
translated and edited by Karl Johns

Editor’s introduction: Alexander Conze: The Bureaucrat and Art-Historiography

Like a number of his colleagues, Alexander Conze (Hanover December 10, 1831-Berlin July 19, 1914), came to classical archaeology after first studying law. His interests and gifts seem to have tended more toward curatorial and administrative work rather than lecturing, and he will be primarily remembered for his part in bringing the Pergamon Altar to the Berlin museums. It may therefore seem ironic that he nevertheless had a great influence as a teacher and probably the greatest influence in another field, which was only later to be defined and brought to fruition in academia by his students as ‘the history of art.’

For the purposes of art historiography it is therefore significant that after nearly ten years at Halle as Extraordinarius, he was called to the University of Vienna as Ordinarius, taught from 1869 to 1877, where Franz Wickhoff, Alois Riegl, Emanuel Löwy and Julius Schlosser, among others, were influenced by his teachings. In the lectures given by Conze to the Prussian academy later in his career, it is not difficult to recognize a similarity to Schlosser in the binocular attraction of more abstract questions on the one hand and the aesthetic appeal of the individual object on the other. Conze also anticipated and presumably inspired the later studies made by Ernst Garger on the ground in relief sculpture and the historical place of the Monument of the Julii.

Conze’s theoretical bent towards the origins and early developments of art must have been a primary feature of his lectures in Vienna. There was also an idealistic and bureaucratic aspect to his approach. At the time he was preparing his comprehensive edition of Attic stelae, whilst also inaugurating institutions and serving to sponsor further collective projects. It was during his years in Vienna that he set out on the excavation of Samothrace with two campaigns. Here and later at Pergamon, the ambition was to excavate all parts of a Greek city – something continued by the Austrian excavation of Ephesus. At the university in Vienna he co-founded the Archäologisch-Epigraphisches Seminar with Otto Hirschfeld in 1873 and was instrumental in publishing the Archäologisch-epigraphische Mitteilungen aus Österreich-Ungarn (continued by the Jahreshefte des Österreichischen Archäologischen Institutes in Wien). He was succeeded more briefly in this by Hirschfeld and then Eugen Bormann who also hosted the informal meetings of the ‘Wiener Eranos’
attended by Wickhoff and Riegl as well as publishing the *Eranos Vindobonensis* from 1893 onwards.¹ These meetings became a centre for the definition of objectivity in this and related disciplines. They were also informal and popular and inspired the relative flexibility which later attracted other students with different interests such as Fritz Saxl.²

When Conze returned to Berlin in 1877 to become director of the collection of antiquities in the Berlin museums, he became involved with the excavation of the monuments from Pergamon and was instrumental in their installation. They were something of a centrepiece for the Berlin museums and certainly felt to compare with the Elgin Marbles which had inspired him during his travels undertaken after the completion of his studies. At this moment in German political history, soon after the unification of the realm, the curatorial work of the museums was being done in conscious comparison with other national showpieces of various origins, primarily London and Paris, but also Vienna, St. Petersburg and others. The Berlin museums persisted as a centre for scholarship in a way that had not appeared self-evident elsewhere. While ancient Rome had a more natural symbolic resonance for the political undercurrents of the time, Conze stands out for his particular interest in Greece and might to his colleagues have recalled J. J. Winckelmann.

In 1887 Conze became secretary of the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, but also had a hand in founding the Römisch-Germanische Kommission which further reflects his interests in prehistory, with the local traditions and to some degree national flavour. In a time when scholarly fields were narrowly defined and distinguished from one another, he was able to maintain a broader view and include questions transcending the pervasive pedantry – as we can see in a number of his other lectures.³ He pioneered the study of the Geometric Style, repudiated Gottfried Semper, illuminated the Mycenaean and Minoan art that would later cause trouble to the theories of Riegl, and placed the role of plant ornament into a more critical perspective. A good overview of his publications and range of interests is available in the (incomplete) list in the catalogue of the library in the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut.⁴

² Certain further details about Wickhoff and his pupils can be found in Karl Johns, ‘Franz Wickhoff et ses élèves ou l’histoire de l’art au service de l’objectivité’, *Austriaca Cahiers universitaires d’information sur l’Autriche* no. 72, juin 2011 L’école viennoise d’histoire de l’art ed., Céline Trautmann-Waller, pp. 117-149.
He remained an able administrator and theorist during the period when the students of Theodor Mommsen were completing the corpus of Roman inscriptions, Bormann had compiled the inscriptions from the Austrian limes, Karl Robert was producing the corpus of sarcophagi, and the publication of *Paulys Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft* set a milestone in the field. Since their territory did not include the prestigious excavations of France or Italy, and even in the more manageable field of numismatics they would probably never rival Paris or London, it might appear natural that the Prussian and Austrian scholars would look past the more famous monuments, including provincial documentation and concentrate on questions of method. It is interesting to observe the differences between Conze and Wickhoff in their approach to a synthesis in presenting provincial monuments as part of a grander span in the history of art - questions which still tend to be overlooked in more general surveys, but have always attracted the attention of some of the most gifted young students of their time.

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If it was ever true anywhere, then it was true in ancient Greece that the human form stood at the centre of the visual arts with everything else contingent upon it, and that the perfection in depicting it provided the zenith for this artistic tradition. For a number of decades now, historical research on Greek art has gone back to the early periods where the first seeds of this rich urge presented themselves, where the subject was dominated by entirely other forms, that of the Geometric Style - an appellation which has taken root. Gottfried Semper first evaluated that style and gave the impression that he was discussing the very origins of art on earth.

As it appears on Greek soil, the Geometric Style is not based on an imitation of the forms around us in living nature, but is composed of linear combinations whose laws govern the images of men and also animals, and in this way they are assimilated and matched. Rather than view the style as originating in a human pleasure in this mathematical world of form and as a channel for this feeling for abstract regularity and variety, Semper has instead singled out braiding and weaving which he considers to be the most primitive technical process, and to have necessarily arisen from the completion of these tasks. Semper’s hypothesis was that humanity discovered the appeal of these things only after it had created them and only then did the intellectual or spiritual activity fit in with that impulse (traditionally considered a root of art) in the play instinct, and led to their use in the purely decorative context of geometrical forms. Some might posit a deeply innate feeling within humanity, which leads us to accept and further develop the formal system (‘Formenwelt’) as technology necessarily brings it forth, while others might wish to stress the external influence which led to a sense for order and symmetry by repeated quotidian practice of traditional forms. Another possibility would be to allow that both innate and learned elements converged in this.

This entire theory about the origin of the visual and also partly of the spatial arts as has been inspired by Semper and applied, some would say, with exaggeration, conforms itself so well with a currently ubiquitous mode of thought, extending as Goethe has said ‘from the lowest animal urges of craftsmanship to the highest expressions of our intellectual art’, that it is inevitably enjoying a vogue.

Geometrical beauty, as it is the property of minerals, and as bees produce it in the polygonal shape of their cells by blindly and inevitably inserting their heads into the soft wax mass repeatedly – as Mr. Schulze has shown me - emerges in equal measure from human hands when the goal is utilitarian. What follows then is the

first step which raises humanity above the rest of creation; inspired also by the various colours of the materials which they combine with into a unified whole, people began to play with these forms and over long, not precisely calculable periods, move towards the cusp of the ‘Geometric Style’ without entering upon it.

The situation might also appear this way if one looks past Greece to the art of early Europe as can be seen in the preservation of countless artefacts. An image of art arose in what we commonly call the stone and bronze-age, and this was expanded in the Greek Geometric Style to become one of the early European styles that would comprise the southern-most link in early Italic art. I have discussed this in two essays published in the reports of the Academy of Sciences in Vienna in 1870 and 1872 and a modified version has been published in the Annali dell’instituto di corrispondenza archeologica in 1874.

As appealing as the widespread agreement about this theory is, the answer to these problems is not as simple as it might at first appear. There are two directions in which it is not so simple – first of all regarding the historical place of the Geometric style in Greece, but also as an insight into the origin of art itself. It is the latter question which I would like to examine again here.

In Greece during the last twenty years, something very significant has come about, namely in the discoveries of Heinrich Schliemann. The scholarly examination of these discoveries has shown that a more highly developed art existed, and that according to the circumstances in which it was found in Mycaenae, it preceded the Geometric Style, and has been called Mycenaean according to its earliest influential appearance, or more generally Aegean - which Wolfgang Helbig has recently attributed to the Phoenicians. In stark contrast to the Geometric Style, it is characterized by a widespread use of plant motifs, which had been completely absent in the Geometric Style, a heightened mastery in the depiction of animals, a frequent appearance of the human form - not schematically given as in the Geometric Style, and freely formed curves in its ornament, once again very different from the simpler geometric play of strictly straight lines. This discovery has opened a broad and completely new field to the question of the origin of art in Greece and reveals a dual development in a far earlier period, like that played far later in the parallel development of the Dorian and Ionic styles. This phenomenon does not appear to affect the world wide historical significance of the Geometric Style or its chronological place.

Whether one considers the Geometric Style to have come to Greece from Asia Minor – as Helbig no longer believes, to be related to migrations into Greece such as that of the Dorians who brought an early northern art to displace that of Mycenae, or whether one prefers a third explanation (which will be examined presently), this style will remain the more primitive of the two, and continue to offer an example of an earlier phase of art.

The third explanation is one that I heard in lectures given by Paul Wolters in Athens and have seen in a wealth of individual observations, presented in an essay entitled ‘Zur Ornamentik der Villanova-Periode’ by Johannes Böhlau - Sam Wide is
also currently elaborating upon it.\textsuperscript{10} The Geometric Style had been traditional and indigenous in Greece, but had arisen spontaneously everywhere and functioned in some places - with local variations - as ‘peasant art’ even during the predominance of the more refined Mycenaean style. At the end of the Mycenaean culture the Geometric Style once again came to the fore, was adopted by the workshops in the capital, and on the basis of its earlier development then achieved its completely mature state in the period following the Mycenaean culture. As recently touched upon by Helbig, a similar process repeated itself again at the beginning of the middle period [‘mit dem Beginne des Mittelalters’].

However, one feels that the Geometric Style arose in Greece, and this would not be a point of contention if it were not being conceived of as the primary artistic style according to Gottfried Semper. With the expansion and intensification of studies surrounding the primitive artistic practices around the world, it has become necessary to avoid limiting our attention to too narrow a subject if we are to consider the question of the origins, and with it something of the essence, of the visual arts [‘im Raume schaffende Kunst’]. The task of embarking on the voyage into such a vast ocean is unavoidable, however frail our vehicle might appear.

When I myself had treated the question previously, I had compared the beginnings of Greek art to that of other early artistic styles from the remaining parts of Europe, and believed the Geometric Style to be the earliest form of visual art. Thankfully, there have been decisive objections to such a conception, in particular from Alois Riegl in Vienna, in his book \textit{Stilfragen Grundbedingungen zu einer Geschichte der Ornamentik}, Berlin: Siemens 1893, particularly in the first section devoted to the Geometric Style. The most resounding of these objections seems to be the evidence that the Geometric Style was in fact not the earliest form of art in Europe, to remain within that continent, and that the very earliest artistic images are to be found instead, in sculptures and contour drawings made from and upon animal bones discovered in the Dordogne as far back as 1852. Since then, other examples from the same period have also been discovered in other regions. The most elevated of these images include depictions of animals. The best available reproductions are probably those in Gabriel and Adrien de Mortillet, \textit{Musée préhistorique}, Paris: Reinwald 1881.

Due to a feeling of uncertainty about its authenticity I had previously omitted this source. During the 1870s disputes over the originality and inauthenticity of sources were raging among scholars (see the lectures at the congress of anthropologists in Constance, 1877) and since I was primarily interested in the aesthetic aspects, I considered caution to be advisable – especially after Ecker had been very circumspect on the subject in his lecture at that conference in Constance. Since then, I have neither had the chance nor taken the initiative to

\textsuperscript{10} [Festschrift der deutschen anthropologischen Gesellschaft zur XVI allgemeinen Versammlung zu Cassel gewidmet von der Residenzstadt Cassel 1896, pp. 91-110, Sam Wide, ‘Die ältesten Dipylonvasen in Attika’, Opuscula archaeologica Oscuri Montelio septuagenario dicata d. IX m. sept. a. MCMXIII, Holmiae: in aedibus J. Haeggstroemii, 1913, pp. 205–214.]

reach my own opinion on the question of forgeries. In the meantime however, there have been so many eyewitnesses experienced in judging authenticity and then endorsing the evidence that we are compelled to acknowledge these achievements in prehistory. In addition to this we also have the testimony from reliable witnesses about the circumstances of the discoveries - although archaeologists will be inclined to leave a certain amount of space for interpretation.

I had recently asked an experienced colleague in the field, with reliable powers of judgment, to examine the numerous relevant artefacts in the museum at St. Germain, and was told that their outward appearance provides no reason for any suspicion of forgery. Like so many others before him - Ludwig Lindenschmit in particular - what he found most striking was how sophisticated the vision and craft was despite being developed in such primitive conditions. Mortillet had said that ‘this childhood of art is far from being an art of children.’ Cartailhac has frequently characterized this animal imagery as somewhat sketchy, like practice pieces in an unfettered ‘passion for art’, and stresses that the reproductions often fail to do justice to the originals.

If we look beyond Europe and consider the highly naturalistic depictions of living animals observed by more recent travellers and anthropologists among the peoples still living among the earliest levels of civilization, then our final half-hearted doubts will vanish. In his meticulous publication, Ernst Grosse (Die Anfänge der Kunst, Freiburg and Leipzig: Mohr 1894) concludes his discussion of this question (pp. 156 ff.) with the sentence: ‘The puzzle of the reindeer artefacts has been resolved by ethnology. The much disputed carvings are the work of primitive people. Their truth to nature does not speak against, but on the contrary, it is the best evidence of their great age.’ He supports this with images from the Australians and bushmen and explains that the necessary means for creating such images resulted from the life of the hunt in which they had been trained and the sense of observation and dexterity on which they depended. Richard Andree and others had already used similar arguments in favor of the authenticity for the greater part of the discoveries made from the caves. A work such as the reindeer from Thayingen seems to represent an apogee among all comparable examples. Nadhailac also believes so.

Riegl is correct in rejecting the idea that the animal imagery from the caves can exclusively be derived from impulses arising out of technology. The question then remains, however, as to whether he is correct in placing the imitation of natural forms, imitation generally, and sculptural plasticity chronologically, before representations on surfaces, and then whether he is correct in finding the early traces of ‘geometrical’ decoration in the work of the cave dwellers to be the result of a distorted imitation of nature or an ‘inborn’ human need for decoration.

If I make observations of my own, then this is intended less in expectation of discovering a solution and more to reconnoitre the situation. The further we progress in our search for the origins of the visual arts, the more aware we become of how far the earliest preserved artefacts are themselves removed from their
beginnings. These populations must now be living in a state that is itself developed well beyond its earliest stages. The populations’ artistic activity remained at a relatively simple level and when it became impossible to further develop their reservoir of formal motifs, they might have embellished or degenerated what already existed.

In our search for traces which might reflect something of the primal urges, I still find the excellent reports by Karl von den Steinen about the primitive populations in Brazil to be remarkable.\(^1\) He observed gestures of drawing used while speaking, which preceded and led to the custom of drawings in sand (drawing into the earth at our feet) as a form of drawing to imitate the forms of nature which he considers to predate ornamental drawing. This would be a sort of derivation from language. It is advisable to read the description made by Von den Steinen himself. Other observers of primitive people have noted similar phenomena. H. M. Stanley was astonished at the agility and naturalism of drawings made by the Waganda people on Lake Victoria to complete or communicate things they could not adequately express orally.\(^2\) This is what G. T. Fechner calls visible words - he makes reference to the physicist Professor Gilbert in Göttingen who followed a primal urge to trace every motion he described with a line on the blackboard until it was completely covered in a jumble of all sorts of lines.\(^3\) Fechner limits the example to lines made in imitation of something, which is integral to this primitive form of expressing thoughts, yet it only attains perfection and the common mode of expression when the imaginary images are related to somebody else. A friend whom I often approach for enlightenment has written: ‘I believe that the original impulse leading to the visual arts is a productive urge in humanity, not the impulse toward mimesis and imitation in the common sense, but rather an urge to record the imaginary images as they are generated and live within us. Its childish beginnings do not consist in sitting before an object and making a drawing of it, but in the living image of an object or action within our imagination.’ Corrado Ricci has reached the same conclusion in his book, L’arte dei bambini, Bologna: Zanichelli 1887. As a particularly reflective artist Joshua Reynolds has referred to works of art as ‘images which have been precisely gathered in the memory.’ I believe that this is a main source for the stream of the visual arts. At this point this source is still related, by a common root, to the language of sounds which gives rise to: ideographical writing, the form of ballads mentioned by Fechner, demonstrative drawings accompanying a lecture and book illustrations arising from a common source, until a nation finally expresses its most intimate character in an emerging and developing

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joy in representation, and the manner of depiction, through the language of sounds and visible forms. An example of this are the so-called ‘pictographs’ of the north American Indians, which Garrick Mallery, in complete accord with what we have been saying, describes as the ‘visible expression of ideas, not a mere portraiture of an object’ (Fourth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution 1882-83, Washington: Government Printing Office 1886, pp. 13 ff.).

These original impulses of the visual arts as speech by way of visible forms still have no need for ‘beauty’ as an essential ingredient. It is completely alien to the ‘pictographs’ we have mentioned from the American Indians as well as the narrative imagery of the bushmen, Chukchi and Eskimos. It might not be described as ‘art’ according to the conceptual constructions abstracted from what surrounds us today. This allowed Anton Springer to conclude in one of his early publications about the visual arts that ‘art is by no means among the earliest living manifestations of human history, and it is even less present in the prehistoric condition of humanity’ (Kunsthistorische Briefe Die bildenden Künste in ihrer weltgeschichtlichen Entwicklung, Prague: Ehrlich 1857, second letter). As it has been remarked, Springer thus begins the history of art with the bel-étage: The seed leaf of a plant does not yet reveal its developed form.

It was the goal of expressing thoughts as clearly as possible in a visual medium and performing one’s task as well as can be done which drove the sculptors of the Parthenon pediment figures, even on the sides remaining hidden, and the same joy in creation for its own sake which animated the draftsman of the reindeer in Thayingen – if we are permitted to consider it original and not a forgery. There would have been a joy in form present in these earliest phases of development, and an interest in the objects only followed afterwards. This was the path leading to naturalism in art.

If we follow Von den Steinen and other observers on the art of indigenous peoples, then we must consider that the wide spread of art based on geometrical forms, with its apparently complete lack of naturalism, emerged in the same way. According to these observers, the images of surrounding objects became ever simpler in the course of repetition, and in ‘the fight for survival’ those that triumphed were technically simpler to make than their more complicated counterparts. This was a process which also led to our alphabets. Among the Karaja Indians of Brazil, the repeated depictions of triangles were not abstracted freely from a geometrical construct, but rather derived from the form of the female skirt. One should consult a passage from Von den Steinen (p. 268) which agrees almost completely. In an essay about the ornament among the peoples of the Pacific Ocean, Charles H. Read says the same thing: ‘The first promptings of art instinct are towards realistic delineations. These are perfected so far as the power of the artist will permit it, conventionalism becomes possible. This is more likely to occur, when the objects represented are in universal demand and have to be produced in large numbers. The artist would unconsciously lean toward a kind of generalization of
details which, by saving him time, would enable him to produce more, and naturally at a cheaper rate.\textsuperscript{14}

If we admit that the phenomena of geometric decoration originated along these lines, then the repetition, sequence and alterations of forms which generated the so-called Geometric Style, make it impossible to overlook a new aspect which we had not seen in the putative development from ‘visible words’ and a joy in imitation toward naturalism, and this is the appeal of rhythm and symmetry. This appears as something of a second source combining to create the stream that we only then give the name of art. Its ultimate reason is often seen as an instinctive sense which is inborn or developed at an early stage from the symmetry of the human body and apparent in the basic if not primal joy in decoration and particularly in the peculiar art of tattoos.

This might be true, but the development of art also includes a further didactic factor. This is the aspect of technology, tectonics and technique.

From this point of view, and under the influence of Gottfried Semper in particular, everything which had been said on the development of art as we have been using the term, persisted because of the influence of primitive tectonics. Even if tectonics is not the exclusive mother of art it is its foster mother. When a basket is braided, cloth woven, or a wall is made from bricks, a pattern emerges - as Semper has said - in much the same way as the bee’s head is repeatedly led to the hexagon of the beehive. Humanity goes beyond the animal world in adopting this realm of forms and, possibly due to an instinctive preparation, divorces it from its technical derivation and develops and applies variations on the originally used materials; baskets made from clay or metal for instance.

This process has also been acknowledged by observers of the art of indigenous peoples in our own time, so as to modify the one-sided theory that all geometric ornaments are simplified and degenerated illustrations. For instance, William H. Holmes concludes his study of Polynesian art forms with the sentence ‘all things considered, I regard it as highly probable that much of the geometric character exhibited in Polynesian decoration is due to textile dominance’, and in the book we have already mentioned, Grosse also devotes a typically precise discussion on this question, and is led to say that we might equally well claim that rhythmic articulation led to the appeal of rhythm as well as vice versa.\textsuperscript{15}

If we admit that there were two ways which led primitive art to use geometric motifs, and the first was more energetic in developing a style, then early European art can be said to have taken the other route.

What the populations of the caves in the Dordogne succeeded in doing seems to have disappeared without any trace of a further influence. In his substantial publication, ‘La sculpture en Europe avant les influences greco-romaines’, Salomon Reinach has recently shown that these are no more than

\textsuperscript{14} Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, vol. 21, London 1892, p. 142.

childlike beginnings running parallel to the early Italic and northern European bronze work of the time, which we are in the habit of calling the bronze age, a cohesive and rounded style within its limitations which still satisfies our developed sense of beauty even today. The monotony of its linear and three-dimensional world of forms remained completely alien to any use of plant forms, and it is remarkable that this involves a general rule of development since plant motifs also decline in the art of the non-European indigenous peoples. It reminds us of how comparatively late it was that landscape became a genre of modern art. Imagery of human figures and animals arose in the arts not in a naturalist vein but to the contrary schematic according to the dictates of the style, this being the so-called dipylon style in the south and in Irish ornament in the north.

In explaining the geometric style in Europe, it has not been possible to derive the forms from a simplification of living forms or other human paraphernalia as has been done for the geometric ornament of the Karaja Indians and other indigenous populations. Even if it should turn out to be possible, as has repeatedly been attempted, to discover such a source for an individual motif from the formal system such as the swastika, from what I can tell, this would still not affect the entire system of the forms. For all of their similarities, the overall character of geometric decoration among the indigenous populations of today and of the early Europeans are quite distinct. As Carthailac has said, apparently quoting Bertrand: ‘il n’est pas possible d’assimiler au hazard les sauvages modernes aux primitifs nos ancêtres. Les uns portaient en eux les espérances de l’humanité, le génie des autres est peut-être sur son déclin.’

Countless generations of early Europeans expressed their aesthetic needs in the field of the visual arts through the valueless formal harmonies of their geometric style, until they were incrementally drawn into the influence from a realm of more abundant artistic forms emanating from the eastern regions of the Mediterranean. Yet this did not cause their own artistic sensibilities to quickly evaporate as is happening in our own days when these cultures are exposed to the overwhelming influence of the developed cultures. Hippolyte Taine said that the Doric style ‘consisted of no more than two or three basic geometric forms’, and in Greece it might have arisen under the influence of the mood from the earlier geometric style. It is impossible to overlook, and I have never doubted that the primeval styles were tenacious in facing the advance of Greco-Roman art in northern Europe. After succumbing initially, the traditional local manner transformed the foreign forms and emerged again in the so-called Gothic style transfiguring the conflict of those two artistic worlds, and after the victory of the Renaissance, one might even see a final lingering trace in the Rococo. In a way related to the Gothic, Islamic art also broke through the Greco-Roman mantle and revealed ancient undercurrents. Such widely flung considerations could only be pursued if the world historical aspects of the general history of art could be demonstrated.