Mieczysław Wallis
INSCRIPTIONS IN PAINTING

Introduction

By "semantic enclave" I mean such a part of a work of art, which is composed of signs representing different types or different systems of signs than the rest of that work. Different types of signs are e.g. conventional signs and iconic signs. Different systems of signs are e.g. different systems of national spoken languages or different writing systems. The French passages in the Russian novel *War and peace* by Tolstoy are examples of semantic enclaves: phrases from the spoken French, rendered by means of Latin alphabet are placed within a whole composed of phrases from spoken Russian, rendered by means of the Cyrillic alphabet. An enclave in painting may be a musical score, a map, an emblem, a coat of arms, an inscription. This study is dedicated to semantic enclaves in paintings in the form of inscriptions.

When I define inscriptions in paintings as semantic enclaves, I mean to underline that, within the painting, they constitute autonomous entities, they have a different semantic structure, they speak a separate "language". Inscriptions are also a medium for elements of rich and complicated systems of conventional signs — national languages and various types of writing — to penetrate into the painting.

In order to interpret correctly iconic signs in a painting it is necessary to have some knowledge of visible objects, as well as some familiarity with artistic conventions of a given culture in a given time period.[1] In order to

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[1] The fact that one is familiar with diverse visually perceptible objects may be insufficient for a correct interpretation of visual iconic signs. A Japanese person, not accustomed with the central perspective, interprets a box drawn in perspective as

correctly interpret an inscription — a phrase in a national language rendered by means of some type of writing, it is necessary to know two systems of conventional signs: that of the particular type of writing and, at least to some extent, that of the national language employed. Often then the viewer may be capable of interpreting the iconic signs of a painting, yet he may fail to interpret the inscription. Therefore, semantic enclaves in paintings in the form of inscriptions are usually meaningful for a narrower audience than the iconic signs of those paintings.

The term "enclave" has no pejorative tinge in this case. It does not mean that inscriptions in painting are always only interpolations which could be removed with no detriment to the work as a whole. In various artistic circles and time periods inscriptions are essential components of paintings.

A painting with a semantic enclave in the form of an inscription is one of many forms of cooperation between image and writing, between iconic signs and conventional signs. A sculpture with an inscription on the pedestal, a coin or a medal, an illuminated manuscript, an illustrated book or an illustrated magazine, an announcement in a periodical or a signboard with an image, a post stamp, a poster — these are all further examples of similar cooperation. In this article I limit the scope of my analysis to inscriptions within paintings. So I do not take into consideration either inscriptions on frames (despite the fact that e.g. in some works of the Late Gothic or Renaissance painting the frame is an important part of the work), or inscriptions on the reverse side of paintings. In my discussion I do not include either the illuminated codices, where word is not an addition to image, but image is an addition to word. Nor do I include graphics, where the relation between image and word is often extremely close. Even when I thus narrow my subject, it still remains quite vast. I will therefore limit the scope of my study to inscriptions in Western painting — medieval, early modern and modern — and to a few remarks about inscriptions in Egyptian painting and Chinese painting.

To my knowledge, inscriptions in paintings have not yet been the object of a systematic study.[2] For lack of sources which could serve as preparatory

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distorted. An Indian, not familiar with the common method in Western painting of suggesting a solid shape by means of shadow and light, "sees" a face partly hidden in shade as mutilated. (Both examples are taken from the book: Gombrich 1960: 267-268).

[2]There are even no comprehensive studies dedicated e.g. to inscriptions in medieval paintings. "There is, to my knowledge, no comprehensive study of mediaeval picture inscriptions, in which the practical, formal, and iconographic intent of the inscriptions is considered [...]" (Covi 1963: 12).

material, this study can be no more than an essay, a rough fragmentary sketch.

Inscriptions in medieval painting

The main purpose of medieval paintings was to arouse religious sentiments in the viewer, to raise his soul towards God, to edify or to bring home to him the articles of faith. The role of inscriptions was there especially to facilitate the proper interpretation of those paintings.

There were various methods of introducing inscriptions in paintings. At times, as for example in Byzantine and Russian mosaics, the inscription would be placed on a flat, blank, usually golden background. At times it would be placed as if it was hovering in the air, not connected with the space represented in the painting (Jan van Eyck, *The Annunciation*, Washington, National Gallery of Art; Rogier van der Weyden, *The Annunciation,* Munich, Old Pinakothek; a Netherlandish painter from the early 16th century, *The Allegory of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, Warsaw, National Museum). We encounter the same method of introducing inscriptions in the early Christian paintings of the catacombs e.g. in the painting *Vibia enters into Paradise.* Sometimes the inscription would be inscribed in the halo around the head of a figure (*Pietà of Villeneuve-lès-Avignon*, c. 1460, Louvre). But perhaps the most common practice was to place the inscription on an object introduced specifically for that purpose and treated schematically — a plate or a ribbon with curling ends, the so-called "banderole" or "phylactery" (Master of Choirs, *The Sending of the Apostles*, the middle piece of the "Triptych from Mikuszowice," c. 1470, Cracow, National Museum).We encounter the same method in early Christian art e.g. in the mosaics in the Santa Maria Maggiore basilica in Rome.

In the 15th century, owing to the growing realistic tendencies in Western art, we observe the effort to combine all the elements of a painting into a most closely unified whole. When an inscription is introduced, its character of an enclave is hidden. It is treated not as a distinctly separate part, but is most closely related with the objects represented in the painting. The presence in the paintings of the objects on which the inscriptions are placed is in the given situation somehow motivated: they are placed on the pages of an open book, on a dress, on a banner, on a sarcophagus, on a wooden beam in the entablature or on the base course of a building etc. These objects are represented in the same realistic manner as the rest of the objects in the painting. The letters are represented as if they were carved in stone, cut in wood, embroidered on a dress. Through foreshortenings and the play of light

and shadow they are made to come forward or draw back, they are partly darkened by shadows or hidden, also partly, behind other objects. Through these techniques inscriptions could become an integral part of the reality represented in the painting. This method has its origins in ancient painting.[3]

In Byzantine painting the language of inscriptions was Greek, in the Russian painting — Church Slavonic, in the West European — Latin, or at times, rarely, also Greek or Hebrew. In the 15th century there appear the first inscriptions in modern national languages — in Flemish ("Als ik kan" by Jan van Eyck), in French (Jean Bellegambe, triptych *Noli me tangere*, Warsaw, National Museum), in German (Master of the Book of Reason, *Uncourtly lovers*, Gotha, Schlossmuseum).

In medieval painting particular attention was paid to the lettering of inscriptions. The aim was to make them evocative through their very layout — the disposition of letters, the ornamental initials etc.[4] Inscriptions were usually placed above the person's head, somewhere near the person or symmetrically on both sides. At times letters, single or in syllables, were written not horizontally one after another, but vertically from top to bottom. At other times they would be placed on a semicircular or a wavy line. Regardless of its meaning, each inscription was a kind of pattern and this pattern was integrated, with great care and skill, into the painting.

In the West, initially, Roman capitals were used or a lettering which resembled them. This endowed the inscriptions with a particularly monumental, solemn character; they evoked the inscriptions from the monuments of the Ancient Rome.

In the 12th century, under the influence of the Gothic forms in architecture, the rounded lines of Roman capitals, constructed on the basis of the square or the circle, were replaced with angular, spikey lines. Especially the vertical lines in letters were stretched. Hans Jensen, a German historian of writing, calls this new type of writing "Bruchschrift" and enumerates its suc-

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[3]Covi 1963: 13. —- We observe here a certain analogy with the passage, discovered by Panofsky (1953, chap. V), from "overt symbols" to "disguised symbols."

[4]In the Middle Ages, especially in the Early Middle Ages, the writing and the word alike were attributed with magical powers. Painters tried therefore to endow the inscriptions with special significance and power of expression by means of an unusual graphical aspect of the inscriptions, by differentiation of letters in their pattern, size and colour, by rich decoration e.g. zoomorphic ornaments etc. This is most notable in the illuminated insular Celtic manuscripts from the 8th century, as well as in the Carolingian and Ottonian manuscripts. Hans Jantzen goes as far as to speak of a "Bildwerdung der Schrift" or a "magische Verbildlichung des Wortes" (1940). I owe special thanks to prof. dr Jan Białostocki, who kindly lent the book to me.

cessive stages: "the Gothic minuscule," "the spikey writing" (13th century), "the Gothic texture" (14th century), "the Schwabach writing" (end of the 15th century) and finally "the fracture" (end of the 15^{th}century/beginning of the 16th century) (Jensen 1958: 505-511). Since the subtle differences between these types of "broken script" are of no import for us, we will term all of them together "Gothic script." In Poland this type of script first appears in the 14th century.

Yet Roman capitals, or a script which resembles it, did not disappear entirely from inscriptions. In the Ghent altarpiece by Jan van Eyck (1430 — 1432) the inscriptions in the scene of the Annunciation, as well as those above the figures of the prophets and the sibyls on the external panels of the polyptych, which are there for everyday view, are written in Gothic script. Whereas the inscriptions above the Highest Being, Virgin Mary and St. John the Baptist, Adam and Eve, on the internal panels of the altarpiece, uncovered only for special feasts, are written in Roman capitals.[5]

In the 15th century, an age of humanism and of the renaissance of antiquity, we observe, especially in Italy, a return to the Roman capitals modelled on the inscriptions from the times of the Roman Empire. A hierarchy of different styles of lettering is introduced. Texts from the consummate in respect of form literature of ancient Rome are written in bright, spaced out Roman letters. For texts in vernaculars, or in the contaminated Latin of the Middle Ages Gothic, script seems to be more appropriate (Covi 1963: 12). In Northern painting we still encounter the Gothic script in the first half of the 16th century, as e.g. in the triptych by an unknown Netherlandish master with *The allegory of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (Warsaw, National Museum) or in *Vanitas* by Barthel Bruyn the Elder (1524, Otterlo, Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller).

The grammatical and logical structure of the inscriptions in medieval paintings is extremely diverse. There are names — nouns ("Maximianus," "iustitia") and nominal phrases ("Sancta Barbara," "speculum sine macula"); expressions which are sentences in logical terms: with a verb in the indicative, in all three persons, singular or plural, in various tenses; and expressions which are not sentences in logical terms: commands or demands with a verb in the imperative ("Ite in universum orbem et predicate" — the words of Christ to the apostles in the painting of the Master of Choirs *The Sending of the Apostles*; "Ave, gratia plena" — the words of the Angel to the Virgin Mary in the scene of the Annunciation); wishes in the optative ("Fiatmihi

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[5]I owe this remark to Aleksander Wallis.

secundum verbum tuum" — the words of the Virgin Mary to the Angel in the scene of the Annunciation).

Longer inscriptions in medieval paintings are rarely original inventions of the painter, the founder or the instigator of an iconographic programme. They are usually quotations from the New and Old Testaments, from Church songs e.g. from the hymns of St. Ambrose, from liturgical texts e.g. from the grief of Christ on Good Friday or from the Litany of Loreto etc. At times we even find a quotation of a quotation. Thus, for example in the work of Ghirlandaio *Madonna with Saints* (Uffizi) Thomas Aquinus holds in his hands an opened book, where we read "Veritatem meditabitur guttur meum et labia mea detestabantur impium." This is a quotation from the beginning of St. Thomas's work *Summa contra gentiles.* This passage, however, is in itself a quotation from the Proverbs of Salomon (Prov. 8, 7).

Since inscriptions are usually quotations, and the artist or his adviser may expect that an educated viewer will know the source text, the inscription, therefore, is often there not to communicate something new, but to recall something familiar, and so it is sometimes presented in a shortened form. The dialogue between the Angel and the Virgin Mary in the scene of the Annunciation, which in the Gospel of Luke takes a dozen of lines (1, 28-38), is usually given in a more or less shortened form. In *The Annunciation*, a work of "szkoła sądecka," a Polish school of Gothic painting from the second half of the 15th century (Łopuszna, parish church), the Angel says: "Ave gratia plena Dominus tecum benedicta" and Mary responds: "Ecce ancilla Domini fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum." Whereas in *The Annunciation* by Jan van Eyck the Angel says only: "Ave gratia plena" and Mary responds "Ecce ancilla Domini." Sometimes it is only the Angel who says: "Ave gratia plena." Apparently the painter believed that these words would be enough to recall from the viewer's memory the entire dialogue. At times the sentence in the inscription even breaks off in the middle. We find an extreme example, though in fact dating from the 16th century, in the inscription on a ribbon carried by angels: "Ecce agnus Dei qui" in *The Rest on the Flight into Egypt* by Denis Calvaert (Warsaw, National Museum). Of course a sentence cannot end with "qui." The artist probably expected that the viewer will complete for himself the rest of the sentence: "tollit peccata mundi" (John 1, 30). The letters "I. N. R. I." are of course also an abbreviation, standing for "Ihesus Nazarensis Rex Iudeorum" in the scenes of the Crucifixion.

From the point of view of their function the inscriptions in the medieval painting may be divided in four groups:

I. Inscriptions which give information about the represented persons,

allegorical figures, objects and events, and which are placed by them. We can distinguish here three subgroups:

1) Inscriptions, usually names, which facilitate the identification of the represented person, allegorical figure, object or event: "S(ancta) Barbara," "iustitia," "stella maris," "He anastasis," "annuntiatio." Saints are sometimes characterized in a twofold manner: by means of their attribute (i.e. an iconic sign functioning as a conventional sign) and by means of an inscription (i.e. a conventional sign or a group of conventional signs), e.g. Saint Barbara is characterized by a tower and the inscription "S(ancta) Barbara." This is what theoreticians of information call redundancy.

2) Inscriptions which put in relief a certain feature of the represented person e.g. the inscription by the figure of Christ: "rex regum et dominus dominantium" (Rev. 19, 16); by the Virgin Mary depending on the circumstances: "Mater Dei" (Domenico Veneziano, *Madonna with Saints*, c. 1440, Uffizi), "Virgo Mater" (*Pietà of Villeneuve-lès-Avignon*), "Regina celi letare alleluya" (Polish Gothic school "szkoła sądecka," *The Coronation of the Virgin Ma*ry, second half of the 15th century, Łopuszna, parish church).

3) Inscriptions naming a particularly significant event from the life of the represented person. Thus for example in *The Braque Family Triptych* by Rogier van der Weyden (c. 1450, Louvre) by the figure of St. Mary Magdalene we find a short description of an event from her life, as it is recounted in the Gospel of St. John: "Maria ergo accepit librum unguenti nardi pistici pretiosi et unxit pedes Jesu" (John 12, 3).

Outside the domain of sacred art, we find the inscriptions-information above all in portraits. They often give not only the first and last name, but also the age, position and titles of the person in the portrait. These kinds of inscriptions were of particularly great importance in early medieval portraits, when individualization in the art of portrait still left a lot to be desired and an inscription with the name and the coat of arms largely helped to decipher the identity of the person.

II. Inscriptions meant as statements of the represented persons and placed by them.

Most often a person represented in a painting addresses another person or group of people represented in that work. The words of the Angel "Ave, gratia plena" are addressed to Mary, the words of Mary: "Ecce ancilla Domini" — to the Angel. The models were certainly drawn from medieval mystery plays.[6] Sometimes, though, the represented person addressed the assumed

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[6]On the influence of the medieval liturgical theatre on painting: Mâle 1908; Réau 1955.

viewers. Herein we can distinguish two types. Sometimes the represented person addresses the assumed witnesses of the event; this is the role of the apostrophe of Mary in *Pietà of Villeneuve-lès-Avignon*, which shall be discussed later. At other times the statement of the represented person is addressed to everyone. It is to everyone that Christ says: "Ego sum lux mundi" (John 9,5) in Cimabue's painting *Christ between St. Peter and St. James Major* (Washington, National Gallery of Art).

The statements of the represented persons could also be categorized differently.

It will be of use to now introduce the distinction between the representational and the narrative works of sacred art. The representational works present saints or divine persons in an indefinite moment of their existence, as if lingering in a timeless reality, static, standing or sitting. Whereas the narrative works present events from the lives of saints or divine persons, which occur in a definite moment of their life. Christ in Majesty, Madonna with Child, Sacra Conversazione — these are examples of representational works. The Annunciation, the Last Supper, the Deposition from the Cross are examples of narrative works. The narrative works may compose of a series representing for example the life of a person — Christ, Mary or a saint. At times it is difficult to set a clear-cut boundary between narrative and representational works. Thus e.g. the Crucifixion or the Lamentation, which constitutes episodes from the life of Christ or Mary and happen in a precise moment of time, seem to freeze within the frame, turning into fixed groups of persons — in the case of the Crucifixion, it is a group with Christ on the Cross in the middle, Mary and St. John the Baptist on either of His sides; in the case of the Lamentation — a group of Mary with the dead corpse of Christ in her lap. They become groups of figures existing as if out of time. This is how the works initially conceived as narrative turn into representational.

In narrative works the statements of the represented persons are the statements they make in a particular situation. These statements are part of the represented action. For example, the words, which have already been quoted many times, of the Angel to the Virgin Mary in the scene of the Annunciation and the response of Mary. In representational works the statements of the represented persons are detached from any particular situation; they constitute as if the leading motive of the person, is to grasp a concise formula of his or her role in the history of the world. When in the painting of Cimabue, which has been mentioned above, Christ holds an opened book with the inscription: "Ego sum lux mundi," these words

are not Christ's statement in a given moment, but they express His role in the universe. When for example in Filippo Lippi's painting *The Adoration of the Child* in Berlin, St. John the Baptist is represented with a streamer containing the inscription: "Ecce agnus Dei qui tollit peccata mundi" these words are not uttered at a given moment, but they express something as in the essence of his future speeches, determining his role in the sacred history, which will be to recognize, in his adult life, that Christ is the future Savior.

III. Inscriptions which are invocations — requests or prayers — of the assumed viewers to the divine person or the saint represented in the painting. Thus e.g. in the painting of Giovanni del Biondo, active in the years 1356 — 1392, *Madonna enthroned with St. John the Baptist and St. Peter* (Los Angeles, County Museum), a supplication to Madonna is placed at the bottom: "S. Maria Mater Dei ora pro nobis."

IV. Authorial statements, unrelated with the subject of the painting. To this group of statements belong the maxims and mottos of painters, short sayings expressing their artistic credo e.g. the inscription "als ik kan" in Jan van Eyck's paintings. Signatures indicating the authorship belong to the same group of statements. In most cases we are only given the name of the author and we are supposed to guess what the missing end of the sentence would be, in this or another language, "made this" or "painted this." Sometimes, along with the name, there appears other information, such as the date when the work was created.

Signatures can be found as early as in the Hellenistic painting. In *Itinerant musicians*, a mosaic decorating the so-called villa of Cicero in Pompeii (Naples, Museo Nazionale), the artist signed his work in the left top corner in Greek letters: "Dioskourides Samios epoiese" (repr.: Maiari 1953: 96). In the Early and High Middle Ages signatures are rare. They gained popularity as late as in the 15th century. One of them is the famous signature of Jan van Eyck on the portrait of Arnolfini couple: "Johannes de eyck fuit hic/1434," which can be translated both as "Jan van Eyck was here" and as "Jan van Eyck was the one [we are to understand: the one who painted it]." Sometimes the signature accompanied the self-portrait of the painter, who painted himself amidst the persons participating in some event represented in the painting. We can name the following examples: inscription "Is perfecit opus" on the ribbon next to the figure of a kneeling clergyman in *The Coronation of the Virgin Mary* by Filippo Lippi (1447, Uffizi), or the inscription "Opus Benotii" on the beret of one of the persons in Benozzo Gozzoli's fresco *The Procession of the Magi* (1459, Florence, Palazzo Riccardi). Not only the name, initials or a monogram could serve

as the author's signature, but also his emblem, a geometrical figure etc. In those cases, however, it was no longer an inscription.

In narrative works the inscriptions would sometimes serve as guidelines for the viewer to establish the chronological order of the represented events. Beginning with the Renaissance, in Western painting the principle of simultaneity of all events within one painting was generally accepted, a fact which was later so strongly emphasized by theoreticians of art e.g. by Lessing. This, as it is generally known, was not a principle of medieval painting. Within one painting a series of successive events one after another would often be represented (there is a painting in St. James Church in Toruń, where we even find, within one composition, twenty two scenes from the life of Christ: from the Entry into Jerusalem to the Ascension) (Kruszelnicki 1968). Inscriptions were then an aid for the viewer to establish the chronological order of the represented events. When in the scene of the Annunciation to the Angel's greeting: "Ave, gratia plena," Mary responds: "Ecce ancilla Domini," the action represented in the painting is divided in two consecutive phases: the anterior — the Angel's greeting, and the posterior — Mary's response. As a result, the introduction of inscriptions transforms the simultaneous coexistence of two persons into an action in two phases, turningsynchrony into diachrony.[7] Another example: in a painting which has already been mentioned in this article, *The Sending of the Apostles* from the circle of the Master of Choirs, on the banderole surrounding Christ's head we read the following words: "Ite in orbem universum et predicate," and on the banderole

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[7]Lucien Rudrauf in his book *L'Annonciation. Étude d'un thème plastique et de ses variations en peinture et en sculpture* (1943) (a summary and extracts can be found in Rudrauf 1948-49) distinguishes, in respect to the factor of time, seven variations of the scene of the Annunciation: I. The Angel arrives — Mary has hardly had the time to realize his presence. II. The angel has arrived —- Mary is surprised by his presence. III. The Angel speaks — Mary listens. IV. The Angel has spoken — Mary hesitates. V. Mary responds — the Angel listens. VI. Mary has responded — the Angel has received her answer. VII. The Angel speaks — Mary responds. Commenting on the last variation, he writes: "It occurs at times that the artist, in order to condense into one moment two important stages of the drama, synchronizes the annunciation and the response. In theatre and on the screen, which employ real time, such a synchronization would be absurd. In plastic arts a simultaneous representation of two successive moments is a very logical way of using the real time. The speaking Angel attracts our attention. Once we have understood what he meant to communicate, our attention turns to Mary, who responds. The real time is the time of our attention, which focuses first on the Angel, then on Mary. There is here no true synchronization, but a succession of action and reaction" (Rudrauf 1948-49: 334). The inscriptions make us realize that we are not dealing here with two events happening simultaneously, but with two successive events.

in the hands of St. Peter: "Petrus Romam adyt [adiit]," which may signify: "Peter goes to Rome" or "Peter went to Rome;" on other banderoles held by the Apostles we read: "S. Johannes in Asyam," "S. Thomas in Indiam" etc.; in each case we are expected to guess that the Apostle "goes" or "went." The inscriptions introduce here differentiation of time; the fact that Peter goes or went to Rome was posterior to Christ's words: "Ite [. . .] et predicate."

Inscriptions had yet another function in medieval art.

One of the basic statements of Christian theology is, as it is generally known, that the Old and the New Testaments are linked by a close correspondence: "concordia Veteris et Novi Testamenti." The people and the events from the Old Testament are foreshadows, "types," "prefigures" of the people and the events from the New Testament. Adam is one of the prefigures of Christ, the three angels hosted by Abraham — a prefigure of the Holy Trinity, the sacrifice of Isaac — a prefigure of the sacrifice of Christ etc. This is called a typological conception.[8] Now, quotations from the Old Testament in the paintings representing the people and the events from the New Testament were supposed to raise in the faithful the consciousness of this close correspondence between the two parts of the Bible. Let us look at a few examples. In *The Assumption* from the Cathedral of Włocławek in Poland (c. 1470), attributed to Francis of Sieradz, the inscriptions on the banderoles, referring to the Virgin Mary, are taken from the *Song of Songs*: "Quae est ista quae ascendit de deserto deliciis affluens" (Song 3, 6), "Veni de Libano sponsa, veni coronaberis" (4, 8), "Quae est ista quae progreditur quasi aurora consurgens" (6, 9) (Walicki 1961, tab. 90: 314-315[9]). Similarly in the triptych with *The Allegory of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary* by an unknown Nederlandish master from the early 16th century in the Warsaw National Museum, we read on the top of the middle panel words from the *Song of Songs*: "Tota pulchra es, amica mea, et macula non est in te" (Song 4, 7).

A contemporary viewer displays generally little interest for the inscriptions in medieval paintings, just as he cares very little about the symbolical meaning of flowers, fruit and insects in Dutch still life from the 17th century, or the cosmic symbolism of the Pantheon or a Gothic cathedral. Only rarely does he try to interpret them and the effort he makes is at best cursory. In medieval paintings he looks for the same qualities he seeks in the works of contemporary art: the beauty of composition and colour, creative ingenuity, atmosphere or powerful expression. Every epoch has the right to develop

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[8]On the typological conception: Mâle 1948: 133-141; Réau 1955: 192-222.

[9]The inscriptions in the painting have "que," instead of "quae."

its own way of interpreting and experiencing the works of art of the past periods. But a historian and a theoretician of art has to make the effort to reconstruct, as far as it is possible, the aesthetic experience aroused in the people for whom they were first intended. Any reconstruction of this kind is of course always conjectural, although it is also indispensable.

For the educated people who could read and knew the language of the inscription, the inscriptions in medieval paintings must have worked powerfully. A number of factors combined to this effect.

The value of the word was different in the Middle Ages than for today, when we are not only ceaselessly flooded with the spoken, written and printed word, but also with the word transmitted through radio or television, in short, when we deal with inflation of the word. Hans Jantzen says: "The őWordŕ, as an act of conveying a message, had in the Early Middle Ages a far different weight than in our wordy era. Its sound was deeper, it was suffused with meaning and had the capacity to contain ultimate truths" (Jantzen 1959: 100)[10] The Gospel of St. John identified, as we know, Christ with "Logos," translated in the Vulgate as "Verbum" — "Word." Over centuries people would attribute magical powers to the word. They believed in the existence of a mysterious connection between the name of an object and the object itself, between the word and the object which it denotes; they also believed in the possibility of exerting influence on the object by means of that word. Whereas writing was an act of preservation of word. In the Early Middle Ages word was valued much higher than image, literature or painting. This opinion found a particularly keen expression in the words of Hrabanus Maurus in the 9th century:

Nam pictura tibi cum omni sit gratior arte

Scribendi ingrate non spernas posco laborem,

Psallendi nisum, studium curamque legendi,

Plus quia gramma valet quam vana in imagine forma

Plusque animae decoris praestat quam falsa colorum

Pictura ostentans rerum non rite figuras.

Nam scriptura pia norma est perfecta salutis,

Et magis in rebus valet, et magis utilis omni est,

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[10]A similar thought was expressed a hundred years earlier by Karol Libelt: "The power of man, as spirit, used to lie in the word. Upon the word rested the omnipotence of truth, its power was mighty and dreadful. Once pronounced, it was sacred like religion; unchangeable like the past. Even now there still exist dreadful words, and poetic in their dreadfulness, though in general the power of the word has grown somewhat stale" (Libelt 1854: 116-117).

Promptior est gustu, sensu perfectior atque
Sensibus humanis, facilis magis arte tenenda,
Auribus haec servit, Iabris, obtutibus atque,
Illa oculis tantum pauca solamina praestat.
Haec facie verum monstrat, et famine verum,
Et sensu verum, iucunda et tempore multo est.[11]

Longer inscriptions in medieval paintings were mostly quotations from the Bible, i.e. from the books containing divine revelation, which in itself was enough to arouse sentiments of veneration. Finally, one more thing: in Byzantine painting the inscriptions were in Greek, in Russian painting — in Church Slavonic, in Western painting — in Latin and also, though rarely, in Greek or Hebrew. In the Middle Ages none of these languages was an everyday spoken language. They were languages of the holy books, of the liturgy, of science, law and diplomacy. Hence the phrases in these languages had a ceremonial, solemn ring, just as all archaic or outdated phrases do.

For educated people, therefore, the inscriptions in medieval paintings must have worked powerfully. However, in the Middle Ages there was only a narrow group of the faithful who could read, and of those even fewer knew Latin or other languages of the inscriptions. But even on those who could not read the inscriptions might have had a strong emotional effect. For they had a presentiment that those inscriptions conveyed meanings of great significance, the articles of the holy faith, and this awareness alone could make the incomprehensible, mysterious signs an object of veneration. Similarly the sound of the Latin words in the liturgy arouse in the faithful feelings of veneration, even if they do not understand their meaning.

T. S. Eliot once said that Shakespeare's plays have several layers of meaning: for the simple viewers there is "the plot, for the more thoughtful the character and the conflict of character, for the more literary the words and phrasing, for the more musically sensitive the rhythm, and for the auditors of greater sensitiveness and understanding a meaning which reveals itself gradually" (Eliot 1975: 153). Similarly we could say that medieval paintings could have had a different effect on various circles of viewers. The simple folk

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[11]Hrabanus Maurus, *Carm.* 30; quoted in: Tatarkiewicz 1960: 122-123. A similar thought is expressed in the so-called "Charlemagne's books" (c. 800): "O imaginum adorator [...] tu luminaribus perlustra picturas, nos frequentemus divinas Scripturas. Tu fucatorum venerator esto colorum, nos veneratores et capaces simus sensuum arcanorum. Tu depictis demulcere tabulis, nos divinis mulceamur alloquiis" *Libri Carolini*, III, 30, quoted in: Tatarkiewicz 1960: 122. Only as late as in the 13th century William Durandus wrote: "Pictura [...] plus videtur movere animum quam scriptura" *Rationale Divinorum Officiorum*, I, 3, 4; quoted in: Tatarkiewicz 1960: 127.

was scared of the punishment of hell, and hushed with the hope of paradise; this is exemplified in the famous stanza from the prayer that Villon composed for his mother. The more subtle viewers were moved by the motherly joys of Mary or the Passion of Christ. The educated people interpreted the symbols, they realized the deeper meaning of the presented things and saw in the correspondence between the New and the Old Testaments a confirmation of the supernatural origin of those writings. The symbols and inscriptions were the esoteric part of the paintings, the images, the iconic signs — their popular part.

I would like to show on the basis of another example how we should imagine the role of the inscriptions in medieval paintings. In the so-called *Lamentation from Avignon* (*Pietà of Villeneuve-lès-Avignon)*, a masterpiece of late Gothic expressionism, the atmosphere of overwhelming sorrow infects the viewer without the aid of any inscription. It is evoked by a number of means: by the bleak symphony of colours — the large patch of dark blue of the Virgin Mary's dress, the dark flaming red of Mary Magdalene's dress, the brown of the earth and the golden background; by the jagged rhythm of the contour of Christ's dead body curved like a bow; finally, by the expression of suffering in the faces and figures of the two women: the quiet and composed suffering of Mary, the vehement and uncontrollable suffering of Mary Magdalene. And still the painter decided to add an inscription at the top, which is meant as a statement by the Virgin Mary addressed to the assumed viewers: "O vos omnes qui transitis per viam, attendite et videte si est dolor sicut dolor meus." Now, these words which Mary uses to express her grief are not her own: these are words of Jeremiah lamenting over the fall of Jerusalem (Lam 1,12). Through this inscription and the typological conception of two great eras in the history of the world — the era under the rule of Grace (*sub gratia)* and the era under the rule of Law (*sub lege*) — are inextricably bound together, two great sorrows — that of Mary after the death of Christ and that of Jeremiah after the destruction of Jerusalem — merge into one piercing sorrow. Image and word, "imago" and "verbum," iconic signs and conventional signs merge here into one unified whole.

Inscriptions in paintings from the 16th — 19th centuries

The development of each of the various kinds of inscriptions ran a different course in history.

The inscriptions-information maintained their place almost uniquely in portraits. In the Renaissance, mannerist and Baroque portraits they would sometimes grow into long panegyrics. Thus, for example, Antonis Mor put

in his official self-portrait (1558, Uffizi) a long Latin panegyric written in Greek letters on a piece of paper, which is attached to the canvas in front of the figure of the painter. The panegyric was composed in honour of Mor by the humanist Lampsonius. The content of this panegyric could be translated as follows: "O heavens, whose likeness is this? It was made by the most famous painter of all, who, surpassing Apelles, the ancient and his own contemporaries, with his own hand painted himself in front of the mirror. O, noble artist! Moro is portrayed here. Lo, he shall speak unto you" (Benkard 1927: 24). Laudatory inscriptions abound in Polish portraits from the 17th and 18th centuries, the so-called Sarmatian portraits. This is for example an inscription from the portrait of Stanisław Rewera Potocki (c. 1750, Cracow, National Museum, Osławski's gift): "Stanisław Potocki of Podhajce, the voivode of Cracow, the castellan of Kamień, born of lady Piasecka, the great Crown hetman, the above mentioned Rewera, [who] in Paniowce turned a Lutheran church into a stable and himself withdrew from the Lutheran church; having gathered his relatives and friends and common people the royal voi[vode] marched across the town, where he utterly destroyed a great crowd of Tatars which was preparing to invade Poland. 15 000 Polish prisoners he set free. As he rode to Lviv, a common peasant, who while ploughing his ground dug out an iron baton, brought it to the chariot and gave it to him. Then a great many of hetmans advanced, until the third one [of the hetmans' batons] was given to him, after the defeat of hetman Kalinowski, who was killed in the battle of Batowo. He beat Bazyli Szeremeta at Cudnowo, the Swedish at Lublin, Rakoczy in the mountains. He passed away in 1667. My great grandfather on my mother's side" (Dobrowolski 1948: 186-188, tab. 132, 134). In the portraits from the second half of the 18th and 19th centuries inscriptions gradually disappear or shrink to a short mention of the age of the person.

The inscriptions meant as statements of the represented persons, so common in the medieval sacred paintings, disappear completely in the 16th century. Painters tried to express the emotions of the persons exclusively by means of gestures and facial expressions. It was not until the 20th century that inscriptions of this kind underwent a revival in the so called "bandes dessinées" or comic strips in the journals, which later spread to Pop Art paintings.

Quite popular, however, in the paintings from the 16th — 18th centuries were inscriptions expressing some general thought, the inscriptions-mottos.

The painting of that period was, no less than the medieval painting, saturated with thoughts, it sought to edify, to preach, to stimulate reflection

on human life. To that end, it developed, just as the medieval painting did, a whole apparatus of conventional signs, symbols, personifications, allegories etc. Inscriptions-mottos, expressing the core idea of the painting, were also one of the means to achieve that end. They were usually given in Latin, which in the Western world was still the language of the church and of science, and remained a necessary element of the education of the privileged social groups. Some of those inscriptions were quotations from the Bible in its Latin translation, or passages from Roman writers. Indeed, they only had meaning for the educated people, but at least educated people of different nationalities. Often the painter would create the illusion that they constituted an integral part of the represented reality, placing them e.g. on a piece of paper attached to the wall, on a musical instrument, a sarcophagus etc.

Inscriptions-mottos can be found in many paintings which treat the subject of "vanitas" — the transience and vanity of all things, the universal power of death.[12] Barthel Bruyn the Elder in his still life with symbols of death — a skull and a nearly burnt out candle (1524, Otterlo, Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller), put a quotation from Lucretius: "omnia morte cadunt, mors ultima linea rerum." In the painting by Bartholomeus Spranger (1546—1611) *Putto with a skull and an hourglass* (Cracow, Wawel) the inscription reads: "Hodie mihi cras tibi" (repr.: Białostocki, Walicki 1955, tab. 152). Juan de Valdes Leal in his painting presenting three dead corpses in open coffins, each at a different stage of decomposition (1672, Seville, Hospital de la Caridad) introduced the inscription: "Finis gloriae mundi," a paraphrase of the saying "Sic transit gloria mundi," which has its origins in the sentence "Oh, quam cito transit gloria mundi" from *Imitatio Christi* by Thomas à Kempis (I, 3, 30; 1441), who in turn refers to the words from one of the letters of St. John: "Et mundus transit et concupiscentia eius" (1 John 2, 17) (Büchmann 1919: 452). We also find the inscription "[S]ic transi[t glor]ia mundi" e.g. in a beautiful painting attributed to Jan Verkolje, *A youth with a viola da gamba* (c. 1672, Cracow, Wawel) (Białostocki, Walicki 1955, tab. X and p. 524). In *The Dance of Death* by an unknown painter from the 17th century, hanging in the Observantine Franciscan monastery in Cracow, within a composition of one larger canvas and fourteen smaller ones, there is a poem in Polish proclaiming in sixteen quatrains the equality of the members of all social groups and professions in the face of death. In all these cases the inscriptions repeat that which is suggested — literally or symbolically — by the objects

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[12]About paintings on the subject of "vanitas" see Białostocki 1961.

in the painting, so their character is redundant.

The theme of death, so common in the period of Baroque, haunted with the obsession of transience, returns in yet another inscription: "Et in Arcadia ego." The phrase appears in the painting by Giovanni Francesco Guercino painted between 1621 — 1623, and in two paintings by Poussin, the earlier of which was probably painted around 1630 (currently in the Devonshire Collection in Chatsworth), the later one — around 1635 (currently in the Louvre). In Guercino's painting two shepherds notice with terror a huge human skull lying on the top of a crumbling wall with the inscription "Et in Arcadia ego," while a fly and a mouse are playing around the skull. All those elements are popular symbols of decay and all-devouring time. In the first version of Poussin's painting a group of shepherds makes a similar terrifying discovery. Poussin transformed the crumbling wall into an ancient sarcophagus, added the god of rivers, Alpheus, and a shepherdess to the two shepherds, but he decided to leave the skull on the sarcophagus, although he shrank it and made it less conspicuous. As it was in Guercino's painting, the assumed speaker who pronounces the words "Et in Arcadia ego" is Death and the meaning of those words is "I am even in Arcadia, the utopian land of happiness." In the second and final version of Poussin's painting instead of three people approaching from the left, we have four of them, placed symmetrically at either side of the tomb, absorbed in a peaceful conversation and meditating upon the beautiful past of the man buried in the tomb. The skull is altogether done away with. Instead of terror and dismay, the painting is filled with an elegiac atmosphere, breathing with mild sorrow. After the suppression of the skull, together with the change of composition, of postures and gestures, the inscription "Et in Arcadia ego" took on an entirely different meaning. From a statement made by Death it turned into a statement of the deceased man in the tomb. Instead of a proclamation of the omnipresence of death, it is now an expression of sorrow and grief after the loss of an immeasurable happiness (Panofsky 1955). We observe here how an inscription — a set of conventional signs — may completely change its meaning when its situational context is changed.

Quite different is the character of the Latin motto in Vermeer's painting *The Music Lesson* (London, Buckingham Palace). In a spacious, sunlit room, decorated with refined taste two young people in elegant clothing stand at a spinet. The lady, with her back towards us, but whose reflection shows partly in the mirror on the wall, bends slightly over the instrument, surely to listen for the right pitch. The man, with his profile towards her, is watching and listening intently. There is a cello standing on the floor paved

with large tiles. And on the spinet's lid we read the inscription:

MVSICA LETITIAE CO[ME?]S

MEDICINA DOLOR[IS?][13]

As in other Vermeer's paintings, he managed here to catch the charm of a transient moment, a moment which one would love to address in Goethe's words: "Verweile doch, du bist so schön!"

The charm of the represented persons and the interior, the beauty of the bright light which softly envelops all the objects, and the toned down colours make for the subtle harmony of the scene. Yet the inscription, though it expresses a praise of music, brings also to that scene another element: we ask ourselves whether the music played by the lady is there to accompany a moment of happiness, or rather to serve as a remedy for suffering?

A peculiar phenomenon are the long and often enigmatic Latin inscriptions in ceiling paintings in the Polish monastic churches. Hardly visible from a distance, they could only serve "ad maiorem Dei gloriam."[14]

The greatest success of all the types of inscriptions in the post-medieval painting enjoyed the authorial statements in the form of signatures. From the 16th century they gained currency in Western art, often combined with information about the date and place of creation or with a dedication. At first the letters in those signatures were meticulously calligraphed and imitated the letters in books or on monuments. Later on, the individual character of the painter's handwriting began to be highly prized as an expression of his personality. Rembrandt was perhaps the first painter whose signature in paintings was the same one he used in everyday life.

Particularly meaningful is the dedication combined with signature in David's painting *The Death of Marat* (1793, Brussels, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts):

À MARAT

DAVID

L'AN DEUX

The painter emphasizes thereby that his work is a homage paid to the man whose death it presents, the great Marat. The succinct character of the inscription and the shape of letters refer to Roman inscriptions. This is

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[13]Others conjecture that the words on the lid of the spinet, partially covered by the young woman, should be read as "CONSORS" (a companion, a comrade) and "DOLORUM" (in suffering). *Catalogue of the Exhibition of the King's Pictures 1946 — 47* 1946: 108. For our discussion this is of no great importance.

[14]I have this information by word of mouth from prof. dr Władysław Tomkiewicz on 17 XII 1969; it is based on the study by Magadalena Witwińska.

connected with the cult of the Roman civic virtues, which prevailed at that stage of the Revolution.[15]

In the 19th century the whole large apparatus of conventional signs, symbols, personifications, allegories etc. which dominated in the painting of the 16th — 18th centuries, especially in the painting of the Counter-reformation and Baroque, was gradually falling apart. In its place more and more visible was the desire to represent reality in a most faithful, unbeautified manner. Around 1850 "realism" became the catchphrase of the day. If a realist paints an inscription, it can only be something which already belongs to the reality such as the painter perceives it and aims to represent in his painting. When Aleksander Gierymski in his painting *The Old Town Gate in Warsaw* (1883, Łódź, Museum of Art) includes a signboard with a bilingual inscription in Polish and Russian: "M. Taszyńska — locksmith services," then the inscription together with the entire signboard belongs to the reality as it appears to him and so he strives to render it with the same meticulous care which he applies to other elements — the architecture of the gate, the figures of fruit vendors and merchants, the children etc.

Inscriptions-mottos, also interwoven as part of the reality which is to be rendered, can only be encountered in the works of painters who stand outside of the mainstream of realistic painting, such as Arnold Böcklin in his *Vita somnium breve* (1888, Basel, Kunstmuseum), a work presenting three stages of human life.

The Impressionists in turn, more or less from the year 1870, strived to suppress from the painting all that goes beyond visual impressions, all that is not a pure visual perception. Hence, they rejected not only, as realists did, allegories and symbols, but also all types of "literature," anecdote, story. They wanted to render above all the fleeting effects of light and colour, especially those in the open air. So if they included in a view of a street an inscription on a signboard, then it appears there only as a colourful impression caught in a passing glimpse, usually blurred, indistinct and illegible.

The Impressionists fulfilled the demand of Delacroix that a painting should be above all "a feast for the eyes." In this conception of painting there was no room for inscriptions. The entire idea of painting had to change before

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[15]David put in this painting two more inscriptions. On the piece of paper which Marat is holding in his hand there is the false account by Charlotte Corday and on the scrap of paper on the pedestal by the bath — a request to pass the enclosed banknote to a mother of five children, whose husband died for his country. These inscriptions serve a closer characterization of Marat (Alpatov 1963: 326).

inscriptions could be reintroduced. This occurred when the reaction against Impressionism began. Gauguin put in his paintings from Tahiti inscriptions in the language of the natives, rendered in Latin alphabet: "Ia orana Maria" (*Ave Maria*, 1891, New York, Metropolitan Museum), "Ta matete" (*A Market*, 1892, Basel, Kunstmuseum), "Nave, nave mahana" (*Delightful Day*, 1896, Musée de Lyon). For most viewers such an inscription was incomprehensible without an appropriate explanation. But even without such explanation, the inscription had a certain effect on the viewer: it enhanced the exotic atmosphere of the painting.

Inscriptions in 20th-century painting

In the painting of the 20th century two fundamentally different attitudes to inscriptions developed (apart from signatures). Some movements, like Post-Impressionist Colourism, (Bonnard, Kapists in Poland), Fauvism, various kinds of non-objective art, worked on the basic assumption that the art of painting should employ only the resources which are proper to it. So, on principle, they exclude from the painting all non-iconic semantic elements, if not all semantic elements in general, inscriptions as well. While other movements, which strived to broaden and enrich the resources employed in the art of painting and attached little importance to traditional barriers between different types of art, had no objections to inscriptions and introduce them in their works — in various manners and for various purposes.

The Futurists, e.g. Gino Severini (*Nord-Sud*, 1912, Milan, collection Emilio Jesi) presented inscriptions on signboards or street boards as part of the constantly moving, restless, if not chaotic city landscape.

In the years 1911—12 Picasso, in order to expand the artistic resources employed in painting, which had been impoverished by analytical cubism, inscribed in a number of his paintings the words "Ma jolie," taken from a popular song of the day. In several other paintings from the years 1912—14 he introduced fragments of the title of the Paris "Journal." It enriched the painting with a certain black-and-white pattern, while at the same time it brought to mind a journal popular at that time, which harmonized with other objects from everyday life of artistic bohemia — guitars, bottles, playing cards. In those years Georges Braque, Juan Gris, Louis Marcoussis also introduced into their works fragments of journals painted in a similar manner with large black letters on a white background. Later on Picasso, instead of painting them, would take scraps of an ordinary newspaper and glue them on the painting. This was one of the sources of the so-called papiers collés, the "collages."

Chagall introduced Hebrew inscriptions in his fantastical visions of the life of the Jews in godforsaken little towns in Belarus. Just as the inscriptions in the language of the natives of Tahiti in Gauguin's paintings, they enhanced the peculiar exotic aura of those works. In the paintings of Georg Grosz or Bronisław Linke inscriptions brought in the element of pungent social or political satire, of irony or grim humour.

In Dada and Surrealist paintings the deliberately absurd texts constituted one of the means to stun and shock the viewer. Thus e.g. in Max Ernst's collage *The Mystery of the Central Europe* (1920, Brussels, private collection) with fantastical vessels and flowers, there are two inscriptions across the top. One verse reads: "always the best man wins," the other: "sodaliten schneeberger drückethäler rosinen und mandeln schlagen die eingeborenen mitteleuropas." The inscription in the bottom finishes the last sentence: "zu meerschaum und eilen nach stattgehabter denudation den ereignissen in bester Absicht voraus."[16] Inscriptions of this kind, which were composed out of word clusters or words from colloquial speech and built according to the rules of syntax, but absurd in themselves as a whole, worked together with the fantastically absurd sets of objects towards the same effect of astounding or shocking the viewer.

A separate group form those inscriptions which the painter for some reasons made deliberately hard to read. To this group belong the inscriptions in mirror writing, which can be read only with the aid of a mirror. Apart from the desire to make it harder for the viewer to read them, the artists may also seek to bring out of the reversed shapes of letters some peculiar graphic or atmospheric effect. To this group also belongs the diversely divided and broken texts or the texts inscribed in various geometrical figures, inscriptions in rare languages etc. It may be that a deliberate hindering of the reception of an inscription has the only purpose to give the viewers a greater satisfaction when they actually manage to read it. At other times the aim may be to limit the reception of the work, to endow the inscription with an esoteric, perhaps even secret character, accessible only to a narrow group of the initiated.

Finally, we find in contemporary painting graphic compositions which we could call "pseudo-inscriptions." They are a series of tiny drawings

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[16]Catalogue: *L'art en Europe autour de 1918* 1968: 132, repr.: no. 5. About the inscriptions in the Dadaist collages of Max Ernst, Werner Spies says: "Die Bildinschrift ist Teil der Komposition. Die kleine Schrift, die am oberen und unteren Bildrand mitläuft, rahmt die visuelle Darstellung mit Sätzen ein. Die Zusammenstellung von Wörtern scheint zunächst ebenso wichtig zu sein wie die Zusammenstellung von Bildfetzen, die an ihren Nahtstellen Funken aus Sinn und Unsinn sprühen" (Spies 1969).

resembling letters of various alphabets, numbers etc., some of which are but a free invention of the artist. They create the illusion of an inscription, but they are none. It is impossible to read them and this is why they trouble and excite our imagination with their mysterious aura; just as for many centuries the Egyptian hieroglyphs or inscriptions in cuneiform troubled scientists; just as, up to this day, the Peruvian ropes with knots, which we cannot interpret, excite our imagination. Contemporary painters — Klee, Zbigniew Makowski — sometimes mae use of such half-comprehensible or entirely incomprehensible graphic compositions in order to arouse certain emotional reactions. Let us take the example of Klee's aquarelle *A Document* (1933, Lucerne, Angela Rosengart's collection) (repr.: San Lazzaro 1957: 184). On a pink empty background we see a yellowed piece of paper, covered from top to bottom with series of tiny drawings. We recognize in some of them letters, in others we see numbers, but the whole remains to us incomprehensible. Such illegible, incomprehensible texts can be interpreted as symbols of the "illegible," incomprehensible world, as an expression of the artist's doubt whether it is possible at all to know the world.

Inscriptions in Egyptian painting

The most beautiful Egyptian paintings cover the walls of sepulchral chapels in the tombs of the pharaohs and their wives, of high ranking dignitaries of the state, priests and scribes. Most of them date from the beginnings of the New Kingdom, from the early period of the 18th Dynasty (15th century BC).

A considerably large space in those paintings take the form of inscriptions. They usually give names and titles of the represented persons. Sometimes they contain the story recounted by the dead person about his past life and addressed to posterity, whom he expects to pray and offer sacrifices. At other times they are short sayings of the represented persons: humorous, full of affection or rage, pompous, commanding, courteous or — bawdy. Usually they are magical formulas.

Egyptians loved life and wished not only that the deceased continued an existence after death, but that they enjoyed all the pleasures they had known in this life. Therefore, in the paintings in the sepulchral chapels they would represent not only the deceased one and the funeral rites, but also sumptuous tables filled with food and drink, feasts, minstrels and dancers, hunting and fish catching, finally scenes of rural life painted in rich detail: sowing, reaping of the harvest, grape-picking, baking of bread, beer brewing, cattle slaughter. Yet it was not sufficient in itself to paint those people,

animals, food. By means of special gestures and words, by "charms" and "incantations," the painted people and things had to be transformed into living beings and real things; the represented objects into their designates. This was the role of the inscriptions: they were incantations which gained permanence through writing. The inscriptions were there to prevent a second, ultimate death of the deceased and to make sure he would be leading a life similar to the one he had known, and perhaps even more joyous and happy.

Painted in hieroglyphic writing, they were composed of numberless miniature images of human figures and bodily parts, mammals, birds, snakes, various equipment and tools, diverse lines and figures. They were usually painted with black paint, which symbolized the posthumous rebirth and eternal permanence, and sometimes also with blue, red, green, yellow, and white. The small images of human figures, mammals or birds differed in scale from similar images in paintings themselves, but they were drawn according to the same artistic conventions and with the same mastery.[17] Arranged in horizontal bands or in columns on a flat background, these writings harmonized with the objects represented in the painting. "In the best Theban tombs, in the underground royal mausoleums and in the temples of great epochs" they are "a genuine feast for the eyes" (Mekhitarian 1954: 22).

The paintings of the Egyptian sepulchral chapels strike with their colourful jollity, their cheerful atmosphere. They do not present a ghastly posthumous existence, but the charming pleasures of life. The role both of the iconic signs and of the inscriptions was to preserve life.

Plunged deep in the darkness of the chapels, in most cases these inscriptions were only visible in the light of a torch. Yet they did not have to be seen or read at all. It was enough that they were there and worked through their very presence (Mekhitarian 1954; Posener, Sauneron, Yoyotte 1959, especially the articles: *Art, Biographie, Couleurs, Dessein, Magie, Nom, Peinture, Textes funéraires*).

Inscriptions in Chinese painting

From the Han Dynasty to the end of the Tang dynasty (2nd centuryBC — 9th century AD), in Chinese painting, developed in the climate of Confucianism, the human figure reigned supreme. But from the 11th century, especially

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[17]Jean Capart says that in the Egypt of the pharaohs "the art of writing did not differ from the art of drawing." "On the same tomb we often find an animal represented both in its natural form and as a writing sign: both images are identical" (J. Capart, *Propos sur l'art égyptien;* cited in: Etiemble 1962: 89).

under the influence of Taoism, it was the landscape that began to dominate. Sky-high mountains and rocks, often seen through a veil of mist, forests, waterfalls, streams, blooming trees and shrubs, birds, at times the rising moon; hues and moods of nature in different seasons of the year; a man, alone or in a circle of friends, tiny and insignificant in the face of the immensity of the sky and the earth, of the vast expanse of the universe, but finding comfort, tranquility, inner equilibrium in the close community and loving unity with nature, in the life of harmony with its order and rhythm, with the Tao — these were for centuries the main themes of Chinese painting.

Painted with aquarelle or ink on a horizontal or vertical scroll of silk or paper, Chinese paintings were usually elitist, addressing a relatively narrow group of the educated, the "literati." They were usually kept in chests and occasionally, for a short time, they would be taken out for contemplation — in solitude or in a small group. An inscription would often be introduced in the painting and that inscription was its essential part.

Chinese writing was initially pictographic. Later on the pictographic character to a large degree wore off, the schematic iconic signs became purely conventional signs. But they retained their peculiar picturesque and decorative nature.

The Chinese exhibited extremely fine sensitivity to the aesthetic values of particular strokes composing the characters of their writing, to the aesthetic quality of the characters themselves and to their arrangement. This sensitivity is reflected, among others, in their theoretical treatises on calligraphy. In the book *Seven mysteries (of calligraphy)* we read that the horizontal stroke (heng) is "similar to a very long cloud, which breaks off suddenly;" the dot (dian) resembles "a rock, falling suddenly from a height;" a diagonal stroke from the left to the right (pie) — is "the horn of a rhinoceros;" the vertical stroke (shu) is "a vine a thousand years old, but still vigorous;" the deeply curved stroke (wan) resembles a bow; the diagonal stroke from top to bottom and from the left to the right (na) is a wave of a certain shape. In another treatise, *Eight Methods of the Character Yong (permanence)*, Wang Hsi-chih discerns thirty-two variants of the eight basic strokes, which he compares to a hook, a duck's beak, a tiger's tooth, a ram's paw, a drop of dew, a hanging needle, a leaf of an orchid, a knife, a javelin, a phoenix' wing, a dragon's tale, a swimming swan, a playful butterfly etc. No less diverse are the associations evoked by the characters themselves. Wang Hsi-chih says: "Once you have finished writing a character, it is necessary that the character has the look of a caterpillar gnawing a leaf of a tree or of a tadpole swimming in water; sometimes it is a warrior with a sword or a girl in an elegant dress." Souen

Kouo-t'ing at the end of the Tang Dynasty claimed: "In the writing of great calligraphers one can see characters straight like hanging needles and dots round like drops of dew. One can also see characters curved like a sudden lightning or like blocks of rock, which are falling. The sloping characters like birds flying away or galloping predators. The characters resemble dancing phonixes, crawling serpents, hanging cliffs, steep mountain peaks. Some are heavy like thick clouds, others are light like the wings of grasshoppers. There are characters charming like the moon rising on the horizon, splendid like the stars suspended in the firmament" (Etiemble 1961: 350-352). Painting and the art of beautiful writing, calligraphy (without the negative undertone which the word sometimes carries), were in China most intricately bound, they formed a unity, which was called "shu-hua" (calligraphy-painting). The same brush served to paint and to write, each painter was a calligrapher, and each calligrapher was a painter. Arranged in vertical columns, read from top to bottom and from the right to the left, placed usually asymmetrically in one of the top corners of the painting, the beautiful characters of Chinese writing harmonized perfectly with iconic signs. While in medieval paintings of the West the inscriptions would be written in a writing as even as possible, as if impersonal, the Chinese always highly appreciated the charm of the individual character of the writing in their inscriptions, for it was yet another means of expression of the painter's personality.[18]

As for the content, the inscriptions in Chinese paintings are usually authorial statements. At times they are personal confessions of the painter. Thus, for example, Chao Meng-fu in the painting *Autumn colours on the Qiao and Hua mountains* (1295) describes in a long inscription the circumstances in

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[18]For some contemporary painters, such as Mark Tobey or Henri Michaux, the beautiful shapes of the Chinese ideograms were an inspiration to compose original arrangements of lines and colour patches. This is why some spoke of the influence of oriental calligraphy on contemporary painting (Read 1959: 252-253; Seitz 1962). According to Seitz, the moment when Mark Tobey introduced oriental calligraphy to American abstract art was the summit in the history of artistic tightening of relations between the West and the East, which began with Chinese trends of the 18th century and found its continuation in Impressionism (Seitz 1962: 86, footnote 99). There is, however, a fundamental difference between the paintings of Tobey or Michaux and the works of Chinese calligraphers. For Chinese artists the ideograms of their language are not only beautiful shapes, but also signs, semantic compositions, and it is through the combination of the graphical shape and the conveyed meaning that they gain their aesthetic value. Whereas in contemporary Western abstract art and non-objective art the compositions of lines and colour patches inspired by Chinese ideograms have a decorative and expressive value, yet are void of meaning, asemantic (this difference is strongly emphasized by Etiemble 1961: 355-356).

which the painting was composed (Cahill 1960: 103). At other times they are small lyrical poems. In Ma Yuan's (active c. 1190—1230) ink and aquarelle painting *Walking on a mountain path in Spring* a scholar or a poet in the company of his servant is taking a walk along a stream, watching birds on a branch of a wind-blown willow. Beside there is the inscription: "Brushed by his sleeves wild flowers dance in the wind; birds, fleeing from him, hide and cut short their chant" (Cahill 1960: 80-82). Chen Tcheou (1427—1509) in his painting *Watching the Mid-Autumn Moon* put the following melancholy poem:

> When we are young, we look blithely at the moon in mid-Autumn;
> This time of the year seems to us no different from any other.
> But reverence grows with age.
> Our eyes are no longer distracted
> And we raise a deep cup to honour the feast.
> How many mid-Autumns does an old man have the right to see?
> He knows he cannot retain this fleeting brightness. (Cahill 1960: 128)

A painter from the 17th century wrote in his painting the following poem:

> I pour the ink to make it take the shape of mist and haze.
> The flowers of lotus of the Tai-hua Mountain are wet with moisture;
> On the roads, in the mountain gorges, there is no man to be seen.
> The waves of autumn are hasting on to disappear in the endless distance,
> The waters are murmuring and humming over the hidden rocks,
> The haze is winding playfully in the transparent air. . .
> An inventive mind can thus
> Grasp the power of creating with spare means.
> With ink I try to render
> The breath of the life of nature.
> From the depths of the mountains the streams flow down.
> What lies beyond the mountains, the clouds conceal.
> (Contag 1940: 69; cit. in. Lützeler 1963: 644-645)

Sometimes, under the inscription of the author, scholars added their comments. They constituted an essential part of the painting, they testified to the aesthetic thrills which the work aroused in its lovers over the centuries.

From the comments on the painting by Wang Tingyun (1151—1202) *Secluded Bamboo and Withered Tree*, most important is the comment of a theoretician of art from the 14th century, Tang Hou. It consists of a passage in prose and the following poem:

> Show your heart, without reserve,

And your brush will be inspired.
Writing and painting serve one purpose:
To reveal inner goodness.
There, you see two companions:
An old tree and a soaring bamboo.
The hand which drew them transformed them freely.
The work was finished within a moment.
The incarnation of a single glimpse —
Here lies the treasure of a hundred centuries.
And, as we unroll this scroll, our hearts grow tender,
As if we saw the maker himself. (Cahill 1960: 96)[19]

In the West, especially in the Early Middle Ages, literature was more appreciated than painting. In China they were both equally esteemed. I repeat two verses from the Tang Hou's poem quoted above:

Writing and painting serve one purpose:
To reveal inner goodness.[20]

Conclusion

In different cultures and time periods semantic enclaves in the form of inscriptions had various functions in paintings and their significance for the interpretation and reception of those works was diverse.

Some inscriptions, like e.g. signatures, dedications or artists' mottos, could be interesting for many reasons; generally, though, they contributed nothing to the interpretation of the painting. Others, like the names of saints in medieval paintings or mottos in the Baroque allegorical paintings, repeated what the painter already said by means of iconic signs, symbols etc., in other words they were redundant. Quite often, however, inscriptions were an essential part of paintings.

In medieval paintings they sometimes helped to identify the represented persons or they put in relief one of their features. They were part of the represented action or they helped to establish its successive stages.

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[19]This article is an extended version of the paper *Form and function of inscriptions in painting,* which was presented at the meeting of Polskie Towarzystwo Semiotyczne [Polish Semiotic Society] in Warsaw on 12th December 1969 and repeated, in a slightly altered form, as *Inscriptions in paintings*, at the meeting of the Committee on Art Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw on 17th December that same year.

[20]All the Chinese poems quoted in this section of the article were translated from German or French. They are, therefore, only approximations of the original content.

They helped to create a connection between the persons represented in the work and the viewers. They brought home to the viewers the perfect correspondence between the New and the Old Testaments. Their sole presence endowed paintings with a solemn atmosphere arousing reverence.

In the 20th century, inscriptions in painting had also various and often significant functions. In some paintings, they enhanced the exotic aura. In other works, they would bring a note of pungent social or political satire, of irony or ghoulish humour. In yet other works they contributed to the effect of shock and astonishment. When they were made scarcely legible, they endowed some parts of the painting with an intriguing or mysterious character.

In many Chinese paintings from the 11th — 17th centuries the atmospheric visions of nature and intellectuals who cherished close contact with it harmonized with the inscriptions, which contained subtle lyrical poems composed by the painters or their personal confessions.

In medieval, Egyptian and Chinese paintings the inscriptions, through their highly decorative character, enhanced also the aesthetical side of the paintings.

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