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## The Pursuit of the History of Art: Ethical Problems

The ethical problems facing the art historian in his professional activities as a researcher, museum expert, and art critic are for the most part identical with those encountered in the other humanities. Only in some cases do they assume a special nature proper to the history of art as a separate discipline. I shall give a general outline of these problems, which relate to three basic aspects of the art historian's research and may be headed "scholarship and truth," "scholarship and reputation," and "scholarship and profit."

**Scholarship and truth.** The principal postulate in scholarship, that of truthfulness, in other words that the scholar's enunciations be a true representation of his scientific beliefs, is self-evident. Hence, with all due respect for the individual's personal views, one can hardly fail to note the moral ambivalence in the tendency of art historians to express allegedly scholarly opinions not so much for the sake of truth but rather with the intention of gaining recognition in a particular intellectual, ideological, or political milieu – a practice prevalent not only in the past. In other words, "writing to please" is reprehensible.

I would also put into this group of morally dubious practices what might be called a special kind of methodological snobbery. Instead of engaging in an authentic search for the truth and using plain, logical, and straightforward language, the methodological snob resorts to pseudo-scientific phraseology and bewilders his recipients with references to fashionable foreign authorities, sometimes pseudo-authorities. Instead of applying clear, objective argumentation, he produces an obscure jargon or just mumbo-jumbo. Alas, the present-day history of art in Poland has not been left untainted by this defect, which it dismisses as a result of the "postmodernist theory."

It would be well to keep in mind the fact that an academic's worth may best be gauged by his attitude to his students, his colleagues, and the work of his predecessors. Professor Tazbir has discussed the subject of integrity or its lack in the writing of reviews. I for my part would like to add that scholarly critique should be objective, not personal, that is, it should relate to what is being researched and not to the researcher. As regards the senior academic in his role as a tutor, I believe that his true worth can be observed in his attitude to junior scholars who are more

academically gifted than he is. I would go further and say that a good professor is one who has educated a more talented pupil to succeed him. Unfortunately, what we are observing today is on the whole a levelling-down process: students generally tend to have lesser qualifications than their masters.

**Attitude to colleagues.** It should not be necessary to say how demoralising it is in an academic milieu, especially for those who are only starting out in scholarship, when a professor adds his name to his colleagues' publications, thereby confirming what are essentially the achievements of others with his name. This habit may occasionally be encountered, especially in joint projects carried out on the basis of grants. The rule of "to each his just deserts" should always be observed in scholarship. This also applies to the way we treat the work of our predecessors, which should mirror the way we would like our own achievements to be treated by future researchers.

This point is especially relevant in research on the history of art, which unlike other fields of historical study is constantly bringing new facts to light, and not just new interpretations. The progress made in the cataloguing of works of art, the international antique market, the public disclosure of private collections, and the discoveries contributed by archaeology are presenting more and more artefacts, and even hitherto unknown artists, and thereby creating a need for changes, sometimes quite considerable ones, in the existing syntheses of art history. Hence doing justice to the discoverers is of tremendous importance, especially as more often than not they are modest, not very widely known individuals working in the field of scholarship. Unfortunately, in this country, although everyone uses reference books like *Katalog zabytków sztuki* or *Słownik artystów polskich*, not everyone cites the source of his/her information, treating the data published in such handbooks as general knowledge which does not need to be quoted in interpretative work. In this way we come on to another group of ethical problems.

**Scholarship and reputation.** What I have in mind here is not only the need for a distinction between one's own work and the achievements of others, along with the clear specification of who did what in a join project or publication, or more precise acknowledgements for a particular piece of information instead of the usual formula of gratitude "for a series of invaluable comments." I am also thinking of the extremely delicate issue of the way in which Polish academia is promoted abroad. Polish participants in numerous international conferences present, and subsequently publish their papers in the proceedings, often relying on the research results of other academics, which have been published in a generally inaccessible language, Polish. The point is that their papers should make it clear how much is the speaker's own contribution, and how much has come from the work of less well-known authors. Let's not deck ourselves out unknowingly in others' feathers.

**Scholarship and profit.** The postulate of disinterestedness in scholarship is difficult to put into practice, nevertheless it is extremely important, especially in the history of art. Here I am thinking not only of the nowadays fairly ubiquitous practice of treating university tutoring as a kind of business activity, but especially of the honest performance of expertises, verifications, and attributions of works of art for the antique market, and the delicate matter of art criticism. Sir Ernest Gombrich, one of the most outstanding contemporary art historians, when asked about the torrent of money that flows into the hands of not very honest art experts, referred to a well-known Italian saying, “Give me *un milione*, and I’ll tell you it’s a Giorgione; give me *un miliardo*, and I’ll say it’s a Leonardo.” And he called this state of affairs disastrous for our discipline. We in Poland have had the opportunity of seeing this for ourselves, for instance in the valuation of the Porczyński Collection in Warsaw. Everyone in the field of museum studies and art history has known the true value of most of these pictures for a long time, but no-one except Dr. Mieczysław Morka was brave enough to speak out publicly.

What goes for the antique business in works of art also goes, even more subtly, for art criticism as practised by art historians. I need not mention the artificial pushing up of the value of artists and prices, as a purely commercial stimulus. It is extremely hard to tell the difference between an art critic’s genuine belief about a given work or artist, and what is merely a complimentary phrase occasioned by opportunistic conformity with the current trend, or even a marchand’s deliberate, profit-oriented hoodwink. In other words, whenever he acts as an expert or critic, the art historian must be very careful not to become a tool in the dealers’ hands.

To sum up, I shall say that all of these problems may be resolved if we keep strictly to the promise made during the promotion ceremony for the conferring of the doctor’s degree. The Latin words of the oath that new doctors take are that they shall engage in scholarship neither for sordid lucre, nor for vainglory, but so that the truth be propagated all the more.