

Words of suspension.

## The definition of 'Written Sources' in Julius von Schlosser's *Kunstliteratur*

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In the years when I used to teach 'Letteratura artistica' at the University of Rome 'La Sapienza', I still recall that students often described Julius von Schlosser's *Kunstliteratur* (Art Literature) as a '*lungo elenco telefonico*', as though the book were merely a long list of names, dates and places to be classified and memorized like strange objects hanging on the vaults of a claustrophobic *wunderkammer*.<sup>1</sup> Although no scholar would have seriously agreed with such a reductive statement, it is surprising to observe nevertheless how, even among some of the most engaged art historians, such as Lionello Venturi in his *History of Art Criticism*,<sup>2</sup> there is a recurrent tendency to view Schlosser's monumental work as no more than a philological enterprise— mostly if not exclusively— invaluable as a selective bibliography but nothing more than that.

In more recent years, intellectuals from different fields, such as Umberto Eco in his *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, have once again respectfully yet dismissively circumscribed the critical topography of Schlosser's *Kunstliteratur* as an encyclopaedic bibliography. In a rather unambiguous sentence, Eco claims in fact that 'Schlosser Magnino's works are first and foremost enormous and well-organized bibliographies'.<sup>3</sup> Although both scholars recognize the important aims and goals of Schlosser's undertaking, neither Venturi nor Eco have considered it as the textual embodiment of a specific field of research, namely the Art Literature, thus neglecting its specific epistemological distinctions. In spite of their admiration, they nonchalantly anchor Schlosser's enterprise in the placid waters of an essentially bibliographical lake – an immense lake.

<sup>1</sup> J. von Schlosser, *Die Kunstliteratur. Ein Handbuch zur Quellenkunde der neueren Kunstges*, Vienna: A. Schroll & Co., 1924; trans. *La letteratura. Manuale per lo studio delle fonti della storia dell'arte*, Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1988. For further analysis regarding Julius von Schlosser, see R. De Mambro Santos, *Viatico Viennese. La storiografia critica di Julius von Schlosser e la metodologia filosofica di Benedetto Croce*, Sant'Oreste (Rome): Apeiron Editori, 1998. More recent bibliography can be found in M. Trimann, 'Julius von Schlosser (1866-1938)' in *Klassiker der Kunstgeschichte. Con Winckelmann bis Warburg*, Munich: Beck, 2008, 194-213; and more recently, R. De Mambro Santos, 'The concentric critique. Schlosser's *Kunstliteratur* and the paradigm of style in Croce and Vossler', *Journal of Art Historiography*, 1, 2009, 1-RdMS/1 (<http://www.gla.ac.uk/departments/arthistoriography/>). My most grateful thanks to Karl T. Johns for having attentively read the manuscript of this essay and provided so many insightful comments on it.

<sup>2</sup> L. Venturi, *History of Art Criticism*, New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1936; trans. *Storia della critica d'arte*, Rome: Edizioni U, 1945). See also R. De Mambro Santos, *Opera al bivio. Alle origini della moderna storiografia critica dell'arte*, Sant'Oreste (Rome): Apeiron Editori, 1998.

<sup>3</sup> U. Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986, 238.

According to these views, *Die Kunsthistorie* should be basically read as a catalogue, an astonishingly rich compilation of written sources directly connected to the sphere of art, characterized by a remarkable erudition and an outstanding philological accuracy. Yet no mention is made to Schlosser's critical constructions, no effort to analyse its theoretical basis or its profound philosophical orientation. It is this widespread, narrow and constrained interpretation of Schlosser's *Kunsthistorie* that I would like to reassess in this paper, and attempt to stress the fact that, far from being a simple, portable set of textual sources of the History of Art, arranged as a sort of bibliography *de poche*, Schlosser's volume is, quite to the contrary, a conscious and highly intellectually-oriented expression of a coherent network of premises based on Karl Vossler – to whom the *Kunsthistorie* was dedicated—and Benedetto Croce, 'a man', Schlosser loudly affirms, 'who will be certainly indicated by the future generations as the philosopher of the century'.<sup>4</sup>

In the present essay, I shall further investigate Schlosser's enterprise primarily as the result of an intense dialogue with Croce's principles and Vossler's studies on Linguistics, in order to understand the particular definition of written sources conveyed by *Die Kunsthistorie*. To this purpose, I shall divide my essay in three complementary parts: the first devoted to Schlosser's notion of 'historical grammar' examining his adoption of Vossler's crucial distinction between 'language' and 'style'; the second part of the essay dealing with the analysis of the concept of 'artistic essence' to outline Schlosser's peculiar reception of Croce's *Estetica* as well as his attentive reading of the latter's *Teoria e Storia della Storiografia*; finally, in the third part, I shall address my attention more closely to Schlosser's intentionally restrictive definition of written sources in order to emphasize the epistemological relevance of the *Kunsthistorie* as a specific field of research, completely autonomous and yet profoundly linked, on the one hand, to the making of the *Kunstgeschichte* (History of Art) and, on the other, to the development of the *Kulturgeschichte* (History of Culture).

### **The consciousness of a distance**

Located at the epistemological crossroads of philology and philosophy, the monumental structure of *Die Kunsthistorie* is built up according to a precise definition of art—or a particular definition of 'artistic expression'<sup>5</sup> – based on Croce's aesthetic reflections. Coherently, Schlosser's volume considers the *Quellenschriften* (written sources) as irreplaceable witnesses as well as eloquent traces of an otherwise incomprehensible process: the creation of an artwork. In the attempt to understand—and idealistically revive—such a process, that have ultimately led to the formulation of a concrete work of art, the scholar should initiate research, according to Schlosser, by historically locating the context in which such an artwork has been generated, thus circumscribing as accurately as possible the geographical as well as

<sup>4</sup> J. von Schlosser, *Der Kunst des Mittelalters*, Potsdam: Athenaion., 1923, trans. *L'arte del Medioevo*, Torino, Einaudi Editori, 1998, 11.

<sup>5</sup> The definition of 'artistic expression' is borrowed from B. Croce, *Estetica come scienza dell'espressione e linguistica generale. Teoria e storia*, Milan: Remo Sandron, 1902. See also De Mambro Santos, *Viatico Viennese*, especially the first chapter.

the temporal boundaries of its appearance. After having overcome this first step, the scholar should then identify in greater detail the hands of the individuals – or groups of individuals – who have made it in the concrete sense. In other words, to use a metaphor adopted by Schlosser himself, one should determine, first of all, the big ocean of Context in order to contemplate, in a second moment, the blossoming islands of Art: first, the historical components of the Context; then, the aesthetic elements of Art.

Created under specific conditions to respond to a certain range of purposes and expectations, the work of art originally acts as a powerful means of communication, speaking loudly and clearly to its contemporaries. Once displaced from its original context, however, it becomes inevitably silent and loses its former capacity to establish such connections. For this reason, according to Schlosser, the preliminary task of any scholar should be to recover and retrieve the audience's old familiarity with certain objects in the attempt to resume their promising dialogue, their *civil conversatione* with artworks from the past. To put it another way, it is imperative to learn how to read the peculiar language with which an individual work is made, according to the range of historical context, to determine, then, the creative relevance of such a work as well as its aesthetic values in different contexts of reception.

As the result of a concrete net of historical interactions, any work of art shares some of its own features with other works belonging to the same time and place. These shared features, common to any art object produced within the same context, constitute what Karl Vossler defines 'the linguistic level of art', or the sphere of language, as opposed to the sphere of style.<sup>6</sup> Thanks to the presence of these conventional features—which form a map of the collective identity of an artwork—it is possible to analyse even the tiniest fragment of marble or the smallest portion of a painting in the attempt to take them back to their original contexts of creation, by means of a philologically-grounded research. After having conducted such a preliminary investigation, the scholar should be able to establish the general, the commonly shared set of forms, materials and techniques through which—and sometimes against which—an individual work of art emerges. This set of general patterns constitutes what Schlosser has indicated as the 'historical grammar' of art.<sup>7</sup>

Once eloquent and immediately able to establish communicative exchanges with the audience, artworks from the past now appear, before the eyes of modern spectators, as mute systems of shapes, or speechless tracks of time. Between the modern viewers and the objects produced in the past there is a gap, a broken line of conversation which, according to Schlosser, cannot be entirely filled up, for it is too vast to be closed. In other words, an unbridgeable space separates the modern horizons of possibilities – or 'systems of expectations' as Gombrich would say –

<sup>6</sup> The distinction between 'language' and 'style' is addressed in several studies undertaken by Vossler such as *Positivismus und Idealismus in der Sprachwissenschaft. Eine Sprach-Philosophie Untersuchung*, Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1904.

<sup>7</sup> On the concept of 'historical grammar,' see O. Kurz, *Julius von Schlosser. Personalità metodo lavoro* in Schlosser, *L'arte del medioevo*, XXXIII.

from the original context in which an 'artistic expression' has been reached and physically materialized in an object.

The consciousness of such a distance, however, instead of discouraging any attempt to provide an aesthetic explanation of the artworks, leads Schlosser, on the opposite, to postulate the existence of two consecutive aspects of research, guided by diverse methodologies and oriented towards different yet complementary goals: the first moment should assume the form of an historical investigation to be undertaken in accordance with a series of philological as well as comparative principles, in order to grasp the general laws under which a work of art has been created, thus designating, from a critical standpoint, its 'historical grammar'. Such a frame of universals – corresponding to the preparatory space of language in Vossler's critical terminology – should provide the introductory key thanks to which a scholar could finally start the analysis of what Croce once called the 'truly individual components' of an artistic creation - that is to say, its style. For this reason, the notion of style will be defined by Schlosser as a highly personal, unmistakably recognizable vocabulary of forms, procedures and techniques directly related to an *Individuum*, as distinct from the intersubjective paradigm of the language.

The preliminary study of the 'historical grammar' therefore emerges as the major focus of a culturally-centred examination of artworks, such as those promoted by the supporters of *Kulturgeschichte*, the historians of culture. On the other hand, the second moment of research shall definitely be devoted to the exploration of individual and personal features discernable in works of art and in the programmatic attempt to circumscribe and capture the specificity of their style. Coherently, this aspect of research must focus primarily on the analysis of what Schlosser, in a faithful paraphrase of Croce, has called 'the very essence of the artistic expression', namely the stylistic innovations proposed by an individual artist.<sup>8</sup> When seen in this light, the formal characteristics of an artwork appear as the visual materializations of a master's creative identity and then, from the perspective of an art historian, provide the legitimate objects of *Kunstgeschichte*.

Basing his statements on Croce's distinction between 'general' prose and 'individual' poetry, as well as Vossler's strict differentiation of language from style, Schlosser then claimed that one problem is to verify the general conditions that have in one way or another oriented the various articulations of the 'historical grammar' for a certain period and place (an activity that characterizes, in fact, the historians of culture); another is to grasp the individual paths pursued by each artist in the creation of their personal styles (a task that should be unequivocally undertaken by historians of art). In a schematic way, we could argue that, in Schlosser's views, there are two contiguous aspects of historical research connected with the analysis of artworks, which will eventually lead to a deeper understanding of the latter: first of all, the study of language, or the investigation of the 'historical grammar' of a period, with the clear predominance (methodologically) of the philological approach, making it possible to identify the linguistic conditions under which an artistic intuition has been materially articulated; second, the analysis of style, or the accurate identification and critique of all individual features that

<sup>8</sup> Schlosser, *Der Kunst des Mittelalters*, 2.

characterize an 'artistic expression', if one intends to fully grasp the artistic essence of an object, in the eloquent words of Schlosser, this element of research should be undertaken 'in a philosophical spirit'.<sup>9</sup>

### Beauty beyond language

When considered as intertwined poles of any artistic creation, such a drastic distinction between 'historical grammar' and 'personal expressions' reflects Schlosser's familiarity with Vossler's Linguistics on the one hand and his profound veneration of Croce's *Aesthetic* on the other. Basing his critical remarks on the identity between 'intuition' and 'expression', as postulated by Croce in his *Estetica*,<sup>10</sup> Schlosser significantly defines the product of the creative process as something individually determined, in spite of its general linguistic patterns. It is not by accident that Schlosser considered art works as unique – and therefore, unrepeatable – formulations of an idea, of a highly personal insight, translated into an equally unique, unrepeatable form. If it is truly 'artistic'—i.e., 'poetic', in Croce's terminology – the work of art cannot be reshaped or articulated in any other expressive form. As the concrete result of an individual experience, the work of art appears to Schlosser as the tangible materialization of the 'essence of art'. Although one should never overlook the role played by the set of conventions, habits and technical modalities commonly shared by the masters belonging to the same context, the History of Art as a discipline must focus quite selectively on analysing the individual qualities of the style, rather than exploring the general parameters dictated by the context, described by Croce as '*lo stile del tempo*' (the style of the time) and indicated by Vossler as the language of art. Schlosser is familiar with both designations, but also attracted by those of Alois Riegl in including so problematic a concept as *Kunstwollen* in *Die Kunstliteratur*, he operates a synthesis of these categories referring to the contingent conditions of the artistic enterprise as its 'historical grammar', as well as to its individual features as the style—or aesthetically relevant expression.

The work of art therefore presents the fruit of a double encounter: the general components shared with other pieces belonging to the same context and the specific degree of innovation to be found *only in that* certain object. If the former reveals the 'historical significance' of a work, it is nonetheless the latter which determines its potential 'aesthetic values', outlining at the same time the modicum of individuality as it permeates a work of art. Accordingly, the History of Art should be seen literally as the History (*Geschichte*) of Art (*Kunst*), that is to say, the discursive reconstruction of an unrepeatable event. Such a definition explains the reasons why Schlosser so programmatically distinguishes the 'historical' understanding of art from its 'aesthetic' comprehension. In his pages, History appears as a shareable form of knowledge, whereas Art reveals itself as a personal experience. A question then inevitably arises: on the basis of such a system of oppositions, how is it possible to reconcile these apparently conflicting poles and narrate the History of Art *sub specie veritatis*?

<sup>9</sup> Schlosser, *Kunstliteratur*, 5: 'in philosophischem Geiste betrachtet'.

<sup>10</sup> Croce, *Estetica*, 92.

In fact, by assimilating Croce's separation of 'art' from 'non-art', 'poetry' from 'prose', and Vossler's distinction between 'language' and 'style', Schlosser sets a radical gulf between 'historical grammar' and 'personal expression'. This distinction ultimately creates a methodological divide in *Die Kunstdliteratur*. By considering the aesthetic quality of an artwork as the visual materialization of an unrepeatable process of creation, conducted individually and idealistically detached from its own historical context – as a flourishing island vanishing over the fatal horizon of the sea – Schlosser definitely makes it impossible to attain an historical knowledge of the 'essence of art'. In other words, given its 'spiritual' dimension, it is impossible for the spectator to achieve any historical understanding of the aesthetic qualities of an object. History and Aesthetics appear to be guided by contradictory forces and to move accordingly in different directions rather than converge on their hermeneutic goals. However, as we shall see, Schlosser's conciliatory goals eventually overcome this initial divide, and provide a promising methodology, which makes it possible to cross the apparently unreachable boundaries of Beauty by means of an accurate historical analysis – as extensively examined by Croce in his *Estetica* and *Teoria e Storia della Storiografia*.<sup>11</sup> From Schlosser's perspective, the question is then how a philologically-based study could disclose the threshold of the 'aesthetic' qualities of an artwork, touching its style beyond the limits imposed by the language? In the terms of Croce, how could History help us to describe the 'spiritual', 'personal' dimension of an 'artistic expression'?

According to Schlosser, History and Philology in fact become the two disciplines which allow us to reconstruct of the 'historical grammar' of a work of art, although they will also not be able to capture the truly individual characteristics of the art work epistemologically or philosophically: *those* particular characteristics which according to Croce render the artist's creation as a perfect synthesis between 'intuition' and 'expression'. What scholars should attempt to do, therefore, is not to search for a rigid taxonomy of conventions, or attempt to identify a normative set of elements which might be presented generically as exemplary or as documenting a certain period but they should, on the contrary, undertake a philologically-accurate process of remembrance and restitution of the original 'intuition' that originated in a personal 'expression'. The work of art is unique in its reformulation of previous forms, techniques and themes, and should thus be evoked, described and evaluated exclusively on the basis of its individual qualities - in the attempt to approach the centre of its inimitable style as closely as possible.

It is no accident that Croce defined the concept of Beauty as the fullest 'expression' of a personal 'intuition'. No mathematical laws, no conventional rules of proportion, and no anatomically-based canons of harmony could ever ultimately determine the amount of Beauty conveyed by through a work of art. Only its truly individual qualities can do so. To mention a concrete example: Piero della Francesca and Leonardo da Vinci, two masters consistently examined by Schlosser as writers and painters, certainly shared many elements of their art with other fifteenth-century artists. These components of the 'historical grammar', namely the art of the

<sup>11</sup> B. Croce, *Teoria e storia della storiografia*, Bari: G. Laterza, 1920, reprint Naples: Biliopolis, 2007.

Tuscan *Quattrocento*, can provide the horizon of reference from which their personal creations stand out so magnificently. No other master working in the same conditions ever managed to imitate Piero's sense of geometry or Leonardo's delicate *sfumato*. From an idealistic standpoint, no other artist could fully emulate what is personal in an artwork, for the simple reason that, according to both Schlosser and Croce, the 'artistic expression' is the non-mediated translation of a purely individual 'intuition'. Such a form can thereby reveal the timeless evidence of an experience lived intensely, which opens a threshold to our immanent experience of the past. How then could a scholar in any other way identify the artistic quality of an object than by means of philological and historically-based research?

Schlosser addresses this paradoxical topic in the dense introduction of *Der Kunst des Mittelalters* (The Art of the Middle Ages), published in Vienna in 1923, one year before the appearance of *Die Kunstliteratur*. Without denying his solid preparation as a philologist trained in the core of the 'School of Vienna', the author in these pages proposes a significant reassessment of the critical paths of interpretation of art works, splitting it, as we have seen, into two consecutive stages: in the first, the scholar should reconstruct the original context of an object in the attempt to grasp, in the following step, the aesthetic qualities of it, and to thus determine its unmistakably artistic values. By the end of this second aspect, the scholar should be idealistically able to define the stylistic components of a work, separating its individual features from the general grammar of codes, shapes and conventions commonly adopted in a certain period. In fact, in a quite incisive sentence, Schlosser claims that the historical relevance of an artwork as well as its expressive uniqueness is identifiable only by means of a progressive development of 'hermeneutic subtraction': 'One arrives at the so-called period style by abstracting from the only relevant element [the work of art], the individual creation, which presents the sum of all that which survives, and in certain historical periods accounts for all artifacts of expression'.<sup>12</sup>

By eliminating the commonplaces present in an artwork, through a process of hermeneutic disclosure conducted '*per via del levare*', as Ghiberti would say, in a virtual process of gradual purification, one could visualize the emergence of distinctively individual qualities of an object, which could not be imitated or reproduced without losing their aura of uniqueness. For this reason, I have elsewhere referred to Schlosser's interpretive method as a 'concentric critique',<sup>13</sup> through which the scholar can get closer and closer to the – idealistically unattainable – centre of the style, by pursuing a spiral-like movement of progressive analysis, in which the elements lacking in uniqueness are gradually eliminated as factors of the generic sphere of language, or of the 'historical grammar' of art. The 'artistic expression' had its origins in an unrepeatable process, and can neither be

<sup>12</sup> 'unter Abstraktion von dem eigentlich und einzig Bestimmenden, Individuell-Schöpferischen als die Summe alles dessen, was dann übrig zu bleiben und in gewissen Perioden allen Werken des Ausdrucks, guten, mittelmässigen, wie schlechten, Originalen wie Ableitungen, zu eignen scheint, des sogen. Zeitstils' in Schlosser, *Der Kunst des Mittelalters*, 2.

<sup>13</sup> For the concept of 'concentric critique' see De Mambro Santos, *Opera al bivio. Alle origini della moderna storiografia critica dell'arte*, Sant'Oreste (Rome): Apeiron Editori, 2001, especially 35-43. Also De Mambro Santos, 'The concentric critique', 9.

verbally translated nor historically explained in its aesthetic dimension. Such a dimension can be only intuitively re-enacted. In other words, the epicentre of Beauty will always remain out of reach to any spectator, even amongst contemporary viewers, for it can only be fully experienced—and materially translated into a work of art once: by the artist himself in the very moment of creation.

No philological research or any historical investigation could therefore exhaustively define what is authentically individual and unique in an 'artistic expression'. In spite of its being irrecoverable from an historical perspective, the uniqueness of the creative experience is not dissimilar from the Romantic postulate of 'spiritual inspiration',<sup>14</sup> and can nevertheless be re-evoked through an exquisitely philosophical examination. According to these premises, a scholar should rather wear the costume of a poet than the clothes of an art historian. Coherently, *ekphrasis* is praised by Schlosser as the highest form of art criticism, and considered as the only way a scholar could get a 'higher proximity to the intimate essence of an art which has become strange to us',<sup>15</sup> thus transforming the contemplation of an artwork into a 'spiritual event'.<sup>16</sup>

In other words, rather than exploring the historical set of conditions in which a work of art originated, scholars should embark on a series of philologically-oriented campaigns of poetical recalling. In this way, they might transform the art of a certain period into 'an inward rather than a mere outward event, one within our spiritual development'.<sup>17</sup> The moment of aesthetic comprehension will then coincide with the poetic contemplation of an object, in a process of evocation which might allow the spectator to idealistically re-enact the path of creation as it was originally pursued by the artist (according to the constitutive paradox of Croce's *Estetica*) and to virtually revive the past (as argued by the philosopher in his *Teoria e Storia della storiografia*). Such a hermeneutic procedure has several implications: philosophically, it outlines the disappearance, from Schlosser's pages, of any residue of methodological *Positivismus*; historically, it reveals his connections with the Viennese Secession as well as with the German *Expressionismus*; methodologically, it affirms a dialogue over decades with Croce about art, history and historiography while also revealing Schlosser's profound attention to Vossler's concepts. The epistemological synthesis of these sources will clearly appear in the codification of Schlosser's peculiar concentric critique, in which a philologically-based form of *ekphrasis* is endorsed as the most accomplished mode of interpretation. It was no accident that Schlosser praised Heinrich Wölfflin as 'the most important art historian of our time'<sup>18</sup> and a master of verbal allusions, much as Roberto Longhi was systematically upheld for his excellent models of art criticism. One could ultimately state that Philology, Poetry and Philosophy shape the

<sup>14</sup> On the poetics of the Romanticism see Nicholas Halmi, *The Genealogy of the Romantic Symbol*, London: Oxford University Press, 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Schlosser, *Der Kunst des Mittelalters*, 5.

<sup>16</sup> Schlosser, *Der Kunst des Mittelalters*, 5.

<sup>17</sup> Schlosser, *Der Kunst des Mittelalters*, 5.

<sup>18</sup> Schlosser, *Der Kunst des Mittelalters*, 7.

complementary sides of Schlosser's epistemological polyhedron: the Art Literature as a humanistic discipline.

### Words in-between worlds

What ultimate use might written sources have for an aesthetic comprehension of art works from the past? To answer this question, it is first of all important to recognize the definition of *Quellenkunde* provided by Schlosser in the introduction to *Die Kunstliteratur*, entitled 'Idea and Extension of the Sources of Art History'.<sup>19</sup> As he there explains: 'Even the concept of the study of sources requires an explanation. We are referring [i.e. in the pages of *Die Kunstliteratur*] to secondary, indirect, written sources—what historians generally describe as literary documents—and dealing consciously and theoretically with the arts in historical, aesthetic or technical terms. That which we might call the impersonal documentation, such as inscriptions, written records and inventories provide the material for other disciplines'.<sup>20</sup>

Presented as secondary yet personal testimony, the textual sources are considered as intentional traces of the artistic process and not merely factual remnants. In fact, Schlosser clearly separates a typology of sources that appears as a self-conscious explanation of the process of artistic creation from a sort of source which does not reveal such a self-reflective relevance. Consequently, he will in *Die Kunstliteratur* consider only the first kind of sources as relevant, directly related to the sphere of art 'in a theoretical sense'. According to this, a brief note by Marcantonio Michiel or a long description written by Giorgio Vasari should assume an equal place in the range of sources examined in *Die Kunstliteratur*, whereas other random records from archives or epistolary exchanges should not be considered as relevant to this field of study. Moreover, such a selective distinction between 'theoretically relevant' and 'unintentional' written sources carries also an epistemological implication, for it postulates two different conceptions of History: if the first kind of source will form the basis of the *Kunstgeschichte*, the second will be more appropriately considered within the methodological boundaries of the *Kulturgeschichte*.

Schlosser's differentiation of two typologies of written sources reveals, once again, his profound debt to Croce. It is not a mere coincidence, in fact, that in the dedicatory page of *Die Kunstliteratur* he stresses the remarkable transformation as it occurred in his project from the initial idea of writing a general bibliographic *compendium* of art historical sources to a more philosophically-grounded enterprise, culminated in positing Art Literature as a particular field of research. At first

<sup>19</sup> 'Vorerinnerung. Über Begriff und Umfang der kunsthistorischen Quellenkunde' in Schlosser, *Kunstliteratur*, 1-2.

<sup>20</sup> 'Auch der Begriff der Quellenkunde selbst bedarf einer Einschränkung; gemeint sind hier die sekundären, mittelbaren, schriftlichen Quellen, vorwiegend also im Sinne der historischen Gesamtdisziplin die literarischen Zeugnisse, die sich in theoretischem Bewusstsein mit der Kunst auseinandersetzen, nach ihrer historischen, ästhetischen oder technischen Seite hin, während die sozusagen unpersönlichen Zeugnisse, die Inschriften, Urkunden und Inventare, anderen Disziplinen zufallen und hier nur einen Anhang bilden können' in Schlosser, *Kunstliteratur*, 1.

conceived as a 'handbook of the science of sources', *Die Kunstliteratur* ultimately assumed 'a double aspect', as Schlosser puts it, becoming then 'a theory and a history of the Historiography of art'.<sup>21</sup> In other words, what was supposed to be a set of textual data to be examined on the basis of well-established philological premises has become, in the light of the dialogue with Croce and Vossler, a monument of critical reassessment, in which the very notions of art and art history became major objects of theoretical speculation. On the other hand, such an epistemological revisionism is also associated with the *re*-definition of the *Kunstgeschichte* as a field of study. As Schlosser himself affirms, he conceives it as 'an historical discipline related to its sister science the so-called classical archeology by its nature, even if its purpose and some of its methods might differ. It is not least of all due to its origins in philology that archeology seems more strictly scholarly'.<sup>22</sup> With respect to the chronological boundaries of such a field of study, Schlosser comments: 'In speaking of the history of art [i. e., in the pages of *Die Kunstliteratur*], we are relatively justified in limiting our view to the modern arts of the Christian period to the extent in which it seems to have become historical, approximately between Diocletian and Napoleon'.<sup>23</sup>

The modification of the book's title is in itself rather symptomatic. Previously entitled *Materialien zur Quellekunde der Kunstgeschichte* (Materials for a science of the sources of Art History),<sup>24</sup> the volume was then renamed almost epigrammatically, *Die Kunstliteratur: a Literature of, on and about Art*. Curiously enough, Schlosser's use of the term 'literature' in the title of his volume has never received the attention it deserves from scholars. The shift from 'materials' to 'literature' conveys, in fact, a programmatic attempt of critical revision, as if Schlosser wanted to emphasize, at this point of his intellectual career, a new conception of art, defined in accordance with both Croce and Vossler. In his dedication of the book to Vossler, he emphasised that his study should be read as 'a reflection of the spirit of our common and venerated friend, Benedetto Croce'.<sup>25</sup>

Furthermore, Schlosser's adoption of the term *Literatur*, instead of the more generic word *Materialien*, carries many critical implications. It clearly establishes a hermeneutic frame of reference as well as an epistemological restriction to the field

<sup>21</sup> 'in eine Geschichte unserer Disziplin selbst ausmünden muss' in Schlosser, *Kunstliteratur*, 2.

<sup>22</sup> Schlosser, *Kunstliteratur*, 2.

<sup>23</sup> 'Unter Kunstgeschichte verstehe ich aber hier, mit einer leidlich zu rechtfertigenden Einschränkung, lediglich die Geschichte der neueren, und zwar der christlichen Kunst in dem Umfange, in dem sie wirklich historisch geworden zu sein scheint, also etwa von Diokletian bis auf Napoleon' in Schlosser, *Kunstliteratur*, 1.

<sup>24</sup> Schlosser, *Kunstliteratur*, VII. The earliest contributions of Schlosser to the study of the written sources are: J. von Schlosser, *Beiträge zur Kunstgeschichte aus den Schriftquellen des frühen Mittelalters*, Wien: Tempsky, 1891 (*Sitzungsberichte der Kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien: Philosophisch-Historische Classe*, 123, 2); J. von Schlosser, *Schriftquellen zur karolingischen Kunst (Quellenschriften zur Kunstgeschichte, Neue Folge IV)*, Wien: Graeser, 1896; J. von Schlosser, *Die Kunst- und Wunderkammern der Spätrenaissance: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Sammelwesens*, Leipzig: Klinkhardt und Biermann, 1908. For critical comments about the title's modification see De Mambro Santos, *Viatico Viennese*, especially in the first chapter.

<sup>25</sup> Schlosser, *Kunstliteratur*, VII.

of study he intends to explore: while not all texts should be read as examples of artistic creations, not all sorts of written sources should by the same token be included within the horizon of *Die Kunstliteratur*, but only 'intentional', i.e., 'theoretical', ones. What matters for Schlosser is, above all, the 'spirit' with which the sources have been originally conceived and not simply their survival as material traces of the past. No longer confined within the boundaries of documentary facts, whose historical evidence could be accepted as unquestionable, the textual sources selected by Schlosser will operate as interpretive bridges to the spectators, allowing them to pursue the process of re-enacting the moment of creation of an artwork.

In the light of Croce's concept of *Storia*, according to which 'every history is contemporary history',<sup>26</sup> Schlosser's adoption of the term *Literatur* assumes another implication from a critical standpoint: whereas the previous term *Materialien* had with its premeditated neutrality, stressed the historical knowledge of the artistic production of the past as the main goal of the critical inquiry, the expression 'literature' implies a more systematic method of analysis, in which philological premises are merged with philosophical investigations. When using the word *Materialien*, Schlosser had to at least some extent maintained the air of neutrality as outlined by the Positivists for the basis of a historical research, while in adopting instead the term *Literatur*, he seems to have decidedly reoriented his method of research toward an Idealist, Crocean conception of History, according to which the process of analysis of an artwork should be conducted as a subjective re-enactment, and highly personal re-evocation of the past. The hermeneutic process could then become an attempt to revive, by means of poetic *ekphrasis*, the aesthetic qualities of an object intrinsically incorporated in its material components. Against the mute remnants of the past, weakly enlightened by the use of textual *Materialien*, Schlosser's new critique intends to retrieve the intuitive eloquence of artistic creations from the past by contemplating them through the evocative lens of a notion of *literature* conceived along Crocean lines.<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, Schlosser's adoption of the term *Literatur* further underscores one of the most crucial functions performed by written sources, namely to describe and explain the individual features of an art work by means of a 'hermeneutic subtraction', or an interpretation *per via del levare*, and to provide a definition on the basis of a progressive differentiation of its highly personal, original and inimitable style. It is however important to emphasise that in Schlosser's views, the written sources *are not able* to indicate what is truly personal in an artistic creation. On the contrary, they can only delineate the general set of conventions, formulae and rules diffused in different contexts. By circumscribing the 'historical grammar' of an art work, the written sources can describe, in a silent yet eloquent manner, what *should be considered* as individual and, therefore, stylistically relevant in an object. If the linguistic structure of an art work is to—due to a philological reconstruction of its material parts—become a subject for historical knowledge, its stylistic level can be identifiable only by means of an aesthetic experience, carried out as a poetic,

<sup>26</sup> 'Ogni storia è storia contemporanea' in Croce, *Teoria e storia*, 3.

<sup>27</sup> It is worth mentioning the fact that Schlosser was also the translator of several works written by Croce, including *Poesie und Nichtpoesie. Bemerkungen über die europäische Literatur des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Zurich: Amalthea Verlag, 1925.

*ekphrastic* recollection of the past, in the attempt to regain contact with the 'intuition' that had originally led to the appearance of an artistic 'expression'. In other words, the *Quellenschriften* cannot guide the scholar directly along the road to the style, but they can successfully circumscribe its 'historical grammar'.

On the basis of such a process of hermeneutic subtraction, the work of art will eventually become the epicentre of aesthetic knowledge. Accurately displayed on the interpretive armature of the *Quellenkritik* developed by Schlosser in *Die Kunstliteratur*, the written sources can support the spectator in beginning to identify the general features of an artwork in order then after this to savour its specific qualities. In other words, by consistently focusing on what is universal in a work of art, the written sources will help the viewer to understand what *could not be otherwise said*, that is to say, recognize the quotient of uniqueness and originality of an object.

The study of written sources should therefore accumulate the preliminary background from which one should undertake the path of poetic evocation of the past. Given that the 'artistic essence' of an aesthetic artefact cannot be fully grasped, except from the perspective of a philosophical *Idealismus* – nor can it be fully expressed in words – the very essence of the style will be not only untranslatable, but also tied, in a quite complex manner, to the actual structure of the artwork: its shape, its size, its technique. Hence, the necessity of providing accurate formal analysis of the artworks, for only the precise description of its material components as well as the study of the comments dedicated to it could disclose more effective trajectories of interpretation. Such a premise explains Schlosser's particular definition of *Quellenkunde* as a field of research that intentionally establishes a link between the analysis of the aesthetic qualities of an artwork (History of Art) and the investigation of the multiple ways in which it has been conceived and verbally explained in different contexts (Historiography of Art). As he asserts in the introduction of *Die Kunstliteratur*:

A primary goal for the study of the sources is to establish the extant material [i.e. the written sources] and in the very least to arrange it bibliographically. At a more advanced level, it proceeds to critically evaluating this raw material, and must do so in a way that is apt for each individual historical period. It only reaches the status of the other 'auxiliary sciences' – to use that awkward phrase – when it reveals the innate historical content in a philosophical spirit which then necessarily leads into the most recent period, where it merges into the history of our discipline.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> 'Die Quellenkunde hat zunächst den tatsächlich vorhandenen Stoff auzzukundschaften und mindestens bibliographisch beschreibend zu übermitteln. Auf eine höhere Stufe steigt sie durch die kritische Bearbeitung dieses Rohmaterials, die den einzelnen Perioden wohl angepasst sein muss. Zum Rang einer selbständigen historischen Disziplin, gleich den übrigen 'Hilfswissenschaften' – um den verfänglichen Ausdruck einmal zu gebrauchen – erhebt sie sich durch die Darlegung des inneren historischen Gehalts dieses Materials selbst, in philosophischen Geiste betrachtet, wo sie dann notwendig, in die neueste Zeit übergehend, in eine Geschichte unserer Disziplin selbst ausmünden must' in Schlosser, *Kunstliteratur*, 2.

In this sentence, Schlosser postulates the existence of four consecutive moments connected to the study of written sources. In the first one, the scholar should undertake, with the 'passion of a collector', a bibliographical selection of textual data. Contrary to the apparent belief of both Venturi and Eco, bibliographical research is merely the starting point for a much more complex mode of inquiry. In fact, in the following step, the scholar should arrange these indiscriminately collected materials on the basis of a more critically-grounded set of paradigms. Such an ordering process inaugurates an important stage in the research for it provides an historical explanation of the sources previously collected. At this point, according to Schlosser, rather than being conceived as self-evident tracks of the past, the written sources should be examined, on the contrary, 'in a philosophical spirit', that is to say, in relation to a wider net of problems, concepts and premises.

To put it differently, they should not simply be taken as facts, whose historical evidence appears as an unquestionable truth, but should rather be regarded as interpretive tracks by and through which a scholar could finally undertake the idealistic attempt to cancel the distance between present and past during the moment of critical re-enactment of the original intuition. If considered 'in a philosophical spirit', the sources will make it possible for scholars to understand the 'historical grammar' of a certain period, thus preparing the concentric circles of the critique that will ultimately allow them to approach the aesthetic quotient of an artwork, which is *ex Croce definitio* unreachable as well as untranslatable. Consequently, the fourth and final step of the research will coincide with the progressive transformation of such a philological inquiry into an historiographic enterprise able to delineate, as Schlosser justly emphasizes, 'the history of our discipline' – the history of Art History as such.

To conclude: the field of study promoted by *Die Kunstliteratur* focuses on the multiple ways in which the concept of art as well as its actual processes of production and reception differ in specific times and places. As a discipline, the central topic of research addressed by the Art Literature should not however be the aesthetic value of an artwork, since Schlosser felt this to be the main goal of the *Kunstgeschichte* and its emphasis on the individual character of the style. On the contrary, the main task of *Die Kunstliteratur* is seen rather to analyse the various forms in which the notion of art and its operative as well as creative procedures have changed throughout history, considering the written sources as the most eloquent witnesses of the ever-changing nature of Beauty. In this sense, the *Kunstliteratur* will appear as a discipline deeply associated with Philosophy, in general, and Aesthetics, in particular. Since the historical analysis of the style pertains to the History of Art (*Kunstgeschichte*) and the critical study of the language belongs to the territory of the History of Culture (*Kulturgeschichte*), the major task of the Art Literature (*Kunstliteratur*) will be, according to Schlosser, to establish a bridge between these two disciplines, by collecting, examining and interpreting the many 'intentional' written documents left from the past and directly related to the sphere of art.

Julius von Schlosser seems to assert, therefore, the existence of two different modes of investigation, in the middle of which the *Kunstliteratur* should find its most appropriate location as a discipline: on the one hand, the critical explorations

undertaken by the *Kulturgeschichte* in the attempt to understand the general language of a certain group of artworks, and on the other, the highly individualized interpretations provided by the *Kunstgeschichte*, intently focused on the aesthetic qualities of the style. Based on different premises and geared to different goals, *Kulturgeschichte* and *Kunstgeschichte* should however not be considered simplistically as antagonistic fields of research, but instead taken as equally important procedures through which the spectator could finally reach 'a closer level of proximity' with the essence of an artwork.

Suspended on the cognitive line that separates the sphere of *Kulturgeschichte* from the *Kunstgeschichte*, the science of written sources, the *Quellenkunde*, could solidly establish a connection between these two poles of investigation, if appropriately conceived 'with a philosophical spirit', thus offering a critical synthesis of *Positivismus* and *Idealismus*, Philology and Philosophy, Aesthetics and Art Criticism. Unable to fully describe in words the quotient of Beauty present in an artwork, and to explain the causes of its appearance in a given context, the written sources can nevertheless examine *what has been said* about specific objects in different places and times. With an attentive investigation of the sources, it becomes possible to *speak* about art. Words of suspension, displayed in an 'intervening' space between methodological boundaries—in the dynamic interaction between Philology and Philosophy, *Kulturgeschichte* and *Kunstgeschichte*—the written sources should play the role of privileged vessels of both particular and universal values, crossing back and forth over the frontiers between what is highly personal in an artwork and what is generic and conventional. They perform, therefore, as witnesses of a mystery that cannot be solved—the creative struggle of the style against the commonplaces of the language or of the division between poetry and prose. Nonetheless, the written sources can activate a process of interpretation in which it is possible to establish a virtual link between the original moment of production of an artwork and its variable reception in different contexts. Words of suspension between two epistemological poles, the written sources help the spectator to build up new paths of historical as well as aesthetic comprehension, suggesting *what could not be otherwise said* and explicitly saying *what could not be otherwise suggested*. Suspended on the threshold of language and style, in the dynamic tension of a dialogical space, the written sources support scholarship in the process of examining the past without demanding that we renounce the meaningful experiences of the present—thus celebrating a territory of hermeneutic convergence.

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