

"Meliora latent": Art, Concealment, and Clandestinity before Modernity

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The relation of art and culture to secrecy is highly ambivalent. On the one hand, many theorists have acknowledged the general rootedness of cultural practices in mysticism and the early occurrence of 'artistic' objects in the context of occult rituals, or even the fact that various traditions – e.g., the myth of Prometheus's theft of fire, or the ancient topos of artists stealing from nature – ascribe the origin of civilization, or of mimetic art, to a clandestine act: from Nietzsche ("each kind of culture begins when things are concealed") to Aleida and Jan Assmann ("the invention of the secret was the foundation of culture").

Art history, on the other hand, has struggled to take this idea systematically into account. Nowadays, a discussion of the 'secret' nature or 'hidden' aspects of artworks, or of great masters, takes place predominantly in lurid, sensation-seeking publications with little or no scholarly value. This very broad and undefined notion of 'secrecy', however, is very different from what remains a task for art history: to pay attention to the very paradoxical nature of art, between – on the one side – its essential necessity to be visually and virtually present, and perceivable, and – on the other side – the desire evoked by art's luring rarity and a curiosity generated by its distinguishedness from those things that are considered ordinary (the literary meaning of the Latin word "secretum", meaning something that has been set apart from the rest).

In Europe after the Medieval Ages, not only was there an enormous increase of images in the public sphere, a rise of serial reproductions and of publications on the arts, eventually leading to the opening of more and more institutions providing public access to artworks. The emerging new concept of ‘art’ at the dawn of the Early Modern period is also characterized by ways of production that are more secluded than before, by measures of value based on the rarity and difficulty to access an artefact, by collectors jealously hiding their items and prohibiting copies, and art lovers secretly violating norms to get desired objects into their possession, or at least to have the singular chance to admire otherwise concealed images for a short moment.

In what follows, this preliminary paper will touch upon four different aspects. First, I will begin with a very cursory (and, admittedly, unfair) description of the discipline’s history and reorientations in order to think about why many of the aspects that I am interested in were gradually marginalized in the art historical discourse. Two following paragraphs will describe various elements which are essential to a clandestine history of art, or which need to be taken into account when attempting to reconstruct a history of objects and practices that were intentionally concealed and nondisclosed – aiming both at a material history and at a history of concepts. This is directly linked to my final listing of some methodological issues, observations and possible outcomes, all of which are intended to be taken up and continued in the seminar’s discussion.

1. The disappearance of the secret in art history

In art historical studies, skepticism towards the secret arose as soon as the discipline emancipated from aesthetics and post-romantic prose. For highly influential mid-19th century art historians such as Carl Schnaase, Herman Grimm, and many others, it was not uncommon

to contemplate the inaccessible secrets of beauty, of a ‘masterwork’, or of a ‘genius’. By the turn of the century, however, accepting the own inability to answer questions raised by the object was no longer an option. A more refined methodology of connoisseurship (Morelli, Berenson, Friedländer) and the parallel emergence of iconographical studies was per se defined by its capacity to resolve puzzles, to decode enigmas and to expose obscured images, and to present definite answers to the secrets of artworks (the early Warburg, Saxl, Panofsky): a scientific trend which, as Carlo Ginzburg has observed, has a likeness in the methodologies of Sherlock Holmes and Freud’s psychoanalysis. Considerations of the risks of the language used to analyze art led Walter Benjamin to even reject the term “Geheimnis” (secret, mystery) entirely. Not only because it seemed to him – similar to ‘genius’ – outdated, but because he regarded it an uncontrollable concept, which, according to Benjamin, could eventually be misused by fascism.

The development outlined so far is intrinsically connected to the young discipline’s struggle to fight its historiographical tradition, and to find its place within academia. In between the 1920s and 1940s, this self-imposed pressure of justification led to methodological claims and positivist promises going far beyond those of other disciplines of the Humanities. At the very time when Benjamin avoided the use of the term “secret” in his discussion of the original work of art in relation to its reproductions, some of his German-spoken colleagues from the very opposite side of the aisle would have agreed. The intended transformation of *Kunstwissenschaft* into what was now defined a “pure” and “rigorous science”, capable to present “objective scholarly results” (Pinder, Sedlmayr), had no place for studies dealing with the inaccessible, the invisible, and the sphere of the unreasonable.

Two other and more recent developments have to be considered: the growing importance of studies on the history of collections, and the increasing focus on the visual perception of images. I will begin with the latter. We are surrounded by visual impressions,

signs, and pictures. But not every image is art. Even today, with a common understanding of ‘art’ very dissimilar to the one coming up in the Early Modern period, this fundamental distinction continues to exist: the difference between ‘high’ and ‘low’, between popular art for the masses and those few works that are highly esteemed, prized and therefore separated (in one way or the other), has not been overthrown. Yet scholar’s interest in the power of visual evidence and persuasiveness, or of representation through images, concentrates foremostly on works that were meant to be accessible and to be seen. Studies reflect why so-called enemies of images censor or destroy them, but pay little attention to an absence of images caused by the desire to possess them, and not wanting to share the pleasure of visual perception. What is more, the focus rests much more on the depiction and the beholder’s perception of the represented, instead of his genuine interest in the object’s physical and material properties and artistic qualities. Visual studies and Bildwissenschaft are much indebted to iconology, but much less to connoisseurship, and have barely any interest in the history of the art market.

How the before-mentioned art lover would have handled the sculptures or paintings in his possession would today be subject to the vast art-historical subfield of the history of collections, or museology. Especially in the 18th and 19th century, when the preserved corpus of written sources regarding collectors or private sales is much richer than in the centuries before combined, the names of owners who do not wish to disclose their artworks are dropped on a regular basis. Yet, these cases are usually not mentioned at all in scholarly publications specialized in this field of art history, and if so, only as an allegedly singular, eccentric exception from the norm. The difference to another area of scholarship on collecting is striking: the phenomena of bibliomania and bibliotaphia (book-lovers ‘burying’ their treasures like in a grave) are subject to a serious discussion and critical analysis since the 16th century. How come it is so different in art history? My guesswork is that it has much to do with a certain disinterest to understand, and a lack of sympathy for this specific handling of artworks

by collectors. Already the printed sources dating from the period of transition to Modernity detest such owner's refusal to contribute to society and scholarship by opening the collections (as many other contemporaries did), or express mere puzzlement about art lovers hiding their treasures in boxes instead of hanging the paintings on the walls.

Not alone were many of these textual sources written by connoisseurs who had a self-interest in seeing the artworks (ironically often giving best proof of inaccessible collections when they complain their failure to visit them). What is more, modern museology pursues this ideology. Limited visibility is rather condemned than analyzed as an important part of a history of response and reception aesthetics, with its genuine logics and epistemology. Consequently, the history of collections is told as a development of becoming successively more 'modern', which is understood as becoming more public and accessible: from the highly exclusive studiolo tradition of around the time from the 14th till the 16th century to the modern museum (as defined by the UNESCO).

2. The era of the private image at the end of the Middle Ages

The triumphal narrative of how collections eventually turned into the 'modern museum' is highly problematic insofar as it is a tale of a linear, progressive process. The only interruptions seem to be caused by occasional lootings. It is maybe the only area of today's art history which still pursues a historiographical way of description similar to the one deployed by Vasari. This is, first, because the academic history of collections loses sight of merely private collections in the 19th, 20th, and 21st century: for the most parts, it is a narrative of how private collections turned into public institutions (an observation which is only true for some philanthropists, and for some collections). Secondly, it has to do with the sources at hand. The idea of progression is largely based on accounts which want to report something that was

accessible, and they are in most cases silent about what was not to be seen. Equally important is that they were written overwhelmingly by privileged, elitist viewers. A narration failing to mention that even some of the most famous, so-called ‘public’ collections in the 19th century would not allow visitors wearing mud-stained boots, or decline access to someone not arriving in a carriage, or without a letter of recommendation, fails to address the systematic policy of exclusion in these institutions and the long-standing self-conception as institutions open not generally to *the* public, but only to *a* specific public. I am wondering whether these aspects have actually changed so much in our times.

When we ask ourselves how the (post)-modern understanding of ‘art’ and its adequate display still pursues the notion of being something extraordinary, and its admiration an uncommon experience, or great privilege, we need to look back at the emergence of this relation of art to the quality of rarity. In the last part of Hans Belting’s “Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image Before the Era of Art,” the author suggests fundamental changes taking place when mobile artefacts – painted or sculpted objects – started to become more frequent in private homes, sometime in between the 13th and 14th centuries (the title of this paragraph of my paper is simply adopted from the respective chapter in Belting’s seminal study). With private possession and custody comes limited visibility and a certain degree of secrecy: the German term “heimlich” (secretly) derives from “Heim” (home), that is to say something that is kept in or belonging to the private space.

The history of early modern art collections, one might summarize, begins when sacral images are retained in profane spaces not – or not exclusively – for devotion, but because of their artistic value. This might first be observed in inventories which do not only mention the religious subject, but also the name of the artist who created the object. One fundamental aspect of this ‘privatization’ of artworks is also the changing mode of how such works were produced. Around 1300, documents begin to mention how painters and sculptors are working

behind barriers, or that a finished creation is exposed by its ‘unveiling’ – thus only made visible after the conclusion of the concealed working process. A bit later, art theorists begin to distinguish between those works which we would consider belonging to the ‘Fine Arts’ on the one hand, and the mechanical arts or, respectively, crafts, on the other: the first are executed in spaces with limited access and visibility (“i pittori valenti non stanno a bottega, ma lavorano in casa”), while the others continue to be practiced in visitable and therefore visible environments (“a bottega aperta pubblicamente”). Looking at the actual social circumstances of course evidences that this distinction is not entirely accurate, but the tendency of this historical development must in fact be confirmed.

Around the same time when devotional paintings enter private households, medals and other antique relics are also to be found in some collections, and starting as early as in the 14th century drawings become collectible items, too. However, this new trend is carried by a small number of men, those who value these artefacts for a quality which average people would not attribute to these objects: a drawing that was only serving as a record and model for future designs to the artist would now be appreciated because of its artistic quality, and an ancient medal would surprisingly not be melted in, but preserved as something that is more precious than the worth of its material. The appreciation of these qualities of artworks remains that of an elite for centuries. Over the course of the 16th, 17, and 18th century, there are numerous reports of how ignoramuses misuse or destroy pieces of the highest quality without any awareness of their value to others, or of burglars stealing household goods but leaving behind the much more valuable artworks. One Bolognese collector, for instance, states at the beginning of the hand-written 17th-century inventory of his paintings the reason for his compilation: he needs to make sure that his heirs will not simply throw the artworks away. This is why he communicates his sons in this list not only the subjects and attributions, but also the approximate worth of his Carracci’s, Guido Reni’s, Guercino’s, etc.

3. Desire and clandestine practices

What is very interesting is the fact that those few who are appreciating the arts do not only desire their possession. From early on, they also value the occasion to see such works. Learned travelers – and of course traveling artists – in the Early Modern period frequently paid money to vergers to have them open the wings of altarpieces, or to lift curtains so that they could enjoy the paintings on the altars. One might suspect that the entrance fee to museums was in a way born out of such bribes, but already in the 13th century travelers knew about one painting in an Italian city that the private owners would show to foreigners only if they would be reimbursed to do so.

This last example is a fairly early case for a trend more and more frequent over the course of the next centuries. Parallel to reports about a community of art lovers and connoisseurs generously reaching out to each other, or of collectors gaining fame, sources mention at the same time collectors who, in contrast, restrict the access, or prevent others entirely from seeing their artworks. A number of statements suggest that such imposed difficulties triggered a desire to see the objects. Sometimes the display in visitable collections paid respect to this effect. As it was the case in churches, a typical feature in Early Modern collections are curtains in front of paintings, and slipcases or shutters inserted into the picture frame: these were mostly not meant to prevent the works to be seen at all, but to build up tension and curiosity in order to increase the delight once the object is unveiled.

In many cases, and for different reasons (for example to protect the eyes of children, females, and the faithful), such temporary viewing barriers were placed in front of lascivious depictions. It cannot be denied that the desire for art by the (male) viewer resembles in many aspects that of sexual attraction, and some myths and topoi of the history of art support this idea. However, I believe it is not a theory capable to explain entirely why some men guarded

their artworks jealously (a term used very frequently in Early Modern sources), and why, in contrast, other men had an extreme desire for artistic objects – especially in those cases of artworks whose subject is not that of human beauty. Maybe it is not even so complicated. If we look at economic theories developed during the 13th and 14th centuries, namely by scholars from the Franciscan order, two major new elements are added in order to determine a subject's value: apart from its special properties and usefulness, now rarity – the difficulty to obtain it – becomes acknowledged, as well as a very subjective, individual desirability (“beneplacitum” or “complacibilitas”). Tellingly, Pierre de Jean Olivi (†1298), who first brought forward this concept, illustrates “complacibilitas” with the example of a “graceful object” (“ornamentum sive iocale”) which might give great pleasure to someone, while others will not value it. In this regard, it is worth pointing out that rarity does not equal scarcity: the Latin term “raritas” includes, among other aspects, the quality of being “thin” or fragile, thus a quality that makes such objects precious because of their material virtuosity, and due to their vulnerability to damage or loss.

As I mentioned before, there is much reason to believe that already the rareness of seeing an object had an effect on its attributed value. The practice to place precious masterpieces behind curtains has rightfully been compared to similar practices at use in churches. Some theological texts state clearly that these sacral artworks are not concealed *because* they are objects of devotion, but in order *to achieve* that they will in fact be venerated, since they are made visible only on rare occasions. This concept might even have had an effect on the economy of the art market, and established a paradoxical countereffect to the relation of the fame of artistic icons to their market value: in some cases, when artworks previously preserved in notoriously inaccessible collections were ‘discovered’ and put on sale after the collector’s death, these formerly unseen paintings surprisingly gained prizes twice as high as the average sum paid usually for works of the same artist.

What such theories cannot to the full extent explain is why the desire to see or to own artworks led to seemingly irrational behavior, manifest in practices that I shall describe as ‘irregular’. Art lovers took a high personal risk to gaze at works which they were not supposed to see (e.g., by sneaking into a collection, or into a cabin protecting an unfinished artwork), collectors would forget about their high moral values and violate social and legal norms to bring artworks into their possession, and from the very beginning on trading art is predominantly something that has to be considered a grey or even a dark market: with both vendors and buyers systematically hiding their identity or using straw men; handling stolen goods and smuggling being a standard way of moving objects; sale information and important discoveries or attributions being oppressed or exchanged through coded letters, or subject to rumor. The desire and demand for rare ‘art’ – objects with no utility value in the tradition of economic theories – resulted in the systematic manipulation of the established organization of market exchange and transactions.

4. Some methodological considerations

What I have described above can be deduced from interpreting textual sources which differ very much in nature and quantity. Sources on a history of secrecy are fundamentally precarious because, theoretically, the best evidence would be provided by their absence. Artists, collectors, or art merchants trying not to disclose certain works or practices were successful when they left very few traces. Many collections that were not promoted, and did not invite visitors, have indeed never entered the canon studied by modern scholarship.

In other cases, the original intention not to address a broader public has been simply overlooked when historians could make use of printed sources without considering that these were not generally available at the time, or that this information was meant to be restricted.

The nowadays famous connoisseur Hagedorn wanted the catalogue of his collection to be printed, but without disclosing his identity: “without any name or location attached to it.” Some catalogues of prestigious collections, for example the first one ever printed about the paintings preserved in the Electoral Gallery in Düsseldorf, have survived only in one or two copies. The original print run was intentionally limited to about 50 copies which were not meant to be publicly distributed, but exclusively to be handed over to specific individuals. In other cases, such publications were produced without consent: the earliest catalogue of the gallery in Pommersfelden castle was written and printed by the collection’s inspector, but when the ruler, the Elector of Schönborn, found out about this, he ordered that the whole print run was to be destroyed, as he did not want this sort of publicity for his artworks.

These examples help to understand that it is necessary to consider not only the information provided by written sources, but also the medium and the author’s intention. Things are much different with numerous anecdotes dealing with clandestinity and concealment. As a historical source, the anecdote belongs at the same time to the most disprized and to the most popular, most often quoted forms. It is not necessarily a witness to actual events, but to concepts, and it is this aspect which constitutes its importance as a historical document: we learn from artistic anecdotes for example how people in the Cinquecento could actually imagine how an artist would not allow his powerful patron to see a yet unfinished artwork, that the idea of a collector who conceals his most beloved pieces is a very frequent literary motif, or that the unorganized looting taking place during the sack of a city was clearly distinguished from the theft of single artworks, commissioned or personally managed by art lovers.

In some lucky cases, the ideas and concepts transmitted in such texts can be contextualized with the help of other primary sources, e.g. letters or payments. When Early Modern biographers report how Michelangelo did not allow access to his decoration of the

Sistine Chapel until he had it completed, this notion of secrecy becomes somehow more tangible once we consider a payment for a locksmith who is reimbursed for installing a lockable trapdoor in Michelangelo's scaffolding. When Vasari reports that the young sculptor Bartolommeo Ammannati was so intrigued by Michelangelo's virtuosity that he stole his drawings, this story is backed up by an inventory compiled after a burglary into the artist's workshop just around the time when Ammannati would have been a teenager.

My intention is not to suggest that a great deal of these anecdotes is trustworthy. I believe though that they have the actual potential to be linked to a material history of art. What I mean by this is that such sources are not only connected to concepts: e.g., to that of the accessibility of Early Modern collections, or to the intellectual theft of artistic inventions and the connected theory of copyright infringement. Once we discuss these anecdotes and concepts together with the handling of material objects present in other contemporary sources – the shutters, curtains, metal grids and locks attached to artworks; the confiscated boxes with false bottoms that were built to smuggle paintings; the brushes, pigments, models and drawings reported to be stolen from one painter by another artist; or the temporary screens made of straw mats, wooden boards, or linen protecting the artist's privacy – this story of the appreciation of art becomes much less abstract and detached: eventually, it might turn out that a concept of art can only be truly understood if also the non-artistic objects are taken serious by scholars and included into a history of the artworks.