PAUL VAN DEN AKKER

LOOKING FOR LINES

Theories on the Essence of Art
and the Problem of Mannerism

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Cover illustration:
(left) R. Dührkoop, Portrait of Heinrich Wölfflin, early 20th century,
Porträtsammlung Berliner Hochschullehrer der Humboldt-Universität, Berlin
(detail of fig. 1, chapter 3);
(right) A. von Maron, Portrait of Winckelmann, 1768,
Kulturstiftung Dessau Wörlitz, Dessau (detail of fig. 5, chapter 7);
(left folded cover flap) Pellegrino Tibaldi, *The Adoration of the Sheperds*, 1548,
oil on canvas, 157 x 105 cm, Galleria Borghese, Rome;
(right folded cover flap) Jan van Deene, *Peinture VII*, 1913, oil on canvas,
39.5 x 32.5 cm, private collection

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Table of Contents

PART II

PART III

Preface

There are many reasons to write a book, probably as many as there are not to. *Looking for Lines* is the result of what started out as nothing more than the search for an answer to a small question. This search happened to blossom into a journey whose course and length I could never have predicted. It proved to be – at least for me – an interesting journey through the wonderful, colourful world of art historiography, to freely paraphrase a remark made by a nineteenth-century art historian. This world emerged more than twenty centuries ago and has been inhabited by a broad assortment of curious art lovers ever since. The excursion took me through a great variety of ideas voiced by scores of art historians, historians, artists, critics, theorists and philosophers who, as if in a kind of relay race, took up questions about the nature of art, its history and role in culture and passed them along to each subsequent generation. They did so out of a desire to create order in the almost overwhelming chaos of facts and theories new and old. In response they wrote countless texts that were by turns sparkling or tedious, clear or murky.

This book began many years ago when I was trying to understand the apparent effortless manner in which twentieth-century art historians managed to analyse Mannerist art in formal terms. The problem for me was that their analyses seemed to diverge so much from what the sixteenth-century writers had to say about the art of their day. But instead of starting my inquiry in that earlier period, I decided to take a different road and travel back in time from the present to the past by analysing the theories of more recent scholars – first regarding Mannerist art but soon that of other periods as well – by asking where their ideas came from, and then tracing it back to what their mentors had been told, and their mentors' mentors and so on. Moreover, this strategy of tracing the scientific ancestry of these ideas in reverse provided me with the criteria for my selection. Without denying the historical significance of innumerable authors whose theories I decided not to discuss, this backward journey allowed me to focus on those figures who each form a link in a chain that joins the modern formal approach with its origins, which are found somewhere back in the eigtheenth century. In *Looking for Lines* the reader is asked to follow this

reverse chronology in the search for these roots. Let the reader be assured, however, that he will eventually return back home to the present day and in a traditional chronological step-by-step process.

Luckily, I met a lot of people during my journey who proved to be good company and whose support was indispensable. I would like to thank a few of them in particular. I thank my former colleague Jan Baptist Bedaux for our many discussions regarding the problems our discipline faces and his suggestion to expand my article on Mannerism into a book. Of course, I am responsible for taking it to heart and I can only hope that I made the right decision. I further would like to thank my other former colleague, Ilja Veldman, for her sincere trust in the genesis of this book, her patience and sense of humour. I am also grateful to many of my students for serving as a critical audience of my lectures in which I first presented some of my ideas. One of them, Ingrid Vermeulen, I later had the honour to coach as a Ph.D. student. Our fruitful exchanges regarding eighteenth-century art and art theory, among others, have always been one of the joys of my scholarly life. Another joy has been the fact that her dissertation was also recently published by AUP. I wish to thank my friend since the beginning of my art historical life, Jeroen Stumpel, for his critical and constructive comments on the manuscript, which all revealed his acute knowledge and sense of logic. After the publisher accepted the manuscript I was further able to profit from the sagacity and wisdom of Eddy de Jongh. His lectures from the period when I was a student a long time ago in particular conviced me of the rationale of art history as a discipline. I am now again greatly indebted to him for his careful and detailed critical comments on the manuscript, and for his sympathetic sense of perspective. Finally there is Gerard van Wezel, my fellow traveller without whose opinions and love I would have never enjoyed (nor persevered in) making this or any other journey.

There are many reasons to read a book, probably as many as there are not to. It is up to the reader to decide whether he will turn to the next page and begin reading.

Fig. 1 – L. Richter, *Bilderbude*, from R. Reinick, *ABC-Buch für kleine und grosse Kinder*, 1847

Introduction

1   The Picture Stall

This book tells the story of a complex, unfinished history. A history of how, for a very long time, art historians have approached the works of the Old Masters from a modern point of view. It is the story of the widespread assumption that art is defined by the two opposing forces of figuration and linear stylisation, whose relationship to one another has allegedly changed over the course of history. It is also the story of Italian Mannerism, that sixteenth-century style which, due to this modern approach, gradually began to be aesthetically reappraised during the twentieth century. However, whether this favourable interpretation would have made sense to anyone in the sixteenth century remains to be seen. But allow me to begin with a funny German poem that dates from 1845.

It is a children's poem written by Robert Reinick about a market stand that sold pictures – the so-called *Bilderbude* – and is included under the letter 'B' in his *ABC-Buch für kleine und grosse Kinder* (Abecedarium for Children Young and Old). Shouting 'Kermis here, Kermis here! Lovely time of the year!' (*S'ist Jahrmarkt heut', s'ist Jahrmarkt heut'! Das ist doch eine lust'ge Zeit!*), the poet lures his young readers to the picture stand. It is the most beautiful stand at the fair. The Picture Man (*der Bildermann*), portrayed by the painter Ludwig Richter in the accompanying print (fig. 1), tells us why. Wrapped in a stylish, mended jacket, a pointed cap on his head, a feather duster under his arm and a sort of beggar's bowl in his hand, he entices the curious to buy his wares. The Picture Man tells the children that they have come to the right place to learn about what the world has in store for them because his images present an accurate view of, for example, a variety of different animals, Mount Vesuvius, a storm at sea, and the four seasons. Moreover, they offer the viewer some unique opportunities: one can laugh at a lion without risking one's life, no matter how loud it is roaring; observe a battlefield scene without ever being hit by a bullet, and even visit royal treasuries and the most beautiful cities without having to walk for miles.[1]

Who would disagree with the gentle Picture Man's claims? They may be illusions, but representational pictures can be entertaining and informative

Fig. 2 – L. Richter, *Ich bin der junge Bildermann*, 1853, pencil, ca. 18 × 18 cm (whereabouts unknown)

about things we rarely, if ever, will actually see in real life, let alone with such ease. To be sure, they are more than a mere child's distraction. This was apparently Ludwig Richter's conviction as well because, about ten years later, he drew a less caricatured version of another image vendor, now in the guise of a young man travelling about the world with his easel on his back and a bag full of paintings (fig. 2). This youngster is obviously able to entice people of all classes and ages to gather around him in the street as the poem that accompanies the image also points out: 'I have the prettiest things for all classes, high and low' (*Für alle Stände gross und klein, Hab ich die schönste Sachen*).

The Picture Stand falls within the tradition of pictures we have of the so-called street criers and barkers; that is, of various vendors who in earlier times

Fig. 3 – S. Guillain II, after Annibale Carracci, *Vende Quadri* (*Picture Seller*), 1646, etching, 38.6 x 34.2 cm [upper left]; J. Perkois, *The Print Seller*, black and coloured chalk, 1784, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam [upper right]; D. Herrliberger, *Street Vendors of Pictures*, from: *Zürcherische Ausruff-Bilder*, 1748-1751 [below]

strolled the cities loudly extolling the virtues of their goods (fig. 3). At the same time, Reinick's ode to pictures can be seen as a translation into the child's world of the common praise for art as it was formulated for centuries in serious art theory. For example, by the French art theorist Roger de Piles, who in 1699 had extolled the great usefulness of prints as a way of gathering and storing knowledge in every possible field in his *Abrégé de la vie des peintres* in which prints were referred to as 'Depositories of all that is Fine and Curious in the World' as an English edition from 1706 translated it.[2]

Reinick's poem also echoes another art theory notion in the last stanza: Here the Picture Man requests that the children remember and greet the artists whose portraits hang from the wooden frame of his stall. It reminds one of the high level of esteem that was accorded to painters who could professionally conjure

Fig. 4 – R. de Piles, *Abregé de la vie des peintres …* (1699), Table of Contents

up complicated visual illusions no matter how easily the beholder seemed to be seduced by them. For example, the table of contents of De Piles' treatise alone, must have been enough to awe the reader with the immensity of the painter's task (fig. 4). The table reads like an extensive list of essential ingredients for an

artist with separate chapters devoted to the human figure, perspective, landscape and chiaroscuro – to mention just a few – as elements that were necessary for the creation of visual illusions that would be tasteful and convincing enough to deceive the beholder's eye.

De Piles and most art theorists since Alberti were convinced that art was seldom just a meaningless game of deception. Illusion was not a goal in itself, but a means to an end to show us, for example, a realistic image of Paradise, to warn us of an existence of hell and damnation, or to memorialise rulers and their deeds, or to give us insights into nature, human behaviour and customs. In short, the visual medium in principle revealed everything there was to reveal about life. Of course, no viewer would ever allow himself to be completely fooled. Moreover, an increasingly large group of art lovers and collectors admired the ingenuity and dexterity that went into the creation of images so that their awareness of the painting's artificiality became an essential aspect of their viewing pleasure.

That Reinick and Richter expressed their admiration for the wonder of illusion in a children's book was probably no accident. By the mid-nineteenth century, the art of illusion was no longer the topic of adult discussions about art. The interest in illusion did not disappear altogether but it gradually became more associated with areas of image-making other than serious art with a capital 'A'. The world of illustrations, among others, including children's books like Reinick's *Abecedarium*, or scientific studies that were dependent on accurate, true-to-life renderings. Charles Darwin, in *The Origin of Species*, for instance, referred to drawings of plants as proofs of his theory about the effects of constant selection by floriculturists. 'We see an astonishing improvement in many florists' flowers,' he wrote in 1859, 'when the flowers of the present day are compared with drawings made only twenty or thirty years ago'.[3] Obviously, these drawings were a reliable source of information for Darwin. But what if the level of realism had been as high in mid-nineteenth-century art as it had been, for example, in early fourteenth-century art, which, in terms of natural evolution, is not much more than a millisecond in the course of time. There is no doubt that Darwin would have been shocked rather than amazed by the difference between the real and the depicted flowers.[4] Yet, as with many of his observations, there was nothing wrong with Darwin's interpretation of the drawings as fossils. It probably just didn't occur to him that the realistic quality of the drawings resulted from an evolution of skill in rendering images, which had begun several centuries earlier. After all, he was not shocked by the evolution of art, but by the changes the real flowers had undergone in the hands of floriculturists.

The question of how much these drawings could be considered art was totally irrelevant to Darwin. For art scholars and artists during Darwin's time, it was quite a different story because they were increasingly likely to answer this question in the negative. Despite being so important since the beginning of the Renaissance, the effect of visual illusions no longer excited them. And thus, neither did the skill it required to produce these images. For example, August Wilhelm Schlegel, in his discussions of the paintings in the Dresden museum of 1799 (*Die Gemählde*), had one of his characters ask why Jacob Hackert's landscapes lacked that great and sublime nature – why 'one is lured purely as if by a soft siren's song into the real world, which the painting tries to depict' – to which the immediate response was that Hackert's paintings showed nothing more than camera obscura images. 'Its effect is less powerful than nature's', Schlegel continued, 'and yet not powerful enough as art'.[5] Similarly, Karl Friedrich von Rumohr in 1827 argued that if we want to fully comprehend art 'we should begin by totally abandoning all existing or conceivable themes'.[6] Von Rumohr thought that too many people were accustomed to interpreting the history of art as an evolution towards perfect realism, which was the result of the increased mastery of 'design, colour, chiaroscuro, composition, expression'. He believed this interpretation was incorrect because it tended to confuse 'the merely technical with the spiritual in art'.[7]

Statements like those of Schlegel and Von Rumohr were in sharp contrast to the promises that the Picture Man made to the children in Reinick's poem, or, for that matter, De Piles' earlier notions of art. These views show a completely different notion about what makes an image a work of art, in the fact that they had very little room left for illusion. This was to remain the opinion of many critics into the twentieth century, including such influential advocates of modern art as Walter Crane and Theo van Doesburg, who will be discussed later in this book. But it was also the opinion of many other, now-forgotten, writers from the first half of the twentieth century. Their innumerable publications must have familiarised the broader public with the notion that illusion, or even figuration, was irrelevant to art. Among them was a certain Hans Cornelius, who, in following Crane and Heinrich Wölfflin in his 1906 *Elementargesetze der bildenden Kunst. Grundlagen einer praktischen Ästhetik* (Elementary rules for visual art: Foundations of practical aesthetics), was particularly interested in teaching his readers to observe lines, colours and the formal relationships in works of art, apart from their figurative results. He considered this 'artistic way of looking' (*künstlerische Betrachtungsweise*) as the only correct way. After all, anyone who based his appreciation or rejection of a work of art on the value of its figurative content was thought to be distracted by something that 'just

doesn't concern its artistic value' (*eine solche, die eben nicht seinen Kunstwert trifft*).[8] For instance, Veronese and Tiepolo's ceiling paintings were considered to be masterfully rendered, yet artistically inferior (*kuenstlerisch minderwertig*) because they belonged to 'illusion painting' (*Illusionsmalerei*), as Cornelius disparagingly called it, which created confused spectators because they expected to see depth but were instead unpleasantly deceived.[9]

This opinion continued to reign until after the Second World War. In his 1954 book *Art and Visual Perception*, Rudolf Arnheim anathematized, so to speak, the principle of illusion in art. He spoke of 'the illusionistic doctrine' that had been held for so many centuries (and even on into the contemporary period, as he pointed out), which was based on the erroneous notion that 'deceitful illusion' is the primary goal of all art. Thus, works of art that did not necessarily conform to this principle – which, Arnheim added, basically included all art because perfect illusion was essentially impossible – were being interpreted in every conceivable way. Any deviations were understood as being the result of an artist's physical or mental shortcomings, or his violation of the rules of illusion, whether done wilfully or not. Arnheim, however, rejected this as a misleading notion, which was based on 'what is known in philosophy as "naive realism"'. After all, anyone who believes this is making the incorrect assumption that the material world is identical to the mental image formed by perception and that – for this reason – a painting or a sculpture is nothing more than a replica of what the artist has just witnessed. An artist is at most accorded the power to manipulate reality and depict things in a manner more beautiful than they actually are. But, Arnheim believed that this didn't mean much because it effectively reduces artistic creativity to nothing more than a 'cosmetic' act or a form of 'plastic surgery', which could just as well have been performed on real models in a studio.[10] (This passage was included unaltered by Arnheim in the 1974 edition of his book.)

Several years later, in 1961, the influential art critic Clement Greenberg also warned against the age-old idea that art is similar to illusion. 'Free-standing pictorial and sculptural art...', he wrote, 'was until a short while ago identified wholly with the representational, the figurative, the descriptive'. Greenberg criticised this age-old notion in order to promote the modern works of abstract art of his time. He did this not by rejecting all painting and sculpture that had come before it, but just the old theories that had supported them. Greenberg was attempting to minimise the importance of the recognisability of the object or scene and thought that the figuration found in old art no longer had any artistic relevance. Instead, a painting should be understood as 'a complex of shapes and colors to behold'. Greenberg even went so far as to predict that

future connoisseurs, once convinced of this truth, would eventually understand the value of old art much more than at that time – 1961 – and discover how it was similar to modern art. He hoped they would also discover the real reason why nature was imitated in old art: not to produce beautiful illusions, but to offer 'above all, a wealth of colors and shapes, and of intricacies of color and shape, such as no painter, in isolation with his art, could ever have invented'.[11]

When David Hockney, in a 1979 interview, was asked about his fondness for Piero della Francesca's paintings, he praised his ancient predecessor in a similar manner. Although the paintings have 'an explicit subject, often a Christian theme', Hockney explained, it is not 'the story which makes them so exceptional, but the always exciting composition'.

2   Imitation and Perfect Nature

By reducing the importance of illusion, the Picture Man's stall was razed along with, in a certain sense, all art theory prior to 1800. Arnheim's statement that art from the earlier periods was often considered a kind of plastic surgery may have revealed some understanding that art was more than mere imitation. However, apart from the condescending tone, the remark does no justice whatsoever to the sensitive nature of the actual art production and the accompanying art literature. It would be much more appropriate to compare the artist from the past with a breeder or a florist who is attempting to improve the animals, plants and anything else that nature provided or, more appropriately in both Dutch and German, to 'ennoble' these animals and plants. In fact, the artist's creations, especially those of the human figure, were often described as being something more than just imitations, that is, they were considered products that transcended nature except for their lacking breath and respiration to paraphrase the prominent topos of the time. Of course, people were well aware of the fact that artists were using paint or stone and not living materials. Artists had been empowered to improve upon nature not by means of the materials nature supplied, but via its tools, so to speak.[12]

The belief in the artist's power to utilise nature's toolkit was based on the widespread Aristotelian theory of the capacity of the human perceptual and cognitive faculties to detect order in the various forms of life. Aristotle believed that we learn to subdivide animals and plants into different groups by comparative observation and recognising their similarities and differences. No matter how different each individual in one group may be, we also tend to notice that they share a common set of structural features, which separates one species from another. Such a set was considered a blueprint or the inherent form

of a species, which comprises the driving force behind the creation of every new individual within a species. The differences between species are considered essential, while those between the individuals of one species were usually defined as accidental blemishes or defects. This is a completely different view of life and its variations as Darwin would have observed, but that, of course, is another story.

When, in 1563, Benvenuto Cellini praised the artist's creative powers as something that rivalled those of Apollo, who, according to ancient myth, had created all forms of life on earth, he was alluding to this Aristotelian view of human cognition. He called it the power of *disegno*, which enables the artist to design figures, animals and plants – and here Cellini was following an established literary tradition – by virtue of his knowledge of nature's blueprints. Cellini characterised *disegno* as the mental power that enables one to plan various actions that need to be performed, just as nature produces each form of life according to her own invention.

A true artist (or so it was said) was able to visualise perfect or ideal forms, which meant that he was capable of expressing nature's blueprints. Although such perfect forms were thought to be very rare in the real world, painters and sculptors were often seen as among the only people capable of learning to see these forms via large numbers of comparative studies of individuals. In 1568, Giorgio Vasari agreed with Cellini when he noted that it was the artist who was able to extract the essential knowledge of perfect design, or *disegno* from a broad range of available samples.[13] In short, in terms of art practice, artists were instructed to draw particular forms, analyse their structure and then choose and memorise the most beautiful parts. In a certain sense, their training was similar to that of biologists in that they also had to learn to recognise and remember these supposed basic forms. Pupils were compelled to study the nude and to draw classic models, especially those aspects of Antique Greek and Roman sculptures that were considered representations of the ideal human body (fig. 5). The drawing instruction manuals that began being published c. 1600 generally included a selection of perfect body parts to guide prospective artists (fig. 6). In this way they also offered a method for developing the imagination by mentally visualising how to properly combine the various parts to create new, well-proportioned and perfect figures, an image that the artist would eventually have to give shape to on canvas.

This method served as the basis for all classical, academic training for a period of several centuries, which competed with a no-less-stronger tradition that highlighted pure realism or naturalism. In 1770, the president of the English Royal Academy, Sir Joshua Reynolds, made this theory even clearer. In

Fig. 5 – C.-J. Natoire, *Drawing Class in the Academie Royale, Paris*, 1746, black chalk and water colour, 45.3 × 32.3 cm, The Courtauld Gallery Institute of Art (Gallery), London
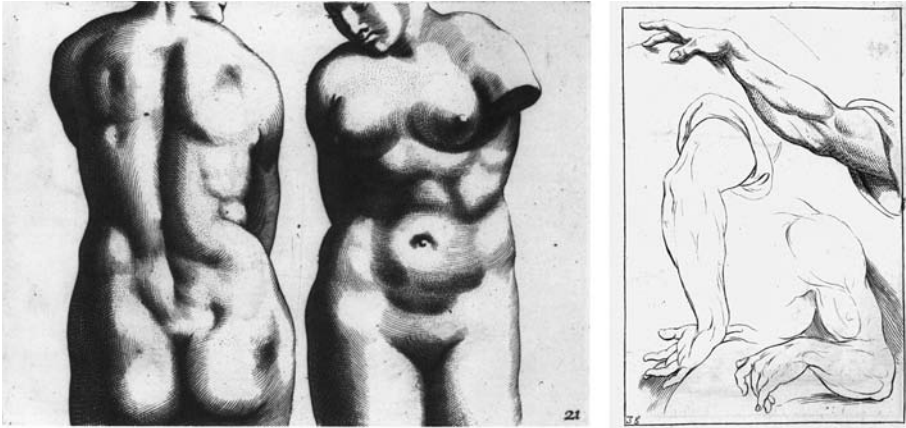
Fig. 6 – J. Gellee, *Tyrocinia artis pictoriae caelatoriae ac sculptoriae*, 1639: *Female Torsos*, [left]; Anonymous, *The compleat Drawing-book*, 1757: *Arms* [right]

his third *Discourse*, he informed his audience that, although it was not easy to give 'any precise invariable rules' in the acquisition of a great painting style, 'we may truly say that they always operate in proportion to our attention in observing the works of nature, to our skill in selecting, and to our care in digesting, methodizing, and comparing our observations'.[14] Reynolds focussed on the need to contemplate and compare natural phenomena with all of their 'blemishes and defects':

> This long laborious comparison should be the first study of the painter, who aims at the greatest style. By this means, he acquires a just idea of beautiful forms; he corrects nature by herself, her imperfect state by her more perfect. His eye being enabled to distinguish the accidental deficiencies, excrescences, and deformities of things, from their general figures, he makes out an abstract idea of their forms more perfect than any original; and what may seem a paradox, he learns to design naturally by drawing his figures unlike to any one object. This idea of the perfect state of nature, which the Artist calls the Ideal Beauty, is the great leading principle, by which works of genius are conducted.[15]

There has been a variety of differing opinions regarding how the perfect state of nature or Ideal Beauty should look since the Renaissance. The history of art provides enough examples: after all, Reynolds's own figures looked quite different from those of Vasari. However, on a theoretical level, Reynolds and Vasari did agree that the painter's task is to conjure up an illusion of a world

filled with three-dimensional figures. The relevance of the skill of imitating nature within the creative process was beyond dispute for most other artist-writers as well. It was considered vital and indispensable in the acquisition (and provision) of insight into the world of ideal forms.

3   A Colourful, Wonderful World of Forms

Art and illusion went hand in hand for centuries. Whenever a painting was deemed beautiful, it generally denoted the subject and the manner of depiction. Or rather, the veracity of the illusion and the artist's skill in applying design, colour, chiaroscuro, expression and other means to produce the desired effect, because, after all, some subjects could hardly be called beautiful, including depictions of martyrdoms and battle scenes, for instance. These characteristics were, according to De Piles and others, what a painting and its creator should be judged on. But these were, as stated above, the exact features that Von Rumohr in 1827, was to judge so harshly, considering them as belonging to 'the merely technical' rather than 'the spiritual in art'.

In the nineteenth century, other qualities began to be sought after to help distinguish a painting from a mere representation. One could say that Charles Perrault was already undermining the old imitation theory in as early as 1688. He remarked that being an accurate imitation should no longer be considered a quality that determined whether a painting was a work of art.[16] It was certainly a worthy quality in ancient Greece when, in Perrault's view, art was still in its infancy. But art, he believed, had already come a long way by the late seventeenth century. In the eighteenth century, attention began to shift from a concentration on the representational character of a painting to one that focussed on its so-called aesthetic qualities. Qualities such as Hogarth's line of beauty or what Goethe defined as perceptual artistic laws (i.e., order, symmetry and contrast) emerged as the main criteria necessary when investigating the essence of art. This distinction between style and representation, or between form and figurative content, was in part determined by the emergence of the science of connoisseurship in c. 1700 and newer theories of perception and cognition. The latter entailed distinguishing a dichotomy in the process of perception that included, on the one hand, a purely optical sensation of forms and colours, which concerns the information that is received and perceived by the eye, and, on the other hand, three-dimensional images or mental constructs that were the result of the logical mind synthesising various visual and other sensory impressions with prior knowledge to produce meaningful things.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the study of aesthetics arose as a form of scientific inquiry that studied the formal, two-dimensional qualities of an image, which supposedly corresponded to direct visual sensations, or purely *visual* perception. Much less attention in this field was paid to the figurative aspect of painting. The invention of photography must undoubtedly have strengthened the notion that the representational should be seen solely as the result of technical skill sans artistic value. This, however, did not mean that the figurative aspect was completely ignored or rejected when judging a work of art. Natural forms and, for that matter even photographs of these forms in the second half of the nineteenth century, were still considered as the starting point of art. However, the figurative as such was no longer an essential aspect of the definition of art as it had little to do with style. Works that had hitherto been appreciated as lifelike illusions were more and more being praised as compositions of abstract lines, forms or patterns of colours, light and shade, qualities, which, in turn, were now perceived as the real stuff of beauty.

This approach constituted one of the basic principles of nineteenth-century thinking about art within a broad range of professions. It can be found in the writings of nineteenth-century artists, such as Adolf von Hildebrand or James McNeill Whistler. In 1878, Whistler defended his kind of painting, which he referred to as 'Nocturne' by describing it as 'an arrangement of line, form, and colour first,' which strove to 'bring about a symmetrical result'.[17] In the same vein, Maurice Denis in 1890 made his famous statement that 'it is well to remember that a picture – before being a battle horse, a nude woman, or some anecdote – is essentially a plane surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order'.[18] In this respect, Crane and Van Doesburg's observations followed those of Whistler and Denis. Van Doesburg actually made the almost logical step toward the creation of abstract art, which his forerunners would not have thought of, but which was to become a much-debated principle in twentieth-century art. In 1935, for example, Charles Biedermann wrote that he was trying for 'a complete riddance of any semblance to nature objects in my painting' and further predicted that 'someday all the painters will realize that color and form are things which have an existence of their own'.[19]

A similar approach can be found in the writings of nineteenth-century experimental aestheticians, such as Gustav Fechner, who will be discussed later on. They were the actual predecessors of Arnheim. This approach could also be found among various art philosophers such as Conrad Fiedler, who was convinced that a real artist was capable of using 'the eye preponderantly and independently in developing sensory material into reality' being exceptionally sensitive to the 'colorful, wonderful world of forms'.[20] Fiedler's remark not only

Fig. 7 – Parmigianino, *Marriage of St. Catharine*, ca. 1526, oil on canvas, 64 x 56 cm, National Gallery, London

Fig. 8 – From Fagiolo dell'Arco (1970)

resembles those of Denis, but also seems to predict Greenberg's earlier-noted quote.

This change in approach, as manifested in the aesthetic literature and art criticism of the time, also had a significant influence on art historical research. The belief in a definable essence of art, that there is such thing as Art, survived as did the old conviction that the history of art is cyclical and had passed through succeeding stages of blossoming, flowering and decay. In that sense, they could still shake hands with all of the art historians since Vasari. What had changed, however, were essentially the definitions of art and the appreciation of the various historical phases. Art historians also initiated the assigning of less artistic value to illusion in art until it had eventually been reduced to something quite inconsequential. They began considering the essence of art in its formal, non-figurative aspects similar to, for instance, the earlier-quoted Cornelius, who, in 1906, thought that a focus on the figurative was characteristic of an inartistic way of looking (*unkünstlerische Betrachtungsweise*) at art. Art historians

in particular began to equate the essence of art with the stylisation of the figuration, regardless of whether this made it difficult to identify the subject that was being depicted.

Let me here provide an example. In his famous 1967 book on Mannerism, John Shearman wrote that Parmigianino in his Marriage of St. Catharine (fig. 7) invited us to see 'curves that, like waves, flow together to climaxes, and then part again – curves so filled with their own aesthetic vitality that the illustrative meaning of the forms ... of which they are composed is partially lost'.[21] In the same vein, another one of Parmigianino's paintings (fig. 8) was discussed three years later by Maurizio Fagiolo dell'Arco in terms of an abstract line pattern: 'If the painting were reduced to the formal lines of the picture' – whereupon Fagiolo dell'Arco elucidated his words with a diagram – 'it would look like a sixteenth-century print depicting the movements of the celestial bodies'.[22]

Now, one may wonder why sixteenth-century works of art were never, as far as we know, described in these kinds of terms in their time. Perhaps people did not record their perceptions or maybe they did not perceive them in this way. This is certainly an art historical conundrum. Did Parmigianino really hope that the viewer would respond to patterns of curves and lines (never mind the fact that neither he nor any other sixteenth-century painter ever employed these abstract patterns in the construction of a painting)? We do know, however, that sixteenth-century authors often described the lifelikeness of various painted figures, which, I think, makes more sense. Isn't the fact that the Marriage of St. Catherine conjures up an illusion of several figures in a room its most salient visual feature? Even today, most viewers without any specific religious background see two elegant women with a child, the head of a man and some bystanders in a doorway in the background.

To be honest, Shearman's remark about the dominance of the line's aesthetic vitality in Parmigianino's painting does not sound like a sixteenth-century observation. It actually more resembles what Wilhelm Worringer defined in 1907 as the essential quality that transforms a figurative representation into a work of art. A painting, he wrote, can be designated as art, provided it does more than simply allow the viewer to recognise organic, living forms; the work must also display an aesthetics of their beauty by how the artist draws his lines and forms. 'For us, the value of a line, of a form', Worringer observed, 'consists of the value of Life, which it holds for us. It is beautiful only because of our vital urge (*Vitalgefühl*), which we mysteriously read into it'.[23]

Of course, it is actually quite difficult to identify what kinds of reactions painters desired in the distant past. But the fact remains that when one stands in front of a Mannerist painting, its message alternates, depending on one's

approach: whether you use an approach based on the theories contemporary at the time of the painting or a more modern approach. This variable effect may not offer a decisive answer regarding the correct interpretation, but it does alert us to the fact that there is a problem. In any case, it inspired me to write this book.

As I noted earlier in the introduction, this book is about the influence that the aforementioned modern approach to art has had on the historiography regarding the Old Masters. We must look at the origins of this approach and discover how it became customary to interpret the historical development of art as something that occurred in a situation of conflict between recognisable figuration and abstract stylisation. Stylisation was accorded a primary role in the assessment of the artistic merit of a work of art. In this book, special attention will be paid to the art – or the period – that is commonly referred to as Mannerism, including Parmigianino's painting described by Shearman, for instance. The history of the recognition and appreciation of Mannerism is a fairly accurate measure of how ideas about art and its history evolved over the past two or three centuries, as well as ideas about art's role in a broader context of cultural history. The same can also be said for various other kinds of non-classical art that are often seen as deviating from the classical norm, such as Medieval art. They all tell a similar story about the strict norms that were used to judge art in the past and the long-term and often surviving negative effects it had on views of non-classical art.

Mannerism has been criticised and reviled for a very long time because it didn't fit in well with contemporary notions of what art was supposed to be. At best it was recognised as evidence of art's decline after the supposedly superior and unsurpassable High Renaissance. In c. 1800, for instance, the art historian Luigi Lanzi used the term 'Mannerism' in his *Storia pittorica della Italia* (*The history of painting in Italy*) to denote the preponderance of imitations of a recognised master's works in a literal and servile manner. He thought that this slavish imitation was not just characteristic of sixteenth-century Florentine and Roman art in which Raphael's and Michelangelo's visual vocabulary were imitated over and over again. Lanzi, in fact, considered this to be an inevitable phase that each aspect of culture must pass through. He called it 'a sort of fatality' that 'seems to prevail in all human things, rendering their duration in the same state of short continuance; so that after attaining their highest elevation, we may assuredly at no distant period look for their decline'. For instance, Lanzi pointed out that Venetian art met with much the same fate after 1600, when the work of Tintoretto was being copied to excess.[24]

The general usefulness of the term 'Mannerism' was reiterated in 1948 by Ernst Robert Curtius in his *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter* (*European Literature and the Latin middle ages*) where he also contrasted 'Mannerism' (as non-perfect art) with art that was perfect. Curtius defined the two as equally valid forms of art and emphasised that he was in favour of using 'Mannerism' as more a neutral term.[25] We can ultimately decide for ourselves which view we prefer. 'Anyone who prefers Tintoretto to Raphael can give good grounds for his preference.' It may seem self-evident, but this tolerant attitude – no more than the attitudes towards Medieval art – took a long time before it was readily accepted. Apparently, art historical recognition and even aesthetic appreciation of non-classical art could only come to the fore, as we will see, after it was first considered from a cultural-historical point of view, which gave it its right to exist in the collective historical memory.

Curtius was primarily addressing literary historians and advised them to borrow the art historical term 'Mannerism' to denote a kind of non-classical style of literature. It wasn't his goal to contribute to the art historical discussion about the usefulness and validity of the term in the periodization of the history of art. 'This is not the place', he noted, 'to discuss whether the word "Mannerism" is a good choice as the designation of a period in art history and to what extent it is justified.'[26] Eventually, this was done by the 1960s art historians Shearman and Craigh Hugh Smyth who became devoted to articulating the 'good grounds' for the aesthetic preference for Mannerist art. Shearman in particular went a long way toward justifying the use of the term in various aspects of Italian culture since 1520, that is, not only in the visual arts, but in literature and music as well.

Shearman eliminated various wrong-headed historical and aesthetic premises prominent in art historical research because they had obstructed the view of the original intentions of artists and patrons for far too long. He saw Giambologna's Rape of the Sabines or Perino del Vaga's print of Vertumnus and Pomona (fig. 9), for instance, as proofs of the general preference for the elegant, abstract stylisations of figurative forms. 'The scale of the figures', of Del Vaga's picture, he observed,

> being almost that of the whole design, we are more immediately aware of the freedom in the distribution of their parts, as if they were abstract and not figurative material; for the figures, interlaced one with the other, are also deployed in a remarkably decorative way over the whole surface. This freedom of disposition is obtained by manipulations of considerable torsion, achieved, however, with perfect ease in the figures themselves. Grace, not tension, is the result....[27]

Fig. 9 – Perino del Vaga, *Vertumnus and Pomona*, 1527, red chalk, pen and ink, 17.6 x 13.7 cm, design for engraving by Caraglio, British Museum, London

Fig. 10 – Raphael, *The Sistine Madonna*, 1512-13, oil on canvas, 270 x 201 cm, Gemäldegalerie, Dresden

In his aforementioned analysis of Parmigianino's Marriage of St. Catharine (fig. 7) Shearman went on to explain how the emphasis on decorative stylisation could sometimes even be detrimental to 'the illustrative meaning of the forms'.

It was on the basis of this hypothetical predilection for stylisation that Shearman came to define Mannerism as the 'stylish style'.[28] So, notwithstanding the appropriate criticism he applied to earlier works on the subject, there was one thing that Shearman obviously steadfastly believed: that art is a tension between figuration and linear stylisation, whereby the latter was deemed as the determining factor in the aesthetic or artistic content of a work. This conviction did not emerge back in the sixteenth century, but evolved gradually somewhere in the eighteenth. The history of this way of looking is the subject of the present book.

By characterising the figures as almost abstract and his lyrical descriptions of the works of art as compositions of elegant, wavy contours, Shearman was actually paying Mannerist art a wonderful compliment. This appreciation for elegant contours had already been the exclusive preserve of high classical art for a very long time. 'How grand, how noble is her Contour', Winckelmann once exultantly wrote referring to Raphael's Sistine Madonna (fig. 10) thus putting

Raphael on a par with the best Greek artists from Athens in the time of Pericles. Winckelmann certainly believed that other valuable paintings had been produced since the time of Raphael and Michelangelo. But the majority of what we now call Mannerist art was of no value whatsoever to him. He was utterly convinced that art had fallen into a state of barbarism, that is, until the Carracci arrived in the late-sixteenth century. Winckelmann would have considered Shearman's characterisation of Mannerism as something of a curse.[29] But, art history has come a long way since the eighteenth century, and so, I propose that we now travel back in time from the 1960s, back through the twentieth, the nineteenth to eventually find ourselves somewhere in the eighteenth century.