

The Vienna school and Central European art history

Review of:

Jan Bakoš, *Discourses and strategies: the role of the Vienna School in shaping central European approaches to art history † related discourses*, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2013. (Slovak Academy of Sciences, Series of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, 5.)

Branko Mitrović

Ján Bakoš's latest book is a collection of eight essays that were presented at conferences or came out individually in journals.¹ Although they are published unchanged in this volume, the book is coherent and presents an erudite and comprehensive picture of the trends within and the external impact of the Vienna School of art history. The particular value of the book is its engagement with Slavic-language sources, which are often neglected in English-speaking perspectives on central Europe, as well as the author's careful analyses of the concealed political motivations that permeate much of the central European scholarship of the era and are often not obvious to a foreign observer. Bakoš is in fact careful to note that 'the zenith of research into the relationship between epistemology and ideology is almost over' (7)—but it is hard to imagine how the theoretical constructs that he is writing about, so profoundly marked by the political and ideological trends of their environments, can be separated from the context that motivated them.

The opening essay "'Humanists" versus "Relativists": Methodological Visions and Revisions within the Vienna School' presents the historical line of the ideas articulated within the Vienna School as a series of intellectual reactions and interactions between its protagonists. The story necessarily starts with Alois Riegl's approach based on the study of formal-artistic solutions, and Max Dvořák's replacement of this model with the understanding of art as an expression of ideas. Julius Schlosser established singular artworks and individual artists as the base of art history in opposition to theories of formal evolution or collective worldviews. Hans Sedlmayr's 1927 programme, as presented in his paper on the *quintessence* of Riegl's art historical method, revived the reduction of individuals' creativity to their membership of groups. In defining his approach, Sedlmayr relied on the sociological teachings of Alfred Vierkandt, but by the 1930s racially-based versions of collectivist explanations of human creativity became widespread, as one can witness in the works of Josef Strzygowski, Dagobert Frey and Karl Swoboda. Collectivist approaches were under Ernst Gombrich's attack from his very early publications, while Otto Pächt made efforts to revive Riegl's and Dvořák's legacy. In a separate essay Bakoš surveys Gombrich's repeated attacks on the collectivist position. (107-122) This essay is a valuable

¹ 'Humanists' versus 'Relativists': Methodological Visions and Revisions within the Vienna School,' 11-40; 'The Depth of the Historicity of Art and Walter Benjamin,' 41-55; 'From the Ideological Critique to the Apologia for the Market,' 69-106; 'In Defence of Liberal 'Humanism': Gombrich's Struggle against Metaphysics,' 107-122; 'From Universalism to Nationalism: Transformations of the Vienna School's Ideas in Central Europe,' 125-147; 'The Revision of a Bourgeois Idea: From a National to a Dynastic History of Art,' 148-167; 'Paths and Strategies of the Historiography of Art in Central Europe,' 168-217.

contribution that provides a comprehensive survey of the ways Gombrich conceptualized and criticized collectivist approaches to history writing through his career, from his early critique of 'hypostatized collective personalities', subsequent attacks on 'the intellectual mousetrap of dialectical materialism', the dismissal of the understanding of style as an imaginary super-artist as well as his articulations of the problem of the universality of the human cognitive apparatus.

The art history professors who were the main protagonists of the Vienna School were by definition Austro-Hungarian state employees. They had a particular role to perform: to justify, in their field of research, the existence of a state randomly concocted from territories acquired through Hapsburg expansionism, wars and marriages. The Monarchy, Bakoš summarises the situation,

had to cope with two fatal dilemmas: one, resulting from the conflict between the political dominance of the aristocracy and the growing economic power of the bourgeoisie, and the other one, resulting from the multinational nature of the Empire. (126)

The essay 'From Universalism to Nationalism: Transformations of the Vienna School's ideas in Central Europe' describes the ways Viennese art historians endeavoured to adjust their ideology to the interests of the survival of this improbable conglomerate. Bakoš observes that following the restoration of 1848,

Austrian art historical institutions did not arise as the realisation of the Enlightenment ideals. Generally speaking, their task was, on the one hand, to legitimise the restored political power of aristocracy by means of history, and on the other to contribute to the centralization of the Empire by means of the idea of a common trans-national cultural heritage. (125)

On the one hand, it was necessary to reject the universalist ideological postulates of the Enlightenment in order to justify the traditional state structures derived from feudal parochialism; on the other, to invent some kind of universalism in order to prevent local parochialisms from taking the state apart. As a result, the aim of art historical education was not *Bildung*; rather, it aimed at providing graduates with specific skills required in order to sustain bureaucracy, which was one of the vital buttresses of the regime. Bakoš describes, generation after generation, the way the scholarly assumptions of Vienna art history professors resulted from their ideological positioning. Rudolf von Eitelberger insisted on the idea of the universal trans-national cultural heritage of the Monarchy; his successor Moritz Thausing formulated the doctrine of art history as a science, separated art history from aesthetics and thus 'launched the Vienna School crusade against ahistorical normativism'. (128) Thausing's follower Franz Wickhoff argued for the plurality and equality of styles and rejected the universal nature of beauty as well as the idea of periods of decline in the history of art. (129) The turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century was dominated by Riegl; Bakoš sees Riegl's introduction of the idea of the autonomy of art and the interest in the transition from 'Antique sensuality to Medieval spiritualism, from objectivism to subjectivism, or rationalism to irrationalism' as an approach that made it possible 'to cope with the crisis of liberal optimism in a symbolic way'. (130) The understanding of Riegl's *Kunstwollen* that Bakoš advocates rejects the 'nationalist' interpretation of Riegl (i.e. the

understanding that nations are the bearers of *Kunstwollen*). (142-143) In the beginning Max Dvořák followed Riegl's 'epistemological optimism' and parted with Riegl's 'evolutionism, autonomous and formalist theoretical model' only as a result of war experiences. (131) Bakoš sees in Wickoff, Riegl and Dvořák supporters of the centralisation of the Monarchy, while he interprets Josef Strzygowski's polemics against hegemonic centralism of Mediterranean art as 'bourgeois centrifugal particularism' and thus opposed to the centralising tendencies within the Monarchy. According to this understanding, the interpretations of the historical past can take the form of the conceptions of the political future. The end of World War One brought new challenges for the methodological and ideological positioning of the school. On the one hand, one can find the proponents of the idea of art history as 'strict science' (Hans Sedlmayr, Otto Pächt, Guido von Kashnitz-Weinberg) that Bakoš understands as a reaction against *Geistesgeschichte*; on the other historians such as Dagobert Frey and Karl Maria Swoboda who endorsed racial theories and the nationalist programmes of the 1930s.

The great value of Bakoš's book is that it does not stop at surveying the positions of German-speaking art historians, but, rather, provides an all-embracing picture that includes the perspectives of the disciples of the Vienna School in the countries that emerged after the dissolution of Austro-Hungary. In recent decades, interest in non-German-speaking central Europe has almost disappeared from English-speaking scholarship, and such thoughtful and well-informed analyses of art historical research in the region are rare. After 1918, the disciples of the Vienna School became the employees of the respective governments of newly-created states and were entrusted with drawing up these countries' histories of art. They thus faced, in a new form, the dilemma between universalism and particularism. Bakoš's judgment of the impact of the Vienna School in this situation is generally favourable: formalism made it possible for these protagonists to look for genetic links; the causal approach to explanation offered the opportunity to identify the place of a particular phenomenon in a genetic chain while the emphasis on the method prevented them from an easy relapse into romantic nationalism. As he puts it, "This is why "genetic formalism", in contrast to "*Geistesgeschichte*", had the strongest impact on the development of the majority of national historiographies in Central Europe between the two World Wars." (134) At the same time, this description of the impact of the Vienna School outside the German-speaking area implicitly qualifies the use of the term 'cosmopolitan' that Bakoš often uses in relation to the positions taken by (some of) the protagonists of the Vienna School: its impact pertained to Catholic countries and it is really *Catholic* cosmopolitanism (like that of the empire that created it) that Bakoš is talking about. Its limited influence in non-Catholic lands that gravitated towards Austro-Hungary (Serbia, Romania) as well as Russia (before 1914 many Russians studied abroad) or even Protestant German-speaking lands is remarkable. It is also indicative that, in spite of the huge Jewish contribution to the intellectual life of Vienna, Jewish protagonists start to appear only very late in the history of the Vienna School. All this says much about the political role of the School within a specific Catholic project for central Europe and certainly emphasizes the importance of Bakoš's approach based on the political role of art-historical ideas and their implications.

The essays 'The Revision of a Bourgeois Idea: From a National to a Dynastic History of Art' (148-167) and 'Paths and Strategies of the Historiography of Art in Central Europe' (168-217) depict the influence of the Vienna School in non-Germanic central Europe and follow this influence well into the decades after World War Two. The quarrel between Riegl's and Strzygowski's camp ('causalists and cosmopolitans versus essentialists and nationalists', as Bakoš puts it) continued in central European national historiographies after

the breakup of Austro-Hungary. (186) The general trend that Bakoš describes consisted in the effort to avoid chauvinist nationalism by replacing the notion of expression with that of patronage and art production. Here too, it is not hard to recognise certain ideological and political needs behind methodological positioning: 'Art history seems unable to escape from its instrumental and notoriously affirmative role as far as its relationship to politics is concerned.' (166) Central-European art historians thus had to react against the nationalistic trends of German scholarship of the 1930s, struggle for survival in the 1940s, and then position their approaches in relation to the various phases of Soviet-era Marxist internationalism. The essays describe the various stages of the resulting debates, such as the re-evaluation of the concept of *Kunstlandschaft*, (152-153) the introduction of artistic mega-regions (Jan Białostocki) and their relationship to dynastic histories (207-211), or Robert Suckale's important formulations of trans-national models of cultural transmission in central Europe (214-217). The essays provide a panorama on various efforts to deal with the problems that derive from the institutionally-imposed expectations to write the histories of 'the art of' regions, groups, contexts, ethnicities—as if these conventional entities, rather than individual artists, can create art. Vasari, one is tempted to think, knew it better, but he was lucky to work for the Medicis and not for the philistine Hapsburg bureaucrats and their progeny.

Bakoš's is a remarkable book and it will certainly find enthusiastic readers among those art historians who are interested in the history of their discipline. Many of the topics and debates that the book addresses are still very little known among English-speaking specialists. The perspectives on non-German speaking central Europe are particularly valuable in the moment when interest in this part of the world seems to have utterly vanished following its absorption into the European Union. The book will certainly promote valuable awareness of a corpus of intellectual contributions that come from this part of the world.

Branko Mitrović received his doctorates in architectural history and philosophy. He is the author (or co-author) of six books and has been the recipient of the Humboldt Research Award. He teaches at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology.

brankomitrovic@hotmail.com

Central European History - Monica Black, Mirna Zakic. Central European History offers articles, review essays, and book reviews that range widely through the history of Germany, Austria, and other German-speaking regions of Central Europe from the medieval era to the present. All topics and approaches to history are welcome, whether cultural, social, political, diplomatic, intellectual, economic, and military history, as well as historiography and methodology. Contributions that treat new fields, such as post-1945 and post-1989 history, maturing fields such as gender history, and less-represented fields such as medieval history and the history of Studies in Central European Histories is a peer-reviewed book series that presents original work and translations of the histories of the German-speaking and closely related peoples of Central Europe between the Middle Ages and the present. It aims to bring forward new and neglected perspectives on important subjects and issues in the histories of these peoples. The series is designed for advanced students and scholars of German and European history in the early modern and modern periods. General Editors: David M. Luebke and Celia Applegate. Brill Open offers you the choice to make your resear... A Story of Central European Subjectivity. Volume 59. By: Erika Quinn. Culture & History. Environment & Leisure. Health & Social Services. Japanese School in Vienna. Lycee Francais. Mayflower Christian Academy. Svenska Skolan / Swedish School. The American International School Vienna. Vienna Elementary School / Vienna European School. Vienna International School. Contact for this page: wien.at-English Edition Contact form. © wien.at: Vienna City Administration, Rathaus, A-1082 Wien € Credits and disclaimer € Privacy.