"*Eine kleine Welt*": Riegl, Expressionism, and the Recovery of Painting

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In the past fifteen years the Viennese art historian and curator Alois Riegl, who was virtually forgotten by English-speaking art historians for several decades, has received considerable scholarly attention. His three major texts, *Stilfragen* (1890); *Spätromische Kunstindustrie* (1901); and *Holländische Gruppenporträt* (1902), have all been translated into English, the last of these translations sponsored by the Getty Research Institute having appeared just last year. These translations, and the critical responses to Riegl's thinking that have proliferated as a result, testify to the current interest in the theories of this exceptional Viennese thinker and the continued relevance of his ideas.

Contemporary art historians have rightly perceived the foundations of their discipline, as well as several of its more recent permutations, in Riegl's exhaustive studies of the forms found in ornament, late Roman art, and seventeenth-century Dutch painting.[1] For example, though it may seem contradictory both formalism and New Historicism can identify the antecedents of their approaches in Riegl's work. Riegl had a remarkable gift for closely investigating the stylistic aspects of any object, whether it was a carpet or an oil painting, and this attentiveness to the uniqueness of form inspired several generations of formalist art historians. In contrast, because of his ability to maneuver between the seemingly non-essential details of his objects of study and larger cultural concerns, Riegl's method can also be characterized as an early example

[1] Alois Riegl, *Problems of Style : Foundations for a History of Ornament*, transl. by Evelyn Kain ; annotations and introduction by David Castriota; and preface by Henri Zerner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); *Late Roman Art Industry*, transl. Rolf Winkes (Rome: G. Bretschneider, 1985); *The Group Portraiture of Holland*, transl. Evelyn M. Kain and David Britt (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1999).

of what Walter Benjamin called "materialist historiography."[2] Benjamin respected Riegl's "esteem for the insignificant," identifying him as the precursor to those historians who demonstrate "how much such an inquiry, based on the most inconspicuous data of an object, can wrest from even the most worn-out things."[3] Benjamin found Riegl's method sympathetic to his own analyses of peripheral phenomena, a critical approach which itself anticipated the later emergence of New Historicism in art history.

While the relationship between Riegl's writings and modern methodologies has helped to re-establish Riegl's importance in art history's own history, less attention has been paid to the relationship between Riegl's theories and the emergence of certain art practices. In 1932, Benjamin briefly alluded to just such a connection, stating that "the person who reads Riegl's major work today ... will recognize retrospectively how forces are already stirring subterraneously ... that will surface a decade later in expressionism."[4] Benjamin is unusual among twentieth-century historians in his recognition of a contextual relationship between Riegl and modern art. While he does not elaborate on the nature of this connection between Riegl's theories and Expressionist art, it is an observation of which we should take note both for its acknowledgement of the interdependence of theory and praxis, as well as its portrayal of Expressionist art as the true heir to Riegl's legacy.

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[2] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Aendt, transl. Harry Zohn (New York, 1969): pp. 253-264. For a discussion of Benjamin's reliance on Riegl's example, see Charles Rosen, "The Ruins of Walter Benjamin," *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections*, ed. Gary Smith (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1988).

[3] Idem., "Rigorous Study of Art: On the First Volume of Kunwissenschaftliche Forschungen" (1931/33), transl. Thomas Y. Levin, *The Vienna School Reader: Politics and Art Historical Method in the 1930s*, ed. Christopher S. Wood (New York: Zone Books, 2000): p. 442.

[4] Ibid., p. 443.

The general lack of interest shown by scholars in connecting praxis and theory seems somewhat odd given the fact that Riegl's Vienna has become notorious for its "hothouse" environment which produced a number of notable intellectuals and cultural figures, among them the artists Gustav Klimt, Oskar Kokoschka, and Egon Schiele. It seems that if we were to identify a sphere of influence for Riegl's ideas, we would be led to one of these major developments in Viennese visual culture, either the decorative Arts and Crafts aesthetic of Klimt and the Secession, or the highly-charged Expressionist works of Kokoschka and Schiele. The two movements are usually seen as antithetical to one another, since the difficult revelations of Expressionist art offer a pointed response to the luxurious ornamentalism of Klimt's Secessionist style. Shifting from a consideration of Riegl's impact on art history to one of Riegl's impact on art practice would necessitate determining which, if either, of these artistic enterprises might be considered the more persuasive counterpart to Riegl's theories.

It is the first of these connections, between Riegl and the Secessionist decorative style, that seems - at first - to be the most plausible. The attempts that have been made to understand Riegl's relevance to his contemporary art world have usually associated his theories with the Arts and Crafts movement, represented in Vienna by Klimt, the Secession and the design workshop of the *Wiener Werkstätte*.[5] Riegl worked as a curator of textiles in the Austrian Museum of Art and Industry and focused in his book *Stilfragen* on the history of ornament. Because of his refusal, in his choices of subjects, to abide by the conventional distinctions made between the so-called "fine" and "minor" arts, Riegl relativized these categories and called attention to the aesthetic merit of ornamental decoration and the applied arts. This is, incidentally, one of the primary

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[5] See especially two recent and important contributions to Riegl studies, Maragaret Iverson, *Alois Riegl: Art History and Theory* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1993): pp. 7-8, and Margaret Olin, *Forms of Representation in Alois Riegl's Theory of Art* (University Park, Penn.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992): pp. 24-30.

reasons why he has become so interesting to more recent art historians, because he dramatically expanded our conception of what kinds of objects can be legitimately studied and what counts as art historical knowledge.

The Viennese Arts and Crafts movement proposed a similar reversal of the terms normally used to evaluate art production. These standards typically relied on a conception of the art object as singular, autonomous and separate from the world around it, an aesthetic system that was set forth in *The Critique of Judgment* by Immanuel Kant.[6] The concept of the perfectly complete and internally harmonious work of art is an important part of Kant's critique since only such a work can hold our attention making it unnecessary to refer elsewhere for our judgment. In Kant's system, aesthetic judgments are judgments of taste which do not refer to, or ask anything of, reality; the world is completely excluded from the exchange that occurs between the work and the beholding subject. The result is a conception of the art work which posits an object that is self-sufficient and fundamentally separate from other objects in the world, those items which exist for utilitarian purposes rather than aesthetic contemplation.

Instead of adhering to this view of the isolated, autonomous object, Klimt and his colleagues in the *Wiener Werkstätte* abandoned the conventional reverence for the singular and separate artefact in favor of an approach that embraced every possible kind of design inserted into the most mundane spaces. At the heart of this philosophy lay the concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the total work of art, an ideal that at the turn of the century was quickly becoming the predominant aesthetic principle in modern Viennese art. The *Gesamtkunstwerk*

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[6] On Kant's philosophy of aesthetic autonomy and its influence on the developments in modern art, see the Marxist inflected readings of Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, transl. Michael Shaw, fwd. Jochen Schulte-Sasse (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), and Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

sought to collapse the boundaries between art and life by producing not only paintings or sculptures but also objects utilized in everyday experience. Breaking down the barriers between the fine and the applied arts, and permeating every aspect of life with art, was the driving concept behind the *Wiener Werkstätte*, leading to the production of workshop-designed houses filled with coordinating furniture, wallpaper, textiles, cutlery, and even clothing. Josef Hoffmann's Palais Stoclet in Brussels, for example, represents a successful realization of the *Werkstätte*'s dream of the total work of art, in which the designer integrates every element of the home, from the building and furniture to the cutlery and carpets, into a seamless whole. Thus, the concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* lent art validity *not* because of its autonomy but because of its permeable interaction with the world. In this system, painting, which had traditionally occupied a position at the top of the aesthetic food chain, was considered no more nor less significant than a table, a dress, or a doorknob.

This synchronous relationship between Riegl and the Arts and Crafts movement can be complicated, however, by looking again at Riegl's methodology. Upon closer consideration, it can be argued that Riegl upheld precisely that conception of art as a self-sufficient, singular object that he had seemingly rejected. Riegl's predilection for the applied arts and his willingness to subvert traditional categories of aesthetic judgment in favor of a radically revised approach to the analysis of art objects, developed from his insistence that the form of an object offered the most promising insight into that work's meaning. In other words, instead of analyzing subject matter, or considering the artist's biography, or researching why a work was commissioned, Riegl argued that the visual and material aspects of an object contained that which was most essential about the work, and even about the culture in which it was produced. Riegl conceived of the work of art as a meaningful entity that could only be understood if one attended to the

particularities of that object's form, those qualities that are contained precisely *within* the work itself.

Riegl pays little attention to external factors, except to reinforce observations that he has already made based on his analysis of the individual work's formal properties. For Riegl, only those qualities that are particular to the material object itself can be relied upon when analyzing the work and its significance. The individual work speaks volumes, it is for Riegl an extraordinarily rich source of knowledge that cannot be duplicated by any other kind of document or resource. This reliance on form as the authentic source of meaningful information, on a structural world of color, line, space, and composition that is contained solely within the work itself, returns the work to a space that is fundamentally separate from the world at large. Seen from this perspective, Riegl's writings, even the earliest ones on ornament, develop the theoretical premises for conceiving of the work of art as an independent, autonomous product, thus countering the *Gesamtkunstwerk*'s eradication of boundaries between art and non-art.

Thus in spite of his dismantling of the conventional barriers maintained between those arts that occupy a higher realm and those that inhabit the prosaic everyday world, a position that would seem to erase the opposition set up by traditional aesthetic judgment of a qualitative difference between the world of the work and the world at large, Riegl's methodological emphasis on formal analysis can be seen as re-instating the self-sufficient presence of the work of art. This notion of the art object as an entity separate from, and as authentic as, the "real" or external world, a concept predicated on the proper regard for the work's form, proceeded to influence an entire generation or more of art historians in Germany and Austria. Its final implications can be seen in the writings of Hans Sedlmayr, who looked to Riegl for the theoretical means with which to prevent art history from devolving into a simple categorization

of objects according to maker, time period, and iconography. His conception of the art object as a unique structure, fundamentally separate from the concerns of the world beyond its borders, can be seen in his description of the work of art as a *kleine Welt*, singular and sufficient unto itself:

> Once the individual work of art is perceived as a still unmastered task specific to the study of art, it appears powerfully new and close. Formerly a mere means to knowledge, a trace of something else that was to be disclosed through it, the work of art now appears as a self-contained *small world* or microcosm of its own particular sort.[7]

Nothing could be further from the Arts and Crafts imbrication of the work and the world in which it resides than this conception of the object as a qualitatively different realm, a privileged object that articulates a knowledge peculiar to itself and its own world.

By 1910, the Arts and Crafts movement had given way to a new avant-garde, Viennese Expressionism, and the primary vehicle of the new style was painting. The major figures within this movement were Egon Schiele and Oskar Kokoschka, both of whom had begun their careers in a style closely associated with Klimt and Secession, and both of whom had quickly rejected this precedent in favor of ambitious oil painting. Schiele and Kokoschka chose to execute much of their work in a medium that had begun to lose its appeal in Vienna because of the emphasis on the applied arts that had been so successfuly enacted by the Secessionist movement. Expressionist art suddenly loosened those ties to the vast material world which had been so crucial to the modern movement in Vienna and returned to the production of figurative oil paintings.

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[7] Hans Sedlmayr, "Toward a Rigorous Study of Art" (1931), transl. Mia Fineman, in *The Vienna School Reader: Politics and Art Historical Method in the 1930s*, ed. Christopher S. Wood (New York: Zone Books, 2000): p. 155.

These works were no longer intended to ingratiate themselves into an overarching design aesthetic, in which a picture would be just one component of a comprehensive total work of art. Instead, these paintings were intended to be singular, anarchic statements. Schiele and Kokoschka registered with full force their discontent with the art world in Vienna, and with Austrian imperial society in general, by funneling their weighty ambition and energies into paintings. The Expressionist image was granted the kind of isolated autonomy and authorial presence that had not been seen in Vienna's avant-garde culture for over a decade. This was an art that seemed to return to the Kantian conception of the unique, self-sufficient art work, an exceptional object that compels disinterested contemplation and a regard for the distinct world of the framed, precious painting.[8]

Although few current scholars have noted the contextual alliance between Expressionist painting and Riegl's formalism, at the time Schiele and Kokoschka were making and exhibiting their art, the cultural critic Hermann Bahr recognized the reliance of the new Viennese painting on Riegl's theories. In *Expressionismus*, Bahr included a short chapter devoted to the deceased art historian, entitled “Who is Riegl?” In this text, Bahr credited Riegl with establishing a new paradigm for the evaluation of art by emancipating art from all aims or purposes extrinsic to itself: "This was Riegl's first great feat. He taught us how to differentiate again between art and

[8] Elsewhere I have discussed the work of Egon Schiele in somewhat different terms, arguing that his treescapes could be seen as undermining the notion of the self-sufficient, framed object. See Smith, "Egon Schiele's Treescapes. Work and World: Unframing the Autonomous Landscape," *Art History*, v. 23, n. 2 (June 2000): pp. 233-261. I am now considering the ways in which Expressionist art might be thought of as ambivalent, an attempt to both sustain and dismantle conventional modes of aesthetic contemplation. This working paper represents an initial effort to think through the contradictions of Expressionist painting by proposing an alternative argument to that presented in my earlier essay.

craft; he freed art from the external goal to which it seemed to have already succumbed..."[9] In other words, art, as theorized by Riegl and concretized by the Expressionists, was to exist only for its own sake. Art was to be severed from the demands of any object, concern, or even aesthetic program that might exist in the world beyond its own borders. Bahr perceived Expressionist art as having changed the terms of art production and reception, reviving a notion of the painted object as an independent and special being, and identified Riegl as the figure who enabled this transformation.

Bahr's statement should catch our attention, because he perceived an important connection between modernist painting and Viennese art history that for the most part has gone unacknowledged. Riegl's theory of meaningful forms, a conceptual move that posits the single work as a distinct and self-generating phenomenon, provided Expressionism with the theoretical armature with which to rescue painting from obsolescence. Schiele and Kokoschka focused on producing paintings at a time in which the ideal of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* threatened to eviscerate painting of its traditional status and therefore to substantially alter the terms of aesthetic judgment. From this perspective, the Expressionist movement in Vienna can be seen as an attempt to restore to painting its privilege and presence, a project partially enabled by the radical formalization of meaning first advanced by Riegl and ultimately realized in the modernist theories of pictorial autonomy that dominated mid-twentieth-century aesthetics.

[9] "Das war Riegls erste große tat: er hat uns wieder zwischen Kunst und Handwerk unterscheiden gelehrt, er hat die Kunst vom äußeren Zweck, dem sie schon zu erliegen schien, befreit..." Hermann Bahr, *Expressionismus* (Munich: Delphin Verlag, 1918): p. 52. Translation mine.