Right: The same in reverse.
On Right and Left in Images

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Dear Wolters, you have taken every duty in life seriously, even that of a chairman of the Munich Society for the Study of Art, where, as a member of the same, I so often had the opportunity to admire you: you knew how to find the right word to overcome an embarrassing situation, to showcase merit, to fight off the threat of procrastination, and with what urbanity. And upon my departure, as I held my last lecture in the Society, it again was you who, with a few friendly words, bid me farewell. I am using the occasion today to thank you by referring back to that very lecture and dedicating to you these short observations on right and left in images, which, alas, have hardly been further explored, and which nevertheless seem to me to present an important problem in art.

In a class on art history, where one works with slides [Diapositiven], it can sometimes happen that a plate, wrongly placed, will yield an image in reverse. Then there is usually the irritated interjection: “Turn it around! The plate is not correct!” but one might well consider why the image cannot be set in reverse and what about its effect changes. That the right hands become the left is in the end irrelevant, but it is in fact the case that even apparently perfect symmetries like those of Raphael’s Sistine Madonna or Holbein’s Darmstadt Madonna do not tolerate such inversion.

1. Let us examine the case of Raphael. In the correct view, we follow Sixtus’s upward-turned gaze from the left, up to the elevated Madonna, and Saint Barbara, who lowers head and eyes, leading us on the other side back downward. I do not say that this is the only movement that can be executed, but there is a definitive tendency in the manner of presentation to ascend from the left to the right and to descend along the opposite diagonal. As soon as the image is viewed in reverse and the directions are inverted, the appearance is distorted: the motifs appear disconnected and go “against the grain.” Instead of the sweeping ascent felt when Sixtus kneels to the left, we sense a heavy subsiding, and that expansion of clouds beneath Saint Barbara, which originally created a sense of calm, stability,
and closure, becomes an incomprehensible void in the image [compared to] when the clouds lie to the right. And in the same manner, the accompanying movement of the drapes, when the gaze’s natural path [Blickbahn] is destroyed, becomes not only incomprehensible but repellent as well.

This is surely not just a habit of sight regarding this image: it is a way of ordering forms that is to be found in the north just as well as in the south. Holbein’s Darmstadt painting, too, contains the same observational fact: the ascent on the left side and the descent on the right side, where again care has been taken so that this downward movement ends in a calm closure of shapes [Schlussformen]. If the composition is seen in the reverse, then everything loses its meaning and context, and the eye contends with the resistance.

Over the course of further such observations, we have occasion throughout to speak of the rising and falling diagonals. That which runs along the left-right diagonal is perceived as rising, the opposite as falling. In the former case we say (when nothing else speaks against this!) that the staircase leads upward; in the latter, the staircase leads downward. The same line of a mountain [Berglinie] draws itself upward when the elevation lies to the right, and it sinks when the elevation lies to the left (for that reason the mountain’s declivity as pictured in evening landscapes so frequently follows the line from the left downward to the right).

I repeat: “when nothing else speaks against this.” There are combinations that can modify this basic effect; e.g., when the objective movement of the figures runs in the opposite direction. But the direction of light [Lichtführung], too, can work as a counterforce, and the more easily identifiable form will, in all circumstances, exert a more immediate attraction than the form that is more difficult to perceive, and in this way (from another angle), [the more easily identifiable form will] dictate a particular path for observation. Usually it is a case of combined effects of color, light, and form, the possible variations of which are infinite, and at times one seems to have found a particular charm in the contradictory guidance of voices [Führung der Stimmen].
2. One could think that our art—like our writing—must always have the tendency to display an objective pull of movement [Bewegungszug] (marching soldiers, running horses) from the left to the right. It is not so. But it is surely the case that the right side of the image has a different emotional value [Stimmungswert] from that of the left. The outcome on the right side determines the affect [Stimmung] of the image. The final word is spoken there, as it were.

Nothing changes in its material inventory, regardless of whether the three trees in Rembrandt’s etching are on the right or—in the reverse—on the left side. But the affect is a completely different one. The image, as Rembrandt printed it, has a pronounced, active character; the closed group of trees in their verticality give the whole an accent of energy that, strangely, gets lost in the inversion, even though the great contrast of the vertical and horizontal lines is not, in fact, weakened. But as soon as that horizontal line of the plain comes to lie on the right side, it becomes the decisive form in terms of affect [die stimmungsmäßiğ entscheidende Form]. The trees are devalued, and the accent lies on the resting, endlessly expanding plane.

In other etchings, which recall what is typical for the Dutch horizontal landscape [Flachlandschaft], Rembrandt has placed this plane to the right, and there the motif is naturally in its right place.

With somewhat altered application, this law of effect meets us again in a Dutch domestic interior, as in the affectively evocative [stimmungsstarken] Reading Woman by Janssens in the Alte Pinakothek. It is the atmosphere of composure [Sammlung], and everyone admits that it lies in the room and not in the figure of the woman. The fact that the room is clean and bright and tidy does not alone accomplish this, for as soon as one inverts the image, the “Sunday atmosphere” vanishes and the reader sits uneasily, as if lost in her parlor. Apparently, here, too, questions of direction [Richtungsfragen] speak to this in a decisive way: it is important that the figures on the right side be rich and delicate, that the bright patches of sun play there, that there the bold color kindles. If these things appear on the other side, then one glances over it, as over a more or less trivial lead-in,
and the unfilled closing on the right side of the image [Bildabschlusses], as it turns out, is enough to spoil the mood of the entire scene.

The seventeenth century was not the first to value these insights of effect [Wirkungseinsichten]; we see them already in Dürer, although then, in the sixteenth century, people thought about the effect of images in a fundamentally different way. *Saint Jerome in His Study* provides the best example for comparison. Here, the closing wall is indeed on the left and the space opens to the right, but the arrangement of the forms [Formanordnung] is of a related manner: the image attains its character of stillness and contentment because, of the chosen forms, all those that are loud and restless are located on the left, while on the right the image flows into the clear, the determinate, the thoroughly composed [durchgebildet]. The arched windows appear restless—restless the overlapping, restless, above all, the alignment of the large wall—while on the other side, the impression of resolution is already achieved through the lion and through the gourd, which occupies the corner (not to speak of the other things). And one cannot set this image in reverse without taking away its magic. Even when no other forms come into play, the effect shifts fundamentally as a result of the secondary motifs appearing in the places of primacy.

In the same vein, there is the custom of beginning with an overlapping form as backdrop on the left and leading toward the right in order to allow the illustration to come to completion (after the manner of the Cranach Crucifixion in the München Pinakothek). Although the opposite also occurs, the examples of the first arrangement are so predominant that one may well say that they are per-
ceived to be natural. A particular shade or tone of feeling [Gefühlston] need not be attached to it.

3. The wealth of various possibilities of effect that are associated with the right and left are not bound by the examples described. I would like just to recall here that the method of graphic art—the kind that involves, first of all, reproduction—is not so unified as one might think. Whereas in Italy a Marcantonio Raimondi would endeavor to preserve the original sense of the composition (in that he took the illustrations and placed them in reverse on the plate), the engravers à la Rubens, e.g., took the matter remarkably lightly and had no qualms about, for instance, taking an Assumption of Mary, which culminates in a rising diagonal, and changing the direction. And such changes happen under the eyes of the Master. Should one assume that he, accustomed to monumental proportions, attached no importance to the paper’s direction? True, in certain cases, it is done differently. And so a Boetius à Bolswert produced the Lance Thrust [i.e., Christ on the Cross between the Two Thieves] in the same direction [as the original], so that the incomparable ascent toward the upper-right corner, where the thief on the cross rears back and where the motif, precisely through the compression into this right-hand corner, first seems to acquire its whole emphasis, is kept preserved on the paper. Rembrandt, who in his youth did not shy away from bringing the image of the Descent from the Cross (Munich) as a reversed etching to the market, later became very sensitive to direction [richtungsempfindlich]. The so-called small-format Descent from the Cross [kleine Kreuzabnahme] is decisively calculated with a falling diagonal for the scene. Here we are no longer dealing
with reproducing graphic art, and with that arises the question about the relation of the sketch to such pages, which from the beginning were conceived of as prints. As they increasingly cater to the effects of direction [Richtungswirkungen], the preliminary sketches must make themselves felt as such—i.e., precisely as artworks that do not stand on their own feet—even apart from the right- and left-handedness in the gesture. What we possess, however, are mostly drafts that, even if clearly intended to be reversed, still retain their own pictorial measure [Bildmäßigkeit]. The decisive, simply not reversible [quality] seems to have come about only in the last stage of execution. Nothing [is] more instructive than to examine such final accentuations. In Milan there is a sketch of Dürer’s Jerome in his study (Wölfflin, Dürerzeichnungen, 46), which comes quite close to the final version but does not yet demonstrate recognition of [kennt] the striking differences between the obverse and the reverse [den zwei Bildseiten]. Similarly, in essential points the composition of Death of the Virgin from 1510 goes beyond the nevertheless quite developed preliminary sketch in Vienna. Missing, too, is the drawn-back bed canopy. It is a motif that is possible only when the slant is on the left side, and in the reverse the impact is one that is completely different and undesirable: for then it looks as though a strong draft were blowing through the room and had pulled back the curtain.

For architecture, the problem of right and left in the sense described plays no role; for the representational arts, [it plays a role] only from a particular developmental stage onward, and even then, inconsistently. How much meaning it has beyond Western art would still have to be investigated. With all the limiting parameters of time period and geography, however, nothing has yet been done to explain the phenomenon. It has, apparently, deep roots, roots that reach down into the depths of our sensory nature [sinnliche Natur].

Note