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German Baroque and 'Sonderrokoko': canonising and 'nationalising' the arts in Germany during the long nineteenth century

Review of:

Ute Engel – *Stil und Nation. Barockforschung und deutsche Kunstgeschichte (ca. 1830-1930)*, Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2018, 798 pp, hbk, € 128,- ISBN 978-3-7705-5492-8

Arnold Witte

The near completion of the Berlin Stadtschloß could be interpreted simply as an indication of what present-day Germany intends to 'repair' in the urban fabric of its 'new' capital, but its ideological significance cannot be explained without recourse to the historiography of art in Germany. Indeed, the reconstruction is due at least in part to the building's canonisation – and that of its architect, Andreas Schlüter – during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and how the Stadtschloß came to be associated with national identity during this period. Both aspects are placed in a broader perspective in Ute Engel's recent publication *Stil und Nation.*

Barockforschung und deutsche Kunstgeschichte (ca. 1830-1930). This monumental study (counting almost 800 pages) discusses two main issues. The first is how German art historians discovered, defined, and canonised seventeenth- and eighteenth-century German art and architecture. The second is the more general methodical and conceptual approach to the art of the Baroque and Rococo periods. In this study, we regularly encounter the Hohenzollern residence; appreciation for it varied in tone but gradually became more positive. Kugler, in 1842, lamented the absence of a real 'German school' in eighteenth-century art, but saw Schlüter's architecture as a positive exception; in 1855, Wilhelm Lübke appreciated the 'simple forms' of this building as a positive contrast to the despicable, 'degenerate', Italian Baroque, whilst in 1889, Cornelius Gurlitt (the first to appreciate Baroque architecture in its own right) stated that Schlüter's architectural abilities were manifold, but unable to keep up with his 'agitated imagination'. In 1926, Georg Dehio still reproached Schlüter for 'defects in the design', but at the same time considered his style heroic and deemed that the Stadtschloß had a peculiar attraction; in 1912, Wilhelm Pinder outright compared Schlüter's artistic genius with that of Michelangelo.

In her new book, Ute Engel offers many examples of monuments and artists rediscovered and canonised during the period 1830-1930. She also discusses the changing interpretation of these works by a large number of authors and places their ideas in the broader context of the re-evaluation by German-speaking scholars of the Italian Baroque and (to a lesser extent) French Rococo in this same period. Thus, the book not only offers a critical examination of canonisation processes, but also deals with methodological developments in the discipline of art history as a whole, *and* discusses familiar art historians in the context of their lesser-known

colleagues who wrote about the period and/or these particular subjects. From the latter perspective, this book goes beyond the names canonised in recent art historiography, and for this reason, it is a real 'Fundgrube', replete with fascinating materials. But it also confronts the reader with a complex network made up of authors, publications and concepts that hampers an overview of the developments within Baroque and Rococo studies in Germany – which, it should be remembered, was *in statu nascendi*, and therefore a fluid concept.

To organise her material, Engel has structured her argument following a straightforward chronology: that of the date of publication of the contributions to this debate, starting with Kugler's 1837 *Handbuch der Geschichte der Malerei* and ending with Dehio's final 1926 volume of his *Geschichte der deutschen Kunst*. She considers not only publications specifically on German art, but also more general handbooks on the Baroque and Rococo in Europe alongside studies on specific (German) regions and artistic disciplines, and, last but not least, articles that deal with the phenomenon. Most of the authors were academics, but some were journalists with a university degree in history, art history or adjacent fields, and they came from various regions of Germany – and some even from places outside its borders, such as Prague, Basel or Vienna. This central part of the book is preceded by an introductory section that deals with conceptual issues; the book closes with an epilogue that explains how, after 1933, certain themes and tropes of the preceding century were used to create much more explicit nationalist (and racial) narratives.

Art history and concepts of German nationality

The main conclusion that Ute Engel draws from her abundant material is that there was no direct or apparent relation between art historical discourse and nationalist rhetoric. The individual authors differed in how they defined 'German' in their publications, and there is no chronological evolution towards conceptual convergence. This was true even after the First World War, when it is most often assumed that the nationalist perspective became dominant. During this period, Engel notes two contrasting developments taking place simultaneously – on the one hand, a methodological discussion (which decidedly went beyond formalism), and on the other hand a history of art based on emphatic readings of monuments and works of art – by Pinder, Worringer and Brinckmann.¹ The latter development was indebted to the new fields of psychology and phenomenology, and, as a result, a spirit of experimentation in art history led to a broad range of approaches and concepts.²

With this interpretation, Engel's book contrasts with readings of German art historiography along the lines of political history, as they were developed from the

¹ Ute Engel, *Stil und Nation. Barockforschung und deutsche Kunstgeschichte (ca. 1830-1930)*, Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2018, 519.

² See also Ute Engel's chapter 'Against Formalism: Aspects of the Historiography of the Baroque in Weimar Germany, 1918-1933' in *The Baroque in Architectural Culture, 1880-1980*, Andrew Leach, John McArthur and Maarten Delbeke (eds.), Farnham: Ashgate, 2015, 73-86.

1990s onwards by Martin Warnke, Eric Garberson and Evonne Levy, among others.³ Warnke, for example, has claimed that Wilhelm II's ascent to the throne of the German Empire in 1887 led to both a neo-Baroque building boom and in its wake to a new 'nationalistic' appreciation of the historical Baroque in publications by Gurlitt and the young Wölfflin.⁴ Garberson argued on a more theoretical level for the relation between the new state and the contribution to its construction by the discipline of art history which propagated the Baroque as a national style.⁵ Most recently, Levy has focused on the early decades of the twentieth century, seeing clear political overtones in the publications of five authors, backed by an analysis of their respective political and social views.⁶

Engel objects to these views, stating that the definition of 'German' in the publications analysed could be equated to varied concepts such as 'Nordic' or central-European, or based on the conceptualizations of 'Volk' (which also comprised various interpretations), on language, on natural, political or artistic geography ('Kunstlandschaft') and economic systems, and even on religion. Moreover, these authors all had different opinions on the relationship between German art and that of Italy, France and other countries. Another conspicuous development noted here is that of *regional* studies on the Baroque (about which more below). In other words, Engel does not see a coherent argumentation developing in art historical discourse heading towards a definition of German art that supported, or even furthered, National Socialist racial ideology from the 1930s onwards.

At this point, a crucial paradox in Engel's book becomes apparent. Its main question, namely how German and/or Germanic were defined and applied to the visual arts and architecture of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and who took the lead in this process, is given two different answers. In the introduction, Engel adopts the approach that national identity is an 'invented tradition', and starts out with an 'archaeology' of the concept of 'Germanness'. By tracing the roots of this concept all the way back to Latin sources such as Vitruvius and Pliny the Elder, and following its development through the Middle Ages to the modern period, she posits that at the start of the nineteenth century, this resulted in an 'archive of ideas'. She then assumes that between 1830 and 1866, during the years of the German Confederation, an intellectual discourse led to the construction of a pan-German identity. In this period of cultural nationalism, 'patriotic' art historians played an important role in formulating the nature of this identity and how it expressed itself in art. In other words, it is suggested here that art history played a leading role in

³ See also Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, *Toward a Geography of Art*, Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2004, 55-56, and Marlite Halbertsma, *Wilhelm Pinder en de Duitse kunstgeschiedenis*, Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1985, one of the first discussions of art historiography in conjunction with political history.

⁴ Martin Warnke, 'Die Entstehung des Barockbegriffs in der Kunstgeschichte' in *Europäische Barock-Rezeption*, Klaus Garber (ed.), Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1991, 2:1207-23.

⁵ Eric Garberson, 'Baroque architecture and German national identity in art historical texts ca. 1900' in *Barock als Aufgabe*, Andreas Kreul (ed.), Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005, 165-177.

⁶ Evonne Levy, *Baroque and the Political Language of Formalism (1845 - 1945)*, Burckhardt, Wölfflin, Gurlitt, Brinckmann, Sedlmayr, Basel: Schwabe, 2015.

creating a coherent German identity – and in this respect, Engel agrees with most of the aforementioned scholars.

However, recent literature has proposed another interpretation of the process of identity construction during the period of the German Confederation. This phenomenon was influenced by the complicated political and economic history of what in 1871 would become the German Empire – it was marked by constant reforms, and especially by the regular inclusion and exclusion of certain geographical regions, for example Eastern Prussia, Bohemia and (parts of the) Austro-Hungarian Empire. In fact, it has been argued that rather than one coherent concept of Germanness, a 'federal awareness' of nationality evolved within the Confederation, in which a regional set of identities was certainly not replaced by a pan-German one – on the contrary.⁷ This view is much more in keeping with Engel's analysis; the authors she discusses disagreed not only on the level of the *concept* of German identity (suggesting that the 'archive of ideas' maintained its validity), but also drew different geographical boundaries to define their material – in turn dependent on their citizenship. It is also from this perspective that the phenomenon of studies on regional varieties of the Baroque, noted by Engel, can be explained not as a new phenomenon but as a major issue throughout the nineteenth century.

If we accept this latter approach, art historians were not part of an avant-garde intellectual elite trying to construct a pan-German identity, but instead mirrored the political vicissitudes within the German Confederation, with their texts merely reflecting the domestic debates of their own regional state. This crucial paradox is not dealt with directly but left implicit; had she done so, it would have given Engel's own analytical framework a much clearer focus and clarified the core of her debate with the aforementioned authors.

Baroque, Rococo and 'Germanness'

Engel is much more explicit in demarcating her subject by including in her study the artistic production of the whole eighteenth century – the style we now refer to as Rococo but which, until the early twentieth century, was often considered part of the Baroque. This 'longue durée' perspective of art historians before 1930 is acknowledged in earlier historiographical studies, but the nationalist motives that inspired this particular combination of Baroque and Rococo are most clearly demonstrated by Engel.⁸ Suffice it to think of the full title of Gurlitt's book, *Geschichte des Barockstiles und des Rococo in Deutschland* of 1889, or of Brinckmann's 1919 publication, *Barockskulptur. Entwicklungsgeschichte der Skulptur in den romanischen und germanischen Ländern seit Michelangelo bis zum 18. Jahrhundert* to see

⁷ Wolf D. Gruner, *Der Deutsche Bund 1815-1866*, Munich: Beck, 2012, 34-36.

⁸ Engel, *Stil und Nation*, 209-13. Levy, *Baroque and the Political Language*, 255f covered Brinckmann's discussion of Rococo together with the Baroque, but did not develop a broader interpretation of this issue.

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that before 1945, art historians did not consider the year 1700 as the end of the Baroque period.⁹

The tendency to maintain the stylistic and cultural unity of the Baroque and Rococo was motivated principally by political history, in particular the Thirty Years' War, the resulting devastations, and its economic impact on the arts in the latter half of the seventeenth century. According to art historians of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, during the seventeenth-century foreign influences were 'digested' into Germanic forms, ultimately resulting in what Pinder and Brinckmann called the 'Sonderrokoko' – a Rococo style peculiar to the German context that was no longer indebted to foreign inspiration or masters.¹⁰ This term was derived from the 'Sondergotik', coined during a fierce debate between German and French art historians during the First World War (as a result of nationalist rhetoric and propaganda), and which indicated a specific (and independent) German Gothic style.¹¹ Indeed, one of the core issues in studies on the German Baroque and Rococo was whether it was possible to identify stylistic differences from Italy and France, and to explain how 'negative' foreign influences were transformed into 'positive' indigenous qualities - Wilhelm Lübke (1855) and Alfred Woltmann (1876) followed this line of reasoning in their works, and it was a recurrent theme in almost all later publications.

A second motive underlying the preference for the Rococo as the expression of 'Germanness' was related to the so-called 'Kulturkampf'.¹² This debate on the relations between the German state and religion (and between Protestants and Catholics) was sparked by Bismarck's laws aiming to turn German Catholics into loyal citizens in 1871, and resulted in Prussian (and thus Protestant) leadership in this new political constellation, and the exclusion of Austria (and thus the Catholic point of view). The Vatican decree of 1875 condemning the Prussian laws as invalid further increased the tension between Church and Empire. Since the Baroque had been interpreted by German art historians as the expression of the Counter-Reformation and the Jesuit Order, this style was strongly associated with the Catholic cause and thus often seen as anti-national.¹³ The Rococo, by contrast, lent itself to a more open interpretation thanks to its association with court life in Lutheran Dresden and Berlin and the mercantile classes, irrespective of their

⁹ This was only argued after 1945; see for example Anthony Blunt, *Some uses and misuses of the terms Baroque and Rococo as applied to architecture*, London: Oxford University Press, 1973 and Jan Białostocki, "'Barock': Stil, Epoche, Haltung', in idem, *Stil und Ikonographie. Studien zur Kunstwissenschaft*, Cologne: DuMont, 1981, 106 and 115-16.

¹⁰ Engel, *Stil und Nation*, 541.

¹¹ Michela 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: Éd. de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 2012, 167-89.

¹² Manuel Burutta, *Antikatholizismus. Deutschland und Italien im Zeitalter der europäischen Kulturkämpfe*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010, 289-325 and Engel, *Stil und Nation*, 118-20. See also Levy, *Baroque and the Political Language*, 189-90.

¹³ For the 'Jesuit style', see Evonne Levy, 'The international Jesuit style: evil twin of national styles' in *Spirit, Style, Story. Essays honoring John W. Padberg, S.J.*, Thomas Lucas (ed.), Chicago: Loyola-Press, 2002, 181-202.

religious denomination. As such, it was more attractive and feasible to turn the Baroque into a mere precursor of the true 'national' style. This also meant that religious criteria constituted the basis for certain interpretations of what was German, and what was not – as was true, according to Engel, of Cornelius Gurlitt who downplayed the Bavarian Baroque and Rococo, while celebrating Prussian and Saxon architecture.

Conclusion

Although the main title of the book, *Stil und Nation*, suggests an approach that thoroughly contextualises art historiography by comparing concepts and approaches with political and historical discourses, the ways in which external factors affected art historical discourse often remain implicit. This leads to a relative neglect of the broader issues and their sources, and thus also the constantly shifting geographical boundaries of what Germany was, or what was German, during the time of the Confederation. This book does represent an important step forward in the field, however, as it no longer assumes that art history is an academic, and thus neutral, discipline, as was often the case until the 1990s.¹⁴ The question remains, though, whether art historians actively constructed this identity – national or regional, or something in between – or whether they simply adopted concepts that originated elsewhere.

This notwithstanding, Engel's book complements other studies on France and Czechoslovakia, which have come to comparable conclusions. Authors such as Thoré-Bürger (also politically very active) developed a similarly positive appraisal of the Rococo as a particular artistic expression of the French national character; in the Czech context the architect Johann Santini Aichel was excluded from architectural history since his Swiss-Lombard background was no longer in keeping with the current construction of a new nation.¹⁵ This confirms the thesis that nineteenth-century nationalism was a European and international phenomenon, and that it had a significant impact on the discipline of art history.¹⁶

Another merit of this publication is that it distributes the discussion of various well-known authors such as Burckhardt, Wölfflin, Tietze and Pinder over several chapters. This allows Engel to suggest that in the development of their discourse they communicated with other, now far less well-known or even forgotten authors, by means of their publications; one interesting result of this approach is that some authors now considered canonical thanks to their

¹⁴ An example of this, which in no way means direct criticism, is Udo Kultermann, *Geschichte der Kunstgeschichte - der Weg einer Wissenschaft*, Munich: Prestel, 1996, 198-99, where the issue of Pinder and Brinckmann's involvement with National Socialist party politics is avoided.

¹⁵ Claudia Hattendorff, *Die Suche nach der Nationaltradition in der französischen Malerei. Kunstliteratur und nationales Bewußtsein im 19. Jahrhundert*, Freiburg: Rombach, 2004, 101-102 and Dirk de Meyer, 'Writing architectural history and building a Czechoslovak nation, 1887-1918' in *Nation, style, modernism*, ed Jacek Purchla and Wolf Tegethoff, Cracow: International Cultural Centre, 2006, 75-93.

¹⁶ Joep Leerssen (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018.

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fundamental contribution to the history of art, were often far from the first to discuss certain concepts and/or monuments and works of art. Engel does not expand upon the fact that this discourse in many cases transcended (fluctuating) national borders (and influenced Austrian, Swiss and Czech art historians), but it is a relevant issue since the value of a concept might actually change under the influence of a new political and national context.

Finally, we could ask why Kugler, Gurlitt, Pinder and others were so positive about the Stadtschloß – not only because they had begun to appreciate the Rococo and/or wanted to reappraise the 'German' qualities of its architecture, but because they had links with the Prussian (or later Imperial) government and its capital Berlin, having either been born there or working at its university, and as a result of their religious denomination. Schlüter thus came to be considered Prussian or Protestant, as much as German. 'Style' and 'nation' act in the plural in Engel's book – Baroque and Rococo, Bavarian, Prussian and Saxon were just a few of the many options used to construct the antagonisms and comparisons between styles and identities that formed the main argumentative structure of German art historical publications in the long nineteenth century.

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