

Book Review

SASAKI Ken-ichi, デイドロ『絵画論』の研究 (*Study of the Treatise on Painting by Diderot*)**Three Volumes Boxed, 976pp. Chūōkōron Bijutsu Shuppan, Tokyo, 2013**

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Ken-ichi Sasaki is a professor emeritus of aesthetics at the University of Tokyo, and after being President of the Japanese Society for Aesthetics, held such important posts as President of the International Association for Aesthetics and a Vice-President of International Federation of Philosophical Societies. Professor Sasaki has recently published a set of three volumes entitled, *Study of the Treatise on Painting by Diderot*. The first volume is devoted to a meticulous commentary of the *Treatise* (pp. 1–506), the second volume assembles historical studies on Diderot's aesthetics and philosophy from the viewpoint of the *Treatise* (pp. 519–842), and the third volume gives a critical edition of the French text, with a Japanese translation on the opposite pages (pp. 1–109). The original text of the *Treatise* amounts to only forty-nine pages in Sasaki's critical edition (or sixty-nine pages in the authoritative DPV edition from the publisher Hermann). On this small-scale text Sasaki spends almost twenty times the amount of space, not only to throw much light on Diderot's aesthetics, but also to offer a close and detailed analysis of the significance of 18th century French aesthetics. In fact Sasaki spent more than thirty-five years on this study.

This is a monumental work commemorating the year of the 300th anniversary of the birth of Denis Diderot (1713–84). Here are found many important proposals and critical suggestions by Sasaki, for and against Diderot studies today. This reviewer has for more than 40 years been engaged in building an aesthetics of fine arts, in terms of the tri-stratified structure of the *Bildbewusstsein*, based on the Phenomenology of Edmund Husserl. Here he will present and review Sasaki's work from this standpoint.

1. *Treatise* and contemporary aesthetics of image

Casting a glance on contemporary aesthetics, we perceive that image or imagery is acknowledged to be one of the key concepts. Studies on visual culture have provided many topics in Anglo-American aesthetics since the final decades of the last century. In the present civilization which is dominated by consumption, technology for visual communication has developed rapidly and has penetrated deeply into our daily life: product design, display lighting, photography, TV, video, animation, cinema etc. Today we look in vain for boundaries between high culture and low culture, pure art and popular art, culture and subculture. These image theories seem to be

based on a common ground with *Bild* (or image) theories from German aesthetics. However, they very often neglect the historical accumulation of visual culture centered on painting.

Sasaki's contribution through his *Study* may shed a new light on contemporary visual culture, through making a scrutiny into the historical view of Diderot. While Sasaki affirms that in Diderot's century, painting was the paradigmatic art form, i.e., other arts looked to the state of painting, he is also interested in various vulgar currents of our time. For him Diderot's *Treatise on Painting*, which is one of the classics of theoretical reflection on painting in the world history of aesthetics, treating an individual genre, might answer the whole problem of the visual arts, even today.

This long-awaited book is a very timely and excellent gift for the today's vivid situations of visual culture studies or image studies, and also presents ambitious challenges to the contemporary aesthetics.

Modern aesthetics, under A. G. Baumgarten's denomination as a science of sensory cognition on the basis of the system of logics, has been focusing on the linear way of thinking (*nacheinander*). On the contrary, images or the eikonic forms are based on another sort of logic which presents different objects, colors, and forms at the same time, or side by side, namely simultaneously (*nebeneinander*). The aesthetic thought developed in the *Treatise* by Diderot is an aesthetics of the latter. We should thus consider Diderot's *Treatise* as an important contribution to contemporary visual aesthetics.

2. *Encyclopedia and Salons*

Denis Diderot is a philosopher who perplexes us because of his wide-range activities and diverse impacts on the 18th century French aesthetic history. In the middle 1740's, he appeared on the stage of philosophy with an adaptation of a book by the 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury. He was sympathetic to the latter's notion of the close connection between beauty and virtue. This sympathy came probably from his moral consciousness, inherited from his father's pride in his craftsmanship of *maître coutelier*. Sasaki analyzes the differences between the original text of Shaftesbury and Diderot's adaptation, so as to make sure of the starting point and life-long theme of Diderot's aesthetics.

After this Diderot engaged in the editorship of the *Encyclopedia* (the 1st vol. appearing in 1751), at first as joint editor with d' Alembert, who resigned in 1759. The whole work was finished in 1772 with a total of 28 volumes, 17 texts and 11 illustrations. In these days he was, so to speak, "Diderot of the *Encyclopedia*". With regard to aesthetics, he wrote a long article "*Beau*" in the 2nd volume (1752), well known for its definition of beauty as a perception of relation. This article was eventually reprinted later in the form of book, and had very much influence on European academic circles.

Whilst busily occupied with *Encyclopedia*, Diderot wrote a criticism of the Salons. These texts are regarded as the most important in this field, and four early texts have meaning for us as the decisive steps to the *Treatise*. In those days the Salon of Louvre Palace exhibition was held every second year, with free admission, and caused a public sensation in Paris. Famous artists

from the *Academie royale de peinture et de sculpture* exhibited their works there. The events attracted not only collectors and art dealers, but also a large public. An official catalogue in a very simple form was sold, and news, briefs and reports appeared in the “public sphere”. Diderot was offered the chance of reviewing these exhibitions by Baron de Melchior Grimm, a German resident in Paris, for his *Correspondance Litteraire* (hereafter: *CL*), a semi-monthly handwritten magazine.

Diderot wrote nine *Salons* in total: 1759, 61, 63, 65, 67, 69, 71, 75, 81. But this *CL* had a very small circulation of no more than fifteen copies, and was addressed only to the royalty within the Northern Europe, North Germany and Russia. Along with the *Salons*, several masterpieces of Diderot, including the *Treatise on Painting*, were published in the *CL*. This means that his achievements in the field of visual art remained beyond the reach of the French public. Diderot visited the *Salons* frequently to gather news and listened to the self-explanations by the artists themselves. Artists also expected his comments, especially concerning the content of their works, but his aesthetics was unknown in detail in Paris.

It was after the death of Diderot that his criticism of the *Salons* became accessible to contemporary people. Diderot’s *Salon of 1765* was included in the library of art theories compiled by Buisson (1795), together with a supplement, under the title of *Essais sur la peinture* (on the problem of the authentic title, we shall discuss below). Three years later, the *Œuvres de Denis Diderot* (edited by Naigeon) was published, in which all of the nine *Salons* were collected and so came to be known by members of the French art world. We can state that Diderot’s presence in the field of visual art theory began to take place after his death.

Diderot’s aesthetics was formed in some of its essential parts through his art criticism of *Salons*. His aesthetics must be counted as one of the monumental triumphs of modern aesthetics, to be ranked with that of the modern German aesthetics. Sasaki’s work convinces us of this. Firstly, Sasaki reads Diderot’s texts intensively “through a magnifying glass”, secondly, he has an overview of the surroundings around and behind them, with bird-eye views of 18th century thought on philosophy, social thought, and art etc, and thirdly, of course, he reads between the lines to show the significance of Diderot’s own intellectual activities through his naked eyes of an aesthetic philosopher of our times.

3. *Salons* and the *Treatise*

In the last quarter of the 19th century, *Œuvres complètes de Diderot* by Assézat-Tourneux (1875–77) appeared for the first time, with the claim of being “complet”. With this edition, the whole matter of Diderot’s views on beauty and art became accessible to the public interested in his aesthetic thought. In those days, however, the new waves of the artworks and exhibitions, for example, Impressionism, arose in Paris, and then were much involved in the scandalous problems of the contents of artworks and exhibitions. One of the most important Diderot’s contributions to the painting was regarded as a pioneer of art criticism, although his philosophical treatises on painting did not yet awake any interest at that time.

In the latter half of the 20th century, *Œuvres esthétiques de Diderot* (ed. P. Vernière, Garnier,

1968) contributed to the infiltration of Diderot's aesthetics into a wider audience, including the reviewer himself. It was not long before the authorized edition of DPV (1975–) began to be published. But the *Study* by Sasaki shows that even the latest versions mentioned above had left some problems unsolved and that they are still only a milestone toward the more authentic version, with the perfect critical text of Diderot's writings, in particular of his *Treatise on Painting*. In order to prove his proposition, Sasaki uncovered unresolved or overlooked problems through his intensive and extensive research on Diderot's different versions or manuscripts.

Sasaki has considered the *Treatise on painting* to be not merely “the most important writing of Diderot's aesthetics, but also to be one of the leading works in modern European aesthetics”. Nevertheless, this *Treatise* has still not been investigated with the eyes of a specialist. No monograph on it was written before Sasaki's *Study*, not only in book form, but also in the form of an academic paper. With a surprising curiosity and attention to detail, Sasaki has been reading the *Treatise* for more than thirty-five years with the lucid and lively insights of an excellent aesthetician, just like a director who elevates words in the script to the live voices of actors and actresses on the stage. And he has been re-reading Diderot's originals from another viewpoint of the contemporary thought as well. This is sure to have the impression that Sasaki's *Study* stands at the forefront of the Diderot's studies today.

4. Sasaki's new critical edition of the *Treatise*

Sasaki has not been philologist at all. He started his study on the *Treatise*, at first using available editions. However, Sasaki noticed various, either great or small, differences among its editions, and was driven to make up his own thorough rigorous text-criticism.

Today the original copies of *CL*, carrying the whole texts of the *Treatise*, is conserved in the following three institutes: the Kungl Biblioteket of Stockholm, the Russian State Archive of Ancient Acts of Moscow and the Forschungsbibliothek of Gotha. The original handwritten manuscript by Diderot being lost, we can consider these three copies of *CL* as the second most credible and original texts of the *Treatise on Painting*. Sasaki visited the former two institutes and obtained a photocopy from the Library of Gotha. On the basis of these texts he identified the differences in details, such as whether the letter is capital or small, and what punctuation is used. Through this steady effort, he could propose some important revisions, of which the reviewer will pick up some distinctive issues:

a) The first point concerns the title of the work. *Essais sur la peinture* has long been the title given to our text. It was in an exceptional case that Nageon modified the word “essai” from Buisson's plural form to singular. Even today, all publications, including DPV, follow this custom, probably respecting the fact that it was the first title given to this text. But this title with *Essais* deformed fatally the original intention of the author. Differences between treatise and essay apart, the choice between a singular or a plural implies a significance that is much more serious than it appears. If you say “Essay”, it concerns an integrated work, while “essays” means a set of collected papers. The decisive fact is that Diderot never called this text otherwise than *Treatise*. So Sasaki insists on this original title.

b) So Naigeon rectified Buisson's plural title with a singular. He however betrayed this just comprehension of the work of Diderot by inserting into it the short article "Examen du claire-obscur", by which Naigeon appeared to distinguish his edition from Buisson's. All the versions of the *Treatise* published ever since have adopted Naigeon's model. Judging that it was an unjust compilation made by Naigeon, Sasaki sets this short text apart as appendix to the *Treatise*.

c) Chapter VII is named "*un petit Corollaire de ce qui précède*". What does "*ce qui précède*" denote? All scholars seem to have taken it as the previous chapter as a matter of fact. Chapter VI being on architecture, a Vernière and a G. May (in DPV!) called these last two chapters to be the "two chapters about architecture".

However, Sasaki does not consider the final chapter a mere supplement to Chapter VI, and proposes to read it as an independent chapter of the conclusion, that is, to understand the "*ce qui précède*" as all the preceding six chapters. The aesthetic thoughts presented there in a condensed form are nothing but the principles of criticism which Diderot had formed for 400–500 works in total since he began to write his *Salons*. Sasaki summarizes that this chapter exactly answers to his basic intention of the *Treatise*, which consists in bringing his principles of the criticism to self-consciousness and also giving the grounds for it.

5. Theory of 'Taste'

Just a short time before Diderot wrote his *Treatise, Aesthetica* (I: 1750) was published by Baumgarten in the German language sphere. The thoughts of both philosophers show us two different ways of modern aesthetics. Diderot intended to write, so to speak, an aesthetics of production, or aesthetics for the creator, while Baumgarten's aesthetics was conceived on the level of the reception, as a science of sensory knowledge, or the logic of the lower cognition. In the aesthetics of artistic production, beauty constitutes the aim of the productive work. Diderot's aesthetics integrated in Chapter VII demonstrates its basis.

Sasaki is convinced that the subject of Chapter VII is 'taste'. In fact, this chapter begins with an ironical question: "What is the meaning of all these principles, if taste is capricious?". Of course, taste is not capricious, and it is significant to ask about its principles. Diderot defines taste as faculty acquired by repeated experience, so as to grasp at a stroke the true or the good with its circumstances, which makes it beautiful. This is far from Kant's definition of taste as faculty of judgment, which is given *a priori* to everyone. Diderot's view of taste was probably formed on the model of craftsmanship, the spirit of which he seems to have inherited from his father, who was a skilled cutler in Langres, Champagne. In virtue of his good taste, acquired by his repeated experiences, Michelangelo was able to give the most beautiful form to the *Dome of Saint Peter* in Rome, with a curve in which the geometer de la Hire read the highest physical power of resistance. Diderot pointed out the accumulated taste of the carpenter, who can give the exact angle to the stay against an inclined wall, and the tact of the craftsman, who knows the right angle

of the wings of a mill.

Here we notice that beauty is deeply correlated with truth and goodness. For Diderot the truth was related to the physical order of the cosmic or natural world, while goodness and beauty were strongly concerned with human beings. It is true that the human intellect cannot grasp all causes and effects. This is the condition of the human beings. But artists will be able to conquer these deficiencies with taste, a faculty acquired through the accumulation of experiences.

Diderot defines art as imitation of nature. The first chapter of the *Treatise* begins with a detailed description of the physical structure of a woman who lost her eyesight in her youth, from the deprived eyes to the toes. By a rigorous imitation respecting this physical constitution of the body, the painter will certainly arrive at a picture which might appear to have been deformed: the head is too heavy; the feet are too big; the legs are too short etc. But, insists Diderot, tact justifies these apparent deformations.

Taste and, above all, tact, which constitutes taste, is a personal ability to overcome the condition of the human being. Tact cannot analyze, but can feel the structure of nature. Sasaki considered this as the most fundamental concept in Diderot's aesthetics. In other words, for Diderot, beauty consists in the beauty of art.

In Chapter VII, Diderot remarks that a basic condition of being a good poet consists in being well versed in the secret of presenting interesting objects, such as parents, married couples, children. He was a son of an experienced *maître coutelier*. This remark reflects the spirit of craftsmanship, based on tact, i.e. on the grounds of his aesthetics. For Diderot, beauty was the beauty of art.

The reviewer has above been focusing on some core problems of the *Treatise*. It goes however without saying that Sasaki's copious work comprehends the researches on diverse interesting problems. Just to mention some, they are : the birth of art criticism, theory of the perception of relation presented in the *Treatise* without being mentioned, critic of the "imitation of beautiful nature" to be confronted with the imitation of the ideal model, parts of technic and idea which correspond to the respective work of painter and philosopher, aesthetics of proportion, sub-consciousness and organism, Diderot's way of writing, dates of writing each chapters of the *Treatise*, and difference of aesthetics of Diderot and Goethe, who was the first commentator of the *Treatise*.

6. Another Work by Sasaki: *Study of the history of the 18th century aesthetics*

Before proceeding to the present work, Sasaki published 『フランスを中心とする18世紀美学史の研究——ワトーからモーツァルトへ』 (*Study of the history of the 18th century aesthetic centered on France — from Watteau to Mozart*) (541+34 pp. Iwanami Publishing Co., Tokyo, 1999). Just as its subtitle shows, Sasaki surveyed there the general art world, in order to grasp historical characteristics of the century from a painter, Watteau (prologue), to a musician, Mozart (epilogue, i.e. so to speak, the prologue of the 19th century). The main subject of the book is the painting as paradigm of 18th century aesthetics, contrasted with music as a paradigm of the 19th century, and he discusses various notions such as interest, happiness, aesthetic perception and the birth of subjectivities etc. Sasaki was specially engaged in reading the writings of

philosophers and poeticsians, such as Malebranche, Boileau, Condillac etc. and theories of painting, panorama of many paintings. It is obvious that this book was a preparation for the present comprehensive work concerning Diderot.

In Diderot's time, people experienced a serious crisis, which was caused by the collapse of the ancient theological order. The truth in Diderot was not theological or metaphysical, but scientific. He defined beauty as value based on truth and goodness in a modern sense, so as to recognize it in a new trinity of value: scientific truth, goodness and beauty. Sasaki is convinced of the originality and modernity of Diderot's aesthetic value theory by comparison with the "beauty=goodness (*kalokagathia*) theory" from Plato.

The reviewer hopes that the present Japanese book will be translated into any other, especially western language in the near future, so as to become an international resource for Diderot scholars today, and thus to contribute to the solution of the problems that Sasaki has suggested here.