



# Art History as Ekphrasis

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The history of reflections about what art history is and how it might best be done, about how art works and what art is, is long and distinguished. I do not propose to review it here. Nor do I presume to suggest a definition of what art is or how it may come to be. My concern is more limited. I want to make a proposal about the nature of art history, which may seem outrageous to those who see themselves in the tradition of the 'critical historians of art', or to those who believe art history has the elevated status of philosophy, or to those who think the discipline is ultimately a branch of history more generally, but I will make it nonetheless. My proposal is very simple. Far from being a rigorous pursuit, art history – certainly since its founding fathers in the modern era, Vasari and Winckelmann, and undoubtedly in the surviving ancient sources who were their inspiration (Pliny, Vitruvius, Lucian, Philostratus, even Pausanias) – is nothing other than ekphrasis, or more precisely an extended argument built on ekphrasis. That is, it represents the tendentious application of rhetorical description to the work of art (or to several works or even to whole categories of art) for the purpose of making an argument of some kind to suit the author's prior intent. Not everything that results from ekphrasis is art history, but that series of uses of interpretative description, which attempt to make a coherent argument on broadly historical or philosophical lines, is definitely art history. The particular rules governing the making of description and its appropriations have changed radically over the centuries from (say) Philostratus to Vasari to Riegl to T. J. Clark – to suit the particular intellectual contexts and social aspirations of those writing about art in these different worlds. And the kinds of results or findings required by different periods (and sometimes different scholars) from such description have also changed. Some find that art can reveal artists, others that it can indicate social history or underlying cultural reflexes, others still that it implies very little at all beyond itself. But my proposition is that – whatever the particular agenda or argument – art history is ultimately grounded in a method founded on and inextricable from the description of objects. I hope this is not controversial.

A number of issues follow methodologically from placing description at the centre of the enterprise. First, we must be clear about what we mean by description. Here I take an extremely open-ended view: any account of an object from the most hardcore formalist analysis (Riegl's work is exemplary here, and that of his followers in the Second Vienna School), to a floridly evocative description (what Panofsky somewhat dismissively called attention to the sensuous aspects of art), to a highly complex analysis of deeper meanings and symbolic networks (the high-

**Detail of Michelangelo,  
Rondanani Pietà, c. 1555–64  
(plate 3).**

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point of Warburgianism), from the mere mention of an object to its dismissal, from encomiastic praise to vituperative attack – all these and everything in between constitute ekphrasis, and hence may make up the descriptive basis for the practice of art history (see plate 1). The reason such accounts are ekphrasis, and hence the bedrock of art history, is that all these descriptions conspire to translate the visual and sensual nature of a work of art into a linguistic formulation capable of being voiced in a discursive argument. The act of translation is central. We conduct it with such ease. And yet the conceptual apparatus into which the object has been rendered, and its transformation from a thing that signifies by volume, shape, visual resonance, texture into one that speaks within the structures of grammar, language, verbal semiotics (call it what you will) and can be appropriated to numerous kinds of argument or rhetoric, are quite simply vast. In fact, they are so vast that the truly responsible viewer might balk at the prospect of so falsifying the object by the act of its verbal rendition. Or, as in Lucian's brilliant dialogue 'On the Hall' (*De domo*) might rise to the challenge of creating through verbal artistry a description (descriptive fiction?) which at least attempts to rival or to emulate the range of emotive, formal and textural resonances evoked by the object described.

The enormity of the descriptive act cannot be exaggerated or overstated. It constitutes a movement from art to text, from visual to verbal, that is inevitably a betrayal. Not everything in the world of the sensual autonomy of the object can be translated into words, and much that was not there is inevitably added by words. In other words, description is not merely selective; it is (at its best) a parallel work of art. To put this another way, however good the approximation in words of the object described, it can never fully be or fully replace the object. Description may be seen as a primary interpretative act (like an anthropologist's account of a different culture in which unavoidably prior viewpoints born from scholarly training or cultural background cannot be wholly extricated from 'objective' ethnography). In this case, on the bedrock of a verbal interpretation, many further layers of analysis – each more interpretative than the last, each more authoritative or speculative than the last – will come to rest. But the difference from anthropology is that, in most cases, works of art are not cultures or peoples for whom an unrepeatable ethnography – whatever its partiality, whatever its weaknesses – may have to stand. Rather, each of us can make our own primary description (tendentious in that it exists to help me make my specific argument and tendentious also in that it inevitably emerges within the range of other such descriptions, differentiating itself rhetorically from them in order to make my point about the object different and special, but thereby finding its voice not in the direct inspiration of the non-verbal nature of the visual but rather in the history of other verbal discourses already floating about the object or objects like it). Yet it is on this foundation and no other that art history rests. So far as I know no rules have ever been written for this act of translation and it has hardly been subjected to analysis. It is the necessary and inevitable move before we start – the only way we can have objects to discuss at all. Yet the questions it begs are endless and the fundamental assumption that pictorial or architectural thought operates in parallel ways to verbal thought, that verbal forms of signification are adequate in any way to account for visual and material forms of signification, must remain no more than an assumption taken unexamined as an axiom.

It might be objected that since the end of the nineteenth century description has become more objective because it can be supplemented with photographic reproduction – a visual (as opposed to verbal) rendering of the object by visual

means and a 'control' against which the description may be read. If one followed this line, one might grant the descriptive translation more authority than I have done, less haphazard partiality and tendentiousness, and a greater objectivity (as necessary to the foundation block of an argument). But personally I cannot for a minute entertain the credibility of photographs as anything but tendentious and personal 'takes' on whatever they frame in the shot. The photograph is a visual ekphrasis – interpretative, angled, chosen, made possible by a particular circumstance, the presence of a photographer in a specific time and place... The art historian may take his or her own pictures, in which case the 'objective correlative' of visual proof is merely part of the tendentiousness of the original ekphrastic formulation. Or photographs may be purchased from an archive or museum or someone else, in which case the art-historical argument (especially an argument based on photographs rather than one where the author has recently been in front of the actual object) will depend in part on other people's framings and interpretative views, the appropriation of earlier forms of tendentious (visual) ekphrasis to one's own point. This is no different from working with earlier essays and discussions of the object to hand.

Now, even if my worries about the betrayals of ekphrasis were granted, we cannot be squeamish about committing the act. Without interpretative description, there would be no art history. But that is at best an instrumental argument (there may be someone, somewhere, after all, who can envisage a better world without art history – as Plato arguably might have done). More to the point, images and objects – insofar as they are designed to relate to us at all – invite ekphrasis, indeed they require it. Part of the play of their relations with viewers is to elicit verbal as well as more directly sensual or visual responses, and in that sense they are themselves the spur to the range of narratives to which art history belongs. They may be coy about the potential mistranslation and misrepresentations in this process, but these are themselves part of the game of soliciting meanings and encouraging often contradictory interpretations. So the generation of ekphrasis is not only necessary (to art history) but is inevitable in the viewing of art.

Descriptions often need to be long, for they must entice the non-verbally responsive object into a state where it is both available as ekphrasis and so angled in its new descriptive form as to be appropriate to the specific argument being made. Yet *arguments* are rarely about one object or even a few. Typically, for them to be compelling or simply interesting enough to be published and read, they must make a general point – usually a historical one in the current era. But how can one little object – one object among millions, which may have survived by pure happenstance and is known to the art historian by the same chance that makes him or her ignorant of so many other objects – how can one object carry the weight of a general argument? It is, in my experience, always the case that the ekphrastic descriptions (often combined with photographs), that form the basis of our art history books and articles, are made to carry more weight – both as cultural exemplars of their time or context and as steps within an argument on which its next stage can rest – than they can in fact bear. For one aspect of ekphrastic interpretation is to make the particularity of a work of art more general, by becoming discursively like other objects with which we may want it to be comparable, than its pre-verbal form actually is. There are many reasons why art history might wish to suppress its reflex to move from the particular to the general (not least its disciplinary claims to be a grander philosophical or historical profession than simply the description of objects) but its unwillingness to reflect upon the ekphrastic process on which it is founded is one of them.

**Alois Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry* (1901), trans. Rolf Winkes [adapted], Rome, 1985, 139.**

As an example we may take the ceremonial picture representing Justinian and Maximian. A composition on the plane: centralised; just verticals (contour, folds, ornaments; the axiality is only slightly reduced in the figure of Maximian) and horizontals (lines of heads, feet, garment-seams and arms). Spatial composition: the figures step frontally out of space in the direction of the beholder and stare straight at him; even though the main group shows partial overlaps on the plane, along with the entourage of five body guards in three rows, the main group is compressed into one compact plane-like mass leaving no visible space between the figures. The floating of the feet repeats the phenomenon (already observed in the more advanced style early Christian sarcophagi from Rome) by which the foreground figures appear to step on the feet of the ones behind them; this is obvious proof that the artist's aim was a complete isolation of the individual figures in space, even at the price of sacrificing the connection to the plane (in this case the connection of the feet with the ground below); linear folds (corresponding to the engraved folds in sculpture), yet inclined towards pleating (as can be seen particularly in the double lines). All this, along with the slim, elongated and stilted-bodily proportions (together with a reduction in head size) largely establish a relationship with the subsequent Byzantine style, which is generally the most characteristic aspect of the style of these mosaics.

How one can speak of 'decline' in view of works such as the San Vitale mosaics, is incomprehensible since every line demonstrates clear planning and a positive will...

**Han Sedlmayr, 'Bruegel's *Macchia*' (1934), trans. Frederick J. Schwartz, in Christopher Wood, ed., *The Second Vienna School Reader*, New York, 2000, 330.**

To facilitate the disintegration of figures, the individual parts out of which they are composed must be separated from each other as clearly as possible. This leads to a preference for objects that are, by their very nature, piecemeal and patchwork and that tend to fragment. Thus the clothes of the peasants are not chosen with a uniform taste but are thrown together by chance, just as the 'motley' costumes of *The Battle Between Carnival and Lent* are improvised out of everything imaginable. The dappled torsos of the horses and cows fall by themselves into such patches. In the visions of madness (and dreams), we see how heterogeneously

composed, fragmented creations – 'condensations', to use the specialized term – come together and then dissolve as in *Dulle Griet* (Mad Meg).

Alternatively, the positions and movements of the individual bodies are sought to show the separation and independence of the limbs: the prisoners' feet separated from their bodies by the stocks in *Allegory of Hope*; the awkward movements of the dancing peasants in *Peasant Kermis*, which have been criticized as 'poorly drawn'; the contortions of epileptics. Only the legs remain of the figure who falls into the barrel in *Allegory of Gluttony*, only the upper body of the one who falls through the ice in *Skaters in Front of Saint George's Gate*. They all appear mutilated, and the cripples in fact are.

In its intentions, this disintegration of form corresponds in the real world to the process of destruction...

**Edgar Wind, 'The Significance of Botticelli's *Derelitta*' (1940), in *The Eloquence of Symbols*, Oxford, 1993, 39.**

The painting called *La Derelitta*, ascribed first to Masaccio, then to Botticelli, then to that amiable fiction L'Amico di Sandro, and recently regarded as part of a series of cassone panels executed by the young Filippino Lippi after designs by Botticelli, is a source of discomfort not only to the connoisseur but also to the student of iconography. The subject is as enigmatic as the authorship. A young woman, shut out of a palace, sits 'derelict' on the steps before the gate and weeps. This is the sort of pathetic scene which appealed to nineteenth-century novelists by arousing reflections as to what had happened before and what would happen after.

**J. D. Beazley, *The Pan Painter* (1944), Berlin, 1974, 2.**

The Pan Painter likes out-of-the-way subjects; and the picture on the other side of the vase is unique. The god Pan is almost unknown in Attic art before the Persian wars: he had ground for complaining to Philippiades, on the eve of Marathon, that the Athenians neglected him. After the Persian wars Pan becomes quite popular at Athens: but not in this context: only here is he seen pursuing a boy. A young goatherd, in country garb – goatskin, sheepskin cap, stockings, whip – is hotly pursued by the goat-god; at the rock-seat, a third, strange person, the wooden image of some small, Priapus-like deity, views the scene with a round, bewildered eye.

A word about the painting, before we turn to other vases by the same painter. A blend of late archaic

daintiness and early-classic grandeur; the pathos of the early-classic period but not its ethos; swift, nay explosive movement; ravishing elegance; a darting, fastidious touch; piquant contrasts, deliberate and amusing disproportions – small things made larger, big things smaller, than one expects; round heads with tiny nose and delicate nostril but big chin and bull neck; wasp waist but sturdy thigh; powerful arms but tapering fingers; the bow very long, the quiver very thin; the hounds Lilliputian; Pan's face small between long beard and long horns. The forms, even more than in most vase-painters, approximated to geometrical shapes, with a special fondness for circle and arc (even the irregularities of the rock are fully patternised); yet packed with expression, and tense with life.

**E. H. Gombrich, 'Raphael's *Madonna della Sedia*' (1955), in *Norm and Form*, London, 1966, 64-65.**

But can we still see it in isolation? Is not the popularity it once enjoyed, and our own reaction against it, a disturbing element? I may confess to you that, when I approached the Palazzo Pitti this autumn to study the picture in preparation for this lecture, my heart sank as I saw the coloured postcards, box lids, and souvenirs displayed on the stalls in front of the Gallery. Should I really inflict this on you? A fresh encounter with the original removed my doubts. My doubts but not my difficulties. For, after all, you have only my word for it that the painting looks different from those baneful reproductions, that the very brushwork shows a freshness and boldness which banishes all thought of the sugar-box, and that the colours, under old varnish, have a mellowness and richness which no print and no copy can bring out. I remember in particular the warm golden brown yellow of the Christ-child's garment, as it stands out against the deep blue of the Virgin's skirt, the dark red of her sleeve and the gold-embroidered back of the chair, and, most of all, the blending into harmony of that daring green scarf which so easily brings a cheap and discordant note into prints. There are some patches of repair and over-painting over cracks affecting St John and the fringe on the Christ-child's face; but by and large the condition of the picture seems to be good, and the enamel-like finish of the Virgin's head, the spirited, fresco-like treatment of the drapery and the chair with its impasto highlights all appear to me to betoken the master's own handiwork. It is true that even in the Pitti Gallery it is not easy to come to terms with the picture. The vast golden eighteenth-century frame produces a

dazzle that all but kills the subtle gradations of tone on which Raphael relied. As soon as you screen it off with your hands the picture comes to life.

**Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures*, New Haven and London, 1985, 80.**

Chardin seems to be doing something strange with perspective here and there. The chair-back is odd: if the lady were sitting comfortably on the chair, surely the chair-back would not be turned to face us and the picture-plane as much as it does. The tea-pot is also rather 1910: spout and perhaps also handle are flattened out on the canvas. Then there are a whole range of striking colour devices. The most obvious is the red-lacquered table, assertive but almost unstable. And if one looks in other pictures by Chardin, one finds other cases of reds in relation to blues and blacks. Again, and very conspicuously, there seems something extraordinarily deliberate and determining about the differential distinctness and lighting of the picture. There is a determinate plane of distinctness on the line of the teapot, hand and arm; and within this plane some things are more sharply focused than others. What does all this represent?

**Michael Camille, *Image on the Edge*, London, 1992, 40-41.**

In the *bas-de-page* of the Ormesby Psalter's 101<sup>st</sup> Psalm, the scandalized look of the gryllus is almost voyeuristic. Here he stares at a 'bawdy betrothal', in which another squirrel-grasping lady accepts a ring from a young man – an anti-illustration of 'my heart is smitten' in the Psalm above. In this marginal masterpiece the margins include their own meta-marginal parody further out on the edge. Here, beneath the courtly couple, a fat cat stalks a mouse, reversing the gender positions above, so that the mouse in its hole is beneath the knight whose sword sticks out of his own hole like a phallus. The complex criticism of their encoded eroticism is further annotated by the gryllus here who, watching from the wings, as it were, is an incarnation of scopic obsession – having a head between his legs instead of a prick. His look is an ejaculation.

**Some ekphrases from a selection of paradigmatic art historians. A sense of decency has made qualification for inclusion that the authors be dead, which has the interesting effect that all are men. To discuss how any one of these, as description, formulates the nature of the argument of which it is part would take too much space. But clearly different descriptive choices would in any of these cases have yielded the possibility for profoundly different results.**

Beyond the issue of generalization, there lies the specific problem of argument. The object translated into ekphrastic description is available for use in an argument – indeed, a series of arguable and argumentative assumptions are the inevitable basis of the descriptive terms chosen to create the ekphrasis in the first place. For much art history nothing is so compelling in such argument as the adduction of formal and stylistic observations so as to make the point at issue out of the object's own object-hood. Indeed, this was a fundamental aspect of the great Viennese project in art history from before the end of the nineteenth century until the aftermath of the 1939–45 war. Yet the problem is that what we adduce as formal is in fact not the object's own object-hood and existence as matter but that ekphrastic transformation which has rendered it into a stylistic terminology. How secure can we be that such ekphrastic formalism (the closest in art history some might affirm, that an object can be to its pre-verbal state) is no more than a carefully crafted verbal translation whose discursive functionings are as far from the actuality of objects as any other interpretative description? Likewise, in those arguments which turn to questions of meaning (and are ultimately dependent on the great Warburgian projects of investigating symbol and memory as well as the emphasis on meanings in the early work of Panofsky and Wind), to what extent can we be clear that it is the work of art itself that interrelates with the literary and other cultural artefacts beside which it has been placed, rather than our tendentious ekphrastic extrapolation of it? In other words, when the object speaks in art history and when it is heard, what is heard is our ekphrasis. But we do not stress this point, since the need to elide ekphrasis and object is essential to the method, if it is to carry the conviction of some empirical validity (not to speak of objectivity or positivism)...

Let us take an example. Here is a little piece recently composed on Michelangelo's *Rondanini Pietà* (see plates 2–5).

### **The *Rondanini Pietà***

Michelangelo is said by Vasari to be the apogee of the Renaissance, the point to which the entire tradition of naturalistic representation has led and at which it has culminated. If this is true, then his last work – the haunting *Rondanini Pietà*, which since 1952 has been in the Castello Sforza in Milan – is perhaps his most characteristic sculpture. For it is not so much the apogee of his art as the emblem for everything Michelangelo was and for the totality of the tradition of Western image-making in which the Renaissance holds so potent a place. The sculpture's naturalism is potent but almost in abeyance: an exquisitely rendered arm belonging to the Virgin from an earlier, abandoned sculpture of the Deposition but not yet removed; the elongated forms of Christ's lifeless legs, breaking into near verisimilitude at the knees before reverting to sketchy unfinish at the feet and the groin. The very elongation of forms, stripped down (unfinished?) almost to the point of abstraction, presages the mannerism to come in Renaissance art. The refusal to finish – the near resistance to move beyond the pure blocking-out of the faces of the sorrowing mother and her dead son – foresees every gesture of modernism in later sculpture from Rodin to Giacometti and Moore. There is, in short, very little, perhaps nothing at all, in the passions and abstractions of the later development of the tradition of Western statue-making which the *Rondanini Pietà* does not foretell.

Yet the sculpture remains naturalistic. Its naturalism is about choosing varieties of unfinish to pare down representation to its ultimate and simplest. How best to render the relations of mother and son? With the intense realism of Michelangelo's earlier *Vatican Pietà*? Or with the sketched abstraction of the heads, upper bodies and faces

of the Rondanini, into which a viewer may pour all his or her own sense of that grief and mourning which must surpass all others? However humanist the vision, let us not forget its piety and genuine devotion: this is not just any old mother and son, it is the pair of the one mother and son, which means of all and every mother and son. Here the Rondanini is the summing up of Michelangelo's long fight with the *pietà* as sculptural subject – from the perfection of finish in the Vatican sculpture of his youth via the abandoned and incomplete versions now in the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo and in the Accademia in Florence, abandoned because they did not satisfy their maker, to this final meditation. The *Rondanini Pietà* is Michelangelo's last statement on unfinish, and in particular on that moment of (in)completion which comes when you lay down your creative tools during the unfolding of a process and simply say this is enough, and on how naturalism to achieve the supreme expression of emotion may need to resort to incompleteness and abstraction.

In its naturalism, the *pietà* is in fact entirely a piece in the classical tradition – looking back beyond Michelangelo's predecessors like Donatello and the Pisani to the depths of antiquity, with the same intensity as it looks forward. The very willingness to tolerate a no longer relevant fragment, like that near-completely rendered arm, seems to hint at the fragmentary nature of the classical heritage – detached limbs, torsos, heads, all so perfectly finished yet battered and dismembered. That pin, which fixes the abandoned arm to the torso of Christ, stands like a deliberate memorial to all those ancient statues (Roman marble copies of lost Greek bronze originals, we call them now) which sport such struts to keep the marble limbs from splitting off. The urge to combine areas of exquisite finish with a roughness which in ancient survivals is caused by ruin, abrasion and the depredations of time turns this piece into a modern antique, deliberately poised between finish and incompleteness, on the edge of that state of ruin whose supreme evocation must be the death of Our Lord.

Artistically, what is striking about both the inheritances from the past and the intimations of the future between which this sculpture is so supremely, magisterially, poised, are certain very precise gestures of difference. Ancient statues were finished – their unfinishedness, fragmentation and rough areas are an addition by time to what was once finished. Noses are smashed and faces made rough where statues once fell or were broken. But Michelangelo's unfinish is by design; and it lies before a state of final finish which he decides never to attain. His work is in progress and for ever incomplete. But some parts of that unfinish, and perhaps all of it – above all that arm which looms to the right of the principal group, and the sketchy intimacy of the faces of the Virgin and Christ – are deliberate, deliberately not worked further upon or removed. By contrast, the masterworks of modern sculpture that use abstraction, fragmentation and abrasion, do so with full design. They adopt as a stylistic trait, a strategy of representation, an aesthetic mode, that which in this sculpture is the point of unfinish most close to the wear of time on an ancient statue and beyond which Michelangelo judges that his sculpture will lose more than it can gain.

It is as a work in progress, poised at the zenith of the tradition and encapsulating all that went before and would follow – positioned between naturalism and abstraction and engaged with the naturalism of feeling only possible in abstraction – that the *Rondanini Pietà* towers above all Michelangelo's art. It stands as the emblem not only of the kind of work possible in marble sculpture but also of more philosophical concerns about the possibilities of representation embedded in marble sculpture. It is as a work in progress that the *Rondanini Pietà* becomes the epitome of a tradition of representation in progress and of a drive to naturalism whose most moving moments come when the panache of illusionism yields to the pathos and simplicity of pure form.

2 Detail showing bottom half of Michelangelo, *Rondanani Pietà*, c. 1555–64. Milan: Castello Sforzesca. Photo: Author.



3 View from right hand side of Michelangelo, *Rondanani Pietà*, c. 1555–64. Marble, 195 cm (height). Milan: Castello Sforzesca. Photo: Author.



4 View from left hand side of Michelangelo, *Rondanani Pietà*, c. 1555–64. Marble, 195 cm (height). Milan: Castello Sforzesca. Photo: Author.



5 View with Ancient Roman  
base of Michelangelo,  
*Rondanani Pietà*, c. 1555–64.  
Milan: Castello Sforzesca.  
Photo: Author.



Rather than tarnish another scholar – arbitrarily chosen and cruelly exposed – I have taken a piece of my own. Let me begin by saying that this little fragment was not composed for this essay, but beforehand and quite separately – in response to seeing the object for the first time in the Castello Sforza in Milan. I still stand by the piece in that it expresses what I think (or feel?) about Michelangelo's sculpture, if not to the very best of my conceivable abilities then at any rate as well as I could on the day. Clearly the account is tendentious in that the sculpture has been reformulated according to longstanding concerns of my own – the nature of naturalism, the long process of its rise, fall and rise again in the European artistic tradition, its limitations (especially in relation to religion). Effectively, the object functions as a springboard for and embodiment of concerns which neither it nor its maker could fully comprehend (especially my thoughts about what it presages in later sculpture). Note the big claim with which I open – reading the object to hand as an emblem of the entire Western tradition of image-making (which is implicitly to read Michelangelo in Vasarian terms as a supreme genius). If the piece were cast as history this would perhaps be beyond the pale; I hope it can stand in the context of a more evocative reflection about the Western tradition of naturalistic illusionism. But the move to generalization (or rather the opening frame of generalization which justifies discussion of the particular object in the first place) could hardly be more strongly made.

The description is deliberately and even insistently formal in the first two paragraphs – in part because any discussion of naturalism and its departures must be so. But the assumptions running it (and most other descriptions of naturalistic images) are large. Why, on the face of it and without recourse to the tradition of both Renaissance representation and the art-historical discussion of it, should one impose on pure representation (that is, a block of marble carved in such and such a way) all these assumptions about finish and unfinish, elongation and verisimilitude, abstraction and empathy? Or is Michelangelo's very choice to *represent* – a man and a woman, Christ and his mother – not already an opening into the ekphrastic, embedded in the object before any particular viewer may come along to help it into a frame of his or her interpretations? One answer to the 'why should we impose' question, is because we cannot unwrite the traditions of representation and art history within which we were educated and out of which our thought inevitably must come. But that is a response from weakness: because we cannot be other than our ideological conditioning does not greatly strengthen one's confidence in that conditioning. ... A stronger answer might be that I do not want to resist all the assumptions of the tradition because (at any rate in this piece) I am writing specifically about and in response to the tradition (both that process of making art in which Michelangelo was so formative a figure and that process of making art history in which naturalism is a central concern). Fair enough. But still the key question about ekphrasis remains, which is why the object need be spoken about at all in these terms (terms I need to make my discussion) rather than any other terms (some of which may not yet be available to us and others which might just seem utterly eccentric or personal if expressed in writing). Not only is ekphrasis translating the object into its own terms but it is dragging it into a network of concepts generated by the ekphrastic tradition of art history over many centuries, and helping it along down a slippery slope of interpretative meanings implied already in the choices made in its own manufacture. A purist would not be wrong to resist this tendency.

And yet, while the tendentiousness is inevitably there in ekphrasis – I mean, the appropriation of the object for ends that suit the interests of the interpreter, the counter-question might be why we would want anything else of description (or of

art history). At no time – not at the moment of creation, not at the behest of patrons, not in their receptions in history, have objects been innocent, pure or objective. The ekphrastic appropriation is in this sense not much different from Michaelangelo's own appropriation of a block of Carrara marble and his working on it to turn it from stone to *pietà* – and in the case of the Rondanini he has himself marked his second thoughts (that is, the nature of the changes in his interpretative intent) by preserving the arm of a different sculpture once to be cut from the same block. So the worry about appropriation is less about the act of interpreting and leaping from the described image into one's own argument than in judging why my argument may be better, more valid, more justified, more interesting, more whatever-you-will, than yours or anyone else's. But my point here is less to judge which interpretation of any given group is better, than to argue for the need to be clear about the extent of subjectivity – or shall we call it personal taste, even whimsy? – in the very formulation of the descriptions from which our apparently rational art-historical arguments are generated.

Now it may be that Michelangelo really did think about finish and unfinish, fragmentation and completeness in statuary in relation to antique survivals – as I tentatively suggest here. Or even that he did not think about this but was conscious of it in some part of himself during his handling of the stone or as part of the very process of sculpting. But clearly it is my own tendentious claim – or that of the tradition in which I write? – that his sculpture looks forward into modernism itself. Here the exercise of comparisons – Donatello, the Pisani, ancient statuary, Michelangelo's own other *pietà*s, Rodin, Giacometti, Henry Moore – is itself interestingly ekphrastic. For though none of these examples is a description of a work of art, each invokes both a set of characteristic works (the Vatican *pietà* being the most specific one) and a set of standard accounts in art history. My own interpretation (interpretative description) builds on these and might be said to be meaningless to anyone without a sense of the tradition in which they unfold. That is, my ekphrasis is founded upon and related to a series of other ekphrases (none of which I have read in the immediate context of writing the piece, some of which I read long ago and some of which I have never read). Inevitably, though apparently founded on and inspired by a single object (and written on the same day as seeing it), my ekphrasis is at least as much about the range and history of other ekphrases of other objects in the tradition. Indeed, in the sense that it is ultimately about the tradition itself, it may be said to elide the object, which it professes to discuss centre stage, as merely the emblem or figment of a tradition in which that object (as 'Michaelangelo's last sculpture') was inevitably a player but not necessarily so savvy and self-conscious a player as my interpretative impulse has made it.

Now, my piece is illustrated, and by my own pictures. I am proud of my photographs – for it is not easy to make pictures without a flash or a tripod in the Castello Sforza (where, as usual in museums, such things are not allowed), and these were some of the few that came out (from the many I took, despite the harassment of a guard who believed that five was the maximum any visitor should be allowed). Nor am I a particularly good photographer (less good certainly than the excellent digital camera I use). But what do the pictures add? Conventionally, pictures may be seen to supplement and support a description (or, many might say, to constitute the prime evidence, the description being there to supplement them by an interpretative steer). But more potently, reproductions in a text speak the (visual) discourse of the real, grounding the interpretative flow of ekphrasis (which is itself a verbal appeal to the real, material, object) with an actual material snapshot of a real thing out

there, outside the bubble of rhetoric. The photograph is a kind of ekphrasis within an ekphrasis – a visual interpretative framing within a textual interpretative framing. The photograph promises that bottom line of ‘thereness’ in which the text’s argument can finally be grounded. That is a powerfully rhetorical role for the visual, and one particularly suited to ekphrasis, in that interpretative picturing attempts the same thing as interpretative description in relation to the bigger argument being made. But it remains no more than a rhetorical role with the photograph (whatever feelings of achievement my in-focus shots may raise in me) being as tendentious as the rest of my account.

So much then for an analysis of my own ekphrasis. I have of course been careful to avoid commenting too much on the content – the tendentiousness – with which the piece was designed and in relation to which the description functions. That is hardly my right and is anyway not my purpose in assessing the ekphrastic basis of art history, although close attention to the rhetorical aspects of interpretative description may reveal the tendentiousness more acutely than is usual. But it is the tendentiousness which we cannot control. Nazis like Josef Strzygowski and Hans Sedlmayr were great art historians whatever one thinks of their wider views or the more horrible turns which some of their arguments took. We may take a moral stand – agree or disagree – but then what is at issue (despite appearances sometimes) is not art history but politics, ethics or ideology. Art history is about constructing compelling and well-founded arguments out of objects, and that means out of ekphrasis. Whether my argument on the *Rondanini Pietà* is either well-founded or compelling is hardly for me to say.

Where does this take us? I opened with a proposition about art history as ekphrasis, because I think it true but simultaneously uncontroversial *pragmatically* among art historians (that is, we have no choice but to do interpretative description) and yet thoroughly controversial *ideologically* (that is, we find it impossible to admit to ourselves that this is what our practice and its core methodology consist in). To say that art history is ekphrasis is to say that it is no less literary and rhetorical as a discipline than it is philosophical or historical. It is to claim the study of art as playful and fictional as well as serious and substantial. It is to deny any fundamental difference between ‘art history’ and ‘art criticism’ other than the tendency of their ekphrastic flow and the rules by which they are written. But usually we are embarrassed to be caught writing fiction with footnotes (why this is so, I have never understood – for that is what we do, even if the footnotes chart a careful series of ‘true’, or at least generally accepted or empirically attested, parameters within which we steer our fictive imaginations). Worse, for some reason (another thing I have long failed to understand) a large number of art historians are insistent on the priority of the object, as if ultimately art history were a discipline of things and not of words. They are wrong. Art history is not possible without ekphrasis, just as it is not possible without objects. That means it is, at the very least, a verbal discipline of the visual, a discipline of the constant translation and re-translation of art into text, and of the belief in (or desire for) the potential transfiguration of the visual cast in verbal terms that can make it more clearly or effectively or essentially grasped. Art history has always turned the object into text and no amount of cant or bluster can make it otherwise.

This is not to say that the history of art history is the same as the history of ekphrasis. On the contrary, the history of art history is a great professional chapter in the history of an ancient descriptive practice that encompasses many turns – playful, fictional, poetic, metaliterary – that are by no means all art historical. So the claim that art history is ekphrasis is also a claim for a much longer and grander historiography to

the discipline than the usual survey of the usual suspects from Vasari to Panofsky or as late as Baxandall or even up to Michael Fried and Michael Camille, all of whom have usually performed as if they were writing prose history about objects or artists. The ekphrastic passages that deal with art in Homer, Virgil, Dante and a host of epic poets, in the world of epigram and lyric, in the vast number of novels that describe works of art from antiquity to the present, are an essential part of the discipline's history in that not only do they perform the process of interpretative description with remarkable panache and self-reflection, but they do so on works of art which are both real and fictive. That they may turn the discussion to other directions than just 'art history' has the potential to add possibilities to our own practice. But beyond pragmatics and beyond the potential acquisition of descriptive strategies deep in the tradition (but usually avoided by art historians as just one step too far), a bigger sense of ekphrastic historiography is a way of sharpening our critical edge.

Interpretative description is *always* tendentious. When we pay attention to ekphrasis critically, we isolate the formal and rhetorical elements. So, in my account of the *Rondanini Pietà*, I borrow a series of substantive or generic tropes from the art-historical tradition – issues of naturalism and abstraction in the question of forms, comparisons made with art and artists from other periods – and tie them to claims to generalization both at the opening and at the close. These themes are presented in ways designed to up the stakes of the importance of the object discussed (and implicitly in the theme I am using the object as a vehicle for discussing), so that it can indeed serve as an emblem of something of significance in respect of the whole tradition. Rhetorical choices include the use of adjectives to support the emotive force of the piece – 'the haunting *Rondanini Pietà*', 'Christ's lifeless legs', 'the sorrowing mother' – and the repeated terminology of 'apogee' and 'zenith' to define a period both within the chronological history of art and of artistic creativity. The theme of a work poised between artistic traditions or at the cusp of a shift within them – so prescient as to presage the future yet also able to encapsulate the past – is verbalized through the repeated play on 'finish' and 'unfinish', 'sketched abstraction', '(in) completeness', fragmentation, abrasion, those legs 'breaking into near verisimilitude at the knees before reverting to sketchy unfinish at the feet and the groin'. In analysing the way ekphrasis attempts to make the object speak, especially by masking its rhetorical aims through verbalizing the object's forms and material characteristics, one may hope to lay bare the tendentiousness – the directing desire or ideology which fuels the description towards a chosen end (a topic which in the interests of decency I had better not attempt in my discussion of myself!). In general, art history takes this desire too much for granted as if it were the result of an argument (showing a Marxist view of a given set of objects, or their place in ritual, or their status in an artist's oeuvre or whatever). But this desire is so often the starting point that shapes the discussion, informing the ekphrastic opening and ensuring a circularity by which the argued conclusion is only a restatement of the opening proposition in different terms. And that, although it may be satisfying ideology, is not good argument nor good art history.

Worse, how much of that desire is my own? In finding the terms to formulate my object in description, I not only fix the direction of argument in which it will lead, but am dependent on the structures, tropes and ground-rules set up by art-historical tradition. Through my apparently personal description, the tradition seems simply to rewrite itself – finding perhaps (one hopes) more subtle meanings, better analogues, a new document or an old one more precisely assessed, a more nuanced interpretation in the process. Yet as it rewrites itself through me, what can become

clear are the very limitations of my particular ekphrastic responses, the questions those responses allow me to ask, the ground-rules within which my argument operates. This brings us back up against the object – its glorious resistance to being fully verbalized, its uncanny ability to be verbalized in a myriad of ways, equally valid and sometimes mutually exclusive. As description knocks against the object's object-hood, the important thing is the chance that is offered to see it afresh in the creative gap between the visual and our traditions of verbal tropes. In the ancient definitions of ekphrasis as a rhetorical tool, prime weight was placed on the ability to bring what is described before the reader's or the listener's eyes. The role of ekphrasis – and of art history itself – is to make the reader or the listener 'see' more than they saw before, when they encounter the object next. That search for words to make us 'see' is at the heart of the creative struggle against the ways in which what we have learnt can go stale, and it is an attempt to open to the new.

The formatory nature of the ekphrasist's desire (in this case the art historian's) on both the discussion and its underpinning descriptions is at least partly pre-rational, and requires both literary methods and a literary sensibility to be diagnosed by the critical reader and to be given full vent by the descriptive interpreter. Sometimes, a more fictive and playful form of description may do better justice to our chosen objects than a recourse to painstaking historicism. Panofsky famously compared iconology by contrast with iconography to ethnology by contrast with ethnography and to astrology by contrast with astrology. He wished the first of these comparisons (that is, the idea of iconology as a parallel to a respectable discipline like ethnology) to stand as a positive model but not the second (since he was not dealing in the mystifications of astrology). But with his characteristic acuity Panofsky pointed to the terrible (or wonderful) truth that art history in fact embraces both extremes, however ideally we may try to police it. Sometimes, we may need – in other words – knowingly to allow the intellectually dubious as well as the academically respectable to inform our making of ekphrasis. Otherwise, it will simply do so without our acknowledgement: in fact, it frequently does so already.

#### Notes

**This paper is the result of teaching several courses at the University of Chicago on issues of ekphrasis and historiography – I am grateful in particular to a number of students for egging me on down one or two mad alleyways. In a way it is also my response to a historiographical turn in my own research that has had me thinking about and against the likes of Riegl and Panofsky for several years (here I am specially grateful to Richard Neer, Peg Olin, Adrian Rifkin and Joel Snyder for various discussions and the encouragement not to throw in the towel, as well as my partner in the folly of attempting to translate the German of the early Panofsky, Katharina Lorenz). It also continues two long conversations over many years with John Henderson on the question of art and text, and with John Ma on art history and history, so I thank them especially for having got me here (even if they are bound to disagree). Insofar as I have chosen to avoid that great fiction of the real in academic discourse, namely the footnote, I genuflect to a venerable tradition in *Art History* established by John Onians in a famous piece on imagination in late antiquity (in 1980) and recently revived in an elegant paper by John Ma (in 2006). My particular gratitude is due to audiences in Oxford and at Emory (especially Jean Campbell and Walter Melion), to whom I have**

**given different versions of the thoughts contained here, to David Peters Corbett and the editorial team at *Art History* and particularly to an extraordinarily sharp anonymous reader whose empathetic response conveyed more telling criticisms and disagreements more directly than hostile criticism can ever achieve.**

I have been asked to add some bibliographic suggestions. The ancient prescriptions for ekphrasis as a 'colour' of rhetoric are given by a series of authors – Theon, Hermogenes, Aphthonius, Nicolaus and John of Sardis – who span the Roman and Byzantine periods. They are now conveniently translated into English in G. A. Kennedy, *Progymnasmata: Greek Textbooks of Prose Composition and Rhetoric*, Atlanta, 2003, esp. 45–7, 86–7, 117–20, 166–8, 218–21. For discussion of the ancient techniques and scope of ekphrasis, see especially Ruth Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice*, Farnham, 2009, with large further bibliography. Outstanding discussions of ekphrasis in literary and artistic tradition – from a variety of different scholarly cultures internationally – include: Page duBois, *History, Rhetorical Description and the Epic*, Cambridge, 1982; Françoise Meltzer, *Salome and the Dance of Writing: Portraits of Mimesis in Literature*, Chicago, IL,

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