

## The Adventures of the Optic Nerve

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THE TITLE OF THIS LECTURE comes from Pierre Bonnard's definition of painting, 'The transcription of the adventures of the optic nerve'.<sup>1</sup> This is intended to signal that the visual medium of art and its encouragement of voyages of perceptual discovery are priorities in what I shall say. My principal argument will be that the visual medium requires, for its adventurous art-historical study, not only concentration of mind but also freedom of imagination. In March 1936, Alfred Barr's exhibition, *Cubism and Abstract Art*, opened at The Museum of Modern Art. It has come to symbolise Barr's position as a rational defender of a rational art. Then, nine months later, his *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*, opened. It included a cartoon by James Thurber (Figure 1) that parodied a famous print by Goya to tell of the comical failure of our defences against the forces of the irrational: 'Look out, here they come again!'<sup>2</sup> I did consider this for the title of my lecture.

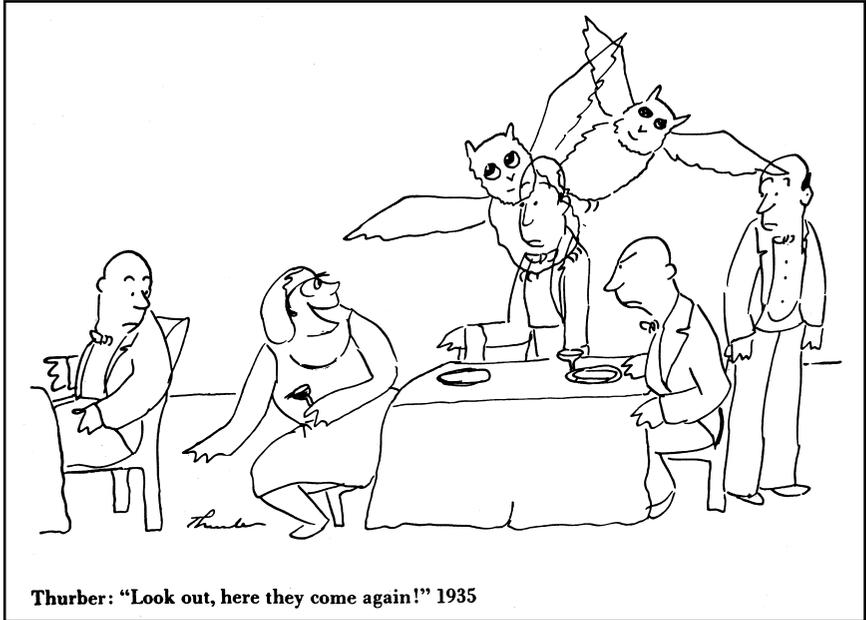
Three years earlier, in 1933, Roger Fry had begun his first lecture as Slade Professor of Fine Arts in the University of Cambridge by acknowledging

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*Note:* I wish to acknowledge the research assistance of Iris Mickein in assembling the documentation for this lecture.

<sup>1</sup> 'La Peinture ou la transcription des aventures du nerf optique'. Diary note for 1 Feb. 1934, quoted in *Bonnard*, exh. cat. (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1984), p. 190, trans. in *Bonnard*, exh. cat. (Washington: The Phillips Collection, 1984), p. 69.

<sup>2</sup> Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *Cubism and Abstract Art*, exh. cat. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1936); Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*, exh. cat. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1936). The print by Goya is *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*, reproduced in Alfonso E. Pérez Sánchez and Julián Gállego (eds.), *Goya: The Complete Etchings and Lithographs* (Munich, New York: Prestel, 1995), p. 58.



**Figure 1.** James Thurber. *Look out, here they come again!* 1935. Ink on paper, 8.5" × 11.3" (21.6 × 28.3 cm). Cartoon was published in the catalogue to the exhibition *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1936).

that the university might still have qualms about art history as an academic study. 'I sympathize with your apprehensions', he said, '— you probably imagine some undergraduate with a journalistic gift gaining first class honours because, without doing any solid work, he has picked up the latest fashionable gossip about Sur-realism and the Russian Ballet.'<sup>3</sup> Now, seventy years later, art history is a long-established academic study —and is largely concerned with topics like Surrealism and the Russian Ballet. Remarkably, the history of modern art is now studied by more people than the history of art of any other period or place. In the United States, for example, of some 200 doctoral dissertations completed on art historical subjects in 2001, almost half were on modern subjects.<sup>4</sup>

It is easy to forget, then, that as recently as the early 1960s, the history of modern art could still be judged—even by those most sympathetic to it—to be too much of the present to be a suitable subject of academic

<sup>3</sup> Roger Fry, 'Art History as an Academic Study', in *Last Lectures* (New York: Macmillan, 1939), pp. 1–21 at p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> See 'U.S. Dissertations, 2001', *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 74, no. 2 (June 2002), 397–408.

study. I myself passed my undergraduate years in a settlement of such sympathy in Yorkshire, where no classes were offered in the history of modern art on the theory that it was something to do for oneself, like reading contemporary novels or going to the movies.

I offer this shard of autobiography—and shall offer a few more—because I can neither speak of modernist art history as if I were not myself in this field, nor as if I were in all of the parts of this field caused by its recent, fissiparous development. Therefore, I have structured what follows in three sections, each with a different temporal and geographical centre of which I have some personal knowledge. In the first section, based in London, I appear only by descent and only because it jumps quickly from John Ruskin and Fry to the foundation of The Courtauld Institute of Art in 1932. This section addresses the relationship of art history to the existential acts of painting and looking at painting. The second section, based in New York, moves to The Museum of Modern Art, founded in 1929, and my employer, being interested in how the so-called story of modern art has been narrated. In the third section, based in Caracas, and on an artist I am now studying, I shall ask us to consider how modern histories can accommodate the unfamiliar that is not normally part of the story.

And now that we see what stretches ahead, I should like to pause and fulfill a very welcome obligation. This is to thank the British Academy for having asked me to speak on the occasion of their centenary, and the art historians of the University of Essex for having nominated me. The foundation of the British Academy belongs to a period of scholarship when dreams still persisted of knowledge of the totality of past cultures. We awaken in a period that requires something more realistic but, therefore, more expected to be fulfilled: imaginative curiosity, especially for what seems to be different, which is to say, for the strangeness of exceptional works of art as well as for the otherness of the past and other societies. The distinguished art-historians of this university, past and present, have taught us so much about how to venture into uncertainty, clarify it, and then leave it intact for future explorers. The three parts that follow intersect with some of their research interests, and they will hear their own voices in some of what I shall say. Another voice, and greater indebtedness, I shall reserve for mention in proximity to the art-historical innovation to which it deserves to be associated.

## 1. London

In 1870, when Ruskin was appointed the first Slade Professor of Fine Arts in the University of Oxford, he said that his aim was to ‘make our English youth care somewhat for art’, and insisted that talking about its history ‘was in no wise directly connected with the studies which promote art-capacity and art-judgment’.<sup>5</sup> This had a disastrous effect on his audience, says Peter Lasko, and meant that the establishment of academic art history was delayed for sixty years.<sup>6</sup> The gap was filled by the growth to prominence of connoisseurship, which Bernard Berenson famously defined as distinguishing ‘between the authentic works of an Italian painter of the fifteenth and sixteenth century and those commonly ascribed to him’.<sup>7</sup>

But Ruskin was correct. At best, art-historical knowledge *indirectly* advances the talents and skills required by the creation and appreciation of art, which has long proceeded independently of its art-historical study. Conversely, artists were the first advisers to those amateurs of art from whom connoisseurs and then art historians descended. The belief in an initial approach to modern art, unencumbered by art historical learning and strengthened by studio practice, which I experienced in the early 1960s, was a distant echo of Ruskin’s way with English youth. However, it was a somewhat less distant echo of Roger Fry’s response to the attack on his 1911 Post-Impressionist exhibition by cultivated audiences, hitherto his most eager listeners.

In the celebrated words of Fry’s 1920 ‘Retrospect’ to *Vision and Design*: ‘These people felt instinctively that their special culture was one of their social assets. . . . It was felt that one could only appreciate Amico di Sandro when one had acquired a certain considerable mass of erudition and given a great deal of time and attention, but to admire a Matisse required only a certain sensibility. One could feel fairly sure that one’s maid could not rival one in the former case, but might by a mere haphazard gift of Providence surpass one in the second.’

<sup>5</sup> John Ruskin as quoted by Peter Lasko, ‘The Courtauld Institute of Art and Art History in Britain’, *Revue de l’Art*, no. 30 (1975), 87–91, 114–15.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 115.

<sup>7</sup> Ernest Samuels, *Bernard Berenson, the Making of a Connoisseur* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1979), pp. 104–5. Quoted here after Caroline Elam, ‘Roger Fry and Early Italian Painting’, in Christopher Green (ed.), *Art Made Modern. Roger Fry’s Vision of Art* (London: Merrell Holberton, 1999), pp. 87–106 at p. 88.

‘In contrast to its effect on the cultured public,’ Fry continued, the ‘exhibition aroused a keen interest among a few of the younger English artists and their friends. With them I began to discuss the problems of aesthetic[s] that the contemplation of these works forced upon us.’<sup>8</sup> This allows, if does not quite say, that modern art is better understood with the aid not of erudition but of aesthetic contemplation and within not the social circle of established culture but the practical circle of art. Fry, as we have heard, would in 1933 speak in support of the academic study of art history. But his notion of it, as evidenced in his Slade lectures, is more concerned with promoting art-judgement than with massing up erudition from any source.

In his 1933 lecture, Fry mentioned the establishment, the year before, of The Courtauld Institute of Art, the first academic institution in England to be concerned, as its prospectus stated, ‘with the study of the History of Art in all its aspects from Early Christian times up to the present day’.<sup>9</sup> What Fry did not mention (perhaps it hadn’t yet happened) was the arrival in London from Hamburg, in the year of his lecture, of what soon would be called the Warburg Institute. The Courtauld Institute of Art had been founded in emulation of Harvard’s Fogg Art Museum, a bastion of connoisseurship since 1909. The Warburg Institute, in contrast, was dedicated to *Kulturwissenschaft*—now known as cultural studies—and to the iconographic more than stylistic side of *Kunstgeschichte*, the century-old, Germanic tradition of art history.

The histories of the Courtauld and Warburg Institutes are well known, and I shall only mention their mutual influence. The influence of the latter upon the former is nicely summarised in a reminiscence, by the then Warburg scholar Ernst Gombrich, in Miranda Carter’s recent biography of the then Courtauld scholar Anthony Blunt. Gombrich remembers the Warburg’s Director, Fritz Saxl, as being impatient with ‘the insularity of these people’ at the Courtauld, and very keen to ‘wean these young men from a certain amateurishness’.<sup>10</sup> As Carter observes, the ‘serious professionalism [introduced by the Warburg scholars] seemed so different to the British tradition of connoisseurship and amateurism. This was a polarization that would continue for many decades.’<sup>11</sup> The terms of

<sup>8</sup> Roger Fry, ‘Retrospect’, in *Vision and Design* (New York: Brentano’s, 1924), pp. 284–302 at pp. 291–2.

<sup>9</sup> As cited by Lasko, ‘The Courtauld Institute of Art and Art History in Britain’, 114.

<sup>10</sup> Miranda Carter, *Anthony Blunt: His Lives* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), p. 143.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

the polarisation of which she speaks—the difference between professional and amateur, the erudite and the instinctive, and the foreign and the native study of art—suggests that the Warburg transfer to London was, effectively, a colonialist operation that wanted to achieve assimilation.

It was. It did. And in great part it eventually succeeded—although as late as 1952 the BBC broadcast reflections on teaching art history by Nikolaus Pevsner and Ellis Waterhouse under the title, ‘An Un-English Activity?’<sup>12</sup> However, as Tzvetan Todorov has observed, colonists have a tendency to end up being colonised by the peoples they thought they had assimilated.<sup>13</sup> Thus, a puzzled, North American art historian observed recently, of a famous book written in 1980 by a professor of the history of the classical tradition at the Warburg, that it was unsystematic in the manner of British philosophy, scholarship, and museum curatorship.<sup>14</sup> This essential remark may not have been meant as a compliment, but I take it to mean that the colonists’ tradition of scrupulous empirical research may have been different, but was not ultimately opposed to the native tradition of empirical connoisseurship. They combine in an art history that emphasises the investigative act of seeing.

This risks being essential, too. Yet, those art histories that emphasise the visual medium are practiced in Britain in a field whose opposite sides were marked out in the years after 1932. To say this in the year 2002 may seem strangely anachronistic, given the growth in the 1970s of the so-called New Art History, which renewed interest in cultural studies and engaged the discipline with feminism and psychoanalysis, structuralism and semiotics, and socio-political analysis. And yet, as Stephen Bann pointed out in a book on that subject: ‘Only through making the assumption that there is indeed a “craft” of seeing, constituted historically in the dialectic between internal experience and the external forms of representation, can we begin to make sense of the unique Western tradition of visibility.’<sup>15</sup>

It hardly needs saying that art history benefits from adventures outside its own circle, but not—and this does need saying—for some

<sup>12</sup> Nikolaus Pevsner, ‘Reflections on Not Teaching Art History’, *The Listener*, vol. 48, no. 1235 (1952), 715–16; Ellis Waterhouse, ‘Art as a Piece of History’, *ibid.*, no. 1236 (1952), 761–2.

<sup>13</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America* (New York: Harper, 1992), pp. 245–6.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Crow (on Michael Baxandall’s *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980)), *The Intelligence of Art* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), pp. 60–1, as characterised by David Summers in *Art Bulletin*, vol. 74, no. 2 (June 2002), 375–6.

<sup>15</sup> Stephen Bann, ‘How Revolutionary is the New Art History?’, in A. L. Rees and Frances Borzello (eds.), *The New Art History* (London: Camden Press, 1986), pp. 19–31 at p. 27.

reason ‘as pretentious or transient as striking up an alliance with another discipline’;<sup>16</sup> rather, because art history has long demonstrated the advantages of expansion. Still, the circle of art will expand the circle of art history, as no amount of scholarship in or out of the discipline can. And it was thus expanded in 1957, when The Courtauld Institute of Art accepted a Ph.D. dissertation written by a painter as the first English dissertation to transpose the methods of art history to a contemporary subject.<sup>17</sup>

Reaching this watershed moment allows me to fulfill my promised acknowledgement of an indebtedness, which is to the author of this dissertation on Cubism, John Golding, whose student I was privileged to become when he encouraged another painter to work as a Courtauld art historian. Alberti’s statement of intention—*parlo come pittore* (I speak as a painter)—did not need to be spoken since it was seen.<sup>18</sup> Connoisseurship may be said to have derived from taking pleasure in affective things, and *Kunstgeschichte* from enjoyment in putting them into an order. The desire to be an art historian may well come from other sources, too, but practising art history will always benefit from practical interest in the creating mind at work.

By this, I do not mean, with Albrecht Dürer, that only artists can judge art; for all others it is a foreign language. But I do agree that it is a visual language to be learned. This means understanding these four things. First, that theory is the meaningful elucidation of practice and, therefore, will be exemplified, never promulgated. Second, that our collecting of textual sources and images cannot descend into ‘mindless adulation’ of the former, to use Leo Steinberg’s words,<sup>19</sup> or substitution of the latter for spending time in the presence of objects. Third, that paying attention to the visual medium means noticing what Bann calls ‘the capacity (and incapacity) of language to represent the nuances of painterly practice’, and accepting the challenge of ‘recreating (and interpreting) the experience of seeing a work of art’.<sup>20</sup> And fourth, that all this

<sup>16</sup> Peter Brown, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 13.

<sup>17</sup> John Golding, *Cubism: A History and an Analysis 1907–1914*, Ph.D. thesis (The Courtauld Institute of Art, 1957).

<sup>18</sup> Bann, ‘How Revolutionary is the New Art History?’, p. 21, of Lawrence Gowing, another painter-art historian, whose colleague I was privileged to become.

<sup>19</sup> In conversation with the author.

<sup>20</sup> Bann, ‘How Revolutionary is the New Art History?’, p. 21.

presumes what Bridget Riley has stressed for a painter's education, too: enjoyment in the pleasures of sight.<sup>21</sup>

I realise that what I have just said is subsumable to what is now sometimes referred to (usually with distaste) as a 'return to the object', the antipathy owing to the understanding that this means a return either to connoisseurship or, of more clear and present danger, to some version of formalism. But no one can say, in good faith, that this is what the objective study of works of art must mean. To the contrary, the close attention that such study requires is most likely to demonstrate that the creating mind at work does not distinguish between forms and images.<sup>22</sup> And only vague attention is needed to see that formalistic concerns are not intrinsically but instrumentally important. In modern painting, they frequently serve to create instrumental arrays whose function is to coax along the vision of the beholder. Needless to say, modernism did not invent the performative beholder, as anyone with interest in these matters will know from Gombrich's *Art and Illusion* of 1960.<sup>23</sup> Yet, once it became inescapable that 'art does not reproduce the visible but makes visible' (to cite a famous observation by Paul Klee),<sup>24</sup> the beholder's responsibility for the management of his or her share became greater.

Klee is worth listening to, if only because he made it into both *Cubism and Abstract Art* and *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*. He seems to have meant that painting does (or should) not reproduce what we see, but, rather, manufactures what we see. Under this interpretation, a painting is not a machine to capture and display existing visible data, but is a machine to create new visible data. Furthermore, if a painting can be said to make visible, it may be said to do so for a beholder. Thus, although the artist makes the machine that makes visible, it is the beholder who turns it on, and keeps it running, by being a beholder. But Klee means something more than this. When he talks of the visible, he seems to be using it in its two senses of what is commonly seen and whatever *can* be seen. Thus, art does not reproduce the visible (what is commonly seen), but

<sup>21</sup> Bridget Riley, 'The Pleasures of Sight', in *The Eye's Mind: Bridget Riley. Collected Writings 1965-1999* (London: Thames and Hudson in association with the Serpentine Gallery and De Montfort University, 1999), pp. 30-4.

<sup>22</sup> See Richard Wollheim, *On Formalism and its Kinds* (Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 1995).

<sup>23</sup> Ernst Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Presentation*, A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts 5 (London: Phaidon Press, 1962).

<sup>24</sup> Paul Klee, *The Thinking Eye: The Notebooks of Paul Klee*, Jörg Spiller (ed.), trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Wittenborn, 1961), p. 76.

makes visible (what commonly is not seen). This links Klee's statement to the long-standing thematisation of painting as a release from blindness—the re-presentation of a nature that can never be seen as a whole but only be caught in glimpses. In so far as the beholder's accumulated glimpses of the painting, along a route constrained by the painter, shapes its appearance, the capacities of perception may be thought to be as much a part of the medium of painting as the canvas and the paint.

In speaking recently of how the beholder's share is experienced as 'occurring within *us* not within *it*', the painting, Michael Podro properly offered two cautions. First, 'it does not follow that [the effect we see] is experienced as discontinuous with what we know is there—the material surface'. Second, we savour the experience not because it exemplifies an effect, as with a psychologist's perceptual demonstration, but because it engages the imagination.<sup>25</sup>

These are necessary cautions. Without them, the valorisation of the beholder can become the valorisation of a subjectivity unconstrained by the object of art. This should not be a problem for any middlingly responsible study of most modern art. Usually, the visual array may be experienced as the objective manifestation of intention and, therefore, a constraint of subjectivity. And usually, testimony of artistic intent can be deduced from archival study. But two kinds of modern works of art do especially pose problems. First, works of Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism—especially Surrealist objects and their descendants—that have been thought to open channels of communication between the subconscious of artist and beholder. Second, works of Cubism and Abstract art—especially Minimalist works, confusable with objects—that have been thought to invite the destabilisation of the beholder by the work. Objective works of this kind, more than most, are destabilised by the beholder, and the artist's constraint of our subjective acts of destabilisation may be difficult to tell. Unless the permit of imaginative projection is precisely what the intention is.

Whether it is or is not, the art historian's responsibility for visual and archival study is great with respect to such works since they, especially, open the way to relativism and merely democratic judgements of taste. And, to put the matter bluntly, there is not an inalienable right to be wrong about someone else's intentions. Imaginative curiosity is quite another thing.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Podro, *Depiction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 7–8.

## 2. New York

In the United States, the teaching of art history began some fifty years earlier than in Britain—in Princeton in 1883 and shortly thereafter at Harvard.<sup>26</sup> But, in 1917, the College Art Association was still discussing appropriate instruction for future ‘writers on art’ and ‘museum workers’, suggesting that the terms art historian and curator were then unknown.<sup>27</sup> However, when someone who would combine these roles, Alfred Barr, enrolled as an undergraduate at Princeton the following year, he was able to do serious work on medieval art.<sup>28</sup> A decade later, Barr was teaching, at Wellesley, the first ambitious college course in the United States on visual modernism, while working on his Harvard dissertation, *The Machine in Modern Art*.

But art history in the United States, as in England, had to await refugees from Nazi Germany for its full professionalisation, most conspicuously at New York University’s Institute of Fine Arts, founded contemporaneously with the Courtauld and Warburg. Only slightly earlier, in 1929, The Museum of Modern Art was founded, part of the same professionalising tendency, albeit not directly under the influence of Germanic scholarship. Barr had to abandon his Harvard dissertation when he was appointed the Museum’s first director. However, in 1947, Harvard awarded him a doctorate for his MoMA publication, *Picasso: Fifty Years of His Art*, making it the first in the United States to be awarded for the study of a living artist.

In fact, the first such doctorate awarded for a dissertation, by Columbia University in 1949, was on the now forgotten American artist, Chaim Gross, by the now forgotten American art historian, Joseph Lombardo. The maturity of art history in the United States after the First World War had been aided, as Erwin Panofsky remarked, by its cultural and geographical distance from Europe, which took the place of historical distance.<sup>29</sup> However, the period of the Second World War appears to have fostered a retreat to concentration on American art—of which more

<sup>26</sup> See Craig Hugh Smyth and Peter M. Lukehart (eds.), *The Early Years of Art History in the United States: Notes and Essays on Departments, Teaching and Scholars* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1993).

<sup>27</sup> Michael Rinehart, ‘Bernard Berenson’, in *ibid.*, pp. 89–96 at 90.

<sup>28</sup> Sybil Gordon Kantor, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and the Intellectual Origins of The Museum of Modern Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), pp. 18–35.

<sup>29</sup> Panofsky, ‘Three Decades of Art History in the United States: Impressions of a Transplanted European’, in *Meaning in the Visual Arts. Papers in and on Art History by Erwin Panofsky* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1955), pp. 321–46 at p. 329.

later. But by the end of the 1940s, modern European subjects assumed prominence, with three new doctorates on Cubism and one on Matisse. I hardly need mention that Matisse and Picasso appear to have fulfilled this early promise as subjects of art-historical study.

Golding's 1957 Courtauld dissertation on Cubism would complete the sequence of, and overshadow the North American dissertations of Christopher Gray (1951), Winthrop Judkins (1954), and Herschel Chipp (1955).<sup>30</sup> However, the dissertation on Matisse, by Frank Trapp in 1952,<sup>31</sup> was overwhelmed, even as it was being written, by a 1951 Museum of Modern Art publication by Barr called *Matisse, His Art and His Public*. How Trapp must have felt on first seeing it hardly bears imagining. Far more than any previous museum publication, Barr's Matisse book brought the big guns of North American institutional scholarship—with its special access to artists, archives, galleries, collectors, and teams of researchers—to bear on a modern subject, to a deeply unsettling effect that continues to reverberate, even a half-century later. 'Former Prime Ministers,' Gladstone said, with Peel in mind, 'are like great rafts floating untethered in a harbour.' Some would say, with Barr and his great book in mind, torpedoes.

I referred earlier to the enjoyment in *Kunstgeschichte* of putting things in an order. Barr enjoyed putting into order modern things of a range that reflected his study of medieval art as well as his visit to the Bauhaus. Indeed, before he came up, in 1933, with his famous image of The Museum of Modern Art as a torpedo moving through time, asserting its progressiveness, he toyed with the image of a cathedral, with apses and chapels for different mediums, asserting its expansiveness. But Barr, of course, did not invent the idea of a progressive, expansive modern museum. The practice of creating a narrative by hanging by movements or styles, with which he is most associated, was but the logical development of the policies of hanging by national schools, then hanging works in a single line, the better to tell the story, that had become fairly common by the end of the nineteenth century, influencing, and being influenced by, the development of *Kunstgeschichte*. Even more distantly, the very first modern museum, The Louvre, founded in 1793, may have been based on

<sup>30</sup> Christopher Gray, *Cubist Aesthetic Theories*, Ph.D. thesis (Harvard University, 1951); Winthrop O. Judkins, *The Nature and Techniques of Fluctuant Representation in Synthetic Cubism: Picasso, Braque, Gris*, Ph.D. thesis (Harvard University, 1954); Herschel Browning Chipp, *Cubism: 1907–1914*, Ph.D. thesis (Columbia University, 1955).

<sup>31</sup> Frank A. Trapp, *The Paintings of Henri Matisse: Origins and Early Development, 1890–1917*, Ph.D. thesis (Harvard University, 1952).

the older, royal treasure-palace—literally so—but it differed in embodying the twin Napoleonic ideals of progress and expansion. It was consciously developed by Vivant-Denon with the idea of progress in mind, on the model of Vasari's art history except that Napoleonic classicism occupied the space that the High Renaissance did for Vasari. And it exemplified and contained the fruits of nationalist expansion, and we may shudder when we read that Napoleon, in a contemporary's words, was 'devoured by anticipatory lust for the best things in every country',<sup>32</sup> but that sounds to me like a lot of the curators that I know.

A few years ago, a group of us at The Museum of Modern Art installed the first forty years of the collection, 1880–1920, roughly on the basis of genre: figure, landscape, and still-life.<sup>33</sup> Some critics said that we had finally overthrown Barr's chronological, historical installation. Our installation was, indeed, not chronological, but it was historical just like Barr's. That is to say, like Barr, we did not arrange the works in the order that they were made, but offered a new, narrated order based on our historical understanding of the works and the practice that produced them. But our installation was unlike Barr's in being arranged according to genres, not styles and, therefore, in not offering a progressive, genealogical history. But it was not (except in a few provocative interventions) an ahistorical thematic arrangement, like those now favored by the Tate. Rather, it was meant to ask us to ponder historically the consequences of Barr's genealogical approach, which I also wish to ask today. This means that, if Gombrich's *Art and Illusion* was behind my first section, his *Norm and Form* will be behind this one.

'There can be few lovers of art', Gombrich wrote in 1963, 'who have never felt impatient of the academic art historian and his concern with labels and pigeonholes', then went on to describe how he had learned from K. R. Popper that the demand for an 'essential' definition was a remnant of the Aristotelian belief in classification and description, such as zoologists and botanists performed when they believed that their classes were found in nature, not created.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Quatremère de Quincy on Napoleon Bonaparte as cited by Lawrence Gowing, *Paintings in The Louvre* (New York: Stewart, Tabori and Chang, 1987), p. 20.

<sup>33</sup> John Elderfield *et al.*, *ModernStarts: People, Places, Things*, exh. cat. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1999).

<sup>34</sup> Ernst Gombrich, 'Norm and Form: The Stylistic Categories of Art History and their Origins in Renaissance Ideals', in *Norm and Form: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance* (London: Phaidon Press, 1966), pp. 81–98 at pp. 81, 87–8.

Now, of course, for zoologists and botanists—and I trust for art historians—the species is the one (and only) exception to the rule that all taxonomic names are subjective. It may be argued that a group or movement of artists, like a local population, shares a particular place, language, ideology, and so on, and therefore comprises a distinct cultural unit. But Fauves and Cubists, for example, are not separate species. They are better thought of as subspecies, groups that exhibit the genetic separation that tends to arise when populations do not interbreed for a while, but do not stop interbreeding permanently to produce a new species. And, for certain, which artists we count as Fauves or Cubists is highly subjective. Thus, I organised a Fauve exhibition in 1976, which contained the work of ten artists, all of whom had worked in France; a Fauve exhibition in Paris in 1999 contained the work of fifty-one artists from fifteen countries.<sup>35</sup>

To take another example (and to maintain the genetical analogies), it may seem that Dada and Constructivism branched separately from a parent stock, but they are directly connected by unbroken chains of marriage (Schwitters with Lissitzky, for example) and indirectly connected by unbroken chains of potential marriage (Robert Morris and Bruce Nauman are but two of the many children). The historian of science Richard Dawkins has observed: ‘. . . it is not clever to get embroiled in passionate arguments over how many categories of tallness or shortness deserve a name (giant, dwarf, average, etc.). Similarly, it follows from evolution that if all the hominids who ever lived were available to us in a gigantic fossil museum, all attempts to segregate them into non-overlapping species or genera would be futile.’<sup>36</sup> Yet, many curators of the gigantic fossil museum of art history still try very hard to do so.

The first example of this I encountered in my own art-historical pre-history, when I was a student of architecture in 1961, was in the form of the great, branching ‘Tree of architecture’ on the frontispiece of Sir Bannister Fletcher’s *A history of Architecture on the Comparative Method*, first published in 1896 (Figure 2). To turn the page, however, revealed the extraordinary imaginary architectural museum conceived by Professor C. R. Cockerell in 1849 (Figure 3): when the actual works were collected in this ‘Professor’s Dream’, they could not be segregated on the branches of a tree but had to be assembled for comparison in a field.

<sup>35</sup> John Elderfield, *The ‘Wild Beasts’: Fauvism and its Affinities*, exh. cat. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1976); Suzanne Pagé et al., *Le Fauvisme ou ‘Lepreuve du feu’: Eruption de la Modernité en Europe*, exh. cat. (Paris: Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1999).

<sup>36</sup> Richard Dawkins, ‘Extinct Humans’, *New York Times Book Review* (6 Aug. 2000), 18.

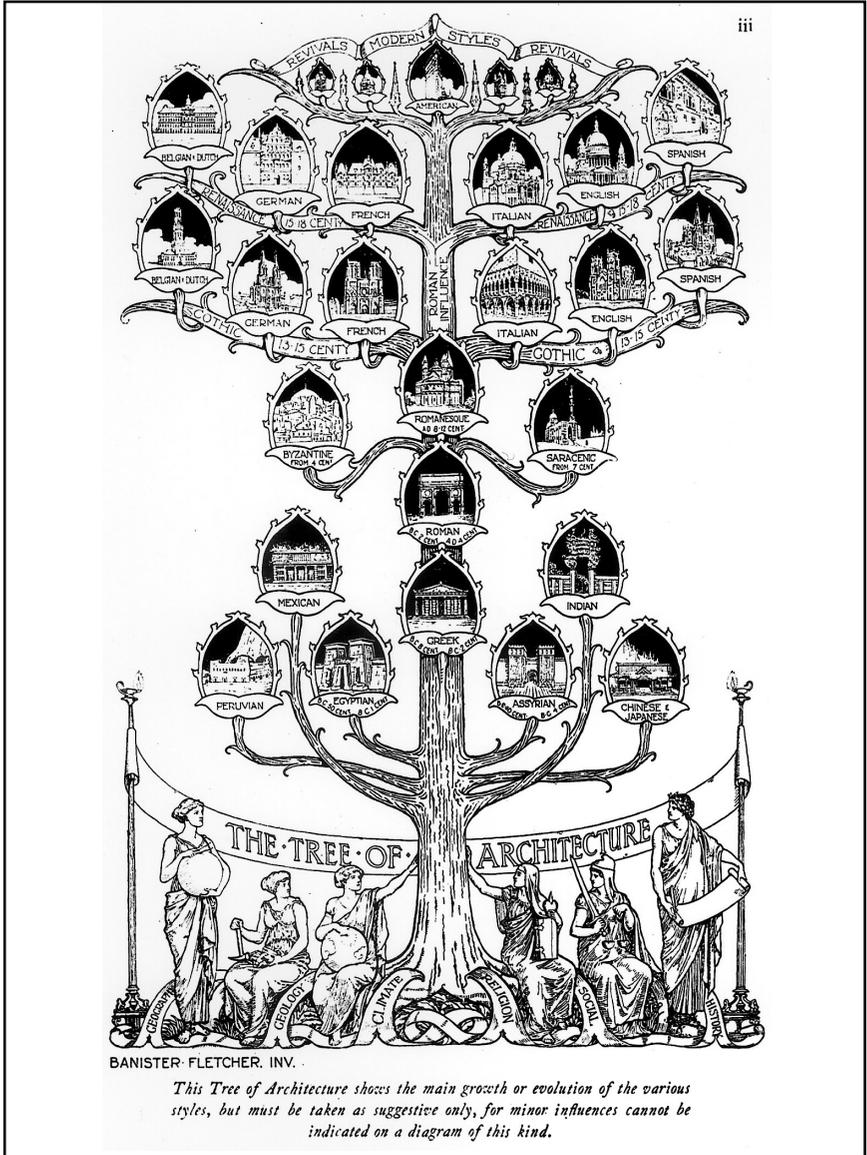
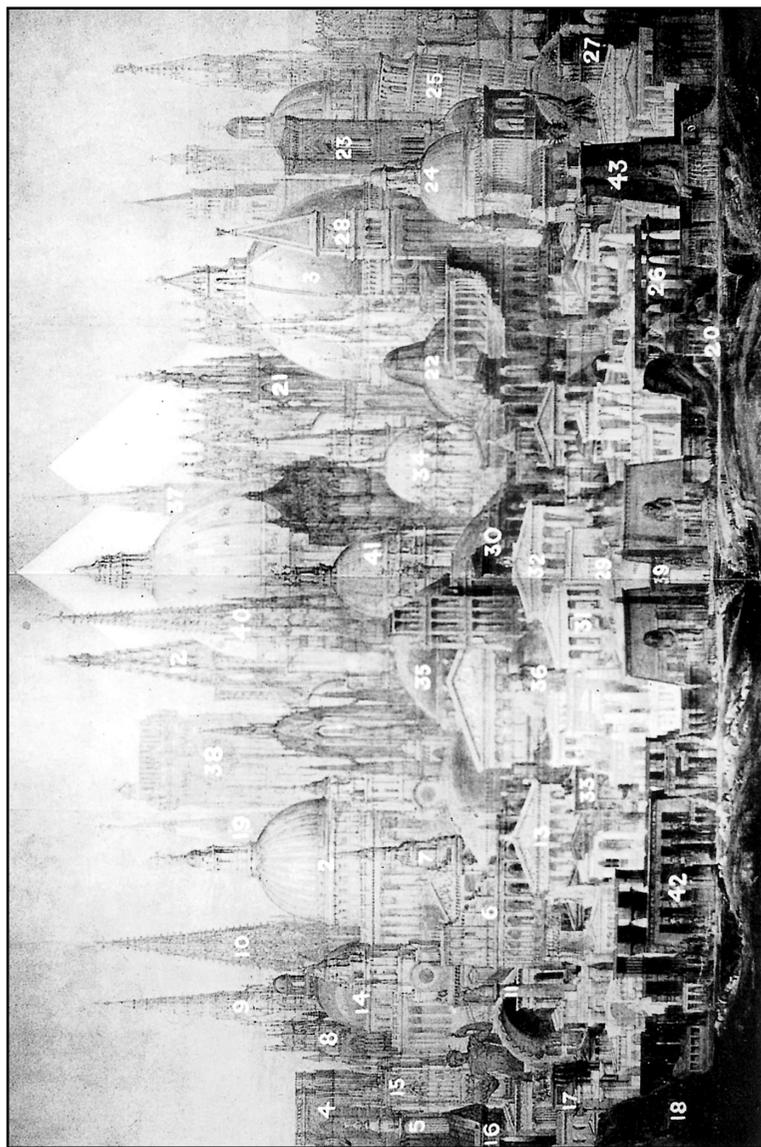
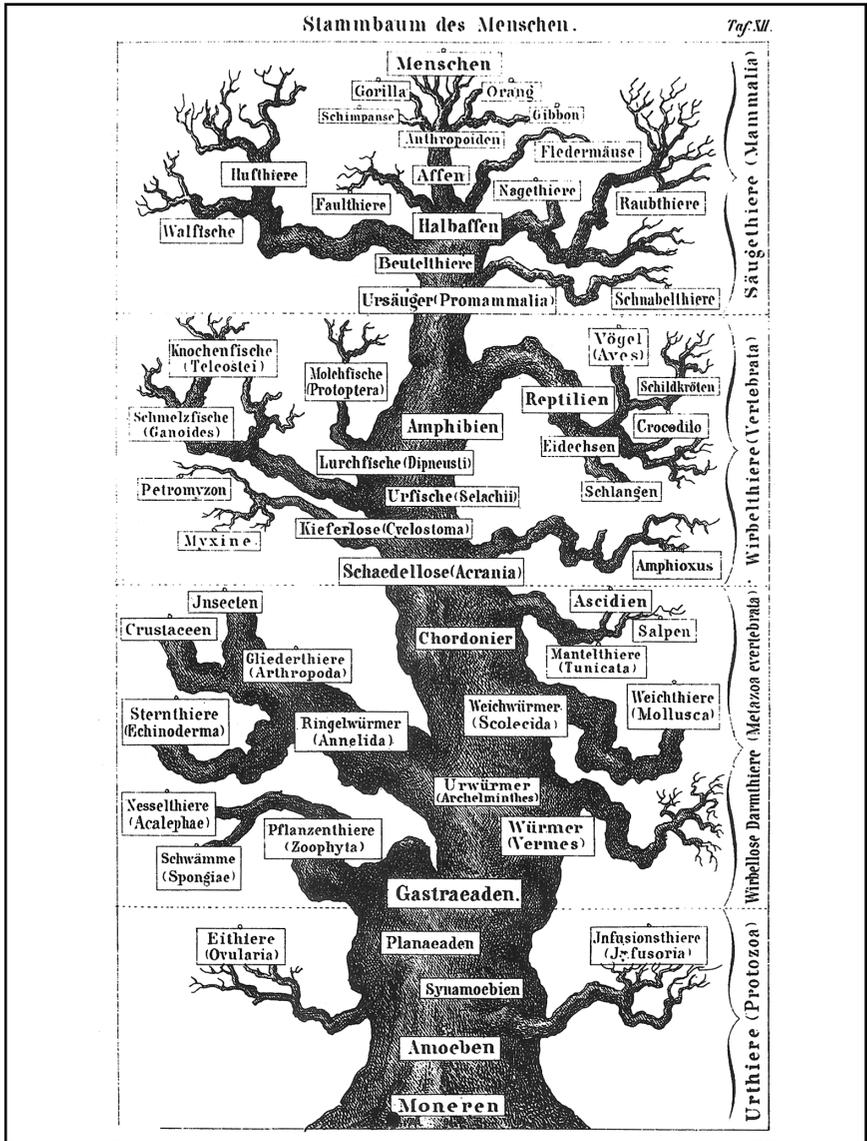


Figure 2. *Tree of Architecture*. Conceived and published by Sir Bannister Fletcher in *A History of Architecture* (London: 1896).

Fletcher’s architectural tree of 1896 bears obvious comparison with such biological trees as Ernst Haeckel’s ‘systematic *Stammbaum* (lineage) of mankind’ of 1874 (Figure 4). And both look back to Charles Darwin’s famous 1859 diagram of natural selection in *The Origin of*



**Figure 3.** Professor C. R. Cockerell. *The Professor's Dream—The Principal Architectural Monuments of Ancient and Modern Times*, 1849.



**Figure 4.** *The Lineage of Mankind.* Conceived and published by Ernst Haeckel in his *Anthropogenie oder Entwicklungsgeschichte des Menschen* (Leipzig: 1874), plate 15.

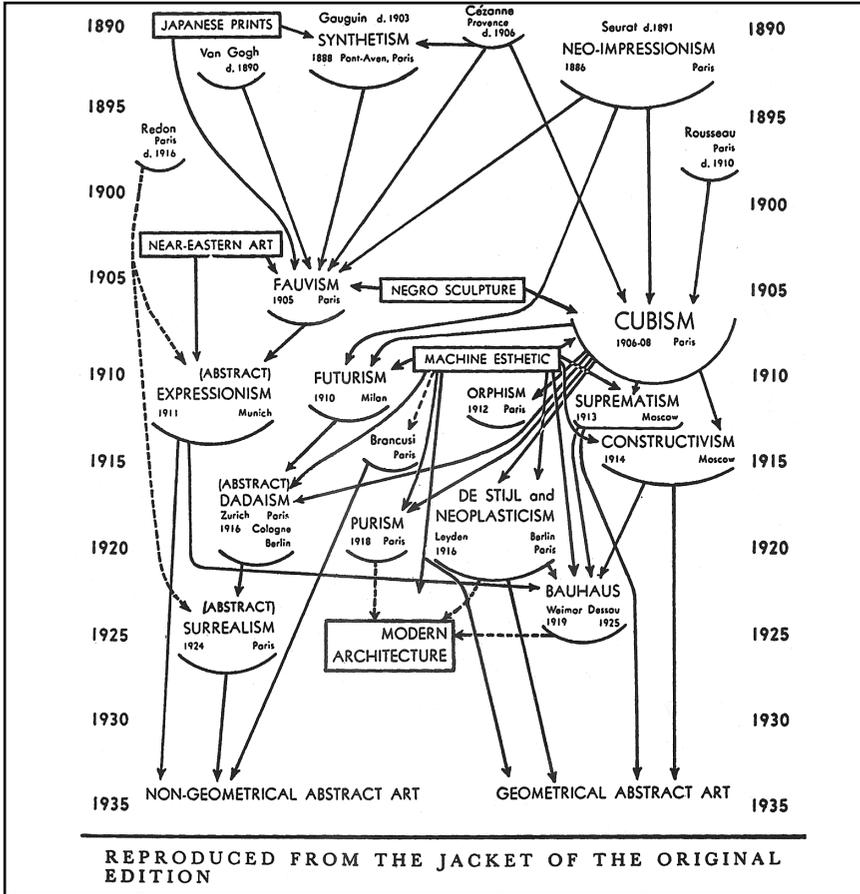
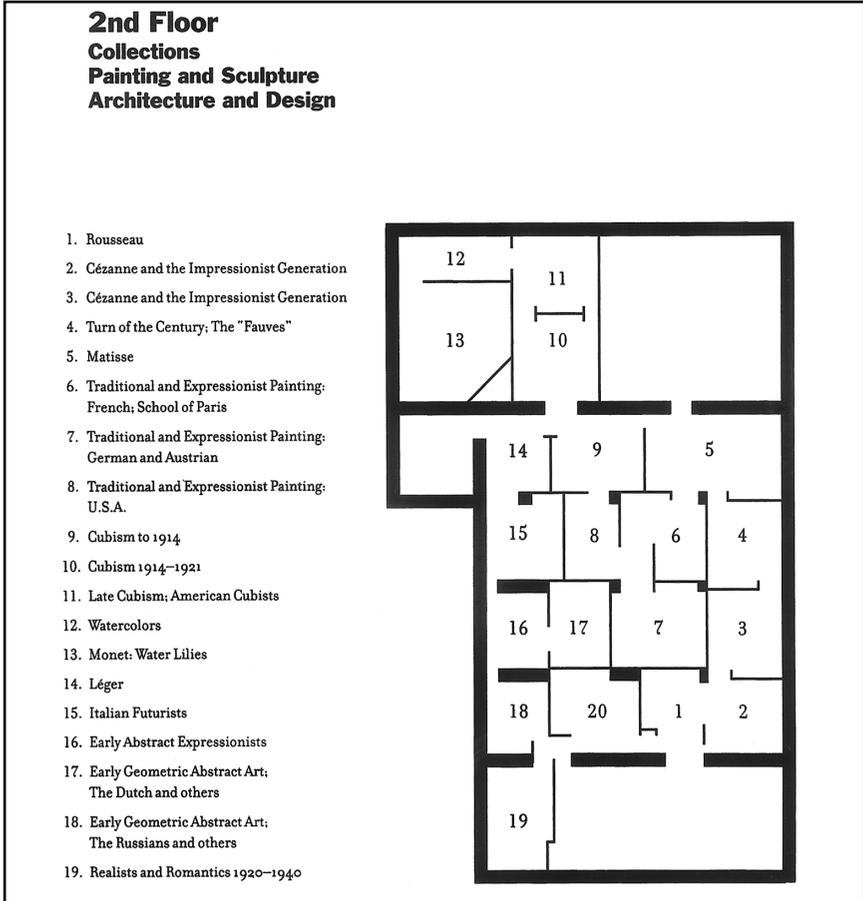


Figure 5. Alfred H. Barr, Jr., prepared this chart for the book jacket for the catalogue of the exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1936).

*Species*.<sup>37</sup> In the modern art-historical literature, the most famous descendant of Darwin’s diagram is, of course, the inverted tree diagram on the cover of Barr’s *Cubism and Abstract Art* of 1936 (Figure 5). But just as Fletcher discovered that he had to abandon the tree for the field when imagining (with the help of Cockerell) what all the buildings might look like together, so Barr had to abandon his genealogical tree when imagining what his works would look like in the Museum’s galleries (Figure 6).

<sup>37</sup> On these, see Whitney Davis, *Replications: Archeology, Art History, Psychoanalysis* (University Park, Pa.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), pp. 305–8.



**Figure 6.** Installation plan for the second floor galleries of The Museum of Modern Art as advanced by Alfred H. Barr, Jr. (1964–7).

It has been pointed out, of Barr's evolutionary chart (out of which, I fear, too much has been pointed), that it not only unfolds a large number of individual narratives but also emphasises the overall narrative dimension of modern art and, therefore, that the modern can be explained by recounting its genealogical pedigree.<sup>38</sup> Thus, it has been interpreted as if it were representing, in Darwin's words for his chart, 'a constant tendency in the improved descendants of any one species to supplant and exterminate in

<sup>38</sup> W. J. Thomas Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

each stage of descent their predecessors and original progenitor'.<sup>39</sup> In so far as it is a genealogical chart, it does belong to the same general current as the so-called neo-Darwinian Modern Synthesis of 1930s and 1940s palaeontology, which combined Darwinianism and Mendelian genetics to offer the view of a single-evolving human lineage. And yet, I have myself come to believe that the hopeless complexity of Barr's diagram actually records the impossibility of constructing a genealogy—records the beginning of the defeat not the triumph of neo-Darwinianism.

It was defeated by the exhibition that followed *Cubism and Abstract Art*, namely *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*, for which Barr did not do an evolutionary chart. Instead, he reproduced, as the first plate of his catalogue, one drawn in 1919, which runs from Ingres to its creator, Francis Picabia (Figure 7). Here they come again, the forces of irrationality.

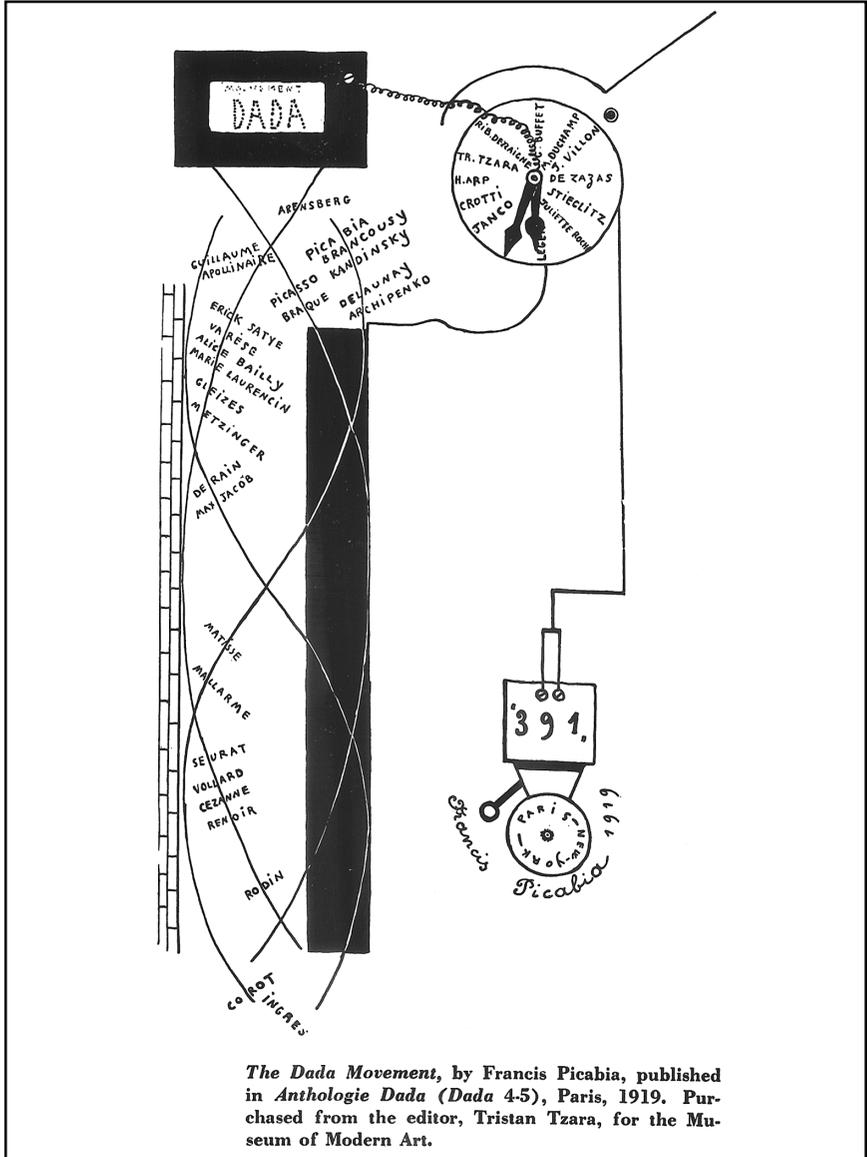
Barr's *Cubism and Abstract Art* diagram begins with the name of Cézanne raised above the 1890 starting date of everyone and everything else. As such, it parallels the chronology of The Museum of Modern Art's collection which, it was being decided in the late 1930s, should begin fifty years prior to date of the Museum's founding in 1929. And it also parallels Roger Fry's characterisations of Cézanne as the 'tribal deity' of modern art in his monograph of the artist, published just two years before that, a characterisation based on Cézanne's 'classic', post-Impressionist style created around 1880.<sup>40</sup> Barr had met Fry in London in that very year, 1927, and unquestionably was influenced by him.<sup>41</sup> The conclusion seems inescapable that 1880 was recognised as an appropriate date for the Modern's collection to begin because it was then that Cézanne founded classic modernism, in Fry's—and Barr's—interpretation.

But, even as Barr was making (with Fry's help) the beginning of classic modernism, modernism had become classic no longer. Throughout the 1930s, Cubist and Surrealist currents were actively interbreeding; Barr's attempts to segregate them would not be sustainable. And he knew that a fixed order could not be made from the shifting patterns of modernism, in which competing tendencies accumulate and vie for critical and art-historical attention—and purchase funds. Hence, the pathos of his notes planning corrections to his chart in 1941: 'Omit the arrow from "Negro

<sup>39</sup> Quoted by Davis, *Replications*, p. 306.

<sup>40</sup> Roger Fry, *Cézanne: A Study of his Development* (London: Hogarth Press, 1927), p. 1; Christopher Green (ed.), *Art Made Modern: Roger Fry's Vision of Art* (London: Merrell Holberton in association with the Courtauld Gallery, Courtauld Institute of Art, 1999), pp. 28–9, 143–5.

<sup>41</sup> Kantor, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and the Intellectual Origins*, p. 217.



**Figure 7.** Alfred H. Barr, Jr., published this diagram by Francis Picabia in the catalogue to the exhibition *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1936).

Sculpture” to “Fauvism”. Add a red arrow from “Machine Esthetic” to “Futurism”. The three dotted arrows leading from “Purism”, “de Stijl”, and “Neo-Plasticism” and “Bauhaus” to “Modern Architecture” should be solid, not dotted.<sup>42</sup> And so it goes on. The editors of Barr’s writings say with a straight face, ‘Barr never considered the chart to be definitive’.<sup>43</sup> It sounds more like the procrastinating Penelope weaving Laertes’ shroud to avoid choosing between her 129 suitors.

I don’t want to exaggerate the extent of Barr’s doubt, for it seems to have been assuaged by the efforts of trying to build an ever more comprehensive collection and fitting it into rectangular galleries. His galleries did often offer a compulsory course in the history of modern art; and we know that history, like the policeman, is always asking the dawdlers to move on. The sparseness of his installations set a pattern that would be criticised for wanting to sacralise the museum space and reinforce how art belongs to ‘the universal and timeless realm of the spirit’.<sup>44</sup> To the contrary, the use of juxtaposition as an art-historical tool of comparison—sometimes highly imaginatively—meant that interpretation was stressed equally with, or more than, experience, to use Nicholas Serota’s terminology,<sup>45</sup> and was justified to the extent that The Museum of Modern Art could, uniquely, offer a comprehensive history of modernism.

It is now easy to view this as controlling, or simply to argue for audience free will. But it is difficult to recover how such installations could be thought to be appropriate complements to the hermeticism of the Museum’s most demanding works, and their esthetic of infinitesimal increments in a carefully calibrated, dynamic equilibrium. I am thinking, for example, of the work of Mondrian, an artist with whom Barr shared a Protestant sense of grace as rectification. And it is to Benjamin Buchloh (hardly an apologist of capitalist cultural institutions) that I owe the question: in so far as Mondrian’s work exemplifies the radical separateness and specificity of modernist painting as a cognitive, epistemic, and perceptual practice, is it accessible to recent art histories that developed to study other forms of visual representation and social production?<sup>46</sup> But why not?

<sup>42</sup> The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York: Alfred H. Barr, Jr., Papers, 3.C.4.

<sup>43</sup> Irving Sandler and Amy Newman (eds.), *Defining Modern Art. Selected Writings of Alfred H. Barr, Jr.* (New York: Abrams, 1986), p. 92.

<sup>44</sup> Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (London, New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 17; Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach, ‘The Museum of Modern Art as Late Capitalist Ritual: An Iconographic Analysis’, *Marxist Perspectives*, vol. 1, no.1 (Winter 1978), 28–51.

<sup>45</sup> Nicholas Serota, *Experience or Interpretation: The Dilemma of Museums of Modern Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996).

<sup>46</sup> See Benjamin Buchloh, ‘Social Silence’, *Artforum*, vol. 34, no. 2 (Oct. 1995), 89–91, 126.

Buchloh tells a wonderful story from Jean-Paul Sartre of the visit of a philosopher and novelist to the 1949 Mondrian exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art, where ‘fifty pictures . . . were set against the white walls of this clinic: no danger here, where everything was proof against microbes and the human passions’. Said the visitor to the curator, Andrew Ritchie: “‘Naturally . . . Mondrian doesn’t pose any questions at all.’ . . . ‘Oh,” said Ritchie, “you mean questions about sex or the meaning of life or poverty? I was forgetting you studied in Germany.”’ Meaning that we cannot usefully say that his art does pose such questions?<sup>47</sup> But why not?

### 3. Caracas

The first article in the first, November 1941, issue of the *College Art Journal* issued by the College Art Association of America was entitled ‘Modern Art Makes History, Too’. Written by Barr, it argued that twentieth-century art should be taught *more* than any other period. ‘It is our century,’ he proclaimed: ‘we have made it and we’ve got to study it, understand it, get some joy out of it, *master* it . . . And what opportunities are being lost. Graduate students can’t correspond with . . . van Eyck, Masolini or Vasari to clear up scholarly problems but they can air-mail Maillol or Siqueiros and write or phone for an appointment with Wright, André Breton (and so on).’<sup>48</sup> One respondent thought that this would produce ‘documentation of a dubious sort’ and another that a documented history is much easier to produce after artists are dead; they will not change their minds or talk back.<sup>49</sup> But all agreed that documentation was the thing to get.

So did the author of the article that followed Barr’s. Written by Elizabeth Wilder and entitled, ‘Call for Pioneers’, it called for pioneers to photograph, make technical studies, and especially find documents to advance the art-historical study of Latin-American art. Otherwise, its study would remain amateur because: ‘In Latin America as elsewhere one cannot exaggerate the importance of building on the bed-rock of documentary evidence.’<sup>50</sup>

<sup>47</sup> See Benjamin Buchloh, ‘Social Silence’, *Artforum*, vol. 34, no. 2 (Oct. 1995), 89–91, 91.

<sup>48</sup> Alfred H. Barr, Jr., ‘Modern Art Makes History, Too’, *College Art Journal*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Nov. 1941), 3–6 at 5.

<sup>49</sup> Laurence Schmeckebier, ‘Modern Art First, Not Last’, *College Art Journal*, vol. 1, no. 3 (March 1942), 60–3; Frank Jewett Mather, JR., ‘Old Art or New’, *ibid.*, no. 2 (Jan. 1942), 31–3.

<sup>50</sup> Elizabeth Wilder, ‘Call for Pioneers’, *ibid.*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Nov. 1941), 6–9 at 8.

In 1931, a decade before these articles appeared, The Museum of Modern Art had devoted its first one-person exhibition to Matisse and its second to Diego Rivera, and began programmes to exhibit and acquire art from Latin as well as North America and Europe. One reason for this is well known: it was expedient, given the Rockefeller family's business, and the United States's political, interests in Latin America. Less often remarked is that, in the 1930s and 1940s, the adjective 'American' could be used in the United States to refer to the whole continent, and that the art of the United States and Latin America could share that adjective because both revealed magic-, social-, and sur-realist tendencies. In 1941, Barr thus symbolically joined the United States and Mexico at the front of his revised torpedo.<sup>51</sup>

At that time, the geometric tendencies of European origin, which existed alongside the various realistic ones in the United States, had not yet extensively begun to infiltrate Latin America. They did so precisely at the time, in the 1950s, when Abstract Expressionism altered North American modernism by claiming to be free from both the geometric and the realist. Latin America, still stuck with both of these preceding tendencies, became a special artistic cause, which created a problem, which persists, and which may be explained as follows.

First: the new situation, described in the titles of exhibitions, was that the international success of *The New American Painting* now overshadowed that of both *Cubism and Abstract Art* and *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*.<sup>52</sup> Second: since David Hume's *The Natural History of Religion* of 1875, a two-tier model, whereby a rational, cultivated, few are subjected to the continuous upward pressure of the instinctive, vulgar, many, has proven to be remarkably long-lasting in the study of history.<sup>53</sup> Third: the contrast of *Cubism and Abstract Art* and *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* may be seen as a contrast of the rational and instinctive, and since 1492, what became Latin America has epitomised the instinctive in contrast to the rational. Fourth: therefore, the art of Latin America could be summarised as an *Art of the Fantastic*, to give the title of a 1987 exhibition.<sup>54</sup> Fifth: imaginative curiosity about practices quite properly understood to

<sup>51</sup> Kirk Varnedoe, 'The Evolving Torpedo: Changing Ideas of the Collection of Painting and Sculpture of The Museum of Modern Art', in John Elderfield (ed.), *The Museum of Modern Art at Mid-Century: Continuity and Change*, Studies in Modern Art 5 (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1995), pp. 12–73.

<sup>52</sup> *The New American Painting*, exh. cat. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1959).

<sup>53</sup> See Brown, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity*, p. 11.

<sup>54</sup> Holliday T. Day, *Art of the Fantastic: Latin America, 1920–1987*, exh. cat. (Indianapolis, Ind.: Indianapolis Museum of Art, 1987).

be special, that is to say different, will struggle against a benevolence that translates different as wondrously strange. Sixth: therefore, the defenders of modern art in Latin America against that benevolence will tend to prefer *Cubism and Abstract Art* to *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*.

The first Venezuelan historian of modern art, Alfredo Boulton thus took on, in the mid-1950s, the challenging case of a notoriously fantastic figure, just deceased, who had lived what seemed a sort of Robinson Crusoe existence on the Caribbean beach of Macuto near Caracas. The case of Armando Reverón will point us to the end of this lecture. But it occupies this prominent position not for its considerable intrinsic interest. Rather, as George Kubler observed in 1942, because the art of Latin America was created under ‘different-to-usual’ circumstances, it allows for ‘different-to-usual’ insight into the nature and function of artistic activity not only in Latin America—and of art-historical activity, too.<sup>55</sup>

In the mid 1920s, Reverón, then an accomplished, minor painter, began bleaching some of his landscape compositions of colour, while increasing their surface tactility, to produce a small group of unmistakably original, almost monochromatic paintings (Figure 8). Thirty years later, Boulton offered that they were the artist’s claim to modernity.<sup>56</sup> Following the example of the chromatic periodisation of Picasso’s early work, he proposed a three-part division of Reverón’s *oeuvre* into blue (early Impressionist-Symbolist works), white (the monochromes), and sepia (later paintings, including chiaroscuro figural works). Following the example of a familiar two-part critical division of Cézanne’s work, he characterised the ‘white’ landscapes as perceptual and abstract and the ‘sepia’ figure paintings as psychological and fantastic—thus also managing to isolate the two poles of Latin American art, and state his preference for the former.

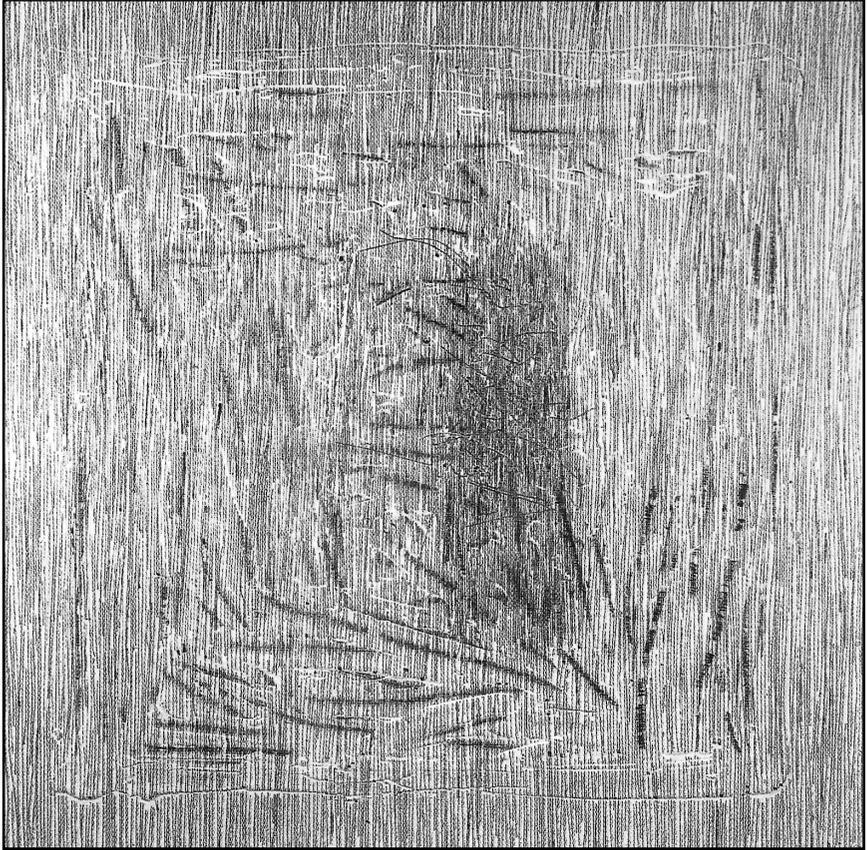
Boulton’s interpretation served not only to valorise Reverón as a modernist but also to establish a paternity for young Venezuelan artists of perceptual abstraction in the 1960s like Jesús Rafael Soto (Figure 9). These artists knew, or knew of, Reverón, and may have drawn inspiration from his work, but they were, in the main, creating original hybrids of Cubist and Surrealist tendencies in that period. A later critic could go further and create an optic-haptic genealogy of style that connected

<sup>55</sup> The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York: *Early Museum History, 18.A.* (George Kubler).

<sup>56</sup> Alfredo Boulton, *A Reverón, Pintor Venezolano* (Caracas: Creole Petroleum Corporation, 1956).



**Figure 8.** Armando Reverón. *El Árbol*, 1931. Oil on canvas, 25.4" × 31.7" (64.5 × 80.5 cm). Collection Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, Caracas.



**Figure 9.** Jesús Rafael Soto. *Vibraciones*. 1960. Oil and wire on canvas, 39.4" × 39.4" (100 × 100 cm). Collection Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, Caracas.

Reverón to, say, a Brazilian abstract painter like Mira Schendel and, implicitly, to a North American Minimalist like Robert Ryman.<sup>57</sup>

I first paid attention to the ‘white’ paintings in an exhibition organised by Luis Perés Oramas at the 1998 São Paulo Bienal. I found them remarkable, in classical modernism, for how they seem to push the perceptual record to the extreme of addressing the subject of blindingly bright light —and to push the painterly record to the extreme of addressing the subject of raw canvas and dry pellets of paint. Imagine a Bonnard landscape

<sup>57</sup> Mari Carmen-Ramírez, ‘Reflexión Heterotópica: las obras’, in *Heterotopías: Medio Siglo Sin-Lugar, 1918–1968*, exh. cat. (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2000), pp. 39–41, 331–45.

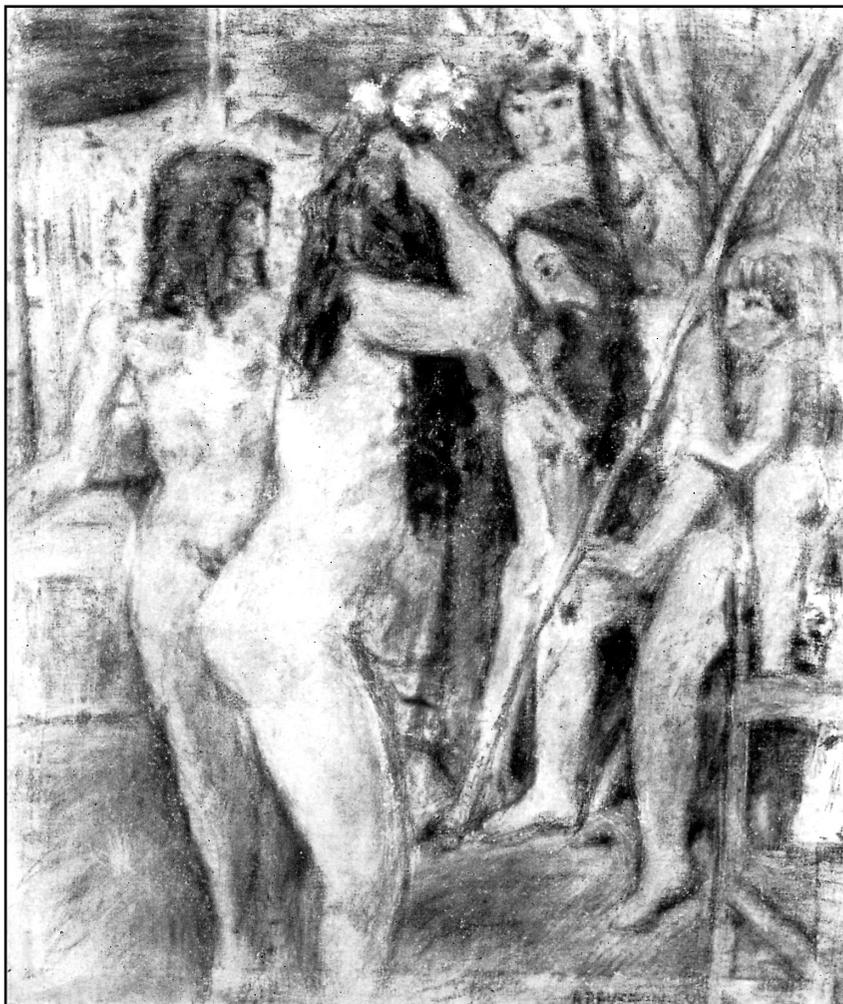
painted by Ryman, is how I still explain what these almost unreproducible works look like. Yet, to recover this important artist, little known outside Latin American studies, on the basis of genealogy, influence, and style is to enmesh him in the very chains of which his production is largely oblivious. It was because he was working outside these categories that he didn't fit in. Likewise he didn't fit in because he also made the 'sepia' figure paintings (Figure 10), thought to be psychological and fantastic, and he especially didn't fit in because he made replicas of objects, including the life-sized *muñecas* or dolls (Figure 11) which provided, from the late 1930s, the models for many such paintings. And he didn't fit in because there wasn't an art world, as we know it, to tell him what did and did not fit. Still, even with that considerable advantage, his reception reveals the difficulty, not despite but because of avant-gardeism, in valuing true non-conformism, and the ease of assimilating artists (or artists assimilating themselves) by compromising what they have to say.

Reverón's object-production made him appear—like Freud's Leonardo da Vinci, making toys for court festivities—'uncanny and incomprehensible to his contemporaries', allowing the interpretation that he 'remained like a child for the whole of his life'.<sup>58</sup> Although the objects have been exhibited as works of art—and their affinities to post-modernist productions encourage that interpretation—Reverón never sold or exhibited them. The oral record tells that Reverón would unnerve visitors by introducing the *muñecas* by name, Graciela, Guajira, Niza, Serafina, and so on. That is to say, a *muñeca* 'not only represented a person, but also was treated like a person', as Hans Belting describes cult images from 'before the era of art'.<sup>59</sup> But, in the absence of documentation, how can we tell if, and how, Reverón's *muñecas* and objects may be said to be akin to devotional effigies. Presumably, by comparison with such effigies, for example, Latin American *santos*, images of Catholic saints (Figure 12). But if they actually do derive from cult images, are we ready to dismiss them from Reverón's production because they are not works of modern art? No. But are we ready to divide his production into perceptual images that are secular and modern and symbolic images that are cultist and non-modern?

No. Because dolls were used as artist's models in modernist (as earlier) studio practice; for example, by Edgar Degas and Oskar Kokoschka.

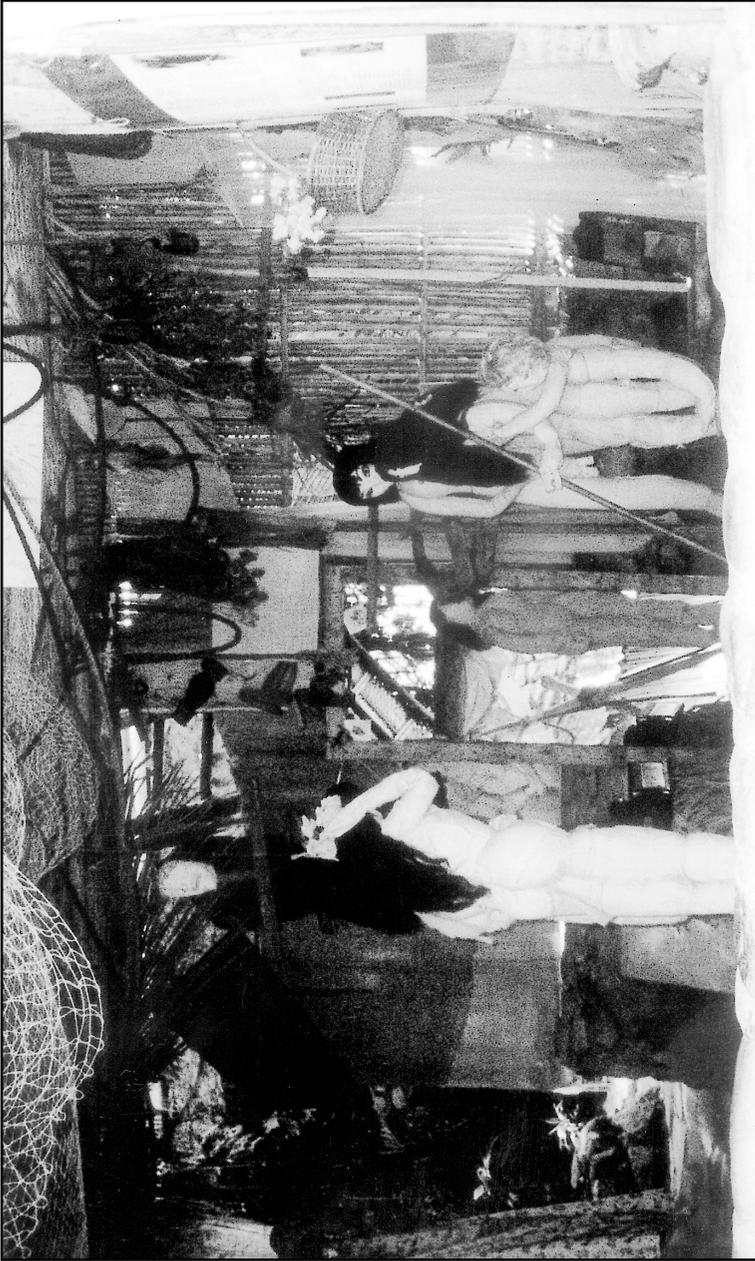
<sup>58</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood* (New York: Norton and Company, 1989), p. 88.

<sup>59</sup> Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. xxi.



**Figure 10.** Armando Reverón. *Anciano, tres mujeres y niño*. 1948. Oil on canvas, 37.6" × 32.1" (95.5 × 81.5 cm). Collection Museo Armando Reverón, Caracas.

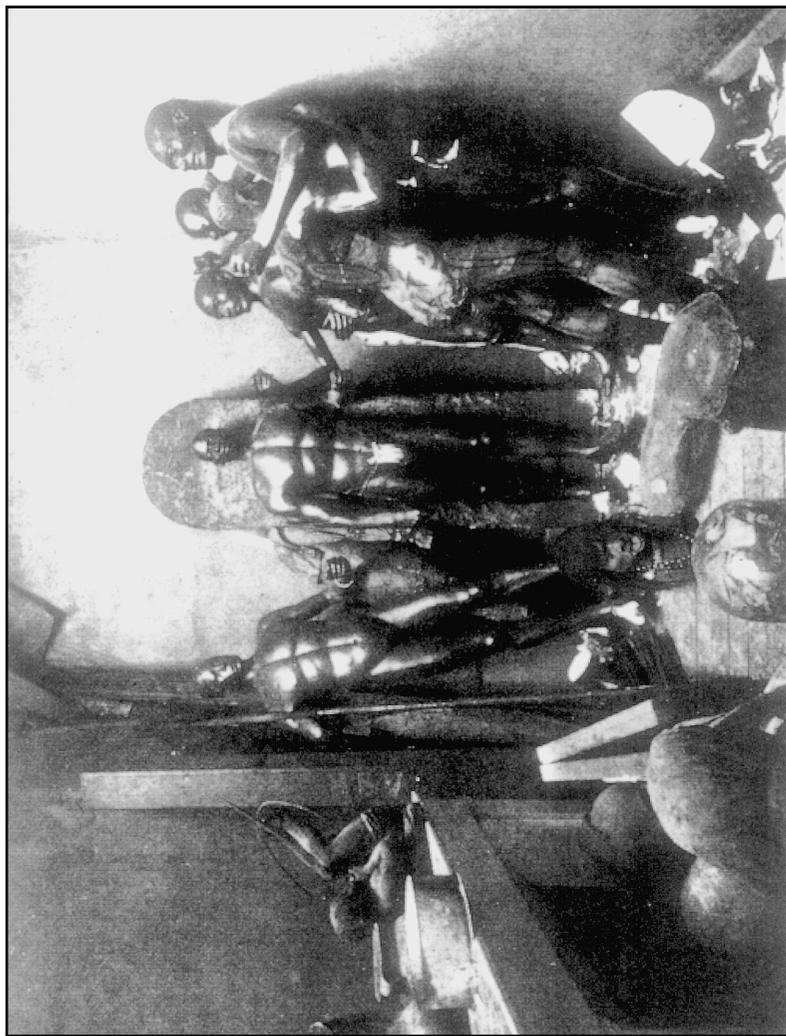
Moreover, in the later 1920s and 1930s, dolls and similar images were created or photographed by Surrealists like Hans Bellmer and Georges Bataille (Figure 13). As yet, nothing has been found to suggest that Reverón was aware of either possible source of inspiration. But perhaps we shall find that a copy reached Caracas of the magazines *Documents* or *Minotaure*—or of Barr's *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* catalogue. But do we then replace a divided modern and non-modern oeuvre with a



**Figure 11.** Studio of Armando Reverón in Macuto, Venezuela (now destroyed), with *muñecas* posed to correspond to the painting *Anciano* (Figure 10). Photograph: John Elderfield, 1999.



**Figure 12.** *Santos*. Nineteenth century (?). Painted wood. Museo de Anzoategui, Barcelona, Venezuela.



**Figure 13.** In 1929, Georges Bataille published this photograph in the surrealist journal *Documents* (5) subtitled *Greniers. Mannequins, débris et pousssières.*

divided modern oeuvre that rehearses the division of modern Latin American art into abstract and fantastic?

Perhaps, instead of trying to fit the atavistic object production into the modernist context of the paintings, we should be trying to see how the apparently modernist paintings might fit into the atavistic context of the objects. Witnesses have spoken of Reverón's activity of painting resembling a performance. Might the paintings and the objects be thought to be equally relics of performances, like sand paintings, or like modern works by such Latin Americans as Lygia Clark or Europeans as Joseph Beuys?

Or would we be prepared to think back to another artist associated with both the abstract and the fantastic, namely Paul Klee, and his making the invisible visible. Klee's statement admits the interpretation that art may make visible not only something commonly not seen but also something that can *never* be seen—more precisely, something that is permanently impossible to see directly, but may only gain a visible existence when manifested in an object or action. So, would we be prepared to view Reverón's most modernist paintings as his most cultist, having the capacity of manifesting invisible intangibles, like images from before the era of art? Klee's statement does not ask us to go this far. However, he does ask us to go as far as to acknowledge that a painting can sponsor interactivity and, if it does, may be used imaginatively to deliver an onrush of recognition of sensations, at once familiar and strange, of experiences forgotten in the visible world. And, if the sensations are thus remembered without the incidents that originally provoked them, they may be understood to have floated free from their moorings in that world to become mobile, affective echoes, voicing bodily feelings, longings, and desires; invisible intangibles, in short.

I began this lecture by quoting Roger Fry. I would be prudent to end it as Fry ended *Vision and Design*, saying: 'Any attempt I might make to explain this would probably land me in the depths of mysticism. On the edge of that gulf I stop.'<sup>60</sup> I shall be imprudent, and say one thing more.

The study of the history of art, especially of modern art, is a secular study, which pretty much takes for granted that landing in the depths of mysticism means landing in very shallow water. There have been some bad falls: into humanistic validation, New Age spiritualism, and (yes) an exotic, or primitivist, understanding of art that is different. However, by invoking, among possible interpretations of Reverón's modernism, a

<sup>60</sup> Fry, *Vision and Design*, p. 302.

cultist one, my aim is not to stress *its* alterity. It often has been remarked that Spain not only discovered, in 1492, an external other for Europe, but, by finally banishing that year its Moorish and Jewish populations, it also expelled its own internal other. Kubler was right. Among the fascination of a study in the art of Latin America is that it directs one to the alterity in modernism itself that our tidy, organising art history often expels because disorderly. And tells us that the disorderly should no more confine, or be confined to, Surrealism than Latin America. (In modern art, we learned earlier, the most ungovernable things happen at both the most abstract and the most surrealist poles.) The terminology of art history may have largely been built, as Gombrich pointed out in *Norm and Form*, on words denoting some principle of exclusion.<sup>61</sup> But art history, as we know it, is the product of a hybridity, to use a term popular in Latin American studies, which began when connoisseurship joined *Kunstgeschichte*. It tells us to be wary of antithesis. So, it is not our professionalism that still makes us wary of the mysteriousness that issues from engagement with objects of imagination, and that is the internal other of the study of art. That is yet another antithesis of which to be wary. So it must be how we define our profession.

We use empirical words, and art history cannot (unlike poetry) describe the ungovernable things that happen in front of transformational objects that occupy our thoughts as we occupy them with ours. But simply to admit this mutual colonisation is to declare a zone of amnesty in which imaginative visual enquiry may become more comfortable with the unfamiliar, and familiar with the uncomfortable. The acknowledgement of otherness, Stanley Cavell once observed, demands willingness for the jolting experience of the uncanny.<sup>62</sup> The study of the history of art might do well to deliver, as well as to accept, such jolting experiences of its own.

I say this not only as a challenge but also a cry for help, which I know that I should have used as the title of this lecture: 'Look out, here they come again!'

<sup>61</sup> Gombrich, *Norm and Form*, p. 89.

<sup>62</sup> Stanley Cavell, 'The Uncanniness of the Ordinary', in *In Quest of the Ordinary. Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 153–78.

