

J v Schlosser

Report on the Habilitation of Dr. Hans Sedlmayr¹

Translated by Karl Johns

Hans Sedlmayr was originally trained as a practicing architect, but during his two-year course at the Technical University already began studies in mathematics and philosophy at the University of Vienna, which were not without effect on his development. In 1920, he enrolled in the history of art while Max Dvořák was still active, and what I would underscore, passed the entrance examinations for our sister - (or rather mother -) department, the Institut für Geschichtsforschung. He began his career (now under my tutelage) with a dissertation about Johann Bernhard Fischer von Erlach, published as a book in 1925 with heavy revisions.² He was addressing the greatest artistic phenomenon of our local Baroque which has remained the point of departure for Sedlmayr's substantial oeuvre. This topic lies squarely within the tradition of our 'school' from Albert Ilg down to Alois Riegl. In spite of the already broad bibliography, the immediate need was to prepare the ground for further research, primarily purging the artistic oeuvre of Fischer according to the historical-philological method he is thoroughly familiar with from the nursery of our old Vienna School. He has continued this work without interruption until now, expanding the Fischer oeuvre with new discoveries and perspicaciously dealing critically with recent publications.³ As I myself suggested to him, his Habilitation at the Technical University in 1932-1933 continued the same subject, but from the outset his goal was to elucidate the artistic personality of the great master. In keeping with his disposition as apparent from an early age, he very soon became aware of the necessity to come to terms with modern psychology, particularly the so-called Gestalt Theory. This is particularly apparent in his next book dealing with the entire vicinity and intellectual background of Fischer von Erlach in presenting Austrian baroque architecture in the half century 1690-1740, published in 1930.⁴ The important concept of artistic structure entered into this fruitfully, and his detailed familiarity with modern research in psychology is clear here. Characteristic in this book is his 'introduction for laymen' which he considers apt to place ahead of his fine, careful and concise analyses, while the 'introduction for art historians' treats the principles of the historical situation according to his periodization. Already in studying the figure of Fischer von Erlach he had

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² [H. S. *Fischer von Erlach der Ältere*, Munich: Piper, 1925.]

³ [H. S. 'Zum Oeuvre Fischers von Erlach, *Belvedere Monatsschrift für Sammler und Kunstfreunde*, 11th year, vol. 21, no. 9-10 and 11-12, 1932-1933, 89-115, 135-161.]

⁴ [H. S. *Österreichische Barockarchitektur 1690-1740*, Augsburg: Filser, 1930.]

confronted the still enigmatic figure of the typical baroque artist Francesco Borromini who cast his shadow over the youthful work of Fischer, and for this reason he has undertaken to establish the historical place of Borromini in a new book, a provisional monograph as he cautiously calls it (also published in 1930).⁵ The psychologist of architecture and philosopher of aesthetics already appear here very prominently. It is no coincidence that part four of this book, the discussion of Borromini's historical role, is described only as a 'sketch'. We see a struggle for a specific terminology, not always without oversimplification (*Gewaltsamkeit*), but the serious aspiration for rigorous concepts assumes a subsidiary place. Numerous errors (*Mancher Irrweg*) become apparent, something he later himself recognized and abandoned. Among them I include the idea of an experimental study of art expressing itself in the attempt to test forms in the manner of Borromini using examples, to 'discover' (*erfinden*) it in the spirit of the artist, not escaping the pitfalls of psychopathology, especially the now somewhat paling schematics of Kretschmer. He still finds Borromini's style to be a typical example of schizophrenic art!

His historical training ultimately leads him in different more promising directions. With Fischer von Erlach and Borromini as his predecessor, he had already much earlier recognized the necessity for tracing the roots of the Baroque from the vantage point of structural theory back to the period of Michelangelo and the so-called mannerism, and beyond this to late antiquity, to the Baroque of Hellenistic Rome. One of his best and nearly mature essays about the Capitoline square designed by Michelangelo (*Jahrbuch der Preussischen Kunstsammlungen* 1931) shrewdly and convincingly analyses the artistic structure of this unique field, particularly antithetical to the vague interpretations in terms of 'intellectual history' as published most recently by his classmate Karl Tolnai from Hungary.⁶ This also leads him to the changes made to the Michelangelo design by his follower della Porta, which also introduce the actual 'baroque' element.⁷ In an as yet unpublished essay he approaches the very interesting problem of an artistic superfetation, the question of the artistic palimpsest first delineated by Benedetto Croce. The reference to this greatest of modern Italian philosophers, whom I have for a few decades already been at pains in teaching and writing to introduce to a new generation of German art historians, and particularly my students, is beginning to bear fruit here. The historian again emerges, always in touch with the architectural psychologist, in his most recent publication, the first medieval architectural system, appearing as the prodromus for a work about 'architectural systems' in the *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen* of 1933, edited by my student Otto Pächt.⁸ This part is devoted to the

⁵ [H. S. *Die Architektur Borrominis*, Berlin: Frankfurter Verlags-Anstalt, 1930.]

⁶ [H. S. 'Die Area Capitolina des Michelangelo', *Jahrbuch der Preussischen Kunstsammlungen*, vol. 52, no. 3, 1931, 176-181, reprinted in H. S. *Epochen und Werke*, vol. 1, Vienna: Herold, 1959, 266-273. Charles de Tolnay, 'Beiträge zu den späten architektonischen Projekten Michelangelos', *Jahrbuch der Preussischen Kunstsammlungen*, vol. 51, 1930, 1-48, vol. 53, 1932, 231-253.]

⁷ [H. S. 'Das Kapitäl des Della Porta', *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, new ser., 3, 1934 no. 4-5, 264-274.]

⁸ [H. S. 'Das erste mittelalterliche Architektursystem', *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen*, 2,

question of late antique architectural structure to its final point, the Hagia Sophia lately again arousing much attention. It is very instructive to see Sedlmayr here again bringing out the formal element against the elucubrations of intellectual history, regarding the intrinsic medieval character of the typically late Roman exemplary architecture. For this reason, I have also expressly accepted this publication for the Habilitation.

In a series of good essays, Sedlmayr has attempted to present the historical and psychological questions at the core of his relationship to the modern gestalt psychology of Max Wertheimer. These are the two articles 'Gestaltetes Sehen' (1925-26) based on his analysis of the Borromini design of S. Carlo alle IV fontane in Rome, with the aspiration of achieving more rigorous criteria for stylistic analysis in place of their more intuitive predecessors in order to reach the interior of the aesthetic personality (as described by Benedetto Croce) through an experience of the structure of the art work.⁹ An essay in the form of a review, 'Summative Stilkritik' of 1926 again begins with a design by Fischer von Erlach, and shows how a more elevated analysis of authenticity and originality of art is not achieved from a sum of individual characteristics, but only through a theoretically firm insight into the entire organism, precisely the 'gestalt'.¹⁰ From the very start, Sedlmayr's goal is always geared to a rigour in research on the arts, and this is the title of his article that opens the 1931 volume of Pächt's annual journal.¹¹ It is a dispute with earlier art historical methods, in some ways of course debatable and including a fair amount of immature, youthful exaggeration. I myself admit that to me, the very concept of 'Kunstwissenschaft', 'art studies,' still involves the same amount of ambiguity as the idea we have already mentioned of an experimental study of art with the belief that historical and philosophical knowledge of the primal artistic phenomena must necessarily complement one another, but are in danger of reciprocal mediatization during their amalgamation into an ostensibly unified study of the arts (*Kunstwissenschaft*). It is also clear how difficult Sedlmayr's struggle still is in expressing himself, particularly with his terminology and how often he requires pliable terms from foreign languages, certainly difficult to dispense with.

For precisely this reason, it is all the more commendable that Sedlmayr (again in the sense of Benedetto Croce) devotes himself to the history of the problems that interest him. This is primarily apparent in the introduction of Riegl's

1933, 25-62, reprinted in H. S. *Epochen und Werke*, vol. 1, Vienna: Herold, 1959, 80-139.]

⁹ [H. S. 'Gestaltetes Sehen', *Belvedere*, vol. 8, no. 10, 40 of the entire series, October 1925, 65-73, H. S. 'Zum gestalteten Sehen', *Belvedere*, 9-10, no. 3, 45 of the entire series, March 1926, 57-62. The expanded version of his famous analysis of the Borromini design of San Carlino appears in Sedlmayr, *Die Architektur Borrominis*, Munich: Piper, 1930, available in English translation by Karl Johns, *Journal of Art Historiography*, no. 14, June, 2016]

¹⁰ [H. S. 'Summative Stilkritik', *Belvedere*, vol. 9-10, no. 2, 44 of the entire series, February 1926, Forum, 21-23.]

¹¹ [H. S. 'Zu einer strengen Kunstwissenschaft', *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen*, 1, 1931, 7-32, reprinted as 'Kunstgeschichte als Kunstgeschichte', *Kunst und Wahrheit*, Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1958, 35-70, ed. Mittenwald: Mäander 1978, 49-80, English translation by Mia Fineman as 'Toward a Rigorous Study of Art (1931)', *The Vienna School Reader: Politics and Art Historical Method in the 1930s*, ed. Christopher S. Wood, New York: Zone, 2000, 133-180.]

collected essays (published by Karl Maria Swoboda in 1929), entitled the 'Quintessence of Riegl's Teachings', although this is also marred by immature elements.¹² It is laudable to establish for the present the 'intrinsic relevance' of Riegl's often misunderstood and yet inchoate ideas, such as the '*Kunstwollen*' that has already become a slogan for formalists, much of which does in fact seem to lead in the direction of modern gestalt theory.

I myself urged Sedlmayr to add a supplement to his Habilitation thesis, and for good reason. On the one hand I am unflinching in not allowing an art historian to qualify for the senior lecturing position in the field of all post-medieval art history on the basis of only one branch or subsection of the subject, however independent a subject the history of architecture might be. Things might be different in the School of Engineering. I suggested that he take a topic from the history of the actual 'visual arts' (*aus der Geschichte der eigentlichen 'bildenden' Kunst*) in order to test his appraisal of structural theory. We now have this essay in an as yet unpublished study, written in 1933, 'On the 'macchia' of Pieter Bruegel'.¹³ I must note specifically that I myself had no influence on the choice of subject and approach, that these were done completely independently. It is equally true that he came across an essay by Croce (in the shorter writings on aesthetics which I translated) and found the decisive stimulus completely spontaneously in the course of his study. This is the theory of the 'spot of colour', the *macchia* recalling Leonardo, proposed in 1868 by the very original Neapolitan author Vittorio Imbriani, a student of Francesco de Sanctis, coming from Hegel in the struggle against the ideas then arriving from northern Europe, and anecdotal painting, in some sense a precursor of Impressionism. As opposed to the extra-aesthetic 'content' aesthetics of laymen, Sedlmayr in this most mature of his publications begins with the purely pictorial form, the original 'idea' on the part of the artist, and actually reaches the *connubium biforniae et philosophicae* that has for a long time appeared as an ideal before our school. As previously with Borromini, he again here works with what is considered a 'problematic' artist, now far more clearly (*viel geklärter*). This is the old and much misunderstood Netherlandish artist Pieter Bruegel. In an aperçu-like way, Max Dvořák had already intuited, but also spoke of the *macchia*, in other words the primary pictorial structure when he discussed the uniquely tapestry-like, apparently rudimentary cubistic effect, of this pictorial form.¹⁴ Sedlmayr begins with this *macchia* because it dovetails completely with the insights of gestalt theory he had already developed, but this is followed by the problem of the intrinsic meaning of this strange use of forms,

¹² [H. S. 'Die Quintessenz der Lehren Riegls', Alois Riegl, *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, Augsburg: Filser, 1929, xxxv-xxxix, reprinted as 'Kunstgeschichte als Stilgeschichte', H. S. *Kunst und Wahrheit*, Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1958, 14-34, ed. Mittenwald: Mäander 1978, 32-48.]

¹³ [H. S. Die 'Macchia' Bruegels, *Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen in Wien*, new ser., 8, 1934, 137-159, reprinted in H. S. *Epochen und Werke*, 1, Vienna: Herold, 1959, 274-318, English translation by Frederic J. Schwartz as 'Bruegel's *Macchia* (1934)', *The Vienna School Reader: Politics and Art Historical Method in the 1930s*, ed. Christopher S. Wood, New York: Zone, 2000, 323-378.]

¹⁴ [Max Dvořák, *Pieter Bruegel der Ältere, Siebenunddreissig Farbenlichtdrucke nach seinen Hauptwerken in Wien und eine Einführung in seine Kunst*, Vienna: Hölzel, 1920, reprinted Max Dvořák, *Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte*, Munich: Piper, 1924, 217-257.]

signifying an 'alienation', a 'masking' of the so-called 'actual' world, a procedure that can now be accessed again by the most recent research in psychology. In a very mature way (after succumbing to this very thing in the case of Borromini!), Sedlmayr consciously and expressly avoids the psycho-pathological interpretation that is particularly tempting with this artist. The presentation of his artistic personality leads to what has become a much-discussed problem today, that of northern European Mannerism. Sedlmayr here assumes his place as historian interested in and animated by psychology, a place he has reached after numerous diversions.

After following Sedlmayr's development as a participant since his beginnings, I am happy to be able to say today that I consider him to be one of the most promising people in our discipline. For this reason, I can confidently recommend the commission to accept his application for the Habilitation most warmly. He has already demonstrated his abilities as a teacher at the Technical University: at the age of 37, he is outwardly as well as inwardly mature, as much so as any of those who have been granted the Habilitation in the past and will be done in the future.

February 8, 1934

Julius von Schlosser

Commission Meeting on Sedlmayr February 9, 1934

On February 9 of this year the commission appointed to consult on the Habilitation-application of Dr. Hans Sedlmayr met under the aegis of the dean, consisting of Messrs. Dopsch, Patsch, Praschniker, Hirsch, Bühler, Menghin, Menhardt, Egger, v. Srbik, Versluys, Übersberger, Schlosser. They began by discussing the personal aptitude of Dr. Sedlmayr.

Dr. Hans Sedlmayr, born 1897 in Hornstein (Burgenland) thus 37 years of age, Roman Catholic, son of Professor a. D. Hochschule für Bodenkultur, Sedlmayr moved from the school bench to the eastern- and Palestine front, and distinguished himself in his 31-month service – among other things receiving the Iron Cross – and began studying architecture for two years at the Technical University while also enrolled in mathematics and philosophy at the University. In 1920, he entered the Kunsthistorisches Institut under Dvořák while also passing the entrance examinations for the Institut für Geschichtsforschung. In 1923, he graduated from the department, now under my supervision, and passed the oral examinations. After he continued studying in my department, and in 1933 achieved the Habilitation as Privatdozent in the history of art at the technical university. The commission has unanimously endorsed the personal qualifications of Dr. Sedlmayr for the Habilitation.

Then his qualifications were discussed. The head laid out the accompanying recommendations, further complemented by Professor Bühler.

Finally, Professor Hirsch spoke very approvingly of Dr. Sedlmayr's gifts as a lecturer, as he had himself been able to observe at a conference in Burgenland.

The commission then accepted the recommendation of Schlosser to admit Dr. Sedlmayr to the position of Privatdozent for the history of medieval and modern art at the University.

[signed]

Schlosser

Bühler

Seneke

C. Patsch

R. Egger

J Versluys

Praschniker

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