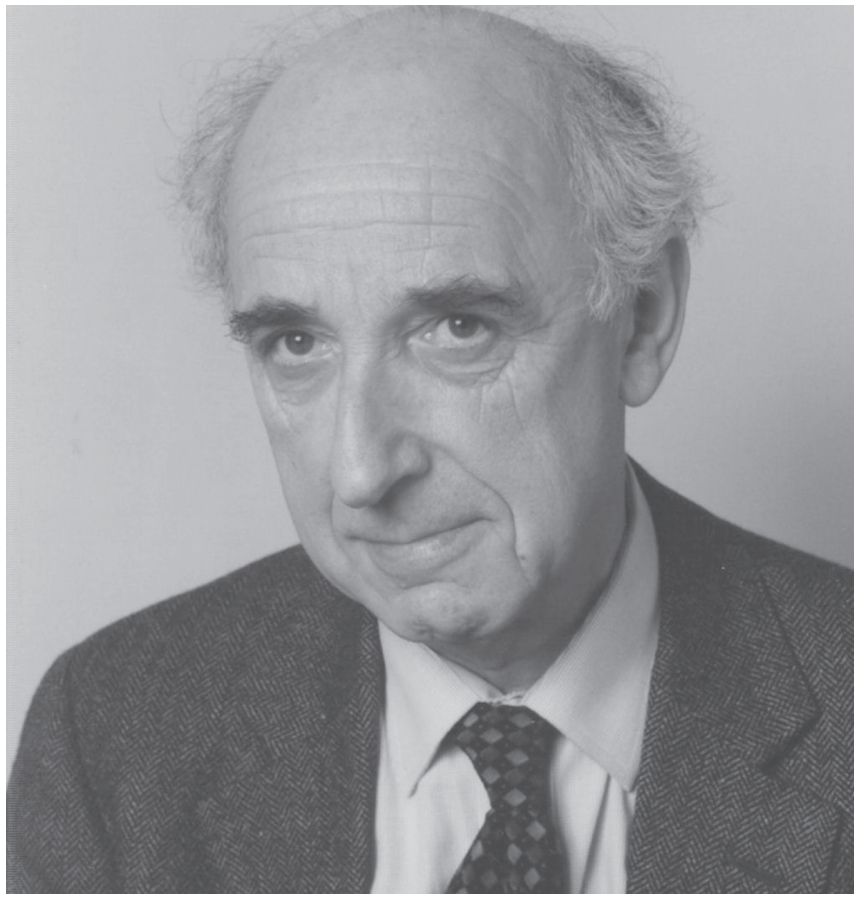

MICHAEL PODRO

Michael Podro
1931–2008

Michael Podro was a scholar of real note and a genuine intellectual, and also a significant public presence in British cultural life. What mattered to him above all was serious thinking about art, thinking that took place in the gallery in front of actual works of art as well as in the study. His scholarship had a broad reach and integrated the larger concerns of philosophical aesthetics, art history and art criticism. The distinctive combination of rigorous analytic thinking and close viewing he cultivated made him particularly attentive to the complexities of response elicited by works of art. Significantly, the impetus for his election as a Fellow of the British Academy in 1992 came both from philosophers and art historians.

The impact he had extended well beyond his accomplishments as an original and creative scholar. He took education very seriously, exerting a considerable influence on the study of art history, not only as director (1970–4, 1977–80) of the programme in art history and theory he was instrumental in developing at the University of Essex, but also as a leading intellectual presence throughout his time there, first as Reader (1969–73) and then as Professor (1973–97). An inspirational figure, he enlivened the discipline of art history through the generosity with which he engaged those who like him valued the life of the mind. He was a member of the editorial boards of the *British Journal of Aesthetics*, *Word and Image* and the *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und Allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*. He was a significant presence in the museum world, playing an active role as a trustee of the Victoria and Albert Museum (1987–96). His services to the academic community and the art world were recognised with the award of CBE in 2001.

Proceedings of the British Academy, **172**, 251–272.

Intellectual project

Podro's outstanding achievements as a scholar—he was undoubtedly one of the most important figures of his generation writing on the history and theory of art—had a lot to do with the sustained nature of his intellectual project. He thought harder and more fruitfully than anyone in the field about the value of a close critical engagement with works of art, exploring the complex interplay of visual perceptiveness and cognitive and ethical awareness such engagement entailed. As he wrote in the conclusion to his first book, *The Manifold in Perception: Theories of Art from Kant to Hildebrand* (1972), any genuinely productive 'critical discussion of the arts' necessarily brought to bear larger assumptions about 'the nature of the mind and the location of the arts within the over-all context of our human purposes and perceptions'.[1]

What particularly fascinated him was the paradox central to Kantian aesthetics—that an aesthetic response to a phenomenon was categorically different from a conceptual and moral or ethical understanding of it, but brought into play a capacity for such understanding. The disinterestedness entailed by the aesthetic, he was at pains to stress, should not be confused with indifference to knowledge or ethical or political considerations. He was as opposed to narrowly formalist conceptions of the aesthetic as he was to the anti-aesthetic stances that became fashionable in artistic and academic circles. While he insisted that the terms in which one apprehended a work of art were categorically different from those operating in one's everyday visual engagement with things, an aesthetic response had for him a significant vernacular dimension. He made frequent recourse to a parallel between literature and art to clarify this point: just as poetry and literature use as their basic materials the language deployed by people in their ordinary social commerce with one another, so picturing deals in the visual vernacular of perceptions and images that form the fabric of people's everyday commerce with the phenomenal world.

Podro's explorations into art and the aesthetic fall into three broadly defined categories. First, there is his philosophical examination of the aesthetic attitude, and in particular understandings of the aesthetic that developed out of the critical thinking of the late European Enlightenment. Kant functioned as his leading point of reference, supplemented by the more political understanding of the aesthetic later developed by Schiller.

[1] M. Podro, *The Manifold in Perception: Theories of Art from Kant to Hildebrand* (Oxford, 1972), pp. 125–6.

These concerns formed the substance of his first book and he returned to them in the publication on which he was working at the very end of his life.[2]

A second major concern was the intellectual basis of art historical analysis. In his most widely known and frequently cited study, *The Critical Historians of Art* (1982), he examined the tradition of German art historical scholarship that emerged in Germany in the nineteenth century and culminated in the work of Heinrich Wöllflin, Erwin Panofsky and Aby Warburg, a tradition that was instrumental in establishing art history as a serious academic study. This was no ordinary historiography of the discipline, but something much more interesting and valuable. He focused on the theoretical commitments that had informed the more successful attempts by scholars working in this tradition to fashion a genuinely critical history of art. For Podro, such critical history needed to be both serious historical enquiry and theoretical exploration of the nature of art as a cultural phenomenon. In other words, it was a study that involved constant negotiation between historical reconstruction and critical thinking about art. His philosophical background meant that he was able to do justice, in a way that other scholars at the time examining the intellectual basis of modern art history could not, to the complexities of the neo-Kantian thought informing nineteenth- and early twentieth-century German critical study of the visual arts.

Forming the third area of enquiry in his larger project was a sustained examination of the nature of pictorial depiction that eventually gave rise to his very fine book *Depiction* (1998). He posed the fundamental question as to how seeing subject matter or a motif in a picture or cognate form of art such as low relief differed from while also bringing into play everyday perceptual engagements with the world. Throughout his career, Podro insisted that viewing and creating pictures involved a complex imaginative interplay between one's apprehension of features and structures internal to processes of picture making, and one's perceptions of things and situations and images in the outside world that these evoked or depicted.

In making this point, Podro was not so much offering a defence of artistic figuration against the widely held assumption that the more vital forms of modern art were necessarily those that had abandoned traditional pictorial representation. Rather he was critiquing the oversimplified models of viewing presupposed by the formalist conceptions of art

[2] Aspects of this work have been published as articles—see below, n. 31.

informing such assumptions—models in which seeing a painting as a representation or depiction of a motif or subject was assumed to be categorically distinct from seeing a painting as a material phenomenon in its own right. Podro broadly agreed with Richard Wollheim's conception of the 'twofoldedness' of viewing paintings—a process of 'seeing in' that involved being visually aware of the marked and coloured surfaces of the painting at the same time as discerning in these a recognisable phenomenon existing in its own space rather than on the painting's flat surface.[3] This for Podro was not just a technical issue about perceptual processes, but had to do with the way in which the mind was activated in the close viewing of a work of art. The mind's imaginative processing of the visual particularities of a painting and their interconnections, he insisted, brought into play larger understandings of the world we live in—understandings involving ethics and politics as well as knowledge.[4]

Formation—literature, philosophy and art

Podro was born in North London to Jewish parents on 13 March 1931. His early home life there introduced him to an intellectual and cultural milieu that later was to prove important for him. His father Joshua Podro, a Jewish immigrant from Austria of Russian origin who had settled in London, was a biblical scholar of some note—he developed these interests in his spare time while running a successful press-cutting agency. As a young man he had been involved in a Yiddish circle that included figures such as the poet Isaac Rosenberg and the painter David Bomberg. Michael Podro's aunt, Clara Klinghoffer (1900–70), was an artist who had enjoyed a considerable reputation in the British art world of the 1920s, known for her portraits and figure studies—she is represented by a painting, *The Old Troubadour* (1923), in the Tate collection.[5]

Podro's education after he finished school and completed his National Service with the RAF in 1951 was somewhat unconventional and unusually broad. It began with his reading English at Cambridge as an undergraduate. This was important, not so much for developing his interest in literature as for laying the basis of his life-long preoccupation with critical

[3] R. Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (London, 1987), pp. 46–7.
[4] M. Podro, *Depiction* (New Haven, CT, and London, 1998), p. 8. Some of the ideas developed in this book were sketched out in an earlier article, 'Depiction and the Golden Calf', in A. Harrison (ed.), *Philosophy and the Visual Arts* (Dordrecht, 1987), pp. 3–28.
[5] Several of these details are taken from Podro's obituary in *The Times* (3 April 2008).

responsiveness to works of art. F. R. Leavis was a major inspiration, giving him (as to so many others of Podro's generation) a sense of the abiding significance of close critical engagement with literature and, by implication, with visual art too. Particularly important was Leavis's sense of the ethical and intellectual stakes involved in this critical engagement, having to do not with the content of a work as such but with the nature of the aesthetic response it activated and of the imaginative world it conjured up. William Empson, another key figure in British literary criticism at the time, was also important for Podro, though he was not teaching at Cambridge. Like Leavis, he conveyed a sense that critical analysis involved something much more than mere professional or academic expertise, and had a deeper intellectual rigour to it.

Podro summed up what he had gained from his early involvement with critical writing on literature by asking 'how can the procedures of literary criticism be transferred to the criticism of painting?' 'This', he maintained, 'has remained for me central.'[6] It remained central partly because studies of language and literature played a more significant role in British intellectual life than studies concerned with visual art and representation, and so constituted a somewhat richer field of enquiry. It also did so because the art-critical analysis with which he was familiar for the most part drew on somewhat inflexible models of formal structuring and signifying procedure—this being true both of an earlier modernist, purely visual formalism and its later more sophisticated semiotic iterations. Podro sought to bring the resources of close reading to bear on close looking, defying the rigid divide between the literary and the pictorial, or between the linguistic and the visual, often found in modern theorising about visual art.

After finishing his degree in English in 1954, Podro's career took a new turn when he registered as a part-time student at the Slade School of Art in London. It was there that he met his future wife, Charlotte Booth, a fellow student who later became a conservator in the Royal Institute of British Architects' collection of architectural drawings. Married in 1961, the close companionship they formed was to play a central role in both their lives, as did that with the two daughters they had, Natasha and Sarah. Michael Podro is survived by his wife, Charlotte Podro, and both daughters.

During Podro's year at the Slade in 1955–6, Ernst Gombrich was offering seminars in art history that Slade students could attend. His encounter with Gombrich set him on a new trajectory. Gombrich was then working

[6] M. Podro, 'Brief outline of a biography', undated typescript, after 2001.

on the book, *Art and Illusion: a Study in the Psychology of Visual Representation*, that when it came out in 1959 became the single most important and certainly the most widely read and influential study in the history of art to appear in the post-war years. The issues Gombrich was working through, having to do with pictorial representation and the perceptual processes involved in viewing paintings and other forms of visual depiction, were to become foundational for Podro's engagement with art history. Podro took from Gombrich two key ideas, the first being that the perception of a visual representation was not a purely visual or optical process, but also involved a mental conceptualising. The second was that the recognition of a motif in a painting, while it developed in part out of a familiarity with representational conventions particular to painting, also brought into play habits of viewing deployed in the everyday perceptions of things in the world around us.

Put simply, Gombrich's central argument was as follows—what happens when we see a picture of a horse is not the same as what happens when we see a horse, yet the former perception depends on visual memories of the latter. There was one aspect of Gombrich's perceptual psychology of art that Podro was to find increasingly problematic, however, namely his assumption that at the moment when we see a horse in the picture of a horse, we no longer see the picture's representational devices. For Gombrich it was as if we had a momentary illusion of perceiving a horse in the visual effects generated by the painted representation. On his understanding, we adjust our perceptual framing so that we compensate for the disparities between the look of the painting and the look of an actual horse, and for a moment only see what these perceptions share. In this way a work that initially seems unnaturalistic can, when we adjust our expectations, give rise to a vivid visual impression of the motif it depicts.

Richard Wollheim's review of *Depiction*, the book by Podro that was his eventual answer to Gombrich's *Art and Illusion*, nicely sums up what was at stake in Podro's debt to and departure from Gombrich's phenomenology of viewing. Gombrich, Wollheim explained, developed two theses from his explorations in perceptual psychology that were to preoccupy Podro, one negatively and one positively. The first was 'that we cannot simultaneously be aware of what is represented (the subject) and of the representing support (the surface)'—with the latter seen as including the literal markings and texturings created by the artist. The second was 'that there is, in our experience, no observable boundary between subject and surface; as we scrutinize a painting, subject turns into surface, surface into subject'. And he concluded: 'Podro claims what is evidently correct: that

it is only by rejecting Gombrich's first thesis that we can do full justice to his second.'[7]

Podro came to the conclusion that the close viewing of a painting precluded making any clear separation between seeing the painted surface and seeing what was represented—a viewer did not alternate between these two ways of seeing, but was drawn into the painter's way of imagining and depicting things to the point that the what and how of representation become inextricably bound up with one another. An awareness of painterly effects and structuring made the image or motif discerned in the former all the more imaginatively compelling. This both built on and contradicted Gombrich's understanding of how we apprehend a painting.

Podro's encounter with Gombrich had a further dimension of productive give and take. Through Gombrich, Podro was made aware of a rich tradition of German art historical analysis that had not yet been assimilated within the study of art history in the UK—such study being limited largely to formal stylistic analysis, connoisseurial attribution, and archival research into artistic practices, patronage, and historical and cultural 'background', without any overarching critical framing that would make larger sense of art as a cultural or even a distinctively visual phenomenon. Gombrich, while offering rich insights into the strengths and limitations of the analysis developed by the major figures of German art history such as Wölfflin and Panofsky, was deeply sceptical of the critical philosophical thinking underpinning the more speculative aspects of their work. More specifically, he refused to engage with the Kantian and neo-Kantian ways of conceptualising art and artistic culture that were foundational for the intellectual tradition within which they were working. It was this gap that Podro went on to fill. Podro also distanced himself from the crude anti-Hegelianism that became marked in Gombrich's later pronouncements on art history and cultural history as he became ever more reliant on Karl Popper's positivistic critique of Continental thought.[8]

During his year at the Slade, Podro began working under Gombrich's guidance on the theoretical concerns shaping the tradition of German art historical analysis to which Gombrich had introduced him. Gombrich advised him to strengthen his background in philosophy, and he spent the next year, 1956–7, studying in the Philosophy Department at University College London, working towards his Ph.D. qualifying examination.

[7] Richard Wollheim, '*Depiction*. Michael Podro', *Times Literary Supplement* (April 23 1999).

[8] Podro offers a very illuminating account of Hegel's ideas on art and of the role these played in nineteenth-century conceptions of the history of art in his book *The Critical Historians of Art* (New Haven, CT, and London, 1982), particularly pp. 17–30.

Gombrich put him in touch with Richard Wollheim who was teaching philosophy at University College at the time. This proved to be another crucially important encounter for Podro, leading him to embark on a Ph.D. dissertation jointly supervised by Gombrich and Wollheim. The dissertation was on the late nineteenth-century German art theorist Konrad Fiedler. Fiedler's neo-Kantian conception of art's autonomy and understanding of the mental processing of visual form played a significant role in the new systematic analysis of artistic style that developed in German and Austrian art historical scholarship at the turn of the century—best known nowadays from the still widely read publications of Heinrich Wölfflin.

Characteristic of Podro's independence of mind and critical acuity was his willingness to act on the dawning realisation that Fiedler's theoretical analysis, far from being a key to understanding what the neo-Kantian tradition that interested him might offer in the way of a richer critical understanding of art, in fact marked something of a dead end—a dead end resulting from a mode of thinking that fundamentally misconstrued the more radical implications of Kant's philosophical aesthetics. In the book, *The Manifold in Perception: Theories of Art from Kant to Hildebrand*,[9] that eventually developed out of his doctoral dissertation, he concluded: 'In the writings of Fiedler the image of human personality has become so limited, and so little detailed experience of works of art or anything else is called upon, that it is hard not to see him as the end of a tradition.'[10]

Career—art historian, educator and public personality

While working on his Ph.D., Podro was based at the Warburg Institute in London, where Gombrich held a position first as Reader and from 1959 onwards as Professor of the History of the Classical Tradition and Director. It was during his years studying at the Warburg in the late 1950s that Podro met Michael Baxandall, a fellow student of Gombrich's, and the two of them became close friends. They formed a discussion group which met to tease out the implications of the new ideas Gombrich was developing on the mental processing of visual and pictorial representa-

[9] Adolf von Hildebrand was an artist friend of Fiedler's. His book, *The Problem of Form in the Visual Arts* (published in German 1893), one of the foundational texts of modern formal analysis, drew heavily on Fiedler's theoretical ideas.
[10] Podro, *Manifold*, p. 120.

tions with his explorations in the psychology of perception. The upshot was not just the important work of two of the foremost art historians to make their mark in Britain in the following few decades, Podro and Baxandall.[11] There also emerged a distinctive understanding of art historical study, rather different from Gombrich's positivistic one, that brought to bear British analytic thinking on the larger concerns and intellectual ambitions of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century German scholarship. As different as Podro's and Baxandall's approaches were, with Baxandall much more concerned with specificities of historical circumstance and particularities of the languages of art critical and art theoretical discourse, and Podro with examining the philosophical underpinnings of visual aesthetics, they shared certain very important commitments. For both, a close and attentive viewing of works of art and a preoccupation with the subtleties of the perceptual and intellectual processes such viewing set in train were absolutely central.

Podro's first teaching job was as Head of Art History at Camberwell School of Art and Crafts in South London, a position he took up in 1961 after completing his Ph.D. This might seem an unconventional move for someone with Podro's theoretical and philosophical bent. However, it gave him a freedom to devise an innovative programme of historical and theoretical study of art that a more conventional base in a university philosophy department, or in one of the few university art history departments, would not have allowed. Here he developed his talents as an innovative educator committed to a study of art history that gave students a theoretical understanding of art as well as familiarising them with key aspects of its history. The practice of studio teaching involving close examination and discussion of students' work dovetailed with his commitment to enhancing academic historical study with practical criticism conducted in front of original works of art.

Teaching at Camberwell brought him into contact again with contemporary art practice. It was there that he developed a close friendship with the artist Frank Auerbach whose approach to painting proved important for the ideas on artistic depiction he was developing at the time.[12] That Auerbach was working in a semi-figurative rather than purely abstract mode was less important than the larger question his densely worked over paintings seemed to pose—was compelling artistic depiction still possible

[11] On Baxandall, see J. Onians, 'Michael David Kighley Baxandall 1933–2008', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 166, 2010, 27–46.
[12] Auerbach did a number of portrait studies of Michael Podro.

in present-day circumstances?[13] Auerbach's response, as Podro characterised it in an article he published some years later, was a hard won and precarious yes. The almost indecipherable overlay of mark making in Auerbach's depictions, Podro explained,

> … keeps one particularly aware of the way in which the artist transforms and reconstitutes the subject. For the artist who does not simply try to mirror, mimic, or map, the initial subject has to be given up, every obvious hold on it sacrificed in order for it to be remade, with all the uncertainty of whether it will be retrieved, whether it will re-emerge or re-emerge in any adequate way in the materials and rhythms of the medium.[14]

Podro hinted here at a contemporary problematic of depiction that rarely surfaces elsewhere in his writing—namely that immersion in processes of painterly mark making might remain simply that and the resulting work never come alive as an image of something. Podro usually emphasised the mutually enhancing relay between processes of painting and delineating a motif, seeing these as fusing in successful depiction to produce a vivid sense of something seen or felt that seemed to emerge out of the paint work. At times his response to Auerbach's work came closer to this harmoniously integrative conception of painterly depiction, as in this comment he made about the 'play of real and fictive salience' in a thickly worked head by Auerbach: 'It is as if, through a leap of the imagination, the rich complications of Auerbach's paint reveal the intricacies of live tissue around and inside the skull of the sitter.'[15]

Podro also developed a friendship with another major figure in the contemporary British art world, Ron Kitaj. Podro features in one of Kitaj's better known paintings, *The Jewish Rider* (1984–5), a work whose complex overlay of associations would have been particularly appealing to Podro—the famous *Polish Rider* by Rembrandt, one of Podro's favourite artists; the train journeys Podro regularly took to Colchester travelling from his home in London to the University of Essex where he started teaching after leaving Camberwell; and specifically Jewish associations with train travel—the Holocaust on the one hand and the image of the displaced, itinerant Jewish intellectual on the other. The latter suggestions are implicit in a way that Podro would have appreciated, and not too serious

[13] The paintings and drawings from life Giacometti was producing at the time posed a similar question.
[14] M. Podro, *Frank Auerbach. The Complete Etchings 1954–1990* (London, 1990), unpaginated.
[15] M. Podro, 'Frank Auerbach. Paintings and drawings, 1954–2001', *Times Literary Supplement* (21 Sept. 2001).

or insistent—the Podro figure is contemplative, but also a bit of a dandy in his white shoes, echoing Podro's warmly performative persona.

Kitaj's appeal for Podro is slightly puzzling. While it is easy to see why Kitaj's intellectual approach and the alternative he offered to abstract formalism would have appealed to Podro, his approach to painting—in particular his somewhat collage-like juxtaposition of motifs, his disregard for the formal niceties of painterly depiction, and his cultivation of a slightly edgy discrepancy and heterogeneity—is at odds with what Podro generally responded to in the art he most admired. In a review Podro wrote some years later of Kitaj's work, he suggested as much when commenting on the paintings Kitaj had shown in his first 1963 London exhibition:

> When, in a painting, we recognize a scene or a figure or a still life we assume that the painted surface will offer us ways of imagining the subject more fully: analogies between shapes, the pressure of the brush, relative opacity and transparency of medium may be absorbed into imaging the subject. But the paintings shown … did not make their effect this way, despite the fact that this was something at which he was immensely accomplished.

Podro went on to comment on the apparent arbitrariness of the montaging of motifs in Kitaj's paintings and the absence of underlying visual or semantic connectivity: 'Implicit connexions are not in the service of realizing a scene but of intimating an event by texts, confused imaginings, oblique reminders … If one asks what legitimizes these connexions the answer must first acknowledge the disparateness of areas of reference which have been yoked together.'[16] 'Yoked together' is an apposite term for describing the disarticulated montaging of elements characteristic of much pop and assemblage art of the period. Podro's deploying of the term testifies to his openness to new developments taking place in art and critical thinking about art to which he was constitutionally unsympathetic. In Kitaj's case, one suspects, friendship and shared intellectual concerns trumped aesthetic sensibility, as they often do.

In 1967, Podro left Camberwell to take up a temporary position as Lecturer in the Philosophy of Art at the Warburg Institute, returning to his intellectual home. However, it was with his move to the University of Essex as Reader two years later that he began to play a much more public role in the British art historical world. He was to remain at Essex until his retirement in 1997, and during his early years there played a key role building up the new Department of Art History and Theory. He set in place a

[16] M. Podro, *The Burlington Magazine*, 317, No. 1105 (April, 1995), 242–7 (see particularly pp. 242–3, 244).

distinctive curriculum very different from that offered at other universities. Traditional art history was complemented by programmes of study in art theory, philosophical aesthetics, critical theory and historiography of art-historical enquiry, and practical criticism of works of art. For him, disseminating his ideas through educational initiatives and interaction with students, and through his highly performative lectures at Essex and elsewhere, was as if not more important than the scholarly production of monographs and articles. He had a keen sense of mission and was an agitator and reformer as much as he was a scholar. It is a matter of some regret that he never had a real opportunity to deploy his intellectual energy and initiative at the institution that formed him, the Warburg Institute.

Podro's breadth is clearly evident from the range of people whom he knew from different walks of life—philosophers, painters, art historians, psychoanalysts, and museum curators. As a trustee of the Victoria and Albert Museum for almost ten years (1987–96) he became actively involved with difficult policy issues that had to be negotiated in these somewhat turbulent times for the Museum. His enthusiasms were not just intellectual and educational. He was fascinated too by the intricacies of political manoeuvre, both as an observer of this curious form of human sociability and as a participant, making effective interventions, whether at his home institution the University of Essex, or as a trustee at the Victorian and Albert Museum, or as a forceful voice in the ideologically charged debates that took place at academic conferences in the 1980s.

Psychoanalytic explorations

Podro also played a role in the world of British psychoanalysis. He was a chair and trustee of the Squiggle Foundation, an organisation devoted to the study and dissemination of the ideas of the analyst and writer D. W. Winnicott, a leading figure in the object relations school. Winnicott's studies on the role of play in child development were particularly attractive to Podro, given Podro's abiding interest in Schiller's conception of the imaginatively charged play characterising an aesthetic engagement with things.[17] Podro became a close friend of Marion Milner, a prominent

[17] Podro devoted almost as much space to Schiller as he did to Kant in his book, *The Manifold in Perception* (pp. 36–60) and the book on which he was working just before he died included an as yet unpublished article on Schiller. Podro saw Schiller as particularly important for having recast Kant's understanding of aesthetic judgement in a such a way that a more active role was played in it by the ethical and moral dimensions to mental life.

writer and analyst sympathetic to Winnicott's way of thinking. She was also an amateur painter, who published a fascinating book, *On Not Being Able to Paint* (1950), analysing her experiences trying to create paintings that convincingly conveyed aspects of her inner life and sense of things.[18] In his fine memorial tribute to Milner, Podro reflected on something for which he in a way was striving in his own writing, namely her 'ideal of aesthetic education, where thought was to be continually tested for how it resonated with what was most intimate and personal. In her own writing there are no gaps between the personal voice and the general argument, between, we might say, a lyric and a philosophical register.'[19]

Psychoanalysis plays a curious role in Podro's writing. It hovers on the margins as an insistent presence, but only rarely is it explicitly addressed. It is as if he felt a compulsion to take on board the disruptive intrusions of the unconscious in conscious life central to modern psychoanalytic ways of thinking, but equally felt compelled to keep these considerations at one remove. Is this perhaps a case of his being true to his injunction that in our apprehensions of things 'we cannot make fully focal what emerges most powerfully'?[20] The concluding section of his book *Depiction* includes an excursus touching briefly on what psychoanalytic theory might offer in the way of understanding the irrational and violent phantasies activated by works we find particularly compelling. Characteristically for him, the work cited there is a still life by Chardin,[21] where the violence is quite muted, suggested by a large eviscerated fish featured in an array of sea food and kitchen utensils.

Up to this point his analysis has been concerned with the expansive and constructive dynamics of an aesthetic response. It is for the most part envisaged as a freely engaged, integrating process of making sense of the perpetually shifting perceptual, mental and affective responses activated by a work of art—with the proviso that it is of the essence of the aesthetic that this intuitive sense will never quite conform to any conceptual definition one might attribute to the work. But this still leaves open the question of how 'the productive or aesthetic stance' as Podro called it 'would accommodate the sense of potential extremity of feeling, including terror

[18] *On Not Being Able to Paint* (London, 1950) was first published under the pseudonym, Joanna Field.

[19] M. Podro, 'A tribute to Marion Milner', *British Journal of Psychotherapy*, 15 (1998), 252–3.

[20] Podro, *Depiction*, p. 176.

[21] Jean Baptiste Siméon Chardin, *La Raie (The Skate)*, 1726, Musée du Louvre, Paris. Interestingly he does not refer to the hostile presence of the kitten hissing with its back tensely arched.

and pity, that seems bound to our conception of art'. How 'might our account of the complexity of painting and the viewer's engagement with it be thought of as more than fortuitously related to such extremity?'[22] This question is never answered. What Podro subsequently offers is a discussion of how compelling works of art that draw on strongly affective unconscious material, material deriving from formative childhood phantasies and traumas, do so by distancing us from the potentially unmanageable resonances of such material—redeploying it within a conceptually and perceptually satisfying artistic structure that brings its resonances within the purview of our rational purposes and interests. But the real question is never answered—namely how the irrational substratum of psychic life endows aesthetic engagement with a work with real urgency it would not otherwise have, and does not simply furnish material on which such engagement draws. Nevertheless Podro had the intellectual insight and integrity to realise that he needed to pose the question, even if he was unable to follow through on it in the sustained way he pursued over avenues of thought.

The problems Podro faced incorporating the insights of psychoanalytic theory into his Kantian analysis of the aesthetic emerge early on in an intriguing essay 'Art and Freud's displacement of aesthetics', published in a volume of essays on Freud edited by Jonathan Miller that came out in 1972. Here he makes a suggestive analogy between the intuitive sense of something coherent but inarticulable that emerges from the multiplicity of perceptions in an aesthetic response, and the sense of there being an unconscious impulse underlying the apparently senseless concatenation of thoughts and images in a dream. Podro develops this analogy with an intriguing parallel between Kant's notion of an aesthetic idea and Freud's of an unconscious idea. He argues that in each case conceptually elusive features of mental or psychic life are hinted at through constellations of ideas and images and perceptions that, apprehended in their totality, elude rational definition. Podro describes as follows the mental processes at work in the formation of Kantian aesthetic and Freudian unconscious ideas:

> For Kant it was a matter of the profusion of interconnected imagery being a suitable exercise of our minds for hinting at the realm of the supersensible. For Freud that profusion was a means by which ideas readily available to us could be organized in such a way as to allow associated thoughts, otherwise too disturbing for us to consider, into consciousness; and these thoughts in turn, were

[22] Podro, *Depiction*, p. 171.

> indicative of something which was within and not outside us: not a reality to which our knowledge aspired, but a reality from which our urgencies derived.[23]

The passage hints suggestively at the ways in which the disruptive imperatives of the unconscious addressed in psychoanalytic understandings of psychic phenomena are radically different from the integrative imperatives of the rational impulses operating in his Kantian understanding of the aesthetic. However, he does not go on to consider whether this might call for some modification of his understanding of the affective dimensions to an aesthetic response. He at most hints at the problems involved by making a distinction between the ways in which the irrational imperatives of unconscious impulse are negotiated and brought to consciousness in therapeutic diagnosis, with a view to uncoupling their hold on the patient's psychic life, and the ways in which such impulses are mediated and creatively reworked in works of art, so that they then enliven and give resonance to one's mental life.[24]

Interventions

Podro's guarded, if also critically self-aware, engagement with psychoanalytic theory highlights his deep commitment to a positively engaged and poised rationality of the kind he admired in Kant's thinking. The scepticism regarding the conscious capabilities of the mind, and the negative assessments of the reach of rational understandings of the self articulated by Freud, were temperamentally as well as intellectually at odds with Podro's outlook, even as he recognised how compelling at some level Freud's insights—and those of his less humanist successors—were.

Both living and thinking for Podro were at their best open-ended, explorative processes, involving constant give and take and negotiation. This cast of mind sets him clearly apart from recent deconstructive and poststructuralist ways of thinking. One could say he was utterly unfashionable and, after the postmodern turn in academic studies of art and culture gained ascendancy in the 1980s, possibly even a little rearguard, despite his earlier having been at the forefront of the move to a more theoretically aware and critically self-conscious approach to the study of art history. But there is a lot to this unfashionability that is not just admirable,

[23] M. Podro, 'Art and Freud's displacement of aesthetics', in J. Miller (ed.), *Freud. The Man, his World, his Influence* (London, 1972), p. 129.
[24] Podro, *Depiction*, pp. 170–1.

but also very necessary. He offers an intellectually rigorous and ethically grounded alternative to the disintegrative logic and relentless negation so often found in recent critical thinking about art and culture—whether this takes the form of theoretically inclined postmodern melancholy, or bolshie anti-theoretical scepticism.

At the same time, Podro was very attentive to recent trends in intellectual life and in his own understated way actively engaged with and responded to these. He wrote a very incisive, and far from unsympathetic assessment of Jacques Derrida's *The Truth in Painting* soon after the English edition appeared in 1987.[25] Each of his major books, while developing long-standing preoccupations of his—of which thinking through the broader implications of Kant's theory of aesthetic judgement for a critical understanding of art was the most central—focused on issues and problems that were very much in the air. In each case, Podro would indicate how his analysis addressed certain limitations in the theorising about art current in recent scholarly literature. He refused to engage in extended critique, and his interventions were short and to the point, almost afterthoughts. He thereby made it clear that the burden of what he had to offer was not an admonishing of tendencies he found ill-advised, but rather a rigorously critical exploration of material that he believed merited careful consideration because of the positive insights it had to offer.

In the conclusion to his first book, *Manifold in Perception*, Podro indicated that his examination of post-Kantian thinking about the aesthetics of visual art was in part directed against the narrow definitions of the aesthetic found in recent writing about art, that in turn had given rise to a narrowly sceptical take on aesthetics by Anglo-Saxon philosophers. Podro had in mind those theories of art that singled out a particular aesthetic quality or aesthetic attitude as defining the essence of art—such as say the narrow formalism associated with Roger Fry or the crude expressive theory of Croce.[26] Revisiting Kant and the more critically aware post-Kantian thinking about art, he believed, would make evident the complexity of the aesthetic attitude and give the lie to such misunderstandings. Podro was also at pains to correct a misconception of Kantian notions of aesthetic disinterestedness that equated this with an insistence on the autonomy of artistic form and the complete separation of the apprehension of artistic phenomena from the perception of phenomena in the world at large.

[25] M. Podro, 'Derrida on Kant and Heidegger', *Art History*, 11 (1988), 433–8.
[26] Clement Greenberg's neo-Kantian formalism would have been another case in point.

The analysis Podro offered in *The Critical Historians* had to do with the role aesthetic theory played in critical art history, rather than with aesthetics as such. The book came out at a moment in the early 1980s when there was considerable interest in and debate about the theoretical basis of art history as a discipline. The historiography of art historical study was attracting a great deal of scholarly attention, and a number of studies began to appear on major figures in the German tradition of art historical scholarship such as Erwin Panofsky.[27] At the same time, traditional approaches to art historical study, in particular the focus on stylistic analysis, were being intensively critiqued. Something of a schematic divide opened up between proponents of an approach that gave precedence to the political, social and cultural circumstances of artistic production, and those who believed that art historical study needed to concern itself with the distinctive visual qualities of works of art. This roughly panned out as a conflict between a social historical approach that envisaged art as shaped by external factors and a formal approach concerned with factors internal to art. There always had been something of a divide in art historical study along these lines but it became particularly acute in the late 1970s and early 1980s and also overtly politicised.

Podro's study intervened in this debate by offering a picture of a critical history of art that threw into question the exclusive claims being made on either side of the debate. In a terse formulation, he pointed out how a critical history of art that had any broader ambitions was necessarily one which required 'us to see how the products of art sustain purposes and interests which are both *irreducible* to the conditions of their emergence as well as *inextricable* from them'.[28] In so much as he defended artistic autonomy, this had to do with ethical integrity of purpose, and not some exclusive concern with style and the formal characteristics of art. In addition, he argued against the narrow historicism prevalent at the time, in which it was assumed that present-day understandings of art had to be excluded from any properly historical study of the art of past cultures. In Podro's view, 'Two central concerns gave direction to the writing of critical history: first, to show the way in which art exhibited a freedom of mind, like that experienced in discursive thought or in composed, self-possessed behaviour; and second, to show how the art of alien or past culture could

[27] Michael Ann Holly, *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History* (Ithaca, NY, and London, 1984).
[28] Podro, *Critical Historians*, p. xvii.

become part of the mental life of the present.'[29] His central point was that a critical history was characterised by an ongoing give and take between broad, theoretically informed exploration of the nature of art and close examination of particular works of art and the particular material, social and cultural conditions instrumental in their formation.

Depiction, Podro's most readable and immediately engaging book, includes some brilliant discussions of performativity in Rembrandt's portraiture and the complex orientation of viewpoint in his work. It came out in 1998 in a rather different context from *The Critical Historians*. Podro's concern was now with an aspect of artistic practice that previously had been central to understandings of art, particularly painting, but that had been increasingly marginalised both in art education and in theoretical discussions of art during the course of the twentieth century—first as a modernist privileging of formal abstraction gained ascendancy, and then as various conceptual, semiotic and poststructuralist modes of theorising took over. The latter have been instrumental in shaping not just understandings of modern and contemporary work but also broader attitudes towards the aesthetics of the visual arts. By depiction, Podro did not just have in mind mimesis or visual representation, or the making of recognisable naturalistic images. At issue rather was the artistic practice defined by a give and take between the artist's apprehension of a motif or visual effect (which could be remembered rather than directly seen) and the material process of rendering it in a vivid and compelling way. A viewer's apprehension of such work in turn involved a sustained, constantly shifting interplay between recognition of aspects of things or images previously seen that the work conjured up and material particularities of the artist's paint work or sculpting.

Podro made the point that, as depiction had become displaced as a central concern in twentieth-century art, general understandings of art were being impoverished by the theoretical polarity that resulted between traditional representational and recent non-representational ways of conceptualising art.[30] With his analysis of 'the imaginative potential' of painterly depiction, he was effectively arguing against the widespread dismissal of depiction as a phenomenon unworthy of serious theoretical consideration, a dismissal that failed to take account of the fact that most discussion of art still had to do with work in which depiction played a central role. Though he preferred to put his case implicitly rather than explicitly,

[29] Podro, *Critical Historians*, p. xxii.
[30] Podro, *Depiction*, pp. 23–7.

the position he took effectively challenged widely held, often quite unreflective, assumptions that the claims of realistic or naturalistic representation were largely mythic, that naturalistic looking depictions were in the final analysis as conventionalised as abstract ones. Podro's *Depiction* presented an intellectually sophisticated and principled alternative to this reigning semiotic orthodoxy. It was a semiotics which took the view that the motifs in a work of art largely gained their significance as signs defined by artistic and cultural convention, and that recognition of visual resemblances between a motif and a phenomenon seen in the world had no significant role to play in a critically engaged response to a work of art, particularly when this was a work of modern art. Podro's brief statement positioning himself in relation to current assumptions about the insignificance of artistic depiction was directed for the most part at recent Anglo-American philosophical thinking about the nature of artistic representation.[31] However, it applied equally well to the less rigorously argued unease about depiction and iconic resemblance in discussions of modern and contemporary art: 'There is an incompatibility between the interest of depiction as it has been characterized [in my discussion] so far and what we might call, broadly, semiotic or nominalist accounts.'[32]

Epilogue—the aesthetic attitude

Podro was working on a further book at the very end of his life. This final intervention only reached publication in fragmentary and incomplete form in several articles, the most recent of which, 'Literalism and truthfulness in painting', appeared in 2010.[33] Here he was in a way returning to the

[31] Podro (*Depiction*, p. 182, n. 15) particularly had in mind Nelson Goodman. Goodman's *Languages of Art* (London, 1969) had a significant impact in the art world. The case he made there for the sign-like as distinct from iconic nature of visual representation helped prepare the way for the take-up of French semiotic theory by British and American writers on art in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

[32] Podro, *Depiction*, p. 27.

[33] M. Podro, 'Literalism and truthfulness in painting', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 50 (2010), 457–68. This was probably intended as a concluding chapter of the book. Other chapters have appeared in preliminary or partial form as follows—the chapter on Diderot as 'Les limites de la peinture: Diderot et Herder', *Revue germanique internationale*, 13 (2000), 87–96; the one on Herder as 'Herder's *Plastik*', in J. Onians (ed.), *Sight and Insight. Essays on Art and Culture in Honour of E. H. Gombrich* (London, 1994), pp. 341–54; and the one on Kant as 'Kant and the aesthetic imagination', in D. Arnold and M. Iversen (eds.), *Art and Thought* (Malden, MA, and Oxford, 2003), pp. 51–70. The chapter on Schiller, that is substantially different from the section on

concerns he had addressed in his first book, *The Manifold in Perception*, taking the philosophically grounded aesthetic theory developed in the late Enlightenment as a basis for a developing a fuller understanding of what was at stake in a properly critical engagement with works of art.

He was addressing two central claims. First, he was concerned with how in the late Enlightenment the shift from art theory to what we call aesthetics brought with it a new understanding of the critical engagement with art as an exercise of mental faculties that had value in its own right, and did not require justification in terms of higher religious or metaphysical values. For Podro this aesthetic theory was particularly important in laying the foundations for modern critical conceptions of art and a viewer's engagement with art. Secondly, he saw this late Enlightenment speculation as throwing into relief a key feature of the specificity of the aesthetic, namely, the value placed 'on aspects of experience that eluded clarity and therefore did not constitute knowledge or serve as the basis of knowledge'. He went on to relate this elusiveness to his first point by putting it in historical perspective:

> Earlier, such elusiveness had been valued either as part of mystical or religious experience, itself conceived of a special part of knowledge, or it was associated with the delicacy of perception, alertness and wit in responding to others, an aspect of courtesy, a moral quality. It was when it became valued as an exercise of sensibility in its own right beyond serving knowledge, sociability or morals —and this is what happened in the thought of Diderot and Kant—that our conception of art and aesthetics took on its modern cast.[34]

A passage in his unpublished introduction to the book illuminates the particular context in which he was setting his re-examination of the aesthetic. With the stress on elusiveness, not as a sceptical assertion of undecidability, nor as an anti-rationalist positing of some ineffable real that eludes conceptual definition, but as something integral to rational processes of thinking that the aesthetic threw into sharp relief, he saw himself as positing an approach that got beyond a debilitating divide between formalist and anti-formalist approaches in modern critical analysis of art. Both in his view were caught up in reductive understandings by seeking determinate explanations of what constituted a work of art. The point of the aesthetic attitude, he argued, was that it involved the mind in a closely engaged yet open exploration of the interplay between a work's signifi-

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Schiller in *Manifold of Perception*, is unpublished. The book manuscript is cited here under the title *The Aesthetic Attitude.* Chapters are paginated separately.

[34] M. Podro, *The Aesthetic Attitude*, Introduction, pp. 3–4.

cance and formal structuring, which of its nature could never be fixed or stabilised. Formalist criticism, while calling attention to features one might otherwise not notice, can

> have the debilitating effect of narrowing attention, so that the reader/viewer looks at the painting [or work of literature] just for these features … The problem of such formalism (sometimes wrongly attributed to Kant) is not with what it points to but what it eliminates. Correspondingly, what is wrong with the arguments of the anti-formalists is what they, on their part, ignore or deny: those relations by which the mind is engaged in its exploration of the work. Reductive formalist is simply one kind of reduction, like literalism or narrowly social and psychoanalytic reading …[35]

This final study also addressed the ethical imperatives informing a fully engaged aesthetic responsiveness. In part Podro sought to do this by re-examining the case Schiller made for the ethical significance of the aesthetic attitude in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Mankind*.[36] Schiller's understanding of the aesthetic was certainly crucial for later modern constructions of the aesthetic as pointing to utopian possibilities radically at odds with, but also nevertheless to some degree latent in, the realities of human social and political interactions in the modern world. Interestingly, Jacques Rancière, from a political perspective very different from Podro's, but one equally at odds with easy postmodern pessimism, has also made a strong case for clarifying what is at stake in modern understandings, and misunderstandings, of the relation between the political and the aesthetic by returning to Schiller.[37]

Podro's most compelling claim for the ethical significance of the aesthetic comes in his discussion of 'Literalism and truthfulness in painting'. This has to do with a particular kind of truthfulness, and commitment to truthfulness, we attribute to the art we take seriously. At issue is not literal truthfulness, the truthfulness of the subject matter, or truthfulness to visual appearance of the representations the work of art offers up, though, as Podro explains, artistic truthfulness is not entirely disassociated from such truthfulness either. His point is that the truthfulness of what one recognises in a work—a situation, a phenomenon, a human presence, an understanding of or attitude towards things—is sustained by the compelling nature of the internal, artistic relations and effects the work creates.

[35] Podro, *Aesthetic Attitude*, Introduction, pp. 6–7.

[36] As before, Podro was at pains to trace how Schiller developed his political and ethical understanding of the aesthetic from ideas about ethical values latent in the structuring of aesthetic judgement that Kant never explicitly articulated (*Aesthetic Attitude*, Kant, pp. 16–7).

[37] Jacques Rancière, 'The aesthetic revolution and its outcomes', *New Left Review*, 14, second series (March–April 2002), 133–7.

Such truthfulness, Podro argues, emerges most strongly when the ordering of the art work allows no easy resolution, positing difficulties that can only be overcome through sustained attention and extended negotiation of the conflicting possibilities being suggested. There is then a double effect of truthfulness, produced by the 'sustainability and fertility' of the 'correspondences' and interrelations the work articulates on the one hand, and the 'sense of difficulty' these create, the blocking of easy resolution, on the other. Such truthfulness, involving as it does 'the sense of sustainable analogy and conflict' kept in play as one attends to a work closely, is true to life, but in a way that of its very nature cannot be equated with the work's literal truth.[38] This in turn suggests a truthfulness operating at the level of a 'more extensive sense of significance: the sense that what is told or depicted stands as exemplary of some wider fabric or relation of ideas'. This is a claim often made for the truthfulness of realist art and literature—as fiction that conveys a sense of something real whose truthfulness, not found in unprocessed reality, has a depth and resonance extending beyond the particularities of what is literally represented.

Podro is less concerned with such claims than he is with the ethical basis of the open, expansive nature of the mental processes at work in an aesthetic response, and with the commitment to truthfulness this entails. What Podro has to say on the subject sums up what is possibly the most important single imperative driving his life-long preoccupation with the complexities of an aesthetic response to art, and it makes an appropriate note on which to end. The truthfulness of a work of art, he explains,

> … lies in its capacity to prompt in the audience the widest mobilization of its own thought, bringing latent and difficult thought to consciousness. It elicits, we might say, truthfulness in the audience. What is involved is that the work demands we become aware of the relevant level of importance, placing the subject against as wide a horizon of values as can be made relevant, looking for what can be revelatory.[39]

What mattered to Podro above all was the commitment to sustaining a freshness of response to whatever was engaging him, whether this be ideas, people or works of art. Even when he was critically ill with cancer at the end of his life (he died on 28 March 2008), this urge to respond openly and creatively and intently remained with him.

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[38] Podro, 'Literalism', 460–2.
[39] Ibid., 462.