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A Distant View

The art is always there.

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Is Art History? Selected Writings
Svetlana Alpers

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Art historian Svetlana Alpers believes that "distance is an essential part in the viewer's attention to art," because temporal (historical) and physical (spatial) distances help us to see anew, and to realize "the curiosity and the strangeness of things."

Alpers's book *Is Art History?* is her tenth. It comes four decades after *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* established her credentials as a blue-chip art historian. Yet those who were around in the 1980s might remember her name from Hilton Kramer's searing review of her subsequent monograph, *Rembrandt's Enterprise: The Studio and the Market*, which was so ferocious that the discussion of the review takes up the entire "critical responses" section of Alpers's Wikipedia page. Appalled by what he perceived as the equal treatment given to the great Dutch master and the self-described "business artist" Andy Warhol, Kramer portrayed Alpers's monograph as an embodiment of "the dismal fate of art history when the study of art is no longer its primary concern" and "an emblematic event" that encapsulated everything wrong with art history as an academic field. In the critic's view, Alpers was culpable for "the catastrophe that has overtaken not only the study of art history but much else that we prize in the life of the mind."

The virulence of Kramer's reaction to *Rembrandt's Enterprise* recalls the comparably brutal critical response written by Alexandre Benois, a well-regarded Russian artist, critic, and publisher, seven decades earlier to Kazimir Malevich's 1915 geometrical abstract painting *Black Square*:

> This black square in a white frame—this is not a simple joke, not a simple dare, not a simple little episode…. Rather, it's an act of self-assertion of that entity called "the abomination of desolation," which boasts that through pride, through arrogance, through trampling of all that is loving and gentle it will lead all beings to death.

Benois's revulsion at Malevich's painting sprang from his accurate anticipation of looming cultural catastrophe that was about to take place in Russia, but he was wrong to see Malevich as a culprit. History has proven that the painter who, while undoubtedly a disrupter, was not remotely cynical. On the contrary, like his literary contemporary T.S. Eliot, Malevich was a reverent student of tradition, searching for ways to create original art in the modern world.

Similarly, while Kramer turned out to be correct about the dismal trajectory of art history, thirty-five years after his damning verdict, *Rembrandt's Enterprise* looks less like a "politically inspired demolition project" than a genuine, good-faith attempt to illuminate "the painter's share." Although usually astute in his critical judgements, Kramer was mistaken in regarding Alpers as an agent of destruction. *Is Art History?*—Alpers's shot across the bow of a discipline—proves that she and Kramer were on the same team all along. It showcases the gulf between her approach and methodology-driven "contextual studies" scholars, illustrating her steadfast dedication to the tradition of art history and, above all, to painting.

Published by Hunters Point Press last year, the writings collected in *Is Art History?* cover seven decades of Alpers's prolific professional life. Arranged chronologically, from a long scholarly article first published in 1960 to a book review that came out in 2023, the compilation offers a long-distance view of a storied career. The book is clearly a labor of love. It is hefty, at 420 pages of text plus color plates, complete with a red cloth cover with embossed gold lettering and a silky gray ribbon bookmark. The margins are extra wide (a rarity today). In addition to the color plates compiled at the end of the volume, there are black-and-white illustrations in the margins, for quick reference. This is one of many nods to the classic art history texts of yore. The foreword is by Barney Kulok, a young photographer who collaborated with Alpers, and the introduction is by her former student, now professor of art history at Stanford University, Richard Meyer. The absence of contributions by her colleagues, friends, or coauthors (who included the likes of John Berger, Michael Podro, Richard Wollheim, and Michael Baxandall), is a sad reminder that, as Alpers remarks: "Everyone I would have written for is dead."

The opening thirty-five-page essay was originally written for E.H. Gombrich's Harvard seminar on Vasari in the spring of 1959 and published in the *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* the following year. In the annotation, she notes that, although today "Vasari is often challenged or dismissed," his *Lives of the Artists* "remains a foundational critical and historical text on art." This is the first of many defenses of tradition throughout the book. It reminds us that, even as a budding scholar, Alpers did not shy away from big topics. Later in her career, she addressed the state of art history as a discipline, as well as the role of style within that discipline, authoring a seminal interpretation of one of the most important paintings in history, Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (1656).

Unlike many of her colleagues, Alpers is wary of anachronistic projections. In the book's second chapter, a paper on Bruegel delivered at the College Art Association in early 1974, she notes contemporary critics' desire "to attribute high seriousness" where the artist was motivated by reasons more complex—that have to do with painting rather than morality. Avoiding oversimplification, she objects to the didacticism that views Bruegel's peasants as obstructing the profundity of his "secular, realistic, low-life art…born out of comic impulses." Also, unlike many of her colleagues, Alpers is acutely aware of art history's limitations where language is concerned. She credits this to her interest in history and literature that predates her studies in art history, and which facilitates her distinction between description and narration in painting.

Alpers started her scholarly career in the tradition of connoisseurship. Although she appreciates the utility of "social" art history, she also understands its shortcomings. Her reservations stem from the widespread critical ignorance of how the social-history approach affects the objects being studied. Throughout the book, she emphasizes that her focus is on pictures rather than text or theory (she even refers to herself as a "pictures person"). And while she welcomes a "healthy decentralization in the view of art," she is concerned with the "leveling tendency" that operates whenever paintings become cultural artifacts.

This concern is the focus of the book's key text—the eponymous essay "Is Art History?" Originally published in 1977, Alpers shows how art history evolved from seeing artworks as pieces of history in themselves to seeing them as elements within a larger cultural context. She recognizes the irony that today, unlike in 1977, the title also implies a debate "about the standing of the field." The essay lays out "the history of art history" (as Alpers's friend Michael Podro called it), from its roots in the taxonomy of period styles through the new "social" art history. And although her faith in "a common intellectual cause" uniting the

"historians, critics, artists, and writers of our time" might appear naive, by 1977 Alpers had no illusions about teaching her students traditional methodology and connoisseurship, as she appreciates that by then the discipline had forever changed. It would be futile to ask her graduate students at UC–Berkeley to do what had been demanded of her at Harvard two decades earlier.

I can personally attest that the situation had further deteriorated by the mid-1990s, when I was a graduate student in art history at Brown University. Connoisseurship was no longer on the menu, and nobody expected us to read Wölfflin in the original—or in translation, for that matter—although we were encouraged to wade through the writings of Hayden White. Alpers, who was always reluctant to join fashionable academic trends, was not seduced by the "radical arguments" of Michel Foucault and Stanley Fish. But her appreciation of classical art history was not rooted in nostalgia for its own sake. Alpers anticipated that the shifting of focus away from the object would lead to the loss of values. She praises Erwin Panofsky for accepting "the responsibility for his own thought and his commitment to certain values" in contrast to "the current rush of alternatives" that rendered values elective: "To what view of human and societal values, and to what understanding of the sequence of objects that we call history do we tend in our current mode of equating all works as separate but equal pieces of history?" Equity in art does not sit well with her.

In another late-1970s text, a conference paper titled "Style Is What You Make It"—a classic Alpers piece, bold yet nuanced, erudite yet lucid—she takes up one of the basic building blocks of the discipline: style. Delving into the writings of Gombrich, Wölfflin, and Riegl, she name-checks Hayden White to say that his thesis of "strategies of explanation" is unhelpful in the climate of "a leveling upwards in the arts." Her solution to the question of style is to "link the maker, the work and the world and leave the fiction of the stylistic problematic to be just that—one of many modes in which man makes meaning of his experience."

Alpers's 1983 paper on *Las Meninas*, "Interpretation Without Representation," is a vital addition to the earlier discussions of its style (by Gombrich) and its iconography (by Panofsky). This essay marks the midpoint of both the book and her career. Appropriately enough, it established her place in the canon, alongside Panofsky and her *Doktorvater*, Gombrich. Long after she left his pastoral care, Gombrich continued to influence her writing and thinking. The book contains a loving tribute written for his eighty-fifth birthday

festschrift. The annotation reads: "My disputation's stance is Gombrichian." Elsewhere, she admits that her groundbreaking concept of the "painter's share" was a pendant to Gombrich's famous "beholder's share."

One of the reasons the book is so engaging is that unlike many of her hesitant colleagues, Alpers doesn't shy away from value judgments. She speaks, for example, of Albrecht Dürer's landscapes being superior to his nudes because "he was far better at a characteristically northern task, print-making, than at a southern one, painting." Her value judgments show her colors as a critic, although formally her métier in the late 1970s was still that of the art historian. Alpers relied on her discriminating eye in the 1970 review of Sir Kenneth Clark's monograph *Rembrandt and the Italian Renaissance*. While she generally praised the book, she quipped that Clark's suspicion of individual taste in art history is detrimental to his scholarship because "criticism [is] endemic to art history as a field." The past two decades away from academia, following Alpers's retirement, only strengthened her penchant for judgment. In the 2022 interview with Ulf Erdmann Ziegler, she ponders whether the notion of "greatness" was "just a prejudice of mine?" And what, she asks, should we do with "discrimination," now a very "tricky word." She continues:

> [S]o "discrimination" is not being talked about in America, because metaphorically it has a very bad vibe. On the other hand, being a critical reviewer of art, you are discriminating all the time! We have to insist on "discrimination" as part of what matters in looking. So there is a problem from our own polity today, what do you do? If you don't believe in the metaphoric sense of discrimination, what do you do in a political sense—what do you do with art?

Alpers is also openly critical of presentism and ideological partisanship. In a 2017 book review of an edited volume on Harvard's university museum, she questions the authors' deconstructive approach:

> They repeatedly point to the limits of its frame, its forms of representation. Surely that is true of all forms of representation. This reader kept wondering on what ground these writers stand themselves? If the Harvard of the past (its professors, administrators, donors, visitors) was in error about the superiority of white over black and brown, and new America over old Europe, what are the blinders worn by the Harvard of today?

I wonder what Alpers thought about last year's Claudine Gay controversy. She is similarly unimpressed with the obsession about the status of servant and painter Juan de Pareja in relation to his master, Diego Velázquez. One of the most recent texts in the book is a 2023 review of the catalog for the Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition *Juan de Pareja: Afro-Hispanic Painter in the Age of Velázquez*. In it, Alpers brings up one current hot-button issue about the relationship between an artist and the artist's life. She is skeptical about the source of another reviewer's enthusiasm in the narrative of Pareja's enslavement by Velázquez. She pushes back against the idea that he was somehow "compelled" to pose, pointing out that any portrait sitter is effectively "compelled" to pose, before wryly concluding that "the reviewers' comments seem to be in danger of confusing pictorial authority with enslavement." Alpers's take on the question of colonization is likewise skeptical:

> It has been said, an accusation really, that to perceive something as exotic is a function of a colonizing or anthropologizing eye: what they are to us is not what they are to themselves. As such it is not a recognition of difference but emptying of it. This seems to me a shriveled view of art and of human nature. […] Encountering the exotic is not peculiar to the colonial experience. It is a human experience.

For Alpers, the exotic is a positive, because creating a distance is instrumental to the understanding or the creation of art.

She applies the same commonsensical, non-ideological stance to the issue of gender. Despite her membership in the CAA Women's Caucus for Art, she has a nuanced understanding of feminism, rejecting the "unearthing, naming, and making visible the works of art of women artists of the past" as the end in itself. Her way of processing gender is not to foreground it, as is often done, but to de-emphasize its importance: "For me, Vermeer challenges today's gender-obsessed world. Women in Vermeer's paintings come to represent for him mankind in general." Certainly, Alpers's own scholarly advancement did not hinge on her gender identity but on merit: "I was a person before I was a woman. And I assumed that the best person, man or woman, should succeed."

Two more areas elucidated in the book show Alpers's steadfast dedication to the object and, through it, to traditional art history. One has to do with museums and curation; another with education. In her 1991 paper "The Museum as a Way of Seeing," Alpers argues for an unmediated communion between art and its viewers. Object information, she argues, should

be provided separately, not imposed as a filter through which art must be seen due to the inadequacy of language in "translating" painting. Her demoralizing annotation to one mid-1990s article signals her disappointment with the direction museums have taken: "I am struck now by how confident I was thirty years ago about looking at art in a museum. It was confidence in the institution and in the works it cared for (to return to the literal meaning of curate). That confidence has eroded. But I still feel it." In her exhibition reviews of the past three decades, Alpers speaks of "attentive looking, the essential museum mood." Now, in retirement from the academy, Alpers pursues her main occupation of looking, sourcing her art criticism in objects, just as she did in her art-historical writings.

In her capacity as a teacher, Alpers also stayed centered on the object. One chapter discusses an innovative course she taught in Berkeley, formerly known as the "Giotto to Picasso" survey. Alpers reconfigured the course around a selection of nine great works, substituting the traditional history of styles with close analysis of the works' form and context. It was team taught and featured guest speakers, including the philosopher Richard Wollheim and the painter Wayne Thiebaud. The aim was to encourage "active viewers," to explore "a sense of painting's possibilities."

It is the painting that matters to her first and foremost. In a 2015 conversation with Ulf Erdmann Ziegler, she muses: "Who wants to be trapped in a discipline? I was not proud to be an art historian, I was proud to be looking at and thinking about paintings. The study of paintings was my major concern. There was this great intellectual tradition coming out of the nineteenth century.… It is gone now!" And even aware that the traditional form of art history is long gone, she optimistically remarks that "the art is always there" and "the discipline of art history is not necessary for art to exist." It seems Hilton Kramer was right about a "systematic and politically inspired demolition project" that was already underway in the 1980s. But Alpers was not on the demolition crew. She is, and always was, on the side of art.

Perhaps this is why Alpers is befuddled by today's disciplinary confusion in which art, the master, is subjugated by art history, supposedly its emissary. Consider the following remark she made in a 2022 follow-up to the earlier conversation with Ziegler: "I agree with my great, late art historian friend Michael Podro, who said that painting has self-substance that insulates it from events and changes in the world of things—political, religious, or personal. Painting just goes along."