



## IN MEMORIAM

Michael David Kighley Baxandall  
Professor of History of Art, Emeritus  
UC Berkeley  
1933 – 2008

Michael Baxandall, probably the most influential art historian of the latter half of the twentieth century, died August 12, 2008, of pneumonia related to Parkinson's disease. He was 74 years old. Having visited the campus as Una Lecturer in 1982, he joined the University of California, Berkeley faculty in 1985. He retired in 1996.

Born in Cardiff, Wales, on August 18, 1933, Baxandall was educated at Cambridge University (where he took a degree in literature in 1954), the University of Pavia in Italy, and the University of Munich in Germany. He undertook graduate work at the Warburg Institute at the University of London under Sir Ernst Gombrich, a great pioneer in the study of the psychology of perception and the communicative qualities of visual art. Baxandall never completed his dissertation, but he would later take a position as lecturer at the Warburg.

Baxandall's originality stems in part from his equally keen interest in language, in art, in cultural history, and in science, especially the science of vision. He studied (and taught) the properties of wood, the structures of rhetoric, and the mechanisms of light transmission on the retina, as well as the nature of artists' career paths, patronage systems, and the techniques of art production. He meditated deeply on the visual properties of things, and on the tensions between the verbal and the visual as types of experience and as media of expression.

When Michael Baxandall came to Berkeley in 1982 to deliver the Una lectures, he was at the height of his career. In the previous decade he had produced three extraordinary books, each one quite different from the others, that had established him as a leading voice in the discipline of art history— and a controversial one as well. That he was controversial might come as something of a surprise today, so thoroughly has his early work been absorbed into the way we think about art and intellectual history. Thousands of students and interested amateurs have read *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* (1972), which, in refreshingly direct, unpretentious prose, introduces us to the cultural conditions in which Renaissance pictures were designed, beheld, and understood. At the center of this book is the notion of the “period eye,” by which Baxandall means the social acts and cultural practices that shape attention to visual form within a given culture. A merchant estimates the volume of a barrel; a preacher exhorts his flock to imagine a seasonal holy story; certain gestures or postures become associated with civility or its opposite. These nonartistic factors condition how a maker of art thinks about his task of visualization, and how his audience comprehends the image he makes.

This all seems so obvious today, when reconstructing a “period eye” has become one of those things that undergraduates are taught to grapple with in primer art history classes. But Baxandall's book has to be understood not only as a contribution to this field, but as an intervention very much of, yet also counter to, its moment. In the 1970s, art history was torn between an old guard who dealt with stylistic development, attributions, and archives, and a movement of young radicals for whom Marxist social history constituted a tool of political intervention: for them, works of art could be explained as the material embodiments of ideology, outgrowths of class conflict. The subtitle of Baxandall's book deliberately situated it between these

factions. Yet it satisfied neither one. Its call on social phenomena as drivers of formal properties, or style, dismayed traditionalists, while its form of social history seemed almost unbearably apolitical to the Marxists. His second great work of “social history,” *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany* (1980), was a much larger and more traditionally shaped book about an entirely different subject, one rooted in Baxandall’s early work with sculpture as curator at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. It avoided some of the criticism that had plagued *Painting and Experience* because it dealt with artworks in which standard art history had no great stake, but it, too, would become a classic in the field.

Baxandall’s first major book, different from either of these, had been *Giotto and the Orators* (1971). It was much less about Giotto than it was about the orators, or, more specifically, about the Latin words that early humanist writers on art found to describe the artworks that they felt merited new forms of attention. This book was Baxandall’s first meditation on a theme that was to occupy him throughout his career: the inadequacy of words to register the visual qualities of a work of art. As he put it in this early work, “any language. . . is a conspiracy against experience in the sense of being a collective attempt to simplify and arrange experience into meaningful parcels.” The experience of vision is particularly ill- served by language, he posited; words interpose themselves between us and our attempts to explain the image.

“We do not explain pictures: we explain remarks about pictures — or rather, we explain pictures only in so far as we have considered them under some verbal description or specification.” This is the opening of *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* (1985), the book that grew out of Baxandall’s *Una* lectures at Berkeley. In a series of case studies, he grapples with the often unacknowledged difficulty art historians have in explaining why visible, man- made objects in the world look the way they do. It would seem an obvious task of art history to answer this basic question, yet relatively few writers really try to do that. Perhaps they avoid the attempt because it is almost impossible to determine the causes of appearance in any sort of rigorous manner. Baxandall, in his characteristically restrained and lucid way, offers some thoughts about what art historians actually do when they “explain” visual form, and how they might refine this into a more satisfying practice. His first case study, examining the building of the Forth Bridge at Queensferry, Scotland in the late nineteenth century, has become a classic of art history even while remaining entirely unique. Baxandall examines the “brief” presented to the bridge’s designer, the problems with which he was confronted, and how the material circumstances of the commission affected design decisions and hence the ultimate appearance of the bridge. He then takes this focus on inferred practical reasoning and tests it on three famous paintings, each from a completely different culture, produced in completely different circumstances. In these cases the outside circumstances of production that resulted in particular decisions and particular visual qualities are less immediate or practical: they may involve expectations generated by art criticism and the market, or cultural notions of perception. Baxandall does not pretend to come up with definitive answers, or to offer a methodological model that others can follow, but simply invites art historians to reflect upon their situation as writers about visual objects, and challenges us to consider the limitations of our practice.

When Baxandall joined the Berkeley faculty, he and Svetlana Alpers became increasingly close collaborators. They shared an impatience with the type of art history that sought to find meaning in works of art, as if by naming some message intended by the artist, one had definitively explained the image. This type of study, often termed ‘iconography,’ was another dominant form of art history through the twentieth century; rejecting it entirely, Baxandall and Alpers teamed up for their next book, *Tiepolo and the Pictorial Intelligence* (1994). They chose to focus on a real artist’s artist, whose paintings are brilliant tours de force but about whose life and circumstances almost nothing is known. The challenge they set themselves was to think through Tiepolo’s process of visual thought, to closely analyze the processes of production, the very movements of his pen or brush as he made an image, the way his frescos demanded to be beheld — not to find meaning, but to explore the generation and effect of appearance. The book’s politics are extremely subtle, gently probing the painter’s view of human nature as implied by the experience he creates with his artworks; the authors’ experience of looking is where the text’s passionate intensity lies, and their evocative writing does a better job than Baxandall himself would admit at registering that visual experience for the reader’s pleasure.

Baxandall’s next two books, *Shadows and Enlightenment* (1995) and *Words for Pictures* (2003), continued to explore the relationships between sight, artistic practice, and cultural patterns of perception.

Baxandall was not only a gifted scholar; he was an exceptional classroom teacher. His Berkeley seminars ranged widely, from Botticelli and Piero della Francesca, to Hogarth and Chardin, and the Enlightenment Shadow. Students consistently paid tribute to his clarity and organization, his open and friendly manner, his unflinching sense of humor. Above all they responded to the excitement of his ideas.

Michael Baxandall took on central problems in art historical scholarship; wielding an extraordinary array of visual and language skills, historical methods, and unbounded curiosity, he had a broad impact on scholarship throughout the humanities. The producer of magisterial and revolutionary works, he was, personally, a self-deprecating and quiet man. He exhibited both exceptional judgment and unfailing good humor in his relations with both faculty and students. Widely recognized and widely read, he became a fellow of the British Academy in 1982, and in 1988 was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship. The History of Art department is instituting a Michael Baxandall prize to be awarded annually to a graduate student in his honor.

Baxandall is survived by his wife, Kay, of London, two children, and two grandchildren.

Margaretta Lovell

2009  
Elizabeth Honig