

ERWIN  
PANOFSKY

MARCH 30 · 1892

MARCH 14 · 1968

A COMMEMORATIVE  
GATHERING FOR  
ERWIN PANOFSKY  
AT THE  
INSTITUTE OF FINE ARTS  
NEW YORK UNIVERSITY  
IN ASSOCIATION WITH  
THE INSTITUTE  
FOR ADVANCED STUDY

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MARCH THE TWENTY-FIRST

1968



# ERWIN PANOFSKY

1892-1968

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CRAIG HUGH SMYTH

*Institute of Fine Arts, New York University*

THE INSTITUTE for Advanced Study in Princeton and the Institute of Fine Arts of New York University are holding this meeting together. Professor Millard Meiss and Professor Harold Cherniss are here from the Institute in Princeton to speak. Professor Bober and Professor Buchthal from New York University will also speak, Professor Buchthal particularly with respect to Erwin Panofsky's Hamburg years. Professor David Coffin will take part from Princeton University, where Pan very often taught, and John Coolidge from Harvard, where Pan was Norton Professor. We wanted to ask others, but we ended by having representatives just from the institutions with which Pan was officially associated.

Pan came to this country first in the fall of 1931. He was then professor at the University of Hamburg. He came at New York University's invitation, taught here from 1931 to 1935, and was a foundation stone of this Institute. During the first three years, he spent alternate terms here and in Hamburg. After the Nazis relieved him of his post in 1933, he moved with his family to the United States. In 1934-35 he taught concurrently at Princeton and New York University. In 1935 he joined the Institute for Advanced Study.

To use Pan's words, "the Institute for Advanced Study . . . owes its reputation to the fact that its members do their research work openly and their teaching surreptitiously, whereas the opposite is

true of so many other institutions of learning." His surreptitious teaching was done nearly every year at New York University and Princeton from 1935 on. In 1947-48 he was at Harvard for a year as Charles Eliot Norton Professor. In 1962 he became Professor Emeritus at the Institute for Advanced Study and, at the same time, accepted the Samuel F. B. Morse Professorship of the Literature of the Arts of Design at New York University. He has continued teaching here ever since and has been a frequent visiting professor at Princeton as well.

This is the bare chronology of Pan's official posts. What he has meant to those who have known him, studied under him, and read his extraordinary works will be expressed by those who follow me. But as an introduction to their remarks I may say that this very autumn we have seen once more the effect of this incomparable man. It is reflected in the words of a mature and thoughtful student in his course. "Studying with Professor Panofsky has changed my life." Others here will know what he meant.

#### MILLARD MEISS

*Institute for Advanced Study* •

THOUGH Pan's death seemed imminent during the past weeks, and in some serious sense not wrong, the event itself is overwhelming. In these first days words about him sound empty, and I can only try to catch for you a very few of the ideas and images that flit through the mind of a friend of thirty-seven years. Through a mad, comical coincidence a new era in our discipline in the United States was initiated by a scholar, outlawed in Germany because of his Jewish family tradition, who taught most effectively in an illegal American speak-easy. It is good to recall, especially in our present troubled time, that in an earlier crisis two American institutions were sufficiently perceptive and, I must add, sufficiently

bold (because America is not entirely cosmopolitan) to bring this man to us and to offer him a life appropriate to his gifts.

He came from Hamburg to New York a little like Dürer from, say, Nüremberg to Basel — though he was infinitely less thrifty — and he revealed to us not only medieval Paris and baroque Rome but our own city — cosy he called it. He was entranced by the language, the traffic, the cab drivers, and the jets of steam in the streets — symbols of the efficient and affluent society. He astonished that first group of students (which included Margaret Barr and Helen Franc), as he did many groups afterwards, by taking us seriously, despite the deficiencies of our previous training in language and literature. During my oral examination for the doctorate at this institute, when a question all too obviously confused me, it was Panofsky who leaned across the table and slowly offered a cigarette, to provide the vital momentary distraction. For innumerable acts like this, I, as well as many others, loved him deeply.

While dazzling us with his hypotheses he gave us a sense of our own possibilities, especially by his scepticism of his conclusions, expressed in such soft asides as “die verdammte originalen” — the intractable works of art that resisted a historian’s passion for patterns.

Panofsky’s love of learning and of history survived to the very end, into the period when his awareness of his shattered body made him unable to face all but a very few old friends. Wolfgang — the famous Panofsky as Pan liked to hear him described — told me that recently, when Carl Nordenfalk came to the house, Pan decided an encounter would be unbearable, but when this good friend nevertheless entered and presented a photograph of a problematic painting Pan plunged into an intense, animated discussion. About the same time his unquenchable spirit was responsible for a really superhuman act, and I shall refer to it despite its personal, even private nature. I brought him my two new books that had their first beginnings long ago in the speak-easy, and I offered

them to him — he had to lie flat in bed — with uneasiness about their contents as well as embarrassment for their weight. He held them over his head for an hour, reading voraciously, asking questions, his eyes glowing while his arms trembled. I kept thinking of his description of Immanuel Kant's last days, when the dying philosopher insisted on rising to greet a visitor, saying: "The sense of humanity has not yet left me." It did not leave Panofsky either, and humanity for him was hardly imaginable without his beloved history of art.

## HAROLD CHERNISS

*Institute for Advanced Study*

BEYOND the circle of initiates who were Erwin Panofsky's pupils and fellow-workers in the history of art is another wide circle of friends who were enlightened by his brilliance and who thrived in the generous warmth of his humaneness. As one among these uninitiates I wish to bear testimony of gratitude for the light that he gave us and of sorrow for the darkness in which we have been left. The strong but subtle joys of private friendship that he afforded are too sensitive to endure expression; but in the life of each of his many friends they will live and work their vital magic so that all will be, each in his several way, living and growing monuments of Pan's multifarious influence.

Pan, his beloved nickname, shows the providence in names, for to us, who before we knew him had looked upon all things without seeing, he revealed the meaning of all; and all meaning was his province, for he loved all significance and in his enthusiasm for it all he made it clear to everyone with the candid clarity of his own insight. Both Pan and Hermes in one he was to us, the true philologist, lover of the logos, of articulate thought in sound and shape, in word and colour, in all that meets the sense and the understand-

ing, and master of the logos, of articulate expression, by whom even the error of interpretation was transmuted by the sure interpretation of error into the meaningfulness of cryptic beauty.

αἰαί, ται μαλάχαι μὲν, ἐπὶν κατὰ κᾶπον ὄλωνται  
ἦδὲ τὰ χλωρὰ σέλινά τὸ τ'εὐθαλὲς οὖλον ἄνηθον,  
ὑστερον αὖ ζῶντι καὶ εἰς ἔτος ἄλλο φύοντι.  
ἄμμες δ'οἱ μεγάλοι καὶ καρτεροί, οἱ σοφοὶ ἄνδρες  
ὀπίπτε πρᾶτα θάνωμες, ἀνάκοι ἐν χθονὶ κοίλα  
εὐδομες εὖ μάλα μακρὸν ἀτέρμονα νήγρετον ὕπνον.  
καὶ σὺ μὲν ὦν σιγαῖ πεπυκασμένος ἔσσεαι ἐν γαῖ,  
ταῖς Νύμφαισι δ'ἔδοξεν αἰεὶ τὸν βάτραχον ἄδειν.  
ταῖς δ'ἐγὼ οὐ φθονέοιμι. τὸ γὰρ μέλος οὐ καλὸν ἄδει.

(Epitaphios Bionos 99-107)

Ah me, when in the garden the mallows and freshly green parsley  
Perish and also the flourishing anise with closely twined tendrils,  
They live again thereafter and sprout in the following season,  
While we men in our greatness and might, we men in our wisdom,  
Once we have died, hear nought in the hollow of earth  
but are sleeping  
Soundly a sleep right long, yea endless without any waking.  
Even so you too in the earth will be muffled in silence,  
While by the nymphs 'tis resolved that the frog be asinging forever;  
Them I begrudge not the choice, for the song that he sings  
is no sweet one.

HUGO BUCHTHAL

*Institute of Fine Arts, New York University*

WHEN I decided early in 1930 to move to Hamburg in order to study with Erwin Panofsky, the teacher I had chosen was still a young man. He was then under forty, and everybody took his exuberant vitality for granted. Some of his most outstanding works, including *Idea*, had by then been published. But he was not by any



means recognized as the leading German art historian. He did not care for easy success. He never talked down to his audience, and he never drew the huge crowds which some of his rivals attracted. Moreover, his interest in the meaning in the visual arts made him suspect to the establishment. Hamburg was the ideal place for pursuing those interests and for establishing them as a new subject in its own right. It was not an important or an old-established university, but it offered unique facilities: the Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg, as the Warburg Institute was originally called, and the group of outstanding scholars who worked and published in its shadow: Aby Warburg himself, Fritz Saxl, Ernst Cassirer, to name only a few. This was the congenial atmosphere in which young Panofsky found his identity as a scholar. It was a mutual give-and-take; it benefited every one of that small circle of scholars, and, by implication, his students.

Pan's seminar was not crowded. More often than not, it was a joint affair conducted together with Saxl. Pan and Saxl complemented each other perfectly. Our little group, the last group of his German students, including Adolf Katzenellenbogen, Walter Horn, William Heckscher, Peter Janson, could make the most of our opportunities. We used to gather in the evenings at the Warburg Institute, and study art-historical sources: Vitruvius, Bernard of Clairvaux, Abbot Suger. Frequently the discussions went on into the small hours of the morning. Pan carried his tremendous learning lightly. He was the most generous of men: he always welcomed contradiction. He was not infallible, and he never considered himself infallible. He was always ready to learn, he encouraged us to disagree, and was genuinely pleased when a seminar report turned out quite differently from what he expected.

Pan was first and foremost an incomparable teacher. In his dealings with his students he was really inspired. He expected those of us who worked for their Ph.D. to call upon him at least once in every term during his office hours, and to report on recent progress.

The office hours were in the morning; but when he was in good form and felt relaxed, when something one had put before him fascinated him or caught his imagination, he would take the fortunate student home, and extend the discussion for many hours, sometimes far into the night. These were unforgettable experiences, worth more to us than a whole term's conventional teaching. This does not mean that being Pan's disciple was always easy. He was not always relaxed. He was a temperamental master, with strong likes and dislikes, with a quick wit and a sharp tongue, and he could be very outspoken. Still, we loved and worshipped him. It was always easy to respond to his keen sense of humor.

During those dark days early in 1933 when his, and our, world began to collapse, Pan was in the United States. It was his second time as a visiting professor here, and, needless to say, he had felt at home from the beginning and was instantly appreciated and loved by his American students. It would have been easy for him not to return to Germany at all, to accept a permanent position in this country immediately, and to make his family follow him to the States. Indeed some of our teachers disappeared from the scene without even informing their students. No so Pan. He realized that three of his pupils — I was one of them — were far enough advanced with their Ph.D. work that they might conceivably, and with a special effort, finish that summer and thus avoid almost certain trouble with the authorities — but only if he himself would be on the spot for some months to guide them. Thus, in April, 1933, Pan returned to Hamburg, mainly for that one reason: to supervise our work, and to help us to obtain our degrees before it was too late. He went about this in the most dignified manner: he refused to set foot in the university which had suspended him, but let it be known that in the interest of his students he was willing to report on our dissertations and to conduct oral examinations in the privacy of his own home. And this is what, with the connivance of a benevolent dean, actually happened. Again, it was character-

istic of him that he did not abuse the privilege. On the contrary: the orals, which took place in his private study, under four eyes and were not subjected to any control, were, if anything, more difficult than they would have been under normal circumstances. Thus, he was visibly shocked when I failed to identify immediately a little-known painting by Colin de Cooter, and my ignorance was duly recorded in the official report.

Pan's was a rich and full life; during most of the time he enjoyed every minute of it, and made others enjoy every minute they were privileged to spend with him. His zest for life could be infectious. We shall never meet the like of him again.

#### DAVID COFFIN

*Princeton University*

LAST night, considering whether there is any single word which would describe Erwin Panofsky, I realized that there is one word which summed up thirty years of acquaintance of him. I should like to celebrate Erwin Panofsky as the greatest, and perhaps the last, humanist whom, I believe, I have ever known or expect to know. I use the word humanist knowing well that its definition has been a source of bitter conflict among scholars of the humanities, but this is of no importance, for Erwin Panofsky fits every definition of the word offered, from the narrowest to the broadest.

In the narrowest definition of the humanist as a grammarian, this is Pan, for he loved words. He loved their origins and their histories. No pupil can ever forget those digressions in his classroom, some brief, some long, when he would expâtiate on the history of a word. They were so perfect that one sometimes questioned their spontaneity, but their genuineness was proven at other times. For in the same way, no one can ever forget those sudden interruptions at home of an evening when he darted into the nearby study to seek vindication, as he always found it, in a dictionary or in a

pamphlet dragged down from the shelves as he teetered on a book-laden chair.

In the definition of a humanist as a master of classical languages, this also is Pan. This is the Pan who deflated doting parents with the dictum that no child should be seen much less heard until he could read his Latin, and he meant it. This is the Pan, who, when his paperback, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, appeared, triumphantly noted that the quotations in Greek in the footnotes were generally printed without translation and wondered whether this was not the first such event in American paperback printing, because Pan loved "firsts."

The definition of a humanist as a scholar of classical antiquity, and especially of its literature and philosophy, needs no comment; the proof lies there for all to see and to use in those books from *Idea* to *Correggio's Camera di S. Paolo*.

Like almost every great humanist, Pan was a distinguished and indefatigable letter writer, an art which our age has lost. Everyone had the experience of receiving in the return post a thank you note for an offprint which, at least briefly and more often at great length, revealed that every word of the article had been read. More important, in one or two sentences he would unerringly sum up the major significance of the article, a significance which, I suspect, was often unknown previously to the author.

I am convinced, however, that the definition of a humanist which best fits Pan is properly his own definition. For Pan a humanist is one convinced of the dignity of man — one, as he said, who rejects authority but respects tradition. He found in Erasmus the humanist *par excellence*, and in many ways Erwin Panofsky and Erasmus must have been similar. Like every humanist, Pan was aware of the transience of life. He did not like it, but he understood it. He knew that all man had was his dignity and that would be preserved only as long as man questioned authority and respected tradition, which he did in his teaching and his writings.

## JOHN COOLIDGE

*Harvard University*

ALL OF US have passed our adult years in Panofsky's ambience. It has been like living next door to a lighthouse. Objectively you watched the beam revolve until suddenly you yourself were drenched by his ebullience, by his crackling perceptions, by his overwhelming, unaccountable kindness. How frequently or how rarely it happened never mattered; the immediate impact of that most vivid man obliterated everything else, especially any awareness of how long it had been since last you saw him.

When that beacon so unexpectedly went out, the first reaction of most of us was to talk to one another about these inextinguishable private memories. Next, one turned back to his writings, trying to relive the hours of discovery that had come to each of us when hearing him talk, when listening to him lecture, or when reading his books. And yet, could we pass on but one impression of the things Panofsky gave us, it would be an impression neither of the personal memories nor of the hours of discovery. Surely we would wish to transmit some sense of the way his whole being was an affirmation of the importance of the life of the mind.

What a pompous formulation that is and how briskly Pan would have dismissed it! At least towards the end of his life, his favorite mode was comedy. His preferred formal attire was the traditional garb of a high Hamburg dignitary, preferred because he was keenly aware of how ridiculous he appeared in this costume — that alert merry face ringed by an absurd ruff. He chose to wear this fool's motley on official occasions just because he wanted people to ask him why he wore it. His answer — and what a moving story it was — called attention to respect for the intellect and to the persevering courage that is required to preserve the life of the intellect. These, happily, have also from time to time and in one place or another been characteristic of our tortured century. Pan thought

of himself as the involuntary, indeed the unwilling symbol of those qualities. We will always remember him as the classic exemplification of them, of respect for intellect and of the persevering courage required to foster the intellect.

HARRY BOBER

*Institute of Fine Arts, New York University*

WE ARE gathered here in a final ritualistic effort to show and to say to ourselves and to each other — and somehow, mystically and helplessly, to Pan — how much we loved him and how he begins now to live with us in all the ways that man might yet remain with the living. I spoke simply of love, without mentioning esteem of his intellect, because I don't know that there is yet a word that serves to express or describe that kind of beautiful convergence in which Pan's ideas, knowledge, feeling, and exquisitely perfect craftsmanship were articulated in his intellectual being and in his work.

Through his published works, the world at large knows and has something of this. But the subtlest of this essence of Pan's being came through most fully and beautifully in his actual person and presence. When he talked, we sat and — it is not enough to say that we listened but that we began to glow, as if illuminated. And we were never the same thereafter.

It is this inimitable essence of our Pan that seems to me most precious and it is around this that I thought our recollections of Pan might be gathered for a little while. In Pan's letters this is preserved as in perfect amber and so I shall read from two of his letters that we may listen to him together. In the first is an evocation of that beautiful intellect; the second, adding something of his self portrait and a message I think he meant me to preserve for him:

97 Battle Road  
Princeton, New Jersey  
January 19, 1961

. . .

The more I hear them [scientists] talk, the more I feel that they sound either like the Bible or the pre-Socratics . . . When the Bible and the Fathers accept a "creation before time" and when good old Moses makes God say "Let there be light," these two tenets have a most amusing similarity with the modern concept of physics according to which both time and space came into being together at the moment when, for reasons as yet not accounted for, there was created that continuum of mass and energy which we call "matter" and of which light, having both weight and a constant velocity, is the prime example. A modern Moses would have to write: "And God said: let there be a continuum of mass and energy," and it would amount to the same thing.

Similarly it seems that the concept of the Four Elements . . . has seen a resurrection (on a somewhat different level, to be sure) in modern physics which again distinguishes four states of matter, to wit, the gaseous (air, of course), the liquid (water), the solid (earth), and, as the most recent addition, "plasma" (which, for all intents and purposes, partakes of the nature of fire). "Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose." What does not change, however, is fortunately the loyalty and friendship of former pupils who have now become masters, yet fondly remember their more and more decrepit teachers. For this loyalty and friendship I thank you, dear Harry, from the bottom of my heart.

With all good wishes from both of us to all of you . . .

97 Battle Road  
Princeton, New Jersey  
September 18, 1945

. . .

We had a very delightful summer in good old Kennebunkport, where life begins at seventy and where we were treated extremely well. Not only did our generous spinster friends give us a really charming house (dated 1786) for nothing, they also made all sorts of arrangements for our comfort, and since a considerable percentage of the inhabitants consists of railroad Presidents and Chairmen of the Board we had no

difficulty in obtaining wonderful reservations and stopping trains at random so that we made both trips from door to door as it were. Also our excellent Emma rejoined us after having left us for more than a year for a war job and provided superior food and service (she is now again with us until death or marriage doeth part us), and as a result Dora recovered very well. She can now move around without her bandages and even take short walks, and her blood pressure, when last measured, was almost normal (it may go up, though, when the tissues assume their final shape, but even so the whole thing seems to have worked out pretty well). I have been loafing, without qualifications, for more than two months, with the sole exception of a lecture in Bread Loaf, and find it quite difficult to break that sweet habit. For the first time in my life I really felt I needed "recreation" after the somewhat difficult months of spring. I used this leisure to bone up a little bit on modern physics (which I find easier to understand than the one I learned at school, for now everything is again, as in Plato and Aristotle of yore, "determined by measure, number and weight," and quantum mechanics seem to agree much better with our idea of historical continuity *plus* the probability that in some phases something "happens" which does not happen all the time, than did the classic theory), and I know now so much about nuclear physics that, whenever a neutron or proton is mentioned, Dora exclaims, in despair, "Please don't explain." It may interest you to hear that my younger son, who had to design and supply some incidental gadgetry for the Atomic Bomb, was in the B-29 that circled, at an altitude of 10,000 feet above the historic test explosion in New Mexico. Having his eyes glued to his voltmeters and things, he did not see anything and had not even time to be scared. He believes, like myself (and, incidentally, old Tarkington) that the thing should be internationalized right away instead of being used to threaten Uncle Joe. No major invention has ever remained a secret for more than two or three years, and that every offensive weapon produces an adequate defensive one is simply not true. Even for the ordinary rifle bullet there is, in fact, no other "defense" than to stay out of its way or to shoot the other fellow first. So we have really no choice other than either to keep the peace (when a military man said in Tarkington's presence: "We must muster all our courage to face the atomic age" the old gentleman very wittily and wisely said "I hope to God we will muster all our cowardice") or to wind up as a *nova*.



Privately, the Atomic Bomb has the funny effect that Sugar will be delayed considerably because the Princeton Press has to publish the famous Smythe Report inbetween. But since the world has waited for a translation precisely eight hundred years it can well wait a little longer.

Otherwise there is little to report except that the other night, after an afternoon in the presence of my granddaughter, I dreamt the following epitaph on myself;

“He hated babies, gardening, and birds;  
But loved a few adults, all dogs, and words.”

...

With best wishes from us both,

Yours as ever,

Pan

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*Photograph by Lotte Jacobi*