

Letter from Otto Pächt to Meyer Schapiro concerning 'national constants' (1934)¹

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Accusations have commonly been made in the United States that the work of Pächt and his associates was based on nationalist and even racist assumptions. Some of these have been inspired by the book review by Schapiro ['The New Viennese School', The Art Bulletin, 18.2, June 1936, 258-67']. This letter to Schapiro from more than a year before the review appeared enunciates Pächt's refutation of that misunderstanding more clearly than many of his more substantial publications.

Vienna, October 4, 1934

My dear Mr. Schapiro,

Dr. Hirst has informed me of your desire to become more acquainted with my views on certain scholarly problems. I am more than happy to comply with your request, especially since, given what is happening today, it should be one's foremost goal not to be misunderstood by the few stalwarts still striving for the truth who, while refusing to continue with their old routines, are equally unwilling to let themselves be contaminated by pseudo-scholarly and pseudo-intellectual doctrines. The delay of my answer to your letter is due to the fact that I was traveling (Italy!) and was ill afterwards for several weeks.

If I understand correctly, you fear that my theory of 'national constants' could be used for a sort of scholarly justification of (political) nationalism and inevitably lead to the embrace of a 'Nazi attitude' [English in the original – Translator]. I think I can prove that this is not the case and that my theory is entirely unsuited to a defense of a nationalist stance; in fact, I think that it is only from the vantage point of my position that one can launch a truly radical critique of popular nationalism as well as conservatism. First, however, I would like to ask if you agree with the view that I simply had to make my views known, to the extent that they are based on actual experience, regardless of any negative consequences

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for myself. At least as far as I am concerned, one must contend with a truth that presents itself even if it completely contradicts one's own preferred view of the nature of reality.

Before going any further, I would also like to emphasize that if I have been using the term "theory," I mean this less as a hypothesis than as a simple observation, or a reference to an empirical fact. While I was working on the evolution of Austrian Gothic panel painting, I realized that the whole material could be sorted into multiple genealogies, each of which corresponded to a particular (regional) mode of production, and that within these different genealogies there was always one *constant* factor. This constant factor wasn't something that could be defined by identifying certain homogeneous, regularly or frequently recurring forms. It wouldn't do either to characterize this constant factor as a specific attitude towards a particular contemporary style or as a particular mode or point of view, the term 'constant factor' also implies a constant reflected in the object that is being made. Of course, we are not talking about something that remains the same externally. Rather, one has to imagine a kind of shared ideal, present to the different artists in a variety of vague formulae, which more or less explicitly guides the process of creation and appears, through a constant flux of viewpoints, in ever new guises but in fact remains the same and has to appear differently (and filled with new content) only because, like any ideal conception, it is only roughly approximated in each particular act of creation, so that some unfulfilled demand always remains, which then serves as an incentive for new developments.

Even in particular notable cases -- these are, as a rule, those in which that basic idea is less hidden than usual, or those where the desired outcome is, to a much higher degree, present to the artist, and determinations made during the creative process become prescriptive rules -- the criteria for classification always remain driven by art historical considerations. The artists that are part of a specific artistic genealogy do not by any means share the same ethnic background. Spanish art would not be the same without El Greco, and yet he was not born in Spain. And while descent does not at all determine the genealogy to which a particular artist belongs, even the artistic environment into which that artist is born does not define his artistic affiliation. Yet, as the case of El Greco demonstrates, not even the first freely chosen artistic environment plays that pivotal role (Venice, in this case), as opposed to the one that offers the best space in which to unfurl his artistic talents. Therefore, it is the primary task of art history to uncover the origin of the artist's aesthetic, rather than his empirical, personality. The latter does not irrevocably determine the nature of the former. While we don't get to choose our biological ancestors, we may select our artistic ones. There is, indeed a certain freedom of choice when it comes to the birth of the aesthetic person.

I probably don't need to elaborate how the position represented here would respond to reactionary-nationalist theory. The question of attachment to soil -- to use a term that has enjoyed such popularity in the Austrian version of fascism -- is irrelevant even when it comes to the emergence of a national art (culture).

There are many other aspects of our problem worth discussing, but I want to draw your attention to the practical and heuristic value of researching these constants. Previously, we were able to associate an anonymous, non-localized work to a specific school only if we could "derive" it from works created earlier with a firmly established origin. For the opposite approach -- attempting to prove that works with a clearly determined place and time of creation were descended from a work with still undetermined origin -- does not warrant the conclusion that such a work is an early example of that same school. The Large and Small Herculaneum women (the originals, of course, not the existing examples of these sculptural creations) are not Roman, even though the majority of the female Roman drapery sculptures can be stylistically traced back to them. But if one has determined the constant, one can, regardless of the chronological relationship, say with certainty whether or not one is dealing with representatives of the same constant. Precise understanding of the nature of the Dutch constant, for example, can help us solve the question of the beginnings of Dutch painting, as it has -- correctly I think -- been posed (though not really answered) by Dvořák. My approach also opens a new avenue for solving the problem of the early works of an artist known for his later activities. Yes, in the entire matter of artistic attributions we would only now be able, I think, to get beyond as yet very incomplete conclusions based on probability. In a similar vein, Sedlmayr in his *Borromini* has rightly pointed out that structural research has placed the whole business of attribution on an entirely new foundation, and, as has been the case with structural research, I too feel corroborated by the fact that, on the basis of my understanding of the nature of the French constant, been able to make predictions that have later been fulfilled by contemporary art, e.g. in the movies of René Clair.

I hope these hints will, as much as this is possible in a letter, clear up a few potential misunderstandings; of course, I am always willing to provide a more elaborate explanation if needed. --

Dear Mr. Schapiro, before I was able to mail this letter, Dr. Sedlmayr allowed me to read your letter containing a passage regarding me, and I hasten to answer your questions. I was, of course, caught completely off guard to learn that you, without knowing me personally, have been thinking in such an extraordinarily caring manner about my advancement and have been advocating for me. I am not sure what I have done to deserve your concern, and I want to thank you, with all my heart, for this exceptional act of friendship.

If I may indeed rely on your protection, let me briefly describe to you my personal situation right now. After my return from Heidelberg, where I received my appointment right before the Hitler business started but never even had a chance to deliver my inaugural lecture, I have devoted myself to independent research (on late antiquity and Byzantium), since any application for a position in this country would have been futile given the dominance here of the steadily worsening, church-induced antisemitic climate. Since my father is still supporting me, I haven't yet had to work a job that would have taken away from my research time without any benefit to me professionally. But this is not a guarantee that I will be able to devote myself uninterruptedly to my studies in the future as well-

conditions in Central Europe are getting ever more disastrous-and I do not want to idealize the situation of the independent scholar, who, in all public institutes and libraries, is usually just tolerated as a visitor. Previously, when I was in Heidelberg, I was hoping to be connected with a group of other researchers, since I believed academic work could only be carried out collectively, but I am more skeptical and resigned these days regarding that possibility.

I know too little about the working conditions, the level of intellectual engagement, and the character of a typical American college to offer an opinion on your proposal. An appointment that would place heavy demands on me without allowing me to do my own work is not something I could not entertain. Matters would be different, though, if I could secure a good position somewhere, even if my teaching and lecturing, given the lower level of the students, wouldn't result in very much. Of course, this position should be compensated in such a way that I would be able to get by on my salary. Right now, because of restrictions on foreign currency it is completely impossible to send money abroad. Thus I cannot rely on any material help from home. I fear that our entire plan will fail just because of that. A lecture tour of some sort would, of course, be wonderful, since it would enable me to familiarize myself and study the great American museums. But I will only mention this to you, knowing full well that this will remain a bold, utopian fantasy.

There is another problem, too: while I am able to read English, I can barely speak it. I would have to close this big gap, though I am convinced that I can remedy this situation in a few months.

Perhaps it is not unimportant to mention here that I am very awkward and clumsy in all practical matters and in my interactions with other people and have very little experience in social situations. I have always been told that I am incredibly unsuited for life in America.

May I ask one last question? What in fact is the Institute for International Education? I don't want to keep you any longer, though; my letter is too long as it is, but if you like any further information from me, I promise to send answers immediately and not wait three weeks, as I just did. I am enclosing the desired list of important dates.

A thousand thanks, again, for your kind efforts and best regards,
from your Otto Pächt

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