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Studying gestures in art

[Introduction to 'The hand on the breast' by Julius Lange]

Eckart Marchand

Julius Lange situates his 1887 study at the intersection of psychology and art history as he addresses the history of depictions of what he claims as a timeless human gesture: the hand that is moved to the site of the heart in response to emotion that quickens or slows its rhythm. Hand gestures, however, Lange points out, are not purely natural but open to control by those who make them. Thus, they are not the kind of physical expressions of human emotions that Charles Darwin or Lange's own brother Carl, an eminent psychologist of the time, perceived as valuable for their studies. Having thus positioned his research, Lange sets out to demonstrate what art history can contribute to the study of this interdisciplinary topic and ultimately to the understanding of the 'most remarkable animal species, the human beings we are'.

Fifty years later, in 1931, Fritz Saxl pointed towards similar issues of interdisciplinarity between the sciences and humanities in a lecture at the Kulturhistorische Bibliothek Warburg (K.B.W.) in Hamburg. Addressing the delegates of the twelfth annual conference of German psychologists, Saxl presented his audience with the core ideas of the recently deceased founder of the K.B.W., the cultural historian Aby Warburg.[1] According to Warburg visual representations of gestures had been formulated in antiquity and proved such powerful means of emotive expression (*pathos formulae*) that artists of the Italian Renaissance felt urged to re-use them. Like Lange, Saxl began his lecture with Darwin, pointing to the latter's rejection of artistic representations of gestures as evidence for psychological studies. Darwin's psychology, however, Saxl points out, was evolutionist in nature and he asks his audience to come forward with new approaches that would enable art historians and psychologists to address collaboratively the study of the formation of gestures in art and their survival across different periods and cultures.

The distinction between human behaviour and its representation in art, so crucial for Warburg and Saxl, was not an issue for Lange. Having defined the gestures he is looking for, he rarely describes how they are rendered and shows little interest in the visual, physical or social contexts in which they appear. Using

[1] Fritz Saxl, 'Die Ausdrucksgebärden der bildenden Kunst', *Bericht über den XII. Kongress der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Psychologie in Hamburg, vom 12.-16. April 1931*, Jena 1932 [no page nos.], reprint in Fritz Saxl, *Gebärde, Form Ausdruck: Zwei Untersuchungen*, Pablo Schneider, ed., Zurich, 2012, pp. 59-107, on Warburg's notion of the *pathos formula* see e.g. Claudia Wedepohl, 'Warburg, Saxl, Panofsky and Dürer's Melencolia I', *Schifanoia*, 48-49, 2014, 27-44, esp. 35-40. [Currently accessible at https://www.academia.edu/30644865/WARBURG_SAXL_PANOFSKY_AND_D%C3%9CRER_S_MELENCOLIA_I. 12.11.2021 Editor]

his 'human intuition' he decides whether a gesture expresses emotions, is a self-reflective pointing, signals humility, fear or pride, and even whether the depicted figure makes it in sincerity or pretence. At times he even criticizes a painter for choosing an inappropriate gesture for their figure, since it fails to communicate a human truth.

But Lange is also concerned about historical difference and he is keen to draw out which versions of his gesture were used in which period or geographic or cultural space. This he sees as of benefit to the art history of the time which was mainly concerned with the figure of the artist, rather than broader issues of representation. For one, he states, his research draws out significant cultural differences, e.g., between ancient pagan art, where the hand on the breast was virtually unknown, and 'modern', that is, post-medieval, Christian art, where it is used extensively, while the antique gesture of moving the hand to the head is rare. Secondly, he argues, this kind of research reveals artistic choices, as for example in the case of Bertel Thorvaldsen who frequently used the antique gesture of the hand at the chin, and not the 'modern' hand on the heart.

Lange's texts were influential, not least due to their ambitious methodological scope and the vast array of material he drew upon. Important studies in the history of motifs, such as J.J. Tikkanen's 'Die Beinstellungen in der Kunstgeschichte' ('On leg poses') and 'Zwei Gebärden mit dem Zeigefinger' ('Two Gestures with the Index Finger') of 1912 and 1913 are clearly indebted to him.[2] However, the reverential way in which Tikkanen refers to Lange does not proclude his own development towards a more sophisticated art historical approach. It can indeed be argued that a more precise visual analysis might have helped Lange to weed out some of his examples where hands rather rest on abdomens or shoulders than the heart, or might best be described as being kept close to the body. Equally, the lack of consideration for context and the beholder comes over as particularly naive and problematic when in the case of nineteenth-century naturalistic depictions of female nudes the 'hand on the breast' gesture is discussed without any consideration of the male gaze for which these works were conceived. In her 1912 review of Tikkanen's study, recently re-published in this journal, Erika Tietze-Conrat argued that both Tikkanen and Lange showed too little interest in what she called the 'artistic problem' by which she primarily meant the factors that affected artists' choices of gesture.[3] In comparison to Lange, however, Tikkanen analyses the

[2] J.J. Tikkanen, 'Zwei Gebärden mit dem Zeigefinger' ('Studien über den Ausdruck in der Kunst I'), Offprint from *Acta Societatis Scientiarum Fennicae*, vol. 43, Helsinki, 1913, 1-107; J. J. Tikkanen, 'Die Beinstellungen in der Kunstgeschichte. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der künstlerischen Motive', reprint from *Acta Societatis Scientiarum Fennicae*, vol. 42, Helsinki, 1912, 1-197.

[3] Erica Tietze-Conrat, 'J. J. Tikannen, "Die Beinstellungen in der Kunstgeschichte. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der künstlerischen Motive", Tom. XLII Nr. 1 of the *Acta Societatis Scientiarum Fennicae Helsingfors* 1912', *Kunstgeschichtliche Anzeigen Beiblatt der Mitteilungen des Instituts für österreichische Geschichtsforschung*, Redigiert von Max Dvořák, Jahrgang 1912 Heft 3/4, Innsbruck: Wagner 1912, 66-69; republished in English *in Journal of Art Historiography*, 23, Dec. 2020. https://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2020/11/karl-trans-etctikannen-1.pdf [last accessed 11/11/2021].

depiction of gestures in works of art much more carefully, describing, for example, how they relate to other figures, including the implied beholder, or how their choice was determined by the type of image in which they appeared. In 'Two Gestures with the Index Finger' he observes, e.g., that in religious paintings of the Italian Renaissance saints are often shown pointing with the index finger while looking straight at the beholder, and in 'On leg poses' he describes the motif of the *Venus Pudica* as the goddess's paradoxical defense against the 'impertinent attention of the beholder for whose delight her pose has been ultimately invented'.[4]

The psychological questions raised by Lange, Warburg and Saxl were again addressed in the context of the Warburg Institute, now in London, by Ernst Gombrich who in the 1960s provided the first consistent theory on the formation of gestures in life and their representation in art.[5] Following studies on animal behaviour, Gombrich argued that gestures in art originated from natural human expression and had gone through varying processes of ritualization, in which they had acquired their specific forms and meaning. Meaning for Gombrich was 'at best secondary to gestures' and he showed little concern for historical difference in the reading of gestures in his own interpretation.[6]

A theoretical underpinning of the historical reading of gestures was provided in 1972 by Michael Baxandall's *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*.[7] Baxandall discussed gestures as part of his concept of the 'period eye' that insists on perception as historically conditioned. Thus gestures in painting or sculpture reflect choices based on the cultural experiences of artists and those for whom they worked. To develop an historical understanding of gesture the art historian has to draw on relevant primary sources such as conduct or prayer manuals that might condition reception. Following Baxandall and in contrast to Gombrich, Laura Jacobus and the present writer have defined gestures as part of human communication and therefore always conventional whether in life or representation.[8] In relation to Italian Renaissance images, I argue in particular for the importance of the specific pictorial and physical contexts that would have informed interpretation of a depicted gesture.

From the point of view of art historical methodology, 'The Hand on the Breast' is mainly of historiographical value. Like Warburg Lange criticized the art historical priorities of his time, urging scholars to move away from monographic

[4] Tikkanen, 'Zeigefinger', 62; 'Beinstellungen', 78-80.
[5] Ernst H. Gombrich, Review of Moshe Barasch, *Gestures of Despair*, in: *Burlington Magazine*, 120, 1978, 762-763; reprinted in E.H. Gombrich, *Reflections on the History of Art* edited by Richard Woodfield, Oxford: Phaidon 1987, 38-41; Gombrich, 'Ritualized Gesture and Expression in Art', in: *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London*, Series B, Biological Sciences, 251, 1966, 303-401; reprinted in E. H. Gombrich, *The image and the Eye*, Oxford: Phaidon, 1982, 63-77.
[6] Gombrich, Review of Barasch, 763.
[7] Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy. A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972; on gesture: 56-71.
[8] Laura Jacobus, *Gesture in the Art, Drama and Social Life of Late-Medieval Italy*, unpublished PhD, Birkbeck-College, University of London; Eckart Marchand, *Gebärden in der Florentiner Malerei: Studien zur Charakterisierung von Heiligen, Uomini Famosi und Zeitgenossen im Quattrocento*, Münster: Lit, 2004.

studies and to see art as a means to bridge human psychological response and cultural expressions, as an index of expressions across different cultures and periods.

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