

Work in Progress.

Report on *Rudolf von Eitelberger: Netzwerker der Kunstgeschichte*.  
Conference held for the 200<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the birth of Rudolf  
Eitelberger (1817-1885). Museum of Applied Art, Vienna, 27-29 April  
2017.<sup>1</sup>

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Rudolf Eitelberger is commonly recognised as a key figure in the institutional formation of art history as a scholarly discipline. The first professor of art history in Austria and only the second in Europe, he also organised the first international art historical congress in 1873. He persuaded Emperor Franz Joseph to found the Museum for Art and Industry and was involved in the establishment of many other museums of design and industry across the Habsburg Empire. He was also influential in the development of monument conservation and protection in Austria. One can therefore safely state that without him the landscape of the nineteenth-century art world in Austria-Hungary would have been markedly different. How should we, therefore, assess his legacy? Even though his name may be familiar to art historians, he has seldom been the subject of close analysis and, if asked, few would be able to do more than repeat the brief outline provided above. This symposium set out to address that deficit, with 19 presentations on his social and intellectual origins, his involvement in Viennese cultural politics, his work as museum director, and his broader social, political and intellectual concerns.

As the initiator of the Vienna School of Art History, he is invariably compared with his better known successors, such as Alois Riegl or Max Dvořák, but this is probably misconceived. Although a crucial figure in the formation of the discipline, there was no 'method' associated with Eitelberger. He created a lasting monument with the publication of scholarly editions of primary texts (the so-called *Schriftquellen*), but his broader contributions to art historical knowledge were limited. He wrote some pioneering surveys of medieval Hungarian and Dalmatian architecture, overviews of nineteenth-century Austrian art, as well as shorter essays on sometimes unusual topics, such as playing cards. Yet his insights often did not go beyond positivistic descriptions of objects and images.

It is perhaps in the area of art and cultural policy that he made his most important contributions to public life. His interventions into lively debates on topics such as how Austria should respond to the rise of Prussia, women's labour, design and the global market, and the organisation of the proposed rehousing of the imperial art collections (he never lived to see the opening of the Kunsthistorisches Museum) ensured he was a highly prominent and influential public figure. In this regard his journalistic publications in newspapers should be as much a measure of his legacy as the more formal academic writings.

<sup>1</sup> <https://kunstgeschichte.univie.ac.at/einzelansicht/news/rudolf-von-eitelberger-netzwerker-der-kunstgeschichte/>

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The symposium was in honour of Eitelberger's bicentenary, but this did not rule out a critical analysis of his strengths and weaknesses. A recurrent point of debate was whether Eitelberger did, indeed, have any core intellectual commitments. To the casual reader the diversity of his output would suggest not, but some speakers nevertheless suggested it was possible to talk of him as having a method did. Influenced by the views of the medallist Joseph Daniel Böhm, Eitelberger developed an intense interest in the material properties of artworks; he combined this with an active interest in the political uses of art. Analysis of his lecture notes from the 1840s in the archive of the city of Vienna revealed a thinker engaging with questions about the social nature of art. As a number of participants argued, Eitelberger consequently stood at a distance from perhaps the most important aesthetic theorist writing in the Vienna of the mid-1800s: the formalist Eduard Hanslick. His interest in the material properties of works of art, an attitude he owed to Böhm, may explain his sympathetic response to the ideas of Gottfried Semper when it came to setting up the Museum for Art and Industry.

It was also suggested that Eitelberger was one of the earliest art historians to recognise the need to engage with art on a global scale. This was more than just recycled Hegelian aesthetics, or an endorsement of Hans Kugler's universal history of art, for whom the history of art was a succession of hermetic stages and styles. Eitelberger instead emphasised the importance of cultural exchange and pointed to the fluidity of cultural and artistic boundaries. In this respect Eitelberger was an important forerunner of Riegl and for similar reasons: although of different generations they were both committed to a Liberal belief in the free trade of ideas (and goods), a position which, for a while, converged with Habsburg cosmopolitanism. Indeed, one speaker suggested that Eitelberger was one of the foremost Liberal ideologists of the Ringstrasse, although this comes with a caveat: Liberalism itself underwent various transformations during his life. By the time of Eitelberger's death it had begun edging towards the nationalistic politics that would dominate Vienna and much of the rest of the Empire in the 1890s and beyond.

Other speakers were more critical of Eitelberger. His concept of art was empty of content, it was argued; his 'practical aesthetics' as one speaker referred to it, evoking Semper, lacked the conceptual groundwork of the Swiss thinker. This much was evident in the fact that Semper's idea of design reform, central to which was the need for a more meaningful relationship between medium, function and style, degenerated in the hands of Eitelberger into a concern with improving taste. Moreover, although he promoted the work of specific artists – Anselm Feuerbach and the orientalist Leopold Carl Müller were considered as examples – his observations about them seldom rose above unexceptional commonplaces. Indeed, it was suggested, Eitelberger was more interested in artists than artworks, and this was evident in his reluctance to discuss individual paintings and sculptures in any depth.

This betrayed his roots in the positivism of the time, perhaps, and yet Eitelberger was anything but a seeker of merely neutral facts about art. He was highly sensitive to the political ramifications of art and the way it could be talked about, and he repeatedly bemoaned the encroachment of 'federalism' and nationalistic sentiment on the field of art. Indeed, his most engaging writings are those that deal with the politics of the artworld,

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whether, for example, they touch on the Austrian museological landscape, the ramifications of the Franco-Prussian War, ministerial budgets for the arts or the artistic infrastructure of France. It was as an artistic administrator that his greatest legacy is to be found; as one speaker noted, given that he had very publicly supported reform in 1848, it was quite remarkable that only 16 years later he persuaded the Emperor to fund a museum that would rival the existing imperial art institutions, with an initial endowment of objects from the Emperor's collections. The conference offered some genuinely new and original material; undoubtedly the most striking example was a paper on Eitelberger's support for female emancipation, in which his wife Marie emerged from the shadows as having also been a significant agent.

Despite the limitations of his art historical studies, Eitelberger comes across in his interventions in cultural politics as an engaging figure; much attention has been given to Riegl's embrace of multiculturalism *avant la lettre*, but it was Eitelberger who provided the model. In an article on art in Austria written at the height of the conflict between France and Prussia he stated:

The times are past when educated peoples and individuals could believe they can cut themselves off from their neighbours and neighboring peoples. This is least possible of all in the domain of art and design, at least in Austria. The artist belongs to the world just as much as to his nation, and industrialist must have the global market in mind, and the demands of good taste worldwide. The call for prohibitive measures, for the exclusion of foreigners, recalls the times when, instead of helping ourselves, we called for the police and censorship.<sup>2</sup>

We may wish to distance ourselves from his uncritical embrace of the emerging global capitalism, yet he was clearly right to dismiss protectionism and narrow nationalism as a regressive and defeatist strategy.

It was therefore an irony, therefore, that despite his cosmopolitan values, few speakers at the conference addressed Eitelberger's place in the Habsburg Empire as a whole. The 'networker' referred to in the title of the symposium was very much limited to Vienna and the German-speaking world. Yet of course we know that this offers a very partial view. Böhm came from near Košice in what is now eastern Slovakia, then part of Hungary. Crucial members of the Böhm circle, such as Ferenc Pulszky, Imre Henszlmann and Gábor Fejérváry all came from the same region around Košice as Böhm, and one can just as much think of the Böhm circle as a Hungarian intellectual enclave, which puts Eitelberger's commitment to Empire in a different light. For those who were most important in his formative years as an art historian were from a far-flung outpost of the Empire. Given that they also came to play a crucial role in the development of museums in Hungary, they are of added interest, and there are caches of Eitelberger correspondence to be found in museum archives in Budapest and Košice and, one suspects, a proper investigation would reveal others elsewhere. In this sense Eitelberger, with his web of social, professional and intellectual contacts spread across

<sup>2</sup> Eitelberger, 'Die Kunstbestrebungen Österreichs' (1871) in Eitelberger, *Gesammelte Kunsthistorische Schriften* (Vienna, 1884), II, 177.

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the Habsburg domain, embodied the Empire in a striking manner. Eitelberger himself, of course, came from Olmütz (now Olomouc), a German island in a Moravian sea of Czech speakers. It was a pity that there were no participants from there, even though Eitelberger was instrumental in setting up the museum of design there. It is heartening that there will be a separate conference on Eitelberger in Olomouc in the Autumn.

The symposium raised some important issues in relation to Eitelberger. First, the scope of his oeuvre is still hardly known. The writings in the four volumes of the *Gesammelte Kunsthistorische Schriften* represent the tip of the iceberg, and a thankless but important task has to be the compiling of a proper bibliography of his articles written not only in academic and trade journals, but also in newspapers as the *Wiener Zeitung* and the *Neue Freie Presse*. The Vienna City library also has substantial quantities of material, from correspondence to lecture notes and other unpublished writings. Closer study of these may well offer new interpretative possibilities. Given the complex constitution of Austria-Hungary, and given the substantial attested intellectual exchanges between, for example Vienna and Hungary, it is no longer tenable to view figures such as Eitelberger solely through a Viennese lens. Other perspectives and points of comparison have to be taken into account, too, even though the linguistic barriers to such an exercise are considerable. Finally, the sheer range of his concerns meant that he is a subject of interest for scholars working in numerous disciplines, such as economic history, the history of museums, archaeology, conservation history, as well as art history and broader cultural and social history.

*Rudolf von Eitelberger: Netzwerker der Kunstgeschichte* was an important first step in gathering together the diverse array of projects that, different ways, refer to or focus on Eitelberger. Nevertheless, as with the best gatherings of this kind, it also highlighted how much more work there is to be done.

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