Looking Again

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David Rosand: Drawing Acts. Studies in Graphic Expression and Representation (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge and New York, 2002), 332 b&w illns, 419 pp., hardback ISBN 0–521–77330–X, £65.00.

Art history is at a juncture in which the after-effects of interdisciplinary studies risk marginalising the object. The past decades have seen a spike in the publication of books and articles based on the study of textual sources – in the form of archival materials, art theory and literature. While this research has tremendously enriched our understanding of the circumstances surrounding the production of works of art, it is easy for the works themselves to become buried amid justifiable delight at this new information. David Rosand's *Drawing Acts: Studies in Graphic Expression and Representation* offers an intellectually lively reminder of the visceral pleasures of looking.

Drawings potentially offer an unhindered view into the process by which works of art are conceived and realised. Yet as Rosand points out, this promise is more often recognized than manifest in scholarly studies. Despite the central importance they were accorded by Renaissance viewers, in our own day they are too often marginalised in relation to finished works. Similarly, the study of drawings has long been considered the province of specialists and connoisseurs. Francis Ames-Lewis deserves credit for opening up the study of drawings to a broad audience in *Drawing in Early Renaissance Italy* (1981; reprinted 2000) and *Drawing in the Italian Renaissance Workshop* (1983). His book has been followed by many other excellent studies, both exhibition and collection catalogues and monographs. To speak only of Italian drawings, these include various books by Carmen Bambach, Martin Clayton, Michael Hirst, Paul Joannides, Catherine Monbeig Goguel, Pina Ragionieri, Anna Forlani Tempesti, Annamaria Petrioli Tofani and Carel van Tuyll van Serooskerken.

While acknowledging the achievements of these recent publications as well as those of earlier generations, Rosand asks the following question: 'Once the drawings of an artist like Michelangelo or Rembrandt have been catalogued, the creations of the master distinguished from those of his disciples and imitators . . . once chronology has been established and function within the context of production clarified – what then?' (p. 23). Rosand criticises the notion that once a drawing's function is determined, enquiry ends. The book's title emerges from a desire to emphasise the process of making rather than the finished product. 'To declare that the meaning of a drawing,' he writes,

> lies essentially in its historical function not only ignores the complexity of that experience, thereby narrowing the possibilities of meaning, it effectively dislocates meaning itself . . . our experience of the drawing involves the *re*-enactment of the drawing gesture, our mimic *re*-creation of the creative acts. Critical responsibility, then, must be to those originary acts, to the experience of the making, in which, we assume, lies the most profound, because most human, meaning of the work.

While Rosand's preoccupation with process results in a number of significant observations, his lack of interest in function and his skepticism about it as an object of study seem unnecessary: surely it need not be mutually exclusive to wonder both how and why a drawing was made.

Rosand distinguishes his book from recent endeavours both by its chronological range and theoretical ambition. The eight chapters and epilogue cover topics from connoisseurship to the *capriccio*, and artists from Apelles to Picasso. It is difficult to weave together such disparate subjects, but they are united by one argument, or at least point of view, consistently evident in the analyses of diverse material. It is what Rosand calls 'the phenomenology of drawing'. As he explains through references to Merleau-Ponty and Valéry, both the act of making a drawing and of perceiving it are inseparable from the movement and sensations of the body: the draughtsman feels the pose of the figure as much as he sees it, and the viewer of a drawing 're-enacts' this movement. In Rosand's words,

> Drawing something is a complex action; it involves subject and object, perception and representation, eye and mind, and most obviously – yet too often the neglected components in critical discussion – hand and body. Nor is it merely a dialectical relationship between paired terms. Between perceiving eye and object there intercedes drawing itself, as both gestural sequence (act) and evolving configuration (art). Once the first mark disrupts the blank paper, the draftsman enters into a double dialectic: with the object before him (or the idea imagined) and with the emerging graphic construction itself. As the drawing develops, its demands upon the draftsman begin to take precedence over those of the object (or idea) before (or within) him; the drawing asserts itself as the main object of concern, the primary other in the subject–object relation (p. 13).

It is a powerful description of drawing, and a welcome antidote to the lingering fashion – prevalent in the 1980S – for describing the act of seeing as equivalent to that of reading, and any object as a text to be decoded.

As a corollary to this position, Rosand contests the pervasive belief that the hand acts as the manservant of the mind – a dumb tool. He writes, 'The general assumption, already fully articulated in the Renaissance, is that the obedient hand of the artist gives visible form to an idea conceived in the mind . . . . But drawings are made by the hand, and our observations and interpretations must, of necessity, begin with the visible marks

on the paper' (pp. 19–20). His argument emerges most clearly in his account of the circular motions of the hand of Raphael, as well as in his discussion of Rembrandt, and how his fluid strokes capture in a few motions both the psychological and physical components of an observed pose. Here as elsewhere one senses that Rosand's sensitivity to the physicality of drawing derives in part from 'first-hand' knowledge. Insight born of experience is all too rare in art history, and merits encouragement. Rosand works not only with the means traditionally employed by students of drawing – close study and description of the originals – but also by invoking philosophical reflections in an impressive if occasionally dizzying manner (as in references ranging from Pliny the Elder to Saul Steinberg in the space of a single chapter).

The temporal reach of Rosand's book sets it apart from many other recent studies. However, his interest in phenomenology and his unrepentant embrace of beauty coincides with a broader revival in studies of aesthetics and sense perception. Michael Fried (in *Menzel's Realism*, 2002) and Alex Potts (in *The Sculptural Imagination*, 2000) both explore aspects of phenomenology, but put it to entirely distinct uses. Beauty, its spell, and its redemptive potential have been examined by Elaine Scarry in *On Beauty and Being Just* (1999) and by James Elkins in *Pictures and Tears: A History of People Who Have Cried in Front of Paintings* (2001). What these works share is a consensus that art has the power to evoke responses beyond the optical or the intellectual. The implications of this insight are explored in a collection of essays edited by James Cuno, *Whose Muse? Art Museums and the Public Trust* (2004). It should hardly come as a surprise that museum professionals would be at the forefront of a return to the beauty of the object, having never lost sight of it.[1]

In a book as broad-ranging as this, some parts are inevitably stronger than others. Rosand is at his most consistently persuasive and insightful when discussing Leonardo and Rembrandt. The chapter on Leonardo, in particular, leaves one wishing for more. Despite the artist's extraordinary fame, he is also difficult and elusive, and the sheer volume of his graphic and literary output is daunting. Rosand succeeds in balancing a subtle analysis of the drawings with a learned account of the writings and theory – aspects of the artists' production that are too often separated. In many ways Leonardo is the book's central figure, and Rosand cannot resist alluding to him in almost every chapter.

Although the chapter 'Raphael and the Calligraphy of Classicism' includes many perceptive observations about the artist's technique and vivid accounts of his drawing methods, the link Rosand wants to suggest between Raphael's line and that of the calligrapher is intriguing but remains elusive. Here and in the following chapter Rosand discusses prints by Raimondi and others; but the inclusion of prints within the same category of 'graphic expression' as drawing comes across most persuasively in relation to Piranesi. As Rosand argues, 'Piranesi's etching technique records the motions of his drawing hand ...' (p. 287). Piranesi himself justifies the connection in his remark, 'When I create the effect on the copper, I make of it an original' (p. 291).

The chapter on Rembrandt contains a discussion of what Rosand calls 'the physiology of style,' in which he links changing aspects of the draughtsman's use of materials and his affinity for particular subjects with his own aging. In a typical passage he writes, '... Rembrandt's blind protagonists stand as symbols of his art, an art at once supremely visual and yet profoundly haptic, like the broadly bounded yet luminous strokes of his reed pen' (pp. 248–51). Rosand's ability to provide an account of subject by means of close observations about technique within the context of the artist's career suggests that it may be worth reconsidering the recent art-historical distaste for biography.

Picasso makes a wonderful subject for the epilogue; without rhetoric [unpolemically] but by demonstration, Rosand suggests the shallowness of the notion of Modernism as a break from the past. Picasso's remark that as a child he could 'draw like Raphael' and a compelling comparison of one of his childhood drawings to sheets by Leonardo reinforce a sense of meaningful continuity with earlier practices. The allusion to Cubism provides a hint of how many of Rosand's observations, although principally concerned with matters of representation, could be extended beyond the realm of mimesis.

Rosand's prose is often eloquent and poetic, but it occasionally lapses into language that could discourage the non-specialist (in terms such as 'dialogic imperative'). This would be a pity, because in other ways the book has a potentially wide audience. Other aspects of the book are consistently inviting: it is generously illustrated, with 332 photographs, and both author and publisher deserve praise for recognising that the nature of the study required intensive visual demonstration. In several cases details from drawings are used effectively to make a visual argument, as with those from Leonardo's studies for *Leda and the Swan*. The notes, too, are a gold mine, often filled with additional quotations and insights, and almost constituting a parallel text.

Connoisseurship has long been ripe for resuscitation, and Rosand is right for the job. Tainted by its historic association with commerce, and the sort of conflict of interest embodied in the career of the brilliant but complex Bernard Berenson, it remains at the foundation of the discipline. It has often been considered the province of the elite – those with ready access to the originals – but in our own day it may well be the most egalitarian thing an art historian can do. For the premise of connoisseurship is surely that a great deal of information can be gleaned from an object simply by sustained and repeated looking: in other words, that looking constitutes a form of research equal to any other. It is perhaps ironic

that the sort of scholarship meant to break down the elitist assumptions and concerns of traditional history requires archival and linguistic skills acquired only through advanced education, while the doors of the museum are open to all comers. Many of the world's great drawings collections, including the British Museum and the Fogg Museum of Art, allow visitors to see their treasures with no prior appointment and minimal if any identification.

Rosand writes about drawings with the authority and conviction born of long experience; and the daring breadth of his study should serve as a reminder that our training as art historians gives us not only knowledge but *skills* – in John Berger's famous phrase, 'ways of seeing.' Although a commonplace of introductory courses, it is too easily forgotten in the rush to specialise. The book opens up the rich field of drawing study with intelligence, enthusiasm, and discernment. It can only be hoped that it will spur a new generation of students, novices, and scholars to delve into the drawing cabinets themselves with fresh and invigorated eyes.

Notes

1. I would like to thank Joseph Koerner, Lionel Devlieger and Frederic Schwartz for sharing their thoughts about the recent interest in phenomenology and aesthetics.