remarked, he arranged like glossaries around the text as in a medieval manuscript. On the resulting idiosyncratic pages, the notes do not buttress but circulate around the text. This is a looser format that visualises the simultaneously fundamental and supplementary character of the information they contain. As a result of Shearman's rich approach and the breathtaking quantity of sources he consulted, *Raphael's Cartoons* opens up an entire world. It is a microhistory *avant la lettre*, offering a fascinating picture of the culture at the papal court in the early sixteenth century.

After this extraordinary effort, the breathless pace of Shearman's book production slowed down, but only by a little. In July 1983 he published *The Early Italian Pictures in the Collection of Her Majesty the Queen* (Cambridge). The book goes back to Blunt's commission in 1959, before Shearman decided to treat Raphael's cartoons first in a separate volume. In the meantime, Blunt had died in March 1983 and by a hair's breadth missed seeing the volume in print. Moreover, in 1979 Blunt's public exposure as a former Soviet spy let all hell loose. He was under massive pressure from sections of the Fellowship to resign from the British Academy and Queen Elizabeth stripped her former employee of his knighthood. The latter might explain why Shearman, in a catalogue of the Queen's Collection, does not mention his mentor anywhere in the acknowledgements. The book is also left conspicuously without a dedication. Yet there can be no doubt about the loyalty of Shearman, who in 1967 with Michael Kitson edited Blunt's Festschrift (*Studies in Renaissance and Baroque Art*

presented to Anthony Blunt on his 60th Birthday, London, 1967) and served as a consultant for Miranda Carter's balanced 2001 biography of the disgraced long-time director of the Courtauld Institute (*Anthony Blunt: His Lives*, London).

What distinguishes *Early Italian Pictures* from other similar catalogues is Shearman's careful technical analysis of each painting. This was another innovation he took from Wilde, who already in the 1930s as a curator in Vienna had closely collaborated with restorers and was the first to use X-radiography for the reconstruction and discussion of artworks. As student Shearman thus spent many hours in the laboratories of the Courtauld Collection and later regularly taught seminars with conservators. Tellingly, the only conference Shearman organised focused on the collaboration with scientists. The resulting publication, edited with Marcia Hall, had the programmatic title *Science in the Service of Art History: Papers of the Princeton Raphael Symposium* (Princeton, NJ, 1983). In fact, his 1966 article on Masaccio's *Pisa altarpiece* (*The Burlington Magazine*, 108, 449–55) had already demonstrated in spectacular fashion how productive such collaboration could be. His detailed investigation of the margins of the altarpiece fragment kept in the National Gallery in London led Shearman to the thesis, which still pervades scholarship, that Masaccio's altarpiece constitutes the first representation of a so-called *sacra conversazione*.

For his catalogue of the Royal Collection, Shearman had each painting's frame removed, if necessary multiple times, even if that involved lifting a large work such as Tintoretto's *Esther before Ahasuerus* down from the wall. In that particular case, the analysis of the canvas revealed that the painting had been cut on the right margin, which led Shearman to the inspired suggestion that Tintoretto had originally included here a figure that seems necessary to balance the composition and which, indeed, appears in a workshop replica in the Escorial. This catalogue entry, like many others, is densely packed with observations, including the identification of Tintoretto's compositional model (Raphael's cartoon of the *Sacrifice at Lystra*) and of a portrait of Pietro Aretino, the painter's early mentor. Although a concise text of less than two pages, it actually is an essay and remains the most thorough discussion of the painting to date. Considering the breadth of the Royal Collection and the concomitant range of readings Shearman had to master in order to uphold his standards of quality, one gains an idea of the truly Herculean task he mastered in *Early Italian Pictures*.

At the time of the book's publication, Shearman had already begun teaching at Princeton University. He moved there in 1979, five years after

his candidacy for Director of the Courtauld Institute had fallen through. Apparently Shearman's close affiliation with Blunt did not facilitate his application. Already before his downfall, Blunt's direction of the Institute had become controversial. He led the Courtauld like one of the gentlemen's clubs to which he belonged, residing on the top floor of Home House in Portman Square as a patriarch. Some considered Shearman a part and creature of Blunt's autocratic system of clientelism; he did not represent the fresh start many felt the Courtauld needed. When necessary, Shearman did, however, stand up to Blunt, who rarely held meetings and grew aloof to the increased staff workload at the rapidly expanding Courtauld. Thus, Shearman arranged for private conversations, pushing for a reduction of the teaching-load and for salary increases, which Blunt had neglected for years.

But Shearman's lack of diplomacy certainly did not help his candidacy either. Not a man of many words, yet confident and with strong convictions, he cut right to the chase in conversation and, although soft-spoken, rarely sugar-coated his opinions, at times upsetting his interlocutors. What is more, like a carp, the born sceptic seemed to enjoy swimming against the current. He could be combative and uncompromising, all characteristics hardly fitting the leader of a research institution. In fact, years later when he applied to direct I Tatti, Harvard's research centre housed in Bernard Berenson's villa near Florence, this position also was denied to him.

To his credit, more often than not Shearman was right and, characteristically, the quality of work, rather than ideology or politics, was his guiding principle. Hence his fierce defence of a colleague at Princeton who was denied tenure because of his Marxist scholarship. In fact, this blatant betrayal of scientific ethos greatly contributed to Shearman's decision to transfer to Harvard in 1987. At the same time, it seems reasonable that the tragedy of the self-inflicted death of his wife Jane Smith in 1982, with whom he had three daughters and a son, also led to a desire for a fresh start in Cambridge, Massachusetts with Sally Roskill, his new wife since 1983.

At Princeton and Harvard Shearman swiftly had to adjust to the customs and demands of American universities. For one thing, his dressing style became more casual. He abandoned the suit and tie, which he always used to wear in England, where even in the late 1960s he cut his hair short, almost as a visual expression of the accuracy and seriousness of his scholarship. While at the Courtauld he had few students, who moreover only had to take one course per term ('I had their undivided attention'), he now

dealt with a much larger and diverse student body, which, in addition, expected more guidance from him. Shearman took this task very seriously. He had an open-door policy, attended his office hours religiously and only half-jokingly complained that not enough students were coming to see him. He invited students to his house to use his library while he prepared lunch with a superb selection of British cheeses and an espresso at the end that made your heart race. For his seminar courses Shearman also never failed to throw a party, in which he, unforgettably, walked around serving wine with a bottle in each hand.

At the undergraduate level, he was a brilliant lecturer, who never sacrificed clarity for complexity. His Michelangelo lectures drew students from the entire university—undergraduate and graduate—and filled the largest auditorium at Harvard. The courses, however, were less structured didactically. There were few common readings and leading discussion was not Shearman's strength. The meetings were based on student presentations, on which he commented sparsely but usually to the point. He was not always sensitive to the fragile psyche of his students. To one candidate who confessed not intending to work in the archive for a dissertation on architectural style, he simply stated: 'We must probably change that.' Similarly, when I sent him a chapter of my dissertation with a ponderous reconstruction of the date of an altarpiece, he called to tell me that 'Reading this was flagellation.' But while they appeared brutal at the time, in the long run these remarks were surprisingly productive. The architectural student eventually became a very successful archive wizard and once I recovered from my hurt pride, I started to work much harder on guiding readers through an intricate argument. What is more, I often catch myself repeating to my own students advice that I originally received from him, such as his comparison of the difficult and nerve-wracking process of developing a dissertation topic to parachuting: 'At first you drift in the air but in the end you arrive exactly where you wanted to go.'

It is telling of Shearman's ethos and uncompromising commitment to the field of Renaissance studies that he was generous as an adviser and not only to his own students. He served as an unofficial consultant for several German dissertations, especially on decorations in the Vatican, and one repeatedly learns in the acknowledgments of peer-reviewed articles that Shearman lifted the veil of his anonymity and provided the author with transcriptions of documents drawn from his own precious archive. In addition to the already mentioned volumes he edited, he also served on numerous editorial boards, including the *Burlington Magazine* (1968–2003), *L'Arte* (1969–73), *Art Quarterly* (1969–72), *RILA/BHA* (1971–99), *Art*

History (1977–78), and the *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* (1984–89). At the Courtauld, he served as Deputy Director from 1974 to 1978 and was Chair of the Department of Art and Archaeology at Princeton from 1979 to 1985 and from 1990 to 1993 of the Department of Fine Arts at Harvard. He never shirked committee work but, tellingly, that of the library mattered most to him. From 1975 to 1979 he even served as Chair of the Art History Committee of Library Resources of the British Library. To prospective students striving to explain why they were applying to Harvard, he would simply respond with awe: ‘The library, the library ...’.

But Shearman was not only bookish. When in the fall of 1966 he learned of the flood in Florence, he immediately acted with fierce determination. He organised the passage to Florence for, and accommodation of, more than a hundred volunteers. To help with the fundraising and financing of the incurring restorations, he alerted the public to the devastating consequences for the afflicted city in a series of articles for *The Times* as well as mounting a documentary exhibition with photographs of the damage at the Royal Academy.

Considering these merits and engagement, honours and distinctions soon started to rain on him. Already in 1964 he was a Fellow of the Institute of Advanced Study in Princeton, and in 1976 he was elected Fellow of the British Academy and was awarded its Serena Medal for Italian Studies in 1979. That same year he also became a member of the Accademia del Disegno in Florence and in 1983 he received the Bronze Medal of the Collège de France. In 1993 he was admitted to the American Society of Arts and Sciences and in 1995 to the Accademia di San Luca in Rome. While one would not exactly call Shearman humble or modest, for he was only too aware of his accomplishments, he was a much too private man to reveal how much he actually cared about these and other awards. Hiding behind his moustache, Shearman liked to keep an ironic distance. In an obituary, he has been called ‘conservative yet anti-establishment’, which is probably what best characterises his complex personality.

In the methodological wars that in the 1980s shook the Humanities, Shearman grew estranged and increasingly felt isolated, particularly in the US, where the post-structuralist onslaught was felt most ardently. In part, Shearman even shared some of their concerns. He was always sceptical of the iconographical school of Panofsky, who apparently shunned the young scholar during his fellowship at Princeton because of his ties to Wilde and the Vienna school. He often told the story of Panofsky asking him whether he had noticed that Titian hardly uses yellow colour, which considering paintings like the *Pesaro Madonna* puzzled Shearman. This

anecdote is indicative of his conviction that Panofsky cared more about ideas than about ‘getting things right’, which for Shearman defined the ethos of the historian. At the same time, as has been mentioned, Shearman was not opposed to interpretation, unlike some more conservative colleagues who responded to the new trends in equally radical terms with what they called ‘realist’ and what Shearman named ‘minimalist’ readings. In a 1995 essay on Piero della Francesca he wrote: ‘The refusal to interpret except reductively must be recognized as itself a choice, a position, agenda-driven. And in this case (*the kinetics of refraction and reflection in Piero’s paintings*) it is the less realistic position’ (‘Refraction and reflection’ in M. A. Lavin (ed.), *Piero della Francesca and His Legacy*, Hannover, NH, p. 220).

What disturbed Shearman was his impression that the ‘obsession with methodology’ eclipsed the quest for epistemological insight. In the introduction to *Only Connect . . . Art and the Spectator in the Italian Renaissance* (Princeton, NJ, 1992)—which grew out of his 1988 Mellon Lectures—he reflects on the comments of a colleague in comparative literature who flatly accused art historians of not interpreting. To Shearman, his colleague’s statement testified to a self-serving intellectual parochialism in which each group decides ‘what shall count—as interpretation, for example, as narrowness, or as innovation—and will decide what, to their satisfaction, is now discredited, old hat, or just boring’. When approach thus turns into dogma what is actually at stake—historical insight—becomes secondary: ‘To me the greatest gain lies not only, nor even principally, in a new range of questions, for I often challenge their newness, but it lies in a more strenuous awareness of the processes and objectives of history.’ New Art History’s apparent disregard of this awareness deeply troubled Shearman: ‘Sometimes I feel that pejorative terminology such as Positivism is now used of scholars who were only trying to get it right, and heaven help us if historians stop trying to do that.’

Only Connect, thus, is deliberately (and maybe polemically) anti-theoretical, as Gombrich noticed in a review in the *New York Review of Books* (March 1993, p. 19): ‘it teaches by examples rather than theoretical observations’. Focusing largely on religious art of the sixteenth century, Shearman demonstrates the reciprocal relationship of certain artworks with their viewers. By actively engaging spectators and making them a structural part of their functioning, these works of art come to life. Shearman calls such works transitive because like transitive verbs they require a direct object to complete the sense. To cite only one example from the particularly innovative chapter on dome decorations, Correggio

illusionistically directs the *Assumption of the Virgin* in the Cathedral of Parma to the nave in order to engage spectators approaching the cupola from the entrance. While such a spatial correlation is relatively common in dome decorations, Correggio makes it much more specific by omitting Mary's tomb. This implies that she has risen from inside the church and physically shared the space with spectators, who thus become active witnesses and actors in the narrative.

Here, as elsewhere in *Only Connect*, Shearman refers to Reception Theory, which was particularly popular in Germany in the 1980s. A collateral effect of this approach is a rejection of the model, advocated most prominently by the American art historian Michael Fried, that historically art strives for self-sufficiency, including independence from its spatial environment, an ambition culminating in post-war abstract art of the USA. Fried's immediate target was the Minimalism of the 1960s to which interaction with viewers is constitutive. What Fried condemned as Minimalism's deviation from the natural intention and evolution of art, other critics celebrated as liberation from previous constraints. Without ever mentioning Modern and Contemporary art, Shearman simultaneously challenges Fried's schematic evolutionary model and the notion of Minimalism's great structural novelty, simply by uncovering historical continuity. At a time when Old Masters were increasingly considered old-fashioned, even reactionary, and faced strong headwind especially in American academia, *Only Connect* demonstrated that Renaissance studies is perfectly capable of actively participating in contemporary discourse.

Indeed, *Only Connect* also relates intimately to the power of images, which since the early 1990s has become a popular topic in visual culture and the German *Bildwissenschaft*. Accordingly, images are not mere re-presentations but can possess real presence and even act. In the brilliant chapter on portraiture, one of the most stimulating discussions of this fundamental genre, Shearman demonstrates that many painters responded to the challenge of Petrarch, who complained that Simone Martini's representation of Laura cannot bring his deceased lover back. Painters, thus, portrayed the sitter as actively engaging with spectators and even eliciting a response so that he or she gains physical presence and comes to life. In the chapter 'History, and Energy' Shearman offers a pioneering discussion of *enérgeia*, the Greek concept of energising the artefact, which occupied Renaissance aesthetic theory from Leonardo to Ludovico Dolce and, more recently, *Bildwissenschaft* and its concern with the ways in which images develop their rhetorical power.

Only Connect was a great success; it received the Charles Rufus Morey Award for the best book of the year from the College Art Association and soon came out in a paperback edition. Gombrich called it ‘essentially an autobiographical book’; and, indeed, Shearman develops here themes he pursued throughout his entire career. Already in *Mannerism* he briefly implied the transitive conceit underlying Leonardo’s frontal rendering of the *Angel of the Annunciation* but it is in *Only Connect* that he explicates the dynamics in which viewers complete the scenario by projecting themselves into the position of Mary at the Annunciation. For the book, Shearman also revisited a couple of his articles as in the discussions of Raphael and Correggio’s domes and Pontormo’s decoration of the Capponi chapel in Santa Felicita, Florence. Shearman’s articles often are real treasures. Thanks to his concise language—Shearman never wasted a word—the small format suited him well, as it is appropriate for a scholar who enjoyed researching but confessed to not liking writing. In fact, only rarely did Shearman repeat himself—his time was too precious to rehash an old argument.

While seemingly equally comfortable with sculpture as with painting, he rarely dealt with architecture and, apart from *Mannerism*, only in articles. But one hardly gets the impression that he was less at ease with it, particularly when reading his sensitive and eloquent descriptions of Raphael’s designs and buildings. The artist from Urbino clearly was closest to his heart, as he details in a great variety of articles written throughout his entire career, which address topics ranging from ‘Raphael’s Clouds, and Correggio’s’ (M. S. Hamond and M. L. Strocchi (eds.), *Studi su Raffaello*, Urbino, 1987, pp. 657–68, to the ‘Organization of Raphael’s Workshop’ (*Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies*, 10, 1982, 41–57), and ‘Raphael’s Chronology 1502–1508’ (Y. v. Flenmning and S. Schütze (eds.), *Ars naturam adiuvans. Festschrift für Matthias Winner*, Mainz, 1996, pp. 201–7). Everything seemed in order for a comprehensive monograph, for which Shearman, however, apparently never entertained concrete plans. Instead he wrote *Raphael in Early Modern Sources*, the definite critical edition of all documents in which Raphael is mentioned in the period from 1483 to 1600. In 1983 Shearman officially announced that he was actively working on this edition at a conference in honour of Raphael’s five hundredth birthday at the Bibliotheca Hertziana in Rome, which eventually would also publish the book. But already in the early 1960s he had begun quietly and somewhat haphazardly to transcribe Raphael documents for his own use, quasi as addenda to Vincenzo Golzio’s much admired *Raffaello nei documenti* from 1936 (Vatican City). In fact, in the forty years it ultimately

took Shearman to complete this gigantic project, it would always retain its original title: *Golzio*.

The resulting two-volume monument with more than 1,700 pages that eventually appeared posthumously in 2003 extends Golzio's corpus of sources 'from about three hundred and sixty to well over one thousand', many of them previously unpublished. But Shearman made structural changes to Golzio as well. He always transcribed the document in its entirety and where he felt it necessary translated the Latin (and Greek); he arranged the documents strictly chronologically and not thematically; and he included a section on 'False documents', on the importance of which he writes illuminatingly in the introduction. The book's crux was, according to Shearman, the extensive index, which is why he tried (but failed) to persuade his publishers to put it not at the back but at the beginning. 'Helpfulness' was Shearman's guiding principle.

Whereas Golzio merely provided slightest background information in footnotes, Shearman offers extensive commentary on each source in a separate text following the transcription. In agreement with his credo of 'helpfulness', these comments aim to be concise. But, where necessary, they have the length and complexity of an article, as in the cases of Raphael's famous letters to Leo X and Baldassare Castiglione. The authorship of the former is controversial, not least because it survives only in transcriptions. Revealing considerable linguistic skills, Shearman divides the letter into various sections conceived by different persons, the first by Castiglione, the author of *Il Cortegiano* and Raphael's good friend, and the second by Raphael himself. The authorship of the letter to Castiglione is also controversial. Shearman, who baptised it 'Signor Conte' and had already written about it in 1994 (*Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz* 38, 69–97), attributes the letter to Castiglione. He suggests that the poet wrote it posthumously 'as a literary portrait, a "portrait of the mind"', and as such it belongs to 'the earliest moment of the artist's reception and the formation of the canon'.

In many ways *Raphael in Early Modern Sources* is a book out of time, a project in the spirit of nineteenth-century historicism and, yes, positivism. But that art historians no longer pursue such projects has everything to do with a lack of stamina and skill and nothing with the alleged dullness or obsolescence of such works—Shearman has given Raphael scholars almost an unfair advantage and, in fact, the book is long out of print. As the commentaries on the letters to Leo X and Castiglione demonstrate, Shearman went well beyond a mere technical editing of documents. Interpretation was required at every stage in the process, which becomes

only too evident in the transcription of the letter to Leo X, which survives in various versions, none of which is uncontroversial. In the introduction, Shearman thus goes into attack against the relativism and archive snobbery of contemporary art history. While he happily acknowledges the contingency of documents and historical truth in general ('I don't believe that historians ever get anything wholly right'), this hardly means documents are useless and may be ignored. As a comrade in arms he cites Manfredo Tafuri, a shrewd choice because the Italian Marxist and social historian was also a protagonist of post-modern architectural criticism: 'We are also convinced that documents contain no "truth": however, one has to start with the "relative lies" which they hand down to us in order to construct verifiable histories.'

At the same time, the assertive tone of the introduction cannot hide Shearman's frustration which since the publication of *Only Connect* had only increased. At a memorial organised by the Bibliotheca Hertziana in 2004, the Italian art historian Salvatore Settis cited a letter Shearman wrote him in 2000 (Settis's text was later published in *Römisches Jahrbuch der Bibliotheca Hertziana, 2003–04*, 35, 23–6). Just like the 'Signor Conte', it is a portrait of the mind. After heaping praise on Settis's latest publication on the Laocoon and contrasting it with what he calls 'bio-degradable art history, derivative and sectarian theory', Shearman defines what he and Settis are doing as 'Continuing Art History', holding on to the historical foundation of the discipline because of a strong belief in hermeneutics rather than yelling for change because that sounds more innovative: 'They think they have dismissed something by saying it is "traditional", without knowing what traditional art history is. I would be interested in putting together a collection of works like your *Laocoon* to show that "continuing" methods can achieve far more radical results than this post-this-or-that.'

In part, Shearman's noticeable bitterness towards the end of his career derived from the experience, especially painful for such a proud and competitive man, of suffering the arrogance and belittlement of much less hard-working and accomplished scholars now succeeding in academia. However, even during the greatest craze for new theories and methods, Shearman's merits were hardly forgotten. He was asked to lead the Art History department at Oxford in 1994, which Harvard countered by offering him the position of University Professor, the university's highest professorship. Students continued to flock around him from all over the world, as testified in his Festschrift *Coming About . . . : a Festschrift for John Shearman* (L. R. Jones and L. C. Matthew (eds.), Cambridge, MA), which appeared in 2001 with contributions from no fewer than fifty-three of his students.

Thanks to his regular collaboration with conservators, Shearman was sought after as a consultant in the major restoration campaigns of the 1980s. He was on the international advisory committee for the extremely delicate cleaning of Leonardo's *Last Supper*, which took more than twenty years from 1979 to 1999, in which large parts of previous retouchings, some of them historic themselves, were removed. From 1987 to 1994, with fellow art historian Michael Hirst, he joined the Pontifical Advisory Commission for the Restoration of the Sistine Chapel. Shearman supported the removal of the seventeenth-century glue largely responsible for the dimming of Michelangelo's strong colours, a highly controversial stance which made him lifelong enemies. The argument escalated with art historian James Beck, an outspoken critic of vigorous art restorations, who eventually sued Shearman for a not very diplomatic (or flattering) comment he made to the mayor of Padua in relation to the restoration of Giotto's fresco in the Scrovegni chapel.

The fruits of Shearman's engagement in these restoration campaigns were many. It offered him an opportunity to revisit his dissertation and to discuss the function of Michelangelo's colour, now appearing in a very different light. Most spectacular, however, was Shearman's account of the decision of Julius II to decorate the Sistine ceiling. The restoration revealed old cracks, which were fixed before Michelangelo laid hand on the ceiling. Thus, Julius probably thought that the scaffolds, which had to be set up to repair the fissures, could also be used for a decoration of the ceiling.

In an obituary (*The Burlington Magazine*, 146, 2004, 264–5), his students Caroline Elam and Nicolas Penny have remarked with awe that Shearman covered nearly every genre of art historical writing, the only major exception being the exhibition catalogue. To omit this genre that is at once lucrative and generates wide public attention was a moral decision, for Shearman often said that people like to travel but works of art do not. He even refused to see the great Leonardo drawing exhibition, to the dismay of one of the curators at the Metropolitan Museum, a former student. But there is another genre that Shearman did not cover: the survey. While he agreed to write the volume on fifteenth-century painting for the Penguin History of Art series, he always postponed it, clearly prioritising other projects. He became increasingly sceptical of the usefulness of such overviews and asked students whether they actually consulted them. Yet over the years he had worked on the Penguin book on and off and with the completion of *Raphael in Early Modern Sources*, it became the next item on the agenda. The Harvard archives preserve the fragments

of this project, which would have revealed that Shearman, who published mostly on the sixteenth century, was also an expert on fifteenth-century art.

The last years of Shearman's life were particularly happy. After a painful divorce from Sally Roskill in 1997 he married in 1998 the art historian Kathryn Brush, with whom he seemed rejuvenated. Thanks to his retirement in 2002 he had more time for his passion, sailing. He also considered moving back to England and entertained the eccentric idea of living in the monastic complex of Wells Cathedral, where apparently one can stay for nothing in return for giving twice-weekly guided tours. But visitors would never have the privilege of being shown around the cathedral by John Shearman. Only a year after his retirement he died of a stroke when on vacation with Brush in the Canadian Rocky Mountains. Though he had for years suffered from diabetes, Shearman's death was sudden and unexpected. With *Raphael in Early Modern Sources*, however, he had truly completed his life's work. He had come full circle, and nothing expresses this better than the dedication of the book to his teachers at the Courtauld: Anthony Blunt and Johannes Wilde.

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