

Vincenc Kramář, 'Obituary of Franz Wickhoff'¹

translated and edited by Marta Filipová

Translator's introduction

Vincenc Kramář (1877-1960) was one of the first Czech art historians to have studied in Vienna. Between 1899 and 1901 he attended lectures by Franz Wickhoff, Alois Riegl and Julius Schlosser, and during this time he befriended Max Dvořák. Like his Viennese colleagues, Kramář's scholarly interests were far reaching and included research into the art of the Middle Ages, Baroque art, as well as nineteenth-century and modern painting, especially Cubism, which he promoted extensively in Bohemia and later in Czechoslovakia. His book *Kubismus* (1921) is believed to have been the first theoretical text on this topic written by an art historian.² Kramář also became an important collector of art from these periods and became a close associate of the French art collector and dealer Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, Alfred Flechtheim, the Berlin based art dealer and Carl Einstein, the German art historian and critic with whom he exchanged many letters and works of art. In 1919 Kramář was appointed director of the Picture Gallery in Prague, which eventually became the National Gallery.

Kramář's obituary is also the first attempt at a concise summary of the methodological and theoretical premises of both Wickhoff and Riegl, and the first document where these scholars are referred to as a 'School.' Dvořák complimented Kramář on his text in a letter to him: 'Your obituary of Wickhoff pleased me very much, it is the best that has yet been written. It is a shame that you never write anything for us, it is a sin against the Holy Ghost.'³ However, written in Czech, the obituary had little impact on contemporary scholars who did not speak the language.

Pondering over Wickhoff's legacy, which he saw mainly in terms of his influence on his students through his lectures and not in terms of his published work, Kramář focused on his teacher as well as on the entire school. Kramář identified the basic theoretical and methodological approaches associated with the School, which he saw in for example the attention to genetic links between artworks and the idea of the universal development of art or the 'objective' study of works of art. Naming Niebuhr and Theodor von Sickel as key influences on Wickhoff and Riegl, he firmly rooted the Vienna School in historical scholarship. It is notable, too, that Kramář emphasised Wickhoff's personal artistic preferences and the extent to

¹ First published as Vincenc Kramář, 'Franz Wickhoff,' *Volné směry*, 13, 1909, 211–214.

² See Vojtěch Lahoda, 'In the Mirror of Cubism', in *Vincenc Kramář. From Old Masters to Picasso*, ed. Vojtěch Lahoda, Prague: National Gallery, 2000, 24. Kramář's study was published as Vincenc Kramář, *Kubismus*, Brno: Moravsko-slezská revue, 1921.

³ Pavla Sadílková and Lada Hubatová-Vacková, 'Chronology', in *Vincenc Kramář. From Old Masters*, 219.

which they informed his work; this ran completely counter to the argument, famously put forward by Riegl and, before him, Thausing, that aesthetic taste should have no role in art history.

Marta Filipová works at the School of Art and Design at the University of Wolverhampton. Before receiving her PhD in art history from the University of Glasgow, she studied art history in Brno, Czech Republic. Her interests lie in the historiography of art history in Central Europe and the formation of national identity in modern art in the region. She has published essays and reviews on the topic in a number of books and journals, including the *Journal of Design History*, *Centropa*, the *RIHA Journal*. Currently, she is completing an edited volume on international exhibitions and world's fairs in geographic peripheries and is working on a monograph on Czech historiography of art history and art criticism before WWII.

Marta.Filipova@wlv.ac.uk

Franz Wickhoff

On 6 April, the Viennese Professor of the history of art, Franz Wickhoff (*1853) passed away in Venice. The deceased was born a man of considerable refined artistic taste who refused to be bound by period theories and who was open to all truly artistic impressions; he was a scholar of high intellect and, at the same time, an utterly temperamental individual. No wonder he greatly influenced the development of scholarship. He and his colleague, the recently deceased Prof. Alois Riegl (1858-1905), are the very founders of the Viennese art historical school that today occupies the leading place in the field. Although the School's early days can be seen in the work of Thausing and, to an extent, in that of Eitelberger, it was Wickhoff and Riegl who gave it a concise physiognomy. Because of them, Vienna became the centre of all progressive efforts that aimed at putting an end to dilettantism and superficiality that had been prominent in the study of the visual arts in the previous decades and that, in contrast to the exaggerated emphasis on iconography, facts and other secondary issues, put the main emphasis back on the intrinsic artistic content of the works. Individual attempts in this regard had already been carried out here and there a long time ago. Let me mention, for example, the ground-breaking discoveries of Giovanni Morelli, the writings of K. Fielder, Löwy, [[ulius] Lange, K[arl] Justi, Gurlitt, Wölfflin and others, but only Vienna turned them into a solid system. The latter is the only versatile progressive system of our times; at its heart is the effort to investigate artistic development in an objective way.

Wickhoff and Riegl set out with the goal of making art history a true historical science and in this regard, they followed the steps of the founder of our science, Baron Rumohr. It is of interest that in both cases the impulse came from the historical sciences: in Rumohr's time it was the influence of Niebuhr, in our times it was the results of the studies at the Institute for Austrian History, where, mainly thanks to Sickel, the method of historical work acquired an unprecedented degree of perfection. Thus Wickhoff and Riegl's intentions were that the modern historian of the visual arts should seek objective knowledge of artistic development, using the same historical method that had for decades governed other fields of historical research. The prerequisite for this, however, was that he should be able to free himself from all aesthetic and other theories of a particular period, which prevented an independent view of innumerable artistic phenomena and built a wall between the spectator and the work of art. But even this was not enough. It was necessary to suspend all aesthetic judgements in general, for such an approach was always subjective and cannot provide science with a firm basis. Wickhoff and Riegl replaced subjective aesthetic assessment with an objective and historic one, for which the decisive moment is the stage of development of the work of art. In so doing, they dealt a final blow to absolute aesthetic value in scholarship. A whole range of historic styles, which until now had been condemned and disregarded as a result of the influence of classical aesthetics, was recognized as valid, and the limitations on ideas of beauty vanished into oblivion. All that remained was art as a single phenomenon, and this was not realistic or idealistic, it was both, and the various forms it could take were inexhaustible. Alongside the decline of absolute

aesthetic value, a stop was made to materialism, a legacy of the eighteenth century, which distorted the relation to artistic work for almost the entire nineteenth century. In this, an autonomous intellectual activity reappeared with its own rules that can only be controlled by external influences to a certain degree. The old naïve theories of influence thereby lost their credibility and were rectified. We witness briefly an interesting phenomenon – in the same school that laid the foundations for the sober, objective study of works of art, a view of the nature of artistic creation achieved refinement that had hardly been seen before.

Evidently, the efforts of the Vienna School are, foremost, of a critical nature. The School seeks to commence with reliable material, on the basis of which it can proceed to other goals and that is why it pays such great attention to detailed questions. The geographical and historical origin of the work of art, its intrinsic artistic content, its internal and external influences and genetic connections or importance within the universal development of art are the main questions that the modern historian of art seeks to answer, while he is exhausting all possible historic and critical aids and uses psychological analysis to explain the mysteries of artistic creation. However, such detailed work, which is mostly analytical in character, is not what characterizes the Vienna School. It contains something monumental, it aims for synthesis, that is, a universal view of the history of art, and that is why it considers detailed monographs only as a preparation, however inevitable. Similarly, it does not consider any task resolved unless the position of the work in the universal development of art has been established. This indicates that in all work on monographs the Vienna School demands awareness of the general development of art and leads, in its highest ambition, towards establishing this continuous stream of artistic creation. And it is this combination of the great courses of development, in which the frontiers of countries and national differences disappeared and in ancient times shook hands with each other, that gave impulse for the fascination as well as aversion of circles outside the School, that is, German imperial circles in particular. In the history of art, we have already experienced critical and universalistic periods, but they were always one-sided. It is only the Vienna School that first synthesises these two viewpoints and this is where its historical importance rests. Given its attempt at being objective, it is understood that in all synthetic works it requires its material to be as complete as possible.

This rich, comprehensive system of studying fine art, briefly outlined here, which corresponds with the requirements of science as much as it tries discretely to penetrate the mystery of artistic work, is the work of Wickhoff and Riegl. The first books in which it was applied in all its extent, are Riegl's *Stilfragen* (1893) and Wickhoff's *Genesis* (1895); two ground-breaking works of art historical literature. However, what is probably even more important than all their texts is the fact that they founded a school that preserves their principles and that is acquiring ever more decisive influence on the development of art history. In this respect, lectures and seminars, through which these strong figures could affect their listeners, had much more significance. This was the case especially with Wickhoff and that is why in this posthumous recollection I tried to offer a comprehensive picture of his efforts and findings in his work rather than analyse his written texts. Whoever limited themselves to his books would in any case be doing him an injustice. Wickhoff has not written much. He was not one of those scholars for whom the study of art was a

mere opportunity to show their wit and who could write up extensively about completely disparate subjects with equal interest. For Wickhoff, being in touch with art was an inner need, as he was himself artistically inclined. The desire for artistic experience never gave his purely scientific interests the chance to dominate. Writing, in fact, and I mean publishing books here, was always secondary for Wickhoff and only a strong inner impulse and an unusual interest in a subject made his pen work. This also explains the freshness of his works, their elementary appeal and value.

His works can be divided into two categories, according to the two tendencies of the Vienna School, mentioned above, analytic-critical and synthetic. In the former group, one can find in particular treatises on Italian painting, which was his special subject – if the term special subject can be used in the case of such a universal taste – and in which he brought the experimental method devised by Morelli to a high degree of perfection. He could be proud that he was the first to lecture on the critical method of the Italian doctor and art connoisseur at a German university. However, to remain historically objective, we have to add that Wickhoff's predecessor, Thausing, was an earlier supporter, as well as a personal friend, of Morelli.

In the second group of texts by Wickhoff the *Vienna Genesis* stands out both for its scope and for its value. I shall discuss this book, which caused a true stir in academic circles, in more detail. The *Vienna Genesis* is, as is known, an early Christian illuminated manuscript in the royal library, and Wickhoff set himself the goal of explaining the style of its miniatures using the genetic method. What he presented was a true history of classical sculpture and painting and, regarding the latter, it was the first effort of this kind. We are, however, no longer content with the *Genesis* in many respects, but that also is to Wickhoff's credit. In particular, when comparing the *Genesis* with Riegl's *Stilfragen*, a history of ancient and early medieval ornament that nevertheless examined a much more accessible subject and was characterised by its complete objectivity and inductive method, one can see that the *Genesis* is not free of a certain dose of subjectivity and dogmatism and that it bears marks of materialism, absolute aesthetics and ahistoricism. For us, to oppose 'standardising' Oriental-Greek art and 'individualising' western Roman illusionism is an obsolete point of view; we do not see the various styles as the expression of races but as different developmental stages of the same art. The theory of autochthonism rules out any idea of overall development (Wickhoff admits that on page 11) and therefore jeopardizes the success of Wickhoff's work. Fortunately, in practical work his instinct was stronger than all his out-dated theories and thus the *Genesis* reached the same findings in the field of sculpture and painting as Riegl's book in the field of ornament: it recognized the uniform development of Classical and early Christian art. The books also share a wider view, which brings their broad perspective alive. The idea of a single universal artistic development became one of the founding ideas of the Vienna School. Viewed as a whole, all these deficiencies disappear in light of the positive value of Wickhoff's work. Moreover, when inspecting them more closely, they are an almost necessary, or at least, explicable foil of his merits. One should only remind oneself what Roman art had meant for archaeologists before Wickhoff's time or, partly even today! No more than the decline and decay of everything Greek; hence the neglect with which it was swept

aside. It was the foremost goal of Wickhoff's work to show its positive virtue and far-reaching significance for future development. It is no wonder that he tried to free Roman art from Greek influence as much as he could. And what more evidence could he provide for his thesis than showing the autochthonous Italian origins of Roman art on the basis of a principle that was so different from the Greek one? That is his theory of Etruscan illusionism and its highest form in Flavian art. Yet it is here that he went too far and created a rupture where there was none before. The *Genesis* is a radical book and as such it shares all the merits and faults of such works. It is one of the works of the nineteenth century that, for the spirit of its time, discovered the positive value of related artistic periods. Its author was an enthusiast for modern Impressionism and we understand well the archaeologist's hesitation when he finds the names of Velasquez and Manet in a book on classical art – fresh air entered the shrine accessible only to magicians. The *Genesis* is the great apotheosis of Impressionism to a point where it is to the detriment of other artistic styles (see especially p. 34). Such subjectivism is typical of the *Genesis*. Especially at the beginning, it is an artist who is speaking from its pages and it is only further along that the historian can be felt a little more. There is one lesson from this book: that a true step forward can only be made by the art historian who takes an active part in contemporary artistic development. And, there is one more reason why the *Genesis* is an illuminating document: the relationship between content and form. The book reads like a novel and there is no trace of any effort directed towards purposeless art criticism. The content or the subject of the book is what matters and they produce this remarkable whole while the means of expression are similarly important. In no place does one encounter those empty tasteless clichés that are, unfortunately, in fashion now. The language is simple, yet full of inner warmth and expression and appropriate. Wickhoff, of course, had read a lot and he especially respected Goethe, which is, in this case, certainly typical. However, his style cannot be accounted for by all of this literary interest or by any innate or acquired expressive techniques. The secret of this lively, simple, natural and, at the same time, excellent style lies most of all in the warm interest of the author in the subject matter and in its comprehensive inner organization.

The *Genesis* won its battle and now there is no doubt that Roman art can be an equal partner of the finest creations of the Greek genius. Yet it achieved much more if we leave aside the positive scholarly benefit that Augustan and Flavian art was first discovered and that a scholarly history of classical art was outlined here for the first time. There are also fundamental successes. Wickhoff was the first to show here with unusual fervour and conviction that classical art is *art* in the first place and that it should be understood as such. And that is his great legacy to the archaeologists. Secondly, the *Genesis* wiped out the artificial boundaries between archaeology and the history of art and today it is impossible for a rigorous historian of more recent art who has deep interests to omit in his studies classical art as a source of all that followed.

Recently, Wickhoff's writing was limited to reviews of literature for the critical journal *Kunstanzeigen* (from 1904), which were written under his name and

which were aimed at hitting dilettantism at its roots.⁴ His articles are characteristic of a great, sometimes a little too great, wit and their piercing irony gave rise to a lot of bad blood around the Empire. Reactionary forces even founded their own journal which followed tried and tested paths, but it did not take long for it to change content as well as course – that was one of the symptoms that proved the victorious advancement of the Vienna School's ideas.

I have shown that when compared to Riegl, Wickhoff was much more subjective, despite all his efforts at objectivity. Indeed, he was much more artistically inclined and often let his instincts guide him, whereas Riegl sought objective criteria. For Riegl's ideal was a historian without any personal taste. Wickhoff, however, was on surer ground with his own ideas, which often tempted Riegl, too. It is no wonder that Wickhoff had his own predilections. After all, even the most objective historian has them when he is in a direct contact with art. Wickhoff's favourites were the old Venetian masters as much as Goethe was his literary favourite. Venice was his dearest refuge after work and illness and it was fate's doing that he passed away here. Here, he rests near those masters that he loved so much.

⁴ Translator's note: this is probably a reference to the journal *Kunstgeschichtliche Anzeigen*, which Wickhoff founded in 1904.