

Origins and Principles of World Art History—1900 (and 2000)

At first glance, David Summers's 2003 *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* and John Onians's 2004 *Atlas of World Art*—although both attempts to encompass world art history; although both similarly monumental books—could not appear to be more different in concept, methodology, and presentation. Of the many more comparable features which do emerge on closer reading, here I primarily wish to emphasize only one: both works present themselves as absolutely innovative.¹ Onians claims to be taking “a whole new approach to the subject” of art; whereas, Summers declares that prior “formalist, contextual and post-structural approaches to art cannot provide the basis for a truly global and intercultural art history,” therefore he “mean[s] to make it possible for traditions of art (and art history) to address one another in new ways.”² For both authors, premises of methodological novelty and of originality make it superfluous even to pose the question of earlier historical attempts to deal specifically with world art—though Summers in particular commences with a lengthy review of art historical thinking and frequently brings the luminaries of European intellectual tradition, from Plato and Aristotle to Kant and Hegel, to bear in his arguments.

¹ These claims seem to be over-stated: “absolute innovation” is a characteristic quality of the self-proclaimed avant-garde artist/intellectual, as shown by Krauss 1985; equally available are the “absolute” paradigm shifts in the sciences, see Kuhn 1962.

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Summers 2003: dust jacket and p. 13; but see also p. 15ff his claim to have broken with “all that has gone before”; Onians 2004, 10. To name just some of the more important reviews: Elkins 2004; Silver 2004; Kemp 2005.

Obviously, this is not meant to deny that there are—in other contexts—excellent discussions of the “history of the study of non-European art,” as for example the chapter of the same name in Gerbrands 1957, 25–65.

The bibliography on these questions is overwhelming; two comprehensive books are Torgovnick 1990 and Connelly 1995.

The state of research (with further bibliography) may be found in Halbertsma 2003 and Müller 2003; for Asian art history, see also Von Erdberg 1985.

This is to claim for art history what Bunzl and Penny 2003, 1ff has outlined for the anthropological (and historical) disciplines in an excellent contribution, albeit with a slightly different chronology of the decisive changes and a tendency to undervalue the factor of “psychology.”

This tendency to overlook older art historical research on the theme of world art is a characteristic displayed not only by Summers and Onians.³ Naturally, at least since the period in which Early Modern *Kunst- and Wunderkammern* were pieced together, examples of “exotic handicraft” have been the topic of discussions across Europe. It was a topic which accrued even more intense interest in the nineteenth century when new means of transport became available, international expositions were held, the systematic acquisition of colonies by almost all *Kultur-Nationen* was in full swing and the first attempts to establish ethnological museums were made. Ever since the Enlightenment, there has been a self-consciously high regard and nostalgia for the “noble savage” and the “original”—qualities which from a European perspective both contemporary indigenous and prehistoric peoples alike seemed to offer. The heirs to this nostalgia in a certain sense were movements of the intelligentsia and the modern artists of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries which were enthusiastic about appropriating indigenous arts and cultures.⁴ All this seems to have been the focus of research for quite a long time. Today, nevertheless, most of these products of art history and other disciplines, at least as practiced up to the 1970s, appear to bear the stamp of colonial appropriation and Eurocentrism, to such an extent indeed that most research today can proceed only under the banner of “postcolonial studies”—and only by radically distancing itself from its forerunners (Schmidt-Linsenhoff 2003; Errington 1997; Thomas 1999; Volkenandt 2004; Brückner 2004).

As a consequence of this, the first efforts to arrive at a world art history by German-language writers have until now largely been seen in direct relation to the acquisition, beginning in the 1880s, of German colonies.⁵ The purpose of my contribution is to argue against this assumption by revealing three additional aspects and sketching in the details to make a more complex picture⁶: my first point is that the beginnings of German research on world art, dating back to the 1880s and 1890s, derived from the interdisciplinary context of texts and discussions which so far have been virtually or entirely ignored by art history, namely, cultural anthropology and psychology. My second contention is the fact that nineteenth-century art historians initially focused on these apparently uncommon questions can hardly have been the outcome solely of “colonialist thinking,” but may also be attributed to the methodological and institutional crises which agitated German art history during these years. The third point about which I wish to speak is to make at least a passing reference to why these beginnings of world art history in the German-speaking realm received little international notice, and, after c. 1930, fell into such complete oblivion that today it is necessary to discover these discussions anew. Furthermore, a certain kind of question asked is comprehensible only if very distinct, nationally particular historical trajectories such as that in Germany and Austria at the turn of the twentieth

century are taken into account. When this step is taken, such studies on the historiography of art history are transformed into an analytical tool (not an antiquarian quest) in the search to understand our own cultural-intellectual situations, conditions, and concepts of thinking.

Needless to say, some of the following ideas suggested can hardly claim to do anything more than just hint at topics of interest. In the complex intermingling texture of nineteenth-century theories, my argument has to concentrate on the main context, the psychological, anthropological, and institutional foundations of a world art history. I will introduce the reader to certain marginalized authors and texts, which most explicitly demanded a world art perspective and consequently a methodical revision of traditional art history in the first place.

KUNSTWISSENSCHAFT, ANTHROPOLOGY, AND THE PSYCHOLOGY OF ART

The fundamental crisis in German art history in the decades around 1900 can be characterized summarily as a battle between *Kunstgeschichte* (“art history”) and *Kunstwissenschaft* (“the science of art”). Whereas the adherents of *Kunstgeschichte*—Karl Friedrich von Rumohr among others—concentrated on studying and accumulating individual historical data, the defenders of *Kunstwissenschaft* sought in these newly accumulated facts binding principles of art (*Grundbegriffe*) and overarching rules governing its development—on a strictly “scientific” methodological basis and without falling back on idealistic constructions of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries or other traditions of deductive aesthetic and philosophical speculation.⁷

The latter group’s claims were given extra impetus by the institutional situation in the field which required dual legitimation. As a recently created university discipline, the study of art history had to demonstrate its “scientific” dimension in comparison with other human sciences—and it had to fulfil the requirements of a “science,” primarily expressed as holistic explanatory models and laws (Dilly 1979; König and Lämmert 1999; Locher 2001, esp. 378–397). Simultaneously, art history had to secure an independent profile in order to contrast itself to the discipline of history, which had provided the most important methodological model for the positivist *Kunstgeschichte* in the tradition of Rumohr. This predominance of history as a discipline loomed even more threateningly in the 1880s and thereafter, when a growing tendency towards the writing of an all-embracing “cultural history” emerged. This included the study of art as a subfield and thereby attempting to incorporate art history into itself as a kind of secondary discipline (Haas 1994).

Probably the most decisive attempt to solve this dilemma on the part of *Kunstwissenschaft* involved an orientation towards the natural sciences, initially based on their classification systems,

Kuper 1988, 2 (esp. for Germany 129ff); for the importance and popularization of Darwin's ideas on the whole range of "the human sciences" see Young 1995 (esp. for psychology 56–78) and Daum 1998. See for a very selective discussion of the influence of Darwin on nineteenth-century art historical writings, Golden 2001. In the decades around 1900, the terms "anthropology," "ethnology," "ethnography" and the like were not yet precisely defined, see for example Haddon 1910, preface.

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See Hauser 1985 and Mallgrave 1985; the modifications of Semper's original theories by, for example, E.E. Viollet-le-Duc and A. Choisy, are outlined in Krufft 1985, 321–328.

most famously developed for paleontology by Georges Cuvier. Then Charles Darwin's theory of evolution began to exert an influence (nevertheless the traditionally very prominent German philological traditions continued to play an important role, not least because the research on anthropology and prehistory pertaining to newly found relics of prehistoric life prior to the advent of Darwin and the mid-nineteenth century, was carried out mainly by "comparative linguistics"). In a nutshell: Darwin's (and others') ideas about physical anthropology had to be extended and complemented by a new anthropology of culture. A "scientific programme," to which history, religious studies and linguistics, as well as the new disciplines of the "human sciences" (such as art history, ethnology, prehistoric archaeology, psychology, and others) were eager to contribute. The fact that Darwin's triumph stimulated a very "un-Darwinian anthropology" (often more indebted to Jean-Baptiste de Lamarck and Herbert Spencer, to name just two) need not concern us here in detail.⁸

Out of these exemplary scientific models and their concomitant inductive method, art history initially gained a "functional materialism" in the trend of Gottfried Semper, who, commencing with the primitive beginnings of art (their "Urformen"), tried to explain the increasingly complex development of art forms and ornaments by their function in relation to materials, techniques and other social and cultural factors.⁹ When this influential theory quickly came under fire, a second attempt was prompted—one decisive to my question, which has so far received too little attention. It was constructed on the then widely popular "empirical psychology," which borrowed a mechanical and mathematical model. Its foundations were laid by the philosopher Johann Friedrich Herbarth (rejecting the older theory of *a priori* mental "faculties"). This new psychology received decisive impulses through a growing interest in the natural sciences, historical anthropology, and cultures worldwide (Leary 1977; Arens 1989). Matters of investigation were the origins of the imaginative, creative, moral and cultural potentials of the human soul/intellect on the one hand, and their evolutionary developments and different stages on the other, that is, human "psycho-history," which manifests itself in the totality of cultural output of humankind.

Two aspects made this question scientifically so attractive: first of all, psychology presented itself as the "missing link" between human physiology and culture; or to phrase it slightly differently: the new psychology seemed to make it no longer possible to separate mind and culture (the "subjective") from the domain of scientific law (the "objective"). In research in art history and aesthetics, especially after the 1850s, this led to the development of a new methodological approach, which we might perhaps call "psychological aesthetics," of which the Herbartian Robert Zimmermann, Robert and Theodor Vischer, Gustav Theodor Fechner and others were protagonists. Surprisingly, these figures

personally showed little interest in the problem of “primitive art,” even though their theories would assume a central importance in the initial discussions on world art history (Drüe 1983; Allesch 1987; Mallgrave and Ikonomou 1994; Wiesing 1997). Secondly, and at least for a certain group of scientists, the quest for the human psyche promised to deliver a common “anthropological basis” — that is, a point of departure which would be the same for all humans; one which could provide objective scientific grounds of comparison, thereby allowing the cultural and individual developments and deviations from this to be determined (for example, these might result from local geographic or socioeconomic conditions or from “racial differences”). Since it was easier to study the basics and principles of these psychic mechanisms on such “primitive” human beings as prehistoric or indigenous peoples or children than on complex European high cultures, the results of their research in those areas gained the highest respect.¹⁰

Incidentally, Johann Gottfried Herder had already attempted something very similar with his collection of fairy tales: he sought to discover characteristics and connections between peoples which could be grasped in more uncorrupted form in folk art and literature than in “high art.” Moreover, Herder — in contrast to the then dominant Enlightenment doctrine of a *raison universelle* manifesting itself in all humans alike — already favored the idea of a plurality of cultures and individual histories of peoples. Wilhelm von Humboldt would develop Herder’s concept in his *Plan einer vergleichenden Anthropologie* (“Plan of a Comparative Anthropology,” 1795/97; remained unpublished the first time) (Broce 1986; Bunzl 1996; Zimmerman 1998, 102–5).

By mid-century, most of these thoughts seem to have been common currency in German scientific discussions: they were, for example, succinctly presented and discussed between 1859 and 1871 by Theodor Waitz in the six volumes of *Anthropologie der Naturvölker*, which the first was translated into English as early as 1863 as *Introduction to Anthropology* (Waitz 1863, esp. 380ff). Right in the very first pages, the relevance of psychology is introduced as the only possibility to facilitate a truly scientific research into the cultural phenomena of humankind. Furthermore, Waitz claims a “general uniform intellectual capacity in all human populations” from the Greeks to the Hottentots — a uniform capacity which had only a short while before been questioned, most prominently by Gobineau in his thesis about the “inequality of races,” a thought which had been and was to be shared by several other influential “polygenist thinkers,” who argued for multiple origins of human races (and thereby tried to establish a “scientifically proven” fundamental difference between the Europeans and other peoples).¹¹ Among the representatives of the idea of uniform intellectual capacity themselves, many parties still held rather contradictory views on more or less any other question which happened to arise. The majority of the followers of Anglo-American

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A short summary of this idea is given by Bastian 1874. See also Bastian 1868 and Waitz 1863. Finally, when research into the human psyche became psychoanalytical, even the drawings of neurotics were, in imitation of Freud, included in this argumentation, see Von Sydow 1927, esp. 39.

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Gobineau (1853–1855); the first German translation appeared only in 1898–1901 under the title *Versuch über die Ungleichheit der Menschenrassen*.

For the complex history of polygenist theories from the eighteenth century to the Nazis and the initially slow reception of Gobineau in Germany, which until c. 1900 remained, at least for the majority of the physical anthropologists, the country of monogenism, see Stocking 1982, 42–68; Massin 1996; Weikart 2004.

See Stocking 1987 and Sanderson 1990, esp. 1–35; for the importance of Franz Boas and (to a lesser extent) W. H. R. Rivers in rejecting evolutionism and introducing (German) diffusionist ideas into Anglo-American anthropology, see Kuper 1988, 125–51, 162–65 and 171ff.

The literal translation of *Völkerpsychologie* would be “psychology of peoples.” Franz Boas proposed “folk psychology.” Lazarus and Steinthal 1860; outlined already in Lazarus 1851; both texts now edited in Lazarus 2003. See the excellent analyses of Belke 1982; Whitman 1984; Kalmar 1987; Bunzl 2003, and Diriwächter 2004.

Bastian himself stated the formative importance of Lazarus's and Steinthal's theory and those of Waitz's writings, on his thoughts, see Bastian 1881, 32ff. However, he subordinated linguistics and philology as they were tinged with instability and therefore not very reliable sources for his ethnology of material culture. For Bastian's theories in general see Köpping 2005; also Zimmerman 1999, 206 on Bastian and art.

anthropology (led by Edward B. Tylor) stated a severely unilinear, materialist evolutionism for all stages of the human race. Consequently, in their eyes an innate “artistic consciousness” of primeval humankind, unchanged in principle over the centuries, was out of question. Considering the early and “savage” manifestations of human handiwork (including ornament, painting and the like), preponderantly the necessities of survival and society (and prompted scarcely at all by any genuine aesthetic impulse) were accepted as possible motivations. Nevertheless, the long and short of it was that the European was believed to epitomize the teleological aim and indisputable role model of all developments.¹²

In contrast to this, especially in the context of German-speaking discussions, the postulation of a uniform mental capacity in all human populations led to the genesis of a further idea: if all peoples shared the same intellectual conditions in the first place, why should these varying cultures all follow the European model? And were they not so profoundly different from each other and in their characteristics that they should be studied without applying preconceived Eurocentric categories and evaluations? This final step was eventually taken up by the German-Jewish founders of *Völkerpsychologie*, the philosopher and psychologist Moritz Lazarus and the linguist and philologist Heymann Steinthal.¹³ Their programme of a “psychic ethnology,” developed during the 1850s, was based on systematic research into language, religion/mythology, art, and other similar systems of all peoples—since, they argued, only these manifestations of collective genius finally seen in synthesis offered the clue to the driving forces and governing principles of various historical trajectories. Lazarus and Steinthal traced a theoretical demand (based especially on their interests and professional training in the field of language, which appeared to them to be the main unifying psychological essence of a people) which was modified only slightly later (since 1860) and actually applied to the whole range of research on “primitive peoples” (now primarily their material cultures) by the founder of German ethnology, Adolf Bastian.¹⁴

Bastian's universal relativism was founded on the idea of the “psychic unity of humankind,” which implied equal intellectual capacities and assumed that all cultures could ultimately be reduced to the same mental principles or elementary thought patterns (*Elementargedanken*). These basic common psychic foundations and innate human universals never actually occurred as such, but were subject to modification through an equally innate “propensity to change” as well as through geographically, chronologically and socially divergent overlays on different *Völkergedanken* (patterns of thought of a people). For this reason no culture could be transformed into another. Every people existed in their own right, in their own context and with their own categories—though within different stages of development. So, with Lazarus, Steinthal, and Bastian the superiority of Europeans, at least theoretically,

was eclipsed. Only decades later, in 1910, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl formulated an idea even more radical than that of psychic unity and equal cultures: he postulated there is a fundamental alterity of “primitive,” prelogical thinking, or in other words: in Lévy-Bruhl’s eyes even cognition is relative.¹⁵

Here is not the place to pursue other, later receptions and modifications of these theories of *Völkerpsychologie* (by, for example, Wilhelm Wundt, who eventually gave it a nationalist turn) or its (partial) rejection by a younger generation of German “diffusionist ethnologists” after 1904, who tried to explain similarities of cultures to only a very limited extent by common psychic foundations, but attributed these mainly to direct transmissions. Consequently they argued for limited, more in-depth research into *Kulturkreise* and of human differences for their own sake (Whitman 1984; Bunzl 2003; Penny 2003, esp. 110–24). Nor can we pay adequate tribute to folk psychology’s importance to the field of sociology (Georg Simmel) or research on history, where it contributed to efforts to construct a “cultural” or “universal history” (Karl Lamprecht) (Lamprecht 1896; Lamprecht 1905; Breysig 1896; Ratzel 1904; Chickering 1991; Köhnke 1990; Haas 1994).

The only fact of relevance here is that there were some radical implications in all this for art history: Germany especially had quite a number of scientists and intellectuals who acknowledged the “artistic impulse” as a kind of innate human universal and thereby conceded the people known as primitives “real art” (Hirn 1900; Rothfuchs-Schulz 1980). This led to the problem that, if all cultures around the world produced “real art” which adequately expressed the respective attitudes and claims in its own right, this obviated the existence of any obligatory canon of aesthetic norms. The ancient European ideals of beauty, which had sought their legitimacy by referring to God, Nature, or Classical antiquity, were robbed of their validity. Aesthetic principles should be ascertained empirically by the application of perceptual psychology, using categories of a shared human psychic constitution, but modified through time, place and cultural traditions.

Two further aspects of “primitive art” should have made this very attractive to art historians: the enormous expansion of the range and objectives of the discipline and the presumed “historylessness” among prehistoric and indigenous peoples. “Primitive” peoples seemed to live without a historical consciousness, without written history. As no written testimonials existed, it seemed that only art and the products of handicrafts could offer information on the stages of their cultures.¹⁶ This unique anthropological approach allowed the protagonists of *Kunstwissenschaft* to believe that it could finally be emancipated from the confines of historical and philological research and concentrate on methodological independence and security of “form,” namely, on what was genuinely “visual” and “artistic.” In this the champions of *Kunstwissenschaft* saw the chance for it to become one of the leading “human

Lévy-Bruhl’s theories were most probably not generated by German writings on anthropology, but should be seen primarily as a reaction to E. B. Tylor’s unilinear evolutionism, see Scott Littleton 1985. For an explicit reaction to Lévy-Bruhl in the context of German art history see Vatter 1926, 23–34.

Consistently, after the “Introduction” Lubbock 1870 begins with a chapter on “Art and Ornament.” Also Schweinfurth 1875, X: “A people, as long as they are on the lowest rung of their development, are far better characterized by their industrial products [“Kunstfleisses”] than they are either by their habits, which may be purely local, or by their own representations, which (rendered in their rude and unformed language) are often incorrectly interpreted by us. If we possessed more of these tokens, we should be in a position to comprehend better than we do the primitive condition of many a nation which has now reached a high degree of culture.” In contrast, only a few years earlier, Prichard (1848) did not even mention art and art history.

An indication of the success of art history in its quest for disciplinary acceptance is given by the historian Lamprecht 1905, 118ff and esp. 123.

sciences” of the future.

In sum: if it were natural for the human “psyche” to produce art, as the new anthropological research tried to demonstrate, only a consideration of all the products of art worldwide—the “art of all times and peoples”—could deliver definitive conclusions about the origins and fundamental principles of art in its entirety. This paved the way to a central motivation for world art history around 1900. It also once again makes it apparent that it was a specific constellation of anthropology, psychology and discussions about cultural evolution in Germany which influenced the positions in the new *Kunstwissenschaft*. Another strand of arguments led to the same result: German art history in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century could seemingly only succeed as a “science” in the canon of university fields—that is, as a discipline explaining the rules and fundamental principles of all connections and developments in art—by adopting the new empirical and inductive methods of the natural sciences. This late, law-oriented objectification of artistic production, reception, and development could only be achieved in connection with the concept of a universal human psyche. Now, in order to determine these “basics” from the millennia of cultural histories, the art of “primitives”—namely, children, prehistoric and indigenous peoples—suddenly acquired a central interest. Hence world art history received a second decisive impulse from the methodological and institutional crisis of the discipline in the late nineteenth century. This is not to say, of course, that the “colonial interests” should be dismissed from their claim to be another important factor—especially since expeditions and colonies provided the material for studying the art of world peoples.

“PRIMITIVE ART” AND THE SURMOUNTING OF “OLD EUROPEAN PREJUDICES”

Following this brief sketch of the principal lines of thought, how did the art historical discussion go into detail? Three preliminary remarks are necessary to set the stage.

First of all, the separation between “principle thinking” and the “art historical discussion in detail” is only necessary because none of the texts I discuss below really develops the interconnections I have laid out above giving due weight to their full implications. None the less, all these texts, even if it is not obvious they do relate directly to this discussion, at least allude unmistakably to these “psychological” theories, which seem to have been delivered through various, widely dispersed channels. Therefore, the contemporary “horizon of discourse” in this case must be reconstructed; this lack of any obvious, direct connection may also be one of the reasons these texts have received so little attention over the years.

The idea of undertaking research into the art of all cultures without any comparative evaluation was formulated by authors who will be designated “relativists” in this discussion. Their

For the context of Kugler see Locher 2001, 208–66; on art historical ideas of progress Hazan 1998; Errington 1997. Of special interest in this context is also the history of “world architecture”: published under different titles and in different forms since 1855 this was initially done by James Fergusson, who included an introductory chapter “Ethnography as Applied to Architectural Art” (Fergusson 1865–1867, 42–74).

In France, slightly later Charles Blanc commenced publishing his project of compiling a *Grammaire des arts*; for a concise summary of these developments see Locher 2001, 328–78.

considerations always relate to other contemporary art historical reflections on non-European art. Consequently, the two additional alternatives—namely the theories of “evolutionists” and “nationalists”—also deserve a brief introduction, even more so as a clear-cut separation of these three camps is impossible to achieve without some ambiguity creeping in.

Finally, the names of quite a number of art historians and authors of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, which usually occur in art historical discussions on the beginnings of a literary and scientific estimation of non-European art, will be mentioned only in passing. This is not to deny the relevance of Edmond de Goncourt, Aby Warburg, Roger Fry, Guillaume Apollinaire, Carl Einstein and Wilhelm Worringer, among others, for offering important aspects for a new view on world art. In the context of a psychic conception of artistic production worldwide, however, they do not occupy a central position. Therefore, it seems justifiable that this article concentrate primarily on the lesser known writers who have pleaded most explicitly for a worldwide art history and the end of Eurocentric aesthetic categories, and who have anticipated some of the central claims made in present-day discussions with their demands for a methodological renewal of the subject of art history. All that can be done is to acknowledge that, because these texts both cover many different subjects and were published over a long time period (c. 1860–1930), the selection here could quite definitely be expanded.

The art historical “evolutionists” presented themselves as the successors to the age-old theories on the historical progress of humanity, which were formulated most cogently by Hegel and which had already led to the situation that, in Franz Kugler’s *Handbuch der Kunstgeschichte* in 1842, for the first time non-European art had received an astonishingly “objective” appreciation in the context of an “entire art history.”¹⁷ Just in this period, the new scientific classificatory systems, especially Darwin-inspired theories, offered a role-model which was also eminently suitable for arranging works of art according to morphological principles and in sequences of development. This was underlined by the fact that the majority of “primitive art” known in the nineteenth century consisted of ornaments, which could be arranged and illustrated particularly well in series set closely together. Ralph Nicholson Wornum’s *Analysis of Ornament* of 1856 and Owen Jones’s *Grammar of Ornament* from the same year were both born of attempts to detect eternally stable foundational and developmental principles from a complete comparison of world ornament (as the basic “language” of all different styles).¹⁸ In 1861 Semper presented his most authoritative formulation of the origins and early functionalist developments of art forms and ornaments, which he argued begin with abstract-geometric forms and end with the most naturalist ornament. As early as 1879, in a short paper entitled the *Anfänge der Kunst: anthropologische Beiträge zur Geschichte des*

Ranke 1879; for an explicit, if somewhat critical discussion of Semper see pp. 16–24.

However, Ranke later disputed the “dignity of science” of non-European anthropology, see Zimmerman 1998, 35ff and 87.

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A. Lane-Fox Pitt-Rivers 1874–1875 contributions are reprinted in Pitt-Rivers 1906; Balfour 1890 and Balfour 1893; taking the art of New-Guinea as his starting point, Haddon 1895, 306ff: “There are two ways in which art may be studied—the aesthetic and the scientific. The former deals with all manifestations of art from a purely subjective point of view, and classifies objects according to certain so-called ‘canons of art.’ These may be the generally recognised rules of the country or race to which the critic belongs, and may even have the sanction of antiquity, or they may be due to the idiosyncrasy of the would-be mentor. In criticizing the art of another country it must be remembered that racial tendencies may give such a bias as to render it very difficult to treat foreign art sympathetically. Western Europe and Japan are cases in point. Dogmatism in aesthetics is absurd, for, after all, the aesthetic sense is largely based upon personal likes and dislikes.... We will now turn to a more promising field of inquiry, and see what can be gained from a scientific treatment of art. This naturally falls into two categories, the physical [including: “psychology”] and the biological.”

For a discussion of Haddon’s ideas and their transference to all artistic products see Colley March 1896; his ideas on ornament in Colley March 1889. Stolpe’s articles of the 1890s are collected in Stolpe 1927.

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Hildebrand 1885; Lange 1899, V–XXXI; the expression “Gesetz der Frontalität” is not Lange’s own, but was coined by the editor Furtwängler, who regarded its discovery as a “kunstgeschichtliches Resultat ersten Ranges, der Entdeckung eines Naturgesetzes vergleichbar.”

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Hein 1891 was reviewed by Alois Riegl; Riegl 1892.

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The best succinct summary of Riegl’s thinking is given by Kemp 1990.

Ornaments (“Beginnings of Art: Anthropological Contributions to the History of Ornament”), in Munich the anthropologist Johannes Ranke would attempt to link these materialist explanations to anthropological-ethnological considerations, based on the newly published materials gathered from all over the world.¹⁹ However, it was especially in Great Britain and the Scandinavian countries that unilinear evolutionism found its most faithful supporters: Augustus H. Lane-Fox Pitt-Rivers, Henry Balfour, H. Colley March, Alfred C. Haddon and K. Hjalmar Stolpe.²⁰ In opposition to Semper and his followers, they formulated an early history of ornamentation which led from naturalistic to abstract forms (“degeneration theory”). At this point, at least two Scandinavian scholars should be mentioned briefly: the Swedish historian Hans O. Hildebrand, a specialist in early history who published drawings and carvings of the Inuit peoples in 1883, and foremost among them, the Danish archaeologist Julius Lange who was one of the first to compare not merely ornaments but the monumental sculpture of several “primitive cultures,” including Greek archaic sculpture, and who concluded most importantly that the “law of frontality” had been a universal principle of form at this point in plastic representation.²¹ Nevertheless, the decisive aspect in this case is that invariably in all these evolutionist theories, the analyses of ornaments and other art forms supplied interesting information concerning early human history, but such artefacts were always thought to be hopelessly inferior to later products. Ornamental decorations especially were regarded simply as craft objects and even seen partly as a “pictographic writing system,” but basically not regarded as “real art.”

As an objection to this, it seems to have been a trait of German-speaking ethnological research to emphasize the artistic character of ornaments even in the most “primitive level” of cultures. In 1890–1891, Alois R. Hein explicitly pointed out the aesthetic qualities of “savage” ornament and distinguished between the material culture of a civilization and the quality of its art (partially this idea had already been widespread earlier, for instance, in Owen Jones and Ralph Nicholson Wornum).²² Only two years later, in 1893, Alois Riegl presented his groundbreaking criticism of Semperian materialism and offered a new account of the historical development of (ancient) ornament. As is well known, slightly later, in *Spätromische Kunst-Industrie (Late Roman Art Industry, 1901)*, he also introduced the concept of “Kunstwollen,” a psychological force behind all artistic developments (and obviously influenced by the theories of *Völkerpsychologie*).²³ Since these considerations demanded the abandoning of normative aesthetic categories and evolutionist imaginings of art’s development, Riegl at this point had already become a “relativist.”

Now a brief word needs to be said about the “nationalists.” Obviously it was an easy step from the conception of an ever more perfect series of stages in art forms and cultures to “nationalist”

(and racist) schemes. In the German-speaking world, since the efflorescence of Pan-Germanism and *völkisch* movements in the 1890s, some scholars had postulated the superiority of (German-) Aryan art to “primitive” art. The rub was that a second argument also had to be brought to bear in order to discredit the artistic traditions of ancient Italy and Greece, previously celebrated as the foundation and perfection/apotheosis of Western art. As there was little to criticize in the products, instead of vilifying them, writers contested their priority. Therefore, they directed attention to the Near East, the “cradle of the Aryans,” and attempted to locate the origin of central art forms there—consequently, in a seemingly paradoxical fashion, a new point of view on non-European art tailored to nationalist purposes emerged. An early example of this can be found in the writings of Friedrich Seesselberg in 1897.²⁴ The best-known example is certainly Josef Strzygowski, beginning with his 1901 publication of *Orient und Rom*. His interest in non-European art would later be employed for nationalist ends (Jäggi 2002; Kite 2003).

The third and most important group was that of the “relativists.” In 1875, Georg Schweinfurth was already implying that the “civilization” of the world by the West could be understood as a double-edged narrative—of progress, but also as a history of loss: “Speed is of the essence as the destructive tendency which is generated when our industrial productions obtrude themselves upon all the nations of the earth, threatens, sooner or later, to sweep away the last vestiges of indigenous arts, even in Africa.”²⁵ Yet shortly afterwards, the technically advanced works of art from Benin—looted during a British penal expedition in 1897—not only dramatically justified Schweinfurth’s lament, they also conclusively upset ideas about “primitive” African art.

The real discussion was actually opened by an exceptional intellectual achievement in 1894: the 300-page treatise by Ernst Grosse on *Die Anfänge der Kunst (The Beginnings of Art)*. In contrast to its title, in reality it presents itself as an attempt to found anew the discipline of *Kunstwissenschaft* on a strictly objective and scientific basis as a kind of “comparative ethnological method applied to art history”; this revised *Kunstwissenschaft* aspired to analyse in order to make “individual manifestations” its primary goals (p. 9), but to define the overarching cultural-historical, and socioanthropological hypotheses pertaining to the art forms of body decoration, ornament, sculpture, dance, poetry, and music, all objects which Grosse regarded—at least in their early stages—as having been heavily determined by their socioeconomic functions.²⁶ Behind all this of course lies Darwin’s evolutionist theory: “The development of art, too, is accomplished under the great law of natural selection” (p. 14). Grosse argued that “humanity ... by no means moves along a single line in a single direction; rather, as different as the living conditions of peoples are, so different too are their paths and destinations.” And therefore “the present

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Seesselberg 1897 is most explicit in the “Conclusion,” p. 141; for the origins of “northern” and “southern” European art in Near Eastern “world art” see pp. 4–15.

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Schweinfurth 1875, X; the book has a dedication “Seinem vielverehrten Freunde Prof. Dr. A. Bastian, dem Gründer der Deutschen Gesellschaft zur Erforschung Aequatorial-Afrikas.” For the (German) tradition of criticizing Eurocentric historiography and Western “materialism” see Marchand 1997.

26

Grosse 1894; the English translation of 1897 went through five more editions in 1898, 1899, 1900, 1914 and 1928; a French translation appeared in 1902 under the title *Les débuts de l’art*. A short discussion of the merits and (evolutionist) limitations of Grosse’s theory is in Gerbrands 1957, 47ff.

Schmarsow 1907, 310–12. Also relevant in this context are Schmarsow 1910 and Schmarsow 1919. For the tradition of German anthropology to collect materials and facts, without theoretical *a priori*” see Zimmerman 1998, 54–64.

28

Verworn 1907, 5–7. For Hegel see Locher 2001, 206.

29

Worringer 1919 [1907], 70ff. On the same pages, he praises Japanese art. See also his later rejection of the idea of “art” as a human universal in Worringer 1956; whereas in Worringer 1911, 6–9, he argued against the dominance of a (European) canon of classical beauty.

history of art [has] made the field of its research too narrow to the detriment of foreign arts” (p. 2). “The science of art should extend its researches to all peoples; but it should apply itself especially to those groups which it has formerly most neglected. All forms of art are equally endowed with a claim to their own intrinsic interest” (p. 23). Once again the summary states the central idea of artistic potential as a human universal: “Our investigation has proved what aesthetics has hitherto only asserted: that there are, for the human race, at least, generally effective conditions governing aesthetic pleasure, and consequently generally valid laws of artistic creation. In contrast to this fundamental agreement, the differences between primitive and higher art forms appear to be more of a quantitative than a qualitative sort. The emotions represented in primitive art are narrow and rude, its materials are scanty, its forms are poor and coarse, but in its essential motives, means, and aims the art of earliest times is one with the art of all times” (p. 307).

The new investigations into world art reached a first climax in 1907: in this year August Schmarsow tried to devise a first systematic summation of the meaning of *Völkerpsychologie* and anthropology for a new *Kunstwissenschaft*.²⁷ The point of departure adopted by Schmarsow was Grosse’s book, which he linked with the theories of Yrjö Hirn (*The Origins of Art*, 1900) and Wilhelm Wundt (*Völkerpsychologie*, 1900). To avoid the problem of how to differentiate between art and other artefacts made by these peoples, Schmarsow pleaded for an unprejudiced and general inclusion of all handicrafts from a culture. In the same year, Max Verworn developed the programme of an art psychology of the “primitives,” in which he also modified (unconsciously?) a *dictum* by Hegel that art could sometimes give the deepest insight into the nature of a people (or could even allow exclusive insight if the people are illiterate).²⁸ Furthermore, the reader should be reminded of the fact that in 1907 Wilhelm Worringer’s enormously influential PhD thesis on *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* (*Abstraction and Empathy*) was published; his work was also based entirely on the tradition of psychological-formal aesthetics and changed the general acceptance of abstract forms of art radically. Despite his pioneering effort, Worringer could still continue to dismiss all prehistoric and indigenous arts as “not yet really art.”²⁹ If Carl Einstein’s publications on *Negerplastik* (1915/1920) and *Afrikanische Plastik* (1921) are pointed out at this stage, this is done for reasons beyond the newly researched and remarkable formal analysis of these works of art. Indeed, as one of the first, Einstein seems to have recognized the dangers of the psychological *Kunstwissenschaft*, because its central term “empathy” — against all previous intentions and with Worringer as the latest to modify it — began to be endowed with an increasingly subjective-speculative component (Einstein 1981, 65ff).

After 1918 — after the eclipse of Imperial Germany and the loss of the colonies — the demands for a world art history were able to become even more radical. The year 1923 seems to have marked

a second climax in the attempt to develop a world art history: in this year Herbert Kühn published a substantial book on *Die Kunst der Primitiven* (“Art of the Primitives”), which embraced the entire spectrum of prehistoric and indigenous art forms: the products of Aztecs, Bushmen, Eskimos, Africans and so forth. In contrast to other books about the “art of all times and peoples,” Kühn did not espouse the idea of a superior development of the art derived from the so called *Kultur-Nationen*. His introductory conviction was instead that “the art of the primitives is not in truth primitive—men of the time lived primitively ...—but their art is the purest expression of their world We must thus look at them from an entirely different point of view. Winckelmann and Goethe’s concepts are no longer adequate for interpreting the art of aboriginal and indigenous peoples. A time when Greek antiquity and the Renaissance alone appeared to be the epitome of art and when every stylization seemed a corruption would have no understanding for an art of primitive peoples” (Kühn 1923, 7; this and subsequent translations are mine). Kühn added an acute analysis of the historiography of the topic stretching from Semper to Riegl to the ethnologists—in order to pursue a Marxist-related theory of all-determinative forms of economic organization.

In 1923, Josef Strzygowski also presented a systematic summary and elaboration of his thoughts, which he had been developing since the publication of his controversial book *Orient und Rom* in 1901.³⁰ If his work had not included unabashedly anti-Semitic attacks against the “Jewish world conspiracy” and if we had not known about Strzygowski’s later nationalistic instrumentalization of his theories, his *Krisis der Geisteswissenschaften* (“Crisis of the Humanities”) may have been regarded as one of the fundamental methodological texts of a world art history (taking its place alongside Grosse’s and Schmarsow’s publications). In explicit opposition to a Eurocentric “humanistic tradition” and a view of the whole world obtained by means of a “strictly scientific” three steps of “tidings, nature, development,” Strzygowski attempted to assert that a “comparing/comparative art research” would be a leading discipline of the future human sciences: “It seems to me that we have been taught to think in a certain ‘humanistic’ way, dominant since the Renaissance, a kind of superstition.... This is how I see the situation of the humanities when all and sundry is viewed from the perspective of philosophy, Classical philology and the historiography of Europe.... If we were to let the objects speak for themselves, to see ourselves simply in the service of those projects who have their own character...., then we might perhaps begin to reach out for each other around the globe in friendship.... If there were a science which would embrace the entire circle of the globe, mankind in the entire course of its existence, and in addition in all of its societal stratifications, and which would finally strive to understand its inner values as common to its universal character, it will show the way to the other disciplines in the humanities. This science,

Beyer 1923, the book went through three printings in this one year.

For Grosse's *Kunstwissenschaftlichen Studien*, published in 1900, see Heinz 1970, 210–13; his publications on East Asian sculpture, East Asian ink painting, and the art collections in Tokyo, etc. contributed significantly to making this art widely known in Germany, see Von Erdberg 1985.

On Kühn see his partly “autobiographical” Kühn 1976.

it seems to me, could indeed be the investigation of the arts.”

Finally, in the same year, in his small book *Welt-Kunst: von der Umwertung der Kunstgeschichte* (“World Art: The Reevaluation of Art History”), Oskar Beyer attempted to dethrone classical Greco-Roman and Renaissance art completely: Beyer, too, strove to establish a “world perspective” and an “surmounting of old European prejudices” with help from the “previous work and findings of the [ethnological, anthropological and archeological] sciences.” But he only went as far as to designate the art of classical Greece, on the basis of its manifest “individualistic principle of art” — that is, its production of singular artist-geniuses in competition with one another and therefore no longer representatives of the community as a whole — as the beginning of artistic (and with it, of ethical and societal) decline.³¹

As a digression it should be mentioned that in the following year, at the second *Kongreß für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* (Berlin 1924), the sociologist Alfred Vierkandt presented arguably the best summary on the competing theories so far developed and the problems confronting the new anthropological-psychological art research. However, he addressed his methodological conclusions and demands only to ethnology, and did not draw attention to the implications of a new world art history (Vierkandt 1925). This may also have been connected with the fact that those years were marked by a contest which was apparently taking place between art history and anthropology, disputing which discipline had discovered “primitive art” and whose task it was to investigate and document it. *Kunstwissenschaft* seemed to be winning out at first with its “aims for a universal History of Art of all times and peoples ... which will make possible the discovery of universal laws of artistic creation, the origin and change of style, as well as the conditions for the individual psychology, the sociology and culture of artistic creation” (Vatter 1926, 7ff).

In trying to make sense of the fact that all these works obviously play no part at all in today’s art historical discussions, at first sight it is tempting to conclude that most of the authors could be considered marginal figures of art history: Grosse (1862–1927) studied philosophy and literature and in 1894 became a professor of philosophy in Freiburg; beginning in 1896–1897 he specialized in researching and collecting East Asian art.³² Kühn (1895–1980), who had written his PhD on *Die Grundlagen des Stilwandels in der modernen Kunst* in 1918, became a professor in 1929 — of pre-history and early history, an area of study to which mainstream art historians paid little attention.³³ Beyer (1890–1960) spent his entire life working as an independent scholar and writer. Only Schmarsow (1853–1936) and Strzygowski (1862–1941) may be considered important academic art historians in Germany and Austria of their time, but they were both also very idiosyncratic and controversial figures: the contemporary critique bemoaned the lack of

careful factual research in Schmarsow's extensive published *oeuvre*, touching upon a wide range of topics as well as methodical questions. Strzygowski unfortunately stated his subversive ideas of Eastern influence on European art very uncompromisingly and pugnaciously; he also brought discredit upon himself through his already mentioned anti-Semitic and nationalistic remarks.

Nevertheless, this impression of marginalization is complicated by the fact that some of their publications were obviously very popular and had a wide readership; some—for example Grosse's—were even translated into English and French.³⁴ The prehistoric and indigenous art in the German multivolume manuals on the art of all times and peoples (Woermann, Springer, *Pro-pyläen*, very selective: *Handbuch der Kunstwissenschaft*) were at least intended in part for the *Bildungsbürgertum*; and also the steadily increasing production of “coffeetable books” on these topics seemed to be a parallel phenomenon to the various editions of popular “world histories” in the Germany of the Emperor Wilhelm II (Bergenthum 2002). Other factors were also unquestionably important: the very common *Völkerschauen*; the founding of ethnological museums; the growing antiquarian market; and even the first exhibitions of non-European art are pertinent indications that World Art experienced a kind of heyday in the early 1900s.³⁵ In 1924–1925, finally, the first German-speaking specialist journals—*Jahrbuch der asiatischen Kunst*, *Artibus Asiae* and *Jahrbuch für prähistorische & ethnographische Kunst (Ipek)*—, which operated exclusively outside of the established art historical canon, were founded.

That these impulses did not really penetrate the Anglo-American realm is attributable to a variety of theoretical and methodological developments: the domination of unilinear evolutionism in the late nineteenth century, whose strongest supporters were Tylor and Frazer; the historical particularism of the German-Jewish émigré Franz Boas (in our context especially his 1927 published *Primitive Art*); and, finally, the increasing hegemony after the 1940s of structural-functionalism propagated by Bronislaw Malinowski and A.R. Radcliffe-Brown. Paradoxically, Boas's (at least temporary) overwhelming influence on American anthropological research made his name a virtual substitute for the German research tradition and all earlier forms of cultural relativism were gradually subsumed under it.³⁶

Nevertheless, probably the most decisive break with and “neglect” of the early German impulses in world art history should be set (and not surprisingly) in Germany itself: attributable to the changing ideals undergone by ethnology in the years after 1900 (abandoning among other pursuits the search for fundamental elements of the human psyche); the growing nationalism of the Weimar Republic and the general crisis of *Geisteswissenschaften* during these years; and especially in the 1930s, when the Nazis begin to force a radical racism of research and insist on a severance

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See also the positive contemporary evaluations of Grosse's book, for example by Frobenius 1897, 12.

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See Penny 1999. This search for a world art history might even be set in relation to the idea of “modern art” around 1900 becoming a “world language [of art] ... beyond natural differences in place and time,” as Julius Meyer-Graefe put it; see Gillen 2002.

36

This does not imply that Boas himself ever formulated this claim; see Bunzl 1996; Massin 1996; Bunzl and Penny 2003, 5–7 and 22.

For the “ethnological” dimensions of this change see Penny 2003 and Bunzl and Penny 2003.

Instead, within the discipline of anthropology/ethnology a subfield “anthropology of art” was established, see Haselberger 1969; Kreide-Damani 1992; Morphy 1994; Hatcher 1985.

Onians 2004, 11ff. For a concise summary of the actual discussions on human universals see Brown 2004.

with all earlier liberal approaches.³⁷ This did not happen in a vacuum: analogues in neighbouring disciplines, for example, the cultural historian Karl Lambrecht and his Institut für Kultur- und Universalgeschichte (Institute of Cultural and Universal History) in Leipzig, founded in 1909 and closed by the Nazis in 1933 may also be pointed out (Haas 1994, 229–42).

After 1945, German art historians avoided dealing with the recent past. Hence, the controversial topic of world art was simply expunged from the art history curriculum.³⁸ Cogently, the conceptual reworking of the second edition of *Propyläen Kunstgeschichte* (1966) turned back to Winckelmann, insofar as it allowed the history of art in Volume One to begin once again with the Greeks — and no longer as in the first edition (1923) with the early cultures and indigenous peoples, which were divided over the supplementary volumes (Paul 2003).

TOWARDS 2000

In many respects, the re-awakening of interest in world art in the 1970s and 1980s astonishingly resembles the situation in the decades around 1900: since the 1970s and during the 1980s, cultural historical and anthropological questions and methods have also celebrated a comeback. As in the years at the beginning of the twentieth century, today we pose questions about the possible connections between and common principles in the objects of world art — not to do so would make world art history appear to be nothing more than an accumulation and linear regimentation of art forms, without making clear, for example, what a comparison between an Inca temple and Michelangelo’s dome for St Peter’s should contribute to our understanding. Even today, the solution to the problem consists in taking recourse to the “psychic unity of mankind” and to human universals: in Hans Belting’s 2001 *Bild-Anthropologie*, thoughts of death, memory, and substitution form the foundation for all representations. In the work of Summers, “real space” (an idea also heavily reliant on anthropology and basic human-psychology concepts) and “post-formalist art history” assume this role. In the case of Onians, finally, it is “nature,” and when he specifies that “[t]he nature referred to here is one familiar to people of all cultures. It is nature as a set of resources and constraints, principally those embodied in the nature of the earth, of time and of man”³⁹ — his work almost reads as an unmediated sequel to Bastian’s theory of the divergent overlays of the *Völker-gedanken*. In other words: we are still wrestling with what has been the greatest problem ever since the initial European ideas about World Art, namely the “ennobling” category of “art” itself and the tensions between its deeply Eurocentric connotations contrasted with its potential to be understood as a human universal.

Finally, interestingly the institutional conditions framing world art history in Germany in 1900 and 2000 also display

parallels: if the original issue was the establishment of *Kunstgeschichte/Kunstwissenschaft* in the university landscape, today it is the survival of art history in the context of newer, purportedly more interdisciplinary fields like *Bildwissenschaft*, visual studies or media studies, all competing for the distribution of scarce resources and funds. Taking account of the historiographical beginnings of the subject, namely the origins and principles of world art history around 1900, can alert our consciousness to points relevant to the current discussions, with regard both to methodological and to institutional conditions, possible solutions and self-imposed apori.

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