Whither the Study of German Art?

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Art historians in German studies face a contradiction. On the one hand, our field is thoroughly Germanic. The founding intellects of art history as a discipline are virtually all German or German-speaking: Erwin Panofsky, Heinrich Wölfflin, Alois Riegl, and the list goes on. No student at the undergraduate or graduate level can escape contending with the methodological and theoretical insights these founders offered to the field over a century ago. Moreover, their works continue to be mined even as the objects of study and questions that motivate art history have become interdisciplinary and global in recent decades: Panofsky is still invoked in studies of Peruvian iconography, Wölfflin is still relevant to analyses of formal change in the art of Waziristan, and Riegl still offers insight into the material culture of Romania and its connections to broader international and transnational flows of artistic production and reception.

So the field is root and branch Germanic. But while art history relies on the theoretical insights of its German-speaking founders, it perennially proves itself less interested in the study of German art. For large swaths of its history, the discipline has negatively assessed Germany's premodern and early modern artistic achievements as "barbaric," or in less incendiary terms "unclassic." Dürer usually stands out as an exception to this assessment. It should be noted, however, that his redemptive status frequently owes a great deal to his Italianate artistic leanings.

When we turn to Germany's artistic achievements of the modern era, the charge is typically that they are "derivative." Liebermann, so it goes, is Monet with a time lag. Expressionism might be exempt in this regard, given its wide recognition as Germany's most original, vanguard contribution to the history of modern art. Even here, though, the work of Kirchner, Nolde, and others fails to escape the pall of the derivative entirely. In its long historiography, some have adjudged Expressionism (rightly or wrongly and usually as part of a nationalist agenda) as simply a more angst-ridden variant of the subjective subject matter and bravura use of color seen in the works of Van Gogh, Gauguin, and the Fauves. And what about Germany's other artistic heritage of the modern era—its imperial, Nazi, and East German manifestations? Despite years of revisionism, art history remains hard pressed to consider this

other heritage as anything more than "nonart" propaganda. As a result, the discipline tends to rule it out of court entirely.

I exaggerate, of course. There are myriad examples of publications, conferences, and college art association panels that prove to the contrary that German art has a viable place in the discipline. But in this moment of curricular "streamlining," "rubrics," and "outcomes assessment"—not to mention the shuttering of German departments—the case has become if anything harder to make that students should devote more time to Beckmann than to Picasso. One could claim that Beckmann's vivid palette and sonorous imagery rival or surpass similar endeavors in the art of his School of Paris contemporaries. But few would argue that Picasso's meditations on space and the building blocks of representation were anything other than seismic in their impact on art, perception, and what we have come to think of as "the modern." From an art-historical standpoint, Picasso is simply more important than Beckmann. If one has to choose, Beckmann is therefore more likely to get the axe.

In 1993, Hans Belting explored Germany's historically "troublesome relationship" to its art.[1] "Troublesome" is also a good term to use in describing art history's relationship to German art in general. And why is this? The standard favoring of Italian, French, and American contributions to (Western) art's history over German ones naturally has a good deal to do with history writ large. To state the obvious, the value ascribed to German art has not been enhanced by the country's instigation of two cataclysmic world wars. The significance of Germany's culture in general has proven difficult for the world community to perceive and to countenance as a result. At various times and in various ways, ethics and not aesthetics has therefore dominated responses to German art. For some, validating German art *as* art might be construed as tantamount to excusing the country of its heinous acts. According to this logic, a nation and a people capable of such acts must be understood as incapable of producing art.

In more prosaic, disciplinary terms, art history's troublesome relationship with German art also has to do with this art's penchant for "extra-aesthetic" concerns. From the standpoint of Alfred Barr, Clement Greenberg, and other founders of modernist criticism in the 1930s and 40s, extra-aesthetic concerns are all those that deviate from formal innovation and the means and methods of art making in the narrowest sense. And though their modernist criterion has undergone waves of revision since the Cold War, it still holds tremendous sway in determining what makes it into the canon, what gets taught in the classroom, and what finds its way to the museum wall. German art's extra-aesthetic meanderings have entailed a frequently promiscuous entwinement with life, namely politics, literature, mass culture, and other factors not—from the perspective of modernist criticism—intrinsic to art. This is not to say that claims of formalist autonomy can be considered any less promiscuously entwined

with life. What typically distinguishes German art from that of France, for example, is that it simply declares these liaisons more openly. Given German art's permeability in this regard, the interdisciplinary bent of German Studies as an association and the *German Studies Review* as a publishing venue make them in many respects an ideal forum for historians of German art.

But we are art historians, not historians, not political scientists, and not literary or film scholars devoted to the study of things German. So what can and should we as art historians bring to German Studies? And what can and should we do about the current state of German art in our classrooms?

The shortest and perhaps best answer to the first question is simply "more of the same." Art historians have (so far as I am aware) always had a small, yet outstanding presence in German Studies conferences and publications. Naturally, art history could have an even greater presence. Most important, we offer to this interdisciplinary setting precisely what we do: that is provide historical analysis and critique of art relevant to German studies. In the words of Wolf Lepenies, Germany has through most of its modern history been prone to "the seduction of culture" and a particular reverence for artistic achievements of the highest order.[2] To surrender the specificity of art-historical analysis or to maroon confrontation with Germany's painting, sculpture, architecture, and other high arts in an undifferentiated sea of visual culture therefore strikes me as missing something important about the object of study in German Studies, namely Germany.

In this regard, what is important and salutary about the interdisciplinary framework of German Studies is not, from my point of view, that art historians should feel compelled to abandon or transform their area of expertise in unrecognizable ways. On the contrary, I believe this framework calls instead for art historians' greater and deeper investment in art, its history, and the discipline's theoretical underpinnings and interpretive methodologies. The high arts can then appropriately be put in tension with other media and other forms of historical and critical dialogue, in order to illuminate all the more closely the hierarchies, exclusions, continuities, and fissures that have made up and continue to make up German culture.

And now I turn to my second question: what can and should we do about the current state of German art in our classrooms? This, of course, is a question not just about the everyday routine of showing slides, devising exams, and mentoring undergraduates through papers on the subject. It is also about the continued life of the field, from the training of graduate students to the desiderata of scholarly publication. Given the constraints I mentioned earlier (streamlining, rubrics, and assessments), hard choices are being made about what does and does not count in the fundamentals of the discipline and what knowledge is to be passed on to future generations.

Those early German-speaking founders of the discipline—Panofsky, Wölfflin, and Riegl—were all about deciphering art's role in mediating between mind and world. But

this philosophical and interpretive project can be applied to any art, really, including that of Peru, Waziristan, and Romania. So what is so special about German art? Now that globalism has relativized the Western canon, shouldn't German art (which has always had something of a "troublesome" place within that canon anyway) simply move aside and make way for other artistic traditions? Is it simply not as important, or no longer relevant, in an expanding arena of possibilities for art-historical investigation and analysis?

At the risk of sounding like an unrepentant nationalist, my answer to these questions is no. I should clarify, however, that I have no sentimentality about Germany. I also disdain nationalism, though I do think pronouncements concerning the death of the nation-state with the dawn of globalism are premature. One need only look at recent events in Europe to see that the nation-state is alive, well, and kicking, despite, or perhaps because of, EU efforts to forge common governance. Nonetheless, for a historical discipline like my own, ideas and realities of nation have been and will remain a central category of analysis for a long time to come.

So why should German art remain in the classroom? In short: precisely because it is troublesome. Moreover, neglect of German art's troublesome character points to something more than simply neglect of Germany's art. For better and worse, Germany and its culture have occupied a central place in the history of a modernizing world, both its potential and its crimes. To exclude Germany's important lesson from our consideration of art strikes me as part and parcel of a historical amnesia we can ill afford. For modernists in particular, it is also to overlook crucial aspects of the very modernity on which modern art depends. To come back to my earlier Beckmann-versus-Picasso standoff: To exclude Beckmann from art history runs the risk of losing more than just a slide comparison. It brings with it the peril of losing connection with fundamental issues that have defined who and what we are today as modern people. And, as always, we confront an uncertain future that will require enlightened circumspection about where we have been and where we need to go. In my view, Germany and its art are too important to surrender in the face of this deeply "extra-aesthetic" imperative.

So should I go on teaching my German Expressionism course the same way I have for the last twenty years? My answer to this question is again no. It is especially no if the main goal of such a course is to recount a nationally and temporally circumscribed chronology of Germany's history of expressionist art. (I should confess that I now offer a course precisely like this, so my preaching is directed as much at myself as it is to other historians of German art.) The times require a sober reckoning with what continues to make Germany and its art relevant and important to our current and future students. For German art to remain in the classroom, other approaches will likely need to be explored.

In this regard, outstanding scholars and publications have long demonstrated that

Germany's art can be situated productively in an expanded field of analysis. That expanded field has explored German art's imbrication in topics ranging from empire and nation building to revolution, colonialism, the emergence of mass media, evolving class and gender relations, and state terror, to name just a few themes. These accounts help to set German art within an international or transnational frame of reference that also serves to illuminate more sharply its particular and at times distinctive aesthetic character.

In other words, examples of expanded-field thinking are out there. Translating them into pedagogy, however, may require retooling and perhaps even the restructuring of what it is we do. This may well involve more collaborative teaching and publishing, especially in those instances where a broadened frame of reference entails a greater range of temporal and geographic scholarly expertise. Indeed, some of this pedagogical and scholarly rethinking could well be undertaken in German Studies panels devoted to the subject and by contributions to this journal. In these ways, German art's troublesome character can continue to prove productive. It compels us to rethink in creative ways the foundational premises of what we do and how we do it in light of the challenges now facing us as scholars and teachers of German art.

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Notes

1. Hans Belting, *Die Deutschen und Ihre Kunst: Ein Schwieriges Erbe* (Munich: C. H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1993). English edition: *The Germans and Their Art: A Troublesome Relationship*, trans. Scott Kleager (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).
2. Wolf Lepenies, *The Seduction of Culture in German History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).