Real Style: Riegl and Early 20th Century Central European Art

Kimberly A. Smith
Southwestern University

The taxonomies of style have been so well established in the discipline of art history, at least in its treatment of western art, that they have come to seem almost self-evident. Inherent to this conventional method of archiving art’s history according to stylistic differences is a notion that distinctive and consistent formal traits have both temporal and geographical dimensions, that they can be located within specific regional and chronological coordinates. Thus normative art history involves itself with the analysis of objects typically understood as exhibiting a coherent set of formal characteristics that are allied in some way with the cultural moment in which they appeared. There is nothing natural, of course, nor even intrinsic to the objects, in this way of ordering the visual past. The discipline of art history, and the terms central to its practice, are always in negotiation, and style has been simultaneously one of the most fundamental and most malleable of its constructs. The concept of style, of the significance of ordered form, has its own intellectual history. In this essay, I would like to discuss the ways in which our understanding of style as a historically specific phenomenon was articulated by intellectuals working in the late 19th century, primarily in Germany and Austria, and the epistemological repercussions of this shift in thinking for both the theory and the practice of art in central European art in the years before World War I. I will focus on the writings of Alois Riegl, in which this approach to thinking about style came to its most influential fruition, and propose that Riegl’s conception of form had interesting implications for artistic practice (Fig. 1). Riegl’s methodological understanding of artistic form drew connections between morphological types and perceptions of reality, thereby altering the ways in which artists could conceive of aesthetic authenticity. Style itself could then be seen as the harbinger of truth, opening up the possibility that any style might offer a genuine revelation of the real.

Learning from Kant: Style as Cognitive Reality

In theories introduced by German and Austrian art histori-
than negatively constrained by skill or material. By emphasizing the creative capacity of the artist, Riegl countered Gottfried Semper’s theory that stylistic development may be traced to the producer’s ability to mimitically reproduce the apparent world, or, alternatively, to the physical properties of the medium. For Semper, the emergence of the Geometric Style would thus be traced to the forms symptomatically produced by weaving textiles, but for Riegl, this mechanistic emphasis on technique overlooked the necessary intellectual contribution of the creator. In his study of ornament, Problems of Style, Riegl writes, for example: “the abstract, linear patterns of the Geometric Style are, of course, not obvious in nature; releasing them ... into an independent existence in art requires a conscious mental act whose intervention, however, was to be ignored at all costs [by Semper’s materialist explanations of stylistic development].” Riegl’s rejection of technical materialism granted the producer a crucial role in the evolution of form by asserting that art does not duplicate the appearances of the natural world but results from the individual’s cognitive apprehension of the world. The work emerges from this intellectual act and is, thus, an artifact that performs an epistemological as well as aesthetic task. It makes visible a particular way of knowing the world, of understanding what is real.

Riegl’s ideas were formed, in part, through his familiarity with previous theorists, and his theories should be set within the intellectual context of other neo-Kantian thinkers of the time. Konrad Fiedler, who published in the 1870s and 1880s, represents a key theoretical precedent for Riegl’s ideas. Fiedler adopted a formalist approach to evaluating artistic production, and used this concentration on style to argue that the individual artist’s cognitive apprehension of the world can be understood as a generative act in both philosophical and aesthetic terms. As Henry Schaefer-Simmern notes, “Fiedler’s particular task is to apply Kant’s method of epistemology to the field of visual art.” Fiedler insisted that artistic problems are also philosophical problems, and recognized the implications of Kantian thought for aesthetic criticism:

The decisive turning point in our quest for knowledge occurred in the moment where, upon deeper reflection, the reality [Wirklichkeit] which is apparently endowed with absolute reality [Realität] was revealed as a deceptive appearance; where the insight formed that the human capacity for knowledge does not stand across from an external world that is independent from it, like a mirror before the object whose picture appears in it, but that what one calls the external world is the eternally changing result, ceaselessly created afresh from out of itself, of a mental [geistigen] event. As significant as this insight has been for the development of human knowledge, still, because of a curious restriction, it has always remained unutilized for investigations into the essence of artistic activity ... The question of what truth is concerns not only the realm of philosophical knowledge ... it likewise concerns the realm of artistic production.

Fiedler attempts to correct this oversight by utilizing Kant’s philosophy of cognition to explicate an independent mode of thinking required for the production of an art that is, necessarily, the production of the world itself. At a time in which the merits of descriptive realism were vying for prominence with the idealizing conventions of academic art, Fiedler proposed that both were based on the false premise that artists could simply confront an available reality and choose to either alter or improve upon that material. Yet if reality as we know it could only be conceived as the result of mental processes, if it did not precede but was the product of cognition, then both the reordering of the world and its faithful duplication must be considered unacceptable on
both philosophical and aesthetic grounds. This allowed Fiedler to pose a revised conception of artistic meaning: “What art creates is no second world alongside the other world which has an existence without art; what art creates is the world, made by and for the artistic consciousness.”

Significantly, Fiedler asserted that this mental apprehension, and thus creation, of the world could be observed not in subject matter but in form. The appearance of a work of art is the result of this productive cognitive process, and thus artistic form now becomes the manifestation of the artist’s cognitive production of a world whose truth cannot exist apart from this intellectual event. “Art,” writes Fiedler, “is nothing other than one of the means through which man produces reality.”

From One to Many: Style as Cultural Reality

Riegl shared with Fiedler this neo-Kantian view that the truthfulness of any particular work of art emerges from the artist’s perceptual apprehension of the material of experience, which is transparently made manifest in the work’s form. For both Fiedler and Riegl, the individual artist’s creative act concretizes a reality that is cognitively realized. That an artist must will a particular object into being was crucial for Riegl, yet, unlike Fiedler, far more was at stake for him than understanding the individual artist’s intellectual apprehension of the world as manifest in his/her artistic style. Riegl wanted to see style as culturally meaningful, the product of a particular historical moment and not simply the result of a particular artist’s perceptual reality. To be sure, there was an existing tradition of assigning style to both individual and cultural origins, but this had always been an uneasy alliance, as discussed by Willibald Sauerländer in his essay, “From Stilus to Style: Reflections on the Fate of a Notion.” Sauerländer notes that the origins of the word “style” can be traced to classical rhetoric, in which typical styles were identified as producing varying effects. In this case, style functioned as a classificatory term used to designate known literary methods of exposition, a use that would later be transferred to descriptions of the visual arts. Hence, style began to be turned to as a means of defining the works of regions and schools and, finally, with Johann Joachim Winckelmann, time periods. It is in Winckelmann’s History of Classical Art (1764) that we find the first articulation of artistic style—specifically Greek classicism—as tied to a temporally and geographically unified cultural perspective. However, the idea of artistic style also experienced a different sort of trajectory in which personal attributes were paramount, and form was seen as resulting from individual genius, as described earlier in this essay. Thus, as Sauerländer explains, style has ever since exhibited a “double face”: “The art historical notion of style had to be nominalistic and universalistic at the same time, it had to do justice to any possible variation of artistic originality and to function as a coherent system of classification.”

Riegl’s notion of style deftly did away with the tension between these individual and historical definitions of style. His Kantian premises allowed him to conceive of style not as the Janus-faced opposition of personal and cultural form, but as the site where individual and collective perception happen simultaneously. To move beyond the singularity of the artist’s production, Riegl identified what he famously called the Kunstwollen, a term for which there is really no satisfying English variant but which usually is translated as “will to form” or “artistic volition.” This expansive concept, which was first introduced in Problems of Style and came to have an increasingly important role in Riegl’s scholarship, enabled Riegl to define style as the product of not only individual but collective perception. Riegl’s Kunstwollen generally signifies the manner in which not only an individual but an entire society perceives the physical world. Kunstwollen is a notoriously troublesome term, one which is both central to Riegl’s methodology and difficult to define because it is presented rather cryptically by Riegl himself. It is precisely this ambiguity that is arguably one of the Kunstwollen’s most expedient traits, endowing it with the ability to encompass both the specific and the universal. The Kunstwollen allowed Riegl to establish a theory of art that could accommodate the individual’s role in the work’s production, an event bound to the artist’s intellectual apprehension of the world, and the problem of how that unique object could be returned to history.

This transposition of subjective cognitive knowledge to a cultural context becomes evident in Late Roman Art Industry, in which Riegl expands on the Kunstwollen theory first proposed in Problems of Style:

All human will is directed toward a satisfactory shaping of man’s relationship to the world, within and beyond the individual. The plastic Kunstwollen regulates man’s relationship to the sensorily perceptible appearance of things . . . Man is not only a passive, sensorily recipient being, but also a desiring, active being who wishes to interpret the world in such a way (varying from one people, region, or epoch to another) that it most clearly and obligingly meets his desires. The character of this will is contained in that which we call the worldview.

According to Riegl, then, a society as a whole can only apprehend the material of experience through a collective mental act of perception. Riegl insists that the way in which
a culture perceives the world is a matter of will rather than simple sensorial reception, i.e. it is a creative act. Thus, Riegls can say in *Late Roman Art Industry* that “mankind wants to see sensory phenomena presented in outline and in color in the plane or in space in different ways in different times...” In other words, Riegls recognizes the individual’s cognitive understanding of the noumenal world, an intellectual intervention that produces a certain version of reality, in cultural terms. Both the individual and the group comprehend the world by means of a cognitive exercise that is necessarily interpretative and derives its fundamental concerns from a comprehensive worldview present in all aspects of human experience during any one period or place. In Riegls’s theory of the *Kunstwollen*, the will of the artist and the will of a culture are coextensive. Individual cognition and its productive faculties become the local occurrence of a larger phenomenon: the collective apprehension of a historically situated group. The conflict between the specific and the universal has been elicited in favor of a methodological approach which looks to form as the revelation of a reality experienced at the level of both the individual and the society of which he/she is a part.

**Riegls and Central European Art: the Reality Effect of Style**

The inductive conclusions suggested by Riegls’s theory of the *Kunstwollen* and its notion of collective perception have proven to be tremendously significant for the development of art history. Riegls’s expansive notion of style became a fundamental heuristic tool with which to analyze the art of the past. Methodologically, the *Kunstwollen* offered a means of discovering how mental apprehension has functioned for any particular group by proposing that the way in which a culture perceives the world will define its visual interpretations of experience, its art. Riegls’s *Kunstwollen* suggested that cultural cognition betrays its operational processes and desires in the formal properties of the work of art, that object which was now theorized as the concrete manifestation of perception. Thus, the meticulous study of past forms, rather than the analysis of iconography or subject matter, could lead directly to an understanding of what constituted “reality” for any given culture. Riegls’s ideas also promoted a more inclusive understanding of what aspects of the history of art could be perceived as valuable. By arguing that cognitive reality is made visible by style, Riegls not only granted style a previously unthinkable importance, but also that every historical style carried this heavy epistemological burden. All past cultural forms, even the conventionally denigrated styles of late antique and Baroque art, concretized the culture of a conception of what is real. Riegls’s influence on the practitioners of art history was profound and widespread, though this did not lead to uniformity in their methods. Scholars as distinct in their approaches as Wilhelm Worringer and Erwin Panofsky were indebted to Riegls’s theories. In general, though, it can be asserted that the art historians who read Riegls during the early years of the 20th century shared a new conception of artistic form as the product of a determining *Kunstwollen*, and of style as the means by which a culture’s cognitive apprehension of the world is made manifest. For those historians every period or regional style emerged from a culture’s cognitive animation of the world and thus the careful observer, when standing before the physical object, was witness to that event.

Riegls’s impact on the discipline of art history is well known, but it is important to remember that many artists working in central Europe during the early years of the 20th century also knew of Riegls’s theories, either directly through his own texts, or indirectly through the work of scholars who followed his example. For example, Riegls’s book *Late Roman Art Industry* was read by many of the artists and architects associated with the German Werkbund, particularly Walter Gropius and Peter Behrens, and his ideas had a significant impact on their work. The ornamental language of Behrens’ design for Emil Rathenau, for example, is derived from decorative elements illustrated by Riegls in *Late Roman Art Industry*, and demonstrates the compositional uniformity and alternating light and dark patterns that Riegls identifies as crucial to the decorative arts of this period (Fig. 2). In Prague, designers and architects in the Group of Plastic Artists, and painters and sculptors in Skupina, turned to Riegls’s notion of the *Kunstwollen* as they developed a cubist idiom. In Vienna, according to Debra Schafer, Riegls’s interest in the perceptual attributes of ornament, which would clarify the relationship between form and function, “dictated surface ornament in the products of the Wiener Werkstätte before World War I and came to define the workshop’s principal style.” In addition, the Viennese critic Hermann Bahr identified Riegls as a theoretical progenitor of Expressionism, and, as Catherine Soullen recently argued, it is likely that Kokoschka not only was familiar with Riegls’s writings, but incorporated some of the art historians’ theories on representation into his portrait paintings, specifically Riegls’s discussion of the dialogue between object and beholder in Dutch group portraiture (Fig.3). It should also be noted that many artists in central Europe learned of Riegls’s basic precepts through the work of art historians influenced by him. Wilhelm Worringer’s extremely popular treatise *Abstraction and Empathy*, for example, depended heavily on Riegls’s notion of the *Kunstwollen*. We know that Egon Schiele was given a copy of Worringer’s text.
by his patron Arthur Roessler, and in Germany, August Macke, Franz Marc and Wassily Kandinsky; all members of the Blaue Reiter, knew and admired Worringer's book."

These artists, all of whom were familiar with Riegl's work to some degree, did not eschew any one visual style. On the contrary, in the early years of the 20th century, central European artists produced a wide variety of forms in the "fine" and decorative arts alike. Clearly this diversity can be analyzed in terms of linguistic differences, local traditions and the politics of national identity, as well as the international exchange of ideas. Yet I think there is also another way to interpretively frame the diversity of artistic practice in central Europe in the years before World War I, one which situates these contrasting styles within the legacy of Rieglian art history. I say "Rieglian" art history, because Riegl's notion of the Kunstwollen and of style as the embodiment of perceptive reality transformed the way in which numerous art historians regarded their objects of study, thus giving rise to a Rieglian paradigm that also found its way into the aesthetic programs of numerous artists working in central Europe. It seems remarkable, then, that at precisely the moment when Rieglian methodology in art history had made the convincing case that style offered the legible materialization of a distinct cultural worldview, a notion that by necessity assumed a consistent approach to form within a particular temporal and geographical setting, central European visual culture became consciously heterogeneous. It may be that, precisely because form came to be regarded in central Europe as the visual incarnation of perceptual truth, the disparate works of modern art produced by its artists were able to make equal claims to authenticity. In other words, I would argue that the Rieglian conception of meaningful form gave rise to a conception of style which could produce the effect of the real, and that this transformed notion of style encouraged a pluralistic artistic practice that ultimately contradicted Riegl's basic principle of historical uniformity.

To make this case, I want to draw on Roland Barthes' notion of the reality effect in his well-known essay of the same title. In this text, Barthes analyzes the stylistic attributes of 19th century French realism, which contain a profu-
sion of precise details that have no narrative function. These elaborate descriptions of the material world appear to be useless and unnecessary, yet, as Barthes argues, it is precisely their superfluousness that allows them to seem objectively real. If they do not mean anything within the story, if they serve no narrative purpose, then they can claim to exist apart from representation, to refer to nothing but their own reality. "Semiotically," Barthes writes, "the 'concrete detail' is constituted by the direct collusion of a referent and a signifier." However, the unnecessary detail does have a signifying function and does not exist apart from meaning. "For just when these details are replete to denote the real directly, all that they do—without saying so—is signify it... it is the category of 'the real'... which is then signified."

This is what Barthes calls the "reality effect," and I suggest that this concept can also help us to understand the implications of Riehl's method for modern art in central Europe, and perhaps beyond. Like Barthes' literary details, which posit a simple "referential plenitude" that belies their active production of meaning, Riehl's form claims a similar repeleteness, offering itself not as a sign of the real, which would entail difference and distance, but as its materialization. This was an alluring and persuasive model for understanding art. Rather than reading subject matter, and deciphering the meaning signified by particular persons, scenes, or objects, form seemed perfectly contiguous with its origin, and, thus without a signified. Yet, as Barthes writes, "the very absence of the signified... becomes the very signifier of realism: the reality effect is produced."

The Reality of Style(s): Individual Form as Cultural Truth

My use of Barthes' reality effect to describe Riehl's theory of form, and consequently its importance for the early 20th-century central European art, offers an alternative to Linda Nochlin's well known translation of Barthes' reality effect into visual terms in her important essay "The Imaginary Orient." Nochlin appeals to Barthes' concept as a means of understanding the rhetorical persuasiveness of French naturalistic painting during the 19th century. In the article, she analyzes the highly precise depictions of the so-called Orient, especially those painted by Jean-Léon Gérôme (Fig. 4). Gérôme's paintings are infused with a surfeit of detail, contained within paintings that are meticulously illusionistic:

Gérôme tries to make us forget that his art is really art, both by concealing the evidence of his touch, and, at the same time, by insisting on a plethora of authenticating details, especially on what might be called unnecessary ones... They are signifiers of the category of the real, there to give credibility to the 'realness' of the work as a whole, to authenticate the total visual field as a simple, artless reflection—in this case, of a supposed Oriental reality.

Thus Nochlin assesses Gérôme's visual reality effect as the result of both the superfluous details identified by Barthes, and the smooth finish of the painting, which effaces all tell-tale signs of the artist's presence and, thus, any reminders that the work is the product of human intervention rather than an unmotivated expression of reality itself.

Nochlin's application of Barthes' theory to Gérôme's painting is absolutely convincing, and would be equally relevant for an understanding of the central European variants of realism, such as that of Wilhelm Leibl (Fig. 5). Yet by the first decades of the 20th century, this kind of naturalistic style had little presence in the art world of central Europe. Nineteenth-century realism may have achieved its reality effect by veiling the work of the artist, thus suggesting the artlessness of the painting, but by the 20th century, in an aesthetic culture very much aware of Riehl's theories, the reality effect could be generated within a substantially different set of terms. When we think of the art produced in central Europe during the years before World War I, the pristine surfaces and incidental details described by Nochlin are not what we expect to see. No single style dominated in central Europe during these years. Indeed, the artistic climate was determinedly pluralist. Yet if anything might be seen as characterizing much of the work of this period, it would be its lack of interest in fostering any sense of artlessness. On the contrary, much of this art called attention to the formative processes of its manufacture, it status as an object produced not by natural but by human acts. Yet I would argue that in the post-Riehlian intellectual climate, it was precisely this didactic presentation of style, of organized and manipulated form, that engendered the reality effect because style was now believed to corporealize the real.

Focusing on the German context, for example, the artists of the Werkbund, who knew Riehl's ideas well, created work in which the pretense of artlessness did not seem to be a concern (see Fig. 2). Rhythmically united patterns and layered geometric surfaces did not pretend to be issued by nature. These are obviously ordered forms, the products of carefully thought out procedures. Any authentic identity to which they might lay claim would seem to originate from these repetitive, abstracted visual equations, indicating that they stem from general processes of which these particular works are only local variations. Indeed, the members of the Werkbund aspired to create works that would adequately
communicate the historical "Kunstzwecke" of the period, as Frederic Schwarz observes, rather than mimic the appearances of the natural world. Schwarz quotes Peter Behrens, who helped to found the Werkbund and advocated the creation of a style which would transcend the singular mannerisms of any one designer, a "unified formal expression, the manifestation of the entire spiritual life of an epoch. Unified character, not the particular or the peculiar, is the decisive factor." The Riegian concept of style, which had so permeated central European intellectual and aesthetic culture, made it possible for these artists, working in the measured complexities of modern design, to regard their art as tied to the 'real,' not because they aspired to the artlessness of 19th century realism, but because their works could be conceived as the formal manifestation of a larger cultural reality, precisely because they pointedly acknowledged their own possession of style.

However, objects such as those produced by the Werkbund and other design organizations co-existed with the often strikingly dissimilar works of Expressionism (see Fig. 3). These images also betrayed a sense of artifice, evidenced not by the orderly construction of their design, but by the obvious brushstrokes typical of Expressionist paintings, regardless of their degree of abstraction. Expressionist artists created images which, far from striving for the polished finish of naturalistic painting, called attention to the marks made by the artist on the work's surface. The rough facture of Oskar Kokoschka's mottled bodies, the thick slabs of bright orange used by Ernst Kirchner to designate a face, or Wassily Kandinsky's vivid swirls of paint could hardly seem more arbitrary when compared with someone like Gérôme. Far from adhering to any need to disguise the manner of their own creation, these forms insist on reminding us that a particular person produced them. Idiosyncratic and indexical, the awkwardly lavish style of Expressionist painting certainly seems to testify to the presence of the embodied artist, and therefore to his individual reality, but its claims to 'truth' would seem to stop there.

Yet this is precisely how most Expressionists in central Europe described their own work: as truthful or authentic in a way that transcended the individual. They could conceive of their work in this way because, as discussed above,
the conventional conflict between personal and historical style no longer seemed problematic. Riegl and his successors provided the theoretical framework within which the peculiarities of individual style could be seamlessly aligned with the broader cultural or historical spirit. In his writings, Kandinsky, for example, consistently makes reference to the synchrony between the work of the artist and the art of an era. In the *Blute Reiter Almanac*, he writes: "Form reflects the spirit of the individual artist. Form bears the stamp of the personality." Yet he continues, "The personality cannot, of course, be regarded as something outside of time and space... As each individual artist has to express himself, so each person has to express itself, including the people to which the artist belongs... And finally, each period has its special task as well, the revelation possible through it. The reflection of this time element is recognized in the work as style."*28* Similarly, in Vienna, Hans Tietze turned to Riegl's methodology as a means of justifying Expressionist paintings by Kokoschka and others, since they were simply serving the ends of a larger historical will. The dramatic gestures of the Expressionist artist were necessary for the realization of a larger cultural truth. As Rainer Fuchs points out, such a position may seem to give precedence to the artist's individual exclamations, yet according to Tietze's underlying method, which was indebted to Riegl, "each border-crossing and innovation is encumbered a priori with the stigma of historical necessity."*29* The effusive brushmarks of Expressionist painters then, rather than testifying merely to the temperament or interiority of the artist, were thought simultaneously to manifest a broader cultural reality. Because the Rieglian paradigm had provided the basis for understanding artistic personality—the result of an individual’s intellectual understanding of the world—as synonymous with historical perceptual truth, personal form, no matter how idiosyncratic, became homologous with cultural style and, thus, with cultural cognitive reality.

The reality effect that I am arguing adhered to these works resulted from this understanding of individual/cultural style as the material incarnation of the ‘real’. In central European culture, form began to carry the heavy burden that in an earlier era was born by the Romantic idea of the symbol. It seemed to promise pure access to absolute meaning, or, to be precise, as absolute as possible in a post-Kantian world which recognized that the only knowable reality is cognitively constructed. Style conjured the real. With Barthes’ help, we may recognize now the rhetorical character of this promise, its reality effect, but for Riegl and his contemporaries, form seemed to embody—not allegorize—human reality. Thus the two case studies above—Werkbund designs and Expressionist painting—could both claim equal access to the real because of a theoretical integration of personal and historical style, a union which was itself possible only because of Riegli's Kantian notion of form as the manifestation of cognitive reality. But there is something surprising about this proposition of shared cultural authenticity, since it is being claimed by two very different sorts of art. Both Werkbund and Expressionist objects have style, to be sure, but they do not have the same style. That they might both have successfully generated a reality effect should alert us to the ways in which the Rieglian theory of meaningful form may have encouraged an artistic pluralism that subverted the very *Kunstwollen* theory of historically unified style from which it sprung.

**Real Style: Artistic Pluralism in early 20th-century Central Europe**

For Riegli, the forms of a specific group of objects, joined both temporally and geographically, exhibited a fundamental coherence based on that culture’s perceptual under-
standing of the world, that is, of what could be conceived as real. It was crucial for Riegl that the cultural limits of this particular worldview as manifested in the work of art were not porous or relative but firmly circumscribed. One might expect that the effect of Riegl’s ideas on early 20th-century artistic practice in central Europe would be the production of a typical style that could be observed in all of the culture’s art. Yet, as we have already seen, the art of central Europe during this period was not defined by a formally consistent style. Not only did a decorative program co-exist with the painted works of Expressionism, even within these broad categories we can hardly make a case for unanimity. Consider the varieties of form on view just within the Expressionist tradition in Germany, which was defined as much by its internal variances as by any shared aesthetic. Ernst Kirchner, Franz Marc, Käthe Kollwitz, Wassily Kandinsky, Max Pechstein, Alex Jawlensky, Gabriele Münter, August Macke, to name just a few of the better known artists who produced works thought of as Expressionist. If we extend our scope beyond Germany to Vienna, the view becomes even more fractured with the inclusion of Egon Schiele, Oskar Kokoschka, Max Oppenheim. To the Austrian example, we can add the “Cubo-Expressionist” styles of the Activists in Hungary, including Béla Uitz and János Máttis Teutsch, or someone like Emil Filla in Prague.

Certainly, “Expressionist” may not be the most appropriate term with which to describe all of these styles, but the dilemma is not one simply of nomenclature. At issue here is not only Expressionism, singly or in combination with other styles, but more generally the rapid proliferation of distinct artistic styles in the years preceding World War I. Visual culture in central Europe during this time was remarkably diverse, a prismatic constellation of contrasts. To be sure, these visual cultures tended to move away from figuration, yet the transformations in central European visual culture cannot be exhausted by examining the degree to which art did or did not become more abstract. The tendency toward the non-representational coincided with a simultaneous explosion of formal possibilities. Not only did manz of its new artists refuse to abide by the illusionistic conventions of the past, but they began to repudiate the notion of any normative approach to organizing form. The sheer diversity of form began to seem as startling as its rejection of representation. This situation could be observed even within a single state. For example, Robin Lemen, in a study which focuses on political and economic correlates for this situation, describes the situation in Germany: “By 1914, despite increasing integration of the market, the German art scene was more varied than ever before.” Cast the net wider to include all of central Europe, and the degree of variety is thrown into even higher relief. As Timothy Benson writes: “Just as Central European history itself has long been as much one of disruption, discontinuity, and intentional rewriting as one of coherent evolution ... we approach the cultural production of the avant-garde as irreducibly multiple: varied in its states of completion and extraordinarily diverse.”

That these disparate versions of modern art, in spite of their great variety, came to seem equally plausible to those who produced them may be partially attributable to the understanding of style put forth by Riegl at the turn of the century. In the Rieglian theory of artistic form, as articulated by Riegl and espoused by his followers, style was reconfigured to designate the way in which cognitive knowledge of the world is made manifest at a particular moment in history. This notion of style as the concretization of historical perception was formulated to account for the singularity of style in any one time or place, and the theory presupposed an absolute simultaneity between form and a certain perceptual reality. Yet the broadly Rieglian understanding of style as the transparent expression of the real, and thus as autonomously meaningful, nourished the idea that any style might be acceptable. In other words, the persuasiveness of the Rieglian paradigm undermined the very premises upon which Riegl’s definition of culturally specific style were first constructed, opening the door to the contingencies of form which emerged before World War I. Style became defined as the visual incarnation of cognitive reality, so that form itself, whatever its specific attributes, testified to perceptual truth. This seems to me to be a key moment in the Rieglian legacy. Form now enjoyed a privileged relationship to the real, existing as the apparently unmediated revelation of reality. Regardless of its strategies, any work that possessed style had the ability to generate a convincing ‘reality effect.’ Thus the epistemological shift brought about by Riegl’s adaptation of Kantian philosophy supported the pluralism of central European modern art, its increasingly radical and variant forms sanctioned by a conviction that style itself is the sign of authenticity.

Notes
1. This essay expands on ideas presented on the panel “Style” at the College Art Association in 2001 organized by Karen Lang and Thomas Huhn. My thanks to them, the other panelists, and the members of the audience for their feedback. I would also like to acknowledge Christopher S. Wood for first sparking my interest in the intellectual history of art history. Our conversations about Riegl and the Germanic tradition of art history, although they occurred several years ago, have helped me to think through the arguments presented here. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are by the author.

3. Margaret Iversen. *Alois Riegl: Art History and Theory*. Cambridge, Mass. 1993. 45. On Riegl’s intellectual indebtedness to Kant, specifically in his concept of attentiveness, see also Matthew Rampling. "Spectatorship and the Historicity of Art: Re-reading Alois Rieg's *Historical Grammar of the Fine Arts.*, *Word and Image*. 12. 2. 209–217. In contrast, Margaret Olin has suggested that Riegl was uncomfortable with the pervasiveness of post-Kantian thought and, like other Austrian scholars, wanted to find a way to salvage some empirical relationship to the physical world. According to Olin, Riegl’s desire for an art that contained both optic (subjective) and haptic (empirical) forms was the result, a method that he also hoped would save the possibility of representation in art. See Margaret Olin. *Forms of Representation in Alois Riegl’s Theory of Art*. University Park, Penn. 1992. However, I would suggest that it is precisely this rather melancholic claim on tactile experience that suggests the degree to which Riegl knew that a pre-Kantian definition of reality was no longer available, and realized that Kantian epistemology would have to be factored into any modern theory of perception and, therefore, of art.


5. Riegl, work cited in note 4 above. 17. My emphasis.


8. "Der entscheidende Wendepunkt für den nach Erkenntnis strebenden Geist tritt in dem Augenblick ein, wo sich dem tieferen Nachdenken die anscheinend mit absoluter Realität ausgestattete Wirklichkeit als ein trägerischer Schein enthüllt, wo sich die Einsicht aufdrängt, daß das menschliche Erkenntnisvermögen nicht so einer von ihm unabhängigen Außenwelt gegenübersteht wie ein Spiegel dem Gegenstande, dessen Bild in ihm erscheint, sondern daß das, was man Außenwelt nennt, das ewig wechselnde und ununterbrochene von neuem sich erzeugende Resultat eines geistigen Vorganges ist. So folgenreich diese Einsicht für die Entwicklung der menschlichen Erkenntnis gewesen ist, so ist sie doch infolge einer eigen tümlichen Beschränkheit von jeher für die Untersuchungen über das Wesen der künstlerischen Tätigkeit ungenügend geblieben. ... Die Frage, was Wahrheit ist, gilt nicht nur für das Gebiet philosophischer Erkenntnis ... sie gilt ebenso auch für das Gebiet künstlerischer Gestaltung." Konrad Fiedler. "Moderner Naturalismus und künstlerische Wahrheit" (c. 1881), in *Schriften über Kunst*. Cologne. 1977. 123.


10. Fiedler, work cited in note 8 above. 129.


20. Timothy Benson’s Central European Avant-Gardes: Exchange and Transformation, 1910–1930, cited in note 16 above, makes a significant contribution to just such an understanding.


22. Barthes, work cited in note 21 above. 147.


24. Olin briefly discusses the effect of the real in relation to Riegl’s work as well, but she makes reference to the idea as it is discussed by Jean Baudrillard. Olin, work cited in note 3 above. 183.


