Art historical ‘borderlands’: Elisabeth Wilson, Martin Heydrich, and August Schmarsow on ‘primitive’ ornament*

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In 1914, Elisabeth Wilson submitted her dissertation on ‘primitive’ ornament, entitled Ornament on the Basis of its Ethnological and Prehistoric Foundations: A Chapter from the Beginnings of Art, to the University of Leipzig (Figure 1). She was a student of art historian August Schmarsow and of Karl Weule, the former only the third to hold a chair of art history at that university and the latter the first full professor of cultural anthropology there. Two other Leipzig professors, the founder of experimental psychology Wilhelm Wundt and historian Karl Lamprecht, were also her close advisors.1 In the same year, Martin Heydrich also completed his doctoral thesis ‘Ornament in the Art of Primitive Peoples’ at that institution (Figures 2-3).

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Figure 2 Title Page, from Martin Heydrich, Afrikanische Ornamentik (Beiträge zur Erforschung der primitiven Ornamentik und zur Geschichte der Erforschung), 1914. Leiden: Internationales Archiv für Ethnographie 22, Supplement.

Figure 3 Plate II, from Martin Heydrich, Afrikanische Ornamentik (Beiträge zur Erforschung der primitiven Ornamentik und zur Geschichte der Erforschung), 1914. Leiden: Internationales Archiv für Ethnographie 22, Supplement.

Heydrich studied primarily with Weule, as well as with Wundt and Lamprecht. Both of these noteworthy interdisciplinary texts, along with other student works spanning art theory and ethology, were products of the burgeoning of research and writings on so-called primitive art by German-speaking scholars in previous decades. Both works surveyed this recent history and literature, and, in this essay, I examine their insights into these, along with their interest as documents of lively and contentious disciplinary intersections. Subsequently, I discuss an important extended article by one of Wilson’s mentors, Schmarsow, on the relationship of art history and ethology, a work that also gives a picture of the contemporary configuration of these fields disclosed by Wilson and Heydrich’s works.

As their titles suggest, the topic of ornament was key to this recent scholarly outpouring and was regarded in this period, to a great extent, as synonymous with ‘primitive’ art. Ornament had been the subject of a tradition of architectural and decorative arts writing centring on the theme of decorum, and its global forms had also long been associated with the primordial and non-classical in European art theory. In this period, a number of cultural currents brought it to the fore. Ornament became the topic of widespread debate due to new nineteenth-century industrial processes of manufacturing everyday decorated objects and the phenomenon of historicism in design. These concerns meshed with the expanding knowledge of global objects considered in this category generated by colonial practices and by the recently established fields of anthropology and prehistory. The latter reinforced the notion that ‘primitive’ peoples’ primary artefactual production was decorative and seemed to demonstrate universal beginnings of artistic activity, aligning also with the high post-Semperian scholarly standing of the minor arts. For ethnologists, art theorists, psychologists, and others, ornament’s ‘earliness’ positioned it as a source of definitions and laws of art, mental processes, and their evolution. Significant too

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was the desire on the part of modern art theory to ‘begin from below’, inverting the approach of idealist aesthetics and thereby calibrating with contemporary approaches to cultural and natural sciences.\(^5\) ‘Primitive’ ornament thus became intertwined with impulses in various fields to modernize and to demonstrate that traditionally esteemed periods and mediums were no longer normative, that the study of the minor and the temporally and geographically distant were key to understanding culture, and that critical aspects of human accomplishment and mentalities could be ascertained from characteristic objects and practices lacking accompanying texts.

The University of Leipzig was a key locus of such theoretical production. This was due in part to the city’s important ethnological museum, one of the principal sites of the redefinition of German anthropological practice in the late nineteenth century. Chiefly responsible were key thinkers who facilitated the expansion of the notion of the ‘primitive’ beyond ethnology and prehistory, influencing the disciplines of art history, experimental psychology, and history. In addition to the history at the university of Anton Springer’s attempts to treat art in a ‘scientific’ manner, students drew upon the models of those like Schmarsow, who believed ‘primitive’ art should lead to a redefinition of the study of art history altogether, of Wundt, who pursued ethnological theory as complement to the practice of experimental psychology, and of Lamprecht, who outlined History as a set of psychological stages of which the first, ‘primitive’ Symbolism, was best manifested in ornament.\(^6\)

In their works, both Wilson and Heydrich set themselves the task of encapsulating and annotating the extensive literature produced during this relatively short period. They regarded it as intricate enough to require historicization and did so as a manner of acknowledging progress they thought had been achieved. Their diligent glosses provide maps of the array of positions in this

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field, its self-conceptions, and epistemological possibilities in this period for these mainly German-speaking scholars. In sketching out this terrain, they pose a series of similar problems. They chart and rehearse its becoming ‘scientific’ and modern, a development from what they consider speculative to rigorous approaches, associated with the natural sciences and with notions of scientific objectivity. These brought ‘primitive’ ornament under scholarly scrutiny from a previous state in which it was neglected because of norms governing the study of culture and misunderstanding, they believed. Another stress is laid upon the nature of scientific evidence provided by ‘primitive’ peoples and their artefacts, past and present. This had particularly to do with the question of parallelism between prehistoric humans and contemporary Naturvölker, or small-scale cultures from all over the world. Related to this were methods of reasoning in terms of fossils and ‘rudiments’, fundamental to nineteenth- and early twentieth-century anthropological and archaeological theory, as well as other sciences.

Above all, they return to a set of persistent oppositions between works that argued that ‘primitive’ ornament was technically or materially conditioned, those that emphasized that it had a meaningful sacred and symbolic referent or was a remnant of such, and aesthetically oriented ones that asserted that it was originally abstract and creatively motivated. The first was the product of a willingness, particularly in the field of archaeology, to grant causality to material evidence and technical possibilities that emerged from a reaction against the previous domination of idealist philosophy. This desire to demonstrate that materials and techniques acted, in some sense, ‘automatically’ was combined with an attitude characteristic of scientific objectivity that was eager to account for ‘low’ types of evidence not previously examined. The second was indicative of the tendency of ethnological study to insist upon the practical and magical meanings of ‘primary’ ritual and design and to associate visual abstraction with a lack of sense or value, requiring tracing back to some earlier form of more direct reference. On the other hand, the last was typical of a ‘flexible positivism’ developed near the end of the nineteenth century and associated with art theory aligning itself with the term Kunstwissenschaft (the rigorous study of art). The latter had also keenly absorbed the lessons of objective empirical study from the sciences, including experimental psychology, but foregrounded its conviction in the particularity of aesthetic experience, of the art historical discipline and its objects, and their essentially creative qualities. The proponents of Kunstwissenschaft at issue here tended to


highlight a psychological notion of art making and experience centred on the primacy of the will.

II

In Heydrich’s first, historiographical chapter, he writes, figuring this field of study according to the positivist theory of knowledge, ‘as with every young science, in that of the history of primitive art, we also find a speculative-theoretical period at the beginning of its research’, represented by members of ‘the historical disciplines….To begin with [in 1843] the Leipzig scholar Gustav Klemm composed, purely deductively, a complete history of the decorative arts’.9 Subsequently, the earliest ethnologists, having ‘emancipated’ themselves from previously existing paradigms and confronted with the enormity of the task of transforming ‘old curiosity collections into scientifically ordered museums’, could only laterally extend the reach of their field. They could not ‘penetrate into the depths’ of their new science and had little time for what they considered to be ‘trifles’ like ornament and art. This was left to the next generation.10

A number of prehistorians also investigated ‘primitive’ ornament early on, stimulated by unfamiliar finds and fresh approaches to classical archaeology. However, Heydrich contends, they were less concerned with ornament’s ‘aesthetic-artistic value’ (ästhetisch-künstlerischen Wert) than in employing ornamental series to build up more precise site chronologies than had previously been possible, thereby inventing the typological method.11 In addition to these prehistoric archaeologists, for Heydrich, the most significant pioneers in the field include architect and theorist Gottfried Semper, who, for the first time, in the 1860s, ‘granted great space to primitive ornament, while otherwise generally the Kunstwissenschaft of that time, with a few exceptions, passed over the art of Naturvölker’. Another decisive early


figure—and the founder of the ethnological study of ‘primitive’ ornament—was the versatile Swedish scholar Hjalmar Stolpe. For both, Heydrich argues, so-called geometric ornament, in particular, became a central theme and means by which to determine the derivation of ornament and driving forces of its evolution and transmission.12

Semper argued, according to Heydrich, that the Urform (primordial form) of this ornament is the result, first of all, of the technique (Technik) of the textile arts, its motif, later transferred to ceramics and then to other mediums, initially as symbolic of materials and techniques and, later, as decoration. Ornamental forms are linked, moreover, with function (Gebrauchszweck) and material (Material).13 On his part, Stolpe, who studied the ornament of peoples in Polynesia and the Americas from the 1880s, sought the ‘lost meanings of ornament’. He believed that once ‘seemingly meaningless’ geometric ornament was arranged into developmental series, researchers would possess the capacity to discern the original models and significance of its forms, distinguishing these from apparently abstract ‘rudiments’ (Rudimente), or vestigial forms. The naturalistic Urbild, or archetype, discovered in this way would always be found to have a symbolic and religious content, which later forms were meant to recall, and only over time did ornament degenerate into solely decorative stylization.14

In Heydrich’s summaries of a host of other writers, the vast majority of them ethnologists, he outlines a set of differing approaches to so-called primitive ornament: those that, like Semper’s, stress the influence of material (Stoff) on art forms; those focused primarily on ornament’s utility in constructing prehistoric chronologies and typological sequences; and those, like Stolpe’s, which were preoccupied with pinpointing of meanings and referents—whether sacred or imitative of real objects. He also calls attention to a further orientation pursued by a small group of scholars in the field of Kunstwissenschaft, especially Alois Riegl and Schmarsow, who turned against the ‘material conception of art’ (materielle Künstlerischer Wert), instead attending primarily to the ‘aesthetic-artistic value’ (ästhetisch-künstlerischer Wert) of ornament by appreciating and explicating its


13 Heydrich, ‘Afrikanische Ornamentik’, 2. This common simplification of Semper’s thought has been widely discussed and refuted.

artistic and psychological motivations.\textsuperscript{15} In one unusual combination of such
perspectives, Alois Raimund Hein considered ornament from the viewpoint of
‘aesthetic pleasure’ (ästhetisches Gefallen), demonstrating in his work ‘the great
enjoyment in artistic activity of [‘primitive’] peoples…and their fine sense for the
delicate effects of decorated forms’. However, like Stolpe, Heydrich writes, Hein
was adamantly opposed to the notion that ornament could be the result of
abstraction (Abstraktion); instead, he argued that it must always originate with the
imitation of objects in man’s environment or in symbolism.\textsuperscript{16}

Together, these views synopsized by Heydrich compose the history of
‘primitive’ ornament’s primary interpretive strands in art theory from the late
nineteenth century to the cusp of World War I:\textsuperscript{17} the material (technical, functional,
practical), usually associated with archaeology; that concerned with arranging
typological arrays and linked with strands of prehistoric archaeology; the symbolic
and the imitative—these two often connected and characteristic of ethnology; and
the aesthetic (or anti-materialist) pursued by a group of art theorists and historians.
These occasionally combine with each other, and within each, there are further
individual nuances. The last, the primarily ‘aesthetic’ consideration of ornament
pursued by Rieg, Schmarsow, and also Wilhelm Worringer, was certainly a
minority position in this broader field, as Heydrich’s survey indicates.

III

Like Heydrich, at the start of her text, Wilson narrates the story of how her small
discipline became scientific. In doing so, she lays out its fundamental premises and
how these have been revised and complicated from the earliest days of the field. She
writes that while previously theorists sought the ‘origin’ (Ursprung) of ornament,
they now realize that they have access only to ‘beginnings’ (Anfänge) and
development (Entwicklung) and focus instead on particular problems, such as the
priority of geometric or naturalistic forms. Yet, she believes, there has been a recent
resurgence of scholarly desire to once again approach an ‘origin point’
(Ausgangspunkt), although with these methodological reservations in mind.

With the term ‘primitive’, Wilson explains, theorists of art and ornament
encompass both prehistoric peoples and Naturvölker, groups whose cultural
expressions were traditionally regarded as lacking ‘the elevation of those of fully

\textsuperscript{15} Heydrich, ‘Afrikanische Ornamentik’, 1, 2–3, 7, 29–30.

die Kunst der Dayaks unter dem Gesichtspunkt ästhetischen Gefallens. Er schildert “das
höhe Vergnügen dieses Volkes an künstlerischer Betätigung, seine Leidenschaft für das
Kunsthandwerk und den feinen Sinn für zarte Wirkungen der verzierten Gebilde”’.

\textsuperscript{17} On the ‘end’ of these approaches to ‘primitive’ art, see Halbertsma, ‘The Many
Beginnings’; Ulrich Pfisterer, ‘Origins and Principles of World Art History—1900 (and
See Penny, ‘Traditions’ on how German anthropology transformed around this time.
cultural peoples’. Prehistoric artifacts possess the advantage of greater chronological precision, due to geological placement of remains and the possibility of finding isolated series of artifacts. Naturvölker, in contrast, cannot be so easily defined or chronologically pinned down, neither in terms of their relationship to the beginnings of human history, nor as a homogenous group. Although viewed at one time as vestiges of prehistoric peoples, Wilson writes that Naturvölker are now recognized to have undergone development and as highly differentiated. She acknowledges that the concept ‘primitive’ is not absolute and that many of its products are hardly aesthetically undeveloped.\(^{18}\)

Naturvölker are, however, vital to ‘supplement the mute material’ of prehistory, even as ‘residues’ (Rückstände) of a second order.\(^{19}\) In a time in which it is still necessary to apply the ‘biogenetic law’ to the humanities, she concedes, both groups are required to mutually reveal the Urformen of the psyche, of which art is a product, and the development of individual creativity. Naturvölker can, with these provisions in mind, ‘be considered the living rudiments (die lebende Rudimente) of early human development’. It is also the ‘essence of art that it is an index fossil (Leitfossil) of “biogenetic” observation’ — that is, part of a class of fossils key to establishing age due to their recurrence in widely distributed strata. This is due to the fact that ‘art alone, of all emanations of the human psyche, leaves a concrete residue (Niederschlag), [and] results in tangible, visible artifacts’.\(^{20}\)

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\(^{18}\) Wilson, *Das Ornament*, 3–5. ‘Die Bezeichnung “primitive” ist zu einem allgemeinen Kollektivum für die Kulturäußerungen geworden, die nicht die Höhe der Vollkulturvölker aufweisen’. This consideration of ‘primitive’ peoples as prehistoric vestiges was typical of early works of prehistory and anthropology.

\(^{19}\) Wilson, *Das Ornament*, 3. Here, Wilson seems to deploy a term from chemistry. ‘…die Ueberlieferungen der Prähistorie als Rückstände erster Ordnung und die der Naturvölker nur als solche zweiter Ordnung gelten lassen will, betont die Notwendigkeit der letzteren zur Ergänzung des stummen Materials’.

\(^{20}\) Wilson, *Das Ornament*, 4–5. ‘Es liegt im Wesen der Kunst, daß sie als Leitfossil für eine “biogenetische” Betrachtung am geeignetsten ist. Denn sie allein von allen Emanationen der menschlichen Psyche hat einen konkreten Niederschlag…’. ‘Daß die Naturvölker trotzdem als die lebende Rudimente anfänglicher menschlicher Entwicklung zu betrachten sind…’.

If Naturvölker are vital to the scientific study of ‘primitive’ ornament, even as this science doubts the validity of this category, they and their artistic products are, like prehistoric artifacts, considered types of fossils—forms of animate and inert material evidence of the past and of primordial psychology. Wundt, in his early twentieth-century texts on Völkerpsychologie, or comparative ethnopsychology, in which he compiled anthropological research as counterpart to his practice of experimental psychology, would formulate this dilemma in a similar fashion. He argued that earlier philosophers had nostalgically ‘invent[ed]’ ‘primitive’ man and did not truly study him in the scientific manner of contemporary ethnology. The latter had transformed the previously ‘abstract opposition’ of nature and culture into a modern field investigating material facts. It was now recognized, however, that the ‘primitive’ as category was only ‘relative’, as such cultures could no longer exist in uncontaminated fashion in the present. Nevertheless, the empirical study of contemporary ‘primitive’ peoples was critical because it allowed scholars to go beyond ‘mere speculations’, make ‘more than inferences drawn from the silent fragments of the bones and a few of the art products of [prehistoric] man’. ‘Primitive’ man had to be validated not ‘under the earth, but on the earth’.21

The methods of reasoning implied by Wilson’s invocation of biogenetic study associated with Ernst Haeckel and the metaphor of the fossil were persistent, although evolving, in art theory from the time of Semper’s writing to that of Wilson’s text. These were characteristic of the decades that witnessed the development of comparative anatomy and evolutionary theory, the establishment of the independent discipline of geology, the discovery and authentication of the deep time of prehistory, and of other scholarly approaches favouring material evidence of the past. All of these created the sense of ‘primitive’ temporalities irrupting into the present by means of material remains and human ‘survivals’. In addition, the modified, natural historical, partly Darwinian notion of rudiments and its inflections via Tyloorean ethnology seemed to be applied in two opposed ways, as the beginning point, or rudiment, of something that would become more complex, or as the degenerated, non-functional vestige of an object that could through interpretation be made to evoke its functional origins. Overall, these terms indicate the layers and combinations of analogies from the natural sciences coursing through this body of thought.

Wilson’s approach demonstrates a great measure of reflexivity. The term ‘primitive’ is ‘relative’, she acknowledges, and ‘shifts according to the viewpoint of the researcher’. In fact, the very search for ‘the primitive’ ‘designates not only a

scholarly (wissenschaftlich) desire, but also has long played a role in the creativity of intellectual culture.' Thus ‘primitive ornament’ is a ‘Grenzgebiet’ (borderland), she writes. This means that it is the ‘ground from which all possible neighbouring disciplines collect their materials’. Although focusing on ornament instead of ‘primitive’ art more broadly allows for scientific focus and a comparative point of view, she argues that, by its very nature, this ornament lies at the boundary of various branches of knowledge, of the history of art, ethnology, and others, ‘illuminating evolutionary, aesthetic, and purely ethnological questions and touching upon religious and economic life’.23

Her history of the field also returns to the same figures. She characterizes Semper’s approach as symptomatic of ‘the materialization of spiritual values’ (Materialisierung des geistigen Lebens) of the mid-nineteenth century, which subjected all human activities to ‘rational dissection’ (rationalistischen Zergliederung). Stolpe is the corresponding pioneer in the area of ethnology, providing ‘primitive’ ornament with its first scholarly interpretation in that field. His work, devoted to the tracing of original divine meanings of forms that had transmuted into ornament, derived to some extent from anthropologist Adolf Bastian’s emphasis on symbolism, Wilson argues, and set goals for the following generation. The latter attempted to decipher ‘primitive’ ornament’s connections to mythology and as correlate of the spiritual life of its makers.24

She also outlines in greater detail the Humboldtian, cosmopolitan orientation of an influential sub-tendency of ‘primitive’ ornament research established by the brothers Alois and Wilhelm Hein and pursued from the 1890s. These scholars interpreted the appearance of identical or similar ornamental motifs in widely separated cultures as proof of the unity of the human race and universal stages of psychological development. These ideas are related to theories of ornamental stylization further developed by Karl von den Steinen, Emil Stephan, and others that became dominant in ethnology, arguing that all ‘primitive’ geometric ornament and patterns are based on the imitation of animals and other objects. These were thought to be abstracted due to various external or psychological causes—lack of skill, degeneration over time, and others—but never intentionally for artistic purposes.25

Wilson’s framework is derived from Schmarsow’s theories of art and ornament and indicates the distinctness of her approach from Heydrich’s and its location in that realm that Heydrich had designated with the term Kunstwissenschaft. Her interest is ultimately psychological, and so, although she delineates all of the

22 Wilson, Das Ornament, 3. ‘…in der Kunstwissenschaft, wo sich dieser Begriff [‘primitiv’] je nach dem Standpunkt der Forschung verschiebt. Das Suchen nach “der Primitive” ist nicht nur bezeichnend für das wissenschaftliche Streben, sondern spielt seit langem in Schöpfertum der geistigen Kultur eine Rolle’.
23 Wilson, Das Ornament, 5, 9.
24 Wilson, Das Ornament, 9–10.
25 Wilson, Das Ornament, 10–15.
possible insights—pertaining to the study and history of religion, magic, technology, geography, and so on—that might be gained from ornament, she ultimately repudiates these. Instead, ‘the definitions of Schmarsow and occasionally from [philosopher Theodor] Lipps alone…provide the scaffolding and the fixed point’ of her examination.26

Heydrich and Wilson’s recurring oppositions are also partly reflected in the divergences between their own approaches. In Heydrich’s account of how ornament became a distinctive area of interest for ethnologists and other scholars in the last decades of the nineteenth century, it is clear that through their interpretations of ornamental forms, theorists weighed the meanings of scientific objectivity, of art’s symbolic purposes, and the relationship of material and technological imperatives against a notion of artistic volition. For ethnologists and others, the notion of pure abstraction without material or ritual basis smacked of idealism. On the other hand, for many art historians, the desire to locate material causes and an emphasis on mimesis was reminiscent of an unrefined positivism and an unsophisticated sense of art in which imitation remained central, which had only recently been overcome. Heydrich’s history, from an ethnologist’s point of view, highlighted repeated interpretive attempts by scholars to undermine the seeming randomness of the geometric and abstract. In the place of these, designated as arbitrary, purely ornamental, meaningless (willkürlich, rein ornamentalen, bloss en sinnlosen), as emerging from the arbitrary will of the artist (Willkür des Schöpfers), or a product of the drive to adorn (Trieb…zu schmücken), they attempted to substitute various kinds of necessity. These included that of the technically motivated, materially conditioned, and practical, all ‘natural and necessary conditions’ (natürliche und notwendige Bedingungen). Furthermore, there was the certainty of imitation, of meaning derived from natural models (eine bestimmte Naturvorlage), almost always animals, of concrete symbolic meaning (konkrete Bedeutung), or of the desire to communicate (Mitteilungstrieb).27 These types of interpretation were often accompanied by techniques that traced ‘rudiments’ through typology. All of these were, in turn, usually the preserve of scholars rooted in the study of material culture or in the natural sciences.

In Wilson’s outline of Schmarsow’s ‘aesthetic’ point of view, she turns such oppositions on their head. In this account, there exists, rather, a contrast between psychophysically and creatively motivated ornament and that which is arbitrary in the inverse sense because it is randomly generated by materials, technology, or the desire to imitate the outside world. The latter are regarded as products of mechanical processes or a mechanistic worldview. The psychological, in Wilson and Schmarsow’s senses, possesses its own ‘materiality’. In their view, artistically generated ornament has its basis in embodied perception, in the historically

26 Wilson, Das Ornament, 5. ‘Allein die Definitionen von Schmarsow und gelegentlich von Lipps sollen das Gerüst und den festen Punkt, von dem aus die Betrachtung erfolgt, abgeben’.
evolving senses of vision and touch. Touch and the gesturing, affect-expressive body—what Wilson calls the ‘region of the motor-haptic’ (Bereich des Motorisch-Haptischen)—are operative in ornament’s beginnings and always, in some kernel, in its later development. This approach was one fundamentally shaped by developments in materialist science of the nineteenth century, especially in physiology, but that had turned against what it considered to be a simplistic deployment of that materialism.

IV

This history and constellation of disciplines presented by Wilson and Heydrich’s texts also provide insight into Schmarsow’s understudied and polemical early twentieth-century writings on the relationship of Kunstwissenschaft and ethnology. One of the most extensive of these was his 1907 ‘Kunstwissenschaft und Völkerpsychologie: Ein Versuch zur Verständigung’, or, ‘The Science of Art and Ethnopsychology: An Attempt at Understanding’. In this text, Schmarsow elucidated his vision of Kunstwissenschaft as a history of art widened and transformed by its contact with ethnology, or, more precisely, the comparative ethnology of Wundt. This bringing together of Kunstwissenschaft with Völkerpsychologie, the latter providing access to art’s ‘primitive’ beginnings, produced a scientific psychology of art (Kunstpsychologie), in his view.

Schmarsow argued in this essay that the data of ethnology must be properly grasped and modified for their own purposes by the practitioners of Kunstwissenschaft, who alone are capable of understanding art and its categories properly. Following Riegl and in parallel with Worringer, he implied that they must, in some sense, rescue the evidence of ‘primitive’ art and creativity gathered by ethnologists and prehistoric archaeologists from the ‘materialism’ of those disciplines, from their ‘rationalist’ aesthetics and ‘natural-scientific method’ (naturwissenschaftliche Denkweise). This relationship of Kunstwissenschaft to ethnology is expressed in this passage, in which Schmarsow makes the case for the importance for archaeologists and ethnologists of Riegl’s work. He writes,

How an Eskimo sees the world, how a Native American narrates in images his warring deeds is documented for us in the collections of the Bureau of Ethnology.... [These] demand[d] the masterful hand of the guide all the more

28 Wilson, Das Ornament, 113.
29 See Adler and Frank, introduction.
urgently, the less the ethnographers and scribes in all the world have the sense for it. The destiny of a profound book like Aloys Riegl’s Late Roman Art Industry...teaches us how poorly prepared even the schools of classical archaeology, Egyptology, and so on, are....His investigation...can also open the eyes of those representatives of anthropology disposed toward Kunstwissenschaft, as to how the cave paintings of Bushmen and maps of Native Americans should really be analysed.32

In the course of the essay, Schmarsow discusses and appropriates, almost point by point, Wundt’s ideas from his Völkerpsychologie on the psychology of ‘primitive’ art and the beginnings and developmental sequence of ornament and art among ‘primitive’ peoples, adapting them towards his own ends. He also responds to Ernst Grosse’s The Beginnings of Art of 1894, and, to a lesser extent, Yrjö Hirn’s The Origins of Art: A Psychological and Sociology Inquiry of 1900 and philosopher Max Dessoir’s notion of Kunstwissenschaft. He refers, as well, to the views on the origins and development of ornament and art of historians, theorists, and anthropologists Semper, Riegl, Stolpe, von den Steinen, the American ethnologist and archaeologist William H. Holmes, and the British scholar Charles H. Read.

Following Grosse, Schmarsow defines Kunstwissenschaft’s task as one of theoretically ordering the facts of art history. In characteristic kunstwissenschaftlich rhetoric opposing the gathering of factual data with intuitive knowledge, he writes, ‘The building material has certainly, for the most part, been brought together....But knowledge of facts alone are, however, only a means to insight [...]...the mountains of knowledge that one heaps up serve only to block light and air from our minds’.33 For Schmarsow, Kunstwissenschaft cannot develop on the basis of a predetermined ‘canon’. On the contrary, ‘the objective research of the beginnings of art among the most simple cultural conditions should aid [art historians] in going beyond’ such ‘book learning’. Although art historians must convey to ethnologists the viewpoints acquired from theories of Kunstwissenschaft, they require ‘authority to investigate all

32 Schmarsow, ‘Kunstwissenschaft und Völkerpsychologie’, 500. ‘Wie so ein Eskimo die Welt sieht, und wie ein Indianer im Bilde seine Kriegstaten erzählt, wird uns in den Sammlungen des Bureau of Ethnology beurkundet, und...das Ganze verlangt nach der Meisterhand des psychologischen Pfadfinders um so dringender, je weniger die Ethnographen und die Schriftgelehrten in aller Welt dafür Sinn haben. Wie schwach es auch in den Schulen der klassischen Archäologie, der Ägyptologie u.s.w. damit bestellt ist, lehrt das Schicksal eines tiefgründigen Buches wie Aloys Riegl’s “Spätrömische Kunstindustrie”...Seine...Untersuchung kann auch kunstwissenschaftlich gesonnenen Vertretern der Völkerkunde die Augen öffnen, wie Höhlenmalerei der Bushmänner und Landkarten der Indianer eigentlich analysiert werden sollten’.

and any needed material. The scientific function of these pioneers [of art history] may not be bound’ to any normative notion of art. He continues, ‘The total available ethnographic material, without exception, is [to be] investigated...with all possible viewpoints of practice’. Thus Schmarsow adheres, in these ways, to protocols of scientific study current in the disciplines of archaeology, prehistory, and anthropology, which emphasized the study of all materials, including the ‘insignificant’, without bias. He writes, however, that the historian cannot completely extinguish him or herself, or a modern point of view, although he or she may take ‘measures to limit the subjective contribution’. Nonetheless, Kunstwissenschaft’s uniqueness proceeds from the fact that while the scholar is permitted in this way to investigate all ethnographic material from all points of view, including technological, he or she is then granted the ability to freely view the subject aesthetically, as form and as sensually perceptible phenomena. This must be kept separate from all other types of study, including mythological.

In defining the various arts and determining their relationships to one another, one of the basic tasks of Kunstwissenschaft, bodily gestures and facial expressions, encompassed by the term Mimik, have a key position in Schmarsow’s thought. They stand closest to a possible Urform of art and to the sense of touch that is crucial to forming the earliest artistic objects, in his view. Mimik arises from primitive expressive movements (Ausdruckbewegungen) of the subject, which later develop into gestures related to art making. A psychological study of art’s beginnings and an understanding of the differentiation of the individual arts must therefore come to terms with this most basic form of expression.

It is in the second part of ‘Kunstwissenschaft und Völkerpsychologie’ that Schmarsow’s outlining of the concepts and processes of Mimik and expressive movement are deployed in order to counter the so-called materialist view of art. These are meant, first of all, to repudiate Wundt’s notions of the origins of ornament and decoration. Wundt believed like Semper and his followers that ornament and the decorative arts are first brought into being accidentally, or for practical purposes. They then stimulate their makers or beholders, whose resulting joy leads to the perpetuation of this ornament and decoration. Furthermore, in Wundt’s view, as in the prevailing view among anthropologists like von den Steinen, Weule,**

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and Stephan, seemingly abstract ‘primitive’ ornament is of mimetic origin. It is composed of simplified or regularized forms of imitated objects in nature, often has symbolic meanings, and its earliest medium is drawing. A key point of reference for Wundt and Schmarsow is ethnologist von den Steinen’s theory of ornament, developed from his travels among Brazilian tribal peoples. Von den Steinen argued that the geometric ornament of Naturvölker derives from the imitation of animals, and that abstraction, when it occurs, is a later simplification of such forms.

The second of these objectionable materialist theories for Schmarsow is that of the ‘Herstellungsmotive’, or motifs generated by production methods. These are the geometric ornamental motifs and patterns generated by the methods of basketry and weaving. Schmarsow attributes these arguments to the followers of Semper, including Wundt and Holmes. Schmarsow writes,

We may…not, like Grosse and Wundt, simply transfer or adapt unchecked to ornament both groups of motifs that the highly meritorious American researcher W. H. Holmes has established for ceramics: production motifs and imitation motifs…. [T]hey bear the stamp of their source in rationalist aesthetics and the natural-scientific attitude so clearly…. All British and American ethnologists, whom we can thank for such rich anthropological material,…are under the spell of the theory of imitation in the sense of the eighteenth century and the materialist form of explanation that appeals to the sober, practical sense…. But also our classical archaeologists stand…on the ground of objective aesthetics and have misunderstood the doctrines of Gottfried Semper in such a materialistic sense that they hardly still ask what [is] meant by mimesis. What a powerful share of subjective self-representation, of direct expression from inside out, is contained in it….

40 Schmarsow, ‘Kunstwissenschaft und Völkerpsychologie’, 484–486. On the debates centered on these motifs, see Basu, ‘Ideal and Material Ornament’, 7–16. Particularly on this topic, but also in the essay as a whole, Schmarsow revisits many of Riegl’s arguments about geometric ornament from his Stilfragen: Grundlegungen zu einer Geschichte der Ornamentik of 1893.
In contrast to Wundt and Holmes, Schmarsow directs readers to bodily adornment derived from *Mimik* and its beginnings in body painting and tattooing in order to discover ornament’s origins and psychological development.\(^{42}\)

The third interpretive strand of ‘primitive’ ornament that Schmarsow opposes is that which emphasizes its symbolic nature. Although Schmarsow acknowledges the symbolic function of much ‘primitive’ ornament, he is concerned with ornament’s ‘beginnings’, which he believes contain its essence. Even when he grants the correctness of Stolpe or Read’s interpretations of symbolic ornament and its abstraction, simplification, and distortion of originally figurative and religious motifs, he assures the reader that this type of ornament belongs to a later stage, and, ‘for such an ornament,…fine art, [in this case,] sculpture, is a precondition….Symbolic decorative motifs are symptoms of a second-hand art’. While Wundt designates an important category of tattooing as symbolic, Schmarsow argues, along these lines, that this is only the final form of a lengthy development. Above all, these forms of interpretation neglect the intellectual achievement of abstraction.\(^{43}\) Schmarsow concludes the essay with a discussion of how bodily adornment is eventually transferred to the decorative arts. These applied arts, like ceramics, bear the corporeal values of this earliest ornament.\(^{44}\)

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The contrast between these forms of explanation of ‘primitive’ ornament catalogued by Heydrich and Wilson and played out in Schmarsow’s text goes to the point that the sciences that converged around this topic and undergirded its study, anthropology and psychology, arose in Germany in the mid-nineteenth century as disciplines that sought to mediate between the material and the ideal in human nature and culture.\(^{45}\) Developed by liberally oriented scholars in the wake of the disappointments of the 1848 Revolution, experimental psychology, on its part, offered the possibility of grasping society and culture by means that were materialist and empirical, instead of deductive. Anthropology, on the other hand, was considered a universal psychology and method of augmenting psychology’s study of the European individual, as well as one not over reliant on materialist

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\(^{42}\) Schmarsow, ‘Kunstwissenschaft und Völkerpsychologie’, 477.


\(^{45}\) Smith, *Politics and the Sciences of Culture*, 47, 121. This is also the case with the historical sciences.
experimentation. In the wider Euro-American field of anthropology, the particularity of German ethnology was perceived in just this way. As Alfred Haddon wrote in his *History of Anthropology* of 1910, the field was considered to have been pioneered by Bastian, who treated it as an inductive and comparative form of global psychology, examining ‘cryptograms of mankind’.46

Brought into the sphere of academic study in the late nineteenth century due to formations and shifts in these disciplines and the influence of the natural sciences on the recently established academic study of art history, ‘primitive’ ornament was constructed as a category of objects and given a distinct identity. Representatives of ethnology, archaeology, *Kunstwissenschaft*, and other areas sought to provide it with meaning and motivation, to locate its beginnings, and to comprehend the logic of its developments and forms. Moreover, through its study, they thought through the meanings of scientific method, artistic creativity, and the psyche’s ability to impose itself on the world. Some art historians who embraced the expanded field of objects brought to light by ethnology attempted, however, to assert the purely artistic significance of these, crucial as they seemed to determining art’s ‘beginnings’ and definitions, and to demonstrate to the natural and material sciences the value of their own approaches. In the *Grenzgebiet*, or borderland, that was the study of ‘primitive’ art and ornament and in which the works of art theorists and ethnologists intersected around 1900, this attempt at mediation between these realms and between competing visions of scholarly rigor was central.

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