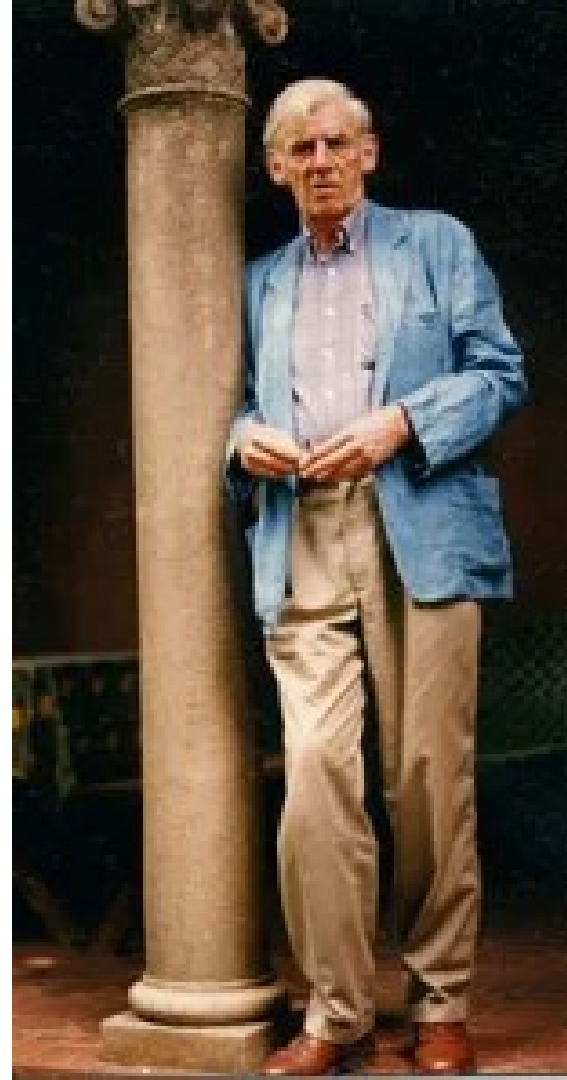


Reading Baxandall

adapting “charge/brief” from visual culture to performative one



Michael Baxandall (18 August 1933 – 12 August 2008)

british art historian

- *Giotto and the Orators. Humanist observers of painting in Italy and the discovery of pictorial composition 1350-1450*, 1971
- *Painting and Experience in 15th century Italy*, 1972
- *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany*, 1980
- ***Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures*, 1985**
- *Shadows and Enlightenment*, 1995
- *Words for Pictures: Seven Papers on Renaissance Art and Criticism*, 2003

Period Eye

The beauty is in the eye of beholder

The brief / the task / the charge

The language of description

... from introduction

The lectures addressed a question: If we offer a statement about the causes of a picture, what is the nature and basis of the statement? More particularly, if we think or speak of a picture as, among other things, the product of situated volition or intention, what is it that we are doing? So the question is, within limits, one about the historical explanation of pictures, though I more often speak of 'inferential criticism' of pictures because this corresponds better with the balance of my interest in the activity.

subchapter *Three kinds of descriptive words*

COMPARISON WORDS

resonance (of colours)
columnar (drapery)
scaffolding (of proportion)

CAUSE WORDS

assured handling
(frugal) palette
excited (blots and scribbles)



THE PICTURE



EFFECT WORDS

poignant
enchancing
surprising

This description is made up of words, generalizing instruments, that are not only often indirect - inferring causes, characterizing effects, making various kinds of comparison - but take on the meaning we shall actually use only in their reciprocal relation with the picture itself, a particular

If we wish to explain pictures, in the sense of expounding them in terms of their historical causes, what we actually explain seems likely to be not the unmediated picture but the picture as considered under a partially interpretative description. This description is an untidy and lively affair.

Firstly, the nature of language or serial conceptualization means that the description is less a representation of the picture, or even a representation of seeing the picture, than a representation of thinking about having seen the picture. To put it in another way, we address a relationship between picture and concepts.



For the moment, then, let us say: The maker of a picture or other historical artefact is a man addressing a problem of which his product is a finished and concrete solution. To understand it we try to reconstruct both the specific problem it was designed to solve and the specific circumstances out of which he was addressing it. This reconstruction is not identical with what he internally experienced: it will be simplified and limited to the conceptualizeable, though it will also be operating in a reciprocal relation with the picture itself, which contributes, among other things, modes of perceiving and feeling. What we are going to be dealing in are relations - relations of problems to solutions, of both to circumstances, of our conceptualized constructs to a picture covered by a description, and of a description to a picture.

Let us start by particularizing the general charge - 'Bridge!' - into a more specific brief for Queensferry.

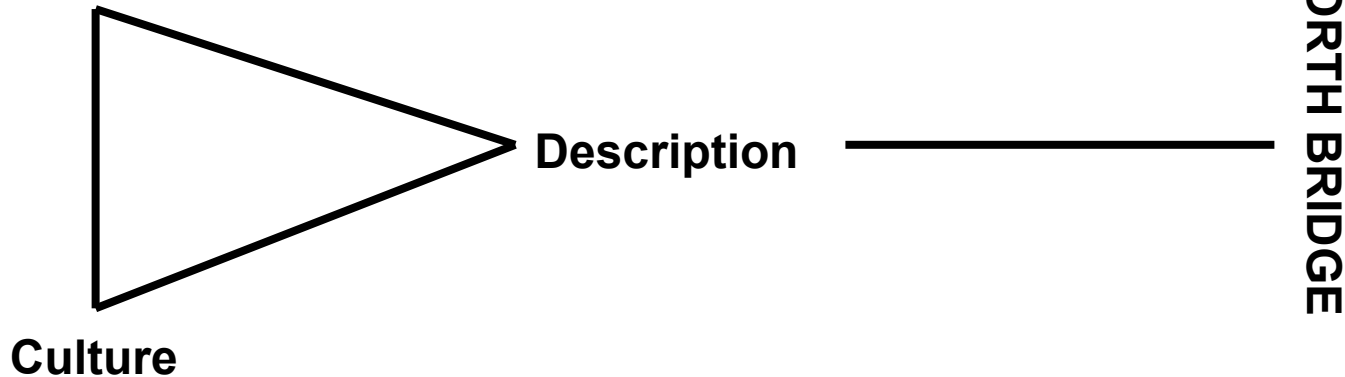
(....)

What we really have on Baker is, if not precisely the Forth - Bridge, then a three-cornered relationship between the Forth Bridge, an objective task or problem, and a range of culturally determined possibilities. The intention of Baker presents itself to us in the form of this triangle.

We have conceptualized and verbalized Baker's problem - his Charge and Brief - in such terms as 'bridge' and 'span', 'silt' and 'side winds', and so on. We have done the same with the resources within his situation: 'steel', 'tensile strength', 'cantilever', 'functional' and the rest.

So one might see the sort of thinking about the Bridge attempted here as a kind of rough triangle of *re-enactment* done between three bases: concepts pertaining to the Charge and Brief, concepts pertaining to resources used or not used, concepts descriptive of the Bridge. Or:

Terms of problems



Then again, Baker's reflective perception of his problem would have been less simple and sharp-edged than the sketch admitted. His task was not purely to span a specifically conditioned gap. It was, one could argue, also to do it neatly, impressively, expressively, and with an eye to other secondary qualities. The Bridge was, in a subsidiary aspect, a publicity exercise. It became the emblem of the east-coast route, represented on posters and on bank-notes. It was to redeem the reputation of British engineering after the literally disastrous Bouch, and at a moment when Britain was beginning to slip behind the technically better educated French and Germans. It was to be strong eloquently and with panache. There were, in other words, accents on the Brief that we have not attended to. And then again, in the matter of who issued Charge and Brief, one suspects that Baker would not have considered himself as working solely to the directors of the Forth Bridge Railway Company: he was working also to his professional colleagues and rivals, and to a society.

The Forth Bridge and the Portrait of Kahnweiler, both purposeful objects, are not necessarily in principle different. The differences seem more of degree and of balance, particularly the balance of our interest or of our critical priorities. One of the deep subject matters of good pictures is the tissue of human intention, in general.

