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EXPLORING THE "DARK CONTINENT"

Franz Wickhoff, Alois Riegl, and the First Definitions of Late Antique Art

IN THE MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY, THE IDEA OF LATE ANTIQUE ART AS A VIABLE subject of inquiry had no intellectual currency. As the discipline of art history began to take shape and the first universal histories of art began to appear on the shelves of German bookshops in the 1840s and 1850s, the visual world of the later Roman Empire had only a ghostly and maligned presence. Whether official or private, pagan or Christian, works of art from the later third through seventh centuries were examined cursorily, if at all, the accompanying discussions shoehorned into the last pages of chapters that discussed ancient art or the first paragraphs of those dealing with the medieval period. In these cramped quarters, major imperial monuments such as the fourth-century Arch of Constantine were held up as objects of ridicule, while the art of the earliest Christian communities, invariably represented by paintings from the Roman catacombs, was damned with faint praise as the pious if undistinguished predecessor of the great works created in Romanesque and Gothic Europe.[1] In this environment, late antiquity was, as Alois Riegl was to note when he came to the subject in the mid-1890s, the "dark continent of art historical inquiry," a period without name or date whose artistic identity summoned grim thoughts of decadence and decline.[2]

The lack of interest in or identification of a late antique art was in some measure a reflection of the status of Roman art. Although the evidence of Roman artistic production was acknowledged as monumental and magnificent, it also was dismissed as the poor and faded sister of Greek art. Moreover,

not only was resistance to the very idea of an independent Roman art robust, but the Romans themselves were denied any but the most banal of artistic sensibilities. As the art historian Wilhelm Lübke (1826–1893) suggested, the Greeks were artists, the Romans bureaucrats. Evidence lay in the nature of their artistic production. While the Greeks produced sublime images of gods and heroes, Roman art was bombastic and official, its notable works the portrait statues, triumphal arches, and honorific columns of the imperial world. Worse yet, these monuments, although imposing, provided unequivocal evidence for the unraveling of classical standards of form and beauty.[3] Herein lay the rub: The real difficulty with Roman art was its style. With its odd systems of proportion, strange repetitions of form, and awkward spatial constructions, it was nothing if not ugly.

A further impediment to the development of the idea of a late antique art lay in the nineteenth-century approach to ancient Christian materials, the study of which took place outside the sphere of classical and art historical scholarship. In the great age of western European archaeological expansion, as governments poured funding into research and classical philologists and archaeologists from Europe's most prestigious universities attended the opening of schools and excavations across Greece and Asia Minor that were sources of national status and pride, the business of Christian exploration was in the hands of ecclesiastics, who operated with different ends in mind. Thus, while classical archaeologists recovered materials from sites such as Aegina, Pergamum, and Delphi in campaigns that gave physical life to the ideals of the classical civilizations understood to be the bedrock of the European intellectual tradition, Christian archaeologists excavated in places such as North Africa or the rocky uplands of the Syrian massif, providing material documentation for a different type of history, that of the early church, which in turn served as a platform for western missionary activity.[4]

Similar aims drove archaeological work in the city of Rome, a territory whose political agenda was as ambitious as its Christian archaeological patrimony was rich. As Italy moved toward unification in the mid-nineteenth century and the papacy's territorial holdings and political authority were increasingly circumscribed, the archaeology of Christianity took on new urgency. Investigation of the city's catacombs, which had begun in the sixteenth century but waned in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, once again came to occupy pride of place in the urban archaeological agenda as a means to enhance the spiritual authority of the Holy See in the face of its diminishing political heft.[5]

Given these unpromising conditions, it is remarkable and, in some respects, strange that there was, by century's end, a comparative explosion of interest in late antique art in, of all places, Vienna. Between 1895 and 1901, two major publications appeared that would give late antique art its definition: *Die Wiener Genesis* (*The Vienna Genesis*) by Franz Wickhoff and Wilhelm von Hartel and

Die spätrömische Kunst-Industrie (*The Late Roman Art-Industry*) by Alois Riegl. Working together, Wickhoff and Riegl aimed to shed light on works of art hailing from their dark continent of art historical inquiry.

DEFINING ROMAN ART: FRANZ WICKHOFF (1853–1909) AND *DIE WIENER GENESIS*

Two things were necessary before the study of late antiquity could be imagined: a definition of Roman art that would persuade contemporary viewers of its autonomy and creativity, and a demonstration of the continuity between pagan and Christian traditions. That project became the work of Franz Wickhoff,[6] who in the early 1890s divided his time between the Austrian Museum for Art and Industry and the University of Vienna. He took up this double-barreled task in an unlikely context, a publication devoted to one of the most well-known manuscripts in the Austrian Imperial Library, the codex known as the Wiener Genesis (Vienna Genesis).[7] The manuscript, which had been in the imperial library in Vienna since the seventeenth century, is an illuminated purple parchment codex that preserves an abbreviated version of the Septuagint Genesis text.[8] It survives incomplete, with twenty-four of an estimated ninety-six folios remaining. Each folio shares a standard format: Text written in large silver uncials occupies the upper half of the page, while an illumination related to the text is seen below. Although now dated to the sixth or even seventh century, earlier studies, Wickhoff's among them, assigned dates as early as the fifth century.[9]

At the time Wickhoff began his study, interest in the Genesis lay exclusively in the description of its miniatures. Earlier publications had presented these illuminations in isolation as a series of black and white engravings, and discussion had focused on iconography.[10] The new project, sponsored by the imperial library, was to take an entirely different tack, one that combined the latest photographic technologies with cutting-edge analytical methods to present the codex in a new light. For the first time, individual folios were reproduced complete and in color, recording each miniature and its allied texts in a single image. In addition, new forms of art historical inquiry were brought to bear on the manuscript's analysis. It was here that the publication made its most innovative intellectual contribution.[11]

Die Wiener Genesis, which appeared in 1895, was a collaborative venture. Wilhelm von Hartel, a classical philologist, took on the codicological and paleographic examination, Wickhoff the art historical assessment. They organized the results of their study in three parts. The first, by Wickhoff, offered a general art historical discussion; the second, by Hartel, provided the technical analysis; and the third, again by Wickhoff, described the iconography of each of the individual illuminations together with their stylistic characteristics.[12]

The conclusions were extraordinary. From his paleographical analysis Hartel observed, albeit incorrectly, that the manuscript was of fifth-century manufacture.[13] Wickhoff, following his colleague on date, identified the illumination's visual characteristics and described them as proper to Roman art.[14] These observations had important consequences: In the absence of any recognition of an autonomous Roman artistic tradition, much less a clear identification of its forms, they required Wickhoff to define what he meant by Roman art. That definition, as much as the analysis of the Genesis itself, stands at the heart of *Die Wiener Genesis*.

Wickhoff took on the definition in part one, centering his observations not, as was then the norm, on iconography but on style. Opening with a discussion of the Genesis illuminations, he isolated and described the manuscript's distinctive visual characteristics. These he identified as two: "continuous narration" (*die continuirende Erzählung* or *die continuirende Darstellungsart*) and "illusionist (or illusionistic) style" (*Illusionsstil*). The first, continuous narration, he described as an uninterrupted form of storytelling characterized by the repetition of a figure within a single visual field. The story of Rebecca and Eleazar at the well (Genesis 24:11–22) offers an example (Figure 9). Rebecca appears twice, walking toward the spring from which she will draw water and then slaking Eleazar's thirst with an offering from the well. According to Wickhoff, such repetition created a seamless flow of action in which no single event took precedence over another.[15] The second, illusionist style, he described as a coloristic means of representation designed to suggest rather than document form through the "impressionistic" (*impressionistischer*) manipulation of light, shade, and the physical medium of paint itself.[16] Wickhoff concluded by stating that, because both representational strategies were Roman, the Genesis must be considered a work of Roman art.[17]

These observations set the stage for Wickhoff's definition of Roman art. In the following three chapters, using the same observational tactics he had applied to the analysis of the miniatures, he discussed the nature of Roman painting and sculpture. In the second chapter, he mapped the relationship between Greek and Roman art in purely formal terms, beginning with a thumbnail sketch of the history of Greek sculpture from fifth-century BC Athens through second-century BC Pergamon and Alexandria. He then continued with a discussion of the sculptural production of Augustan Rome. The protagonists in this art historical survey were the Prima Porta Augustus, the reliefs from the Ara Pacis, and the Grimani reliefs, two sculptured wellheads that had recently come to the Kunsthistoriches Museum in Vienna, the one showing a ewe with a suckling lamb, the other a lioness and cub. Wickhoff observed a common style among all of these works, one that he characterized as a literal observation of nature, delicate and precise in its modeling, powerful in its relief. This, he noted, was "naturalism," a Hellenistic style used by Greek

9. Rebecca and Eleazar at the Well, Vienna Genesis, sixth century. Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. Theol. Gr. 31, fol. 7v. Photo: Courtesy of the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek

artists in Rome for Roman patrons after Alexandrian models. It represented the last phase of Hellenistic and therefore Greek art and was the springboard from which all later Roman art would develop.[18]

Having established to his satisfaction that Augustan art was the last manifestation of the Greek tradition, Wickhoff continued in the third chapter with a description of Roman relief as it developed over the course of the first and

10. Floral relief from the Tomb of the Haterii, late first–early second century, Vatican Museums (Museo Gregoriano Profano). Photo: Album/ Alamy Stock Photo

second centuries. In a visual analysis of floral reliefs from the late first- or early second-century Tomb of the Haterii (Figure 10), he observed what he described as a new emphasis on modeling with light and shade in contrast to the precise, linear replication of detail seen in Augustan sculpture.[19] This new technique created what he considered an impression or suggestion of form, one that required the imaginative completion of the image by the viewer based

on his or her experience of the world. He dubbed the style "illusionist" and argued that the approach was Roman, before going on to track its features at work in a series of first- and second-century examples, among them a first-century bust of a Flavian woman, the reliefs from the Tomb of the Julii at St. Rémy in France, and the Flavian panels on the Arch of Titus in Rome. Using the spiraling, historiated reliefs on the Column of Trajan as a further example, Wickhoff continued by arguing that this Roman illusionist style had its most characteristic expression when coupled with continuous narration, a phenomenon fully in evidence on the column.[20]

In the fourth chapter, Wickhoff traced a parallel course of development in Roman painting, arguing that the illusionist style replaced naturalistic representation in two-dimensional works of art over the course of the first century. Thus, the garden frescoes of Livia's villa at Prima Porta represented an analogue to the naturalistic reliefs from the Ara Pacis, while fourth-style wall painting from Pompeii corresponded to the illusionism of the Arch of Titus panels.[21] As in his analysis of sculpture, naturalism was understood as the documentary replication of natural form in all of its detail. Its means of expression was linear. By contrast, illusionism, best expressed through juxtapositions of color that capture not the minutiae of linear detail but the ephemeral effects of light and shade, suggested the nature of form rather than documenting it.[22]

Wickhoff defined this new Roman art in ethnic terms, as an amalgam of Greek and Latin, or Italic, traditions. The interest in natural form that stood at the heart of Greek art carried over into Roman production, where it was tempered by the illusionistic impulses and narrative techniques of a native Latin tradition.[23] Far from being an art of decline, Roman art was an art of new possibilities, one that flirted with the representation of nature, space, and time in different and exciting ways.

With Roman art defined, Wickhoff returned to the Genesis illuminations in his concluding chapter, recognizing in the execution of its surviving miniatures two types of style. The first style, which was linear, represented the work of artists trained in the book arts. The second, an illusionist style that was combined with continuous narration, derived from the brush of those with experience in the tradition of monumental painting. Although he felt that the execution in a good deal of the illusionist work lacked finesse, the issue of quality was ultimately of little import. What mattered most to Wickhoff was the combined presence of illusionist style and continuous narrative technique: With both in evidence, he claimed the Genesis for Roman tradition.[24] The implications were profound. In this single observation, he expanded the chronological frame of Roman art and drew Christian art into its orbit.

In its most basic sense, *Die Wiener Genesis* was an exercise in definitions: It articulated a concrete difference between Greek and Roman visual form and

so gave shape and substance to the hitherto vague notion of Roman art both in terms of style and by extension chronology. By observing the emergence of the salient visual characteristics of Roman tradition in the art of the Flavian era, Wickhoff was able to place the emergence of what he felt to be a true Roman visual expression in the middle of the first century. By tracking the persistence of these traits as far as the Genesis, he extended the reach of this new tradition well into the fifth.

This seemingly straightforward act of definition had far-reaching consequences: Not only did it legitimate the idea of an independent Roman visual tradition, but it also revised the cultural context of that tradition. By describing the Genesis as Roman, Wickhoff transformed the idea of Roman art, broadening it from its official, imperial, and bureaucratic base to include works of Christian manufacture. This shift was significant. As an art that incorporated Christian images, Roman art now bridged the traditional historical chasm between antiquity and the Middle Ages. As such, it was, Wickhoff claimed, an art of transition.[25]

Although Wickhoff did not define a specific late antique art, he created the conditions for that discussion to happen. He did so most obviously by characterizing Roman art as a distinct phenomenon. Equally important was the method with which he arrived at that definition. Specifically, by treating visual materials as documents and placing the systematic observation of form at the center of study, Wickhoff established new criteria for art historical analysis. In this regard, he set himself apart from his contemporaries. Most nineteenth-century study pursued one of two paths: Either it approached a work of art from the point of view of a salon critic, pronouncing judgment in terms of positive or negative aesthetic value, or it concentrated on the identification and description of subject matter, a process that relied heavily on literary sources for understanding. By setting aside value judgment and iconographic description as the goals of art historical discussion, Wickhoff made the work of art a document in its own right, one that provided information in such formal elements as line, color, and composition. By isolating these characteristic features and compiling information about them, he was able to create something new, a history of visual form and with it a history of perception. In so doing, he set the stage for the work of his younger colleague, Alois Riegl.

LATE ROMAN ART: ALOIS RIEGL (1858–1905) AND DIE SPÄTRÖMISCHE KUNST-INDUSTRIE

While Wickhoff was working on the text that would become *Die Wiener Genesis*, Alois Riegl, then Wickhoff's curatorial colleague at the museum, was preparing material for an exhibition that would become the catalyst to the first sustained discussion of late antique art proper.[26] The Archaeological

Exhibition, held in 1893, brought together antiquities from Austrian private collections. Mounted in conjunction with the forty-second annual meeting of German Educators and Philologists which took place in Vienna that year, its purpose was to showcase Austrian holdings in ancient art. These holdings were overwhelmingly small in scale and included everything from practical objects such as cutlery and cooking vessels to prestige objects such as bronze statuettes of gods and heroes, arms, armor, and gold jewelry. Most of the items were of second- and third-century manufacture, but there was also a cluster of later materials listed in the accompanying visitors' guide that included works of "so-called barbarian enamel" of "late Roman manufacture." These were the works of Riegl's art-industry.[27]

Although only a small part of the exhibition, these objects captured Riegl's imagination, and when the Austrian Ministry of Education invited him to prepare the materials for publication, he accepted the invitation. Initially organized around objects first assembled for the Archaeological Exhibition, his study eventually expanded to include pieces from the Austrian imperial collections. *Die spätrömische Kunst-Industrie nach den Funden in Österreich-Ungarn im Zusammenhange mit der Gesammtentwicklung der bildenden Künste bei den Mittelmeervölkern* (*The Late Roman Art-Industry Based on Finds in Austria and Hungary in the Context of the Larger Development of the Fine Arts among the Mediterranean Peoples*) is the fruit of this labor.[28]

Riegl's title was in some respects misleading, for, although the materials of the art-industry were the *raison d'être* for the publication, they are by no means its actual subject. They represented, rather, one element in an ambitious study that Riegl imagined as a monumental two-part exploration of the visual arts in the "latest phase of ancient art."[29]

The Late Roman Art-Industry was intended as the first part of this exploration. Its purpose was to examine the products of this art-industry in light of the Mediterranean artistic traditions that had given rise to their creation, and in so doing to discover the connections between Mediterranean art and the art produced by the Germanic peoples in the period between the fourth and the eighth centuries. Specifically, Riegl proposed to demonstrate that the development of this last phase of ancient art was beholden not to "barbarian" influence, as was generally supposed, but rather to changes generated from within the Roman world itself. Building on the work of the first part, the second part was to lay out the extent of the Germanic populations' contribution to the formation of the fine arts from the ninth century on. This second study was never completed, a casualty of Riegl's shifting interests and his untimely death in 1905.[30]

To identify and explain the nature of the latest phase of ancient art was thus the goal of the *Late Roman Art-Industry*. This was Riegl's dark continent: a place without date or name or visual characteristics. Accordingly, in an effort

to illuminate the territory, Riegl opened with a definition of terms. He began by setting the dates, a task he undertook with astonishing precision. Late antiquity began in 313 with the legalization of Christianity and ended in 768 with the coronation of Charlemagne as King of the Franks, a 450-year span that Riegl characterized as an age of transition between antiquity and the Middle Ages.[31]

Next came the task of naming. Although he acknowledged the term "late antique" (*spätantike*) as appropriate, Riegl's preferred designation was "late Roman" (*spätrömisch*), a description that had the advantage of being simultaneously exclusive and inclusive. For Riegl, the weakness of "late antique" as a moniker was that it encompassed the art of all late ancient populations, Egyptian and Mesopotamian among them. Riegl saw his imagined community as distinct from the cultures of Egypt and the ancient Near East. The style under study was, he argued, a specifically Roman phenomenon, one associated not with the city of Rome or the Italic peoples but rather with the political enterprise of the Roman Empire and the cultural community it established across the time and space of the Mediterranean world. Riegl understood the uniform artistic tradition produced by and for this community as a kind of cultural glue that served the empire's varied populations, pagans and Christians among them. This phenomenon, enduring and cohesive, was distinctly Roman in the broadest sense of the word; therefore, he thought it fitting that this last phase of ancient art bear its name.[32]

With the chronological and titular scaffolding in place, Riegl then turned to building the larger program. The goal was to identify and describe what he referred to as "laws governing the development" (*Gesetze der Entwicklung*) of monuments in all media.[33] This was a two-pronged project. It demanded, first, that Riegl observe and characterize the formal qualities shared by the arts across media, and, second, that he explain the larger creative force shaping these laws, the phenomenon he referred to as *Kunstwollen*. According to Riegl, *Kunstwollen* governed not only the mind and hand of an individual artist, but also the society in which he operated. It thus conditioned both the creation of and response to artistic form. *The Late Roman Art-Industry* represents an effort to isolate and characterize the distinctive elements of a late Roman *Kunstwollen* as manifest in physical form.[34]

Riegl's second goal was to demonstrate how this late Roman *Kunstwollen* and the art to which it gave rise could and should be understood. Specifically, and against the prevailing opinion that artistic production from the fourth century on demonstrated the collapse of classical values in the face of barbarian influences, Riegl proposed that the last phase of ancient art represented the positive expression of a *Kunstwollen* that was the natural outgrowth of developments generated from within the Roman world itself.[35]

To demonstrate his point, Riegl cast his net wide. Following Wickhoff's newly expanded definition of Roman art and the methodological focus on formal analysis, he relied not only on the traditional sorts of monuments crucial to any study of Roman antiquity – portraits, triumphal arches, and sarcophagi – to build his argument but also on works of Christian art. Materials monumental and miniature were included in the discussion, everything from the fourth-century mosaics in the mausoleum of Constantia in Rome to sixth-century carved ivory panels. Riegl explored these materials in four chapters, each organized around medium. He began with architecture, continued with sculpture, and moved on to painting before coming to an examination of the small-scale works of the art-industry itself. The focus throughout was on form.

In chapter one, ostensibly on architecture, Riegl began once again with definitions, first identifying and describing the laws governing artistic production in all media, and then sketching their development from the Egyptian period through the Roman. Here he observed that the first goal of the visual arts throughout antiquity, whether among the Egyptians, the Greeks, or the Romans, was to imitate nature by representing figures and objects as recognizable material entities on a pictorial plane.[36] Further, it was his conviction that, although all art strives to meet these goals, individuals and, by extension, the historical periods in which they live have different ideas about what constitutes such imitation, based upon interlocking categories of conception and perception.[37]

For Riegl, three viewing traditions structured these categories: *Nahsicht* (near sight, or close viewing), *Fernsicht* (far sight, or distant viewing), and *Normalsicht* (normal sight, or normal viewing). Each term corresponded to a mode of perception and aligned with a moment in history. Riegl defined close viewing in terms of two dimensions. Its most characteristic manifestation was in the art of ancient Egypt, an art in which objects appear flattened and outlined within a single, two-dimensional plane, which he described as "tactile" (*taktisch*) and "haptic" (*haptisch*). This tactile essence constituted perception at its most basic and literal.[38]

Distant viewing, by contrast, was the representation of form in a spatial plane. Its most characteristic manifestation came in the fourth-century frieze that wrapped around the middle of the Arch of Constantine (Figure 11). For Riegl, the reliefs continued to represent figures within the plane, but they did so not on the two-dimensional surface but by isolating individual forms from one another within the plane's three-dimensional space, thus setting up an "optical" (*optisch*) contrast between light and dark. Here perception stepped back from the literal to become imaginative.[39] Like Wickhoff, Riegl understood this imaginative act of optical perception as a process in which an individual recognized and completed the forms represented from his or her own experience of the world.

11. Arch of Constantine, Rome, 315. Photo: S. Bassett

Finally, between the poles of close and distant viewing stood the category of *Normalsicht* (normal sight or viewing). Normal viewing represented not only the balance between the literalness of close viewing and the imaginative play of distant viewing but also that between tactile and optical understanding. Its most characteristic manifestation came in the fifth-century BC reliefs from the Parthenon in Athens.[40]

In conjunction with the broad categories of close and distant viewing Riegl applied two other terms throughout his discussion, "crystalline" (*krystallinisch*) and "organic" (*organisch*). Although not directly defined, Riegl made it clear through usage that the terms characterized the formal qualities of representation. Thus, the term "crystalline" was used to describe works of art that emphasized symmetrical composition and two-dimensional, linear form, while the designation "organic" was applied to images that were asymmetrical and gave the appearance of three-dimensionality. Finally, he associated each of these visual values with a larger idea: Crystalline form embodied the immutable and eternal aspects of inorganic matter, while organic form expressed the accidental transience of nature and living beings.[41]

After defining his terms within the arc of a larger historical trajectory, Riegl then set about observing his laws at play in the various media. In a series of painstaking

visual analyses, he identified and described the visual characteristics of late Roman art. Whether in architecture, sculpture, or painting, those characteristics included an emphasis on symmetrical, un-modeled shape, an interest in the repetition of form, composition within a plane, and, above all, the isolation of the figure in space, all characteristics of distant viewing. Riegl's most important identification of these characteristics occurred in the chapters on sculpture and painting. What he was eager to demonstrate in this analysis was not simply the nature of late Roman style but also the origin of that style in early imperial artistic production. To this end, each of the chapters offers a carefully orchestrated sequence of formal analyses designed to demonstrate the shift from normal to distant viewing that took place within the Roman context between the second and fourth centuries.

Chapter two, on sculpture, opens with a discussion of the fourth-century *largitio* relief on the Arch of Constantine in Rome (Figure 12). In it, Riegl characterizes the scene as one built up of individualized units in planar space. He observes that individual figures are separated from one another, surrounded by pockets of space, and that each figure stands within a larger symmetrical grouping around the central representation of Constantine. The relief represents, he states, the apex of symmetrical centralization.[42] Riegl then observes that modern viewers respond poorly to these qualities because they appear to reject the principles of animation and beauty that organized classical composition, with the result that the relief is understood as a monument of decline. Further, he notes that the decline itself is described either as the result of haste in manufacture or barbarian workmanship and influence. Riegl rejects these claims, arguing that the *largitio* frieze represents a new conception of naturalism and beauty rooted in principles of crystalline symmetry and optical composition that are, in reality, fully Roman.[43] The

12. *Largitio* relief, Arch of Constantine, Rome, 315. Photo: S. Bassett

chapter goes on to demonstrate how this can be the case by tracking the development of form in Egypt, Greece, and early imperial Rome.[44] Having arrived at the second century, Riegl then settles in to the core of his discussion, an analysis of six sculptured reliefs ranging in date from the second half of the second through the early fourth centuries.[45] Here he not only maps the inexorable march to the Constantinian relief and distant viewing but also claims the latter as a purely Roman phenomenon. Having established both the aesthetic legitimacy and the Roman origins of the *largitio* frieze, Riegl then goes on to demonstrate the ways in which post-Constantinian sculpture in the later fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries – everything from monumental portrait busts to sarcophagi and small-scale ivory diptychs – derived from the style of the Arch of Constantine frieze. Implicit in this sequence of analyses was the claim that this later Roman art stood in a direct, internally developed line of descent from the classically based standards of the early Roman tradition.[46]

The subsequent chapter on painting follows a similar, if more circumscribed, logic. Mindful of the fact that the corpus of surviving Roman painting was small, limited at the time to the finds at Pompeii and the evidence of the Roman catacombs, Riegl made no attempt to discuss the evidence of the early imperial period. Instead, he began with the fourth century, noting how works such as the mosaics in the mausoleum of Constantia, which showed isolated figures against a neutral ground, were of a piece with the aesthetic standards of the Constantinian *largitio* frieze. Specifically, he saw the placement of individual objects against the neutral ground and the absence of cast shadow as indicative of a desire to isolate figures in space in a manner analogous to the composition of the frieze. He went on to observe the ways in which examples of fifth-century painting maintained this interest, before finally turning to what he considered the paradigmatic example of distant viewing in late Roman painting – the sixth-century mosaic of Justinian and his retinue from the church of San Vitale in Ravenna.[47]

The analysis of sculpture and painting in chapters two and three sets the stage for the book's raison d'être, Riegl's final observations about the works of the late Roman art-industry. Here he applied his analytical skills to the description and characterization of chip-carved metalwork, enamel, and garnet-inlaid jewelry, material dating from the fifth through the seventh centuries. He observed that this nonrepresentational art, which came largely from Austrian territory, not only used manufacturing techniques and decorative motifs that were of Roman origin but also adhered to the same laws of distant viewing that informed works of later Roman art. As a result, Riegl argued, these materials should not be understood as the products of barbarian ideation, as was customarily supposed, but as works participating fully in the *Kunstwollen* of the late Roman world.[48]

In the fifth and final chapter, Riegl stepped back from visual analysis to outline what he believed to be the fundamental characteristics of this late Roman *Kunstwollen*. He began by reiterating his assertion that all ancient art emphasized material appearance and natural imitation. To this statement he added the observation that in any given representational context, the aggregate of individual shapes used to achieve representation created a unity regulated by rhythm, and that, in the context of the later Roman world, that rhythm stressed uniformity and repetition through the use of rectangular, un-modeled shapes, planar composition, and isolated figures.[49]

To this point, Riegl's assessment of late Roman art had relied solely on the observation, description, and analysis of formal qualities. With those qualities established, he went on to introduce a new category of evidence, literary sources, calling upon the work of two authors – Plotinus (204/205–270) and Augustine (354–430) – to support his definition of a late Roman *Kunstwollen*.[50] Although he did not pursue the discussion of Plotinus, Riegl believed that he had found in Augustine an aesthetic theory to match his definition of the late Roman *Kunstwollen*, one that placed emphasis on complete shape and the creation of unity and rhythm via symmetry and proportion.[51] Finally, Riegl argued that distant viewing, with its isolation of forms in space, flickering optical qualities, and reliance upon the interpretive power of memory and imagination, corresponded to a particular late Roman worldview, one shared by pagan and Christian alike, that replaced reason with magic.[52]

By his own account, Riegl's project built upon and expanded Wickhoff's discussion of Roman art.[53] As had his colleague, he based his discussion on observation, description, and formal analysis with the aim of creating a scientific account of perception that could stand apart from what he felt to be the vagueness of aesthetic judgment. However, what no one would have suspected in reading his title is that its author, not one to think small, had gone well beyond Wickhoff in the service of this enterprise by outlining a theory and with it an entire history of visual form and human perception. What was important about this theory, among other things, is that it not only observed but also accorded meaning to style.

Under its terms, style, the visual manifestation of *Kunstwollen*, was the expression of a worldview and consequently subject to change. Thus, the ancient world, although consistent in its desire to represent objects within a plane, had three viewing phases, each tied to and expressive of a fundamental cultural ethos. The first – the literal, close viewing of Egyptian tradition – expressed an awareness of the arbitrary forces of nature to which human beings were subject. Its aim was to make those forces comprehensible through the structures of stylistic representation that Riegl defined as tactile, a method of representation that made the world tangible. By contrast, the second phase – normal viewing, the art of Periclean Athens, poised between close and distant

viewing – expressed a binding and logical relationship between human beings and their environment. This was an art of cause and effect, of clarity and reason, a relationship expressed in the balance between the physical verification provided by tactile sensation and the imaginative input of optical experience. Finally, the third phase – the optical, distant viewing of the late Roman period that relied exclusively on the interpretive powers of imagination – expressed the sense of isolation and reliance upon magic to which people turned when cognizant of the imbalance between their own fragile existence and the power of nature. For Riegl, this distant viewing represented the visual corollary to the practice of Neoplatonic philosophy, syncretic pagan cult, and early Christian religion. This trajectory from close viewing to distant viewing, from tactile expression to optical expression, evinced neither advance nor decline. Rather, it mirrored and gave visual form to the shape of human experience, specifically the shifting balance in the relationship between human beings and their perception of their place in the world.

CONCLUSIONS

The work of Wickhoff and Riegl represented an initial foray into thinking about Roman art and with it the artistic production of late antiquity. As such, it focused on the basic task of definition, doing so primarily through the observation and analysis of visual form. Although Wickhoff and Riegl used different vocabularies to characterize form – *illusionism* for Wickhoff, *distant viewing* for Riegl – both agreed that the defining criterion of Roman art was its preference for rendering form through the manipulation of light and shade. Further, both understood this particular mode of representation in terms of habits of human perception. Specifically, each believed that forms created through the manipulation of light and shade demanded input from the viewer, a process that required the completion of the image from a personal stock of memory and experience. In essence, they saw Roman art, whether early or late, as an exercise in imaginative recreation.

To this formal definition, Wickhoff and Riegl added a second characterization, one that described their subject in terms of transition. For Wickhoff, this concept was rooted in the constancy of visual form. The persistence of the illusionism first seen in the Flavian Arch of Titus and later in the miniatures of the Vienna Genesis demonstrated the point. Its appearance early and late in works monumental and miniature offered visible proof of the link between pagan and Christian culture, antiquity, and the Middle Ages.

If it was Wickhoff who first mooted the idea of transition, it was Riegl who refined the concept, focusing first on the minutiae of form. In contrast to Wickhoff's general observations about the persistence of illusionism, Riegl made his case by tracking change within the larger illusionistic framework.

It was important to him that there were differences between a second-century sarcophagus relief and a fourth-century frieze on the Arch of Constantine. Far from demonstrating any break with Roman tradition, these differences documented the ways in which incremental changes within the larger framework of the Roman visual repertoire supported an idea of a representational continuum that was itself the manifestation of an internal transition.

To these observations about formal change, Riegl added the specificity of names and dates, a decision that bound his observations to time and place. His insistence upon the term "late Roman" established the focus of the discussion as western and imperial by connecting his materials to the city of Rome and its larger political enterprise, a stance underscored by the proposed chronological framework and the monuments chosen to illustrate his points. The chronology's circumscribing events – the victory of Constantine at the Milvian Bridge in 313 and Charlemagne's coronation as King of the Franks in 768 – established the period as the connective tissue between two of western Europe's defining imperial experiences, the Roman Empire of antiquity and the revived Roman Empire of the medieval and modern worlds. Moreover, as the choice of rulers and the moments emphasized suggest, these events placed a premium on the rise of Christian kingship.

The choice of monuments further buttressed this position. Following Wickhoff, whose discussion had circled around monuments from the city of Rome, Riegl based his own arguments on works of art and architecture of Roman provenance, arguing that, although there were other examples that might have suited his purpose, nothing that he had seen from territory outside of the West contradicted his basic conclusions.

Finally, Riegl offered what Wickhoff did not – an explanation. While Wickhoff had been content to observe the phenomenon of transition in its most general terms, Riegl felt it necessary not only to describe the particular nature of change but also to explain its meaning. He did so by suggesting an analogy between the late Roman visual imagination and the perceptions of such thinkers as Plotinus and Augustine, authors who stepped away from the clear light of reason into the flickering shadows of magical thinking.

In tackling the definition of Roman art, Wickhoff and Riegl created a new approach to the problem of how art might have a history. Their understanding grew not from the traditional descriptions of iconography or the assessment of form in terms of its relationship to an idealized Greek model; rather, theirs was a definition grounded in an analysis of visual style as a historical phenomenon. Thus, the lines, colors, and compositions of painting and sculpture represented historical data that in turn spoke of relations between people, places, and ideas. In the particular case of Roman art, stylistic analysis established continuities.

Wickhoff's illusionism linked the Arch of Titus to the Vienna Genesis, while Riegl's distant viewing allowed connections between second-century sarcophagi and the Arch of Constantine. Their combined efforts yielded three important conclusions: that Roman art constituted a discrete visual tradition whose visual legacy was as much Christian as pagan; that its forms were the result of internally generated change; and that it was, above all, an art of transition between antiquity and the Middle Ages.

NOTES

1   On early art historical texts, see Dilly 1979, 172–258; Schwarzer 1995. For an example of the discussion of Roman and early Christian art, see Schnaase 1842–1879, 2: 407, where the history of Roman sculpture ends in the second century with Hadrian and the Antonines. Schnaase (1842–1879: 3) discusses early Christian art in the context of Roman decline.

2   Riegl 1901, 2; 1985, 6.

3   Lübke 1885, 1: 271–75

4   On classical archaeology in the nineteenth century, see Dyson 2006 for the foundation of the German Archaeological Institute in Athens and the Olympia excavations (82–85), for the French at Delos and Delphi (117–21), and for the Austrians at Ephesos and the foundation of the Austrian Archaeological Institute (113–14). On the Austrians in Asia Minor, see Szmethy 2014. For German initiatives, see Marchand 1996, 75–115. On the history of Christian archaeology, see generally Deichmann 1983, 14–45, and Frend 1995. For the French in North Africa and Syria–Palestine, see Frend 1995, 51–76, 111–29, and Gran-Aymelian 1998, 239–45.

5   On Christian archaeology in Rome, see Frend 1995, 11–17, 76–83, 160–64. Antonio Bosio (1575/1576–1629) launched the first systematic investigation of the catacombs in the sixteenth century. See Bosio 1632. In the nineteenth century, Giovanni Battista De Rossi built extensively on Bosio's study when undertaking his own work on the catacombs. See Rossi (1864–1877), who is credited with establishing Christian archaeology as a rigorous scholarly discipline. He was also a faithful servant of the papacy and felt that the testament of Christian archaeology was a powerful weapon for the papacy against the errant tides of modern life. See Deichmann 1983, 21–23, especially 22, for his statements about the corrective potential of archaeological evidence.

6   On Wickhoff, see generally *EAA* 7:1218–19; Brendel 1979: 25–41; De Grummond 1996: 1192–93; Lachnit 2003.

7   Vienna, Österreich. Nbib. cod. theol. gr. 31.

8   Weitzmann 1979, 458, identifies the material as vellum; however, recent conservation has determined that it is parchment. See Hofmann 2020, 35–69.

9   On dating, Wickhoff and Hartel (1895:142) place the manuscript in the fifth century on the basis of paleographical analysis after reviewing arguments for dates ranging from the fourth to sixth centuries; Wickhoff (1900, 7, 172) confirms a fifth-century date. Earlier discussions include Lambeck and Nessel 1690; Kondakov 1886, 1:78–95; Garrucci 1872–1888, 3:29–43. Lambeck and Nessel dated the manuscript to the late fourth century. Kondakov, Garrucci, and Ainalov preferred the sixth century. Kondakov 1886–1891, 1:78–95; subsequent studies include Gerstinger 1931; Buberl and H. Gerstinger 1937–1938; Ainalov 1961,124–31 (for the original Russian publication, see Ainalov 1900); Mazal 1980; Zimmermann 2003; Hofmann, 2020.

10   Lambeck and Nessel 1690; Kondakov 1886, 1: 78–91, Garrucci 1872–1888, 3: 29–43

11 Wickhoff and Hartel 1895, n.p. See the foreward by the unnamed library administrators on the aims and aspirations of the publication.

12 Wickhoff and Hartel 1895. An edited English-language version (Wickhoff 1900) omitted Hartel's codicological analysis and Wickhoff's assessment of the individual miniatures, and subsequently was published in German (Wickhoff 1912).

13 Wickhoff and Hartel 1895, 142.

14 For the art historical date, see Wickhoff and Hartel 1895, 91; Wickhoff 1900, 172.

15 On continuous narration, see Wickhoff and Hartel 1895, 6–8; Wickhoff 1900, 8–13.

16 On illusionist style, see Wickhoff and Hartel 1895, 11, and Wickhoff 1900, 18. On the impressionistic aspect, see Wickhoff and Hartel 1895, 29–31; Wickhoff 1900, 48–53

17 Wickhoff and Hartel 1895, 12–13; Wickhoff 1900, 20.

18 Wickhoff and Hartel 1895, 25; Wickhoff 1900, 41.

19 Wickhoff and Hartel 1895, 29–31; Wickhoff 1900, 50–53.

20 On continuous narration, see Wickhoff and Hartel 1895, 59–61; Wickhoff 1900, 111–14.

21 Wickhoff and Hartel 1895, 68; Wickhoff 1900, 128.

22 On the difference between natural and illusionist form and the development of the latter in Roman painting, see Wickhoff and Hartel 1895, 64–87; Wickhoff 1900, 117–71.

23 On the transformation of Greek art into Roman, see Wickhoff and Hartel 1895, 28; Wickhoff 1900, 46.

24 Wickhoff and Hartel 1895, 88–92, 96; Wickhoff 1900, 172–82, 190.

25 Wickhoff and Hartel 1895, 96; Wickhoff 1900, 190.

26 The bibliography on Riegl focuses largely on his methodological role in the shaping of the discipline of art history. This discussion has a much more limited aim. Specifically, its purpose is to describe Riegl's definition of and approach to the period of late antiquity. For a more comprehensive investigation of Riegl's life and thought, see Olin 1992, Iversen 1993, and Cordileone 2014. See also Pächt 1963; Podro 1982, 71–97; Rampley 2013, 37–46.

27 For a general discussion of the exhibition, see Cordileone 2014, 187–93. For the objects, see nos. 256, 384, and 456–89 in the catalogue (Masner 1893b), which is basically a handlist.

28 Riegl 1901. The book was reissued as a trade publication in 1927. See Riegl 1927.

29 Riegl 1901, IV, 1; 1985, 4, 5.

30 Riegl 1901, 1; 1985, 5.

31 Riegl 1901, 10; 1985, 15.

32 Riegl 1901, 9–10; 1985, 14–15.

33 Riegl 1901, 1–2; 1985, 5–6.

34 On *Kunstwollen*, see Podro 1982, 95–97; Olin 1992, 71, 148–53; Iversen 1993, 1–18.

35 Riegl 1901, 4; 1985, 8.

36 Riegl 1901, 17; 1985, 21.

37 Riegl 1901, 17;1985, 21–22.

38 Riegl 1901, 20; 1985 24–25 (close viewing or near sight).

39 Reigl 1901, 21–22; 1985, 26–27 (distant viewing or far sight).

40 Riegl 1901, 20–21; 1985, 25–26 (normal viewing or normal sight).

41 Riegl 1901, 49; 1985, 55 (crystalline form). References to organic form as the approximation of organic nature appear throughout.

42 Riegl 1901, 46; 1985, 52.

43 Riegl 1901, 48; 1985, 55.

44 Riegl 1901, 51–72; 1985, 58–83.

45 Riegl 1901, 72–85; 1985, 83–95.

46 Riegl 1901, 85–123; 1985, 95–131.

47 Riegl 1901, 125–38, especially 132–33 for Justinian; 1985, 133–46, especially 139–40.

48 Riegl 1901, 139–207; 1985, 147–222.

49 Riegl 1901, 209–11; 1985, 223–25.

50   Riegl 1901, 211; 1985, 225.
51   Riegl 1901, 211–15; 1985: 225–30. Riegl did not quote directly from Augustine but instead relied heavily on a recent study of Augustine's aesthetic theory by A. Berthaud (1891). Especially important was Berthaud's second chapter, which focused on the ideas Augustine laid out in the now lost *De pulchro et apto*. Riegl (1901, 214; 1985, 229–30) stressed that Augustine's theories explained what modern viewers perceived as the ugliness of late Roman art as a matter of intervals of beauty.
52   Riegl 1901, 216; 1985, 232.
53   Riegl 1901, 6; 1985, 10.