Envisioning Worlds in Late Antique Art

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New Perspectives on Abstraction and Symbolism
in Late-Roman and Early-Byzantine Visual Culture
(c. 300–600)

Edited by
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Cecilia Olovsdotter
Introduction

The beginnings of this book were a conference on abstraction and symbolism in Late Roman and Early Byzantine art organised at the Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul in May 2013. The aim was to present some new and critical perspectives on what is universally considered to be the most defining, yet arguably also the most multifaceted, aspect of late antique and early medieval art: its abstracted and symbolic nature. The specific ambition was to draw a more nuanced picture than is generally conveyed in the literature of the ideals, principles and means by which symbolic (intrinsic, metaphorical, allegorical) meaning was communicated in various contexts of late-antique visual culture, to discuss the methods and theories by which modern scholars have sought to understand the abstraction and symbolisation of art in late antiquity, and to suggest fresh subjects and angles through which we might seek to re-examine and extend our comprehension of them.

The problem of how to analyse and explain the abstracted and "un-classical" visual language that developed in Roman art towards the end of the 3rd century is one that has engaged many archaeologists, art historians, philologists and theologians over the last century. Since the decades around 1900, when scholarship began to shift from a predominantly negative and form-oriented to a more positive and meaning-oriented analysis of late antique art in general and abstracted art in particular, the attention has principally rested on conceptions of the human form and spatio-temporal aspects of composition and narration, and how and why these diverge from the representational modes and interests that characterised the Greco-Roman art from which they grew. Interpretational models that still today underpin much of what is written on late-antique visual culture were those advanced by among others Alois Riegl (1858–1905), Wilhelm Worringer (1881–1965) and Hans Peter L'Orange (1903–1983), who in their different ways held that the abstracted modes of representation that evolved from the last decades of the 3rd century resulted not from a general decline of the arts and artistic competency as crisis-wrecked antiquity faltered to its end, but from a positive and creative response to the challenges of the times; a communal impulse, more or less concerted and controlled, to develop a "new" visual aesthetic through which the concerns and ideals of a "new" era might be conveyed. As reasoned by L'Orange in e.g. *Apotheosis in ancient portraiture* (1947) and *Fra principat til dominat* (1958) (English edition: *Art forms and civic life in the Late Roman Empire* (1965)), and variously affirmed in works such as – to name but a few – Ranuccio Bianchi-Bandinelli's *Organicità e astrazione* (1956) and *Roma. La fine dell'arte antica* (1970), James D. Breckenridge's *Likeness: a conceptual history of ancient portraiture* (1968), Rudolf Arnheim's *Art and visual perception* (2nd edition 1974), the two *Age of spirituality* volumes edited by Kurt Weitzmann (1979, 1980), Ernst Kitzinger's *Byzantine art in the making* (1980), Jás Elsner's *Art and the Roman viewer* (1995), Giselle de Nie's *et al.* (eds) *Seeing the invisible in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages* (2005), and Anastasia Lazaridou's (ed.) *Transition to Christianity* (2011), the major upheavals experienced in the late antique period – political

and religious strife, incursions, disintegration of the Roman empire and state, economic decline – caused a collective insecurity that drove people to seek certainty and meaning in the inner and eternal truths of philosophy and religion. In the terms of visual representation this inner-directed search, first and most influentially channelled through imperial art and reaching its full expression in Christian art, was translated as a renouncement of the physical and material in favour of the a-physical and immaterial. It is thought (often by drawing on philosophical and Christian writings of the period and beyond) that an abstract approach to visual conception, of the human form in particular, enabled artists to reach beyond the living individual to capture the superindividual, essential or "true" man and the moral and spiritual qualities by which he hoped or claimed to transcend the human state; by relinquishing the aesthetic principles of naturalism, the makers of abstracted art could rise above the transience of this world and give shape to the eternal order of the divine. The artists are inferentially credited with the insight and imagination (whether spontaneous or acquired through training is mostly unclear) needed to identify and express such intangible essences through artistic media – "expression", "imagination" and "vision" are variously used to designate the creative impulse and process as well as the resulting work and the viewer's reception of it. Whether one agrees or not with this comprehensive "spiritual" explication of late antique art, and independently of the fact that the naturalistic conventions of Greco-Roman art were not abandoned wholesale but evolved and interacted with the new abstracted forms of artistic expression throughout late antiquity, the phenomena of abstraction and symbolism in late antique art have since the mid 20th century almost unanimously been construed as expressions of eschatological meaning, and as motivated by a collective and period-specific desire to give visual form to the hyperphysical and eternal essence of reality.

My own interest in the abstract and symbolic modes of representation cultivated in late-antique art was raised through my investigations into the imagery of the consular diptychs, a prominent category of Late-Roman and Early-Byzantine official art in which Roman representational conventions were carefully integrated with the abstracted and hieratic image forms developed under the Tetrarchy, combining a close attention to documentary detail with a conceptual approach to physical and optical relations and a high level of symbolic imagery (motifs, configurations, patterns). Although the iconography of the consular diptychs – here I chiefly refer to the fully figural category – was naturally influenced by the artistic currents witnessed in the imperial and other public art of the period (*c.* 370–541), it evolved as a distinct and increasingly self-contained form of visual communication in which the high tradition of Roman commemorative art was condensed and reconfigured into a topical, exceptionally complex and stereotyped iconographic scheme for the glorification of official status; a scheme that would, significantly, come to be adopted by Christian art as a pattern for representing Christ and his apostles as teachers of God's law and the gospels. The hallmarks of "spiritual" abstraction are very much in evidence in the consular diptychs, perhaps most so in the works created for eastern consuls appointed under Anastasius I (491–518) in Constantinople: the iconic impersonality and incorporeality of the consuls' figures; the hieratic frontality and frozen schematism of their postures; the optically ambiguous

or infeasible relations between the consuls and surrounding motifs; the systematic manner in which depictive and symbolic motifs have been juxtaposed and synthesised; the advanced degree to which the principles of centrality, symmetry, stratification and value-related differentiations determine the overall compositions. Observing and unravelling the dense and complex weaves of factual realism and ideational unrealism, representation and symbol, physical tempo-spatiality and metaphysical stasis, earthly and heavenly, human and divine, that epitomise these high-status and large-output secular works, one is aware of the inherent limitations of the paradigmatic notion of "spirituality" as a primary mover behind and blanket explanation for the abstracted and symbolic language of late antique art, hence also of the need to strive towards an understanding that better reflects its heterogeneous nature, motives and meanings.

The aim and content of this volume

The aim of this book is to contribute some new and diverse material to the greater discourse on the nature and meanings of abstraction and symbolism in Mediterranean visual culture from *c.* 300 to iconoclasm. By approaching the phenomena from several different perspectives and critical angles – historical, theoretical, methodological, iconographical, iconological, interdisciplinary – and by highlighting some motifs, themes and artworks that do not ordinarily stand in the centre of scholarly attention, it purposes to add to our understanding of late-antique visual symbolism and the various contextual factors – political, intellectual, religious, social, local – that contributed to the overall abstraction and symbolisation of art in the Late Roman and Early Byzantine period. As is perhaps inevitable, and as is reflected in the title of this volume, all contributions concern or touch upon metaphysical themes in one way or other, the majority dealing with contextually defined examples or types of abstraction and symbolism where figural and narrative elements are either component parts of some greater symbolic configuration, rendered in a highly conceptual form, or wholly absent.

The first three chapters present different aspects on the study of Late Roman and Early Byzantine art. The opening chapter by Sarah Bassett is a critical and historiographical examination of the familiar inner-directed, spiritual or psychological approach to interpreting late-antique art as it was first, and variously, formulated among modernist theorists and artists in the decades around 1900. It is followed by two chapters that present apparently quite diverse approaches to perceiving and interpreting the visual expressions of late antiquity. The first, by John Onians, has an interdisciplinary profile and applies an art-analytical method influenced by neuroscientific research which the author has named neuroarthistory, and which aims at reconstructing the cognitive processes by which the people of, in our case, late antiquity conceived, used and experienced art. The second, by Anne Karahan, is informed by Early-Byzantine religious aesthetics, and considers the modal differentiation and interplay between image and

meta-image (or figural and abstract motifs) in a range of late-antique and early-medieval religious artworks from notions of "incarnate physicality" and "perfected spirituality".

Next are two chapters devoted to abstraction as an independent and intrinsically meaningful form of artistic expression in late-antique visual culture. The first is by Bente Kiilerich and offers a problem-oriented discussion of how to analyse and attribute meaning to a category of abstract motifs and compositions in early Christian mosaics that is commonly regarded as little more than ornamental space-fillers, focussing on some prominent examples from Ravenna and Hispanian Centcelles. The second, by Beat Brenk, examines the motive factors behind the conception of aniconic art, notably apse programmes, in the eastern half of the Late-Roman empire, with a special case study on the twelve-silver-column arrangement in the apse of Constantine's Martyrium church in Jerusalem.

The greater repertoire of late-antique symbolism, and the visual forms and methods by which artists could convey symbolic meaning in different contexts, are investigated in two chapters. The first, by Rainer Warland, presents reflections on the diverse and correlative means developed in the Late-Roman East to lend visual manifestation to the spatial framework that was ostensibly perceived to encompass, differentiate and interconnect earth and heaven. The second, which is my own contribution to the volume, analyses similar macrocosmic concepts through the microcosmic lens of a specific, widely diffused and creatively multifarious motif category in late-antique visual culture: architectural motifs, or imaged architecture.

The book is concluded with three chapters devoted to the analysis and interpretation of specific symbolic images and compositions, and to the tracing of their iconographical and contextual origins. Two of these are concerned with the creation of symbolic formulae for the cosmic representation of Christ: the first, by Hjalmar Torp, offers a comprehensive elucidation of the celestial medallion enclosing the solar-imperial image of Christ that forms the centrepiece of the dome mosaics in the church of Hagios Georgios in Thessaloniki; the second, by Josef Engemann, examines the formally related "ascension type" as it appears on a group of terracotta oil-lamps from North Africa, problematising the genealogical, chronological and contextual aspects of its distinctive imagery. In the last chapter, Livia Bevilacqua presents an iconographical and contextual investigation into a Nilotic floor mosaic in the 5th-century Church of the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes at Tabgha (mod. Israel), discussing the associative aspects by which this much-favoured mosaic theme of Greco-Roman art could be infused with Christian eschatological meaning.

Together, the ten chapters that make up the volume convey a variegated and multi-focal image of late antique abstraction and symbolism in art. Hopefully it is an image that does not only contribute towards relativising and extending our past and present notions about how one may go about interpreting the diverse and complex nature of the phenomena, but one that illuminates its own negotiability and expandability.

Note on the abbreviation system: The abbreviations used through the volume follow those recommended by the The American Journal of Archaeology, supplemented by those of L'Année Philologique and The Oxford Classical Dictionary.

Sarah Bassett

1 Late Antique Art and Modernist Vision

It is a truth universally observed that Roman art in the period between the 1st-century rule of Augustus and the 6th-century reign of Justinian follows a distinct stylistic trajectory, one that moves from "naturalism" to "abstraction". In the context of this conversation style as a general concept is defined as the manipulation of the formal elements of artistic practice – line, color, and composition – while the particular stylistic categories of naturalism and abstraction are understood, respectively, to denote the imitation of the world as we see it and the simplified interpretation of that same reality.[1]

Comparison of the sculptured reliefs of the Julio-Claudian dynasty from the 1st-century BCE Altar of Augustan Peace in Rome (Fig. 1.1) and the 6th-century mosaic of Justinian and members of his retinue in the church of San Vitale, Ravenna (Fig. 1.2), demonstrates the change. In the Augustan relief the Julio-Claudians, male and female, young and old, process along the two long sides of the altar. Figures in varying levels of relief fill the frame in three superimposed ranks. The children and heirs to the dynasty stand at the forefront in the highest relief. Behind them in lower relief are the family's major players. Still further back, merely sketched, are other, unnamed members of the procession. No two figures share the same pose, and the participants appear to shuffle forward, turn and converse, stop and start in the way of all such ceremonial events. The garments, wrapped and stretched in broad swaths and close folds, interact with the bodies they clothe, confirming the sense of motion by creating a series of complex undulating lines that weaves in and out of the composition. With its emphasis on three-dimensional form, the appearance of spatial recession, and the sense of implied motion, the Julio-Claudian procession is seen to convey not only the look of the material world, but also the experience of vitality and transience that stands at the heart of naturalistic representation.

The Justinianic mosaic offers no such vision. As with the altar reliefs, the mosaic depicts a procession. Justinian stands at the center of his retinue against a neutral green and gold ground. He carries a gold paten and sports the sartorial insignia of his office, the diadem, a purple chlamys with gold-embroidered tablion, and jewel-encrusted red boots. A nimbus completes the look. To his left are members of the clergy: the bishop Maximianus, identifiable by inscription, and two deacons carrying

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[1] Beginning with Giorgio Vasari's none too complimentary remarks about art in the age of Constantine, the transformation of Roman style has been the subject of art historical observation. See *Vite* 1.15. For recent considerations of the issue see L'Orange (196); Kitzinger 1977; Brendel (1979); and Elsner (1995).

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objects for celebration of the Eucharist, a censer and a codex. Court members appear to Justinian's right and left. Still farther to his right are soldiers.

In direct contrast to the serried rows of richly sculptured figures in the Ara Pacis reliefs these figures are laid out on a flat plane: there is no sense of depth, volume or motion, an impression enhanced by the shift to the mosaic medium. Although the faces are certainly individualized, and costume distinguishes the rank and status of the participants, each of the figures shares the same frontal pose and confronts the viewer with only minor variation. The garments, which fall in wide blocks of color articulated by straight unbroken lines, not only underscore the planar composition, but also create a sense of stasis. Enhancing this still, two-dimensionality are the overlapping figures that collide with one another and trod on the feet of their cohort to make any sense of directional movement ambiguous. It is not clear whether the group moves forward in a v-shaped configuration with Justinian at the apex or towards the emperor's left and under the guidance of the clergy. These simplified, static forms, so planar and linear in their construct, define what we understand to be late antique abstraction.

Observing this shift is one thing, making something of it another. In current understanding, both natural and abstract styles are seen to connote meaning, with naturalism being equated with the material and the rational, abstraction, the spiritual and the mystical. Correspondingly, this shift in appearances also is linked to a larger change in cultural orientation, one that is understood to abandon the material world and with it rational thought for the embrace of the immaterial and the spiritual. It is, in other words, a stylistic change understood to align with the turn from the polytheistic religious practices of Greco-Roman tradition to those of Christian monotheism, from antiquity to the Middle Ages.[2]

As with all such generalizations, there is truth to this observation: specifically, from the late 3rd century on the visual arts show a greater propensity for the use of this simplified manner of representation than those of the 1st and 2nd centuries. A brief comparison of two imperial portrait busts makes the case; an early 3d-century image of Caracalla,[3] in white marble (Fig. 1.3), and the porphyry portrait of a Tetrarch[4] from about 300 (Fig. 1.4). Both figures share a similar pose and iconography: in each the head turns sharply to the right and both sitters sport the short hair and beard of a Roman military man. It is here, however, that the similarity ends. In the Caracalla portrait, the artist marshals all of his artifice to sculpture a figure that imitates natural form and movement. He does so by rendering the short hair and beard in three-dimensional waves of tousled curls that frame a square face itself conceived

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2 On the correlation between style and meaning and the equation between abstraction and spirituality see L'Orange (1965); Kitzinger (1977); Elsner (1995).

3 Berlin, Altes Museum inv. Sk. 384. See Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (1980) 32 no. 37; and Wiggers & Wegner (1971) 57.

4 Berlin, Altes Museum inv. Sk. 384. See Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (1980) 32 no. 37; and Wiggers & Wegner (1971) 57.

and carved as a series of modulated, merging surfaces designed to capture the texture of skin and the shape of its underlying flesh. Careful observation of the sitter's physiognomy and the rendering of the varying textures of hair and flesh, create the image of a distinct individual and with it the sense of life and motion.

A completely different sense of artifice regulates the Tetrarchic bust where a complex interaction between mass, surface, and line characterizes the image. Three clearly articulated but integrated masses – the head, the neck and the shoulders – establish the visual field. The raised, uniformly stippled surfaces of hair and beard contrast with the regular contours of the polished face on which a series of sharp but thick projecting lines defines and emphasizes the eyes and brows. This stark treatment and the strange color of the porphyry medium eschews naturalistic observation for a type of representation so reduced and simplified that even the basic identification of the figure is unclear.

While this comparison demonstrates a clear shift from naturalism to abstraction, it tells only part of the story. For example, a portrait of a Tetrarch (Fig. 1.5)[5] from the same period as the porphyry bust, shows an altogether different stylistic sensibility, one much more in keeping with the kind of representational tradition manifest in the Ara Pacis with its use of contrapposto and light and shade modeling. Further, if we fast forward to the 6th century, there is ample evidence of the persistence of naturalism in works as diverse as the icon of Christ from the Monastery of St Catherine at Mt. Sinai (Fig. 1.6)[6] and the peristyle mosaic of the Great Palace (Fig. 1.7).[7] Finally, as comparison of the Christ with another 6th-century image from Sinai, the apse mosaic of the Transfiguration (Fig. 1.8)[8] demonstrates, these two styles, the natural and the abstract, continue to coexist, suggesting a problem with respect to established interpretive strategy. Such a coexistence of styles not only indicates a far more complex visual culture than that expressed by the standard equation, but also suggests that the established associations between style and meaning are not necessarily obvious or correct.

Complicating this problem is the issue of terminology. While it is clear from literary sources that ancient artists, their viewers and patrons, admired naturalistic illusionistic representation as an end of art, the fact is that there is no real term for such a visual tradition in the language of ancient art criticism: neither Greek nor Latin offers

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5 Istanbul, Istanbul Archaeological Museum, inv. 4864. See Inan & Rosenbaum (1966) 94–95 no. 80; and Prusac (2011) 146 no. 281.

6 Weitzmann (1976)13–15 no. B1.

7 Dating has been a thorny issue, with suggestions ranging from the 4th through the 7th centuries. Current opinion favors the 6th century. For an outline of the Great Palace and its history, see Müller-Wiener (1977) 229–37. For the initial excavation campaigns of the 1930s and 1950s, see Brett *et al.* (1947) 64–97; and Talbot Rice (1958) 121–54. Subsequent studies include Hiller (1969); Jobst (1987); Trilling (1989); Bardill (1999); Jobst, Kastler & Scheibelreiter (1999); Jobst (2006).

8 On the mosaic and its restoration, see Forsyth & Weitzmann (1973) 11–18.

a word that specifically denotes "naturalism".[9] Even more problematically, neither language includes a word to convey the idea of visual abstraction.[10]

Given the difficulties posed by the material and the literary record, how is it that we have come to use this vocabulary and to make these associations? My purpose in this essay is to consider this question by examining the explorations of late antique art that emerged in the last decades of the 19th century and first decades of the 20th in the writings of Franz Wickhoff (1853–1909), Alois Riegl (1858–1905) and Wilhelm Worringer (1881–1965) in light of contemporary cultural developments, for it is, I suggest, at this moment that the identification of the two poles of visual experience defined as "naturalistic" and "abstract" first emerged as the categories by which we evaluate this art together with the associations between the material and the spiritual that have come to be associated with them. In considering this issue I shall follow three interlocking paths of inquiry. The first explores the contributions of the 19th-century disciplines of psychology and aesthetic philosophy. The second follows late 19th- and early 20th-century art practice and its theory, and the third examines the role of spiritualist movements in creating a Modernist aesthetic vision.

Late 19th and early 20th century modernism

As a prelude to this discussion I would first like to consider the question of "modernism", the umbrella concept covering these various strands. As developed in the 19th

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9 Although there is no actual term for naturalism in Greek or Latin it is clear that on some level the imitation of the natural world was considered normative and desirable for classical viewers, although perhaps not for the same reasons mooted in later criticism. See Pollitt (1979) 2–4; and Elsner (1995) 15–48. "Mimesis" or "imitation", is the term used in ancient discussion for art that imitates the world as we see it. Its own definition changes over the course of time. In the 5th century BCE Greek context when the concept of mimesis first emerged as a category of aesthetic evaluation it may be understood to mean an exact copy of an original. Subsequently under the influence of Plato and Aristotle the definition, explored first and foremost in the context of language and theater, expanded to include ideas of interpretation that also allowed the possibility of an ethical component. For discussion see Else (1958); and Pollitt (1974) 37–41. Naturalism as a category of critical evaluation is allied with mimesis in modern historiography. According to Pollitt (Pollitt (1979) 3) it first appeared in the critical vocabulary when the Italian art historian Giovanni Pietro Bellori used it to describe the work of Caravaggio and his followers; see Bellori (1672/2006) 201–216. Here it was opposed to "idealism" a corrected imitation of nature which Renaissance critics saw as the defining feature of ancient art; see Pollitt (1979) 2–4.
10 *Aphairesis* (n) and *aphaireo* (v) may be understood to mean "abstraction" and "to abstract". The literal meaning of the verbal form is "to take away from", "to rob", "to deprive someone of something", the verbal noun suggesting deprivation or subtraction; see Liddel & Scott. The Latin *abstrahere* may be understood as "to draw away from", "to withdraw", "to divert", "to alienate from"; see Lewis & Short. In neither Greek nor Latin is the word used in the context of visual criticism. In the Aristotelian corpus the corollary to *aphaeresis* is *prosthesis* (addition), and the sense is largely that of subtraction; see Cleary (1985).

century, the idea of "modernism" implied rupture with the past across the full range of human experience. In terms of art and the aesthetic questions aligned with it, modernism meant the rejection of the classical tradition and what was understood to be its emphasis on a literary canon that determined appropriate subject matter, theories that placed beauty at the center of the artistic endeavor, and a prescriptive approach to artistic practice. In place of these established values, Modernist artists and theorists proposed a new range of subject matter that would better reflect the exigencies of modern life, a subject matter that released artists from the mandate to create beauty according to an established norm thus allowing the development of new kinds of representational techniques and with them new theories of practice.[11] Also, and crucially, there developed new theories of perception, theories designed to explain how, in the absence of a representational canon, art might be best understood.[12]

Theories of perception

These theories of perception represent the first strand of inquiry. That artists of the second half of the century were absorbed with questions of optics is well known from such Impressionist works as Claude Monet's 1872 painting, *Impression Sunrise*.[13] But Monet's efforts represent but one manifestation of an intellectual concern that preoccupied late 19th-century thinkers across a range of disciplines. Foremost among them was the German aesthetic philosopher, Robert Vischer (1847–1933). Vischer was interested in understanding the ways in which people responded to and made sense of inanimate objects. This question stood at the center of his dissertation, *Über das optische Formgefühl: ein Beitrag zur Aesthetik* (Leipzig 1873), and his answer was what he called "Einfühlung", "in-feeling", or empathy, the projection on the part of a viewer of individual experience and emotion onto inanimate form, a projection that infused the object with meaning and life.[14]

Vischer worked out this theory in a general way in his dissertation, but it was only in the work of Theodor Lipps (1851–1914) that the theory of empathy found direct application to the problem of art. Lipps summarized his position in his study

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11 The bibliography of modernism is vast, encompassing not only the visual arts but also developments in literature and music. Recent studies focusing on the definition of modernism in the visual arts include Clark (1984) and Varnedo (1990), both of whom deal with 19th- and early 20th-century developments. For an overview of developments in the range of disciplines see Waltz (2008).

12 For an overview see Barasch (2000); Mallgrave & Ikonomou (1994) 5–17.

13 *Impression, soleil levant*; Musée Marmottan inv. no. 4014. For bibliography and illustration, see Wildenstein (1974) 226 no. 263, fig. 263.

14 For "Einfühlung", see Vischer (1873) 21–24. For an English translation (On the Optical Sense of Form: A Contribution to Aesthetics), see Vischer p. 92 in Mallgrave & Ikonomou (1994) 89–123. On Vischer himself: Mallgrave & Ikonomou (1994) 17–29; and Barasch (2000) 99-108.

Grundlegung der Aesthetik (1903), arguing that an observer understands form on the basis of his own experience by projecting that experience into what he or she sees to complete the image. Thus, according to Lipps, when a viewer asserts that he sees an eye that expresses pride in a sculptured portrait, he does not actually see pride itself but something he understands to be the physical manifestation of pride. As such the viewer participates by means of empathy in creating the image of pride.[15] Lipps' application of Vischer's theory of empathy to artistic experience was important in two respects: it redefined aesthetic experience by making the viewer a participant in the creation of the image, and it set emotion at the heart of the viewing experience, for the goal of empathetic viewing was to understand not the material essence of an object, but the ideas and feelings that that object expressed.

Artistic practice

The effect of the Modernist canon rejection was to open artistic practice to a range of possibility, and there were, as a result, many modernisms: Symbolism, Fauvism, Expressionism, Vorticism, Futurism, and Suprematism to name but a few. In this second strand of inquiry I shall consider late 19th- and early 20th-century artistic practice. My purpose is not to provide a historical overview of the various groups and their practices, but to discuss one of their shared concerns, the idea that art could and should reveal inner states of mind and feeling through the combined forces of subject matter and style.[16]

There were of course various types of inner states to be evoked and an equally large number of strategies for achieving that end. For example, the French Symbolist

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15 Lipps based his theory of empathy on the experience of seeing what he referred to as "expressive movements" ("Ausdruksbewegungen"). The flickering of an eye or the waving of an arm could signal an emotional state and thus a response from the viewer akin to participation. Lipps linked this participation ("Mitmachen") to "Einfühlung", a topic he took up in chapter two, "Die Ausdruksbewegungen und Einfühlung"; Lipps (1903) 107–26, esp. 111 (on the link between participation and empathy: "Dies Mitmachen ist aber "Einfühlung". Einfühlung also ist Bedingung der Freude an dem in der wahrgenommen Ausdruksbewegung legenden inneren Varhalten eines Anderen". For a summary of Lipps' thought and work, see Barasch (2000) 111–113.

16 The idea that art could and should reveal inner states of mind and feeling was of course an extension of the empathy theory that had developed and manifested itself in a variety of ways. The relationship between visual appearance and inner life was itself without canonical definition with some artists exploring what they deemed to be the spiritual underpinnings of artistic creation, others the links to sexuality, and still others a range of psychological states to name but a few. On the relationship between modernist art and the spiritual see Tuchman & Freeman (1986) which observes the tie between the development of abstract visual form and late 19th- and early 20th- century spiritualist ideas. For intellectual background and artistic manifestation stressing the link between Viennese scientific and medical developments, art and art history, see generally Kaendel (2012).

painter Odilon Redon (1840–1916) suggested the dream life of the unconscious in works such as *Winged head above the waters* (1878) (Fig. 1.9),[17] an image that was deceptively familiar in its use of a naturalistic individual forms, and perplexing in its juxtaposition of images and manipulations of space and scale. Redon's dreamy fictions contrast markedly with paintings by such artists as Edvard Munch (1863–1944) whose 1893 painting, *The scream* (Fig. 1.10), defines the concept of Expressionism.[18] Like Redon, Munch based his painting on visible reality, but in contrast to Redon he interpreted that world by manipulating line, color, and composition in ways that totally upended the established conventions of representation to use landscape and human subjects as a visual essay expressive of a tormented psychological state.

A particular aspect of this modern interest in the exploration of inner life was the desire on the part of many artists to tap into and reveal what were described as the spiritual underpinnings not only of human experience, but also of physical form. Practitioners of this type of Modernist art which developed in the early decades of the 20th century included the Bauhaus painter Vassily Kandinsky (1866–1944), the Dutch De Stijl artist Piet Mondrian (1872–1944), and the Russian Suprematist Kazimir Malevich (1879–1935). With Kandinsky taking the lead in paintings such as *Improvisation 28* of 1912 (Fig. 1.11),[19] and Mondrian and Malevich following suit over the course of the next decade, a new kind of art, independent of representational tradition developed, a manner of expression described by Kandinsky in his treatise of 1912 *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* as "spiritual" ("geistige") painting.[20] The treatise built on the belief in the relationship between interior life and exterior form. As Kandinsky put it, "form is the external expression of... inner meaning",[21] and throughout the treatise he opposes material reality to the world of thought and emotion. He argues that a material object cannot be absolutely reproduced noting, "Many genuine artists, who cannot be content with an inventory of material objects, seek to express objects by what was once called "idealization", then "selection", and which to-morrow will

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17 *Tête ailée au-dessus des eaux*; Art Institute of Chicago no 50.1428. See Lacau St. Guily & Decroocq (1966) 196f no. 1129. Text illustration after this volume fig. 1129.

18 *Der Schrei*; Nasjonalmuseet for Kunst, Arkitektur og Design, Oslo. See Woll (2009) 316 no. 333.

19 *Improvisation 28*; Solomon K. Guggenheim Museum, New York. See Roethel & Benjamin (1982) 443 no. 443.

20 Throughout the treatise (Kandinsky (1970)), Kandinsky describes non-representational painting based on color, line, and geometric form as "geistig", a term frequently translated as "abstract"; see Kandinsky (2006). The first English translation of Über das Geistige in der Kunst was by Michael Sadler in 1914. Now known as Concerning the Spiritual in Art, Sadler initially published the translation under the title The Art of Spiritual Harmony. All English citations are from the original Sadler translation (Kandinsky (2006)). Kandinsky actively pursued an English edition of the book and worked with Sadler; for details, see Kandinsky (1970) vi-xxv.

21 Kandinsky (1970) 69 ("Die Form ist also die Äußerung des inneren Inhaltes"); Kandinsky (2006) 57.

again be called something different".[22] That something else was "abstraction", which by the 1920s was the term used to describe works by modern artists as diverse as Kandinsky, Mondrian, and Picasso, artists whose work was seen to annihilate the material in the search for what they referred to as spiritual expression.[23]

Spiritualism

Kandinsky's search for the spiritual introduces the third strand of inquiry, a consideration of the late 19th- and early 20th-century fascination with occult, esoteric, and/ or spiritualist practice. Across Europe an interest in mysticism emerged as one of the responses to the industrialization and materialism that had so radically transformed modern life in the wake of the Industrial Revolution.[24] This interest was expressed in a variety of ways: the study of such historical figures as the 13th-century theologian and mystic Meister Eckhart or his 16th-century counterpart, Jakob Böhme[25]; a fascination with non-western religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism[26]; the development of new, esoteric organizations such as the Theosophical Society.

Among these options, adherence to Theosophy was especially popular. The Theosophical Society, founded in New York in 1875 by Helena P. Blavatsky (1831–1891) and Colonel Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907), was the most widely influential organization for the promotion of occult teaching in North America and Europe at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th.[27] Its mission, promoted through local societies and the dissemination of the writings of its founder, Madame Blavatsky, was all-encompassing: to combat materialism in science and dogmatism in religion;

22 Kandinsky (1970) 71: "Der bewußte Künstler aber, welcher mitdem Protokollieren des materiellen Gegenstandes sich nicht begnügen kann, sucht unbedingt dem darstellenden Gegenstande einen Ausdruck zu geben, was man früher idealisieren hieß, später stilisieren un morgen noch irgendwie anders nennen wird" (Kandinsky (2006) 59.

23 In 1917 Gustav Hartlaub also referred to the new manner of artistic form, calling it "symbolic" painting; see Washton Long (1986) 207. Discussing Picasso and Cubism, Kandinsky noted that the new trend represented an "annihilation of materiality" ("Vernichtung des Materiellen"); see Kandinsky (1970) 52 (Kandinsky (2006) 38, which reads "destruction of matter.").

24 Washton Long (1986) 201. As she points out, these artists aimed at nothing less than the transformation of society. Their enterprise was therefore to discover an art form that would effect that transformation.

25 See Watts (1986) 239–55 on Meister Eckhart and Jakob Boehme as subjects of study in the 19th century; and Ringbom (1986) 134 for the connections between immateriality, spirituality and artistic representation.

26 Tuchman (1986) 19; Bolt (1986) 165–183, esp. 174; also Ringbom (1986) 132–138.

27 On theosophy generally, see Galbreath (1986) 388f. On theosophy and the occult, see Tuchman (1986) 17–61. On the relationship between art, the occult, and theosophy, see Ringbom (1966); Ringbom (1970); and Ringbom (1986).

to investigate the laws of the universe, including the concept of the fourth dimension, and develop the latent powers of human beings; to make known the esoteric teachings of the oriental religions; and to promote the brotherhood of humanity.[28] Especially interesting in these teachings was the belief that each human being generates a potentially visible aura, or thought-form, which reveals thoughts and emotion through distinctive patterns and colors. A second generation of Theosophists, Annie Besant and Charles W. Leadbeater disseminated these ideas in two publications, a joint publication, *Thought-Forms* (1901), and a single-author volume by Leadbeater, *Man Visible and Invisible* (1902).[29]

Theosophy was central to the development of the artistic ideas and attitudes that lead to the development of non-objective painting across Europe in the first decades of the 20th century in that many of the most influential Modernist painters either peripherally explored or overtly embraced its tenants. Kandinsky, a practitioner of yoga as early as 1900, frequented a group interested in mysticism while living in Munich, and is known to have read the writings of Blavatsky, Besant and Leadbeater. Moreover, he paid tribute to Theosophical teaching when he noted that he wanted to depict the spiritual reality behind physical form as the world entered in to what he referred to in Theosophical terms as the "Epoch of the Great Spiritual".[30]

Seemingly different on the face of things, the varieties of intellectual endeavor I have sketched here – the study of empathy that emerged in scientific and philosophical circles in the last decades of the 19th century, the development of a Modernist aesthetic in painting and sculpture, and the interest in occult spirituality – share common ground to the extent that all built on the premise that it was possible to see and understand some sort of higher truth – the truth of human emotion or spiritual essence – through the objects of the material world.

The early interpreters of late antique art

With this background in mind it is to the writings of those great interpreters of Roman and late antique art, Franz Wickhoff, Alois Riegl, and Wilhelm Worringer that I would now like to turn. It is, I suggest, with these critics, thinkers who spearheaded the revival in the fortunes of late antique art, that the conversation about the relationship between naturalism and abstraction, and the association of these styles with the material and the spiritual, the rational and the mystical begins. Further, I propose

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28 Galbreath (1986) 388.
29 Galbreath (1986) 390; Ringbom (1986) 136f, 149f. Besant (Besant & Leadbeater (1901)) was published by the Theosophical Publishing House, as was Leadbeater (Leadbeater (1902)). The popularity of Besant's work was such that it was subsequently reprinted in 1905 and 1925.
30 Ringbom (1986) 131.

that the conversation that they inaugurated should be understood in the broader context of the intellectual trends we have been considering: the developing theory of empathy, the desire to understand painting and sculpture as a means of access to hidden emotional states, the trend towards the exploration of the occult.

Franz Wickhoff

In 1895 Franz Wickhoff (1853–1895) published *Römische Kunst*: *Die Wiener Genesis* together with Wilhelm, Ritter von Härtel. The men divided the project, with von Härtel providing the codicological analysis and Wickhoff the art historical content. Although intended to classify the manuscript as an example of Roman art, Wickhoff's project, which was in fact a discussion of Roman art from the period of Augustus to Constantine, also had the far more ambitious aim of establishing the viability of Roman art as a legitimate artistic phenomenon against the claims circulating from the time of Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768) that it was merely a failed offshoot of Greek art. In making his argument Wickhoff observed two elements that he felt identified a specific Roman method of representation: the use of continuous narrative and the creation of an art that he categorized as "illusionistic" ("illusionistisch") against the "naturalism" ("Naturalismus") of Greek art. Wickhoff characterized Roman illusionism as a formal technique in which a series of impressions gathered by the artist were then united into a single image by the viewer. Naturalism, by contrast, resulted from the accumulation of individual observations, meticulously detailed and unified by a perspective system.[31]

Wickhoff considered this impressionistic illusionism, which he observed in both painting and sculpture, as the surpassing achievement of Roman art. By it he meant the kind of representation that demands "that the spectator transform and concentrate into a spatial unity [the subject of his viewing] by means of his own complementary experience".[32] To illustrate the problem he used the example of a relief of a rose bush from the late 1st-century Tomb of the Haterii (Fig. 1.12), a relief which he argued did not faithfully copy every detail of the rose as would be the case in a

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31 The text was soon translated into English in consultation with Wickhoff by Eugenia Strong (Mrs. S. Arthur Strong) as Roman Art: Some of Its Principles and Their Application to Early Christian Painting. All English citations are from the Strong translation (Wickhoff (1900)). On continuous narrative, see Wickhoff (1895) 7–10 (Wickhoff (1900) 8–13). On the impressionistic and illusionistic aspects of Roman art, see Wickhoff (1895) 20f and 52–130 (Wickhoff (1900) 18f and 46–116). On the naturalistic traditions of Roman art, see Wickhoff (1895) 25–51 (Wickhoff (1900) 22–45). On the difference between naturalism and illusionism especially as evidenced in painting, see Wickhoff (1895) 132–137 (Wickhoff (1900) 118–121).
32 "Bezeichneten wir es als das Wesentliche der Illusionsmalerei, daß sie den Beschauer affordert, unverbunden nebeneinander gestellte Farbtöne durch die supplierende Erfahrung zu zusammenhänger Raumwirkung umzuschaffen…": Wickhoff (1895) 161 (Wickhoff (1900) 149).

naturalistic representation, but rather gave the impression of the rose through techniques of carving that manipulated light and shadow in such a way as to invite viewers to complete the picture from their own knowledge of what a rose bush might be like.[33] My purpose here is not to discuss the validity of Wickhoff's assessment, but rather to point out the extent to which his thinking relies on the theories of empathetic viewing promoted by Vischer and Lipps. Like his contemporaries Wickhoff underscored the role of the viewer in creating the image.

Alois Riegl

Alois Riegl (1858–1905) shared Wickhoff's interests. Riegl's extended essay on late Roman art, *Die spätrömische Kunst-Industrie*, published in 1901, took up where Wickhoff left off to examine art and architecture in the period between the reign of Constantine (305–337) and the accession of Charlemagne (768) and to define with these chronological limits the periods we now know as late antiquity.[34] His stated purpose was to observe and describe the laws governing the development of late Roman style, specifically the style of such works as the Constantinian friezes from the Arch of Constantine and the Justinianic panels in San Vitale. In so doing Riegl argued that this newly defined period's artistic production, then universally vilified as one of decline from the naturalistic standards of Greco-Roman classicism, be accepted on its own aesthetic merits as something new, different, and equally valid, a visual expression of the culture it served.[35]

To argue his case Riegl developed a critical language based on sets of opposing values that were designed to make the case for a distinct late antique aesthetic. Riegl worked from the premise that all art strives for the true imitation of nature, but that each person, and by extension each historical period, has its own concept of natural imitation based on two broad categories of conception and perception, "Nahesicht" (near-sight) and "Fernsicht" (far-sight), with near-sight defined as the planar conception of art, such as that seen in Egypt, and far-sight as a spatial approach interested in shape and structure such as that seen in Greco-Roman tradition. In the former, that is in near-sight, representation was understood to be tactile and perception literal. In the latter, far-sight, representation was defined as optical and perception

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[33] Wickhoff (1895) 55–60 (Wickhoff (1900) 49–53). For the Haterii reliefs, see Helbig (1963) 773–781.

[34] Although published at the turn of the 20th century, Riegl's text was translated into English only in 1985 by Rolfe Winkes as The Late Roman Art Industry; all English citations are from this edition (Riegl (1985)). Riegl states that he was building on Wickhoff's work, picking up where his older colleague had left off, and that his aim was to demonstrate that the Vienna Genesis represented progress in the arts; Riegl (1901) 10f (Riegl (1985) 13–15). Riegl himself has been of great interest to scholars; see especially Gubser (2006); Iversen (1993); also Olin (1992).

[35] See Riegl's introductory remarks: Riegl (1901) 1–13 (Riegl (1985) 5–17).

imaginative, with an individual's experience of the world providing the missing doses of reality.[36] In essence these terms and the concepts that underpinned them represented an elaboration of Wickhoff's opposition of naturalism and illusionism, and, like Wickhoff, Riegl's own theory of perception relied upon the work of Vischer and Lipps in the area of empathy.

Within these broad categories Riegl applied two other terms, "crystalline" ("kristallinisch") and "organic" ("organisch"), the former referring to works of art that were symmetrical in composition, two-dimensional and linear in form, the latter referring to those that were asymmetrical and gave the appearance of three-dimensionality by dint of their method of carving or as a result of painting by modulating color with the introduction of light and shade. According to Riegl's scheme crystalline form embodied the immutable and eternal aspects of inorganic, dead matter, while organic form expressed the accidental transience of nature and living beings.[37]

Governing this concept of imitation – both its implementation and its perception – was the larger force he termed "Kunstwollen" ("art-will"), in this instance the set of underlying rules characteristic of a given period that determine a culture's creative force.[38] As observed by Riegl, the leading characteristics of late Roman "Kunstwollen" as seen in a work of art such as the Justinian mosaic (Fig. 1.2) were an orientation towards the pure perception of individual shape which involved what he called rigid crystallization, symmetry, and a suppression of modeling; rhythm, or the sequential repetition of the same appearances for the purposes of achieving unity through simplification and a creation of the sense of massiveness; planar composition, and a desire to see shape in full spatial boundaries resulting in the isolation of the figure both from the ground and from other shapes.[39] These values stood in opposition to the rhythms established by the organic composition in such works of classical art as

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[36] The discussion is taken up in chapter two on sculpture: Riegl (1901) 45–123, esp. 47–57 (Riegl (1985) 51–131, esp. 53–63). See also Riegl (1985) xxii for Winkes' commentary on near-sight and far-sight.

[37] For definitions, see Riegl (1966) 75–81 (Riegl (2004) 123–129). Although Riegl used the terms in *Die Spätrömische Kunst-Industrie* he offers no precise definition of them there, assuming instead a familiarity with them on the part of his reader. Riegl does, however, define the terms in other contexts, particularly the set of lectures that became known as *Historische Grammatik der bildenden Künste* (*Historical Grammar of the Visual Arts*) (Riegl (1966); Riegl (2004)). Riegl produced the initial text during the 1897–98 academic year while on leave from the University of Vienna. In the following academic year (1898–99) he presented his work in a revised format as a lecture course. Publication occurred only posthumously under the aegis of his students Karl Swoboda and Otto Pächt; see Riegl (1966); for the recent English translation, see Riegl (2004).

[38] In *Die Spätrömische Kunst-Industrie*, Riegl refers to "Kunstwollen" first in his introductory remarks; see Riegl (1901) 5f (Riegl (1985) 9f). Subsequently he devotes Chapter V to a discussion of the term.; see Riegl (1901) 209–217 (Riegl (1985) 223–234).

[39] For leading characteristics of Late Roman "Kunstwollen", see Riegl (1901) 209–217 (Riegl (1985) 223f). On the particular qualities of Late Roman "Kunstwollen" as manifest in San Vitale, see Riegl (1901) 132f (Riegl (1985) 139f).

the Ara Pacis frieze that emphasized motion, integration of forms in space and the juxtaposition of opposites in such compositional artifices as contrapposto.

In keeping with his desire to understand artistic form as a visual expression of its culture and turning to the example of portraiture, Riegl observed that the aim of this late antique "Kunstwollen", was "the visualization of spiritual life per se, and not of some kind of individual emotion within it",[40] a purpose distinctly at odds with what he saw as the interest in individual experience seen to characterize earlier Roman art. Thus, to return to the initial comparison, using the criteria of Riegl's analysis, the relief from the Ara Pacis reveals individual psychological characteristics and emotional experience that corresponded to Wickhoff's idea of naturalism as a precise copy, while the mosaic of Justinian and his retinue, its individualized portraits notwithstanding, offered a generalized, illusionistic vision.

Riegl's exploration of late antique style represented an attempt to create a universally valid method of visual analysis that would explain what for late 19th-century viewers, himself included, was the irredeemable ugliness of late Roman art by finding a method to explain what he and his contemporaries saw as the stylistic madness that shaped late antique form.[41] In his bid to take late Roman art on its own terms, Riegl proposed the suspension of classical aesthetic value, which he viewed as external to the historical image. What he failed to address was the fact that even as he was attempting to take this art on its own terms his own language was similarly alien to the material at hand. Indeed, Riegl's fascination with the process of perception and the role of human agency in processing the artistic image was fully consistent with the 19th-century interest in the subject. In a similar vein, his equation of material form with underlying psychological and spiritual states was of a piece with the aims of contemporary artistic production, as was his sense that ugliness represented a legitimate representational category, one whose larger purpose was to reveal not beauty, but truth.

Wilhelm Worringer

Throughout this discussion Riegl, although willing to make conclusions about the relationship between visual form and psychological states, never used the terms

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40 "Nur war das Ziel die Versinnlichung des Geistes-lebens an sich und nicht irgend einer individuellen Regung desselben": Riegl (1901) 111 (Riegl (1985) 119).

41 Riegl has a good deal to say about the perceived ugliness of late antique art, particularly in the *Historical Grammar* (Riegl (1966); Riegl (2004)). He recognizes it as a product of late antique "Kunstwollen" and suggests that "Kunstwollen" allows modern viewers the means of understanding things we understand as ugly in more historically accurate terms (Riegl (1901) 5f; Riegl (1985) 11). Further in the *Historical Grammar* he argues that the ugliness of late antique art is a vehicle for the transmission of the spiritual values that were the main concern of the later Roman Empire's growing Christian population (Riegl (1966) 37f; Riegl (2004) 74f).