

The subject of scientific art history according to Riegl ... and his followers

Rebeka Vidrih

Alois Riegl's self-imposed task of founding the truly modern, properly scientific art history is positioned within Wilhelm von Humboldt's concept of university with its postulate of *Bildung durch Wissenschaft* and Wilhelm Dilthey's discussion and definition of *Geisteswissenschaften*. All the human sciences, according to Dilthey, have a common subject, the socio-historical reality of humanity in its entirety, that is, everything in which human spirit has objectified itself.¹ However, each particular human science studies only a part of that reality. In its formation, it isolates a particular content of that socio-historical reality, and it studies it only relatively, only from a limited perspective.² Each particular human science should therefore be aware of its connection to other human sciences, of its participation in the great project of *Geisteswissenschaften*, whose final aim is education and cultivation of human beings.³ The meaning of the human sciences and their theory is 'to assist us with what we have to do in the world, with what we are able to make of ourselves, and with what we can do with the world and it with us'.⁴

Faced with these requirements, constructing his 'historical grammar of the visual arts' as the foundation of 'art history as a scientific discipline', Riegl announced that 'we will be dealing with (1) elements; (2) the developmental history thereof; (3) the factors that determined that development'.⁵ First he had to establish the proper object for art history as a specific, autonomous scientific discipline. After indicating the five elements – the purpose, the materials, the technique, the motif and the relation between form and surface – that need to be considered when evaluating a work of art, he concluded that the way a work of art is fashioned, the 'how', the relation between form and surface, is the most artistic of the elements and therefore the most specific to the art historical discipline.⁶ Since all works of art of a

¹ Wilhelm Dilthey, *Selected Works, vol. I: Introduction to Human Sciences*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1989, 56; Wilhelm Dilthey, *Selected Works, vol. III: The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002, 103, 170.

² Dilthey, *Introduction*, 79–80.

³ Wilhelm von Humboldt, 'Antrag auf Errichtung der Universität Berlin' in Ernst Müller, *Gelegentliche Gedanken über Universitäten*, Leipzig: Reclam Verlag, 1990, 267–273; Wilhelm von Humboldt, 'Über die innere und äußere Organisation der höheren wissenschaftlichen Anstalten in Berlin' in Ernst Müller, *Gelegentliche Gedanken über Universitäten*, Leipzig: Reclam Verlag, 1990, 273–283.

⁴ Dilthey, *Formation*, 296.

⁵ Alois Riegl, *Historical Grammar of the Visual Arts*, New York: Zone Books, 2004, 292–293.

⁶ Riegl, *Historical Grammar*, 302.

certain period are constituted and binded by certain common elements,⁷ it is the style of a particular period that art history should really concentrate on.

The subject matter of a work of art, the 'what', he argued, is something that art gets from poetry or religion; it is something that art history shares with studies of literature and theology. He admitted that art history and iconography are connected, but he stressed that it is first necessary to differentiate between them, since this differentiation is a precondition of any proper progress in art historical research.⁸

Riegl was obviously fully aware that art is only one of many parts of human socio-historical reality and that art history is only a part of a greater scientific project. The proper scholarly, scientific art historical research – in contrast to mere empirical gathering of data –, he continued, begins only after the question of 'how' we also pose the question of 'why': why were particular works of art fashioned in this way and no other, what are the causes of a given style.⁹ Only by answering the question of the principle that guides the development of all visual art, which is the same as the factor that drives the entire progress of human culture, we can comprehend the true essence of the visual arts.¹⁰

Threatened by the chaotic nature, Riegl explained, man yearns incessantly for harmony.¹¹ In his worldview, man imagines nature to be better than it looks, he seeks to bring order to the apparent chaos; in his art, man re-creates nature as he would like it to be and as it indeed exists in his mind.¹² The worldview, then, the man's relation to matter, to nature in the most general sense, to every object in the world without exception, is the true root of all artistic creativity.¹³ Visual art and all cultural phenomena derive their development from the worldview as expressions of man's need for comfort and contentment.¹⁴ Worldviews differ for different time periods and peoples, every worldview produces its own stylistic law, and in every period there is only one governing orientation of the *Kunstwollen*.¹⁵ For Riegl, there are three fundamental worldviews for the three great periods of human history, all defined in religious terms (fig. 1): anthropomorphic polytheism with its right of the stronger and physical perfecting of nature in art in Antiquity; then Christian monotheism with the emancipation of the weak and oppressed and spiritually perfected nature in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance; and finally, natural-scientific worldview from 1520 on, divorced from religion, merely reproducing the material world in all its unabashed transience and imperfection, portraying the

⁷ Riegl, *Historical Grammar*, 291.

⁸ Alois Riegl, 'The Main Characteristics of the Late Roman *Kunstwollen*' in Christopher S. Wood, *The Vienna School Reader. Politics and Art Historical Method in the 1930s*, New York: Zone Books, 2000, 100.

⁹ Riegl, *Historical Grammar*, 290.

¹⁰ Riegl, *Historical Grammar*, 296, 292.

¹¹ Riegl, *Historical Grammar*, 299.

¹² Riegl, *Historical Grammar*, 299–300.

¹³ Riegl, *Historical Grammar*, 55, 300.

¹⁴ Riegl, *Historical Grammar*, 301.

¹⁵ Riegl, *Historical Grammar*, 301, 400; Riegl, 'The Main Characteristics', 94–95.

causal relationships in nature.¹⁶ National differences are mentioned but not emphasised, at least not until the last, the modern period when a spiritual gap between the North and the South erupted, a wider cultural opposition between Italians and Germanic peoples emerged.¹⁷ The Italians with their individualism and atheism returned to the right of the stronger, but Luther argued against individual volition and for the law of God, consequently protestant German peoples became the sole bearers of further progress as the representation of the correlation and interdependence of all things became the new task for art.¹⁸

Antiquity	anthropomorphic polytheism	the right of the stronger	art as improvement of nature through physical beauty isolation of the motif from the ground
the Middle Ages	Christian monotheism	the emancipation of the weak and oppressed	art as improvement of nature through spiritual beauty naturalistic accuracy and spiritual animation
the modern era	natural-scientific worldview (split between religion and natural science, split within Christian monotheism)	Italian atheism	art as reproduction of transitory nature naturalistic accuracy
		the right of the stronger German protestantism interconnectedness of everything	

Fig. 1: Alois Riegl

¹⁶ Riegl, *Historical Grammar*, 323, 96–98, 362. ‘Art and philosophy do not coincide the way art and religion do, which both create harmony for mankind. Philosophy always runs slightly ahead; being critical, it does not create harmony, but rather destroys it. It is certainly capable of creating harmony – but only at a later point, after its lessons have become common property. It is useful for our understanding of art-historical progress to keep an eye on the twists and turns of philosophy, for philosophical systems likewise grew out of the attitudes of their time and their people and therefore *must* display a close relation to the prevailing worldview. However, this parallel is not so immediately given and is therefore not so illuminating.’ Riegl, *Historical Grammar*, 442.

¹⁷ Riegl, *Historical Grammar*, 172, 259.

¹⁸ Riegl, *Historical Grammar*, 259, 338–339.

According to Riegl, the subject of art history proper, then, is comprised of two interconnected and even conjoined parts: both the style and the worldview. The subject of art history is the general *weltanschauliche* content as is manifested in the specific form.

Heinrich Wölfflin conflated the style and the worldview even more thoroughly. His two fundamental art-historical categories, the linear and the painterly, subsequently analysed in five pairs of concepts, are, for Wölfflin, two different stylistic entities, two the most general forms of representation, but at the same time also already two forms of perception, two fundamentally different forms of seeing or orientations to the world, two worldviews.¹⁹ Different times produce different art, but, according to Wölfflin, temporal character intersects with national character, for there exist constant national modes of visualisation that remain unchanged throughout the centuries.²⁰ Therefore, every people will have art-historical epochs that appear as the more characteristic revelation of their national virtues than others.²¹ For anthropocentric Italy it was the linear Renaissance, for the spiritually inclined, pious and devout Germanic north it was the painterly Baroque (fig. 2).²² Like Riegl, Wölfflin too defined the worldviews in religious terms, even though he did not endeavour to articulate them as precisely as Riegl, focusing more on explication of the linear and the painterly styles. For Wölfflin, the differences in the national or rather racial character were as important and finally even more important than the temporal differences. And the first task of Wölfflin's art history would be 'to give systematic treatment to this question concerning the psychology of national forms'.²³

the Italian linear Renaissance	self-contained and bounded image simplicity of forms calmness and completeness anthropocentrism
the German painterly Baroque	unbounded and infinite image variety and interconnectedness of forms movement and transition piousness
Fig. 2: Heinrich Wölfflin	

¹⁹ Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History. The Problem of the Development of Style in Early Modern Art*, Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2015, 95, 97, 98, 100.

²⁰ Wölfflin, *Principles*, 89; Heinrich Wölfflin, *Gedanken zur Kunstgeschichte. Gedrucktes und Ungedrucktes*, Basel: Benno Schwabe & Co., 1941, 109.

²¹ Wölfflin, *Principles*, 316.

²² Wölfflin, *Principles*, 113, 149, 187, 261, 315–317; Wölfflin, *Gedanken*, 119–126.

²³ Wölfflin, *Principles*, 89.

Focused, at least initially, on Florentine Early Renaissance painting, **Aby Warburg**, too, defined his own work as an 'attempt to grasp the spirit of the age in its impact on style'.²⁴ His starting point was the formal motif of the 'nymph', as he called it, an image of a female figure in striding motion, in a clinging and rippling garment, with flowing hair,²⁵ with the concomitant question of why was this female figure represented in this particular way and not differently. This stylistic question led him to a question of the attitude that the citizen of Medicean Florence had towards the Antiquity.²⁶ Warburg thus concluded that as patrons of painters those citizens succeeded to emancipate the ancient goddess from the medieval bondages, to restore a more classical form to the subject matter of antiquity,²⁷ due to the mental distance they were able to fashion between the self and the external world. The creation of this distance, which Warburg named the fundamental act of human civilization,²⁸ was facilitated by the clash of two dissimilar worldviews which met and competed within patrons and their artists (fig. 3). The resulting levelling or adjustment of the mediaeval Christian outlook on the one hand and the renewed pagan and secular view of life on the other, made Florence the birthplace of modern, confident, urban, mercantile civilization, and ultimately enabled the noblest efflorescence of culture.²⁹ With a new, modern, aesthetic attitude to antiquity, with this will to restore the ancient world, "the good European" began his battle for enlightenment, a battle that in the North commenced only later, with Luther and Dürer.³⁰

Warburg, too, attempted to explain the stylistic form with the worldview. For him, too, the content of the worldview was primarily religious, but in contrast to Riegl and Wölfflin he allowed for a simultaneous coexistence of two different worldviews in the same period, more: this coexistence was located more exactly, in the patron's soul. Furthermore, Warburg was not interested in national differences anymore, but rather in the general 'struggle for the inner intellectual and religious liberation of modern humanity'.³¹

²⁴ Ernst H. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg. An Intellectual Biography*, Oxford: Phaidon, 1986, 268–269.

²⁵ Aby Warburg, 'The Art of Portraiture and the Florentine Bourgeoisie. Domenico Ghirlandaio in Santa Trinita: The Portraits of Lorenzo de' Medici and His Household (1902)' in *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 1999, 201; Aby Warburg, 'Sandro Botticelli (1898)' in *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 1999, 159.

²⁶ Warburg, 'Art of Portraiture', 190.

²⁷ Aby Warburg, 'Italian Art and International Astrology in the Palazzo Schifanoia, Ferrara (1912)' in *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 1999, 584–585; Aby Warburg, 'Airship and Submarine in Medieval Imagination (1913)' in *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 1999, 337.

²⁸ Aby Warburg, 'Mnemosyne Einleitung (1929)' in *Werke in einem Band*, Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2010, 629.

²⁹ Warburg, 'Art of Portraiture', 187, 190–191.

³⁰ Warburg, 'Italian Art', 586; Aby Warburg, 'Pagan-Antique Prophecy in Words and Images in the Age of Luther (1920)' in *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 1999, 647.

³¹ Warburg, 'Pagan-Antique Prophecy', 647.

the citizen of Medicean Florence	
old, mediaeval Christian outlook	renewed pagan view of life
the Church	the World
naive realism <i>alla franzese</i>	antiquarian idealism <i>all'antica</i>
Fig. 3: Aby Warburg	

In his early theoretical papers, **Erwin Panofsky** confirmed that the ultimate task of a science of art is the determination of *Kunstwollen*.³² That is, the task to move from an understanding of stylistic symptoms to an understanding of style in the internal sense, an understanding of the intrinsic meaning or content, defined as the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion; that is, the worldview.³³ In his subsequent tripartite outline of the iconological method, this basic structure was preserved (fig. 4). To it, the iconographical consideration of subject matter was added as an intermediate step, which can be explained by the fact that by now the discipline of art history had already been well established so foregrounding of form as its specific object of study was not such an urgent matter anymore.

Panofsky's studies, like Warburg's, were mostly focused on the Renaissance movement, based on – according to Panofsky following Warburg – a classical revival on the one hand and a nonclassical naturalism on the other, well within the limits of an essentially Christian civilization (fig. 5).³⁴ Both the reintegration of classical motifs and classical themes and the invention of linear perspective were made possible by the establishment of a historical distance towards the Antiquity and a spatial distance between the human eye and the object in the world respectively.³⁵ For Panofsky, too, the *Volkgeist* was less important than the *Zeitgeist*. However, in contrast to Riegl, Wölfflin and Warburg, he now defined the worldview primarily in philosophical terms. He considered the new conceptions of time and of space as an expression of contemporary progress in philosophy, later rationalised in Descartes and formalised in Kant.³⁶ Instead of making out national

³² Erwin Panofsky, 'On the Relationship of Art History and Art Theory: Towards the Possibility of a Fundamental System of Concepts for a Science of Art', *Critical Inquiry*, 35: 1, Autumn 2008, 56.

³³ Panofsky, 'On the Relationship', 63; Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, Garden City: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1955, 14, 30; Erwin Panofsky, 'Das Problem des Stils in der bildenden Kunst' in *Deutschsprachige Aufsätze*, II, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1998, 1016.

³⁴ Erwin Panofsky, 'What Is Baroque?' in *Three Essays on Style*, Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1995, 25.

³⁵ Erwin Panofsky, *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1955, 261.

³⁶ Erwin Panofsky, 'Die Perspektive als "symbolische Form"' in *Deutschsprachige Aufsätze*, II, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1998, 739–741.

characteristics, Panofsky, just like Warburg, focused on the Renaissance movement as the mark of the birth of the modern man as an autonomous subject.³⁷

40 Iconography and Iconology:		An Introduction to the Study of Renaissance Art 41	
OBJECT OF INTERPRETATION	ACT OF INTERPRETATION	EQUIPMENT FOR INTERPRETATION	CORRECTIVE PRINCIPLE OF INTERPRETATION (History of Tradition)
I Primary or natural subject matter—(A) factual, (B) expressional—constituting the world of artistic motifs.	Pre-iconographical description (and pseudo-formal analysis).	Practical experience (familiarity with objects and events).	History of style (insight into the manner in which, under varying historical conditions, objects and events were expressed by forms).
II Secondary or conventional subject matter, constituting the world of images, stories and allegories.	Iconographical analysis.	Knowledge of literary sources (familiarity with specific themes and concepts).	History of types (insight into the manner in which, under varying historical conditions, specific themes or concepts were expressed by objects and events).
III Intrinsic meaning or content, constituting the world of "symbolical" values.	Iconological interpretation.	Synthetic intuition (familiarity with the essential tendencies of the human mind), conditioned by personal psychology and "Weltanschauung."	History of cultural symptoms or "symbols" in general (insight into the manner in which, under varying historical conditions, essential tendencies of the human mind were expressed by specific themes and concepts).

Fig. 4: Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, Garden City: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1955, 40–41.

(Italian) Renaissance	
classical revival	nonclassical naturalism
reintegration of classical motifs and classical themes	linear perspective
historical distance (new conception of time)	spatial distance (new conception of space) (Italian South) philosophy rationalised in Descartes and formalised in Kant (German North)
Fig. 5: Erwin Panofsky	

Even though Ernst H. Gombrich vocally objected to the *Geistesgeschichte* and the concept of worldview,³⁸ his idea of the extensive development of representation from the conceptual methods of 'the primitives' and the Egyptians, who relied on 'what they knew', to the achievements of the impressionists, who succeeded in

³⁷ Panofsky, *Meaning*, 54.

³⁸ Ernst H. Gombrich, *Art & Illusion. A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, London: Phaidon, 1977⁵, 12–18; Ernst H. Gombrich, "'The Father of Art History". A Reading of the *Lectures on Aesthetics* of G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831)' in *Tributes: Interpreters of Our Cultural Tradition*, Oxford: Phaidon, 1984, 51–69; Ernst H. Gombrich, 'In Search of Cultural History' in *Ideals and Idols: Essays on Values in History and in Art*, Oxford: Phaidon, 1979, 24–59.

recording 'what they saw',³⁹ is clearly related to Riegl. Gombrich stressed the rarity of the naturalistic, illusionistic awakenings from primitive modes of art and explained it with a specific political outlook.⁴⁰ The brave overcoming of an overwhelming, natural gravitation toward the schematic, which succeeded in classical Greece and post-Renaissance Europe, propelled by 'this constant search, this sacred discontent, which constitutes the leaven of the Western mind', was explained, following Karl Popper, with a political conception and establishment of our so-called open society, a democratic society of free individuals, overcoming its enemy, the totalitarian tribalism of other societies (fig. 6).⁴¹ Gombrich was thus actually interested in one stylistic shift only: the turn from schematic mode of representation to the naturalistic one, the shift understood as a mark of a civilisational difference.

the primitives, the Egyptians	conceptual schematic presenting 'what they knew'	the closed (totalitarian) society
Classical Greece, Europe from the Renaissance to Impressionism	naturalistic illusionist representing 'what they saw'	the open (democratic) society
Fig. 6: Ernst H. Gombrich		

From another side, a declared heir of Vienna school of art history and Warburg,⁴² **Frederick Antal**, too, offered a sociological explanation for artistic styles. First he emphasised that the notion of style cannot be restricted to formal features alone, but has to include subject matter as well, since it is the subject matter precisely that offers an immediate transition from a style to the general outlook on life.⁴³ Spurred by the coexistence of different styles of painting in the same period, in Florentine Early Renaissance, Antal like Warburg allowed for a coexistence of diverse worldviews. Antal, however, explained this difference of styles with the fact that a society is not a homogeneous body, but is split up into various, often antagonistic groupings.⁴⁴ In a class society, each of the social classes develops its own worldview, whose content is determined by the socio-political position of that

³⁹ Gombrich, *Art & Illusion*, vii.

⁴⁰ Ernst H. Gombrich, *Meditations on a Hobby Horse: and Other Essays on the Theory of Art*, London and New York, 1963, 9; Gombrich, *Art & Illusion*, 108, 101.

⁴¹ Gombrich, *Art & Illusion*, 148, 247.

⁴² Frederick Antal, 'Remarks on the method of art-history' in *Classicism and Romanticism: with Other Studies in Art History*, London: Harper & Row, 1966, 179.

⁴³ Antal, 'Remarks', 179; Frederick Antal, *Florentine Painting and Its Social Background. The Bourgeois Republic before Cosimo de' Medici's Advent to Power: XIV and Early XV Centuries*, London: Kegan Paul, 1947, 4.

⁴⁴ Antal, *Florentine Painting*, 4, 7.

class, which is then manifested in different styles of art (fig. 7). If, for Riegl, the fundamentally religious worldview was the over-determining factor, determining not only styles of art but also political relations of a society, now for Antal, the worldview itself is already over-determined by the social reality.

Art-historical scholarship so far was an invitation to identify with the German spirit, as in case of Riegl and Wölfflin, or with the Renaissance spirit as the sign of the birth of our enlightened modernity, as in case of Warburg, Panofsky and Gombrich. For them, the scientifically established worldview, as the true essence of the visual arts, served the affirmation of one's own socio-political identity. For Antal and other social historians of art, on the contrary, the interpretation of art and explanation of worldviews partook in the critical investigation and comprehension of our socio-political reality.

Florentine Early Renaissance	
upper bourgeoisie	rationalism sober, concentrated naturalism intense interest in antiquity
petty bourgeoisie and the workers	emotionalism (mere) realism of detail the Gothic manner
Fig. 7: Frederick Antal	

Critical of such quite intuitive analogies between form and content, but continuing the project of social history of art, **T. J. Clark** attempted to investigate the relation between the work of art and its ideology more thoroughly and to discover the network of real, complex relations between the two.⁴⁵ Focused on French painting in the second half of the nineteenth century, he let go of the notion of style. Interested in a specific encounter of a specific artist with specific social circumstances within a specific historical moment, he attempted to explain how, in each particular case – for example, Gustave Courbet painting his *Burial at Ornans* –, a content of experience becomes a form.⁴⁶ In other words, how a particular artist uses given ideology as his material, how he works that material and gives it a new form.⁴⁷ Clark thus also let go of the notion of worldview, replacing it with the notion of ideology, defined as 'those bodies of beliefs, images, values and techniques of representation by which social classes, in conflict with each other, attempt to "naturalize" their particular histories'.⁴⁸ For Riegl, the essence of the visual arts was

⁴⁵ T. J. Clark, *Image of the People. Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1973, 10, 12.

⁴⁶ Clark, *Image*, 13.

⁴⁷ Clark, *Image*, 13.

⁴⁸ T. J. Clark, 'The Conditions of Artistic Creation (1974)' in Eric Fernie, *Art History and its Methods. A Critical Anthology*, London: Phaidon, 1995, 251.

to be discovered in the worldview. Similarly, for Clark the scope of art history's ambitions is to investigate 'how ideologies work'.⁴⁹ Both attempted to understand a work of art as only one small part of the great socio-historical reality of humanity, both envisioned art history as (only) an integral part of human sciences, all working together, whether affirmative or critical in aspiration, towards a common goal, 'to assist us with what we have to do in the world, with what we are able to make of ourselves, and with what we can do with the world and it with us'.⁵⁰

The subject of art history has always been more than a work of art and its form alone. The art historical ambition has always been to understand art in a context, this context being precisely the factor that art and the discipline of art history derive their reason from. The subject of the scientific art history as established and argued by Riegl, therefore still remains our firm foundation.

Rebeka Vidrih is assistant professor at the Department of Art History at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana. She lectures on art and architecture from Renaissance onwards, on photography and contemporary art, and on the history of art history. Her foremost research fields are theories of visual arts and of art historiography. Recently she published articles on Leon Battista Alberti in *Ikon* and on Izidor Cankar in *Journal of Art Historiography* and *Acta historiae artis Slovenica*.

rebeka.vidrih@ff.uni-lj.si



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

⁴⁹ Clark, 'Conditions', 253.

⁵⁰ Dilthey, *Formation*, 296.