

Reviews and Discussion

Michael Baxandall. *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980. xx + 420 pp., 145 figures, iv + 102 plates. £25.

Reviewed by Peter Burke
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This beautifully produced volume is one of the most important contributions to the social history of art to have appeared in recent years. Michael Baxandall, who teaches at the University of London's Warburg Institute, made his reputation in this field with his *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (1972). I was engaged in writing a similar study at the same time, and on reading Baxandall I felt, like Gorky reading Chekhov, as if I had been writing with a log instead of a pen. This slim, elegant essay was concerned with two themes. The first was the relatively traditional theme of the art market and the power of the client. The second theme was what Baxandall called "the period eye," and was and is relatively unexplored. It involves the attempt to reconstruct the ways in which contemporaries perceived paintings, thanks to their training in other arts such as religious meditation, dancing, and even gauging barrels (which according to the author encouraged awareness of the geometrical figures underlying superficial irregularities). In other words, he attempted the retrospective anthropology of visual communication in Renaissance Italy.

Limewood Sculptors is a much longer and richer book, but it approaches its subject in a similar way to *Painting and Experience*, allowing for the fact that it is concerned with Germany not Italy, the period 1475-1525 not 1400-1500, and with limewood sculpture not painting. (There is a brief but fascinating account of the cell structure of limewood and the kind of carving it encourages, or resists least.)

As in his earlier book, Baxandall discusses the art market, noting in particular that the coexistence of different markets in Germany at this time left the artists a measure of freedom in their response. Sculpture was a manufacture "conducted on the same commercial basis as other bespoke manufactures." The guilds to which the sculptors belonged worked in the normal late-medieval way, practicing oligopoly by limiting entry to the guild and also by forbidding their members to set up workshops larger than those of their colleagues.

However, sculptors were able to evade the rules of the guild, notably by adopting the strategy of "monopolistic competition," the conspicuous differentiation of their product from what was produced by their competitors—in other words, artistic individualism. Artistic individualism

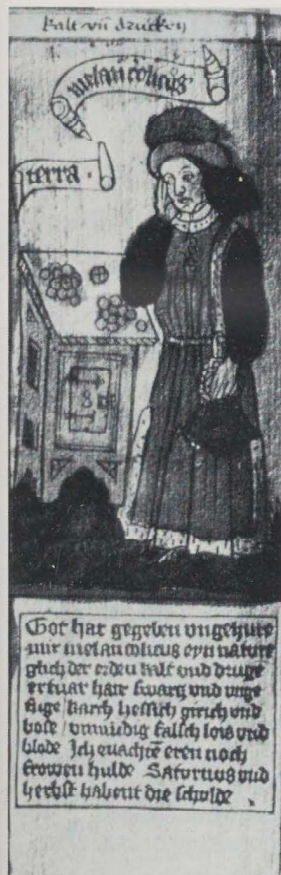
was an issue in Germany at this time, in the world of the mastersingers (Meistersingers) as well as that of artists, as an apt quotation from Hans Folz makes clear. As for painters, in 1516 the statutes of their guild at Strassbourg declared that a candidate should make his masterpiece "without using any pattern," although a group of traditionalists objected that this practice was "unheard of." Workshop organization and style are related still more closely to one another in a bravura passage later in the book, contrasting the large-workshop style of Tilman Riemenschneider, with its "permutable standard types" of figure, to the small-workshop style of Veit Stoss, with its "variable detail."

As in the case of *Painting and Experience*, this book also gives us a long discussion of the "period eye." Although, as Baxandall points out, there were no "authentic critical terms" available to describe sculpture at this time, there were relevant categories in the "wider visual culture." In Germany as in Italy, treatises on the dance provided a vocabulary useful for describing gesture and including such terms as *swazen* (swagger) and *zipfen* (mince). Stage directions in miracle plays help the historian ascertain what particular gestures meant at this time and place. So do treatises on what we call "psychology." The melancholic temperament, for example, is often presented head on hand. See Figures 1 and 2.

Gauging barrels was not an activity relevant to the period eye in Germany—it was a professional activity, not an amateur one—but education for a business career did include another relevant skill, writing, which possessed an elaborate vocabulary for describing the various kinds of line made by the pen, such as *gewunden* (wound) and *gebrochen* (broken). See Figure 3.

Limewood Sculptors is far more than a mere adaptation of Baxandall's earlier schemata to fit new material. It explores paths of its own. There is an important chapter on "functions," essentially concerned with images (more especially the images represented on winged altarpieces) as expressions of pre-Reformation German piety. The author distinguishes the "modest" image which functioned as a focus for meditation from the splendid but immodest—indeed, to some contemporaries, "shameless"—painted images which were the focus, so the reformers tell us, for "superstitious" worship. Iconoclasm, Baxandall suggests in one of his most telling phrases, should be regarded as the "practical criticism" of the period.

Although it deals with no more than 50 years, this book is very much concerned with changes over time. Baxandall remarks on the rise of new genres, such as the portrait, between 1520 and 1550, in order to fill the gap left by the disappearance of the altarpiece, rendered obsolete by the success of the Reformation. He suggests that the period 1475-1525 should be divided into three generations, and contrasts the age of the great masters



◀ **Figure 1** *The Temperament: Melancholic*. Mid-fifteenth-century woodcut, Zentralbibliothek, Zurich.

Figure 2 Nikolaus Gerhaert, *Bust of a Man*, about 1465. Musée de l'Oeuvre Notre-Dame, Strassburg.



Figure 3 Common, Wound and Broken Ductus. Etched plate from Johann Neudörffer, *Anweisung einer gemein hanndtschrift*, Nuremberg, 1538.

Stoss and Riemenschneider, who ignored Italy, with that of Hans Leinberger of Landshut, for whom, together with his contemporaries, "the existence of the Italianate was a circumstance they lived with from the start, developing their personal manners in some sort of relation to it," whether positive or negative.

In short, this is a very fine book. The work of an art historian (a former Keeper of the sculpture at the Victoria and Albert Museum), working downward to the material basis of society, rather than that of a sociologist or historian working upward, this study abounds in perceptive comments on the works of sculpture themselves. Sense is matched with sensibility. The book is also the work of a man with a wide range of interests and learning as well as the power to focus this learning to illuminate particular dark problems. He knows his Paracelsus, his master-singers, his humanists and reformers—not to mention modern studies of the history of gesture or even the theory of the firm. He puts to good use the Warburg vocabulary of "schema," "stereotype," and "pathos formula."

This is a precise, discriminating book which at times reminds one that its author read English at Cambridge in the age of F. R. Leavis. It is the book of a man with a fastidious distaste for coarse-textured generalizations. Indeed, the distaste for the general is perhaps a little too strong. The book has a tendency to fragment into chapters and even sections, extremely revealing in their juxtapositions of images and ideas which are not normally considered together, but together providing something less than a picture of a whole culture. But then "culture" is a term Baxandall treats with suspicion and tends to eschew. In so doing he avoids a number of crude formulations of the type offered by (say) Arnold Hauser in his *Social History of Art*, but he does pay a price. He succeeds, it is true, in giving us a context which makes the sculpture of Renaissance Germany more legible than it was, and this achievement is a considerable one. But he could, if he wanted, have given us a brilliant general picture of the culture and society of the period, a study in the manner of great classics like Burckhardt, Huizinga, or—given his fascination with alien categories and sensibilities—Evans-Pritchard. Baxandall is so much more than a historian of limewood sculpture, but he rejects the blandishments of cultural history. He seems to think its ambitions immodest, even shameless. It is with some sense of opportunities lost, as well as advances achieved, that one puts down this remarkable book.

Gerald R. Miller and Norman E. Fontes. Videotape on Trial: A View from the Jury Box. Beverly Hills: Sage, 1979.

Reviewed by Phoebe C. Ellsworth
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In most jurisdictions, a major complaint of citizens called for jury duty is that they spend a great deal of time sitting around doing nothing and very little time actually hearing cases. Even when they are called to hear a case and are accepted by both attorneys during the voir dire, they may not hear the whole case, or they may not have an opportunity to deliberate and reach a decision because the parties come to an agreement and the trial was aborted. Various reforms in the recruitment of jurors are currently being attempted, such as letting members of the jury panel know each morning whether or not they should bother to come to the courthouse that day. Miller and Fontes begin with the assumption that the use of videotaped trials will also promote more efficient use of jurors' time and will hasten the halting pace of justice more generally by eliminating delays caused by "objections, bench conferences, delays for witnesses, counsel's pauses, client conferences, and chamber retreats" (p. 21) and sparing the jurors the necessity of listening to trials that are never completed.

This efficiency is achieved by having the attorneys prepare taped depositions of the direct and cross-examination of all the witnesses, raising objections to each other's tactics as they would in a live trial, and then handing the whole package to the judge, who rules on the objections and orders that inadmissible material be edited out. The resulting tape is much shorter than a live trial would be, cases that are settled midway through the proceedings need never be presented to a jury, and the same judge can preside over more than one trial at the same time, since all the legal rulings have been made in advance. Miller and Fontes present impressive anecdotal evidence of the time saved by these procedures in one or two jurisdictions where they have been tried.

The question is, of course, do we pay a price for this increased efficiency? Do jurors behave less skillfully, or less fairly, or somehow differently when they see a taped trial than when they see a live one? Miller and Fontes have translated these vague and abstract concerns into specific questions, and have tried to answer them with a series of experiments. Their work is basically practical and applied and is presented with a minimum of theory. Their most general conclusion is that "within the procedural confines of our research, there is no evidence to suggest that the use of videotape exerts any deleterious effects on the juror responses studied; in fact, as far as