

THE HISTORY OF ART: ITS METHODS AND THEIR LIMITS

THE FOUNDING FATHERS

Tracing the broad outline of European art history means presenting the different methods considered essential to the formation of this discipline. Historiographical research arrives quite naturally at a criticism of the methods themselves and at a search for a broader horizon.

To the extent that the historian is involved with the thinking and the problems of his age, his methods reveal personal and conjunctural concepts and ideas which will guide the reflections of his successors; these successors will modify and correct the concepts received in order to adapt them to new experiences and questions. Or they will add others which are more apt to supply the answers sought. The means of analysing art history today are the fruit of four centuries of discussion during which certain normative criteria, traditional theories and underlying concepts were called into question while at the same time, though being sometimes exported to other areas of the world, they have demonstrated a tenacious degree of longevity. But perhaps a brief recapitulation might be helpful here.

Translated by R. Scott Walker

In addition to the permanent dialogue with historical thinking, the art historian, turned toward the past, is confronted with the artistic production of his own time. Despite proclamations of objectivity with regard to historical phenomena, contemporary artistic currents exercise an influence of considerable weight on the art historian and on the choice of a topic for his research. At the time of the expressionists scholars were sensitive to the Roman period and were able to develop criteria proper to Mannerism. Each generation of historians discovers traits in the work of masters from long ago which are not unknown but badly known, which have become accessible because of the experience of the contemporary world.

The attitude of the historian towards a work of art changes and evolves in close connection with transformations in the world which surrounds him. The diversity and heterogeneity of artistic production in our times goes together with the plurality of the historian's approaches. The disorientation before the phenomenon of art, the meditation on the meaning of their activity and the search for new horizons are common to the artist and to the historian of today.

To make this situation understandable, a brief survey of the antecedents seems necessary.

It was possible to create a true history of art after the technical observations couched in workshop language used from Antiquity to the Middle Ages (and I am passing over the theories of art from Plato to Plotinus) were replaced by a historical vision of artistic creation, the first manifestation of which was the appearance, during the Renaissance, of monographs on artists written by artists. Toward the end of the 18th century, with Winckelmann, the history of art appeared alongside the history of the artist. Once the aesthetic norms which favored classicism and condemned any deviation from it lost their despotic character with Alois Riegl (1858-1905), it was possible to undertake a rehabilitation of all non-classical eras, such as Hellenism, art of the Late Empire, Mannerism, Baroque, etc.

The concept of a work of art, born of the conflict between normative aesthetics and historical experience, appeared relatively late in Europe, at the time when artists were contesting the opinion that they exercised a manual trade, a craftsman's labor engaged in simply to earn a living, and were therefore excluded from the *artes liberales* (grammar, rhetoric, dialectics, arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy) which alone were capable of leading to philosophy. To

demonstrate that the art of painting, of sculpture or of building also required ingenuity and knowledge, artists of the Renaissance emphasised their awareness of literature, history, poetry and mythology—in short their humanist erudition—on the one hand, along with their mastery of geometry and the laws of optics for perspective construction and thus their scientific knowledge on the other. Two criteria were essential to judge the quality of the artist's work: *imitatio*, which necessitates the study of nature and of Antiquity; and *invenzione* (novelty) proof of personal genius. Others were added to these: *disegno*, *grazia*, *decoro*, *iudizio*, *maniera*, etc.

Vasari inherited this theory and developed his historic model around a standard of beauty formed in Antiquity and rediscovered during the Renaissance.

VASARI (1511-1574)¹ – *The History of Artists*

Vasari is considered to be the father of modern historiography of art.² His writings contain a series of monographs on Italian artists of the 14th to 16th centuries along with a historical and aesthetic theory of the Renaissance.

He conceived of his work by taking his inspiration from four different genres current in ancient literature: the artist's monograph modeled on Plutarch's lives of famous men; the rhetorical description of a work of art following the example of the *Eikones* of Philostratus; the technical precept given by Vitruvius; and stylistic evolution based on the rhetorical model of Cicero's *Brutus*. The *Vite* became normative throughout all of Europe. It is necessary only to mention Karen van Mander, *Schilderboek*, 1604; Joachim von Sandrart, *Teutsche Akademie*, 1675; Jean-Philippe Mariette, *Abécédair*e, (18th-19th centuries).

It is significant with regard to this art literature that it was the artists themselves, or later enlightened art lovers, who wrote in favor of their colleagues. Vasari states that his intention is to create a reference work for artists who, through history, *Historia magistra vitae*, receive practical and theoretical instruction to "*trovar il fine e la perfezione dell'arte*".

Vasari borrowed the organic and cyclic model of history from Roman authors; organic when he speaks of the birth of art in Greece,

The History of Art: Its Methods and Their Limits

of its apogee and of its decadence, along with the rebirth of art in Italy in the Trecento, of its adolescence in the Quattrocento and its fulfillment in the Cinquecento, whose culmination was the divine Michelangelo (1475-1564), creator of a titanic body of work whose equal is found not even in Antiquity. Cyclic when he says that ancient art went through the first cycle, and that the second cycle began with Giotto with the rebirth of ancient art, that it attained and surpassed its zenith with Leonardo (1452-1519), Michelangelo and Raphael (1483-1502). To explain this passage into a new cycle, he had recourse to the catastrophe theory which held that Antiquity did not die a natural death, but that it was killed off by the intrusion of savage tribes, by the “barbarisation” of civilisation. To avoid a decline in the new cycle, it had become obligatory for every artist to study these great Masters, but also to study Antiquity and nature. It is evident that Byzantine and Gothic art were excluded from this historical framework because they were incompatible with the established norms: rule, order, harmony, *disegno* and style. Style thus has a historic dimension as well as a normative dimension; it can be recalled that the denomination “non-classical style” had a pejorative meaning initially.

Given the importance of an artist’s training, it is not surprising that Vasari was involved in its institutionalisation and that he played a major role in the foundation of the *Accademia del Disegno* in 1563 in Florence, inaugurating the long academic tradition which served as authoritative body until the Secession movement against the Vienna Academy around 1900.

WINCKELMANN (1717-1783)³ – *The history of art as history of an ideal*

A new evaluation of the significance of art within the world of the spirit and a new historical vision of art were created as a result of the work of Winckelmann.⁴ His writings should be seen in relation to the numerous historical operations of the 18th century, a period which witnessed the development of the French encyclopaedia, the archaeological repertoires of B. de Montfaucon, the art criticism of D. Diderot, of a new concept of history by Voltaire who also had several essential ideas in common with Winckelmann. Winckelmann turned his attention enthusiastically toward the art of ancient

Greece, a country which he never visited and which he defined as a world quite distinct from and often opposed to his own. An awareness of the impassable chasm which separates the present from the past replaced the naive viewpoint that Antiquity, in its Roman tradition, had anticipated Italian art and that this had in turn been able to resuscitate its artistic predecessor. Although he considered Greece as a paradise lost which could only be reborn through its ideals, in an internal renewal of each person, Winckelmann clearly demonstrated that it was in fact another country, that this was another people, with its own means of expression, and that an adequate understanding of its art raised problems involving historical knowledge.

The panegyric description of an artist or of a work of art is not sufficient, no more than the judgement on quality pronounced by a connoisseur in terms of the taste of his times. Winckelmann undertook a historical analysis of Greek art taken as a cohesive entity and proceeded to distinguish the various stages of its stylistic development. It was Winckelmann who introduced the concept of style as a means of making possible a clear organisation of the ensemble of artistic manifestations in Greek and Roman Antiquity. By an elaboration of successive styles, he revealed the continuity and the discontinuity of particular phenomena.⁵

His research followed the artistic production of ancient Greece down the path it had taken, and in this way he was able to discern certain laws in its development and to give a genetic explanation to the individual work. The history of Greek art was subject to the ancient biological theory which Winckelmann accepted, seeking the origins of this art, noting its slow development, a brief summit and a long decline. This decline was caused by the invasion of the Barbarians, a stage in the life and death of cultures ever since Petrarch (1304-1374), the first and one of the most influential of the great Italian humanists.

It is evident that Winckelmann, raised in a bourgeois setting and with his humanist ideals, did not attempt to arrive at a more objective knowledge of the past for itself but sought instead to influence his peers by constructing a grandiose tableau meant to instill the idealist Utopia, *Edle Einfalt und stille Grösse*, in each of his contemporaries.

Let us pass at once to the work of three historians at the beginning

The History of Art: Its Methods and Their Limits

of this century: Alois Riegl, Heinrich Wölfflin and Max Dvorák, to whom art history is indebted for new concepts and methods, without pausing to consider the German *Kulturgeschichte* of Jakob Burckhardt (1818-1897), nor the technical-materialist approach of Viollet-le-Duc (1814-1879) or Gottfried Semper (1803-1879), nor the Comptesque positivism of Hippolyte Taine (1828-1893).

ALOIS RIEGL (1858-1905)⁶ – *The foundations of modern art history*

Although his ideas found an echo outside central Europe only very late, this thinker expressed concepts of great influence on the principles of our discipline. He approached this discipline concretely thanks to the close contacts he had with the works in the Museum of Decorative Arts in Vienna where he had been a conservator at the beginning of his career. One of his first publications dealt with Oriental carpets.

In his work *Stilfragen* (Stylistic Problems, bases for a history of decoration), for the first time in the history of art, he dealt with the minor arts as a major topic, demonstrating that the development of floral decoration—the palmette and acanthus leaf—could be retraced as a single and identical process extending over five thousand years, in Egypt and in the ancient Orient, and then in classical Greece and Rome, and later in Byzantine and Islamic decorative art. He thereby countered the technical-materialist theories of Gottfried Semper who maintained that every decorative form is the result of technique and materials and that all artistic creation derives from an instinct for imitation.⁷

By removing all external factors from his analysis, he attempted to explain changes in style in terms of an internal and organic evolution, as a relatively autonomous development which owes nothing to entirely accidental circumstances or to the whim of an artist. The moving force behind a change in style is internal to artistic development. Each stylistic phase engenders its own preoccupations to which the following phase provides responses while at the same time raising new problems which another generation will have to resolve.

In his fundamental work, *Die spätrömische Kunstindustrie* (Applied Arts in the Late Roman Empire), he attempted a careful

analysis of all the artistic production of late Antiquity and, conjointly, its rehabilitation since until that time it had been considered a bastardisation of Greek classicism. In this way he re-examined the question of applying normative aesthetic criteria to historical research along with the hierarchisation of artistic genres, and sought to discover the real *raison d'être* of an era until then considered to be decadent. He showed rather clearly that if the art of the Late Roman Empire differed from that of the classical era, it was not because of an artistic incapability but because of a search for radically different means of expression. For a proper understanding of history, therefore, it is necessary to discern in each artistic phase a positive stylistic direction and to associate this to spiritual, religious or other preoccupations, and to define the aesthetic ideal which is proper to it.

With the rejection of the evaluation of the past according to classical canons, the traditional opposition is eliminated between art which resembles nature and art which distorts it. What is required is a conception of the world which is specific to each artistic expression.

He proposed a new concept, the *Kunstwollen*⁸, “artistic desire, intentional form”, which, according to him, conditioned the specific appearance of a work of art, that is, its style. This concept does not aim at a phenomenal classification of style, but is meant to determine the stylistic principles which, as foundations of all phenomenal traits, would explain the character proper to the style by revealing its immanent meaning. Rembrandt’s artistic intentions, for example, can be classed with the general tendencies of his country and his age, namely 17th-century Dutch art, in terms of their *Kunstwollen*. They represent the supreme achievement of this age and this country, but they are not the prerogative of an isolated and exceptional genius. For Riegl, the historian can only envisage the stylistic phenomenon “genetically”, that is by establishing its relationships, and by defining its character relative to these.

The most widely-accepted definitions of *Kunstwollen* were psychological, generally associated with the psychological-perceptive conception of modern aesthetics.

In his research into general and systematic concepts, Riegl saw the global development of art taking place between two poles: the tactile (or “haptic”) and the optical, the objective and the subjective.

The History of Art: Its Methods and Their Limits

For example, classical Greek art is tactile and objective; Hellenistic art optical and subjective.

Riegl's work, although couched in a terminology which can occasionally be contested, and despite its historical determinism, is an inexhaustible heuristic source.⁹

WÖLFFLIN (1864-1945)¹⁰ – *The history of styles*

To understand the stylistic development of art, Wölfflin developed a set of formal-visual criteria which correspond to the modalities of representation in Renaissance art and in Baroque art. He attempted to grasp the process of evolution manifested in Italian art from the Cinquecento to the Seicento by combining antithetical concepts which are of an abstract and general nature but which are yet capable of evoking the actual dimensions of artistic phenomena. To characterise these two styles, he established a general framework of five pairs of concepts which define the visual-formal foundations of classical art and of Baroque art. "The development of the line and the devaluation of the line in favor of color (linear-painterly); the development of the surface and the devaluation of the surface in favor of depth; the development of closed form and its dissolution with passage to open and free form; the development of a united whole with autonomous parts and the contraction of the effect on one or more points (the various parts not being autonomous); the complete representation of things (clarity in the sense of the object's value) and factually incomplete representation (clarity in the appearance of things)".¹¹

Without a doubt these formal-optical categories define clearly and effectively the stylistic character of the two periods in question as an evolution from the linear to the painterly, from surface to depth; but they omit considerations of the Mannerist style which characterised the period situated between the Renaissance and the Baroque, whose very special character was formulated later by such historians as Dvorák, Friedländer, Weisbach, Kauffmann, etc. This argument already abolished, if such was necessary, the cyclical theory (G. B. Vico, 1688-1744) which Wölfflin was party to, holding the thesis that the development from the linear to the painterly, from the more simple to the more complex, etc., is repeated at regular intervals.

However, it is evident that Wölfflin's stylistic criteria are only applicable to the historical period in question and do not hold for the stylistic development of other periods or of other cultures.¹²

Another element which can be criticised is the fact that he developed stylistic categories for these two periods from a classical point of view and characterised the Baroque negatively. Nevertheless, his effort to explain the general formal principles which govern Baroque art and which are the binding force between the work of Caravaggio, the work of Rubens and the work of Tiepolo remains fundamental to the concept of style, in both aesthetic and historical terms.

The ensemble of categories, whose inter-relations are not systematic in nature for they deal rather with historical notions of classification, seeks to encompass the totality of the artistic expression of a given era and does not pretend to be able to do justice to the diversity and the richness of individual and national styles.

A Baroque painting is neither painterly nor composed in depth in itself. It becomes so in comparison with other Baroque paintings and in relation to Renaissance works. Thus the individual work is an actualisation and a differentiation of general principles of representation which can provide access to a specific analysis and which facilitate situating the work in the general development.

No one will contest the fact that Greek and Hellenistic art, or Roman and Gothic art have a specific definable character. But it is also evident that each definition represents a simplification of the true historical process. The formulation of a period style must abstract from the complexity of the phenomena and limit itself to the dominant tendency, supposing that a principal line of development exists.

In his work *Kunstgeschichte ohne Namen* (Art History without Names), which is highly indebted to Auguste Comte, he placed the stress on linking up the phases of artistic development in the sense that each stage is conditioned by the preceding one and oriented toward an indicated direction. Every artist is rooted in his milieu and in his period. He can enrich or renew the artistic vocabulary, but he cannot elude it or avoid it.

His dispute with Benedetto Croce (1866-1952) has become famous. Croce, an opponent of all historical-stylistic relationships, dealt only with the isolated and insular work of art: "art is intuition, intuition is individuality, and individuality cannot be repeated", and

The History of Art: Its Methods and Their Limits

he was convinced of the pre-eminence of form.

Wölfflin's thinking had great influence; its traces can be found in the works of André Malraux and of Henri Focillon. Objections have been made with regard to some of his ideas, including one which refers to the interdependence of form and its genre, of technique, of its content, of its function, which does not allow separating out "pure form" and determining a historical development by comparing it with another "pure form".

DVORÁK (1874-1921)¹³ – *The history of art and the history of ideas*

Reacting against the stress laid on style and form, Dvorák spoke of the necessity of associating the history of art with the history of ideas and proclaimed the fundamental unity of all the intellectual and artistic manifestations of a period.¹⁴ He developed the concept of mannerism by formulating its stylistic characteristics and its philosophical and spiritual attitudes.

In contrast to Wölfflin's cyclical theory, he proposed his concept of a continuous and accumulative development of art which he associated with thinking and with the *Weltanschauung*. For his writings he selected the major turning points in the history of art and attempted to prove that the roots of each artistic change can be found in the history of ideas. He conceived of the work of art as a document and not as a monument.

Without seeking to provide a systematic answer to this problem, he envisaged a cultural and intellectual history in general, drawing on other disciplines in the human sciences to place art history in a broader framework.

PANOFSKY (1892-1968)¹⁵ – *Iconography vs. iconology*

Introduced to iconography-iconology by Aby Warburg, to the history of forms by Adolph Goldschmidt and Wilhelm Vöge and to the philosophy of "symbolic forms" by Ernst Cassirer, Panofsky is the most important representative, if not the actual founder, of the iconological school.

To make an iconological analysis it is first of all necessary to

define the sentiment, the expression and the spiritual significance of the works of art in an iconographical complex, “images, stories, allegories”, and then to thematise their underlying ideas, which make known the mythical, religious or philosophical state of mind of a group or a period.

Seeking “cultural symbols” which have their basis in a shared spiritual attitude, Panofsky established, for example, the homology of scholastic thought and the structure of Gothic buildings; he demonstrated the change of interpretation in the arts and in religious and profane literature dealing with a theme such as “Hercules at the Crossroads”, without indicating the correlations between the different modes of expression or the particularity of each one of them. Consequently he did not strive for an individual and singular method of interpreting a work of art. For him the work of art is the indicator of a larger cultural context, a document revealing theological and philosophical conceptions, mentalities in general and their transformations. His research, more literary than artistic in nature, was devoted to archetypes, to symptoms and to collective symbols, representing a considerable contribution to the understanding of the manner in which ancient culture had been received since the time of the Carolingians.

As for the sources which he consulted, these were based in the general history of the mind, in the history of *Gestaltung* and the history of types, each handled with remarkable erudition.

Panofsky distinguishes in the work three levels of interpretation: factual description, iconographical analysis and iconological analysis.¹⁶

1. *Phänomensinn*: The meaning of the phenomenon or primary significance, subdivided into *de facto* significance and expressive significance; identification of objects represented and initial characterisation of their expressive qualities known from practical experience.
2. *Bedeutungssinn*: The meaning of the significance or conventional significance; identification of the story or of the theme represented, running through a cultural context; by iconographic analysis due to literary knowledge.

The History of Art: Its Methods and Their Limits

3. *Wesenssinn* or *Dokumentsinn*: the meaning of the essence or the meaning of the document, i.e., the intrinsic significance; the work is considered as a symptom of culture in general, representative of a basic mentality, discernible also in other domains of art and of the mind.

To defend himself from any possible accusation of “rationalism removed from life”, Panofsky took care to indicate that the intellectual operation, which he had to present in the form of apparently distinct movements, in fact developed as a single, unique and perfectly homogeneous process.

SEDLMAYR (1896-1984)¹⁷ – *The structure of the work of art*

Style draws its categories from a formal-visual character; it is therefore necessary to return to structural principles: structure can be grasped on an individual level, in a particular work of art, and on a general level, in a given cultural area.

Structure is made up of different layers: formal, compositional, stylistic, historical and symbolic—indissoluble and complementary to one another. The first stage of the analysis arrives at a characterisation of each layer; the second is devoted to the definition of the organising principle which determines the relation between the parts, and the whole is thereby reconstituted in a synthesis. The layers form a totality thanks to their common expressive and symbolic foundation. For example, in the painting by Pieter Bruegel “The Fall of the Blind Men” (1568) in Naples,¹⁸ there is a sloping terrain which forms a diagonal moving from the upper left hand corner to the lower right hand corner across which six blind men make their way with difficulty, one following another, holding on to one another’s staffs. The leader has fallen into a ditch, the one following him stumbles and will follow him shortly, risking bringing the others along with him, still unaware of the accident. This scene takes place outside a village set in an autumnal landscape, dominated by a little church in the background. First of all Sedlmayr notes its visual and expressive character: disturbing, gray, downward falling, etc., and places this in relation to the various layers of meaning. First the literal meaning (the row of blind men);

secondly the allegorical meaning (the world overturned—heretics); third the eschatological meaning (the blind men as an example of humanity); the tropological meaning (the blind men as a symbol of the human soul). Sedlmayr does not re-create the various layers using motifs or sources outside the painting as Panofsky does; the layers in fact derive from the visual-expressive character of the work.

Another example follows the development of space. The idea of reproducing images based on nature was adopted for the first time as an element of artistic expression in the paleolithic era, but these images were separated neither from the human sphere nor from surrounding nature. The instability of wall paintings is revealed in the absence of lines denoting their location; the animals or figures seem to float on the wall of the caves with no relation nor proportion. An abstract order, constructed by man, is lacking. In the neolithic period, megalithic constructions distinguished themselves by their use of the horizontal line to align foundations and the vertical line to create volume. Man created his own space, separating it from natural space. This led later to an orthogonal spatial construction with its squared beams and stones, or its bricks, in Egypt and the ancient Orient. This system of vertical and horizontal coordinates and planes, which resulted in the imaginary space of the cube, led to the concept of Euclidian space.

Structural analysis¹⁹ is less an instrument for the historical interpretation of a work or of a category of works than a means for understanding the logic of their individuality. Despite the unresolved problems of this approach and Sedlmayr's highly contestable ideological position, his writings remain stimulating.

II. THE METHODS AND THEIR LIMITS

An art historian finds himself faced with a certain number of difficulties: the art-language relationship, the search for general concepts, the singularity and the historicity of the work, the history of art as a humanist discipline.

The documents examined by art history, whether it be plastic or applied arts, architecture or photography, are exclusively visual works; the theatre and cinema are only partially so. The art

historian attempts to transpose a visual reality into another means of expression, language. The difficulties and dangers which flow from this are legion. Ever since Giovanni Pietro Bellori (1636-1700), the historian is aware of the fact that words can only inadequately render all that is seen, and that there comes a moment when it is best to remain silent, when one is not able to explain the *nescio quid*, the “I just don’t know”.²⁰ It is always possible to seek consolation in the poverty of language along with Burckhardt who said that if it were possible to re-create a work of art fully through a written description of it, this work would be useless as a source of knowledge. Language, at the service of the visual work, can quite easily distance itself from the latter through its own logic and its own expressive power. One procedure consisted in reproducing a work of art poetically, that is in rendering one artistic phenomenon through the medium of another one. This simply displaces the analysis by one degree, by eliminating the specifically artistic nature of the visual. On the other hand metaphors and figured expressions can sometimes better evoke a visual state than long descriptions. The problem of terminology remains an essential one; the choice of terms, of figured-concrete or deductive-abstract character, a crucial choice.

Ever since Riegl and Wölfflin, art historians have attempted to develop fundamental concepts (*Kunstwissenschaftliche Grundbegriffe*), pairs of notions which conceptualise the fundamental problems of artistic creation. The pillars of Riegl’s system are the concepts “tactile-optical” and “objective-subjective”; for Wölfflin they are “linear-painterly”, “surface-depth”, “open form-closed form”, “autonomy of the parts-subordination of the parts”, etc.

Criticising these systems, Panofsky suggested that the work of art, on an ontological level, is an act of reasoning between “*Fülle*”, sense perception, and “*Form*”, ordering organisation; and on a methodological level, an act of reasoning between “time” and “space”. A certain number of antitheses belong to these concepts which characterise figural and compositional values.

W. Worringer’s system, the foundation of which is abstraction and *Einfühlung*, attempts to relate Riegl’s categories to those from psychology, beginning with the idea that art is a purely subjective and intuitive act. Every system created up until now remains insufficient. Its mission should be to define the artistic process, to

include stylistic criteria and to highlight *Kunstwollen* by a system of fundamental and special concepts.

The work of art is a microcosm with an internal cohesion in which all its constitutive elements mutually condition one another, that is the form and content, the meaning and its expression, intimately related one to another. Moreover, the work is the result of influences and the indicator of trends. It is situated in a system of coordinates within space and time and inserted in a historical continuum where it is determined in relation to its predecessors and to its successors, with which it is associated. It thus defines a stage in a historical development.

There are two possible approaches:

1. The focus of research is the individual work from which are derived the concepts which aid in the explanation of all its components. This procedure has the advantage of producing a perfectly adequate analysis of the concrete object. But the field of application of the concepts thereby derived remains extremely limited, as does the possibility of being able to understand the work as a vehicle of artistic influences and trends. An analysis of the work establishes its singularity, a characteristic which is less strongly felt in this age of *Reproduzierbarkeit* (Walter Benjamin). It is difficult to see how criteria and concepts can be generalised to serve for an analysis of a larger artistic whole.

2. The historical approach defines its concepts by an analysis of the artistic production of a region or of an age, or both, and characterises the work in relation to the specific location it occupies within the general development. In this approach principles of representation are determined, morphological characteristics are sought, along with typical expressive values, intrinsic properties and so on, in order to describe a regional, national or temporal style. Obviously there is a certain distance separating this approach from the individual work. Since the form and the content of artistic creations cannot be dissociated from their genesis, and to avoid seeking something which the artist was not able, nor wanted, to create, the historical point of view seems to be the most appropriate. For this reason it is necessary to abstract all explanations of a psychological or aesthetic nature which, because of their normative and subjective nature, manifest instead the personal preferences and antipathies of the viewer.

The History of Art: Its Methods and Their Limits

The study of a work according to all the ancient and modern methods of scholarship is indispensable. This can provide information with regard to the date and place of its creation, re-create its original condition and the location for which it was created. Such research returns the work to its historical-cultural context and assembles all the dates which refer to the artist and historical facts such as the commission, the reason, the origin and conditions of its creation. The author of the work is identified; his travels, his meetings and his contacts are uncovered. These dates provide the artist's biography and that of the work but do not resolve the problem of historical classification and characterisation, nor of his personal contribution. The master with whom an artist served his apprenticeship, in a biographical sense, is not necessarily the same as the master who provided him with the foundations of his artistic training. The true artistic ancestors can only be recognised in their works. Therefore, in addition to historical-archaeological research there must also be a stylistic, structural, iconographic and iconological analysis.

Stylistic analysis

The fact that so many works have come down to us with no indication of the date of their creation nor of their authors quite early attracted the attention of historians who sought to assign reference marks for dating and attributing them, based on collective features of an artistic trend, on its general tendency and the distinct stages of its development. The most basic argument for the existence of a style is the concordance of a certain number of artistic traits in the works of a given culture and period.

A style includes the constitutive and constant elements of the artistic production of a group during a period, that is forms-components and forms-relations, expressive qualities, compositional and structural features including techniques and materials. "What constitutes a style?", asks Henri Focillon.²¹ "The formal elements which serve as indicators, which are the repertory, the vocabulary and sometimes the powerful instrument of this style. Even more, but less evidently, a series of relations, a syntax."

Renaissance style is both more and less than what is expressed in the individual works of the masters because this style explains to us the organising principles which determine the character and the structure together but not the personal handwriting of an artist nor the specificity of the work. We can compare the style of a period to a musical theme whose variations are before us. As for the stylistic description of the work, the historical place it occupies in the system of time and space coordinates becomes intelligible relative to its predecessors and its successors as does its originality through which the artist found a solution to the artistic problems of his period. "But style is above all a system of forms possessing a quality and expression rich in meaning, through which the personality of the artist and the broad perception of a group can be mastered. It is also a means of expression within the group which makes social and moral life known through an emotional evocation of forms. It is also a common area relative to which the innovations and the individuality of individual works can be measured."²²

The style which characterises a period encompasses the works of the great masters as well as those of the lesser figures, the most modest artifact together with the most sumptuous architecture. Sometimes a style gives a name to an entire culture—Baroque, for example—and is applied to poetry, to music, to theatre and even to philosophy. The frame of references and the stylistic criteria of the other disciplines are obviously of another nature than those of the plastic arts with which they share a vision of the world and social and political conditions shared in common. It is by its refinement and its deep delving that stylistic analysis can determine and describe the most subtle differences between various regions within the same period, between successive generations of artists, between a youthful work, a mature work and a work executed in an artist's old age.

An examination of the style of a period, of its origins, its characteristics, its particular problems and developments leads to a perception of the major currents, but also of underlying or subsidiary movements, phenomena of anticipation, of composite mixture and of continuity. There are a certain number of features which unite the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, or Gothic art to Baroque art. Naturally these are not phenomenally apparent fea-

tures, but underlying resemblances of structure and deep-seated affinities.

It is necessary to consider the coexistence of different currents within a style. The sculptures of a Gothic portal placed alongside one another may reveal a more traditional concept in one and a more modern design in another, or manifest the characteristics of different regional schools. In a medieval painting, the execution of the landscape may be much more daring than the rendering of the sacred figures. The same artist might conceive revolutionary architectural designs and remain conservative in his plans for funerary monuments.

As Panofsky noted in his critique of Wölfflin, the concepts of “vision”, of “eye”, and of “optics” have two different connotations—a proper sense and a figured sense. No one would maintain that an artist perceives with an eye which is physiologically different the reality he represents in a linear style or that rendered in a painterly style. That which the eye sees as receiving organ will be set in a linear or painterly form through the active intervention of the mind. The general form of representation typical of the Renaissance, which sees linearly, on the surface and in a coordinating manner, is an intersubjective choice.

This throws light on the famous problem of the relation between form and content. A given viewpoint or certain way of looking at the world also has an influence on contents. “To each new perspective is associated a new ideal of beauty” (Wölfflin). Since form and content are inseparable, the more craftsmanlike distinction between the form and the object seems more acceptable.

Such terms as monumental, ornamental, decorative, stylised, idealised, naturalistic, realistic and so on correspond to expressive attitudes which are profoundly human and thus probably usable in all cultures. On the other hand, terms such as medieval, Gothic, Mannerist, Baroque, Romantic, Impressionist and so forth are descriptive characterisations of historical periods of Western art; and from a methodological point of view it seems impossible to apply them to the art of another culture, to speak of Baroque Chinese art or Impressionist prehistoric art. To generalise the concept of a historic European style in such a manner as to apply it to a style which is impregnated with totally different cultural preoccupations is a flagrant example of abusive Eurocentrism.

With regard to European art, the historian can easily sense the difficulty in snatching these terms from their historical context and speaking of a Mannerist Gothic art, for example. It is equally improper to transfer them to artistic expressions which are fundamentally foreign to European art. I will expand on the remarks of Prof. J. Ki-Zerbo in his fine article on "Prehistoric African Art":²³ "The sense of the essential engenders symbolist forms which are the complete opposite of the Baroque". I would add that they are also the complete opposite of all European styles and that the researcher should try to find a frame of references within the artistic expression concerned without relying on prior opinions based on a framework established for another culture.

Structural analysis

Leaving historical interpretation in the background, structural analysis attempts to understand the individuality of a work or of a characteristic feature of a culture as a whole and to examine the relationships between their constituent parts and layers. In an act of synthesis the researcher reconstructs the whole in order to discern its structures. Structural analysis contributes to our discipline a knowledge of the internal organisation of the work, of its immanent logic.

Iconographic analysis

This refers to the interpretation of the contents, to the identification of the subject of a work of art, i.e. its figures, allegories, attributes and symbols. First of all iconography supplies the explanatory sources for determining the subjects represented, essential for every period or culture whose figurative thinking is no longer familiar to the modern viewer. These may be the mythological themes of Antiquity, the religious themes of the Middle Ages, the Neo-Platonic subjects of the Renaissance, the pictorial programs of Baroque churches or the panegyric decorations of royal residences, in the European context.

Another category includes ephemeral themes, created to satisfy

the specific spiritual, religious or decorative needs of an age: the *pietà* for mystical contemplation at the end of the Middle Ages, for example, or the story of Ossian, the sentimental legend of Romanticism.

As for the group of constant themes, transmitted by tradition from one generation to another, it is necessary to expect considerable changes in meaning. The beautiful Ganymede, carried off by an eagle at the command of Zeus in order to enjoy eternal youth on Mount Olympus, became the symbol of the love of the soul for God in the Middle Ages. Endymion sleeping in his garden might represent Jonas, symbol of the resurrection.

This is why iconography cannot be limited to a simple identification of the objects represented. It is never pure description but historical interpretation. It implies a prior classification referring to the history of types and of forms. The identification of a theme requires a certain interpretation of its historical significance. To the question "What is represented?" is added another: "What does this subject mean?"

Iconography has recourse to an abundant literature, including literary works, religious (theological and liturgical) texts, philosophical treatises and historical documents, to reconstitute the cultural framework of a period and to cast light on its favorite themes, its innovations and its holdovers.

Iconological analysis

Formerly "iconology" meant "the art of representing abstract notions", such as the virtues and the vices, the temperaments, the ages of life, moral and intellectual qualities, etc. The most influential work (for Baroque art) was the lexicon of allegories and symbols, *Iconologia*, by Cesare Ripa.²⁴

The "intrinsic" significance or contents of a work of art or of a group of works reveals the basic mentality of a group, of a period, a class, a religious or philosophical conviction. Thus the work is considered to be a symbol of culture in general, of an artistic or spiritual attitude which can also be discerned in other areas. This approach, more synthetic than analytic, seeks to identify the constants in the thinking of a period as well as its transformations.

Important research has been done in the field of the history of architecture²⁵ which considers, for example, Sumerian and Babylonian ziggurats, divine mountains, as well as the terraced temples of the Indians or Chinese pagodas as reproductions of their respective cosmological systems. The basilicas from the beginnings of Christianity were in the image of the heavenly city, and the medieval cathedral seems structured in all its details according to the divine order of salvation.

The iconologist invites the other historical, political, social, literary, religious and philosophical disciplines to meet together on an equal footing, in a non-hierarchical complementarity.

A psychological approach²⁶ and an anthropological approach²⁷

Wölfflin's affirmation that his formal categories of classical and Baroque art were universal criteria for classification was refuted by Panofsky who noted that the act of seeing a form does not have a physiological aspect only but is conditioned by cultural conventions. These conventions are subject to historical changes. The psychological implications of this phenomenon were of interest to Ernst Gombrich. His principal theme is the representation of reality in art, in particular the image of nature. He examined its conventions and transformations. The mechanism of the perception and of the reproduction of reality can be perceived in the change of visual, expressive and receptive habits. The results of this analysis provide the psychological bases for a style and for its change. In this way a history of styles is envisaged, based on the options for or against possible forms.

George Kubler provided historians with his "sequence" theory which is in fact a revival of the cyclic theory, beginning with the observation that a category of art and a form of art run through a cycle under conditions which are not intelligible using a purely chronological framework. To characterise the path of an artistic form, he preferred the language of electrodynamics to an organic description and spoke of a transmission with impulses, resistances, transformations in the circuit, losses and gains en route, generating centers and relay stations. A sequence is made up of beginnings, maturity and the end of a specific form. At the moment when the

The History of Art: Its Methods and Their Limits

problem to which form has given an answer is transformed, a new sequence is set in motion. The date of a work is less important than its place within this sequence. It can be contemporary to another work and still have a different place in the overall development.

CONCLUSION

This reflection on the origins of the history of art, on the “founding fathers” who dealt with art by stylistic, iconographic, iconological or structural approaches, and on the methodological instruments currently in use would hope to contribute to the study of problems in a discipline in crisis.

Vasari was the founder of a history of art based on a theory of aesthetic norms to which certain followers, avowed or not, remain faithful even in our own times.

The creation of art history as a historical discipline is due to the efforts of a German-speaking school which, having lost aesthetic criteria, attempted to construct historical models to explain artistic heritage. Typical of the scientific optimism of this period, each approach was presented in a spirit of exclusivity, a little like the philosopher’s stone discovered at last. The following generations have obviously discovered the weaknesses in each method and criticised their unilateral nature: a single aspect of the work was examined at the expense of the others.

Less optimistic today, the historian suffers from the feeling that the methods which he has available do not allow him to appreciate in an adequate manner both the historical and artistic character of the world as well as its communicative quality as expressive form which transmits a vision of man and of his universe.

Is this then “the end of the history of art”?²⁸ The question mark augurs well for a history of art in search of the synthesis which will make it possible to recount the history of man and of the images he has created.

Ulrika von Haumeder
(Vienna)

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- ¹ VASARI, Giorgio, *Le vite de più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori* (1550, 1568), con nuove annotazioni e commenti di G. Milanesi, 9 vols. Florence, 1878-85.
- ² *Il Vasari. Rivista d'arte e di studi Vasariani*, Arezzo, 1927-1966.
- VON SCHLOSSER, Julius, *Die Kunstliteratur*, Vienna, 1924, pp. 251-304, and *La letteratura artistica*, Florence, 1956, pp. 289-346.
- ROUCHETTE, Jean, *La Renaissance telle que nous l'a léguée Vasari*, Paris, 1959.
- LEONTIEF ALPERS, Svetlana, "Ekphrasis and aesthetic attitude in Vasari's Lives", in *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 23, 1960, p. 190 ff.
- GOMBRICH, Ernst H., *Norm and Form. Studies in the Art of the Renaissance*, London, 1968.
- BOASE, T.S.R., *G. Vasari, The Man and the Book*, Princeton, 1971.
- BELTING, Hans, "Vasari und die Folgen", in *Theorie der Geschichte*, 2: Historische Prozesse, Munich, 1978.
- ³ WINCKELMANN Johann Joachim:
- *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst* (1755), in J. J. Winckelmann, *Kleine Schriften und Briefe*, Weimar, 1960, pp. 29-61.
- *Abhandlung von der Fähigkeit der Empfindung des Schönen in der Kunst und dem Unterricht in derselben* (1763), in J. J. Winckelmann, *Kleine Schriften und Briefe*, Weimar, 1960, pp. 152-176.
- *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* (1764), W. Senff ed., Weimar, 1964;
- *Gesamtausgabe* Stuttgart-Berlin-Leipzig, 1929 ss, 14 vols.
- ⁴ JUSTI, Carl, *Winckelmann und seine Zeitgenossen*, 3 vols. Leipzig, 1898.
- HEIDRICH, Ernst, *Beiträge zur Geschichte und Methode der Kunstgeschichte*, (1917), Hildesheim, 1968, pp. 28-50.
- WAETZOLD, W., *J. J. Winckelmann*, Leipzig, 1946.
- LEPPMANN, W., *Winckelmann, Eine Biographie*, New York, 1970.
- BAUER, Hermann, *Kunsthistorik. Eine kritische Einführung in das Studium der Kunstgeschichte*. Munich, 1979, pp. 68-72.
- BECK, H., – BOL P. C. Bol (eds.), *Forschungen zur Villa Albani. Antike Kunst und die Epoche des Aufklärung*, Berlin, 1982.
- ⁵ He distinguishes four styles: the archaic, prior to Phidias; the sublime expressed by Phidias; the beautiful expressed by Praxiteles, Lysippus and Apelles; the imitation and decadence of Greco-Roman art.
- ⁶ RIEGL, Alois, *Stilfragen. Grundlegungen zu einer Geschichte der Ornamentik*, (1893), Berlin, 1923.
- *Spätromische Kunstindustrie* (1901), Darmstadt, 1964.
- *Das holländische Gruppenporträt* (1902), Vienna, 1931.
- *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, Augsburg-Vienna, 1929.
- ⁷ In his arguments against the idea that the origin of ornament is found in the techniques and materials used, he includes a study of the Maori in New Zealand, who had no knowledge of the production of cloth nor of leather—considered to be the sole source of inspiration—and who nevertheless developed complex tattoo patterns based on the spiral.
- ⁸ PANOFKY, Erwin, "Der Begriff des Kunstwollens", in *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*, vol. 14, Stuttgart, 1920, pp. 321-339.
- DITTMANN, Lorenz, *Stil, Symbol, Struktur. Studien zu Kategorien der Kunstgeschichte*, Munich, 1967, pp. 16-49.
- ⁹ SEDLMAYER Hans, "Die Quintessenz der Lehren Riegls", in A. Riegl, *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, Augsburg-Vienna, 1929.
- JANTZEN, Hans, "Besprechung von Riegls Gesammelten Aufsätzen, in *Kritische*

The History of Art: Its Methods and Their Limits

Berichte zur kunstgeschichtlichen Literatur, III, Leipzig, 1930-1931, pp. 65-74.

– SAUERLÄNDER, Willibald, “Alois Riegl und die Entstehung der autonomen Kunstgeschichte”, in *Fin de Siècle. Zu Literatur und Kunst der Jahrhundertwende*, Frankfurt, 1977, p. 125 ff.

– PÄCHT, Otto, *Methodisches zur kunsthistorischen Praxis*. Munich, 1977, p. 141 ff.

¹⁰ WÖLFFLIN, Heinrich, “Prolegomena zu einer Psychologie der Architektur”, doctoral thesis, Munich, 1886, in *Kleine Schriften (1886-1933)*, Basel, 1946, pp. 13-47.

– *Die klassische Kunst. Eine Einführung in die italienische Renaissance*, Basel, 1898.

– *Renaissance und Barock. Eine Untersuchung über Wesen und Entstehung des Barockstils in Italien*, Munich, 1915.

– *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Das Problem der Stilentwicklung in der neueren Kunst* (1915), 7th ed. Munich, 1929.

– *Gedanken zur Kunstgeschichte*, Basel, 1940.

¹¹ Cited from Erwin Panofsky, *La Perspective comme forme symbolique*, Paris, 1975, p. 185.

¹² BÖCKELMANN, W., *Die Grundbegriffe der Kunstbetrachtung bei Wölfflin und Dvorak*, Dresden, 1938.

– BALDASS, Ludwig, “Zur Bedeutung Heinrich Wölfflins für die Kunstgeschichtsforschung”, in *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte*, 12-13, 1946.

– HAUSER, Arnold, *Philosophie der Kunstgeschichte*, Munich, 1958, pp. 127-306.

– DITTMAN, Lorenz, *Stil, Symbol, Struktur. Studien zu Kategorien der Kunstgeschichte*, Munich, 1967, pp. 50-83.

– SCHOLL, J. A., Gen Eisenwerth (ed.), *Beiträge zur Theorie der Künste im 19. Jahrhundert*, Frankfurt, 1971.

– GOLDHAMMER HART, Joan, *Heinrich Wölfflin: An intellectual biography*, Berkeley, 1981.

– LURZ, Meinhold, H. *Wölfflin: Biographie einer Kunsttheorie*, Worms, 1981.

¹³ DVORÁK, Max, *Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte. Studien zur abendländischen Kunstentwicklung*. Munich, 1928.

– *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kunstgeschichte*, Munich, 1929.

¹⁴ Like many others, he drew his inspiration from the sociologist Karl Mannheim, “Beiträge zur Theorie der Weltanschauungsinterpretation” in *Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte*, vol. 1, 1921-22, Vienna, 1923, pp. 236-274.

¹⁵ PANOFSKY, Erwin, *Zum Problem der Beschreibung und Inhaltsdeutung von Werken der bildenden Kunst* (1932), in *Aufsätze zu Grundfragen der Kunstwissenschaft*, Berlin 1974, pp. 85-97.

– *Idea. Ein Beitrag zur Begriffsgeschichte der älteren Kunsttheorie* (1924), 2nd ed., Berlin, 1960.

– *Studies in Iconology. Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance*, Oxford, 1939.

– *Albrecht Dürer*, Princeton, 1943.

– *Early Netherlandish Paintings. Its Origins and Character*, Cambridge, 1953.

– *Meaning in the Visual Arts. Papers in and on Art History*, Garden City, 1957.

¹⁶ BIALOSTOCKI, Jan, *Stil und Ikonographie. Studien zur Kunstwissenschaft*, Dresden, 1966.

– DITTMANN, Lorenz, *Stil, Symbol Struktur. Studien zu Kategorien der Kunstgeschichte*, Munich, 1967.

– GOMBRICH, Ernst H., “Aims and Limits of Iconology”, in *Symbolic Images. Studies in the Art of the Renaissance*, London, 1972.

– KAEMMERLING, Ekkehard, *Ikonographie und Ikonologie. Theorien – Entwicklung – Probleme* (Bildende Kunst als Zeichensystem), Cologne, 1979.

– KULTERMANN, Udo, *Geschichte der Kunstgeschichte, Der Weg einer Wissenschaft*, Vienna-Düsseldorf, 1966.

¹⁷ SEDLMAYR, HANS, *Kunst und Wahrheit. Zur Theorie und Methode der Kunstgeschichte*, Hamburg, 1958.

– “Zum Begriff der Strukturanalyse”, in *Kritische Berichte zur kunstgeschichtlichen Literatur*, III-IV, 1931-32, pp. 146-160.

– *Epochen und Werke*, 3 vols. Mittenwald, 1977.

¹⁸ SEDLMAYER, Hans, “Pieter Bruegel – Der Sturz der Blinden. Paradigma einer Strukturanalyse”, *Hefte des Kunsthistorischen Seminars der Universität München*, No. 2, 1957.

¹⁹ DITTMANN, Lorenz, *Stil, Symbol, Struktur*, Munich, 1967, pp. 142-216.

– VON EINEM, Herbert, “Der Strukturbegriff in der Kunstwissenschaft”, in H. v. Einem *et al.*, *Der Strukturbegriff in den Geisteswissenschaften*, Mainz, 1973.

– ALPATOFF, Mikhail V., *Studien zur Geschichte der Westeuropäischen Kunst*, Cologne, 1974.

²⁰ BÄTSCHEMANN, Oskar, *Einführung in die kunstgeschichtliche Hermeneutik*, Darmstadt, 1984, pp. 50-54.

²¹ FOCILLON, Henri, *La vie des formes*, Paris, 1981, (7th ed.), p. 12.

²² SHAPIRO, Meyer, “Style” in A. L. Kroeber, *Anthology Today*, Chicago, 1953, p. 287.

²³ *Histoire générale de l’Afrique*, vol. I, under the direction of J. Ki-Zerbo, Unesco, Paris, 1980, p. 723.

²⁴ RIPA, Cesare, *Iconologia, ovvero descrizione di diverse imagini cavate dall’antichità e di propria inventione* (1593). Facsimile of the 1603 Rome edition with an introduction by E. Mandowsky, Hildesheim-New York, 1970.

²⁵ BANDMANN, Günter, “Ikonologie der Architektur”, in *Jahrbuch für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*, Stuttgart, 1951, pp. 67-109; in Martin Warnke (ed.), *Politische Architektur in Europa vom Mittelalter bis heute – Repräsentation und Gemeinschaft*, Cologne, 1984, pp. 19-71.

– *Mittelalterliche Architektur als Bedeutungsträger*, Berlin, 1951, 7th ed., 1981.

²⁶ GOMBRICH, Ernst H., “Art and Illusion. A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation”, *Bollingen Series XXXV*. 5, Princeton, 1960.

– *Studies in the Art of the Renaissance*, London, 1972.

– *Meditations on a Hobby Horse and other Essays on the Theory of Art*, London-New York, 1963.

²⁷ KUBLER, George, *The Shape of Time. Remarks on the History of Things*, New Haven and London, 1962.

²⁸ BELTING, Hans, *Das Ende der Kunstgeschichte?*, Munich, 1983.