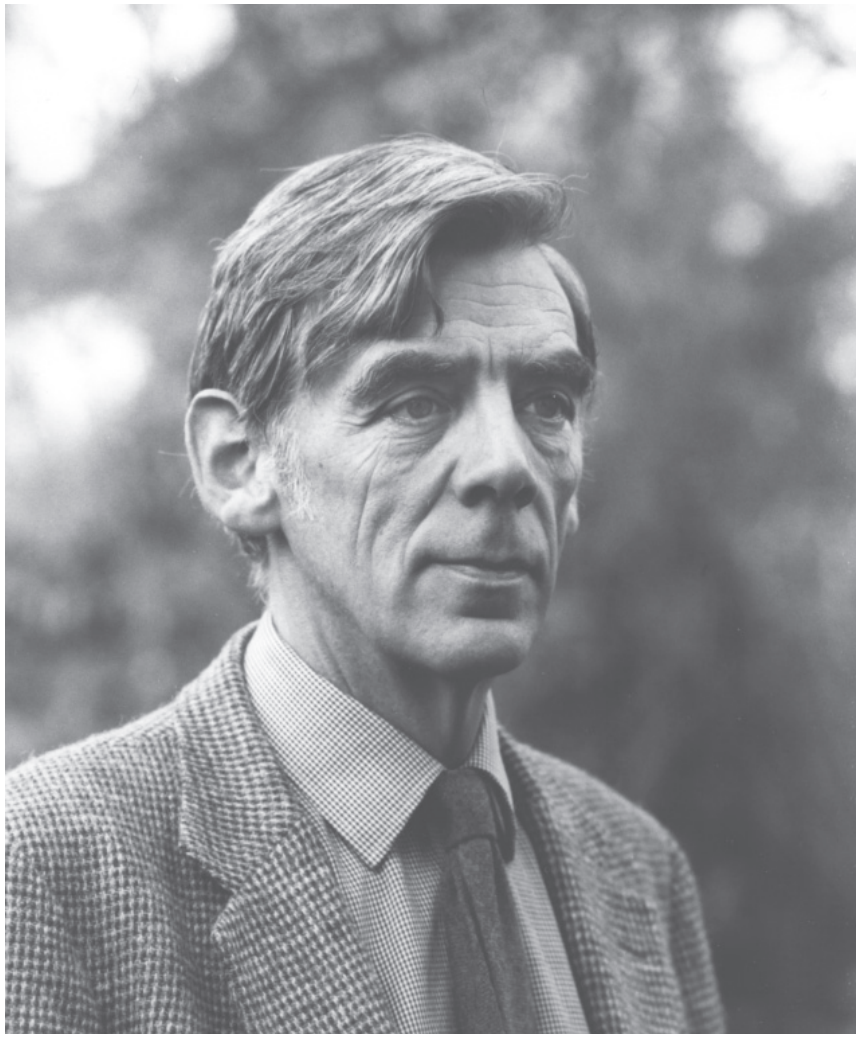

MICHAEL BAXANDALL

Michael David Kighley Baxandall
1933–2008

Michael Baxandall was probably the most important art historian of his generation, not just in Britain but in the world. In a series of books published between 1971 and 2003 he kept expanding the frontiers of the discipline, introducing new topics, new ways of writing, and new explanatory models, always demanding of himself and his readers an undissembling clarity of thought and expression. If art history is now a field that can hold its own with more established areas of the humanities it is largely because he had a talent to transmit to others through the printed page the powerful intellectual resources he had built up through tireless inward reflection. These resources he applied with equal engagement to Italian Renaissance art criticism, German wood sculpture, the understanding of shadows in the eighteenth century, the planning of the Forth Bridge, and the functions of the neural structure of the retina. An intellectual pied piper, who during his working life moved easily from the museum to the university and from Britain to the United States, he showed with charm how a lofty mind could be at home not just with the intellectual and the aesthetic but also with the material, the physical and the mechanical.

His magic as a guide to his contemporaries and to younger generations lay in his understanding of words. There was no one in the field who was so aware, both of their role in the formation of artistic culture and their instrumental value as the tools of the writer of art history. He was deft in his analysis of their role in the past and they were crucial to the daily materialisation of his own thought. With a high-level education in

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Greek and Latin at school and in English at university, immediately followed by deep immersions in Italian and German, by his mid-twenties he had a sophisticated grasp of the extent to which some of the most important European languages might serve as the keys to systems of thought. Embedded in his own mind they gave it the lamination he celebrated in the structure of sand dunes as an image of his personality in his final Memoir, published posthumously.[1] They also gave him a sense of the importance of language in general. It was this sense that guided him as he sought to exploit the constraints and resources that words presented as a medium of thought and expression in his ever more subtle and profound explorations of the worlds of artists and patrons, of critics and historians. The persuasive lucidity of his own verbal artefacts, his writings, was also above all the product of long and intense conversations, some with his relatively few friends, the most important with himself.

Baxandall's relation with words was intense. He empathised with their particular properties just as his maternal ancestors in South Wales had empathised with those of sheep and his paternal ancestors in Yorkshire with those of coal and grain. Their precision they shared with the scientific instruments his father's father cared for and studied as Curator at the Science Museum, their expressiveness they shared with the art that fascinated his father as he rose through the gallery world to become Director of the Scottish National collections. It was Baxandall's ability first to quantify and then to exploit these properties that made his major books, from *Giotto and the Orators* (Oxford, 1971) to *Shadows and Enlightenment* (New Haven, CT, 1995), milestones in the rapid formation of a discipline and kept him always ahead of the crowd.

The crowd was never a place where he was at home. He was born in Cardiff on 18 August 1933, but was always attached to the hills that were his mother's home, and this attachment increased after he was evacuated to a remote Radnorshire farm during the war, in spite of the fact that it was probably there that he contracted the condition that was destined to influence first the tone and eventually the substance of his life. Drinking from a mountain stream he picked up a dangerous encephalic infection. Its effects were slight at first, but they must always have created a distance from other boys, and they resulted in his being excluded from that great leveller, national service. They manifested themselves as Parkinsonism and in his last two decades their symptoms caused him to shun all public

[1] M. Baxandall, *Episodes. A Memorybook*, with an introduction by Carlo Ginzburg (London, 2010).

life except lecturing. Still, the presence of this shadow over his life may well have encouraged the interest first in perception and then in neuroscience which infused some of his most creative work.

After primary school in Cardiff Baxandall was sent to a prep school in Chepstow, where the grounds and surrounding countryside offered him freedom of movement and imagination and where a novelist teacher first inspired him to dream of enchanting others with the written word. The circumstances of his secondary education were very different. His father's appointment as Director of Manchester City Art Gallery took him north to Manchester and, although the freedom of the Yorkshire Pennines of his father's ancestors was not far away, the atmosphere at Manchester Grammar School was physically and intellectually inhibiting. Most important for the formation of the future Baxandall's distinctive sensibility to the importance of the constraints inherent in verbal expression was his Classical education. The ultimate test of his mastery of ancient culture was composition in the Greek and Latin languages. In proses he learned the structural pleasures of the period, and in verses he developed even finer sensibilities to metre and rhythm. As he sat in a northern classroom he learned from the philosophers and poets, historians and orators nourished in a distant Mediterranean world how to think that bit longer about the choice of a word or a figure of speech. It was there too that he realised that what really interested him was the use of his own language, and it was to pursue that interest that he made sure that, once admitted to Emmanuel College, Cambridge, to read Classics, after a term he changed to English.

At Cambridge for the first time he met great minds that were not dead. F. R. Leavis was then in his prime, and his habit of following each reading or interpretation with the simple 'It is so isn't it?' added a vital self-interrogative dimension to the rigorous standards of description and argument which were to characterise the mature Baxandall.

Not that he had a clear sense of his future career when he left university in 1954. His dream of becoming a novelist might take years to realise, and in the meantime he needed to do other things. Before he went up he had been tempted by an apprenticeship to become a printer, an activity that combined an interest in the verbal and the visual, and he now saw his problem as involving a choice between careers in art and literature. He was not pressed, however. In Manchester he had enjoyed watching long games of county cricket and in his own movements and speech there was always a certain lassitude. What mattered most was getting something right. Now he was forced, by his rejection from national service, to mark time, and he spent 1954/5 occupied with a variety of activities, including

writing a review of a book on art by the painter, Patrick Heron, and improving his Italian.

He then got a grant from the British Council to study in Italy. This could have taken him in many directions, were it not for the place, the environment and the teachers. The Collegio Borromeo at Pavia with its building and way of life going back to the sixteenth century was a suitable base for a journey back to the roots of modern Italian and European culture where Latin and the vernacular vied for dominance. Pavia was also a good base for visits to Milan and other Italian cities where he could see art of a higher quality and greater range than the mediocre Venetian quatrocento material that he was learning about in Eduardo Arslan's lectures.

Away from England he was also now discovering the varieties of mental space offered by other cities, other countries and other cultures, and the following year he moved from Italy to Sankt Gallen in Switzerland where the teaching of his native language in a private college funded his study of German, to which he had been unconsciously exposed by his German nanny before the war. Art had been a more continuously important element of his background since childhood and this too now increasingly nudged at his consciousness, especially once he had decided to move on to Munich. There he studied at the University with the controversial Hans Sedlmayr, but found a more congenial tutor in Ludwig Heydenreich, Director of the Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte. With Heydenreich he studied the art produced at the court of Urbino, and it was probably in studying the fortunate conjunctions of that remote city in the fifteenth century that he, for the first time, acquired a sense of the way powerful minds are able to exploit a complex interchange of circumstances to produce great art.

This did not, however, immediately lead to a decisive move to deepen his enquiries in this area. In fact his next step was to return to England and obtain a position with the British Council teaching English in Baghdad, which he saw as a base for the exploration of neighbouring countries, such as Lebanon. He was probably in pursuit of materials for future novels. Who knows what his life might have been if a revolution in Iraq had not prevented his departure for the Middle East? It was only when forced to rethink his plans that he made the move that would be crucial for his future. He had already written to Gertrud Bing, the Director of the Warburg Institute (1955–9), to ask about the Institute's Junior Fellowships, only to discover that he was too late, and it was now, at her invitation, that he was to cross the threshold of its newly constructed

Woburn Square building. At her suggestion he went to work in the Photographic Collection while waiting for the next Junior Fellowship to be advertised. At the same time he also took an external qualification for graduate work in the history of art at the Courtauld Institute. This last was an institution he never became attached to, although there are parallels between his subsequent work and that of two slightly older students there, John White's *The Birth and Rebirth of Pictorial Space* (London, 1957) and John Shearman's *Mannerism* (Harmondsworth, 1967). Fresh from Sankt Gallen and Munich he was much more at home than most Englishmen of his generation would have been in an institution still largely staffed by German and Austrian scholars, and he instantly fell under the spell of Bing, the first of three charismatic women who were to play important roles in his life. The second was Kay Simon, whom he was to marry in 1963, and the third Svetlana Alpers, with whom he spent a large part of the last twenty years of his life.

Through Bing he got to know the work of two of her predecessors. One was her deceased partner, Fritz Saxl, the man who had brought the Warburg Library to England, and whose photographs he now had to insert judiciously into the Photographic Collection. The other was the Library's founder, Aby Warburg, whose collected writings he needed to read closely in order to identify images to illustrate the forthcoming Italian edition. The creative eccentric Warburg did not become a model, but he did make Baxandall aware of the importance of relating the familiar masterpieces of Renaissance art to forgotten areas of contemporary expertise and of relating the high to the low. And, above all, the wealthy banker's son was an exemplary figure, showing how the scholar could emulate the prince in his authority, disregarding the disciplinary constraints that inhibited most researchers, and feeling free to move through all areas of his chosen domain, communicating with lords in their palaces, merchants in the piazza and artisans in the back streets.

An exemplary figure in a deeper, and so more problematic, sense from the same environment was E. H. Gombrich, who became his supervisor after he was appointed to a Junior Fellowship in 1959. Gombrich had by then arrived at the height of his powers, having become Director of the Institute in the same year, and publishing his most influential book, *Art and Illusion. A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Style* (London, 1960), during the period of his supervision, a work which revolutionised the way people understood art with its demonstration of the ways in which pictorial representation is a fundamentally problematic activity. It was there that Gombrich introduced the concept of 'The beholder's share', which

anticipated Baxandall's 'The Period Eye' both in its neatness and in its acknowledgement of the importance of the viewer. Significantly, though, where Gombrich was content to adumbrate the importance of 'The Beholder's Share' by allusion and triangulation, Baxandall was able not only to clearly define his 'Period Eye' but also to explain its basis in neuropsychology. Baxandall was to be Gombrich's most influential pupil.

Gombrich certainly influenced, if he did not determine, the topic of Baxandall's dissertation, 'Restraint and decorum in Renaissance art'. The reason this is certain is that when the author of this memoir arrived at the Institute in 1965, the topic agreed with Gombrich, when he also became my supervisor, was 'Style and decorum in Renaissance architecture'. The general topic resonated with both of us as inhibited, and Classically formed, Englishmen, but there can be no doubt that decorum meant most to Gombrich, who had only narrowly avoided becoming a victim of the horrors of Nazi excess. Somewhere he probably felt that inhibited Classically educated Englishmen might help in finding a key to preventing the return of such barbarism.

In Baxandall's case any such search was interrupted by fate in the form of the interest of John Pope-Hennessy. Baxandall had done some free-lance translation for Pope-Hennessy, who was then Keeper of Sculpture at the Victoria and Albert Museum, and, in 1961, when the Junior Fellowship ran out, he asked Baxandall to apply for an Assistant Keepership, to which he was then appointed. The greatest need in the Department was for someone to work on the Museum's collection of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century German sculpture and this became his main responsibility. Meeting it, as when researching his Ph.D., Baxandall laid down the deep knowledge, and began the fundamental rethinking, that would provide the basis for his later books. In both cases he was privileged to have daily access to exceptional resources: at the Warburg an unrivalled library of primary texts, at the Museum a cabinet of objects of the highest quality. These texts and sculptures had an important role in helping him to raise his own skills in reading and looking to a new level.

It was, however, to be his appointment to a Junior Lectureship in Renaissance Studies at the Warburg in 1965 that encouraged him to develop and formulate the thoughts that all that reading and looking inspired. He was now teaching regularly on an M.Phil. in the Italian Renaissance; so it was in that area that he published first. In the first two years of the next decade he produced two books that would transform the study not just of Italian Renaissance art, but of all of culture. The appear-

ance of *Giotto and the Orators* (Oxford, 1971) and *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy. A Primer in the Social History of Style* (Oxford, 1972) created an enormous impact. It may sound a strange thing to say, but above all they made people think.

Baxandall's demonstration that there were many factors affecting the production of works of art that had never been considered previously raised questions about the status of all earlier claims about the creative process. In the first book he used a close reading of contemporary texts to rethink the process of stylistic change. He did so by an extraordinarily detailed analysis of the writings of those fourteenth- and fifteenth-century individuals whose knowledge of Classical texts led to them being collectively called humanists. From his reading he extracted key terms for literary and artistic styles and related their use to the work of the most important artists from Giotto to Pisanello. The exercise was almost magic. In a little over a hundred pages he persuaded his readers to focus on a few Latin words, which they had previously either ignored or treated as clichés, and turned them into 'Open Sesames' to a previously invisible world. Fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Central and Northern Italy were revealed as an environment in which, for the first time in the history of European art, the discussion of art became the theatre for *tours de force* of critical acuity, and the most innovative artistic change was shown to be largely driven by such discussion. His most brilliant illustration of how this worked was in his concluding study of Alberti's *De Pictura*, and especially of his formulation of the concept of 'composition'. In pointing out how the humanist had created the concept of composition, he demonstrated that the term, which would become an axis central to the theory of European painting, had its origin in Alberti's desire to rethink the painting process by introducing to it an equivalent to Latin sentence-construction. By so doing he made his readers take both the humanist who invented the idea and the artists who implemented it much more seriously. But the person his readers took most seriously was Baxandall himself, who was now empowered to do for modern art history what Alberti had once done for art.

Giotto and the Orators was innovative in content, but in form it was a scholarly text in a traditional mould. It came out under the editorial control of the Warburg in the series of the Institute's Studies published through Oxford University Press. Its chapters had much in common with articles in the *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, in whose pages some of its materials had already appeared. It addressed a learned audience. It contained few illustrations, but a large appendix of texts in

the original Latin. *Painting and Experience*, by contrast, was published directly by Oxford University Press, contained many illustrations and only used texts that had been translated and integrated into the argument. It was readily accessible to an educated lay audience and was soon adopted as a course textbook by the Open University and republished in paperback. Its ideas were also now packaged under catchy phrases such as the 'social history of style' of the title or the 'Period Eye' that heads its longest chapter. As a result, at the time that the study of Renaissance art was generally being upstaged by scholarship in more trendy areas, such as the nineteenth century, *Painting and Experience* rapidly became one of the most widely read books on art history.

The core of the book's argument was that the members of different classes and professions in fifteenth-century Italy could be seen to possess different skills, and that these skills could be invoked when explaining differences in artistic style. If an aristocrat was trained in dance he would be very alert to bodily gestures and so tend to prefer works of art in which they figured prominently. The different trainings of merchants and artisans had comparable effects. It was not just that the more mathematical their education the more they would prefer an art which embodied mathematical properties, but that highly specific skills, such as the ability to gauge barrels, measure and evaluate cloth or estimate the worth of pigments, all had their specific correlates in art production. What made the book's argument so widely attractive was that it was presented as a general theory, as in the first sentences of the chapter on 'The Period Eye':

> The brain must interpret the raw data about light and colour that it receives from the cones [in the retina] and it does this with innate skills and those developed out of experience … each of us has had different experience, and so each of us has slightly different knowledge and skills of interpretation. Everyone in fact processes the data from the eye with different equipment. In practice these differences are quite small, since most experience is common to us all. Yet in some circumstances the otherwise marginal differences between one man and another can take on a curious prominence.[2]

What Baxandall proposed was that, according to the laws governing neural formation, laws that were then still obscure, it was possible to understand why different individuals, even within the same community, had different artistic preferences. The general principle was most forcefully summed up in the Preface, where he was happy to assert that 'the visual

[2] M. Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy. A Primer in the Social History of Style* (Oxford, 1972), p. 29.

skills evolved in the daily life of society become a *determining* (my italics) part of the painter's style . . .'.[3] In a more traditional author, such a profession of determinism might have provoked rejection, and it says much for Baxandall's judiciousness in presenting his arguments that this never happened. There was also a happy resonance between his theories and those then becoming fashionable in sociology, a discipline which sought to reduce the study of human behaviour to a science.

Indeed, the book had its roots in anthropology and sociology and found important echoes there. It was, thus, profoundly influenced by the work of the American anthropologist Melville Herskovits (1895–1963) and was taken up by the French anthropologist and sociologist of culture, Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002). The major book which Herskovits had masterminded and which came out posthumously, just after Baxandall returned to the Warburg, *The Influence of Culture on Visual Perception* (Indianapolis, IN, 1966), provided a carefully documented account of the way the responses to different optical illusions in different African communities could be shown to be related and, almost predictably, based on differences in their environment. Baxandall went much further than Herskovits in two important ways. One was in explaining differences between groups and individuals living in the same environment. The other was in suggesting that the differences had a neurological basis. The first of these points made his argument appealing to Bourdieu, who was then elaborating his explanation of the differences in taste within a community in terms of the differential distribution of social capital. This was why he had the chapter on the 'period eye' translated into French and published in his journal *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales* in 1981.

The success of these two books transformed Baxandall's status within the field. From being a respected expert in recondite aspects of humanist rhetoric he became a star in the firmament of art history. In 1975 he was invited to deliver the Slade Lectures at the University of Oxford, and in 1981 was appointed Professor in the History of the Classical Tradition at London University. He was elected Fellow of the British Academy in 1982. International recognition came in the form of an appointment as A. D. White Professor at Large at Cornell University 1982–8, an invitation to give the 1982 Una's Lectures at the University of California, Berkeley, and the award, in 1988, of a prestigious MacArthur Fellowship.

A position he refused, to the regret of many, was that of natural successor to E. H. Gombrich when he retired as Director of the Warburg

[3] Ibid., Preface.

in 1972. Instead Baxandall preferred to support the nomination of the Institute's Librarian, his friend, J. B. Trapp. Had Gombrich in the mid-1960s followed Baxandall's recommendation and made Michael Podro's temporary appointment as Lecturer permanent, he might have been more ready to take on the mantle. Podro was trained as a philosopher and had many interests in common with Baxandall, especially in the theory of art history. He was also a close friend and the person with whom Baxandall most often shared his ideas. Had he stayed at the Warburg, and Baxandall become Director, however much against his personal inclinations, the Institute might have become even more of an intellectual centre than it was under Gombrich. Some sense of guilt about his abdication of responsibility at the Warburg provoked by the then current threats to the institution's beloved library may lie behind something he said to his wife in his last days in hospital. When she asked him what he was thinking about, his reply was 'The future of the Warburg Institute.'

As it was, the closest he came to using the Warburg as the basis for an intellectual renewal of the discipline was accepting an invitation to join the editorial board of *Art History*, the journal of the recently founded Association of Art Historians, when it was launched in 1978. The present writer, as the first Editor, is only too well aware that Baxandall's readiness to host in his Warburg room the meetings of the editorial board until his departure to Berkeley, combined with his behind the scenes advice and discreet contributions to its discussions, provided invaluable support and guidance in the journal's early years. This role also allowed him to reveal a generosity of spirit, which was often hidden. Before the first meeting of the board in 1977 he took me aside and said he wanted to strengthen my position against external influence by surrendering to me his chair.

The only time he showed annoyance with me was when, in 1979, I published an article by someone with the title 'The language of art history' unaware that Baxandall was publishing an article with an identical title in *New Literary History*. Obviously there was something in the air, but, while the article I published in *Art History* never attracted attention, Baxandall's became perhaps the most famous of his relatively few contributions to journals. Its fame resides in its rejection of the trend which, according to him, had seen many art historians 'beating their breasts about the "theoretical inadequacies" of the activity',[4] a trend in which many saw Baxandall as one of the leaders. He was blunt:

[4] M. Baxandall, 'The language of art history', *New Literary History*, 10 (1979), 453.

> I cannot get along with this sort of thing and have no intention of joining the discussion. For one thing, I have not much confidence in conclusions drawn from serial generalisation at the level at which I and most art historians seem equipped to practice it … Then I do not at all like the tone of the debate, which seems oddly hortatory and peremptory: I dislike being admonished. On the other hand what I do like is there being a manifold plurality of differing art histories, and when some art historians start telling other art historians what to do, and particularly what they are to be interested in, my instinct is to scuttle away and existentially measure a plinth or reattribute a statuette.[5]

And he then embarked on a highly theoretical account of the core of the art historian's activity, which he presented as a form of 'art criticism'. The art historian is not just describing works, but operates 'demonstratively' and even 'ostensively' by using very carefully chosen words to help his readers to see a particular aspect of a work. A principal obstacle to the art historian in this task, in his view, is the available vocabulary. He has to work very hard to find the right term to 'show' his readers what he means. In making this claim Baxandall is above all wanting to get art historians to realise that their activity is unlike all the disciplines from which they like to take their models. As he says in his impatient final sentence, if we are to borrow theories from fields such as anthropology or literary criticism, 'it would be good to get art history's peculiarity just clear enough to know roughly what sort of activity one is projecting the lessons learned from them in or on to'.[6]

Baxandall's view of that activity, which is elegantly sketched in the article, is then elaborated in a major series of publications in the next two decades, each of which broke new ground. The subtitle of *Painting and Experience* was *A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style*. Many asked themselves, if that complex work was a primer, what would a more advanced text be like, and that question was soon answered in two very different books: *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany* (New Haven, CT, 1980), a worked-up version of the Slade Lectures at Oxford, and *Patterns of Intention. On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* (New Haven, CT, 1985). *Limewood Sculptors* is a particularly remarkable work because, although it presents itself as a rather prosaic study of topics such as materials, techniques and markets, it builds up its picture of them, less on the basis of contemporary texts and documents than on Baxandall's personal observations of individual objects, often in highly specified conditions. It is his ability to shape a vocabulary for this task that makes the

[5] Ibid. 454.
[6] Ibid. 465.

book one that combines the best historical reconstruction with quite exceptional 'ostensive' criticism. At the end of the book the reader has not only been taken into workshops to watch carvers turning raw limewood into images capable of ravishing the beholder, but also experienced the ravishment in their final setting in a late medieval church. By following Baxandall's cues the reader's eyes have empathised with a whole set of apparatus, ranging from chisels to a calligrapher's hand, and the wizardry of a chiromancer. This innovative and expansive project is summed up in the typically elegant and compressed formulation of its opening paragraph as one involving the use of 'carvings as lenses bearing on their own circumstances'.[7]

If theory was implicit in *Limewood Sculptors*, it became explicit in *Patterns of Intention. On the Historical Explanation of Pictures*, the worked-up version of the Una's lecture series. In it Baxandall reflected on a number of issues which he felt had been either avoided, like 'intention', or misunderstood, like 'influence'. He took some inspiration from Gombrich, who had often used lectures to deal with topics such as 'Norm and Form' and had meditated on hobby horses, but Baxandall avoided the anecdotal references and constant shifts of attention of his teacher and instead adopted a rigorous, almost a philosophical, tone, as in the description of the book's subject: 'If we offer a statement about the causes of a picture, what is the nature and basis of the statement?'[8] As this phrase suggests, the book is largely about the status of language, but it is also about the nature of experience. Some chapters are more about the former, others about the latter. But they are also related in a surprising way, as when he talks about the strain between them in terms of the 'incompatibility between the gait of scanning a picture and the gait of ordered words and concepts'.[9] The emphasis on 'gait' is highly original, suggesting that our engagement with pictures in both categories is mediated by the body, something confirmed by the observation in relation to a description of Piero della Francesca's *Baptism of Christ*, that 'our disposition to move around in the space offered by the words is an energetic and muscular one'.[10] It also gives substance to his emphasis on the importance of the 'demonstrative' and the 'ostensive' and the difference between them, with the demonstrative involving pointing out and the ostensive depending on

[7] M. Baxandall, *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany* (New Haven, CT, 1980), p. vii.
[8] M. Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*, p. v.
[9] Ibid., p. 3.
[10] Ibid., p. 10.

'both myself and my hearers supplying precision to' an observation 'by reciprocal reference between the word and the object'.[11]

Baxandall notes the importance to him of the multiple puns—'I count three or four'[12] in the title *Patterns of Intention*, and there is a similar multiplicity in the levels of operation of the factors that lie behind his somatic approach. One is a development of the recognition apparent in *Giotto and the Orators* that much of the language of ancient rhetoric employs metaphorical language that has direct reference to reality, sometimes embodied in gesture. Another is an awareness of phenomenology. Yet another is a growing interest in the physiology and psychology of perception, and especially in the process of scanning, particularly saccadic movement. The fourth is the heightened consciousness of the problematic nature of physical movement which came with his own increasing Parkinsonism. No writing on art before or since has been shaped by such a complexity of reference to the body's involvement in both response and expression. This is one of the reasons why the book is so challenging. The other is the self-consciousness with which each word is selected, and each paragraph framed. It is as if Baxandall's sense of the physical references implied in the act of writing about art has led him to choose his verbal movements with the care of a painter calibrating the hue, tone and texture of each brushload of paint before judiciously adding it to the existing array, as he describes the French eighteenth-century painter, Chardin, doing in the book's most brilliant chapter.

Incidental to the scheme of the book is an 'Excursus against Influence', which is revealing of an important central feature of Baxandall's overall agenda. As he says, the notion of one painter influencing another inverts the real active and passive roles. It is the painter who chooses to take something from another and who is thus the active partner in the relationship. This brings out the importance that Baxandall gives to mental activity that is conscious, something which is also implicit in the book's title *Patterns of Intention*, intention referring to 'a general condition of rational human action'.[13] This does not mean that he has a narrow view of such rational action. Taking his key from economic theory he sees the artist as operating in relation to consumers through what he calls 'troc', defined as 'a form of relation in which two classes of people, both within the same

[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid., p. vii.
[13] Ibid., p. 41.

culture, are free to make choices in the course of an exchange',[14] an exchange whose product is not so much pictures as the 'profitable and pleasurable experience of pictures'.[15] Here and again and again throughout the book Baxandall gives an unprecedented prominence to the artist's mental activity, especially its more conscious dimensions. Within his critical enterprise his greatest respect is reserved for conscious intelligence.

It was a shared interest in artistic intelligence that drew him to Svetlana Alpers. They had been family friends, but during the 1980s they became close companions. When Baxandall accepted a half-time appointment at Berkeley in 1986 they became colleagues, in 1992/3 they were Fellows together at the Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin, and in 1994 they jointly published *Tiepolo and the Pictorial Intelligence* (New Haven, CT). Given the strength of their personalities and their convictions, this book might seem as improbable as a single ceiling worked on by both Michelangelo and Raphael, but in fact it draws from each of them some of their finest writing, as they warmly compete in the use of vision and language to explore works such as their subject's greatest fresco, the vault of the grand staircase at the Prince Bishop's palace in Würzburg.

The book on Tiepolo testified to an interest in the eighteenth century that also surfaced in *Shadows and Enlightenment*, which appeared a year later, in 1995 (also published by Yale University Press, New Haven, CT). *Shadows* reflected a growing interest in a topic within the area of his grandfather's professional interest, the history of science, and especially the science of perception. The problematic nature of perception had been a primary concern for Gombrich too, but he had only touched on its basis. Indeed, the similarities and differences between pupil and teacher appeared particularly strikingly at this juncture. Unbeknown to each other both were writing books on the same theme at the same time. While Gombrich's book, *Shadows*, also published in 1995 (London), which accompanied an exhibition at the National Gallery, was a light and fast-moving survey of the use of shadows in European painting, Baxandall's was, in its core, a highly technical study of the optical theories which underlay views of shadows in the eighteenth century presented in parallel with a discussion of the latest neurological knowledge about their perception. He described it as 'a discussion of shadows and their part in visual experience. More particularly, it juxtaposes modern with eighteenth-century notions about

[14] *Patterns of Intention*, p. 48.
[15] Ibid.

shadows with a view to benefiting from a tension between them.'[16] The emphasis on the 'modern' is apparent from the second sentence of the Introduction, which defines light as:

> the flux of mass-energy units emitted by a source of radiation. … These mass-energy units, or photons, are surplus energy, the surplus product of smaller particles combining together to become larger particles, and some of these photons are more energetic than others. *Visible* light consists only of photons in the middle of that energy range, which is plotted in terms of the pulse of electrical disturbance, or wavelength. These moderately energetic photons are visible in that cells on the retina of the eye have evolved to react to them.[17]

Such language was unprecedented in art history.

Baxandall had already, a year before, published a study illustrating how adopting a scientific approach could transform our understanding of familiar masterpieces. This he did appropriately in *Sight and Insight*,[18] a volume offered to Gombrich by his pupils on his eighty-fifth birthday. In his contribution, 'Fixation and distraction: the nail in Braque's *Violin and Pitcher* (1910)', the argument is that the artist using exceptional powers of self-reflection—ones which, indeed, could be said to rival his own—exploited both phenomena to increase the effectiveness of his composition. His starting point is a recognition that 'much psychophysical and neuropsychological experiment' now suggests that perception involves two modes of attention: 'An "endogenous" system would work with central, foveal vision: it is directed by cognitive demands for information about objects. But this can be overridden by an "exogenous" system working with peripheral vision, operating more quickly, more automatically, and free of control by any higher-level search for enlightenment.'[19] This leads him to reflect on the way the two systems interact in our response to the painting, with our attention to central objects, such as the nail and violin, being constantly distracted by the stimulation offered by such almost abstract properties as a higher relative intensity of tone or greater sharpness of edge on the periphery, and this in turn leads him to detail the first stage mechanism involved, the retina's synaptic system. These claims are backed up by substantial knowledge and this Baxandall insists on

[16] Ibid., p. v.
[17] Ibid.
[18] J. Onians (ed.), *Sight and Insight: Essays on Art and Culture in Honour of E. H. Gombrich at 85* (London, 1994).
[19] M. Baxandall, 'Fixation and distraction: the nail in Braque's *Violin and Pitcher* (1910)', in J. Onians (ed.), *Sight and Insight*, p. 402.

sharing with his reader, which is why this article breaks new ground in the humanities, by containing the first illustration of the detailed neural structure of the retina, and the first publication and illustration of Marr's revolutionary modelling of visual processing based on studies in artificial intelligence. This hard science leads into an extraordinarily elegant reconstruction of the processes that went on in both Braque's and our heads, culminating in a passage that in effect outlines a whole new direction for art history. In the final paragraph of the article he draws a broader conclusion from his exploration of the perceptual processes activated by viewing the painting:

> A proper perception of *Violin and Pitcher* might be a state of having experienced many of the innumerable quantity of perceptions within the picture's frame, having pleasurably exercised with them, and having come away with them still incompletely integrated or resolved. The picture is bracing, therefore, and in some moods one is anxious to insist that its narrative theme is the intrinsically moral one of the complexity and excitement of seeking true knowledge. However, the fabric of the performance is visual representation of visual knowledge, and that is a sign not transparent through to some paraphraseable semantic object somehow inside. The fabric is, precisely, scopic.[20]

In this view, perception as both a mental and a physical activity is what the painting is about, almost its substance. This places the neuropsychology of vision centre stage and in the reference to the 'state of having experienced many of the innumerable quantity of perceptions within the picture's frame' there is an echo of the statement that 'each of us has had different experience, and so each of us has slightly different knowledge and skills of interpretation' which preceded the formulation of the concept of the 'period eye'. Baxandall's observation that the way the sequence of scannings and fixations called for by an attentive viewing of a painting leaves us with an accumulated knowledge of the artist's enterprise is crucial. It opens the way to a myriad micro-histories of 'painting and experience'. Like each period, each painting forms its own 'eye'.

That such a neuropsychological analysis is of universal applicability is suggested by a similar analysis of Piero della Francesca's Arezzo *Resurrection* in his last major publication, *Words for Pictures* (New Haven, CT, 2003), a volume which also includes a collection of earlier studies and which leaves the reader agasp at the distance he had travelled, beginning in the

[20] M. Baxandall, 'Fixation and distraction: the nail in Braque's *Violin and Pitcher* (1910)', in J. Onians (ed.), *Sight and Insight*, p. 414.

1960s in the library and ending in the laboratory. The reward of the journey is that it enables him to become the first historian of art to use knowledge of the eye's neural structures and operations to penetrate the minds of the greatest painters, showing how, in the case of exceptionally visually alert artists, highly specific combinations of neurobiological constraints and resources could be seen to shape the turning points not just in individual careers but in the whole history of art.

From the late 1980s the damage done to Baxandall's own neural equipment by his encephalitis as a child became increasingly apparent. This affected his physical behaviour in such a way that when he lectured in the 1990s he seemed almost electrified. It also affected his inner life, and there can be little doubt that this both sharpened his interest in neuroscience and heightened his awareness of the neural basis of his own reactions to works of art.

However handicapped physically, intellectually Baxandall always kept moving. Thus, in the last years of his life he contributed to a volume on the contemporary German artist *Baselitz* (2004) and one on *Kitsch* (2006).[21] He also increasingly looked back. The article on Piero took him back to the Italian Renaissance and the piece on Baselitz to two other early passions, Germany and sculpture. But the most original retrospection is found in his memoir (see above, n. 1). There is little here of the usual tittle-tattle and name-dropping. Instead, as he says at the outset:

> What I am interested in pursuing, introspectively, are some types of transformation that recollected past experience undergoes and the different formats into which deliberate recall rearranges itself—the genres and schemes of recollection, a sort of rhetoric of recollection. My hope is that I may come to some conclusion about what shaping pressures have been at work in producing the memory-like objects and events I have in mind—which I believe to be related to memory, but not to be fragments of actual past experiences incompletely or imperfectly preserved.[22]

As always Baxandall is looking at a problem beyond the ones other people are working on, and, as so often, a piece of writing which seems at first self-indulgent turns out to be a a service to humanity. Like a novel, and unlike a learned article, this triumph of introversion, as deft as it is merciless, eludes summary and description, and needs to be absorbed word by

[21] M. Baxandall, 'Foreword', in *George Baselitz. Recent Sculptures* (New York, Gagosian Gallery, 2004); and his untitled contribution in *Kitsch Unedited: Letters and Texts of Friends*, compiled by Jan Andriesse (Rotterdam, 2006), pp. 11–13.

[22] Baxandall, *Episodes. A Memorybook*, p. 6.

word. And Baxandall did write his novel in the end too, *A Grasp of Kaspar* (London, 2010), published posthumously, which might be read with a cigarette in the hand and a glass of whisky at the elbow, as Michael would once have done.

Baxandall did not have many Ph.D. students, either at the Warburg or at Berkeley, but among those in whose supervision he had a role were some who became leaders in their fields, and whose interests and careers echoed his. Alex Potts's dissertation on Winckelmann became, when rewritten and published as *Flesh and the Ideal* (New Haven, CT, 1994), a landmark in the intellectual history of art, and provided the foundations for his leading role in the revival of sculpture studies. Peter Mack's studies of reading and rhetoric in the fifteenth century continue his teacher's deep penetration of Renaissance culture. Nigel Llewellyn's work on seventeenth-century British tomb sculpture resulted in the production of one of the most originally anthropological studies of early modern funerary practices, *The Art of Death* (London, 1991). This last work accompanied an Exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, as did his later study of the Baroque, and most recently he has become head of research at another national museum, the Tate. Charles Saumarez Smith went on after his dissertation on Castle Howard to become the first head of Research at the Victoria and Albert, before becoming, successively, Director of the National Portrait Gallery, the National Gallery and the Royal Academy, while his Berkeley Ph.D. student, Evelyn Lincoln, has worked with a comparable intensity on the function and meaning of the print medium at the same period.

Baxandall never received a Festschrift, but, in 1998, was the subject of a special issue of *Art History*, which served some of the same functions. Appearing also as a separate publication with the title, *About Michael Baxandall* (Oxford, 1999), the volume contained a gently probing introduction by the journal's editor, Adrian Rifkin, and articles by Michael Ann Holly, Allan Langdale, Malcolm Baker, Alex Potts, Molly Nesbitt, and Paolo Berdini, which all to different degrees address Baxandall's work. Essential for any subsequent assessment of his contribution is the concluding Bibliography. Langdale had earlier written a Ph.D. at the University of California, Santa Barbara (1995) which remains unpublished except for the transcript of an extensive 1994 interview that appeared in the first issue of the *Journal of Art Historiography* (2009, 1–31), while

another important interview from the 1990s is held by the Getty Research Institute.[23]

Even more personal is an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist of the Serpentine Gallery, published in *Res* (May 2008) shortly before its subject's unexpected death. In it Baxandall is genial, almost jocular, as he had increasingly become after his move to Berkeley. His observations are, as always, refreshing and revealing, like his suggestion that the sixteenth-century Italian writer, Vasari, who in a sense invented art history, already did much of his research through interviews. Others hint at the discomfort caused by stones that had long been in his shoe, his distaste for the formalism of Roger Fry, so beloved by his father, his regret, verging on bitterness, that his intellectual father, Gombrich, could not see that 'the period eye' had nothing to do with Hegel's dangerous Zeitgeist, his impatience with social art history as orthodoxy. He ends in typically allusive fashion with what amounts to an invitation to his many devoted readers to join him in his final contemplation of inquietude and of shadows.

In the interview he avoids any grand retrospective assessments of his own work and shows some irritation with Obrist's cautious attempts in that direction. He was famous for not liking any of the, usually laudatory, reviews of his books. He didn't like the chapter I wrote about him in *Neuroarthistory. From Aristotle and Pliny to Baxandall and Zeki* (New Haven, CT, 2007) and would probably grimace at what I will now say.

Michael Baxandall held his readers' attention because he was a master of a limited set of tools which he exploited to their limits. His use of words was one and his use of his eyes another. No art historian has been so zealous in his efforts to relate the one to the other, while constantly acknowledging that their findings could never match. In many ways it was the tension between the constraints of these two fields in which he so loved to exercise that always absorbed him. It was certainly his interest in the particular constraints on the visual system, under which both he and the artists he studied as a critic/historian had laboured, that led him to move far in front of his contemporaries in his research into the system's neural basis and its implications for painters and sculptors. There was only one at first sight surprising limitation to his enquiry. I once asked him why he restricted his study of neurophysiology and neuropsychology to the eye. Why did he not move up the optic nerve to study the brain? His reply was

[23] Interviews with art historians 1991–2002. Research Library, Getty Research Institute, 940109.

that it was all too complicated. He never wasted his time and exceptional energies on activities that he thought pointless, preferring to concentrate, as he did with such tenacity and lucidity, on issues that rewarded analysis and problems that could be solved. Michael Baxandall died on 12 August 2008.

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Note In preparing this memoir I have greatly benefited from the advice of Kay Baxandall and Svetlana Alpers, who should not be held responsible for any errors or omissions.