

ALOIS RIEGL (1858—1905)
AUSTRIAN ART HISTORIAN

Alois Riegl is regarded, along with Wölfflin and Panofsky, as one of the founders of art history as a discipline. All three were steeped in the tradition of German Idealist philosophy stemming from Kant and Hegel. This is perhaps especially true of Riegl, whose mission, as he saw it, was to counter an increasingly influential materialist conception of art. He associated this tendency with the name of Gottfried Semper, a writer on art theory and a prominent architect whose buildings adorn the centre of Vienna. Riegl accused the ‘Semperians’ of holding the view that style is the product of a conjunction of certain materials and techniques. Riegl countered this idea by introducing what he called the *Kunstwollen* — a will to make art in a particular style that transcends any necessities imposed by practical utility, available materials, or technologies.

Interestingly, the notoriously abstract concept of the *Kunstwollen* was first formulated in the context of the ‘decorative’ arts, in particular, debates concerning the genesis of ornamental motifs that Riegl engaged in his first book *Stilfragen: Grundlegen zu einer Geschichte der Ornamentik (Problems of Style: Foundations for a History of Ornament)* (1893). He argued that the origin of the zigzag pattern, for example, is not to be traced back to a happy accident that occurred when different coloured grasses were woven together. On the contrary, the geometric pattern tells us a great deal about the aesthetic feeling of the people who made it and, more generally, about how they framed their relationship to the world. On the same grounds, Riegl argued against the view that the imitation of nature had much to do with the appearance of new motifs; he showed how the ubiquitous acanthus leaf pattern was really a simple lotus motif elaborately evolved over generations. Ornament was thus provided with an autonomous history based on principles of design. The implications of this debate can be clearly seen in the case of architecture: if, as was claimed by some contemporary theorists of architecture, form is dictated by technology and function, then architectural forms lack all meaning. Materialist approaches to style give it a casual explanation, rather than an interpretation in terms that would link it to peoples' most fundamental attitudes.

The idea of the *Kunstwollen* is fully elaborated in Riegl's *Die spätromische Kunstindustrie nach den Funden in Osterreich-Ungarn* (1901; *Late Roman Art Industry*). Here the concept has another resonance, for the art of the Hellenistic, late Roman and early Christian periods was regarded as symptomatic of the cultural decadence of the Empire brought about by barbarian invasions. Yet if the art of each period of art's history has a distinctive *Kunstwollen*, the notion of decadence can have no place. Instead of contrasting late Roman art unfavorably with classical antiquity, Riegl searched for an immanent aesthetic governing the style. He also secured for the period a necessary place in the history of art. Its particular anti-classical tendency was a necessary step paving the way from antique to modern forms of representation. Since Riegl thought that architecture, sculpture, painting and crafts were all subject to the same aesthetic intention, the *Kunstwollen* of a period style had to be defined in highly abstract terms: ‘the appearance of objects as form and colour in the plane or in space’. Riegl held that transformations of these highly formal characteristics of art could be attributed to shifts in peoples’ sensibility or their worldview. Riegl's formalism was partly dictated by the fact that iconographical motifs have only a marginal place in architecture and craft and so cannot be considered fundamental or essential to the visual arts in general. Also, consistent with his German Idealist background, he was more interested in how something is represented rather than with what it is represented. The contours of the mind's relation to the world and their transformations are best indicated by the way motifs are taken up and treated. Accordingly, Riegl's book on late Roman art begins with a long chapter on architecture, which, along with craft, reveals the *Kunstwollen* in its purity.

Riegl's great contribution to the history of art, advanced in *Late Roman Art Industry*, is the distinction between the ‘haptic’ (or tactile) and the ‘optical’ modes of representation. His highly speculative history of art is one that plots a continuous historical evolution from one pole of this opposition to the other. In

the early stages of art's history, he proposes, people have a defensive relationship to a hostile nature and so their way of framing their ideal perceptual relation to the world in art is to keep objects tightly controlled within boundaries. Riegl regards the *Kunstwollen* determining ancient Egyptian pyramids, and art of the period generally, to be 'the creation of self-contained objects surrounded by space conceived as a void'. To put it another way, this artistic will aimed to represent something like Kant's 'thing-in-itself' prior to the dissolving effects of visual perception. Since a substantive conception of space would blur the boundary between objects and their surrounding space and thus compromise the absolute self-containedness of objects, depth had to be reduced to a minimum. This ideal object is one kept, as it were, at arm's length and is likened to the conception we gain of objects via the sense of touch. It is termed the haptic ideal so as to avoid connotations of literal touching. However, the perception of even flat, circumscribed things requires some subjective synthesis to bring the separate, haptic points of perception together to form a plane. Thought processes, even at this early stage, inevitably find their way into the object of perception and compromise its absolute integrity and objectivity. Our mental framework gradually becomes more and more entangled with the object perceived and, more importantly, this fusion is increasingly tolerated. According to Riegl's history, classical Greek art and the columned portico of the temple acknowledges to a greater extent the mind-constituted nature of the world. Relief sculpture, so typical of the period, includes some projections, soft shadows and gentle foreshortenings, but figures are still made to adhere firmly to the ground plane. This ideal contrasts with relief sculpture typical of the late Roman Empire where deep undercutting fragments and disperses the tactile plane. Instead, we perceive an optical-coloured plane. Late Roman art is thus aligned with contemporary Impressionist painting except that, in contemporary art, the object in perception finally loses all trace of its self-contained exteriority.

The *Kunstwollen* of late Roman art turns out to be the negation of tactile coherence, the opening up of the object into a surrounding space, which makes possible the Renaissance's conception of fully three-dimensional, infinite space. There are, of course, echoes of Hegel's great systematic philosophy of art in Riegl's ambitious history. The morphology of Riegl's three phases coincides, more or less, with Hegel's Symbolic, Classical and Romantic phases of art's history. But for Hegel, the purpose of art is to enable human beings to come to the gradual realization that their highest thoughts and ideals (such as God) cannot be properly represented in any of the materials of art. Art is finally absorbed in and transcended by religion and philosophy. Hegel's system obviously implies a hierarchy of value since later forms of art are closer to art history's ultimate, self-cancelling destination. Riegl wanted to adopt Hegel's rich multiple morphology of stylistic types as well as his idea of a history of art couched in terms of increasingly subjectivized models of the mind's relation to the world, but without importing the notion of progressive development. In fact, Riegl had misgivings about modern art's obliteration of any sense of a world independent of our mind-constituted conceptions and thought he detected a return to a haptic ideal in the work of some Secession artists. He seemed to be most at home with seventeenth-century Dutch art, the subject of his next book.

Das Hollandische Gruppenportrat (The Group Portraiture of Holland) (1902) carries forward many of the ideas elaborated in the book on late Roman art, but does so in a context focused on a particular genre and restricted to a narrower geographical and historical purview. It also abandons the strict formalism of the earlier book and replaces its distinction between haptic and optic styles with the terms objective and subjective. This book's major contribution to the history of art is Riegl's characterization of a type of composition whose coherence is dependent on the presence of the beholding subject. A compositional problem arises for group portraiture because it must somehow combine a number of figures in a group without involving them in any distracting and distorting action. In order for a group portrait to cohere, the figures must be shown in attentive attitudes, listening to, or looking at, one another. This would result in a weaker form of coherence, if the artist did not compensate by eliciting a heightened attentiveness on the part of the beholder: we are solicited, often by the outward gaze of depicted figures, to join and close their circle. Riegl gave the name 'external coherence' to this type of composition that makes the world of the painting imaginatively continuous with our own and contrasts it with the Italian

paradigm of 'internal coherence', which is achieved through action and subordination. In Rembrandt's *The Syndics of the Cloth Draper's Guild*, for example, the figures are immersed in a shallow circumambient space registered by the blurring effects of loose, painterly handling and their psychological relation to one another is carried by the suggestion of aural attention paid to the central figure. The spectator is called on to attend and to complete the scene by imagining a person to his or her left who is addressed by their steady gazes. The concept of attention describes both the viewer's and depicted figures' activity and is the solution to the problem of coherence in group portraiture.

Riegl sums up the meaning of the term as follows: 'Attention is passive, as it permits itself to be impressed by external objects and does not try to subdue them; at the same time it is active as it searches for the objects without intending to make them subservient to selfish desire'. An ethics of beholding is implied that values a kind of perception free of willful designs or emotional charge — a spiritual peace. Schopenhauer's hymn of praise to Dutch still-life painters seems to me a likely inspiration for Riegl's formulation of this attitude: they depict simple objects with great care and 'the aesthetic beholder does not contemplate this without emotion, for it graphically describes to him the calm, tranquil, will-free frame of mind which was necessary for contemplating such insignificant things so objectively, considering them so attentively, and repeating this attention with such thought'. This is, as it were, the 'objective' side of attention and portraiture obviously participates in this attitude when depicting individual physiognomies. But what characterizes Dutch portraiture is the depiction of attentive attitudes to the world; it depicts the subjects of attention rather than the objects.

Although Riegl tried to elaborate a history of art without aesthetic norms where every style would have an immanent aesthetic ideal and a place in the history of art, the subjects he chose and his treatment of them imply a certain ethical standpoint. In both his major books, Riegl celebrated a kind of aesthetic ideal that breaks down the self-contained separateness of objects and persons. This is achieved in early Christian art by formal means: the shallow circumambient space binds figures together. For Riegl, 'it is significant that this physical bridge between figures was built at the same time as that between persons, which we call attentiveness in the Christian sense'. While both moments in art's history make space embrace disparate elements, Dutch art of the seventeenth century perfects the representation of psychological bonds and elicits a performative attentiveness from the spectator. While the attentive person does not give up his or her identity, the attitude does imply the partial dissolution of a self-contained ego necessary for sympathy and community without coercion.

Biography

Alois Riegl was born on 14 January 1858 in Linz. He studied law, then philosophy and history, and finally art history at the University of Vienna, where he was a student of Robert Zimmermann. He was appointed Keeper of Textiles at the Österreichisches Museum für Angewandte Kunst, Vienna in 1887 and Lecturer in Art History at the University of Vienna in 1889. He wrote *Stilfragen: Grundlegen zu einer Geschichte der Ornamentik (Problems of Style: Foundations for a History of Ornament)* in 1893. He was made full professor in 1897 and appointed head of the Art Conservation Commission in 1901. He wrote *Late Roman Art Industry* in 1901, *The Group Portraiture of Holland* in 1902, and *Der moderne Denkmalkultus, sein Wesen, seine Entstehung (The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Origins and Character)* in 1903. He died on 17 January 1905 in Vienna.