

Hans Sedlmayr's art history*

Review of:

Maria Männig, *Hans Sedlmayrs Kunstgeschichte: Eine kritische Studie*, Köln–Weimar–Wien, Böhlau Verlag 2017, 309 pp., 45 b/w illus., bibliography, index

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Hans Sedlmayr (1896–1984), along with several other students of Max Dvořák (1874–1921), Julius von Schlosser (1866–1938) and Josef Strzygowski (1862–1941), represents a kind of epilogue to the Vienna School of Art History, which exerted a huge influence on academic research into art and its history in Central Europe from the end of the 19th century to the middle of the 20th century. In many cases the politically engaged Viennese art historians acquired reputations as important researchers whose methods were at times difficult to understand. Leaving aside the odd fluctuation, interest in their ideas persisted from the mid-1940s until the mid-1980s. After this, however, the feeling gradually took hold that this chapter in art history had been closed and interest faded.

In 2000, Christopher Wood published selected translated texts by the younger Vienna School of Art History, and these reawakened an interest in the ideas of the entire school.¹ These translations, along with Wood's own extensive introduction, introduced Viennese art history of the first half of the 20th century to a generation of British and American art historians who had not been burdened by memories of the Second World War, as their German and Austrian counterparts had been in the latter half of the 1940s and the 1950s.

During the 1930s and 1940s, the undeniable links between several members of the Vienna School and the politics of the Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei or NSDAP, turned many researchers in German-speaking countries off their legacy.² The main representative of this compromised group of art historians was Hans Sedlmayr, whose sympathy for Nazism cast a shadow not only over his later research but over almost the entire Vienna School.

However, the new millennium saw efforts made at a historical and methodological revision by researchers in the USA and Great Britain. Amongst other things this is visible in the growing number of translations into English of

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¹ Christopher S. Wood, *The Vienna School Reader. Politics and Art Historical Method in the 1930s*, New York 2000.

² See, for instance, Heinrich Dilly, *Deutsche Kunsthistoriker: 1933–1945*, Berlin 1988; Ruth Heftrig, Olaf Peters, Barbara Schellewald (ed), *Kunstgeschichte im "Dritten Reich". Theorien, Methoden, Praktiken*, Berlin 2008.

texts by Viennese art historians.³ This renewed interest is accompanied by numerous studies by English speaking researchers, including Matthew Rampley, Michael Gubser, Diana Reynolds Cordileone, Alina Payne, Richard Woodfield, Karl Johns and, as mentioned above, Christopher Wood.⁴

As well as British and American researchers, Hans Aurenhammer and Agnes Blaha have taken up the cause of the Vienna School,⁵ and Artur Rosenauer and Edwin Lachnit have also contributed important studies.⁶ Maria Männig, who studied at the Institute of Art History at the University of Vienna and completed her studies at the Staatlichen Hochschule für Gestaltung Karlsruhe, is part of this trend. The study under review thus ranks her amongst researchers who have addressed themselves recently to the topic of the Vienna School. However, the book is especially interesting for its innovative method of historiographic research, which opens up new possibilities for the interpretation of art history texts of the 20th century.

The book is divided into three sections inspired by *The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) and its reception in the 20th century, namely Inferno, Purgatorio and Paradiso (the author explains this approach on pp. 20–22). These main chapters examine the individual themes of art history that Sedlmayr was most exercised by during his long career: modernism, the gothic and the baroque. An art history canon was created that in Sedlmayr's work mirrored his critical and yet conservative stance to the culture of the 20th century.

³ See, for instance, Otto Pächt, *The Practice of Art History: Reflections on Method*, London 1999; Alois Riegl, *Historical Grammar of the Visual Arts*, New York 2004; Alois Riegl, *The Origins of Baroque Art in Rome*, Los Angeles 2010, et al.

⁴ Matthew Rampley, *The Vienna School of Art History. Empire and the Politics of Scholarship, 1847–1918*, Pennsylvania 2013; Michael Gubser, *Time's Visible Surface. Alois Riegl and the Discourse on History and Temporality in Fin-de-siècle Vienna*, Detroit 2006; Diana Reynolds Cordelione, *Alois Riegl in Vienna 1875–1905: An Institutional Biography*, Burlington 2013; Alina Payne, 'Beyond Kunstwollen: Alois Riegl and the Baroque' in: Alois Riegl, *The Origins of Baroque Art in Rome*, Los Angeles 2010, 1–33; Richard Woodfield, 'Ernst Gombrich and Max Dvořák', *Ars* LXIV, 2011, 125–138; Karl Johns, 'Julius von Schlosser and the Need to Reminisce', *Journal of Art Historiography* 1, December 2009, https://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2011/02/media_139128_en.pdf, accessed 4 September 2017. During the nineties, the Vienna School in general and Alois Riegl in particular were taken up by Margaret Iversen and Margaret Olin. See Margaret Iversen, *Alois Riegl: Art History and Theory*, Cambridge 1993; Margaret Olin, *Forms of Representation in Alois Riegl's Theory of Art*, Pennsylvania 1992.

⁵ For example Hans Aurenhammer, 'Max Dvořák (1874–1921). Von der historischen Quellenkritik zur Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte', in: Karl Hruza (ed.), *Österreichische Historiker. Lebensläufe und Karrieren. 1900–1945*, Bd. II, Wien 2012, 169–200; Agnes Blaha, 'Fritz Novotny and the New Vienna School of Art History — An Ambiguous Relation', *Journal of Art Historiography* I, December 2009, https://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2011/02/media_139126_en.pdf, accessed 4 September 2017.

⁶ For example Artur Rosenauer (ed.), *Klassische Texte der Wiener Schule der Kunstgeschichte: Gesammelte Aufsätze*, Wien 1996; Edwin Lachnit, *Die Wiener Schule der Kunstgeschichte und die Kunst ihrer Zeit: zum Verhältnis von Methode und Forschungsgegenstand am Beginn der Moderne*, Wien 2005.

Männig's approach draws on the principles of French poststructuralism, especially discourse analysis, which in reflections on contemporary developments she adapts to the requirements of art history (pp. 15–17). In practice this means that she does not attempt to describe the cultural and political environment within which Sedlmayr's operated, and its influence on the texts in question, but structures her interpretation differently: she regards the text as fundamental. It is the primary source and the means by which she attempts to outline the period situation of its author, a situation that the text refers to both directly and indirectly. This leads her to a new conception of Sedlmayr's art history, since just as Dante's pilgrimage is embodied in his work by means of subjective narrative, Männig introduces Sedlmayr's cultural environment in a similar fashion via his reflections upon art history, thus assigning the role of narrator to Sedlmayr through the prism of his works.

Männig's interpretation is based mainly on Sedlmayr's best known work, *Verlust der Mitte: Die bildende Kunst des 19. Und 20. Jahrhunderts als Symptom und Symbol der Zeit*.⁷ The book outlines the causes of the decline of modern art within the context of a deeper cultural and religious crisis beginning at the end of the 18th century. The author diagnoses the state of modern art, which he claims has lost its foundations and is on the verge of collapse. Männig creates a network of period cultural references around this study and points to the reasons for Sedlmayr's criticism and the way it was gradually duplicated in his reflections upon art history.

An example of this would be Männig's extensive analysis of *Die Entstehung der Kathedrale*.⁸ She searches for the broader starting points of Sedlmayr's formulations of medieval architecture and finds it in his cultural criticism. She thus interprets the text as part of its author's 'anti-classical' canon, something he had been working on since the thirties and fully articulated in *Verlust der Mitte* (p. 165). She shows that Sedlmayr's art history always returns to the ideas and periods of unified monarchies built on the Catholic faith, the purest manifestations of which were gothic and later baroque art.

Männig shows that the logical outcome of such thinking is a critical approach to the art of the 19th and 20th centuries, which had lost such unity. In this way she teases to the surface the issue of Sedlmayr's relationship to the political and cultural rhetoric of Nazi Germany, which was similarly disparaging of modern art, calling it 'degenerate'. She pursues this connection doggedly and points, for instance, to Sedlmayr's art historical formulations in relation to his enthusiastic acceptance of the annexation of Austria by the German Empire in 1938 (pp. 38–96, 221–234).

In the concluding sections of the book, which are devoted to Sedlmayr's lifelong interest in baroque art, especially the architecture of Johann Bernhard Fischer von Erlach (1656–1723), Sedlmayr becomes a 'Sun King', a fact that is

⁷ Hans Sedlmayr, *Verlust der Mitte: Die bildende Kunst des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts als Symptom und Symbol der Zeit*, Salzburg 1948. During the fifties, this book became one of the bestselling books on art history in German speaking countries and in 1957 was translated into English as *Art in Crisis*. See Hans Sedlmayr, *Art in Crisis: The Lost Center*, London 1957.

⁸ Hans Sedlmayr, *Die Entstehung der Kathedrale*, Zurich 1950.

implied by the festivities of 1964 organised on the occasion of his departure from the university in Munich for the university in Salzburg. At these celebrations, Sedlmayr was transported by coach and photographed wearing a baroque wig with a bottle of Coca-Cola in his hand (pp. 243–245). When interpreting these photographs, Männig demonstrates that even Sedlmayr's reflections upon baroque art were part of the 'anti-classical' canon he himself created: '*In his oeuvre including works on the gothic, the baroque and the modern, Sedlmayr follows the anti-classical canon. The renaissance makes an appearance, but as a blind spot, as it were.*' (p. 249).

Despite indicating that Sedlmayr's art history is 'anti-classical', in a wide ranging examination of period ideas and circumstances, with an emphasis on events in Germany and Austria, the author pays close attention to the transformations of his thinking, beginning in the 1930s, from a more cultural and historical than methodological perspective. She does not set aside much space for his relationship to the Vienna School of Art History. She comes closest in an analysis of *Die Macchia Bruegels*,⁹ in which she contrasts Sedlmayr's reflections on art history with those of his Viennese teachers (pp. 97–109), and in Sedlmayr's links to the studies by Riegl and Dvořák of baroque art (pp. 249–253).

It would have been interesting to include then contemporary debates on art history in her overview. Though Männig highlights the importance of Worringer's *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* of 1907 (pp. 174–179) and Sedlmayr's polemic with Emil Kaufmann (pp. 72–86), and the backdrop to the considerations of John Ruskin (pp. 145–148) and Eugène Viollet-le-Duc (pp. 168–174), she does not concern herself with the wider context of the field. Sedlmayr's post-war activities especially do not receive the same attention as his activities during the thirties and forties, in which Männig focuses on the genesis of ideas culminating in *Verlust der Mitte* and *Die Entstehung der Kathedrale* (though at this point it should be pointed out that Männig is working with unpublished archival materials that have uncovered new and often highly informative factors).

However, at the time Sedlmayr was working at the university in Salzburg it would have been interesting to see a comparison of his reflections on art history with the period critique of post-war iconography and iconology published by his Viennese colleague Otto Pächt (1902–1988).¹⁰ Such an expanded field of view would have been beneficial, for instance, when discussing Sedlmayr's 'anti-classical' canon, which neglects the renaissance as a blind spot in art history. Pächt's critique of iconography and iconology, headed by Erwin Panofsky (1892–1968) and Edgar Wind (1900–1971), and Sedlmayr's much vaunted lack of interest in the renaissance, a period that was pivotal for many important post-war art historians (as well as Panofsky and Wind one thinks of Ernst Gombrich, André Chastel, Leopold Ettlinger, Michael Baxandall, et al.), are clearly based on their similar understanding

⁹ Hans Sedlmayr, 'Die Macchia Bruegels', *Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen in Wien* VIII, 1934, 247–318.

¹⁰ Otto Pächt, 'Der Kritik der Ikonologie' in: idem, *Methodisches zur Kunsthistorischen Praxis. Ausgewählte Schriften*, München 1977, 235–250. Pächt first appeared with his critique of iconology in 1964 at the CIHA congress in Bonn.

of the history of art, an understanding forged in the 1930s.¹¹ This might then retrospectively uncover the deeper methodological roots of Sedlmayr's thinking to be found in the core principles of the Vienna School.

However, these remarks regarding an otherwise ambitiously conceived piece of historical research are marginal when we consider the goal set by Männig, namely to describe the work of Hans Sedlmayr using the discursive coordinates of the strategies deployed in his texts, especially *Verlust der Mitte* and *Die Entstehung der Kathedrale*. From the perspective of modern art history, Männig's book is important above all for its understanding and elucidation of Sedlmayr's cultural and intellectual milieu and the critical character of his work. However, if we wished to delve more deeply into the theoretical and methodological aspects of Sedlmayr's thinking, Männig's conclusions would have to be supplemented by a deeper reading and examination of how individual formulations arise from the more broadly conceived context of the discipline of that time.

Nevertheless, Männig has opened the path to new possibilities of research into, *inter alia*, the Vienna School over and beyond the classical canon of its research, which focuses on the methodological aspects dating back to the start of the 20th century, especially to the texts by Wickhoff, Riegl and Dvořák. Her book has created solid foundations for further investigation of the complex but undeniably important art history of the 20th century. It can be understood as the journey taken by a controversial art history from the sins of the thirties through the purgatory following the Second World War to rehabilitation (and symbolic coronation) in the sixties.

Translated by Phil Jones

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¹¹ Their frameworks for the structural analysis of an artwork were worked out in articles published in the magazine they founded *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen*, of which there were only ever two issues, in 1931 and 1933.