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Iconology and the Phenomenological Imagination

In this essay, my concern is with the philosophical crossroads that the history of art seems to have confronted in the middle of the last century: phenomenology or iconology? In an authorial nutshell: Gadamer or Panofsky? "The Relevance of the Beautiful" or "Studies in Iconology"? Panofsky appears to have emerged victorious, at least in an Anglo-American context, with his well-known iconographic/iconological schema for detecting meaning in historical works of art. Gadamer's trenchant criticism of iconography, however, should not go unheeded. "It is an objectivist prejudice of astonishing naiveté," he declared, "for our first question to be, 'What does this picture represent?'" In the second decade of this century, recent historiographic fixations on materiality and agency may be returning art historians, once again, to a pressing, even exciting, dialectic: experience or analysis, presence or representation? Writings of other phenomenologists, such as Merleau-Ponty, are resurrected in order to highlight a certain powerful and persuasive phenomenological strain in art history, one that has always coursed underground in the discipline. Might it be the case that Panofsky's haunting level of iconology gestures, in some way, towards this other possibility? Where would we look? At what paintings leave unsaid or the very silence they urge upon their viewers? Two works of art help us contemplate what this other philosophical commitment might yield. Chardin's "Young Student Drawing" of 1738 and Rembrandt's(?) "St. Anastasius" of 1631, both subjects quietly rapt in their activities, here serve as visual touchstones for another way of construing not meaning, but poetic presence in the history of art.