

Riegl and 'objective aesthetics'

Karl Johns

Alois Riegl is well known to the readers of the present journal for having provided the basis of an art-historical approach independent of the other historical disciplines and of pseudo-science. Readers today often have difficulties in understanding his prose, sometimes considering this to be universal, and at times he is even declaring him to have been intentionally obscure. In fact, he wrote fairly clearly to his contemporaries of the 1850's and simply requires the attentiveness he himself observed in art and life.

Riegl himself once used the metaphor of an architectural edifice for historical constructs, and the present review must be admitted to be one of the smaller bricks in his own scheme, but offers a glimpse into a number of his preoccupations. It discusses a popular French publication about art and was written toward the end of his short life – close in time to the publications of his best-known and most celebrated work. It is not particularly opaque in any way, appeared in one of the most widely read daily newspapers in Europe of the time, and conjures up many of Riegl's favorite topics.¹ It reminds us how superficial much of the writing of the time was, it evokes the magic term objectivity, refers to philosophical materialism as a thing of the past and shows Riegl's tendency to conceive grand polarities at work in the minutest of phenomena. Here as elsewhere, his adulation of Greek art evokes a potential contradiction to much else in his writings. He ends with the national styles or tendencies and with his conception of ripe moments causing shifts in the preference of one style over another, something like a solo within a piece of music while the other instruments politely recede in volume. He refers to the relation of academic art to nature, and to that of religion to science. He touches on his key idea of 'Stimmung' or 'mood' as a central element in later 19th-century art being viewed at greater distances and providing a reason for the predominance of painting in his time – it is a genre not close to his own specialization and treated far more curtly than the others in his *Spätrömische Kunstindustrie* which was published just a number of months earlier.²

¹ Even in a relatively remote corner of Europe just a few years later, Elias Canetti recalled his father being consumed by the pages of the *Neue Freie Presse*. 'It was a great moment when he began to unfold the pages. As soon as he began reading he would no longer recognize me, I knew that he would not answer at all, and my mother also did not ask anything of him, not even in German.' Elias Canetti, *Die gerettete Zunge. Geschichte einer Jugend*, Munich: Hanser, 1977, 42.

² 'Stimmung' became an important conception to Riegl in his view of 19th century developments. While he brought it up frequently, he discussed it most thoroughly in his essay, 'Die Stimmung als Inhalt der modernen Kunst,' *Die graphischen Künste*, vol. 22, 1899, 47-56 and reprinted in Alois Riegl, *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, Augsburg: Filser, 1929, 28-39. This

He stresses the question of movement and emotion which had come to the fore in the studies of baroque art from his last years, and had provided a persistent problem to theorists before him.³ Movement had been an element in Riegl's analysis from an early date, but since his work centred on ornament and he considered the human form and iconographical questions to distract from the more important problems of the historical analysis of art it has not become apparent to many of his readers.⁴ Although his grander generalizations are not always convincing, even in such a short review written for popular consumption, Riegl manages to evoke an unusually rich array of questions with an originality that is rare and still striking today.

Karl Johns completed his doctorate in the history of art at the Fogg Art Museum, and has worked with the Dallas Museum of Art, the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe in Hamburg, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, among others. His publications have centred on the art of the Netherlands in the early modern period and the earlier Viennese art historians.

KarlTJohns@aol.com

Alois Riegl, 'Objective aesthetics'⁵

Even those who would deny that contemporaries can form an unprejudiced opinion of modern art will be forced to tentatively admit that it is of great historical importance, since this art for the first time in quite a while sees its role as not merely filling the empty spaces on the walls of the rich, but also in fulfilling a general aesthetic need of humanity. Of course the original goal of modern art was nominally no different than any other artistic trend since the renaissance – re-establishing contact with nature. Although this has barely been underway for twenty-five years, voices are already being heard calling for a return to nature. In the light of recent art, such as the work of Toorop, those who define nature as the average quality in the appearance of things, as we know it from experience, will not be surprised by

concept has been best discussed in its context by Margaret R. Olin, *Alois Riegl and the Crisis of Representation in Art Theory 1860-1905*, Diss. University of Chicago, 1982, 408-420.

³ A good bibliography and discussion of the rhetorical aspect of movement and emotion in art theory is offered by Norbert Michels, *Bewegung zwischen Ethos und Pathos. Zur Wirkungsästhetik italienischer Kunsttheorie des 15. und 16. Jahrhunderts*, Münster: Lit, 1988.

⁴ The illusion of movement is an element not limited to Riegl's later studies of the baroque, but is already present in his consideration of the Persian silver bowls in the main section of his short book, *Ein orientalischer Teppich vom Jahre 1202 und die ältesten orientalischen Teppiche*, Berlin: Siemens, 1895, particularly 20.

⁵ [Originally published as 'Objective Ästhetik,' *Neue Freie Presse*, No. 13608, Morning Edition, Sunday, July 13, 1902, 'Literatur-Blatt,' 34-35, translated and edited by Karl Johns.]

such demands. Some will be amazed and wonder how nature can revert to such a pure form of unnaturalness within such a short time of being gained. But appearance is well founded since it is based in our ambivalent conception of nature, those things which the visual arts represent or reproduce. On the one hand, we still live with the traditional idea that the things in the world exist completely independent of us and therefore appear as objects before the contemplative subject. In its most purely naïve form, this is a view that only existed in the ancient Orient. The ancient Greeks already recognized that there is a subjective element in the untenable appearance of things which is not a property of the objects but is introduced into the equation by the subject. In suppressing these random and completely relative subjective ingredients in the work of art, the Greeks succeeded in creating an expression of the human figure in statues more generally valid and objectively true than the living human being themselves. The relation of the objective to the subjective aspects in the appearance of objects and its gradual shifts of emphasis has dominated the entire development of the visual arts until the present day. The development itself has generally consisted of a continuous increase in the subjective element, meaning that nature was increasingly sought less in independent objectivity and more in a subjectivity conditioned by the viewer. What is to date the furthest extreme of this, the most unmitigated subjectivity, is logically to be found in the latest phase of the development – in the most modern art. From the outset, its greatest goal has, similarly to the Japanese, been to translate the objects of nature with stimulating colour and evocations of mood. It is an intention embodying an advanced state of subjectivity. At first the artists were keen to offer a sort of compensation by considering common experience in their choice of colours and observing certain limits. It soon became clear that this limited objectivity inhibited the achievement of heightened moods (the innately subjective element of artistic value) and was then to such a degree displaced by pure subjectivity to the point that today the depiction of natural objects in art has no more than the most basic elements common with the qualities of experience in reality, such as the number and location of body parts for instance. Artists follow their inner urge and are of course completely within their rights and duties, but today there are none who can decide with any certainty whether the people of our time are generally ready for such extreme subjectivity. In any case, there still are many who would not like to forego a certain trace of generally valid objectivity in outward appearances, and for this reason at least, voices have slowly made themselves heard to assert that there is a nature existing objectively and there should accordingly also be an objective aesthetic.

It is in this context that a book recently published by Paul Richer, a French physician known for his studies in anatomy and physiology of art, deserves the greatest attention.⁶ It is a book intended to present no more than an introduction to a future series of special studies projected to deal with the human figure, but in fact contains the entire program for a new aesthetic and vivid propaganda for its

⁶ Paul M. L. P. Richer, *Introduction à l'étude de la figure humaine*, Paris: Gaultier Magnier, 1902.

application. It is first of all striking that the exterior of the human body is again considered worthy of study in and of itself, while the subjective trend is inclined to assess all objects of nature as of equal value and in some cases even avoids the human form since it always tends to assert an objective dominance on its surroundings. For this reason landscape in the broadest sense for a certain amount of time dominated modern painting by far, and if this seems to be changing, then it could also be a symptom of an imminent reversal. Richer believes that the human figure should again become the central point of emphasis exactly as it had been in antiquity, the renaissance and baroque art of the Mediterranean cultures. Richer has also quite properly recognized that the one-sided account of psychological subjectivity is responsible for the present state which he laments. Instead of this, Richer endorses a return to the consideration of physicality, the only aspect available to the senses and therefore the only objective aspect of humanity with the ultimate goal of balancing the two factors in the sense of *mens sana in corpore sano* [a sound mind in a sound body] as it had already been adopted in antiquity and among the moderns by Rubens, a romanized Fleming. While a German professor of the history of art has recently put forth the idea in a two volume book that the character of art involves a conscious self-delusion, Richer tells us that the visual arts in no way strive for deception or illusion (Täuschung), but seek nothing more than to depict real life and only accept mere appearances when it is unavoidable, such as when representing freely moving living figures.⁷ Richer therefore believes that there is in fact an objective aesthetic, certainly with generally valid limits which the visual arts must necessarily respect. Yet who should provide the artists with the reliable information as to where these limits are to be found? Richer responds that this is to be done by the sciences, more particularly the natural sciences which after all also include the study of the human figure from the exterior.

Richer sees all the future good fortune for the visual arts as relying on a close association with the sciences. He declares the widely held idea of an unbridgeable gulf between the two as an insanity originating in and propagated by prejudice. He shrewdly points out that the great fruitful scientific ideas such as those of Galileo or Newton came about in the very same intuitive way that brought about the great works of art. While religion was called on to explain the world aptly and authoritatively throughout the visual arts in ages of faith, in modern art, the sciences must perform the same task now that it has assumed the same position of a primary cultural force. The only question is how the visual arts should maintain their creative freedom and the artist their individual capacity for originality when they are inhibited by the unbending rules of science. Richer's answer to this question is the most important and decisive sentence in his entire book. He says that the outward appearance of the human body reveals such a boundless variety to the attentive observer that the artist cannot possibly evoke them all in their work and is

⁷ [Konrad Lange, *Die bewusste Selbsttäuschung als Kern des künstlerischen Genusses*, Leipzig: Veit, 1895; Lange, *Vom Wesen der Kunst Grundzüge einer realistischen Kunstlehre*, Berlin: Grote, 1901.]

forced to choose among them, and that this free choice of a very few from an endless number of objectively present signs of life is the basis of their subjective freedom. There is a boundless supply of possible combinations, but the more apt and certain the artist is in their choice, the more convincing and vivid will be their effect.

This leads the French physician to consider the precise scientific observation of detail to be a condition of all healthy and conscientious artistic creation, and since this can be taught like all subjects of objective knowledge, the author advocates that beginning artists be instructed in various sciences. We might even be misled to believe that behind a mask of suggested reforms for the future, we are here being shown nothing more than a reactionary return to an earlier period of art we had believed to be obsolete. Yet this would be mistaken, and it is only necessary to read Richer's image of artistic anatomy to recognize its difference to what was being done in earlier art academies. We need but to see how he develops a physiology of art and considers a morphology of the human figure borne equally by art and science to be a task still facing us. And we can only conclude that his book deserves to be considered modern in the full sense of the term.

It is another question entirely whether his proclaimed aesthetic of the future will gain a general and unconditioned acceptance among the culturally productive nations, and we are more likely to be doubtful. It is too one-sided and too much in the mode of thought and point of view specific to a physician and to the French tradition. In a time when there is so much talk of the 'failed sciences,' we can only sympathize with his warm enthusiasm for the successes of science. Although our processes of thought have still not been explained mechanistically as the materialists promised us fifty years ago, the 'century of the natural sciences' has nonetheless accrued a number of achievements. The one-sidedness of a physician is based on a certain overestimation of the scientific observation of details surrounding the human body as opposed to the phenomena reflecting our emotional lives. One example can clarify this essential flaw in Richer's objective aesthetic.

In choosing quite a drastic example of the benefits of modern science and its means to art, we are told that time-lapse photography has recently led to the recognition that the depiction of human figures running and horses galloping since the renaissance is physiologically impossible and does not reflect reality whatsoever. Yet it cannot be denied that the effect of the traditional images is far more vivid than if the act of running had been shown more as it actually occurs. Richer believes that the earlier artists for this reason used their poetic license to depict a heightened movement of flight rather than a measured run. In this matter, the modern artist must follow the physiological truth of nature just as the unsurpassed artistic culture of the Greeks depicted a run as such, and not as flight. While it is based on details observed entirely correctly, the defect of this entire argument of Richer is that he explains the shortcoming in the depiction of running by flight being used as a poetic surrogate for the state of running. It was actually dictated by the intention to simultaneously show a physical movement and its internal emotional impulse, something which all of baroque art understood perfectly. When the Greeks of the classical period correctly depicted the movement of running exactly as such, this

was because they considered the driving impulse behind it to be something all too subjective, and saw no fundamental reason to distort the purely physical aspect with a subjective element.

In this instance Richer, as a physician, has overlooked the significance of the emotional aspect in the artistic history of the earlier periods, and he seems not to have properly considered its impelling force for the development of future art. This new form of objective aesthetics might appeal to the heirs of classical art, the Latin cultures, and particularly the French. They have always assumed the conservative role of finding a measured balance between the emotional and physical expression in a work of art. It brought them the disadvantage of not producing any outstanding greatness, but then also the benefit of a steady quality in artistic production. Yet even in those quarters where Richer's doctrines will not find fertile soil, they might have a certain beneficial effect and promise fruitful developments in the future, simply by posing a conscious opposition to the neo-idealistic trend. All living developments in the visual arts are based on the opposition between eastern, antique, Latin conceptions on the one hand and Indo-Germanic trends on the other, and if we read the signs correctly we might in the near future and after satisfying ourselves with English and Scandinavian art, be facing a period in which the Latin element will flourish.