

Occupied Europe and German art historiography: methodology and morals

Review of:

Kunstgeschichte in den besetzten Gebieten 1939-1945, edited by Magdalena Bushart, Agnieszka Gasior and Alena Janatkova. Cologne/Weimar/Vienna: Böhlau, 2016, 327 pages, b/w illustrations, ISBN-10: 978-3-412-50168-6, € 45,00.

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In the late 1970s, German art historiography finally began to tackle a thorny subject that had been pending for over two decades: the state of the discipline during the Fascist era and the involvement of its practitioners in the political discourse of dominion and dictatorship. Since then, an avalanche of edited volumes and studies has reported on these academic and moral inquiries. Publishers have launched entire series dedicated to the subject, such as *Forschungen zu Kunst und Kunstgeschichte im Nationalsozialismus*, of which the book reviewed here is the second volume.

The focus on the development of art history during the Third Reich was a logical response to prior historiographies that either avoided the subject altogether or focused solely on theoretical developments from an internalist perspective. The latter had resulted in contested parallels between emigrant art historians such as Erwin Panofsky and regime-supporting academics such as Dagobert Frey, thought of as 'adopting similar methods' as Udo Kultermann wrote in 1966 – on the basis of Frey's own post-1945 evaluation of the field.¹ After several studies on individual art historians – such as Marlite Halbertsma's work on Wilhelm Pinder² – Heinrich Dilly was the first, in 1988, to dedicate a comprehensive study to art historians active between 1933 and 1945, dealing with the phenomenon from an institutional and statistical perspective.³ He discussed the numerical growth of the field thanks to nationalist and expansionist policies, and the involvement of many academics in 'intellectual warfare'; but he also stated that little was known of the practical workings of many art history institutes. Subsequent publications from the 2000s onward were therefore dedicated to the specific situation in German art history departments and the career, or fate, respectively, of individual (Jewish or non-

¹ Udo Kultermann, *Geschichte der Kunstgeschichte. Der Weg einer Wissenschaft*, Vienna: Econ-Verlag, 1966, 426, referring to Dagobert Frey, 'Zur wissenschaftlichen Lage der Kunstgeschichte' in *Kunstwissenschaftliche Grundfragen. Prolegomena zu einer Kunstphilosophie*, Vienna: Rohrer, 1946, 23-79. See especially Martin Papenbrock, 'Geschichte und Methodik der wissenschaftsgeschichtlichen Forschung zur Kunstgeschichte' in *Kunstgeschichte im Dritten Reich: Theorien, Methoden, Praktiken*, Berlin 2008, 27.

² Marlite Halbertsma, *Wilhelm Pinder und die deutsche Kunstgeschichte*, Worms: Werner, 1992, of which the original Dutch edition was published in 1985.

³ Heinrich Dilly, *Deutsche Kunsthistoriker 1933-1945*, Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 1988.

Jewish) lecturers and professors after Hitler's rise to power in 1933.⁴ Moreover, these recent publications were based on archive materials, and as a result avoided merely repeating apologetic autobiographical accounts and moved beyond the phase in which the relationship between ideological and methodological issues was the main focus of these historiographies.⁵

The volume reviewed here takes on board these recent methodical developments, but at the same time widens them in a geographical sense. The book deals in particular with the actions of German art historians and the response of their international colleagues, specifically in nations under the influence of, or directly occupied by, the German Reich. What were the responses of academics in the Czech, Polish, Dutch, Belgian, Lithuanian and Swedish contexts to the new political situation after the outbreak of the Second World War? What were the differences between the countries actually occupied by the German forces and those that remained 'neutral'? And how did German art historians, often working for Nazi institutions such as the SS-Ahnenerbe, the Einsatzstab Rosenberg (responsible for the large-scale looting of art works) and the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (under the banner of the Ministry of Education) operate in these occupied territories?

As the practical, political and ideological impact of the Second World War differed in each country, the present volume presents the kaleidoscope of choices facing academics and the extremely variegated circumstances they had to navigate. For example, in Bohemia, the Netherlands and Belgium, the German occupying authorities opted for the strategy of self-Nazification; by means of cultural propaganda, in which art and its history played a significant role, the (non-Jewish) inhabitants of those territories were to be convinced they were Aryans and thus a natural part of the German Reich. As the chapters by Alena Janatková and Christina Kott clearly illustrate, art historians working in these countries were often lured into collaborating with the Germans, and the art works themselves were interpreted to show the inherent 'Germanness' or Teutonic past of these particular regions.

The situation in Poland presents a marked contrast with this seemingly harmless approach – in this case, the German ideological position was that Polish national culture was inferior, German art in Polish collections was to be transported into the Reich and the remainder of monuments destroyed. Likewise, the existing academic and heritage institutions were to be suppressed and replaced by German equivalents. The chapter by Sabine Arend in this volume shows how these new organisations were not set up to serve academic purposes. Art history, like many other humanities disciplines during the Nazi regime, were pressed into the service of 'Kämpfende Wissenschaft' or 'militant science' – which was to prolong and conclude the military conquest of the country in 1939.

⁴ For example Ulrike Wendland, *Leben und Werk der unter dem Nationalsozialismus verfolgten und vertriebenen Wissenschaftler*, Munich: Saur, 1999.

⁵ See for example *Kunstgeschichte im Nationalsozialismus. Beiträge zur Geschichte einer Wissenschaft zwischen 1930 und 1950*, edited by Nikola Doll, Christian Fuhrmeister and Michael Sprenger. Weimar: VDG, 2005.

An important task of the newly-established art history departments in Poland was to demonstrate to the new inhabitants of 'Germanised' districts of Polish cities the impact of German art on eastern European culture – thus providing a legitimisation for the Nazi occupation of these regions. In some cases, such as the city of Gdansk, ceded to Poland by the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, it actually reversed the preceding efforts of Polish academics in the interwar years to 'Polonise' the city's cultural memory.⁶ Therefore, as Agnieszka Gasior's chapter makes clear, collaboration with Polish academics was out of the question; instead they were collectively dismissed and the majority temporarily imprisoned. Subsequently, 'secret universities' were established that functioned as underground institutions, whose teaching activities aimed to strengthen Polish identity through the study of its culture and art. At the same time, Polish art historians tried to save as much as possible from the German mass destruction and looting of their heritage by documenting architectural monuments and hiding art objects from the German authorities. Interestingly enough, this led to another wave of 'Polonising' Silesian cultural heritage after the war.⁷

In many cases, however, the situation of academics in occupied territories was more complex; an example is the life of the Lithuanian art historian Mikalojus Vorobjovas. As Giedre Jankeviciute describes in the present volume, this art historian had been educated in Marburg, Berlin and Munich in the 1920s, had maintained close contacts with German colleagues since then, and strongly opposed Russian influence as his parents had been deported to Siberia, where they presumably died, during the Russian occupation of Vilnius in 1941.⁸ Vorobjovas therefore chose the German side when Lithuania was occupied for a second time by Nazi troops in late 1941. When the Nazis sought to promote the region's German architectural heritage as proof of their rightful possession of this territory, he took the opportunity to research Baroque architecture in Vilnius, and in particular the eighteenth-century German-born architect Johann Christoph Glaubitz who was an ideal subject for German cultural propaganda in the Baltic region. When the Russian army invaded Lithuania, Vorobjovas fled, through Austria, to the United States as he feared persecution for his collaboration with the German authorities.

The situation in neutral Sweden shows that even in a country spared German occupation, art historians adopted the ideological position of 'northern art' and the concept of artistic autarchy and moulded it to serve their own political views. This can be seen in Andreas Lindblom's *Art History of Sweden* of 1944, a hefty volume whose main line of argument is not chronological stylistic development but the immutable national characteristics of Sweden's artistic heritage. Inga Lena

⁶ Jacek Friedrich, 'Netherlandism of Early Modern Gdańsk Art in the Eyes of Polish Researchers before 1945' in *Netherlandish Artists in Gdansk in the Time of Hans Vredeman de Vries*, Gdansk/Lemgo: Muzeum Historyczne/Schloss Brake, 2006, 28.

⁷ Antje Kempe, 'Ein anderes schlesisches Antlitz – Zur polnischen Nachkriegsforschung über die Kunst Schlesiens, in *Paradigmenwechsel. Ost- und Mitteleuropa im 20. Jahrhundert - Kunstgeschichte im Wandel der politischen Verhältnisse*, Hohenems: Bucher, 2011, 60-64.

⁸ Sigitas Saladžinskas, 'Tragiški Mikalojaus Vorobjovo ir jo tėvų gyvenimo faktai' (Tragic facts of the life of Mikalojus Vorobjovas and his parents) in *Lietuvos Dailės Muziejaus metraštis* 16 (2012) 25-26.

Ångström Grandien shows that this was achieved by omitting works by undeniably German artists, such as Bernt Notke's famous statue of Saint George and the Dragon in Stockholm's Storkyrkan, or by turning foreign artists, such as Nicodemus Tessin the Elder, into Swedes. In this case one might say that the enemy's weapons were appropriated and turned against him. Interestingly, this also led to a (failed) attempt to usurp territory, in this case that of Finland – Lindblom was chairman of the committee that aimed to send voluntary troops to help the Finns against the invasion by Russia in 1939, on the ideological basis of a presumed cultural and racial connection between the two countries; in this case, Sweden was not an occupied country but a potential aggressor.

To return to the issue of the occupied territories, the newly established network of institutions and the propaganda geared towards the existing population and/or newly introduced inhabitants meant that academics working in Germany itself were sent out to spread their ideologically tainted views among their colleagues and the wider public. Four chapters in this volume deal with this reverse side of the same coin. The first discusses the German presence in Italy through the Florentine art historical institute – increasingly pressed to function as a propaganda machine; the second deals with Wilhelm Pinder as a standard bearer of German culture thanks to an incessant itinerant lecture program organised less by academics than by German embassies and Imperial governors. Both essays show how insistent the demands of government offices could be on academics – who did not resist or even leaped at the opportunity. A third essay deals with Dagobert Frey and his pioneering role in the so-called *Ostforschung* (research into Germanic ethnicity and cultural characteristics in eastern European countries) as he developed it during his time in Krakow from 1931 to 1945 – and his role in the looting of art during the occupation of Poland; the fourth and last focuses on Karl Heinz Esser who worked in various regions under the influence of the German occupying army, Transylvania and Norway, studying the 'Teutonic' features of the timber architecture of these regions.

The chapter by Christina Kott discusses the complex ideological and practical impact of the German military and civil authorities on the process of restoring and preserving monuments in Belgium. This essay departs to some degree from academic art history, because it is primarily concerned with the vicissitudes of restoration architects in a situation of foreign dominion and the attempts to transform an advisory committee into a professional bureaucratic institution. The second essay dealing with this particular field describes the practice of restoration in the Netherlands. The latter, however, maintains a rather outdated internalist perspective in which bureaucratic continuity and the competences and skills of restoration architects are supposed to have safeguarded against German interventions in restoration plans, thus protecting those involved from Nazi ideology. Marieke Kuipers's description of the Dutch situation, in itself factually accurate, lacks the high standard of analysis of other chapters in this volume and strikes the reader as naive in equating good and bad restoration practices with good and bad moral positions. Kuipers tends to repeat the stories told by its protagonists, who declared after 1945 that they had resisted political pressures while in practice they often gave in to – and subscribed to – the concept of national identity that

represented the main tool used by the German authorities in the process of Dutch 'self-Nazification', aimed at effecting the Aryanisation of Dutch culture.

As the introduction to this volume illustrates so well through the example of Karl Maria Swoboda, repeating the ex-post justifications of the protagonists is one of the main fallacies that scholars fall into when researching art history in times of regime change. After 1945, Swoboda presented his actions in Prague, such as his advice to the German authorities on the 'safeguarding' – i.e. looting – of art works from Czech institutions, the restoration of Teutonic monuments and various other involvements in the German administration of Bohemia, as an act of protecting Czech heritage, and thus of implicit resistance. At the same time, he downplayed his political involvement by underlining the practical application of his competences and skills. Only thanks to archive documents has it been possible to demonstrate that Swoboda's role was far from neutral. Thus, to avoid taking at face value the post-1945 legitimations provided by those involved in academia or heritage institutions, historiographical research on the period of the Second World War requires further critical and, above all, archive research.

Apart from this important (and partially involuntary) conclusion, the volume suffers from an imbalance on two levels. First, the title suggests that the main subject is the academic discipline and its practitioners during the Second World War, but some chapters stray rather far from disciplinary history. This is true, apart from the two essays on monuments committees discussed above, of the chapter by Volker Mohn on the propaganda exhibition *Deutsche Größe*, organised in 1941 by the Amt Rosenberg and the Reichsprotektorat (Imperial Protectorate) in Prague to argue the central position of Bohemia as the 'cradle' of the German Reich. In this case, the main actors were not art historians but military officials and employees of the German embassy, with little to no involvement on the part of art historians either in Germany or in Prague.

Second, the title of the book refers to the six years of German occupation, but it also deals with non-occupied territories such as Sweden, although this adds to its importance. More generally, however, there is a bias towards eastern (and some northern) European countries, to the detriment of western and southern Europe, which is more of a pity. Greece, France and Spain are missing altogether, while Italy might have deserved more attention. Admittedly, the Italian situation is included in this volume but presented exclusively from the point of view of the German institute of art history in Florence and its role in propaganda, without asking if and how this policy had an impact on Italian academics. France, on the other hand, is completely absent, though it was part and parcel of the 'Aktion Ritterbusch' – a megalomaniac research project of 500 German academics organised by the Ministry of Education – that aimed to study the historical impact of German art on the rest of Europe.⁹ The lack of French (Vichy) historiography during the War years can be

⁹ On the Spanish situation, see Jesusa Vega, Jesús Carrillo, Francesc Fontbona de Vallescar, Vicente Lleo, Juan Antonio Ramírez and Victor I. Stoichita, 'Points de repère pour l'histoire de l'art en Espagne', *Perspective*, 2 (2009) 180-206. For the Aktion Ritterbusch and the study of French art in relation to Germany, see Frank-Rutger Hausmann, "*Deutsche*

explained by the fact that at the present state of research we completely lack any consideration of the period 1940-1945 – Germain Bazin's history of the discipline merely offers a philosophical history of ideas, and the institutional history of French art history published in 1998 by Lyne Therrien only considers the period up to the early 1900s.¹⁰

Despite these flaws, this volume demonstrates that German art historiography has taken a particular course in which academic practice and the institutional context have become just as important as the philosophical concepts adopted by its practitioners, and that this is all the more relevant when studying the discipline in times of regime change. Non-German historiographers can take this as an example in the study of their own national schools. At the same time, the geographical limitations of *Kunstgeschichte in den besetzten Gebieten 1939-1945* show that a more comprehensive study of the European dimension of art history during the Nazi era still remains a desideratum.

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Geisteswissenschaft" im Zweiten Weltkrieg. Die "Aktion Ritterbusch" (1940-1945), Dresden: Dresden University Press, 1998, 207.

¹⁰ Germain Bazin, *Histoire de l'histoire de l'art de Vasari à nos jours*, Paris: Michel, 1986 and Lyne Therrien, *L'histoire de l'art en France. Genèse d'une discipline universitaire*, Paris: Éditions du CTHS, 1998.