

BOOK REVIEW

A History of Art History by Christopher Wood

Matthew Rampley

Institute of Art History, Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague, CZ
rampley@udu.cas.cz

A book review of Christopher Wood, *A History of Art History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019. 459 pp. ISBN 978-0-691-15652-1.

In 1982, the British art historian Michael Podro published a study, *The Critical Historians of Art*, of the development of art history as a discipline. It examined how Austrian and German art historians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as Anton Springer, Alois Riegl, Carl Schnaase, Erwin Panofsky, and Aby Warburg, responded to basic philosophical questions, in particular, the fact that 'it is our notion of art which itself suggests what it is relevant for us to look for' and that 'we cannot divide the questions of historical fact from the questions about the role of the notion of art [...]'.¹

It was not the first work to reflect on art historical writing; as early as 1921 Wilhelm Waetzoldt had written a series of portraits of German (and Austrian) art historians over the previous century.² Nevertheless, Podro's analysis was important inasmuch as he identified a coherent intellectual project that unified the authors in question. Like Hegel, he argued, they sought to devise a concept of art that might account for all its various historical manifestations, in order thereby to render otherwise remote images, artefacts and buildings from the past intelligible in the present day. The presence of Hegel was long felt by practitioners of the discipline, even by those, such as Anton Springer, or, more recently, Ernst Gombrich, who saw it as their task to combat his influence.

Podro limited himself to examining a particular tradition, yet his book raised obvious questions about art history writing outside of Germany. To what extent could inquiry into the historiography of art in countries such as Italy, France, or Britain generate comparable insights? In fact, just such a publication had already appeared in 1966, Udo Kultermann's *Geschichte der Kunstgeschichte*, subsequently republished in several editions and translated into English.³ Kultermann was much more expansive, both in chronology and geographical scope, discussing art historical writing from ancient Greece up to the 1960s, and including many other countries. The price he paid for this ambition, however, was a lack of focus or of any compelling conceptual frame. A similar observation can be made of Germain Bazin's *Histoire de l'histoire de l'art*, published four years after Podro's book, or Gianni Carlo Sciolla's

¹ Michael Podro, *The Critical Historians of Art* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982), xvi.

² Wilhelm Waetzoldt, *Deutsche Kunsthistoriker*, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Seemann, 1921, 1924).

³ Udo Kultermann, *The History of Art History* (Norwalk, CT: Abaris Books, 1993).

La critica d'arte del Novecento of 1995, which paid particular attention to French and Italian art historians.⁴ All of these offer surveys of art history, but only Podro tried to define what art history is.

Christopher Wood's *A History of Art History* is the latest entrant into this field. Wood is a much-respected art historian, who first made his name with a monograph on Albrecht Altdorfer and then translated and edited a number of classic works of art history, such as Panofsky's *Perspective as Symbolic Form*. Wood's edited volume *The Vienna School of Art History* is an important anthology of texts and his introduction to it is still one of the finest summaries of Viennese art history believed to be published in any language.⁵

How, therefore, does *A History of Art History* compare to the works of other authors, in particular, Podro's? There is no doubt that in its scope it is comparable to Bazin's and Kultermann's. It begins with Adam of Bremen in the eleventh century and continues up to the recent past. For understandable reasons, certain authors and periods attract particular attention: Vasari, for example, and the authors writing in his wake such as Bellori and Karl van Mander; French antiquarians and Enlightenment figures including Diderot; Winckelmann; Goethe and German Romanticism, including Hegel; historicism and its critics; 'scientific' and formalist art history by the likes of Alois Riegl, Giovanni Morelli, Heinrich Wölfflin, and Bernard Berenson; the relation of art history to the avant-garde in the early twentieth century; Aby Warburg's investigations into art and cultural memory; fascism and the reactionary politics of scholars such as Hans Sedlmayr; the migration of art historians to the United States in the 1930s and their impact on art history after the Second World War; the aftermath of the War in Germany and the work of the generation born in the early twentieth century, including George Kubler, Ernst Gombrich, and Meyer Schapiro. A few themes recur across chapters including, intriguingly, occasional forays into prehistoric art.

In contrast to the predominantly Eurocentric narrative of previous attempts, Wood is conscious, too, of the need to work on a global scale, even though, as he admits, 'the author reads only some European languages and is unable to offer more than superficial comments on the non-European historiographies of art' (p. 10). The book nevertheless brings into the discussion various other non-European texts, but it still has significant blind spots. Although it discusses fascism and art history, no space is given to art history under the Communist regimes of the Soviet Union and its post-war satellites; in general, central and eastern Europe are absent, in a narrative that is predominantly about male French and German authors.

Wood's admission as to his linguistic limitations, which undoubtedly explains these and other absences, is perhaps the strongest argument yet as to why an enterprise of this kind would best be undertaken by a team of researchers rather than a single scholar. Almost from the beginning, the volume unintentionally invites us to question one of the firm conventions of art history: the single-author monograph. One chapter discusses the professionalization of art history in the nineteenth century, and although it alludes to the 'protocols of publication' (p. 253) this led to, the book would have benefited from a more considered examination of them, including reflection on the extent to which it is itself a product of such protocols.

In the Introduction Wood outlines various broad conceptual issues that provide the backbone of the book, including the relation between order (instantiated in artistic form) and disorder; personal intimacy with artworks versus the ideal of objective rigour; the tension between the belief in classic masterpieces and an awareness of historicity (of both the work

⁴ Germain Bazin, *Histoire de l'histoire de l'art: de Vasari à nos jours* (Paris: Michel, 1986); Gianni Carlo Sciolla, *La critica d'arte del Novecento* (Turin: UTET, 1995).

⁵ Christopher Wood, ed., *The Vienna School of Art History: Politics and Art Historical Method in the 1930s* (New York: Zone Books, 2003).

of art as well as the viewer and the viewing art historian); the singularity of the artwork and its relation to typological and other categories. It would be difficult, however, to describe this list of oppositions as a conceptual or methodological agenda, and at times it becomes distracted by abstract theorising, the relevance of which is not wholly apparent. Although it avoids the positivistic cataloguing that marred Kultermann's work, which offered a succession of names of art historians, it nevertheless suffers from a comparable lack of shape. This lies in part, of course, in the nature of the material. How can one construct a narrative that encompasses such diverse authors as Adam of Bremen, Vasari, Piranesi, Dong Qichang, Sir Christopher Wren, Dust Muhammad, Goethe, Horace Walpole, and Nikolaus Pevsner? What does 'art history' even *mean* here? Wood appears to have adopted the most generous and wide-reaching definition possible, which is that 'art history' includes any kind of reflection on the art of the past and one's relation to it. It is a minimalist definition, which has the virtue of inclusiveness but the disadvantage of possessing limited heuristic value. The question of coherence is evident, too, in the structure of the book, which is divided into chronological periods, but it would be helpful to have some sense of the logic. The first section runs from 800 to 1400, although since Adam of Bremen (1050–1081/85) is the first author to be mentioned, the choice of 800 is curious. Subsequent chapters cover increasingly smaller periods of time, first a century, then fifty years, then twenty years, and then ten. The presumed purpose of this is to convey the idea that time is itself not a constant – a much debated topic in art history – but the caesuras are arbitrary. Why 1890–1900 rather than 1893–1901, the years Riegl published *Questions of Style* and *Late Roman Art Industry*? Both these works were, on Wood's account, seminal texts. Wood periodically makes reference to Chinese authors, pointing out interesting parallels with writings in Europe. However, like the chapters on non-European art in Gombrich's *Story of Art*, these are awkward intrusions, for there was no *structural* connection between the artworld of the Ming dynasty China and sixteenth-century Europe. Or, if there was, no attempt is made to argue for it. We are left with interesting coincidences or similarities, but they remain just that. The scope of the material also means that individual authors and concepts can only be dealt with in cursory fashion.

A product of impressive learning, one might hesitate to be too critical of the book, especially because of the insights it does offer. Wood rightly takes issue with Ernst Robert Curtius's assertion that art, unlike literature, is so self-evident that it requires no scholarly commentary. Writing about the history of art has long been intimately intertwined with the aesthetic tradition, he argues, and not only the Austro-German authors examined by Podro. But Wood does not make this into what might be a *leitmotif*. *The History of Art History* seems to be a little unclear about its aims. What, therefore, *might* a history of art history writing be?

The German art historian Lorenz Dittmann approached it as a form of conceptual history, eschewing the focus on individuals for a concern with its categories and methods.⁶ Others viewed art history through the lens of social history; Heinrich Dilly, for example, examined art history as an institution, exploring the rise of art historians as a professional class and the settings (the museum, the university) within which art history was practised.⁷ Still others have approached modern art history as an instrument of cultural politics, arguing that even the notion of a 'scientific' discipline was infused with ideological values, in particular those to do with nationalist ideas of identity.⁸ The focus of such studies is less on individual

⁶ Lorenz Dittmann, *Kategorien und Methoden der Kunstgeschichte 1900–1930* (Berlin: Steiner, 1985).

⁷ Heinrich Dilly, *Kunstgeschichte als Institution* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1979).

⁸ See, for example, Michela Passini, *La fabrique de l'art nationale: le nationalisme et les origines de l'histoire de l'art en France et en Allemagne 1870–1933* (Paris: DFK, 2012); Evgenios Matthiopoulos, ed., *Art History in Greece: Selected Essays* (Athens: Melissa, 2018).

scholars (the approach of Kultermann) and more on larger thematic and structural issues. There are elements of this kind of explanation in Wood's study. He points to the fact that, as the art market grew in the 1600s, an increasingly sophisticated language was required so that the sales catalogues could accurately identify the works they contained. The rise of large collections, too, created a need to formulate principles of organisation so that owners could keep track of their possessions. This explains, too, the overlapping professional interests of collectors, dealers and professional art historians, and has sometimes posed uncomfortable questions for art historians whose pride in their professional integrity could be undermined by their dependence on the financial interests of the market. However, Wood is not interested in building up these isolated observations up into a more comprehensive account, and hence their potential contribution to the larger narrative is lost.

For Podro the tradition of German history of art merited study due to its engagement with basic epistemological questions. It foregrounded the fact that 'I cannot look at anything and know where my mind's contribution to its qualities ends and the qualities that belong to it in itself begin [...]. There are only the qualities it manifests from a particular viewpoint [...].'⁹ The tradition he considered was a series of elaborations on this basic theme. It may have been a restrictive definition of art history, but it at least had the merit of indicating why the theories of art historians in the past should still be a matter of interest in the present.

The historiography of art can be studied for the way in which it engaged with other philosophical problems, too. The Viennese art historian Julius von Schlosser, informed by a reading of Croce, came to the conclusion that a *history* of art was impossible, since insertion of the individual work of art into a sequence or narrative robbed it of its singular aesthetic character. As a result, he eventually confined himself to writings about non-art objects, such as wax portraits, musical instruments and art collecting. There are echoes here of the debate over the role of categories. Schlosser and, more recently, Georges Didi-Huberman might have argued that categorising works of art turned them into lifeless specimens.¹⁰ Kendall Walton, by contrast, suggested that aesthetic appreciation is *dependent* on an awareness of the categories to which the work of art belongs.¹¹

Regardless of how this debate is resolved, the point is that art history was frequently intertwined with questions in aesthetics. Other examples abound. Art historians were anxious to distinguish their discipline from mere art appreciation, in order to turn it into a respectable 'scientific' discipline. This was informed, in part, by awareness of Kant's distinction between taste and the merely agreeable. The question, therefore, was how judgements about artworks could be a matter of public discourse and elevated above the expression of merely personal preference. One solution was the embrace of positivism; objectivity could be attained by *discarding* potentially unreliable judgements of quality. Positivism was widely embraced throughout the nineteenth century, and has persisted through to the present, especially in central Europe. Yet, its basic flaws were also quickly recognised. If the history of art is merely the identification of, admittedly, scrupulously researched circumstantial facts, on what basis does one ascribe art historical significance? What makes certain works of art more deserving of our attention than others? Carl Friedrich Rumohr (1785–1843), one of the pioneers of positivistic art history, eventually had to admit that unless he wished to end up with a chaotic collection of individual pieces of information, he had to reach into the 'domain of theory' to find

⁹ Podro, *Critical Historians*, 215.

¹⁰ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Devant l'image: questions posées aux fins d'une histoire de l'art* (Paris: Minuit, 1990).

¹¹ Kendall Walton, 'Categories of Art', *Philosophical Review* 79 (1970): 334–67.

some means of giving it coherence.¹² The later formalist art histories of Riegl and Wölfflin, much derided subsequently for their lack of attention to socio-historical specifics, were an attempt to answer the same basic question, that of making the description of artworks more than a matter of articulating personal impressions (or indeed a display of rhetorical virtuosity). Moreover, what kind of framework can be constructed such that non-arbitrary relations *between* artworks can be posited? As in Podro, focusing on the way such questions were dealt with by art historians necessarily excludes many authors; Vasari and Horace Walpole would have little place in such a study. But one would at least have a sense of art history as having an intellectual focus beyond the mere gathering of information about artists and artworks.

Wood alludes to one of the more pressing debates in art history, namely, how to expand its horizons to encompass a global vision and, more contentiously, the extent to which its operating concepts and values are themselves irreducibly Eurocentric. Since the work of Partha Mitter in the 1970s, there has been, rightly, a critical view of how European art historians traditionally write about non-Western art.¹³ Wood devotes nearly a whole chapter to Stella Kramrisch (1896–1993), a Viennese scholar of Indian art who sought to break away from Western art historical ideas in order to do justice to her subject. It is a pity lack of space ruled out exploring this further, in order to consider not only wider questions of cultural difference in art history but also the troubling fact that many who advocated the study of non-European art, most notably, Kramrisch's teacher Josef Strzygowski, were reactionary racists.

The occasional mention of Chinese, Japanese, Indian and other non-European authors, while well intentioned, makes clear the problems arising from a *global* history of this kind. For, although many cultures have developed their own discourses about the art of the past, it would be misleading to term them 'art history' simply because they belong to entirely different intellectual traditions and contexts. Similarities can be found between China and Italy, but given the lack of intellectual exchange, these are entirely coincidental. The interests of authors such as Dong Qichang or Shitao Daoji, cited by Wood, are so different from those of their European contemporaries that their writings are unrecognisable as art history. As James Elkins has claimed, art history as an intellectual project guided by specific protocols, values, and methods is a European invention.¹⁴ Specialists in Chinese art have long demonstrated the existence of a sophisticated tradition of writing on art and connoisseurship that owed nothing to Europe, but to include them in a history of art history does make for misleading comparisons.¹⁵

A History of Art History is the obvious result of considerable labour and learning. It offers innumerable individual observations of interest. Even if, as a whole, it leaves the reader puzzled as to its goal, it is of inestimable value in prompting renewed reflection on what might be gained from exploring the past of the discipline and how one might define it.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

¹² Carl Friedrich von Rumohr, *Italienische Forschungen*, vol. 1 (Berlin: Nicolai, 1827), 4.

¹³ Partha Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters: A History of European Reactions to Indian Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

¹⁴ James Elkins, *Stories of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

¹⁵ See, for example, Susan Bush and Hsio-Yen Shih, *Early Chinese Texts on Painting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985); James Cahill, *The Painter's Practice: How Artists Lived and Worked in Traditional China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

How to cite this article: Rampley, Matthew. 'A History of Art History by Christopher Wood.' *Estetika: The European Journal of Aesthetics* LVIII/XIV, no. 1 (2021): pp. 89–94. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/eeja.254>

Published: 17 March 2021

Copyright: © 2021 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

HUP
HELSINKI
UNIVERSITY
PRESS

Estetika: The European Journal of Aesthetics is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Helsinki University Press in cooperation with the Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague.

OPEN ACCESS 