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Authors

Rudolph, Conrad
Cummins, Tom
Hadjinicolaou, Nicos

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INTERVIEW WITH NICOS HADJINICOLAOU

Conrad Rudolph

Tom Cummins

Nicos Hadjinicolaou was born in Salonica and later moved to Athens where he received his baccalaureate. After having studied German in Vienna for several years he took up the study of Art History, German literature, and Philosophy at the Universities of Berlin, Munich, and Freiburg in Breisgau. Since then he has lived in Paris where he has been working on his Doctorat d'Etat entitled "La lutte des classes en France dans la production d'images de 1829-31: première partie: la critique d'art" and has been an active member of the board of editors of the marxist journal "Histoire et Critique des Arts." He is currently a visiting professor of Art History at UCLA. His large number of publications cover a wide range of interests including the art of 19th century France and 20th century Greece but particularly focus on the subject of Art History as a discipline. His book *Histoire de l'art et lutte des classes* (Paris, 1973, 3rd ed. 1978) has been translated into Spanish, Italian, Dutch, and English. Portuguese and Greek editions are in preparation. Another book, *L'oeuvre d'art face à ses significations* should appear this year.

Hadjinicolaou has been given responsibility for the literary estate of Frederick Antal by his widow, Evelyn Antal. Antal was born in Budapest in 1887 and studied under the great art historians Heinrich Wölfflin and Max Dvořák at the University of Vienna. He returned to Hungary where he took part in the short lived marxist government of Bela Kun in 1919, leaving that same year after the government fell for Vienna and eventually Berlin. Antal fled Germany to England when Hitler seized power in 1933. It was at this point that Antal, who previously had taken a strictly formalist approach to the history of art, began to apply marxist principles to his research. In Antal's case this briefly means that he investigated the social, political, and economic factors in order to see, in general, why certain styles exist, co-exist, and change, and in particular, what specific works of art meant or were supposed to mean at the time of their production. *Florentine Painting and Its Social Background* (London, 1948) and *Classicism and Romanticism*

(London, 1966) are perhaps his best known efforts along these lines. Hadjinicolaou is now editing a manuscript from Antal's estate which, although a formalist work, continues where *Florentine Painting* left off.

Q. Would you explain what this manuscript comprises and the technical process of editing it?

A. It's a series of manuscripts, actually. Frederick Antal left Germany as a refugee in 1933 with a completed volume on the history of Florentine painting from the middle of the 15th to the end of the 16th century. It seems that he had reworked it before he went to England. I found among his papers two (of some chapters even three) different versions of this work. The typewritten manuscripts are filled with extensive remarks in extremely difficult German handwriting. Friends and graduate students participating in my seminar on the manuscript have been helping me read them.

What I'm trying to do is to find out which was the final version he had in mind, sometimes it's difficult to tell. After that the main work consists in bringing it up to date (new attributions of paintings, changes of location of paintings, etc.), finding the photographs, and so on. In an introduction I will try to show the place of this manuscript in Antal's intellectual development and also consider it in the context of the evolution of Mannerist studies. For example, to what does his remarkable insistence on the relationship between Mannerism and late Gothic art correspond? Was this really a new approach for the period in which he was writing? How does Antal's personal evolution correspond to the general development of a marxist theory and method of art history? When published this work will probably be about 600 or 700 pages with over 500 photographs.

Around 1933 or 1934 Antal abandoned the project completely. He decided to begin new studies and to go back to the 14th century in order to find the sources, so to say, of the Renaissance and of Mannerism. I am trying to understand how he became the social art historian or marxist art historian that he is now famous for being. The manuscripts that I have in my possession are extremely formalist writings.

Q. Wasn't he a marxist from the beginning?

A. No one is a marxist from the beginning. What is rare in Antal is that he became a marxist very late in his life. He studied under Max Dvořák and participated in the revolution in 1919 in Hungary. He was

on a committee responsible for the confiscation of paintings in private Hungarian collections. He was evidently active there. He had participated in the now famous Sunday Circle of Georg Lukács together with Bela Balasz, Karl Mannheim, Arnold Hauser and others. Once the revolutionary regime fell, he fled to Germany. Curiously, if you look at his articles published in Germany between 1920 and 1933 you don't find any traces of a marxist approach.

In the best of cases there are perhaps some reminiscences of Dvořák. So on the one hand we have these manuscripts completed in 1930-31 which definitely bear no signs of a marxist or social art history, and then on the other hand we have the Courtauld lectures of 1935-36 on "Classicism and Romanticism," the foremost example of a marxist approach known on 18th and 19th century art dating from before the Second World War. Antal was then 45 years old.

Q. Do you think that Antal's flight from Germany had anything to do with the change from a formalist to a marxist approach in his writings?

A. It could be that the wound or shock of having to leave Germany pushed him in a certain direction and that he started to reevaluate his own work and method. It was in England from 1933-38 that he wrote *Florentine Painting and Its Social Background*. Its publication was held up until after the war. This book covers painting in Florence during the 14th and early 15th centuries, that is it stops exactly at the moment that the unpublished manuscripts I am editing starts with.

Q. Why do you feel that it is important to publish his earlier formalist work?

A. It is an important document in the evolution of Antal's methodology and it is a fantastic piece of scholarship. I think that an understanding of the process of how one becomes a marxist or a social art historian, especially under the conditions of the 1930s and 1940s, is a fascinating subject.

Q. Have you had much interest from publishers?

A. A publisher in Dresden, the Verlag der Kunst, is very interested. They have published practically everything of Antal's with the exception of the first book on Florentine painting which was published by Henschelverlag in East Berlin. Editori Riuniti in Rome also wants to publish it. As for the English edition, Routledge and Kegan Paul in London will probably do it (they have published all of

Antal's works in English) but nothing is yet definite.

- Q. Why did Antal never attempt to have this work published?
- A. I think because he changed his mind about it: he considered it too formalistic himself.
- Q. But then don't you as a marxist art historian also consider it too formalistic?
- A. Well, I think that in spite of that we have a right to know Antal's role in 20th century intellectual history, how he evolved from his earlier position toward marxism, and this manuscript is a milestone of this evolution. Evelyn Antal, his widow, also thinks that it is not improper that this be published.
- Q. Antal has been in disrepute with mainstream Renaissance and Mannerist art historians. Do you think that this book will have a beneficial effect on his reputation?
- A. Perhaps this work, when it's published, will force them to go back and look at *Florentine Painting* more closely. It will demonstrate, convincingly I think, that one can be a great connoisseur and yet abandon this position for something else. In Italy Antal is acknowledged as one of the most important art historians of the 20th century who have written on Italian art of the 16th century.
- Q. But not here in the United States.
- A. The art history that prevails in the United States is generally more conservative.
- Q. Antal's position in the United States is interesting in that on the one hand he represents a conception of art history which had never been so thoroughly developed before, namely a social history of art, an area in which much work needs to be done. On the other hand he also represents something very few art historians want to deal with: a marxist history of art.
- A. I don't say that it's not a delicate problem. I asked myself to what extent this publication might indirectly contribute to the reinforcement of a traditional, conservative approach to art history. But I think that finally there are many more people who would be helped. They would see that marxist art history is not a series of ready made formulas but a position one has to conquer after having

assimilated the traditional methods of approach. But there is no doubt that when this manuscript is published the image of Antal is going to become much more complicated than the one we have now.

- Q. Do you think that it will advance scholarship in Renaissance studies?
- A. I think that it will show that a lot of the traditional work done in the meantime by celebrated art historians was anticipated 20, 30, or even 40 years before by one who later abandoned their approach because he considered it insufficient.

Conrad Rudolph and **Tom Cummins** are graduate students in Art History at UCLA. Rudolph is currently working on Bernard of Clairvaux's *Apologia ad Guillelmum* as the basis for further studies on the art policy of the Cluniac Order. Cummins is researching the painting of the Incas at the time of Spanish contact.