

undisciplined thinking_

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Andreas Beyer_ The Improbability of National Art Histories

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When Fritz Saxl and Rudolf Wittkower explored the 'contacts' between England and the Mediterranean cultures, they worked under a certain premise characteristic to Aby Warburg and his circle: that the migration of images was not confined to national borders and that art is in a constant state of flux continually escaping national attributions and identifications.* One might think by now their lesson should have been long learned. The truth, however, is that Art History still relies on stereotypes, which coincide with ideas of national identity.¹ Oddly enough, the more 'global' the discipline's perspective gets, it seems, the stronger concepts which derive from its 'national' past become.²

It was namely the question of 'style' that was discussed in terms of attributions to nations and, by consequence, served for political appropriations. Describing 'artistic styles' and organizing their historic sequence is an enterprise that sits at the heart of art history as an academic discipline. It has to be kept in mind that the ways in which art is being discussed in general are primarily informed by academic discourses. It is the language of these discourses that determines theory and practice alike. What is conceived in the often remote and solitary studies of the academics soon finds itself being translated into the public sphere. Specific historical narratives, the arrangements of museums, art politics – they all can be traced back to hypotheses and topoi employed in the academic field.

That nationalism was decisive to the formation and implementation of art history as an academic discipline is well known. It is not by chance that the development of the profession of the art historian took place simultaneously with the rise of nationalist ideologies. The two were, as Matthew Rampley has aptly emphasized, structurally linked, for art history was, as he put it in reference to the philosopher Louis Althusser, an 'ideological apparatus of the state'.³ In the aftermath of the emergence of the nation-states in the nineteenth century, institutes and departments of art history were founded towards the end of the century, destined to promote the research and the teaching of a particular history of art. This was considered to be a history of national artistic schools and traditions. Thus, national identity was reaffirmed by means of an imaginary common visual patrimony - and the specific 'styles' became the touchstone of what was an ideological appropriation of the arts; they were declared a national heritage. Since identity is not least generated through distinction, however, the construction of each national artistic tradition was bound to advance in opposition to other national traditions.

A famous example for such an antagonistic development give the true battles regarding the 'ownership' of the Gothic; battles carried out with tenacity by German and French art

* This text is the revised and expanded version of the article: Restitution: Wie national ist Kunst? In: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 19 February 2019: <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/kunst/restitution-wie-national-ist-kunst-16047703.html>

historians alike at the beginning of the twentieth century. Was the Gothic's essential spirit German, as Wilhelm Worringer claimed, or was its essence French, as his colleagues on the other side of the Rhine insisted. The bloody trenches of the First World War resonated uncannily in the lecture halls on both sides. The same is true for the claim of authorship concerning the Renaissance as a historiographic concept. The Renaissance was a subject by whose means both French and German art historians defined national traditions; this time not only in opposition to each other, but also in opposition to Italy. There were, fortunately, some exceptions. The French Renaissance scholar Eugène Müntz contested such ideas and opposed himself to these attempts to nationalize the Renaissance - which earned him the allegation of defeatism. Also Aby Warburg – an enthusiastic reader of Müntz – rejected such ideas and pointed out the transnational circulation of artists and artistic ideas between cultures. But these two cases were, as mentioned above, exceptions.

The abiding story of influence of nationalism on art history can be observed in every part of Europe. As a consequence, unfortunately, this means that all those art histories that will be written elsewhere in the world being based on the European model, can hardly escape this hold. Even though the ideological aberrations of the early twentieth century may seem naïve in retrospective, one should make no mistake about the persistence of such concepts.

Although not alone, European museums are still mostly organized according to 'national schools' – as are 'National Galleries' around the world. They all are governed by 'geopolitical' patterns, as it were.

These might be well known facts. Nonetheless, the ideological impact of nationalist ideas on 'Stil-Kritik' as art history's initial task and original concern, has been explored only in part and is yet to be analyzed in depth. How French is Impressionism? How German is Expressionism? Is there an Englishness of English art? Is Pop Art more specific for the USA or for Great Britain? Such questions touch on political issues and they are not confined to the Western sphere: somewhere between the global and the local the nation still lurks as an effective concept. In light of avant-gardism, cosmopolitanism and migration we may ask, where and how specific 'forms' such as the ones mentioned above converge, and where they differ? To do so, one has also to learn from the ideologically overdetermined discussions of the past and understand that stylistic denominations, the tale of artistic landscapes generally have never succeeded in describing a subject-matter but were always mere variations of modes of narration. Significantly enough most stylistic characterizations have been coined belatedly, *ex post*. Even the 'Young British Artists' were labeled as such only when they had already grown much older.

If there is no 'national style' - is art then, or has it always been, transnational? Is art, indeed, a global language? Unfortunately, this too would mean to cherish an illusion. For, 'global' is potentially merely another variation of a mode of narration.

In the summer 2018, the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin showed an exhibition entitled *Hello World!* It was an attempt to insist on a globally identical diversity.⁴ A *contradictio in adiecto*, of course. Such universalism, that insists somehow on anthropological and structural principles, tends to conceal the ever different and varied contexts, in which form finding occurs. These contexts might very well be political. But they are never national. These forms do not draw up a frontier, they do not contour national demarcations, do not contain any folkish or racial essence. They are not identical with nations, but identical only with themselves and they obey only to the inherent logic of the form.

Take for example the weird case of the Strassburg cathedral – one of the finest examples of the international Gothic style. As long as the city belonged to the German *Reich*, though, it was considered to be the monumental representation of a German supremacy. Once the city became French, the minster too transformed into the supreme icon of the French artistic genius. If there is any truth in this history, then it is that this monument is neither nor. For, it is art, architecture and sculpture in a specific place, created at a specific time and condensing intrinsic and extrinsic forms.

But there is a tradition within the discipline of art history, that escapes such heteronomy. Aby Warburg and his Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek exemplify it, as do his followers in the early years in the London exile. And maybe, art history could have avoided being used by nationalist interests if it had followed one of its founding fathers, the Swiss art-historian and historian Jacob Burckhardt (1818-1897). Particularly during the 19th century, the century of nation-building, Switzerland had a clear awareness of its proper situation as a point of intersection and crossing, for its synthetic potential. The Swiss poet Conrad Ferdinand Meyer (1825-1898), for example, had been characterized by his sister (and lifelong collaborator) Betsy Meyer as a man, standing on the borders of several countries, combining the “vehemence of a Martin Luther”, the “lucent glow of a Dante Alighieri” and the “sharp ray of a Blaise Pascal”. What seems to be, in the case of Conrad Ferdinand Meyer, somehow the process of ‘filtrage’, of absorption and amalgamation, appears different in the case of the Genevan philosopher Henri-Frédéric Amiel (1821-1881). In his famous *Journal intime* he had developed a concept of neutrality as ‘mental style’. His isolated situation on the Lake Geneva, where he observed Europe from his “tour paisible” in a wide and impartial view, allowed him to find participation and distance alike. And may be this position would have been the right one for art history as well. Especially because Burckhardt seem to have chosen it too, at least in a certain way, when he decided to spend his live in Basel - a ‘splendid isolation’ indeed.⁵

A famous photograph shows Burckhardt on his way to the University’s lecture theatre, carrying a folder with stamps and photographs, that helped him to illustrate his lectures on the history of art. Most of the artworks the author of the famous *Cultur der Renaissance in*

Italien (1860) discussed were in fact far away. In Italy, mainly, but also in the Netherlands and elsewhere. Next to his own memory, supported by notes and drawings, photographs were the main means by which Burckhardt conducted his groundbreaking research.⁶ Furthermore, as the folder tucked beneath Burckhardt's arm implies, they served him in particular when he was lecturing. The spatial disjuncture, inherent to his position in Basel, characterizes the critical (i. e. healthy) distance he kept to the objects of his research. When editing the second edition of Franz Kuglers *Handbuch der Geschichte der Malerei* (1847), he changed its structure decidedly. The first edition of this very popular book had been organised according to national terms, the chapters discussed Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, France and England. This arrangement according to "people", Burckhardt argued, had to be given up on behalf of "higher requirements of historical nature". He rather went for a "synchronistic (...) system, according to the inner cohesion of the evolution". This renunciation of an art history according to nations had its equivalences in the philosophical convictions of Burckhardt's colleague in Basle, the historian and anthropologist Johann Jakob Bachofen (1815-1887) who insisted on a "spatial universality" that corresponded to an "absolute devaluation of all geographical data". Also, in his *Cicerone* (1855), Burckhardt ordered his material according to the specific forms and not even according to a chronological system.

Jacob Burckhardt had always felt the narrowness and the constrictions of his small hometown of Basel. But it was only here that he could develop that spectacular intellectual radiation that would revolutionise history and art history alike. He had studied and travelled widely abroad - in Germany, in Italy. But when he decided in 1858 to accept the position of professor at the University of Basel, it was a decision for independence. When refusing in 1872 the offer to succeed the historian Leopold von Ranke as professor for history at the Berlin University – undoubtedly the most prominent post in the field at that time – it was a decision against heteronomy. The British historian Hugh Trevor Roper (in a contribution for the Proceedings of the British Academy in 1984) has recognized Burckhardt's wish to distinguish himself from the German university system and its personnel who were all in the service of the upcoming German empire. Burckhardt, in contrast, was the 'anti-prussian', the denier of the national-state. Apparently, he knew that he could find his proper position only at the "archimedian point", outside the "affairs", from where he observed the world (as he writes in his posthumously published *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen*, 1905).

This position, exemplarily demonstrated by Jacob Burckhardt, is a paradigm; as such it could have guided art history (and may guide it in the future). It would have helped as an antidote to all nationalist collections. If there is nothing like a national style, there should not be national art histories either. Would not everyone agree, that the best contributions on certain specific phenomena in art are usually written from 'outside', overcoming any 'campanilismo'?

May be the most interesting contributions to the art of Gustave Courbet have been written by American scholars. For sure the crucial book on German limewood-sculptors has been provided by a British art historian and some German-speaking authors have recently contributed in a decisive way to the literature on Giovanni Bellini. It is the state of being ideologically un-entangled, which Jacob Burckhardt embodied, that art history might assume as a proper paradigm. Fritz Saxl and Rudolf Wittkower were pervaded by this conviction. Exiled in London, they had found that “archemidian point”, which scholars will find in themselves, if they are willing to address art according to its proper rules.⁷

¹ Thus, for example, pointed out by Matthew Rampley: *The Persistence of Nationalism*. Review of: Michela Passini, *La fabrique de l'art national: Le nationalisme et les origins de l'histoire de l'art en France et en Allemagne 1870-1933*. Paris 2012, in: *Journal of Art Historiography* 11 (2014), pp. 1-4.

² Cf. Martha Langford: Introduction, in: *Ibid.* (ed.): *Narratives Unfolding. National Art Histories in an Unfinished World*, McGill-Queens University Press, Montreal 2017, pp. 3-41.

³ Matthew Rampley: *The Vienna School of Art History. Empire and the Politics of Scholarship, 1847-1918*, Pennsylvania 2013, pp. 74-95. Cf. Louis Althusser: *Idéologie at appareils idéologiques d'État (notes pour une recherche)*, in: *La Pensée* 151 (1970), pp. 67-125.

⁴ Cf. Andreas Beyer: „Die Unmöglichkeit einer Weltkunst. Kunstgeschichte im Konjunktiv: Wie die Berliner Museen aus dem westlichen Kanon ausbrechen wollen und sich dabei verrennen“, in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, 6. Mai 2018, No. 18, p. 47

⁵ Cf. Lionel Gossman: *Basel in the Age of Burckhardt: A Study in Unseasonable Ideas*, Chicago 2002.

⁶ Burckhardt's use of various media is discussed by Irmgard Siebert: *Jacob Burckhardt: Ein Kunsthistoriker auf Reisen*, in: *alma mater philippina* (1997/98), pp. 16-20.

⁷ Erst nach Drucklegung dieses Aufsatzes erschien, vielfach erfreulich korrespondierend, Sigrid Weigel: *Transnationale Auswärtige Kulturpolitik – Jenseits der Nationalkultur. Voraussetzungen und Perspektiven der Verschränkung von Innen und Aussen*. Ifa-Edition Kultur und Aussenpolitik, Stuttgart 2019.