

## Whither *Strukturforschung*?

Review of:

*The New Vienna School of Art History. Fulfilling the Promise of Analytic Holism* by Ian Verstegen, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023, pp. xxxi + 331. ISBN 978-1-4744-8976-8 (hardback), £ 85.00.

Erhan Tamur

In this thought-provoking book, Ian Verstegen engages with one of the most innovative art historical schools of the twentieth century, the New Vienna School. Prefaced by Richard Woodfield, the book is divided into two parts. The first part, titled 'Theory and Methodology', introduces the main premises of the New Vienna School as well as the broader intellectual context, with particular attention to Gestalt psychology. The author makes his position very clear: these chapters are 'an interpretation and theoretical defence of the method of *Strukturforschung*' (103). The second part consists of four case studies that are selected by the author to demonstrate *Strukturforschung* in action. These are Hans Sedlmayr's *Die Architecture of Borromini* (1930), Otto Pächt's 'The Design Principles of Fifteenth-Century Northern Painting' (1933), Johannes Wilde's 'The Decoration of the Sistine Chapel' (1958), and finally Otto Demus's *Byzantine Mosaic Decoration* (1948). Following a short concluding chapter arguing for the relevance of *Strukturforschung* today, the book closes with Endnotes, Bibliography, and Index which constitute over a hundred pages (213–331).

Already in the Introduction, Verstegen characterizes his project as an 'affirmative' one, acknowledging the New Vienna School as 'a fruitful school that produced pivotal contributions that are emphasised here not as an ideological undertow of the present (although they are that as well) but more as a living approach' (6). What is at stake for the author is not only to provide a historiographical overview but also to formulate a coherent statement for the future of the discipline. This forward-looking statement is founded upon multiple interrelated theoretical commitments that are in line with the author's earlier work<sup>1</sup>—some of which are included as entire or partial chapters in this book—and structures his treatment of the New Vienna School.

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., Ian Verstegen, 'The 'Second' Vienna School as Social Science'. *Journal of Art Historiography* 7 (2012): 1–17; Verstegen, 'Materializing *Strukturforschung*'. in *German Art History and Scientific Thought. Beyond Formalism*, eds. Mitchell B. Frank and Daniel Adler (Surrey: Ashgate, 2012), pp. 141–160; Verstegen, 'Obscene History. The Two Sedlmayrs'. *Studia austriaca* XXIV (2016): 73–93; Verstegen, 'Sedlmayr's Borromini'. *Journal of Art Historiography* 14 (2016), 1–22; Verstegen, 'Otto Demus, Byzantine Art and the Spatial Icon'. *Journal of Art Historiography* 19 (December 2018): 1–

The first commitment is to a Critical Realist position which affirms a distinction between ontology and epistemology, or between the ‘real’ and the ‘observable’. We can only attempt to get closer to the former through empirical methods yet our knowledge claims are always subjected to fallibilism; they are never the last word (i.e., they are ‘transitive’). Although the specific terminology of the paradigm of Critical Realism, combining transcendental realism and critical naturalism, is a product of the second half of the twentieth century (following Roy Bhaskar’s work), many of the underlying principles have longer histories. For example, the author finds commonalities with Gestalt psychology (the way in which it was both realist *and* fallibilistic), which are, in turn, utilized to explicate some of the foundational premises of the New Vienna School—e.g., see the discussion on Mental Set (*Einstellung*) on pp. 59–63. Simply put, the book is characterized by a multilayered argument against the longstanding claims of not only positivism (and its empiricism) but also constructivism. Although a very brief Glossary of Terms is presented at the beginning of the book, the terminology used throughout signals the author’s insistence that the New Vienna School cannot be rigorously investigated without serious engagement with philosophies of science.

The second and related theoretical commitment concerns naturalising art history—studying artworks through methodologies that are not fundamentally different from those used in natural sciences. This, of course, does not mean reducing humanities to sciences, but developing rigorous explanatory procedures to account for the particular ontology of the object of study (i.e., artworks) in a self-reflexive manner.<sup>2</sup> Such an objective is reflected in New Vienna School’s move from *Kunstgeschichte* towards *Kunstwissenschaft*, as well as in their interest in neighbouring scientific fields, particularly Gestalt psychology. Although the impact of Gestalt theory on *Strukturforschung* had been questioned in some of the earlier literature,<sup>3</sup> Versteegen situates the beginnings of the New Vienna School convincingly within the Gestalt tradition.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, a central argument of the book is that proponents of *Strukturforschung* did not fall into the trap of strict holism (*Ganzheit*) but practiced what the author calls ‘analytic holism’, which maintains the identity of the parts and avoids totalizing: ‘It [Gestalt theory] promoted holism without the obscurantist and romantic associations of reactionary uses, while at the same time maintaining scientific rigour’

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24; Versteegen, ‘Otto Pächt and ‘National’ Constants in Late-Gothic Painting’. *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* 65 (2018): 148; see also Versteegen, *A Realist Theory of Art History*, London and New York: Routledge, 2013. It would have been helpful for the reader if a list of the published material were provided in the book.

<sup>2</sup> See Versteegen, *A Realist Theory of Art History*, chapters 3–8.

<sup>3</sup> E.g., Christopher Wood, ‘Introduction’. *The Vienna School Reader. Politics and Art Historical Method in the 1930s* (New York: Zone Books, 2000), n. 68; Frederic J. Schwartz, *Blind Spots: Critical Theory and the History of Art in Twentieth-Century Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005): 176–77.

<sup>4</sup> See also Simon Morganthaler, *Formation einer Kunstwissenschaft* (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2020) for a recent discussion of Gestalt-theory related drafts and documents in Sedlmayr’s archive.

(37). In defence of this phenomenologically-oriented formalist position, his narrative is consistently waging against rival schools such as style history, iconography, and iconology. It appears that Verstegen's 'affirmative project' is affirmative only at the expense of everything else.

A paragraph buried in a later chapter (74) but that was published multiple times in earlier publications<sup>5</sup> summarizes the stakes of the book:

What is missing in art history—and which has not been solved by two decades of postmodernist critique—is a way of successfully communicating the fallibilism of one's conclusions without framing it as an undecidable aporia or dogmatic assertion. We can make best guesses based on the state of knowledge and our knowledge of what we ought to be attending to, based on the prior history of the field. But fallibilism, ironically, also presumes realism and the sane admission that a transcendent object is out there to which our efforts can slowly, if imperfectly, bring us closer. A caricature of immanent understanding is partly presented by Sedlmayr, which is reminiscent of the totalising visions of science of Vienna School positivism. Our goals have to be loftier and yet much more modest. Sedlmayr ultimately subverted the very kind of progressive, cumulative form of art historical research he espoused.

### **Sedlmayr's *Strukturforschung***

It is particularly the last sentence of this quotation that constitutes the core of the author's treatment of Sedlmayr's work. Verstegen, like many others before him, identifies a break in Sedlmayr's thinking around 1934, marked by the publication of 'Brueghel's Macchia', which was 'incorrectly...treated as a paradigm of *Strukturforschung*' in later scholarship (41). This leads the author to leave out Sedlmayr's almost entire oeuvre and to limit himself to the analysis of two main pieces: *Die Architecture of Borromini*, published in 1930, and 'Towards a Rigorous Study of Art', which opened the first issue of *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen* in 1931. The author insists that this approach is not intended to 'rehabilitate' Sedlmayr: 'Although committed to a methodology crucially pioneered by Hans Sedlmayr, this book does not attempt a rehabilitation of Sedlmayr (although many will perhaps confuse it as such).<sup>6</sup> Rather, it uses Sedlmayr's early theoretical work as the basis for a refined formal theory of art history' (6).

I admit that this almost Althusserian 'epistemological break' is very convenient for the purposes of the author, yet one has to note that Sedlmayr continued to see himself as a *Strukturforscher* until the very end. This is evident in his *Verlust der Mitte*<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Verstegen, 'Materializing *Strukturforschung*', 153–54; Verstegen, *A Realist Theory of Art History*, 121.

<sup>6</sup> Here, Verstegen cites Evonne Levy's article 'Sedlmayr and Wittkower (1931–1932): More than a Skirmish'. *Selva* 2 (Fall 2020), 51–59.

<sup>7</sup> See Hans Sedlmayr, *Verlust der Mitte* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Ullstein, 1955), 132, where he cites Max Wertheimer as well as Benedetto Croce, and summarizes the guiding questions of a

and even more so in his later *Kunst und Wahrheit* which republishes or reiterates many of the methodological commitments that he laid out in the 1930s.<sup>8</sup> Verstegen circumvents the issue by insisting that what Sedlmayr did after 1934 was not the 'true approach of *Strukturforschung*' (38), but instead was 'a variety of iconology' (22). Therefore, the later Sedlmayr 'disfigured his 'rigorous' project and, in some interpretations, betrayed it' (44). Sedlmayr's shift towards 'iconology' had already been noted by others including Otto Pächt,<sup>9</sup> yet Verstegen could have been more precise in explicating that process. For example, when he gives as evidence the placement of Sedlmayr's Vermeer article in *Kunst und Wahrheit* under the section 'Zwei Beispiele der *Interpretation*' (rather than 'structural analysis'), he disregards Sedlmayr's very clear definition of 'interpretation' in the preceding pages. Mimicking the phrases that he used in the 1930s, Sedlmayr defines it as the process of 'recreating' ['wiedererschaffen'] or 'reawakening' ['wiedererwecken'] the individual artwork, which is ultimately the basis of *Strukturforschung*.<sup>10</sup> In other words, regardless of how we retrospectively interpret Sedlmayr's work, he remained proud of that 'new era' of art history that he claimed to have initiated in 1925, which, according to him, lasted not until 1934 but until around 1950.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, if Verstegen's book is not the 'rehabilitation' of Sedlmayr himself, it is the 'rehabilitation' of *Strukturforschung* in the sense that it is being attempted to be 'saved' from its leading theorist.

Whether Sedlmayr ever managed to *implement* that self-reflexive, rigorous art history that he preached remains a central concern. Since the aforementioned temporal limitation leaves Sedlmayr's book on Borromini as the only candidate for a historical case study, Verstegen devotes an entire chapter to it, with the aim of 'return[ing] the book to the genealogy of art historical formal structuralism and highlight its role as a founding analysis of the 'new' Vienna School' (109). Following an overview of Sedlmayr's phenomenological reading of Borromini's architecture, which stresses numerous original and insightful observations of the Viennese author, Verstegen undertakes a detailed re-contextualization of Sedlmayr's characterological analysis of Borromini, which had identified the artist with a 'schizothymic' personality. Calling it 'notorious' six times, Verstegen considers it an overly ambitious aspect of Sedlmayr's attempt at naturalising art history. Just as the Borromini book as a whole has been a 'victim of failed hermeneutic charity' (108), the chapter on characterology has either been 'misunderstood' (134) or ignored because of language barriers and 'a retrospective

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'*Strukturanalyse der Gesamtstörung*'. but claims that such an analysis would go beyond the scope of the current book.

<sup>8</sup> Hans Sedlmayr, *Kunst und Wahrheit. Zur Theorie und Methode der Kunstgeschichte*, Mittenwald: Mäander, 1978.

<sup>9</sup> Otto Pächt, *The Practice of Art History*, London: Harvey Miller Publishers, 1999, 71.

<sup>10</sup> Sedlmayr, *Kunst und Wahrheit*, 96–122, 133–34. See also Sedlmayr, 'Zu einer strengen Kunstwissenschaft'. *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen* 1 (1931): 14; Sedlmayr, 'Geschichte und Kunstgeschichte'. *Mitteilungen des Instituts für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung* 50 (1936): 191–94.

<sup>11</sup> Sedlmayr, *Kunst und Wahrheit*, 22.

misreading of German-language academic discourse on the body and the intuitively and immediately given' (123). In the rare cases that the book was seriously engaged with, Verstegen claims, the reader is too fixated on the characterology-related chapter and that we 'are too ready to read too much into it' (125). At this point, I find it useful to go back to Sedlmayr's text for a moment:

The advantage of this vantage point [characterological and somatic analysis of the artist] in understanding the art of Borromini is that many separate characteristics of his art converge—as expressions of a certain psychological type in the field of art. When seen in isolation, there is no direct indication that such a massive productiveness and the tendency to crass expressiveness belong together so intimately; in relation to this personality type, one can begin to understand them as various peripheral manifestations of a typical attitude. We can grasp them all from the simple fact that Borromini was a schizothyme type. For this reason—and this is important methodologically—one should no longer interpret these aspects of his art (as such) as data for intellectual history [geistesgeschichtlich] (or otherwise). One will discover these characteristics in all works by schizothyme artists (of this particular type) and completely independently of the 'spirit of the age' ['Zeitgeist'] or the 'artistic will' ['Kunstwollen'].<sup>12</sup>

If Sedlmayr is presenting Borromini's 'schizothymic' personality traits as historical explanation that cuts across and supersedes 'Zeitgeist' and 'Kunstwollen', is the problem really the reader who is 'reading too much into it'? If Sedlmayr's brilliant phenomenological discussion of Borromini's architecture crescendoes and concludes in this manner, what else should the reader do but dismiss these conclusions? And if this conclusion is presented not really as a side note but as deriving from his ambitiously theorized 'second science', shouldn't we then question the application of this very 'second science' itself?

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<sup>12</sup> 'Der Gewinn dieser Betrachtung für das Verständnis der Kunst Borrominis ist, daß sich verschiedene getrennte Züge seiner Kunst, von hier aus gesehen, zusammenschließen—als Äußerungen eines bestimmten psychischen Typus im Gebiete der Kunst. Für sich allein besehen ist es nicht ohne weiteres zu durchschauen, daß zum Beispiel die massenhafte Produktion und die Neigung zu krassen Ausdruckswirkungen so eng zusammengehören; bezogen auf diesen Persönlichkeitstypus beginnt man, sie als verschiedene periphere Äußerungen eines typischen Verhaltens zu begreifen. Sie alle sind rein aus der Tatsache zu verstehen, daß Borromini ein schizothymischer Typus war. Deshalb dürfen—das ist methodisch wichtig—diese Züge seiner Kunst (als solche) nicht mehr geistesgeschichtlich (oder anders) interpretiert werden. Denn diese Merkmale würde man—ganz unanhängig von dem 'Zeitgeist'. dem 'Kunstwollen'—überall an Werken finden, die typische Schizothyme (dieser Unterklasse) zu ihrem Urheber haben'. See Sedlmayr, *Die Architektur Borrominis*, Berlin: Frankfurter Verlags-Anstalt A.-G., 1930, 122. Translation adapted from p. 75 of 'Hans Sedlmayr, The Architecture of Borromini'. introduced, edited and translated by Karl Johns, *Journal of Art Historiography* 14 (June 2016): 1-114.

Further, it is simplistic to say that it is our retrospective modern sensibilities that associate such conclusions—and references to figures like Ernst Kretschmer—with racism, and therefore leading us to reject them; Sedlmayr's characterological analysis of Borromini had nothing to do with race,<sup>13</sup> yet the problem was still apparent to many of Sedlmayr's contemporaries. We do not need to look too far to illustrate this point: in the *Gutachten* submitted in 1934 in support of Sedlmayr's appointment as a professor, an English translation of which was recently published in the pages of this journal, Sedlmayr's doctoral supervisor Julius von Schlosser wrote the following:

Numerous errors (*Mancher Irrweg*) become apparent, something he [Sedlmayr] 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<sup>14</sup> art! ... 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 [Bruegel].<sup>15</sup>

Did Sedlmayr abandon characterology in his Bruegel essay—which has its own, separate problems as Versteegen also notes—because he saw the drawbacks of the method, or did he do so out of opportunism, namely to gain favour with Schlosser whose support was indispensable for his academic promotion? Perhaps both. His ambivalent relationship with Schlosser and the ups and downs of their academic relationship within the course of 1934 is clear from Sedlmayr's correspondence with Meyer Schapiro as well.<sup>16</sup>

The issue of opportunism comes up again in the case of Sedlmayr's National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP) affiliation. Sedlmayr was a member of the NSDAP between 1930–32 and from 1938 onwards until the end of the war. In the Preface penned by Richard Woodfield, which centres upon Ernst Gombrich's remarks on Sedlmayr's NSDAP affiliation, opportunism—rather than firm conviction in Nazi ideals—is given as the main reason for his post-*Anschluss* politics. What about his 1930–32 affiliation before the appointment of Hitler as chancellor? In the same interview with Woodfield, Gombrich notes that Sedlmayr originally was 'rather, very, left wing if not communist Marxist' (xvii). Largely based on this piece of information, Versteegen

<sup>13</sup> Sedlmayr explicitly rules out race as a reliable category (Sedlmayr, *Die Architektur Borrominis*, 118).

<sup>14</sup> To be sure, 'schizothemia' and 'schizophrenia' are different things, but this does not really alter the central point of Schlosser's critique.

<sup>15</sup> J. v Schlosser, 'Report on the Habilitation of Dr. Hans Sedlmayr'. translated by Karl Johns, *Journal of Art Historiography* 27 (December 2022): 1, 5.

<sup>16</sup> See Erhan Tamur, 'Specters of Influence: Meyer Schapiro and the New Vienna School'. *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 75/76 (2021): 215.

characterizes Sedlmayr's early NSDAP affiliation as a 'hopeful trial' that is symptomatic of the oscillation between far left and far right at the time. In fact, in an earlier article, the large parts of which were incorporated into this chapter, Verstegen defined Sedlmayr as a 'National Bolshevik':

After the failure of the November Revolution in 1918 and the murders of Rosa Luxemburg and Liebknecht, whatever leftist solution Sedlmayr was interested in was a Leninized 'dictatorship of the proletariat'. This is the key, I believe, to understanding his later Nazism and indeed all his politics. He accepted a radicalized confluence of left and right that brought Soviet and German authoritarian ideas together against capitalism. In short, he could be classed a 'National Bolshevik'.<sup>17</sup>

Verstegen separates Sedlmayr's politics from his academic work, as the period of his first NSDAP membership between 1930–32 was also the height of his involvement with the 'cosmopolitan and completely non-racist theories of Gestalt theory' (125). The author further notes that many of Sedlmayr's co-workers in Vienna (e.g., Otto Pächt and Bruno Fürst) were Jewish and adds: 'I do believe that it is not helpful, or historical, to believe that Sedlmayr and Pächt broke [in 1934] because the former was 'a Nazi'. Sedlmayr, in embracing political anti-Semitism, betrayed the principle of free and unprejudiced thought that is a hallmark of enlightened life'.<sup>18</sup> While it is true that Sedlmayr was not a member of the NSDAP in 1934, it was primarily his open anti-Semitism, combined with his far-right Catholicism, that led his Jewish friends to distance themselves from him. Their correspondence with Meyer Schapiro includes a number of clues concerning this point. In March 1934, Sedlmayr wrote 'I must tell you that I am completely out of contact with Fürst and Pächt due to 'ideological' differences'.<sup>19</sup> Pächt was even more explicit: 'When I learnt about Sedlmayr's political views over a year ago, I explained to him that I cannot collaborate with him any longer. This collaboration was the basis of Kw.Forschungen after all'.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Fürst informed Schapiro that he broke off all contact with Sedlmayr and complained about his 'bad character'.<sup>21</sup> Sedlmayr disclosed his anti-Semitism to Schapiro even earlier,

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<sup>17</sup> Verstegen, 'Obscene History'. 78.

<sup>18</sup> Verstegen, 'Obscene History'. 90.

<sup>19</sup> 'Ich darf Ihnen nicht verschweigen, daß ich mit Fürst und Pächt wegen 'weltanschaulicher' Meinungsverschiedenheiten stark ausser Kontakt bin'. Sedlmayr to Schapiro, 23 March 1934. Meyer Schapiro Collection, 166/13, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

<sup>20</sup> 'Vor mehr als Jahresfrist, als ich die politische Gesinnung Sedlmayrs kennengelernt habe, habe ich ihm erklärt, dass ich mit ihm nicht mehr zusammenarbeiten könne. Und diese Zusammenarbeit war doch das Fundament der Kw.Forschungen'. Pächt to Schapiro, 23 February 1935. Meyer Schapiro Collection, 155/8, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

<sup>21</sup> Fürst to Schapiro, 12 November 1934. Meyer Schapiro Collection, 127/24, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

most likely when the latter visited Vienna in 1933.<sup>22</sup> Being closer to ‘Katholisch-Nationalen’, Sedlmayr was against Engelbert Dollfuss and his successor Kurt Schuschnigg,<sup>23</sup> and acknowledged later in his correspondence with Schapiro that he is a ‘fascist’.<sup>24</sup> In the end, one asks oneself if it really matters which brand of fascism he was embracing during that six-year interval in his NSDAP memberships.

Indeed, the conundrum is that while Versteegen asks us to judge Sedlmayr on the basis of the merits of his work, he also feels the need to dwell on whether or not Sedlmayr was an *actual* Nazi. It is true that there are scholars such as Evonne Levy who have argued that Sedlmayr’s work, even in those early years, essentially reflected his reactionary politics.<sup>25</sup> Yet many others who are against Sedlmayr’s *historical* analyses, myself included, are against them not because he was a member of the NSDAP, but because they are *bad* historical analyses. Whenever Sedlmayr ventured out of his ‘comfort zone’—his extraordinary phenomenological analyses—he violated the rule of self-reflexivity that he preached, and consistently failed. In the end, Versteegen is perhaps right when he notes in passing that ‘Sedlmayr is the great methodologist, maybe a better theorist than historian’ (14).

### Otto Pächt and National Constants

To find a proper *historian* to illustrate *Strukturforschung* in practice, Versteegen turns to Otto Pächt, ‘the real star of this book’ (7). The central piece under investigation is the article ‘Design Principles of Fifteenth-Century Northern Painting’, published in the second and final volume of the *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen* in 1933. Pächt investigated the Netherlandish/Flemish, Dutch, and French schools on the basis of their treatment of space, surface pattern, and figure-ground relationships, and identified a series of ‘national constants’. Versteegen provides a useful overview of each of those categories and argues that Pächt attempted to decouple ethnicity and style and that his use of the term ‘national’ had no racial connotations.

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<sup>22</sup> According to their correspondence, they were aware of each other’s political convictions by February 1934. See Evonne Levy, ‘Sedlmayr and Schapiro Correspond, 1930–1935’. *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* 59 (2010), 244.

<sup>23</sup> On 11 June 1934, about a month before the assassination of Dollfuss, Sedlmayr again wrote to Schapiro complaining that he worked ‘unter ungünstigen Resonanzverhältnissen (und auch unter dem allgemeinen Druck der auf unserem Land liegt)’, referring both to his personal relations with his colleagues and the broader political atmosphere (Sedlmayr to Schapiro, 11 June 1934. Meyer Schapiro Collection, 166/13, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University). See also Hans Aurenhammer, ‘Zäsur oder Kontinuität. Das Wiener Kunsthistorische Institut im Ständestaat und im Nationalsozialismus’. *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* 53 (2004): 20–21.

<sup>24</sup> Sedlmayr to Schapiro, 4 April 1935. Meyer Schapiro Collection, 166/13, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

<sup>25</sup> See Evonne Levy, ‘Sedlmayr and Wittkower’. 53. For a recent take on this matter, see Nuria Jetter, ‘The origins of Hans Sedlmayr’s methodology and its relation to his politics: a disregarded approach’. *Journal of Art Historiography* 29 (December 2023): 1–23.



Meyer Schapiro was an early critique of Pächt's 'national constants' and initiated a correspondence with him to clarify the main points.<sup>26</sup> Verstegen devotes a section to Schapiro's critique and asks: 'Although one can see how style and ethnicity might be confused in Pächt's account, especially with respect to France, it is more difficult to see how Schapiro read race into the theory' (157). Reading about 'national constants' in 1934, how wouldn't he? In a paper titled 'The Concept of Race in Art History', presented at the College Art Association (CAA) meeting held in New York between 28-31 March 1934, Schapiro acknowledged constants as an indispensable part of any art historical research—with one, important caveat: 'We recognize individual constants, city constants, regional constants, national, period, and finally psychophysical constants in art (we all perceive red in the same way); but no racial ones'.<sup>27</sup> Schapiro cited numerous contemporaneous scholars across disciplines who either used 'race' and 'nation' interchangeably, or derived the characteristics of the latter from supposedly fixed, essential qualities of the former.<sup>28</sup> Contrary to what is implied by Verstegen, Schapiro was well aware of the fact that Pächt's idea of constants was 'borrowed from the natural sciences, where it has a precise and controllable meaning'.<sup>29</sup> Pointing out the apparent inconsistencies and stressing the temporal and spatial boundedness of constants, Schapiro demanded scientific precision.<sup>30</sup> His affirmation of 'national' constants in the CAA talk stems from the fact that he considered a nation primarily a historically conditioned cultural and geopolitical unit, not necessarily homogeneous in its ethnic makeup or artistic production. Therefore, the later 'rapprochement' between Pächt and Schapiro was not due to the latter's 'increasing familiarity with Gestalt psychology' (156)<sup>31</sup> but rather due to the fact that Pächt *explicitly* ruled out race as a requirement for national constants for the first time in the excursus to his 1937 review essay, a passage initiated by his correspondence with

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<sup>26</sup> Meyer Schapiro Collection, 155/8, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University. See Cindy Persinger, 'Reconsidering Meyer Schapiro and the New Vienna School'. *Journal of Art Historiography* 3 (December 2010): 1–17. Cf. Tamur, 'Specters of Influence'. As Pächt was denied taking up his appointment in Heidelberg by the Nazis, Schapiro was also trying to see if it would be possible to find him employment in the United States.

<sup>27</sup> Meyer Schapiro, 'The Concept of Race in Art History'. draft, Meyer Schapiro Collection, 658/3–5, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

<sup>28</sup> In this context, I should note that Verstegen questions how totalizing Riegl's use of the concept of 'Volk' was (83). Yet, it would have been informative to take a brief look at how Riegl utilized the terms 'Indo-Germanen' and 'Orientalen' in his essay 'Zur kunsthistorischen Stellung der Becher von Vafio'. *Jahreshefte des Österreichischen Archäologischen Instituts* 9 (1906): 1–19. The same goes for Kaschnitz von Weinberg's generalizations on the 'switch from Neolithic to Bronze Age arts' which is regarded by Verstegen as 'a significant idea, and with it we feel that we have attained to some significant sense of the passage to a new sense of civilisation' (8). Elucidating the drawbacks of Kaschnitz von Weinberg's treatment would necessitate a separate study.

<sup>29</sup> Meyer Schapiro, 'The New Viennese School'. *The Art Bulletin* 18, no. 2 (June 1936): 263.

<sup>30</sup> See Tamur, 'Specters of Influence'. 217–8.

<sup>31</sup> Schapiro was following the growing literature on Gestalt theory since the beginning of his career, yet he never fully embraced its premises. See Tamur, 'Specters of Influence'. 211.

Schapiro.<sup>32</sup> As late as April 1940, Pächt was still in search of the ‘ideal proof of the disconnection of racial and cultural factors’.<sup>33</sup>

Moreover, I would recommend not being too hasty in our characterization of these scholars and their works. For example, Verstegen writes: ‘The politics do not coincide with biography because it can be argued that Schapiro was an even better *Strukturforscher*, as suggested by Otto Pächt, than Sedlmayr himself’.<sup>34</sup> The author is referring to a passage from 1939 in the Schapiro-Pächt correspondence, where Pächt referred to Schapiro’s essay on Souillac as an example of *Strukturanalyse*. Yet when one reads the entire correspondence, it becomes clear that one of the core aspects of their disagreement concerns the very definition of *Strukturanalyse*: Schapiro kept questioning Pächt’s explanations and never shared the latter’s understanding of what *Strukturanalyse* encompasses. In fact, numerous authors, including Verstegen himself (152), pointed to how Schapiro’s empiricism led him to refrain from admitting hypothetical assumptions (i.e., beyond documented, empirical facts) into his explanatory frameworks. How can Schapiro, ‘America’s greatest empiricist’,<sup>35</sup> be a *Strukturforscher* if he is rejecting *the* foundational theoretical commitment of *Strukturforschung*’s ‘second science’? Is the author expanding (or, one could also say, effectively limiting) the definition of *Strukturforschung* in a way that includes any art historian who is sensitive to formal properties of individual artworks, or figure-ground, and part-whole relationships?

This tendency to reorient the semantic range of terms is also reflected in Verstegen’s treatment of Riegl’s *Kunstwollen* (81–104). Briefly, the author redefines it as a social scientific concept: ‘it is necessary to pursue this line of enquiry because *Kunstwollen* is hopelessly vague without this materialistic and positivist background’ (91). In addition, Verstegen maintains that ‘switching to *Kunstwollen* as a social scientific idea and limiting its historical reference makes understanding it more tractable’ (97). I agree with the author that the term does become defensible after that arduous process of naturalisation, yet one has to admit that it ultimately becomes *something else*, rendering the very use of the term *Kunstwollen* rather unwarranted. Still, the author succeeds in clarifying numerous misconceptions revolving around Sedlmayr’s and Pächt’s utilization of the term, with a very important section on Alfred Vierkandt and the ‘objective spirit’ (84–90). Indeed, the greatest strength of the book is the author’s

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<sup>32</sup> Otto Pächt, review of *Romeinsche Kunstgeschichte*, by G. A. S. Snijder, *Kritische Berichte zur kunstgeschichtlichen Literatur* 6 (1937): 14–15. See Pächt’s letters to Schapiro from June 15, 1936; December 6, 1936; March 3, 1937; and an undated letter of presumably early 1937 (Meyer Schapiro Collection, 155/8, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University).

<sup>33</sup> Pächt to Schapiro, 19 April 1940. Meyer Schapiro Collection, 155/8, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

<sup>34</sup> Verstegen, ‘Obscene History’. 93.

<sup>35</sup> Ian Verstegen, ‘America’s greatest empiricist’. *Journal of Art Historiography* 26 (June 2022): 1–15.

serious engagement with the diverse web of intellectual relationships with which the members of the New Vienna School were intertwined.

### ***Strukturforschung* beyond Sedlmayr and Pächt**

Verstegen admits that ‘it is difficult to find another historical study of the Vienna group of the calibre of ‘Borromini’s architecture’ or ‘the design principles of Late Gothic painting’ (168), and eventually goes with Johannes Wilde and Otto Demus. In ‘The Decoration of the Sistine Chapel’, Wilde focused on questions of function and carried out a phenomenological reading, reaching the conclusion that ‘the physicality or embodiment of the work dictates certain possibilities for its own execution and meaning’ (182). Without thorough attention to the works in their environment as well as to the conditions of lighting and points of view, any iconographical analysis is destined to be doomed. Verstegen highlights Wilde’s attention to the interrelationship between various parts (though, as far as I can see, Wilde does not explicitly cite Gestalt theory), and stresses the feasibility of imaginative reconstruction through phenomenological analysis. Although the author points out potential parallels between Wilde and Sedlmayr, the reader expects an acknowledgment on how Wilde’s sensible and restrained historical conclusions differ from Sedlmayr’s.

With the observation ‘if Wilde explained the image *in* space, Demus showed how the image could function as space itself’ (190), Verstegen turns to Demus’s *Byzantine Mosaic Decoration*. Demus’s treatment of ‘negative perspective’, the use of optical corrections, and conventions of viewing challenges traditional (western) assumptions on structure and function of Byzantine mural decoration. Not dissimilar to Wilde’s account, the lesson Verstegen asks the reader to draw from Demus is again the drawbacks of iconographic interpretation that neglects particular modes of visibility. Following an overview of the more recent reception of Demus’s account, as well as the ways in which an analysis of parts and wholes features in this work (though Demus does not cite Gestalt theory either), Verstegen closes by arguing for the benefits of utilizing basic Gestalt ideas to explain figure and ground shifts—e.g., since the figure occupies *real* space, the ground shifts from an individual wall to the whole church. While Verstegen asserts that ‘such extreme [Gestalt] restructurings are ideal for considering art beyond the west’ (190), it is unfortunate that he does not refer to the substantial body of work in the field of non-western ancient art on image-making processes, phenomenology-oriented explorations of cult and votive images, and on the ontology of images.

Before ending this review, I would like to note that the book could use more editorial attention. As mentioned earlier, a large part of the text consists of already published articles, and the transitions between them and individual sections are not always sufficiently articulated. In several cases, typos, and grammatical or syntactical mistakes made in the original article are repeated in the book.<sup>36</sup> For example, a very

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<sup>36</sup> Conversely, some other mistakes seem to stem from the very process of revising published articles for this publication (e.g., the endnotes of Chapter 1 do not align with in-text citations).

important statement from Pächt on free will (101) had been misquoted in the original article,<sup>37</sup> and the same error is repeated in the book—which significantly changes the intended meaning for a reader who is just getting acquainted with Pächt’s ideas. Similarly, in another critical section featuring Sedlmayr’s famous list of those theoretical premises which were *dispensed with* thanks to Riegl’s work (77), the double negative of the original sentence disappears, conveying exactly the opposite meaning. The author, of course, is aware of the correct meaning but if this book is intended to serve as an introduction to the New Vienna School, such editorial mistakes must be corrected in the second edition.

Indeed, an undergraduate or a graduate student reading Verstegen’s book would have a significantly different understanding of the New Vienna School than one who reads Dittmann, Wood, Schwartz, Binstock, Levy, Bohde, Männig, and others. I find this a very welcome development as the point should be to read all of these accounts together—and to read them critically. Moreover, this book is highly beneficial not only for bringing together Verstegen’s fresh insights that have remained dispersed in many articles, but also for its ambition to engage with theory out in the open, rather than relegating it to a series of tacit assumptions buried deep within a historical study. That transparency is key to any meaningful progress in art history.

**Erhan Tamur** is an art historian and curator specializing in the arts of ancient West Asia. He received his Ph.D. from Columbia University and is currently the Andrew W. Mellon Postdoctoral Curatorial Fellow at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. In January 2024, he will move to the UK to take up a teaching position in the Department of History of Art at the University of York.

erhan.tamur@metmuseum.org



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<sup>37</sup> Verstegen, ‘The ‘Second’ Vienna School as Social Science’, 14. Pächt writes: ‘It is not the freedom to do as you please but the freedom to do the right thing, the one and only thing that makes sense in the context of a specific task. In other words, it is a tied freedom’. See Pächt, *The Practice of Art History*, 132.