



Interweaving Eastern and Western Perspectives

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In *Florence and Baghdad*, Hans Belting writes a new history of the human gaze based on its symbolic value in relation to the image. His starting point is the cultural transfer between the East and the West, leading to the invention of perspective in the 16th century. The author then examines two different forms of cultures of the gaze and lays the groundwork for a global art history.

Reviewed: Belting, *Florence et Bagdad. Une histoire du regard entre orient et occident*, translated from German by Naïma Ghermani and Audrey Rieber, Paris, Gallimard, coll. Le temps des images, (Ed.) Jean-Claude Schmitt and François Lissarague, 2012, 384 p., 35 €

Hans Belting's work is renowned far beyond the circles of art history connoisseurs. Hans Belting is a prominent medievalist, the author of *Likeness and Presence*¹ and of *The Image and its Public in the Middle Ages*². He has developed a novel approach to art history by focusing on images, all images, as well as by putting the notion of art into perspective as a modern Western invention. More recently, he has made the case for an anthropological approach to the image³ and written an essay on the relations between the different systems of truth attached to the image in the Western world⁴. Presently, he is broadening the scope of his analysis in two directions, by moving from the history of images to a history of the gaze and from a Western history towards a history interweaving “the East and the West”.

The Science of Vision and the Culture of the Gaze

Since the Renaissance, Western modern culture has established a link between the image, which is necessarily figurative, and human vision. From the discovery of perspective to the invention of photography, the image has been equated with what Alberti defines as “a section of the visual pyramid”. As such, it is meant to replace reality as it is perceived by the

¹ Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence : A History of the Image Before the Era of Art*, University of Chicago Press, 1993. French translation : Hans Belting, *Image et culte. Une histoire de l'image avant l'époque de l'art*, translated by Frank Muller, Paris, Éditions du Cerf, 1998.

² —, *The Image and its Public in the Middle Ages : Form and Function of Early Paintings of the Passion*, De Caratzas, 1990. French translation : *L'Image et son public au Moyen Âge*, Paris, Gérard Monfort, 1998.

³ —, *Pour une anthropologie des images*, translated by Jean Torrent, Paris, Gallimard, 2004.

⁴ —, *La Vraie image : croire aux images ?*, translated by Jean Torrent, Paris, Gallimard, 2007.

human eye, by standing between the eye and the world. For centuries, artists and scholars have strived to reach this illusionist utopia. From the Renaissance perspectivists to the 19th century physiologists, including the mathematicians in Marin Mersenne's entourage, all have endeavored to uncover the laws to deceive the gaze.

However, the cultural revolution of perspective, which entailed an analogy between the gaze and the representation of the world, also carved out a role for the viewer in the image. Perspective's vanishing point, an imaginary point of reference for three-dimensional representation, matches the viewer's viewpoint. The image thereby also stages the stance of viewing and gauging the world. Thus, the perspective image's sole function is not to depict reality; rather it is aimed at answering our own gaze. What we see looks back at us, in Georges Didi-Huberman's well-chosen words⁵.

Addressing the issue of images in modern Western culture means accounting for the cultural and symbolic layers of meaning in the gaze, and not just vision or perception in a more commonplace and strictly physiological or psychological apprehension. Addressing images means apprehending the gaze as embedded within the West's heritage of texts, of artifacts, of behaviors shaped by culture. This heritage cannot be confined to objective knowledge. Hence, the idea that the image reproduces our gaze upon the world is not universal. On the contrary, it implies a culture of the gaze. As it lays its eyes on the surrounding world, this culture of the gaze conveys unity to chaos; it organizes the visible world and internally shapes the image out of the visible. This new culture of the gaze had previously been discussed by Norman Bryson, according to whom a difference surfaces during the Renaissance between a furtive glance and an engaged gaze upon the world. Both are conditioned, as is most of our behavior, by the impact of culture⁶.

In his 2003 lectures at the *Collège de France*, which led to *Florence and Baghdad: Renaissance Art and Arab Science*⁷, Hans Belting focused on this line of thinking. His aim was to apprehend the gaze as part of culture, not as Bryson or the visual studies approach did, i.e. by assessing the conditions which determine the evolution of our visual behaviors, but rather by questioning the link between the image and the gaze. The idea was to set forth a *symbolic* dimension in the history of the gaze which had been absent from most studies on this subject, more influenced by psychology. Whereas visual studies explored the influence of material culture on psychology and perception habits, Belting focused on the economy of the gaze, following in the footsteps of Marie-José Mondzain. He set out to explore not only the scientific heritage of theories of vision, but also the metaphoric dimension of the gaze⁸. As a metaphor of the relationship between individuals – exchanging gazes –, of the relationship between mankind and God – namely in Nicolas of Kues's⁹ work – of imagination, desire or power, the gaze has different cultural functions and its main manifestations are present

⁵ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 1992.

⁶ Norman Bryson, *Vision and painting : the logic of the gaze*, London, Macmillan, 1983.

⁷ Hans Belting, 2002-2003 holder of the European Chair at the *Collège de France*, gave a series of lectures under the title *History of the gaze. Representation and vision in the West (2002-2003)*.

⁸ See *Le Commerce des regards* (Paris, Seuil, 2003) by Marie-José Mondzain, whose influence on Hans Belting's project is manifest.

⁹ Michel De Certeau, "Nicolas de Cues. Le secret d'un regard", *Traverses*, vol. n° 30-31, March 1984, p. 70-84.

throughout art history. Individual portraits and group portraits, icons, erotic paintings, the panoptical organization of architecture are different expressions of our culture of the gaze in its concrete and symbolic dimensions.

Arab Optics and Renaissance Perspective

The Renaissance was a highly defining period in Western history regarding this culture of the gaze. It is the precise moment when the relationship between the gaze and the realm of images was established in a lasting manner, with the discovery of the geometrical laws of perspective. However, as Belting had already suggested in his February 11th, 2003, lecture, the sudden use of geometry in painting, which helped painters strive to match the image to the gaze, is the outcome of a protracted cultural transfer. This transfer took an optical theory formulated in the 11th century at the heart of Islamic culture by the mathematician Alhazen and promised it to a great destiny in Europe. Not only did it open the way for a rediscovery of Euclid in the Western world, by acting as a mediating culture, but it was also a significant contribution in itself. This theory was translated and discussed by the “perspectivists” in the 1270s and was used, during the Renaissance, as a reference by the theorists of applied perspective in painting, such as Lorenzo Ghiberti, Piero della Francesca and Leon Battista Alberti.

As this cultural transfer took place, Alhazen's optical theory was gradually transformed and took on a new meaning. Alhazen originally focused on exploring the properties of light and the mechanisms of image creation within the eye – this research was later built on and completed by Kepler. Alhazen's work was imported in the Western Middle Ages as an enhancement and a challenge to the field of gnoseology, i.e. the science of the knowledge of the world, less concerned by geometrical calculations and variations on Euclidian themes than by the relations between a philosophy of the essence and a philosophy of the appearance. Alhazen's translation into Latin was later used to conceptualize the practice of painters: it provided a geometrical theory with a mathematical relation between proportions and the distance to the viewer as a foundation for painters' wish to represent volumes and space. Stemming from an optical theory and integrated within a philosophy of perception, perspective became a mathematical theory applied to painting and used to give the painting or the fresco the illusion of a third dimension and thus match the image to the gaze. At this point, the notion of perspective took on the meaning it presently has.

In this book, Hans Belting engages in a transcultural analysis which flows from this moment of contact between Islamic and Western culture. Developing precisely this point of his 2003 lecture allows him to establish a landmark on the path towards a global art history. He has been advocating for this global art history and working on it in his most recent projects at the Karlsruhe *Zentrum für Kunst und Medien*, under the title *Global Art Museum*¹⁰. What makes this research so remarkable, in its pathways between Florence – the metaphorical location of the invention of perspective – and Baghdad – the capital of the Fatimid Caliphate –, where Alhazen was born and lived before moving to Cairo after some trouble with the court?

¹⁰ James Elkins, *Is art history global?*, London — New York, Routledge, 2007, Hans Belting, *et al.* (Dir.), *Global studies. Mapping contemporary art and culture*, Ostfildern, Hatje Cantz, 2011.

A History Interweaving the East and the West

Historians have consistently highlighted the relations between Islam and the Renaissance, which were displayed in a major exhibit in 2001 (*Venice and the Islamic world, 828-1797*, Metropolitan Museum of Art).¹¹ Alhazen's influence on medieval philosophy has been broadly studied by Abdelhamid I. Sabra, who also translated the first three books of the *Book of Optics*¹² from Arabic, as well as by David Lindberg, a distinguished expert on perspectivists, namely in the work of Roger Bacon¹³. Perspective itself is a broad field boasting seemingly innumerable studies¹⁴. Thus, Belting builds on the existing literature rather than pursuing it further. The book's originality lies essentially in the way these different strands are tied together in a history of the gaze interweaving the East and the West. Belting's aim is to use perspective as a means to gain insight into different forms of cultures of the gaze. According to him, the transformation Alhazen's theory undergoes during its transplantation on European territory – i.e. its translation and reception in the European Middle Ages and Renaissance – can be explained by a fundamental difference. Indeed, there is a gap between an aniconic culture, Islam – Muhammad surrounded Mecca and destroyed the idols in 630, the Quran confirmed this mistrust of idols in Surahs 21.58 and 17.81 –, and a culture overflowing with images. On the one hand, abstract and scientific geometry prevails in Islamic art, leading to 19th-century artists' fascination with the “logical beauty” of Arab ornamentation, as Rémi Labrusse demonstrates in his seminal study.¹⁵ On the other hand, Europe was marked by an iconic culture, which sought to gradually include volume in its two-dimensional representations. Belting's compelling pages on the Islamic doctrine regarding images, which he compares to the Christian theology of icons in medieval Europe (Chapter 2), makes his occasional slips into the “islamophile” (and not orientalist!) mythology surrounding the aniconism of Arab culture hardly worth mentioning. In these pages, the reader delightfully follows the author's lead to the intellectual heights displayed in *Likeness and Presence*¹⁶.

The well-documented pages on geometrical ornamentation, based on the latest literature on the Girih (interlaced) style, are fascinating. The Chapter on Alhazen (Chapter 3) plays a crucial role in the demonstration: in this Chapter, Belting insists on the invention of

¹¹ *Venice and the Islamic world, 828-1797*, Exhibit Catalogue, Metropolitan Museum of Art and Institut du monde arabe, October 2nd – February 18th edited by Stefano Carboni, New York – New Haven [Conn.], Metropolitan Museum of Art – Yale University Press, 2007, George Saliba, *Islamic science and the making of the European Renaissance*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 2007.

¹² Alhazen, *The Optics of Ibn al-Haytham. Books I-III, On direct vision*, Ed. Abdelhamid I. Sabra, London, Warburg Institute, University of London, 1989.

¹³ David C. Lindberg and Roger Bacon, *Roger Bacon and the origins of Perspectiva in the Middle Ages : a critical edition and English translation of Bacon's Perspectiva, with introduction and notes*, Oxford – New York, Clarendon Press – Oxford University Press, 1996.

¹⁴ From Erwin Panofsky to Martin Kemp, there are too many studies to list here. We will just mention a few : Samuel Edgerton, *The Renaissance discovery of linear perspective*, New York, Basic Books, 1975, M. Kemp, *The science of art : Optical themes in western art from Brunelleschi to Seurat*, New Haven, 1990, Erwin Panofsky, *La perspective comme forme symbolique et autres essais*, translated by Guy Ballangé, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 1975.

¹⁵ Rémi Labrusse, *Islamophilies : l'Europe moderne et les arts de l'Islam*, Paris – Lyon, Somogy – Musée des beaux-arts de Lyon, 2011.

¹⁶ See footnote 1, above.

the *camera obscura*. Initially, it was not designed to create images but to perform experiments with light. Belting mostly stresses Alhazen's transformations of Euclidian geometry. Optics is a science of light independent from the idea of the image. During the transfer of this fundamental work towards the medieval West, a key role is played by the perspectivists who translate it and coin the Latin term *perspectiva* (Chapter 4). Nonetheless, Belting also restores the crucial role of a mathematician who is usually overlooked by studies on perspective: Blasius of Parma (died in 1416). He was the "inventor of mathematical space" and he first linked distance to the size of viewed objects. The artists Lorenzo Ghiberti and Piero della Francesca followed in his footsteps and also wrote perspective treatises.

Perspective as a Symbolic Form

Hans Belting's work does not just tell the story of a scientific theory's transfer. The theoretical corpus of treatises on perspective would not have become so culturally significant if the representation of perspective space hadn't been a symbolic action *per se*. As it has been demonstrated by Erwin Panofsky, perspective is not a universal law of representation – rather, it is a cultural code, a symbolic form used for its signifying value¹⁷.

In Masaccio's Holy Trinity, the skyline separates the Biblical space from the space of the commissioners and of the viewers. This space is portrayed as being destined to inescapable death, as it is expressed by the tomb in the foreground. This highlights the fact that perspective is essentially used for telling stories and for including the gaze as an actor in the fiction playing itself out in the painting or on stage, before the viewer's eyes. From the Italian enclosed theatre's decoration to baroque illusionism, including Urbino's *vedute*, perspective is a symbolic field (Chapter 5).

The metaphorical dimension reaches a climax in the last chapter (Chapter 6), where the reader will once again find some of the questions raised in the *Collège de France* lectures: the eye as a metaphor of the divine gaze appears in Nicholas of Kues's *On the Vision of God*, in which the famous theologian distinguishes God's vision, matutinal and encompassing, and the believers' vision, vesper and piecemeal; the figure of Narcissus, an allegory deceived by his reflection, a metaphor of painting in Alberti's work. The Western culture of the gaze, marked by theology, is also influenced, with Narcissus, by pagan mythology.

Hans Belting's study maps out a path along which arts and science meet in an intertwining of Arab and Western culture. By stressing the fact that the most fundamental characteristics of our visual culture – perspective and *camera obscura* – actually come from the Arab world, and by using this moment of contact to develop an overarching analysis of the notion of the gaze, the great art historian Hans Belting is writing a global history, without giving up the theoretical significance of art history.

¹⁷ Erwin Panofsky, *La perspective comme forme symbolique et autres essais*, translated by Guy Ballangé, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 1975.

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