A joke told in ancient Rome: an emissary from a Germanic tribe, wandering in the big city, is offered a small sculpture of a goatherd at the price of five pieces of silver. He responds in indignation: I wouldn’t pay five pieces of silver for the ugly old goatherd himself, so why on earth would I want a copy of him? The German visitor revealed his simplicity by failing to grasp the transformatory power of art. For the cultivated city-dweller, by contrast, imitation mysteriously inverts the direct and natural response to things, the recoil from the ugly and the lowly. Today we take this attitude for granted, but behind it hides a complex theory of art, and a bold claim made on behalf of the artwork. The topos of art’s power to neutralize ugliness lies at the heart of Western aesthetics. The locus classicus is Aristotle, Book Four. But the idea has recurred whenever art is threatened by materialism or pragmatism.

Under Romanticism the topos of the redemption of the ugly through art took on a new complexity. In that period it took the form of a rediscovery of medieval art, which for three centuries had been despised and forgotten. But this time it was not the represented objects that offended and thus required redemption, for medieval art pictured mostly beautiful objects, the saints and the divine personages. Rather, the pictures themselves were ugly. The primitive figures in the old frescoes and panels had been humbled by the triumphant idealism of Raphael and the Carracci. But now, in the eyes of the Romantic generation, they found their way back to a full aesthetic life, rescued by the idea of a timeless “art” that transcended merely local variations of taste. To see the
beauty of a medieval work, around 1800, was to see art itself, more clearly than ever. The appreciation of medieval art grew and deepened throughout the 19th century, and by 1900 the old cult of Greco-Roman equipoise and perfection had devolved into the dull-witted reflex of the philistine. Meanwhile the range of real objects available for artistic transformation was expanding drastically: from Goya to Géricault to Courbet to Menzel, the disgusting, the bloody, the banal, the mechanical, became the new raw materials of beauty.

The aestheticism of the late 19th century, in rejecting academic classicism, at last cleared out a space for a negative, critical, perhaps revelatory conception of art. For it had become clear that the classicism of the previous centuries had concealed an essentially affirmative aesthetics: an aesthetics of consolation, or of celebration.

In the art historical writing of the new century, it was Alois Riegl who pushed the new negative aesthetics the farthest. Riegl gave all historical forms equal treatment: every form was assigned a niche within a total evolutionary schema. For Riegl, the forms change, but through it all the impulse to make form persists, and drives the process. “Art” transcends and orders the infinity of local forms, which may or may not be judged “beautiful” according to this or that canon. In Riegl the historical-philosophical analysis of art suspends the question of beauty. Thus the 4th-century reliefs on the Arch of Constantine, the ugly ducklings of art history, the negative model against which Raphael built his new order, were reborn in Riegl’s writings as just one of the stages in the long process that transformed the haptic art of Egyptian and Near Eastern antiquity into the optical art of modernity.
Yet even this schema was perhaps not completely value-free, not yet liberated from the heavy logic of antique culture. For wasn’t Riegl’s rehabilitation of the ugly Constantinian reliefs basically a Christian interpretation, a paradoxical inversion of the pagan order under the rhetorical sign of the *sermo humilis*? The low shall be made high, and the ugly beautiful. For Riegl, the stunted Constantinian figures were no longer the comical goatherds or the instinctual fauns of pagan antiquity: but nor were they purely neutral, empty signifiers, either. In Riegl they became indexes of a new spirituality—the advance signals of modern European conceptions of interiority and subjectivity. And because Riegl’s schema inverted the old pagan identification of ugliness with evil, it still contained the pagan within itself. Indeed the roots of the *sermo humilis* can be found in Plato, in the *Symposium*, where Alcibiades speaks of the trick Silenus statues that open to reveal a beautiful youth in the interior, inside the ugly shell. This passage was noticed by Christians—most notably by Erasmus, who cited it in his *Adages*, in fact in virtually the very year of Raphael’s letter to the Pope where he explains the historical devolution of art that produced the impoverished Constantinian reliefs. Erasmus was in effect undermining Raphael’s neo-classicism at the moment of its birth. For if the ugly exterior conceals a beautiful spirit, where then is the urgent necessity of the beautiful exterior?

It would seem, then, that for Riegl the late Roman period was not just any arbitrary station along art’s path to modernity, but the crucial station. Thus we see the limit of Riegl’s relativism. To arrive at a still more thorough relativism, and a more evenhanded approach to ugliness and beauty—let us say a post-pagan *and* post-Christian approach—art history required a stronger conception of the *work*. This is where Otto Pächt enters the scene. For Pächt, the artwork was the elemental unit: not "art" or the
"artist" or "beauty," but rather the work as a self-contained system. Such a work generated meaning by its own resources, not by reference to a real world but from within. The desires and drives of the recipient which determine the fundamental responses of attraction and repulsion—attraction to the beautiful, for example, and repulsion from the ugly—are deflected and transformed by the mechanism of the work. Thus Pächt offered not an application of Riegl’s aestheticism so much as a radicalization.

This innermost essence of Pächt’s art history is disclosed most clearly by his writing on 15th-c. Austrian and German art: in the dissertation published in 1929, *Österreichische Tafelmalerei der Gotik*; in the great article of 1931 on Michael Pacher; in the essay of 1952 titled “Zur deutschen Bildauffassung der Spätgotik und Renaissance.” In his writing on these often raw and clumsy images we look into the depths of Pächt’s anticlassicism and his relativism. The German 15th century was one of the last unrehabilitated corners of European art history, indeed all but a few exceptional works remain even today beyond the pale of conventional taste. These works are still seen through Hegel’s eyes: for Hegel, fascinated by their savage energy, did devote a page or two to early German panels. His interpretation of them was aesthetically naïve: he saw their ugliness as a direct, realistic expression of the violent aspects of the Christian story and of the dark sides of the human soul. “Hierin zeichnen sich…die oberdeutschen Meister aus”—thus Hegel—“wenn sie in Szenen aus der Passionsgeschichte die Roheit der Kriegsknechte, die Bosheit des Spottes, die Barbarei des Hasses gegen Christus im Verlauf seines Leidens und Sterbens mit grosser Energie in Charakteristik der Hässlichkeiten und Missgestaltungen hervorkehren, welche als äussere Formen der inneren Verworfenheit des Herzens entsprechend sind.” Hegel also saw the paintings as
expressions of a “halsstarrige, widerspenstige Natur,” the nature of a society struggling “sich mit saurer Arbeit aus ihrer Beschränktheit und Roheit herausreissen und zur religiösen Versöhnung durchkämpfen zu können.”¹ That is, he saw the roughness of the images as a mirror of the late medieval German soul itself. Given such a literalist approach to the works, it is no surprise that 19th-c. taste left these panels in an aesthetic wilderness, even as that same taste was discovering consolation, spirituality, and refinement in the French Gothic and in the Flemish primitives. To these eyes, the German paintings were not sufficiently aesthetic: they did not seem to transform reality as artworks were meant to, rather they delivered a direct, crass Abdruck of corporal experience. And so they remained beyond the reach even of Riegl’s idea of art, which as we saw was at bottom a transcendental one, involving an overcoming of somatic experience in favor of a detached, interiorized subjectivity.

Pächt, by contrast, emphasized not the link between the German panels and the world, their expressionistic reference to reality or to human nature, but rather the “work”-character of the panels. He stressed their internal coherence and their systematicity. A good example is his reading of the Freisinger Baptism of Friedrich Pacher, 1483, in Österreichische Tafelmalerei. Pächt’s point here was to show how Pacher imposed an idea of the Flächenbezogenheit der Figuren on top of the local südtirolische Gestaltungsprinzip, namely Veranschaulichung des Raumes durch Bewegung von Körpern. The result in this painting is that the bodies bend in obedience to the stylistic will. “In welligem Schwung”—here I am citing Pächt—“sind Christus und Täufer einander entgegengeneigt. Die Bewegungskurve, die durch die Gestalt des Christus

¹ Hegel, Ästhetik, 3: 126, 124.
hindurchläuft, krümmt seine Beine, sie ist auch die Ursache seiner tänzelnden Stellung. Dem Johannes legt sich der Mantel in mächtigen Schlingen um den Körper; das Wölkenbündel ist spiralig gewunden; selbst die seitlichen Baldachinfilialen biegen sich, ihre Steinnatur verleugnend, in die Mitte zusammen; in Schlangenwindungen kommt der Fluss aus der Tiefe.”

Pächt saw distortions and disrespect or ignorance of the classical canon of beauty not as signs of truth to experience, but rather as signs of the radical alienation of these paintings from experience. Systematicity and alienation from reality: for Pächt these were the precisely the criteria of art. The early German panels for him were neither curiosities, nor tokens of a primordial national genius, but rather paradigms of the aesthetic.

The key to that aesthetic was systematicity: the parts of the artwork all function together like a machine. That is true, for Pächt, of all successful artworks. The peculiarity of the German works is that their beholders are pulled into the aesthetic machine, into the “Welt des Kunstwerks,” as Pächt puts it, and are forced to participate in it. In the German panels, that Distanzierung des Betrachters which characterized their various prior models—Italian in the earliest 15th century, Netherlandish later—wird aufgehoben. He shows this through a comparison of a Verkündigung by Rogier van der Weyden and one by Rueland Frueauf. In the painting by Frueauf—here Pächt—“wir fühlen uns in die Dynamik eines Kräftespiels hineinversetzt und sehen auf einmal, wie die Formen sich gegenseitig bedingen, in Spannung halten und schliesslich im labilen Gleichgewicht sich ausbalanzieren.” In the Verkündigung by Rogier, by contrast, “

2 Pächt, Österreichische Tafelmalerei der Gotik (Augsburg: Filser, 1929), 50.
alle Formen fliessend verbunden durch eine Bewegung, die über alles gleichmässig hinweggeht, alles ist unter den Einheitsnenner der Bewegung gebracht, aber es steht nicht untereinander in irgendeiner wesensmässigen Abhängigkeit.”

In the Netherlandish painting, it is as if the “movement” is imposed on the forms from the outside, by an artistic Regisseur. The movement “prepares” the forms for presentation to the outside world, the real world beyond the artwork. Whereas in the German painting, the forms seem to have plunged spontaneously into their dance, generating a powerful force-field that pulls the beholder inward, forcing him, too, to dance. The Welt des Kunstwerks threatens to colonize the real world.

This is the sovereign artwork, the monadic work that would later emerge as the elemental unit of the two most powerful philosophies of art in the 20th century, those of Heidegger and Adorno. It is equally a model of aesthetic trnfiguration just as it is found in the theorists of classical, utopian Modernism: in Kandinsky, Malevich, Mondrian. Or in the writings and mysterious diagrams of the Bauhaus guru Johannes Itten, who in his pedagogical Analysen alter Meister, from the volume Utopia: Dokumente der Wirklichkeit published by Bruno Adler in 1921, took early German paintings as his models. Here, for example, a diagrammatic lithograph explicating the Anbetung of Meister Francke, from the Thomasaltar in Hamburg, from the 1420s, illustrates Itten’s principles of pictorial rhythm. In the hands of these artists, in the 1910s and 1920s, the framed, self-contained tableau re-asserted itself as the cornerstone of art—directly against the potentially disruptive ornament-based conception of art that Art Nouveau had offered at the turn of the century. We might well characterize classical Modernism’s

revitalization of the sovereign work, embodied in the framed easel painting, as a new academicism. This return to the work is the context for Pächt’s art history. Pächt’s modification of the art history of Riegl parallels classical Modernism’s overcoming of the ornamental, anti-work aspect of Art Nouveau.

One of the consequences of taking the work as the elemental unit of art was a questioning of any reflexive, automatic preference for Italian over northern art. For in a crucial passage, Pächt argues that “in einer italienischen Komposition jedes Teilglied eine relative Selbständigkeit gegenüber dem übergeordneten System besitzt.” Every part of the Italian work is beautiful; each beautiful element is like a work in itself. In the part [wird] “das Ganze schon vorbereitet und so das Einzelne auch an der Schönheit des Ganzen teilhat.” If every part of the Italian work mirrors the whole, then the work is self-similar: it has no natural boundaries; there is no reason why it should come to an end here and not there; it can be carved up easily into subworks. Pächt sees Italian art functioning according to an ornamental, modular conception of the artwork, very different from the closed and necessary machine-like artwork of the German system.

In fact what he is describing in Italian art is close to the idea of art implied in the writings of Aby Warburg. Warburg’s aesthetics could not have been more different from Pächt’s. Warburg did not treat the picture [Bild] as an elemental unit; instead he focused on isolated gestures, motifs, figures, most memorably those Florentine nymphs which mysteriously preserved the agitation of ancient life. Warburg’s indifference to the concept of the artwork, as it had been developed in the art academies and later by idealist philosophers, was the basis for his radicality. Warburg dismantled the work, so crucial to
the practice of the academy, to the museum, to the collector, and instead travelled back to
a primordial conception of art, to the roots of art-making in the imitation of the human or
animal figure. Desire and fear, the primal forces that underlie the judgment of the
beautiful and the ugly, are focused once again, in Warburg, on things, on objects. The
artwork and the aesthetic attitude, in Warburg, are not given the chance to suspend the
primal responses to beauty and ugliness.

In Pächt, by contrast, whose concept of art was civilized and ultra-modern, not
primordial, those basic responses are neutralized. The most apparently chaotic picture,
once the beholder discovers the “key,” is transformed into a coherent structure. “Chaos”
is revealed to be “dynamism.” Distortions and confusions are revealed to be simply
consequences of a pictorial logic. In Pächt’s analysis, the Meister des Krainburger
Altars, a painter of Steiermark or Kärnten of the early 16th century, takes from Rueland
Frueauf and the Salzburg school “die vollkommen einheitliche Wölbung der
Gestaltoberfläche, die dort als Endresultat einer allseitigen räumlichen Expansion der
Kernmasse motiviert war. Er löst nun, ohne die Rundung der Oberfläche zu zerstören,
die fertige Körperform in malerischen Schein auf…Die im Schwung geschwellten
Körpermassen Frueaufs verwandeln sich gleichsam in Seifenblasen.”5 As Pächt explains
elsewhere: “Wer diese Bewegung nicht mitmacht, sie nicht in ihrem sinnvollen Ablauf
erlebt, für den muss ein deutsches spägotisches Bild stumm bleiben, der sieht nur das
Chaos, ‘die Unruhe im Gemäl.”“6

---

4 Pächt, “Historische Aufgabe Michael Pachers,” 73.
5 Pächt, Österreichische Tafelmalerei, 65
6 Pächt, “Historische Aufgabe Michael Pachers,” 70.
This “key” that unlocks the work is a leap into the work, a collapsing of distance, of sightlines, of judgment. The German work asks for participation with the entire body. For Pächt, the German Bildauffassung needed to be completed by an active, creative gaze, a gaze that swerves and pokes about, shifting position from side to side and back to front. Space in the German painting is seen from more than one point of view at the same time. Space is not projected onto the picture plane, as it is in perspectival pictures, but rather shaped to produce eloquent rhymes with the picture's content and strange psychosomatic effects. Konrad Witz's allegorical image of Synagoge, from his Speculum altar in Basel of about 1435, is pressed down, defeated, by the angle of the doorway, bending in unison with the broken banner. “Die dritte Dimension,” Pächt writes memorably, “ist nichts als eine Abbiegung der zwei ersten.”

Pächt was drawn to the 15th century because it was a period of transition: in the 15th century painting began to be understood for the first time as a report on the results of visual experience. This was something new; medieval art had not been grounded in vision. But German art of the period participated only incompletely in this revolution. German painting, in Pächt’s analysis, figured not visual but tactile experience—a palpitation or a “seizing,” haptein, of the world. Thus there is a sense in which German painting was actively undermining, sabotaging, vision at the very moment of its establishment as the new basis of art. German painting represented a delay or postponement of the visual regime, the violence of the stable, visually grounded composition that would set in after 1500.

---

That long-lived fiction of stable, rational vision, or perspective, was the primary fiction that modernist art had to overcome. Throughout the 20th century the theme of the promise of touch as an alternative to vision would emerge and re-emerge, as Martin Jay has demonstrated in his analysis of the “denigration” of vision in modern thought, *Downcast Eyes*. To grasp the world physically would be to avoid the lie of conceptualization, but also the lie of the judgmental binarism of beautiful and the ugly. “Nausea,” for Jean-Paul Sartre, was the result of the failure of conceptualization—the idea, reflection—to grasp the “thingness” of the world. It is reflection, distance, vision that transmutes the merely thingly into something ugly and repulsive, or something beautiful and attractive.

Ugliness is in the eye of the beholder: it is a visual phenomenon. The murderous power of the Medusa is activated by a sighting, a fixing with the gaze. Beauty and ugliness correspond to the visual distinction we naturally draw between the secondary and the primary sex characteristics, between the hair and the breasts, on the one hand, which are beautiful to the gaze, and the genitalia on the other hand, which until desire is activated are ugly. But once desire is activated, the sense of touch takes over, and in sex there is then neither beauty or ugliness, neither primary nor secondary features: the whole body is desirable.

The collapse of vision into touch is therefore the basis for Pächt’s erasure of the concept of the ugly. Pächt does not set out to *rescue* the humble early German panels, to pull them into the precinct of the beautiful. Rather, he provides a set of instructions for experiencing them that suspend entirely the binarism of beautiful and ugly. His approach suspends visual attraction and its opposite, repulsion.
This is the achievement of Pächt’s art history, its moment of participation in a high modernist aesthetics. But we are obliged as well to trace the limits of his project. Pächt’s cancelling of the responses of desire and repulsion in the name of the artwork entailed an almost systematic disinterestedness towards the real and the political. The logic of Pächt’s formalism virtually required this indifference. This neutrality toward content went deeper than that skepticism towards “iconological” art history which Pächt is famous for. Here the comparison with Meyer Schapiro is instructive. In Schapiro, the ugly continues to play a role—not of course as a negative marker, as it was in classical and Christian aesthetics, but rather as the index of the intrusion of the real into art. When the Romanesque carvers described diabolic monstrosities, or when Cézanne distorted his bowls of fruit, they were translating real fears and drives into stone and paint. For Schapiro, the acceptance of the real—whether understood as the unconscious or as material, sensual experience—was the dynamic key to historical progress in art. Pächt’s formal readings may well have prepared the artwork for social and political analysis of this sort, but Pächt himself never performed such analysis.

Pächt’s decision to make the artwork the elemental unit of his art history, meanwhile, closed him entirely to popular art, to ornament, to the reproductive media, to everything that we would today call “visual culture.” Here the contrast with Aby Warburg is sharp. Warburg, as we have seen, dismantled the stable frame that since the Renaissance had protected and unified the modern European artwork. By this means he was able to identify some of the deep motivations that drive people to make art in the first place: fear, superstition, pride, intoxication with physical movement. By disrespecting the frame, and not concerning himself with the value or the “museum-readiness” of the
historical image, Warburg was able to trace the survival of those deeper motivations into the modern era.

Pächt, by contrast, avoided any direct encounter with the sources of art-making. He conveys little sense of what Hubert Damisch has called painting’s fundamental “barbarism,” its savage, messy proximity to the alchemy of materials and to cult. Pächt’s artwork was a clean, modern machine. When he saw medieval paintings as closed systems of meaning, he was anachronistically imposing on them a Modernist conception of art.

Indeed, in many ways Otto Pächt was not really a historical thinker. He sustained his idea of the artwork by suspending his project within the 15th century. The preponderance of his writing was devoted to this dynamic period bracketed by two international ideals of beauty—false ideals, he might have said: at one end, the courtly Schöner Stil of the years around 1400, and at the other end the new idealism of the early 16th century. Pächt’s analyses reveal that the rise of the modern artist and the modern model of the framed artwork in the 15th century depended on an initial renunciation of that ideal of courtly beauty current in 1400. And what happened a century later, after 1500? At that time beauty became an end in itself, and art began to find its modern function within society: to provide beauty, to provide a beautiful frame for the truth. It is possible that the truth of the humble, ungainly German panels of the 15th century paintings was, in their own time, too much to bear. Their apparent ugliness was the effect of a hyper-aestheticized approach to existence, an approach that demanded full, unconditional participation from their users, a collapse of intellectual distance. The experiment, like the parallel experiment attempted by utopian Modernism of the 1910s
and 1920s, was in practical terms unsustainable. The powerful new artwork would have to be domesticated with beauty.