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On the Art of Translating Art

Texts dealing with art matters resist any translation-related text type categorization. Style-wise, they range indefinitely from technical specifications and record lists to learned philosophical essays, from rigid forms of catalogue entries to belle-letters descriptions. Apart from that, there is hardly any area of human knowledge they do not cover. Therefore, texts on art spread stubbornly, if unevenly, across any text-type classification. This fact alone makes teaching translation of such texts complicated. There are, however, certain focal points to be concentrated on. Firstly, the difficult part about translating texts on art is that they are the double-faced Januses making the translator deal with two systems of signs, linguistic and visual ones. Practice proves that, more often than not, only verbal texts are fed to the translator, the commissioner hardly ever realizing that it may turn out to be crucial for a good result. However, it is specifically in texts dealing with arts that verbal context alone may appear insufficient for resolving cases of polysemy or the ambiguities of language, the second plane – the visual one – being capable of destroying the suggested translation variant. Secondly, consistency is required in dealing with the titles of works of art (or exhibition names), which is sometimes hard to achieve for several reasons: a work may be known under several titles, the title may be undergoing translation for the first time to stay in the target culture etc. In such cases the translator is challenged with the extremely exacting task of name giving. Thirdly, the cultural component of presenting information is essential. Localization is a buzzword today, and it needs to be applied with greater efficiency to texts on art.