

Re-reading Riegl

Review of:

Peter Noever, Artur Rosenauer and Georg Vasold, eds, *Alois Riegl Revisited. Beiträge zu Werk und Rezeption. Contributions to the Opus and its Reception*. Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2010. 146 pages, b/w ills, ISBN 978-3-7001-6498-2, paperback, € 48,50

Michael S. Falser, Wilfried Lipp, Andrzej Tomaszewski, eds, *Conservation and Preservation. Interactions between Theory and Practice. In Memoriam Alois Riegl (1858-1905). Proceedings of the International Conference of the ICOMOS International Scientific Committee for the Theory and the Philosophy of Conservation and Restoration, 23-27 April 2008, Vienna*. Florence: Polistampa, 2010. 295 pages, b/w ills, ISBN 978-88-596-0746-5, paperback, € 25.

The centenary of the death of Alois Riegl prompted a spate of commemorative publications and events, including a conference in Rome on the theme *Alois Riegl (1858-1905). One Century On*, a special issue of the *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte*, and a conference in Vienna, of which one of the volumes reviewed here is the outcome.¹ All of these ventures raised the question of the meaning of Riegl in the present. While his historical significance is accepted, defining the nature of his legacy is not at all straightforward. As Michael Podro asked nearly 30 years ago, 'what kind of commentary are we to construct upon a literature . . . if we no longer believe in its theories?'² Riegl was undoubtedly one of the most innovative and imaginative art historians of his generation, but the conceptual framework he constructed, central to which was the idea of the *Kunstwollen*, drew on theories of perception that were outmoded even in his own lifetime, might now be regarded primarily as an historical artefact. And yet, the sheer intellectual ambition of his work has ensured that it continues to exert a fascination on subsequent scholars, who have not infrequently cited it as a precedent that provides some kind of validation for their own enterprises. This, however, can create its own problems, and it would not be an exaggeration to talk of the emergence of a Riegl cult over the past 20 or so years. Indeed, commentators otherwise critical of the artistic monograph as a genre of writing have nevertheless contributed to the monographic treatment of the art historian; with the exception of Heinrich Dilly, few authors have reflected on the methods of historiographic study.³

¹ *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte*, Vol 53 (2005). Special Issue: 'Wiener Schule - Erinnerung und Perspektiven;' *Alois Riegl (1858-1905) un secolo dopo. Atti dei Convegni Lincei 236. Convegno internazionale organizzato d'intesa con l'Istituto Archeologico Germanico, l'Istituto Storico Austriaco, la Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa, l'Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Filosofici, Roma, 2005*, Rome: Bardi, 2008.

² Michael Podro, 'Art History and the Concept of Art' in Lorenz Dittmann, ed., *Kategorien und Methoden der deutschen Kunstgeschichte 1900-1930*, Wiesbaden: F Steiner, 1985, 209.

³ Heinrich Dilly, *Kunstgeschichte als Institution*, Frankfurt am Main: Surhkamp Verlag, 1979.

Riegl Revisited goes some way addressing these issues, its contributors opening up new possibilities of interpretation that substantially enhance existing scholarship on Riegl. Moreover, as the editors note (p. 8), although the volume is a commemoration of his achievements, its intention is not 'to undertake a hagiography of Riegl, but to engage with him critically.' As such, the volume also functions as a barometer of the changing landscape of Riegl literature. With the exception of an absorbing discussion by Michael Gubser of Riegl's analysis of rhythm, which places the latter's use of the term in the context of contemporary aesthetic and psychological thought, there is little of the concern with the detailed methodological analysis that was so characteristic of earlier Riegl literature. Instead, most of the authors examine his place within the cultural, disciplinary and institutional politics of the time; the three central essays in this regard are those by Georg Vasold, Reinhard Johler and Diana Reynolds-Cordileone. Vasold examines Riegl's reliance on the discourses of national economy; the focus of Vasold's account is Riegl's short book of 1894 on folk art and the applied arts, which was concerned with their role in government economic policy.⁴ Instead of Riegl the historian of formal evolution, as we know him from *Questions of Style* published only the year before, we encounter here a different Riegl, concerned with the social and economic history of the arts. Vasold's essay, which provides a summary of some of the arguments proposed in his own earlier doctoral study of Riegl – easily the most significant piece of recent scholarship on Riegl – alludes to the very different figure Riegl might have become, had his work found a more engaged readership.⁵ It also highlights the extent to which Riegl was involved in debates with a far wider reach than art history alone. Vasold's essay is thematically linked to the contribution by Johler on Riegl's input into the emerging field of ethnology. The interlinking of art history and ethnography is most usually associated with Aby Warburg – Johler acknowledges Warburg's influential role in the inaugural conference of the German Ethnographical Society – but Riegl was equally immersed in the field. This was evident not only in his book on folk art and industry but also in the numerous essays and reviews he published in ethnographic journals, including the first volume of the journal of the Austrian ethnographic society. As Johler points out, Riegl was ideologically and intellectually close to Michael Haberlandt, a crucial figure in the formation of ethnography in Austria, and who saw the discipline as a patriotic enterprise promoting the multi-cultural character of the Habsburg state.

It is a commonplace of Riegl scholarship that the art historian left his position as a curator of textiles at the Museum for Art and Industry with reluctance, but this anecdote – mentioned by Max Dvořák in his Riegl obituary – is given the proper attention it deserves by Reynolds-Cordileone. Drawing on previously unpublished first-hand archival material, Reynolds-Cordileone demonstrates not only that Riegl felt compelled to leave the Museum in 1897 due to the acrimonious and antagonistic relation with Jacob von Falke, successor to Rudolf von Eitelberger as director, but also that he sought to become its director after the resignation of

⁴ Alois Riegl, *Volkskunst, Hausfleiß und Hausindustrie*, Berlin: Siemens, 1894.

⁵ See Georg Vasold, *Alois Riegl und die Kunstgeschichte als Kulturgeschichte: Überlegungen zum Frühwerk des Wiener Gelehrten*, Freiburg im Breisgau: Rombach, 2004.

Arthur von Scala in 1900. Crucially, too, Reynolds-Cordileone identifies the wider museological vision that underpinned Riegl's ambition, in which he was all too aware of the public and political significance of exhibitionary practice. In all three cases, therefore, Riegl was shown to be conscious of his identity as a public intellectual; while his major writings were produced for a narrowly academic audience, making no concessions to a non-specialist readership, he was nevertheless mindful of the broader public implications of his work.

The work of Riegl appears in a new light in a number of the other contributions to this volume, too. *Questions of Style* has traditionally been viewed in the light of the debate with Semper and his followers over the engine of formal stylistic change, but as Oleg Grabar suggests, its importance may equally be considered in the context of the emerging study of Islamic art. When Riegl wrote *Questions of Style* the conceptual apparatus of art history was constructed around the evolution of figurative representations. Although the commercial value of ornamentation was recognised, there was no language or method for writing the history of ornament. Riegl's book was thus an important early step in the development of such a methodology and, significantly, it made possible the study of ornamental Islamic art.

Alongside Grabar's exploration of the relation between Riegl and Islamic studies, Jaś Elsner highlights the unacknowledged influence of Riegl on classical archaeology. The key text here is *Late Roman Art Industry*, and it was less Riegl's formulation of the late Roman *Kunstwollen* (and his explanation of the shift to late Roman forms of representation) and more his ability to bring the heterogeneous array of late Roman artefacts excavated across Austria-Hungary into some kind of systemic order. This debt to Riegl was only formally acknowledged by Gerhart Rodenwaldt (1886-1945) and in the postwar era his legacy was completely neglected. Indeed, an early work by Elsner himself, on spectatorship in late Roman art, made no reference at all to Riegl.

Elsner's paper is a valuable reminder of the cross-disciplinary significance of Riegl's work, but his influence is overstated. Rodenwaldt may have openly referred to Riegl, but within the context of the development of archaeology as a discipline concerned with the production of taxonomies of objects, this was arguably of minor significance. Although Riegl described the stylistic evolution of Roman art, there was no attempt at the systematic and totalising classification associated with archaeological work – in that sense Winckelmann provides a more plausible ancestor. Archaeology was (and is) founded on a more fundamental epistemic regime, which also underlay much art historical work (not only Riegl, but also Heinrich Wölfflin and August Schmarsow, for example, undertook similar system-building projects), and to ascribe this impulse to Riegl alone misreads his significance.

Alongside his art historical publications Riegl was active in the final years of his life in the field of monument protection, having been appointed general conservator of the Central Commission for Research and the Preservation of Monuments in 1902. Alongside the general principles he articulated in his famous essay on 'The Cult of Monuments' he also actively intervened into the practical domain of individual conservation projects, at times coming into conflict with local elites – most notably in Cracow – whose vision of historical monuments was at odds

with his own. Sandro Scarrocchia examines the legacy of Riegl's ideas for Italian conservation theory and practice, contending with the paradox that, on the one hand, key individuals in Italian conservation in the 1960s such as Cesare Brandi and Piero Gazzola made no reference to Riegl, while many of articles of the Venice Charter of 1964, 'sound like Riegl.' The solution lies, for Scarrocchia, in the fact that Riegl stood as the 'intellectual father' of the tradition that led to the Charter, but that his role had been forgotten. As with the issue of Riegl's influence on classical archaeology, however, there is a danger in attributing ideas which, by the early 1960s, were circulating widely, to a sole (uncredited) point of origin. Riegl rightly deserves credit for the ideas on conservation policy that he articulated in the final years of his life; in particular, his dismissal of the nationalistic ideas of Georg Dehio still finds resonance today, but given that his writings coincided with the growth of interest across Europe in monument protection theory and policy, it is important not to overstate his influence. As the editors point out, in 1916, only eleven years after Riegl's death, Hermann Bahr felt compelled to ask: 'who is Riegl?' so quickly had the art historian disappeared from public awareness.

How, then, might we describe his legacy? As Margaret Olin asks: 'What remains of Riegl's theory?' In fact, if one holds fast to the strict notion of 'theory' in this formulation, the answer is, very little. Neither Riegl's formalist description of ornament, nor his commitment to the idea of historical evolution, nor his theory of the *Kunstwollen* have much critical currency in the present. For as Olin herself concludes, what remains are the *values* he espoused; in relation to the theme of the group portrait, 'We can always draw on Riegl's work if we wish to understand how a work of art depicts, forms and at the same time embodies a community' (130). Here is an unequivocal statement of the political charge of Riegl's thinking the values it promoted. Others included: the rejection of traditional art historical hierarchies that entailed the exclusion of the applied arts from art history's narratives; they also included his refusal (with one importance exception) to countenance notions of artistic decline and his embrace, in the name of a positivistic conception of objective scientific enquiry, hitherto overlooked practices, such as, most obviously, late Roman art. They also included the rejection of narrowly formulated ideas of national identity; as his book on folk art argued forcefully, the isolation sought by turn of the century nationalist ideologues could only lead to cultural obsolescence and decay. He also contested the attempts by various interested parties to lay claim to sole moral and spiritual ownership of historical monuments, stressing instead their multivalent character, emphasising the fact that in as culturally heterogeneous a state as Austria-Hungary, public spaces and monuments belonged in a variety of different, not always commensurate, historical narratives.

Caution, however, has to be exercised in compiling such a list, for a popular notion of Riegl has seen in him an advocate of multi-culturalism *avant la lettre*. It is important to emphasise, however, (and some of the contributors to this volume have done so in other publications) that Riegl's resistance to nationalism, his espousal of cross-cultural exchange, was closely aligned with the legitimising narrative of the late Habsburg Empire, which sought to uphold a feudal dynasty through appeal to the notion of the diversity of Austria-Hungary being its strength. In contrast to the Emperors of Germany and Russia, the Franz Josef could not claim

to embody the Austrian people, because there was none. Instead, he had to adopt a position of the being an impartial paternal figure who could transcend national differences, and a massive state apparatus was put into place to uphold this official state ideology. Riegl was a prominent representative of this apparatus, of which both the Museum for Art and Industry and also the University were central institutions. This opens up a critical reading of the ideological stakes of Riegl's work which might also, for example, point to his blindness to the paradoxical situation of German-language scientific scholarship in Austria-Hungary. On the one hand it was seen as the impartial *lingua franca* of scholarly enquiry with a universal application, yet increasingly, as the vicious inter-ethnic politics in the University of Prague of the 1880s demonstrates, this sentiment was not shared by other minorities of the Empire, who saw it as the cementing of the educational, cultural and social hegemony of the Austro-Germans, underpinned with state support.

There is a very short contribution to the volume on Riegl's trip to Split and his correspondence with Frane Bulić, the Croatian archaeologist. It is a pity that the discussion is so brief, since it highlights the fact that Riegl was concerned not only with events in Vienna, but was in contact with academic colleagues across the Empire. Indeed, the wider Austro-Hungarian context is seldom addressed in these essays; Riegl's interventions into debates about folk art were in part a response to the way that peasant culture and folk art had become central to the ideas of 'national' art that were such a preoccupation for artists, architects and critics across the Empire. Paradoxically, some of his most faithful followers were not to be found in Vienna, but in Prague, where leading figures such as Vincenc Kramář, the art critic and collector of Cubist art, or the art historians Zdeněk Wirth and Antonín Matějček, who substantially shaped the development of art history in Bohemia and, later, Czechoslovakia, explicitly drew on Riegl's ideas (and were themselves often criticised for promoting 'German' art history). In this regard the volume, for all its significant qualities, highlights the extent to which we have yet to recapture the intellectual exchanges that once existed in Austria-Hungary, and to which Riegl was a major contributor.

Conservation and Preservation. Interactions between Theory and Practice. In Memoriam Alois Riegl (1858-1905) consists of the proceedings of the ICOMOS conference that was staged in Vienna in 2008, in the memory of the 150th anniversary of Riegl's birth. In keeping with the framework of this publication, this is very much written for professionals involved in practical policy issues of conservation. Its 21 contributions are organised into four sections, dealing with (a) the roots of European conservation thinking; (b) the rise of canonical doctrines of monument protection; (c) current work by ICOMOS committees; (d) conservation philosophy in the contemporary transcultural world. It is concluded with a brief summary of Riegl's achievements.

The papers collected in the first session offer a welcome reminder that when Riegl drafted his texts on conservation, he was not doing so in a vacuum, but rather against a background of a long tradition of debates and ideas about its nature and purpose. Key figures mentioned here include Viollet-le-Duc and John Ruskin. The latter is a particularly important precursor, given his considerable influence on Austria in the late nineteenth century. One of the papers, by Andreas Lehne,

performs the valuable task of setting Riegl's writings in the context of his exchange with Georg Dehio, the Strasbourg-based art historian, whose notorious 1905 lecture on monument protection offered a nationalist rebuttal of Riegl, to which the latter in turn responded critically. Yet, as Lehne concludes, for all the contemporary admiration, more historic monuments have been preserved due to the much simpler Catechism of Monument Protection of 1916 by Riegl's successor Max Dvořák, which, through its popularisation of basic issues in monument preservation, made them into matters of broader public concern.

The contributions to the second section offer a useful overview of the changing literature on monument protection since the 1960s. Bogusław Szmygin provided a detailed and useful compilation of 'doctrinal texts' in heritage protection, but the essay seemed more concerned with constructing a typology of different kinds of text (charters, statements of principals, guidelines, and documents) than with analysing the shifting landscape of debate or ideas. Its primary goal was to draw up a prescriptive list of types of text that should be issued, without indicating the significance of the difference between them; this revealed, perhaps, the legalistic concerns of a professional concerned less with conceptual debates and much with practical issues of the formulation of policy documents.

Andrzej Tomaszewski's comparison of the 1931 League of Nations Athens Conference on architectural preservation with the Venice Charter of 1964 pointed out how restrictive policy and thinking became during this period. The ideas explored at Athens had an exploratory, free-thinking character whereas by the time of Venice, basic ideas and guidelines had taken on the authority of an inflexible set of commandments. Michael Falser examines shifts in thinking between 1964 and the World Heritage Convention staged in Nara, in 1994, focusing in particular on the notion of authenticity. First introduced in the Venice Charter, the concept took on increasing significance in the subsequent 30 years, yet as Falser demonstrates, with the globalisation of heritage and monument protection practices and discourses, this has brought other problems in its wake. Falser notes, for example, how when analysing conservation techniques in Japan, Euro-American observers lapse into clichés of cultural authenticity that mobilise stereotypes of 'traditional' Asian societies; more remarkable still is the fact that Japanese authors have internalised this discourse and reiterate it.

The papers in the third section address ongoing dilemmas in heritage management; these include, as Zbigniew Kobylński outlines, the conflicts between research, which, in the case of archaeology, inevitably transforms its object, and preservation, or between the concerns of heritage 'experts' and those of the wider public in a democratic society. Regarding the latter, as Kobylński notes, archaeological sites often have to be 'enhanced' in order to enable them to appeal to wider audiences and thereby justify the public resources expended on their preservation. Other contributions examine ongoing issues in contemporary conservation, including the role of the vernacular, or the 'cultural landscape', perhaps the least theorized aspect of heritage discourse, and consequently also the least protected by legislation.

The fourth section ('Conservation Philosophy in Today's Transcultural Reality') addresses the theme of heritage in a global context, examining case studies in Zimbabwe, Jerusalem, Vienna and Kathmandu, and issues such as sacred sites (and religious doctrines of heritage), notions of authenticity in 'the age of fakes,' and the resolution of the conflicting demands of the past and the present. There is much of interest in these contributions although, as is often the case with conference proceedings, none of them is of sufficient length to do their subject justice. In keeping with the nature of this volume as an ICOMOS publication, many of these contributions are concerned with formulating prescriptions for future conservation policy, which often limits the theoretical nuances of some of the analyses.

English has become the *lingua franca* of academic discourse, and both of these publications are either wholly or extensively published in English. It is unfortunate, therefore, that they were not carefully edited by a native speaker of English, since both contain numerous grammatical errors that could have been avoided.

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