Picasso and Truth, From Cubism to Guernica

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Reviewed by CHRIS MIELE

ON PAGE 163 of this meticulous, well-crafted intellectual biography we find the exact date of the invention of architectural history: 11th September 1844. It was then that Robert Willis, the Cambridge University polymath, presented a paper on Canterbury at the Cathedral, the first of his admired ‘cathedral series’. And so, Alex Buchanan, writes, was born ‘the first book ever to be defined by its author as an “architectural history”’. Buchanan is not one to speculate. What she says in this book she says only on the basis of the most careful consideration of all relevant sources, and then only after the proposition and every source relating to it has been thoroughly turned over. Buchanan’s temper and method are at one with her subject. If Willis had anything to say about the matter, then this is the intellectual biography he would have wanted.

But the question that constantly came back to the present reviewer was whether what Willis wrote really was ‘architectural history’, even if he himself named it so. Willis was more of a building archaeologist than a historian. The world he analysed was hermetic: here is this physical evidence in one part of a medieval church, here that in another, finally a third from a different place altogether. Put them together with whatever reliable manuscript source he could find (and there are not many) and so conclude the date of the building, what influenced it and what it influenced.

It was only when Willis looked at medieval monastic remains that he went beyond the world of features, style and fabric to think about how physical evidence could illuminate social or cultural history. Even then, when analysing the plan of St Gall or Castle Acre Priory, he dealt with strictly functional relationships and how ‘they shaped’, Buchanan writes, ‘the arrangement of surviving buildings’. Even here all things find their way back to the physical characteristics and the site. This was the approach he adopted in his posthumous four-volume opus (jointly written with his nephew, J.W. Clark), The Architectural History of the University of Cambridge of 1886. This book more than any other secured Willis’s reputation by sheer dint of the number of influential people who read for degrees there and so explored Willis and Clark.

Willis matured at a time when the historical study of buildings was seen as a branch of inductive science. The rigour he brought to his scholarship was born of an interest in mechanics and mathematics. In that sense his contribution mirrors that of William Whewell, the other Cambridge polymath. His Architectural Notes on German Churches pioneered the structural explanation of Gothic. The pointed arch, the style’s defining feature, had evolved, Whewell thought, from the construction of rib vaulting, a German specialism. That Teutonic myth was shattered in the 1840s, when bit by bit the centrality of French Gothic came to be accepted by English scholars. Whewell (1794–1866) was a true contemporary but, unlike Willis, his contribution to architectural history was a youthful dalliance. Whewell went on to make a name for himself as a physicist and philosopher of science, and therein lies his principal contribution to the culture of nineteenth-century science.

Buchanan carefully charts the interchange between science and historical study. Along the way she takes the reader to surprising places. Willis, it turns out, investigated the operations of chess-playing automata and carried out early research into acoustics and the ‘mechanism of the larynx’. That empirical mindset collided with an antiquarian tradition that was, as often as not, intellectually thin or just muddled. Like Whewell, Willis defined a new way of looking at things by resorting to foreign examples, in his case Italian Gothic which forms the basis of his Remarks on the Architecture of the Middle Ages of 1835. It is interesting – and Buchanan does not mention this – that both these scientific-minded, numerate men relied on a ‘dataset’ outside the United Kingdom. Perhaps there was too much cultural baggage associated with the cherished historical scene at home. Continental study freed their minds.

Willis refined his method on the amateur society lecture circuit, delivering a series of papers at various conferences organised by the British Archaeological Association. These were major cultural events, reported in the local press, attended by local dignitaries. Willis led炉crows around the country’s great medieval sites, and to make himself heard he often had to stand on a chair. He carried his audience with him by lively gestures and ‘that striking bodily activity which was so characteristic of the man, and for the display of which his lectures gave so many opportunities’. There was how the great historian, and one time architectural historian E.A. Freeman described Willis in his obituary. That image, of ‘sparkling and witty performance [...] particularly popular with his female listeners’ (as Buchanan writes), is at odds with the tone of what Buchanan accepts was the often ‘dilatory academic’ style of his publications.

One of the products of Buchanan’s tremendous research is the picture she is able to paint of the world of Victorian amateur archaeologists, their struggles to assert their authority, secure reputations and gain status. To the best of my knowledge no other study of this period even comes close to describing this network.

What of Willis’s legacy, which Buchanan handles in two thousand words? This is probably sufficient, but therein lies the quiet tragedy of this great intellectual. Willis is sometimes likened to Pevsner who relied on his predecessor’s cathedral series for his own marvellous entries in The Buildings of England. In fact, the two were very different writers. Pevsner quirky but also with a critical edge, Willis a man sticking strictly to the facts and avoiding aesthetics. It is telling that at a time when architecture stimulated the literary imagination, from Ruskin to Trollope, Willis set his mind on the evidence as had no one before. In another country, in Germany or France, Willis would have been an academic art historian and through the university network have created a new discipline. Instead he had to rely on a network of enthusiastic amateurs working through local societies and guidebooks.

Thus it is fitting that any study of Willis can only be an intellectual biography. There is no personal archive, regrettably because clearly Willis had charm and wit in person if not in his writings. We can be sure, beyond all reasonable doubt, that there is no personal information lurking out there, for if there was, Buchanan would have discovered it.


Reviewed by NEIL COX

SUPPOSE THAT TRUTH is a work by Picasso.1 Such a thought experiment raises the highest hopes about the nature of the achievement in a particular work, but it also opens the question of truth itself, both philosophically and in terms of contemporary culture. ‘The question of truth’ implies the unravelling of the values of moral philosophy and epistemology, and is as much about a need for ‘untruths’ as it is about the function of the desire for truth, as well as for a distinction between good and evil, in Western culture. To recast the understanding of Picasso’s art against this extra-moral questioning is, I think, the ambition of T.J. Clark’s dazzling and sometimes troubling book.

Divided into six ‘lectures’, each with a single-word title, it retains the lyric feel and intensity of live performance that characterised the 2000 Mellon Lectures upon which it is based.2 The ‘Introduction’ has to do a huge amount of work. For a start it sets out the author’s stall in very broad-brushed terms vis-à-vis the existing scholarship on the artist. No one is named, but the target is a hagiographic and biographically focused...
literature dismissed as apotropaic, an ideological machine designed to protect us from exposure to the destabilising force of Picasso as Truth. Of course, Clark grants that the autobiographical question must in some way be at the centre of the artist’s project; the question is who the ‘I’ that ‘writes’ might be? Arthur Rimbaud’s dictum ‘Je est un autre’, favoured by Picasso, is a touchstone in Clark’s negotiation of the problem. This kind of argument has been made before. What is different about Clark’s approach is his insistence that, first, ‘the way to particularity in art is via absolute aesthetic generality’ – here he means to insist on art, to hang onto the notion of sensuously embodied ideas – and, secondly, that what Picasso’s ‘autobiographical’ project does is question the last remaining ‘universal’ left to our culture – the ‘fiction of subjectivity’ (pp.12–13). The first of these points underpins the value placed in the book on the sustained interrogation of single works; the truth (or ‘untruth’) will be got out of them no matter how long it takes, and no matter how many dialectical turns or ambivalences need to be embraced. The second opens up the broader historical argument: that Picasso’s art addresses with the world of the bourgeois, the nineteenth-century form of subjectivity that embraced. The second opens up the broader exposure to the destabilising force of Picasso, as a future-oriented artist willing to give up the humanist body of the classical tradition, the notion of the individual artist-genius, and the spaces and time of bourgeois culture.

In Clark’s Farewell to an Idea of 1999, it was Cubism between 1909 and 1911 – and maybe even only in 1910 – that functioned as the zenith of Modernism and as the leitmotif of the book. In Picasso and Truth, intense pessimism over the twentieth-century landscape of destruction and pogroms leads Clark to treat the ‘retrogressive’ tendency in modern art, everything from Chagall to de Chirico to Kahlo, as now almost preferable to year-zero radicalism, collectivism, abstraction and agit-prop, tainted as the latter are for him with complicity with dictatorships and tyrannies. The book thus offers an ethical defence of Picasso’s apparently a-political and ‘retrogressive’ post-Cubist eroticism and mythopoetic universe. No matter how joyful or ludicrous the paintings become, Clark insists that we shall hear bass notes: of the crisis of the bourgeois order and, negatively, of the horrors of the century.

In making this stick, the focus is on the conjuring of space in Picasso’s paintings. In one sense space here is that of the bourgeois: it is about things and about private life, about possessions and possession, closeness and domesticity; above all the centrality of space in the discussion is meant to signify a particular kind of world view that is a bedrock of certainty; the drama of Clark’s book confronts life-denying nihilism. The argument about space in painting is about the twilight of the idol of certainty; the drama of Clark’s book is to show how Picasso’s loyalty to a world of things in rooms is made to coexist or merge with a world of pure spaces and structures, and beyond this – perhaps as a result – to make monstrosity and disorder in the everyday. In this book Nietzsche thus represents a profound voice somewhat more adequate to Picasso’s remarkable painted worlds. To make a philosophical text illuminate painting so evocatively, to such wonderful degrees, is a signal achievement. The political despair and the will to confrontation with the amoral that motivate the equation Nietzsche/Picasso could itself, perhaps, be subjected to a kind of genealogical testing. What is the choice of Nietzsche as guide meant to produce for our sense not only of Picasso from the perspective of the present moment, but of a critical history of culture today? We should not miss the decision to make Nietzsche central – not Marx, not Benjamin, not Freud, not Adorno. What all-too-human need is fulfilled by the compelling force of Nietzsche as cultural origin?


6 The Mellon Lectures remain available as podcasts at www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/audio-video/mellon.html.
A History of Chromolithography: printed colour for all.


‘I am aware,’ Michael Twymann, states in his preface to this new book, ‘that I am merely scratching the surface of an enormous subject. This “scratch” has resulted in a bible of 728 pages and over eight hundred illustrations. Deeply rooted in the collection at the Department of Typography and Graphic Communication at Reading University, Twymann has devoted his life to the history of a technique that was developed in the nineteenth century, flourished in the second half of that century, and started its decline in the first decades of the twentieth. To art historians lithography is known by the many artists who used the technique as a printmaking tool, culminating in the coloured posters of the first half of the twentieth century. But art historians tend to neglect all commercial work, even the ponderous object. The production of these colourful and well-collected items was in no way different from the commercial practice of the day, as Twymann points out in his chapter on “the chromolithographic artists.”

Printing historians are for the most part interested in letterpress and typography, rather than illustration. Book historians deal with the book as a phenomenological object, publishing and the book trade.

Twymann starts off his bible with the development of colour printing in general, as old as printing itself. Lithography proved to be the best technique for printing in colour, although technical demands, such as registration and transparency of the inks had to be solved before the technique could develop into the vast industry that arose from it. The development, from the end of the nineteenth century, of photomechanical methods of reproduction, falls outside the scope of this book. Chromolithography had to give way to three- and four-colour reproduction from screened negatives, first in relief printing, then in offset and gravure – common practices today.

It is hard to understand the craftsmanship of the ‘chromiste’, the man determining the number of colours to be used, and the order in which they had to be printed to yield the intended result. We can hardly imagine the skill with which such a person could analyse colours of a work of art, by pure instinct and experience, and render them faithfully in the final result by using twelve, sixteen or whatever amount of colour to reproduce in a given size. Anyone familiar with the Arundel Society’s huge chromolithographic collections would be astonished by the fact that colours were not separated using filters and photography, but by experience alone. All methods used in chromolithography – and there were many – are here extensively treated and well illustrated in a way we can all understand.

Inevitably there is some overlap with Twymann’s earlier writings on lithography. His Lithography 1820–1870 (1970), is now outdated by further research, but the publication of his Panuzzi Lectures, held in 2000 (Breaking the mould: the first hundred years of lithography, published by the British Library in 2001), heralded the book here under review.

It is well written, designed and typeset by Rob Buisman, who deserves full credit for the successful organisation of such a wealth of material. The volume opens easily, and, remarkably, the reproductions of original wood-engravings, like those of printing presses, taken from the original catalogue, are reproduced in line, not in halftone. The typography is clear, set in two columns, and the numerous footnotes – in three columns – leave no doubts about the origin of the information in the text. Finally, a list of terms, an excellent index as well as a comprehensive bibliography complete the book.

JOHN DE ZOETE

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