

Scholarship and Empire

Review of:

Matthew Rampley, *The Vienna School of Art History: Empire and the Politics of Scholarship, 1847-1918*, University Park: Penn State Press, 2013, 296 pp., \$89.95 hdbk, ISBN 9780271061580.

The Habsburg monarchy administered a great empire encompassing a variety of countries, among them Austria, Hungary, Bohemia, Galicia, and Dalmatia. Its subjects spoke a medley of languages besides German, among them Czech, Croatian, Polish, Slovene, Hungarian, Romanian, Slovak and Ruthenian. Vienna, its hub, also housed an important school of art history. Matthew Rampley's important new book, *The Vienna School of Art History: Empire and the Politics of Art Historical Scholarship, 1847-1918*, places the scholarship of the first period of the famed school amidst the political and cultural contexts of the empire.

The book owes a great deal to Carl Schorske's well-known study of the failure of liberalism in Viennese culture, whose time frame it shares.¹ Yet because of its focus on a particular field, *The Vienna School of Art History* offers a new perspective through which scholarship is viewed as an empire on its own. The administrators of this scholarly realm presided in universities, museums and monument commissions, and contended with the same issues of language and identity that absorbed the functionaries of the Habsburg Empire itself. At the same time, the scholars needed to take into account the ideologies and demands of those same Habsburg functionaries, because they controlled appointments and the finances for positions and scholarly projects.

The huge cast of characters includes many art historians, both the well known, such as Franz Wickhoff, Alois Riegl and Max Dvorak, and the lesser known Czech and Polish art historians working in their own centres such as Izador Kršnavi in Zagreb and Marian Sokolowski in Cracow, but also officials like Albert Ilg, the architect and polemicist Camillo Sitte, museum director Jacob von Falke and many more. Some of the best passages concern the careers of historical actors. In the early years of the Vienna school, for example, Rudolf Eitelberger von Edelberg had to tread a thin line between his early liberal activism and the established imperial ideology he followed in his scholarship.²

The book shows how art historians spoke in coded ways about the present and carved out positions about the empire and nationalism through their utterances

¹ Carl Schorske, *Fin-de-siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture*, New York: Knopf, 1979.

² Although Rampley identifies him as Rudolf von Eitelberger throughout his book, in his book *Kunsthistorische Schriften* and elsewhere, he is identified as R(udolf) Eitelberger von Edelberg.

on baroque and folk art, modern art and historical preservation. The argument has a deeper significance for the conflict over identity, fought with, and over, visual signifiers, where possession of a visual signifier can stand for the claim to territory. In the fin-de-siècle case, the baroque style stood for imperial identity, while Neo-Renaissance expressed German identity. Elsewhere, these styles might be harnessed for other meanings. Sometimes, as the author points out, a national style might admit only folk art, and reject the great art historical styles. In the latter case the issue that must be faced is whether folk art does or does not itself stem from the great art historical styles. Time itself in the form of new materials such as iron, as Rampley argues, might also have a role in stylistically-imagined identity.

The project addresses difficult intellectual-historical challenges. 'Nation' is a tricky word to define in an empire. Political and geographical definitions must be adjudicated, as well as ones based on culture, that are opposed to those based on ethnicity. In different contexts, Rampley spells out the consequences of most of these ambiguities while providing a workable survey of the progress of art historical institutionalization in Vienna and the different art historical centres of the Hapsburg Empire.

Along the way he discusses the theoretical and practical precursors of the school. As in earlier intellectual historical treatments of the Vienna School, it is necessary here to explain the role of positivism, and the school's quarrels with and adaptations of Kantian and Hegelian ideas and processes (14-21). While the connection between theoretical and political issues can sometimes seem vague, in places the author illuminates it with skill, most effectively in an account of the ways in which, under the flag of 'science', local nationalisms can be overlooked in favor of an overarching (read 'imperializing') narrative (84). Rampley provides a fascinating discussion of the twenty-four-volume work known as the 'Kronprinzenwerk', a multi-volume cultural account of the empire, with substantial sections on art history (84-5). The work began in 1887 and continued until 1902. Alois Riegl's *Spätromische Kunstindustrie* deserves to be placed in the same category of ambitious imperial projects. Perhaps the most illuminating discussion of the metaphoric relation between scholarship and political expression happens here, in a discussion of censorship. It is well known that art was used as a proxy for political beliefs, even concerning censorship itself. A review by 'W.' of the Winter Exhibition of new design published in 1897 in *Die Neue Freie Presse* during a period of albeit relaxed censorship in Vienna, argued that above all ornamented chairs, the modest and unornamented and not very beautiful 'American editorial chair' was the most comfortable, because 'one can, in a relaxed sitting position, write an editorial for or against the government.'³ Such a circumvention of censorship in order to speak one's political mind when it would otherwise be forbidden comes, however, as a surprise when the protagonist is Prince Rudolf. Suffering under restrictions similar to those that constrained the reviewer in the *Neue Freie Presse*, the prince used the

³ W. 'Alles Englisch', *Die Neue Freie Presse*, 24 November 1897.

production of the large study as a way to engage in 'debates over the identity of the Empire' (84).

The consequences of the politics of nationalism in different parts of the empire for art historical surveys of those regions are also interestingly spelled out. These differed in different places in the empire, even in different Slavic districts. 'Ruthenia', for example, is an entity much mentioned in art historical texts of the Vienna School, whereas the term appears only rarely among inhabitants of the area, who were more likely to regard themselves as Polish. The regional identity of Dalmatia, meanwhile, did not inspire the creation of a specific 'Dalmatian' identity. Discussions about the art of that area were more likely to evince the conflict between a south Slavic identity and an Italian identity favoured in his survey by Rudolf Eitelberger, founder of the Vienna school (23).

The book raises far-reaching questions. How much pressure was placed on art historians to toe the imperial line of benign multiculturalism under a German-speaking majority? When did they mouth necessary platitudes and when did they freely express their own views? Did Alois Riegl internalize imperial points of view when collecting textile samples throughout the empire during his tenure as textile curator at the Museum of Art and Industry? Rampley teases out latent contradictions in Riegl's theories of monument preservation in an interesting and often convincing argument, especially when it comes to the art-historical content of his notion of age-value. Age value, Rampley argues, is not merely an ethical position, as most writers usually emphasize, but also itself an art historical position (205). But did Riegl's eventual advocacy of a system for listing monuments that are important 'for their artistic qualities' suggest an honest change of mind from his original position in favour of a radical equality of monuments, a contradiction, a compromise founded on practicality, or a capitulation to power (204)?

Rampley deals with issues such as naturalism and realism in general terms. Missing, however, is a sense of what art historians see when they analyze a monument with national and imperial perceptions in mind. One might be justified in wondering, reading the book, whether art historians just read the labels on the works: Renaissance, baroque. But the argument also might lead one to postulate that an art bearing such a label might begin to look more Bohemian, less German, more of a hybrid, or universal. If so, then it is possible to question how and whether art historians analyze works to make these visual transformations possible. How do these analyses in turn affect what we see when we look at these monuments? Is it still possible to see them through imperial or anti-imperial eyes? Rampley looks elsewhere, and justifiably does not see this kind of perceptual analysis as his job. Indeed, his avoidance of this point of view makes it possible to show, convincingly for me, that Wickhoff's defense of Gustav Klimt in the famous controversy over Klimt's ill-fated commission for three of four paintings on the ceiling of the University's Aula, was also a defence of the empire. Some of the participants in this debate, including the professors who opposed the paintings, specifically related

form to thought, a fact that masks the political underpinnings of their artistic preferences.

The project of relating form to thought is, however, a desideratum. The discussion of Alois Riegl's exploration of the concept of *Stimmung* (unaccountably translated as 'ambience' and in my opinion misidentified as an early formulation of his theory of 'attentiveness') seems curiously empty in isolation from the commitment to form that stimulated Riegl to develop the concept. Among the topics that the book introduces that would be of interest to explore in this regard are the shared artistic preferences and positions by people opposed ideologically, such as Josef Strzygowski and Aby Warburg, both of whom supported the paintings of Arnold Böcklin as well as Hugo Lederer's 1906 Bismarck memorial in Hamburg (161, 5). The intersection of their artistic tastes might make it appear that the label 'modern art' was a 'kind of floating signifier' (165). Indeed, it is a mark of the assumed relation between art historical positions and identity that the writings of the anti-Semitic Strzygowski once inspired a young Jewish scholar to inquire of Martin Buber some twenty years after Strzygowski's death whether Strzygowski was Jewish.⁴ It would be interesting to ask whether the political associations Warburg and Strzygowski attached to the artistic styles they both appreciated might have created filters through which these works appeared very different to the two scholars.

Some unexpected affinities and differences between artistic judgments might be illuminated by analyses of the stylistic ideas of the protagonists. It is difficult to make a connection between the Hapsburg imperial creed and the details of Wickhoff's understanding of Impressionism in the Vienna Genesis without comprehending the ideas that connected, and distinguished, for example, the appearance and philosophy of German Impressionism based on perceptual theory from those of French Impressionism based on more philosophical ideas of subjectivity. The slippage and conflict between these two notions of Impressionism come to the fore in the discourse about certain Impressionists whose identity was at stake, especially Max Liebermann, a painter from an old German Jewish family who was often accused of masquerading as 'French.'

Another issue raised by the book is the lurking notion of a 'purely art historical study', for which designation, perhaps unsurprisingly, none of the studies discussed qualifies, even though some of them, such as Eitelberger's study of Dalmatia, ostensibly might (23). Is it accurate, however, to describe in good conscience any art historical study as 'pure'? Perhaps the problem is that art history is itself a nationalistic project, having grown up with nationalism in the nineteenth century. Furthermore, even were nationalism to disappear from the earth, art historians would continue to speak from one or more positions, although not from all of them at once. Is there a non-political position? To discuss art history in

⁴ See Margaret Olin, *The Nation without Art: Examining Modern Discourses in Jewish Art*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002, 152.

Bohemia, the choice is to turn toward a national Slavic narrative or toward a celebration of diversity (94). Either, as Rampley shows so clearly, involves a political choice. Is there a non-political choice in the early twentieth century in Central Europe? For that matter, is there a non-political choice in the early twenty-first century on a global stage, once one is committed to a geo-political understanding of art history? Would we want such a choice?

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