

The Return of the *Orient oder Rom*

Review of:

Orient oder Rom? History and Reception of a Historiographical Myth (1901-1970)
edited by Ivan Foletti and Francesco Lovino, Roma: Viella and Masaryk
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Immediately after World War II, during a period in which Europe, as well as the rest of the world, had changed unrecognisably that included scholarly reflections on the past. The *Orient oder Rom* Debate was described by John Bryan Ward-Perkins, the director of the British School in Rome, as ‘one of the most heated controversies of modern scholarship.’¹ The debate that erupted among art historians in 1901 was a by-product of a century-long European philological and ethnographic grappling with Europe’s relationship not only to its own distant past but also to the geographies outside it. The simultaneous publication of several books by major figures and their followers around the Vienna School of Art History launched another century of debate that, as we can see from the present publication under review, entitled *Orient oder Rome? History and Reception of a Historiographical Myth (1901-1970)* and edited by Ivan Foletti and Francesco Lovino, has not subsided. In the age of globalisation and diversity, the discipline of art history – which despite its claim to universality is a thoroughly Western institution, discipline, and method – returns to its unresolved questions about itself and the rest of the world.

This well-designed and well-edited collection includes eight scholarly essays following an introduction by the co-editors. Appropriately entitled ‘*Orient oder Rom*, and Josef Strzygowski in 2018’, the introduction notes that the volume is an outcome of the papers presented at a conference in Brno that aimed to ‘reflect on the pivotal conundrum for art history at the beginning of the twentieth century, namely the origins of Christian art and its relations to Antiquity.’² Setting the discussions in the larger context of both Strzygowski’s political milieu as well as recent studies on the Orient or Rome debate, including those conducted by Christina Maranci, Margaret Olin, Carola Jaggi, Matthew Rampley, and Jas Elsner, the editors raise the question of Strzygowski’s reinstatement into the canon of art history ‘despite his Nazi sympathies...’, while pointing to his ‘problematic’ yet ‘meaningful’ contribution to our present anxieties of the discipline and its equally contemporary blind-spots.³ Yet one detects an apologetic tone that takes a teleological form in the introduction;

¹ J. B. Ward-Perkins, ‘The Italian Element in Late Roman and Early Medieval Architecture’, in *Proceedings of the British Academy* 33, 163-94 (London: Oxford University Press, 1947), 163.

² *Orient oder Rom*, 7.

³ *Orient oder Rom*, 9.

perhaps a discomfort unfitting to the difficult task that both the editors and the authors are committed to tackling. Most of the authors proceed to tease out and foreground the art historical details and nuances that rendered the Orient or Rome debate so central and heated, in specific areas understudied before. Why, for instance, was it 'ironic' for Strzygowski to be appointed Franz Wickhoff's successor? Or why 'it is our task to make things go differently, and not to find ourselves making racist photomontages forty years from now, trying to please a new regime'. Given that scholarship operates on debates and disagreements, would that be appropriate?⁴ The question is why would we remain so disturbed by Strzygowski's basic proposition, of Europe's eastern artistic influences, and how, unlike the art historians of the turn of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century we would not force historical teleology, we would not 'make things go different', and would only remain committed to art historical evidence and disciplinary method, fully in recognition of its always discursive nature?

The first chapter by Robin Cormack, entitled 'St Sophia as *Feuertempel*: Inspiration or Madness?', examines Strzygowski's proposition of St. Sophia as a Sassanian fire temple. A professor emeritus in the History of Art at the Courtauld Institute of Art and a specialist on Byzantine art, Cormack begins his essay with a personal anecdote about his advisor who, as a student, visited Strzygowski who told him without much sugar-coating, as many have commented then and now, that it was 'a complete waste of time' for him to visit Istanbul for a week, as Riegl must have told any young man, about Rome. We already know that art history has been kinder to Riegl, not because he did not point to such obvious things. Which advisor would dare to tell a student that she can see 'everything' in any major historical centre of the world these days? He discusses the importance of an ivory linked to Alexandria to Strzygowski's arguments and, through him, to Late Antique art, concluding that 'Strzygowski is worthwhile as he was an art historian who immersed himself in the details of the object ... but only if this thinking is radically reconstructed.'⁵

The second chapter, entitled 'Strzygowski and Pope: The Reformulation of Persian Art History across the Trans-Atlantic World', is authored by Yuka Kadoi, a historian of Islamic art with a focus on the Persianate world. The piece traces the historiography of 'Persian art' as delineated by the American art dealer and scholar Arthur U. Pope from the late-1920s to his death in 1969. As the most outspoken advocate of Persian art in Pahlavi Iran, his theories on what constituted that art was coloured in no small way by Strzygowski, who either visited only Khorasan or never visited modern-day Iran. After setting the similarities and difference between the two scholars, Kadoi traces the mechanics through which Pope's numerous undertakings shaped the discourse on 'Persian art' premised on Strzygowski's taxonomy of race vis-à-vis Iran.⁶

⁴ *Orient oder Rom*, 11 and 13.

⁵ *Orient oder Rom*, 29.

⁶ *Orient oder Rom*, 46.

Entitled '*Gallien oder Rom? The 'Italo-Gallic' School of Early Christian Art*', the third essay by Adrien Palladino, examines a group of early Christian 'mobile' objects and the American lens in the interpretations of the *Orient oder Rom*. A close examination of both the historiographical and political history of Baldwin Smith's formation of the Provencal School to the then accepted centres of Christian art, the essay does a masterful job of foregrounding the impact of larger political gains and alliances on art historical discourses and taxonomies. Refreshingly, the geographical fluidity of both the artefacts and the art historians under examination mirrors the sophisticated method deployed to situate Strzygowski's effect on the discursive context of the Italo-Gallic School and its politics within the larger questions of Christian art.

The next essay by professor of early mediaeval art history at Reed College, William J. Diebold, entitled '*Baby or Bathwater? Josef Strzygowski's "Ruins of Tombs of the Latin Kings on the Haram in Jerusalem" (1936) and its Reception*', returns to a binary method in order to analyse the complex and controversial theories launched by *Orient oder Rom*. The essay opens other binaries that have preoccupied many art historians before in struggling to make sense of the Orient or Rome debate: 'art history and politics', 'the controversial to the crazy', 'unreadable ... still well worth reading', and Strzygowski's 'art-historical contribution' versus 'thought and character'.⁷ Through a detailed examination of his 1936 article, 'in various contexts, that deals with a series of Christian sculptures reused in Muslim monuments in Jerusalem, Diebold traces Strzygowski's scholarly activities in the US starting with his tour in 1921-1922 and culminating in four articles in American journals in 1928 and 1936.⁸ By then, Ernst Herzfeld, the German archaeologist who had excavated Persepolis in the early 1930s and had been forced out of Iran due to local political intrigues as well as his Jewish ancestry, renewed his old brawl with Strzygowski. Strzygowski's new approach to Herzfeld was that he acted as 'the leader' of 'an association of Jewish art historians in New York'.⁹ Returning to the 1936 article, although the author notes that 'Strzygowski basically got it right' regarding the Christian origin and flexible Muslim use of the Jerusalem sculptures—a concept quite normative in Islamic art historical narratives—he wonders how Strzygowski's contentions 'sound quite politically correct in our multicultural days', finally noting that 'we thus find ourselves in a strange situation'.¹⁰ The case is further elaborated based on Israeli scholar Zehava Jacoby's positive citation of Strzygowski's work on the history of the sculptures, where Diebold concludes 'it is remarkable that it is Jacoby', a Holocaust survivor, 'who favourably cited Strzygowski'.¹¹ Is it at all possible that it is not 'the quality of mercy'

⁷ *Orient oder Rom*, 65.

⁸ *Orient oder Rom*, 65.

⁹ *Orient oder Rom*, 70.

¹⁰ *Orient oder Rom*, 74.

¹¹ *Orient oder Rom*, 78.

as the reasoning attributed to Jacoby's motive, but a disciplinary and intellectual overlap that compelled her to concur with Strzygowski?

The fifth chapter, entitled 'Ravenna as a Battlefield: Late Antique Monuments, between Orientalism and Nationalism' by Zuzana Frantova of Masaryk University in Brno, continues the discussion on mainland Europe by focusing on the importance of Ravenna monuments to Byzantine studies for Italian scholars. Among them, Giovanni Teresio Rivoira stood out as Strzygowski's opponent after World War I as a vocal advocate of the Roman origin of Western architecture. The essay excellently places the Ravenna architectural discourse in the larger politics of the Vienna School, Austria-Hungarian imperial ambitions, and, above all, Italian nationalism and fascism. It demonstrates that these discussions belonged to a discursive domain, where 'the conception of Ravenna is primarily a historiographical construct ... easily adaptable to sometimes completely contradictory theories'. Without chasing after 'who Strzygowski really was', Frantova lays the ideological grounds upon which art history manifests itself as a discourse, just like other narratives of power.

Entitled 'Strzygowski in Turkey' by Elif Kök, from Marmara University, the next essay traces the adoption of Strzygowski's theories by Turkish intellectuals. The nationalist struggle to establish an independent official discourse on Turkish art history with its own independent stylistic and racial logic is examined where Strzygowski's arguments were wholeheartedly embraced. Rather uncritically argued, Kök seems to highlight, and in the methodology, mirrors both Strzygowski's ethnic-based essentialism as well as that of Turkish nationalism. The essay does not make an effort to show any local contestation to racism, concluding, 'it has still been fashionable in some academic circles to look for a pure Turkishness in material culture, and we can attribute that attitude to the efforts of Strzygowski.'¹²

In contrast, the following three essays by Marta Filipova ('The Czechoslovak Orient'), Petra Hackova ('Disquiet in the Camp: The Question of Roman Art and the *Orient oder Rom* Issue in Czech Art History'), and Klara Benesovska ('The Epilogue of *Orient oder Rom* in 1970s? The Forgotten Work of Vaclav Mencl') provide the intellectual, political, and art historical interplays between the Orient or Rome debate and its workings in the Czech context on the *longue durée*, including the formation of the Czechoslovakian state. Nuanced and detailed, all three pieces approach the application of Strzygowski's theories to the Czechoslovakian case with a critical eye, careful not to fall in the easy trap of essentialising the adoption of art historical theories to racist theories or the normalising the relations between them. For scholars interested in Strzygowski and his brand of migration theory, these essays are of particular significance because they provide the historical and art historical context out of which Strzygowski's wooden church architecture begins to make sense. For him, the evolution of the dome on a square base, from Parthian Iran to mediaeval Armenia on its way to the Germanic lands, had a pivotal stop in Slavic

¹² *Orient oder Rom*, 113.

wooden architecture. Detailed examination of how Czech scholars adopted as well as vehemently rejected this use of wooden architecture in his universal theory of architectural history and, above all, how it was deployed in the internal political struggle is immensely helpful not only in our better understanding of the Orient or Rome debate, but also the complexities of architectural history in the Czechoslovakian context. Another important aspect that is revealed by these essays are the direct ties between Czech art historians—on either the Orient (including Florian Zapletal and Jaroslav Nebesky) or the Rome (including Max Dvorak, Vojtech Birnbaum, Antonin Matejcek, Zdenek Wirth, and Vincenc Kramar) camps—and the Vienna School of Art History; a direct and personal tie that rarely existed between Vienna and other non-European art historians who adopted Strzygowski's theories for nationalist purposes.

Filipova outlines the art historiographical disputes that ensued from the Orient or Rome debate among Czech art historians, who after World War I saw direct political implications in the shaping of a discourse on the origin of the mediaeval architecture of Bohemia and Moravia as 'Eastern' (Slavic) or 'Western' (Latin and Germanic). In this essay it is particularly intriguing to discover how the contextual arguments (i.e., east or west) about the origin of Czech structures lent themselves, through the agency of local art historians and public figures, to a methodological system of art history (i.e., 'German' or 'Czech' art history).¹³ Focused on the study of Roman art, Hackova's essay begins by tracing the reasons for the prominence of Rome in art historical and archaeological discourses, where 'the inconsistent and diverse nature of Roman art' lingered as 'a great problem.'¹⁴ This is followed by the Czech polemic among art historians, including Miroslav Tyrš, Birnbaum, Dvořák, and Matejcek, for or against the Roman origins in national styles and methods, concluding with the onset of Nazism and Communism that put an end to the vigorous study of ancient and early Christian art in Czechoslovakia, including imprisonment of such figures as Ruzena Vackova.

The ninth chapter by Benesovska brings the Czech narrative to the 1970s and focuses on the late work of historian and architect Vaclav Mencl, who had long studied and written about the wooden churches of Slovakia. When in 1971, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1941-1979)—not his father Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1925-1941) as confused in the essay—decided to put on the biggest and most expensive manifestation of the Indo-European origins of civilisation in Persia, it was only logical that the Czechs would be involved. Invented traditions have their own teleology. The cooperation between Czech architects like Mencl and Czech filmmakers and artists with the Pahlavi state for a successful celebration of the 2500 anniversary of the Persian Empire can hardly be described as 'absurd', for if seen from a Strzygowskian perspective of universal history, it all makes sense. Mohammad Reza Shah was hailing precisely the kind of migration of races and forms mapped by the Orient or Rome debate. In effect, as all of those before him, art

¹³ *Orient oder Rom*, 121.

¹⁴ *Orient oder Rom*, 132.

historians and diplomats alike, he was laying claim to and confirming the Oriental side of the debate. It should come as little surprise that Mencl pursued the study of Sassanian dome technique, as others like Arthur Pope and Hans Sedlmayr before him, in relation to Roman and Byzantine cupola architecture. Unlike Benesovska, however, I do not find it 'remarkable' that Mencl returned to the Orient or Rome debate as we constantly do in this and other scholarly undertakings.¹⁵ The proposition that Christianity might have had a Sassanian architectural beginning as well is a question that will resurface again and again until such time we give up our insistence on a singular, pure origin. In other words, when we stop being surprised by what Strzygowski proposed, we might be in a better position to examine the strengths and the shortcomings of his theories.

The book ends with a final chapter by Francesco Lovino, entitled 'East by North-East: The *Essai sur l'extension de l'art des Goths de Cremee* by Joseph de Baye', traces the life, work, and travels of the French baron-turned-archaeologist from the 1890s to 1931. As did Strzygowski, Joseph proposed an interconnected global network of a cultural map in his unpublished work, the *Essai*, which was a result of his extensive travels and research in the Russian territories, spending a significant time in the Caucasus. Following de Baye's proposal, as Strzygowski's, of the 'Oriental origin' of Western culture the essay concludes that 'at the dawn of the decades that brought Europe and the whole world to World War II, it still seems remarkable and worth our knowledge.'¹⁶

This collection of essays is well written, well edited, and handsomely designed. Each chapter is also well illustrated with several images of previously understudied or under-published artefacts and structures. Overall, the essays have advanced a nuanced discussion not only on the Orient or Rome debate and the diverse ways of its occurrence, reception, appropriation, abandonment, and at times revival, but also on larger art historical and historiographical questions of inclusions, influences, and the many myths of pure origins so essential to the discipline. The book, furthermore, does an exceptionally good job of exploring the Czechoslovakian case, wherein the majority of the essays are focused, *vis-à-vis* Strzygowski's theories and impact. These particular chapters bring to the fore the agency of Czech art historians as well as diplomats, archaeologists, and other actors on shaping multiple local art historical discourses that were as contested as was the original *Orient oder Rom*. The reader would have benefited greatly, however, from an explanation, perhaps in the introduction, for the reasons for the glaringly missing chapters on both early medieval Armenian and Parthian architecture, which were nodal territories and temporalities to Strzygowski's theory of the evolution of Western architecture. The essays on the specific Iranian, Turkish, and Russian/Caucasian cases, both in their art historical occurrences and their discursive formations, remain to be elaborated further in each of their rich local complexities. In the late Ottoman

¹⁵ *Orient oder Rom*, 156.

¹⁶ *Orient oder Rom*, 174.

and early Republican Turkey, there must have been more than the blind adoption of Strzygowski's theories.

By the same token of local agency and context, the productive critique that I could offer to the collection of these mostly excellent essays is that of contemporary ideological contextualization. We probably must always take into account that we are not radically different from any of the art historians who came before us in our structural and convictional limitations and possibilities. The close examination of art historical and historiographical questions pregnant with racist ideology must also recognize that we all are, always, musing and practicing art history from a discursive platform as well. An edited book on Strzygowski and the *Orient oder Rom* debate cannot but start with the methodological acknowledgement of the very existence of this structural truth. 'Who Strzygowski really was', ask the editors in the introduction, might not at all be the central question to endeavour to answer, but rather the search for an answer to that question, in its historically accurate sense—as if that were recoverable—has become so central to our art historical methods and arguments. 'Why is it important to answer today "who Strzygowski really was"?' might be the underpinning question that pains us.

With the aim to see ourselves *in lieu* of Strzygowski—or rather as politicized as Strzygowski—a brief biography or intellectual contextualization of each of the authors who contributed to *this* particular *Orient oder Rom*? would have immensely help not only to better understand the structural possibilities and limitations of each of the arguments, but also would have situated this publication in its larger ideological context in and out of the discipline of art history. The author biographies would have placed the agency of the art historian in its specific historical milieu with its own intellectual, material, and political opportunities and restraints as they each aim to place the 'the most heated controversies of modern scholarship' in its proper historical light.¹⁷ A return to the unending *Orient oder Rom* debate ought to serve, not to perpetuate the agonizing musing over how European brand of racism, sexism, and imperialism has always shaped art historical discourses in the past, but as a rhetorical as well as empirical strategy that might lead to a deeper grasp and critique of both the Orient-or-Rome debate proper and our own constructs of historical (arti)facts. As Keith Moxey argued many years ago, 'it is in the clash of rhetorics, rather than through appeals to 'what really happened', that historical insight is obtained.'¹⁸

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¹⁷ Ward-Perkins, 'Italian Element', 163.

¹⁸ Keith Moxey, 'History, Fiction, Memory: Riemenschneider and the Dangers of Persuasion', *Studies in the History of Art* 65 (2004): 202-13, at 211.

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Monarchs (2009); *Contemporary Iranian Art: From the Street to the Studio* (2014); and the forthcoming *The Persian Revival: Ancient Iran in Art Historiography & Imperialism* (Penn State Univ. Press).

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