1842 – The Art History of Handbooks and Anachronic Icons

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On 18 October 1842 the Greek temple high above the Bavarian river bed was completed. Floating by on the Danube you can lift your gaze and see what looks like a sparkling white version of the Parthenon temple on the Acropolis in Athens. The aim of Ludwig I of Bavaria in having it built was to create a worthy space for the German spirit, founded on the German-speaking countries’ linguistic community in the wake of the humiliating war against France. Its architect Leo von Klenze (1784–1864), who also designed the Glyptothek and Alte Pinakothek in Munich, wanted to let the outer grandeur of this monument, this Walhalla outside Regensburg, mirror its inner, spiritual greatness\(^1\) – Doric temple on the outside, the home of the Old Norse gods by name, and on the inside a memorial dedicated to German intellectuals. Initially, around 170 neoclassical marble busts lined the walls but the number has increased over time and continues to increase.\(^2\) A monument, memorial, heathen temple, as well as a kind of deifying museum for dead white Germans. The reason why this ‘hall of fame’ was received with mixed feelings was probably above all aesthetic. Something felt wrong with this pastiche, even for many of those who believed that the Germanic spirit was based on the Greek. Its topicality can, however, be described as ‘historical’, which the painter Wilhelm von Kaulbach sometime later described as the only ‘contemporary’.\(^3\) For the budding art historians, however, the monument was a challenge to the newly established explanatory model that proclaimed that art is a symbiosis between content and form, time and place, spirit and materiality.

Not even then was everyone in agreement over Classicism capturing the essence of the German spirit, arguing that Romanticism lay closer to the heart of the Teutonic sensibility. When the British Romantic J. M. W. Turner painted the autumnal inauguration of the Walhalla, the sharp, cold forms were dissolved in the contour-blurring haze that characterises his most famous work. That same year, 1842, the Prussian court decided to resume the building of the cathedral in Cologne, which was started in 1248 but had, for various reasons, stalled in the 16th century. By 1842, German Romanticism in art and literature had seen better days, but in the budding field of art history it was still a relevant, in fact highly contemporary, art form.

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And by ‘Romanticism’ the young science of art history meant what we today would call the Middle Ages. The decision to resume building was made, as in the case of the Walhalla, based on a cultural impulse to conjure up their own Germanic tradition from the past for the future. The style that characterises Cologne Cathedral and that was invented in France is today called Gothic, but since Goethe’s famous essay and still in 1842 the Germans preferred to call it German or Germanic. The fact that the German national spirit could at the same time conceive of itself as Greek and Gothic is a sign of their fairy-tale cultural chauvinism but also of just how much such identifications are a form of ideological projection.

The building of Cologne Cathedral was thus in part resumed for antiquarian reasons – and in that sense modern in accordance with the historical insight that every era has its own discrete style and deserves a measure of respect for that – and in part was absolutely contemporary, since the aesthetics that found expression here recurred in the typography,
design, fashion, furniture and interior design, as well as architecture of the time. When the cathedral was finally completed on 14 August 1880, the cast-iron bridge over the river, a construction that hinted at the vast possibilities of modern architecture in the late 1800s and early 20th century, was also finished. Was the cathedral then a Medieval building or how is its temporality to be understood? Can an art-historical categorisation of a work encompass the fact that it took 632 years to complete, especially when the definition of a work is so dependent on its specific historical time? Here the progress of the Medieval cathedral entailed that it successively became more historical, ‘older’ and more distanced from both its origins and from the contemporary art and architecture. In this monument the connection between content and form, idea and execution, message and medium breaks down.

An artwork such as Cologne Cathedral – analogously with the Walhalla to a certain extent – evades the historical explanation that the field of art history made its own in the 19th century. According to this model, which can be described as historical, an artwork must be understood based on its coordinates of time and place. Art is here defined in relation to its birthplace, the point in time and the cultural geography of its inception. To understand an artwork is to trace it historically, that is to say backwards, to the source, the origin, where we find its first utterance. The first person to articulate this fundamental idea was the philosopher G. W. F. Hegel, who in his aesthetic lectures in the 1820s in Berlin pointed out art’s inextricable roots in culture – a word that is connected to cultivation and is deeply entrenched in nature. This thought re-emerges a century later in the reflections of another phenomenologist, Martin Heidegger, regarding the Greek temple’s rootedness in the earth and the world.6 The fact that the cathedral has a firm, given place is clear, but the era seems to transcend and shatter itself into several eras.

The generation of art historians who in the 1830s came into contact with Hegel’s ideas became decisive for the birth of the modern art-historical discipline.7 This ‘Berlin School’ first identified itself strategically as a Hilfswissenschaft, an ‘ancillary’ science for the most important of the humanist disciplines after philosophy: history. Not the history that dealt mainly with kings and war, but the department of so-called ‘cultural history’, that includes all conceivable contexts around the artwork, from religion and social ethics to economy and law. It was only towards the end of the 19th century that art history as a discipline had enough self-confidence actively to differentiate itself from this legitimating connection, to be reborn as an independent, autonomous science.8

Art history was thus a modern Wissenschaft (human science), gradually established in the course of the 19th century. This occurred in Germany and some other countries in Europe but gradually spread to other parts of the world. Nowadays, art history is an institutionalised part of the global academy. There may be a long and multifaceted prehistory to the establishment of art history as a science, but irrespective of all analogies and partial similarities, there is a vital difference between the art studies conducted before the beginning of the 19th century and those that took shape thereafter. This may have something to do with the so-called temporal revolution, that is when the biblical chronology was abandoned in favour of the notion of Earth being many millions of years old, proven by geological findings.9 Some claim that Giorgio Vasari’s way of arranging his Italian artists’ biographies in 1550 marked the birth of art history, while others decidedly elevate Johann Joachim Winckelmann

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...to the position of father of art history by virtue of his art history of antiquity, from 1764.\textsuperscript{10} Despite his antipathy towards the philosopher, E. H. Gombrich claimed that Hegel should instead be counted as the founder of art history.\textsuperscript{11} The decisive leap cannot, however, be attributed to any of the works by these, admittedly fascinating, individuals, but took place over a longer period of time, without ‘iconic’ heroes and without those involved even seeming to be aware of it. Such an unglamorous process corresponds to the task of proving Hegel wrong in his claim that contemporary art ‘remains for us a thing of the past’ that one can only reflect on in retrospect.\textsuperscript{12} Instead one tried to show that art through the ages, from the beginning until today, really was a continuous historical phenomenon, with its line of development, lows and highs, that also ran on into contemporary times, where it confronted everyone who is interested in art, and, not least, urged the artists themselves to continue the story, continue creating great art worthy of a great cultural community, a great people or a great nation.\textsuperscript{13}

While both Vasari and Winckelmann, regardless of the differences between them, had worked with organic metaphors about the rise and fall, birth and death of art in a relatively static circular model that had its roots in antiquity, the temporal revolution entailed a breakthrough for a dynamic evolutionary viewpoint, where nothing recurs but everything is engaged in progressive change. This is also why models such as budding, blossoming, wilting, death and rebirth no longer sufficed, although some of that usage persisted. Instead, a unique, empirically founded context had to be established for art from all over the world as the only way to write its actual history. The first work with this ambition, the ambition to outline the history of art from its first tentative ‘attempts’ to the contemporary levels of high culture, was also published in 1842.

The author, Franz Kugler (1808–58) was not a celebrity on a par with Winckelmann or Hegel, and his book with the uninspired title \textit{Handbuch der Kunstgeschichte} (‘Handbook of Art History’) is not exactly intellectual fireworks. Weighing in at almost 900 pages without illustrations, it has also never been translated. Calling Kugler an art historian is slightly anachronistic, since there was no such discipline at the time, neither could one study the subject at the university in Berlin. Individual lectures within the philosophical faculty and at the Art Academy were, however, held occasionally. Kugler was an extremely versatile historian and art scholar, as well as a poet, cultural politician, amateur actor, musician, etc. He was long assigned a marginal place within German (not to mention international) art historiography, but in recent years, interest has increased, although not many people would agree that this scholar was ‘one of the most important cultural figures of the 19th century’.\textsuperscript{14} But sure, the term ‘cultural figure’ is hardly the most coveted accolade for a historian and it is quite a good indication of his ambiguous historical position. It is not the work itself but its effects that are decisive for an author’s posthumous elevation. And these effects do not refer to the book’s favourable reception or that it provided a specific model to emulate, but to the collective activity that was thus generated. Already in the following year, in 1843, the first volume of seven of Karl Schnaase’s \textit{Geschichte der bildenden Künste} (‘History of the Fine Arts’) was published, which had been planned in parallel with but independently of Kugler’s book.

It was dedicated to Kugler and contributed a substantially more in-depth explanatory context of cultural history, while his predecessor primarily presented and characterised one region and artistic medium after another. Schnaase’s ambitious project, however, was a fragment

\textsuperscript{10} E.g. Vasari, available at \url{http://arthistorians.info/vasari} (accessed 15 February 2019); Winckelmann, available at \url{http://www.timelineindex.com/content/view/4057} (accessed 15 February 2019).
\textsuperscript{13} See Eleonora Vratskidiou. ‘A third art history? The role of artistic practice in the shaping of the discipline’, \textit{Journal of Art Historiography} 19, December 2018.
that reached only as far as the Middle Ages, while Kugler’s textual panorama was strikingly global and extended all the way to his own times.

In 1855, a book carrying the same title as Kugler’s was published by Anton Springer, who five years later would come to symbolise the institutional establishment of art history in Germany by occupying the first professorship in the field, in Bonn. In 1860, Wilhelm Lübke wrote a book in the same genre, the genre that Kugler may not have created but made possible: *Grundriss der Kunstgeschichte*, which was translated into several languages, including English.\(^{15}\) The work on new editions of Kugler’s handbooks, which involved Lübke amongst others, eventually led to the first international congress of art history in Vienna in 1873 (parallel to the World’s Fair that year) – another institutional indication of the establishment of the field.

Both Springer’s and Lübke’s books were fairly richly illustrated. The fact that the first two titles in this genre – that we today know from brand names such as Gardner, Janson and

Stokstad – completely lacked images was of course perceived as a problem.\(^{16}\) Both Kugler’s and Schnaase’s work, however, was overshadowed by the art-historical museum that had just taken shape in the Prussian capital: Museum, later Altes Museum (1823–30). Moreover, Hegel was also involved in the discussion about appropriate ways of hanging and historical order, as well as the other members of the Berlin School: Carl Friedrich von Rumohr and Gustav Friedrich Waagen. The interested circle of readers of the handbooks could thus match the black-and-white texts to in the originals exhibited in the museum. Furthermore, Kugler also wrote the museum’s first visitors’ guide and started a journal entitled Museum. Eventually, the so-called *Museuminsel* with its five art museums huddled on a small island in central Berlin, could become a three-dimensional visual anthology for the art-historical surveys in general art history (*allgemeine Kunstgeschichte*).

Only a few years after the first two handbooks came out, another visual medium was announced: an illustrative supplement to Kugler’s publication, edited by August von Voit and Joseph Caspar and entitled Denkmäler der Kunst (‘Monuments of Art’).\(^{17}\) The first volume was published in 1845 and the medium was thin line engravings, which in a colourless yet subtle way emphasised the artworks’ formal essentials. A number of colour lithographs were also included, such as Cologne Cathedral in all its anachronic splendour.\(^{18}\) While the halls of the museums were like illustrated chapters in the art-historical surveys, the supplement could be described as a virtual museum. Crouched over this visual atlas, the reader/viewer could follow the development of art from the first raw stone monuments to the finest compositions of modern times. The selection was, as always in art research, canonical – with a view to the most excellent artworks of each era – at the same time, each era was seen as valuable, not so much aesthetically as historically. Every art form, even ones that did not stand out during a given period, was ensured a place in the eco system of art. This idea was already established by the German Romantics, but Kugler was the first to really create a discursive totality of all the details, where they were later understood in their capacity as pieces of a larger picture: the collective singularity that can be called art history with a capital A and a capital H. At the same time, the geographer Alexander von Humboldt was working on something similar in the field of nature, to ‘describe’ the geo-historical whole that we today call the Earth system, in the book *Kosmos*. Some have argued that Kugler ventured to create an ‘aesthetic Kosmos’.\(^{19}\)

This general, encyclopaedic, in the parlance of the time ‘total’, writing of art history that initially defined the empirical field of knowledge that the history of art mines, and that henceforth, in turn, would define art history, had a certain conflict-ridden relationship to so-called ‘iconic’ artworks. While the art-historical monographs, survey books and art museums treated artworks as representatives of a range of different identities – time, culture, nation, cultural geography, schools, genres, styles, the hand of the artist, and so forth – iconic artworks, above all, represent something beyond that. They represent themselves, which demands that they are first distanced from their historical categorisation and identity by being reproduced and updated in other media. They are mentioned, described, admired, replete. They circulate in other places via different forms of mediation, not unlike how celebrities are treated artworks as representatives of a range of different identities – time, culture, nation, cultural geography, schools, genres, styles, the hand of the artist, and so forth – iconic artworks, above all, represent something beyond that. They represent themselves, which demands that they are first distanced from their historical categorisation and identity by being reproduced and updated in other media. They are mentioned, described, admired, replete. They circulate in other places via different forms of mediation, not unlike how celebrities are

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\(^{16}\) The names refer to the innumerable editions of survey works or handbooks in general art history that were written by Helen Gardner (*Art Through the Ages*, from 1926), Horst W. Janson (*History of Art*, from 1962) and Marilyn Stokstad (*Art History*, from 1995).


attrition that only becomes comprehensible within the framework of a historical paradigm in which certain clusters of artworks belong to a certain temporality and demonstrate certain typical traits of the time. All artworks are of course unique, peculiar, but this is about a more fundamental relationship. All artworks are different but some are more different than others... Iconic works rather form their own crossover genre, both historical and ahistorical. The Walhalla is a good example of such a work.

The artwork that came closest to Kugler’s conception of an iconic work, with the potential of breaking away from its historical determinants was The Sistine Madonna (1513–14), by Raphael. For Kugler and his generation, the altar painting was art history’s greatest masterpiece in all categories. At the time it did not yet belong to the Renaissance, which is a periodical designation associated with Kugler’s most famous pupil Jacob Burckhardt. According to Kugler, the Madonna belonged to the ‘modern’ period, which carried on all the way into his own times. She could be admired at the art museum in Dresden whence the painting had been brought from its sacred place of origin. Winckelmann had seen the altar painting at the German museum and made it into one of the starting points for his most famous text – about the contemporary imitation of the inimitable antique artworks. Dresden was, according to Winckelmann, an ‘Athens for artists’ and in this Madonna one could still sense ‘the soul with which the artist inspired his godlike work’. In Kugler’s case, his high regard for this work was motivated by it being an art-historical synthesis, which seems to indicate that he had, after all, adopted a dialectical perspective from Hegel, whose aesthetics are otherwise kept at arm’s length in Kugler’s work. The Madonna combines the cold perfection of antiquity with the Romantic (what we would call Medieval) era’s warm spirituality. Precisely this work would later become one of the most copied paintings in the 19th century and long after; everyone probably recognises the small cherub-like figures on the bottom edge that are set apart from the image and have found their way into popular culture all the way into our times. Although The Sistine Madonna has become iconic through reproduction – and Kugler himself contributes greatly to this by following Winckelmann’s opinion, albeit with a different motivation – the most common reason for a work becoming iconic is probably that it has come to denote and partially even symbolise itself, its own characteristic as an image, its pictoriality. This requires time, repetition and also that the explanatory models of conventional art history, represented by the art history of handbooks, art museums and the discipline of art history, are set aside.

An iconic work is never created as such, but becomes so with time. An iconic work cannot be exhaustively explained art-historically, based on its place of birth in time and space, but has another, broader story of origin. Besides the unadulterated copies made of a work like The Sistine Madonna – such as the one made by Pier Antonio Avanzini to replace the lost altar painting in Piacenza, or the one by Friedrich Bury for Sanssouci, the royal palace in Potsdam, or the innumerable prints, postcards etc. – artists have also contributed with (more or less irreverent) versions that strengthen the ‘aura’ of the original work, contrary to Walter Benjamin’s famous analysis. Kurt Schwitters’ irreverent image is one such example from the 20th century. According to a theory launched by Mieke Bal, such paraphrasing has an impact on the original itself, which would have sounded strange to Kugler and his generation. Or, not strange, actually – more like completely wrong. Surely a work has to be understood within its historical context! But does not the history and context continue right into our times, as we now stand and look and think about these still magnificent artworks? Are we not, then, a part of the history and context!

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20 About the work, see Mariene Putscher. Raphael’s Sixtinsche Madonna: Das Werk und seine Wirkung Tübingen: Hopfer-Verlag, 1955.
of the legacy of these works, their genealogy, that has brought them on winding roads all the way here? Are our more or less well-informed gazes and interpretations then not able to have an effect on (the understanding of) artworks, analogous to how we affect them professionally via reproductions and physically via restoration?

Nowadays, the philosopher Giorgio Agamben believes that those who are truly contemporary are not of their time, contemporary with it, but deviate from it; are not contemporary but anachronous. The figure of thought is that of the avant-garde – where artists gain success and fame by distancing themselves from what up until now has achieved precisely that: time-honoured history, tradition, norms. The crux of the pre-avant-gardist Walhalla is, of course, that it was simultaneously deeply contemporary and anachronous, since time here, in an increasingly obvious way, was out of joint, as Friedrich Nietzsche lamented a little later. And by the time Cologne Cathedral had been completed, modern art – Realism and Impressionism – had made it entirely obsolete, out of phase with the times. A decade later, Claude Monet had the cathedral in Rouen dissolve into colour and light. While a work like Cologne Cathedral does not have its own art-historical time and has never been contemporary, it is still, without a doubt, iconic. Coincidentally, it was also depicted by Andy Warhol at an angle that only a photograph from the ground could achieve – an image of an image (of an image of the Middle Ages). What makes the iconic works into something more than just historically rooted art is their potential to go beyond their times, tear themselves loose from their historical shackles and set out on a journey criss-crossing the linear development lines of history.

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