Picasso and Truth, From Cubism to Guernica

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Robert Willis (1800–1875) and the Foundation of Architectural History.
Volume 8, The History of the University of Cambridge: Text and Studies. By
Alexandrina Buchanan. 470 pp. incl. numerous col. + b. & w. ills. (Boydell
Reviewed by CHRIS MIELE

ON PAGE 163 of this meticulous, well-crafted intellectual biography we find the exact date
of the invention of architectural history: 11th September 1844. It was then that Robert
Willis, the Cambridge University polymath, presented a paper on Canterbury at the
Cathedral, the first of his admired ‘cathedral series’. And so, Alex Buchanan, writes, was
born ‘the first book ever to be defined by its author as an “architectural history”’. Buc-
anan is not one to speculate. What she says in this book she says only on the basis of
the most careful consideration of all relevant sources, and then only after the proposition
and every source relating to it has been thor-
oughly turned over. Buchanan’s temper and
method are at one with her subject. If Willis
had anything to say about the matter, then
this is the intellectual biography he would have wanted.

But the question that constantly came back to the present reviewer was whether
what Willis wrote really was ‘architectural history’, even if he himself named it so. Willis
was more of a building archaeologist than a historian. The world he analysed was
hermetic: here is this physical evidence in one part of a medieval church, here that in
another, finally a third from a different place altogether. Put them together with whatever
reliable manuscript source he could find (and there are not many) and so conclude the
date of the building, what influenced it and what it influenced.

It was only when Willis looked at medieval monastic remains that he went beyond the world of features, style and fabric
to think about how physical evidence could illuminate social or cultural history. Even then, when analysing the plan of St Gall
or the cathedral series, he dealt with strictly functional relationships and how ‘they shaped’, Buchanan writes, ‘the arrangement of
surviving buildings’. Even here all things find their way back to the physical characteristics and the site. This was the approach
he adopted in his posthumous four-volume opus (jointly written with his nephew, J.W.
Clark), The Architectural History of the University of Cambridge of 1886. This book more
than any other secured Willis’s reputation by sheer dint of the number of influential people who read for degrees there and so
explored Willis and Clark.

Willis matured at a time when the historical study of buildings was seen as a branch of inductive science. The rigour he brought to
his scholarship was born of an interest in mechanics and mathematics. In that sense his contribution mirrors that of William
Whewell, the other Cambridge polymath. His Architectural Notes on German Churches
pioneered the structural explanation of Gothic. The pointed arch, the style’s defining feature, had evolved, Whewell thought, from the
construction of rib vaulting, a German specialism. That Teutonic myth was shattered in the 1840s, when bit by bit the centrality of French Gothic came to be accepted by English scholars. Whewell
(1794–1866) was more of a building archaeologist than a historian, but, unlike Willis, his contribution to archi-
mental mindset collided with an antiquarian tradi-
tion that was, as often as not, intellectually thin or just muddled. Like Whewell, Willis defined a new way of looking at things by
resorting to foreign examples, in his case Italian
Gothic which forms the basis of his Remarks on the Architecture of the Middle Ages
of 1835. It is interesting – and Buchanan does
not mention this – that both these scientific
writers relied on a ‘data set’ outside the United Kingdom. Perhaps there was too much cultural baggage associat-
ed with the cherished historical scene at home. Continental study freed their minds.

Willis refined his method on the amateur society lecture circuit, delivering a series of
papers at various conferences organised by the British Architectural Association. These
were major cultural events, reported in the local press, attended by local dignitaries.
Willis led large crowds around the country’s
greatest medieval sites, and to make himself
known he had to rely on a network of enthusiastic
amateurs working through local societies and
guidebooks.

Thus it is fitting that any study of Willis can only be an intellectual biography. There is no personal archive, regrettably because clearly
Willis had charm and wit in person if not in his writings. We can be sure, beyond all reasonable doubt, that there is no personal
information lurking out there, for if there was, Buchanan would have discovered it.

What of Willis’s legacy, which Buchanan
handles in two thousand words? This is probably sufficient, but therein lies the quiet tragedy of this great intellectual. Willis is
sometimes likened to Pevsner who relied on his predecessor’s cathedral series for his own marvellous entries in The Buildings of England.
In fact, the two were very different writers, Pevsner quirky but also with a critical edge, Willis a man sticking strictly to the facts and
avoiding aesthetics. It is telling that at a time when architecture stimulated the literary
imagination, from Ruskin to Trollope, Willis
set his mind on the evidence as had no one before. In another country, in Germany or France, Willis would have been
an academic art historian and through the university net-
work have created a new discipline. Instead he had to rely on a network of enthusiastic amateurs working through local societies and
guidebooks.


S U P P O S E T H A T T R U T H is a work by Picasso.1 Such a thought experi-
ment raises the highest hopes about the nature of the artist’s achieve-
ment in a particular work, but it also opens the question of truth itself, both philosophically
and in terms of contemporary culture. ‘The question of truth’ implies the unravelling of the values of moral philosophy and epis-
temology, and is as much about a need for ‘untruths’ as it is about the function of the desire for truth, as well as for a distinction
between good and evil, in Western culture. To recast the understanding of Picasso’s art against this extra-moral questioning is, I
think, the ambition of T.J. Clark’s dazzling and sometimes troubling book.

Divided into six ‘lectures’, each with a single-word title, it retains the lyric feel and
intensity of live performance that characterised the 2009 Mellon Lectures upon which it is based.2 The ‘Introduction’ has to
do a huge amount of work. For a start it sets out the author’s stall in very broad-brushed
terms vis-à-vis the existing scholarship on the artist. No one is named, but the target is a hagiographic and biographically focused
literature dismissed as apotropaic, an ideological machine designed to protect us from exposure to the destabilising force of Picasso as Truth. Of course, Clark grants that the autobiographical question must in some way be at the centre of the artist’s project; the question is who the ‘I’ that ‘writes’ might be? Arthur Rimbaud’s dictum ‘Je est un autre’, favoured by Picasso, is a touchstone in Clark’s negotiation of the problem. This kind of argument has been made before. What is different about Clark’s approach is his insistence that, first, ‘the way to particularity in art is via absolute aesthetic generality’ – here he means to insist on art, to hang onto the notion of sensuously embodied ideas – and, secondly, that what Picasso’s ‘autobiographical’ project does is question the last remaining ‘universal’ left to our culture – the ‘fiction of subjectivity’ (pp.12–13). The first of these points underpins the value of 1924–140.7 by 200.3 cm. (Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York).

a Nietzschean situation. At least some of what Clark might have been productively related to or contrasted with Christopher Green's important book Picaaso: Architecurt and Vertigo (London 2006), driven as it is by similar conceptual oppositions.

**Publications Received**

**Miscellaneous**


Constantijn Huygens the Younger (1628–97) kept a diary between 1649 and 1696. It has much in common with that of his contemporary Samuel Pepys and yet is much less well known and little used by historians and art historians. It certainly deserves far more attention, and in this short account of the diary, Rudolf Dekker, who heads the Centre for the study of Egodocuments and History in Amsterdam, stresses its importance and its breadth of interest. Huygens was, of course, the son of a famous father. Constantijn the Elder had been secretary to three successive Orange stadholders and was a remarkable humanist, poet, musician and scholar. His second son was the great scientist and astronomer Christian Huygens. Constantijn the Younger followed his father into the service of the Orange family and, most importantly, was secretary to William III during the Glorious Revolution. He accompanied the Stadtholder-King on the invasion of England and was at his right hand during his first years as King.

For art historians the prime interest of Huygens’s diary will be the references to art, particularly as William III’s status as patron and connoisseur has never been entirely clear. In Huygens’s account William comes across as seriously interested in art. However, as Twyman tells it, that as he marched with his army towards London from the landing at Brixham, William III took the time (despite a heavy cold) to visit Wilton and admire the Van Dycks. Once in London, King and secretary viewed the paintings in the royal collection and spent time discussing and rearranging them. On 3rd May 1669 William sent for Huygens: ‘This afternoon I was with the king, who talked to me about paintings, and in particular about Van Dyck’s “King on Horseback”, which he had removed from the gallery. He thought it had been put in the chamber behind his cabinet, here at Hampton Court, and he wanted to show it to me, but it wasn’t there’. The Queen also asked his advice, on one occasion about a suitable restorer for Mantenga’s Triumph of Caesar. Huygens also played a significant part in the building and rebuilding of palaces in the Netherlands. On 9th October 1652 he records: ‘The King called for me to see a design by Maet for the upper hall here at Het Loo’. Huygens was considered to be a connoisseur by his contemporaries at court. He formed his own collection of prints, drawings and paintings and admired them. He notes his purchases in the diary, and comments on the tastes of others. He went with Adrian van Gendt, a member of the States General, to a shop in Fleet Street where Van Gendt’s purchases were described succinctly by Huygens as ‘rubbish’. Huygens also formed a valuable library — in the catalogue of the sale, published by the Leiden booksellers Van der Aa after his death, 3,669 books are listed — and in his chapter on ‘Zuilichemania’ (Zuiilchem was the family estate in Gelderland), Dekker discusses its extraordinary range. The diary gives a fascinating picture of life at the court, which Dekker introduces in chapters on ‘Quacks and Witchess’, ‘Gossip and Sex’, ‘Servants and Maidsh’ and ‘The Court as a Microcosm’. He has done a great service in drawing attention to this valuable source for the study of the Netherlands and England in the second half of the seventeenth century, and, more particularly, the court of William and Mary. An English translation of the diary would, of course, increase its accessibility.

**Christopher Brown**


In 1953 Minotaur published a set of six photographs of items of discarded art on urban life — a rolled up bus ticket, a gob of toothpaste etc. Although these images differed from any existing understanding of sculpture, in that they were neither intentional nor preserved, they were dignified with the description, ‘Involuntary Sculpture’. Their continuing presence has, however, been secured in the form of photography, and this set of images by Brassaï forms the central reference point for this collection of essays that explore the diverse legacies of Surrealism, knowingly or otherwise, adopted by contemporary artists, in terms of the accidental, the impermanent and the role of photography in giving substance to their work. The photographic trace of a work or an ‘act’ of art is never neutral, and tensions between the pretence of its function as objective document and its capacity to make things strange emerge from within most of these case studies. Anna Dezeuze examines the photographic record by Richard Wrenchmore of the ingenuous impromptu solutions that people come up with to solve everyday problems such as propping open a window through processes of fiddling or bricolage — but remains aware of the artist’s ambivalence about the status of his photograph. The example of Allan Kaprow’s Happenings is revealed by Martha Buskirk as a minefield of curatorial conflicts and paradoxes when events, conceived in flux, yet recorded in photographs, are restaged. Mike Kelley’s practice was notable for its proliferation of media, but, John C. Welchman’s richly analytical study argues for the role of photography in relation to his thinking, precisely in terms of its ambiguity of material, scale and reference and the psychic nuances of media imagery derived from the recent past.

Other contributions give greater focus to the original issues of Surrealism, and Julia Kelly notes the Dada artists’ interest in the Inventors’ Fair in Paris which preceded Breston’s concentration on the unconscious properties of the flea-market discoveries. She also points out the argument of the nineteenth-century anthropologist Henry Balfour that the origins of art could be found in suggestive natural forms, such as the mandrake root — memorably explored in Man Ray’s photographs Anamorphic figures — and his father, Steven Harris argues how Hans Holbein, the elder, used plaster as the basis of his ‘concrete’ forms was intended to maintain its ‘involutarine’ nature. Valuable contributions also come from Simon Baker, linking Brontë’s understanding of photography to the work of Melissa McGill, Margaret Iverson, who applies a semiotic approach to her ingenuity in avant-garde film; Samantha Clark discusses the photographic work of Christian Boltanski, Samantha Clay on the close-up in avant-garde film, and Carrie Lambert-Beatty on Terry Fox’s Children’s tales (1974).

**Robert Radford**


‘I am aware’, Michael Twyman states in his preface to this new book, ‘that I am merely scratching the surface of an enormous subject’. This ‘scratch’ has resulted in a bible of 728 pages and over eight hundred illustrations. Deeply rooted in the conference on the Department of Typography and Graphic Communication at Reading University, Twyman has devoted his life to the history of a technique that was developed in the nineteenth century, flourished in the second half of that century, and started its decline in the first decades of the twentieth. To art historians lithography is known by the many artists who used the technique as a printmaking tool, culminating in the coloured posters of the first half of the twentieth century. But art historians tend to neglect all commercial work, even the poster industry was part of it. The production of these colourful and well-collected items was in no way different from the commercial practice of the day, as Twyman points out in his chapter on ‘The chromolithographic artists’.

Printing historians are for the most part interested in letterpress and typography, rather than illustration. Book historians deal with the book as a phenomenological object, publishing and the book trade.

Twyman starts off his bible with the development of colour printing in general, as old as printing itself. Lithography proved to be the best technique for printing in colour, although technical demands, such as registration and transparency of the inks had to be solved before the technique could develop into the vast industry that arose from it. The development, from the end of the nineteenth century, of photomechanical methods of reproduction, falls outside the scope of this book.

Chromolithography had to give way to three- and four-colour reproduction from screened negatives, first in relief printing, then in offset and gravure — common practices today.

It is hard to understand the craftsmanship of the ‘chromote’, the man determining the number of colours to be used, and the order in which they had to be printed to yield the intended result. We can hardly imagine the skill with which such a person could analyse colours of a work of art, by pure instinct and experience, and render them faithfully in the final result by using twelve, sixteen or whatever amount of colours were superimposed. Anyone familiar with the Aruldel Society’s huge chromolithographic collection will be astonished by the fact that colours were not separated using filters and photography, but by experience alone. All methods used in chromolithography — and there were many — are here extensively treated and well illustrated in a way we can all understand.

Inevitably there is some overlap with Twyman’s earlier writings on lithography. His *Lithography 1800–1850* (1970), is now outdated by further research, but the publication of his Panuzzi Lectures, held in 2000 (Breaking the mould: the first hundred years of lithography, published by the British Library in 2001), heralded the book here under review.

It is very well produced, designed and typeset by Rob Buxham, who deserves full credit for the successful organisation of such a wealth of material. The volume opens easily, and, remarkably, the reproductions of original wood-engravings, like those of printing presses, taken from the original catalogue, are reproduced in line, not in halftone. The typography is clear, set in two columns, and the numerous footnotes — in three columns — leave no doubts about the origin of the information in the text. Finally, a list of terms, an excellent index as well as a comprehensive bibliography complete the book.

**Johan de Zoete**