

# Alois Riegl, 'Lovers of art, ancient and modern'

Translated with introduction by Karl Johns<sup>1</sup>

## Riegl as Lecturer

Alois Riegl (1858-1905) was the most influential of the Viennese art historians from the period when the discipline was being defined there as an academic subject. He should not require an introduction to the readers of these pages. Otto Pächt offered a very succinct explanation of his work to a previously unsympathetic English audience.<sup>2</sup> References he himself made to his own publications tell us that he considered it to have been his foremost achievement to have refuted the theories put forth by the followers of Gottfried Semper, who derived artistic forms from the material and techniques with which they were made. Riegl succeeded in demonstrating that one artistic form was based on another as the grounds of an autonomous history of art. A less forward looking aspect of his reflections was an interest in universal history which he shared with Wickhoff. This led him into subjects barely remembered today, but considering his lasting influence the entire work should be borne in mind and generalizations not be based on too narrow a selection.

Although his followers have been described as 'radical formalists', Riegl's relatively consistent approach was in fact comprehensive. A number of his essays address strictly iconographical subjects while others involve sociological aspects in the context of universal history. Although this has often been related to an influence from G. W. F. Hegel, he was in fact more interested in the rather different world view of Friedrich Nietzsche, and this is apparent in several of his more popular essays.<sup>3</sup>

His obscure manner of expressing his speculative ideas has always made it difficult to understand them properly. Ludwig Coellen and Walter Passarge misrepresented them as a 'psychological' explanation of art and the tangent taken

<sup>1</sup> Originally held as a lecture and only posthumously published as 'Über antike und moderne Kunstfreunde Vortrag gehalten in der Gesellschaft der Wiener Kunstfreunde,' *Kunstgeschichtliches Jahrbuch der K. K. Zentral-Kommission zur Erforschung und Erhaltung der kunst- und historischen Denkmale*, Volume 1, 1907, Beiblatt für Denkmalpflege, column 1-14, reprinted in Alois Riegl, *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, Augsburg Vienna: Filser, 1929, 194-206.

<sup>2</sup> Otto Pächt, 'Art Historians and Art Critics, VI: Alois Riegl,' *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 105, no. 722, May 1963, pp. 188-193, reprinted Otto Pächt, *Methodisches zur kunsthistorischen Praxis*, Munich: Prestel, 1977, 141-152, 310.

<sup>3</sup> Diana Reynolds Cordileone, *Alois Riegl in Vienna 1875-1905: An Institutional Biography*, Studies in Art Historiography, Farnham: Ashgate, 2013.

up by Wilhelm Worringer was recognized and immediately reviewed as such.<sup>4</sup> Riegl's famous concept of *Kunstwollen* was even misinterpreted with a national or racial connotation in lectures published during the 1930's by Karl Maria Swoboda, himself an editor responsible for popularizing Riegl's writings since 1929.<sup>5</sup> Guido Kaschnitz and Otto Pächt may be considered as examples of critical and insightful scholars whose lectures and essays have endorsed Riegl and continued his approach.

Since obstacles to an understanding of Riegl obviously persist even beyond English-speaking areas, it seems worth recalling that in spite of his inscrutable way of expressing himself, his inconclusiveness and frequent mistakes in dating monuments among other things, he was efficacious as a teacher. The practical application of his particular idealist approach is probably best seen in the book reviews published by his students, primarily in the *Kunstgeschichtliche Anzeigen*. Aside from the fact that much of the best surviving work of Max Dvořák and Hans Tietze is to be found among those reviews, Georg Sobotka, Oskar Pollak, Adalbert Birnbaum and other devoted students left evidence of Riegl's teachings in the criticisms they levelled in those pages against the publications of the time.

While the great works such as the *Spätromische Kunstindustrie* suffered from empirical and other lapses which the author did not survive to emend, his lectures at the university must have inspired a greater seriousness of study which cannot be gleaned from his published work alone.<sup>6</sup> The present lecture about art lovers ancient and modern shows his typical speculative nature as it was geared to a broader audience outside the walls of academia.

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<sup>4</sup> Ludwig Coellen, *Über die Methode der Kunstgeschichte Eine geschichtsphilosophische Untersuchung*, Traisa-Darmstadt: Arkadenverlag, 1924, Walter Passarge, *Die Philosophie der Kunstgeschichte in der Gegenwart*, Berlin: Junker und Dünnhaupt, 1930, Wilhelm Worringer, *Formprobleme der Gotik*, Munich: Piper, 1912.

<sup>5</sup> Swoboda's publications are listed in: 'Verzeichnis der Veröffentlichungen Karl M. Swobodas' Karl M. Swoboda, *Kunst und Geschichte Vorträge und Aufsätze*, Vienna Cologne Graz: Böhlau, 1969, *Mitteilungen des Instituts für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung*, suppl. vol. 22, 258-265.

<sup>6</sup> The most circumspect sympathetic criticism was written by Kaschnitz: Guido Kaschnitz, 'Alois Riegl: *Spätromische Kunstindustrie* Rezension,' *Gnomon*, vol. 5, no. 4-5, 1929, 195-213, reprinted Guido Kaschnitz von Weinberg, *Ausgewählte Schriften*, vol. 1, *Kleine Schriften zur Struktur*, Berlin: Gebrüder Mann, 1965, 1-14. Josef Bodonyi, *Entstehung und Bedeutung des Goldgrundes in der spätantiken Bildkomposition*, diss, Univ. of Vienna, 1932 includes a very well considered critique of Riegl's approach. An English edition has been prepared and will hopefully appear without too great a delay.

Alois Riegl, 'Über antike und moderne Kunstfreunde Vortrag gehalten in der Gesellschaft der Wiener Kunstfreunde' — translation

Our organizations and clubs are among the most striking phenomena of modern life. What is the reason for this, and what is the nature of this compulsion? The answer is that there is a community of interest. A group of people arrive at the same activity and consider it profitable to pursue the same goal together. Yet something else is also involved. When a group of individuals unite in a purpose, they strive to improve not merely themselves, but also the whole, and by dividing the labour in one manner or another they fulfil a given need on behalf of the others. Bare egotism can never become a principle of society. It is true that there are some societies apparently espousing it in a superficial way, but they must also contain some inner necessity – otherwise they could never function properly. This would be intolerable to the totality which they jeopardize and never promote.

It would seem at first glance that nothing could be more private and egotistic than the art lover, and it would appear particularly true when they also collect art – although in our own time the two no longer necessarily go together since we have public collections. They collect exclusively according to their own personal preferences and for their own pleasure. As a social matter, they might allow a circle of friends to partake of their activity. Although there are some who make their collections available to larger segments of the public, they are the exception and such opportunities are rare. Such exhibitions are not among the defining characteristics of the art lover.

Now the art lovers have banded together, and this requires no further demonstration because otherwise I would not be honoured to speak to this gathering today. Yet the very fact that the lovers of art join together in this way is itself a sign that they consider their activities to be profitable for all of society. The social functions must have a particular significance for them, and in the present cultural situation they must fulfil a certain mission. What is the nature of this mission? It strikes me that the time has now come to pose this question and to propose an answer. Whether I have been successful or not is for you to decide, but I nonetheless beg the indulgence normally reserved for such unprecedented forays.

First there is the preliminary question of what actually is a lover of art? This would literally refer to any of us with a favourable relation to the visual arts, yet this would be to cast the net too broadly. There are for instance many factory workers who attend popular lectures about art and undoubtedly demonstrate a love of art, but they would not be counted among the art lovers. The general principle normally applied to questions surrounding the visual arts is that of supply and demand, production and consumption, the separation of productive artists from the consuming laymen. This principle also fails in regard to the art lover since the group

present this evening includes both artists and laymen. It is not the production which interests the art lover since this would eliminate the laymen, but neither is it the consumption in the current sense of our modern art since there would then be no artists in our presence here anymore than grocers would come to a food co-op. What is typical of the art lovers and draws them together into such organizations is therefore neither the production nor the consumption (that is to say the pleasure in modern art), but rather a third factor. When we peruse the list of previous lectures held before this society there can be doubt as to the identity of this third factor.

These lectures have been exclusively devoted to what we call earlier art, art that is not modern. If we apply the phrase 'art lover' as a strict technical term, then this can only refer to an admirer of the art of earlier periods. What thus defines the art lover is an aspect of consumption, a consideration of old masters and not of modern art, and this is also the reason that practicing artists, modern by definition, are also among us here today in their capacity as consumers of art.

The question immediately arises as to the relation of the art lover to modern art. To address this now would only complicate and confuse the development of our actual subject. This is unnecessary and I therefore content myself for the moment with observing that art lovers are in fact generally not at all averse to modern art. We can say this seeing that our present group also includes a number of modern artists who would certainly not compromise their own livelihood. This is a relationship we must return to later on.

It follows that the mission of art lovers is a consistent appreciation of older works as they have come down to us, and not of modern art. The question we must consider is the extent to which the art lovers are fulfilling a public interest in their mission.

As our thinking is organized today, it is only possible to arrive at a convincing answer on the basis of historical data. Have there not been other times in history when art lovers like those of the present also thrived, and what were their circumstances? These circumstances themselves might provide a key to clearly recognizing the imperatives followed by our current art lovers either consciously or not. Similar conditions produce similar effects.

From our place at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century we can observe a considerable number of art lovers extending back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century. If we go back in time and examine the phenomenon more closely, it becomes clear that the art lovers to varying degrees admired the work of their own as well as earlier times. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Lorenzo the Magnificent was familiar with only the art of the Florentine Renaissance and antiquity. In Germany in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the great collectors such as the Fugger were more patrons of contemporary art than admirers of earlier art. This had changed somewhat by the time of the Emperor Rudolph II., and in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, we already discover a much finer distinction. We can now recognize that a stricter differentiation arose toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which honours the art of earlier periods as a temple constructed as an end in itself and no model for us, and then more or less accepts the art of its own time as an

unavoidable craft being produced at the moment. The art lovers from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries appear as the mere predecessors of their modern descendants, with no difference in either quality or quantity. As interesting as it would be to study them, it would not help us in our question, since they are ultimately alike and would not provide the substance for a fruitful comparison. We must consider the patrons and collectors who have no direct connection to those of today, and also the distinct historical circumstances in which they arose. If it should turn out that they nonetheless bear comparison to those among our contemporaries, then this will confirm what we believe. Were there such art lovers further beyond the medieval period? Yes indeed, they did exist. For some time now we have been aware of them and of the characteristics which they share with their descendants of today. They existed in the early period of Christianity and their activities reach an apogee in the first and second centuries of the Roman imperial period, between Augustus and the last of the Antonines. There were also others in the final centuries before the advent of Christianity. This is of interest to us both in terms of the origins as well as the decline of this phenomenon – although the decline can obviously not be studied in comparison to the art lovers among us today.

I must limit myself to just a few details from the lives and proclivities of these ancient lovers of art which might serve to illustrate their similarities and differences to those of the present.

In the plan designed by Vitruvius for the house of a well-situated man of the period of Augustus, there is a room to be used as a picture gallery, while there are also sculpture galleries documented in other sources. Works in metal were particularly popular because they could be used as ceremonial dishes. Silver and bronze objects are mentioned with great frequency, particularly the so-called Corinthian bronzes. Yet never in all of this is there any reference to a contemporary piece. Most of these objects were associated with names from the archaic and classical period of Greek art. Among the sculptors, Polyclitus, Myron and Phidias are mentioned most often, while it is Polygnotus and Apelles among the painters. Quintilian was struck by the fact that some people considered the old fashioned work of Polygnotus to be more valuable than the paintings of Apelles, and declared this to be the result of a sort of coquetry among connoisseurs as we can also see it occurring today. Works in silver with rubbed and worn details were also valued more highly since they were considered to be older than objects in better condition which made the impression of being more recent.

Of course an art market becomes the unavoidable ancillary phenomenon to such things. Most of these objects could only reach these Roman collectors through dealers from Greece and the Greek east. Their names are only preserved in very few instances, but Horace has left us with a vivid description. Aside from this there were also agents, two of whom were employed by Verres, Greeks who were referred to as his tracker hounds.

An inevitable consequence of the art market are forgeries, and there are many references to them. It is clear that copies were being made and sold without

misgivings, yet the copies were often being associated with the names of the greatest earlier artists. Phaedrus, the author of fables, has recorded an interesting remark about such forgeries when he says that 'In our own time, gnawing envy favours what is old rather than what is good.' Specific tributes to the work of contemporaries are very rarely recorded in that period. It recalls many artists in our own time who also cannot understand why their own work is not appreciated and purchased at the same prices as older items, and who consider the same sort of envy to be the reason.

It is difficult to conceive of an art lover without a certain knowledge or connoisseurship of the older artefacts. Of course there are many references to such connoisseurship, and then as now, there were many degrees of such connoisseurship, ranging from the authentic and well-founded to the completely spurious.

Dionysus of Halicarnassus defined the duties of connoisseurship very cleverly – it exists to determine the authorship and to reliably distinguish originals from copies. Most of the art lovers of that time were confident of their ability to do this. Their confidence often had very little justification and aroused the ridicule of poets and authors. These dubious connoisseurs were recognizable by the way in which they spoke mostly of the monetary value and technical aspects, with the material almost never being omitted from mention. They bandied catchwords about which are still recognizable today: a strong cast, mixed bronze, contours, application of color, shading, proportions and so forth. There were some who claimed to discern the compound of the bronze by smell, and I have still experienced such things myself. It was already remarked at that time, that there was so much said about the age, rarity, the material and previous owner with famous names – and nothing about the absolute aesthetic value. Collectors were attracted by the name of a famous artist and a high price. Petronius has given us a delightful description of Trimalchio, a socialite with newly acquired wealth and presenting himself as a lover of art.

We should not overlook that these were particularly notable as examples of excessiveness, and that the authors were more inclined to record sensationalism and exaggeration. Beneath all of this there was nonetheless also a core of justifiable activity which exemplified a characteristic and earnest aspect of ancient cultural life. Historians have recognized this and proposed their own explanations. Key passages among the 1<sup>st</sup> century texts of Pliny and Petronius have been collected in this regard containing criticism of contemporary art and praise of older Greek examples. This has led some to conclude that the collectors of the time recognized the superiority of the early classical period over the later decline, and considered them to have therefore turned their attention exclusively to the earlier art. Yet this interpretation has been shown to be incorrect.

First of all, there was no less interest in art during the earlier Roman imperial period than at any other time. Among the remains of Pompeii we have evidence from that very time for the role of the visual arts in the daily life of the Romans and

Greeks. It applies not merely to the official and cultural life, but also to the intimate private surroundings, independent of all artificial exaggerations and outward pomp. It is well known that that city excavated from the ash has revealed to us an aesthetic sense which seems to have been unprecedented in any of the earlier periods of human history. Within the houses of Pompeii, from the decoration of the walls themselves down to the patterned perforations of the colander in the kitchen, every surface and object available to the wandering eye was required to bear a certain characteristic stamp of artistic treatment. Are we to seriously believe that this society immersed itself aesthetically as no other, but was indifferent or even rejected the art of its own time? This would be inconceivable.

One can imagine that the art lover would have recognized a great difference between the art of the classical period and all of these marvels of the Roman imperial age – much in the way that people from Winckelmann until recently considered Roman art to be nothing better than a series of copies after classical models, progressively duller and weaker as time wore on. A close study of the monuments from the time of Augustus into that of the Antonines has revealed that they relate to the classical period in approximately the same way as our contemporary painting does to the Renaissance. A development could be discerned which extended from Phidias and Polygnotus through the Alexandrian artists and the period of the Diadochs into the first two centuries of the Roman imperial period and beyond. The art of the Roman imperial period has been compared to that of our own time. Professor Wickhoff in Vienna, who has done pioneering work in illuminating this relationship, has even gone so far as to directly describe this art as Impressionism, not claiming of course that it could ever be confused with our modern variant. This does indeed offer us an enlightening parallel. There have been two periods in human history in which the creation of art was governed by so-called impressionistic principles – at the beginning of the Roman Imperial period and in our own modern times. In both of these periods, we are confronted with the phenomenon of the art lovers, enthusiastic in their appreciation and admiration of the art of earlier periods. – Just as modern art continues to develop inexorably beside and in spite of all this excitement over older art, so too must it have occurred during the Roman imperial period. Those things which were to be seen every day were considered inevitable and not worth special reference. Yet the enthusiasm of a group of nobles or wealthy citizens was a new and unprecedented phenomenon (although an attentive examination of the artistic monuments in their content and extrinsic functions would show that these conditions emerged slowly over a long period during antiquity). This is the reason that it is referred to so often in the literary remains of the time.

And thus the emergence of what is called Impressionism in art has historically gone hand in hand with the appearance of art lovers as admirers of earlier art on the basis of its age alone. An obvious conclusion suggests itself: there must have been something about Impressionism which arouses an interest in earlier

periods of art in a portion of society influential by its number and education. What is the essence of Impressionism?

I have already mentioned that Impressionism is considered a certain trend of modern art which on not strictly solid grounds can be compared to a parallel in ancient art. For this reason I would like to pinpoint those qualities which modern Impressionism shares with the analogous stage of ancient art. This is a certain quality of optic subjectivism. – Fear not that I might assault you with some aesthetic hair splitting. On the contrary, I hope to be able to explain myself in very few words.

All of the objects of the world, as the arts of man depict them, share two common characteristics: 1. those which are properties of the object whether or not they are contemplated by a human being (these are the objective qualities), 2. those which a human subject at a given moment perceives about them (these are the subjective qualities). There will always be some, but not all, of the objective aspects among them, but then consistently those, such as the illumination, which can never be objective. – We describe an art as objective when its goal is to reproduce the objective qualities of things. On the other hand, we describe an art as subjective when it fundamentally seeks to reproduce the momentary image of things as it appears on the retina of the individual viewer.

The qualities of objects are defined by the stimuli with which it affects the individual perceiving them. These stimuli are of two kinds: 1. purely optical – qualities of colour, which stimulate nothing other than the eye. 2. the so-called tactile stimuli, these are the bodily qualities of the objects and their limits in space, as they stimulate the sense of touch in the individual viewer, while remaining discernible to the eye at a distance. – An art depicting the objects purely in terms of colour is described as optical, while that demonstrating the corporeal qualities above all is described as tactile.

It should be simple to understand what optical subjectivism is. It is an art depicting the objects as momentary stimuli of colour, the stimuli experienced by a single viewer. Anybody with a knowledge of modern art will understand this without difficulty.

As we have said, this optical subjectivism is present in the art of the Roman imperial period as well as in modern art. There are however certain differences between the two, which at present I can do no more than to point out. Like the art of all of antiquity, that of the Roman Imperial period was fundamentally geared to objectivism. This art became relatively subjectivist only when it undertook to depict the optical qualities of things in place of the tactile which had been preferred by the earlier arts of Asia Minor and classical Greece. This is due to the fact that the purely optical stimuli of colour are by nature more fugitive and subjective than the extension and limitation of the sense of touch. In the dark, the objects lose their visibility but retain their tactile accessibility. Medieval art, which gave rise to that of the modern period, became far more subjectivist, but, since its goal was above all a clear delineation of things, it must still be seen as relatively objectivist. The actual

common factor between the art of the Roman imperial period and modern art lies in the exclusive consideration and escalation of the optical, coloristic qualities of things.

We arrive at the final decisive question: how does optical subjectivism succeed in arousing interest in ancient art, indeed imperiously provoking it?

The quality of optical subjectivism is an extreme randomness in treating those objects which the artist wishes to depict. It is random to limit consideration to the optical qualities of colour and to suppress physicality, by which we mean the contours of height and breadth, as well as the shadow suggesting extension into space. It is also random to shrewdly isolate the most momentary and fugitive visual aspects, such as coincidental foreshortening and illumination. Finally, and essentially, it is random to transfigure the appearance of objects, not merely physically, but also colouristically, reducing the material phenomenon to a simple means of arousing subjective moods.

The naïve joy in the appearance of things as such, and that desire which the use of our senses of touch and sight awakens in us – as it has been a fundamental aspect of artistic pleasure through millennia – is here forcefully suppressed, exterminated for no other reason than entertaining our faculty of thought and feeling.

The art lover's contemplation of earlier artistic – not modern – periods relates to our modern randomness in a double way. First, this occurs positively and in agreement. When we contemplate an old picture, we see more than its appearance to the senses, but it also has an effect on our feelings and creates a mood by its mere age and this exclusively intellectual aspect. In and of itself, this would be nothing new: 16<sup>th</sup>-century painters already began including ancient temples in their work in order to arouse memories in their viewers of a life that was long past. Seventeenth-century paintings of ruins were made with the same intention. These differ from our present modern times in that no particularly selected motif is any longer necessary, and that the image of a simple eighteenth-century domestic house suffices to arouse a mood in the spectator, and all the more so if the painting has the outward signs of having been made in the eighteenth-century.

In its effect of conjuring a mood, our contemporary art lovers' contemplation of earlier art coincides directly with the modern artistic goals of optical subjectivism.

There is another aspect however, in which the affectionate interest in earlier art directly contradicts the goals of modern art. The older art specifically displays those qualities which are being suppressed from modern art: tangible corporeality and local colour ('*festhaftende Farbe*'). In this sense, the admiration of older art presents itself as a flight into the realm of relative constancy, fixity and quietude, and away from the randomness in which everything is shown as flowing up and down into infinity and intangibility. Whether it occurs consciously or not, this strikes me as the truly beneficial and fruitful mission of the art lover.

There can be no doubt that the universal development of history displays a trend toward the emancipation of intellectual functions from corporeality – this can

be seen quite stringently in the development of the history of art, as well as in the history of religion with the development of ethics in politics and social life. This trend has always halted before the complete negation of corporeality, since the spiritual phenomena would themselves become inconceivable without a corporeal substratum. And thus two souls live within our breasts: the one which exults in the joys of our physical world and its appearance is in danger of being short-changed by the trends of modern art. Whoever takes pleasure in the physical appearances, definite forms and movements, full and composed colour, and recognizable effects of light and shadow, they will necessarily desert the modern exhibitions and seek refuge in the older galleries or private houses of our great art collectors.

I beg not to be misunderstood. Far be it from me to cavil about the development of modern art. Art historians have long ago recognized that it is not their task to prescribe – as Winckelmann once did – what contemporary artists should be doing. I am also convinced that art will by itself develop away from such extremes, and symptoms of this are already revealing themselves. Can it be a coincidence that an artist such as Jan Toorop, who sees the object of his work most purely in terms of mood, lends outward forms to these things, whose models are derived from Egyptian art – that form of art standing in the strongest conceivable contrast to our modern optical-subjectivist mode with the starkest tactile objectivism. How else can we explain that the line, that basic tactile element, assumes such an important place precisely in modern decoration, other than by the instinctive aspiration of our artists to balance an extreme randomness on the one hand with an equally extreme severity on the other.

If this tendency can be recognized among modern artists to render objects with firmer contours and not allow them to dissolve, how much simpler can it be to understand the same attitude among laymen who for the same reason have immersed themselves in the contemplation of older art. The interest in earlier art is the same interest that wishes to preserve modern art and all of the visual arts generally.

Allow me to voice a single objection and consider its value. It is common to hear it said that collectors of modern art desire nothing more than to smugly flaunt their wealth. This need not even involve braggadocio – the idea is that it satisfies such people to be aware that they are surrounded by precious objects that have cost preposterously high prices. There can be no denying that such a feeling of satisfaction in possession is to some degree present in collectors, yet it always goes hand in hand with that refined ideal which I have found to be the actual mission of the art lover. This is like human ideals: none of them could thrive without at least a modicum of material defectiveness, selfishness or egotism. Some observers are only able to recognize these defects. Whoever studies the matter thoroughly will soon conclude that even a person confessing with cynical candour that they collect solely to satisfy their egotism also serve a higher ideal in the public interest whether intentionally or not – they are also fulfilling the ideal mission of the love of art.