

Obituary: Hans Sedlmayr, 'Julius Ritter von Schlosser 23 IX 1866 – 1 XII 1938'¹

Translated by Karl Johns

The fact that the work of Julius von Schlosser, whose death we are mourning and whom we are commemorating here, has contributed very much to the history of art is something which even his very few opponents would agree to. It is the most obvious task of an obituary to make an account of his contribution, its essential character and the questions it has left us with. The study of medieval art alone owes an untold amount to his early essay 'Zur Kenntnis der künstlerischen Überlieferung im späten Mittelalter'. His essay 'Geschichte der Porträtbildnerei in Wachs: Ein Versuch' has been dismissed by some as a mere caprice, but the profound questions posed there have in fact still not been properly recognized. When the book appears this year which he had been working on at his death, the monograph about his favorite artist Lorenzo Ghiberti, it will certainly be an impulse toward revising the entire decisive period of the early renaissance from the ground up. The greatest respect one could show would certainly be a renewed and serious consideration of Schlosser's work – and yet we have another duty which strikes me as more important still, and this is to recognize its significance for the history of art beyond the mere accrual of knowledge. For us art historians, this question is inextricably bound to the other as to whether we have done justice to his work, and as paradoxical as it might sound about such a figure who was given the highest possible honors during his life, I would have to answer in the negative.

Praising something is often only a quicker way to being through with it. What is perfect is complete, and when something is completed, it seems not to require our further attention. For this reason, I would most like to show that the large and impressive work of Julius von Schlosser is today in no way finished, and that the day it was published is fading behind us, but indeed that Schlosser still has a very living contribution to make to the history of art of our own time, and that it is far from fading. This is very clear as we consider his work in relation to his own time.

Any of those familiar with the work of Schlosser or who knew the man personally, either closely or at a distance, had the impression of a rare and very deliberate personality. It is hopeless to wish to sketch his character in just a few sentences, but necessary to do so. Schlosser's personality included a number of fundamental characteristics which are not common in even the most influential people today, but provide at least an introduction to better understanding. I am always struck by the marvelous steadiness in his personal and scholarly development. Both grew quickly and reliably. At the age of 26 he became a lecturer

¹ Originally published *Mitteilungen des Österreichischen Institutes für Geschichtsforschung*, vol. 52, 1938, 513-519.

at the University of Vienna, at 35, director of one of the most important art collections in the world, and at 48 a full member of the academy of sciences. These outward successes conform completely to the intellectual development of a person who was a scholarly authority at the age of 30. His work expanded organically and ever more fully from the scholarly elevation he achieved at such a comparatively young age. We are unavoidably reminded of the image of a large tree. In his very personal 'Lebenskommentar', Schlosser himself enumerated the branches and their individual shoots while following them all back to their roots. We can trace each of these roots completely through to the top with a rare transparency.

One root was apparent at an early date. This was the subject of written sources and intimately related to this his interest in the medieval period both rising from his great educational experience at the Institut für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung, the school of Theodor von Sickel, but also a result of his own personality. This interest in sources was not something he learned, but was a part of his nature and the same congenital attraction to originals which as an art historian always drew him back to the primary sources of art historical knowledge, to the works of art themselves. This twin field spawned his many publications about the written sources of the history of art as well as his equally numerous studies of medieval art and the medieval attitude to art. Another great root for him was the museum and his studies of coins, medals, musical instruments, sculpture and particularly small-scale sculpture. This related to his natural interest and deep appreciation for that which is small, for the small monuments 'which can and must be studied in their most intimate detail'. The small and most minute characteristics reveal what is true and genuine about the work of art and distinguishes it from imitations or mimics. This field is the source for his many publications about sculpture, manuscripts, collecting and the cabinets of art and curiosities. Each of these three roots produced very ripe fruit after the first mature essays: the *Kunstliteratur*, the book about medieval art and that devoted to Ghiberti.

This is one of the rare instances where the phrase about the organic growth of a personality is apt. His development had the still and steady character of many natural formations. There are no crises, setbacks, mistakes and nothing forced. This is the secret of his great productivity.² Nothing was forced either outwardly or inwardly. Schlosser never did the slightest thing to 'assert himself'. His friends properly sense something Olympian about his manner of living and working, although it also struck others as nearly wooden or forbidding. It is difficult to gain access to such people. This is further strengthened by the daunting breadth of his

² Hans Hahnloser has compiled a list of Schlosser's publications for the Festschrift published to commemorate his 60th birthday [Hans R. Hahnloser, 'Bibliographie der bis zum 23. September 1926 erschienen Schriften von Julius Schlosser', *Festschrift für Julius Schlosser zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Arpád Weixlgärtner and Leo Planiscig, Zurich: Amalthea, 1927, 274-284, expanded in Karl T. Johns, 'Julius Alwin Ritter von Schlosser: ein bio-bibliographischer Beitrag', *Kritische Berichte*, vol. 16, no. 4, 1988, 47-64 with egregious and at times amusing errors introduced by the publisher. I am delighted to supply corrections to those interested, now also Franz Kirchweyer, 'Julius von Schlosser Schriftenverzeichnis,' *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte*, vol. 66, 2021, 221-230].

work which is difficult to assess in spite of the fact that no part of it is obscure or confusing. It has commanded the same respect as he himself, his achievement and type seems to come to us from a different time protruding into our own with grandeur and freedom. Even those condemned to criticize him approached timidly.

Nonetheless his personal development and work took place in a period of the greatest possible intellectual and spiritual crisis and profound and passionate reversals. Only once we have recognized the internal measure in relation to the contrast to the doings of the world will we see how each of these phases had their effect and significance.

Schlosser's early life and work occurred in a time when the foundations were laid for a history of art with 'precision' in the historical sense. Following the pioneering image of Sickel, Franz Wickhoff undertook to define an objective method for dealing with the art historical sources. At the same time, Riegl and Wölfflin created the conceptual foundations for art historical knowledge. We can easily understand that Schlosser's natural preference for the concrete aspect of things drew him more in the direction of Wickhoff, and he was destined to achieve superiority and even mastery in that area. In the marvelous obituary by his other student, Max Dvořák, we read that 'Wickhoff was granted the blessed gift of artistic vision and feeling although this gift was accompanied by a no smaller insight into scholarly problems and achievements. This meant that even as a student, the immeasurably higher scholarly level of archaeology compared to the history of art did not escape him, but actually determined his further development'. Schlosser's personal gifts could unfold very naturally in such an environment and we can see how he could so astonishingly quickly reach such a level as to become one of the leading authorities in his field by the age of 30.

Yet after this secure period of creating foundations, the scope of the history of art was broadened immensely just following the turn of the century. This occurred in many directions. First there was an expansion of the material at hand. The great blank spots on the art historical map were resolved, bold conquistadorial campaigns claimed territories with varying degrees of success. Louis Courajod had already looked into Asian art. Riegl was still a lone and leading figure. Already in 1890, his report on the ornament from New Zealand did not allow any part of the earth to be ignored. In 1893 Riegl's *Stilfragen* treated the art of all periods from the palaeolithic onwards. However contestable, the book *Volkskunst, Hausfleiss und Kunstindustrie* raised the questions surrounding folk art in 1894. With a faith in his scholarly instruments, Riegl was able to go beyond the limits of those historical periods and cultures which were already best known. What had still been the essay of an isolated individual in the 1890's became the general trend of the age after 1900, and particularly since 1903. Finally, no area of art remained undiscovered, not even the misnomer of the so-called 'art' of children, the blind and mentally ill. This expansion of material had an extraordinary effect on the study of German art. Its sources became a topic for research both with and against Riegl, and without that example we today could never imagine studying art in historical terms.

This expansion of the horizon went in tandem with an expansion of methods. Methods from other fields intruded left and right. Methods from prehistory were applied to the historical period, though not always justifiably, while psychological procedures were accepted. The undeniable gain was once more achieved at the cost of a questionable amalgamation, increasing obscurity about the actual method of the history of art and a hazardous expansion of the concept of art itself. Many scholars lost sight of their craft. Crude 'constructions' were joined with wobbly intuitions to form unstable methodological formations. All certainties seemed to be called into question, and the firm and clear distinctions of art seemed undermined. The history of art came to be viewed as the flow and convergence of large streams of artistic configurations. A sense for the value of art seemed to be evaporating. This state of research increasingly led to a general feeling of an abyss or 'crisis'.

This period has an exact analogy in the arts themselves with what is inadequately called 'Expressionism'. The paramount characteristics of that too have been the advance into new areas, the mixture of often brilliant ideas with a repellently crude craft and an endangerment of the art itself.

Just as Schlosser did not oppose or even object to Expressionism but simply did not take cognizance of it, he did not occupy himself with any of those newfangled trends in his discipline. It was a time when he was working in his museum, which he loved as a 'museum' in the old sense of the term, did not move with the times and for that reason seemed to have lagged behind it. It is astonishing that his scholarly work was never questioned even in this period which was so objectionable to his manner. His work appeared remote and not up to date, and this is how the figure of Schlosser appeared to me in 1920, the later phase of Expressionism, when I myself came into contact with the history of art as a student.

In the life of scholarship, expansion is necessarily followed by contraction. A new phase arrived in the history of art. It is animated by a commanding new call for unflinching solidity in the craft and certainty in scholarly knowledge. It is searching for a solid place and finds it in the individual work of art. It does not isolate the aesthetic aspect of the art work, but approaches the entire work of art as it mingles in every direction with other parts of our lives. 'Art as a whole resides in the individual work of art' (Goethe) – the work of art is a monad containing a concentration of the artistic potential of an entire nation and period – this and similar ideas now dominate practical scholarly work. A need is also felt to recognize the differences of value and quality between what we call works of art, the creative work as opposed to concoctions which allow us to trace the history of forms but not the history of art. Essays of this kind have been flourishing since 1925.

Those of us who were young art historians seeking a contribution of our own, groping at first and slowly becoming more definite about our intentions, realized that what we were doing had been called for by Schlosser since about 1903. Schlosser had suddenly become modern on the basis of an aspect of his work which members of his own generation had considered insignificant but attended to

tolerantly. When he recognized along with Karl Vossler and Benedetto Croce that the history of the artistic language is distinct from the history of art and that history of art in the true sense could only become possible when the two were properly integrated, this essentially preempted the program of the 'younger Vienna School'. This was the point at which we were destined to meet Schlosser sooner or later. It was this and not some random factor that drew me so close to Schlosser as a scholar in his later life, before he realized it and as I would never have anticipated it.

This is not to deny the differences between Schlosser and us who have become his students in the deeper sense. Essential differences are inevitable since we arrived at this new attitude through the 'expressionist' period while Schlosser had circumvented it. One of the deepest differences lies in how we relate ourselves to the prehistory of our own art in completely other ways. It taught us something when on the one so decisive point, Schlosser turned out to be closer to us than any other predecessor.³

This is the only way I am able to understand that after rejecting the *primo et unico loco* chair in Prague in 1903 and not applying to be considered as a successor to Wickhoff in 1909, Schlosser aged 56, decided to accept a position as successor to the 47 year-old Max Dvořák in 1921 – after it had not been possible to hire Wilhelm Pinder or Wilhelm Koehler in Vienna. It is not ours to speculate whether a person who takes such a step contrary to his own habits and preferences is no individualist or maverick, but does it from a feeling of academic duty. We might add that Schlosser could have felt that his congenital gift in seeking certainty and clarity felt a mission at this stage in the historical development of the history of art, however thankless it would have appeared at that moment. It would not be true to claim that those of us without original ideas about the discipline then could already have understood the meaning of this step in 1921.

This decision moved Schlosser from the general history of the academic discipline into the particular history of the 'Vienna School', the history of which he described in an essay of 1934.⁴ We must then consider the position of Schlosser within the 'Vienna School'. The scheme we have been happily using no longer serves us in this. It would be the greatest conceivable mistake to attempt to integrate the unique personality of Schlosser into a 'dialectic' development of the Vienna School.

³ I have written about this in a short essay, Hans Sedlmayr, 'Kunst und Geschichte', *Mitteilungen des Österreichischen Instituts für Geschichtsforschung*, vol. 50, 1936, pp. 185-199 [in English translation [here](#)].

⁴ Julius Schlosser, 'Die Wiener Schule der Kunstgeschichte Rückblick auf ein Säkulum deutscher Gelehrtenarbeit in Österreich', *Mitteilungen des Instituts für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung*, Ergänzungsband 13, no. 2, 1934, pp. 145-228 [available in a somewhat literal English translation by Karl Johns, 'Julius von Schlosser, The Vienna School of the history of art – review of a century of Austrian scholarship in German', *Journal of Art Historiography*, no. 1, December 2009, pp. 1-50].

This academic school does not reflect the three phases we have emphasized in the development of the history of art, but the prominent personalities have created and decisively defined its development by their original activities and defy such historical schemes. What is commonly called the 'Vienna School' is far more than a school of the history of art in the traditional sense. The achievements of these individuals are not what can be defined as a school, but they embody the living development of the entire academic history of art in the German-speaking area. Such a coherent sequence of personalities such as Riegl, Wickhoff, Dvořák and Schlosser will remain rare in the history of any discipline. Josef Strzygowski was teaching in Vienna at the same time as these. We can appreciate the irreplaceability of Schlosser's personality if we bear this in mind. It will provide a difficult problem to a future historian of the Vienna School, but only a thorough comparison of those two personalities could ever clarify this. I believe that the significance of Schlosser for the Vienna School lies in his tenacious insistence on the 'history of art as a history of art', not excluding any of the other approaches but rather including them, but also in the fact that he never dictated any dogmatic way to this goal.

Schlosser's significance as director of the department of the history of art at the university is easier to delineate. He did not come naturally to teaching and did not feel the slightest joy as an administrator, and for this reason I was myself surprised to look into this aspect of his activity and discover the unmatched number of institutions and facilities due to him and persisting – whether or not a student of his own succeeds him. The course of study only assumed a firm and meaningful structure under his leadership. The traditional essay for gaining admission was supplemented with another for becoming a 'regular' member of the department and included examinations in medieval paleography and diplomatics. Classical archaeology became a requirement. In a meaningful way, the tutorials were divided into those before original art, those surrounding written sources and those devoted to individual problems. The famous 'Monday tutorials' with original objects in the museums recall similar courses given by Wickhoff, and gave students an experience of original qualities at a time when German universities were teaching nearly exclusively with reproductions. It was a truly revolutionary step with enormous practical effects. Each of these changes which Schlosser made were not conceived abstractly but emerged from his own character like his research itself. Today, students themselves call for more rigorously structured courses, and we should not overlook that fact that Schlosser was the first to foresee such a thing. This contribution has been essential in the history of the department and probably also to those of all German-speaking universities. It shows that Schlosser was not merely a 'chairman' but a true leader of the department in spite of or precisely because of his dislike of academic vacuousness. He is responsible for the two-hour course which still bears the same title as Schlosser always intended it: lectures in the 'history of German art with particular attention to the southeastern regions'. Schlosser first instituted this course for his Assistant, Karl Maria Swoboda, now teaching at the German university in Prague, I then took it over myself, and it is now being continued in an exemplary way by Karl Oettinger. Each semester, it provides 200 future teachers of history with the necessary art historical background, and teaches the basic questions of historical preservation, so that instead of remaining a series of

hollow rules those problems are attended to in all parts of the country by people who have learned the artistic traditions of their nation from a young age.

If we look back at all of this, then our image of Schlosser's life work assumes a very different character, or includes another very different aspect than it does to those who did not know him. Schlosser, author of *Die Kunstliteratur*, was indeed the great scholar in the anachronistic sense that sounds nearly intimidating today – a descendent of the 18th century polymaths and intellectual giants. Yet he also provided one of the centers for reflection on the history of art as a discipline, and this is less often recognized today. He seemed to be completely devoted to the '*vita contemplativa*,' but if one looked closer, this '*vita contemplativa*' often reverted into a '*vita activa*' in an unobtrusive way that was typical of this noble personality. His private life has also rarely been recognized for what it was.

In reaching the end of our attempt to emphasize some of the less-known aspects of Julius von Schlosser's life work there is also a desire to see them in terms of the evanescent and vivid qualities of his personality. We would like to mention what will be missing for those who come into contact with his intellectual life in the future. With his gait, stance, voice and intonation we reach the limits of any possible understanding.

The history of art owes Julius von Schlosser extraordinary original and essential insights, but possibly more important, also its internal order. He provides one more great name for the Vienna school, a significant fact in itself, as well as having written its first chronicle and history. The department at the university owes him arrangements and facilities which persist and affect all daily operations, and as his successor what he has taught me and how he has helped me cannot be expressed in so few words. Our gratitude for all of this is not the result of an enthusiasm we feel in the hour of mourning and is not contained in a frozen state of admiration. This gratitude will continually renew itself in the future if we are to do justice to the life work of Schlosser. Many tasks still face the history of art and will appear natural to the generations thereafter – they will not realize that they were eked out with great effort. Schlosser's efforts were not devoted to any such passing goals, but to the sources and conclusions of art historical activities as each generation must come to terms with them. It is the question as to 'what actually is the history of art as we claim to cultivate it, and how do we conceive of art and history, or do we even possess such a conception?' These questions are an integral part of Schlosser's life work, and the fact that he considered them as seriously as he did ensures that it will remain with us more than most.

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