

# The young Hans Sedlmayr

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Since so much emotion has accrued around the figure of Hans Sedlmayr due to his collaboration during the Nazi period in Austria, it has been felt that, however controversial, it might be enlightening to direct attention to less well known aspects of the earlier part of his prolific, multifaceted and influential career.<sup>1</sup> Unlike Baldur von Schirach (*Gauleiter* and *Reichsstatthalter* of Vienna), Sedlmayr loved the polylingual culture of Vienna and then devoted most of his scholarly attention to Byzantine and French architecture. We publish the critical appraisal by Julius Schlosser of Sedlmayr's application of 1934 for the junior teaching position in the Kunsthistorisches Institut der Universität Wien, Sedlmayr's obituary read at the funeral of Schlosser in 1938,<sup>2</sup> and his article 'Geschichte und Kunstgeschichte' (History and the History of Art), a retort to early criticisms from Eberhard Hempel from 1936.<sup>3</sup>

As a student of architecture at the Technische Hochschule (where he then later taught), Sedlmayr had attended the lectures of Adolf Loos. During a three-year stint in the Dardanelles he faced the divisions led by Winston Churchill, and aside from such activities as exchanging poems by Stefan George over the radio in Morse code with fellow soldiers including Erich Kahler, later Professor of History at Princeton University, he became familiar with Byzantine architecture.<sup>4</sup> Byzantine art provided an alternative to the aesthetics of Loos, and after continuing his studies from the school of architecture, moving to the university, the bewitching example of Max Dvořák led him to the Austrian Baroque. As a native of the Hungarian 'Reichshälfte' (born 18 January 1896, in Szarvokő, Kingdom of Hungary), his apparently earliest published article of 1923 appeared in Hungarian about Johann Bernhard Fischer von Erlach.<sup>5</sup> Being born and raised on the linguistic border seems

<sup>1</sup> Something of that career is apparent from the published bibliography of his writings, Friedrich Piel ed., *Hans Sedlmayr 1896-1984 Verzeichnis seiner Schriften*, Falkenberg: Mäander, 1996. A good appraisal without bias by one of his earliest doctoral candidates, and a solid and prolific scholar in her own right, is Eva Frodl-Kraft, 'Hans Sedlmayr 1896-1984', *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte*, vol. 44, 1991, 7-46.

<sup>2</sup> This journal, 27, 2022: J v Schlosser, 'Report on the Habilitation of Dr. Hans Sedlmayr', trans. Karl Johns [27/KI4](#).

<sup>3</sup> This journal, 27, Dec 2022: Hans Sedlmayr, 'History and the History of Art', trans. Karl Johns [27/KI5](#).

<sup>4</sup> Erich Kahler, published a book, *Stefan George: Grösse und Tragik*, Pfullingen: Neske, 1964. He was married to Josephine Sobotka, an opera singer who was a cousin of Georg Sobotka, the doctoral student of Julius Schlosser afterwards employed at the Berlin museums and documented elsewhere in the present *Journal* [Karl Johns, 'Georg Sobotka: bibliography and three translations' [27/KI6](#).] As a beginning student, I was once able to have a conversation with Sedlmayr about this time of his life.

<sup>5</sup> 'Fischer von Erlach', *Ars Una*, vol. 1, 1923, 100-111.

to have nurtured a gift for languages in the precocious young boy.<sup>6</sup> After a lecture at the summer art school in Salzburg later in his life, I can recall him answering questions in perfect English, French and Italian. In spite of such an expansive assimilation of information, he was in some ways impatient with details, never used footnotes quite properly, at times bent the rules of grammar and often omitted to acknowledge sources or mention page references. When it would obviously affect his later career, he was presumably too impatient to sit through the courses at the Institut für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung. After beginning its '33<sup>rd</sup> Course', held 1921-1923, Sedlmayr 'already withdrew November 8, 1921'.<sup>7</sup> Aside from baroque publications such as the universal history of architecture by J. B. Fischer von Erlach, he collected first editions of authors he enjoyed most, such as Charles Dickens and Hermann Melville, but those did not keep him from staying abreast of twentieth-century literature as it was being written. He had most of world literature under his belt, published about Turgenev and also followed the soccer leagues. He is said by students to have had an astonishingly good memory. Some of his articles recall the manifesto style of early twentieth-century artists, and it is apparent from the letters to Meyer Schapiro how actively he was involved in the editorial work behind the *Kritische Berichte zur kunstgeschichtlichen Literatur* in the period before his appointment to the faculty – something which after misgivings was finally sealed in the documents from February 8-9, 1934 which we publish below. There are some who will consider his contributions to the *Kritische Berichte* to be his best work.

In a collective development based on a new reading of Alois Riegl and in tandem with a 'rediscovery' of certain rudimentary principles found in those studies, he soon developed a pattern for interpreting works of architecture described as 'structural analysis', involving also in some examples tracing the sensual experience of the visitor. Perhaps the most succinct expressions of his manifesto are the articles 'Gestaltetes Sehen', 'Zum gestalteten Sehen' and 'Summative Stilkritik', while the thorough study was reserved for the two longer articles in the *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen*, all cited by Schlosser in the Habilitation-appraisal and in the Hempel-retort below. Rather than merely reconstruct or describe a structure as it would have been found in earlier publications such in the work of Viollet le Duc, Sedlmayr included such elements as an analysis of the progress of shifting sights and fragrances during processions into Hagia Sophia on high festival ceremonies, and pursued similar goals in his immense study of the gothic cathedral. There he included the parallel development of nearly everything from music to the origins of gothic script – the '*gotische Brechung*' in the shaft of a written letter believed to have first arisen either in Paris or Ghent. His attention was always devoted to large subjects. He had an aggressively ambitious side which presumably added to his work's provocative qualities, and the obvious

<sup>6</sup> Hans Sedlmayr, *Das goldene Zeitalter: Eine Kindheit*, Munich: Piper, 1986 is a memoir of his childhood, written for his second wife in quiet hours while commanding a tank near Kursk in 1942.

<sup>7</sup> In the words of Alphons Lhotsky, *Geschichte des Instituts für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung 1854-1954*, *Mitteilungen des Instituts für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung*, Ergänzungsband 17, Vienna: Böhlau, 1954, 369.

objections began to be made immediately.<sup>8</sup> The most lasting criticism might be seen in the uncompromising works of Johannes Wilde's students at the Courtauld Institute – Wilde having been what struck some at the time as a 'flat-footed' empiricist, both innovative and brilliant at the Kunsthistorisches Museum throughout the same years, inspired more by Max Dvořák than Riegl.<sup>9</sup> Frederick Antal had been a classmate of Wilde, and presumably also had a certain influence on the same Courtauld students.<sup>10</sup> The key concept of '*Struktur*' is intended to bring the greatest possible clarity and objectivity, but instead, it rather obviously harbours opacity or obscurity.<sup>11</sup> The relative success of its application might best be measured in the better dissertations done under his direction – such as that of Wiltrud Mersmann (cited below).

<sup>8</sup> Rudolf Wittkower, 'Zu Hans Sedlmayrs Besprechung von E. Coudenhove-Erthals Fontana-Monographie', *Kritische Berichte zur kunstgeschichtlichen Literatur*, Jahrgang 3-4, 1930-31 and 1931-32, 142-146. Eberhard Hempel, 'Ist 'eine strenge Kunstwissenschaft' möglich?' *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, vol. 3, no. 3, 1934, 155-163, with the rejoinder by Sedlmayr translated below. Sedlmayr, *Die Entstehung der Kathedrale*, Zurich: Atlantis, 1950 (begun in the 1930's) elicited many of the same objections from among others, Ernst Gall, Walter Ueberwasser and Otto von Simson, *Kunstchronik*, vol. 4, 1951, 14-21, 84-92, 329-330, 76-84 respectively, with Sedlmayr's response 'Um die Erkenntnis der Kathedrale', *Kunstchronik*, vol. 4, 1951, 304-310. Reviews also by Pierre Francastel, *Annales: Économies Sociétés Civilisations*, vol. 7, no. 2, 1952, 237-243, Erich Herzog, *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur*, vol. 83, 1951-1952, 105-110, Eberhard Hempel, *Deutsche Literaturzeitung*, vol. 73, 1952, col. 26-33, Peter Metz, *Das Münster*, vol. 4, 1951, 361-364. I have mentioned some of the difficulties in applying the Riegl-method in my own paper, Karl Johns, 'Austrian Art-Historical Method in the United States: Meyer Schapiro and Emil Kaufmann', Waldemar Zacharasiewicz and Christoph Irmscher ed., *Ideas Crossing the Atlantic: Theories, Normative Conceptions and Cultural Images*, Vienna: Verlag der Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2019, 385-412 including a translation of the explanatory letter from Otto Pächt to Schapiro, written approximately a year before Schapiro's review, republished in this journal: Karl Johns, 'Letter from Otto Pächt to Meyer Schapiro concerning 'national constants' (1939)' [27/KI2](#).

<sup>9</sup> John Shearman, 'Johannes Wilde (1891-1970)', *Wien und die Entwicklung der kunsthistorischen Methode*, Akten des XXV. Internationalen Kongresses für Kunstgeschichte, vol. 1, Vienna: Böhlau, 1984, 91-98, also Ian Verstegen, 'John White's and John Shearman's Viennese Art-Historical Method', *Journal of Art Historiography*, no. 1, December 2009, 16.

<sup>10</sup> Frederick Antal graduated with the doctorate awarded July 10, 1914 under Max Dvořák, his dissertation entitled 'Klassizismus, Romantik und Realismus in der französischen Malerei von der Mitte des 18. Jahrhunderts bis zum Auftreten Géricaults', and later published in a revised form as 'Reflections on Classicism and Romanticism', *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 66, no. 385, April 1935, 159-168, II vol. 68, no. 396, March 1936, 130-139, III 77, no. 450, Sept. 1940, 72-80, IV, 77, no. 453, December 1940, 188-192, reprinted in Antal, *Classicism and Romanticism with Other Studies in Art History*, New York: Basic Books, 1966, 1-45.

<sup>11</sup> This is very well illustrated in the review by Meyer Schapiro, 'The New Viennese School' *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 18, no. 2, June 1936, 258-266. Yet Schapiro was himself an ambitious young scholar at this point making his initial mark, and I have alluded to some of Schapiro's misrepresentation of the theories of Alois Riegl in the paper mentioned above, Karl Johns, 'Austrian Art-Historical Method in the United States'.

In a contentious defence of his programmatic early essay about a 'rigorous method' (*Geschichte und Kunstgeschichte* translated [here](#)) he tells us: 'Facing the alternative between 'the individual work of art or the style as the primary preoccupation for the history of art' we stand with Wickhoff and Schlosser, while on the question of 'contemplation or reconstruction as the historical method' we hold with Riegl. Our position is one of mediation, but I believe not eclectic.' Riegl had been a very different personality, expanding his brilliant studies of small objects and details previously overlooked into claims on universality, while the tradition in Vienna had come to favour intersecting places between grand periods or cultures, particularly the transition from 'pagan' to Christian art, or the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Just at the advent of the Turkish Republic, young Sedlmayr in Istanbul discovered the epochal question of when, where and how a distinctly medieval architectural concept was found and implemented to replace the traditional construction of the Romans who consistently maintained individual rows of arches superimposed one above the other – as we see in the Colosseum and the aqueducts. For all of their uninhibited originality in developing cement, monumental structures, designing new spans of domes and so much else, it must have been felt as anathema to place a smaller arch inside of a larger arch. It can never be known with certainty, but Sedlmayr found indications that the idea might have arisen in Syria, but ultimately studied Hagia Sophia as 'the first medieval architectural system'. Anthemios of Thralles and Isidore of Miletus are there given credit for creating the design of Hagia Sophia around the year 480.<sup>12</sup> In the later years of Sedlmayr's tenure in Munich, one of his most substantial publications was still 'the articulation of walls in late Antiquity'. Students from the time have told me that the subject frequently came up in his lectures held during the 1950s in Munich. From the 'first medieval system' his interest moved to the 'emergence' of the gothic cathedral, as perfected in the Île-de-France around the end of the twelfth century. He describes the cathedral as the pinnacle of all European art, and his book from 1950 as '*exemplarisch*' – a model for studying art.<sup>13</sup> In reiterating why architecture is the primal art that naturally organizes and subordinates sculpture, painting and the rest, he liked to evoke the definitions of the ancient Greek '*archē*' – APXH'.<sup>14</sup> The cathedral embodied the order of the arts which then began to dissolve in the processes he traced disdainfully in his conservative cultural analysis begun during his wartime lecturing in Vienna, and continued in one form or another to the end of his life.<sup>15</sup> I heard him lecture twice in his later years where he confided to having

<sup>12</sup> Sedlmayr, 'Das erste mittelalterliche Architektursystem', *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen*, vol. 2, 1933, 49-51, reprinted Sedlmayr, *Epochen und Werke*, vol. 1, 117-121.

<sup>13</sup> A critical reader might be reminded of Edgar Zilsel, *Das Anwendungsproblem*, Leipzig: Barth, 1916 written by a fellow mathematics student while Sedlmayr was enrolled there in the department of mathematics in the university.

<sup>14</sup> Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1996, 252. In his letter to Meyer Schapiro from November 1, 1934 he indulges in the etymology of his own family name.

<sup>15</sup> He applies his form of a 'structural analysis' to broad cultural developments in the famous *Verlust der Mitte: Die bildende Kunst des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts als Symbol der Zeit*, Salzburg: Müller, 1948 and *Die Revolution der modernen Kunst*, Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1955.

discovered the inalienable, original qualities of nineteenth century art and admitted to having been incorrect and overstated in his earlier judgment. It is not completely clear when he discovered the sixteen-volume oeuvre of the well-travelled Bavarian polymath Franz Xaver von Baader (1765-1841), whose hostility to traditional empiricist philosophy remained a mainstay, frequently quoted in his later work. He had apparently planned to publish an anthology, but this would have gone into a level of editorial detail that might have taxed his sensibility. When we asked the normal questions, such as distinguishing who has a better understanding of an art work than another, his responses increasingly involved a Roman Catholic religious element most apparent in the expanded edition of *Kunst und Wahrheit*.<sup>16</sup> Interpretations converge as they become increasingly correct so that only a single correct interpretation is possible.<sup>17</sup> Like his erstwhile friend Otto Pächt, he searched for artistic 'principles' which permit an 'understanding' of the 'whole'. This included 'Teilanzheiten' and a host of other less tangible concepts taken from gestalt theory. The Gothic developed away from the heavier, dark Romanesque architecture as the principle of the 'baldachin' was increasingly exploited, uniting form and meaning. Gothic cathedrals developed toward 'diaphanous' wall structure with long, slender supports bearing vaulting to permit ever greater amounts of light and realize the vision of heaven as appearing to arrive from heaven. This interpretation of a vision descending rather than a structure built up toward the heavens elicited some of the greatest objections from the other living scholars of gothic architecture. Otto Pächt considered Sedlmayr in some ways to have abandoned the history of art and migrated into 'iconography'. Already during his earlier teaching in Vienna, some of the dissertations completed under his tutelage were not so much structural analysis of art or the personality of an artist, but instead included subjects such as the meaning of the rose window and of the large circular candelabrum – but also about the baldachin principle.<sup>18</sup> When it was necessary to appeal to Julius Schlosser in order to advance his position in the university, Sedlmayr discovered Tommaso Imbriani's theory of the 'macchia' among the writings of Benedetto Croce and applied it to the paintings of Pieter Bruegel the Elder.<sup>19</sup> This of course had the further attraction in that it used the examples in the

<sup>16</sup> Hans Sedlmayr, *Kunst und Wahrheit: Zur Theorie und Methode der Kunstgeschichte*, Mittenwald: Mäander, 1978.

<sup>17</sup> Hans Sedlmayr, 'Über das Interpretieren von Werken der bildenden Kunst: Entwurf eines didaktischen Programms', *Interpretation der Welt: Festschrift für Romano Guardini zum achtzigsten Geburtstag*, Würzburg: Echter, 1965, 349-367, reprinted *Kunst und Wahrheit*, ed. 1978, 181-197.

<sup>18</sup> Zdrawka Mintschewa, 'Die Entstehung und die Entwicklung der Baldachinformen in Frankreich bis zur Mitte des 13. Jahrhunderts: Eine Betrachtung des Statuenbaldachins, ausgehend von den Baldachinen in Bamberg', 1936, Adelheid Kitt, 'Der frühromanische Kronleuchter und seine Symbolik', 1944. Wiltrud Mersmann, 'Die Bedeutung des Rundfensters im Mittelalter', 1944 (a revision published as Wiltrud Topić-Mersmann, *Rosenfenster und Himmelskreise*, Mittenwald: Mäander, 1982). Another dealt with the iconology of baroque ceiling paintings.

<sup>19</sup> [This journal, 27, 2022: J v Schlosser, 'Report on the Habilitation of Dr. Hans Sedlmayr', trans. Karl Johns, p. 4. [27/K14](#).] His essay about the *Parable of the Blind Leading the Blind* by Pieter Bruegel, 'paradigm of a structural analysis' has been frequently challenged, cf. Heinke Sudhoff, *Untersuchungen zur 'Blindenheilung' und 'Blindensturz': Ein Beitrag zu Bruegels Neapler*

museum where both Schlosser and Sedlmayr as well as their colleagues taught their introductory exercises. This is of course not a principle in the same sense as the 'Gestaltungsprinzipien', the 'formal principles' discovered by Pächt in fifteenth-century Flemish and Dutch painting. A comparison of Pächt's 'Gestaltungsprinzipien' with Sedlmayr's 'macchia' illustrates a problem we sometimes find when an architect analyzes earlier paintings. The influence of a tradition, the personal aesthetic element and scale are so completely different that Sedlmayr's ideas about Johannes Vermeer might have eluded the purview of artists in Delft during the seventeenth century. The subject of the painting from the Czernin collection was recently still moot. In spite of difficulties surrounding his type of analysis which could not be applied to most artefacts, and his recourse to disputed psychological concepts, the force of the arguments touched some of his fellow students such as Jozef Bodonyi and Maria Hirsch.<sup>20</sup>

The Habilitation-appraisal by Schlosser (February 8, 1934) summarizes the early career of Sedlmayr from an opposing point of view – which Sedlmayr later called 'the historical school'. Sedlmayr was possessed of vaulting ambition and was gifted as a lecturer. Numerous students described his lecturing as 'spellbinding' or incomparable 'when he was prepared'. In applying for the teaching credential in the university, which had been his driving ambition, it was necessary to earn the approval of Julius Schlosser, head of the 'II. Kunsthistorisches Institut'. In documents intended only to be seen by the dean, Schlosser seems to have been permissive in some ways and not in others. Cavalier treatment of empirical data had been at the root of Schlosser's ultimate inability to work with Josef Strzygowski who accepted over a hundred dissertations of which some were too general to provide much edification, while others would today be assigned to other departments within the university.<sup>21</sup> Working his way through to pleasing Schlosser well enough to reach this acceptance was probably an achievement as great as any of the others that Sedlmayr would himself have mustered as his most memorable accomplishments.

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*Gemälde von 1568*, diss. Univ. Bonn, 1980. Also, Daniela Bohde, 'Pieter Bruegels Macchia und Hans Sedlmayrs physiognomisches Sehen: psychologische Interpretationsmodelle von Hans Sedlmayr', *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte*, vol. 57, 2008, 239-262 and other later publications by Bohde. Ricardo de Mambros Santos has published a translation on Croce in this journal [27/RdMS1](#).

<sup>20</sup> In the summary of his dissertation: 'As Aranyalaf Keletkezése és értelmezése a Késő-Antik Művészeten', *Archaeológiai értesítő*, vol. 46, 1932-1933, 4-40, Jozef Bodonyi praises Sedlmayr, although he does not do so in the dissertation itself which was submitted to Schlosser. Schlosser recommended that dissertation to Saxl for publication in the *Studien der Bibliothek Warburg* (WIA/GC 1932/2771, December 25, 1932), but alas, Saxl did not respond, and a publication of Bodonyi's writings in English has been delayed. In her dissertation, 'Zur Künstlerpersönlichkeit des Meisters E.S.', Maria Hirsch almost raves over the epochal significance of Sedlmayr's method in the preface to her dissertation.

<sup>21</sup> We have published the documents of Schlosser's rejection of the dissertation by Raymond Stites, Karl Johns, 'Streiflicht auf Strzygowskis Publikum', *Mitteilungen der Gesellschaft für vergleichende Kunstforschung*, 2023, no. 1 (in print).

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