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ABSTRACT

Art historians of the present deal with the description, chronology, topography, and evaluation of works of architecture, sculpture, painting, and the minor arts. They connect works of art with sources and documents referring to their origin, their artists, and their techniques, and are interested in biographies and the reconstruction of the original environment of a work of art. Art historians of the past, on the other hand, did not call themselves by that name. They were poets, mimists, historians and chroniclers, architects, painters, naturalists, travelers, biographers, statesmen, members of the clergy, or private collectors, who in their writings touched one or another aspect of our present complex method of writing art history. By combining bits of information offered by authors from Homer to the 19th century, present historians can collect descriptive and historical information about ancient art works. Rare books are primary sources for such information. (Author/LS)

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Paper presented at the ALA's Association of College and Research  
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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,  
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EDUCATION

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Art historians of the present deal with the description; chronology, topography, and evaluation of works of architecture, sculpture, painting, and the minor arts. They connect works of art with sources and documents referring to their origin, their artists, and their techniques. Art historians of the present are also interested in biographies of artists and patrons, and try to reconstruct the entire original environment of a work of art in order to be able to properly evaluate it and thus also establish its aesthetic value.

Art historians of the past in general did not approach works of art in this complex way; they never even called themselves art historians, as they were specifically either poets, mimists, historians and chroniclers, architects, painters, naturalists, travelers, biographers, statesmen, members of the clergy, or private collectors, who in their writings touched one or another aspect of our present complex method of writing art history.

It is in combining bits of information offered by authors from far distant times that a work of art can now be given its necessary specification, so that we can put it between other works of the same time, and compare it with works conceived before and after it was. Where can these scattered bits of information be gathered and who do we call art historians of the past? Gleaning through the literature of Classical Antiquity, Medieval times, the Renaissance, Baroque times, up until the 19th century, we find writings which, linked together like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, fit into each other,

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complete each other, and construct the building of art history, each of them being one of its stepping stones.

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Going back to prehistoric times we stumble over descriptions in Homer: in the Iliad he describes the cup of Nestor, the one Schliemann believed to have found in Mycenae; in the Odyssey he enumerates the bronze walls, enamel cornices, golden doors, silver doorposts of the palace of Alkinous. He gives an account of Thetis watching Hephaistos working on 20 silver tripods with golden wheels, explaining the technique of toreutike, the art of chasing metal.

The 5th century B.C. historian Xenophon stated in his Memorabilia what idealizing in art really means. He let Socrates say to Parrhasios:

"...since it is not easy to find one man who is completely faultless in appearance, you take the most beautiful features of each of many models and thus you make the entire body appear beautiful..."

Herodotus, the Greek historian from the 5th century B.C., described, among many others, the treasury of the Syphnians in Delphi so exactly that archaeologists of the French School in Athens easily recognized the statues of the pediment, when they started their excavations there at the beginning of the 19th century.

In one of his mimiamb-- mimes in iambic verse-- the 3rd century B.C. mimist Herondas lets two ladies, visiting the sanctuary of Asclepios in Kos, chat about the votive offerings they saw on display in the treasury of this temple. They do not talk like art historians, rather like readers of the Lady's Home Journal, but Herondas, through their chatty account, immortalizes the kind of works of art offered to the god for miraculous healings.

The Sicilian author Diodorus Siculus, who lived in the 1st century B.C., gives an account of different inventions. According to his account, Telechinus in Rhodes was the first to make images of the gods, the Cretans discovered the use of fire in casting bronze, and Laedalus, the engineer of King Minos in Crete, is mentioned as the greatest inventor of all times. He attributes the invention of the potter's wheel and that of the tooth-saw to Daedalus, and tells also the story of the heifer-costume this inventor constructed for the queen of Minos, Pasiphae, when she fell in love with the white bull who became the father of her son the Minotaur.

Vitruvius, the architect of Caesar and Augustus in the first century A.D., not only described Greek, Etruscan and Roman buildings in his book De Architectura, but mentions also Agatharchos the inventor of perspective in painting.

From the Naturalis Historia of Pliny the Elder (1st century A.D.) we not only learn about architectural works like the labyrinth of Crete, constructed after the escape of Daedalus on wings, by his successor Theodorus, but also of one of the seven wonders of the world, the temple of Diana of Ephesos, the paintings of Zeuxis and Apollodorus, the works of the sculptors Praxiteles, Lyssippos, and Leochares, the statue of the Laocoon, and that the invention of modeling in clay is ascribed to a certain Brutades, potter in Sykion. He claims that painting, as such, was not invented in Egypt, but in Greece, a country he and all Romans admired. He goes into detail and explains how first in Corinth outlines of shadows were followed in order to create contour designs.

Josephus Flavius, a Jewish soldier and historian in the first century A.D., not only described the capture of Jerusalem from the Maccabees by Titus, in his Jewish War, but also the great triumphal procession on the Via Sacra of Rome-- later imitated by Napoleon when he arrived with his loot of works of art in Paris--, represented on the reliefs of the triumphal arch of Titus, erected for this occasion.

Plutarch, the 2nd century A.D. Greek biographer from Chaironeia, mentions Phidias in an erroneous way in his Life of Pericles. He

believes that this greatest sculptor of all time was accused of stealing from the gold and ivory he was given by the City of Athens to construct the gigantic statue of Athena Parthenos for the Acropolis and that he died in prison.

Pausanias, the great 2nd century A.D. traveler and antiquarian, contested this, describing the later works of Phidias in Olympia, his workshop there, and the beauty of his big gold and ivory statue of Zeus. He even mentions that the descendants of Phidias inherited, for centuries, the task of cleaning the temples in Olympia. The work of Pausanias, Periegesis (or Hellas) (Travels in Greece) contains the most extensive travel book on Greece, the layout, plans and descriptions still quoted in Baedeker, Guide Bleu, Michelin, etc. He describes temples, places of worship and explains the different rites performed at these places, in addition to the works of architecture, sculpture, and painting. He even unraveled the meaning of monuments like that of the tyrant-slayers Harmodios and Aristogeiton, the tower of the winds in Athens, and others.

The Roman historian Suetonius (69-140 A.D.) was the secretary of Emperor Hadrian, great builder and restorer of monuments in Rome. It is through the historical work of Suetonius' Lives of the Caesars that we know about the love of Hadrian for Greece, and that we encounter this architect emperor and great patron of arts, an early precursor of Renaissance rulers.

From the writings of the 8th century scholar Paulus Diaconus, courtier to Charlemagne, later Benedictine monk at Montecassino, we learn about the existence of some medieval monuments in Lombardy. These are enumerated, not really described.

The ancestors of our museum exhibits, and of their catalogs were the medieval Heiltumstuhls and Wiltumbuchs. These Heiltumstuhls were temporary buildings erected on certain feast days, and at times of pilgrimages in front of a cathedral, displaying the most rare and ornate relics. Encased in artistic goldsmithwork using materials like ostrich eggs, elephant tusks, horns of the fabulous unicorn, etc., the Heiltumbuch was a written descriptive catalog of these relics.

These catalogs in codex, blockbook, and incunabula form show a certain affinity with the methods of Pausanias describing sites of worship and description of rites in Greece. The most extensive of these literary works were those composed and published by the treasuries of St. Ulrich and Afra in Augsburg (1481), the one of the cathedral of Bamberg (1478) and that of St. Stephen in Vienna (1502).

The Inventory of the Collection of Varia of Jean Duc de Berry (1340-1416), compiled by his steward Robinet d'Estampe, tells us not only about its divergent aspects, but also about the salaries and working conditions of his employees. Prices of art supplies are listed in this table of contents of the possessions of this man who collected practically everything except arms and weapons.

Historical works from late medieval times like the Chronicles of the Florentine Villani brothers (1275-1348) which mention artists; works written by artists about the techniques they used like the Treatise on Painting by the Florentine painter Cennino Cennini (1360-1435), or the Commentaries of Lorenzo Ghiberti (1378-1455) on architecture, all deal with some aspect of art history.

Great artistic achievements of the Renaissance are surrounded by literary works of the time. A real masterpiece is the utopian treatise of Antonio Filarete, in which he dreams of an ideal city to be called Sforzinda in honor of his employers, the dukes of Milan.

The Book of Chronicles of Hartman Schedel, a Nuremberg physician, is less honest. It describes never-seen cities and monuments, being an example of how works of art should not ever be approached.

A contemporary of Schedel, Bernhard Breydenbach tries harder. In his Peregrinatio in Terram Sanctam, he gives a precise account of the cities and sites visited during his pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 1480. There is no lack of exact and dutiful descriptions in the book of Bernardine Scardeone extolling the monuments of his native city of Padua.

Leonardo da Vinci's Treatise on Painting has never been surpassed by anything written on art education.

The first author giving a complex analysis of works of art,

combining this with biographical data of artists and patrons, who does not withhold his own aesthetic judgment, is a painter, architect and art collector from Arezzo. As the first, he tried and succeeded, not only to bring scattered information on either work or artist, but who in his Lives of the most excellent painters, sculptors, and architects united these different approaches. Hence he is the man who deservedly is called the father of art history: Giorgio Vasari. In his Lives Vasari put together all the information he could gather from his written sources and the results of his own investigations. As an artist and an art collector he traveled extensively and tried, wherever he was, to collect oral and written documentation pertaining to the works of art he was to describe. Being a good judge of artistic achievement, endowed with the fine and discerning taste of the collector, his aesthetic evaluations were mostly precise and fair. Both editions of his work, the shorter Giuntina and the extended and illustrated Torrentina, are sheltered in our Rare Book Collection and serve as important primary sources for all interested in Italian art, the art of portraiture, the art of woodcarving and fine printing.

Inventories of Chambers of Art and Curiosities of the Late Renaissance and the Baroque lack the critical and evaluative approach of Vasari entirely. The Catalog of the Museum Calceolarium (Verona, 1622), a collection of natural objects, and that of the Museo Cospiano (Bologna, 1677), a collection of naturalia and artificialia, both try to emphasize the description of the curious, the unusual, the abnormal, and the hard to produce. Their authors do not really understand works of art. But whoever had the means to do it, collected and tried to brag with the list of his specimens, possibly enumerated in a printed catalog. It is typical of these times that apparently there was a demand for instructions about how to start a collection and that the Museographia Neickeliana, a work of the Leipzig physician Caspar Fridericus Neickel, appeared. He describes in it an ideal, non-existent museum as a "Leitfaden" (guide) for prospective collectors, or for those who did not know how to arrange and how to display.

their acquired treasures (of dubious value). He also recommends the establishing of a collection of reference books pertaining to the character of the specimens. The Collections of the Emperors in Vienna resembled this ideal, imagined utopian museum.

The two volume Museum Museumum (Museum of Museums) of another physician, Michael Bernhard Valentinus (published in Frankfurt 1704-1714), is similar to the travel books of our times. It lists all existing collections known in his time. He enumerates their content, one by one, putting more emphasis on the objects of curiosity, such as books written with the toes of an armless cripple, calves born with two heads, and other anatomic anomalies, rather than on works of art.

The woodcut on the title page of the Inventory of the Chamber of Curiosities and Art of the Danish physician Dr. Hans Worm (Amsterdam Elzevier, 1652) gives us an idea of how these collectors catalogued their holdings. They certainly began by putting every object-- natural, ethnographic, artistic-- in its proper pigeon hole, but eventually became tired and bored by this typologizing and itemizing of their collections and kept a handy box for Varia in their "Museum" in which they could throw all remaining uncatalogued material.

It is in a time well prepared by the interest for the curious, the unusual, the astonishing, that the first archaeological discoveries in Herculaneum and Pompeii were made. Ferdinand of Bourbon, who in 1767 became King of Naples as a retarded boy of 17, did not understand too much of what he was told about the finds at the slopes of Mount Vesuvio. He liked to put ice cream in the pockets and marmalade in the hats of his courtiers, and it was rather his young wife Caroline, daughter of Maria Theresia and sister of Marie Antoinette who encouraged excavations. She loved to be present at faked and prearranged finds in diggings at the site of the twin cities Herculaneum and Pompeii, destroyed by the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 A.D. The royal couple, in spite of not being interested in the past, wanted to brag with a collection of their own in the desire to surpass all collectors of curiosities of the time, and establish a museum (first in Portici), in which the brutally extracted objects could be stuffed, stored,

and displayed. They founded the Herculaneum Royal Academy, the members of which had the sole right to publish the drawings they made in copying the random objects excavated from the haphazardly drawn trenches at Pompeii and Herculaneum.

When the German scholar August Wilhelm Winckelmann (later to be called the father of archaeology) arrived in Naples, he was finally, after many requests, given permission to visit the sites and the museum, but was prohibited from taking notes or making sketches, as only the non-professional and untrained members of the Royal Academy were allowed to publish anything about the works of art possessed by the king or to excavate. In his Sendschreiben (circular) Winckelmann revealed some facts about this non-professional way of handling antiquities and tells, for instance, how bronze horses from Herculaneum were melted down, in order to be transformed into busts representative of the childish royal couple.

The quoted authors, except Vasari and Winckelmann, all fulfilled only one of the many tasks of art historians of the present: some of them described the appearance of works of architecture, sculpture, or painting; others wrote about the message a work of art conveys. From one we learned the way of idealizing in art, from another about the invention of techniques. Descriptions of sites, pageants, rites are due to them, as well as our knowledge about preservation, protection and restoration of monuments and early ways of collecting and displaying museum specimens.

All these particles of written information, randomly pulled out from the colorful tissue of the past, are of art-historical value. They demonstrate that always, through the ages, mankind longed for beauty and that there were always blessed artists who could satisfy this eternal demand.

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One branch of most rare book collections usually shelters old books. Books of historical value: incunabula, which by some collectors are appreciated mainly as rare products of the time when printing was

in its swaddling cloths. They are appreciated for their paper, their watermarks, their binding, their types, their printers' marks, or their illustrations and hand painted initials. A university library mainly catering to scholars and scholars-to-be approaches them from the angle of their content as well, although all the mentioned other aspects detract from their text, their human message. In our exhibit of Stanford incunabula books are arranged and explained according to their subject also, and works of the mentioned authors Hartmann Schedel and Bernhard von Breydenbach on display can be examined.

Original Renaissance books carry an awe-exhaling aura of their time, of their author, printer, illustrator, binder and of the row of their owners. Some of their details, changed and corrected in later editions often lead us to speculate about the conditions of their production and of their original appeal.

Why, for instance, are some eight of the artist-portraits, in Vāsari's Torrentina, the first illustrated edition of his Lives, missing from their frames? How do we approach the designs published by the members of the Herculaneun Royal Academy, how do they relate to their since-reconstructed, complex environment?

Many of these primary sources, waiting to be explored, are kept in Rare Book Collections, expecting the readers who are not only interested in them as in beautiful and curious objects, but who are fascinated by the other important aspect an old rare book offers: its subject.