

Lech Kalinowski

## Hogarth the Theoretician of Art

The prints and paintings of William Hogarth (1697-1764), the most outstanding and best-known 18th-century English artist, has a complementary backdrop in the form of his treatise *The Analysis of Beauty* (1753), published in a full edition fitted out with an introduction and source-study by Joseph Burke, with an appended sub-title, “with the rejected papers from the manuscript drafts and autobiographical notes,” Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1955.<sup>1</sup>

Hogarth’s treatise was extraordinary because it was the first European work on art and beauty to present a uniform doctrine based on the formal values. Unlike his predecessors in the theory of art – such as Theophilus in the Middle Ages, Cennino Cennini at the dawn of the modern age, or the Renaissance commentators, such as Leon Battista Alberti, Leonardo da Vinci, and Albrecht Dürer, or Nicolas Poussin in the Baroque period – Hogarth did not consider the purely technical and workshop issues, but in a consciously independent attitude and regardless of the hitherto opinions on beauty and art as disseminated ever since Antiquity, he defined and described the principles of his own doctrine, albeit he had a good knowledge of the ideas of his predecessors, and referred to them (e.g. Michelangelo or Gianpaolo Lomazzo) when the need arose.

As the very title of his treatise indicates, its subject-matter is above all beauty, which was the principal issue in the 18th-century French and British literature on philosophy and aesthetics. Not until that period did thinkers realise how difficult it was to define beauty and what was beautiful. The concept of beauty was associated on the one hand with taste (French *goût*),<sup>2</sup> which was why Hogarth added an explanatory phrase, “with a view of the Ideas of Taste,” preserved in successive editions (London, 1753, 1772, and two editions in 1810; Pittsfield (Mass.), 1909; and Oxford, 1955). On the other hand the enigmatic French formula *je ne sais quoi* would be resorted to whenever beauty was discussed.<sup>3</sup>

Making this distinction, Hogarth also observed that grace, which was connected with taste, and beauty were two different things, since beauty was always pleasing on account of a set of rules or principles, while grace or gracefulness was pleasing without any associated rules.

*The Analysis of Beauty* is a manifesto of Hogarth’s independent views, which were nevertheless developed in opposition to the opinions held by the Connoisseurs, especially Jonathan Richardson, author of *The Theory of Painting* (1715). In his treatise Hogarth

rejected the doctrine of the need to continually improve on Nature by idealisation, and repudiated the custom of artists turning to the works of earlier masters and treating them as if they were an ultimate authority.

Declaring his reservations about what he called “orthodox taste” and the moralising character of some of the contemporary periodicals on art and beauty, he offered an absolute, rather than moralistic or literary, key to answer the question of the true nature of beauty.<sup>4</sup> Hogarth himself put forward neither a moral nor a literary but an absolute key to the secret of the true nature of beauty.

He presented this absolute master-key as his own idea, but backed it up with the antiquarian authority of Michelangelo and the Greek artists, with a reference to Lomazzo. In *Trattato dell' Arte della Pittura* (Milano, 1584, Book I, Chapter 29), Gianpaolo Lomazzo had written that Michelangelo had encouraged his student Marco da Siena del Pino to present human figures in the shape of a snake-like pyramid.<sup>5</sup> To illustrate this theory and with a reference to Pythagoras, wisest of the Greeks (the plate on p. 9), Hogarth used a table with an ancient torso known as the Michelangelo Torso, which depicted, or rather embodied, the secret of the art of beauty. An idea which was undoubtedly Hogarth's original contribution to this theory was the “waving” or “serpentine” line, which he called “the lines of beauty and grace.” The “waving” or “serpentine” line was definitely superior to the angular line. In compliance with the principle of fitness, Hogarth recommended the waving line for the depiction of the beautiful; and the straight line for the depiction of the comic.

His waving line consisted of two contrasting curved surfaces which had to be arranged in opposite directions with respect to each other but had the same depth, that is they had to be neither too bowed or taut, nor too light and shallow. Hogarth drew seven such lines in the shape of the letter “S”. The depth of his curved surfaces ranged from lines which were almost straight to ones which were almost circular. A beautiful serpentine line would be created by the uniform twisting of a wire round a cone, which he compared to the conical movement of a flame.

This notion of the waving line was Hogarth's own; later – but only once *The Analysis of Beauty* was published – he was shown a similar idea in Lomazzo's book.<sup>6</sup> Incidentally, C. A. Du Fresnoy in *De Arte Graphica* (Paris, 1667), and R. de Piles in *Cours de peinture par principes* (Paris, 1708), had stated explicitly that grace depended to a large degree on the flowing nature of the waving or serpentine line.<sup>7</sup>

Hogarth enumerated the abstract attributes of beauty: fitness, variety, simplicity, symmetry, distinctness, intricacy, uniformity, and quantity, but acknowledges variety as the principal attribute. So the art of good composition meant the art of differentiating well.

Hogarth believed that the adoption of the waving line, along with everything that this implied in practice, would be a very useful thing for the artists of his times. He expressed his conviction that in this way a new architectural order could be created, whereby churches, palaces and prisons, ordinary houses and summer residences could be built with features far more suitable for their purpose. In this manner architects could free themselves of the authority of Palladio, whom every architect of the age was obliged to follow, no matter whether the building concerned were in Lapland or in the East Indies.

Hogarth observed the operation of the waving line principle in practical objects – we would say in the applied arts and crafts: tables, chairs etc., in compliance with the fitness rule. When a vessel sailed well, the sailors would call her a beauty.<sup>8</sup>

It is enough to think of the Louis XV decorations to appreciate Hogarth's remarks on variety, and thereby also on the wavy or serpentine line, the graceful line. The features of rococo and the then widespread chinoiserie come to mind.

How should Hogarth's attitude to the rococo be described? Essentially the rococo was an interior decoration style, and consisted in the application of "C" bends in wainscoting, painting and sculpture.<sup>9</sup> The diminutive curves of waving lines, the joy derived from their mobility and the delight drawn from their arrangement may be observed in the work of Watteau and Boucher, and in a modified version in Hogarth, too.<sup>10</sup> Despite his xenophobic attitude to everything French he owed much to the French rococo, both in his early works like *Before - After*, as well as in his later series, *Marriage à la Mode*, for the making of which he travelled to Paris, to secure the collaboration of the excellent engravers of Paris for this task.<sup>11</sup> Although Hogarth may not be called a rococo painter, he was certainly influenced by this style.<sup>12</sup>

If we can easily observe his principle of the waving line as the determinant of beauty in the rococo, and thereby explain the natural link between the concept and the style, we shall nevertheless find it much harder - at least at first glance - to detect such a relationship between the waving-line idea and the Gothic style, its construction and its decoration. However, if we look at much shorter sections of the waving line and their expression, we shall more readily understand its relation to Gothic as Hogarth saw it.<sup>13</sup> Significantly, it should be said, as regards the intricacy and detail of his description of Gothic, Hogarth was ahead of Romanticism.

What caught his attention most of all in Gothic were the "Steeple and spires . . . built higher than ordinary, to be seen above other buildings, purely as an ornament; and a great number of them give a rich appearance to a City. As the business of this part of the building is merely show, its shapes ought to be beautiful. The best general form for them is the pyramid or cone, and this has been chiefly chosen in all countries, even for Gothic spires, and some of them are finely and artfully varied, as the famous steeple at Strasburg, and several others. But the most elegant varied steeple in Europe, perhaps, is that of St. Mary-le-Bow in Cheapside, built by Sir Christopher Wren, the Prince of architects.

There are many other churches of great beauty, the work of the same architect, which are hid in the heart of the city, whose steeples and spires are raised higher than ordinary, that they may be seen at a distance above the other buildings; and the great number of them dispers'd about the city whole city, adorn the prospect of it, and give it an air of opulency and magnificence, on which account their shapes will be found to be particularly beautiful . . .

Westminster Abbey is a good contrast to St. Paul's, with regard to simplicity and distinctness, the great number of its filigrane ornaments and small divided and subdivided parts appear confused when high, and are totally lost at a moderate distance; there is nevertheless such a consistency of parts altogether in a good Gothic taste, and such propriety relative to the gloomy ideas they were then calculated to convey, that they have at length acquir'd and establish'd a distinct character in building. It would be look'd upon as an impropriety and as a kind of profanation to build places for mirth and entertainment in the same taste.

Have not many Gothic buildings a great deal of consistent beauty in them, perhaps acquired by a series of improvements made from time to time by the natural persuasion of the eye, which often very near answers the end of working by principles; and sometimes begets them?"<sup>14</sup>

William Hogarth had a rich and complex personality, composed of numerous contrasting and mutually contradictory traits. In his youth (as of 1713) he was a goldsmith's apprentice in the workshop of Ellis Gamble. He started out on his own in 1729 as an independent engraver working in metal and copperplates. The facts relating to his life and the very broad range of his work and affairs are to be found in his autobiography, the manuscripts of which are preserved in the British Library. They have been published in Joseph Burke's meticulously compiled edition, which I have already quoted. To all intents and purposes as a painter Hogarth was self-educated, although in 1720 he enrolled in the first of the St. Martin's Lane Academies, which he left without obtaining a certificate of proficiency. In the practice of the painter's profession he was influenced by his father-in-law, Sir James Thornhill, whom he himself chose for his master and guide.

Hogarth the theoretician of art was not only a writer, but also and above all an excellent organiser of the life of the art world.

Through the quality of his pictures Hogarth the painter and engraver played a crucial part in the making of the English school of painting. He committed himself to numerous endeavours to raise and enhance the social status of artists in England.

In appreciation of the importance of an education in painting and engraving, in 1735 he founded the second of the St. Martin's Lane Academies, the chief forerunner of the Royal Academy, which was established in 1768 on the initiative of Sir Joshua Reynolds.

His concern for artists' social and material status led to the passing of the Engraving Copyright Act in 1735, which protected their creative work against abuse and exploitation by dishonest collaborators. He tried to show by his own work, and succeeded in doing so, that artists could work independently of a patron, publishing and selling their prints on their own, which would be made from their own paintings.

His attitude to the Continental art milieu was marked by an extreme degree of xenophobia. He loved England and everything that England stood for. He called himself a Britophile. He was strict and unrelenting in his assessments, critical of anyone he could find fault in, regardless of person or position. Above all he criticised the French, but also the Italians – Poussin, Raphael, Michelangelo. In a Salon review of 1765 Diderot wrote of Hogarth and his severe judgements, “Je ne pardonne pas davantage à Hogarth d'avoir dit que l'École française n'avait pas même un médiocre coloriste.” (I cannot forgive Hogarth for having said that the French school did not have even a mediocre colourist)<sup>15</sup>

In his paintings and engravings Hogarth wanted to perpetuate and leave an artistic testimony of what was known in genre painting as “the moral subject.” On this account Sir Joshua Reynolds gave him a somewhat exaggerated epithet, saying he had invented a new species of dramatic painting.<sup>16</sup> His subjects were stories and scenes from contemporary life in the city, as portrayed in the novels of Henry Fielding (1707-1754).<sup>17</sup> In his series Hogarth the moralist interpreted the manners of his times, perpetuating and disseminating stories like the ones in Fielding's novels in the pictorial medium. He endeavoured to treat his successive subjects like a dramatist. A genuine lover of the theatre, in his compositions he was always a first-rate director. “My picture is my scene,” he wrote, “a dumb-show.”

The part he ascribed to formal values in painting and print-making is best to be seen in the mnemonic system he devised and applied, for which he relied on the Classical “art of memory” – *Ad Herennium*, Cicero's *De Oratore*, and Quintilian's *Institutiones*

*Oratoriae*. He adroitly put together what is known as the *loci* and the *imagines*;<sup>18</sup> his innumerable notes and observations recorded figures and scenes drawn from everyday life.

In the critical remarks he made in *The Analysis of Beauty* on the “moral character” of the contemporary writings on art Hogarth applied the criterion of the “absolute turnkey” of pure art. However, in the choice of subjects for his own paintings and engravings he used quite a different principle. He made his mark in art as a moralising artist, who tried to exert an influence on society with his examples of laudable and blameworthy conduct. But since he was interested in the theory of art and the formal values in particular works of art, it was time, as Joseph Burke put it in his introduction to *The Analysis of Beauty*, “to review the legend of [Hogarth] the ‘literary’ artist.”<sup>19</sup>

We may say, after E. H. Gombrich’s apposite appraisal of Hogarth’s art, that he applied his brush well, he distributed light and colour skilfully, he arranged his groups elegantly. He followed the Italian tradition as regards his interest in subjects; he believed in the rules of taste and remained a rationalist. It was to his engravings, often copied after other people’s designs, rather than to his paintings that he had to thank for his reputation. He could admire the beauty latent in detail, he was renowned as a satirist, and his satirical engravings were given the name of the Hogarthiana.<sup>20</sup>

#### Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup> For William Hogarth see Joseph Burke, *Hogarth William*, in *Encyclopedia of World Art*, VII, New York, Toronto, London, 1963, col. 576–581; Sheila O’Connell, *Hogarth William*, in *Dictionary of Art*, edited by Jane Turner, 14, New York, 1996 (printed with minor corrections, 1998), p. 636–643; Jan Białostocki, *Hogarth*, Warszawa 1959; and Ellis Waterhouse, *Painting in Britain 1530–1790*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1953 (third rearranged impression, 1954); Nicolaus Pevsner, *The Englishness of English Art*, Harmondsworth, 1956; Peter and Linda Murray, *Dictionary of Art and Artists*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1959, p. 15, 153, 154; Arthur M. Hind, *A History of Engraving and Etching. From the 15th Century to the Year 1914, being the third and fully revised edition of “A Short History of Engraving and Etching”*, New York, Dover edition, 1963, p. 233–235; A. Brookner, L. Gowing, *Hogarth William*, [w:] *Kindlers Malerei Lexikon*, Band III, Zürich 1966, s. 233–248; Joseph Burke, *English Art 714–1800*, Oxford, 1976 (Oxford History of English Art IX); Elizabeth Einberg, Judy Egerton, *The Age of Hogarth, British Painters Born 1675–1709*, Tate Gallery, 1988. On *The Analysis of Beauty* and Hogarth’s theory of art, see S. E. Read, “Some Observations on William Hogarth’s ‘Analysis of Beauty’: A Biographical Study”, *The Huntington Library Quarterly*, V, 1941–1942, s. 360–373; Karl Justi, “William Hogarth,” *Zeitschrift für bildende Kunst*, VII, 1972, p. 1–8 and s. 44–54; Lionello Venturi, *History of Art Criticism*, translated from Italian by Charles Marricot, new revised edition, New York, 1964, p. 144, 166; *Teoretycy i krytycy o sztuce 1700–1800*, selection, introduction and commentaries by Elżbieta Grabska and Maria Poprzącka, Warszawa, 1974, p. 46–52; the Polish translation of *The Analysis of Beauty: William Hogarth „Analiza piękna”*, napisana w celu ustalenia chwiejnych pojęć o smaku, transl. W. Juszcak; and Joseph Burke, *Hogarth and Reynolds. A Contrast in English Art Theory*, Oxford, 1943; Giulio Carlo Argan, “L’idée artistique de William Hogarth,” *English Miscellany*, I, 1950, p. 161–178; J. T. A. Burke, “A Classical Aspect of Hogarth’s Theory of Art,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, VI, p. 151–153, reprinted in *England and the Mediterranean Tradition*, Oxford, 1945, p. 139–141; Donald Paulson, “The Aesthetics of Mourning”, in *Studies in Eighteenth Century British Art and Aesthetics*, ed. Ralph Cohen, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1985, p. 48–181.

<sup>2</sup> On taste see Władysław Tatarkiewicz, *Estetyka nowożytna*, Wrocław, Warszawa, Kraków, 1967, p. 43, 420, 425, 428, 437, 438, 463, 472–473, 474–475, 509, 511.

<sup>3</sup> On “je ne sais quoi” see Burke, 1955, p. lvii, 7, 14; Katharine Everett Gilbert and Helmut Kuhn, *A History of Esthetics*, London 1956, s. 259; Tatarkiewicz, op. cit, footnote 2, p. 422, 435, 445, 499, 535.

<sup>4</sup> Burke, 1955, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> Burke, 1955, p. 7, 11–12.

<sup>6</sup> Gilbert and Kuhn, p. 261.

- 7 C. A. Du Fresnoy, *De Arte Graphica*, Paris, 1667; R. de Piles, *Cours de peintures par principes*, Paris, 1708; zob. Burke, 1955, p. xxx, lviii n. 2, 6, 176.
- 8 Gilbert and Kuhn, p. 261; Pevsner, p. 125: "In shipbuilding the dimensions of every part are confined and regulated by fitness for sailing. When a vessel sails well, the sailors... call her a beauty; the two ideas have such a connection."
- 9 The waving line had appeared before Hogarth's time as a structural unit in sculpture already in the curved columns of the baldacchino of St. Peter's Confession in the Vatican Basilica.
- 10 *The Thames and Hudson Encyclopedia of British Art*, General Editor David Bindman, London, 1985, p. 205.
- 11 For the rococo see Fiske Kimball, *The Creation of Rococo*, New York, 1964; Sheila O'Connell, *Rococo*, in *Dictionary of Art*, op. cit., p. 499, § 4.
- 12 D. Bindman, *British Art*, p. 205: "Despite his xenophobic sentiments, some of Hogarth's early works c. 1730, like *Before and After* (Cambridge Fitzwilliam), are in composition and handling indebted to French Rococo."
- 13 Kenneth Clark, *The Gothic Revival. An Essay in the History of Taste*, John Murray edition, 1962.
- 14 Cited after Burke, 1955, p. 172-173, p. 65
- 15 *Art français. Hommes. Oeuvres. Beiträge zur Entwicklungsgeschichte der französischen Kunst*, Herausgegeben von Otto Grautoff, Bielefeld und Leipzig, 1930, p. 40.
- 16 Pevsner, p. 6.
- 17 Burke, 1955, p. lvii n. 1, xxvi, lii, liii; Frederik Antal, "The Moral Purpose of Hogarth's Art," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, XV, 1952, p. 169-197.
- 18 Burke, 1955, p. xxxviii.
- 19 Burke, 1955, p. xiv.
- 20 Ernst H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art*, Phaidon, London-New York, 1968 (first printed 1950/7).

[translated by Teresa Bałuk-Ulewiczowa]