

Svetlana Alpers

The Making of Art



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I came to the Kolleg with two books under way which I had been working on for some time. And it was with a mixture of expectation but also a certain desperation that I looked forward to completing them. In each case part of the problem was how to keep up, even renew, my interest in work of long-standing which was threatening to go stale. As it happened, slowly at first, thinking and writing fell into place and I find myself in July with two virtually completed book manuscripts — *The Making of Rubens* and, co-authored with Michael Baxandall, *Tiepolo: Three Essays*.

The study of Rubens' practise began almost twenty years ago as an account of his peasant *Kermis* in the manner of Pieter Bruegel. Starting from a circumstantial account of artistic making, I had let myself be led by a series of links from the life and context of one painting, to the after-life created by the taste of viewers and artists that followed in 18th century France and, with these viewings in mind, back to the artist as maker in the sense of his sense of his embodiment in his painting. Of particular interest to me was Rubens' identification in a painting in Munich with Virgil's drunken Silenus pouring out his song as a model for the artist's creativity.

Three very different kinds of circumstance renewed my interest in this work this year. First, the disturbing explosion of nationalist sentiments and actions in Europe turned me back to consider the nature of such allegiances and how they are registered in painting. To call Rubens a Flemish painter seemed, suddenly, too simple. His *Kermis* came to new life when I realized the difficulty the internationalist and Habsburgian painter Rubens had in trying to paint in Flemish. The discovery of a Rubens half-sister who was a member of the royal House of Orange (she turned up in some publications secured for me by the tireless library staff) further docu-

mented the complexity of his situation. Secondly, living and working in Germany, and most particularly in Berlin so near to Friedrich's Sanssouci, made me more acutely aware of the difference between the ways in which the taste for art was institutionalized in France and Germany in the 18th century: the French collectors who broke out in conversation before a Rubens-like Watteau had a different view of painting from travellers lectured to by Winckelmann in Rome. These differences have had a long life. Thirdly, and more mundanely, the publication, just in the middle of the year, of an entire German doctoral dissertation on Rubens' Munich *Silenus* with which I was centrally concerned disrupted me and, as such things do, forced me to focus my own sense of the painting.

The meetings of a group of fellows interested in images, or the visuality group as we came to be called, did not quite succeed in getting off the ground. But the shared sense — between Griesemer, a philosopher of biology, and Camille, a student of medieval illuminated manuscripts, and myself and Baxandall, historians of later European painting — that what interested us was the difference of pictures and how to articulate the nature of that difference in our own areas of interest, was bracing. Even among art historians, the intellectual climate has become such that it is time, one feels, to attend to images as such (and to see just what that may mean) as our primary interest and concern.

The presence of the group of chaos physicists and that of biologists at the Kolleg became relevant in unexpected ways. At the weekly colloquia one had put before one's eyes, and then turned this way and that, the filtered phenomena that the physicists produced to work with and the still unfiltered, perhaps unfilterable? phenomena with which the biologists were grappling. And as an alternative, one listened as legal scholars dealing with contemporary constitutional issues revealed the curious non-man's land of their concerns — neither high principle nor low practice, but a mixture of the two. At a moment when the humanistic disciplines take pride in removing disciplinary barriers and take pleasure in a sometimes wanton fertilization across fields, one was repeatedly reminded of the material specificity of things. The likeness instead lies, it seemed, in the moves made by minds to make sense.

It was this frame of mind, as it turned out, that made it possible to bring my writing on Tiepolo to a conclusion. The project had begun as an address to an instance of the pictorial intelligence at work. The general point which had become over-worked, a bit too much like special pleading, began to come to life. It normalized itself. Perhaps it was the setting of the Kolleg, where listening to others explain themselves and explaining one's work to others was the norm. Given this working space, a co-authorship which had been difficult and even contentious found its common ground.

A humanist among scientists, but also an American in Berlin: there is much, I learned, that is good about being an outsider when one is a welcomed one.