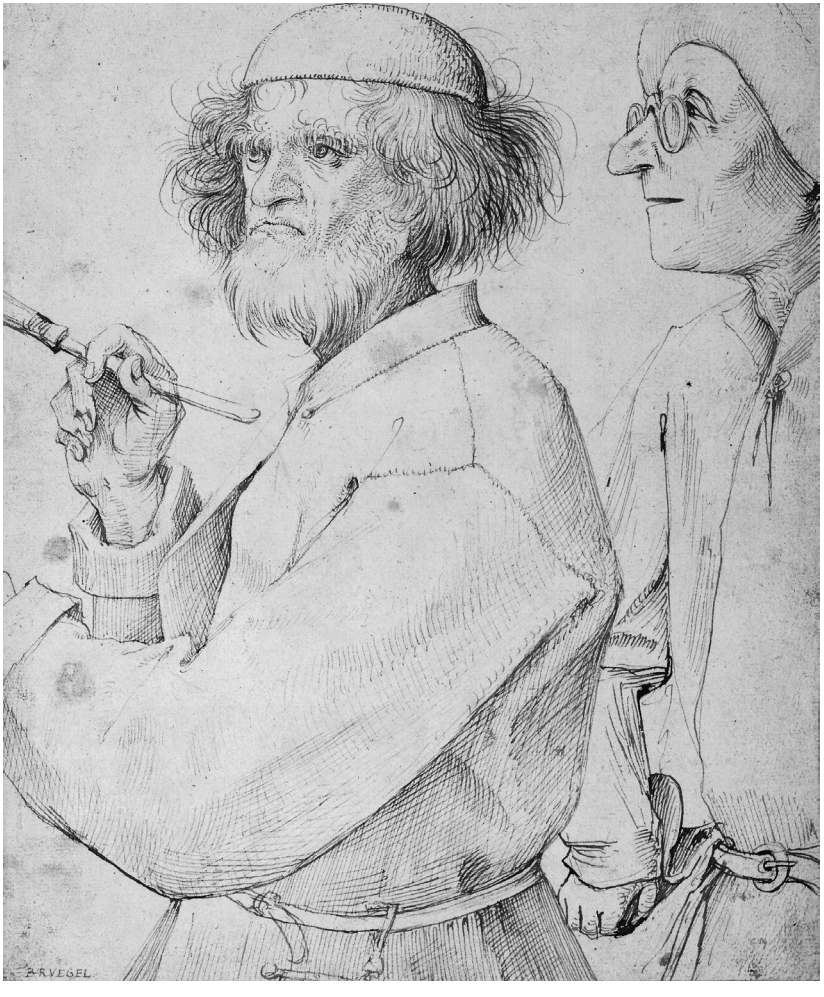
Arikha

On Depiction

Selected Writings

ON DEPICTION

selected writings on art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Avigdor Arikha

ON DEPICTION

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1965–94

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TO START AGAIN FROM THE BEGINNING

Michael Peppiatt

To be simple in life is difficult enough. To be simple in art, without in any sense being naive, requires unusual courage allied to a fine awareness of the ever-present, never resolved complexities of expression. Only children or undeveloped adults are naturally simple. Mature artists may achieve simplicity by an unconditional attempt to give their experience its most direct, essential form. But the attempt involves an important risk: by cutting through preamble or sophisticated disguise, it quickly indicates how much or how little the artist has in him to convey.

This is the revealing and uncomfortable position, it seems to me, that Avigdor Arikha sought. Endowed with an enviable natural facility, he spent much of his artistic career abandoning what he could have easily achieved. The Israeli artist-cum-philosopher-cum-curator could have used his encyclopaedic erudition and gift for synthesis to elaborate the content of his art. Instead, he progressively narrowed it and, by doing so, created some of the sparest figurative canvases in existence. Given the ability to undertake the most ambitious themes, how does one decide to make pictures containing a solitary broom, a section of anatomy, or a piece of bread?

Part of the answer may lie in the artist's background, marked as it was by extremity and conflict. Born in 1929 in German-speaking Bukovina, Arikha was imprisoned from the age of twelve onwards in a series of Nazi deportation

camps. The precociously accomplished sketches he did of the desolate life around him were discovered and—by a miraculous twist of fate—they secured his release via the Red Cross in 1944. Arrangements were made to send him immediately to Israel where he lived in a kibbutz. In late adolescence, he fought and was severely wounded in the 1948 Israeli War of Independence. By that time, Arikha had already spent two years at art school in Jerusalem, where the official style was so heavily dominated by Cézanne that the artist ruefully admitted it took him twenty-five years to get it out of his system. From 1949 to 1951 he followed the traditional course at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, and although he returned regularly to Israel (of which he said: 'Every stone in that country speaks to me'), Paris remained his home from 1953 until his death in 2010.

Arikha continued for a while as a figurative painter, moving towards a freer, more personal handling of form than the one prescribed by his art school. As a parallel outlet for his teeming mental energy, he studied philosophy under Jean Wahl at the Sorbonne. The Paris of the mid-1950s reverberated with new styles and attitudes, of which abstraction was by far the most alluring; next to it, figurative art looked compromised and constricting. By 1957, Arikha had embarked on wholly abstract compositions: anguished shoots of colour half-swallowed by a black background, like great fires climbing into the night.

That Arikha became abstract is far less surprising than the fact that, having developed his style and his reputation considerably over the eight years that followed, he found it imperative to change once again. Characteristically for this impassioned student of art—already as learned as many a professional art historian—the volte-face was triggered by an encounter with Caravaggio's dramatically realistic compositions in a large show at the Louvre in 1965, after

which he exclaimed: 'We have to start again from the beginning . . .'

The return to 'life' proved more exacting than the lyrical conversion to abstract art. If he was to 'start again from the beginning', Arikha felt he would have to accept certain self-imposed limitations. He decided he was 'not yet ready for colour' and restricted himself to black and white. The desire for predetermined limits was also manifest in Arikha's choice of subject and format. Both were strikingly modest, announcing that the artist's renewed raid on the real was to be made in small, hesitant steps.

Clearly pronounced, too, was the absence of any hierarchy among his subjects. A pair of collapsing trousers received the same scrupulous notation as a self-portrait. Essentially there was only *one* subject. Each drawing recorded its own difficult birthing (Arikha's face would be plagued by nervous tics as he squinted and squinted again, groaning frequently in protest against the difficulties he was encountering), as though squeezed through the artist's conviction that only by deliberate restriction could valid, new, figurative images be made. The images emerged crisscrossed with doubt, as if in perpetual questioning of their real existence in the bright, blank air of the paper. The fundamental difference between one Arikha drawing and the next lay in the intensity achieved, and so an empty armchair or socks lying strangled on the floor proved as poignant as a portrait.

However humble in pretension and scale, each drawing constituted a work in itself: not a sketch or a study, but a complete statement—in fine yet sumptuously gradated black ink—about a passing moment of precise visual content. The desire for factual precision that Arikha felt at the end of his abstract period meant that thenceforth the artist would never draw or paint without continuous reference to a model (whether inanimate, a member of his family, a friend or a professional). 'Everything I do is from life', he liked to emphasize:

> That's the whole basis of my work. I wouldn't allow myself to do a dot that wasn't from life. In fact, I consider drawing from memory or imagination a lie—an impossibility. To believe you can record a living instant with the memory of this instant is to me an aberration.

The attitudes and practices that Arikha had developed throughout his chosen 'exile' into black and white naturally carried over into oil painting, which he resumed in 1973. A similar range of subjects also prevailed: still lifes (of what was nearest to hand), the immediate landscape (the studio, or what could be seen from the window), and portraits (of friends, the artist himself, his wife Anne, or their children) formed the main reach of his themes. Nothing was imagined, nothing recalled: only what the artist could maintain under his rapid, pale blue eye throughout execution qualified.

Arikha liked to work in short, furious bursts, alternating his activity as a painter with another as art historian and guest curator. Although the impression of balance and completeness seems to belie it, the paintings were usually executed in a single session, without any preliminary study, and then never reworked—if he couldn't bring something off successfully in a single sitting, he would scrap the result and wait for another occasion. Arikha believed that the only chance he had of capturing the ever-elusive spark of life was by trying to seize it in one go (which, of course, could have lasted five or more hours). This strictly observed convention, and Arikha's insistence on having his subject always before him, puts one in mind of the unities of time and space in classical drama: it is as if the artist had taken a look round the unstructured proliferation of contemporary art and decided that to have a game worth playing he would have to invent (or re-establish) some rules.

Arikha's theory and technique of painting were deeply anchored in tradition. His parallel career as art historian

allowed him not only to compare attitude and method with all the major periods of Western art, but also made him aware to the point of anguish of everything that had already been achieved in painting. 'There's an element of entropy in culture that gradually reduces what's credible in art,' he would say,

> And when what's credible shrinks, what's expressible shrinks too. But since the need to express stays constant, we continue to try . . . It's impossible, of course, to capture the totality of an image. But if you feel intensely about what you have in front of you and attempt to follow what you see truly, you may produce a suspended trace of life, a series of seismic marks of your feeling.

When he expounded his theories (which were as complex as his art is apparently simple), Arikha could not stand still. In the studio near Montparnasse, which he drew and painted with such fidelity, the artist would step back to deliver a well-prepared definition, then dart forward to peer and squint at a recent oil on the easel, then hurry off to the adjoining study to check a reference from the rows of highly specialized tomes or pads with unflagging enthusiasm, then up to the split-level platform which he used for storage in search this time of a portfolio of drawings. In all the provocative intelligence and undoubtedly contagious excitement that emanated from this wirily energetic man, one sensed a compulsion to persuade, convince, even convert.

> Painting had to be learned. Now it's been unlearned . . . though I get the impression that the new generation is interested in learning again. Art is not simply a question of feeling, obviously. Take colour: colour is also a question of intelligence. You have to think how you are going to achieve the right pitch, the precise tone. A picture, after all, has to be both a painting *and* the truth, without falling into the trap of illusionism . . .

> I myself want to reunite with tradition but not, naturally, without taking modernism into account. I could not paint the way I do—with these planes . . .

He once said, pointing to a still life in which a knife, some cheese, and bread appeared pressed almost vertically to the picture surface, continuing,

> . . . if Mondrian hadn't come before. Just as Mondrian could not have painted the way he did without Vermeer. By the way, have you noticed how Mondrian helps one to see Vermeer?

Arikha's personal experience of changing radically from one style to another, together with his historical connoisseurship, gave him a special awareness of the dilemma of contemporary art. The fundamental question (largely shelved during the abstract period) about what else was left for painting to say, and about what areas had still been left to explore, Arikha answered in much the same way that his friend Samuel Beckett answered it for literature: the task is to reduce, to limit oneself to the barest elements of the knowable, record them with humbled passion, and from there—maybe—move out with a renewed eye towards a wider vision of the universe.

PROLOGUE

Painters are meant to paint, not to write. And yet almost all did—on technique or theory, via diaries or letters. Although it is not by words that a pictorial difficulty can be overcome. Nor can words supplant or even explain the visual sensing of line, form and colour in interaction. Is this attraction to writing due to the fact that painting is mute, often mis-seen, in need of words to shield it? I haven't been able to resist the temptation, going even against my grain as a painter, often studying and writing on artists for whom I had more esteem than with whom I had an affinity, and nothing on Piero or Vermeer, Chardin or the early Menzel. Engulfed in the study of the Classical Ideal, I soon realized that the need for moderation and proportion, on one hand, and the romantic call of vertigo, on the other, are two facets of one and the same drive; that idealism is deeply rooted in the Western world's subliminal notion of art, and some of its components were, and still are, responsible for totalitarianism—not only political, but aesthetic as well. In the end, everything hinges on a hair.

The history of art is a history of exceptions, and cannot be reduced to a history of tendencies, of schools, of 'isms', or explained by social causes. Such an approach stems from misseeing and this is the menace to art today.

Paris, January 1990 A.A.

ON PETER PAUL RUBENS[1]

Rubens's immense oeuvre never stopped reverberating; he was one of the greatest draughtsmen of all time and his activities were multiple: he was an antiquarian scholar, connoisseur and collector, courtier and diplomat, besides being a painter; his correspondence with some of the most brilliant and significant personalities of his time (250 letters survive, written in Italian, French, Flemish, Latin and Spanish), his sense of duty, of loyalty and friendship, his elegance, his impact on his own time and on posterity, are of such magnitude that one would need a lifetime to tell his life. From Roger de Piles (the apostle of 'Rubenism'), Charles Ruelens and Max Rooses to Julius Held and Michael Jaffé, all those who entered the giant's den were absorbed into its density.

But are any words really possible—or necessary—in front of such marvels as *Hélène Fourment with Two of her Children* (*c.*1636, Paris, Musée du Louvre), or Hélène as Aphrodite (*Het Pelsken*, 1630s, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum), *The Judgement of Paris* (1938–9, Madrid, Prado), or in front of Rubens's *Self-portrait with Isabella Brant* (1609–10, Munich, Alte Pinakothek)? Painting communicates without mediation, and yet the spontaneous love of art calls for inquiry, which intensifies it. The art historian's purpose is to shed light and allow the flame of passion to blaze. The most important publication in the field of Rubens studies was the one of his

documents and correspondence, by Charles Ruelens and Max Rooses, published in six volumes between 1887 and 1909,[2] now a great rarity (waiting for a daring publisher . . .). The latest light on Rubens studies has been shed by Julius Held's critical catalogue of the oil sketches, which is an insightful and indispensable work on Rubens—a monument of scholarship.[3] More recently, condensing the vast material, although not as a critical catalogue but as a 'life', Christopher White has written a very fine biography.[4]

I

Rubens's father, Jan Ruebbens, Alderman of Antwerp, Doctor of Laws both Roman and Ecclesiastic, whose family history can be traced back in Antwerp to the fourteenth century, a Calvinist, had to flee his home town in 1568 because of religious conflict and Spanish oppression. He went to Cologne with his wife Marie Pypelinckx and their four children. There he became Councillor to Anna of Saxony, Princess of Orange-Nassau, wife of Prince William 'the Silent', founder of the Dutch Republic, who was assassinated in 1584. In 1571, Jan Ruebbens was sent to prison by order of Count Johann of Nassau, in the name of Prince William, on charges of adultery with the Princess, after she had given birth to an illegitimate child. Jan Ruebbens pleaded guilty, facing the death penalty, awaiting execution in the dungeons of Schloss Dillenburg. But Marie Ruebbens-Pypelinckx intervened by writing two profoundly moving letters of forgiveness and begged for his pardon, which was later granted (to avoid scandal?) The Rubens family was, however, banned from Cologne until 1678 and moved to Siegen where three more children were born, all sons: Philip in 1573, Peter Paul in 1577, and Bartholomeus who died in infancy. Cologne was the first city Peter Paul learned to love, but after Jan Ruebbens's death in 1587, Marie Pypelinckx-Rubens and her three surviving children returned

VELÁZQUEZ, *PINTOR REAL*[1]

Velázquez was one of the first artists to understand the importance of painting directly from life, and he did so from the start. His knowledge of geometry, philosophy, scientific theory and even medicine (suggested by what we know of his library) didn't get in his way when he turned to the canvas. It is as if all his accumulated knowledge was stored up in order to propel him out of his own time and allow him to paint what he saw. This is how a painter's eye still sees him.

It is essentially thanks to Pacheco (1649), Lázaro Díaz del Valle (1656, 1659) and Palomino (1724) that we can imagine bits of Velázquez's life, and our assumptions are further nurtured by documents and commentaries such as Jusepe Martínez's (1675), known to Palomino, and more so, by the research pioneered by such historians as Carl Justi (1888) and continued by Lopez-Rey, Elizabeth Trapier (1948), Enriqueta Harris (1982) and Jonathan Brown (1986), among others. Though art historians are usually at variance with artists, being more attentive to *what* is painted than *how* it's painted, and tend to be carried away by cultural history, they are a great help in reconstructing the missing facts of an artist's time and, eventually, of his life. Indeed, the facts of Velázquez's life remain scarce—we have only the court documents published in *Varia Velazqueña*.[2] There is no remaining correspondence, as in the case of Rubens or Poussin; nothing is left in writing about Velázquez's ideas, and almost nothing

about his character—except the report that he was witty. But his activities at the court of Philip IV and the principal events of his life are well documented. His interests can be guessed at from the listed contents of his library, which contained virtually all the books a seventeenth-century humanist could have wished.

Few of Velázquez's paintings can be dated with precision and some attributions remain questionable. From the 226 works listed by Stirling-Maxwell,[3] and attributed to Velázquez, the number of authentic works was gradually reduced, attaining a rough 125 works in the second edition of the José López-Rey *Catalogue Raisonné* (1979).[4] No other drawings attributable with certainty to Velázquez are extant but the *Cardinal Borja*, which is one of the greatest drawings of all time: the purity of its line, more connected to Holbein than to any Italian, the space, the shading, the rhythmic line, last but not least, the expression and unmistakable likeness of the sitter, all reveal a great draughtsman, i.e. an incessant practitioner of drawing. There must have been many drawings but none is mentioned in the post-mortem inventory. They all vanished.

Although Velázquez's painting gives the impression of a simple transcription of nature, this apparent simplicity is both misleading and enormously difficult to analyse or describe. Blessed by nature with extraordinary talent, he was fortunate to benefit from royal opportunities, but these opportunities, favourable to his creation, restricted his audience to the king and his immediate entourage, with few exceptions—this was his exclusive public. In spite of the fact that he became, as Brown puts it, the only Spanish painter of his age whose work was to equal and even surpass the best works of Flanders and Italy, his painting was not considered of an importance in France or Italy during his lifetime. He remained unnoticed by the principal European commentators of the seventeenth century, such as the Italian classical art theorist Giovan Pietro Bellori, or the French theorist Roger de Piles.

ON ABSTRACTION IN PAINTING

'Round is always round and square is always square'
Piet Mondrian

Abstraction in painting[1] is as ancient as art itself. It appeared at its dawn in Palaeolithic sculpture and incision, where complex subjects were turned into simplified shapes used as representational conventions.

Rare in later, personal, idiosyncratic styles, it usually appeared unconsciously in the final phase in life, as in the late work of Titian, Rembrandt or Cézanne. Abstraction is to their work what wisdom is to life: unintentional and transcendental. However, it was not perceived as such before our century, even by 'connoisseurs'.

There was another form of abstraction, which also appeared at the dawn of art, and that was *total abstraction*. This can be achieved by anyone, anywhere, anytime. This is *ornament*.

Painting, drawing (incision originally) and sculpture have as their purpose, knowingly or unknowingly, the preservation of the traces of life. They are a storehouse of feeling and fact, unintentionally sent into the future. Like the light of extinct stars. That fact and feeling can be recorded on surface or stone is a marvel. And art history is partly the chronicle of such marvels.

Ornament, on the other hand, which is adornment, transformed a bone or a flint-stone into an artefact. A pottery

vessel into a collective ceremonial object. A pattern into a sign. This sort of transformation is due to stylization. In ornament, style is prior to truth. Stylization is achieved by this *Kunstwollen* (art-will) as Alois Riegl qualified it (but he was concerned with ornament—the stylization of the acanthus plant),[2] by which ornament is segregated from *naturalism*, i.e. sublimating the mimetic need. But art-will (*Kunstwollen*) ends up in artifice and finally leads to conformity with a ritual, a fashion or a *collective style*.

Abstraction as it appeared in our century—as a system and a collective style, an ideology—is wrongly held to be unprecedented. Considered as the coming to a head of a long, parallel legacy of insurgence, of anti-tradition, and qualified in more recent times as 'avant-garde', its roots stem more from *idealist* theory and the evolution of ornament[3] than from the last works of Titian, Rembrandt or Cézanne.

Plato's division of imitation (*mimesis*) into *eikastike* and *phantastike*,[4] (*eikastike* meaning likeness without illusionism, and *phantastike* illusionist likeness), Aristotle's division of poetry into *elevated* and *vulgar*[5] and the latter's definition of *ideal imitation*[6] are the origins of classical idealism in art, which dominated, and imperceptibly still dominates the Western world. This set of concepts was transmitted and refined by Quintilian, Cicero, Horace and Vitruvius, among others, and after a relative but not absolute oblivion, resurrected by such theorists as Ficino (1544), Castelvetro (1576), Lomazzo (1590) and Comanini (1591), among others. Comanini, ranking the *phantastike* higher (and attributing it to Arcimboldo),[7] misunderstood Plato's division of imitation. This misinterpretation was maintained by Bellori. Bellori condemned the *pittori icastici*, whom he confused with *facitori di ritrati* (ordinary 'portrait-makers').[8]

In accordance with the Platonic concept that Beauty does not stem from matter, that Nature is in itself imperfect, he condemned naturalism[9] (because it simply copies, 'i difetti di

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