

I hesitated a great deal before accepting the honor – and the responsibility – of speaking on this occasion celebrating Alois Riegl one hundred years after his untimely death and, as I was asked, to focus more particularly my remarks on the significance of Riegl's views for the study of ornament.

The reasons for my hesitation can be stated in the following manner. Whatever I may have thought about Riegl's theories and methodological insights nearly forty years ago when I was trying to understand how Islamic art was formed and nearly twenty years ago when I tried to explain to myself and to others the nature of ornament, my views and considerations are at least one generation away from today's concerns of historians of art and Riegl's were then two or three generations farther removed. Furthermore, while always interested in theory, I am primarily a historian of a very specific and complex culture, that of the Islamic world, and theory only matters when it can help practice. Like most of the founding fathers of our discipline, so many of whom were practicing in Vienna, Riegl's work seemed, at least at a first glance into his two most important books for my purposes of dealing with ornament – “Stilfragen” and “Spättrömische Kunstindustrie” –, to answer or to elucidate questions which are no longer asked, at least not within the narrow field of historians of traditional arts and even Islamic art (matters are slightly different when one turns to contemporary criticism and to the history of twentieth century art for at least one reason to which I shall return at the end of my remarks). His case is interesting to compare to that of another centennial celebration of 2005, the case of Albert Einstein, whose *annus mirabilis* was 1905 when he published two papers which revolutionized the study of physics and our understanding of the universe and which are still today the essential basis on which most modern physics is based. The Humanities do not operate with the hierarchical rigidity of physics, but the fact remains that few contemporary studies dealing

with history or with the historical (rather than critical) understanding of individual works of Islamic art refer to Riegl's work except as a sort of passing salute to the past. It is as though the vibrant passion of his eloquence and the breadth of his concerns no longer affects, positively or negatively, the main line of historical scholarship today. Or, to put it another way, whereas physics operates within its own internal logic after key revelations and hypotheses like those of Einstein or of Newton a hundred and fifty years earlier, the Humanities answer questions which can be both internal and external to the field but do not necessarily build on a past heritage.

I shall return to one aspect of this premiss, but I must record the two exceptions to my generalization about the uses of Riegl today. One exception lies indeed in the field of ornament. A couple of generations of modernism have so downplayed ornament that the topic has seemed secondary for over a century now, and its fairly recent practitioners like Gombrich and myself (there are others as well) have not been very satisfied with their own results. This was so in part because we failed to elicit any follow up, critical or not, to whatever theories we had developed. More significantly, neither one of us had begun with Riegl to develop whatever thoughts he had on ornament; at best, we acknowledged our differences with Riegl, but did not feel that we had been helped by his pioneering exercises and conclusions. This again is a point to which I shall return, since it is an essential aspect of the nature of humanistic research, especially when compared to the natural or physical sciences, that references to past ideas are not caused by the acknowledgment of intellectual filiation but by a sort of veneration of past masters who, like patron saints, must appear at the beginning of our statements, whether they were involved in their formulation or not.

The second exception is historiography and we all know the enormous growth of an explanatory scholarship on the theory and practice of scholarship in the early decades of last century, especially in the German speaking world, or among other aca-

* Bei diesem Beitrag handelt es sich um die Abschrift des Vortragsmanuskriptes des Autors. Oleg Grabar verzichtet auf einen Anmerkungsapparat.

demics inspired by German scholarship. These endeavors are all laudable, but I do not feel competent to engage with them, as I am not sufficiently versed in the philosophical discourse of these decades, the Kant to Heidegger or to Walter Benjamin road which is essential to appreciate and understand the setting in which Riegl and other historians of art worked.

So, I did not feel equipped to deal with the intellectual climate of Vienna around 1900 nor did I feel it worthwhile to argue that my views on ornament are different from Riegl's. I felt, therefore, that there was not very much that I could contribute to the discussion and there is always something in poor taste about expressing one's divergence of views from those of someone dead for a hundred years.

This reticence explains the slightly disorganized character of the remarks which follow. But then, as I reread some of Riegl's major works and surveyed some of the recent scholarship dealing with him, I realized two things. One was that the new interest in Riegl by critics of contemporary art never refer to works dealing with ornament, which were the only significant ones to the medievalist of different colors that I am. This led me to my second realization which was that there may well be something interesting and perhaps unexpected in the ways in which Riegl affected not so much our ways of understanding ornament or the decorative and industrial arts but the attitudes developed by the twentieth century about Islamic art, the art of the lands which from Spain to China confronted for centuries western Europe in ways which could be seen as parallel and fraternal or as inimical and antithetic. It is this aspect of Riegl's thought that I will try to sketch out briefly through a sequence of observations on his work in relationship to what was happening at the time with our knowledge and understanding of Islamic art.

It is a particularly interesting topic, because, in so far as I have been able to learn, whatever his fascination with Persian or Turkish rugs, Riegl never considered Islamic civilization, in contrast to ancient Egypt which had been accepted for some time as the beginning of art historical time, as anything but an aspect of an Orient without history and without culture. "The arabesque is a special creation of the Orient, but particularly of the Arabs", he wrote in "Stilfragen", almost a racist statement no longer acceptable today and partly contradicted by his own argument about the necessary development of forms. It is precisely the emphasis he gave to social background over forms that is one of his key contributions to our understanding of Dutch art. In a broader sense, his *Historismus* gave unique values to every moment and every work of art, but some moments, Europe's, counted more than others. Riegl's lack of concern for Islamic culture is also interesting to compare with the attitude of the

Romantic period which was far more learned about Persian or Arabic languages and societies and, at least in some pages of Goethe, Victor Hugo, or Pushkin, was esthetically and sensually involved in the products of an Islamic culture recognized as uniquely its own but possible as a model for universal values. Something quite different happened around 1900 which affected significantly and on the whole negatively the attitudes toward Islam we express today. I shall argue that Riegl's thought or the uses made of that thought had something to do with the formation of these new attitudes, even if he himself does not seem to have been concerned with these implications.

The serious history of Islamic art began around 1900 along three parallel paths. There was the history, mostly, of architecture, developed, directly or indirectly, by travelers and explorers to what were exotic lands and to a recognition of an original "intentionality" or originality (I suppose this could be seen in part as whatever Riegl meant by *Kunstwollen*) in the arts of southern Spain, Egypt, the Ottoman empire assimilated to Turkey, and India (a knowledge of Persia and Central Asia came later) which was different from whatever inspired European architecture. Those areas were, in the spirit of the time, associated with ethnic groups and races and one talked of Arab, Moorish, Saracenic, Turkish, or Hindu styles in a scholarship more common in France and England than in Germany or the Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires for reasons that are not part of my concern today.

A second way was through collections, mostly textiles and glass or metalwork and ivories, as the great exhibitions held in Paris and Munich served to popularize objects gathered for centuries in churches or princely treasuries and associated with exotic areas of Asia; a few private collections began to appear mostly in colonial countries like France and Britain. An art of painting in Persia and India was just beginning to be discovered, as manuscripts until then were studied only for their texts. Techniques of manufacture were the main concern of those who wrote about these exhibitions and relationships between techniques were established, as well as endless catalogues of ornamental motifs, where we often encounter the same preference for ethnic, if not racist, definitions. All major countries of Europe from Madrid to St. Petersburg were involved in collecting and in developing their own industrial arts and all languages were used to write about these objects *except* the languages of the countries from which the objects came. This whole approach to an artistic tradition around objects and techniques remained until today a primarily western European and American approach.

The third way appeared, mostly but not exclusively, within the German-writing world and, almost for the first time, used primarily the adjective "Islamic" for its subject. This way

dealt with what was seen then as a “style” and it was associated with a history, that is to say with time, only secondarily with an ethnic or national group. I shall return in a moment to the nature of the history and to the explication of the time that was meant.

This different attitude was triggered by two striking events with major political as well as scholarly implications. One was the arrival in Berlin in 1903 of the Mshatta facade, already known by many scholarly accounts, and the second one was the publication in 1907, again after years of preliminary accounts in the press and in restricted travel books, by the Vienna Academy of Alois Musil’s book on Qusayr Amrah. An enormous critical literature surrounded both works almost from the very beginning. Nothing comparable ever happened to any other discovery in the field of Islamic art, before or after. There were many reasons for this popularity. One of them was that, for a long time, both monuments were understood as something else than what they were. Mshatta was supposed to be pre-Islamic, even Persian imperial, and made sense as a treasure for the German emperor, who would not have gotten the same psychological credit for owning a work attributed to a Muslim caliph or a lower *amir*. But it was also a work of high technical quality, yet of a totally unusual sort, and there was no existing intellectual procedure to deal with it. The key work for its intellectual elaboration was that of Ernst Herzfeld, “Die Genesis der Islamischen Kunst und [as a subtitle] das Mshatta-Problem”, published in 1910 in “Der Islam” which led to a robust polemic with Josef Strzygowski.

As to Qusayr Amrah, the fascinating thing is that two of the greatest luminaries of the Viennese academic scene, the orientalist Joseph von Karabacek and the art historian Franz Wickhoff, were formally involved in the publication. What they wrote was remarkably foolish, because they truly did not know what they were writing about. They did not know Qusayr Amrah physically, having only seen photographs and watercolors, and its archaeological setting was totally alien to both of them. They did not even try to understand the context in which it was created. But the book was very much reviewed all over the European scholarly world, by all the major figures not of the history of art but of Islamic studies, like Carl Becker, Max van Berchem, Ignaz Goldziher, and so on. These “orientalists” were not any better acquainted with the place than the established historians and art historians, but the existence of an early Islamic monument with paintings was contrary to everything they had learned and they wanted an explanation. It is curious that the great German historian and eventually politician of the Weimar era, Carl Becker, criticized the Vienna Academy for not having asked the one person in Vienna who was competent in the matter (ac-

ording to Becker) to write about Qusayr Amrah, and that was Strzygowski. I do not know whether the matter was ever considered and whether there are documents dealing with the possibility, but it would make an amusing exam question for students in Vienna today: to draft Strzygowski’s introduction to Qusayr Amrah which would certainly have been more exciting than Wickhoff’s and probably equally wrong-headed.

Why did these two events play such an important role in establishing the field of “Islamic”, as opposed to Arab, Turkish, or Persian art? Why were Orientalists more interested in these works than historians of forms? The questions are all the more interesting since one of the works involved, Mshatta, is almost totally devoid of representations of living beings and was seen therefore as pure ornament, while the other one, Qusayr Amrah, is only figurative, which refuted all established attitudes toward Islamic culture and became an anomaly to explain in cultural terms. It was of no particular interest to classical historians of a western art full of representations, because the quality of the images were not high enough. The argument I will try to sketch out is that Riegl’s thought was essential in creating the kind of climate which led to the contrasting attitudes toward two monuments which appeared on the scene, just as Riegl dies at the early age of 47. I have not been able to establish whether he knew of either one of them.

Let me begin with Mshatta. Its presence in Berlin at the same time as the Pergamon altarpiece or the Miletus Library was due in large part to Josef Strzygowski who persuaded Wilhelm von Bode and indirectly Wilhelm II that the magnificent facade of decorated triangles in the semi-desertic part of what is now Jordan was in danger of being destroyed by the building activities around the construction of the railroad to Mekka – this was certainly true – and that this facade represented the art of imperial Iran whose possession would enhance the universal imperial ambitions of the Kaiser – this was certainly not true. But there was no scholarly or intellectual mechanism to present carefully carved relief panels of some 40 triangles three meters high set over a base of 1.30 meters and topped by an entablature of some 90 centimeters. Altogether we are talking about 40 meters by 5 meters, some 200 square meters, of sculpted craftsmanship consisting not of stories being told as for Pergamon or of events being depicted or symbolized as in the Ara Pacis in Rome, but of what appeared to be simply ornament, to be appreciated for the pleasure it provides (in my view of twenty years ago) or for the orderly framework it provides for something else (Gombrich’s view). Some have recently argued that hidden meanings may exist in this ornament, but this is a direction I have not so far pursued, although it certainly is likely that there were meanings, but not in details,

as art historians like to discuss, rather in the conception of the whole composition.

Traditional art history was of no use, because there were no subjects to identify and to explain and no formal structures to identify. And the Semper inspired technological approach was useless because it was not possible to detect the operation of artisans and to explain the necessity of whatever was visible – leaves, tendrils, fruits, circles – through the character of the maker's technical training. (Later on, some detailed observations will lead to this sort of conclusion, but, in my judgement at least, not very successfully, precisely because a focus on details destroys the visual point of the whole; it may be worthwhile to note that one of the major writers in this direction was Maurice Dimand, formed in Vienna in the early twenties).

How could one deal with these features? By accepting two principles developed by Riegl. One is that ornament is art, at the same level as representation, even if it is not of the same type. It requires and justifies the same level of thorough observation and of widely distributed explanations. The other argument is that ornament has a history, in which modifications are brought to a restricted number of Late Antique forms and lead to the arabesque which will become the expression of the *Kunstwollen* of a new culture, what Riegl still called the Orient but which more specialized scholars like Ernst Herzfeld called, correctly, the Islamic world. Riegl had provided parts of the terminology and something of the procedure to identify what became identified as, one could almost say promoted to be, a style. And in a fascinating fashion, Riegl's ideology was powerful enough to lead to the conclusion that both Carl Becker and Herzfeld developed in the first volume of a new journal called "Der Islam" (as an interesting parenthesis, it was closely connected with the Hamburg milieu sponsoring the short lived German colonial ambitions), the notion that what made the unified features of Islamic art possible was the existence of a unified classical Antiquity. It is strikingly expressed in Carl Becker's pithy statement: "Ohne Alexander den Großen würde es keine islamische Einheitszivilisation geben." Like early Islam itself in its imperial Umayyad and Abbasid forms, Riegl's thought assumed a sort of autonomy of artistic forms at the highest level of quality and allowed scholars to avoid ethnic or social explanations. It is these Late Antique forms of vegetal ornament that evolved into something new because of a new volition, a new impulse which Riegl recognized but was unwilling to relate to some willful decision of a culture. In a fascinating paradox, then, history was no longer necessary, once the main change into an arabesque, established *a priori* as the ultimate development of vegetal ornament, had been accomplished. Early Islam – for art historians from Mshatta to

Samarra, for historians from the Muslim conquest to the ninth century – sufficed to explain Islam in general, a tragic error for which we continue to pay a heavy price.

It is not my intention to hold Riegl responsible for a major sin in the interpretation of cultures. I suspect that the matter of what led to a specific act of cultural volition in an alien culture did not concern him. For there is another aspect of his thought which can, more easily than his definition and explanation of the arabesque, be seen as a remarkably perceptive and creative approach. In this aspect, more like with Einstein's formulas of 1905, Riegl's thought may have, quite unwittingly, created something which does indeed illuminate our understanding of very different epochs and styles of Islamic art as well as of contemporary art and criticism. For in his struggle to establish a distinction between the making and the perception of forms, he gives considerable credit to the "desires" of the viewer, desires that shape his interpretation of what he sees. Translated into terms used by contemporary criticism of Islamic art, this approach implies a certain freedom of interpretation, by which choices of meanings are provided to the viewer. These are not willed choices created by an artist as a sort of test for the viewer, but choices built in the creative impulse, the *Kunstwollen*, of the maker and of the viewer. This sort of freedom also characterizes many works of contemporary art. And this is one of the reasons why some critics today, faced with an art without topics but with forms, turn once again to Riegl for ideas and especially for the structure of an explanation.

But this is another topic and there are here better scholars than I am to discuss it. I would like to conclude in another fashion. It is Riegl's concern for forms and his innate sense for development, change, history that led him to recognize that even apparently minor and secondary features have a history, exhibit an evolution, almost a Darwinian one. He then provided a series of developments for certain forms, hitherto unrecognized as significant, and connected their changes with cultures, the latter being identified without much thought or investigation. His thought would have remained a relatively minor theme for the history of Islamic art, had it not been for two accidents, the appearance of Mshatta in Berlin and the involvement with Qusayr Amrah of philologists and historians, usually immune to the world of visual experience. The combination of these accidents and of Riegl's thought provided the first steps of the study of Islamic art, at least on a formal level. It would take two more generations to move from forms to meanings. And the vision of the arabesque as the end of a logical line in the development of ornament hampered the further study of ornament within Islamic culture. With the third Samarra style, the beveled style or ornament, discovered after Riegl's death, what could

be seen as a continuous evolution of tendrils came to an end and could not evolve in a manner which found a fascinating parallel in the development of abstract art in the twentieth century and the theories of Clement Greenberg. The appearance of representation within the techniques of the arabesque was not forecast in the evolutionary scheme. Does this mean a cyclical return to the past? Or a continuous free evolution whose character we have not yet learned to identify or to explain, because we have not pushed Riegl's ideas to their limits?

But – and this is the last paradox I want to bring up – as one turns over Riegl's thoughts and some of the ways in which they were used or transferred by his followers and successors, one realizes that, in dealing with the arabesque, he paid no attention to human history, because that *Kunstwollen* was not located in the needs of cultures nor of men, but in the structure of forms, which, like biological organs, kept on reproducing themselves and evolving according to their own rules. Such an organic growth brings Riegl's thought and role closer to Einstein's and to the supremacy of science so essential to European thought until World War One. Later generations will find these basic structures in signs and in language, or in Marxist inspired social structures and social needs. All were fun to deal with but ultimately failed and I wonder what the *Kunstwissenschaftliche Wollen* of the next generation of historians will be.