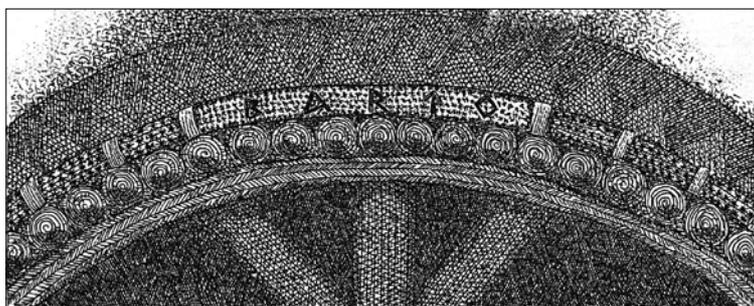


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The Methodological Approaches of Formalist Theory in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art

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The paper focuses on Fiedler, Riegl and Wölfflin's formalistic theories. After divorcing art from its representational functions, its historical environment, aesthetic pleasure, and the reflection of beauty, Fiedler connects it with a special form of "artistic vision" that is characteristic only of the artist. The most important goal of the artist is the creation of pure artistic forms cleansed of inartistic factors. In perfect art, according to Fiedler, form must itself actively operate on the purely artistic, i.e. formal, material from which the work of art is being created. *The will to art* becomes the central idea of Riegl's conception. On this basis, he grounds the specific nature and autonomy of artistic activity, and he explains the historical patterns and driving forces involved in the development of art. When discussing the plastic expression of the will to art, Riegl observes that it primarily reveals itself as a specific "artistic vision" that helps us understand the world. These forms of vision are revealed in specific linear, chromatic, spatial, and compositional structures that have been dominant during different periods in the development of art and that are considered the formal principle. The goal of a student of art is to analyze the immanent changes in these forms – in their formal compositional structures, in their means of artistic expression, and in their styles. Wölfflin's concept of art history without names developed as a reaction against the eclecticism and methodological impotence of descriptive and academic art history. In his thinking, a radical shift emerged from the old concept of the history of great artists to an impersonal history of artistic styles based on the solid principles of the philosophy of art. It is obvious that Wölfflin's formalism is not consistent, that it is often qualified, corrected, and supplemented with theories that create an impression of artificiality. Here, we can see gaps between apt observations and *a priori* schemata adopted from aesthetics, the philosophy of art, and cognitive psychology.

Key words: aesthetics, philosophy of art, study of art history, formalist theory, Conrad Fiedler, Alois Riegl, Heinrich Wölfflin, Adolf von Hildebrand, Hans von Marées, methodological approaches, form, style.

Formalism – in Western aesthetics, in the philosophy of art, and in the study of art history – is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that we have long oversimplified. This influential movement was formed as a reaction against the abstractness of the

classical, speculative German philosophy of art and against the eclecticism and methodological impotence of the descriptive art history practiced in universities. Speaking out against the fetishization of artistic secrets, the destruction of the distinctive role of art in social, ethical, and other contexts, and the one-sided overvaluation of plot, theme, and idea, the proponents of formalist methodology drew attention to the immanent (inner) patterns in art – patterns that were usually interpreted as purely formal and structural. In the fine arts, the focus of scholarly interest shifted from the question of *what* is depicted in a picture to the question of *how*. Thus, the formal, plastic, compositional structures and forces of a picture became the center of attention.

In the West, during the late 19th and early 20th century, three basic formalist movements crystallized: 1) a German one (including Austrian and Swiss), whose leading representatives were Conrad Fiedler, Alois Riegl, and Heinrich Wölfflin, 2) a French one represented by Henri Focillon along with Jurgis Baltrušaitis and André Malraux, who were closely allied to him, and finally, 3) an English one with Clive Bell and Roger Fry.

In this chapter, we will limit ourselves to the main formalist concepts that German-speaking theoreticians developed about the immanence of art because these ideas had the greatest influence on later aesthetic thought. Fiedler and Riegl are often regarded as the true prophets of a qualitatively new science of art and as the most significant art historians of the 20th century. Moreover, the growing interest of recent decades in Fiedler and Riegl's

theoretical legacy is related to the polemics that has arisen about the ultimate distinction between the spheres of competence of aesthetics and the philosophy of art.

The formalist philosophy of art was originated by Johann Friedrich Herbart, who had embraced Kant's ideas. Understanding the limitations of the purely empirical study of art, he criticized the metaphysical nature of Hegel's philosophy of art and hoped to find a third way. He wanted to liberate the science of art from the oppression of philosophical metaphysics and make it autonomous. On the basis of Kant's theory of aesthetic disinterestedness and the principles of associative psychology, the most important criterion for evaluating art was, for Herbart, *spontaneous pleasure for its own sake, which is evoked by the form of a work of art and by the relationship between its component formal elements*. As Vosylius Sezemanas noted, "the Kantian theory of beauty already contains a certain duality that splits it into two independent parts based on completely different principles and criteria: a theory of pure form and a theory of objective content. Schelling, the Romantics, and Hegel ascribed a decisive role to objective meaning and considered sensory form only the means of external realization. Herbart and his followers, on the other hand, were convinced that beauty is determined only by the relationship between the parts or elements of an object"¹. The formalist movement was developed by Robert Zimmermann, who analyzed the forms, structures, rhythms, and proportions of works of art and their interrela-

1 Sezemanas, V. *Estetika*. Vilnius: Mintis, 1970, p. 273.

tionship. From the formalist viewpoint, an analysis of the formal structural principles of art, one that is not weighed down with metaphysical speculations, should make the study of art effective and scientific.

Conrad Fiedler's Theory of the Immanence of Art

In the late 19th century, these ideas of the forerunners of the formalist philosophy of art were developed by three close friends and members of the so-called Roman circle – Conrad Fiedler, Adolf von Hildebrand, and Hans von Marées. They called upon scholars to return to art as an object of learned study and to recognize its inner, formal, structural laws. The proponents of this theory of pure visibility (*pure visibilité*) maintained that art is autonomous, has its own formal laws of development, and can be known only in this way.

The ideological leader of this group, Conrad Fiedler (1841–1895), was the most consistent in laying out the methodological principles of the formalist philosophy of art. As Philippe Junod aptly observed, fortune did not smile on Fiedler, for his expressive, concisely formulated ideas were usually attributed to his closest friends, pupils, and followers, who included such leading figures as Alois Riegl, Heinrich Wölfflin, and Erwin Panofsky².

After acquiring a multifaceted education in the humanities at the universities of Heidelberg, Berlin, and Leipzig, Fiedler

began to live independently by working as a jurist. Only after his father's death, when he received a large inheritance, did he finally devote himself to the study of art. Highly significant for Fiedler's intellectual evolution was his marriage in 1876 to the daughter of Julius Meyer, the director of the *Gemäldegalerie* in Berlin. His father-in-law introduced this future art theoretician to the elite of German museum workers and art historians and at the same time impelled him to take a professional interest in the theoretical and methodological problems of art.

After many long tours of France, Italy, Spain, Greece, Palestine, Syria, and Egypt, Fiedler stayed for a long time in Rome, where he became a generous patron of the local German artistic community, which included Anselm Feuerbach, Hans von Marées, Adolf von Hildebrand, Franz von Lenbach, and the Swiss Arnold Böcklin. Eventually, Marées and Hildebrand became his closest friends and comrades-in-arms. Close association with them led to the crystallization of Fiedler's formalist views.

Despite the outwardly fragmentary character of Fiedler's thinking, he sought, like Nietzsche, to systematically reflect on the fundamental problems of the existence, function, and inner structure of art. His graceful, perfectly chiseled aphorisms distinctively express long-nurtured thoughts. Unlike Marées and Hildebrand, whose views grew naturally out of their artistic experience, Fiedler constructed his conception from above, by relying on philosophical ideas and *a priori* theoretical attitudes. The most important of these attitudes were the aspiration 1) to rigorously delimit the

2 Junod, Ph. *Transparence et opacité: Essai sur les fondements théoriques de l'art moderne: Pour une nouvelle lecture de Konrad Fiedler*. Paris: Éditions l'Age d'Homme, 1976, pp. 16–17

spheres of competence of aesthetics and a universal theory of art, or the philosophy of art, 2) to treat art as an immanent phenomenon, and 3) to relate the value of artistic phenomena to formal structures.

In order to shed light on the theoretical sources of Fiedler's philosophy of art, we must first recall Kant's theory of knowledge, the principles of which Fiedler constantly invoked. His views were influenced by Herbart's formalist ideas, which he supplemented with individual principles taken from Wilhelm Schuppe's immanence philosophy and from the philosophy of art espoused by Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Burckhardt. From Schopenhauer, he adopted the thesis that "the world is idea" (*die Welt ist Vorstellung*), i.e. that all the diversity of the world converges into ideas. He combined this idea of Schopenhauer's with Schuppe's similar thought about, asserting also the of reality on human consciousness.

Fiedler's connection with Burckhardt is not always obvious (partly because of the new cultural and philosophical situation, which presented scholars with different goals), but precisely this connection mainly determines the place of the Fiedlerian philosophy of art in the development of formalism. Fiedler connected Burckhardt's theory of artistic vision with the thought of Riegl, Wölfflin, and Panofsky, whose analogous concepts marked a return to the historical problems of the development of art.

Valuing art as an independent and highly important aspect of spiritual culture, Burckhardt strove, before Fiedler, to theoretically ground the autonomy of art in regard to economic, social, and political

phenomena and to study a work of art for its own sake alone. This restriction of the field of study to immanent problematics determined Burckhardt's place in the history of the philosophy of art. He rejected the traditional study of art with its focus on the achievements of individual artists, schools, and movements *and concentrated his attention on specific problems in the development of art, on the differences between individual art forms and styles, and on the inner structural, formal aspects of a work of art*. In the course of his analysis he used many abstractions that he did not define. One of his most influential concepts was that of the spatial style (*Raumstil*), which he contrasted to the organic style (*organischer Stil*), a category that became extremely popular among proponents of the formalist theory of the immanence of art. Burckhardt's tendency to deal with the philosophical problems of art history as well as his abstract formalism, his theory of the immanence of art, and his desire to regard artistic activity as an abstract artistic-aesthetic construction based on its own principles of "artistic vision" exerted a great influence on Fiedler and other researchers who were already devoting less attention to the historical problems of the development of art. For this reason, the traditional connection between the philosophy and history of art grew weaker in later formalist theory.

In dealing with the problems of art, Fiedler devoted most of his attention to a theory of knowledge. Taking little interest in important aspects of the creative process, he concentrated on the methodological and theoretical problems of the philosophy of

art and mainly concerned himself with the specifics of art, the creative activity of the artist, his relationship to reality, the formal structural patterns in art, and the inner architectonics of a work of art. Fiedler used Schopenhauer's teaching about intuitive and discursive knowledge in order to define the specific nature of artistic activity, which he contrasted to science. Both of these forms of social consciousness *rely on the same sensory material, but science works through abstractions, while art speaks forth through the intuitive language of artistic images*. "The essence of art," according to Fiedler, "lies in the possibilities of intuitive consciousness"³. *Affirming the limitations of logical thinking, he simultaneously exalts the significance of poetic, or artistic-intuitive, knowledge and declares it to be a language that reveals the true nature of the human condition*.

An important achievement of Fiedler's theory of art is related to the concept he developed to distinguish between the object of study of the philosophy of art and that of aesthetics. In a critical assessment of earlier developments in the science of art, he wrote that until today the greatest error in the earlier philosophy of art has been that it has studied art under the aspect of its effect. For this reason, the philosophy of art has gradually been transformed into aesthetics. Indeed, in the late 19th century, under the growing influence of psychology, the problems of the philosophy of art and those of aesthetics became more similar. At that time, aestheticians not only sought to grasp the specific nature of beauty but were

3 Fiedler, K. *Schriften über Kunst*. 2 Bde. München : R. Piper & Co, 1913–1914, Bd. 2, S. 43.

also constantly drawn to theoretical reflection on the nature of art. For this reason, artistic structures were, in contrast to artistic experience, more and more often regarded as aesthetic structures, and the nature of art was in turn connected with questions of aesthetic value. Moreover, the scholars who dealt with narrow themes of the apprehension of art often neglected the most important theoretical and methodological problems of the philosophy of art. In an attempt to separate the specific conceptual problems of philosophy from the sensory ones of art—historical aesthetics, Fiedler resolved to "cleanse" the philosophy of art of aesthetic impurities. He maintained that the object of aesthetics is beauty and the problems involved in apprehending it, while the philosophy of art is concerned with the nature of art, the creative activity of the artist, the sources of creativity, and the inner patterns of a work of art. Beauty is revealed subjectively through feeling pleasure, whereas the goal of the philosophy of art is to know truth. Opposing beauty to truth, Fiedler sought to prove that the philosophy of art has nothing in common with aesthetics. In other words, a true work of art is not based on feelings and beauty. In order to understand it, feelings are not enough. Hence follows his programmatic conclusion: *knowing the nature of art is the field of competence not of aesthetics, but of the philosophy of art*.

Fiedler's aspiration to eliminate *beauty* from the philosophy of art and to elevate the concept of *truth* is the antithesis of the above-mentioned excessive psychologism and tendency to sociologize art in the theoretical thought of the late 19th century.

By separating beauty from art, Fiedler's conception narrowed the direct impact of the latter. This change made Fiedler's philosophy elitist. *Maintaining that the traditional views of ordinary people have nothing in common with "true" art, this scholar primarily sought to establish the independence of art from life, from the influence of external factors, and to study it for its own sake as a completely immanent phenomenon.*

Hence followed the conviction that knowledge of artistic phenomena must be based not on the materiality of art, but on inner cognitive activity, which he called intuitive knowledge. Like Schopenhauer, Fiedler considered the purpose of art to be the liberation of man from the meaninglessness of the external world. Truly great art, according to Fiedler, tends toward pure contemplation and expresses the diversity of forms in the surrounding world. In a spontaneous flight of his creative spirit, the artist subdues reality by modeling plastic forms.

"Art can be fully understood," Fiedler states, only when the opposition between nature and artistic image has been completely eliminated. Here, artistic creation is interpreted as a synthetic universal act that combines various elements of a subjective vision of the world and of objective reality. However, the natural connections between art and reality are distorted in Fiedler's works because he considers reality to be "appearance," which consists of nothing other than forms perceived through vision. Hence follows the assertion that *in the creative process the artist does not reflect the world, but recreates it*

by combining images of reality into a unified autonomous system of artistic forms. "Art adds nothing to nature, for art itself creates nature"⁴. In Fiedler's opinion, the creative principle not only gives a work of art purposiveness, refinement, and a logical inner structure of artistic forms but also makes it more real than reality itself. Like a Hegelian idea, a work of art is primary in regard to reality.

In Fiedler's philosophy of art, a special role falls to the creative activity of the artist. His work *Über den Ursprung der künstlerischen Tätigkeit* (On the Origin of Artistic Activity) emphasizes that the artistic personality is characterized by extraordinary inner creative activity that is primarily expressed through the form and content of a work of art. Fiedler writes:

If since time immemorial two great principles, that of the imitation of reality and that of its transformation, have quarreled for the right to be the true expression of the nature of artistic activity, a settlement of this quarrel seems possible only by putting in place of these two principles a third one: the principle of the production of reality. [emphasis added – A. A.]⁵

Elsewhere, Fiedler qualifies his thought thus: "Artistic activity is neither slavish imitation nor arbitrary invention, but free creation"⁶.

Thus, this conception of artistic crea-

4 Fiedler, K. *Schriften über Kunst*. 2 Bde. München: R. Piper & Co, 1913–1914, Bd. 2, S. 102.

5 Fiedler, K. *Schriften über Kunst*. 2 Bde. München: R. Piper & Co, 1913–1914 *Schriften über Kunst*. München, 1913, Bd. 1, S. 180.

6 Fiedler, K. *Über die Beurteilung von Werken der Bildenden Kunst*. Leipzig, 1876, S. 50.

tion combines Kant's understanding of man's active creative principle with Novalis' exaltation of creativity and the vitalism of Nietzsche's concept of the artistic work of the genius. For Fiedler, even patterns in the spread of artistic styles and various developments in art were connected not with sociocultural factors, but with different forms of an artist's creative activity. Here, the development of art is interpreted as the result of activity by creative geniuses who provide specific artistic visions and stylistic elements. As if polemicizing with Goethe and the followers of the French sociological theory that affirms the social conventionality of a genius's creative work, Fiedler expands on the individualistic ideas in Schopenhauer, Burckhardt, and Nietzsche about the philosophy of art. He maintains that in all fields manifestations of genius appear unexpectedly, that genius cannot have precursors. For this reason, in the history of style, when one artistic form is exhausted, a new personality creates a new one that replaces it. The development of a style in art is the spread of a creative cognitive act and an immanent change in the forms of a vision. In Hegel's works the role of the driving force in the development of art is performed by spirit (idea), while in Fiedler's philosophy of art this function is taken over by the forms of "artistic vision".

After divorcing art from its representational functions, its historical environment, aesthetic pleasure, and the reflection of beauty, Fiedler connects it with a special form of "artistic vision" that is characteristic only of the artist. The most important goal of the artist

is the creation of pure artistic forms cleansed of inartistic factors. In perfect art, according to Fiedler, form must itself actively operate on the purely artistic, i.e. formal, material from which the work of art is being created. This form need not express anything other than itself, for everything that lies beyond the means of artistic expression is beyond the bounds of the true nature of art. In this sense, it is impossible to separate form from content in a work of art. Fiedler, however, also employs the concept of content in its usual sense. He acknowledges that such a thing does exist, but he nevertheless maintains that true artistic value depends not on theme or plot or any other aspect of content, but on form.

In Fiedler's philosophy of art, it is precisely form that accumulates all the existential potentialities of a work of art, while *art itself is interpreted here as an immanently developing phenomenon that can be known only in reference to its own inner laws*. For this reason, the nature of art cannot be explained in terms of any social, philosophical, religious, or psychological factors, which only distract the researcher from *grasping its most important, purely artistic, formal structural elements*. Thus, in Fiedler's conception art emerges as a *completely self-contained, autonomous phenomenon that develops according to its own inner laws and is determined by the patterns of a "pure artistic vision."* The goal of a student of art is to analyze the immanent changes in these forms – in their formal compositional structures, in their means of artistic expression, and in their styles.

Alois Riegl's Concept of the Will to Art

The traditions of the formalist philosophy of art were developed by the leading representative of the Vienna School of Art History – Robert Zimmermann's pupil Alois Riegl (1858–1905). Panofsky equated his significance for the further development of art history with Kant's achievements in the theory of knowledge (Panofsky, 1924, p. 71). Riegl's works are amazing for their multifaceted scholarly interests, abundance of new ideas, and unexpected twists of thought. His views were influenced by the earlier traditions of formal art history and by positivism, the voluntarism of Hegel and Schopenhauer, and the ideas of psychologism. Many of the ideas that we encounter in Riegl's works were dealt with at the same time by his contemporaries: Fiedler, Hildebrand, Marées, and Wölfflin. Who was first is sometimes difficult to determine.

While polemicizing with his predecessors and contemporaries, Riegl integrated many of their ideas into his conception. He was a more original art theoretician than Fiedler and closer to conceptualism than Wölfflin. Foreign to him were Fiedler's excessively *a priori* approach and Wölfflin's empiricism. Characteristic of Riegl's style of thinking were flexibility and methodological consistency. With the exception of *Historische Grammatik der bildenden Künste* (Historical Grammar of the Fine Arts), which consists of lectures given at the department of art history at the University of Vienna, he did not write any popular works. For this reason, Riegl was not as popular as Wölfflin, even though his authority in academic circles and his

influence on the further development of theoretical thought were more significant.

Riegl's scholarly interests were consistent. On the basis of the many specific works of art he had studied, he created a unified philosophy of art dominated by questions of historical development. Wölfflin's conception arose as the result of a theoretical generalization of the patterns in the development of art. In Riegl's works, a more important role falls to *a priori* attitudes. His goal was to create an objective science based on "positive facts" and rigorous methodological principles. Hence arises the aspiration to reveal the highest and most general patterns in the structure and development of art – patterns lying beneath a mantle of accidental phenomena. In order to learn how art develops, Riegl sought the sources of its creation – the underlying structural elements in a specific work that determine the different forms of art and the inner patterns in its development. "True knowledge of the nature of art," Riegl writes, "is possible only when we have clarified the history of the development of those elements that are determined in the fine arts by the supreme main factors involved in all human creative work"⁷ Riegl's tendency to focus on historical and methodological problems is to be explained not only by the Austrian and German traditions of art history and the philosophy of art (with which he had close contact at the University of Vienna) but also by the need to solve the problems encountered by art historians at the turn

⁷ Riegl, A. *Stilfragen: Grundlegungen zu einer Geschichte der Ornamentik*. Berlin: G. Siemens, 1893, S. 24.

of the 20th century. Rapid progress in the field of art history – a spontaneous deluge of empirical facts about different cultures, civilizations, and periods of development – raised the problem of how to systematize and theoretically ground the latest scientific data. Almost 150 years after Charles Batteux published his most important work, Riegl tried to conceptually summarize the latest art–historical data. Like Batteux, he urged scholars not to study the patterns in individual art forms, but *to create a theoretical base that would combine into a single system the fundamental problems involved in knowing art (the relationship between art and reality, the nature of creativity, style, the will to art, artistic vision) and to theoretically ground the patterns characteristic of all visual art forms.*

Without promising his contemporaries any solutions, Riegl focused on the important problems of the philosophy of art at that time. At the turn of the century, interest in the problems of style was stimulated by an increasingly complex artistic process whose condensed and contradictory character acquired a hitherto unseen scale. In the modern art that was emerging, kaleidoscopic changes in style and the growing importance of problems of form also had an influence on the development of theoretical thought. The category of style became extremely popular and was interpreted in many ways. It became the most important concept of the new universal science of art (*allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*). *Style was more and more often identified with the concept of art, and the history of art was interpreted as the history of changes in style.* These changes were also reflected in

the nature of the science of art. *The field of art history was increasingly transformed into the philosophy of art history, and the greatest attention was directed toward style – the patterns in its genesis and development, its inner mechanisms, driving forces, and inner and outer determinants, its distinctive character at different stages in the evolution of art, and its connections with other spheres of culture.*

In the works of many of the most significant art theoreticians of this time we see a conspicuous gap between their theoretical constructs and real artistic practice. Theoretical thought usually wanders about in the distant past in an attempt to discover “forgotten” periods in the development of art. A fascination with formal problems had emerged in Western European modern art, and this fascination had its counterpart in the science of art, where *a change in style was increasingly explained formalistically – as the replacement of one artistic form by another.*

In harmony with the spirit of his times, Riegl regarded the history of art as the history of style. He constantly emphasized that the concept of style is universal, *a priori*, and basic to the history of art. Hence arises his view of style as the “main principle,” a sort of “artistic law” that strengthens the ties between the individual structures and elements of an artistic phenomenon. For Riegl, moreover, the concept of style gives meaning to the structural center of various artistic phenomena. Even when analyzing the structural levels of art (goal, motif, material, technique, form), Riegl consistently derives them from a “unified principle of style.” And finally, Riegl’s conception distinguishes between two different principles

of style: the first is the *tactile*, based on the sense of touch, which creates an isolated image, and the second is the *optical*, related to vision, which begets a single image of the object perceived. In Riegl's theory, both of these principles of style *express formal qualities of a work of art and are manifested as formal principles*.

In his first book, *Stilfragen: Grundlagen zu einer Geschichte der Ornamentik* (Questions of Style: The Foundations of a History of Ornamentation, 1893), Riegl already raises many of the problems that later became the most important goals of his research. His treatment of the evolution of ornament from the oldest monuments to the rise of Islamic culture provides a sweeping panorama of the development of style. He argues that continuity in artistic style involves not a simple repetition of earlier phases in its development, but the constant birth of new "conflicts" that have a specific solution at every stage in the history of art. However, he declares that *the real reason for changes in artistic form lies not in outward, material factors, but in the new ideals that become dominant during each period*.

In another book, *Spätromische Kunstindustrie* (The Late Roman Art Industry, 1901), as if expanding the range of his earlier research, Riegl again chose to deal with the objects he studied and the problems he raised from an aspect that went against established scholarly opinion (late Roman art was considered an insignificant stage during the sunset of ancient artistic culture). According to the author, this book was supposed to fill the blank spots between the artistic cultures of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. However, such a formulation

of this problem is superficial and does not reveal the true nature of Riegl's quests and discoveries. He was far more excited *not by narrow art-historical problems, but by theoretical and methodological questions of the development of global styles and by the reasons for the uniqueness of each stage in the development of art*.

In Riegl's opinion, the inability to discern genuine value in the art of various periods and different cultures usually indicates not the inferiority of the works in question, but people's inferior taste and lack of artistic and cultural sophistication. This scholar valued each stage in the development of art as a unique stylistic phenomenon that for many reasons often remains alien to someone belonging to another period or culture. These problems of interpretation arise because taste and judgment are based on stereotypes, which are always subject to the limitations of history. Hence follows the conclusion that, in order to adequately understand the art of another culture and period and the specifics of the beauty and harmony embodied in it, one must abstract oneself from the stereotypical artistic ideas and judgments of one's own period. Thus, *every artistic phenomenon needs to be understood together with the historical and cultural environment that begot it*. This *contextual* methodological position helped Riegl clarify many new features in the development of artistic culture.

In Riegl's opinion, *knowledge of art must begin by asking not what art is, but how it is born*. In his search for an answer to this question, this scholar analyzed the complex relationship between art and reality and sought to explain the nature of artistic

creation and what stimulates it. Influenced by the ideas of Nietzsche and Fiedler, he regarded the creation of art as an activity of the artistic consciousness, as something intended for the creative rethinking of reality. According to Riegl, when artistic consciousness refers to the natural forms around it, it inevitably begets the “naturalness” of the results of artistic creation. However, a genuine work of art is not a passive imitation of nature, but the creation of something that does not exist in reality. *Thus, when the artist, in the course of creating, filters reality through his own individual understanding of the world, not only does he change the accidental, chaotic forms of reality and give them a clearly defined “architectonic content,” the shape of harmonious spatial structures, but he also breathes into them a unique spiritual principle.*

In his polemics with the positivist Gottfried Semper, who considered material, technique, and purpose to be the most important impulse for the development of art, Riegl, without rejecting the role of these factors, declared that the main driving force of art is the spiritual principle – what he called the “will to art” (*Kunstwollen*). “The entire history of art,” Riegl writes, “is an endless struggle with material, and the primary decisive principle here is not instrument or technique, but the idea that creates art and seeks to expand the bounds of imagination and strengthen the creative principle”⁸. This exaltation of the spiritual principle in Riegl’s conception attests to the influence of Hegel’s philosophy of mind

8 Riegl, A. *Stilfragen: Grundlegungen zu einer Geschichte der Ornamentik*. Berlin: G. Siemens, 1893, S. 24.

(*Philosophie des Geistes*). Here, the history of art is interpreted as the history of the evolution of mind.

However, Riegl’s theoretical constructs also intertwine other ideas that at first glance often seem incompatible. First of all, when criticizing Semper’s positivism, he eventually appeals to specific instances of the development of art as emphasized in positivist theories and to attitudes of scientific rigor. Moreover, after adopting many features of Schopenhauer’s metaphysics of the irrational will, Riegl interprets the will to art as a substantial principle that develops according to its own immanent laws. In his early works, this vague concept has a fatalistic undertone of “artistic fate,” but later it is given a universal voluntaristic meaning. Eventually, it becomes a means of knowing the individual work of art and the creative outlook of the artist. Riegl often describes *Kunstwollen* as “an inner artistic impulse,” or “artistic aspiration,” that impels the artist to create new artistic forms.

Thus, *the will to art becomes the central idea of Riegl’s conception. On this basis, he grounds the specific nature and autonomy of artistic activity, and he explains the historical patterns and driving forces involved in the development of art.* Manifesting itself as a living, desirable systematic organizing principle independent of the influence of secondary factors, the will to art delineates, as it were, and later corrects the most important tendencies in the development of art. In the instinctive striving of the will to art, Riegl sees “inevitability,” a kind of destiny that cannot be resisted. Here, this directedness of the will to art toward its own immanent goals is not accidental, but

essential, almost fatalistic. In Riegl's conception, a work of art is understood as an immanent "artistic discovery" independent of social ties and the reflection of reality.

When discussing the plastic expression of the will to art, Riegl observes that it primarily reveals itself as a specific "artistic vision" that helps us understand the world. For this reason, the concept of reality, about which Riegl speaks so much in his reflections about the relationship between art and the real world, *is narrowed down here to the "visible reality" characteristic of the visual arts*. It is within the bounds defined by this "visible reality," or these "forms of vision," that the development of specific historical art forms, motifs, and styles takes place. Thus, Riegl's attention is increasingly directed toward knowledge not of the objects of reality, but of the ways of depicting them. These forms of vision *are revealed in specific linear, chromatic, spatial, and compositional structures that have been dominant during different periods in the development of art and that are considered the formal principle*. Thus, Riegl grounded the positions of his formalist philosophy of art on the *a priori* patterns involved in apprehension of the visual psychological world.

When reasoning about the role of the will to art in the development of art, Riegl constantly emphasizes the "multidirectionality" and "various levels" of its effect. He resolutely negates the simplified view of the development of art as a single linear evolution of the realistic depiction of the world from elementary to higher, more complex forms. As the proponent of a spiral conception of the development of art, he was convinced that *it is not possible to ob-*

jectively assess different regional forms and historical stages of artistic development on the basis of a single because an historically specific artistic consciousness always creates only that toward which the will to art of each unique period of artistic development is directed. Thus, the specific nature of art forms is determined by profound changes taking place in the *real* world of the will to art.

Proclaiming the stylistic and intellectual unity of each specific period in the development of art, Riegl fought on two fronts: 1) against the above-mentioned theory of a single progressive linear development of art and 2) against the traditional theory, which he also opposed, of the rise and fall of art. Hence follows his fundamental conclusion: *there cannot be any bad artistic styles because each of them is based on its own individual will to art*. And if each stage in the development of art contains a unique will to art that directs it toward ever-newer heights, it follows that "art never falls into decline"⁹. Thus, by elevating the idea of the creative activity of the spirit, Riegl ultimately renounced the idea of historical progress, which had formerly dominated art history. In this way, he theoretically grounded the ideas of the reconstruction of art history and of the rehabilitation of separate stages and styles in the development of art. Let us recall that in earlier art history many periods were regarded as regressions or temporary deviations from the highroad in the development of art. Riegl justly exposed the superficiality of these views.

9 Riegl, A. *Spätromische Kunstindustrie*. Wien: Verl. der Österr., 1927, S. 11, 18.

At the turn of the 20th century, Riegl's ideas reflected and theoretically grounded the fundamental changes taking place in Western European art. Influenced by the growing crisis in classical Western culture, the artistic intelligentsia turned to the *nonclassical* and *peripheral* stages in the development of art and to the complex problems of the interaction between different civilizations. There was a growing understanding that every culture, its uniqueness notwithstanding, is an organic part of universal world culture. For this reason, in the scientific study of art *there emerged a renunciation of traditional Eurocentrism and of a priori academic attitudes, and the amplitude of research perceptibly expanded. Not only did scholars undertake the more consistent study of the forgotten and peripheral phenomena of European artistic culture, but they also became interested in the art of India, China, Japan, pre-Columbian America, Africa, and Oceania.* In this reorientation of the field of art history, an important role falls to Riegl's ideas.

However, Riegl's theses about the unique nature of every stage in the development of art also had other consequences. In the study of art, he demolished the established vision of patterns in its development and eliminated the traditional historicism of classical art history, for he maintained that the objective process of the development of art is identical to a formal *preprogrammed* change in artistic styles. At the same time, this theory renounced value judgments and claims of ultimate truth. The ideal art theoretician, according to Riegl, consciously renounces "the arbitrariness of his own taste" and, in the purely

formal structures of a specific work of art, tries to grasp the objective patterns in the development of art. "The best art historian," Riegl states, "is the one who renounces his own personal taste, for what is most important in art history is to find the objective criteria of historical development"¹⁰. Once artistic judgments have been renounced, all historical stages in the development of art and different regional art forms become equal in value. About this view, Mikhail Alpatov expresses the thought that, in the name of objectivity, science begins to renounce all value judgments by recognizing all artists, periods, and styles as equal in value. Everything that takes place in art is interesting just because it exists. The historian does not have to judge art. It suffices for him to relate how everything happened. By going in this direction, art history can liberate itself from constraint, tendentious criticism, and become a genuine science¹¹.

Thus, in order to highlight the uniqueness of each stage in the development of art, Riegl ended up renouncing all value judgments.

Thus, Riegl's philosophy of art developed as a reaction against descriptive empirical, Neo-Romantic, and vulgarized sociological conceptions that overemphasized the external thematic aspects of art, exaggerated the importance of the artist's personality and of environmental factors, and therefore ignored the specific nature of art. Hence follows this scholar's

¹⁰ Dvorak, M. *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kunstgeschichte*. München: Piper, 1929, S. 285.

¹¹ Алпатов, М. В. О задачах истории искусства. *Методологические проблемы современного искусства*. Вып. 1– Ленинград, 1975, с. 52.

goal of creating an objective science based on rigorous methodological and formal structural principles for knowing art. One of the most important achievements of Riegl's philosophy of art is historicism – the consistent emphasis on the specific nature of the art of different periods and cultures. However, it must be acknowledged that in his theory the *unique* and *distinctive* nature of different stages in the development of art often breaks down because this scholar employs excessively broad stylistic categories. As he sought to create consistent schemata for the development of art, Riegl sometimes missed details and ignored the individuality of the artist and his specific creative flights. Even though his thinking preserves many of the universalist features characteristic of Schelling's and Hegel's analogous conceptions of the development of historical styles, there are also essential differences between him and them. *First of all, Riegl rethought the most important periods in the development of global styles and found the sources of today's artistic vision in the Late Roman art ignored by his forerunners. Second, his conceptions bear the powerful imprint of Kantian apriorism (through Fiedler) and of a formalist interpretation of the main categories of style.*

Riegl achieved much by explaining the inner mechanisms of the formation and interaction of stylistic structures and by grasping the role of style in changing cultural cycles. His conception, which deals with a multitude of significant problems, objectively reflects the growing strength of subjective tendencies in the formalist philosophy of art. Riegl's philosophy of art contains an inner contradiction due to the

subjectivist treatment of the demiurge in his theory – the will to art. The metaphorical, voluntaristic nature of this category inevitably conflicts with this scholar's goal of giving knowledge of art a solid theoretical and methodological foundation.

Although Riegl maintains that arbitrariness is alien to the will to art, which expresses “the highest patterns in the development of art” and obeys the rigorously determined immanent expression of this development, the concept of the will to art nevertheless does not objectively lose its irrational content. This thinker's theory flails about oddly between two different poles. As soon as he attempts to implement a *scientific* approach, his theoretical constructs begin to collapse because they are buttressed by the irrational principles of the will to art, whose essence is foreign to any scientific system. When Riegl conforms to the abstract voluntarism of the will to art, he unavoidably departs from the *scientific* approach he has proclaimed.

Wölfflin's Formalism

The methodology of formalism was also advanced by someone who had studied under Jacob Burckhardt and who was a friend of Conrad Fiedler and Adolf von Hildebrand as well as a proponent of some of Alois Riegl's ideas – the Swiss art historian Heinrich Wölfflin (1864–1945). This name is connected with marked achievements in the field of art history during the first half of the 20th century. Wölfflin is undoubtedly one of the most significant art historians of this period; his works, ideas, methodology, and pedagogical talent played a special

role in establishing art history as a field of study. The election of this art historian as a member of the German Academy of Sciences was a first, and it officially established art history as a mature discipline in the humanities.

Wölfflin formed his conception by theoretically summarizing the patterns in the development of Western classical art. This disciple of formalism was not interested in simply listing, inventorizing, or compiling the individual facts of art history. He created an objective, systematic science of art history based on genuine facts, rigorous methodology, and an analysis of those formal stylistic elements that determine the specific forms of art and the patterns in its historical development. Dissociating himself from subjectivism, he spent many decades, like Riegl, creating a universal grammar of art forms in order to turn art history into a precise science based not on the vague, barely definable judgments and associations of taste, but on a precise analysis of specific empirical facts. Hence follows his special attention to methodological problems, auxiliary research tools, and the analysis of specific art forms. In solving the problems he raised, he gave unconditional priority to the fine arts and architecture, i.e. to those arts characterized by clearly defined forms and materiality.

Many of the fundamental principles of Wölfflin's system are directly derived from the earlier traditions of the philosophy of art and art history. He fused into a single system Hegel's teaching about the historical forms of artistic development, Taine's biologism, Burckhardt's conception of artistic styles, Fiedler's theory of artistic

vision, Hildebrand's teaching about artistic apprehension, and individual elements of Johannes Volkelt's psychological aesthetics and Theodor Lipps' theory of empathy (*Einfühlung*). Benedetto Croce, who did a detailed study of the sources of Wölfflin's theories, justly described him as an "eclectic thinker". Wölfflin emphasized the need to study specific works of art and their means of artistic expression.

After adopting the formalist theory of the Roman circle as his first principle, Wölfflin integrated the development of global styles and the interpretation of works of art into an impressive system that combined aspects of empirical, positivist, comparativist, culturological, sociological, psychological, and hermeneutic methodology. By employing a comparative method, he analyzed the classical and baroque styles and explained their differences in the Renaissance movements of the North and the South and their specific expressions in painting, sculpture, and architecture. In his dualistic juxtaposition of Renaissance classicism and Baroque spontaneity, we can sense a dialectical reflection of the Apollonian and Dionysian principles developed in Nietzsche's works. On the basis of this opposition, Wölfflin developed his vision of the cyclical nature of the history of art – a vision in which a classical period is succeeded by a baroque one, which in turn succeeded by another classical one.

In the book *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Das Problem der Stilentwicklung in der neueren Kunst* (Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art), the development of art is regarded as a gradual shift from a

material sensory apprehension to a purely optical one. In his attempt to discover the inner mechanisms of the development of art, Wölfflin encounters a difficult question: whether styles develop because of immanent (internal) factors, or this development is the consequence of certain forms of apprehension, or the reasons for stylistic development lie in motivating external factors.

Thus, the main object of Wölfflinian analysis is the category of style, the interpretation of which also includes clear-cut aspects of formalism.

Like Riegl, Wölfflin expanded the Hegelian concept of epochal styles in the development of art by supplementing it with elements of biologism, psychologism, positivism, and formalism. What was new in this Swiss art historian's theory was his rejection of the view that the individual personality is the driving force in the history of art. He declared that he would "never write about personalities, but only about facts." By eliminating from art history the traditional theory of genius, he firmly rejected the individualism of his teacher Burckhardt and of Nietzsche, both of whom interpreted the history of art as primarily the history of work by artistic geniuses. For this reason, in Wölfflin's conception art history is transformed into an impersonal history of artistic styles, or – to use a phrase taken from Auguste Comte's works – "history without names" (*histoire sans noms*). In this way, by depersonalizing art history and limiting himself to rigorous stylistic analysis, he hoped to reject nonessential details, to grasp the inner mechanisms of the transformation and spread of styles,

to bring out the "impersonal" stratum in art, and to elevate art history to a higher theoretical level as well. In order to assess an object's artistic value, in Wölfflin's view one must first appeal to formal principles – which have nothing to do with expressiveness, and which refer to purely optical phenomena.

Here, style is interpreted not only as a formal factor but also as one rich in content with the features of a specific period, geographical environment, national culture, individual artistic temperament, etc. However, this thinker gave the factors rich in content an auxiliary status. In his opinion, the most important driving force of artistic forms and styles consists of certain "forms of artistic vision," or "optical schemata." Here, the influence of Fiedler's ideas is obvious. Each artist, according to Wölfflin, sees the world differently, and giving plastic meaning to a specific vision is precisely what comprises the essence of a work of art. The work of art itself, however, is not a monolith. It consists, as it were, of two different parts: an external one and an internal one.

The external form splits in turn into two closely related strata. The first – the material-imitative part – consists of matter and technique, while the second is idea, theme, and the artist's worldview, i.e. everything that is usually called content. In Wölfflin's opinion, the latter part of a work of art may be completely different. The problem is that in artistic apprehension different "optical walls" are revealed that "express the underlying essence of a work of art." Thus, beneath the external stratum Wölfflin encounters another, internal stratum

of artistic vision, which, by giving meaning to the underlying essence of an individual work of art, plays a decisive role in the immanent development of art in general.

After a detailed analysis of the compositional and spatial structures of classical art, Wölfflin maintains that five basic pairs of an evolving artistic world vision can be distinguished:

1. the linear and the picturesque [*Das Lineare und das Malerische*];
2. surface and depth [*Fläche und Tiefe*];
3. closed form and open form [*Geschlossene Form und offene Form*];
4. multiplicity and unity [*Vielheit und Einheit*];
5. clarity and lack of clarity [*Klarheit und Unklarheit*].

Wölfflin understood that these basic concepts and the principles he had suggested for the study of art are not universal because they can be applied effectively to an analysis only of the Classical Period in Western Europe and only of the fine arts, but it is not possible to use them to know the patterns in the development of Asian, Egyptian, Byzantine, and modern art. Therefore, he considered these basic concepts only a working aid to help one recognize the patterns in the development of artistic styles. In these five pairs of concepts he also distinguished two different strata: the imitative and the decorative. The latter is the main object of artistic apprehension, for all of the processes involved in contemplating, i.e. knowing, art are primarily related to the apprehension of certain decorative schemata or structures. In his opinion, visible phenomena always crystallize into certain visual forms.

Ignoring descriptive and ideological approaches toward a work of art, Wölfflin devoted most of his attention to the study of formal structures. Because he believed that in the fine arts “everything is form,” he held that its multifaceted analysis is essential if one wants grasp the spiritual content of a work of art. It is in the detailed study of the formal structures of a work of art that Wölfflin sees the most important prerequisite for liberating art history from vague descriptive methods, the one-sidedness of sociology and psychologism, and the indefiniteness of taste and emotions and for making it into a rigorous objective science that provides almost experimentally verifiable facts. “Among art historians,” Wölfflin proudly states,

I am a formalist. I accept this name as an *honorary title* because I see the goal of the art historian as primarily the analysis of plastic form. However, the word *formalist* also has within it, in a certain sense, a negative connotation because the analysis of plastic form is regarded not only as the first but also as the ultimate goal, on account of which the significance of the spiritual content of a work of art is trivialized. *Form* means a great deal. And ultimately, in the fine arts everything is form; therefore, an exhaustive analysis of form is essential for the understanding of its spiritual content.”¹²

Thus, Wölfflin identifies artistry with the formal aspects of art in the belief that an objective analysis of the formal structures of a work of art can liberate the science of art from the arbitrariness of taste and from one-sided sociology and psychologism.

¹² Wölfflin, H. *Gedanken zur Kunstgeschichte*. Gedrucktes und Ungedrucktes. Basel: Schwabe, 1941, S. 2.

His conception partially destroys the connection between the work of art and the artist and apprehender. The work of art is almost understood as “a pure objective form.” Like other formalist theoreticians, Wölfflin is inclined to “cleanse” art of theme and “inartistic” aspects and to relate it to contemplative “forms of reflection.” Moreover, he indicates that the artist’s worldview depends on a specific form of artistic vision that ultimately determines the nature of each work of art. By emphasizing that the universal psychosocial content of an age determines the specific historical nature of an artistic vision and style, Wölfflin tries to overcome the limitations of formalist theory.

When we look at the fundamental formalist ideas of Wölfflin’s art history without names from the perspective of the early 21st century, we may state that despite essential changes in our scientific knowledge, the appearance of new methodological tools, and periodically recurring accusations of traditionalism and excessive Eurocentrism in Wölfflinian theory many of this Swiss art historian’s works and ideas have survived the test of time.

Wölfflin’s concept of art history without names developed as a reaction against the eclecticism and methodological impotence of descriptive and academic art history. In his thinking, a radical shift emerged from the old concept of the history of great artists to an impersonal history of artistic styles based on the solid principles of the philosophy of art. It is obvious that Wölfflin’s formalism is not consistent, that it is often qualified, corrected, and supplemented with theories that create an impression of artificiality. Here, we can see gaps between

apt observations and *a priori* schemata adopted from aesthetics, the philosophy of art, and cognitive psychology. The basic pairs of art–historical concepts distinguished by this scholar cannot claim universality but are suitable for knowing only a limited period in the history of Western art. Wölfflin’s perceptiveness and talent as an art historian reveal themselves not so much in his carefully developed theoretical schemata as primarily in his subtle comparative and formal analysis of specific works of art. Many of his assessments and observations have achieved universal recognition and have become an integral part of today’s approach to art, especially that of the Renaissance and Baroque periods.

The works of Wölfflin and Riegl concluded, as it were, the classical stage in the theory of style and opened up a new one in which a consistent attempt is already being made to reveal the inner formal structural mechanisms involved in the formation of styles and in which there is an understanding of the active role of style in the system of changing cultural cycles. These scholars revealed for the first time the twofold nature of the phenomenon of artistic style, which is primarily manifested as a totality of certain formal structures. Moreover, style functions as a cultural–historical phenomenon that encompasses the main artistic processes and points them in a specific direction. Here, the most important feature of style is not the seamless totality of stylistic characteristics proclaimed by Winckelmann and Burckhardt and born from the integration of individual stylistic traits into a conditionally independent system, but the structural unity of forms.

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