

A Transcultural Approach to Art History through the Lens of Its First International Conferences

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ABSTRACT

This essay aims to propose a cross-cultural rewriting of the history of art history during the decisive years of its emergence and institutionalization that significantly revises existing narratives, going beyond traditional disciplinary and national boundaries in a global context. The focus is on the first international conferences in art history, which are essential instruments of cultural transfer. This should help both to reconstitute a transnational perspective and to overcome art historical narratives that reinforce only the celebrated names of art historians or artistic schools, expanding their horizon toward an international art historical koine. Dealing with the problematic tension between national and global, historiography reveals itself as the most powerful means of deepening our understanding of today's global perspective and particularly of the way in which processes of centralization and standardization coexist with an increasing splitting into sectors, which is the result of a multicentric differentiation of national identities.

The history of art history can be seen as a privileged point of observation for tracing how different disciplinary approaches developed from each other, both diachronically and synchronically. Situating itself on a metalevel, the history of art history offers us useful epistemic tools for thinking about the relation between a discipline and its objects, letting us see that the forms of vision, such as the forms of narration, have not been always the same. Starting from this simple consideration allows us to linger on the phase in which art history began to define itself as a discipline. This means looking at how methodologies, practices, and techniques spread out through a series of scientific exchanges, such as institutions, conferences, reviews, exhibitions—in short, cultural transfers.

The following pages aim to offer an example of a transnational approach through a brief analysis of some of the first international conferences for art history, which started

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at the end of the nineteenth century. The intent is to show how a transcultural and transnational approach to art history can help to avoid the perspective of the big narration of a single art history, showing that many art histories coexisted and that the history of art history (or, better, of art histories) is the result of a series of encounters, conflicts, and collisions between different actors and approaches. Seemingly, this brings us to abandon the idea of a linear and evolutionary temporality, substituting it with a discontinuous one, that better suits to a transcultural narration.

VIENNA: *KUNSTWISSENSCHAFT*

On the occasion of the fifth world's fair held at the Museum für Kunst und Industrie in Vienna in 1873 (now the Museum für angewandte Kunst), which attracted art historians from different European nations, Rudolf Eitelberger, professor of art history at the University of Vienna and director of the museum, took the opportunity to invite his colleagues to the First International Congress of Art History, to be held at the beginning of September.¹ The aim of this meeting was to bring together professors and museum professionals from different countries to discuss methodological issues and the introduction of new media in art historical practice. One of the main goals was to critically reflect on the relationship between art history and cultural politics, highlighting the importance of art history for building national identities. Sixty-eight people accepted this invitation and went to Vienna. However, this first encounter was not as international as had been announced. Not only was the conference language German, but the guests came mostly from the Austro-Hungarian and German Empires. This was already explicitly apparent in the title of this meeting, “Erste Internationale Congreß für Kunstwissenschaft” (First international congress for a systematic and scientific study of art). *Kunstwissenschaft* is a German phenomenon that has no equivalent in some languages² and refers to a tendency developed during the process of institutionalizing art history as a discipline at the end of the nineteenth century, when a criterion of scientificity was sought for art history in order to distance the discipline from both aesthetics and historiography and to develop a methodological alternative

1. Among the recent publications on Eitelberger, see the well-documented volume edited by Kernbauer et al., *Rudolf Eitelberger von Edelberg*.

2. If in some languages, such as Dutch (*kunstwetenschap*), Norwegian (*kunstvitenskap*), and Afrikaans (*kunswetenskap*) it is possible to find a literal translation for the term *Kunstwissenschaft*, one cannot say the same for, e.g., English and Italian: “science of art” or “scienza dell’arte” would sound odd. In any case one should be conscious of the cultural-historical context. The French *science de l’art* is introduced in France in the 1930s by Victor Basch, who transplants *Kunstwissenschaft* in the francophone debate on art history.

to connoisseurship-oriented practices.³ From the perspective of the history of humanities (or more generally of the history of knowledge), it is interesting to remark that a discipline comes to reflect upon its objects, methodology, and boundaries when it misses something. It is in these proper periods of crisis that a discipline tends to look at its past and to trace its own history. *Kunstwissenschaft* represents for art history around 1900 an attempt to design new routes, being conscious of its very tradition.⁴

As an example of founding new methodologies for art history, it seems relevant to recall that one of the participants in the Erste internationale Kongreß für Kunstwissenschaft and Eitelberger's colleague from Vienna, Moriz Thausing, devoted his inaugural lecture at the University of Vienna in October of the same year (1873) to the topic of positioning art history as a science ("Die Stellung der Kunstgeschichte als Wissenschaft").⁵ In distancing art history from archeology, aesthetics, and historiography, Thausing defined its methods as an analysis of textual sources and artifacts that requires both theoretical and practical competences and the need to learn a new language, the language of forms: "As documents are expressed in words, monuments speak to us in visible forms; the task of art history is to learn how to properly read and understand this

3. This is not the place to give an in-depth discussion on *Kunstwissenschaft*, so I will limit myself to some observations about its English translation. Some translators rendered *Kunstwissenschaft* as "science of art," an expression that does not do justice to this particular current that developed in the German-speaking countries at the end of the nineteenth century and had a revival in the twenty-first century as part of a broadening interest within art historians for art historiography. In his last book devoted to this topic, Christopher Wood translated *Kunstwissenschaft* as a "systematic study of art" or "artology;" see Wood, *History of Art History*, 320. Although the translation that I offer in the text ("systematic and scientific study of art") doesn't satisfy me completely, I still think that one of the aims of *Kunstwissenschaft* was to find a criterion of "scientificity" for art history, looking to other fields and disciplines. *Kunstwissenschaft* is related not only to a systematic approach to art but also to a sort of "interdisciplinarity" *avant la lettre* and to a more theoretical approach to art. It tends to broaden its spectrum of interest beyond art in a strict sense, looking for some kind of general concepts (*Grundbegriffe*) to interpret its objects. One should not forget the historical context in which *Kunstwissenschaft* arose: it was also an attempt to offer an alternative to the criterion of scientificity proposed by connoisseurship.

4. Regular conferences were devoted also to the delineation of *Kunstwissenschaft*. In 1906, Max Dessoir published his book *Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* and founded the *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* (which is still active today). Two years later, he established the Vereinigung für ästhetische Forschung, whose main task was organizing regular conferences dealing with the distinctions between aesthetics and *Kunstwissenschaft*. The first conference took place in Berlin in 1913. Because of the First World War, the second conference was not held until 1924. Beginning in 1924, the conference was held regularly until 1937. One had to wait until this date to hold a conference outside the German-speaking countries. Thanks to the engagement of Victor Basch, the 1937 conference took place in Paris, adopting French as a major language and translating *Kunstwissenschaft* as "science de l'art." See, among others, Collenberg-Plotnikov et al., "Schwerpunktthema: Berlin 1913–Paris 1937."

5. Thausing, *Kunstbriefe*, 1–20.

language.⁶ Besides the general language of art, one should also apprehend the national language of art: “The art of a people is also a language; its monuments are like towering milestones that direct the trajectory of the searching gaze far back along the path upon which a nation has, for millennia, been led by its genius.”⁷ Another important element, which seems to go in the opposite direction of the search of general principles for interpreting artworks from different times and epochs, comes to the fore: nationalism. Already in the eighteenth century, there was a tendency in art history, as in other historical disciplines, to look at the relation that a particular oeuvre had with the place, the climate, and the people from that place.⁸ Since then, “geography of art” has continued to be practiced, sometimes explicitly, sometimes tacitly, in different countries. It is obvious that from this angle of observation the step into national, ethical, and political distinctions expressed by that particular artwork was quite natural.

Concerning this topic, one of the main interests in creating an international platform for art historians was to bring these national histories into a dialogue. With this

6. “Wie die Dokumente in Worten, so sprechen die Monumente in sichtbaren Formen zu uns, diese Sprache richtig lesen und verstehen zu lernen, ist die Aufgabe der Kunstgeschichte” (ibid., 9; translations are mine unless otherwise noted).

7. “Die Kunst eines Volkes ist auch eine Sprache; ihre Denkmäler sind wie ragende Meilenzeiger, die den forschenden Blick weit zurückgeleiten den Weg, auf welchen eine Nation durch Jahrtausende von ihrem Genius geführt worden ist” (ibid.).

8. One can find examples in Germany, France, Great Britain, Italy, etc. The German tradition of *Kunstgeographie*, which properly started in the nineteenth century, finds its roots in the work of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Johann Gottfried Herder, and Alexander von Humboldt. Foundational works on the genealogy of *Kunstgeographie* are, for instance, Schnaase’s *Geschichte der bildenden Kunst* and Kugler’s *Handbuch der Kunstgeschichte*. In France, Seroux d’Agincourt, in his monumental work on medieval art history, reflected on the effects of climate on architecture and on how different materials brings to different forms and style: “Placée par notre état naturel au nombre de nos premières besoins, nécessaire à l’homme en le supposant même dans l’isolement, l’architecture n’a pas attendu pour naître, comme la sculpture et la peinture, que les sociétés fussent formées. Soumise aussi d’une manière plus directe à l’empire du climat, elle a dû, dès son origine, employer le pierres, les terres, les bois, que chaque pays lui a présentés, pour assurer à l’homme une retraite contre les attaques des bêtes féroces, un abri contre les intempéries des saisons. C’est dans la différence de ces matériaux, qu’elle a puisé chez le différents peuples, les formes et le style qui la caractérisent diversement dans chaque pays; et ces formes distinctives, ce style propre, se sont maintenus plus ou moins longtemps, suivant les modifications de l’état social qu’en avait favorisée l’établissement” (*Histoire de l’art par les monuments*, vol. 1, pt. 2, 2). In John Ruskin’s essays, written between 1837 and 1838 and later published with the title *Poetry of Landscape*, Ruskin also studied the environment’s impact on architecture and the relationship between forms and national character, anticipating later geographical thinking. Luigi Lanzi’s notion of *scuole pittoriche* was a framework of sorts for organizing his history of painting in Italy. The first volumes were published in 1792, whereas the other were published in different posthumous editions until the 1850s. Classification by schools was quite diffuse in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as Giovanni Battista Cavalcaselle, Joseph Archer Crowe, Bernard Berenson, and Roberto Longhi have shown, and is still practiced today.

goal in mind, during the conference in Vienna, the decision was made to regularly organize international meetings in different countries, aiming to build a transnational platform for methodological art historical issues. This goal notwithstanding, the discussion focused mainly on national identities and their link to the definition of a national cultural heritage. Moreover, the following conferences were small and took place almost exclusively in German-speaking countries.⁹

ROME

The first truly international conference for art history was held in Rome in 1912.¹⁰ This congress represents a paradigm shift in the history of art historical meetings in terms of its dimension, its target, and its structure. For the first time, it took place outside of the German-speaking territories, bringing together a very large number of participants, totally 450, from seventeen different countries. Moreover, it was devoted to investigating a common topic from a transnational perspective, namely, the relationship between Italian and foreign arts. Among the participants were Louis Dimier, Walter Friedländer, Josep Puig y Cadafalch, Jacques Mesnil, Carlo Ricci, Henry Thode, Adolfo Venturi, and Aby Warburg.

The initiative for organizing the conference was taken by Warburg, a German art historian whose interest in the relationship between northern and southern art, between Northern European and Mediterranean art, was the driving force behind his cultural-political enterprise of an “extension of the methodological borders of [the] study of art, in both material and spatial terms.”¹¹ One thinks, for instance, of his essays “Flemish Art and the Florentine Early Renaissance” (1902), “Artistic Exchanges between North and South in the Fifteenth Century” (1905), “Dürer and Italian Antiquity” (1905), and “The Gods of Antiquity and the Early Renaissance in Southern and Northern Europe” (1908).¹²

Only a few years earlier, when Germany and Italy were fighting each other in the First World War, Warburg called for a cooperative European project informed by the

9. A notable exception was the conference held in Paris in 1921, whose exclusively French organizers refused to allow it to be called “international” and excluded Germany from the participant guest list. During that time, German and French art historians were competing to establish their dominance in the field of European art history. On topical perspectives on a “global art history,” see, e.g., Allersdorf and Leisch-Kiesl, *Global Art History*; Belting, “From World Art to Global Art;” Dilly, “Geschichtslos, nicht ohne Geschichten;” Elkins, *Is Art History Global?*; DaCosta Kaufmann, *Toward a Geography of Art*; DaCosta Kaufmann et al., *Circulations in the Global History of Art*; Pfisterer, “Origins and Principles of World Art History;” Wolf, “Kunstgeschichte aber wo?;” Zijlmans and Van Damme, *World Art Studies*.

10. The proceedings of the Rome conference (1912) were not published until ten years later; see *L'Italia e l'arte straniera*; and see also Nova et al., *La storia dell'arte e le sue frontiere*.

11. Warburg, “Italian Art and International Astrology.”

12. These essays are found in Warburg, *Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*.

unifying role of culture. As early as the art historical conference held in Munich in 1908, he had been trying to convince Adolfo Venturi of his intention to organize the tenth international congress in Rome, “La storia delle relazioni artistiche internazionali e specialmente dei rapporti fra l’Italia e le altre nazioni attraverso i secoli” (The history of international artistic relations and in particular of the relationship between Italy and other nations throughout the centuries”). Finally, he managed to get it approved; he was also concerned that the conference could have been a platform for his most conservative colleagues.

The fact that Warburg was conscious that the “now of legibility”¹³ had not yet arrived for his revolutionary enterprise of enlarging his field on a thematic, topographical, and methodological level is confirmed by the use of the term “positivist,” by which Warburg meant his more conservative colleagues. This was also supported by a comment made by Giacomo Agosti in his well-known monograph on Adolf Venturi: “Positivists from universities all over Europe were able to take advantage of [the congress] for a total of fifty talks. Accompanied by black-and-white slideshows . . . Spanish, French, German, Italian, Belgian, and Dutch professors presented materials for a ‘real European art history,’ as underlined by Prof. Rudolf Kautsch (the president of the Permanent Committee of the International Congress of Art History) in the opening session.”¹⁴

However, if one attentively reads the proceedings of the Tenth International Congress of Art History, first published only ten years later in 1922, it is difficult to confirm this harmonic and unitary picture.¹⁵ The topic of the relationships between Italian art

13. “Now of legibility” (*Jetzt der Lesbarkeit*) is an expression used by one of Warburg’s contemporaries, Walter Benjamin, to indicate that every work resonates only in particular times. I find this expression quite appropriate for underscoring the fact that Warburg’s times were not yet ready to understand the revolutionary potential of his art historical and cultural historical enterprise.

14. “Ne approfittarono i positivisti delle università di tutta Europa per un totale di cinquanta interventi. Accompagnati dalla proiezione di diapositive in bianco e nero . . . i professori spagnoli, francesi, tedeschi, italiani, belgi e olandesi offrirono i materiali per ‘una vera storia dell’arte europea’, come sottolineava ad apertura dei lavori il Prof. Rudolf Kautsch (che era allora il presidente del Comitato permanente dei Congressi internazionali di storia dell’arte)” (Agosti, *La nascita della storia dell’arte*, 244).

15. In this sense, one should also not forget that on a cultural political level the conference represented a sort of “battlefield” between two different German institutions based in Rome: the Bibliotheca Hertziana (now the Max Planck Institute for the History of Art) and the Preußisches Historisches Institut (now the Deutsches Historisches Institut in Rome). The director of the historical institute was Paul Friedolin Kehr, a controversial figure in the history of German art history. The Bibliotheca Hertziana was supposed to be inaugurated in October 1912, during the international conference “L’Italia e l’arte straniera.” However, the opening of the Bibliotheca Hertziana was a very marginal event in the scope of the conference because of Kehr’s imperialistic attempt to bring the German art historical institute into the broader context of the German historical institute. His attempt failed, but the inauguration of the Bibliotheca Hertziana nevertheless failed to attract much attention.

and the art of other nations was not simply the logical outcome of the different approaches and methodologies by scholars of different nationalities. It could rather be read as a litmus test to express, also on a veiled political level, nationalist tendencies. Through the study of cultural heritage, art history revealed itself as a powerful political instrument with the capacity to affirm different national identities and to rewrite European political geographies. This became evident already from a lexical point of view: if terms such as “comparison” (*Vergleich*), “position” (*Stellung*), and “relationships” (*Beziehungen*) used in some contributions sound politically correct, one cannot say the same for a term like “influence” (*Einfluß*), which presupposes a hierarchical positioning by the observer.¹⁶

Many were the languages used for the talks and discussions during the 1912 conference in Rome, which were partly transcribed in the publication of the proceedings—mostly Italian, German, and French, but also Spanish. Though this could be interpreted as a sign of the openness to build an international platform for art history, one becomes aware, in reading the different contributions, that the art historical landscape was not yet ready to become a collaborative European enterprise, as Warburg wished. This is expressed by Kautsch’s welcoming address. In looking for a criterion of scientificity for art history, he compared his field with physics and chemistry. Whereas the general principles investigated by the natural sciences can be expressed by a unique and international language, the language of mathematics, and similar hypotheses come to bring similar conclusions, art history deals with a language that—as he said—“discolors” (*scolorisce*). This means that its very object, art, is characterized by something “mainly personal” (*prettamente personale*) in terms of the way it can be described, depending on the background and origin of its interpreter. Kautsch explicitly alluded here to factors of nationhood, race, and origin, which determine the ways in which art historians use different “colors” (*colori*) and “nuances” (*sfumature*) to speak about art—and concluded: “Only as soon as we are able to understand ourselves [and we could add: our specific national art], will we be able to build a proper European art history.”¹⁷

16. This is not the place for offering an in-depth analysis of these terms and their related histories. One could add that if the term “school” is generally used in art historical writing to indicate a group of artists working around a prominent artist, one cannot say the same for the notion of “influence.” In fact, this is not a neutral term, since it seems to trace a hierarchy between an “original” source and its “reproduction,” situating the latter in a subsidiary position. Furthermore, from a historiographic perspective, the idea of “influence” seems to follow an evolutionary and progressive idea of art history à la Vasari.

17. “Sol quando saremo in grado di capire bene noi stessi, riusciremo a creare, ciò che è il nostro sommo fine: una vera e propria storia dell’arte europea” (Rudolf Kautsch’s welcoming address to the International conference held in Rome in 1912, quoted in *L’Italia e l’arte straniera*, 8).

The first section, devoted to the general features (*caratteri generali*) characterizing the history of the international artistic relationships between Italy and other countries, was marked by a language that speaks about factors such as nationhood, race, and blood. The opening presentation, titled “Die italienische und die deutsche bildende Kunst: Vergleich ihres Wesens” (Italian and German visual arts: A comparison of their essences), was held by the renowned German art historian Henry Thode, well known for his fine work on Michelangelo and Saint Francis of Assisi. One suspects that he, as a valued and esteemed scholar, was not taking the task of such international conferences seriously, since his talk proceeded through very general and almost racist affirmations.¹⁸ The same can be said about the second talk delivered by Paul Schubring, titled “Die Stellung des nordischen und südlichen Künstlers zum Bildvorwurf” (The positioning of northern and southern artists to pictorial ideas). Schubring started with a passage by Giovanni Morelli about an incommensurable incommunicability between northern and southern art: “It is not only comprehensible, but also self-evident, that the son of the south, guided by the coercions of blood and instinct, experiences the art of his country with more immediacy and all the sensual freshness that people from the north rarely have at their innate disposal and learn only through long experience.”¹⁹

This quotation galvanized Warburg, who stated in the discussion: “From the perspective of a pragmatic art historiography, for which Western Europe represents an organic and cohesive territory of exchange of artistic self-formation, the theory of the two artistic temperaments cannot remain uncontested. The doctrine of the insurmountable, natural polarity between the man from the south with a bright, sensual talent for beauty and measure, and the man from the north, who suffers from an inaptitude for design due to his darker and more profound space of introspection, works with an attractive and simple, but too simplistic, principle of division between historical styles.”²⁰

18. Ibid.

19. “Es ist nicht nur begreiflich, sondern selbstverständlich, dass der Sohn des Südens, vom Zwange des Blutes und Instinktes geleitet, die Kunst seines Landes unmittelbarer erlebt mit jener sinnlichen Frische, die der Nordländer selten von Haus aus hat und erst in langer Erfahrung entwickelt” (ibid., 50).

20. The Proceedings of the Rome Conference also partially include the general discussion, which followed the contributions. Here is Warburg’s reaction to Schubring’s talk: “Vom Standpunkte einer pragmatischen Kunstgeschichtsschreibung aus, für die Westeuropa *ein organisch zusammengehöriges Austauschgebiet künstlerischer Selbstbildung* bedeutet, darf die Lehre von den beiden Kunsttemperamenten nicht un widersprochen bleiben. Die Doktrin von der unüberbrückbaren, natürlichen Gegensätzlichkeit zwischen dem südlichen Menschen mit heller, sinnesfreudiger Begabung für Schönheit und Maß, und dem nordischen Menschen, der an der Gestaltungsunfähigkeit seines dunkleren und tieferen Innenlebens leidet, arbeitet mit einem verlockend einfachen, aber allzu einfachen stilgeschichtlichen Einteilungsprinzip” (ibid., 54).

In the context of the predominant nation-based art historical methodology practiced by his colleagues, Warburg's talk, "Italienische Kunst und internationale Astrologie im Palazzo Schifanoia zu Ferrara" (Italian art and international astrology in the Palazzo Schifanoia, Ferrara), came as a breath of fresh air. His "plea for a methodological extension of art historical boundaries both concerning its object and its geography"²¹ let appear a strong discrepancy between a nationalist approach to art history (which identifies national art with geopolitical borders) and a transnational and transcultural art historical methodology dealing with the migration of artifacts toward spatial and temporal borders, anticipating current tendencies within global art histories. In the conclusion of his talk, Warburg wanted to actively involve his colleagues, calling them "fellow students" (*Kommilitonen*) and addressing them in the form of an attorney's speech, with the aim of turning their perspective in favor of a different concept of space in order to implement the potentialities of art history:

Until now, a lack of adequate general evolutionary categories has impeded art history in placing its materials at the disposal of the—still unwritten—"historical psychology of expression." By adopting either an unduly materialistic or an unduly mystical stance, our young discipline blocks its own panoramic view of history. It gropes toward an evolutionary theory of its own, somewhere between the schematism of political history and the dogmatic faiths in genius. In attempting to elucidate the frescoes in the Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara, I hope to have shown how an iconological analysis that can range freely, with no fear of border guards, and can treat the ancient, medieval, and modern worlds as a coherent historical unity—an analysis that can scrutinize the purest and the most utilitarian of arts as equivalent documents of expression—how such a method, by taking pains to illuminate one single obscurity, can cast light on great and universal evolutionary processes in all their interconnectedness. I have not tried to find a neat solution so much as to present a new problem, which I would formulate as follows: "To what extent can the stylistic shift in the presentation of human beings in Italian art be regarded as a part of *international process of dialectic engagement with the surviving imagery of Eastern Mediterranean pagan culture*?"²²

21. "ein Plaidoyer zu Gunsten einer methodischen Grenzerweiterung unserer Kunstwissenschaft in stofflicher und räumlicher Beziehung" (*ibid.*, 179).

22. "Die Kunstgeschichte wird durch unzulängliche allgemeine Entwicklungs-Kategorien bisher daran gehindert, ihr Material der allerdings noch ungeschriebenen historischen Psychologie des menschlichen Ausdrucks zur Verfügung zu stellen. Unsere junge Disziplin versperrt sich durch allzu materialistische oder allzu mystische Grundstimmung den weltgeschichtlichen Rundblick. Tastend sucht sie zwischen den Schematismen der politischen Geschichte und den Doktrinen vom Genie ihre

He concluded: “It was with this desire to restore the ancient world that ‘the good European’ began his battle for enlightenment, in that *age of internationally migrating images* [*Zeitalter internationaler Bilderwanderung*] that we—a shade too mystically—call the Age of the Renaissance.”²³

As mentioned, at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, the study of the spatial dimension of artistic production largely informed art historiography. Many studies were devoted to a comparative analysis of different stylistic areas that corresponded to national blocks, amounting, therefore, to a methodological nationalism centered on a consideration of national artistic character. Looking for what he termed the “dogmatic schematism” of either a political history (i.e., a nation-based art historiography) or the individuation of “the dogmatic faith in genius” (i.e., an evolutionary art historiography driven by the search for artists or artistic schools), Warburg called for an expansion of art history’s boundaries, moving from the notion of influence toward one of circulation—that is, substituting exchange with interchange. This implied a proper shift in the notion of space, substituting boundaries with thresholds and contact zones.

STOCKHOLM

Warburg’s plea seems to have remained unheard until the Thirteenth International Congress of Art History, held in Stockholm in 1933 and devoted to the topic of the geography of art. In his welcoming address, the conference president, Johnny Roosval, stated: “It seems truly urgent that we abandon the outdated, but still-used method of subordinating artistic facts from one thousand years ago to the conditions of the political geography of 1933. What are we waiting for to react against this all too accepted

eigene Entwicklungslehre zu finden. Ich hoffe, durch die Methode meines Erklärungsversuches der Fresken im Palazzo Schifanoja zu Ferrara gezeigt zu haben, dass eine ikonologische Analyse, die sich durch grenzpolizeiliche Befangenheit weder davon abschrecken lässt, Antike, Mittelalter und Neuzeit als zusammenhängende Epoche anzusehen, noch davon, die Werke freier und angewandtester Kunst als gleichberechtigte Dokumente des Ausdrucks zu befragen, dass diese Methode, indem sie sorgfältig sich um die Aufhellung einer einzelnen Dunkelheit bemüht, die großen allgemeinen Entwicklungsvorgänge in ihrem Zusammenhange beleuchtet. Mir war es weniger zu tun um die glatte Lösung, als um die Heraushebung eines neuen Problems, das ich so formulieren möchte: ‘In wieweit ist der Eintritt des stilistischen Umschwunges in der Darstellung menschlicher Erscheinung in der italienischen Kunst als *international bedingter Auseinandersetzung-Prozess mit den nachlebenden bildlichen Vorstellungen der heidnischen Kultur der östlichen Mittelmeervölker* anzusehen?’” (ibid., 191).

23. “Mit diesem Willen zur Restitution der Antike begann ‘der gute Europäer’ seinen Kampf um Aufklärung in jenem *Zeitalter internationaler Bilderwanderung*, das wir—etwas allzu mystisch—die Epoche der Renaissance nennen” (ibid., 585–86).

routine? To reposition art's geographical maps, to exclusively consider artistic data and deliberately neglect political borders?"²⁴

For the organizers of the Stockholm conference, abandoning a political approach to spatiality meant showing the ambiguity of the notion of "national artistic character," which should not be limited to its understanding as a political and territorial entity but instead extended toward a broader anthropological and cultural concept. In doing so, looking beyond political borders enabled scholars to identify patterns and stylistic motifs in different national context. This made it possible to draw new art historical maps, in substituting "Italian," "French," or "German" art with broader transnational "artistic zones."

Warburg was not mentioned this time. The organizers of the congress, Roosval and Paul Gerstenberg, referred instead to two other representative art historians of the time who, with different methods, enlarged art history's horizons: Heinrich Wölfflin and Josef Strzygowski. The reference to Wölfflin (under whom both Roosval and Gerstenberg studied) functioned as a source of inspiration to rethink the very idea of an extension of national boundaries. From his *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Das Problem der Stilentwicklung in der neueren Kunst* (Principles of art history: The Problem of the development of style *Italien und das deutsche Formgefühl* (Italy and the German sense of form) of 1922 to his *Die Kunst der Renaissance: Italien und das deutsche Formgefühl* (Renaissance Art: Italy and the German sense of form) that appeared in 1931—that is, two years before the Stockholm congress—Wölfflin's oeuvre was engaged with the question of the link between artists and the territories in which they operated. However, this was not due to a nationalistic attempt to pinpoint the superiority of Germanic art. It was driven, instead, by the identification of a horizon of formal possibilities determined by the visual attitudes and capacities acquired within a specific cultural milieu. This means that the very idea of "nation" was not political but cultural and was linked to the assumption of an elective affinity of formal and expressive modes within a shared culture. Therefore, German art includes for Wölfflin not only German-speaking territories but also Flanders and Holland. It seems that borders between cultures were not fixed and impermeable but rather, on the contrary, porous and crossable. In this sense, the figure of Albrecht Dürer, to which many contemporaries of Wölfflin devoted their attention, was representative. Dürer's grandiosity was established

24. "Il semble en vérité urgent, que l'on abandonne la manière surannée, mais toujours en cours, de subordonner les faits artistiques d'il y a mille années aux conditions de la géographie politique de 1933. Qu'attendons-nous pour réagir contre cette routine trop acceptée? Qu'attendons-nous pour dresser des cartes géographiques de l'art en considérant exclusivement les données artistiques et en négligeant délibérément les limites politiques?" (Roosval, *Actes du XIIIe Congrès International d'Histoire de l'art*, 29).

by the paradox of his being the “most German of German artists,” serving as a canonical artist within German art, while taking his inspiration from Italian art. Studying Dürer’s oeuvre therefore signified confronting oneself with the complexity and contradiction of every artifact, which cannot be isolated as a single object but was rather the result of cultural encounters and traditions.

From here, Gerstenberg and Roosval took their cues to abandon a nation-based art historical methodology, focusing instead on the circulation of forms and iconographical motifs together with the analysis of their material conditions within a shared culture. In this perspective, physical borders do not always serve as obstacles and barriers but can in fact be observed as contact zones.

Abstracting from political borders, Gerstenberg identified larger transnational zones characterized by a similar formal production, called “zones of similar optics” (*Zonen gemeinsamer Optik*). The resulting landscape comprises a northern territory (including Normandy, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Iceland, and Norway); Flanders and Holland; an eastern Germanic zone from East Germany to Poland; a southern Germanic area including southern Germany, Austria, and Bohemia; a Franco-German area; a Mediterranean area; and a Baltic area. Within this topography Gerstenberg identified *longue durée* modalities of the migration and propagation of styles, driven by directional vectors: if Roman and Renaissance art move from the south to the north, Gothic art moves from the west (France) to the east (Germany). Gerstenberg called these “artistic vectors” (*Kunstträger*). Wölfflin’s formalistic approach was translated by his pupil into a sociocultural approach to art, inserting the study of patterns and forms, and their revivals, within a geography of art that substitutes the notion of influence with that of circulation.

A similar search for a stylistic continuity and homogeneity within a supranational area characterized Roosval’s work. With the expression *domaine artistique*, he defined the medieval artistic landscape of the Baltic area. His work was driven by a strong interest in materiality. As an example, in his work on medieval art in the Baltic area he was considering the diffusion of the use of bricks in the architecture of the thirteenth century as symptomatic for the Baltic artistic domain.

Even if Gerstenberg and Roosval’s attempt to understand the permanence of forms was intended to rewrite a geography of art within a transnational perspective, they both resorted to terms like *caractère national* or *caractère artistique national*. The “national” is still considered as the epistemological instrument to think about continuities in the *longue durée* of the evolution of forms. Within this perspective, the reference Roosval made to Strzygowski in his introductory talk is of vital importance. As is well known, the Viennese art historian was perceived as a problematic figure by several European art historians (like Henri Focillon and Bernard Berenson) because of his

adherence to the Nazi party, expressed by the *fil rouge* of the supposed continuity of the Aryan race across various eras and spaces throughout time and space. In quoting him, Roosval was, of course, not alluding to his political orientation but rather to a methodological innovation in subverting criteria that until then were considered as given once and for all. From the perspective of the geography of art, Strzygowski had reversed what had until then been observed as the center (Rome) with the so-called peripheries (such as the Ural-Altai zone or Scandinavia).²⁵ In his pioneering work, he had not limited himself to a critique of a Eurocentric geography of art, but had rethought both art historical chronology (annihilating the division between archeology and art history) and the division between artistic genres and material supports (substituting works of art with artifacts).²⁶ Despite this *ouverture*, times were not yet ready for a truly transnational art historical practice. As well as Warburg's presence, the Rome congress was bringing a new light through the introduction of a new iconological method, which would take the form of a canon only many years later through its migration to the North American context, thanks to Panofsky and his translation into a new art historical language and methodology. Seemingly, the broadening of the field toward a proper global art history, to which the organizers of the Stockholm conference were alluding, still had to wait before becoming one of the most widely practiced methodologies for art history.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen, the metalevel of the history of art history makes possible a privileged point of view for approaching comparisons and interconnections from a transcultural vantage point. Considering different approaches to art history both synchronically and diachronically helps us to avoid the perspective of the big narration of a single art history, substituting it with a plurality of art histories. In the preceding pages, we have shown, through the analysis of some of the first international conferences for art history, how they offer a useful epistemic tool for this kind of analysis.

In particular, we selected three of the first conferences, which we consider of particular relevance. Vienna was the first one; Rome, the first international one in a literal sense; and Stockholm, a quite interesting one for the perspective of a transcultural art history, considering its focus on the geography of art.

Furthermore, we chose these examples since they had quite different transcultural approaches. The first conference, held in Vienna in 1873, was called the *Erste Internationale Congress für Kunstwissenschaft* and took place on the occasion of the fifth

25. Castelnovo and Ginzburg, *Centro e periferia*.

26. Rampley, *Vienna School of Art History*, 185; Wood, *Vienna School Reader*.

world's fair. Although countries such as Japan and China, as well as the Ottoman Empire, participated for the first time in the latter event, the sixty-eight conference attendees came almost solely from the Austro-Hungarian and German Empires. The official language was German, and the main topic was the discussion on methodological issues and the role of new media (such as photography) for art history. From the conference title, the role held by *Kunstwissenschaft* (a specific German-language approach to art history) is already clear. Moreover, the program was very explicitly oriented toward the importance of art history for building national identities.

Although the idea was to open up the floor soon to a more international art historical audience, one had to wait until 1912, when the first international conference took place in Rome on the initiative of Aby Warburg and Adolfo Venturi. Four hundred fifty speakers from seventeen different countries participated in this conference, whose theme was “The History of International Artistic Relations and in Particular of the Relationship between Italy and Other Nations throughout the Centuries,” a common topic to be analyzed from different perspectives. With his introduction and his revolutionary talk, Warburg hoped that the international art historical scene was ready for a common enterprise of working on a transcultural history of art. However, nationalist tendencies clearly emerged and cultural heritage was used as a political instrument for the narration of art history. Themes such as nationhood, race, origin, and influence were at stage as well as the juxtaposition between north and south.

The geography of art was the focus of the international conference held in Stockholm in 1933. The intent of the conference's organizers, Roosval and Gerstenberg, was to show that “national artistic characters” are not only related to political and territorial entities but should also be included in a broader anthropological and cultural context. In this sense, drawing on Wölfflin's and Strzygowski's work, they introduced the idea of “artistic zones” and replaced the concept of “influence” with that of “circulation” of forms and iconographical motives together with the analysis of their material conditions within a shared culture. This was meant to show that physical borders do not always serve as obstacles and barriers but can also be observed as contact zones. However, both Roosval's and Gerstenberg's talks were not devoid of expressions such as “national artistic character.” The seeds of a global art history were sown, but they had yet to flourish.

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