

# Julius von Schlosser and the need to reminisce

Karl Johns

At the peculiar moment when the 'New Vienna School' in the history of art was becoming known beyond the discipline and even outside of the confines of academia itself, Julius Schlosser (1866-1938), the Ordinarius in charge of the 'II. Institut für Kunstgeschichte', just on the verge of retiring from a forty-four year teaching career, found himself in a unique position to record its origins and development. Many particulars might have been lost if he had not done so.

He had risen through the imperial bureaucracy and migrated from a study of literature, classical archaeology and then history, to become curator of sculpture and finally the successor to his own mentor in the chair of art history. The decision to make this momentous move from the museum to the university occurred precisely at the time in which the monarchy was being abolished and the inflation became so severe that the younger children of Vienna were being evacuated to the Netherlands, Scandinavia and other welcoming areas where the food shortages were not so severe. His own earliest doctoral candidate, Ernst Kris, entered his seminar when the lack of heating materials made it necessary to close the secondary schools in the afternoons.

Even before the universal devastation of the war and the influenza pandemic of 1918, a sense of morbidity had seemed to have settled on this field by the fact that no Viennese professor of art history since perhaps Rudolf Eitelberger had lived out a normal life span, while many of the most promising younger lights, such as Hermann Dollmayr and Wolfgang Kallab, had also met an unexpectedly early end.

Schlosser, whose own father had died before the age of fifty, would have felt more than one reason to affirm the nature of the proud local tradition and to record numerous significant projects and plans by predecessors and friends which had been curtailed by extraneous outward circumstances. At the moment of his decisive move into academia, his own intellectual origins and adherence to the program of instruction of the Institut für Geschichtsforschung, an independent university department devoted to rigorously training archivists and other related officials, seemed to be further threatened by the appearance of Josef Strzygowski at the University of Vienna.

Strzygowski had arrived from Graz and attracted attention with his lectures and publications about a far broader range of subjects than had been the average fare. At the beginning of his career Strzygowski had written prodigiously about iconographical topics, the art of the Balkans and other

subjects which had largely been previously avoided as provincial, ancillary, or belonging more properly to other academic areas. In Vienna instruction had traditionally been based on the Latin sources and non-European or exotic materials had been viewed either in relation to the 'classical tradition' or within the context of the anthropological or psychological sciences. Strzygowski became increasingly polemical in his interpretation of northern European and 'Asian' sources and influences. There was a widespread interest in Asian art at this time, the lectures of Strzygowski drew large audiences and his curriculum for doctoral candidates was far less rigorous. On the one hand, such an embrace of nations without relevant written sources militated against the traditional local course of study which emphasized precisely such sources. On the other, Strzygowski increasingly proposed that these areas had provided fundamental impulses for the development of European art, precisely at a time when Schlosser was devoting himself to the neo-idealist philosophy of Benedetto Croce and Karl Vossler, which viewed influences as inessential to the true nature of the greatest artistic monuments.

Directly amid the most horrific economic circumstances in common memory, the two rivals were forced to compete for private finance of their department libraries, publications, and quotidian administrative needs. Schlosser is said to have described his colleague as 'the "Attila the Hun" of art history.' Indeed, he narrates the development of the discipline in Vienna with only a passing reference to Strzygowski and no mention of the work of his numerous pupils, which after all included Otto Demus, Fritz Novotny, Karl Ginhart, Richard Kurt Donin among others. This episode has been fortunately analyzed by Eva Frodl-Kraft on the basis of her own personal knowledge, memories and experience.<sup>1</sup>

As a child of German parents from the central Rhine area, whose ancestors had pursued their careers in Rumania and the Balkans, the irony that Schlosser should have become the first native Viennese to occupy the chair might to some degree explain his digression about the artistic geographical location of the city at the nexus between the Slavic, Germanic, the Roman and the Barbarian cultures.

Since the practical constraints were forcing this to be greatly adjusted and a new generation was arising with a greater interest in the work of Riegl, it is significant that he has described his teaching curriculum as closely as he has. Just as his former Assistant, Hans Hahnloser was given the teaching chair at the University of Berne, and replaced by Hans Sedlmayr in Vienna, Schlosser had been himself pursuing the ideas of 'neo-idealism' in his own monograph about Lorenzo Ghiberti and in lectures about the Italian Quattrocento and theoretical subjects. While the latter were published by the academies in Vienna and

<sup>1</sup> Eva Frodl-Kraft, "Eine Aporie und der Versuch ihrer Deutung Josef Strzygowski - Julius v. Schlosser," *Wiener Jahrbuch der Kunstgeschichte*, Volume 42, 1989, 7-52.

Munich his 'pet project', the book about Ghiberti which he described as his 'besonderer Liebling' ('my special favorite'), never found a publisher during his lifetime. This again testifies to the fact that he seems to have resigned himself to the idea that he could only reach a small and particularly cultivated audience and never showed a wish to do otherwise.

When Strzygowski retired from teaching in 1933, the two departments were again merged, Schlosser could find succor in seeing his own influence alive in Switzerland and Italy. Even as the increased violence of the local Fascists made normal gainful employment increasingly elusive, a number of his pupils found a refuge in the emergent institution of his old friend Aby Warburg, while certain personal disappointments probably further contributed to an urge to reminisce. Schlosser remained an historian, a pedant and a 'dyed in the wool' Austrian bureaucrat. At this moment, the economic situation was threatening all institutions and individuals. Other friends and colleagues such as Wilhelm Bode had passed from the scene, in the same year as Warburg, without finding comparable successors. Even in print, the old teacher was also forced to admit that his predictions had not been realized that Benedetto Croce would be recognized and acknowledged as the most important philosopher of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. From certain rare references in his correspondence, such as that with Fritz Saxl,<sup>2</sup> it is clear that he was proud of the work of his many students, including those who completed their dissertations in other countries or other academic subjects. Some of these had begun their studies under the direction of Max Dvořák, and this led them to a renewed interest in Alois Riegl. After a career that had featured frequent polite intimations of the limitations of the approach taken by Riegl, and occasional references to factual errors, many of his own most brilliant students were beginning to search for national constants which Schlosser had himself been refuting since his own earliest essays about the cultural blend of the northern Italian artistic centers. Such was the vogue that a version of the section devoted to Riegl within the present essay was even printed in a popular literary journal in Munich.<sup>3</sup>

At this moment toward the end of his life, when he was recording the history of the Viennese art historians, he must have wistfully seen many of the brilliant students more interested in Riegl than in his own arguments. His new Assistant was among those who had not enrolled in the courses of the Institut für Geschichtsforschung and went further in endorsing Gestalt psychology, as his own generation could not countenance this within the bounds of art history -

<sup>2</sup> The letter dated 25 December 1932 from Schlosser to Saxl particularly illuminates the difficulties pervading that time, as well as including recommendations of Josef Bodonyi and Otto Kurz, and referring also to Otto Pächt. The reply by Saxl was dated 4 January 1933. Warburg Institute Archive, General Correspondence, Schlosser to Saxl, 25 December 1932; Saxl to Schlosser, 4 January 1933.

<sup>3</sup> Julius von Schlosser, "Alois Riegl," *Corona Zweimonatsschrift*, Jahr IV, Heft 2, Dezember 1933, 205-219.

and he was himself embarking on the model of the superlative artist as monad. Each of these trends went against the local traditions. At the same time, he continued insisting that his students submit to the most thorough possible training in the historical auxiliary sciences, while he was himself describing these as the 'philological' substructure to the actual 'language of art'.

While some critics were later to accuse him of 'hero-worship', this presents a gross misapprehension on the part of authors who have not read his writings particularly closely or comprehensively. Schlosser had been born and raised during the disputes surrounding Charles Darwin, remained a mid-century anti-clerical rationalist throughout his life, and his interest in the values of Romanticism was far more subtle, critical, academic than might casually appear and was devoid of any pathos. By the time in which he was writing, it had become clear that the methods propagated at the Institut für Geschichtsforschung could only remain compatible with the problems of more thoroughgoing art historical research in an eclectic way, but not 'organically' as this had still appeared to Moritz Thausing, Franz Wickhoff - and to himself in his earlier career. In this sense, he has been apt in designating his survey a retrospective and the pride in his achievements through difficult times and the success of his students must have been tempered by the sadness or cynicism of many 19<sup>th</sup> century historians. It should however be recognized that due to his relative longevity, productivity and reflectivity, his own influence has been more sustained and sophisticated than is generally acknowledged. In retrospect, his own place will remain unobtrusively close to the center of the history which he himself recorded here.

Throughout his career, Julius Schlosser cultivated a difficult style of writing which during his period of university instruction must partially have been intended to deflect any faint hearted or casual readers. He retained a lifelong preference for 'Schachtelsätze' - interminable nested sentences with dangling participles following an accumulation of subordinate clauses which are unusually tangential to the main thought. It is as if he felt that these dear details could only be saved from oblivion in this way by the true historian with the proper perspective. They seem to attain their florid crescendo when he speaks of subjects or people close to his heart, such Wolfgang Kallab and Franz Wickhoff. To break these up into more standard English usage would in some cases violate his intention in writing and create yet further redundancies in a text already replete with repetition. Before becoming an historian, an art theorist or art historian, he had been a bad poet. Some of his lengthy sentences which occasionally bend the grammatically admissible limits and some of his occasional redundancies have not been greatly modified here.

**Karl Johns** completed his doctorate in the history of art at the Fogg Art Museum, and has worked with the Dallas Museum of Art, the Rijksmuseum,

Karl Johns

Julius von Schlosser and the need to reminisce

Amsterdam, the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe in Hamburg, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art among others. His publications have centred on the art of the Netherlands in the early modern period and the earlier Viennese art historians.

Karl Johns  
270 Goins Court  
Riverside CA 92507

KarlTJohns@aol.com