THOMAS PUTTFARKEN

Thomas Monrad Puttfarken
1943–2006

Well over six foot tall, highly companionable yet at the same time deeply reticent, Thomas Puttfarken was one of the most accomplished and original art historians of the last quarter century. He was born on 19 December 1943 into a Hamburg family that included jurists back to the eighteenth century: two generations ago his great uncle had clashed with the Nazis and lost his judgeship; his brother was a professor of international law and his daughter Nathalie is a qualified lawyer working as a translator and editor of legal documents in Hamburg. This background is hardly irrelevant to the fastidiousness, calm and authority with which, for much of his career, he filled senior university posts, as a dean, pro-vice-chancellor or (on three occasions) head of department. He was seriously concerned with the civic dimension of the university as the necessary complement to its scholarship. This surely reflects his personal history, growing up in post-war Germany. (One of his closest colleagues remarked that he took on these offices not because he enjoyed the exercise of power but because he could not stand its administration being handled badly.) If that sense of legal propriety can be traced in his conduct in office, it also has its parallel in his work as an art historian: the patience and rigour with which he examined arguments, reconstructed contexts, responded to counter-arguments and, throughout, his resistance to any arbitrary move. His enormous contribution to the life and work of the University of Essex, where he spent nearly all of his academic career, included vigorous sponsorship of the arts on and off campus (including the University choir) and support for the preservation of the built and natural environments. He

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was a lover of good food, good wine, good company and a wide range of music—as well as a talented painter and furniture-maker.

Thomas was the younger of two brothers seen as prodigies from their school days at the Gymnasium. They were brought up by their mother, a warm and handsome woman whose conversation was permeated—so it seemed to me—by a gentle irony. Despite the economic hardship, she took her two boys to Italy in the 1950s with a small supply of tinned goods in their luggage. She was particularly close to Thomas and, after the death of her second husband, came to live near him and his second wife Elly, in Wivenhoe. After military service as a medical orderly, he studied art history, philosophy and classical archaeology at successively Innsbruck, Munich and Hamburg. He also spent some months at the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence,where Ulrich Middeldorf was his mentor, and where he worked on the Palazzo di Parte Guelfa.

Thomas came to Britain in 1967, aged 23, from the University of Hamburg on a fellowship created to celebrate the centenary of the birth of Aby Warburg. After the fellowship he accepted a lectureship in the Department of Art at the University of Essex, returning to Hamburg after a year. This was a turbulent time in German universities, where the basic left–right divide was exacerbated by continuing links with the past. Thomas, although very junior, was elected chairman of his department; while he was no left-wing extremist, he clashed with its senior professor, Wolfgang Schöne, his 'Lehrervater'. Schöne was clearly on the authoritarian political right, was thought to be an ex-member of the Nazi party, and it has been suggested that he felt undermined by Thomas's awareness of this political past. The potential conflict was inflamed when, in his role of chairman upholding rules which had been agreed, he had to overrule Schöne. It then was made clear to Thomas that his academic career in Germany would be blocked. He returned to the Department at Essex where he remained for more than thirty years, until his death.

When looking across Thomas's work, there emerges a very precise sense of how, in his view, art history should be conducted. The subject for him was not a mere conjunction of empirical observations to which might be added some issues in philosophy or theory or history. It was a distinctive discipline that generated its own principles and procedures. This did not isolate it from the other areas of humanistic study—his work drew upon intensive classical and historical reading—but it had its own purposes. This was not a matter of imposing an *a priori* scheme of concepts in the manner of Hegel or the great historians of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The tradition of German theoretically minded

art historians had been to lay out systematic distinctions through which individual works and groups of works should be analysed—distinctions that were, in a broad sense, perceptual: for instance contrasting paintings in which the represented subject-matter was delineated in clear shapes that tended to be shown as closely assimilated to the picture surface, in contrast to those in which no such correspondence is felt; or, another opposition particularly pertinent to Puttfarken's work, where the array of represented subjects appears to occupy a self-contained space, cut off from that of the viewer, as opposed to seeming sited within a space continuous with that of the viewer. For instance, he compares Titian's *Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple*, which occupies a whole wall in what is now the Accademia in Venice, with a small predella panel by Jacopo Bellini of the same subject and having a substantially similar configuration. In front of Titian's vast canvas, we orient ourselves to the different figures, as we might to different figures or objects in our surrounding world; in contrast to this, in looking at the small panel we have to take in the scene as a whole. The scale of depiction and its significance for the painting's relation to the viewer was a factor in a series of critical studies that extend from Titian to Poussin and on to David and Géricault.

Part of the interest of Thomas's work lies in his ability to deal with the sophisticated problems of visual analysis, without falling into a narrow formalism. Nor did he try to devise a single, overarching system to coordinate and classify the diversity within the field of painting. Rather, he analysed the interaction of psychological and functional factors, social or religious, as they manifested themselves within the particular painting. The art historian with whom he identified most closely was Jakob Burckhardt. He contrasted Burckhardt's stance with that of the Hegelian search after a unified system and the assumption that, at any one time, there was a single, coherent culture that its art would make manifest. This, for Burckhardt, failed to acknowledge the sheer complexity of historical circumstances and the multiplicity of factors that impinged on the artist, to which he had to respond. He assumed that postulating such unity was self-deceiving speculation, as was characterising the interest of a painting as manifesting a stage or moment in the teleological development of style. Such views imposed a conceptual abstraction incompatible with the kind of understanding that art demanded: intuitive, perceptual and historically circumstantial. Thomas quotes Burckhardt's summary of his position: '*Anschaulichkeit und Zuständlichkeit* are the conditions and the aim of historical exposition.' But he did not cut himself off from the formalist literature; rather, he

sought distinctions of the kind that it proffered without turning them into a system.

At the start of his career, his first publication was on the manuscript representing the early medieval cloister of St Gallen in Switzerland; he proposed a solution to a long-standing problem of the underlying rationale of its plan. In the beautiful Carolingian manuscript, there are discrepancies between the drawn plan and the numerically inscribed measurements. Were the inscribed measurements corrections of the schematic drawing? Was the drawing an aestheticised version of some original? Thomas's paper explored the kind of possibilities within the contemporaneous architectural culture to which the schematic drawing might be open. His problem-seeking and -solving shows a similar pattern to his work on painting. He was encouraged by Schöne to publish the paper before he had completed his doctorate, contrary to German academic protocol. Then, in 1969, he curated and produced the catalogue of an exhibition in the Hamburg Kunsthalle, *Meister Franke und die Kunst um 1400*. At the same time, he had taken as the overt topic of his dissertation questions of pictorial scale, *Massstabsfragen* (Hamburg, 1971).

His exemplary case history in the thesis was that of Titian's *Pesaro Madonna* in the church of the Frari in Venice. This part of his thesis has been frequently republished. The painting had been subjected to extensive analysis by art historians because it seemed so anomalous in relation to the tradition of altarpieces, leaving the Madonna off-centre and diminished in relation to the donor. Was this the new Renaissance individualism curtailing Christian reverence? To put a long and ingenious story very simply, Thomas showed that if the painting was seen from the centre of the church, from the central archway of the rood-screen, it would be to our left—its surface at an angle of 60 degrees to our line of sight. From that position, the arrangement of the figures would reconfigure: the Madonna would appear addressing us as she thrusts the Christ child forward. This effect was enhanced by the massive columns within the depicted scene: from that appropriate viewing angle, they aligned themselves with those of the real columns in the nave of the church. The effect depends not only on the scale of the work and our orientation toward it but also its liturgical function. The factors become intertwined or interdependent.

Throughout his subsequent work there are two dominant and interpenetrating themes. The first is how the unity or coherence of a painting is to be understood—the question of composition; the second, the relations between painting and literature. He does not argue for any general thesis in either case, for the relations are of so many kinds. For all the

philosophical sophistication of his arguments they are never aimed at constructing a theory; rather, they are concerned with clarifying past critical theories, probing the debates of which they were part and the institutional frameworks they served. The trajectory of his work is typically—although not exclusively—from particular texts to particular paintings to which they might apply.

In his study of seventeenth-century theory of art, *Roger de Piles' Theory of Art* (London, 1985), he was concerned with the theoretical position adopted by the newly formed Académie de Peinture under the leadership of Lebrun and Félibien that sought in painting correspondences to notions of poetic and dramatic unity to be found in Aristotle's *Poetics*: the unity of time, place and action. This was not without its problems: the unity of action in drama presupposed sequentiality; painting had to find ways of suggesting what comes before and what comes later. Examples were taken from Poussin, in which one part of the painting showed an episode to which another part could be seen as a response or consequence. But how could a painting fulfil the demand for the unity of action beyond mere sequentiality? Here, the underlying assumption of Félibien and his colleagues was that the unity required of painting was a unity of subject: it was the unity inherent in the (literary) subject-matter. Hence the task of the painter was to represent the action perspicuously and accurately—true to the relevant text and historical circumstances. It was this literary conception of unity that de Piles challenged in his theory of painting: when we looked at a painting we took it in all at once, in the *premier coup d'oeil*; the 'unity of the subject' was displaced from its dominant position, as governing the work of the painter, subordinating all other factors. It was replaced in de Piles's theory by the 'unity of the object' and by the properties that belonged to the painting by virtue of its visual character.

The unity of a painting—its coherence—was now, according to de Piles, achieved by engaging the attention of the viewer so that the whole array presented by the painting was absorbed in a single focus. He had several paradigms of such unity: for instance, the way a bunch of grapes, by virtue of its illumination, could subordinate its components into a single shape (an example associated with Titian), or the way a round and curved mirror could unify what it reflected. The task of the painter was to seize and control the viewer's visual attention. Underpinning this conception of unity was that of centralised perspective construction. The perspective construction itself had been a topic of dispute between those who saw it as a mere means of representation and those who saw it as giving to painting its central intellectual order: a matter of content.

It would appear that de Piles's position corresponds to neither party; indeed, he would seem to bypass both. Puttfarken argues that, for de Piles, there was no conflict between the value placed on the creation of illusion and the creation of order. The unity he sought in painting, as opposed to the unity of the (literary or historical) subject, was a matter of visible *disposition (ordonnance).* The sense of *ordonnance*—a term from rhetoric—had been used previously for the arrangement of the elements of a painting's subject-matter, analogous to the order of words in a sentence; but it now took on a new meaning. *Ordonnance* became understood as the visual *tout ensemble.* The cross-over from a literary to a visual sense of order brings into sharp focus a continuous uncertainty as to whether the painter's disposition of his subject matter within his work was to be conceived of as a question of intellectual achievement or mechanical skill. (Elsewhere, Puttfarken traced the arguments on this in the letters and responses to Poussin. Was the relation of figures and their illumination intellectual work as opposed to mere technical skill: a matter of *pensée* or of craft?) The defence of the painter's claim to intellectual and liberal status, so justifying the pretensions of the Académie, gave urgency to this opposition.

What gives distinctive value to Puttfarken's account of de Piles is the subtlety with which relations to the implied intellectual context are traced, irradiating the whole discourse of which it was part, reaching back through the correspondence of Poussin to sixteenth-century Italian theories. But beyond that historical context, he brings to light issues of pictorial order and representation at other historical moments, down to the early twentieth century; such historical parallels set up, in a non-systematic way, what we might call an intellectual sensitivity to the field of painting.

Later, in his *Discovery of Pictorial Composition* (New Haven, CT, 2000), he traces the history of the conception of pictorial coherence. According to Puttfarken, in the early fifteenth century composition was understood as the relating of parts of the body of a single figure (Cenino Cennini) and subsequently of connecting one figure to another in a narrative (Alberti), although this did not include the surrounding setting or *campagna* (Vasari on Raphael); only later does composition become a matter of overall visual impact, the paintings' capturing and controlling the structure of the viewer's perception. The term 'composition' and its cognates was part of a more or less stable conception in which the relation of limbs to a body and of words to a sentence formed a natural analogy. He introduces the *Discovery* by pointing to the way writers from Kandinsky via Gleizes and Metzinger to Clement Greenberg and the Gestalt psy-

chologist Rudolf Amheim assume that there is some notion of pictorial unity or pictorial structure that applies just as well to Rembrandt as to Cézanne: a conception that, Puttfarken shows, reduces it to a matter of the bounded image tied to the framed surface. (The attempt to overcome even this 'convention' underlies the attempt of American Abstract Expressionists, particularly Jackson Pollock and Barnet Newman, to override our sense of the boundaries of the painting—something even more radical, one might think, than eliminating recognisable subject-matter.)

Probing the sense of pictorial unity, Thomas pointed to the peculiar difficulty that certain paintings have presented to historians. He observed how deeply embedded in our sense of pictorial structure was the priority given to the centre of the pictorial field, to the foreground and to a sense of left–right symmetry. Historically, devotional images are assumed to be approached frontally, face to face and, later, centrality and frontality were enforced by the standard use of perspective construction, with its vanishing point central to the surface and directly opposite the viewer. When these expectations were denied, the literature showed anxiety, as evidenced in the later eighteenth century by critical disputes over David's painting *Brutus and his Dead Sons* of 1789, in which the main protagonist is at one side of the painting and in shadow. Critics and historians went on complaining about this apparent aberration until the mid-twentieth century.

Thomas traced a more radical disruption to our expectations of pictorial unity in his analysis of the two scenes of the life of St Matthew in the Contarelli Chapel in San Luigi de' Francesi in Rome. He distinguishes between the unity that emerges from our overall synoptic attention to each painting and the conflicting meanings that arise from attention to their details. In the *Calling of St Matthew*, the overall sense is of Christ's commanding gesture and the response of the figure we take to be Matthew, seated at the centre of the table and seemingly pointing in apparent surprise at himself. Scrutinising the detail of the figures, he argues that the figure we take to be St Matthew is simply transacting business and that it is the figure on the extreme left, with his head lowered, gathering in the money, that is really the banker Matthew. His argument is that the non-obviousness and indeed the counter-intuitiveness is crucial to the religious demand of the painting. It is something the viewer has to discover for himself or herself and indeed has difficulty in retaining when returning to the normalising synoptic view.

A corresponding observation applies to the scene on the opposite wall, the *Martyrdom of St Matthew*. Who is the murderer? The central nude

figure leaning over the saint and carrying a sword? But why should a soldier—as the murderer is said in the texts to be—be nude? Thomas argues that a scene of baptism had been disrupted, the figure has been or is about to be baptised, and he points to the less conspicuous armed group making its getaway to the left. The appalled disciple has lifted up the sword they have left behind. Again, the overall sense of a centralised pictorial effect misleads us: 'If the divine events do not reveal themselves to us, it becomes our task to work them out.' Caravaggio's art here seems to involve—in Frank Kermode's phrase—the genesis of secrecy.

Unravelling different senses of pictorial coherence was, as we have observed, one central theme of his work, running from *Massstabsfragen* through the de Piles book and on to the *Discovery*. But there was also that second theme deeply intertwined with it: the relation of thought in painting to its literary counterpart, to poetry and drama, and how literary theory from Aristotle onward could be adapted to painting.

The relation to literature is set within a much wider intellectual context in the first part of *Titian and Tragic Painting* (New Haven, CT, 2005). Here the so called modem system of the arts and the relation of painting to humanistic disciplines, as represented both by Ernst Robert Curtius and by Paul Otto Kristeller, is challenged. Thomas points to the representation of the arts and crafts on the Campanile in Florence as conforming to a division between the liberal and mechanical arts, the latter marked by the need for physical labour, the inheritance of Adam, in contrast to the disciplines that were 'free' and liberal like law, grammar and rhetoric: intellectual skills that can serve spiritual life. The cycle of reliefs made in the early fourteenth century by Andrea Pisano had been enlarged in the fifteenth. Luca della Robbia's addition of painting and sculpture was then misread in the sixteenth century by Vasari and no doubt others as bringing these into the group of liberal arts, whereas their placing associates them with manual labour—although involving human ingenuity—rather than the spiritual development that leads the mind to theology.

This commentary on the distinction between the mechanical and liberal arts serves as an introduction to analysing the notion of *poesie* as it became attached to certain paintings by Titian. Rather than allowing this to be a vague and romantic notion, Thomas places Titian's mythologies in relation to literary and theatrical culture in the mid-sixteenth century. He invokes the well-documented new interest in Aristotle's *Poetics* around 1550 and connects it with contemporaneous writings and staged performances of tragedies. This bears on the discussion of Titian in two ways: first is the fact that he was a close friend and dining companion of Aretino,

and Aretino must have had some interest in the recent literary and theatrical discussions of tragedy. We can assume that this is a discourse of which Titian would have been aware, even without himself (or Aretino) reading any of the scholarly texts. Secondly, while Titian is often characterised as the painter of erotic mythologies, of paintings for and about pleasure, he was also a painter of scenes of violence and cruelty, both religious and mythological. One of the most important contributions that Puttfarken makes to our understanding of Titian is the way the paintings of erotic enchantment may at the same time be structured like tragedies, with reversals and discoveries. The *Danae* is perhaps the most erotically eloquent of all mythologies, in which Zeus inseminates the nymph in a shower of gold. According to the myth, it had been prophesied that a child of hers would slay her father Acrisius. He therefore imprisoned her in a tower so that she could not become pregnant, but despite her imprisonment she was impregnated by Zeus and the child of this liaison, Perseus, fulfils the prophesy by killing Acrisius.

It is characteristic of Titian's mythologies that the image invokes a sense of causality in a dramatic sequence involving pity and terror. There had been a strain of such violence in earlier paintings but it becomes dominant in the 1540s. In the case of the religious paintings, there is no reason to attribute this to the demands of Counter-Reformation patrons; they often antedate the Council of Trent by several years and both religious and mythological subjects share in this. Nor have we any reason to think they express some inward pessimism that afflicted his mental life beyond normal human vicissitudes. He had never shunned violent subjects and, whatever we imagine about his mental life, he was, after all, internationally honoured and wonderfully productive.

What Puttfarken points to is the conjunction of re-enforcing factors: Titian's encounter with Michelangelo in Rome in 1545, spurring him on to grander and more impassioned representation of figures; commissions for religious images and such dramatic works as the four *Great Sinners* for Margaret of Hungary (sister of Charles V), images of remarkable scale and violence; and thirdly, the availability of the discussion of tragedy, including the effect of tragedy when staged and not merely read, a discussion of which he could make use of in developing his own pictorial imagination. Crucially, Puttfarken's argument dismantles the facile categorical oppositions of erotically charged paintings, as if they were uncomplicated pin-up images, to be contrasted with learned paintings, or between aesthetic pictures for delectation and learned pictures addressed to cultured intellect. The separation would seem particularly doubtful in the context

of tales from Ovid that were available in translation and oft-repeated, so not the exclusive property of the learned. Ovid's poetry moved in an imaginative realm that joined mythic seriousness and elegant allusiveness in a way that corresponds to Titian's *poesie*. Puttfarken's commentaries alter how we conceive of Titian's art; they bring to focus its psychological complexity and its imaginative scope.

The book on Titian has clear affinities and continuities with Thomas's previous work. Here, too, he engages with the relation between painting and literary criticism; but there is also a difference. He works outward from the paintings themselves, the literary theory providing a resource for his responsiveness, not his starting point; he uses the literary background to give his sense of the picture a conceptual frame rather than, as in the case of the de Piles book, being interested primarily in texts. Taken in the context of his earlier work, there is a certain irony: from the time of writing the *Massstabsfragen*, Titian has been at the heart of his interest, but he later comes upon the artist afresh after working through Poussin and the use of Aristotle in seventeenth-century French criticism. However, he starts *Titian and Tragic Painting* from another historical point of departure: from fourteenth-century Florence and the late mediaeval conception of the arts. If we trace these movements of his focus, we cannot help but see a pursuit of historical repleteness and interconnectedness that is carried forward as far as Delacroix (on whom there is substantial as yet unpublished material) and set in dialogue with the later twentieth century. He did not set out to write a narrative of a central current within European theory of art; but the fact that his work offers us an oblique sense of such a narrative is no mere accident, for there was always his concern to keep hold of a wider picture without allowing it to freeze or become a single theory. His writing emanated from the sense of particular paintings and particular texts understood in the light of each other, often centuries apart. Much remained unpublished at the time of his death—on Delacroix's journals and on Caravaggio, for example—and he was also leading a major Arts and Humanities Research Council project on 'The Moral Nature of the Image in the Renaissance'.

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Beside his teaching and administration at Essex, Thomas Puttfarken gave the Durning-Lawrence Lectures at University College London (1985), was Visiting Professor at the University of Hamburg, sat on the Higher Education Funding Council's 'Follett Committee' on libraries (among

other committees) and was brought in to advise several universities on the development of their art history departments. His workload was vast, but he never gave the sense of being rushed or hurried. If the appearance of calm never deserted him, there were times when he seemed ominously exhausted, markedly so in his last decade. He was invited to head the two most prestigious art historical institutes in Britain and to take on equivalent roles in Germany, which he declined. (Perhaps the thought that Burckhardt had declined grand chairs, remaining in his modest position in Basel, figured in his reflections.) He could hardly have finished his books and papers had he accepted any of them. He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 2003 (in the same year that he was the proud recipient of the Essex Students' Union 'Apple for the Teacher' award).

Thomas married twice, first Herma Zimmer in 1969, with whom he had two children, Nathalie and Malte, and then in 1981 Elspeth Crichton Stuart, who all survive him together with his grandchildren, Felix and Carlotta. He died at his desk of a ruptured aneurysm on 5 October 2006. His ashes were scattered in three of the places he lived and loved: Hamburg, Wrabness in Essex, and Falkland in Scotland where he has a gravestone in the Memorial Chapel.

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Note. Michael Podro died in 2008 before completing this memoir. We are indebted to Thomas's former colleagues Dawn Adès, Neil Cox, Jules Lubbock, and Peter Vergo and to his widow, Elspeth Crichton Stuart, for assistance in producing this final version.