THE MACCHIAIOLI: ART AND HISTORY

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In dialogue on the Macchiaioli, the inquiry ineluctably becomes the nature of art history and its method and values.

I had the eeriest déjà vu feeling reading Norma Broude’s review, “The Macchiaioli: Art or History?” in the Summer 1987 issue of the Art Journal. Especially after I spotted several mentions of my name. Although we were students at Columbia University at the same time and worked with Ted Reff, I don’t think we ever met formally. Her name first came to my attention in connection with the most extraordinary scholarly exchange I can imagine. While reading the “Letters” section in an Art Bulletin of 1973, I ran across her name signed to a letter that had the audacity to attack a reviewer for writing a positive evaluation of someone else’s book. She actually censured the reviewer for choosing “to criticize the book for precisely those qualities which make it a useful reference tool.” In her mind it was far more important to play up the book’s “real limitations and more serious shortcomings.”

As might be expected, the reviewer, Albert Alhadef’, was puzzled by Broude’s response, and had to practically write a sequel correcting her unfounded charges and erroneous logic. I am sure that most readers would have done a double take in reading this exchange, but I think I must have done a version in triplicate when I discovered that the book in question was my own The Academy and French Painting in the Nineteenth Century!

Just as I felt then like an innocent bystander to the exchange between Broude and Alhadef’ over the merits of my book, so now in reading her present critique I feel outside her discussion despite the fact that she uses my name frequently throughout the essay. I simply do not recognize myself or my work in the statements and ideas she imparts to me. What she has done is to build a straw man to attack, a phantom that she can use as a safe target for her ideological assertions. This needs to be clarified at the outset of my response, because the intention of her review is to call in question a left-progressive perspective and at the same time attempt to demonstrate that it was poorly applied. One of her main themes is that I continually fail to account for the true class position of the Macchiaioli, overlooking their bourgeois and even aristocratic pretensions. Now nowhere do I claim that the group transcended the limits of their class; I repeatedly showed that they formed part of the vanguard of the Risorgimento, a national liberation movement to rid Italy of foreign occupation. Like most bourgeois in the progressive stage of their attack on feudalistic structures, they believed that the political rights they gained would also benefit the popular classes. This would also apply to women, whose emancipation was a cardinal plank in Mazzini’s program. In my discussion of the feminist issue I stated that “we should not look for radical feminist suggestions in the work of the Macchiaioli. They came from a predominantly bourgeois and patriarchal background, where women bore not only the weight of male oppression, but the omnipresent pressure of the Church in everyday family life.” What I tried to do was to account for the astonishing number of scenes depicting women absorbed in useful occupations, working in the service of the Risorgimento, and even playing together in non voyeuristic views that are exceptional in 19th-century art. I was careful to qualify this by pointing to the conventional treatment of feminine space in their work (although Broude is for some reason reluctant to state my qualifications), but nowhere in their work do you find the whore-madonna syndrome or the pouting femme fatale. The most casual comparison of their female portrayal with Pre-Raphaelite painters or with that whole kit bag of categories so admirably developed for us in Bram Dijkstra’s Idols of Perversity will convince the beholder that something unique is going on in Macchiaioli scenes of women. Their work displays respect for the intimate space of the domicile, which bourgeois women were in the process of declaring as their power base.

That said, we can move on to the substance of her attack and the reasons for it. I will not, however, conduct the argument in her terms. The treatment of the ideology of aesthetic issues in the field of social and cultural history is not merely “fashionable,” as Broude describes it, but is a dynamic process that is developing all the time. Conflict is healthy for the life of any discipline. My ideas reflect my understanding of this process at the moment, and I welcome constructive suggestions that will enrich and qualify my interpretations. Alas, this is not the spirit of Broude’s review. To facilitate any debate a certain decorum is necessary, a decorum which does not impute an ideological motive to a colleague whose interpretations are sharply different. Broude tries to devalue my research by accusing me of being “heavily invested in crediting the concept of modernism” and even challenges my competence in the use of the “currently fashionable, sociohistorical approach.” She deploys codewords such as mechanistic, reductive, manipulative, and self-indulgent to obscure my efforts to provide a historical explanation for the Macchiaioli movement. At several points she even tries to get inside my mind, referring to my “predilections” and even dogmatically asserting that a particular idea “never occurs” to me. I believe that it is basic to the scholarly endeavor that the reviewer should consistently address the arguments and supporting evidence and show that one’s own interpretations and supporting evidence are more explanatory and backed by more facts. Rarely does Broude do this: her strategy is to attack my arguments with my facts and try to find their logical flaws. This takes her off the hook of having to meet my discussion on its own terms by supplying her own historical interpretation.

Rather than assuming my scholarly seriousness, Broude has confronted my work with a hegemonic theory of art history that brooks no opposition. Its cardinal principle is that art has a transcendental character, that it takes place in a realm which is not enmeshed in political discourse. Its corollary is that writing on art should be non-political and above partisan belief. This would make the art idea analogous to a religious idea exempt from history and criticism, and detach the scholar from the circumstance of life and society. This is fine in theory, but in practice the reality is far more complicated. Thus no one is really helped in our business when the adjective political is used to discredit any work for daring to violate the cardinal religious taboo. In short, Broude suggests that she is a channeler for the only correct approach to art—that I am the heretic and she the only true believer. Indeed, this sectarian view is emphasized by Broude in the closing section when she states, “For many of us, to broaden the mainstream will suffice.”

I will not treat her as she has treated me; I acknowledge that she has a right to her method—the idea that art is detached from the
sociohistorical discourse. She attacks my writing as Marxist, mechanistic, and reductive, telling me that in her world there is no room for my methodology, while, ironically, she inadvertently admits (in the discussion of Cabianca's Il Mattino) that in my pluralist scheme there is room for her. For all true believers heretics are never viewed in any but the starkest of terms, so that even when confronted with evidence to the contrary they will maintain the canonical fiction. For example, Broude notes that Dario Durbe's piece attempts to disassociate himself from some of the views expressed in my essay, and uses it to bolster her point of view. In fact, all the organizers of the exhibition agreed on allowing scholars with differing perspectives to express themselves openly and freely without concern for the "unity" of the catalogue. We insisted on a pluralistic scheme that would expose American audiences confronted with this unfamiliar material to the broadest possible range of ideas associated with it. We even invited Broude to participate but she demurred in favor of her own plans for an exhibition. In addition, to assure that all recent scholarship in the field was documented, I made it a point to ask Broude for her current views to see if they had changed since she last wrote on the Macchiaioli and her response was duly acknowledged in the catalogue. Thus we did not "take pains" to enlist Durbe in support of our position, but allowed him to make his own choice for the subject of his essay. That his own perspective developed over time is part of the historical record we tried to document in the introductory remarks; I believe that writing about the production of knowledge should not ignore the producer's involvement as an actor within her or his own historical circumstances. And just to set the record straight about our presumed disagreement, the Archives of the Macchiaioli plans to do a translation of the catalogue which has been favorably received by both Italian and American scholars. Most gratifying of all has been the Italian reception of my essay; both scholars and lay readers have expressed surprise that an American could get so close to their culture. I say this not to vaunt the qualities of the essay but to put Broude's review in perspective.

It's now time to systematically explore her attacks on me, and let the reader judge whether or not these attacks are justified. For example, she states that it never occurred to me that Signorini's Venetian Ghetto shown at the Turin exhibition might have been done out of "cynical opportunism rather than pure political conviction." Aside from the fact that she herself concedes a highly political motivation (which "cynical opportunism" clearly is), she neglects to furnish the whole of my argument which stated quite clearly that Turin would have represented an excellent market for such a picture:

Signorini must have counted on this favorable climate for the reception of his theme of the Venice Ghetto. He painted it at a time when his patriotic impulses were strong, when there was a growing market for Risorgimento themes, and when artists were pressed to depict patriotic themes in preparation for the 1861 exposition...

I repeated this though on the following page, where I stated unequivocally that in Turin, "as in Florence, patriotism and the art market were inseparable, and Signorini reminds us in a note that his military paintings sold well; he clearly imagined that the painting would reach the same market and exploit the same climate." Broude's coda to her curious omission regarding his later image of the Florentine ghetto castigates me for overlooking "the fact that in this case Signorini has indeed painted a truly realistic image of contemporary poverty." In fact, I stress Cecioni's observation on the elderly man wearing tattered clothing, who symbolized for him the desolation of Florence's Ghetto.

What I find so bizarre in these attacks is the way that she turns my own facts against my interpretation, as if she had the perception in the first instance. In her critique of my Lega section she claims that I failed to ask why the "happy mother" topos reemerges in the work of a painter whose earlier feminist images, as I suggested, appear startling when compared to those of his contemporaries elsewhere in the world. Yet I not only asked this question, but attempted to answer it on page 67:

In the following decades Lega's views took a conservative turn, probably reflecting his disillusionment with the slow progress of the Risorgimento and its failures... Lega's later work depicts family life as it revolved around childhood, depicting children dressing up as adults in play, and mothers and grandmothers teaching children to read and write. Thus his center of social gravity shifted to an emphasis on the domestic and maternal realms.

This concern for raising the next generation of Italians so that they would be freed from the baggage of the past inspired Colloidi's Pinocchio, a work that shares the Macchiaioli's latent sensibility. Colloidi was well known to the group, and he even entitled one of his writings Machiotti, or "Little Bitches." Pinocchio's successive metamorphoses from a piece of scrub pine to a realized human being constituted the symbolic passage from an embryonic macchia (one definition of which is "scrubwood") to a "finished" production—the hopes for a regenerated Italy through a new morality.

Still claiming a virtual monopoly on the facts that I have provided, Broude next rejects my argument on the connection between the Mezzadria agrarian system in Tuscany (a type of sharecropping) and Macchiaioli scenes and then writes that "Beime passes over the late work of Fattori, which does in fact present a scathing indictment of the failures of agrarian reform and related public policies." Here again she refuses to recognize the obvious. Discussing the change in Fattori's late works, I wrote on page 57:

Fattori's fascination with the Maremma, analogous to the American frontier fantasy of the Old West, absorbed him throughout his life. His later works exemplify the heroic actions of the butteri, the so-called "Tuscan cowboys" who herded the wild animals in the region. In La marcatura dei puledri in Maremma (The Branding of the Colts in the Maremma) ... the relationship of the human figure to the landscape is reverse, as Fattori presents an alternative perspective on life in Tuscany. His disillusionment with the progress of the Risorgimento took the form of melancholy resignation, expressed in the views of the Maremma plains and the day-to-day grind of the butteri, whose individuality he nevertheless invested with mythical status.

Next Broude claims that in my entire essay "there is virtually no mention of an artistic tradition or context for the Macchiaioli." Evidently,
she decided not to count my discussions of the veduta tradition, the Neapolitan and Milanese schools, French and Italian history painting, and the work of the fathers of Abatti and Signorini. If she feels that I unjustly neglected the Puritans, notably influenced by Overbeck and the Nazarene movement, then by all means she should demonstrate her case. But instead of doing that she contented herself with generalizing my exclusion of it as an absence of all mention of an artistic context.

Broude is so intent on finding fault that she sometimes gets herself into contorted positions. She takes my section on Cabianca’s Il Mattino in which I try to account for seeming contradictions and exceptions to my overall argument, and turns my text to fit her own interpretation which actually agrees with mine. I clearly linked anticlericalism and the Risorgimento, and the fact that the picture (as she points out) was purchased by the local Promotrice society in Turin proves my case.

Although the work represents a scene in a convent, a religious theme unusual in Macchiaioli work, it depicts the nuns as depersonalized, imprisoned beings totally walled off from nature. (This was the liberal reading of the picture at that time.) That Broude could then write that my discussion demonstrates that having nowhere to go I had to retreat “into pure formal analysis for its own sake” not only does the reader a disservice but severely compromises her initial assertion as to my doctrinal position.

Broude’s quarrel with my discussion of the significations of the term Macchiaioli needs to be set against a thorough reading of my essay. Her attack is riddled with fragmented selections and omits the core of my analysis. The suffix aiolo derives from the Latin ariolus, which designated the plebeian groups in Florentine society. These included oncioioli (ruggers), borsaioli (pickpockets), and even merdaioli (shite workers). When I said that the Macchiaiolı wanted to associate with the working-class movement in Tuscany, I did not suggest that they went around wearing overalls or peasant blouses, but that they did so to align themselves with an energetic power base in opposition to the status quo. I nowhere claim (as Broude insists that I do) that the Macchiaioli applied the name to themselves, but that they came to accept the denomination. Broude herself wrote in her dissertation that the evidence suggested that “prior to 1862, the terms Macchiaioli” and “effettiisti” were both current in Florentine art circles and that both were applied to the progressive group of artists, interchangeably, as descriptive of their tendencies (pp. 45-46).” It goes without saying that these “progressive” groups willingly took on the designation, a fact repeatedly emphasized in the autobiographical statements of Pat- tori. Fattori recalled in a letter to Gustavo Uzielli his initial encounter with Felice de Tivoli, brother of Serafino, “ambedue ferci macchiaioli” (both ferocious Macchiaioli). Elsewhere he recalled that in his youth he served as a runner for the party of action in Leghorn during the revolutionary period 1848-1849, and when he subsequently moved to Florence he joined another form of “conspiracy”—the new art movement directed against the Academy and classical painting “battezzati con il titolo di macchiaioli” (baptized with the name of Macchiaioli).

(See G. Fattori, Scritti autobiografici editi e inediti, ed. F. Errico, Rome, 1980, pp. 32-33, 106.) These statements should also alert us to Broude’s misguided attempt to confine the original use of the term exclusively to “the tonal structure of their paintings.” It clearly connoted subversive activity, if only against the Academic establishment at that time subject to Austrian hegemonic control. Broude also rejects my contention that the political situation of the Risorgimento “generated an atmosphere of acceptance for stylistically experimental and unfinished works,” citing as her evidence “the critical dialogue surrounding the new art in 1861 and 1862” which I failed to adduce. Here she ignores my discussion of the exchange between Signorini and Rigutini which attempted to show the differences in ideological perspectives between parsians of the new movement and their critics. Further, the first Italian National Exposition, held in Florence in 1861, not only exhibited unfinished paintings (including Fattori’s Battle of Magenta) but also awarded prizes to several Macchiaioli. Finally, I did not define the macchia as a sketch per se, but linked it with sketching procedures implied in the terms effettiisti and tonal painting.

Most astonishing of all, Broude wants to impugn my scholarly integrity and competence. She warns the “uninformed reader” of my credibil- ity, citing what she considers “inaccuracies” in the research. What she comes up with is my confounding of Giovanni Costa from Leghorn with Giovanni Costa from Rome, which in no way affects any of my arguments, and a difference of opinion on the importance of an early series of articles by Signorini for his Caricaturisti e caricaturati al Caffè Michelangiolo. Here she disputed my claim that the articles of 1866-67 provided the basis of the definitive study. In fact, she should return to the primary source: Signorini said as much by recalling them in the very first sentence of his book (1862 edition, p. 43).

Given this type of blatant misrepresentation, it is now time to address the more fundamental issue implied in this review. How can we explain this absurdity? What has so distressed me is its attack on my personal character, my motives and my scholarly integrity. Why has she so disgraced UCLA’s attempt to enrich our knowledge of a field in which, as Broude knows only too well, there are so few scholars working? Where is the foundation of fellowship and collegiality that should mark scholarly evaluation? Has Broude written this review in the interest of spreading ideas or with the narrower motive of closing debate?

As she concludes, Broude provides us with a clue to her motivation to her forthcoming book on the Macchiaioli. She does not give us her arguments but directs us to the publication. Coming after such a long litany of disparaging remarks about my arguments and ideological position, we may well wonder if her review was not an attempt to vanquish an imagined rival. What comes through most vividly in her review is an expression of territoriality in the field, as if she owned an exclusive franchise and intends to keep it. This type of scholarly behavior is not only anti-intellectual and contrary to the basic purposes of scholarly investigation, but it deems every member of our profession. Perhaps her attempt to brand my work with the label of partisanship will have served a purpose if our exchange helps clarify the ways in which so-called “liberal” art history functions in fact as a sectarian gospel.

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