

The advantages and disadvantages of Art History to Life: Alois Riegl and historicism

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...in the future, confronted with every single available fact, we will find it necessary to ask what the actual value of that fact is. Even historical value is not absolute, and it is not only the knowing [of the fact] but also the ability to ignore it at the right moment that has its advantages for the researcher

-Alois Riegl (1901) ¹

Alois Riegl was one of the seminal art historians of the early twentieth century, but very little is known about his career as adjunct-curator of textiles at the Austrian Museum for Art and Industry. He worked at the Museum from 1884 and combined this position with University teaching until he left this post to become a full Professor of Art History at the University of Vienna in 1897. While interest in Riegl has shown no signs of abating in recent years, most scholars continue to debate Riegl's theories and methods. The aim of this paper, however, is to demonstrate just how much of Riegl's theorizing was brought into focus by practical issues at the Museum for Art and Industry.² As recent studies have indicated, Riegl was much more than an ivory tower theoretician; his work reverberated with the type of cross-disciplinary cultural criticism we associate with the intellectual life of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna. Another goal of this paper is to contribute to our

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¹ '...künftig werden wir uns angesichts jeder einzelnen ermittelten Tatsache zu fragen haben, was sie eigentlich wert sei. Auch das Historische ist nicht das Absolute, und nicht allein das Kennen, sondern auch das Ignorierenkönnen an passender Stelle hat seinen Vorteil für den Forscher.'

Alois Riegl, 'Spätromisch oder Orientalisch?' *Beilage zur Allgemeinen Zeitung* 94, München, 1902, 164.

²Riegl rose to international stature as a premier theorist of the twentieth century. His neologism *Kunstwollen* (already articulated in the 1891 book, *Stilfragen*) and his approach to problems of preservation and restoration assured his prominence as a theorist long after his premature death in 1905. Little attention has been paid to Riegl's years at the Museum for Art and Industry from 1884-97; Riegl perfected the model of the natural scientist and his disinterested empirical approach to his curatorial tasks is evident in his many small entries in the Museum's *Mitteilungen* between 1884 and 1895. This small essay is one of his more personal and polemic pieces. For this reason, perhaps, it has not been seriously considered as a major theoretical piece. .

The literature on Riegl is too vast to reproduce here. For an introduction to Riegl's theories see Otto Pächt, 'Art historians and art critics vi: Alöis Riegl' in *Burlington Magazine*, CV (1963): 188-193; Hans Tietze, Alöis Riegl, *Neue Österreichische Biographie* 8 (1935): 142-150. New editions of Riegl's works are now appearing under the general editorship of Artur Rosenauer, University of Vienna.

expanding understanding of Riegl in his social and institutional contexts. Finally, it traces ways in which Riegl used his early exposure to Nietzsche, particularly Nietzsche's second *Untimely Meditation (The advantages and disadvantages of History to life)* to craft his responses to contemporary artistic and social crises in the final decade of the nineteenth century.

Between 1885 and 1897 Riegl's position as adjunct curator of textiles brought him into steady contact with the lively exhibitionary culture of late-Imperial Vienna. As a worker in what Tony Bennett has called the 'exhibitionary complex', Riegl was confronted with the (sometimes conflicting) tasks of promoting Austrian commercial success while protecting and enlarging the Museum's collections.³ Thus he was involved in displaying the Museum's canon of 'good taste' (mostly associated with the Italian Renaissance style). To accomplish this he organized the Museum's contributions to both international exhibitions and to craft schools (*Fachschulen*) and museums within cisleithanian Austria. As public interest expanded into the so-called 'folk arts' Riegl's duties also increased to include collecting and preserving the remnants of pre-industrial crafts throughout the Habsburg lands. This caused him to look both backward and forward - he was responsible for not only protecting the past but also shaping the future of industrial designs in textiles. His position as a Curator at the Austrian Museum for Art and Industry was undoubtedly prestigious, demanding, and exciting, for Riegl's tenure there corresponded to the Museum's peak of popularity in the age of historicism.⁴ From this position of social visibility he sometimes acted as social or artistic critic; often criticizing a poorly executed exhibition (usually outside the Habsburg Monarchy) othertimes cheering on the efforts of a local craft school in its attempts to regain market share from its foreign (French, German or Italian) competitors. In the day-to-day work of a museum curator, however, he was kept busy by the constant cycle of regional and local exhibitions and the ongoing demands of supplying the craft schools with the appropriate museum samples.

Much of this work was dominated by historicism, for the Museum's mission was to collect and disseminate the canon of 'good taste' associated with the past. Nevertheless, in a small essay published in 1895, Riegl analyzed the failures of historicism in the arts and crafts, thereby levelling criticism at his employer and, by extension, some of his own activities as a museum employee. This little-known essay, entitled '*Über Renaissance der Kunst*', documents Riegl's ambivalence about the theory and practice of historicism at the Austrian Museum for Art and Industry.⁵ Although written in response to specific conditions at the Museum it was also a surprising theoretical departure from the values and aspirations of his colleagues. Riegl boldly suggested that the activities of the Museum for Art and Industry worked against

³ Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, London: Routledge Press, 1995.

⁴ See Peter Noever ed., *Kunst und Industrie; Die Anfänge des Museums für Kunst und Industrie im Zeitalter des Historismus*, Vienna: Catje Hanz Verlag, 2000.

⁵ Alois Riegl, '*Über Renaissance der Kunst*', *MöM* N.F. V (1895): 342-350; 363-371; 381-393. Hereafter cited as '*Renaissance*'. This was first presented as a public lecture at the Museum in December 1894 and published in Spring 1895.

creativity; as long as artists and designers promoted historicism in design, they would not create an art of the future.⁶ He demonstrated how the Museum's celebration of the best styles of the past subverted the preconditions of a successful renaissance in the arts and crafts. Historicism substituted knowledge about the past for a life-giving encounter with art. For a curator at the Museum for Art and Industry, this was an unexpected reevaluation of its values. More important, it was also a critique of the limitations and the excesses of art history. In view of his canonical status as one of the 'founders' of the Vienna school of art history, we do well to consider his argument, first in its historical context and secondly as an indicator of his engagement with the early works of Friedrich Nietzsche.

I. The 'Renaissance Debate' in central Europe

Riegl's title, *'Über Renaissance der Kunst'* was an ironic reference to an ongoing feud known as the 'Renaissance debate' between design reformers in Germany and Vienna that had begun in 1876.⁷ While this debate was technically about the merits of the German Renaissance style, which had become a popular design for furniture and home furnishings after 1871, the conflict was really about the problem of national identity in arts and crafts. While German theorists advocated a 'northern Renaissance' style as a symbol of *reichsdeutsch* nationalism, the Viennese preferred the Italian Renaissance. Both the Museum's first director Rudolf von Eitelberger (1813-1885) and the Director of the *Kunstgewerbeschule*, Josef von Storck (1830-1902), actively promoted the Italian Renaissance style as the best style for educating Austrian designers in matters of taste and execution.⁸ Renaissance motifs formed the basis of all drawing instruction in the Habsburg realms—not only at the *Kunstgewerbeschule* in Vienna but also at regional craft schools [*Fachschulen*] in the provinces. Throughout the 1880s educators in Munich and Vienna debated the merits of their respective approaches to the Renaissance style. While the Viennese criticized the Germans for crass imitation and excessive copying, they praised themselves for graceful adaptations. Meanwhile, Germans extolled their northern, Protestant and middle-class values in contrast to the aristocratic, southern, and orientalized Habsburg lands.

By 1894, however, the debate had run its course - especially as the chief promoter of the German Renaissance style in Munich, Georg Hirth, directed his enthusiasm away from historicism and toward the new art movement he christened *Jugendstil*. This allowed Riegl to reconsider the problem of artistic renaissances from a more disinterested point of view. As we might expect from Riegl, his contribution to the

⁶ Riegl, 'Renaissance', 391.

⁷ Eva Ottillinger, 'Jacob von Falke (1825-1897) und die Theorie des Kunstgewerbes', *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* XLII (1989). For the Renaissance debate in Germany see Sabine Wieber, *Designing the Nation*, Diss. University of Chicago. See also Diana Reynolds Cordileone, 'The Austrian Museum for Art and Industry: Historicism and National Identity in Vienna 1863-1900', in *Austrian Studies* 16 (2008) 123-41.

⁸ Eva Ottillinger, 'Jacob von Falke', 222. Also Ulrike Scholde, *Theorie und Praxis im Wiener Kunstgewerbe des Historismus am Beispiel von Joseph Ritter von Storck (1830-1902)*, Diss. Salzburg, 1991.

problem went far beyond the terms of the previous debate. He not only helped to put the final nail into the coffin that was historicism at the Museum, but in doing so, he also challenged the basic presuppositions of the institution and the scholarly culture of art history in Vienna and beyond.

II. A history of renaissances

Riegl's lengthy essay appeared in three instalments in the Austrian Museum's journal (*Mittheilungen des österreichischen Museums für Kunst und Industrie*) in early 1895.⁹ It began harmlessly enough. In the first two sections Riegl, ever the historian, presented a general overview of artistic renaissances of the past. It was, after all, the goal of the Museum to foster an artistic renaissance in the present. What better way to begin than to evaluate the key events of the past?

He began by examining three significant artistic renaissances in Western Europe: the Carolingian Renaissance, the 'proto-Renaissance' of the twelfth century, and the Italian Renaissance. This careful analysis lasted for about twenty pages and we can summarize it by saying that on the basis of these three 'renaissances' Riegl concluded that a genuine renaissance contained several common elements. Regardless of their geographical or temporal distance from one another, artists and craftsmen in all three epochs shared the same qualities: a dissatisfaction with contemporary art (for one reason or another), a recognition of a superior style somewhere in the past (Roman antiquity in all three instances), and a happy confidence (without awe) in their ability to draw from this source and adapt it for contemporary use. Riegl called this last quality the *unbefangene Auge*—the unfettered eye. Renaissance artists, whether from the ninth, twelfth, or fifteenth century, all turned to the past for inspiration, but did not let the past dominate their present: 'With their gazes trained steadily forward, the artists of all three Renaissances ... never considered it necessary or important to restore the styles of the past.'¹⁰ For a genuine renaissance to occur, Riegl concluded, the artist must adapt, not copy, the past in a spirit of confidence and joy. Freedom from history was a common characteristic of renaissance artists and adaptation was their goal.

Curators at the Museum for Art and Industry believed this to be true about themselves, (they 'adapted' but did not copy the Italian Renaissance designs, for example), but Riegl was not so sure. For him, there was really no national difference between the Germans and his colleagues at the Museum. In both locations their shared reliance on historicism ruined the naïve relationship to the past necessary for a true renaissance. His conclusion was provocative: Everyone had been wrong about how to effect a renaissance in contemporary design. Historicism in the applied arts had universally failed to produce an artistic renaissance:

⁹ Alois Riegl, 'Über Renaissance der Kunst', *MÖM* N.F. V (1895), 342-48;363-71; and 381-93.

¹⁰Riegl, 'Renaissance', 369. 'Die Künstler aller drei Renaissancen haben eben den Blick stets vorwärts gewendet gehabt, . . . und sie hielten es . . . nicht für nötig, alte, vergangene Stilweisen dem Wesen nach zu restauriren'.

The art of the nineteenth century has been shaped by a restless and untiring struggle and search for a higher achievement, a passionate demand for a new and original style. Modern attempts to create a new renaissance have not succeeded. A success, a completely unmitigated success involving contemporary artistic life, has remained elusive [and] . . . the nineteenth century has failed to produce any significant style of its own.¹¹

What had gone wrong? Why had a 'renaissance' not occurred in the nineteenth century? In the final section of the essay he explored these problems.

III. A surfeit of art history

In the third instalment, Riegl pinned the blame on his own discipline: Art history. The nineteenth century's overall fascination with history had shifted the balance between knowledge and life, and his own colleagues—art historians—had unwittingly contributed to this state of affairs. He demonstrated how the new scholarly discipline [*Wissenschaft*] of art history that emerged at the end of the 18th century mediated the relationship between artists and the public, and retarded the emergence of a new, nineteenth century style. Thus institutions like the Museum for Art and Industry were partially to blame for the failure of historicism.

Riegl argued that a fundamental change in modern Europeans' relationship to the past now altered the ages-old equilibrium between knowledge and life. Art history was a symptom of this imbalance. For Riegl, the new epoch of artistic barrenness began with Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768), and the modern disciplines of archaeology and art history he had engendered.¹² For Riegl, Winckelmann's scholarly rehabilitation of Greek art and his promotion of a Greek aesthetic in the late eighteenth century created a combination of forces that altered the social role of the art historian, introduced a foreign (Greek) style to Western Europe, and ushered in the taste for historical revivals that continued throughout the nineteenth century.¹³ It was therefore, the taste for all things Greek that had disrupted the equilibrium between knowledge and life in Western Europe.¹⁴

¹¹ Riegl, 'Renaissance', 343. '*Die Kunst des 19. Jahrhunderts, . . . is ja charakterisirt durch das rastlose und unermüdliche Streben und Trachten nach einer höheren Blüthe, . . . durch das leidenschaftliche Verlangen nach einer besonderen eigenartigen Stilweise. Aber es ist mit diesen Bestrebungen . . . nur beim Versuchen geblieben. Eine Erfolg eine vollen, unzweifelhafte Erfolg, . . . haben die modernen Renaissancebestrebungen bisher nicht aufzuweisen, oder mit anderen Worten: das 19. Jahrhunder hat es bisher noch zu keinem eigenen Kunststil gebracht*'.

¹² J.J. Winckelmann, *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* (1763-68), translated by G. Henry Lodge, *History of Ancient Art*, New York: Ungar Publishing, 1968. For a brief discussion of Winckelmann, the origins of art history, and his idiosyncratic interpretation of Greek antiquity see Gert Schiff, *German Essays on Art History*, New York: Continuum Publishing, 1988, xi-xvi.

¹³For a discussion of philhellenism in German culture, see Suzanne L. Marchand, *Down from Olympus Archaeology and Philhellenism in Germany, 1750-1970*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.

¹⁴ In view of German philhellenism, Riegl's interest in Roman antiquity could also be interpreted as a counterclaim for an Austrian Identity based upon Latinity.

The introduction of the Greek aesthetic under Winckelmann also contributed to the prestige and power of the scholar, for most western artists were more familiar with Roman antiquity; they needed both access to and help interpreting Greek antiquity. From then on, Winckelmann and his intellectual offspring (the art historian) served as mediators between Greek art and the contemporary producer. After Winckelmann, art history developed its scholarly apparatus and the art historian began to instruct in matters of taste, often serving as the educator to the artist:

From the moment when art chose Greek antiquity as its model, the advantages and disadvantages of art history became apparent. Who knew anything about Greek antiquity? Those artists of the 15th century [Italy] viewed the ruins of Roman antiquity with a naive and unfettered eye. The artists of the 18th century confronted Greek art shyly, as a stranger. What course of action remained open to them except to consult the scholar? ¹⁵

The scholar had now gained the upper hand over the creative artist. The century of historicism that followed created a culture in which the scholar helped to shape public taste through exhibitions and publications, and the practicing artist now bowed to the demands of that 'good taste.' ¹⁶ Art history placed an oppressive burden of the past upon contemporary artists and robbed them of the confidence necessary to develop new forms: 'art history has retarded, overgrown and smothered the development of art'.¹⁷ The prescriptive function of the art historian fed the nineteenth-century consumer's passion for imitations and condemned the artist to a never-ending cycle of historical revivals.

Historicism was, therefore, a cultural symptom. Riegl now compared the contemporary lack of confidence (as evidenced by the fashions for historical reconstruction) to the confident creations of Renaissance artists. For him, the most telling trait of the nineteenth century, and its most distinctive difference from the Italian renaissance was the tendency to copy:

Now [after Winckelmann] one observed the construction of artworks that would have been unimaginable in the entire Italian Renaissance. It has already been emphasized how the distinctive self sufficiency of the Italians' intercourse with

¹⁵Riegl, 'Renaissance', ., 386. *'Von dem Augenblicke an, da die Kunst sich die altgriechische Antike zum Vorbild erkor, hatte sie sich auf Gnade und Ungnade der Kunstgeschichte ausgeliefert. Wer kannte denn überhaupt die altgriechische Kunst? Der Künstler des 15. Jahrhunderts durfte ein antikes Denkmal der Römerzeit... mit völlig unbefangenen Augen betrachten. . . . Der Künstler vom Ende des 18. Jahrhunderts stand den altgriechische Kunstwerken fremd und scheu gegenüber; . . . was blieb ihm übrig, als zum Kunstgelehrten . . . zu gehen. . . ?'*

¹⁶ Riegl, 'Renaissance', 366.

¹⁷ Riegl, 'Renaissance', 391. *' . . . die Kunstgeschichte hat die Kunstentwicklung aufgehalten, überwuchert, erstickt.'*

antiquity is demonstrated in that they never, not even once, attempted to copy an antique temple. Nowadays, however, this has happened repeatedly.¹⁸

The scrupulously accurate historical copy was not a precursor to a renaissance; it was evidence of creative weakness.

In Riegl's view, scholars at institutions like the Museum perpetuated this craze for historical accuracy by providing more and more artefacts from the past to serve as models for contemporary design. Even after Winckelmann's beloved Greek style fell out of fashion, the community of scholars continued to instruct the artist and mediate taste:

In the place of Greek Antiquity a new example needed to be presented. Who could instruct in such a new fashion? Again, only art history. Instead of finding emancipation they [the artists] bound themselves into its servitude once more.¹⁹

With the help of scholars a succession of historical revivals followed: Gothic replaced Greek style; Renaissance replaced Gothic; Baroque replaced Renaissance. In each instance it was the art historian who gleefully put his expertise to work:

Once again art historians were ready and willing to produce new samples of historical styles, to publish journals on French or German Renaissance styles, and to rummage through the storehouses of old castles and churches to find long-forgotten examples of these styles – saved only by happy coincidence – and put them on display in museums.²⁰

Riegl's irony is palpable as he envisions art historians running amok in cellars and attics and for Riegl, the Museum for Art and Industry was an accomplice in the frantic rush from one historical revival to another. He viewed this practice as a combination of ambition and pedantry that allowed (indeed, encouraged) artists, critics, and the public to remain in the thrall of an unfruitful historicism. By presenting and researching all available past styles, art historians presented modern man with everything necessary for outward decoration, but this scholarly activity could bear no fruit. 'Once art history gained its unquestioned dictatorship after Napoleon I, that

¹⁸Riegl, 'Renaissance', 386. 'Nun sah man Kunstwerke entstehen, die in der ganzen italienischen Renaissance undenkbar gewesen wären. Es wurde schon vorhin als im höchstens Grade bezeichnend für die Selbständigkeit betont, mit welcher die italienische Renaissance den antike Vorbildern gegenüber verfahren ist, daß sie niemals, auch nicht ein einziges Mal, einen antiken Tempel genau copirt hat. Nun aber, in der modernen Zeit, is dies wiederholt geschehen.'

¹⁹Riegl, 'Renaissance', 388. 'An Stelle der griechischen Antike musste abermals eine andere . . . neues Vorbild gesetzt werden. Wer vermochte aber eine solche Kunstweise zu lehren? Wiedem nur die Kunstgeschichte. Anstatt sich von derselben zu emancipieren, begab man sich abermals in ihre Knechtschaft.'

²⁰Riegl, 'Renaissance', 389. 'Wiederum war es die allzeit bereitwillige Kunstgeschichte die die neubegrhten Muster hergab, die die Publicationen über deutsche und über französische Renaissance veranstaltete, und die aus den Rumpelkammern alter Schlösser und Kirchen die durch glückliche Fügung erhaltenen Denkmäler dieser Stilen in den Museen zur Schau stellte.'

barren and unfruitful period of art that we call Empire had its beginning.’²¹ Art history, he continued, ‘has led living art into a barren and unfruitful *cul de sac*.’²²

V. History and life

But Riegl’s critique of historicism was more than a tardy contribution to the ‘Renaissance Debate.’ It was also a reframing of Friedrich Nietzsche’s critique of historical culture written in 1876, which Riegl had read during his student years at the University of Vienna.²³ Like Nietzsche, Riegl now argued that an excess of historical knowledge was not proof of scholarly acumen, neither was it a marker of national identity nor a guaranty of commercial success; it was an indicator of cultural crisis. For Riegl, the European’s love of imitation was an outward symptom of an inner lack of confidence. Modern man lacked an inner connection to any style; art history had created a back-ward looking culture.

Modern art, no longer knows what art it is most closely related to. ... It feels equally related to all and equally estranged from all. In this way it waltzes from one example to another, it knows how to imitate it on the outside without being able to understand it on this inside, and after a short while it turns from this superficially understood [historical] sample to another.²⁴

²¹ Riegl, ‘Renaissance’, 388. ‘Als aber die Kunstgeschichte endlich die unbestrittene Dictatur erlangt hatte, begann jene kahle und völlig unfruchtbare Kunstperiode, die wir nach Napoleon I das Empire nennen,’

²² Riegl, ‘Renaissance’, 386. ‘[Die Kunstgeschichte hat] . . . die lebende Kunst selbst in jenen dürren unfruchtbaren Kreis hineingeführt.’

²³ *Jahresbericht des Lesevereins der deutschen Studenten Wiens über das VI Vereinsjahr 1876-1877*. Vienna 1877, 16. (Hereafter cited as *Jahresbericht VI*). Riegl wrote and signed the yearly report, and was club librarian. Riegl’s involvement with this student club has not been mentioned by any of his biographers. His activity in the *Leseverein* provides evidence of his exposure to the early writings of Frederich Nietzsche’s *Untimely Meditations*, in 1876 and 1877. For a discussion of the influence of Nietzsche’s thought on this generation of students, see William McGrath, *Dionysian Art and Populist Politics in Austria*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

This new information challenges summaries of Riegl’s university years that ordinarily concentrate on his attendance at lectures from 1875-1880. Cf. Margaret Olin, *Forms of Representation in Alois Riegl’s Theory of Art*, University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992, 4-6. For a discussion of Riegl’s years in the Institute for Austrian Historical Research after 1880 see Hans Tietze, ‘Alois Riegl’, in *Neue österreichische Biographie* 8 (1935) 142-150. For Herbart, Zimmermann and Brentano see; Roger Bauer, *Der Idealismus und seine Gegner in Österreich*, (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1966; Rudolf Haller, ‘Wittgenstein and Austrian Philosophy’, in *Questions on Wittgenstein*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988, and Kurt R. Fischer, *Philosophie aus Wien*, Vienna: Geyer Edition, 1991. Dvorak suggests that neither Herbart nor Hegel was a significant intellectual influence for Riegl: Herbart was out-dated and Hegel was too metaphysical. Dvorak also specifically denies that Riegl received any inspiration from Schnaase. See Max Dvorak, ‘Alois Riegl’ in *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, Munich: R. Piper, 1929, 280.

²⁴ Riegl, ‘Renaissance’, 390. ‘Die moderne Kunst. . . weist längst nicht mehr, welche Kunst ihr am verwandtesten ist. Sie fühlt sich im Grunde allen gleich verwandt und allen gleich Fremd. So schwankt sie von einem Vorbilde zum anderen, jedes wei sie äußerlich nachzuahmen, ohne sich innerlich damit erfüllen zu können, und nach kurzer Weile wendet sie sich von diesem doch nur oberflächlich gestreiften Vorbild ab und einem anderen zu.’

Riegl's claim that contemporary artists knew how to 'imitate a culture on the outside without knowing how it felt on the inside' had several similarities with the early Nietzsche, who had argued that historical knowledge, when consumed for its own sake and without hunger, created a chaotic inner condition. Indeed, this difference between the outer and inner man was the central concern of his second *Untimely Meditation* on 'The advantages and disadvantages of history for life'. Historical knowledge masked an internal void:

This precisely is why our modern culture . . . is not a real culture at all but only a kind of knowledge of culture; it has an idea of and feeling for culture but no true cultural achievement emerges from them.²⁵

Nietzsche had also predicted that historical culture would produce a weakened personality and a diminished capacity to give meaning to life:

Just as the young man races through history, so do we modern men race through art galleries and listen to concerts. We feel that one thing sounds different from another, that one thing produces a different effect from another: increasingly to lose this sense of strangeness, no longer to be very much surprised at anything, finally to be pleased with everything—that is then no doubt called the historical sense, historical culture.²⁶

In this vein Riegl maintained that the modern craftsman's inability to look forward was the outcome of historical culture, and art historical scholarship was to blame for this uniquely modern condition. The hegemony of scholars created a culture in which artists and consumers were taught to value reconstructions and historical revivals, not free and forward-looking creations. 'Art history has turned art away from its onward and upward path and has caused it to look backwards.'²⁷ Like Lot's wife, the result was a lifeless pillar of salt that made fruitful ground barren.

Riegl now reformulated Nietzsche's descriptions of the consequences of too much history. Both artist and viewer were caught up in historical culture and the modern man lacks an inner connection to any style, feeling equally related to, and

²⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life', in *Untimely Meditations*, translated by R.J. Hollingdale, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 80. Hereafter cited as Nietzsche, 'History', Hollingdale trans. All German citations are from Friedrich Nietzsche, *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen*, Goldmann Verlag, 1992.

²⁶ Nietzsche, Section 7, 3. Goldmann, 119. 'So aber, wie der junge Mensch durch die Geschichte läuft, so laufen wir Modernen durch die Kammern, so hören wir Konzerte. Man fühlt wohl, das klingt anders als jenes, das wirkt anders als jenes: dies Gefühl der Befremdung immer mehr zu verlieren, über nichts mehr übermässig zu erstaunen, endlich alles sich gefallen zu lassen, das nennt man wohl den historischen Sinn, die historische Bildung.' English from Hollingdale trans., History, 98.

²⁷ Riegl, 'Renaissance', 388 and 391 *Die Kunstgeschichte ist es, die die Kunst von dem natürlichen, stets aufwärts und vorwärts führenden Wege abdrängt und sie veranlasst hat, ihren Blick nach rückwärts zu richten*'.

estranged from, all styles.’²⁸ This absence of surprise and wonder was the outcome of too much art history, the bland (and scholarly) application of exterior ornament, and the excesses of the exhibitionary complex.

It was precisely this oppressive knowledge that robbed the creative spirits of their confidence. In order to restore that confidence, Nietzsche had argued in favour of forgetfulness. ‘Cheerfulness, the good conscience, the joyful deed, confidence in the future, all of them depend, in the case of the individual as of a nation, ... on the possession of a powerful instinct for when it is necessary to feel historically and when unhistorically.’²⁹ Without this instinct, a creator would always be afraid of the greatness of the past.

Riegl’s critique of historical culture was unique at Museum for Art and Industry. While several staff members (including its second Director, Jacob von Falke) reluctantly admitted that historicism was not working out as planned, no one at the Museum was prepared to blame the achievements of historical culture and nineteenth-century scholarship. The criticisms Riegl levelled here had no affinity to the intellectual culture of optimism, positivism, and progress that characterized the Museum and its patrons in the early 1890s. It appears that only Riegl understood how Nietzsche’s critique of the excesses of monumental history explained the contemporary crisis of historicism in design.

Riegl did not cite Nietzsche in this essay, but he clearly retained elements of Nietzsche’s distrust of the excesses of historical culture. Indeed it had been Nietzsche who singled out art historians as practitioners of the worst kind of monumental history.

Think of the inartistic and weakly artistic types who are preserved and protected by the monumentalist history of the artists; against whom will they direct their weapons? Against their arch-enemies, the strong-spirited artists. Their way will be made arduous; their air will be darkened when a half-understood monument from some-such great epoch will be danced around like an idol while someone declares: ‘here, this is the real and true art, what do you all hope to achieve with all your desires and longings?’ Apparently this dancing mob possesses the privilege of ‘good taste.’ Art is ... beaten to death by art.³⁰

²⁸ Riegl, *Renaissance*, 390. ... *allen gleich verwandt und allen gleich fremd.*

²⁹ Nietzsche, ‘History’, Sec.1;3. English from Hollingdale translation, 63. German from Goldmann, 80. ‘*Die Heiterkeit, das gute Gewissen, die frohe Tat, das Vertrauen auf das Kommende — alles das hängt, bei dem einzelnen wie bei dem Volke, davon ab, ... daß man ebenso gut zur rechten Zeit zu vergessen weiss, als man sich zur rechten Zeit erinnert; davon daß man mit kräftigem Instinkte herausfühlt wann es nötig ist, historisch, wann unhistorisch zu empfinden.*’

³⁰ ‘*Man denke sich die unkünstlerischen und schwachkünstlerischen Naturen durch die monumentalische Künstlerhistorie geharnischt und bewehrt; gegen wen werden sie jetzt ihre Waffen richten? Gege ihre Erbfeinde, die starken Kunstgeister Denen wird der Weg verlegt; denen wird die Luft verfinstert, wenn man ein halb begriffenes Monument irgendeiner großen Vergangenheit götzendienerisch und mit rechter Beflissenheit umtanzt, als ob man sagen wollte: ‘Seht, das is die wahre und wirkliche Kunst: was gehen euch die Werdenden und Wollenden an?’ Scheinbar besitzt dieser tanzende Schwarm sogar das Privilegium ges ‘guten Geschmacks’. . . . Die Kunst [wird] durch die Kunst . . . [todtgeschlagen].’* Nietzsche, ‘History’, Sec. 2:6. Hollingdale trans., 71. German from Goldmann, 89.

The canon of good taste in art was a refuge of the weak and fearful artist or scholar. What Riegl would later criticize as 'Stilgeschichte' - the scholarly litany of styles taught in the art historical curricula of German universities - was nothing more than a monumentalist art history.³¹

Riegl was unique at the Museum for Art and Industry in suggesting that the techniques of historicism should be called into question, and he never stopped criticizing the excesses of scholarship. Like Nietzsche, he believed that monumental history had its place. But the task at hand was to free the contemporary artist from the chains of the past. Strong measures were necessary.

Riegl used the final portion of his lecture to reflect on the dilemma facing the Museum for Art and Industry in late 1894. Riegl proposed that the obsession with style ruined the enjoyment and the naive, unreflective energy necessary for creating something new:

When we regard every single work of art that is created today exclusively from the perspective of whether it contains the germ of a longed-for new style, then our enjoyment of the work of art is spoiled from the very first moment.³²

By becoming too self-conscious and too self-aware, artists and critics destroyed the aura of innovation. This concern for enjoyment also echoed his critique of dogmatic Semperianism in his book *Questions of Style (Stilfragen)*, which appeared in 1893. There he had argued that materialist theories could not account for the reasons why a primitive artisan *liked* the accidental discovery of a pleasing form. In the processes of creation, Riegl favoured the expressive freedom of the artist over rationality.

Riegl concluded his essay with an unexpected admonition to abandon analysis altogether: 'Let us rather enjoy the gifts of our time, that no age before us has enjoyed and forget for a moment the weighty concerns about the style of the future, *that is certain to appear only when we least expect it.*'³³ Riegl wanted to reinstate both joy and accident to the process of creativity. A creative breakthrough could not be planned. This was a complete rejection of rationalistic approaches to design reform employed by men like Jacob von Falke. His suggestion that a style would emerge when it was 'least expected' contained a considerable degree of ambiguity about the role of reason and scholarliness in processes of artistic creation. It was a radical departure from the rational and utilitarian approach of the Museum for Art and Industry. Riegl clearly disagreed with the prescriptive nature of the Museum's mission. Instead he advocated a more modest approach that continued to collect and study, but abandoned any attempt to 'create' a

³¹ AVA.CUM, Prof. Alois Riegl berichtet über die Bedürfnisse seiner Lehrkanzel. (1900)

³² Riegl, 'Renaissance', 391. 'Wenn wir jedes einzelne Kunstwerke, das heutzutage geschaffen wird, lediglich von dem Gesichtspunkte aus betrachten, ob sich daran endlich die ersten Spuren des ersehnten neuen Kunststils beobachten lassen, dann werden wir uns den Genuss dieses Kunstwerkes gewiss von vornherein vergällen'.

³³ Riegl, 'Renaissance', 393 [emphasis mine]. 'Freuen wir uns dieser Gaben, die kein Zeitalter vor uns besessen hat, und vergessen wir darüber eine Weile die bekümmernde Sorge um den Zukunftsstil, der sich gewiss erst dann einstellen wird, wenn wir ihn am wenigsten suchen werden'.

new style. For Riegl, this would be the best way for the Museum to proceed in the future.³⁴ This was altogether different from political or commercial attempts to popularize an historical style by making it fashionable.

This was a surprising argument from a man who was both an art history professor and a curator at the Museum for Art and Industry. Not only did he reject historicism he also criticized the excesses of scholarly culture for its abuses of power. Scholarship and the urge for accuracy had robbed artists of their confidence and prevented the emergence of a new art. The result was unfruitfulness and stagnation.

'*Über Renaissance der Kunst*' documents Riegl's ongoing intellectual debt to the early Nietzsche, but while Riegl adopted a Nietzschean critique of art history, but he did not suggest that art history should be abandoned altogether. As in *Stilfragen*, Riegl's real opponent was scholarly excess. Like Nietzsche, he wanted to restore a balance to the relationship between the past and present. In addition, he hoped to redirect the Museum into channels that would focus more on collection and scholarship—but the right kind of scholarship; not the prescriptive tyranny of the art historian but the loving care for documents of the human past. Nevertheless, Riegl's argument - the tyranny of art history created the sterility of the nineteenth century - was a remarkable position for a practicing art historian at the most prestigious arts and crafts museum on the continent. Yet he was willing to challenge the Museum for the sake of truthfulness.

It was likely that this had professional consequences. As he wrote this essay in 1894, Riegl was hoping for a promotion at the Museum that reflected his new stature at the University of Vienna, where he had recently been appointed full professor of Art History. This was doubly important for his career at the Museum had not moved forward; after seven years, he was still only an adjunct curator of textiles. But a promotion to full curatorship did not happen. In a bitter series of letters to the archaeologist Otto Benndorf, Riegl complained about his situation, which worsened with each passing year.³⁵ In the same way, Riegl's contribution to the historicism debate fell on deaf ears, at least inside the Museum, where its leaders continued devising plans to rehabilitate another historical style, the Biedermeier, in an upcoming exhibition.³⁶

Perhaps because of its historical context, Riegl's essay on the Renaissance problem continued to be neglected in the twentieth century. Until now, it has not been considered as significant to his theoretical work. Yet this is a significant loss to our understanding of Riegl's career path and his relationship to the Museum for Art and Industry. His assertion that a style would appear when everyone 'least expected it' must have seemed outrageous to men like Falke and Bucher, who viewed the creation of a new style as the certain and rational outcome of their activities. When re-reading Riegl from this perspective it is possible to see how, starting with his earliest essays on Oriental rugs, to *Stilfragen*, through his book on the folk arts (*Volkskunst, Hausfleiß und*

³⁴ Riegl elaborated on this in a proposal to the Ministry of Religions and Education in 1900. See n. 29.

³⁵ Several letters from Riegl to Benndorf, beginning in 1889, are located in the Austrian National Library; ÖNB, *Nachlaß Benndorf, Handschriften Abteilung H 82/54*.

³⁶ This was the Vienna Congress Exhibition of 1896. See, *Katalog der Wiener Congress Ausstellung* (Vienna: Artaria, 1898).

Hausindustrie, 1894) and concluding with *Über Renaissance der Kunst*, Riegl maintained a critical, sometimes Nietzschean, stance toward the accepted beliefs and practices of Vienna's exhibitionary complex and its denizens.

Nevertheless, the singularity of Riegl's thought was in the way in which he combined his strict empirical, comparative and positivist method with elements of philosophical irrationalism.³⁷ While recognizing the benefits of modern scholarship, he also remained aware of its limits. And as an art historian, he created space for the mysterious process of creativity that remained inaccessible to rational inquiry in his neologism, *Kunstwollen*. He did not use that formulation in this essay, but in suggesting 'forgetfulness' he proposed that knowledge might sometimes strangle or smother the complex processes of creative activity. This deserves emphasis. Riegl, known to posterity as the staunch advocate of scientific method (and co-founder of the Vienna School of Art History), consistently urged his readers and colleagues not to become ensnared in the hubris of scholarship. In this he was, to some degree, a follower of Nietzsche.

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³⁷Irrationalism, derived from Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, emphasized the power of non-rational forces in human experience. Irrationalists were not anti-rational; theirs was merely a reaction against the rationalism of Enlightenment thought. By the 1890s this was also called the 'revolt against positivism'. See also, H. Stuart Hughes, 'The Revolt against Positivism' in *Consciousness and Society*. For the relationship between strict empiricism and philosophical irrationalism after 1900 in Vienna, see *Eros and Inwardness in Vienna: Weininger, Musil and Doderer* by David S. Luft, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003 and David Lindenfeld, *The Transformation of Positivism: Alexius Meinong and European Thought*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980.