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ART HISTORY’S NORMATIVE RENAISSANCE

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No American academic discipline was more profoundly marked by the emigration of German and Austrian scholars during the Nazi era than the history of art. A recent monograph lists 126 German-speaking art historians who made their way to the United States, nearly all of Jewish ancestry.\(^1\) Many, although by no means all, found employment in museums, colleges, and universities. The émigré art historians brought with them a sense of the history and the intellectual legitimacy of their own discipline; practical notions of how to teach art history, and especially how to train graduate students; and intimate familiarity with the material relics of ancient, medieval, and early modern European culture exceeding that of all but the most privileged Americans. They also brought a vivid conviction of the absolute value of the

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achievements of European civilization, a conviction that emerged with increasing clarity as Hitler began to realize his aims. The Renaissance figured in their art history as that crystallizing moment when the standard formats and representational conventions of European art were established – easel painting, portraiture, landscape, one-point perspective, unity of narrative time and space – and when permanently valid truths about human nature and destiny found their most successful expression in the visual arts. Confidence in the exemplarity of the masterpieces of Western art became the main framework for American research conducted in the Italian Renaissance field. It is risky to generalize about the émigrés, an intellectually heterogeneous group. But it does seem at times that the major émigré scholars working in the field of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century art were offering less an analysis of the artistic achievements of the Renaissance than an endorsement.

The émigrés’ affirmative approach to the Renaissance did not reflect the complexity of the European debates they left behind. In pre-war European intellectual life, the exemplarity, the modernity, indeed the very reality of the Renaissance had been major points of contest. The émigré art historians smoothed out these debates and told a simpler and non-dialectical story. They abandoned the sophisticated “formalist” methodologies in fashion during the pre-war period, which had tried to read artistic form as a supersensitive index of history, and instead shifted the focus to the philosophical or theological content of works of art. The disjunction between what German-speaking art history had been between the wars, and what it became in the post-war United States, is one of the most important features of the academic emigration.

The reception of the émigré scholars in the new world was intellectually frictionless. Art history by 1933 was well-established institutionally in the United States, but not at all sure of its bearings. The émigrés introduced both a method of historical scholarship and a strong sense of scholarship’s purpose and value. The émigrés’ intellectual good fortune in the United States was grounded in long-standing American admiration for German educational institutions and ideals. Indeed, in a certain sense the American academy had been preparing for the central European emigration, fearsome accident that it was, all its life. Already in the 1830s the American university was beginning to transform itself on the model of the German system of lectures and seminars, chairs and assistants. Harvard’s most promising young scholars had been
pilgrimaging to Germany for finishing ever since the 1810s, when Edward Everett was sent to Göttingen to earn a doctorate before taking up the professorship of Greek literature. Henry Adams sketched the new German itinerary memorably in the Education of Henry Adams. Twenty-year-old Adams was sent to Berlin to study history in the winter of 1858-1859, and despite having learned nothing whatsoever, by his own account, was recalled in 1871 to Harvard College to teach. This event in fact marked the end of Henry's education. But many other young Americans – Bernard Berenson, for one – prized and aspired to distinctly Germanic models of Bildung and Kultur. Until 1861, when the first doctorate in a field other than theology or medicine was awarded by an American university (at Yale, in classical philology) – a Ph.D. meant a German Ph.D. And a Ph.D. in art history meant a German Ph.D. until the 1910s. The very idea of teaching art history at a university was a German idea. In 1875, when Charles Eliot Norton was appointed professor of Fine Arts at Harvard, the first professor of art history in the United States, art history was already being taught at 29 universities in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. But over the next decades dozens of American colleges and universities built up curricula in art history. By 1912, sixty-eight institutions had special chairs in art history or archeology. Academic art history on the German model was infinitely more developed in the United States than, for instance, in Great Britain. When Erwin Panofsky first arrived as a visiting professor at the Graduate Department of Fine Arts of New York University in 1931, he found a German-style institute under the

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4 EISLER, loc. cit. (see note 1), p. 547.
5 Among the earliest doctorates awarded in art history (as opposed to classical archeology) – perhaps the earliest? – was George Edgell’s Harvard dissertation on early Umbrian painting (1913); see S. GORDON KANTOR, “Harvard and the ‘Fogg Method’”, in C. H. SMITH - P. M. LUKEHART (eds.), The Early Years of Art History in the United States, Princeton, 1993, p. 169. The first M. A. in art history was awarded at Vassar College in 1876; see P. ASKEW, “The Department of Art at Vassar: 1863-1931”, in SMITH - LUKEHART (eds.), p. 60.
direction of Richard Offner, an American scholar of Austrian extraction, who had in 1914 earned a Ph.D. at the University of Vienna.\(^8\)

Until the First World War, German language study was central to the American secondary school curriculum. In 1915, 316,000 American high school students were enrolled in German language classes.\(^9\) Undergraduates in the late nineteenth century were expected to read German: from the 1870s to the 1890s, the required textbooks in the standard courses offered by Norton at Harvard, Fine Arts 3 (Ancient Art) and Fine Arts 4 (Roman and Medieval Art) included Jacob Burckhardt’s *Die Cultur der Renaissance in Italien*, Carl Schnaase’s *Geschichte der bildenden Künste*, and Franz von Reber’s *Kunstgeschichte des Altertums*.\(^10\) Eventually, books by these and other continental scholars, among them Wilhelm Lübke, Franz Wickhoff, Heinrich Wölfflin, and Wilhelm Worrringer, were translated into English. And none too soon, for the First World War sharply cut the American appetite for German language study: by 1922 the number of high school students learning German had dropped to 14,000 — a decline of 96%.

But Americans did go on learning classical languages, at a rate greater than ever before or since: 429,000 U.S. public high school students were studying Latin in 1948, 7.7% of all students, compared to only 1.7% in 1994.\(^11\) It is hard to overstate the depth of the American attraction to the classical. Classicism offered a framework for the most basic thinking about what art was and what function it had in life.

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\(^11\) For these statistics, see nces.ed.gov/pubs/digest97/d97t057.html. Only 0.8% of high school students were studying German in 1948; that proportion had climbed back to 2.9% by 1994. The more alarming statistics cited by Panofsky in 1953 (*op. cit.* [see note 1]), without attribution, do not seem reconcilable with the government records: out of one million New York City pre-college students in New York City, according to Panofsky, only 1000 (0.1%) were studying Latin (and only fourteen Greek!); PANOFSKY, *op. cit.* (see note 1), p. 343.
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Steepled in Goethe and Ruskin, Americans tended to focus on art’s ethical and cognitive content. Classical balance and decorum were indeed ethical as much as formal ideals, and they helped bridge the vast cultural gap separating Americans from Renaissance Italy; classicism helped Americans overcome their reflexive suspicion of Popish spectacle and superstition, and their disapproval of the worldly mores of the Renaissance princely and merchant patrons. Nineteenth-century Americans, including Emerson himself, brought back reproductive prints of Raphael’s Vatican frescoes from their European tours. The stories the young country told about itself were gripped by the dialectic of civilization and barbarianism, the powerful “coordinate-system of the late Antique world” redescribed and indeed endorsed as late as 1937 by the doyen of Viennese art historians, Julius von Schlosser. The Roman Empire, history taught, had tried but ultimately failed to defend its borders against the barbarians. The modern United States, by contrast, managed to permanently ‘close’ its frontier by crushing the indigenous barbarian population. Classicism was the apology for this triumph.

American academic art historians in the 1920s and early 1930s, to be sure, fastidiously distanced themselves from any facile, vulgar appetite for the classical. Art history at the universities was dominated by empirical or ‘archeological’ work, in other words the establishment of a corpus of dated and localized objects. In fact there was relatively little research conducted in the Italian Renaissance field. Most of the major figures in the discipline were medievalists: Charles Rufus Morey, Arthur Kingsley Porter, Chandler Post, E. Baldwin Smith, Meyer Schapiro. We recall that Charles Eliot Norton’s introductory survey at Harvard, Fine Arts 3 and Fine Arts 4, had stopped just short of the Renaissance. The Index of Christian Art established at Princeton by Morey in 1917 extended only to the year 1400. And in the discipline’s leading journal, the Art Bulletin, articles published between 1922 and 1932 on medieval and Byzantine art outnumbered articles on Renaissance art 64 to

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The American discourse on Renaissance art was simply not very advanced. The *Art Bulletin* saw fit to publish in 1936, for example, an article with the plain title “Lucas Cranach the Elder”, an introductory survey of that complex sixteenth-century artist’s works and career by W. L. M. Burke, a student of Morey’s at Princeton who had travelled to Hamburg in 1932 to study under Panofsky.

The contrast between the pre-war scenes in Europe and America was great. In the German and Austrian universities, the interpretation of the Renaissance, and more generally the destiny of the classical heritage in the post-antique West, was a major historiographical battleground. Admiration for the giants of Italian neoclassical painting, from Raphael to the Carracci to Guido Reni and Domenichino, had been a fundamental premise of nineteenth-century academic art. By the turn of the century, artists and critics had tired of the burden of academic taste. Scholars eventually followed, and the rejection of any idealized, normative vision of the Italian Renaissance became one of the rallying points of progressive continental art history between the World Wars. Within academic art history, the anti-heroic version of the Renaissance had its roots in the influential writings of the turn-of-the-century Viennese scholar Alois Riegl (1858-1905). Riegl in his scholarship studiously avoided the ‘peaks’ of art history, the classical and neoclassical high points. Instead he wrote major monographs on such profoundly unfashionable subjects as the art of the late Roman empire, or sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Dutch group portraiture. Riegl worked on the margins of art history not as a merely antiquarian exercise, but in order to plot an alternative trajectory for Western art: not the story of a successful recapitulation of classical balance, doomed to petrifaction, but the story of a continuous, progressive rise of a subjective art that appealed to individual beholders, through the play of light and shadow and representation of interior psychological states. Like his near-contemporary Freud, Riegl sought to bring a methodical, disenchanted objectivity to his field. Riegl’s special tactic was to “look through” the

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14 Volumes 5 through 14. The medieval tally excludes articles on late antique and Islamic art; the Renaissance tally includes articles on the Italian Trecento.

apparent content of a work of art in order to perceive its underlying formal features. Riegl tried to ignore the blandishments of style and the spurious dramas of subject matter and symbolism, and instead focus on the work’s deep structure: format, framing, composition, the interplay between figure and ground. This perceptual discipline had an unhinging, disorienting effect; to describe it, a Viennese follower of Riegl’s of the 1930s, Hans Sedlmayr, coined the verb zergehen, meaning something like “see to pieces”. Riegl’s radical formalism disrupted the complacent pieties of nineteenth-century bourgeois taste and turned the established history of art inside out. Riegl was not impressed by classical equipoise or its ethical claims. He inhabited, after all, a culture saturated with simulations and repetitions of classicism.

In Riegl’s history of art, the traditional highlights and heroes of the Italian Renaissance are almost completely eclipsed. Riegl’s book The Origins of Baroque Art in Rome, published posthumously in 1908 and based on lectures delivered in the 1890s, treats the Renaissance as a kind of clumsy prelude to the Baroque. One of the first paintings he analyzes is Correggio’s Adoration of the Shepherds in Dresden, painted in the 1520s (Fig. 1). Riegl shows how Correggio has broken the figures out of classical, objective isolation and instead melded them together into a psychic unity, a little group held together by exchanged glances and by Empfindung, “feeling”. The Virgin Mary and the shepherds – the divine and the human, the high and the low – are levelled by a uniformly sympathetic, anecdotal, genre-like treatment. The composition is knitted together not by an objective symmetry but only from a highly subjective point of view, a standpoint taken up at the extreme left, that puts the giant shepherd at the left into sharp foreshortening. What does not interest Riegl about early sixteenth-century painting is the emulation of classical antiquity; the reproduction of pagan cosmological models; and the humanist adaptation of painting to literary or rhetorical models. On the contrary, he says that what is happening in the Correggio amounts to a “definitive overcoming of antiquity” (p. 46). And yet he sees even the novelties of Correggio not so much as violent affronts to the High Renaissance, but rather as deeply rooted in it, in this case in Raphael’s St. Peter in Prison in the Vatican Stanze.

16 A. RIEGL, Die Entstehung der Barockkunst in Rom, eds. A. BURDA - M. DVORÁK, Vienna, 1908.
For Riegl, the moment of classical equilibrium in Renaissance art, if it exists at all, is not a permanent benchmark but just another station en route to modernity.

Riegl’s refusal to pause at the heroic, classical moment, and his irreverent neglect of the achievements of the earlier Italian Renaissance, from Giotto to Michelangelo, had a huge impact on German and Austrian art history in the 1910s, 20s, and 30s. The shift in taste and in scholarly emphasis was so thoroughgoing that by 1940, as hyperbolically formulated by Sedlmayr, the Italian Renaissance had been transformed into the “darkest” episode in the history of Western art.17

Riegl’s radical formalism accomplished this demotion by denaturalizing the coherent, self-contained painted image, traditionally seen as the main achievement of Italian Renaissance art. In principle, the Renaissance painting represented an event unfolding in mathematically measured space in a circumscribed interval of time. The modern conception of the painter as an author was grounded in the ability to construct such images. Art history itself, since Vasari, was built around the verbal description and analysis of these images. Since meaning was meant to emerge out of the spectacle of significant human action unfolding in unified space and time, the new eloquence of the painted image was dependent above all on the illusion of space. Space, supposedly, made meaning possible; meaning in turn elevated the painting from the status of mere furniture or furnishings to the status of the work of art.

Disintegrative formalism called all this into question. Formalist art historians of the 1910s, 20s, and 30s, for instance Heinrich Wölfflin, Fritz Burger, Otto Pächt, Hans Sedlmayr, and Theodor Hetzer, demystified the spatial illusionism of the Renaissance image by stressing the subordination of linear perspective to the two-dimensional plane, to the concern with planar pattern. In their accounts, natural, objective space was never an end in itself in the Renaissance; rather, space was always handled with close attention to the visual effect of the projection of three-dimensional form in the plane, and with close attention to the demands of narrative. We saw that in Riegl’s analysis of the bunched, concentric, emotionally colored space of the Correggio Adoration.


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2. Titian, Flaying of Marsyas. (Gallery, Kroměříž, Moravia).
One of the key contributions to the radical formalist position on space was Erwin Panofsky’s “Perspective as ‘Symbolic Form’” (1927), an essay that emerged directly out of the young scholar’s intellectual engagement with Riegl. Here Panofsky showed how illusionistic technologies like perspective could be understood as something like “styles”, each peculiar to and expressive of the cultures that developed them. The ancient Greeks and Romans, for instance, conceived of space only as the negative gaps between solid bodies, rather than as an infinite, homogeneous quantity. They represented space with clusters of juxtaposed and overlapping things. The various perspective systems matched up not with the world, but with different conceptions of the world. These demonstrations provided the raw material for a true relativization of the Renaissance perspective system, even if Panofsky, within the essay itself, backed away from the strongest formulation of that thesis.

Formalist art historians in these years opened new relationships between art history and disciplines such as Gestalt psychology and information theory, estranging the discipline from its traditional allies classical philology, theology, and intellectual history. These art historians explored painterly meanings that did not depend on the illusion of space extending into depth; indeed, meanings that were generated by a certain blockage in the picture plane: allegory and emblems relying on paratactical or non-hierarchical juxtapositions; visual rhymes, puns, rebus, anamorphoses, and other deliberately staged crises of representation. By attending to the persistence of the picture plane, these scholars – like the later sixteenth- and seventeenth-century artists who chipped away at the edges of the idealist consensus – were able to make the Renaissance image strange again. Scholars focused more intensively than ever before on the critiques of the image levied from within the Italian Renaissance. Ernst Gombrich, like Hans Sedlmayr and Otto Pächt a pupil of Julius von Schlosser, wrote his dissertation in 1934 on the fantastic decorative conceits of Giulio Romano.

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ging out of this body of work was a darker, even Faustian vision of the Renaissance. In this vision, the prestige of the powerful individual artist, the artist as author, was purchased at the price of the cohesion of the older communities that had agreed upon subject matters and installed works of art at the center of public and imaginative life. Deliberately idiosyncratic artists and their willfully capricious clients turned the old hierarchies of center and margin inside-out and installed previously peripheral pursuits like landscape or still-life painting, or grotesque ornament, at the very center.

The new historiography relativized the traditional achievements of the Italian Renaissance, and at the same time constructed an alternative Renaissance whose claim on modern attention, indeed whose claim to stand at the threshold of modernity itself, was grounded not in the rebirth of classical art, but in the crisis of representation; in the challenges posed by much Renaissance art to the ideal isolation and integrity of the body, and to the theory of human will and character proposed by the conventional narratives; in the loss of confidence in the figure-ground distinction, which related to the detachment of easel painting from architecture; and in the persistent concern with surface pattern that undermines spatial illusionism at the very moment of its technical success. The revival of antiquity, meanwhile, ended up looking nostalgic, anachronistic, and conservative; and neo-Platonist iconography looked like a humanist superstition.

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American art historians of the 1920s and early 1930s were picking up only fragments of what was happening in European art history. They were only dimly aware of the most advanced European work in art history, particularly in the formalist tradition. Heinrich Wölfflin’s *Principles of Art History* (1915) was translated into English only in 1932. Alois Riegl had virtually no reception in the United States, except among specialists in late antique art. *Spätrömische Kunstindustrie* was little known until it was translated into English in 1985. Bernard Berenson was said to have kept a copy of Riegl’s book permanently open on a lectern, but as Meyer Schapiro acidly pointed out, his own writings show little evidence of his actually having read it.¹¹ Richard Offner,

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¹¹ M. Schapiro, “Mr. Berenson’s Values” (1960), repr. in Schapiro, *Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist, and Society*, New York, 1994, p. 213. This is not a completely fair judgment;
although he had written a dissertation under Max Dvořák in 1914, was actually the least Viennese of art historians. The American scholar John Coolidge reports that the architectural historian Fiske Kimball used to say, late in life, “I was too old when I came to understand Wölfflin. I could no longer change”. And the continental debates about the significance of the Renaissance could hardly resonate in a culture that had barely begun to absorb the fundamental theses of Burckhardt.

American scholars did get a glimpse of the disenchanted, reductivist version of Western art history in an address delivered at Harvard in 1936 by Adolph Goldschmidt, one of the towering authorities on medieval art. But it seems doubtful that Goldschmidt’s American audience caught his drift. Goldschmidt had been the first Jewish Ordinarius or full professor in art history, and until the National Socialist regime broke their contracts in the spring of 1933, one of three Jewish full professors. Goldschmidt and seventy other distinguished scholars from around the world were invited to the Harvard Tercentenary to participate in a three-day series of symposia in the humanities and social and natural sciences. The humanities symposium on September 10-11, 1936, was titled “Independence, Convergences, and Borrowings in Institutions, Thought, and Art”. In 1936 Goldschmidt: was 73 years old and making his third visit to the United States: he had taught for a year at Harvard in 1927-1928 (evidently the first German-Jewish art histo-

see BERENSON’s comments on Riegl in Aesthetics and History in the Visual Arts, New York, 1948, pp. 168-169, 226-227; and The Arch of Constantine, New York, 1934, pp. 22-24. Schapiro himself was ambivalent about Riegl’s legacy: see his book review “The New Viennese School”, Art Bulletin, 18, 1936, pp. 258-266; repr. in The Vienna School Reader: Politics and Art Historical Method in the 1930s, ed. C. S. Wood, New York, 2000, pp. 453-485. Schapiro also said that Berenson was already “behind” by 1900, failing to absorb the teachings of the most interesting Germanic art historians, including Max Dvořák and Heinrich Wölfflin. But Berenson professed to value the German art historians, and as late as the 1950s was complaining that too few of their works had been translated into English (Arch of Constantine, p. 19).


24 Goldschmidt was made Ordinarius at Halle in 1904, Paul Frankl also at Halle in 1921, and Erwin Panofsky at Hamburg from 1926; in 1933 these three actually accounted for a tenth of all the full professorships in art history in Germany. Michels, Transplantierte Kunstwissenschaft, op. cit. (see note 1), pp. 180-181.

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Goldschmidt returned to teach in the United States; he returned in 1930-1931 to teach at the Graduate Department of Fine Arts at New York University and to receive an honorary doctorate from Princeton; and now finally in September 1936 Goldschmidt was at Harvard again to give his talk at the symposium and collect another honorary degree. (Goldschmidt did not remain in the United States, but returned to National Socialist Germany and did not leave Berlin until the spring of 1939. He died in Basel in 1944.) Goldschmidt prepared a version of his Harvard lecture in English, but at the last moment was encouraged by his hosts to deliver it in German. American scholars were nothing if not confident in their own ability to understand foreign languages. The lecture, entitled “Die Bedeutung der Formenspaltung in der Kunstentwicklung” (The Meaning of Formal Disintegration in the Development of Art) was broadcast on radio (“all over the world”, Goldschmidt reported in his memoirs) and later published in the symposium proceedings in the original German. Despite all the German-language study in the American high schools, it seems unlikely that very many people in the audience at Harvard, let alone the radio audience, were able to understand what Goldschmidt said.

When one reads Goldschmidt’s lecture today, it becomes clear that in a larger sense no one at all understood him. For he was offering a story about Western art history that could not possibly find resonance in an American context. The thesis of his talk was that the history of medieval art was driven by a series of profitable misunderstandings and dismantlings of earlier artistic formulas. Later artists coming across Greek or Roman decorative motifs or representational schemata, according to Goldschmidt, misunderstood their original rationales and meanings. When these later artists copied earlier art, they tended to barbarously pull the forms apart and reassemble them in strange ways. Goldschmidt’s Formenspaltung clearly resembles the disintegrative seeing proposed by Riegl; indeed, Goldschmidt cites Riegl twice in his address. The formal “errors” of the medieval copyists, Goldschmidt

26 Goldschmidt, op. cit. (see note 6), pp. 231-286, 292-334, 351-383 on the trips to the United States; pp. 394-413 on the situation in Berlin in late 1938 and early 1939 leading to his emigration.

argued, often led to entirely new, unexpected, and successful formal systems. The acanthus leaf of the classical capital, for instance, was flattened out in Byzantine art, pressed back into the plane. But as a side-effect, the negative surfaces between the leaves assumed for the first time an independent formal value, and even competed for primacy with the leaves. This levelling of positive and negative form became the fundamental structural principle of Islamic ornament. Goldschmidt went on to show how Byzantine and Arabic architects sometimes stripped the antique column of its load-bearing function and instead used it as a decorative motif, inserted into walls or the corners of piers in the form of imbedded or engaged half-columns. In Romanesque architecture, the engaged columns were extended into the arches above; eventually they came to play a crucial role in the Gothic formal system. Indeed – and here I am extending Goldschmidt’s argument – the engaged column and its relationship to the ceiling vaults, born originally of an error, became so fundamental to Western formal thinking that it governed the most creative experiments in architecture all’antica of the fifteenth century. It was the medieval development of the relationship between the engaged column and the wall that made possible the Renaissance reception of the complex ancient Roman wall system.

Goldschmidt’s dispassionate formalism robbed the history of art of much of its sense. In his vision, concisely and unpretentiously sketched in the Harvard talk, formal systems were one after another drained of their prestigious original meanings and taken up as raw material for new formal systems. His schema called into question any easy assumptions about the connectedness of art to the rest of historical experience. Goldschmidt implied that formal transformations in the history of art could not be understood by referring them to an anthropomorphic, naturalistic, classical, or other normative standard outside the formal system. His history of art looked like a series of choices made within a relatively closed system of formal relationships. Once the external, normative standard is abandoned, many apparent ‘errors’ in the history of art disappear. Supposed solecisms like the engaged half-column, the bad draughtsmanship of the Middle Ages, or the faulty perspective, can all be reinterpreted as the accidental by-products of a historical development of art that had very different long-term aims than the restoration of Greco-Roman antiquity.

In a sense, Adolph Goldschmidt’s visits to Harvard and to New York University in the 1920s and 1930s represented a kind of false
start to the scholarly emigration. For Goldschmidt came not as a political refugee but as a visitor, and he made no particular effort to accommodate himself intellectually to his hosts. He initiated no real communication with American art historians.

Everything began to change when the émigrés, nearly all of them younger than Goldschmidt, got settled in the United States. Eight art historians arrived already in 1933 and 1934, six more in 1935; most came later in the decade and in the early 1940s. During these years émigré art historians took up positions and had immediate impact at the departments of art history at New York University, Harvard, Pennsylvania, Chicago, Berkeley, Barnard, Cooper Union, Vassar, Smith, Oberlin, Louisville, Washington University, and many other institutions; within a decade or so émigré scholars found their way to Columbia, Princeton, and Johns Hopkins.

The émigré art historians began constructing an unambiguously affirmative story about Western art. The Renaissance specialists among them – principally Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968), Edgar Wind (1900-1971), Rudolf Wittkower (1901-1971), Ulrich Middeldorf (1901-1966), William S. Heckscher (1904-1999), Charles De Tolnay (1899-1981), and H. W. Janson (1913-1982), author of the most successful college textbook in art history; as well as Ernst Gombrich (1909-2001), who settled in Britain but had a deep impact on American art history – insisted on the intellectual content of Renaissance art. In the accounts of all these scholars, Renaissance artists tended to succeed in reconciling pagan and Christian wisdom, in synthesizing the demands for pleasure and instruction, in squaring faith with science, and in extracting the permanently true from the welter of the real. Renaissance art, once it was conceived as a fundamentally intellectual enterprise, took on enduring and paragonal value. (It is no surprise that the only other field that so admired its own objects of study was Renaissance intellectual history, dominated from the 1940s to the 1970s by the émigré Paul Oskar Kristeller [1905-1999]). The strong version of art history's reinvigorated, normative Renaissance was unfolded in a series of key texts by Panofsky, who had been a student of Adolph Goldschmidt at Berlin.

In the introduction to Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance (1939), Panofsky argued that the aim of art

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\(^{28}\) Michels, Transplantierte Kunstwissenschaft, op. cit. (see note 1), p. 24, n. 155.

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historical interpretation in general was the apprehension of "those underlying principles which reveal the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion – unconsciously qualified by one personality and condensed into one work". The art historian could improve on the mere stylistic and thematic analysis of the work by applying what Panofsky called "synthetic intuition", or "familiarity with the essential tendencies of the human mind"; and then by tempering this intuition with "insight into the manner in which, under varying historical conditions, essential tendencies of the human mind were expressed by specific themes and concepts". This is what Panofsky meant by "iconological" interpretation. In the second part of his introduction, he turns abruptly to the Italian Renaissance, suggesting the peculiar appropriateness of the iconological method, supposedly built on universal philosophical principles, to the study of Renaissance art. The implication, unspoken and unsupported, was that Italian Renaissance art had expressed the universal tendencies of the human mind with exemplary eloquence and efficiency, and had in effect provided us with the key to the interpretation of cultural symptoms or symbols in general. The book then offers a series of case studies tracing various Renaissance motifs back to their roots in classical art. These studies, Olympian and assured in tone, installed a family of works of art allegedly saturated with neoplatonic philosophical content at the core of the Renaissance achievement. Panofsky's scholarly tours linked the historical mythographies of Piero di Cosimo to the painted poesies of Titian to the allegorical sculptures of Michelangelo, staking out a chronological and intellectual heartland of Renaissance art.

Panofsky himself had sketched out the conceptual infrastructure of the 'neoplatonist' Renaissance in a lapidary, elegant essay originally published in 1924 but translated into English and published in the United States in 1968 with the title Idea: A Concept in Art Theory. Idea reveals that Panofsky was in effect looking back at the Renaissance from the point of view of the classicizing seventeenth century. His rapid historical survey of Western aesthetic theory culminates in the figure of

Gian Pietro Bellori, the Roman theorist who managed to "develop the theory of Ideas" that had prevailed in the Renaissance "into a normative, 'law-giving' aesthetics". But Bellori knew more than his Renaissance predecessors about the ways artists could offend against the ideal. Where the Renaissance theorists Alberti, Raphael, and Vasari had worried mainly about departures from nature, classicist art theory "had to protest with the same vigor against both the dipingere di maniera (in the derogatory usage still current today) and the artistic movement that seemed to be the opposite and equally ruinous extreme — Caravagesque 'naturalism'". Bellori was thus able to "complete" the Renaissance project. Panofsky's Idea had the same effect as the neoclassical theory it expounded: it smoothed out much of the historical distinctiveness of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century art by superimposing idealist theory on it. In principle, Idea re-organized the whole corpus of Renaissance art around an abstract model of theoretical equipoise. Works of art that refused that balance were measured by their refusal, or not measured at all. In effect, Panofsky's schema kept the centripetal field of ancien régime aesthetic judgment intact, even if modern life had forced open a taste for the centrifugal.

Panofsky's writings of the 1920s had reflected the full complexity of German-speaking art history. He published Idea in the same year that he wrote the very different essay "Perspective as 'Symbolic Form'". But nearly all traces of the formalist, 'Viennese' Panofsky faded in his post-emigration writings. In his enormously influential book Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art, published in 1960 but based on work dating back to the early 1930s, Panofsky neatly defined the whole period as the successful reintegration of classical form and classical content. Panofsky argued that in the "sporadic" medieval resurgences of interest in the classical heritage — each of them in their own way false renaisances — artistic form and mythographic content had remained estranged from one another. Form and content were finally and definitively brought

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into coordination, with the help of philological scholarship, only in the fifteenth and early sixteenth century, in Italy. This reintegration, Panofsky concluded somewhat obscurely, “is not only a humanistic but also a human occurrence”.32 The contrast between Panofsky’s thesis and that of his teacher Goldschmidt, who with nominalist evenhandedness had presented the disjunction of form and meaning not as failure but as the very texture of historical change, could not be sharper.

All the émigrés had shared the atmosphere of disillusionment and dry cultural pessimism of the interwar years. Not only Panofsky, but also Pächt and Gombrich, had been steeped in the radical formalism of the 1920s and 1930s, and in the relativized, anti-heroic vision of the Renaissance. But little of it travelled with them.33 In the New World they abandoned the ironic ‘Viennese’ approach of their teachers – and of their non-Jewish, non-emigrating colleagues. There are many reasons for this. In part, the émigré scholars were recoiling from formalism, or the systematic mistrust of the apparent meaning of a verbal or pictorial text, in particular its claim to represent a reality external to itself. For the formalist, meaning is most reliably legible in the internal structure and make-up of the text, and in the pattern of its various adoptions and deflections of received conventions. Formalism had once seemed a potent weapon against mystification: it pierced through rhetoric and refused to accept the work of art on its own terms. But in the context of the European catastrophe, formalism had come to appear too subtle and abstract an exercise, a kind of interpretative luxury, an approach to culture at best naively detached from the most urgent contemporary political concerns, at worst dangerously vulnerable to ideological manipulation. Formalism in the earlier twentieth century seemed to have encouraged apolitical or even reactionary aestheticisms. And it is easy to see how professional art historians felt a need to stress the intellectual content of art, and the engagement of iconography with the key themes of civic life, in order to reassert the seriousness and pertinence of the visual arts in a time of crisis.

Some émigrés deliberately turned their scholarship to the defense of liberal values in the face of what they saw as a new barbarism. Their

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33 The interesting work of Lotte Brand Philip, who had been a student of Panofsky’s at Hamburg, is an exception to this rule.
strategy, in the most general sense, was to secure the link between Mediterranean civilization and the modern liberal democracies by focusing on continuity, shared universal themes, and the metaphysical grounding of cultural forms and symbols. The state of emergency seemed to call for a provisional suspension of historical relativism and the critical stance toward tradition and received cultural values, the scholar’s privileges in normal times. Emigré scholars cleaved to the Enlightenment ideals of individual self-determination, rationality, and universal humanity grounded in common moral imperatives, and with ever-greater urgency as nationalist populism and totalitarian models of government raised the gravest threats to basic liberal freedoms. George Mosse and others have located these ideological aims within a larger context of Jewish assimilation into nineteenth- and early twentieth-century German bourgeois society through a secularization of Jewish traditions of learning. The tradition of optimism and universalism among German-Jewish intellectuals was one of the major frameworks for the émigré approach to the Renaissance.  

34 Whereas Jacob Burckhardt had emphasized the role of the willful, rational individual in Italian Renaissance culture and the forward-looking break with tradition, post-World War II American scholarship came to emphasize the Renaissance artists’ and scholars’ respectful and successful revival of antique culture. Whereas Burckhardt’s many early twentieth-century critics had stressed the continuities between late medieval and Renaissance culture, the post-war consensus insisted once again on the rupture with the Middle Ages. Whereas Julius von Schlosser and Aby Warburg had unearthed deep layers of irrationalism, superstition, and even totemism in Renaissance culture, the new American scholarship emphasized the objectivity and balance of the Renaissance mind. Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the new vision was the rehabilitation of neoplatonic thought. What in the Renaissance had been a rich but confused jumble of amateurish antiquarianism and mystical yearnings was transmuted by Panofsky, Gombrich, Wind, and others into the solid philosophical underpinnings of the new culture of painting, and more generally the guarantee of modern art’s metaphysical claims.  

35 As Michels points out, the question of Jewish identity has been evaded in many recent American analyses of Panofsky’s legacy; see Michels, Transplantierte Kunstwissenschaft, op. cit. (see note 1), pp. 176-177, 161.


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When one considers the struggle of leading economic and political historians of the Italian Renaissance in the 1930s and 1940s to liberate themselves from the myths about the Renaissance that the Renaissance told itself, one is all the more struck by the art historians' generally acclamatory approach to the period, and the virtual absence within the discipline of a skeptical, revisionist tone of voice. In their classrooms and textbooks the historians would eventually turn away from the prejudicial period designation 'Renaissance' in favor of 'early modern'; yet art historians, to this day, have made no move to follow. Apparently it is felt that the age was truly most memorably defined by its artistic creations. In the end, the Renaissance of the arts has been the most stable Renaissance.

The effect of the émigrés’ revision was to reinstate the old hold that the Renaissance’s self-reflection and self-mythologization had on modernity and modern art, a death grip that early twentieth-century artists and critics had struggled to free themselves from. Panofsky in particular restored a repertoire of terms and polarities that had been established in the Renaissance itself, including the notion that modern art can never be anything but an extension of the project initiated by Renaissance art. This debilitating axiom had dictated the long, self-absorbed agony of European painting between 1550 and 1750. Modernism had simply been the attempt to break the hold of the Renaissance. Panofsky ignored this and instead tried to restore the exceptional prestige of the Renaissance project in the figurative arts. Whereas Ruskin and other modernists had dismissed the imitation of antiquity as mere copying, Panofsky renewed the neoclassical fixation on emulation. Whereas modern art – and above all contemporary American art – had drawn deeply on northern European and other non-classical sources of inspiration, Panofsky only reinforced the traditional, invidious Mediterranean disregard for post-medieval northern art, except at those rare moments, for example in some works by Dürer, that it managed to tap into neoplatonic wisdom and the mainstream of classical symbolism. Panofsky at one point spoke of a modern period, “essentially distin-

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36 See Molho, loc. cit. (see note 12), pp. 270-277. For a glimpse of the controversy, see the symposium published in the Journal of the History of Ideas, 4, 1943, pp. 1-74, with contributions by Hans Baron, Ernst Cassirer, Paul Oskar Kristeller, and Lynn Thorndike, among others. See also W. K. Ferguson, The Renaissance in Historical Thought: Five Centuries of Interpretation, Boston, 1948.
guished from the Renaissance”, that had begun in 1600. But his research into the successful restoration of that “intrinsic oneness” of classical themes and classical motifs was in fact describing a “long Renaissance” that extended into the eighteenth century. It is worth noting that the frontispiece of Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance is a drawing by the eighteenth-century Venetian artist Giovanni Battista Tiepolo. Panofsky’s ‘Renaissance’ was nothing more or less than the ancien régime.

In the last fifteen years it has become routine within American academic art history to critique Panofsky on the basis of his neoclassicism. But to perceive Panofsky’s deep allegiance to the humanistic synthesis and to a universally valid classical culture is no great interpretative achievement. There is no need to read between the lines. Panofsky said explicitly, for example, that “content” emerges most eloquently when “idea” and “form” are brought into equilibrium, balancing the claims of functionalism on the one hand, and design on the other; that “it was the privilege of the Renaissance proper to reintegrate classical themes with classical motifs after what might be called a zero hour”; that the persistence or “clinging” of medieval features to those classical motifs revived in the Renaissance is best described as a “pseudomorphosis”, and that “human records” have autonomous meaning and “from the humanistic point of view [...] do not age”. In an article of 1933, Panofsky and his co-author Fritz Saxl wrote that “we can understand why [...] down to the crisis of our own days, which, among other phenomena, has given rise to the classicism of Picasso, almost every artistic and cultural crisis has been overcome by that recourse to antiquity which we know as classicism”. Konrad Hoffmann has pointed painfully to the homology between this view and certain aspects of the

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38 Panofsky, op. cit. (see note 29), p. 28.
40 Panofsky, op. cit. (see note 29), p. 27.
41 Ibid., pp. 70-71.
43 Panofsky - Saxl, “Classical Mythology in Medieval Art” (loc. cit. [see note 31]), p. 278.
Fascist reception of antiquity.\textsuperscript{44} To be sure, the idea of a synthetic, integrated Renaissance culture, and the idea of the spatially unified and symbolically eloquent painting at its core, took on completely different political meanings at different times, depending on what one thought about modernity. Alois Riegl had suggested that it was the light-infused, spatially ambiguous, and symbolically taciturn paintings of the northern Baroque, not the clear constructions of the Renaissance, that pointed forward to the liberal democratic community. Riegl's followers in the 1920s and early 1930s had suggested that the artificiality and tension inherent in the Renaissance picture pointed toward the contradictory, ambiguous conditions of modernity. But in the 1930s and 1940s, more and more traditional scholars recoiled from modernity entirely. Both the liberal émigrés and some figures on the reactionary right in Germany – see, for example, the “Revision of the Renaissance” sketched by the Nazi sympathizer Hans Sedlmayr in 1948\textsuperscript{45} – found themselves looking back to the Renaissance with admiration and extolling its conciliatory, socially cohesive aspects and its decompartmentalization of faith and reason, art and science. From their point of view, the proto-bourgeois Quattrocento explored by Burckhardt and Warburg, with its hard-edged, pragmatic merchant’s mentality, its dynamic responsiveness to rapidly evolving economic and social conditions, its focus on civic virtue and political action, and its frequent lurches into irrationalism and superstition, had lost much of its appeal.

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It is striking how decisively the American art historical community embraced the newly optimistic version of the Renaissance. Only a few émigrés, after all, taught in major graduate programs, and yet these few exerted a powerful, thoroughgoing influence. Practically every professional American art historian can trace an academic lineage back to an émigré. The anecdotal lore about the émigrés percolates from teachers to graduate students to this day. Americans took to the idealist, centripetal, secularized but still highly ethical version of Renaissance art, to what we might call Panofsky’s ‘white magic’. They allowed them-


\textsuperscript{45} Sedlmayr, \textit{op. cit.} (see note 17).
selves to be seduced by the assured, Augustan prose, and in many cases by the charismatic personalities, of their new teachers. Whereas 'iconology' looks in retrospect like a resuscitation of neoclassical reading strategies, at the time it appeared to be a cutting-edge methodology. American scholars were justifiably enthusiastic about an approach to Old Master painting that was not tainted by association with collecting and the art market. In the German-speaking countries, by contrast, academic art history had long since established its intellectual independence from connoisseurs and curators. American art historical research in the 1950s and 1960s had little in common with the radically innovative project of the early twentieth-century scholar Aby Warburg, who coined the term “iconology,” and yet whose writings were not read in the United States at all (indeed were not translated into English until 1999!).

We recall that before 1933 American scholars had conducted relatively little research in the Renaissance field. But in the seminar rooms of the émigré scholars, the Italian Renaissance was instantly converted into the newest and most exciting field, playing something like the role that the French nineteenth century would in American art history in the 1970s and 1980s.

Iconology also flourished in post-war Europe, not least in the chastened, doggedly empiricist German academy. Martin Warnke has called it the “international style” of art history. But the non-dialectical version of the Renaissance has resonated longest in the new world. There are a number of reasons for this. First, American art history for a long time had no capacity to resist or even respond to the program of the émigrés. The American conversation about what art history ought to be, or how one went about posing and solving art historical problems, was simply not sufficiently developed. Second, Americans were at some level impressed by the decorum, balance, grace, and impression of naturalness in the new image of the Renaissance presented by the émigrés. The United States, like Europe, was by 1940 laden with countless layers of simulated classicism. But Americans had perhaps not yet reached a point of unbearable fatigue, and were able to embrace yet

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46 Only a handful of essays had been translated until the publication of The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity, Los Angeles, 1999.
47 Panofsky actually taught a lot of German art at the Institute of Fine Arts, but few students followed him; see Michels, Transplantierte Kunstwissenschaft, op. cit. (see note 1), p. 96.
48 Cited in Michels, Transplantierte Kunstwissenschaft, op. cit. (see note 1), p. x.
another neoclassicism. Third, Americans were less willing than Europeans to hear the deflating messages about high culture of the sort that radical formalist – or for that matter materialist – art history delivered. The United States in the 1930s and 1940s saw itself joining the circle of cultivated nations; this was no moment to abandon the gold standard of classical pagan culture. The academy did not want to see the art of the Italian Renaissance intellectually eviscerated, or the painted image flattened out; Americans had enough worries about their own superficiality. What many Americans thought they needed was more Bildung. And as Carl Landauer has pointed out, the American reception ironically made the German émigrés more German than ever: “for Panofsky playing the part of the model humanist for American audiences often meant cultivating rather than escaping his Germanness”.

Thus the Italian Renaissance in American art history became not a battleground as it had been in Europe, but rather a field for ideological convergence and consensus. It seems possible that this happened not because the Renaissance mattered so much to Americans, but because it mattered so little. Was it not true that the deeper issues that had roiled European scholars – the dialectic between civilization and barbarism, the tension between elite and mass culture – had in some sense been historically resolved in twentieth-century America?

After the war, research by American scholars in the Italian Renaissance field tended to focus on monographic treatment of individual artists – the establishment of stable œuvres and artistic ‘personalities’ – and research into intellectual contexts, rather than on the material, economic, or political circumstances of production. The artistic achievements of the Renaissance were in a sense sealed off in the post-war years from the raw forces of irrational faith, the market economy, and political violence, and exempted from the reductive, close-grained autopsy of nominalist or materialist scholarship.

49 LANDAUER, loc. cit. (see note 31), p. 256. See also the remarks by MOLHO, op. cit. (see note 12), pp. 286-288, on the almost intrinsic conservatism and mistrust of modernity of American academic art historians.

50 There was no equivalent in the United States, for example, to the social history of Quattrocento painting by the émigré FREDERICK ANTAL; see his Florentine Painting and its Social Background, London, 1947.

51 It is interesting to compare the lively reception of RIEGL’s writings in Italy, which tended to convert him to materialist – and in the 1950s, after Fascism, Marxist – methodological ends; see S. SCAROCCHIA, Studi su Alois Riegl, n.p. Nuova All, 1986.
medieval art history, by contrast, which by this time was arguably a more mature field, materialist or ‘realist’ approaches flourished: one thinks of the work of Meyer Schapiro or, among the émigrés, Ernst Kitzinger (1912-), Kurt Weitzmann (1904-1993), and Richard Krautheimer (1897-1994). Indeed, Marvin Trachtenberg observed recently in a memorial tribute that for Krautheimer the architecture of the Italian Renaissance remained somehow idealized and off limits, a “never-never land” sealed off in his imagination “from the complexities of facture and chronology, from the messy realities of Renaissance practice, and from [...] social context”; whereas of course in his home field of medieval architecture Krautheimer “constantly emphasized the concrete, solid facts of architectural history.”

If the new Renaissance field was enthusiastic and “warm”, American medievalists were “cool”, both before and after the emigration.

The “warm” and the “cool” styles clashed revealingly in an episode of 1961, a ludicrous public dispute between Panofsky and the American abstract painter Barnett Newman. In 1951 Newman had titled one of his canvases *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, apparently trying to give it a classical and rhetorical depth, in a way that today mostly embarrasses us: Newman’s painting, now at the Museum of Modern Art, is greatly admired, but precisely not because it has been pumped up with Latin learning. The properly American approach to painting, we now believe, is to mistrust classically dignified subject matter. Anxiety about cultural superficiality was Newman’s blind spot, as it was perhaps for some other American painters of the day. Titles were a way of getting content in through the back door of an abstract painting. Panofsky saw through this, but then he could not find any other way to look at the painting either. Newman would discover that to dabble in Latin was a mistake. His painting was reproduced in the journal *Art News* in February 1961 as an illustration to an article by Robert Rosenblum. In the caption the title was accidentally misspelled: *sublimus* instead of *sublīmis*. This caption elicited an unpleasantly sneering letter to the editor from

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Panofsky, pointing out pedantically that the correct spelling of the word was not *sublimus* but *sublimis*. But in the actual title of the painting, which Rosenblum gives in the text of the article, the word was correctly spelled *sublimis*. Panofsky, who was completely uninterested in abstract art, might have seen this if he had actually read the article and not just glanced at the caption. Newman should have let the matter drop. Instead, he replied angrily to Panofsky with a dubious argument about an obscure variant form of the word that would have legitimated the typographical error. (According to academic legend, he was relying on philological advice from Meyer Schapiro.) In fact, Newman and Panofsky were grappling about a non-issue: they both had fallen victim to the same fallacy about painting’s dependence on literary or philosophical content.

Barnett Newman may have overrated book learning; but Panofsky certainly underrated Newman’s flat, deadpan paintings. If Panofsky had looked more charitably at American paintings of his own time — by Newman but also by Jackson Pollock, for example — he might have been able to admire some Italian Renaissance paintings that did not match his notion of what the Renaissance was about, like the late painting by Titian, the *Flaying of Marsyas* (Fig. 2). This is one of the sixteenth-century Italian paintings most admired today. The painting is in Kroměříž in Moravia and Panofsky never actually saw it. On the basis of photographs, however, he doubted its authenticity, and found it “difficult to accept Titian’s responsibility for a composition which in gratuitous brutality [...] evinces a *horror vacui* normally foreign to Titian who, like Henry James’ Linda Pallant, ‘knew the value of intervals’”.

The subject was too violent for Panofsky, the composition too “all-over”, the space too shallow to sustain profound meaning. But an eye trained by Pollock’s own sometimes reckless *horror vacui* might have seen the deep meaning in Titian’s radical flatness.

One American art historian in these years was questioning the conventional and rather lazy post-war analogy between pictorial space and meaning, the axiom behind the dominant interpretation of Renaissance painting: George Kubler (1912-1996), a specialist in the pre- and post-conquest art of the Americas, and possibly the most interesting of all

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American-born art historians. Kubler was an art historian psychologically unencumbered by German Bildung, despite or perhaps because he was the son of an American father who had earned a Ph.D. in art history in 1906 from the University of Munich. Kubler approached the Renaissance from an oblique point of view: he wrote about the importation of Renaissance art and architecture into the New World, in the Spanish and Portuguese colonies in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Unlike European scholars, Kubler did not automatically “impose on indigenous America,” as Claude Levi-Strauss once put it, “that absence of profundity which characterizes the contemporary history of the New World”. And Kubler kept a close watch on contemporary art. Kubler published a review of Panofsky’s Renaissance and Renascences in that very issue of Art News where the title of Barnett Newman’s painting was misspelled, which is why Panofsky happened to be reading Art News in the first place. In his review Kubler endorsed Panofsky’s main argument about the disjunction between form and content in the Middle Ages, noting acutely that Adolph Goldschmidt had made a similar point in 1936. But he went on to reflect on the violent disjunction in style between contemporary art and past art, wondering whether or not this “formal rupture” would eventually “induce” a cultural shift at the deep structural level. Kubler used Panofsky’s schema to suggest that twentieth-century art was wilfully plunging into a new Middle Ages, which would not be a dark and confused age in need of “reintegration,” but rather a time of experimentation and “difficult reorientation” that would yield an unimagined future. The implication is that Panofsky’s schema does not allow for any useful assessment of Abstract Expressionism, a kind of painting that no longer dealt in what Kubler called “adherent signals”, i.e., symbols. In his book *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (1962), Kubler in many ways points forward, beyond Abstract Expressionism, to the theoretical positions of

55 Kubler earns that distinction, if at all, by virtue of Meyer Schapiro’s birth in Lithuania. See the essay by A. Neumeyer on the state of the discipline in the 1950s, “Art History: Victory without Trumpet,” in L. White, Jr. (ed.), *Frontiers of Knowledge in the Study of Man*, New York, 1956, pp. 178-193, which mentions Kubler’s innovations and generally looks forward rather than backwards to the émigrés.


Pop Art and Minimalism: in place of meaning he proposed being; in place of the adherent signal, he offered the “self- signal”, or what he called the “mute existential declaration of things”. Today, the Pop and Minimalist attitudes have long since been internalized by artists and scholars alike: the relentless, ironic transpositions of center and margin; the mistrust of conventionally coded sign systems; the disabling of the matter-spirit dichotomy through the introduction of a powerful third term, a quantity neither matter nor spirit, namely, information; the acceptance of iteration as the basic condition for difference and for meaning. It is striking that a history of Italian Renaissance art that might correspond to these attitudes has not yet emerged.

It ought to be easy to undermine the normative Renaissance, now that critical theory with its routine decenterings of the concepts ‘man’, ‘self’ and ‘nature’ has provided so many ready-to-use tools. Literary studies and cultural history have been turning the sixteenth century inside out for years. Historians like Frances Yates, D.P. Walker, Eugenio Battisti, and Carlo Ginzburg have all cast powerful searchlights on the underside of the Renaissance imagination, following a path marked by Aby Warburg. Other scholars have constructed a newly strange and internally riven sixteenth century against the looming, if rather frail, foil of Michel Foucault’s “classical episteme”. In some fields at least, there is by now no more predictable, well-worn move than the overturning of the early modern order of things. And yet, in the United States, the émigré art historians’ version of Italian Renaissance art remains robust. The dynamic, indeed more or less permanent, revisionism within the broader early modern field has not penetrated to the core – the most prestigious – monuments of the Italian Renaissance. This material is protected by the celebratory term ‘Renaissance’ as if by a palladium. The marketing imperatives of the major university presses, who want the word ‘Renaissance’ in titles if at all possible, have exerted a subtle retarding influence. Nothing like a revisionist consensus or even a single, large-scale revisionist account has emerged. If there has been an extension of the skeptical Vienna School project, it has happened in France, where art historians were re-reading Riegl already in the early 1970s, and where the contours of an alternative history of

Renaissance art have emerged in the writings of Hubert Damisch, Jean-Claude Lebeschtein, Henri Zerner, Georges Didi-Huberman, and others. In the United States, there has been no return to the corrosive, critical formalism of the pre-war period. The main alternative to the sort of monographic or iconological work promoted in the 1950s and 1960s has been patronage studies, and more recently research on the art market, taste, and collecting. American scholarship on Mannerism has tended to be monographic, and has tended to prize the Mannerist episode mostly as a quirky interlude before the reprise of the great naturalist and classical themes of the High Renaissance beginning around 1600. Work on Mannerism usually leaves the principles of the "long Renaissance", painting's ancien régime, quite intact. There are many individual exceptions to these generalizations. Recently, for example, there have been efforts to bring a global perspective to the Renaissance. But the émigrés' Renaissance does seem in some fundamental way to have blocked the way back to the historical early modern image. Arguably, the route to that image has in the last couple of decades been most successfully tracked within the 'northern,' or Netherlandish, French, and German, field, which is still institutionally severed from the Italian field to a much greater degree than it needs to be.


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