

The Pinch of Expressionism in Art History

Review of:

Kimberly A. Smith, ed., *The Expressionist Turn in Art History*, Farnham, Surrey, and Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2014, 374 pp., 35 ill. b/w, £75.00, ISBN: 978-1-4094-4999-7

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There is no more common, and probably no more useful, art historical superstition than the hunch that whatever disparate phenomena appear around the same time (be they artworks, philosophies, wars, or styles of dancing) have something in common. This is useful because, even if wrong, such connections often illuminate by force of contrast. More embarrassing is the *success* of such operations: no one will any longer accept an explanation in terms of *Zeitgeist*, style, source, *Kunstwollen*, episteme, turns of the dialectic, and other collective generalizations – at least, no one outside one’s own camp. More recent attempts, like Michael Baxandall’s ‘cognitive style’, wore their dustiness on their sleeve, convincing only where charming similarities could be found, and not through any grand explanation of the similarity.

Be that as it may, one term in the historicist vocabulary seems to have evaded our suspicion: the ‘turn’. The first, and most famous, a ‘Linguistic Turn’, gave the rather tendentious title to a mid-century anthology in the philosophy of language edited by Richard Rorty. An iconic turn was thereafter declared in art history (to roll back the linguistic one), and haptic, auditory, performative, and enactive turns have tumbled over one another, cheerfully proclaiming the primacy of some sole favoured approach, whether in a specialized field like cognitive science (the enactive turn) or all the humanities (the enactive turn again).

The volume under review fortunately does not suffer from such partisan myopia, since neither editor Kimberly Smith nor any of the living contributors (many of whom provide not just interesting introductions but also translations of allegedly expressionist art historians) believe that we are or should be expressionist art historians. Indeed, they seem to be agreed that the phenomenon of a critical (and more questionably, historical) expressionism lasted hardly more than two decades, and affected primarily Germany, Austria and Switzerland. But like other contemporary users of ‘turn’ rhetoric, Smith seems convinced that once we swallow the term, we can enjoy a relatively smooth empirical ride, for the world took an expressionist turn, apparently, and though we don’t know precisely why, or in which direction the influence (another nasty old historicist term) flowed, there is no doubt that art prose shared some of the emphatic, pathos-laden, Germanic (at times to the point of bigotry) tone of expressionist painting, especially in the decade immediately before and after the Great War. Then one met opening sentences like those of Wilhelm Worringer’s *Altdeutsche Buchillustration* of 1912:

The German is not born with a naïve sensuality of the eye, but must instead acquire it. He is too strongly interested in what is essential to record things with impartial sight. And if he is an artist, then he tends to express what things are, instead of representing them.¹

Such crude jingoism makes one wonder not just whether forgotten expressionist historians need rediscovering, but even whether famous ones like Worringer shouldn't be forgotten. But of course most of us reading such an author today are not joining a debate on methodology, but treating the author as a kind of exotic historical beast, perhaps one that will cast indirect light on Ludwig Kirchner or Emil Nolde. And at times reading on does pay: Worringer's second sentence already suggests an interesting contrast between the essential and the objective that, however misguided, might throw light on larger range of modern art and thinking than the expressionist label would suggest. The third sentence applies this broad claim to art and artists, and already our sought-after term, expression, makes its entrance.

Readers expecting to find a theoretical history of expressionism via its art-historical personnel will be disappointed. Benedetto Croce, whose aesthetic theory of expression underwrote much interesting argument about art from Julius von Schlosser to Clement Greenberg, makes at most intermittent appearances in the notes; the same goes for empathy theorists like Theodor Lipps and Theodor Vischer (though the sparse index, which omits reference to the endnotes, is no guide in tracking sources). But that is really not the point of the collection: unlike the influential Getty volume of translations on empathy theory, and Chris Wood's reader of *The Vienna School*, Smith's book makes no claims to reclamation (or critique) of a founding moment of art history: rather, the book aims to estrange these venerable traditions, and its heart consists in texts by two obscure Germans (Fritz Burger and Ernst Heidrich), juxtaposed with canonical (Heinrich Wölfflin, Worringer) and nearly-canonical (Max Dvořák, Carl Einstein) figures.²

The ratio of unfamiliar to familiar is then not overwhelming, and that of translated material to critical essay is likewise less than generous: in the case of three authors, there is one critical essay and just one translation. We are given rather familiar texts by Wölfflin at least. His late (1933) reply to critics of his *Kunsthistorische Grundbegriffe*, though absent from the old Dover *Principles of Art History*, is going to be included in the new translation (ed. Evonne Levy and Tristan Weddigen, 2015), and besides is far less a 'revision' than the English word suggests: in German, 'Revision' just means 'look back', and the author is neither bold in amending his formalism, nor does this fragment of the thirties have much to do with expressionism. The reader would have been better served by a translation of

¹ Wilhelm Worringer, 'Introduction to *Old German Book Illustration* (1912)', translated by Heather Mathews, with Kathleen Chapman, in Smith (ed.), *The Expressionist Turn in Art History*, 81.

² These claims apply of course only to English-speakers: in Vienna, Dvořák is as famous as Wölfflin, and Worringer and Einstein are suspect. The authors constantly advance such canonical considerations, but given that obscurity afflicts such remarkable historians as Émile Mâle or Arthur Kingsley Porter (whose names are known, but who are read only by specialists), overwrought worrying that, e.g., 'a prominent German historian of the teens is now hardly read' betrays a Teutonic chauvinism in English-language art historiography.

his first submission to the philosophical magazine *Logos*, the 1913 article 'Über den Begriff des Malerischen' [On the concept of the painterly] which diverges interestingly from the first chapter of the *Grundbegriffe*, and possesses a freshness in the way it runs its concept roughshod over various media that is likely to have been infectious to artists (as Wölfflin boasted of the 1915 book).

Besides the 'revision', there is Wölfflin's 1922 *Logos* contribution, 'Italy and the German Sense of Form', which despite being familiar in book form (1931; the 1958 English ed. is censoriously titled *The Sense of Form in Art: An Introduction to the Italian Renaissance*), serves the editor and translators well as a test case of failed aesthetic diplomacy, Wölfflin's delicate investigations of Italian form North of the Alps being offset by a fateful 'two ways of seeing' approach that has been kept alive above all by Svetlana Alpers' *Art of Describing*. The essay on Wölfflin, by Michela Pasini and Francesca Peri, is a careful, precise reconstruction of two senses of the word expression, labelled in dry analytic style as expression₁ and expression₂, the former of which signifies intentional communication of a content (expressing a thought) and the latter, the elusive bringing to the surface of things hidden (expressing the 'temper of an age', p.242). The results of applying these rubrics to Wölfflin's writings make nice sense where sceptics like Gombrich often saw just windy rhetoric; the authors don't paper over Wölfflin's German nationalism, not at all an inevitability for a Swiss national, but not all that uncommon either.³

The character of the other essays varies in scope, from Hans Aurenhammer's and Charles Haxthausen's assured, broadly historical placements of Dvořák and Einstein respectively, to the understandably more apologetic and expository introductions to Burger and Heidrich by Elena Filippi and Eveliina Juntunen. One can see why their authors were forgotten: Burger compares the canonical Cézanne with Hodler before getting to their synthesis in Franz Marc, which will not change any reader's mind today, but is obviously of historical interest for the marriage of German art history with then-contemporary art. Heidrich's Germanic philippics against Italian form and in favour of German colour, meanwhile, must have embarrassed the more nuanced and ecumenical Wölfflinians. But Heidrich can also surprise: in discussing Rubens' *Massacre of the Innocents* and other tragic pictures (178-9), he acknowledges the Counter-Reformation background of his themes and beliefs, but insists that 'Rubens' elementary worldview...the full feeling for life which, perpetually welling up as a unity, cannot be destroyed' is what makes these pictures powerful. Corny but true! Rubens is in this sense a precursor to Goethe, who confessed to Eckermann that he was incapable of composing tragedy. The translators, here and elsewhere, deserve credit for neither sweeping these writers' poetic flights under the rug, nor collapsing into kitsch.

Returning from the translations to the scholarship, Kathleen Chapman's accomplished essay actually manages to say something new about Worringer, by

³ 246-9. Typically, Passini and Peri are careful to distinguish this pan-Germanism from Worringer's and that of Julius Langbehn. A shame that editorial staff didn't amend sentences like 'while it accentuated his diffidence for certain chauvinistic components of German culture, it strengthened his ties to the German community.' A footnote to this unlovely sentence makes clear that 'diffidence' should rather be 'unease'! Wölfflin during the war is quoted as complaining: 'This is the unity we heard so much about: everyone has lost his mind.' (251)

focusing on his *Altdeutsche Buchillustration* and showing how William Morris-like ideas about handiwork and home industry (a great passion of Adolf Loos and Alois Riegl as well) combined with German exceptionalism to produce the fantastic thesis that 'the German propensity for abstraction was expressed most clearly in illustration' (61). Though the Werkbund is cited as context, this is a rare case of the essays going beyond the writer in question to illuminate the world he inhabited: it is worth considering the degree to which such ideas infected the Werkbund, or the first, expressionistic phase of the Bauhaus. A middle term might be Karl Scheffler's *Der Geist der Gotik* (Leipzig: Insel, 1917), which in its shrill attack on Greek order and boundless enthusiasm for Germanic chaos folded up functional architecture into the latter.

The introduction by Kimberly Smith is both well-read and, for an edited volume, unusually attentive and respectful to the actual arguments advanced by her authors (I cannot describe the irritation of being misunderstood by your own editor, and dismissed in a few banal sentences: a feeling her author/translators will not have here). I am however puzzled by her way of organizing this text: she first brings up the theme of expressionism in art and scholarship, then provides short subtitled sections dealing with each translated author, returns to argument with a section on 'Expressionist Art and Art History' (showing how even the suspicious Dvořák greeted 'the spiritual' dimension issuing in 'German soulfulness'), before finally giving an overview of the essays and translations. This rather redundant arrangement indicates the tension between original scholarship on an era and anthology of that era, with which the book struggles. As it is, I am afraid it does too little of either to serve as a definitive study of or anthology of these figures—but its hybrid form will make it a welcome guide to those new to the area, including undergraduates in advanced courses on German expressionism.

Finally, since a reviewer's primary task is not to praise or blame but to indicate what is done and what needs doing, I want to draw attention to an aporia haunting more than one of the contemporary texts. It is freely admitted by Aurenhammer and Haxthausen that the authors they discuss were not particularly sympathetic to, nor particularly understood, the art we most literally call expressionist. And, as Smith puts it in her introduction, when Worringer wrote of expression, 'he was thinking more of Hans von Marées, Ferdinand Hodler, or Adolf von Hildebrand than Wassily Kandinsky or Franz Marc' (23). She adds thoughtfully that it was Cubism which set the tone, and not its German epigones. But if that is true, as it certainly is, then the very canon of expressionist art historians is exploded. If Marées in fact *was* important, why not include Julius Meier-Graefe (who crops up in the book, but not in the index), who not only wrote saliently on 'expressionists' from Munch to Beckmann, but who despite his dislike of the Germanophile artists speculated that his German background and Mediterranean orientation might have allowed Marées to achieve a monumental style not available to his beloved Impressionists? It is fatuous for reviewers to complain of omissions, since every reader will have other favourites: but the point is not the omission of a favourite of mine as much as the shape history is given by forgetting some persons and remembering others. Here this means that the force of art historical tradition—a rigid identification of Expressionism with *Die Brücke* and *Der Blaue Reiter*—has prevailed despite the rhetoric of rethinking. Be that as it may, provoking argument about the relation of

art to history is a worthy endeavour, so the editor and authors of *The Expressionist Turn* have already put us in their debt.

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