

Erica Tietze-Conrat, 'On leg poses in art history'¹

Translated and edited by Karl Johns

[Originally published as 'J. J. Tikannen, "Die Beinstellungen in der Kunstgeschichte. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der künstlerischen Motive", Tom. XLII Nr. 1 of the *Acta Societatis Scientiarum Fennicae* Helsingfors 1912', *Kunstgeschichtliche Anzeigen Beiblatt der Mitteilungen des Instituts für österreichische Geschichtsforschung*, Redigiert von Max Dvořák, Jahrgang 1912 Heft 3/4, Innsbruck: Wagner 1912, pp. 66-69.]

This book is written so simply and is so pleasantly straightforward that we are tempted to publicly thank the author for such a document of his open humanity; he nowhere suppresses contradictory facts for the sake of his construction, and at every turn lays out the obscurities inherent in the subject. The motifs of the poses of legs in the visual arts are arranged according to characteristic groups: 1. the stance with legs spread, the foot turned to the side and the dance master pose; 2. the stance with

¹ E. H. Gombrich, 'Obituary of Erica Tietze-Conrat', *Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 101, 1959, pp.149:

With the death on 11th December 1958 in New York of Erica Tietze-Conrat (born 1883) another link with a past now almost legendary has snapped. The daughter of Hugo Conrat, whose poems after Hungarian motifs were immortalized by Brahms in the *Zigeunerlieder*, she still remembered the composer. She was the first and only woman to graduate in the history of art in the era of Franz Wickhoff and Alois Riegl who guided the interest of their students to formerly neglected fields. Like her future husband, Hans Tietze (1880-1954), she thus pioneered the study of baroque art and clarified the history of Austrian eighteenth-century sculpture in many articles and books. Like him she also became a champion of the art of her generation, the work of Oskar Kokoschka and Georg Ehrlich. She collaborated with Hans Tietze in the Critical Catalogue of Dürer's works and in the *Venetian Drawings* (1944), as well as in many preparatory studies for these monographs in which her unflinching visual memory enabled her to track down derivations of motifs and connexions between paintings and drawings. Her rich bibliography, recently compiled by Otto and Hilde Kurz, and published in *Essays in Honor of Hans Tietze* (published by the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*), testifies also to her status as an independent scholar, best remembered, by readers of this Journal, for her studies in Renaissance art and iconography and for her monograph on Mantegna. Her last book on *Dwarfs and Jesters in Art* and an unpublished manuscript on the *Motif of Suicide in Literature and Art* bear witness to the range of her passionate historical curiosity. Fortright and fearless in the face of adversity, she cared for truth.

[<https://gombricharchive.files.wordpress.com/2011/04/showdoc98.pdf> accessed 15.08.2020.
Ed. © The Gombrich Estate]

knees together; 3. the stance with one foot supported and legs crossed; each of these individual groups is treated in its historical development. The motif of these poses can fill a function as when an executioner stands with his legs apart in order to better wield his axe; on the other hand it can be an expressive motif when a small satyr crosses the supporting leg with his free leg to express his '*dolce far niente*' as he also does with his inclined small head, his soft body leaning against the trunk of a tree aside from the inactivity of the legs. Yet such a strict distinction is not always possible. There are instances in which a particular pose of the legs has been frequently used without ever having been interpreted as conveying an expression – such as the straddling stance in the Trecento; and then suddenly within the general development of art, the increasing realism during the Quattrocento, the pose began to clearly assume an inherent 'moral' context and was used to express this. The motif was savoured. The later generations of artists and spectators were only able to enjoy its perpetuation (*Utrierung*). In this way it then declined from its character as an expressive motif clearly imparting a concept (in the Filippo Scolari by Castagno, the St. George of Donatello) to a ludicrous distortion of its once so serious implication (pose of Landsknechts). A revival (numerous examples in the work of Jacques-Louis David) can never be achieved without an aftertaste of the caricature once attached to it; we sense that the motif no longer seems comical, but retains a strong tang of theatrical pathos.

The individual studies are necessarily preceded by a definition of the expressiveness inherent in the individual motif. To remain with the motif of the straddling stance – since this has been the subject of an essay by Julius Lange, 'Die Geschichte eines Motivs' (1888), the straddling stance can stress a rootedness in the earth, can display bodily energy or swank, yet it can also express the vulnerability of a child, an aged or sick person who are only able to regain their balance in this way.² And thus the expression is not clearly determined, but gains this only with the association of other factors. Only when such factors become clear can we decide whether this youth is straddling his legs to express a cheeky challenge, or whether he is holding back tears and on the verge of collapsing. What is the case when we are no longer able to identify such assistive associations or even misidentify them? We will either not recognize them whatsoever or receive a distorted idea of their expressiveness. I would like to object to the author, that the contemporaries of David saw his straddling poses as rich expressions of true heroism, and that we today see them as conveying an 'overly precious pathos' since we are no longer aware of the entire gamut of associated expressive motions, the complete content of these figures, and can no longer do them proper justice.

In examining the expressiveness of typical figural poses, one finds that only a small fraction of the entire sum can be seen as vehicles of expression, and that

² [German translation by Ida Anders: Julius Lange, *Ausgewählte Schriften (1886-1897)*, vol. 2, Strasbourg: Heitz 1912, pp. 85-99; originally "Et Motivs Historie", *Nordisk Tidskrift för Vetenskap, Konst och Industri*, 1888, pp. 475-494, reprinted in *Udvalgte Skrifter af Julius Lange*, vol. 2, Copenhagen: Det Nordiske Forlag, 1901, pp. 69-88.]

those few are most often carriers of quite vague and general expressiveness which might only be made clearer when placed in relation to another. For this reason the effect of thighs together seems more coy than spread legs. Only when there are further associations to help us can we positively determine the nature of an expression or say any more about them. When we are able to recognize all of these indications with a vivid consciousness then the individual motif can come into its own and expresses itself abundantly. When we are not able to understand all of the features of a figure or misinterpret some of these, then the motif becomes weak in its expression or even interpreted as the agent of an incorrect expression.

Another question is that of the manner in which a motif disappears from art. Is this because its meaning and the artistic models have changed for the audience? Is this because it comes to be seen as nothing more than a caricature and is not used in art for this reason? (Similarly Lange). An example from our own time: along with the development of art toward rendering more fleeting qualities, portraiture – in its rivalry with photography – has fixed the typical pose of a nonchalant man of the world during the last half century: legs crossed, leaning back in an armchair, cigar between the figures etc. Today this motif has been crowded out to the most remote reaches of artistic provincialism, while the pose itself continues to survive in society unabated and unchanged. In art, portraiture is now striving for the isolated and also essential qualities of a personality and does not chase whimsical details; for this reason it has moved away from the familiar type. The motif is abandoned not because it might have lost its meaning but because it has lost its relevance to the artistic problem.

This aspect of the artistic problem strikes me as insufficiently considered in the present book. We can see a figure standing in a straddling pose as the expression of a vigorous person firmly rooted in their surroundings and we would in all probability be correctly divining the intention of the artist – we can be certain that in paintings this is a motif to stress the surface and in sculpture to create a frontal impression. A figure with a straddling pose placed far in the depth of an image will never be an expressive vehicle, but always an element in generating the spatial illusion. Aside from its expressiveness, the straddling pose is furthermore the formally most well rounded and impressive solution to the problem of an isolated phenomenon, and in those cases where this and the statuesque effect of an individual figure is the goal of the artist, even within the framed image, then the straddling pose will be the favourite. A painting with many figures is divided into compartments, and each of these concentrated within itself. In cases where the individual figure is not present and the image consists of interpenetrating linear elements, then the straddling pose will have no place; however much it still impresses us, it has no place among the artists because it does not conform to their formal intentions.

For these reasons the historical treatment of expressive motifs is a difficult subject; on the one hand because its content is not clear and can only be grasped

subjectively; on the other hand because it is implemented in concert with formal problems and must either concur with these or yield.³

Even if the subject is a difficult one, the fruits of this study remain significant for the discipline. In spite of the fact that it is based on a number of individual examples and in spite of the fact that it is geared to the expressive function of these individual examples, this book by Tikannen is better able than any other to convey what we might call the greatest results of the archaeological method; it makes tangible the metaphysical force which continuously works through all periods in creating given types.⁴

Karl Johns (Independent), Riverside CA and Klosterneuburg

karltjohns@gmail.com



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

³ For the subjective aspect, cf. the description given by Lange and Tikannen of the Filippo Scolori by Castagno op. cit. p. 90'...as rough and fearless as he appears, he also expresses something far less active. He is standing "in thought" with his head slightly inclined to the side etc. He is holding his unsheathed sword diagonally before him while bending its elastic blade in his strong hands. Inner movements of mood usually express themselves in such insignificant play. The straddled stance serves more than to express only a knightly virility, indeed, the artist has correctly observed that when the mind is wandering independently and disconnected from the body, it automatically assumes this pose as it provides the body with a very solid support.' Tikannen (p. 13) on the other hand: '...we inevitably become conscious that...the way this wild warrior stands there with his blade held horizontally in both hands, that he is used to using it to resolve any disputes.'

⁴ On reading this review I was reminded of Ernst Gombrich's review of Moshe Barasch *Gestures of Despair*. *The Burlington Magazine*, 110. Reprinted in *Reflections on the History of Art*, ed. Richard Woodfield, Oxford: Phaidon 1987 [Ed.].