

PREFACE

The Eye and the Mind. Józef Grabski and Italian Renaissance Art

After 1900, the great Swiss art historian Heinrich Wölfflin introduced into art history an axiological dichotomy between the act of attribution and the act of interpretation, willingly denigrating the attributional judgement of the art historian. Residues of this “high brow” approach are felt to this very day. Although I am an academic art historian with almost no attributions to my credit, I have always rejected this negative interpretation of the attributional process. I am convinced that if backed by other art historical procedures, by an analysis of types, iconographical details and a thorough scrutiny of the iconographical range applicable to each work of art, and combined with a good knowledge of style and cultural history, the act of attribution or of differentiating between various hands is still one of the main procedures of art history. This obvious truth might serve us as a starting point when speaking of the contributions which have been made to art history by the Polish art historian Józef Grabski. Grabski often occupied himself with attributions, but, as a rule, a successful attribution has always served him as a springboard for wider intellectual and analytical departures.

The second point to be made here must concern Italy. This land, traditionally the origin of almost all art historians, has fascinated Grabski from his early student days on. He followed here the classic path of Renaissance studies by being anchored firmly in the Cinquecento, but with frequent forays into earlier and later centuries. But within these studies, he tried to stress more the sensual than the philological side of art. Thus, it should not surprise us that, though he has written about the art of Rome and Florence, it is Venice and the most sensual of all painters – Titian – that has been in the centre of his interest for almost forty years. The choice of Venice as the location for IRSA – the pioneering research institute founded by Grabski – was thus no doubt an outcome of his predilection for the Serenissima.

For Grabski, Titian lies at the core of a particular vision of Venetian painting. He is fascinated by the artist’s readiness to absorb the refined iconography of his humanist patrons without neglecting the refined eroticism and *joie de vivre* so often met

in that then vibrant city. In a harmonious interpretation, proceeding step by step, he suggests that Titian's famous *Venus of Urbino* constitutes a hidden homage in the form of a memorial picture to the famous poetess Vittoria Colonna. Having discovered that the column in the background constitutes a reference to the family coat of arms, Grabski draws out a web of references that do strongly imply such a possibility. On the way towards this conclusion, we are offered a multi-faceted piece of cultural history. The all-pervading Venetian iconography of love stressed the elegance of earthly love, and expressed it by a subtle play of meanings, as shown in Grabski's analysis of Titian's *Allegory of Love* from the Louvre. Interestingly enough, Grabski continues this trope when studying the art of an emulator of Giorgione and Titian, namely Paris Bordone. He brilliantly interprets Bordone's two Viennese allegories with Venus and Mars as a dialogue between the lovers and suggests that the iconography of "love's interplays" is evidenced by the subtle positions and gestures of the figures. The steady, circular oscillation between the "you" and "me" brings to mind a similar literary ploy and phrasing in Italian Renaissance erotic poems. The lover functions as a reflection of the other; mutual love is projected from one lover to the partner, like the reflections in a mirror, or in the case of these love allegories, like a reflection on the armour of the warrior. Following Grabski's argumentation, we can discern here a deeper parallelism, also aided by the allegoric visual costume, between the contemporary visual arts and literature. Grabski is obviously – like his friend, the late great art historian Philipp Fehl – fascinated by the literary and humanistic foundations of Venetian sensuality.

The second great subject to be met in these studies is Renaissance portraiture. Grabski has here important investigational successes to his credit, starting with the so-called *Portrait of a Youth* formerly in Cracow, commonly ascribed to Raphael, which Grabski – in my opinion justly – assigns to a post-1520 follower of the great painter. To read Grabski's analysis is to see attributional art history at its best, but his findings are also corroborated by carefully selected historical evidence – in sum, his iconoclastic findings amount to a major breakthrough in Raphael studies. Another important find was the discovery of a likeness of the queen of Cyprus, Caterina Cornaro, in a wonderful painting by Lorenzo Lotto in Cracow. This justly famous lady, a cornerstone of Venetian policy in the Eastern Mediterranean, is shown in an uncharacteristically active part as Saint Catherine, her Patroness, standing behind a Madonna and Child. On a somewhat more general level, Grabski produced a wonderful study about the role of attributes and symbols in the portraits of Lorenzo Lotto. Even when discussing other matters, he makes interesting observations on the degree of autobiographical references in Titian's splendid *Marsyas*, with the old artist cast therein into the role of an observer of the death of Marsyas.

Grabski, like many outstanding art historians, likes to write about great works of art. However, his precise knowledge of the world of forms precludes his partaking in art-historical hero worship. Not only did he question the autograph character

of the abovementioned Cracow painting supposedly by Raphael, but he also dissected under this aspect the last paintings of Titian, finding in them parts executed by a studio assistant, probably the German minor painter Emanuel Amberger.

But before ending this rapid overview, whose sole function is to show the qualities and range of Grabski's studies (I have on purpose omitted here the three studies on the Baroque), I have to mention one more contribution, perhaps the most important one of all. It concerns Tintoretto's *Scuola di San Rocco* paintings, commonly believed to be the most outstanding artistic ensemble in Venice. In a painstaking analysis, Grabski has shown how the artist achieved a balanced spatial congruence between the room and architectural forms of the *Sala Terrena* and the location and interior spacing of the paintings themselves. In the vast literature devoted to the San Rocco complex, this has become a classic work, quoted or made use of in each successive larger study.

To sum up: the studies presented here offer in many aspects a new and deepened view of the Italian Renaissance. They combine a stylistic and iconographic analytical procedure with numerous facts or relevant connotations taken from the realm of cultural history and the history of ideas. In London, the art historians at the Courtauld Institute were traditionally characterized – though of course in a *cum grano salis* manner – as the “eye people”, those at the Warburg as the “mind people”. Grabski obviously belongs to both groups.

Józef Grabski has devoted the major part of his life to publishing books as well as editing and, last but not least, financing one of the world's leading art-historical journals, namely *Artibus et Historiae*. The studies presented here were put together in his spare time, on the margins of other pressing duties. I am certainly not alone in expressing the hope that this volume will one day be followed by another, one that is also anchored firmly in this particularly attractive tradition line of Renaissance studies.

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