

## Rethinking the geography of art history

Review of:

Jerzy Malinowski, ed., *History of Art History in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe*. Toruń, Society of Modern Art and Tako Publishing, 2012. 2 vols. 299 + 285 pp.

In September 2010 a remarkable conference was staged at the University of Toruń on the historiography of art of central and eastern Europe. The occasion of the conference was the bicentenary of the first lecture on the history of art at the University of Vilnius, which was delivered by Joseph Saunders, an English artist who was also professor of etching and the literature of the fine art. Although now the capital of Lithuania, Vilnius was historically an important city of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and in 1810, when Saunders delivered his lecture, Polish was the language of teaching at the University. Indeed, it remained so until 1945, when Vilnius became part of the Soviet Republic of Lithuania, and the University, together with its staff, was relocated to Poland and reconstituted as the University of Toruń.

The conference was therefore marking 200 years of a continuous tradition of Polish university teaching and scholarship in art history. As the title of the two-volume Proceedings might suggest, however, its focus was much broader than Poland. Speakers, which included the present author, addressed historiographic practices across a vast geographic range, from central Europe to central Asia, examining topics such as nationalism in the art history of Hungary, Bohemia, Ukraine, Latvia or Finland, the rise of intellectual centres of art historical discourse such as Cluj, Lvov, Tallinn, Moscow and Bucharest, or the art history of Islamic art in the Crimea, Poland, Turkey or Tatarstan.

This book is a timely reminder of the fact that study of the historiography of art has been provincial and myopic. Dazzled by the intellectual ambitions of the Austro-German tradition of art historical writing, historians of the discipline have shown little curiosity in examining contexts outside of the axis Hamburg – Berlin – Vienna.<sup>1</sup> Not until James Elkins published *Stories of Art* in 2002 and then *Is Art History Global?* was the idea of art history (as opposed to art) as a global practice taken seriously as an object of study.

There are some quite pragmatic reasons why this should be so. In part, it is due to linguistic obstacles. While knowledge of German, Italian, Spanish and French are run of the mill for most art historians, familiarity with major European

<sup>1</sup> There has been a growing literature in German on the topic, but in English almost nothing. See Robert Born, Alena Janatková and Adam Labuda, eds, *Die Kunsthistoriographien in Ostmitteleuropa und der nationale Diskurs*. Berlin: Gebrüder Mann, 2004.

languages such as Polish (with some 40 million speakers), Ukrainian (approximately 35 million speakers) or Russian (155 million speakers) remains exceptional, an 'exotic' curiosity, limited to a cadre of specialists. This is even more so in the case of languages such as Hungarian, Czech, the Baltic languages, Estonian, Finnish or Croatian. Consequently, the historiographic literature in these languages is entirely inaccessible; primary materials as well as more recent secondary studies, of which there has been a growing number, remain unknown.

This barrier is itself a reflection of ideological and political factors, of course. For all its rich literary, artistic and musical traditions, Poland, sandwiched between Russia and Germany, and non-existent for 150 years, is mostly a cultural *terra incognita* for anglophone readers, an ignorance that reflects its historic marginalization and the fact that from the eighteenth century Poland was dismissed as culturally and artistically insignificant. A similar story could be told of the other regions covered in this book.

This publication therefore has to be regarded as a major landmark, opening up new horizons of research and reminding us that there is more to the study of art historical writing than Panofsky, Riegl, Warburg, Wölfflin and their German-speaking peers. The question to be asked, therefore, is what it tells us. On the one hand, it becomes clear that the story of historiography in central and eastern Europe throws up parallels with that elsewhere. Long before the emergence of art history as a university discipline there were rich traditions of antiquarian and connoisseurial writing that have belatedly been recognized as intimately connected to the later practices of 'scientific' art historical discourse. Thus, Count Stanisław Kostka Potocki (1775-1821) was not only a generous benefactor of the arts, but also the author of numerous writings on the history of art, ranging from his diary of a journey to Italy in 1795-97 to a three-volume work *On the Art of the Ancients or the Polish Winckelmann* (1815) or the unpublished manuscript, *The Art of the Moderns*, on painting since the Renaissance. The creation of a public collection of prints and drawings at the Royal University of Warsaw in 1821 led to the publication, a year later, of *News on the Print Room* by Jan Feliks Piwarski, Secretary to the National Public Library, which sought to outline the aesthetics of graphic works of art and methods for studying them. Likewise, in Vilnius the architect Michał Szulc published a wide-ranging lecture delivered in 1801 on the history of architecture, *Mowa o Architektury* (Discourse on Architecture), which attempted to trace the continuous evolution of architecture from ancient Greece to the present and sought to underpin his own Neo-Classical architectural practice. In Croatia, the extensive classical remains, especially in Split, attracted the attention of antiquarians from across Europe including, famously, Robert Adam, but also gave rise to a home-grown tradition of antiquarian writing by now-forgotten figures such as Ivan Pavlović Lučić (author of *The Monuments of Makarska*, published in 1789, and *The Monuments of Trogir*, in 1811).

Art history emerged as a university discipline in central and eastern Europe at the same time as in Germany. It was introduced as a formal subject at the University of Kiev in 1869, while the historian Nikodim Kondakov was appointed to an assistant professorship in art history at the University of Odessa in 1870, being promoted to professor in 1876 and then, in 1888, taking up the chair in art history in St. Petersburg. Similarly, a chair of art history was set up at the University of

Cracow in 1882, only the third in Austria-Hungary, a further chair being established in Lemberg (L'viv) in 1893.

There were strong intellectual parallels and connections between central and eastern European art historians and those in France and Germany during the nineteenth century. Positivism was the dominant ideology. In part this reflected the political imperative driving much art historical research, namely, the perceived need to document and record an artistic and architectural heritage that risked being lost through neglect and ignorance. It also revealed, however, the influence of French and German notions of science; in art history the critical method pioneered in Berlin by Carl Friedrich von Rumohr and Gustav Waagen played a crucial role in this respect, and it is perhaps no coincidence that Marian Sokołowski, first professor of art history in Cracow and a highly influential figure in Polish art historiography, studied in Berlin. This methodological and conceptual engagement with German scholarship continued into the twentieth century. One of the most theoretically ambitious Polish art historians, Mieczysław Wallis (1895-1977), professor of art history at the University of Łódź and author of books on Secessionism and Self-Portraiture, studied with Wilhelm Windelband and Carl Neumann at Heidelberg, published a number of works on aesthetics in which he attempted to formulate a critical response to the influence of Neo-Kantianism. In certain respects he followed a parallel path to Panofsky or the representatives of the Second Vienna School, in which the historical study of art became intimately linked to questions of cognition and aesthetic experience, even though the solutions he arrived at were rather different.

For all that there were intercrossing paths of inquiry between the development of art history central and eastern Europe and that in Austria, Germany and France, the contributions to this volume make clear that there were significant differences, which reflected the divergent imperatives and distinct political, social and cultural situations. In many cases art history was intimately bound up with nationalist political agendas. This meant that they were often driven by an anxiety to assert national particularity in the face of the imperial regimes of Tsarist Russia and Austria-Hungary, although some of the papers in this book also examine the role played by art history in the carving out of a post-Ottoman national Turkish identity. Perhaps the best known examples examined are those in Poland, such as the invention of the Zakopane style by Stanisław Witkiewicz, which was accompanied by an extensive literature on the folk art of the highlanders of the Tatra mountains, or the creation of the 'Vistula-Baltic style,' where the historical study of Gothic architecture on Polish territories underpinned the resurrection of Neo-Gothic as an authentically 'Polish' architectural language.

Ethnography was also a central part of art historical discourse, and the study of folk art, particularly for cultures where there was no tradition of bourgeois or courtly high art, had a prominence that was absent in art historical literature elsewhere in Europe. Some of the examples examined in these volumes, including the treatment of folk art in nineteenth-century Hungary, Poland or Bohemia, are well known; others, however, are considerably less so, covering territories as wide-ranging as Ukraine, Tatarstan, Kazan or Siberia. As a number of the contributions highlight, although the folk art movement was a product of the late nineteenth century, folk art continued to be a central topic throughout the twentieth century.

Diverse regimes, including fascist, conservative nationalist and Communist, saw political advantage in supporting research into the subject. Tanja Zimmermann notes, for example, in a perceptive essay on Neo-Primitivism in Tito's Yugoslavia, the study of folk art and vernacular cultures was sponsored as a means of underpinning the myth of an indigenous national historic artistic culture precisely at the time that the government was trying to steer an ideological course that was independent of the two power blocs of the Soviet Union and American-led western Europe.

One consequence of the concern with articulating national identities was that much of the historiographical literature had a certain parochial quality. While there were exceptions, such as Jurgis Baltrušaitis, Jan Białostocki or Igor Grabar, whose wide-ranging intellectual interests secured for them an international audience, a majority of the authors examined in the conference were concerned almost exclusively with questions of national art, which was almost a guarantee that their work would be only of local or regional interest. In some cases they could be aggressively provincial; Coriolan Petranu, professor of art history at the University of Cluj between the Wars, built up his reputation as an advocate of Romanian art in Transylvania, contesting in particular any notion that the culture of the former principality had anything to do with that of Hungary. Petranu's aggressive stance even brought him into a pointless conflict with Béla Bartók over the national identity of the various melodies the composer used in his work.

The image of central and eastern European intellectuals as hopelessly entangled in the politics of nationalism has been tempered, however, by acknowledgement of the complex demography of Europe east of the Elbe. Ethnic, linguistic and confessional diversity was the norm; this is exemplified well in the case of Habsburg Galicia, with a mixed Jewish, Polish, and Ukrainians population, or Bukovina (in particular, the capital Cernowitz), its population made up of Ukrainians, Romanians, Jews, Germans and Hungarians. Each of these former Habsburg Crownlands has become a *lieu de mémoire*, with a growing literature celebrating their role as microcosms of Austria-Hungary.<sup>2</sup> However, although now culturally homogeneous, the population of Poland was once as diverse as Austria-Hungary, comprising Poles, Lithuanians, Tatars, Germans, Czech, Germans, Jews and Ukrainians. While many art historians were narrowly concerned with Polish art history, many, equally, sought to do justice to this complex cultural heritage. Hence, Poland produced its own body of research into the Islamic art of its former southern territories while, equally, the history of Jewish architecture was the subject of an extensive scholarly literature in Polish. Many of the authors concerned fell back onto familiar orientalisng tropes. In some cases, such as that of Julian Zachariewicz, historical studies were translated into architectural projects; in 1873 Zachariewicz designed the Czernowitz synagogue in a Moorish Revival style that was explicitly meant to communicate the 'oriental' character of the Jews. Such engagement with Jewish art and culture was shaped by the discursive limitations of the time, but

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Larry Wolff, *The Idea of Galicia. History and Fantasy in Habsburg Political Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012); Martin Pollack et al, *Mythos Czernowitz. Eine Stadt im Spiegel ihrer Nationalitäten* (Potsdam: Deutsches Kulturforum östliches Europe, 2005).

there was nevertheless a recognition of the confessional and cultural pluralism of the time.

Having stated that this is a landmark publication, it should be noted that it has significant weaknesses. The language of publication is English, but the quality of the English is highly variable. Some articles are so riddled with syntactic, lexical and grammatical errors that they are almost impossible to read. Some careful editing by a native speaker was an absolute necessity, and it is a pity that this has not happened. In addition, for all its admirable scope, the volumes would have benefitted from editorial selectivity. Every paper presented at the conference has been included, regardless of quality. This is unfortunate, because some of the contributions contain little that is new, or are too short to offer anything other than a superficial account, and they could have been omitted. However, the most noticeable weakness of the volume lies less in these editorial concerns and more in the approach that recurs throughout the contributions. Specifically, a significant number of the contributions limit themselves to positivistic documentation, listing authors and titles, with a minimum of interpretative analysis. In one sense this does not detract from the importance of this work, for it still undertakes the inestimable service of laying the groundwork and indicating the scope of the terrain to be traversed. At the same time, however, it represents a lost opportunity and also leaves important questions unanswered.

To indicate the nature of the problem, I shall mention just one example. The papers cover the period from the late eighteenth century up to the present, and thus cover historiography under the period of Communist rule. Yet there is no analysis of how art historians navigated the changing and complex ideological waters of the twentieth century. Most Anglophone readers still have a reified image of the impact of Communist rule on the practice of art history, and assume that, as with so many other areas of intellectual endeavour, art historical discourse had to adapt to the prevailing political conditions. Although the politics of art history in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are touched on, they are completely bypassed when it comes to more recent times. We learn, for example, that the Academy of Sciences in Moscow sponsored research into the Tatars in the 1930s, but how could this be reconciled with the fact that at the same time the Stalin regime was systematically persecuting the Tatars as enemies of the state? We are also informed that during the period of Soviet rule art history in the Caucasus republics was driven by nationalistic and factional rivalries. Armenians, Azeris and Georgians disputed the national affiliation of certain historic monuments, but how did this square with the official ideology that sought to suspend such national schisms?

At times, it appears that political events had little impact on the conduct of art historical scholarship, which seems difficult to believe given the intrusive nature of state control of university teaching and research by Communist regimes. Art historians did not have to toe the official party line, or parrot Leninist-Marxist doctrine, but there were other, more subtle, ways in which the state insinuated itself into the conduct of scholarship, affecting in particular the kinds of subjects that scholars investigated.

For all the problems of this book, it nevertheless has to be recognised as an important publication that offers a glimpse of topics of research that have hardly

been touched. As such, it has to be hoped that it will prepare the ground for probing, interpretative analyses.

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