

Joshua Reynolds teaching art history: Learning from the past for the future

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Abstract

For Joshua Reynolds, the president of the Royal Academy, the history of art had one specific purpose: to learn from it. Student should learn from Old Masters not only their technique or style, they should amass a collection of ideas that they could draw from when producing new works of art. To depict ideas instead of the mere visual was the ultimate goal of art for Reynolds and contemporaries. Those ideas could be obtained directly from nature by hard mental labour. Or they could be borrowed from the public domain of cultural heritage. Present time progress, according to that, means standing on the shoulders of giants. Just like written books in the natural sciences, the painted works of art are a realm of wisdom an artist is able to contribute to.

The English term “enlightenment” and the French term “lumières” both relate to the metaphor of light. According to this, enlightenment - just like the German term “Aufklärung” - is a process of becoming visible.¹ Bringing light into the dark describes a fundamentally visual concept: What can be seen, can be understood. Therefore it seems consistent that it was an artist who described a method of how seeing becomes comprehension. Joshua Reynolds brought the Fine Arts into a context of enlightenment

¹ See Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Roads to Modernity. The British, French and American Enlightenments*, London 2008, pgs 11–12.

and placed the artist's ability to generate visual knowledge and to communicate it through the production of images into the centre of his thoughts.

In contrary to the developments in continental Europe, British art went a kind of *Sonderweg* throughout the centuries. For geographic and political reasons its encounter with European art theory, developed since Renaissance, only began in early 18th century. At this time Britain rose to a world power, dominated in military and economic terms and began to seek ways to also compete with continental Europe on a cultural level. For this reason, in 1769, under the patronage of the king, an academy was founded in London, whose expressed goal was to support the arts in this country.

On January 2 1769, Joshua Reynolds gave his first lecture as president of the new Royal Academy. He stated: "A Student is not always advancing because he is employed; he must apply his strength to that part of the art where the real difficulties lie; to that part which distinguishes it as a liberal art."²

With this programmatic declaration in front of the members of the academy, he set the goal for the Fine Arts in Britain: The essence of art is the result of hard labour. Reynolds tried to establish art as an epistemological system embedded in both philosophy and art theory. Accordingly, to acquire visual knowledge was to work with methods of empiricism and rationalism. Reynolds focussed his visual epistemology on the cognitive process of seeing and the ontological properties of images.

Joshua Reynolds was an artist himself, who wrote several shorter essays on aesthetics before.³ When he became president of the Royal Academy, on the occasion of the annual presentation of prizes to the students of the academy, he held lectures that were later published under the title "Discourses on Art". Usually they are referred to as late summaries of continental art theories of the 16th to 18th century.⁴ This is probably the reason why Reynolds has been only occasionally discussed and the last translation into

² Joshua Reynolds, Discourse I, in: *Sir Joshua Reynolds. Discourses On Art*, Robert R. Wark (ed.), San Marino 1959, p. 19.

³ In 1759, Reynolds published a series of essays in *The Idler* edited by Samuel Johnson (Nr. 76, 29. September, Nr. 79, 20. October u. Nr. 82, 10. November 1759).

⁴ Wark points out, that Reynolds drew mostly on 17th and 18th century French and British authors, in part also 16th century Italian authors such as Giorgio Vasari (Wark, op. cit., p. XXIII).

German appeared in 1893.⁵ Reynolds art system, however, is more than an eclectic compilation of older ideas. It rather represents a visual epistemology in the context of British philosophy between rationalism and empiricism that can serve as an important source of today's Visual Studies.

In order to define art as a system of epistemology, Reynolds built upon a number of authors, most importantly Plato and his idea of three stages of knowledge. In the allegory of the cave the Greek philosopher described how to gain insight into ideas behind things.⁶ While ordinary men just interpret shadows, knowledge of a higher order understands that these are shadows only and philosophers are able to grasp the idea behind the things. In his ideal state that represents a social hierarchy according to the degree of understanding, it is those enlightened that should lead the state.

In addition, Plato discussed the question, whether artists are also able to gain such real knowledge and in how far they are able to represent knowledge on canvas. In his *Politeia* he expressed a very restrictive opinion: He wrote, a craftsman (e. g. a carpenter) models an object (e. g. a bed) according to the idea of the object. The painter, on the other hand, only creates an image according to the impression the object makes. This means a painter does not directly work after the idea, but only what is visible. He, therefore, is twice removed from the idea and is accordingly placed socially under the craftsman.

Since the time of Renaissance, many artists and art theorists have expressed contempt against this negative concept of the role and possibilities of the artist. Their goal was to define the task of the artist in much wider terms and by this, raise his social status.⁷ Their arguments can be traced back to Aristotle and can be found in the works of Italian theorists such as Giorgio Vasari and Giovanni Bellori, of the French Roger de Piles and André Félibien and of the German archaeologist Johann Joachim Winckelmann.⁸ In 1756 Winckelmann wrote, it should not be the solemn goal of the artist to show nature

⁵ Eduard Leisching, *Zur Aesthetik und Technik der bildenden Künste. Akademische Reden von Sir Joshua Reynolds*, Leipzig 1893.

⁶ Platon, *Politeia*, book VII, 514a-521b, in: *Plato: Werke in 8 Bänden*, hg. v. Gunther Eigler, Bd. 4, Darmstadt 1990, p. 555-575.

⁷ This quote goes back to Horaz (Quintus Horatius Flaccus, *Ars Poetica*, line 361, in: *Quintus Horatius Flaccus, Ars Poetica*, Eckhart Schäfer (ed.), Stuttgart, 1972, p. 6; see also Rudolf Schweizer, *The Ut pictura poesis controversy in eighteenth-century England and Germany*, Frankfurt a. M. 1972).

⁸ Jean H. Hagstrum, *The Sister Arts. The Tradition of literary Pictorialism and English Poetry from Dryden to Gray*, Chicago 1958, p. 143.

as it appears, but “to form general concepts of beauty for the individual parts of the body as well as for its proportions: concepts that were meant to rise above nature”.⁹

This concept becomes clear in an anecdote narrated by the classic author Pliny the elder: The artist named Zeuxis received the commission to create a likeness of Helen of Troy. Being unable to find a single model that resembles the beauty of Helen, Zeuxis selected the best features of five women to create a composite image of ideal beauty. The result was an image that was more beautiful than the beauty of any single one of the models.¹⁰ This shows that the artist is able not only to imitate the external nature, but generate internal ideal images and give them an external representation – he is able to perfect nature.

Winckelmann’s book *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der Griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst* was translated into English by Henry Fuseli in 1765, and was probably known to Reynolds. In his *Discourses*, he also turned against the Platonic view to understand paintings only as likenesses. Reynolds defined the task of the artist rather as the representation of a general idea of beauty. Painters should depict no particular object, but what similar items have in common: “All the arts receive their perfection from ideal beauty, superior to what is to be found in individual nature.”¹¹

Reynolds followed Plato’s view inasmuch as it is the goal of knowledge to decipher the ideas behind the mere visible. But he disagreed with Plato in his theory that the artist can represent only the visible reality. Because his conception of how these ideas could be obtained differed fundamentally from Plato’s. Reynolds rather argued that the artist has also access to ideas. While Plato argued that epistemology is nothing but remembrance of the super-heavenly place (anamnesis) and that there are only ideas *a priori*.¹² Reynolds, in contrast, followed notions of British empiricists of the 17th and 18th Century, such as Francis Bacon, John Locke and David Hume. They argued that knowledge could be gained only a posteriori. In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), Locke disagreed with the idea that there is such a thing as spontaneous inspiration. By this, he

⁹ Johann Joachim Winckelmann: *Reflections on the painting and sculpture of the Greeks*, transl. by Henry Fuseli, London, 1765, p. 12

¹⁰ C. Plinius Secundus d. Ä., *Naturalis historia/Naturkunde*, lateinisch – translated by. Roderich König, Buch 35, München 1978, p. 64.

¹¹ Reynolds, Discourse III, in: Wark, op. cit., p. 42.

¹² Platon, *Menon*, 81d, in: *Plato: Werke in 8 Bänden*, Gunther Eigler (ed.), vol. 2, Darmstadt 1990, p. 539.

also opposed the opinion of the scholastics, who wanted to gain knowledge through pure consideration. Real knowledge, according to Locke, is only gained by sensory experience. He was convinced that in the initial state the human being is like a blank slate (*tabula rasa*) that could only be inscribed by experience:

“Let us then suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper, void of all characters without any ideas. How comes it to be furnished? [...] To this I answer, in one word, from experience. In that all our knowledge is founded, and from that it ultimately derives itself. Our observation, employed either about external sensible objects, or about the internal operations of our minds, perceived and reflected on by ourselves is that which supplies our understandings with all the materials of thinking.”¹³

Locke’s notion of experience was also pivotal for Reynolds. In front of the students of the Royal Academy, he made clear that one cannot come to ideas by looking into the Platonic space ideas (“*tópos hyperouránios*”):

“The poets, orators, and rhetoricians of antiquity, are continually enforcing this position; that all the arts receive their perfection from an ideal beauty, superior to what is to be found in individual nature. [...] They call it inspiration; a gift from heaven. The artist is supposed to have ascended the celestial regions, to furnish his mind with this perfect idea of beauty. [...] [A student] examines his own mind, and perceives there nothing of that divine inspiration, with which, he is told, so many others have been favoured. He never travelled to heaven to gather new ideas; and he finds himself possessed of no other qualifications than what mere common observation and a plain understanding can confer.”¹⁴

Then, he took a decisive turn in his theory that emphasized the importance of empirical knowledge:

“This great ideal perfection and beauty are not to be sought in the heavens, but upon the earth. They are about us, and upon every side of us. But the power of discovering what is deformed in nature, or in other words, what is particular and uncommon, can be acquired only by experience; and the whole beauty and

¹³ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding*, London 1700, Book II, Chapter I, § 2.

¹⁴ Reynolds, *Discourse* III, p. 42–43.

grandeur of the art consists, in my opinion, in being able to get above all singular forms, local customs, particularities, and details of every kind.”¹⁵

Reynolds countered Plato's image theory by calling inductive generalization of sensory data identical with Platonic ideas. Thus, he stands closer to Aristotle, who had already expressed similar arguments against Plato's theory.¹⁶ All knowledge, said Aristotle, needs to start with the sensory perception, because it enables the abstraction of general concepts.¹⁷ For Plato, these universals had their own independent reality, while Aristotle thought them to be in the individual things themselves. John Locke, finally, postulated that these universals do not adhere to the things, but that they are only a mental image of what a class of things have in common:

“[I]t is plain, by what has been said, that general and universal belong not to the real existence of things; but are the inventions and creatures of the understanding [...]”¹⁸

Also Reynolds followed this notion: He called for an empirical epistemology in which the ideas did not exist independently, but only in the mind of a man or an artist - it has to be worked out by intellectual effort:¹⁹

“The Art which we profess has beauty for its object; this it is our business to discover and to express; but the beauty of which we are in quest is general and intellectual; it is an idea that subsists only in the mind; the sight never beheld it, nor

¹⁵ Reynolds, Discourse III, p. 44. See also: Amal Asfour/Paul Williamson, “On Reynolds's Use of de Piles, Locke, and Hume in His Essays on Rubens and Gainsborough”, in: *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 60 (1997), p. 215–229.

¹⁶ Hazard Adams, “Revisiting Reynolds' Discourses and Blake's Annotations”, in: Robert N. Essick/Donald Pearce (Hg.), *Blake in His Time*, Bloomington 1978, p. 128–144, p. 131. More on this debate see Bredvold, op. cit., Hoyt Trowbridge, „Platonism and Sir Joshua Reynolds“, in: *English Studies* 21/1–6 (1939), p. 1–7, Walter J. Hipple Jr., “General and Particular in the Discourses of Sir Joshua Reynolds: A Study in Method”, in: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 11/3 (1953), p. 231–247 and Frederic Will, “Blake's Quarrel with Reynolds”, in: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 15/3 (1957), p. 340–349

¹⁷ Aristoteles, *Metaphysik*, book A, 980a, in: *Aristoteles Metaphysik*, Thomas Alexander Szlezák (ed.), Berlin, 2003, p. 3.

¹⁸ Locke, op. cit., book III, chapter III, § 11.

¹⁹ Trowbridge op. cit., p. 4.

has the hand expressed it: it is an idea residing in the breast of the artist, which he is always labouring to impart [...].”²⁰

Thus, Reynolds added another component to empiricism: rationalism that is processing the sensory data.²¹ His goal was to elevate the artist to become a visual philosopher, who also has access to higher truths. At the same time, he strove to differentiate art from the “*Artes mechanicae*” and establish it as part of the “liberal arts.” Reynolds opposed Plato’s image theory with European art theory and British philosophy. Moreover, he went beyond Locke: He understood processing of visual data as an intellectual task. The representation of an idealized, not directly visible nature presupposes a capacity for abstraction. Thus, Reynolds put the mind and its analytical power at the centre: the artist depicts more than the mere visible, as the “Camera Obscura” does,²² he also does not realize the truth due to spontaneous revelation, but as a result of processed sensory experience: “The value and rank of every art is in proportion to the mental labour employed in it or the mental pleasure produced by it.”²³

Reynolds followed Plato in the idealistic goal and Aristotle in empirical epistemology. With Locke, he added the task of the mind and added the specific intellectual work of the artist that stood at the centre of his system of visual epistemology. The vision was for him not just looking, but a recognition, understanding, an abstraction. This mental work consists of “contemplation” and “comparison.”²⁴ It, thus, is an active process of analysing, filtering and ordering, of repeated observation, of rethinking and comparing with the aim to derive an idea from nature.

²⁰ Reynolds, Discourse IX, in: Wark, op. cit., p. 171.

²¹ His book *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums* was translated in 1849 by Giles Henry Lodge. Winckelmann writes: “Die Schönheit wird durch den Sinn empfunden, aber durch den Verstand erkannt und begriffen” (Johann Joachim Winckelmann: *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums*, Dresden, 1764, book IV, chap. II, § 18).

²² It is remarkable that Joshua Reynolds was in possession of a “Camera Obscura.” Today, it is in the Science Museum, London (No. 1875–28).

²³ Reynolds, Discourse IV, in: Wark: op. cit., p. 57.

²⁴ Reynolds explains: “But it is not every eye that perceives these blemishes. It must be an eye long used to the contemplation and comparison of these forms; and which, by a long habit of observing what any set of objects of the same kind have in common, has acquired the power of discerning what each wants in particular” (Reynolds, Discourse III, p. 44). Hagstrum writes: “General beauty is like scientific law: it is disclosed not by revelation but by research” (Hagstrum, op. cit., p. 143).

Reynolds' rationalism cannot be separated from his empiricism. On the one hand, he made clear that working from memory alone would not lead to great art. In his critique of the French artist François Boucher, he said, the continuous study of nature is the basis of great works of art.²⁵ On the other hand, Reynolds rebuffed purely mystical contemplation, with the aim to attain higher wisdom. Reynolds rather called for a combination of sensory experience and mental labour.

This turn away from the external world towards the spirit of the artist is of decisive importance: It is no longer about the representation of reality alone, but about looking at the reality. According to Reynolds, the artist reaches the goal of abstracting from the variation of nature creates general ideas through a synthesis of sensory experiences and the power of the mind. The resulting idea could be described as an inner image produced using this intellectual power: "The power of representing this mental picture on canvass is what we call Invention in a Painter."²⁶

While Locke understood the "internal image" as a term, for Reynolds the character of the mental image was basically visual.²⁷ Reynolds saw the attainment of inner images as a cognitive process. For him, the transformation of an internal image to an external picture, however, was more a question of technical skill that the aspiring artist should receive in his academic training. However, the focus should be on the mental part in order to raise art from craft: "[I]t is not the eye, it is the mind, which the painter of genius desires to address."²⁸

In *Discourse IV* Reynolds made clear that the depiction of ideas practically meant to omit the details and only show what stands before one's inner eye. Details of clothes, furniture, or action have no importance. A portrait should capture the impression of a person and not his accurate appearance. In a historical painting, said Reynolds, Raphael had shown the apostles not as simple people who they were, but as one should imagine them, i.e. as noble gentlemen. The painter, who - unlike the writer - is able to work with the visual medium can show the noble character of the apostles by representing them in idealized bodies, i.e. not as specific persons, but the general idea of virtuous men.²⁹

²⁵ Reynolds, Discourse XII, in: Wark, op. cit., p. 223–225.

²⁶ Reynolds, Discourse IV, p. 58.

²⁷ Locke wrote of "signs, whether words or ideas" (op. cit., book III, chapter III, § 11, p. 241).

²⁸ Reynolds, Discourse III, p. 50.

²⁹ Reynolds, Discourse IV, p. 57–73.

For Reynolds, the goal of artistic activity is the ultimate transformation of internal images into external pictures, which are carriers of knowledge. The painting should be more than pure copying of nature, but a picture charged with semantic meaning that goes beyond the visible. Therefore, Reynolds insisted on the elaboration of objective truth that cannot be seen easily, but has to be abstracted from sensory data. Things, people and events should not be shown as they appear, but as they should be. This is “that part of the art where the real difficulties lie.”³⁰

Before his audience, which included members and students of the Royal Academy, Reynolds called for the consistent implementation of this complex process. At the same time, he pointed out that this process has a shortcut. The study of ancient Greek and Roman sculptures and paintings of Old Masters, especially Raphael and Michelangelo. Those artists, according to Reynolds, have done the requisite mental labour already that is represented in their works.

In the speeches Reynolds defined pictures as communication media of visual epistemology and the fine arts as a scientific system of knowledge: empiricism and rationalism generate a visual understanding of the world that is turned into pictures. Just like a scientist who studies the book of the generations of scientists before him and adds his own thoughts to this knowledge, Reynolds outlines the system of art as constructive system of collective knowledge.³¹

This idea is a result of Reynolds’ departure from Plato’s system of ideas as a memory process. Reynolds accepted the limited possibilities of human knowledge through sensory experiences and declared art to be a system of knowledge:

“A knowledge of the disposition and character of the human mind can be acquired only by experience [...] but we can never be sure that our own sensations are true and right, till they are confirmed by more extensive observation. One man opposing another determines nothing; but a general union of minds, like a general combination of the forces of all mankind, makes a strength that is irresistible.”³²

Therefore, the task of the artist is to collect a number of internal images through the observation of nature and studying of Old Masters that can be depicted on canvas or in

³⁰ Reynolds, Discourse I, p. 19.

³¹ Robert K. Merton, *On The Shoulders of Giants. A Shandean Postscript*, New York 1965, p. 268.

³² Reynolds, Discourse VII, in: Wark, op. cit., p. 132.

sculpture in order to progress in collective knowledge. Art is thus an epistemological system generating truth. Reynolds defined the role of the artist within a knowledge-seeking society. The artist thus possesses the ability to present the results of his intellectual work to the public in the visual medium.³³

Reynolds was the undisputed authority at the Royal Academy.³⁴ He was also the inspirational source for two generations of art students who were enthusiastic about the idea of the artist as an intellectual. Over the 21 years in which he delivered 15 Discourses, his position was not a dogmatic one, but he tried to incorporate currents of the time. In *Discourse XIII* in 1786, to a limited extent he allowed to address the emotions of the viewers. He even dissented in part from the extreme focus on the mind and responded to contemporary ideas, which are connected with Roger de Piles. De Piles, a French art theorist of the 17th century, turned against the rationalization of the painting, as propagated the French Academy based on the works of Nicolas Poussin.³⁵ Instead of addressing the mind with a reduced color palette and a linear style of painting, de Piles pleaded for the emotional impact of color as they are to be found in the works of Rubens.³⁶

Also in England a romantic countercurrent had set in. Already in 1757, Edmund Burke was calling for the sublime as an additional element of aesthetics. One of the most important representatives of the emerging Romantic Movement in England, however, was William Blake. In the marginalia of his copy of the *Discourses* he sharply criticized Reynolds rationalism.³⁷ In particular, Blake criticized the role of imagination in the

³³ Reynolds, Discourse IX, p. 171.

³⁴ Samuel H. Monk, *The Sublime. A Study of critical Theories in XVIII-century England*, New York 1935, p. 173.

³⁵ Thomas Kirchner, "Neue Themen – Neue Kunst? Zu einem Versuch, die französische Historienmalerei zu reformieren", in: Ekkehard Mai/Anke Repp-Eckert, *Historienmalerei in Europa. Paradigmen in Form, Funktion und Ideologie*, Mainz 1990, p. 107–119.

³⁶ The tension between Ratio and Emotio is also the thrift between the so called Rubinists und Poussinists in the late 17th century, see Roger de Piles, *Conversations sur la connoissance de la peinture*, Paris 1677. Reynolds probably possessed this edition of the work : *The Art of Painting and the Lives of the Painters*, London 1706. See: Thomas Puttfarcken, *Roger De Piles' Theory of Art*, New Haven/London 1985.

³⁷ He used the second edition of Edmond Malone published in 1798 (see Adams, op. cit.). More on Blakes Marginalia see: James Fenton, *School of Genius. A History of the Royal Academy of Arts*. London 2006, p. 106ff.

artistic process according to Reynolds. Just like for Locke, for Reynolds inventions were just recombinations of previously stored sensory experiences:

“It is indisputably evident that a great part of every man's life must be employed in collecting materials for the exercise of genius. Invention, strictly speaking, is little more than a new combination of those images which have been previously gathered and deposited in the memory: nothing can come of nothing: he who has laid up no materials, can produce no combinations.”³⁸

For this reason, every artist should create a large image archive in his mind in order to vary these images as extensively as possible. Indeed, neoclassicists frequently were using image formulas borrowed from antiquity and from Old Master for their own compositions.³⁹ The imagination is thus based on memory and is a process of association: The mind forms new combinations in a kind of spontaneous, unconscious process, which is controlled by rational principles. Reynolds put value on the intellectual power of the artist, but that was a far cry of what Blake thought to be a creative act.⁴⁰ While Reynolds asked for abstraction from nature, Blake was convinced that ideas come from imagination. While Reynolds separated the mental work for the generation of pure ideas from its visualization on canvas, Blake believed that the creative process lies in the process of painting itself. Here the thinking and innovation takes place.

Another notable position is the development of Reynolds' theory in the U.S. During the Revolutionary War, numerous artists came from America to London. Thrilled by European art treasures and the notion of painting ideas, they tried to establish history painting in the United States. Being used to simple likenesses of the colonial era, the American public rejected this concept of the idealized image and even accused those paintings, unimpressed by art theoretical discourse, of painterly lies. The reproduction of the visible appearance was considered a top priority of image production. An artist who created a mental picture and brought this on canvas had hardly a place in American

³⁸ Reynolds, Discourse II, in: Wark, op. cit., p. 27. See also Edmund Burke, “On Taste”, in: *The Sublime and Beautiful*, London 1759, p. 16.

³⁹ Other examples are works by John Singleton Copley and Benjamin West (Werner Busch, “Copley, West, and the Tradition of European High Art”, in: Thomas W. Gaetgens/Heinz Ickstadt (ed.), *American Icons. Transatlantic Perspectives on Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century American Art*, Santa Monica 1992, p. 34–59).

⁴⁰ See: Ernst H. Gombrich, “Reynolds's Theory and Practice of Imitation”, in: *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 80/467 (1942), p. 40–45.

society. Probably for this reason, the daguerreotype in 1839 encountered such an enthusiastic reception in the U.S., for it seemed to show genuine visual reality.⁴¹

For Reynolds images represented the result of an intellectual process. Imagination for him was the ability to retrieve a large collection of visual experience, combining them to new inventions and represent them on canvas. Reynolds' art system as visual epistemology thus consists of five elements: First, he assumes that the goal of knowledge is the acquisition of ideas. Ideas are attained by empirical sense data and their mental processing. Finally, it is the imagination that combines this content to new images and contributes to collective knowledge. By this, Reynolds gave the artist's activity a clear theoretical framework and a goal. He distanced himself much from of the idea of the artist as a mere mindless copyist, as Plato had seen him. Instead, he expanded the artistic task to the presentation of ideas. These ideas, according to Reynolds, do not fall from the sky; the artist develops them from empirical sense data using his reason. The knowledge acquired in this way, is then is then handed on in the form of images by the artist. Thus, Reynolds established an art system that contributes to the individual and collective knowledge acquisition.

Reynolds achievement lies in bringing art into an order in the sense of enlightenment, in which it can be of service - similar to natural science. On one side, Reynolds tried to create an institutional and a theoretical base for a British artistic tradition by founding the Royal Academy and publishing his *Discourses*. This is the reason why he reverted to the art theory developed over centuries in Europe. On the other hand, he wanted to establish an own English tradition of painting that was independent from continental Europe. Therefore, he included thoughts of British authors and took on a mediating position between rationalism and empiricism.

The notion of visual epistemology that represented Reynolds in his writings can be connected with current issues in visual studies. As Reynolds dealt with the visual process that goes far beyond a passive gaze but extends to an active recognition. He also understood images as communication tools that are able to gain knowledge and to pass them on. By this, Reynolds did not focus on the painting as an object of contemplative aesthetic, but on man as artist and beholder. It is man who sees, processes and generates

⁴¹ Harald Klink, *Amerikanische Historienmalerei. Neue Bilder für die Neue Welt*, Göttingen 2011, and Donald D. Keyes, "The Daguerreotype's Popularity in America", in: *Art Journal* 36/2 (1976/1977), p. 116–122.

new images that recognizes images as carriers of meaning and uses them as a means of communication of internal images and ideas. Reynolds theory of art is, thus, to be read in the context of contemporary theories of image in which the focus is on the human being.⁴²

Reynolds Discourses show that he understood image production as a fundamentally intellectual task that combines the method of observation with an epistemological process in order to detect the ideas behind things and communicate them to the audience of the artworks. The study of his writings can thus make clear that the theory of art has always dealt not only with issues of art, but also with general questions of the image and its relevance to humans.

Reynolds thoughts on the history of art and its role in teaching at an art academy played an important role in the formation of a new idea of progress in the arts in America. Samuel Morse founded the National Academy of Design in 1825 that mimicked much the Royal Academy in London. Morse even delivered addresses similar to those by Reynolds. However, they gradually differ in their notion on progress and increasingly cut off the role of European Old Masters as models for artistic production in America. In keeping more and more a distance from Reynolds, a younger generation of artists developed their own basis of exemplary artworks. This was instrumental also for the creation of American modernism as developed in early 20th century.

⁴² Hans Belting, *Bild-Anthropologie. Entwürfe für eine Bildwissenschaft*, München 2001, p.11-55.