

Art History in the Time of Nationalism

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Between the start of the Franco-Prussian War and the rise to power of Adolf Hitler, art historians in Germany and France were studying the Italian Renaissance and the Gothic monuments of the Middle Ages. Passini's recent book analyses the role of French and German nationalism in the shaping of art history.

Reviewed: Michaela Passini, *La fabrique de l'art national: Le nationalisme et les origines de l'histoire de l'art en France et en Allemagne, 1870-1933*, Paris, Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2012

In comparison to many areas of humanistic or social scientific inquiry, the history of art emerged late. The reasons for this are many and varied; but one consequence is that art historiography, the history of art history, is a much newer field than the parallel histories of literary criticism or history proper. It was only with the so-called new art history of the 1970s and 1980s (now fully institutionalized) that art historiography emerged as anything more than an occasional subject for panegyric, obituary, or autobiography. But Michaela Passini's book makes clear that art historiography has now come into its own; it is rhetorically and intellectually sophisticated in ways that many of its predecessors were not.

Nationalism and Art History

The subtitle of Passini's book is an accurate guide to its subject. Since her study is chronologically circumscribed by the start of the Franco-Prussian War and the rise to power of Adolf Hitler, it is no surprise that conflict is a crucial theme as she studies the role of French and German nationalism in shaping the discipline of art history. It would certainly be easy to write a simplistic history of art history in that period along those lines. Such a history would feature, for example, Émile Mâle's *L'art allemand et l'art français du moyen age*, a book whose tone is predictable from its original publication date of 1916-1917, in the midst of the First World War. That prediction is confirmed by virtually every one of the book's sentences; the first can stand for the whole: "It is difficult to speak of German art."¹ Passini does not ignore books as crass as Mâle's or the German response to it,² but her study is much more complex and nuanced.

¹ "Il faut faire un grand effort pour parler de l'art allemand." Cited from the 4th edition, Paris, 1923, p. 5.

² *Studien über die deutsche Kunst* (= *Monatshefte für Kunstwissenschaft*, vol. 9, 1916).

Complex and nuanced, but also admirably clear. The book, if a non-native speaker of French is permitted to judge, is exceptionally clearly written, perhaps because Passini composed it in Italian (it was originally a thesis from the Scuola Normale Superiore of Pisa) and then translated it herself. Much more significant is the clarity with which she has structured her presentation. To gauge the degree to which French and German nationalisms affected French and German art history, Passini restricts herself to only two topics. Their number may be few, but they are brilliantly chosen; both are crucial to the history of art history and both allow her to showcase her material in the best possible way. The book's first half looks at how the art historians Passini studies understood the Renaissance. This is an excellent litmus test; not only was that field the discipline's most prestigious for most of the art historians about whom Passini writes, but because the Renaissance was usually thought to have been centered in Italy, it was not a simple subject for nationalistically-minded art historians north of the Alps.

Every historian who, between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, wrote a history of French or German art in the Renaissance and modern eras was obliged to take a stand, more or less explicit, on the role of Italy in that history. It was against the norm of Italian art and the paradigmatic quality of the historical narrative about it that a "national" art history was established in France and Germany.³ (113)

"Taking a stand" broached crucial questions. Were there national versions of the Renaissance in France and Germany? If there was a French Renaissance, as many of the authors whom Passini studies believed, was it somehow more Mediterranean and thus closer to the Italian Renaissance than a German version? If that was the case, was this due to racial or cultural similarities between France and Italy, or some other cause?

Art as a Sequence of Styles

Passini explores these issues by looking in detail at selected texts by a range of art historians; she also analyzes a few museum exhibitions. She thus considers Louis Courajod's attempt to define a Franco-Flemish renaissance that predated the Italian and Henry Thode's claim (contra Burckhardt) that the Renaissance was primarily Christian and thus not a sharp break from the medieval heritage that preceded it. Such arguments begged the crucial question about periodization. Did styles come and go according to a pattern? Was it right to assign stylistic changes positive and negative valences or should the history of art be non-evaluative and consider each era on its own merits? These were the crucial art-historical questions of the day (the now-dominant cultural-historical method associated with Warburg and Panofsky was still on the horizon). Passini interestingly argues that Courajod was one of the key figures in bringing about what she calls *dénormativisation* (24), for her a precondition for a true history of art. By this term

³ "Tout historien qui, entre la fin du XIXe siècle et le début du suivant, s'est engagé dans l'écriture d'une histoire de l'art allemand ou français à la Renaissance et aux temps modernes, a été obligé de prendre position, de manière plus ou moins explicite, sur le rôle tenu par l'Italie dans cette histoire. C'est contre la valeur normative de l'art italien et contre la qualité paradigmatique de récit historique de l'art italien que s'est mise en place, dans les pays comme la France et l'Allemagne, une histoire de l'art 'national.'"

she means the historicist claim that the history of art is a sequence of styles, each with its own characteristics and value, not a series of rises to and falls from some ideal. Wölfflin's famous claim that in the history of art "not everything is possible at all times" is the motto of *dénormativisation*.⁴ Until now, this position has been almost universally associated with German-speaking art historians (especially Riegl and Wölfflin); it will be interesting to see if art historiography accepts Passini's bold attribution of it to the Frenchman Courajod, up until now a relatively minor figure.

The second half of Passini's book shifts the geographical and chronological focus from the Italian Renaissance to the French and German Middle Ages; in it, Passini studies the understanding of the Gothic between 1870 and 1933. Again, the choice of subject, while relatively narrow, is inspired. The chief monuments of the Gothic were located in France and Germany. Some of them, notably Strasbourg cathedral, even moved across the Franco-German border during the period Passini studies. Such literal cases of a building shifting sides were rare, but the two countries had long argued about which gave birth to the Gothic, which was regarded as the most prestigious and distinguished northern European style and thus parallel (or opposed) to Greco-Roman classicism and its Renaissance avatar. In an art-historical age in which style was the dominant issue, the Gothic was a rich topic. Was it basically a classical style or fundamentally anti-classical? Was it coherent or was the late Gothic a different (perhaps characteristically German) *Sondergotik* opposed to the classical French high Gothic? Speculations along this line could lead to excesses as bad as Mâle's, for example Worringer's pernicious (and unhelpful) claim that the northern Baroque was "the awakening in a different guise of the suppressed Gothic will" (184-185).⁵ The issue was not just academic, but trenchant; the Gothic was implicated directly in the political and military conflict between France and Germany, notably in the attacks on Reims cathedral during the First World War. Passini has a fascinating chapter on the ways in which art was used as a source of propaganda during that conflict, for example in the 1916 Paris *Exposition des oeuvres d'art mutilées ou provenant des régions dévastées par l'ennemi*. Passini's rediscovery of this little-known but telling event is typical of her thorough research.

This section of the book concludes with a detailed account of Henri Focillon's characterization, at the end of the period Passini discusses, of the art of the Middle Ages as an "art of the West," that is, an art transcending the borders drawn by French and German nationalism. Although Passini does not point this out, Focillon's idea had a long historiographical run; it was powerful and useful in the 1930s, when he conceived it, but became even more so after the Second World War. This *Abendland-ideologie* (as it was called in post-War Germany) did not draw a line between France and Germany, but saw western Europe as a coherent cultural whole. During the Cold War, this ideology provided a powerful historical pedigree for a unified Western Europe and manifested itself in such post-War art-historical events as the 1965 Aachen exhibition devoted to

⁴ "Nicht alles ist zu allen Zeiten möglich," Heinrich Wölfflin, *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, Munich, 1915, p. 11; English cited from Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*, trans. M. D. Hottinger, New York, n.d., p. ix.

⁵ "le réveil sous un masque étranger de la volonté gothique opprimé."

Charlemagne/Karl der Grosse, the quintessential historical figure to straddle the modern Franco-German border.

The European Scene of Art History

Set into the bigger picture of modern European history, the overarching claims of Passini's book are not surprising; rather, they repeat some of the most familiar narratives of modernity: rising nationalism, and increasing professionalization. The two were linked. The period about which Passini writes saw the construction and institutionalization of art history as a university discipline in many parts of Europe, but also saw France and Germany each develop its own characteristic and distinctive academic *habitus*. Passini's contemporary text, by contrast, stands very firmly under the rubric of post-War European integration: an Italian thesis published in French in a series sponsored by the German *Forum* for art history in Paris. But do we live in a new age of European integration? And was nationalism quite as powerful a force in the past as Passini would have it?

The preface to her book, by the French art historian Roland Recht, has some very tart words for Recht's French colleagues. He accuses them of having too little knowledge of German art-historical scholarship (he makes parallel claims about German scholars' knowledge of French art history, but in a more tempered fashion) and sees Passini's fine book as a sign that times are changing. But there have been past examples of Franco-German cross-fertilization and they are telling. Consider the concept of *habitus*. Passini borrows the term from the late Pierre Bourdieu, a leading French social scientist. Bourdieu's concept is now part of the stock-in-trade of modern academia, but few know that he derived the idea from his reading of a text on Gothic architecture (of all things!) by (of all people!) the leading art historian of the 20th century, Erwin Panofsky, a Jew forced by Hitler from his native Germany into American exile. Panofsky, in turn, borrowed the term from medieval scholastic thinkers writing in what was for them a universal language, Latin, and in an era in which neither art history nor nationalism can be said to have played a role.⁶ *Habent sua fata libelli* and Passini's fine book helps, through its close and careful examination of the formation of art history as a discipline in France and Germany show how some of these fates came about.

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⁶ The story of the relationship between Bourdieu and Panofsky has not been fully traced. See Bruce Holsinger, "Indigeneity: Panofsky, Bourdieu, and the Archaeology of the *Habitus*" in his *The Premodern Condition: Medievalism and the Making of Theory*, Chicago, 2005, pp. 94-113. Holsinger's text is an important first step, but is not authoritative; in particular, he frequently credits Bourdieu with ideas that are, in fact, Panofsky's.