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Neutral observer or institutionalized voice? Willibald Sauerländer and German art history after 1945

Review of:

Willibald Sauerländer und die Kunstgeschichte, Franz Hefele/Ulrich Pfisterer (eds.), Passau: Dietmar Klinger Verlag 2022 (Veröffentlichungen des Zentralinstituts für Kunstgeschichte in München 54). ISBN 978-3-86328-186-1

Arnold Witte

In 2011, Willibald Sauerländer's long and rich career spurred a number of international colleagues to honor his contributions to the field by holding a conference in his name. The edited collection of papers that resulted from that conference, *Gothic Art and Thought in the Later Medieval Period: Essays in Honor of Willibald Sauerländer*, contained contributions from US scholars, as well as those from France, Germany and Spain, and highlighted the relationship between the arts and political, intellectual and religious history. In opening up the discussion to perspectives other than style, it showed the breadth of Sauerländer's methodological innovations in the study of the medieval period.[1] The volume which is the subject of this review is also the outcome of a conference, held in 2018 at the Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte in Munich, dedicated to the memory of its then recently deceased former director. This book, however, discusses Sauerländer's contribution to our discipline within a broader chronological scope, also encompassing his research on Baroque, eighteenth-century and modern art. One further difference is that several contributions provide an oblique perspective on the development of art history within the post-war context of the German Federal Republic; Sauerländer exemplifies the position of an academic trying to wrestle free from the unwanted legacy of the previous generation who built their careers under the Nazi regime.

The volume under discussion oscillates between presenting Sauerländer's academic achievements as resulting from personal and intrinsic motivations and constructing them as shaped by external, sociopolitical circumstances. Apart from the biographical contributions by Ulrich Pfisterer and Pierre Rosenberg, almost all chapters implicitly or explicitly highlight how Sauerländer distanced himself from the approaches of his predecessors – especially the formalistic discussion of objects – and embraced new methods of interpretation, such as iconography and the consideration of cultural, political and religious contexts. While Wolfgang Augustyn views his discussion of Romanesque art primarily as a methodical renewal born of a rejection of pre-war approaches, Jacqueline Jung interprets his study of Gothic art more expressly as a form of 'anti-nationalism'. She highlights how his international

[1] Colum Hourihane (ed.), *Gothic art and thought in the later medieval period: essays in honor of Willibald Sauerländer*, Princeton/University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011.

network – with a focus on his sojourns in the USA – enabled him to develop a comparative approach in which French and German art were seen as engaged in a continuous process of artistic exchange. When he did discuss German art, he followed an explicitly transnational line of reasoning, looking for parallels beyond Germany's borders, as in the case of the Naumburg *Stifterfiguren* or Bamberg Cathedral.[2]

Andreas Beyer illuminates the same phenomenon from a slightly different viewpoint when he discusses how Sauerländer followed a trajectory typical of his German peers in choosing a research theme beyond the borders of his own nation. Italy was the preferred *Wahlheimat* for most, as it allowed them to avoid discussion of the antagonism that had characterised Franco-German relations since World War I, and which had manifested itself in the art historical debate about whether the roots of Gothic architecture were French or German.[3] Sauerländer, however, not only dared to enter this intellectual minefield, but also acknowledged that political tensions could only be resolved within a broader context, such as that of the European Union. From this perspective, he was cautious, if not pessimistic, in his assessment of whether the Deutsches Forum für Kunstgeschichte, established in 1997 in Paris, could resolve this problem – as a child of his time, he preferred a more transnational approach to both political and academic issues.

Due to his uneasiness about the appropriation of period style in nationalistic discourses, Sauerländer became ever more cautious with this central art-historical concept, as Michael Zimmermann explains in his contribution. It led him to reflect upon the terminology and refute its use in the context of 'period style', resulting in the famous 1983 article in *Art History*, 'From Stilus to Style'. It is also from this starting point of moving away from stylistic approaches that Henry Keazor elucidates Sauerländer's analysis of Poussin's *Four Seasons* series and Rubens' altarpieces, showing how he drew on literary theory (and also on theology) in his iconographical analysis of these paintings. This exploration of the advantages and limits of iconography is related to the post-war popularity of Panofsky's method, which is here explained as a search for spiritual content after the catastrophe of 1945. As Ulrich Rehm explains elsewhere, however, we can also read this as an explicit acknowledgement of a method that had been side-lined in Nazi Germany,

[2] Willibald Sauerländer, 'Reims und Bamberg. Zu Art und Umfang der Übernahmen', *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 39, 1976, 167-92; idem, 'Integrated fragments and the unintegrated whole – scattered examples from Reims, Strasbourg, Chartres, and Naumburg' in *Artistic integration in Gothic buildings* (eds. Virginia Chieffo Raguin and Kathryn Brush), Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995, 153-166 and 323-325; and idem, 'Die Naumburger Stifterfiguren: Rückblick und Fragen' in idem, *Cathedrals and Sculpture*, vol. 2, London: Pindar Press, 1999-2000, 593-711.

[3] Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, *Toward a Geography of Art*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004, pp. 86 and 378 note 78, and Nicola Lambourne, 'Production versus Destruction: Art, World War I and Art History', *Art History* 22, 1999, 347-63.

and therefore as a conscious attempt by Sauerländer to interrupt the continuity with pre-war German art history.[4]

Given the volume's tendency to discuss the interdependence of art history and contemporary politics, Thomas Gaehtgens' biographically oriented article on Sauerländer's studies of eighteenth-century French art could have resulted in a different conclusion. Gaehtgens sees in this choice of Enlightenment art as a subject a heightened personal involvement expressed through enthusiastic formulations: 'the author tried to personally participate in the intellectual and social debates of this period, and to bridge the gap with our own time'.[5] The context of this volume might suggest an alternative interpretation of this issue: namely, that it was the inherently critical position that the thinkers of the Enlightenment Age took to romantic notions of nationalism that made Sauerländer choose this epoch as a field of study. This would be consistent with Peter Geimer's contribution to the volume, which shows that Sauerländer remained keenly interested in politics, even when he was well into his nineties, and his allegiance to the rational never wavered.

Although the volume thus frames Sauerländer's career by drawing into the discussion the post-war interdependence of politics and academia, not all the authors focus explicitly on this specific point. Furthermore, it glosses over one intriguing issue. By the 1960s and 1970s, other scholars were openly criticizing German art history under the spell of National Socialism – as Martin Warnke and Berthold Hinz did in their famous session 'Das Kunstwerk zwischen Wissenschaft und Weltanschauung' (The work of art between science and ideology) at the Deutsche Kunsthistorikertag in 1970, which denounced the continuity of pre-1945 art historical positions in post-war Germany, both in terms of the methods applied and the art historical terminology used.[6] As such, they demanded the denazification of the discipline, which only slowly took place. Sauerländer, who was half a generation older than Warnke, chose a more implicit response, adopting French research subjects, spending the years between 1955 and 1959 in Paris, and traveling regularly to the United States from 1961 onwards. He did, however, maintain his distance from concepts that had become contaminated and the methodologies underpinning them. All the while, he ascended to important positions in German art historical institutions, such as director of the Zentralinstitut.

Sauerländer thus remained safe within institutional and academic circles, posing his critique primarily through methodological reflections, and advancing even those quite tentatively. For those working in the field in the 1970s, he therefore represented a traditional, even conservative voice – as became clear upon his election as president of the Verband Deutscher Kunsthistoriker (German Art

[4] Ulrich Rehm, 'Vom Sehen zum Lesen. Eine Fallstudie zur ikonologischen Praxis der Nachkriegszeit' in *Kunstgeschichte nach 1945. Kontinuität und Neubeginn in Deutschland*, (ed. Nikola Doll), Cologne: Böhlau, 2006, 74.

[5] P. 108 in the present volume.

[6] Martin Warnke, *Das Kunstwerk zwischen Wissenschaft und Weltanschauung*, Guterloh: Bertelsmann Kunstverlag, 1970. See also Christine Tauber, 'Relektüren: der Kunsthistorikertag 1970 in Köln und seine Weltanschauungen' in *Kunstchronik* 75/8, 2022, 398-401.

Historical Association) in 1972.[7] In 1970, Warnke and Hinz had actually included citations from Sauerländer's publications, demonstrating (in an anonymized form) that at that time his rhetoric was still modelled on that of the generation of art historians who had worked under the Nazi regime. It is, in this light, significant that his more critical reflections on the discipline's historiography, and his own position within it, started to appear in print from the 1990s onwards. In other words, it was only when he was no longer a representative of an institution, but had taken on the role of public intellectual writing for German newspapers such as the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, that he was willing to admit that his early work had partially been an 'escape into *Scheinpositivismus*', and that he had been slow to acknowledge the development of new discourses in art history, such as that of New Art History.[8] And even then, he avoided any direct confrontation with his own role within the scholarship of the period by choosing the rhetoric of the neutral observer. As this volume suggests, when one reads between the lines, this was a conscious strategy of adapting to new tendencies, while not openly resisting the previous generation, of whom quite a few – for example, Sedlmayr, to name but one – had regained their positions of power in post-1945 Germany.

Arnold Witte is associate professor at the department of Arts and Culture at the University of Amsterdam. His publications focus on institutional aspects of artistic patronage in a transhistorical perspective, and deal with seventeenth-century Italy, especially ecclesiastical patrons and the functioning of religious art, and with contemporary art and the role this plays in the corporate world. He also publishes regularly about the historiography of art history, in particular the way the Italian Baroque has been studied in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century.

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[7] *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 18 April 1972; see pp. 10 and 179 in the present volume.
[8] Willibald Sauerländer, 'Zersplitterte Erinnerung' in *Kunsthistoriker in eigener Sache*, (ed. Martina Sitt), Berlin: Reimer, 1990, 318.