Reflections on the Ground Rules of the Baroque

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(TRANSLATED BY MARK JARZOMBEK)

When and where to place the beginning of “modern” art history and with which persons and points of view one might justify this placement is a topic about which one could argue at length. It seems plausible, however, that from the perspective of the turn of the twentieth century, claims to a new beginning would have been substantiated by the attempt to base art history in some way on reliable “scientific” foundations, on a set of ground rules, on “universal” principles or on recurring formal features. This belief dominated the views of art historians such as Heinrich Wölfflin, who formulated the problem toward the end of his introduction to his Kunsthistorische Grundbegriffe: “To define the law of recurring formal features would be the main task ... of a scientifically-based art history.” This, then, was no longer the humanistic or hermeneutical position that attempted to understand art as the result of the creative process, the manifold nature of that process, and the changes it brings about; such a position was superceded by the assumption “that in all change, law remains at work.”

While the search for fundamental laws has left its own trail and traditions—as has the general concept of style—it had become by 1900 a method that far exceeded the textbook-like listing of “formalistic” elements such as capitals or arches. Style became an overarching quality, a universalia of art history. In his 1893 Stilfragen, Alois Riegl declared himself against “materialist” derivatives and positioned himself directly in opposition to Semper’s attempt to achieve a balance between, on the one hand, an in-depth investigation of individual art historical facts, and, on the other, the principles of lawful regularity (Naturgesetzung) guiding the artistic process. Describing Semper’s method as a form of Darwinism and as “art materialism,” Riegl argued for a comprehensive view that saw the “will to art” (or Kunsthollen) as part of a general stylistic concept. That Riegl’s view has affected modern architecture beyond Peter Behrens, insofar as it expressly took a stand against the imitation of styles in a search for a pure style, is well-known. Walter Gropius in his Internationale Architektur (1925) also wanted to see an end to the “formalistic trend” with its rapid turnover of “isms,” and hoped to replace that trend with what he called a “will to develop a unified world view with ‘objective validity.’” This “objective validity” would also extend to the “personal” and “national.” Of the “three concentric circles—individual—nation—humanity,” the last, for Gropius, was the most inclusive. Wölfflin proceeded less summarily. At the end of his Kunsthistorische Grundbegriffe, which distinguished between external and internal art history as well as between developmental change and periodicity, he, too, broached the issue of national character: “However different national characters may be, the universally human—the elements that unite—are stronger than those that divide.” This claim was followed by an even more disarming and conciliatory sentence: “A constant balancing and adjustment takes place.”

It is astonishing to realize to what degree so-called modern art history has served as godfather to modern art and architecture. Both searched at the time for a universal and fundamental concept of style. Both were more or less willing to accept the reduced importance of historical contexts. In the final analysis, then, it is no surprise that the option offered by the “classical”—although a risky term in the debate—gained the upper hand in establishing
the formal terms of modern architecture.⁶

Today, the convergence of Modernism and Classicism has long since been accepted. Yet even the apparently anti-modern reaction of Post-Modernism conducted its attack—as in 1980 in the “Strada Novissima” at the Venice Biennale—under the insignia of the arch-symbol of classical architecture, the column. And neither Charles Jenks nor Thomas Gordon Smith shy away from putting together the terms “postmodern” and “classical.”¹⁰ In the search for style-concepts (Stilbegriffe) and universals (Allgemeinliltigkeit), one easily forgets that the most obvious problem appears to have been overlooked. This is surprising, for that selfsame search for valid concepts and categories—that general desire for objectivity—oriented itself, at least in the framework of art history, on its apparent opposite: the “Baroque.” This applies to Riegl, and even more so to Wölfflin and others. Karl Ernst Osthaus, mentor of so many moderns (Gropius and Le Corbusier included) held that “the Baroque style is the last great style of world history.”¹¹ In his Grundzügen der Stilentwicklung, he deliberately denied recognizing anything new in science all the while praising “living art,” and characterized his interest in holistic concepts as a search for “the unified weaves on the carpet of life.”¹² For Osthaus, the Baroque was the last unified style dedicated to weaving this so-called carpet of life, and was thus not part of the catalogue of “isms” with which Gropius wallpapered the enemy camp of the Modern. For Theo van Doesburg, another propagator of a new and objective world that was meant to be enthroned with the de Stijl movement, the terms “baroque,” “classical” and “modern” had a similarly universal significance, as one can see from the title of his 1921 pamphlet, Classique-Baroque-Moderne. And Le Corbusier, who found, in good French tradition, the Roman Baroque to be distasteful, nonetheless worshiped the artistic creativity of the father of the Baroque, Michelangelo: “Michelangelo is the hero of our last thousand years just as Phidias was for the preceding millennium.”¹³

A difficulty arises, however, within the framework of these definitions when the required regularity is not found. The difficulty was expressed by Riegl in his posthumously published lectures on Baroque art in Rome in which he initially appears almost desperate to come to grips with the phenomenon of the Baroque; “We do not understand the extraordinary quality that defines the Baroque, it is not convincing, it contains a contradiction, seems untrue; we therefore perceive it as miraculous.”¹⁴ He even admits being disturbed and irritated by praying figures that move in “unmotivated convulsing contortions,” leading him to conclude: “we do not understand this.”¹⁵ It seems that those reliable, rationally decipherable Baroque concepts might actually not exist at all. In the end, rather than entrust himself to such insecurities, Riegl preferred to find refuge in those Nordic-Protestant forms familiar to him.¹⁶

Wölfflin, who has no doubt rightfully entered history as the one who actually defined the modern concept of the Baroque, solved the problem in his own way. In his first dissertation, “Prolegomena zu einer Psychologie der Architektur” (1886), he faithfully documented an architectural itinerary, included abrupt changes of direction, and made no attempt to hide apparent difficulties.¹⁷ Working from the perspective of a psychological inquiry, he focused on “general formal laws,” the absolute significance of which, however, was again interrupted (much as in the later “Kunstgeschichtlichen Grundbegriffen”) by references to “stylistic forms,” “folk feeling” and “form feeling.” For already in 1886—seven years before Riegl’s dismissal of Semper—Wölfflin was deeply involved in the battle against the “materialistic nonsense” that explained the development of architectonic form as a consequence of necessary givens such as material, climate and purpose. He thought that such a “mechanistic point of view should be silenced.”

Seen from this perspective, it makes sense that Wölfflin, a little later in Renaissance und Barock (1888), should
have directed his search for “principles of lawful regularity” first towards that period of history—appearing under the heading “Disintegration of the Renaissance”—in which “randomness and arbitrariness” are mentioned specifically for the first time. Perhaps this amounted to “squaring the circle,” as it were. But in the “symptoms of disintegration” he described, Wölfflin apparently believed to have discerned a law “that might offer insight into the inner workings of art,” and along with this, “the actual end purpose of art history.” In other words, he was searching for a psychological understanding of the transition from Renaissance to Baroque, and furthermore, for the very principle of “law.” What Wölfflin attempted in Renaissance und Barock can be understood as a testing out of the approach he had taken back in 1886, except that as opposed to the usual, familiar psychologisms, he turned “to the general laws of form.”

If we look closer, it becomes evident that he was searching for the one but could not ignore the other, let alone abandon it. Artistic phenomena are manifestations of the soul and cannot be reduced to a line or a circle. Nonetheless, it must be remembered that in 1886, Wölfflin had already articulated an objective interpretation of art, which derived to no small degree from the aesthetics of Robert Vischer. Building on this tradition, he departed from the well-worn paths of a “psychology of architecture” and turned, rather abruptly and more assertively, to the “laws of form.” Only in the latter, so it seemed, did he expect reliable answers about the nature of art.

For research on Baroque art, this has yielded both advantages and disadvantages. What might appear, geometrically, so logical is not yet by any means the differentia specifica of artistic expression. The dichotomy, for example, between Renaissance and Baroque is not simply to be explained away by the contrast between straight and curved, no matter how popular this pairing has been ever since the idea of ars oppositorum was first developed in late medieval times. The idea lasted up until Eugène Grasset’s comprehensive theory of ornament, which was divided into the treatment of “rectilinear elements” and “curved elements”; in the hands of Le Corbusier, these then took a distinct turn towards the respective geometrical bases of forms. Geometry may have proven its universal validity, and the more geometrico has demonstrated, and still demonstrates, the benefit of its logic in the arts. But this still does not explain what might be hidden behind the corresponding forms with respect to psychological or artistic motivations.

Wölfflin’s transition, which he so abruptly reveals in 1886—“I interrupt,” he writes. “Let us turn to the general laws of form”—pointed to a topic that was to remain hotly debated for a long time as it concerned the very nature of aesthetic understanding. Furthermore, the contrast in approach described above corresponded to the attempt, in contemporary academic debates, to differentiate between nomological and historical interpretations. Of course, that the difficulty lay in articulating a satisfactory methodology was hardly new at the time. Wölfflin’s 1886 Prolegomena—and even more so Riegl’s subsequent 1893 Stilfragen—had already been anticipated by Gottfried Semper’s “Prolegomena” to style in 1860. Both had accused Semper of having fallen into the trap of “mechanism.” In reality, both Semper’s and Wölfflin’s “Prolegomena” share a longing for natural laws with respect to art and architecture. For Semper, this applied to symmetry, eurhythmy and direction, which he claimed bestowed to the facts of architecture their fundamental aesthetic significance and formal authority. For Wölfflin (his ideas originated from Semper’s colleague, Vischer), the “interior” and “exterior” determinants of form—such as “delineation in space,” “measure,” “balance,” “symmetry,” “proportion,” and “harmony”—all led to an objective contemplation of the architectural. Here, Wölfflin, admitted that he was well-acquainted with the corresponding explanations in Semper’s “Prolegomena.” On the one hand, he referred to Semper’s concept of eurhythmy as a “sequential regularity,” which led him not only to demand “regularity” but also “rules.” On
the other hand, the rules of regularity led Wölfflin into "art psychology" and back out again to the concept of a historically grown feeling for form (or *Formgefühl*), to a reconsideration of generally accepted formal architectural laws (such as the division into proportions or horizontal and vertical members) and, finally, to ornament. Even Semper had not only argued against the "materialists" who had "welded the idea too firmly to the material," but had, more constructively, incorporated the particular quality of the artistic into his theory of vision, thereby undermining both Wölfflin's and Riegl's reproaches. Since to his mind the arts rose above "common tellurian Being" into "elevated spheres," Semper had even drawn a comparison to religion on account of the urge to perfection.

This back and forth between facts, historical realities and their respective generalities (whether innate or attributed), was not so unusual. Wölfflin cited in this context Kant's "Architektonik der Reinen Vernunft"—by which he meant, of course, that segment in the *Critique of Pure Reason* that starts with the sentence: "By architectonic, I mean to indicate the artfulness of systems." Wölfflin even brought in Virchov and drew upon his formulation: "form = inner purpose." For us, these are indications that Wölfflin—even in the examples he took from the natural sciences—attempted to strip away those elements of art psychology that might be deemed unreliable, to reveal lawfulness and, even more concretely, to arrive at an ideal approach: "to work with exactitude." Of course, he did not want to achieve this by reducing himself to the merely factual: "A history that restricts itself only to stating what happened sequentially cannot prevail: it would deceive itself if it believes that in doing so it has been 'exact'.” Consider in this respect Wölfflin's comment that "One should only focus exactly there where it is possible to catch the stream of appearances in fixed forms:" While this may sound tautological, it moves Wölfflin beyond a narrowly logical stand and brings him once again to a psychology of art, albeit in reformed guise. What follows is the Wölfflinian grasp for "mechanics," which is explained this way: "Fixed forms are revealed to physics, for example, through mechanics. The humanistic sciences still lack this foundation; it can only be found in psychology." Here, just as mechanics does for physics, psychology is given the task of establishing a scientific foundation for art history: "[Psychology] would likewise allow art history to base the individual on universal law." Behind this expectation hides yet a bolder thesis, according to which it is proven that "the organization of the human body is the constant throughout all change," and consequently "the uniformity of its organization also guarantees the uniformity of the Feeling for Form." In short, to make art historical and cultural statements scientifically solid, one has to place one's trust in a universally valid human nature.

In *Renaissance und Barock*, these convictions are applied to art historical praxis. "Throughout, we presume a physical presence that conforms to ours," he writes, for example, in the chapter entitled "On the Foundations of Stylistic Change," and so attempts on the basis of this analogy to determine the "form fantasy" of the artist. In so doing, Wölfflin approaches the "form feeling of an epoch" by way of "easily controllable psychological facts." The artist has, in such a psychologically charged field, no other choice than to interpret the artistic as, or to raise it to, an idealized realm, to "that which man would like to be." Wölfflin's beliefs—his concept of style, his emphasis on proportions (these followed Friedrich Thiersch)—were readily accepted by the architects of his generation, the very ones who, along with Riegel and Behrens, accused Semper of mechanism. But Wölfflin's psychologically-based notion of "form-feeling" is, even in his own wishful imagination, just as mechanical as any of Semper's cultural historical typecasting. Indeed, one could argue that Semper's formulations—for example, when he tries to find a carefully nuanced formula for the "principle of clothing" based on "a structural-symbolical scheme rather than a structural-technological one"—are frequently
more differentiated than what Wölfflin tried to demonstrate by means of his analogy between what mechanics does for physics and what psychology does for art history. Yet no one has ever reproached him for this analogy. Besides, how many of the anti-Semperians have actually read him? When, at a later date, another art historian wanted yet again to borrow concepts from the natural sciences, the borders were drawn differently, and a new storm of indignation rose. Hans Sedlmayer in his study of Borromini not only drew on a “Cartesian world view” and on Kretschmer’s psycho-physical structural types, but also on Lavoisier and his “new chemistry.” This was going overboard, methodologically speaking, although Sedlmayer claimed that all he wanted to create was a “formal conceptual model.” Sedlmayer’s chapter on the “Psychology of Borromini” has been described by Anthony Blunt, perhaps in slightly exaggerated terms, as an ingenious if perverse Freudian analysis. One wonders if this prominent critic actually read either Freud or Sedlmayer, and if so, whether he understood or wanted to understand either one.

What is clear is that taken together, these more or less trumped up controversies involve psychological perspectives on art. While accusations of dogmatism were made, all basically agreed that dogmatism could hardly lead to a clarification of historical facts. Some acknowledged the speculative character of their cited models while others thought they were excessive: “Comparative description,” “genetic” representation, “structural analysis!” The transitions between such models were fluid. To what extent insights gained from prior interpretations could be applied to those that followed was likely the real cause of dissent. This is hardly surprising, in view of a truly demanding epistemological question that goes to the heart of intellectual endeavors. It is no doubt because of interpretive finesse that the much longed for ground rules for art do not obliterate history altogether! Wölfflin’s facit, which appeared in his 1931 Kritik der Kritik yet did not resolve the Borromini debate, sounded as follows: “Theoretical nitpicking obstructs access to the individual work.” This also applies to Wölfflin, Semper and other art historians. Wittkower saw such theoretical nitpicking as “a reversal of the ... desired aim.” While this may be true, one may be left to wonder—indeed, should wonder—what happens when one moves beyond the single work of art to something more fundamental.

Wittkower was caught up in that question as well. When he examined the purely theoretical issue of how to generalize in geometrical terms the proportional arrangement of Palladian architecture, sharp criticism was unavoidable—although he did not go to the same extremes as his student Colin Rowe, who went so far in his generalization as to draw Le Corbusier’s villas into direct comparison with Palladio’s and, in so doing, helped—by way of “proof”—to crown modern architecture with the “classical.” The larger context of this history—namely, the universal declaration of geometrical laws as well as basic rules and their application in the “Lex Thierschiana” (which was also used by Wölfflin as a point of departure for his studies of proportion, and which was known to Le Corbusier although he did not admit this)—were barely of interest to him. This proves how much the search for ground rules—itself a generalization—emerges from a complex history.

As for the psychological question, Wittkower dealt with it in other contexts—not as a comprehensive principle that gave the concept of style a sense of aliveness (as with Wölfflin), but as a contextual enlargement for the analysis of individual works of art. In 1931, Wittkower saw the “psychological architectural mindset” as Bernini’s “very own domain,” a correct characterization, by the way, if one relies on one of Bernini’s rare moments of self-observation, the Milano testimony with its correspondingly revelatory remarks. Here, the encounter with reality leads one to understand that psychology, for the art historian, is related above all to sensory perception. It is somewhere between all these positions that art and architectural history has maneuvered, albeit without, for the
most part, paying heed to the fundamental considerations that were, and are, connected to them. To have done so would have been the best way to come closer to the truth, particularly if the aim is to navigate the minefield between, on the one hand, the front presented by purely factual recitation, and, on the other, the overly hasty capitulation to principles and laws. In the best of intellectual traditions, this double point of view—the nomological and the historical—has been postulated as the necessary and correct approach to holistic inquiry. In this regard, the “baroque object” is in the end an idealized folly, because the unilateralness and inadequacy of the “one method” that is juxtaposed to it comes clearly into focus. What matters are the shades that lie in between the extremes posited by the venerable *ars opposatorum*; conjecture points in the right direction. In this way, knowledge approaches reality. This was already made clear by Angelo Poliziano in his “Panepistemon” and the three possibilities or “genera doctrinarum” among humans that it elaborated, namely the “Inspiratum,” the “Inventum,” and the “Mixtum.” To recognize this is not all that simple, but becomes essential in the Baroque context. So the baroque-skeptic, Jakob Burckhardt, declared to his teacher Franz Kugler during his journey to Varallo on August 5, 1857, in a statement that now seems quite understandable to us: “I would like at least once in my lifetime to see, so that I can believe, the *mixtum compositum* of sculpture and painting that Gaudenzio Ferrari has propounded there.” To transform a matter of belief into a rational statement is by no means easy! Art history has often floundered on this, especially where the Baroque is concerned. For this reason alone, we continue to face an exciting and challenging task.

2. Wölfflin (1915), 19.
4. See Peter Behrens, “Über den Zusammenhang des baukünstlerischen Schaffens mit der Technik,” in *Kongress für Ästhetik und Allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft Berlin 7–9 Oct. 1913* (Stuttgart, 1914), 251 ff. See also Werner Oechslin, *Otto Wagner, Adolf Loos, and the Road to Modern Architecture* (Ger. ed. 1994; Cambridge, 2002), 75 ff. Opinion continues to be divided on whether art historical causalities and their consequences could be applied to the present. Consider the case of Rudolf Wittkower and Colin Rowe, which was exemplified by Henry Millon in one of his well-known studies. Henry Millon preferred, just like his teacher Wittkower, to stay with history rather than offer ungrounded generalizations or turn to contemporary developments as the foundation for arguments. This general skepticism of causalities is the reason for which the following essay is dedicated to him.
6. Ibid., 7.
7. Wölfflin (1915), 250.
8. Ibid., 250.
10. See Charles Jencks, “The New Classicism and its Emergent Rules,” *Architectural Design Profile 71* (1988), 23 ff. “The third phase of Post-Modernism, which started in the late 1970s, has led to a new form of classicism, a free-style rather than canonic version of the traditional language.” How generously the term “classical” was used can be seen in Thomas Gordon Smith, “Classical Architecture, Rule and Invention” (1988), in which Frank Lloyd Wright, Borromini, Guarini and Dientzenhofer are all included because they used the capital and column.
12. Ibid., 7.
15. Ibid., 3.
19. Ibid., v.
20. Cf. Wölflin (1886), 19. Shortly before this, he explains: "Doch ich breche diese Betrachtungen ab." A similar stage direction can be found on 12: "Wir ziehen uns zurück. Im Folgenden werden wir keine Rücksicht mehr nehmen auf diese Schwierigkeiten, sondern die herkömmlichen bequemen Ausdrücke auch unsrerseits gebrauchen."
21. Ibid., 19 ff.
22. Ibid., 19.
25. Wölflin (1886), 34
26. In Ibid., 40, Wölflin introduced this as follows: "Nur mit Mühe hat bisher die Erörterung des Ornaments zurückgesohen werden können."
27. Semper (1860), vol. 1, xiv.
28. Ibid., xxvi-xxvii, n. 1.
29. Wölflin (1886), xvi.
30. See Immanuel Kant, Critik der reinen Vernunft (Riga, 1781), 832; "Der Transcendentalen Methodenlehre Drittes Hauptsstück. Die Architektur der reinen Vernunft."
31. Wölflin (1886), 24, where we find the surprising remark: "Diese Sätze stammen von Virchow. Man kann sie unmittelbar in die Aesthetik herübernehmen."
32. Ibid., 48.
33. Ibid., 48.
34. Ibid., 48 ff.
35. Ibid., 49.
36. Ibid., 49.
37. Wölflin (1888), 63.
38. Ibid., 63.
39. Semper (1860), vol. 1, 222.
40. See Hans Sedlmayr, Die Architektur Borrominis (2nd ed.; Munich, 1939), 133. The incriminating sentence reads as follows: "Wie ein Lavosier die chemischen 'Körper' aus 'Elementen' bestehen "sieht"; so sieht ein Borromini die architektonischen aus Reliefelementen zusammengesetzt."
41. Anthony Blunt, Borromini (London, 1979), 221. See also Werner Oechslin, "Borromini e l'incompresa 'Intelligenza' della sua architettura (350 anni di interpretazioni e ricerche)," in Richard Bösel, Christoph L. Frommel, eds., Borromini e l'universo barocco (Milan, 1999), 107 ff.
42. See Rudolf Wittkower, "Zu Hans Sedlmayrs Besprechung von E. Coudenhove-Krath: Carlo Fontana, Die kritischen Berichte zur kunstgeschichtlichen Literatur 1 (1931-32), 145.
44. See Wittkower (1931/32), 144
45. See Jacob Burckhardt, Briefe (Basel, 1955), vol. 3, 268.
46. Here I would like to refer to the 'baroque' foundations of rational explanations; see Werner Oechslin, "Quantum homini licet: 'Aesthetik' zu heilsgeschichtlichen Bedingungen" in Sebastian Schütze, ed., Estetica Barocca: Akten des Kongresses Rom 2002 (in publication).