



# PANORAMA

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The art historian's primary responsibility is to the artist. What makes the work tick? What are the right terms to provide an adequate description of it—what it looks like, what it's trying to communicate? This is far from saying that the art historian is only the handmaiden to the artist, a public-relations specialist or eager acolyte concerned to honor what the art "says." On the contrary, the art historian's responsibility to the artist often involves seeing what the artist has not seen, describing the art in such a way that it comes into being, anew, in the art historian's words. Yet even in this misdirection, this newness of saying, the compact between the art historian and artist should be strong. That is because in such an endeavor the art historian takes the work of art as seriously as the artist does.

I don't think that much art history these days takes works of art seriously. Yes, of course, in a way the opposite is true. Art historians take works of art *very* seriously. Hardly can a reader turn a page but he finds pictures aligned into political and philosophical schemes. The poorer efforts of this kind even make it seem like artists actually think like politicians and philosophers as they make their works, when in fact only the bad artists do this. The better art historical efforts of this sort lift the art allegorically into situations that enrich its significance, vitalize its standing in current debates, and honor the discipline of art history with dutiful demonstrations that it, too, like more exalted academic fields, operates by notable theoretical tools and political imperatives.

But increasingly I feel that art history has little to do with art. Saying so, I realize, makes me seem like a connoisseur of the old school, a person of the kind who used to rail against the "politicization" of art and praise the power of works of art to "speak for themselves," etc., etc. But I'm not that way. I mean only (again) that an art historian's primary responsibility is to the artist. The form of that responsibility is not only a compact between the art historian and the artist, as I said earlier, but a knot, a whorl, some in-twirled engagement between the two. My metaphors aren't right, but I have in mind a particular clasp, a give-and-take, whose contours and purposes aren't necessarily legible, least of all to the participants themselves. The "form" of art history, at its most impressive, is this whelk's shell of involutions, the turning-round of two intelligences.

What is the social usefulness of such an idea of art history? Reading Lauren Kroiz's excellent essay on Lester Longman, I feel Sumner McKnight Crosby is the villain, cordoning off the art historians safely from any relation to artists. But I cannot be as sanguine as Longman that an art history avowedly concerned with art, as he hoped, might make better citizens. When I teach and when I write, I turn inwards, in the manner of Panofsky's contemplative life. That contemplation—Aristotle with his hand on the bust of Homer—makes no bold claims to change the world. It scorns utility, even of Longman's subtle and less Dewey-like kind. Instead an inward scholarship flouts the expectation that it fit the political urgency of a given moment. It regards such expectation as the "specter that wants to lure us into playing a particular role instead of attempting to be human, as best we understand," to quote Hannah Arendt.

The inward turn, however, does contain its own dream of citizenship. The dream is more than just the possibility that a scholar might model what contemplation is. The practice of art history is more



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existential and material than that. The knot, the whorl, the hollow—these depth spots of thought—are the mysterious places where past and present, writing and visual art, come into uneasy and unclear combination. The person coming upon these unlikely combinations—art and art history, together—must say that, here, for once, is not explanation, not utility, not politics, and not philosophy, but rather all and none of these things, manifest in the record of one mind engaged with another. And the integrity of that engagement is an act in the world.