

Julius von Schlosser: Aesthetics, Art History and the Book

Report on the 150th Anniversary Conference on Julius von Schlosser, 6th and 7th October 2016:

Julius von Schlosser (1866–1938)

Internationale Tagung zum 150. Geburtstag, gemeinsam veranstaltet vom Kunsthistorischen Museum Wien und dem Institut für Kunstgeschichte der Universität Wien

Aus Anlass des 150. Geburtstag erinnert die Tagung an diesen großen Wiener Gelehrten und beleuchtet seine einflussreiche Rolle als Museumsmann und Universitätslehrer. Die Vorträge thematisieren sein Verhältnis zu großen Zeitgenossen wie Bode, Riegl, Warburg, Wölfflin oder Croce ebenso wie seine wegweisenden, bis heute stark rezipierten Publikationen, seine wichtigsten Schüler und seine Aktualität innerhalb des kunsthistorischen Methodendiskurses.

Julius von Schlosser (1866-1938) is perhaps the least known of the major art historians of his generation. The contemporary of Aby Warburg, Max Dvořák and Josef Strzygowski, his writings are more often mentioned in passing than actually read. Only recently has his work begun to be explored in depth. Of this the most notable has been his 1910 history of wax portraiture, which was republished in German in the 1990s, and which has since been translated into English. With the exception of the translations and essays published on him in the pages of this journal, he has been the subject of very little interpretative and critical commentary.

The conference jointly staged by the Kunsthistorisches Museum and the Institute of Art History of the University of Vienna to celebrate the 150th anniversary of his birth was thus a welcome event. Schlosser, the curator of weapons and arts and crafts at the Kunsthistorisches Museum, who only became a full professor late in his career after the death of his younger colleague Dvořák, is now known primarily for *Die Kunstliteratur* (1924), the wide-ranging survey of art writing from late antiquity to the eighteenth century, as well as his studies of collecting, musical instruments and the history of the Vienna School. He was a prolific author, but his outputs were mostly in the forms of essays, catalogues and smaller scale pamphlets and booklets. The *Kunstliteratur* was his only substantial book-length publication, and he was atypical in other ways, too. His interests were diverse, and they were shaped in part by his commitments as a museum professional, but it is notable that he wrote mostly on 'marginal' art historical topics. He was a great admirer of Ghiberti, and while he published a translation of the sculptor's *I Commentarii*, Schlosser's planned monograph on the artist remained incomplete when he died in 1938, and there are no other substantial studies of any artists by Schlosser. He wrote a survey of medieval art, but it was for a popular audience and can be hardly be regarded as a major work of scholarship. It was perhaps as a teacher that Schlosser has the most lasting impact on art historical practice, for he counted amongst his

students Gombrich, Ernst Kris, Hans Sedlmayr, Fritz Saxl, Otto Pächt and Hans Hahnloser. They all pursued their own individual interpretations of art historical method, but all spoke highly of their teacher, viewing their work as, in some sense, remaining true to his memory. The best known example is the opening line of Gombrich's *The Story of Art*, namely, that 'There is no such thing as art. There are only artists,' which was taken directly from Schlosser.

The speakers at the conference brought out many of the complexities and contradictions of Schlosser. It is not possible to provide a detailed account of each, but it is worth outlining some of the recurring themes. The studies of collecting were, of course, driven by Schlosser's professional role as a curator, but his activity in this capacity is not fully appreciated. He was, for example, responsible for setting up and organising the musical instruments in the Kunsthistorisches Museum into a coherent unit, where they had previously been scattered across various different departments of the imperial collections. He also played an important role in introducing professional standards of cataloguing in the Department of Weapons and Arts and Crafts, of which he was the curator. His work as author of *Die Kunstliteratur* and editor of many other historical writings was, in one sense, a logical extension of this activity, in which he displayed the archivist's instinct for taxonomic ordering. He also amassed a substantial personal library, larger than the norm for most of his peers, which betrayed the same bookish instincts.

At the same time, and here we encounter the first contradiction, Schlosser was fiercely critical of those art historians who constructed stylistic categories for ordering works of art, or who strove to place them in historical cultural genealogies and contexts. Hence, in his essay on the history of the Vienna School Schlosser distanced himself from Riegl, precisely because he felt that the latter sought to deprive works of art of their particularity. This view, which Schlosser ultimately owed to Benedetto Croce and the linguist Karl Vossler, stood at odds, however, with his curatorial activity.

One of the more prominent themes that emerged at the Conference was the identity of Schlosser the would-be aesthete. He twice allowed himself to be photographed cradling a small Renaissance bronze of Heracles from the collection of the Museum, as if to emphasise the image of Schlosser the connoisseur. This reflected his wider view that art history should be concerned not with the social history of art, a 'hybrid creature' (*Zwittergeschöpf*) for which he had little sympathy, but with the masterworks of art and the creativity activity of the artist genius. Ironically, however, he wrote almost nothing that might have illustrated the kind of art history he had in mind. He believed that the writing of Roberto Longhi was an exemplar of aesthetically sensitive scholarship, but he did not attempt to approximate it. Indeed, his studies of 'auxiliary' topics might almost be thought of as a kind of avoidance strategy. His insistence on the central role of the art object was matched by his reluctance or awkwardness when writing about actual artworks, where he frequently supplied merely anodyne merely factual descriptions or even just relied on citing the work of others. Schlosser's work could be described as a form of negative theology, in which he circled round the absent centre, namely, a discourse that remained true to the aesthetic singularity of the object, without ever being able to develop a positive sense of what might be. It was left to his students,

most notably, Hans Sedlmayr, to provide what was missing, although whether 'Strukturforschung' was what Schlosser was struggling to articulate is open to question.

At the heart of Schlosser's wrestling with the problems of aesthetics was his relationship to Croce. It is now difficult to exaggerate the significance of Croce in the early twentieth century, as a historian, as a philosopher and as a politician. It was Croce's aesthetics that shaped Schlosser's understanding of art, and Schlosser saw in Croce an intellectual fellow traveller; he tried several times, although unsuccessfully, to secure membership of the Austrian Academy of Sciences for the Italian. His affinity for Italian culture also underlay his enthusiasm for Croce, motivated, too, by a sense that he was little understood in his native Vienna. It was also important to Schlosser that this was reciprocated, and he also saw the approval of a person of Croce's prestige as a source of legitimization. Yet Schlosser was never a theorist, for all that he ventured into the territory of methodological analysis. This marred some of his most substantial work; given that it represented the culmination of many decades's work, *Die Kunstliteratur* suffered from a notable absence of any meaningful concept of what a literary source even was.

Croce was not the only figure in whom Schlosser saw a kindred spirit. Against expectation, he also admired Heinrich Wölfflin. He chose to ignore the Swiss scholar's concern with stylistic categories in *Principles of Art History* and instead focused on works such as *Classic Art* (1899) and *The Art of Dürer* (1905) in which, he argued, Wölfflin respected the individuality of the work of art and the creativity of the artist. Schlosser also had great respect for Aby Warburg. His study of wax portraiture – another non-art subject - with its references to sympathetic magic in art and the notions of living presence, bore a clear resemblance to the some of the ideas explored by Warburg in his 1902 essay on 'The Art of Portraiture and the Florentine Bourgeoisie,' and Schlosser maintained a supportive correspondence with Warburg.

The Schlosser of the period 1918 to 1938 is sometimes viewed as a relic of Austria-Hungary. Like other compatriots such as Stefan Zweig (1881-1941), Joseph Roth (1894-1939) and Robert Musil (1880-1942), he seemed to have been orphaned by political events and mourned the passing of civilization. Recently discovered correspondence with Wilhelm von Bode in Berlin reveal the depths of his despair after 1918. Warburg suffered psychological collapse; Schlosser's reaction was not so dramatic, but he outlined to von Bode his intention to leave Austria, which he felt had nothing left for him, converted to Lutheranism, and identified himself no longer as an Austrian – the term had no meaning in the immediate post-war years – but as a German. He eventually decided to stay in Vienna, but the material discovered so far reveals the conflicting motivations and wishes that Schlosser had to address in the final 20 years of his life.

In contrast to Wölfflin, Riegl, Warburg and Dvořák, Schlosser devised no polished method or school of thought, and in this sense he left less of an impression on the course of art history. Yet he crystallises the many contradictory impulses that drove the discipline in the first half of the twentieth century. His failure to resolve them should in itself be a prompt for further discussion and analysis, and he was probably the most complex and multi-layered art historian of his generation. A

publication based on the conference is due to follow, which will hopefully ensue the growing engagement with Schlosser continues. It is not so much the solutions Schlosser proposed as much as the way he identified the challenges of art history that makes his work of continuing significance for the practice of the discipline.

Programm

Donnerstag, 6. Oktober 2016

Kunsthistorisches Museum, Bassano Saal (1010 Wien, Burgring 5, 2. Stock)

10:00

*Generaldirektorin Dr. Sabine Haag und Prof. Dr. Sebastian Schütze:
Begrüßung und Einführung*

Sektionsleitung: Generaldirektorin Dr. Sabine Haag (KHM, Wien)

10:30

*Paulus Rainer M. A. (KHM, Wien):
Schlosser als Mittler zwischen Kunst und Publikum. Das Beispiel Saliera*

11:15

*Dr. Marthe Kretzschmar (Universität Wien):
Julius von Schlosser und die Forschung zum Wachsporträt*

12:00

*Dr. Konrad Schlegel (KHM, Wien):
„Aus der Wiener Kunstammer“. Fragmente zur Rolle der Kleinplastik bei Julius von
Schlosser*

Mittagspause

*Sektionsleitung: Prof. Dr. Sybille Ebert-Schifferer (Bibliotheca Hertziana, Max-Planck-
Institut für Kunstgeschichte, Rom)*

15:00

*Dr. Beatrix Darmstädter (KHM, Wien):
Julius von Schlosser und die ‚neu geschaffene Sammlung historischer Musikinstrumente‘*

15:45

*Dr. Rainald Franz (MAK, Wien):
Julius von Schlosser und das Österreichische Museum für Kunst und Industrie.
Kunstammer und Mustersammlung*

Kaffeepause

17:00

*Dr. Hans Ulrich Kessler (Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz,
Berlin):*

*„Ew. Excellenz, Hochverehrter Herr Geheimrat“. Kunst- und Kulturgeschichte – die
Korrespondenz von Julius von Schlosser an Wilhelm von Bode in den Jahren 1889–1925*

Abendvortrag

19:00

*Prof. Dr. Artur Rosenauer (Universität Wien):
Schlosser und Riegl*

Freitag, 7. Oktober 2016,

*Universität Wien, Institut für Kunstgeschichte, Seminarraum 1 (1090 Wien,
Universitätscampus, Hof 9, Zugang über Garnisongasse 13)*

Sektionsleitung: Prof. Dr. Sebastian Schütze (Universität Wien)

9:00

*Dr. Berthold Hub (Universität Wien):
Schlossers „Ghiberti“*

9:45

*Prof. Dr. Michael Viktor Schwarz (Universität Wien):
Die Giottoforschung und Schlossers „Ghiberti“*

Kaffeepause

11:00

*Prof. Dr. Ingrid Ciulisová (Slowakische Akademie der Wissenschaften,
Bratislava):
Julius von Schlosser, court art and iconology*

11:45

*Prof. Dr. Raphael Rosenberg (Universität Wien):
Die Kunstliteratur – Nach Epochen oder Gattungen?*

12:30

*Prof. Dr. Hubert Locher (Universität Marburg):
„Inselhaftigkeit“. Schlossers Kunstbegriff im Kontext*

Mittagspause

Sektionsleitung: Prof. Dr. Michael Viktor Schwarz (Universität Wien)

15:00

*Prof. Dr. Michael Thimann (Universität Göttingen):
Kunstgeschichte als Bücherwissenschaft: Julius von Schlosser und Aby Warburg*

15:45

*Prof. Dr. Matthew Rampley (University of Birmingham):
Schlosser's concept of language and the aesthetic*

Kaffeepause

17:00

*Prof. Dr. Sebastian Schütze (Universität Wien):
„Aber ich tue mein möglichstes, ein halbwegs guter Crocianer zu werden“. Schlosser und
Croce*

17:45

*Prof. Dr. Robert Williams (University of California, Santa Barbara):
Schlosser, Vossler, and Wölfflin*

Reference / Quellennachweis:

CONF: Julius von Schlosser (Wien, 6 Oct 16). In: H-ArtHist, Sep 23, 2016.

<<http://arthist.net/archive/13787>>.



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