

The Persistence of Nationalism

Review of:

Michela Passini, *La fabrique de l'art national: Le nationalisme et les origines de l'histoire de l'art en France et en Allemagne 1870-1933*. Paris, Maisons des sciences de l'homme, 2012, €48.00, xx + 333 pp., ISBN-10: 2735114392
ISBN-13: 978-2735114399

It has long been recognised that nationalism was central to the formation of art history as a modern academic discipline. The fact that the profession of art historian established itself at the same time as the popularization of nationalist ideals was more than a mere historical coincidence. The two were structurally linked, for art history was, to use an old Althusserian term, an ideological apparatus of the state. Not only were modern universities founded as part of the modernisation drive of emerging nation states in the nineteenth century, in addition, institutes and departments of art history were established in order to promote the study of national artistic schools and traditions. In so doing, they helped create the imagined community of the nation and thereby bound artistic scholarship to the interests of the state. Consequently, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed a proliferation of national histories of art.

This is a well known narrative, but while it has been explored in outline, it has seldom been analysed in depth. This important book provides what has been missing: a substantial study of the uses of nationalist ideologies in French and German art history writing and, crucially, the ways that they were contested.

Focusing on the period from 1870 to 1933, which also coincided with the rise of the German Reich, its transformation into the Weimar Republic and then replacement by the rule of Hitler, this volume examines a number of topics: the idea of the Renaissance in France, the relation of France and Germany to Renaissance art, the meaning of Gothic, the so-called 'Primitives' of the fifteenth century. The work of many of the German writers discussed, such as Heinrich Wölfflin, Henry Thode, Georg Dehio or Wilhelm Worringer, is well known, and the book's contribution here consists less in offering new insights and rather more in gathering discussion of them together in a single coherent treatment. Where it does break new ground is in its sustained analysis of French art historians, such as Louis Courajod, Louis Dimier, Eugène Müntz, Henri Bouchot or Henri Focillon. In comparison with the extensive scholarship on Austro-German tradition of historiography, France remains, in many respects, an undiscovered country, and this book begins to make good that lack.

Identity is produced through difference, and as this book points out with admirable clarity, much the same could be said of the construction of national artistic traditions, in which German and French art came to be defined in opposition to each other. The best known example of this remains the interminable debates

around 'ownership' of the Gothic. The association of medieval art and architecture with the Germans dated back to Vasari and, thanks to Goethe and the Romantics, had been reiterated in the early 1800s. Yet by the mid-nineteenth century it had become recognised that Gothic architecture had originated in France; even authors such as Anton Springer had rejected the theory of the German origins of the style. Yet, as Passini demonstrates, such was the political and psychological investment in the idea of it being an expression of the German spirit, that a range of theories were put forward that sought to maintain the notion. Wilhelm Worringer's *Problems of Form in Gothic* (1911) held tenaciously onto the notion that its essential spirit was German, while Kurt Gerstenberg, acknowledging its French origins, held that the Germans had made it their own and developed it into specifically German forms, resulting in the German 'Sondergotik' or 'special Gothic' of the late Middle Ages. An older contemporary, Georg Dehio, saw the Germanness of Gothic in the fact that it was the precursor of Baroque art, which was the true embodiment of the northern German spirit.

With his notion of the Gothicising Baroque ('gotisierendes Barock') Dehio attempted not only to contest the exclusive French claim to Gothic, but also to disrupt the emerging orthodoxy that saw Baroque as the logical successor to Italian Renaissance art. As such we are reminded that French and German art historians defined national traditions not only in opposition to each other, but also in opposition to Italy. Attention has mostly focused on the writings of German authors, but French art historians frequently articulated equally nationalistic views and promoted a similarly partisan image of art history. Louis Courajod (1841-1896), for example, proclaimed that the roots of the Renaissance lay in thirteenth-century French art; according to this account Italy was a latecomer to transformations in aesthetic sensibility that had first been visible in French sculpture of the thirteenth century. Likewise, numerous lesser known figures, including Léon Palustre (1838-1894), Marius Vachon (1850-1928) and Henri Delaborde (1811-1899), became embroiled in a pointless debate about the Frenchness of the School of Fontainebleau. For some it constituted the French counterpart to the Italian Renaissance and was celebrated as such, while for others it constituted the irruption of decadent Italian artistic and cultural values, with the painter Francesco Primaticcio, one of its leading figures employed by Francis I, singled out for particular moral censure. In response to the 'discovery' of the early Netherlandish 'primitives' at the turn of the century, Henri Bouchot (1849-1906), working at the bibliothèque nationale, organized a large scale exhibition at the Louvre in 1904 of 'Primitifs Français' that sought to demonstrate that France, too, had had its own flowering of late medieval and early Renaissance painting that had made its own decisive contribution to European art. Even more substantial art historians such as Henri Focillon were not immune to this nationalistic ideology; his *Art of the West* (1938) published at the very end of the period covered in this book, was essentially an apologia for French civilisation. As Passini notes (p. 231) 'when Focillon was thinking of Western Europe, the intellectual and symbolic centre of his idea of the "West" remained France.'

Such ideas were contested. The Renaissance scholar Eugène Müntz (1845-1920), at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris, distanced himself from attempts to nationalise the Renaissance, and his extensive engagement with German-language literature led some in France to doubt his loyalty. Likewise Aby Warburg, who cited

Müntz approvingly, emphasised the transnational circulation of artists and artistic ideas between France, Flanders and Italy. But they were often marginal voices.

This book provides a valuable source of material, even if some of the episodes relating to the German authors are already familiar, but it remains curiously inconclusive. The currents analysed here culminated, Passini argues, in the CIHA conference of 1933 in Stockholm, when the concept of national art was the central theme. But this raises more questions rather than bringing the discussion to a conclusion.

Published by the Deutsches Forum für Kunstgeschichte, a joint Franco-German initiative based in Paris, comparative study of France and Germany is perhaps an inevitable aspect of the research. What is not quite clear from this volume is what such comparative study is intended to achieve. Although the book lays out admirably the ways in which the interests of German and French scholars converged or came into conflict with each other, it nevertheless presents a series of parallel stories, rather than a history of intertwined practices.

The mutual suspicion of many German and French art historians is strongly in evidence, and it is common knowledge that this was fuelled by political events, from the Prussian humiliation of the French army at Sedan to the invasion of the France by the imperial German military in August 1914. But it might have been helpful to have a clearer sense of the ways in which art historical writing was immersed in this wider political context. A chapter on the impact of the Great War and the mutual recriminations over war damage to important historic monuments is the closest the book comes to such a desideratum. Otherwise, the book runs the danger of offering an outline of politically charged writings by numerous art historians but without any political analysis.

One might ask: was there something distinctive about the Franco-German situation? The depressing story of nationalism's hold on art history is one that could be recounted in relation to every part of Europe, and there were clear parallels with art historical practices elsewhere. The genealogical coupling of Gothic and Baroque which Dehio tied to the German national spirit was repeated elsewhere in central Europe; the Czech art historian Vojtěch Birnbaum (1877-1934), for example, used the term 'Baroque Gothic' ('barokní gotika') in relation to what he regarded as a specifically *Czech* treatment of late Gothic art. This was a polemical response to Dehio's own thesis, but the fact that Czechs and Germans could have the same kinds of disputes over 'ownership' of late Gothic as German and French art historians did over Gothic or Renaissance art reminds us of the wider pattern into which the French and German cases fitted. This is alluded to in the final chapter of this book, but a more expansive critical treatment would have been helpful or indeed a discussion of the particularities of the Franco-German case.

Finally, since so much of the formation of the sense of German and French national artistic culture was dependent on the negotiation of the differences and similarities to Italian art, what did Italian art historians think of this appropriation of their art as a foil? It would have been interesting to learn what Adolfo Venturi thought of French claims to the priority of France as ancestor of the Renaissance, given that Venturi was at the same time engaged in production of a massive history of Italian art. Such requests for more should not detract, however, from what is a

valuable addition to the historiographic literature that casts light on the some of more inglorious moments in the development of the discipline.

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