

# Ernst Gombrich: 'Some reminiscences of Julius von Schlosser as a teacher'

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Translated by Karl Johns\*

These memories cannot be and are not intended as anything more than a very modest complement to the autobiographical writings by Julius von Schlosser himself, in his contribution to the volume, *Die Kunstwissenschaft der Gegenwart in Selbstdarstellungen* (Leipzig: Meiner, 1924) and his *Geschichte der Wiener Schule der Kunstgeschichte* (*Mitteilungen des Österreichischen Institutes für Geschichtsforschung*, supplementary vol. 13, no. 2, Innsbruck, 1934).

When I first enrolled as a student in the University of Vienna at the age of nineteen in the autumn of 1928, Julius von Schlosser had not yet reached the age of 63 years. This is not that great an age, but the difference between the generations and the lifestyle of the time had the effect that the almighty 'Hofrat Schlosser' lingers in my memory as a sober old man who could only be approached with all signs of respect. Even in purely physical terms Schlosser was a giant. It would have been possible to think of a somewhat awkwardly moving bear, except that his unusually large head with his introverted eyes prevented any impression of brutal force. His lectures were more like monologues, speaking to himself so to say without looking for much contact to his auditors. I still have a rather unsuccessful pencil drawing of Schlosser during one of his lectures under which I wrote: 'The river flowed into itself.' A characterization of these meditations always centred on the tension between art-language and art, not by any means intended with any hostility. This had become an agonizing problem for Schlosser since the point when he completely subscribed to the aesthetics of his friend Benedetto Croce. He would sometimes murmur to himself in his idiosyncratic and quaint language, 'this is one of the prickliest problems of our discipline which is certainly rich in prickly problems', and that would be the long and short of it. For the new arrivals, Schlosser's lectures were also not easily accessible since he made no concessions to his audience and gave his associations free reign. It was important to know, as with Homer, that every figure had a corresponding literary epithet, so that the 'loquacious Aretine'

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could only be Vasari. I believe that the 'German professor lost in the maze of journalism' referred to Richard Muther.

I would not like to make the impression that Schlosser's lectures were only quirky. I recall his deeply felt words before *The Crucifixion* by Masaccio in Naples, with the enthralling figure of Mary Magdalene. These moments of true emotion were doubly impressive precisely because every subject interested him as a distinction between 'poetry and non-poetry' in Croce's sense. It comes as no surprise, of course, that Josef Strzygowski's passionate advocacy of misunderstood traditions and artistic modes attracted more students at that time than Schlosser's almost esoteric reflections. Sometimes there were so few students in his lecture that somebody would rush into the department library to bring in a few more – something that Schlosser presumably never noticed. He was certainly not interested in a large audience, and indeed he consciously created barriers to keep 'young socialites' out of his department. For this reason he insisted that only those could become members of his department who had passed the examinations in palaeography and diplomatics required by the Institut für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung, something that would have had greater value for us art historians if they had not been almost exclusively devoted to the scripts and written conventions of the early and high Middle Ages.

All of this might give the impression that Julius von Schlosser had no particular interest in conveying his knowledge and experience to a younger generation, but I know that his students owe him an immeasurable debt. Even if they liked to smile at his idiosyncrasies, the personality of this true scholar was so venerated that every one of his students desired his goodwill. There were always opportunities for this, particularly in the tutorials and seminars which Schlosser held regularly. It is clear from the organization of his seminars that Schlosser carefully planned his curriculum in order to introduce his students to the greatest possible variety of problems in the field, namely through 1) his weekly tutorials with objects from the Sammlung für Plastik und Kunstgewerbe, 2) bi-weekly seminars about the biographies of Vasari, and then 3) alternating bi-weekly seminars about problems in the history of art as an academic discipline.

In purely practical terms, these classes were certainly not well organized. In the sessions at the museum, the object of the study was placed on a table between the head and the speaker. Since Schlosser spoke softly, the result was often a dialogue at close range which the others could not very easily benefit from. In addition to this, the comparative illustrations enlisted by the student had to be found in the books they had brought along, and then passed around among the others who could not easily know what was being referred to. This cumbersome procedure also had the effect that the presentations often lasted for more than one session and gave the student more time to prepare their topic. It was all not as bad as this must make it appear. We were generally a very small group of students and got along very well with one another. There was much exchange of opinions and mutual assistance, so that we usually already knew the presentation before it was given before Schlosser. He often limited his comments to a few references and remarks, but was very well able to make it known whether he agreed

or not. My own experience of this was certainly not unusual. In my first year, Schlosser assigned me the Carolingian book cover with Gregory in the act of writing.<sup>†</sup> I spent months immersing myself in the corpus edition by Adolph Goldschmidt, and attempted to place the work more closely within the so-called schools of Carolingian ivory carving as well as studying the individual motifs for their history. This led me to compare the architectural framework not only with the related forms occurring in the Consular Diptychs, but also to find parallels in the actual architecture itself. When I referred to some sort of similarities in Syrian monuments, Schlosser, in his typical way, remarked 'Yes, Syria is a dubious region,' which of course was also something of a warning not to steer in the direction of Strzygowski. It became clear that he was otherwise not dissatisfied with my conclusions when he assigned me an ivory pyxis from the Kunsthistorisches Museum in the following year, then considered to date from the early Christian period. He was so convinced by my argument that it is a Carolingian copy that he immediately suggested I publish it in the *Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen*, proving how unconventional he was in his attitude, my being a student in my third year far from earning my doctorate.

My older classmate Otto Kurz had a similar experience when he discovered an unrecognized source for the biography of Filippo Lippi during the Vasari exercises. Schlosser told him to publish it immediately.

In the Vasari exercises, each student was assigned a given biography to compare between the first and the second edition, and analyze according to its sources while Schlosser appreciated it when the results considered Wolfgang Kallab's *Vasaristudien* in great detail.<sup>‡</sup> He would remark slightly mischievously that when he published it posthumously from Kallab's estate without an index, he did so 'not entirely unintentionally,' to insure that people would read the entire text – an unrealistic hope that reveals something of his indulgent attitude.

Both the museum tutorials and the Vasari exercises might create the impression that Schlosser directed his teaching entirely to his own earlier fields of specialization. This cannot be said of his third consistent theme of the bi-weekly discussions. They dealt with more or less current questions surrounding the method and philosophy of art-historical studies which he assigned to the students. He encouraged me to report about Alois Riegl's *Stilfragen*, a book that had been published forty years previously, and he wished to see considered in terms of more recent research. I was then completely possessed in a hunt for acanthus-motifs and their modifications, and Schlosser was pleased that I had gone to the herbarium of the Naturhistorisches Museum to get a close look at the actual plant. A year or two later, he had me give a report about the hand gestures in the Dresden manuscript of the medieval German legal compendium, the *Sachsenspiegel*,<sup>§</sup> a subject which Karl von Amira had written about and appealed to

<sup>†</sup> This image of St Gregory with Scribes may be viewed at the Kunsthistorische Museum website: <https://www.khm.at/en/visit/collections/kunstkammer-wien/selected-masterpieces/> (ed.).

<sup>‡</sup> Kallab's *Vasaristudien* may be read at <https://archive.org/details/vasaristudien00kall> (ed.).

<sup>§</sup> See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sachsenspiegel> (ed).

Schlosser's interest in formulaic configurations in medieval art. The subject was especially timely because the psychologist Karl Buehler was just then treating the history of expression and its related ideas in his lectures. Both of the subjects Schlosser assigned to me have interested and permanently occupied me.

The best way to convey an image of Schlosser's actual teaching activities would be to compile a list of the topics he assigned in these seminars. Many of the dissertations he accepted were developed from these seminar reports. This is true for instance of Josef Bodonyi's study of the origin of the gold ground, a subject which Schlosser had called to his attention.\*\*

Schlosser was generally not in the habit of posing dissertation topics, but reserved the right to approve them. In my case it was very simple. I had become familiar with the Palazzo del Te in Mantua during a trip to Italy and suggested to Schlosser that I write my dissertation about Giulio Romano as architect, and he acquiesced with a friendly nod of the head. It was not his way of doing things to intrude much on the progress of his student's dissertations. At most, he might once in a while inquire how things were going. It was customary though to present him with an outline before it reached its final form. This led to the following misunderstanding with my colleague Otto Kurz: when Schlosser returned his study of the early work of Guido Reni, he found that certain passages were marked with lines in the margin. He interpreted this as disapproval and omitted those passages from the final version. Only later did he discover that those were the parts particularly pleasing to Schlosser. He naturally never noticed these omissions. Nothing of this sort occurred with me of course, after Schlosser had asked me to bring my dissertation to him in his apartment. It was the only time that I ever visited him at home, and through the door, I heard rather dissonant tones, until Schlosser opened the door himself with his cello in his hand. He had just been trying out a solo sonata by Max Reger that was apparently difficult for him. I cannot recall any particular comments he made on my dissertation, but when we reached the oral examinations, which occurred with only the two of us in his inner sanctum, where he only showed me some photographs, looked at the clock and said, 'actually I am supposed to test you for an hour but, after all, I know you already'. He was certainly not what we would call a '*Schulfuchs*', pedantic about rules.

In spite of it all, he very naturally understood how to keep a certain distance between himself and his students. We addressed him in the third person in keeping with the good Austrian tradition, 'Has Herr Hofrat been able to read the dissertation yet?' and by no means urged him if he answered in the negative.

As beginning students, we could never be completely certain if he was aware of which of us he was speaking with. In spite of the fact that we definitely did not look anything alike, he often confused me with Otto Kurz in those years. When the news reached us that Heinrich Wölfflin would be holding lectures during the summer

\*\* See Ernst Gombrich, [J. Bodonyi, Entstehung und Bedeutung des Goldgrundes in der spätantiken Bildkomposition](#), *Kritische Berichte zür Kunstgeschichtlichen Literatur*, Vol. 5 (1932/3), 1935, 65-75 (ed).

semester in Berlin, some of us felt the urge to hear the great man. I could only decide to do so after a certain delay, and with my heart pounding, I went to Schlosser to take my leave. I could have spared myself the nervous feelings, since he only gave me a friendly and absent-minded nod, saying 'you had already told me this, have a good trip'.

I do however recall an earlier time when Wölfflin visited the II. Kunsthistorisches Institut,<sup>††</sup> and Schlosser came out of his office with his guest, waved vaguely toward our desks and remarked somewhat tactlessly, 'so this is where the horrors are born'. He did show his good will though at celebrations within the department which he attended regularly. I even managed to cajole him onto the stage once, and he accepted very courteously.

There is no doubt that after the early death of Max Dvořák, he only very reluctantly exchanged his place at the museum for the university position. He might have been convinced by others to accept it. In any case, the story is told that during a visit to Vienna from a German applicant – it might have been Wilhelm Pinder – he would indeed be tempted to represent German culture in the East. Schlosser is supposed to have responded, 'my dear friend, we must regret, but we have been managing that ourselves now for a thousand years.' Of course I was not there, but it sounds quite authentic.

I can only report very little about Schlosser's political views. As a person of partially Italian descent and a friend of Benedetto Croce, he could only have eschewed any form of nationalist fanaticism. When the custodian interrupted one of his tutorials, asking him at the behest of the German student's league (*deutsche Studentenschaft*) to close the department on time since they required use of the room, it was the only time I ever hear him raise his voice when he replied, 'I do not care about the German student's league.' His indignation might have been due more to the intrusion on his authority than a political attitude. Of course, when in those times of great tensions and student demonstrations, Otto Kurz was physically beaten by Nazi students and injured, Schlosser greeted the returning student with a quotation from Schiller, '*Monument unserer Zeiten Schande*' (you monument of the shame of our times).

He also had no taste for the political trend of the Dollfuss period. He was once unusually candid to me when he said to me, 'this has become a Jesuit university'. Like so many of his generation, he was not able sympathize either with the political left or the right. Anti-Semitism was completely alien to him, some of his favourite students were Jewish, above all Ernst Kris, whom he liked to mention as his '*Urschüler*' (first and primal student). Of course he was worried about the rising anti-Semitism in Austria, and at least once told an applicant that he already had so many Jewish students. He presumably meant that he could not imagine helping them find employment. I have nothing to report from my own experience about his conduct during the Third Reich. I have been told of an open postcard he sent at that time to a colleague in Florence thanking him for the gift of an offprint. It ran roughly, 'I thank you for this essay which

<sup>††</sup> On which see Karl Johns, '[Julius von Schlosser, 'The Vienna school of the history of art \(1934\)'](#)', *Journal of Art Historiography*, Number 1, December 2001 (ed).

would have interested my deceased friend Aby Warburg. Heil Hitler! Your Schlosser' It remains to be seen whether this intrinsic contradiction was intentional or not.##

I am aware that this sketch from a worm's eye view so to speak, only addresses formalities. Those interested in what went on in that beautiful and large mind I mentioned at the beginning will need to devote themselves to his publications.##

**Sir Ernst Gombrich** OM CBE FBA (30 March 1909 – 3 November 2001) was an Austrian-born art historian who, after settling in England in 1936, became a naturalised British citizen in 1947 and spent most of his working life in the United Kingdom.

Web archive: <https://gombrich.co.uk/>

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## The irony is, of course, that Aby Warburg was Jewish. Perhaps that would have been lost on the censors, or the neighbours. It needs a sense of irony to be appreciated. (ed)

## For a bibliography of Schlosser's works, see Karl T. Johns, 'Julius Alwin Ritter von Schlosser, ein bio-bibliographischer', *kritische berichte* 4/1988, 47-64. (ed)