

Gombrich on Strzygowski

Richard Woodfield

“In the final years, Strzygowski embraced the Nazi sentiments of racism and nationalism, although these appeared to be more the logical conclusion of his earlier theories than any attempt to court the political authorities.”

[<https://dictionaryofarthistorians.org/strzygowski.htm> accessed 25.10.2017]

Between March 1988 and May 1990 I met Ernst Gombrich on a monthly basis to conduct a series of interviews with him on the topic of his life and work, starting with his teenage childhood in Vienna. This was to form the basis for a critical analysis of his thought, a kind of intellectual biography. Then, at the end of 1991, Didier Eribon published *Ce que l'image nous dit*,¹ a set of interviews that included much material that had also emerged in our conversations. I saw little point in pursuing the project and subsequently turned my attentions to Viennese art historiography.

The following transcript dates from 10th March 1988. There is some overlap with Didier's conversation but also a bit more.² I am also adding the two obituaries that I mentioned to Ernst as representing the UK/US view of Strzygowski's work from 1941/2 (pages 5-7 below).³ To illustrate the range of material published by Strzygowski's I. Kunsthistorischen Instituts der Universität Wien I have also added a separate PDF of a sheet tipped into my personal copy of Alfred Karasek-Langer, *Verzeichnis der Schriften von Josef Strzygowski. Mit einer Einführung von Karl Ginnart*, Klagenfurt: Im Kommissionsverlag Artur Kollitsch 1933. It may be accessed [here](#).

The interview is intended to supplement this journal's publication of Karl Johns' translation of Josef Strzygowski, *Die Krisis der Geisteswissenschaften* (1923).⁴ Ernst attended Strzygowski's lectures in his first term at the University of Vienna, October 1928.

¹ Ernst Gombrich and Didier Eribon, *Ce que l'image nous dit : Entretiens sur l'art et la science*, Paris : Adam Biro 1991.

² English translation: E.H. Gombrich, *A Lifelong Interest: Conversations on Art and Science with Didier Eribon*, London: Thames and Hudson 1991. Strzygowski forms the focal point of discussion on pages 37 to 38.

³ See also Christopher S. Wood, 'Strzygowski and Riegl in America' in this journal [17/CSW1](#).

⁴ For which, [click here](#).

**Ernst Gombrich on Josef Strzygowski. Interview with Richard Woodfield.
8 minutes 44 seconds recording.⁵**

Gombrich: I was repelled a little by Strzygowski. I have jottings from some of Strzygowski's lectures. I found them here, you see. He was very egotistical. I... my present view of Strzygowski is perhaps not as negative as it was then. He did bring in new fields of research, with great vision in a way, but he was a racialist and he was a populist, in a sense, you know and he wanted to be a kind of saviour or a messiah. He was one of those people. There is a curious negative parallelism between Aby Warburg and Strzygowski. Aby Warburg wanted to save the world by studying the classical heritage you see, and he was an anti-classics man, but both thought that the salvation of the world depended on art history. In that sense, there was a certain parallelism. This obsession with their own work and discovery and so on. Strange.

Woodfield: Do you think it would be tactful of me to leave the reference to Strzygowski as it stands; simply as references to the obituary notices in the *Burlington Magazine* and *Speculum*.

Gombrich: I didn't read those obituary notices. What did they say?

Woodfield: What it says, in the *Burlington*, well they both say that he was a very interesting scholar, who thought some highly innovative ideas, but his work was tainted by Nazism and it was for future generations to make up their minds as to the overall value of his contributions.

Gombrich: That is not wrong and it is perhaps not wholly fair. I mean he was a crank. One of the typical, one of the facts about him, did I ever tell you that? He was to such an extent a crank, that his obsession for a time was the Iranian fire temple. Everything dependent on the original idea of the circumambulation of a fire altar in Iranian religion, whether that ever existed I cannot tell you, and that therefore, Romanesque and Armenian churches all reflected the Iranian fire temple and he hoped that when the Nazis would come to Austria, they would build such a fire temple on a certain mountain near Vienna, and when they failed to do so he was disillusioned. [laughter] You see he ceased to be a Nazi because they didn't build a fire temple. I mean he was a crank. He had Jewish friends, he was not an anti-Semite or anything but he believed that the health of Europe lay in the, in the steppes and in migrations and so on. Tents and nomads and all that, that was a creative factor in European art

⁵ With thanks to Abigail Kinsey, my editorial assistant for this issue, for producing the transcript from my tape.

history, while the art of the powers; Rome and the church, all this was a negative influence. Tyranny.

There was something, I mean, even that, though it is of course in this form arrant nonsense. But he saw this power cult in Roman art etc. He reacted to it very strongly, you know. And he called it *Machtkunst*, the art of might, you know, of power, against embroideries and folk art and timber buildings. This was a sort of submerged creativity which had been oppressed or suppressed by the church and by the powers and by papacy and sort of inherent... I mean there are the sort of little nuggets of interesting ideas there but also are completely exaggerated and he would sort of lecture like a rabble rouser, you know. I mean he had a salvation in mind from this dominance of Rome and of the renaissance, and of course that was expressionism you know, that the renaissance was a mistake you know. Back to the creative roots of Germanic art, also Slavonic art, away from... from what we would call the mainstream of art history, you know, it's on the fringes that the real creativity happened.

Not an uninteresting mind but a crank [laughter]. Quite a nice crank, as I say he was not an anti-Semite. He spoke with a strong Slavonic accent. He came from Graz. There was one of these ... you must think there were many of these philosophies of history and geopolitics at that time in Europe. There was a man called Gumplowicz⁶ who had such ideas, who influenced Strzygowski and of course there was Oswald Spengler at that time who was much read ... 'The Decline of the West,' you know, all of these enormous, large philosophies of history which made many converts. And again, there were the more cautious academics, the scholars of the type of Julius von Schlosser who kept aloof while, you know, it can't have been all that simple (laughs).

So that is, I think, important. When I... I reacted against these large-scale philosophies. I think you quote something about my saying something that all this is connected; Rembrandt...⁷ That is a reference

⁶ Ludwig Gumplowicz (March 9, 1838, Kraków – August 20, 1909, Graz, Austria-Hungary), author of *Der Rassenkampf: Sociologische Untersuchungen*, Innsbruck 1883 available at <https://archive.org/details/derrassenkampfs00gumpgoog>, accessed 25.10.2017.

⁷ A reference to a quotation from Ernst's school-leaving essay written before he went to university:

.. in a truly wild tangle of associations they bring together the most unlikely names and concepts, and in their identification of sonata forms and analysis, of Rembrandtian chiaroscuro, Newton's theory of gravity, and the court etiquette of Louis XIV, they seem to be approaching the "Ars Magna" of Raymond Lull, creating a labyrinth of words which is impossible to verify and which the sharp-witted reader is left to marvel.

to Spengler, to Oswald Spengler, you see. The idea that it was all one... He had, sort of very loose associations, everything came in, he was a bit of a show off, Spengler. Immensely learned also, but everything would have to be one thing... typical of the period. I read Spengler and I didn't take to it, you see. I thought it was all wishy washy. Worringer was one of those a little... of the sort of great philosophers of race and of periods and of, you know, it was all neo-Hegelianism in a certain sense, and to be taken with a grain of salt and I took it with that grain of salt. It didn't appeal to me.

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[*Wandlungen in der Kunstbetrachtung (Von Winckelmann bis zur Jetztzeit) Hausarbeit des Ernst Gombrich*, ms. 1928, 71 (copy in my possession translated by Joanne Adams).] The original Austrian typescript is available in the Gombrich Archive at the Warburg Institute. The young Gombrich was averse to holism before he enrolled at university. In this regard he shared his father's views on the nature of evidence, and distaste for waffle, well before he met Karl Popper. Both Ernst and Karl's fathers were lawyers.

***Burlington Magazine*, 78, 1941, 132:**

JOSEF STRZYGOWSKI.—The death at Vienna on January 7th, at the age of 78, of Dr. Strzygowski should not pass unnoticed in the columns of a magazine, of whose Consultative Committee he was a member for nearly a third of a century, and to which he was a valued, if but occasional contributor.¹ The case of the famous Austrian scholar is one of somewhat unusual complexity: for while no one would deny that his work has left its mark profoundly impressed upon history of art, yet opinion is, and is likely to continue for some time, strongly divergent as to the value of many of his findings. Without belittling his achievement, it is but right to recognize that there was in him the strain of a fundamental Romantic; and that this tended to lead him astray, not least in those ultimate developments of his, harmonizing with the crudest Nazi tenets, which future judges of his work will perhaps find more charitable to ignore.

¹ "Turner's Path from Nature to Art", Vol. XII [March 1908], pp. 335-30; "Oriental Carpets", Vol. XIII [October 1908], pp. 25-30; "The Origin of Christian Art", Vol. XX [December 1911], pp. 46-153.

***Speculum*, 17, 1942, 460-461:**

JOSEF STRZYGOWSKI

JOSEF STRZYGOWSKI, Corresponding Fellow of the Mediaeval Academy, died in Vienna on 7 January 1941. He was born in 1862 at Biala in what was then Austrian Silesia. His father was a manufacturer, and the son at first went into the father's business, accounting for his tardy university training, which commenced only in 1883 and was pursued at Vienna, Berlin and Munich.

The energy of this young scholar was quickly apparent. His thesis, *Die Ikonographie der Taufe Christi*, was published in 1885, and three years later he brought out two works, *Cimabue und Rom* and *Die Calenderbilder des Chronographen vom Jahre 354*, of which the second at least is still fundamental in mediaeval archaeology. The direction his studies were finally to take was determined by his *Studienreise* of 1888-1890, in Greece, Asia Minor, and Russia, during which he formed the plan of a comprehensive history of Byzantine Art. The *History* was never written. His studies for it issued in the rich output of his earlier career, up to the time of the World War, but its completion was frustrated by the ideology that controlled his later writings and expanded his outlook far beyond the Byzantine field.

On his return from travel he served as Privat-Dozent in the history of art in Vienna, and in 1892 was called to a professorship in Graz. The three volumes of *Byzantinische Denkmäler*, published from 1891 to 1903, convey little idea of his activity during this period. A catalogue at the end of the third volume lists 71 of his articles, and the *Byzantinsche Zeitschrift*, founded at this time, owed its immediate leadership in East Christian archaeology to Strzygowski's notes, articles, and reviews. The epoch-making product of this period was *Orient oder Rom?*, which appeared in 1901 and initiated the polemic between the advocates of the Roman-centric view of early Christian art and Strzygowski's conception. He saw it as an

evolution proceeding from a Hellenistic tradition fertilized in late antiquity by the influence of resurgent oriental concepts and forms in the eastern provinces of the Empire. This controversy still continues so far as minor issues are concerned, but the principal points of Strzygowski's thesis are now generally accepted.

The thesis was developed in four works, *Kleinasion, ein Neuland der Kunstgeschichte* (1903), the monograph *Machatta* published in the *Jahrbuch der Preussischen Kunstsammlungen* for 1904, the catalogue *Koptische Kunst* of the Coptic section of the Cairo Museum (1904), and *Amida* (1910). The first laid the foundation for a study of Byzantine origins in architecture, the second and fourth initiated the differentiation of Oriental from Hellenistic in late antique ornament and building-plan, the third is still the *vade mecum* of any student of Coptic art. Strzygowski himself was responsible for the preservation of Machetta facade by its transfer to Berlin. Despite the fact that the early date he gave to the building is not now accepted, he always regarded his monograph on Machetta as the most important of his works to that date. And rightly so, for in this there first appears the comparative method in the history of art which he championed from the war-period to his death.

This method, simply stated, insists on the establishment of evolutionary relation by analysis and comparison of the works of art themselves, with philology and history removed from their primal position to that of accessory instruments to be employed after the working hypothesis has been formed. An illustration of the far-reaching results of this shift in approach is Strzygowski's citation of two Chinese mirrors as valid comparisons for the rinceaux of the Machatta facade. The link between such widely separated examples was according to him to be sought in Iran. The role of Iran as intermediary or distributing point of the artistic currents converging on the Near East, was further developed in *Altai-Iran und Volkerwanderung* (1917) (in which also was presented his theory of the part played by nomadic races and Nordic tribes in the evolution of ornament) and in *Die Baukunst der Armenier und Europa* (1918). Iran, whose focal importance was predicated not on existing monuments but on the assumed influence exerted on the arts of other areas, was to Strzygowski the 'heart of Asia,' on which depend the religions and arts of China, India and the Hellenistic West. Its influence may be traced by the two symbols of the arch and landscape, and in technique by appliqué on a plane surface.

This conception of Iran, as the melting-pot of Asiatic style — receiving, distributing and creating; absorbing and developing the concepts and nomadic art of the north — eventually broadened into the generalization of the three zones of human culture. The evolution of this idea may be traced through the author's writings in the 20's and 30's: *Die Landschaft in der nordischen Kunst* (1922), *Die Krisis in den Geisteswissenschaften* (1923), *Der Norden in der bildenden Kunst Westeuropas* (1926), *Early Church Art in Northern Europe* (1928), *Forschung und Erziehung* (1928), *Die altslavische Kunst* (1929), *Aliens bildende Kunst* (1930), *Asiatische Miniaturmalerei* (1933), *L' Ancien art chretien de Syrie* (1936), *Dürer and der nordische Schicksalshain* (1937). Of the three zones the southern, with no need for permanent habitation, contributed nothing to architecture, and in its other arts was content with the reproduction of animal and human life in isolated figures. The northern zone is

cold, produced therefore the house or tent wherein lie the germs of architectural design, and expressed its deeper spiritual endowment by ornament rather than the human figure. The middle zone is the zone of empire, where art was prostituted in the end to the service of monarch, church, or other force suppressive of humanism. The penetration of the purer culture of the North produced in the middle realm the classic and Gothic styles, only again to be submerged and subjugated by the Renaissance.

This was the doctrine (in which one cannot fail to see the influence of the ideology of National Socialism) which was taught in the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Vienna, under Strzygowski's leadership since 1910. It was in truth a doctrine, since he conceived art-history, if taught by his comparative method, as educative in the direction of a return to the pure and pristine virtues of Nordic culture. This thesis, which absorbed Strzygowski's effort in his later years, was open to immediate criticism for its lack of substantial proof, and the comparative method, on which its far-reaching conclusions were based, aroused a similar distrust. The fame of the scholar has been thereby so dimmed that his earlier contribution to mediaeval archaeology is less appreciated. But this contribution was no less than a complete re-orientation of early mediaeval art, and if it is possible to speak of 'founders' of modern concepts in this field, Strzygowski's name may well lead all the rest.

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