

*HANS KÖRNER. *Auf der Suche nach der wahren Einheit. Ganzheitsvorstellungen in der französischen Malerei und Kunstliteratur vom mittleren 17. bis zum mittleren 19. Jahrhundert.* München: Fink 1988. DM138.00

Near the end of his book (248), on occasion of criticizing the beloved exercise of treating Delacroix as the predecessor of impressionism, Körner turns against all those teleological models of history which take each historical period as preparatory to the following and the following as fulfilment of the preceding. But, in fact, the author himself did nothing else but follow the model of a step-by-step development from the classical Italian art theory to the romantic aesthetics of genius. The subtitle of the book, "Ganzheitsvorstellungen in der französischen Malerei und Kunstliteratur," describes the project exactly and 'unité' may indeed be the central term of any classical and postclassical art theory to which all further determinations are subordinated. Therefore, a monographical treatment appears to be more than promising.

In the preface, Körner explains his methodological orientation. Against the frequent tendency to stylize a general "organic unity" (whatever that may mean) as a fundamental condition of any kind of aesthetic concretion, Körner postulates the necessity always to ask about the particularity of the

4 Huston Diehl, *An Index of Icons in English Emblem Books 1500-1700.* (Norman/London: U of Oklahoma P, 1986).

respective unity concept. With this demand he turns against methods widely spread, especially in art history, in which grids of composition are used to describe varying aesthetic phenomena, without being examined for their historic relevance.

The author then examines the ideas of what should be understood by artistic unity by analyzing both paintings and texts. Yet, the interpretation of texts takes priority, so that non-art historical interests are also responded to. Like almost any other study in classical European art theory, here too the starting point is Alberti. Alberti regards composition, i.e. the level of installment of unity, as the arrangement of human bodies: for the Renaissance, in general, pictorial order is not an abstract quality but the order of the picture objects. In the neoclassical theory of the seventeenth century the author perceives an understanding distinctively oriented towards the entirety of the picture. Félibien, Le Brun, and especially Depiles do not think of pictorial coherence as depending upon single objects but on the overall disposition of the whole. Such a theory appears to respond to developments of painting experience, especially to that of Poussin, who through the modal determination of the picture tends to subtract the power of expression from the figure and its gestic and mimic modulation and transfers it to the overall atmosphere of the picture.

The relativization of the traditional idea of imitation causes the pathos of Diderot's idea of unity. For the enlightened philosopher the model of nature is dissolved into an infinite number of relations. Art's foremost task is to reveal these relations in a transformed form. Due to its limited means art can only be "asymptotic approximation," never a copy. The unity of the work of art becomes a paradoxical form of autonomous reflexion. The relation to the model is no longer established through the objects that constitute unity but lies in unity itself. Here the objects are nothing more than the phenomenal expression of universal relation.

During French Neoclassicism the absolute of unity and the discredit cast upon representationalism lead to a point where unity not only comprehensively emphasizes the pictorial contents, but installs itself as a transfigural scheme. At this point Körner replaces text exegesis with picture exegesis: David constructs pictures into which figures are fitted. Pictorial order becomes all powerfull and restricts the protagonist's activity. The idea of the vivid pictorial organism is dead. As Körner puts it trenchantly, the artist no longer wishes to order objects but to objectize order.

The Romantic movement indeed does without the compulsive character of neoclassical composition, but it takes on and even forces the relativization of figure and object. For once and all the unity of the work of art is kept in the subjectively created autonomy of the pictorial structure and is no longer based on the interaction of objects. With Delacroix, for example, colour

